

Godfrey's Uncollected Artist

WILLIAM H. NEW

DAVE Godfrey's short story "The Hard-Headed Collector," like all quest stories, promises to unravel mysteries, enflame the heart, and resolve the political problems of the universe. That it has acquired so much notice since it appeared in 1966¹ indicates that many readers have found solid artistic strengths as well as spiritual conundrums in it. But for many others it remains a puzzle. Margaret Atwood comes closest to explicating it when in *Survival* she talks of it as a parable in which the Canadian artist's creativity comes into conflict with and is destroyed by the American social/cultural/individual will to reduce art to a commodity.² Her aim is thematic: to indicate the political/social directions in which Canadian literature moved during the 1960s. There are other subtleties in Godfrey's work itself. The bare bones of anti-American-Imperialist (and anti-Canadian-"colonial") sentiment that Atwood accurately locates in it are draped by wit and literary archetype. Godfrey draws patterns from myth and fairytale, alludes to literary analogues, and integrates them all with his political message in order to write a passionate defence of artistic freedom. The result is a funnier story than might immediately seem possible in the circumstances it describes, and a more complex grasp at understanding Canada's cultural dilemmas.

The story in brief concerns the efforts of a band of seven artists to travel across Canada from the Queen Charlotte Islands off the West Coast to the Bay of Chaleur on the east, to find a promised tree ("Egsdrull")³ for the totem they intend to create. Unconsciously, for as artists they work from an urge to voice their private visions, the totem

will both symbolize and invoke their cultural identity, and all of them are necessary for the task. Piet Catogas, the carver and leader, has with him Pier Dela Ombre, a singer; Torah Black, an engraver; Looky McLaww, a poet; Scrop Calla, a composer; André Mineur, a linguist; and Ole Siuk, a sculptor. Their names suggest the cultural mix on which the Canadian nationality depends; their occupations range through the manifestations of artistry. But one by one they drop from the journey, leaving only Catogas to arrive. Enfeebled by the trip and the loss of the others, he arrives too late and unequipped to complete the task; he dies unfulfilled, and a ship comes mysteriously for his body.

Interrupting the romantic episodes that detail their movements are flat fragments of a newspaper report. In them another story comes clear. A millionaire, Mr. Hirschhorn, has made his money by buying land in Canada (by buying Canada, therefore, and selling it to the highest bidder) and marketing uranium (presumably for destructive as well as creative ends, indiscriminately), while living in the United States. He is reported as saying "*I couldn't do what I did in any other country,*"⁴ and Canada comes off as the patsy in an international con game. Hirschhorn has invested his money hard-headedly in an art collection, which he donates to the American nation; the President responds:

"Washington is a city of powerful institutions — the seat of government for the strongest government on earth, the place where democratic ideals are translated into reality. It must also be a place of beauty and learning, and museums should reflect a people whose commitment is to the best that is within them to dream. We have the elements of a great capital of beauty and learning, no less impressive than its power." (pp. 111-12)

He talks of art not as a creative act, that is, but as an object for collecting and institutionalizing. Moreover, he implicitly links art with political motives and with military (hence potentially destructive) strength. As Piet Catogas is aware, the real power of art is of another, less tangible, kind, but if an artist's society either does not appreciate it or cannot distinguish between creative and destructive spirit, then

the artist himself increasingly becomes an "alienated" exotic.

The tonal contrasts between the sections of the story, then, no less than the explicitly thematic contrasts, spell out the nature of the conflict between Catogas's dream and Hirschhorn's reality. As the technologically useful takes precedence over the beautiful in the life of a society, the profitable and powerful take precedence over the true and the emotionally genuine in its scale of values. In such an environment, heroism becomes less possible, even less admirable, and the heroic romance carries less appeal—which returns us to the story's quest pattern. The mordant, acidulous wit which accompanies each encounter between Catogas's artists and the ordinary people of the country—and that which, at another level, allows for the Hirschhorn intrusions into the progress of the story—serves constantly to distance readers from the central characters and to jog their awareness of the contemporaneity of the fable. When Piet and Ole Siuk at one stage of their journey, for example, are castrated and have their thumbs cut off by a clam-shell, they react almost laconically. Siuk decides to stay:

"Maybe this act of mine will atone in some way. I wouldn't visit us, however, on your way back. I'll probably be married to the woman who collects thumbs."
(p. 112)

