

"YOU CAN ALMOST PICTURE IT":  
THE AESTHETIC OF A NOVA SCOTIA STORYTELLER\*

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Aesthetic concepts in Western civilization characteristically have been related to an appreciation of a cultural mentifact or artifact for its own sake, divorced from any particular social or physical context. When we speak of aesthetics we recall the appropriate words and phrases that we have been culturally conditioned to associate with art appreciation: truth, beauty, art for art's sake or for truth's sake, and so on. The formalist school of literary criticism, calling itself the New Criticism, was based on just such a principle of aesthetics--that the work of art can only be understood and appreciated on its own terms for its own sake, that the author and his milieu are not significant in literary criticism and appreciation. More recently, in Alan P. Merriam's The Anthropology of Music, we find the same fallacy of independent aesthetic value perpetuated. Merriam writes, "The aesthetic person is considered to be an emotional person, moved by the art he surveys; it must be stressed that he is moved not by the context in which the art is perceived, but directly by the art itself."<sup>1</sup>

The fallacy here is that art can stimulate an aesthetic reaction independent of the context in which it exists, and apart from the associations which the viewer or listener introduces through his reaction to the item. When an individual writes or reads a story (or tells or listens to a story), he brings to bear upon this event associations derived from his own past experiences; an individual's mind pictures only what is within the realm of his experience and imagination. In this sense, the concept of an aesthetic, particularly a folk aesthetic, is dynamic, not static. A cultural artifact or mentifact can be appreciated out of context--the boat in a museum, the folktale in a book, the jet plane mounted like sculpture at an airfield--but even then we imagine its typical context, or create an acceptable alternative context. It is this importance of context, for example, that makes the outdoor folk museum a more viable forum for the presentation of material folk culture than an indoor museum where artifacts become static and nonfunctional. When Melville Jacobs states that "readers of non-Western oral literature are, I suppose, about as rare as nuclear physicists who read Bulgarian poetry,"<sup>2</sup> he implies the same point: an individual will not respond to cultural materials which he cannot relate to his own past experience.

Research to determine a folk aesthetic is of particular importance because only in this way can we learn how and to what extent people value and evaluate their own cultural traditions. Furthermore, the study of aesthetics is most fruitful when approached in terms of one person's aesthetic. No two people can react to

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the same cultural item or social situation in precisely the same manner. The individual's idiosyncratic experiences determine how he will respond to the item or the situation. The following fictional exaggeration, with the storyteller's explanation of it, is a case in point:

I've been down around Yarmouth quite a few times, and I heard about a nigger wench down there and they called her Sabre Tooth. I've heard them talking, some fellers, you know, and they said that she could eat peanuts right through a chickenwire fence. I was over there in the store the other day and there was a feller come in there, a traveller or something, from down Yarmouth way, and I asked him if he ever heard tell of Sabre Tooth down there, and he said, "Who's that?" Well, I says, "It's a nigger wench down there somewhere and she can eat peanuts through a chickenwire fence." And, by gosh, he'd never seen her. Well, I says, "I heard tell of her down there and they told me she was the one down there." And I did. Somebody down there told me, you know. But he [the man who originated the exaggeration] must have been some kind of a storyteller or something 'cause he, he added that on to it. They might have called her Sabre Tooth but he must've added the peanuts on to it. But when you think about it, why, it is kinda funny, it makes you, you can almost picture it, you know.<sup>3</sup>

Certain prerequisite experience, knowledge, and bias are necessary for the individual to be able to picture and appreciate this exaggeration. First, obviously, it helps to know what peanuts are and what a chickenwire fence looks like. More importantly, the listener or teller must either accept the racist connotation of "nigger" and find humor in it or be able to accept it as simply an added humorous detail without any racist intent. The latter instance seems unlikely, yet, the storyteller in question has, as far as I could ascertain, little if any racial prejudice to bring to bear upon his appreciation of the exaggeration. The point here is that the storyteller has verbalized an aesthetic concept--"you can almost picture it"--and that his aesthetic cannot be separated from his personal experiences and the associations they elicit.

