

A TRIPLE MIRROR:
THE PLAYS OF MERRILL DENISON,
GWEN PHARIS RINGWOOD, AND
ROBERTSON DAVIES

An Abstract of a Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of the Department of English
University of Manitoba

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Geoffrey Barry Ursell
October 1966

For some fifty years Canadian critics have continually deplored the state of the theatre in Canada and ignored the state of the drama. They have taken for granted, in fact, that there was no drama worthy of their consideration. This writer has refused to accept either their ignorance or their judgement. He has made a critical examination of three representative Canadian playwrights whose plays have to some extent been both published and performed--Merrill Denison, Gwen Pharis Ringwood, and Robertson Davies--to determine the actual quality of Canadian drama.

This thesis has found that quality is not always lacking, though it is not consistently present in any of these three artists. No conclusive explanation for this inconsistency has been essayed, but the inattention of the inattention of the critics has been considered as a possible reason for it. In order that a meaningful and substantial body of Canadian drama may develop, this thesis has also decided that the dramatic artist in Canada must write for himself and the theatre, not for Canada's "intellectuals" nor for those who surround the Canadian amateur theatre.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Theatre as a mirror and critic of the moods, tones, idioms, paradoxes, virtues, and inadequacies of life on a thinly-populated, four-thousand-mile sub-Arctic strip, as a concentrated artistic statement with a persevering dynamic, as a body of imaginative work with themes and standards--in short, theatre as something of value to a discerning public has never counted in the life of English-speaking Canada. Nor is it likely to in the reasonably foreseeable future.¹

Most critics of the theatre in Canada² (as distinct from critics of the drama in Canada, of whom there are hardly any) are not as literately pessimistic as Nathan Cohen. But they are, on the whole, a rather pessimistic group. They want theatre to matter to Canadians and they feel it does not matter very much. They want writers who will do for Canadian theatre what Shaw has done for British, Synge and O'Casey for Irish, Sartre, Camus, and Anouilh for French, O'Neill, Williams, and Miller for American theatre. They want a theatre that is alive and their own, but they have had to be content with a theatre that has been and is almost exclusively derivative, when they have had even that.

¹Nathan Cohen, "Theatre Today: English Canada," The Tamarack Review, 13:24, Autumn, 1959.

²Vide Chapter II. (The term "Canada" in the context of this thesis will always refer to English-speaking Canada.)

They have demanded in practically unanimous chorus theatre buildings and artists, and an audience, before Canada could hope to have its own dramatists, the givers of life to theatre. A few dissenters have called for dramatists whose plays would command performance. All have agreed that there never have been such dramatists.

Thus there has not been very much criticism of Canadian drama. A section in fifteen of the yearly reviews of "Letters in Canada" in The University of Toronto Quarterly since 1935, a thin chapter (or none at all) in those thick books purporting to examine all Canadian literature, a few paragraphs reviewing a play's appearance in published form, and article here and rarely there, an unpublished thesis or two--these constitute the nearest approach to a body of critical analysis of Canadian drama. The critics have instead deplored the state of Canadian theatre. They have seized upon a few prime causes to explain its defects and paid them unceasing devotion.

The next few pages will attempt to take the measure of that devotion. It is a devotion that has kept critics so busy diagnosing the poor health of Canadian theatre that they have allowed Canadian drama to live in neglect. The correctness of their diagnoses will not be discussed here. Nor do I wish to essay yet another by saying that if the critics had paid more attention to what drama there was,

there would be more and better drama today. One may, however, compare these critics to physicians practising before the advent of psycho-analysis, who believed they could ignore the patient's mind if they cured his body. This, alas, was not always the case. But physicians of the body have ever searched for a simple to cure man's every ill. Canadian critics have simply searched in the same way for a cure for the theatre's ills. They have paid little attention to the mind of the theatre--the playwright. This thesis will endeavour to offset their emphasis by critically examining the published plays of Merrill Denison, Gwen Pharis Ringwood, and Robertson Davies. But first let us give the critics the same shrift they have given the playwrights--short.

CHAPTER II

THE CRITICS

I have always held that people are greatly influenced by their physical surroundings. Take the roughest man, a man whose lines have brought him into the coarsest and poorest surroundings, and bring him into a room elegantly carpeted and finished, and the effect upon his bearing is immediate. The more artistic and refined the external surroundings, the better and more refined the man.¹

George Mortimer Pullman's belief in this idea may have had something to do with making him a millionaire. The critics of Canadian theatre hope that their belief in it will make a Canadian drama. They wish to lead Canadian dramatists into the elegant and finished surroundings of theatres willing and able to pay for and produce Canadian plays, and away from coarse and poor amateur playhouses. But the provision of theatres will not be enough, they reason. They also wish to ensure that when the Messiah of Canadian drama arrives he will not be met by carefully tended empty edifices. He must be greeted by an intelligent and critical audience, educated in the classics of other countries and thus able to appreciate its own playwrights. These beliefs originated in

¹George Mortimer Pullman, quoted in The Tastemakers. Russell Lynes, New York: Harper, 1954, pp.95-96.

Canadian theatre criticism in 1911² and 1908³ respectively. And they have endured.

"There is no Canadian drama,"⁴ one critic bluntly declaimed in 1914. His contemporaries had already told him why, and his successors would go on in the same strain. "...at the present time we have no plays of our own for the excellent reason that we have no machinery for producing them,"⁵ one of his fellows informed him. Another presented a solution to this problem by asking why a chain of "national theatres" could not be maintained "throughout the Dominion."⁶ In these, we may suppose, the education of public taste to plays "of merit"⁷ could be begun. With the removal of such "disheartening conditions"⁸ as no theatre to produce and no audience to hear plays, one who said:

²Bernard Keble Sandwell, "The Annexation of Our Stage," The Canadian Magazine, 38:22-26, November 1, 1911.

³Frederick Robson, "The Drama in Canada," The Canadian Magazine, 31:58-61, May, 1908.

⁴Jesse Edgar Middleton, "The Theatre in Canada," in Canada and its Provinces. Adam Shortt and Arthur G. Doughty, eds., Toronto: Glasgow, Brook, 1914, Vol.12, p.661.

⁵Sandwell, 24.

⁶Martin Harvey, "Canadian Theatres," The University Magazine, 13:218, April, 1914.

⁷Robson, 61.

⁸Harcourt Farmer, "Play-Writing in Canada," Canadian Bookman, 1:56, April, 1919.

There are no signs as yet upon the literary horizon of the arrival of our dramatist, but we are waiting expectantly, for we feel that he should soon come now,⁹

could not have long to wait.

The critics of the 1920s held fast to the same solutions, the establishment of theatres and the education of an audience, but they founded their hope for Canadian drama upon the development of the little-theatre movement.

Vincent Massey, a spokesman for little theatre, sounded a familiar chord when he wrote, "...there is still too uncritical a public to accept good plays," and "If we are to have a Canadian drama we must have a Canadian theatre in which to produce it."¹⁰ To both educate the audience and found the theatres was the task of little theatre. He declared, "...on the perpetuation and spread of the amateur movement will depend the growth of what we call a national drama."¹¹

Herman Voaden, Carroll Aikens, and many others worked in little theatre with the belief that:

Collectively [the] little theatres are important beyond measure because they build the foundation for more mature creative theatres and develop an audience for

⁹Fred Jacob, "Waiting for a Dramatist," The Canadian Magazine, 43:146, June, 1914.

¹⁰Vincent Massey, "The Prospects of a Canadian Drama," Queen's Quarterly, 30:198, 200-201, Autumn, 1922.

¹¹Vincent Massey, ed., Canadian Plays from Hart House. Vol. I, Toronto: Macmillan, 1926, p.vi.

the Ultimate National Canadian Theatre.¹²

During the 1930s interested theatre people like John Coulter and Harley Granville-Barker, and critic W.S. Milne continued to voice the desire for "a theatre...in which Canadian plays of promise could be given production"¹³ and for an audience to view these plays. Vincent Massey's great hope, the amateur theatre, seemed not to have realized his desires. Nor did Milne and others think that it was without faults as it stood. In 1926 Lionel Stevenson had noticed that numerous one-act plays had become available for amateur production, "since a one-act play can be given intensive preparation by busy people whose handling of a full-length play would necessarily be cursory and inartistic."¹⁴ By 1938 the trickle had become a spate of one-acters, so that W.S. Milne was led to comment:

One looks forward to the day...when there will be two or three first-rate plays so good that one can devote most of this survey The University of Toronto Quarterly, "Letters in Canada: Drama" to a detailed consideration

¹²Robert Caplan, "The Ultimate National Theatre," Canadian Forum, 9:143-144, January, 1929.

¹³John Coulter, "The Canadian Theatre and the Irish Exemplar," Theatre Arts Monthly, 22:509, July, 1938. For the expression of similar sentiments see: Harley Granville-Barker, "The Canadian Theatre," Queen's Quarterly, 43:256-267, Autumn, 1936; and W.S. Milne, "Merrill Denison," Canadian Forum, 13:63, November, 1932.

¹⁴Lionel Stevenson, Appraisals of Canadian Literature. Toronto: Macmillan, pp.142-143.

of them, and spend less time on the small fry.¹⁵

For Milne's annoyance and for the reiterated pleas for theatres and an audience Arthur Phelps had no sympathy. He wrathfully challenged all such supplicants:

...to push argument to the point where the sorry lack of good Canadian dramatic writing is considered simply due to the fact of our lack...of continuous audiences and especially established theatres is to comfort ourselves foolishly.¹⁶

And he deftly planted his thumb on the major worry of all preceding critics when he declared, "We await the Canadian literature of the drama."¹⁷ Nor was he afraid to offer, in a pithy psychological examination of the nation, a fitting theme for "The Great Canadian Play":

Our real trouble is that we have not yet come alive as a people....There is little passion in Canadian life.... The people living in Canada are not interested in spiritual self-discovery. Rather, they seem to fear it.¹⁸

Succeeding critics were thus bereft of any excuse for mousing what Phelps believed were the panaceas of their predecessors.

But John Coulter and Herman Voaden continued to

¹⁵W.S. Milne, "Letters in Canada, 1937: Drama," The University of Toronto Quarterly, 7:368, April, 1938.

¹⁶Arthur L. Phelps, "Canadian Drama," The University of Toronto Quarterly, 9:83, October, 1939.

¹⁷Loc. cit.

¹⁸Ibid., 86.

advocate the building of theatres,¹⁹ and they even won the odd convert.²⁰ Phelps, however, was not forgotten. A follower ruminantly chewed his cud, "Canadian theatre, to be really Canadian, needs, basically, Canadian playwrights."²¹ These playwrights "should write about the people [they know] in the country in which they most obviously belong."²² Another agreed that Canadian drama "does not express our own life."²³

Eventually, Phelps' tempest found a teapot. The blame for the agreed-upon dearth of Canadian drama was taken back from the writers and returned to the lack of theatres and an audience. The occasional voice still sagely affirmed,

¹⁹John Coulter, "Toward a Canadian Theatre," Canadian Review of Music and Art, 4:17, 20, August, 1945; and _____, "Some Festival Visions of a National Theatre," Saturday Night, 62:20-21, May 17, 1947. Herman Voaden, "Theatre Record, 1945," Canadian Forum, 25:184-187, November, 1945; and _____, "The Theatre in Canada: A National Theatre?" Theatre Arts Monthly, 30:389-391, July, 1946.

²⁰Walter Alford, "When Canada has Theatres Plays will soon Follow," Saturday Night, 64:18-19, October 16, 1948; and Robert Speaight, reported in Myron Galloway, "Robert Speaight on Canadian Theatre: An Interview," Northern Review, 3:48-50, February/March, 1950.

²¹Myron Galloway, "Scene:Canada--Time:Present," Northern Review, 3:35, October/November, 1949.

²²_____, "The Canadian Play and Playwright," Northern Review, 3:40, December/January, 1949/50.

²³Vincent Tovell, "Theatre in Canada," Here and Now, 1:80, December, 1947.

"Canada still awaits its playwrights."²⁴ But a chorus replied:

If we are to have a major development of the theatre in Canada we must have more theatres...and the establishment of professional companies,²⁵

as well as the removal of such economic restrictions as the amusements tax from existing theatres.²⁶ The question of the audience was also well-remembered.

Certainly there is a primary need for better Canadian plays, but a need also urgently exists for an adult, informed, and experienced audience for whom those plays may be written,²⁷

said Norman Williams in reflective defense of his own plays.

Mavor Moore scathingly agreed:

I know of no country, including Afghanistan and Tibet, where the dramatic arts are in such low estate as Canada....It is not the Canadian artist who is not good enough; it is the Canadian public which is not good

²⁴Herbert Whittaker, "The Audience is There," Saturday Review, 42:25, October 24, 1959.

²⁵Alan Skinner, "Drama," Food For Thought, 10:28, May, 1950. See also Tyrone Guthrie, "Development of Live Drama in Canada," Saturday Night, 68:7-8, June 6, 1953; and George McCowan, "Vincent Tovell and George McCowan: A Conversation," The Tamarack Review, 13:11, Autumn, 1959.

²⁶Robertson Davies, "The Theatre," in Royal Commission Studies: A Selection of Essays Prepared for the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences, King's Printer, Ottawa, 1951, pp.382-384; and Phyllis Hartnoll, ed., The Oxford Companion to the Theatre. London: Oxford University Press, 1957, p.113.

²⁷Norman Williams, "Prospects for the Canadian Dramatist," The University of Toronto Quarterly, 26:274, April, 1957.

enough for the artist.²⁸

Those particularly wise or knowledgeable of the past, such as the 1951 Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences, recognized both possibilities.²⁹ And such disparate authorities as Wendy Michener³⁰ and Earle Birney³¹ agreed upon the necessity of audience education and the creation of a modus vivendi for Canadian theatre.

But scarcely anyone has critically scrutinized extant Canadian drama. The critics have instead encircled Canadian theatre with their means for its invigoration, and have shown Canadian drama not its ends, but their own. They have spent more than fifty years and fifty-thousand words belabouring the obvious. They have reiterated that Canadian theatre needs theatres and audiences. Surely it is about time it

²⁸Mavor Moore, "The Canadian Theatre," Canadian Forum, 30:110, August, 1950. See also Michael Tait, "Drama and Theatre," in Literary History of Canada: Canadian Literature in English, Carl F. Klinck et al, eds., Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965, pp.633-634.

²⁹Report of the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences. Ottawa: King's Printer, 1951, "The Theatre," pp.192-200.

³⁰Wendy Michener, "Towards a Popular Theatre," The Tamarack Review, 13:63-79, Autumn, 1959.

³¹Earle Birney, "North American Drama Today; A Popular Art?" Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada, 3rd ser., 51:31-42, June, 1957.

was assumed that those who are involved in Canadian theatre understand their problems and are working to effect a solution to them. But do the dramatists understand the problems of those who have written before them? If they do, it is certainly not due to the critics.

These repetitious critics of the theatre are no longer needed. What is needed is critics of the drama, a new outward-looking circle giving the same favours to the theatre critics as those critics gave Canadian dramatists. Let us turn, then, away from the theatre critics to examine the published plays of three Canadian playwrights, Merrill Denison, Gwen Pharis Ringwood, and Robertson Davies.

These authors have been chosen for consideration here because they are Canadian dramatists whose plays have to some extent been both published and performed. Their comments on the Canadian scene are like the planes of a triple mirror, which reflect, respectively, comic, tragic, and satiric images. They represent as well three respective decades of Canadian drama.

CHAPTER III

THE PLAYWRIGHTS

I. MERRILL DENISON

Merrill Denison made a brief sortie into writing for the Canadian theatre in the 1920s. He did not emerge unscathed. As one critic wrote a few years later, Denison "is in grave danger of being labeled definitely The Great Canadian Dramatist. This is not because he has written The Great Canadian Drama, but because nobody else has."¹ This same critic went on to categorize Denison's venture in this fashion:

Some half dozen plays, mostly of one act; four of them dealing with the same restricted milieu; not a bit of imagination in any one of them, unless by accident. A small thing almost perfectly done. That is the dramatic achievement of Merrill Denison, and he is Canada's greatest dramatist.²

"Some half dozen plays" only from a man who once said that writing for the theatre "seems to me...to be the most ample, varied and richest means of expression the race has ever developed."³ But then, Denison also had a peculiar

¹W.S. Milne, "Merrill Denison," Canadian Forum, 13:63, November, 1932.

²Ibid., 64

³Merrill Denison, "Hart House Theatre," Canadian Bookman, 5:63, March, 1923.

conception of whom he was writing for, and how what he produced was to be judged.

These plays [he wrote of his volume The Unheroic North] have their origins in the needs of a theatre--not the theatre.... It must be remembered that these plays were written for a Canadian theatre, not Broadway, and that any literature of the theatre in Canada must follow the same course--be written for Canadian production.⁴

Such a statement reveals an appreciation of the Canadian theatre's need for a drama of its own, as well as of the problems of amateur production. Even so, good plays need not be bound by localism or production techniques. For they cannot ask for less than honest criticism on these grounds. One must beware also that writing for "a theatre--not the theatre" does not become a useless exercise in artistic isolation or a hapless slavery to a static technical mode.

Norman Williams was to react some thirty years later to what he called "false and self-conscious Canadianism."⁵ He said, "The artist seeks, not what is national, [sic] but what is universal in the life around him."⁶ While it is wise to seek the universal, it is wiser to seek it through the immediate. Williams concerns himself with his goal to the

⁴Merrill Denison, quoted in Highways of Canadian Literature. John Daniel Logan and Donald G. French, Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1928, p.335.

⁵Williams, ibid., 283.

⁶Ibid., 277.

exclusion of his means. Did Denison concern himself too much with his means--the national locale--to the exclusion of the end--the universal application?

It is impossible to say for certain whether Denison's awareness of the particular problems of Canadian theatre (which meant amateur theatre) in the 1920s had a detrimental effect on his writing. But it is certainly possible to examine his writing to see if it has the merit to appeal to a large and critically aware audience--an audience realizing the value of the particular, but demanding that it relate to the general.

