THE COLLEGE OCCASION AS RABELAISIAN FEAST: ACADEME'S DARK SIDE IN THE REBEL ANGELS

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"I wished that he had not compared our pleasant College occasion to a Rabelaisian feast."[1] Simon Darcourt, one of the two alternating narrators of Robertson Davies' *The Rebel Angels*, is distressed that a colleague should have even fleetingly placed the university in a less-than-flattering light. To Simon, stoutish Anglican priest and Professor of Ecclesiastical Languages, a self-confessed "man fond of ceremonies," the lingering vestiges of "the old tradition of scholarly hospitality" should not be taken with any disparaging levity. Everything the scholar encounters should be tinged with significance, and Simon prefers to think of a Guest Night at his College as "one of civilization's triumphs over barbarism, of humane feeling over dusty scholasticism, an assertion that the scholar's life is a good life." He bridles at the suggestion that an affair of such import should be likened, however casually, to social gatherings of lesser consequence:

> This was not food and drink provided so that people might meet to haggle and drive bargains, not the indigestive squalor of the "working lunch", not the tedium of a "symposium" with a single topic of conversation, but a dinner held once a fortnight when the Fellows of the College asked some guests to eat and drink and make good cheer . . . (p. 168)

But how then is Simon's "occasion" different from the incident cited by his colleague in Rabelais concerning "the country people at the feast where Gargantua is born, chatting and joking over their drinks" (169)? Thereby, as we shall see, hangs quite a curious academic tale.

Simon's vision of his world and profession is nothing short of lofty-minded, and he dedicates himself unreservedly to the articulation of that vision. "I had become convinced, in some words Einstein was

[1]Robertson Davies, *The Rebel Angels* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1981), p. 169. All subsequent references to this work will be given in parentheses in the text.

fond of," he reports, "that the serious research scholar in our generally materialistic age is the only deeply religious human being" (p. 55). A passing exchange of banter early in the novel reminds him of the whimsically eclectic, strangely vital and undeniably fascinating historical jottings of John Aubrey; and "The New Aubrey" he becomes, striving in his portion of the work to give voice to the university that inspires and sustains him. In this he is enthusiastically supported by the other narrator, whose vision of scholarship is no less uplifting than his own. Maria Magdalena Theotoky, doctoral candidate at the same university, disdains study "in order to acquire what is now called expertise, and which enables one to become an expert-tease to people who don't know as much as you do about the tiny corner you have made your own." Instead, she wants "nothing less than Wisdom," selecting as her motto a statement by Paracelsus, "*The striving for wisdom is the second paradise of the world*" (pp. 38-39); and so it develops that Davies entitles her portion of the work "Second Paradise," utilizing the voice of a young, beautiful and very intelligent graduate student to hymn the praises of the life intellectual. The novel's structure depends, therefore, on the essential harmony of its two speakers: a teacher and a student, each an admirable representative of the type, giving tongue to the university as a place of mighty imaginative potential. The harmony is strengthened because the voices entwine about one another without being conscious of the process: each speaks in turn, but is unaware what the other has said. Only the reader hears them both, and is aware of their spiritual unity, chanting the glories of higher education. So unrelievedly edifying is all of this, we might be excused for taking the whole thing as an extended exercise in academic propaganda, were it not for one sly little detail. Maria's special area of research is the life and times of François Rabelais.

That detail aside, the sustained and sincere admiration for the professional scholar in this novel would mark it as a distinct anomaly in the relatively recent genre of the fiction of academe. Far more typical, as George Watson observed in a survey for *Encounter*, is a novel like Malcolm Bradbury's *The History Man*, a work intended to sweep aside the impression of the British university don as a decent and lovable chap. The protagonist is Dr. Howard Kirk, Professor of Sociology at the University of Watermouth, writer of two trendy but insubstantial treatises, whose philosophy is summed up in his phrase "everybody exploits somebody." At first it appears Dr. Kirk's exploi-

