

*PSYCHOLOGISM AND THE PHILOSOPHY
OF PROGRESS:
THE RECENT FICTION OF
MACLENNAN, DAVIES AND ATWOOD*

Larry MacDonald

The immediate purpose of this article is to develop a critical approach to the recent fiction of MacLennan, Davies, and Atwood, an approach which raises questions that most of our critics prefer to ignore.¹ While I share to some extent the critics' largely enthusiastic response to the centrality and stylistic achievements of these writers, I have serious reservations about the cultural assumptions which inform their work. A secondary and more general aim of this analysis is to explore the usefulness, for purposes of literary criticism, of George Grant's critique of the philosophy of progress and Russell Jacoby's account of conformist psychologies. Grant and Jacoby are closer in their approaches than one might at first suppose (the former an apologist for conservatism, the latter for the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt school), and both elucidate issues that ought to be incorporated into serious study of our literature.

Of these two writers, George Grant is undoubtedly the best known to readers of this journal. Even if one has not read his coherent and penetrating analysis of the philosophy of progress in *Philosophy in the Mass Age*, *Lament for a Nation*, or *Technology and Empire*, one is likely to have encountered a version of it in the numerous articles and books it has inspired, most notably, for those interested in contemporary Canadian Literature, Dennis Lee's *Savage Fields*.² Given Grant's growing influence and his genius at identifying and elaborating those elements of consciousness and social structure which are uniquely Canadian, it should come as no surprise that the fiction of MacLennan, Davies, and Atwood, whether consciously or unconsciously, seems to mirror important shards of his thought. Beginning with *Return of the Sphinx*, published in 1967, these novelists have together written ten novels in the last fifteen years. All of these novels are tendentious; that is, they are thesis novels which self-consciously anatomize Canadian society in terms of their writers' deliberately advanced ideas about what is wrong with the social order. The manifestations of private and public disorder that these novels record are in many respects identical to the symptoms of social disintegration that George

1. The most important of the few critics who ask serious questions of our literature is Robin Mathews, whose *Canadian Literature: Surrender or Revolution* (Ottawa: Steel Rail, 1978) has received nowhere near the attention it merits.

2. Dennis Lee, *Savage Fields: an Essay in Literature and Cosmology* (Toronto: Anansi, 1977).

Grant attributes to the dominance of liberal ideology in the "advanced" civilizations of the West. It is precisely this deceptive similarity of their thematic concerns to Grant's profound critique of liberalism that makes these novels, from my point of view, so dangerous; their beguiling surfaces mask books which, in most important respects, reproduce and celebrate the root causes of the ills they apparently oppose.

It is the less well known work of Russell Jacoby that becomes relevant at this point. Jacoby (and others, such as Christopher Lasch in *The Culture of Narcissism*³) persuasively argues the case that a hallmark of our narcissistic culture is the reduction of all social and collective problems to their psychological component in individual psyches. Of the three novelists, MacLennan is perhaps the most direct and unapologetic defender of this practice. His last two novels advance the Oedipus complex as the key to understanding all of history. Davies is more sly and whimsical in this regard, but just as determined to find an undivided personality at the bottom of every war or alcoholic. Atwood's allegiance to theories of psychological determinism is the least programmatic of the three, but she is just as relentless in her reduction of all social evil to psychological disruption. Society in her first-person narratives is known to the reader almost exclusively as it is subjectively experienced in psychological terms by her central characters.

Atwood, Davies, and MacLennan respond to the social crises that their writing evokes in terms that are consistent with their portrayal of the issues: problems whose origins are, in reality, inescapably collective are addressed in the novels only in terms of healing the psychic wounds of individual characters. Consequently these novelists end by urging individual adaptation to a status quo which their fiction simultaneously urges upon us as intolerable. Whatever good intentions we may choose to grant them, these writers are nonetheless advocates of the liberal ideology that their novels often give the appearance of attacking. Before proceeding to document this charge, it might be well to refresh our sense of George Grant's thesis with a very brief summary of those aspects of his rejection of liberalism which, on the one hand, appear to be sympathetically portrayed in the novels under scrutiny and, on the other hand, are the basis for a critique of the failure of these novels.

George Grant and the Philosophy of Progress

George Grant's most succinct definition of the philosophy of progress is to be found in *Lament for a Nation: The Defeat of Canadian Nationalism*: "Men assume in the age of progress that the broad movement of history is upward. Taken as a whole, what is bound to happen is bound also to be good."⁴ The philosophy of progress, he argues in *Technology and Empire*,

3. Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1979).

4. (Ottawa: Carleton Library Edition, 1970), pp. 37-38.

is the philosophy of liberalism. The ideology of liberal philosophy is based on "a set of beliefs which proceed from the central assumption that man's essence is his freedom and therefore what chiefly concerns man in this life is to shape the world as we want it."⁵ Historically, Grant tells us,⁶ this conception of man as essentially free originated with Machiavelli and Hobbes, and found its bourgeois expression in such British thinkers as Locke, Smith, and Hume. The writings of Rousseau, Kant, and Hegel developed this notion of freedom to the point where man was thought to stand outside nature, free to manipulate and perfect it:

It is the very signature of modern man to deny reality to any conception of good that imposes limits on human freedom. To modern political theory, man's essence is his freedom. Nothing must stand in the way of our absolute freedom to create the world as we want it. There must be no conceptions of good that put limitations on human action. This definition of man as freedom constitutes the heart of the age of progress. The doctrine of progress is . . . an open-ended progression in which men will be endlessly free to make the world as they want it . . . As liberals become more and more aware of the implications of their own doctrine, they recognize that no appeal to human good, now or in the future, must be allowed to limit their freedom to make the world as they choose. Social order is a man-made convenience, and its only purpose is to increase freedom. What matters is that men shall be able to do what they want, when they want. The logic of this liberalism makes the distinction between judgements of fact and judgements of value. "Value judgements" are subjective. In other words, man in his freedom creates the valuable. The human good is what we choose for our good.⁷

Grant repeatedly emphasizes that the United States has no history (for its European settlers) prior to the age of progress. He also reminds us of the strong Calvinist heritage of the will to master and dominate. These historical determinants have contributed to the United State's position as the dynamic centre of the philosophy of progress, particularly as it involves the worship of technological mastery for its own sake.

The conservative ideology which liberalism has supplanted assumes that man is a part of nature and subject to Natural Law, which derives its authority from an eternal order. Conservatism thus holds that virtue is prior to freedom, and that some things are not subject to change or progress. Basic to the social doctrine of conservatism is the belief that "public order and tradition, in contrast to freedom and experiment, [are] central to the good life."⁸

I would like to draw some attention to the difference between the social doctrine of conservatism and the social doctrine of liberalism, because this difference is central to my study of MacLennan, Davies, and Atwood. Whereas liberalism emphasizes the freedoms and rights of the individual, conservatism envisions a society in which "the right of the com-

5. (Toronto: Anansi, 1969), p. 114, fn. 3.

