

**Robertson Davies:  
Narrative Structure  
and the Search for a Canadian Identity**

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Honors Thesis**

If American literature seeks to answer the question "Who am I?" or perhaps "Where am I?" then quintessential to Canadian literature is "Where is here?" (This point is made by Canadian scholar and critic, Northrop Frye.) Indeed, a major theme of Canadian writers is the search for or problem of a Canadian identity. Yet this identity focuses on regional locality rather than a national identity, a contrast with the aims of government that seeks to establish a national voice and sense of self. What arises from this quest is a conflict on many literary levels: east versus west, rural versus urban, prudery and conventional stereotypes versus liberal freedom of expression, modernism versus postmodernism. This conflict only overshadows Canada's voice, only highlights its purported failings: America has its mythology; Canada does not. But Canada does have a very definite voice, and in the latter portion of the twentieth century, this voice is able to coexist, if not peaceably then cohesively, among its various internal conflicts. In other words, the realist fiction of Robertson Davies, Morley Callaghan, and Hugh MacLennan thrive alongside the development of the staunchly feminist writings of Margaret Atwood and Alice Munro and the archetypal postmodern works of Leonard Cohen and Michael Ondaatje. Each establishes a strong presence and contributes an invaluable chapter to the development of Canada's literary voice.

Robertson Davies is perhaps unique in this venture, for he was able to maintain traditional realism during a time of turbulent literary growth and he gained international

acclaim for it; instead of becoming waylaid amidst the changing sentiments of postmodernism and feminism in the seventies and eighties, he contributed his critical and commercial best. How did Canada's favored man of letters maintain his realism and his answers to the question of an authentic Canadian identity and the function of the realm of arts among its people? In a time where boundaries were challenged and art became synonymous with originality, why was Robertson Davies so successful? What makes him the quintessential Canadian writer? Why is he such an ideal entry point into the canon of twentieth century Canadian literature?

The beginnings of the answers to these questions can be found in an examination and analysis of Davies' works and provide the basis for this paper. Davies writes about a very accessible Canada, one that is not so very far removed; he maintains a love for his country, a quest to firmly entrench what Canadian means, and is never without a recommendation or action plan to improve upon the nation. To examine how these themes of Canadian identity are incorporated into his fiction, a starting point is tracing the development of his narrative style as it progresses from his earlier, predominantly third-person omniscient to his later, more unusual narrators and structure. In other words, as Davies becomes more effective in his narrative choice, so does (often) his commentary on Canada become more effective.

To begin to grasp Davies' contributions to the Canadian canon, it is important to

have an understanding of his interests and career paths. Indeed, Davies prospered in three consecutive careers, but there should not be a clear, definitive separation among them; his years spent as an actor, a journalist and a publisher, and as the first Master of Massey College at the University of Toronto all built upon one another and had a rather synergistic effect on his novels and later nonfiction. Thematically and stylistically, all three professions were dependent upon the others.

After Davies graduated from Balliol College at Oxford, he had decided that acting was the profession for him, how he should make his way in the world. He was hired on as a junior member by the reputed Old Vic Theatre and drama teacher at the Old Vic Theatre School in London, yet after a series of mediocre starring roles and a score of understudy roles, Lionel Hale, a well-known critic at the time, demanded of Davies, "What the hell are you doing on the stage? You ought to be writing, and if you don't get off the stage I am going to put you off, and I can do it" (Grant 215). A devastating blow to someone of less arrogance and assertiveness, Davies was undaunted, frustrated but undaunted. His contract was renewed for the following season and included some stints as director, a role in which he would later succeed rather well; yet as the Second World War was impending, Davies and his young bride, Brenda, the first female stage manager at the Old Vic, had to return to Ontario, the home of his youth. However, Davies was never very far removed from the stage,

becoming a noted playwright and frequent contributor to professional and amateur theatre productions.

In Peterborough, Ontario, he became an editor of the *Peterborough Examiner* in 1942 and began to contribute a column under the pseudonym of Samuel Marchbanks.

These were social commentaries on a vast range of timely issues, and, as Davies' foremost biographer Judith Skelton Grant remarked, "...it is here that the preoccupations that later characterized his novels made their first appearance- in particular his delight in the exceptional, peculiar, and eccentric, and his conviction that the past illuminates the present" (Grant 235). These columns were later published as The Diary of Samuel Marchbanks in 1947, The Table Talk of Samuel Marchbanks two years later, and, in 1967, Samuel Marchbanks' Almanac. A collection of the most prominent excerpts from the three publications were titled The Papers of Samuel Marchbanks in 1985. The Marchbanks character portrayed himself as a native of the fictional Skunk's Misery, Ontario and the most cynical, disgruntled of all humorists with an important commentary. In one essay, Marchbanks charges Canadians with being "a nation of ash-choked grouches" (Shelton 113). As Davies' alter-ego, the effectiveness of Marchbanks was not universal and the distinction between the two has been made: "Writing in the voice of Marchbanks...Davies is whiny, provincial, and off-putting. Writing in his own voice, however, he is endlessly beguiling and informative" (Shelton

113). Yet here are the seeds of Davies' developing attitudes toward Canada; their articulation by Marchbanks proved an important step in Davies' growth as a writer able to regard Canada with a loving frustration, or what he characterized as not unlike the attitude of a parent with a wayward child (Shelton 114). Davies concluded the Marchbanks column in 1958 and took on the role of publisher, remaining at the *Examiner* for another decade.

