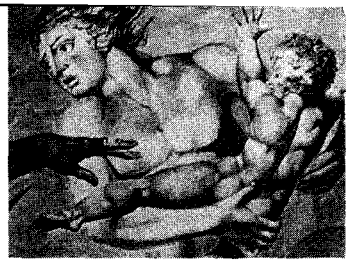

An Interview with Michael Bedard

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Résumé: Lauréat du Prix du gouverneur général pour son roman *Redwork* en 1992, Michael Bedard discute de l'importance de l'influence de Blake, Böhme, Brontë, Dickinson et Flaubert sur son oeuvre. Son affinité avec les poètes romantiques est évidente: il tend à recourir à des métaphores organiques pour décrire le processus créateur et, tout comme Blake, parle non pas "du bien et du mal" mais de l'opposition entre l'imagination et la restriction, la lumière et l'obscurité, la fleur qui s'épanouit et l'entonnoir qui engloutit.

Summary: Michael Bedard, winner of the Governor General's Award for *Redwork* (1992), and one of Canada's most gifted writers for young people, discusses in this interview the influences of Blake, Boehme, Brontë, Dickinson, and Flaubert on his craft and vision. Bedard's kinship with the Romantic poets is clear: he tends to use organic metaphors to describe the creative process, and, like Blake, he speaks not of "good and evil," but of imagination versus restriction, light versus darkness, the unfolding flower versus the restrictive funnel. Bedard also discusses details of his craft — his use of landscape and architectural space and broader issues such as his generic slipperiness (he mixes realism with fantasy, mystery, and horror).

Reading Bedard, one soon becomes familiar with the words "frightening" and "alluring." His characters are drawn to the dark, slipping toward it in dreams and in daylight. Some are enslaved by it; but most come back into the light. All are changed by the experience. But for Bedard the dark is not equivalent to the traditional moral category of evil. It is frightening and it is alluring, double-edged, but it is not outside oneself and it can never be completely vanquished. Indeed, Bedard quarrels with the polarities of good and evil, asserting that human regeneration can be achieved only through the workings of the imagination, which sees the interdependence of the dark and the light, not through some

final conquering of "evil."

Bedard's faith in the imagination informs many of his best portraits: Arthur Magnus of *Redwork*, the protagonist of *Emily*, and Emily Endicott in *A Darker Magic* and *Painted Devil*. All are artists whose seeing into the dark proves redemptive; they are not fragmented, torn or destroyed by the experience. Indeed, if postmodern fiction highlights fragmentation and discontinuity, then Bedard's emphasis on continuity and completion makes him a bit of a literary stray. He finds kinship amongst visionaries, Romantics, and mystics of former times and asserts the primacy of striving for connectedness between people.

It is not only Bedard's vision that catches one by surprise, but also his fine craftsmanship. Typically, he holds several plots in motion at once, handles time slips effortlessly, and interweaves the central plot with long stretches of dream, stories within stories, or Punch and Judy skits. The result can be magical satisfying echoes and challenging parallels, a prose that is often rhythmic, visceral, and characters who seem real. And yet for all of his interest in dream and time slips, Bedard's vision is clearly oriented in time and space. He is not about to abandon this world we know — where the sun sets in his fiction and who lives two doors down. His novels open not with terrors and mysteries, but with the banalities of everyday life: catching cockroaches in jam jars, holding dirty tea parties in sandboxes, and blubbering motor sounds as toy trucks are smashed into walls. But this doesn't mean that Bedard is predominantly a realist. The generic slipperiness of his work is well-known: "realism," "fantasy," "mystery," "psychological thriller," "mystical prose-poetry" — they've all been used to describe his work. And they all fit in some ways. His work is elusive, almost protean. The more one reflects upon it, the more it seems to grow into multiplicity. We can read Bedard as a philosopher spinning fables about the dangers of passivity, an elegist of lower middle-class simplicities and early adolescence, a dramatist staging a battle between light and dark, a poet of tenderness, solitude and silence, a contemplative witness to the allure of the dark. And it is this contemplativeness which produces the true Bedard note: plangent and deep, reflective and awestruck, sympathetic and uncensorious; patient before the vastness of time, the petty cruelties of life, and the protracted confrontations between dark and light that feed moral choice.

Bedard himself is soft-spoken, thoughtful, precise, and quiet about his accomplishments. Of his literary mentors, William Blake, Emily Dickinson, and George MacDonald, Bedard is less elusive than Dickinson and as utterly sincere as Blake and MacDonald in his defense of the Imagination. A self-confessed creature of ritual, Bedard quotes Talking Heads with approval when describing his ideal writing space: "Heaven is a place/Where nothing ever happens." But being the eldest of five children, and having four children of his own (aged four to 21), that sort of heaven, Bedard laughingly admits, has never really been attained. Yet his fiction is the better for it; for me, Bedard's casual, laconic way of presenting the restive atmosphere of improvisation, pettiness, and affection

of a crowded lower middle-class home is just as skilful as his portrayal of Professor Mephisto's frightening allure. It's an unpretentious but loving place of broken nightlights, scraggy dolls, dirty diapers, bicycles with rusty chains, and dark, cool garages. And it's the modest world from which Bedard comes.

