

The I and the Eye in the Desert:
The Political and Philosophical Key to
Dave Godfrey's
The New Ancestors

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The "In the Fifth City" section of *The New Ancestors* restates many of the political problems and personal relationships of the rest of the novel, but in a non-sequential, surrealist way, as if in a state of heightened consciousness, and by an unidentified narrator. Understandably, critics have noted the differences, rather than the similarities, between this section and the others. They have generally not seen its typifications of the characters and its heightening of the main point of view as clues that help to identify its narrator and to reveal the full import of that narrator's remarks. My analysis does this, thereby showing that "In the Fifth City" is not peripheral to the rest of the novel but, rather, central to a complete interpretation of it.

Dave Godfrey certainly intended to confound readers: he says he "wanted the non-African reader in some way to experience those moments of stark incomprehension which hit even the most open-minded travellers to Africa."¹ Chronology is purposefully disguised, and a number of African and Akan words are left untranslated. Furthermore, five of the six sections of the novel are narrated from a different point of view. This in itself suggests conflict and a confusion of values in this fictional world, and it implies an authorial refusal to judge among these values.

Several commentators have furthered readers' comprehension of this long, complex novel about the confusion and corruption of family and political life in Ghana or "Lost Coast":² William H. New, Robert W. Margeson, Deane E.D. Downey, and Calvin L. Smiley. William H. New has pointed to Godfrey's repeated reference to the process of cell division in the Fifth City section—"prophase, metaphase, anaphase, telephase" (367,

¹ Dave Godfrey, "A Note on the Missing Glossary," *The New Ancestors* (Toronto: New P., 1972) 444.

² The phrase comes from Robert W. Margeson, "A Preliminary Interpretation of *The New Ancestors*," *Journal of Canadian Fiction* 4.1 (1975): 96-110.

410)—suggesting that that biological metaphor may lead readers to see “the equatorial African scene as a battleground between outmoded ideologies while of itself it gives divisive birth to its own (new, old) perspective.”³ Robert W. Margeson has provided translations and explanations of the Akan proverbs and has unscrambled the hidden chronology—of all the sections except “In the Fifth City”—to reconstruct a straightforward plot line. When, or whether, this fifth section of *The New Ancestors* actually occurs is problematical. In February 1966, Ama recalls that her husband, Michael Burdener, was in Mopti with her brother Gamaliel at Christmas 1964, and again with her, and possibly First Samuels, in the summer of 1965 (110, 166-67, 170, 174). But with that gesture toward narrative possibility, certainty ends. All commentators have remained unclear about the Mali, or Fifth City, section, preferring to place it outside chronological time altogether. Deane E.D. Downey says that this “complex surrealistic section . . . has no clear relationship to the rest,” that “in style it departs almost disruptively from the Lost Coast material”; but she concludes that this section may be the culmination of Godfrey’s central theme of “the intolerable interference of one country in the affairs of another.”⁴ Margeson asks, but cannot answer, the question of whose point of view is being voiced:

The fluid, dreamlike nature of the events . . . together with the quotation from the *Bhagavad Gita* which introduces them, and the mystic rose which is their symbol, all suggest that perhaps the whole section is a dream or vision. But whose? (99)

Calvin L. Smiley thinks that “In the Fifth City” is “more effective than enlightening,” and that

its hallucinatory, surrealistic quality is highly suggestive of a dream or a drugged experience . . . When placed in the context of the novel as a whole, the region of the Fifth City appears to be some form of parallel, imaginative reality to the reality of Lost Coast.⁵

³ William H. New, “Equatorial Zones and Polar Opposites,” *Articulating West: Essays on Purpose and Form in Modern Canadian Literature* (Toronto: New P, 1972), 216-33.

⁴ Deane E.D. Downey, “The Canadian Identity and African Nationalism,” *Canadian Literature*, 75 (1977): 15-26.

⁵ Calvin L. Smiley, “Godfrey’s Progress,” *Canadian Literature*, 75 (1977): 27-40.

