

D. M. R. Bentley

The Wide Circle and Return: *Tay John* and Vico

The most obvious structural feature of Howard O'Hagan's *Tay John* (1939) is its division into three parts: "Legend," "Hearsay," and "Evidence—without a finding." These divisions are accompanied by some intriguing shifts in narrative mode. The first part of the novel, "Legend," is told from an omniscient perspective in a manner that frequently recalls the King James version of the Bible ("He stayed with them, and the people were glad, for they believed that he was a great man" [23]). This narrative mode is briefly continued at the beginning of Part 2, but the remainder of "Hearsay" is recounted in the first person by Jack Denham in a self-reflexive manner that frequently calls attention to narrative matters ("Do you see what I mean?" The "social function" of a "backwoodsman" is "to hand on what he has heard, with the twist his fancy has been able to add" [78, 114]). Denham continues to narrate the third part of the novel, "Evidence—without a finding," but now with less emphasis on what he himself has seen and heard than on the stories of various others ("Some of the words, as I have repeated them, may be mine—the gist is his" [216]). It thus seems quite clear that *Tay John* is a novel in which structure and "style" as well as "themes" are "sensitively linked" (Ondaatje, "Afterword" 271). But on what basis and to what end?

The answer proposed here is that the tripartite structure and stylistic shifts of *Tay John* as it moves from the Shuswaps, to the backwoods, to urban culture reflect the three ages that Giambattista Vico discerned in each of the recurring cycles of human history—the "age of the gods," the

"age of the heroes," and the "age of men" (20). According to Vico's analysis or "emplotment"¹ of human history in the *Scienza Nuova* (3rd. ed., 1744), each of these three stages has its own type of government and jurisprudence ("theocratic," "aristocratic," and "civil" [339]), as well as its own mode of expression: "[t]he first . . . hieroglyphic, sacred or divine; the second, symbolic, by signs or by heroic devices; [and] the third, epistolary, for men at a distance to communicate to each other the current needs of their lives" (140). By explicit analogy with individual human organisms,² each of Vico's tripartite cycles (*corsi*) enacts a process of growth, maturity, decline, and return to divine origins (*recorso*). Thus the "rise [and] progress" of a culture is followed by its "decadence . . . dissolution," and, beginning the whole process again, its providentially decreed entry into "new divine times" of "primitive simplicity" (415, 399, 424). To students of twentieth-century literature, Vico's ages and cycles are probably best known as the "paradigm" behind the Nestor episode in Joyce's *Ulysses* (Klein 346). They also lie centrally in the background of Northrop Frye's thinking, both in *The Great Code*, which "begins with an avowal of the importance of Vico for his current work" (Bahti 119), and in the *Anatomy of Criticism*, where the "high mimetic" mode of fiction belongs to the "age of the gods" and the "low mimetic" mode to the "age of men" (33-60).³

No English translation of Vico was available to O'Hagan when he wrote *Tay John* in the 1930s, and nor was one necessary. Competent enough in Romance languages to work in Buenos Aires (a substantially Italian city) in the early 1930s and to live in Sicily from 1964 to 1974,⁴ he could have read the *Scienza Nuova* and other writings by Vico either in the original Italian or in the French translations of Jules Michelet (1835, 1839). Not only did the 1744 edition of the *Scienza Nuova* become available in 1928 in Fausto Nicolini's magisterial edition of Vico's works (1911-41), but there was also a growing interest in the Neopolitan philosopher in the surrounding decades: R. G. Collingwood's translation of Croce's *Philosophy of Giambattista Vico* appeared in 1913; C. E. Vaughan's *Studies in the History of Political Philosophy, Before and After Rousseau*, which contains a lengthy chapter on Vico, appeared in 1925; and H. P. Adams's *The Life and Writings of Giambattista Vico* appeared in 1935. Also available was Robert Flint's *Vico* (1884) and a number of discussions of Vico's political, legal, and aesthetic ideas,

including D. C. Heron's *Introduction to the History of Jurisprudence* (1860) and George Sorel's "Etude sur Vico" in *Le Devenir Social* (1896). Since O'Hagan studied law at McGill University in the late 1920s, it is possible that his preliminary or even primary interest in Vico was as a philosopher of law. This would not be inconsistent with the emphasis on crimes and remedies in *Tay John* and, indeed, it highlights the extent to which the novel deals with the interconnectedness of legal and cultural matters.

Part 1: Legend

In the first part of *Tay John*, O'Hagan's account of the Shuswap band who look for leadership to the man whom they call "Kumkleseem, for his yellow head" (40) coincides closely with Vico's "age of the gods." "In this age," writes Flint,

man . . . was rude, fierce, emotional; endowed with a strong sense of the presence of the divine, although incapable of conceiving of it except as in visible things and forms; and gifted with an unregulated but vigorous and creative imagination. It was the age in which the family was instituted, in which language originated, in which myths were produced, and in which the chief rudiments of civilisation were brought to light. . . . Unable as yet to distinguish otherwise than most vaguely between the physical and the spiritual, or between things and thoughts, men in the primeval age regarded the phases and aspects of nature as themselves divine existences or divine actions, and conceived of the creations of their own imaginations as corporeal animated realities. (218)

