Dialectic, Morality, and the Deptford Trilogy

Marco P. LoVerso

Robertson Davies has referred to himself as a "moralist" and to his novels as "a moralist's novels."[1] The central question that led him to write the Deptford trilogy was a moral question: "to what extent is a man responsible for the outcome of his actions, and how early in life does the responsibility begin?" (*One Half* 66). But this concern with morality raises the issue of authority: who or what defines moral truth? This is a particularly difficult question in our relativistic age, an age that is characterized in much of its fiction by what George Woodcock has called "Don Quixote's dilemma," by which he means a solipsistic world view.[2] But one obvious answer to the question of moral authority is suggested by the story of Don Quixote itself, where we are made to see that the solipsistic view maintains its integrity only until it runs headlong into the tangible world, at which point some adjustment of the original vision must be made. The Spanish don's encounters with windmills and sheep remind us that the individual who lives in the physical world finds himself continually interacting with that world, and it is through this give and take process, which is something like a dialectical process, between the self and the material world that personal perceptions and conclusions can be tested.

Such a dialectical process can help us to see how a moral position can be defined and defended in art. As John Gardner argues in *On Moral Fiction*, moral art must be social.[3] A dialogue that carries beyond the single perspective must exist. This leads Gardner to contend that morality in art is "less a matter of doctrine than of process. Art is the means by which an artist comes to see; it is his peculiar, highly sophisticated and extremely demanding technique of discovery" (Gardner 91). What this means is that, according to Gardner, fictions should be based on characters who embody values and who test these values through their actions. The interaction of the characters is thus more

---

[1] *One Half of Robertson Davies* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1977) 16.

[2] "Don Quixote's Dilemma, or the Future of Fiction," *Canadian Fiction Magazine* 22 (1976): 68-73.

[3] (New York: Basic Books, 1978) 82.

important in a moral work than discursive thought (Gardner 92). In the present essay, I intend to apply Gardner's criterion for moral fiction to Davies' Deptford trilogy. It is particularly useful to do so because some of the recent critics who have addressed the moral issue in Davies' novels have judged the works negatively precisely because they have not found in them the kind of testing process that Gardner describes. For example, in *Moral Vision in the Canadian Novel*, D.J. Dooley finds fault with *Fifth Business* because in it Davies does not question the objective truth of what his protagonist sees, he puts too much emphasis on psychological and therefore relativistic truth, and he leaves the moral questions unanswered.[4] Similarly, Stephen Bonnycastle identifies several moral problems in all three novels of the Deptford trilogy and finds the source of these problems in the absence of dialectic in the books.[5] Bonnycastle recognizes that the novels are based on a system of confrontations between characters, confrontations that lead to a type of growth. But these confrontations are not, in Bonnycastle's view, dialectical because they typically consist of a dominant person—usually a teacher figure—imposing his or her philosophy or language on a student figure. The confrontations are based on what Bonnycastle calls "the ethics of monologue," and they suggest a "might is right" philosophy. In Bonnycastle's view, then, the novels of the trilogy are anti-rational, and they reflect a dislike for argument and systematic thought.

This is the strongest criticism that has been brought to bear against Davies' novels. If Bonnycastle and Dooley are correct, if Davies does indeed fail to test his moral ideas, if a true dialectic is absent in the novels, then we must conclude with them that Davies has failed as a "moralist" and the novels of the Deptford trilogy are not "a moralist's novels." It is my contention that this is, in fact, not the case, that all three novels *are* based on a very well developed dialectical system, and that Davies' moral positions are therefore tested and made to seem reasonable and right. To prove this, I will present a detailed analysis of the system of confrontations in the trilogy to determine if these confrontations are dialectical or not.

To begin, it should be recognized that all three novels of the Deptford trilogy deal with the relationship between historical facts, personal interpretations of these facts, and public reaction to these interpretations. The three protagonists—Ramsay, David Staunton, and Magnus Eisengrim—are all involved in recounting

---

4 (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1979) 109-22.

5 "Robertson Davies and the Ethics of Monologue," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 12.1 (1977): 20-40.

the events of their past and interpreting these events as they see them. The possibility for dialectic arises when each character chooses an audience and attempts to share his interpretation with that audience. At that point the character reveals his self-knowledge and, at the same time, opens himself to the possibility of public judgment, a process which, ideally, could lead to wisdom and growth.

Initially, it would appear that such a situation does not really exist in the first novel, *Fifth Business*, because it is, for all practical purposes, a traditional, first-person narrative. The story is addressed to Ramsay's former headmaster, but the headmaster has no voice in the novel and thus does not engage in the kind of dialogue with the narrator that we find in the other novels of the trilogy. And as Bonnycastle has suggested, even the contrasts between Ramsay and the other characters do not seem to provide a true dialectic because the secondary characters, as well as Ramsay himself, are simply monologuists whose theories about life are not explicitly tested.

Certainly there are no real Socratic dialogues in *Fifth Business*. And one often gets the sense that the teacher figures like Father Regan, Padre Blazon, and Liesl are uttering set speeches. But even if the arguments made by these characters are not debated as their points are made, is it not possible to see these speeches as part of a system of confrontations between the individual and the world (as in *Don Quixote*), a larger dialectic between opposing points of view that Ramsay must deal with as he progresses through his story? The key to the question of the presence or absence of dialectic, I would argue, is whether or not one can identify conflicting perspectives that lead to a positive change in Ramsay. If Ramsay comes to a fuller understanding of himself and of his world as a result of his exposure to other monologuists, a dialectic does exist: first, because different points of view have been articulated and, second, because this exposure to other views has resulted in a new wisdom in Ramsay. A clue to this approach to dialectic is suggested in *World of Wonders* by Magnus Eisengrim. At one point, Eisengrim's antagonist, Ingestree, quickly dismisses the many Canadian opera houses that his English theater group played in as "frightful places." And Eisengrim responds, "I've seen worse since. . . . You should try a tour in Central America to balance your viewpoint."[6] In effect, this idea of balancing one's viewpoint is at the heart of the narrative method in *Fifth Business*. It is a

[6] *World of Wonders* (Toronto:Macmillan, 1975) 257.

dialectic that is based on Ramsay's exposure and reaction to a series of contrasting positions on the central concerns of his life.

