

METAPHORS AND CONFUSIONS

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THE TITLE of a novel usually serves as a pointer to the author's main concern. However, this is not the case in Robertson Davies' *Fifth Business* because, if we follow the route signposted by the title, we find ourselves pursuing a secondary theme. The term "Fifth Business" refers to Dunstan Ramsay's vital, but peripheral, influence on the loves of Boy Staunton and Paul Dempster, men of importance in the public world from which he is excluded.¹ Thus, it suggests that this novel, like *A Mixture of Frailties*, is primarily about people whose lives are played out in public. As such we might expect it to be an elaboration of Ramsay's comment that "we cast [people in prominent positions] in roles, and it is only right to consider them as players." While it does deal with this issue, *Fifth Business* is mainly concerned with Ramsay and his private life drama rather than with Boy Staunton, Paul Dempster and the public worlds of business, politics and the theatre.

It is necessary to recognize the false emphasis of the title because it reflects what seems to be a real confusion in Robertson Davies' mind about the subject of *Fifth Business*. Besides being granted undue importance by the novel's title, the public theme is overstressed both in Dunstan Ramsay's introductory comments and in the concluding events. Ramsay's initial claim that he achieved the "full stature of a man" because he undertook the "vital though never glorious role of Fifth Business", and the prominence given to his part in Staunton's death which we are intended to take as the fulfillment of Liesl's claim that he can make a real life for himself by becoming Fifth Business, both assert his public role as the cause of his personal success. Robertson Davies thus asks us to look for a single complex theme in which the personal and public are inextricably bound together, rather than for two separate strands. However, the main action of the novel,

which comprises the story of Dunstan Ramsay's life up to and including his seduction by Liesl, does not support this contention. The public theme illuminates the private in that we learn much about the ideal of the authentic man from the limitations of people like Staunton and Dempster, who conceal their real selves behind public masks. But it is not a part of it in any direct sense since Ramsay becomes a mature adult because he eventually finds the courage to cast off the false self he has adopted throughout his adult life and not because he is involved in Paul Dempster's rise to fame as a magician or in the death of Boy Staunton, the Lieutenant-Governor *manqué*.

Clearly, what has gone wrong in *Fifth Business* is that Robertson Davies has, at times, misused the concept of Fifth Business. Its role in the novel is essentially a metaphorical one in that it crystallizes the complex of ideas which constitute the public theme. As such it can serve no useful function in relation to the main personal theme. However, it seems to have exercised such an influence on Davies' imagination that in the opening and closing sections of the novel he tries to make it the controlling metaphor rather than a subsidiary one. In order to understand what *Fifth Business* is actually about, as opposed to what Robertson Davies claims it is about, we must examine Ramsay's development in relation to its correct metaphorical core, the concept of "the boy". Only then can we see that the main theme properly reaches its climax with the seduction scene and that the death of Boy Staunton not only has no relevance to the main theme but also makes nonsense of what is established by the first climax.

The term "boy" is employed in three different senses which serve to define the three main stages in Dunstan Ramsay's development. It is first used in its literal sense to describe childhood, the period during which the individual on the one hand lives according to the standards of his family and immediate society and on the other begins to develop an independent self. Secondly, it defines the false adulthood which most of us achieve by choosing to shape ourselves according to the demands of a specific social code. Its most obvious use in this context is Staunton's adoption of the name Boy at the point in his life when he embarks on precisely this kind of self-formation. However, as Paul Dempster points out later, Boy's name symbolizes his desire to be loved and it is thus applicable to all those people, including Dunstan Ramsay, whose actions are shaped by a need to be accepted. Finally, the term boy describes the authentic man, that is, the man who casts off all social definitions and who achieves, in Father Blazon's words, "unity of the life of the flesh and of the life of the spirit". In order to discover this essential being the individual must yield up the egotistical aspects of the self to a

larger spiritual force and hence becomes a boy in the sense expressed, albeit sentimentally, by little W.V. " 'Our sense . . . is nothing to God's; and though big people have more sense than children the sense of all the big people in the world put together would be no sense to His. We are only little babies to Him.' " Ramsay is transformed into this kind of boy as a result of his encounter with Liesl.

