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Michael Ondaatje's "Coming Through Slaughter" and
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"The problem," says Rudy Wiebe at the beginning of his short story "Where Is the Voice Coming From?" "is to make the story."¹ History has lost its accepted status as a positively ascertainable science and become "Western myth" (Foucault); this is particularly true when, as in Wiebe's case, the position of the author is one of posterity and (meta-)historical consciousness in a postcolonial context:

Contemporary writers — and postmodern fabulators even more so — find themselves at once drawn to embracing history as the ultimate discourse — for who can resist the seduction of the real — at the same time that they reject the claims of history as fantasy, projection, rationalization, theodicy, textual naïveté, or whatever.²

The willed separation from the colonial motherland renders all pre-independence written matter (from official reports to newspapers) specimens of colonial discourse from "taim bilong masta" (Tok Pisin). The unreliability of the documented source in this context sets in before Hayden White's imagined historian has even touched the matter in the process of superimposing yet another rhetorical layer of fictionalization on it: "in the very *language* that the historian uses to describe his object of study, [...] he subjects that object of study to the kind of distortion that historicists impose upon their materials [...]."³

To write historical texts in the mode of Sir Walter Scott, portraying fictional — and admittedly invented — characters against an implicitly 'factual' historical backdrop — which is usually accepted as such — becomes difficult against this background. Books that are unselfconsciously assertive about the history they present may still become bestsellers, but they run the risk of being derided by the profession. The majority of today's historical novels and romances is sold from the paperback racks near the cashier's counter of your local supermarket.

¹ Rudy Wiebe, "Where Is the Voice Coming From," *The Angel from the Tar Sands* (Toronto, 1982), 78.

² Allan Thiher, "Postmodern Fiction and History," *History and Post-war Writing*, ed. Theo D'haen and Hans Bertens (Amsterdam, 1990), 14.

³ Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, 1978), 102.

Approaching historical subjects or personages in the postmodern, metahistorically conscious mode, then, becomes either a matter of metafictional bricolage, leaving it to the reader to fill in the gaps (as in e.g. Timothy Findley's *The Wars*); or a professional raconteur's insistence on good storytelling (as in e.g. T.C. Boyle's *Water Music*).⁴ The instability of the writer's position in view of his material extends to the genre of biography of both self and others: the assertive mood contained in the ethymologically monosensical 'biography' has given way to 'life-story' with equal stress on the experienced and the possibly fictional, and to 'biomythography,' inserting a consciously or subconsciously mythifying element between the life as lived and its de-scription.

'Biomythography' as a replacement term becomes more readily acceptable in view of life-stories in which an author's subject was taken from the realm of the legendary, as is the case in the two books by Canadian author Michael Ondaatje which shall be the center of investigation in this paper: *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* on/about the legendary Western outlaw Henry Antrim a.k.a. William Bonney,⁵ and the 1976 volume *Coming Through Slaughter* on/about the almost equally legendary and enigmatic New Orleans jazzier Charles Bolden.⁶ There are four determining factors in this constellation: a (1) postmodern author from a (2) post-colonial nation adopts two ultimately (3) U.S.-American (4) legends. I will therefore in the following focus my attention on the interdependence/interaction of the historical, the (meta-)fictional, and the legendary in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and *Coming Through Slaughter*.

More than any other country (with the possible exception of Mexico), Canada has felt the dominating power of American political and cultural discourse. Ondaatje's use of two American legendary characters, both of whom were at some point in their lives called '(the) Kid' and are better remembered today not by their real names but by nicknames: 'Buddy' Bolden, and Billy the Kid, may then seem to be a case of jumping the bandwagon of an American popular culture industry, succumbing to its ubiquitous power. The question to which degree *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and *Coming Through Slaughter* are actually 'Canadian' books will therefore be addressed in closing.

The realm of the legendary warrants additional information. Historical 'facts,' however provisional their standing, and their documentation (of necessity) incomplete, do yet as a general rule achieve a greater degree of historicity than legends. The real, factual core legends may have — or, rather, may have had — has become indistinguishable from a tangled web of added information: Historical people like Robin Hood or Dyl Ulenspiegel once upon a time became the focal point of

⁴ In a genial turn, John Steffler's Governor-General's Award-winning novel *The Afterlife of George Cartwright* (Toronto, 1992) explores the historical subject from a new vintage point of view anticipated in the title.

⁵ Michael Ondaatje, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (London, 1989; ¹1970); hereafter *BK*.

⁶ Michael Ondaatje, *Coming Through Slaughter* (Toronto, 1976); hereafter *CTS*.

numerous stories in an oral tradition, and over the course of several centuries the historical core became mixed in with the rest. The initial “verbal model of the set of events”⁷ has, so to speak, disappeared among the accumulated verbiage.

One of the most amazing aspects of American culture is that by comparison it has not only made up for its incipient lack of legendary figures (non-Indian), but it has turned modern urban legends into a specifically North American product line. Starting with the pulpmills churning out the other raw material for the Beadle & Adams Dime Novels, the production of legendary figures became a branch of American industries. This industrialization process started around the same time when the makers of serious history — the term here denoting not so much the ‘great men’ but the writers of history books — were working under the spell von Ranke had cast, urging them to find out “wie es wirklich gewesen.” By default, they left to professional glamorizers the field of the ‘Western’ — a cultural life-form rife with historical facts and legendary possibilities that in the last quarter of the 19th century was rapidly passing into history.⁸ The same process is observable half a century later, when the initial ‘Golden era’ of Jazz — that is, the period from about 1900 to 1925 — had passed unnoticed by history writers, and subsequently became the focus of attention only in the late 1930s, when several of the important and illustrious figures of the early period — Bolden, but also Bix Beiderbecke, Freddie Keppard, King Oliver, Frank Teschemaker — were already dead, and the process of myth-making had set in.

