

# BATTLES WITH THE TROLLS

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THE ASSERTION OF Magnus Eisengrim near the conclusion of *The Manticore*, "I am what I have made myself," and Liesl's postulate in the same chapter that "the modern hero is the man who conquers in the inner struggle" crystallize the theme which underlies all five novels of Robertson Davies from *Tempest-Tost* (1951) to *The Manticore* (1972). It is the theme of psychological growth toward wholeness which is based on the existential struggle carried on in the interior spaces of the mind and culminates in the fulfilment of the "yearning for greater enlightenment through mystical experience." (*Tempest-Tost*)

This theme runs through the five novels in a three-fold manner. In its most obvious form it serves as the framework in which the events and the characters evolve and progress within the boundaries of each novel. Whether the inner growth of the principal characters is painfully slow and barely recognizable as in the early novels, or far-reaching and symbolically significant as in the later ones, it is embodied in a specific way in each of the five books.

The series of novels viewed as a whole reflects the same theme in the progression from its embryonic expression in the form of unrest and dissatisfaction and the "yearning for greater fulfilment" through various stages of development toward levels of insight and into realms of wisdom and serenity.

Thirdly, as manifestations of a creative consciousness as it has found expression in and through language, the novels reflect the existential struggle and growth not only of their principal characters but also, and more importantly, of the author himself.

A neo-Romantic novel exploring the interior spaces of the human mind is essentially the expression of a creative consciousness at a given point in time, while the body of work of an author is the manifestation of the growth of that consciousness as it has moved through time. Robertson Davies has posited in his novels the patterns and the essences of his life in ways which enable the reader to take part actively in the developmental processes of the author's consciousness and to follow his quest toward the realms of fulfilment, self-realization, and mystical revelation.

Whether the struggle of the striving individual is conceptualized in terms of Jungian individuation and self-realization, in the symbolism of the Superior Man

of Eastern philosophies, or as a Kierkegaardian progression toward the leap of transcendence in which the temporal body and the eternal mind fuse to create spiritual totality, it is always conceived of as a struggle without end. The processes of psychological growth are not directed toward definite goals which can be attained and directly comprehended, but rather into higher, more complete and more spiritual realms of awareness and wisdom which can be glimpsed in moments of fulfilment and totality.

Nor is it a quest for happiness, because happiness is a state of repose and therefore stagnation. Self-realization is a dynamic process which for ever reaches beyond itself in often painful struggles with the confines of existence. None of the main characters in the five novels ever achieves happiness. Those among the secondary figures who appear outwardly happy and securely complete function as foils for contrast and often satire because they have ceased to become and therefore to be alive in the truest sense of the word.

From Hector Mackilwraith through the Yarrows and the McGorkills to David Staunton's trolls, these characters are never capable of any significant kind of insight or growth. The novels therefore never conclude with a "happy ending" because at the conclusion of each book the main characters who are involved in the struggle, and who live because they grow, have not come to the end of their road but rather to a new plateau which points to a new height and not to itself.

As they in turn focus on different aspects of the theme of growth and at their conclusion point to the next step, to another Chinese box inside itself, to a new struggle and a new attainment, the novels form an ascending succession of stages representative of the many levels of individual strife. From one novel to the next, the main theme becomes more and more pronounced, its treatment more and more complex and refined, its boundaries more clearly defined and its components more sophisticated. It is in this respect that they reflect the psychological growth of the author. Attainments which are merely hinted at in the early novels are realized through later protagonists, and themes sketched out for the Salterton characters become fully developed in the lives of Dunstan Ramsay and David Staunton.

The basic movement in the psychological growth process is the progression from "confident innocence through the bitterness of experience toward the rueful wisdom of self-knowledge" (*A Mixture of Frailties*), in which the task of the seeker is to fuse the temporal with the eternal so as to posit spirit and acquire true individuality. The initial experience of a growing consciousness on its road toward self-realization is extemporalized in the conflicts arising from the restrictions and obligations caused by the parent-child relationship. Filial predicament and the guilt caused by the struggles of the young to liberate themselves from the parental bondage permeate all of the novels. Robertson Davies makes one his mouthpieces express this theme in *A Mixture of Frailties*.