tation is confined to the area of his specialty, which happens to be the politics of sexuality: but soon it becomes manifest that his exploitative activities extend into every aspect of life around him, commencing at the university but reaching insidiously out into the community beyond. By the novel's end, Dr. Kirk has emerged as a gutless version of Iago, deliberately, deftly and always covertly maneuvering others into conflict that he might savor the misery. He keeps his department in a constant frenzy of petty contention, he drives several students in confusion from the campus, and he presides solemnly over the collapse of marriages he helps to disrupt. The concluding paragraphs describe Kirk's wife attempting suicide, using exactly the same method his best friend had resorted to somewhat earlier in the story. The novel projects an ugly picture of subtle and consistent viciousness, rendered all the more disquieting because Kirk and his colleagues wield powers that extend beyond the university. Against the chilling background of the Watergate news from America, the author (himself, incidentally, a professor of English) depicts his academics as adepts at political intrigue—extorting grants, influencing votes and manipulating elected officials, all achieved without opposition or protest, thanks to the cloak of academic disinterest. It is a stark presentation, constituting what Watson calls "the most withering exposure of academic hypocrisy since *The Groves of Academe*."[2]

There can be little doubt that Watson's assessment of the dominant trend in the genre is essentially correct. A number of prominent authors have turned to academic fiction over the past few decades: C.P. Snow with *The Masters* and Kingsley Amis with *Lucky Jim* in England; Mary McCarthy with *The Groves of Academe*, Randall Jarrell with *Pictures from an Institution*, John Osborn with *Paper Chase* and Joyce Carol Oates with *Unholy Loves* in America; and John Metcalf with *General Ludd* and Gérard Bessette with *Le Semestre* in Canada. Notwithstanding the variations in structure and tone across these works, the intent seems remarkably the same—the delineation of a number of charges against the university world. Terming these charges "seriously plausible," Watson proceeds to distinguish three, offering them "in mounting order of gravity." Academics are guilty of "the sin of Pygmalion," of attempting to shape "their pupils to resemble themselves." Academics are guilty of "hypocrisy," of failing to practice what they preach: "the Lefter your views, the higher and fatter you

[2]George Watson, "Fictions of Academe," *Encounter* (November, 1978), p. 46.

live." And academics are guilty of "righteousness," of working under the assumption they are infallible: "a sage cannot afford to be wrong."[3] An entire genre of fiction has evolved to tell Western readers that academics are self-regarding, self-indulgent, and particularly prone to the sin of pride. Given that tradition, the academics themselves will understandably be delighted and relieved by the advent of *The Rebel Angels*. Canada's foremost man of letters, greatly esteemed in both artistic and scholarly circles, has intervened decisively to set the record straight. In reasoning thus, of course, they will be taking a leaf from "The New Aubrey": refusing to recognize in the pleasant College occasion anything remotely akin to a Rabelaisian feast.

II

But others will, and should, read the novel otherwise. Graduate students all over the Western world, for example, will rejoice at the marvelously bawdy Rabelaisian flourish with which Davies commences the tale. He is careful to give the student voice a slight primacy, since the work begins with Maria speaking and concludes with Simon thinking fondly of her, tellingly enough within the context of a quotation from Rabelais: "*Vogue la galère*, Maria. Let your ship sail free" (326). And what concern does the author place uppermost in the mind of this central character, as the book swings off into its romp through the groves of academe? She is preoccupied by the fact that she has been "screwed" by her thesis director. Nor, as Davies brings us back to this Rabelaisian motif again and again, does he eschew this appropriately coarse terminology. "You mean you've screwed her?" Simon asks Professor Clement Hollier, the erring thesis director who had clumsily sought to evade distasteful reality with pedantic circumlocution. "I—I've had carnal knowledge of her," had been his way of putting it. But Simon can be priest as well as professor, and will not be eluded in a smokescreen of tergiversation. Relentlessly, he drives home the logic of using ugly student words for an ugly fact of student life:

> How many tasteful expressions are there? I can't say you've *lain* with her; maybe you didn't. I can't say you've *had* her, because she is still clearly in full possession of herself. "Had intercourse with her" sounds like the police-court—or do they still say that "intimacy occurred"? What really happened?

[3]Watson, pp. 45-46.

Clem (for so we come to view him, in his naked, fallen state) is somewhat heartened when Simon, after hearing his halting attempt at explanation, reverts from priest to professor and places the whole incident in a neat academic context: "Abelard and Heloise lived again for approximately ninety seconds" (p. 95). The Rabelaisian feast, we might at this point notice, can always be reduced to a pleasant College occasion. And yet, not—in this book—for long.

