

The Declension of a Story: Narrative Structure in Howard O'Hagan's *Tay John*

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WHEN DAVID STOUCK STATES in his article "The Art of the Mountain Man Novel" that "actual exploits of mountain men had not been written down, but passed on by word of mouth so that they became the stuff of legends" (212), he implies that the process of storytelling is a development from circumstances or happenings, to oral tale, and then eventually to legend. He and many other critics of Howard O'Hagan's *Tay John* have seen the novel as portraying how story develops in this fashion. However, the section titles within the novel move from "Legend," to "Hearsay" (one of the *OED* definitions of which is "oral tidings" or "tradition"), and then to "Evidence — Without A Finding." This seems to imply that O'Hagan actually believes that the process of storytelling is a degeneration from authoritative legend to inconclusive evidence. The novel itself also suggests that O'Hagan intended to represent storytelling not as a movement from a tangible reality or event to intangible mythic proportions, but rather as a declension from an elusive but indisputable legend to corporeal but uncertain facts. To O'Hagan, there is clearly a difference between telling a story and the story itself: to tell a story is to attempt to gain a hold, however tenuous, of an ethereal and absolute story, represented in *Tay John* by shadow, darkness, wilderness, and even by Tay John himself.

In the first section of the novel, "Legend," the narrator gives a Platonist explanation of Shuswap basket making: "[The Shuswaps] believed that the world was made of things they could not touch nor see, as they knew that behind the basket that 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" (29). To the Shuswap people (as depicted in *Tay John*), a perfect and permanent

Platonic form of the basket exists in “the shadow of what they could not yet discern” (29), and the physical baskets they make are imperfect and transient imitations or representations of the immutable form. Plato also viewed art and storytelling in a similar manner: artists and poets are “imitators” who are “removed . . . from the truth” (11-12). In the same way, O’Hagan intends the basket making to represent storytelling: the shadow’s evidence, which is the basket or the tale, is a transmutable representation of the true form which exists, like legend, outside of the physical realm. And an ephemeral imitation is also all the evidence can be; it cannot ever be as pure as its form: “Each man sought the shadow beyond his work, and no man could reach it” (29-30). Telling a story, then, like making a basket, is a degenerative process and a removal from an authoritative origin.

However, many critics assume that in *Tay John* storytelling is a process in which simple events are altered through tale until they transmogrify into legend. In his paper entitled “Howard O’Hagan and ‘The Rough-Edged Chronicle,’” Michael Ondaatje uses O’Hagan’s depiction of the shout of Red Rorty to argue that the movement of the novel shows how legend grows from oral misrepresentations of events: “the paragraph [describing the shout] ends by moving from the clear image into something that is almost mystical” (Ondaatje 283). However, the description of Red Rorty’s shouting actually supports the order in which the novel’s sections are named:

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. (14)

The movement of Rorty’s yell develops from a mysterious, purposeless, and inarticulate origin into interpretable articulate calls removed from and yet attached to their source. This is actually the pattern the novel follows: shadow and darkness are the origin of Tay John, and people place a number of names upon him, which represent an aspect of him (his yellow hair), in order to interpret him; dusk gives land its being, and then man gives land its name in order to “keep it within the horizons” (80).

And naming, which Margery Fee has claimed is “analogous to myth-making” (10), but which actually is analogous to storytelling in *Tay John*

(see 167), is always, to O'Hagan, a decline from mythic or legendary power. Many critics have viewed Denham's explanation of the power of naming, "Put a name to it, put it on a map, and you've got it" (80), as investing a "higher truth" and "authority" into his own words and role as a narrator (Davidson 37) and as opposing his later statement that "to tell a story is to leave most of it untold" (Zichy, "Critics" 197-98). However, it is clear that this "getting" of the wilderness is a tenuous one. If the unnamed "is the darkness unveiled" (80), then to name wilderness is merely to place a veil upon it. The "magic" (80) that holds the land to its name is more like that of a street magician pulling a rabbit out of a hat than of gods creating or controlling worlds. Although the "few wisps of hair" from the mare's tail are Tay John's "title" to her, they do not actually keep the horse within his grasp (117), and neither does a name truly give one possession or comprehension of the land. Naming is always represented as degenerative: Denham, when he sees Tay John fighting the bear, gives the hero a name to "align him with the human race" (87). Thus, naming Tay John is a despiritualization and demythologization of him. Similarly, naming a country is a demystification and "humanization" of it (Keith, "Growth" 82). Therefore, according to O'Hagan, storytelling is a humanization or despiritualization, as well as a weak articulation, of a legend.

