NARRATIVE UNCERTAINTY IN DUNCAN'S THE IMPERIALIST

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I

In recent years a number of Australian films have won acclaim in Canada, as elsewhere, for their sympathetic and realistic depiction of colonial life in the years before World War I. The common theme of such films as *The Getting of Wisdom, My Brilliant Career, Picnic at Hanging Rock* and *Breaker Morant* is the process of maturation from colony to nation: they are preoccupied with Australia's ambivalent relation to British social traditions and Britain itself. These are notable examples of successful regional art—works that command an international audience for a subject that might have been of merely local interest.

English-speaking Canadians may well be jealous. There are so few films in English that give a vivid sense of Canadian life and almost none of our evolution from a colonial past.[1] The Australians' success is not only a sad commentary on our film industry but reveals a curious gap in our cultural records. Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* should never be ignored if one is looking for insight into English-Canadian life in the period after the pioneers and before World War I, but Leacock's perspective is of course neither serious nor realistic. In this context, a much less well-known work of fiction, Sara Jeannette Duncan's *The Imperialist*, appears as the remarkable achievement it is. Unlike the Australian filmmakers, Duncan did not have the benefit of historical hindsight. *The Imperialist* was published in 1904 and for the most part deals with the contemporary scene. In subject-matter and perspective, however, it is very similar to Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches*. Her theme is the ambiguity of Canadian identity and especially the mixture of excitement and scepticism or apathy with which we viewed

[1]The one exception that proves the rule has just appeared in *The Wars*, which vividly evokes the colonial world at the moment of its slipping into the maelstrom of World War I.

our role in the British Empire. She vividly depicts that period of relative calm before the eruption of the modern age, a time in which British attitudes and customs were being slowly but unmistakably altered by the demands of a new country, and the Mother Country's political and cultural dominance was coming increasingly into question.

Like the Australians, Duncan sought to interest an international audience in a local issue, but unlike them her degree of success was very moderate.[2] In the last twenty years, however, her novel has become a standard text in Canadian studies. Publication in the New Canadian Library paperback series has helped make it a standard offering in university courses, and a good deal of useful critical commentary has accumulated around it.[3] With the spread of Canadian studies to other countries it may be hoped that Duncan will eventually earn the wider readership she deserves. In any case it seems likely that *The Imperialist* will be increasingly recognized as an unusual and accomplished testimony to an important stage in the development of our nation.

Whatever its historical significance and artistic merit, *The Imperialist* is not likely to win wide popularity, mainly because of the very considerable difficulties it presents its readers. Duncan's narrative voice is the chief puzzle. Although her subject is a provincial way of life, she herself as narrator is notably cosmopolitan, sophisticated, witty, complex, altogether hard to catch and hold. The problem is partly a matter of tone:

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[2]For a summary of the reviewers' rather discouraging reactions to *The Imperialist*, see Thomas E. Tausky, *Sara Jeannette Duncan: Novelist of Empire* (Port Credit, 1980), pp. 267-270. Tausky's is an especially useful study: see in particular pp. 73-90 for a treatment of Duncan's fictional methods in general and pp. 153-174 for an analysis of *The Imperialist*.

[3]In addition to the study of Tausky, above, helpful commentary may be found in Alfred G. Bailey, "The Historical Setting of Sara Duncan's *The Imperialist*," in *Beginnings: A Critical Anthology*, ed. John Moss (Toronto, 1980), pp. 129-142—a slightly revised version of an article that first appeared in *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, II, No. 3 (1973), 205-210; Claude Bissell, Introduction to the New Canadian Library edition of *The Imperialist* (Toronto, 1961); D.J. Dooley, "Sara Jeannette Duncan: Political Morality at the Grass Roots," in his *Moral Vision in the Canadian Novel* (Toronto, 1979), pp. 25-35; Carole Gerson, "Duncan's Web," *Canadian Literature*, No. 63 (1975), 73-80; John Moss, *Patterns of Isolation in English Canadian Fiction* (Toronto, 1974), pp. 66-79; Catherine Sheldrick Ross, "Calling Back the Ghost of the Old-Time Heroine: Duncan, Montgomery, Atwood, Laurence, and Munro," *Studies in Canadian Literature*, IV, No. 1 (1979), 43-58; Leon Slonim, "Character, Action, and Theme in *The Imperialist*," *Essays on Canadian Writing*, III (1975), 15-20; Clara Thomas, "Canadian Social Mythologies in Sara Jeannette Duncan's *The Imperialist*," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, XII, No. 2 (1977), 38-49; J.M. Zezulka, "*The Imperialist*: Imperialism, Provincialism, and Point of View," in *Beginnings: A Critical Anthology*, ed. John Moss (Toronto, 1980), pp. 143-157—a considerably revised version of an article that first appeared in *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, No. 22 (1978), 80-92.

she alternates between an ironic and an objective mode of reporting,[4] and we cannot always be sure how to take her. It is partly a matter of style: she has a penchant for clever obliquity that makes her a consistently demanding writer and occasionally a very obscure one.[5] It is partly a matter of narrative method: she moves unpredictably and abruptly from one topic to another, sometimes with the explicit suggestion that her novel-writing is a spontaneous affair, a little uncertain and not entirely under her control. An affectation or simply the truth? The question is not easy to answer, though the narrator's cultivated sensibility and considerable intellectual self-confidence may make us suspect that we are in the hands of someone who knows what she is about, even when we don't.