The particular is certainly captured by Denison in the three one-act plays, Brothers in Arms, The Weather Breeder, and From Their Own Place, in his volume The Unheroic North. As Arthur Phelps says:

In these...works he is preoccupied with a rural pioneer area and with the particular kind of life which develops on the stony farms about the lakes which make the summer resort centres of Ontario.⁷

Here is a valid starting point for Denison, a locale he knows and is able to re-create. As Synge did in Ireland, Denison has listened to the rhythms of speech of the people who live, not just vacation, in "backwoods" Ontario. He has a sympathy for and understanding of these people. But he has

⁷Arthur L. Phelps, Canadian Writers. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1951, p.44.

little sympathy for those who understand this area as "the land of Robert Service and Ralph Connor,"⁸ or those who understand it not at all. It is his main purpose in Brothers in Arms to contrast these false interpretations with Canada's true "North." To see it unheroically, Denison believes, is to see it realistically but not coldly.

Dorothea Browne in Brothers in Arms does not see it realistically. She and her husband, J. Altrus Browne, illustrate two untrue ways of looking at the North which neither square with each other nor with the reality they confront. It is from the juxtaposition of Dorothea's vision with Major Browne's method, as well as of both with real backwoods life, that humour comes in the play.

Dorothea envisions a "wild, virgin country"(20) dotted with "simple" camps of "rustic charm"(10), populated by "big, fine, simple men, living so close to nature all the time"(11), free and "noble"(12) creatures, the Canadian version of Rousseau's savages. "...here," she says to Altrus, "we might find romance...romance in the land of Robert Service and Ralph Connor"(12). But the reality belies her romantic imaginings. "This place aint bad,"(19) says backwoodsman

⁸Merrill Denison, Brothers in Arms, in The Unheroic North. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1923, p.12. All succeeding quotations from this volume will be noted by a bracketed number immediately following the quotation.

Syd White, because it has rocks, bush, and lakes far enough away from the "bother" of "city folks" (20). But the camp is "dirty and squalid" (9), with holes in the floor and wooden boxes for chairs. And Syd is a nondescript character in a nondescript costume, who prefers "huntin" (21) to working for city folks, and "jest [ripping] a board off'n the floor" (13) to chopping wood for the stove when he is busy "huntin." It is impossible for Dorothea to fit him into any role in the fiction she has fancied for herself.

This jarring contrast of illusion and reality proves somewhat comic, but principally pathetic. For Dorothea is a character who is little more than a caricature. She must wave her arms, have suitably pensive expressions, and gush enough inane lines in ecstatic fashion to remove all trace of human personality from herself. She is a "romantic little fool" (12) who cannot help it, the worshipper of all the "unreal, sentimental, heroic, and romantic"⁹ images of northern life concocted by previous Canadian authors. She is a completely unbelievable paper doll who has been shredded apart by Denison's anger before the play has ever begun. There is a complete lack of subtlety in the presentation of Dorothea's character, and perhaps Denison's desire to deride

⁹V.B. Rhodenizer, A Handbook of Canadian Literature. Ottawa: Graphic Publications, 1930, p.157.

the nascent tradition of Canadian pastoral is the cause.

J. Altrus Browne's method has as little relevance to the backwoods reality. He sees no vision of beauty here, only a "God-forsaken hole" (10) he wishes to leave in order to complete a business deal. His "penchant for efficiency" (9) and belief in discipline, however, help him not at all to effect an escape. Indeed, his self-important and imperious manner only deter him from getting someone to drive him to the nearest railway station. He considers Syd to be hopelessly inefficient and quite unheroic, when he hears how Syd has acted in and been discharged from the army. But there is obvious irony in the comparison of Syd's actual courage, his desire to fight in his own way, with Browne's actual cowardice, his safe sojourn in the Quartermaster's Branch at Sandgate which he encourages Dorothea to glorify. It is also ironic that the efficiency-minded Browne proves so inefficient as not to ask Syd if he will drive him to the train, but waits angrily for Syd's partner, Charley. Browne's pretensions are quite unfounded. Dorothea should adore neither an unheroic North nor an unheroic Browne.

Altrus Browne, like Dorothea, is not a fully realized character. He too is more a caricature than anything human. It is difficult to accept him either as unique or representative. His faults are obvious, his virtues undiscoverable. We find it hard to condemn him as a man because he stands

prejudged. But we cannot extend that judgement beyond the personal because we are not given an argument either for or against the general values of efficiency and discipline which Browne illustrates. They are simply values which do not hold in this situation, even were their propounder not a hollow man. As a particular person Browne is not allowed any chance to escape annihilation; as a representative of a general mode of conduct he is too constricted to accept.

Syd White is the most believable character in the play. His values are not necessarily celebrated, but they are sympathetically presented. Denison has seen them embodied and understands how they may be applied. Syd is the focus of the play from which the Brownes are equally opposite. His easy acceptance of his actual surroundings and his interest in not working for anyone except in his own way are the real core of his life. The first of these makes him unheroic to Dorothea, the second to J. Altrus Browne. But if we accept Denison's judgement of their standards, Syd becomes both real and heroic by comparison.

In fact, is Syd either? The tone of Denison's portrayal of Syd seems to be sympathetic. Thus it would probably be a mistake to assume that this characterization is meant to be ironic. Syd, it appears, is not to be condemned

because he is, in Matthew Arnold's terms, "fast friends"¹⁰ with his natural surroundings. But neither is he to be lauded as one who conforms to his environment and its values to survive. The "squalid" camps of the economically depressed Ontario backwoods deserve no paeans. Nor do their inhabitants. These people live as they do because they cannot live elsewhere. Their modus vivendi suits them to the backwoods alone.

The characterization of Syd benefits greatly by comparison to the caricatures that are the Brownes. But even seen as he is, without this benefit, he is both somewhat real and heroic. It is not his fault that he comprehends J. Altrus Browne's request as he does. As far as Syd is concerned, when Browne says, "I've got to have him [Charley] drive down to that train to-night" (16), that means he does not want Syd to do so. Syd is not stupid. "Thinkin...aint impossible" (34) for him. Nor does he lack a sense of humour. When Altrus hurts his ankle in a hole in the cabin floor, Syd wryly comments:

One day last week one of the hounds fell down that there hole and broke his leg. We had to shoot him. You'd best to sit quiet for a while. (22)

¹⁰Matthew Arnold, "To an Independent Preacher," in The Poems of Matthew Arnold. London: Oxford University Press, 1926, p.60.

He also has a certain pride in his way of life. He will not let Altrus deride the backwoods and its activities, and he politely puts up with Dorothea's romantic pother. Though he "tersely" tells Charley that Altrus "Seems kinda crabbed" because "He was a head lad in the war"(32), he is still generous enough to think that Dorothea is "a nice sort of woman"(32).

Syd's experience in the army does not satisfy us as a general condemnation of authority and discipline, but it is revealing about his nature. He wants only to fight the Germans, but, says Syd, "We wasnt doin nothin but follerin them head lads around, drillin"(24). He wants to be heroic, but in his own fashion.

Syd, then, is not an artificial character. He is a realistically presented human being. Dorothea and J. Altrus Browne are purveyors of romanticism and materialism respectively. Syd is selling us no false goods. He asks us to believe neither that he is a rugged natural individual, nor a lackey to nature's powers. He is presented not ironically, nor philosophically, but humanely.

There are possibilities for complexity in Brothers in Arms that Denison has neglected. The romantic vision founders too quickly on the rocks of the real to be of sustained interest and amusement. The practical view, however, is given no chance to avoid or withstand those rocks. As

represented by J. Altrus Browne, a stupidly authoritarian snob, it could probably do neither. He is too unseaworthy a craft to begin with, so our sport at his chances is little. The trouble with this play is that one theme is too easily exhausted, the other too lightly dismissed. Denison seeks only to present Syd White, the central third, realistically, and in this he succeeds fairly satisfactorily.

From Their Own Place is a more successful play because it is more limited. It does not attempt to present an important confrontation of views, but only to reveal the ineptly scheming nature of the "backwoodsmen." Harriet Stedman retains something of Dorothea's romanticism, but it is tempered and believable. Larry Stedman shares his wife's appreciation of the country, but he has more awareness of the nature of its inhabitants than had J. Altrus Browne. The backwoodsmen here are not the comparatively admirable ones of Brothers in Arms but the butt of the comedy. Their chicanery is given some justification by the nature of their situation. "...it's a hopeless country to try and make a living in" (89), says Harriet to Larry.

He is rather more critical of this "fourth generation, inbred pioneer stock gone to seed.., the dregs" (80) of the country. He says sarcastically:

They're not so damned simple as they appear. I'd rather deal with a litter of Paris Apaches or New York Gunmen than these splendid backwoodsmen of the Canadian wilds.
(88-89)

But his sarcasm is mitigated at his success at not being taken in by them this time, in fact, at their scheming turning to his benefit. Character is more coherently presented here, but it is, in fact, the amusing handling of an extremely limited situation which makes the play better than Brothers in Arms. Better, but still no more than slightly entertaining.

The Weather Breeder is not even that. This play is evidently intended to display the bliss of young love ignorant of the dangers which older counsel warns are only too imminent. To Lize's father, Old John, the happy days of Lize and Jim are but "weather breeders," foreboders of the storm that will make their love impossible. Old John feels that ruin will strike their unsheltered love just as storm will strike the unsheltered grain harvest, making both marriage and profit impossible. But it is his belligerent insistence on the truth of his prognostication rather than any fear of its proving true that annoys the lovers. The mood of Old John is itself a "weather breeder" of trouble for him. When this is finally made evident to him, he repents of having wished Lize and Jim apart and concurs in their wish to be married. Thus both the storm he forecasted and the one his brooding threatened prove negligible, and good harvest and marriage are the lovers' to enjoy. But that this is so in spite of his prophesying makes Old John "sour, disappoint-

ed and disgusted" (66).

The mixed motivations of Old John are too confused to be amusing, the love affair too banal to be moving. The allegory of the weather has little effect, for just as there is no real storm there is no real trouble. So slight a victory of love can only be faintly interesting.

Another superficial play which hovers between comedy and tragedy, hesitating to integrate them and thus missing both, is The Prize Winner. The central character, Ed Rawlings, leader of a cheap four-person road show, is playing a dangerous game in running a "Great Popularity and Beauty Contest" in a town of "four houses and two stores."¹¹ The contest is shabby in itself, but the winning of it has become an immensely important point of honour to each of two backwoods clans.

Ed is selling one vote in the contest with every cake of "Green-Wonder thousand purpose Farm Soap, Complexion Beautifier, Dirt Chaser, and Implement Cleaner" (6), or five of each for a dollar. And the clans have spent \$655 in toto on soap. As Denison insists on assuring us, this money "is the most important thing in the world" (8) to Ed and "justi-

¹¹Merrill Denison, The Prize Winner. New York: Appleton, 1928, p.11. All succeeding quotations from The Prize Winner will be noted by a page number in brackets immediately following the quotation.

fies everything"(26). The money must then, of course, be lost to Ed, whose idiocy is unequalled even by the village half-wit, Midge. And it is that "wise fool," (as he is judged by Eva, the realist in the play, if not by us) abused and unpaid by Ed, who with heavy-handed irony is mistakenly given the money by Ed, and so is the real "prize-winner."

Were it not for the realistic comments of Eva that accompany the action, this play would hardly be endurable. Her "hard-bitten"(2) responses cut through Ed's pother and his wife Minnie's echoes. It is this juxtaposition which is the source of most of the strained humour of the piece. But even Eva comes to think that Ed is "covered with diamond bracelets"(32) when he suggests to the judges that the contest be declared a tie, two prizes be awarded, and trouble thus avoided. However, it is her sarcastic realism combined with her sympathetic awareness of Midge that makes her the most credible character in the play. Ed is too small to be tragic, too stupid to be funny. Midge is too much the leering, hysterical idiot to win our acceptance. The others are as shadows cast by the imperfect light of The Prize Winner.

Balm is a ridiculously inconsequential pseudo-play which Denison should have had sense enough to keep out of print. One of the characters, a "little old woman, Uminie," is, with unsurpassable generosity, called "the kindest and

most gentle, patient person in the world"!¹⁷ The longing of herself and her friend Miss Greyth, "an old, old lady,"¹⁸ for a child to care for sinks to offensively pathetic depths:

Uminie: /to a social worker/ Sometime, there might be a little darkie child that no one would have at all? One that you'd be glad to get rid of
Miss G: /doubtfully/ I don't know that I'd want a little darkie. I'd rather have a white one even if it wasn't quite so good and didn't have any parents. /Pleadingly/ Isn't there a little one down there that's sickly and nobody wants or will have at all?¹⁹

Miss Greyth's final line most appropriately passes judgement on this play.

These five one-act plays are neither very entertaining nor very stimulating. They are indeed "small things" but they are not at all "almost perfectly done." Localism in itself need not have a stultifying effect upon the force of an author's themes, the validity of his treatment of characters. But the themes of these plays are far from powerfully handled, the characters rarely convincing.

Marsh Hay is an eminently better play in comparison with Denison's one-act efforts. Here is deepfelt concern

¹⁷Merrill Denison, Balm, in Canadian Plays From Hart House. Toronto: Macmillan, Vol. I, p.155.

¹⁸Ibid., p.156.

¹⁹Ibid., pp.169-170.

expressed in a frankly realistic manner. Here is a strong portrayal of the effects of inescapable poverty, a general problem which is given more force by this particular illustration of "extreme squalor"²⁰ in the Ontario backwoods.

John and Lena Serang locked the door of their own poor cage when they were married. They know well its bounds and viciously rehearse them in Act I. But they are both "tired, crushed and worn out"(103-104) by them. They have had twenty years together "on fifty acres of grey stone and fifty acres of cedar swamp"(108), a wedding gift from Lena's father. "Twenty years...workin fifty acres of grey stone and cuttin marsh hay"(112) and twelve children--five now dead--are what they have endured. For John, in his exasperation at his predicament, his awareness of the cage bars and his long-lost chance to escape them, the place has become "a pig sty"(110) and Lena "a damned sow"(112). Shockingly true as this may be, it is answerable only by Lena's "cold, bitter rage"(112) at John's part in making it so.

For the children there is little chance of escape. Two of the sons, Hank and Sam, got away from the farm during the war only to find a better abode in ignominious death.

²⁰This play is also part of the volume The Unheroic North. Quotations will be noted in the same way as others from the same source have been, as, in this case, (151).

Pete, the oldest son at home, "a cheerless boy" (106), wants to leave and seeks that opportunity in education. But this is only "a better chance" (117), not a good one. John, the oldest living son, has been married.

His sisters have gone and are going "the same way" (115). "First Mary...Then...Charlotte...now Tessie. All of them gone" (115), moans Lena. For the girls this way is futile. Their going only creates a similar situation for themselves as that they leave with their parents. They have their own man, together they build their own cage--and lock themselves in. And what chance have they got to escape this cage? John Serang cynically says "None." He tells a neighbour:

Look at my girl Tessie and young Tom Roche. They've went away together. He'll have to marry her. They'll make him. Lena...his ma...the church...both churches. (120)

John is speaking from experience, and though he realizes exactly how hopeless this tradition is, he cannot prevent its sad effects from being passed on.

This is an environment which does not move as the world moves, which national and provincial politics leave untouched. John refuses to believe his more educated neighbour's panacea of a change of government. He holds no false hope forth when he says:

...it don't make no difference to you or me what party is in...or whether we're part of the States or Canada.

We'd still cut marsh hay to winter our half-starved cattle, that we have to drive forty miles to a railroad to sell...raise a few chickens...kill a deer when we got the chance. Andy, the only thing a change in government ever changes, Andy, is the government.
(119)

John is justified in this cynicism, for the government does change during the course of the play, but the effect on the backwoods is imperceptible.

There is no exit from this situation, except into the cage of marriage. And this is the exit that young Sarilin wants to take against all the ineffectual attempts of her mother to stop her. Sarilin demands at least the freedom to go this way, a way of vicious and futile sex, without fully realizing its consequences.

Lena can do nothing to stop her, even though Sarilin is the only one left to her, and thus her last chance to salvage something from her own life. Sarilin does get pregnant. But Walt Roche, who got her that way, is unwilling "to stick in the backcountry all (his) life, cuttin marsh hay and raisin kids"(143). He sees the cage just as well as John, and he does not want to experience it. John's problem is to deal with Walt, Lena's is to justify Sarilin's behaviour to herself. She is able to do this by revolting against the conventional standards of judging Sarilin, represented by the Minister and Mrs. Clantch, when she is given the chance to place Sarilin's conduct in a new context,

provided by a woman from the city.

Those who would normally condemn Sarilin's act as the "disgrace"(156) of a "strumpet"(161) who is "steeped in sin ...and damned"(156) are driven out by Lena, who has been "converted"(159) to a new "creed"(135) with a new "saint"(159). The creed involves accepting the fact that the baby is coming and giving it "the best chance"(160) possible to grow up loved and wanted. The baby should not be stigmatised with the name illegitimate, nor should Sarilin feel ashamed. Sarilin, in fact, is to be treated like a saint. She is to be removed from the eyes of the world as she is removed from the stage in Act III, and only her voice is heard calling her worshippers into the sanctum of her room.

Lena's belief that Sarilin has been driven to do what she has by her treatment at home and that once the home is changed Sarilin will "want her baby and be proud"(165) is powerful enough to effect a great change. "The place lacked self-respect before"(151) but Lena has demanded self-respect for her family and her home. Jo, Pete, and even John Serang respond to her demand for dignity, though ignorant of its essential cause. John says, "I can't figure out what's got into you. Whatever it is, you got me half believin in it too"(164).

But John believes in it only as long as the conventional solution--marriage--seems unlikely. When Walt Roche is

made to propose marriage however, John is most happy to accept. But Lena will have none of this convention. She well understands the door it opens--into the same cage in which she has spent her life. And she will not have Sarilin "forced" (169) into it. Sarilin must, as a saint, expiate the hateful sins of the past through love.

