

"FALSE AS HARLOTS' OATHS":
DUNNY RAMSAY LOOKS AT HUCK FINN

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Near the end of the second chapter of *Fifth Business*, the crucial chapter in which Dunny Ramsay explains his motives for writing his autobiography, the venerable teacher pauses to preach a brief homily against earlier endeavours in this form:

I have always sneered at autobiographies and memoirs in which the writer appears at the beginning as a charming, knowing little fellow, possessed of insights and perceptions beyond his years, yet offering these with a false naïveté to the reader, as though to say, "What a little wonder I was, but All Boy." Have the writers any notion or true recollection of what a boy is?

I have, and I have reinforced it by forty-five years of teaching boys. A boy is a man in miniature, and though he may sometimes exhibit notable virtue, as well as characteristics that seem to be charming because they are child-like, he is also schemer, self-seeker, traitor, Judas, crook, and villain — in short, a man. Oh, these autobiographies in which the writer postures and simpers as a David Copperfield or a Huck Finn! False, false as harlots' oaths!

This is more than the crankiness of an envious old eccentric declaiming against the folly of an overly indulgent representation of the tender years. This is, in effect, a deliberate and bold invitation from Robertson Davies to compare Dunny's account with the acknowledged masterpieces of two famous comic writers. Why else would he have his narrator belabour the point for several paragraphs? The idea of comparing two established comic novels with a well-received newcomer is a sound one for literary scholars to pursue, offering varied insights into the nature of comedy, of criticism, and even of art itself. But we must grant Davies his little joke on the academic: a comparison between *David Copperfield* and *Huckleberry Finn* would outreach the bounds of a dissertation, to say nothing of making the game three-cornered by incorporating *Fifth Business* into the analysis. Since this paper can only be a beginning to the project, and since Dickens is of the Old World while both Twain and Davies are of the New, let us set the Englishman's book aside for the moment and concentrate on the two North American works.

¹Robertson Davies, *Fifth Business* (New York: Signet Books, 1970), p. 15. All subsequent page references to this novel will be given in parentheses in the text of the paper.

We might start by considering Dunny's real reason for so roundly denouncing Huck Finn's narrative. In what sense, if any, may the adventures of Huckleberry Finn be called "false as harlots' oaths"?² Dunny is hardly convincing when he argues that Huck is "a charming, knowing little fellow, possessed of insights and perceptions beyond his years," given the wit, industry, compassion, and comprehension that Dunny also possessed at roughly the same age. He comes much closer to the marrow of the matter when he pauses again a little further on in his story for another harsh condemnation of the falsity of a posturing youth. The recipient of his disapprobation this time is his own young self, spinning out the events of his boyhood for the instruction and amusement of a very pretty English nurse:

She wanted to know all about me, and I told her as honestly as I could; but as I was barely twenty, and a romantic myself, I know now that I lied in every word I uttered — lied not in fact but in emphasis, in colour, and in intention. She was entranced by the idea of life in Canada, and I made it entrancing. (74)

Dunny slips past whatever honesty his statements may have had because he wants to confess the duplicity inherent in any alteration of fact through selection, emphasis, and colour. But his insistence upon accuracy reveals only that he lied with the lies of youth, innocently touching up the world in which he lived with tinges of honour, adventure and romance. In other words, he told of his Ontario with the same bright vigour that Huck told of his Mississippi. According to Dunny, the way a boy sees things is false, romantic, naive; the way an old man sees things is true, realistic, experienced. Davies has created an old man determined to tell it like it is; and, in an era grown weary with an excessive preoccupation with youth, the old man's story serves as a fascinating counterbalance to all that kid's stuff from the past.

It is critical at the outset to grasp the full import of the gap of two generations between Huck and Dunny. Huck is raw and maladroit, a boy groping towards manhood. His tone is awkward and unsure, reflecting his perplexity with a world that apparently confounds him at his every move. Dunny is smooth and subtle, a man mellowing towards old age. His tone is balanced and authoritative, reflecting his assurance with a world that apparently confirms him in his every thought. The extremity of age embodied by each of these narrators is, paradoxically, the device that at once most separates and most unites their narratives. We might regard the two works taken together as a North American prose equivalent to Blake's "Songs of Innocence" and "Songs of Experience," for Blake's poetry

²We should bear in mind a possible play on the word "oath" here. If we take it in the sense of "a ritualistic declaration," Dunny is clearly dismissing Huck's narrative, because the solemn affirmation of a harlot is not worth much; but if we take it in the sense of "a blasphemy," Dunny is endorsing Huck's narrative in a subconscious slip, because the foul language of a harlot is a true indication of her personality. No reader of *Huckleberry Finn* can doubt that Huck meets Dunny's definition of a boy, because Huck sees himself as "schemer, self-seeker, traitor, Judas, crook, and villain."

provides more than a passing literary parallel here. His two collections of poems seem opposed because they convey opposed viewpoints, but these dissimilar viewpoints are actually directed to similar phenomena, showing how our perceptions can alter the way we conceive the world about us; to cite the most renowned doublet of poems, "The Lamb" and "The Tiger" comprise a two-fold contemplation of divine artistry, setting out innocent and experienced views of the mystery of creation. So it is with *Huckleberry Finn* and *Fifth Business*. Each novel delineates an emerging North American society, a society struggling to realize its genuine individuality while encumbered with the trappings of another time and place. Twain has depicted a new frontier, the antebellum Southwest facing the trauma of looming civil war, as seen through the eyes of a teenager. Davies has depicted an old frontier, the world's first Dominion facing the trauma of ending a century of cultural and economic dependency,³ as seen through the eyes of a septuagenarian. To read these two novels, one after the other, is to look at two manifestations of the North American social order — one through the eyes of innocence and the other through the eyes of experience. This is the dual vision Davies suggests to us by means of Dunny's intemperate outbursts on youth.

I

The limitation that one's point of view necessarily imposes on one's perception constitutes a major theme common to both these books. From one context to another, each narrator raises the issue time and again. When Tom Sawyer reflects upon the anomaly that chunks of watermelon are included in the scraps of food being taken to Silas Phelps' locked woodshed, he deduces that the mess must be intended for a human prisoner rather than a dog, and Huck is amazed at the performance. He ponders his own perceptual failure, and disconcertedly blurts out: "It shows how a body can see and don't see at the same time."⁴ When the soldiers of Dunny's unit are gleefully amazed at his metamorphosis from the bible-reading Deacon into a Charlie Chaplin telling scurrilous personal jokes about the officers, Dunny is dumfounded by the revelation that his virtuosity came as a surprise to them. He ponders their perceptual failure, and sardonically ridicules their wonderment in voicing his own: "Their astonishment was what astonished *me*. Jesus, eh? People don't look very closely at other people, eh? Jesus!" (66) Huck, as we should expect of a self-effacing illiterate deferring to the superior discernment of an erudite friend, marvels at his own limitations; Dunny, as we should expect of an imaginative polymath disparaging the inferior discernment of some shallow acquaintances, marvels at their limitations. But both articulate an awareness of how the individual's little

³Mordecai Richler captures the idea of Canada as an old frontier in the line: "Tomorrow country then, tomorrow country now." See Mordecai Richler, *St. Urbain's Horseman* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1972), p. 5.

⁴Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958), p. 195. All subsequent page references to this novel will be given in parentheses in the text of the paper.

world can restrict his consciousness of the larger world inhabited by us all.

