

## *Small Town Ontario in Robertson Davies' Fifth Business: Mariposa Revised?*

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Before arguing what Davies the novelist makes of small town Ontario, I shall consider Davies the reader and critic. In a recent essay, "A Rake at Reading," Davies explains his notion of reading and recounts the books that have been influential in his development: the account, as Davies recognizes, says more about *his* taste than about the books themselves. Take his preference for melodrama over realism: "melodrama is as valid a mode of synthesizing experience as tragedy or comedy, and . . . whereas few of us are so happy as to live our lives in terms of comedy, and fewer still move in the terrible world of tragedy, most of us live out our existence in that combination of cheerfulness, despair, coincidence, poetry, low comedy and slap-dash improvisation that is the shimmering fabric of melodrama".<sup>1</sup> What shines through this lively definition of melodrama is not only a faith in the variegated human condition but also the contentious no-nonsense attitude of a self-made man of letters, a man who set his eclectic taste and practical experience of the world against the remote categories of the trained-up scholar. Certainly, in Davies' essay, the striking quality of his writing often arises from his violation of conventional assumptions: in an age that looks askance at nineteenth-century melodrama, Davies champions melodrama; in a secular age largely indifferent to the Bible, he advances the practicality and vitality of the Bible, "a repository not only of salty, hard bitten wisdom but [also] . . . a never failing book of wonders and inspiration that are timeless" (p. 16). In the era of professional and archetypal critics, Davies champions the amateur reader and suggests that meaning resides primarily in the individual reader, *not* in the text: "when you read a book, you are at least half the totality of that experience; the reader makes something fresh of whatever it is he reads. A book is renewed every time it finds a perceptive reader" (pp. 18-19). Indeed reading itself becomes a creative art: it is "a truly turning inward. It is exploration, extension and reflection of one's innermost self" (p. 19). Elsewhere Davies insists that reading is the silent speaking, the inward acting, of the text.

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<sup>1</sup>Robertson Davies, "A Rake in Reading," *Mosaic*, 14, No. 2 (1981), 11.

Yet in a much earlier essay and lecture, one on Stephen Leacock, Davies assigns reading a much more modest place; he disclaims for himself, the reader, any set point of view, any preconception of the author's meaning. He modestly complains, ". . . I lack a critical theory—a novel point of view. When I began my preparation, I had some splendid ideas about Leacock, but deeper study of his work banished them. He was too big to be caught in the net of any of my theories."<sup>2</sup> Here Davies, the reader, apparently submits to the larger reality of his author, Leacock. Later, however, while suggesting that Leacock wrote in an era "before the modern vogue for easy self-revelation," Davies says, "If we are to seek the truth about him, we shall have to read between the lines in his work, for we shall not find what we are looking for plainly set forth" (p. 98). And which Leacock does Davies read between the lines? Not finally the Leacock who was the "master of fun" (p. 107), nor the Leacock who belonged to the "greatest tradition," i.e., the tradition of "the deepest humour, the full and joyous recognition of the Comic Spirit at work in life" (p. 107), nor the humane Leacock who insisted that humour must be "kindly" (p. 109). For it now appears that the previously modest Davies *does* have a theory of humour ready at hand: humour is not always innocent or kindly; it is a comment on life from a special point of view. . . ." (p. 109). Humour implies truth-telling and thereby pain: while humour may "strip away" the conventional and thereby "set us free" (p. 110), "the truth is a very sharp knife". In Davies' metaphor, then, Leacock becomes a surgeon performing exploratory surgery, anatomizing the ills of an unhealthy patient; his outlook, the "glare of the clinician's lamp" (p. 112). On the way to clinching this point, Davies denigrates Leacock's fictional village of Mariposa:

[*Sunshine Sketches*] is a detailed portrait of an Ontario community which is not only very funny, but also ferocious and mordant. We are beguiled by the manner in which the book is written from giving to[o] much attention to its matter. What it says, if we boil it down, is that the people of Mariposa were a self-important, gullible, only moderately honest collection of provincial folk; they cooked their election, they burned down a church to get the insurance, they exaggerated the most trivial incidents into magnificent feats of bravery; the sunshine in which the little town bathed seems very often to be the glare of the clinician's lamp, and the author's pen is as sharp as the clinician's scalpel. (pp. 111-112)

<sup>2</sup>Robertson Davies, "On Stephen Leacock," in *Masks of Fiction*, ed. Malcolm Ross (Toronto: McLelland and Stewart, 1961), p. 94. Originally delivered as a lecture, first published in *Our Living Tradition*, 1957.

To Leacock's truth-telling, his mental toughness and sharpness, Davies now attaches the attributes of breadth and sophistication: "Leacock's affection [sic] of frontier attitudes and habits of speech was nothing more than the intellectual fancy dress of a highly educated, sophisticated, and mature being" (p. 112). Yet Davies represents Leacock after all as a failure—a failed novelist and a man who failed to come to terms with the darkness, "the pathos and melancholy [which] enter his work unbidden" (p. 107). Leacock is now transformed into the sad clown behind the comic mask, an unappreciated man "who fought the solitary fight of the literary artist in a special state of loneliness" (p. 113).