When I first asked him about the evolution of his writing, he pointed to two high school English teachers as early influences. These were the people who, as supportive readers and critics of his work, gave him the feedback and encouragement he needed as a young writer. He continued:

BEDARD: I started writing when I was about seventeen and I pretty much knew that's what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. The jobs I've taken since then have all been to further the cause of my becoming a writer — a sort of apprenticeship to my craft. After I did a degree in English and Philosophy at U of T (1971), I worked for seven years at one of the University libraries as a technician. Working there allowed me to become very familiar with other writers while I was practising my craft. Then I worked in a small print shop, where I was a pressman for a few years. I was also interested in producing books, and that's where my first two books came from — collections of original fairy tales for children.

DAVIS: Have you had any training in visual art or drama?

BEDARD: No, nothing formal. I did the layout and design on the fairy tale collections. I enjoy drawing. I did a couple of dramatic productions in high school. But that's about it.

DAVIS: I ask about this because your novels are very visual — in terms of both colour and imagery, but also in terms of spatial organization. I have a keen sense of where there's elbowroom and where there isn't; what lies on my left and what on my right. *A Darker Magic* and *Painted Devil* would make good screen plays.

BEDARD: The visual is very important to me. I know when I'm working on a piece I can only write as far as I can see. When I stop being able to see the scene, I must stop writing. I'm not a writer who can somehow prompt the scene by the act of writing the words.

DAVIS: Does the idea for a scene come first or the image?

BEDARD: The image comes first, then I go chase it. Once I am chasing it, I'm very interested in how I flesh it out — then the diction, the flow of the language, and the texture of the words become very important to me. But none of those things in itself will save the piece if I can't see it.

In the case of all of these novels — well, not all of them, but certainly with *Redwork* — I knew the places I moved people around in. I knew that movie theatre; I had worked in a theatre like that. I knew the house, because I had lived in a house just like that. I knew the park. In fact, I switched the house I had lived in to the site of that park. It's very important to me to be able to clearly move around the physical setting of the piece. I then set the fiction in motion within that space.

DAVIS: In a lot of your work, it's almost as if the plot is already in the landscape too.

BEDARD: I think that's true to a certain extent. It's a very circumscribed world

that I work with, and within it there are three or four key places that rebound off each other. I like to set up triangles: in *Redwork* you have the movie theatre, you have the house, you have the park. Different things happen within each of these places but they all relate to the main characters, and to one another.

DAVIS: So your natural scope is a little like Jane Austen's — you know, "3 or 4 families in a Country village is the very thing to work on." With you, it's three or four locations.

BEDARD: Jane Austen operates within a relatively limited sphere when you think of the big chunks of life other writers would take. She is more interested in what happens within the characters than in the setting itself. That's true for me as well.

DAVIS: Although your settings are far more like autonomous characters: the depot has its own character, the ravine has its own character. So does the library. And there's a striking sort of inevitability about the way in which the plot moves through that landscape of characters.

BEDARD: Yes, I recognize that too. I'm working on a new novel now and it suddenly struck me that I am using a building to ground the piece. It stands at the very centre of the work. As I write, I will start moving things around in relation to the building, but I keep coming back to it, as though to a touchstone.

DAVIS: English Romantic writers come to mind when I think of your work— ones whose settings are so striking. I think of the Brontës' use of houses and moors, for instance, and of George MacDonald and the way he uses the architecture of the house in *The Princess and the Goblin.* It seems to me you share a similar perception of space as something psychological.

BEDARD: I like MacDonald very much. And I've just finished working on a book on the Brontës, which will be coming out in the Spring [of 1997]. It's a picture book. I've looked at one day in the life of the Brontë children.

DAVIS: When they're making Gondol?

BEDARD: Yes. When they were just beginning to create the imaginary world called Glass Town, just starting to write those little books. What I was attempting to do was to show the birth of creativity among a small group of children in what seem to be — at least on the surface — adverse circumstances. I tried to see the whole shape of their lives on one day during their childhood. It's what I like to do, take a little spot of time and open it up.

DAVIS: You did that in *Emily.* And you do give readers a sense of Dickinson as a person; well, as much as any one can give.

BEDARD: She's elusive. The embodiment of mystery. But, she teaches you very deep lessons. On the surface she lived a very limited life in a very limited world. But she opened that out in incredible ways. She saw into the small things of life with a passion and a depth that someone in a larger world might not have seen comparably. Very small events become very important to her. She sees eternity folded in with time.

DAVIS: A lot of the writers you admire seem to have that vision of time. George MacDonald was mystical as well; like Dickinson, he sees eternity in time and he

sees dream and reality as being one and the same thing. Would you say that is a very strong component of your vision too?

BEDARD: Yes, I would say that's true. I've long been a student of Blake and of a man who was his mentor too, Jacob Boehme. Boehme was a visionary writer (born 1575; died 1624), a shoemaker by trade, who wrote a number of profound and demanding books. He has a short saying that he often wrote when he signed his name in friends' autograph books:

> Der ist befreit
> Von allem Streit,
> Wem Zeit ist wie die Ewigkeit
> Und Ewigkeit wie Ziet.

It translates as "That one is free from all strife, for whom time is as eternity and eternity as time." You see this very much in Blake who will say that eternity is in love with the production of time and who will say if the doors of perception were cleansed, we would see everything as it is — infinite.

DAVIS: The earthly, literal world is as nothing, then; it's only a speck in time or it contains the constituents of eternity? I'm not sure I understand.