If we trace Ramsay's changeing attitudes towards Mrs. Dempster, we see that a process of growth is made possible by a continuing dialectic on her and what she represents. The entire novel presents us with a series of contrasts between Ramsay's personal vision of Mrs. Dempster and a number of other perspectives from the public world. At first, Ramsay develops a sympathy towards Mrs. Dempster that is totally antithetical to the judgment of the town. Even though his innocence leads him to see her sexuality as "madness,"[7] he comes to accept her as a "wise woman" and a saint (54) whereas the people of Deptford reject her totally and call her "simple" (25) and "mad" (53); even her own husband thinks of her as "his heavy cross" (40). But these opposing points of view have no effect in changing Ramsay's mind, for he is at what can be called the anti-dialectical stage, the stage when it is more natural for him to reject the ideas of his parents and their society than to think about them. At this initial stage, then, he is in opposition to his society; but this situation is necessary, for it establishes that Ramsay's view is an uncommon one and that he is going to have to deal, somehow, with the view of the rest of his community.

From this point on, Ramsay experiences a number of confrontations that challenge his anti-dialectical stance and help him to reconsider his attitude towards Mrs. Dempster. The first step is his rejection of Deptford and his parents by going away to war, and for that he suffers a kind of death, a death which is associated with his desire to see Mrs. Dempster as a miracle-working saint (he thinks she appears to him as a madonna on the battlefield). After he is reborn as St. Dunstan and after he is awarded his VC, his vision begins to change, for he now finds himself in the role of saint and hero. This is an important part of the dialectical process; in assuming the role into which he had placed Mrs. Dempster, Ramsay can start to see the relationship between the hero and the hero-worshipper differently. He recognizes that someone who is called a hero might be a person like himself, a normal individual who acted heroically by accident. But this realization is not enough to change Ramsay's perspective because Ramsay is too comfortable in the role of saint. Even though he does experience "the sins of the world," good times, and sex (134), represented by Agnus Day, Gloria Mundy, and Libby Doe, he does not have any lasting relationships. He, in effect, puts himself above the sinful world and dedicates him-

---

[7] *Fifth Business* (Toronto:Macmillan, 1970) 56.

self to Mrs. Dempster, a choice which blinds him to his own and Mrs. Dempster's human, sinful nature.

For this reason, Davies introduces what might be called the Mrs. Dempster-as-sinner argument into the dialectic by having Ramsay encounter a number of persons who point to Mrs. Dempster's mortal weaknesses. First is Joel Surgeoner, the man who has sex with Mrs. Dempster in the Deptford gravel pit—a place that Ramsay associates with "a Protestant Hell" (47). Of course, Surgeoner does call Mrs. Dempster "a blessed saint," but he also reminds Ramsay of Mrs. Dempster's carnal act, and he unwittingly convinces Ramsay of the need to face his past (155). The next encounter is with the Deptford magistrate whose conversation reheats Ramsay's "strong sense of guilt and responsibility about Paul" (157). As a result, he goes to see Father Regan, who provides the first fully articulated challenge to Ramsay's vision by calling Mrs. Dempster a "fool saint" (159). Ramsay then goes to visit his fool-saint, now describing her as "an unremarkable woman really, except for great sweetness of expression" (160); and he has a conversation with Bertha Shanklin, who talks about her niece in terms that suggest she is worthy of pity and help rather than of adoration (162).

The net effect of this series of conversations, then, is to remind Ramsay of Mrs. Dempster's humanity and to suggest to him that, if he is to grow as a human being, he will have to come to a fuller understanding of his past. So it is significant in terms of the notion of dialectic that after these conversations that Ramsay's treatment of Mrs. Dempster changes: whereas in the first section of the novel he sees her as a superhuman saint, a performer of miracles, in the "My Fool-Saint" section he becomes more sensitive to her human suffering, and he accepts her as his responsibility.

But even though he is being forced to witness Mrs. Dempster's degeneration, he refuses to accept her humanity because he refuses to accept his own humanity. It is the role of the last two dialectical antagonists—Padre Blazon and Liesl—to challenge his pride. Blazon attacks the problem directly by telling him to ask himself why he wants to see Mrs. Dempster as a saint (207) and by accusing him of playing God. Ramsay seems to reject this accusation, but we do see another change in him after his encounter with Blazon: he is becoming more and more depressed by his involvement with Mrs. Dempster because, as he points out, she is now "very dull," his visits are the high points of her life, and he is repelled by what he calls the "sexual fetor" of her hospital (209). He tries to put himself above this "fetor" by telling the patients stories of the saints, but he is

unsuccessful. He compares the experience to "visiting a part of my own soul that was condemned to live in hell" (210). Significantly, this damnation is associated with Ramsay's refusal to share the care of Mrs. Dempster with anyone: "she was mine" (211), he says. This is an act of pride that is associated with his desire to be saintly and above the world. But, ironically, he is beginning to see the egotistical and therefore damnable side of what he had wanted to consider as a charitable act. Padre Blazon was right: Ramsay is playing God, and for this he is thrown into hell; but, at this point, he refuses to accept the idea that he belongs there.

