

LITERARY QUEST



An International, Peer-Reviewed, Open Access, Monthly, Online Journal of English Language and Literature

The Sacred and the Profane: Religious Voices in David Williams's *The Burning Wood*

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Abstract

Whenever I come to the fountain to drink
I find the living water itself thirsty;
And it drinks me while I drink it.

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Shall the day of parting be the day of gathering?
And shall it be said that my eve was in truth my dawn?

-Kahlil Gibran

Religion marks a particular system of belief or behaviour and is essentially marked by a mode of rituals. Religion particularly speaks of the battle of the Good against Evil. Evil and Good become relative terms in a world of multiple faiths and shifting perspectives.

Keywords

Profane; Sacred; Religious Voices; David William; The Burning Wood



There is something dark and destructive in all of us.
But evil can be overcome, through creativity, which
is a healing process.

-David Williams

Based on one's own belief, people have started seeking "religious liberty", in their faith, worship and social interaction. C.H. Brown, in *Understanding Society: An Introduction to Sociological Theory* (1979), quoting the French sociologist Emile Durkheim, speaks of the sacred as "those categories of objects, values or rituals that could not be questioned" (30). Sacred things are special and beyond the ordinary profane) reach, remain unquestionable and their authority always unchallengeable. The sacred thus constitutes the transcendent realm of life and the profane that of the temporal realm (the realm of time, space, cause and effect). "The function of ritual in a community", according to Kishore Jadav, "is that of providing proper rules for action in the realm of the sacred as well as providing a bridge for passing into the realm of the profane" (43). Thus, the ritual of baptism is seen as a sacred second birth that "washes" man of the profanity of his material conception even as the ritual of burial anticipates his spiritual rebirth. Baptism, therefore, is seen as a motif of death and rebirth in the rites of passage – a salvation through symbolic death, just as burial becomes a symbolic unification of dust-to-dust, matter-to-matter, and spirit-to-spirit.

Religion thus becomes a salvation code in family culture, and is closely associated with the sacred, just as the church culture is. In the "habitualization" of this sacred "we tend to take it for granted and are hardly aware of it until some 'extremist' or "Marxist" or just a rude foreigner [throwing harsh light on the dark realities of habitualization] asks an awkward question, like the boy who exclaimed that the emperor had no clothes" (Brown 31). In a world of multiple societies and communities, faiths are many and the question of truth and faith has hence become relative.

According to Rev. Dr. Marsalen Bage, in *Many Other Ways? : Questions of Religious Pluralism*. (1992):

Religion may be understood in cultural terms as an expression of a particular way of life. [But] whatever definition of Religion one may give, the simple existential fact to be recognized is that every one of us lives among other fellow human beings. We

share [emphasis mine] a common humanity. At the same time each one also feels that he has his own identity. (11)

Rev. Bage emphasizes on the unavoidable essential predicament of the emergence of a religious plurality and the need for “sharing” between peoples. The consciousness of “my being Christian and being with others in society leads me to reflect on the question of religious plurality” (11) and, what applies to religion should logically apply to race.

Religion is an expression, however abstract it may be, of humanity’s search for truth and order in matter and spirit and the hope of assurance “after life”. Death is a phase of life that frightens and threatens man’s mental and moral composure, as much as the mysteries of after-life is the phase that confuses and troubles him. Hence, it can be said that the fear of death, its enigmatic authority and threatening presence makes man lean towards religion. The function of religion is, therefore, twofold: The social function of religion prepares man for life in this world and the spiritual function is concerned with preparing man for death and life thereafter. Thus religion essentially moves from the known to the unknown in order to make known the unknown. The former preparation caters to the salvation of the body by providing a code of law and conduct for the upkeep of personal and collective moral integrity. This upkeep of moral integrity and the need for the repression of the body is believed to be the first and most important step towards salvation and celebration of spirit according to traditional Christian ideology.