In the remainder of this paper I will deal with the above-mentioned storyteller, Robert Coffil of Blomidon, Nova Scotia, and his aesthetic. First, the methods used to determine a folk aesthetic must be outlined, for aesthetic principles are not readily or easily verbalized at the folk level of culture. Henry Glassie explains this when he writes, "the folk aesthetic can rarely be elicited directly; analysis of artifacts, behavioral observation, and ethnoscientific questioning are the means for its determination. The lack of an aesthetic vocabulary does not prevent aesthetic operation."<sup>4</sup>

The folk aesthetic in a geographically defined storytelling tradition can be determined by fieldwork research and analysis in the following manner: (1) observation of audience reaction to performances by various narrators, and subsequent interviewing of the audience; (2) collection and analysis of the active and passive repertoires of storytellers within the defined tradition; (3) concentration on the repertoire of a premier narrator, for he has selected certain kinds of narrative from a broader narrative tradition, and this selection process is indicative of his aesthetic response to the broader tradition;

and (4) intensive interviews with the storyteller to determine his sense of an aesthetic. It is with the last two approaches that I am primarily concerned here--my fieldwork employing the first two approaches has established that Bob Coffil is the best storyteller of the twenty to thirty men who regularly or occasionally spend their evenings in a small general store in the Blomidon community.

Bob Coffil was born seventy years ago. When he was eight or nine years old he began to sail during the summers with his father, a merchant seaman and occasional vessel owner. At thirteen, Coffil left school to work full-time on his father's boat with his father and brother, John, fourteen years his senior. That fall the vessel leaked, so much so that he and John said afterwards that they must have pumped the whole Bay of Fundy through the boat. Except for "twelve wasted years" in the late 1920s and 1930s when he bought and drove a succession of trucks, Coffil has spent his entire life on the sea, freighting, fishing, and now as a ship's pilot. When he was twenty years old, he and another brother bought a two-masted vessel. At twenty-one, he became captain of the boat.

In the ensuing years, Bob Coffil often worked with his older brother John--on freight boats, on fishing boats, and in the trucking business. John died eleven years ago, yet many people remember and tell the tall tales of John Coffil. As one man said of John, "He could lie through a hole in an iron kettle." Bob Coffil first became interested in storytelling because of his brother, and a third of his tall tale repertoire comes from John. Some of these he now tells as his own stories, others he tells about John, still others are told as third person anonymous. The same is true with the rest of his limited stock of tales.

Besides fairly canonized tall tales, set pieces as it were, Coffil invents or recreates countless other stories and exaggerations to fit particular situations. One man who came to the area for the fall harvest was also a tall teller, and he attempted to establish a reputation in the local store with his brag talk. Coffil did not like this, so he would invent appropriate stories whenever the other fellow was present.

"That fellow that was here last year, he's back now," I said, hoping to elicit Coffil's attitude toward his competition. Coffil grinned for a moment and then replied:

I see he's back. He won't stay over there. When I go over and he's sitting on the back bench, you know, why he'll get up and go over and sit by the door. I tell him about the lobsters and things. I don't know whether I ever told you that about that.

[No, I don't think so.]

Well, he goes down there where the lobster fish are, down around the lower end of Nova Scotia. And he, he was up here a few days and I never knowed him. But I went over to the store and he was there, and, of course, he was talking about fishing and down around the lower end of Nova Scotia. And the boys here, Forrest Lyons and them, when I went in, of course they was looking for a story. They asked, he was telling about how big a