Both Margeson and Smiley note the parallels between characters in this and the other sections of the novel, but they do not comment on the significance of these overlaps.

One purpose of "In the Fifth City" is to correct the sympathies aroused for important characters in the other sections of the novel. All the characters, even those who are otherwise presented in their subjectivity, are seen in the Fifth City section as they would appear to a detached observer. Burdener, Ama, and First Samuels figure in brief a-chronological scenes in the guises of Burr, Donalda/the desert woman, and Effeze, respectively. Lieutenant Rusk, a shadowy figure in the other sections, appears as himself, but more prominently here. Gamaliel becomes El Amaliel. Each is entirely recognizable, but each has become an abstraction of his (or her) particular attitudes and purposes—a type whose acts we track, now with a different narrator whose focus is broader. Burdener's political activism becomes Burr's dysentery. Ama's painful confusion becomes both Donalda's nymphomania and the desert woman's faith in the power and truth of her people's legends. First Samuels remains his angry, self-centered self: his betrayal of his mother, his opposition to Kofi Kruman (Lost Coast's "father figure"), and his murder of his half-brother Gamaliel become the whole group's murder of the archetypal father in the desert. The most important new character introduced in the Fifth City section is this archetypal father, who complains,

You have set religion aside as a superstition of the ignorant. . . . You will not hide religion from me, my disillusioned ones. I will provide mushrooms if you seek blindness and pretend not to see what I have seen. (410, 411)

The fear that Lieutenant Rusk may be spying for the Americans is turned into his multiple murders. These last events are illogical as plotted sequences; however, they are appropriate as fantasy wish-fulfillments on the part of the other characters. Also, the repetition of these murders insists that violence is the outcome of political conflict. Following the fourth of Rusk's seven deaths, the narrative tone changes to express disgust and fatigue, as if the narrator now despairs that repeated experience can teach anything to those who refuse to see through events to their meaning. Finally, Gamaliel's sloganeering, puerile, political journalism on behalf of Kofi Kruman (Lost Coast's "Redeemer") becomes El Amaliel's rhythmic articulation of a vision of Africa redeemed by ancient religion and ritual. Since none of these characters narrates the section, what alternatives remain?

In order to answer that question, it is necessary to note the one device that is used to overcome the confusions of character, time, and place in the rest of the narrative: the consistently maintained double focus of watching and being watched. In all its varieties—paranoia, voyeurism, political spying, passivity, tourism, or historical imagining—watching is the central visual and attitudinal orientation of all the characters. Watching is more than a distancing technique used to double the action by showing both it and a character's relation and response to it. Watching is Godfrey's main polemical device, and to trace its management is to be led directly to meaning.

The focus of watching is not only maintained in "In the Fifth City," but even accentuated. As in *Lost Coast*, betrayal of loyalties and traditions is the basis of the action in Mali. Everyone is guilty. The punishment is fear of those people closest to oneself, self-division, uncertainty, the strain of constant watchfulness, and paranoid states of mind that are the inner reality of every character throughout the text. In the Fifth City section, these are narratively imitated in the extreme intercutting of scenes and fragmenting of chronology. Another device that reflects uncertainty is the narrator's repeated use of the words "if" and "if not," "or," "appears," "unless," "perhaps," and the question "is it?" These words, and the alternative possibilities they introduce, emphasize that the narrator, characters, and readers are unable to distinguish between illusion and reality in the text, and, by extension, in the world.

As in the other sections of *The New Ancestors*, though with more abrupt transitions, most points of view are clearly identifiable in "In the Fifth City." Unlike the rest of the narrative, however, this section has an "I," and an attendant "we," whose identity is not immediately clear. The tone and content of his remarks are unlike any others. These comments are too scientific to come from any of the African characters presented. They are too sophisticated, cynical, and, especially, detached to be Michael Burdener's. And they are too knowing and omnipresent to be either Geoffrey Firebank's or Richard Bewsher's, the British Council men. Narrating everything as though it were seen through the lens of a camera, this "I" finally denies the validity of that method of seeing. The only point of view that *could* both see all and also evaluate the attitude underlying that omniscience is the implied author's. Correspondingly, the "we" and "you" must refer to the implied author and his Western readers.

