

SCRAPBOOK MEMORIES:
MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S FICTION

SCRAPBOOK MEMORIES:
HISTORY AND MEMORY IN
MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S
POSTMODERNIST FICTION

by

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ABSTRACT

The fragmented structures and stories of Michael Ondaatje's postmodernist fiction reflect our perception of the past as we view it through both personal memories and public documents of history. The mnemonic theories of F.C. Bartlett, Ulric Neisser and Roger Schank delineate the ways in which the human mind assembles and reassembles these fragments into useful realizations of the past. Combined with Ondaatje's historiographic metafiction, these theories describe the mnemonic workings of the mind as they reveal themselves in literature. Inherent in the view of the past which underlies the fiction and psychological theories invoked by this thesis is the realization that gaps and distortions are unavoidable in the reconstruction of the past. Working primarily within a theoretical framework provided by Linda Hutcheon and Roland Barthes, this thesis examines the way Ondaatje embraces these areas of ambiguity in the past as the primary locus of his imaginative writing in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, *Coming Through Slaughter*, *In the Skin of a Lion*, and *The English Patient*. Ultimately, the psychological and literary views of memory and history describe and predict Ondaatje's ability to re-animate the past into a living performative existence in the present.

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INTRODUCTION: The Mnemonics of Literature

In 1977, a psychologist named Ulric Neisser delivered a conference paper titled, "Memory: What are the Important Questions?" Seven years earlier, a young poet named Michael Ondaatje published an eclectic collection of poetry, prose and photographs called *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. Both the conference paper and long poem mark important seminal moments of contemporary memory research and Ondaatje's postmodernist fiction, respectively. Roughly two decades later, those seeds have grown into two complex systems which comment on each other in ways which tentatively reveal the way the human mind constructs itself and its environment, as well as the ways in which that process exposes itself in literature.

Ondaatje's type of literature, quintessentially postmodernist, was growing and evolving dynamically when Ondaatje produced *The Collected Works* and the long fiction works which followed - *Coming Through Slaughter* in 1976, 1987's *In the Skin of a Lion*, and *The English Patient* in 1992. Memory research and theory, on the other hand, according to Neisser, had been effectively useless in the century preceding the delivery of his paper. Neisser dismissed most of the existing memory research because it lacked what he called "ecological validity," meaning that memory research and theory "should, [but unfortunately did not] apply to naturally

occurring behaviour in the natural context of the real world"(Cohen 3). According to psychologist P.E. Zimbardo, as a result of Neisser's scolding of the psychological community, "the psychological study of human memory now emphasizes the powerful role of 'reconstructive processes' in shaping what is remembered"(256). This new emphasis brought with it a renewed interest in the work of F.C. Bartlett. Writing in the first half of the twentieth century, Bartlett's psychological theories were, in Neisser's words, "ecologically valid," but Bartlett's work was largely ignored until Neisser began reshaping approaches to memory theory. Bartlett's work, published in the 1932 book, *Remembering*, examined and theorized about "the rich and complex functioning of memory in natural contexts"(Cohen 3).

The idea of ecological validity does not apply simply to the external contexts of human memory, however. By approaching the structures and processes of memory with the awareness of context which is dictated by ecological validity, memory theory must account for, acknowledge and attempt to understand the contextual influences of memory and memories on itself/themselves. This is where postmodernism, and with it, Michael Ondaatje, begin to speak to memory theory. This awareness of memory contexts, both external and internal, manifests itself in Bartlett's theories, which observe that "remembering appears to be far more decisively an affair of construction rather than one of mere reproduction"(Bartlett

205). Bartlett's description of memory could apply equally to Ondaatje's fiction which links fragments of history, myth, memory and media:

It is an imaginative reconstruction, or construction, built out of the relation of our attitude towards a whole active mass of organised past reactions or experience, and to a little outstanding detail which commonly appears in image or in language form. (Bartlett 213)

Ondaatje's postmodernist assembling of images and linguistic shreds of history and memory in order to (re)construct experiences and characters has led one of Ondaatje's critics, Anne Blott, to describe Ondaatje's fiction as "a montage of techniques designed to catch and record the process of recollection"(188). As one of the leading critics of postmodernism, Linda Hutcheon, writes in her *The Poetics of Postmodernism*, "'Imaginative reconstruction' or intellectual systematizing ... is the focus of the postmodern rethinking of the problems of how we can and do come to have knowledge of the past"(92).

Hutcheon, like most literary critics who address the reconstructive approach of postmodernism to the past, focuses on history while conspicuously avoiding the obviously related issue of memory. Because of the work of historians like Hayden White, literary critics have a friendly historiographic theoretical framework which is both transportable and receptive to literary application. Psychological memory theory, as opposed to historiography, has not provided literary critics with a similar superstructure. As previously

indicated, psychologists themselves have avoided ecologically valid memory research until Neisser's relatively recent urging. As a result, the best maps for the functioning of human memory structures come from the original source, Bartlett, and Roger Schank -- not a psychologist at all, but an artificial intelligence specialist. By supplementing the already interesting on-going discussion of postmodernist reconstructions of history with the memory models of Bartlett and Schank, I hope to take the "imaginative reconstruction" approach to postmodernist literature to the logical next step: that is, exploring not only the way postmodernist literature like Ondaatje's creatively reassembles history, but the way in which the literature relates to and reveals fundamental psychological structures and processes which determine exactly how we achieve the "imaginative reconstruction" not only of public history, but the private history of personal memory.

* * *

Though memory structures and literature are implicitly connected as products of the human mind, this connection has not been explored academically in any satisfactory manner. Perhaps Leslie Mundwiler, in *Michael Ondaatje: Word, Image, Imagination*, comes closest when he tentatively comments, "Ondaatje's poetry does not (as far as I know) derive from or represent a memory system, but the structure of its imagery does bear a striking resemblance to the products of this creative mnemonics"(52). The "creative mnemonics" to which he

refers, however, are techniques of conscious and active *memorization* and exam-like methods of recall rather than experiential, episodic and unconsciously processed memories. This paucity of scholarly work in the area connecting memory and literature is not, however, a signal that the two do not reveal in themselves elements of the other. In the very paper which turned memory research towards the ecologically valid approach which could then be applied to elements of the "real world" such as art and literature, Ulric Neisser lays the groundwork for the linking of memory theory and literary texts. He sees literature as a valuable clue to the workings of memory when he points to a specific literary work as being a potential source for scientific discovery:

Esther Salaman's fascinating autobiographical book *A Collection of Moments* (1970), which describes many images of early childhood that came to her unbidden and unexpected, may be a useful source of hypotheses about spontaneous memory. ("Memory" 16)

Even if, as Neisser implies, literary critics and memory theorists can learn from each other, the literary-mnemonic theoretical ground remains inhospitably unbroken. Rather than attempting to construct a memory-based approach to literature in a theoretical vacuum, however, we can again turn to Neisser for a theoretical starting point. Much of the attention that critics of postmodernist literature devote to the issue of history can actually be transferred and translated into the realm of memory theory. Neisser points out that "[i]n a literate society, we do not often think of history as

something remembered; it is usually something written down"("Memory" 17). The classification of history as a "literary" act, therefore, is merely a Western conceit because "[i]n many parts of the world, ... history has long been the responsibility of memory specialists, or oral historians"(Neisser "Memory" 17). Because, as Neisser points out, "the relation between literacy and memory is poorly understood"("Memory" 17), I believe that many of the postmodernist critics who approach the question of memory, however briefly, retreat to more highly developed theoretical structures such as those of history and narrative which quickly subsume the problem of memory. Psychologists have been largely unable to fill this theoretical gap, and the result is that discussion focuses on historiography and narrative as products of the human mind rather than on the mental structures and processes which shape and direct those products.

Ina Ferris, for example, is a critic of Ondaatje who finds herself exploring a mnemonic question only to shift her focus almost instantly to *both* history and narrative as more comfortable issues: "Ondaatje asks not 'what happened?' but 'how is it remembered?' His interest, in other words, has now shifted from history as event to history as the narration of event"(77). Linda Hutcheon, as one of Ondaatje's and postmodernism's most astute historiographic critics, is perhaps the one who is forced to avoid the problem of memory

most explicitly. Hutcheon writes in *The Canadian Postmodern*, "the narrative voices of the writing artist-figure and the memory-ridden protagonist merge; memory and creation are more closely related than we might like to think"(100). Though she establishes this close relation, Hutcheon does not explore it further, and when she seems on the verge of breaking into the memory issue, she reverts instantly to the "historical narrative" framework of Hayden White:

There is no such thing as the reproduction of events by memory: 'As a symbolic structure, the historical narrative does not reproduce the event it describes; it tells us in what direction to think about the events'(White 1978, 52).("History" 179)

By refusing to move off the well-trodden critical ground of historiographic literature, postmodernist critics simply fulfil Neisser's contention that writing, not remembering, is the dominant structuring force in history and fiction. As Ondaatje himself says in an interview, "Writing links up one's own life with the history of our time"(Wachtel 58).

So if psychology has been slow to produce memory theory which is applicable to the "real world" and literature, and literary critics have been reluctant to engage the problem of memory in literature, what type of theoretical framework is capable of examining the relationship between human memory and postmodernist fiction like Ondaatje's? Neisser indicates in "Time Present and Time Past" that a useful and accurate model of memory should acknowledge the influence of "the present as well as the past"(548). In *Memory in the Real World*, Marjorie

Cohen describes the type of memory model that is required by any potential literary-mnemonic critic: "We need a dynamic memory system to cope with the changing circumstances and a changing physical environment"(218). Cohen's definition of memory and, therefore, her goals for a useful theory of memory, rest on a concept of memory which challenges traditional boundaries. She writes, "In the real world, memory acts as a bridge between the past, the present, and the future"(219). Working from this definition, Cohen lists the memory phenomena which need to be described and investigated by any "real world," literature-friendly, memory theory:

This integration of past, present, and future in a unified personal history is achieved by interactive processes. New memories are stored within pre-existing knowledge structures; old memories are modified by new ones; prospective plans are built out of elements abstracted from past experience.(219)

Also central to any "literary" model of memory would be the concept that the remembering organism is active in the storage, organization and metamorphosis of memories. Cohen describes this phenomenon: "some personal memories are not accurate, and, rather than being raw experiences, they incorporate the interpretations which are made with hindsight, which suggests they are reconstructed"(118). Finally, in the following passage, Cohen summarizes all the requirements of a "real world" memory theory:

Memories which are dynamic need to be assembled. Processes of transformation may be needed to rotate, align, expand, or contract the internal analogues we construct of the real world.

Processes of selection, abstraction, and generalization are needed to protect the system from overload. Hypothetical representations have to be constructed and implicit information has to be recovered by inferential processes. Complex matching processes are required to integrate new information with representations of past experience, and in order to perceive analogies between current problems and previously encountered ones.(220)

Since Cohen has established what is required of a mnemonic theory applicable to postmodernist writing like Ondaatje's, we can turn to two theories which meet those demands.

The first specific psychological theoretical framework belongs to the man whom Neisser cites as being the grandfather of useful memory theory, F.C. Bartlett. (The following description of Bartlett's ideas is extremely condensed and many more specific details will be illuminated in the body of the thesis.) Bartlett's concept of memory begins rather simply with the truism that

traces [of memory] are generally supposed to be of individual and specific events ... Since these are all stored in a single organism, they are in fact bound to be related one to another, and this gives to recall its inevitably associative character.(Bartlett 197)

Bartlett logically concludes, then, that "the past operates as an organised mass rather than as a group of elements each of which retains its specific character"(Bartlett 197). As new memories form, they "have to be regarded as constituents of living, momentary settings belonging to the organism ... and not as a number of individual events somehow strung together and stored within the organism"(201). To refer to this

"active organization of past reactions, or past experiences, which must always be supposed to be operating in any well-adapted organic response"(201), Bartlett uses the term "schema." The result of these multiple "schemes" is that "all the past operates *en masse*, and the series is of greater weight than its elements(301) because of the multi-faceted organizational powers of the schema. Schemes supersede the original order of occurrence of the actual events as people learn "how to utilise the constituents of [their] own 'schemes'"(301). The ultimate result of active schemes is that

[t]here are changes in order of sequence, changes of direction, of complexity of structure, of significance, which are not only consistent with subjectively satisfactory recall, but are also perfectly able to meet the objective demands of the immediate situation.(Bartlett 312)

This type of "dynamic memory" is, not coincidentally, the title of the book from which our second model of memory is taken.

Six decades after the publication of Bartlett's *Remembering*, Roger Schank formulated an interconnected series of memory theories which picked up where Bartlett had left off. Schank, with R.P. Abelson, devised the concept of the "script," which is much like Bartlett's schema, in that scripts "provide connectivity"(Schank & Abelson 40) among memories. The idea of scripts comes out of Schank's observation that "[o]ur dynamic memories seem to organize themselves in such a way as to be able to adjust their initial

encodings of the world to reflect growth and new understanding"(Schank 2). Since the way we understand our environment and ourselves "is affected by what is in our memories"(Schank 4), the script becomes extremely important because it provides "a kind of data structure that [is] useful in the processing of text to the extent that it direct[s] the inference process and tie[s] together pieces of input"(Schank 3). This "structure," like Bartlett's schema, "is an interconnected whole, and what is in one slot affects what can be in another"(Schank & Abelson 41). This is the associative, inter-dependent nature of memory which produces the type of fragmented, yet connected, postmodernist writing which dominates Ondaatje's fiction.

