

SILENCING THE WORD IN HOWARD O'HAGAN'S "TAY JOHN"

Arnold E. Davidson

THE LANGUAGE OF LEGEND

As the naming of its three parts ("Legend," "Hearsay," "Evidence — without a finding") well might suggest, Howard O'Hagan's *Tay John* does not provide any definitive conclusion but trails off into uncertainty and indeterminacy. Mere hearsay succeeds and subverts the legend of the protagonist with which the book begins, while such evidence as is set forth in the last section — and throughout the entire work — conduces to no final finding. Words, in short, do not lead to any truths in or of the novel, and the text marks out a space of misnaming and misunderstanding. It is this space that Jack Denham, O'Hagan's Irish Canadian version of Joseph Conrad's Captain Marlow, would occupy with his "Tale," his "gospel" of Tay John.¹

Even that protagonist's name posits the yawning disjunction between the word and its referent around which the novel is structured. "Tay John" is, of course, a mispronunciation of "Tête Jaune" — the French designation for the blonde Indian as voiced by men who do not speak French. Yet the name Denham originally gives to the same character is the English "Yellow Head," and the protagonist's previous Indian name was "Kumklessem," which can also be translated as "Yellow Head." One name subsumes and replaces another by differently saying the same thing, and thereby attests to the arbitrary nature of names as well as to the transitory nature of identity, for the original Kumklessem who first enters the white man's world is not synonymous with the final Tay John who at last takes himself out of it. "Tay John" differs, too, from "Tête Jaune," and the change in spelling even more than any change in pronunciation serves to obscure the French origin of the name, to make it more a purely conventional appellation instead of a partly descriptive one. Conjoining the comfortably familiar "John" with the vaguely esoteric "Tay," "Tay John" becomes simply another version of "Indian Joe" (meaning not quite a regular Joe but on the right track), and as such it voices more the programme of those who employ the name than the being of him to whom it is applied. Again, naming is misnaming, and even the most seemingly obvious descriptive designation is strangely deflected as it travels from one tongue to another.

Lest these opening postulations seem too strained for a work written in the 1930's — a time when Western Canada was supposedly first finding in fiction its

realistic voice, not its metafictional voicelessness — let us turn now to the first section of the novel to examine in some detail just how capably O'Hagan compromises the very story he constructs by telling it in terms of a much larger legend, the most unquestionably accepted legend or story in the western world. Essentially, I argue, the numerous "gospel" references in the novel are no accident, and one narration that strangely takes us from a miraculous birth to an equally miraculous death necessarily invokes the prototype of all such narrations, the (at least by common Christian consent) greatest story ever told. Yet O'Hagan's tale of a failed messiah who cannot save his people or the woman he loves or, finally, even himself persistently counters the larger story with which it is framed. For example, in contrast to "In the beginning was the Word," we have, in *Tay John*, three (incongruous trilogies pervade the novel) emblematic endings in silence — a "skull" with a "stone . . . still between its jaws"; a corpse, its lips sealed with frozen froth; a pregnant woman, dead, her open "mouth . . . chock-full of snow."² It is that first stone, however, that speaks most clearly of Tay John's case, for the stone, marking the end of Tay John's beginning, effectively sets forth the silence and death out of which this character is born.

The stone ends a story, a story that begins with a man whose "voice overtopped all . . . others" and his conversion experience. Red Rorty, crude, drunk, and loud, down from the mountains to sell his furs and carouse away the proceeds in an 1880 Edmonton as elemental as the man himself, is on his way to the whorehouse when he is stopped by the sound of singing from a nearby church. Soon he is loudly proclaiming the tenets of this church — "That whosoever believeth on Him shall not perish but shall have everlasting life" — and presently, as drunk on religion as he ever was on whiskey, he kills his horses, burns all of his other material possessions, and sets out, like Saul of Tarsus, for a different life. He will go among the Indians.

The Shuswap, whose myths tell of a "leader with yellow hair who [will] come to take them back over the mountains to a land full of game, fish . . . and berries," take Rorty in but soon decide that he is a forerunner of their promised messiah and not the man himself. Rorty tells them, loudly, of another who will "come again one day to be a leader of mankind," to save those who believe and to afflict those who do not. This differing as to deferred leaders lasts until Rorty lapses into his old ways. He sees a young wife shredding cedar bark by rubbing it on her thigh, which, "bare, and oiled with the cedar, shone in the sunlight." That night he seizes her. "She did not resist. His troubled flesh found ease." But even if she did consent, her people did not. Next day the other Indian women beat Rorty, drive him into the forest, seize him and tie him kneeling to a tree. The parodic Paul who became a parodic John the Baptist now becomes a parodic Saint Sebastian, a grotesque martyr to a crude lapse from a crude faith. Children shoot arrows into his stomach. The women set fire to his hair and then to the

tree to which he is tied. The last words that he might have spoken are stopped by a stone jammed into his mouth. Sometime later the young wife dies and still later a baby is born from her grave. The baby, of course, is Tay John.

