A CYCLE COMPLETED

The Nine Novels of Robertson Davies

George Woodcock

GLENDOWER: I can call spirits from the vasty deep.

HOTSPUR: Why, so can I, or so can any man,
But will they come if you do call to them?

GLENDOWER: Why, I can teach you cousin, to command
The devil.

HOTSPUR: And I can teach thee, coz., to shame the devil
By telling truths: tell truth and shame the devil.

(William Shakespeare, *Henry IV, Part 1*, III.i.53-59)

WITH THE PUBLICATION in the autumn of 1988 of *The Lyre of Orpheus*, Robertson Davies has completed the third of his fictional trilogies, each centred on a different Ontario town, and each dominated by a central group of characters through whose varying perceptions and memories the current of events that characterizes the trilogy is perceived.

The completion of the triple triad is, as Davies has undoubtedly recognized, an event that stirs a multitude of numerological, folkloric, and mythological echoes. Nine was one of the three mystical numbers of the Pythagoreans, and though three was a perfect number which Pythagoras made the sign of the deity, nine had its specific significance as a trinity of trinities, the perfect plural. For Pythagoras, and later for the great classical astronomer Ptolemy, the universe moved in nine spheres. In various contexts we find the number particularly associated with inspiration and imagination. There were nine Muses, nine Gallicenae or virgin priestesses of the Druid oracles, and nine Sibylline books transmitted from Cumae to Rome. Echoed constantly in Davies' novels is the ancient concept of a nine day's wonder: as the old proverb has it, "A wonder lasts nine days, and then the puppy's eyes are open." But most relevant of all in considering *The Lyre of Orpheus* as the last Davies novel to date — and perhaps the last of the kind to which we have become accustomed since *Fifth Business* appeared in 1970 — is the role which nine plays in music, for nine was the Pythagorean *diapason*, man being the full chord, or eight notes, and nine representing the deity, ultimate harmony.

The Lyre of Orpheus is not merely a novel about music; it is a novel about the nature of art in general and its relation to reality and time and the human spirit. But the main plot carrying this theme concerns a musical event, and in doing so it takes us back with striking deliberation to the first group of Davies novels, the Salterton series. For, like the last of that series, *A Mixture of Frailties* (1958), *The Lyre of Orpheus* is built around a family trust which offers a phenomenally generous grant to a young woman musician from a Philistine background, and finds itself sponsoring a controversial opera, so that a contribution is made to the art of music in a general way at the same time as the young musician, aided by wise teachers, undergoes an inner transformation that opens to her what in Davies terminology one might call "a world of wonders"; in Jungian terms she is taken out of the anonymity and personal incompleteness of common life and achieves individuation.

There are indeed important ways in which *The Lyre of Orpheus*, written thirty years later, goes beyond *A Mixture of Frailties*. While Monica Gall in the earlier novel is a singer whose talents are trained by inspired teachers, and the opera in which she becomes involved is the original work of another — a wayward modern genius — in *The Lyre of Orpheus* we edge nearer to the creative role, for the musician, Hulda Scknackenburg (generally called Schnak), is a composer engaged not in an original composition but in a task of inspired reconstruction. She is making an opera, *Arthur of Britain*, out of scattered fragments left by E. T. A. Hoffman (better known as a Gothicist tale-teller than as a musician) of an opera he was unable to complete before his early death from the nineteenth-century endemic, syphilis. At the same time the priestly scholar Simon Darcourt (one of the narrators of an earlier Davies novel, *The Rebel Angels*) constructs the libretto around which the score that Schnak develops from Hoffman's fragments is built up. Schnak and Darcourt, with their various collaborators, manage to recreate an authentic sounding early nineteenth-century opera which pleases the spirit of E. T. A. Hoffman who makes a ghostly appearance in the comments from the underworld that appear as interludes between the narrative chapters.

Related to this major plot is a strikingly similar sub-plot devoted to the visual as distinct from the audial arts. As well as acting as pasticheur-librettist, Simon Darcourt is engaged on a biography of Francis Cornish, the celebrated connoisseur and art collector whose bequest has funded the preparation and production of *Arthur of Britain*. Darcourt stumbles on the clues which reveal to him what readers of *What's Bred in the Bone* already know, that Cornish was actually the painter of a famous triptych, *The Marriage of Cana*, done so authentically in the fifteenth-century German manner that it has been plausibly attributed to an unknown painter working five centuries ago who was given the name of the Alchemical Master.