The supposed reason for Leacock's failure as a man and artist has special application to my own argument regarding Davies' point of view and the Ontario village that Davies makes for himself. Leacock in various ways is shown to be an unappreciated and undeveloped genius, a man preoccupied with his boyhood experience of frontier poverty and thereby with the dubious security of money; Leacock's inadequate (or uncritical) audience demanded merely a cheerful flow of nonsense, demanded the same thing over and over again, and thereby discouraged Leacock's experimentation and growth. That Leacock's audience might have provided a barren soil for the growth of genius can be seen in Davies' own presentation of our provincial culture:

We undoubtedly owe much to the earnestness and seriousness of purpose which marked our pioneer ancestors, but we may surely recognise now that there was a negative side to that condition of mind; Canada was settled, in the main, by people with a lower middle-class outlook and a respect, rather than an affectionate familiarity, for the things of the mind. Worthy and staunch though they were, there was also a grim dreariness and meagreness of intellect about them which has shaped and darkened our educational system and which casts a damp blanket over our national spirits to this day. We retain a sour Caledonian conviction that a man who sees life in humorous terms is a trifler. (pp. 99-100)

Do we indeed? Remember, this is the reader, Davies, speaking about Leacock's Ontario and Canada, and Leacock himself. Davies' evocation of Canada in fact bears little relation to what Leacock's fiction presents: in *Sunshine Sketches*, Leacock's villagers are celebrated in (if not for) their unselfconscious, childish ease; despite their efforts to take on big city ways and to grow larger, Leacock celebrates their arrested development, their static dreamlike existence. Leacock's Dean Drone and his young "hero" Pupkin remain, it is true, ineffectual, spectacularly out of it—so much so that one might indeed wonder how their fore-

fathers could possibly have survived as pioneers. But consider the place of Josh Smith in Leacock's dreamworld: Smith the illiterate and pragmatic frontiersman from the North would appear to be the genuine hero of Leacock's small town Ontario: he acts; he shrewdly solves every problem and profits from every near catastrophe; and yet unlike the Pluturians in *Arcadian Adventures*, he seems content, despite his boisterous dress and slick ways, to accomplish little more than a return to the previous equilibrium.<sup>3</sup> The last chapter of *Sunshine Sketches* makes clear that Leacock has deliberately frozen time or contained action, for Leacock "transforms the image of a train returning to Mariposa to no more than a train of nostalgic memory proceeding from the mind of one of those Mariposans who has remained attached to his roots while becoming one of those big city Pluturians who rest and muse and work out of the Mausoleum Club" (p. 509). Provincial and frontier culture stands up well here against Leacock's fearful anticipations of our metropolitan and scientific future. I find Leacock's maturity of mind then to reside in his tough, shrewd recognition that the past, the world which originated us, can only be retained through an act of loving and yet ironic remembrance.

From my version of Leacock, then, I would argue that it is Davies, not Leacock, who exhibits the close relation of humour to truth-telling and pain: it is Davies who assumes that humour is based upon painful recognition. It is Davies, not Leacock, who looks upon Leacock's village with the glare of the clinician's (or psychoanalyst's) lamp, reading between the lines, denying the truth of appearances, suggesting sinister shadows or depths beneath the sunlit surfaces of the individual or collective mind.

What relation Davies' fictional world or Leacock's fictional world has to Canada itself or small town Ontario itself, one cannot know, but I believe that a literary work is not a mirror: it does not present a simple, unmediated or undistorted reflection of "reality". Certainly, Davies' and Leacock's "reflections" do not agree with one another, and indeed Davies "reading between the lines" makes Leacock's words (and his village) mean something other than what they say.

It is obvious then that I would encourage Davies' reader to take a sceptical stance toward Davies, for Davies is a tricky writer who believes that "reality" itself and fictional reality are tricky. Like many modern

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<sup>3</sup>R. D. MacDonald and J. Jushner, "Leacock: Economist/Satirist in *Arcadian Adventures* and *Sunshine Sketches*," *Dalhousie Review*, 56, No. 3 (1976), 508.

novels, Davies' novel *Fifth Business* is fraught with ontological difficulty: is the presented world of Deptford merely Dunstan Ramsay's world? or also at a more profound level is it Robertson Davies' world? Are the words of this novel, this autobiographical letter from Ramsay to his new headmaster, Ramsay's alone? or is Davies implicated as well? Is Ramsay to be seen as a paradigm of humanity or at least improved humanity, showing us how we ourselves, by coming to terms with our own personal devils or dark and narrow selves, might also be enlightened and enlarged? What does Davies make of Ramsay in *Fifth Business*, and what does Davies himself mean by *Fifth Business*?

