

O'HAGAN'S ROUGH-EDGED CHRONICLE

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THE FASHION in our generation of authors is to have stories of heroes told by anti-heroes. Narrators have gradually forced themselves — along with their inhibitions and qualitative judgments — on to the original source of the story until their books have become psychological studies or witty and ironic narrations. Some of the best literature in the last century has emphasized this style. Wilkie Collins, fascinated by the way a jury discovered the eventual truth of an incident by hearing several witnesses in a court of law, used a parade of narrators in *The Moonstone*. Nabokov's *Pale Fire* and Robert Kroetsch's *The Studhorse Man* are two satirical examples of how narrators insist on making themselves the heroes in someone else's tale, and this quality is parodied even more succinctly in Costa-Gavras' film *The Sleeping-Car Murders*, where relatives of the deceased arrive at the police station and insist on talking about *their* lives and *their* problems. The hero has been qualified or masked to death and we have to go back to Joseph Conrad to find a moderate and humane balance between story teller and central character. Yet even Conrad's compassion and identification suggests a great weakening in the status of the hero. The power of Greek tragedy was after all caused by the very fact that the narrators, or Chorus, had no true understanding of the dogmatic, determined power of the central characters. Kurtz is the only one of Marlow's human studies who is allowed that power.

It is the result of a literary evolution that allows one to read several exceptional examples of complex narrative devices while it is difficult to find books in which the original myth is given to us point blank. The writing may be finer, more careful, more witty, but it has lost that original rawness.

About six years ago I read Howard O'Hagan's *Tay John* and just recently read it again. I've read little else of his work, mainly because his book of short stories — *The Woman who got on at Jasper Station* — is almost impossible to find. When I spoke to other writers about *Tay John*, most said they liked it but that the book was flawed or badly written at moments. Yet I can think of no novel that has got as close to that raw power of myth as O'Hagan's book does.

And although his book also moves out into the control of its narrators, the power of the hero's story is left intact and virtuous. The source is not qualified.

The story O'Hagan tells is built around the legend of the Yellowhead Pass, of Tay John whose name is a bastardized version of Tête Jaune. The book is in three sections. Part 1: "Legend" is about Tay John's father, Red Rorty, who goes among the Shuswap tribe with religion in his head, impregnates an Indian girl, is murdered. The girl dies while pregnant but a baby is found crawling out of the grave six months later. The tribe brings up the boy who has no shadow, for "he was not born as other children between the ground and the sun where his shadow could find him." He is given a shadow, made human, but eventually leaves the tribe. Part 2: "Hearsay" is the recollection of a narrator Jack Denham, who speaks of two incidents in Tay John's life that he or his friends witness. Part 3: "Evidence" — without a finding — deals largely with the growing civilization of the railroad hustlers, ending with Tay John's death/disappearance with a woman into the earth once more.

The story is powerful because of the way O'Hagan has found it and retold it. Narrators stay in the background, and although Parts 2 and 3 are told by Denham in a technique very similar to the narrations of Conrad's Marlow, the cast is small and the mysterious centre is given power to grow. O'Hagan, one senses, truly understands where the dramatic sources of myth lie. Myth is biblical, surreal, brief, imagistic. There are three or four scenes that take up not much more than an eighth of the novel but whose strength invades the rest of the book. They are the remnants left to story-tellers — a fight with a bear, the chopping off by Tay John of his own left hand on a fur trader's table. . . .

"So you know him?" I asked.

"Know him?" McLeod rose, pushed the dishes back from the table top and pointed to some dark stains in the wood. . . .

"Look at that — what do you make of that?" he said.

I looked closer. "Blood, perhaps. I don't know." It was a great wandering black stain, like the map of Russia.

"Blood. You're right, man, that's what it is. And I can't wash it off. I've scrubbed and soaped and still there it is, and I have to eat off it. . . ."

We follow Tay John's path with fascination and horror.

MYTH IS ALSO ACHIEVED by a very careful use of echoes — of phrases and images. There may be no logical connection when these are

placed side by side but the variations are always there setting up parallels. Tay John chops off his hand; the woman Ardith cuts off the nails of a baby bear to stop it scratching her and the paws bleed. After the bear fight, Tay John slices off its head and leaves it in the branches of a tree; Red Rorty's brother commits suicide in a tree (Red himself having been tied and burned to a tree); Tay John chases an escaped horse and is seen with some of the hairs from its tail in his hand; after a fight from which Tay John escapes we have this description:

One of the men remained standing in a dazed fashion gazed at some yellow hair clutched in his fist. He shook his head, opened his fingers. The yellow hair floated to the floor. . . .

Some of these echoes are more obvious than others, and in fact the weaker ones are more suggestive. In any case the use of echoes is crucial to the myth in the book for the action in the novel turns in on itself, is incestuous. O'Hagan is aware that legend needs only two or three images to sustain it; myth breeds on itself no matter what the situation or landscape. This is especially important, for the landscape is being changed with the coming railroad; the fragments and formulas however will repeat themselves for ever.