Even though many of the original participants in both eras contributed liberally to the creation of mythical accounts of the times and characters they witnessed, it was particularly the market-oriented professionalism of the marketeers which sped up the process. It encouraged (and to a degree necessitated) the frequent repetition and recombination of individual motifs and figures to form ‘postmodern’ layers and patterns of “Beliebigkeit,” recombining e.g. the historical but quite legendary Billy the Kid not only with the equally legendary Wild Bill Hickock, but with mythical (and unlikely) companions such as Count Dracula.⁹ Professional marketing also accounts for the influence of American legends in this century. Conceived from a historical core, spread and distributed via the modern mass media, rearranged in memories, newspaper interviews, fictional stories, and even more fictional movies, American legendary figures grew into international phenomena, inspiring fantasies worldwide. The industrialized replication (W. Benjamin) and distribution of American cultural products including legendary figures has in the past been unfairly if not entirely unjustifiably attributed only to U.S.-

⁷ White, *Tropics of Discourse*, 88.

⁸ Vardis Fischer and Opal Laurel Holmes, “Fact or Fiction: The Blend of History and Legend,” *The Western*, ed. James K. Folsom (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1979), 95.

⁹ Stephen Tatum, *Inventing Billy the Kid: Visions of the Outlaw in America, 1881-1981* (Albuquerque, 1982), 75. More recent revisions include another poetic treatment by bp nichol, a play by Robert Coover, and a computer game (“Wyatt Earp hunts Billy the Kid”).

cultural imperialism. This criticism must fall short of its mark as long as it does not take into account the receptability of non-U.S. markets to these new products.

The Collected Works of Billy the Kid and *Coming Through Slaughter* were originally published six years apart, but even a cursory reading uncovers a number of similarities. Rather than a volume of poetry, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* is a collection of texts mixing, transgressing, and ironizing genres, with interspersed historical documents and a number of photographs commenting on and juxtaposed to the text. The same holds true for *Coming Through Slaughter*, with the noted difference that whereas *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* leans more towards the poetic side, *Coming Through Slaughter* shows more features of prose fiction and the novel. However, this paper will not discuss style and form¹⁰ in the books, but will concentrate on the representation of possible histories and historical ambiguities in the text, and on how both books simultaneously assert and subvert the biomyths they are based on. A second point is that of the artist as the creator of metahistorical disorder — both books have been interpreted as post-modern versions of the genre form of *Künstlerroman*. Finally, the texts are discussed as metahistories of literature — an abduction of American cultural icons for CanLit purposes.

From what has been said above about legends and history, it ought to be clear that neither *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* nor *Coming Through Slaughter* should be expected to be 'factual' biographies. Nor are they historical in the sense that 19th- or even 20th-century historical novels are: While the historical novel from the paradigmatic *Waverley* onwards insists on the implicit factuality of its historical background, Ondaatje in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and *Coming Through Slaughter* uses historical characters but surrounds them with inventions of his own and with "facts [...] expanded or polished to suit the truth of fiction." Auctorial invention is admitted in postscripted paragraphs called "Acknowledgements" and/or "Credits" in both *Coming Through Slaughter* and *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. To call Ondaatje's assertion of poetic license "an attempt to save the 'true life' of William H. Bonney, alias Billy the Kid, from the popular legend that grew around his figure"¹¹ is therefore a grave misreading, and Naomi Jacobs' grouping of both texts under the heading "New Fiction Biographies" more to the point.¹² In fact, Ondaatje acknowledges the sources he worked

¹⁰ This field is covered convincingly by Barry Maxwell, "Surrealistic Aspects of Michael Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter*," *Mosaic*, 18 (1985), 101-114; Alice van Wart, "The Evolution of Form in Michael Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and *Coming Through Slaughter*," *Canadian Poetry*, 17 (1985), 1-28; and especially Stephen Scobie, "*Coming Through Slaughter*: Fictional Magnets and Spider's Webbs," *Essays in Canadian Writing*, 12 (1978), 5-23.

¹¹ W.M.Verhoeven, "(De)Facing the Self: Michael Ondaatje and (Auto)Biography," *Postmodern Fiction in Canada*, ed. Theo D'Haen and Hans Bertens (Amsterdam, 1992), 181.

¹² Naomi Jacobs, "Michael Ondaatje and the New Fiction Biographies," *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 11 (1986), 2.

from. In the case of Buddy Bolden's story, the main source of what Ondaatje somewhat misleadingly calls "historical information" was *Jazzmen*, a book published in 1939 by Frederic Ramsey jr. and Stephen Smith.¹³ Ramsey and Smith basically collected a number of myths and stories at large about Bolden and the other early jazzers and lent a degree of factuality to these rumours and tales by turning them into printed form. The equivalent had already appeared in 1926, aptly named *The Saga of Billy the Kid*.¹⁴ Finally, there is a third pair of books important in this context: Donald Marquis researched the life of the legendary New Orleans cornetist for more than a decade, and presented only the ascertainable facts in his 1978 book *In Search of Buddy Bolden*,¹⁵ whereas Stephen Tatum declined to try and find out yet another 'truth' about the famous Western hero but recorded instead how the process of *Inventing Billy the Kid* had taken several turns since his death in 1881.¹⁶ More than any other figure out of the Old West, Billy had spurned the imagination of authors, proving Foucault's dictum about history becoming "Western myth" doubly true.

