

Saying What You Mean: Form and Rhetoric in Ian McKay's *The Quest of the Folk*

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FORUM

Saying What You Mean: Form and Rhetoric in Ian McKay's *The Quest of the Folk*

IAN MCKAY'S *THE QUEST OF THE FOLK*, published in 1994, has been a success by almost any measure that could be applied. Glowingly reviewed in both the academic and popular press, the book has found many readers outside the enclaves of the university, impressing the editors at McGill-Queens University Press with its steady sales. Most significantly, the volume has challenged and influenced the ways scholars of Maritime and Canadian studies perceive their work. The success of the book is due in part to its subject matter and theoretical approach. As McKay examines cultural activities with which many people have personal experience, and fuses the familiar with a fully engaged political sensibility shaped by Marx, Gramsci and Foucault, he explores issues that contest traditional views and capture the reader's attention. But if the book's success is due to its engaging argument, its appeal is also due to McKay's style. The wealth of information and evidence McKay marshals is shaped within a strong narrative structure and communicated through sharp metaphors and flashes of irony. The book's well-turned phrases draw the reader in and move him/her along. Nor is the style simply a sugar-coating that makes the medicine palatable. The style itself has a deep impact on the reader, shaping responses and ultimately furthering the political purposes of the text. The style along with the content has made this text the effective influential study it has become.

Reviewers of *The Quest of the Folk* have been uniform in their praise of McKay's argument and a number have commented on the effectiveness of his style. Carol Bruneau notes that he develops an "eloquent argument", while Pat Byrne praises his "fluid, engrossing style . . . [and] unflinching analysis".¹ Ann McMullen, in *The Public Historian*, goes further to call it a "vivid chronicle", which is "beautifully written and . . . should serve as a model for cultural historians".² One of the most interesting comments about McKay's rhetorical power comes from Margaret Conrad, who

* This forum is comprised, for the most part, of four papers (revised for publication) originally given at a panel discussion – "Reflections on Ian McKay's *The Quest of the Folk* and the Study of Atlantic Canada" – at the 2003 meetings of the Canadian Historical Association at Dalhousie University in Halifax. Ian McKay was present at this session and responded informally that day. His more comprehensive reflection on *The Quest of the Folk* at the end of this forum arose in response to his subsequent reading of the four papers.

1 Carol Bruneau, "The Semiotics of Plastic Lobsters", *Atlantic Books Today*, 8 (Fall/Winter 1994), p. 7 and Pat Byrne, "Farewell to Nova Scotia: Review of *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia*", *Canadian Literature*, 22 (Spring/Summer 1997), p. 211.

2 Ann McMullen, Review of *The Quest of the Folk*, *The Public Historian*, 17 (Fall, 1995), p. 125.

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observes that the style itself affects the reader; she notes that the study was “highly readable, stimulating, and even a cause for action”.³ While reviewers commented on the effectiveness of McKay’s style, none had the opportunity to examine the patterns that govern his rhetorical strategies.

McKay asserts that *The Quest of the Folk* is not just a historical overview but an intervention, and that its polemical elements are meant to stir and motivate the audience in the ways Conrad notes. The formal and rhetorical strategies that McKay uses to capture the reader and fulfill his objectives are not, in themselves, neutral literary devices. In the early 1970s, Hayden White drew attention to the pivotal role narrative and rhetoric play in the creation of historical texts. Indeed, White recognized the similarities between historical discourse and literary texts and asserted that any claim that historians find their tales while fiction writers invent their stories “obscures the extent to which invention also plays a part in the historian’s operations”.⁴ White demonstrated in a subsequent article that the forms historians use to shape their stories have a deep impact on the final significance of their texts: “The encodation of events in terms of such pregenerative plot structures is one of the ways that a culture has of making sense of both personal and public pasts”.⁵ This is particularly true of McKay, who employs the structures and rhetoric of irony to advance his position.