Sarilin's heritage unfortunately is stronger than Lena's new creed. Tessie has been to see Sarilin to tell her that she would be a fool not to abort herself. Lena may be able to defend Sarilin from the external forces of convention, just as she stands before Sarilin's door in Act III "to protect the girl within" (165,167) from Walt's proposal, but she cannot extirpate the internal nature of Sarilin's inheritance, which Sarilin listens to before all else. Sarilin does abort herself and convention may pronounce its judgement at last. "She fell" (171), says John. The pun is a devastating one.

When biblical angels fell man's life was immeasurably saddened. When it is recognized that pseudo-saint Sarilin actually fell, Lena's hopes are shattered. The Serang home, the environment Lena sought to change, "(sinks) back into its old dilapidation" (172). John resumes his bitterly sarcastic mien, the boys their pettish disobedience. Lena's attempt to instill the power of love into her children's lives has failed because of the heritage of hate from her own and John's

lives. The healing purge proves ineffective. The bitter disease that rages in John, making him deny love completely, infects the children. He admits of no fondness in his years with Lena. He says:

Fond? Fond be damned. We stuck together because we couldn't get away from each other. That's why we stuck. We're chained here. That's what we are. Just like them stones outside the door, there. Fond? Bah!
(182)

Lena tiredly realizes that there is no love for her. Nor will there be any for Sarilin, for in Act III's close, nearly identical with Act I's, she once more comes into the grasp of vicious and futile sex.

Denison convincingly presents the conventions of backwoods poverty, its sad effect on the capability of human beings to love, and the impossibility of either shattering those conventions or remedying that effect in this play. The tragedy of Lena's attempt to do both is a moving one. It is the more potent because the minor characters are, on the whole, entirely believable, and there is little material which is not integral to the exposition of the main theme.

The central characters are consistent to themselves and yet serve Denison's purpose. Andrew Barnood, Mrs. Clantch, Tad Nosse, Walt Roche, and William Thompson all prescribe the bounds of convention, although they may proscribe each other at times. Neither Mrs. Clantch, nor Andy Barnood,

nor Mr. Thompson can understand Lena's desire for Sarilin. "It'd be better all round if he Walt were to marry Sarilin" (131), Mrs. Clantch thinks. Her "very prim" (155) conventionality is "utterly shocked" (161) at the idea of "that young strumpet" (161) "in disgrace" (156) not being ashamed of having a baby. She "don't think she Lena done right" to drive away the minister, the bearer of Job-like comfort to Lena.

Andy Barnood is a much more sympathetic neighbour but even he feels "He Walt should marry her, John" (120). He wonderingly comments on Lena's behaviour to Mr. Thompson:

Most people would count what's happened somethun of a disgrace but she goes around as if she was nursin a saint. (139)

In fact, Lena believes she is. But it is impossible for Andy to comprehend this. He demands of Walt, "Are you goin to do the right thing and marry her?" (143). And when this becomes feasible he tells Lena to "Let him marry her" (166) for "That'll give the young one a name" (168).

Andrew Thompson acts as the representative of the most entrenched form of convention, the law, when he forces Walt into asking for Sarilin in marriage. When he comes to the house with Walt, he tells John not to be too hard on the boy, for "He'll probably be willing to marry her and that's all you want" (166). It is not, however, all that Lena wants. And when she interferes Thompson says "Don't be foolish, Mrs. Serang" (169).

Walt Roche, who swaggers in false triumph when he believes he can escape the powers of convention, is soon brought to his knees when it is made evident to him that he cannot. But his foolish defiance only serves to make clearer Lena's defiant wisdom.

Tad Nosse, who at one moment says, "I'd a shot him Walt like a dog" (131), when he thinks Walt cannot escape the law, and at the next worships Walt as a hero for his seeming defiance, also serves as a foil for Lena. Nosse attempts to evade convention in a disgusting viciously petty way, but he cannot understand Lena's courage when she defies convention in a grand way. He too unwittingly exclaims, "You'd think they was harbourin a saint instead of Sarilin" (135).

Such are the uncomprehending external forces which surround Lena's struggle. These are forces she can defy, and yet her hope fails. She and John have quietly hated each other for too long for their children to place any trust in love. The children have been unwanted and, knowing it, those who could go have gone. The others, Sarilin, Pete, and Jo, but wish to do the same. Lena's belief is only temporarily convincing. Sarilin is no saint, she is Tessie's sister, and her heritage is defiant self-regard.

Marsh Hay is Denison's best, perhaps his only good play. It reveals the ability of its author to both deeply

care and convincingly express himself. The elements of all drama--structure, character, and theme--are used here to make good drama. But Marsh Hay is only one play. Denison's other plays have little force or facility. In both theme and character they are paralytically restricted.

It would be unfair to Denison to decide that he gave up being an artist in order to be produced. But his one-act plays have been quite popular as the choice of amateur theatre, whereas Marsh Hay, to my knowledge, has not once been performed. If this be Denison's fault, let it be said that the artist in him was not satisfied to continue to be the seer of the few.

Ivy Compton-Burnett once remarked: 'I would write for a few dozen people; and it sometimes seems that I do so; but I would not write for no one.'²¹

Denison, in 1929, decided that he would not write even for the few dozen. He sarcastically commented on the state of drama in Canada:

It is not at all surprising that there should be no Canadian drama. One's surprise comes from learning that anyone could have seriously believed there could be a Canadian drama. Let it be noted to the credit of the mass of Canadian citizenry that but a small fraction of its number has ever concerned itself about the matter. It has been the fancy of a very special and narrow group

²¹John Russell Taylor, Anger and After. London: Methuen, 1963, p.10.

which, for want of a better name, may be called intellectuals.²²

And if those "intellectuals" uncritically accepted Denison's bad plays and left unperformed his one good play, what hope could the artist have? It would seem that he must either continue to write poor drama to please the immediate few of a theatre, or write for himself and the posterity of the theatre. As writing plays for posterity is not a very materially satisfying pursuit, Denison was probably very human in not following this course. But had he been more the artist, had he been more set on developing absolutely in his own way, Denison's contribution to drama might have been as worthy in sum as Marsh Hay is in part.

²²Merrill Denison, "Nationalism and Drama," Yearbook of the Arts in Canada: 1928-1929. Bertram Brooker, ed., Toronto: Macmillan, 1929, p.51.

II. GWEN PHARIS RINGWOOD

Gwen Pharis Ringwood began writing plays in the late 1930s. She is still writing today. But during her almost thirty years as a dramatist, she has had only four plays published and those in the early years of her artistic career. This is no place to bewail the possible callousness of publishers when presented with new Canadian plays. The House of French, in the 1930s, printed a Canadian Playwright Series which consisted of a number of uniformly unhappy attempts at drama. Who can blame the other publishers if this endeavour proved so depressing (certainly aesthetically and probably financially) to French and Company that the publication of Canadian plays has become as sporadic as a miser's twinges of munificence. This is not to suggest that Gwen Ringwood's published plays need a munificent appreciation. Nor is it my intention to give them one. But three of her plays, Still Stands the House, Pasque Flower, and Dark Harvest, will be critically examined here to determine what force and facility they do possess.

Still Stands the House is a tersely powerful tragedy in one act. Its theme is very similar to that of Denison's Marsh Hay, the impossibility of loving, human emotions surviving in a hostile environment. The environment in this play is a house and land, which claim as their respective

keepers the son and daughter, Bruce and Hester, of six-years-dead Martin Warren. The emotions are those of Ruth, Bruce's wife, who has "made her choice"¹ and moved onto the isolated farm, which she thinks she can change(22). But Hester and Bruce are bound to the past by their father's will which has given the house to the one and the land to the other. Now they are offered a chance to sell their heritage--for \$5,000 and an irrigated quarter-section near town--and the measure of their bondage to the past is taken.

Hester's servitude is complete. It is her house, but only as she is its curator. For she still keeps it for her father. His portrait on one of the walls watches over the "faded austerity, the decayed elegance that is...remote and cheerless"(5) of the living-room with an expression in his eyes "of his unconquerable will"(5). "The room has made a stern and solemn pact with the past...and has settled in a rigid pattern of neat, uncompromising severity"(5). Hester does not want changes in this room. She does not want Ruth's hyacinths or chintz curtains and cover for her father's chair. She must grudgingly accept some changes because, as she says to Ruth, "You've more right here than I have now,

¹Gwen Pharis Ringwood, Still Stands the House. Toronto, French, 1939, p.10. All succeeding quotations from Still Stands the House will be noted by a page number in brackets immediately following the quotation.

I suppose"(13). But she "won't have Ruth touch"(13) her father's portrait, and she keeps his room locked and "as it was"(8). She wants the house to stand still in her memories.

Her character seems "to make her a part"(8) of the living-room. Like it, she too "Once...held the warm surge of life"(5). But now the hyacinths, which are signs of "birth" to Ruth, "seem like death"(10) to Hester. And if that life, in the form of a baby, comes, she will "keep out of the way"(14). When she herself had the chance to marry, to be a source of life, she stopped the young man from coming to see her. She says to Ruth, "I never saw a man I'd let touch me. Maybe you don't mind that sort of thing. I do"(14-15). Any sign of imminent life and change now only makes more evident the death and decay of her own place in the world. Long ago she decided that her "duty was here in this house"(15) to living people. Her duty is still in the house, but it is to dead memories. She breaks off a bloom of Ruth's hyacinths, foreshadowing in this small way what she will do later to those who seek to disrupt her existence irreparably. Again and again she affirms her stand, "This house will not be sold. I won't allow it"(10).

Bruce, the son, is similarly bound to his father's heritage, for he must care for the land. He tells Ruth, "I feel about the land like Hester does about the house, I guess. I don't want to leave it. I don't want to give it

up"(20). But in the years since his father's death he has been made "bitter" by "His vain struggle to make the farm pay"(15). Still he says, "I don't want to sell"(19) when Ruth tells him that he must decide at once about the offer to buy the place. He wants to keep "this house. The finest in the country!"(20) for his son. More, he wants to keep on the land where he has "put roots down"(21).

He has been partially redeemed from his servitude, however, by marrying Ruth. He has found someone to love and be loved by as Hester has not. And when Ruth reveals her fear to him that a child--that new life---could never survive in "this dark house"(21-22), he is forced to decide to buy their life in the future by selling the dead heritage of the past.

The quiet strength of Ruth accomplishes this much at least. Like her biblical namesake her devoted love proves a rewarding thing. But her love, like Lena's in Marsh Hay, though it may seem to prevail for a time, in fact cannot. For Hester, once called a wise virgin by her father, has kept her virginity but become a fool. She declares to Ruth, "This is my home. You can't change it"(25), as she slowly [unravels] her knitting"(25), a sign of the unravelling of her own mind. The love of Bruce and Ruth "is a flame in the room" only "for a moment"(25). This flame, like those in the unfilled lanterns (one Bruce takes to go find the mare in

foal, the other Hester gives Ruth to go after Bruce), must soon be snuffed out, and the "moving shroud, the winding-sheet" (12) of snow and Hester's memories cover them all. The world "beating outside" that Ruth represents, where "people laugh and play" (22), is shut out completely and finally by Hester. And her house will still stand alone.

An environment triumphs here, as in Marsh Hay, over warm human emotions that struggle to escape its pressing, deadly cold. Love freezes here like the hyacinths Hester sets outside, and the heritage of the house moulders uselessly. The tragedy of this conclusion is extremely well prepared for. The cold and dark are powers which all but Hester perceive and fear. She, as her father did, likes the snow. But for Ruth the story of the real estate agent, Manning, about the death of a sheepherder by freezing is "frightful!" (7). "These prairie blizzards are no joke" (6), he says. Neither is the cold inside the Warren's house a joke. Hester, having discovered the deed of sale:

(Takes the Bible to the sideboard and places it under her father's portrait. She stands looking up at the portrait.) This house will not be sold [she affirms]. I won't allow it. (10)

Ruth, "shivering," replies, "It's so cold it almost frightens me" (10). This juxtaposition neatly forces us to be aware of the cold not merely as a natural force, but also as a human force.

Bruce, though he does not express any fear of the cold, probably because he is more used to it, nevertheless says, "I'd hate to walk far tonight....You can't see your hand before your face"(17). It is the darkness that envelops the land, not the cold that invades the house, which worries him. In fact, both these fears are justified. For the cold and the dark are too powerful for the flame of love to survive inside or the flames of the lanterns to survive outside the house.

Still Stands the House is a very good play. Excellent characterization is combined with a forcefully presented theme to produce a powerful one-act play. It is probably the best short play in Canadian drama.

Pasque Flower is the one-act predecessor of Dark Harvest. Its situation, characters, and theme were later expanded by Gwen Ringwood into a full-length drama. Pasque Flower, however, is worth consideration not only as a forerunner to a major play, but also as a dramatic piece in its own right.

The action centers around Jake and Lisa, husband and wife, on an Alberta farm, and David, Jake's younger brother, who has left the farm to become a doctor but is returning for a brief visit. All of these characters desire to know if they are loved. During the course of the play each finds an answer to this question. But all are ignorant of it

when we first see them.

Jake cannot understand what Lisa wants from him. He says, "As God is my witness, Liz, I don't know what you want."² He is exasperated that she seems to be purposefully secluding herself with some private "woe" (9), living with him "As if [she] had a sentence to a life in prison" (8). He laments that she does not love him actively, but instead:

I've felt you stiffen when I touch you
And grow quiet....
And then submit, in patient duty. (11-12)

Lisa accuses him of not wanting "to share things" (10) with her, but Jake in turn protests that she thinks he has "no feeling to compare with [David]" (11). And he bitterly declares:

Maybe you and he and white-faced dreamers
like you
Have a corner on all the feeling in the world,
And we poor clod-shufflers, who have to dig
the ground,
Or slit a hog's throat, or stick a bloated
cow [sic]
Have to do this, I tell you, to survive--
We've got no feelings! (11)

Thus exasperated, then, he does not give Lisa the first

²Gwen Pharis Ringwood, Pasque Flower, in Frederick H. Koch, ed., The Carolina Playbook, 12:8, March, 1939. All succeeding quotations from Pasque Flower will be noted by a page number in brackets immediately following the quotation.

pasque flowers of the spring which he has brought in for her as a token of his love.

He retreats into his own prison, built in retribution, a prison called "land." He proclaims his pride in his six sections "all in one block" (9), "the biggest wheat field/ In all the country round" (10), which he has just consolidated by taking over an old neighbour's farm. And if Jake is locked out of Lisa's prison, she is locked out of his. She cannot understand that Jake will buy land he does not "need" (9), just to make "Four thousand acres lying in one piece" (10), as she says with "an irony in her tone which escapes Jake" (9-10). Later she spitefully exclaims:

Sometimes I wonder if you're human, Jake,
And if you care for anything on earth
besides your land!

...
You've traded all the good in you
For land, more land. You'll never have
enough! (12-13)

Thus from within their prisons Jake and Lisa shout at each other, and do not hear what each is whispering alone. Even so, Jake affirms to Lisa, "I'll never let you go!" (13).

Between these two comes David, who, in asking love for himself from them both, reawakens Jake and Lisa's love for each other. He makes them realize exactly what the walls of their prisons are, by attempting to break through them. He understands Jake's love for the land. He says, "Jake feels...about the land....It's something to master,

if you fail it breaks you"(15). But he will not condone the selfishness of such a love when it is a selfishness that puts an old neighbour, whom he and Jake "followed... like pups when we were lads"(15), "to work as a hired man/ On his own farm"(16). Jake declares, "I needed that section, now I've got it"(16). But David will not "praise Jake for this rotten deal"(16). "It will be barren soil for you," he tells Jake. "You'll curse the day you took it over"(16).

Having thus challenged the strength of Jake's walls, David now tries Lisa's. Her feeling for David is, in fact, the prison enclosing her love for Jake. David wants to set Jake free from his prison; he wants to carry Lisa off in hers. "I came on your account," he declares to her, "I had to come"(17). Lisa, in reply, says that she has had David "in my thoughts more than I wished for"(17). But she realizes that Jake "loves me better far than I deserve"(18), and she says to David, "Don't ask me for love, David,/ I haven't any love to give"(18). David, however, has "come, asking"(18) and offering to unchain her cage from Jake's. Lisa is very tempted to accept, for she feels that without David she has "not been herself", But something lost in the darkness,/ A cry flung on the wind, asking no recognition"(18).

But then she discovers the flowers. David admits that he has not brought them, and Lisa then realizes how

she has made her "dream"(19) of David into a prison for her love for Jake. Her feeling for David, she tells him, has been "a flame" that "mounted" "for a moment"(19). But her feeling for Jake is, "Not...duty /but/ some blind need that Jake has for me and I for him"(19). And Jake, when he returns from being "outside of walls"(20), has discovered that he was in them. He will now let his neighbour, Roebuck, keep his farm, and he does not hate his brother David for telling him to do so. David, having effected this freedom for them, says good-bye and goes to seek a life of his own. Jake and Lisa, seeing each other "clearer somehow"(20), celebrate the flowers that signify the renewal of their love as they do the coming of the spring.

Pasque Flower is a simple but very effective play. Its structure is clear, moving directly from a statement of the human problem through a forceful confrontation of it to a quietly powerful resolution. The characterization is complete enough to enable us to understand the conflict and sympathize with all three protagonists. The outcome, in terms of their personalities, is believable.

The simple poetic style of Pasque Flower lays bare the directness of the structure and the drama of the conflict. Perhaps, however, it lays them too bare. Few images bloom in the sparse verse of the play, not even when Jake and Lisa's love shows forth again. Thus we cannot be sure if the barren conclusion to the poetry is meant to

suggest a barren conclusion to the love or not.

Pasque Flower is not as moving a play as Dark Harvest. Nor could it be, for its resolution is a confirmation of love, whereas Dark Harvest ends with a negation of love. For the obstacles between Gerth Hansen and his wife Lisa in Dark Harvest are not broken down, and they lead to Gerth's death. The younger brother, David, proves to be not a catalyst of reconciliation but of separation, a separation that Gerth cannot stand.

