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The Dorian Gray Phenomenon in Canadian Literature

Much of Canadian literature (both early and late, both French and English) is disturbing and unsettling stuff. Strange things happen up in Canada, different in nature from the kinds of things that happen in the parent countries or in the country that lies to Canada's south. There is something freakish, demonic, and bizarre about it all, something as yet unexplained, which draws on the parent traditions but which deviates unexpectedly away from them. Anyone exposed to Canadian literature can sense it. There is something in the air, in the cold, in the vastness: something that we know is there but that we cannot name. And the literature produced by Canadians is hence uniquely at home in the twentieth century, the century of terror in which we all happen to be caught.

My own interest lies chiefly in twentieth-century English Canadian writing, where the density of strangeness is overwhelming. A recent series of lectures at Harvard University illustrated this characteristic strangeness. Margaret Atwood argued convincingly that Canadian literature is populated by monsters of one kind or another ("Canadian Monsters — Magic and the Supernatural in Canadian Literature"). And a few short weeks later Northrop Frye argued — just as convincingly — that the "spirit" of Canadian literature is "Haunted by lack of ghosts." McLuhan added his idiosyncratic blend of mysticism and humor. And the general atmosphere was one of spookiness, irrationality, and strangeness.

Courageous pioneer work has been done, most notably by Frye himself, in an attempt to define the Canadian imagination. But much remains unexplored. I'm not brave enough or foolhardy enough to attempt a new definition here. Instead, I'd like to suggest that one of the strangest aspects of Canadian literature — as yet unrecognised and undescribed — is the Dorian Gray phenomenon. (I'm not sure I understand it fully, but I'm going to attempt to establish its existence and suggest a few reasons for its appearance.)

Dorian Gray — unlikely as it may appear — exerts a strange and vicelike grip over the Canadian imagination of this century. Dorian Grays pop up all over the place, under the most unlikely bushes. They appear with far greater frequency and determination than in American or British literature. They don't appear casually. Their role is most often central to an understanding of the work. Sometimes it is clear that the connection is on the conscious level; sometimes not. And once again the Harvard lectures provide a fine example.

In his talk on "Canada — the Borderline Case," McLuhan talked about the lack of any "typical American face." American faces remain "baby faces" to the end. And McLuhan took time out to illustrate his point by filling in his audience on the story of Dorian Gray. He reminded his audience that Dorian Gray had wished his portrait would age, and not his face — and so on. The recapitulation of the plot was totally unnecessary: McLuhan had already made gigantic and justified assumptions about the level of intelligence and education in his audience. The reference was clear — *without* the concomitant explanation. But McLuhan, like many other modern Canadian writers, had fallen victim, at least half-unwittingly, to the Dorian-Gray spell.

The writer who provides the clearest example is none other than Mordecai Richler. And we know that the influence is conscious, thanks to the title of *Choice of Enemies* (1957): "A man cannot be too careful in the choice of his enemies. I have not got one who is a fool," claims Lord Henry Wotton in the first chapter of *Dorian Gray*.¹ Richler's next novel, *Duddy Kravitz* (1959), is heavily in Wilde's debt, and the book could as well have been entitled "The Picture of Duddy Kravitz" as "The Apprenticeship."

The debt is appropriate, of course, because of the similarity of theme. Both *Dorian Gray* and *Duddy Kravitz* present the corruption of (relative) innocence, stage by pitiless stage. By the end of each novel, the portrait is complete — the last shred of innocence covered by paint. (*Duddy Kravitz* is the more cynical of the two books, as the final Duddy has succeeded in blinding himself to what he has done, while Dorian Gray can at least *see*.) In each novel, possible Duddys and possible Dorians are killed off as the work progresses, leaving the monsters alone at the end. Uncle Benjy's letter sums it up succinctly: "A boy can be two, three, four potential people, but a man is only one. He murders the others."²

Duddy lives in a crippled and crippling universe. Once again Uncle Benjy's letter points the way to an understanding of Richler's intent in

the novel as a whole (it is a clear statement of theme), and this time the debt to Wilde is explicit:

