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Robertson Davies' *Deptford Trilogy* as Canadian Myth

by Gordon Gamlin, *Ph.D.*

In *The Deptford Trilogy* Robertson Davies defines his versions of a Canadian myth. Essentially the trilogy tells and retells the tale of the quest for self-fulfilment. At first Dunstan Ramsay is firmly established as the authoritative narrator in *Fifth Business*, and his account of Boyd Staunton's personal history is the first full version of the myth. Then, the tale is retold in the stories of David, Liesl and Magnus. When Ramsay self-reflectively closes the trilogy, his own quest ends successfully in artistic immortality. Throughout, the minor characters in their roles as doubles reflect aspects of their more fully developed central counterparts. At the same time, Judeo-Christian and classic mythoi along with Jungian models of psychoanalysis accumulate to substantiate the various tales. As the work gradually unfolds, a superbly crafted entry into the Canadian conscience emerges. In the end we are given Davies' analysis of the nation's mind through his myth.

The Deptford Trilogy brings together fiction, history and mythology. One must acknowledge that gothic (Suggars 2012), autobiographic (Braz 2009), and traditionally mythic (Grant 2009, Ryan 2011), are all valid views that are not necessarily competing but complimentary. (See Gamlin, 1992 for a more a thorough discussion of myth.)

In *Fifth Business*, Ramsay, the hagiographer, self-reflectively announces

that he is about to write *The Saints: A Study in History and Popular Mythology* (185). In *The Manticore* David mentions that Ramsay is currently working on "something about faith as it relates to myth" (353). Finally, in *World of Wonders* Ramsay declares outright that he is recording Magnus' experience to gain immortality:

> I deeply wanted to create, or record, and leave behind me a document, so that whenever its subject was dealt with in future, the notation 'Ramsay says...' would have to appear. Thus, so far as this world is concerned, I should not wholly die.
>
> (569)

The fiction before us is therefore mostly secular hagiography with an emphasis on the mythical element. According to Magnus, Ramsay's fictionalizing of those around him "is truer to the essence of [his] life than the dowdy facts could ever be" (528). Similarly, David agrees when Ramsay says, "history and myth are two aspects of a kind of grand pattern in human destiny: history is the mass of observable or recorded fact, but myth is the abstract or essence of it" (377). Ingestree later points out that "we cannot help falsifying [the past] in terms of later knowledge" (606). Lind then adds that art through the creation of myth can capture the subjective truth of the past: "[W]e would produce an Abdullah that would give the right effect, though it might be far, far away from the real Abdullah of 1918" (607). Thus, the trilogy sets out to create a web of myths comparable, perhaps, to Ramsay's *Hundred Saints for Travellers*. (See, for comparison, Grant 1995).

Essentially, the myth of self-fulfillment is retold in variations, often with Jungian applications but always within the Canadian context. Ramsay himself acknowledges that most tales can be reduced to a few core myths.

The story of the relationship between Paul and Willard, for example, is "the very old tale of the man who is in search of his soul, and who must struggle with a monster to secure it" (688). The personal histories, therefore, have universal applications, although Ramsay's myth begins "long ago and far away, in a country which you would scarcely recognize as modern Canada" (687). They are traditional beliefs which often remain unquestioned in the national conscience. Similarly, the eccentric characters of the trilogy become Canadian archetypes, though they initially seem to exclude the vast majority of Canadians which make up such a collective mind. Given the diversity of this country, Ramsay's character is perhaps as good as any to represent its people. We hardly need David Staunton's innuendos about Ramsay's affair with Leola, to realize the biases of the principle narrator. With Ramsay's limitations in mind, we then proceed into his version of the Candian conscience.

Three protagonists emerge from the human web portrayed in *Fifth Business*, *The Manticore* and *World of Wonders*. They are Percy Boyd Staunton, David Staunton and Magnus Eisengrim alias Paul Dempster. Dunstan Ramsay the fifth business, wartime hero, scholar, and author hovers like a spiritual superego above the trilogy as a whole. We are given three distinct points of view in the first-person narratives of Ramsay, David and Magnus; but Ramsay emerges as the most powerful narrator of the three. David and Magnus may be given an equal narrative space in *The Manticore* and in *World of Wonders* comparable to that of Ramsay in *Fifth Business*. The two, however, are invested with less authoritative power, and in *World of Wonders* Ramsay takes over again to filter Magnus' narrative through his own. Thus we see most of the trilogy's action through his eyes and evaluate the events accordingly.