By referring to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Godfrey points to his own method:

No Arabs or dark pagans fire spears or utter imprecations from the shore. Kurtz has long since escaped to Arabia. The Cape Cairo walk is terminated. There is no forest of ghosts nearby. (395)

Different historical circumstances require different characters and other techniques of persuasion, but *The New Ancestors* can be read as one re-working of the Conradian tradition. In order to make them "see," Marlow recounts his tale to Europeans who have not directly experienced Belgian imperialism in the Congo. In order to indicate, as Marlow does, the implicit involvement even of non-participants in the events portrayed, the "I" and the "we" need to be introduced into "In the Fifth City."

A-chronological repetition of events (the multiple murders of Rusk, for instance) and circularity (the four men are shown arriving in Mali after their adventures there have been recounted) are the static, synchronic devices that unify this timeless, archetypal section. But, within this unplotted framework, the voice of the "I" narrator develops and changes. At the beginning of the section, "I" overtly draws readers' attention to various objects, persons, and ideas, becoming gradually an insistent but obfuscating observer-guide. In the end, he abandons the fictional role of guide, refuses any longer to correct the readers' perspective, and places himself and his readers as characters within the action.

On the occasion of Rusk's first death near the ancient fort, the narrator comments on his own narrative attitude: "And what more invisible but dominant characteristic of one observer's mind than this propensity for examples of power: of long-range cannons, of quick horses, of betrayals, of coercion, of racial manipulation?" (351). Again, the narrator intrudes, apparently, to distinguish between appearance and reality:

But I ask you to observe only one small object, one minor verification: what you have called strings are in reality cords. True, they are thin but observe. Around a central core, the yellow winds, the red winds, the black winds. In a small spiral. This is what provides the bulk. Then these are tied about the *kambu*, hiding almost completely the cloth from the shroud of the sainted one. (357)

However, this narrator never really departs from Godfrey's own stated intention to baffle readers: African customs remain unexplained. Later, after the four men have returned from the desert, keeping secret their discovery of "the

ore," the narrator places a passage that, by the use of "we," includes himself among the characters' confusion about place, time, and event:

If the sun is high, the *kambu* has just sunk with the speed of a guillotine into the menstrual sand, then probably the *kambu* is about to speak in the voice of El Amaliel or Donalda. If the sun is simply there, with the kiss of a Bessemer closing your eyelids against the voluble grit, the gregarious dust, then we are hiding the body again in some hidden place: Ali Tatari's pirogue, the house in Gao, a Mopti bar, in the sand near the fort, quite uncertain what we are doing, quite overburdened with remorse and joy, unable to see one another's faces clearly. (361)

Having admitted that Lieutenant Rusk might be more deeply understood, the narrator ironically dismisses the need to know more than what appears on the surface. To those who might wish to know more, "unlike myself," the question is asked, "why?" (362).

It is enough to see the surface with moderate clarity, to judge the weight and the age as would a gypsy, in the case of most of those with whom one comes into human contact. Anything more is dangerous, ambiguous; leads one to consider unnecessary possibilities and thus refrain from action. (362)

This imitates the way Rusk himself is believed to evaluate others and corresponds with a later comment to the reader on the need to be superficial and usurious:

Are you ready at last in your dilatoriness you who loved the uncontrollable convict, you are almost ready to go back now, with your limbs, dark skin; psychotic eyes. You have your gold, you have learned to be lazy and brutal, women have loved you; surely now if you go back and mix in politics you will be saved. It little matters that you detest your country. (374)

Following Chelmiak's talk of "scientific Marxism," the narrator interposes: "No, We have escaped all that pagan superstition," pointing out the quotation from Touré about the introduction of science and technology into a colonial society (378-79). A playful addition to the uncertainty that was established earlier about where "we" are, what "we" are doing now, is the certainty about the placement of Gao. "We are definitely

inside Gao . . . Yes, it is obvious, definitely, where we are. One thousand, seven hundred and twenty-six miles to the south lies Uli" (379, 380). At that distance to the south lies the empty South Atlantic Ocean. Until now, the narrator has indicated points of greatest interest and has contributed to the general bewilderment about reality. He is all-knowing yet withholding, a player of games.

