"PROMPTINGS STRONGER" THAN "STRICT PROHIBITIONS"

New Forms of Natural Religion in the Novels of Robertson Davies

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θεοσεβέστατον αὐτό ἐστι πάντων
ζῴων ἄνθρωπος;

Plato, *Laws* x.902.

Omnia illa per quae Deo reverentia exhibetur, pertinent ad religionem.

— Summa Theol. 2-2.q.83.3[1]

PHILOSOPHY HAS LONG STUDIED natural theology. Plato, in the tenth book of the dialogue *Laws*, establishes the existence, providence and justice of God(s), beginning from the reassuring point that both "Hellenes and barbarians" make "prostrations and invocations . . . at the rising and setting of the sun and moon, in all the vicissitudes of life. . . ."[2] Passages in many other classical writers attest a wide-spread discussion of such questions.[3] In the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Thomas Aquinas, like Plato, finds that the existence, providence and justice of God can be established without the aid of dogma, along with the immortality of the soul and the eternity of reward and punishment; other medieval writers study the same or similar points.[4] In *De Veritate*, Lord Herbert of Cherbury seeks the Common Notions which underlie all the local forms of religion, and finds them in the existence of God implying worship, piety, penance, reward, and punishment ("cultus Dei, pietas, resipiscentia, praemium & poena");[5] his rather conventional list had much influence on the Deists, who decided that "natural religion" was enough, and that anything further was priestcraft.[6] Since, however, Lockean psychology was already discrediting innate ideas, the whole concept of natural religion fell into disuse after the French Revolution, with the

aid of nineteenth-century science, as well as nineteenth-century romanticism.[7] In the twentieth century, on the other hand, natural theology has revived: John Baillie, for example, asserts that those religious truths which atheists "deny . . . with *the top of their minds*, they believe . . . all the time in the bottom of their hearts."[8] In literature, Robertson Davies appears to evoke new forms of natural religion in many actions of his fictional characters, who under extraordinary stress behave, contrary to their usual beliefs, attitudes, or customs, in accordance with some deep, but normally unrecognized, religious promptings.

The most startling example of natural religion in Davies's novels occurs in *Fifth Business*, when

> the Reverend Amasa Dempster christened it [his premature child] immediately, . . . This was by no means in accord with the belief of his faith, but he was not himself and may have been acting in response to promptings stronger than seminary training. . . . Dempster wanted to dip the child in water, but Dr. McCausland brusquely forbade it, and the distracted father had to be content with sprinkling. (FB 20)[9]

Since Dempster is a Baptist minister, his "seminary training" would have reinforced a lifelong belief that baptism can be granted only to those who are old enough to experience personal conversion, and who have experienced it. Paul's baptism, from this point of view, would be invalid on two counts: incapacity through his infancy, and the inefficiency of sprinkling as opposed to dipping.[10] Davies, who is obviously well aware of these objections, overrides them with Dempster's "response to promptings stronger than seminary training." Dempster has acted in accordance with the belief and practice of most Christian churches, but against those of his own, apparently because infant baptism is an element of a natural religion which lies deeper than and prior to any learning process. Dempster would undoubtedly have heard of infant baptism even before entering his "seminary," but he would have heard of it as of an abhorred and unscriptural practice. Beneath this learned response, however, he has an innate, and hitherto unknown, natural belief that baptism is necessary to salvation, that it is efficacious even for infants, and even by sprinkling.

In teaching the efficacy of infant baptism by sprinkling, Davies is reinforcing doctrines of his own church, the Anglican Church of Canada:

> The Baptism of young Children is in any wise to be retained in the Church, as most agreeable with the institution of Christ. (Article 27 of the 39 Articles, *Book of Common Prayer*)[11]
>
> . . . if . . . the Child is weak, it shall suffice to pour Water upon it. . . . (The Ministration of Publick Baptism of Infants, *Book of Common Prayer*)

By suggesting, however, that belief in such efficacy is part of a natural theology, Davies goes beyond any ordinary idea of natural religion, and might fall under the Thomistic condemnation: "Non licet inducere aliquem ad religionem per

falsam doctrinam."[12] Since baptism is one of the "Sacraments ordained of Christ our Lord in the Gospel" (Article 25), it depends upon a Divine revelation, and cannot be part of that natural religion which predates all revelation. In fact, the episode seems to be a grotesque joke, showing that Baptists cannot *really* believe what they think they believe.