Careful readers will discover that *The Imperialist* is tightly, indeed elaborately, organized, a fact that has been clearly established by its modern critics. But the published criticism, valuable as it is, has only begun to explain the curious mixture of artistic control and the apparent lack of it that we find in this novel. Several critical problems present themselves. The general tendency of the novel is well understood, but the detail of the pattern deserves more thorough treatment. A consideration of the way her central themes affect her treatment of minor characters and individual scenes will show something of the painstaking care with which she works. The inconsistencies in her narrative method become the more striking. Of these, the most obvious is the disparity in treatment between the main and sub-plots. Her conclusion presents yet another problem. Finally, there is the general question of how far her narrative uncertainty constitutes an artistic flaw.

II

Duncan begins her novel in Elgin's market square, which is central to the town both literally and metaphorically. She repeatedly returns to this setting, always to suggest that it represents the unchanging fact of the practical, commercial spirit that rules the community. Her hero's misunderstanding of the market and its people is of a piece with his misunderstanding in general. In chapter nine, having become a young lawyer, Lorne Murchison looks out over the market from the passageway to his office and dreams about its importance and his own (73-74).[6] He feels an affinity with the people of the market, as indeed he

[4]As is pointed out by Thomas, pp. 39, 44.
[5]For a discussion of her style, see Tausky, pp. 84-87.
[6]All references are to the New Canadian Library edition.

should, considering that he is the privileged eldest son of a man who has struggled with great effort to a high place in the commercial world. He recognizes the market people as the foundation of the world he has inherited and is filled with a sense of his own power and purpose. But he and the narrator see the market in different terms. She stresses the harshness of the struggle it represents. It is a grim, joyless process, a "twisted and unlovely" tradition, "no fresh broken ground of dramatic promise, but a narrow inheritance of the opportunity to live which generations has grasped before." Lorne overlooks the "sharp features" of the market and sees it in terms of its promise. He is seized with tenderness "for the farmers of Fox County" or rather for "the idea they presented" to him.

The narrator is not suggesting that Lorne is wrong in thinking Elgin has a promising future, at least commercially. She consistently presents Canada as a thriving, expanding and very North American enterprise, a place of new opportunities that subtly converts the British immigrant into someone who thinks in new and wider terms. Nor is Lorne wrong to think well of his own future. But he does not understand how far his world and he himself are controlled by the tradition of single-minded commercialism that the market represents. As his father later says (150), he takes too much for granted that other people are like himself. He fails to recognize the limitations of their minds, the dogged resistance to attempted amelioration with which he will be met.

In this particular scene Lorne's failure of understanding is dramatized by his confrontation with Elmore Crow and his mother (74-78). Elmore is a cautionary parallel to Lorne himself.[7] Having been Lorne's fellow-student at the Collegiate Institute—a notable avenue to social advancement in a new country—he dreamed of making a new start out West, only to find that the frontier is governed by the same principles as Elgin itself. Now that he has returned he has become even more a victim of economic necessity. Since his father is old and his brother Abe is to become a dentist, Elmore must take over the family farm. He tries to ignore his mother's existence—"If you had been 'to the Collegiate,' relatives among the carts selling squashes were embarrassing." But she and the life she represents are inescapable. She may be a "frail-looking old woman," but she shows no signs of weakness whatsoever. She treats Elmore as though he were a child. She is shrewd, suspicious, a sharp businesswoman, impatient of "big ideas" and utterly unimpressed by Lorne's claims to be treated as an unusual individual.

[7]As is suggested by Gerson, p. 77.

If you don't buy Mrs. Crow's rhubarb at her price, you can do without rhubarb altogether (77-78).

Mrs. Crow is a pretty close parallel to Mother Beggarlegs, with whom Duncan began the novel (11-12). These characters represent the base fact of Lorne's community and one he is never able to deal with effectively. Like the farmers of Fox County, Mother Beggarlegs is a traditional, indeed ancient, institution. Her antecedents are mysterious, and she is the subject of speculation, especially by Lorne, who sees her as a kind of dramatic possibility. The idea is typical: from the first pages of the novel we are led to think of Lorne's world as one that may inspire great ideas in children and other imaginative types but ultimately defeats them. Mother Beggarlegs' gingerbread comes without gilt, and no other is for sale in Elgin, a place where the only safe dreams are the ones you have in bed (45).

Mrs. Crow and Mother Beggarlegs are two of the many characters who personify the intractability of society in general. Like the punctilious Peter Macfarlane (135), most people are quite unvarying in their social routine. Lorne is perpetually disconcerted by this fact. In England he dreams of getting to know the working classes by talking to bus conductors but gets no further than he did with Mother Beggarlegs and Mrs. Crow (118). The little he does learn is not comforting. "There was the driver of a bus I used to ride on pretty often," he tells his family, "and if he felt like talking, he'd always begin, 'As I was a-saying of yesterday—' Well, that's the general idea—to repeat what they were a-saying' of yesterday; and it doesn't matter two cents that the rest of the world has changed the subject" (132). As a result the imperial scheme makes headway slowly. Wallingham is able to convert some people in the upper reaches of society, but there is a problem with "the resistance of the base," and Lorne admits that at present the promoters of the scheme are "fiddling at a superstructure without a foundation" (129).