During this time, Davies tried his hand as a playwright. He has had five one-act plays, two masques, a play for television, and nine full-length plays published or produced. They are almost all comedies that celebrate individuality and the potential of the human spirit; his protagonists must overcome the barriers to actualization or realization in whatever form the barriers manifest themselves. "Overlaid" has been touted as Davies' most popular play and won the Ottawa Drama League's annual playwrighting competition in 1947; the action centers on the battle between an opera-loving farmer who desires a life more cultured and urbane and his middle-aged daughter clinging to the conventional and provincial life. His one-act play "Eros at Breakfast" describes a young man, Mr. P. S. (Psyche and Soma), who falls in love while at breakfast; it is a conversation among his most inward intangibles: Aristophontes, the Intelligence, Parmeno, the Heart, Crito, the Solar Plexus, etc. "Eros" won the prize for Best Canadian Play at the 1948 Dominion Drama Festival. In other plays that followed,

with varying critical and commercial success, Davies continued to prod notions of Canadian culture in its best and worst forms and reiterate the importance of all art to any civilization. Indeed, these themes carried on throughout a majority of his work. Furthermore, Davies also honed his ability for writing witty, moving, effective dialogue that would characterize his novels.

Following his journalistic career, Davies entered the University of Toronto as a visiting professor of English in 1960. In 1963 he became the first Master of Massey College, a graduate school, a position he maintained until his retirement in 1981. During this time, Davies' ability as a masterful storyteller began to reach an international audience. Furthermore, the world of higher academia became a source and backdrop of satire and humor for Davies. Indeed, the worlds he most encountered fueled his literary vision in these respects; yet his intent is not merely subversive nor overtly complimentary. As Davies expressed himself, "Most groups- church, newspapers, academia, the stock market- they all take themselves with a leaden seriousness. They never seem to see themselves in perspective" (Cameron 95). Throughout Davies' greatest works, he seeks to add a little perspective, a Canadian perspective.

Graham McInnes, art critic for Davies' newspaper and Davies' friend, said in 1947, "[Davies] has written full-length plays, continues to work at them, and hopes that

they will be produced in England. If, by the age of 40, he has not achieved this aim, he says he will turn to novels" (Grant 323). Davies did not, however, wait the remaining six years until his fortieth birthday. In 1950 he began writing Tempest-Tost, the first novel of the Salterton Trilogy, so named for the fictionalized version of Kingston, Ontario, in which they take place. As a twelve-year-old, Davies got his first taste of the "Limestone City" (Grant 94) when his family moved there from Renfrew; since Renfrew was a community that thinly disguised its rough pioneer origins, the impact that the apparently polar opposite Kingston had on young Davies was prodigious. He remained in Kingston until he left for Oxford ten years later in 1935. From his recollections he creates and modifies Salterton, and includes the people and places he knew during that time.

Tempest-Tost is a novel of manners and revolves around the attempts of Salterton's Little Theatre to put on a production of Shakespeare's The Tempest. This is a rather daring venture for the group for they have never attempted a pastoral before this. The satirical device that Davies employs is not complex: the aim to locate among the uncultured Saltertonians those who can faithfully, passionately, artistically portray Shakespeare's characters. The result is as comical as it is ludicrous. Professor Vambrace, the arrogant pedant, is Prospero; Roger Tasset, the young lieutenant whose only desire is to seduce as many women as possible, is Ferdinand; Gonzago is played



by Hector Mackilwraith, the middle-aged high school math teacher who falls foolishly in love with the play's Ariel, the eighteen-year-old heiress, Griselda Webster.

Furthermore, the off-stage actions of the cast serves to parody much of the action in The Tempest. Bruce King, a critic of Davies and of Canadian literature in general, describes the results of this analogous parody as threefold: "They satirize, bringing out by contrast the narrow vision and weak passions of local life; they give a universal significance to otherwise petty behavior in a small provincial city; they implicitly suggest that Shakespeare's 'pastoral' is grounded in continuing realities" (King 101). In other words, the social comedy in both works can be viewed as escapist humor or as a manifestation of recurrent themes in human nature. Cobbler, a character who acts as the illuminating light of T-T and in the subsequent novel in the trilogy, Leaven of Malice (1954), sums up the ineptitude of provincial Canada to enter the realm of art, specifically Shakespeare.