I think the most disgusting and immoral relationship is between mothers and sons — no, on second thought, between fathers and daughters.

The father-daughter as well as the mother-daughter conflicts are in reality more easily resolved, though the effect of the struggle stops short of transcendental attainment. It is the mother-son conflict and, to a somewhat lesser degree, the father-son confrontation which Robertson Davies finds most difficult and at times almost impossible to resolve.

All the variations of the parent-child relationship are utilized in the novels to initiate the struggle of the main characters after their leap from innocence into experience. For the protagonists in the earlier novels it is also their last significant act; they are incapable of moving on to higher levels of liberation. For the modern heroes in the later novels it is merely a beginning, the first though deeply significant link in a long chain of traps which have to be recognized and overcome.

Hector Mackilwraith is the first figure to liberate himself successfully from the maternal bondage, but since his is an act of intellectual determination rather than of self-realization it is of little psychological significance and does not result in any growth.

Solomon Bridgetower and Pearl Vambrace are much more deeply involved in their predicament, though their success is still limited. Pearl succeeds in asserting her individuality and resolves the conflict with her father, but Solly's struggle with his dominant and demanding mother extends over all of the first three novels without resulting in relief from the unending pain imposed on his life by his chief troll.

Bridgetower is in this respect characteristic of the first two Salterton novels. The protagonists are presented primarily in unsuccessful battles with each other and only peripherally in significant encounters with their innermost selves. Some are capable of resolving the problems arising from interpersonal relationships, usually with the aid of one of the early mentor figures — Humphrey Cobbler, Valentine Rich, and Elspeth Fielding. None can come to grips with their internal discrepancies. Their formative years are narrated in retrospect but are rarely analyzed psychologically as they are in the later novels. Characters of predetermined personalities who act out their lives according to predictable patterns, they are pre-psychological types whose mental growth is restricted to ordinary levels of maturity and whose involvement remains on unassuming planes.

**T**HE MAJORITY of the characters in all five novels are frozen into this kind of spiritual immobility. The figures representative of the negative forces in life are incapable of developing psychologically and experiencing any

deep kind of change. They are the foils against which the struggles of the heroes take place, the trolls with whom they have to battle, the Shadow figures which they have left behind. The personifications of the positive forces are immobilized at relatively advanced levels of development as they are deemed sufficient for the immediate purposes. These are the influential archetypes who guide the heroes on their quests, provide cues for their movements, and represent sources of insight and revelations.

In the first two Salterton novels the latter types are only rudimentarily developed while the former ones constitute the main content. The main protagonists are not significantly differentiated from them as yet, so that the theme of psychological growth is practically non-existent except in a few isolated cases. Yet it is contained in both and foreshadows its greater development in the later novels.

In *Tempest-Tost* it finds expression in the form of the embryonic externalization of unrest and dissatisfaction in the main characters, coupled with a longing for something more, something beyond the fruitless battles with the trolls, a "consciousness of a destiny apart from these unhappy creatures" and a "seeking for means by which he might be delivered from his fate". The author is groping for a resolution of the conflict, for a liberation from the confines imposed upon the Salterton characters, but is not yet able to actualize the longing, and the yearning is not fulfilled.

The same inability pervades most of *Leaven of Malice*. The characters remain caught in the absurdity of existence and in the struggles continues without bringing relief. Toward the end of the book, Gloster Ridley comes to terms with one of his ghosts and attains a measure of freedom through his realization that "wisdom may be rented on the experience of others, but we buy it at an inordinate price before we make it our own forever."

More importantly, Pearl Vambrace manages to extract a meaning from her struggle and become a person in her own right. She breaks through her quiet submissiveness to recognize her predicament, free herself from the paternal bondage and become the first protagonist to move toward a new awareness and selfhood. She assumes a new name, Veronica, to signify the change, foreshadowing the romantic flight of fancy and ultimate renaming in *A Mixture of Frailties*, the similar though more profound baptism in *Fifth Business*, and the gesture of despair in *The Manticore*. Yet she cannot transmit her new strength to Solly, who despite his awareness of the predicament and his desire for liberation, remains chained to his impotent role in the drama of "Mother alone with her Boy." (*Tempest-Tost*)

The questing figures can liberate themselves, but they cannot assist others in the struggle. This function is carried out by the Magus in his many forms, those higher figures who have already attained levels of insight and can therefore give

advice and guidance. But these figures do not come into existence in an effective way until *A Mixture of Frailties*.