The Collected Works of Billy the Kid

Walter Noble Burns' 1926 effort had been to portray the 'truthful' image of the Kid, writing in a time when the congruence of truth and historical writing still remained largely unchallenged (discounting cynics like Henry Ford and his declaration that "History is bunk"). What he did, though, was to virtually achieve a u-turn in Billyography:

Instead of depicting the Kid as an outright villain in deeds and demeanor, the *Saga* portrays a noble, generous, daring, handsome, cool, and cavalier gentleman; instead of presenting the Kid's unjustifiable violence, the *Saga* presents the Kid as a persecuted youth forced to act violently in order to exist; and instead of fighting for an unprincipled, aristocratic greed, the Kid in the *Saga* confronts the corrupt machine politics of Murphy, Colonel Dudley, and the Santa Fe Ring.¹⁷

Relying on Burns' new rendition of the Bonney myth, Ondaatje never as much as tries to give a survey of the life of Billy the Kid. Taking for granted that the legend will be common knowledge, he can — like so many other books, stories, and notably films — concentrate on the dramatic ending of the hero's life. From

¹³ Frederic Ramsey, jr., and Stephen Smith, *Jazzmen* (New York, 1939). The only extant photograph of Buddy Bolden's band was reproduced in this book before the original was lost after the death of the last member of the original Bolden band, Willy Cornish, in 1942.

¹⁴ Walter Noble Burns, *The Saga of Billy the Kid* (New York, 1926).

¹⁵ Donald M. Marquis, *In Search of Buddy Bolden: First Man of Jazz* (Baton Rouge and London, 1978). Obs. that this book was published two years after Ondaatje's. One might wonder whether the two authors ever crossed each other's trails, or heard one about the other, since both cite the same sources, worked in the same archives, and in one instance interviewed the same person.

¹⁶ Tatum, *Inventing Billy the Kid*.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 102.

the beginning, however, Ondaatje's text is set to undermine its own reliability. Instead of the oft-reproduced photograph of the Kid, the reader sees an empty frame right on the first page — representing at once none and all of the different images of the outlaw created through (then) 90 years of his story. (Has anyone ever noticed the resemblance between the one photo of Billy, buck teeth and all, and the one photo known to show another literary enigma, Thomas Pynchon?). In fact, not one of the photos reproduced in the volume has any immediate connection with the main protagonist, whereas of the photos described in the text there are no reproductions.¹⁸ Several critics have drawn attention to the affinities not only to photographic but also filmic representations of realities, with Billy's viewpoint sometimes taking the role of a camera lens.¹⁹ Using a technique usually attributed to modernist writing (Dos Passos), Ondaatje comically reverses the many Hollywood renditions of the Kid. The effect is one of visual rather than narrative uncertainty, allowing "the pieces to float inside the text, unweighted by subtitles."²⁰

The conflict between a postmodern undermining of fixities and a modern sense of order comes to a climax in the many-layered ending(s). In the limited historical sense, of course, the ending of a biography is fixed, and so are — or were — the physical lives of Billy the Kid and of Buddy Bolden, ending on July 14, 1881, and on November 4, 1931 respectively. On the metalevel, however, and especially on the level of metahistory/metafiction in Ondaatje's texts, neither story has just one fixed ending. Instead, both texts open views on a whole set of possibilities.

In the case of Billy, the death scene itself is endowed with a possibility of incest (a deadly mistake: Billy mistakes the second person in the bed of his host Pete Maxwell — Garrett — for Maxwell's sister Paulita), adding another comical twist to the story:

Pete Maxwell gives a nervous giggle full of fear which Billy mistakes for embarrassment. Paulita! Jesus Christ. He leans forward again and moves his hands down the bed and then feels a man's boots. O my god Pete quien es?

He is beginning to move back a couple of yards in amazement. Garrett is about to burst out laughing so he fires, leaving a powder scar on Maxwell's face that stayed with him all his life. (*BK*, 93)

The rest is "legend a jungle sleep" (*BK*, 97). Billy's choice of possibilities, which in his case means choosing death (rather than to run away to Mexico) can be seen

¹⁸ For an extensive discussion of the relation between the photographs and Billy/Ondaatje as artists, see Perry M. Nodelman, "The Collected Photographs of Billy the Kid," *Canadian Literature*, 87 (1980), 68ff.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 70; Dennis Cooley, "'I Am Here on the Edge': Modern Hero/Postmodern Poetics in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*," *Spider Blues: Essays on Michael Ondaatje*, ed. Sam Solecki (Montreal, 1985), 216f. The seemingly spurious 'interview' with the Kid rendered by Ondaatje (*BK*, 81ff.) is based in part on an interview Bonney did give in jail, cf. Tatum, *Inventing Billy the Kid*, 31.

²⁰ Solecki, 237.

as the modern artist's way of ascertaining his own individuality and choice to prefer (Locke). In a postmodern turn, however, his modern choice is comically and ironically subverted by the aftermath and drawn out into a continuing postmodern language game.²¹ The moment of death is transcended into literature in one anticipation and several layers of sequels: The anticipation can be seen in the appearance in the text of a deputy named Poe, who for all the reader knows may be an invocation of the famous poet.²² In death, Billy breaks through a window with his arm (a motif to be repeated several times in *Coming Through Slaughter*), symbolically breaking through the here and the yonder world, between the text(s) he can control and those which he can't (94f.). Garrett's attempt at re-establishing order, however, fails despite his physical triumph over the Kid. The biomyths and stories surrounding him become entirely unhinged and develop a life of their own beyond the Kid's imagination. In historical time, fictionalizations and the creation of Bonneyana had set in even before Billy's death — and the first *True Life of Billy the Kid* was recorded with the Copyright Office of the Library of Congress already on Sept. 7, 1881 by somebody named (of all things) Edmund Fable.²³ Legendization in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* starts with Paulita Maxwell denouncing one of many stories that popped up after Billy the Kid was shot and killed by Pat Garrett, replacing it with a story of her own (96). This is followed (97) by an ironic account of what graspable remains there are: "Imagine, if you dug him up and brought him out. You'd see very little. There'd be the buck teeth."

