

An Eye for an Ear:
Fifth Business and
La grosse femme d'à côté est enceinte

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The absence of Robertson Davies and Michel Tremblay from Philip Stratford's comparative study of the Québécois and the English Canadian novel, *All the Polarities*, is a gaping omission—particularly when the book purports to consider "the best works of our best authors" (1). Stratford's methodology, which is to pair individual works of similar theme and content, is simple, straightforward and remarkably effective in drawing out the stylistic differences between the English Canadian and the Québécois novel. The general descriptions of the typical *roman québécois* and the typical English Canadian novel offered in *All the Polarities* evidence what I would argue to be one of the most cogent distinctions to be made between the two cultures: the Québécois tendency towards "orality," on the one hand, and the English Canadian tendency toward "literacy" or "visuality," on the other.

Davies' *Fifth Business* and Tremblay's *La grosse femme d'à côté est enceinte* are superlative and archetypal examples of their respective milieus. The question remains as to whether or not such disparate novels can be compared according to the methodology Stratford has established in *All the Polarities*. At first glance one might well ask in what sense *La grosse femme* and *Fifth Business* are parallel. However, as we consider the themes, characters and attitudes of these works more closely a basis for comparison does emerge. Both Tremblay and Davies were well established as playwrights before publication of *La grosse femme* and *Fifth Business*. In each case the novels were to be the first of a trilogy;

however, Tremblay's trilogy of Plateau Mont-Royal has grown to a tetralogy. Both novels are romantic satires treating the lives of the people of a small community. While the major characters of *Fifth Business* are from Deptford, Tremblay's characters live on the rue Fabre in Montréal and form their own closely defined quarter. Both novels romanticize their heroines to the point of mythologizing them. Mrs. Dempster, of *Fifth Business*, is first described as having an alluring, mysterious air, gentle, fragile, almost ethereal nature, and a generous heart. In the course of the novel she brings Willy Ramsay (the narrator's brother) back from the dead, she effects the miraculous conversion (through the innocent offering of her sexual favours) of Joel Surgeoner from degenerate vagabond to missionary and guiding light of the poor, and finally she appears to Dunstan Ramsay as a Madonna icon during the height of fighting at the battle of Passchendaele.

At the same time Davies satirizes, and occasionally almost vilifies, the community that was unable to see or appreciate Mrs. Dempster's saintly qualities. The townspeople at first tolerate her as a simpleton, then chastise her as a burden, and finally deride and denigrate her as a unfit, unsavory and immoral woman. As well, Davies satirizes dull, narrow, malleable religious views as represented by Mrs. Dempster's husband, Amasa, and Mrs. Ramsay. The principle thrust of his satire, however, is against the prevailing philosophy of materialism. Dunstan chastises his colleagues for being unable to get beyond "scientific" reality or political realities, which he recognizes as being no more than personal prejudices. Boy Staunton is held up to ridicule for his perverse views of religion, his dull, pragmatic view of life and love, his prosaic concern for social mores, and his incredible naiveté about individual and social psychology. Davies also takes the opportunity to lance women's liberation as represented by Denise Hornick, Boy's second wife, as a philosophy bereft of a metaphysics.

Tremblay also takes aim against the philosophical materialism, narrow religious views and warped sense of propriety which entrap many of the residents of the rue Fabre and stifle growth, imagination and the zest of life. In the midst of this

close, repressive atmosphere, Tremblay lionizes the character of "la grosse femme." Throughout the novel she is the prevailing symbol of love, and of imagination and dreams. She dreams of Acapulco as young Dunstan dreamed of Paris; she reads *Bug-Jargal* as Dunstan read *A Thousand and One Nights* and books on magic and hagiography. Eventually she takes on transcendental, mythic proportions, as we discover that she is being carefully watched over by four invisible spinsters next door, mock versions of the Greek gods, who knit booties on her behalf.