At first, Davies invokes the seniority of old age when he defines the controlling conscience of his narrator in *Fifth Business*. Dunstan Ramsay the Assistant Head and Senior History Master grows into the traditional powerful voice of a Victorian novel. Ramsay's account of his childhood, for example, is reminiscent of that of Pip in Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*.

Like an old master of the epic convention, Ramsay then repeatedly conjures up the authority of religion in his comments. His status as hagiographer combined with an extraordinary knowledge of Judeo-Christian mythology add weight to his interpretation of the world around him. He is never zealous, though firm in his beliefs. Understandably, the text he creates is filled with Christian symbolism, which in turn, is reinforced by the larger Christian patterns of the trilogy. Christmas Eve, for example, is the setting for several key scenes, thus stressing "continuity in the human condition." Both Ramsay and David Staunton are reborn just before the holiday. In *The Manticore*, David becomes a new whole person when he allows himself to descend into the irrational and the mystic in the climactic 'bear cave' scene. Similarly, Dunstable Ramsay is reborn as Dunstan Ramsay in *Fifth Business* just before Christmas Eve. At this time Diana (who preserves Ramsay's chastity by refusing to marry him) compares Ramsay to St. Dunstan. The saint's myth resurfaces when Ramsay struggles with Liesl, like Paul before him, and ends up making love to her. Nonetheless, Liesl also introduces David to the cave, and though she may be a devil in disguise for Ramsay, she becomes David's guardian angel.

> "St Dunstan was a marvellous person and very much like you - mad about learning . . . . [T]he Devil once came to tempt him in the form of a fascinating woman, and he caught her nose in his goldsmith's

> tongs and gave it a terrible twist . . . . ." Diana got some of her father's port and poured it on my head and re-named me. She was Anglican, of course, and her light-minded attitude toward some sacred things still astonished the deep Presbyterian in me; but I had not waded through the mud-and-blood soup of Passchendaele to worry about foolish things; blasphemy in a good cause (which is usually one's own cause) is not hard to stomach.
> (97)

Along with unquestionable scholastic and religious merits, martial accomplishments further Ramsay's gradual veneration. This ultimate elevation of Ramsay's persona becomes most apparent when seen in light of the world he creates. Ramsay's Canada looks constantly to Great Britain for approval and guidance. Naturally, a wartime hero honoured by the King is therefore the most authoritative of all possible narrators.

Despite the detailed account of Ramsay's admirable life, the romantic figure of Boyd Staunton dominates *Fifth Business*. His success-story is the first full version of the Canadian myth we encounter in the trilogy. The filter of Ramsay's consciousness simultaneously presents a critical evaluation of the unfolding events. The myth itself is neither elaborate, nor original, nor strictly confined to the Canadian experience. It has been told before in different circumstances but with similar narrative structures in Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim* and in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* for example. Boyd Staunton simply illustrates the universal belief that given a little starting capital, the right circumstances, some insight, vision, and courage, any man can ascend to the point where the sizeable income he draws is only a minute portion of the colossal corporate wealth he represents to the

world. Perhaps the myth of the upwardly mobile self-made man who moves from rags to riches is most pronounced in under-populated former colonies with large recent immigration from Europe. If so, Robertson Davies offers a masterful rendition of a tale that lies at the very heart of the Canadian conscience.

