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merge into absolute peace and harmony. When man cannot understand his oblivious amoeba, he seeks to destroy it, being incapable of achieving the expansion that should necessarily follow the reduction.

Thus Scott rejects man's need for anthropomorphic gods and goddesses, the myths that helped explain and justify the relevance of man's existence. Phylogenic man is the result of a biological accident. His ludicrousness is the result of his own capacity for creating a farcical environment. But man also has the potential for creating a more positive environment, simply by placing himself in perspective relative to the landscape. Scott's philosophies are "new names" for interpreting and describing the landscape through man's relation to the landscape.

Footnotes

- 1 Desmond Pacey, *Ten Canadian Poets* (Toronto, 1958), p. 223; and A.J.M. Smith, *Towards a View of Canadian Letters* (Vancouver, 1973), p. 115.
- 2 Gregory P. Schultz, *The Periodical Poetry of A.J.M. Smith, F.R. Scott, A.M. Klein and D. Livesay, 1925-1950* (The University of Western Ontario, 1957), p. 85. (Unpublished M.A. Thesis.)
- 3 *The McGill Movement*, ed. Peter Stevens (Toronto, 1969), p. 51.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 67.
- 5 *Towards a View of Canadian Letters* (Vancouver, 1973), p. 121.
- 6 Robin Mathews, *Prolegomenon for an English Canadian Poetics*, (unpublished, P. 23). Mr. Mathews defines English Canadian Poetic tradition under the headings of nature, quality and structure, the "laws" of poetic expression. He observes that the Canadian reality is a materialist reality in two senses: "as a fact of social Darwinism (survival of the fittest) and the quasi-idealized world of evolutionary Darwinism informed with an altruistic factor that provides purpose and definition to existence" (p. 18). Many of Scott's poems "assert the possibility of value (altruism) as a function of the materialist reality" (p. 23). In "Japanese Sand Garden" and "Autumn Lake," Mr. Mathews notes, F.R. Scott, "expresses a secular apprehension of a materialist reality that asserts the possibility of human integration with the concepts of time and place rather than the necessity of alienation from them" (p. 23).
- 7 *Towards a View of Canadian Letters*, p. 120.
- 8 H. Hesse, *Siddhartha*, (New York, 1972), p. 102.

Lynette Hunter

Form and Energy in the Poetry of Michael Ondaatje

Michael Ondaatje's poems constantly resonate with each other in theme, image and rhythm, not only within one collection of poems but also from book to book. While this paper will concentrate on *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, examples from other works will be briefly included to illuminate the interrelation of form and energy in the poetry.

Contained within the world of Ondaatje's poetry is the knowledge that there is always a potential failure of its expression. The poem "Letters & Other Worlds" from the book *Rat Jelly*, speaks of the death of the poet's father as a "new equilibrium" different from that of life. This new equilibrium sends:

the blood screaming in
the empty reservoir of bones
the blood searching in his head without metaphor.¹

Metaphor, which expresses experience, is here necessary for the equilibrium of life. The violent energy of reality has to be felt, has to be experienced to yield personal value; yet at the same time it must be controlled or it will destroy the individual. In this sense all men must exercise an artistic function; they must find the expression that allows them to participate in reality without a loss of their own integrity.

The work of art is so made that it shall carry in its body the intolerable feeling of being immersed in reality. . . . To possess is to destroy; reality is so much more powerful than any person that to possess reality is to be destroyed. To escape reality is not difficult, but the poet seeks to incarnate reality, by becoming a medium through which that reality may pass. . . . If the process is to be cathartic, the expression must assume form — a form growing from within itself and self-bounded, to correspond with the form of the feeling. In this activity the poet discovers to himself the reality in which he is immersed, and extricates himself from it.²

Ondaatje is constantly aware of the artistic and poetic process as it operates from day to day. He generates a form that finds its

release in the use of metaphor; and the more sophisticated metaphorical complexes of symbol and myth. Even his short poems of domestic life are continually infringed by an often violent energy that must be acknowledged and yet kept in equilibrium with control.³ When the equilibrium is created through the metaphor, energy finds release. "For John Falling"⁴ from the poet's first collection *The Dainty Monsters*, shows the process working. It begins in a construction camp a few seconds after a worker has fallen over the edge of a pit. The poem creates an increasing tension out of the uselessness of action, and the coincident frustration of inactivity. The verse is excruciatingly prosaic until the steady rhythm stops in the word "drowned". The final line, "in the beautiful dark orgasm of his mouth" rhythmically expands, and releases the energy of the poem, the word "beautiful" exercising a delicate control over the violence of the image.

In Ondaatje's work there is a conscious statement that poetry is a metaphor for all experience. While the poet uses the metaphor to express yet control the energy within his own work, he also uses the poetry itself as a direct metaphor for how a man experiences reality. Many of the poems in the "Troy Town" section of *The Dainty Monsters* are concerned with the use of art and artist as metaphors for experience and man. As the poet becomes interested in examining artistic expression as a process, the form generated becomes a sequence of poems. While sequence is necessary to the poet's intention, it brings with it narratorial problems. Each poem may be sufficient unto itself, but there must be connections between them. Unless these connections are skilfully made the poem as a whole will not generate a complete experience. The poet must not only bring the individual poems together but provide an overall meaning for the internal continuity. In Ondaatje's poetry the meaning is usually expressed in the unifying effect of metaphor, which when extended becomes symbol.

