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The Divine Ryans. Wayne Johnston.

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REVIEW

The Divine Ryans. Wayne Johnston. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1990. 233 p. $26.95.

STUART PIERSON

ON ONE SIDE the Ryans — The Divine Ryans — who are Catholic, bigoted, sexually stopped-up, and, as they are portrayed in this third novel of Wayne Johnston's, flat, comical and more than a little sinister. On the other side, Linda Delaney (Mrs. Donald Ryan), who married into the Ryan family, and her two children, Mary and Draper Doyle Ryan, the latter narrating this account of dissolution and death in the ranks of a family come to the end of the line after years and years of eminence in two trades requiring digging in the dirt: journalism and undertaking.

The late Reginald Ryan Sr., the patriarch of the present family, disinherited his namesake, Reg Jr., for reasons unstated, and in consequence left family power in the hands of the widowed Philomena Ryan Clark, a fierce and unbending harpy who with the help of her grand vizier brother Seymour, a priest, and her sister Louise, a wheel-chair-confined nun, rules the house of Ryan on principles perfected at *casa Borgia* in the High Renaissance. Both Reg Ryan Jr. and Linda Ryan (with Mary and Draper Doyle) had their houses sold out from under them and had thus been forced to move in with Aunt Phil, all of this of course having been engineered by the latter on the grounds of the family economy, for the sake of its unity and the integrity of its capital. Reg Jr., who has given up the struggle, takes refuge in irony and carefully managed eccentricity; Linda, ferociously protective of her children, fights bitterly against the regime, with little guerrilla attacks such as giggling midnight conferences with her children in which the tyrants are mocked and scorned, and also with heroic and determined stands such as this one after Aunt Phil drags Draper Doyle to a wake at Ryan's Funeral Home because the deceased is a small boy and the occasion therefore instructive (that is, terrifying):

> "Draper Doyle is my child," my mother said. "I've told you before that I don't want you taking him to wakes and I'm telling you now. You had no business taking him without my permission. I'm sure I can trust you not to do it again." (133)

The tone of this passage suggests the depth and permanence of the battle-lines.

But we are still in Johnston-land, and that means a lot of jokes in the tents behind the lines. Most of these are provided by Uncle Reg, who is cut out of the same cloth as the father in *Bobby O'Malley*. (The pattern seems to be: patriarchy one or a couple of generations back, followed by a cohort of strong and sexless women and irresolute men, who are devious and extramarital in sexual expression, leaving the Bobby O'Malleys and Draper Doyle Ryans with a leaderless or model-less struggle towards manhood.) Some of Uncle Reg's sallies are funny. There was the myth that he was in charge at Ryans. People believed he was the "power behind the crone" (that is, Phil), when actually he was only a combination of chauffeur and gofer, "a gauffeur, you might say." Again, he referred to himself as tall: a shade over six feet. But this had a way of becoming "a shade, over six feet tall." Reg's Tiny Timometer, an instrument that measures the cuteness that cloys us all in the movies on view around Christmas, is a welcome invention. While Aunt Phil wept through *Going My Way* or *The Bells of St. Mary's*, Uncle Reg would wink, signalling that the pointer had nearly gone off the scale. During the same season

> I often played Tiny Tim to Uncle Reginald's Scrooge, or Uncle Scrooginald, as he called himself. "Please Mr. Scrooge," I'd say, "something to eat for my little sister."
>
> "I will give you," Uncle Scrooginald would say, "in exchange for your wheelchair and your sister's crutch, and all the clothes that you and your sister have on your backs, one cup of lukewarm water."
>
> "Oh God bless you, Mr. Scrooge," I'd say, "God bless you, you're a saint." (94)

Draper Doyle unfortunately takes this sort of thing too far, causing his uncle to tell him that, if he persists, he will make "a pudding of [his] plums."

