Religion in Elgin: A Re-evaluation of the Subplot of *The Imperialist* by Sara Jeannette Duncan

Elizabeth Morton

Lack of unity in the plot of *The Imperialist* has generally been explained in terms of character and theme—either the theme of idealism or the theme of love. Carole Gerson has pointed out: "While the overt subject of *The Imperialist* is indeed imperialism, the novel's deeper structural unity derives from its focus on idealism."[1] And Clara Thomas has suggested:

> Parallel to this "politics of politics" theme, Duncan set a "politics of love" motif, concerning the love of Lorne for Dora Milburn, a superficial self-centered flirt, and of his sister Advena for Hugh Finlay, a Scotch Presbyterian minister and immigrant to Elgin and a man of ideals and ethics as lofty on a personal level as are Lorne's on an international scale.[2]

While both love and idealism are important elements of the structure of *The Imperialist*, there is a third way in which the two plots are united in the portrait of Elgin. The political burden of the main plot is complemented by a discussion of the other preoccupation in Elgin—religion.

The infusion of love and idealism into the subplot clouds the religious perspective, but the purpose of the subplot is nevertheless to provide a view of religion in Elgin, just as the main plot gives Duncan's understanding of politics in South Fox. If the religious theme is kept in mind, the complexity of the social vision embodied in the novel becomes evident, and the parallels between Lorne and Advena are seen to be not fortuitous, but, rather, Duncan's exploration of the way in which the idealist responds to a world epitomized by Mr. Milburn's "averages, balances, the safe level."[3] Both Lorne and Advena have a tendency to adopt extreme positions, and the dynamics of the novel involve a resolution of these extremes in favour of a balance between idealism and pragmatism.

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[1] "Duncan's Web," *Canadian Literature* 63 (1975): 73.

[2] "Canadian Social Mythologies in Sara Jeannette Duncan's *The Imperialist*," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 12.2 (1977): 38.

Evidence of the importance of religion in Elgin and a justification of the designation of religion as the primary theme of the subplot are found in Chapter VII, where the narrator states: "The town of Elgin thus knew two controlling interests—the interest of politics and the interest of religion" (58), and she elaborates:

> In wholesome fear of mistake, one would hesitate to put church matters either before or after politics among the preoccupations of Elgin. It would be safer and more indisputable to say that nothing compared with religion but politics, and nothing compared with politics but religion. (60)

Given this understanding of Elgin's social dynamics, it seems unlikely that Duncan would not include a treatment of religion as a corollary to the discussion of politics included in the main plot. Just as politics is filtered through the idealism of Lorne and the practical manoeuvering of Bingham and Williams, so religion is filtered through the idealism of Advena and Finlay and the balancing pragmatism of Dr. Drummond.

A distinction must be made between religion as social institution and religion as embodiment of emotional faith, for it is as an institution that the church is apprehended in Elgin. The narrator reveals how important the social function of the church is and how the average inhabitant of Elgin relates to the church:

> In Elgin religious fervour was not beautiful, or dramatic, or self-immolating; it was reasonable . . . . The habit of church attendance was not only a basis of respectability, but practically the only one: a person who was "never known to put his head inside a church door" could not be more severely reprobated, by Mrs Murchison at all events. It was the normal thing, the thing which formed the backbone of life, sustaining to the serious, impressive to the light, indispensable to the rest, and the thing that was more than any of these, which you can only know when you stand in the churches among the congregations. Within its prescribed limitation it was for many the intellectual exercise, for more the

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[3] Sara Jeannette Duncan, *The Imperialist* (1904; rpt. Toronto: McClelland, 1971) 51. All quotations from this edition.

> emotional lift, and for all the unfailing distraction of the week. (60)

Church membership is largely responsible for one's sense of identity and feeling of community: members look after their own, and Dr. Drummond sets the example by buying within the congregation at Murchison's. Furthermore, courting is carried on through church attendance, a custom which accounts for the absence of young men from evening services, although, ironically, it is the wife who worships with the husband. The social functions of religion demonstrate the way in which the demands of society dictate matters of faith; in a similar manner Dr. Drummond's pastoral visit to the Murchisons is treated by Mrs. Murchison as a social rather than a religious occasion. People in Elgin tend to be reticent about their faith and beliefs, and the conversation over tea centres instead on the Ormiston case. As the narrator explains,

> It is not given to all of us to receive or to extend the communion of the saints: Mr and Mrs Murchison were indubitably of the elect, but he was singularly close-mouthed about it, and she had an extraordinary way of seeing the humorous side—altogether it was paralysing, and the conversation would wonderfully soon slip around to some robust secular subject, public or domestic. (39)

