

Patricia Monk

Review Article

Robertson Davies Recently

What's Bred in the Bone. By Robertson Davies. Toronto: Macmillan, 1985. Pp.436. \$22.95.

The Papers of Samuel Marchbanks. By Robertson Davies. Toronto: Irwin Publishing, 1985. Pp.540. \$24.95.

Robertson Davies. By Michael Peterman. Twayne World Authors Series TWAS 780. Boston: Twayne Publishers 1986. Pp.178. \$19.95.

In *What's Bred in the Bone*, Davies's fiction exhibits more strongly than ever before the "savage and often melancholy wisdom" for which, in the persona of Samuel Marchbanks, he once praised the operas of Gilbert and Sullivan. It is perhaps appropriate, therefore, that Davies's latest novel should appear simultaneously with his rumbustious Doppelganger's *Papers*, for the cord that links them is clearly intact and influences are running both ways.

What's Bred in the Bone is the second volume in the Spook trilogy, which began with the story of the events following the death of Francis Cornish in *The Rebel Angels* (1981). Opening some time after the end of *The Rebel Angels*, *What's Bred in the Bone* begins with Francis's official biographer, Simon Darcourt (whom we have previously met as one of the two co-narrators of *The Rebel Angels*), attempting to explain why the biography is not going well and despairing of ever being able to discover what was "bred in the bone" of his subject. *What's Bred in the Bone* then doubles back in time, however, and gives us the life of Francis Cornish, as it is reviewed by the Angel of Biography, the Lesser Zadkiel, and by Francis's personal tutelary spirit, the Daimon Maimas.

The narrative follows Francis's childhood in Blairlogie in the Ottawa valley, his life at Colborne College and Oxford, his development before and during World War Two both as a member of "the

profession" (intelligence and counter-intelligence) and as an art expert and collector, and his final retreat into reclusivity in post-war Toronto. Strange, richly entertaining, and thoroughly plausible characters cluster round Francis and help to shape his life. Chief among them in his childhood in his grandfather's house are Mary-Ben (his pious and art-loving great-aunt), Victoria (the Calvinist cook), Zadok (coachman and undertaker) who between them bring him up in the long absences of his emotionally chilly parents. Later they include Ismay, his political-activist cousin (and later wife); Ruth, his lover, a historian and astrologer; and the sinister, learned, and amoral art expert and restorer, Tancred Saraceni, who becomes Francis's mentor. Their lives, however, impinge on his: they do not centre on it. Francis's peculiar temperament and his particular talent and interests take him far beyond the understanding of these people who, with the exception of the generous and loving Ruth, think that they understand him perfectly and assume, consciously or unconsciously, a proprietary interest in him.

Their appropriation of him, however, is always illusory, Francis is thoroughly displaced in his relationship to other people. A hint of this continuing displacement is given early in his life, for in a foreshadowing of his destiny as an artist, Francis, like Vincent van Gogh, is given the same name as the older brother whose gravestone he sees in the churchyard. Like Dunstan Ramsay in *Fifth Business*, Francis appears to others to be peripheral to their own lives, but unlike Ramsay whose apparent peripherality conceals his centrality (as *Fifth Business*) for those other lives, Francis is truly the odd man out. He is even more radically displaced than Maria in *The Rebel Angels*, who, as a European gypsy in WASP Toronto, is displaced culturally. For Francis is displaced in time, so that at the moment of his deepest insight into his life, his work, and the meaning of both, when he paints "the myth of Francis Cornish," he is forced to admit that he is unable to speak "in the voice of his century," but only in "the final accents of the Gothic voice."

The increase of "savage and melancholy wisdom" in *What's Bred in the Bone* is signalled in the sombre shading which characterizes this cast of eccentrics. Francis himself is not an attractive hero: unloved (or loved only inadequately and uncomprehendingly) as a child, he grows into an unlovable (for the most part) adult. The reader may feel considerable compassion for him, but it is impossible to like him (as it is possible, for example, to like Dunstan Ramsay or even David Staunton in *The Manticore* in spite of some quite unlovable characteristics). Apart from Ruth (and perhaps also Francis's grandfather,

Senator Hamish McRory), there is no truly likable or admirable character in the book.

The increasing misanthropy in the creation of individual characters is paralleled by the increasing misanthropy in the portrayal of general human nature. The children of Blairlogie, for example, are shown to find their entertainment in torturing a cat and tormenting the misfit Francis, just as their elders find theirs in torturing the dwarf, François Xavier Bouchard. The remaining members of aristocratic Dusterstein family govern their lives according to their chosen motto: "Thou shalt perish ere I perish" (397). The European and American art historians and experts with whom Francis becomes acquainted are without exception jealous, spiteful, and self-interested; among the modern painters whom he encounters in Toronto, are "fakers of a chthonic inner vision". Authority, whether in the form of the local school-teacher in Blairlogie keeping order in the school or the Canadian government dealing with the problems of spending public money on art, is ignorant and unfair. This view of humanity is summed up by Maimas: "People are such muddlers and meddlers."

With meticulous, and perhaps ironic care, the settings throughout the narrative reflect this darkened vision. With few exceptions (Francis as a very small child in his grandfather's garden, confronting a peony), most of the key scenes take place at night or indoors or both. The indoor settings become increasingly claustrophobic, ranging from the normal but richly furnished Victorian opulence of Senator McRory's house to the crammed, dark, and filthy apartments in which Francis lives out his final years.