I have briefly summarized the chief legend in "Legend," the story of Red Rorty's end and Tay John's beginning, because that dual account especially exemplifies the two dialectics implicit in this novel. As Rorty's failed missionary career illustrates, the structure of his whole conclusion is governed by the faltering opposition of sex and salvation on the one hand and sound and silence on the other. Furthermore, these dialectics both work at cross purpose and are intertwined with each other. Thus the roisterer of the mountains who for sheer delight "hurled his voice" until it "rolled from one rock wall to another" stands silent in the town, caught on his way to the whorehouse by the hymns emanating from a "new" and "different" church. Turning from his originally intended mission, Rorty soon sings the loudest in the choir, and after listening, in a setting vaguely homoerotic, to the whispered counsel of the unkempt minister, the "echoes" of Rorty's affirmation of belief "rolled in the emptied church louder than they ever had in the mountains." Rorty then decides to take that new belief back to the mountains and to be, in a new and different way, a voice in the wilderness. His model is "Saul of Tarsus, afterwards called Paul, who left one path of life for another; who went out into the world, among strange people, and preached The Way, and became a great man whose words were remembered." Forfeiting sex for salvation might prepare him, he imagines, to voice the living word, and that word, surviving the silence of death, might allow a kind of continuing existence even on earth — which was ostensibly the function of sex.

His tenuous programme hardly works out as planned even though the dialectic of his categories remains just as confused as ever. Indeed, Rorty's sermon to the Indians — "the people said that no man had spoken with such a great voice before" — is soon followed by his silent seizing of Hanni, the young wife. And that act is followed by his demise and a consequent re-evaluation of his earlier words. Three days after Rorty's apocalyptic death by fire, the Indian women return to the still smoldering scene:

They found the skull, fallen to the ground and caught in the black twisted roots of a tree. The stone was still between its jaws. Yaada took a stick and pointed.

"See!" she said, "he was a great liar, and the word has choked him!"

As the pervasive Biblical typology of Rorty's silent dying attests, the word is the Word and the Word is stone.

Although itself compromised in the Indian setting, Christian myth still serves to undermine the Indian myth that, in this novel, comes after it, not before. To start with, there is the definite confusion embodied in Rorty's mission into the wilderness. As both prophet and precursor, just what does he promise to the

Indians? Signifying, to them, the coming of their messiah, he speaks, to them, of the coming of his. So Rorty as a sign equally asserts two contradictory meanings, one firmly embedded in one mythology and one in the other, and either reading of that sign founders on what it necessarily leaves out.

Unless, of course, the two different promised leaders turn out to be one and the same — a possibility that the Indians also early consider. But, whether either, neither, or both readings of Rorty are valid, the result for Tay John is still the same. He is born bearing an impossible burden — a supplement of deferred hopes that from the very beginning deprive his life of human possibility by imparting to it a surplus of mythic meaning. Through an odd conjoining of Christian and Platonic thought, the Shuswap define their leader and their need:

Their faith was the substance of things hoped for, the shadow of what they could not yet discern. They believed that the world was made of things they could not touch nor see, as they knew that behind the basket their hands made was the shape of the perfect basket which once made would endure for ever and beyond the time when its semblance was broken and worn thin by use.

Kumklessem cannot be merely Kumklessem; he must also be the man behind his name, the perfect essence and not the particular individual. No wonder sustained ceremonies of rebirth and renaming are required to keep him in the world at all.

That the paradigms for the father will be somewhat different for the son is early indicated by the way in which the boy, born from the grave, “walked in the sunlight as other children, but alone with no shadow to follow him and protect him.” He is a presence marked by an absence and still marked even when that telling absence is undone. Although the child is united with his shadow through the agency of a wise old woman, the union is not secure. The first faint shadow flees when it is early stepped on, so the reforged bond is never tested. “The people were careful not to tread upon his shadow nor to touch it, fearful that it would leave him,” and he them. Consequently, only “when the sun was gone and his shadow had left him for the night . . . could [Kumklessem] come close to his people.” The natural division of day and night, of light and dark, modulates the inverse unnatural division between this prospective leader and his people who await his future mission.