It follows quite logically, then, that the next antagonist who must convince Ramsay of his pride and sinfulness is the devil himself, represented by Liesl. As in the previous dialectical episodes, Ramsay encounters his antagonist when he is pursuing his research on saints and miracles (this time on the shrine of the Virgin of Guadalupe). But, soon after he meets Magnus Eisengrim and Liesl, he is invited to become part of their world of illusions. In symbolic terms, he is tempted into sin and falls to the temptation. He agrees to write a false "autobiography," and, soon after, he recognizes the sinful side of this new part of his life: "I was regaining the untruthfulness, the lack of scruple, and the absorbing egotism of a child" (252). And he identifies "two things that were wrong" with his life: "I had become a dangerously indiscreet talker, and I was in love with the beautiful Faustina" (252). Ironically, it is these two "wrong" things that lead to Ramsay's new self-knowledge, for they allow him to become more fully involved in the sinful world and, thus, make him a vulnerable and unsaintly human being.

Because Ramsay's humanity is revealed in this way, he is receptive to Liesl's attack. Like Blazon, she accuses Ramsay of playing God, of "watching from the sidelines" (260), and of being a "knight" and a "saint" (261). But she presses the argument one step further by inviting Ramsay to go to bed with her. This is not a frivolous invitation, but a serious challenge that he accept his sexual, sinful self. And the violent battle that ensues between them is actually a physical manifestation of the dialectic that has been taking place. Ramsay, in his pride, has been trying to deny the devil in himself and has, consequently, shut himself off from the rest of sinful humanity. Liesl confronts him with this truth, which he initially fights. But when he eventually embraces the evil in himself, represented by his sexual union with Liesl, he finally achieves peace: "never have I known such deep delight or such an aftermath of healing tenderness" (267).

At this point, the dialectical process leading to Ramsay's self-knowledge has almost come to an end. After Ramsay has been made to see from the point of view of the world of illusions (symbolic of the sinful world), he is able to free himself of the "saintly" illusions about himself. In fact, in the final section of the novel, Ramsay is associated with the devil by Mrs. Dempster, who, in her final days, has fits of rage against Ramsay as "the evil genius of her life" (285). The final step that remains is for Ramsay to redefine his attitude towards Mrs. Dempster. And this takes place after a last conversation with Blazon, who reminds Ramsay that Mrs. Dempster is a "fool-saint." But, significantly, Blazon does not dismiss Mrs. Dempster. Rather, he suggests a balanced attitude towards her, for he concludes that, even if she is not a true saint, she is still worthy of admiration because of her love of God and her consequent heroic struggle to endure a hard fate. In this way, Blazon justifies Ramsay's veneration of Mrs. Dempster. At the same time, Blazon's argument suggests an identification between Mrs. Dempster and Ramsay as heroic beings; for both have been involved in inner struggles, and Ramsay's has culminated in his successful battle with the devil. Ramsay obviously finds this argument convincing, for when he finds the Little Madonna that he had seen during the war, he sees, not another miraculous appearance of Mrs. Dempster, but a statue with Mrs. Dempster's expression, "an expression of mercy and love, tempered with perception and penetration" (295). These are human qualities, and Ramsay's new ability to see them as such illustrates his final victory in his struggle to understand himself, a victory that is achieved through a long, dialectical process.

The struggle for self-knowledge is a basic concern in the entire Deptford trilogy, and it is related to the theme of moral responsibility. The link between these two themes is made clear in the last section of *Fifth Business*, where Ramsay accuses Boy Staunton of not knowing himself completely, of repressing that part of himself that put the stone in the snowball. Throughout the novel, Boy is presented as Ramsay's opposite, as a self-centered materialist who remains frozen in his spiritual development. In effect, he does not grow because he has not benefited from the kind of self-analysis that stems from productive dialogue with others. And when he seeks his own death, he obviously removes himself completely from his responsibilities and from the possibility of participating in dialectic and of achieving self-knowledge.

In *The Manticore*, Davies shows, in greater detail than is necessary in *Fifth Business*, how such a process of self-knowledge through dialectic is achieved. He does it by focusing on

Boy's son, David Staunton. This is significant, for David embodies those qualities that Boy lacks and that would have allowed him to be, like Ramsay and Eisengrim, one of the "twice-born." David has more in common with his teacher, Ramsay, than he does with Boy (at one point in the novel, Caroline even argues that David is Ramsay's son). Like Ramsay, David has a very strong sense of responsibility. In fact, on the very first page of the novel, he indicates that he has gone to seek psychological help in Zurich because he has examined himself and has weighed his "degree of responsibility."[8] Also, like Ramsay and unlike Boy, David has mastered a body of knowledge (in his case, the law) but, in the process, has sacrificed his love life and his ability to feel. In this way, Davies associates the all-consuming pursuit of knowledge with the individual's escape from part of life and, therefore, with his alienation from his true self.

There is a similarity in the basic patterns of *Fifth Business* and *The Manticore.* In both books, the protagonist begins with a basically subjective (anti-dialectical) and limited point of view and then comes, through a series of dialectical encounters, to overcome his narrow vision by understanding himself. (We shall see a similar pattern in *World of Wonders*, where this process is more explicitly defined in terms of the growth from egotism to egoism.) The one important difference between Ramsay and David that affects the presentation of this dialectical process centers on their attitude towards the noumenal. Ramsay is essentially a man of faith, who is able to relate personal experience to broader historical or mythical patterns. He has, therefore, a natural disposition to looking beyond his self, and, consequently there is no need to analyze Ramsay's self-examination or to present a dialectic that relates to an inner or psychological growth in *Fifth Business.* David, on the other hand, is a rationalist, with true faith only in his own reason. He is more seriously trapped in a solipsistic world and must, therefore, engage in a dialectic with a teacher figure (Dr. von Haller) who can take him beyond himself by educating him to see the universal in his personal experiences. Once he attains this new vision, he is ready to confront elements of his past and of his self (in the Sorgenfrei episodes) to the extent that the shocking episode in the caves awakens his ability to feel and to experience awe and wonder.