Before considering Davies, one must begin with Dunstan Ramsay, Davies' fictional narrator; and before Davies' small town Ontario, Ramsay's fictional village of Deptford. It is no simple matter to ask who Davies' Ramsay might be, for the story as a whole indicates that we have many potential selves and that our obligation is not so much a matter of being true to one's self as it is in discovering and enacting our deeper possibilities. Ramsay is aware that he has been summed up, dismissed as a mere retired schoolmaster when he is in fact a man of unusual accomplishments, amongst other things a war hero and a hagiologist of international reputation. Thus the purpose of his extended letter to the new headmaster (which comprises the length of Davies' novel) is at least twofold: first, because his former student, Lorne Packer, has dared to characterise Ramsay in the *College Chronicle* as no more than (and perhaps less than) his job, Ramsay is determined to defend his reputation and to turn Packer's condescending spite back upon himself; secondly, because Packer has dared to compare Ramsay unfavourably to Ramsay's lifelong friend and enemy, his rival from childhood, Boy Staunton, and thereby again to slight him, Ramsay is again roused not only to defend himself but to attack what he has been set against. Ramsay's letter then is an militant apologia written from spite and with subtle self-awareness: the writer is obviously a clever and tough adversary, cleverly honest in his self-admitted duplicities and, as I shall argue later, cleverly dishonest in his deliberate (perhaps playful) refusal to tell all in this seeming work of confession. Indeed, Ramsay the man of thought is no tender-minded intellectual; he is a tough, even deadly adversary; he "kills" or is largely responsible for the death of his opposite, Boy Staunton, the heroic man of action. Despite my catalogue of pejorative epithets ("deadly", "dishonest", "spiteful"), however, Davies disposes his reader to admire and trust Ramsay: for it is difficult to distrust a villain who shows the humbug in others and who confi-

dentially admits his spite and takes frank pleasure in his own cleverness and deceptions. If Davies makes his narrator attractive, is Davies own viewpoint to be identified with his narrator? And is the novel to be identified with the letter? And Davies' small town Ontario with Ramsay's Deptford?

To answer such questions, one must examine Ramsay's words closely, both what he says and does not say: the silences, the unspoken spaces here, the deliberate confusions or ambiguities there, will be as significant as Ramsay's apparently plain style of exposition. I am not (as Davies himself might say) "reading between the lines"; I am attempting to read the words, lines and actions themselves, and (as Davies might say again) I am attempting to watch (as might perhaps an unimaginative child) the magician's hidden actions, Davies' feints, his deliberate misdirections of the spectator's attention: through such attention the cleverness and meaning of Davies' world will become more apparent. In the second chapter, Ramsay's direct address to the headmaster is obviously sneering, undercutting and academic: Ramsay's allusions to literary tradition and to the larger adult world beyond childhood and beyond the provincial milieu of Deptford is used to prevent the reader from taking Ramsay's account of his childhood at face value. Chapter I, however, is exact, even "objective" in its opening and closing, and spare in its narration of the crucial childhood incident, i.e., Ramsay's deliberate feint in front of the Dempsters which results in Boy Staunton's snowball accidentally hitting Mrs. Dempster and results further in the premature birth of Paul Dempster and the transformation of Mrs. Dempster into a "simple" or mad woman. The opening exhibits the exactitude of a police report: "My lifelong involvement with Mrs. Dempster began at 5:58 o'clock p.m. on the 27th of December 1908, at which time I was ten years and seven months old."<sup>4</sup> This precise attention to time creates an oddly matter-of-fact background to the melodramatic consequences of the thrown snowball, Dunny's absolute sense of guilt, his permanent isolation from his family and village and his resentment toward Boy Staunton, who denies any responsibility for or knowledge of the secret sin. Nor does Ramsay's deflection of attention from himself to Dempster suggest an apt or dramatic focus: "That was how Paul Dempster, whose reputation is doubtless familiar to you (though that was not the name under which he gained [fame]) came to be born early on the morning of December 28 in 1908" (p. 12). Despite the

<sup>4</sup>Robertson Davies, *Fifth Business* (Toronto, 1970; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), p. 9.

spare, undramatic objectivity of the prose, the wording does suggest that the young Ramsay's clever malice, which gave rise to the deliberate feint in front of the Dempsters (and hence the thrown snowball), survives into the present in the ongoing flow of the teller's words: "that afternoon I had been sledding with my lifelong friend and enemy Percy Boy Staunton, and we had quarrelled, because his fine new Christmas sled would not go as fast as my old one" (p. 9). The close juxtaposition of opposites, "lifelong friend and enemy", immediately violates the reader's conventional expectations of language and human relations; the "because" neatly shifts the blame for the quarrel from Dunny himself to Boy; and the deft implication that no one, man or child, can tolerate another getting ahead of him hints immediately at a toughly cynical and competitive attitude and a self-assured and ironic overview. The paragraph following is a capsule narrative in which the adult speaker re-enacts his childish triumph, his revenge, his clever getting ahead of his lifelong rival:

The afternoon had been humiliating for him, and when Percy was humiliated he was vindictive. His parents were rich, his clothes were fine, and his mittens were of skin and came from a store in the city, whereas mine were knitted by my mother; it was manifestly wrong, *therefore*, that his splendid sled should not go faster than mine, and when such injustice showed itself Percy became cranky. He slighted my sled, scoffed at my mittens, and at last came right out and said that his father was better than my father. *Instead* of hitting him, which might have started a fight that could have ended in a draw or even a defeat for me, I said, all right, then, I would go home and he could have the field to himself. This was crafty of me, *for* I knew it was getting on for suppertime, and one of our home rules was that nobody, under any circumstances, was to be late for a meal. So I was keeping the home rule, while at the same time leaving Percy to himself.