As depicted by O'Hagan with the help of various authorities and compendia, including *The Golden Bough* and, as he acknowledges, Diamond Jenness's *Indians of Canada*,⁵ the Shuswaps are certainly "endowed with [the] strong sense of the divine" that characterizes the "age of the gods." "Believ[ing] that the world [is] made of things they [cannot] touch or see" (29),⁶ they regard all animals as possessed of a "spirit" that must be honored and placated for hunts to be successful. Kumkleseem perceives an "owl [as] the soul of a departed woman" (49) and, after his visionary sojourn at the head of the "dark river," he is informed by Squeleken, "the oldest . . . and . . . most wise" of the "old men," that "[t]he bear-spirit will be [his] guardian spirit" and "talk" to [him] with a man's voice" (49-

50). When a member of the band is sick, "Kwakala, who was the farthest on in his magic" (38), makes a "likeness of the sickness and burn[s] it" (34). Anxious and curious in the face of natural phenomena that all people of the "age of the gods" believe to be divine, the Shuswaps find "satisfaction in divination . . . [and] mythology," regarding dreams and visions "as indications of the will of the Deity" (Flint 219) and the arrival of Kumklessem as the fulfilment of "their belief that one day a leader would come among them—a tall man . . . with yellow hair, and lead them back over the mountains to their cousins, the Salish tribes along the coast, from whom in the first place they stemmed" (21-22). That the journey to "the great green meadow" in the mountains (62) which partly fulfils this prophecy entails the death of three members of the band ("[t]hree times they stayed to mourn. Three more graves they left behind them") is but one of the many instances of the use of suggestive numbers (three, four, twelve) in the first part of the novel to imbue Shuswap culture with religious and mythical resonances.⁷

In a "revolt against . . . [the] individualism" of the Reformation, Vico held that "the first stage in the 'long education of the human race'" occurred with "the birth of the religious instinct and, with it, the Family" (Vaughan 1: 252, 213). Civilization began when men, in fear of the "divinity" that they apprehended in thunder, took refuge in shelters with "certain women . . . in religious and chaste carnal unions . . . solemnized marriages . . . begat certain children and so founded families" (Vico 9). In accordance with Vico's view of mankind's fundamentally "civic" nature (Vaughan 1: 252), the Shuswaps regard "We" as the "greatest magic" (44), and, as the interloper Red Rorty discovers to his great cost after raping Swamas's wife Hanni, they hold that "a woman ha[s] one man and a man one woman and no other" (27). The Viconian idea of the "monastic Family" (Vaughan 2: 213) and, with it, Vico's insistence that primitive people are "sociable," "religious, truthful, . . . faithful," "temperate," "strong, industrious, and magnanimous" (424, 176), finds expression in the code of conduct by which the Shuswaps live: "it [is] bad to speak untruthfully, to steal, to be lazy, to lie with a woman till she ha[s] become [one's] own, or to boast if [one] is not a great man" (45). "We have our way with women that each man may know he lies with his own and not where another may lie," explains Tis-Kwinit; "[i]f the usage of time be not respected, and the mark of a man on a woman mean

nothing, then each man must fight for his woman and the fathers of children will be nameless" (66). The torture and burning of Red Rorty by the women and children of the band is a manifestation of the "admixture of religion and cruelty" that Vico finds among cultures in the "age of the gods" (176-8).

The "mark" of betrothal to which Tis-Kwinit refers is earlier conferred upon Zohalat's daughter Shwat by the hunter Memhaias. After "paint[ing] on his back his dream-spirit—an eagle with a spear"—he "look[s] upon her," "touche[s] her breasts and point[s] an arrow against her belly," these being "signs" that she will "understand" (64). Like Tis-Kwinit's "mark," Memhaias's spirit-painting and courtship "sign" accord with Vico's theory that in the "age of the gods" symbolic representation takes the form of "pantomimic signs, an imperfect form of language to which correspond[s] an imperfect form of writing, the sacred or hieroglyphic" (219). As Vico explains, the first language "was a divine mental language by mute religious acts or divine ceremonies, from which there survived in Roman law the *actus legitimi* which accompanied all . . . civil transactions" (340). To express his competing attraction to Shwat, Tay John also employs a "language . . . [of] natural signification," a "gesture" which has a "natural relation . . . with ideas" (Vico 139): "where all who [are] watching might see, he lift[s] her skirt and rip[s] open her breech clout" (64). The fact that for less ceremonial occasions the Shuswaps use a "difficult and distinct" language that is "not ready with big words" (20-21) accords with Vico's view that all languages begin, as do children, with "monosyllables" (77), as, of course, does their naming of Tay John metonymically by the color of his hair, for, as Vico states, the use of metonymy in the "age of the gods" is "due to inability to abstract forms and qualities from subjects" (130).

In one of the several references to the New World in the *Scienza Nuova*, Vico observes that, had "they . . . not been discovered by the Europeans," the "American Indians" would have continued to follow the same laws of social development as other cultures (414). With the removal of the Shuswaps to the high Rockies towards the end of the first part of *Tay John*, their gradual development through Vico's three stages once again becomes a possibility, albeit one that is scarcely sustained by the novel's emphasis on the westerly movement of European culture. For Tay John himself, however, the future is very different: the mysteriously

delivered son of Hanni and Red Rorty, he has a partial affinity for Europeans that begins to manifest itself when he guides two prospectors to the "dark river" and receives in return a "rifle, . . . bullets, [a] red coat," and "the new name of *Tête Jaune*" (55). With his insistence on being called by a white name that soon becomes corrupted to the non-metonymic "*Tay John*" (55), he begins to stand apart from the Shuswaps both racially and ethically: "[h]is yellow hair marked his different birth. His rifle was his own and no man could touch it. His red coat was a sign of the white man's favour" (56). In Viconian terms, Tay John's emblematic "red coat" is also an "heroic blazoning" which, like a "family . . . coat of arms," proclaims the identity and ownership of its wearer (340, 161-4) and, in so doing, indicates his movement from the "age of the gods" into the "age of the heroes." That movement occurs physically when, after a bloody fight with Memhais which itself recalls Vico's notion that "duels" began in the "barbarous period" and continued under the "heroic commonwealth" (354), Tay John finds his isolation from the Shuswaps complete and attaches himself to the advancing European culture.