Moreover, unlike *World of Wonders* and *The Rebel Angels*, where Davies has foreshadowed this misanthropic view of humanity only through the off-centre characters of Eisengrim and Parlabane, respectively, here in *What's Bred in the Bone* it is presented in the voice of the Daimon Maimas, the preternatural entity who is in charge of shaping Francis's life from the moment of his conception to the moment of his death. Permitted more naked and direct expression by reason of its speaker's non-human nature, it achieves an authority unprecedented in Davies's fiction, by reason of its status external to the narrative on which it comments. At the same time, however, since it falls within the fiction of which that narrative is a part, it casts a retrospective shadow on *The Rebel Angels*. For the opening chapter of *What's Bred in the Bone*, in which Simon Darcourt, Maria, and Arthur discuss the making of the "biography" of Francis Cornish, closes with the first appearance of the Daimon Maimas and his collocutor, the Lesser Zadkiel, "who had been drawn by the sound of their own names to listen to what was going on," as though Parlabane (and, to a lesser extent, Eisen-

grim), whose tone of voice and views on the way in which the universe moves somewhat disconcertingly resemble those of Maimas, have been putting forward something more than a merely individual view. What may be dismissed as the result of "spleen" and a disorder of the blood in a mortal may have to be accepted as the result of a disinterested understanding in a presumably bloodless immortal.

Yet even this view put forward through Maimas is not a final determination. Davies's own definition (in the essay "Ham and Tongue") of a moralist is "one who looks at human conduct with as clear an eye as he can manage, and says what he sees, drawing, now and then, a few tentative conclusions," and in keeping with this restriction to "tentative conclusions," Davies is necessarily careful in *What's Bred in the Bone* to avoid what might be described as moral closure. In the course of their first conversation, Maimas is shown admitting to the Lesser Zadkiel that "Even we do not know the entire truth, brother"; by this admission he places himself and Zadkiel within a hierarchy where the level of knowledge determines the truth of what is seen. Here Davies implies that Maimas's view of the way things work and the rightness of what he (Maimas) is doing may equally be imperfect because his knowledge is not necessarily perfect. Maimas may not be human, but he is not divine either. He says to Zadkiel at the end of the book "we are metaphors ourselves" (524), implying perhaps a hierarchy of realities.

Closure, is precluded by the position of *What's Bred in the Bone* as the second volume (the first being *The Rebel Angels*) of what is clearly shaping up to be another trilogy. If Davies's habit of working in threes is not sufficient indication of another volume yet to come, the words of the Daimon Maimas in his last conversation with the Lesser Zadkiel in the novel point to it more explicitly: "The end is not yet."

Even *What's Bred in the Bone*, unfortunately, arrived too late to be discussed in Michael Peterman's volume on Robertson Davies in the Twayne World Authors series of biographical-critical studies, although it did squeak into the bibliography. *Robertson Davies* is constructed according to the familiar Twayne formula, but Peterman makes efficient use of it. The preliminary biographical chapter ("Robertson Davies: Man of Letters as Artist") is an indispensable resource for biographical fact and background on its subject, and the second chapter, "Samuel Marchbanks," is a concise and careful introduction to part of Davies's work which is often undervalued in discussions of his artistic development. Peterman then devotes one chapter to the early and one to the later plays. Even so, as he points out, "Necessarily, some selection has been practised," but his selectivity is exercised sensibly in omitting *Brothers in the Black Art* and *Pontiac and the*

Green Man and mentioning Davies's two masques (*A Masque of Mr Punch* and *A Masque of Aesop*) only briefly. He does, however, begin his discussion of the early plays with a discussion of the unpublished "The King Who Could Not Dream," which he identifies as Davies's first play, using it to establish the "affinity for the Irving tradition and . . . implicit commitment to the theme of self-discovery" which he sees as continuing in some of the later plays. Peterman then turns to the fiction, devoting one chapter to the Salterton novels, one to the Deptford trilogy, and one to *The Rebel Angels*. His chapters on the novels are, given the terms of reference of the TWAS series, unexceptionable: they are thorough, but concise, and the obligatory plot summary is smoothly integrated. His readings of the individual novels are straightforward and helpful, and he makes quite clear, without undue emphasis, the continuity of development from *Tempest-Tost* (1951) to *The Rebel Angels* (1981). Throughout his discussion of the work, his choice of critical material for reference is carefully selected. The volume concludes with the usual Notes and a useful Selected Bibliography of primary works and secondary materials (although it should be noted that there are one or two critical items cited in the text and referred to in the Notes which are not included in the Bibliography). All in all, *Robertson Davies* is an extremely useful resource for both the general reader and the student of Davies's fiction and drama.

The Papers of Samuel Marchbanks also arrived too late to do more than squeak into Peterman's bibliography. According to the publishers' note, "material in Parts One and Two is drawn from *The Diary of Samuel Marchbanks*, (Clarke Irwin 1947) [and] *The Table-Talk of Samuel Marchbanks* (Clarke Irwin, 1949)"; Part Three, *Marchbanks' Garland*, "is drawn from material in *Samuel Marchbanks' Almanack* . . . by permission of the Canadian Publishers, McClelland and Stewart [1967]." Omissions from the *Diary* and the *Tabletalk* will have to be identified by page by page comparison, but the omissions from the *Almanack* include at least all the astrological material used to structure it (and possibly more). The *Papers* are provided with a new introduction and footnotes in academic style by Davies. Readers who are familiar with the original editions of Samuel Marchbanks's work will probably prefer to stay with them rather than move to the shortened version offered here; for those who have never previously encountered Samuel Marchbanks, this collected volume is a handsome introduction to him.