With the federal by-election Lorne has a chance to put his fine new ideas before the people themselves. Once again he encounters Mrs. Crow, as much an inescapable fact in the political process as she was in the market, since the two are in fact different aspects of the same ruling principle. Perfectly set in her ways, the very picture of the social type she represents, she waits for the Liberal politicians in her parlour:

> She sat on the sofa in her best black dress with the bead trimming on the neck and sleeves, a good deal pushed up and wrinkled

> across the bosom, which had done all that would ever be required of it when it gave Elmore and Abe their start in life. Her wiry hands were crossed in her lap in the moment of waiting: you could tell by the look of them that they were not often crossed there. They were strenuous hands; the whole worn figure was strenuous, and the narrow set mouth, and the eyes which had looked after so many matters for so long, and even the way the hair was drawn back into a knot in a fashion that would have given a phrenologist his opportunity. It was a different Mrs. Crow from the one that sat in the midst of her poultry and gardenstuff in the Elgin market square; but it was even more the same Mrs. Crow, the sum of a certain measure of opportunity and service, an imperial figure in her bead trimming, if the truth were known. (188)

A key word here is "imperial." The title of the novel is of course ironic as well as literal. Lorne, the bearer of the imperial ideal, is presented as a kind of Canadian prince, receiving the admiration and acknowledgement of all as he passes through the market square (75). Ultimately, however, he is governed by the people he would lead. The emphasis on Mrs. Crow's limitations as a nurturing parent is also significant and typical of the novel as a whole. Like Mother Beggarlegs and the Mother Country she is certainly not going to take Lorne to her bosom. She may have given Elmore and Abe their start in life, but they, and anyone else like them, had better look after themselves now.

It is not simply that Lorne and his fellow-idealists are defeated by the lower orders, though they present the reality with which the idealist must contend in its starkest and most unmistakable form. Though Dr. Drummond is sympathetically portrayed, he is no less fixed and certain in his ways than Peter Macfarlane. His study is lined with "standard religious philosophy, standard poets, standard fiction, all that was standard, and nothing that was not" (156). He is a "beneficent despot," and Knox Church is his "dominion" (62). It is he who controls the action of the sub-plot, confronting Hugh Finlay with the inescapable fact of his love for Advena and, when Hugh will not be governed by him, marrying Christie Cameron himself. As a figure of authority he is very like John Murchison: both are kindly, thoughtful, dignified, imaginative but educated by the "discipline of circumstances" (30), preoccupied by the world of practical necessity and as perfectly inflexible in their own spheres as are Mother Beggarlegs and Mrs. Crow in theirs. John Murchison is an excellent parent, but he cannot give his children money for their Victoria Day celebrations when he doesn't have it (19). If Mrs. Murchison is more forthcoming on this occasion she is no less resolute

and unchanging in her views in general. As the sub-plot is controlled by Dr. Drummond, so the main plot is controlled by Henry Cruickshank. It is he who gives Lorne the chance to go to England, suggests his name for the Liberal nomination, and resolves his final dilemma by offering him a law partnership in Toronto. Like Dr. Drummond, Cruickshank is especially welcome in the Murchison home and bears some resemblance to John Murchison in character and social status. Thus Lorne and Advena grow up in a tightly-knit, stable social group that is closely supervised by a few highly respected and powerful elders. The newspaper editor Horace Williams takes not just his social announcements (27) but his editorials (42-43) virtually from Dr. Drummond's dictation, and public opinion tends to follow their lead respectfully. In short, the dominance of parents and parental figures is a major theme of the novel (which is dedicated, incidentally, to Duncan's father, the supposed original of John Murchison). Through her imagery the theme is extended to Britain and Canada. For Lorne the imperial idea means that "the old folks" in Britain will come to accept the leadership of "the sons and daughters" (122). The immediate response is that "England isn't supperannuated yet." We Canadians are "not so grown up but what grandma's got to march in front," Horace Williams later remarks (131).

To note the universality of this theme is not to deny the importance of the distinctions Duncan is careful to make among the various social groups she portrays and among the individuals within these groups. One of the strengths of the novel is the precision of her social analysis. Although the same principles are shown to prevail in Britain as in Canada, British and Canadian attitudes are carefully distinguished. Her main characters are drawn from Elgin's "polite society" (14), which is set off both from the factory workers of the town and from the farming community. As children, Lorne and Advena attended the lacrosse match on the twenty-fourth of May when they could afford the admission, unlike "the young Flannigans and Finnigans, who absolutely couldn't" but went anyway (15). Within polite society there are marked contrasts between Dr. Drummond and Hugh Finlay or between the Murchison and Milburn families; within the Murchison family, between Advena and her sisters or between Lorne and his brothers. Even here there are differences: Lorne's brothers seem interchangable, but Stella seems likely to become a more intelligent conformist than her sister Abby.

