Myths of Dominance Versus Myths of Re-Creation in O'Hagan's *Tay John*

Jack Robinson

"I can think of no novel that has got as close to that raw power of myth as O'Hagan's book does," wrote the Canadian poet Michael Ondaatje in 1974.[1] Until then, little had been written about *Tay John* since its first publication in 1939. Only recently have Canadian critics recognized that the novel was far ahead of its time, dramatizing the theory later expounded by Roland Barthes that myth—taken in the broad sense of comprising religious and philosophical preconceptions, legends, stories, social stereotypes, and cultural values—assumes the guise of "natural" or absolute truth, but is really nothing of the kind.[2] In Barthes' terms, O'Hagan has created not a "work" designed to appeal to the presumptions of his culture, but a "text" which gives pleasure by "deconstructing" those premises, especially the world-explaining myth of ideology itself.[3]

This postmodernist awareness underlies the novel's first sentence: "The time of this in its beginning, in men's time, is 1880 in the summer, and its place is the Athabaska Valley, near its head in the mountains, and along the other waters falling into it, and beyond them a bit. . . "[4] The voice here is non-realistic, disembodied, speaking from beyond men's time. Narrowing from this pan-historical long shot in the "Legend" section to the personal testament of narrator Jack Denham in the "Hearsay" section, the field of vision blurs into uncertainty and doubt in the "Evidence—Without a Finding" section. Meaning is constantly deferred, just as the descriptive focus here keeps shifting "beyond."[5]

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[1] "O'Hagan's Rough-Edged Chronicle," *Canadian Literature* 61 (1974): 24.

[2] Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (1973. rpt. New York: Hill, 1975) 31.

[3] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (1957 rpt. New York: Hill, 1972) 11.

[4] Howard O'Hagan, *Tay John* (1939 rpt. Toronto: McClelland, 1974) 11; all further references are to this edition.

[5] "Beyond" is perhaps the operative word in O'Hagan's fictional vocabulary, connoting the constant deferral of meaning and the always impending disappearance of certainty central to his description of landscape to a point beyond the immediate field of vision. In the short opening paragraph of O'Hagan's other novel, *The School-Marm Tree* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1977) 15, four "beyonds" drive home the theme of dreams unfulfilled: "Selva dreamed. Selva was awake, wide,

The opening sentence alludes to the first verse of Genesis: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." The Christian creation myth posits an eternal Great Mind directing the universe, establishing a division between creating Spirit and created Matter. From this division descends an antagonism between spirit and flesh, a conflict portrayed in the tales of two brothers told at the beginning and the end of *Tay John*, bracketing the central story.

A sinner turned saint, Red Rorty exchanges the brothel for the church, burns his possessions, shoots his horses, and sets out to be a missionary. Proud of his booming voice as it echoes in the mountains like Christian soldiers marching onward, he carries to the humble Shuswap the myth of an avenging Messiah who will destroy all who do not believe (24). Rorty's spiritual model, St. Paul, wrote "I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh."[6] But Rorty cannot maintain a Pauline repression of the flesh; he rapes a married woman named Hanni, and is tied to a tree and burned by the tribe's women.[7] A stone is placed in his mouth "as a word he tried to utter." Rorty's preaching has been a verbal rape, a paradigm for the taking of the land and the suppression of the indigenous cultures by the invading white culture. If we consider Jung's analysis of the stone as an archetypal symbol of the soul, the stone in the mouth of the charred skull is an ironic emblem of the soul swallowed in flesh and of the necessary integration of the two in spiritual wholeness.[8]

Like his brother, Father Rorty is undone by the division of body and spirit. He falls in love with Ardith Aeriola and writes her a long letter asserting that she, as mistress to railway magnates, has heeded the cries of her spirit, while he has been a materialist of the cloth, valuing above all the priestly symbols of repressed physical longings. He questions whether Saint Augustine's dictum that "the flesh lusteth against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh" does not deny "the balance that life imposes upon us" (212).

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wide awake—and still she dreamed. She dreamed *beyond* the window by which she sat, waiting for Slim Conway to come up the street, and *beyond* the street and *beyond* the town and far *beyond* the mountains rising above the town" (my italics).

[6] Rom. 7:18. All Biblical references are to the revised Standard Version, Catholic edition (London: Nelson, 1966).

[7] "The parodic Paul who became a parodic John the Baptist now becomes a parodic Saint Sebastian, a grotesque martyr to a crude lapse from a crude faith," writes Arnold E. Davidson in "Silencing the Word in Howard O'Hagan's *Tay John*," *Canadian Literature* 110 (1986): 31.

[8] C. G. Jung, *Man and his Symbols* (London: Aldus, 1964) 205.