As a result, the narrative technique is more complex in *The Manticore* than in the first novel because Davies is now concerned with presenting something like a Socratic dialectic on his

---

[8] *The Manticore* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1972) 1.

protagonist's life.[9] David, like Ramsay, does retell some of the events of his life, but, unlike Ramsay, he must defend his interpretations to an objective listener. The conflict that results between David and von Haller provides a testing ground for the opposing points of view that each holds. It is this testing process, this dialectic, that convinces David of the limitations of his self-centered perspective and leads him to embrace a more mature attitude towards himself and the world.

David, in the tradition of Boy Staunton, begins the novel in an anti-dialectical state of mind. Even though he has gone to see a psychiatrist, he confesses that, "I have never believed these people can do anything for an intelligent man he can't do for himself" (3). He presents himself as a man of reason, and even his decision to seek psychiatric help is made "on a basis of reason" (6), following the "usual examination," which, as he describes it towards the end of Part I, involves his sitting in judgment on himself in the courtroom of his own reason (which he calls Judge Staunton). Thus, although David believes in the law (a faith that saves him from total solipsism), he seeks refuge in his own mind, and he is wary of psychiatrists. At the same time, he is prejudiced against women and doubts that Dr. von Haller could ever understand his problem. But von Haller manages to overcome David's prejudices by, significantly enough, being eminently reasonable. Specifically, she makes David attend to the facts of his history, and she appeals to common or typical human experience in order to convince David that he is not alone or totally unique in his suffering. She uses methods comparable to the lawyer's approach: she presents evidence, and she cites precedents. In this way, she engages David in a dialogue and eventually convinces him to remain in the dialogue.

Dr. von Haller begins by questioning David's reason for seeking treatment. David claims that it is because of what he calls the "murder" of his father. Dr. von Haller answers this by citing a precedent from human experience with death: "the death of his father is always a critical moment in a man's life" (9). This is meant to challenge David's assumption that he is a unique sufferer. Also, she challenges his contention that Boy was murdered. First, she tests his facts when she puts Boy's stone in her mouth, and she cites the newspaper reports which indicated that "suicide was the generally accepted explanation" (10). Secondly, she questions his thinking and presents the experience of others as evidence: "You think your stepmother murdered

---

[9] James Neufeld has pointed out that Davies has linked the three novels of the trilogy with "framing devices" which "become progressively more complicated during the course of the trilogy." See "Structural Unity in 'The Deptford Trilogy': Robertson Davies as Egoist," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 12.1 (1977): 71.

your father psychologically, but you don't think that would be enough to drive him to suicide. Well—I have known of such things" (10). Thirdly, she forces him to face the facts: "Oh come, Mr. Staunton, nobody could put that stone in a man's mouth against his will without breaking his teeth and creating great evidence of violence. I have tried it. Have you? No, I thought you hadn't. Your father must have put it there himself" (11).

By this point, David has his back up against the wall. Dr. von Haller presents reasonable hypotheses based on the facts, and David defends his interpretations by ignoring the facts and citing Boy's strength of character and love of life as proof against the suicide theory. But the weakness of his argument is quickly revealed when von Haller reminds him of a fact he himself had submitted as evidence:

> "Perhaps somebody told him to do it. Somebody he could not or did not wish to disobey."
> "Ridiculous. Nobody could make father do anything he didn't want to do."
> "Perhaps he wanted to do this. Perhaps he wanted to die. People do, you know."
> "He loved life. He was the most vital person I have ever known."
> "Even after your stepmother had murdered him psychologically?" (11)

In this exchange, we can once more see von Haller citing common experience and the basic facts of the case. These two forms of evidence make her argument reasonable. David is forced to admit this. His only recourse is to try to run away. But von Haller convinces him to remain engaged in the dialogue, and she does it once more by citing common experience (she refers to the behavior of "many people," "everyone," and "people of your general type") and the facts (his "intelligence" and reasonableness—1).

This first session between David and von Haller is important because, in establishing the relationship betwen the two characters and ensuring that David is actively engaged in this relationship, it defines the nature of the dialectic of the novel. Dr. von Haller is not an authoritarian expert who imposes her system on her passive patient. Rather, she is a practised dialectician who bases her analysis on a close attention to the facts and a thorough knowledge of human nature. Her authority is founded on these two elements. As can be seen in the passages just summarized, she establishes her authority through reasonable persuasion.

This method is the basic pattern in all of the major conversations between David and von Haller in the first two sections of the novel. In Part I, after she convinces him, of the limitations of his subjective vision and of the need to participate in the dialectic, she can present her goals to him: to help him become himself but also to see that self in terms of "the common heritage of mankind" (63). Part II deals with this process, the anamnesis. Here, parts of David's education in recognizing the archetypes are summarized as the narration takes the form of David's "brief" of his sessions with von Haller. But the rest of the time von Haller plays a prominent role in criticizing David's vision of his past and in identifying the archetypes. For example, she points out his inability to feel; she questions his double standard for his mother and his father and his double standard for his relationship with Judy, and Carol's relationship with Tiger; she convinces him that his "love" for her (Dr. von Haller) is not real, and she teaches him how to interpret the manticore dream; she questions the morality of Boy's arrangement of David's first sexual experience; she continues to question his reverence for his father and his vision of Judy; and she convinces him that his persona is not his true self.