6. *Lament*, p. 61.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 56-57.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 71.

mon good restrains the freedom of the individual.”⁹ Liberalism encourages the emancipation of the passions and individual self-fulfillment as the basis for building society. The priorities of conservatism are the exact opposite: it makes strict demands on self-restraint and holds that the pursuit of individual freedom and fulfillment must be subject to the common good. In more practical and political terms, Grant argues that “liberal ideology reconciles the political power of the elites with the private satisfactions of the masses.”¹⁰ Or, to put the matter in terms that will be developed as this article proceeds, the dominant concern of a liberal ideology that preaches individual freedom and private satisfaction is “subjectivity.”

The Use and Abuse of George Grant

For those of us who share Grant’s concerns, it would be some small comfort if we could point to three of our best writers as artists who have identified and successfully countered the most problematic assumptions of liberal consciousness. At first glance it might seem that this is possible, that their novels illuminate the will to technological dominance and resist the social drift towards a society that knows itself primarily in terms of the freedom of its atomistic units. MacLennan, for instance, has consistently argued that we must reaffirm a sense of limit, a belief in God and an eternal order, if we are to survive. The vision of God that transforms the world for Jerome Martel in *The Watch That Ends the Night* is the same vision that suggests a basis for hope at the end of *Voices in Time*. Nor is it possible to think of his life’s work without recalling his persistent attacks on technology and the will to power. Even if we remember his novels from a distance, we are unlikely to forget his antipathy towards American imperialism and his stern lectures on our obligation to recognize the conservative heritage that is unique and worth fighting for in our nation.

All of these themes — the death of faith, technology, the Calvinist heritage of the impulse to mastery, American imperialism and Canadian nationalism — are also important concerns in the novels of Davies and Atwood. Davies’ Deptford novels echo the teachings of C. G. Jung, who holds that the twentieth century has favoured the overdevelopment of technological mastery and of man’s thinking or reasoning “function” at the expense of his intuitive or spiritual “function.” If man does not acknowledge a god, Davies is fond of remarking, he will make one of himself. Atwood’s poems and novels insistently offer us male characters whose ideas of society begin and end with social engineering, and whose interpersonal relationships are poisoned by their need to dominate others, to reduce them to objects that serve calculating male purposes. The inter-

9. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

nal splits in her female heroes, and their externalized battle with mass society, are allegorically orchestrated to reveal the fact/value dichotomy that everywhere obtains in a desacramentalized universe.

All three writers reject those who would refashion history according to some ideology, and in this assault upon the fundamental modern assumption that man makes history, and history is progress, they appear to be aligned with conservative elements in Grant's thought. In *Philosophy in the Mass Age*, he writes:

The most characteristic belief of modern man is that history is consciously and voluntarily made by human beings. That is what I mean by saying that modern man is "historical" man. He believes that the chief purpose of life is the making of history.¹¹

MacLennan, Davies, and Atwood are nothing if not consistent in this matter. Their novels thoroughly discredit every single character who is given a pragmatic and revolutionary orientation towards the making of history. All characters who claim to offer a rational and humane alternative to liberal capitalism are stripped of those claims and revealed, by novel's end, to be diseased products of the social order they oppose. In the final analysis, what is meant to be remarkable about such characters is not the truth or falsity of their ideas for social reform (ideas which are rarely evaluated in their own terms), but the prior fact that they have "ideas" at all. There is a rigorous and paralyzing logic at work here, a logic of despair, which Dennis Lee attributes to George Grant:

What is most implacable about this modern despair, Grant holds, is that it cannot get outside itself. Any statement of ideals by which we might bring our plight into perspective turns out to be either a hollow appeal to things we no longer have access to, or (more commonly) a restatement of the very liberal ideal that got us into the fix in the first place.¹²

What are we to do then, if, like the novelists, we stand opposed to the drift of our society? According to Lee: "Grant declares that to dissent from liberal modernity is *necessarily to fall silent*, for we now have no terms in which to speak which do not issue from the space we are trying to speak against."¹³ Because these novelists effectively silence the voice of political opposition in their novels, for the reasons that Lee outlines, it might be supposed that MacLennan, Davies, and Atwood are at one with Grant in his orientation to history.

Except that I can nowhere find in Grant's work the insistent urging of silence that Lee assures us is there. What I find in *Technology and Empire* is a thinker who frankly acknowledges "the *grave difficulty* of thinking a position in which technique is beheld within a horizon greater than

11. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1960), p. 27.

12. "Cadence, Country,, Silence: Writing in a Colonial Space," *Open Letter*, Second Series, No. 6 (Fall 1973), 9. 45.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 44. Emphasis is mine.

itself.”¹⁴ In another essay in this same book, Grant declares: “Nothing here written implies that the increasingly difficult job of preserving what is left of Canadian sovereignty is not worth the efforts of practical men.”¹⁵ Throughout his work, Grant affirms a commitment to social and political reform that is too often passed over lightly by those who write as his disciples:

To those who are not [reconciled to the misery of others], the sense of meaninglessness should not result in a beaten retirement, but in a *rage for action*.¹⁶

These are not the words of a man who is courting Silence as his muse. Rather, these are the words of a philosopher whose writing consistently embraces, as Lee’s does not, the contradictions inherent in any critique of the philosophy of progress.

The Place of Marxism in Grant’s Thought

The contempt for Marx has not been confined to the irresponsible rich and their demagogues. It is heard from responsible business men and government officials and from their servants in the universities.¹⁷

Grant might have included “novelists” in his list of those whose thought is impoverished by their uninformed contempt for Marx. It is only after Grant has devoted a large portion of *Philosophy in the Mass Age* to surveying Marxism’s challenging legacy that he concludes:

In these essays the central question of modern moral philosophy has been posed: How can we think out a conception of law which does not deny the truth of our freedom or the truth of progress?¹⁸

For all his attacks on “progress” and “freedom,” Grant does not deny that they have their truth. The nature of this truth and the dialectical mode of reasoning by which he arrives at it are crucially absent from the novels.

Grant is a Christian, and he can hardly deny, categorically, the idea of history as progress, for as he himself demonstrates, its origins are in the “Judaean-Christian idea that history is the divinely ordained process of man’s salvation.”¹⁹ Grant is also a Protestant, and is therefore not about to deny, categorically, “the mediating term between history as providence and history as progress, [which] is the idea of freedom,” of men “conscious of themselves as free.”²⁰ Thus, if the historical consequences of the truth of our freedom and the truth of progress constitute the basis for Grant’s lament, it must also be emphasized that the historical possibilities of freedom and progress are the source of the philosophical optimism and materialist analysis that inform his discussions of history.