That division is magnified by the vision journey whereby Kumklessem would determine “the shape and the colour of the life before him and . . . the spirit that would guide him.” This same ordeal ostensibly also proves Kumklessem’s readiness to become the promised leader whom the Shuswap have long anticipated, and thus parallel’s Christ’s trial in the wilderness. Yet there is, from the first, a shadow over the venture. Kumklessem travels into a dark valley dangerous to man. The danger is of supernatural separation from others and loss of human status: “Men feared that one night . . . [“the spirit of that valley”] would come down upon them in their sleep and leave them with a coyote’s howl for a voice

and only a coyote's claws for hands, and each man would be for ever a stranger to his neighbour."³ For Kumkleseem, already markedly apart from others, the darkness of this valley especially threatens to undo that other more natural darkness only in which he can "come close to his people."

Kumkleseem returns from the ordeal with two signs of his journey, his account of the animals he encountered and the actual gold dust he found at the head of the dark river. The Indians read only the first sign and read only the possible significance of the last animal that watched over the youth's watch, a grizzly bear. "The bear-spirit will be your guardian spirit. His strength will be your strength, and his cunning yours. . . . He will pull back the cape from his face so that you may see him, and he will talk to you with a man's voice." That reading at least promises them the possibility of a great leader. But a better reading would be based on the second sign. Indeed, the *gold* dust from the *head* of the dark river names the protagonist and grounds that name (all three of them, in fact) in absence and separation, which soon follow with the arrival of other whites on the scene. Three prospectors (the wise men from the East) can immediately discern at least one paramount meaning in the glittering dust Kumkleseem discovered and promise him a modest reward if he will lead them to it. He thereby acquires a rifle, powder and bullets, a new red coat, a new name that no one can properly pronounce, and a growing taste for white ways. "His rifle was his own, and no man could touch it." With such new ownership, as opposed to the old communal ways of the Shuswap, Tay John can now hunt more for furs to be privately traded than for food to be communally shared.

It is at this point that the division and duplicity that already characterize Kumkleseem/Tay John subsume also his anticipated mission as messianic Indian leader and do so especially in terms of the crucial paradigm of presence/absence, which is simply the sound/silence of his predecessor-prophet-father translated into another medium. The Indians await their future (chronologically elsewhere) leader in the person of Tay John, who is now mostly geographically elsewhere, and hope thereby to be rejoined to their past (another chronological and geographic elsewhere). Elsewhere, Tay John is learning the white man's ways, which are more and more copied by the other Indians too. "Days came when the young men, following Tay John, failed to hunt meat and hides for the village" but hunt instead for trading furs and thus for rifles and "red scarves and sashes." Their successful hunting in this new fashion soon reduces them all to general starvation and a crisis of expectancy as they wait "for a sign from Kumkleseem" to "go whither his finger pointed." But of course they are already well on their way. Their leader is conducting them into their future which, in the white man's world, not the Indians', will be both chronologically and geographically elsewhere or, more accurately, nowhere.

The final severance of Tay John from the Indians is precipitated, however, by

the other dichotomy (sex *vs.* salvation), which also passes in somewhat altered form from father to son. The latter does at last briefly take on the role of leader, but even then he refuses to be the leader whom the Indians expected: "The woman of Tay John is the people. He is the leader of the people and is married to their sorrows." Tay John would subvert such definition and mission by seizing a woman already promised to another man of the tribe. The resultant crisis is resolved not by execution but by exile, after which the Indians tell each other tales of the missing man being away on a particularly arduous hunt, and perpetually prepare for his imminent return. For example, they make him, with the advent of winter, "a new house," and "each day they brought fresh boughs, laid them there for his bed, and made a fire against his coming." But only occasionally at night can they sometimes believe they hear him near, "and in the morning no one would speak of what had happened during the night."

"All that winter smoke rose from the new house built for Tay John. At night an owl perched by it and hooted." Ending thus, "Legend" attests that the end of legend, for the Indians, is an enduring absence made bearable by the most tenuous hints of presence and by the hope, sustained through holding fast his story, that the king might come again. Legend is, then, the perpetual deferral of things hoped for as marked by the telling of that hope. Or by not telling it; with the sign necessarily here and its significance ever elsewhere, the story can sound even in the hoot of a night owl.