Subsequently, after the fourth death of Rusk, "I's" attitude changes. No longer interested in his former dual role of unreliable participant-guide, he disparages the readers' ability to understand and refuses authorial responsibility. This is an unusual twist in point of view, and it is one that yields striking rhetorical results. Following a symbolic passage in which the tongs and skull are found in a red sack beside Rusk's body after the pineapple has exploded, the narrator says: "I am not interested in adjusting your gunsights. The eyes you were born with are clouded by sand" (389). Rusk's death on the basketball court and the inadequate photograph of his body bring the comment: "I am only responsible for the moment" (422). Again, in an interposed account of Jackson and the Creeks, Big Warrior and Shelokta, "I" says:

I am not responsible for that. . . . No, I can carry only so much with my narrative. You too must educate yourself, whorewomen and lepers. You too must prepare your secular scriptures. I insist, I am responsible for nothing more than the moment. (423)

This is the authorial admission of responsibility for the narrative; it is also a denial of responsibility for the readers' interpretation of either the events narrated or analogous American ones. The narrator directs attention once again with "we observe several of the young noblemen" (423), but immediately afterward places himself and his readers inside the narrative: "Yes. Here they are arriving. The colonels have predicted well. I am not too eager to watch them climb down from the dusty bus. I already know who owns the bus . . ." (425).

Yes I will say to the men the phrase they expect, the phrase that has been spoken many times here already. Welcome in the kind name of Allah. What is in your hearts is known to him, therefore make your lives worthy. The voyage is prepared before you. In an hour I will take you to Ali Tattari, who is the honest boatman you have been informed of long before now. But for the moment, seek calm, partake of that which calms the unslaked thirst, think only of the voyage which awaits

you, which searches for you, which lusts for you,
and yet which possesses you tomorrow as it pos-
sesses you yesterday as it possesses you today.
(426)

This closing passage of "In the Fifth City" performs a grammatical and rhetorical trick. Throughout this section, the unidentified "you" has referred to the novel's readers. Here, the group of arriving characters to whom the narrator will speak is "them" until he rehearses his intended speech; then "they" becomes "you." By again placing himself within the events—he will introduce Burr and the others to the (dubious) character Ali Tatari—the narrator proceeds to address his characters as he has been addressing his readers. This shift effects an identification of readers with main characters.

Godfrey's purpose in *The New Ancestors* is not merely to picture foreign interference in the affairs of an African nation and the resulting local confusion. Such a view of fiction is too comfortably familiar to the Western liberal imagination. By using "I" and "we" in the Fifth City section, Godfrey puts himself and his readers in the picture, insisting that guilt for corruption, violence, paranoia, and disruption of tradition be not attributed to "them"—to others—but, rather, personally felt. Without "In the Fifth City," the shift in focus from the characters' point of view to reader-involvement could not be made. Godfrey means readers to understand what they might not otherwise see: through reading they are also observing, and they therefore are as implicated in, and responsible for, the events of the novel as are its politically involved African and Western characters.

The implied author says: "Once the observer becomes a part of the system which he observes, his every measurement distorts that system slightly and renders his data invalid for a second point of time . . ." (366). This statement of a principle of modern scientific thought is used in its context to comment on the confusions that lie ahead if a spy is a double agent. It also hints at the purpose of Godfrey's manipulation of the "I" and the "you" in this section. Yet, the larger purpose of that identification of reader with character moves away from the dualism of Western perception to provide a demonstration of the monistic philosophy of the passage from the *Bhagavad Gita* that stands as epigraph to the Fifth City section:

. . . When he feels the infinite joy of union with
the One, then he sees himself in the heart of all
beings and he sees all being in his heart. And

when he sees me in all and he sees all in me, then
I will never leave him and he never leave me.

(347)

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