An example of a sequence of poems in *The Dainty Monsters* is "Peter". The title character is the primitive man. The energy of his expression is direct action. If he is hungry he kills an animal and tears off its flesh; when captured, he communicates verbally with howls of disgust. The civilization he enters lames him in the knee and ankle so that he cannot fight back; it finds his voice crude and so tears out his tongue. However, underneath this physical taming of direct action the energy of the man's life still runs. Peter learns to express the

energy indirectly through art, through moulding and carving bodies into spoons and cups with a "violent beauty". Art becomes not only a release for the violence he feels, but also a communication of it.

Peter communicates best with a young girl of the family in which he lives. But as she grows older she becomes more distant and does not react to his communication. Since his artistic expression has apparently failed, he turns again to direct communication and attacks the girl, "Then laying arm above her breasts / he shaped her body like a mould" (*DM*, p. 77). She is his new material; he shapes and moulds her body to provide the form through which energy mounts and releases in sexual love. Sexual love becomes a recurring image in Ondaatje's poetry for the metaphorical function that controls and releases the violent energy of life.

The individual poems are for the most part successful. However, the poem as a whole is weak in its connections. There is little resonance between the seven units of an imagistic or rhythmic kind. The isolation of each is emphasized because Peter never expresses himself directly except through action, yet there are no echoes even of a shape that he carves. The density that does exist in the poetry comes from the changes of rhythm⁵ that underline and strengthen several sections of the verse. But these examples tend to be restricted to descriptions, like that of the maturing girl, rather than the points of action in which Peter expresses himself, such as his love-making. Because there are no metaphors that reveal Peter's experience the reader deduces his feeling rather than experiencing it as real. The poem is about the process of art, about learning how to make metaphors so that one can find an equilibrium in life to control yet release energy. While this image is intellectually clear, there is no central metaphor functioning over the whole poem to give it an energy of its own. This loss of overall metaphorical control, which is a destruction of the poet's own equilibrium, makes it impossible for the reader to experience the complete poem and results in a loss of much of its value.

Another sequential poem also about the artistic process is *The Man With Seven Toes*. Here we are provided with a sense of a separate narrator, so that the immediate perceptions of the main character can be more closely felt when directly described.⁶ The main character herself initially appears totally controlled in her reactions to reality: she excludes any response to energy. The poem

shows her gradually learning how to release the experience of violence as well as control it. Again the poem is successful in its units. The first part of the narrative finds the woman stranded by a railway track in the Australian desert. She walks into an aboriginal camp and gradually becomes involved with the life of the aborigines. As she does so her perceptual process changes. At first she merely sees how they physically appear; then she begins to transform her reactions into images that eventually incorporate rhythmic response as well. For example, her description of being made love to becomes the chant:

then him in me
in my body
like a like a
drum a drum⁷

The verse is quite different from the preceding:

not like, they move
like sticklebacks,
you hear toes
creak with weight,
elbows, sharp as beaks
grey pads of knees.

(*TMWST*, p. 13)

The woman describes and eventually becomes completely involved in a tribal dance which is a religious-mythical enactment of transforming control over the violent enemies that surround the savages, and ultimately of control over death. The experience leaves her able to release the violence she sees in nature in a metaphor of her own making, "The sky raw and wounded" (*TMWST*, p. 17).

The following sections of the narrative which show the woman returning through the jungle to civilization are less successful. Not only are they longer, requiring a more sustained effort to give them unity, but also the process of the woman's mind work against them. As she returns, her mind becomes less able to cope with reality, less willing to express experience. On her entry into civilization all the images that surrounded her experience of reality are simply listed without expansion. As she lies in a hospital bed in the concluding poem the narrator is used to show the remains of her ability to express artistically. The woman retains a capacity for establishing an equilibrium equivalent to that of the aborigines. Just as they had "maps on the soles of their feet" (*TMWST*, p. 13), she now

acknowledges her body "like a map." Her "running heart" echoes the "heart still running" (*TMWST*, p. 16) of the sacrificial animal representing the savages in the dance. When she awakes in the morning she sees that a bird entered during the night, and was chopped and scattered by the fan, "its body leaving paths on the walls / like red snails that drifted down in lumps". She can participate in the violence of the event, as the savages participated in the death of the enemy. Far from allowing it to dominate her, she uses her imagination and sees the feathers "falling around her / Like slow rain". The savages released their dancing; and just so, the woman releases the energy of her experience through the form of her imaginative image.

While this final poem by the narrator acts successfully as a symbol of the woman's initial experience, it does not conclude satisfactorily the meaning of her journey through the jungle to civilization. The narrator provides a far greater use of rhythm and sound to parallel and deepen the action than in "Peter". However, it is again the first section of the poem which is most cohesive. It builds to a rhythmic intensity that expands beyond the limits of brief controlled lyrics almost into prose. After a resounding climax the rhythm suddenly collapses into the still lyric of the woman alone, released from her fear of the savages. The remaining sections are not only less unified, but also the poem as a whole is too broken up to generate a powerful overall metaphor. Even the poet, who places a ballad frame-work around the story to provide unity, has not prepared for it enough. The ballad quotations provide the rumour and surface to the reality that lies inside the poem. They express the civilized response to the experience but are not organically connected with it. As the ice over the "wild green river" (*TMWST*, p. 42), they should illuminate the tension between human control and the energy of reality. However, they are too distant; the reader can appreciate their intellectual meaning but not experience their reality. The reader partially feels the woman's initial process of learning; but without a strong symbol the implication of the whole poem, which is that even though she opts for a superficial life she still retains a way of coping with the violence that intrudes, loses its effect and value.