Cleanth Brook’s essay *The Language of Paradox*, in David Lodge’s *Twentieth Century Literary Criticism* (1972) illustrates the fact that the language of religion is the language of paradox. Paradox welds together discordant and contradictory elements to bring about a meaningful whole. Religion is a field of emotion and passion built on personal or collective faith rather than intellect, and its language of paradox is therefore emotional as much as the figure of speech itself is assumed in its intellectuality. Any intellectual “religious exploration” thus can result in contradictions, exposing unverifiable codes, as evident in the questioning of conventional and established orthodox norms of its

beliefs and application and would thus enter the realm of the profane. It is thus that the creation myth of the Bible is questioned by empirical science as much as the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mother is pooh-poohed by critically censorious rationalists. Yet, Christianity has survived where ancient dynasties and empires had fallen. This suggests the fact that man is basically emotional and sentimental and enters the realm of intellectual pursuit only for the sake of its challenging enterprise rather than to establish that religion is fictitious, which again is a paradox that perpetuates religion in the very attempt of decrying it. A slogan written in the middle of the night by anonymous hands on a wall in my neighborhood comes to mind: “No God”. The very next night another unseen hand re-wrote the same as “K(No)w God”. Both hidden hands were attempting to justify and juggle with their own world-views, hiding themselves from the harsh light of self-exposure. Each, in his indirect attempt at “educating” the other, was hiding himself from the angry glare of possible censure and retribution by the other. The intellectual “Donnes” treatment of sacred love in the act of poetic re-creation may seem paradoxically profane to conformists.

The myth of Creation is the story of structural paradox. It is the story of creation through binaries establishing differences, which in their very essence of separation only go to complement each other the more. Thus from chaos came clarity, from disorder came order. But this again, in a tail-chasing manner, exposed an inner paradox that it was from this disorderly orderliness came an orderly disorder, or division. This essence of creation bespeaks of the fact that nothing in matter can exist without this innate self-chasing antithesis. And what can be said of matter can only be logically extended to the spirit that is contained in matter, or needs matter to relate itself. By rule of logical deduction on the Biblical creation, it was the “Word” that became “matter” and it was “spirit” (the breath of life) that made matter become “life”.

This co-existence of opposites, the Janus figure, is like the two sides of a coin, or as explained by Yeats, (who is said to have collected the idea from William Blake) in his *A Vision*, the essential make up of antithetical elements in every “being”. His principle of the gyre illustrates the fact that opposites are

inseparably entwined, and relatively perceived. Thus there is the element of the subjective in what may be predominantly objective, and vice versa. Thus it is believed that every man “contains” the women in him and vice versa; that every man possesses reason as well as passion; and that the best of man cannot be devoid of evil. Man, having been created in the “image” of God was assumed, by religious convention, to be pristinely pure in spirit and had characteristically acquired the element of evil through the devil’s work. But a logical mind would say that man’s spirit was undoubtedly pure but essentially possessed “the other” in all its material and “dusty” signification upon which the “serpent” worked in order to win him over.

Literature, which is sandwiched between the realms of fact (history) and fiction (philosophy) and “reflecting” on life, exposes this hidden and deliberately ignored evil under the harsh light of intellect or “knowledge” that the Promethean and Adamic myths say, was marginalized from man. Williams’ novels are deeply concerned with the role of the creator in his creation and the problem of evil that seems to separate man from God but which he believes is inseparable.

Regarding this problem of evil, which Williams’ novels are greatly concerned with, Williams himself says:

I tend to see it (evil) in traditional Christian terms as stemming from pride, or egoism, concern for self before concern for others, though even as a child I was asking why God’s concern for his own glory wasn’t just as bad, then? ... God shares in our guilt, but also in our suffering, and is being purged through his creation, much as an author is affected by his characters, grows through them is even transformed by them or raised to a higher moral grain... good and evil grow up side by side in this world, and that which purifies us is trial, and trial is by what is contrary... (Williams, personal communication 26 Aug.1992).