Schank's theories focus most explicitly on the "high level structures that develop in ... memories"(Schank 4). These

develop because they address the needs that arise during processing by the understander. That is, what an understander needs to do to process the experiences he has will affect the development of structures in his memory.(Schank 4)

The most important aspect of this facet of Schank's theory in relation to postmodernist literature is the fact that these "general memory structures are used for reconstruction" (Schank 14, *my italics*) and that understanders are "constantly modifying ... general structures, which ... is what we mean by a dynamic memory"(Schank 14). These are two of the most significant influences of memory processes that we can trace

through Ondaatje's fiction. Schank emphasizes that the "key to understanding is this continual creation of new high level structures" which "reorganize information we have stored indefinitely"(Schank 81). As Schank writes, "The key point here is that scripts are active memory structures"(Schank 82, *my italics*). Schank describes the high-level memory structure which facilitates this active relationship of scripts as a "memory organization packet [MOP]"(Schank 83). "A MOP processes new inputs by taking the aspects of those inputs that relate to the MOP and interpreting those aspects in terms of the past experience most closely related to them"(Schank 84). MOPs are not, in themselves, memories. "Rather, they organize scenes that contain memories"(Schank 95), much like the role of the narrative structure in a fragmented, episodic postmodernist work of literature like *Coming Through Slaughter* or *In the Skin of a Lion*. Two other aspects of the MOP which influence Ondaatje's brand of postmodernist literature involve the alteration and distortion of the raw event through its processing by memory. MOPs, though efficient memory structure/processes, can cause inaccuracies in recollection because "sharing memory structures [as several scripts do under one MOP] ... creates possibilities for memory confusion"(Schank 88). Second, and more important in Ondaatje's work, is the way in which "MOPs are responsible for filling in implicit information about what events must have happened but were unstated"(Schank 84). Because Ondaatje, in

each of the four works I will examine, works from a fragmented and gap-filled original historical "text," he must create implicit events, emotions, characters and thoughts, much the same way a MOP fills in gaps in memory. Ondaatje ultimately fills these gaps with his most intensely artistic moments, thus making the absences in the textual traces of the past the central aspects of the four texts involved in this study.

While each body chapter of this thesis will examine the role of history, myth and memory in one of Michael Ondaatje's four major fiction works, the final chapter of this thesis will bring together *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, *Coming Through Slaughter*, *In the Skin of a Lion* and *The English Patient* in an intertextual analysis which will engage Neisser's ideas of ecological validity, as well as Bartlett's schema and Schank's scripts and MOPs. Many critics, including Alice VanWart and Sam Solecki, have noticed and discussed briefly the intertextual relationships and evolution of Ondaatje's fiction. Many themes, ideas, techniques and concepts which originate in *The Collected Works* evolve uniformly and revealingly towards *The English Patient*. In a truly postmodernist way, Ondaatje's works of fiction not only mirror the psychological concepts of the schema and script within each individual text, but the "ecological validity" of Ondaatje's fiction and real world memory theory breaks the boundaries of the single text and demands an intertextual analysis. This unified critical approach, which brings

together both psychological and literary theory, will provide not only a fresh perspective on Ondaatje's work, but clues as to how we, as readers and writers, approach literature through the mnemonic structures of the human mind.

CHAPTER ONE: *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*

Since his birth on November 23, 1859, the events of William H. Bonney's life have been shifted, shaped, distorted and embellished by the forces of history, gossip, legend and art to create the concept we know today as "Billy the Kid." Ondaatje creates his own eddies and currents in Billy's fluid tradition with the 1970 long poem, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. A poem filled with failed and deconstructed attempts at concrete empiricism, *The Collected Works* defies an authoritative, definitive form of history. The fragmented text which grows out of this decentralized and plural view of the past offers a postmodernist challenge to any single voice. These fragments, by definition, leave gaps which invite the free play of the characters, readers and poet. As Ondaatje moves within the spaces in and around "objective" history, he infuses areas of factual absence with imagination and passion, thus enlivening the raw historical text with the aesthetic and emotional power of artistic creation. Throughout this metamorphosis from historical record to artistic creation, the structures and processes of human memory describe and explain Ondaatje's artistic decisions and his readers' reactions to them.

In order to penetrate and alter a previously existing text, whether it be historic, literary or mnemonic, readers must be able to challenge, as Ondaatje does, the concept of

the authorial monolith. Roland Barthes discusses the way in which "[t]he author in Western culture is an authority because in the prevailing literary ideology he functions as a barrier against interpretation: the text cannot mean what he did not consciously want it to mean"(Wasserman 101). This authoritative tradition, however, is not unassailable. Barthes proposes that the author "is not the only figure of authority: ... any idea or agency that can be presented as the signified of a text, can be invoked" as an authority (Wasserman 101). In order to accommodate Ondaatje's role as an active reader of not only the historical text, but also the text of memory, as well as his appeal to the power of his readers' imaginations, Ondaatje dissolves his own authorial power. Ajay Heble describes this process in "Michael Ondaatje and the Problem of History": "The final lines of *Billy the Kid* signal Ondaatje's entry into the text and contain an implicit suggestion that even the author cannot finally make unambiguous sense of what he has just written"(109). Returning to Barthes, Michael Moriarty writes about Barthes's desire, which he expresses in "La Mort de l'auteur," that the author not be the only locus of interpretive power. Barthes tries to "combat the attempt to set a *priori* limits on interpretation"(Moriarty 2). Simply stated, "no [one single] interpretation can claim authority"(Moriarty 3). The reader should have the freedom, as s/he does in both the record of the past (whether in memory, myth or history) and Ondaatje's

text, to read that text "without the inscription of the Father [author]"(Barthes "From Work" 1008).

The disruption of traditional, monolithic authority which underlies Ondaatje's text manifests itself in *The Collected Works* as failed and undercut attempts at fixing objectively empirical facts and truth. Billy seems to welcome an objective retelling of his life and even suggests that there is a simple key which will yield precious, undeniable truth: "Not a story about me through their eyes then. Find the beginning, the slight silver key to unlock it, to dig it out"(20). This quest for empiricism, however, is immediately disrupted by the next image, one of confusion and aimless searching: "Here then is a maze to begin, be in"(20). Billy's opening linguistic "work" attempts to achieve some sort of quantifiable reality as he enumerates "the killed" in a list(6). The insertion, however, of the parenthetical comment "(behind a very safe rock)" deconstructs the supposed truth of the statement, "5 Indians [killed] in self defence"(6). Later in the poem, more errors in this seemingly factual list become apparent. Both Gregory, whose death is vividly described only nine pages later, and "Young Bell" are careless omissions from Billy's list. When Ondaatje does offer what appears, superficially, to be an excellent opportunity for achieving empirical, verifiable truth, the results are unsatisfying. The "EXCLUSIVE JAIL INTERVIEW" in the *Texas Star* promises a journalistic revelation of the facts regarding the much-

mythologized (even in his own time) Billy the Kid. The paper announces the potential for revelation with the bold declaration, "THE KID TELLS ALL"(81). This grandiose promise, however, like most other attempts to procure the distilled and unadulterated "truth" in *The Collected Works*, fails. The only concrete truths which are established are trivial and waste the "exclusive" opportunity:

I: Mr. Bonney, I am from the *Texas Star*. You are how old?
 B: 21.
 I: When is your birthday?
 B: November 23rd.(81)

These questions do not probe any sort of elusive truth, but settle for the only type of "verifiable fact" Ondaatje allows into his text, the trivial.

The imperfections of memory also distort efforts to satisfy what Stephen Scobie calls the "obsession with fixing things"("Legend" 15). Garrett admits the difficulty inherent in building a story like Billy's through the retrospective medium of memory when he says of Billy's escape from prison, "And it is now in retrospect difficult to describe"(86). When Billy recounts the wording of his death sentence, it initially appears to be a direct quotation, the medium which Roland Barthes claims "connects Text to history"(Moriarty 147). In actual fact, however, the repetition of the word "dead" reveals that what seems to be an objective quotation is actually a memory which has been altered to emphasize what is important to the remembering subject:

It is the order of the court that you
 be taken to Lincoln and confined to
 jail until May 13th and that on that
 day between the hours of sunrise and
 noon you be hanged on the gallows
 until you are dead dead dead
 And may God have mercy on your
 soul

said Judge Warren H. Bristol (80)

Another example of the distorting power of memory involves one
 of the most discussed passages from *The Collected Works*:

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

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

Roger Schank would describe this strangely tangled group of
 lines as memory confusion caused by a shared MOP. In Billy's
 case, a MOP, one dealing with the particular sensation derived
 from inserting his hand into both a man's stomach and luke
 warm tea, contains two memories which flow together,
 disrupting any possibility of accurately relaying either
 incident as it actually happened. Such are the obstacles
 which Ondaatje's characters face in reconstructing the past.

Scripts, as defined by Schank's work, may be effective
 tools for increasing the efficiency of human memory, but they
 also detract from our ability to recall and reproduce some
 specific events which are part of established patterns of

behaviour. In *The Collected Works*, Billy especially tends to remember certain events and patterns of events through the use of scripts. As a result, Billy's retelling of these events is less recreation than his "private expectations about how things proceed in [his] life on a day to day or minute to minute basis"(Schank 80). Billy describes events at the Chisums' ranch in two pages of explicitly scriptual terms:

On weekdays anyway, she'd sit like that on the bed, the sheet tight around her top and brought down to her belly, her legs having to keep themselves warm. ... She would get up and after a breakfast that she would eat wandering around the house slowly, she would begin the work. Keeping the books, dusting his reading books, filling the lamps in the afternoon - (33)

This script, "a predetermined, stereotyped sequence of actions that defines a well-known situation"(Schank & Abelson 44), is finally interrupted by the accuracy of specific recall as Billy realizes the inaccuracy of script-aided generalization: "No I forgot, she had stopped that now. She left the paraffin in the lamps; instead had had John build shutters for every door and window, every hole in the wall"(33). Scripts, because of their amalgamation of the usual, identify and perhaps over-emphasize the unusual when it does occur. Describing activities at the Chisums' ranch again, Billy does not describe any specific evening, but rather a regular pattern, a script:

At 1 or 2 then Sallie would get up and bring me the cat and leave to make coffee and get ready for bed. And come back with the three cups and changed into her nightgown, always yellow or white with fabulous bows at her shoulders and the front of her neck.(67)

The only detailed memory that Billy recalls from that specific evening is the one which does not fit the script: "The thing here is to explain the difference of this evening. That in fact the Chisum verandah is crowded"(67). Though this emphasis on the crowded verandah identifies what is important to both Billy's memory and Ondaatje's story, it does not necessarily reflect the objective truth of the evening. The script seems to be an effective literary tool which allows the author to create an emphasis which is not necessarily an exact recreation of an event, while making that emphasis seem natural because it grows from a phenomenon inherent in human memory processes.

Lacking a unified, empirical reality to structure the poem, *The Collected Works* becomes, in the words of Alice VanWart, "a series of shots with the lenses all wide open to admit a multiplicity of impressions"(16). Ondaatje says in an interview with Eleanor Wachtel, "I don't believe stories are told from A to Z anymore, or if they are, they become very ponderous. ... We discover stories in a different way"(59). As a result of this view, "Ondaatje fragments structure and time as he selects, reworks, and changes facts in order to transcend the facts"(VanWart 7). In fact, Perry Nodelman describes *The Collected Works* as "an album, organized according to a logic that is not chronological"(68). This structure means that the reader receives Billy's story in the same way Tom O'Folliard receives his life-saving water, "drop

by drop"(51). Events are replayed and revised, and, as Anne Blott discusses, events such as Charlie Bowdre's death, which is described three separate times, are played out in different contexts each time they appear(198). Brian McHale, in *Postmodernist Fiction*, says that this type of structure "seeks to foreground the seam [between historical reality and fiction] by making the transition from one realm to the other as jarring as possible"(90). This, however, is not the case in *The Collected Works*. Critics like Stephen Tatum recognize the fragmented structure as constructive rather than jarring: "It is only by experiencing the Kid from all these angles that we can return to the blank where the photograph should be [on the poem's first page] and fill it in"(145). These fragments, in fact, "become increasingly interwoven"(VanWart 9), forming a text which Barthes would describe as "a tissue, a woven fabric"("From Work" 1008). Nodelman uses the metaphor of the static frames of a film blending together in motion: "In the same way, Ondaatje's collection of still photographs of Billy the Kid comes together as a sequence to create a moving picture of a convincing human being"(78).

If Ondaatje's critics are correct in their assertions that the fragmented text of *The Collected Works* is actually unified, how does the reader achieve and perceive this unity? The answer could lie in our memory structures. Though textual fragments appear unnatural on paper because of the plainly chronological tradition of "classics" upon which most of us

were weaned, Ondaatje's chaotic structure is actually the way we remember our own pasts. Schank theorizes about a high-level memory structure called thematic organization points (TOP). TOPs allow us to organize memories according to themes like failure, pride or deception rather than by chronology or geography (Cohen 116). "These ... structures allow us to recognize similarities and analogies between superficially quite different events" (Cohen 116). When an author like Ondaatje produces fragmented texts like *The Collected Works* or *Coming Through Slaughter*, therefore, readers are able not only to identify the thematic unity of the work, but also feel comfortable with this type of text because it reflects the organization of their own personal histories.