Neither does legend (nor Tay John either) fare any better in the white world. Deferral and disappearance, carried over now from Indian story to white, continue to govern the text of the novel and to undermine the larger text on which it is modelled. Consider, for example, the crucifixion of Father Rorty who played at imitating Christ to find only the imitation real.⁴ Such contraverting of Christian story with its promise of teleological finality continues to the end of *Tay John*. Thus Christ, who in a transcendent sense walked out of death to save all men, is countered by Tay John, who — just as transcendentally — once out, walks back in again and does so to save no one. This protagonist's final passing and the end of the novel — "He had just walked down, the toboggan behind him, under the snow and into the ground" — is presided over, it will be remembered, by the burden he takes with him. And Ardith Aeriola, pregnant and dead, tied to the toboggan, her open mouth "chock-full of snow," enunciates one final devastating parody of the promised last word frozen in time. From beginning to end, then, *Tay John* turns on Biblical parallels but it employs those parallels to undo the model on which it is based. With such erasure of the original Book, *Tay John* is finally grounded in nothing. The result is a work that denies transcendence; that translates "In the beginning was the Word" into the opposing dictum "In the end was silence" and then translates that ending into a new beginning.

STORY AS HEARSAY

The narrative mode of "Legend" is an ironically aloof omniscience so distanced from the action it describes that it can give us a bird's-eye-view of not only the Rocky Mountain setting of the novel but also of man set in the peaks and valleys of his whole history — recorded and unrecorded. "The time of this in its beginning, in men's time, is 1880 in the summer, and its place is the Athabaska valley, near its head in the mountains, and along the other waters falling into it, and beyond them a bit, over the Yellowhead Pass to the westward, where the Fraser, rising in a lake, flows through wilderness and canyon down to the Pacific." In this beginning there are two parallel double perspectives. The opening panorama portraying the "place" of the novel is set in a still larger panorama of "wilderness and canyon" beyond and beyond that the broad Pacific; and so too is "men's time" set in the larger perspective of what we might term "Legend's" time and beyond that timelessness.

Yet the two times of the novel — chronological, historical, on the one hand; and, on the other, timeless legend verging towards timelessness — also stand in opposition to one another. For example, the metaphoric "Word," the Bible as the timeless book transcending time, is subverted and silenced in the here and now of 1880 Alberta by a real stone; moreover, with that stone, Red Rorty's mission to eternity ends in stasis and parodic death. Nor does Indian legend, Indian theology, fare any better in the present human time in which that legend unfolds. The Indians await their promised leader who will guide them to an earthly heaven but they await him in a land already transgressed by fur traders and prospectors and soon to be penetrated by the railroads too. In a very real sense, the whites, in history, seeking their lost Eden in the New World, are busily destroying all possibilities of paradise through the very rigour of their search. There will be no other place left, for them or for the Indians. Tay John, then, is deprived of his mission before it can be begun. Not kingdom but exile must be his fate, and exile into a world of other exiles seeking (like Red Rorty or Jack Denham or Alf Dobbie) some kingdom in the mountains.

Just as legend's time with its attendant timeless hope is undone, for the Indians, by the intrusion of white history, so, too, is it undone by the intrusion of Indian history, which is now white history writ small. When the Indians, in the exigencies of an exploited present, still pin their "faith" and "hope" on Tay John, they wait for him to "speak with a great voice" and to resolve thereby their suffering and their doubt. Yet "a great voice," it must be remembered, has previously spoken, so the promise of the mythic future is already the fact of the actual past, and that fact calls the anticipated future not into being but into question. The Shuswap have already had their leader and he failed them, or, at best, he presaged the subsequent leader who will also fail them. The Indians drop from

sight; Tay John falls from transcendent destiny into a crude quotidian; the story declines from legend to hearsay.

That final declension might, at first, seem to represent a narrative gain. Since timelessness is denied by time and omniscience serves mostly to negate the promise of story, it well might be that the only authentic speaking possible in the novel is the human voice with all its limitations. And "Hearsay," combining (by meaning) "rumour" and (by etymology) "repetition," insists on both the humanity and the limitations of the voices whereby the rest of the text is rendered. Again, however, the novel is built around structuring polarities which are themselves structured to collapse.