The primary theme of both novels lies in the juxtaposition of the material world, that is, the common notion of "reality," with the realm of the mythic, the mysterious and the imaginative. In both books, the young, the infirm, the insane and the outcast seem to have privileged access to the transcendent ether. In *Fifth Business*, the young Dunstan Ramsay, the one-legged Dunstan Ramsay, the "simple" Mrs. Dempster, the near-deaf, delirious bum Joel Surgeoner, the pixilated Padre Blazon, and the gargantuan Liesl are all implied to be in touch with a spiritual reality for which concrete reality is but a faint shadow. La Grosse Femme, who is obese to the point of immobility, the diabetic, one-legged Ti-Lou, the near senile, reclusive, exacerbating Victoire, young Marcel, and the fabulous story-teller Josaphat-le-Violon all have visions which extend beyond the realistic worlds of Albertine and Rose Ouimet. Rose and Albertine are among the antagonists of Tremblay's novel and, like Boy Staunton, Mrs. Ramsay and Amasa Dempster in *Fifth Business*, they are the voices of disapproval, the representatives of narrow, repressive social and religious views. In both novels myth feeds back into everyday reality. Just as Davies tells us, through the voices of Dunstan Ramsay, Padre Blazon and Liesl, that myth and legend inform, anticipate and affect everyday reality, in *La grosse femme* we find the mythic spinsters comforting Marcel, humbling Victoire and watching over la Grosse Femme.

Both novels represent the thesis that life touched by myth, even if that mythology implies illusion and self-deception, is preferable to that insular life which struggles to attach itself to nothing but the hard, cold facts of common reality and normality.

For example, Ti-Lou forms a myth of herself as "la louve" of Ottawa, exaggerating her own glory and importance while repudiating the discomfort and shame of being a prostitute. Her self-myth gives her pride and verve and the strength to turn her ignominious death into a kind of personal victory. The suffering of those without a sense of myth and dreams is unmitigated. Albertine turns angrily on Josaphat-le-Violon for telling Marcel fabulous fables. She then asks Laura Cadieux for her opinion of this outrageous story-telling.

"Pis toé, Laura, comment c'est que tu fais pour savoir quand c'est que ton père te conte des contes pis quand c'est qu'y te dit la vérité?" Laura arrêta pendant quelques secondes d'essuyer les assiettes. Elle semblait réfléchir profondément. Lorsqu'elle parla ce fut avec conviction et sa réplique n'appelait aucune réponse. "Ça m'intéresse pas de savoir, ma tante. J'dirais même que des fois ça m'aide à vivre qu'y me fasse voyager comme y fait." (316)

Laura finds comfort in her father's stories, but as for Albertine ...

Albertine replongea les mains dans l'eau bouillante. "Bon, okay, j'ai compris. C'est moi qui est folle. Rêvez, toute la gang, rêvez, vous saurez ben me dire un bon jour que vous auriez été mieux de rester les deux pieds su'a terre comme moé!" (316)

In *Fifth Business* Padre Blazon offers a point of view which parallels that of Laura Cadieux. He calls Mrs. Dempster Dunstan's "fool-saint" (a saintly fool, tainted with madness and of no real good, as Father Regan suggests). Blazon is doubtful of the miracles Dunstan Ramsay feels she has performed, but he offers this reasoning, the ratiocination of the novel:

I have been thinking about your fool-saint, what I conclude is this: she would never have got past the Bollandists, but she must have been an extraordinary person, a great lover of God, and trusting greatly in His love for her. As for the miracles, you and I have looked too deeply into miracles to dogmatize; you believe in them, and your belief has

coloured your life with beauty and goodness; too much scientizing will not help you. (249)

Though she cannot be proved to be a "true" saint, Padre Blazon counsels Ramsay that he should pray to Mrs. Dempster as a saint. The Padre points out: "Your life has been illuminated by your fool-saint, and how many can say so much?" (249). Boy Staunton, like Albertine, has his two feet on the ground and is also unprepared to accept the psychological comfort of an imaginative mythology.

He had embraced Denyse's rationalism—that was what she called it—fervently, and one day at the York Club, following the publication and varied reviews of my big book on the psychology of myth and legend, he denounced me petulantly for what he called my triviality of mind and my encouragement of superstition. (241)

Boy Staunton suffers from his confinement to reality much as Albertine does. Dunstan's reply defeats Boy, and it can offer us new insight into the character of Tremblay's Albertine.

He had not read the book and I was sharp with him. He pulled in his horns a little and said, as best he could in the way of an apology, that he could not stand such stuff because he was an atheist.