14. *Technology and Empire*, p. 32. Emphasis mine.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 77.

16. *Philosophy in the Mass Age*, p. 113. Emphasis mine.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 111.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 57.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 61.

Grant's elaboration of the philosophy of progress is thus more complex, and more balanced, than either Lee's one-sided account or our novelists' ideological rejection of man as a political being. Whereas MacLennan, Davies, and Atwood retreat from a materialist interpretation of history into the unchallenging confines of subjectivity (as my reading of their novels should establish), Grant engages the sociological dimension of reality directly by maintaining two sources of tension in his thought. The first of these is between the individual and society and addresses man's history-making activity, the noble goal of which is the attempted elimination of evil from history. The second source of tension is between this historical goal and the eternal order which man did not make and to which his making of history must subordinate itself. The latter is never used as an excuse for failing to grapple with the former in concrete, revolutionary terms:

The truth of natural law is that man lives within an order which he did not make and to which he must subordinate his actions; the truth of the history-making spirit is that man is free to build a society which eliminates the evils of the world. Both these assertions seem true. The difficulty is to understand how they both can be thought together.²¹

Clearly, in Grant's view, any response to history which is not formulated with a sense of some good that is higher than freedom for its own sake, or for the sake of personal fulfillment and private gratification, will be crippled at best and pernicious at worst. It does not follow logically, however, that all materialist ideologies which see history as the highest goal of men's striving are equally crippled; nor does it follow that a materialistic philosophy cannot formulate, within history, a concept of the good that inspires human activity with a spiritual sense of meaning and purpose. Grant, in other words, allows that some materialist philosophies are preferable to other materialist philosophies. In choosing among them, Grant is guided by how they conceive the relationship between the elements in the historical tension, the reciprocal relationship between the individual and society. On this basis, and in accordance with his often stated hostility to the social doctrine spawned by capitalism, he turns to the philosophy of Karl Marx.

"In many ways," Grant writes, "the Marxists have a greater sense of the world as a spiritual order than we do."²² Marxists have a greater sense of spiritual order than "democratic capitalist morality" can provide because

... the Marxist hope is not for the isolated individual but for the society as a whole. His humanism is not for a few rare, fine spirits in exceptional positions, but promises the good life for all. So often humanist liberalism has been made ridiculous by its individualism which disregarded the dependence of the individual on the community, and seemed little concerned with the way the mass of men lived. But how can the human spirit find any moral fulfillment in such individualism? ... This makes Marxism incomparably more powerful than those humanisms which are liberal and individualistic.²³

21. *Ibid.*, pp. 89-90.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 110.

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 76-77.

None of this is meant to suggest that Grant is a Marxist. He is not, for he takes issue with Marxism's weak account of evil and wishes it had a stronger sense of individual freedom. The point to be grasped here is that Grant's account of the philosophy of progress, when it addresses history, assumes that history is intelligible and that the rational and disinterested application of reason to the understanding of modern history is best served by a Marxist structure of analysis. His thought is at every point informed by an objective rendering of social reality that is couched in the language of Marxist dialectics. His account of the liberal consciousness which animates the philosophy of progress is always complemented by a detailed comprehension of the social and economic arrangements that support it. Consequently he does not fall back on the call for a private, internal change of attitude by individuals as the only possible response to the contemporary social crisis; he counsels a "rage for action" in the public and political life of the collective. It is against this reading of Grant's philosophically conservative and socially active response to liberal ideology that the novels of MacLennan, Davies, and Atwood will be measured.

Psychologism in the Novels of MacLennan, Davies and Atwood

The themes of the novels in question mirror a deeply felt anxiety about the quality of existence in a mass society. But the way in which these themes are presented and interpreted by their creators is entirely characteristic of the liberal consciousness that is supposedly under assault. While it is true that they attack many of the assumptions of the philosophy of progress, and also lament with Grant the absence of a spiritual or transcendent dimension to life, both their fictional embodiment of these truths and their rhetorical reactions to them have the effect of encouraging more of the same. Their rejection of man's freedom to make any history different from the history of liberal capitalism leaves them with no alternative but the desperate hope we can humanize the inhumane, make it somehow more palatable with a superadded dollop of spirituality and a touch of self-knowledge.

There is, as we like to say these days, a mediating term. That term is "psychologism." Very simply, Jacoby defines psychologism as "the reduction of social concepts to individual and psychological ones."²⁴ Problems whose reality is inextricable from their collective and sociological nature are apprehended as individual and psychological problems. Jacoby makes a very convincing case that an alarming characteristic of recent liberal thought has been the tendency to reduce all actions and ideas, all experience and history, to their psychological components. MacLennan and Davies, in fact, have publically encouraged this tendency by proclaiming their support for systems of thought which interpret the meaning of history primarily in psychological terms.

24. Russell Jacoby, *Social Amnesia: A Critique of Contemporary Psychology From Adler to Laing* (New York: Beacon Press, 1975), p. 78.

In MacLennan's case, the recent work of Elspeth Cameron establishes beyond all doubt that he enthusiastically appropriated the *Oedipus at Colonus*, *Sex in History* by G. Rattray Taylor, and Daniel Schneider's *The Psychoanalyst and the Artist* as interpretive models for the historical events portrayed in *Return of the Sphinx* and *Voices in Time*.²⁵ Of these three influences, the most significant is Taylor's *Sex in History*, a neo-Freudian thesis which reduces history to the obedient servant of alternating matrist and patrist societies. According to Taylor, a society is matrist or patrist in any given epoch depending on whether it favours the fixation of unresolved Oedipal complexes on mothers or on fathers. Virtually all of a society's public values, private structures of feeling, and social arrangements are determined by this one crucial fact. As Cameron rightly argues, MacLennan's predisposition to think of history in cyclical terms found a pseudo-scientific home in Taylor's simplistic account of history. Perhaps impatient with the failure of his readers to notice what he was up to in *Return of the Sphinx*, MacLennan carefully runs the theory by us in *Voices in Time*; Conrad Dehmel approvingly summarizes it as the hypothesis of a young thinker whom he met at an American university.

Taylor's psychological model of history's meaning is not only the basis for structure and character development in both these novels, it is also the key to MacLennan's interpretation of the historical events that are portrayed. We are barely four pages into *Return of the Sphinx* before Gabriel theorizes

. . . that all the politics of the world originated in the nurseries of large families like his own or in the despair of outsiders who craved to belong to such groups and didn't: thence were translated into public life, but the origin always the same, the process the same, love-hunger growing imperceptibly into hunger for power.²⁶

Alan Ainslie later tells the House of Commons that:

"No people in history has ever tried to break with a strict Catholicism without turning to nationalism or some other kind of ism as a surrogate religion. As I see it, that is the essence of the situation in Quebec today. The problem there isn't economic, it's psychological . . . I don't have to remind you that all revolutions have neurotic roots."²⁷

Those of us who believe that the "revolution" in Quebec has a crucial economic and social dimension will find our position being advanced in this novel by Latendresse, a failed priest with very serious psycho-sexual problems. That MacLennan meant his readers to remark upon, and take

25. Elspeth Cameron, "MacLennan's *Sphinx*: Critical reception & Oedipal Origins," *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, No. 30 (1981). I am as indebted to Laura Groening of Carleton University for suggestions about the importance of neo-Freudian rhetoric in MacLennan's work as I am to Professor Cameron for the excellent biographical substantiation she has published in this regard.

