

Robertson Davies: Illusionist

In *World of Wonders* (MacMillan, 1975) Robertson Davies concludes his trilogy with the illusionist Magnus Eisengrim's account of his bizarre upbringing. The book is, in part, an elegiac commentary on aspects of nineteenth-century entertainment which were gradually snuffed out in our own age. Eisengrim serves a long and extraordinary apprenticeship in which his own personality is negated as he imitates, climbs inside, and becomes a phantom of others. Stolen by a carnival showman from Deptford, Ontario, he starts his training inside a machine doing card tricks which baffle country hayseeds until the world of vaudeville is overwhelmed by cinema. His training continues under Sir John Tresize, inheritor of Irving's mantle in the old school of romantic, bravura acting, until it too loses out to the modern school of naturalism. The final polish is added in his repairing of a collection of nineteenth-century mechanical toys for a Swiss industrialist. Eisengrim is a bewildering Protean figure, constantly taking on new names. Sodomized as a child he is related to the hermaphroditic Tiresias. He is linked also to Sir Galahad and to Merlin. Through an elaborate array of doppelgänger devices Davies makes out of his Nobody a Somebody. Eisengrim becomes eventually a supreme egoist like the nineteenth-century figures he has imitated and distinctly more impressive than the mere neurotic egotists which is all our modern age can produce.

Liesel, his mistress explains what is distinctive about him when she relates him to Spengler's concept of the Magian World View of the Middle Ages:

It was a sense of the unfathomable wonder of the invisible world that existed side by side with the hard recognition of the roughness and cruelty and day-to-day demands of the tangible world. It was a readiness to see demons where nowadays we see neuroses, and to see the hand of a guardian angel in what we are apt to shrug off ungratefully as a stroke of luck. It was religion, but a religion with a thousand gods, none of them all-powerful and most of them ambiguous in their attitude toward man. It was poetry and wonder which might reveal themselves in a dunghill, and it was an understanding of the dunghill that lurks in poetry and wonder. It was a sense of living in what Spengler called a quivering cavern-light which is always in danger of being swallowed up in the surrounding impenetrable darkness. (pp. 323-324)

These ambiguities and paradoxes are revealed with superb inventiveness in Davies's richly theatrical account of Eisengrim's life. There are not many Canadian writers who can give us this relaxed sense of effortless assurance, who can cast sparkling lures in all directions to hook the reader's interest. Much of the book is concerned with Eisengrim's assertions of the endless patience and attention to detail required in producing a successful illusion. It is clear that Davies knows the literary equivalent of palming coins, card dexterity, and the clockwork mechanisms which must be concealed if readers are to be truly surprised and to be "made partners in their own deception" (p. 5). Yet there are times when the sleights of hand are not as expertly concealed as in the earlier books.

There is a framing device scattered through the narrative. A group of artists, who have made a film of the life of Robert-Houdin, a famous nineteenth-century illusionist, listen to Eisengrim's confessional narrative which is offered as a "subtext" to the film—"the dunghill that lurks in poetry and wonder"

(p. 323). Conrad's Marlow never had such a fractious group of egoists to reveal his exotic adventures to. They are constantly asserting different versions of how to reflect reality: for the Swedish film maker it can all be done in the composition of shots; for the cameraman the essence of things is rendered by lighting; the historian hungers for documents. They chatter away about the devil, art, evil, the nature of autobiography. There is much Pirandellian riddling about what the nature of truth is and whether one can define it. Davies is absorbed in those puzzles which the writers of the 20's and 30's explored so relentlessly. Early in the novel these discussions creak rather too noticeably. They are not warmed into life. One begins to suspect that Davies doesn't really care to conceal the mechanism of his illusions. For the book is not merely about an illusionist, it is organized on the principal of both the carnival and the magic show. All the interruptions are meant to build suspense, to hook the reader, to build up a rising expectation of bigger and better tricks. These squabbling artists are the "bally" to the show. They speculate about the wonders and secrets inside the magician's head and we are meant to be taken in by these skills as the rubes are outside the carnival tent. Only when Eisengrim tells of characters in his past life who turn out to be among his small group of avid listeners do we begin to forget the creaking narrative mechanism. They are brought up on stage to share in the storytelling, to afford us a glimpse through another facet of the crystal. The hypnotist Eisengrim charms them up behind the footlights and then makes fools of them. We begin, however, to appreciate the limits of autobiography: "it's a romance of which one is oneself the hero" (p. 289). Davies, indeed, has a defence prepared against any accusation that the characters in the framing device are no more than thin, cardboard stereotypes. This is not their autobiography and they are mere supporting characters in the drama. There is dunghill and poetry in their lives, too, we may be sure. We are given glimpses of it in the lives of Ingestree and Liesl. But this version of "The Ring and the Book" will not extend to include everyone.