"Our national dislike for doing things on a really big and spectacular scale, shows up in this play. You heard that row a couple of weeks ago when old Vambrace and Eva Widlfang were carrying on about the beauty of simplicity? They think Shakespeare can be run entirely under his own steam. He can't. You've got to have as much lavishness in costume and setting as you can, or your play will be a flop. The day of Shakespeare in cheesecloth costumes and a few tatty drapes is done." (Davies T-T 163)

Here Cobbler, an expatriate Englishman, shows an understanding that the Little

Theatre troupe has missed: Shakespeare, especially in The Tempest, exemplifies the

Elizabethan love of dressing up and grandeur, and to do without it is a crime against one of the most lasting artists; furthermore, this fear of grandeur is characteristic of small town Canada. Solly, the assistant director and central thread throughout the trilogy, agrees with Cobbler: "And that is one of the big troubles with Canada; we have very little ceremonial sense. What have we to compare with Mardis Gras, or the Battle of the Flowers? Nothing. Not a bloody thing" (Davies 162). Indeed, this novel of manners is reflective of several of Davies' compliments and complaints about the Canadian sensibility. Shakespeare is lasting, yet provincial Canada can not do it right. Provincial Canada needs an artistic outlet, yet often what emerges is mediocre at best. Human foibles, vices, and abuses can be highly amusing, yet there are truths about the failings of human nature at the heart of that amusement.

Some of these thematic expressions are carried into Leaven of Malice (1954), the second novel in the trilogy. The malice of the title concerns a false engagement notice published in the *Salterton Evening Bellman* stating that Pearl Vambrace, daughter of Professor Vambrace, will marry Solly (Solomon) Bridgetower on the 31st of November. The subsequent events only highlight the worst character traits of those involved. Specifically, a long academic rivalry between the Vambraces and the Bridgetowers resurfaces in the selfish behavior of the parents. Professor Vambrace, protective of his only daughter, sees her as much slighted by the very suggestion of a

union with Solly Bridgetower and threatens legal action; the widowed Mrs. Bridgetower, the manipulative, domineering mother, feels that the Bridgetower name will be forever tarnished if a lawsuit is not pursued. The story progresses with a bit of mystery novel tension and ends with the inevitable engagement of Pearl and Solly and the discovery of the perpetrator of the false announcement. It is Bevill Higgin, the immigrant voice teacher who published the notice because he felt slighted by both parties, and decided to capitalize on local prejudices which, when it is revealed that Higgin mistook Tessie Forgie for Pearl, are abundant and ample.

Perhaps the most lasting image of LM is Solly's struggle with a nineteenth century Canadian writer, Charles Heavyside. As an assistant professor at Salterton's small university, Solly is encouraged by his superiors to quickly publish an analysis that will gain him academic preferment, an analysis of Heavyside. Despite this recommendation and Heavyside's reputation among his contemporaries, mostly throughout Canada, the studies have nauseated Solly.

Why do countries have to have literatures? Why does a country like Canada, so late upon the international scene, feel that it must rapidly acquire the trappings of older countries- music of its own, pictures of its own, books of its own- and why does it fuss and stew, and storm the heavens with its outcries when it does not have them? Solly pondered upon these problems, knowing full well how firmly he was caught in the strong, close mesh of his country's cultural ambitions. Already he was being asked for advice by hopeful creators of culture. (Davies LM 392-3)

This frustration seems particularly acute, not only in the realm of higher learning but also in the desperation of a culture to assert itself before it has anything worthwhile to back it. Davies expressed this sentiment about his Canada and Heavysage: "...he wrote two or three ghastly novels and a great big thumping tragedy. The extraordinary thing was that he got a lot of encouragement. Longfellow said he was absolutely first-rate and even compared him with Dante. You know, he was blown up enormously. But it hasn't remained. It's a kind of an object lesson to all writers: you can be enormously praised in your lifetime, but that doesn't really mean your work is any good" (Cameron 95). In short, culture cannot be created; only that which is enduring and long-standing becomes part of the cultural heritage.

The final novel in the trilogy, A Mixture of Fraillties (1958), far surpasses the first two in its depth of meaning. While the satire present in T-T and LM is still found here, it functions on two levels and is much more subtle. As young Monica Gall receives a trust left by Solly Bridgetower's deceased mother, she is afforded the opportunity to study voice and music under some of the finest instructors in London; the satire then can focus on comparisons between two worlds in manners and taste. Monica's naive expectations provide the first glimpse of such: "England would be very quaint, and the people- though not so go-ahead and modern as the Canadians- would be exceedingly polite, honest, and quaint as well...there would be a lot of culture and gracious living

and characteristic English understatement in evidence everywhere" (Davies ME 557).

