MARLENE GOLDMAN

Madness, Masculinity, and Magic in Robertson Davies’ *Fifth Business*: A Tale of Hysteria; or, ‘the Suffocation of the Mother’

ABSTRACT

*Fifth Business* is obsessed with straying wits, wandering women, female and male tramps, and boys who run off to the war and to the circus. Tramps and tramping threaten to destabilize the gender roles that secure settled bourgeois life in the fictional Ontario town of Deptford. These crises of mobility are often aligned with madness and, more specifically, with the disease of hysteria, the latter having been identified since antiquity with aberrant sexuality, pathological wandering, and sex-role conflict. With its portrayals of hysterical wandering, sex-role conflict, role-playing, and hypnosis, the novel recalls nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century conceptions of hysteria. But, as well as presenting familiar images of female hysteria, Davies, in his portrayal of his protagonist, also sheds light on the lesser-known form of male hysteria. Showing Davies’ debt to Freud and to hysteria studies, and presenting homosexual and lesbian alternatives, the narrative ultimately conveys the message that male mental health and masculinity can be secured only by the performance of heterosexuality.

*Fifth Business* opens with the narrator, Dunstan Ramsay, attesting to his ‘lifelong involvement’ with Mrs Dempster (9). As readers recall, an errant snowball aimed at Dunstan strikes Mrs Dempster and instigates both the premature birth of Paul Dempster and the loss of Mrs Dempster’s wits. According to Dunstan, ‘[T]he shock of being struck by the snowball had brought Mrs Dempster to a series of hysterical crying fits …. Not long afterward it had become clear that she was about to bear her child’ (19). As it turns out, the event causes both wits and bodies to stray because, as Dunstan explains, after the accident, Mrs Dempster ‘intensified her roaming and would spend a whole morning wandering from house to house … it was too clear that she did not know where she was going next, and sometimes, she would visit one house three times in a morning’ (44). The depraved depths of her disorder become apparent when she is found by the townsfolk copulating in a pit with a tramp.
This paper explores the novel’s obsession with straying wits, wandering women, female and male tramps, and boys who run off to the war or join the circus. I argue that in this novel, tramps and tramping threaten to destabilize the gender roles that secure settled, bourgeois life in the fictional Ontario town of Deptford. Moreover, in the text, these crises of mobility are often aligned with madness and, more specifically, with the disease of hysteria. The connection between mobility and hysteria is not entirely surprising, given that the latter has been identified since antiquity with aberrant sexuality, pathological wandering, and sex-role conflict. With its portrayals of hysterical wandering, sex-role conflict, role-playing, theatricality, and hypnosis, *Fifth Business* forcibly recalls nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century conceptions of hysteria. What makes *Fifth Business* particularly intriguing, however, is that in testifying to his lifelong involvement with Mrs Dempster and in representing familiar images of female hysteria, Dunstan Ramsay also sheds light on hysteria’s lesser-known counterpart, male hysteria. While other critics have responded to Davies’ interest in Jungian archetypes, I want to shift the emphasis to Davies’ debt to Freud, and to hysteria studies, in particular. In fact, Freud’s groundbreaking hypothesis concerning psychic bisexuality – the cornerstone of classical psychoanalysis – was predicated on his recognition that both men and women suffered from hysteria.

In many respects, Mrs Dempster’s transformation into a tramp draws on both nineteenth-century and classical accounts of hysteria. According to Dunstan, after her tryst with the tramp, Mrs Dempster was thought to be dangerous, not because of any violence on her part, but because fearful people were frightened that if she were to wander away again some new sexual scandal would come of it; I think they really believed that she would corrupt some innocent youth or bewitch some faithful husband by the unreason of her lust. It was widely accepted that, even if she could not help it, she was in the grip of unappeasable and indiscriminate desire. (62)