As I walked back to the village he followed me, shouting fresh insults. When I walked, he taunted, I staggered like an old cow; my woollen cap was absurd beyond all belief; my backside was immense and wobbled when I walked; and more of the same sort, *for* his invention was not lively. I said nothing, *because* I knew that this spited him more than any retort, and that every time he shouted at me he lost face. (Italics mine, pp. 9-10)

I draw attention to the logical connectives because first they indicate the petty, vindictive logic of Staunton and secondly, the more devious and conscious logic of Ramsay. Ramsay in this account willingly casts himself in the role of the ugly, abused and awkward victim but also makes clear his clever double-consciousness and duplicity, which en-

abled him to taunt Boy Staunton by means of dignified withdrawal and yet to behave as the obedient child getting himself home in time for supper. Thus, while at this point Ramsay does not go on explicitly to say that he has made the Dempsters into his target, the reader has already been made aware of Ramsay's leading Staunton on. The bare presentation of fact overrides Ramsay's subtle admission of mischief and forestalls any tendency of the reader to judge the full extent of Ramsay's responsibility:

Percy had been throwing snowballs at me, from time to time, and I had ducked them all; I had a boy's sense of when a snowball was coming, and I knew Percy. I was sure that he would try to land one last, insulting snowball between my shoulders before I ducked into our house. I stepped briskly—not running, but not dawdling—in front of the Dempsters *just as* Percy threw, and the snowball hit Mrs. Dempster on the back of the head. (Italics mine, p. 10)

Notice in this quotation the absence of “therefore’s” and the frequency of “and’s”: here Ramsay does not declare, though he leaves implicit and obvious, the fact that he *therefore* “stepped briskly”. Notice also the syntactical feint, “not running but not dawdling”, which obscures the motive, motive and direction of the sentence and the flight of the snowball—for Ramsay mischievously moves in front of the Dempsters in order that Boy Staunton's rage, the thrown snowball, will in its results recoil back upon Staunton himself. In this opening then, Ramsay has managed to show himself as the knowing original cause of the “accident” while at the same time setting that fact for the reader at an emotional distance.

It is in the second chapter that we discover the reason for this strangely distanced narrative. Ramsay is compelled to justify himself as a man and professional against Packer's “portrait of [Ramsay] as a typical old schoolmaster doddering into retirement with tears in his eyes and a drop hanging from his nose” (p. 13). Packer's ham-fisted prose and mean attitude are delightfully parodied by Davies. The energetic indignation of Ramsay's response (i.e., “what most galls me is the patronizing, dismissive tone of the piece—as if I had never had a life outside the classroom, had never risen to the full stature of a man” [p. 14])—this energetic indignation is delightfully consistent with the secretly but fully vindictive child/man of the first chapter. His explanation of his autobiographical stance is also delightful because of Ramsay's sophisticated and cynical awareness of literary conventions—of the typical



saccharine knowingness of the child in autobiographical narration: "I have always sneered at autobiographies and memoirs in which the author appears at the beginning as a charming, knowing little fellow, possessed of insights and perceptions beyond his years, yet offering these with a false naïveté . . ." (p. 15). Indeed, both the child and the man Ramsay, the recalled child and the narrator, exhibit knowingness, malice and clever charm—but never of a saccharine kind.

Yet Ramsay's narrative point of view is oddly and complexly remote: his perspective is attributed in part to Deptford, but it is an understanding which pretends to a larger cosmopolitan horizon beyond Deptford and from which Deptford is judged. While Ramsay's remoteness and isolation are attributed in large part to his secret guilt over Mrs. Dempster's madness, it is also attributed to the Scottishness of Ramsay's family. Ramsay comments upon the confident superiority of his family: ". . . the Scots . . . the salt of the earth . . . we were not surprised that [the town] looked to us, the [Scottish] Ramsay family, for common sense, prudence and right opinions on virtually everything" (p. 18). Liesel, however, with her knowledge of Swiss Calvinism later sees the inhuman repression of Ramsay's background and characterizes him as "a man full of secrets, grim-mouthed and buttoned-up and hard-eyed and cruel, because you are cruel to yourself. . . . That horrid village and your hateful Scots family made you a moral monster" (p. 217).

But the costive dourness of Ramsay must, as Liesel recognises, be attributed to more than Ramsay's family and Scottish background: the background of the village itself is the familiar frontier and provincial background found in many Canadian literary works: it is a narrow, precarious, unheroic, drab, even mean ground of being; in Ramsay's version, however, one finds little of pioneer hope, energy or resourcefulness. Instead Ramsay is preoccupied with what society is not: "our village . . . did not contain everything, and one of the things it conspicuously lacked was an aesthetic sense; we were all too much the descendents of hard-bitten pioneers to wish for or encourage any such thing, and we gave hard names to qualities that, in a more sophisticated society, might have had value" (p. 25). This passage stands against a portrait of the ineffectual but girlish freshness, the simple naturalness of Mary Dempster, whom Ramsay later reveres as a saint: to Ramsay she is the paradigm of a clear, open and sweet breadth of spirit; to the narrow villagers of Deptford she is merely the dotty wife of the Baptist preacher and finally a mere mad whore. Dunny's departure from the ways of the parochial, repressed village begins then from his admiration

for Mary Dempster and his secret guilt for the premature birth of her child and her incipient madness.