The most consistent and carefully plotted image is Tay John's birth from and eventual disappearance into the earth. The only other story of O'Hagan's that I have read — "The Teepee" (reprinted in Rudy Wiebe's *Stories from Western Canada*) — ends this way:

From the doorway I watched him go along the ridge and down it, wading through the willows that in the moonlight rose around him, around his legs, his hips, his shoulders until at last, when against the gleaming river his head dropped from view, it was as though he had walked down among the roots, under the faded grasses, into the earth to which he was a closer neighbour than I.

That image is the central one in *Tay John*. At various times we get scenes like this one after the bear fight:

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.

or later:

His legs were spread, each foot firmly set. Yet it was not an impression of solidity he offered, so much as one of emergence — from the ground itself, as though he had sprung up there a moment before my arrival.

On rereading the book I felt that perhaps these images of Tay John's link with the earth were heavy-handed. But in fact they physically parallel the strange and dark asides of Jack Denham in a crucial way. The suggestion in the last quotation is not one of power but of fragility. Tay John is little more than seasonal grass. He *has* to disappear. From the very beginning he is part of the mechanics of nature and the fateful metaphor will also assure his rebirth. Images revive. As his mother was buried pregnant — so he goes into the snow at the end with his dead and pregnant woman. And the pulling of the toboggan which carries her reminds us subconsciously — with no mention made of it — of his shadow. Early on in the book this is said :

Men walk upon the earth in light, trailing their shadows that are the day's memories of the night. For each man his shadow is his dark garment, formed to the image of his end, sombre and obscure as his own beginning. It is his shroud, awaiting him by his mother's womb lest he forget what, with his first breath of life, he no longer remembers.

These asides must be seen in the light of Tay John coming out of or going into the ground. They are on one level the voice of Indian legends, on another the world-view of O'Hagan. They unify the book by being the mediation between the physical glimpses of the myth. They are a part of a comical vision of the world to the likes of Jack Denham who sees all civilization as ephemeral, and tragic to those who take their foothold on the earth too seriously.

He fled from the old. He looked for the new. Yet there is nothing new — these words, nor their meaning — nothing really new in the sense of arrival in the world unless an odd meteor here and there. We have ½ a million tons of them and their dust a year. To-day was implicit in time's beginning. All that is, was. Somewhere light glowed in the first vast and awful darkness, and darkness is the hub of light. Imprisoned in its fires which brighten and make visible the universe, and shine upon man's face, is the core, the centre, the hard unity of the sun, and it is dark.

All that is not seen is dark. Light lives only in man's vision. Past our stars, we think, is darkness. But here, we say, is light. Here is light where once was darkness, and beyond it, farther than our eyes can see, than our greatest telescopes can pierce, is darkness still.

The witnessing of myth, its arrival and disappearance in the midst of civilization, Tay John's fragility of position, must be seen in this context. Man becomes a pulse of light in a dark landscape. He disappears into historical time and re-emerges in an echo. Tay John is the progression made from the blood of a dinosaur. As in Birney's "November walk near False Creek mouth", man is placed in

a context by the eye that can see a million miles up past shelves of clouds or downwards through shelves of the sea.

He listened to the seconds, ticking, measuring his mortality, theirs the only sound in all eternity where suns flamed and stars wheeled and constellations fell apart. A woman's laughter reached me from the building. I shook myself. . . .

The civilization growing up around Tay John is ludicrous in its self-importance. In the midst of its birth/death it feels no need to destroy him; it doesn't have to; the book contains no obvious myth of the scapegoat removed from society. Everything will disappear. Dobble's dream of a "Lucerne in the Rockies" — a sort of Banff Springs Hotel before its time — in the end rots under the snow. "You might say Dobble left barely a trace behind." Even New York, one of the steps along the way for the woman Ardith, echoes Conrad's sepulchral city in *Heart of Darkness*:

It was there in that sculptured city, in that outpost of man in time, in that white tombstone of the future, that she met the Canadian man of railways.

ONCE O'HAGAN has established the base of the book — the myth with its power and fragility — he is able to turn to the role of the storytellers. These men are separate from the source of power. They may eat off the table which has soaked up Tay John's blood but they get no closer. In the superb scene in which Tay John fights the bear, Jack Denham, who witnesses it, is separated by a raging river he cannot cross but which is only two yards wide. He is unable to cross over into the arena of pure myth. And not till the fight is over does Denham provide a social context:

He had won. *We* had won. That was how I felt. I shouted. I did a dance. . . . A victory is no victory until it has been shared.

And so the event becomes the centre of 'Jackie's tale' told to his cronies in the bars Denham inhabits, and for the rest of the book it is Denham who searches for "the remnants of his presence". Denham, we discover, is one of those men who loves the wilderness as opposed to "the treacherous period in town" but who is still overcome by raw nature:

. . . 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. It is physically exhausting to look on unnamed country. 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 unnamed — it is the darkness unveiled. . . .