"I'm not surprised," said I. "You created a God in your own image, and when you found out he was no good you abolished him. It's quite a common form of psychological suicide."

I had only meant to give him blow for blow, but to my surprise he crumpled up. (241)

Albertine is on the verge of this same psychological suicide. Her god, like herself, is harsh and mean-spirited. Throughout the novel her despair is frantic and acute at the inadequacy of the insensate and disapproving god she has created for herself.

Albertine is matched not only by the "realist" Boy Staunton, but also by Dunstan's strict and disapproving mother. Mrs. Ramsay's anger and bitterness lead to the breakup of her relationship with her son. Dunstan's reaction to his mother is,

like Marcel's reaction to Albertine, fear and avoidance. Dunstan's resistance eventually turns to mistrust, disdain and contempt. As Dunstan lies in a hospital bed recovering from his war wounds, he learns of the death of his mother:

I was glad that I did not have to be my mother's own dear laddie any longer, or ever attempt to explain to her what the war was, or warp my nature to suit her confident demands. I knew she had eaten my father, and I was glad I did not have to fight any longer to keep her from eating me. Oh, these good, ignorant, confident women! How one grows to hate them! (81)

A similar anti-maternal malevolence arises in Albertine's daughter, Thérèse:

Sa mère ne lui faisait plus peur depuis longtemps et ses sautes d'humeur la laissaient indifférente . . . non, pas tout à fait . . . les sautes d'humeur de sa mère commençaient à réveiller en elle un sentiment inconnu qu'elle ne comprenait pas encore mais qui la remplissait d'une joie morne, mal définie, presque malsaine: le mépris. (38)

The anti-maternal feelings focused on Albertine and Mrs. Ramsay are counterbalanced in the novels by the great sympathy and quasi-adoration afforded *la Grosse Femme* and Mrs. Dempster. Dunstan describes Mrs. Dempster, saying:

she seemed to me to have a breadth of outlook, and a clarity of vision that were strange and wonderful; . . . perhaps she was crazy, in part, but only in part; the best part of her brought comfort and assurance into my life; . . . I regarded her as my greatest friend, and the secret league between us as the tap-root that fed my life. (52-3)

La Grosse Femme also provides an outlook which seems to transcend the daily squalor of the rue Fabre. She brings peace to the children and comfort and assurance to Gabriel, and she forms a secret league with Edouard which is mutually sustaining. In the final episode of the novel she is pictured with six of the

neighbourhood's pregnant women gathered about her attending to her counsel—a symbol of maternity, a mother of mothers.

La Grosse Femme and Mrs. Dempster, the symbolic centers of the respective novels, are both presented as bizarre madonna figures. Mrs. Dempster is pregnant in the opening scene of *Fifth Business*, and la Grosse Femme is pregnant in Tremblay's novel. Both these pregnancies provoke disapproval. Mrs. Dempster walks the streets of Deptford when "it was not the custom in our village for pregnant women to show themselves boldly in the streets—not if they had any position to keep up" (10). La Grosse Femme's pregnancy is denigrated because she is obese and over forty, and her pregnancy is keeping her husband out of the war. The censure of these women becomes frenzied when each is discovered in an act of sexual intercourse. Albertine becomes hysterical when she realizes that Gabriel and la Grosse Femme are making love in the afternoon. Mrs. Ramsay goes into a righteous rage after Mrs. Dempster's tryst with Joel Surgeoner. Eventually both women are held under varying forms of captivity. La Grosse Femme is immobilized by her obesity and, as a consequence of her madness, Mrs. Dempster is tied up in the house by her husband, Amasa.