To start with, the paramount speaking voice in "Hearsay" regularly aspires to transcendence. The text denies truth. Nevertheless, Jack Denham, the capable narrator of the middle section, implicitly insists on the higher truth of all that he says and does so by positing the "magic" of naming.⁵ "For a country where no man has stepped before is new in the real sense of the word, as though it had just been made, and when you turn your back upon it you feel that it may drop back again into the dusk that gave it being. It is only your vision that holds it in the known and created world. . . . [But] a name is the magic to keep it within the horizons. Put a name to it, put it on a map, and you've got it." The world called into being by the ordering word constitutes a great image of authority. Yet the authority that Denham claims for his own naming, his own tales, he denies to those of others:

For your backwoodsman is a thorough gossip. . . . He pays for a meal, for a night's lodging, with a tale. His social function is to hand on what he has heard, with the twist his fancy has been able to add. . . . What he has not seen he deduces, and what he cannot understand he explains.

And those others, and the novel, deny Denham the authority that he denies them: "He might meet a friend at the street corner and follow him to his destination, talking, *stretching his story the length of Edmonton*. It became known as 'Jackie's Tale.' It was a faith — *a gospel to be spread*, that tale, and he was its only apostle" (emphasis added). Faith, hitherto, has not fared well in the novel. Nor are we reassured as to the absolute truth of the rendering when we note that the whole gospel according to Denham is a tale he tells in a bar.

It might also be noted that Denham's extended defense for the truth-in-magic of naming is refuted by the very occasion that prompted it, his excursion into "country where no man has stepped before." This excursion first brings Denham into the presence of Tay John — on the other side of the river that Denham was exploring to its source and over which Denham himself had earlier crossed. The narrator is not therefore envisioning the naming of his own new world but the renaming of Tay John's old one; he is not an Adam taking his first green inventory of Eden but a latter-day Columbus still deaf to the Indians' words and blind

to the Indians' map, the Indians' claims on the country. He will name the land; he will name Yellow Head too; such naming is also an unnamings and it is a dispossessing as much as it is a possessing. But more to the point, by Denham's own logic, the true first name that endows possession precedes any voicing of later and necessarily inauthentic names. And with authenticating origins deferred ever further into the past, does not any story become dubious repetition, mostly rumour, mere hearsay?

Denham's practice of naming, as opposed to his logic, is itself named in the novel, which is to say that the processes and programme prompting "Jackie's Tale" are themselves embedded in his often repeated account. That embedding is especially seen in his description of his first crucial encounter with Tay John just across the raging mountain stream and of Tay John's immediately subsequent encounter with the bear. For Denham had "dreamed of — of [he haltingly early admits] meeting a bear one day close up, hand to hand so to speak, and doing it in. An epic battle: man against the wilderness. And now I saw the battle taking form," he continues, "but another man was in *my* place" (emphasis added). His story, he would have it, is at least in part the story of his dispossession, a tale of how "only the width of a mountain stream kept him from the adventure of his life." So, deferring from the first the critical question of just whose adventure, whose text, it really was, he slowly works out ["It took me a long time to find the words"] his narration of Tay John's victory over the bear. That account of how a man armed only with a knife killed an "immense" grizzly concludes by emphasizing the symbolic rebirth of the victor from the beast just killed: "Then the mass quivered. It heaved. A man's head appeared beside it, bloody, muddied, as though he were just being born, as though he were climbing out of the ground. Certainly man had been created anew before my eyes. Like birth itself it was a struggle against the powers of darkness and Man had won." That last general "Man," however, begins to give the game away. The rebirth here imaged is not just Tay John's, for the Indian soon "vanished, as though he were leaving one form of existence for another." The protagonist can exit from the scene because the narrator has entered more fully into it, reborn into his own tale by visioning a recreated image of himself. "He [Tay John] had won. *We* [he and I] had won" (emphasis in the original). Denham will participate in the triumph by his telling of it and thus he will reconsecrate his adventure, his victory. He, most of all, might be converted by his gospel, which demonstrates that his sustained enterprise of recounting is not an exercise in authentic being but in pretended becoming.⁶

Yet the paradigms of sound/silence and presence/absence come into play for the narrator, too, particularly since Denham, we are told (just before the voice of omniscience hands the novel over to this narrator), has his own personal story but declines to tell it: "His name was Jack Denham, but he was known generally as Jackie — a man whose pride was in his past, of which he seldom spoke, but

over which loomed the shadow of a great white house in the north of Ireland. . . . From that past, and because of it, he received four times a year a remittance." The remittance man is here because he grandly failed there; he is marked by the absence of his former higher status, which is his shadow. Not to sound that absence, Denham substitutes one story for another, and the hero of a New World tale replaces the failure of an Old World one.