BEDARD: I'm not sure I'm capable of doing justice to this vision, but I would say that the vision is that eternity is in time; it doesn't exist apart from time. The eternal is manifested in the things that we see and touch. It's not something that is set apart from or opposed to the things one sees and one touches. The outer world is in some way a signature or figure of an inner invisible realm. The inner pushes into the outer and manifests itself there. The difficulty is, of course, in putting yourself into the state to perceive that .

DAVIS: So, it is a false opposition — the earthly and the heavenly?

BEDARD: Utterly.

DAVIS: How does the idea of eternity folded in with time relate to the specifics of your novels? How does it relate to Magnus's alchemical experiments, the reappearance of Professor Mephisto to three generations of women, Magnus and Cass's mystical links, or even Alison's thesis?

BEDARD: I cannot pretend to answer this question. I don't want to give the mistaken impression that for me the movement in writing is from intellect to imagination. It is rather the other way around. Writing is dreaming, and writing a novel is like dreaming a long dream. Ultimately, as Ursula Le Guin correctly states, "Dreams must explain themselves."

But apart from the specifics, I think it is true to say that the work of imaginative fiction takes place in a realm where eternity and time walk hand in hand. The world of the novels may look in one sense like the external world, but it is not. The scene is set in Imagination, and in that country eternity is in time and time in eternity, fear and wonder walk hand in hand. The rules that apply in the daylight world are down.

I began my work by writing poetry and fairy tales. I think perhaps that is still what I'm doing. The form has changed, but the intent is the same. Baudelaire

says that the aim of poetry is to introduce "l'infini dans le fini." This, I believe is the aim of all art, to glimpse eternity clothed in the things of time, shining through the things of time. This is what moves us in a piece of poetry, a fine sculpture, a beautiful dance; we see the harmony of inward and outward, the finite and the infinite, eternity and time.

DAVIS: Aside from Blake and Dickinson, are there other people who have influenced you — either in a technical way or in terms of your own vision?

BEDARD: One writer I particularly admire and return to is Flaubert. I also like Truman Capote, especially some of his earlier work, and Willa Cather. (She is really good in something like *A Lost Lady* [1923] or *My Mortal Enemy* [1926], the shorter transition pieces between the earlier prairie novels, which I also like, and the later stuff, which I can't read.) And I really admire the Brontës. Among writers for children, I think Paula Fox is the best stylist writing in the US right now. When it comes to fantasy I like the British writers. I have a soft spot in my heart for British fantasists like Susan Cooper and Alan Garner. Garner is a very significant writer. He does things with children's writing that challenge the genre. And I love his lean, economical style.

DAVIS: There is some of that leanness in your own prose. Like Garner, you can evoke this strong sense of background feeling behind the text. An enormous pressure behind the slight words.

BEDARD: Well, there are a lot of silences in Garner's work. You have the feeling that what is unsaid is as important if not more important than what is said. There are certain key points in his work, often at the conclusion, where he will draw back and he won't give you what you expect, and that is important for me too. It is very important to leave silences, because in fiction speech and silence interdepend.

DAVIS: Like the relationship between white space and type?

BEDARD: Yes. I think you should feel the silences between the words and between the lines. Those are the reader's entrance into the book.

DAVIS: You want the reader to enter into a book and create with you?

BEDARD: The reader is really a co-creator. It is not up to me to detail everything to such an extent that I put the reader's imagination out. It's rather up to me to sketch things and to touch on detail to the extent that I bring the piece alive, but beyond that the reader comes in and fleshes it out. I don't like describing, for instance, the physical aspects of characters in a book. There are some people I do it to, but I never describe what Cass looks like in *Redwork*. I think the reader should do that. It always makes me feel awkward when I read a book, even a Nancy Drew novel, where you will get a sentence like, "Nancy, a bright-eyed brunette teenager." That sort of stuff makes me cringe.

DAVIS: And yet when I think of children who are not described physically in a book, I think of C.S. Lewis. His children are, to me, too bodiless and faceless; it's almost as though they have been de-sexed, neutered. Your "undescribed" are different — there seems to be enough weight to your characters that I don't notice that you haven't described them.

BEDARD: That's as it should be. You need enough of their speech and their thoughts to really get inside them and open them out.
DAVIS: So, how do you leave room for the reader to co-create and also flesh out the characters enough that they seem to have presence?
BEDARD: I think it is important that you feel intimately with characters, and that is something that you do from the inside out rather than from the outside in. I'm more interested in getting you as close to the centre of the character as I can — so close that you are seeing with the character. So, it's often a matter of controlling the perspective.
DAVIS: Is that why you tend to write the novels mainly through the eyes of the child protagonists instead of exclusively through an omniscient narrator? It suggests a kind of respect for your young characters.
BEDARD: You have to have a profound respect for your characters. Blake says that everything that lives is holy because in each living thing there is a centre opening — it's the same centre, but it opens differently. In something as small as a piece of fiction, I try to enter into each of these characters' lives and open their centres. While they may appear on the surface to be pretty insignificant, once you start seeing with them, you begin to see a whole distinct vital universe opening up. What I like to do in a book is set different universes in motion and see what happens when they intersect.
DAVIS: When you set those different worlds in motion do you deliberately parallel them or do they just happen to parallel in your hands?
BEDARD: I don't think I deliberately parallel. But it certainly is the case that when you are working on a piece you are looking for harmony, fullness, completion. You have to feel that the end of the book bends back on itself, touches the beginning. There has to be that sense that things have come full circle. Linear progression is not enough. When I set a theme going in the earlier part of the book and I repeat that theme later in the book, it will be different because I have touched it once already. The second time you touch the theme, it has more implications and overtones than it had before. It reverberates — that's what I like to see happening in a book. When I see a piece start to resonate, it's beginning to live and I know I am on the right track.
DAVIS: So, is writing like orchestrating?
BEDARD: I have said many times that for me writing a book is less like building a house than it is like having a child. I don't have the sense when I'm working on a piece that I am like a carpenter who has an external design and that I'm measuring pieces, fitting things and trying to shape something out there. However the piece starts — and for me I usually start with a strong visual image — once it starts, it's like something stopping in the flow of time. Then things start to circle around it and set up a vortex. That first start is like a seed that is germinating. It's my business as a writer to give it the guarded space in which to grow so that it will unfold according to its own inner dictates. That means, for instance, I don't talk about a piece while I'm writing it because it's like opening