In addition to these similarities of theme, character and incident, the novels are parallel in that they are both explicitly governed by Greek notions of fate. In *La grosse femme*, fate is represented by the four old ladies knitting on the porch next door:

Florence avait posé ses mains à plat sur ses genoux. "Faut jamais retourner en arrière. On est là pour toute aille vers l'avant. Ce qui est tricoté est tricoté même si c'est mal tricoté." (101)

In *Fifth Business*, Boy Staunton pushes Dunstan to take control of his life and to make something of himself (in terms of Boy's view of reality). Dunstan is, of course, uninterested in following Boy's advice. "I was not sure I wanted to issue orders to life; I rather liked the Greek notion of allowing Chance to take a formative hand in my affairs" (129). This fatalism reflects in the politics, or rather lack of politics, of the novels. In the face of

Fate, political action is absurd. Both novels, therefore, adopt a *laissez-faire* attitude toward politics. As Dunstan Ramsay explains: "My fondness for myth and legend have always blunted my political partisanship" (150). Tremblay offers a whimsical political allegory of the defeat of Duplessis at the hands of Aldéric Godbout in '39 in the form of Godbout, the dog, savaging Duplessis, the cat. There is no equivalent for the cat and dog allegory in *Fifth Business* but, of course, there is the corresponding political defeat of Boy Staunton. There is also a strong similarity of features between the *vicieux*, egotistical, eventually pathetic cat, Duplessis, and the sexual, cruel, selfish, arrogant, and finally tragic Boy Staunton. The sense of fate in *La grosse femme* supersedes politics, reducing it to phatic conversations and the occasional splash of oratory in the tavern on Sunday afternoon.

That the novels share a sense of fate, and are analogous in terms of symbolism, characterization and theme, confirms their parallelism. In the light of these similarities, the stylistic differences between the two novels become all the more distinct and striking. For example, if we consider the overall structures of the novels, we notice that *Fifth Business* is first of all a letter; it is a *Bildungsroman*, and it is a memoir. In addition to these structures, the book is modeled, in whole and in part, on the Jungian archetypes of human consciousness and unconsciousness. Events of the novel, as Dunstan Ramsay frequently points out to us, are patterned after myth—the story elements of the magic show, the pattern of the miracles, and various relationships. Dunstan likens his triangular relationship with Boy Staunton and Boy's first wife, Leola, to the myth of King Candaules, and likens himself to the "fifth business" of comic opera (the character who stands outside the action of the four main characters but becomes the catalyst of key events). The novel is thus designed with a multitude of infrastructures and superstructures, into which the basic elements of the story must be fitted, attached and subsumed. *La grosse femme*, on the other hand, is a-structural. While one perceives the musical composition inherent in the novel, it is remarkable for its lack of visible

structures. The book has no chapters, no rubrics, no clearly identifiable structure beyond a form that is flowing, episodic and rhapsodic. The organic interrelations of events and characters seem independent of the traditional grids of literary convention.

The novels are opposed in terms of range as well. *Fifth Business* crosses countries and social barriers, and it spans sixty years. *La grosse femme* takes place in one poor neighbourhood in Montréal in about half a day.

These dichotomies are predicted in Stratford's descriptive definitions of the English Canadian and French Canadian novel in *All the Polarities* (97-8). In fact, although *All The Polarities* does not include the novels by Tremblay or Davies, and despite Stratford's explicit exclusion of *La grosse femme* from his definition, the general contrastive analysis of English and French Canadian novels which Stratford presents does identify most of the polarities to be found between *Fifth Business* and *La grosse femme*.

The basic thrust of Stratford's description of the typical or expected English Canadian novel is that such a novel depends on external conventions and a highly objectified sense of reality. The French Canadian novel, however, works with internal conventions and a communalized and personalized sense of reality. Stratford accounts for the tendencies of the Québécois novel through a consideration of the conditions of encirclement inherent to Québec's geographical and cultural situation. Time, space and history are collapsed into a confined community. These values can then only be communicated via a close appreciation of the community. The writer therefore moves more deeply into the community, rather than broadly across the world. The English Canadian novel by contrast moves horizontally through space and time. Stratford acknowledges the fact that in the English Canadian novel the individual is constantly emerging from a community into the world, but he does not account for this tendency, except to contrast it with that of the French Canadian character whose confinement redirects him to integration with the community.

The function of culture—custom, mores, fabric, ritual, and art—has always been to integrate the individual into the

community (be it the Québécois, anarchist or theosophist community). From this perspective, the tendencies of the Québécois novel require little or no explanation. From this perspective, it is the English Canadian novel that is anomalous and that demands some explanation. For most English-speaking Canadians an invitation into what McLuhan has called the Global Village is without menace and accepted easily. In many cases it seems to be an invitation home, or a visit to the cousins. For the Québécois such a possibility automatically implies either submission to English or an alien French culture or else dispersion. Over the years the English Canadian has, unthinkingly, adopted citizenship in the world, while the Québécois has striven, against the pressures of the Global Village, to keep his community intact and alive.