Experience doesn't teach: it deforms. Some Oscar Wilde I would have made, eh?³

Duddy is born into a sick world, and he is surrounded by the crippled and deformed. The first words of the novel ("What with his wife so ill . . .") refer us to the first in a long line of casualties: Mrs. MacPherson. Mr. MacPherson ends up as an alcoholic wreck in Verdun, the mental hospital with the marvelous battleground name. Jerry Dingleman, the Boy Wonder, is crippled by polio, while his woman is crippled by drug addiction. Uncle Benjy is dying. Virgil *begins* as an epileptic, and becomes more and more incapacitated, largely thanks to Duddy, as the novel progresses: "There was a kind of flask attachment under the mattress of Virgil's bed and it was gradually filling with urine."⁴ Frier and Cuckoo Kaplan are two other wrecks. And there is some specially bitter irony in the fact that the only doctor on the scene is the incompetent Lennie who manages to botch the illegal abortion.

In the midst of all the deformed, Duddy stands, a fairly healthy specimen (even though "Are you sick?" is a question posed frequently to him). The "picture" of his moral crippling lies elsewhere — in the damage he has created in the lives of others — and, with greatest impact, in the face and in the twisted body of the "Boy Wonder," the Jerry Dingleman whom Duddy is in the process of becoming. The crippled Dingleman, lurching along on his crutches, is a projection of Duddy himself. The connection is reinforced by the inappropriateness of the title "Boy Wonder" to a physical wreck, and the precision with which such a title fits Duddy. Duddy is the real Boy Wonder of the novel, the motherless boy who made it in the face of all odds, the "Mr. Kravitz who just bought all the land." By the end of the novel he has as much right to the name as Dingleman ever did. And, as Simcha alone recognizes, *his* picture is as ugly as the "two-bit, dope-smuggling cripple" that he chases off his land. Duddy has become the Boy Wonder — he is the cripple now — and he no longer has need of Dingleman's actual presence. The two are one.

One physical sign, however, reinforces the connection. On the last page of the novel, "Duddy's cheeks burned red." Lennie, the doctor, recognizes this as a sign of sickness: "Are you O.K.? . . . You look sick, Duddy." The redness of Duddy's face (like his constant sweating) links him climactically to the repulsive and disgusting picture of the Boy Wonder:

Everywhere he went the Boy Wonder huffed and puffed and had to wipe the sweat from the back of his rolled hairy neck with a handkerchief. The bony head suddenly seemed massive. The gray inquisitor's eyes whether hidden behind dark glasses — an affectation he abhorred — or flashing under rimless ones unfailingly led people to look over his shoulder or down at the floor. His curly black hair had dried. The mouth began to turn sharply down at the corners. But the most noticeable and unexplained change was in the flesh of his face. After his illness it turned red and wet and shiny.⁵

The red and wet shininess of the face here is undoubtedly a deliberate echo of one of the most repulsive details in the original Dorian Gray portrait: "that loathsome red dew that gleamed, wet and glistening, on one of the hands, as though the canvas had sweated blood."⁶ Both the Boy Wonder "after his illness" and Duddy after *his* have faces that are "red and wet and shiny." And Dorian Gray, robbed of the elegance and sophistication of fin-de-siècle London, is reborn in a Montreal ghetto: "a skinny little fart he was at the time, a St. Urbain Street boy." (I suspect that if you scrambled Jerry Dingleman and Duddy Kravitz's names together, you might come up with something approaching "Dorian Gray." And meanwhile the "Boy Wonder" is a nice description of the original Dorian — literally true at the beginning of the novel, and ironically true at the end.)

There are some very strange links indeed between *Duddy Kravitz* and Robertson Davies's *Fifth Business* (1970) — some connected to the Dorian Gray business and some quite independent of it. The two novels have a great deal in common, despite the radical differences in tone and theme. (Richler's work is profoundly cynical; Davies's just as deeply optimistic.) Both novels begin with what must be an archetypal Canadian scene: a snowball thrown by a small boy. In each case, the snowball sets off a chain of consequences with dire and fantastic results (including a madhouse in each novel — for Mr. MacPherson and for Mary Dempster respectively); and the full implications of the snowball are only finally realised on the last pages of each work. (Davies goes a step further than Richler here — the chain of consequences lasts through three novels now, and the reader has a clear sense of those consequences continuing through all eternity.)