An integral part of this myth, which is common to all of North America, and which comes under Ramsay's attack, is the quest for everlasting youth. Perpetual adolescence, as stressed in Boyd Staunton's first name, becomes an unobtainable goal for him and leads to his self-destruction and ironic self-fulfillment. Ramsay condemns Boyd's adolescent attempts to emulate Don Juan. Boyd's stereotypical shallow notions of manhood, as he understands it, is especially damaging to his son David. When Boyd arranges for David's initiation into manhood and has him seduced by Myrrha, David is left psychologically scarred. While Boyd carries on as a forever youthful, energetic business tycoon, Ramsay criticizes his shortcomings at home. Boyd neglects his obligations vis-à-vis his wife and children. Ultimately, this lack of responsibility and the unwillingness to face old age drive Boyd to commit suicide. Through Eisengrim we later learn that Boyd merely copied the Prince of Whales and his abdication. Ironically, Boyd's self-destruction is also his self-fulfillment because he is never defeated by old age, nor does he fall from the height of his success. Boyd Staunton's tale thus becomes the first version of the trilogy's central myth.

In David Staunton's version of the myth, different elements are stressed. Endowed with inherited wealth he still proves himself as a successful lawyer but his real quest for self-fulfillment is wholly internal. In order to reach his goal, David must at first leave his home country. Although he temporarily moves from Canada to Switzerland, his tale can still be identified with the

large body of texts in which Europeans move to the New World in their pursuit of happiness.

The sessions with Dr. von Haller diagnose David's problems and their sources. As mentioned above, one of his complexes was caused by Boyd's narrow conventional concept of 'true manliness.' Because of his limited views, Boyd, at one time, destroys a doll that David values. The child is confused and pained by the loss and therefore compensated with a teddy bear. Sadly, the bear is one of few outlets left for David's affection. He gradually represses his emotional and irrational side in an attempt to eliminate it.

The climactic scene of *The Manticore* therefore occurs when David descends with Liesl into a prehistoric cave "about the size of a modest chapel" (540), which once was devoted to the worship of the powers of nature as exemplified by bears. When faced with the altar-like arrangement of the ancient bones, David shows little interest and Liesl rebukes him: "You don't feel enough for it to mean anything to you" (541). David admits that he is scared, but Liesl continues her lecture on the ancestors: "We stand where men once came to terms with the facts of death and mortality and continuance" (542). David wishes to end their discussion: "For the love of God let's get back to the light" (542). "Back to the light, my child of light. You must be reborn into the sun you love so much, so let us lose no time," (543) replies Liesl. As their electric torch fails, David becomes "afraid of Liesl, who had become such a demon in the cave..." (543). Liesl here becomes emblematic of the Jungian shadow as described by Dr. von Haller. David is about to confront his dark side and he will be a better person because of the experience. When he hears a sudden noise he "kn[ows] in that instant the sharpness of death" (544). His fear reduces him instantaneously to a "dirty brute" as he wets his pants and lies paralyzed. Liesl then invokes the

mystical: "Have you no God? Have you no ancestors?" David remembers: "Then I thought of Maria Dymock, staunch in the street of Staunton, demanding money from the passers-by to get herself and her bastard to Canada. Maria Dymock, whom Doc Staunton had suppressed..." (544). Incidentally Maria becomes somewhat of a saint to David at this moment.

As *The Manticore* closes, Ramsay presents Liesl, Magnus, and Davey with a gift: "Ramsay. . . solemnly handed us each a large gingerbread bear" (547). Ramsay then adds the legend of St. Gallus to the events along with a moral directed at Liesl, "though [she doesn't] need it: cherish your bear, and your bear will feed your fire" (547). David has at this point found self-fulfillment through successfully joining the mystical, irrational side with his rational self. He will cherish his bear as he has in his childhood. Ramsay's account of the saint links the episode to the Christian mythology of the trilogy. The gingerbread becomes the wafer of communion and the body of Christ, as well as the gift of a wise man to Davey - the new born child. It connects the episode in the bear cave with Christmas and with the myths of the numerous saints. Thus, prehistoric bear rites, ancestor worship, and the Virgin Mary, all come together in the cave episode and are through Ramsay linked to other thematic structures of Christian mythology in The Deptford Trilogy. On a more simple and essential level, however, David Staunton's tale is a variation of the myth of one who goes out to find himself and reaches that state of fulfillment.