Differences in imaginative capacity are especially important. This is not a matter of social class: Elmore Crow is as capable of "big ideas" (77) as is Lorne. The members of the Murchison family are "all im-

aginative" (18), though in varying degrees, and are regarded as slightly odd by the townspeople, whose attention (says the narrator sardonically) is typically restricted to "the immediate, the vital, the municipal" (60). The Murchisons live at the very edge of town[8] in the old Plummer Place, an unusually spacious house that is "in Elgin, but not of it" and that had been built by an earlier settler with "large ideas" (28-29). Henry Cruickshank, who becomes Lorne's mentor, is characterized as having "lofty but abortive views" (81). His opposite is Octavius Milburn, the "representative man" (51), who is incapable of imagining anything beyond the narrowest practical necessities. Lorne characteristically imputes his own imaginative sympathy to others and tends to assume that older people will all be as benevolent as those who dominate the little world he was raised in. He hopes that Milburn imagines him to be a suitable prospective son-in-law, when in fact Milburn is holding the garden gate open for him merely because it is more convenient than closing it (94-95). Once again Lorne is making his appeal to the wrong sort of parental figure. In a pleasant twist on this pervasive theme, Milburn is the "Father of the Elgin Boiler" (52) and of Dora Milburn, two products that have in common a certain hard, commercial quality. Lorne will be no more successful with the Milburns than he was with Mrs. Crow and Mother Beggarlegs or than Advena will be when she utters "her ideal to [the] unsympathetic ears" of the visiting Scotchwomen. She had "brought her pig, as her father would have said, to the wrong market" (220).

The elaborately particular social world that Duncan depicts thus appears to be the scene of a perpetual conflict between a romantic world of imagination and controlling world of hard fact.[9] From the first pages the world of children is associated with imagination, romantic dreams, the transmutation of the ordinary into the miraculous, the dramatic, the splendid. Against this tendency there is the steady pull of mundane or market-place reality, bringing the imagination back to earth, containing and disciplining it. This is the pre-existing or parental world, into which the imaginative mind is born and to which (in this novel) it must ultimately accomodate itself. Not that the imagination is invariably subordinate: Lorne's legal career is launched when his imaginative sympathy for Walter Ormiston allows him to penetrate Florence Belton's hard, businesslike dignity and to score in the face of "probability, ex-

[8]As is pointed out by Tausky, pp. 172-173.

[9]Tausky, p. 162, says that "the struggle of imaginative minds against their environment" is "the pervasive concern of her fiction" in general.

pectation, fact" (84-87). Nor are the townspeople in general without imaginative qualities, if of a somewhat opportunistic sort. Following his courtroom success, they see Lorne as a promising young fellow. But they desert him when he fails to deliver in the only terms they can really understand, just as his fellow Liberals are not willing to sacrifice their short-term interests for the sake of the imperial connection, though they were willing to "work it for what it was worth." Having been defeated by the business community's distaste for the idea, they turn to the second-rate Carter as "the admitted fact" (262). Similarly, the Canadian delegation to Britain is forced to accept the fact of British apathy and misunderstanding. Hugh Finlay must accept that the fact of his relationship with Advena "is beyond mending" (160) and that the "whole fabric of circumstance was between them" (180). The Murchison parents "acknowledge their helplessness before the advancing event" (204) of Christie Cameron's arrival. She appears as "the material necessity, the fact in the case" (215). Advena finds it impossible to deny the fact of her physical passion (250), but it takes the hardheaded Dr. Drummond to strike the bargain that will set the lovers free.

In a characteristic passage Duncan begins with the everyday occasion of a Murchison family outgoing to church, sketches in a winter's night in Elgin and concludes by contrasting what an imaginative mind might have made of the scene and what the Murchison parents actually did make of it:

> Mr. and Mrs. Murchison, Alec, Stella, and Advena made up the family party; Oliver, for reasons of his own, would attend the River Avenue Methodist Church that evening. They slipped out presently into a crisp white winter night. The snow was banked on both sides of the street. Spreading garden fir trees huddled together weighted down with it; ragged icicles hung from the leaves or lay in long broken fingers on the trodden path. The snow snapped and tore under their feet; there was a glorious moon that observed every tattered weed sticking up through the whiteness, and etched it with its shadow. The town lay under the moon almost dramatic, almost mysterious, so withdrawn it was out of the cold, so turned in upon its own soul of the fireplace. It might have stood, in the snow and the silence, for a shell and a symbol of the humanity within, for angels or other strangers to mark with curiosity. Mr. and Mrs. Murchison were neither angels nor strangers: they looked at it and saw that the Peterson place was still standing empty, and that old Mr. Fisher hadn't finished his new porch before zero weather came to stop him. (202)

This passage is very like the novel as a whole. It is factual, precise and vivid. We are made aware both of the scene and of the narrator's literary sensibility. The key issue is the restraint placed on the human imagination by the social world she depicts. An angel or stranger might have found the scene dramatic, mysterious, symbolic, but their long years in Elgin have taught Mr. and Mrs. Murchison to restrict their vision to the ordinary. The idea of a limiting world is subtly reinforced by the detail of Mr. Fisher's failure to build the porch he had planned. Yet the general impression left by the scene is one of romantic potential.[10] Mr. and Mrs. Murchison may not be able to appreciate it, but the narrator does, and she keeps alive the hope that the young people of the novel (who are closer to being angels and strangers) will somehow make more of this world than their elders have.