Robertson Davies uses the term boy to epitomize two very different adult states because he believes that each of us constructs his adulthood out of one aspect of the dualistic authentic-inauthentic nature of the child. The inauthentic aspect of the child is that part which operates according to the demands made on it by family and society and the authentic is that part which compels it to express its essential spiritual and imaginative self, even if this involves contradicting its society's expectations. Thus, when Ramsay says that "a boy is a man in miniature" and that "a boy . . . is an imprisoned man striving to get out", he does not mean that the man is a product of the entire boy, but of a part of him.

The duality of the childhood experience is particularly strong in Dunstan Ramsay's case. Familial and communal influences play such a large part in the formation of his childhood self that, in his retrospective account of his early years, Ramsay pays considerable attention to defining his milieu. In Book I, Chapter III, he establishes the narrowly moralistic stance of the village and the "Scottish" qualities of common sense, prudence and concern for position which characterized the Ramsay family, before going on in the following chapters to demonstrate how fully these standards became his own. Ramsay's attitude towards the events surrounding the birth of Paul Dempster most clearly demonstrates the influence of environment on his character. Because of his Presbyterian background he feels an acute sense of guilt even though he played only a peripheral part in the snowball incident, and because of his society's view that sex is a "hog-wallow" this guilt is intensified by the vague sexual dimensions of the incident.

However, beginning with his interest in an insane member of the Athelstan family, a spiritual and imaginative impulse begins to draw Ramsay away from the conformity, order and rationality of Deptford society and towards the mysterious and irrational areas of human conduct. Eventually this aspect of Ramsay's personality finds consistent expression through his friendship with Mrs. Dempster.

Whenever Deptford society is made aware of Ramsay's authentic self it reacts with hostility, viewing it as the work of the Devil. This definition is established by the mad woman who shuns Ramsay because she suffers from the delusion that he is a "false friend", that is, the Devil. Amasa Dempster reacts in a similar way. When he discovers that Ramsay has been teaching Paul conjuring and

telling him stories of the Saints, he accuses him of being "the agent . . . by means of which the Evil One had trailed his black slime across a pure life."

The claims of the community and the self are finally brought into direct conflict when Mrs. Ramsay, having discovered his friendship with Mrs. Dempster, insists that Ramsay choose between them. The choice is essentially between clinging to the inauthentic aspect of the child, and being his mother's "own dear laddie", and committing himself to the authentic self which Mrs. Dempster has nurtured. Ramsay is too aware of his mother's faults to be willing to subjugate himself to her will. Moreover, having already been acknowledged "as a man", he does not wish to retreat into childhood. However, although he realizes that Mrs. Dempster "lived by a light that arose from within" and could lead him to full self-knowledge, he lacks the maturity to accept her as his guide. Thus, he avoids choosing either by joining the army.

Ramsay's lack of decision on this occasion has a crucial effect on his later life because it separates him from the spirit of Mrs. Dempster for some forty years. Having escaped his mother, Ramsay falls under the equally destructive influence of Diana Marfleet, who teaches him to cultivate the outer man at the expense of the inner. As we might expect from someone who is so committed to correct form that she "thinks it bad manners to be factual and serious", Diana offers Ramsay only the superficial kind of maturity involved in improving his word usage and his eating habits, and acquainting him with the "strange lands" of sexual knowledge and the musical show. The fact that Ramsay grants his sexual initiation the same importance as seeing *Chu-Chin-Chow* indicates the lack of any deep spiritual implications in his relationship with Diana.²

The nature of the damage which Diana does to Ramsay's personality is indicated by the name which he adopts to mark his new life-style. Just as St. Dunstan drove away the Devil by tweaking his nose with a pair of tongs, so "Dunstan" Ramsay, as a result of Diana's influence, rejects the Devil of his authentic self which had been so prominent in his childhood. The change which is thus wrought is pre-figured in Ramsay's two war-time nicknames. The first nickname, Deacon, implies a man committed to spiritual values and the second, Charley, a man who, like the entertainer Charley Chaplin, exists only as a public personality.