The dime-novel mystification introit (98) in the form of a facsimile frontispiece: *The True Life of Billy the Kid* is a title in "The Five Cent Wide Awake Series." The cover of the 1881 dime (nickel, really) novel by John Woodruff Lewis shows "a glowering, dark-haired evil Kid,"²⁴ but this impression is offset immediately by a chivalric and dashing Kid in the following sequence from a 1969 comic book legend, "Billy the Kid and the Princess," reproduced by Ondaatje as text only but clearly indicating the range of possibilities of 'true' lives for Billy the Kid including *The Authentic Life of Billy, the Kid* written by Pat Garrett himself.²⁵ That Ondaatje next includes the rumor according to which Garrett shot the wrong man

²¹ Sam Peckinpah's movie *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* (1973), starring Kris Kristofferson as Billy, uses the same motif of Billy wanting to stay, therewith risking — and ultimately loosing — his life.

²² Ondaatje achieves this effect by calling the deputy only by his last name. The person referred to was of course not Edgar A. but John W. Poe, who really accompanied Pat Garrett the day Garrett killed Billy the Kid and later wrote an account of it: John W. Poe, "The Death of Billy the Kid," *Heroes of the American West*, ed. Martha R. Pappas (New York, 1969), 172-184.

²³ Item No.7 in J.C. Dykes, *Billy the Kid: The Bibliography of a Legend* (1952), quoted after Manina Jones, "The Collected Works of Billy the Kid: Scripting the Docudrama," *Canadian Literature*, 122/3 (1989), 26.

²⁴ Tatum, *Inventing Billy the Kid*, 80.

²⁵ Pat F. Garrett, *The Authentic Life of Billy, the Kid* (Norman, 1989), published originally in 1881, shortly after he had terminated that very life.

should not really come as a surprise:

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

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

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

As in the case of Butch Cassidy²⁶ and other famous Western outlaws, this is an important facet of the myth, productive into the 1980s when it sired the "Young Guns" movies. The fact that Ondaatje misquotes Poe in the above quotation, leaving out the certainty in favour of the uncertainty is another aspect of undermining fact in favour of myth in the text.²⁷

It is only consequential that Ondaatje adds an ending of his own, including an invention of himself, with a portrait of the artist as a (Billy-the-)Kid, in a photograph of a 6-year-old toting toy guns. Ondaatje liberates yet one more of many possible endings to the storyline by adding himself to the series of actors starring as youthful Billy. The postmodern texts leave enough open endings, gaps, and empty spaces between the lines to enable the author to assert "the ineradicable presentness of the author in any form of writing,"²⁸ i.e., his own existence and tentative authority, by entering the text. In *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* the writer Ondaatje — if the photograph does in fact portray him — makes only a cameo appearance, but obviously the protagonists are described as artists of sorts, even though more often than not their art is distorted, perverted, and negatively loaded to the point of self-destruction. Billy's 'art' comes across e.g. when he stalks, locates, and by killing it liberates the moribund cat of the Chisum household (*BK*, 44f.). As long as he is "moving in lyric," his artistry is of a postmodern kind: ego- as well as photocentric; whereas "MISTUH ... PATRICK ... GARRETT !!!" (*BK*, 42) also appears like an artist on stage, but part of his art is having trained himself to hold enormous amounts of alcohol, almost destroying himself in the process (*BK*, 28f.). His pursuit of Billy and his gang is seen by Dennis Cooley as a typically modernist attempt to reconstruct and reestablish order at all (destructive) cost. It is this context of modern 'artistic experiment' which provides a background for the episode about the mad singer Livingstone who bred dogs into insanity only to end up eaten by them (*BK*, 60f.). Garrett's and Livingstone's attempts to create order, which prove futile in the end, make them "examples of

²⁶ Cf. Tony Hillerman, *Coyote Waits* (New York, 1992); Richard Brautigan, "The History of Bolivia," *Rommel Drives on Deep into Egypt* (New York, 1970), 31.

²⁷ The whole passage in Poe reads as follows: "'That was the Kid that came in there onto me, and I think I have got him.' I said, 'Pat, the Kid would not come to this place; you have shot the wrong man.' Upon my saying this, Garrett seemed to be in doubt himself as to whom he had shot, but quickly spoke up and said, 'I am sure that was him, for I know his voice too well to be mistaken.' This remark of Garrett's relieved me of considerable apprehension," Poe, "The Death of Billy the Kid," 183.

²⁸ Verhoeven, "(De-)Facing the Self," 183.

excessively modernist responses to life — the belief that the world is chaotic and that we'd better impose some order, some superstructure, upon it."²⁹ Art, insanity, and self-destruction always seem to travel together in Ondaatje's earlier poetry, in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, and in *Coming Through Slaughter*.

Coming Through Slaughter

The Bolden stories in *Jazzmen* only cover some 15 pages (pp.3-18), but all the biomythical legends that have since appeared and reappeared in bits and pieces in different books on Jazz and Jazz history are there, except for the one rumor that Bolden did return to New Orleans at some time after he was committed to an insane asylum in 1907.³⁰ Donald Marquis is able to deflate this story, and his findings also include the fact that Bolden did not run a barbershop (a claim that Ondaatje doesn't make),³¹ that he did not edit a scandal sheet called *The Cricket*, and that he did not — and this is crucial for Ondaatje's plot — go berserk during a parade. Bolden's deterioration was slow but progressive, as Marquis describes it, and he was taken into custody several times before he was interned for good. *Jazzmen* reports Bolden's sudden fit of madness;³² however it was one of the Bolden band who suffered a stroke during a parade and had to be hospitalized: "Cornish suffered a stroke while playing a parade and fell at the corner of South Rampart and Julia Streets."³³ Again, like in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* before, Ondaatje chooses to reshuffle the different truths to find a new meaning: In *Coming Through Slaughter*, it is Cornish who catches Bolden as he falls after the artistic climax (131).³⁴

Subversions of historicity in *Coming Through Slaughter* are not proclaimed as openly as in the different endings of *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, but they are subtly interwoven into the text like notes in a jazz piece, audible/legible

²⁹ Cooley, "'I Am Here on the Edge,'" 232.