In many ways *The Quest of the Folk* bears the hallmarks of standard academic discourse. The text is shaped into an introductory chapter, four subsequent sections of detailed analysis, extensive (even exhaustive) footnotes and a comprehensive bibliography. Much of the argument is conveyed using the standard voice of historical investigation with careful documentation of primary sources to support the central argument. But the study as a whole is also indebted to the traditions of irony, the mythos which Northrup Frye insists characterizes not just realist texts, but narratives intent on social critique. Ironic patterns, Frye argues, “attempt to give form to the shifting ambiguities and complexities of unidealized existence”. Writers employing the ironic mythos resist the temptation to view their protagonists as heroic or even positive figures, and the ironic plot’s tendency to emphasize plausibility and resist romantic formulas accommodates McKay’s desire to subvert the nostalgic, romantic impulses of the neoconservative cultural producers. Ironic structures critique aspects of the world that need to be reformed and attempt to build a broad consensus about the “undesirability” of the system being attacked. As a form, irony attempts to win the reader over to a new perspective on the world. As Frye notes, “for effective attack we must reach some kind of impersonal level, and that commits the attacker, if only by implication, to a moral standard”.⁶

McKay’s determination to indict the cultural producers who have hampered the labour causes of the Maritimes leads him to adopt and parody some of the conventions of the mystery or detective novel. Just as a detective novel opens with a crime scene, so *Quest of the Folk* opens with observations that the poor have been exploited, the

3 Margaret Conrad, Review of *The Quest of the Folk*, *American Historical Review*, 101 (April 1996), p. 597.

4 Hayden White, “Introduction to Metahistory”, in Dennis Walder, ed., *Meta History: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (1973; reprint Oxford, 1990), p. 42.

5 Hayden White, “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact”, in Vincent Leitch, ed., *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (New York, 2001), p. 1716.

6 Northrup Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, 1957), pp. 223-5.

concerns of labour ignored or buried, and the interests of antimodernist conservatives advanced. Who is guilty of perpetrating this imbalance of cultural power? McKay's text is itself a quest to unveil the power politics that have perpetuated the economic, gender and racial imbalances in the province's social hierarchy. In his introduction, McKay briefly adopts the traditional academic stance of neutrality as he grants blanket immunity to the players: "There need be no disrespect in critically evaluating this body of applied social thought and assessing its current implications. The architects of Innocence were not the calculating perpetrators of a hoax, but the sincere builders of a framework of interpretation". But having stated that the actors in the text are sincere, he proceeds to demonstrate that not all the suspects are equally innocent. Some people were conscious that they were misrepresenting the people and conditions before them. McKay's ironic attack borrows from the techniques of detective fiction, as chief suspects are carefully investigated and conclusions are drawn identifying their misbehaviour. The entrepreneurial folklorist Helen Creighton is criticized in several sections for her deceptive practices. McKay claims that she exaggerates her knowledge of the repertoire of folk-singer Henneberry, lies about visiting Sable Island and "surely misrepresented the culture of the province in which conventional institutional churches, not witchcraft cults had long set the tone of the spiritual life". Even her self-portrayal (her alias one might say) as a "favourite Victorian aunt . . . was well crafted and deceptive". Having established weaknesses in Creighton's credibility, McKay investigates further to point out how her version of the Folk as Innocent misrepresents the economic and social hardships under which the real people laboured. She ignores work songs and bawdy ballads, disregards the economic disparity that characterized fishers' lives, and discounts any link between labour and the Folk as she was convinced that "to preserve the Folk, the labour movement, with its horrible songs of social disunity, must be symbolically (and perhaps literally) erased". Most damning is McKay's well-supported argument that Creighton was willing to cast suspicions on those individuals whose use of folk material seemed to her politically suspect. Against such musicians as Pete Seeger, she was willing to mobilize "the state bureaucracy and the RCMP to create a certain kind of Folk, free from the taint of radicalism".⁷ By the time McKay finishes his 108-page analysis of Helen Creighton, readers cannot help but conclude that she was not a simple folklorist intent on preserving her community's heritage, but a cultural producer intent on refashioning a marginalized sector of society to advance her own neoconservative and antimodernist agenda. The formal devices borrowed from the detective genre blend seamlessly with the historical discourse to intensify the critique.

