



# FILM HERITAGE

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Cover: Wyatt (*Easy Rider*) and Wyatt Earp

Quotations from *The Gospel According to Thomas* published with the permission of Harper & Row.

# Easy Rider:

THE INITIATION  
OF DENNIS HOPPER

*Reflections On a Conversation With Dennis Hopper*

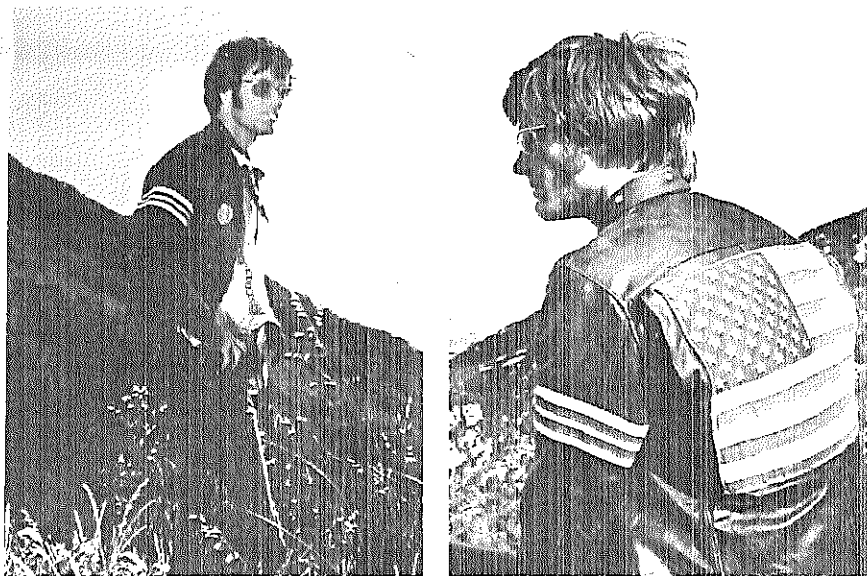
BY ANTHONY MACKLIN

“WE BLEW IT,” SAYS WYATT TO BILLY in *Easy Rider*, a lyrical and savage motion picture. “We blew it” is the culmination of Wyatt’s search for freedom across the worn, gaping face of America. The words are a realization of his culpability. America wears a deathmask, and Wyatt has worn a saintly false face. He has been a seller of cocaine, implicated with a pusher (“The Pusher” is a “monster” say the lyrics done by Steppenwolf in the film). This is how he and Billy have gained funds to travel to New Orleans for the Mardi Gras and then on the road to Florida, the realm of retirement. Wyatt Earp and Billy the Kid tripping east on iron steeds. Many viewers have been stymied by the words “we blew it,” but in context they become clear. As they bed down on the way to Florida Billy says, “We’ve done it... We’re rich, Wyatt... We’re rich. We’re retiring in Florida now, mister... That’s what it’s all about, man. You go for the big money and you’re free.” Wyatt answers quietly, “We blew it.”

Wyatt (played gracefully by Peter Fonda) has understood what the cost of their success has been. In the context of Billy’s joy over the money, Wyatt’s realization is clear: They have gone the way of corrupt money; they have betrayed their possibilities. They have failed. Wyatt has failed himself, and he has failed as leader. All leadership in America (including that which has been moral, anti-establishment, and supposedly free and honest) has failed. It has corrupted its own principles. The liberal culture hero has failed. Charisma has been blind.

Wyatt’s sad realization is the hope and agony of the film. It is the point of no return. The establishment isn’t the only culpable one. Wyatt has failed. But many viewers are not prepared for such a realization; it goes against the grain of their preconceptions. Unfortunately many will miss Wyatt’s self-indictment because they want to slip into easier damnations. Dennis Hopper, the fine young (33-year-old) director, is partially to blame for this. The opening scene of Wyatt and Billy (Hopper) pushing hard drugs is abrupt and is liable to be forgotten in the ensuing meanderings of the film. There are only occasional reminders: the scene in the gas station, when Billy gets nervous about

Mr. Macklin has an essay on 2001 to appear in *Film Comment*.



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the money being discovered, and their glorious meal in the posh restaurant in New Orleans are random reminders of their money, but the idea of what they have done is seldom sustained. Hopper has had the wisdom to excise a scene in which they discussed why they blew it. An explanation is unnecessary, but a sense of their culpability gets lost in the trek eastward.

