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Review Article

Confessions of a Sorcerer's Apprentice: *World of Wonders* and the Deptford Trilogy of Robertson Davies

With the publication of *World of Wonders* Robertson Davies has completed the trilogy begun by *Fifth Business* and continued by *The Manticore*.¹ Characteristically, the completion it provides manages to be both unlikely and inevitable. It is unlikely for two reasons: because of its apparently tangential relationship to *The Manticore*, and because of its apparent change of subject for the last section of three (a mere twenty-three pages). So tangential does the relationship to the *Manticore* appear that I began by wondering if this trilogy was going to have four parts, since any reader in suspense about the fate of David Staunton after the end of *The Manticore* is left in suspense. There is no convenient landing-place for him in *World of Wonders*, which leaps back in space and time to pick up from *Fifth Business* the life of Paul Dempster at the moment when he disappeared from Deptford.

At the opening of *World of Wonders* Paul, now Magnus Eisengrim and a world-renowned illusionist, is completing the filming of a BBC feature film about the nineteenth-century French illusionist Robert-Houdin, at Sorgenfrei, Liesl's "Gothic gingerbread" home in Switzerland, where he and Dunstan Ramsay are Liesl's permanent house-guests and her occasional lovers. Ramsay takes over the narration of this frame story and introduces the other main characters: Lind, the Swedish director; his Danish cameraman, Kinghovn; and Roland Ingestree, the BBC producer in charge of the film. As the result of a slightly less than amicable wrangle with the rest of the group, Eisengrim offers them a "subtext" for the film in the form of the story of his life, from the day when, as he says of himself, "I descended into hell."

"Hell" is his life in a carnival freak show, as pathetic to Willard the Wizard, who rapes him, steals him, teaches him the art of the illusionist, and obsesses him throughout a long and painful servitude. He begins by spending his time in the bowels of a card-playing automaton, but later becomes Willard's understudy, as they move through the Canadian and American mid-West carnival and vaudeville circuits at the lowest possible level, observing distantly, but never making contact with, the world outside the show. From this, after Willard's death, Eisengrim moves on to a life as the leading actor's double in Sir John Tresize's old-fashioned theatre

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company in London (and later on tour in Canada), where his life is more comfortable, but equally anonymous. The carnival (Wanless's *World of Wonders*, from which the book not insignificantly takes its name) demands to be described as bizarre, grotesque, nightmarish – but still impresses itself as being uncomfortably real, solid, and credible. Eisengrim's life with the theatre company has a similar effect, though rather less nightmarish and rather less easy to describe; "stagey" is perhaps too glib; "romantic" ignores Davies' obviously firsthand experience of the less romantic aspects of theatre life. From this theatre company Eisengrim moves on again, pursuing his earlier hobby of clockwork in order to earn his living, to his encounter with Liesl, and to the point of his re-emergence into the life of Dunstan Ramsay.

Set into this narrative, somewhat in the manner of choric episodes, are the conversations in which his listeners (whether before his face or behind his back) discuss the events and implications of his story. These discussions centre on the nature of good and evil, of God and the Devil, and of truth and illusion, although Davies, in the person of his narrator Ramsay, is wise enough to point out that, "I'm not expecting to untangle anything. But I'm making a record -- a document."

The apparent change of subject for the last section ("Le Lit de Justice"), which is the second reason for the apparent unlikeliness of *World of Wonders* as the completion of the trilogy, develops from Ramsay's insistence as a historian and as Eisengrim's biographer, on getting a true record. He believes that Eisengrim knows more about the death of Boy Staunton than he has been willing to say. Here we are given Eisengrim's previously withheld account of his encounter with Boy Staunton on the night of the latter's death-plunge into the muddy waters of Toronto harbour, holding firmly in his mouth the stone long-hoarded by Ramsay from the snowball thrown at him by Boy, which felled Mrs. Dempster. In this section, the emphasis suddenly shifts from Eisengrim; he, the egoist who has made quite sure the emphasis rested in the right place (him) up to this point, now himself shifts it to Boy Staunton – whom we have previously seen only as second lead in *Fifth Business* as Ramsay's "lifelong friend and enemy", and as villain in *The Manticore* haunting and almost destroying his son David. Paradoxically (I was tempted to write perversely), Davies turns this seeming irrelevance into the key to the trilogy, and it is to this last section, which slots into place the last few pieces of the jigsaw puzzle of Boy's death, that *World of Wonders* owes its inevitability as the completion of the trilogy.

