THE MANTICORE: *PSYCHOLOGY AND FICTIONAL TECHNIQUE*

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Patricia Monk's "Psychology and Myth in *The Manticore*" (*SCL*, 2 [Winter 1977], 69-81) provides a useful exposition of the Jungian background to Robertson Davies's novel and, in questioning the reading of the book as a "primer on the precepts of Carl Jung" (p. 69), offers a healthy challenge to over-simple interpretation. Yet her own commentary still emphasizes its psychological rather than its literary aspects. She is content to trace out the specific Jungian references and to show how the process of Jungian psychoanalysis, its terminology and basic procedures, is recreated and (in her view) ironically undercut in the course of the narrative. This approach soon leads to difficulties. "My contention," she writes, "is that Davies, far from committing himself to Jungian theory in the novel, in fact reveals a profound ambivalence about its value," and she goes on to claim that the first suggestion of this "is to be found in David's description of the Jung Institute" (p. 69). But she has already slipped from Davies to David, from creating novelist to created character. The discipline of Jungian psychoanalysis is obviously of extreme importance in the book, but we must never forget that *The Manticore* is first and foremost a novel and that it thus requires an examination in literary-critical terms. In the ensuing paragraphs I wish not so much to dispute as to refine Patricia Monk's argument.

My starting-point is D. H. Lawrence's frequently-quoted remark from his "Study of Thomas Hardy": "Every work of art adheres to some system of morality. But if it really is a work of art, it must contain the essential criticism on the morality to which it adheres."[1] In this principle, with all its technical ramifications, we find, I suggest, the artistic equivalent to Patricia Monk's "ambivalence" or "undercutting." Although we would not expect a man with Davies's independence of mind to be an uncritical follower of any system, the implication that, in some undefined way, he may be dissatisfied with Jung's method seems, on the face of it, unlikely.[2] But as a creative artist he would be anxious to make his book a novel and not just a psychological tract. Consequently, he would have recognized the need to introduce into *The Manticore* (to adapt Lawrence's words) "the essential criticism of the *psychology* to which it adheres."

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[1]D. H. Lawrence, *Phoenix* (1936; rpt. London: Heinemann, 1961), p. 476.

[2]See, for example, Davies's comments on Jung in Donald Cameron, ed., *Conversations with Canadian Novelists* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1973), I, 35.

Patricia Monk argues that "the ambivalence of the author's attitude is made visible by the device of constantly undercutting the analytic process by means of the narrator's responses and criticisms of it" (p. 71). I doubt this; once again she has slipped from Davies to David. David Staunton's resistance to the method is standard and true to character. Indeed, the extent to which Dr. von Haller persuades him to overcome his initial prejudice would seem to be an index to the strength of the Jungian approach. Davies's own oblique glosses on the psychoanalytic method are to be found not in David's responses but in the biography that the novelist has created for him. By emphasizing the process of David's treatment, Patricia Monk ignores most of the narrative detail in the book, but it is precisely here, where the Jungian terminology is absent, that we find Davies's insertion of indirect comments on the psychology upon which his novel is based.

For instance, one of David's earliest memories concerns the horrors of Dr. Tyrrell's Domestic Internal Bath.[3] David's body is drastically cleansed on Saturdays so that he can be "pure" and ready for church on Sundays. What more appropriate physiological image for the process of depth-psychology can be imagined? When recognized, the association is amusing, challenging, perhaps rather alarming — but it is serious and deliberate in intent. Such physical-psychological parallels recur throughout the book. At the opening of the novel David is submitted to a thorough medical examination before being accepted for psychological treatment; at the close, his defecation in the cave-passage is a crucial experience in his climactic "inner journey" from which he emerges to become, after a much-needed bath, "renewed — yes, and it seemed to me reborn" (*M*, p. 276). The qualification of the major structure by variations at humorous and often grotesque removes is an important aspect of Davies's art. Such scenes reflect back and forth upon each other. They represent not so much ironical undercutting as structural balance; they commit the alert reader to a continuing series of intellectual adjustments.

The genealogy-hunting, though less sensational, represents another oblique commentary on the main Jungian theme. This quest for historical antecedents, for an ancestral past, is initiated for snobbish social reasons by Boy Staunton, who dislikes what he finds. Pledger-Brown sums up the point, significantly, in a pun: "Too bad, Davey; he wanted blood, and all we could offer was guts" (*M*, p. 275). But it provides, by means of what might be called a structural pun, a parallel for David's probing of his personal past in his attempt to come to terms with himself. At first, he too dislikes what he finds, but ultimately recognizes that what was distasteful to his father is strengthening to him. The connection becomes explicit, once again, in the cave-scene, where David is introduced to his primordial racial past. At the moment of crisis, the thought of Maria Dymock upholds him in his capacity to endure just as the image of Mary Dempster (the shared initials suggest those coincidences

[3]Robertson Davies, *The Manticore* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1972), p. 76. Hereafter cited in text as *M*.

defined by G. K. Chesterton as "a spiritual sort of puns" [*M*, p. 253]) comforted and inspired Dunstan Ramsay on the battlefield in *Fifth Business*. Continually, narrative incident and psychological theory interact with each other.