Notwithstanding each author's clear intent to explore lapses in perception, and notwithstanding the truism that every human must have such lapses, it is no easy task to isolate those of either Huck or Dunny. As we saw earlier, the fault that Dunny finds with Huck is his inordinate acuity, a fault (if it may be called such) that must also be found with Dunny himself. Both are extremely alert and intelligent observers, quick to isolate relevant facts and competent to draw appropriate conclusions. Huck's summary of the behaviour of the crowned heads of Europe may seem hilariously jumbled in its details; but it comes very near historical accuracy in the spirit of the regal shenanigans he discusses, and there is more than a little justice in his association of the wastrels on the raft with the authentic nobility he names: "What was the use to tell Jim these warn't real kings and dukes? It wouldn't a done no good; and besides, it was just as I said; you couldn't tell them from the real kind" (130-31). Dunny's summary of Boy Staunton's unqualified genius may seem either unwarranted or exaggerated, but that merely reveals the confines our modern infatuation with specialization has placed about our appreciation of the multifarious nature of extraordinary talent: "He was a genius — that is to say, a man who does superlatively and without obvious effort something that most people cannot do by the uttermost exertion of their abilities. He was a genius at making money, and that is as uncommon as great achievement in the arts" (136). There is also a good deal of justice in Dunny's accusation that Boy and his colleagues betrayed their genius, misconstruing to themselves and others the gift of their accomplishments, by receiving and repeating the commonplace cant that moneymaking is just hard work: "How happy they might have been if they had recognized and gloried in their talent, confronting the world as gifted egotists, comparable to painters, musicians, or sculptors! But that was not their style. They insisted on degrading their talent to the level of mere acquired knowledge and industry" (150). The difficulty in seeing Huck and Dunny as imperceptive is that they see the world all too well. This reinforces in us an unquestioning acceptance of their narratives while it conceals from us a careless acceptance of their seeming omniscience. But we can restore their humanity to them through an admission of their limitations by examining more than their perceptions of the world they assess so shrewdly; we must go on to examine the perceptions hidden away in every word they utter, the perceptions they convey of themselves.

Because Huck is so completely an innocent, he cannot recognize that he is (to use Dunny's phrase) "a little wonder." The very qualities that make him an innocent preclude any such recognition. His is the glorious sight of pure artlessness, the sight that can turn the tawdry into what it aspires to be:

It was a real bully circus. It was the splendoriest sight that ever was, when they all come riding in, two and two, a gentleman and lady, side by side, the men just in their drawers and undershirts, and no shoes nor stirrups, and resting their hands on their thighs, easy and comfortable — there must a' been twenty of them — and every lady with a lovely complexion, and perfectly beautiful, and looking just like a gang of real sure-enough queens, and dressed in clothes that cost millions of dollars, and just littered with diamonds. (124)

Huck cannot see the shabbiness that must be dominant in a marginal circus touring the backwater reaches of Arkansas, for the central quality of his innocence is its resilience, its resistance to ugly reality. Huck understands that some things are not true, some things are not just, and some things are not lovely; but, consistent with the advice of St. Paul — advice that he has not read, yet still lives with intuitively — he does not choose to think on these things. He senses that there are better things that might command his interests. Thus it is that he is diffident about his experienced plan to conceal his escape from Pap with a bogus murder and robbery; it is too easy, too straightforward, too devoid of all art to be satisfactory: "I did wish Tom Sawyer was there, I knowed he would take an interest in this kind of business, and throw in the fancy touches" (29). Thus it is that he is enthusiastic about Tom Sawyer's silly scheme to free Jim in the grand style of Dumas and Scott: it is difficult, devious, and replete with sufficient wacky ingenuity to gratify even the masters: "I see in a minute it was worth fifteen of mine, for style, and would make Jim just as free a man as mine would, and maybe get us all killed besides. So I was satisfied, and said we would waltz in on it" (195-96). Although astute enough in the detection of fraud, Huck nevertheless accepts everything that offers itself in sincerity, since he lacks the maturity to differentiate between genuine goodness and earnest error. Huck's strength is that he looks to the good; his weakness is that he is blind to incongruity. And so Twain personifies for us the fundamental traits of innocence.

Dunny's situation, as we might have anticipated, is precisely the reverse of Huck's. Because Dunny is so thoroughly a sophisticate, he cannot acknowledge that he is an old innocent.⁵ The very qualities that make him experienced prevent any such acknowledgment. His is the disciplined sight of pure artistry, the sight that will not compromise truth by permitting any distortion:

As a circus it was a pitiable affair. Everything about it stank of defeat and misery. There was no planned performance; now and then, when a sufficient crowd had assembled, a pair of gloomy acrobats did some tumbling and walked a slack wire. The Human Frog sat down on his own head, but with the air of one who took no pleasure in it. The Wild Man roared and chewed perfunctorily on a piece of raw meat to which a little fur still clung; the lecturer hinted darkly that we ought to keep our dogs indoors that night, but nobody seemed afraid. When not on view the Wild Man sat quietly, and from the motion of his jaws I judged that he was solacing himself with a quid of tobacco. (129-30)

⁵In fact, we know that Dunny is an old innocent in every sense of the word. Davies has paralleled Dunny's life with the life of St. Dunstan of Canterbury, and shows us in Dunny what sainthood means. See my article: "Miracle and Art in *Fifth Business*; Or, Who the Devil is Liselotte Vitzlipützli?", *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 9 (November, 1974), 3-16.

Dunny cannot overlook the joylessness that permeates a seedy carnival touring the rural areas of Austria, for the central quality of his experience is its blunt honesty, its insistence upon seeing things as they are. Dunny understands that good is good and evil is evil; he understands that light is light and dark is dark; and, in obedience to the warning of Isaiah, a warning that he undoubtedly read and remembers, he is not about to put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter. He gazes firmly upon distasteful fact, for he hopes to work through to some wisdom, and he wishes to convince himself that he has thrust away childish things. Thus it is that he seeks refuge in understatement about his own naive love of childhood entertainments, circuses, magic shows, music-hall performances: "Enthusiasm for magic had never wholly died in me, and I had seen the best illusionists of my time — Thurston, Goldin, Blackstone, the remarkable German who called himself Kalanag, and Harry Houdini, not long before his death" (179). Thus it is that he weaves convoluted rationalizations about his lifelong indulgence in these innocent pursuits, concealing his delight by making out of them esoteric alternatives to exclusively adult concerns: "I see that I have been so muddle-headed as to put my sexual initiation in direct conjunction with a visit to a musical show, which suggests some lack of balance perhaps. But, looking back from my present age, the two, though very different, are not so unlike in psychological weight as you might suppose. Both were wonders, strange lands revealed to me in circumstances of great excitement" (77-78). Although candid enough to deal openly with any unpleasantness, Dunny nevertheless shies away from everything that shows itself as plainly good, since he lacks the charity to differentiate between optimism and foolishness. Dunny's strength is that he looks at evil without flinching; his weakness is that he will not see joy. And so Davies personifies for us the fundamental traits of experience.

One of the most stimulating developments in Blake's "Songs" is the inference that the two contrary states of the human soul — innocence and experience — are ultimately reconcilable. Like yin and yang in the celebrated Eastern mandala, the one is continuously on the verge of the other because they are only different aspects of the same entity. It is in the tradition of the finest comedy that Huck and Dunny, in a delicately amusing fashion, demonstrate this development as well. Each stands poised for flight at an extremity of bachelorhood, one near the beginning and one near the end, eying with intermingled apprehension and desire the feminine domain that he dare not enter. Yet each has exerted considerable effort, all the strength at his command, all the resources of his time of life, to keep himself in the male preserve where he thinks himself safe. Each was driven to this position through the menaces of a smothering mother-figure, a female associated more with good order and household discipline than with parental love. Huck speaks of Miss Watson with some distaste: "Miss Watson she kept pecking at me, and it got tiresome and lonesome" (4-5). Dunny speaks of Fiona Ramsay with positive abhorrence: "the screeching fury who had pursued me around the kitchen with a whip, flogging me until she was gorged. . ." (33). Each has managed to elude the allurements of femininity by an exploitation of the traits typical of his age. Huck is in his early teens, on the brink of sexual awakening; but he fights this transformation into a new

personality, buffeted by forces he cannot assess, with an innocent affirmation of his childhood values. He urges Mary Jane, when telling her some bad news, to "just set still, and take it like a man" (157). There is nothing she is less equipped by nature to do, but Huck is far too uncomfortable with that truth to employ any other choice of words. Dunny is in his early seventies, on the brink of the tranquillity of his last years; and he hurries along this transformation into a new personality, serene beyond the forces that harried him, with an experienced repudiation of his adult affairs. He catalogues three young ladies with whom he had passing liaisons, and he congratulates himself upon the decency of his disengagement from them: "I played fair with all of them, I hope; the fact that I did not love them did not prevent me from liking them very much, and I never used a woman simply as an object in my life" (106-07). There is no hope more vain than this pious piece of self-complacency, if the indecent haste in which he cut and ran from Fiona, from Diana, and from Leola is any measure of his treatment of these later loves; but Dunny is far too uncomfortable with that truth to employ any other choice of words. The youth and the old man are thus on the same precarious perch, and Twain and Davies alike tumble their narrators off with a final irony. Twain hints to us, through Huck's sustained reverence for Mary Jane, that a girl much like her will take him; and Davies tells us, through the postcard Dunny received at the hospital and the postmark at the end of Dunny's narrative, that Liesel has taken him. The male can no more stand aloof from the female than experience can be divorced from innocence.