Part 2: Hearsay

Just as Red Rorty's tendency to see trees as men and his espousal of apocalyptic Christianity (14-19) makes him an appropriate presence in the first part of *Tay John*, so Jack Denham's aristocratic connections—his family owns "a great white house in the north of Ireland" (75)—make him an appropriate narrator for the portion of the novel that is homologous to the "age of the heroes." "Government," writes Flint of the "heroic age," "was aristocratic; law was based on the force of the heroes, who were, however, controlled by . . . fear of the gods; . . . in ceremonies, compacts, and judicial procedure, a scrupulous and religious regard was paid to particular words and formulae" (223). Flint also notes that, "while the mythological language of the divine age was largely retained" in the "age of the heroes," it was supplemented not only by "heraldic emblems and devices" but also by "metaphors and comparisons in . . . articulated speech" (222). It is surely not fortuitous that most of the second part of *Tay John* consists of "articulated speech"—the "web of words" that is known in Edmonton as "Jackie's Tale" (77). In this context, "hearsay" is both a legal and a narratological term that nicely

captures the split between language ("names") and reality ("things") which, according to Vico, came with the "abstract forms" of the "age of the heroes" (130-1).

In his capacity as a surveyor for the Grand Trunk Pacific railway, Denham is a mapper and a namer who continually reveals his awareness of the power and limitations of words. "I found myself saying 'Yellowhead,'" he says of his first encounter with Tay John, "'Yellowhead.' I had to give him a name so that I could help him—morally, you know. I had to align him with the human race. Without a name no man is an individual, no individual wholly a man" (86-87). Denham is also much given to similes and metaphors; "[a] new mountain valley leads a man on like that—like a woman he has never touched" (80), he says at one point, and at another, "[Tay John] waited . . . immobile as—well, immobile as an idol" (106). When Denham first sights Tay John across a stream that has "teeth in it" (like an animal or a saw), he senses that this "tall . . . Indian . . . [with] . . . full . . . thick . . . yellow" hair is more than he seems: "there was something, it is hard to say, something abstract about him—as though he were a symbol of some sort or other. He seemed to stand for something. . . . [H]is muscles across his body . . . represented strength in the abstract" (83). As if elaborating Flint's comment that in the "heroic age . . . types of character were personified as individuals,—e.g., . . . heroism in Hercules, and poetry in Homer" (223)—Denham conceives Tay John as a "type" of physical strength and himself as merely the teller of tales told by "innumerable others" (114). (Vico, it may be recalled, initiated the hypothesis that "[t]he great representative and type of a heroic poet"—Homer—was not an "individual genius" but the name appended to the collected wisdom and mythology of a "marvellous age" [Flint 222, and see Vico 301-32].) After the resonantly Herculean⁸ Tay John kills the bear that he has been fighting across the stream from Denham, he follows what the reader knows to be Shuswap custom by placing its severed head in the "crotch of a tree" (89). Not only does Denham fail to appreciate the placatory significance of this act, but he also interprets the preceding struggle abstractly or, to use two of Frye's terms for the dominant mode of "verbal expression" in the "heroic age," allegorically or analogically (*Great Code* 5-8): "man had been created anew before my eyes. Like birth itself it was a struggle against the powers of darkness, and Man had won" (88). It is entirely consistent

with the correspondence between the second part of *Tay John* and the "age of the heroes" that although Denham recognizes nothing spiritual about the hoot of an owl (90), he determinedly casts Tay John himself in the "heroic mould," seeing in him "some hint of a destiny . . . that . . . ma[kes] him stand . . . taller and his yellow hair . . . shine . . . brighter" (101).

An increasingly obvious pattern of allusions to Arthurian legend amplifies the heroic and aristocratic resonances of the second part of the novel. Above Colin McLeod's bed in the cabin where much of the action of "Hearsay" takes place hangs "a large print of a girl, veiled in mists of modesty, who was always about to step into a fresh and bubbling pool, by whose sides the grass was forever green, the trees eternally in leaf, and the sky above steadfastly blue" (96). Very likely a reproduction of a mythological scene by an artist such as Poussin or Burne-Jones, this print is treated as if real by the representationally naïve Tay John (who sometimes "stands in front of [it] . . . saying nothing, just staring, and run[ning] his fingers over it" [100]), but to the reader, as to McLeod, it fits neatly into the Arthurian pattern that gathers momentum when Tay John spots the piratical Timberlake's "cream-coloured" "sorrel mare" standing in "new green grass" and, Denham imagines, sees her not just "as more than a horse" but as the horse "on which he would ride to his destiny like a warrior to the wars" (102-3, 106). After failing to win the mare in a card draw,⁹ Tay John again reveals his naïve literalism *and* the physical violence of the "age of the heroes" by obeying the biblical injunction that "[i]f a hand offend you . . . cut it off" (109). Predictably, this gruesome act of self-mutilation prompts Timberlake to bequeath the mare to Tay John. As a "possession" *per se* and as the possession that draws him down from the high country to the "eastern slopes of the [Athabasca] valley" (113, 118), Timberlake's mare is both an instance and the agent of Tay John's movement across the rubicon—Denham's saw-toothed creek and, later, the Athabasca River—between the "age of the gods" and the "age of the heroes." Little wonder that when Tay John nearly drowns in the Athabasca while "hanging on to his horse's tail" the incident prompts an allusion to Arthurian legend: on seeing Tay John's "hand lifted" and shining in the "moonlight," recalls a witness, "[he] would not have been surprised . . . if out of it a sword had been brandished before [his] eyes" (124, 125).

