"RIVER TWO BLIND JACKS" DAVE GODFREY'S CHAUCERIAN ALLEGORY

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The suspicion that our Canadian environment is not as far removed from the whale-halls and sea-monsters of *Beowulf* as one might believe, has been voiced and elaborated upon at length by Northrop Frye in *The Bush Garden.* The Canadian poet, argues Frye,

> has to deal with a poetic and imaginative environment for which, to find any parallel in England, we should have to go back to a period earlier than Chaucer. In certain Old English poems, notably "The Wanderer" and "The Seafarer," there is a feeling which seems to a modern reader more Canadian than English: a feeling of the melancholy of a thinly-settled country under a bleak sky, of the terrible isolation of the creative mind in such a country. . . .[1]

Certainly, poems such as Earle Birney's "Mappemounde" and "Anglo-Saxon Street" come to mind, as does a poem mentioned by Frye in his discussion, Robert Finch's "The Peacock and the Nightingale," a twentieth-century reworking of the mediaeval debate form such as one finds in "The Owl and the Nightingale" or slightly later in Chaucer's own "Parliament of Fowls." Indeed, one might enlarge upon Frye's observation, to note that Middle English works as well have served as poetic precedents for Canadian artists. If the vision offered by the Old English poets — one of a bleak environment confronting the artistic mind — is germane to the Canadian condition, then no less germane is the vision of Geoffrey Chaucer, the vision of man coming to terms with the social and religious structures and protocol of the day. Such a concern with social organization may be just as pressing to a new country striving to establish political and cultural institutions as the environmental concern much emphasized by critics such as Frye, Atwood and D. G. Jones. In fact, one might point to an early attempt by a Canadian writer to provide a Chaucerian "backdrop" for a tale of settlement in the New World, in Pierce Stevens Hamilton's *The Feast of Saint Anne and Other Poems* (1878). Hamilton humorously transforms the Canterbury pilgrims into a group of picknickers at Micmac, who decide on the Feast Day of Saint Anne, to take turns telling glorious tales from the annals of Nova Scotian history![2]

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[1] Northrop Frye, *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination* (Toronto: Anansi, 1971), p. 146.

[2] Fred Cogswell, "Literary Activity in the Maritime Provinces, 1815-1880," *Literary History of Canada,* edited by Carl F. Klinck (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1965, 2nd ed. 1976), I, pp. 130-131.

Almost a hundred years later, we find authors such as Dave Godfrey returning — with more originality and more penetrating insight than P. S. Hamilton, one needs must say — to the Old and Middle English writers. Both William H. New and Margaret Atwood have noted Godfrey's use of the Arthurian matter in *Death Goes Better With Coca-Cola;* New compares the character of Caratogas in "The Hard-Headed Collector" to that of Arthur, proving his right to the crown by pulling Excalibur out of the stone. In fact, New states that his use of the word "quest" in relation to that particular story is deliberate, "for Godfrey has explicitly patterned his story on that romantic heroic form."[3] Atwood, who views Godfrey's collection as an expression of what one might call the domino theory of victimization (We as aggressors and hunters are to wild animals what the Americans are to us), notes as well the Arthurian flavour of Caratogas' death; his body is taken aboard a mysterious ship after his slow death from infected wounds.[4]

Before tracing what I believe to be the Chaucerian elements in Godfrey's early story, "River Two Blind Jacks," one must acknowledge Godfrey's divided reaction to tradition. In another story from *Death Goes Better With Coca-Cola,* "The Way We Do It Here," one finds amid scattered references to Defoe, Thoreau, Rilke and Bunyan, the following statement by Godfrey's narrator: "Moi, the university had just finished dumping a year's supply of ideals into my mind while crimping my spirit with its innate snobbery, its unresolved class tensions and distortions."[5] For Godfrey, academic tradition always suggests social traditions and class privilege. Later in the story, Godfrey undercuts the very precedent upon which his collection of "hunting stories" is based, the Faulknerian tradition: "But Jean Lorignol avoided tradition, he carried the quarters back into the bush and left them there for the lynx cats; he did not divide the flesh among the successful" (*DGB,* p. 101). Any reader searching out a Sam Fathers or Ike McCaslin figure in Godfrey's collection will be sorely disappointed; killing here has other, darker political associations. Thus it comes as no surprise that William H. New senses, in spite of the traditional motifs of the quest to be found in "The Hard-Headed Collector" (the journey, the riddle, the episodic structure, the "reliance on companions" and the exaggeration), that Godfrey nevertheless undercuts the traditional return of the hero.[6]

This deeply felt ambiguity in Godfrey accompanies an equally profound ambiguity in his attitudes towards society itself. In an interview