II

As befits the accounts of men on the run, both books are structured about that classic literary device the Homeric concept of the voyage. Huck travels the better part of the Mississippi system, from Missouri to the Old South, drifting down the river on a raft in company with the runaway slave Jim. Jim's runaway status provides an urgency to the flight from St. Petersburg, but Twain focuses our attention on Huck's travels, rather than on those of Jim, by the neat expedient of having the two miss Jim's avenue of escape up the Ohio when they slide past that route in a fog. "We talked it all over. It wouldn't do to take to the shore; we couldn't take the raft up the stream, of course" (79). Under the circumstances, there could be no talk of alternatives; the shore is suspicious and hostile, the raft is out of harm's way, and the two quickly become reconciled to their lot: "We said there warn't no home like a raft, after all. Other places do seem so cramped up and smothery, but a raft don't. You feel mighty free and easy and comfortable on a raft" (99). From the moment of this reconciliation with the raft, Jim's escape recedes slowly into the background, and we come logically to concentrate upon where Huck is going. Dunny travels the better part of the Western world, Canada, and Europe and Mexico, first as a soldier enrolled in the Canadian Army and then as a scholar engaged in research. His enlistment in the Army provides an impetus to his flight from Deptford, but

Davies focuses our attention on his scholarly excursions, rather than on those of his military service, by the neat expedient of having him mustered out as a hero after being wounded in Flanders. "I was out of it at last, and I was happy to take pleasure in security and cleanliness. . ." (76). Under the circumstances, it is reasonable that Dunny should want to return to Canada, and it is reasonable that he should later want to go back to Europe to visit the trenches where he had fought. "I went on to Antwerp, because the first object of my journey was a tour of the battlefields" (110). During his tour, he seeks the statue of the little Madonna he saw when he was wounded, but he discovers only that he has acquired a vocation in hagiology. "When the time came at last for me to go home, I knew I had found a happiness that would endure" (112). From the moment of this discovery, Dunny resolves to continue his annual scholarly expeditions, and we come logically to concentrate upon where he is going.

Throughout each book, we are constantly reminded that the narrator is a fugitive. Many studies of *Huckleberry Finn* emphasize Jim's role in the work, and rightly so, for Jim's flight from conventional bondage functions as dramatic counterpoint to Huck's flight from a much more complex range of bondage,⁶ a range in which each variant exploits and demeans the victim. Huck initially runs from the cloying stultification of the village, with its cumbersome clothes, its vexatious school, and its meddling adults — the kindly but officious Judge Thatcher, the sweet but sorrowful Widow Douglas, and the antiseptic but abrasive Miss Watson. He next runs from the brutal attention of Pap, who beats him when sober, attacks him with a knife when drunk, and locks him up in solitary confinement as a means of obtaining money. He finally runs from the grotesque repression of the entire fabric of Southern society, with its manic retention of medieval institutions that most Western nations had long ago cast off as threadbare — slavery, clan feuds, justice by violence, religion by rote. Huck's flight, taken in these terms, can itself be used to counterpoint Dunny's adventures. Those studies of *Fifth Business* now in circulation do not emphasize the fact that Dunny is a veteran traveller.⁷ This is a serious oversight, since Dunny is as much in flight as Huck, and for virtually the same reasons. Dunny is running from spiritual captivity, from the chains Blake wrote about in "London," the chains that fetter the soul, the "mind-forg'd manacles." He commences his flight by turning away from the intellectual rigidity of the village, with its complacent self-esteem, its dogmatic churches, and its narrow know-it-all intelligentsia — the pontifical Dr. McCausland, the

⁶See Henry Nash Smith, "Introduction," in Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Boston, 1958), p. xii: "Huck and Jim share a common quest, not merely because Huck is helping Jim, but because Huck too is fleeing from slavery. On occasion it is implied that the contrast between freedom and slavery is even more general, that Jim's and Huck's predicament is that of every man, and their quest a universal human undertaking."

⁷Gordon Roper notes that Dunny's journey "is at once an inner and outer one," but he is concerned with showing the novel in Jungian terms, and does not attempt to go beyond the psychological aspect of the work. See Gordon Roper, "Robertson Davies' *Fifth Business*, and 'That Old Fantastical Duke of Dark Corners, C. G. Jung,'" *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, 1, No. 1 (Winter 1972), 33-39.

emotional Rev. Dempster, the inflexible M^{rs}. Ramsay. "... One of the things it conspicuously lacked was an aesthetic sense; we were all too much the descendants of hard-bitten pioneers to wish for or encourage any such thing, and we gave hard names to qualities that, in a more sophisticated society, might have had value" (23-24). He continues his flight in earnest once he enlists in the Army to escape his mother, whose unrestrained and incessant demands for emotional, spiritual, and mental subservience had threatened to swallow him whole: "I knew she had eaten my father, and I was glad I did not have to fight any longer to keep her from eating me" (74). He thereby commits himself to a half-century of running away, dodging about all the pitfalls that two societies — Imperial and provincial — have placed in his path. Running from a bombardment at Passchendaele, he blunders into an enemy machine-gun nest and silences it; running from the possibility of an enemy relief-party, he flounders about between the lines until he is hit and loses consciousness, lapsing into a blissful coma to awaken six months later a maimed hero in an English hospital. The event — with its controlled fear, accidental casualties, incidental heroism, enigmatic mishaps, and concluding peace — is symbolic of the remainder of Dunny's life. He finds himself running from a regular parade of beauties: Diana, Leola, and the triad of casual loves — Agnes Day, Gloria Mundy and Libby Doe. Glimpsing in these women something of the mother who would have devoured him, with the declaration "I had no intention of being anybody's own dear laddie, ever again" (80), he is off. He finds himself running from the dreary secularism of his country and the staid routine of his teaching. Glimpsing in his surroundings the parochialism of Deptford magnified, with the rhetorical question "You don't expect me to pay attention to the opinion of numskulls" (177), he is off. His quest is that of Huck before him: the quest for personal freedom. "I wanted my life to be my own" (80).

The most salient feature of flight is its indifference to direction. The fugitive runs from oppression, and any path that will accommodate him is perfectly acceptable; hence, neither Huck nor Dunny frets overmuch about where he is going. Huck knows that moving South past the Ohio means the end of Jim's chance for liberty: "If he missed it he'd be in the slave country again and no more show for freedom" (74). Moreover, Huck knows that moving South past the Ohio means danger and discomfort for him; the Old South had enmeshed him in the ghastly tangles of the feud, and this had sickened him: "I wished I hadn't ever come ashore that night, to see such things" (97-98). But he cannot stay on the raft without moving South, and he feels impelled to cling to the immediate haven of the raft; and, in this, despite every other consideration, he is supported by Jim: "I was powerful glad to get away from the feuds, and so was Jim to get away from the swamp" (99). Let the future bring what it will, so long as the present is secure; sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof. The sentiment might be considered naive, but is echoed by Dunny out of the profundity of his experience. Dunny knows that he is drifting when he completes his education, because he settles upon teaching solely as a convenient interim measure: "When I was finished at the university, duly ticketed as an M.A. in history, I still wanted time to find my way, and like many a man in my case I

took to schoolmastering" (105). Moreover, even when he comes to an acceptance of his teaching career, Dunny knows that his dedication to hagiology is not a practical course. On occasion, he chides himself for his aimless ways: "Dunstan Ramsay, what on earth are you doing here, and where do you think this is leading? You are now thirty-four, without wife or child, and no better plan than your own whim. . . ." Though he tells himself to "go to Harvard and get . . . a Ph.D., and try for a job in a university, and be intellectually respectable" (151), he cannot do so without abandoning hagiology. He feels impelled to cling to the enduring sanctuary of hagiology; and, in this, despite every other consideration, he is supported by Destiny: "My path was certainly an odd one for a Deptford lad, raised as a Protestant, but fate had pushed me in this direction so firmly that to resist would be a dangerous defiance. For I was, as you have already guessed, a collaborator with Destiny. . ." (152). Anywhere suits the fugitive, just as long as the intolerable is left behind. Huck says it best in the opening lines of his story: "All I wanted was to go somewheres; all I wanted was a change, I warn't particular" (4).