That witness is, of course, Arthur Alderson, the English engineer whose restless wife Julia fulfils the Arthurian pattern intimated by McLeod's print and Timberlake's mare by playing Guinevere to Tay John's Lancelot. When a startlingly "transform[ed]" Tay John reappears at McLeod's cabin wearing a "black high-crowned Stetson" and riding a "pinto . . . with . . . white-rimmed eyes, and arched neck" (119), he resembles both a medieval knight and an American cowboy. With her "white horse," her "high-heeled riding boots," and her aristocratically "purple bow" and "purple haze of . . . perfume" (120-1, 129), Julia Alderson similarly combines the two heroic types of the cowgirl and the medieval lady. Not surprisingly, she is soon labelled a "'United Stater'" (121) and later reminds the men at McLeod's cabin of "pictures from old books of castles and knights with banners . . . a wandering and abandoned Lady Godiva" (142).

These heroic associations are made explicit after Julia returns from spending a night on the mountain with Tay John and before she makes the accusation that he has "imposed himself on [her]" (145). The response of Arthur and her admirer Ed to this charge is predictably irate, but against their vengeful impetuosity calmer heads prevail. "The people to handle this . . . are the police, the North-West Mounted," says the Aldersons' cook Charlie, who later expresses privately his belief that the lack of any sign of violent struggle ("there wasn't a mark on her") does not support Julia's accusation of rape (146). Moreover, Charlie is "impressed by the fact that as the days [go] on it [is] Alderson, more than Julia, who desire[s] to bring Tay John to what he call[s] 'justice'" (147). Nevertheless, two Mounties—Tatlow and Porter—bring Tay John down to face his accusers in a scene that resembles a more formal legal proceeding: Tatlow, playing the role of judge, sits at a table scattered with papers; Porter, "Tay John's advocate" (151), stands by the side of the accused; Julia reluctantly makes a statement and Tay John steps forward to assert his integrity (154). After the hearing, Alderson apologizes to Tay John, but Tay John pushes him aside and, discarding his emblematic "black Stetson," rides "into the mist and distance" (156). All this is very different from Red Rorty's treatment by the Shuswaps, and it accords closely with Vico's definition of "heroic jurisprudence" as a cautious process involving "the use of certain proper words" and "taking care or making sure" (343). As Denham puts it at the beginning

of Part 3: "Tay John had met the new—the world of authority and discipline moving with the railway into the mountains" (161).

Part 3: Evidence—Without a Finding

In Vico's scheme, the "age of men" encompasses both the "maturity" and the "decadence" of human culture: at its close the historical cycle completes itself and ushers in "the . . . new divine times" (398-9). Not only does the Viconian idea of *corsi* and *recorsi* help to account for Denham's suggestion that in meeting "the new" Tay John has encountered "the memory of an earlier authority and discipline" but it may also lie behind his ensuing assertion that "there is nothing new . . . nothing really new in the sense of arrival in the world unless an odd meteor here and there. . . . To-day was implicit in time's beginning. All that is, was" (161). Moreover, the markedly neoplatonic quality of Denham's subsequent meditation on human life—"[s]ometimes when we are older there is a glimpse. It appears we are returning. We have made the circle" (162)—may also derive partly from Vico, for, as Adams points out, the Viconian assumption that "[t]hroughout the . . . universe there is a perpetual tendency to return to its divine source" owes a considerable debt to Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, and other proponents of "the neoplatonic doctrine of emanation" (34-35). "Men walk upon the earth in light, trailing their shadows that are the day's memories of the night," intones Denham; "[o]ur life, our brief eternity, our to-day is but the twilight between our yesterday and our to-morrow" (162).¹⁰

What, then, are the characteristics of the "age of men" that signal the achieved maturity and incipient "dissolution" of a culture? Perhaps the most direct approach to this question is through Vico's argument that, "as myths fade away and are forgotten" in the "age of men," the religious instinct that had been present at the inception of the historical cycle is both "purified" in its dedication to "diffusing morality" and fatally weakened by "scepticism, and . . . philosophy" (Flint 224). That natural phenomena have relatively few mythological overtones in O'Hagan's equivalent of the "age of men" becomes clear soon after Denham resumes his narration in Part 3: a "splash" in Yellowhead Lake is caused merely by a "beaver's tail" or a jumping fish, and "the hoot of [a] great horned owl" has much the same status as a "shout" or a "man's laugh" from the nearby village or the brothel across the water (165). The task of keeping