Many of the difficulties mentioned in both "Peter" and *The Man With Seven Toes* are specifically concerned with finding an equilibrium in the narrative technique. *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* presents an immense advance in the skill of arrangement,

continuity, and organic interdependence. As it does so, it also expands the concept of the necessity of artistic vision. The individual poems and distinct parts of the book show Billy the Kid learning how to express his experience of reality, and how to use this expressive ability. The overall image of a man maintaining his equilibrium is conveyed by the narrator through the metaphor of Billy as an artist. The poem is given another dimension in the person of the poet who presents a meaning for the poem in its examination of the breakdown of myth to legend, and his own role in its expression.

The poet is involved specifically as himself. There are the personally involving credits that conclude the book where Ondaatje claims that despite his editing "the emotions belong to their authors"⁸ (which is essentially correct if one accepts that he is their author). There is also the photograph of himself as a child that concludes the narrative. The poet is identified with the narrator in that he has the final control over the form of the book; and the poet also has final control over the poetic expression of Billy.⁹ It is this ultimate external responsibility for the juxtaposition and interpenetration of both expressions, which pours the poem into that:

exact arc
of steel still soft and crazy
before it hits the page.

(*RJ* p. 55)

The poet finds his own artistic equilibrium in the myth of Billy in two ways. Firstly, he finds balance as an artist when he creates the myth; and secondly, he finds balance in life through the myth which is specifically concerned with the balance man finds through art. The important aspect to him is Billy's death, because the death begins the degeneration of myth into legend.

The narrator is concerned with presenting Billy as an artist to symbolize the artistic needs of man.¹⁰ He shows us that Billy has to have a metaphorical equilibrium or he cannot express reality, and that the break-up of this equilibrium is simultaneous with Billy's death. Here is the overwhelming symbol of man trying to cope with reality, found in an artist's recreation of experience that controls and releases energy through metaphor. Death becomes the heart of the experience, the giving of oneself up to reality, which man can survive only through the cathartic release of art.

Billy himself is attempting to find equilibrium in the face of

violence, of death of friends, of murder, of personal sexual death, and ultimately death of himself. He finds the equilibrium in his mind through expression of the violence in life; and equilibrium in his life through a balance of Sallie and Angie who are the two main female characters of the book. In attempting to express his life Billy experiments with several forms. To begin he lists the dead, but merely listing is not enough. The static control of the list breaks when he has to mention the death of his own friends; the rhythm becomes jerky, the syntax elliptical, until he releases the energy into metaphor: "Blood a necklace on me all my life" (*BK*, p. 6). The attempt at straightforwardly reporting the "facts" of Tom O'Flaherty's death is similarly meaningless until the rhythm of the prose re-constructs the rhythm of the event. The quick jabber of "jaws tilting up and down like mad bladders going" (*BK*, p. 7) is stopped and emptied by, "Garrett took clear aim and blew him out" (*BK*, p. 7). The third poem, which is an assessment of the meaning of violence with an enumeration of how many people are killed and in what way, also tells us little. It is interesting that it is followed by an account of the complete lack of control in the arbitrary impressions of the mind, which is just as fruitless.

The fifth poem of the first group arrives at a discovery. Billy tells us that to find value you must suffer with the person who dies; you must participate in the death. In the poem, Billy contrasts his reaction with that of the "newsmen's brain" which says:

Well some morals are physical
must be clear and open
like diagram of watch or star
one must eliminate much

(*BK*, p. 11)

This morality will kill and then, "walk off see none of the thrashing/
the very eyes welling up like bad drains"; it believes:

... the moral of newspapers or gun
where bodies are mindless as paper flowers you don't feed or give to
drink.

But for Billy this kind of morality only applies to the purely physical, the mechanical "stomach of clocks".

The essential participation in reality is also necessary for the artist. Billy's discovery of the moral value of experience is coincident with his first balanced metaphorical poem. In this manner the narrator demonstrates that the discussion of the meaning of the

energy and violence of life only yields value when the expression allows for experience, which is here generated through metaphor. Ultimately man can only find meaning for death in experience of it. What the realization makes clear for Billy is that death cannot be an objective experience. He examines crimes committed apparently without reason and for social discipline. Both are equally involving; either way one suffers with the dying. Through his realization the narrator generates the metaphor of the artist who experiences reality by giving himself up to it through his art. With Billy, as with the artist, expression is a voluntary immersion in the violent energy of reality in an attempt to find meaning. In both cases the role of art is simultaneously to provide the reality that causes suffering, and the release from it through metaphor. If man is to experience reality without being destroyed, he too must exercise an artistic function and express experience, find an equilibrium.

We have seen that the equilibrium finder within the poetry Billy thinks is metaphor; and it takes many forms. While the lyrics achieve much of their intensity from sensual images underlaid with rhythm, the prose sections make possible a far greater use of rhythmic metaphor in their ability to expand into dialogue and in their slower accumulation of effect.