Echoing structural genres outside traditional historical forms sharpens the text's argument; however, McKay's rhetorical strategy, especially with his use of metaphor, is also important to the political intentions of the book. In his analysis of Hayden White's theoretical perspective, Wulf Kansteiner notes that much of the impact of a text's literary style operates at the level of "metaphor, metonymy, [and] synecdoche [which] represent the basic categories which predetermine the secondary, conceptual

7 Ian McKay, *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia* (Montreal, 1994), pp. 41, 74, 123, 98, 149, 151.

level of the historian's representational framework".⁸ McKay is aware of his own style and is self-reflexive about his rhetorical devices. He observes that "if the emergence of folklore was best captured in metaphors of mining the invention of handicrafts required the language of technical training". However, the author's observations about his own figurative devices are incomplete in that he employs a wide variety of metaphors to communicate his anxieties about Creighton's activities. When discussing cultural producers who are at work in the field of folklore, McKay's metaphors are often related to theft or overly aggressive acquisition, and these metaphors position us against Creighton and her fellow collectors. Metaphors associated with Creighton in the second chapter are pointed. Her activities are sometimes imagined as being akin to a sexual seduction: "Once the ballad-hunter conquers the virginity of the singer . . . he is home free". Elsewhere, McKay returns to his mining metaphor, suggesting that Creighton viewed the singer Henneberry as an "unexplored mine, [whose] . . . treasures were already entering into the calculations of the new cultural marketplace". Late in the discussion he adopts a smelting metaphor to depict the self-stylized superiority of the collector who felt that "one needed folklorists to release the gold of the true culture from the dross of the people who were its temporary custodians".⁹ In each of these metaphors the cultural producer is viewed not just as miner, but as an exploiter, a user.

The intensity of McKay's attack of the cultural producers interested in folklore stands in sharp contrast with his rhetoric when examining cultural producers who worked cooperatively with marginalized groups. In particular, McKay's analysis of Mary Black in the third chapter is less rhetorically charged. Comparatively few figures of speech are used when discussing her work and the metaphors that are employed do not attack Black but satirize the government that resists her attempts to aid the handicraft industry. While Black had "an almost utopian vision of the redemptive power of craft", the government was inattentive and their steps "frequently took the form of well-intentioned experiments that inevitably shrivelled into underfunded corpses". More explicitly, McKay suspects that Black sees the department of tourism as a "vipers nest".¹⁰ The tropes are used not to unveil Black's negative traits but to emphasize the negligence of the Nova Scotia government.

Why should the rhetorical devices employed depict Black in such a neutral position when Creighton is burdened with negative metaphors? The answer lies in the political implications of their respective activities. McKay concluded that Black, though an antimodernist, was motivated by a progressive perspective and, even if she reimagines a marginalized and impoverished segment of society within a narrow set of stereotypes, she emerges as a positive figure because she was attempting to empower them. Creighton and other cultural producers dealing with folklore are taking from marginalized people a part of their cultural capital and marketing it for their own benefit. The Marxist scale of justice operating in the text is clear. Cultural producers who aid the proletariat are pardoned, cultural producers who stereotype, essentialize,

8 Wulf Kansteiner, "Hayden White's Critique of the Writing of History", *History and Theory*, 32, 3 (1993), p 726.

9 McKay, *Quest of the Folk*, pp. 143, 48, 59, 132.

10 McKay, *Quest of the Folk*, pp. 166, 170, 171.

reduce and exploit the complex cultures of the marginalized in order to fuel their own accumulation of capital are condemned. The more exploitative the practice, the stronger the rhetorical force.