But perhaps the clearest instance is Caroline's reckless theorizing about David's paternity and the circumstances surrounding their mother's death. Structurally, David's argument with Caroline acts as an ironic parallel to his sessions with Dr. von Haller; on another level Caroline's deductions constitute a parody not so much of psychological speculation itself as of popular misconceptions concerning it. This scene has the paradoxical effect, however, of emphasizing rather than qualifying the basic seriousness of the book as a whole. While Caroline jumps to wild conclusions from insufficient data, Dr. von Haller judiciously and professionally sifts the evidence and leads David not to accusations about others but to understanding of himself. The scene between Caroline and David fits Lawrence's requirements for a work of art to perfection. One might even say that, if any possible uneasiness about the Jungian method still remains, it is "projected" on to Caroline's travesty.

Patricia Monk lays great stress on David's move in the third part out of the orbit of Dr. von Haller into that of Liesl. But Liesl's "function as a counter to orthodox Jungian theory" (p. 80) needs to be qualified. Dr. von Haller has herself announced to David at the close of the second part that they have reached an end of a particular stage in their work: "If you want to continue . . . we shall proceed quite differently. We shall examine the archetypes with which you are superficially familiar, and we shall go beyond what is personal about them" (*M*, 235). This, I submit, is what Liesl achieves — not, it is true, in the manner of "orthodox Jungian theory" but close, surely, to its spirit. The switch from Dr. von Haller to Liesl is, I am convinced, to be explained by artistic requirements rather than intellectual doubts. Liesl the enchantress can stage-manage David's inner journey more imaginatively and more quickly than Dr. von Haller with her slow but deliberate methods. She can provide the all-important element of fantasy and stimulate in David (albeit indirectly) the "awe" that he lacks. She is, we might say, the practical "shadow" to the psychoanalyst's theory. In the Sorgenfrei section David returns, as he should, into the active human world not only from the ancestral cave but also from the consulting-room. (The two are themselves related according to the technique of artistic balance that I have described.) Liesl is not so much a counter to Dr. von Haller as (to use a more appropriate word that Patricia Monk employs on one occasion) her complement. We should not forget that in David's final vision on the last page of the book a female figure is conspicuous but that he "could not see whether her face was that of Liesl or Johanna [von Haller]" (*M*, p. 280). In "the Comedy Company of the Psyche" (*M*, p. 207), a phrase that Davies is careful to attribute to the psychoanalyst herself, not to the "undercutting" David, Dr. von Haller and Liesl are equally capable of playing the same liberating role, though each would play it, of course, in her own way.

One of the most remarkable artistic features of *The Manticore* is its capacity to be both profound and extremely funny at the same time. If we concentrate on the direct presentation of the Jungian psychoanalytic process, we shall disturb this balance and emphasize the serious at the expense of the humorous. I have deliberately stressed the many different puns in the book because they help to prevent it from becoming unduly solemn. Davies is one of the wittiest writers of the age, and this wit manifests itself in structural invention as well as verbal repartee. He even manages to inject his taste for puns into the Unconscious itself. As early as *A Voice From the Attic* (1960) he noted that "Freud has shown the Unconscious to be pranksome and witty in a manner that suggests James Joyce."[4] The idea is put to creative use here. David's formal treatment closes with Dr. von Haller's interpretation of his dream of Boy Staunton exposing his back parts to his son like God to Moses. She explains that this represents not his real father but the authoritative father-figure within the depths of his being who presides over his inner court: "I believe that you have, in a literal sense, seen the end of Mr. Justice Staunton" (*M*, p. 238). This is neither ambivalence nor undercutting, let alone mere comic triviality. It is an example of Davies's irrepressible, bountiful, inventive vision, an essentially comic vision in all connotations of the word.

The Manitcore is no less profound and no less serious for being a notable comtemporary example of comic art. For all its psychological interest, the book must be judged ultimately on its artistry, and I hope to have demonstrated that this artistry is considerable. "The Unconscious," Dr. von Haller is made to observe, "chooses its symbolism with breath-taking artistic virtuosity" (*M*, p. 161). But within the fictional world of *The Manticore*, Robertson Davies claims the privilege open to the artist but not to the psychologist of controlling the Unconscious; the remark can therefore be applied with equal appropriateness to himself.

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[4]Robertson Davies, *A Voice From the Attic*, New Canadian Library (1960; rpt. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1972), p. 217.