Simon Darcourt manages to convince everyone involved, including the owners

of the painting and the reluctant mandarins of the National Gallery to which it is eventually given, that a work done sincerely and without intent of fraud in the style of a past age is not a fake and can be as authentic as the best work in a contemporary manner. The argument put forward by Darcourt's colleague Clement Hollier, an expert on myths, is not only interesting in itself but important for what it tells us about Davies' own attitudes towards the arts and about his own literary achievement. Here is Darcourt's paraphrase of Hollier's statement:

> If a man wants to paint a picture that is intended primarily as an exercise in a special area of expertise, he will do so in a style with which he is most familiar. If he wants to paint a picture which has a particular relevance to his own life-experience, which explores the myth of his life as he understands it, and which, in the old phrase, "makes up his soul", he is compelled to do it in a mode that permits such allegorical revelation. Painters after the Renaissance, and certainly after the Protestant Reformation, have not painted such pictures with the frankness that was natural to pre-Renaissance artists. The vocabulary of faith, and of myth, has been taken from them by the passing of time. But Francis Cornish, when he wanted to make up his soul, turned to the style of painting and the concept of visual art which came most naturally to him. Indeed, he had many times laughed at the notion of contemporaneity in conversation . . . , mocking it as a foolish chain on a painter's inspiration and intention.
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> It must be remembered . . . that Francis has been brought up a Catholic — or almost a Catholic — and he had taken his catholicity seriously enough to make it a foundation of his art. If God is one and eternal, and if Christ is not dead, but living, are not fashions in art mere follies for those who are the slaves of Time?

In musical terms the chapter in which these matters are resolved can be regarded as a coda, a concluding passage after the main pattern of the work has been developed and completed; it states the theme of the novel more definitely and succinctly than in early renderings. *Arthur of Britain* has been completed and successfully launched as a new work in the operatic repertoire, Schnak had found herself and her career, and now, three years later in a chapter free of the ghostly voice of E. T. A. Hoffman (a ghost now actually laid), we can consider what is the meaning of it all, assisted by our reflections on Francis Cornish's strange master work. And so, just as *The Lyre of Orpheus* as a whole, with its deliberate reordering and retelling of the plot of *A Mixture of Frailties*, completes the circle of Davies' mature fiction, so this final chapter of the latest of his novels acts, I suggest, as a veiled *apologia pro vita sua*, a justification for the uncontemporary aesthetic underlying Davies' life work.

GEORGE ORWELL ONCE REMARKED on the striking fact that the best writers of his time — and among them he included the great apostles of literary modernism — have in fact been conservative and even reactionary in their

social and political attitudes. This is certainly true of most of the great moderns in the Anglo-American tradition; Eliot, Pound, and Wyndham Lewis were all to be found politically somewhat to the right of old-style Toryism, and James Joyce failed to join them only because of a massive indifference to anything outside his own linguistic experiments.

Robertson Davies has not spoken of his political views in any detail or with much directness. I have no idea how he votes, though it is clear that he has the kind of Tory mind which judges politics ethically; his treatment of Boy Staunton's political career in *Fifth Business* suggests that he probably has little patience with what passes for a Conservative cause in late twentieth-century Canada.

What distinguishes Davies from the reactionary modernists is that his Toryism runs into his art as well as his political ethics. He is an unrepentent cultural élitist. "There is no democracy in the world of intellect, and no democracy of taste," he said in *A Voice from the Attic* (1960) and he has not since shown a change of attitude. He has never posed as an avant garde writer of any kind. In spite of occasionally expressed admiration for *Ulysses* as a great comic work, he has never followed Joyce's experiments in language, and despite a loosely stated interest in Proust, he has never tried to emulate Proust's experiments in the literary manipulation of time and memory. Indeed, in this respect he has been far less experimental than other writers we do not regard as particularly avant gardist, like Margaret Laurence and Marian Engel. Though in his two later trilogies he may view the same sequences of events in different novels through different eyes, he still tends within each novel to follow a strictly chronological pattern, with effect following cause, whether the causes are the inner ones to be dragged out by Jungian analysis or the outer ones which we see a character's social ambiance and physical environment imposing on him.

Not that, even taking into account the clear, serviceable and declarative prose that Davies writes, we should regard him as a plain realist. If he is a realist, it is not in the documentary sense, but in the theatrical sense of wishing to give plausibility to the implausible, in his early novels to farce and in his later ones to melodrama. There is always in his writing a heightening of the use of language that goes beyond the demands of ordinary realism, and, given his special interests, Davies might justly be called a magic realist rather than a surrealist. It is true that he shares with the surrealists a preoccupation with depth psychology and its resources of imagery, but while most of the surrealists tended to put their faith in Freud, Davies has found Jung a richer source.

Just as his magicians are technicians of illusion rather than true thaumaturges, so Davies himself takes a pride in artifice, yet he is too conservative a writer to fit in with the postmodernists, metafictionists and destructionists of our own day. Far from being destructionist, indeed, his novels are as Edwardianly well-made as Galsworth's Forsyte novels or Arnold Bennett's fictional chronicles of the Five

Towns, while among his contemporaries the one novelist he has regarded as undeniably great, and whom he has admitted to be an influence, is Joyce Cary, whose virtues lay not in his experimental daring, but rather in a zest for the language, "a reaffirmation of the splendour and sacredness of life," and the same kind of restless and active erudition as Davies displays in his own fiction.