Williams believes that evil “stems from pride” (egoism) and “selfishness” and that it grows at the cost of prudence and the commandments of the New Testament: (Matt.5:43; Rom.13 : 9). Hence his logical argument, by extension, that God in

his divine authoritarian egotism, also must contain evil is necessarily a argument but on emotional irritant to fundamentalist believers. But the word “contain” here can be ambiguously interpreted as that which “possesses”, “holds within” evil, or even that which “borders”, keeps under control or marginalizes evil. This same ambiguity is that which can be extended to look at the Bible or any scripture as a faith oriented Holy writ or as the rational archetypal literary text. Williams believes that, not until speculation and faith in God become balanced in man’s thought will his vision of life acquire meaning. For example, *The Book Job* is the finest expression of a happy blend of human speculation and human faith and thus has been called wisdom or reflective literature on the divine ambivalence. Williams’ moral philosophy on this divine ambivalence believes that “god is not evil more than he is good; so modern man can only trust that his struggle with death, his fight with his own evil, shall prove the soul’s existence as certainly as creation shall last...” (Williams, personal communication 26 Aug. 1992).

Melinda McCracken, a Winnipeg freelance writer, quoting David Williams in her article *David Williams’s Ivory Tower on the Prairies* (sic) says: “Like those of Margaret Laurence . . . [Williams’ novels] are very much concerned with matters of the spirit” (36), she quotes Williams in her article saying,

Fundamentalism is puritan... is very emotional, although without ritual, except for the singing, which I always enjoyed. Although I can no longer call myself a Christian and no longer view myself as religious, I still have the same concern for a personal vision and private experience. I am concerned with the visionary, the problem of evil and the fear of dying. I believe that literature can provide an answer to death. In the 20th century, we’ve lost faith in the after-life and we need to find some symbols of immortality some collective belief. There is no longer anything to heal the death fear. (36)

Norse mythology narrates the birth of the frost giant Ymir from opposing elements of fire and ice. Odin the god of Midgard (the New World) is the great-

grandson of Ymir (thus the foundation laid in the divine archetype forming for the basis of human generational quarrel). Odin creates Midgard out of the wastes of Ymir. Thus the New World was created out of the “wastes” of “the great-grandfather” which also underlines the irony of the scatological creation of Odin or even that of Adam, for that “matter”. This process of creating life out of the lifeless is a process of infusion of spirit into matter. Thus the creation of man in the Adamic myth, in a way, was the creation from waste (dust/earth) and the respired breath (spirit) of the Creator. The past/old order therefore, though apparently absent, becomes present in a new form, retaining the spirit of the old. Even the Norse giant Kvasir (the god of peace and harmony) is said to be born out of the spittle of all the warring gods of the Vanir and the Aesir, even as Eve was created off the bones of Adam.

Evil in Norse mythology takes on the form of the diabolic *Loki*. Ironically and suggestively as well, Odin is said to have sired both Loki the Evil and Baldr the Good. Yet the important point to note for the sake of our discussion is that the spirit of Norse mythology is much different from that of the Greeko-Roman or the Judaic in its purer and less selfish intentions. It brings the gods to the likeness of men in their origin and destiny just like the spirit becoming flesh for the salvation of man in Christianity.

All religions show both good and evil to shift shape either for constructive or destructive purposes. Evil is found to be more powerful and successful against the grain of good that stumps religious faith most times. The voice of warning derived from all religions therefore strikes at the root of suffering and despair as caused by greed, pride, jealousy and most of all, loss of faith. From the beginnings of literary creation man’s desire has been to regain the lost paradise in spirit if not in letter; and to retrace himself into the security and warmth of the womb he came from. The mature act of artistic creation or the innocent act of running one’s fingers in sand points to such a retrogressive desire for the sake of spiritual progression.