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lobsters they caught, and how many, and all this, and Forrest says, "What's the biggest lobster you ever seen?" That was me. And I says, "Well," I says, "the biggest one I ever caught was in the Bay of Figs." And I says, "I was fishing out of a twelve-foot skiff, and when I, when I got him aboard the skiff, why, his tail hung over the stern of the skiff and his, his claws hung down over the bow." And he fired his hat right down on the floor, and shook his head. But he thought he was in a bunch of farmers and no fishermen, you see. Of course, I wasn't much of a fisherman, but still I'd been around Cape Sable a couple times. But he didn't like it 'cause he found somebody that had been around the same place he'd been, see.<sup>5</sup>

Similar spontaneous exaggerations are a normal part of Coffil's conversation. In telling his grandson to come home from the store soon to help him sack several bushels of potatoes and carry them down to the cellar, he said, "If you don't come home and help me, I'll just eat all them damn potatoes now instead of later. That's an awful load for an old man like me to carry down them steps."<sup>6</sup> Once when his son was describing the large codfish caught by some fishermen that day "as long as that kitchen table there," Coffil replied, "They'll have to watch they don't haul the boat into the mouth of one of them fish."<sup>7</sup>

Storytelling, at present and throughout Bob Coffil's life, has certainly not been limited to exaggeration humor. Yet, except for a wide range of personal experience narratives, a few legend fragments, and a cycle of trickster tales about a man with whom he once worked, only four traditional folktales other than tall tales have been collected from Coffil during almost four years. Of these four tales, two have been personalized by Coffil so that in the telling they function much like his tall tales: his fool tale is told as his personal encounter with a foolish person, and his catch tale is set in the framework of a conversation he had just the other day. The third tale, a local anecdote about a cross-eyed man and a near-sighted man walking into each other (Cross-eyed man: "Why don't you look where you're going?" Near-sighted man: "Why don't you go where you're looking?"); is related to his tall tale repertoire because he learned it from his older brother John from whom he first became interested in tall tales. The fourth non-tall tale, an Irishman joke, is at best a passive part of his repertoire, and in telling it to the collector he had difficulty remembering it, despite the fact that Irishman stories and other fool tales have been as popular in this local tradition as the tall tales.

Bob Coffil's repertoire indicates that he has selected from a broad storytelling tradition only a particular kind of folk narrative--exaggeration humor. The other stories that can be considered part of his active repertoire are all humorous personal experience narratives. His stock of tall tales and countless spontaneous exaggerations, in the framework of such a repertoire and storytelling tradition, is an artful extension of the personal experience narrative.

The collection of the storyteller's repertoire and the investigation of its relationship to the storytelling tradition in the community or area is an initial step in discerning an aesthetic. More important, however, is the storyteller's ability or inability to express his own aesthetic. The more explicit an aesthetic is, the more value the culture and the individual place on that tradition, regard-

less of whether the tradition is storytelling, singing, or boatbuilding. Also, three aspects of tradition must be considered in determining a folk aesthetic in performance-oriented genres of folklore and in material folk culture: the item or text, the creator or performer, and the context and its functional meaning. The individual who can segment and describe these three aspects of his tradition has a more fully developed attitude toward it than one who does not see the tradition in this way. The more interest the individual shows toward the first two aspects--item or text and creator or performer--the more explicit is his aesthetic.

With storytelling that is basically personal, that is, where the memorate is the accepted or usual form of narrative, consciousness of the folk aesthetic has been found to be quite low. This was the case in Richard Bauman's study of verbal art in a Nova Scotia community.<sup>8</sup> A situation--evening talk at the general store--was singled out by the people in the community as being the time and place when "stories" were told. A good storyteller, apparently, was defined solely in terms of a man's experience. Since none of these good storytellers were available for interviewing and since the situation Bauman studied had ceased to exist, his work was necessarily largely reconstructive. Accordingly, in this case the determination of a folk aesthetic could be only tentative and inconclusive, at best.

It is understandable that the people within a tradition recognize that one must have a wide range of experiences in order to become a good storyteller; folktale scholars have made the same point.<sup>9</sup> By travelling and working over a wider area than others, the potential storyteller has more interesting and unusual experiences to draw upon in telling fictional tales or memorates. He also hears more stories and finds himself in more storytelling situations; this provides him with fresh material and a variety of performance techniques from which to choose.