The poem about killing Gregory contained in the first section, is an example of Billy participating in a death he has caused. Billy recounts the story of a chicken walking over to the dying man and pulling a vein out of his neck "till it was 12 yards long" (*BK*, p. 15). The rhythm of the verse is tightly controlled as if the writer were trying to be objective about the sight. The tension is slightly released by the lighter touch of "as if it held that body like a kite". This loosening prepares us for the total rhythmic and vocal change of the final line, "get away from me yer stupid chicken", and makes the effect ludicrously funny rather than purely gruesome. In the poem, Billy was "about to walk away" but is captured by the action of this chicken and forced to watch the death. When the chicken "walks away" he is carrying that body behind him on a kite just as Billy carries the experience with him. In writing about the event Billy re-creates the horror of death through the use of the chicken's action; yet in the poem he is released from it. The reader in his turn can also experience the disgust which is built up by and released through the form of metaphor.

A different use of metaphor with much the same aim of involvement is Billy's description of making tea for Sallie Chisum and a friend. The friend asked to see a bullet that Billy had used to kill someone; and Billy, while washing out lukewarm tea, remembers putting his hand into the stomach of the killed man to retrieve the bullet. The first stanza is a mixture of interpenetrating thoughts which juxtapose the present experience of cleaning a tea-pot with the remembered action. The randomness of the ideas and rhythm is anchored in the last line "With Sallie Chisum in Paris Texas" (*BK*, p. 27). However, the poet continues by writing the poem in reverse order of lines, almost as if trying to negate the experience and call back the sickening image. What results is a total identification between the lukewarm tea and the stomach, which proceeds away from the anchoring line with Sallie Chisum in an increasing effort to suppress violence of the experience. The identification of the two, makes the reality that the metaphor is trying to express vivid and intense. Here Billy is re-creating the horror and forcing himself to participate in it. It is this horror that is the reality lying behind the bullet charmingly shown to a friend at tea-time; a forgetting of this reality will cheapen and devalue any moral choice made concerning the death, and the death itself.

An example of the use of metaphor in a prose section occurs when Billy is sitting on the Chisum porch with Sallie, John, Garrett and Angie. He is contemplatively recalling the actions that made up the evening, and without using images creates a sense of relaxation with groups of short steady sentences that every so often come to rest in a longer one. A memory of other evenings introduces images of Sallie like some "great bird", but these do not disrupt the rhythm. However as Billy gets drunker the sentences become uneven; and he concentrates on actions of people rather than the mood of the evening. When the party breaks up and goes to bed, Angie wants to make love to Billy. In recounting the progression of the evening, the rhythm has shifted completely from the slow contemplative flow of the opening, to a quick and active reporting of speech and movement. The pace increases through the incorporation of dialogue and creates a sense of climax that is sustained, intensified and finally released in the metaphor that ends this action, "enter her like a whale with a hat on, my drowning woman my lady who drowns, and take my hat off" (*BK*, p. 68). Imagistically there is the humour of the visual picture. But the metaphor functions most

strongly as rhythm. The position of the central phrase lengthens the experience and yet reverses its action in the reversal of the movement of beat and sound. The juxtaposition of the softer, two-syllable words with the harder monosyllabic "take my hat off", provides a heavy sensual interlude, before the brief and defined ending. The energy of the event is built through the rhythm of the active prose, and released through the rhythm of the final metaphor which increases the intensity through the use of image as well.

The expression of violence through metaphor brings equilibrium to Billy's mind; and the first section of *Billy: the Kid* condenses his thoughts concerning expression. With the narrator's help the remainder of the book expands from Billy's mind into his life and how he finds equilibrium there. His morality and code of values are clarified by his reactions to other people and their modes of living. He introduces us to Pat Garrett as the "sane assassin". Garrett has the mind of a doctor; he has the ability to "kill someone on the street walk back to finish a joke. One who had decided what was right and forgot all morals" (BK, p. 28). Because he walks away from what he kills, the death has no value. Any control he exercises through violence will not be organic but externally imposed; the chaos lying beneath order will remain unchanged, and there will be no social value. As Billy puts it, "assassins/ come to chaos neutral" (BK, p. 47). The unwillingness to experience any level of reality personally, means that Garrett's understanding is limited to rationality and logic. In the one monologue he is permitted, we see him trying to assess Billy and his relationship with Angela Dickinson. Every detail that occurs is minutely documented, but his explanations bypass any genuine knowledge of Billy. The limits of rationality and sanity are presented beautifully in two lyrics on flowers. In the first Billy describes the overwhelming smell of a flower dying. It is a sensuous experience of power that is as intense as the life is loses. But in the second lyric the flower is picked, brought under a domestic control. Now it, "gets small smells sane/deteriorates in a hand" (BK, p. 56). The sane do not die, they merely deteriorate. We see death becoming a metaphor for the ability to experience; and the sane have too much control to lose themselves in the experience of reality. While Garrett is the extreme of too much control, it should be pointed out that "the law" which he represents is not presented in a totally negative way. The mad dogs created by Livingstone that eventually turn on and destroy him, have

to be exterminated by the local sheriff; and it is not a pleasant task. Secondly, and more interesting, is the only extended instance of Billy's mind being out of control, when he is traveling across the desert as a captive of Garrett. It is Garrett's voice and action that bring him back into some form of control.