The Assured and the Accursed

The religious voices in all the three novels of Williams are centred on man's significant struggle towards redemption – be it spiritual, social or psychological. In his first novel *The Burning Wood* (1975) the altercation is between Grandpa's Cardiff's Fundamentalist and socio-ethical voice of censure saying, "I'd have you know that you must not take from another man what is rightfully his, unless he should first give it to you" (9), and Rev. Haggshed's biblical voice of self-righteous castigation saying, "keep yourselves from the accursed, lest ye make yourselves accursed" (114) along with the trans- religious human voice of conviction of the miscegenating self-styled humanist grandson Joshua Cardiff who says: "I guess if you love someone ... you've got to take her the way she is" (200). The central religious image and metaphor of all three novels being crucifixion, Williams attempts a parody to show how man's authority of religion attempts to manipulate God's power, whereas the New Testament points one to God's powerlessness and suffering on the cross. Williams's note on the aspect of redemption/saving is made obvious in the post-modern era of dissolving centres, where God is in need of saving from self-righteous and self-cantered man. Thus Jack, in Williams's second novel *The River Horsemen* (1981), suggests his parodic story of redeeming his God.

While the first and the last novels struggle to redeem their respective families from, what is feared to be, the Cardiff and the Vangdal curses, the second draws upon it the curse of vanity that tends to destroy mankind. The condition of Williams' protagonists floundering on the river of life caught in the current of sensations and sensuousness is revealed in the unwitting statement of Magnus "Sigurdsen" saying "hell is where you're cut off from hope" (47). Hope, and the loss of it, therefore becomes the central orchestrated note: hope against odds, hope amidst suffering, hope against suffering and hope in the sharing of suffering.

In *The River Horsemen*, Jack Cann and Fine-day are apparent opposition even as Religion, which focuses on these two themes, has a dual function to play -- social and spiritual. The religion of the Crees is pro-matter for it believes in

the celebration of the material in life, the earth itself. But Christianity is apparently anti-matter; the denial of the body to embellish the spirit. Joshua's world is caught between these extremes of ideology: the white culture denies the body and represses matter to seek salvation and the Crees' indulge in a celebration of life on earth, the here and the now.

Williams' idea of gnosticism replaces the word "suffering" with "trial" for the latter suggests a positive, open-ended struggle. Thus the trials of the flesh indirectly prepare one for the testimony of the spirit. His protagonists undergo suffering at different planes: Joshua's baldness effects a psychological suffering of his dignity through marginalization; his apparent "freakishness" becomes the unifying factor with the Crees whose paganism and vulgarity upsets conservatives like Grandpa Cardiff. The protagonists of *Horsemen* suffer the trials of encountering death in matter and spirit. The social trials faced by Nick makes him hate supercilious authority of any kind; the trials of Many-birds make him blame an uncaring God who refuses to share his pain; and Wayne suffers the fear of damnation and to wrestle the inevitable evil grandfather in him. Each, ironically, becomes the other in the apparent practice of his faith. Fine-day and Jack Cann are samples of apparently opposing myths; Fine-day and Many-birds, are dual specimens of a common myth; Many-birds and Jack-Cann are common traits in opposing faiths; Nick and Many-birds are apparent opposites but who essentially contain the other in them. What applies to *Wood*, in terms of Christian and Cree religious traditions, also applies to *Horsemen*. Like Thomas with Joshua, it is Many-birds' profanity that makes Jack come alive. Many-birds' monologues serve as comic and profane parallels to Jacks' sacred musings. Old Fine-day clings to the lost world of the spirit in native religion forsaking the "body" of his wife; Many-birds clings to the lost body of his lover, in spirit; Jack Cann appears to be like Fine-day, but turns out to be like Many-birds; Nick clinging to the lost body of his father turns out to be like Fine-day.

Northrop Frye in *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (1982) explains how the story of Israel began with "the burning-bush contract" which introduced a revolutionary quality into the Biblical tradition (114). It was a contract with

Moses who was given the task of liberating the Israelites from bondage but himself made a bondman. Joseph Heller in *God Knows* (1984) mockingly presents the illogicality and senseless vanity behind the contract when God says he will harden the Pharaoh's heart and make Moses' work difficult. The disillusioned Moses asks:

‘Then where is the sense?’... ‘Whoever said I was going to make sense?’ answered God. ‘Show me where it says I have to make sense. I never promised sense.... I’ll give milk, I’ll give honey. Not sense. Oh, Moses, Moses why talk of sense? ... If you want to have sense, you can’t have a religion’”. (33)

Yet God seems to give his chosen man an impossible task but decides to make it difficult for him to achieve it. God seems to believe that the acquiring of sense or knowledge will deprive him of man's obedience; that is, if man “knows” he will “slay” his God.