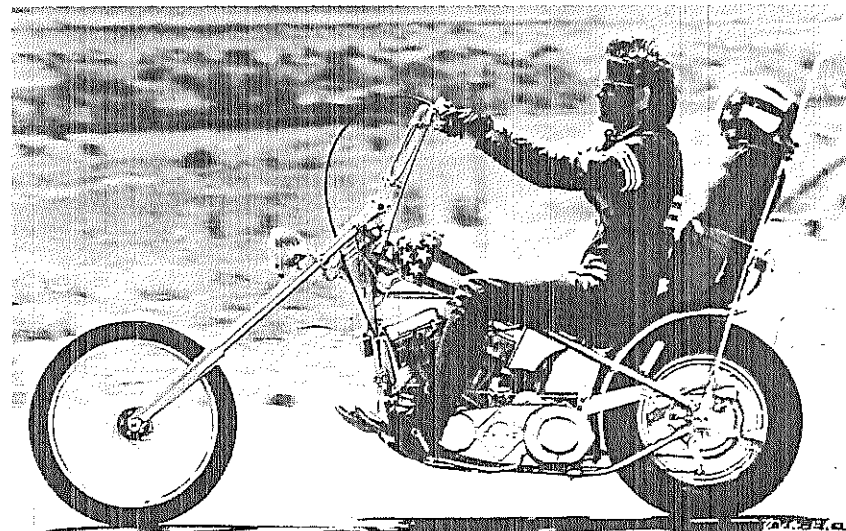
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Another crucial area in *Easy Rider* is the acting. Hopper is particularly sensitive about this subject. He has drawn the Southern populace with a harpy fury that brings reflexive connotations, though he insists the story could take place anywhere. Schwerner, Goodman, and Chaney were murdered in the south, so the portrait has validity, but it is too undemandingly simplistic. Hopper has used "real people" in some situations, but the fact that they are literal inhabitants of a town does not mean that they are effective performers. When I suggested to him, at our meeting, that the girls in the diner had fallen short, he flared and insisted that they were real. "I've worked with Lee Strasberg!" he snapped. "If there's anything I know it's acting. Hey, man, they were real." It is an especially sore point. For Hopper the girls are excellent; for others of us they are dreadful, like leftovers from a high school play.

Originally the people looking for talent for the film had gone into the town and lined up local talent, people with some disposition to acting. The fact that they were unsatisfactory is not surprising. Hopper rejected them, and for the men in the diner scene he selected some locals lounging in a corner watching the film's crew and commenting

to themselves. Somewhat to his surprise, they agreed. (One of the men in the scene is the high school principal.) To get the response he wanted he told the men that Wyatt, Billy, and George Hanson (Jack Nicholson) had attacked a girl outside of town and nothing they said about them would be too strong. One ironic point is that people have asked Hopper how he got the great acting job out of the rancher Wyatt and Billy visit. The "rancher" is actually Warren Finnerty, an excellent eastern actor, who was brilliant in *The Connection* at the Living Theatre. Experience does tell.

Method acting is something that has haunted Hopper. It was, for a time, his downfall in Hollywood. For eight years he says he was "blackballed" by director Henry Hathaway. He was in Hathaway's *From Hell to Texas* (1958) and Hathaway's *The Sons of Katie Elder* (1965). He received a reputation of being a troublemaker because of his own ideas of acting, which conflicted with the director's. Hathaway was not about to budge. For one Hathaway scene, it took seventy-eight takes before Hopper submitted. He finally did the scene Hathaway's way. Hathaway growled "great, kid, great," and chewing a cigar, embraced him. But Hopper now had a reputation as a troublemaker that was to stick. When Hathaway called him for *The Sons of Katie Elder* with John Wayne, his comment to Hopper was "Big Duke don't go for any of that method crap." While Hopper was working on *Easy Rider* Hathaway called again, and though Hopper was going to refuse, a friend convinced him it wouldn't be good to offend Hathaway at this point. So Hopper played the knifed man in *True Grit*. It offered the young director a temporary change from the pressure of *Easy Rider*.