³⁰ This story by itself provides an insight into the generation of a fact: The undocumented claim appears in print in Sam Charters, *Jazz: New Orleans 1885-1963* (New Orleans, 1965) but has been repeated as fact by Joachim Ernst Berendt as well as in James L. Collier's comprehensive history, *The Making of Jazz* (Boston, 1978), 69. Cf. Marquis, *In Search of Buddy Bolden*, 149, who cites circumstantial evidence that raconteurs telling stories of Bolden's return are either confusing Bolden and his son Charles jr., who did in fact return to New Orleans after serving in the Navy during WW I; or Bolden and the 'colored aeronaut' Buddy Bartley, whose parachute jumps from a hot air balloon were a public attraction. Marquis cites one source who got the two so mixed up that he recalled Bolden playing his horn while ascending in a balloon (ibid., 149f., 61).

³¹ Viz. *CTS*, 10: "This is N. Joseph's Shaving Parlor, the barber shop where Buddy Bolden worked." However, Bolden is shown later on as being in possession of the place, e.g. when he fights with Tom Pickett (72ff.).

³² Ramsey/Smith, *Jazzmen*, 18.

³³ Marquis, *In Search of Buddy Bolden*, 138.

³⁴ For another view of Ondaatje/Marquis and their versions of Bolden, see Scobie, "*Coming Through Slaughter*: Fictional Magnets and Spider's Webb," 6f.

to the attentive reader/listener. Bolden listens to John Robichaux's band on a radio belonging to his friend, Webb, at a time when radios did not exist in private households (CTS, 93). In another scene, the mysterious death of his wife's mother is linked through a newspaper article to the famous strangulation of Isadora Duncan, whose long scarf got caught in the wheels of the car she was riding in (CTS, 27f.). This ignominious death happened in 1927, at a time when Bolden had already been a hospital inmate for years. A casual glance at the "Canadian Cataloguing in Publication Data" brings up Bolden's year of birth as 1868 — which would have made him 38 years old in 1906, negating Ondaatje's claim to being of the same age writing the book with Bolden when he exploded into silence — "Thirty-one years old" (CTS, 156).³⁵ Finally, there are some incongruencies within the plot, like the photograph of the Bolden band Webb receives from Bellocq (CTS, 52) and hands on to Cornish (CTS, 145), but which is supposed to have been damaged and waterlogged by the fire in Bellocq's studio (CTS, 66) — which the photographer starts *after* Webb's visit. Likewise, the life history of Buddy Bolden, as told and retold in a Bakhtinian carnival of voices from a multitude of viewpoints, creates contradictions. But this is part of the basis of the story: "Their stories were like spokes on a rimless wheel ending in air. Buddy had lived a different life with every one of them." (CTS, 63) It is this atmosphere of meta-biographical *differance* which makes *Coming Through Slaughter* more interesting than *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* in that it invents "subtle, singular, and subindividual marks that might possibly intersect [...] to form a network that is difficult to unravel."³⁶

One of the fascinating aspects about the Bolden "network" is that even the serious biographer intent on a purely non-fictional approach apparently cannot escape the lure of the legend. Donald Marquis, whose research dispelled so many invented truths, still admits to the forces of the imagination:

You sit in a patio in the French Quarter and have a few cool ones, early one morning when there is no worry or commitment [...]. The city is so still, you strain to catch a familiar sound and you realize what they meant — Jelly Roll and Albert Glenny and the rest — about the way sound used to carry so far in the New Orleans night. And over where Globe Hall used to be (seven or eight squares away), if Buddy were playing you know you could hear him clearly, along with the people applauding and laughing. You want to go back there, but can't; you can only imagine how it was on a New Orleans morning in 1905.³⁷

³⁵ Ironically, the findings of Donald Marquis point to Sept. 6, 1877 as Bolden's birth date, which would make him younger than 30 at the time he went insane.

³⁶ Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald Bouchard (Oxford, 1977), 145.

³⁷ Marquis, *In Search of Buddy Bolden*, xv. Marquis's research, among other items, turned up a signature from Bolden's hand, a hitherto unknown portrait, and the fact that somebody had pilfered various documents from the Bolden files.

The serious — modernist — biographer within *Coming Through Slaughter* is, of course, Webb, the Cop, trying to fix Buddy in a spider's web ("You're a cop Webb" *CTS*, 19) of his limited imagination. His interests are in order and arrangement, e.g. of the swirling magnets Bolden admires:

And Webb who had ten of them hanging on strings from the ceiling would explain the precision of the forces in the air and hold a giant magnet in his hands towards them so they would go frantic and twist magically with their own power [...]. (*CTS*, 35)

The photographer Bellocq, on the other hand, is seen e.g. by Nancy Bjerring as essentially in league with Bolden and like him an "avatar [...] of postmodernism, misunderstood in an earlier, inimical age."³⁸ However, it is possible to see Bellocq also as a typically modern artist, experimenting and trying to find an order only he is able to perceive (*CTS*, 54f.), who finally — but only after Bolden has disappeared for the first time — leaps into a postmodern nothingness. His destructive urge and the lure of his perception of art links him to Pat Garrett in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. Consequently Webb, Nora, and Cornish hold Bellocq responsible for Buddy's final blowout.