There is more, much more, here than a protracted dirty joke. Though both the voices of the novel can sing the glories of the academic groves, they are far too honest to ignore the shadowy recesses along their chosen path. "Universities cannot be more universal," Simon remarks, "than the people who teach, and the people who learn, within their walls" (p. 47). A student like Maria, gifted and lovely, has not embarked upon any comfortable venture. After she describes an effective teaching ploy to win the attention of her Freshman history class, a female faculty member counsels her: "the first lesson of a teacher to a student should be, don't be too clever unless you want to be in perpetual hot water" (p. 52). And thus Davies incorporates into his fiction a hard fact that most Western academics do not care to contemplate. Idealistic students placing wisdom before expertise rarely come off brilliantly at institutions prizing professionalism above all else. Doctoral candidates chiefly motivated by "a desire to continue one's general intellectual growth without reference to any career plans," one lengthy survey of dropouts from the doctoral program informs us, have the highest rate of attrition in each of the major "areas of study."[4] From the first pages of the novel, Davies explains why this can be so. Maria regards her sexual encounter with Clem as an earnest of love, but he takes it only as a favor to be requited—"a lay for an A," to use the cynical student expression. Instead of love, or (failing that) an honest apology, he can offer nothing more than an extraordinary scholarly advantage to the girl he has seduced. "One of those manuscripts will be the making of you" (p. 3), he enthuses, oblivious of the crass sexual innuendo. Maria's response, not surprisingly, is forced delight ("How exciting") to mask bitter disappointment ("Can you really be so unfeeling, such a professor?" [p. 4]). Out of this clash between ugly reality and frustrated idealism, Davies has fashioned the paramount spiritual concerns of his book.

[4]Allan Tucker, *Factors Related to Attrition Among Doctoral Students* (East Lansing: Michigan State University, 1964), p. 136.

What Maria must learn to confront as she proceeds with her intellectual development is that the scholarship she so ardently admires can be twisted into some horrifying perversions. Scholars were burned in the early Renaissance, Hollier tells her, condemned on the testimony of other scholars. Rabelais and his celebrated contemporary Paracelsus, with their unorthodox opinions and activities, each risked that sort of fate. "Pushed far enough it could have meant death!" Hollier thunders: "The stake!" (p. 211). Nor can such grisly perils be discounted as the unfortunate lapses of a hysteria-prone past long banished from the world. Maria, the daughter of a Polish engineer and a Hungarian gypsy entertainer, has reason to know better than that. In one of the most moving sections of the book, we follow her thoughts as the music of Franz Liszt takes her to a few decades earlier, to "the Nazi madness" and a little-known chapter in the ghastly record of the holocaust. The Gypsies of Europe, her own people one generation back, had come to the attention of Nazi academics with frightful consequences to themselves:

> There is a terrible humour in the fact that they were declared to be, living creatures as they were, under the protection of the Department of Historical Monuments. So they were herded together, and then it was discovered by the same scientists who had acclaimed them that they were an impure ethnic group, and a threat to the purity of the Master Race . . . (p. 147)

The scholars proposed eradication by sterilization,[5] but the politicians preferred the simpler expedient of mass execution; so the Gypsies were "hunted" by soldiers "through the woods like animals," and those not "shot on sight" fell into the hands of "the *Einsatzgruppen*, the exterminators" to be "gassed" (p. 148). "Who weeps for them?" Maria asks of this sentimentally romanticized, hideously abused and forlornly forgotten people: "I do, sometimes." And the chapter closes: "I do."

Maria, then, was born into a complex, mad world of materialsim "where the cheats and rogueries are institutionalized" (p. 148), and her strivings after Wisdom must bring her to realize how this world is reflected in her cherished university in the very person of the man she wants so desperately to be her lover. Abelard and Heloise, indeed. Clem, who could not be less Clement when he is crossed in his

[5]Influenced in their thinking, perhaps, by the cold-blooded logic of Swift's Houyhnhnms, who also mooted this solution to their Yahoo problem.