Of course, Monica begins to learn how mistaken she is, how inadequate her Salterton upbringing has been to prepare her for life in London. However, unlike the previous novels, Monica does not remain unchanged by her inadequacies; instead, she grows into a complete individual through careful instruction in her art and her emotional development from her varied experiences. In this novel Davies personifies one of his central tenets: the more education and experience any individual has, the happier and more fulfilled that individual will be. The self-actualization of Monica is expressed similarly by noted Canadian critic George Woodcock: "A Mixture of Frailties broadens because of its multiplicity of locale, and deepens psychologically because we are no longer seeing people merely in terms of their behavior, but as individuals who feel deeply and speak their feelings. They also speak their knowledge..." (Woodcock 214). However, the implication in this is that Canada cannot yet be enough; for a truly full life, one must gain education and experience outside of the provinces, and then may never return.

In brief summation, the Salterton Trilogy employs the most basic of narrative styles, that of the all-knowing third person singular. Here, Davies is beginning to grasp the Canadian identity as he is adjusting to the novel genre. His observations are a bit intuitive and his style is not new. This distinction is furthered as Davies presents a

Canada that is in dire need of artistic expression; yet that means is not achieved effectively by any characters in either T-T or LM. And, slightly discouraging, when Monica Gall attains her education and experience and grasp of the arts, she returns to her native country only for an uncomfortable and short visit. Davies as yet immature narrative structure sheds light on an immature Canada that is not yet self-sufficient.

The Deptford Trilogy, consisting of Fifth Business (1970), The Manticore (1972), and World of Wonders (1975), has been acclaimed as Davies' first important contribution to the world of novels; indeed, many critics hail FB as Davies' finest work. These three novels are the result of a single incident that opens FB: Percy Boyd (Boy) Staunton is following his ten-year-old classmate, Dunstable (Dunstan) Ramsay, and is throwing snowballs at him. When Percy throws a snowball with a rock inside of it, Ramsay dodges it, and it hits Mary Dempster, the wife of the Baptist minister, causing her to go into premature labor, giving birth to Paul Dempster (later known as Magnus Eisengrim). The lives of those involved in this "accident" intertwine and intersect throughout the subsequent decades, and Davies shines as a deft craftsman and mythmaker.

Fifth Business derives its title from the opera term of the same name, and its definition begins the novel. "Those roles which, being neither those of Hero or Heroine, Confidante nor Villain, but which were nonetheless essential to bring about the

Recognition or the denouement, were called the Fifth Business in drama and opera companies organized according to the old style; the player who acted these parts was often referred to as Fifth Business" (Davies FB 3). Indeed, Davies' Fifth Business is Dunstan Ramsay who correctly assumes this role and cannot escape its haunting results or ensuing guilt. The structure of the novel is that of a long letter written by Dunstan to the Headmaster at the fictional Colborne College in defense of a rather condescending farewell notice. Before FB becomes an involving and intriguing web of imagery, however, the reader must readily accept the implausibility of the length of a letter lasting an entire book. This is Davies' first departure in his fiction to attempt a point of view that is not the omniscient third person narration, and his first attempt to develop an original myth, surpassing the content and structure of the Salterton Trilogy. Furthermore, FB can be seen as Davies' attempt to make Canada's literary tradition self-sufficient and sustaining with originality of story and voice. FB recounts Mary Dempster's mental degeneration, Boy's rise to great wealth and stature in politics and later mysterious death, Paul's kidnapping by a traveling show and later a master magician, and Dunstan's increasing expertise in hagiology. Although a Presbyterian, Dunstan grows in self-awareness and finally realizes that he is no saint at all. Although gripping, filled with plot twists and an eloquent and rather unchanging tone, FB is highly problematic in its depiction of women.

The first woman we encounter is, of course, Mary Dempster, who becomes the "fool-saint" after the premature birth of Paul and her willful engagement in sex with a passing tramp. When her husband, Amasa Dempster, asks her why she did it, her response is a disconcerting, "He was very civil, 'Masa. And he wanted it so badly" (Davies FB 45). First, this supposed diminutive form of Amasa into 'Masa is clearly reminiscent of the language of a slave to the master. Second, the mere mention that Mary Dempster engaged in sex simply because a man "wanted it so badly" is a maddeningly infuriating comment on the role of women. Davies has presented us with this opening view of women, and that is one of overt subservience to males. The next woman we meet is Dunstan's mother who, despite all the goodwill and charity she demonstrates, is still not an enviable character. After Dunstan secretly removes an egg from his kitchen, his mother goes into a frenzy and begins whipping him with a horsewhip. This scene of uncontrollable rage and fury prompted Dunstan's remark, "But what I knew then was that nobody- not even my mother- was to be trusted in a strange world that showed very little of itself on the surface" (Davies FB 34). This, however, remains rather innocuous as it seems to be the beginning effort of Davies to come to terms with this side of his own mother's character (Grant 477). Davies seems more understandable than misogynistic in this light. Continuing, Dunstan often condemns Boy for his sexual escapades, but he is unable to see how his own



