MESSAGES AND MESSENGERS IN THE *DOUBLE HOOK*
Dawn Rae Downton

In her essay on *The Double Hook* Barbara Godard notes that Sheila Watson's novel is "above all a story of 'the coming of the Word,' a dramatization of the beginnings of language and cultural order in a primitive people."[1] Godard's article in fact substantiates this claim less than it does her concurrent point that Watson, as a "post modernist" under the influence of, for example, Gertrude Stein, explores and discovers in her novel the *limits* of language and, by dislocating certain syntactical and grammatical linguistic conventions, "moves beyond language into music" (165 and 156). Although this music remains "a dimension of writing," Godard suggests that Watson, in her search for "words with more potential as vehicles of meaning" which has been made necessary by the "generally stereotyped nature" of language, moves beyond language itself:

> Like Gertrude Stein, Watson is becoming a receiver, listening to voices speaking, recording the idiosyncracies of speech. She thus acknowledges that the only linguistic reality is the individual speech act, that other categories are abstractions useful for classifying but giving no insight into language. The result has been a collage of dead languages, that, in this new context, has been given fresh meaning. Watson is attempting to free language from the burden of the past, by the process clearly spelled out in Felix's struggle to "remember" "half-forgotten phrases" as he waits for the coming of the "Word" that will free the community from the past. . . . (157)

Her point is well taken. But what Godard fails to document is the development of the language of the community, apart from the language of Watson, from its past stagnation to revivification. The passages she cites from the novel without doubt display Watson's interest in linguistic possibilities but they do not substantiate that a concurrent movement in the community from cliché to archetype[2] is what the novel is "above all" about. Godard's examples, if anything,

---

[1] " 'Between One Cliché and Another': Language in *The Double Hook,*" *Studies in Canadian Literature* 3 No. 2 (Summer 1978), 149.
[2] In Wilfrid Watson's and Marshall McLuhan's terms in *From Cliché to Archetype.*

show that the community's embracing of a new language is already in progress at the beginning of the novel. The anaphora used in the initial genealogy, for instance,

> In the folds of the hills
> under Coyote's paw
> lived
> the old lady, mother of William
>   of James and of Greta
> lived James and Greta
> lived William and Ara his wife
> lived the Widow Wagner
> the Widow's girl Lenchen
> the Widow's boy
> lived Felix Prosper and Angel
> lived Theophil
> and Kip·
> until one morning in July[3]

is for Godard an example of Watson's use of repetition to emphasize the poetic style of the passage and of the novel as a whole, and to provide linguistically a kind of "musical notation." Godard's argument holds in terms of Watson's experiments with language and in terms of the style of the novel. The language of the community, however, which appears in the monologues and dialogues of the characters, is another matter.[4]

Nonetheless, Godard's claim that the novel is "a dramatization of the beginnings of language and cultural order" in the community is supported by Watson's own remarks:

> . . . there was something I wanted to say: about how people are driven, how if they have no art, how if they have no tradition, how if they have no ritual, they are driven in one of two ways, either towards violence or towards insensibility — if they have no mediating rituals which manifest themselves in what I suppose we call art forms.[5]

---

[3]Sheila Watson, *The Double Hook,* as printed in the manuscript, *Open Letter* 3 No. 1 (Winter 1974-75), 185.

[4]Godard does give the examples of the contextual use by the novel's characters of the words "thing" and "glory" to document a shift from the cliché to the archetype but the analysis is rather strained to be altogether convincing. It might be possible to dispense with the notion of development if we view Mrs. Potter's death as the sole event that occasions the community's rebirth, so that the novel opens with the rebirth already accomplished. But the novel does not bear this out, and Godard herself indicates that the story dramatizes a process rather than describes an end.

[5]"What I'm Going To Do," *Open Letter* 3 No. 1 (Winter 1974-75), 183.

Watson's emphasis, however, appears to be on cultural order insofar as it generates moral order. "Violence" and "insensibility" are moral positions, and the novel dramatizes the development of morality centrally and "the beginnings of language" peripherally. The movement of the characters, within the moral poles of Mrs. Potter and Kip,[6] is from fragmentation to community and from amoral denial to moral responsibility.