And Piet, recalling the most sexually athletic of his companions, "chuckled to himself as he came upon the birch bright sea. 'It's lucky old McLaww didn't make it to that part of the contest. He would have hated me for the rest of his life'" (p. 113). The allegorical suggestion that society castrates its artists provides one interpretation of the passage; more important is the meaning that occurs because of the contrast in tone. The phrase "birch bright sea" carries all the vibrancy of a Maritime folksong like "The Killigrew's Soiree"; juxtaposing it with matter-of-fact phrases about violence intensifies the incongruity, which arouses laughter and horror at the same time. Similarly,

when Piet reaches the lumberyard that is his destination, his despairing cries — eloquent, formal, ritualistic, and artificial — are met only by abrupt colloquialities:

“Father, father, I am a grown man. You promised me Egsdrull. I discovered the Pacific; I fed China for three months; I played poker with Lord Astor; I kissed the dirty Hun’s lady. I courted death. You have forsworn me. Thiefman.”

“Forsworn you, my ass. Terms is terms. There it is in black and white. Ninth of May or all terms void.”
(p. 114)

The differences in rhythm give voice to a clash between a conservative code of values and an apparently less formal but much more enslaving system of expediencies. What had seemed chivalry turns out to have been merely expansionist policy. We greet the characters’ bizarre situations with laughter, but that laughter throws us promptly back into reality, where equally bizarre confrontations prove more serious and more searing.

This is no *escape* into romance, in other words; it is a deliberate venture into artifice in order to probe the functions of the imagination. The characters are flat because the author is not concerned with elaborately explaining the motivations for their actions. Instead he observes that his characters exist and act. Their significance is not to be found by trying to understand their behaviour, which would implicitly make them empirically “real,” but by acknowledging the artifice of the art object through which they move, the patterns which give them their shape and substance. To do so is neither to deny art vitality nor to reduce it to a collectible commodity; it is to insist that whatever realities art envisions, it communicates indirectly, and that those realities differ in kind from the materials that go into its making. The distinction between the ‘heroic’ (unreal) Catogas and the ‘real’ (unheroic) Hirschhorn is drawn once more.

To say that Godfrey does not explain his characters’ motivations is not to say that they are absolutely unmoti-

vated. Each time one of the artists leaves Catogas, he has a reason. Pier Dela Ombre, for example, drawn by appetites of various kinds to food and family, accepts an appeal to security; he responds to Katrina's offer of a tent and herself:

"We will give you your own tent And a complete set of the *European Encyclopedia*, and after twenty years' service a golden shovel. Which will no doubt help to make you feel glorious as you clear away the blizzards from your door or clean out the many ashes from your stove. Around here we have very little anthracite." (p. 104)

Blackmail enter the process of persuasion, too, and the sardonic tone is gloriously maintained. But out of everything, Pier acquires immediate (and paternalistic) recognition of the knowledge he already possesses, and a long-range security; he walks "in the gentle circle of one who is uncaringly lost," (p. 105) and surrenders the quest for the unknown, imaginable only, artistic truth.

Torah Black, by comparison, is attracted by battle and gives himself over to causes and faction; Looky McLaw abandons himself to sexuality; Scrop Calla turns mystical and calls "I know, I know, I know" to a crowd of people hungry for answers (of any kind) to assuage their own uncertainties; André Mineur perverts his talents in madness; and Ole Siuk resigns himself to conformity in order somehow to do penance for his family's difference. All such decisions describe temptations that are open to artists, and the choices read like a gloss on the catalogue of failed poets in Abraham Klein's "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape," who:

set twenty-one jewels
into their watches; the time they do not tell!

Some, patagonian in their own esteem,
and longing for the multiplying word,
join party and wear pins, now have a message,
an ear, and the convention-hall's regard.
Upon the knees of ventriloquists, they own,
of their dandled brightness, only the paint and board.

And some go mystical, and some go mad.
 One stares at a mirror all day long, as if
 to recognize himself; another courts
 angels — for here he does not fear rebuff;
 and a third, alone, and sick with sex, and rapt,
 doodles him symbols convex and concave.