In Dark Harvest the beginning of that separation is the death of the baby Lisa wanted. She says:

I thought the baby would give us something to live for besides land; I counted on him for that. And then I had him for one day. I think something inside me died too.³

This is the accusation she most fiercely makes against Gerth. When she was having her baby he went out to care for his land and did not get the doctor in time to save the child. She "[plays] angel of mercy" (24) to the under-privileged children of the district, she angrily tells him:

To keep myself from remembering...that we had a child once, and I planned for it and loved it and held it in my arms--and that I lost it--but the ploughing got

³Gwen Pharis Ringwood, Dark Harvest, Toronto, Thomas Nelson, 1945, p.4. All succeeding quotations from Dark Harvest will be noted by a page number in brackets immediately following the quotation.

done that year.(24)

Such is their point of departure away from each other. And on either side of it Gerth and Lisa construct their prisons of self-defense. As in Pasque Flower, Lisa finds refuge in remembering her love for David, Gerth in his care for the land.

Lisa gives vent to her frustration first in Act I. She objects to Gerth, "You don't want me to share things with you"(11). She cannot understand his need for land and tells him so when he decides to foreclose on his neighbour, Al Morrow. "You've got more acres than you can farm," she exclaims, "There's a place to stop"(13). The fact that Gerth seems to care more for "Four thousand acres lying in one piece!"(13) than for her is very perplexing to Lisa. And when Gerth comments that David would "have a living now"(22) if he had stayed and farmed, Lisa explodes, "Land! Everything goes back to land with you"(22). She accuses Gerth bitterly:

There's no trouble too great for you to take for that field out there. Your wife, your brother, they don't count, as long as you can walk the fields and say, "I own this land--it's mine"--that's all that matters.
(22-23)

Lisa perceives the wall in front of Gerth well enough, but she cannot see that they are protecting rather than enclosing him. She realizes that they have moved apart and it worries her. She says:

It's time we stopped and looked at each other and realized that we're as far apart as strangers, that we walk from room to room in an empty house and never touch each other at all.(23)

If they had "something to love together," she thinks, "perhaps that's all we need"(23). But Gerth knows this is not enough. They need to forgive and love each other before they can love something together.

Gerth tries to lead Lisa behind his walls and show her why they are there when he attempts to explain about his land. He tells her:

I've planned to make this farm look like no other I've ever seen. In a way, that's for you.(26)

Lisa says she thinks she knows that, but at the mention of David it is her turn to run behind her own walls. Gerth is very sensitive to her feeling for David, but Lisa does not notice. She does not comprehend his sensibility. In this Lisa is like David, who, several years before, had not understood Gerth's motive for killing a dog. Gerth now rages at them both:

You think I've got no feelings to compare with yours. Well, maybe I haven't. Maybe people like you and Lisa here have a corner on all the feelings in the world. And those of us who have to dig the ground, or slit a hog's throat, or stick a bloated cow, we've got no feelings.(37)

But again his feelings are brushed aside while Lisa and David attempt to get money from him to buy a practice for David. Lisa blindly proceeds to reproach Gerth:

Sometimes I think you don't need anything from anyone. I wonder why you ever thought you needed me.(42)

But it is for her that Gerth gives David the money he needs. It is for her that he will water her lilacs and help set them out. Lisa, however, thinks Gerth will be happier in his fields, and David can help her garden. It seems that for all her evident wish to know Gerth better, she knows him not at all, while he in turn is kept from knowing her by her feeling for David. Gerth is the one most wronged at the end of Act I, and he quietly laments, "Now that David's here, there won't be any need for me to stay"(45).

The presence of David, then, does nothing to effect a reconciliation between Lisa and Gerth. In fact, it only makes them draw further apart from one another. And the two years that pass between the first two acts is but a period which intensifies their mutual withdrawal. Gerth has grown the best wheat in the country during that time, and he says that this is "enough to work for"(54). But Al Morrow's sneering revelation that Lisa, Gerth's "sad-eyed wife" is "not so sad in Lethbridge with David"(53), pierces Gerth's front. Gerth well knows that this is "a place his land doesn't help"(53). For Lisa dreams David's dreams and not Gerth's.

David has been appointed director of a children's

hospital the Government will build. And he wants Lisa to supervise the playrooms. But for this to be so the hospital must be built on the hill that Gerth has taken over from Morrow and planted with apple trees. When David asks Gerth to sell this land, it is clearly revealed that Lisa has no understanding at all of what Gerth is trying to do. She can only see that "the land would do a lot more good if used for a hospital than for growing apples"(72). She cannot admit that, as Gerth says, "That land might mean as much to me as it does to you"(73), and she condemns him by saying:

...in the end the ground you walk on is the only thing you care about, the only thing you'd lift your hand to save.(73)

But she herself is the one that is truly selfish. For she is interested only in saving David--for herself and, parenthetically, for the district. She dreams of "squandering some of the love that's stored up inside me"(75) on the hospital. For she is so hidden behind David that she cannot realize how desperately Gerth is trying to get her to spend that love on him. She undiscerningly declares, "...out here, there isn't any place for me to put the love I've got. Nobody needs it"(75). Yet when David admits that he loves her and wants to take her away, Lisa will not completely forsake Gerth. She laments:

...I can't...reach out to touch you whom I love, because it's too late. And I can't touch Gerth because we're

on different paths.(78)

Lisa tells Gerth that she is "frightened of what's happening to us...of what's happening to me--we're getting so far apart that we can't talk about anything any more"(80). But even when Gerth attempts to explain his path, to show Lisa how she has forced him to take it, she cannot leave her own path to look at his. The tragedy is that Gerth has the perception to know Lisa's way, but he cannot make her see and sympathize with his. Gerth knows that what he does is for Lisa. And he tells her so:

Everything I do is tied up with you. Don't leave me.
All I wanted was your love.(83)
With you gone this place won't mean anything to me.(84)

But Gerth does not think that Lisa wants just his love. Indeed, from her replies to his pleas, it seems that his love is not enough. Her duty, more than her love for Gerth is revealed when she plainly declares, "I'll never leave you Gerth"(84) and "My life's tied up with yours, Gerth. I want to stay"(84).

This, however, is enough for Gerth. And, to express his love for Lisa, he gives his land for the hospital. He asks both Lisa and David if there is something between them that would make them refuse his offer, but their answer is that there is not. Yet when Gerth offers even more to Lisa, the chance she has long desired to adopt a child, her reply reveals to him the bond that actually exists between his

wife and brother. Lisa says, "I think I could do more up there [at the hospital]--if David wants me to help--"(89). "Yes," Gerth hopelessly responds, "if David wants your help, your heart would be up there"(89). Thus, he thinks, is everything he has done for Lisa made to seem "useless"(90).

Twice Gerth has ventured out from the protection of his walls to ask Lisa to join him. And twice Lisa has stayed behind her own walls and denied him. The anguish that this has caused Gerth is made evident in Act III by the contrast of his tired indifference to his dream of land that Lisa has rejected with Lisa's "excitement and pleasure"(96) at the sureness of David's dream. Gerth feels he is now "out of the stream of things"(96). His wheat means nothing to Lisa as compared with David's hospital. Thus it means as little to Gerth.

Gerth does not care, although he may know, how David feels for Lisa. David suspects that Gerth does know, and this leads him to tell Lisa that either he must leave, or, "If I stay, I'll have to tell Gerth I love you"(105). Lisa cannot let David do that, for she has some conscience and she knows she is at fault for Gerth's condition. "If only I could have loved him like he asked me to, instead of going through all the years needing you"(106), she mourns to David. She decides once again that she must stay with Gerth. But again, when Gerth seeks solace in her love from his perplexity at

the transitory nature of existence, when he opens himself to her completely and says that David's dream is better than his own, Lisa cannot see his need. She retreats again into "the dream [Gerth] has given back to them"(110)--David's dream--and she turns, not to Gerth, but to David. This time Gerth is truly defeated, his good dream transformed into a nightmare.

Once, he says to Charley, his loyal but uncomprehending hired hand:

I had a dream...of a great wheat field, yellow in the sun....And I grew it. It was mine--mine!...And Lisa was in my dream, standing there, her eyes as blue as flax in the morning, and the wheat around her. But a hail storm came up. I saw it smashing the wheat back into the earth, breaking it off at the roots, leaving it only fit to feed the birds. And I ran to where she was, because I didn't want the hail to hurt her....but when I got there, she wasn't there any more. She'd gone.(112)

Gerth has no more reason to care for his land. It has not given him "what he's wanted most"(113), the love of Lisa. Now he feels he is himself "useless"(113). He reasons that "one thing's got to go so there'll be room for something better"(113), and he is convinced his dream must go so David's dream (which Lisa shares) can come true. "When you're finished, you step aside"(114), he says. And the hospital is "just beginning....Just beginning"(114).

The resolution of this play is inevitable. Al Morrow, driving a gasoline truck for the government to the hospital

site, sets the truck on fire. David is trapped inside the building and will be killed if he comes out and the truck explodes. Lisa comes to Gerth calling for him to save David. Her shouts for David but justify even more Gerth's perception. He realizes he has not a hope for his dream, that Lisa will never love him. But the measure of his love for her is so great that he will risk even his life for her. Having decided that David's dream must not die as well as his own, Gerth drives the burning truck away from the hospital and stays with it, although "He could have jumped"(117), until it explodes. Gerth's last act is both defiant and resigned. He must save something for Lisa, but he himself has nothing to be saved for.

Gerth is the central tragic protagonist and consequently he receives our greatest attention and sympathy. Gwen Ringwood has made sure this is so by her presentation of the minor characters. Every one of them--Julia MacDonald and her son Bert, Charley, even Al Morrow, whose land Gerth takes over--are witnesses to the magnitude of Gerth's character, whether they know it or not.

Julia tells Lisa that "We have to forget those things" (4) when Lisa is bitterly mourning her lost baby. For Gerth is both a "good husband" and a "good...farmer"(4). She also speaks plainly to Gerth about Lisa's need for a child. She comments, "Sometimes something inside a house can mean more

than a full granary outside"(54). But she is not a powerful enough intercessor to break down the walls Lisa and Gerth have built around themselves. Her greatest sympathy, however, is for Gerth. As she tells Lisa:

There's plenty of people depend on Gerth. Where would I be? He's paid me more than I'd get anywhere else, ever since Mac left.(29)

Her son, Bert, is another who depends on Gerth. And Bert receives good treatment from him. Gerth acts as a father to Bert, in place of Mac who left Julia seven years ago. He lets Bert drive the men home from working on the farm. And with gruff kindness he offers Bert the chance to take flying lessons--and understands the independent nature of his refusal. Bert wants to be like Gerth, to "go his own way"(102). He does not realize the difficulties such a course has led Gerth into, and his comment that Gerth "knows what he wants and gets it"(57) is purest irony. But Gerth's death moves him greatly.

To Charley, "Gerth is an idol"(5). Fifteen years ago, we are informed in Act I, Gerth brought Charley home from the East, a sick man. Ever since, Charley has spent his time on Gerth's farm. His devotion to both Gerth and the farm is a constant factor throughout the play. At the beginning of Act II Charley tells Gerth, "This big farm, you run it right, Gerth. You don't make mistakes"(47). When the hospital starts to take shape on the hill, Charley

expresses a dislike for it. He says, "It's all you can see, no matter where you look"(93). And a little later he protests to Gerth, "I suppose that building is going to look fine high up on the hill like that, but the field of wheat you cut down looked better"(96). Charley can point out that Gerth's dream is literally coming under the ascendancy of David and Lisa's dream, even though he himself does not comprehend the significance of what he says.

Nor can he understand what is happening to Gerth, although he constantly worries about it. Charley can see Gerth has "something on his mind, but," he admits, "I don't know what it is"(58). Even when Gerth tells Charley his dream, Charley can only be a sympathetic listener, not a perceptive one. He remains in complete ignorance of Gerth's decisions until the end of the play. For when Morrow's truck is on fire, Charley's concern is that "If it explodes that gas, it'll take the wheat"(114). He cannot die for Gerth, not because he is "too old"(117), but because he does not know what Gerth is dying for.

Gerth's treatment of Al Morrow, who hates him, is perhaps a better measure of Gerth's quality than his kindness to Charley, who loves him. Gerth has waited five years for Morrow to give some indication that he will repay the \$1,000 Gerth has paid to allow Morrow to keep his farm. Now he wants to take the farm to make Lisa "proud of what the

does⁷ with it"(27). And Lisa agrees that Gerth is just in what he does. Even so, Gerth volunteers to Morrow that, "I'll help you get settled some place else if I can"(16), and Gerth lets him remain in the house on the property until he can find another place. He also offers to loan Morrow "a team to start...road work"(41). When Gerth discovers that the police are suspicious that Morrow is supplying liquor to minors, he warns him to stop or he may be arrested. And he tries to keep Morrow at work, getting him a job on a neighbouring farm.

It is not Morrow's hatred, then, that is the real cause of Gerth's death. Gerth says he is not afraid of anything Al can do. Nor is he. But he is afraid of having no reason to live or to die for. And thus he accepts the death with which Morrow's craziness provides him.

Dark Harvest, like Marsh Hay, is a play about the failure of love. In both plays it is a failure that occurs not through the inability of Gerth or Lena Serang to express their desire, but through the inability of others to respond to their plea. The aura of tragic futility that emanates from both plays is a convincing one. Both are good plays as well, for the playwrights both care for their subject and employ their art in a forceful presentation of it.

Dark Harvest, however, is not a great play. Its main

theme is handled powerfully enough, but it has to wend its way among several pools of banality. It does not rise to the heights it might because sometimes it gets mired down. The most obvious example of this fault is the expenditure of some three and one-half pages of dialogue on David's repair of Bert's cut thumb. This episode serves neither as comic relief nor as a revelation of character. The only thing it does do is reconfirm something that Charley has already told us--that David is a successful doctor. Such a point does not deserve this lengthy treatment.

There is a danger also in the play that with all the minor characters directing our sympathy towards Gerth, we may be too liable to condemn Lisa and David. Indeed, it sometimes does seem that Lisa's continued and selfish hiding from accepting and returning Gerth's love is the sign of a shallow character whose responses are limited. David's ignorance of Gerth's problem in the face of his own dilemma, however, is quite understandable.

These three plays of Gwen Ringwood, then, are all of some worth. Their themes in particular are well handled. They all indicate that here is a dramatist who is deserving of more attention, both in the form of criticism and publication, than she has received. Perhaps the solution to this problem is inherent in its very terms. If Gwen Pharis Ringwood had been commented upon by more critics, more publication might well have followed.

III. ROBERTSON DAVIES

...you must never lose sight of the fact that your first duty is to civilize yourself, and infect the people around you with your civilization.¹

Robertson Davies spoke thus to a convocation of Canadian university students. In his plays he speaks in a similar manner. He is concerned that intelligent imaginations be given a chance to "civilize" themselves in the Canadian environment, an environment which in present circumstances often proves stultifying. He also hopes that any art, such as the theatre, which those imaginations may use to "infect" their countrymen with "civilization" may be allowed "to be its own justification."² He wants to keep art out of the hands of those "who regard it as a means of spreading some sort of education dear to themselves, or think that it is a social medicine," for they "will kill it dead as a doornail."³ Davies' logic happily excludes himself from this barren of mule-headed murderers of art. Whether, in fact, he should

¹Robertson Davies, "God forbid I should utter such foolishness," a Convocation address at McMaster University, Spring, 1959, printed in Waterloo Review, 2:21, Winter, 1960.

²Robertson Davies, "The Theatre," in Royal Commission Studies: A Selection of Essays Prepared for the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences. Ottawa, King's Printer, 1951, p.385.

³Loc. cit.

be excluded, will be decided in this consideration of his plays.

Let it be noted now, however, that his desire to have art which both justifies itself and instructs mankind how to be "civilized" is self-contradictory. Davies doubtless is attempting to draw a line here between those artists who do not let their message interfere with their artistic skill and those who do. In Canada, he feels, fine artists are few, poetasters many.⁴

It is these problems, then, as Hugo McPherson comments, "the plight of the imagination in this chilly cultural climate,"⁵ and the function which is to be accorded art in Canada, as well as his search for their solution, which pervade the plays of Robertson Davies. As far as Davies is concerned, these problems are a part of Canada's heritage. He sees them as existing in French Canada in 1653 and in English Canada in 1837, and has chosen to conduct an enquiry into their nature, using the settings of those times as backgrounds to his theme in Hope Deferred and At My Heart's Core.

⁴Cf. Robertson Davies, "Are they only 'accomplished versifiers'...?" Canadian Author and Bookman, 35:6-7, Spring, 1959.

⁵Hugo McPherson, "The Mask of Satire: Character and Symbolic Pattern in Robertson Davies' Fiction," Canadian Literature, 4:18, Spring, 1960.

The conflict in Hope Deferred centers around Governor Frontenac's wish to stage Molière's Tartuffe, a desire to which Bishop Laval's coadjutor, Monseigneur de Saint-Vallier, is utterly opposed, "for the sake of the humble people of New France, and particularly for the Indians."⁶ In fact, he is opposed to the production of any plays. He wants Frontenac "to help make this a pious country before anything else" (70), a country which is "Good and great. Let us make it good," he says, "and greatness will follow" (72). Bishop Laval concurs in this sentiment, if not in the manner in which it is forced on Frontenac.

But these "lovers of the good" do not go unchallenged by the "lovers of the beautiful" (75). Frontenac has to support him a young Indian girl, Chimene, who has been "civilized" in France and trained in the best tradition of French theatre. Together they challenge the idea that this "new land has no time for amusements which may be destructive" (73), as Saint-Vallier stingingly phrases it. Frontenac demands of the "fanatical" (61) Monseigneur:

Are you asking me to reduce the intellectual tone of this whole country to what is fit for Indians and shopkeepers? (70)

⁶Robertson Davies, Hope Deferred, in Eros at Breakfast and Other Plays. Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1949, p.69. All succeeding quotations from Hope Deferred will be noted by a page number in brackets immediately following the quotation.