26. Hugh MacLennan, *Return of the Sphinx* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1967), p. 7.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 69.

seriously as scientific fact, the notion that history is ultimately reducible to its psychological components is insisted upon in a letter that he wrote to his publisher, John Gray, in August of 1967:

The tragedy of the western world today can be expressed very simply — the inability of the young men to identify with a father — i.e. with a creative superego, on account of what the patrists did in 1914, failed to do in the 1930s, repeated in 1939 and now are attempting to do in Viet Nam, big business and advertising . . . Applied to French-Canada, Mother Church took the place of Father France for two centuries. Need one look any further than that for the rapprochement between that supreme Father-Image DeGaulle, and the youth of today's Quebec which has rejected Mother Church.²⁸

Well, yes, one does need to look further. Much further. Just as one needs to look further into the significance of the First World War than the archetypal resonances which are the sole preoccupation of Dunstan Ramsay, the history teacher, in *Fifth Business*. Davies is far less generous than MacLennan when it comes to giving the political economists their day in court; no one in *Fifth Business* is allowed to mention the role of European imperialism in the war, not even a neurotic, failed priest. Davies has loudly proclaimed his championship of C. G. Jung's system of thought, and his last four novels were unapologetically devised to prove that the laws of history are none other than the laws which govern the individual psyche (as elaborated by the mystical and alchemical Dr. Jung). If we are to believe these novels, the ultimate — indeed, the only necessary and sufficient — truth of any human activity is its psychological truth. Furthermore, as Jung himself insists, subjectivity is the prime focus of this psychology: "The central concept of my psychology is the process of individuation . . . Individuation means becoming a single, homogenous being, and, in so far as 'individuality' embraces an innermost, last, and incomparable uniqueness, it also implies becoming one's own self."²⁹

Atwood, unlike Davies and MacLennan, has not publically declared herself to be an adherent of any body of ideas which answers all questions psychologically, so we shall have to content ourselves, so far as our initial orientation is concerned, with recalling her associations with Frye, with James Reaney's mythopoeic *Alphabet Magazine*, and with archetypal criticism of Canadian literature. All these roads lead to Jung; none suggests an interest in economics, politics or sociology. In any event, her novels demonstrably bear the imprint of psychologism and the rhetorical devices that it engenders.

Social Unrest as Psychological Symptom

The first of the rhetorical strategies generated by psychologism is the reduction of all manifestations of political and social unrest to the status of

28. Quoted in Cameron, pp. 152-53.

29. Quoted in Gordon Roper, "Robertson Davies' *Fifth Business* and 'That Old Fantastical Duke of Dark Corners,' Carl Jung," *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, 1, 1 (Winter 1972), p. 35.

mere symptoms. Political movements such as nationalism and socialism are presented to the reader as nothing but symptoms of psychological disruption. In *Return of the Sphinx*, MacLennan all but turns his back on the explanation that nationalism and socialism in Quebec are essentially political responses to two centuries of cultural oppression and economic exploitation. He chooses to dismiss the concrete "local origins" of Quebec's collective anger by attributing signs of social disorder to "a change in [the country's] personality" which is symptomatic of a "universal disease."³⁰ Quebec, we are informed by the healthy and attractive Chantal, is "behaving like a woman in the menopause."³¹ MacLennan's systematic choreography of orphans, May-December romances, and Oedipus complexes is designed to reinforce at every point his reduction of contemporary Quebec politics to the clinical case study of a neurotic. Elspeth Cameron tells us that

In a letter to John Gray that same year [1967], he drew an analogy between Quebec's situation as regards the new nationalist movement and a patient under psychiatric treatment: "I have the impression," he wrote, "that the nationalists are nearing the state of mind of a psychiatric patient just before the treatment forces him to admit openly his real trouble—his hatred of his father or mother as the case may be, and his terror of punishment for feeling that way. In this case, of course, the Church."³²

As we have already noted, MacLennan's authorial strategy for diverting our attention from the importance of social and economic grievances as a legitimate focus of concern is to advance, quite without intellectual shame, the tautological proposition that such a misguided concern can be seriously maintained only by misguided personalities. The novel's only spokesmen for a critical, sociological analysis of Quebec, Latendresse and Daniel Ainslie, are totally undermined by MacLennan when he saddles each of them with unresolved sexual problems. We are immediately invited to dismiss their narcissistic rantings on social injustice as regrettable symptoms of their retarded psychic development. Ideas which are critical of English, liberal capitalism in Quebec do not stand much of a chance as ideas in such a psychologically charged atmosphere; they can be read only as symptoms. The dialectic between private consciousness and public social forces is severed; the former is cast in the role of determining agent, inevitably at the expense of the latter.

The following passage, which comes early in *The Rebel Angels*, constitutes fair warning that Davies, like MacLennan, is quite prepared to explain away all flaws in the social fabric as symptoms of psychological maladjustment:

"What really shapes and conditions and makes us is somebody only a few of us ever have the courage to face: and that is the child you once were, long before formal education ever got its claws into you—that impatient, all-demanding child who wants love and power and can't get enough of either . . .

30. *Sphinx*, p. 266.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 43

32. Cameron, p. 148.

It is those pent-up, craving children who make all the wars and all the horrors and all the art and all the beauty and discovery in life, because they are trying to achieve what lay beyond their grasp before they were five years old."³³

Fair warning though this be, it nonetheless comes as a shock to see how far Davies is willing to pursue his dismissal of all sociological determinants in favor of their translation into psychological symptoms. Later in the novel we are invited to think (for a rare moment) about social evil as it is experienced in Toronto's poorer neighborhoods. A female politician (not quite a silly do-gooder, but uncomfortably close) speaks of the child prostitution and horrifying instances of child abuse that she has witnessed. She argues that poverty and ignorance are root causes. Such a naive delusion is soon put to rest by the urbane and disinterested scholars at the university dining table. It is first pointed out to her that instances of child abuse are not unknown amongst even the better families of Toronto (though child prostitution is conveniently forgotten as the Jungian chit-chat proceeds). Finally, the whole disturbing business is psychologized away with the observation that petty theft is often practised by well-paid professors. The point of this apparent non-sequitur is that all humans have a "shadow" and thus all humans are, to some degree or other, prone to commit evil. Child abuse, everyone seems to agree, is less interesting as a sociological problem than it is as confirmation of Dr. Jung's profundity. Like petty theft, it is to be approached as a *symptom* of psychic turbulence, a manifestation of the shadow at work in all of us.