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3. William H. New, "Godfrey's Uncollected Artist," *Ariel* 4:3 (July 1973), 10.
4. Margaret Atwood, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972), p. 240.
5. Dave Godfrey, "The Way We do It Here," in *Death Goes Better With Coca-Cola* (Toronto: Anansi, 1967), p. 100. All further references to this text will appear in parentheses in the text, accompanied by the abbreviation, "*DBG.*"
6. New, 11.

with Graeme Gibson, Godfrey affirms that the writer "tends to register a protest against society and the way society is organized." Yet he is quick to acknowledge at the same time that "my basic premise is that every one has a responsibility to society."[7] On the literary level, Godfrey is equally aware of this conflict between protest and indebtedness to an existing tradition; of the use of older literary forms to capture the tensions of contemporary Canadian society, he comments, "You'd have to work out a chain of novels because it's a very, very disparate society, and you'd have to go at it historically too. I guess what I'm saying is you'd have to push it towards the epic."[8] This recognition of the clash between traditional form and contemporary complexity echoes, in fact, one important distinction made by Northrop Frye in his discussion of Canadian mediaevalism:

> Now of course modern Canadian life is far less simple and homogeneous than Old English life. The Canadian poet, though he must try to express something of what the Old English poet felt, cannot afford to forget either that a highly sophisticated civilization is as much a part of Canadian life as deep snow and barren spaces.[9]

The obvious solution to Godfrey's problem — being torn between tradition and contemporary relevance, protest and responsibility — is a literary form such as parody, wherein respect for the past may mingle with social and literary irreverence alike. Parody, comments Godfrey, is "one of the ways you get to the richness of texture and structure — by playing."[10]

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In "River Two Blind Jacks" Dave Godfrey constructs a richly textured national allegory — a tale of the rivalry between an English and a French lumber camp — by "playing" with the motifs and structure of Chaucer's "The Pardoner's Tale." Godfrey often christens his characters with allegorical names: Piet dela Ombre in "The Hard-Headed Collector," for instance. In "River Two Blind Jacks," the fact — repeated once at the beginning and once at the end of the tale — that the narrator's grandfather, the narrator of the story of the two lumber camps, had been searching for "Henri La Mort" when the deadly feud between Reginald Couteau and Albert Godspeed broke out, carries a deeper allegorical meaning. Of course, the prototypic story of a search for death is that of the three "riotoures" of Chaucer's tale, who vow that "we wol sleen this false traytour Deeth" who has been terrorizing the country.[11] This search is intensified by the appearance of a mysterious Old Man who is also seeking Death and who guides the rowdy trio to the fortune which eventually incites them to jealousy, greed — and murder. Similarly, in Godfrey's story, Reginald and Albert, the two duelling loggers, embark on a fierce competition which issues in their own deaths. Symbolically, their names, "Godspeed" and "Couteau" (i.e., knife) sum up the two possible treatments which man may expect at the hands of his fellow man: cooperation or a curse. (The two surnames also represent, of course, the French and English language groups in Canada.) Even the grandfather is a type of allegorical pioneering figure, a composite cultural figure dressed appropriately in Blackfoot moccasins, Mountie breeches, Cree jacket, flannel shirt and English bowler hat — a spectre of multiculturalism indeed! Thus Godfrey is adapting a form traditionally concerned with religious and moral conduct — the allegory — to the contemporary political scene. As W. H. New suggests in relation to "The Hard-Headed Collector," "Godfrey draws patterns from myth and fairytale, alludes to literary analogues, and integrates them all with his political message . . . "[12] In illustration of this practice, one is reminded of another moment of brilliant national allegory in *Death Goes Better With Coca-Cola;* in the story "The Way We Do It Here," the divided body of a moose (a symbol unmistakeable in its nationalistic overtones) provokes this exchange between two of Godfrey's characters:

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[7] Dave Godfrey, interviewed by Graeme Gibson in *Eleven Canadian Novelists* (Toronto: Anansi, 1973), p. 157.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 165.

[9] Frye, p. 147.

[10] Godfrey in *Eleven Canadian Novelists*, p. 174.

[11] Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Canterbury Tales," in *Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, edited by F. N. Robinson, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), p. 152, 1. 699. All further references to this section will appear in parentheses in the text, accompanied by the abbreviation "*WGC.*"

> "Pretty ugly booty," I said.
> "A pretty ugly country," Horace smiled. (*DGB,* p. 102).

Both Godfrey's story and "The Pardoner's Tale" are "framed" tales, that is, tales framed by a description of the storytelling process itself. In Chaucer's tale, as is so often the case, the substance of the tale is ironically belied by the condition of the storyteller. Thus, the Pardoner's injunction to his listeners, "Now, goode men, God foryeve yow youre trespas, / And ware yow fro the synne of avarice!" (*WGC,* p. 154, 11. 904-905) is undercut by his stories of selling false relics (bones from a sheep's shoulder, for instance) to gullible believers. Godfrey's narrator, however, is a positive touchstone in relation to his tale; not only does he represent cultural multiplicity, his tale is clearly a diagnosis of our national confusion, a "totem."[13] Moreover, he addresses his tale of cultural hatred expressly to children — the potential inheritors of those cultural hatreds (RTBJ, p. 302).