Within this context the motif of messages and messengers in *The Double Hook* becomes significant. The careers of the novel's three designated messengers, William, Kip, and Heinrich, involve both processes of the growth of morality and the birth of language. At the beginning of the novel William and Kip represent opposite poles in terms of the community's search for moral and linguistic meaning: William is the "cliché" and Kip the "archetype." At the end a reversal of roles has been accomplished: the power of Kip's moral vision has corrupted and defeated him, while William's "knowledge" is shown to fall short of truth so that its reassessment occasions the birth of meaning in him. Heinrich, the Widow's boy and the youngest character in the novel excepting the baby Felix, is, in a sense, the agent of three conversions.[7] Heinrich's progress toward the new order, unlike that of the other characters, does not falter, and in his case the process is generation rather than regeneration. By providing a moral centre for the community he is instrumental in both William's and Kip's careers as well as influencing the community as a whole.

From the beginning William is characterized as a man of public and seemingly illimitable knowledge. He is the village mailman, so that his messages neither originate from him or are influenced by him; he is a reservoir of other men's truths. Moreover, he has no access to the private message itself, but he is nonetheless in the position "to know" in his own eyes and in the eyes of the

---

[6]"Although Watson has made use of the belief that Coyote is a mediating god . . . she allows only fragments of this myth to be retained by the community. No meaningful pattern of culture exists. In Mrs. Potter we see that significance becomes sterile and fossilized; in Kip we observe it turn to self-annihilating violence as symbolized by his blindness." Godard, p. 154.

[7]Age appears to be a factor in the individual's experience in the process toward meaning and community. The novel's two "old ladies," Mrs. Potter and the Widow Wagner, are the most difficult to convert, presumably because they have held their empty values longer than the second generation characters. The Widow Wagner "comes round" only on the third last page. Mrs. Potter is not moved, nor is Theophil, an "old man" in that, like Mrs. Potter, he is a tyrant and a figure of death.

community, and his mail route takes him further than anyone else. He goes as far as "the town below," and his opportunities to gain and interpret experience as truth seem boundless. Accordingly, he cultivates the image of man of knowledge, and we are provided with two examples from his repertoire of facts:

> He could give half a dozen reasons for anything. When a woman on his route flagged him down with a coat and asked him to bring back a spool of thread from the town below, he'd explain that thread has a hundred uses. When it comes down to it, he'd say, there's no telling what thread is for. I knew a woman once, he'd say, who used it to sew up her man after he was throwed on a barbed-wire fence.
> Ara wasn't sure where water started.
> William wouldn't hesitate: It comes gurgling up from inside the hill over beyond the lake. There's water over and it falls down. The trouble with water is it never rushes at the right time. The creeks dry up and the grass with them. There are men, he'd say, have seen their whole place fade like a cheap shirt. And there's no way a man can fold it up and bring it out of the sun. You can save a cabbage plant or a tomato plant with tents of paper if you've got the paper, but there's no human being living can tent a field and pasture.
> I've seen cows, he'd say, with lard running off them into the ground. The most unaccountable thing, he'd say, is the way the sun falls. I've seen a great cow, he'd say, throw no more shadow for its calf than a lean rabbit.[8]

William's words are prefaced by the authorial remark, "William would try to explain, but he couldn't" (p. 20). The reader apprehends the pattern of his ramblings to be just that: he approaches a moral, philosophical, or ultimately theological problem (in terms of the novel's symbology) and then retreats from its contemplation by enumerating exemplae. He acknowledges suffering without naming it; he realizes that "the trouble with water is it never rushes at the right time" and that there *are* "unaccountable things," but he makes no attempt to transcend his limited, factual experience in order to deal with them. Neither does he recognize that his description of the landscape is an analogue for the spiritual condition of the community, nor that the "great cow" he describes, in failing to protect her young from the elements, suggests Mrs. Potter, who is

matriarch of the community without providing for it a moral centre. Moreover, William's role is strictly to deliver the mail. He initiates no action and accepts no responsibility. Instead of getting the woman her thread, he provides for her a discourse on the uses of thread. Spools of thread for Watson, as for William Faulkner, represent connection and community. For William, however, "there's no telling what thread is for," and at this point he can no more provide connection between communities than he can between individuals, and even his sister goes so far as to deny him his official role as government messenger:

> I suppose William's gone for the post, Greta said. I'm waiting for the catalogue. There are things one needs from time to time. There are things people think other people have no need of. There are things that other people think people need that no one needs at all.
> She turned to Angel.
> Take her, she said. I don't want her. I don't want you coming Ara. I don't want anything from William. My post I'll come for myself. James'll come for it. I don't want my things pried over and then brought along here. The government pays William to carry our things as far as your post office. No farther. The government pays you to hand me my things out of the sack. I'll come along and get my catalogue myself. (p. 41)

