

Introducing Walter A. Davis

I discovered the work of Walter Davis while reading a book on literary criticism by Julian Markels called, *The Marxian Imagination*. Markels made reference to Davis's book, *Inwardness and Experience* in one of his footnotes. I also found Walter Davis's psychoanalytic social theory on the internet when I came across his Counterpunch essays about 9/11. These essays pointed me to his book, *Deracination: Hiroshima and the Tragic Imperative*. Davis sees the dropping of the atomic bombs on Japan as the defining moment in modern U.S. history, the central theme of his *Deracination*.

The central event of Davis's own life seems to have been his discovery of psychoanalysis as a therapy, a mode of literary criticism and a radical theory of society. He is now writing an autobiographical novel called, *The Last Catholic*. Davis began by applying psychoanalysis to the study of literature and in turn applied the theory of tragedy to psychoanalysis, Hamlet being his main example of the tragic individual. His conception of psychoanalysis rejects the mechanistic theory of the functioning of the unconscious as an energy system. He reads Freud and his followers in terms of the existential project of liberation and political and personal responsibility. He argues that as subjects of history, we are even responsible for the dreams we have since we are their authors. Freud had made it clear that dreams always take the form of a drama. Our dreams can be thought of as movies with complex plots and characters. They present psychic conflicts we are trying to resolve, but cannot resolve. One of Davis's most important theoretical innovations is his goal of analyzing the psyche of an entire society. This is the central theme of his *Death's Dream Kingdom*.

Like Sartre, Davis has written plays, fiction and highly theoretical works. All of Walter Davis's writings express his engagement with the important political issues of our times. He has a wide-ranging interest in both philosophy and the arts. He has both written and acted in plays. As I mentioned above, Davis is currently engaged in writing a novel about his life. It is not yet clear to me whether *The Last Catholic* will be closer to *Nausea* or *Roads To Freedom*.

This novel is about liberation, but the liberation of what, a society or a man? Davis knows very well that we cannot be liberated without participating in a struggle for a fundamental change in the established order of society. It has never been easy to free one's self from the crisis brought on by an abusive family or an oppressive society. Davis's novel is endless and may never be finished. Like many of Sartre's books, *The Last Catholic* may remain an unfinished project. It is now over 3000 pages.

One of Sartre's most important theoretical concepts is the "practico-inert." For Sartre, this refers to the results of our actions which in turn imprison us within a field of limitations. As Sartre puts it, "Man is the product of his product." For Davis this takes the form of our desires which are turned back against us. They block the possibility of our becoming the agents of history.

Like Sartre, Davis applies dialectical reason to the understanding of the world

we have produced. He attempts to develop a dialectical existentialism and a radical version of psychoanalysis as well as a new theory of society. He tries to go beyond the Frankfurt School in his own treatment of psychoanalysis as a method of critique. There are new themes in his radical psychoanalytic theory of society. I would recommend that readers begin by reading his collection of essays called, *Art and Politics*. His *Inwardness and Experience* is a more theoretical work and is also well worth reading.

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Web pages:

<http://www.walteradavis.com/>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walter_A._Davis