I hesitate to say that the village itself does not change or that Ramsay is transformed into a liberated man, a man of broader, more joyful and more sympathetic spirit, for one cannot forget the lifelong relationship of enmity which unites him to Boy Staunton—and one must not forget that Dunny brings about the death of Boy Staunton. That relationship and the village are, I think, better understood by examining the place of the Staunton family in Deptford. Like the Ramsays, the Stauntons seem removed from the mainstream of Deptford: Boy Staunton's father is the town doctor and a land developer, farmer and sugar-beet industrialist. Yet while wealth would seem to elevate the Staunton's above the commonplace, Boy Staunton himself is shown to live a glossy existence which is little more than an imitation of a style defined by someone else. Although he "gleamed" and "glowed" and seemed the epitome of youth, he is made to seem a second-hand hero out of a Scott Fitzgerald novel (p. 114). The tawdry heroism of the young war hero, Staunton's unconscious identification with the brutality of the townspeople's victory procession, is sharply caught by the vindictive Ramsay:

Here they were, in this murky, fiery light, happily acquiescent in a symbolic act of cruelty and hatred. As the only person there, I suppose, who had any idea of what a really bad burn was like, I watched them with dismay that mounted towards horror, for these were my own people.

Leola's face looked very pretty as she turned it upward towards the fire, and Percy was laughing and looking about him for admiration as he shouted in his strong, manly voice, "Hang the Kaiser!" (p. 102)

Moreover Staunton's insistence upon remaining "Boy" Staunton, his refusal to grow older or grow up, his refusal to accept his part in the accident that befalls Mary Dempster, Ramsay's continued representation of Staunton as a clever organiser, a man of action without self-awareness—all this would seem to indicate that despite his wealth and urbane style Boy Staunton remains representative of the mean, unconscious, unenlightened background which is Deptford. While Staunton cannot be identified entirely with his former classmate, the clownish Milo, he is not that far removed mentally from the collective "consciousness" expressed by Milo who acts as Davies' comic chorus:

'... I guess the worst was young Grace Izzard—maybe you don't remember—she's always called Harelip because she's got this funny-looking lip. Well, she got to fourteen and got to guessing, I suppose, but who'd want her with a face like that? So she promises her kid brother Bobby, who's about twelve, a quarter if he'll do it to her, and he does but only if he gets ten cents first, and then, jeez, when he's finished she only gives him another nickel because she says that's all it's worth! Isn't that a corker, eh? And then—'

And then two bastards, a juicy self-induced abortion, several jiltings, an old maid gone foolish in menopause, and a goitre of such proportions as to make all previous local goitres seem like warts, which Dr. McCausland was treating in Bowles Corners. The prurient, the humiliating, and the macabre were Milo's principal areas of enthusiasm, and we explored them all. (p. 105)

Later, of course, Staunton is seen as a Titan of industry far above such mean absurdities, identifying himself with the charisma of the young Prince of Wales, yet showing still a crude and cruel sensibility beyond the prurient imaginings of Milo. Staunton seats himself between his wife and Ramsay (the former suitor to his wife) while exhibiting to the two the nude photographs which he has taken of his wife and which he has had Ramsay develop. Again, when Paul Dempster reveals his Deptford origins in common with Staunton and Ramsay, Dempster identifies Staunton with the crude, thoughtless cruelty of the small town and says:

... I can call up in an instant what it felt like to be the child of a woman everybody jeered at and thought a dirty joke—including you, the Rich Young Ruler. But I am sure your accent is much more elegant now. A Lieutenant-Governor who said "hoor" would not reflect credit on the Crown, would he? (p. 261)

In reading the second and third novels, *The Manticore* and *World of Wonders* of Davies' trilogy, however, one can see that Paul Dempster himself has retained as much his share of spite as do his two fellow Deptfordites, Ramsay and Staunton. Indeed it could be argued that the conclusion of the stone-in-the-snowball story is as much about the triumph of the spirit of cruelty—in this case, truth-telling as the inflicting of painful self-recognition—as it is about the metamorphosis of the provincial spirit into a larger cosmopolitan spirit: the sons of Deptford who have gone out into the larger world seem capable only of new unfoldings of a spite.

If the spirit of Deptford is no more than this, what is one to make of the larger world beyond Deptford? I have suggested that initiation into that larger world does not really mean (whatever Robertson Davies

intends) an improvement of spirit, though perhaps it does mean enlightenment. Consider the basic tale of Dunstan Ramsay: for his part in the initial snowball episode, Ramsay is self-condemned to isolation and to a conscience-stricken devotion to Mrs. Dempster. Out of his youthful isolation, however, he makes himself into a polymath, discovers and practices the magical tricks of Houdin, and devours the stories of the saints—thereby achieving “a splendid extension of life, a creation of a world of wonders, that hurt nobody” (p. 43). Thus the boy who has been separated from ordinary life is already well on his way to becoming the historian of religio/psychological archetypes, the man of thought who increasingly becomes aware of believing, pretending and lying as a route to deeper human truths, to the archetypes which underpin and shape our daily lives. Indeed by the end of *Fifth Business*, psychological truth is what matters above all else, not factual truth: heroic consciousness is what matters, not conventional or reflex acts of decency. The height and remoteness of this heroic consciousness is indicated by the gothic settings which bring to a close *The Manticore* and *The World of Wonders*, the gingerbread castle of Liesel high in the Swiss Alps, Sorgenfrei, the way of high, romantic freedom. It is this ideal of elevated human consciousness which finally tests or takes the measure of Boy Staunton’s meanness and thereby brings about his death.