Just as the poem may seem to be fragmented but is, in fact, thematically unified, the poem may also seem separate from established history and myth, but is actually part of that existing system. By revealing, and in fact revelling in, the discrepancy between fact and myth in *The Collected Works*, Ondaatje announces that he is aware that he is working within Billy's established factual-mythical system. Manina Jones, in "Scripting the Docudrama," actually refers to the existence of this pre-established context as "the advantage of working with a figure of legend" (28). Robert Kelly, in his article about the English-Canadian long poem, writes that the blank "photograph" at the opening of *The Collected Works* represents the poet's "refusal ... to be dependent on a ... conventional

view of Billy" like that provided by mythology(28). Perhaps Ondaatje avoids the conventional view because, as Stephen Scobie writes in "Two Authors in Search of a Character", the "historical facts about Billy have been buried under a vast accretion of legend"(186). Ondaatje seems to delight in revealing (or even creating) this discrepancy between fact and myth. Sallie Chisum, who, because of Billy's mythical reputation, was "*frightened ... the first time he came*"(30), later reveals what she considers to be the truth beneath the Billy myth:

A COURTEOUS LITTLE GENTLEMAN:

*I suppose it sounds absurd to speak
of such a character as a gentleman,
but from beginning to end
of our long relationship,
in all his personal relations with me,
he was the pink of politeness
and as courteous a little gentleman
as I ever met.(87)*

This supports Sallie's earlier recollection of Billy when she contrasts his legendary killer's status with the real, observable person:

*I was sitting in the living room
when word was brought he had arrived.
I felt panic. I pictured him
in all the evil ugliness
of a bloodthirsty ogre.
I half expected he would slit my throat
if he didnt like my looks. ...*

*I stretched out my hand automatically to him,
and he grasped it in a hand as small as my own (52)*

Paulita Maxwell also questions the validity of myth when she denies an "*old story that identifies me as Billy the Kid's*

sweetheart"(96). Billy himself identifies the gulf between empirical fact and false creation: "I could only be arrested if they had proof, definite proof, not just stories"(81). Ondaatje and his characters obviously recognize that myth is, as Barthes notes, an attempt "to pass off an arbitrary sign as a natural, analogical, one"(Wasserman 24). Ondaatje does not, however, discard the power of myth because, though he sees and exploits its arbitrary nature, he also has to work within and against the Billy myth which he inherits. This myth, regardless of its truth or lack thereof, is a very real factor which exerts considerable force on Ondaatje's portrayal of Billy. Barthes discusses the way in which myth sprouts arbitrarily, but "once established, that very system or configuration of signs exists as a distinctive entity that can be studied within the specific temporal and spatial elements of its occurrence"(Ungar & McGraw xiii). Ondaatje studies the existing myth in this way, reveals its weaknesses, and then, acknowledging the power of legend, creates his own myth.

Memory and literary theory provide remarkably similar explanations of the way in which a work like Ondaatje's functions within the history, memories and traditions it inherits. T.S. Eliot writes of literature:

The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is the conformity between the old and the new.(467)

Not only does this explain the way in which *The Collected Works* relates to literature in general and Billy's existing history and mythology specifically, it also helps explain the way the individual fragments within the text relate to each other. The new work or the most recent fragment adds a new angle, a new layer of potential meaning, to the concept of Billy which was, previous to the addition of the new work or fragment, "complete" but not total. Bartlett, a contemporary of Eliot, describes memory in much the same way Eliot approaches literature. In *Remembering*, Bartlett quotes Sir Henry Head: "Every recognizable change enters into the consciousness already charged with its relation to something that has gone before"(199). Bartlett's description of the memory "schema" helps explain not only how *The Collected Works* adds to the history and mythology of Billy without denying the validity of the previously existing system, but also how the fragments of the text work together in an additive, rather than destructive, manner. According to Bartlett, the concept of the schema

suggests some persistent, but fragmentary, 'form of arrangement', and it does not indicate what is very essential to the whole notion, that the organised mass results of past changes of position and posture are actively *doing* something all the time; are, so to speak, carried along with us, complete, though developing, from moment to moment.(201)

Bartlett and Eliot, though they write about memory and literature respectively, identify the same complex human cognitive processes. Ondaatje's *Collected Works* reflects

these processes in both its internal structure and its relationship to the tradition within which it operates. Both the individual text and the history-mythology are "complete, though developing, from moment to moment."

Ondaatje's awareness of his historical and mythological context allows him to see the incompleteness of either history or myth on its own. Stephen Tatum writes in *Inventing Billy the Kid* that "[p]oets like ... Ondaatje ... deny that the Kid can be captured and understood by either history or legend, and in that denial they subvert traditional beliefs about knowledge and truth"(142). The belief that history and myth must work together to form a synthesis of meanings is supported by the theories of Roland Barthes: "traditional [singular] literary history-biography-criticism ... is produced by denying the life of its subject"(Wasserman 11). The singular function of either myth or history provides meaning only in the telegraphic manner in which John Chisum initially receives word of Livingstone's fate: "I got a note from another friend ... and he said Livingstone ... had been eaten by his dogs. It was a postcard and it didnt say anymore"(60). This absence of complete information leads to misinterpretation, as we see in a brilliant, two-layered image in *The Collected Works*: "One of the cages had a huge owl. It was vast. All I could see were its eyes - at least 8" apart. The next morning however, it turned out to be two owls, both blind in one eye"(37). In the dark, receiving only partial

information, Billy misinterprets the two owl eyes he sees. In the light, he can see the two eyes for what they are: two half-sighted owls, perhaps representing myth and history, which only together form one "vast" owl, one vast story. By acknowledging and incorporating both history and myth, *The Collected Works* functions, in one respect, like a MOP. MOPs connect separate memory systems by identifying and exploiting nodes of interaction. Ondaatje's text does the same thing; it brings Billy's history and myth together to speak to each other by concentrating on certain shared characteristics such as their mutability, subjectivity and fragmentary natures.

If Ondaatje engages both of these figurative "owls," he must accommodate history into *The Collected Works* without betraying the facts to a degree which would render his text strictly mythological. Although, as Scobie points out, Ondaatje's intention is not to produce total historical accuracy ("Two Authors" 187), history and historical characters are the seeds of the work. Barthes formulates an approach to this type of situation in which the author is both grounded in history and fighting against it. Wasserman writes that, though the author should enjoy a liberal amount of play with history, "the abstraction from history must not be total" (24). "The concepts [in the work of historical fiction] are reactions to history, rather than accurate reflections of it; ironically, one of the effects of history is to conceal its own workings" (Wasserman 24). Ondaatje, therefore, looks for

areas which are concealed by/from history and fills those areas with his fiction:

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)

The photograph of Billy which he describes here can be seen as a representation of the way Ondaatje and Barthes perceive history. History, in this case, tells us that "there was a white block down the fountain road"; that is all we see from a strictly historical perspective. The story behind that block, however, is a space of free play for the historical author/mythologist. Ondaatje finds these concealed areas in history and exploits them as the source and locus of his fiction. Here again, Ondaatje's poem serves a purpose much like that of a MOP. According to Schank, "MOPs are responsible for filling in implicit information about what events must have happened but were unstated"(84). *The Collected Works* fills in implicit information about what events, thoughts and emotions *could* and *might* have happened, but are unstated by the "white blocks" in the historical record.

Ondaatje's approach to the writing and rewriting of history emphasizes the creativity which authors can project retroactively into the events and characters of the past. Heble claims that "Ondaatje wants us to realize that history remains [only] a verbal construct whose meaning changes as

persons and events are recontextualized and rewritten"(100). This type of interactive approach to history facilitates the destruction of the barriers to the creative rewriting of history. The resulting history, as Linda Hutcheon writes in *The Canadian Postmodern*, "is a lived experience for both reader and writer"(86). In fact, Douglas Barbour points out in *Michael Ondaatje* that the lexical sounds in *The Collected Works*, such as "hisssssssssss sssssssssssssssss"(90) and "MMMMmmmmmm"(92), make the text "a kind of performance"(65). Seemingly static elements of the past like the photograph of Billy become dynamic pieces of the present once Ondaatje engages them in his poem: "Only now, with the red dirt, water started dripping out of the photo"(50). The immediacy of this type of (re)lived experience is evident; as Hutcheon continues, "In *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* Ondaatje literally inserts himself into Billy's textual world in the final photograph of himself as a child in a cowboy outfit"(86). This photograph, combined with the book's last poem which I read as being narrated by Ondaatje himself, makes the present an explicit part of the pseudo-historical document which is *The Collected Works*. Past and present interact and co-exist. In fact, Hutcheon indicates that history, almost by definition, exists in the present: "History does not so much say what the past was; rather, it says what it is still possible to know - and thus represent - of it"(Politics 87). Alan Baddeley indicates that "episodic memory in general

allows one perhaps to 're-experience' the past"(13). *The Collected Works'* fragmented, episodic text provides its readers exactly that type of "re-experience." Stephen Tatum, in *Inventing Billy the Kid*, stating even more emphatically the interaction of the past and present, writes, "The Kid is only known in the present, immediate moment of creation"(150). In this view, both memory and Ondaatje's postmodernist writing function much like performative verbs which call into existence their own subjects as the word and/or story is spoken, or, in Ondaatje's case, read.

Because the (re)creators in the present are responsible, in a sense, for the existence of the past, the poem emphasizes the reconstruction of memories and history. The blank square which opens the poem emphasizes the importance of construction by forcing the reader to assemble his/her own picture in order to fill the space allotted to a definitive picture of Billy. Billy himself explicitly constructs memories rather than simply replaying them:

Yes. In white long dresses in the dark house, the large bones somehow taking on the quietness of the house. Yes I remember. After burning my legs in the fire and I came to their house, it must have been my second visit and Sallie had begun using the shutters at eleven.(33)

Still describing his treatment for burns, Billy again brings his memories into the narrative present through reconstructive story-telling: "And Sallie I suppose taking the tent sheet off my legs each morning once the shutters closed. No. Again. Sallie approaching from the far end of the room like some

ghost"(34). Memory theory reveals another example of the type of reconstructive memory which indicates the importance of the present to the past. Cohen refers to an experiment conducted by Neisser and a colleague which

found that when people examined their own memories, some were remembered from the original viewpoint of the experiencer, but a large number of memories seemed like viewing the event from the outside, from the point of view of an external observer. These 'observer' memories cannot be copies of the original perception and must have been reconstructed.(118)

The best example of this type of externally remembered, and therefore reconstructed, memory occurs as Billy describes Garrett, his friends and a dog coming down the street, but then the passage concludes, "All this I would have seen if I was on the roof looking"(46). Memories like this reveal the extent to which the past in *The Collected Works* is constructed to exist in the present.

In *The Canadian Postmodern*, Linda Hutcheon provides a model and terminology for this interactive relationship of art and history. She sees in works like Ondaatje's "a desire to record and invent [in] a typically postmodern paradox"(19). According to Hutcheon, this paradox is most typical of a literary form she calls "historiographic metafiction - fiction that is intensely, self-reflexively art, but also grounded in historical, social and political realities"(Canadian 13). As we see in *The Collected Works*, with Ondaatje's explicit presence at the end of the poem (and there are many other examples as well), Ondaatje's book has the "attention to the

processes of writing, reading, and interpreting"(Hutcheon *Canadian* 13) which marks the difference between a historical novel and a work of historiographic metafiction. Hutcheon describes the interplay we have already seen in Ondaatje's poem between the past and present in terms of historiographic metafiction: "it is a critical counterpointing of dialogue between the 'texts' of both history and art, done in such a way that it does not deny the existence or significance of either"(Canadian 14). Historiographic metafiction, then, emphasizes the role of the author/(re)creator as one which "is (equally) to narrate [and] to re-present by means of selection and interpretation"(Hutcheon *Canadian* 66).

Both Barthes and Tatum offer descriptions of the way Ondaatje subjectively modifies the events and characters of the past by bringing them into the present. Wasserman describes two different portrayals of the subject of his book, Roland Barthes, by describing two different Barthes: "One of these Barthes is conceived of as 'text', a formal object to be read; the other quite literally 'writes' that object, 'covers' it with a discourse of his own"(15). This description is especially applicable to *The Collected Works*. One artist, Billy, is the formal object to be read, while the other artist, Ondaatje (and/or Ondaatje's readers) writes over Billy in his own discourse, covering Billy, but not completely. This is similar to the dynamic concept of history, memory and tradition that Eliot and Bartlett describe, and which is also

supported by Schank, who states that humans "continue to reorganize information we have stored indefinitely"(81). This process of palimpsestic writing, according to Wasserman's account of Barthes's theories, "questions and attempts to renegotiate its own relationship with history"(41). Tatum sees this renegotiation as subverting "the externals of historical investigation by creating a Billy who exists within the poet's mind"(143). Though I agree that Billy exists primarily in the poet's mind, the historio-mythical Billy is so strong that his presence permeates the entire work and, therefore, is never totally subverted. Perhaps the best illustration of the subjectivity at play in *The Collected Works* comes from Barthes, whose analogy describes Ondaatje's relationship to history and mythology, Billy's relationship to his environment, and the reader's relationship to Ondaatje's text. To Barthes, each of these three artist figures plays "the Text in the musical sense of the term"("From Work" 1009). This illustration fits perfectly because it allows for the pre-existence of an independent "text" which is then actively rendered and interpreted by the artist.