Father Rorty seeks to exorcise his doubt by lashing himself to a Y-shaped "school-marm tree" on a hill to feel, for one night, the visionary transcendence of the flesh that Christ felt upon the cross, but the Christian doctrine of revelation through suffering serves him only too well: the leather thongs binding his limbs to the tree contract in the rain, and he cannot escape self-crucifixion through exposure. Narrator Jack Denham sees in the incident the height of spiritual pride—an effort to obtain absolute spiritual knowledge" (219). The text implies that the Christian cross of doubt and guilt is self-imposed.

The self is not eternal duality or essence in the text's postmodernist view.[9] The novel depicts the self as many instead of one, assuming clear meaning only provisionally, taking on one meaning in the perspective of one character or culture, but losing that meaning in a different context: as Jacques Lacan has written, "when the subject appears somewhere as meaning, he is manifested elsewhere as 'fading,' or disappearance."[10]

The flickering meaning of the self is apparent in the legend of Tay John's origins, where the text appropriates a Tsimshian folktale in which a young boy walks miraculously out of the grave of his pregnant mother.[11] In O'Hagan's retelling, the mother is Hanni, who became ill shortly after her rape by Red Rorty. Tay John is apparently the Shuswap Messiah, destined to guide the tribe back to its cousins, the coastal Salish.[12] But he escapes the Indian definition of self to fulfill his halfbreed destiny, leading the Shuswap only part way to their promised land and then leaving them.

A second identity lurks behind that conferred by Shuswap culture. When Tay John fasts and has a vision that will give him his identity as a man, his story is misinterpreted by the Shuswap elders. They assign the bear as his totem animal because its

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[9] Jean Beaudrillard states that such a view of the self as subject makes it "nothing but a miserable wreck, grappling with its own desire or its own image, unable to command a coherent representation of the universe." Quoted in Regis Durand, "On *Aphanisis:* A Note on the Dramaturgy of the Subject in Narrative Analysis," *Lacan and Narration: The Psychoanalytic Difference in Narrative Theory*, ed. Robert Con Davis (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1983) 896.

[10] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. J. A. Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1978) 218.

[11] Diamond Jenness, *The Indians of Canada* (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1932) 195-99. In the original tale, the mythic boy is reluctant to join human society but is persuaded to do so by a ceremonial ablution. In O'Hagan's version, he becomes fully human by acquiring a shadow, symbol of human ignorance; the change aligns the episode with O'Hagan's vision of doubt and meanings deferred.

[12] The historical Shuswap had no Messiah myth, and Tête Jaune, who gave his name to Yellowhead Pass and Tête Jaune Cache, is an Iroquois. John Grierson MacGregor, in *Overland by the Yellowhead* (Saskatoon: Western Producer, 1974) 26-27, tells how "Tête Jaune," an Iroquois, went west with the fur trade, discovered "Yellowhead" pass in 1832, and was finally murdered by local natives.

power befits a leader, but they neglect another "sign" in his report of his visionary experience: "An owl, the soul of a departed woman, was in the tree above me, and my ears, become lonely, were tender to its message" (49). The owl, symbol of woman, will re-appear above his deserted cabin after he has left the tribe and will cry after he has killed the bear, his putative guiding spirit. He will leave the tribe because of a dispute over a woman spoken for by another brave and, from then on, will stalk the fringes of white society in pursuit of woman.

The elusiveness of the self is proclaimed in images of torn hair or fur. In the legendary episode of his miraculous birth, the Shuswap Kwakala tries to hold the boy who has walked out of the grave but grasps "only a few wisps of yellow hair" (38). Ardith Aeriola's story trails behind her, Denham says, "the way a mountain goat, down from the rocks, will leave white tufts of wool caught in the tough brush of the high meadows" (195). 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.

The proliferation of stories, with several characters taking over the narrative briefly, embeds in the text the postmodernist assumption that all reality is fictive. The partial nature of the truth uncovered by every story can be seen in the limited perceptions of two men who represent clumsy, institutional ways of knowing the self. RCMP Inspector Jay Wiggins knows only through fact and logic, and is mildly parodied as he sits in his Edmonton office, "head bowed, hands clasped upon the desktop, as if in reverence before the accumulated and recorded achievements of the force" (248). In his empiricist wisdom, Wiggins dismisses Tay John as a "halfbreed trapper" and Ardith Aeriola as the sort of woman who "draws men like a piece of bad meat draws flies" (252).

For American entrepreneur Alf Dobble, Ardith is a purchasable sexual object, and Tay John an item of local colour to be used in greeting the trainloads of tourists expected to deboard at Dobble's Swiss resort in the Rockies. Dobble's business vision is a grandiose flop; his human vision, a bourgeois dead-end. Jack Denham's comment on the mail-order Aphrodine Girdle which Dobble wears in his failed seduction of Ardith (a satirical symbol of his attitude that human and non-human nature are to be reshaped by technology) is most apt: "Around his head it might have done some good. That was where rejuvenation was needed" (233).