The crippled world is again in evidence (Dunstan Ramsay's loss of a leg in the First World War, and the bizarre and grotesque mating between Ramsay and Liesl), but the real moral crippling is not to be found there. As in *Duddy*, it hides behind a more attractive mask: the face of the Prince-of-Wales figure — another "Boy" — Boy Staunton. In his

way, he is as much a "Boy Wonder" as either Duddy or Dingleman, this financial wizard who exploits and abuses innocence, who capitalizes on human distress, who sells candy during wartime, and who is able to push any troubling guilt-feelings out of his mind completely (his forgetting about the Dempsters' very existence, let alone his responsibility for Mary Dempster's madness).

It is part of Davies's genius that Boy Staunton emerges as a very human and half-sympathetic figure. It is after all — and here the real complexity of the thing emerges — *his* wheelings and dealings that finance Dunstan Ramsay's chase after saintliness. He is as much Ramsay's Shadow as the more openly diabolical Paul Dempster, alias Faustus Legrand, alias Magnus Eisengrim. And he is much more genuinely a figure of evil. While Eisengrim is surrounded by suggestions of pacts with the devil (his magic powers, the "Vision of Doctor Faustus," the beautiful and bisexual Faustina, the ugly and bisexual Liesl), he is basically a far more moral creature than Boy. Eisengrim does not capitalize on human distress. He remembers his debts, and he views the world as a place where human beings are held accountable for their actions.

Like Eisengrim, Davies knows how to distract his audience. Boy, after all, doesn't seem so bad. But on the penultimate page of the trilogy, at the end of the chapter entitled "le Lit de Justice," Davies tweaks back the mask and lets us see, for a brief moment, the full ruthlessness of Boy Staunton. In a final analysis of Boy's death, Ramsay suggests that he had swallowed the snowball-stone as a final act of malice, a final "nasty surprise":

" . . . It might have come out that it was my paperweight, but even if it didn't, he knew I would know it was, and Boy reckoned on having the last word in our life-long argument that way."

"What a detestable man!"

"Not really. But it's always a good idea to keep your eye on the genial, smiling ones, and especially on those who seem to be eternally young."⁷

The fascinating and devil-like trappings had surrounded Eisengrim, but all along the greater moral ugliness had hidden behind the Dorian-Gray face of the eternally-innocent-looking Boy Staunton. The conclusion of *World of Wonders* recognizes this explicitly, and it is fitting that some final tribute should be paid to the Dorian-Gray mask which had always, implicitly, been there.

By contrast, the diabolical trappings are largely absent from Richler's work. They are limited to the imprint of Jerry Dingleman's crutches in the wet sand near the lake (the devil's mark), the ugliness of his face, and the unnatural innocence of his smile. But in both Richler and Davies, the *full* ugliness of moral corruption is suggested in the relationship between an untouched exterior and an interior ruthlessness. In each case, Dorian Gray has a special role to play.

There are also, appropriately, female versions of Dorian Gray in Canadian literature. The incorporation is easy, as Dorian Gray, from his name on, is nothing if not of ambiguous sex. The paint becomes make-up, and the chief modern exponent is Margaret Atwood, working here — whether she is conscious of it or not — in the tradition established by Frederick P. Grove.

Atwood is much less of a moralist than Richler or Davies. Her concern throughout most of her writing is with psychological survival, and her controlling image is one of surfacing: the moment when what is underneath the surface breaks through, when what is hidden emerges. Examples of this are abundant: the drowned woman in "This is a Photograph of Me"; the rising baby in *Surfacing*, the drowned fetus reaching the surface of the lake; the unzipping of the animal and human skins in *Surfacing*; the blood that oozes out of the strawberries in "Dream 1: The Bush Garden"; the water that is pushing through the ice in "Woman Skating"; and so on. The atmosphere is one of nightmarish terror, violence, breaking apart.