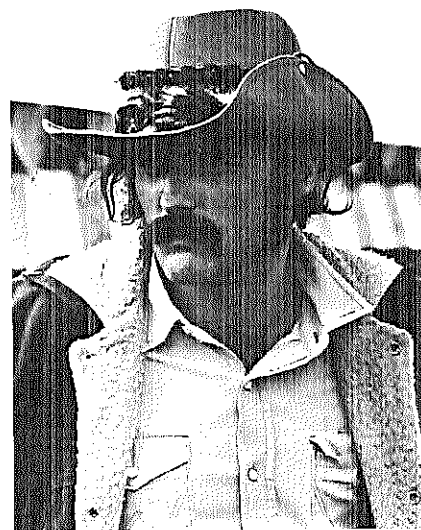
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Hopper's experience with Hathaway has ultimately seasoned him and proved helpful. It taught him the potential power of the director. Originally Barry Feinstein, the director of *You Are What You Eat*, was to film *Easy Rider* for Hopper, but there was a struggle for dominance and Hopper wound up in a slugfest with his cameraman that left him with the accusation that he needed "psychiatric help" ringing in his head. "They tried to take it away. I raved. It was *my* picture," he reports. "They thought I was insane, man." Hopper's fury was credited by a producer with ultimately saving the film. He had made the crucial step, taken the film away from those he couldn't trust, and he turned to a professional crew with Laslo Kovacs as cinematographer and Donn Cambern as editor, a circumstance that proved monumentally fortunate. It had been a battle for control, and Hopper had survived.

This is not to slight Peter Fonda who had the original concept for the film nor Terry Southern who titled it, and whose name helped open doors, but Hopper was the director. Though he obviously feels personal pride in the picture, he is careful to mention Fonda with consideration. He tells how Fonda called him with the idea about two young men going across the country and getting shot by some duck hunters. Hopper liked the idea, but they didn't act on it until Fonda returned from making the Roger Vadim section of *Spirits of the Dead*. Then Fonda got the date of the Mardi Gras wrong, thinking it was in March when it was in February, which crimped things and caused the irregular footage of the Mardi Gras scenes. When we met, Hopper had just heard from Fonda. "I just talked to Pete," he said. "He took the film to the Edinburgh festival. When it ended there was silence. Then they gave Pete a standing ovation.



*Easy Rider*



*Easy Rider*



*Easy Rider*

Everybody wanted to talk to him," he said proudly. Any time he speaks about Fonda he is careful to say, "I'm not putting Peter down." It would seem Fonda has gained stature and identity from *Easy Rider* that has freed him from the unfair image as Henry Fonda's callow son. Hopefully there is a symbiotic relationship between Hopper and Fonda that will endure. They are supposed to do another picture together about their difficulties in raising money for *Easy Rider*.

Hopper is at times strangely vulnerable; he believes Nicholson will get the Academy Award for best supporting actor, and he says with an intensity, "That may not be all it (the film) gets." Hopper, when I saw him, was a worn-down free-spirit, feeling the demands of trying to publicize his film. He was long-haired, with bright eyes and no mustache. He is a creature of various styles and abilities. At the restaurant at which we ate, he ordered wine from the menu with knowledge and a weary aplomb.

Hopper has had exhibitions of his paintings and sculpture. He believes that symbol, mysticism, and reality are one. He has been influenced by Luis Bunuel, Spanish writer-director. Hopper's new film, *The Last Movie*, set in Mexico, will be shot in Peru. A film within a film, it is the story of a Mexican town whose townspeople come to be influenced by the western that is being made there. Being produced independently, it will be distributed by Universal.

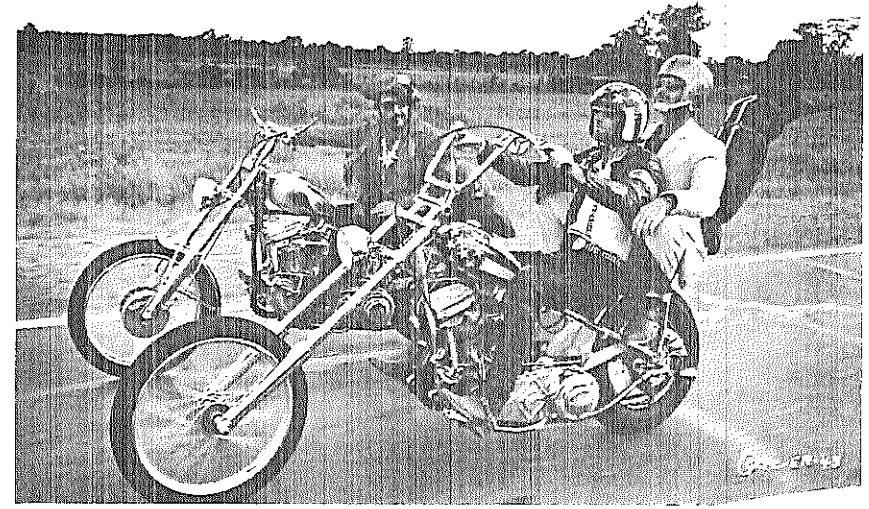
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In *Easy Rider* Hopper has no easy answers, though some of his questions may be facile. If the thesis of the film were merely that money