It is, in fact, the iceberg tip of the fourth part of the trilogy. This is not, however, the fourth book which the tangential relationship between *The Manticore* and *World of Wonders* seemed to require: it is the narrative continually implied in the narratives of Dunstan Ramsay, David Staunton, and Magnus Eisengrim: the story of Boy Staunton. Eisengrim provides the key to it when he says that in becoming Sir John Tresize's double he "entered upon a long apprenticeship to an egoism", and describes Ramsay as "a ferocious egoist". On this level the trilogy is about four egoisms: Eisengrim, Ramsay, David Staunton, and Boy. But of the four it is Boy Staunton's which is the lever and motive force of the trilogy as a whole.

Just as on the story level the events of the trilogy follow his outward action (a product of his egoism), the thematic development follows the distorting effect which his egoism has upon the inner lives of those whose outer lives are most deeply affected by the snowball's action (including Mrs. Dempster whose life is so closely bound up with Ramsay's). Boy's own egoism is so profound that he can distort an egoism as profound and independent of his own as Ramsay's; he can divert a new mind into egoism, as he does Paul Dempster's; and he can create it as a consequence of sheer opposition to himself, as he does with his son David. His influence is consistently disruptive; his force moves the other characters centrifugally from the central point of his own ego at this particular point in time.

It is for this reason that the shape of the trilogy appears to be so unorthodox; the three novels radiate from a common source in different directions. But they are bound together again finally, in spite of their divergence, by the presence of Liesl. For where Boy is the centre all three heroes flee, Liesl is the centre they all (though David to a lesser extent than Ramsay and Eisengrim) seek.

This is not, however, the only factor involved in the distance between *The Manticore* and *World of Wonders*. Another is that Davies, while apparently abandoning the Jungian machinery, nevertheless creates a polarity of character between David Staunton and Magnus Eisengrim which is explicable in Jungian terms. David's problem, as Frau Doktor von Haller makes clear to him, is that he is too much of a thinker — he depends too much on intellect and analysis. Magnus, on the other hand, has "no brain" (according to Liesl), but depends entirely on feeling to understand and control the world around him. The relationship between the two men is one of affinity: David, during his stay at Sorgenfrei, finds himself liking and wanting to know more about Eisengrim, thus reflecting in a curious way what Jung said about modern man — that he "wants. . . to know how he is to reconcile himself with his own nature — how he is to love the enemy in his own heart and call the wolf his brother".² For Eisengrim is the wolf, as his name (chosen for him by Liesl out of the mediaeval Beast Epic) indicates, and the wolf brother, the enemy within, is the archetypal Shadow which every individual carries within his or her psyche.

A further ironic contrast (and therefore distancing) between David and Eisengrim is produced by the trajectory of the journey which each takes in search of himself. David's is begun at least under the hygienic auspices of psychotherapy — a process which is designed in modern man to replace the lost mythic pattern of initiation. But Eisengrim's is a true initiation, carried out fully in the primitive terms of myth, and is explicitly identified as such. In the argument which follows Eisengrim's narration of Willard's death, Ramsay draws attention to the mythic quality of Eisengrim's life:

What I want is to defend Eisengrim against the charge of being a villain. . . You must look at his history in the light of myth. . . What is the mythical element in his story? Simply the very old tale of the man who is in search of his soul, and who must struggle with a monster to secure it.

The same mythical element has been visible in *The Manticore* in the life of David Staunton as an implied counterpoint to the trajectory of his *anamnesis*, and more overtly in the story of his expedition to the prehistoric bear-cult cave with Liesl, which plunges him back into the deepest levels of the past and of his own soul. It was implied, too, in the story of Dunstan Ramsay, by his "death" on a battlefield of World War I and his later rebirth. In the lives of all three men, the pattern of the hero is unmistakable — the symbolic events and objects and figures of the quest myth reappear, all variously disguised, yet always retaining beneath the disguises their own unalterable identity. However, the story of Magnus Eisengrim demonstrates the mythic pattern more clearly than the two previous narratives, partly because of the quality of feeling involved, partly because of the author's treatment of evil, and partly because of his control of his material.