relationships with women are imbalanced. Because he compulsively accepts entire responsibility for Mary's condition and becomes wholly preoccupied with her, Dunstan is increasingly dominated by his sexual repression until, at the age of fifty, he is enchanted by Magnus Eisengrim's beautiful young assistant, Faustina, and his partner, the wise yet ugly Liesl. It is Liesl who says to him, "Why don't you shake hands with your devil, Ramsay, and change this foolish life of yours? Why don't you, just for once, do something inexplicable, irrational, at the devil's bidding, and just for the hell of it?" (Davies FB 218). Liesl then attempts to seduce him, and Dunstan escapes her powers by acting the way St. Dunstan acted centuries before, by giving the nose of the devil a hard twist (Grant 480). A handful of chapters later, Dunstan admits to himself that he believes Liesl to be the devil. Robert Jones, in a 1985 review, explains:

The devil is a woman. In case the reader fails to grasp Davies' point, he states it explicitly in a later conversation between Ramsay and Eisengrim. One begins to suspect that all the talk of damnation, of the mysteries of the universe and the journey of the soul have nothing to do with theology or the life of the spirit, but with a dread of sexuality and an alarmist view of women as the "other." Suddenly all the references to harlots and virgins, to private parts and masturbation, become evident not as aspects of a vision, but as part of a private pathology. (Jones 181)

Is this the nature of Davies' writings? That women predominantly fall into the roles of servant-slave or devil? Perhaps that is a bit of an extreme statement, yet it does have plausibility in regard to FB. Many of the incidental female characters follow similar

patterns: Leola as a trophy and something to be educated just enough for public appearances, Diana as a temptress, Denyse as a manipulator only until Boy can expose her caring, nurturing side. Certainly, then, the hints, the semblance of a misogynistic attitude are here, but perhaps it is important to note that in FB there are really no desirable characters, regardless of sex. Perhaps Jones takes his analysis a bit too far, throwing into question all women and all references to anything sexual or related to sexual power, yet the two glaring examples of Mary Dempster as slave and Liesl as devil certainly color an otherwise engaging novel.

The second novel, The Manticore, is a journal record by Boy Staunton's son, David, for his psychoanalysis. The novel is primarily concerned with the mysterious death of Boy that occurred at the close of FB; here, the reader is given confirmation that Boy's car drove off a cliff and he drowned within it, with the same rock he hit Mary Dempster with years before in his mouth. As David attempts to come to terms with his father's death, Davies' passion for Jungian psychoanalysis is at its most clear. On the surface, this may seem totally unrelated to Canadian literature. However Davies often remarked that there is a sort of mysticism that lurks behind, above, and around the prudish and conventional image Canada shows to the world. Jungian psychology fits neatly into this perspective and has come up in the works of other noted Canadians like Northrop Frye, who offered archetypes for literature, and Margaret Atwood. Perhaps

this is so because in his theories, Jung claims that there is a duality at the core of man, "an archetypal polarity" (Allentuck 102). This presence of opposites is distinctly Canadian: British and American influences, French and English languages, urban and rural landscape, contrasts between reality and perception, etc. M most clearly fleshes this out, and the result is a fascinating entrance into a world of Jungian psychology.

The concluding book of The Deptford Trilogy, World of Wonders, is rare in that it requires virtually no knowledge of the previous two. This time, Magnus Eisengrim (nee Paul Dempster), the world-famous magician, is engaged to portray the life of legendary French magician Robert Houdin for a B.B.C. film. As the group with whom he is working, narrated by Ramsay, listens to Eisengrim's tale of how he became the greatest magician in the world, his story provides the subtext for the underlying quest for truth. And, in the end, the truth is packaged in nice, tight, Davies-like fashion. Superficially, the truth that has been sought since M is the real killer of Boy Staunton; of course, Davies includes what may be a clear-cut answer: Staunton himself. Yet there is a sense of ambiguity in this for Eisengrim is the foremost suspect, and indeed he is the master of illusion; the possibility, however small, remains then that Eisengrim lied. However, the real truth lies in what Eisengrim refers to as the Great Justice: "But I don't monkey with what I think of as the Great Justice... Though it doesn't look poetic in action; it's rough and tough and deeply satisfying. And I don't administer it. Something

else does- something I don't understand, but feel and serve and fear- does that. It's sometimes horrible to watch...But part of the glory and terror of our life is 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" (Davies WW 822). Here, Davies has distinctly moved beyond a notion of only that which is applicable to Canadian imagery to focus on the universal, the human which is still altogether satisfying. Because this Great Justice that Eisengrim and Davies himself embrace is not specifically Canadian but decidedly universal. Again, Davies is continuing to expand in his scope of subject, narrative, and the rightful place of Canada on the international scene.