Although David travels to Europe to experience his inner growth, enough elements are preserved to make this a Canadian quest: Three of the four main characters are Canadian and the protagonist of *The Manticore* has left his homeland to find his "treasure" (549). Interestingly enough, the

group does not accept or incorporate any Swiss customs into their Christmas celebration, although they must be well aware of them, and although Liesl has presumably been raised in the traditions of her country and would miss them. Thus the group exchanges their presents, for example, on Christmas Morning instead of Christmas Eve. The landscape in the trilogy, therefore, serves only as a backdrop. The characters are in no way connected to the land, though Liesl may suggest so in her cave speech, to stress continuance in the human condition; but essentially the Canadians in *The Deptford Trilogy* are unmistakably nomadic.

Liesl's fate offers another version of the trilogy's central myth. Because of an excess of growth hormones she is subjected to radical treatments from which she emerges one Christmas "looking like an ape" (830). Grossly disfigured she overcomes her handicap completely. When we first meet her, she is an irresistible bisexual seducer, able to entice both the beautiful Faustina and Ramsay. Paul Dempster and Davey Staunton both become her lover and she thus engages with the leading characters in a "love that gives all and takes all and knows no bargains" (545).

Part of her enviable aphrodisiacal powers stem from her superhuman role as demon. Both Ramsay and David Staunton characterize Liesl repeatedly in diabolic terms and link her to the Devil; but she is not the Antichrist. Instead, she is the externalized personification of the Jungian Anima to them. Liesl helps both Ramsay and Davey to face all that they internally repress. She exorcises their demons by forcing those around her to acknowledge their weakness, fear and that which is ugly within them. Cleansed, those who come in contact with her, can then proceed to live fuller lives. Her saintly powers spring, of course, from her own struggle to come

to terms with her limitations. Liesl's triumph and subsequent self-fulfillment reaffirm the optimistic belief in one's internal powers. She embodies the New World myth of the human spirit's unlimited potential for greatness, which can face all adversity with a Christian optimistic meta-determinism.

Magnus Eisengrim alias Paul Dempster emerges as the protagonist of *World of Wonders*. His version of the trilogy's central myth is closest to Boyd Staunton's tale. Relentless practice makes him a master of deception. Magnus becomes the most accomplished artist in his field. Like Ramsay he satisfies the public's curiosity for the miraculous. Eisengrim illustrates how one with a little talent and much determination can rise from an appalling to an enviable and esteemed position. As the trilogy closes he has progressed from a victim to a victor who, in his triumph, is at liberty to grant mercy when he reveals the innermost secrets of those around him.

Even Ramsay who in *Fifth Business* was in every way superior to Paul, is now reduced from the authoritative narrator to merely another character. As such he acts out the final framing version of the myth of self-fulfillment. Self-reflectively he announces that he will make "a record - a document" (864) for posterity which incidentally will grant him immortality. *The Deptford Trilogy* is, of course, that document, and Ramsay has found his place amongst other famous story tellers.

The concept of the universal application and variation of the core myth is repeatedly amplified through the appearance of doubles. The Fortuneteller in the travelling show, for example, performs the same service for Paul as Dr. von Haller does for David. Father Knopwood, the homosexual priest, acts as Ramsay's double when he proclaims that "God is not mocked" (456). Knoppy's "pattern in the spirit" and pattern in reality" (456), is reflected in Ramsay's carefully constructed narrative with all its Christian optimism and

Victorian sense of purpose in design. Netty's assaults on David's foreskin (356) pre-figure his encounter with Myrrha, and add to the subconscious burden of his Jungian Shadow. Chronologically, a cruel young Davey becomes the Mr Hyde of the mature David Staunton. Rango is the unlikely double of Liesl's Jungian Shadow, and Magnus compares the two explicitly (829). Some doubles connect to more then one central character within the trilogy. Thus, Ingestree balances, on the one hand, Ramsay's education at Oxford, and mirrors, on the other, David's sexual initiation when "the Cantab" is sent off to "the bawdy-house" (800). The complex connection reinforce the notion of a universally applicable myth which may be repeated in many variations, but which remains essentially the same.