He is worried about giving an opportunity to intelligent imaginations to be educated. Chimène is worried as well about the possible product of these educated imaginations--art. "Are we to found a land without art here?" (73) she asks Bishop Laval, a land that will be surrendered to those who sorely lack any sort of imaginative education? In that case, as with Chimène herself, artists will be driven to leave. And, as Frontenac protests,

...when artists go that is sheer loss--deadly loss.
 /For/ It will be a thousand years before this country has such a quantity of brains that it can export them without causing a famine at home. But if trade and piety thrive, art can go to the devil: what a corrupt philosophy, and what stupidity for a new country! (76)

The characters of this confrontation are not really very important. Davies does wish to affirm that the problem they illustrate has been with Canada since the first French settlement. It is this confrontation which itself is of the essence to Davies. The same kind of confrontation in Tartuffe makes the choice of this play as the first one to be banned in Canada particularly significant. In Tartuffe Molière satirizes hypocrisy of the worst sort--the use of pretended piety for the gratification of avarice. Such a pursuit injures the truly good, but this good eventually does prove victorious in Tartuffe. In Hope Deferred, however, the truly good for Davies, the beauty and "civilizing" effect of art, is sacrificed to a false good, the desire to make Canada

a "good" and materially prosperous country.

Here the lovers of this good have forced the lovers of the beautiful into submission. Nor do the latter have much hope that this good will ever be overcome. "There is no tyranny," complains Frontenac, "like organized virtue" (76). It would seem that the country has been given up into the hands of "clods and bigots," who, being good "without the arts [demand of themselves]" a simplicity bordering on the idiotic" (74). This is the way the confrontation is resolved in New France. May the same confrontation and conclusion be expected of Upper Canada?

At My Heart's Core does not have as pat an ideological ending as Hope Deferred. The theme, however, is still the problem of the educated imagination and its benefits--cultured society, science, and art (and two kinds of art are differentiated here)--surviving in and reshaping a dull environment. The problem is made explicit in the characters of Mrs. Frances Stewart, Mrs. Catherine Parr Traill, and Mrs. Susanna Moodie. During the course of the play, these ladies are made aware both as individuals and as representatives of society, science, and art respectively, of this situation. They have heretofore accepted it and have not let it bother their daily course of existence in the Canadian backwoods, but they are made to think about what they might have been and done free of this environment. The agent of their

revelation which they suppose to be temptation (as it may be of their personal integrity in their role as married women, but not of their creative powers in the realms of society, science, and art) is an ambivalent devil named Cantwell. But let us consider this gentleman after the ladies.

Mrs. Stewart is introduced to us first. She is, says Davies, "a naturalist of uncommon abilities."⁷ This comment is somewhat misleading and certainly irrelevant. For what Davies wishes to emphasize about Mrs. Stewart is her social graces. She is, above all, "a real lady and not a spurious one"(4), "brought up...in all the refinements of high cultivation"(4). Her "high cultivation" is quite in evidence in Act I. She has warmly and generously accepted Honour Brady into her home to have a baby. She is sincerely charming and pleasantly witty with her friends and with Cantwell. Her sense of humour is not disturbed by Phelim Brady's (Honour's step-father and husband-to-be) refusal to comply either with her conditions for the return of Honour to him or her request for him to leave.

Davies' desire that the actress playing Mrs. Stewart

⁷Robertson Davies, At My Heart's Core. Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1950, p.3. All succeeding quotations from At My Heart's Core will be noted by a page number in brackets immediately following the quotation.

"have a beautiful voice"(4) is not a trivial one. For she is the voice of cultivation speaking softly in a strange land. She has known the "brilliant and fashionable society" (45) of Lord Rossmore and his friends in Ireland. She has left it to marry Thomas Stewart and come to Canada. Cantwell puts the contrast to her and then says:

You are beautiful, highly born, witty, and possessed of that wonderful generosity of spirit--that quality of giving--which raises beauty and charm to the level of great and holy virtues. What need has the backwoods of these things? You should not be here. You chose wrongly.
(45)

There is both temptation and revelation here. The temptation is of Mrs. Stewart's wifely love. The revelation is that the cultivation she speaks for is but a plaintive cry in this wilderness. The temptation is acknowledged and answered. As a person Mrs. Stewart loves and is loved by her husband, who tells her, "I do not suppose that a day passes I do not thank God for the blessing of our life together"(90). Their love is sufficient to secure a victory here. But the question of the value of the cultivated voice to the backwoods is not so readily answered. Indeed, it does not seem that Mrs. Stewart even comprehends the problem. She may ponder in her heart the challenge to her love. But her personal decision to continue in this love necessarily involves the decision of cultivation to remain. Nevertheless, the question is presented and no reasons are given in reply.

The characters of Mrs. Traill and Mrs. Moodie may be seen in a similarly dual fashion. Their personal natures are distinctive but their purported personal justification for remaining in their situation is the same--duty, wifely duty. Cantwell refuses to deal with them on this level, spurning the personal to reach the universal. And the universals they respectively represent are science and art.

The challenge to Mrs. Traill to seek truth succeeds the challenge to Mrs. Stewart to provide beauty. The climactic challenge to Mrs. Moodie yet awaits our attention.

Cantwell demands of Mrs. Traill:

If you have it in you to do notable scientific work is it not my concern, as a man of some education myself, to ask you why you make it a bad second to the drudgery of a settler's wife?(48)

The scientific quest for truth must not be encumbered by the seeming necessities forced upon it by an unfortunate environment. Mrs. Traill is somewhat disturbed by Cantwell's accusation, but her life goes on unchanged. However, the greater question to which her small case has given rise still remains.

Cultivation and science are important to Davies, but the critical issue is art. Cantwell has left Mrs. Moodie to the last because what she might do were she to slough off her environment is a critical thing to him as well. He asks Mrs. Moodie:

Do you suppose that the importance of literature is diminished because nobody hereabout understands it?... Your work is art, and art is what gives form and meaning to life.(56-57)

Beauty may have form, and truth meaning, but it is art that reveals most clearly these aspects of them to mankind. Mrs.

Moodie does realize her situation. She says:

We have little enough time to read, but half an hour now and then gives the mind something to feed on during the endless hours of sewing, mending, cooking, candle-making, preserving, gardening--all the endless tasks that devour our time in this Ultima Thule of civilization.(56)

And it is significant that, of the three, it is she who escapes from the backwoods when her husband gets a government post. It would seem that love is enough for beauty, duty enough for science, but that art must escape if it is to find its fullest expression.

The importance of art to Davies is illuminated in this play by the focus of the sub-plot on Phelim Brady. Mrs. Moodie's art is the creation of an educated imagination, Phelim's is the gift of the ages, "poems and tales...rooted deep in a mighty past"(25). But original and traditional art are "two branches o' the same old tree"(25), and they have the same problems in this new land. Phelim complains that these Canadian settlers:

...are not the people I knew, God help them. They're a strange lot entirely, with the blush o' health on their cheeks and the maggot o' respectability in their brains.
(29)

And Cantwell is sympathetic in this manner:

There is a period of struggle between poverty and affluence during which men feel no need for what you have to offer them, Phelim. And there is a sort of education which forgets that the mind needs not only to be polished, but oiled. (29)

Whatever the cause, Phelim is definite in his assertion to Mrs. Moodie, "that a country that has no need for my stories has no need for yours" (29). He affirms:

...you and me is both in one losin' battle. We're the songbirds that aren't wanted in this bitter land, where the industrious robins and the political crows get fat, and they with not a tuneful chirp among the lot of 'em. (42)

Phelim is figuratively as well as literally left out in the cold not only by the educated people of the play, but also by everyone else in Upper Canada--as is his and Mrs. Moodie's art.

The one who points out the conflict of the creators of beauty, truth, form and meaning with their environment is Edmond Cantwell. It has been suggested elsewhere⁸ that Cantwell is simply an evil power, whose actions towards the ladies echo Satan's temptations of Christ in the wilderness. The ladies, in such a case, if taken together, should form Davies' Christ, the one in which their three attributes--cultivation, science, and art--unite. But Cantwell is a

⁸M.W. Steinberg, "Don Quixote and the Puppets: Theme and Structure in Robertson Davies' Drama," Canadian Literature, 7:45-53, Winter, 1961.

tempter in a conventional sense only, and the ladies are well warned in Act I by Phelim, whom they treat as the Trojans did Laocoön. The temptation proffered by Cantwell is a personal one--that they each put their own creativity first and leave behind the human bonds that tie them to the backwoods. But the universal problem which their particular examples illustrate is the possibility (or impossibility) of creativity in a hostile environment.

Cantwell feels that creativity is not possible, and he declares:

Here in the forest I met a lady whom a poet might adore for her charm, her beauty, and her loveliness of spirit! I met another gifted with power to see into the heart of Nature herself and to reveal the mysteries of Nature to mankind: and as though this were not adventure enough for a single day, I met still a third whom I knew to be capable of enriching the world through acts of creation no less miraculous than the miracle of life itself. I found these three Graces hidden in the wilderness. (61)

Cantwell's own story confirms his sincerity at this point. He has "rescued" (43) his own wife from a nunnery (a place which may be considered to be a hostile environment for her, as she has been put there to prevent her marriage) and brought her to Canada. Having now discovered the nature of this land, they are going to Italy, considered the home of art and a place of refuge for such artists as Byron, Shelley, and the Brownings in the first half of the nineteenth century. It is to be the Cantwell's refuge as well. This man, an

appreciative critic of the offerings of the educated imagination, cannot stay here. Can the ladies, can cultivation, science, art, stay either?

This question is resolved in the play almost entirely on a personal level, but not on a conceptual one. Cantwell, who has asked it of the ladies, suddenly and unconvincingly becomes "sharply changed" (65). He gives up his critical function and assumes a spurious personality. It seems he has merely seized this opportunity to take revenge on the closed society which has "put a slight" (83) upon him and his wife. He is amused and arrogantly contemptuous at his success (65). He is put on trial during Act III for this "moral" (81) offence, that he has bared something of "the agony of frustration of the mind...[that] a devoted and loving wife may know" (79) in this environment. And his defence is that:

...a little humility this morning, and a little charity towards Mrs. Cantwell a few months ago might have spared [the ladies] this distress. (84)

In Act II he is far more convincing when Mrs. Stewart expresses concern that she has "been shamefully rude and neglectful" (42) in not visiting Mrs. Cantwell. He says then:

There is no cause for embarrassment, I assure you. We did not show ourselves friendly. And Mrs. Cantwell needed a period in which to accustom herself to domestic life. (43)

Is this mere politeness or temptation-working deception from a man who dares "to say what other men fear to say" (80)?

If this is Davies' attempt to condemn Cantwell as an insincere intellectual who cannot confront his environment to "civilize" it, but instead flees and tries to get others to do the same, it is not very successful. As we shall see in Fortune, My Foe Davies believes that artists and intellectuals must stay. Cantwell is not going to and he asks why anyone else should. Even though Cantwell has the wrong answer for Davies, however, the question Cantwell demands the ladies reply to as representatives of society, science, and art is still a valid one. And the problem he poses for all artists and intellectuals cannot be denigrated by an attack on the man who presents it. For Davies to do this is for him to commit a grossly obvious argumentum ad hominem.

Having caught himself up, then, in a problem to which he can offer no solution, Davies attempts to evade it by having Cantwell descend from the conceptual to the personal. And so do the ladies and Phelim. Cantwell believes he has revenge, but Mrs. Stewart is rescued from it by love, Mrs. Traill by devotion, and Mrs. Moodie by her husband's government post. Even Phelim's difficulties in marrying Honour are removed.

But what of it? This is a tidy ending in one way only. And it takes an entire act to get even this. Meanwhile, the position of the ladies as creators of beauty, truth, form and meaning in relation to their environment is

made no clearer. Davies' concern for this problem outruns his dramatic consideration of it and the play satisfies us only as a character study, if that, for its idea prohibits complex character development.

In terms of the temporal order of Davies' plays, At My Heart's Core appears to be a reconsideration of (if not an intellectual hang-over from) the same problem as realized in a contemporary urban setting in Fortune, My Foe. And both of these plays are preceded by Overlaid, a one-act play on the same theme in a modern rural setting. In this country neither French and English traditions, nor urban and rural areas have lacked this struggle of the individual with his intellectual environment. For Robertson Davies this is and always has been a fact of Canadian existence.

In 1947 Davies wrote in The Diary of Samuel Marchbanks:

Reflected for the millionth time that it is a pity that Canadians with this sort of artistic ability have so little chance or encouragement to use it in advancement of their native land. Canada exports brains and talent with the utmost recklessness, as though we had a surfeit of them at home, instead of having one of the highest living standards, and one of the lowest artistic and aesthetic standards in the world.⁹

In fact, he thinks so little of these low standards that he put before the text of At My Heart's Core a lengthy introduction explaining how to read a play with understanding.

⁹Robertson Davies, The Diary of Samuel Marchbanks. Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1947, p.22.

He does not "beg for special consideration"¹⁰ as he fears he might, but he does want intelligent consideration. He obviously feels that it will not be readily forthcoming in Canada. Why these standards may be as low as they are, and thus why Davies might worry about receiving an intelligent reception, is the subject of Overlaid.

The encounter of two imaginations in this play is a potent one. One is disgusted with its spiritual starvation, the other does not even know such a thing exists. The combatants are Pop and Ethel, father and daughter. Their personal conflict is triggered by a \$1,200 life insurance policy coming due, which both want to cash in to satisfy their own souls. But Pop would include the whole township in his condemnation of Ethel's mode of living. He says that she and her husband Jim are "emotionally understimulated, the both of you--"¹¹ As for everyone else, there is:

No food for their immortal souls--that's what ails everybody roun' here--little, shriveled-up, peanut-size souls.
(91)

This is a sad comment on life when, as the opera broadcast to which Pop is listening ("the one time o' the week when I get a little food for my immortal soul"(85) he says) assures us:

¹⁰Davies, At My Heart's Core, p.viii.

¹¹Robertson Davies, Overlaid, in Eros at Breakfast and Other Plays. Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1949, p.83. All succeeding quotations from Overlaid will be noted by a page number immediately following the quotation.

If our lives lack beauty we are poor indeed.

For No life today need be starved for the fulfillment which the noblest art can give. (84-85)

The township is starved, exclaims Pop, and he knows why:

...everybody's too damn dumb to know they're alive.... they've starved and tormented their souls....they're against God an' don't know it.

They try to make God in their own little image an' they can't do it. (91-92)

They have destroyed the only pretty things in sight of Pop's farm, a row of elm trees, to widen the road. But the road does not need widening and their necessity proves false.

Says Pop:

But that's the way around here; necessities first, every time....ther's always a gol-danged necessity to get in the way whenever you want somethin' purty....Somebody's got to take the bull by the horns an' ignore necessities if we're ever goin' to have any o' the things that make life worth livin'. (95)

Pop's doctrine of action does not quake before the phantom "duty" either. He asserts:

I've had a bellyful o' duty. I've got somethin' in me that wants more than duty and work. (95)

Pop wants to "render his life gracious with the boon of art" (91), as the radio says one should do, although he has a rather uncultivated idea of art. Pop wants to travel to New York, dine in style, attend the opera, visit a bar with a floor show, and then call on Mrs. August Belmont, the President of the Opera Guild. But this is not quite the

terminology Pop uses to describe his desired life experience --with intermission. He says:

I'd go to New York....I'd get some stylish clothes, and I'd go into one o' those restrunts, and I'd order some vittles you never heard of--better'n the burnt truck Ethel calls food--and I'd get a bottle o' wine--cost a dollar, maybe two--and drink it all, and then I'd mosey along to the Metropolitan Opera House and I'd buy me a seat right down there beside the trap-drummer, and there I'd sit an' listen, and holler and hoot and raise hell whenever I liked the music, an' throw bookies to the gals, an' wink at the chorus, and when it was over I'd go to one o' these here nightclubs an' eat some more, an' drink whiskey, and watch the gals take off their clothes--every last dud, kinda slow an' devilish till they're bare-naked--an' maybe I'd give one of 'em fifty bucks for her brazeer--(89-91)

This experience, however, is just a symbol for something else, something "warm an'--kind of mysterious"(95).

But Pop is not to get that something else. Ethel wants a tombstone, a marker on the family grave to commemorate her and her mother's duty, respectability, and goodness. She really has nothing to live for, so she must have something to die for. And in this desire her "power of goodness"(100) must have its way. As Pop says:

There's a special kind o' power that comes from the belief that you're right. Whether you really are right or not doesn't matter: it's the belief that counts.(100)

Pop cannot stand up to Ethel's belief in her own goodness, and he gives her the money.

To Pop, however, the tombstone is both a memorial to a daughter that might have been--one who had beauty, and a marker for one who is--one who has goodness. In Ethel the

beauty was long ago "overlaid," as now Pop's chance for it is. Yet it is not overlaid forever, though Pop may tie on a black band of mourning for his chance to discover it for himself.

If there is no such chance in Canada, should the intellectual and the artist stay? And if so, to what use shall they put their talents? These are the questions which Davies attempts to resolve in Fortune, My Foe. The combination, unfortunately, proves to be too much for his artistry to handle.

Nicholas Hayward, in this play, is a relatively young (thirty-five) and British-educated intellectual whose home is Canada. But he is thinking of leaving. His motivation for doing so is a mixture of dissatisfaction with the cultural environment and a desire to have the money to marry Vanessa Medway. It is because of this latter desire that his apparent dissatisfaction may be questioned. He exclaims feverishly enough:

I am not patient! But I am not unreasonable! I can live on a promise, but in a country where the questions that I ask meet only with blank incomprehension, and the yearnings that I feel find no understanding, I know I must go mad, or I must strangle my soul with my own hands, or I must get out and try my luck in a country which has some use for me!¹²

¹²Robertson Davies, Fortune, My Foe, Toronto, Clarke, Irwin, 1949, p.21. All succeeding quotations will be noted by a page number in brackets immediately following the quotation.

as well as more quietly:

...I hanker for a little honour and a little money. These are things which Canada gives her scholars with the utmost reluctance, and usually when they are near unto death. (15)

But to have these explanations followed by a submission to Vanessa's wishes and the question "how can I think of marriage on the money I'm getting?" (16) respectively is to transform them into seeming rationalizations. Nicholas must go to the United States and use "catchpenny scholarship" (8) if he would earn enough to marry Vanessa. He will not ask her to live on a Canadian University lecturer's salary. He demands that Idris Rowlands, a seasoned Professor, explain "how a man and his wife could live on what I get," and when Rowlands answers "Others do it," Nicholas's response is "More fools they" (34).