There is a cold and smug logic at work here which is entirely characteristic of Davies' treatment of evil. Evil is never presented as the conscious activity of people who are shaped by and responding to a particular historical context, a context which can be altered and ameliorated by conscious human endeavour. "Evil isn't what one does," professor Hollier instructs, "it's something one is that infects everything one does."³⁴ And, of course, the range of the verb "is" in that aphorism is everywhere restricted in Davies' work to the product of frustrated childhood cravings. By such transparent sleight of hand we are all conveniently absolved of complicity in historical evil. Our only obligation is to treat the psychological symptom: learn to know and accept your shadow; it may be the key to your genius.

A similar fate is accorded all political and social activism in Atwood's novels. In *Surfacing* we are offered the unspeakably chauvinistic and sadistic David as the typification of nationalism with a radical social conscience. He professes to share both Grant's opposition to the ideology of capitalism and his concern for the integrity of Canadian nationhood. In the end, however, David's political activism is revealed to be nothing but a product of his diseased "American" consciousness. His "ideas," according

33. Robertson Davies, *The Rebel Angels*, (Toronto: Macmillan, 1981), p. 32.

34. *Ibid.*, p.78.

to Atwood's reductive use of the psychoanalytical laws of displacement, are no more significant than the bibles he once sold door to door as a candidate for the ministry, or the faddish communications theory that he now hawks at a community college. Scratch a left-nationalist, and you'll find a failed minister.

Nationalist and socialist responses to the perceived social crisis are represented in *Lady Oracle* by Arthur, whose credentials include six months or less in each of the following causes: Ban-the-bomb, Marxism, Castro, China, Women's liberation (for flagellation purposes, we are told), Quebec separatism, Vietnam draft dodgers, student revolt, and left-wing nationalism. This latter cause is also represented by Sam, Marlene, and Don. While Arthur seriously believes in all his causes, we are given to understand in no uncertain terms that his political commitment originates in, and is therefore to be considered primarily as a symptom of, "inertia and the absence of a sense of purpose."³⁵ Similarly, the militant politics of his friends are labelled an "escape fantasy" that was never meant to happen. Their politics are presented as symptomatic of a bored and empty intelligentsia that fastens onto any fad, in this case "radical chic."

People like David do exist, and the intellectual dilettantes in *Lady Oracle* are recognizable parodies of fickle left-nationalists in Toronto who lead messy personal lives. We may laugh at them, as we were clearly meant to, until we call to mind the fact that nowhere, in any of the novels by these writers, does left-nationalism appear as anything but the babblings of psychological misfits. Eventually, given the serious intentions of these serious writers, such a pattern overwhelms the local intentions of each particular novel.

The Trivialization of Ideas

This personalist orientation towards any political position that confronts the existing social order with a practical, material analysis results in another lamentable shortcoming of psychologism: the trivialization of ideas. As Christopher Lasch remarks in his introduction to *Social Amnesia*, "to see ideas as purely reflective and symptomatic," to treat ideas as purely responses to immediate psychological determinants, is to adopt "a procedure that always ends by trivializing ideas."³⁶

If Atwood did not *want* to trivialize the rich and challenging tradition of socialist and nationalist thought and action, she would not always choose to embody it in narcissistic fools who are philosophical and political illiterates. The same may be said of Davies' treatment of the tweedy, common-room socialists in *Fifth Business*, or of his loftily contemptuous handling of Brown and the female politicians in *The Rebel Angels*.

35. Margaret Atwood, *Lady Oracle* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976), p. 196.

36. *Social Amnesia*, pp. x-xi.

MacLennan's trivialization of the ideas behind Quebec separatism has already been noted. Socialism, as represented by Gabriel's first wife in *Return of the Sphinx*, fares no better:

"She was a graduate of the London School of Economics and her father was a well-known left-wing professor. When I met her she was in the WAAF . . . She was a born student . . . She studied to be best at everything she did. She got books about love-making and studied them just as she studied everything else. She learned to make love from a book."³⁷

If that is what studying Marx and joining a meekly socialist party does to one, then there is obviously no need to inquire any further. A vote for the social democrats, apparently, is a vote to let Marx into the bedrooms of the nation. One should add that MacLennan has not even the excuse of satire; he is being perfectly serious.

Rebellion as Psychological Displacement

Merely to list the rebels against the social order in these novels is to confirm a remarkable hostility in MacLennan, Davies, and Atwood to anything that suggests a collective social solution to collective social problems. All characters with "politics" are characters with psychological problems. Their rebellion against the status quo is always interpreted for us as a lame substitute for their failure to resolve personal neuroses. Those with liberal politics, on the other hand, struggle through to some kind of inner conversion of consciousness (or "rebirth") that leaves their political notions untouched. The rhetorical tactics of psychologism reinforce the contemporary obsession with subjectivity. These novels, at one level, are high-toned versions of the pop-psychological self-help books that are abundantly available on the paperback racks of any drugstore or train station.

Although the argument is too complex to trace in any detail here, it should be noted that one of Jacoby's central purposes in *Social Amnesia* is to document how "liberal revisions [of Freud] traded the revolutionary core of psychoanalysis for common sense," a "common sense" that accepts without examination the dominant assumptions of liberal ideology. Most criticisms of society that are advanced by such post-Freudians are ultimately "absolved by the concepts and formulations that point toward health and harmony."³⁸ The core of the post-Freudian contribution, according to Jacoby, is subjectivity:

Neither the content nor the popularity of the post-Freudians can be abstracted from the social and cultural environment. Their work suggests liberation now—without the sweat and grime of social change. They promise to unleash or tap the real self and real emotions: the authentic individual. From their perspective, the very move from a Freudian biological and instinctual psychology toward a humanist, existential, and personal one is proof of how far industrial society has progressed toward liberation: we are now ready for the final freedom — the subjective and psychological individual.³⁹

37. *Sphinx*, p. 56.

38. *Social Amnesia*, pp. 19, 26.

39. *Ibid.*, pp. 46-47.