While recognizing that a novel is a work of artifice in which verisimilitude is part of the illusion, and often using contrived fictional devices, Davies manifests little of that preoccupation with the relationship between writers, readers, and the work which has led metafictionists ever since Cervantes and Sterne in their smoke-and-mirror games with reality. He is too didactic, too much concerned with developing lessons about life, and with displaying knowledge and expertise, to subordinate the central narrative, the line of purpose in his works, to any speculative process that might seem to weaken its validity. He is, essentially, a novelist in the central English tradition of Fielding and Dickens and Cary, intent on using artifice to entertain and to instruct. He is brilliantly inventive and has an extraordinary power of assimilating information and presenting it acceptably. But he has little formal originality, little of the power of imaginative transfiguration, so that his novels are still influenced by the conventions of the theatre where he began his writing career, and large sections of them are dominated by the kind of didactic dialogue we used to associate with Bernard Shaw and his disciples. Art comes, when it does, at the end of the process, in the accidental way which also accords with the main English fictional tradition. The kind of deliberate artistry that distinguished the main French tradition from Flaubert onwards, and the tradition of deep social criticism that distinguished the central lineage of Russian fiction from Turgenev onwards, find no place in Davies' books.

Nor, for that matter, does one find much in common between Davies' novels and those of the writers, like Hugh MacLennan and Sinclair Ross and Margaret Laurence, whom we regard as most faithful in their projection of the climate and character of Canadian life and its relation to the land. Davies' novels are restricted geographically to a tiny fragment of Canada — Toronto and the small towns of western Ontario — and to a restricted social milieu of Old and New Money, of the false and true intellectual and artistic aspirations of the middle class, and working-class people are introduced only for comic relief, as in the case of the Morphews in *Leaven of Malice* or the elder Galls in *A Mixture of Frailties*, or on condition that they become transformed and find their way into the cultured bourgeoisie, as Monica Gall does in *A Mixture of Frailties* and Hulda Sckneckenburg seems about to do at the end of *The Lyre of Orpheus*.

Davies did indeed define his attitude to Canada in an interview in *Maclean's* in 1972, two years after *Fifth Business* was published, when he replied to the complaints he had heard that "my novels aren't about Canada."

> I think they are, because I see Canada as a country torn between a very northern, rather extraordinary mystical spirit which it fears and its desire to present itself to the world as a Scotch banker.

Davies and his critics tend to use the term "mystical" in a rather loose and general way which has nothing to do with the genuine experiences of mystics like St. John of the Cross or Jakob Boehme, but if we interpret this statement to mean that Canadians hover between an intuitive acceptance of their environment which leads them to see their history in mythic terms, and a grey and materialist attitude in everyday life, I think we have perhaps a good point at which to begin a reconsideration of the triple fictional triads of which *The Lyre of Orpheus* represents the conclusion.

LOOKING BACK AT *Tempest Tost* (1951), the first of the early novels of manners which Davies set in the small town of Salterton (Kingston transmogrified), we notice how limited is the range of situations in Davies' novels, for here already we have the theatrical producer, Valentine Rich, coming into a Canadian town to direct the amateur actors of the Little Theatre in a production of *The Tempest*, just as in *The Lyre of Orpheus* the formidable Dr. Gunilla Dahl-Soot will descend on Toronto to preside over the Canadian metamorphosis of Hoffman's *Arthur of Britain*. And in the very choice of the play that is produced in the earlier novel — *The Tempest* — we have the favourite Davies theme of the interchangeability of life's pretences of reality and art's frank and open illusionism.

The main satirical device of *Tempest Tost* is a relatively simple one: the effort to find among the inadequate citizens of Salterton the types who will adequately project Shakespeare's characters. The results of the casting are ludicrous: Prospero is played by an arrogant and insensitive pedant, Professor Vambrace, Ferdinand by a young army officer whose aim in life is to seduce as many girls as he can, and Gonzago by an owlish middle-aged schoolteacher, Hector Mackilwraith, who falls lugubriously in love with the rich man's daughter Griselda Webster, who is half his age and plays Ariel.

As this is a novel of manners, people are rarely illuminated from within, but are seen usually as they react to each other in social situations. At this stage Davies was still obviously much affected by the theatrical world in which he had recently been so closely involved, and the dialogue reads like a cross between that of early twentieth-century English farce and — when ideas are uppermost — that of Thomas Love Peacock's conversational novels. All the Davies novels give off a perceptible whiff of Peacock, though I have been unable to find any reference that might show Davies took a direct interest in him; the way of transmission may have been through Aldous Huxley, whom Davies certainly read with attention, since in

The Rebel Angels — with oblique acknowledgement — he made extensive use of W. H. Sheldon's theories linking temperament with physical types which Huxley had already introduced extensively into his later books.

