

A NOTE ON DOUGLAS BARBOUR'S  
"DAVID CANAAN: THE FAILING HEART"  
(SCL, WINTER 1976)

by  
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It is refreshing to read a critical analysis of *The Mountain and the Valley* that faces up squarely to its many implicit ironies. The purpose of this note is to show how Douglas Barbour's argument in "David Canaan: The Failing Heart" receives support from several remarks that Ernest Buckler once made about the novel in a letter to a publisher which is now in the Ernest Buckler Manuscript Collection in the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto.<sup>1</sup>

Central to Barbour's argument is his contention that David Canaan's death and his thoughts preceding it are a final example of David's essential self-centredness, his willful nature, and his habit, apparent throughout the novel, of retreating from reality into "a fantasy future of imagined public success,"<sup>2</sup> something specifically illustrated by his earlier dreams of being the greatest general in the world, the greatest actor, the best doctor, the most famous mathematician, the most wonderful dancer.<sup>3</sup> In his last moments David, according to Barbour, "ignores the harsh truths of the situation" when he "dreams of the praise and the prizes he will receive, not of the joys and anguish of craftsmanship which are their own reward" and when he "absolves all the others, and himself, of the hurts they gave each other."<sup>4</sup> These points can be placed alongside what Buckler said in a letter to Dudley H. Cloud of the Atlantic Monthly Press on 15 May 1951.<sup>5</sup> In the

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<sup>1</sup>Grateful acknowledgement is given to Ernest Buckler and to the University of Toronto for permission to quote from the Buckler Manuscript Collection.

<sup>2</sup>"David Canaan: The Failing Heart," 73.

<sup>3</sup>Ernest Buckler, *The Mountain and the Valley* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1961), 41, 82, 178, 290, 291.

<sup>4</sup>"David Canaan: The Failing Heart," 74.

<sup>5</sup>Buckler Manuscript Collection, Box 15. Since October 1950 the Atlantic Monthly Press had had an option on *The Mountain and the Valley*, but on 4 May 1951 a letter was sent by the Press to Buckler rejecting the novel. The book was subsequently rejected by Harper's in August and then by Random House before being accepted by Henry Holt & Co. in January 1952.

letter Buckler reveals that the conclusion of the novel is intentionally ironic, and, while we cannot take a writer's intentions as a definitive guide to what he actually achieves, one can here at least perceive that Buckler's and Barbour's views of the novel are one with regard to its conclusion. Buckler says that he intends "the crowning point of the whole dramatic irony" of the novel to be that David at the moment of his death should "achieve one final transport of self-deception: that he would be the greatest writer in the whole world." Not only, then, does Buckler's statement support the idea that David is presented ironically, a view never developed by any critic prior to Barbour,<sup>6</sup> but he apparently intended David's artistic failure to be a direct result, as Barbour's analysis deduces, of a moral failure in David himself (i.e. David's self-deception).

A further point in Barbour's article can similarly be examined in the light of what Buckler says about the novel in this letter. Barbour's contention that David dies of a heart attack, and not, as Ms Atwood suggests, of a "mysterious seizure," can be compared to Buckler's statement in the letter to Cloud that David's death is "the most overt piece of symbolism in the book," that it is caused by his exhaustion climbing the mountain when he is "beset by the ultimate clamour of impressions created by his physical condition and his whole history of divided sensitivities," and that it is prepared for in the novel "not only by long accounts of the result of his fall, but by the medical officer's advice to him at the time of his enlistment examination, and, more immediately, by the excitement, the panic, the climbing." Apparently the straight-forward heart-attack, however attractive as an explanation and however convenient as a means of providing Barbour with his punning title,<sup>7</sup> is not all that Buckler had in mind; though, as Barbour rightly points out,<sup>8</sup> there are indeed two specific allusions to David's having a heart problem in the course of the novel.

My final note on Barbour's article has to do with his criticism of Claude Bissell's view that "the last section of the book [is] something of an anticlimax."<sup>9</sup> Barbour's argument is that the novel is carefully structured,

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<sup>6</sup>But see the discussion of Buckler's irony contained in my *Ernest Buckler* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1976), 36-37, and in my forthcoming article for the *Journal of Canadian Fiction* on "The Genesis of Ernest Buckler's *The Mountain and the Valley*."

<sup>7</sup>Barbour's title and its stress on "heart" is matched in one of the various possible titles that Buckler proposed in a letter to his agent, Harold Ober (23 May 1951): "None but the Lonely Heart." About the suitability of this title, however, Buckler had a query: "Has someone already used that?" Presumably the closeness of this to the title of Carson McCullers' first novel was the problem.

<sup>8</sup>"David Canaan: The Failing Heart," 65.

<sup>9</sup>Bissell's point of view is given in his introduction to the edition of *The Mountain and the Valley* cited above, xii.

the Prologue initiating "a series of scenes which reveal with great clarity just why and how David is isolated from his community throughout his life," the Epilogue providing the inevitable climax to this failure of David as both artist and man.<sup>10</sup> Buckler's letter to Cloud includes a discussion of this all-important final section of the novel. Buckler claims, in fact, that the section was "the very first thing I wrote: the foundation for the whole thesis." Indeed, as the letter further makes clear, Buckler had originally planned to begin with this section but later "split the opening chapter and shifted that part [i.e. that dealing with David's death] to the epilogue." His intention, then, which Barbour would presumably claim as realized, was to suggest that the Epilogue is no mere anticlimax, but, like the Prologue, is a statement of David's final situation, itself the inevitable sum and substance of the six intermediary parts of the novel that trace the successive states of David's life prior to the final climbing of the mountain.

Buckler's letter to Cloud thus provides an illuminating glimpse of a writer's intentions which in this instance happen to be largely in harmony with the interpretation of one literary critic. Though providing evidence of a kind that a critic would tend to reject out of a desire not to be a victim of the "intentional fallacy," the letter is obviously not without relevance to a critical argument that does much to open the way to a fresh understanding of what Barbour refers to as "one of the best novels of the post-war period."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>"David Canaan: The Failing Heart," 64.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 75.