Just as conflict is the central concept of Freud's work, adaptation is central to the conformist psychologies whose popularized notions are used by these novelists to interpret the significance of their characters' behaviour. One need look no further than Adler's ego psychology to find the origins of MacLennan's and Davies' vocabulary of frustrated childhood cravings for love and attention growing into hunger for power in adulthood. But the ideology that guides their rhetorical manipulation of this impoverished vocabulary has been most succinctly stated by Rollo May (an upbeat American existential psychologist) in *Man's Search for Himself*: "Rebellion acts as a substitute for the more difficult job of struggling through to one's own autonomy, to one's own beliefs"—as if, Jacoby comments, "one could struggle through to one's own autonomy without rebelling."⁴⁰

In *Lady Oracle*, Arthur's politics and Joan's gothic romances are allegorically aligned in a psychological equation. His politics and her novels are both presented by Atwood as escapist substitutes for the struggle to become autonomous individuals. Significantly, this equation breaks down in the final pages. Whereas Arthur's political rebellion gets him nowhere, Joan's escapist novel turns out to be perilously real, and its psychological excesses prove to be psychic road signs on the path to the palace of wisdom. Joan, like the narrator of *Surfacing* before her, now thinks that she might be able to experience real love, which should bolster the morale of Rollo May, whose dismissive views on commitment to social change are complemented by his shallow optimism in another of his books, *The Art of Loving*.

The message is clear: unresolved personal neuroses that can not be faced in their own terms can be usefully displaced and resolved through the helpful agency of art; the same can not be said of politics, which must be avoided at all costs; love makes the world go round—and narcissists make the best lovers. The artistic vision is banal and without intellectual integrity; it projects as the ideal an escape into a bleak, selfish ("I'm O.K., You're O.K.") human consciousness:

Sensitivity and warmth for the few, and coldness and brutality for the rest, is one of the stock notions and realities that feed the ongoing system. [In reality], love within a structure of hate and violence decays or survives only as resistance . . . One helps oneself because collective help is inadmissible; in rejecting the realm of social and political praxis, individual helplessness is redoubled and soothes itself through self-help, hobbies, and how-to-manuals . . . The "perspective" that guarantees freedom—inward freedom—is the first gimmick of the apologist.⁴¹

40. Quoted by Jacoby in *Social Amnesia*, p. 51.

41. *Ibid.*, pp. 37,51.

Reason is Dead: Long Live the Irrational

It is not only "ideas" that are trivialized in these novels; reason itself is under assault. "The trouble," Atwood tells us repeatedly, "is all in the knob at the top of our bodies."⁴² It never seems to occur to our novelists that, as George Grant insists, "it is open to [mankind] to pursue the life of reason as more than simply domination."⁴³ These writers inevitably equate all reason with the debased, instrumental form that a liberal consciousness encourages. But if we rail against reason in general, if intelligent and concrete thought becomes the enemy, as it clearly is in the novels under discussion, then it follows predictably that the irrational must be glorified as an attractive alternative.

Atwood offers us primitivism as salvation in *Surfacing*—a psychological allegory full of Indian rock paintings, visions brought on by ritual starvation and the female hero's transformation, first into an animal and, finally, into a tree. She and Davies serve up schizophrenic narrators and Fool Saints who proclaim the sanity of madness. Gypsies, spiritualists, magicians, tarot cards, automatic writing, and hauntings from the beyond are scattered throughout their novels like clues in a mystery book. Jungian detectives write exegetic articles that solve the crime, which is rational analysis, and point the moral, which is to pay more attention to one's unconscious and let society take care of itself.

The End of Ideology?

MacLennan is happily exempt from the charge of encouraging primitivism and spiritualism as the means to social liberation. But he joins the other two writers in undermining reason with a simplistic notion of psychological determinism. He joins them in rejecting any concept of man and society that is not founded on the principles of liberal, democratic capitalism. In his essays, as well as in his novels, MacLennan is given to lumping together different social theories and dismissing the whole lot as nothing but the obsessions of anti-Christian madmen:

Nationalism, Fascism and Communism, as everybody should know by this time, are fundamentally neither political nor economic movements. They are, in their appeal to the masses and even to intellectuals, aberrations of the religious impulse . . . They are aberrations because their dogmas are founded on hatred rather than on love, and it is this quality of hatred which makes them hideous creations, so destructive and dangerous that they will bring about the extermination of the human race unless their growth is arrested.⁴⁴

Why is Capitalism missing from MacLennan's deliberately mixed list of "destructive and dangerous" ideologies? Is it because there is more love of

42. Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1972), p. 83.

43. *Philosophy in the Mass Age*, p. 23.

44. Hugh MacLennan, "Help Thou Mine Unbelief," in *Cross Country* (Toronto: Collins, 1949), p. 141.

human kind in Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* than in *The Communist Manifesto*? This passage, from one of MacLennan's most widely read essays, is, to be blunt, irrational and almost willfully ignorant of the facts of history. The destruction wrought by liberal capitalism in its lust for profits in the "Third World" can not, by reasonable and disinterested observers, be so easily ignored; nor can the political and economic appeal of ideologies be so cavalierly dismissed.

The novels of all three writers disappoint because they repeat an anti-intellectual pattern with mind-numbing regularity: reasoned opposition to capitalism is proven impossible on the grounds that disinterested and humane reason is unavailable to us; "ideologies" are guilty through simple association with (perverted) reason; therefore, all consciously appropriated political beliefs turn out, in the end, to be the escape fantasies of neurotics, often acted out as compensation for a love-starved childhood. The question must be asked: Who stands to gain most, and who to lose most, in this relentless onslaught against the concept of ideology? George Grant answers:

In political terms, liberalism is now an appeal for "the end of ideology." This means that we must experiment in shaping society [and fiction?] unhindered by any preconceived notions of good. "The end of ideology" is the perfect slogan for men who want to do what they want.⁴⁵

The Sound of One Hand Clapping: Reciprocal Action

Although it is a premise of all these novels that they accurately imitate the social conditions and historical forces which determine the context of their characters' development, these imitations are characterized as much by ideological wish-fulfillment as they are by accuracy. The requirement for accuracy is not satisfied by easy generalizations which substitute vague theories of psychological determinism for an informed and subtle analysis of objective material conditions. The reduction of complex social and economic configurations to the obliging cardboard backdrop for psychological morality plays is every bit as mechanical and simplistic about social history as is the artistic abuse of economic determinism by vulgarizers of Marx. The crucial and revealing difference is that many of our writers (and most of our critics) are quick to see the latter, but almost helpless to recognize the former. What is needed, of course, are structures of feeling and ways of seeing that embrace the reciprocal action between objective conditions and subjective consciousness. I have already emphasized the reciprocal (or dialectical) nature of Grant's cultural analysis; it remains to demonstrate its absence in the cultural polemics of MacLennan, Davies, and Atwood.

45. *Lament*, pp. 57-58.