Ramsay, Eisengrim, Liesl, David and Boyd Staunton all illustrate versions of the myth of self-fulfillment. At the same time they are entangled in a complex human web that reaches back to history and ancient mythology. Their fates, versions of the modern Canadian myth, are in turn interconnected with elements of Judeo-Christian and classical mythology. David, Dunstan and Paul, for example, are, as their names might suggest, pious people. David explains that he "acquired [such] virtuosity in ritual, [that he] . . . bodied forth some ideal for a lot of people, as the plaster statues of the Infant Samuel at Prayer used to do in the nineteenth century" (351). Dunstan and Paul, on the other hand, are deeply pious, but reject ritual. All three share a vast knowledge of the scripture, which allows them to comment on aspects of their personal history in terms of Judeo-Christian mythology.

Simultaneously, Jungian doctrines are spun into the thematic web. Early in David's sessions with Dr. von Haller the martial image of the good little soldier emerges. In moments of intense emotional stress, as at the death of his father, David hides behind the persona of "the good little soldier" (319). In

a Jungian analysis of his early dreams, Dr. von Haller later suggests the cold, rational "soldier" within David also prevents his acknowledgment of vital emotional needs and thus threatens to destroy him. "Dr. von Haller kept leading me back to some point at which I had to admit that the Enemy [who threatens the keeper of the treasure in the dream] might be some portion of myself" (361). The final enigmatic sentence of *The Manticore* brings together the central Jungian images and dreams of the sessions: "I know that not later than tomorrow I must know what face the woman wore, and which woman is to be my guide to the treasure that is mine" (549). A likely interpretation is that the treasure is David's soul and conscience, and the women represent a dualistic version of Jung's Anima which in turn is composed of parts of all women which influenced or traumatized David in the past.

The martial image of David also connects him to Dunstable who is "the good soldier," though "little" only in comparison to the large scheme of things. Both men acknowledge their Anima in moments of the most intense emotional stress possible. Faced with imminent death, they connect within themselves their opposing conscious forces. Ramsay projects his Anima onto the Virgin Mary at Passchendaele to which he adds the Crowned Woman in *The Book of Revelation* - the final book of *The New Testament*, as well as his personal saint Mary Dempster. David's corresponding act of confronting his Anima in the cave has been discussed earlier.

Besides the Christian myths of saints such as St. Gallus or St. Dunstan, and Celtic myths like that of Merlin, classical myths are woven into the thematic structure of the trilogy. Tiresias is the most prominent of the classic mythical figures. Liesl "called Magnus Tiresias, because like that wonderful old creature he had been for seven years a woman, and had gained strange wisdom and insight thereby" (839). Liesl, too, is bisexual and both

Ramsay and David hint that they may be. The myth of Tiresias links up with the Jungian Anima and Animus. A full acknowledgment of the internal forces connected with the opposite sex, may well result in a breakdown of the fine, partly conditioned borders of sexual orientation. Liesl, for example, who has come to terms with her Animus at an early stage can thus enjoy relationships with others without gender generated psychological restraints.

Another aspect of the classical myth is "the shameful secret of [David's] birth" (387). When Carol suggests that David may be Ramsay's son, she creates an uncertainty which aligns David with Oedipus. In a similarly somewhat underdeveloped parallel the three narrators, Ramsay, David and Magnus crisscross their known world which consists of America and Europe, with the grand purposeful strides of ancient epic heroes.

Perhaps the initial sexual experience of the central characters represents the role of sex in the trilogy best, as it points out links with the classical and Jungian patterns of the work. Only Ramsay is "initiated . . . most tenderly" (89) by Diana, and calls the experience a wonder (90), brought about by his goddess of love. The other characters are all subject to violent initiations. In David's case, the element of seduction is stronger than that of rape, but he is, nevertheless, left traumatized. Paul's rape by Willard, which is mixed with scatological detail, is particularly violent, but it, too, contains an element of seduction: Paul "thought this was the beginning of some splendid illusion, and opened [his] mouth willingly" (580). He then is carried off like Europa. Liesl describes her rape by Magnus and the preceding struggle, in curiously tender images: "It was the first time for both of us, and it is a wonder we managed at all. It is like painting in watercolours . . . " (838). The different initiations illustrate the various balances of power between those involved. Since the initial joining of the sexes is also emblematic of Jungian unions between the

Shadow and the consciousness, the struggle is necessarily violent and painful with "strange wisdom" as its reward.