In his first novel, Davies had already made a similar joke in direct terms, through Tom Gwalchmai: "Now if this fellow Mackilwraith had been a believer — and I don't mind saying that I'm thinking of the C. of E. — he would have known that suicide is a sin, and his belief would have held him up in his trouble" (TT, 281-82). Hector Mackilwraith himself, as son of a Presbyterian minister, "knew from his earliest days that he was a dedicated boy" (TT 74), and although "it was many years since he had prayed, . . . he had always thought of himself as a religious sort of man, and he believed firmly in God" (TT 270). Tom's idea of "a believer" is clearly different from Hector's, and presumably better: Hector's belief leads only to a grotesque prayer ("O God, here I come!" — 270) as he attempts to kill himself, lacking both the knowledge and the support affirmed by Tom. The joke is only in part a joke; here and elsewhere Davies suggests that true belief and Anglican belief are the same: The Church of England exemplifies natural religion. As joke it parallels, and perhaps alludes to Fielding's joke via Parson Thwackum in *Tom Jones*, Bk. III, ch. 3.

Hector's effort to pray, although grotesque, does not need to overcome any resistance other than habit, but Professor Vambrace is surprised into a prayer which contradicts his conscious disbelief. "It was the Professor's contention, after his experiment in Catholicism [which he had never accepted], that man could lead a life of Roman virtue without any religion at all" (TT 122), and he educated his daughter, Pearl, as an agnostic. His aggressive insistence on agnosticism, during a period of at least seventeen years, made both school and home uncomfortable for Pearl (TT 122, LM 95). Nonetheless, when Bevill Higgin reveals that he "Never meant any harm to Professor Vambrace" (after Vambrace had assumed that the advertisement was part of "a plot . . . to bring him into disrepute and mockery" — LM 95),

> "God bless my soul!" said the Professor. It was a strange comment from a professed agnostic, and it rose to his lips unbidden. (LM 249)

Although the conscious mind has not "bidden" the words, some deeper part of Vambrace has sent them forth. Whereas the original stress of seeing the advertisement caused raging fury (LM 28-30, 47-48, 94-98), the surprise of learning that the supposed plot did not exist permitted that deeper (and probably truer) part to speak.

Similarly, David Staunton shows that his devotion to reason is merely the surface of his being. He tells Dr. von Haller, "I am no longer a Christian"

(M 191), though he wonders whether psychiatry were just an expensive substitute "for something the Church gave away, with Salvation thrown in for good measure" (M 43). Instead of confessing his sins to God, David has argued his behaviour in the court of Mr. Justice Staunton, acting himself as prosecutor, defence attorney, accused, and judge (M 60-61 et passim). Nonetheless, when he is oppressed with claustrophobia in the darkness of the bear cave, he cries out, "... for the love of God let's get back to the light" (M 274). Liesl comments ironically on his choice of words, and then worships at the bear shrine. As they crawl up the exit tunnel, he collapses in fright, and when Liesl urges him to pray for strength, he "must have called upon Maria Dymock [his promiscuous but courageous great-grandmother] and something ... gave [him] the power" to persevere (M 276). The second prayer is ambiguous: it resembles invocation of an unlikely saint, but of course it also means calling upon the strength of his own genes.

THE THEME OF THE UNLIKELY SAINT has already been treated at length in *Fifth Business*, where Ramsay's attachment to Mary Dempster leads to an interest in what constitutes saintliness, and to an investigation of saints generally. Later, Ramsay muses:

> I had sought God in my lifelong, unlikely (for a Canadian schoolmaster) preoccupation with that fantastic collection of wise men, virtuous women, thinkers, doers, organizers, contemplatives, crack-brained simpletons, and mad mullahs that are called Saints. But all I had found in that lifelong study was a complexity that brought God no nearer. (WW 42)

Ramsay comes to this realization late in his life; in a sense many of Davies's characters are engaged in the search for God, but never come to realize the fact. Furthermore, for most of them, the search remains, as for Ramsay, unfulfilled: they do not find God, and they cannot find a substitute.

Clement Hollier goes to Darcourt for information about the missing MS, and when quizzed about his embarrassment bursts out, "I suppose it's part of your job to hear confessions?" The outburst (and the subsequent confession) appear to be partly or even wholly undesired by his conscious mind, as he mutters "I was afraid of this when I came here" (RA 94). Although Hollier rejects the suggested penance (97), he is a second time shocked into recognizing an unsuspected orthodoxy in his own thinking when Darcourt mentions the importance of "sheer, bald-headed Luck." Hollier protests, "I would have expected you to say God's Saving Grace"; he acquiesces, however, in Darcourt's novel definition of God, and drinks a toast "to the Rum Old Joker" (101). He has not found God, but he has clearly indicated his need to believe, and his true, if hidden,

belief. His confession is not merely unloading on a fellow human being, as he has chosen a priest, and specifically mentions the office ("job to hear confessions").