And with that remark I am sorry to have to report that Johnston himself takes things a little too far. For at the heart of this story, we learn only at the end, is a misery. A homosexual man is forced to marry an unsuspecting woman for reasons of family. Uncle Reg and his wife Delia were childless; Phil's children, of course, were not Ryans; the other children were celibate; that left Donald to perpetuate the name. He hadn't wanted to marry. He would have preferred the priesthood, but he succumbed to the pressure because he could think of no way to explain why not. Thus the plot's inner sanctum is a dirty little secret. And since the narrator is nine years old in the year of the book's action, and no one on the scene has an admissible sex life, the consequence is a whole barrage of innuendoes, euphemisms, and coy reticences that have spilled over into the author's very style. Here is the narrator's version of what his Aunt Louise refers to as "the sex act":

> I believed that the man put his pee-swollen bud inside the woman — that is, up her backside, there being, so far as I knew, no other place to put it — then did his pee, the unlikely result of which was that the woman had a baby some time later. (41)

Along the same lines goes a recurrent motif concerning the boy's scrotum, a vessel of some importance, since it contains, we may hope, the seeds of future Ryans. Uncle Reginald

> told me it was wrinkled because it was thousands of years old, being the only part of the human body which had passed down through generations, God giving to each newborn baby a "used Methuselah," Uncle Reginald called it, the hairless, wrinkled sage between my legs...
>
> "The wisest of the wise," said Uncle Reginald. "The oracle of oracles. The centre of the world."
>
> "My Methuselah is the centre of the world?" I said. He nodded.
>
> "The centre of your world," he said. There was even an invocation to Methuselah, he said, to be spoken while looking at him, that is, while looking at his reflection in a mirror held between your legs. "Oh Methuselah," said Uncle Reginald, "oh Great Hairless One, Great wrinkled One, oh Oracle of Oracles, oh Prince of Prunes, oh wisest of the wise, I command you, tell me all." (52)

It helps a little that Draper Doyle asks this diminutive pundit about hockey scores, but only a little. The joke fails, and is tiresome.

Similarly the central action of the novel, with its symbolic swirls and flips, seems to me to be unsuccessful. An eight-year-old boy decides to wish his father a happy birthday early. His father works nights at the family newspaper, the *Daily Chronicle*. The boy bursts into his father's office only to find him being buggered by a colleague. The father commits suicide, and the boy discovers the body. All of this we learn in the penultimate chapter. We are told at the beginning only that Draper Doyle has "blanked out" all of these events, including the subsequent wake and funeral. "My 'missing week', uncle Reginald called it" (9). The central thread of the novel is the boy's recovery, a year later, of his knowledge, which he uses, once he has it all back, to blackmail Aunt Phil into letting his mother, his sister and himself escape.

Along the way, Draper Doyle periodically sees his father's ghost. These visitations lead, on the one hand, to sessions of psychoralysis, a therapy invented by Uncle Reg, a kind of counter-psychoanalysis, in which the patient listens while the psychoralyst talks. From these, Draper Doyle learns a lot about the family, and this starts in train a Freudian sort of logic that provokes erotic dreams about a composite of his mother and his sister Mary — "Momary" — and in turn to his peeing himself at night and a long elaborate joke about underwear that again ceases being funny long before we hear the last of it.

The most satisfactory symbolic movement in the book orbits around ice hockey, its talisman the puck, the *Aeneid* of Virgil, and the boy's dead father. This sounds unlikely, and it is too intricate to explain fully. Draper Doyle's father had given him a puck that had — accidentally? providentially? — come his way in the Montreal Forum in 1963, during the father's "missing year," an