Dunstan’s portrait of a deranged woman guided by ‘the unreason of her lust,’ in ‘the grip of unappeasable and indiscriminate desire’ underscores the narrative’s debt to the diagnosis of hysteria and the related fascination with the possibility of hysterical dissociation (the eruption of another self from within the self), which, since antiquity, were linked to the organ and motion most closely identified with hysteria, the ‘wandering uterus.’ According to the ancient Egyptians, the cause of disturbances in adult women was the wandering movement of the uterus, which they believed to be ‘an autonomous, free-floating organism, upward from its normal pelvic position’ (Micale 19). In *Timaeus*, Plato famously explains that ‘the womb is an animal which longs to generate children. When it
remains barren too long after puberty, it is distressed and sorely disturbed, and straying about in the body and cutting off the passage of the breath, it impedes respiration and brings the sufferer into the extremist anguish and provokes all manner of diseases besides’ (qtd in Micale 19). Owing to its association with choking and loss of air, in the sixteen hundreds, hysteria was referred to as ‘the suffocation of the mother’ (Micale 47).

In the seventeenth century, advances in the understanding of the human nervous system resulted in the waning of gynecological and demonological accounts of the disease. As early as 1670, it was proposed, instead, that the site of hysteria was the brain and spinal cord (Micale 22). One of the most important theorists of hysteria in Britain, Thomas Sydenham (1624–89), fashioned the first neuropsychological model of the disease (Micale 22). In effect, Sydenham’s research made hysteria an equal-opportunity disorder because it was no longer tied to the female reproductive organs. As early as 1878, the neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot, the ‘Napoleon of Neurosis,’ who made his fame studying hysteria in Paris at the Salpêtrière, began to gather materials on male hysteria and, by the end of his life, had published sixty-one case studies of male hysteria in men and boys, and left notes on over thirty more. During the winter of 1885–86, Freud studied with Charcot. Not coincidentally, their period of interaction corresponded with the height of debate within the Parisian medical community about male hysteria. When Freud returned to Vienna, he delivered a controversial lecture on the subject to the Vienna Society of Physicians. As Michael Micale observes, classical psychoanalytic theory ‘represents … a working out of the heritage of gender indeterminacy implicit in the nineteenth-century French research tradition of masculine hysteria’ (166)

Readers may, however, miss the connection between male hysteria and Davies’ text because, despite Charcot’s and Freud’s efforts to illuminate the bisexual aspect of hysteria, the disorder was not associated with men. As one French alienist said after hearing Freud’s talk, ‘A man cannot be hysterical: he has no uterus’ (qtd in Micale 166; see also Gay 53). According to Elaine Showalter, the cultural denial of male hysteria is no accident; it is the result of avoidance, suppression, and disguise: ‘[A]lthough male hysteria has been clinically identified at least since the seventeenth century, physicians have hidden it under such euphemistic diagnoses as neurasthenia, hypochondria, shell shock or, more recently, PTSD’ (Hystories 64). Again, what makes Fifth Business so intriguing is that it forcibly demonstrates hysteria’s relationship to gender-role conflict in both sexes and maintains the classical link between hysteria and wandering.

As Carol Smith-Rosenberg argues, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, impossible tensions existed in the two central roles
women were expected to assume: the True Woman and the Ideal Mother. On the one hand, the True Woman ‘was emotional, dependent, and gentle – a born follower’; on the other hand, the Ideal Mother ‘was expected to be strong, self-reliant, an efficient caretaker in relation to children and the home’ (198–99). Smith-Rosenberg suggests that women who found themselves unable to negotiate these antithetical roles may have used hysteria as means ‘to redefine or restructure their place’ within the domestic realm (200). Fifth Business highlights these gender-role conflicts early on. We learn, for instance, that even before being struck by the snowball, Mrs Dempster never fit the role of a preacher’s wife. Though well-meaning housewives, including Dunstan’s mother, try to show Mrs Dempster ‘the ropes,’ she ‘showed no signs of getting down to work . . . And thus the opinion grew that Mrs Dempster was simple’ (27). After her disgrace, Mrs Dempster is quite literally shown the ropes: to prevent her from wandering and causing further scandal, her husband leashes her to the house – a more graphic demonstration of how to keep the Angel in the House could hardly be imagined.