men from this brothel—of "diffusing morality"—falls to Red Rorty's younger brother, a Roman Catholic priest whose very name—Thomas—indicates the dubious nature of his religious faith. "He was a man of faiths, this Father Rorty," explains Denham; "[h]e could not believe that his brother was still alive, yet he had faith that he might be" (186). An aesthete who quotes Keats (188), enthuses over sunsets (187), and holds that "[w]ithout the Cross our Saviour's life would not be beautiful" (188), Father Rorty is a "realist" and a "material[ist]" (184, 211) who is prone to hysteria (208) and cupidity (213). In a self-conscious and masochistic imitation of the crucifixion, he ascends one of the mountains near Yellowhead Lake, ties himself naked to a "school-marm tree," and, forgetting that the "rain [will] shrink the ropes till he [cannot] escape" (222) dies with "[f]roth on his lips" (221).¹¹ Taken together, two of Denham's comments on Father Rorty's death—" [P]riestly arrogance could go no further" and "[O]ur fathers worshipped trees. I think I understand" (218-9)—resonate with the Viconian idea of a return to "barbaric times" at the conclusion of an historical cycle (398). The fact that before indulging in his self-serving *imitatio Christi* Father Rorty writes a long letter confessing a Pauline and Augustinian inner conflict of "flesh" and "spirit" (210-16) also gathers significance from Vico's theory that the language of the "age of men" is both epistolary ("for men at a distance to communicate") and alphabetical (as in "Dobble . . . [with] two *b*'s in it").¹²

The recipient of this letter and the object of Rorty's attempt to reconcile sacred and profane love is Ardith Aeriola, a woman of central European origin who exercises an almost universal appeal to men on the frontier because, by Denham's analysis, she represents in "idealised" form "all that they ha[ve] left behind" (195, 204). Part of Denham's explanation of the appeal of this *fin-de-siècle allumeuse* could stand as a gloss on the third part of the novel: "I remembered . . . that woman was the death of heroes and the destruction of heroes' work—but heroes, those vulnerable men, are gone from the earth, and woman's power therefore no longer what it was" (192; but, perhaps, in the process of becoming so again). Although capable of being "idealised," Ardith Aeriola does not suggest "symbolic" or "abstract" qualities as did Tay John and even Julia Alderson in Part 2; on the contrary, she is perceived as an individual but representative woman—a physically passionate (200), somewhat cruel

(201), and moderately talented (196) everywoman in an "age of men." "When you met her you felt you had found something. Reality of some sort. . . . She was a figure. She made her place. She stood for something— . . . like a woman on a barricade thrown across the street. . . . Here was woman" (197-9). Consistent with the democratic age that he, too, now inhabits, Tay John is "not quite so tall" as Denham remembers, and he now has "a thin line of black" in his hair which not only demystifies his yellow head but also associates him with the black-haired Ardith Aeriola (207, 242). When the two are together, Tay John is "a man no better nor worse than the others, but different" (253). Once regarded as divine, then perceived as heroic, he is now seen as merely human.¹³

The most striking manifestation of the decay and artificiality of the "age of men" in "Evidence—without a finding" is also the "low mimetic" equivalent of Tay John's luminously yellow hair: the "immense gold cap" that glitters in the mouth of Ardith Aeriola's scheming consort, the demotically named Alf Dobbie (168). A literary descendant of Stephen Leacock's unscrupulously entrepreneurial Josh Smith,¹⁴ Dobbie is regarded with distaste and condescension by Denham. "Somewhat the picture of a villain—but not quite," his other "teeth [are] large, long, . . . [and] rather browned with tobacco," and the "grey . . . ends of his "brown moustache . . . droop . . . as low as his chin," as if mimicking the physical difficulty that prompts him to purchase an "Aphrodine Girdle" (168, 227-8, 233). It is entirely consistent with the correspondence between Vico's "age of men" and "Evidence—without a finding" that Dobbie considers himself "a man who knows other men— . . . who knows himself" and takes pride in taking "a realistic view of all . . . things, [and] their significance" (170, 224). It is also consistent with this correspondence that Dobbie has created a parodic fiefdom in the Rockies (a "castle built of logs in the wilderness" [192]), and that Denham's view of his *ersatz* "Lucerne" and its belligerent inhabitants is heavily ironical, for, as Vico famously observes, irony is not possible until "falsehood" begins to wear "the mask of truth" during the "age of men" (131). Frye's inclusion of deceptive advertising and bawdy humor among the characteristic productions of the "ironic mode" (*Anatomy* 43-49) helps to explain the presence of both in the third part of *Tay John*. Dobbie's "Aphrodine Girdle" reveals him to be a victim as well as a practitioner of "publicity"

(224, 228), and Denham, not previously given to reporting such matters, repeats several scatological insults uttered by Dobbie and his men. Dobbie's remark that "railway officials have their brains in their bowels" sticks in his memory (181, 191) and he also recalls the story that Ardith Aeriola gave up a career as a music-hall singer after "[s]omeone shouted at her, 'Lady, yer cawn't sing with yer buttocks'" (196). Such remarks accord with Vico's distinction between the poetic and noble languages of the preceding ages and the "vulgar" speech of the "age of men" (144, 147, 342).