With the subjectively creative role of the artist established in relation to history, the question waits to be asked: Does Ondaatje impose a specific artistic agenda on the history and historical figures he engages? The simple answer is that Ondaatje seeks to instill imagination in the gaps of history signified by Billy's "white block." Linda Hutcheon

claims that "[h]istoriographic metafiction does not pretend to reproduce events, but to direct us, instead, to facts, or to new directions in which to think about events"(*Poetics* 154). In *The Politics of Postmodernism*, she discusses the "distinction between the brute events of the past and the historical facts we construct out of them. Facts are events to which we have given meaning"(57). With an interesting choice of words, Hutcheon writes, "It is historiography's explanatory and narrative emplotments of past events that construct what we consider historical facts"(*Poetics* 92). The interesting aspect of her diction is that Hayden White, in "Historical Text as Literary Artifact," uses the term "emplotment" to refer to the process of assigning meaning to bare events. Bartlett, too, has his own term for Hutcheon's process of infusing events with facts. He uses the term "attitude" to refer to "a complex psychological state or process" like that which would be part of facts, but not simple events. According to Hutcheon, "[d]ifferent historical perspectives therefore derive different facts from the same events [or same characters]"(*Politics* 57).

Ondaatje's historical perspective, then, treats imagination as the fact derived from the events; imagination is what Ondaatje "give[s] meaning." The infusion of imagination into the historical text, and specifically Billy, is what Stephen Scobie is referring to, probably unknowingly, when he writes, "Ondaatje's book fixes a certain view of the

kid into an intense, fully realized image"("Two Authors" 191). Ondaatje's "fully realized" Billy is designed to leave the reader, in Garrett's words, "seduced ... by imagination"(43). Hutcheon indicates that in "historiographic metafiction we are lured into a world of imagination only to be confronted with the world of history"(Canadian 17). Ondaatje inverts this pattern by confronting and fusing the history of Billy the Kid with imagination, with the *facts*, because, to Ondaatje, "Billy's story cannot be told without some attempt to account for Billy's imagination"(Heble 106).

In the paucity of "truth" about Billy, Ondaatje probes the gaps in the history and the legend. These gaps are what Ondaatje eventually fills with his own *facts*, imagination. / The spaces in the truth are, to Ondaatje, physical absences: "Imagine if you dug him up and brought him out. You'd see very little"(97). As Scobie writes, "Ondaatje's Billy does not have the substantiality of history; his history is changed and fashioned into something else: legend, the aesthetic image in all its depth and detail, its vividness and force"("Two Authors" 205). Behind the physical "white block," Ondaatje projects, as Dennis Lee writes in "Savage Fields," "meditations on nature and violence which are not even conjectural biography"(166). Ondaatje makes these imaginative meditations the fillers of the gaps in history and thus, the true subjects of his poem. As Tatum indicates, plot and events become secondary: "By breaking up a linear sequence of

ideas and images [Ondaatje] force[s] us to concentrate on the uniqueness of each moment during the experience"(154), thus emphasizing internal movement over spatial or temporal drama.

What seems to interest Ondaatje particularly about all of the subjects of his revised historical text is the emotional space which goes unexpressed in conventional history. Tatum writes that

Ondaatje solves the problem of ... history's ... concentration on exteriors quite simply by creating the Kid from the inside out, by filtering experience through the Kid's consciousness (149)

and, therefore, his imagination. Billy's description of Boot Hill enumerates hundreds of acts of violence as plainly as a grocery list and then ends with two powerful lines which alert the reader to Ondaatje's real interest, the unexpressed emotional impact of all that violence: "In Boot Hill there are only two graves that belong to women/ and they are the only known suicides in that graveyard"(9). Heble sums up Ondaatje's focus well: "Ondaatje suggests a complexity of the mind which is either misrepresented or lost in most factual interpretations of Billy's life"(106). For Ondaatje, the way into those misrepresented and lost areas is through Billy's imagination.

This emphasis on Billy's imagination and the intimacy it brings to the reader connect, through memory theory, back to Ondaatje's fragmented text. Cohen writes about a psychologist named Tulving who theorizes that "*episodic* memory consists of personal experiences, and the specific objects, people, and

events that have been experienced at a particular time and place"(114). Implicit in Tulving's theory is that personal, intimate memories are episodic, while chronological narrative order is an externally-imposed convention which signals a distance from the remembered material. Ondaatje, therefore, brings his readers deep into the fictional psyche of his main character by not only infusing Billy with the imagination and emotions which conventional history ignores, but by employing narrative structures which imitate personal mnemonic processes. The artistic creation strips away the veneer of historiographical objectivity and invites the reader into the intimately subjective realm of memory.

CHAPTER TWO: *Coming Through Slaughter*

As he does in *The Collected Works*, Ondaatje builds the fiction of *Coming Through Slaughter* on and among the shreds and shards of history, mythology and legend. Buddy Bolden leaves the same sort of tantalizingly incomplete clues as to his "true" self as Billy the Kid. Ondaatje examines and reveals the impossibility of an objective truth about Bolden, but sees this elusive truth as being not only the product of temporal distance and poor record-keeping, but also as a lack of "truth" within Buddy, a character Ondaatje portrays as lacking a tangible identity even in his own lifetime. Capitalizing on the gaps in Buddy's historical identity, Ondaatje penetrates Buddy's character with his own imagination, infusing his historio-mythic character with not simply an imagination, as is the case with Billy the Kid, but rather, *his own* imagination. Though this tangle of history, myth and imagination may seem chaotic, Ondaatje's prose poetics create an order which resembles the non-linear organization of theoretical memory structures. These structures animate the pieces of Buddy and the fragments of the text, "playing" the pieces like musical instruments in order to revive Buddy and infuse him into the present as Ondaatje injects himself and his readers into the traces of the past.

Throughout *Coming Through Slaughter*, Ondaatje emphasizes

the uncertain and hollow nature of the historical information from which he constructs his fiction. As a researcher, fan and author, Ondaatje writes to Bolden, "you removed yourself from the 20th century game of fame, the rest of your life a desert of facts"(*Slaughter* 134). Buddy's self-erasure from the record of fame leaves only, as Nancy Bjerring notes, evidence and traces of Buddy which are "inevitably second-hand, fragmentary, inaccurate, subjective, or absent"(331). In fact, Buddy, though a legendary musician, "was never recorded. He stayed away while others moved into wax history, electronic history"(*Slaughter* 37); the most important record of Buddy, that of his music, never existed. Even Buddy's environment seems to repel history. Ondaatje writes of Bolden's neighbourhood, "But here there is little recorded history"(8), "History was slow here"(9) and even "the various homes of Bolden, still here today, [are] away from the recorded history"(10). This uncertain historical framework turns the author-researcher towards the only traces of the character he can find, those in casual texts of the past. As Linda Hutcheon indicates, this phenomenon is characteristic of "historiographic metafiction [in which] there is ... an acknowledgement that we know [the characters of the past] only from their textualized traces in history"("History" 179).

"Textualized traces" are all that Ondaatje has of Bolden and his environment, so the author enters his main character through the largely unsatisfying and incomplete vehicle of the

document. Ondaatje recognizes and, in fact, capitalizes on, the fact that these documents cannot directly reclaim the past. Hutcheon writes in *The Politics of Postmodernism*, "The document can no longer pretend to be a transparent means to a past event; it is instead the textually transformed trace of that past"(87). The past, even if it is more completely recorded than Bolden's, is always non-transferable to the present: "Historians never seize the event directly and entirely, only incompletely and laterally - through documents" (*Politics* 87). Buddy's broadsheet, *The Cricket*, according to Bjerring, "serves as a metaphor for the narrator's search"(331) for Bolden among the traces of history and the inanimate documents. Ondaatje describes *The Cricket* as "unedited"(13) and respecting equally "stray facts, manic theories, and well-told lies"(24). Naomi Jacobs describes the way this broadsheet "briefly mak[es] sense of situations that would have changed again by the next issue of the paper"(14). In researching Bolden, Ondaatje must work within a *Cricket*-like historical stew which he describes, in reference to *The Cricket*, as a "pail of sub-history"(24). This unedited sub-history acts like random memories without the organizing influence of a MOP or schema. Ondaatje's fiction takes the drifting pieces of history, and by imposing the unifying artistic vision which I will examine later in this chapter, orders and organizes the past, as well as the present, in a sort of literary MOP.

As in *The Collected Works*, the uncertain historical backgrounds of the characters and environment manifest themselves in the actual text of *Coming Through Slaughter*. Every effort at cataloguing, recording and preserving information about Bolden and the people and culture around him seems doomed to wash away and be covered over like the Mississippi delta. Bjerring acknowledges the way in which, despite the knowledge of ultimate futility, characters, especially the narrator, continue to search and thirst for some sort of definitively accurate record:

The narrator ... although he renounces the possibility of ever establishing the "true story" of Buddy's disappearance, temporary silence, reappearance, and ultimate silence, ransacks archives to assemble documents and transcripts of eyewitness accounts, visits the "scene of the crime," even takes photographs of the landscape.(331)

Webb, also an explicit researcher figure, realizes the impossibility of acquiring total knowledge, as he thinks to himself, "There were things Bellocq hadn't told him"(56). When Bolden says, "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"(106), he seems to be mocking the attempts of external labellers to capture any sort of truth. He realizes that no collection of labels, which is largely what historical records tend to be, is capable of encapsulating a person or experience. Tangible attempts at providing definitive records prove, in *Coming Through Slaughter*, to be as temporary and transitory as money

in a pocket: "The Blue Book ["which listed every whore in New Orleans"] and similar guides listed everything, and at any of the mansions you could go in with money and come out broke"(9). No matter how much information or money is available, time will wash it away. Even the official records which Ondaatje offers at the end of the novel, perhaps as a concrete antidote to his speculative fiction, are fraught with uncertainty: "CHARLES 'BUDDY' BOLDEN/ Born 1876? A Baptist. Name is not French or Spanish"(132).

Just as these official records seem to promise an empirical reality which they cannot deliver, photography functions the same way in Ondaatje's novel. What we normally regard as frozen reality or a "slice of life" actually proves to be distorting and unobjective. When Ondaatje evokes the power of the photograph to help construct an image of Bolden, Ondaatje tells his readers, "This is what you see"(66). What you see, however, is nothing more than a list of names attached to a list of instruments. In fact, even as a conduit of that simple and basic amount of information, the "photograph ... is not good or precise, partly because the print was found after the fire"(66). The forces of time, here represented by the fire, are always eroding the documents of the past. Even Bellocq the photographer, who, of all people, should have the greatest faith in the power of the photograph, seems, in the words of Steven Heighton, "to sense that his photographs fail in some fundamental way, that despite their

merits they are too static, too lifeless, for he slashes them with a knife"(234). In fact, Heighton claims that Bellocq's suicide is the result of the inability of photography to capture the living flesh: "Unable to make the flesh Word through his art ... Bellocq decides to kill himself"(234). Given the impotence of photography and other attempts at recording the past, Ondaatje uses these shreds of the past as triggers for the imagination which invite living fiction into the inanimate documents of history:

The photographs of Bellocq. ... 89 glass plates survive. Look at the pictures. Imagine the misshapen man who moved round the room, his grace as he swivelled round his tripod, the casual shot of the dresser that holds the photograph of the whore's baby that she gave away, the plaster Christ on the wall.(54)

The missing history behind *Coming Through Slaughter* is not, however, entirely a product of temporal erosion. Buddy's personal history, his personal identity, is, even to himself and his closest friends, incomplete and mysterious. Webb discovers that "Bolden had never spoken of his past"(22). Webb's investigation is frustrating in its absence of real information. The following exchange is typical of Webb's search for Buddy's private history in friends, acquaintances and, in this case, Nora Bass, Buddy's "wife": "Who was he with?/ I don't know./ Tell me"(19). Buddy seems to take pride in his undefined past and identity: "Laughing in my room. As you try to explain me I will spit you, yellow, out of my mouth"(140). When Buddy returns from the Brewitts', his only

way of re-accessing the person he was in New Orleans is to read through his "diary"(113), *The Cricket*: "This afternoon I spend going over four months worth of *The Cricket*. ... I read through it all. Into the past"(113). In Frank Lewis's transcribed interview, he asks, "Where did he [Bolden] come from? He was found before we knew where he had come from. Born at the age of twenty-two. ... Never spoke of the past"(37-8). Since, as Neisser writes in "Time Present and Time Past," "we use autobiographical memory to sustain a sense of unique personal identity"(555), Buddy's lack of both a public and personal past indicates, in many senses, an absence of identity. This absence is, I think, what attracts Ondaatje to the character of Buddy and allows Ondaatje, as artist, to infuse the character with his own imagination.