While Arnold Davidson is aware that "the story declines from legend to hearsay" (37), he sees "legend" in *Tay John* as "the perpetual deferral of things hoped for as marked by the telling of that hope," and thus as being "grounded in nothing" (35). But Francis Zichy points out that "the authoritative narrative voice and historical and 'legendary' content [of Part I] suggest that it was certainly not O'Hagan's intention to do anything so paradoxical as to ground his novel in nothing" ("Critics" 192). However, Part I is not the only place in the novel where O'Hagan attempts to show that storytelling (and thus also his novel) is deeply rooted in some great intangible authority. Denham explains that Tay John's story "was a story which found its root in the memories of men, and its form, and a sequence to its incidents [and thus its empirical evidence] in their speech" (113-114). Denham also later calls the mind "the urn of blood and shadow, the place of silence behind our eyes, borne by each of us upon his shoulders like a penance for his days above ground" (153). This seems to suggest some universal subconscious in which all

people are united in the shadow and darkness from which Tay John and the wilderness have sprung.

The passage of the novel that most forcefully repeats this suggestion is the one in which Denham uses the analogy of mountain-mining to express the nature of storytelling. He explains that to “tell a story is to leave most of it untold” because the “heart” of it, like that of a mountain, remains untouched by its telling, which “merely assault[s] the surrounding solitude” (167). Within this description, Denham states that every story has “its source in a past we cannot see, and its reverberations in a future still un-lived,” as does man, who is “the child of darkness, walking for a few minutes in unaccustomed light” (166). This is obviously meant to recall the legendary birth of Tay John from Part I, a legend of which Denham has no specific knowledge, and to foreshadow the end of Tay John and his story in which he supernaturally returns underground. Obviously O’Hagan’s purpose in this repetition is to emphasize the existence of an unknowable universal subconscious outside of the physical realm of evidence and storytelling from where stories and man are born and to which they return. When Denham says, “[Tay John’s] story, such as it is, would have existed independently of me” (166), he is not implying that other narrators would propagate it regardless of him; he means that the story exists independently of any narrator. Yet, this “unknowable” and “unfathomable” darkness, which is the source of man and stories, is not exactly a “nihilistic void” as Stouck indicates (220). To call it such is to suggest that the shadowy home of story “has no real existence” or is “devoid of meaning” (“Nihilism”). Denham explains that a man’s shadow is intended to be a reminder of the existence of the darkness which is his source: it is the “image of his end, sombre and obscure as his own beginning” (162). And, as J. Hillis Miller explains that meaning for Joseph Conrad’s Marlow exists outside of his tale, saying that “[meaning] is a darkness, an absence, a haze invisible in itself” (26), so does meaning exist for O’Hagan and for Denham outside of the tale and within the shadow, darkness, and unnamed wilderness.

The major indication that the idea of the birth of a story from an external non-physical realm is what O’Hagan intended to convey through his novel can be found in his description of the writing process of *Tay John*. In an interview with Keith Maillard, O’Hagan describes how he began *Tay John* as the diary of a man about whom he had read in Milton and Cheadle’s *The Northwest Passage by Land*, and then changed the nar-

ration to that of an omniscient voice, which, by the fourth chapter, he felt was not sustainable (23-24). He explains that the rest of the novel came to him through the disembodied voice of Jack Denham telling him the story; he then began to write the novel “as though [he] were just copying something down” (24-25). After hearing O’Hagan’s explanation of writing *Tay John*, Maillard further explains the experience: “the story comes and it tells itself, and you feel almost like you’re an empty vessel and the story is just pouring right through you.... It came from *somewhere else*” (25; emphasis added). O’Hagan agrees with Maillard’s summation of creative writing as coming from a mysterious outside source, and says that “as crazy as this sounds, apocryphal I know, *it’s so*” (24; emphasis added). O’Hagan’s statement clearly shows his belief in the reality of an external and hidden origin of story; to ignore this and claim that O’Hagan intended *Tay John* to question “Truth” and “myth-making” (Fee 10) is unfounded.

Although O’Hagan wrote much of Parts II and III of *Tay John* inspired by an almost supernatural outside source, the disembodied voice of narrator Jack Denham, Keith argues that O’Hagan’s use of actual events in the novel support the idea that the book is an expansion and growth of the ideas and incidents used. He writes that the various sources for *Tay John*, such as the headless man in Milton and Cheadle, the trapper known as Yellow Head, and Jenness’s *The Indians of Canada*, the written source of the Tsimshian legend, are expanded by O’Hagan “into a larger whole” (“Growth” 79-80). However, when O’Hagan describes his borrowing of the Tsimshian legend to Maillard, he says, “happenings aren’t copyrighted. It’s only the writing that’s patented. And it’s my writing – it’s not his writing” (28). This statement is partially a defence of his use of outside materials, but it also indicates that he believes that the legend itself is the true source of story and that Jenness’s and his own writings are merely the tangible, copyrightable, and degenerate evidence of it.