Nicholas protests fervently that he is leaving Canada for idealistic reasons. But our suspicion is that it is love for Vanessa and his willingness to accommodate himself to her monetary stipulations for marriage that make him do so. This suspicion is supported by Nicholas's anger at Rowlands when Idris probes for his real motive. That motive is love, and for saying that Vanessa is not worthy to be loved so, Idris is viciously humiliated by Nicholas.

The dilemma with which Nicholas is struggling, however, is most completely revealed when we see Nicholas and Vanessa

alone. Nicholas then says that his "duty"(82) demands that he stay in Canada to awaken it culturally to the twentieth century. For, he comments:

The things that concern me--scholarship and the arts--still linger in the nineteenth century in Canada; we still pretend to be pioneers, for whom such things are luxuries and not necessities.(81-82)

But it is his "love--love for Vanessa, love for many, many things that make life sweet [that] drives [him] elsewhere"(82).

Vanessa very perceptively realizes what this struggle means to their relationship. She tells Nicholas:

If we marry and go south you will always feel, in your heart's core, that I made you shirk your duty; if I never grow to love you, that will be a tragedy.(82)

She thinks that by remaining in Canada Nicholas will also remain where it is best for him. She proves quite worthy of his love, then, for she will not ask him to sacrifice "everything that is best in [him]"(83) for it.

Being let down by love is no easy thing for Nicholas. His duty is hardly a comforting thing. Canada lacks, he believes, both "warmth and gaiety"(76). These are "qualities men...seek in vain, now," says Nicholas, "yet...many of us crave these things, deep in our hearts"(76). He craves these things himself, but he intends to help change his country so that others who cannot leave may be satisfied too.

If we all run away [Nicholas propounds, Canada]will never be any better. So let the geniuses of easy virtue go southward; I know what they feel too well to blame them.

But for some of us there is no choice; let Canada do what she will with us, we must stay.(98)

Davies doubtless wants us to celebrate this decision, but we may well have reservations. Cantwell asked the ladies why they should stay, and they could give no reply. Nicholas's answer is that he must try to "civilize" Canada, rather than himself enjoy the benefits of places already civilized. He feels that the "backwoods" do need him. He will sacrifice self-interest but will not admit self-defeat.

Nor will Frank Szabo, an artist who carries with him all the traditions of art in Europe. But Szabo does not have much choice. For in Canada he is a Displaced Person, an illegal immigrant who is hiding from the authorities. In Davies' view he is the perfect representative of all the arts in Canada. He is unable to leave, but he will try to make the best of a bad situation. He says at one point:

This is my country now. I must be hopeful. I must believe in it, for there is nowhere else for me to go.(37)

Szabo has no choice, he has "only hope--or despair"(37), and he refuses to despair. For if he must stay, perhaps he can manipulate his environment as he does his puppets. And his mastery of them may enable him to master Canada.

Nicholas and Szabo, as representatives of scholarship and the arts in Canada, serve as focuses for Davies' bitingly satirical treatment of their environment. His picture of the

position of scholarship and the arts is one which the Massey Report¹³ amplifies but does not change. The neglect and starvation of the humanities, the isolation and starvation of the arts, are central themes of Fortune, My Foe as of the Royal Commission. Two years after Davies has pointed out exactly what is wrong, his words are granted the official status of a Royal Commission Report.

The characters of Nicholas and Szabo, however, do not give a very adequate answer to Cantwell's question. Nicholas says he is staying in Canada to do his duty. But there is some doubt as to whether he really wanted to go elsewhere, and he particularly has no reason to do so after Vanessa ditches him. Szabo certainly has motivation for remaining in Canada, but it is motivation which admits of no question of his ever leaving again. This artist has no chance to leave. If he did, as many others do, and yet decided to stay, his decision would have some meaning. As it is, Davies completely begs the question of the necessity of the artist to confront the Canadian environment, and leaves us in doubt

¹³ Report of the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences. Ottawa: King's Printer, 1951, Section IV: Scholarship, Science and the Arts.

about the same necessity of the intellectual. Does he deal with the problem of the function of art in Canada with any more facility?

In what service shall the talents of educated imaginations be used? The camps are divided in the play between those who would have art serve something, and those who would have art justify itself. There is no question that Davies is in the latter camp, for he makes puppets of those in the former and fumblingly displays them in even shoddier fashion than Weir does Sancho Panza in Szabo's production of a scene from Don Quixote. The gestures that might make them seem human are completely suppressed. Ursula Simonds, Mrs. E. C. Philpott, and Orville Tapscott are bloodless caricatures of types Davies evidently abhors. His wrath dictates that there must be no sympathy for them and his satire allows none.

Ursula Simonds, "the rich commie"(72) as she is called by the pit humour of Buckety Murphy, presents one interpretation of the function of art. Art must be used, according to her, to teach a lesson, a political lesson. She exhorts:

Your message is what makes your play. Get your message first, then clothe it in some little fable--the simpler the better--and there is your play. (56)

Her message is designed "to bring Canadians up to date in their political thinking"(56), to have them understand world problems as a struggle of the proletariat against class

government and capitalism. But her view is rejected by both the artist and the intellectual. Szabo says, "I would not be happy teaching politics with my puppets" (57). And Nicholas declares, "I only trust art in the hands of artists!" and condemns her "chunk of propaganda" (93).

Davies pays far more attention, however, to the views of that well-meaning pair, Mrs. E. C. Philpott and Orville Tapscott. Their opinions are as similar as their rhymed names. Tapscott speaks for both when he pontificates, "in this country art is proud and happy to consider itself the handmaiden of education" (70-71). But they are interested in the education of children only, and are anathema to art, which, as Szabo replies, is what men may be helped by education to appreciate. They twice confront artist and intellectual, once to discuss to what use they may put art, next to see and comment upon the artist's work to which the intellectual is responsive. They are viciously derided and driven away both times, but they so defile the "temple of art" the second time that Idris Rowlands destroys it "because (he) could not bear to see it profaned" (94).

In their juvenile ignorance they do not realize what art is, and they would use Szabo's puppets "to win the battle of the tot-lot" (68). Puppetry originally meant to them one of the "tot-to-teen activities". Simple handicrafts to

encourage manual dexterity"(64). But it proved to be "a flop as a manual-development project"(66) and thus came the idea to use it for tots from three to eight "And morons from three to sixteen"(66), to teach "Socially acceptable behaviour, of course"(66). Szabo greets their travesty with wrath. He asks:

Are fifteen generations of puppet masters to end with a harlot of a dirty dog who uses his art to tell nonsense? ...You are wrong, Mr. Tapscott, and if your nonsense is what your country believes, it is time your country got some sense. (69)

But in their censorious folly they return to see the artist's creation and find that it "will not do"(88). For it is a play that "[makes] fun of others"(88), and "satire is no good for children--not even for teen-agers"(90). Its chief character, as well, is "a maladjusted person"(92), and it is altogether a "brutal"(92) story. It must be "changed a lot and cleaned up," says Tapscott, for "there are principles of recreational psychology and creative-character building that have to be observed"(93). Whereupon the rage of Rowlands descends upon these "Nice Nellies"(94) and they are driven away.

Rowlands tells Szabo that this kind of interest is the greatest danger to his art in Canada. But Szabo must stay and he will maintain his artistic integrity. He explains:

I am an artist, you know, and a real artist is very,

very tough. This is my country now, and I am not afraid of it....So long as I keep the image of my work in my heart, I shall not fail. The educated like my work and the uneducated like it. As for the half-educated--well, we can only pray for them in Canada, as elsewhere. (95)

The interest of those like Tapscott and Philpott is the greatest danger because, as Weir says, these people "have a simple belief in their own power to do good"(96). Monseigneur de Saint-Vallier and Ethel have forcefully demonstrated this power already. But it is inadmissible here. Chilly exclaims:

...I hate simple people, with their simple beliefs. A simple belief in the multiplication tables don't make you a mathematician; a simple belief in God don't make you a saint; and a simple belief in your power to do good don't make you fit to boss everybody and give them lip. To hell with simplicity, I say! (96)

Had Davies' "simple" people been less "simple-minded," Chilly's curse might have more force than rhetoric. But Simonds, Philpott, and Tapscott have not a single redeeming human quality. The only sentiment Davies wants us to feel for them is scorn. But if we feel only that, it is time to question whether the author has presented us with a character or a caricature. A character serves a purpose of his own in a play, a caricature the purpose of the author. And if Davies is going to have the art of drama justify itself, we are going to have the people of the drama justify themselves. In the case of these "simple" people, they do not. Davies caustically satirizes Ursula Simmond's theory of art, but his desire to teach an aesthetic lesson makes him guilty

of perverting his own art in the same way.

Because Nicholas and Szabo either have very little or no choice of leaving Canada Fortune, My Foe, fails to resolve the problem of the necessity of the artist and intellectual to confront their environment. Nor does it decide what the function of art should really be, because those who oppose what Davies considers the true function are obviously too foolish for the annihilation of their opinions to matter much.

Yet Rowlands' hope for Canada, expressed in the final stanza of his song:

Frown though ye may,
 /Fortune, my foe,/
 Yet shall you smile again;
 Nor shall my days
 Pass all in grieving pain (99),

is a justifiable one. For if artists and intellectuals do stay--no matter why--perhaps they will "infect" the Canadian environment with "civilization" at last. Fortune has frowned on Rowlands, as on Canada, because its artists and intellectuals have continually deserted them both. But if Nicholas and Szabo remain, though their decisions to do so evade asking whether they should really stay or go, Idris and Canada may yet be saved from the 'good' people. Davies does not deal adequately with the question of Nicholas and Szabo abiding or departing because it has only one answer for him. Artists and intellectuals must stay. His concern is for the battle they must fight when they do.

Davies' bitterness about the Canadian cultural environment flares through this play as through others.

Idris Rowlands declares:

I have given all I have to Canada--my love, then my hate, and now my bitter indifference. This raw, frost-bitten country has worn me out, and its raw, frost-bitten people have numbed my heart. (48)

Szabo says, however, that Rowlands certainly does care about Nicholas's plans to leave, and thus he does care about Canada. Nor is Davies, though bitter, indifferent to Canada. He does believe that it can be changed, perhaps by education, but not by the present methods of education. For all that has been garnered from them is a "national passion for dowdy utility,"¹⁴ "a high regard for anything that involves toil,"¹⁵ and a "gloomy, immobile pan on the average Canadian Citizen."¹⁶ Our civilization is both a "nervously tense, an intellectually flabby"¹⁷ one.

If the problem of the artist is the disregard of art, the problem of the intellectual is the disregard of education,

¹⁴Robertson Davies, The Table Talk of Samuel Marchbanks, Toronto, Clarke, Irwin, 1949, p.93.

¹⁵Ibid., p.62

¹⁶Ibid., p.126.

¹⁷Robertson Davies, A Voice From the Attic, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1960, p.9.

except, of course, as both may serve to keep the country "good." Presumably, were an educated group, both humanistic and appreciative of art (in A Voice From the Attic called the "clerisy"), to be created, the intellectual's worries would be resolved and the artist's far closer to resolution. But, as Davies reveals in two short plays--The Voice of the People and Eros At Breakfast, a suitable educatory process is far from Canada's reality.

Shorty, in The Voice of the People, has very definite ideas about what education should be. And after all, as he says, "The voice of the people--that's me."¹⁸ This he may be, but not as he thinks. For if Davies intends Shorty to represent what Canadians, in general, feel about education, he also intends him to reveal how short most people are on real education. Davies does not give us much justification, however, for accepting Shorty as an exemplification of a general view, even though Shorty identifies himself as its spokesman and is chosen to speak for his peer-group at least. For we are not wont to take fools at their word, and barbers are, after all,

¹⁸Robertson Davies, The Voice of the People, in Eros At Breakfast and Other Plays. Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, p.45. All succeeding quotations from The Voice of the People will be noted by a page number immediately following the quotation.

an infinitesimal minority. And thus it is that the play may, and I think does fail to be anything more than an unhappy examination of a mediocre Canadian family. But for the duration of this discussion let us suppose that Shorty is typical, as I think he is undoubtedly intended to be. Shorty proposes that, "The trouble with modern education is it ain't practical. It don't fit kids for the problems of life" (46).

For instance:

All kids ought to shave earlier....It's hygienic. They ought to teach it in the schools....It would be no funnier than a lot of the stuff they do teach. (38)

In fact, "what they need...at school is a good course in common sense" (53). Lacking this, as his wife Aggie says, the newspaper is wonderfully informing about such indispensable information as the size of the Pacific Ocean and the difference between a piccolo and a concert flute. And, "if a person read all these every night, they'd soon have a first class education" (41-42). But when Shorty is challenged by a person of some education, Sam North, the electrician who is fixing his stove, his response belies his theory. If Shorty had had less practical training, his "shortness" might be just a physical and not a metaphysical thing. But he is both petty and ignorant. He thinks the newspaper "a terrible paper because half those sport reports are so skimpy they don't mean a thing" (39). Sam, who is interested in the report on a trade conference, is told by Shorty, "I never

read that stuff. You can't depend on it"(41).

Shorty's rank ground is also a tangle of creeping prejudice. His comment on international affairs is, "I'd tell those foreigners right where they get off, in plain words"(41). And the newspaper is of course, "Controlled by its advertisers"(41), just as the trade conferences are "in the hands of the big interests"(41). There are "wheels within wheels"(41), says Shorty. From here it is only one short step to identifying the inner wheels as those one does not like--to naming a scapegoat to sacrifice to one's own inadequacies.

Shorty is already too quick to identify anything which he is told slights him as proceeding from his own personal enemies. He is asked by telephone to reply to a letter in the paper, but he does not even read the letter before attempting to write a reply. In the same way he judges, without being at the meeting to hear it, a speech given by the School Inspector as a "controversial topic"(37) on which the Inspector has no right to have an opinion.

Shorty is even ignorant of the Bible, that all too popular arbiter in any time of needed proof, although he attempts to use it in his own support. Sam, who "was brought up on the Bible"(43), soon makes that clear. But if Aggie can believe that "God wrote the Bible Himself"(45), then

surely Shorty can revise it. For he is the voice of the people, and "The voice of the people is the voice of God" (45). Shorty is obviously beyond help, but perhaps God can find himself another prophet. An educated prophet, we can easily infer, would certainly do a lot more for His image.

The intent of this satire, however, is difficult to decide. The play does not really convince us that Shorty is a very representative figure, although Davies undoubtedly means him to exemplify the Canadian multitude. As well, Sam North, "a good workman and a man of considerable character" (33), who is presented as the alternative to Shorty, excites no great desire in us to see more like him. For it does not take a very "considerable character" to show how inconsiderable Shorty is. And all Sam's praise of the newspaper, which he says, "I read pretty carefully" (41), makes us think him no more than a mouthpiece for Davies (in his capacity as editor). The Voice of the People is an unsatisfactory play because Shorty is an individual, not an example, and Sam is not a thrilling (or even very satisfactory) alternative. At times, in fact, Sam seems nothing more than a back-patter for all hard-working but unappreciated editors.

It is Davies' feeling that "widening literacy has produced a shallower culture."¹⁹ This shallowness is quite

¹⁹J. S. Erskine, Review of A Voice from the Attic, Dalhousie Review, 41:119, Spring, 1961.

evident in Shorty's home pond. And in the midst on a lily-pad sits Shorty, very content to sit, like Aesop's frog, snapping up all such flies as come his way, but making absolutely no further effort to nourish his mind. Nor are the higher reaches any deeper. In Eros at Breakfast Davies comments on the average young Canadian, in this case a symbolic Mr. P.S., who has submitted himself to the University:

A.: ...so long as Mr. P.S. remains at the University there isn't too much for his intelligence to handle. The professors are a very considerate lot...they keep the actual thinking down to a minimum. If there were nothing before us except getting Mr. P.S. his Bachelor of Arts, I should be perfectly happy. You know him as well as I do: no doubts about religion; no doubts about politics--except for that week when he thought he was a socialist--no tiresome intellectual curiosity of any sort; a thoroughly solid young Canadian, in fact.

C.: Absolutely level-headed.

A.: Dead-level.²⁰

The pun in the last line reveals exactly what Davies thinks of such an education. This is not true education, but training that "With a good University degree...[will make Mr. P.S.] quite certain of a job in his uncle's stock and bond house."²¹ It is a perversion of Shorty's goal of practicality, which,

²⁰Robertson Davies, "Eros At Breakfast," in Eros At Breakfast and Other Plays, Toronto, Clarke, Irwin, 1949, p.9.

²¹Ibid., p.23.

when attained, provides a successful if not an enjoyable life. In fact, "A Canadian's Intelligence is not an instrument of fun...it is a curb upon his baser instincts."²² In this play, however, Mr. P.S.'s first love affair triumphs over his Intelligence and his emotions celebrate. But there is little hope that the celebrations will continue. Mr. P.S.'s Intelligence is only temporarily tipsy, and when he recovers from his hangover will seek revenge.

Davies revels in this celebration of the emotions. It is so unlike Canadians, he thinks, but so like alive human beings.

And what a wonderful thing it is to see an Ontario audience laugh! he says Those stony, disapproving, thin-lipped faces, eloquent of our bitter winters, our bitter politics, and our bitter religion, melt into unaccustomed merriment, and a sense of relief is felt all through the theatre, as though the straps and laces of a tight corset had been momentarily loosened.²³

Unfortunately, the Canadian environment is at those straps and laces again almost at once, pulling them tight on joy. For the play will end, its patrons disperse, and their warmth and gaiety will icily solidify once again under the bitter gaze of those who did not attend.

²²Ibid., p.25.

²³Davies, The Table Talk of Samuel Marchbanks, p.242.