Dorian Gray comes into the picture when Atwood focuses on the face. Skin then becomes a mask which, at any moment, may begin to disintegrate due to pressure from within. The cover of *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* provides a good illustration. The collage was designed by Atwood (as were the other collages in the book, and each reinforces the sense of layers and the terror that lies beneath the surface). On each side of the cover grim trees rise from the black earth, and in the centre a lake-like oval contains the face of Susanna Moodie, lying on her side, as if in a coffin. The face appears to be rising, like a drowned corpse to the surface of the lake; and the graininess of the photograph suggests that it is not only rising — it is also disintegrating and dissolving as we watch.

"Looking in a Mirror," a crucial poem in the *Susanna Moodie* sequence, puts this into words:

My heirloom face I brought
with me a crushed eggshell
among other debris:
the china plate shattered
on the forest road, the shawl
from India decayed, pieces of letters⁸

The heirloom face cracks, and what emerges is what has always been there, unrecognized, repressed:

(you find only
the shape you already are
but what
if you have forgotten that
or discover you
have never known)⁹

The portrait changes as we watch, pushed and shaped by psychological truth (rather than by the moral truth of *Dorian Gray*). And it is this aspect of Atwood's work which makes her such a compelling twentieth-century writer, as frighteningly irresistible as Plath.

Dorian Gray seems to hover over much of her work as a faint and disturbing presence, far less explicitly there than in Richler or Davies. The closest she comes to a direct echo of *Dorian Gray* is in the character of Anna in *Surfacing*. The narrator and her lover Joe are staying with two married friends, David and Anna, at the lakeside cottage which had belonged to the narrator's parents. During their stay, several submerged truths batter their way to the surface of the narrator's consciousness, including the truth about the failure of David and Anna's marriage. This failure is epitomized in Anna's use of makeup. On the morning of the first day, the narrator gets up very early to find Anna standing "in front of the wavery yellowish mirror" (a lovely melodramatic touch that), putting on her makeup:

I realize I've never seen her without it before; shorn of the pink cheeks and heightened eyes her face is curiously battered, a worn doll's, her artificial face is the natural one. The backs of her arms have goose pimples.

"You don't need that here," I say, "there's no one to look at you." . . .

Anna says in a low voice, "He doesn't like to see me without it," and then, contradicting herself, "He doesn't know I wear it."¹⁰

Later in the novel, when the four have set off on a canoe trip, Anna discovers to her genuine horror that she has forgotten her makeup:

"God," she said, "what'm I going to do? I forgot my makeup, he'll kill me."

I studied her: in the twilight her face was gray. "Maybe he won't notice," I said.

A sound came out of her throat, a cough or a laugh. "It's not just that: it's something for him to use. He watches me all the time, he waits for ex-

cuses. Then either he won't screw at all or he slams it in so hard it hurts. I guess it's awful of me to say that." Her egg-white eyes turned toward me in the half-darkness. "But if you said any of this to him, he'd just make funny cracks about it. . . ."11

The sequence of images here (make up, "eggwhite eyes," and "cracks") links this dissolving face to the "heirloom face . . . a crushed eggshell" of the *Susanna Moodie* sequence. Her lack of makeup is part of the disintegration; the face underneath is pushing through.

The face that is finally revealed is a very human face, nothing too terrible after all, lacking all of the classic Dorian-Gray melodrama:

Anna's face in the daylight was dried and slightly shriveled without its cream underfilm and pink highlights; her nose was sunburned and she had prune wrinkles under her eyes. She kept turned away from David, but he didn't seem to notice, he didn't say anything, except when she knocked her foot against his cup and tipped some of his coffee out onto the ground. Then all he said was "Watch it Anna, you're getting sloppy."¹²

It is all stupidly and ridiculously pathetic, a parody of Dorian Gray, an anticlimax of the chillingly comic variety.