ESSENTIALLY, Ramsay emerges from his relationship with Diana as a boy in the sense epitomized by Boy Staunton. Hence, the adopted names Dunstan and Boy are synonymous. There are, of course, obvious differ-

ences between Ramsay and Boy Staunton — whereas Staunton adheres to the crudest materialistic values, Ramsay pursues intellectual goals. Moreover, Ramsay is always at least vaguely aware that there is something lacking in his chosen way of life. Nevertheless, they are similar in the crucial sense that each denies the inner, spiritual self. As Ramsay himself says in retrospect: “to him, the reality of life lay in external things, whereas for me the only reality was of the spirit — of the mind, as I then thought, not having understood yet what a cruel joker and mean master the intellect can be.”

This common denial manifests itself most obviously in their attitudes to what they respectively assume is religious. Staunton’s religious life revolves around the Anglican Church, but he demonstrates little understanding of its spiritual aspects. For him, membership of a Church is entirely a social matter and he joins the Anglican Church because it is “in some way more hightoned than the evangelical faiths, and thus [he is] improving [his] social standing.” The Christ of Boy Staunton’s faith is not the one who directed man to cultivate his inner self and to turn away from materialistic values, but is the one conjured up by the Reverend Leadbeater. This Christ is “a very distinguished person”, “a designer and manufacturer”, “a man of substance” and “an economist”.

Ramsay’s faith is the private one he developed during his childhood. However, although it evolved to satisfy the needs of the inner man, unlike Boy Staunton’s religion, Ramsay nevertheless converts it into an expression of the outer man which, in his case, is the intellectual man. Rather than continuing to seek self-knowledge through the Saints, Ramsay increasingly looks upon them as subjects for scholarly research. His study of Wilgefortis, for example, involves him in seeking variants of the legend in which she is involved and even leads him to dabble in medical research on excessive facial hair, but it has little to do with the essential truth concealed behind the details of her life. Similarly, although Ramsay suffers materially in undertaking to care for Mrs. Dempster, the other icon of his private religion, he is inspired to do so by intellectual rather than religious motives: “Now I should be able to see what a saint was really like and perhaps make a study of one without all the apparatus of Rome.”

By dedicating himself to externals Ramsay, like Boy Staunton, becomes excessively concerned with his public image and suffers from a consequent inability to enter into personal relationships. The public man is of so much more importance to Staunton than the private that, rather than try to develop his own personality, he dedicates himself to goals which will win him a worldly reputation. Thus, he pursues wealth and high social position and models himself on the Prince of

Wales. Since Staunton denies his own humanness, it is not surprising that he is unable to recognize the unique existence of others. Leola is the main victim of this trait because she is regarded as nothing more than an accessory to the image Staunton is trying to create for himself. When she fails in her role as wife of "one who had once hobnobbed with a Prince", she is simply rejected. Boy's attitude to sex further underlines his stunted approach to human relationships. For him, sex is divorced from love and is nothing more than a form of physical activity, analogous, in Ramsay's words, to "a workout".

Superficially, Ramsay's attitude to worldly reputation is the opposite of Staunton's since he eschews all conventional paths to public prestige. By choosing to remain a High School teacher he sacrifices any chance he might have of becoming wealthy or of improving his social position, and by engaging himself in the obscure field of hagiography he denies himself even a general intellectual reputation. Nevertheless, Ramsay is basically concerned with what others think of him and his unconventionality is, in many respects, as much a public pose as Boy Staunton's conventional businessman figure. Indeed, the person which Ramsay creates for himself is such a powerful social instrument that Boy Staunton, who is always alert to ways in which he can eke the full potentiality out of any public situation, invites him to his parties in order that he might serve as a counterpoint to the general tone of conventionality: "Sometimes I heard Boy speaking of me to the bankers and brokers as 'very able chap — speaks several languages fluently and writes for a lot of European publications — a bit of an eccentric of course, but an old friend'."

Although Ramsay mainly exploits his interest in the Saints as part of his pose of oddness, he also strives to win whatever academic reputation he can from it. Not content to pursue hagiography for its own sake, he brings himself to the attention of the Bollandists and repeatedly tries to impress them with the results of his research. Since Ramsay's pursuit of academic reputation is marked by a competitive spirit very similar to Boy Staunton's, it is appropriate that Father Blazon should define his attitude to the Saints as "spiritual athletics", a metaphor reminiscent of the workout image which defines Staunton's approach to sex.