a womb — you don't do it. This means that you can't bring the lessons that you learn from writing one book to the next book, because the next book will have its own dictates as to how it unfolds.

DAVIS: You use metaphors drawn from nature to describe your art — not just having a baby, but being a vortex or being a seed that's germinating or a centre that's unfolding. Yet in the eighteenth century, writers like Dryden often used architectural metaphors to describe the creative aspect of their work. And architectural metaphors seem very popular today when children's writers describe their work.

BEDARD: I'm in complete sympathy with William Blake's rebellion against his period. I think that the period he was rebelling against is quite like the period that we are living in right now. If you're writing at the rate of someone like R.L. Stine, who writes two novels a month (if you can believe that!), then the metaphor of architecture probably applies. He's writing in a particular genre; he knows the conventions, and he's interested in getting out a large body of work. He builds them. I prefer books that escape the shallows and set out on the high seas.

DAVIS: Are there writers whose craft you admire or whose work seems to resonate and "live," as you put it?

BEDARD: I admire Flaubert's consummate skill as a craftsman. I know of no other writer who can touch a particular theme and bring it to life by one or two quick strokes. He does this time and again in *Madame Bovary*. Let me see if I can think of an example. In the beginning of the book when he is first describing Emma Bovary before she is married, there is an episode where her future husband has come to visit her. He talks and they share a liqueur together. She only pours the tiniest drop into her glass and then she reaches in with her tongue and licks out the very bottom. He will do something like that and completely open the character. A little touch like that! It's as if he will take a mental picture and will give it one, two, three beats. At each touch he will make the picture more particular by giving you detail. So by the end of the three beats, the thing is absolutely alive. Now, I don't know any other writer who does this as well as Flaubert. That's why I admire him so much. He is a consummate craftsman. I also love his rhythm. He will set up a rhythm and have it going for pages. And you will feel the flow of his sentences. When he was writing, he would drum out the rhythms of his sentences with his fingers on the table; and when he got near the end of *Madame Bovary* he said he had not written the last 20 pages yet, but he knew them because he could feel the flow of the sentences. That's what I like about him. He was very much a poet who found himself working in prose but he tried to make prose sing in a way that it had not sung before.

DAVIS: Do you have habits like that — drumming out sentences?

BEDARD: Well, I write by hand because it keeps me closer to the rhythm of the work. I think that writing is basically a very primitive craft and the closer you keep it to its primitive roots the better. This is important to me. I need to feel the pull of the pen across the page.

DAVIS: You admire the work of a realist, a mystic, a fantasist — where does

your work fit in here? In what genre would you place it?
BEDARD: I don't think in those terms. The book comes in its own form; I follow it there. I know all three of the novels have elements of fantasy in them. I can't see myself ever writing a novel that would be straight realistic. I don't know if that puts me in a genre or not, but I try not to think about the piece fitting into a particular type of writing.
DAVIS: One of the things I've noticed is that the three novels all began in realism, depicting an essentially middle class world.
BEDARD: Yes, it's a lower middle-class world.
DAVIS: I've always loved your detailed descriptions of these domestic homes which are never blissful. There is always someone screaming — as in *A Darker Magic* when Albert bellows and crashes about.
BEDARD: That's what it was like in my family! I'm the oldest of five children. I think people who come from larger families may feel a certain echo of their own experience.
DAVIS: That's true for me, too, I think, though, that these portrayals of the domestic scene come across as realistic because there's no melodrama or sentimentality. Tim Wynne-Jones's work is like that as well. He shows a similar kind of love for family life and a similar kind of respect for children. His characters are not as noisy and obnoxious as yours, but you both depict domestic disorder in a tender way. I think of Emily Endicott who puts her room downstairs to get away from her siblings, but when she wakes up in the morning her mother is washing Albert's soiled diapers right near her and she has to drag herself upstairs and take care of Albert. And she does it without complaint.
BEDARD: It's a close bond between her and Albert. I really like the relationship that obtains between an older and younger sibling. I think that can be a very tender and tendering relationship.
DAVIS: Did you have that in your family?
BEDARD: Yes, I was often called on to watch the younger kids because there is a seventeen-year gap between me and the youngest. For someone like Emily, who is on the borderline between being a child and an adult, having the influence of a younger child is beneficial. The younger sibling offers a reminder of where you came from and is helpful in developing where you are going to go.
DAVIS: It's strange how easily that very realistic portrayal of sibling relationships and the domestic world gradually bleeds into a fantasy world where a mystery plot begins. It happens almost seamlessly. I know that at Western where I teach children's lit., the course divides itself by genre, and I never know where to put your work. Do you see the notion of genre itself as something useful for cataloguing books but otherwise sort of false?
BEDARD: Yes I do. I think that the task of the writer is to break down as many barriers that would enclose the writing as he possibly can. I think that there must be an element of insurrection in the act of writing itself. I'm uncomfortable with the writing being tame enough to fit comfortably in one particular genre.