O schizoid solitudes! O purities
 curdling upon themselves! Who live for themselves,
 or for each other, but for nobody else;
 desire affection, private and public loves;
 are friendly, and then quarrel and surmise
 the secret perversions of each other's lives.⁵

Only Catogas is left, apparently powerless without the talents of all the others with him. Like the prince in the fairy tale who in order to meet the challenges that will win him a princess needs his five servants — men who variously can see and hear all in the world, stretch to great heights, eat enormous quantities, and shiver in intense heat — Catogas to fulfill his quest must meet:

“seven terms: shape an axe, sing its joints, engrave its shaft, bless its point, name it in ten tongues, knit soul and intent, determine where lies its enemy.” (p. 113)

His companions could have aided him; without them he is still left with the riddle. If he still wants as it were to be Arthur, to prove his Kingship by pulling Excalibur from the stone, he is not allowed the opportunity:

“Put that axe in my hands, and show me the tree, show me Egsdrull, and God himself will not be able to catch the bloody chips.”
 “Terms is terms,” the manager said. (p. 113)

Again the colloquial voice intervenes to provoke our sensibilities. The romantic archetypes and analogues run head-on into laconic, unimaginative, unimpassioned, pragmatic practicality. Catogas's society follows rules, values technical efficiency and immediate application, and again we are made conscious of the way in which an artist's quest is thwarted.

The word “quest” is deliberate here, for Godfrey has explicitly patterned his story on that romantic/heroic form. The mythic journey, the riddle-like Egsdrull, the terms to

be satisfied, the reliance on companions, the episodic structure, the exaggeration, the dislocation (perhaps even spatializing) of time, the sense of abrupt conflict, and the strange customs to be survived — all emerge directly from the quest tradition. But what the quest heroes have in common is their commitment not only to discover the perfection they seek, but also to return to the land from which they came, somehow revitalizing it in the process. Catogas knows this from the start:

“We are on our way to a strange land and there is not one man I can afford to lose. We have the return journey on our minds too.” (p. 103)

But Godfrey's controlled reversals advise us also from the start that all is not well. For one thing the direction is wrong. North American literature and historical analogues force their questors to head westwards, to explore the wilderness and discover new land; Catogas's eastward search of already 'civilized' land utters auguries of paralysis and disaster.

But these are not necessarily auguries of absolute failure. Godfrey appends to the beginning of his story a hexagram from the *I Ching*:



It is the *K'un* symbol of the empty lake: oppression and exhaustion. “The upper trigram [*tui*, the lake] belongs to the principle of darkness, the lower [*K'an*, water] to the principle of light. Thus everywhere superior men are oppressed and held in restraint by inferior men.”⁶ Aptly the description both summarizes Catogas's dilemma and explains the apparent authority of Hirschhorn, the President, and the Manager of the lumberyard. But the commentary on the symbol explains further:

Times of adversity are the reverse of times of success,
But they can lead to success if they befall the right

man. When a strong man meets with adversity, he remains cheerful despite all danger, and this cheerfulness is the source of later successes; it is that stability which is stronger than fate. He who lets his spirit be broken by exhaustion certainly has no success. But if adversity only bends a man, it creates in him a power to react that is bound in time to manifest itself. No inferior man is capable of this. Only the great man brings about good fortune and remains blameless. It is true that for the time being outward influence is denied him, because his words have no effect. Therefore in times of adversity it is important to be strong within and sparing of words.⁷

Such an assertion explains Catogas's good humour and provides a counter-point to the story's political message. Rejecting an artist does not silence art, and in its art a culture survives.

Indeed, for the story to have ended with its political message, condemning the purchase of Canada and rattling slogans just like Hirschhorn's President, would have been unfaithful to its central commitment to the *imaginative* force of art. Godfrey is certainly concerned that art carry meaning, that (as in traditional African culture, for example⁸) the artist not be peripheral to his society but centrally involved in invoking its mores. But he is also concerned that any message art carries, any function it serves, be embodied in the art form rather than merely attached to it — hence his careful control over the shape and tone of "The Hard-Headed Collector" and his implicit demand that we respond to its particular detail. The story ends not with Catogas's death, nor with the negative Presidential acceptance of the Hirschhorn art collection, but with the observation:

In the mornings he slept later and later. He would have been fired on the morning he died if ever he had reached the yard where men sorted the sixteen-foot one-by-sixes into four grades without a passing glance at the ship which came for his body. (p. 115).

The point about Catogas is that he remains the true artist, that he is capable of the quest for truth while others are locked in and blinded by the world of measurements, and

that his artistry is demonstrated by the quest itself even though he does not immediately fulfill his dream.

The story's method demands an archetypal as well as an allegorical interpretation of the final sentence, however. Traditionally the sea is the symbol of rebirth. For Catogas the story claims directly no such new life. Allowing him to drift off vaguely in the direction of Europe, it seems as though Godfrey might even ironically be exiling him further from Canadian culture. But just as the quest has re-fashioned many standard images of Canadian life and history (totem-carving, ice-fishing, horseback-riding, folksong-singing, and so on), so now the appearance of the boat to take Catogas out to sea recapitulates a recurrent image in Canadian literature.