Ramsay's failure to develop the inner man, "to forgive [himself] for being a human creature", as Father Blazon puts it, makes him insensitive to the needs of others. In general Ramsay does not use people in the blatant way Boy Staunton does, although he certainly uses Staunton himself as a source of income and amusement, but he is no more capable of entering into a genuine human relationship. Because of his intellectual bias, Ramsay chooses to be an observer, a position

which he feels frees him from all responsibilities to others. Thus, although he realizes that Staunton is destroying Leola by trying to mould her according to his own preconceptions, he refuses to involve himself: "I never intervened when Leola was having a rough time. . . . To be honest, I must also say that I did not want to shoulder the burdens of a peacemaker." Even when Leola makes a direct plea for help, Ramsay self-righteously rejects her on the grounds that he is "not to be a victim of her self-pity". This inability to comprehend the needs of others is epitomized by Ramsay's response to the news that Leola has attempted to commit suicide. Rather than sympathize with Leola's situation, Ramsay, for once very clearly revealing his concern with public reputation, expresses anger at the discomfort her tactless suicide note could have caused him: "Fool, Fool, Fool! Thinking only of herself and putting me in an intolerable position with such a note. If she had died, how would it have sounded at an inquest?"

Although Ramsay is scornful of Boy's attitude to sex, his own is no less inadequate since he usually withholds from sexual activity altogether in order to avoid any emotional entanglement. In the few instances where he has engaged in a sexual relationship he has successfully deprived the women with whom he was involved of any individuality by giving them allegorical names which reduce them to types: "There was Agnes Day, who yearned to take upon herself the sins of the whole world. . . . Then there was Gloria Mundy, the good-time girl. . . . And, of course, Libby Doe, who thought sex was the one great, true, and apostolic key and cure."

There are two reasons why Ramsay eventually manages to break with the false image which he has created for himself, while Staunton remains a boy, in the inauthentic sense, throughout his life. Firstly, although Ramsay misuses his Saints and Mrs. Dempster, he never entirely loses sight of their original function. As a result he frequently questions his way of life and has the potential for recognizing the "illumination" for which he seeks, should it appear. Boy Staunton, on the other hand, except for a fleeting moment of doubt, refuses to acknowledge that his life could have taken any other direction. Secondly, Ramsay is fortunate enough to meet Liesl, whose influence enables him to resurrect his almost submerged childhood self.

RAMSAY achieves self-knowledge in the single epiphanic moment of his seduction by Liesl. However, this climactic experience is the culmination of a more protracted process during which he has gradually been break-

ing loose from his accustomed life-style. Although Ramsay visits Mexico simply to carry out further research, he is so impressed by the simple piety of the worshippers at the shrine of the Virgin of Guadalupe that he begins to penetrate back to the genuine core of his interest in the Saints: "anti-clericalism and American bustle would soon free them of their belief in miracles and holy likenesses. But where, I ask myself, will mercy and divine compassion come from them." Ramsay's approach to experience alters further after he joins Paul Dempster's troupe because he enters metaphorically, as well as literally, into a world of magic. In contrast to his usual engagement in the analytical task of scholarly research, Ramsay undertakes to write a fictional autobiography of Magnus Eisengrim, in the composition of which he is "under no obligation to be historically correct or to weigh evidence", thus allowing primacy for once to his imaginative faculties. As a result, and without intending to do so, Ramsay begins to recapture the authentic self he last knew as a child: "Working on these illusions was delightful but destructive of my character. I was aware that I was recapturing the best of my childhood; my imagination had never known such glorious freedom."

The ground is thus made ready for the encounter with Liesl. This incident serves as a microcosm of Ramsay's entire development because it begins with him reverting completely to the role of social man. His attitude to Liesl's lesbian encounter with Faustina is conventional and moralistic and he berates her for deviating from all standards of "decency and honour". As Liesl points out, Ramsay is behaving "just like a little boy", and she sets herself the task of releasing the other, and authentic aspect of his childhood self, which she describes, again in keeping with the novel's dominant metaphorical patterns, as his "devil". Ramsay's response to Liesl's attempt to seduce him and hence prove he is "a human, like other people" is, as we might expect of a man who has withdrawn from human involvement for so many years, one of rejection. By pulling Liesl's nose, he reasserts that he is St. Dunstan and, as such, wants nothing to do with the Devil. However, this St. Dunstan self has been so weakened during the preceding weeks that when Liesl persists, Ramsay abandons his spectator position and yields to her. As a result of committing himself to another human being, Ramsay at last experiences "deep delight" and "an aftermath of healing tenderness!"