That O’Hagan views his and Jenness’s writings as merely versions of one legend shows that he likely did not intend the different versions of stories about Tay John in the novel to deny an immutable truth. Perhaps the intention of their inclusion was rather to question humanity’s capacity to express the unknowable. Francis Zichy argues that the novel, particularly when rumours of Tay John’s amputation become mixed with the tale of his bear fight, falsely (and unintentionally) causes critics to doubt the veracity of the “Legend” section, saying that the ambiguity shows “that

the events of hearsay can be upgraded, or further corrupted, into legend with the passing of time” (“Critics” 195). Fee is one critic who doubts in this manner, saying that “Myth ... in O’Hagan’s creation, is not immemorial, immutable, and universal, but flexible, time-bound, and appropriate to its setting” (23). Keith also contends that Denham’s and McLeod’s reactions to the Alderson’s new version, which he calls a “new legend,” of Tay John’s dismemberment shows that story “should grow and develop like an organism” (“Growth” 82). However, it is likely that O’Hagan intended the Aldersons’ misinformation not to show the changeable nature of myth and story, but to further prove the ephemeral nature of tale-telling and the permanent one of legend. C. Kerényi, in the introduction to his book on *The Gods of the Greeks*, comments on the disparities between differing versions of Greek myths, writing, “in all ... forms, developments and variations [they are] the same permanent and unmistakable basic story.... [and] behind the variations can be recognised something that is common to them all: a story that was told in many fashions, yet remained the same” (9). Since O’Hagan gives a similar note to the end of “Montana Pete Goes Courting,”¹ as does Denham after he recites Father Rorty’s letter,² O’Hagan likely intended readers to view the inconsistent versions of Tay John’s story in a similar way, as changeable variations of a single “permanent and unmistakable basic story.” Although the tale of Tay John itself modifies and does not always conform with empirical evidence of the events, it always reflects the immutable “essence” or “legend” of Tay John and carries what Denham calls “the remnants of his presence” (92).

This then seems to be how O’Hagan intended to portray stories in *Tay John*, as tangible mirrors or carriers (though not containers) of an elusive essence. Tay John himself is meant to represent the intangible essence of story. O’Hagan first establishes Tay John as a symbol for story within Part I through his supernatural birth from a grave. This “emergence” is repeated in Parts II and III in Denham’s narrative: first, Denham depicts Tay John crawling from under the bear he had killed as “climbing out of the ground” (88), and later describes him as always giving the sense of “emergence — from the ground itself” (205). The idea of Tay John emanating a particular essence is also repeated: Denham says “there was something, it is hard to say, something of the abstract about him — as though he were a symbol of some sort or other” (83), and MacLeod says that there is “Something working in the man. You can feel it when he is

around. ... it's in his bearing, in just the way he carries himself" (99). Tay John's incommunicable "something" is further emphasized by his elusive physical body: when Tay John first appears, within one page his body shrinks to "only a few wisps of yellow hair," and then grows back again to normal size (38); when Denham sees Tay John at Lucerne, he thinks his hero is smaller than he remembers (204); and when Blackie sees him in the snow, Tay John at first appears very large, and then "no bigger than a little boy" (260-61). His elusive "something" is what causes the other people in the novel to try to impose a narrative upon Tay John, to give him a name in order "to keep [him] within the horizons" (80). However, the narratives fail to capture Tay John: "Evading definition, the soul of the being is always reached for but never caught, just as parts of a story can be assembled but its essence never contained" (Robinson 169).

In *The Indians of Canada*, Diamond Jenness writes that "when a people borrows folk-tales from surrounding peoples ... it cannot assimilate them if they differ radically from its own folk-tales, but modifies them to conform to ideas and patterns that are already familiar and imposes on them the individuality inherent in its own legends and traditions" (185). Thus, because Tay John is neither white nor native and is an unfamiliarity to both races, his essence is particularly hard for either the Shuswaps or the British, American, and Canadian colonists to understand or seize through narrative, which difficulty causes the people to superimpose familiar stories upon him. The Shuswaps attempt to make Tay John substantial and permanent by imposing the "Kumkan-Kleseem" story of a yellow-headed saviour upon him, and by performing rituals, shaking rattles and singing to him (38), and sending him on a journey for visions (45). The colonists attempt to understand him through Arthurian legend: Alderson sees him as a lady of the lake (125), and Denham portrays him as a parodied Lancelot or Tristan in his relationships with Julia and Ardith. However, neither the "Kumkleseem" narrative nor the "Arthurian" one, both of which intend to make Tay John a hero and saviour, are successful at binding him. He rejects the roles imposed upon him: he leaves the Shuswaps without leading them, he rejects Julia Alderson as a Guinevere, and he is chased away by the ineffectual Mr. Dobbie. Paradoxically, yet logically, his refusal to be narrated is what makes him a particularly good representation of O'Hagan's concept of story. Like the heart of the story, he remains "resistant to your siege" and "unfathomable" (167).