The disadvantage of this kind of dialogue, as Hugo McPherson pointed out in an early issue of *Canadian Literature*, is that it reveals very little of the private as distinct from the social personalities of the characters, and this creates an extraordinary formal awkwardness, since Davies then saw no other way to reveal his people in depth than to explain them in long narrative passages; in one instance, twenty pages of narrative are spent giving the history of Hector Mackilwraith so that we know how this amorous clown — the would-be lover of Griselda — came to be what he is. The shallowness of this approach to characterization ends in simplistic contrasts; Valentine Rich strikes us as being much too good and Professor Vambrace much too bad to be true.

Yet *Tempest Tost* prefigures in its own way much of the later Davies: the preoccupation with mystery as illusion, with art as artifice and — personified in those who variously court Griselda — the absurd complexities of the emotional life — with love and sex as rich sources of comedy.

Like *Tempest Tost*, *Leaven of Malice* anticipates the later novels with the kind of display of practical knowledge that often makes one think, while reading a Davies novel, of Zola and the naturalists. Davies is not so brutally obvious as Zola in presenting his characters as the products of material circumstance; even in his later novels when he shows his characters strongly conditioned by childhood experience and social ambiance, he allows them ways of liberation for which the iron determinism of the naturalists left no space.

But he does share with the naturalists the urge to present very circumstantially the activities and interests in which his characters become involved; it is part of the verisimilitude on which convincing illusions depend, as his magicians constantly insist. He began — and this perhaps shows the caution of a writer who is craftsman by intent and artist by good fortune — with areas where he already had knowledge through experience. His involvement in the theatre — both professional and amateur — gave him the background for *Tempest Tost*, and his occupation of editing a newspaper, the *Peterborough Examiner*, gave him that for *Leaven of Malice*, which combines a satirical picture of small-town feuds with the tension of a rather mild detective mystery, for the plot centres on a false and maliciously placed newspaper announcement of the coming marriage of Sollie Bridgetower and Pearl Vambrace. Like the Montagues and the Capulets, the academic families of Bridgetower and Vambrace are ancient enemies, and the notice results in splendid histrionics as Professor Vambrace threatens legal action in all directions. However, in the end all is well, since, by the kind of glib twist that was common enough in London West End comedies at the time, Solly and Pearl fall in love during the

feuding process, and after the perpetrator of the hoax is discovered the malicious announcement is in fact fulfilled when they marry.

Leaven of Malice, though a more tightly constructed book, is flawed in the same ways as *Tempest Tost*. The satire moves at the surface level of manners, so that the characters are two-dimensional, and the didacticism of the book is largely unassimilated; Davies will break up the action for several pages at a time to give — say — a disquisition on who reads newspapers and why. Thus the novel moves haltingly as a series of dialogues and slapstick encounters interrupted by essays. At best it and *Tempest Tost* are reasonably good entertainment, but like most mere entertainment they seem very dated a third of a century after writing.

A Mixture of Frailties is an altogether more satisfying book — and much more of a real novel — than its predecessors, as Davies himself seems to suggest by repeating its essential situation in *The Lyre of Orpheus*. There are several reasons for this. First, though satire is not absent, it is given depth by the comparison of two worlds of manners and taste, those of Salterton and those of Britain. Then, through the concentration on the training of Monica Gall and the emotional adventures that accompany it, we are shown for the first time not merely a character getting wise to his own inadequacy, as with Hector in *Tempest Tost*, but the awakening and development of a whole personality as her various masters introduce Monica to the splendours and miseries of life and art. In the process a deeper and less facile element of romance enters into *A Mixture of Frailties*, and the tension between satire and romance, between comedy and the tragedy that eventually breaks in, gives the narrative an element of dramatic *chiaroscuro* and a depth of perspective that the earlier novels lacked. *A Mixture of Frailties* broadens because of its multiplicity of locale, and deepens psychologically because we are no longer seeing people merely in terms of their behaviour, but as individuals who feel deeply and speak their feelings. They also speak their knowledge, and sententious in a sub-Wilde way as Sir Benedict Domdaniel may be when he talks of life and artifice and art, his aphorisms are an improvement on the interpolated essays of the earlier works.

With *A Mixture of Frailties* in 1958 Robertson Davies seemed like a novelist who after some clever failures was really beginning to find his way, and yet he waited twelve years before publishing his next novel, *Fifth Business*, in 1970. During the intervening period he moved from the newspaper world into that of academe, becoming Master of Massey College at the University of Toronto in 1961 and shortly afterwards he began to teach dramatic literature as a graduate study. During this interlude his writing was very scanty and almost entirely journalistic. Whatever the reason for the silence, it was a productive one. The world changed, and Davies changed his mind with it. He paid attention to

the deep theological and political debates of the 1960s, and though he became no easy convert to any novel doctrine, he quietly modified his attitudes to life and kept his mind open to anything he might be able to use when he returned to fiction again. It was a time of rapidly growing permissiveness both in behaviour and in the ways in which people expressed themselves, and though Davies was too conservative at heart to make any great changes in his use of language, he was ready, by the time he came to write *Fifth Business*, to write openly of things he had not even hinted in his earlier novels, so that while both *Tempest Tost* and *Leaven of Malice* were devoid of any active sexual irregularities, and *A Mixture of Frailties* contented itself with a little heterosexual living in sin, such hitherto unmentioned pursuits as sodomy began to find their place in later Davies books, and invariably as negative manifestations of the quasi-Gnostic dualism that had turned the novels from 1970 onwards into the skirmishing grounds of good and evil.