The more personal and human organization of Sallie is something far more ambiguous and subtle. Her control of light in her house is at first alarming to Billy in a state of delirium. Sallie closes the shutters at eleven o'clock and opens them at four, when the heat of the day has passed; and Billy thinks he's going blind twice a day. But the cool blue of midday soon becomes soothing and calming. The greys and blues of shadow that always describe Sallie also associate her with similarly described moods of calm elsewhere in the book. Sallie later exercises the same civilized control over light when she brings the lamp to the darkness of the porch as Billy returns from seeing her animals. Yet Billy finds this disturbing; he feels that the proximity of such organization to wild animals makes "it all mad" (BK, p. 37). A further ambiguous aspect is Sallie's collection of pets. Unlike Garrett who can only collect dead birds, Sallie controls her animals by keeping them in cages at night, while the heat of the sun forces them to remain in the shade of the cages during the day. Just as every animal, "was given a welcome, the tame, the half born, the wild, the wounded" (BK, p. 36), so:

Every man worth knowing in the Southwest
and many not worth knowing, were guests
one time or another.

What they were made no difference in their welcome, (BK, p. 30)

There is an uncomfortable sense that she tames everything she lays her hands on. It is significant that Sallie is most fully described in the section containing Garrett's controlled monologue and also Tom O'Folliard's story. From Billy we learn that Tom's face has collapsed, and to prevent the pain of air taking new channels through his skin he chews "red dirt" continually. While this kills the pain by repressing it, there is something wrong about the insistence on him being left "riddled with energy", that lies outside him and beyond personal control. Ultimately Sallie requires people to conform to her organization, which is also an artificial control based in repression of chaos rather than any involvement in it.

The third character to whom Billy reacts is Angela Dickinson.

She becomes the extended metaphor for energy and release through sexual love. Two main streams of images surround her, one being violent and connected with death, and the other being peaceful and connected with release. The first glimpse we have of her is of a great energy expressed through "tilts", "swivelling", "shattering", "spitting electric", that becomes violent as, "her body is nearly breaking off my fingers/pivoting like machines in final speed" (BK, p. 16). In the extended description of her two-thirds of the way into the book, the violence is emphasized. For example there is the stanza:

Her mouth is an outlaw
she swallow your breath
a thigh it can drown you
or break off your neck.

(BK, p. 64)

By contrast, the releasing side of her is constantly connected with white rooms. While Sallie shuts out the light of morning, Angie lifts the cloth on the window, "so the bent oblong of sun/hoists itself across the room" (BK, p. 21). Much later in the book, after a bad night, when the sun comes in "hitting and swirling on the white walls and the white sheets on the bed" (BK, p. 69), she is seen "golden and cool", "so brown and lovely. . . Beautiful ladies in white rooms in the morning" (BK, p. 71). She does not control the energy that passes through her to release itself; itself in the sense that her body provides the necessary form for it to happen. Billy has to find an equilibrium between Sallie's control and Angie's energy.

From the narrator's perspective the reaction Billy has to Garrett is that of the artist to total control. Garrett represents a domination of control in eventually tracking down and killing Billy, destroying the equilibrium. The other main narrative event of the poem is Billy bringing Angie to Sallie's house. We have seen Billy personally fluctuating between Sallie and Angie, as form and energy. The sustained contentment of the time they all spend together at the Chisum ranch reflects the release effected by the equilibrium form and energy.

The narrator has presented a Billy searching both in his life and mind for equilibrium. Beyond the individual poems that communicate this he has also created a group of resonating images and rhythms that recur through the book. These culminate in four intense lyric poems that contain within them the essential symbol of

Billy as artist expressing the agony of man searching for equilibrium. The first such lyric is the previously examined poem of the first section, stating the necessity for participation in the violence of reality. The need for experience is expressed through contrasting metaphors. The "newsman's brain" is described in carefully controlled rhythm around static images:

well some morals are physical
must be clear and open
like diagram of watch or star

(BK, p. 11).

The contrary, the experience of violence, is expressed through lengthened lines, less controlled rhythms, visually horrible images. However, the loosening of poetic control in order to experience the violence does not mean that it is not present at all. The energy is finally controlled in the condensed, careful ending of the flower-image, "or give to drink".

The second lyric expressing Billy is the central "star" poem. While the metaphors of the first were organized to express different attitudes, this poem has a sustaining equilibrium of metaphor, which is appropriate to its theme of the need for equilibrium. The expanding energy and control of the first stanza indicate this equilibrium well:

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

(BK, p. 41)

We should notice that "red golden pouring which when cooled/mists out to rust or grey" uses in juxtaposition the "golden" associated with Angie and the "grey" with Sallie. Similarly the lines, "the beautiful machines pivoting on themselves/ sealing and fusing to others" are a direct echo of the "pivoting like machines" connected with Angie, and are followed by the human control of "men throwing levers like coins at them." As long as the equilibrium is maintained there will be stress without destruction.

The lyric which describes Billy being shot shows this equilibrium of metaphors breaking down. The rhythm is deliberately slowed down to increase the intensity of the experience; the images all have a much longer time to work. The red/grey dichotomy of the previous poem becomes:

as if fire pours out
red grey brain the hair slow
started by it all pour

(BK, p.73).

The control in equilibrium of the star becomes the destructive total control of Garrett, "the man in the bright tin armour star." the whole poem is interfused with images of sexual love, and of the violent images connected with Angie:

Miss Angela D her eyes like a boat
on fire her throat is a kitchen . . .
she swallows your breath
like warm tar pour.

The shot causes a dying into reality; it is the violence and pain of experience that by itself breaks the equilibrium between energy and form. While Angela D. is now prominent it is only with her violent aspect; because there is no control, she cannot release energy. Billy experiences the disruption of equilibrium in actual living.

