

THE MASK OF SATIRE:

*Character and Symbolic Pattern in
Robertson Davies' Fiction*

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VERY WELL, if you wish it, I shall talk to someone else," says Samuel Marchbanks to one of his many vacuous dinner partners. "I do not believe in wasting good talk on people who are plainly unable to appreciate it." This testy, Johnsonian pronouncement might stand as the key signature of Robertson Davies' writing. In the past dozen years he has produced fifteen volumes of drama, fiction and discussion of the theatre. Many of them are very good talk indeed, yet Davies' reviewers — like Marchbanks' dinner partners — have generally failed to grasp the full import of his astringent and irreverent statement. They praise his wit, ribaldry and invective, and even join in his laughter at Canadian conformity and stodginess; but in the end they label him as a clown — ubiquitous and erudite to be sure, but scarcely a serious thinker.

Unquestionably Davies is the *enfant terrible* of Canadian letters, but behind the puckered mask of the satirist lives a serious writer of romance. His novels study in symbolic fashion a problem that has concerned Canadian writers since Susanna Moodie: the plight of the imagination in this chilly cultural climate. This central theme in his work has generally gone unrecognized because the genre of satirical romance is unfamiliar to Canadians (Davies is its only native practitioner), and because, having come to the novel from drama and the essay, he has had difficulty creating characters who live *on the page*. As a result he has been judged upon the most prominent features of his work—his explicit ideas and his burlesques of Canadian manners. In this essay, therefore, I propose to redress the

balance by going back to the beginning of his fiction — to the irascible Samuel Marchbanks — and examining the symbolic structure and statement of his novels, and the problems of characterization which, until *A Mixture of Frailties*, have plagued him.

ROBERTSON DAVIES had been writing plays, studying the theatre and writing for newspapers since Neville Chamberlain's great umbrella-waving year, 1939, but he did not publish a volume of fiction until 1947; and even then his approach was oblique. A few years earlier he had created in the columns of *The Peterborough Examiner* a dyspeptic gentleman called Samuel Marchbanks — a disaffected Canadian whose attacks on contemporary manners borrowed heavily on the capital of Pepys, Addison, Swift, Samuel Butler, Shaw and, in desperate moments, H. L. Mencken and Sinclair Lewis. Marchbanks was at once the apostle of intelligence, the champion of live-and-let-live eccentricity and the defender of the principle that ideas, like mothers-in-law, are to be entertained rather than maintained. So voluble was his talk that it finally overflowed the *Examiner* and filled two book-length volumes—*The Diary of Samuel Marchbanks* (1947), and *The Table Talk of Samuel Marchbanks* (1949).

These informal essays or "confessions" gave Davies most of the advantages of the novelist with almost none of the responsibilities. He could disregard plot; a simple day-to-day chronology sufficed. He had no need of consistently-developed characters; the persons of the diary are clever caricatures who perform their antics on the stage of Samuel Marchbanks' observation. As in Davies' models, the ruling principle is the play of idea and opinion; nothing is sacred, and Marchbanks wastes no opportunity, trivial or profound, of whacking the provincial backsides of his Canadian and American compatriots. By turn self-pitying, ironic, antic, savage or sweetly reasonable, he applies his lash impartially to Hollywood films ("the apotheosis of the Yahoo"), to pious politicians and salesladies, to medical fads, and to chocolate-stuffed children who allow balloons to "disembarrass themselves of their wind" in adults' faces. But above all, Marchbanks fights the glum sobriety of Calvinism, the morality which calls any bovine female a Lady so long as she is "Good", and the mentality

of “young fogies . . . fellows who, at thirty, are well content with beaten paths and reach-me-down opinions; [whose] very conservatism is second-hand, [because] they don’t know what they are conserving.”

Mixed in with all this is a dash of ribaldry. In parodying the synopsis of a French play, for example, Marchbanks gives the characters such names as Alphamet, Feenaminte, Flanalette, Clitore, Merde and Vespasienne. This particular example is unfortunately juvenile; nevertheless Davies uses crude humor deliberately, for he will not indulge readers who would like to think Marchbanks “proper”. To *l’homme moyen sensuel*, everything is proper — in its place. Marchbanks’ all-encompassing complaint, then, is the narrowness of Canadian thinking and the reflection of this narrowness in Canadian manners.