When we read *Fifth Business*, we might imagine Davies with a twinkle in his eye as Dunstan Ramsay tells us that the "mystical body of wealth" which stands behind Boy Staunton proves he is a genius — "that is to say, a man who does superlatively and without obvious effort something that most people cannot do by the uttermost exertion of their abilities. He was a genius at making money, and that is as uncommon as great achievement in the arts."⁴⁶ It is undoubtedly true that some ability is required for success in the world of high finance, but so, in the vast majority of cases, is access to education and a family inheritance. Davies' apologia for the rich is more than a passing twinkle; it is soon reiterated as a serious proposition that can be generalized to explain all of Boy Staunton's "moneyed, influential friends":

. . . I came to the conclusion that they were reaping where they had sown, and that what they had sown was not, as they believed, hard work and great personal sacrifice but talent — a rather rare talent, a talent that nobody, even its possessors, likes to recognize as a talent and therefore not available to everybody who cares to sweat for it — the talent for manipulating money.⁴⁷

It would be improper, of course, to deny any "genius" its full flowering.

Davies projects onto the world the evidence he needs to support his defence of capitalism, for no one, in fact, inherits a talent *for making money*. To argue thus is to confuse the historical content of an instinct with the instinct itself. What we inherit, perhaps, is an unequally distributed "talent" for the accumulation and manipulation of *things*. This instinct becomes a talent for making money (and earns our thoughtless approval) only in a society where every institution is organized with an eye to the value of money. Jacoby states the obvious when he argues that concrete thought must acknowledge a reciprocal action between the instincts and the social configuration:

The instincts represent the general tendency, while matters of *money* and the desire to become wealthy represent a specific form which the general tendency can assume only in the presence of certain definite social conditions.⁴⁸

Davies' self-satisfied refusal to measure the human cost exacted by liberal capitalism approaches the condition of religious belief. Making money, in his novels, takes on the overtones of a spiritual activity. What Donat O'Donnell said of Evelyn Waugh can also be said of Robertson Davies: "In Mr. Waugh's theology, the love of money is not only the root of all evil, it is a preliminary form of the love of God."⁴⁹

46. Robertson Davies, *Fifth Business* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1970), p. 175.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 194.

48. *Social Amnesia*, p. 95.

49. Donat O'Donnell, *Maria Cross* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1954), p. 126.

Evil is the subject of *The Rebel Angels*, and evil's greatest enemy in this novel is a rich banker with a perfectly individuated personality. The hero, Arthur Cornish, is blessed with absolute self-knowledge. He has inherited both faultless artistic taste and the ability to turn a small fortune into a large fortune. This genetic portrayal of the ruling class is complemented by an onward and upward theory of social evolution: although Arthur's grandfather ("a fine old crusted money type") was anti-intellectual, his father ("a very good banker") was less "savage" in his attitude towards the pursuit of learning. Arthur, the final product of all this surplus wealth, is not only "born to business administration" — the emphasis is Davies' — he is also born to "good taste." We lesser mortals have only to defer to this financier's genius and all will be well:

"I am going to be a patron . . . A great *animateur*; somebody who breathes life into things. I suppose you might call it a great encourager, but also a begetter, a director who keeps artists on the tracks, and provides the power—which isn't all money by any means—that makes them go. It's a kind of person—a very rare kind—that has to work in opera, or ballet, or the theatre; he's the central point for a group of artists of various kinds, and he has to be the autocrat. That's what calls for tact and firmness, but most of all for exceptional taste. It has to be the authoritative taste artists recognize and want to please."⁵⁰

Mostly, great artists want to please themselves; when they want to please rich men it is usually for very pragmatic reasons. The conjunction of money, talent, and taste which is meant to legitimize Cornish's power is not accidental; Davies' arranges it all according to a logic that is truly Lamarkian. He would have us believe that the inherited wealth of the rich brings with it the privileged ability to inherit simultaneously the secondary characteristics that money appropriates to itself. Their power to rule and dictate taste is thereby made "natural."

MacLennan's interpretations of collective social life are similarly biased in their dogmatic refusal to incorporate any specific and concrete historical facts which might challenge the controlling psychological theories. Although his novels give the appearance of reciprocal action between the details of socio-economic history and psychological hypotheses about the role of consciousness, in fact there is no tension at all. Legitimate concern with the subjective aspect of experience is never enriched by a genuine confrontation with historical facts that might trip up the dancers in his rigidly choreographed ballet of ideas.

Thus, in *Voices in Time*, we are assured that almost no one took Hitler seriously, "until it was too late."⁵¹ No one, of course, except the lone and heroic figure of Dr. Erlich, the psychoanalyst whose theories about the insecurity of the collective German psyche enabled him to predict events with impressive accuracy. It is a matter of historical record, however, that

50. *Rebel Angels*, p. 144.

51. Hugh MacLennan, *Voices in Time* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1980), p. 174.

many people took Hitler seriously before it was too late. Most of them, history tells us, were socialists and communists (consequently without access to the truth in MacLennan's world); many ended up in the ovens. Whatever one may think of their politics, one must surely acknowledge their courage and admit they arrived at the truth in accordance with *their* theories of social reality. MacLennan forgets history, then reinvents it to prove the novel's thesis: "all the politics of the world originated in . . . love-hunger growing imperceptibly into hunger for power."⁵²

Another revealing tactic in this novel is the substitution of upper-case abstractions for lower-case particularities. In a single paragraph we encounter the following: "'the System,'" "'the Establishment,'" "'the Great Barrier Reef of unidentified humanity,'" and, of course, "'The Dark People of Russia.'"⁵³ Elsewhere his depiction of society hides behind such reductive generalizations as "Science," "Management," "Older people," "Smiling Bureaucracy," and "King Common Man." This vocabulary mystifies the social process and suggests that it cannot be understood except as a black and white shadow play. Paranoia follows:

Right up to the beginning of the Fear, the Bureaucracy continued to smile at us. Their computers computed us, their pollsters polled us, their con men conned us. They even conned themselves. Behind them moved in the shadows those faceless men who juggled what they called the world's economy.⁵⁴

The men who juggle the world's economy are well known to anyone who cares to know, as are the methods by which they maintain power — and they all have faces.

Finally, what are we to make of the implications in the following crucial step on the road to MacLennan's apocalypse:

About ten years after Uncle Conrad's death, whole peoples in what the journalists called the Third World began to erupt. We saw them on our screens, mobs as large as a million or more, packed body to body like swarming insects, some of them blasting off with the guns our businessmen had sold to their former chiefs. We knew nothing about these people, but anyone could see they were screaming support for the usual Savior who was promising them a new life.⁵⁵

The slanted language in this extrapolation of contemporary history is racist. What is extrapolated is not a complex reading of history; it is MacLennan's hysteria, for he collapses all of the many and various struggles for self-determination in Third World countries into a single pattern of irrational behaviour. MacLennan does not test or support his structural analysis of the larger movements of history by holding a mirror up to nature; his mirror reflects only the selfish fears of liberal consciousness.

52. *Sphinx*, p. 7.

53. *Voices in Time*, pp. 62-63.