If we carry McLuhan's notions of oral and visual/literate cultures to Stratford's descriptive definition of the Québécois novel, we discover a highly literate, visual perspective being brought to bear on a cultural phenomenon reflecting an "oral" bias. The upshot is that, in considering the Québécois novel, Stratford repeatedly notes the absence of visual values: lack of distance (focusing distance) from the object of perception, lack of order, lack of foreground/background distinction, "little perspective," and the absence of "a convincing external view of reality" (97).

The French Canadian writer grounded in Québécois culture, and thus encircled, is faced with two choices: either to embrace the Global Village and the technical universe with its culture of visual values, or to emphasize his immediate community and to adopt the "oral" values implied in this choice. If he chooses the latter, the direction of his choice will be the reverse of that of McLuhan's tribal man who adopts literacy.

Nearly all the emotional and corporate family feeling is eliminated from his relationship with his social group. He is emotionally free to separate from the tribe and to become a civilized individual, a man of visual organization who has uniform attitudes, habits and rights with all other civilized individuals. (265)

The passage reminds us that *Fifth Business* is the story of a literate young man who cannot find happiness in his small hometown. The novel emphasizes, as Stratford suggests is typical of the English Canadian tradition, "the individualistic hero" (97), and at the same time it draws upon the notion of the individual as a citizen of the world. For example, Dunstan describes his camaraderie with the circus performers in universal rather than communal terms:

It is not hard to be popular with any group, whether composed of the most conventional Canadians or of Central European freaks, if one is prepared to talk to people about themselves. (164)

Boy Staunton, as a character, is also universalized and standardized:

He was the quintessence of the Jazz Age, a Scott Fitzgerald character. It was characteristic of Boy throughout his life that he was always the quintessence of something that somebody else had recognized and defined. (174)

In contrast, Tremblay, in *La grosse femme*, recreates the world of Plateau Mont-Royal as a communal society where relationships are immediate and communication is primarily oral. Victoire is glued to the radio nightly, the community gossips, the men go to the tavern for conversation, and the family listens to the stories of Josaphat-le-Violon. Only the twelve-year-old children and young Laura Cadieux read the newspapers. La Grosse Femme herself reads, but she prefers to turn the experience back to its oral form. While fantasizing about Acapulco, she says to Gabriel: "Tu lirais *Notre-Dame de Paris* ou ben donc *Eugénie Grandette*, à voix haute, pis quand les vagues seraient pas dans mes oreilles j'écouterais" (40).

McLuhan notes that radio—the main technology of *La grosse femme*—has the power to "retribalize" man and to effect an "almost instant reversal of individualism into collectivism" (256). McLuhan contrasts radio and the press, saying that:

Radio restores tribal sensitivity and exclusive involvement in the web of kinship. The press, on the other hand, creates

a visual, not-too-involved kind of unity that is hospitable to the inclusion of many tribes, and to diversity of private outlook. (256)

Whereas Tremblay looks inward at the closely interwoven web of relationships within the community, in *Fifth Business* Davies is compelled to deal with uniform and universal views implicit in literacy and reinforced by other visual media—such as films and television. Therefore, for example, Deptford must be placed somewhere within the universal/technological notions of a small town.

Village life has been so extensively explored by movies and television during recent years that you may shrink from hearing more about it. I shall be as brief as I can, for it is not by piling up detail that I hope to achieve my picture, but by putting the emphasis where I think it belongs.

Once it was the fashion to represent villages. (16)

In *La grosse femme*, however, tribal attitudes toward territory are highlighted.