Not so with Frederick P. Grove and his character of Clara in *Settler of the Marsh* (1925). Once again we have a female version, and all of the old thunder and horror are there, all of the old moral reverberations. The signs on the face are now the signs of sin, not just sunburn. And this Clara, whose husband had never seen her without makeup, is the literary ancestor of Atwood's Anna. (The wife never seen without makeup is a strange and contrived device, and I've never encountered it outside Canadian literature.)

In Grove's novel, Niels, the young Swedish immigrant, unwittingly marries the local whore. Only gradually and excruciatingly does he learn what he has done, and one of the first signs is the discovery that Clara's hair is dyed. He begins to suspect that the color of her face is also artificial, and this is confirmed — gruesomely and dramatically — one morning when he enters her room early to wake her up:

From behind the mask which still half concealed her face, another face looked out at him, like a death's-head: the coarse, aged face of a coarse, aged woman, aged before her time: very like that of Mrs. Philipyuk, the Ruthenian woman at the post office: strangely, strikingly, terrifyingly like it: but aged, not from work but from . . . what?

For a moment Niels stared. Something like aversion and disgust came over him. Then, carefully, almost fastidiously, he lifted a corner of the satin coverlet, baring the shoulder and part of the breast which were still half hidden under the filmy veil of a lacy nightgown. There, the flesh was still smooth and firm; but the face was the face of decay. . . .¹³

The face has aged "before her time" — not from years, not from work, but from the moral poison she has drunk in the course of her profession. It is "decay," eating its way through the mask, pushing through the paint in classic Dorian Gray fashion.

As the relationship between Niels and his wife disintegrates, Clara accentuates the horror by dressing seductively, yet leaving off her makeup. On the first occasion when they meet accidentally in the kitchen (they have been living separate lives in the one house), Clara attempts to hide. In the brief glimpse he catches of her, Niels sees an exaggerated version of the earlier decayed face: "an ageing woman, yellow, lined with sharp wrinkles and black hollows under the eyes, the lips pale like the face."¹⁴

On their next meeting (the progression is as inexorable as in Wilde), Clara no longer attempts to hide: "Again she was in undress for the night, with a gown thrown over her shoulders. Again her face, that of an ageing woman, aged by God knew what, stood in strange contrast, an incomprehensible, uncanny contrast, to her appearance; it was so yellow, lined. . . ."¹⁵ Her pose is defiant and pathetic at one and the same time. The face, looking through the mask, demands to be destroyed, yet begs for sympathy. And it is this face, mocking and desperate, that Niels finally shatters:

At the left, the woman was sitting, her face made up, her body wrapped in silks. . . .

On the table dishes, plates, cups, a biscuit-bowl, a tea-pot. . . .

The woman rose, a half frightened, half triumphant smile on her face. She sought his eyes; but she looked into the barrel of a gun.¹⁶

Grove's *Settlers of the Marsh*, like Richler's *Duddy Kravitz*, gives a central place to the Dorian-Gray device. Other examples abound in modern Canadian literature, some obviously of less importance than others, and I make no pretense of having tracked them all down. The characteristic way in which it appears involves the pushing of an old and frightening face through the mask of a youthful face. Pratt's "Erosion," that most Canadian of poems, captures such a moment with classic economy and grace:

It took the sea an hour one night,
An hour of storm to place
The sculpture of these granite seams
Upon a woman's face.¹⁷

The "brute and paleolithic outline of a face" that stares out of the newborn iceberg in "The Titanic" is another fine example.

Two examples from modern French Canadian literature come easily to mind. The face of Florentine in Gabrielle Roy's *The Tin Flute* is a face in the Grove-Atwood tradition:

For the moment, despite her heavy make-up, the image of the old woman she would become was superimposed on her childish features. By the set of her lips one could foresee the wrinkles into which the fine modeling of her cheeks would dissolve. All youth, confidence, vivacity seemed to have fled from her listless, shrunken eyes, leaving a vacuum. But it was not only the mature woman that appeared portentously in Florentine's face; even more shocking were the marks of inherited debility and deep poverty that she bore. These seemed to rise from the depths of her somber pupils and spread like a veil over the naked, unmasked face.¹⁸

One added refinement is that here social conditions, rather than moral or psychological forces, bear the brunt of the responsibility.