underground period after his years at Oxford. (The echo of the "missing week" reverberates here.) Another magical gift was a copy of the *Aeneid* in cartoon form. He tells his son that "puck" originally meant "demon" or genius. We may be reminded that in Roman belief a man is accompanied through life by a tutelary spirit, or genius, representing his best self, and also representing the family line. In our story, the puck, as genius and as the central object of hockey, sanctifies the game and transforms different versions of it into rival religions. Thus Father Seymour delivers a little homily on the CH on the Habs' jersey: "church" begins and ends with those letters, and means nothing unless u r in it, and so on. (Barrel of laughs, Seymour.) The next morning at Mass, Draper Doyle dozes and dreams a strange melange of hockey and religious observance — "Toe Blake was saying 'Upon this Rocket, I will build my Church' " (91). The puck and the Host merge. His father appears, a puck in his hand, outside the church, and Draper Doyle beckons him to come in. Father, however, "kept glancing back and forth from me to the puck, a look of quizzical distress on his face." The boy falls; his embarrassed family straightens him; his sister Mary holds him up by pressing her body against his.

The image of holding up and of bodies pressing close, sometimes face to face, sometimes stomach against back, recurs in key places in the action. It reproduces the decisive moment in the *Aeneid* (II, 699 ff.) when Aeneas with the help of a sign from Jupiter persuades his father Anchises — old, tired and desirous of being left behind to die — to allow himself to be carried away from Troy and to install the household gods (as it were, the puck) in a new home. Draper Doyle last sees his father in this position, bearing his lover on his back.

The last act of the drama begins with a family viewing of the Stanley Cup finals of 1967. The Ryans regard the Montreal Canadians — the Habs — as the godly Catholic outfit, whereas the Toronto Maple Leafs signify the ghastly evil Error of Protestantism. The Leafs, to everyone's surprise and despair, win the decisive game 3-1. Draper Doyle goes blackly to engrave the score, as had been his father's practice, invisibly on the yielding cover of the *Cartoon Vergil* with an inkless ballpoint. He goes to bed, and:

> I saw my father as I had last seen him alive. I saw the other man's face pressed against his back, his cheek to my father's back, the two men with their eyes closed as if they were inwardly pursuing some common goal, something that was always just ahead of them, just out of reach. My father's face had been contorted as much with anguish as with pleasure, and no wonder. Faced with a choice that would have satisfied even Aunt Phil's grim sense of irony — misery in this life, or eternal damnation in the next — he had chosen damnation, through which, even as I was watching, he might have been bearing the other man on his back. (209-10)

These passages are some of the best in the book. There follows, however, an extended dream sequence which begins with a storm of pucks falling from the sky — the "Apuckalypse," according to Uncle Reginald — and proceeds to the obligatory journey to the underworld (here the basement waking rooms at

Ryan's Funeral Home) as in Book VI of the *Aeneid*, with Tom the Doberman, a neighbourhood dog, standing in as Cerberus at the gates, or at the bottom of the stairs. Instead of three heads, as in Vergil, this dog has three sets of "private parts," and instead of a sop, is diverted by three pucks thrown to him by Draper Doyle.

The dream goes on and on, and loses its way. There is something *voulu* about the whole thing, as in one of John Barth's extended, well-thought-out, but finally overwrought constructions. When Draper Doyle awakens, he finds an invisible letter from his father on the same book cover where the scores were recorded. Using a blank sheet of paper and a pencil, he shades the letter in: words, "like some buried memory at long last surfacing," emerge "ghostly from the paper" (224). His father does not ask forgiveness. The family will have a greater chance for happiness without him. It is at this point that Draper Doyle goes to Aunt Phil and forces her to let his mother and the two children go. In the last chapter Uncle Reginald drives them to the airport in the hearse, and they fly away. Death and resurrection.

There is, as I have indicated, much to admire and much to deplore in this most recent Wayne Johnston novel. We have come to expect, from the previous ones, a comical surface, and murk in the depths. It is not easy for an author to keep the funny parts from obscuring the seriousness — the life-and-death earnestness — of the proceedings, and it is not easy to keep the dark forces and their murderous consequences from making the jokes seem tasteless and misplaced. To succeed, the jokes have to be just right. Here they are often too long, too crude, and too juvenile. Pee-swollen bud, indeed.