By the end of this dialectical process, David comes to have a more balanced view of his self and his relationship to the world. As he puts it in the early pages of Part III,

> I am beginning to recognize the objectivity of the world, while knowing also that because I am who and what I am, I both perceive the world in terms of who and what I am and project onto the world a great deal of who and what I am. If I know this, I ought to be able to escape the stupider kinds of illusions. The absolute nature of things is independent of my senses (which are all I have to perceive with), and what I perceive is an image in my own psyche. (242-43)

An important aspect of this insight is a new faith in himself. Now that David understands himself and his relationship to the world better, he is in a position to confront the world on his own, without the help of Dr. von Haller. In fact, at one point in this last section, Liesl tells him, with reference to the kind of psychiatric session that David has had with von Haller, "these analyses, Davey—they are duets between the analyst and the analysand, and you will never be able to sing louder or higher than your analyst" (263). And she goes on to point out that the great analysts (Freud, Adler, Jung) all based their insights on "self knowledge". But this simply serves to reinforce the lessons of Dr. von Haller. Throughout the first two sections, it is clear that

self-knowledge comes through dialectic. But once a certain level of self-knowledge is achieved, von Haller tells David that he is ready to answer his own questions, and she puts an end to the anamnesis. So when Liesl later tells him that "the modern hero is the man who conquers in the inner struggle" and she invites him to "be the hero of your own epic," she is giving David an extra push in the same direction in which the dialectic has taken him up to now.

The final step that David must now take is to become convinced of the strength of the ego and to engage heroically in the inner struggle. This is why Part III is dominated, not by von Haller the dialectician, but by examples of strong egoists (Ramsay, Liesl, and Eisengrim) who have achieved a level of self-knowledge and have accepted themselves. And all three help to remind David of the importance of accepting himself, of rejecting psychological crutches like his preoccupation with his father, and of confronting the world on his own.

Eisengrim gives the first lesson by stressing his own acceptance of himself: "I am a great egotist[10] and a very unusual one, because I know what I am and I like it" (257). Ramsay is the second teacher, and he tells David to jettison his dependence on his father's memory; Ramsay later dramatizes this need to break with the past by throwing the stone away as David watches. And Liesl, as we have seen, reminds him of the importance of engaging in the inner struggle and of accepting his full humanity, which involves understanding that every individual shares with all human beings "the great mysteries" and must come "to terms with the facts of death and mortality and continuance" (272-73). This is, of course, the point of the episode in the caves, where David is finally shocked into feeling and experiencing his primeval humanness.

These events in Part II are essential to the success of Davies' moral method. If we look at them in terms of the dialectical process as it is defined and developed in Parts I and II, we can see that David's experiences at Sorgenfrei and in the cave are a logical consequence of this dialectical process. The three egoistical teachers are not really forcing David to do anything. They are simply presenting the point of view of the strong, self-conscious ego. In this way, the events in Part III are dialectical in the same way that Ramsay's conflicts with opposing points of view are dialectical in *Fifth Business.* And David's episode in the

---

[10] In *World of Wonders*, Eisengrim calls himself an "egoist" rather than an "egotist," and he makes an important distinction between the two terms. In *The Manticore*, Eisengrim does not seem to be aware of this distinction.

cave is comparable to Ramsay's fight with Liesl in that the cave trip dramatizes David's fear of accepting his primal self and his eventual recognition of the power and reality of that self and of his fully-realized ego.

This theme of the acceptance of the ego is the central concern of the third novel of the Deptford trilogy. *World of Wonders* begins with Jurgen Lind asking Eisengrim by what standards he judges Robert-Houdin, and Eisengrim answers, "Myself. Who else?" (3). Such an answer raises the issue of the authority of the ego and its subjective point of view. By this point in the trilogy, Davies is concerned with the fully-realized egoist who must put his personal perceptions and judgments to the test by engaging in a dialectic with an audience of peers. As a result, the narrative in *World of Wonders* is more complex than in the two earlier novels. The last novel presents us with two types of dialectic. On the one hand, we have Eisengrim's narrative, which, like Dunstan's, shows the protagonist's going through a series of confrontations that serve to expand his wisdom and knowledge. And, on the other hand, we have a more complex dialectic comparable to the David-von Haller dialogues, a series of conversations between the members of the audience themselves.

The first type of dialectic can be understood by summarizing the stages of Eisengrim's growth, a process that takes him from the egotism and innocence of youth to the egoism of his maturity. In the early stages of his life, Eisengrim is Paul Dempster, the prematurely-born son of a Christian minister who tries to protect his family from evil by imprisoning his erring wife in their house and by forcing Paul to memorize the Psalms. But such imposed innocence cannot allow for the development of the ego, and so Paul is prompted by the devil, as he puts it, tempted into the World of Wonders, and forced into the hell of Willard the Wizard's pederasty. Willard is an important figure in the transition from egotism to egoism, for he represents an extremely limited and self-centered view of life; as Eisengrim notes, "I have never met anyone in my life who was so bleakly and unconsciously selfish as Willard" (79). At this point, Paul becomes Cass Fletcher, a name that is associated with bestiality and the suffering of the innocents; Willard gets the name from a sign on the barn that reads, "FLETCHER'S CASTORIA, CHILDREN CRY FOR IT" (65). In terms of the dialectical struggle, Willard and the other anti-dialectical figures like Charlie, the monologuist, lead Cass to embrace a cynical attitude which divides humanity into two groups, "The Wise Guys and the Rubs, the Suckers, the Patsys" (114). Cass's imprisonment in Abdullah thus becomes a symbol of his limited vision, and this vision manifests itself in his