This lack of direction is consistently held before us, we should not be unattentive to the atypical departure that occurs at the conclusion of each work. For the first time, each narrator tell us that he now has a direction of his own,* a direction indicated to him by a close friend and intimate advisor. Tom Sawyer invites Huck and Jim to join him "over in the Territory," offering as a temptation that they will "go for howling adventures amongst the Injuns" (244); and Liselotte Vitzlipützli invites Dunny to "come to Switzerland and join the Basso and the Brazen Head," offering as a temptation that "we shall have some high old times before the Five make an end of us all" (237-38). Each narrator has adequate wit to seize upon the idea, seeing immediately that the proposed direction uniquely meets his needs. Huck, whose experience is as yet masked by his innocence, looks to the young and unformed West, the Free Territory unhampered by civilization, seeking space in which he may grow. He is still naive enough to specify his intention baldly before he goes: "I reckon I got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me and I can't stand it. I been there before" (238). Dunny, whose innocence is as yet masked by his experience, looks to the old and molded East, the cultured Europe graced by civilization, seeking wisdom in which he may grow. He is still experienced enough to convey his intention cryptically after he arrives: "*Sankt Gallen, 1970*" (238). Each narrator firmly tells his reader that he has brought his narrative to its end, implying therefore that the new departure is to him a successful point of arrival. Huck's statement is aptly verbose: "There ain't nothing more to write about, and I

*Henry Nash Smith does not assign any special significance to the conclusion of *Huckleberry Finn*. He argues that Huck is "diminished" in the evasion sequence by reverting to an acceptance of Tom Sawyer's leadership, and he concludes that the "diminished" Huck is incapable of the maturity necessary to formulate an adult direction. (See Smith, pp. xxi-ii.) This argument rests on the assumption that the states of innocence and experience are mutually exclusive and cannot coexist in the same human soul, an assumption that I cannot consider tenable.

am rotten glad of it, because if I'd knowed what a trouble it was to make a book I wouldn't a tackled it and ain't agoing to no more" (245). Dunny's statement is aptly succinct: "And that, Headmaster, is all I have to tell you" (238). Because physical direction may legitimately be taken as a tangible form of spiritual direction, we may assume that both narrators have come at last to a satisfactory destination.

III

As each author moves his narrator through his own region of North America, he intentionally sketches the society of that region in an ambivalent manner. On the surface, but only on the surface, he creates the impression of a North America that is (in the words with which Dunny dismissed the hamlet of Bowles Corners) "rustic beyond redemption" (18). We are exposed to village life on the Mississippi and village life in Southwestern Ontario. And the village populace seems hopelessly oblivious to glaring social deficiencies. Village sentiment is mawkish and maudlin. Any funeral circumstance could excite the ghoulish artistry of the admired Emmeline Grangerford, who would rather write poetry to the tranquil and romantic dead than to the turbulent and robust living: "She warn't particular, she could write about anything you choose to give her to write about, just so long as it was sadful. Every time a man died, or a woman died, or a child died, she would be on hand with her 'tribute' before he was cold" (88). Leola Cruikshank's engagement to the village rich boy stirs the sloppy artistry of the admired Milo Papple, who would rather babble on about the village beauty's ostentatious ardour than keep silent about her sordid self-interest: ". . . It was easy seen where Leola had give her heart. That's what her old lady used to say. 'Leola's give her heart,' she'd say. Ben Cruikshank wasn't strong on Perse to begin with, but the old lady shut him up" (94). Village entertainment is rowdy and repulsive. Loafers in Bricksville go to the dogs for their amusement, rejoicing in the torment they bring to a pack of stray mongrels: "There couldn't anything wake them up all over, and make them happy all over, like a dog-fight — unless it might be putting turpentine on a stray dog and setting fire to him, or tying a tin pan to his tail and see him run himself to death" (118-19). Idlers in Deptford prefer to harass the family of a pathetic madwoman apprehended *in flagrante delicto* with a tramp, rejoicing especially in the torment they bring to her husband, a Baptist parson forced out of his ministry by the scandal: "At midnight a gang with blackened faces beat pans and tooted horns outside the cottage for half an hour, and somebody threw a lighted broom on the roof, but it was a damp night and no harm was done. Cece's voice was heard half over the town, shouting, 'Come on out, Mary! We want it!'" (46) Worst of all, village opinion is partial and prejudiced. Huck and Aunt Sally chatter on about the outcome of a putative explosion aboard a steamboat, quite ignorant of how their exchange discloses the inhuman values of a slaveholding world:

"Good gracious! Anybody hurt?"

"No'm. Killed a nigger."

"Well, it's lucky; because sometimes people do get hurt. Two years ago last Christmas, your uncle Silas was coming up from Newreans on the old *Lally Rook*, and she blowed out a cylinder-head and crippled a man. And I think he died afterwards. He was a Baptist." (185)

Dr. McCausland lectures Dunny on the hazards of an active imagination, quite ignorant of how his harangue discloses the constricted values of a materialistic world:

Dr. McCausland found a chance to have what he called 'a word' with me, the gist of which was that I might become queer if I did not attempt to balance my theoretical knowledge with the kind of common sense that could be learned from — well, for instance, from himself. He hinted that I might become like Elbert Hubbard if I continued in my present course. Elbert Hubbard was a notoriously queer American who thought that work could be a pleasure. (57)

Seen strictly in this light, North America is not lovely.⁹

However, neither author will allow us to see North America strictly in this light. Behind the unfinished frontier, there remains the parent civilization from which it was cloned, the generative source of so many lugubrious social elements that the New World has reduced to absurdity. Twain contrives for us a stern denunciation of the village rabble, placing it in the mouth of Colonel Sherburn, who contemptuously hectors a lynch mob that he is coolly holding at bay:

The idea of *you* lynching anybody! It's amusing. The idea of you thinking you had pluck enough to lynch a *man*! Because you're brave enough to tar and feather poor friendless cast-out women that come along here, did that make you think you had grit enough to lay your hands on a *man*? Why, a *man's* safe in the hands of ten thousand of your kind — as long as it's daytime and you're not behind him. (123)

This splendid defiance recalls the chivalry of the European novels, but Twain has most eloquently deprived the speech of all dignity beforehand with the incident that underlies the Colonel's haughty stand. Sherburn must confront the ragged cowards of the mob, riff-raff though they might be, because they had presumed to pursue him after he cold-bloodedly shot an unarmed old drunk dead in the street — right before the terrified eyes of the drunk's gentle young daughter. "They pulled his daughter away from him, screaming and crying, and took her off. She was about sixteen, and very sweet and gentle-looking, but awfully pale and scared" (121). Sherburn is a noble man, no doubt about that. He had pledged his word to kill the

⁹For a possibly influential view of an America "rustic beyond redemption," we could go to the American passages of Dickens' novel *Martin Chuzzlewit*.

drunk, if the drunk had not ceased his sodden stupidity by one o'clock; and he was true to his word at the appointed hour, without fear, without remorse, without pity. What else could a noble man do? Twain damns the man and his antique callous code together, spurning them both as hideous anachronisms, rejecting them in the anguished fear of the daughter and the impotent sympathy of Huck's report.¹⁰ Nor is Davies any more tolerant of ancient social malignancies that seek to flourish again in the New World. He contrives for us a bizarre exhibition of the violence latent in the village population, using for the purpose Dunny's agonized response to the hanging and burning of Kaiser Wilhelm in effigy, a ceremony that evolves as the grand finale to Deptford's version of a Roman Triumph:

And the people in the crowd, as I looked at them, were hardly recognizable as the earnest citizens who, not half an hour ago, had been so biddable under the spell of patriotic oratory, so responsive to *Canadian Born*, so touched by the romantic triangle of Leola, and Percy, and myself. Here they were, in this murky, fiery light, happily acquiescent in a symbolic act of cruelty and hatred. As the only person there, I suppose, who had any idea of what a really bad burn was like, I watched them with a dismay that mounted towards horror, for these were my own people. (92)

The wild scene — with the flaming effigy, the blood lust of the crowd intent upon ferocity, and the maddening screams emitted by Myron Papple "artist to his fingertips" as the Kaiser's voice — is no less than a rural restaging of the savage panoply of Imperial Triumphs since the degenerate days of Rome. Who, then, is the most barbaric? Davies gives an edge to the question by having Dunny precede this vignette with an equally disconcerting one of Imperial London's celebration of the Allied Triumph: "I saw some of the excitement and a few things that shocked me; people, having been delivered from destruction, became horribly destructive themselves; people, having been delivered from license and riot, pawed and mauled and shouted dirty phrases in the street" (77). These people were indulging in pagan rites, harsh rituals pleasing only to the grim old gods of war. Davies condemns the crowds and their excesses together, spurning them all as appalling anachronisms, rejecting them in the contortions of peaceful citizens and the revulsion of Dunny's report.

The fact is that each author regards the unwholesome decadence of the parent civilization to be as great a peril as the anarchical barbarism of the frontier. Civilization caresses with its seductions, but it also corrupts, and each narrator learns this, somewhat to his sorrow. Huck is almost swept away by the steely brilliance of the Grangerfords, while Dunny is almost overwhelmed by the satiny elegance of the Marfleets. The bewildered wayfarer soon condones the inauspicious welcome extended to him by the aristocracy, for hospitality is the established rule with the upper classes, and

¹⁰Henry Nash Smith insists that Sherburn speaks for Twain in this speech, but he does not discuss the relationship between the speech and its context. See Smith, p. xxvi.

the guest is virtually compelled to become a member of the family. After he recovers from being greeted with loaded firearms, Huck relates how the Grangerfords took him in: "They said I could have a home there as long as I wanted it" (84). After he recovers from being greeted with light flippancy, Dunny relates how Diana Marfleet took him in: "Gradually it broke in upon me that Diana had marked me for her own" (75). Rapidly the resplendent living of the aristocracy captivates the poor wayfarer. Huck sings the praises of the sociable disposition of the Grangerfords: "Sometimes a stack of people would come there, horseback, from ten or fifteen mile around, and stay five or six days, and have such junketings round about and on the river, and dances and picnics in the woods, daytimes, and balls at the house, nights. These people was mostly kinfolks of the family" (90). Dunny rhapsodizes over the receptive disposition of the Marfleets: "How my spirit expanded in the home of the Marfleets! To a man who had been where I had been it was glorious" (76). Nevertheless, the wayfarer is not distracted that he fails to notice minor quirks that his refined hosts have long been conditioned to accept as normal. Huck remarks upon the penchant the Grangerford males have for guns: "Next Sunday we all went to church, about three mile, everybody a-horseback. The men took their guns along, so did Buck, and kept them between their knees or stood them handy against the wall" (93). Dunny remarks upon the fondness the Marfleet females have for intrigue: "It was on the night of November 12, in a house in Eaton Square belonging to one of her De Blaquiere aunts, that I first slept with Diana, the aunt giving her assent by silence and discreet absence. . . ." (77). These minor quirks are portents placed in the text by the author: they are straws in the wind that is mounting in intensity to whirl the narrator back where he belongs. Huck's gallant compliance with Sophia's furtive request that he steal to the church to bring home her Testament draws him into the catastrophe of the feud. With his aid, Sophia possesses the details of her assignation with Harney Shepherdson, and when the lovers elope across the river to the safety of the West, they leave their enraged and antagonistic clans to rush together in a cataclysmic clash. While the bloody work is being done, Huck watches helplessly, coming to the stark realization that the militant pageantry of the Grangerfords means death to his friends: "The boys jumped for the river — both of them hurt — and as they swum down the current the men run along the bank shooting at them and singing out, 'Kill them, kill them!'" (97) Dunny's gallant compliance with Diana's motherly compulsion to figure prominently in his rebirth draws him into the catastrophe of a quasi-incestuous romance. With his aid, Diana possesses the one with whom she can mime Jocasta, and when she nurses the crippled youth she intends to have as a lover, she subconsciously derives pleasure from the handicaps that reduce him to her surrogate child. While she feeds him, washes him, handles his bedpan, teaches him to walk, and instructs him in the nuances of polite intercourse, Dunny participates helplessly, coming to the eerie realization that the tender courtesy of the Marfleets means the end of his independence: ". . . What was wrong between Diana and me was that she was too much a mother to me, and as I had had one mother, and lost her, I was not in a hurry to acquire another — not

even a young and beautiful one with whom I could play Oedipus to both our hearts' content" (80). In the brief lull following the storm of such a realization, there is nothing left for the narrator to do but catch his breath, say goodbye to all that, and get out.

The repudiation of the atrophied elements of civilization becomes most explicit at the conclusion of each novel through a violent stroke of adversity that fells the major character who strains diligently to give those elements a revival. Tom Sawyer is shot in the leg, badly wounded by a bullet from the gun of an irate farmer, a would-be defender of slavery unwittingly doing his bit in the daft drama crafted by Tom himself. Boy Staunton is maneuvered into death by suicide, seated stiffly at the wheel of his Cadillac convertible as it hurtles into Toronto harbour, clamping shut in his mouth the pinkish stone so sadly illustrative of his heartless indifference to others. Both Tom and Boy finish as they do because they were what they had chosen to be: relics of a mode of existence that no longer has any relevance. Scions of the village gentry, they expend themselves in a frenzy of fantasy, attempting to reconstruct in the New World a feudal realm that none but themselves could acknowledge. We do not tend to take Tom seriously: after all, he is only a lad, and his actions appear quite innocent. But the basis of his behaviour is a very adult yearning for respectability, a yearning that materializes in his slavish adoration of the social chimera he has fabricated out of the fabulous tomes he has read. "I've seen it in books; and so of course that's what we've got to do" (9). Thus runs his unceasing refrain while he labours to impose his will on those about him. The result of his labour is to make the chimera live for a moment, unleashing a monster upon his friends; for, in his hands, much to his gratification, the fable becomes a thing that can kill. "Then there was a rush, and a *bang, bang, bang!* and the bullets fairly whizzed around us!" (229) On the other hand, however, we tend to take Boy seriously indeed: he is truly a man, and his actions appear quite experienced. But the basis of his behaviour is a very childish tendency to conform, a tendency that materializes in his servile emulation of the fabulous tales repeated about the prince who was briefly to be Edward VIII. "It was characteristic of Boy throughout his life that he was always the quintessence of something that somebody else had recognized and defined" (103). By living out the princely saga to the letter, right to the detail of a politically inadvisable marriage to a divorcée, Boy brings his fate down upon himself. Denyse Hornick awakens in him the implausible ambition of obtaining the honorary office of Lieutenant-Governor of Ontario and restoring to that outmoded rank the real prerogative of political power. "Boy thought the idea a brilliant one. He had never lost his taste for matters connected with the Crown; he had no doubt of his ability to fill a ceremonial post with distinction, and even to give it larger dimensions" (210). Close on the eve of taking up the regalia of royalty, he is persuaded for a moment to abdicate in favour of his innermost desire; and with (literally, in this case, as well as figuratively) his heart in his mouth, darkly faithful to the fable, instead of ascending, he plunges to the depths. The stone, like the bullet, is a hard fact smashing home to a dangerously Quixotic manipulator of people and events.