DAVIS: So the slips between genres can have thematic or philosophical import? Like the links MacDonald or Phillipa Pearce make between dream and reality by blurring realism and fantasy?
BEDARD: Well, I think it's important to the way we live out our lives. It's important not to clearly follow these distinctions.
DAVIS: Why though?
BEDARD: Because then you are open to the essential mystery, the awe that underlies the whole of our lives. To the small child the world is utterly new and the things we take as solid and dead and unmoving are suffused with life. It is very much the business of the writer to keep that vision percolating.
DAVIS: Doesn't the blurring of genres complicate the issue of where the "real" world is and who lives there?
BEDARD: Well, I know that in *A Darker Magic*, Emily's mother was always talking about "the real world," and I'm not quite sure what that means. Let's look at something like *Redwork*. What is the real world in a world like that? Is it somehow the world that is outside and apart from all of these various lives that are being lived? Is it a common denominator that they all sort of touch upon? Or is the real world something that opens from the centre of each one of them. Mr. Magnus's world — is that an unreal world? His world is very much his apartment and his memories, and his search for the stone: that's a real world; that's an utterly real world. A lot of people have this sense that the real world is the world that we passively accept rather than the one we actively create. But reality lies in the creation of worlds, rather than the passive acceptance of them.
DAVIS: So, the tendency for people to think that ugly reality — smoke stacks and child abuse — is reality, and anything that is beautiful or mysterious is not reflects their sense of their agency?
BEDARD: Yes, it's the natural consequence of believing that reality is something that exists outside of you and which you must somehow passively accept and come to terms with. That belief makes one feel very powerless about their reality. When you feel powerless and helpless, reality will be the ugly things, the dark things, the inevitability of one's own deterioration or demise — these function as your reality, and the only thing you can do to avoid them is to entertain yourself. Turn away from them one way or another.
DAVIS: Is this, then, where evil or the dark side of life comes from?
BEDARD: I find that I don't think in terms of good and evil because it is very easy to use those terms to one's own purposes. I immediately think of someone like Blake when I think of the notion of good and evil. When he was writing *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, he would say that what most people consider good was "reasonable" and what most people consider evil was passionate and fiery. He was right; that is what his particular period thought about those two terms. He took it as his business to reverse those things to show that there was good in evil and evil in good. So, following him, I find that I don't use those terms and I'm more comfortable talking about light and darkness, life and death.

Imagination is life; it is not something on the other side of life and light. It is life. I would say that life is imagination versus death and darkness. I hope I have not given the feeling in my work that imagination is something dark.

DAVIS: No, but isn't the imagination really the conduit into both sides — the light and the dark?

BEDARD: I would say that the imagination will lead one into life and light.

DAVIS: But like Blake, you show that you can't just stay in light and life because you can't know it unless you are lead into death, darkness, secrets.

The fool and the wise man
don't see the same tree.
What you see is a function
of what you are.

BEDARD: Exactly, you encounter the two all the time. Light doesn't come from light but from dark. You live in a world of joy and pain and flip between them. The two frame one another and define each other. The characters in the light have been sensitive to the darkness. They have seen it. And it's their openness to the imagination that makes them vulnerable to the dark, too.

DAVIS: So, do people contain both the powers of light and darkness within themselves?

BEDARD: Absolutely.

DAVIS: Is one better than the other?

BEDARD: Yes, absolutely. I would say that while our lives are composed of a vast "yes" and a vast "no," the "yes" is the side one must come down on. You have to make a choice. As Boehme says "We are each our own makers and shapers." You can't just sit back and say "yes, there are elements of light and darkness in our lives." Within and without there are elements of openness, freedom, expansion, as well as elements of contraction and cutting down and one cannot just observe them objectively apart from the fray. No, we are intimately involved in these things, because they not only occur in the world outside our selves but also inside ourselves. So we must choose between the light and the dark. I think you can serve the light for twenty minutes and then serve the dark for two hours, but then you know you should be serving the light. It is a battle that never ends.

DAVIS: The forces in this battle — the light and the dark — how are they manifested every day?

BEDARD: We are all composed of imagination and selfhood and/or imagination and reason. The polarity is between that which opens in oneself, which naturally expands and makes connections between things, and that which tends to close down in oneself — that puts one outside oneself. If you stand outside yourself (by using reason), then you are a stranger to yourself because your imagination that wants to open is not opening, and you can't bear to see it opening in the things around you, so you begin to cut them down. The operative term for me is whether something opens and unfolds.

To Dante, heaven is a flower and hell is a funnel. The flower is organic: it

opens and unfolds its life from its centre. It does this without contention with other things. Hell is a funnel: it sucks everything into itself; it consumes. These images speak to me.