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is corrupting, or the South is bad, or some such banality, the film would be one-dimensional. But, though many viewers may try to confine it thus, Hopper is too much an artist to be so limited. Is there a value that Hopper is celebrating? Wyatt's letdown makes him human not heroic. Is it the commune they visit that Hopper elevates? Perhaps. But he also seems to have found uncertainty and ambivalence in its "ideal." Jack (Robert Walker) leads the prayer at the commune and says, "Thank You for a place to make a stand." Will they survive? Initially, with the 360 degree pan shot ("doesn't everybody making his first film use a 360 degree pan; even Roger Corman does") and the gentle, bizarre tenderness at the commune, one thinks this may be the value being celebrated. But there are nagging doubts. Wyatt says, "They'll make it, man," though as Hopper remarked he doesn't give them any money to help them, which is an interesting observation. The possibilities of the commune become even more dubious when the hitchhiker who lives in the commune says, "city kids... getting this crop in, and going to get it harvested. That's the whole thing." But his sanguinity is qualified by Billy who growls, "nothing but sand. They ain't gonna make it." Who knows? With its lovely bathing spots within range and its simple food, despite the clannishness, it does seem the best possibility for salvation in the film. The scene offers the possibility of a stand, but with its inhabitants having had to search for dead horses for food—an actual incident—it also seems a likely place for futility.



*Easy Rider*

What Hopper has done is attempt to create ambivalence within the illusion of absolutes. The existence of ambivalence and dimension are what makes a reading of the film such as that given to it by Richard Goldstein in the *NY Times* so disagreeable. He wrote, "... it makes me angry to remember that Wyatt and his friend never do make it. They are systematically destroyed—busted, beaten, and finally extinguished by the blue-eyed government and its forgotten constituents." Shades of Huck Finn's pa.

Another dimension in which Hopper works is myth. Perhaps the level of interpretation most nebulous and potentially strained is the mythic. Given the general haziness of myth and its often heavy connotations, one comes to the technique with especial care. But with *Easy Rider* myth is helpful to understanding, and since Hopper admits to myth it is appropriate to pursue it. Wyatt as Captain America is an obvious take-off on the American ideal of heroism. Another myth in *Easy Rider* is that of the Old West and the use of the modern counterparts for Wyatt Earp and Billy the Kid. This is set up early in an obvious use of symbol when as Wyatt and Billy are removing the tire from their motorcycle, the rancher in the foreground is shoeing his horse. This helps set the concept of the changing times. But why the Wyatt-Billy parallel? Hopper has used the parallel to make a moral point. He is revealing the discrepancy between the image and the actuality, drawing upon the glamour of the culture's idealization of Wyatt Earp and Billy Bonney. There is also a pertinent contrast between the two "heroes." Hopper has seen the contemporary Wyatt as a "leader" and Billy as a follower. But he has seen a failure in Wyatt (both the historical and contemporary Wyatts),





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a failure of leadership. For Hopper, Billy was a "bummer," while Wyatt Earp was not as noble in the killing at the OK Corral as has been popularly assumed. Earp was also involved in tainted land dealings.

Even more personal and problematic are the religious levels of meaning in the film. These are more oblique than the myth of the west, and religious myth is often objectionable. The religious symbolism is delicate. Hopper is heavy with some, cautious with other, myth. He did admit that at the end Wyatt and Billy, for him, represent the two thieves. "Can you imagine if I said that publicly," he laughed. "People would say 'the two what?'" But the allusion is not as outrageous as it might seem. Wyatt has perhaps been saved by knowledge; Billy is beyond it. In this context one may look for a Christ myth, but Hopper desists. "Christ isn't in the film," he says. Still, it is not impossible to see George Hanson in this role, slain between the two sleeping men, speaking in parables about the Venutians, stating, "You know this used to be a hell of a country." (Stanley Kauffmann asks when?) There are other gestures. When Wyatt is beaten he lies with his arm out in a traditional pose. He makes a pieta with the statue of the Madonna in the acid trip in the cemetery. Such mythic work is heady stuff.