If Buddy is, indeed, lacking a personal past, and therefore, a personal identity, how does Ondaatje portray a character who necessarily destroys his own past and identity? The answer may lie in Roger Schank's scripts. As many critics have discussed, Bolden is a character both repulsed and attracted by order. These self-contradictory desires lead Bolden into a pattern (itself ironic) of establishing a routine order and then destroying it. Buddy's life at the barber shop is described in the novel very much in script-like terms: "Close friends who needed cuts and shaves would come in early, well before noon"(12). With his family as well, Buddy lives a script: "He taught them all he was thinking of or had

heard, all he knew at the moment, treating them as adults, joking and teasing them with tall tales which they learned to sift down to the real"(13). As soon as Buddy's life becomes a script, however, as soon as he has "private expectations about how things proceed in [his life] on a day to day or minute to minute basis"(Schank 80), he moves on, obliterating the script he leaves. As Ondaatje's narrator describes it, "He could just as easily be wiping out his past again in a casual gesture, contemptuous. Landscape suicide"(22). Schank writes in *Dynamic Memory* that "memories are structured in a way that allows us to learn from our experiences"(2). What Buddy does, however, is abandon his dominant memory structures, scripts, thus abandoning both his ability to learn and his personal identity.

Buddy's lack of identity combines with the previously-examined absence of solid and detailed records to create what Ondaatje calls the "thin sheaf of information"(134) which invites his creative energies. Because, as the narrator says, "The place of [Buddy's] music is totally silent"(133), the legend of Buddy Bolden can be altered and augmented by Ondaatje because, according to Sam Solecki in "Making and Destroying," Buddy has no "record" in either the historical or audio sense(26). What Robert Kroetsch calls Ondaatje's "fear of fact"(15) is actually an attraction to the absence of fact because it is in these absences that Ondaatje is at his artistic best. The gaps allow Ondaatje, in the words of

Heble, to "create Bolden's visions; he must render verbally the tempo of his mind"(104). The connection Ondaatje feels between himself and Bolden (a connection I will explore in detail later) "seems to have given Ondaatje the freedom to create a Bolden out of 'personal pieces of friends and fathers' and of himself"(Jacobs 10). In "The Good Jazz", Roy MacSkimming contrasts the view of Bolden "down the dusty tunnel of history" with Ondaatje's portrayal of the jazzman which MacSkimming characterizes as being like tasting "a dead man's sweat and blood"(94). To accomplish this, Ondaatje looks into the gaps in Buddy's life and sparks them like unignited gas: "He came over, dug [a match] out of his pocket and lit the row of hissing till they popped up blue, something invisible finding a form"(124).

One of the ways in which Ondaatje animates the gaps is by turning the chaos of incomplete history into a dynamically ordered system which works much like a memory structure in recalling a past that is vivid rather than one which is "bleak [and] washed out"(Slaughter 10). Because of the way facts reach the narrator, he is forced to "spread them out like garbage"(134) in a random and chaotic pattern. In Ondaatje's novel, however, chaos is, itself, an effective ordering principle. As Barthes writes, "Incoherence seems to me preferable to a distorting order"(Reader 3). VanWart reveals the ordering principle behind the apparent chaos and incoherence: "Ondaatje's form dramatizes the anarchy and

ambiguity of the artist's life while it recreates the mental and physical geography of the artist, Buddy Bolden"(5). Indeed, Ondaatje's narrative actually adheres to postmodernist forms in its apparent chaos. Bjerring writes that *Coming Through Slaughter* challenges "the traditional stance that the function of art is to synthesize, to transcend experience by formalizing it into an ordered structure"; in fact, "Buddy exercises the postmodernist's knack of decentring conventional forms and structures, denying listeners the comfort of synthesis and order"(330). Ondaatje does not try to "transcend experience"; his art (re)creates experience as it animates the experience of history and memory in literature. To do this, Ondaatje must avoid the traditional concept of narrative order and structure his novel in a more natural way. As Gillian Cohen writes in *Memory in the Real World*, the memory "retrieval mechanism makes use of the way memory representations are organized in terms of categories, time periods, and levels of generality/specificity"(221). This variety of organizing principles in memory means that any given retrieval strategy may not be appropriate for a given recall situation. In literature, a reader may bring the wrong reading strategy to a novel. If a reader expects linear structure from *Coming Through Slaughter*, the novel will obviously appear chaotic, but, on the other hand, a reader who expects animation of history and memory in a naturally various manner will find the novel ordered by its distinctly

postmodernist rules.

This accumulation of postmodernist fragments functions much like one of Roger Schank's TOPs. Because, as VanWart describes, "fragmentation is a motif that juxtaposes and merges legend, fact, fiction, and voice"(4), readers must have a processing structure like a TOP, which Cohen describes as giving us the ability "to recognize similarities and analogies between superficially quite different events"(116). This ability allows writers like Ondaatje to create what Barthes would describe as "serial (rather than linear) forms of arrangements"(Reader xvi). Because TOPs provide the "key to understanding [through the] continual creation of new high level structures where the essential similarities between different experiences are recorded"(Schank 81), "chronological organization [can be] avoided" because Ondaatje is not bound to cater to "a particular kind of reading act that assumes a priori temporal notions of cause and effect"(Solecki "Making" 34). Ondaatje's is a novel which is made of fragments which are as free to associate as individual memories within a larger structure: "He [Galloway] slipped back into my memory as accidentally as a smell"(96). When this free-association occurs on a large scale in a narrative it inspires descriptions of the novel like this one from VanWart: "Events occur in what appear to be random or chaotic fashion from various points of view, interspersed with documents, snatches of songs, lyrics, dreams, and specific recurring images"(7).

Though this type of structure may seem chaotic and confusing it is not; this is exactly how we each retain and catalogue our own pasts.

One of the dominant metaphors for the way in which Ondaatje's fragments work together to create a living image of Bolden and his culture is that of the moving picture. Ondaatje himself likes to think of his brand of literature in cinematic terms. In his interview with Sam Solecki he discusses the editing of his work: "With the actual editing that's when the director moves in. That's when you decide the film's structure. You remake the whole film"(16). He continues, "I find the editing of a manuscript to be like the editing of a film, that's when you determine the work's shape, rhythmic structures etc."(21). Heighton picks up Ondaatje's parallel:

Many of the structurally discrete paragraphs or passages in the novel resemble the frames of a film. ... Besides suggesting and simulating a motion picture, the device serves again to engage the reader's imagination, at least in a metafictional way - for it is the reader who, on "reading" the individual stills, must make the connection between them and unreel them in the imagination so that the "film" moves and coheres as a kinetic narrative.(241)

These individual frames move together to create a living image which, much like a Bartlett memory schema, is a "series [which] is of greater weight than its elements"(Bartlett 301). *Coming Through Slaughter* and, especially, the character of Buddy are brought to life by Ondaatje's kinetic imagination which brings the fragmented text to life like a film or memory

schema. Imagination, motion and natural memory structures combine to accomplish the ultimate goal of Ondaatje's novel: to activate a dormant past for his readers and allow them to experience that past through his and their own imaginations.

This process of activating the past is similar to Barthes's idea that a text can be played in the same manner as a musical instrument. Besides being a particularly fitting metaphor for *Coming Through Slaughter* given the subject of the novel, this concept helps illustrate the way Ondaatje, his readers and his characters can take the inanimate texts of the past, the "instruments," and through their own talents "perform" those texts into dynamic existence in a process Barbour describes as the "reader's ... growing involvement in the subjective moment portrayed"(114). Bellocq provides the best example of a character who brings the static past to life in the present. Though, as Hutcheon reminds us, "all photographs are by definition representations of the past"(Politics 91), Bellocq slashes his photographs to make them current performative acts rather than acts of freezing the past:

The cuts add a three-dimensional quality to each work. Not just physically, though you can almost see the depth of the knife slashes, but also because you think of Bellocq wanting to enter the photographs, to leave his trace on the bodies.(55)

This type of reeling of the past into the present is an integral aspect of Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction. Hutcheon sees representation as the performative act in

historiography which brings the past into the present in an altered, yet living way:

But in historiographic metafiction the very process of turning events into facts through the interpretation of archival evidence is shown to be a process of turning the traces of the past (our only access to those events today) into historical representation. (*Politics* 57)

This representation on which the writing and reading of the novel rely so heavily is the key to Ondaatje's vision of his characters and text. As Bjerring writes of Bolden's music, it is "performance rather than product"(330). Ondaatje believes that filling gaps in the static "product" of recorded history with imaginative "performance" will bring the past into the present in an experiential manner. This belief leads ultimately to Ondaatje's insertion of himself into the history and text of *Coming Through Slaughter* and the tangling of the text of the past with the performance of the present.

Barthes writes, "The Novel is a Death; it transforms life into destiny, a memory into a useful act, duration into an oriented and meaningful time"(*Reader* 52). Ondaatje battles this assertion with a living, performative novel. Ondaatje links himself to Buddy explicitly as he writes, "When he went mad he was the same age I am now"(133). Note the emphasis on the present, both in tense and in the concentration on the current moment. Jacobs recognizes the significance of the connection between Ondaatje and Bolden as making explicit the contrast between intimate experience and inarticulate history:

Such identification [of Ondaatje and Bolden], at

first the motivation for the biographical quest, becomes its technique as well, a route to knowledge, and it is when treating the most intimate and crucial experiences of Bolden that Ondaatje uses the first person: ... the narrative fades into the distance of third person accounts by peripheral characters and of historical records, which say so little.(10)

Attempts to bring the past into the present through conventional means like experiencing Bolden's "geography"(8) prove unsatisfying, so Ondaatje brings the past to life in the present, both in the performative act of representing the past and also in a grammatical sense: "He [Bolden] puts the towel of steam over a face. ... Bolden walks off and talks with someone"(11). Hutcheon claims that "the past was real, but it is lost or at least displaced, only to be reinstated as the referent of language, the relic or trace of the real"(Poetics 146). Ondaatje's self-imposed assignment is not simply to reinstate the past as the referent of language, but as the referent of experience and imagination and memory. All these factors combine to bring the past to a level of re-animation which is unusual in literature and which is both the cause and result of his real focus, the psychology of his characters. As Solecki writes in "Making and Destroying":

This deliberate merging of the past and present, while preserving an ostensible historical distance, is his means of freeing his vision from time and history in order to ground it more definitely in psychology.(34)

The past and present do indeed come together, and, in doing so, come alive in *Coming Through Slaughter*. Ondaatje works through and among and around the fragments of history to

find the gaps across which to arc the electricity of imagination which sparks the re-experiencing of the past in the present. The novel comes to life in these areas of play between the facts, as well as in the structures, whether cinematic, kinetic, artistic or mnemonic, which shape and organize the scattered traces of the past. Naomi Jacobs writes:

It is the mixture of factoid and fact, of absolutely convincing psychological development and yet absolute refusal to claim real knowledge, that makes *Coming Through Slaughter* so successful and offers a way out of the dilemma of the writer drawn to a historical subject, who wishes neither to mislead readers about the accuracy of the account nor to undervalue the truth of fiction.(18)

Ondaatje creates his own path out of the dilemma of the writer of historical fiction, a path which leads him and his readers directly into the performative present of active imagination and memory.

CHAPTER THREE: *In the Skin of a Lion*

In the Skin of a Lion continues Ondaatje's active relationship with historical figures and events. This novel, however, focuses not on the gaps in the trace records of historical figures, but on the fictional characters which Ondaatje creates to surround historical buildings. Ondaatje, typically, finds that conventional recorded history does not adequately satisfy his curiosity about the past. In *In the Skin of a Lion*, Ondaatje's characters and narrators experience the actual and figurative absence of the essence, knowledge and physical proximity of people, places and the past. These absences precipitate efforts to combat the lack of satisfactory knowledge. By gaining access to the past through the variety of sources necessary to complete the picture, however, Ondaatje provides, once again, a fragmented text which must be ordered and controlled by the art and memories of the characters and author. Organizing the text in this manner brings the past and present into an intimate exchange which ultimately allows Ondaatje to animate the past with the imagination of fiction.

In her thesis, Claudia Kotte points out that "archives, libraries, bookstores, and museums assume a special importance in Ondaatje's [fiction] ... for they collect and preserve the literary and historical text(ures) of the past"(31-2). Nowhere more so than in *In the Skin of a Lion*, however, are

the inadequacies of these receptacles of the past more explicitly exposed. Hutcheon writes about the raw reliability of the historical document in *The Politics of Postmodernism*:

And certainly the status of the document has altered: since it is acknowledged that it can offer no *direct* access to the past, then it must be a representation or a replacement through textual refiguring of the brute event.(80)

As the primary "searcher" in the novel, Patrick probes documents and other physical traces of the past in a quest to understand the people around him. Of Patrick's search for the past of Nicholas Temelcoff, Ondaatje's narrator writes,

Even in 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.(34)

The "exclamation mark" is obviously ironic, for Nicholas is all but invisible to documented history. Even more three-dimensional traces of the past offer the same faint (re)experience of the past. As Patrick sifts through the photographs, "sumac bracelet [and] rosary"(139) which are Hana's mementoes of Cato, Patrick feels as if he has "discovered Cato through the daughter"(139). This is, however, a false impression. Even though Patrick can, later in the novel, hold "the last ten minutes of Cato's language"(156), neither Patrick nor Ondaatje's reader dis/re-covers a fully-realized Cato because the physical records of the past betray the full portrayal of history.