For according to Ramsay, Staunton is an atheist because he has made his God merely in his own self-image and hence is finally unable to abide that God: atheism is here merely “psychological suicide”, a denial of one’s larger potential, an evasion of the basic pattern of human life, i.e., the necessity (even for “Boy”) to grow old and to come to terms with aging. As Paul Dempster (who has transformed himself into “Eisengrim”, the master magician with the nature of a wolf) argues: Staunton has hardly moved beyond what the town made of him—aside from his genius for making money, he is no more than a polished image of the town and thereby not really an individual man. Ramsay, however, like Dempster, transforms himself into an aristocrat of the imagination: he becomes adept at truth-telling through his anatomies of the saintly myths and through outright fiction and lying; as Father Blazon contends, Ramsay has proven his “heroic” dimension by wrestling with the devil (in the form of a woman, Liesl) while yet retaining his integrity (p. 250). In Jungian terms Ramsay has embraced his dark and dangerous shadow while retaining his hold on his conscious self. Because Ramsay fully realises the rivalry that underpins his friendship with Staunton and be-

cause he sees the deadly game or combat that they have really been engaged in, he is able finally to test Staunton's mettle, to bring Staunton, the incomplete man, into full possession of what he is. Ramsay presents himself as Staunton's redeemer: "I'm simply trying to recover something of the totality of your life. Don't you want to possess it as a whole—the bad with the good? I told you once you'd made a God of yourself, and the insufficiency of it forced you to become an atheist. It's time you tried to be a human being. Then maybe something bigger than you will come up on your horizon" (p. 264). Staunton, however, insists (with some justice, surely): "You're trying to get me. You want to humiliate me in front of this man here . . ." (p. 264). A pragmatic reader might argue that the proof of whether the act is generous or mean depends upon what Boy Staunton is able to make of the stone. Whatever, Staunton "swallows" the stone, drives off the dock and drowns himself. Has Davies then shown Ramsay to have acted generously, to have brought out of Boy Staunton what was already latent, his inability to grow old, his inability to accept a reality larger than his small, polished persona? Has Ramsay delivered Staunton from an intolerable human existence? Or is the "returning" of the stone to Staunton merely another act of vindictiveness, the final extremity of that one-up-manship with which the novel opened, the murderous action of the aware and clever thinker guiding the unconscious man of action to unforeseen but inevitable destruction?

I am not certain how Davies intends me to read the ending of his novel. Whatever the answer to my questions, I am certain that his "here", his *Fifth Business*, the outside observer who finally acts, and brings about the finale is all too much like Fowles' Conchis in *The Magus*: Conchis deliberately (consciously and wilfully) contrives a God-game, intervening in the course of an unconscious "here's" life, offering the unconscious participant a dubious freedom in a whimsical, devil-may-care spirit. Davies the novelist could himself be seen as a similar director of consciousness offering his reader the delights of expanded and "elevated" consciousness—the liberation of a devil-may-care spirit.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>See Stephen Bonnycastle's attack upon the morality of the Deptford trilogy in "Robertson Davies and the Ethics of Monologue," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 12, No. 1 (1977), pp. 22-40. Bonnycastle argues forcefully that we must reconsider the moral vision that works through Davies' writing: "The religion of these novels proposes a new deal, something primitive and sublime in which society and its institutions are insignificant, and dialogue and the reasoning powers of the mind are eliminated. When thinking, reasoning and dialogue are undervalued, it is significant that chance or destiny, should take on unusual importance" (p. 35).

But consider more exactly the impulse which finally moves Ramsay to action. He has been irritated by Staunton's attempt to make him look like a fool in front of the apparent stranger, Eisengrim, Paul Dempster. Ramsay has been astounded and further irritated to learn that the painful guilt he has carried through life has been conveniently forgotten by Staunton. Before brandishing the symbolic stone, Ramsay thinks: "Either I spoke now or I kept silence forever. Dunstan Ramsay counselled against revelation, but Fifth Business would not hear" (p. 263). Earlier in the book Ramsay fears it was an impulse of the devil that made him dodge in front of the Dempsters. Now at the conclusion, the more conscious and deliberate Ramsay recognises that he has the unexpected opportunity to act in an absolute way in Staunton's life, and he does bring about the death of Boy Staunton. Is there any less reason to suspect the impulse of the devil or the impulse of vindictiveness?