DAVIS: So, is the force of darkness in your novels a force that constricts and suffocates?

BEDARD: The force of darkness in *A Darker Magic* and *Painted Devil* is basically a surrendering of one's own self; it's a mass giving over of oneself unto the power of another.

DAVIS: I notice that the image that you use for that is the *doll* in both *A Darker Magic* and *Painted Devil* — that image of an ecstatic plastic or ceramic thing that only stares out.

BEDARD: Passivity is the dark. We are called to action. We are called to unfold ourselves creatively. Once we become passive to our world, the dark rises. If you stand apart from your world passively, any kind of activity you view around you becomes a threat, so you wish to cut that down too. We are all very good critics but we are not very good creators.

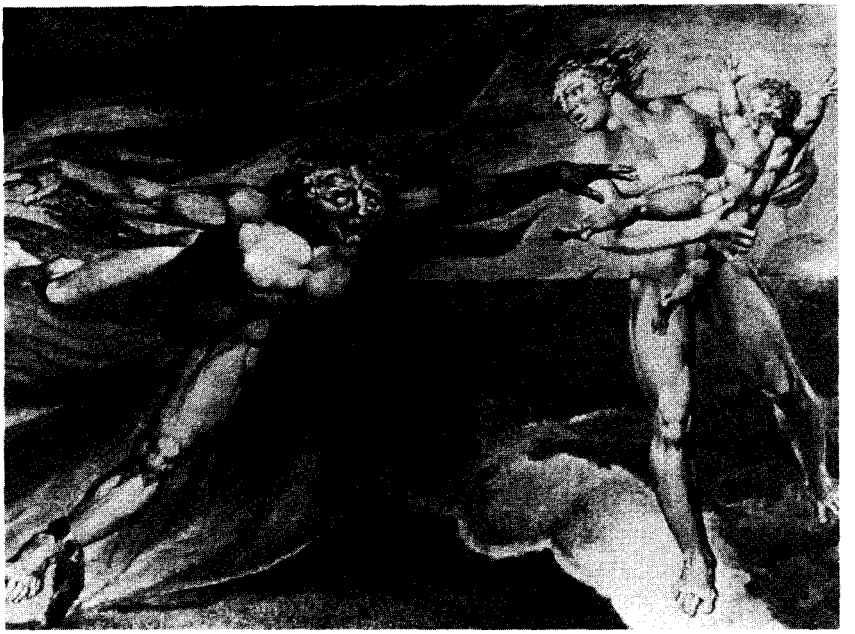
DAVIS: Do you remember the painting that Blake did of Los and Orc where the one figure is chained and enfolded in fire and the other walks on water, holding the child? [See illustration on page 34.]

BEDARD: Yes, "The Good and Evil Angel." I think that painting is very true: these two beings are inhabiting the same world but they are in two different worlds at the same time. If you look at the evil figure in that picture you will see that he is blind. He cannot see the world the good angel can. Blake, like Boehme, very much believes that heaven and hell are everywhere present, and that we enter one or the other with the turning of our wills. The fool and the wise man don't see the same tree. What you see is a function of what you are.

DAVIS: In the painting, "The Good and Evil Angel," the figure on the side of the light is holding a child, innocence. Does that resonate with you in your own work? Do you represent childhood as a state of innocence — the absence of experience — or do you think that children contain within themselves something that adults don't have? I'm thinking of *The Catcher in the Rye* or of Wordsworth's poetry where adults have lost their innocence. They trailed their clouds of glory so long ago that they live inland and they don't know where the sea is.

BEDARD: Yes, that resonates for me very strongly. I do think that childhood, for all of the difficulties that young children can encounter, is a period of innocence. The child's vision is one of wonder and awe. The child is fully imaginative. As the child becomes more accommodated to the world and more self-conscious — around ten, eleven, twelve — some of their initial lights begin to go out. Suddenly it is not enough just to be themselves; it is very important how they are perceived. So these original openings that the child had are curbed and curtailed.

It is quite possible to go through the rest of one's life forgetting this original spontaneous unfolding that went on in one at an early age, and to become rigid,



to dwell outside oneself. It is important to keep coming back to that tender thing in you. One can do it by being in the presence of children or by being engaged in any number of other creative occupations. I think the creator is almost of necessity child-like. There is a certain tenderness in the creative person and a certain discomfiture with what many people accept as being grown-up.

I recently completed a piece on two women sculptors who lived in Toronto in the earlier part of this century. They were very at ease in their own world, but they felt ill at ease in the social world. They didn't pay much attention to their clothes. They didn't view themselves in that type of external way. I've met a number of intense people in my life who were very passionate about whatever they did and they didn't seem to own a mirror. They would dress oddly and wouldn't take care of themselves in the way someone comfortable in the world might. The truly creative person lives in an absence of mirrors.

DAVIS: It is true that Emily Dickinson got along very well with children and so many of Blake's visions came to him when he was a child.

BEDARD: And the figure of the child recurs. He addresses his work to children of a future age.

DAVIS: How do you see Cass, Maddy and Emily, then, in this respect? They are not sentimentalized, idealized children.