As the action of the trilogy moves away from Deptford and probes deeper into the Canadian conscience, the physical geography of Canada becomes increasingly remote from the central characters. The boys of Deptford, together with their parents, battle an environment which is "rustic beyond redemption" (22). In *The Manticore* and *World of Wonders*, however, they leave the world of their childhood behind and instead of the New World ruggedness there is only a void. Paul's travelling fair, for example, moves across the landscape with complete detachment. The same can later be said of his theatre troupe. Ramsay and David leave Canada all together. Nonetheless, the setting of the trilogy could not have been developed in any other way. The split between Canada's physical reality and the conscience of its non-native people is a key characteristic of the Jungian and mythological structures of the work. Most Canadians in the trilogy share an inability to connect with the land around them. They struggle to adapt the values and subconscious baggage of the Old World to the new one. David Staunton characterizes this conflict within Boyd in the following terms: "My father's admiration for whatever was English was one aspect of the ambiguous relationship between Canada and England. I suppose unkind people would say it was evidence of a colonial quality of mind. . ." (369). Ramsay's quest for sainthood leads to a similar split within him when he defines the kind of goodness which is incapable of countering evil:

> And what is this goodness? A squalid, know-nothing acceptance of things as they are, and operatic version of the dream which, in North America, means Mom and apple pie. My whole life had been a protest against this world, or the smudged, grey version of it into

which I had been born in my rural Canada.

(589)

Ramsay, here, defines the shallow version of the American dream while explaining the reason for his detachment from the Canada of his childhood. His inferiority complex vis-à-vis Europe is shared by Magnus and reflected in the latter's patronizing comments on Sir John's tour across the country:

> "The foreignness of Canada semed [sic] to abate a little. . . [T]here was one memorable night when five Blackfoot Indian chiefs, asserting their right as tribal brothers of Sir John, sat as his guests in the left-hand stage box: it was rum, I can tell you, playing Scaramouche with those motionless figures . . . What did they make of it? . . . I doubt if the French Revolution figured largely in their scheme of things."
>
> (807)

Later, when Magnus accounts for the popularity of a play which essentially is "out of time", he offers his explanation for the rift within the Canadian conscience:

> [The play] was speaking to a core of loneliness and deprivation in these Canadians of which they were only faintly aware. I think it was loneliness, not just for England, because so many of these people on the prairies were not of English origin, but for some faraway and long-lost Europe. The Canadians knew themselves to be strangers in their own land, without being at home anywhere else.
>
> (808)

In his enigmatic final speech at the end of The Manticore David offers a psychoanalytical version of the same problem:

> "Every country gets the foreigners it deserves."
> Was I, then, to be a stranger there? But how could I be foreign in the place where my treasure lay? Surely I was native there, however long I had been absent?
> (549)

Thus, the setting for the Canadian myth demands the detachment of the central characters from their country's physical geography. Ramsay, David, and Magnus find self-fulfillment as they move to Europe, across a psychological landscape. Only abroad can they become whole.

Every man is a stranger in his own mind when he sets out to confront his Anima. Together the narrators of Deptford Trilogy, headed by Ramsay, descend into the Canadian subconsciousness to get at the roots of the Canadian myth. They find a construct of Judeo-Christian and classical myth, superimposed on a country that is essentially foreign to its people, though it has "the foreigners it deserve[s]" (549). Ramsay and Magnus make this clear through their stereotypical distant sketch of Canada's indigenous people and through the lifelessness of the psychological landscape. Today Freudian and Jungian Psychology is largely only taught for its historic significance. Most of the theories have been replaced by more complex models of psychoanalysis. To the *Deptford Trilogy*, however, they are important because Ramsay and David endorse them to a point at which science becomes the myth of the twentieth century. Thus, Robertson Davies' *Deptford Trilogy* invokes an all-

encompassing body of western mythology to define the twentieth century Canadian myth at the centre of this nation's consciousness as the quest for self-fulfillment.

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