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The Identity of the Artist: Michael Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*

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In *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970), the artist, Billy the Kid's identity that has been overwhelmed by far too much historical citations is fictionalised by Ondaatje. In fictionalising the fragments of the gathered historical facts, Ondaatje is thus seen as liberating them from the clutches of official history, owning them and thereby making them his private possession. Ondaatje himself may therefore be best acknowledged as an artist who is working in a different medium in an amalgamation of poetry and fiction, created from fragmented facts. The aim of this paper is to first understand in brief the concept of identity and then explore Ondaatje's ways of representing the identity of the artist with reference to *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*.

I

The concept of identity was officially introduced into social analysis and the social sciences in the latter half of the 1950s. However, it was only accepted and became a public discourse in the 1960s, particularly with the popularisation of the work of Erik Erikson's *Dimensions of a New Identity* that was responsible among other things for coining the term "crisis of the identity crisis" (99).

In the mid 1970s, W.J.M. Mackenzie characterizes identity as a word "driven out of its wits by over-use" whilst Robert Coles remarks that the notions of identity and identity crisis had become "the purest of clichés" (qtd. in Cooper 61). This, however, was only the beginning. In the 1980s, with the rise of race, class and gender as the "holy trinity" of literary criticism of cultural studies, the Humanities joined the fray in full force. "And "identity talk" – inside and outside academia – continues to proliferate today. The "identity" crisis – a crisis of over production and consequent devaluation of meaning – shows no sign of abating" (Erikson 99).

Stuart Hall observes in "Cultural Identity and Diaspora", that identity is not always as transparent or unproblematic as we think.

Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think instead, of identity as a 'production' which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation (51).

In the essay, Stuart Hall suggests that there are two ways of thinking about cultural identity. First, the identity of what "we really are" or rather since history has intervened, "what we have become." Cultural identity is, therefore, a matter of "becoming" as well as of "being." It thus belongs to the future as well as to the past. It is not something that already exists, "transcending place, time, history and culture"; it comes from somewhere and it also has histories. But like everything that is historical, it undergoes constant transformation. "Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, it is subject to a continuous 'play' of history, culture and power" ("Cultural" 52).

In Canada, the 1960s was a time when the idea of national identity was being questioned. However, Michael Ondaatje who has immigrated to Canada then, celebrates new bonds of relationships with the newly acknowledged fellow immigrants in his poem "Red Accordion: an immigrant song" thus:

All of us poised and inspired by music
 friendship self- made heat and the knowledge
 each has chosen to come here driven for hours
 over iced highways, to be here bouncing and leaping
 to a reel that carried itself generations ago
 north of the border, through lost towns,
 settled among the strange names,
 and became eventually our own (184).

Ondaatje's commemoration of these new friendships also opens his eyes to the historical violence and bloodshed that took place in the Canadian border in the latter half of the nineteenth century. His choice of Billy in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970), as his protagonist, who is also an outsider shows his rejection of political boundaries. This is echoed at the level of the personal, for Ondaatje himself as a 'foreigner' celebrates new ties of friendship in the 1960s; where national boundaries blur in establishing his new found transnational identity of being both Sri Lankan and Canadian. His choice of Billy the Kid as his artist-protagonist is, therefore, paralleled to the fact that Billy defies national boundaries as he is literally placed between Canada and America in what John Bolland calls the doorway between sunshine and cold dark.

II

In *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, in an unnumbered page before the novel begins, Ondaatje, in what he calls "credits", after listing the number of historical facts that he has used in the novel, states thus: "With these basic sources I have edited, rephrased, and slightly reworked the originals. But the emotions belong to their authors."