conclusion that "whoredom and dishonesty . . . [are] the foundations on which humanity" rests (120). But Cass is also exposed to the antithesis of this cynicism: a belief in human compassion and a genuine interest in and knowledge of people. This attitude is first introduced by Professor Spencer, who convinces Willard to train Cass in magic. Also relevant here is Henry, the property man who teaches Cass about the mechanism of Abdullah and about clockwork. But the most important representatives of altruism and the human knowledge that results from it is Mrs. Constantinescu (Zingara). She is unusual in the World of Wonders because, unlike the rest of the Talent, "Zingara never tired of the humanity or found it a nuisance. She enjoyed telling fortunes and truly thought she did good by it" (125). In this way, Zingara represents a breaking away from Willard's insensitivity and selfishness. It is no accident, then, that Zingara's influence leads to Cass's confrontation with Willard and subsequent destruction of Abdullah. Cass is now seventeen or eighteen years of age and he begins to perform in public on his own. Of course, he is not fully developed yet. His voice is so weak and his public vocabulary so limited that he must work in silence, but, in taking over for degenerating Willard, he is becoming a public person, a citizen of the larger world of humanity.

This rebirth creates the persona of Jules Le Grand, the developing public performer, who admits to enjoying his revenge as Willard becomes more and more bestial before he dies. In fact, Jules sees himself at this stage as a tough, "a bottle in the smoke," but he fails to recognize his own innocence (148). He is still virginal because he has not overcome his old cynicism, the false idea that whoredom and dishonesty are the foundations of humanity. It is therefore necessary for Davies to emphasize the dialectic by introducing the antithesis to cynicism once more, this time in the person of Milady. She, like Zingara, is kind to Jules, and her compassion inspires in him a platonic love for her. This cannot be a physical love (in fact, she is physically unattractive), for it serves the purpose of elevating him above the dirty world he has shared with Willard: this is the "dawn of chivalry" in his life, and he stops picking pockets, for his focus is less on himself and more on Lady Tresize, his idealized woman.

Paradoxically, now that his vision is other-directed rather than self-directed that he can go about developing his self by apprenticing himself to egoism, personified by Sir John Tresize. We can understand the reason for this by considering Eisengrim's between egotism and egoism:

> An egotist is a self-absorbed creature, delighted with himself and ready to tell the world about his enthralling love affair. But an egoist, like Sir John, is a much more serious being, who makes himself, his instincts, yearnings, and tastes the touchstone of every experience. The world, truly, is his creation. Outwardly he may be courteous, modest, and charming—and certainly when you knew him Sir John was all of these—but beneath the velvet is the steel; if anything comes along that will not yield to the steel, the steel will retreat from it and ignore its existence. The egotist is all surface; underneath is a pulpy mess and a lot of self-doubt. But the egoist may be yielding and even deferential in things he doesn't consider important; in anything that touches his core he is remorseless. (191-92)

This passage defines the central dialectical conflict of Eisengrim's life: on the one hand, the forces of egotism have worked to enslave him in a prison of ignorance, self-doubts, and cynicism; on the other hand, the compassionate lovers of humanity in his life have provided the key to self-fulfillment by showing him that he is of "interest or value" (273) and teaching him to value others as well. It is this new sense of self-worth that gives him the strength to be the "double," the "fetch" of someone else. As Mungo Fetch, he is willing temporarily to hide his identity from the public, confident that his emulation of a man of "steel" will develop a more solid identity in himself. But such an act of humility would not have been possible in the absence of altruism and a public consciousness.

The remaining stages that lead to his assuming the identity of Magnus Eisengrim, the fully-developed egoist, are associated with acts of compassion (significantly, acts of compassion associated with toys and young, undeveloped people). When he is living in Switzerland on his own, "one of the great strokes of luck" in his life occurs as a result of "an act of kindness" on his part—that is, his fixing the trick mechanism in a walking stick to save the little girl who broke it further embarrassment. This act leads to his accepting the job of fixing Jeremias Naegeli's collection of toys, which in turn brings the young magician into conflict with Liesl, whom he transforms from a monster who despised her grandfather's compassion to an apprentice to the "Magian World View," a process which gives her the confidence to go into the world again. This is the culmination of Eisengrim's growth: as a fully-developed egoist, he now has the human awareness and the ability to help and teach others.

It is this narrative of his evolution from egotism to egoism through dialectical confrontations that Eisengrim presents to his audience. But, in so doing, he puts his own perceptions, the vision of his egoism, to the test.[11] The initial dialogue in the novel between Eisengrim and Lind helps us to see that this test is dependent on the integrity of the person (the ego) who presents his point of view as the truth. Like Lind, the master film maker, Eisengrim is a master magician who can present persuasive "realities." The problem that his audience faces is to determine if these "realities" are merely illusions (as in the case of Willard, the limited artist) or if they are based on human truth (as in the case of Sir John Tresize, the consummate artist). The audience must decide, through a dialectic with Eisengrim on his story and through a dialectic between themselves on truth and art, if his vision of the past is an illusion based on personal prejudice or a reflection of a more universally acceptable reality that can come only from a deep understanding of one's self and of the world.