The face in Anne Hébert's *Kamouraska*, however, is the more orthodox version, yielding to psychological and moral pressures: "a film of angel skin laid over loathing, thin as can be."

Whatever the specific manifestation, it is clear that *Dorian Gray* has a powerful hold over the Canadian imagination, and I have been puzzling over the reasons behind it. Some would appear to be fortuitous. *Dorian Gray* is, after all, the "first French novel in English," and thereby appeals authoritatively to both the French and English traditions. It was published in 1891, at a time when Canadian literature was busy finding itself; and it was a hard book to ignore. Although one would never at first suspect that such a tale, set three thousand miles away from the Canadian wilderness in degenerate fin-de-siècle London, would appeal to Canadian writers, such has nevertheless been the case. And even though raw nature was still a stupendous force and Canada still stood at the threshold of discovering herself (and the situation hasn't changed much in the interim), there was an irresistible appeal in the very qualities of the novel that made it exotic, distant, and strange. The "dining with panthers" combination of sophistication and wildness fitted perfectly with how Canadians would like to think of themselves. And the outrageous flying in the face of public morals both shocks and attracts one side of the Canadian psyche: the grey bourgeois small-town respectability side. Both Hagar and Rachel would have understood. And both Richler and Davies are "enfants terribles" in the grand manner.

Meanwhile the demonic aspect of Dorian Gray would already have been at home in Canada. Nature as demon, Indian as demon, man as demon — the demonic forces are overwhelmingly in evidence from the earliest writings onward. And the painted-mask aspect is easily incorporated into the world of Canadian masks: the mask of nature described by Frye,¹⁹ where God disappears behind the mask, only to reveal himself in surprising and violent ways; the social mask of the hypocrite, the basis for almost all of the comic writing in Canada, from Haliburton to Leacock. The mask is a staple: the mask of the snow in Catherine Parr Traill's *Backwoods of Canada* and in Hémon's *Maria Chapdelaine*; the mask of Keejigo in Scott's "Gull Lake," and the mask of the pedlar in his short story called "The Pedlar"; the mask of Laurence's Hagar, a stone-angel mask from which she is constantly struggling to break free; and the "mask of the bear" in her short story by that name. The list of masks is endless — and Dorian Gray provides only a minor subsection to the general category.

I'm not sure what to make of it. I know that it exists, a strange phenomenon — at best half understood, at worst an unanswered question. It is a part of the puzzle, and I wait in the hope that other critics may provide some of the missing pieces. In this labyrinth, constantly tantalizing, constantly deceiving, we need every thread that we can find.

Notes

1. Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. Harry Shefter (New York: Washington Square Press, 1972), p. 8.
2. Mordecai Richler, *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (New York: Ballantine, 1959), p. 250.
3. Richler, p. 249.
4. Richler, p. 246.
5. Richler, p. 116.
6. Wilde, p. 173
7. Robertson Davies, *World of Wonders* (New York: Viking, 1975), p. 357.
8. Margaret Atwood, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 24.
9. *Moodie*, p. 25.
10. Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing* (New York: Popular Library, 1972), pp. 50-51.
11. *Surfacing*, p. 145. Curiously Atwood spells "gray" in the Dorian fashion, rather than "grey." It is of possible significance a) because of my thesis, and b) because of its proximity to "face."
12. *Surfacing*, p. 149.
13. Frederick P. Grove, *Settlers of the Marsh* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1965), p. 133.

14. Grove, p. 163.
15. Grove, p. 163.
16. Grove, pp. 186-87.
17. Carl F. Klinck and Reginald E. Watters, ed. *Canadian Anthology*. 3rd edition (Toronto: Gage, 1974), p. 216.
18. Gabrielle Roy, *The Tin Flute*. trans. Hannah Josephson (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1947), p. 7.
19. Northrop Frye, "The Narrative Tradition in English-Canadian Poetry," *Canadian Anthology*, p. 606.