It may be considered that Ondaatje's acknowledgement has not been faithful to history in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, reveals his own identity as an artist in the process of writing the novel. This reminds one of an anonymous quotation: "Writing about identity always reveals one's pursuit of self-identity at the moment of writing" (qtd. in Bin 67), that has been quoted by several critics in their essays related to "identity." In *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (1970), the portrait of the artist as Billy the Kid at the end of the novel is a photograph of Ondaatje himself at the age of seven, in cowboy clothing. When asked in an interview when he became interested in Billy the Kid, Ondaatje responded:

From the age of seven. Roughly when the last picture (of me in Ceylon in a cowboy outfit) was taken. Then it wasn't specifically Billy the Kid, but *cowboys* that was important. So around 1967 when I began the book the cowboy had germinated. The question that's so often asked – about why I wrote about an American hero – doesn't really interest me 'cos I hardly knew what an American was when the image of "cowboy" began that germinating process. I was writing about something that always interested me, something within myself, not out there in a specific country or having some political or sociological meaning. I'm not interested in politics on that public level. The recent fashion of drawing journalistic morals out of literature is I think done by people who don't love literature or who are not capable of allowing its full scope to be seen (Mundwiler 12-13).

As an artist who does not believe in the "physicality of political boundaries" (as was M.F Hussain's response to Barkha Dutt's interview on the question whether he missed being in India after accepting the Qatar citizenship. This was aired on NDTV 24X7 the day of M.F Hussain's death), Ondaatje's defence in the above quoted paragraph does make an important point that art or "literature can never be, nor should it strive to be, only a concrete version of sociological meaning or of political philosophy" (Mundwiler 13).

On a technical level, Ondaatje has achieved some forceful effects through his artistic writing in delineating the identity of his artists in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. And by printing his own photograph when he was seven years old at the end of the novel, Ondaatje as an artist is seen to be making an appearance on stage every now and then.

In *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, Ondaatje improvises upon the gathered historical facts by juxtaposing them with pure fiction. Ondaatje's concern in the novel is on the fragmented identity of his artist protagonist, Billy the Kid who exists on the periphery that is outside the moral and social boundaries of a society. Billy the Kid is a social outcast, an outlaw hero consumed by violence. The very word 'works' in the title *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* seems to suggest violence; echoing the dominant element of aggression and hostility in the character of Billy. Amartya Sen in *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* proposes that "violence" is "fomented by the imposition of singular and belligerent identities... championed by proficient artisans of terror" (2) that create what Robin Mathews terms "protagonists who are usually anti heroes for whom violence becomes an instrument of self-indulgence" (40).

In *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, Ondaatje's main protagonists are Billy the Kid, the sensual outlaw, and Pat Garrett, the police chief appointed by the state to capture the outlaw Billy the Kid. They are artists of sorts whose creativity and sense of art is so chaotic and distorted that it finally leads one to self-destruction and the other to a deep sense of regret. These protagonists mostly resort to violence to attain their desired heights as artists. One may, therefore, according to Robin Mathews consider Billy the Kid and Pat Garret as protagonists who are also anti-heroes. Billy's remarkable art is seen when he stalks, locates and kills the cat of the Chisum household:

We sat around on the veranda for a while and then Billy said, do you want me to kill it. Sallie without asking how said yes ... He began to walk over the kitchen floor, the living room area, almost bent in two, his face about a foot from the pine floor boards. He had the gun out now. And for about half an hour he walked around like this, sniffing away it seemed to me. Twice he stooped in the same place but continued on. He went all over the house. Finally he came back to a spot near the sofa in the living room. We could see him through the window, all of us. Billy bent quietly onto his knees and sniffed carefully at the two square feet of the floor. He listened for a while, then sniffed again. Then he fired twice into the floorboards. Jumped up and walked out to us. He's dead now Sallie, don't worry.... Angie, leaning against the rail of the veranda, her face was terrified. Simply terrified (44-45).