This lack of a concrete past, an accessible past,

manifests itself in the novel in one of the defining phenomena of *In the Skin of a Lion*, the missing person. Every important character is, in some way, a missing person. Ambrose Small is the first missing person of the novel and the only one who fulfils the legal definition of the term:

On December 16, 1919, Ambrose Small failed to keep an appointment. A million dollars had been taken from his bank account. He had either been murdered or was missing. His body, alive or dead, was never found.(58)

Clara, though present in body, is, in many ways, as elusive as her "beloved." Patrick feels that, despite the fact that he can hold Clara physically, "he still didn't know who she was"(72) because "he knows nothing of most of Clara's life"(79). Alice, too, "reveals no past, remains sourceless, like those statues of men with wrapped heads who symbolize undiscovered rivers"(74). Even the gregarious Caravaggio "would never leave his name where his skill had been. ... A tarrer of roads, a house-builder, a painter, a thief - yet he was invisible to all around him"(199). Ironically, Patrick, the character who explores the reluctance of personal history, is, himself, one the "missing" characters. "He would disclose the truth of his past only if interrogated with a specific question. He defended himself for most of the time with a habit of vagueness"(71). Patrick's past, like the histories of the other characters of the novel, is protected by a "wall in him that no one reached"(71). All of these "missing persons" are products of and/or reveal the weakness of history

and its inability to capture the personal essence of the people who are part of it.

Of these characters without a past, Patrick is perhaps the most profoundly "missing." Patrick's particular form of personal absence not only excludes other characters from his past and his identity, but shuts himself out as well. In a world where a "man is an extension of hammer, drill, flame"(26), Ondaatje's intimate portrayal of Patrick's lack of personal identity provides a synecdochial portrait of a society which divorces itself from the essences of history in favour of an avalanche of statistics, trivia and labels. As Neisser explains, "we use autobiographical memory to sustain a sense of unique personal identity"("Time Present" 555). Patrick's problematic relationship with his childhood memories, therefore, bespeaks a strained sense of personal identity. Despite the transference of specialized skills and knowledge from Patrick's father to Patrick, "Hazen Lewis did not teach his son anything, no legend, no base of theory"(18). In other words, Hazen Lewis did not give Patrick a past, and therefore did not help him create an identity. In fact, Patrick is so lacking in his own identity that he "was always comfortable in someone else's landscape"(138). In much the same way he searches for Ambrose, Clara, Alice and Cato, Patrick must search for himself. It is a search which never reaches a successful conclusion: "He [Patrick] had been the searcher who had gazed across maps and seen every name except

the one which was so well-known it had remained, like his childhood, invisible to him"(91).

Throughout *In the Skin of a Lion*, characters like Patrick run away from their pasts, reinventing themselves to escape the powerful tug of history and memory. As Patrick comes to Toronto, he consciously leaves behind his history: "Now, at twenty-one, he had been drawn out from that small town like a piece of metal and dropped under the vast arches of Union Station to begin his life once more"(53). Ondaatje emphasizes the way in which Patrick cuts off his past not only from others, but from himself: "Now, in the city, he was new even to himself, the past locked away"(54). Nicholas also actively shuts away his past in "a vault of secrets and memories"(47).

Nicholas Temelcoff, too, never looks back. He will drive the bakery van over the bridge with his wife and children and only casually mention his work there. He is a citizen here, in the present, successful with his own bakery.(149)

Even Ambrose Small's disappearance proves to be a self-directed effort at self-redefinition as Ambrose swallows his past, trying to defy its influence:

When Clara Dickens joined Ambrose Small after he evaporated from the world of financial power she thought she would see the vista of his nature. But during the years that she lived with Ambrose she would know him only as he wanted to be known by her.(213)

The most dramatic abandonment of the past, the most violent turning away from memory, is the complete transformation of Alice Gull. In the second half of the novel, as Patrick continues his role as a searcher and begins to probe Alice's

past, he discovers that "his relationship with Alice had a horizon. She refused to speak of the past"(137). Alice Gull does not speak of her past because, in a very real sense, she does not have one. In *The Canadian Postmodern*, Hutcheon writes of the nun who becomes Alice, "The nun leaves her habit and habits behind and vanishes into the world to redefine her identity as a woman from scratch, outside of history"(95). The nameless nun accomplishes in a minute what the other characters of the novel undertake implicitly; she conquers the past by cutting it away like her black habit:

She takes the first step out of the Ohrida Lake Restaurant into the blue corridor - the narrow blue lane of light that leads to the street. What she will become she becomes in that minute before she is outside, before she steps into the six-A.M. morning.(41)

Despite the systematic denial of the past, history and memory which seems to infect *In the Skin of a Lion*, history is not totally absent from the novel. In many cases, the apparent absence of history is actually the acknowledgement of a fluid, multifaceted history which defies easy description and, therefore, easy capture. One of the book's two epigraphs indicates that Ondaatje views history as if through a kaleidoscope: "Never again will a single story be told as if it is the only one - John Berger". Ondaatje announces the possibility of deception, incomplete information and other forms of distortion of the past in his prologue when he writes, "Outside the countryside is unbetrayed. The man who is driving could say, 'In that field is a castle,' and it

would be possible for her to believe him"(1). The multiple possibilities of multiple perspectives on the past also allow for different interpretations and distortions, as Ondaatje grants a number of different narrators "their moment when they assumed the skins of wild animals, when they took responsibility for the story"(157). As Fotios Sarris writes,

The fragmentary structure of the novel and its refusal to illuminate all aspects of the story produce a narrative devoid of a rigid authority or officialism: ... the novel ensures that no "single story" can emerge to deny all others, "as though it were the only one".(190)

The multiple nature of history is what ultimately attracts Ondaatje and his fictionalization of the past.

Because, as we have seen, history is, by nature, anti-singular, the novel denies the possibility of a unified "official" history. When a self-proclaimed official history does appear, Ondaatje exposes and exploits its gaps, distortions and trivial excesses. As Sarris writes, "*In the Skin of a Lion* is concerned not just with history, but with the possibilities of different types of history and historiography"(184). Ondaatje brings public and personal forms of history and historiography into dramatic contrast; he reveals the way the official, public history ignores the private and personal histories of the novel's characters. Patrick's personal history, in fact, begins in a geographic area which is invisible to official history: "He was born into a region which did not appear on a map until 1910, though his family had worked there for twenty years and the land had been

homesteaded since 1816"(10).

The difference between official and personal histories comes most sharply into focus in the two major building projects in the novel, the Bloor Street Viaduct and the east-end water filtration plant. The main difference between the two competing histories is the disparity between the two records of the workers. Michael Greenstein points out that Ondaatje's treatment of these two different representations of the past reveals that "alienated labourers [are] without a voice in [official] history"(121). In fact, the "articles and illustrations [Patrick] found in the Riverdale Library depicted every detail about the soil, the wood, the weight of concrete, everything but information on those who actually ~ built the bridge"(Skin 145). An example of this type of historiographic imbalance occurs in the fact that "[t]here are over 4,000 photographs from various angles of the bridge in its time-lapse evolution"(26), but, according to Harris, "There was no record kept"(236) of the number of men who died building the intake tunnel for the water filtration plant. Ondaatje uses the photographs of Lewis Hine as the symbol of the type of personal history which opposes the monolithic official history. Official histories, to Ondaatje, "were always soft as rhetoric, like that of a politician making a speech after a bridge is built"(145). Hine's photographs, on the other hand, "betray official history"(145). According to Harris, Hine's photographs, which portray exploitative child

labour, "put a human face on American industry, and continue to reflect the human experience that official history often ignores"(187). *In the Skin of a Lion* attempts to accomplish what those photographs did; it creates a human-scale alternative to the history of industrial excess.

Because the official history is so unsatisfying and does not do justice to the type of people who are the main characters in the novel, both Ondaatje and his characters engage in efforts to extract the elusive personal history from the official documents and traces of the past. Patrick functions as Ondaatje's principle vehicle for the exploration of personal histories. Officially a "searcher" for Ambrose Small, Patrick, in the words of Linda Hutcheon, "becomes a researcher for the re-appeared" as he "tries to recover Alice's history, her silenced past"(Canadian 98). With Clara, too, Patrick probes her personal history: "He was drawing out her history with Small, a splinter from a lady's palm. He was constantly appalled"(70). In fact, this type of personal history proves so alive and interesting compared to the statistic- and trivia-dominated official history (like the various Bertillon identification system measurements of Small's anatomy) that Patrick "loved the eroticism of [Clara's] history"(69) and "found himself at this hour in the spell of her body, within the complex architecture of her past"(66). Patrick himself is aware of his role as explorer of the hidden personal past. As he finds himself increasingly

seduced by the power of intimate history, he thinks to himself, "She could move like ... she could sing as low as ... Why is it that I am now trying to uncover every facet of Alice's nature for myself?"(147) Ondaatje puts it simply: "[Patrick] realizes what he is doing, that he has become a searcher again with this family [Alice and Hana]"(156).

One of the results of the search through both the official and private histories of the characters of the novel is that the stories are assembled from a variety of perspectives and sources. The loose and fragmented structure which grows out of this multi-source approach marks Ondaatje's return to the familiar ground of the mnemonically-structured narrative. As Alan Baddeley states, "Episodic memory in general allows one ... to ask new questions of [the past]"(13). The episodic structure of *In the Skin of a Lion*, therefore, allows the narrators, characters and readers to (re)evaluate the past, assemble it the way they want it assembled, and create an alternative history to the simplistic official version. Ondaatje describes Patrick's episodic engagement of the past: "His mind skates across old conversations. The past drifts into the air like an oasis and he watches himself within it"(128). By examining history and memory in terms of fragments or episodes, which Ondaatje describes as "fragments of memory ... moments, those few pages in a book we go back and forth over"(147), the reader/(re)searcher can learn, in the words of F.C. Bartlett,

"how to transcend the original order of occurrence of these elements ... to utilise the constituents of his own 'schemas', instead of being determined to action by ... unbroken units"(301). This is what Patrick does, as well as what Ondaatje forces the reader to do: "He saw himself gazing at so many stories - ... He saw the interactions, saw how each one of them was carried by the strength of something more than themselves"(144). When we can approach the fragments of memory, history and, in this case, fiction in this manner, experience becomes "no longer a single story but part of a mural, which was a falling together of accomplices"(145). This sense of "falling together" is not only what Ondaatje achieves with *In the Skin of a Lion*, as well as his other works of long fiction, but also the way we gain access to our own histories and memories.

Though it is fragmented and episodic, the structure of the novel is not chaotic. The order and arrangement of the fragments flow from both mnemonic and artistic principles of organization. The first sentences of the novel are, "*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*"(1). Sarris writes that the

emphasis on reading, or 'gathering,' is significant because *In the Skin of a Lion* is ... a text that is itself fragmented and chaotic, and that only coalesces in a particular reader's mind, in individual interpretations.(190)

The "particular reader" in the case of this novel, is not

singular. Patrick is one of the readers who bring order to the fragments of the past by processing and assembling them in his memory:

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 dare-devil who was unable to sleep without 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)

Hayden White points to this process of coalescence as the indication that "[h]istories ... are not only about events but also about the possible sets of relationships that those events can be demonstrated to figure"("Historical" 55). White also invokes the term "colligation" to describe the operation of identifying "the 'threads' that link the individual or institution under study to its specious sociocultural 'present'"(*Metahistory* 18). What Alice Gull would call "the extreme looseness of the structure"(135) becomes, in the hands of Ondaatje, the signifier of the best art. T.S. Eliot writes, "When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary"(464). Ondaatje seems to concur: "*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). On the same page, Ondaatje expands on this idea when he writes, "The chaos and tumble of events. The first sentence of every novel should be: 'Trust me, this will take

time but there is order here, very faint, very human.'" Ironically, Ondaatje's novel opens, as we have seen, with an assurance of chaos, but then moves towards a subtle artistic and mnemonic order which does not destroy the fragmentary nature of "ordinary man's experience."

As Patrick searches through the artistically-ordered fragments of his past, he brings certain events into the dynamic present by engaging his personal history through the memory structures discussed earlier. Much of Patrick's early childhood is reclaimed in the form of Schankian scripts which become particularly potent in their ability to bring the past into the present. In fact, script-shaped memories move grammatically into the present:

If he is awake early enough the boy sees the men walk past the farmhouse down First Lake Road. Then he stands at the bedroom window and watches: he can see two or three lanterns between the soft maple and the walnut tree. He hears their boots on gravel.(7)

As Schank indicates, "scripts are active memory structures"(82), and Patrick uses scripts as tools of recall in such a way that the memories reappear as active participants in the present. Patrick seems to relive his memories:

In winter the animals are taken down the road to a pasture barn, though once a cow headed towards the river longing for back pasture.

They do not miss it for two hours and then his father guesses where it has gone.(11)

A vivid, present-tense description of the Lewis's efforts to save the cow follows this passage; the description is so vivid

and current that it seems that Patrick is not reassembling a memory, but providing running commentary of an on-going experience. Throughout the novel, this potent form of memory seems consistent with Patrick despite the fact, discussed earlier, that he does seem to discard certain aspects of his past. The memories he does carry with him enable him to relive particular events of his past. Patrick knows this himself: "He knows he will never forget a word or gesture of hers tonight, in this doll-house of a room"(125).