However, Margery Fee suggests that the purpose of using Greek,

Arthurian, and Native legend to tell Tay John's story is to expose the man-made nature of myth: "O'Hagan therefore rigs up a new myth out of the pieces of old ones, revealing in the process how it's done" (10). She goes on to say that O'Hagan's "'enemy' in this novel, then, is not myth, but the belief in one complete immutable myth: the Truth" (10). Her assumption about the use of mythology is absolutely incorrect; it is not to show that "myth has popular origin" (11), or to deny an immutable truth, but more likely to serve the purpose Keith suggests: to express and observe "mythic resonance" of the legends and of Tay John's story (*Style* 38). Although the different stories transposed upon Tay John by the other characters and O'Hagan are inadequate to hold or fully explain him, O'Hagan intended them to reflect the essence of the hero, even as Tay John rejects or fulfills the heroic role.

Denham's admiration for the ability of words to similarly reflect the essence of what they signify runs counter to Davidson's argument that "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" (30). Although this paper has argued that O'Hagan intended *Tay John* to reveal that words, tales, and evidence are degenerations from pure legend, it is in no way meant to imply that O'Hagan believes words are powerless. Keith's estimation of O'Hagan's view of words is closer to the truth, when he says that although "O'Hagan is skeptical of absolutes, or at least doubtful that human beings can make contact with them, there can be no doubt that he possessed not merely a firm respect for words and story but also a profound sense of 'mystery' behind the visible universe" (*Style* 38). O'Hagan's respect for words is particularly apparent in Denham's praise of the term "snow flies": "There's an expression for you, born in the country, born from the imagination of men and their feeling for the right word, the only word, to mirror clearly what they see!" (91). The key word in that passage is "mirror"; although the word cannot capture or conjure snow, its capacity to mirror snow's presence is real and valuable. And although O'Hagan believes that the search for the right word or tale that will reach the "heart" of the story is ultimately elusive, he also believes it is inevitable and vital: as the Shuswap people continue to seek the shadow behind their hands although it is unreachable (29-30), so too the mountain man will attempt to explicate "what he cannot understand" (114), the newspaper

man will “set about to explain ... a happening beyond all their explanations” (193), and Denham will tell the tale of Tay John, “stretching [it] the length of Edmonton” (77). Perhaps the reason for telling a story is because to do so will at least give a reflection of it and will “relate it to the known world” (167): “Though the meaning is outside [of the tale], it may only be seen by way of the tale which brings it out” (Miller 26).

Although a number of critics have described *Tay John* as a work intended to deconstruct the concept of an immutable myth and the power of words or storytelling to create legend, O’Hagan obviously intended that his book portray storytelling and naming as a decline from legend which exists in an unknowable but permanent non-physical realm. Yet, although O’Hagan views storytelling as unable to capture the enduring legend and elusive heart of the story, he also intended *Tay John* to convey the ability of storytelling and words to reflect and “relate” the intangible to “the known world” (167). The contempt with which the narrators treat those who value the tangible evidence over the intangible legend, such as the Shuswaps, who are “told what to believe” (29), and Father Rorty, who as “man of faith is always a material man” (211), as well as those who rely solely upon the intangible, such as Mr. Dobble, to whom “illusions were more real ... than the dark pine-trees which gave logs for his buildings” (163), suggest that what O’Hagan was advocating in his book is a balance of the two: a belief in the existence of the intangible as well as a faith in the ability of the tangible to represent, however temporarily, the intangible. Unfortunately, the closest example given in *Tay John* of this balance is Denham, who, although he respects the power of words while recognizing their limitations, is a disreputable drunken voyeur with an inability to make up his mind between the two points of view. Nonetheless, by exposing both views, *Tay John* reveals the difference between storytelling and story, and illustrates the importance of both.

NOTES

¹ “The words, of course, in the foregoing tale are not exactly those of Montana Pete, but they give the effect of what he said” (O’Hagan, “Montana” 242).

² “Some of the words, as I have repeated them, may be mine — the gist is his” (*Tay* 216).

³ Francis Zichy, in his paper "The 'Complex Fate' of the Canadian," further notes and analyzes the use of Arthurian legend in *Tay John*.

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