The accuracy with which Billy uses his shot gun is frightening. The composure and confidence in his manner of executing and accomplishing his target, leaves his audience speechless and terrified. In locating the identity of Billy the Kid the artist, who hardly seems to miss a shot, Ondaatje's focus shifts to that chaotic aspect of his character that borders on violence. This aspect of Billy's identity is illustrated in Billy's own words after shooting Gregory. He describes his death thus:

I'd shot him well and careful
made it explode under his heart
so it wouldn't last long and
was about to walk away
when the chicken paddles out to him
and as he was falling hops on his neck
digs the beak into his throat
straightens legs and heaves
a red and blue vein out

meanwhile he fell
and the chicken walked away
Still tugging at the vein
till it was 12 yards long
as if it held hat body like a kite
Gregory's last words being
Get away from me yer stupid chicken (15).

In the above quoted lines, one observes how Ondaatje's humour is tinted by the violence of Billy the artist's character. One is also struck by the chaotic order that Ondaatje's Billy exhibits when he says "You know hunters / are the gentlest / anywhere in the world ... in the same way assassins / come to chaos neutral" (47). Ondaatje has interspersed violent imagery with chaotic order throughout the novel. The tension between this violence and the disorganised order that Billy exhibits once a while becomes the subject matter of the poetry in the novel.

Early in the novel, there is a prose account of Billy's stay in a barn, as a boy when he was sick. His condition was weak and his vitality very low. He enters into an imaginative relation with birds, insects, colours, pattern of light and shape of things in the barn.

We were all aware and allowed each other. The fly who sat on my arm after his inquiry, just went away, ate his disease and kept it in him. When I walk I avoided the cobwebs who had places to grow to, who had stories to finish. The flies caught in those acrobat nets were the only murder I saw (16).

However this living in harmony with birds and insects, the respect that he has for them for what they are, comes to an immediate end with his recovery and, the strange invasion of rats from a neighbouring granary. Billy kills every living creature in the barn and his uncontrollable violence is powerfully highlighted in this segment.

White walls neon in the eye
1880 November 23 my birthday
catching flies with my left hand
bringing the fist to my ear
hearing the scream grey buzz
as their legs cramp their
heads with no air
so eyes split and release
open fingers
the air and sun hit them like pollen
sun flood drying them red
catching flies
angry weather in my head, too (58).

In the words of Leslie Mundwiler, Ondaatje depicts Billy as being both "the tormentor and the tormented" (69). Like most artists, Billy struggles to give voice to his identity, to the repressed and inviolate form that no one seems to comprehend. For an artist like Billy, violence seems to be his only resort for the tension between the making and the success of the work is always an endless struggle, and when expectations are not met, the end is disastrous. In the endeavour to transcribe Billy's identity, Ondaatje tries to find "some reasoning" in order "to explain all this violence." and asks himself a question "was there a source for all this?" (54). Ondaatje seems to find it difficult to transcribe the gaps and silences in the life of the historical Billy the Kid in order to situate the source of the violence in his identity. Therefore, he resorts to the construction of Billy the Kid's mythical identity by blurring the boundaries of fact and fiction and fuse them with the oral narratives of his artist-narrators.

In a 1972 untitled interview, Ondaatje emphasized his interest in myth, saying:

I am interested in myth... Making it, remaking it, exploring. I don't like poems or work that cash in on a cliché of history of a personality. I don't like pop westerns and pop Billy the kids. Myths are only of value to me when they are realistic or having other qualities of myth. Another thing that interests me about myth is how and when figures get caught in myths (qtd. Mundwiler 10).

In *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, the prose piece that begins with Billy the Kid's statement: "Not a story about me through their eyes" (*Billy* 20), at one level confirms the author's attempt to create his own myth about Billy the Kid. It also challenges the reader to "find the beginning, the slight silver key to unlock [the myth], to dig it out" (*Billy* 20). Therefore the words "here then is a maze to begin, be in" (*Billy* 20) refers to the centre of the myth, where thoughts, according to Ondaatje are free to wander any path to any unforeseen conclusion. One may also refer to the quotation as an invitation to the reader to actively participate in the reconstruction of the life of this mythical figure.