Its range seems to extend to the gnostic. Hopper does admit to believing in *The Gospel According to Thomas*. It is the kind of esoteric belief that gives provocative dimension to his work. *The Gospel According to Thomas* is a gnostic book, obtainable from Harper and Row, that contains the "sayings of Jesus" recorded by Didymos Judas Thomas, which had been lost for sixteen centuries and were discovered in 1945 in a ruined tomb near Nag Hamadi, Upper Egypt. A copy of the book was given to Hopper and Fonda by a friend; it has brought Hopper back from unbelief and seems to have helped form his artistic vision. Hopper can quote from it extensively and enthusiastically.

Many of the scenes in *Easy Rider* seem applicable to ideas expressed in *The Gospel According to Thomas*. There are strong emphases on fire and light in "the gospel," and Hopper has been able to visualize these in his fierce vision in the film. The foreshadowing of the burning body and the conflagration at the film's end seem expressions of the concept of fire articulated again and again by Thomas. There is an agony expressed:

Jesus said: I have cast fire upon the world, and see, I guard it until (the world) is afire (p.7).\*

Thomas continues the force of the words of Christ:

Thomas said to them: If I tell you one of the words which He said to me, you will take up stones and throw at me; and the fire will come from the stones and burn you.... Jesus said: Men possibly think that I have come to throw peace upon the world and they do not know that I have come to throw divisions upon the earth, fire, sword, war" (pp. 9-11).

Added to the burning of the fire is Thomas' (and Hopper's) sense of the potency of the light, the power of belief:

Jesus said: If they say to you: "From where have you originated?" say to them: "We have come from the Light, where the Light has

\*Non-English phrases have been deleted in all quotations.

originated through itself. It [stood] and it revealed itself in their image" (p. 29).

Thomas records the importance of the fire and the light:

Jesus said: Whoever is near to me is near to the fire, and whoever is far from me is far from the Kingdom. Jesus said: The images are manifest to man and the Light which is within them is hidden and His Image is concealed by His Light (p. 45).

For Hopper, his most important shot in *Easy Rider* is a shot of the sun. He says he told his photographer "to close his eyes and shoot into the sun." The shot communicates a potency; the sun has a tail of energy. "When I saw what we'd got, I couldn't believe it," he says in remembered awe.

The ambivalence of Jesus' words is expressed in the fury of the trip scene in the cemetery. It is the single scene that conveys motivation for Wyatt. And it also expresses the agony of the whores. The title also fits best in this context. Terry Southern's title for the film, *Easy Rider*, has a particular reference to Wyatt and the whores: an "easy rider" is one who is taken care of by a whore. She washes him and dresses him. He may not service her, but she cares for him—maternally. Hopper is sympathetic to the kindness of such women. The scene at the cemetery begins with the body of a dead dog in the street and races into various symbolic modes under the power of the drugs. Wyatt cries out in the arms of the statue. Thomas repeats Christ's words of ambivalence:

Jesus said: Whoever does not hate his father and mother in My way will not be able to be a [disciple] to me. And whoever does [not] love [his father] and his mother in My way will not be able to be a [disciple] to me... (p. 51).

Ultimately Christ's vision and Hopper's art express the blindness of man:

Jesus said: It will not come by expectation; they will not say: "See here" or: "See, there." But the Kingdom of the Father is spread upon the earth and men do not see it (p. 57).

When asked why he made the film, Hopper responded "to put a mirror before men so that they can see themselves as they are."

Though shot through with problems in execution, *Easy Rider* is still the most intellectually interesting American film of the year, providing dilemmas, ambivalences, and dimensions not readily accessible. *Easy Rider*, seemingly almost simple-minded on the surface, has startling resonances. As the film was evolving, Hopper used a selection of rock tunes to accompany it, and though everybody thought it was only temporary he intended to keep them in. Crosby, Stills, and Nash were supposed to do the score, but as Hopper says, "I subverted them." The music, a rock "hit parade," is not just added but is potentially important. And, Bob Dylan has made a significant contribution. Hopper's relationship with Dylan was a crucial one. Dylan liked the film when he saw it, but he hated the ending. Hopper wanted to end *Easy Rider* with Dylan's *It's Alright Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)*. But Dylan refused. Hopper says Dylan responded, "What do you want to use *that* for?" Dylan said when it was written it was like "a cancer" that had to be cut out of him, and