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[12] New, 15.

[13] Dave Godfrey, "River Two Blind Jacks," in *Canadian Short Stories: Second Series,* selected by Robert Weaver (Toronto: Oxford university Press, 1968), p. 303. All further references to this story will appear in parentheses in the text, accompanied by the abbreviation "RTBJ.' "River Two Blind Jacks" originally appeared in *Tamarack Review* 19 (1961).

Although the reader is aware that the grandfather, like the Pardoner, tells lies ("my father has let me know that the closest the old man ever came to the good side of the Mounties was when he trained a pack of Samoyeds they had brought over from Russia," RTBJ, p. 301), those lies hold a larger cultural and moral truth. Lying in this case is, in postmodernist fashion, an imaginative *tour de force:* "truth and fancy ran like two tributaries from the river of his [his grandfather's] memory" (RTBJ, p. 301). Like the cultural divisions of Canada, the divisions of truth and falsehood are ultimately reconcilable through an imaginative leap of faith. Both Godfrey's storyteller and the Pardoner, then, stand in different relations to their stories and yet both fulfill in the last event the demand made by Chaucer's pilgrims: "Telle us som moral thyng that we may leere / Som wit" (*WGC*, p. 148, 11. 325-326).

In addition to these basic structural elements and methods of narration, Godfrey's story reworks several of the major motifs of "The Pardoner's Tale." The Pardoner, for instance, takes great pains to denounce in sermon form the vices of "dronkenesse," "hasardrye" or gambling and "sweryng," showing through *exempla* and protestation that all three vices lead to man's spiritual — if not physical — death. (Ironically, though, the Pardoner's discussion of greed, the very root of the three "riotoures"' downfall, is confined to his Prologue — a sign of his own ambiguous relation to it in particular as a vice.) In "River Two Blind Jacks," the bitter taste of Finnish ale is invoked to describe the bitterness of the hatred between the two logging camps. Moreover, when the two blind jacks are first caught in the bear pits, Albert refuses to give Reginald any of his whisky. Later, their exchange of digging claw and whisky, gifts which would enable each man to attempt to escape, is a symbol of a mended cultural feud. One thinks, in comparison, of the means by which the youngest of the three "riotoures" plots to kill his confreres: he poisons their drink. The deaths of the other two men by poisoning, after *they* have killed the young plotter, are testimony to the continuing effects of hatred and jealousy.

Gambling and cursing, too, figure in the dispute between the two logging camps. As with the description of the Finnish ale, Godfrey makes the link between wagers and hatred explicit: "We was wagering, but you could see a lot of men would rather be laying out fists than dollars" (RTBJ, p. 307). Lastly, we hear of the two men, stranded at the bottom of their bear pits, that "by the end of the day they had ceased to hurl curses at each other" (RTBJ, pp. 312-313). Here, however, cursing is not an instance of "fals sweryng," a sin against God, as it is in "The Pardoner's Tale." Rather, it is a cultural offense. Thus, Godfrey redefines these traditional sins in an entirely different, secular context.

The motif of gold is central both to Chaucer's and to Godfrey's tales. The "riotoures" forget their search for Death when they stumble upon

"Of floryns fyne of gold ycoyned rounde / Wel ny an eighte busshels, as hem thought" (*WGC*, p. 153, 11. 770-771). Of course, the central irony of the story lies in the fact that the three men *have* discovered death — or at least the concrete object which incites their deadly greed. In "River Two Blind Jacks" Reginald and Albert are each given "a leather sack with eight gold guineas" (RTBJ, p 307) at the beginning of their race. (One wonders whether the number eight, here, as well as the number of the odds in their race, eight to one, are deliberate echoes of the number of bushels of coins in Chaucer's tale.) At any rate, each man must place one guinea at the base of the Burnt Pine each day without getting killed. (The cache of gold coins in "The Pardoner's Tale" is found, remember, at the base of a tree.) Whether or not these correspondences are merely coincidental, one can nevertheless say that the destructive impulses of man are incited by the gold of both stories; as the grandfather in Godfrey's story claims, "you could play it [the game of depositing the guinea] any way you wanted, from hide-an-seek, to duelling, to ambush and murdering" (RTBJ, p. 307). One notes that the three "riotoures" of Chaucer's tale decide particularly on the latter two methods, as do Reginald and Albert. Although neither man in Godfrey's story actually kills the other, their consuming cultural hatreds make any attempt at cooperation useless. When each man calls out to what he considers to be a rescuing compatriot to rescue him and leave the other man for dead, he actually attracts that creature — a bear — to the pits. This web of mischance, born of cultural competition and chauvinism (as symbolized in the golden guineas) truly reveals that, to quote the narrator, "Stupidity's hard to kill as a turtle" (RTBJ, p. 303). It lives on.