Ondaatje portrays the artist-characters in *The Collected Works* as maze builders and web spinners, allowing each one of them to weave their own stories around Billy the Kid. The narrative shifts from Billy himself to Pat F. Garrett the policeman, to Paulita Maxwell and to Miss Sallie Chisum. Each one has a story to tell and Ondaatje allows each one of them to have his/her say, to articulate his/her own version, in transcribing the identity of Billy the Kid who is the ultimate artist. However Ondaatje also reminds the reader that the characters who transcribe the life of Billy the Kid are also artists in their own right. Their transcription of the life of Billy the Kid is also a personal transcription of their own selves. In the process, Ondaatje uses techniques of transcription whereby deliberate historical gaps are left as they are, seemingly, to allow these gaps and silences to build up the mythical identity of Billy the artist.

When Billy the Kid further asserts that "there is nothing of depth, of significant accuracy, of wealth in the image, I know. It is there for a beginning" (*Billy* 20), Ondaatje seems to admit to the difficulty of explaining and portraying the actual silences and gaps in the narrative in locating the identity of the artist. He, therefore, manipulates the other artist-characters to give their own take on Billy the kid and deliberately play with documented facts in their transcription of the identity of Billy. Thus in the novel, historical facts are blurred together with the account of Pat F. Garrett on the outlaw, Billy the Kid, with Billy the Kid's own stories about his exploits. He weaves them with the narratives of Paulita Maxwell and Miss Sallie Chisum on Billy, which are mostly in verse.

At this point one may look back at some of the historical events that occurred in Mexico and other territories in the latter half of the nineteenth century. There were four influences that might have incited this group of men to violence and lawlessness. The first was ambition; the scramble for big money and the power that went with it. The second and third were liquor and guns. The fourth and possibly the most compelling one was the "code of the west" – "I'll die before I'll run" (Utley 4). The code originated in Texas, flowing northward onto the great cattle trails of the post civil-war decades. Demanding personal courage and pride, and a reckless disregard for life, it commanded practitioners to avenge all insult and wrong, real or imagined; never to retreat before an aggressor; and to respond with degrees of violence that may even result in death.

In *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, during the "Exclusive Jail Interview" (81) when Billy is asked whether he has a lawyer working on his appeal, he answers with courage and pride, "slip me a gun and I will have" (83). This strong determination to live even if his only resort is to violence is reflected further in the conversation.

Interviewer: Are you happy, or at least were you happy? Did you have any reason for going on living, or were you just experimenting?

Billy: I don't know whether I'm happy or not. But in the end that is all that's important – that you keep testing yourself, as you say – experimenting on how good you are, and you can't do that when you want to lose (83).

Ondaatje's depiction of Billy as a cool, determined gun-shooter who hardly misses a shot or is ever nervous under any circumstance is synonymous with the life of the historical Billy as recorded by scholars and newspapers during the time when he was alive.

In Utley's historical book where he records the actual interview between Billy and Frank Joe, Billy's employer who features in *El Paso Times*, Frank describes how Billy "spent all his spare time cleaning his six-shooter and practicing shooting... He could take two six-shooters, loaded and cocked, one in each hand ... and twirl one in one direction and the other in the other direction at the same time. And I have seen him ride his horse on a run and killed snow birds, four out of five" (32-33). The interview showcases the versatility of Billy the artist's shooting skills, which focuses upon a terrifyingly brutal aspect of his personality.

However, Stephen Scobie compares Ondaatje's Billy to a romantic hero, "whose position as an outsider gives [him] a keener perception that goes beyond the utilitarian norm" (Bolland 20). One may thus consider Ondaatje's idea of the artist as holding an unstable balance between violent energy and beauty, like "great stars,"

...straining to the centre that would explore their white if temperature and the speed they moved a shifted one degree (*Billy* 41).