Jamais personne du groupe n'allait plus loin que chez Eaton. A l'ouest de ce grand magasin c'était le grand inconnu: l'anglais, l'argent, Simpson's, Ogilvy's, la rue Peel, la rue Guy, jusqu'après Atwater, là où l'on recommençait à se sentir chez soi à cause du quartier Saint-Henri, tout proche, et de l'odeur du port. Mais jamais personne n'allait jusqu'à Saint-Henri et jamais personne de Saint-Henri ne venait jusqu'au Plateau Mont-Royal. On se rencontrait à mi-chemin, dans les allées Eaton, et on fraternisait au-dessus d'un sundae au chocolat ou d'un ice-cream soda. Les femmes de Saint-Henri parlaient fièrement de la place Georges-Étienne-Cartier et celles du Plateau Mont-Royal du boulevard Saint-Joseph. (25)

In *Fifth Business*, Dunstan is obsessed with literacy. He is a writer, not a teller of stories like Joshaphat. Whereas Gabriel becomes the tavern orator every Sunday, Dunstan's father is a newspaper editor and writes a weekly editorial. *Fifth Business* is replete with the writing of books, the reading of books and the study of books. The novel is a letter, precipitated by a newspaper

article, and ends with a letter within the letter. Most of the major turning points involve letters, notes, telegrams and newspaper articles.

As far as the authors' own confessed writing habits are concerned, they again show oral (spontaneous) versus literate (structured, visually organized) tendencies. Tremblay describes the writing of his play, *Les Belles-Soeurs*, as simply putting thirteen women on the stage to see what they would say.¹ Tremblay has described his general approach to the writing of his plays as thinking about the idea for a year or two, and then writing the play very quickly—usually in less than six weeks.² Davies' approach is described by Elspeth Buitenhuis in her book, *Robertson Davies*.

Whenever an idea occurs to him, and that may well be while lecturing, or in the middle of the night, or during a party, he jots it down in one of the many tiny notebooks he carries with him. Gradually these little notebooks are filled with the tidy notes in which characters are born and themes plotted. Because he is prey to writer's cramp, Davies composes at the typewriter. Each day begins with the extensive revision of the work of the day before, consisting largely of condensation and rephrasing of what he has written. Once this first draft, on yellow paper, is completed, it is typed on blue paper and the whole book undergoes total revision again. This last revision is almost, at times, another rewriting of large sections of the book. Finally it goes to the publisher. (16)

The polarities of orality and literacy apply not only to the approaches to writing and to the universes they chose to describe, but, consequently and most importantly, to the writing styles which the novels display. Stratford describes the logic of the narrative of the French Canadian novel as dreamlike, while that of its English counterpart is chronological. According to Stratford, the French Canadian novel is coded, clannish, perplexing, not clearly ordered, "a state of mind" (97). The English Canadian novel seems to follow the logic of historical and daily events, and time and memory supply a further degree of order to the extensive detail which the novel typically offers.

These descriptions apply to the novels at hand, but McLuhan's observation that in literate societies there is a "strong bias toward sequence as logic" (88) born of the linear and sequential nature of the alphabet and of print does much to explain this polarity. Thus, in *Fifth Business* the logic of the narrative is sequential and linear. *Fifth Business* relies on chronology as its organizing principle. *La grosse femme*, on the other hand, is an intense, episodic investigation of a brief, and seeming frozen time frame. Primitive man and, by extension, the man who attaches himself to oral culture operate primarily on subjective time. Whereas literate man depends on objective, scientific, clock time, the universe of *La grosse femme* is logical, without necessarily being linear, sequential or dependent on objective time. Tremblay's basic model for the style of *La grosse femme* is the body of his own plays. Characters, situations and the style of dialogue in *La grosse femme* can be found in his earlier plays: *La Duchesse de Langeais*, *A toi pour toujours*, *ta Mary-Lou*, *A ton tour*, *Laura Cadieux* and others. Tremblay's stated ambitions are to model his works on the Greek classics, and for his writing to rival the qualities of music.³

Patricia Morley, in her book *Robertson Davies*, contends that

Davies' love of music is evident in everything he writes. Most of his plays contain a song, a dance or both, and music also plays an important part in his novels. The title of his best known novel, *Fifth Business*, is taken from an operatic term. (2)