Good and evil, truth and falsehood, reality and illusion — the oppositions continue through the rest of Davies' novels, and there has never been a resolution of the struggle. There is much calling up of "the vasty deep," much conscious and unconscious seeking for God, but, as Dunstan Ramsay admits in *Fifth Business*,

> I had sought God in my lifelong . . . preoccupation with saints. But all I had found in that lifelong study was a complexity that brought God no nearer.

In practice, Davies' characters are much nearer to Hotspur than to his own fellow Welsh sage, Owen Glendower; they too seek to "shame the devil, and tell the truth." In fact the whole of the so-called Deptford trilogy (which extended so far beyond Deptford), beginning with *Fifth Business*, is an attempt by three different people, Ramsay himself, David Staunton (the son of his friend Boy Staunton), and Paul Dempster, to discover the truth about themselves and about the strange series of events in which they are involved. All their enquiries proceed on a human level. The wonders that occur among them, at the hand of Paul Dempster metamorphosed into the magician Magnus Eisengrim, are man-made illusions, not supernatural marvels. Mary Dempster, the "fool saint" through whom Ramsay seems to get a whiff of the divine, is in fact a woman turned half-witted by misfortune, and the miracles he attributes to her are not such as the church would accept. In the end the wise and eccentric old Jesuit, Father Blazon, calls upon him to abandon his quest for saintliness if not for saints.

> Forgive yourself for being a human creature, Ramezay. That is the beginning of wisdom; that is part of what is meant by the fear of God; but for you it is the only way to save your sanity. Begin now, or you will end up with your saint in the madhouse.

Similarly, when the devil appears to Ramsay, it is in the form of a human being, the rich Swiss woman Liesl who is Eisengrim's impresario and eventually becomes Ramsay's friend.

In all this, Davies is not suggesting that the good represented by the saints or the evil represented by the devil do not exist. What he tells us is that — unless we belong to the privileged and scanty ranks of the mystics who have been vouchsafed the ecstatic vision of deity — we see both the divine and the diabolical in fleeting manifestations in our human existence, hinted rather than stated in dreams, in myths, in puzzling personal encounters. That is why Ramsay, like Clement Hollier in the third trilogy that begins with *The Rebel Angels*, will operate as a scholar in the interface between history and myth; why Jungian analysis with its underworld of archetypical beings mysteriously residing in the collective unconscious which we all share, will play such an important role in the novels; why the illusions that Marcus Eisengrim creates by mechanical means will shadow forth a different "world of wonders" as mysterious and inaccessible as the world of Plato's Forms. In the end, one is left after reading Davies' later novels with a sense of the enormous ambivalence of one of the key phrases of the religious quest: "Seek, and ye shall find." Davies' characters, or at least the significant ones, seek and indeed they find, but what they find is not the Grail of which they have gone in search. If they are fortunate they find self-realization, and often it is in some way self-realization through creation. The individual may not find God in the whole and all-consuming way of the great mystics, but he will realize the fragment of God, the creative spark, that is within himself.

All this represents an enormous thematic advance on the early Davies novels, and it is clear that the twelve years of literary silence were spent in much study and thought. Still, in the last resort the success or otherwise of the novels lies not in what they tell us, which an intelligent tract could probably do as well, but in how they tell it. And here also *Fifth Business* is a great advance on even *A Mixture of Frailties*. Indeed, there are some who say it represents the peak of Davies' achievement, the best of all the nine novels, and, as we shall see, there is some justification for such an opinion.

In *Fifth Business* Davies departs from the old-fashioned form of third-person narrative with somewhat theatrical dialogue which he used in the Salterton trilogy. Now he uses a direct and rather aggressive first-person approach as Ramsay, a retiring master at Colborne College, protests to the Headmaster about the patronizing farewell notice accorded him in the *College Chronicle*. His letter of protest extends into a whole book, but once we accept this basic implausibility we find ourselves involved in the account of a strange life told with a becoming idiosyncrasy and with a vigour of language and imagery, and a grasp of the grubby glory of life, that is quite beyond anything in the Salterton stories. What makes the book so successful is a remarkable unity of tone which extends into an appropriateness of speech to character and character to action that rarely lapses.