As with other individuals in this storytelling tradition, Coffil's initial definition of a good storyteller is someone who has travelled in his work and has experiences to tell about that the stay-at-home lacks. Also, the man of experience has a rightful sense of superiority over those who are not so widely travelled:

If a feller out of a place like this, if he'd been away and around a lot of these outports, and one thing and another, and where there's shipping, that when he comes into a place like this that there's a lot of people that don't know anything about it, you know, and you can tell 'em the truth and they'll still think you're telling them stories, see, and you're bound to after a while say, "Well, if you wants a story, why, we'll give it to you." That's about the way it is. They think they know everything that's going on, but they's an awful lot of stuff that they don't know one thing about. You can take 'em offshore and sink 'em in about a hundred fathom of water pretty easy.<sup>10</sup>

Asked if there were any stories that he particularly liked to tell, Coffil answered, "No, don't seem to be. It's just under the circumstances, somebody's mentioned something that one of them'll come to me." Although he has no favorite stories--none that he tells more often than others--there are some stories that

he now tells which include the context of their original telling, that is, stories about stories he has told. The story above about the twelve-foot lobster he caught in the Bay of Pigs is an example. Another Coffil story concerns a shipmate of his who was blown overboard as the vessel rounded Cape Horn (where Coffil, of course, has never been), and the woods camp cook to whom the story was first told. The story ends, "The wind blew his upper lip back over the top of his head, and blew him overboard. So, I was feeling pretty bad about that 'cause he was my friend. And then, I never heard from him, and then about two years later I got a letter from him. He was in South Africa and doin' good. After I told the cook that, he shook my hand. He got up and came right over and shook my hand."<sup>11</sup>

At times, Coffil tells stories which he has learned from others and includes the context of their original telling; on other occasions, he tells these stories as third-person narratives. Most often, if a specific social situation reminds him of a story, he will adapt the story to himself and that situation. This identification of stories with particular contexts is not done by Coffil alone. The men who frequent the store, when asked about Coffil and his stories, will more often than not describe a storytelling event rather than tell the story. Aesthetic appreciation is directed toward a story fitting a situation--the two (a story and its situation) are usually inseparable.

Coffil's storytelling aesthetic extends beyond an appreciation of storytelling contexts and the recognition that a good storyteller is a man of experience. After being told that experience was what made a man a storyteller, I argued, "Certainly there are a lot of guys who have travelled around that don't tell stories and that aren't storytellers. So there must be something besides that." His reply was neither abstract nor theoretical. "Well, I don't know," he said. "Some fellers like to tell some foolish things." Without pause, he then told a story about his trickster friend from Campobello Island, New Brunswick, a man who, by Coffil's standards, was quite a storyteller:

But he told me about landing that boatload of rum down there in the winter time and they couldn't, the fellers that was supposed to buy it didn't show up or something. And there was an island right off of, down in Campobello where he was. He lived over kind of alone over on the point, and they landed this on the island and put it there that winter, and the next day he said, they found out they was going to get a chance to get rid of it, so they went out and got it off the island and brought it in. And he buried it in his woodpile.

And, by gosh, he said, the next morning was a beautiful morning. The sun was shining, he said, and when he was eating his breakfast there was a knock come to the door. He says, "When I opened that door," he says, "it was solid full of brass." chuckling One of these customs fellers, I suppose. He says, "It was solid full of brass." And he asked him if he knowed of any, or heard tell of any rum being out on an island that day. They said they'd heard and they was going out to find out. "Well," he says, "I think," he says, "you're too late to find the rum," he says. "I think

they was there yesterday." He said, "Somebody told me they seen the tracks, where they went and got the rum yesterday."