As an occasion for the exercise of law, Dobbie's verbal and physical assault on Ardith Aeriola in the "big hall" at "Lucerne" (238-9) is parallel to Red Rorty's rape of Hanni in Part 1 and Julia Alderson's accusation of Tay John in Part 3. By comparison with "divine law" and "heroic jurisprudence," contends Vico, justice in the "age of men" is relatively "mild" (94): at its best, it "looks to the truth of the facts themselves and benignly bends the rule of the law to all the requirements of the equity of the causes" (343-4). When Dobbie is discovered after the incident in the "big hall" "under some bushes" "badly beaten" and perhaps suffering from "nervous shock" (250), it is "generally agreed" by those who hear the story in Edmonton that he "[h]as got what was coming to him" (247). This consensus may explain the reluctance of the Mounties to pursue and charge Tay John and Ardith Aeriola as seems to be required by Dobbie's accusations (254). More obviously a benign bending of the "rule of the law" is Sergeant Flaherty's later decision to "wink . . . his eye" at Tay John's possession of caribou "meat . . . out of season" on the principle that, while he cannot be "granted the freedom of the Indian in his hunting" because he is not part of "a recognised band," he can "hardly be bound to the restrictions of the white man. He had to live, was how Flaherty saw it" (255-6).

Less disposed to appreciate "the equity of the causes" is Jay Wiggins, the police Inspector whom Denham encounters in an office lined with "blue-backed reports," where he sits with his "head bowed [and his] hands clasped upon the desk top, as if in reverence before the accumulated and recorded achievements of the Force" (248). Wiggins is by turns pedantically legalistic, prejudicially biased, and narrowly rationalistic: he toys with the legal distinction between "assault" and assault and battery; he blames the Dobbie incident on Ardith Aeriola, whom he describes as

a "tart," a "foreign woman," and a troublemaker who "draws men like a piece of bad meat draws flies"; and he concludes that "[t]he whole thing isn't logical" (250-1). These attitudes are consistent with Vico's "barbarism of reflection" (424), the rationalistic decay of human sympathy and natural justice that occurs at the close of the historical cycle. "Even where civil equality is universally and fully attained" in the "age of men," writes Flint, "there will be great inequality as regards wealth, and from that inequality will flow . . . grievous ills . . . general discord and disorder" (224). The most obvious evidence of the "decadence [and] dissolution" of the "age of men" in *Tay John* is the collapse of Dobble's fortunes and, with them, his "Lucerne—in the Heart of the Rockies":

[t]he buildings . . . fell into disuse. Trappers, trainmen, and others filched the logs for needs in other places. The cabins disappeared bit by bit, one by one, as though slowly sinking into the ground. You might say that Dobble left barely a trace behind him. Perhaps his investments in the East had gone bad. (253)

When "the peoples are rotting in . . . civil disease . . . , then providence for their extreme ill has an extreme remedy at hand," writes Vico; "they shall turn their cities into forests and the forests into dens and lairs of men. . . . Thus providence brings back among them the piety, faith, and truth which are the natural foundations of justice as well as the graces and beauties of the eternal order of God" (423-4). It is the "untutored" wilderness (74)—the site of what Vico calls "the primitive simplicity of the first world of peoples" (424)—that provides the setting for the two encounters with Tay John and Ardith Aeriola with which the novel closes.

In his account of the first of these, Sergeant Flaherty notices, not only that the couple is living in the Indian manner (255-8), but also that Ardith Aeriola is wearing a "silver cross" bequeathed to her by Father Rorty (257). Indeed, Flaherty's last sight of her is with her "hand upraised [and the] sun catching the silver cross" against a background consisting of a "smoking tepee," "wooded hills, and . . . the great blue wall of the Rockies" (257). In addition to reporting that Ardith Aeriola appears pregnant (257-8), Flaherty records a further observation that is highly suggestive in the context of Vico's theory of *corsi* and *recorsi*, and

suggestive, too, of a return to the mute language of gesture that characterizes the "age[s] of the gods": in answer to his question about whether she and Tay John will be "coming back," Ardith Aeriola takes a "few steps towards the river" and, "turn[ing] slowly," "trace[s] a circle with a neat moccasined foot through the grass" (256). The suggestion of a completed cycle and a new beginning is reinforced both by Ardith's spoken reply ("you tell them I'm not going back . . . ever") and by her presumed pregnancy.

The second encounter with the couple in the "[w]ild country" comes from Blackie, a trapper "versed in the ritual and suffering of travel—man's form of worship of the vast round earth" (259). Already associated by these comments with old and "new divine times" (Vico 399), Blackie also has "the dark brow of a prophet" and, "[l]ike a prophet," speaks "in amazement" of "[a]lbino bears . . . wolverines that c[an] outwit a man," and other "creatures" which can readily be seen as the products of an age of myth and imagination. There may even be Viconian resonances to the fact that Blackie's voice has "a resounding quality, like a voice out of a cave" (259), for, as observed earlier, Vico locates the origins of culture in the caves to which primitive men retreated when they were terrified by thunder. According to this "big man" from the still partly "unnamed" "country beyond the Jackpine" (258-9),¹⁵ Tay John was pulling a loaded toboggan across a frozen lake when the two met, and his first words concerned the whereabouts of a doctor. On hearing that there is "no doctor around for a hundred miles, maybe more," "he sort o' caved-in" and, as if "havin' visions—or . . . just plain crazy," informs Blackie that he is "going to a church . . . over there behind the mountain" (261). As Tay John departs, Blackie sees to his horror that the "big load tied on th[e] toboggan" is a dead woman—Ardith Aeriola, Denham assumes—with "[o]ne eye . . . open" and "snow in her mouth" (262). When Blackie recovers from his shock and, in an outpouring of human sympathy that is consistent with Vico's account of *recorsi*, decides to "see what he c[an] do to help," he picks up Tay John's "sled tracks" where they "enter . . . the timber" and finds that, "in one place," the trail makes "a wide circle and return[s] to within a hundred yards of where it had been before" (262-3). After this final *recorso*, Tay John's trail indicates that he "climb[ed] slowly up the valley until he was well beyond the timber" and then headed towards one or other of "two passes" (263). According to

Blackie—or, more accurately, Denham's version of Blackie's story—the snow had then begun to fall "in great wavering flakes without cessation,"¹⁶ all but obliterating the sled tracks and leaving the trapper with "the feeling . . . that Tay John hadn't gone over the pass at all. He had just walked down, the toboggan behind him, under the snow and into the ground" (263-4).