This sort of teasing possibility pervades the novel and makes for persistent difficulties of interpretation. What precisely is the relationship of her idealistic young people to the parental world that surrounds them? Will they transform it, be defeated by it, merge into it? Duncan admired W. D. Howells, and in part *The Imperialist* proceeds by arousing and then undermining the reader's romantic expectations, as in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. But only in part. Catherine Sheldrick Ross points out a major problem. The spinsterish Advena, with her nose in a book, is clearly a realistic foil to Dora Milburn, in whom Duncan parodies the appearance and manners of the conventional fictional heroine. Thus Lorne's love affair with Dora is treated in an ironic, anti-romantic way and comes to an appropriate conclusion. But "Advena is in fact involved in a plot with exactly the same structure as that which used to propel the old-time heroine from 'an auspicious beginning, through harrowing vicissitudes, to a blissful close'."[11] The disparity between the main and sub-plot is the most obvious example of Duncan's inconsistency. But even here it is no simple matter to explain why we are led to feel that an inconsistency exists.

III

The Imperialist is as elaborately constructed in terms of scene and plot as it is in theme and character. The scene in which Lorne is introduced to Mrs. Crow is a case in point. The situation will recur when Lorne introduces Hesketh to his father, but with the important difference

[10]As is pointed out by Thomas, p. 39.
[11]Ross, pp. 43-46.

that it is the person being introduced, and not the introducer, who is embarrassed (152-155). The scene with Mrs. Crow begins with Lorne looking out across the market and finding it good. At the end of the novel, after hearing he has been dumped by the Liberals, he is again in "the companionship of Main Street" but finds the view not nearly so encouraging (263). At this point he encounters Hesketh, who caps his revelations with a line that Lorne himself had used in an earlier scene: "is this a time to be thinking of chucking the Empire?" (266, 123).

The correspondence among other scenes is equally striking and especially her careful paralleling of scenes from the two plots. As Lorne and his parents confer with their visitors, Drummond and Cruickshank, in the drawing room, Advena confers with hers, Hugh, in the library. The two parties meet at the front door, and we understand that the affairs of both Murchison children are prospering (88-91). Lorne returns with discouraging news from England, and in the next chapter (xviii) discouraging news from Scotland arrives for Hugh. When he tells Advena about his engagement (138-141), she understands what is really happening, but he does not. In the next chapter (xix), Lorne tries to become engaged to Dora; again the woman is the one who understands. Their secret engagement is both a parallel and a contrast to Hugh's, and both are ended by surprising marriages.

The correspondence of the two plots in theme and characterization is even more obvious. Lorne and Advena are alike in character, unlike in sex and hence in social destiny.[12] The family expects much of Lorne, little of Advena, and would rather prefer that she conformed to the town's conventions for young women. Lorne's professional position makes him as prominent as Advena's makes her obscure. His prospects for advancement are excellent, hers are nil. It may seem a little odd that she sees a sunset as "a hateful reminder . . . of how arbitrary every condition of life is" (71), but social frustration has been the main fact of her life. Hugh Finlay is perhaps too neatly paralleled to her as a sensitive soul who has been cooped up in a harshly unimaginative world of practical necessity and smallmindedness, but in fact he too is a realistically portrayed character—a "great gawk of a fellow," as Mrs. Murchison says (104), with a flair for his profession that resembles Lorne's but even less understanding of life outside it. He is of course both paralleled and contrasted to the plausible Alfred Hesketh, another recent

[12]As is pointed out by Thomas, p. 45.

immigrant who eventually forsakes his old-world attitudes for the fresh prospects afforded by the new.[13]

The disparity in treatment between the main and sub-plots is thus not a matter of structure, characterization or the handling of theme. The main problem is of course the implausibility of the conclusion. Duncan works hard to make the conclusion seem realistic and in keeping with the novel as a whole, but the reader is unlikely to be convinced, largely because a shift in her narrative perspective has already been announced by a shift in her use of language.

Although Lorne is her hero, her view of him is sufficiently dispassionate to be in keeping with her generally ironic and realistic tone. We are aware of his faults and are certainly not asked to identify uncritically with him. Her view of Hugh is less consistently objective. "He was a passionate romantic," we are told, with "deep dreams in his eyes." "His face bore a confusion of ideals; he had the brow of a Covenanter and the mouth of Adonais" (68). Advena is fascinated by this mouth, which she takes to be evidence of his genius. The narrator ironically accepts her view, considering the "difficulty of providing anything else," but then adds, "he had something, the subtle Celt; he had horizons, lifted lines beyond the common vision, and an eye rapt and a heart intrepid" (69). The final phrase destroys the illusion of ironic and realistic commentary. She seems momentarily to have adopted Advena's overheated perspective, and this impression is sustained throughout the scene that follows, that of their first conversation (70-71). This is a meeting of souls, marked by much highflown and rather unlikely dialogue. The scene could only be saved for the cause of realism if the narrator made fun of her overly serious characters a little, as she will later do in describing their tryst at the Murchison home (88-91). But in this case all irony is forsaken, and the scene ends with Advena going on "into the chilly yellow west, with the odd sweet illusion that a summer day was dawning." This uncritically romantic tone recurs in describing Advena's growing love for Hugh: "she walked beside him closer than he knew. She had her woman's prescience and trusted it. Her own heart, all sweetly alive, counselled her to patience" (108). All sweetly alive? Warned by this sort of language that we are not to take the subject of Advena's love ironically, we can only read the climactic scene between the lovers as unrestrained melodrama:

[13]As is pointed out by Gerson, p. 79. For other parallels and contrasts among the characters, see Gerson, pp. 75-79, and Zezulka, pp. 148-149.