academic pursuits, is hurtling with fearsome velocity towards a cataclysmic encounter with the dark powers of scholarship; and this is an involvement, Maria comes to conclude, that she should stand well clear of. The dark powers themselves are first explored in some detail, appropriately enough, at the very College occasion Simon does not care to designate a Rabelaisian feast. "Nobody gets drunk at a Guest Night," Simon explains," the wine performs its ancient magic of making the drinkers more themselves, and what is in the fabric of their natures appears more clearly" (pp. 181-82). As the wine circulates about the table, what appears in the discussion is the very real presence of sinister forces in the academic world. "Inhumanity, cruelty, and criminal self-seeking are not the exclusive property of the poor," Ludlow, the law don, maintains. "You can find lots of that sort of thing right here in the university" (p. 183). He denies he is talking for effect, and goes on to specify theft as an instance of institutional corruption, "thefts of books and property by students, servants and faculty, and betrayal of trust by trusted persons must be expected to continue." Gripped by an impulse to reveal the extent of his familiarity with the dark subject of his discourse, he ends with a startling admission, "I've never seen God, but twice I've caught a glimpse of the Devil in court, once in the dock, and once on the bench" (p. 184). The novel is so devised that Maria, her friends, and the reader, will catch another glimpse of this same Devil, the Old Nick of the medieval burnings, the Nazi madness, the murders and judicial abuses of Canada's criminal scene, occurring just as Professor Ludlow said, behind the lecterns and in the carrels of a Canadian graduate school.

III

One raucous offshoot of this somber theme is as Rabelaisian as Davies could manage, for he wants everyone to understand that scholarship—even at its brightest and finest—can be dismissed as a thoroughly "shitty" business. "The adjective 'Rabelaisian' applied to scatological humour is misleading," the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* magisterially advises, "Rabelais uses scatology aesthetically, not gratuitously, for comic condemnation." So, too, with Davies. In the person of Professor Ozias Froats, the novel presents what seems to be a classic caricature of the wooly-minded scholar, drawn out of Jonathan Swift by way of *Playboy* magazine. A former varsity football hero who married a bouncy cheerleader nicknamed Peppy Peggy,

Froats specializes in the accurate analysis of human excrement, an activity that exposes him to a barrage of predictable invective. Urquhart McVarish, a sleazy-minded Professor of Renaissance History who claims kinship to an obscure seventeenth-century Scots translator of Rabelais, characteristically refers to Froats as "the Turd-Skinner" (p. 14). The butt of the scatological joke here, however, is not Froats: rather, it is people like McVarish, who lack the wit to grasp how scholarship transmutes even the most contemptible dross into insights of rare beauty. Simon elects to visit Froats' laboraty, and there, in company with Maria, he hears the ex-football player lecture with impressive dignity and is shown "extremely thin slices of faeces, cut transversely, and examined microscopically and under special light." To his own wonder, all Simon can think about is "splendid cuttings of moss-agate, brecciated agate," an "extraordinary beauty" reminiscent of "that chalcedony which John's Revelation tells us is part of the foundations of the Holy City" (p. 110). Simon senses he has been vouchsafed something approximating a modern vision, an impression reinforced by Maria's observation that Froats could be a magus, one of the "holy men who serve the forces of nature" (p. 112). Perceptions of this quality, Davies intimates, are vastly beyond the ken of the McVarishes of the age.

Professor McVarish, regrettably, is not alone in his know-nothing buffoonery: one of the more thought-provoking aspects of the novel is its exploration of how the McVarish attitude, when writ large, can constitute a menace to society. Urky's sneering jibes take on greater force as they are echoed from a political platform by Murray Brown, a self-styled "friend of the plain people" bent upon re-election, who attacks the profligacy of a Provincial Legislature squandering funds on scientists "messing about with dirty things" (p. 51). Brown (the surname, in this context, is suggestive) seeks to turn ignorance and prejudice to his own profit, and his strident denunciations threaten the grants essential to the continuance of the Froats project.[6] "His political advantage could cost me seven years of work that would

[6]One disturbing real-life counterpart to Murray Brown is Senator William Proxmire of Wisconsin whose career as opponent of government wastage in scientific spending illustrates the weaknesses of such anti-intellectual posturing. Senator Proxmire reduced or eliminated many valuable research projects in defense of the American taxpayer's dollar, only to turn around and implement the continuation of an expensive and redundant dairy subsidy, an expenditure costing far more than the scientific projects he had savaged. Wisconsin is a dairy-farming state. See "Fleecing Science," *Discovery* (February, 1982), p. 8.