Ramsay, then, emerges from his experiences in Mexico as a boy in the sense that he now lives according to the dictates of his imaginative and creative self and is capable of engaging himself emotionally with others. This development completes the novel's main theme. However, as he concludes his use of the "boy" metaphor, so Davies turns his attention again to Fifth Business. As part of her

advice to Ramsay, Liesl offers the comment that he is Fifth Business. Her intention is simply further to convince Ramsay of the importance of his life by showing him that even those who live on the perimeter of great events have a role to play, and she makes no attempt to extend his function as Fifth Business beyond his involvement in Paul and Mrs. Dempster's lives. For Liesl, the essential Ramsay is still to be found in the authentic boy that she has nurtured into life. However, in the novel's final section Robertson Davies makes much more out of Ramsay's role as Fifth Business — so much so that he finally claims it as being the source of his maturity. This claim is, in itself, confusing enough because it dismisses most of what has gone before, but, even more puzzling is the fact that the values to which Ramsay adheres as Fifth Business contradict those to which he aspired as the authentic boy. By playing Fifth Business in the events which culminate in Staunton's death Ramsay reverts to his earlier position as a spectator and a moralizer. The encounter between Boy Staunton and Paul Dempster fascinates Ramsay in the voyeuristic way that Boy's marriage to Leola did: "I wanted to see what would happen, and my appetite was given the special zest of knowing who Eisengrim really was, which Boy did not, and perhaps would never learn." And it is nothing more dignified than a desire to see how the objects of his attention will react and a moralistic sense that Staunton should not go unpunished that inspires Ramsay, in the name of Fifth Business, to reveal Boy's involvement in Paul's birth: "Either I spoke now or I kept silence forever. Dunstan Ramsay counselled against revelation, but Fifth Business would not hear." Ramsay tries rather belatedly to conceal his unworthy motives by posing as Staunton's potential saviour and pleading that he admit to his involvement in the snowball incident in order that he might at last learn the truth about himself and become a human being. However, the tone he adopts in dealing with Staunton is too hostile and punitive for us to believe that he is primarily concerned with his salvation. By finally rebuffing Staunton with the cruel comment that he is King Candaules, Ramsay remains a detached meddler who subsequently is responsible for his former friend's death at the hands of the enraged Paul.

Since *Fifth Business* is Robertson Davies' most ambitious novel, and in its central sections, his most successful, it is regrettable that he should have let the metaphor of Fifth Business get out of hand. As it is, the novel makes complete sense only if we focus on the development of the boy concept and ignore much of what is claimed by the opening and closing sections.

NOTES

- ¹ The term also has secondary implications in that Robertson Davies gives some attention to the idea that, not only is Ramsay fifth business in the lives of others, but that they, in turn, are fifth business in his life. I have chosen not to deal with this implication of fifth business because, although the inversion of the main metaphor is neat, it serves finally only to express what we would normally assume in dealing with anyone, either in fiction or in real life — namely, that the individual's life is shaped by everyone with whom he comes into contact.
- ² Robertson Davies emphasizes the limitations of these experiences by contrasting them with Ramsay's later superficially similar but essentially different involvement in the magic show and seduction by Liesl. Whereas the earlier theatrical and sexual experience had only the value of novelty the later served to liberate Ramsay imaginatively and emotionally.

WAR-TIME MEMORIES

Christopher Levenson

War-time memories: unlighted trains
 slowly crowding the railheads, sidings
 alive with secret movement, the skies
 a mystery, somewhere
 the flare of a match, a voice
 extinguished
 the air-raid warden's face
 as he emerged from the shelter
 after the all-clear,
 every action galvanic,
 camouflaged in drama,
 whole lives a prey to darkness.
 I, only eight years old
 at the barber's, gazing in *Picture Post*
 at scenes from a distant theatre,
 a desert draped in canvas
 and tanks' twisted carcasses,
 relished the hushed tones, the stage whispers,
 this shared past that divides like darkness
 and hollows my blood.