Rudiments of the Magus appear in the first two novels, though they operate at low levels of spirituality and have little effect upon those they attempt to aid. Hector Mackilwraith is the initial personification of the Magus, but he fails drastically in his supposed role of "honest counsellor" and "oracle of wisdom" (*Tempest-Tost*), when he loses himself in his own dilemmas. Elspeth Fielding effects a rudimentary liberation in Ridley, but only Humphrey Cobbler displays a significant potentiality as Solly's friend, confessor, and advisor. With his independent approach to life and his insights into human predicaments he succeeds in starting Solly on an initial course of positive action. Little comes of this, however, because — as Cobbler himself realizes — the framework within which he has to act is limited. "You are a prisoner of circumstances," he lectures Solly, "and it is my considered view that you are not one of the tiny minority of mankind that can grapple with circumstance and give it a fall." (*Leaven of Malice*) In his own right, he is nonetheless a worthy forerunner of the later Magus figures. His flash of insight with which he tries to launch Solly on a course of self-realization foreshadows much of what Dr. von Haller will teach David Staunton in *The Manticore*. "Everybody is trapped. The best you can hope for is to understand your trap and make terms with it, tooth by tooth." (*Leaven of Malice*)

The true Magus figure takes a more positive approach than that. He treats life as a challenge which can be met successfully to the ultimate benefit of the contestant. Solly's final triumph over his life consists in "giving up caring too much about anything" and "blunting the edge of fate by being stoical." (*A Mixture of Frailties*) This would not suffice for the later seekers, but without a true Magus it seems the best which can be accomplished within the confines of Salterton.

The Magus comes to maturity and full effectiveness in the figure of Sir Benedict Domdaniel. This new character possesses the attributes of the Wise Man: his personality has a controlled forcefulness which is awe-inspiring to those around him, his hold on life is firm and determined, and his philosophy of life is a creative union of imaginative and materialistic forces which alone can lead toward self-knowledge and fulfilment.

Robertson Davies is not yet able to create "one of the tiny minority of mankind that can grapple with circumstance and give it a fall" to match the dominance of Domdaniel, but in the character of Domdaniel's pupil Monica Gall the capacities for intellectual quest and awareness have been sufficiently developed to make *A Mixture of Frailties* a successful novel of growth. The novel is still rooted in Salterton and peripherally continues the analysis of Solly's and Veronica's conflicts with their world, but the main focus is on the more mature and psychologically more successful Monica. By exchanging the local scene for the inter-

national and the individual for a more universal theme, it moves beyond the restriction of the first two novels into realms of genuine discovery.

The new heroine is still not capable of self-realization and individuation in its true sense. Her character embodies the basic prerequisites for growth but not the ability to liberate and utilize the dormant forces without constant external guidance. The novel is primarily a treatise on the role of the Magus in his many forms rather than on the processes of individuation in the interior spaces of the mind. Its main characters are all mentors of varying degrees who guide Monica through the tribulations of experience, provide her with wisdom and means of fulfilment, and are responsible for all her major progressions.

Heading the array of mentors is Domdaniel, characteristically European and characteristically of the opposite sex, as are most of the mentors in the five novels. His is a multiple role which surpasses in impact and importance the dominance of Davies' professional mentor Dr. von Haller and of that cryptic guide into the darkest caves, Lieselotte Vitzlipützli/Naegeli. He lacks, however, the psychological astuteness of the Jungian analyst and the oracular spirituality of Ramsay's devil, and Monica's self-realization necessarily remains at an intellectual and emotional level without reaching the spiritual stages characteristic of total individuation.