In Fifth Business, women edge toward madness whenever they fail to balance the two antithetical roles of the True Woman and the Ideal Mother. When Mrs Dempster turns into a tramp, readers witness the breakdown of the True Woman. When Dunstan’s own mother breaks from her traditional role and savagely beats him, readers observe the hysterical breakdown of the Ideal Mother. As Dustan recalls,

It must have been a strange scene, for she pursued me around the kitchen, slashing me with the whip until she broke me down and I cried. She cried too, hysterically, and beat me harder . . . . How could I reconcile this motherliness with the screeching fury who had pursued me around the kitchen with a whip . . . . Once when I was in my thirties and reading Freud for the first time, I thought I knew. (36)

After this dreadful beating, which illustrates how far his own mother could stray from her role, Dunstan considers becoming ‘a tramp, perhaps, like the shabby, sinister fellows who came so often to our back door for a handout’ (36). Dunstan’s meditations on tramping suggest that hysteria may well be contagious: if women wander in an effort to flee prescribed gender roles, then so will men.¹

In Shattered Nerves, Janet Oppenheim specifically locates the hysterical male in the context of sex-role conflict and changing attitudes towards masculinity and male emotionality. She argues that the majority of cases

¹ In keeping with the link in Fifth Business between wandering or tramping and hysteria, Charcot associated one of his male patient’s hysteria with ‘his errant and shiftless life’ (qtd in Showalter 71).
of shattered nerves in men occurred in early adulthood. Although the dis-
order was typically credited to overwork, Oppenheim speculates that
behind these cases lay other factors, including struggles with authoritar-
ian paterfamilias, the loss of religious faith, and sexual and emotional
repression (see Oppenheim ch. 5). As she explains,

We have become familiar with the idea that the lives of countless Victorian
women were made unhappy by the restrictive models of femininity that
society prescribed for them, but the pain inflicted by late nineteenth-century
dictates on manliness has received little attention from today’s scholars. (178)

Using Oppenheim’s insights, we can see that when Dustan eschews the
domesticated masculine role his mother seems intent on foisting on him,
he mirrors Mrs Dempster’s hysterical rejection of appropriate female
roles. As he explains, ‘[T]o yield and promise what she wanted would
be the end of anything that was any good in me’ (64). Instead, he yields
to the temptation to run away to war. As a soldier in the Great War,
however, he encounters the full force of the cultural and social forces
bent on shaping his masculinity. Indeed, as Oppenheim points out, at
the same time that “the Woman Question” came to the fore, the emphatic
definition of manliness in terms of physical and emotional toughness,
predicated on iron nerves, created an ideal almost impossible to realize’
(178). As Dunstan explains, the officers were ‘anxious to make men of
us’ (68). Although he learns ‘to march and drill and shoot and keep
myself clean according to Army standards,’ he admits that ‘none of it
had any great reality for me’; worse, like the domesticated, intellectu-
ally idle Victorian women, he finds himself pathologically lonely and bored
(68) – the perfect candidate for hysteria.

In short order, Dunstan joins the ranks of the eighty thousand male
hysterics suffering from shell shock and war neurosis by the end of the
First World War. As he explains, for three years he kept his nerve ‘by sti-
fling his intelligence,’ but, on a dangerous mission, he lets his ‘intelligence
ripped and . . . nerve dissolve’ (76). He then becomes a ‘psychiatric curiosity’
under the care of ‘a specialist in shell-shock cases’ (79). Doctors who
treated soldiers during the war immediately saw the relation between
war neurosis and hysteria, but to avoid labelling soldiers as hysterical,
they postulated that the symptoms including ‘limps, loss of voice, paral-
yzed limbs, headaches, amnesia, insomnia, and emotional distress’ might
be related to ‘the physical or chemical effects of proximity to an exploding
shell’; for this reason, Dr Charles S. Myers christened the disorder ‘shell
shock’ (Showalter 72). Like the women who were cured by nerve
doctors and sent back to the domestic realm from which they fled,
Dunstan is cured from shell shock only to discover that he is similarly
expected to continue to perform the masculine (and Oedipal) script. He
yields briefly, and becomes romantically involved with his nurse Diana, but he breaks off their relationship when he realizes that ‘she was too much a mother to me, and as I had had one mother, and lost her, I was not in a hurry to acquire another – not even a young and beautiful one with whom I could play Oedipus to both our hearts’ content’ (88).