Certainly Davies holds a hope for lively intelligence and creative art, but it does not seem to be a great one. His intellectuals and artists are a group of half-beaten battlers and grim hangers-on. Nicholas Hayward says in Fortune, My Foe:

There is no such thing as progress; there is only change. The highest in life is always there for those who want it, but not many of us want it. The only revolutions that make any real difference to the world are revolutions in the hearts of individual men. (72)

This is an idea that D. H. Lawrence expresses in Women In Love in the love of Birkin and Ursula. Birken feels that the change of the individual heart in accepting a new kind of love is the only way to shatter the traditional pattern of love. And he thinks that if Ursula can do this, so can other women, each in their own heart, until the world is changed for the better. Such a rebellion, in Davies as in Lawrence, must begin with the best people--those intellectuals and artists who perceive what a problem the tradition that rules their environment is.

Fingal McEachern expresses this problem in a rather untutored way in At the Gates of the Righteous. He declares to the outlaw band that he has come to join them

"in revolt against Society."²⁴ His protest is sweeping:

Everywhere I look about me I see rottenness and pettiness of soul. Trade is cheating; law is for the guarding of property only; medicine attempts to keep those alive whom Nature plainly wishes to be dead; religion is the lick-spittle servant of trade and the law, denying every instinct that Nature has given to men. I reject all this! (120)

But the place where he has chosen to present his revolt astonishes him. For the outlaws will have none of his idealistic raving. In fact, they decide to get "inside the law" where "the best pickings are"(125). "...society is as sound as a bell"(122), says the outlaw leader, Bill Balmer. To Fingal this is a "maudlin display of self-delusion, hypocrisy, cant and shoddy thinking"(125). He feels that Bill, Effie, and Ronnie are rushing "to join the mob in their dance of death which they call honesty and respectability"(127). He would change society, and he would do it with the force he believes the outlaws possess but are forsaking. He says:

There is only one good, and that is Power. There is only one good way of life and that is Power in Action! (120)

He is, as Ronnie affirms, a romantic. Fingal "sees

²⁴Robertson Davies, At the Gates of the Righteous, in Eros At Breakfast and Other Plays. Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1949, p.115. All succeeding quotations from At the Gates of the Righteous will be noted by a page number in brackets immediately following the quotation.

life in brilliant colours, some light and some dark" (127).

But Ronnie, the realist, "sees light in infinitely delicate tones of gray" (127). Thus, says Ronnie:

For Bill to turn from the gorgeous purple in which you saw him in your mind's eye, Fingal to the jaundiced yellow which you think is the colour of conventional society would be an impossibility. But I can see him changing from the gray of gun-metal to the silver-gray of the statesman's frock coat without the least surprise. (127)

Indeed, if Fingal expected to find rebellion against society here, he was mistaken. For, echoing Lawrence and Marchbanks, Ronnie avows:

Rebellions against the code of society begin at the top, not at the bottom. Stir the bottom and you get nothing but mud. (128)

The change must occur in individuals of intelligence and/or talent. "Real revolt" is "in the mind" (129).

This is the serious message of this delightful play. The exaggeration of character is quite purposeful, for thus the irony of seeking revolt in the most likely place, an outlaw den--but finding just the opposite--is made very apparent. Yet the ironic conveyance of a serious purpose is not heavy-handed. The exaggeration is a source of good humour, perhaps the funniest of all being Bill's declaration in defense of Canadian motherhood:

Upper Canada is, and always will be, a land where motherhood is held in honour and where e'en the sacred name of Wife must give place of honour to that simplest but mightiest of words--Ma! (123)

At the Gates of the Righteous is, in fact, one of Davies' better plays. It presents a serious theme without taking itself too seriously. Its characters are very enjoyable. The outlaw gang consists of a politic highwayman and his polite "wife," a clergyman gone dandy, and a dying dead-shooter. Suddenly into their midst springs an outrageous young idealist and his unwilling girlfriend. The idealist's outspoken cynicism stimulates the return of the gang to society. They forsake their "power" and leave the idealist to wonder exactly how he effected their incredible (to him) conversion. With beautiful irony he is told, "The evil bow before the gates of the good, and the wicked at the gates of the righteous" (Proverbs 14:9). Especially is this so in Robertson Davies' Canada, where the "good" and the "righteous" are of a particular brand and a predominant kind. The play concludes with a problem that is very bothersome to Davies--how can one get change in such a society? Can change be effected by "power," or only by individual conversions or intelligent and creative persons at the "top"?

Richard Roberts, in A Jig for the Gynsv, seeks at the beginning of the play, as he has for thirty years, to win an election in his riding for the Radical Liberals. He wishes his party "To win the election....Then we can proceed

with any changes that seem good."²⁵ His candidate, Sir John Jebson, agrees that "The first duty of a political party is to gain power. That done, all good can follow"(10). Sir John is a novice in politics, but to Richard politics has been meat and drink...for thirty years"(12). He says, "I've sacrificed to Liberalism for thirty years and more. Trade, friends and time. It devours them all"(57). But he himself can expect nothing from the victory except its brief triumph. It does not matter much to his own situation whether Tory or Liberal rules the nation. Thus when the Liberals do win, it does not seem a very valuable gain to him. He has worked for thirty years for it, but while he "used to love the struggle...now (he's) tired of it"(84). "The country is now radical after seventy years of ToryismBut what does it mean to me?"(85) he asks.

Roberts is yet another of Davies' characters who decide that change must occur quietly within the hearts of individual men and cannot be forced upon society by legal or illegal power. His final judgement is that:

We're too much concerned nowadays with helping other

²⁵Robertson Davies, A Jig for the Gypsy, Toronto, Clarke, Irwin, 1954, p.10. All succeeding quotations from A Jig for the Gypsy will be noted by a page number in brackets immediately following the quotation.

people; we don't do enough to help ourselves. If a man wants to be of the greatest possible value to his fellow-creatures let him begin the long, solitary task of perfecting himself. (85)

Benoni, Conjuror Jones, and Jack the Skinner expand this injunction to include the entire world. The environment of all mankind is not a happy one, they say. And each man must be aware that this is so and change it for himself.

J.: The world shouldn't be a tight-laced corset on a man! It should hang loose about him, like my magic cloak.

B.: And every man makes his own cloak and his own world.

J.: And wherever it pinches and strains he whines that the world is hard on him, when all he needs is to change his fashion and wear it looser. We have only to choose the goodliest tailoring.

B.: But the tight boots of vanity, and the strangling, stiff-bosomed shirt of envy, and the crotch-binding old trousers of other people's opinions are the most common wear. The world's dressed in gray old ready-mades and reach-me-downs, though every young man in his own cloak would look comelier. (96-97)

This is a rejection of political solutions, but it is not a withdrawal from commitment to society. Davies holds this idea in common with D. H. Lawrence, that change will proceed by example, not by stipulation. Those who desire change must thus make themselves into models of what they wish man will be when he is changed. They must commit themselves to speak to individuals, and only thus to all society eventually.

Davies is in favour of a "comelier" world, particularly a "comelier" Canada, where believers in the beautiful will

at least balance and keep in check believers in the 'good'. To make this so those who think and create must defy their environment. If they, at least, know themselves, the quiet revolt will have begun and cannot, Davies thinks, help spreading. He is sincere in his expression of this theory of social change, but once he has described the problem and given his answer, he has no place else to go. No place else, that is, except to turn from the expression of this hope to humour--his ready companion through all his plays.

For, as he says in A Voice From the Attic:

Moral causes, good and bad, may shout in the ears of men; aesthetic causes have lost the fight as soon as they begin to be strident.²⁶

Davies' cause is very much an aesthetic one, and he refuses to be strident about it. He is not going to force the beautiful upon anyone, especially anyone in Canada. Mayor Moore quotes a Toronto alderman, voting against the purchase of a piece of sculpture, giving vent to his and many others' critique of the "pushy" beautiful:

How much longer [he demanded] are we going to have this art and culture stuffed down our throats?--and I do mean that.²⁷

²⁶Davies, A Voice From the Attic, pp.7-8.

²⁷Fred Beamis, quoted by Mayor Moore in MacLean's Magazine, 79:14, June 4, 1966.

Moore is prepared to push "longer and harder."²⁸ Davies is not prepared to push very much at all. But Davies may be the one to be disenchanted, having proposed that a quiet revolution begin, not to hear any of its murmurs. And perhaps he has been.

In an essay on Stephen Leacock, Davies wrote:

...humour is a way of saying things which would be intolerable if they were said directly /following, as he says, Sigmund Freud/. "Out of my great sorrows I make my little songs," says Heinrich Heine: the humourist might say, with equal truth, "Out of my great disenchantments I make my little jokes."²⁹

In A Masque of Mr. Punch, his latest play, Davies makes many little jokes. The play has been written, he explains, "for the boys of the Preparatory School of Upper Canada,"³⁰ (perhaps in an attempt to influence, if he can, the young minds of the intellectual and power élites), but the humour is not merely school-boy stuff. It is superficially laugh-provoking, but really quite serious. And it is serious in a disenchanted tone. There is no one in the play who might be one of those involved in Davies' quiet revolution. There are instead

²⁸Mavor Moore, loc. cit.

²⁹Robertson Davies, "On Stephen Leacock," in Masks of Canadian Fiction. Malcolm Ross, ed., Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1961, p.109.

³⁰Robertson Davies, A Masque of Mr. Punch. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1963, p.xi. All succeeding quotations from A Masque of Mr. Punch will be noted by a page number in brackets immediately following the quotation.

many whom he satirizes, not this time people believing in their power to do good, but rather the purported intellectuals and artists of the theatre.

Mr. Punch and his like are driven out of the theatre by these people. There is no longer a place, he is told, for his "vulgar" entertainment. He must have a message or a "style." The audience Punch collects may enjoy him thoroughly, but if the intellectual and artistic guardians of the theatre will not have him, he must go. This he does, and he goes into politics. We have seen how Davies revealed that political action is not the way to change the world. But there Punch must venture, if he is to survive until the theatre calls him back. The theatre, Davies implies, will surely miss his spirit, and although he will probably be quite effective in politics, it is an ineffectual realm. Who are these theatre people, then, who want Mr. Punch out of their way?

It seems that all modern drama denies him. American and European theatre want to change him into their own forms. But Mr. Punch will have none of them. And Davies' parodies of them show why.

Swanee River, "the celebrated playwright of American Southern Decadence"(37), wants to "rewrite [Punch's] play along the lines (he) has made famous and...profitable"(37). Punch is to become a "beautiful degraded Southern beauty,"

who sells "dope from door to door" (40). Swanee River proceeds:

A group of underprivileged children attack you and steal all your dope. You bewail your fate--

Then the children pull you to pieces and eat you. (40)

This sort of shock drama is hardly new. John Ford and John Webster used such ghoulish props as dismembered hearts and hands in their plays. But when the assumption is that "The public will stand anything" (40), and the playwright attempts to give them that "anything," the results may be a jaded audience and art that has no other raison d'être than to shock. Certainly it will have surrendered ability to entertain.

The European Playwright who wishes to rewrite Mr. Punch's play is Samuel Buckett, "the out-rider of the avant-garde" (40). "NO is the dominant symbol of his play" (41).

...the scene is a back alley. Two garbage cans stand against a wall; it bears the thrilling message POST NO BILLS, but POST and BILLS have been worn away so that only the word NO is clear to the audience. (41)

Mr. Punch is wired down in one of the cans, "In the other garbage can is...nobody at all!" (41). Mr. Punch's "character is that of a blind deaf-mute. The drama is (his) struggle to communicate with the other garbage can" (41). "It's a comedy. For three-quarters of an hour nothing happens. Then--curtain" (42).

For Davies, who has said that "plays consist entirely

of talk,"³¹ this is the very antithesis of what drama should be. The theme is lack of communication carried to its logical extreme. But to do so the dramatist must once again sacrifice all entertainment. Mr. Punch, whose first premise is to entertain, will have none of this. Neither will Mr. Davies.

It is just as easy, however, for a mode of talk to lack entertainment value. To demonstrate this, Davies opens the play with a group which speaks "in the portentous, over-phrased manner of a verse chorus in a play by T.S. Eliot"(1). The mode is mocked by the message of this chorus, composed of "the flower of Canadian journalism"(1), who:

...await what the present occasion may bring us.
Our minds not wholly idle--thinking and partly
thinking--
Assured that Time will explain, and Life illustrate
in full colour,
All that man knows about earth, or needs to know of
the heavens. (2)

This is something they get "off [their] chests"(2) before they assume a more conversational tone.

The intellectuals who surround the theatre are just as intentionally caricatured by Davies. Journalists, adjudicators, audiences, and scholars are all presented in

³¹Davies, At My Heart's Core, introduction, p.vi.

this way. Davies explicitly states about the journalists--representatives of newspaper, radio, film, and television--that they are "All somewhat caricatured"(1). 'A plague,' says Davies, 'on the way you abuse your playhouses!'

The Evening-Paper Critic and the Morning-Paper Critic are two of a kind, although the latter presents a more "scholarly and refined appearance"(1), and acts as the spokesman for them both. When asked by Mr. Punch to drum up an audience he says:

I feel a perfect fool. I don't know how to get people into theatres--it's my job to keep them out, if I can.
(13)

Punch, however, can get his own audience. But when his play is done, the turn of the Morning-Paper Critic comes to pronounce on it. Then he sternly tells Mr. Punch:

You had a considerable popularity in the naive era when the theatre was simply a vehicle for thoughtless entertainment. But...today things are very different. The theatre has become thoughtful, and what have you to do with thought? (54)

The Television Man and Woman agree that Mr. Punch is "Endsville"(54). They, who are "used to a captive audienceor none at all"(13), condemn him in the same way.

Punch "Gets rid of the author, which is always an important beginning to any serious work on the theatre"(11), but they say he no longer has a public. They have the public and it will listen to the "messages" they wish to give it,

not to the entertainment of such as Mr. Punch.

The Adjudicator attempts to explain Mr. Punch's play in the context of what he feels is modern theatre. It has no meaning for him except what he can impose upon it. He will not accept it for what it is and instead attempts what Davies scathingly refers to elsewhere as "creative criticism." This is:

...criticism which ventures too far in its attempts to explain [the writer] ..., to give him a helping hand, to put him on the right track.³²

Mr. Punch knows his "right track" as the Adjudicator does not. The Adjudicator (and "It is one of the glories of our Canadian Theatre that nobody has heard of a bad adjudicator" (37)) sees the play as "a not very happy excursion into the Theatre of the Absurd" (35). He perverts its value as entertainment to explain it in terms of what he thinks is the major theme of this type of "Theatre." He says:

It is rooted in the despair which every intelligent play-goer feels about the future, the past, and the present. We are all agreed, I am sure, that everything is bad and rapidly getting worse--that there is, in fact, No Hope. (36)

The play suffers from an:

...intolerable Happy Ending [which] utterly discredits a play which otherwise rises almost to the level of the

³²Davies, A Voice From the Attic, p.315.

mediocre. Let me assure the author he blurts on⁷ that we will not build an indigenous Canadian theatre on plays with happy endings. We are miserable or we are nothing. Hope is out of fashion.(36)

The appreciative audience, as represented by the Lady in Evening Dress, listens carefully to all this. For "The adjudicator is the man who tells us what to think"(35). Then she carefully squelches any feeling of enjoyment she may have had from Punch's entertainment, because she has been told it is really bad drama, for it does not fit the pigeon-hole that the Adjudicator has waiting for it.

That is because, as a Professor representing the Board of Governors of the Stratford Shakespearean Festival says, the Adjudicator is trying to shove it into the wrong pigeon-hole. The real way to do Punch's play is in a "Stratford Shakespearean style of acting"(43), and in a supposedly Shakespearean sort of play. Davies is not having fun here at Shakespeare's expense. His very funny parody denigrates those people who would use Shakespeare's mode without having his artistry.

Canada, it appears, has at last developed some sort of an intellectual elite, but it is an elite that does not please Davies. For he fears that the believers in the 'good,' the murderers of art, are in its front ranks. They will not let Mr. Punch entertain; they will not let art be its own justification, but must attempt to suit it to their

own ends. Davies, it is obvious, does the same. But perhaps because he feels his satire is artless, he excuses himself from being counted among their numbers.

In the very teeth of all who would deny Mr. Punch's place in the theatre, Davies throws this entertaining play. He dislikes those who would tie a corset even tighter about the Canadian character, especially when they are the same people he feels should be loosening it. So he makes his little jokes in his disenchantment. For if intellectuals and artists cannot see what Davies thinks they must do for their environment, but rather make it worse in their ignorance of the value of the cure, what is he to do? The theme of A Masque of Aesop expresses what he thinks the perception is he, as other teachers of a mankind which will not listen to your lesson, must have.

This play presents the trial of Aesop by Apollo, with the Three Fates looking on. Aesop is accused by his fellow citizens of Delphi as one:

...who has the insufferable insolence to think thoughts other than those which [they] recognize as sane, safe and sanitary.³³

The setting of the play, then, is ostensibly classical Greek.

³³Robertson Davies, A Masque of Aesop. Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1952, p.12. All succeeding quotations from A Masque of Aesop will be noted by a page number in brackets immediately following the quotation.

But the matter is evidently modern Canadian. The accusers reveal what might be called Canadian idiosyncracies. And each of Aesop's fables comes closer to that thing which most concerns Davies about Canada.

Aesop confronts his accusers before Apollo with the simple declaration, "I have told the truth"(13). He is shouted down as a liar, but he insists that the only "misfortune" he has is to be "born a wise man"(14). He tells Apollo:

I have done my utmost to correct this fault, but try as I will, I obstinately continue to be wiser than other people. When I give vent to my wisdom, I conceal it as well as I can, but I cannot conceal it altogether.(14)

His method of concealment, he informs Apollo, is by telling fables.