William's ability to communicate and to be a messenger is illusory, then, and his moral stance is neutral. His inclination to speak in maxims survives to the end, even after his regeneration into the group; yet the cliché has taken on meaning, has become an archetype. This is due not to any change in language itself but to the new efficacy of language: the community begins to perceive the appropriateness of their language to its context. After his mother's death and the degeneration of the old order, William is not yet able to surpass either his notion that charity and responsibility begin, and end, at home ("I shouldn't have come away, he said. But a man has his own things to see to. I took it they could straighten things out between themselves. There's things even a man's brother has to pass by" [p. 74]) or his literal, factual way of perceiving things beyond the literal ("I've never seen God, he said, but if I did I don't think I'd be very much surprised" [p. 77]). His sister's suicide is the occasion and Heinrich the agent of his conversion. Amongst the rubble of the Potter house Heinrich tells William that the rational approach does not necessarily guarantee knowledge:

You told me I'd best make sure of my facts. They were probably
as clear to you as they were to me. You don't have to spy your
way along an actual built fence to know the probable lay of the
land. (p. 114)

It is Henrich, too, who initiates action ("If we don't move, the boy
said, night will be upon us, and by the morning there will be no
bones to bury" [p. 115]) and William, while continuing to ruminate,
begins to make connections between reality and the maxim: "I've
seen the place where a cow stumbled, William said, licked clean
before daybreak" (p. 115).[9] At the end of the novel, Heinrich divides
the foolhen which he has snared and cooked in the embers (the
novel's "phoenix") with William, whose final words emphasize
renewal, community, and commitment:

It seems a strange sort of thing, William said, to light another fire
on top of what fire has destroyed. The curious thing about fire,
he said, is you need it and you fear it at once.
A man needs living things about him, William said.

Heinrich concurs:

The thing about a dog lying in the sunlight is it just lies in the
sunlight. Perhaps no living man can do just that. (pp. 129-30)

By the time William's words have become meaningful, Kip's
words have lost their meaning. Kip's association with glory and
knowledge and his affiliation with Coyote are threatened from the
beginning of the novel. He and Heinrich are set up as antagonists,
not merely because Heinrich wants to protect his sister from James,
for whom Kip supposedly acts as courier, but because Heinrich
senses in Kip a greater, demonic danger:

What in hell are you doing? said the boy.
Looking, said Kip.
Get out of here, the boy said. Wherever you are there's
trouble. If a man is breaking a horse when you come round it
hangs itself on the halter, or throws itself, or gets out and back
on the range. (p. 27)

Significantly, Heinrich couches his rejection of Kip in terms of the
message he brings:

---

[9]Again the connection between the cow and Mrs. Potter is implied.

> Take your message back where it came from.
>
> A'right, said Kip. A'right.
>
> He shoved his feet into his stirrups and gathered up his lines.
>
> The girl don't need no telling, he said.
>
> He bent down over the saddle. His face hung close to the boy's.
>
> When a stallion's broke down your fence, he said, there's nothing you can do except put the fence back up again. (p. 27)

Kip's words encapsulate the narrative line of the novel, and his message is a warning against the impending threat to the community, so that language for him at this point is charged with truth and meaning. Appropriately, Heinrich is working with a roll of wire, a variation on the spool and thus another symbol of community, when Kip arrives:

> He went over to the barn and picked up a roll of wire. Then he put it down and looked at Kip.
>
> The boy wrestled with the roll of wire, which curled in on itself seeking the bend into which it had been twisted. . . .
>
> I'm afraid, thought the boy, and even the light won't tell me what to do.
>
> He thought of the posts he would have to drive. (pp. 27-29)

The roll of wire, like the community, resists being turned against the direction in which it has been sitting for so long — "curled in on itself." Heinrich's fence is meant to keep both Mrs. Potter and Kip out, and so the boy is associated with the forces of community and renewal throughout.

Heinrich continues to reject Kip in his role as messenger, as he rejects the concept of an intermediary to communicate between individuals in general. For him the messenger is another symptom of the communication barriers that exist in the community and cause its fragmentation. Real communication grows out of real contact:

> You and your messages, he said. The girl's gone. I've come to speak myself at this end of the creek. If there's anything any man wants from us, let him come asking on his own feet at our door. (p. 44)

When the crisis of the community's fragmentation comes to a head, Heinrich speculates upon the possibility of its renewal in terms of

language. William's role as mailman, too, is implicitly undercut, for only direct speech between individuals is efficacious ("I've held my tongue, he said, when I should have used my voice like an axe to cut down the wall between us" [p. 82]),[10] and this is borne out by the novel. Felix, for example, whom Watson has called the "affirmation" in the novel,[11] after Kip's blinding sets out himself on the road to retrieve Angel from Theophil, and at this point in the story the function of the messenger has become nearly obsolete. Kip's messages never manage to communicate, if they are delivered at all, so that phrases such as "Did Kip bring my message? Did Kip tell you I was waiting?" (p. 60), "Tell me, she said, what words he sent. Tell me," (p. 62) and "You and your messages" (p. 44) are common.