It is the legend of Billy's cycle of killing and bloodshed caused along the Canadian border, coupled with the historical controversies that he succeeded in creating over the created that impacted Ondaatje's mind. Ondaatje allows his imagination to flow as he situates the complexities of the identity of Billy the artist. He fuses fact and fiction and allows fiction to have the upper hand in shaping the character and identity of his artist. In a segment when Billy utters

MMMMMMMM mm thinking

...

moving across the world on horses
so if I had a newsman's brain I'd say
well some morals are physical
must be clear and open
like diagram of watch or star
moving across the world on horses
one must eliminate much
that is one turns when the bullet leaves you
walk off see none of the thrashing
the very eyes welling up like bad drains
believing then the moral of newspaper or gun
where bodies are mindless as paper flowers you don't feed
or give to drink
that is why I can watch the stomach of clocks
shift their wheels and pins into each other
and emerge living for hours (*Billy* 11)

Ondaatje seems to dwell on the tormented Billy, bringing to light the repressed life of the artist. Yet in situating the identity of this legendary artist, Ondaatje allows his imagination to overpower fact, leaving the historical gaps and silences as they are to admit their entry into the novel in order to create the mythical identity of Billy the artist.

In the words of Leslie Mundwiler in her critique of *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, "the animals that are caged at the Chisums are the living symbols of [the] struggle and frustration" of Billy the Kid (Mundwiler 70). Miss Sallie Chisum is one of Ondaatje's

narrators in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, who finds Billy the Kid “as courteous a gentleman as [she] ever met” (87). The Chisum household is as strange as its inhabitants. It is peopled with wild animals that are caged in all their lives. Billy the Kid who has gone to spend a few days with the family finds them strange. “They do not talk much” he remembers. Theirs is “the dialogue of noise – the scraping cup, the tilting chair, the cough, the suction as an arm lifts off a table breaking the lock that was formed by air and the wet of the surface.” (32). Sallie Chisum lives in a dream world and does not have any contact with the outside. Billy remember how she glides into the house like a ghost, and is so obsessed with the change in the colour of the room and with the movement of the sun in the sky. Like Miss Sallie Chisum, Billy the Kid loves animals for they seem to accept him the way he is. When Billy admits “in the end the only thing that never changed, never became deformed, were animals” (10), he seems to echo the frustration and distrust that he has of others in the same manner as Miss Sallie Chisum.

In *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, Ondaatje, however, focuses his attention on the virtually paradoxical amalgamation of the binary opposites in his characters’ personalities while transcribing their identities. The ‘good’ is mixed in with the ‘bad’, chaos merges with order and violence blurs with kindness as in the character of Billy and Pat Garrett. The binary opposites hone *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and his earlier poetic works to the intensity of artistic form. Solecki calls that “centre” of Ondaatje’s poetry the “tension between mind and chaos” (17). One may, therefore, conclude that Ondaatje’s source of creativity stems from that chaotic energy that propels him forward. The element of brutality and heartlessness in the identity of Billy the Kid is, however, a point of interest to Ondaatje in the novel, but he does not dwell at length on what he seems to consider the exaggerated and sensational reports of the media. By keeping the portrait of Billy blank on the first page of the text, instead of allowing the many different images created through the ninety years of Billy’s story “to float inside the text, underweighted by subtitles,” as Solecki points out, Ondaatje invites the reader to enter the text, to actively participate and explore in the mapping out of the identity of his artist-protagonists. On the other hand, Ondaatje’s use of the shifting narrative viewpoints of Pat Garrett, Sallie Chisum, Paulita Maxwell present aspects of Billy’s character that seem to defy definition: “Not a story about me through their eyes then. Find the beginning, the slight silver key to unlock it, to dig it out. Here then is a maze to begin, be in” (20). Ondaatje’s role also seems to be that of a collector of the stories of his artist characters whom he has manipulated into saying something about Billy.

III

Jon Saklofske explores in details the motif of a collector in the works of Ondaatje particularly in *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976) where he connects Ondaatje’s works to Walter Benjamin’s insights into the relationship between “the collector and his possessions” in his essay “Unpacking my Library” (486). However, one may also discover another connection between the essay and *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. Linking order, chaos and memory, Benjamin writes:

Every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector’s passion borders on the chaos of memories... for what else is this collection but a disorder to which habit has accommodated itself to such an extent that it can appear as order? (486-487).