In the final reckoning, through the sensitive humanity of the narrators themselves, both novels approach an affirmation of life in the New World. Huck is contrasted with Tom; Dunny is contrasted with Boy. They represent the New freely striving for expression, just as their more stereotyped friends represent the Old petulantly insisting upon repetition. This contrast, this disparity between the narrator and his foil, is accepted — and even stressed — by each character. Tom Sawyer condescends to advise Huck about attaining the social status a minion should have to develop any stature in a feudal spectacle: "He hunted me up and said he was going to start a band of robbers, and I might join if I would go back to the widow and be respectable" (4). His solicitude is in vain, for Huck is blessed by an inability to shape himself into a copy of Tom Sawyer, and the rift remains between them. At the end of the novel, Huck confesses "I'm low down" (189), a repetition of his original assessment of himself as "so ignorant and so kind of low-down and ornery" (12). At the same time, in his opinion, Tom continues to be a paragon: the time is not yet that he can think otherwise. "Here was a boy that was respectable and well brung up; and had a character to lose. . . ." (196). Similarly, Boy Staunton condescends to advise Dunny about attaining the social status a dependent should have to possess any presence in a millionaire's retinue: "He urged me to get out of schoolmastering (while praising it as a fine profession) and make something of myself" (116). His solicitude is in vain, for Dunny has no wish to become another small success in the ring of wealthy folk around his "lifelong friend and enemy" (9), and the rift remains between them. "I would not have had their cast of mind in order to get their money, however, much as I liked money" (150). This contrast persists because Tom and Boy are sufficiently egotistical to believe that they can of themselves alter the environment that nurtured them, whereas Huck and Dunny are sensible enough to attempt to find themselves within that environment. Huck consistently dwells upon the *idée fixe* of the refuge of his open frontier world: "I guessed I wouldn't stay in one place, but just tramp right across the country, mostly night times, and hunt and fish to keep alive, and get so far away that the old man nor the widow couldn't ever find me any more" (23). Dunny elects to come back to the roots of his quaint frontier world, for he concedes that those roots will always be with him: "Any new life must include Deptford. There was to be no release by muffling the past" (122). Hence, if Tom and Boy can be deemed the parent civilization mocked, then Huck and Dunny can be deemed the frontier exalted. Both narrators are distinguished in having the independence to surmount inhumanity when their so-called social superiors, who should know better, succumb to it. Once Mary Jane learns of the perfidy of the King and the Duke, she reacts by proposing a savage punishment for them: "We'll have them tarred and feathered, and flung in the river!" (157) But Huck chances to see this punishment carried out, and he turns away from the ugly mummery in pity and sorrow: "I was sorry for them poor pitiful rascals, it seemed like I couldn't ever feel any hardness against them any more in the world. It was a dreadful thing to see. Human beings *can* be awful cruel to one another" (194). Once the ladies of Deptford learn why Mary Dempster yielded to the tramp, they unanimously react by

demanding that the demented victim should be ostracized and her husband should forfeit his ministry. "Not that any of the women spoke; they had done their speaking before church, and their husbands knew the price of peace" (44). But Dunny cannot help seeing these demands carried out, and he is moved to sympathetic defiance, visiting the unfortunate woman in secret. "I began this deceitful line of conduct — for my mother would have been furious, and I thought anybody who had seen me going there would have spread the word — hoping I could do something for Mrs. Dempster" (47). From this humane deportment, we can conclude that there is hope for the narrators — and, by extension, hope for the New World that they consider their own. Each novel therefore intimates that the West, in spite of its crudities, does have its merits and can make its contributions to the spiritual heritage of the race.

IV

The optimistic tenor of both *Huckleberry Finn* and *Fifth Business* becomes all the more remarkable when we stop to enumerate the horrors we encounter in each work. There is the evil of physical deformities, of hereditary defect and mutilation inflicted by man: the harelip of Joanna Wilkes and the buckshot wounds and bowie-knife scars of the Grangerford men; the apish visage of Liselotte Vitzlipützli and the crisped chest and truncated thigh of Dunstan Ramsay. There is the evil of mental infirmity, either latent and subdued or manifest and frantic: the cracked morbidity of Emmaline Grangerford, with her macabre art fixed on death and decay; the deranged flutterings in the street of the old Athelstan woman, with her melancholy shout, "Christian men, come and help me!" There is the evil of child abuse, hapless juveniles suffering at the hands of dissolutes: Huck thrashed and menaced by Pap, who is crazed with drink and driven by avarice; Paul Dempster sodomized and threatened by Willard the Geek, who is stoned on morphia and maddened by lust. Each work almost seems to be, in essence, a positive catalogue of calamity. *Huckleberry Finn* brings us into contact with slavery through the separation of Jim from his family, robbery through the greed of the gang on the wrecked steamer *Walter Scott*, smallpox through Huck's ruse to save Jim from the river patrol, feuding through the pride of the Grangerfords and the Shepherdsons, hypocrisy and fraud through the rapacity of the King and the Duke, mob violence through the volatility of the Southern whites, and unsolved murder through the unlamented demise of Pap. *Fifth Business* brings us into contact with war through Dunny's service on the Western Front, influenza through the decimation of Deptford in the epidemic of 1917, marital infidelity and other forms of psychological cruelty through Boy's energetic selfishness, fraud and suicide through the depredations and cowardice of Orpheus Wettenhall, hypocrisy through the inventiveness of a series of misplaced clerics ranging from the establishment Canon/Archdeacon/Bishop Arthur Woodiwiss to the nonconformist Reverend George Maldon Leadbeater, and unsolved suicide-murder through the mysterious and

much-scrutinized death of Boy. Yet the total impact is exhilarating rather than depressing, for these novels are great comedies, in the exact sense that Dante used the word.

Robertson Davies interprets this phenomenon, the great comedy in which horror runs rife, with considerable acumen and authority in his volume of criticism *A Voice From the Attic*. Writing about the mutation in artistry that comes as a master of humour attains full maturity, he comments that "greater artists seem, if they are lucky, to approach and pass a climacteric in middle life which leaves them changed for the better, though it rarely leaves them humorists pure and simple."¹¹ He proposes as exemplars of artists whose work became richer and more mellow under the influence of this benevolent "humorist's climacteric" Mark Twain and Charles Dickens:

The Mark Twain who wrote *The Innocents Abroad* at thirty-four was not the man who wrote *Huckleberry Finn* at forty-nine. Nor was the Dickens who astonished the English-speaking world with *Pickwick* at twenty-four the same Dickens who turned the corner with *Bleak House*, written when he was forty, and was in the main stream of his later development at forty-eight, when he wrote *Great Expectations*.¹²

This "humorist's climacteric" induces the artist to use to advantage the existence of evil as well as the existence of laughter, engrafting the stern shoots of tragedy onto the gnarled trunk of comedy. The ensuing fruit is sharper but more succulent, permitting the reader to savour more of the flavours that life allows. "The comedy of a man past that climacteric," Davies claims, "brings humor to its fullest ripening."

A sense of tragedy, a sense of the evanescence and dreamlike quality of life, and a sense of the imminence of death may all be found in the work of young men, though not often in their works of humor; but in the comedy of older men these things are to be heard, not aggressively, but as a continuing pedal point, supporting the other harmony, whatever it may be.¹³

When we read *Fifth Business*, we can see that Davies himself has undergone this climacteric, for the novel is as far removed from *Tempest Tost* as *Huckleberry Finn* is from *The Innocents Abroad*. The horrors utilized by Davies and Twain in their respective masterpieces remind us that there is much that is vile at loose in our world, but these horrors are rendered as malevolent shadows cast in the flickerings of laughter's fire, reminding us that man's fundamental defense against the dark is the warmth of merriment and hope. This, then, is the humour of the first order of comedy — the comedy of Dante, of Dickens, of Twain, and, yes, of Davies as well.

¹¹Robertson Davies, *A Voice From the Attic* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1972), p. 225.

¹²Davies, *Voice*, p. 227.

¹³Davies, *Voice*, p. 230.