This explains why rhetoric is such an important idea in *World of Wonders* and why it is associated with the dialectic on truth and art. The audience must judge Eisengrim's rhetoric and determine if it reflects the truth. The difficulty of this task is suggested by the opening quarrel between Eisengrim and Lind, a quarrel that Ramsay calls a "rivalry of egotisms" (918). It is significant that the term "egotisms" should be used, for the two antogonists are both guilty at first of trying to gain the upper hand by using what might be called dishonest rhetoric—persuasion without attention to the truth. It is Ingestree's role at this point to emphasize the importance of the truth. He does this first of all by identifying certain truths about the artistic temperament and success in art: vanity and the importance of understanding oneself. And he then proposes that the film that he and the others are working on should be based on a "subtext. A reality running like a subterranean river under the surface; an enriching, but not necessarily edifying, background to what is seen" (14). He is suggesting that the work of art can be convincing and persuasive only if its cinematographic rhetoric is based on something real, the truth, even if that truth is not attractive. As far as the task of judging Eisengrim's rhetoric is concerned, the implication seems to be that the audience must determine if Eisengrim's presentation reflects a universal truth about human life.

As it is human truth that the audience is concerned with, they come to see through their dialectic amongst themselves that this truth must be defined by an individual human

---

[11] For a discussion of the relationship between relativity and egoism, see Neufeld, particularly pages 73-74.

perspective—an ego. That is why Lind argues (in opposition to Ramsay) that objective truth about history is not possible, because "somebody has to write the [historical] document," and that somebody has "feeling" (63). Lind reminds us of the same point reached by David in Part III of *The Manticore*—that the world has an objective existence, but it is known by each of us subjectively. Hence, any humanly-produced document about the world is necessarily the product of an ego.

At this point in the novel, Eisengrim's narration about the development of his own inner self suggests how one should go about judging the ego through its rhetoric. For at the same time that Eisengrim is telling how he learned about the operation of the World of Wonders, he is describing the kinds of techniques of persuasion, or rhetoric, that the members of the World of Wonders used to create their illusions. First of all, many of the Talent used a "gaff," which is "the element of deception in an exhibition" (66). As well, "almost all the Talent spoke two versions of English—whatever was most comfortable when they were off duty, and a gaudy, begemmed, and gilded rhetoric when they were before the public" (71). One of the main examples is Happy Hannah, the fat lady, who relies heavily on Biblical allusions so that she can present herself "to the public as a Biblical marvel, a sort of she-Leviathan" (75). But as Eisengrim points out, Hannah "hocussed the text" (78), inventing false Biblical material when it suited her purpose. Hannah, like so many in the World of Wonders, uses a false rhetoric, a deception, in order to create a particular illusion. And the fact that Eisengrim recognized this deception as he was growing up suggests an important point about his narration: he is in effect explaining how he learned to survive and develop in a world of illusions, and this survival and growth is directly linked to his ability to understand people's motives and to identify the kind of rhetoric that they use. He sees, in fact, that the rhetoric is a window into a person's character. In the case of Hannah, for instance, her use of false Biblical rhetoric leads Eisengrim to identify her as his "first hypocrite," a revelation that he considers "more significant than the onset of puberty" (78), presumably because the first recognition of hypocrisy is a necessary step in the understanding of sinful human nature.

This notion of sinfulness or corruption is important, for it points to Eisengrim's ability to recognize human truth. It is worth remembering that he starts his narration in the following way: "I began to learn conjuring seriously on 30 August 1918. That was the day I descended into hell, and did not rise again for seven years" (15). Ramsay suggests later that this might be seen as "flashy rhetoric" (44), but it is actually a rhetoric that points to

the truth. Eisengrim's introduction to the World of Wonders is through sin—he is sodomized in a privy and kidnapped—and his education is associated with deception—he learns his craft inside Abdullah, which "was one hundred per cent gaff" (67). Quite clearly, then, Eisengrim's narration is the story of an innocent (when he starts he is "utterly unaware of myself"—[28]) who is put into the sinful world and who is taught the languages of that world. And Eisengrim is quite aware of this pattern. In effect, his narration reflects his ability to accept human nature and to see the universal elements of human experience in his life.

This recognition of universal human truth is the last step in the audience's dialectic. At first they are puzzled by Eisengrim's presentation, his rhetoric: was he joking or was he not when he spoke of his hatred for Willard and Hannah? They cannot agree. And the reason for their disagreement is that they are focusing too much on the particular, on the individual ego, and they have not been able to see that ego in terms of some universal truth. Even Kinghovn, the relativist in the group, points out that "you need a point of focus" when you make a film, but "if you want your film to look like truth you need somebody like Jurgen to decide what truth is" (152). Of course, Kinghovn does not want to admit that absolute truth or God exists, but, paradoxically, he must admit that a point of view cannot "convince" unless it is based on a "vérité," a truth that is beyond the self.

It is Ramsay who suggests a solution to the problem by arguing that Eisengrim's story should be interpreted "in the light of myth" (153). There is a significant irony in Ramsay's choice of words, for the "light" that he is speaking of is universal reality—he defines myth as "a boiling down of universal experience" (154); seen in context, this "light" is clearly opposed to the illusion-creating "light" (94) of Kinghovn the relativist and to the gaffs of the members of the World of Wonders. Myth embodies human truth. It comes as no surprise, then, that Ramsay's mythological interpretation of Eisengrim's story has authority and is not challenged by the other participants in the dialectic. All seem to be in agreement with Ramsay that Eisengrim's story boils down to the myth of "the man who is in search of his soul, and who must struggle with a monster to secure it" (155). This insight provides a key to understanding Eisengrim's rhetoric and his inner self.