The limited perspectives of Wiggins and Dobble are parts of an incomplete and unreliable narrative. The story told by Jack Denham, an Anglo-Irish remittance man turned guide and packer, is suffused with irony because his perceptions are shaped by his culture's myth of knowing through antagonism and dominance. To subdue the earth and have dominion over it, God created man and sent him forth into the world, Genesis states. Adam subdued nature by naming it: "Adam gave names to all cattle and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field" (Gen. 2:20). When Denham takes over the narrative, he sees the naming parts of the natural landscape as a means of civilizing the land: "Put a name to it, put it on a map, and you've got it. The unnamed, it is the darkness unveiled" (80).

Yet Denham comes to doubt the capacity of his words to get at "the real story" of Tay John. At first zealously adopting the tale "as a gospel to be spread" (77), he later realizes that there is some irreducible mystery in every story:

> Indeed, to tell a story is to leave most of it untold. You mine it, as you take ore from the mountain. You carry the compass around it. You dig down—and when you have finished, the story remains, something beyond your touch, resistant to your seige; unfathomable, like the heart of a mountain. You have the feeling that you have not reached the story itself, but merely assaulted the surrounding solitude. (167)

The text here undermines the realistic certainty that "reality" can be captured in language and fiction; however, Denham can voice this conclusion only in the terms of his cultural prejudices, which portray knowing as a seige or an assault. His metaphors, referring to mining and surveying, are those of white culture imposing itself on nature, or knowing it only as object—the kind of knowing which the text denounces.

From the start, "Jackie's tale" gratifies his culture's vision of a polarized world in which heroes, victories, enemies, and ideals are perfectly clear. By chance, he witnesses an unknown Indian in hand-to-hand combat with a grizzly bear. Having imagined himself in such a drama, Denham places himself in the role of Tay John, projecting his cultural values onto the stranger. Denham sees it as "an epic battle: man against the wilderness" (86). In order to align the savage with the human race, he must name him "Yellowhead": language is again invoked as a weapon in man's dominion over nature. The Indian crawls out from beneath the enormous bear, like one being reborn, Denham says. Yet, the supposed rebirth is highly ambiguous: Tay John has

killed his totem animal and entered a cultural limbo: the epic hero has receded, and the social misfit emerged.

In an amalgam of fictional modes which reflects his creator's effort to find a new form appropriate to the new place and time, Denham idealizes his subject. Initially he perceives Tay John as a peerless romantic hero; then, more and more, as a man different from other men but still a part of common humanity. He wishes to believe Tay John a wilderness man beyond the possession of woman but must see his heroic freedom vanish in the conventionally comic resolution of love. When Tay John and Ardith disappear into nature, Denham cannot simply label them social marginals, as suggested by Wiggins and Dobble; instead, he translates their tale into an existential victory, envisioning a man and a woman who have courageously transcended the proscriptive myths of their cultures to achieve a life of immersion in the now. His story's ending has the tone of modern tragicomedy, presenting a fading into the existential void in the hero and heroine's final merging with the white nothingness of snow, a photographic negative of the general identification of nature with darkness.

The dark eyes of Ardith Aeriola remind us that woman, like nature, is seen by man to represent the unknown. In this parable of sexual roles, woman's wildness and sexual/creative power are tamed and possessed through law and custom. Denham is well aware that, in sexual and other forms of ownership, "Possession is a great surrender"; therefore, woman is a threat to his mythic hero. At the same time, Denham idealizes Ardith as "Essence of Woman," holding out to men a "promise of immortality" (199). The text surrounds these views with irony, suggesting that to know woman as possession, threat, or ideal, is to ignore her human otherness; moreover, surrender to woman is essential to Tay John's destiny of living a fully human life.

The norm of sexual possession is depicted when Julia Alderson returns from camp at dawn, maintaining that Tay John, who has been employed as a guide for the tourist couple, has "imposed himself" on her. The ensuing trial announces the evaluation of Tay John on the social plane, but public inquiry proves inconclusive. Even after Julia withdraws the charges at the trial (which the frontier men assume she had placed out of offended vanity), the text gives no verdict. Tay John, who has become more and more possessed by white possessions—a name, a rifle, a red coat, a horse, perhaps, finally, a woman—rides away from the trial leaving his newly acquired black Stetson spinning on the ground behind him.