In the narrative of Magnus Eisengrim we experience the events of his life from the viewpoint of a man who relates to the world through his feelings, rather than through his intellect (as do both Ramsay and David Staunton). Eisengrim is acutely sensitive to every element of his environment. As we are locked firmly into his viewpoint by the first-person narration, and are only released temporarily for the conversation and comments which follow each episode of his story, so we are consequently locked into Eisengrim's feelings about what has happened to him. His judgements on this may for various reasons be unreliable, as Ramsay points out; his feelings are not. They exist unchanged by time or later experience, and they are conveyed to us in all their raw pungency by a technique of understatement which Davies has finely honed for the purpose. Eisengrim's narration makes his audience within the story, and consequently the reader, suffer vicariously all the isolation, terror and mystery of each stage of his mythic journey in unwitting search of his soul. Thus they experience not only the particularities of Eisengrim's quest, but also the very pattern of the quest itself.

This level of feeling involved in Eisengrim's experience helps to produce the second contribution to the clarity with which the mythic pattern of his experience is exposed. For Eisengrim does not analyse and discuss the nature of evil (as both Ramsay and David Staunton do); he encounters it at full strength through his hypersensitive feelings and in very concrete terms. The rape of children has not yet become acceptable as material for popular literature (at least, not in that part of it which is distributed through the usual commercial publishing outlets). For although it is human evil in one of its extremest manifestations, it remains *undisguisably* evil, recognizable as such by everyone, and it cannot be prettied up for general consumption and titillation. Davies presents it as the evil it is, without sentimentality or decoration, but with overwhelming vividness, through the wide-open sensitivities *and* the wide-open senses of its victim. His technique in this presentation, in contrast to that of understatement in the presentation of feeling, is the use of sensuous detail in his descriptions. The accuracy of his observation of detail and his skilful manipulation of it play no small part in convincing the reader that (to use one key scene as an example) evil is truly present in the darkened stinking latrine of an Ontario fairground, truly manifest in the person of Willard, and truly acted out in his rape of ten-year-old Paul Dempster.

The fact that the boy is ten years old is not mentioned casually, for Paul's age is important thematically, and Davies' fine control of his material is demonstrated in this placing of the experience of evil in Paul's life-span. Paul is a rather young ten-year-old in some ways, it is true, since he is a minister's son, although he is old in some others because of his mother's condition. But developmentally speaking he is just the right age for the meaning of what has happened to him — "blasphemy" he calls it, and he is right — to be clear to him. His descent into darkness in quest of his soul begins with this dawning of awareness and self-awareness. It is not merely that the psychology of it is right. It is right within the pattern of myth that the development of the hero should be precocious. So that even in this, Davies' manipulation of his material serves to present the strength of the mythic element in Paul Dempster's metamorphosis into Magnus Eisengrim.

This mythic element remains implicitly, rather than explicitly, presented, except for Ramsay's remarks. But clearly it is here that the centre of gravity of the Deptford trilogy lies. As I have pointed out, however, this trilogy has four parts. In what mythic pattern can the story of Boy Staunton be placed?

The question is asked not of Boy's role in relationship to each of the three main character's of the trilogy, but of his role in his own life (so to speak). There are a few suggestive details in the trilogy, of which I can only sketch in the two most promising here: The first is that Boy's life may interpreted in terms the Faust myth. This myth has been implicitly present in the trilogy from the first brief mention when Paul Dempster appears as Faustus Legrand in *Fifth Business*. It is reiterated later in the book with the appearance of the girl, Faustina, and by the theme of the illusion in which she has a part ("The Vision of Dr. Faustus"). In many ways, not only here, but later in *The Manticore*, the myth is again suggested by the relationship between Eisengrim and Liesl, which curiously hints at that between Faust and his demonic servant, Mephistopheles. But *World of Wonders*, which brings the Faust theme to full articulation in Liesl's explication of her stage surname of Vitzliputzli, also disposes of Eisengrim as a candidate for the Faust role. For at the same time Liesl also draws the portrait of Eisengrim as a Magian soul in terms of Spengler's theory set out in *Der Untergang des Abendlandes*. This, so easy to dismiss as "gadgets" or a "red herring", is neither. It is a clear and definite pointer to the nature of Boy Staunton's life-role.