What then might this have to do with Davies' presentation of small town Ontario? At the conclusion, Ramsay claims that he himself, Dempster and Staunton have "all rejected our beginnings and become something our parents could not have foreseen" (p. 262). Indeed all three have apparently gone out into the wider world. Dempster and Ramsay, however, dedicate themselves to the wonders of the imagination, to the art and meaning of make-believe while Staunton makes the error of taking the actual world as the "real" world, seeing himself an active participant in that world but acting out unconsciously, however, the fashionable roles of that world. Staunton devotes himself to a reality no larger than his personal self, to the hollow persona, the ceremonial role of the Lieutenant Governor of Ontario and makes the mistake of overlooking or repressing all which might threaten his ideal self-conception. Indeed then, with the pink granite stone, the old paperweight, Dunstan Ramsay offers Boy the alternative of growing up, taking possession of his conscience, accepting willingly the inevitability of man's lot, mortality—or having all of this stick in his craw. Staunton does not or cannot swallow the stone; he dies. Surely part of the point of Davies parable is that the "Deptford mind" itself, the small mind of the business, political or professional class, would sooner die than be awakened to the larger life of impersonal consciousness.

Unlike Stephen Leacock then, Davies does not permit small town Ontario or Staunton to survive as an ironically distanced and yet sunlit idyllic memory. In *Fifth Business*, one finds little or nothing of Leacock's loving evocation of the surfaces of Mariposa. A similar ironic whimsy is at work in *Fifth Business* but the play of imagination is more darkly

sinister than that of Leacock, perhaps even darker than Davies himself suspects.

And yet I wonder. I think that Davies deliberately raises the sinister ambiguity, the tricky possibility that Dunstan Ramsay's stone was not the actual stone, if indeed there *was* an actual stone, that Staunton threw in the snowball. What would happen then to the book's meaning if there were no stone-in-the-snowball in the first place?<sup>6</sup> What then would we make of Ramsay's lie which brings about the death of Boy Staunton: is not Ramsay then even more responsible for Staunton's death—if indeed Ramsay's paperweight is *actually* his father's. Would Ramsay's lie be analogous to Surgeoner's made-up stories—Ramsay's or Davies' parable of hope pointing toward a larger truth, the opportunity of a higher human existence? Or would the lie, like Ramsay's dodge that opened the book, merely express once again the malign impulse that animates both child and man? Would the book not indicate then that as Ramsay the boy becomes the man (and the villager the cosmopolitan), he continues to act out of much the same malice but now a malice of greater consciousness and deliberation? I could not reach such a story as a parable of liberation, of an enlarged humanity out of a narrow village existence.

But what then would one make of Davies? Davies' deceptions with the stone, his tricking his reader into belief in a non-existent stone-in-stoneball would certainly create a wonderfully ambiguous and imaginative world. But is the reader meant to share in such potential ironies? Or is he simply to be the dullard played upon by the carny-magician-writer, Davies? If indeed Ramsay's way and Davies' way are essentially one, the ironic and emancipated consciousness transforms Davies' village into little more than a narrow and fixed mental horizon, a contrasting foil which brings our "larger" human perspective into a grander focus. In terms of the story itself, Deptford is little more than an unfortunate but necessary stage through which a "higher" humanity, a "fuller" and human consciousness supposedly evolves. Davies' novel makes it impossible for the reader to choose the way of Boy Staunton, the representative of the bullying, unconscious small mind of the village. Nor can one choose the supposedly larger and liberated way of the conscious bully, Ramsay, who sets himself in a timeless nowhere beyond the village. I am not sure what Davies' intended ("consciously" or "unconsciously") or whether Davies himself takes a position in "his" novel that the reader can identify with, but I am disturbed by the vindictiveness

within the book and by the darkly negative play of his mind over Ramsay's lie and over Ramsay's version of Mariposa.

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### Afterword

The Stone in the Snowball?

Two themes are at issue here: (1) the vindictiveness of both Staunton and Ramsay; (2) the telling power of lies, a theme seen in the magical tricks of Liesl and Dempster, the parables of Surgeoner, and, the archetypal histories of Ramsay. I trace the trajectory of the "stone" and snowball as follows:

*Fifth Business* (Toronto 1970; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977)

pp. 10-11. Ramsay deliberately steps in front of the Dempsters. Notice that he is not described bending down to pick up a stone. We only know that he is described, within brackets: "(pausing only for a moment at the scene of the accident)". Readers of *Fifth Business* sometimes swear that Ramsay is described bending down to pick up the stone.

p. 22. Ramsay blames himself for the puniness of the premature Paul Dempster. If one were before now not certain whether Ramsay moved deliberately in front of the Dempsters, it is now all too clear: "If I had not been so clever, so sly, so spiteful in hopping in front of the Dempsters just as Percy Boyd Staunton threw that snowball at me from behind, Mrs. Dempster would not have been struck."

p. 103 Ramsay returns from the war to his parents' home and picks up an unnamed object. Notice here the devious pass of Ramsay's (or Davies') cape: is the object picked up his father's stone paperweight, a memento from Dumfries? Apparently not, but why then does Davies pass this stone before our attention? Why the deliberate confusion of the stone-in-the-snowball with a mere, harmless paperweight? "Everything was where I knew it should be, but all the objects looked small and dull—my mother's clock, my father's desk, with the stone on it he had brought from Dumfries and always used as a paperweight; it was now an unloved house, and want of love had withered it. I picked up a few things I wanted—particularly something that I had long kept hidden—and got out as fast as I could" (italics mine). Later we learn that the stone in Staunton's mouth is pink granite, a colour and type consistent with the geology of Dumfries, Scotland. How much are we to make of this coincidence? Is the "something" above necessarily the stone-of-the-snowball?