Not that *The Quest of the Folk* is without a few weaknesses. While McKay's own ability to shift between structural models and rhetorical devices signals his skills as a writer, he is not as adept in his approach to other producers of literary texts. In the fourth chapter of his study, McKay examines the novels and artistic works of Maritime artists who participated in the antimodernist and conservative project to *other* the Folk within a framework of innocence. Some of the cultural products McKay examines, however, are not as univocal as he initially suggests. Frank Parker Day's novel *Rockbound* is conservative and conservationist in its construction of the Island's culture, as McKay suggests, but other aspects of the novel, particularly Day's depiction of the main hero's struggles, draw heavily from the traditions of liberal-humanism.¹¹ Similarly, Ernest Buckler's fiction, including his best novel *The Mountain and the Valley*, is deeply nostalgic and he celebrates his society's hierarchical, conservative, patriarchal order even as he mourns its demise; yet even within his conservatism, he explores the inevitability of the tide of modernism and its complexity as a cultural movement.¹² McKay is most effective when employing the techniques of literature to represent the historical record and a little less convincing when he starts with the historical experience and uses it to read the literary text.

Whether he is interpreting historical or literary experience, McKay's formal and rhetorical strategies contribute to his larger project to shift the positions we hold as readers of the Maritime experience. Hayden White pointed out that the conservative impulse of traditional historical discourse and the tendency to adopt conventional narrative forms "almost by definition undercuts radical politics as unrealistic".¹³ Traditional forms, for White, lead historical texts to reproduce conservative perspectives. McKay's extensive use of ironic structures and metaphors resists this drift towards the traditional. Readers of all texts are free to interpret them in numerous ways, through any number of subject positions; McKay himself asserts that "even the most sophisticated analysis of the 'subject position' from which a text may be read unproblematically cannot provide us with any guarantees that everyone will infer the same 'subject position' in the given text, or that such subject positions were fully inhabited".¹⁴

The reader of *The Quest of the Folk*, however, is exposed to and encouraged to adopt a particular ideological position. McKay's text is important not just because he fuses Gramsci, Marx and Foucault into a viable methodology or because he brought the paradigm of cultural studies to Maritime studies. His text constructs for its readers a subject position rarely seen before this time in Maritime historiography. As McKay has argued in his article "A Note on Region", the subject position most prevalent in the Maritimes in the 1970s and 1980s was constructed by such scholars as "Graeme Wynn and Larry McCann" and a number of writers published in the early years of

11 Frank Parker Day, *Rockbound* (Garden City, NY, 1928).

12 Ernest Buckler, *The Mountain and the Valley* (Toronto, 1952).

13 Kansteiner, "Hayden White's Critique of the Writing of History", p. 281

14 McKay, *Quest of the Folk*, p. 215.

Acadiensis. Maritime historians of this era often focussed on the political and economic relationship between the Maritime Provinces and the federal institutions, and this “structuralist-functional” model gave rise to the heartland/hinterland model and the underdevelopment paradigm, which inadvertently promoted a vision of the east coast as the victim of larger national and international interests.¹⁵ The relative powerlessness of this victim position is countered in McKay’s *The Quest of the Folk*, which insists that exploitative practices are also constructed from within the region. By rhetorically positioning the reader against these practises, McKay prompts us, consciously and unconsciously, to align ourselves with the labour sector and to empower ourselves to talk back to the region’s antimodernist conservatives. In his later article, McKay also calls for historians to take advantage of the multiple available versions of the region to develop a “space for irony, and the possibility of resistance”.¹⁶

McKay’s 1994 monograph has already started to produce this ironic resistance to the assumed versions of the Maritimes. This fresh, activist subject position was not invented solely by McKay in *The Quest of the Folk*, but his critique of the culture of innocence in this book has moved that activist subject position into a more dominant place in the public discourse. The text’s style and substance calls readers to move beyond their armchair appreciation of McKay’s argument. As Dorothy Turner notes, McKay’s “sophisticated and conscientious work encourages our scrutiny of the relationships between political and academic life”.¹⁷

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15 Ian McKay, “A Note on ‘Region’ in Writing the History of Atlantic Canada”, *Acadiensis*, XXX, 2 (Spring 2000), p. 96.

16 McKay, “A Note on ‘Region’”, p. 101

17 Dorothy Turner, Review of *The Quest of the Folk*, *H-Net Reviews in the Humanities and Social Sciences*, <http://www.h-net.msu.edu/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=10925846692703>, accessed 15 April 2003.