Continuing in the development of more effective narration, the first novel of Robertson Davies' Cornish Trilogy is The Rebel Angels, first published in 1981, a novel that attempts to illuminate the struggle between rational and intuitive thought. Again in the collegiate setting, four professors, a graduate student, a Gypsy, a young tycoon, and a suspicious former monk set about mixing different worlds: the academic and the Gypsy, the scholarly and the personal, etc. This arises from an attempt to procure some stolen Rabelaisian documents from an estate for which three professors and the tycoon are executors. However, what is first striking about the novel is the narration. In many ways, the narration consists of two novellas divided equally into chapters. The

first of these is narrated by the beautiful graduate student, Maria Theotoky, under the title of "Second Paradise." This is derived from the sixteenth century Swiss alchemist Paracelsus who wrote, "The striving for wisdom is the second paradise of this world" (Spettigue 185). The paradise of love, the Eden before the fall is the basis for the first paradise, and although Maria is an extraordinarily beautiful woman, her goal is the second paradise, her dissertation on Rabelais. The other section is narrated by Simon Darcourt, a professor of New Testament Greek and an Anglican priest, under the heading of "The New Aubrey." As the old Aubrey recorded the fascinating details of his contemporaries, so Darcourt too attempts to record the nuances of his fellow academics. On the surface, this structure reinforces the thematic struggle between the rational and the rejected: as renowned for his scholarship and medical skill in the sixteenth century, Rabelais seems to represent the rational; John Aubrey, during the subsequent century, published a volume of studies in folklore and appears to be the area of scholarship rejected by the more mainstream. However, these structural distinctions really condone a balance between erudition and apparently purposeless information. "Second Paradise", while focusing on the Rabelais documents, is titled from writings by an alchemist, and alchemy, although focusing on the magical, was the first step toward the science of chemistry. Furthermore, while Rabelais was aware of all the sciences of his day, he also had a great command of contemporary life, society,

and the vernacular of many cultures. Maria follows this realization and development of this balance:

I have thought a good deal about trees; I like them. They speak eloquently of the balanced duality which I told you was the skeptical attitude. No splendid crown without the strong root that works in the dark, drawing its nourishment among the rocks, the soil, the hidden waters, and all the little burrowing things. A man is like that; his splendours and his fruits are to be seen, to win him love and admiration. But what about the root? (Davies RA 199)

Maria must balance her rational with her intuitive, her crown with her roots, her shining intellect with her Gypsy mother and heritage. During her dissertation studies, she seeks to repress her Gypsy blood, but as her academic mentor becomes entranced with her mother's lifestyle practices as a living relic of ancient beliefs, Maria is able to accept her own Gypsy nature, thus connecting crown to root. Indeed, she comes full circle when, at her Anglican wedding at the book's close, she combines the traditional ceremony with the Gypsy ceremony of bare feet and gold necklace fashioned by her uncle. In short, she finds a way to balance twentieth century rational learning with rejected folklore from her past.

What's Bred in the Bone (1985) precedes RA in the chronology of events that pertain to the central actions by delving into the secrets of Francis Cornish, whose estate is executed in the first novel and whose nephew, business tycoon Arthur Cornish, marries Maria Theotoky. Two celestial beings, the Lesser Zadkiel and the

Daimon Maimon, are replaying the life of the deceased Francis Cornish in an effort to understand his search for self. Furthermore, they are attempting to understand what is bred in Cornish's bones. Davies implies that personalities are an equal mixture of heredity, environment, accident, and an occasional nudge from the spiritual realm. Francis, we learn, has a severely handicapped half-brother who serves as his grotesque double. Francis cannot fully blossom until his brother dies; yet his image haunts him for life, a warning perhaps that much of what a man can become is subject to forces completely beyond his control. Francis is also emotionally neglected by his parents, and those left to care for him infuse him with a confusing collection of, among others, Catholicism, Protestantism, the arts of embalming, restoration, and drawing. The attention he does receive from his prominent father is in the form of instruction in intelligence, or spying. What results is not only a masterful story with formal surprises, but the character of Francis Cornish becomes an almost direct allegory of Canada.

Like his country, Francis is an uneasy mix of Catholic and Protestant, as well as English, Scotch, and French. The turmoil and tension of this dislocated spiritual and ethnic diversity parallels the uncertain identity of the Canadian nation. Francis is an individual of great resources and great potential, but, like the country he reflects, he can never find his creative selfhood- his aesthetic and cultural signature. The forces which play upon him and within him are too large and contradictory to synthesize into a new and dynamic entity. Though much greater in potential than many of his contemporaries, Francis Cornish is left to play a relatively obscure role in the affairs of art. Such also, suggests Davies, is the role of Canada in world affairs. (Spettigue

187)

Throughout WBB this is a fairly straightforward allegorical depiction. However, the sort of running commentary between the Lesser Zadkiel and the Daimon Maimon proves tiresome. Reviewer Michiko Kakutani of the *New York Times* bemoans this structure as well. He likens it to an old Frank Capra film, presumably *It's a Wonderful Life*, where the the life of George Bailey is narrated by two angels, so much so that it overshadows, not the thematic message, but the sleight of hand Davies employs to create an ornate and unpredictable plot (Kakutani 106). Yet WBB is truly a masterpiece, and worthy of a place among the Canadian canon, if not in result then in attempt.