p. 252. "But the most curious fact of all was that in Boy's mouth the police found a stone—an ordinary piece of pinkish granite about the size of a small egg—which could not possibly have been where it was unless he himself, or someone unknown, had put it there" (italics mine). Notice Ramsay's emphasis here upon "ordinary" which picks up (below) Staunton's earlier view of the stone as no more than Ramsay's ordinary paperweight.

p. 264. Ramsay jogs Staunton's memory by "handing him my old paperweight." Staunton sees merely "an ordinary bit of stone" that Ramsay had used "to hold down some of the stuff on your desk for years. I've seen it a hundred times. It doesn't remind me of anything but you" (italics mine). Of course, the wording also reminds us of the paperweight of Ramsay's father. Ramsay, however, claims, "It's the stone you put in the snowball you threw at Mrs. Dempster . . ." The mutual recriminations continue until Dempster and Staunton leave, with Dempster mysteriously refusing Ramsay's offer of the urn of his mother's ashes while saying, "I have everything I need." Only after the report of Staunton's death the next day does Ramsay discover that his "paperweight was gone" and infer falsely that Dempster took it.



Again, is his paperweight the stone of the snowball or is it merely his father's paperweight? The difference matters a great deal doesn't it?

*Manticore* (Toronto 1972; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin 1976)

p. 263. Many years later Staunton's son presents the stone to Ramsay and asks what it means. Ramsay claims to be the keeper of the stone and conscience of Boy Staunton: the two are symbolically equated. "It was my paperweight for over fifty years. Your father gave it to me, very much in his own way. He threw it at me, wrapped in a snowball. The rock-in-the-snowball-man was part of your father you never knew, or never recognized." Again we are told it is pink granite and that it is in Canada a common ancient or precambrian rock. Ramsay emphasizes the incredible age of the stone, and admits once again that his motive in giving the rock to Staunton may be suspect, "I harboured it for sixty years, and perhaps my hope was for revenge."

We might well ask then what Ramsay's motive in telling Staunton's son about the stone could be: he likes David Staunton; he realises that Staunton Jr. is undergoing psychoanalysis; and he could well again be acting the part of Fifth Business intervening in the life of another man, either telling him a necessary truth (or lie) to bring about the completion of the other man: David Staunton's completion, it has been shown, depends upon his liberation from his father's influence over him.

p. 309. Ramsay says, "Are you a man for extremes, Davey? I don't think I can help you. Or can I? You still have that stone. . . . You know, the one that was found in Boy's mouth?" Like a boy, Ramsay throws the stone far down into a valley: the consequence of this action (or parable) is David Staunton's achieving a sudden insight into his troublesome dreams and a momentary vision of great potential riches within. It would seem that Ramsay has been able then to liberate the son if not the father, and it would seem that indeed the stone has taken on a symbolic or mythic power.

*World of Wonders* (Toronto 1975; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin 1977)

pp. 301-302. Ramsay accuses Paul Dempster of vengeance, of having hypnotised Boy Staunton into committing suicide, but Dempster replies that Staunton *himself* stole the stone and that Staunton was "angry and hurt that you [Ramsay] kept that damned stone on your desk to remind you of a grudge you had against him" (p. 306). Dempster merely advised Staunton to "swallow" the stone, surely to digest and pass the guilt (p. 312).

p. 315. Ramsay argues that the stone in the dead man's mouth was Staunton's last attempt to give Ramsay a nasty surprise: "Magnus thinks I kept the stone for spite, and I suppose there was something of that in it. But I also kept it to be a continual reminder of the consequences that can follow a single action. It might have come out that it was my paperweight, but even if it didn't, he knew I would know what it was, and Boy reckoned on having the last word in our lifelong argument that way." There seems little reason to doubt Ramsay's words to Liesel; if to her he says there was a stone in the snowball, the simplest reading is the literal one. But how "reliable" is Ramsay? He is not simple or single-minded, and he believes in the power of falsehoods. I must also remind myself of Robertson Davies' deliberate confusion of the stone from Dumfries and the stone in the snowball. Why does *Davies* introduce unnecessary ambiguity into his book? What possible purpose could it serve except to raise the possibility that Ramsay's original childish falsehood or deception—his spiteful feint in front of the Dempsters—gives rise to the action of the story and that Ramsay's final act of falsehood, the deliberate act of Fifth Business, the parable of the stone-in-the-snowball bully, ends the story and has the potential of either destruction ("Boy's" death) or completion (the healing of David Staunton). If we think of *Davies*' relation to the reader, the stone also implies the oblique, playful and deliberately deceptive relation of the novelist to his reader: to me it stands as a warning that the novelist's intent is *not* meant to be easily measured—and that he intends, perhaps no more than, to entertain and to "have" his reader.