Has Tay John gone to his death in one of the passes, or has he returned to the earth from which he was believed by the Shuswaps to have emerged? If the woman on the toboggan was a dead and pregnant Ardith Aeriola, could her child miraculously rise from the grave? The answers to these questions will, of course, depend on the reader's attitude to the supernatural and the miraculous. Michael Ondaatje ends his seminal essay on *Tay John* by observing that Tay John "is vulnerable to fashion and progress and his only strength is the grain left in the memory and in the hope he will emerge in the future in different forms" ("O'Hagen" 31). Arnold E. Davidson observes near the end of his post-structuralist reading of the novel that "Tay John's descent into the earth to join in death a pregnant woman (his mistress/his mother) too obviously returns to the novel's beginning and the possibility of having it all to recount over again" (43). Margery Fee's brilliant analysis of the mythical components of the novel includes the observation that there are "powerful alternatives" to the "simple conclusion that Tay John has probably frozen to death. . . . Th[e] hint of a possible return of the hero, of a cycle, is mythically irresistible" (16). Perhaps it was especially irresistible when O'Hagen wrote and published *Tay John* in the late 1930s, in the midst of the Great Depression and on the brink of the Second World War. Perhaps the concluding possibility of a Viconian return to the "sociable . . . religious, truthful, and faithful" "simplicity of the first world of peoples" is O'Hagen's gently optimistic response to the "civil disease," "private interests," "deep solitude," "obstinate factions," "misbegotten subtleties," "base savagery," and "premeditated malice" of the world around him (423-4). Perhaps *Tay John* is set between 1880 and 1911—around the end of one cycle (*siècle*) and the beginning of another—to reinforce this optimistic possibility. Certainly many aspects of *Tay John*, not least the Viconian patterns conjectured here, seem to reflect and invite the idea that somehow, somewhere in the twentieth century—perhaps at the beginning, perhaps near the middle, perhaps at the end—one huge historical

cycle is drawing to a close and another is beginning to manifest itself. "So the people waited, blind in time, not knowing what the days would bring," says the omniscient narrator near the end of the first part of the novel. "And while they waited Tay John moved in and out among them, always leaving, still always returning, making great loops through the mountains, till the pattern of his travels reached out from the village like the petals of a flower" (57).

NOTES

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1. This term comes, of course, from Hayden White (216), who includes two informative essays on Vico and "Croce's Criticism of Vico" in *Tropics of Discourse*. A. M. Klein's "A Shout in the Street," first published in 1951 and recently reprinted in his *Literary Essays and Reviews*, contains a brief summary of Vico's theories followed by "An Analysis of the Second Chapter of Joyce's *Ulysses*" (342). In addition to these and other works mentioned in the body of this essay, Isaiah Berlin's *Vico and Herder: Two Studies in the History of Ideas* and Norman O. Brown's *Closing Time* warrant mention as very different and highly individual discussions of Vico.
2. "It deserves to be noted that in describing the age of the gods our author insists on the analogy between the infancy of the individual and the infancy of the race, and he also draws many of his illustrations from the character and condition of savage peoples. In these respects he was the predecessor of a multitude of later writers" (Flint 221). Towards the end of the first part of *Tay John*, the ageing Shuswap patriarch Smutuksen likens his people to "children" in need of a father (69).
3. In *The Great Code 5*, Frye acknowledges that "[t]he sequence of literary modes in [the] *Anatomy of Criticism* is . . . close . . . to Vico," but in the earlier book the Neopolitan philosopher is only mentioned adjectivally in relation to "Joyce and his Viconian theory of history which sees our age as a frustrated apocalypse followed instantly by a return to a period before Tristram" (62). One consequence of Frye's adaptation of Vico in his work on literary modes is that the Frygian analysis of Margery Fee's "Howard O'Hagan's 'Tay John': Making New World Myth" is also profoundly Viconian. "Tay John . . . will not stay put," writes Fee: "[h]e moves from myth, to epic romance, to realism; escapes irony by moving into comedy, and finally moves into myth again" (14). Accordingly, the first part of the book is dominated by "religious mythologies," the second is aligned with "aristocratic romance," and

the third is centred on "American and materialistic realism" but concludes with a "hint of . . . resurrection or cycle" and the "promise of a return of myth in each generation" (12, 20, 16). Echoing Fee, W. J. Keith observes that "[w]ithout a unifying stylistic norm . . . [*Tay John*] could easily fall apart. As it is we are confronted with a series of literary forms remarkably compatible with Northrop Frye's theory of modes as they evolve through literary history—from myth through a version of epic . . . through varieties of romance . . . through the mimetic mode . . . to the level of irony . . . all this culminating in what Frye calls the 'return of irony to myth' . . ." (36-37).