Dr. Drummond himself epitomizes some of the more worldly preoccupations of the church and its members in his annual anniversary sermons, where he reviews the number of members, and in the conflict with East Elgin, where only the certain defection of Presbyterians to the nearby Methodist chapel produces reform. The intertwining of secular interests and religion is most evident in the concern over politics in the sermon and is also reflected in Dr. Drummond's regular prayer for the Royal Family, the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, and the British Prime Minister. If the Murchisons are reserved about the spiritual aspects of their religion, they nevertheless represent all that Dr. Drummond expects from his congregation, for he recognizes in Mr. Murchison one of the "future elders and office-bearers of the congregation, a man who would be punctual with his pew rent, sage in his judgements, and whose views upon church attendance would be extended to his family" (21).

The family's disappointment at the loss of Abby to the Episcopalians and Mrs. Murchison's own code regarding church attendance are demonstrated in the following exchange with Abby:

> "Well, what I want to know is," said Mrs Murchison, "whether you are coming to the church you were born and brought up in, Abby, or not, tonight? There's the first bell."
>
> "I'm not going to any church," said Abby. "I went this morning. I'm going home to my baby."
>
> "Your father and mother," said Mrs Murchison, "can go twice a day, and be none the worse for it." (201)

One gets a clear sense of Mrs. Murchison's talents and accomplishments as a homemaker and of her adherence to the outward forms of her religion, but the exact nature of her faith and belief is not open to inspection, and in this respect she seems to be representative of Elgin's approach to religion.

It is therefore clear why Advena and, to some extent, Finlay seem out of place in this society and within this religious framework. Duncan makes it clear from the beginning that Advena and her brother Lorne are imaginative and idealistic: their response to the Independent Order of Foresters in the Victoria Day parade is emotional and symbolic, reflecting the questioning attitude Lorne will later assume toward politics and the way in which Advena will regard religious matters. Based on an emotional commitment similar to a vision or a communion in which "his country came subjectively into his possession" (74), Lorne finds an outlet for his idealism and becomes a prophet for a new Canada at the centre of a revitalized Empire.

Advena, however, has no such opportunities or encouragement, and her excursions into the outside world extend as far as "taking the university course for women at Toronto, and afterward teaching the English branches to the junior forms in the Collegiate Institute" (32). According to her mother, Advena had never demonstrated the talents appropriate for a girl, and, as a result, she functions in society as an exile, by withdrawing from the circles in which she cannot be useful. The litany of her failures—unable to make her bed properly, always with a book in her hand, pouring cupfuls of soap suds to see the foam rise while washing dishes, wanting her mother to adopt a papoose, refusing to take piano lessons, reading novels, canoeing at six o'clock in the morning and walking "in the rain of windy October twilights"—is epitomized in the condemnation that no man had ever come to court her.

Advena's adoption of a philosophical attitude is justified by Mrs. Murchison's opinion of the value and opportunities of a single woman like Advena: "'I don't deny the girl's talented in her own way, but it's no way to marry on. She'd much better make up her mind just to be a happy, independent old maid; any woman might do worse. And take no responsibilities'" (104). This assumption that the single woman can barely justify her existence leads Advena to withdraw from the society in which she, unlike Lorne, can take no active part, and she embraces a stoic asceticism. Her retreat from the physical world into the realm she has always occupied as a dreamer is appropriate, because within its limitations her intellectual capabilities, unsuited to a wife and mother (according to Elgin's definition), are validated, and her differences from Abby, Stella, and Dora Milburn become positive rather than negative ones.

The narrator describes Elgin as a centre in which "The arts conspired to be absent; letters resided at the nearest university; science was imported as required, in practical improvements"—a small town partaking somewhat "of the ferocious, of the inflexible, of the unintelligent" (60). In this kind of atmosphere, it is not surprising that Advena has no legitimate role, except as a teacher. But, sending "up her little curl of reflection in a safe place" (45), she continues her reading and becomes a devotee of Browning.

Her reading of Browning's most obscure work, *Sordello*, a work considered by the Victorians to be badly written and incomprehensible, indicates the degree to which Advena lives outside the standard intellectual pursuits of Elgin and reveals her interests in writers who were also questioning those things "go-ahead" Elgin takes for granted. Her "queer satisfactions and enthusiasms" (45) also include philosophy and Eastern religion—Buddhism, Yoga, and Plato. It is significant that these philosophies preach the rejection of earthly considerations and physical desire as a means of release from suffering, and it is just this religious model which Advena espouses in her life.