With the ingenuity of a dedicated mythographer, Ramsay traces how a misaimed snowball, intended for him and wickedly loaded with a stone, set the three

main characters of the novel, and of the rest of the trilogy, on their often parted but always interweaving paths in life.

The stone-laden snowball, intended by Boy Staunton for Ramsay, knocks down Mary Dempster and brings on the premature birth of her son Paul. It also results in her permanently losing her reason and becoming what the local Catholic priest calls a "fool saint," eccentric in her behaviour and indiscriminating in her generosity, up to the point when she scandalizes the town by giving herself to a wandering tramp, whom the trauma of their discovery by a search party in the local hobo jungle turns into a missionary in the city slums.

Ramsay, whose evasion of the snowball resulted in Mary Dempster's misfortune, not only feels a lifelong guilt towards her, but, in observing actions he can only interpret as saintly, is started on his career as a high-class hagiographer, tracing the various kinds and conditions of sainthood, and treating the phenomenon of hagiolatry as one of the points where myth and history most illumine each other and where illusion may lead to the recognition of truth.

Ramsay's other boyhood passion is the deceptive magic of conjuring; himself too ham-handed to succeed, he passes his knowledge on to young Paul Dempster who has the necessary manual facility. And when Paul has endured enough of his Baptist minister father's fundamentalist disciplines, and of the mockery to which his mother's actions subject him at the hands of Boy Staunton and the other Deptford children, he lets himself be seduced into a freak show by the homosexual conjuror Willard, one of Davies' most chilling personifications of evil. After years of virtual slavery during which he learns his art, Paul falls in with the formidably ugly and intelligent and also very rich Liesl Naegeli, who establishes him as the internationally famed magician Magnus Eisengrim. Meanwhile, Boy Staunton, the author with his hard-centred snowball of all these strange metamorphoses in the lives of others, goes on blindly with his self-obsessed career as financier and politician, impervious to the sufferings of others until, in a fatal encounter where he and Paul and Ramsay for the first time come together as a trio, he gains a kind of enlightenment into the emptiness of his life, goes off with the stone which Ramsay has religiously preserved, and dies mysteriously, drowned in his car with the stone in his mouth.

It is the single, consistent, idiosyncratic, eloquent voice of Ramsay that gives *Fifth Business* its impressive and convincing power and unity, which neither of the later volumes in the trilogy projects to the same degree. Bizarre as much of it may seem to him, the reader is aware of the essential, devil-shaming truth of *Fifth Business*, its authenticity as the account of a failed search for the divine. Ramsay's letter, of course, is a piece of artifice, a literary contrivance, but it is a contrivance that we accept as easily as we might accept a magnifying glass as an aid to reading a difficult text. The character evoked by it seems to live with his own inner vigour, and so all that happens to him seems fictionally authentic.

In his trilogy Davies sets out to show the consequences of the snowballing from the standpoints of the three Deptford boys who were most affected, but in *The Manticore* he actually circumvents the problem of how to perceive and present the insensitive and monstrously self-conceited Boy Staunton by showing Boy's life through the eyes and feelings of his son, the brilliant and alcoholic lawyer David Staunton, "who had a dark reputation because the criminal world thought so highly of him, and who played up to the role, and who secretly fancied himself as a magician of the courtroom."

Realizing that the shock of his father's dramatic death has pushed him to the edge of a mental breakdown, David decides to subject himself to psychoanalysis, and it is this analysis, conducted in Zurich by the Jungian Dr. Joanna von Heller, that forms the frame of the book. It consists of conversations with Dr. von Heller, interspersed by sections of a narrative of the past which the analyst requires David to write. In the process we are given not only a picture of the kind of upbringing that by middle age had carried Boy Staunton's son to the verge of madness, but also a portrait of that startlingly soulless man, his father, who was evil by default of goodness.

But the framework is too rigid for events to move easily and too awkward to be evocative of character. Neither of the Stauntons stands in the mind's eye as a living person with the same kind of depth and complexity as Ramsay in *Fifth Business*. One of the reasons is that in *The Manticore* Davies is even more eager than in previous novels to perform as the Canadian latter-day Zola, exhibiting too painfully and at times all too dully his Jungian scholarship and his carefully acquired knowledge of the working of the Canadian legal system.