have to be repeated," the biologist worries, "if I had to reduce what I'm doing for a while" (p. 86). The appearance of "half a dozen good papers from Froats, Redfern, and Oimatsu" (p. 110) in the scientific journals is of little consequence to McVarish and none at all to Brown. Each, for his own petty purposes, cannot resist mocking what he cannot comprehend; and this reductive attitude is infectious, pushing even Simon into a momentary strain of frivolity:

> Surely there might be some words for the material so near to the heart of Ozy Froats better than shit? What about the Problems of a President, the Backward Passes of a Footballer, the Deferrals of a Dean, the Odd Volumes of a Freshman, the Anxieties of an Untenured Professor? As for myself, might it not appropriately be called the Collect for the Day? (p. 113)

All this is suitably answered in due course, much as Swift's anti-intellectual tirades against the pursuits of the Royal Society were answered: by the emergence of a convincing expert consensus that the subject of so much animadversion is of inestimable value. Ozy wins "the Kober Medal," a prestigious award placing him "in the Nobel class" (p. 247), and the nation awakens to the promise of what Brown's nasty nonsense had almost suppressed.

Davies is nothing if not thorough in pursuing the ramifications of a joke, for the humanist Hollier is as immersed in excrement as the scientish Froats. "Never hope to find wisdom at the high colleges alone," Clem quotes Paracelsus to Maria, "consult old women, Gypsies, magicians, wanderers and all manner of peasant folk and random folk, and learn from them, for these have more knowledge about such things than all the high colleges" (p. 157). Clem wishes to consult Mamusia, Maria's Gypsy mother, concerning the secrets of the *bomari*—copper vessels designed to rehabilitate the wood and finish of old violins through the application of slow warmth. An involved process handed down from the Middle Ages by Gypsy artificers, the *bomari* works by encasing the defective instrument within a bed of decomposing horse dung after the instrument itself has been carefully wrapped in woollen cloth. This arcane technique is of interest to a modern professor of history, not because "the old ways are necessarily better than the new ways," but rather because "there may be some of the old ways that we would be wise to look into before all knowledge of them disappears" (p. 149). Though Clem's acquaintance with Mamusia will bring him into contact with far more eerie

Gypsy lore than he can accommodate, he is initially determined to present his research as benign, associating the spiritual impulse behind it with the benevolence motivating the work of Ozias Froats. "I am inclined to think of Ozy as a latter-day alchemist," he tells Maria, expanding upon the link between the two lines of scholarly inquiry: "he seeks the all-conquering Stone of the Philosophers exactly where they said it must be sought, in the commonest, most neglected, most despised" (p. 157). However, the relationship between Hollier and Froats at this juncture, in effect the relationship between any two scholars attempting to increase human understanding, is best explained by one meaning underlying the novel's somewhat ambiguous title.

Everyone thinks of Satan as *the* rebel angel, and so most readers will take up this book with some slight expectation of encountering a community of devils. That could be an error, according to Maria, who expounds upon the legend of the Rebel Angels with all the zeal of a graduate student developing an esoteric bit of information. "It's a marvellous piece of apocrypha," she exults to Simon, a professor momentarily reverting to the unaccustomed role of receiving instruction from another, "and I would have expected you to know it, because surely it is the explanation of the origin of universities!" Whatever Simon might be expected to know, it is not surprising Maria's Rebel Angels had not come to his attention: "They were real angels, Samakazi and Azazel, and they betrayed the secrets of Heaven to King Solomon, and God threw them out of Heaven." This downfall did not, apparently, leave them downhearted: deprived of one paradise, they sought another in that quest for wisdom Paracelsus named the second paradise of the world. " 'They gave mankind another push up the ladder, they came to earth and taught tongues, and healing and laws and hygiene—taught everything,' Maria elaborated, adding her own personal academic touch, and they were often special successes with 'the daughters of men.' " There could be nothing Satanic about these benign beings, she insists: "they weren't sore-headed egotists like Lucifer" (p. 257). This last we may be entitled to doubt, given the climactic developments of the novel: and given, too, Maria's belief that her own Rebel Angels were Simon—and Clem.