Billy can now no longer metaphorically die and be released because he has actually been killed. In the fourth lyric he experiences death itself. The images here are random, with only faint echoes of previous images. In death he loses his ability to create metaphors. The poetry surges rhythmically but never releases the energy, never allows a return to life. The final lines read:

click and you toss them across the floor like . . . up in the air
and see how many you can catch in one hand the left
oranges reeling across the room AND I KNOW I KNOW
it is my brain coming out like red grass
this breaking where red things wade

(BK, p.95).

Here death means loss of metaphorical control, yet is also implies the inverse: no metaphorical control or no equilibrium, is death.

The narrator has created a symbol that exists for the complete poem. Billy's life and mode of expression are both metaphors for the artist in man and the form of his experience of how the artist has access to value in any situation, and the story clarifies the need for the artistic process to establish an equilibrium in life. However, the overall meaning of the book includes the poet himself and his concern with the creation of myth that is disrupted by Billy's death. The unity that he provides in myth depends primarily upon clearly resonating and synergetic metaphors, both imagistic and rhythmic.

Myth cannot exist without a dense background of coherently functioning experiential symbol.

The four lyrics that express Billy as a symbol are significantly placed in relation to the structure of the poem which is centred around the meaning of his death. The first lyric, that crystallize his attitude to experience, expresses the source of value in reality as a personal experience re-created in metaphor. It is placed at the end of a series of inadequate attempts to express reality ranging from the totally controlled, to the totally uncontrolled. After it, the poems try to create a direct experience of violence within form. The "star" lyric which presents the need for equilibrium in life and in poetry, lies literally between a poem concerned with getting at the bones of the matter, and Garrett's monologue. We have seen that Garrett's rational control does not generate knowledge of people; and we find much later that the narrator has got to the bones of the man Billy, but it tells him nothing more about him. The equilibrium of the star indicated the necessary fluctuation between energy and control that neither of the two surrounding poems possesses. Billy's poems, from this point until he is shot, maintain an equilibrium.

The third lyric comes almost immediately after the peaceful experience with Sallie and Angie on the ranch. It is separated from it by a poem directly concerned with the act of writing and its fusion of mind with body. The poem is a carefully balanced expression of the tense poise a writer must maintain, and provides a powerful interlude that is disrupted by the third lyric in which Billy is shot. After this lyric the poetic structure gradually changes. The loss of equilibrium within the third lyric is paralleled by the odd collection of rumours, reports, and comic books that follows. The poem loses the impression that the work is a collection of poems with an overriding intent to express the reality of Billy through metaphor: and concentrates more on narrative events. These events culminate in the death lyric whose totally random effect shows the inadequacy of the interpretation of death by recounted incident.

As long as Billy is portrayed with metaphors that function, the process he represents as an artist can be experienced as a valid symbol for a constructive experience of reality. When he dies the myth that arises from the vitality of his life degenerates into legend and rumour; simultaneously the metaphors which create an experience of him dissolve and disperse, and the structural

equilibrium presenting the function of his mind becomes merely narrative event and second-hand report. In a similar manner the surging rhythm generated by the grouping of prose and verse in each of the first three sections, becomes a tense suspension of time in the fourth which follows Billy's killing, and a choppy, erratic tempo in the final part before his death. George Whalley describes the process of disintegration of myth by saying:

It seems to me that narrative is an accidental and not an essential feature of myth. Myth is rather a grouping of symbols which brings them into resonance with each other to embody a comprehensive view of reality Once the myth has taken a narrative form it has started to fall from grace, to move in the direction of "legend" In the legend the cluster of symbols dissipates and becomes confused, . . . and loses resonance; the emphasis moves from the symbols themselves to the narrative events and the personalities of the actors in those events. 11

The equilibrium of the book is based in the poet's creation of the myth of Billy. As a symbol of the artist Billy exerts an organic control over the structure of the poem. Yet the other characters are also symbolic of the various forces that construct the work. The equilibrium of these forces defines the success of the poet's myth that controls and releases energy. The control units of external force that provide the shape for the book, are the italicized interpolations which are often accompanied by blank spaces indicating photographs. The character who contributes most to this control is Sallie. Her reminiscences attempt to report the past, to clarify and make static in the same way the photographs arrest only one image of a man. It is part of the external poet's attempt to make an equilibrium between the vital myth of a man and the facts surrounding him, that presents the first photograph as a blank square enclosed by a black border. All the succeeding photographs and the comic book are surrounded by this black border which emphasizes the limits and single definitions of such images. Two of the sections are given over to Paulita Maxwell. Her blatant interest in Billy as a medium for her own fame is an obvious example of the personal prejudging of events that interprets them for individual satisfaction. Sallie's use of phrases such as "as courteous a little gentleman," which Paulita directly echoes, associates her with this personal perspective. The very slight indication that we get of her jealousy of Angie is found in the comparison of Garrett with Billy, "I

knew both these men intimately" (BK, p.89), and it weakens her integrity. Indeed her connection with Garrett as an agent of control in Billy's own metaphors, is extended to the narrative structure. Garrett's monologue is strategically placed so that we can learn by comparison, of the advantages in what he calls Billy's "pointless" imagination, "never in control" (BK, p.43). It is he who, in killing Billy and destroying the equilibrium, is ultimately responsible for the dispersal of symbols and the increase in "factual" reporting, the newspaperman's brain. But more than any other force in the book it is Sallie who tries to pin Billie the Kid down. She even passes judgment on him in her statement that, "There was good mixed in with the bad/ in Billy the Kid" (BK, p.89). Yet if it were not for the controlling process Sallie symbolizes the book would have no shape or form. There would be no body to contain the energy and release of the myth.

