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“Robertson Davies: At War With Orthodoxies”



by Dr. John Van Rys

The relationship between literature and morality is often strained—lacking the quality of mercy. Robertson Davies, a Canadian novelist who died in December 1995, has frequently been called a moralist. Is such a term praise or blame? How can an authentic storyteller deal authentically with morality? And of equal importance, how can readers experience the imaginative world of the story in an authentically moral way? Shortly after Davies' death, his wife Brenda commented that he wanted his readers to see life as “magical, fascinating, extraordinary”

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Downey A1). Is such a vision of life a moral vision? Similarly, John Irving claimed that Davies was “the greatest comic novelist in the English language since Charles Dickens,” and that Davies “expected” the novel to perform for an audience—to be simultaneously entertaining and instructive; to be intellectually stimulating and emotionally cathartic” (90). Again, is this Dickensian Davies a moralist—comical and cathartic, entertaining and intellectual as well as instructive? With these questions in mind, I would like to explore the relationship between morality and literature, a troubling one for both writers and readers (especially in a Christian context), by considering Davies' own comments on the relationship, by developing a model for “moral” as opposed to “moralistic” reading, and by testing that model with one of Davies' novels, *Murder & Walking Spirits*.

To be honest, I hesitate to tackle at all this topic—morality and literature. My own training, a mishmash of New Criticism and more recent critical approaches, has taught me to hesitate about making moral judgements concerning fictional worlds. Moreover, morality, values, and ethics have become loaded terms—easily appropriated for political ends by radicals and conservatives alike. My greatest concerns, however, relate directly to the practices of moral criticism, or more broadly moral reading. First, morally focused reading easily becomes an opportunity for poor judgement. The temptation is to establish categories and pigeon-hole works and writers accordingly: (a) orthodox and safe, (b) unorthodox but acceptable,

(c) opposed to Faith but capable of Truth, (d) antagonistic to the Truth, and so on. These judgements impoverish literature and fail to honor, I think, the roles of both writer and reader. Whether the critic applies standards broadly Western or narrowly Christian, such moral judgements place moral imperatives upon writers when the writer's responsibility is towards the truth of the imaginative world he or she is creating. In addition, such an approach can easily descend into judging not simply the morality addressed in the imaginative world but also the morality of the writer's "real" life. Either tack involves the reader in "heresies" with respect to the nature of reading and the reading experience. The total richness of the literary experience is reduced to what James Vanden Bosch calls "glib moralizing . . . superficial judgments of the moral or theological rightness or wrongness of literary works" (58), and such criticism becomes ". . . an opportunity for literary prejudice to be added to moral triumphalism" (58).

In this process, the reader is assumed to have a firm hold on the orthodox truth, which then becomes the standard of moral judgement. At best, then, the reader reads in a dualistic confusion—both attracted to a work's aesthetic power and repulsed by its morality. At worst, the reader becomes a static operator reducing literary evaluations to the language used and behaviors portrayed in fiction. Clarence Walhout has recently argued that such reading is Christian platonism, an "epistemological paradigm" that "builds on the polarities of time and eternity, the particular and the universal, the actual and the ideal, the immediate and the transcendent" (33). With this paradigm, the reader extracts moral principles or propositions from the Bible, cuts them loose from their contextual mooring, and makes them the rigid basis for moral judgements (37). "The Christian's appeal," argues Walhout, "is not finally to propositional thought but to the narrative of a God who reveals himself through his actions" (40). The static, moralistic reader misreads revelation and hence misreads all story. In a sense, this reader sees only two options—total acceptance of authorial will and power, or total imposition of the critical will. The result of such critical willpower is a hermeneutics of power no less

destructive than deconstruction. And the will to power is, in most contexts I believe, antithetical to truth, wisdom, and joy.

As a storyteller, Robertson Davies can provide some insight into this dilemma for story readers—perhaps even pointing towards a resolution of the split between moral and literary concerns. In a 1990 lecture entitled "Literature and Moral Purpose," Davies confides that he has never considered himself a moralist. Speaking of his Deptford trilogy, he says, "I assure you that as I wrote those books, I had no sense of moral purpose whatever" (22). Dream and intuition, Davies goes on to relate, gave birth to these stories, and he wished to follow his artistic intuition by exploring the expanding consequences of a single act (throwing a snowball with a stone in it) and investigating the burden of childhood guilt. However, Davies does *not* mean that morality is irrelevant to a writer; rather, it must have its proper place in the imaginative space of the story. According to Davies, all serious writers "become inevitably 'involved' in problems of morality, but such writers are on dangerous and artistically ruinous ground when they allow their work to be 'dominated' by moral purpose" ("Literature" 15). To be true to the nature of fiction, the storyteller cannot impose his or her moralistic will/power on the imaginative world or the reader. A moralist, then, for Davies is "not someone who imposes a moral system upon his art, but someone who sees as much of life as he can, and who draws what conclusions he may" ("Literature" 17).