IV

Whether or not Maria intends it, all this brings us inevitably back to Lucifer, Lord of light, the Fallen One whose malign presence has haunted these pages from start to finish. "Parlabane is back" (p. 1). With this announcement, Maria opens the novel. John Parlabane is Old Nick's most pronounced academic representative in the work, and he is a particularly unsavory specimen of the species. "With Parlabane we have the stench of brimstone," Sam Solecki observes in a shrewd but not fully developed assessment for *Canadian Forum*, "with Hollier and Darcourt the grey mustiness of the university common room."[7] Exactly. But the difference in the impact of these personalities is not, as Solecki assumes, a flaw in the execution of the work; in fact, it is a necessary development of the entire design which functions to emphasize the infectious nature of scholarly evil. And what a bloody and contagious stench, we find, this rarely-considered whiff of brimstone can have. "University violence is so trifling," an English professor remarks at Simon's pleasant College occasion, "one longs for something full-blooded" (p. 171). Parlabane is just the boy to oblige, as both Clem and Simon intuitively understand. "Parlabane is an evil man, and evil is infectious," Clem warns Maria," . . . evil isn't what one does, it's something one is that infects everything one does" (pp. 77-78). The warning is prophetic, as events sort out, for Parlabane can be the very devil when he puts his mind to it. "He was always proud as Lucifer" (p. 99), Simon reminds Clem; and Simon is moved to say much the same to Parlabane himself only a few days later. Repelled by what he knows of the renegade monk's life, dabblings in scepticism, homosexuality, drugs soft and hard, incidental violence, and occasional religion, Simon is testy with his old acquaintance. "You disgust me, parading around as a man in God's service when you're in no service but your own—or perhaps the Devil's" (p. 119). When Brother John obliges him, and doffs his monk's habit to pursue instead the more trendy vocation of novelist, Simon is temporarily relieved. He has forgotten what Clem had taught him, that when an academic decides to publish a big book, there may be hell to pay.

In accordance with his plan to obtain a publisher for his massive and convoluted philosophical novel, Parlabane becomes Urky's creature, master of ceremonies at the McVarish's private festivities. Once

[7]Sam Solecki, "The Other Half of Robertson Davies," *Canadian Forum* (December & January 1981), p. 31.

we think about where Davies is going with his themes, it is logical that Urky would also emerge as a man fond of "ceremonies" (p. 284), his definition of the term a sinister obverse to that which Simon had advanced. Because Urky is to a true scholar what the Black Mass is to the genuine ritual, a blasphemous substitution of evil for good, everything he touches turns vile, His impulse to scholarship brings him to steal an irreplaceable manuscript, so that he might pronounce upon it before any other historian, a not-unknown academic tactic that drives Hollier to fury. "That *is* bloody well my field, and it could be the making of any scholar who got hold of it, and I'll be damned if I want that bogus sniggering son of a whore McVarish to get his hands on it" (p. 92). His impulse to be witty brings him to sneers and covert insult, another not-unknown academic trait that could drive Darcourt—the good, grey, usually soft-spoken Darcourt—to toy briefly with the idea of murder. "Not a very serious comment, but why did I feel that I should like to kill him?" (p. 163). And his impulse to the ceremonious brings him to the unspeakable, that he might infuse his isolated and sordid existence with imagination and excitement, mocking the social and convivial with the solitary and corrupt. For such amusements Parlabane is uniquely suited, a gay monomaniac stalking the campus like a latter-day Madame Defarge, Knitting up wool with dextrous hands as he knits up schemes with horridly fertile brain. What Urky does not reckon upon, though, are the consequences of inviting the devil to wait in attendance upon a lonely feast: his own murder, most grotesque and most foul, exposing him as a freakish stain on the university's way of life; Parlabane's suicide, craftily conceived and cunningly executed, permitting him to flaunt to the grave itself the religious sentiments he professed and scorned; and the conveyance of the irreplaceable manuscript into Hollier's hands, now figuratively blood-stained with spirituad complicity, that a wrong might be compounded with yet another wrong. Even a Gargantua must acknowledge here a surfeit of academic ceremonies.