The image of the earth, the two pits into which the blind jacks fall, finds a similar precedent in "The Pardoner's Tale." The mysterious Old Man who directs the three "riotoures' to the gold is, as I have mentioned, seeking Death also:

> Thus walke I, lyk a restelees kaityf,
> And on the ground, which is my moodres gate,
> I knokke with my staf, bothe erly and late,
> And seye "Leeve mooder, leet me in!" (*WGC*, p. 152, 11. 728-731).

The fall of Reginald and Albert into the bowels of the earth signals not only the likelihood of a physical death, but a fall into blindness (the black pits reproducing imagistically the blind eye of each man). Godfrey multiplies the levels of political allegory to be found in the story, moreover, by having an American dig these pits in search of wild bears for a zoo. Again, Godfrey's power to use a striking image to suggest several levels of meaning — a true hallmark of allegory — becomes powerfully evident to the reader.

Lastly, both stories reveal man in a reduced state, through the image of man as animal. When the youngest "riotoure" goes to the apothecary in search of poison, he explains that he needs the poison

> that he myghte his rattes quelle;
> And eek ther was a polcat in his hawe,
> That, as he seyde, his capouns hadde yslawe,
> And fayn he wolde wreke hym, if he myghte,
> On vermyn that destroyed hym by nyghte
> (*WGC*, pp. 153-154. 11. 854-858)

Chaucer's repeated insistence on the animal image in this passage drives home the ironic fact that there is, indeed, "rat trouble" awaiting this traitor, in the form of his two intended victims lying in wait to ambush him when he returns. One finds this reductive view of man throughout Godfrey's story; Albert's eye turns "wary and cruel as any skunk bear's" (RTBJ, p. 309) and the grandfather compares the hatred in the air to "the way those mongrel curs in Double Mont will hurl themselves after a crippled dog" (RTBJ, p. 307).

Both tales, then, end with the unwitting discovery of death. Godfrey, for instance, continues to picture man in reduced, animalistic form at the end of the story, when he eerily describes the bear licking ants off his fur — am ominous prelude to the killing to come. Chaucer, for his part, hastens to conclude the narrative of the multiple deaths: "What nedeth it to sermone of it moore?" (*WGC*, p. 154, 1. 879), the Pardoner asks.

Although both tales also end with a return to the original story-telling framework, these final "framing" sections carry entirely different implications. The Pardoner's peroration, wherein he denounces once more "glotonye, luxerie and hasardrie" (*WGC*, p. 154, 1. 897) and offers to sell pardons, is interrupted by the enraged Host. A heated argument over the Pardoner's false relics ensues. "I wolde I hadde thy coillons in myn hond," declares the Host, "In stide of relikes or of seintuarie" (*WGC*, p. 154, 11. 952-953). Both parties are silenced by the social leader of the group, the Knight, who bids Host and Pardoner kiss and put their enmity to rest. Godfrey's political allegory, however, ends with social tensions still unresolved. Indeed, the grandfather's act of stirring "the embers up into a fire again" (RTBJ, p. 316) underlines the stirring up of the embers of old cultural enmities. In Godfrey's tale, the child listeners are not incited to argument at the end of the story. They listen to the explicit moral offered by the storyteller (similar to that offered by the Pardoner, on the "synne of avarice"): The land will let men "bloat their funny weak bodies until they can't fly and then lift an arm and crush them in their own blood-fat greed" (RTBJ, p. 317). Again, the image is animalistic; that of the blood-thirsty parasite. The listeners react with fear rather than with anger, and with the sense they are merging with the teller, remembering "the day we had finally captured Henri La Mort" (RTBJ, p. 317). Through this masterful device, Godfrey makes clear the allegorical aim of his tale: to reveal that "we," in stirring up the embers of cultural and linguistic battles, are in danger, like the two blind jacks, of running headlong into blindness and death.

This realization of our collective fate is the final end towards which Dave Godfrey's allegorical tale works. Like the Pardoner, who boasts

> Thanne telle I hem ensamples many oon
> Of olde stories longe tyme agoon.
> For lewed peple loven tales olde;
> Swiche thynges kan they wel reporte and holde.
> *QWGC,* p. 149 11. 435-438

Dave Godfrey, too, proves adept at telling "old stories" once again. Unlike the Pardoner, though, he reshapes and retells those stories not for a "lewed" (i.e. ignorant, unlearned) audience, to extort their money, but for a culturally blind people, to give them sight.

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