Having followed Davies to this extent, we should not let him lose us when he tells us that great comedy involves "humor of a different nature."¹⁴ The difference goes beyond a trifling interjection of horror into humour, a mere juggling act whisking one emotional extreme in and about another. The difference is precisely that the touches of tragedy become integral parts of the comic whole, reinforcing the totality and contributing to the stability of the finished work. The design of the finest art is such that every piece furthers the purpose of the structure, and the purpose of the finest comedy is to conduct the reader to what Dante termed a "longed for, fortunate, and pleasing" finale.¹⁵ This is why the horrors of *Huckleberry Finn* and *Fifth Business* do not depress: evil in themselves, they still advance the movement of the novel, directing the central character to a suitably auspicious concluding situation. Take, for instance, the physical deformities that disfigure certain of the female characters. This is neither gratuitous bad taste on the part of the author¹⁶ nor heavy-handed realism flung out at random. It reveals to the narrator, and to the reader, a nasty cut of personal misfortune; and it cautions the narrator, and the reader, to look more compassionately into the many guises of beauty. When Huck sees Joanna's harelip, he at first notes only her ugliness, a liability that he quickly links in his mind to her old-maidish attitudes and her shrewish questions. He drops into a conversation with her, once almost addressing her as "Hare-lip," and preens himself on the whoppers he spreads out in display before her. "I see I was out of the woods again, and so I was comfortable and glad" (145). But Mary Jane and Susan overhear Joanna forthrightly state her reservations concerning his veracity. They scold her for disregarding her duty to a guest, and she as forthrightly apologizes, winning Huck's esteem by the grace of her humility and leaving him abashed by the unworthiness of his lies. "She done it beautiful. She done it so beautiful it was good to hear; and I wished I could tell her a thousand lies, so she could do it again" (147). When Dunny sees Liesl's bony face and jutting jaw, he at first notes only her hideousness, a liability that he quickly links in his mind to her devious habit of worming out confidences and her voracious sexual appetite. He accidentally comes upon her in a lesbian's embrace with the gorgeous Faustina, and he is reduced to bitterness by this shattering setback to his schoolboy's dream of loving Faustina himself: "I had never known such a collapse of the spirit even in the worst of the war. And this time there was no little Madonna to offer me courage or ease me into oblivion" (197). But in one of the most astounding role reversals of this astounding book, Liesl takes it upon herself to supplant the Little Madonna, and she starts up out of the gloom in the small black hours to console Dunny as best she may. After trading insults in a debate and reverting to fisticuffs in a brawl, Liesl wins Dunny's esteem by her submission to his resistance, and the two talk for hours until they make love and fall peacefully asleep. "With such a gargoye! And yet never have I

¹⁴Davies, *Voice*, p. 225.

¹⁵Letter to Can Grande della Scala, as translated in Thomas Caldecot Chubb, *Dante and His World* (Boston, 1966), p. 713.

¹⁶Henry Nash Smith regards Joanna Wilks' harelip as an "effort to make comedy" and an "undeniable lapse in taste." See Smith, p. v.

known such deep delight or such an aftermath of healing tenderness!" (203) This integration of horror with humour is a distinctive technique in each novel: the evil is there, but it does not taint the narrator, the central character whose pilgrimage we vicariously share, for he progresses towards strength through the very agency of getting himself beyond that evil.

Just as the pall of evil becomes less oppressive in great comedy, so the gossamer of levity becomes more substantial there. The mark of the finest weave of humour is that it interlaces significance with amusement. Mirth is never the sole response to this humour: once it commences by eliciting laughter, it continues by eliciting reflection. A marvellous specimen of the comic art is Huck's deadpan little anecdote about how the Duke taught the King his version of Hamlet's soliloquy. We smile at Huck's awed reverence: "all through his speech he howled, and spread around, and swelled up his chest, and just knocked the spots out of any acting ever I see before" (115). We chuckle over the pastiche of Shakespearean tags: "But soft you, the fair Ophelia: / Ope not thy ponderous and marble jaws. / But get thee to a nunnery — go!" (116) Huck's problem is that he does not recognize bad acting when he sees it. He has been brainwashed into associating turgid rant and sonorous obscurity with a spectacular performance, and it is this that determines his reaction. Obviously, the anecdote is a deft send-up of an innocent gulled by the cult of Shakespearean sensibility, a send-up that has even greater meaning in our era of drama grants and Stratford festivals. However, the jest has an additional dimension, one we may catch sight of as we discover that the Duke's soliloquy exceeds garbled nonsense by having a nutty coherence all of its own:

But that the fear of something after death
Murders the innocent sleep,
Great nature's second course,
And makes us rather sling the arrows of outrageous fortune
Than fly to others that we know not of. (115)

To quote Polonius, "though this be madness, yet there is method in 't." Insofar as it has any sense at all, the Duke's soliloquy derides those flamboyant philosophical fulminations that can sweep imaginative fools into difficulties. For people like these, bad actors like the Duke and the King (and, in another setting, Tom Sawyer to boot), to "lose the name of action" is verily "a consummation devoutly to be wished" (116), and Huck is wise to remember these words, considering the company he keeps. Another marvellous specimen of this rare art is Dunny's droll little anecdote about how he worked in conjunction with Father Blazon to hold a railway carriage for themselves. We grin at the picture of Father Blazon strategically stationed by the open carriage window, repelling any would-be boarders with verbal darts from Catholic liturgy. "He beckoned me inside and went on with his task, which was to read aloud from his breviary, keeping the window open the while, so that passers-by would hear him" (155-56). We chortle at the thought of Dunny joining him in raucous prayer, as incredible a brace of devout birds as ever roosted together, a crippled ex-soldier and a

dishevelled and decrepit old Jesuit, crowing aloud their orisons with a vehemence that inspires their fellow voyagers to a few invocations of their own:

"Give me a hand with a Paternoster," he said and began to roar the Lord's Prayer in Latin as loud as he could. I joined in, equally loud, and we followed with a few rousing Aves and Agnus Deis. By dint of this pious uproar we kept the carriage for ourselves. People would come to the door, decide that they could not stand such company, and pass on, muttering. (156)

However, when Father Blazon roguishly comments, "Strange how reluctant travellers are to join in devotions that might — who can say? — avert some terrible accident," the jape acquires much broader proportions. For Blazon is sincerely a priest and Dunny is sincerely a man of spiritual inclinations, and they are only bending a modern apathy for religion to their own profit. Now, then, who are the clowns in the anecdote? To quote Dr. Johnson on Christopher Smart's alleged eccentricity of falling to his knees in the street and reciting his prayers, "although, rationally speaking, it is greater madness not to pray at all than to pray as Smart did, I am afraid there are so many who do not pray that their understanding is not called in question."¹⁷ Humour of such scope goes so far past the commentator's modest repertoire of skills that he should be forgiven his small lapses in venting his veneration. As Dunny's military associates would have it: "Eh? Jesus!"

V

Many of the animadversions directed against these two superb novels are not much more than failures to appraise the complexity and brilliance of the interplay between apparently disharmonious components. Henry Nash Smith, writing in his introduction to the Riverside edition of *Huckleberry Finn*, laments the presence of "evident defects" in "a literary masterpiece." To him, the most glaring of these defects is the last section of the novel, the section in which Tom Sawyer engineers the evasion of Jim. As far as Smith can see, "Twain seems to be burlesquing his own plot." He declares that "Huck's efforts to help Jim escape, involving real danger and anguished inner conflict with the boy's conscience, give way to the elaborate foolishness of Tom Sawyer's schemes for conducting an Evasion according to rules he has deduced from *The Count of Monte Cristo* and other melodramatic works of fiction."¹⁸ W. F. Hall, in a review of *Fifth Business* for *Canadian Literature*, deplores a "major weakness" in a promising novel that has the "strengths" of "isolated comic scenes." To him, this weakness lies in "the patterns of incident and action," and is most evident in the way Paul Dempster pops up as a magician to entertain Dunny in Austria, Mexico, and Canada. As far as Hall can see, this sort of coincidence is totally unbelievable. He intones solemnly: "If the two levels of reality — the real and marvellous — are seen as two, and they are so seen by Ramsey [sic] (and,

¹⁷James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, LL.D. (London, 1907), I, 246.