Although God in the definitions of orthodox Christianity proves elusive, in other formulations He constantly recurs. Paul Dempster, brought up in his father's joyless creed, learning the Psalms to ward off almost inevitable inherited wickedness (WW 24) — a private version of Original Sin? — loses, during his various careers as Nobody, whatever faith he had achieved. He has, however, as Magnus Eisengrim, complete faith in what he calls "the Great Justice":

> . . . something I don't understand, but feel and serve and fear — does that [administers it]. It's sometimes horrible to watch. . . . But part of the glory and terror of our life is that somehow, at some time, we get all that's coming to us. Everybody gets their lumps and their bouquets and it goes on for quite a while after death. (WW 313-314)

Although Amasa Dempster would not approve, his son appears to believe in Purgatory, along with an apparently matching temporary Heaven, because they are necessary for the Great Justice to be complete.

Closely anlagous to the Great Justice, Madame Laoutaro's Balance "may be rough in showing us how weak we are" (RA 268). Clearly, the case of Madame Laoutaro is different from the others: there is no indication that her idea of Balance comes from her own subconscious, since it appears as part of her Gypsy wisdom. Although "in official matters, Gypsies call themselves Catholics" (214), Maria makes it clear that her mother and uncle's minds are "uncluttered by . . . conventional religion" (215). Whereas the other characters are products of "Canadian conventionality, which keeps religion strictly in its place, where it must not be mocked but need not be heeded, either" (215), the Laoutaro's presumably were brought up in direct contact with what Hollier calls the Wild Mind, in effect the Collective Unconscious. Whatever the source for the idea of Balance, Madame Laoutaro is too much in awe of Balance to call down a curse for Hollier (268-69), and would not "fake his fortune" in reading the Tarot cards (226-27). Although Balance lacks Christian theology, it apparently, like the Great Justice, serves as guarantor of morality.

For David Staunton, the guarantor of morality is the law. He has some "critical moments" of insight as he watches Bill Unsworth, who had led the other boys in vandalizing a summer home, achieve "the finishing touch" by defecating on the photographs of the unknown family. David remembers thinking:

> . . . there is nothing intellectual, nothing rooted in principle — even the principle of anarchy — in what he is doing. So far as I can judge — and I must remember that I am his accomplice in all but this, his final outrage — he is simply being as evil as his strong will and deficient imagination will permit. He is possessed, and what possesses him is Evil. (M 154)

The next day, on the train journey home, David decides to be a lawyer: "I was

against whatever it was that possessed [Bill], and I thought the law was the best way of making my opposition effective" (M 155). Although David does not see the decision in religious terms, it clearly has a religious aspect. In deciding to devote his life in a vocation against Evil, he is implicitly dedicating himself to Good. Uneasily aware of the implication, he later declares, "I had no notions of being a crusader" (M 195). Later still, he recognizes that by becoming a defence barrister he "stood very near to the power of evil . . . I have consciously played the Devil's Advocate and I must say I have enjoyed it" (M 228). His original dedication has somehow, in the intricacies of law and the need for recognition, become reversed, though never rejected: in this very passage, he expresses his dislike for those who are possessed by evil ("a force that is inimical to man"), who wish "to loose that force upon the world" (M 227). In rejecting Father Knopwood's certainties and "irrational notions" (M 196), he still retains an ideal of good against evil, and specifically connects the force for evil with the Devil.

Dean Knapp, as an orthodox Christian, believes in the Devil as a necessary corollary to God, and prays before entering the Cathedral, where strange music is sounding, late on Hallowe'en (LM 50). Many unorthodox characters in the novels, however, also find the Devil forcing himself on their attention. In particular, the Devil arouses considerable thought in *World of Wonders*. Magnus tells Ramsay about Willard's caress, and his own response: "I smiled up into his face . . . it made me an accomplice . . . It was the Devil promting me . . . " (WW 40). Ramsay then retires, thinking about the Devil. Despite the aesthetic appeal, he rejects "an operatic Devil, up to every sort of high-class deception, and always defeated at the end of the story by the power of sheer simple-minded goodness" (WW 41). He muses on the fact that theology has not defined the Devil "so splendidly" at it has God. He decides that the Devil is not sin, "though sin is very useful to him" (42). After sketching several further hypotheses to himself and to Magnus over the next days, Ramsay as "diabologian" (57) wonders "if humour isn't one of the most brilliant inventions of the Devil . . . it prevents us from seeing straight, and perhaps from learning things we ought to know" (WW 85). Liesl develops the idea in another direction, and Ingestree agrees that "we can't resist [the Devil] because he and his jokes make so much sense" (86). When, however, Ingestree toasts the Devil, Lind refuses to drink, because he (although not a religious believer) cannot accept the Devil as merely a joke, and Ramsay issues a warning:

> I quite agree that the Devil is a great joker, but I don't think it is particularly jolly to be the butt of one of his jokes. You have called his attention to you in what I must call a frivolous way . . . [he] might throw a joke or two in your direction that would test your sense of humour. (WW 86-87)

Ingestree rejects the warning, but soon becomes the butt of an extended joke, as

Eisengrim reveals the posturing past of "the genius" (203-69 passim). Part of Ramsay's warning is defused by the alternative explanation of "Merlin's laugh" (141-42, 152); Eisengrim is aware that he is going to humiliate Ingestree. The warning, however, remains at least partly relevant: Ingestree has toasted a joking Devil, and must abide a prolonged and unpleasant joke. In this case, then, the logic of the text supports Ramsay's belief in the Devil, however partial or hypothetical the belief itself may be. Although Ramsay, like many of the other characters, has abandoned the faith of his childhood (and has in addition eluded the challenges of Surgeoner to believe in God [FB 130-36] and of Father Regan, to adopt the Catholic faith [FB 138]), he is still searching to define both God and Devil with an energy which must come from some deep inward recognition of their reality.

The examples of Walter Vambrace, David Staunton, Clement Hollier, and Dunstan Ramsay all show professed agnostics revealing unconscious religious feeling, and, in the case of Ramsay, devoting considerable conscious effort to defining and explaining that which he does not consciously believe. A counter example shows the professed believer acting in a way which shows she does not really believe. Laura Pottinger, "who was . . . very High in her religious opinions, rather liked to be ordered about by clergymen, and was always impressed by the word 'priest'" (LM 49). Nonetheless, when she has heard "a dreadful, unholy sound" (48) issuing from the Cathedral at midnight on Hallowe'en, and Dean Knapp has ordered her to keep away ("as your priest, I forbid you to come to the Cathedral" — 49), she disobediently appears, as a "lurking figure" (50, 53). Her "High" Anglicanism makes her defer to the clergy, but her action shows that she does not really believe in any priestly authority. Furthermore, she probably lacks the faith which renders Knapp apprehensive: "while devotion undoubtedly brings its spiritual rewards it brings its spiritual terrors too" (50). Miss Pottinger lacks the terrors, and therefore, by implication, lacks the devotion. She herself sees her persistence in "snooping" (53) as courage — "I am a soldier's daughter" (49) — and never consciously realizes the nature of her hypocrisy. A deeper hypocrite is Canon Woodiwiss, who "was so broad-minded he did not even insist that [Boy and Leola] be confirmed" (FB 128) when they joined his congregation, despite the directive following the Order of Confirmation in *The Book of Common Prayer*: "And there shall none be admitted to the holy Communion, until such time as he be confirmed. . . ." Presumably, at his ordination Woodiwiss promised "so to minister the doctrine and sacraments, and the discipline of Christ, as the Lord hath commanded, and as this Church and Realm hath received the same . . ." — including that directive. His fault approaches apostasy, but he too disguises it as a virtue, this time as broad-mindedness. Thus, the natural irreligion of the hypocrites is more devious than the natural religion of the agnostics.

A FINAL, RATHER COMPLEX EXAMPLE of natural religion comes in Solly Bridgetower's prayer for his mother. Laura Bridgetower left a vindictive will, described by Cobbler as "a grisly practical joke" (MF 20), tying up her money until Solly and Veronica should produce a son — to be named Solomon Hansen Bridgetower. Meanwhile, Solly had barely enough money to keep up the large Bridgetower house, which he could neither sell nor rent, and became temporarily impotent from the strain of trying to beget a son (272-73). When a son was born dead, strangled in his navel cord, Veronica (and perhaps Solly) suspected the agency of Mrs. Bridgetower's spirit (271-72). When Veronica is found in Mrs. Bridgetower's bedroom "unconscious amid overturned tables and chairs" (373), turning out to be "very badly frightened, a bit irrational and quite a way in labour" (369), Solly is sure that he knows:

> He was neither mad nor fanciful: he had no doubt who, or what it was that had sought to prevent the live birth of his son. He knew what it was, also, that was at last defeated. (373)

Because this second son is alive, the Trust is at last broken, and Solly can begin to control his own life. He does not, however, exult over his victory, but continues:

> It was a time for forgiveness. Against the strict prohibition of his faith, Solly prayed for his Mother's soul. (373)

As described, the act is, like Amasa Dempster's baptism of Paul, an overturning of deeply-held conscious belief by yet deeper forces. Filial love, already shown at the funeral (4), makes Solly desire his mother's salvation; the apparent malignancy of her spirit makes him fear its unlikeliness: thus he prays for her soul, "against the strict prohibition of his faith."