> Pitifully the storm blew her into his arms, a tossed and straying thing that could not speak for sobs; pitifully and with a rough incoherent sound he gathered and held her in that refuge . . . Yet she was there, in his arms, as she had never been before; her plight but made her in a manner sweeter . . . It was the moment of their great experience of one another; never again, in whatever crisis, could either know so deep, so wonderful a fathoming of the other soul. (248)

If we compare this with the climactic scene between Dorothea and Will in chapter eighty-three of *Middlemarch*, we will see the difference between subordinating melodramatic elements to the general design of the novel and failing to do so. What seems to have happened is that Duncan's intense sympathy for Advena's dilemma has subverted her narrative technique and created an unnecessary gap between the main and sub-plots. Though her deviations from the general tone of sophisticated social comedy are infrequent, they constitute a serious flaw, for they all concern Advena and serve to isolate her story from the main concerns of the novel.

IV

Even if we resolutely ignore such slips in narrative tone, the conclusion of *The Imperialist* is perplexing. The Milburn family seems to be central to the puzzle. Clara Thomas points to the racial element in Duncan's thought and suggests that the "pretension, time-serving and prejudice of such neo-colonialists as the Englishman, Octavius Milburn . . . are clearly to be vanquished by the rising generation" of Scotch-Canadians represented by the young Murchisons.[14] For Thomas Tausky the novel is more ambiguous: "she seems to have the Murchisons and the Milburns in mind as two alternative directions for the evolution of a more advanced culture," and her conclusion is highly uncertain.[15] Yet another possibility is that these families represent two contending social principles, neither of which can entirely prevail over the other.

There is no doubt that Duncan portrays a society in the process of change. She strongly emphasizes the passing of the seasons and the years, the rise to social dominance of such men as John Murchison and Dr. Drummond, the emergence of a new generation in the young people of the novel. In a characteristic passage (101-105) the Murchison parents

[14]Thomas, p. 42.
[15]Tausky, pp. 163, 171.

sit on their verandah talking over the development of their children's lives. Now that the Murchisons have "overstamped the Plummers" in the town's consciousness, their home is known as the Murchison Place. The horse chestnut blooms as it had done for thirty years; the "growing authority of his family" has led John Murchison to forsake shirtsleeves for more formal dress; the coming of Abby's babies has led Mrs. Murchison to take out her old patterns for children's clothes. Such gradual developments are presented as part of a larger historical pattern that will determine Canada's future. "[W]e are here at the making of a nation," Duncan remarks at one point (47).

It is also true that in treating this historical pattern she reveals strong racial sympathies. She likes the Scotch and views Indians with contempt (see especially 242-243). The Murchisons, who certainly have her sympathy, are represented as part of a general movement that has supplanted the Anglican colonial gentry. But she presents this change as political and social rather than simply racial, as a move from the Tory centre to the Liberal provinces. The Anglican gentry were succeeded in political office by "young Liberals" and their "grandsons married the daughters of well-to-do persons who came from the north of Ireland, the east of Scotland, and the Lord knows where" (47). Octavius Milburn is not actually an Englishman but a nationalistic and highly conservative Canadian, one who "was born, one might say, in the manufacturing interest, and inherited the complacent and Conservative political views of a tenderly nourished industry" (52). His wife and his wife's sister ape the manners of the British upper class and have taught his daughter Dora to speak with an English accent. The family is Anglican as well as Conservative and has links through the local rector with an English family, the Chafes, whose social and political position much resembles theirs (118-121). Thus the Milburns seem related to the tradition of British colonialism, and Duncan plainly views them with distaste. But again the reason may be political. Wallingham and Williams are not Scottish names, but their owners are liberals and are sympathetically treated. Squire Ormiston is even more clearly a remant of a bygone era and is certainly of English descent, but he is not viewed negatively, perhaps because he does not pose a present threat to the liberal interest. Indeed the good old fellow turns out to be a whig, deep down (171). Duncan's racial prejudices are undeniable, but her political prejudices are even stronger. One reason that the Milburns are treated as the villains of the novel is that they represent the continuing force of conservative opinion in Canadian society.