4. For these and other details of O'Hagan's life, I am grateful to Geoff Hancock's entry in the *Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature*, as well as to the note on "The Author" in the 1989 NCL reprint of *Tay John* and to the "Chronology" in Fee's *Silence Made Visible*.
5. O'Hagan acknowledges Jenness's work in the prefatory note to *Tay John*. As Fee points out, "O'Hagan's sources for much of the first part of Tay John's story [are] the Tsimshian myth 'The Dead Woman's Son' [in Jenness 197-9], which he uses with little revision, and the legend of Tête Jaune, which named Tête Jaune Cache and Yellowhead Pass" (13). For the latter, O'Hagan may have relied on the oral sources mentioned in his prefatory note, but Fee also suggests a written source in John Grierson MacGregor's *Overland by the Yellowhead*, 1, 26-27 and Ralph Maud uncovers borrowings from James Teit's *The Thompson Indians of British Columbia* 323-4. O'Hagan seems to have drawn either directly or indirectly on several sections of *The Golden Bough*, including Fraser's discussion of "*The Soul as a Shadow and a Reflection*" (250-5; which contains a reference to the Shuswaps), his chapter on "*The Worship of Trees*" (144-58), and his comments on the "magical qualities of stones" (43-44) and the use of "homeopathic magic . . . to heal and prevent sickness" (20-22).
6. Both Fee (11) and Arnold E. Davidson (33) call attention to the Platonic resonances of this belief, and its corollary "that behind the basket their hands made was the shape of the perfect basket which once made would endure forever and beyond the time when its semblance was broken and worn thin by use" (29). O'Hagan may also have had in mind the notion, traceable to Michelangelo and sometimes ascribed to Eskimo artists, that a sculptor merely makes manifest a shape that exists within a piece of stone. See also note 15, below.
7. I am indebted for this insight to Bonnie Parkins.
8. The Tay John of "Hearsay" can be aligned with other Herculean heroes in Canadian writing; see my discussion of this heroic type in *The Gay]Grey Moose* 217-33.
9. See the *Scienza Nuova* 205 and 343 for Vico's remarks on the contractual nature ("pacts") of "heroic jurisprudence."
10. Of course there are also echoes here of Wordsworth's "Intimations" Ode.
11. It is worth noting that, while Father Rorty deliberately imitates Christ, Red Rorty's resemblance to St. Sebastian (27-28) is fortuitous, and a further instance of the religious and mythical associations that O'Hagan exploits in Part 1. Whereas Father Rorty's death is a manifestation of the "barbarism of reflection" that characterizes

- the terminal phases of the "age of men," Red Rorty's death occurs in the context of "a generous savagery, against which one could defend oneself or take flight or be on one's guard" (424).
12. See also the "crudely painted black letters" and "words, spelled out in red" of Dobble's sign (175) and the "large" and "small" letters of the promotional leaflet in his office (228).
 13. His hair now leaves a "dark stain of oil" on "the collar of his buckskin shirt" and, manifesting the artificiality of the "age of men," "a steel hook attached to a pad of leather" has been "fitted to his forearm" (205).
 14. The sign on Smith's hostelry in the opening chapter of *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* reads "Jos. SMITH, PROP." (6). The equivalent sign in *Tay John* carries the inscription "Alf Dobble . . . Proprietor" (175). Leacock befriended O'Hagan at McGill and helped him to "obtain employment with the Canadian Pacific Railroad recruiting farm labourers from England" ("The Author," *Tay John*).
 15. See also Vico's description of the "true natural aristocracy" of Plato's commonwealth which, he holds, came into being when providence "ordained that men of gigantic stature, stronger than the rest, who were to wander on the mountain heights as do the beasts of stronger natures, should, at the first thunderclaps after the universal flood, take refuge in the caves of the mountains . . ." (419). Blackie describes Tay John as "[a] tall fellow" who seems, by turns, "very big, shadowy like" and "no bigger than a little boy" (260). These different perceptions of Tay John accord with his final appearance at what may be the end of one cycle and beginning of another.
 16. In recalling the final paragraph of "The Dead" and *Dubliners*, this phrase and the snowfall that it describes suggest a debt and, perhaps, an allusion to Joyce's depiction of Ireland as a moribund culture that may (or may not) undergo a process of renovation. The "extended allusion" to Duncan Campbell Scott's "On the Way to the Mission" that Fee recognizes in Blackie's Story (16) also accords with the Viconian possibilities surrounding the conclusion of *Tay John* for strong suggestions of spirituality and rebirth surround Scott's murdered Indian and his dead wife.

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Electra to Orestes: Against the Furies

Ah, how lovely is the flower of anger,
the red flower in my heart!

J. P. Sartre, *The Flies* (First Fury)

They have not run out of it yet, blood
or anger, they have plenty to paint

our faces with, write war across our cheeks,
broad stripes saying walk with them to battle.

The blood that burns scars so we never forget.

So what can we do? Nothing will turn their hands
not words, not prayer, supplication won't move them

nor the tears that are our only balm, our healing.

Tears make us more human not them.

It is not enough to want an ending.

They will not leave us to gather whatever rags
we have and make of the tatters scant covering

to cloak us until the end, to keep our days empty
wondering what will change and what will change nothing.

I only know that speaking their names scalds them.

Embracing them our arms become their own
burning them as they would us. Hold them as I do

with whatever strength your life has left
hold them against you, and with me say

I will not let you go except you bless me.

Neile Graham