The replacement, however, more and more proves the failure. Although Denham can share in the victory over the bear through the narrative subterfuge of casting himself as Tay John or Tay John as a version of himself, that doubling is undone by another doubling. Balancing, contrasting to, and cancelling out Denham's first episode in his celebration of Tay John's exploits is the final episode, the account of Tay John's victory over Dobbie and all his men and of the victor's subsequent flight into the mountains with Ardith Aeriola. Denham, who is himself clearly drawn to the woman, must once more tell of another who is in his place, but now there is no reward in vicariously sharing that other's triumph. The story he tells thus takes on the same contours as the one he does not tell, as in each he ends up a marginal man. Out of place in his first story, he is displaced from the second one, too, and, in consequence, increasingly disassociates himself from its telling. As we near the end of *Tay John*, Denham first interposes Inspector Wiggins and Sergeant Flaherty between himself and his account. Then he abdicates entirely. At its conclusion the narration is no longer "Jackie's Tale" but has been handed over to Blackie.⁷ Repetition circling back upon itself must sooner or later circumscribe its own emptiness, and Denham, capable narrator that he is, is left finally fictionally bankrupt, without even a tale to tell.

EVIDENCE, FINDINGS, AND FINAL SENTENCES

The title of Part III, "Evidence — without a finding," turning as it does on a legal trope, gives rise to a crucial question. Just who or what is it that is on trial and on what grounds is judgement deferred? The most likely candidate for sentencing is, of course, Tay John. After all, he gives his name to the novel, and throughout that novel he regularly both invites and evades some final summation that might deem him a hero (in the Indian context or the white) or a renegade (again in the Indian context or the white). Yet what we might term the transcript of this protagonist's extended but inconclusive trial itself constitutes evidence for still another transgression that is not prosecuted in the novel. As previously noted, the account of Tay John's life is confiscated to become "Jackie's Tale," which could well lay Denham open to charges of narrative theft and narrative meddling. Furthermore, in the final section of the novel, the faith of Father Rorty, the enterprise of Alf Dobbie, and the virtue of Ardith Aeriola are all at issue and in doubt.

The issues and the doubts are further confused and confounded by the way in which they mix and merge throughout the novel as one inconclusive trial verges into another. Indeed, Part II ends, it will be remembered, with Tay John's one official encounter with the law, his quasi-summons ["request, only request mind you, that he come down here"] to answer an imputed charge of rape. That encounter, however, lurches toward inconclusion instead of proceeding to any official finding and then is followed by Part III, still more "Evidence — without a finding." But since Part I and Part II, "Legend" and "Hearsay," are themselves prototypes of Part III and emphasize by their very nature the missing authenticity that they each also imply, it is not surprising that the clearest inconclusive trial comes before the longest and concluding section of the novel that is ostensibly grounded — or at least named — in just such a trial.

That trial merits attention, first, because it does embody in miniature the narrative strategy of the whole novel — a promise of at last getting at the truth but a promise that is denied in the practice of attempting to do so. The trial, however, is also noteworthy because it constitutes a test of Tay John's response to an immediately previous and more tenuous test of authenticity, his answer to the proto-existential question that Julia Alderson, the young American wife of an older Englishman, poses on the last night of the Alderson's hunting expedition into the Rockies:

"Suppose," she said, lifting her head of auburn hair, "suppose that for each of us, to-night was his last night but one, and that to-morrow you could do anything you wanted to do, be anywhere you liked, what company you desired, what food, anything yours for the asking — for that one day, your last — what would you do?"

The simplistic and hedonistic responses of the cook and the wrangler are in contrast to their subverbal responses, the slow blush of the one, the "hard" stare of the other that "bored" into Julia. For each man, that second response also voices the obvious bad faith of what he actually said. But Tay John's answer, when he is pressed to give one, is all of one piece:

Tay John . . . looked across the fire towards her, seeming not to look at her so much as to include her in a general survey of his surroundings. . . .

Then he looked more closely at Julia. He considered. His glance passed on, over her into the tree tops, into the great wide heavens of the northern night.

"I guess, I go hunting," he said.

"You would only do what you are doing now?" Julia was unbelieving.