Will the Milburns be supplanted by the Murchisons? No doubt Duncan hopes so, but her novel does not give much hope of it. Octavius and Dora Milburn are especially notable as being more clear-sighted in their views of what is going on in society than the characters whom we are expected to like, and at the end of the novel there is no sign that their powers are on the wane. Octavius Milburn has no illusions at all about the likely fate of the imperial ideals (166, 211-212). His daughter is equally realistic. In her own drawing-room "she was very much aware of herself, of the situation, and of her value in it, a setting for herself she saw it, and saw it truly" (96). She has a calculating eye for Lorne's chances. Like the town in general, she begins by taking up with him as a very likely opportunity and ends by discarding him as not really to the purpose. When Lorne rhapsodizes about the English ("they're rich with character and strong with conduct and hoary with ideals") Dora merely replies, "I don't believe they are a bit better than we are" (98-99). Of course she is right, as the career of Alfred Hesketh will show. Lorne discovers that narrow-minded materialism prevails as much in England as at home, and the idealistic Wallingham is ultimately helpless against it (222-223).

Catherine Sheldrick Ross says that Advena "is marked out by name and character as the heroine of the future."[16] But the novel concludes with Dora still ascendant over conventional society in Elgin while Advena and Hugh Finlay, having been set free by the grace of Dr. Drummond, are to bring their combined idealism to bear on life at the White Water Mission Station in Alberta (250). Why should we expect two such impractical dreamers to make more of life out West than Elmore Crow did?[17] If the mission is to the Indians, we know too well what Duncan thinks of them. The ending of the main plot presents a similar problem. Duncan suggests that Lorne and Henry Cruickshank will sustain each other against the onset of cynicism (268) and will continue to struggle for a better Canada. Why should we expect them to be any more successful in the future than they have been in the past?

A modern reading of the novel is necessarily affected by the fact that we know the outcome of the imperial question. Octavius Milburn's skeptical predictions have proved to be the simple truth. It seems that Duncan has dramatized her fears for the future of Canadian society in the figures of the Milburns, her hopes in the Murchisons. In her final

[16]Ross, p. 44.
[17]A point suggested by Thomas, p. 45.

paragraph Cruickshank's offer of a partnership to Lorne is compared with the British government's moves towards imperial federation. Is it too soon for these to be accepted by Canada, she asks, or is it too late (268)? The Milburn faction have won in the short run, but will they win in the long? Duncan tries to leave the issue open,[18] but even to her contemporary readers it might well have seemed that the future of the social world she depicts is more likely to lie with Stella Murchison, who knows how to appear no better than other people (44), than it does with idealists such as Lorne and Advena. Our final image is of Lorne going "forth to his share in the task among those by whose hand and direction the pattern and the colours [of destiny] will be made." This is intended to assert his significance, but it also suggests his submergence in the crowd. Just as Lorne was "an atom in the surge of London" (118) and just as Canadians are "atomic creatures building the reef of the future" (149), so Lorne is powerless to do more than lend his hand to the building of a nation that is ruled, for the most part, by narrow-minded practicality. The Milburns represent a basic conservatism to which society, however liberal-minded it may appear, is always likely to revert. In fact Duncan's liberals are ultimately contained by conservatism. The Liberal party will take up with Lorne when he seems the coming thing, but will desert him just as surely as Dora does when the going gets rough. The Milburns are unattractive figures because they present in its purest form the values that actually prevail in society, without the sympathetic qualities that offset these same values in such figures as Dr. Drummond and John Murchison, and without the excuse of economic necessity that explains such lives as Mrs. Crow's.

As Thomas Tausky remarks, the action of *The Imperialist* "inspires pessimism," yet the work as a whole is not pessimistic.[19] Rather it presents social life as a constant battle in which the human imagination must always be curbed and disciplined by circumstances but in which the heroic quality of life comes from the continued assertion of human ideals in the fact of their continued defeat. Certainly human beings without ideals are an unattractive spectacle, as Duncan presents them. Yet idealism itself is ambiguously presented. Is her hero Lorne Murchison, as she says, or his father? John Murchison and Henry Cruickshank seem to represent the best that society has to offer. Perhaps Lorne's role is to become like them and in his turn to offer fatherly

[18]Tausky, pp. 160-161, points out that the future of the question was especially uncertain at the time the novel was written.
[19]Tausky, pp. 160, 171.

guidance for the idealistic impulse in others. Duncan does not tell us, and evidently she was not sure. She plainly believed in the progressive amelioration of society by liberal principles. Her experience of life and particularly of Canadian life had taught her that this process was at best an arduous and painful one, perhaps even futile. Yet she was not prepared to see the submergence of liberal principles as simply an unhappy ending.

Claude Bissell invites a comparison of Duncan and George Eliot,[20] and the idea is a useful one. The detached yet sympathetic analysis of a provincial community, the insistent theme of social determinism, the use of contrasting yet matched or paired characters (and especially the use of a pair of idealists one male and one female, as central figures in separate plots)—in all these ways we may be reminded of *Middlemarch*. The correspondence in imagery is sometimes striking, as in Lorne's being "fast tied in the cobwebs of the common prescription" (53). Dora is very like Rosamund Vincy in her selfishness, her shallow materialism and her conventional beauty. But the pattern of causality in *Middlemarch* seems so complex and far-reaching that no one can grasp it, and certainly not Rosamund. Duncan is concerned with a simpler and more limited pattern, one that so acute and hard-headed a person as Dora has no trouble understanding. This quality of understanding also means that Dora cannot bring about so tragically destructive an outcome as Lydgate's eventual fate. Dora finds the right mate in Hesketh, and Lorne at least does not find the wrong one in her. Furthermore, such tragic potential as Duncan's material possesses is nullified by the intervention of kindly parental figures. The impossibly idealistic Finlay is saved from disaster by Dr. Drummond, just as Henry Cruickshank saves Lorne from the unhappy fate of trying to become an American. The reader is led to identify with her idealistic young people but at the same time led to understand that there will always be someone around who knows how the world really works and can save the idealists from themselves. Duncan's allegiances are divided: she wants the idealists to win but regards it as simply part of the social comedy when they do not, very likely because she has an underlying faith in the world of John Murchison and her own father. The result is a curious mixture: the social realism she had learned from George Eliot and others gives way ultimately—and yet not entirely—to the conventions of popular romantic comedy.[21]

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[20]Bissell, vi.