54. *Ibid.*, p. 242.

55. *Ibid.*, p. 243.

Margaret Atwood, in her most overtly political novel to date, *Bodily Harm*, shares MacLennan's refusal to inquire into the particularities of history. The social and political landscape of her imaginary Caribbean island is almost wholly literary; it evokes the atmosphere of a novel by Graham Greene or Joseph Conrad. But where they often succeed magnificently in detailing the complex social and political motives of the many protagonists in a revolutionary situation, she fails completely. We put down this novel with no real understanding of the different groups struggling for power. We emerge from the story with little more than a vague sense that the good intentions of the wise and liberal Centrist might be preferable to the good intentions of the slightly adolescent and unrealistic Leftist. Both are to be preferred to the repressive Rightist, whose evil intentions are to be comprehended according to the same terms that Atwood uses to portray both her protagonist's cancer and the pornographic male mind. But if we really look at the Central America that Atwood must have looked at while she wrote, what we see is decidedly at odds with her reduction of political reality to something that is essentially indecipherable except as a conflict between generalized states of consciousness.

In fact, with a little work at the library, it is quite possible to understand a "centrist" like Duarte in El Salvador (or his Christian Democratic brothers throughout Latin America) and to document not only his alliances but his inescapable dependency on a fascist army—regardless of the good intentions he professes. Furthermore, the political motives and detailed social programmes of most Central American "leftists" have been carefully recorded by numerous mature, intelligent, and compassionate human beings. In *Bodily Harm* the revolutionary party is an intellectual joke (no need to look at what they actually say). To be sure, Atwood mistrusts language; so let her test this mistrust by proving there is nothing to choose between the Chile of the eloquent Allende and the Chile of the inarticulate General Pinochet, between the Nicaragua of the pornographic speeches of Somoza and the Nicaragua of the poetically Marxist Sandinistas, between the Cuba of Battista's mafia jargon and the Cuba of Castro's flights of political rhetoric.

When Atwood casts her gaze upon the Caribbean all she can see is a political muddle (informed political choice is impossible). The reader is let off the hook; good liberal intentions from afar will suffice. The novel ends with her protagonist promising to write articles about the region. This act of commitment, given what we know about the singularly uninformed and unsophisticated protagonist, promises to be as "committed" as an Amnesty International report—apolitical and scrupulously silent about the specific social configurations that give rise to torture and the absence of freedom. One ought to support Amnesty International. But it is too easy to stop at being in favour of freedom and against torture, just as, to extend At-

wood's ills is to become an accomplice of the philosophy of progress, the motivating force of which is individualism. The same may be said for critics who fail to remark and scrutinize the content and rhetorical techniques of novels which prescribe more subjectivity as a response to massified society.

These novelists also assume that history is essentially determined by consciousness, and that a change in individual consciousness (a quasi-religious rebirth) is the only legitimate history-making activity open to us. The making of history by citizens who call for fundamental changes in social and economic relations is parodied as the practice of fools or neurotics whose consciousness is hopelessly compromised by the history they oppose. One feels that MacLennan is at least serious about history as a political and economic process, however determinedly he rejects alternative social structures. But Davies and Atwood too often leave us with the impression that it is a spectator sport. History is not something their protagonists work to change or make; it is something to be watched, something that is carefully arranged in the novels so that the characters can learn to see how they ought to see it. We do less harm, their novels imply, if we learn to live, not exactly *within* history (for history is often evil and we do not want to be accused of complicity) but *alongside* history.

Psychologism is fast becoming the dominant response of our fiction to a world that seems mesmerized by the prospect of self-destruction. In the final analysis, the novels of MacLennan, Davies, and Atwood contribute to the social drift towards oblivion. They do so even as, at their best, they record the changing landscape. But if there is any value in Grant's conservative critique of the philosophy of progress, and Jacoby's radical account of conformist psychology, or any truth in my application of their concepts, then the great danger is that some of our most widely read novelists are moving with the dominant metaphor. It is easy to be against cancer and supportive of attempts to find cures, but the elimination of the *causes* of cancer and political unfreedom requires more than good intentions, personal guilt, and a muddled sense that social reality is so complicated that reason stands helpless before it.

Put plainly, there is little reciprocal action in these novels between subjectivity and objectivity because the objective dimension is either missing or present only as a projection of subjectivity. This is true in two senses. The subjectivity of the writers' points of view is projected onto history, and history as it is is never really seen. It is also true in the sense that political and economic forces are accorded no independent power to determine the course of events; they are reduced to matters which are wholly the product of consciousness. To the extent these novels present themselves as mimetic, they are merely tautological. If there is such a thing as empty depth, these writers have achieved it. Their psychological

rhetoric offers the promise of penetration; in fact, it simply reproduces the contemporary obsession with subjectivity.

Conclusion

In the works of George Grant and Russell Jacoby, the search for a collective solution to the excesses of liberal capitalism presents itself as both a moral imperative and the logical consequence of reason applied to an intelligible history. MacLennan, Davies, and Atwood write with different assumptions in mind. They assume, to begin with, that the measures needed to cure civilization are identical with those needed to cure the individual. But to pretend that the contingent techniques which are necessary to patch up individuals can be extrapolated and elevated into a cure for collective social current rather than against it. They deflect attention away from the political and economic imperatives of history and urge upon us the private project of raising cultural consciousness. They make false claims of profundity by relocating the source of historical evil to a spiritual or psychological realm. Their collective refusal, in ten novels, to imagine a *single* positive image of active rebellion against the mad and spiritless society they portray amounts to an uncritical promotion of political resignation and psychological adaptation.

I can think of no better way to conclude this article than with a brilliant passage from George Grant's *Philosophy in the Mass Age*. Its final sentence points the way, and the formulation of its thought is balanced and complex in precisely the way that the novels I have examined are not:

The truth of conservatism is the truth of order and limit, both in social and personal life. But obviously conservatism by itself will not do. For it can say nothing about the overcoming of evil, and at its worst implies that certain evils are a continuing necessity. Let us admit how terribly the powers of this world have used the phrase "the poor we have always with us." In opposition the truth of radicalism offers just the unlimited hope that evil is not necessary. This is why the great Utopian thinkers have developed when a religious, political, and economic structure is being deified. In our modern world the greatest of these Utopian prophets was Marx. As against the capitalist order which made absolute such concepts as the law of supply and demand and particular property relations, which in fact meant acceptance of the evils which went with them, Marx held up a total denial of the world as it was in the name of the ecstatic hope that in history all things are possible, and evil is never necessary . . . Thus it is almost impossible to express the truth of conservatism in our society without seeming to justify our present capitalism. To avoid this, a careful theory is needed in which the idea of limit includes within itself a doctrine of history as the sphere for the overcoming of evil.⁵⁶

Carleton University