The other mythological element that Ramsay identifies in Eisengrim's story is "Merlin's laugh" (156), the laugh that indicates that Eisengrim knows what is coming next. This is a significant point, for it emphasizes once more the importance of universal human truth, and it is instrumental in making the ma-

gician a more honest participant in the dialectic. During his confrontation with Ingestree, Eisengrim is guilty of preferring past details to the truth, and he uses this superior control of detail to get his revenge. As he himself admits during one of his disagreements with Ingestree, "I'm a detail man, and without the uttermost organization of detail there is no illusion; and consequently no romance" (261). But, significantly, Eisengrim himself associates detail with "illusion." What this should remind us of is the point about false rhetoric that is established in Part I. Details may be persuasive, but they do not necessarily give us the truth. In a conversation on the nature of illusion and truth, it is Kinghovn (who himself creates illusions) who sees that Eisengrim has not been giving them the whole truth but just details about the past that do not reflect the Ingestree of today, "the thoroughly capable administrator, literary man, and smoother-of-the-ways." The rest of the audience agrees with this assessment of Ingestree. Two pages earlier, Ramsay defends Ingestree to Eisengrim, calling the Englishman "a distinguished man, and a very nice fellow," to which the magician responds with Merlin's laugh because, of course, he is about to reveal what he considers Ingestree's part in Tresize's death. But when his story is finished, he does not get the complete revenge he expected; for, although Lind admits that Ingestree's defense has holes in it, he still points out to Eisengrim that "what Sir John was played a large part in the way he died, as is usually the case." Here Lind functions like Ramsay the mythologist, and his appeal to the usual (what might be called the universal or mythological element) convinces Eisengrim that he should "reconsider the matter" (302).

What this means is that Eisengrim must give up the role of Merlin, for it is a role that involves the egotistical desire for revenge and places him outside the dialectic. In playing Merlin, he has in effect failed to live up completely to his own belief that "a man is the sum and total of all his actions, from birth to death" (289). His position up to this point in the novel has been that he himself has faced all the details of the past, whereas Ingestree has forgotten them. But Eisengrim is guilty of a similar fault: he has remenbered the Ingestree of the past, but he has refused up to now to recognize that the Ingestree of today is "a very nice fellow." All of this points to the theme of self-knowledge. For Eisengrim to understand himself and be completely honest about himself, he must "reconsider" the totality of his existence, past and present. The dialectic with Ingestree and the others helps Eisengrim to do this. The issue of this dialectic, then, is not just whether Ingestree or Eisengrim is better at remembering the facts about the past, but whether the two men, and Eisengrim in particular, know the truth about themselves. In fact, towards the end of the novel, Eisengrim admits that his hostility towards In-

gestree was based, not on Ingestree's involvement with Tresize's death, but on Ingestree's perceiving the wolfish or voracious side of Eisengrim, an aspect of his character that he had tried to keep hidden.

The dialectic involving Ingestree thus essentially helps Eisengrim to overcome his pride and reveal his true wolfish self, an act which emphasizes his degree of self-knowledge. In this way, the dialectic builds up logically to Eisengrim's retelling of the story of Boy's death. The contrast between Eisengrim and Boy reveals the differences between the mature man who understands and accepts himself and the unrealized man who rejects part of himself and thus, in effect, kills himself. At the same time, the contrast allows us to see that Eisengrim's vitality is based on his having arrived at the "Magian World View." This belief in the spiritual realm allows him to participate in dialectic, for his acceptance of a "Great Justice" beyond himself implies that he does not set himself up as the ultimate authority on truth, even though he has great faith in his personal perception of the truth. In fact, in trying to prove that he did not kill Boy, he quotes all of Psalm 119, verse 83, the first half of which is identified with his immature, more vengeful self: "I am become as a bottle in the smoke: yet do I fear thy statutes" (340). The mature Eisengrim respects divine authority, but Boy accepts no spiritual power above himself. He sees himself as his own god. Consequently, when he is faced with his human limitations—his advancing age and his loss of freedom of choice—he refuses to deal with what he sees as an unappealing view of himself. His suicide is thus his final act of pride: he rejects the human dialectic. As a result, he does not learn to grow; he dies without ever having truly swallowed the stone.

Boy's role as the anti-dialectical figure in the Deptford trilogy and his presence in all three of the novels remind us of Davies' moral concern. Boy's suicide is basically motivated by his refusal to accept what the world has to tell him about himself. In this way, he is something of a negative touchstone throughout the trilogy, for all of the other major characters differ from Boy in that they do participate in a dialectic with the world, and they do grow as a result of that dialectic. All three protagonists begin at the egotistical, anti-dialectical stage, and all three progress, through a series of dialectical encounters, to become fully realized egoists who are conscious of the total self and of its relationship to the objective world. In *Fifth Business*, this development is presented in a linear, plot-oriented fashion: the dialectic (as in *Don Quixote*) is between the hero and the physical world. In *The Manticore*, growth is effected through a logical, question-and-answer analysis of the hero-world conflict: the

dialectic is mainly Socratic, leading to the full realization of the ego and its understanding of its responsibilities *vis-à-vis* the objective world. In *World of Wonders*, these two types of dialectics are combined: part of the focus is on the hero-world confrontations leading to maturity, and part on the hero-audience and inter-audience dialectics that put the egoist's vision to the test.

The question of moral responsibility, then, the question that led Davies to write the Deptford trilogy, is continually before us throughout all three novels. At no point is the subjective point of view of the central characters allowed to go unchallenged. Instead, Davies has built his fictional world on an elaborate dialectical structure that allows him to test the perspectives of his protagonists by analyzing their points of view in the light of facts, the rules of reason, and universal human experience. It must therefore be concluded that dialectic is not only present in the Deptford trilogy, but that it forms the moral backbone of all three novels. To recognize this is to acknowledge Davies' unquestionable achievement as a moral novelist.

Concordia College