Marchbanks’ talk is very good medicine. Canadians, who “don’t like to be kidded or mimicked, though they are extremely fond of kidding and mimicking others”, might take a course of the tonic every spring and fall. And yet the impact of the Marchbanks chronicles is not nearly as great as it might be. It is tempting to argue that their weakness is a malady to which even the best journalism is prone. The newspaper columnist, constantly under pressure to say something bright or challenging, almost inevitably descends to well-worn formulas or wit or impudence, to the superficial glance at people, or to controversy for its own sake. However, Robertson Davies seldom falls into these traps. His problem is that Samuel Marchbanks, for all his energy, never really comes alive as a character. Davies knows that:

Every man and woman is a mystery, built like those Chinese puzzles which consist of one box inside another, so that ten or twelve boxes have to be opened before the final solution is found.

Yet he shows us little more than the bows, the gaudy seals and the tissue of ideas that conceal the deepest reaches of Marchbanks’ character. Hence, far from emerging as a mordant critic in the vein of Swift, Johnson or Shaw, Marchbanks appears as an essentially theatrical creation who strikes attitudes instead of expressing convictions; who screens identity instead of revealing it. And the reader, lacking some glimpse of the “final solution” to his character, sees him as a pastiche of earlier and more assured diarists. Thus, even before Robertson Davies began writing novels, characterization became the *bête noire* of his art.

IN TURNING to this problem of character creation I am not abandoning my original intention of examining the statement and structure of Davies' novels, for both their content and form are contingent upon his conception of character. From what we have seen of Samuel Marchbanks it is clear that his temper is neo-classical rather than romantic; he is confident that he can take care of his own soul, and his prime demand is the freedom to enjoy his own private labyrinth without the pious intrusions of do-gooders and well-meaning acquaintances. But he will not attain this freedom and privacy until his community has achieved a measure of urbanity and sophistication. The aim of Marchbanks' talk, then, is to reveal the deformity or atrophy, the folly or self-deception of individuals as they present themselves in society.

Unquestionably Robertson Davies shares this general view of character. Unlike Hugh MacLennan, who has sought to discover *what* our national character is, and *why* it is, Davies rejects altogether the introspective search for identity. The last thing he wants is to delve into the recesses of Calvinist or Catholic hearts; in their Canadian habiliments they are too pinched and regimented to warrant close attention. On the assumption, then, that everybody *has* an identity, however mean, he focuses his attention on the conflict of ideas and on the spectacle of manners in the community. Character, in short, is a private affair (its privacy guaranteed—or violated—by the manners of others); and it is properly studied through its public manifestations.

Now this conception of character works very well in the theatre, where we watch an action from the outside, or in the essay, where we are concerned with ideas and opinions, but it raises serious problems in the novel. If the characters are to be observed from the outside, then we must have a narrator like the author-impresario in *Tom Jones* whose judgment we know and trust; or alternatively, as in Hemingway, we must be left entirely free to judge the facts on their own merits. In his first novel, *Tempest-Tost* (1951), Davies, still very much the playwright and essayist, was unable to adopt either of these narrative methods. Precisely because of his unwillingness to create anything but "public" characters, he gives us no counterpart of Fielding's intimate narrator to direct our responses, yet he will not, like Hemingway, withdraw entirely from the scene. Instead he gives us a group of externally observed characters and a narrator who,

like Alice's Cheshire cat, has disappeared, leaving only a savage Marchbanksian grin and a disembodied voice that makes acidulous, intrusive comments on the action.

In consequence *Tempest-Tost* is rather like an elaborate puppet show with interminable stage directions describing the setting, and the appearance, background, and motives of the characters; at the same time, an offstage M.C. urges us to see the stupidity of the performance. The story presents for our inspection the kind of people who organize Shakespearean productions in the Little Theatres of provincial Canadian cities — in this case Salterton (or Kingston) Ontario. Almost everybody concerned is so hopelessly second-rate that we are not sorry to see their pretensions exposed. But because the characters are never more than caricatures we are not inclined to look for any meaning beyond their surface absurdities. *Tempest-Tost*, we decide, is a frequently trivial and generally heavy-handed jibe at the parochialism of Canadian Little Theatre.

Having reached such a comforting conclusion we might, like Marchbanks' dinner partner, turn indifferently away from Mr. Davies' talk. But one nagging thought deters us: surely it is inconceivable that a man of Davies' talent and experience in the theatre could produce so banal an account of a Shakespearean production. The play itself, moreover, is not discussed at all. Why not? Surely Davies regards it as a great work of literature? It is when we ask this question about *The Tempest* and its meaning that the whole strategy of Davies' novel suddenly flashes upon us. Its action — so slight when viewed as a topical satire — is really an ironic off-stage re-enactment of Shakespeare's allegory, with a cast of Canadian characters. Robertson Davies not only understands the full import of Shakespeare's play, but he has looked about in a long-established Canadian community for the nearest equivalents he can find to the characters of the ageless romance. The result is a series of chilling ironies.