Taken together, Mrs Dempster’s and Dunstan’s hysterical refusals to perform their gender roles – especially in the context of the more widespread difficulty exhibited by other characters in maintaining the same act – raise the question whether the narrative posits any viable alternative to the Oedipal trajectory. Put somewhat differently, if the settled, domestic roles prove so distasteful, according to Davies, what other roles might be preferable? I use the term role quite self-consciously, in response to the text’s emphasis on role playing. It is worth noting that although scholars typically align the narrative’s emphasis on acting with Jung’s notion of archetypes, the concept of performance was linked much earlier to hysteria, a disorder intimately connected with mimicry and performance. As historians explain, whether expressed as paralysis or shell shock, hysteria hovered elusively between ‘the organic and the psychological . . . it muddled the medical and the moral, or (put yet another way) . . . it was ever discrediting its own credentials . . . were sufferers sick or shamming?’ (Porter 229). Shamming or acting was linked explicitly to hysteria because hysteria’s symptom choice ‘involves complex learning and imitative processes’ (Porter 229). In fact, scholars suggest that hysteria is best understood as ‘a mimetic disorder; it mimics culturally permissible expressions of distress’ (Porter qtd in Showalter, Hystories 15). Many nineteenth-century physicians acknowledged the links between acting and hysteria. In 1904, for instance, P.C. Dubois wrote that ‘the hysteric is an actress, a comedienne, but we must never reproach her, for she doesn’t know that she is acting’ (qtd in Showalter, ‘Hysteria’ 320). In Studies on Hysteria, Breuer and Freud indirectly address this theatrical aspect when they refer to the eruption of another self from within the self as ‘double consciousness,’ which they view as a primary characteristic of hysteria (46).

Not coincidentally, before Dunstan succumbs to full-blown hysteria during the war, he dabbles in acting and muses on the existence of double consciousness. Taking part in an impromptu show for the troops, Dunstan says, ‘I forced myself to do an imitation of Charlie Chaplin . . . I managed to get the right kind of hat . . . I cut myself a little cane . . . and when the night came I put on a burnt-cork moustache and shuffled onto the platform; for twelve minutes I told the dirtiest jokes I knew . . . And from that time forth I was called . . . “Charlie”’ (71–72). In the face of the men’s astonishment at the revelation of ‘the opposite side of his personality,’ Dunstan quips, ‘I cannot remember a time when I did not take it as understood that everybody has at least two, if not twenty-two
sides to him’ (72). Here Dustan affirms the relationships between hysteria, double consciousness, and the discovery of ‘poly psychism,’ the idea that the human ego is composed of many discrete egos ‘distinct though side by side, and more or less closely connected’ (Ellenberger 167). In light of hysteria’s longstanding connection to dissociation and wandering, it is especially apt that Dustan’s performance invokes Chaplin’s Tramp.

With the exception of Dunstan’s socially acceptable performance as the Little Tramp, in _Fifth Business_ non-aesthetic challenges to the traditional masculine and feminine roles are portrayed as singularly perverse. Viewed in the context of Freudian theory, this perverseness makes sense because, according to Freud, to assume the role of an adult man or woman, the psychically bisexual child must first renounce his or her homosexual desire. In keeping with Freud’s theories, the refusal, in _Fifth Business_ , to assume the adult role plunges the characters back into a homoerotic, bisexual realm – a circus of uncensored desires. The narrative presents this primal heterotopia as an alternative to the domestic realm from which Dunstan flees in his attempt to escape his hysterical mother, just as Paul Dempster, ‘the child of a woman everybody jeered at and thought a dirty joke’ (261), attempts to escape his suffocating mother by running away with the circus. In this deviant world of magic and marvels, socially transgressive alternatives to the Oedipal script are acted out.