BEDARD: When I speak of the child, I'm speaking of someone probably before the age of five. But some of my characters keep the child alive in them. Take Alice, for instance. She has a relationship with Lela which I think is important; it keeps

that tender thing alive in her. And her aunt Emily has a relationship with her. So, who Alice is is not a function of who she is but who she encounters. In a certain sense these three figures — Lela, Alice, Emily — are all parts of one another. When we meet Lela and Emily, Alice's character is broadened or enlarged. I don't think that the flow of darkness could have been stopped by Emily on her own in *Painted Devil* or by Miss Potts alone in *A Darker Magic*. It had to be in the conjunction of certain characters that the darkness was stopped. It's the fragile connections between people that harbour the light and the strength to resist the darkness.

DAVIS: Do you deliberately make the conjunction of characters intergenerational?

BEDARD: I'm attracted to the notion of alliance across time, openness to others who at first don't seem like oneself. I also sometimes have a sense of looking at a single character through a whole span of life.

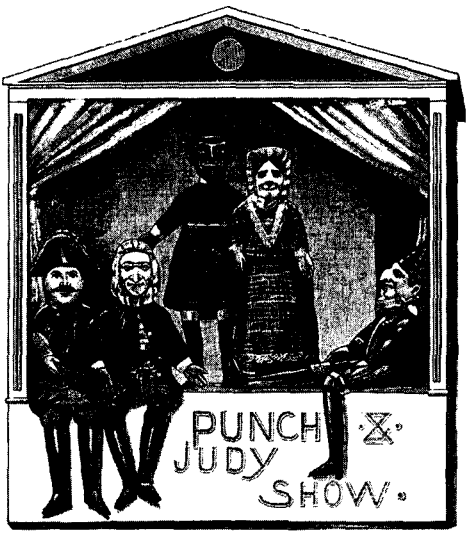
DAVIS: George MacDonald also has a tendency to link youth and age. Usually the older person has some kind of special power that the younger doesn't. The younger is being tutored to some extent. There seems to be a greater equality between the young and the old in your books. Mr. Magnus cannot come to openness without the children. Irma Potts needs Emily. And in fact goes out in search of her.

BEDARD: Yes, that's true. The younger characters usually choose to align themselves with the older ones, but not at first. At the very centre of each of these books there is a moment when the young character is called upon to make a choice. I see that most clearly in *Redwork* where Cass is described as looking down at the sorry state of the house he is living in. The kids in the park across the street are eyeballing the place with hostility, and there's a very definite moment when he decides to go down and cut the grass, trim the hedge — do something this old man can't do for himself. By that very act, he is aligning himself with the old man. He is bringing himself from a state of observation to a state of action, and from that point on he is aligned with that character. So he is able to act on behalf of and in concert with Mr. Magnus. In the same way, when Alice hears Emily's absurd story about the force of darkness recurring, or when Emily hears from Miss Potts about this force at a puppet show, they react with incredulity. It's only as they come to know and sympathize with this character that they are brought to a state of acting in that world. There's always a transition point between wariness and passivity and alliance and activity. And our choices for creative action are always built on such small, subtle things.

DAVIS: Couldn't characters like Sid Specter and Frankie Grogan be described as "active," though. They have anarchic wills. I see that they function like the funnel, with their reductive consciousnesses. They reduce people to objects, bring people down. But is this not a kind of aggressive activity?

BEDARD: But I wouldn't call that action, if one engages in restraint of some sort or another. That isn't action; it is a furtherance of the disease of passivity.

DAVIS: You don't explore how it is that this "disease of passivity" or desire to restrain comes into the world. Your novels are not sociological. But do you think



that it has something to do with our modern world? Do you think the Sid Specters and Frankie Grogans express general human tendencies or do you think they reflect specific societal tendencies?

BEDARD: If I were to go any place, any time, I think I'd find the same thing.

DAVIS: Is that why you use Punch and Judy to help portray darkness — they seem to transcend local culture or history?

BEDARD: I didn't know that I was going to use Punch and Judy. I knew that I was dealing with a puppet show, one that was haunted. I fished around in fairy tales and I explored several ideas, but none seemed to be right. I had a fascination with Punch and Judy since I read *Riddley Walker* (1981) by Russell Hoban — an incredible post-apocalyptic novel. I decided to start experimenting with Punch and Judy and the more I learned about it the more fascinated I became. The time that it was most popular was in the early Victorian period.

DAVIS: What purpose do you think it served?

BEDARD: The Punch and Judy show was popular with the poor who felt oppressed. The Punch figure is like themselves — sort of the eternal child who lashes out at oppressors in a way that makes people laugh. It's not a blood and gore show. Historically, the audience gradually changed from the working poor to the children of the powerful classes. Punch was invited into the parlours of the rich. A lot of the darker elements in the play vanished when the performances were controlled by the very class that the earliest Punch and Judy shows satirized. At the end of the later performances, Punch got his comeuppance when the devil took him away. It becomes a play about good and evil where the good and the evil are understood in terms of moral law. Well, in the earlier street performances of the Punch and Judy plays, the devil could not take Punch away. The people on the street would not allow that to happen.