The citizens and the crowd have listened to these fables and have interpreted them as slandering them and their country. They claim that Aesop has not told the truth. Those who believe they know the truth are the Three Citizens and the Leader of the Crowd. The First Citizen is:

...the editor of the most widely-circulated journal in Delphi and, if anybody knows the truth, [he says,] surely it is I. [Aesop] has not told the truth, upon which I hold the first publication rights; he has perverted it.
(13)

The Second Citizen, "a priest in what is undoubtedly the most largely attended temple in Delphi"(13), argues that Aesop has even "more than once thrown doubt upon what I say there"(13).

The Third Citizen, "a plain, blunt man of business, with no nonsense about him"(13), feels that in his practical opinion (and his "opinions on everything are of the utmost importance"(13)) Aesop is "a scoundrel"(14). "As a representative of organized labour"(14), the Leader of the Crowd agrees:

...that Aesop is an unsettling influence in society, and unless society is reasonably stable my followers cannot threaten it with the horror of instability.(14)

They condemn all of Aesop's fables in strident chorus.

The first short fable presented by Aesop to Apollo as an example of his work is that of the mountain which laboured mightily and brought forth a mouse. "That fable," say the accusers, "is nothing less than a vile attack upon one of our most cherished institutions--the Royal Commission!"(15). Indeed, this purported attack may well represent Davies' views of the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences. For his play Fortune, My Foe had already presented the conclusions of the Massey Report on the state of scholarship and the arts in Canada two years before the Report made them official.

But the fable is simply told and quite open to many interpretations. As they follow one another, however, the fables become more and more pertinent to Canada. Davies is not particularly concerned about the application which is made of this first fable, except that it points the way to

the applicability to the Canadian environment of the fables to come.

The next fable is that of The Belly and the Members. But before it even begins there is an objection to its title by "the unnamed censor from the Department of National Revenue"(16). As in Hope Deferred, pretended virtue and material goods go together. He prudishly expounds:

If there is one thing upon which our great and glorious country prides itself, it is its high degree of refinement. Anything suggestive of obscenity is repugnant to us, except in private conversation. If this fable is to be enacted, it must appear under the title of The Abdomen and the Members.(16)

But he is quickly squelched by Apollo and the fable proceeds.

This time the telling of the fable makes it even more apposite to the Canadian situation. The belly instructs the members that:

...we are like a great country which is divided into many provinces; each province insists on its rights but all are dependent on a central government--a taxing authority...for nourishment, without which they are no more than a heap of enfeebled parts.(21)

All the members agree, even the left hand, which answers in French. The relevance of this to the cultural split of Canada is obvious. But Aesop does not stop at this particular application. He says that he does not mean to espouse mere nationalism, but that, "Not only union within the country was asked for, but a brotherhood of nations--a world unity, as well"(23). The reaction of the accusers is unanimously

condemnatory.

Apollo next has played The Town Mouse and the Country Mouse. Aesop, commenting on this fable, says that its universal truth is "that peace of mind is an agreeable possession"(34). But the Citizens and the Leader of the Crowd have some justification at least in taking the meanings from this fable that they do, for the Country Mouse's Square Dance Song makes the fable germane to Canada's rural districts. This song dwells on the joys of rural living in a manner that could only point to North America. The farmer is "the pet/Of Inland Revenue"(32), for there is "no Income Tax"(33):

And if anything nasty
Happens to me /he sings/
Along comes the Gov'ment
With a subsidy!(33)

Thus he is able to spend the winter in Florida, "Though the harvest season/Couldn't be horrid"(32). He is also courted by the political parties at election time, "For the rural vote/Is always firm"(32).

But the things that the Citizens and the Leader identify as the focus of the fable's attack reveal only their own point of view. The Second Citizen, the priest, sees it as an "embittered attack upon our rural citizens who are notoriously more regular church-goers than city dwellers"(33). Meanwhile the Third Citizen, the businessman, thinks it "sneers at our urban civilization which is unquestionably

the finest that the world has ever seen. Haven't we got a subway?" (33) he demands in a strangely Torontonion classical accent.

The comment of the Leader is couched in even more satiric tones by Davies. This spokesman for labour says that, "This fable suggests that it is better to live without luxury than in the lap of same" (33-34). If the workers stop wanting luxury, "they'll stop consuming" (34). Then they will need no jobs and, in consequence, the labour leader will get no dues from them. Peace of mind, Davies implies, should not depend on church-going, subways, nor material luxury. All these things are features of the Canadian environment and are desired by Canadians. But it is not the central concern of the play to point these out. The play's real focus is revealed in the final fable, The Cock and the Pearl.

Here again we come to Davies' most pressing worry, his central theme in many of his plays, the place of beauty in the Canadian environment. The Cock discloses in his Song and his speech that he is the epitome of Davies' conception of the typical Canadian. The Cock warns himself every morning:

Be careful of what you do!
 Let every action be
 Prudent and tactical
 Tether your wits
 To what's sober and practical;
 Though you have wings, do not venture to fly! (37-38)

And he says:

If I should catch myself soaring
From the realm of the trite and the boring
I bring myself down with a bump!
Art and philosophy
I don't heed....

. . . .
I shun the mercurial
And cheer for the stolid;
Many heads put together
Are sure to be solid;
"Go slow and in circles" is my battle cry,
And I'm not going to change it--
No, no, not I! (37-38)

His Hen and Chicks rhapsodize that they are so:

...lucky...to have such a practical, down-to-earth,
shoulder-to-the-wheel, nose-to-the-grindstone Father and
Husband! And Oh how lucky...to live in a world where
everything is digested and only needs to be swallowed
...without questioning! (39)

Then they find the Pearl in the midst of their daily
dull nourishment. Chanticleer, having hurt his beak on the
Pearl, says, "A Pearl is obviously an inedible piece of
grit" (41). And when the Pearl admits that it has "no con-
cern for children, except to awaken them to beauty" (41),
Dame Partlett joins Chanticleer in derision, because "nothing
is fit for anybody unless it's fit for children" (41). The
Pearl, as summed up by Chanticleer, is "useless and unwhole-
some" (42). But the Pearl really is "beautiful" (42), and:

In the realm where Beauty triumphs
Taking precedence of Pelf (43),

the Pearl is "perfectly at ease" (43). In that realm, the
Pearl sings:

At the apex of the climax
 Of the true aesthetic whirl
 All the knowledgable seek me
 For they know that I'm a Pearl.(43)

To the Cock, the Hen, and the Chicks, beauty is no excuse,
 for they have "no time for anything/That can't be put to
 use"(43).

The Citizens understand this fable as "a vile attack
 upon vocational education"(44). They say:

Aesop wants to fill our children's hearts with useless
 knowledge like poetry and music and dead languages in-
 stead of good, useful information which will help them
 to earn a living.(44)

"Which is, after all, the first duty of a citizen"(44),
 alleges the businessman Third Citizen. But again the Citi-
 zens understand the fable only within their own limitations.
 These limitations, Davies feels, are typically Canadian.
 Canada, for him, is a place where beauty is always denied,
 where instead it is one's "duty" to learn "useful" things.

Aesop scorns his fellows, but he is rebuked "for the
 arrogance of his wisdom"(46) by Apollo. One critic has
 written that Davies "has made his Apollo singularly like him-
 self (in intellectual qualities, not in facial appearance)."³⁴
 I think that it is Aesop who is singularly like Davies, with
 the exception that Davies would hope to think himself not

³⁴Lucy Van Gogh, "Light Satire," Saturday Night,
 68:31, December 20, 1952.

scornful of his fellow Canadians, but loving them. "For," as Apollo asserts, "the greatest teacher is he who has passed through scorn of mankind, to love of mankind" (47). This is a most worthy aspiration. But does Robertson Davies deserve such a title?

Davies quite obviously cares a great deal to have Canada the way he wishes it were (as witness his varied attempts as editor, journalist, book-reviewer, playwright, novelist, and teacher to have some influence on the Canadian scene). But he does not very much care for Canada as he thinks it is. And his scorn for this Canada is often meted out in such measure that it conceals his love. Such is what happens in A Masque of Aesop. The citizens are too obviously an irredeemable bunch and Apollo's chastisement is not going to effect them too much, if at all. (If you live long enough with gods, you soon learn to appease them with paeon-singing pretence.) As for Aesop, only a few children will "remember [his] fables and interpret them wisely when childhood is past" (47). Meanwhile, the citizens will continue to be "contemptible" (44) swine who care not if their teacher is a "noble" (46) caster of pearls. For they will go on their way though they wade through pearls up to their teeth.

Robertson Davies' plays express a sincere dislike for much of what he supposes is the Canadian scene, and a sincere concern that it be transformed by those who think and those

who create into some new "civilization." But the dislike is often poisoned with scorn, the concern tinged with conceit. And sometimes the one and sometimes the other does not find appropriate expression in a play.

In particular, Davies' characterizations often suffer. Frontenac, Chimène, and Monseigneur de Saint-Vallier are mere standard-bearers of what Davies sees as the conflicting forces in the Canadian environment. His scorn makes unbelievable Ursula Simonds, Mrs. E.C. Philpott, and Orville Tapscott in Fortune, My Foe. And Shorty, his family, and Sam North in The Voice of the People are only half-realized characters because the play does not make clear what it is attempting to do. In At My Heart's Core as well, Cantwell endures an entirely unjustified change of character because Davies' theme demands that he be disparaged.

The plays also raise at times problems which Davies cannot, or does not wish to resolve. At My Heart's Core asks why the artist and intellectual should remain in the "backwoods" of Canada, and no real reply is essayed, beyond an inadmissible argumentum ad hominem. Or, as in Fortune, My Foe, Nicholas Hayward attempts to resolve it in terms of one's "duty." "Duty," however, has already been spat upon as a dirty word by Pop in Overlaid. Thus we must remain unsatisfied on this issue.

The plays of Robertson Davies nevertheless can

sometimes be very funny and occasionally are good (and not in Davies' opprobrious sense of the word). Overlaid and At the Gates of the Righteous are examples of his dramatic talent. But perhaps they are so because their themes, though serious, are not treated in too serious a fashion. Davies' dislike and his concern are both kept in check. When they are not, his plays suffer accordingly.

Davies can express with witty satire his dislike for the Canadian environment as he sees it; he can express with effective sincerity his concern that this environment be changed. But too often he does neither. Then his dislike and concern turn to disdain and despair. He disdains the many-headed multitude of believers in the 'good' and despairs that he--and other lovers of the beautiful--shall ever be able to overcome them, thus transforming Canada into a "civilized" country. "...sex," Davies has written, "is a quality common to all men and nice aesthetic discrimination is the attribute of the few."³⁵ In Canada, he feels, 'goodness' is the common, discrimination the curious attribute.

Davies, then, does not hold much hope for Canada. Nor do his plays show much. His satiric savagery is too wont to escape his control. Instead of laughing, as Molière

³⁵Robertson Davies, Shakespeare's Boy Actors. London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1939, p.182.

advises,³⁶ Davies lampoons. He refuses to let his plays be their own justification. Nor is his philosophy of change one to encourage us to expect a rapid transformation of the Canadian environment. Davies, as did Lawrence, confronts the problem of his environment and imagines it to be too inherent in the nature of his fellows to solve by any means other than individual metamorphoses. And, like Lawrence, having once decided that, he can but contemplate his own qualities and await their adoption by others.

Thus it is that Davies runs his wit to the end of its tether and sends it barking in circles. And everyone who comes near well knows that there is hardly any danger of being bitten. Davies has seized upon Arthur Phelps' fitting theme for Great Canadian Plays, that Canadians should "come alive as a people" (vide p.8), but his treatment of that theme has not proven excellent enough to produce a Great Canadian Play.

³⁶Molière, Tartuffe. Trans. by Katherine Prescott Wormeley, Boston: Little, Brown, 1917, p.33.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

Of course at present I'm a case of reaction against the mistake; and the voice of reaction, should, no doubt, always be taken with an allowance.¹

This consideration of the plays of Merrill Denison, Gwen Pharis Ringwood, and Robertson Davies has disclosed that there is Canadian drama worthy of more attention than it has heretofore received. I also think that the suggestion may be made that had Canadian drama in general, and these three dramatists in particular, received more, and more serious critical consideration, better plays might have been the result. This is not to diagnose the patient's health as failing, nor to declare that the panacea is critical regard. But there are obviously faults in many of the plays examined here, and to all appearances there are not many, if any Canadian critics interested in elucidating these faults. Surely the loss of one or two of the repetitious lamentations on the state of Canadian theatre would not have mattered much. And had one or two serious examinations of individual plays written by Canadian authors replaced them, the artist in

¹Henry James, The Ambassadors. New York: Scribner's, 1909, p.218.

question might have been enraged or encouraged enough to continue his artistic endeavours. However, here as in many other affairs, apathy is the Canadian's ultimate weapon against occurrences or ideas he does not like.

"...a native theatre cannot emerge except from its own classics."² The critics have long agreed with this assertion, but they have also long agreed that Canada had no classics. They have hoped, and may still hope, that they could prepare the way for these classics-to-come by demanding that theatres and audiences be made ready. This study has not disclosed any Canadian classics, but it has attempted to disclose the value of some Canadian plays. It has not been my prime concern here to define the problems of the Canadian artist who wishes to write drama, but one of those problems, and I think a major problem, has manifested itself.

Merrill Denison quite forthrightly said that his plays were meant for "a Canadian theatre" (vide p.14). Unfortunately, this was not an advantage to him, but a drawback. And so it may be for Gwen Pharis Ringwood, Robertson Davies, and other Canadian playwrights. For Canada, in fact, did not and does not have a burgeoning theatre. Canadian professional theatre has improved in recent years both in quantity and quality,

²Vincent Tovell, "Native Theatre," Here and Now, 2:81, May, 1948.

and it has at least a fighting chance for further development. But Canadian amateur theatre was what Denison wrote for, and perhaps, to their detriment, what succeeding Canadian dramatists have written for. To have a play actually performed must be a satisfying and informative process. But to write with the limitations of amateur performance primarily in mind is to restrict oneself needlessly and foolishly.

The dramatist must write the plays he wants to write, not the plays he must write if he is counting on performance in Canada. Merrill Denison, it seems, wrote only one play he really wanted to write--Marsh Hay. It has never been performed. Gwen Ringwood has written plays to commemorate events in Albertan history (which plays are not considered here because they are not available in published form). They unhappily remind one of popular musical comedy dialogue or Class-B Hollywood script (as perhaps is their intention). But when an artist involves himself, or herself, in such work, it can only mean less time spent writing plays for the theatre. Robertson Davies as well, though he has been well-educated in the theatre--writing his Doctoral thesis on Shakespeare's boy actors and spending two years with the Old Vic Company in England--sometimes lets his scorn of particularly Canadian idiosyncracies, and his desire to change the Canadian cultural climate, interfere with his dramatic art. At such times his

plays assume the character of a glorified "Spring Thaw" review or a minor Royal Commission Report on the Development of a Culturally Infectious Elite in Canada. And what is this but writing for a theatre, a Canadian theatre whose audiences will understand exactly who and what Davies is talking about?

The artist must demand of himself that he develop absolutely in his own way. The dramatist must write for the theatre, and if that is not near him, he should write for himself either until he can reach out to it or it reaches out to him. He may be active in a theatre if he so desires, but he must not let its demands restrict his art. This is not a course for the artist, it is the only one. The three playwrights this thesis has considered either have not had the ability or have lacked the inclination to take this course.

It is doubtful whether any sort of critical attention would have prompted them to do so. But it might have, and at the least it might have made them aware of artistic deficiencies they could correct. This does not involve telling an author what he should write, but what he has and has not written well. Canadian critics have almost completely neglected to do this for Canadian drama. It has been a mutual loss.

The critics, for example, might have warned Merrill Denison away from the essentially gutless humour of such plays as Brothers in Arms, From Their Own Place, The Prize

Winner, and The Weather Breeder. They might have encouraged him to escape from under the shadow of Stephen Leacock; to be honest with himself and those whose propaganda read, "the twentieth century belongs to Canada." For Denison's exposé of the actual backwoods primitive in Marsh Hay is courageous as well as honest. This also is the best play Denison ever wrote--and his only play of such quality.

Unfortunately, Denison was neither warned nor encouraged. His dissatisfaction with the lack of attention to his work grew until he ceased to produce even attempts at the genre studies in one-act form beloved by his "intellectual" audience. Denison took thereafter not the path of the artist, but that of the journalist. Canadian drama is the poorer for it.

More critical attention might well have made the difference also in the case of Gwen Pharis Ringwood. If Pasque Flower and Dark Harvest do not completely satisfy us, it is probably because their conclusions are motivated by the logic of the theme but not from the emotions of the characters as she has developed them. Lisa, in both plays the still point around which Jake and Gerth respectively revolve, appears so constrained by dutiful bonds that the author's conception of her heroine becomes far more distasteful than appears to have been intended. We find ourselves wishing that Lisa would

cast off her "goodness" and "live." The fact is that none of the central characters in either play seem quite alive, because their reason keeps such a close rein on their emotions. Dark Harvest, in particular, gives us no Aristotelian catharsis. It simply leaves us feeling as though we have been forced to swallow a lot of bitter medicine, which now churns ineffectually inside.

Robertson Davies prescribes a different kind of medicine for our intellectual health. He propounds that it is one's "duty" to "civilize" oneself, "and infect the people around [us] with [our] civilization" (vide p.61). But one wonders, even if this is so, why it must also be one's "duty" as a Canadian to remain in and attempt to "civilize" Canada. Davies himself has remained, but why should we? If we do, we question, may we not become like Davies in nature as well as in place, showing our scorn more than our love (for we are here in "duty" not in love) for the land we call "home"?

This study of three Canadian playwrights has not been a very encouraging one. A few plays, such as Merrill Denison's Marsh Hay, Gwen Ringwood's Still Stands the House, and Robertson Davies' Overlaid and At the Gates of the Righteous, have been found to be first-rate drama, but they have not offset their unsatisfactory companions. The planes of this triple mirror are soiled. They reflect an unclear image, and

often an incomplete one.

Therefore we are led to believe that we still await a good, if not a great Canadian dramatist. He, or she, may be with us now, but if this is so, the critics, as usual, have kept very quiet about it. Let his voice rise without them, then, and his reflections on Canada be clear and revealing.

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