Of all Davies's novels this one most clearly demonstrates that "life is a succession of decisive interventions" (p. 358). But Eisengrim is enough of a nineteenth-century figure not to believe in blind chance, in submitting to life as mere phantasmagoria. You must also have "a clear-eyed, undeluded observation of what lies right under your nose. Therefore—no self-deceiving folly and no meddlesome compassion, but a humble awareness of the Great Justice and the Great Mercy whenever they choose to make themselves known" (pp. 354-355). It is this old-fashioned idea, I suspect, which has made Davies's trilogy so widely appealing. The fascination with tawdry carnival shows and freaks as an image of our clownish existence has been quite widespread in this century. Herman Hesse in *Steppenwolf*, Mann in "Mario and the Magician" and *Dr. Faustus*, Bergman in his early films, Beckett with his tramps, Fellini in virtually all of his films and many others have trampled over this territory. Davies is certainly devastating in exposing the savageness, the evil, the pettiness, the vanity in these marginal, theatrical, disappearing enterprises. But he sees what many others have ignored—a charm and elegance that are not merely to be laughed away by the modern captives of the plastic, pushbutton world. The theatrical tour of Canada on which Eisengrim acts as Sir John Tresize's double is done with incisive observation and a splendid gusto as in the following arabesque on the limitations of cheap hotels: ". . . where one electric bulb hung from a string in the middle of the room, where the sheets were like cheesecloth, and where the mattresses—when they were revealed as they usually were after a night's restless sleep—were like maps of strange worlds, the continents being defined by unpleasing stains, doubtless traceable to the incontinent dreams of travelling salesmen, or the rapturous deflowerings

of brides from the backwoods" (p. 257). Tribute is paid not only to sleaziness but to the gracefull skills and charisma of Sir John. There are times, however, when Davies seems to be a little self-indulgent, tirelessly adding footnotes to theatrical history rather than enlarging our understanding of Eisengrim.

As in the earlier books Davies concentrates on "the divergences between the acceptable romance of life and the clumsily fashioned, disproportioned reality" (p. 288). We have, in twentieth-century literature, had a great deal of the latter with very little attention paid to the former. We can be grateful to Davies not only because he refuses simply to wallow in the dunghill but also because he asserts convincingly the genuine validity of romance in life. Eisengrim indicates what it is in the modern age which has cut us off from an openness to the paradoxes of life: "Education is a great shield against experience. It offers so much ready-made and all from the best shops, that there's a temptation to miss your own life in pursuing the lives of your betters. It makes you wise in some ways, but it can make you a blindfolded fool in others" (p. 18).

Davies, as a good illusionist, saves his best trick for the end in approaching the riddle of Boy Staunton's death with which he had mystified us in *Fifth Business*. But he does not, like the magician, refuse to show us how the trick works. The riddle is not incomprehensible. With patience and an attention to detail we can come to understand the shaping of an ego. Because we have different versions of reality we are not to assume that there is no reality. In the twentieth century writers have been prone to despair. Davies indicates that if we could retain some of the nineteenth-century's capacity for wonder and its devotion to craft we might be a little more sophisticated.

Anthony Brennan
McMaster University