The third novel of the series, *World of Wonders*, tells of the transformation of Paul Dempster, the wretched Deptford boy, into the famous and accomplished stage magician, Magnus Eisengrim. Again there is a rather contrived frame, for the story is told when Eisengrim is playing the role of an earlier magical illusionist, Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin, in a film directed by the famous Swede, Jurgen Lind. Evening after evening, at the urging of Ramsay who wishes to prepare an authentic biography of Dempster as well as the lying life of Eisengrim he had earlier written to give his friend publicity, the magician tells of the terrifying experiences in the lower levels of the entertainment world by which, like an ancient shaman being ceremonially reborn, he was transformed from a parson's tyrannized son into a wonder-worker. The framework gives the narrative a formality that does not always accord with the spirit of what is told, and acts as a kind of hobble to the narrative. Yet the content is so dark and compelling in its evocation of evil and so fascinating in its use of the illusory wonders of the magician's art to suggest by analogy the true wonders of existence, that the knowledge so broadly displayed of early twentieth-century English theatre and of the life and crafts of American show people becomes far more thoroughly assimilated into the narrative than happened with Jungian

analysis in *The Manticore*. In form, as in content, *World of Wonders* impresses one as a work of consummate artifice, in which the protagonist, Paul Dempster, is barely perceived as a human being through the multitude of bright mirror images and the endless argumentative evasions he displays in offering his conversational autobiography. One feels that this is Proteus, and that his creator has never really got him by the heels. At the end of the novel it is not Paul Dempster but once again canny old Ramsay who emerges as the one thoroughly convincing, because thoroughly revealed, character. Such are the perils to a novelist of entering too deeply and deliberately into the world of illusion.

A DIFFERENT KIND OF WRITER'S PERIL emerges in the third group of Davies novels, the Toronto campus trilogy as one might call it. For these books — *The Rebel Angels*, *What's Bred in the Bone*, and *The Lyre of Orpheus* — are partly at least *romans à clef*, based on Davies' experiences of educational and cultural institutions, so that readers in the know have had no difficulty recognizing some of the people whom Davies has embellished into often bizarre characters: John Pearson transmogrified into John Parlabane in *The Rebel Angels*, for instance, and Alan Jarvis made over into Aylwin Ross in *What's Bred in the Bone*. Such mergings of fact into fiction always arouse doubts in one's mind about the writer's motives and ultimately about the nature of his achievement. Is he playing metafictional games with the reader? Or is he lazily offering us memory half raw? As distinct from the youthful autobiographical novel, which is a *rite de passage* many readers undergo in the development of their fictional imagination, the *roman à clef*, in the hands of an experienced novelist, is always an equivocal achievement in which the power of imagination remains in doubt.

Still, the three novels are more than *romans à clef*; if the Deptford series is concerned with the relationship between illusion and reality as mediated by artifice, this later group tends to be dominated by the relationship between true art and artifice, played out, as in the earlier novels, against the shifting scenes of a stage where history and myth are seen as merging.

In a literal way the central figure is Francis Cornish, whose life is told in the middle novel, *What's Bred in the Bone*. Cornish is known to the world as a discriminating connoisseur and a voracious collector of art. In the first volume, *The Rebel Angels*, he has just died and left to three professors the task of sorting the great accumulation of objects he has acquired and of distributing them in accordance with his will. The narrative is a curiously divided one, part of it being written by one of the three professors, Simon Darcourt, as a gossiping journal of academic life he called "The New Aubrey," and alternating chapters forming a kind of interior diary of Maria Theotoky, a half-Polish, half-Gypsy graduate student; she

thinks herself in love with Clement Hollier, the second of the professors, a great mythographer who has seduced her in a fit of absent-mindedness. The third professor, the leading villain, is an unprincipled academic poseur, Urquhart McVarish, who steals from the Cornish collection a remarkable unknown Rabelais manuscript after which Hollier lusts academically.

These high eccentrics, consumed by scholarly passions and academic greeds, and reinforced by such colleagues as the sinister ex-monk John Parlabane, present academe as the terrain of such strange conflicts that one feels often Davies is trying to compensate for his frustration with the dullness of real Canadian academic life. The action mounts to a suicide (Parlabane's) and a bizarre murder (of McVarish by Parlabane) among sexual orgies as strange in their own way as anything in Petronius. The novel slides — as so many of Davies' do — into the serene harbour of a happy ending, out of tone with the rest of the book, in which Maria, having recovered from her infatuation with her professor, marries Arthur Cornish, the rich nephew of Francis and the real administrator of the Cornish estate.

Once again we are treated to displays of knowledge. There is a fascinating oddity about the arcane lore of gypsies rejuvenating and faking old violins which provides some of the most entertaining pages of the book. There is also an unfortunate bit of stale derivativeness when the Sheldonian theory of the effect of physique on temperament is warmed up in a weakly humorous scene when Ozias Froats expounds his theories on the qualities and virtues of human excrement. It is a more disunited novel than any of Davies' previous works; the central intrigue over the Rabelais papers is too weak to carry the burden of so many extraneous interests, and no character — not even wicked Parlabane or the brooding offscene presence of Francis Cornish is sufficiently realized to sustain one's interest.