Domdaniel is at once chief guide through the Kierkegaardian stages of experience, source of self-knowledge, shaper of artistic career, liberator, and future husband (and, as such, giver of a new name). By managing the interactions between his pupil and his assistants with diligence and purposeful determination, he is indirectly responsible for her physical liberation through Murtagh Molloy, her initiation into the mysteries of passion and joy through Giles Revelstoke, the refinement of her interpersonal relationships through Amy Neilson, and her intellectual enlightenment through John Scott Ripon and Bun Eccles.

Monica's story ends with the integration of the levels of experience into a balanced whole, but her final attainment falls distinctly though marginally short of the Kierkegaardian leap because of Domdaniel's essentially intellectual nature. The temporal has not been fused with the eternal, and Monica's final salvation remains confined to a longing which she is incapable of realizing, the longing which is expressed in her favourite song, "Water Parted".

It meant . . . a longing for what was perhaps unattainable in this world, a longing for a fulfilment which was of the spirit and not of the flesh . . . It meant the aspiration toward that from which she drew her strength, and to which she returned when the concerns of daily life were set aside. It was a yearning toward all the vast, inexplicable, irrational treasury from which her life drew whatever meaning and worth it possessed. It was the yearning for — ?

The novel ends on this questioning note, with the final fulfilment an unattain-

able goal despite the thorough reformation of Monica's Self and despite her re-birth into a new life, because as she realizes herself, "not all the wise men in the world would ever tell her."

**T**HE LEAP INTO SPIRITUALITY requires more than wisdom and more than a Magus figure. It requires a flash of insight which is not of the mind but of the spirit itself, a mystical revelation of the essence of existence which cannot be forced because it transcends existence and is beyond immediate comprehension. It can only be realized in mysterious moments when the spirit is full of itself and fuses briefly with the eternal to become its own wisdom and its own fulfilment. The driving force leading into these moments does not come from the Magus but from mystical beings which have themselves transcended the confines of temporal existence and are in contact with the absolute.

It took a twelve-year span for such a being to materialize for Robertson Davies and to make possible the logical sequence to Monica's transformation. The influence of Liesl on Dunstan Ramsay and David Staunton begins where the Magus figures leave off, so that their processes of individuation transcend the self-realization attained by Veronica and Monica into realms of wisdom which were suggested but never actualized in the earlier novels.

The patterns of growth in *Fifth Business* and *The Manticore* follow veins essentially identical to those in the Salterton novels. The basic obstacle is once again the parental bond which must be broken in order to move from innocence into experience. In the story of Hector Mackilwraith's childhood this move was accomplished as a matter of course early in *Tempest-Tost*, but since his mother was a weak figure and he himself relatively strong in a rigid and purely deterministic way, its significance remained marginal and in terms of self-realization inconsequential.

Pearl Vambrace faced the dilemma twice, in *Leaven of Malice* with her father where it served to launch her on a new path, and in *A Mixture of Frailties* with Solly's mother where it took on symbolic significance. With Monica's liberation from her mother's dominance, two important elements were introduced into the struggle: the concept of guilt as an inherent aspect of the loss of innocence, and the ability to come to terms with that guilt by recognizing and accepting its source and integrating the experience in its fullest. The narratives of Ramsay and Staunton are built on this pattern, though the treatment of the theme is considerably more complex and allegorical.

Ramsay's bondage to his mother is severed early in *Fifth Business* without too much apparent difficulty and effort, but the guilt is immediately sublimated into a religious kind of dependency and transferred on to the strong Anima figure of

Mary Dempster, from whose bonds he can only liberate himself late in his life and only under the influence of the cryptic figure arising out of the farthest reaches of his consciousness.

David Staunton remains chained to the shadow of his powerful father for the best part of his life although in adulthood he defies the parental intentions and strives to become a person in his own right. But the bondage is deep-seated and retains a strong influence despite the superficial break.

The parent-daughter conflicts have by now been resolved and both Veronica and Monica have successfully transcended the restricting bondages, but the two sons are forced to suffer long and often fierce battles. The failure of Solomon Bridgetower reverberates through Ramsay's life with his saint and through the long sessions of David's psychoanalysis. The personal struggles of the two sons are unsuccessful in this respect, and the influence of their Magi is insufficient. They both in turn require a transcendental leap to effect their final liberation and complete their processes of self-realization.