Suffering” and “hope” are two simple and commonly uttered words, which cover the deepest and most complex realities of human existence. They have been the theme of every great religious teacher and prophet. Suffering, as believed by religious myths, came to man when he disobeyed his Creator's words. Christianity believes that hope came to man when the Creator himself came as a creation in flesh, when spirit was made flesh. Philosophers of every age have debated their meaning. Buddha began his ministry with the sermon on suffering. Hinduism remarks on suffering as one's Karma of spiritual evolution. Job wrestled with human misery refusing to curse or to blame God. Jesus is said to have accepted the suffering of the world in order to give hope to all mankind. The themes of suffering and hope have special relevance in the contemporary globalized world of materialism and multiculturalism. In the application of the Holy Writ to contemporary society the questions, does one hope in the midst of suffering? Or does one hope against suffering? Or, do only those who share in suffering know of hope? are questions that rationalise an otherwise emotionally faith-oriented theology.

Joshua questions the fundamentalist's concept of the salvation of the soul into a New World when the salvation of existential life in this world itself remains unredeemed. If Christ had suffered all, and for all, why is there no poetic justice in this world and therefore where is Jesus Christ in the unmitigated realm of suffering? Jack Cann's theology picks up where Joshua's humanism leaves off. Logically, is man to blame God for his suffering or inversely, does God blame man for his loss of faith as evinced in the Edenic fall from Grace? And by extension, a greater, more controversial and threateningly blasphemous voice of doubt raised by rationalized logicity is, did God create Evil? For He was the creator of all. If not, where did evil germinate from, to taint and transform the "Son of Light" into the Prince of Darkness? The realm of pure faith and that of orthodoxy will look upon the question as a provocative spiritual perjury, while the realm of pure intellectual reasoning will cast doubts on the very existence of this Omnipotence, thus making the ideological stance of such critics' anathema to most people. And finally, should man "die" in redeeming his maker, even as Joshua "dies" into the Cree cause to redeem his earthly maker -Grandpa.

Suffering in *The Burning Wood* is caused by memory and by desire beginning with the horrible death of Old Bran (great-grandpa) at the hands of the Crees for alleged adultery. Though Old Bran's death seems to be left at the margins of memory in the mainstream of other deaths, one after the other in the novel, this hidden factor becomes a crucial co-ordinating link to the signification of all other deaths. That is, what is left out becomes crucial to the understanding of the whole. Joshua comes face to face with "death" in all its terrible realities in the horrible car-accident, the death of his friend Thomas and the "suicidal murder" of Coming-day. Joshua is indirectly wound in the coils of death and its psychological constrictions indirectly through the death of his Uncle Josh, the "killing" of trees by the Cartiers, the burial mounds, of both Crees and Christians, and the death of the hooch drinking Indians. Death or the experience of loss becomes a turning point in the lives of each of Williams' protagonists. The death of Thomas (161/162) becomes the turning point in Joshua's life: If his great - grandfather's death had damned him, Thomas' death indirectly redeems

him. Moving from fancies to facts and from romance to realities Joshua begins to bind himself closer to the Indians. The Indian euphemism for death “He sleeps now” (162) Lulu believes that Thomas is not dead but in the “green grass world”. Her attempt to exorcise Joshua out of his grief through her carnal language horrifies him to the point of seeing the Medusa in her. Joshua mourns for the dead matter even as Lulu rejoices for Thomas’ living spirit thus making a Christian of a pagan and a pagan of a Christian. Joshua believes that Lulu is making a scapegoat of him for her sexual desires, whereas he is truly making a scapegoat of the very faith in narratively justifying his carnality with Lulu in the place of concern.

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