The Tempest, we recall, dramatizes the conflict between the humane powers of Duke Prospero and the grasping materialism of the King of Naples. Prospero lost his power because he neglected the practical needs of his state for the delights of his library. On the desert island to which he was banished, however, he learned to control the forces of imagination and intellect (Ariel) and the physical forces of the body and of nature (Caliban). And because Prospero mastered the "magic" of these forces, the play ends in a happy marriage between Ferdinand and Miranda — a

creative union of the imaginative and materialistic forces or "families" which had so long been in opposition. In sum, *The Tempest* is Shakespeare's sweetest affirmation of faith in the imagination and its power to make man a genuinely humane and enlightened creature.

In the jejune and complacent community of Salterton, however, it is almost impossible to find people who might be appropriately cast in the various roles of *The Tempest*. Everybody agrees that the production is a daring enterprise; it could not be undertaken at all without the aid of an American-trained director, Valentine Rich (Davies' names are often symbolic), and a despised composer and organist of the Church of England, Humphrey Cobbler. Nevertheless the casting does take place, with piercingly ironic results. The person who is determined to play Prospero, the learned nobleman and loving father, is Professor Vambrace, an egotistical and cloistered pedant from the classics department of Waverley University. Naturally the Salterton Miranda is Vambrace's daughter Pearl, who, unlike Shakespeare's heroine, has had a narrow and ignoble upbringing, and who — though potentially beautiful — can only be described as glum and repressed. Ferdinand, the gentle prince who loves Miranda at sight, is an egocentric young officer from Salterton's military college who prides himself on a long list of seductions.

But if the leading characters of the Salterton "Tempst" suffer a sea-change into something gauche and strange, the transformation of the secondary characters is even more ludicrous. The wise old councillor Gonzalo becomes Hector Mackilwraith, a Salterton mathematics teacher and son of an ineffectual Presbyterian minister; Hector's greatest wisdom is thrift, orderliness, and a slavish reliance on the Puritan logic of *Pro* and *Contra*. Salterton's Caliban, not unexpectedly, is a crude practical joker who works in the local store of the Liquor Control Board of Ontario.

The greatest casting problem, of course, is Ariel, the ubiquitous spirit of intellect, imagination and beauty. (For Davies, as for Shakespeare, music is the symbol of these qualities.) After great deliberation, the Salterton thespians award this role to Griselda Webster, a pretty girl whose singing voice and I.Q. are acceptable though not exceptional. The *real* reason for their decision is that Ariel's father is the richest man in town; moreover, he will lend his garden to the Little Theatre for its *Tempest*. Thus the community's unacknowledged but slavish worship of wealth as the "highest good" is revealed in the casting of Ariel.

From this point on, the ironies of *Tempest-Tost* multiply and proliferate. In Salterton nobody but Valentine Rich (the Canadian artist who must make her living abroad) recognizes the potential of Pearl Vambrace, the Canadian Miranda. Instead, the three bachelors of the story yearn foolishly after Ariel, the affluent "impatient Griselda": Lieutenant Tasset (Prince Ferdinand) covets the physical pleasures which she promises; Hector Mackilwraith (Gonzalo) worships her as a pure and chaste ideal; and Solly Bridgetower, an indecisive young English professor at Waverley (who is the best assistant-director that Valentine Rich can find in Salterton) moons after her weakly. None succeeds in his suit, however, for this shrewd Canadian Ariel is aloof to them all.

In Salterton's eyes, of course, the whole production of *The Tempest* is a frivolous affair. Mrs. Caesar Augustus Conquerwood, the leading patron, departs in the middle of the first performance. What Salterton society really values is revealed in two long episodes which at first appear extraneous to the theme of the novel: the great ball at the military college, and the distribution of the library collected by Valentine Rich's father. The military ball is an overpoweringly stuffy affair, replete with major-generals, MPP's, civic officials, ageing representatives of Loyalist families, Waverley dignitaries, and whoever else can procure tickets (from whatever source). In Salterton people must be cajoled into seeing a play, but everybody wants to be seen at the ball and to have his status confirmed in the social columns of the *Evening Bellman*. The ball, with all its gold braid and medals, is an anti-masque within the Salterton "tempest".