"Yellowhead," "Yellowhead." I had to give a name so that I could help him — morally, you know. I had to align him with the human race. Without a name no man is an individual, no individual wholly a man.

If there is irony and qualification in the novel it is directed not towards the source of the myth but to the story-teller's need for order. Tay John comes into the world without a name or shadow and he is given several names and several kinds of a shadow "to align him with the human race". But words we have seen are part of the imperialistic disguise for an unnamed country, the social mask for the amoral human grass. Words bring morality and immorality. Tay John himself says hardly more than two sentences in the whole book. The action of the novel begins when Red Rorty the trapper takes the words of a preacher literally:

We who believe . . . are a small army. We must go out and take our message to all the world. . . .

He burns down his cabin and goes among the Shuswaps, a John the Baptist to Tay John's later arrival. Most revealing on the status of the word is Rorty's death when he is tied to a tree and his beard set on fire:

With the fire his mouth opened to shout but no sound came from it. Yaada took a small round stone and shoved it between his jaws, and it stayed there, as a word he tried to utter, while the flames began to roar around him. . . .

While the ground was yet hot and smouldered, Yaada and some others returned.

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!"

Religion, like the word, brings values which are totally unnatural to the landscape, and it takes men such as Father Rorty with his "priestly arrogance" down twisted guilty paths to suicide. Even Tay John in his hand-chopping scene echoes his father's naive belief in words and metaphors and performs the act yelling, "If your hand offend you — cut it off." It is his one unnatural act and he is replenished later on with a steel hook. The Shuswap tribe is also riddled with custom and words and, although they are "closer neighbours" to the earth, Tay John leaves them when their ceremonies and laws limit him. They too are waiting for the moral voice of a leader.

As a narrator Denham is saved by his neutrality, his interest in other words. "In Edmonton I saw no newspapers for several days. I was too much taken,

maybe, with the labels on whisky bottles. Good reading that. . . ." He has his own flippant life to live. He is not, like Conrad's Marlow, living almost by proxy. He knows the story will exist without him.

Not that I feel any responsibility to Tay John, nor to his story. No, not at all. His story, such as it is, like himself, would have existed independently of me. 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.

Denham is not the secure, more assured narrator of Conrad's Europe, but a voice genuinely apt for describing an unfinished legend that is reshaping before his eyes. Tay John's life is seen only in the brief seconds of lightning in the night; the rest is tentative meditation. The source therefore dominates our minds.

For these reasons the style of the book and its themes are sensitively linked. There is for instance a very specific way in which O'Hagan describes his characters and this structure of characterization parallels the movement of the whole book. Take the first descriptions of Red Rorty. In the first sentences that deal with him we see him as a fragment of the landscape: "In 1880 one man remained by the Athabaska river where it flowed through the mountains." Then we are given one detail about Rorty — his ability to shout. Then the paragraph ends by moving from the clear image into something that is almost mystical:

At other times he would shout when there was nothing to shout for, and would listen and smile when the mountains hurled his voice — rolled it from one rock wall to another, until it seemed he heard bands of men, loosed above him, calling one to another as they climbed farther and higher into the rock and ice.

The long shot, then the close-up, then the eventual dissolving out of focus into something mysterious and uncaught is the general movement of the whole book. After the tough, tight power of the first two sections the last section is diffuse and scattered — literally "Evidence — without a finding." This has an irritating effect on the reader. For instance — where the book should be reaching its crisis or denouement, four pages from the end, O'Hagan suddenly introduces a new character-witness, Blackie, and gives us a portrait of him that takes up two of the last four pages. The story is taken away from Tay John. What is important about legends now is the effect they have on other men. And, as with all stories told, it is crucial for us to trust and believe in the character of the story-teller.

The dispersing of tension in this way is, I think, intentional on O'Hagan's part. The narrative force is lost because in this new civilization legend tends to have a more decorative role, something heard about in bars, with hideously little to distinguish it from the drama of rumour. Tay John and Ardith not only disappear into the earth, they disappear from the minds of men who have other things to do.

I remembered, too, that woman was the death of heroes and the destruction of heroes' work — but heroes, those vulnerable men, are gone from the earth, and woman's power therefore no longer what once it was.

Both Tay John and Ardith, though hero and heroine, have lived on the boundaries of civilizations. Tay John, when we think back, is the accidental intruder in every scene — in the world of the Shuswaps, with the Aldersons, in the resort at "Lucerne". He is given new names in every setting and he slides through all his roles like water. He leaves just fragments of his myth behind, he has no cause or motive or moral to announce and as a result is of no worth in these new societies of commerce, religion, and imperialism. His life, in the midst of all the words, is wordless — as the core of the sun, which gives off so much light, is pitch black. He is vulnerable to fashion and progress and his only strength is the grain left in the memory and in the hope he will emerge in the future in different forms.