As soon as Parlabane has been whisked off by the crematorium into whatever hellfire awaits him, the novel doubles back in time to trace Hollier's own descent into devilment. Goaded by Urky's thinly-disguised taunts about the missing manuscript—"Run across anything in your special line lately? I suppose it's impossible to put your hand on anything really new?" (p. 271)—Clem approaches Mamusia for help in cursing his scholarly rival. And he sincerely means it, as

Mamusia truly appreciates, since his frightful passion makes him one with those incredible, damned Nazi academics, tainted with the blood of half a million Gypsy victims. "I only know maybe a hundred Gypsies, and most of them are dead," she reminds this scholar burning to cast an old Gypsy spell, "killed by people like you who must always be modern and right." She had once told Clem's fortune, with a singular precision: now she must tell him more, and he is so choked with choler, he cannot follow. He proposes to trifle with the Lord of Balance, invoking harsh retribution upon an ignoble enemy, without reckoning how the act itself must resonate spiritually about everyone involved. Mamusia fears stretching her credit with that awesome Lord "who lives down there in the darkness where Cancer dwells, and whose army is all the creatures of the dark, and the spirits of the suicides and all the terrible forces." But Clem, with "the shocking frivolity of the modern, educated mind" (p. 268), will taste his vengeance. "You have already cursed your enemy in your heart, and you have reached *What*? without me," Mamusia pronounces, "man, I fear for you" (p. 269). Enter Parlabane as "the Knave of Coins, the servant with a letter" (p. 267), the unknown figure in Clem's darkling fortune. His knitting needles pierce not only the fragile armor of Urky's skull, but also the thin veneer of scholastic values behind which Professor Hollier had contained his proud, violent and selfish will.

Following that ominous meeting with Mamusia in February, "crisis month in the University, and probably everywhere else in our Canadian winter" (p. 264), Clem wanders for weeks around the campus, steeping himself in the seething potion of his hate. "McVarish was thwarting him, and Cain was raised" (p. 271), Maria comments, seeing one of her Rebel Angels in a new light, transfigured like Lucifer by a glow from hell, "an obsessed, silly, vain man" (p. 276). It is a measure of Clem's lapse in grace that the death of a brother scholar, a death he had willed, cannot touch him. His sole concern is the manuscript, come finally into his clutches, with which he hopes to win scholarly renown and discharge his debt to Maria. But the Lord of Balance intervenes, acting through the troubled conscience of Simon Darcourt, who claims the manuscript for the estate of the original owner. Clem is left with nothing but the dubious bequest from Brother John, an appointment as literary executor of the now-notorious novel, a book pursued eagerly by publishers intent upon capitalizing on the notoriety of its author. "It's a hot property, so make the toughest deal you can, dear Clem," Parlabane exhorts his

colleague from beyond the grave, "revenge me, dear old boy; roast'em, squeeze 'em, gouge 'em for every possible dollar." With the resulting revenue, the executor is to endow a research fund at Spook, otherwise known as the College of St. John and the Holy Ghost.

> I want it named the Parlabane Bounty, so that every pedant who wants a hand-out has to burn a tiny pinch of incense to my memory. You know how these things are managed. (p. 295)

To be sure, Clem does. Yet he cannot turn the trick this time, since the two-fold shock of losing the prized manuscript again and of acting as laundering agent for some very dirty money proves too much for him. He retreats into spiritual collapse. "Of course he is cold and cannot speak," Mamusia reasons, "the curse has been thrown back on him and he is looking inward at his own evil" (p. 299). As with Faust, so with Hollier; the pride of the scholar goeth before his fall.

V

By the end of the novel, the stricken Hollier has begun a gradual recovery, strengthened through the hope of eventually working with Maria on that elusive manuscript. Nevertheless, Davies gives us leave to ask if the devil can ever be banished from the academic scene. Simon, Clem and Maria, the only mourners at Parlabane's funeral, are so relieved at losing the "awful burden" (p. 263) of his presence that they disrupt the progress of the service with merriment at the thought of discharging the last of his debts. "He could have left Rabelais's will," Maria laughs, " 'I owe much, I have nothing, the rest I leave to the poor' " (p. 267). Their amusement is hauntingly turned back on them out of the depths of the crematorium, only a few hours later, as they read to the end of that letter from the Knave of Coins. The letter is full of hellish jests, a ghoulish plenitude to make the skin crawl. Urky, with his skull pierced; Parlabane, stiff in his monk's robe, "looking well pleased with himself" (p. 259), sent seemingly into the fire rigged out in God's habit; a blackmailer jailed, a petty catch tossed to the police, compensation for losing a murderer; and, to the university, recipient of Parlabane's Bounty, one last parting gesture:

> I make a final bequest under the provisions of the Human Tissue Gift Act of 1971. I leave my arse-hole, and all necessary integument thereto appertaining, to the Faculty of Philosophy; let it be stretched upon a steel frame so that each New Year's Day,

> the senior professor may blow through it, uttering a rich, fruity note, as my salute to the world of which I now take leave . . . (pp. 296-97)

Laughter belched from hellfire reverberates through this Rabelaisian raspberry. Parlabane will be back again, have no fear of that. In some other incarnation, perhaps even as a recipient of Parlabane's Bounty, burning a pinch of incense to his memory.