The episode of Valentine Rich's inherited library is more complex. The will of the late Adam Savage, Valentine's father, bequeaths his library to the clergy of Salterton; they may choose from it what will be useful to them. On the morning when the books are made available there is a near riot at the Savage home; more than two hundred black-clad gentlemen invade the library and strip it like a horde of army ants. In the confusion, rabbis find themselves with commentaries on the New Testament, and a shovel-hatted priest ends up with ten volumes of a Scottish metaphysician. Even for Canada's second estate, books are impressive *per se*, whatever their contents. But there is a final irony: Professor Savage willed to Valentine a wrapped bundle of books which inadvertently fall into the auctioneer's hands and are sold to a New York dealer for the astounding sum (in Salterton commerce) of fifty dollars. As collectors' items the books

are worth several thousands; they are the main asset of the Professor's estate. But Valentine — intent on the riches of art rather than the market — has failed to discover their dollar value. The Canadian heritage, it would appear, is chiefly valuable as a collection of marketable antiques; Professor Savage's legacy of *ideas* is exactly nil. Salterton's best hope is that people like Valentine may kindle the cold Canadian imagination.

Robertson Davies is clearly not optimistic about Salterton's cultural future. As the novel ends, Canada's Puritan Gonzalo, Hector Mackilwraith, attempts suicide, believing that he has lost his gilt-edged Ariel to the lustful Ferdinand. Ariel's younger sister (Shakespeare's messenger Iris) attributes Hector's despair to the oppressive influence of "cheap religion", and proceeds with her youthful project of brewing champagne in Canada. Cobbler, the musical director, warns her that it cannot be champagne — "Just good cider with ideas above its station". And the badly-shaken Hector-Gonzalo decides (God help us!) to accept a job in the Ontario Department of Education, a decision which Ariel rewards with a formal kiss.

THE FOREGOING, I believe, is the essential statement of *Tempest-Tost*. Beneath the surface satire, Robertson Davies has developed a major theme; but his external handling of character and his failure to get beyond the dramatist's impersonal method has so muffled his statement that the book must be accounted a failure. In the Preface to his drama *At My Heart's Core* (1950), Davies recognized that a play loses a great deal on the printed page. "The playwright's work", he says,

. . . is completed by the actor; the reader is not often so imaginative as to be able to discover in the text of the play . . . the qualities which would be revealed in it by a group of capable actors and an able director who had worked on it for a month.

In *Tempest-Tost* he lacked the aid of a "group of capable actors" but had not yet reconciled himself to the novelist's need for some means of revealing more than the outer layer of the Chinese puzzle of character.

Leaven of Malice (1954), a tightly plotted satirical romance, is a much better work. It is not surprising to learn that Mr. Davies has already adapted it as a play which Tyrone Guthrie will produce in New York, for

the hand of the dramatist, carefully building up scenes and climaxes, still dominates. There is as yet no genuinely living character, but the citizens of Salterton are more sharply observed, and the satire has the therapeutic bite of a mustard plaster. (An academic party, replete with games, vile punch, and an overweening sociology instructor as host, is one of the most uproarious chapters in Canadian fiction.) The author-playwright has now withdrawn almost entirely into the wings and distributed his ideas among Humphrey Cobbler, Gloster Ridley, editor of the *Evening Bellman*, and Dean Jevon Knapp of St. Nicholas' Cathedral. And finally, the action reveals more clearly than in *Tempest-Tost* the complementary elements of surface satire and symbolic implication.

Regarded as a waspish satire with a healing moral, *Leaven of Malice* tells of a crude practical joke. A false announcement that Pearl Vambrace is engaged to Solly Bridgetower sets aflame a ready-laid fire of animosities in Salterton. Ultimately the culprit is unmasked, but not until his false charge has led Pearl and Solly into each others' arms, and allowed Dean Knapp to point a moral. Malice, he says,

. . . works like a leaven; it stirs, and swells, and changes all that surrounds it. . . . It may cause the greatest misery and distress in many unexpected quarters. I have even known it to have quite unforeseen good results. But those things which it invades will never be quite the same again.

But exactly what *are* the things that malice has invaded, and how has it changed them? If we look again at the persons of Robertson Davies' story and consider them as representative of various "forces" at work in Salterton society rather than mere satirical butts, we see that the author is once more talking about the failure of Canada's imagination; in contrast to *Tempest-Tost*, however, this action ends in a "marriage" which may portend a new era.