So, they got in the boat. They had the boat there and they got in this boat and they went to the island. He got scared then, and he lugged the rum up in the woods. Got it out of the wood-pile and lugged it up in the woods. And when they come back to the wharf, why he went right down to the wharf. And when they come in they said, "You was right. The rum was gone, but," he said, "we found the tracks." So he says, "You was right about the rum." "Well," he says, "I was pretty sure," he said, "that the rum was gone" /laughter/.

So they got in the boat and went back to Eastport. He was just a little ways from Eastport, about as far as from here to Pereaue somewheres there by the store /a different store, about three miles away/. But he said the rum was gone, and it was all right. It was up in the woods there /chuckling/. But he was pretty, pretty good. Well, what struck me funny /was/when he said the door was solid full of brass /spoken very slowly/. Ah, he was quite the lad. Quite the lad.<sup>12</sup>

At the time I was not aware of the significance of Coffil's telling this story in answer to my question about what, besides a wide range of experience, makes a good storyteller. Weeks later, after he told the exaggeration about Sabre Tooth eating peanuts through a chickenwire fence, this became clear. A good storyteller is one who can create vivid, humorous imagery, who facilitates the listener's appreciation of the story by allowing him to picture scenes in the story as it progresses. In order to accomplish this, the storyteller must have a vivid picture in his mind to tell or describe. When I asked if he preferred telling tall tales in the first person, Coffil answered, "I don't notice much difference." He then continued: "I don't know why it is. Somebody will get to talkin' and they'll say somethin' about somethin' somewhere and this damn thing will, you know, I'll think about it, and then I'll picture it, and then I'll tell it."

The aesthetic of Bob Coffil, storyteller, includes two different but related concepts: first, an appreciation of a story fitting a situation; second, an awareness that good stories and storytelling are dependent upon vivid phrases and images which allow the listener and the teller to picture in detail the story as it progresses from one scene to another. The first aspect of this aesthetic of storytelling suggests several conclusions vis-a-vis an aesthetic in folk narrative and, more generally, in all "performed" folklore genres: (1) performance-conscious genres, such as the tall tale and the personal experience narrative do not lend themselves to an "art for art's sake" aesthetic, that is, to an appreciation of a specific item or story for its own sake divorced from any particular context; (2) when the folk aesthetic is related intrinsically to context, this aesthetic is most often unspoken; (3) conversely, the more static and item-oriented a folklore genre is, the more explicit is the aesthetic; and (4) the closer to professional status the performer is in his or her community, the more explicit is that performer's aesthetic. The attitudes expressed by

singer Almeda Riddle in A Singer and Her Songs exemplify these last two conclusions.<sup>13</sup> Coffil's greater ability to discuss stories and storytelling relative to the others who frequent the general store is further evidence of the validity of the fourth conclusion. He is, after all, the storyteller in the group; it is to be expected that he would have a better idea of what a story is and what a storyteller is:

The second aspect of Coffil's aesthetic suggests a final conclusion: at the core of the aesthetic in all folk narrative, beyond the appreciation of a specific story that fits a particular situation, is an appreciation of the imagery of the narrative, a sense that "you can almost picture it" as the story is told. Here, the story itself becomes a visual drama in the mind's eye of both the teller and his audience. The extent to which a story is appreciated by any one person thus depends upon the associations and connotations that the story calls to mind. The more vivid and detailed the mind-picture is, the better the story. This helps to explain the esoteric nature of much folk narrative. It also suggests a basic aesthetic similarity between written and oral literature: The short stories and novels, as well as the anecdotes and folktales, that we like best are those for which we are able to create a detailed, personal, idiosyncratic picture on the stage that is our mind.