Coming Through Slaughter, like *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, can be read as Künstlerroman or as a (meta-)fictional biography subverting its own sources, but already the term Künstlerroman seems to be ill-fitting. Not only that. The existing artistic achievements of Bolden and Billy are not even mentioned — Billy the Kid's correspondence with the Governor of New Mexico, Lew Wallace (who was then finishing *Ben Hur*) is on record, but never used by Ondaatje, nor is the 'Bolden cylinder,' a wax recording allegedly made by the Bolden band and much sought for in archives to this day, ever mentioned. More obvious in *Coming Through Slaughter* than in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* is the meta-fictional involvement of the reader and, even more so, of the author in the construction of the text, involvement of the 'author' seemingly being an accepted given in the postmodern novel. Whereas the individual character as an entity becomes unstable and subjective in postmodern writing, the author-figure shows a marked tendency to inscribe itself into the text. Sam Solecki pushes this observation to the extreme when he states that "Two generations from now all post-modern fiction/writing will be read as autobiography,"³⁹ and W.M. Verhoeven begs the question: "If [...] the self as a coherent identity is an illusion, whose self — or what self — is Ondaatje attempting to graph in his (auto)biographical work?"⁴⁰

There is ample evidence of the involvement of the author in this text, more than in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. He "float(s) by in a car" at the beginning

³⁸ Nancy E. Bjerring, "Deconstructing the 'Desert of Facts': Detection and Antidetection in *Coming Through Slaughter*," *English Studies in Canada*, 16 (1990), 335.

³⁹ Sam Solecki, "Michael Ondaatje: A Paper Promiscuous and Out of Form with Several Inlargements and Untutored Narrative," *Spider Blues*, 23.

⁴⁰ Verhoeven, "(De-)Facing the Self," 184.

of the text (CTS, 8) but almost takes over the central role in the text after Bolden's lapse into madness. The final sentence of the particular passage when Bolden collapses, set off from the rest — "What I wanted" — can be ascribed to Bolden or to the nameless "I, the author"-narrator. And most critics have in one way or another commented on the author involvement shining through in the following passage:

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

The amount of autobiography in this seemingly obvious statement, however, may be curbed somewhat when taking into account that "(t)his slightly paranoid self-identification with the missing person is a postmodern gesture in itself, reminiscent [...] of such texts as *The Crying of Lot 49* [...]"⁴¹

Commenting on art, music, and photography, and mirroring each other's efforts are not only this narrator and Bolden but also the photographer Bellocq and a number of interviewees, historical and imagined. Taking this aspect into account, the focus may shift from the question of whether "Ondaatje exhibits a marked inclination to conflate the factual and the fictional"⁴² — which then would be an expected part of a program — to the densely patterned imagery of mirroring, and of breaking out of and through walls, windows, and mirrors. (Stephen Scobie, Alice van Wart and others have commented extensively on these patterns, so only these most important images need to be repeated here.) Bellocq, surrounded by a fire he has built himself, breaks out through the burning wall and to his death (CTS, 67); Bolden forces his personal enemy, Pickett, through the glass front of the shaving parlor (CTS, 74f.), breaks a window by just touching it (CTS, 16), and in his final appearance in the parade his notes are 'mirrored' by a girl's movements: "God this is what I wanted to play for, if no one else I always guessed there would be this, this mirror somewhere" (CTS, 130). Finally, 'Ondaatje': "The photograph [of the Bolden band] moves and becomes a mirror" (CTS, 133). Billy the Kid's death, as mentioned above, was also connected with window imagery: "my right arm is through the window pane / and the cut veins awake me / so I can watch inside and through the window" (BK, 95)⁴³ It is not difficult to see the reoccurring patterns of images as representing the themes of an actual jazz piece, the kind of music Bolden played and tried to grasp into his understanding. From this point of view *Coming Through Slaughter* takes on qualities of the 'jazz

⁴¹ Bjerring, "Deconstructing the 'Desert of Facts,'" 332.

⁴² Jerry Varsava, "History and/or His Story? A Study of Two Canadian Biographical Fictions," *History and Post-war Writing*, 210.

⁴³ Ironically, Sam Peckinpah used a similar image in his 1973 movie, when Pat Garrett, after having shot Billy, fires at another perceived target, only to destroy a mirror with his own image in it.

novel,' differing of course widely from texts that have been labelled the same such as Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* or Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, but the link is there:

Indeed, jazz's emphasis on the process of its own creation, the reciprocity of its means and its ends, epitomizes one of the dominant achievements of modernism. Jazz improvisation *is*, virtually, a state of "continuous becoming," more authentically a processual art than, say, the Jackson Pollock "action painting" experiments that Clement Greenberg celebrated as the highest expression of twentieth-century formalism.⁴⁴

Thus, on the level of style and experimental form *Coming Through Slaughter* can be interpreted as still grounded in Modernism; yet at the same time experiments with form and technique link modern and postmodern writing. The ending of *Coming Through Slaughter* clearly shows Ondaatje's inclination towards the postmodern. Most critics have interpreted the ending — with Buddy living out his life in the madhouse, his physical traces all but obliterated — as negative and destructive.⁴⁵ Winfried Siemerling on the other hand has suggested that the multiplicity of possibilities in *Coming Through Slaughter* extends to endings:

I would like to suggest that *Coming Through Slaughter* has several endings, endings which I find very hard to reconcile and which perhaps should not be reconciled. These endings "contain" Bolden as much as they may try to spew him back out into history. The "struggle for life" between "author and hero" of which Bakhtin speaks [...] can be seen, in this perspective, to continue through the finishing line. The collage of different text forms at the end retains the ideal of Bolden's music *before* "coming through slaughter."⁴⁶

In some ways Ondaatje repeats the multiple-endings-technique he used in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*,⁴⁷ but rather than presenting a sequence of fabulations and transmutations, he fades out Bolden with a series of interview bits, acknowledgements, and a repetition of the photographic ending. Stan Dragland's slightly blurred photo of the author on the back is linked to the equally blurred photo of Bolden and his band on the front cover.⁴⁸ The multiplicity on all levels is, again, reminiscent of jazz style:

⁴⁴ John Gennari, "Jazz Criticism: Its Development and Ideologies," *Black American Literature Forum*, 25 (1991), 464.