Kip chooses to withhold or alter the messages with which he is entrusted at will, so that the community is to a great extent culpable in the communication breakdowns which occur, having placed its faith in an untrustworthy courier. Kip's voice, which had initially brought to Heinrich an important truth, ends "yelling and shrieking outside in the night like cats in torment" (p. 64), and to Felix he seems very much an animal:

> The hounds stirring coiled tighter against the sound. Then something answered in the bushes by the creek. Felix heard branches pushed aside. He looked up. It was Kip. Coming over the rise. Lifting his face windward like an animal. . . .
> What's happened? [Felix] said. Where have you been?
> Walking down the creek, Kip said. Finding my way by the smell of the water. (p. 72)

Perhaps the single most important feature that distinguishes man from lesser animals is his ability to develop and use a language that allows displacement, meaningfulness and productiveness. (The language of Paddy's parrot, for example, who appears in the novel's central town scene, does not meet any of these requirements and is mere mimicry. As such, however, "drinks all round" is ironically at least as efficacious as the human language it mimics, which at this point in the novel is altogether divorced from meaning and morality.) Kip is associated with Coyote throughout the novel by his name,

---

[10]Cf. Godard, p. 157: "[Watson] acknowledges that the only linguistic reality is the individual speech act. . . ."

[11]Quoted by Beverly Mitchell, "Association and Allusion in *The Double Hook*," *Journal of Canadian Fiction* 2, i (1973), 66.

insight and behaviour, and his loss of language is significant in that it occasions the merging of the two figures at the end of the book into the flesh-and-blood coyote that the community actually sees for the first time. The coyote figure loses its mythological posture and its ability to intimidate and fragment in proportion to the demise of Kip.

As Kip's glory and voice slip from him, Heinrich approaches the glory and language of the regenerated community. Throughout the novel he is continually motivated to search for the efficacy of language, for the authority of voice, and it is finally revealed to him within the context of the new moral order. Heinrich acknowledges his responsibility as an agent in the process around him and is thus set off from most of the other characters. Moreover, he absolves guilt resulting from failure or inadequacy not through violence and escape (James), nor sleep and insensibility (Theophil), nor fear (the Widow Wagner) but through action. Unlike his mother, for example, he does not dwell on his mistakes and shortcomings, on the fact that "I should have been able to tell Lenchen something. . . . I should have been able to tell her what to do. . . . Without speaking he buckled on his chaps" (p. 81). Heinrich, therefore, differentiates between a time for words and a time for action, so that in the end the efficacy of words will be ensured by the morality of the actions which back them. In comparison, the Widow Wagner's frequent "Dear Gods" are empty words indeed.

The careers of Kip and Heinrich are implicitly set up in the genealogy which begins the book. Heinrich is the only character not named, so that his gaining a name makes the discovery of the new efficacy of language personal and doubly meaningful. The other characters must re-establish the connection between name and identity, so that the process for them is one of rebirth while for Heinrich it is one of birth. In the geneaology Kip is associated with Theophil. His name is not prefaced by the word "lived," so that he must share the "lived" which prefaces Theophil's name with that character whom the novel shows not to live in any significant way. Theophil's and Kip's names, too, appear at the end of the list, reinforcing the suggestion of their alienation from the community.

The regeneration of the community is finally accomplished in the figure of Heinrich, in whom the word and the act, the language and the morality, have merged. As the instrument of William's regeneration, too, he stands with William as an emblem for the new

moral and linguistic order of the community. It is appropriate, then, that James upon his return should see

> in the emptiness of the fenced plot the bodies of the man and the boy [which] seemed to occupy space which, too, should have been empty. The lank body of William and the thin body of the boy roped him to the present. He shut his eyes. In his mind now he could see only the seared and smouldering earth, the bare hot cinder of a still unpeopled world. He felt as he stood with his eyes closed on the destruction of what his heart had wished destroyed that by some generous gesture he had been turned once more into the first pasture of things. (p. 131)