With the tall tale, this concept of the narrative as visual drama is of special significance because of its unique content--the tall tale is a personal experience narrative, told to be true and with a realistic setting, but with an absurd incongruity or exaggeration of truth. The humor of the tall tale derives from this juxtaposition of the believable and the absurd, the realism shattered by exaggeration. The listener and the teller enjoying his own story picture a realistic setting as the narrative unfolds and then suddenly find that picture changed by exaggeration to absurdity, to impossibility. The humor of the joke, on the other hand, can be motivated by various means--a play on words, an awkward or embarrassing situation for the joke's protagonist, sadism or masochism, personal identification with the protagonist, and so on. Certainly jokes succeed or fail in large measure depending upon how vivid the mind-picture is which they elicit. (A good test of the validity of the aesthetic concept "you can almost picture it" is for anyone to consider his own narrative repertoire and realize that the stories he likes best are the ones for which he has the most vivid and detailed pictures.) Yet jokes are never told to be true, and the humor of their visual drama derives from a willing suspension of disbelief. The tall tale, on the other hand, succeeds when a previously established belief is "suspended" by absurd exaggeration.

The determination of a storyteller's aesthetic is of particular value because this criterion perhaps more than any other indicates whether a man is indeed a storyteller or might be seen by others as a storyteller. Although Bob Coffil's brother John did adapt stories to social situations, he more often told stories as independent items, probably because he had a greater appreciation of the stories as art and because he enjoyed being the storyteller. Bob's son, a forty-two year old fisherman, explained the difference: "He was always telling stories, everywhere we went. The old man [Bob] was always quiet. He never talked so much. And everywhere we went in the boat, Jack would tell the stories. He held the throne and people came to hear him talk. Everywhere we went, they knew him. The old man never had much chance to tell stories when Jack was around,



but he was kinda quiet anyway."<sup>14</sup> In addition, John Coffil did have favorite stories: about going over the Reversing Falls in Saint John, New Brunswick, in a barrel and then travelling west; about a bear getting jammed in a cabin door and a woman shoving a hot poker down its throat and then frying doughnuts in the bear fat that dripped out the bear's hind end; about a big Swede running out a wind-blown anchor chain to retrieve the anchor. John's aesthetic was thus at a higher level of consciousness, and he was more of a storyteller than his younger brother, Bob (who is a pretty fine storyteller himself). Bob Coffil's son explains again, with a comment that the folklorist interested in performance and repertoire often hears: "The old man would tell stories like that, but never so much as Jack did. I wish you could have heard him. It's too bad he's not around now. He could really tell you some stories."<sup>15</sup>

## NOTES

1. Alan P. Merriam, The Anthropology of Music (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 265.
2. Melville Jacobs, The Content and Style of an Oral Literature (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), p. 1.
3. Recorded January 11, 1973, Delhaven, Nova Scotia. All of the field-recorded tapes are on deposit in the Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive.
4. Henry Glassie, "Folk Art," in Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction, ed. Richard M. Dorson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), p. 268.
5. Recorded September 29, 1972, Delhaven, Nova Scotia.
6. Field notes, October 10, 1972, Delhaven, Nova Scotia.
7. Field notes, April 25, 1973, Delhaven, Nova Scotia.
8. Richard Bauman, "The La Have Island General Store: Sociability and Verbal Art in a Nova Scotia Community," Journal of American Folklore 85 (1972): 330-343.
9. See, for example, Linda Dégh, Folktales and Society: Story-telling in a Hungarian Peasant Community, trans. Emily M. Schossberger (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), pp. 80-81, 168-171.
10. Recorded January 11, 1973, Delhaven, Nova Scotia.
11. Field notes, September 13, 1972, Delhaven, Nova Scotia. The same story about a story, though without the handshaking conclusion, was recorded on February 17, 1970, and again, in a somewhat longer version, on May 17, 1970.
12. Recorded September 29, 1972, Delhaven, Nova Scotia. The same story, notably without the "solid full of brass" incident, was recorded May 1, 1973, in the first person telling of the trickster from whom Coffil learned the story

twenty years ago.

13. Roger D. Abrahams, ed., A Singer and Her Songs: Almeda Riddle's Book of Ballads (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1970).

14. Field notes, August 24, 1973, Kentville, Nova Scotia.

15. Field notes, August 24, 1973, Kentville, Nova Scotia.