The Magian World View or "Weltanschauung" is described in relation to Eisengrim:

It was a sense of the unfathomable wonder of the invisible world that existed side by side with a hard recognition of the cruelty and day-to-day demands of the tangible world. It was a readiness to see demons where nowadays we see neuroses, and to see the hand of a guardian angel in what we are apt to shrug off ungratefully as a stroke of luck. It was a religion, but a religion with a thousand gods, none of them all-powerful and most of them ambiguous in their attitude toward man. It was poetry and wonder which might reveal themselves in the dunghill, and it was an understanding of the dunghill that lurks in poetry and wonder. It was a sense of living in what Spengler called a quivering cavern-light always in danger of being swallowed up in the surrounding impenetrable darkness.

It is clear that this Magian world view is not only that of Eisengrim, but also of Ramsay (in his exploration of the borderland between history and myth) and of David Staunton (in his progress towards what he speculates might be called *esse in anima*). Each of these men who goes in search of his soul returns victorious with a new self, but also with this sense of "poetry and wonder" of Spengler's formulation.

But the fourth story in the trilogy, that of Boy Staunton, is that of a man who rejects any search for his soul. In its symbolic form as the egg-shaped piece of granite, he throws it away as an act of childish egoism and reclaims it only at the point of his death, to take it down to death with him in the dirty waters of Toronto harbour.³ If the Spenglerian formulation, as I believe, can be interpreted so that the Magian soul is the successful quest hero, then the hero who rejects or refuses the quest for his soul may be described by Spengler's term for the opposite type to the Magian, which is the Faustian — named after the legendary Dr. Faustus of German tradition, in whom Spengler appears to have seen the crystallization of the lesser, later age which followed the Magian (in historical terms the Magian being Mediaeval and the Faustian Renaissance). Through this interpretation, the story of Boy Staunton becomes much clearer in its trajectory, its meaning, and its relation to the other three major characters.

This interpretation of Boy also brings into focus the second thematic role which he plays in the trilogy — that of some sort of polar opposite to Liesl. I have pointed out above that structurally Boy is the centre which the other heroes (Ramsay, Eisengrim, and David Staunton) flee, and that Liesl is the other centre which they all seek, since structurally the novels diverge from Boy's egoist action with the stone in the snowball, just as structurally they all converge on Liesl (specifically on Liesl's bed, although admittedly in David's case this is only by implication).

The polarization of Boy as some sort of "evil" force (disruptive, or destructive) and of Liesl as some sort of "good" force (healing, or synthesizing) begins to take on a rather heavy weight of significance in view of the discussions which take place in *World of Wonders* about good and evil, and especially about God and the Devil (especially when we remember the earlier identification of Liesl with the Devil in *Fifth Business*). Therefore there is more than a simple irony involved in Ramsay's final remark on the nature of God and the Devil: "It's the moment of decision — of will — when those Two nab us, and as they both speak so compellingly it's tricky work to know who's talking." The revision of our notions of good and evil is never very far from Davies's line of attack, either here or in *Fifth Business*.

Although the Spenglerian distinction, by pointing out this polarization of good and evil forces within the novel, throws an important light on a large area of the thematic organization of the book, it is not to be taken as an invitation to interpret the novel in Spenglerian terms. Without the trappings of hagiography or Jungian psychology, *World of Wonders* is a plain tale, and clearly announced as such. According to Eisengrim himself, a great magician is "a man who can stand stark naked in the midst of a crowd and keep it gaping for an hour while he manipulates a few coins, or cards, or billiard balls." (p.4) Eisengrim's remark about the naked magician clearly points to the writer himself — the great writer is one who can, as

Davies does in this novel, dispense with the trappings of his craft, the trappings of wonder, and still create a sense of wonder in the reader.

World of Wonders is a fitting conclusion to the Deptford trilogy. We must all hope that Davies has other "coins, or cards" ready to fascinate us with in the future.

* *World of Wonders*. By Robertson Davies. Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1975. pp. 358. \$10.95.

Footnotes

1. *Fifth Business* (Toronto; Macmillan, 1970); *The Manticore* (New York: Viking Press, 1972).
2. C.G. Jung, "Psychotherapist or the Clergy", in *Collected Works Vol. II, Psychology and Religion: West and East* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1958), p. 341.
3. I am grateful to Jerome Morgan of Dalhousie English Department for pointing out an interesting parallel between this and the Indian rite described in Howard O'Hagan's *Tay John*.