Julia's rape accusation is an exception to the rule in *Tay John*; generally, women are acted upon rather than initiating action in the male frontier world, which may be understood as a microcosm of patriarchal culture. It is the men in the novel who live and die by the collection of antagonisms which the text demystifies. The dominance of flesh by spirit is portrayed as a male form of self-torture. The conquest of external nature is a male game. The submission of Indian and Woman, as parts of nature, is enforced by white *man's* culture and white *man's* use of story. *Man* feels that he can alter or reduce the unknown only by aggression, and so he lays seige to it in the form of the wilderness, the Indian, the Woman, the flesh, the self. The division between the masculine and feminine principles in Western culture has been clarified by Marilyn French. The masculine principle, she argues, "is linear, temporal, and transcendent, for it aims to construct something in the world and within time that will enable the individual to transcend nature," whereas the impulses toward simple continuation of present pleasure or surrender to mortality "are associated with the feminine principle, which is identified with nature."[13]

The novel's interrogation of the masculine principle can be seen in its imagery of darkness. The mountain men of the Albertan northwest hoped to transcend their ignorance by some awe inspiring encounter with the unknown, symbolized by darkness. They dreamed of shedding or reshaping their shadows, each man's badge of his rightful earthly ignorance. But it was delusion: the model of knowing upheld in the novel is not that of a revelation of eternal truth in defiance of mortality and natural processes, but of intermittent glimpses of truth, brief transitory flashes of light, as in a landscape lit by lightning.

One of these flashes occurs in the novel's ending. Tay John and Ardith are last sighted by the trapper Blackie in the middle of a frozen lake in a blizzard. Doubled over and stumbing, Tay John pulls behind him on a toboggan the pregnant and dead Ardith, her open mouth filled with snow. Blackie retraces his steps to see if he can help but finds only the toboggan tracks fading into the snow, as if Tay John had walked back into the ground (264). The ending recreates the circumstances of Tay John's miraculous birth, and it asks implicitly whether another mythic being will now walk out of the pregnant mother's grave. The ending is open-ended, suggesting that myth and story are a perennial spiral in space and time, somewhat like Yeat's gyres. *Man* does not dominate nature; rather, *humanity* participates in

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[13] *Shakespeare's Division of Experience* (New York: Ballantine, 1981) 14.

nature's continual recreation through the perpetuation of myth and story.

The mode of being celebrated in the novel is explained in the Taoist concept of *wei wu wei,* meaning action as a part of the natural cycle of life, free from the desire for personal assertion. As is recorded in *Tao Te Ching,* about 1100 B.C. a group of monks lived in the mountains along the Yellow River in North Central China, worshipping nature and writing mystic verses under the communal name of Lao Tzu. They wrote of constancy to the feminine spirit of creation and of devotion to the *unnamable* mother of the world. They described their Ideal Way of life in terms of the stillness and slippery strength of water.[14] In *Tay John,* too, water imagery is the clue to the way of life in accord with the never-ending flow of creation. When Denham watches Tay John fighting the bear, he cannot intervene because of a fast-running river that flows "clear and fresh and *nameless*" (my emphasis), separating him symbolically from the sense of being-in-nature (90). In his extremity, Father Rorty looked down upon Yellowhead Lake, which has been called a symbol for "the instinctive and the subconscious."[15] Denham asks whether, in his last moments, he might not have heard "the sound of running water where men who thirst may drink?" (222). To drink of knowledge is to seek oneness with the instinctual and natural.

If the text proposes an answer, however, it lies, not in a mystical quietism, but in the redeeming acceptance of diverse ways of knowing—in cultural terms, pluralism. The novel challenges social stereotypes by making Tay John, the halfbreed, and Ardith Aeriola, the kept woman of obscure European origins, its hero and heroine. The warning against cultural entropy resonates from the symbolic misnaming of the novel's title. "Tay John" is an anglicization of "Tête Jaune," the name given the hero by three French Canadian prospectors (a parodic three wise men from the East, who take gold and leave behind pestilence and greed). The title is a symbol of painful acculturation.

Despite its cautionary themes, *Tay John* represents the exhilarating moment in which a literary text interrogates the cultural and literary values of the Western tradition and departs from them to reconstruct a new myth that is specific to Alberta, Canada, in the postmodernist era. The old myths dismantled are the Christian division of spirit and flesh, the egocentric self, the use of language and story as means of subduing nature, the pro-

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[14] Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching,* trans. R. B. Blakney (New York: Mentor, 1955). See pages 39, 60, 77, 80, 96, and 105 in particular.

[15] Glenys Stowe, *Journal of Canadian Fiction* 16 (1976): 181.

cess of knowing through intellectual dominance, the myth of the world-dominating male, the centralist and imperialist concepts of culture, and ideology as *teleos.*

The new myth is of a Jungian sense of the soul as an integration of mind and body; of the self as fluid, reactive, mercurial; of fiction as mysterious, defying the paraphrase and bodying itself forth in new forms; of knowing as a matter of "feeling with" rather than solely "thinking about"; of a revaluation of the feminine and how it may rebalance a patriarchal culture; of a cultural pluralism in Canada; and of life as shifting and contrapuntal, silencing all of our Great Truths in its own protean continuance.

Medicine Hat College