This book is really not far removed from the tradition of its genre after all. Maria's parting words to Simon invoke the lurking presence of Parlabane: "he was a Rebel Angel too" (p. 320). Certainly, academics will prefer to echo the Warden of the University who stresses only the achievements of an ornament like Froats, and who decries the machinations of Parlabane, McVarish and Company as "dreadful interruptions of the natural order." But Davies has set out the dark side of scholarship, silhouetting that menace against the brightness of its promise. "You lean always towards the light," a colleague gently chides the Warden, "perhaps both are necessary, for completeness" (p. 326). This is the doctrine of the Lord of Balance, applicable at the university as elsewhere, as Simon intimated earlier while he pondered the phenomenon of the "other gods than the one God":

> The Romans talked of household gods, and they knew what they were talking about; in every home and every marriage there are the lesser gods, who sometimes swell to extraordinary size, and even when they are not consciously acknowledged they have great power. Every one of the household gods has a dark side, a mischievous side, as when Pride disguises itself as self-respect, Anger as the possession of high standards of behaviour, or Lust as freedom of choice. (p. 314)

Academics have not yet dared to acknowledge the dark side of their household gods, leaving that task thus far to the artists. This is the justification for a genre so apparently restricted as the fiction of academe, which otherwise might be brushed aside as a series of niggling little works, spitefully drawing attention to the minor problems of great institutions. Scholars wield vast powers, and the more so in societies conditioned to admire their achievements: let us not disregard the pride they must feel, and let us beware of them most as they feel that pride. It is a lesson as old as the Faust tale, but it bears repetition in the nuclear age.

Placing *The Rebel Angels* firmly within its genre, however, might well seem a trick of classification that achieves a measure of scholarly precision only at the cost of underscoring aesthetic limitations. For, even side by side with a novel like *Lucky Jim*, Davies' latest book will not rest comfortably with *The Masters* and *The Groves of Academe*. The difficulty is that, upon first inspection, many aspects of the novel could strike the reader as unimpressive or worse. Sam Solecki sums up this problem succinctly, arguing that the whole enterprise is a disappointing hodgepodge of incongruous elements: "This is partly a matter of an overly-controlled even repressive style, partly of characters too obviously intended to represent or symbolize attitudes and modes of being, and partly of a comic mode that may not be a suitable medium for a certain kind of subject."[8] Before we conclude that the evidence warrants that conclusion, we might pause to reflect upon the significance of the minor Dickensian touches in the work,[9] such as Simon consoling Clem in the last pages with a reference to the concluding lines from *A Tale of Two Cities*: "No 'It is a far, far better thing I do—' for us" (p. 320). We have Rabelaisian humor and Dickensian melodrama, all roiling about to convey a wide array of important themes; this is a curiously demanding mixture, and we can be forgiven a little confusion with it at the outset. But this novel is the *Hard Times* of the Davies canon. It is a serious piece of writing intended to pursue at length a number of issues of vital concern to any civilized society, striving after striking contrasts through the use of flamboyant effects. F. R. Leavis, one suspects, might well have approved. "Arthur improved with knowing" (p. 167), Simon remarks laconically of Maria's successful suitor, a wealthy young man almost ponderous with rectitude. The same might be said of the novel itself, which could be around for quite a while, improving all the time—with knowing.

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[8]Solecki, p. 47.

[9]I have only touched on the possibility of considering Davies within the context of a Dickensian tradition, both here and in my evaluative examination of four central Canadian novels. See *A Due Sense of Differences* (Lanham, MD; University Press of America, 1980), p. 85. Now that Davies is receiving a certain amount of international attention, this is clearly an area of investigation that would reward further study.