Gloster Ridley, though not the hero of the romance, is its main character. A self-educated intellectual who takes himself a few degrees too seriously, he has nevertheless transformed the *Evening Bellman* from an unprofitable and provincial curiosity to an alert and thriving newspaper which serves all segments of the community intelligently. But in achieving this revolution he has antagonized Salterton's "old guard"—the smug, sentimentally Anglophile, tradition-bound antiques who regard themselves as the community's social and intellectual arbiters. This group, which in-

cludes granddaughters of Brigadiers, widows of Waverley Deans, and persons claiming distant kinship with British nobility, would not demean themselves to fight Ridley openly, but all are privately delighted when the spurious engagement announcement exposes Ridley, Pearl and Solly to ridicule. Nor is it surprising that the person who secretly performed this malicious act is a toady to the "old guard". He is Bevill Higgin, a maddeningly genteel old country "artist" whose writing, acting, singing and piano-playing epitomize the "old Guard's" worst failings in taste and education.

But Higgin's essential shoddiness does not pass undetected everywhere: a girl whom he imagines to be Pearl Vambrace refuses him university library privileges; Solly Bridgetower rejects his impudent offer to recite Shakespeare to students; and Ridley refuses to print his precious essays in the *Bellman*. Higgin's spiteful hoax wounds the three victims, but it also drives them to self-assessment and positive action. For example, Pearl's father (the egotistical Prospero of *Tempest-Tost*) regards the hoax as an attack on his personal honor, and in the family rows that ensue Pearl is freed from the tyranny and coldness of her home. She even adopts a new name—Veronica. Solly, whose department head has advised him to "jump right into Amcan" and publish a work on the great Canadian dramatist Charles Heavysege, recognizes that he wants to *create* some Canadian literature rather than study its relics. And Ridley, who had hoped for an honorary degree from Waverley as visible proof of his achievement, realizes that he needs no such external reassurances.

As is usual in romance, the maligned parties are aided by benign and intelligent friends—particularly Dean Knapp and Humphrey Cobbler, who represent the genuine humanity and taste of the British tradition as opposed to Higgin's pseudo-culture. Since music is equated with imagination in Davies, it is the happy Cobbler who counsels Solly to defy his "old guard" Mother, marry his Pearl-Veronica, and begin to create. Finally, then, through the working of malice, the creative intelligence of Salterton finds its independence, or at least seems about to find it.

THE STATEMENT OF *Leaven of Malice* is hopeful, but despite the great ingenuity of its action and the sharpness of its observation it is not a warm book. In Gloster Ridley we meet a character who is highly lifelike, yet not entirely alive. Robertson Davies has not yet penetrated

beyond the second or third box of the Chinese puzzle. His point of view is still the "public", wide-angled perspective of the dramatist, and though we watch *Leaven of Malice* with pleasure, we do not live in it.

In *A Mixture of Frailties*, however, Davies finally takes the step—so alien to the Marchbanksian side of his sensibility—which makes him a novelist, as distinct from a playwright. Here for the first time in his fiction he creates a protagonist whom we know fully and through whose eyes we see the action unfold. Now, instead of looking across the footlights, we are on stage and at the center of the action. The career of Monica Gall—a Canadian Cinderella who becomes a great singer—is *our* career; we suffer and learn with her. Because Davies is not entirely at home with this technique of characterization, there are many awkwardly-handled moments in Monica's story, but the access of warmth and intimacy which the method makes possible far outweighs these defects. There is no doubt now that the author intends much more than a topical satire of Canadian provinciality.

Davies' symbolic theme is still the struggle of the Canadian imagination to free itself from second-rateness, parochialism and dulness, but it moves beyond the situation of *Leaven of Malice*. He has explored the prospects of the educated Canadian intellectual, Solly Bridgetower, as far as he is able. Solly will "produce" if he can. The question now is: What happens when a gifted but completely untutored Canadian is exposed to the best that Europe can offer? The story of Monica Gall is Davies' answer.

The machinery which sets Monica's story in motion is farcical though not, as a sequel to *Leaven of Malice*, improbable. The first year of Solly Bridgetower's marriage is blighted by the shadow of his "old guard" mother. The newlyweds live in her forbidding Victorian house, and even her death does not release them from the "Dead Hand" of her tradition. They will inherit her fortune only when they produce a male heir—a new Solomon. Until then a board of trustees is to spend the income from the estate on the artistic education of some talented young woman from Salterton. Monica Gall, Humphrey Cobbler's candidate, becomes the beneficiary.