"Of course . . ." (final ellipsis in the original)

As Michael Ondaatje has rightly emphasized, "Tay John himself says hardly more than two sentences in the whole book," and thus "his life, in the midst of all the words, is wordless."⁸ That largely wordless life lends weight to the few words that this protagonist does utter. Moreover, as Denham, a man of words,

once aptly observes: "Those with few words must know how to use them." Finally, there are the clear existential implications of Tay John's response.⁹ It is therefore tempting to find in that response the novel's kernel of true being-in-action, the one character who acts in good faith, the single redeeming authentic voice. Such temptation, however, cannot be simply indulged, for the next day Tay John does not go hunting; he goes guiding instead, and there is a crucial difference. As the protagonist's missing left hand amply testifies, new desires have entered into his life and those desires sever him from his former self. In short, he is in service when Julia poses her question, which is precisely why it can be put to him. And his answer is his fiction that he is not; thus the "of course" trailing off into ellipsis and the ellipsis into absence, as Tay John leaves the campfire but not the camp.

The precise manner of Tay John's being or not being in service is also the issue of the aborted inquiry that follows the last day of the Aldersons' hunting trip which was itself the "to-morrow" of Julia's question. Arthur Alderson turns his ankle and returns early to camp, leaving Tay John with Julia to complete the hunt. By nightfall the two have not returned. The next morning Tay John's permanent departure (he has taken his horses and his bedroll) can be read in the newly fallen snow. As the other men are preparing to follow that trail, Julia rides into camp to proclaim privately to her husband, but loudly, for all to hear, "Arthur, Arthur, don't you understand? — Are you blind? — he — he — imposed himself upon me." Yet the indirect terms with which she asserts the alleged assault and her inconsistencies in bearing and behaviour along with the contradictory metaphors of concealment and exposure through which the whole scene is described and the refusal of those metaphors to stay fixed all suggest a crucial question. Did Tay John's "imposing himself upon her," when the servant was at last alone for the night with the lady, represent a break from the conventions of "servitude" or from the conventions of "a night alone with the lady"? That question is given further point when we note that Mrs. Alderson cannot bring herself to say at all during the official hearing what she earlier said for all to hear in the camp. So the charge, which was never officially laid, is just as unofficially dropped, and Tay John, in not so much a departure but another characteristic disappearing, strides away from the inquiry and rides out of the action, "merging with the curtain of snow, becoming less a man than a movement."

The question of what might have happened between the two of them on the mountain that night is never resolved. Julia will not testify as an official witness, and neither will Tay John. Such irresolution invites the complicity of the reader just as it elicits the suppositions (a further invitation to readerly complicity) of the other characters:

"I figured she was sore and maybe frightened at being left alone while Tay John went for the horses. Or maybe she wanted to impress her husband. I don't know nothing about it — but that's the way I figured it out." "Maybe," he suggested on a more private occasion, "she wanted it all along — still then why would she talk about it? And why would Tay John pull out the way he did?"

"Charlie's opinion" is symptomatic. What they are all doing is contriving a fiction of Tay John which is also their own fiction. Thus the horse wrangler's "opinion . . . [was] perhaps based upon bitter personal experience." Yet the horse wrangler can at least later voice his fiction, whereas the fiction of Julia Alderson well may be so complex and contradictory as to be beyond all hope of telling. Furthermore, not only do such peripheral fictions stand in for the missing facts, but the more central fictions (Julia's and/or Tay John's version of what "actually" happened) are also missing from the text. Indeed, every aspect of the legal proceeding is undone into unlikely fiction. For example, Porter, the young Mountie fresh from England, who goes out to bring in the culprit, departs in terms of one story — "like . . . in *Chums*, chasing a half-breed hunter through the mountains" — and comes back in terms of another just as dubious. Tay John is now the finest fellow Porter ever met; he has changed his (Porter's) life "entirely"; has shown him how to decipher the mountains; "the hidden was now revealed." And what is revealed is how he, Porter, vested in Redcoat authority, still reads only his own self-gratifying fiction but reads it as a full rendering of what is going on around him.

In the light of such pervasive fiction, any trial must be exactly that, a trying, a provisional telling; it might conclude with a judgement (a rendering of decision) but never with a verdict (a voicing of truth). On the largest level, then, the contradiction of the trial carries over to the contradiction of Part III and to the contradiction of the entire novel. The split is in the word, the story; the word as Word and the word as word; the story as truth and the story as tale. More specifically, the point to the legal trope of the title of Part III is the continuing disjunction in "Evidence — without a finding" between the first promising term and the missing final one. On the one hand, we have legend as evidence, hearsay as evidence, trace as evidence, provisional verbal construct as evidence. On the other, we are denied gospel, authority, transcendence, the final enduring word.