Active memory structures are not only responsible for the re-living of events of the past, but also, and more significantly, the evaluation and re-evaluation of the fragments and pieces of history and memory which compose the novel. Schank writes, "What we know about a subject is altered by new information about that subject"(90). This is certainly the case in *In the Skin of a Lion*, especially in relation to Patrick. As the narrator describes Patrick's encounters with night insects as a child, we are told that

[y]ears later at the Riverdale Library he will learn how the shining leaf-chafers destroy shrubbery, how the flower beetles feed on the juice of decaying wood or young corn. There will suddenly be order and shape to those nights.(9)

Another example occurs when Patrick tries to understand the transient loggers: "No one in the town of Bellrock really knows where the men have come from. It takes someone else, much later, to tell the boy that"(8). That "much later" comes in the form of a conversation Patrick has with Alice:

"... His father skated three miles for the doctor the night he was born. He skated across the lake holding up cattails on fire."

Patrick stopped her hand moving.

- So they were *Finns*. ...

Now in his thirties he finally had a name for that group of men he witnessed as a child.(151)

Bartlett acknowledges the way that memories which seem complete, such as Patrick's childhood recollections of insects on a window or skaters on a river, can actually be dynamic: "the organised mass results of past changes of position and posture are actively *doing* something all the time; are, so to speak, carried along with us, complete, though developing, from moment to moment"(201). Schank reaffirms Bartlett's conclusions decades later: "We continue to reorganize information we have stored indefinitely. New experiences are constantly being reorganized on the basis of similar experiences and cultural norms"(81). This principle of active memory ultimately allows Patrick not only to discover and re-examine his own past, but to begin to understand the complexly woven pasts of the other characters of the novel like Alice and Nicholas:

He [Patrick] turned the page to the photograph of them and he pulled out the picture he had and laid it next to the newspaper. Third from the left, the newspaper said, was Nicholas Temelcoff. ...

He paused, suddenly stilled, wanting to go back, but the library was closed now and it would be pointless. They would not print the photograph of a nun. A dead or missing nun. ...

If Alice had been a nun ...(144)

The pieces of the puzzle start to fit together in Patrick's mind as his active memory structures begin to re-evaluate his previously-stored experiences and knowledge.

Between the novel's fragments of memory and history, Ondaatje finds what I have argued is the locus of his creativity, the gaps in the past. Ondaatje's brother Christopher talks about the way these gaps become literature. Christopher says of his brother, "He takes the facts and then creates them"(Butterfield 165). The facts can remain facts while also being created because Ondaatje works in the gaps in the facts, in facts that *could* be, but which are actually products of the imagination of the author. In *Postmodernist Fiction*, Brian McHale describes Ondaatje's brand of history as "apocryphal history." Of the two types of apocryphal history McHale identifies, Ondaatje's is definitely the former:

Apocryphal history contradicts the official version in one of two ways: either it *supplements* the historical record, claiming to restore what has been lost or suppressed; or it *displaces* official history altogether.(90)

Ondaatje, however, provides the best map to the gaps in history which he exploits as the locus of his fiction; As Patrick threatens the destruction of the water filtration plant, Harris says,

You must realize you are like these places, Patrick. You're as much of the fabric as the aldermen and the millionaires. But you're among the dwarfs of enterprise who never get accepted or acknowledged. Mongrel company. You're a lost heir. So you stay in the woods. You reject power. And this is how the bland fools - the politicians and press and mayors and their advisers - become

the spokesmen for the age.(238)

These dwarfs and mongrels provide Ondaatje with the unrecorded potential which is the kernel of his novel.

As he does in *The Collected Works* and *Coming Through Slaughter*, Ondaatje takes the "events" of *In the Skin of a Lion* and turns them into the "facts" of his fiction. Sarris declares that

one of the principle objectives - and successes - of the novel is to 'betray official history', and reveal, however faintly, the presence of the human element in such Toronto landmarks as the Bloor Street Viaduct and the east-end water filtration plant.(188)

In Hutcheon's terms, the events of the novel are the public figures of the first half of this century and the concrete structures those figures left behind. What Ondaatje chooses to give meaning to in his novel is the collection of mongrel characters who have slipped through the cracks in public history. Patrick, Clara, Alice and Nicholas are the products of gaps, fictional sprouts growing off the undeniable "events" like the disappearance of Ambrose Small and the construction of the Bloor Street Viaduct. According to Greenstein, "Ondaatje's dialogic imagination gives voice to these dainty monsters, ... privileges the underprivileged, and ultimately transcends all boundaries in his postmodern leap into history"(120). As he infuses Billy the Kid with imagination and Buddy Bolden with life, Ondaatje fills the Toronto landscape with, in Greenstein's words, "seeds of fire and passion"(121). Ondaatje's authorial process mimics that of

Clara and Alice making their spiritual drawings, because, "[g]iven the vagueness of [the] covered body [of Patrick or history], they draw upon all they know or can guess"(75) in order to infuse the artistic rendering with both the truth of the past and the fiction of imagination. As Sarris writes, "Clara and Alice's drawings are attempts not merely to reproduce their subject's appearance, but to capture his essence, the spirit revealed in appearance"(192).

Ondaatje looks to his urban geography and the textualized traces of the past to find the raw "events" in which he can find gaps which enable him to extract/create an essence, the "facts." These are the subjects of his novel -- indeed, it would seem, the subjects of his novels. He builds these facts into a strange nest of uncertainty, chaos and absence which paradoxically provides, in its disorder, a loosely artistic shape. Ondaatje's strength lies in his ability to find the chaotic source material he needs to welcome his fiction into the web of historical fact, while simultaneously organizing that chaos according to artistic and mnemonic principles without totally placating the discord which is at the root of the novel.

CHAPTER FOUR: *The English Patient*

Of Ondaatje's works of historiographic metafiction, none animates the past more intimately than the 1992 Booker Prize-sharing *The English Patient*. With its intensely associative, but loose organization of fragments of history and memory, *The English Patient* mirrors the patterns of Schank's MOPs and TOPs and brings the four main characters and their histories to the reader in intimate and lively detail. Rather than taking shreds of history and infusing the gaps in that history with imagination, this novel takes the extremely well-documented World War II and strips splinters off the historic record and fits those pieces to the imaginative core of the novel. *The English Patient* does, however, follow many of the patterns established in Ondaatje's earlier works. Once again, the familiar themes of the lack of and search for identity and personal history dominate the characters of the novel and drive much of the plot. The most important elements of the novel, however, work towards the destruction of the historical distance between reader and characters. The combining of the narrative present and historical past through the free flow of chronology as well as a multi-layered, Eliotic view of history as complete, yet alterable, ultimately bring Ondaatje's reader into the lives and histories of the characters of the novel.

In *The English Patient*, as in the other works examined here, history and identity are fragmentary and uncertain. The

characters in this novel, principally Caravaggio and the patient, are like the books Hana reads to the patient as he falls asleep:

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)

As he convalesces following his mutilation, Caravaggio exemplifies the type of consciously ahistorical character we have met elsewhere in Ondaatje's fiction. The staff of the hospital "knew him as an evasive man. ... He had revealed nothing, not even his name, just wrote out his serial number, which showed he was with the Allies"(27). To Caravaggio, at this stage of his life, his history and identity are threatening, so he sheds his past; "That was how he felt safest. Revealing nothing"(27).

The English patient, however, is the most important mysterious character and the character whose absent (or, rather, uncertain) personal history most dramatically influences the characters, events and movement of the novel. Despite his frequent verbal journeys into his past, the patient remains, as Ondaatje acknowledges in an interview, "a totally anonymous figure"(Wachtel 54). The following exchange between Hana and her patient characterizes the absence of identity and reliable information which define the English patient as well as the bulk of personal histories on which *The English Patient* is built:

Who are you?
 I don't know. You keep asking me.
 You said you were English.(5)

As the patient's words here indicate, his past and identity are absent not only to the characters around him and Ondaatje's readers, but to himself as well: "During his time with these people, he could not remember where he was from. He could have been, for all he knew, the enemy he had been fighting from the air"(6). Though the patient's absence of identity may seem accidental or the product of his plane crash, his experience in the desert inspires him to eschew identities and personal histories. His absence of identity may be like Caravaggio's, a *refusal* to be identified: "Erase the family name! Erase nations! I was taught such things by the desert"(139). As he continues, he seems to describe a virtual plan for the destruction of personal history: "I wanted to erase my name and the place I had come from. By the time war arrived, after ten years in the desert, it was easy for me to slip across borders, not to belong to anyone, to any nation"(139). As he lies in the Italian villa, he has obviously been successful in shedding what he regards as the burdens of personal history: "She does not know anything about him. Even after a month or so of caring for him and allotting him the needles of morphine"(42).

If the English patient does, indeed, intentionally deny important details of his past, both the novel's readers and characters must question his reliability as the author and

narrator of the stories he tells. As I discussed most directly in reference to *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, Ondaatje seems to take pleasure in disrupting the unquestioned authority of the author. As Barthes reminds us, the author "is not the only figure of authority"(Wasserman 101). Barthes's claim draws the support of Caravaggio who not only questions the authority and reliability of the English patient, but his identity as well. Caravaggio even asks himself as the patient relays one story, "Who is he speaking as now?"(244) Earlier in the novel, Caravaggio takes it upon himself to challenge the patient's authority as author by revising the patient's stories. Caravaggio says to Hana, "'Let me tell you a story'"(163) and proceeds to reconstruct the past of the so-called "English patient" through the eyes of a knowledgeable Allied spy. Even the patient himself questions his reliability and mistrusts his memory and his stories: "Was this invented? Dreamed by him while wrapped in oil and felt and darkness?"(22) This lack of singular authority over a story, history or memory is characteristic of postmodernist fiction. Linda Hutcheon, in *the Politics of Postmodernism*, indicates that postmodernist novels like Ondaatje's

draw attention to the dubiousness of the positivist, empiricist hierarchy implied in the binary opposition of the real and the fictive, and they do so by suggesting that the non-fictional is as constructed and as narratively known as is fiction.(76)

Ondaatje dilutes the authority of the author/narrator in order

to contribute to this blurring of the boundary between "the real and the fictive." With this boundary loosely defined, Ondaatje begins the blending of past and present, fact and fiction, that is at the core of not only *The English Patient*, but his other works of historiographic metafiction as well.

With the singular authority of the storyteller discarded, the listeners can interpret and question freely. Hutcheon acknowledges the possibility of this happening not only in the fictional framework of a novel, but also in the realm of history, which is, of course, elemental to Ondaatje's fiction: "Different historical perspectives ... derive different facts from the same events" (*Politics* 57). The patient's stories certainly provide the raw events which become a variety of "facts." However, if we view *The English Patient* as a sort of detective novel, in which Caravaggio plays the gumshoe in search of the true identity of his mysterious comrade, the patient, we miss the point of Ondaatje's postmodernist allowance of multiple perspectives. Hutcheon writes, "Postmodern novels ... openly assert that there are only *truths* in the plural, and never one *Truth*" (*Poetics* 109). Ondaatje himself hints that the multiple perspectives in the novel are each equal possibilities rather than being tantalizing, but erroneous, alternative solutions to the detective's final solution:

My book ... is pieced together with little bits of mosaic. Each scene tends to be written from the point of view of that private, poetic voice - not so much in terms of language but in how one sees

things.(Wachtel 57)

The interpretation, the truth that appeals to the individual characters of the novel, depends almost entirely on what Bartlett calls "attitude." Bartlett describes recall and memory processes as "construction, made largely on the basis of this [previously established] attitude, and its general effect is that of a justification of the attitude"(207). Caravaggio, for example, is suspicious of the patient from the beginning and, therefore, his memory selectively processes the information about the patient in order to justify the "attitude" of suspicion. Hana and Kip, on the other hand, choose to believe that the patient is not the spy Caravaggio eventually claims he is. As Hana says, "'I think he is an Englishman'"(164). Because of these various "truths," the advice of Hayden White becomes particularly relevant:

as a result of this [variety of possibilities], we are indentured to a choice among contending interpretive strategies in any effort to reflect on history-in-general. ... the best grounds for choosing one perspective on history rather than another are ultimately aesthetic or moral rather than epistemological. (*Metahistory* xii)

This strategy emphasizes the artistic over the empiricist. This is exactly what Ondaatje tries to achieve; he strips history of its scientific desire for exactness and brings it alive by aestheticizing it and involving the reader in the (re)creation of the past.

Multiple perspectives on and the recreation of the past are not, however, the exclusive product of a number of

different characters evaluating the same events. Sometimes one person or character can have different perspectives on the same events because of the retroactive re-ordering power of human memory structures. *The English Patient* reveals some of the ways in which, as Hutcheon writes, "the past is shaped by us as we 'eliminate the chaos'" (Canadian 91). Historiographic metafiction can serve, in this respect, much the same purpose as memory structures; this type of fiction can, like memory, allow fragmentation while simultaneously providing order. In *The Poetics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon describes this particular activity of historiographic metafiction: "Historiographic metafiction, of course, paradoxically ... installs totalizing order, only to contest it by its radical provisionality, intertextuality, and, often, fragmentation" (116).