Francis Cornish comes fully onstage in *What's Bred in the Bone*, which is really a classic *bildungsroman*, in form, language, and in the handling of the trilogy's central theme, the relationship between artifice and art. A whimsical structure, in which the chapters are interspersed with angelic conversations, does not disguise the fact that the novel is told in a very conservative third-person narrative. Cornish's life begins in Blairlogie on the Ottawa River, which is clearly a fictional presentation of Renfrew, where Davies spent much of his childhood, and the money that will eventually finance Francis as a collector comes originally from the destruction of the northern Ontario forests. Like Ramsay's, his childhood is dominated by an obsession, in this case with "the Looner," his idiot brother, the first Francis, whose survival has been concealed and who becomes one of the earliest subjects of the second Francis's pencil when he begins his lonely apprenticeship as an artist.

Following a picaresque line, the novel takes Francis to Oxford, where he falls in with the famous restorer of classical paintings, Tancred Saraceni; he eventually joins Saraceni at a castle in Bavaria where their task is to restore — and improve in the restoring — a cache of German late medieval paintings which are passed

on to the credulous Nazis in exchange for authentic Italian masterpieces from German collections. Here — and the opportunity is not lost for a display of the knowledge Davies has acquired of the methods of the old masters and how their effects can be reproduced in materials now available — Francis perfects his grasp of the technique of painting. When he has reached this point Saraceni proposes to test his aesthetic imagination by leaving him to paint — on an old ruined altarpiece — the work that will show he is a true artist as well as a fine artisan. The result is *The Marriage of Cana* which, when it surfaces before a commission established to send European paintings back to their proper homes, Saraceni proclaims to be an original by an unknown early painter, whom he calls The Alchemical Master; later Aylwin Ross publishes an analytical essay that seems to set the picture firmly in the political and social context of the times. What we — as readers — know to be the work of a modern man has been accepted by the artistic establishment as the work of a man five centuries before, and we enjoy the ironies that our knowledge allows us.

But Davies is after more than irony. There is serious business on foot here, as *The Lyre of Orpheus* reveals. I have already shown, in opening this essay, how in plot *The Lyre of Orpheus* circles back to the early Davies novels, as if to signify that a cycle is being closed, and how, thematically, it brings to a conclusion questions regarding the nature of literary art that are implicit in Davies' fiction from the beginning.

Here, in this most recent novel, the artistic conservatism of Robertson Davies is clearly displayed, in argument and in practice. Once again the narrative is a traditional third-person one, given a touch of metafictional contrivance by the introduction of the beyond-the-grave commentaries of Hoffman, which in fact deepen the conservatism of the narrative by presenting the views on art of a nineteenth-century musician, which the twentieth-century musicians in the novel are seeking to bring to fruition. The enthusiastic account of Schnak's dedicated toil in completing another musician's work abandoned so long ago is a clear denial of the cult of originality that has dominated western art and literature since the days of the romantics. Allied to the cult of originality is that of contemporaneity, the idea that the true artist must speak of his time in its own verbal or visual language; Darcourt's triumphal assertion of Francis Cornish's genius, which finds in *The Marriage of Cana* an expression that is neither original nor contemporary but is true to his talents and his life, is a negation of that doctrine too.

Thematically, *The Lyre of Orpheus* projects a viewpoint that is reactionary rather than classicist in formal terms, for, though Davies has adhered increasingly in his most recent English novels to the traditional methods of mainstream English fiction, his interests have placed him on the verge of Gothic romanticism in selecting his content, while his approach to characterization has brought him close to a comic tradition in fiction that, as we have seen, runs from Fielding through Peacock and

Dickens to Joyce Cary. In denying the importance of originality and contemporaneity he is in fact guarding his own territory, for he is neither a strikingly original novelist, nor, in the sense of representing any avant garde, a notably contemporary writer.

Here lie the main reasons for the popularity of Robertson Davies, which some critics have found offensive to their ideas of what Canadians should be expecting of their writers. It resembles the current popularity of realist painters like Alex Colville, Christopher Pratt, Ivan Eyre, and Jack Chambers. Most people, in Canada and elsewhere, are artistically conservative; only the avant gardes of the past are — though not invariably — acceptable to them. It is true that the permissiveness of the 1960s made the broader public open to certain kinds of content that were once unacceptable. But, as the totalitarians have always known, it is in the formal aspects of a work that the deepest rebellion declares itself, and it is at this point that general readers, feeling the boundaries of normal speech and perception slipping away, become disturbed; the nihilism of much of modern art and literature bewilders and repels them. They need reassurance, and the novels of Robertson Davies, which present no real formal challenges, and whose essential optimism is shown in upbeat endings, with quests completed, wishes fulfilled, evil routed, and villains destroyed, are admirably suited for the calming and comforting of uneasy Canadians. They exist on the edge of popular fiction, where Pangloss reigns in the best of possible worlds.

ENVOI

Fred Cogswell

What is there of me in these words I write down?
Not a single one of them is my invention.
They all came to me from heard voices and read books
And their meaning was forged by my learning
How other men and women used them.
Even the order in which I put them
Is so much at odds with my volition
That I feel these poems are not mine at all
And that I am both medium and midwife
To an inexplicable birthing.