Jerome Gagnon
Prof. Alan Bourassa
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Toga! Toga! : The Function of Parties and Higher Education in *The Rebel Angels*

Many film directors have stated their love for shooting party scenes—Blake Edwards' *Breakfast at Tiffany's* being a notable example—because the challenge of recreating the ambiance of a fun party and all the little stories that make it up while also interweaving it with the main characters' own ongoing stories and the film's overall narrative arc is a delicate balancing act that allows them to flex their filmmaking muscles. There's a constant narrowing and expanding of the narrative focus, shifting from the overwhelming flurry of conversation going on amongst its attendants to what we know to be going on with the main characters beyond the party. There is something that is revealed about the story's characters by seeing how they act when put in this context all while juggling their own ongoing stories.

Party scenes in novels are rarer. This is obviously impossible to verify but instinctively rings true. Perhaps because they don't present the same challenge to their creators on a visual and editing level than it does for their filmmaking peers, and so are less of a feat in that regard. For novelists, it is merely a scene that they must write out like any other. Which makes the inclusion of a party scene in a novel all the more noteworthy, for, without the thrill that comes with filming a party scene (such as bonding with drunk extras over a night shoot), the purpose of its inclusion is based solely on what it reveals about the novel's characters and overarching structure.

And so it goes for the party scene in Robertson Davies' *The Rebel Angels*. Occurring near the middle of the book, the Guest Night sequence serves to wrap up the first half of the novel, which focuses mainly on Maria's romantic and academic involvement with Hollier, the executing of Francis Cornish's estate, and setting up the overall academic environment in which this all takes place; and sets up the second in which Darcourt falls in love with Maria, Hollier's sanity unravels as he dives into the realm of murder and gypsy curses, Maria finally manages to reconcile the diverging aspects of her identity, i.e., what she is and what she wants to be, and of course the revelation of the true extent of Parlabane's wickedness. The party sequence serves as a point of convergence for the themes and elements established in the first half—i.e., the more elevated aspiration to seek truth, wisdom, and ecstasy through the equally elevated pursuits of philosophy, art, history, science, etc., and the more grounded realities of gossip, friendship, desire, and all other interpersonal concerns–who were until then unfolding on parallel, compartmentalized tracks, so as to then intermingle all throughout the novel's second half and culminate into a denouement that would otherwise have felt inorganic.

The Guest Night sequence's occurring nearly at the exact middle of the book is no coincidence, nor is Urquhart's reference to Rabelais at the outset comparing the party to "that wonderful chapter about the country people at the feast where Gargantua is born, chatting and joking over their drinks" (Davies 168). Indeed, Davies here is borrowing from Rabelais' tendency to place significant, transformative events at midpoint in his work, a tendency he himself borrowed from

> the medieval literary tradition in which a major poetic event occurs at the midpoint of an epic or a romance. This often involves uncovering a hero's identity to give a deeper sense to the whole work. Half way through the Chevalier de la Charrette, for instance, Guenievre reveals the

> name of Lancelot; in the middle of the Chevalier au Lion, Yvain meets the Lion that explains his name and fame… The deliberate placement of significant meaning at the midpoint of an epic is, of course, [also] exemplified by Dante's Divine Comedy… The midpoint of the *Purgatorio* is itself the middle of the "cantica centrale" in the *Commedia*. There Dante's Virgil announces the Christian theme on which the moral order of the whole poem rests (Rigolot 13).

The use of "this structural device, consisting in placing a "higher sense" at the center of the book" (15) occurs in chapter 29 of *Gargantua*, Rabelais' sequel to *Pantagrue*l focusing on his father's exploits (not unlike how Davies' sequel to *The Rebel Angels, What's Bred in the Bone*, focuses on the life of Francis Cornish), when Gargantua receives a letter from his father Gandgousier telling him to leave his studies and return home to fend off Picrochole's invasion whose "rhetorical purpose is to question the power of a humanist education if it is not harnessed to actual political practice" (16). And so, from then on, the studious Gargantua assumes the role of warrior and leads his father's army to the siege of Picrochole's castle la Roche Clermaud.

That being said, it may not seem immediately obvious how exactly the Guest Night sequence alters or reveals something about *The Rebel Angels'* structure and characters in such a way. But a student of Rabelais such as Davies would not have included this sequence when he did merely for the fun of it or simply to foreshadow the book's denouement, although there is a fair bit of that going on as well. One would be inclined to think that the main revelation or transformation occurs in Darcourt who, after having to listen to McVarish objectify Maria once more, with the added implication that he and Parlabane are aware of her tryst with Hollier, and go on about how looking at her sitting in the front row of his lectures "gives [him] immense pleasure, because students are not, on the whole, decorative, and [he] can't resist decorative women" (Davies 186), leaves with "a feeling… that [he] wasn't [himself] in a way that a few

glasses of wine, taken between six o'clock and ten, could hardly explain" (187). Indeed, after being confronted with a more sexualized perception of Maria that falls outside of the academic context he usually associates her with, he realizes that he is madly in love with her.