This definition of moralist is one that Davies not only accepts but also applies to himself. The moralist's concerns are with actions, reactions, and consequences; good and evil within the context of human society; the pressure of codes of conduct on human life; the roots of behavior and the extent of responsibility, and dream and reality ("Literature" 17). In Davies' own stories, such moral involvement takes the shape of exploring dream and psychological truth, affirming the spiritual pilgrimage of characters, enacting identity problems, exploring the consequences of significant acts, and so on—essentially, examining the truths of human nature. But Davies goes further: fictional truth is unorthodox truth. "The genius of

fiction," he proclaims, "seems to be always at war with orthodoxies, always resistant to established creeds, because the literary artist is drawn toward those things which are exceptions to orthodoxy and which seem opposed to creeds" ("Literature" 18). And such unorthodoxy, argues Davies, is not simple rebellion but wary and unrelenting observation of the shadows that sunlight creates (18). Fiction at war with orthodoxies, fiction demonstrating involvement in moral problems rather than domination by them, is fiction resistant to the moralistic book-keeping of moralistic criticism. Good fiction attacks such Pharisaism, which is a deadly substitute for moral responsibility or spiritual adventures—for writers, characters, and readers alike.

Davies' comments in "Literature and Moral Purpose" suggest that good fiction affects the moral imaginations of readers. Thus, Davies' notion of the writer's involvement in moral problems can be transferred to the reader's engagement with and participation in the story's world. Just as the writer has writerly responsibilities towards the imaginative world, the reader has readerly responsibilities. Reading, then, can no longer be static, contextless willpower; rather, it becomes involvement, engagement, and negotiation. It becomes a true transaction, to use Louise Rosenblatt's term, or authentic dialogue rather than monologue, to use Mikhail Bakhtin's terms. In such situated reading, readers neither leave their moral natures at the door nor place an unfair moral burden upon the writer. James Vanden Bosch goes so far as to argue that the reader has a "virtual moral obligation" to approach the fictive world with "a more nearly relaxed will" that would allow him or her to experience that world with joy (67). Clarence Walhout, too, affirms that such reading is a path to insight, that dynamic engagement leads to "mutual interpretation," reader of text and text of reader, that the values of each are "understood in the light of each other, the two existing within historical traditions—social, cultural, and literary" (43). Such engagement is morally educative in the best sense, suggests Walhout. Indeed, for the Christian reader, perhaps the best fiction unsettles static morality, pushes him or her out of a comfortable Pharisaism towards genuine faith and commitment anchored in the good news. The

writer's impulse towards the unorthodox becomes a catalyst in a reader-text chemical reaction. What Walhout, Vanden Bosch, and Davies each point out, then, is a dynamic of writer, text, and reader characterized by moral involvement—not the will to power of moral domination.

With this notion of moral—as opposed to moralistic—writing and reading in mind, we can turn our attention to one of Davies' novels to clarify how this model works. A logical choice might be *Fifth Business* (1970), perhaps Davies' best and best-known novel, but I propose to examine a more recent novel, *Murder & Walking Spirits*, published in 1991, partly because it has less critical crust attached to it and partly because it provides an interesting example of reader-text

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moral dialogue. Here, Davies' war on orthodoxies is quickly apparent. In several interviews, Davies has discussed this lack of orthodoxy. First of all, he takes seriously religion, belief, faith, and, specifically, Christianity. The Bible, for Davies, is a powerful frame of reference ("Champion" 97), and he willingly acknowledges his attraction to Augustine's thinking ("Bizarre" 40). However, he finds himself unsatisfied with the orthodoxies of organized religion and systematic theology. As part of his apprenticeship, he explored and rejected Freud's understanding of religious belief, but accepted Jung's. Davies describes himself, then, as religious but not sectarian, aggressive, or evangelistic ("Bizarre" 45).