The Lyre of Orpheus (1988), the concluding novel of the Cornish Trilogy, is, in light of this, rather disappointing. Again focusing on the relationship and interactions between life and art, Davies furthers his examination by incorporating questions about authenticity and what constitutes authenticity of self, of culture, of artistic creation, of fact. Simon Darcourt, furthering his "New Aubrey" goals from RA, seeks to uncover the secrets of Francis Cornish and write a book about his discoveries. Additionally, also funded by the Cornish Trust, an unattractive graduate student, Hulda "Schnak" Schnakenburg, is given the opportunity to complete for her doctoral dissertation an unfinished opera by E. T. A. Hoffmann, the German Romantic writer and music critic whose wild life became the inspiration for Offenbach's *Tales of Hoffman*. (This is a continuation of sorts of Davies' MF where Monica Gall was also awarded by a trust the



opportunity to advance her art; yet LO goes one step further with Schnak, who is closer in the creative process than Monica, contributing her own work, although modeled after Hoffmann.) As the opera nears completion and production, the relationship between Schnak and Dr. Gunilla Dahl-Soot undergoes some dramatic changes. Dahl-Soot, the conductor for the opera's premiere, inspires Schnak's musical genius and discipline; she also refines Schnak's tastes, social skills, and physical self-awareness. However, their embrace seems more a part of Dahl-Soot's emotional manipulation than authentic feeling, perhaps because Dahl-Soot is often described as having "seduced Schnak" (Davies LO 369). And, upon completion of the opera, the question of authenticity remains: to what extent is it an authentic Hoffmann? To what extent is it an authentic work of Schnak? In the Darcourt subplot, authenticity is also under question. As Darcourt begins to take risks for the sake of realizing his own destiny, he steals drawings that had been thought to be works of an unknown Renaissance master and are used in a cosmetics advertisement; however, Darcourt discovers that these are not from the Renaissance at all; they are in fact painted by Francis Cornish. When Darcourt does not reveal this in his biography, the question arises, to what extent is this an authentic account of life? Questions of authenticity are important to any art form and art community. However, the novel fails in ways that ~~draw~~ <sup>deter</sup> attention from this main question of authenticity. Too much is dependent upon the first two novels of the trilogy.

For example, while a working knowledge of Francis Cornish and his history is key to understanding many of the implications of LO, very little new information is given. This leaves the reader wanting more. George Woodcock takes this notion further to say this highlights some of Davies' weaknesses as a novelist.

Thematically, The Lyre of Orpheus projects a viewpoint that is reactionary...In denying the importance of originality and contemporaneity he is in fact guarding his own territory, for he is neither a strikingly original novelist, nor, in the sense of representing any avant garde, a notably contemporary writer. (Woodcock 217)

Because Davies offers nothing new, yet demands knowledge of the first two books in the trilogy, his thematic answers to questions of authenticity are therefore hopelessly flawed.

As North America loses ties with the ancestral Old World, children, in claiming allegiance to their New World identity, are increasingly torn between parents' lineage or have little knowledge of it whatsoever. Growing up, Davies certainly found himself torn between his parents' lineage. He was pulled in two directions between his father's grand Welsh stories and his mother's Loyalist heritage. Because he was also Canadian, the problem was more muddled; "Where he was, and where he belonged, was unclear" (Grant 604). This desire to come to terms with his personal ancestry in the light of what it also means to be Canadian prompted the writing of Murder and Walking Spirits (1991), the tale of Connor "Gil" Gilmartin who unwittingly views the

cinematic portrayal of his heritage. The novel opens cleverly enough: "I was never so amazed in my life as when the Sniffer drew his concealed weapon from its case and struck me to the ground, stone dead" (Davies MWS 3). It is rather a double surprise because Gil has surprised his wife, only to find her in bed with her lover, the Sniffer, their colleague, and the reader is surprised to learn that the narrator is dead, a walking spirit. Gil quickly realizes that he must accompany the Sniffer wherever he goes until he receives some sort of absolution or punishment for Gil's murder, and, soon after Gil's death, the Sniffer attends a week-long film festival. (There are failed attempts to rid himself of Gil's ghost, but we cannot assume that the Sniffer managed it somehow because the novel ends with a rather ambiguous, yet still uplifting, conversation between the spirit of Gil and his dear companion.) The films unfold, and, seen only by Gil, they are the cinematographic depictions of his ancestry from roughly 1776, at the outbreak of the Revolutionary War. The Sniffer and the other film critics are watching "real" films. In six successive films, Gil, sometimes painfully, discovers how his forebears helped form his character. Like WBB, Davies portrays how people are very much the products of their ancestors' thoughts and actions; however, in MWS, Gil must die before he can ascertain the misunderstandings he had about himself and his ancestors, and until he can grasp that, Gil can not appreciate the complexities and mysteries of life. Even after death, through watching the films, Gil loses his own

objectivity.