Piet, that is, is not only taken out into what Irving Layton calls "the cold green element,"⁹ he also becomes a version of Duncan Campbell Scott's "Piper of Arll," who after glimpsing the mysteries of art is frustrated by his apparent inability to shape them, who distractedly breaks his reed then — only to mend it again and become "master of passion and of power." Though governed by time, that is, the piper, relinquishing ego, can find an identity in art that declares his enduring artistry:

He was his soul and what he played,
Immortal for a happy hour
And then at evening came the bark
That stirred his dreaming heart's desire
The sailors launched a sombre boat,
And bent with music at the oars
They laid him down within the ship,
They loosed a rocket to the sky
And down she sank till, keeled in sand,
She rested safely balanced true,
With all her upward gazing band,
The piper and the dreaming crew.¹⁰

Even more closely parallel, in light of his companions' earlier fate, Piet Catogas becomes an example of Abraham Klein's true poet, who at the end of "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape":

makes of his status as zero a rich garland,
 a halo of his anonymity,
 and lives alone, and in his secret shines
 like phosphorus. At the bottom of the sea.¹¹

Implicitly by his image and narrative form, that is, Godfrey links his cultural questor not just to a universal archetype but to a specific set of Canadian instances of it. Function and form thus come together. By harmonically sounding Canadian analogues, Godfrey passionately proclaims the viability of his culture's continuity. If his tone is tempered by his sardonic observation of social realities, that only intensifies his artistic conviction, and if his story inhales with indignation and glitters with mordant wit, it never despairs. Out of a fragmenting world, he manages to construct a testament to the enduring and unifying capacities of art and a celebration of the will to persist.

NOTES

- ¹In *Tamarack Review*, (Summer 1966), 3-14, and then as the concluding story of *Death Goes Better With Coca-Cola*, winning the University of Western Ontario President's Medal for the best story of 1967; it has been anthologized at least twice since, in Rudy Wiebe's *The Story-Makers* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1970), pp. 283-04 and in W. H. New's *Four Hemispheres* (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1971), pp. 389-98.
- ²Margaret Atwood, *Survival* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972), pp. 239-41.
- ³The name seems to be a variant of Yggdrasil, which in Norse mythology is the "Tree of the Universe", an ash tree which joins heaven, earth, and hell, and whose three separate roots variously extend to a dragon who gnaws at it, to the well of wisdom, and to the judgment seat of the gods. It is equated also to the principle of creativity. As a prelude to the disintegration of the universe, the World-Ash begins to shudder, but though the Norse myths predict its fall, they do not specify the agency that will fell it. See Brian Branston, *Gods of the North* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1965), pp. 79-85.
- ⁴Dave Godfrey, "The Hard-Headed Collector," in *Death Goes Better With Coca-Cola* (Toronto: Anansi, 1967), p. 105. All subsequent references are to this ed.
- ⁵In C. F. Klinck and R. E. Watters, eds., *Canadian Anthology* (Toronto: Gage, rev. ed., 1966), p. 342.
- ⁶*The I Ching or Book of Changes*, trans. by Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 3rd ed., 1968, copyright 1950), p. 181.

⁷Ibid., pp. 181-82.

⁸Godfrey's appreciation of West African culture is revealed in his novel *The New Ancestors* (Toronto: New Press, 1970).

⁹Milton Wilson, in "Klein's Drowned Poet: Canadian Variations on an Old Theme", links the Layton, Scott, and Klein poems I mention here with several other Canadian poems and with the work of Shelley and Arnold. See *Canadian Literature*, 6 (Autumn 1960), 5-17.

¹⁰*Canadian Anthology*, pp. 151-53.

¹¹Ibid., p. 344.

ARIEL: AUSTRALIAN AND NEW ZEALAND ISSUE

In keeping with the editorial policy of ARIEL to assign at least one number per year, usually the third number, to a special area of literature or to a special author, it has been decided that Volume 5, Number 3 (to be published in July 1974) will be devoted to Australian and New Zealand literature. We should like this critical survey to be as comprehensive as possible and therefore invite, for consideration, articles on Australian and New Zealand literature.

We invite also poems for this issue which will contain an extra poetry section.

The next number, Volume 4, Number 4, to be published in October 1973, will be a general issue.