Despite Morley's intimations, there is little musicality in *Fifth Business*. A few fragments of verse and popular song are included in the novel but, far from melody, they produce a documentary effect. If anything, the novel displays Davies' background as a journalist, and its model would be the newspaper or some rough equivalent in the press. In *Understanding Media*, McLuhan notes the particular style which writers such as Addison and Steele developed specifically for the press:

there occurs a change, not only in the physical appearance of the press, but also in the prose style of those writing for it. The first great change in style came in the eighteenth century, when the famous *Tatler* and *Spectator* of Addison and Steele discovered a new prose technique to match the form of the printed word. It was the technique of equitone. It consisted in maintaining a single level of tone and attitude to the reader throughout the entire composition. By this discovery, Addison and Steele brought written discourse into line with the printed word and away from the variety of pitch and tone of the spoken, and even the hand-written, word. (189)

While the style of *Fifth Business* is characterized by the equitone prose of the press, McLuhan's analysis of a radio disk-jockey's banter captures the essence of Tremblay's writing style.

A few seconds from a popular disk-jockey show were typed out as follows:

That's Patty Baby and that's the girl with the dancing feet and that's Freddy Cannon there on the David Mickie show in the night time ooohbah scuba how are you booboo. Next we'll be Swinging on a star and ssshhhhwwwoooooo and sliding on a moonbeam.

Waaaaaaa how about that . . . one of the goodest guys with you . . . this is loveable, kissable D.M. in the p.m. at 22 minutes past nine o'clock there, ahhrightie, we're gonna have a Hitline, all you have to do is call WALnut 5-1151, WALnut 5-1151, tell them what number is on the Hitline.

Dave Mickey alternately soars, groans, swings, sings, solos, intones and scampers, always reacting to his own actions. He moves entirely in the spoken rather than the written area of experience. It is in this way that audience participation is created. The spoken word involves all the senses dramatically, though highly literate people tend to speak as connectedly and casually as possible. (82)

Being in harmony with oral communication, Tremblay's prose is immediate and absorbing, and does indeed seem to soar, swing, groan, sing and intone. His style is built on onomatopoeia, changes of pace, pauses, and the rise and fall of pitch and tone.

The opening of *La grosse femme*, for example, is composed of the clicking of knitting needles, silence, the creaking of a rocking chair, silence suddenly broken by a few lines of dialogue, the hiss of a cat, a reaction and silence. The next movement begins with Marie-Sylvie calling out in the street for her cat, Duplessis.

The oral style demands, as McLuhan suggests, immediate participation—what Stratford calls, in literary terms, intimate and uncritical participation, and a narrative point of view "in an immediate and unreflective present" (98). On the other hand, the persistent sense of "distance from the action" (97) which Stratford sees in the English Canadian novel is a predictable consequence of visual culture. As McLuhan argues in *Understanding Media*:

The literate man or society develops the tremendous power of acting in any matter with considerable detachment from the feelings or emotional involvement that nonliterate man or society would experience. (83)

Literacy, and the highly visual culture which ensures, forces man to separate himself from his own feelings and events, to exteriorize and objectify them. This fact not only colours the style of *Fifth Business* but, paradoxically, it is one of the themes of the novel. For example, Dunstan Ramsay, being a truly literate man, discusses his relationship with his mother as if it were a case study in Freudian psychology. Dunstan, in this manner, separates himself from the events of his life. In fact, as Liesl points out, he separates himself from life. Significantly, it is this tendency which makes Dunstan Ramsay the "fifth business."

Tremblay, rather than offering a sense of distance from the events, encourages the reader to participate "intimately and uncritically" in the world of *La grosse femme*, through, as Stratford suggests, "the vividness, the suggestiveness, the exceptional quality, or the emotional charge carried by the details selected" (98). To this list of adjectivals we might add the modulation, rhythm, fluidity and sensuousness of the novel. This immediacy and sensuousness, the lack of separation or distance are, as McLuhan has suggested, the marks of orality.

In order to contrast the exteriorizing, distancing, literate style with the immediate, sensuous, oral style, let us consider passages of similar substance from the novels. In the following passage from *Fifth Business* Dunstan is in the hospital recovering from his war wounds and is being nursed by Diana. In this scene we discover that Dunstan has lost his leg.