Through Sallie the external poet controls the facts of the poem, yet he also incorporates the energy and release of Angie. Angela D. is the symbolic force for generating metaphor, the rhythmic and imagistic energy and release. Unlike the others she does not exist as a potentially verifiable source. She exerts no overt control at all. Yet her value as a metaphor for natural energy and release, functions within each individual poem; and it is the metaphors directly connected with her that provide the overall rhythm of the book. The ending of the book contains possible the strongest experience of this. The penultimate poem reporting the clearing up of Billy's body is an intentionally inadequate and frustrating poem that sums up the disintegration of the metaphors that create Billy. Everything this external observer says is a fraction out of phase. Billy is called "William" for the first time since Garrett was introduced to him. There are random connections of his "giggle" with the death of Charlie Bowdre, and the prose love scene with Angie D. The "blood planets" are presumably something to do with the suns in his head at death. His head is now "smaller than a rat," whereas he once described his nightmares in terms of rats caught in biscuit boxes, going mad. And so on. None of these images connects with any other in a resonant organic way. The ballad is a jumble sale of left-over rags that someone has pounced on hoping to reconstruct or understand the event of Billy's death. This is what the poet admits he is reduced to.

In startling contrast is the final poem. It begins with a direct

echo of Billy waking up with Angie D. on the Chisum ranch, and extends the metaphor of that event out to include the whole book. Just as Sallie and Angie together made the equilibrium Billy needed, which ended in the release of the white room in the morning, so the poet's equilibrium between what Sallie and Angie symbolize ends with the white room. While Billy sees in the gun that hangs over the bed, the constant potential for future violence that Angie brings with release, the poet lets the narrator see the cigarette smoke "sliding along the roof like an amoeba" (BK, p.105); the smoke of unformed and potentially growing metaphor which will mean another immersion in some reality. Billy at least can wash the last night out of his mouth because it was actual; the narrator will always have the lingering smell of cigarette smoke and metaphor in his shirt. Yet Billy has to die because he is actually alive; while the narrator and man the artist, comes through experience with the use of metaphor. The narrator's own equilibrium between form and energy releases him, for the moment.

The poet maintains an overall equilibrium for his myth through the power of this final symbol which has continually grown in complexity from the initial image of Angie letting in the sun. Because it expresses the regeneration of man from death, whether it be within sex, reality, or art, it provides the necessary conclusion to the book. The poet has created the reality and died with it, yet its mythical nature allows him to live. In the extended metaphor of the book we too die and emerge living, by surrendering ourselves to the energy and the form of the reality that is expressed. Billy as a man dealing with the violence of his life and finding a form for it, becomes man the artist coping with the energy of reality. The symbol is given external substance and validity by the simultaneous experience of the poet creating myth to express the intensity of his experience.

Both "Peter" and *The Man With Seven Toes* are weakened by the inability of the narrator to express his personal involvement with the story. In *Billy the Kid* Ondaatje has achieved a sophistication of sensual metaphors in resonance with rhythm that provides a symbolic unity to the poem, and which indicates a total involvement by the poet in the work as a reality. Yet the poet constantly reminds us of his separation from the symbol he is creating. The reality he communicates is purely a personal perspective. Since the legend of a man is not as important as the fragments of vital power he leaves in the individual mind,¹² part of the creation of myth must be a

maintenance of potential for varied interpretation. The attempt is reflected in the varied responses that personal participation in the metaphors of *Billy the Kid* makes possible, either on the level of the individual poem, the section of a work, or the collected works. But there is also the necessity for the poet to say that he does not finally know the reality of the man he has made myth. Ondaatje makes it clear that he knows that he only re-creates his view of the man in his distrust of too much external control from words to the myth itself. He places the same warning black borders of limitation around his title page, and around the concluding page, which points specifically to the source of his poem in the picture of himself as a small boy dressed as Billy the Kid.

The most recently published collection of Ondaatje's poetry, *Rat Jelly*, contains many poems that expand the structural and imagistic meaning of *Billy the Kid*. As a concluding experience of Ondaatje's poetic, I would offer the poem "Spider Blues." As a symbol the spiders function in resonance with an image in *Billy the Kid*. There, the spiders in a barn were the metaphor for maintaining the social equilibrium with their cobwebs, "who had places to grow to, who had stories to finish" (BK, p.17), even as they captured the flies. In "Spider Blues" the poet begins by identifying his "own devious nightmares" about his wife with the spiders who, "leave their own constructions/for succulent travel across her face and shoulder" (RJ, p.63). The identification then proceeds in the opposite direction as the spider;

thinks a path and travels
the emptiness that was there
leaves his bridge behind
looking back saying Jeez
did I do that?
and uses his ending
to swivel to new regions
where the raw of feelings exist. (RJ, pp.63-4).

The "murderous" art of both poet and spider:
... sleeps
like stars in the corner of rooms,
a mouth to catch audiences (RJ, p.64).