So speech, in this novel, never reaches the status it aspires to, and such speech, transmuted into text, perpetually questions its own voice and validity. The result is a novel forged mostly out of silence and ever on the verge of slipping back into silence, a novel that presents the life and legend of Tay John in order to explore the much larger absence that surrounds its protagonist's brief and sporadic presence in his story. In this sense, the most representative sign of Tay John is the one he finally writes, the one that Blackie, deciphering the last disappearing trace of Tay John's disappearance, reads not on any page but in the blank snow-

covered landscape itself: "Blackie stared at the tracks in front of him, very faint now, a slight trough in the snow, no more. Always deeper and deeper into the snow."

Yet that last word written in the snow, the text of the protagonist's return to the ground from which he came, is not the last word of the novel after all. To start with, Tay John's descent into the earth to join in death a pregnant woman (his mistress/his mother) too obviously returns us to the novel's beginning and the possibility of having it all to recount all over again. The reader might also note the calculated similarities between Jackie and Blackie — in name and in function. The one perpetually repeats his "gospel" of Tay John's life. The other is left to mull over and to tell over (with obvious religious implications too, for Blackie is twice equated with a prophet) the mystery of Tay John's disappearance into absence and silence.

The contradiction at the heart of the story is not therefore resolved; it is instead endlessly extended. The word sounds only as it emerges from silence; silence is known only by the word that names it and/or intrudes upon it; the text that sounds its own limitations must break off into silence and must do so over and over again. This pervasive resonance is best summed up in the novel by Denham's parable of men and mountains; names and story and silence:

Every story — the rough-edged chronicle of a personal destiny — having its source in a past we cannot see, and its reverberations in a future still un-lived — man, the child of darkness, walking for a few short moments in unaccustomed light — every story only waits, like a mountain in an untravelled land, for someone to come close, to gaze upon its contours, lay a name upon it, and relate it to the known world. Indeed, to tell a story is to leave most of it untold. . . . You have the feeling that you have not reached the story itself, but have merely assaulted the surrounding solitude.

Mountains here are paradigmatic and so is Tay John as a kind of ultimate mountain man. Not even Tay John can escape his names and his story. Not even those names and that story can hold him in the world.

NOTES

- ¹ Both Michael Ondaatje, in "O'Hagan's Rough-Edged Chronicle," *Canadian Literature*, No. 61 (1974), p. 25, and Gary Geddes, in "The writer that CanLit forgot," *Saturday Night*, November 1977, p. 86, note O'Hagan's indebtedness to Conrad.
- ² Howard O'Hagan, *Tay John* (1939; rpt. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1974). Subsequent references are to this edition.
- ³ Tay John's continuing isolation as an adult and the hook that he wears in place of his lost left hand both suggest that there were some grounds for these fears.
- ⁴ Although Father Rorty — Catholic, slight, timorous, whispering — is an inversion of his brother, he follows the same paradigm to a similar parodic demise.

- ⁵ For a fuller discussion of naming in the novel see my "Being and Definition in Howard O'Hagan's *Tay John*," forthcoming in *Etudes Canadiennes*.
- ⁶ Denham himself even intimates at one point and in a different context that his dealings with Tay John were at least in part "frantic efforts of evasion."
- ⁷ Blackie's entrance into the novel need not be seen as the "irritating" flaw that Ondaatje suggests but as Jackie's final separation — marked from the beginning by the mountain stream — from Tay John and his tale.
- ⁸ Ondaatje, pp. 29, 31.
- ⁹ Again it should be noted that the novel was written in the 1930's, well before signs of existential honesty had become fictional clichés.

CANADIAN LINES

Eugene Dubnov

For Rachel Eaves

I

I dreamt of a country of snows which was a continuation
Of another snow-bound country, and in that dream
I was experiencing the same agitation
As I walked across the unending immaculate whiteness.
I strode and strode, and the snow creaked; now and then
I fell into drifts; the blizzard
Would suddenly start and die down;
I attempted to search out the pathways to reach
The aim the quicker — and in the white
Dust of the night
The Bering Straits grew closer.

II

The squareness of boundaries, the maple leaf,
Lakes everywhere and vast taiga in white —
And even if these words seem out of turn,
Still both main local languages are quite
Not that which we require for vibrant singing,
When fir-trees agonise the nights with sound
And in this Arctic blizzard's hour the stones,
Black and severe and pressing to the ground
Are yearning for the rumblings of the voice —
Such as will make the snowy fibres flare
Into a savage storm: here stones consume
The mad expenditure of breath in air.