Darcourt's transformation here is indicative of what the party scene is in many ways trying to accomplish. In the first half of the novel, the reader is thrown into the world of academia without much context or handholding and may be overwhelmed, much like the executors of Francis Cornish's estate were by his massive and unwieldy art collection, by the university's frantic postmodern zaniness punctuated by academic jargon, references to Rabelais, and shrouded in the vagueness of its inhabitants' pursuits such as Hollier's field of medieval psychology or Froats' study of human excrement. The Guest Night sequence serves as the first real moment we see these scholars, who up until then and even at the beginning of the party were presented as archetypal embodiments of their respective fields ("We were a coherent group, in spite of the divergence of our academic interests. There was Gyllenborg, who was notable in the Faculty of Medicine, Durdle and Deloney, who were in different branches of English…" (166)), in a truly social setting. By seeing them break bread with each other, we are reminded of the self-evident truth that they too are human beings and not just complex learning machines, dispelling any of the "nutty ideas" some readers may have "about universities and the people who work in them" (173), that were perhaps hastily informed by the novel's first half.

But the sequence isn't about a few work colleagues putting their more elevated concerns on hold so that the less unwieldy aspirations of fun times and good conversation may flourish, even though the first rule of the evening is to "never talk business or ask for favours" (173). It should seem evident that a group of scholars put together in a room wouldn't keep from speaking of scholarly things for long. Indeed, at these sorts of functions "The wine performs its ancient

magic of making the drinkers more themselves, and what is in the fabric of their natures appears more clearly" (179). And it is precisely because the shared elevated parts of their personalities are brought out in such an uninhibited form that they are able to form these interpersonal bonds so effectively.

Furthermore, their being together in this casual setting allows them to flesh out their elevated ideals through conversation. Throughout the evening they debate each other over the nature of art, the pursuit of knowledge, and the role universities play in that pursuit ("Universities may produce fine critics, but not artists… Scientists are what universities produce best and oftenest. Science is discovery and revelation, and that is not art" (174)), and their own role within the university ("youth alone could not sustain such an institution. It is a city of wisdom, and the heart of the university is its body of learned men… the young come and go, but we remain. They are the minute-hand, we the hour-hand of the academic clock" (184)). The following passage is a perfect example of how such weighty ideas can evolve from an isolated comment through the process of meaningful conversation, how the elevated is served by the informal, how they can both coexist in one same moment and enhance one another:

> "…Animals know themselves but dimly—even more dimly than we, masters of the world. When Man ate the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge he became aware of himself as something other than a portion of his surroundings, and he dropped his last, carefree turd, as he, with wandering steps and slow, from Eden took his solitary way. After that he had, literally, to mind his step, not to speak of his Ps and Qs."
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> "His solitary way," said Penny Raven. "Just like Milton, the old sour-belly! What about Eve?"
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> "Every child repeats the experience of recognizing himself as unique," said Hitzig, ignoring the feminist outburst.

> "Every child repeats the whole history of life, beginning as a fish, before he begins to experience inhibition," said Gyllenborg.
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> "Every child repeats the Fall of Man, quits the Paradise of the womb, and is launched into the painful world," said Stromwell. "Sub-Warden, have those people up the way completely forgotten that decanters are supposed to be passed?" (175).

This convergence of the novel's elevated and interpersonal fascinations in the Guest Night sequence, similarly to Grandgousier's letter to Gargantua, serves to show how "education is not an answer to anything, unless it is united to some basic endowment of common sense, goodness of heart, and recognition of the brotherhood of mankind" (180). Knowledge on its own is meaningless. It is what one does with it that gives it value. In Davies' case, knowledge's value is measured in the quality of the companionship that it yields. Both the elevated and the interpersonal benefit from intermingling with one another in this way. Meaningful interpersonal connections can only be formed through meaningful exchanges, as opposed to light empty chatter; and one's ideas always benefit from being exposed to a variety of perspectives. The sequence, by depicting such exchanges, states the book's emphasis on the importance of friendship, which is why Maria is eventually willing to venture beyond the academic world she worshipped for so long to find it.

This emphasis on companionship is crucial to what Wayne Booth argues in his book *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*, where he elaborates a relationship to literature that considers the role of the reader both as audience and participant, which

> is essentially the pursuit of the other. He considers individual evolution directly proportional to one's ability "to internalize other selves" ([Booth] 69). "In a month of reading," he reveals, "I can try out more 'lives' than I can test in a lifetime" (485). In the second section of his book he pursues the metaphor of friendship between author and reader, suggesting that a narrative

> is essentially a meeting place for conversation between friends, an invitation "to live during these moments a richer and fuller life than I could manage on my own" (223)" (Patterson 145).

Mimicry forms the basis of most socialization, and so we read the words of others to inform our own personal growth. Literature allows readers to form meaningful connections with people across both time and space, with authors who put parts of themselves into their work that would otherwise never be accessible, especially through casual conversation, thus endearing themselves to us while teaching us something about ourselves. "Our happiness is found in a pursuit of [such] friendship, of something more than our limited 'selves'" (Booth 172), and our ideas and morals are clarified through exposure to those of others.

While both Maria and Darcourt's stories are on some level affected by the convergence of people and ideas on this Guest Night, it is perhaps the reader who is most "transformed" by the novel's midsection. Our identity is changed or "revealed" by the very act of reading, and by being exposed to the myriad of ideas being exchanged throughout the scene. It is crucial in works of postmodern fiction (though I hesitate to apply that label to *The Rebel Angels*, I feel it is the term that best captures its freewheeling energy) to strike a balance between the zaniness and the actual narrative. Otherwise it is simply being clever for cleverness' sake, which is perhaps readers' foremost complaint with postmodernism. And by allowing the novel's elevated and quotidian preoccupations to coalesce here, Davies strikes that balance perfectly by anchoring the book's cleverness to a more human frame, by giving its ideas a heart. It is by encountering these ideas through physical and tangible embodiments (such as Maria as Sophia) that we are most easily able to see them as companions and therefore relate and be receptive to them.

Works Used

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