DAVIS: So, in your novel, Punch is able to defeat the devil.
BEDARD: That's right. In the play as it is first uncovered by Mr. Dwyer, the devil does take Punch at the end, and so the whole force of the dark is understood one way: the devil will get the victory. He will take Punch. And so after the climax, they decide to revise the play and do an earlier version where the devil doesn't take Punch. So it goes back more to the roots of the Punch and Judy play.
DAVIS: Which you feel is somehow a more liberating version?
BEDARD: Yes. After Punch has killed his wife, thrown the baby out the window, killed the policeman, and killed the doctor, to have the devil come and take him away at the end feels right on one level. But I think that's the wrong level. Punch is a figure of imagination and must be judged in those terms. He's the child who acts spontaneously — and not always in ways one wishes — running up against the forces of constraint and the barriers that society imposes. His rebellion is imaginatively liberating. The audience knows that none of these victims really die. They will all be there 20 minutes later when the next show begins.
DAVIS: So, is he just an exaggeration of the boy who points out that the Emperor is not wearing any clothes?
BEDARD: Punch says what we sometimes wish we could, and so he's important for keeping us honest. And I know that many people react negatively to Punch and Judy plays. They're very much looked down upon now. And I'm sorry about that.
DAVIS: What about the other interesting attraction in your work, and that is to alchemy? Obviously, it's used to characterize Mr. Magnus. But the notion of going to the core, and having to go through the furnace is very Blakean — you have to endure experience and something like death before you reach the stage of higher innocence. Are these things linked in your mind — alchemy and Blake? Or are they separate?
BEDARD: They're very much linked in my mind in all sorts of ways. Alchemy in *Redwork* functions as an emblem of any creative enterprise. Take, for instance, writing. You are dealing with raw material — words — and you are attempting to spiritualize them, purify them. The dream of alchemy is to come up with a stone that could transform base metals to gold or silver. On one level, that was the aim. On another level, it was about the purification of oneself. Any type of artistic activity is two-pronged: you're both engaged in the act itself and, one hopes, in gradual enlightenment of the self. That's how I feel alchemy functions in the novel. Mr. Magnus is not really interested in making gold. He's interested in maintaining contact with a vision, a vision that has a lot to do with who he was as a child. So, it's something he takes up and never quite works out. So he does it again, and each time he gets a little closer perhaps. But it never completely works out. This is what any artist does. Alchemy is art.
DAVIS: Is the Emily figure, like Magnus, an artist figure? Emily Endicott is in both *A Darker Magic* and *Painted Devil*. There's a bit of her in Alison Parry. Is she Emily Dickinson?

BEDARD: She is a figure who has evolved over the course of my work. When I first met her in *A Darker Magic* she had some elements of myself in her. When I came to write *Painted Devil*, I didn't know she was going to be in the book. It wasn't until I had her in Alice's home, when I was calling her Aunt Elida, I became aware that there was something that had happened to her in her past that would make her sensitive to the puppet show and to the force of darkness. I can still recall the moment when I suddenly realized that this aunt was Emily, that she was grown up, had returned to this town, and this puppet show was the occasion for the recurrence of the force of darkness that had appeared in the earlier book. I had no idea that I was doing this! Emily had kept a journal when she was with Miss Potts. So I made her a poet. Part of her becoming a poet was this experience of darkness she had as a child. I put an Emily Dickinson poem as the epigraph for the first book and so I already had intimations of Emily Dickinson for Emily in the first book. As I looked more deeply into Dickinson as a symbolic figure, I came up with the idea for the Emily book. Emily Dickinson had an encounter with darkness early in her life.

DAVIS: What was the nature of that encounter?

BEDARD: At one point in her life she moved with her family to a house near a graveyard. The funeral processions went by her door on their way to the graveyard. I think the impact upon her is revealed in her continuous preoccupation with death. That proximity to death stayed with her, became part of her emotional make-up. So, I had a character who had had an encounter with death, and she became this Dickinson figure. That's the evolution of the character. It was fascinating for me to take the life of one character beyond the confines of one book — to pick her up, with the space of years intervening, in another book. It spoke to me of the continuing life of the book and of that character.

DAVIS: I was wondering about her, about this outside figure who can talk to children or identifies with them. Typically, she is not judgmental. I think of Irma Potts, Emily Endicott. They tend to live on the margins of society. Is this a necessity for insight? The observer has to be on the outside?

BEDARD: Perhaps the reason these figures seem to be on the outside is because they are further inside. They are champions of the imagination. They are active.

DAVIS: They're also relatively alone with their knowledge. Emily in *A Darker Magic* does not tell her parents or her brother and sister what she is going through. The only person she can talk to is Irma Potts and she never really confides her fears in Irma. Alice handles her knowledge and fears in a similar way. I was wondering if their relative aloneness is important to their developing insight? Do you think it's a precondition for insight? In other words, in order for kids to grow up and gain moral independence, do they need the guidance of an adult or do they need some solitude?

BEDARD: Both of these characters are alone with their experiences. They must come to terms with them on their own. I believe there are things that each of us are alone with. In the case of the fundamental choices in life, one is always alone

with them. One can't look for answers from someone else. At the core of the imaginative character there is silence and solitude. A large part of becoming that type of person lies in coming to terms with the solitude and the silence in oneself and being able to operate from that centre. Emily and Alice are strong and they are not completely isolated. They live within quite dynamic and very alive families.

DAVIS: So, solitude and silence are natural to your characters.

BEDARD: You need solitude to face the dark. Silence can be the condition or spur of reflection. Mystery lives there. It is the seeming nothing that has to be shown as the most important thing to be preserved in one's own life. Though my business is with words, and that's how I make my way, I firmly believe that the artist in our day must be in the service of silence. That is the ground art has to defend.

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