This position towards orthodoxy manifests itself clearly in *Murder & Walking Spirits*. The narrator, Connor Gilmartin, is a dead man; in fact, he is murdered on the novel's first page. The next 356 pages involve two things: (1) Gilmartin's attempted revenge against the man who both cuckolded and murdered him, Randal Allard Going, nicknamed the Sniffer, and (2) a public and private

film festival in which Gilmartin and Going watch separate films. Going's films, a series of classics and Gilmartin's, a series of parallel but private films that narrate the lives of his ancestors, from United Empire Loyalists who must flee New York after the American Revolution, to the Welsh Methodist Gilmartin clan, immigrating to Canada as a result of financial ruin. Within this plot framework, Davies has mixed a veritable stew of unorthodoxies that the static moralist might find distasteful. Among Davies' many ingredients are Jung, Heraclitus, Swedenborg, and modern philosophies rooted in nihilism and negation. Moreover, Davies plays with religious orthodoxies: his afterlife is not conventionally Christian; he pictures faith and spiritual growth in primarily psychological and Romantic terms; he experiments with body-soul dualism and Manichean heresy; Christianity and Christians are open to critique, as are substitute faith systems. Davies also manages to combine metaphysics with the grotesque in the figure of Hugh McWearie, a friend of Gilmartin's and a highly unorthodox thinker. "With such a man," remarks the dead Connor Gilmartin, "argument was futile, for he had a fine command of irrelevance and irrationality, and out of it, I must say, came a splendid wildness of theological speculation, where all beliefs had their own validity, to say nothing of their own absurdity" (25). McWearie's metaphysics is one more ingredient in the novel's unorthodox stew.

In spite of this unorthodoxy in the novel, or perhaps because of it, Davies engages the reader in an extended dialogue, part of which involves the reader in problems of morality. The story does so in many ways: (1) by confronting us immediately with murder, Cain, vengeance, and justice; (2) by using the film framework to initiate an exploratory dialogue on metaphysics, mystery, design and openness; (3) by both satirizing Christianity across more than two centuries and lamenting lost faith and its shallow replacements; and (4) by exploring Connor Gilmartin's spiritual growth brought about through the pilgrimages of his ancestors.

First, Connor's story confronts us with his murder. From that murder develop two themes, both deeply moral: Connor's desire for vengeance against his murderer Going and the murder's root-

edness in the primal sin, Cain's murder of Abel. Indeed, much of the novel explores the various shapes that "raising Cain" takes, not just in Connor's murder, but in the lives of his ancestors: brother against brother in the American Revolution; family disintegration in the Welsh Methodist Gilmartins, from an adoption and baptism into family to worldly success to ruin; husband and wife at odds in William McOmish and Vergie Vanderlip, destroyed by both obsession and prudery, and passing this loveless inheritance to their children; the more civilized but equally destructive gulf between Rhodri Gilmartin and Malvina McOmish, Connor's grandparents, who cannot heal, reconcile, and forgive what seems a minor breakage. These varieties of Cain in the middle stories are framed by Connor's desire for revenge, a desire approaching obsession, a desire he links with justice but the reader might link with a more serious soul disease—lack of forgiveness. "This fellow had killed me," says Connor shortly after his death, "and I saw no reason to forgive him. No, indeed. I decided that, in so far as my unaccustomed condition would permit, I would hound him down, and revenge myself upon him in any way I found possible" (15).

This revenge is Connor's total determination, and it is still with him towards the novel's end, after he has witnessed the film stories of his ancestors. Cain's shadow still haunts him; his desire still burns. The paradox is that this desire for revenge opens a doorway to healing for Connor's murderer. Connor realizes that Going is haunted by guilt, even though Going has no religion: "Heartburn of the soul possessed him utterly" (342). When Connor sings a "pitifully inept, undignified, absurd, vulgar and indefensible" (342) song in Going's ear, it has the effect Connor wants—pressing more guilt on Going. However, Going seeks to deal with this guilt, first by confessing to Father Martin Boyle and second by doing the same to Hugh McWearie. Both men refuse to give Going an easy absolution, an escape hatch from his guilt. In particular, McWearie explains to Going the root meaning of ghost, that is, "fury, or anger." Gil's ghost is what haunts Going, and he must make peace with it. While Connor Gilmartin desires and seeks revenge, he paradoxically creates the possibility—just the

possibility—for whole-hearted change in Going. The revenge issue in which we have become involved remains unresolved.