In this case, however, no such strict prohibition exists. Anglican clergymen express surprise when asked about the supposed prohibition; *The Book of Common Prayer* does not forbid the practice. In fact, the Church of England, in this as in other matters, follows a via media. Jews and Roman Catholics pray for their dead; Calvinists do not; Lutherans and Anglicans are left free to their own consciences. Although Luther rejected the doctrine of Purgatory, the basis for such prayer, the Second Part of the Smalcald Articles notes that "Nothing has been commanded or enjoined upon us with reference to the dead" (II.12) and the Apology of the Augsburg Confession specifies: "... prayer for the dead we do not forbid" (XXIV.94).[13] Calvin, however, points out that such prayer is neither commanded nor described in the Bible, "Yet, the more important the matter is, the more it ought to have been expressly mentioned."[14] Thus, Luther permits in this case what is not expressly forbidden, and Calvin forbids what is not expressly permitted. For Presbyterians, prayer for the dead is prohibited in the

Westminster Confession of Faith (XXI.4) and in the Larger Catechism (q.183).[15] Robert Louis Stevenson could imagine a Scottish Presbyterian "[desiring] that it had lain in our religion to put up some prayer for [an] unhappy stranger" — even while resisting the desire.[16] For Anglicans, on the other hand, the Thirty-Nine Articles leave the matter open. Article 22 denies the doctrine of Purgatory, but does not mention prayer for the dead. Whereas modern Anglicans seem to interpret the omission in a Lutheran sense, the bishops who framed the Articles had a Calvinist bias, and may well have assumed a Calvinist consequence; certainly Sir Thomas Browne did so. In *Religio Medici*, while considering errors about the souls of the dead, Browne says:

> A third there is which I did never positively maintaine or practice, but have often wished it had been consonant to Truth, and not offensive to my Religion, and that is the prayer for the dead; whereunto I was inclined from some charitable inducements, whereby I could scarce containe my prayers for a friend at the ringing of a Bell, or behold his corpes without an oraison for his soule: 'Twas a good way me thought to be remembred by Posterity, and farre more noble then as History.[17]

Final evaluation of Solly's prayer remains difficult. To Solly, it is an upwelling of a natural religious impulse as irresistible as any described in this article, an impulse unconnected with and contrary to "the strict prohibition of his faith." Since, however, he is in error about the supposed prohibition, how does the error arise? Davies, who is fond of teasing his readers, does not give any hint that Solly is wrong, and has certainly been an enthusiastic reader of Browne, praising his "courageous humanism," finding in his book "an astounding mixture of deep wisdom, religious feeling, wit, thunderous declamation and superstition," and nonetheless choosing Browne as "his own philosopher."[18] Perhaps, then, Solly's belief in "the strict prohibition of his faith" derives from Browne, for although Solly was not raised a Presbyterian, he was, like Davies, more conversant with English literature than with Anglican theology.[19] Whatever the source of the error, the passage works its multiple ironies with great effectiveness, and remains a vivid example of the possible conflict between institutional and natural religion.

Ramsay, unlike Solly, was raised a Presbyterian, and genuinely opposes the Calvinist teaching of his youth by praying for Mrs. Dempster, but is less aware of that opposition than of the "impulsion" which moves him to it:

> I prayed for the repose of the soul of May Dempster, somewhere and somehow unspecified, under the benevolence of some power unidentified but deeply felt. It was the sort of prayer that supported all the arguments of Denyse Staunton against religion, but I was in the grip of an impulsion that it would have been spiritual suicide to deny. And then I begged forgiveness for myself. . . . (FB 245)

Ramsay is sixty-one at the time of the prayer, and has for many years been seeking God among the complexities of hagiography. At this crisis, however, he

finds that although God remains unknown ("unidentified"), His belevolence is "deeply felt." Ramsay's "impulsion" implies that God exists, that He is both benevolent and powerful to answer prayer, and that prayer to Him is appropriate and necessary (refusing to pray would be "spiritual suicide"). So far, Ramsay's unconscious agrees with the Presbyterian teachings of his youth. Further, however, it drives him to pray for a dead person, an act explictly forbidden by those teachings. At this remove from childhood, Ramsay is no longer consciously rebelling against the faith of his parents; he thinks rather of Denyse Staunton's rationalism. His mind cannot oppose rationalism with the ringing "authority" of the Westminster Confession (ww 41), because he no longer believes in that authority. Ramsay, the expert on religion, author of books and articles, is reduced to unconscious impulsion as irrational and as powerful as that of any other character here studied. His training gives him, however, one advantage over the others: he can to some degree analyze the impulsion. His unknown God might disgust Denyse, but would not shock the mystics: St. Paul preached "The Unknown God" to the rationalist Athenians (Acts 17:23-29), and declared His inscrutability to the Romans (Rom. 11:33-34). Ramsay cannot define God, and does not know where or how the soul of Mary Dempster may be, but he does know that prayer has vital importance. Whatever the source of the impulse, it is his deepest and truest self who prays. And strangely enough, he prays like an Anglican, where Solly felt the qualms of a Presbyterian.