The only individual in Elgin who shares Advena's concerns is the new Presbyterian minister, Finlay, who is described as being a "passionate romantic," "with deep dreams in his eyes" (68), "a man with horizons, lifted lines beyond the common vision, and an eye rapt and a heart intrepid" (69), whom Mrs. Murchison dismisses as "'A great gawk of a fellow, with eyes that always look as if he were in the middle of next week!'" (104). He, too, is isolated in Elgin, as Mrs. Murchison derisively comments: "'He may be able to talk to Advena, but he's no hand at general conversation; I know he finds precious little to say to me . . . .

He comes here because, being human, he's got to open his mouth some time or other, I suppose'" (104-5).

A brief consideration of Mrs. Murchison's own character and enthusiasms will reveal why Finlay finds little in common with her, and why she finds Advena's talents so useless. She has little patience with her own husband's intellectual pursuits, and no use for books whatsoever: "Mrs Murchison kept a discouraging eye upon such purchases . . . . Mrs Murchison was surrounded indeed by more of 'that sort of thing' than she could find use or excuse for" (30). Her dismissal of Plato and of philosophy reveals her lack of sophistication and narrow horizons: "'Besides, if I know anything about Plato he was a Greek heathen, and no writer for a Presbyterian minister to go lending around. I'd Plato him to the rightabout if it was me!'" (105). While Mr. Murchison demurs from this criticism, one nevertheless feels that Mrs. Murchison represents the inflexible and unintelligent character of Elgin.

Dr. Drummond, on the other hand, is a figure who, like Mr. Murchison, balances the sentimental and the practical, the imaginative and the prosaic, and both Dr. Drummond and Mr. Murchison function as father-figures in the subplot and main plot respectively. Mr. Murchison's own approach can be seen in discussions with Lorne concerning imperialism: "While the practical half of John Murchison was characteristically alive to the difficulties involved, the sentimental half of him was ready at any time to give out cautious sparks of sympathy with the splendor of Wallingham's scheme" (260). Dr. Drummond assumes a fatherly role when he attempts to dissuade Finlay from honouring his engagement to Christie Cameron, and the narrator notes that Dr. Drummond considered that he was just as responsible as the parents of his congregation for the outcome of their children.

The traditional religious doctrines preached by Dr. Drummond do not reflect the spiritual questioning of Advena and Finlay, just as his library consists, instead, of "standard religious philosophy, standard poets, standard fiction, all that was standard, and nothing that was not" (156). Secure of his position in Elgin, Dr. Drummond is equally secure in his faith and in his place in the church: "Religious doctrine was to him a thing for ever accomplished, to be accepted or rejected as a whole. He taught eternal punishment and retribution, reconciling both with Divine love and mercy" (67). The balancing of opposites so important to him is also evident in his own philosophy: "He was a progressive by his business instinct, in everything but theology, where perhaps his business instinct also operated the other way, in favour of the sure thing" (197).

Dr. Drummond is, therefore, very disturbed by Finlay's misguided idealism and sense of honour regarding Christie Cameron, for Dr. Drummond is progressive in rejecting old world notions of honour, and conservative in proposing that Finlay marry Advena, whose feelings for him and character are a known commodity and therefore a "sure thing." But Finlay rejects Dr. Drummond's advice because he "'will not be a man who has jilted a woman'" (161), ironically foreshadowing Christie's jilting of him in favour of Dr. Drummond.

Advena's response to the problem of Finlay's engagement reflects her absorption of the philosophies of renunciation, and she finds in her dilemma the ultimate opportunity to put those teachings into effect. Her idealism becomes fanatically cerebral, as she realizes that the only relationship open to her and Finlay is what Finlay describes as a "'friendship of ideas,'" and beyond that, "'a friendship of spirit'" (183). The extremes to which Advena goes set her apart from Elgin and place her in the context of the fervour associated with Oxford, Mecca, and Benares; she has ceased to be reasonable and Presbyterian in the fashion of Dr. Drummond, and has become like a member of the Oxford Movement, a Muslim, or a Hindu. However, this response corresponds to her way of dealing with Elgin's lack of recognition of her talents.