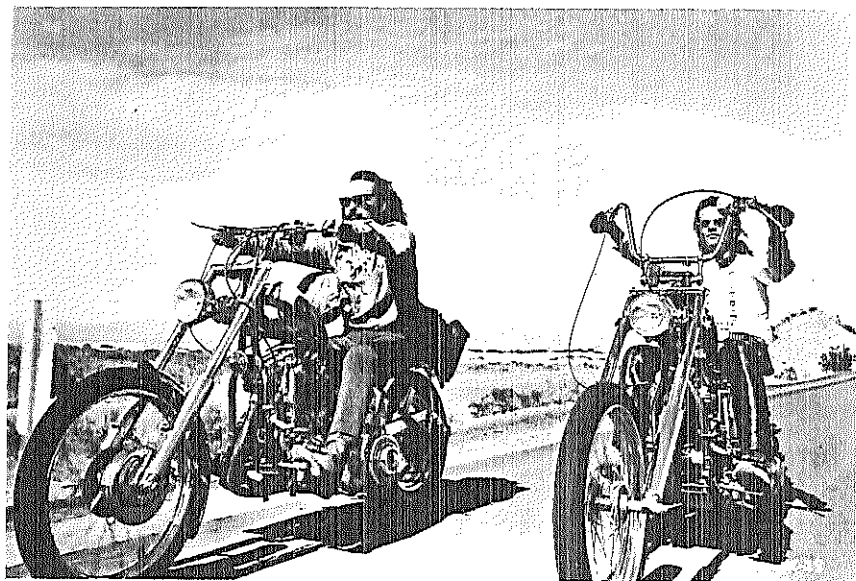


*Easy Rider*

now he was into something else—love. "He wanted me to change the ending," says Hopper. "He thought it should have uplift. He said, 'Somebody who works all day in the mines doesn't want to see that.'" Hopper says Dylan wanted Wyatt to run his motorcycle into the truck. "Or maybe the helicopter taking the final shots would machine gun the truck," Hopper laughed. But there is no question that Dylan's effect was crucially felt. Finally Dylan agreed to let Hopper use *It's Alright Ma* prior to the ending. And, he sat down and wrote some words and said "Give this to McGuinn." So was born *The Ballad of Easy Rider*. (The Dylan lyrics are not credited.)\* The Dylan words are supremely important because, like the Gospel of Thomas, they give a different quality to the ending. Without *The Ballad of Easy Rider* the film would end in despair.

The impact of the film's ending is raw and almost overpowering, it is so sudden and total. One of the major criticisms of the film has been that the violence is a "cop-out." But the sense of violence is consistent. A writer for *Fusion* mocked the scene where only George Hanson is battered, but this scene is not unrealistic. Often there is only one sadist in a group, and the gang attacks the nearest figure, who receives the brunt of their passion. The quickness and facility of the violence render its gratuitousness. As Hopper says, "When violence comes, it is quick. Suddenly you feel something on the back of your head. Before you know

\*Richard Goldstein credits *The Ballad of Easy Rider* to Bob Dylan and Roger McGuinn, in the August 3 Sunday Times, but then he quotes from *Wasn't Born to Follow*, performed by the Byrds in the film.



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what's happened, it's on you."

The ending of *Easy Rider* is deft and devastating. It is a perfect touch that Wyatt is not shown. It also opens up the conclusion to various symbolic possibilities. Wyatt's motorcycle can represent the world itself, hurled to its final conflagration, money engulfed in fire. The motorcycle, like a stricken cross, can form an annihilated world. Billy who has been the body is shown in his agony; Wyatt who has approached the ethereal at times is not shown. The motorcycle ascends. The death is anonymous, universal, total.

If the film ended with this image or even with Dylan's *It's Alright Ma* the effect would be close to nihilism, but the lyrics of *The Ballad of Easy Rider*, though they are hard to focus on after the shattering image, change that. Dylan has been able to inject his uplift, his peace.

The river flows, it flows to the sea, wherever that river goes that's where I want to be. Flow, river, flow. Let your waters wash down, take me from this road, to some other town. All they wanted was to be free, and that's the way it turned out to be. . . .

The river alongside the road reveals a path "to the sea." The elevation of Dylan's ironic lyrics brings man back from the brink of nihilism he has just been terrorized to look over. Such beauty and terror are the qualities of tragedy. ■