In keeping with the text’s emphasis on bisexuality, readers learn that Dunstan encounters the circus in Tyrol while he is hunting for information about Wilgefortis, the saint also known as Uncumber. According to legend, after making a “vow of virginity” she miraculously grew a heavy beard (142–43). Dunstan embarks on his trip hoping to find more information about this saint and to verify his hunch that Wilgefortis might actually represent the persistence of the ‘hermaphrodite figure of the Great Mother’ (143). Despite Dunstan’s theoretical curiosity about bisexuality, his actual encounter with the circus, the wonderful world of uncensored desires, is tempered by a censoring, homophobic strain. This strain informs the text’s portrayal of Paul as the child-slave of Willard the Wizard, a homosexual pedophile and morphia addict (259), and its depiction of the circus as the place where a grotesque butch dyke finds the femme of her dreams. Dunstan catches a glimpse of the

2 As Freud writes,

In all neurotics we find without exception in the unconscious psychic life feelings of inversion [homosexuality] and fixation of libido on persons of the same sex. Without a deep and searching discussion, it is impossible adequately to appreciate the significance of this factor for the formation of the picture of the disease; I can only assert that the unconscious tendency to inversion is never wanting, and renders the greatest service, especially in the explanation of male hysteria. (_Basic 575_)
lesbian alternative to the Freudian primal scene, when, to his horror, he witnesses his beloved Faustina climaxing in the arms of Lieselette Vitzlipützli, ‘the ugliest human creature’ Dunstan had ever seen (205). The emphasis on bisexuality, depicted earlier in the form of Wilgefortis and the image of the hermaphrodite, is alluded to in Liselotte’s surname, Vitzlipützli, which translates roughly as ‘Pussy-Dick.’ This devilish, bisexual ‘Swiss gargoyle’ pulls Dunstan onto his bed and threatens to drag him in her arms and ‘crush out’ his boyish modesty (223). Despite his repugnance and the threat of suffocation, Dustan eventually sleeps with Lieselette and later boasts of his tryst. To understand the significance of this tryst in the context of the text’s fascination with hysteria, it is useful to compare it with the earlier episode in which the tramp insists on having sex with Mary Dempster – because both of these events attempt to resolve male hysterical conflicts.

As an adult, Dunstan encounters the reformed tramp, Joel Surgeoner, who, after having sex with Mary Dempster, settled down and found religion. In effect, Surgeoner teaches Dustan a graphic lesson about the terrifying loss of masculinity associated with mobility. As the tramp explains, ‘Tramps are sodomites mostly. I was a young fellow, and it’s the young ones and the real old ones that get used, because they can’t fight as well. It’s not kid-glove stuff … it’s enough to kill you … when a gang of tramps set on a young fellow’ (134). Surgeoner explains that eventually his ‘manhood couldn’t stand it,’ which is when he met Mary ‘wandering by herself’ (143). Surgeoner forges a further link between wandering bodies and wits when he adds, ‘Women tramps are very rare; too much sense, I guess’ (135). He goes on to recall how, rather than resist the rape, Mary held his head to her breast and talked nicely to him. But, as he confesses, ‘[T]he strange thing is I still wanted her. As if only that would put me right, you see?’ Jody Mason observes that, in Depression-era Canadian narratives about transient life and the grim world into which men are cast, a woman’s body frequently serves as a metonym for home.³ In *Fifth Business*, home is also portrayed as a place where ostensibly normal heterosexual relations – and their power hierarchies – can flourish, while homelessness and wandering are aligned with perversion and emasculation. Faced with this reductive binary, the only thing that will put things right for men is to return home. This return is portrayed as a sexual tryst because, as Freud explains in his essay on the uncanny, women are literally the home of humankind (221). Ironically, in portraying the tramp’s and Dunstan’s experience of sexual healing, Davies recalls classical physicians who recommended as treatment for hysteria a regular regimen of fornication (Micale 20). Therefore, while these sex scenes in *Fifth Business* provide comic relief,
they seem far less amusing when readers consider the overarching message – that male mental health and masculinity can be secured only by the performance of heterosexuality and, worse, by the presence of a dutiful Angel leashed to the house.

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