IF WE PUT THESE SCATTERED REFERENCES together, we arrive at a natural religion derived from the depths of character. Some of the points resemble traditional formulations of natural theology: the existence of God; His providence (and the consequent value of prayer); His justice; reward and punishment after death. These points of natural religion unite such diverse thinkers as Plato, Thomas Aquinas, and Lord Herbert of Cherbury, and are fundamental for Catholic, Anglican, and Calvinist theologians. A second list, however, is more interesting as unique to Robertson Davies, and may help us to understand one aspect of his fiction. This list includes invocation of private saints; the existence of purgatory (together with a [Hindu?] temporary heaven); prayer for the dead; auricular confession; the existence and power of the Devil; the existence of ghosts; the sacramental efficacy of Baptism. Much of this second list opposes Presbyterian pieties: Presbyterians are specifically warned against belief in purgatory, the invocation of saints, prayer for the dead, and auricular confession, and told that "... grace and salvation are not so inseparably annexed unto [baptism], as that no person can be regenerated or saved without it, or that all that are baptized are undoubtedly regenerated."[20] For Anglicans, on the other

hand, although Article 22 rejects both the existence of Purgatory and the invocation of saints, a Table of Lessons in *The Book of Common Prayer* includes readings for services devoted to sixteen different saints, and for All Saints Day.[21] Anglicans are permitted to pray for their dead, and to make private confession to a priest; they are told that "Baptism is . . . a sign of Regeneration or new Birth, whereby, as by an instrument, they that receive Baptism rightly are grafted into the Church; the promises of forgiveness of sin, and of our adoption to be the sons of God by the Holy Ghost, are visibly signed and sealed; Faith is confirmed, and Grace increased by virtue of prayer unto God."[22] The existence of the Devil is accepted by the more orthodox of both churches, and the existence of ghosts is not usually discussed in connection with religious belief. In general, however, just as the original Protestants protested against the Catholic church, so Davies's fiction protests against the "strikingly cold and unsympathetic faith"[23] of his childhood. Even the relatively kind Rev. Donald Phelps tells Ramsay that "the age of miracles [is] past . . . , and . . . [seems] heartily glad of it" (FB 63). Ramsay, however, persists in believing: certainly, even if not dead when revived by Mrs. Dempster, Willie goes on to an unexpected total recovery (FB 62). Throughout the novels, the unexplained recurs; both God and Devil appear to intervene in human affairs.[24]

In addition to the religion of the novels, there is a morality. On the whole, it is a morality of self-knowledge, and of taking responsibility for one's own actions.[25] Each book provides a different field, and each character a different opportunity, for exercising (or failing to exercise) this morality. One particular aspect, however, appears three times, an unusual repetition for Davies, and apparently important enough to warrant such emphasis. Griselda Webster tells Roger Tasset:

> Do you know what chastity is? Not the denial of passion, surely. Somebody wise — I forget who it was — said that chastity meant to have the body in the soul's keeping. (TT 237)

She is declining a second passionate kiss, and thus declining the possibility of an affair, or even marriage, with Roger. For an eighteen-year-old, regarded by her sister (and others) as a fool, Griselda is acting with surprising wisdom and dignity, even if she cannot remember her reference. Some years later, Domdaniel finishes a lecture on true morality by admonishing Monica:

> . . . get this maxim into your head and reflect on it: chastity is having the body in the soul's keeping — just that and nothing more. (MF 242)

She is weeping because Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* has aroused not only guilt over her fornication with Giles, but also grief over the fact that Giles does not reciprocate her love. Domdaniel is consoling her on the first point, and urging full self-knowledge on both points; his wisdom is sincere, and presumably self-

taught in this matter. The maxim arises yet a third time in a wholly new context. When the prurient Urquhart McVarish teases Maria to say whether or not she is a virgin, Maria ripostes with an unidentified quotation:

> "What do you mean by virginity?" she said. "Virginity has been defined by one Canadian as having the body in the soul's keeping." (RA 53)

Darcourt gently corrects her: "I think the writer you are talking about . . . was defining chastity . . . "; perhaps the "Canadian" is Robertson Davies, whom Maria misquotes to fit the context. But whether Davies is quoting himself or somebody else, he clearly thinks this particular point the aspect of morality most in need of repetition to his readers. (Whether Maria's *soul* gave her body to Clement Hollier remains an open question; her "root" later perceives that it was all a mistake . . .)