The second means by which the novel involves us in problems of morality is by initiating a dialogue on the design and openness of people's lives (and afterlives). By rooting his characters in a social and historical mesh of relationships and circumstances, Davies affirms the shapes of people's lives, their metaphysical moorings in a providential order. Connor's films emphasize painfully the Cain theme as a pattern for life. Davies puts this theme, though, within the context of philosophy and art. John Wesley, Connor remarks, probably wasn't up on "the curmudgeonly Greek sage Heraclitus who was the first . . . to point out the psychological fact that anything, if pursued beyond a reasonable point, turns into its opposite," but Wesley certainly understood this truth about human fate (118). Similarly, Connor argues that the horror of William and Virginia McOmish's life is dramatic, but it is in "the mode of melodrama, farce and grotesqueries" that life's realities find their shape (215). Film, too, gets at life's shape, but it is not a comfortable shape. Great films are "dreams in which something significant is told, not in bold Civil Service narrative, but in a puzzle of ambiguity and omission" (31). Later in his film festival, Connor concludes that art, with its attempted coherence, is nevertheless out of sync with the "surging and incoherent" nature of thought, feeling, and experience (224). Finally, this simultaneous affirmation of order and openness is confirmed in the novel's double ending—the end of the film festival, which proclaims cryptically and apocalyptically that "NOTHING IS FINISHED TILL ALL IS FINISHED" (318), and the end of Connor's search for revenge, which ends not with revenge but reconciliation and a movement out into eternity. The final pages record a dialogue between Connor and his Anima, for lack of a better word, in which the Hero Struggle of much of the novel is redefined in terms of acceptance and continued pilgrimage in a world of all NOW (355).

The third way that Davies involves us actively in problems of morality is through his explicit portraits of Christians, Christianity, faith, doubt, and the church over more than two centuries. First

of all, Davies affirms the reality and power of faith in the lives of Connor's ancestors. Anna Gage, fleeing from New York to Upper Canada with a Bible, a Book of Common Prayer, and a copy of *Pilgrim's Progress*, has her understanding of her Creator radically altered by physical and spiritual pilgrimage. Thomas Gilmartin, a fiery Wesleyan preacher, stops at a barbarous Welsh inn, proclaims the gospel of Jesus to a group of men afflicted with the darkness of Cain, and then baptizes, adopts, and newly names the inn's pot-boy. These powerful moments of affirmation, however, are balanced by portraits of disintegrating faith and shaky morality. Connor witnesses the devils that hound and drive his ancestors, and he satirizes Canadian Methodism's materialism.

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The big project that defines builder William McOmish's life is the new Methodist Church, but it is also the project that destroys him. Why? Partly because of his own personal devil, his drive and pride, but equally at fault are the spiritually bankrupt though financially well-off and morally upright members of the church, particularly the bankers, those "priests of Mammon, that popular deity" (193), who turn away from William in his need because of " 'policy', that holy word" (190). In Connor's nearest relatives, his father and grandparents, we witness the disintegration of their faith and its replacement with such idols as music, poetry, art, learning, and Western culture. These substitutions are treated both sympathetically and critically.

Finally, the novel engages us with problems of morality, with value and idea systems, by tracing the gradual transformation of Connor Gilmartin, his Jungian individuation resulting from the knowledge and self-knowledge he gains. Gil's pilgrimage begins with overtones of purgatory: watching classic films that he loves in the company of his murderer, whom he considers a nincompoop critic incapable of true feeling

and appreciation. What develops, however, is Connor's own education in true feeling, appreciation, and faith. The film narratives of his ancestors' lives, each in its own way, cultivates in Gil nothing less than love. These stories lead him to weep with joy and sorrow, to feel deep embarrassment, to know "the shame of the sons of Noah when they beheld their father's drunkenness" (268), to love his father as he never could in life. He recalls in death his discussions with McWearie about each individual's Hero Struggle, the drama of that person's life, and he comes to see that those ancestors he had considered supporting characters in his own drama themselves had deeply ordinary yet heroic lives (268-269). In addition, he comes to believe in "soul," though he cannot define the word (280). And in spite of his continuing passion for vengeance, this film festival leads him to love, meaning "charity and forgiveness, not a foolish egotism"; the stories, he tells us, have "painfully enlarged" his heart, and in this swollen heart he must "find a place for all that [he has] seen of [his] forebears" (322).

Murther & Walking Spirits thus involves us as readers in the full-orbed humanity of its imaginative world. Davies' principle that serious writers inevitably become involved in problems of morality extends in this way to readers. They, too, read transactionally, through negotiation and dialogue, when they become involved in the text with their moral imaginations rather than with static, propositional moral truths—their moralistic willpower. For Davies, dialogic reading would be spiritual adventure as opposed to Pharisaical judgement. Indeed, such reading would broaden and deepen our sense of morality, not limit its nature and scope within the literary enterprise. As readers, we would come to see that morality permeates the full lives of characters and the entire fabric of the fictive world, including the world of ideas, and that such morality calls for readers' self-examination. Davies' fictive world isn't Platonically pure; it's lively and unorthodox and contains its share of moral and aesthetic inconsistencies (e.g. characters speaking for the author; notion of ancestry; lack of real attention to female lineage). But these too are an opportunity for dialogue, an engagement in which we explore the unanswered questions posed by the imaginative world created by Davies' fallible, creaturely, moralist's intuition.

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