⁴⁵ E.g. Leslie Mundwiler, *Michael Ondaatje: Word, Image, Imagination* (Vancouver, 1984), Ch.4, 72ff.: "*Coming Through Slaughter* and Tragic Bathos."

⁴⁶ Winfried Siemerling, "Temptations of Identity: Michael Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter* and Fascination" (Lecture in Osnabrück, Dec. 2, 1991), Ms., 12.

⁴⁷ There is, apart from the structural parallels, also a hidden citation of Billy the Kid in *Coming Through Slaughter* (141f.). Apparently, Billy as a child went under the name of Henry Antrim (Tatum, *Inventing Billy the Kid*, 20).

⁴⁸ Cf. this author, "The Intangible Image of Buddy Bolden," *Image et Récit*, ed. Jean-Michel Lacroix, Simone Vauthier and Heliane Ventura (Paris, 1993), 177; cf. Scobie, "Fictional Magnets," 21.

In any case, when the Negro musician or dancer swings the blues, he is fulfilling the same fundamental existential requirement that determines the mission of the poet [...]. Extemporizing in response to the exigencies of the situation in which he finds himself, he is confronting, acknowledging, and contending with the infernal absurdities and ever-impending frustrations inherent in the nature of all existence by *playing with the possibilities that are also there*.⁴⁹

The highlighting in this quotation is by the author, but it serves the purpose here, indicating again the postmodern quality of these stories about two artists who, playing with the possibilities that were also there, were hurled/hurled themselves violently into silence. However, even though Ondaatje's treatment of self and other in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and *Coming Through Slaughter* as well as in *Running in the Family* seems to invite an interpretation of these texts as autobiographically inspired Künstlerromane, such a reading does not give enough credit to the aspects of the legendary that separates the first two texts from the third.⁵⁰ *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and *Coming Through Slaughter* are not just postmodern biomythographies, they are also metafictional deconstructions of comfortable legends. Also, a reading as Künstlerromane does not give any credit to Ondaatje being a Canadian author who deals with legends American (imperial inclusive phrasing intended).

Buddy and Billy (the) Kid-napped to Canada

In tune with Ondaatje's ironic treatment of historical facts, Winfried Siemerling has tried to steer the discussion about *Coming Through Slaughter* away from "the question of historical adequacy in order to focus, in the wider context of historiographic metafiction, on aspects of fascination and liminality in the encounter between self and other."⁵¹

What I want to stress in closing is a different point in the same wider context of historiographic metafiction: the appropriation of two legendary figures, and subsequently the assertion of the post-modern, post-colonial Canadian imaginative capacity to give a new validity to the worn-out legend of Billy the Kid, and the first proper (meta)fictional treatment to the 'lunatic fringe' legend Bolden.

Billy the Kid and Buddy Bolden are tropes and "legendary [...] in a rhetorical sense, constructed in readings and in writings."⁵² One book always quoting from the next in line, ending in open space where there are no nameable sources — reiterating the mode of the oral tradition to 'hand down' stories for which ultimately no distinct source can be ascertained. What is being appropriated in *Coming Through Slaughter* is a synergeia, a compound myth: the Jazzer per se,

⁴⁹ Albert Murray, *The Omni-Americans: Black Experience and American Culture* (New York, 1970), 58.

⁵⁰ Verhoeven, "(De-)facing the Self," 199f.

⁵¹ Winfried Siemerling, "Fascination and Liminality," forthcoming.

⁵² Jones, "Scripting the Docudrama," 29.

but also the myth of the artist-genius whose accomplishments are achieved Hölderlin-style at the expense of health and/or sanity. The Bolden myth may in fact be a retrospective invention, born in the 1930s, after the untimely demise of another 'kid' genius, Bix Beiderbecke, who may unwittingly have triggered the set of images and myths connected with jazz musicians.⁵³ The myth of the jazzier's early burnout, the "explosion into silence" was reinforced in the 1950s and 60s by Krupa, Dorsey, and especially by the legendary Charlie 'Bird' Parker⁵⁴ — but not, e.g. by the Canadian-born Oscar Peterson. Similarly, Billy the Kid is (re-)presentative for the Wild West myth so notably absent from Canadian history. Ondaatje somewhat self-consciously still inscribes him into Canada — Billy and his companion Bowdre criss-cross "the Canadian border" (*BK*, 20), and Billy is particularly fond of the music of "a Canadian group, a sort of orchestra, that is the best. Great" (*BK*, 84). Writing Canada into the text of *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (and into the consciousness of the reader on the metalevel) is one simple way of ascertaining that the country exists, that it is accessible, and that the arts have a foothold there. In *Coming Through Slaughter* Ondaatje does without these simplistic assertions. The only comparable passages refer to literary figures, but the references are ironic: Coleman (*CTS*, 37) as well as Geddes and Moss (*CTS*, 137) appear to be standing for Canadian authors and critics Victor Coleman, Gary Geddes, and John Moss. These identifications are contested by Marquis' documentation that a Geddes-Moss funeral parlor did in fact exist in New Orleans; they took care of Bolden's corpse in 1931.⁵⁵ Coleman could also indicate the jazzier Coleman Hawkins.⁵⁶ Ondaatje, of course, points out not only his own liminal concern with historiographic factuality but also his fondness of dropping in ambiguous namings, by crosslisting Billy the Kid in *Coming Through Slaughter*

⁵³ Scott DeVeaux, "Constructing the Jazz Tradition: Jazz Historiography," *Black American Literature Forum*, 25 (1991), 533, laments the tragedy of some of the early jazzier's life stories, among them Bolden and Beiderbecke. Whereas Bolden's life had not been made the focus of a literary effort before Ondaatje, Dorothy Baker, *Young Man With a Horn* (New York and London, 1938), claimed that "The inspiration for the writing of this book has been the music, if not the life, of a great musician, Leon (Bix) Beiderbecke." Unfortunately, Baker's novel is a rather badly flawed piece of fiction.