¹⁸Smith, pp. v-vi.

one imagines, by most people most of the time), then, just as clearly, these coincidences, in terms of experience as 'real', appear arbitrary and unconvincing."¹⁹

The evasion sequence of *Huckleberry Finn* is Twain's most accomplished assault on the antiquated militarism he loathed his full lifetime. Shortly before, in a furious attack on the medievalism of Sir Walter Scott, he had marshalled legions of words against this bastion of backwardness. Scott's regression "sets the world in love with dreams and phantoms; with decayed and swinish forms of religion; with decayed and degraded systems of government; with the sillinesses and emptinesses, sham grandeurs, sham gauds, and sham chivalries of a brainless and worthless long-vanished society." Twain was deadly serious in this business: respect for the feudal era was respect for armed oppression, for spiritual poverty, for enslavement of the bodies of some and enslavement of the minds of all. By writing with admiration of a dark and bloody past, Scott "did measureless harm; more real and lasting harm, perhaps, than any other individual that ever wrote." Twain even goes so far as to blame Scott for the havoc of the American Civil War: "Sir Walter had so large a hand in making Southern character, as it existed before the war, that he is in great measure responsible for the war."²⁰ Here, at the conclusion of his best composition, Twain again deploys his forces in the same battle, this time to illustrate for us in action precisely what he means. But now he uses the acid of satire to crumble what had previously resisted his bombast; and, in a triumphant breakthrough, his prose overruns the obstacle. Tom Sawyer's game would be child's play, at the very worst slightly ridiculous, were it not for the incendiarism of Scott and the other authors of his ilk. The imagination of every white Southerner residing on the border of "bleeding Kansas" is so inflamed by the conceit of defending a chivalrous heritage, so weirdly attuned to Tom's histrionic machinations, that the boy has no trouble incorporating real men with real guns into his skit. The hilarious consternation of the bewildered farmers and their wives, incredulously exclaiming over what they found in the vacant woodshed, is a judgment out of their own mouths on themselves and their mad society: "He's plumb crazy, s'I; it's what I says in the first place, it's what I says in the middle, 'n' it's what I says last 'n' all the time — the nigger's crazy — crazy's Nebokoodneezer, s'I" (233). He's crazy? The poor folk simply do not recognize the parody of all that they cherish — slavery, injustice and militancy — all that they will arm for and fight to retain. The near-tragic end of the game, with Tom's senseless wound and Jim's heroic surrender, is a bitterly ironic foreshadowing of what will soon come out of civil war: the tinder of imagination and courage, sparked by the codes and institutions of a primitive age, will set the flames of destruction blazing clear across the continent. Twain wryly underscores the message with the dry dialogue between Huck and the doctor he had gone to fetch for Tom. Huck cobbles up a yarn for the doctor on the spur of the moment, telling him that his brother shot himself in the leg when he kicked a gun during the course of a nightmare:

¹⁹W. F. Hall, "The Real and the Marvellous," *Canadian Literature*, No. 49 (Summer 1971), pp. 80-81.

²⁰Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi* (New York, 1961), pp. 265-66.

"Oh," he says. And after a minute, he says: "How'd you say he got shot?"

"He had a dream," I says, "and it shot him."

"Singular dream," he says. (231)

Singular, indeed. Yet its singularity cannot affect either Huck or Jim, because they no more aspire to knighthood than they hope to own slaves. They ask only to be free. It is Tom who is harmed by the dream, Tom and the other simpletons who imprison themselves within their empty delusions of grandeur. Henry Nash Smith is right about the burlesque — he just misses the target.

The luxuriance of coincidence in *Fifth Business* is Davies' charm for exorcising the demonic in art. Art can be seen as illusion. It reflects a reality, but it is not of itself real: it is nought but facile contrivance, since it is the proficiency of the practitioner that bemuses the beholder, transporting him for a while in a shady realm. The artist becomes, in this view, demon, magician, trickster: demon, because he would fashion something of nothing; magician, because he must preside over a mystery; and trickster, because his creations, no matter how cunning, are fake. Davies conjures up an exponent of this view in the person of Paul Dempster, the bedeviled son of Deptford's most star-crossed couple. Paul is an artist of sorts, a genius at sleight-of-hand, an artificer of "now-you-see-it, now-you-don't." When only a child, he apprentices himself to the fiendish Willard, and studies sorcery as a reward. His adoption of the name "Faustus Legrand" and his preference for the act "The Vision of Dr. Faustus" both lend sinister power to his statement: "one always learns one's mystery at the price of one's innocence, though my case was spectacular" (231). His purpose is to provide "an entertainment in which a hungry part of the spirit is fed" (186), but all he can do is provoke awe, since his illusions have "a spice of the Devil about them" (233). Paul meets Dunny while performing in various corners of the world, and Dunny attempts to reopen their acquaintanceship, for the very sound reason that "this looked like an adventure" (188). These meetings develop into something very like jousts between champions of opposed faiths. Paul is a magician, but Dunny is a writer. Paul is concerned with art as illusion, with fabricating an entertainment; but Dunny is concerned with art as fact, with formulating answers to tough questions. Paul is content to abuse human faith, but Dunny can be content with no less than an understanding of it:

Why do people all over the world, and at all times, want marvels that defy all verifiable fact? And are the marvels brought into being by their desire, or is their desire an assurance rising from some deep knowledge, not to be directly experienced and questioned, that the marvellous is indeed an aspect of the real? (178)

In the three encounters between the two, we see magic contend with miracle, and miracle retains possession of the field. At the first encounter, the meeting in an Austrian village, Faustus Legrand relies upon his hands,

and picks up the temporary advantage of a trophy. "Somebody at *Le grand Cirque forain de St. Vite* had stolen my pocketbook, and everything pointed to Paul" (133). At the second encounter, the meeting in Mexico City, Magnus Eisengrim is forced by his satanic mistress to defer to the saintly reputation of Dunstan Ramsay, and he yields up what he had earlier filched away. "That night when I was making my usual prudent Canadian-Scots count, I found that several bills had found their way into my wallet, slightly but not embarrassingly exceeding the sum that had disappeared from it when last I met Paul" (185). At the third encounter, the meeting in Dunny's rooms at Colborne College, there is no contest. Paul can do nothing with Dunny, who is armoured with the integrity of his solid achievements. "This room speaks of peace and a mind at work. I wish it were mine" (230). He turns instead upon Boy Staunton, a poseur with whom he can wrestle, and, after a prolonged tussle, he carries off the common foe. "Thanks, Ramsay. I have everything I need" (236). Even W. F. Hall applauds the dexterity with which Davies introduces the marvellous into Dunny's scholarly narrative: "Clearly, in terms of experience as 'marvellous' these coincidences are acceptable as part of a pattern that is (if its premises be granted) both ingenious and 'logical'."²¹ Why, then, does Hall complain of Davies' work? It is because he confuses miracle with magic, perceiving nothing but contrivance in the art. The redeeming feature of reality has eluded him, leaving him protesting that two inhabitants of the same village could not possibly meet three times in their travels. But this is silly. Over the span of half a century, taking into account Paul's profession and Dunny's interests, these meetings do not distort probability. They are coincidental, yes, but they are coincidental within a permissible artistic range. If Hamlet can hop aboard a passing pirate ship and come home, if Tom Jones can cease to be Jenny Waters' byblow and become Mrs. Blifil's indiscretion, if Master Pip can feed a starving convict and gain Mister Pip a wealthy Australian patron, if Huck Finn can stumble around the corpse of his own father in a house adrift on a flooded river and not know him, surely now — in all fairness — Dunny Ramsay can bump into a fellow villager three times in their many circuits about the globe. W. F. Hall is right about the coincidence — he just loses sight of the reality in all that mystery.

Finally, in conclusion, it should be stressed that Davies' novel is not a repetition of Twain's: it is not, as some have said of Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, a twentieth-century replay of a nineteenth-century classic. Rather, Davies' novel is a complementary work to Twain's: each may be read as giving an insight into the viewpoint of the other, as well as giving an insight into the world it presents.

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²¹Hall, p. 81.