The narrator states that Advena and Finlay "had abandoned the natural demands of their state" (180), but it is Advena, rather than Finlay, who conceives of this ideal and who, apparently, derives the most satisfaction from it. Advena's conscious self-sacrifice is therefore part of a larger context apart from Finlay, for she has been forced to sacrifice many of her talents, since there was no use for them in Elgin, and has, as a result, become virtually useless in Elgin society. Thus Advena's urge for self-sacrifice is linked with her overwhelming desire to be useful in a practical way.

One reads Advena's statements—"'If I could be of any use I should be very glad to go over them with you,'" "'I should have liked so much to be of use,'" and "'I would like to help you in every little way I can'" (182-3)—made during the brief husband-and-wife tableau in the study in the context of her need to be a useful sacrifice. The narrator emphasizes the corollary nature of this yearning when she states that Advena is "privately all unwilling to give up her martyrdom" (183) and is preoccupied with "the aesthetic ecstasy of self-torture" (184).

Advena dramatizes her vision of the ascetic ideal in her discussion with Finlay. She says, "'I look forward to the time when this—other feeling of ours will become just an idea, as it is now just an emotion, at which we should try to smile. It is the attitude of the gods'" (183). Moving from Plato to the Yogi's renunciation of the body, she hypothesizes, "'I look forward to the time . . . when the best that I can give you or you can give me will ride upon a glance'" (184), and she expresses her fear that the world ultimately sullies all relationships: "'Isn't there something that appeals to you . . . in the thought of just leaving it, all unsaid, a dear and tender projection upon the future that faded—a lovely thing we turned away from, until it was no longer there?'" (184). Finlay's answer, however, has already been given in his musing, "'I used to feel more drawn to the ascetic achievement and its rewards . . . than I do now'" (184).

The theme of usefulness combined with conscious self-sacrifice is continued in Advena's ill-advised visit to Mrs. Kilbannon and Christie Cameron. Once again, Advena

> was there simply to offer herself up, and the impulse of sacrifice seldom considers whether or not it may be understood . . . . to do the normal, natural thing at keen personal cost was to sound that depth, or rise to that height of the spirit where pain sustains. We know of Advena that she was prone to this sort of exaltation. (218)

She repeats to Christie her desire to be useful: "'And I want you to let me help you about your house, and in every way possible. I am sure I can be of use'" (220). The only things that save Advena from becoming pathetic are her sense of humour and her recognition, at last, that her self-sacrifice is out of all proportion to the situation.

After her discovery that Christie Cameron's affections "might have been in any one of her portmanteaux" (215), Advena gives up her ideal: "now it lay about her; her strenuous heart had pulled it down to foolish ruin" (250). Both she and Finlay have renounced their ideal relationship, but only Advena has been purged of the pride that is at the source of their dilemma; it remains for Dr. Drummond and Christie Cameron to complete the process for Finlay. Dr. Drummond's function in the subplot is to restore the balance between emotion and reason, and he achieves this through his pragmatic solution to Finlay's dilemma regarding Christie Cameron. A pragmatic approach is necessary because Advena and Finlay veer between extremes of the cerebral and emotional, and Dr. Drummond is able to see that their situation requires an infusion of typical Elgin reasonableness.

Living in intellectual and emotional isolation in Elgin, Advena is unable to reconcile her imaginative perspective of the world, which led to her asceticism, with her need to fulfill a useful role, which Elgin defines solely in terms of limited, gender-oriented concepts. The subplot therefore involves the purging of Advena's religious asceticism to allow her to reconcile her intellectual and emotional needs with the role of wife, so that she can become, in the eyes of Elgin, and perhaps in her own eyes, useful.

While the subplot reads like a love story whose purpose is to provide a foil for Lorne's romance with Dora Milburn and a counterpoint to Lorne's emotional idealism, its true function can be seen in the interplay of opposing religious concepts—that of the reasonable, secure, socially-oriented institution exemplified by Dr. Drummond and Mr. and Mrs. Murchison, and the idealistic asceticism espoused by Advena and Finlay. The Liberal party of South Fox rejects Lorne's idealistic dream of Empire in favour of a realist who recognizes the importance of the "chink of hard cash" (234) in Elgin politics, and, in a similar fashion, Dr. Drummond uses his influence to show Advena and Finlay that their proposed self-sacrifice is not only futile but also ridiculous in the religious atmosphere of Elgin, noted for its denial of the "beautiful, or dramatic, or self-immolating" (60). Just as Lorne returns to the eminently safe and reasonable world of law with Cruikshank, so Advena escapes the "dramatic end" prophesied by Elgin, and she and Finlay learn to function within the reasonable religious limitations of Presbyterian Elgin, having found in each other the ideal Elgin could not provide.

University of Ottawa