The poem then presents a little cartoon where the spider voluptuously entices the fly to his cobweb saying, "I kill you for the

clarity that / comes when roads I make are being made" (RJ, p.64). But the fly replies "no I choose who I die with." The spider proceeds to kill the fly, "making them the art he cannot be." The whole humour of this interlude lulls the reader, especially since the fly refused to be caught; but he should be warned by the fact that the spider got his victim anyway.

The final part of the poem fuses the metaphor of spider and poet, fly and reader. The reader even receives a warning that this is "The ending we must arrive at" (RJ, p.65), which has to be the capture of a victim in his net if the poet is to write a poem. Again we enter a white room. The poet moves our perspective onto the actions of the spiders. The detail and care involved the reader in the sense of dream-like precision. The rhythm is steady and the sounds muted. "What a scene" holds an air of awe and admiration, not excitement, which extends into the end of that line. The mood is then abruptly broken by the sudden harshness of "the room was a shattered pane of glass." Having taken us right into the action, caught us in his web, the poet now removes us and places us where we wanted to be, on the outside with "all the flies." The audience becomes metaphorically one with the flies who refuse to be involved. The over-reaction and falsity of

They came and gasped, all
everybody cried at the beauty
ALL

indicates the paucity of the experience if the reader cannot give himself up to the poem.

The tone of "Spider Blues" differs from that of most of Ondaatje's poems. The ironic standpoint refuses to allow the reader to participate completely in the poem. The poet creates an experience for the reader, to express what he wants the poem itself to say. It is our exclusion from the poem that becomes the prevailing reaction. It is a very funny work with ambiguous undertones; but unless we allow ourselves to be brought into the final section we cannot fully understand the irony of being put outside in the concluding lines. All the implications of experience, with its personal death into an event but release through metaphor, are here shown to apply to the reader himself. If he loses himself in the poem he will experience the reality it expresses. He, as the poet, will find value in the equilibrium of metaphor. But if the reader does not experience

the reality of the poem, he is avoiding the necessary energy of life. He will never be part of the intense beauty of the poem, or of life; he can only stand outside watching:

the working black architects
and the lady locked in their dream their theme (RJ, p.65).

FOOTNOTES

1. *Rat Jelly* (Toronto, 1973), p. 26.
2. George Whalley, *Poetic Process* (London, 1953), p. 108.
3. Stephen Scobie, "His Legend a Jungle Sleep, Michael Ondaatje and Henri Rousseau," Forthcoming article, *Canadian Literature*, 1977.
4. *The Dainty Monsters* (Toronto, 1967), p. 48.
5. By rhythm, I do not mean metre, but something like the definition George Whalley gives it in the *Poetic Process*: "If the poet's contemplative state is sustained by rhythm it is the rhythm of the apprehended reality which commands that state, clamouring to find a body," p. 204.
6. It is interesting that most critics note that the narrative could be spoken by three different people or could be the different levels of the character's mind. For example, M. Travis Lane, "Dream As History," *The Fiddlehead*, 86 (Aug. Sept. Oct., 1970), p. 158; or F. Davey, *From There to Here* (Erin Ontario, 1974), p. 224.
7. *The Man With Seven Toes* (Toronto, 1971), p. 14.
8. *The Collected Works of Billy The Kid* (Toronto, 1970), p. 110.
9. The separation yet fusion of these levels must account for the contrast in critical interpretation: some critics assuming that the whole poem is by Billy, and others that it is by a narrator and Billy. For example, J.M. Kertzer, "On Death and Dying," *English Studies in Canada*, 1:1 (Spring, 1975), p. 86; as opposed to F. Davey, *ibid.*, p. 224.
10. The concept of Billy as artist is noted by both Stephen Scobie, "Two Authors in Search of a Character," *Canadian Literature*, 54 (Autumn, 1972), pp. 37-55; and S. Dragland, "Michael Ondaatje: *The Collected Works of Billy The Kid*," *Quarry*, 20:3 (Autumn, 1971), p. 67.

11. *Poetic Process*, pp. 181-2. Ondaatje also remarks on the dispersed ending of Howard O'Hagan's *Tay John*, in the article "O'Hagan's Rough-Edged Chronicle," *Canadian Literature* 61 (Summer, 1974), pp. 24-31.

12. In Ondaatje's article on O'Hagan's *Tay John*, he points out the power of the fragments and the weakening effect of joining them together. He goes on to stress the importance of a narrator that does not appear to know everything about the hero he tells stories of.

Penny Kemp (Chalmers)*

Circumlocution

Penny Chalmers and Daphne Marlatt have had considerable correspondence on the nature of poetry in general and on aspects of particular works. Chalmers's discussion of her sensibility, her creativity, and her poetry is a reply to Marlatt's question.

Daphne Marlatt: "I'd ask you about the shift from narrative to invocation between your two books, and how you account for that, what its implications are for you."

Penny Chalmers: "Consider the cobweb. The hub at centre where consciousness attends the arrival of a perception from outside. The perception, netted, shakes the whole fabric of the web but does not break it. Consider the layers, more and more delicate as consciousness moves out, but still taut. Consider the spokes of the web, lines of power, connecting all the levels, all the worlds. Consider the pond into which we skip stones, and ripples widen. The pattern is the same of disturbance, then of movement, from centre out. Consider the sound of a gong, ringing out into silence. Or the mandala.

the parabola of the
story line

sensory input

consciousness

levels of perception

peripheral vision

*Penny Chalmers is now using her maiden name Penny Kemp. Chalmers is retained throughout this article.