In the end, then, Davies perceives a radical difference between morality and religion. The morality of all his books is a morality of self-knowledge, and in the thrice-used maxim self-knowledge is attached to the soul. Although, however, the word "soul" is a religious term, we do not find a corresponding insistence on the necessity of self-knowledge in religion. In *Tempest Tost*, Tom Gwalchmai asserted the importance of religious knowledge, and, throughout the Deptford Trilogy, Ramsay seeks such knowledge. We see, nonetheless, that a characteristically unconscious religious impulse recurs under many forms of stress. The logic of the narratives tells us that there is a spiritual world, and that it is important, but not that it can be known.[26] It is seated in the depths of the most unlikely individuals, and quite possibly in all individuals, yet even Ramsay, the most self-analytic of Davies's characters (and one of the most knowledgeable about religion), does not know that prayer is necessary for spiritual life until impelled by the stress of Mary Dempster's death. Neither does that conclusion force itself upon him as a general conclusion; having prayed at the coffin, he relapses into the spiritual coma of many years. He continues to seek religious knowledge from books, but does not return to the source of the mysterious and vivifying "impulsion." If Amasa Dempster ignored his "prompting" after baptizing Paul, we are not surprised: Amasa is insensitive and anti-intellectual and conformist. But Ramsay? We are left with the impression that religion in these novels, though natural to mankind, belongs to a different order of nature than morality. Whereas several major characters "have the body in the soul's keeping," only a few minor characters manage the higher achievement of having their *souls* "in the soul's keeping": Dean Knapp acts on knowledge and faith when he prays (LM 50); presumably Roy Janes the Anglican minister and his wife truly meant their charity during the flu epidemic (FB 105). For all too many, "promptings" or "impulsions" cause temporary religious behaviour, but not conversion, and not self-knowledge, or any other kind of knowledge.

There remains, however, the possibility that these intrusions will assert to the reader what they fail to tell the characters. Davies excoriates the rationalist (Denyse), the atheist (Sam West — FB 54-55), the hypocrite (Laura Pottinger, Arthur Woodiwiss), the self-seeker (Boy Staunton — FB 241), the woolly-minded (Hector Mackilwraith), and others with false or incomplete religious knowledge. He sometimes jokes about impulses of natural religion, but never laughs them to scorn. In all, he offers an impressive number of examples, proving that skeptics really believe, because the spiritual world exists as truly as the material one, and because in moments of stress people revert to their deepest and truest selves. To resist such promptings is spiritual suicide: perhaps even in the post-Freudian, post-technological, secularized world we inhabit, human beings remain "the most religious of animals."[27, 28]

NOTES

[1] Translations of epigraphs: "... is not man the most religious of all animals?" *The Dialogues of Plato*, tr. B. Jowett (New York: Random House, 1937), II, 644; "... all actions which offer honour to God are the office of religion," Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae, Latin text and English Translation*, ed. Thomas Gilbey and T. C. O'Brien, vol. 39, ed. Kevin D. O'Rourke (London: Blackfriars, 1964), pp. 54-55.

[2] *Laws* x.887, in Jowett, II, 629.

[3] See the overview of Clement C. J. Webb, "Introduction to the History of Natural Theology," *Studies in the History of Natural Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1915), pp. 1-83.

[4] Webb, *Studies*, pp. 137-312. An Arabic writer, Abu Bakr Ibn a Tufail (or Tufayl), describes a self-taught philosopher, who reasoned out the necessity for an "*Effector* (or *Efficient Cause*)," whom he later saw as the *"necessary existent Beeing" — An Account of the Oriental Philosophy, Shewing ... The profound Wisdom of Hai Ebn Yokdan, both in Natural and Divine things; Which he attained without all Converse with Man* ... ([London]: n.p., 1674), pp. 54, 68.

[5] Edward Herbert, *De veritate, provt distingvitvr a revelatione, a verisimili, a possibli, et a falso*, 3rd ed. (London: n.p., 1645), p. 209.

[6] Not all Deists accepted the Common Notions of Herbert; see A. R. Winnett, "Were the Deists 'Deists'?" *Church Quarterly Review*, 161 (1960), 70-77.

[7] For Protestant theologians, the criticism of Immanuel Kant was fatal to "rationalist theology" — John Baillie, *The Idea of Revelation in Recent Thought*, Bampton Lectures in America, no. 7 (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1956), p. 9.

[8] John Baillie, *Our Knowledge of God* (New York: Scribner, 1939), p. 52 (original emphasis). Baillie repeats these phrases, with slight variations, in succeeding sections.

I wish to thank Rev. Dr. John Sandys-Wunsch for drawing Baillie to my attention.