In *The English Patient*, Ondaatje creates a number of scenes or passages which reflect this ordering and re-ordering function of memory and historiographic metafiction. The patient, in his explorations of the desert and the past, needs to order a vast amount of unconnected and disparate information. He finds his retroactive ordering principles in Herodotus: "for him, the histories of Herodotus clarified all societies" (150). Hana, too, allows her memories to be re-evaluated and re-ordered by the present. Most notably, her experiences in the villa provide a context of imagery into which she places the memories she holds of her father,

Patrick:

A novel is a mirror walking down a road. She had read that in one of the books the English patient recommended, and that was the way she remembered her father - whenever she collected the moments of him - stopping his car under one specific bridge in Toronto north of Pottery Road at midnight and telling her that this was where the starlings and pigeons uncomfortably and not too happily shared the rafters during the night.(91)

Hana also retroactively orders her more recent experiences:

Moments before sleep are when she feels most alive, leaping across the fragments of the day, bringing each moment into the bed with her like a child with schoolbooks and pencils. The day seems to have no order until these times, which are like a ledger for her, her body full of stories and situations.(35-6)

In these scenes, Hana's re-organization of her memories not only reflects the paradoxical function of historiographic metafiction, as Hutcheon describes, but they also support the theories of Bartlett, Schank and Eliot. Each of these theorists view memory (or, in Eliot's case, literature) as active structures in which new changes and additions ripple through the entire system, affecting each individual element or fragment within that system.

When Ondaatje orders and re-orders the chaos of history and fiction into the loose, MOP-like order of his novel, his organizing principles bring the private "facts" out of the very public "events" which provide the novel's historical context. Whereas Ondaatje's earlier fiction infuses the shards of history with the author's imagination, *The English Patient* separates the public, historical "events" from the

personal, imaginative, psychological "facts" which are, as Hutcheon reminds us, "events to which we have given meaning"(Canadian 57). As Hana writes to Clara, "*From now on I believe the personal will forever be at war with the public*"(292). This separation leaves little doubt, especially in this novel, that "the entire thrust of [Ondaatje's] vision is intensely psychological"(Solecki "Making" 34). The result is that, rather than focusing on the many well-known events of the end of World War II, Ondaatje's true subjects, his "facts," are symbolized by the bedroom of Katharine and the patient, the adultering lovers: "Our room never appears in the detailed reports which chartered every knoll and every incident of history"(145); it is precisely this absence from the "detailed reports" which makes the lovers so interesting to Ondaatje. The result of this type of focus is that Ondaatje can sculpt his characters in such intimate detail that they are to his readers as Kipling's *Kim* is to the inhabitants of the villa: "(All this occurred before the sapper entered their lives, as if out of this fiction. As if the pages of Kipling had been rubbed in the night like a magic lamp. A drug of wonders)"(94). A passage from Herodotus describes this animating power of fiction eloquently: "*I, Herodotus of Halicarnassus, set forth my history, that time may not draw the colour from what Man has brought into being, nor those great and wonderful deeds*"(240). Ondaatje not only combats the drawing out of the "colour" of history, he takes

the black and white history of World War II and personalizes it in imaginative and colourful strokes.

One of the results of re-infusing history with "facts" and "colour" is that the past begins to come alive, seeming to exist in the present. Rather than simply offering a crisp and frozen piece of history, like "the ancient dog frozen in white ash"(278), Ondaatje's principle storytellers remake history in the telling of it. Hutcheon writes in "The Postmodernist Challenge," "History is made by its writer"(302). This *making* of history is the difference between viewing frozen history and *experiencing* history. Barthes writes in "From Work to Text" that "*the Text is experienced only in an activity of production*"(1007). As the patient tells his stories, makes his history, Hana lives the past through the words of her patient:

She entered the story knowing she would emerge from it feeling she had been immersed in the lives of others, in plots that stretched back twenty years, her body full of sentences and moments, as if awaking from sleep with a heaviness caused by unremembered dreams.(12)

Hana's experience of the past through the stories of the patient is so vivid, in fact, that she conceives of listening as a physical transportation into the story: "Okay, tell me, she thought, take me somewhere"(57); "He whispers again, dragging the listening part of the young nurse beside him wherever his mind is, into that well of memory he kept plunging into during those months before he died"(4). The pull of (re)experiencing the past is so strong for the

patient, in fact, that he confesses his obsession: "But we were interested in how our lives could mean something to the past. We sailed into the past. ... We all slept with Herodotus"(142). Ondaatje's novel and the patient's stories make the past so vividly that the readers and listeners, too, are allowed to sail into that past.

As the past becomes something which is experienced, the boundary between past and present begins to blur and what seem to be mutually exclusive temporal entities flow together. Memory theory already provides a basis for the blurring of past and present. Neisser writes that "memory depends on the present as well as the past"("Time Present" 548). In a novel as intensely mnemonic as *The English Patient*, the dependence on both the past and present creates a difficulty in distinguishing between the two as they merge. Even the visual structure of the novel facilitates the confusion and entwining of past and present because of an inconsistent use of quotation marks and other visual clues to the relative timing of various passages. Different time periods blend together seamlessly in this text: "Sometimes at two a.m. he is not asleep, his eyes open in the darkness [of the villa]. He could smell the oasis before he saw it"(5). The following passage not only describes the temporal movement of the patient and his story through the image of the bucket, but the sentences themselves go "up and down" between the narrative present and the patient's past, both, fittingly, described in

present tense:

She collapses - acacia twigs, leaves, the branches that were shaped into arms uncoiling around him. Limbs begin disappearing in the suck of air. The odour of morphine on his tongue. Caravaggio reflected in the black lake of his eye. He goes up and down now like a well bucket. There is blood somehow all over his face.(175)

The narrative of the novel is like the stone Ondaatje describes skipping off the water of the past into the present and then falling back again:

These years later. A stone skipping over the water, bouncing up so she and he have aged before it touches the surface again and sinks. ... And something this evening has brought the stone out of the water and allowed it to move back within the air towards the hill town in Italy.(299-300)

This fluid relationship of past and present is so important to *The English Patient* that the novel ends with a sentence which destroys all frontiers of geography and time by bringing the past, present and two continents together in one simple gesture:

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 hand 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.(301-2)

In addition to working in various layers of time, Ondaatje also acknowledges and invokes a multi-layered vision of history. Bartlett's quotation from Sir Henry Head supports this palimpsestic view of the past: "Every recognisable change enters into consciousness already charged with its relation to

something that has gone before"(199). This conception of memory, much like Eliot's view of literature, also applies to history. Ondaatje and his novel view every historical event from above, looking not only at the event but past it, into the palimpsest of the layers of history. As Ondaatje himself says, "I began picking up a sense of the layers of history. I was going back deeper and deeper in time. ... That sense of history, of building overlaid with building, was central in my mind"(Wachtel 51). These are the layers of time, of the past and present, through which the stories in the novel "slip from level to level like a hawk"(4). History, and the layers of history, can literally be buried anywhere in the novel: "But in the emptiness of deserts you are always surrounded by lost history"(135). At various points of the novel, different layers of history make "[s]poradic appearances and disappearances, like legends and rumours through history"(141). At one point, in fact, Ondaatje explicitly superimposes two distinct, yet not so distinct, historical periods:

The last mediaeval war was fought in Italy in 1943 and 1944. ... When the armies assembled at Sansepolcro, a town whose symbol is the crossbow, some soldiers acquired them and fired them silently at night over the walls of the untaken city. Field Marshal Kesselring of the retreating German army seriously considered the pouring of hot oil from battlements.(69)

The palimpsest here is so prominent that it seems inverted; the more distant history dominates the most recent layer.

Ondaatje's many approaches to history, memory and the

past all rely on the idea that history is not circumscribed, sealed and complete. History cannot be unalterable; it must be, as Hutcheon describes it, "a text, a discursive construct upon which literature draws as easily as it does upon other artistic contexts" ("History" 170). This text, like memory and the literary tradition, accommodates new additions to the system. T.S. Eliot approaches the artistic system as one which reacts to novelty, a new perspective on the past like Ondaatje's, by altering, slightly, "the whole existing order" (467). Bartlett assumes a similar position on memory systems: "the organised mass [is] ... complete, though developing, from moment to moment" (201). Hana, through her note-making in novels, displays a belief in the systems of Bartlett, Eliot and Ondaatje. The text arrives in her hands complete, but she adds to it, reCompleting the already complete text and slightly altering the contents of the book. The patient, too, displays the same beliefs in his relationship with *The Histories*. The patient "has added to [the original text], 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) and "there are other fragments - maps, diary entries, writings in many languages, paragraphs cut out of other books" (96). History, memory and the past are never complete, never static in either life or *The English Patient*. Ondaatje knows this and engages the past vigorously, twirling it through his fiction and his present to

create a novel not about a particular time or historical period, but about time itself.

CONCLUSION: Intertextuality

Since the early stages of Ondaatje's career, critics such as VanWart, Scobie and Solecki have recognized an intertextuality in his work as his talents and interests evolved. The four works I have examined in this thesis span over twenty years and represent, at beginning and end, two markedly different artists. When the works are examined collectively, however, the differences paradoxically become the threads which bind these four texts of historiographic metafiction. Many of the memory and history issues which permeate the individual texts also speak to the works as a unit. Taken collectively, the long poem *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, the experimental novel *Coming Through Slaughter*, and the more conventional novels, *In the Skin of a Lion* and *The English Patient*, relate to each other and can be analyzed much as I have analyzed the individual texts themselves: within the textual unit, whether it is single or collective, a loose and associative organizing principle directs the central issues.

The progressive changes from work to work reflect what I believe is Ondaatje's increasing comfort with engaging the level of the personal in his literature. In her 1988 book, *The Other Side of Dailiness*, Lorraine York comments on a line of poetry from Ondaatje's collection of poetry, *Secular Love*. York claims that a line which accuses the listener of "always

holding back something of yourself" applies "equally to Ondaatje's development as a writer, to his gradual willingness to approach his personal past through his poems and fiction"(97). This movement underpins many of the changes which occur from *The Collected Works* to *The English Patient* in the way Ondaatje approaches history and memory.

Each work in the series takes the reader and, therefore, the author, closer to the subject of the fiction. This diminishing distance can, in fact, be quantified both physically and chronologically. In *The Collected Works*, Ondaatje's source material, his subjects, exist only in textualized traces of the past. The narrative voice is one which speaks very consciously from the objectifying distance of legend, myth and dubious fact. Ninety years after most of the events of Billy's life, a poem is assembled by an author whose most concrete connection to the wild west is the toy gun belt and imitation riding chaps worn in the childhood photograph on the last page of *The Collected Works*. *Coming Through Slaughter* offers a subject with greater chronological proximity to the author. This allows the researcher/narrator figure more intimate contact with the subject. Associates of Bolden provide recorded testimony and the researcher actually finds himself amid Buddy's geography. The narrative of *In the Skin of a Lion* moves even closer. Set in Ondaatje's home town, Toronto, the geography provides a direct physical link to the story, for the Bloor Street Viaduct and water

filtration plant both still exist. The narrative of this novel is "gathered" in the intimate quarters of the front seat of a car. Finally, *The English Patient* dispenses with distance altogether. Though geographically and temporally the story is various and distant from the time and place of the creating author, Ondaatje emphasizes the intimacy of the novel's stories by describing how the listeners feel part of the world of the past, the world of fiction. In this most recent work, time and history are no longer barriers to the personal.

As Ondaatje becomes increasingly personal, his relative emphasis begins to shift from the public domain to the private. By writing about the legendary Billy the Kid in *The Collected Works*, Ondaatje places even the speculative private moments of the poem into a public context because of the wide fame of his subject. In *Coming Through Slaughter*, however, his subject, while still a historic figure, is much less known. Bolden's relative anonymity diminishes the public aspect of the novel and, correspondingly, begins to emphasize the private. *In the Skin of a Lion* examines and describes an official history which is, literally, concrete and lifeless; the novel engages the public realm through the structures of Toronto's urban geography, but the true focus of the novel is the personal level of activity which floats around these structures. This novel features an explicit examination of the conflict between the private and public realms; Ondaatje

sides heavily with the private, constantly teasing private stories out of the public record. Despite the fact that *The English Patient* grows out of the context of World War II, arguably the most public event in recorded history, Ondaatje almost totally subordinates public history (with the exception of the nuclear bombing of Japan at the end of the novel) to the private stories of the four characters who assemble in the villa, in part to escape the public realm.

Ondaatje's evolution not only involves his treatment of history, but, as his works evolve, they begin to reflect, not only individually but collectively, the memory structures and processes I examined previously. In the first work of the group, *The Collected Works*, Ondaatje takes the traditional novel and breaks it into discrete historic and mnemonic elements. In the following works, however, Ondaatje gradually smooths over the divisions between fragments. These fragmented, yet connected texts mirror our memory patterns which store information in packets which structures such as MOPs, TOPs and schema link almost invisibly. In *The English Patient*, Ondaatje moves seamlessly from fragment to fragment, revelling in the ability of his narrative to connect story elements much as a TOP links different memories.

Lionel Grossman writes in his article, "History and Literature," about the way that, "[i]n literature, ... attempts to push outward the limits of language have become the central focus of the writer's activity"(37). With his

four works of historiographic metafiction, Michael Ondaatje pushes the limits of language, but not in the extrinsic direction Grossman predicts. Through the four books, Ondaatje turns his focus and his language increasingly *inward*, toward the personal histories and memories of both his characters and himself. What he finds, he brings back into the narrative of his texts, infusing his work with the natural structures and processes of both history and memory. These structures compliment and contribute to the development of the themes, characters and language, and, together with Ondaatje's postmodernist techniques, push outwards the limits of language.

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