These films are becoming increasingly personal. I am not unstirred by what has gone before. I felt anger and danger and anxiety with Anna Gage; I was saddened by the vicissitudes of the Gilmartins, for every rags-to-riches tale is a new one, and the later drop from riches to rags is always deflating; the bitterness of William and Virginia McOmish woke my pity. William- that wretched creature, a soured idealist. Virginia, that hater of Venus, what would she have been in our more liberal age?...And Rhodri [his grandfather]- how well I remember my eighth birthday, when he gave me a five-dollar bill, and shook me by the hand; until then he had always kissed me when we met, and that handshake marked an important step in my journey toward manhood...Quite the most troublesome figure was my father...What had given him strength? What had hardened this seeming putty into steel?...Yet- was I really such an unreflective, uncomprehending jackass when I was alive that I supposed the sufferings and inadequacies of humanity came for the first time in my own experience? (Davies MWS 268)

Indeed, love is one of the universal truth in this novel; Gil readily sympathizes with his ancestors, yet love for them does not come so quickly. Finally, his self-awareness makes it possible for Gil to love himself. The tragedies and joys of the past demand it, and it functions as proof all hardships work toward something positive. In addition to individual growth through an understanding of the past comes a fairly ambiguous portrayal of Canada. Gil's lack of a clear identity makes him definitively Canadian; a need for an art form (here, cinematography) to bridge the gap between the practical and the mystical is, according to Davies, characteristically Canadian. And, in Brochwell, Gil's father, is a man who feels he is unable to love his native Canada or any

country unless he can look upon it as a woman: "But Canada isn't like a woman; it's like a family- various, often unsympathetic, sometimes detestable, frequently dumb as hell- but inescapable because you're part of it and can't ever, really, get away. You know the saying: My country, right or wrong- my mother, drunk or sober" (Davies MWS 302-3). So, Canada and the Gilmartins are almost identical in that they are a mixture of national, social, and ideological influences in conflict. Stylistically, this is conveyed in an appropriate, sometimes stream-of-consciousness narration. And it is fitting as Davies allows Gil to be personal and touching; Davies is giving the insider's view of one man's heritage which transcends into everyman's Canada.

Intended to become, along with MWS, a trilogy centering around Davies' beloved Toronto, the city it once was and the city it could be again, and the Gilmartin family, The Cunning Man, first published in Canada in 1994, is Davies' last novel before his death in December 1995. Here, the previous walking spirit, Gil Gilmartin, is a small boy, and the action centers around his godfather, the cunning man, Dr. Jonathan Hullah. Throughout the novel, Davies is a bit more experimental than in previous works, utilizing shifts in narrative and points of view. Yet, he characteristically focuses on the individual and his search for identity, and, by extension, Canada and its need to distinguish itself from America and England. So it is not surprising that, at novel's end, Hullah examines his great losses: two almost-brides, one almost-son, and a

splendorous church now modernized, and he realizes that these failures were not so great after all. For he was able to care for patients, preside over his own clinic, know and love these people, and watch the city of Toronto grow and expand, and this was greater than his losses for Hullah came to see himself as one of few keen, intelligent observers. Is this Davies' last conceptualization of Canada, of Toronto? That Canada must stop looking to the US and the UK as a constant reminder of its failings? Instead, Canada ought to look unto itself and embark upon the unique opportunity to capture a firsthand account of its growing cultural awareness and success. It seems a quite fitting message from a man, unknowingly near his own death, who helped formulate a part of Canadian literary tradition.

In conclusion, Davies' writings are marked by some characteristic tenets of realism; he writes with a focus on the academic middle class and those who need the arts, a surge of optimism, an ability and desire to tie up loose ends and answer, rather definitively, the larger questions that plague the modern world. While he is not exactly associated with writers of magical realism, magicians, manipulators, and masters of the sleight-of-hand have a permanent home in Davies' fiction. He conveys this best when his narrative structure is varied or experimental; moreover, he is at his best thematically. And, more importantly, so is his thematic vision of Canada. As Davies' characters seek to establish their personal voice, so does Canada, and Davies is

helping it along the way. Through his novels, Canada is a nation searching and developing and growing. It is also a large land mass that needs art to develop its smaller communities and detached citizens; Davies often satirizes this by highlighting the major failings of this provincial aim, but, as with all his work, it is done with a gentle and uplifting hand. Furthermore, in light of his careers in theatre, journalism, and academia and in light of his many passions and interests, Davies' writings are rich in structure, meaning, and characterization. His dialogue is witty and enchanting; his characters memorable and lasting; he brings a measure of plausibility to the implausible, and vice versa. But, above all, he is a master craftsman, doing what he does best, weaving a captivating and moving tale. His ability as a storyteller will surely maintain his status within the canon of Canadian literature.

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