[9] In this article, citations from the novels are taken from Penguin reprints, as dated below, with the following abbreviations used parenthetically: *Tempest-Tost* 1983 = TT; *Leaven of Malice* (1983) = LM; *A Mixture of Frailties* (1983) = MF;

Fifth Business (1977) = FB; *The Manticore* (1977) = M; *World of Wonders* (1977) = WW; *The Rebel Angels* (1983) = RA. The present quotation is from *Fifth Business* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1977), p. 20.

[10] "Only those who have personal faith in Christ are acceptable for baptism . . . infant baptism . . . stands for something done to or for, and nothing done by, the one who is baptized" — Rev. J. Gordon Jones, James Street Baptist Church, Hamilton, "The Faith by which we Live," *Our Baptist Fellowship, Our History, Our Faith and Polity, Our Life and Work* (n.p.: Baptist Convention of Ontario and Quebec, Jubilee Editorial Committee, 1939), pp. 50-51. "Neither . . . — total immersion of life or identification with Christ in His Death, Burial and Resurrection — can be expressed by sprinkling . . . " — H. Cook, *What Baptists Stand For*, 5th ed. (London: Carey Kingsgate Press, 1964), p. 143.

[11] *The Book of Common Prayer . . . of the Church of England in the Dominion of Canada*, rev. 1918 (Toronto: Cambridge Univ. Press, n.d.), p. 670. Further citations are from the same edition.

[12] "One may not persuade anyone into religion through false doctrine," my translation; summary of *Summa Theologiae*, 2-2, q. 189, art. 9 [the third possible false inducement to religion], in "Index rerum," *Summa Theologiae*, Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 2nd ed., 5 (Madrid: La Editorial Catolica, 1958), 271.*

[13] Cited by Bernhard Christensen, "Prayer," sect. 13, *The Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1965), III, 1938.

[14] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, III.v.10, tr. F. L. Battles, Library of Christian Classics, 20 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), p. 681.

[15] *The Confession of Faith, the Larger and Shorter Catechisms . . .* (Edinburgh: Johnstone and Hunter, 1853), pp. 90, 268-69.

[16] Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Merry Men*, ch. 3, in *Works* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1912), XXI, 91.

[17] *Religio Medici*, 1.7, in *Religio Medici and Other Works*, ed. L. C. Martin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), p. 8.

I am very grateful to Rev. Dr. John Sandys-Wunsch, for drawing this reference to my attention, and to Canon R. B. Jenks, for consultations about prayer for the dead.

[18] From a review in the *Peterborough Examiner*, 21 July 1943, reprinted in *The Enthusiasms of Robertson Davies*, ed. Judith Skelton Grant (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1979), p. 121.

[19] See Davies's elegant apology to the theologians of Trinity College, Toronto, in "The Devil's Burning Throne," *One Half of Robertson Davies: Provocative Pronouncements on a Wide Range of Topics* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1977), p. 180.

[20] Westminster Confession, XXXII.1, XXI.2, 4, XV.6, XXVIII.5, in *Confession of Faith*, pp. 120, 89, 90, 65, 113.

[21] *Book of Common Prayer*, pp. 667-68, xlviii-xlix.

[22] *Ibid.*, Article 27, p. 670.

[23] "A Talk with Tom Harpur," *Toronto Daily Star*, 16 February 1974, repr. in *The Enthusiasms of Robertson Davies*, p. 315.

[24] This point is briefly discussed by Judith Skelton Grant, *Robertson Davies*, Canadian Writers no. 17 (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1978), pp. 47-49.

[25] "You've got to know yourself and take personal responsibility" — "A Talk with

Tom Harpur," p. 316. Davies frequently inculcates or alludes to this morality; Patricia Monk discusses it throughout *The Smaller Infinity: The Jungian Self in the Novels of Robertson Davies* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1982).

[26] Davies plainly tells us: "Defining God has always seemed to me a pompous and self-defeating exercise" — "Gleams and Glooms," *One Half of Robertson Davies*, p. 243.

[27] Plato, *Timaeus*, 42; *Laws* x.902; in Jowett, II, 23, 644.

[28] The present article was written and accepted before the publication of Davies's eighth novel, *What's Bred in the Bone* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1985). Although Francis, the main character in that book, finds that "religion, but not orthodoxy, is the fountain of everything that makes sense" (378), he is not clearly influenced by Natural Religion, and neither are the other characters. Religious promptings come from the Daimon Maimas, or from half-forgotten or misunderstood religious instruction, not from innate knowledge.

THE CONFESSIONAL POETS

Harold Rhenisch

Roethke

who was an unpleasant man

too loud

and a drunkard

wrote of flowers

Lowell
suffered from respectability
and total

fear of death

Schwartz'

words

are the scum at the bottom of a glass
but fermented anew

and sipped
through the haze of summer

These are
the children of Kunitz

metaphysician
craftsman