As Monica's experience unfolds, we become aware that Davies' characters, while still as much the targets of satire as the caricatures of the earlier novels, now have a new relevance. Such persons as Monica's colleagues in the Heart and Hope Gospel Quartet, her callow, materialistic lover at the Glue Works, her wistful confidante Aunt Ellen, lost in a never-

never world of music—these people reveal to us dramatically, existentially, what Monica *is*. Chief among them is Ma Gall, an image of the repressed Canadian imagination—of what Monica might have been:

Ma, when she told tall stories, when she rasped her family with rough, sardonic jokes, when she rebelled against the circumstances of her life in coarse abuse, and when she cut through a fog of nonsense with the beam of her insight, was an artist—a spoiled artist, one who had never made anything, who was unaware of the nature or genesis of her own discontent, but who nevertheless possessed the artist's temperament; in her that temperament, misunderstood, denied and gone sour, had become a poison which had turned against the very sources of life itself. Nevertheless [Monica] was like Ma, and she must not go astray as Ma—not wholly through her own fault—had gone.

In the same way, Monica's training in England is at once a highly absorbing narrative, full of humor, action and brilliant talk, and a symbolic study of the forces which the artist must recognize and learn to control if he is to become a genuine creator. Monica's director is Sir Benedict Domdaniel, a great British conductor. He sends her first to Murtagh Molloy, a voice coach who teaches her technique—the control of her physical resources—and then to Giles Revelstoke, a composer who initiates her into the mysteries of passion and joy which are the sources of art. The tension between these two aspects of her art, between technique and content, are worked out dramatically—even melodramatically. Monica soon falls slavishly in love with Revelstoke who, as befits the representative of the bardic spirit, comes from a primitive part of Wales, wears a signet ring bearing the image of Orpheus, and publishes a little magazine called *Lantern*. But as we might expect, though Revelstoke takes Monica as his mistress, he cannot be harnessed in marriage, nor can he be mothered; true to his nature, he is an isolated, brilliant, absolutely candid, and easily exacerbated force. But if Monica cannot *possess* the creative spirit whom she loves, she will not become the mistress of technique. At a costume ball her voice coach, Molloy, attempts to seduce her and is rebuffed. "He can't resist a good pupil," says Mrs. Molloy; "wants to run away with 'em all."

Finally, after a violent quarrel, Revelstoke and Monica separate, and when she returns to him in the belief that she must accept his weaknesses along with his strengths, she finds him dead. On the surface level of the narrative this chapter is complex and awkwardly-contrived melodrama; but Revelstoke's death, seen as a final step in Monica's artistic develop-

ment, is inevitable. The artist cannot remain indefinitely in servitude to an undisciplined creative spirit. Yet Monica's love for Revelstoke does not die; though she is freed from his domination, she inherits the files of his *Lantern*, and his talismanic Orpheus ring. Now her education is complete: she can return to Canada a free, self-determining individual. But the voices of Revelstoke and Ma Gall, though no longer dominating, will always counsel her; she will be "as one that hath a familiar spirit."

This account of the structure of *A Mixture of Frailties* does no justice to the subtlety and richness of its execution, but that is the subject of another essay. In typical fashion, the romance closes with a rite. Davies gives us a daringly executed fugal chapter in which fragments of a sermon on the Magi are interwoven with Monica's thoughts and with passages of a letter in which Sir Benedict Domdaniel asks Monica to marry him. It is St. Nicholas' Day, the second anniversary of the Bridgetower Trust, and just before the memorial service begins we learn that Solly's wife has given birth to a healthy male heir. At last the "Dead Hand" of the Victorian past has relaxed its grip. The promise extended at the conclusion of *Leaven of Malice* has been fulfilled. As the congregation leaves the church, the irrepressible Cobbler plays "For unto us a child is born". Monica, we suspect, will accept Sir Benedict's proposal, but this is a matter of small concern, for Monica — a symbol of the Canadian imagination reaching its maturity — is now a citizen of the world.

Robertson Davies, I think, will yet write even better novels than *A Mixture of Frailties*, for he has learned that though the novelist may not lay bare the contents of the Chinese box, he must at least find a means of suggesting its contents. He may never abandon his role as Peterborough's Bad Boy (indeed I hope that he does not) but his most important achievement is his imaginative insight into the problems and the prospects of his culture. That insight, combined with his unfailing wit, bespeaks a gift that is all too rare in Canadian letters.