The externalizations of the Magus figures and of the lesser types of Troll, Shadow, Anima/Animus, Friend, and Mentor of *A Mixture of Frailties* appear again in *Fifth Business* and in *The Manticore*. Where the narrative of Monica's artistic and spiritual education gathered together the possibilities and latent patterns of the first two Salterton novels and gave them new significance in a strictly controlled and purposefully directed framework, the two psychological novels refine the externalizations of the psychic forces and elevate them into symbolic realms in two further variations on the theme.

In *A Mixture of Frailties* the ambivalence of Humphrey Cobbler was resolved in the figure of Domdaniel and the range of mentors was extended to include specific personifications of the various stages of growth. In Ramsay's narrative, the Magus figure is fused with the hero and Ramsay acquires the self-knowledge and insights previously provided by Domdaniel largely on his own. The mentors are at the same time de-emphasized, though they appear at the appropriate phases of Ramsay's journey in forms very similar to those outlined in *A Mixture of Frailties*. Diana Marfleet assists in the physical re-birth and gives Ramsay his new name, Liesl in the emotional initiation, and Padre Blazon in the intellectual liberation, but the main movements are accomplished by Ramsay himself. The novel is primarily a treatise on the role of the Self, and Ramsay's attainments are therefore correspondingly more significant and profound.

*The Manticore* repeats the movement a third time. David Staunton moves through the same phases as his two predecessors, but his actual movement through the physical (Myrrha Martindale), emotional (Judith Wolff) and intellectual (Pargetter of Balliol) levels of experience is reminiscent of the struggles in the first two Salterton novels in that it is largely meaningless to him at the time and does not result in significant growth. The emphasis is not, how-



ever, on the actual movement, but rather on its analysis in terms of Jungian symbolism in a retrospective psychoanalytic setting. It is this analysis of past events which provides Staunton with the insights necessary for the integration of his experiences into a meaningful process of individuation. The novel adds a third element to the theme of growth, the role of the Psyche, by means of which it brings into clearer focus the tribulations and attainments of the earlier seekers.

The figure of the Magus re-appears as a separate entity in David's psychoanalysis in the form of Dr. von Haller; not as a guide through external experience like Domdaniel, but rather as an interpreter of the dark symbolism of the interior spaces of the mind.

With respect to the movements through experience, the two novels closely resemble *A Mixture of Frailties*, but they are brought past the questioning note reflected in "Water Parted" with the creation of the transcendent Liesl, whose visionary revelations enable both Ramsay and Staunton to attain the promised wisdom of self-knowledge. With this, the two novels transcend all the earlier experiences of the author and move into the visionary comprehension of existence in its many-faceted temporality as it is contained and reflected in the eternal truths. The struggle ceases with the oracular revelations of the spirit of wisdom. The anguish of existence, which created the dominant atmosphere in *Tempest-Tost* and *Leaven of Malice* but which started to lose its threat in *A Mixture of Frailties*, is finally overcome by the highly introspective and psychologically astute maturation processes of the two protagonists as they move into the realms of enlightenment and fulfilment. The yearning posited in *Tempest-Tost* is fulfilled in the spiritual re-birth of Ramsay and Staunton as they realize the unity of the infinite and the finite which transcends existence and arrive at a deeper understanding of themselves and of their role in the totality of existence. Their leap yields "some secret, some valuable permanent insight, into the nature of life and the true end of man" (*Fifth Business*) as they "learn to know (themselves) as fully human" and acquire "a fuller comprehension of (their) humanity" (*The Manticore*).

Robertson Davies has moved through the levels of externalization of the creative consciousness in the three Salterton novels, in the disguise of Actor, Editor, and Artist, and in that of Scholar and Initiate in the two psychological novels, in his search for the "flashes of insight (with which a great man) pierces through the nonsense of his time and gets at something that really matters" (*Tempest-Tost*). Over the course of five novels and a twenty-year process of growth, what really matters to him has clearly emerged and has found increasingly complex and sophisticated expression in the language of his books. It is the conquest of one's Self in the inner struggle and the knowledge of oneself as fully human. It is to be.