⁵⁴ Another literary precursor for *Coming Through Slaughter* was Julio Cortázar, "El Perseguidor," in *El Perseguidor y Otras Relatos*, ed. A. Cousté (Barcelona, 1984). His fictional character of a jazzier in Paris was allegedly modelled on Miles Davis.

⁵⁵ Marquis, *In Search of Buddy Bolden*, 131. Scobie, "Fictional Magnets," 6, accounts Ondaatje's inclusion of Geddes and Moss among his "errors" [that] are simply private jokes," not realizing the ironic doubling of meanings.

⁵⁶ Coleman Hawkins (1901-1969) was not one of Bolden's contemporaries. The character speaking in the passage, however, is not Bolden but Frank Lewis, who died in the 1920s and could well have known Hawkins as a young man; cf. Marquis, *In Search*, 137. The ironic reference lies in the fact that a final identification is impossible — more readers in the US and possibly even in Canada would attribute the identification to the famous saxophonist. Maxwell, "Surrealistic Aspects," 108, brings the Coleman reference in connection with Ondaatje's friend Victor Coleman as well as with the modern jazzier Ornette Coleman.

(141f.) under his real name of Antrim,⁵⁷ as a patient who becomes furious over the question whether his weekly shot of medicine ought to be applied into the left or the right arm — a comical reference to the controversy over the apparently left-handed photo of Billy the Kid. But whereas this reference would likely pass unnoticed by Canadian readers, Coleman, Geddes, and Moss signify somebody Canadian outside, somebody American inside the text. Canadian contexts are also available in the simple presence of Canadian author Ondaatje as a literary presence, a repeatedly proclaimed 'I.' Neither *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* nor *Coming Through Slaughter* exists apart from its Canadian premises, even though the following statement by Linda Hutcheon obviously applies: "[...] this kind of metafiction represents something beyond a post-colonial Canadian need to reclaim the past, because it is not necessarily Canada's past that is always sought out."⁵⁸

When Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffith, and Helen Tiffin, quoting Salman Rushdie, ascertained that the "empire writes back,"⁵⁹ the examples they used to prove their thesis were mostly of a more direct type. Ondaatje participates in the post-colonial process in a mode and manner that is inherently ironic,⁶⁰ thereby drawing attention not so much to its (possible) political content but to its artistry and handling of form.⁶¹ Not being obvious items of 'Canadiana,' *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and *Coming Through Slaughter* are not just the result of a literary 'out of area'-mission either. They are mockingly defiant comments on the CanLit hysteria rampant in the 1970s (and still productive in the current discussion of Canadian canons⁶²), and they transfer two floating myths into a Canadian reading context and imaginative space. The "inflated, revered historical images"⁶³ decon-

⁵⁷ Tatum, *Inventing Billy the Kid*, 20.

⁵⁸ Hutcheon, "Canadian Historiographic Metafiction," 236.

⁵⁹ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back* (London, 1989).

⁶⁰ I am using the term and concept of (artistic) irony here following Heide Ziegler, *Ironie ist Pflicht* (Heidelberg, 1994, forthcoming).

⁶¹ Notably, after sifting through hundreds of items of Bonneyana, Tatum calls *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* "the longest and the richest of the poetic treatments of the Kid," adding, "and to do justice to it here is impossible." Tatum, *Inventing Billy the Kid*, 149. Reading *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and seeing the 1973 movie *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*, it is difficult not to imagine that Peckinpah at least knew of Ondaatje's volume. One would like to imagine an actual influence of the Canadian imagination on the American movie film script. Ondaatje's postmodern treatment of Bolden may also have influenced the (comical) review of yet another "tragic" jazzier's life-story, that of Bix Beiderbecke: Ror Wolf, *Leben und Tod des Kornettisten Bix Beiderbecke aus Nordamerika: Eine Radioballade* [a radio ballad] (Stuttgart, 1989).

⁶² Cf. *Canadian Canons: Essays in Literary Value*, ed. Robert Lecker (Toronto, 1991); see also T.D. MacLulich's nationalist essay, denouncing postmodern 'internationalism' in favour of 'true' Canadiana: "What Was Canadian Literature," *Essays in Canadian Writing*, 30 (1984/85), 17-34.

⁶³ Stanley Fogel links Ondaatje with Coover, Doctorow, and Barthelme calling them writers "of a unique genre, a new kind of historical fiction," *A Tale of Two Countries: Contemporary Fiction in Canada and the United States* (Toronto, 1984), 13.

structed by Ondaatje are ironically the Canadian stereotypes that are absent as well as the American ones present. In terms of the politics of reading, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and *Coming Through Slaughter* are therefore more than just assertions of Canadian existence on the 'American' fringe. What they amount to is a reversal of the accustomed standard procedure by means of which U.S. cultural industries for a long time appropriated Canadian stories, histories, and cultural images. In a postmodern language game, Ondaatje toys with representations and signifiers, confirming the possibility of multiple crossings not only out of, but also into Canada: "If you don't shake, don't get no cake" (CTS, 146).