In *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, Ondaatje’s exploration of the identity of his artist-protagonists, borders on that chaotic vigour that defines his poems and earlier fictive works. Thus Ondaatje, by gathering fragmented facts from history and merging them with his

“chaotic memories” and imagination, redefines the identity of his artist characters in the novel through the act of “ownership” which is “the most intimate relationship” between “the collector and his possessions” (Benjamin 491, 486).

Ondaatje’s position in representing the identity of the artist in *The Collected Works* is, therefore, that of a searcher, “a collector, a preserver” who turns into “a destroyer of exclusive history and accurate portraiture by voicing his own selective agency” (Arendt 45) through artistic improvisation. Ondaatje’s creative fusion of fragmented fact and fiction, therefore, rescues a historical figure from being “silenced” or “overwhelmed” (Barbour 7) by far too little or too much documentation as in *Billy the Kid* to give his identity a new meaning.

In tracing the identity of *Billy the Kid* and in searching for the significance of his life, Ondaatje is seen to juxtapose prose with verse, songs with points of view, photographs with eyewitness testimonies and fictional interviews with a comic section on *Billy*, making the novel appear as a scrap book. Ondaatje may, therefore, be identified as an artist working in a different medium altogether, a medium that is created from the manipulation of fragmentary texts. Ondaatje’s “maze” (*Billy* 20) also appears more like an invitation to the reader to actively participate into the reconstruction of the life of *Billy the Kid*.

Ondaatje who emphasises his interest “in myth ... Making it, remaking it, exploring” (qtd. in Mundwiler 10) thus weaves the collated fragments of facts with his own creative imagination to make them appear mythical in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. The narrative that shifts from *Billy* to *Garett* to *Paulita* to *Sallie Chisum*, portrays the narrators themselves as maze builders, web spinners and artists in their own right whose transcriptions of the life of *Billy* may also be seen as personal transcriptions of their own selves.

In *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, *Pat Garett*, the police chief and *Billy the Kid*, the central outlaw are Ondaatje’s two main artist-characters. They are artists of the chaos that forms the core of their creativity that must finally culminate in self-destruction. Violence is thus the common thread that runs through their lives. They resort to it to attain their desired heights as artists.

Historical narratives as Hayden White suggests are not only mere “models of past events and processes, but also metaphorical statements which suggests a relation of similitudes between such events and the processes and story types that we conventionally use to endow the events of our lives with culturally sanctioned meanings” (Historical 89). This form of historical narrative, therefore, encloses the stories of *Billy the Kid* and *Pat Garrett* whereby they are

if anything ... only adds to the number of possible texts that have to be interpreted if a full and accurate picture of a given historical milieu is to be faithfully drawn (White, Historical 89).

Ondaatje’s re-representation of the fragments of historical facts accumulated around *Billy the kid* is, therefore, an attempt to discover the hidden truth that may be missed or intentionally lost by historical representation. Being an artist himself who is in search of the truth and the possible, Ondaatje thus employs his own techniques to reconstruct identities in the novel. Thus while relocating the identity of *Billy the artist*, Ondaatje may also be seen to incorporate another method of transcription where historical gaps and silences are left as they are, so as to allow them to suggest and imply upon the mythical identity of the artist.

In his exploration of “myth... and historical effects of myths of identity” in “*Negotiating Caribbean Identities*”, Stuart Hall reminds the reader that “Identity is not only a story ... it is stories which change with historical circumstances. And identity shifts with the way in which we think and hear them” (281, 286).

In Ondaatje’s manipulation of fragmentary facts coupled with the freedom he gives his artist-narrators to narrate their own tales on *Billy*, Ondaatje deliberately plays with the factual collectables in the reconstruction of artistic identities in the novel. In exploring and

transcribing the identity of Billy the artist, Ondaatje may, therefore, be acknowledged to be an artist himself confirming his interest in the controversies of a mythical figure.

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