[21]See Ross, p. 46, and Tausky, pp. 73-75.

V

Duncan's narrative uncertainty is not always a weakness. It can be an amusing affectation, as when she finds herself launched on "an analysis of social principles in Elgin" despite her desire to get herself and her characters to the Milburns' party (46). But it is not simply an affectation, for the novel has a distinctly improvisational cast. A single final example will show how this quality contributes to its general character.

In describing Lorne's first meeting with Elmore Crow the narrator permits herself an aside (75-76) on the subject of the Collegiate Institute's importance in the life of Elgin. Evidently thinking of her British readers, she identifies the Institute as "that really 'public' kind of school which has so much to do with reassorting the classes of a new country." She then develops this theme at a little length:

> The Collegiate Institute took in raw material and turned out teachers, more teachers than anything. The teachers taught, chiefly in rural districts where they could save money, and with the money they saved changed themselves into doctors, Fellows of the University, mining engineers. The Collegiate Institute was a potential melting-pot: you went in as your simple opportunities had made you; how you shaped coming out depended upon what was hidden in the core of you. You could not in any case be the same as your father before you; education in a new country is too powerful a stimulant for that, working upon material too plastic and too hypothetical; it is not yet a normal force, with an operation to be reckoned on with confidence. It is indeed the touchstone for character in a new people, for character acquired as part from that inherited; it sometimes reveals surprises.

At this point in the paragraph she turns abruptly back to the subject at hand:

> Neither Lorne Murchison nor Elmore Crow illustrates this point very nearly. Lorne would have gone into the law in any case, since his father was able to send him, and Elmore would inevitably gone back to the crops since he was early defeated by any other possibility. Nevertheless, as they walk together in my mind along the Elgin market square, the Elgin Collegiate Institute rises infallibly behind them, a directing influence and a responsible parent.

Clara Thomas suggests that in the first part of this paragraph Duncan was being ironic.[22] This is a charitable view, but it seems just as

[22]Thomas, p. 44.

likely that she was carried away for the moment by her nationalistic sympathies, then remembered that her characters did not fit her thesis and simply said so, rather than revising the paragraph. She is concerned to present Canada as a young and developing nation, and so she falls into rather conventional North American rhetoric about educational opportunities in the new world. But she has already made it clear that class distinction remains all-important in Elgin, however much the traditional barriers may have shifted, and the scene she is depicting turns on this fact. Her apparent confusion on the point derives from her ambivalence about the traditional or parental world. In part, the dead hand of tradition lies on Elgin's hopes; in part, Elgin is moving towards a brighter future. Thus the market is described with notable ambiguity as containing Canada's heart—"the enduring heart of the new country already old in acquiescence . . . the deep root of the race in the land, twisted and unlovely, but holding the promise of all" (73-74). Canada is new but old, crippled but flourishing, dominated by the past but the country of the future. In any case, the Collegiate Institute is clearly "a directing influence and a responsible parent." But what kind of parent? One that restricts its children or sets them free? Duncan knows it is the first: much of what happens at the Institute is an extension of the social principles that separate a Lorne Murchison from an Elmore Crow. In fact, Elmore *will* be what his father was before him, and if Lorne will not, it is because of his father's social position. Yet she trusts it is somehow the second. After all, Elmore's brother will become a dentist. Because of the Collegiate Institute? No doubt, but also because "the old folks are backin' him" (75).

The confusion revealed in this passage is fundamental to the novel. Duncan's uncertainty about the Collegiate Institute is of a piece with her uncertainty about the imperial question and her uncertainty about Canada itself. The result is not simply a flawed novel. Much of the work's complexity and richness derives from her not having been able to decide. She has dramatized her hopes and fears and at the same time has been seemingly compelled simply to tell the truth as far as she knew it. The unevenness and difficulty of the novel are part of its interest and ultimately reveal an imaginative mind grappling with the most perplexing and compelling of all questions to Canadians, that of their own uncertain nature. Will Canada become a major power through her association with the British Empire? Duncan sympathized with the youthful excitement and idealism that accompanied this idea but guessed shrewdly at the forces that would in time make it irrelevant. Will Can-

ada's Lornes and Advenas transform the parental world as they inherit it? The question is left open, though the disparity in Duncan's treatment of her hero and heroine shows her unacknowledged disbelief in the likelihood of much improvement in the unconventional woman's lot. In both her certainty and uncertainty, in her realism and occasional lapses from it, Duncan is an eloquent and important witness to the ambiguity of our developing national identity in the years before World War I.

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