They had other news for me, not so good. My burns had been severe, and in those days they were not so clever with burns as they are now, so that quite a lot of skin on my chest and left side was an angry-looking mess, rather like lumpy sealing wax, and is so still, though is a little browner now. In the bed, on the left side, was an arrangement of wire, like a beeskip, to keep the sheets from touching the stump where my left leg had been. While my wits were off on that paradisaic holiday I had been fed liquids, and so I was thin and weak. What is more, I had a full beard, and the pretty nurse and I had a rare old time getting it off. (80)

In this passage Davies gives us a picture, but does not encourage us to involve ourselves in the incident. We should, of course, notice the visual qualities of the passage—the reference to colour, frequent indications of left and right, the visual similes of "the angry looking mess . . . like lumpy sealing wax," and the arrangement that looked "like a beeskip," the *picture* of Ramsay, weak, thin and bearded, and the suggestion of "the pretty nurse." The passage is classic in demanding that the reader distance himself from events. This distancing is achieved first by the visuality of the passage, then furthered in several ways. As Stratford predicts, the passage is an explicit "act of memory" (97). We are pointedly reminded of the distance in time between "those days" when the action occurred and "now." The passage is even in tone, rhythm and pace. The lines allow only a constricted quiver of emotion with little resonance. Author and narrator strive for understatement. The revelation of the missing limb is buried in the middle of the passage and the difficulty of shaving a full beard becomes the anti-climactic conclusion of the passage. We should, in particular, notice the absence of sounds, feelings, smells,

reactions, suspense, immediate action, and emotions from the passage.

Let us now consider a parallel passage from *La grosse femme* in which we discover that Ti-Lou's stump is gangrenous. She is being nursed by Rose Ouimet, and Rose is helping with her bath.

Rose Ouimet l'aida à entrer dans l'eau. "C'est pas trop chaud?" "Non, non, c'est correct, ça fait du bien . ." Rose Ouimet, la main recouverte d'un gant de ratine, entreprit de frotter les épaules et le cou de Ti-Lou avec de l'eau savonneuse mais quelque chose attira son attention: le bout de jambe droit de Ti-Lou flottait et une tache noire soulignait la cicatrice à l'extrémité du moignon. "C'est drôle, le boutte de vot'jambe droite est tout noir!" Ti-Lou hurla comme si on lui avait arraché le coeur. (134)

The passage also contains references to colour and direction, but its overall style, being sensuous and immediate, is the polar opposite of the detached style found in *Fifth Business*. In this passage, we should note the sounds implicit and explicit in the movement and actions, the interspersing of dialogue, the tactility of human closeness, the immediacy of action and reaction, the sensuousness of soapy water, of heat, of floating, and the rubbing of neck and shoulders with a terry-cloth glove. There are several modulations of tone, an element of suspense, and a build-up to a high emotional pitch and a dramatic, aural climax.

In general, *Fifth Business* seems to have been written primarily for the eye, while Tremblay writes for that sensual involvement epitomized by the ear. Davies' highly literate style, with its architecturally composed sentences with many relative clauses, interrupting and antecedent structures, and parenthetical remarks too linear and involved for the ear, does not translate easily or naturally into speech. Tremblay's rambling, run-on, highly modulated rhapsody of dialogue, onomatopoeia, repetition, extended description and ellipse challenges the printed page and takes us beyond speech into a kind of "total" prose.

As we reconsider the content of the novels in light of this oral/visual dichotomy, a significant internal contradiction becomes

apparent in the fact that *Fifth Business* satirizes what its style reflects—the detached, uniformly ordered civilization of our technological universe. The point is brought home in the novel's conclusion. Boy Staunton's funeral (though a funeral is almost by definition a communal ritual) is turned into a uniform, universalized, impersonal event. Dunstan describes it this way:

The funeral was not quite a state funeral, though Denise tried to manage one; she wanted a flag on the coffin and she wanted soldiers, but it was not to be. However, many flags were at half-mast, and she did achieve a very fine turnout of important people, and others who were important because they represented somebody too important to come personally.

The reception after the funeral was in the great tradition of such affairs . . . Denise was wonderfully self-possessed and ran everything perfectly. (252)

The final gathering in *La grosse femme* reflects exactly the solace, the catharsis, the humanity and transcendence which Boy's funeral lacked. In contrast to Boy's funeral which aspired to an historical event, the gathering on the rue Fabre is immediate and sustaining. Josaphat-le-Violon tells his tales and provides music, the children dance, Victoire is assuaged from her fears of senility, la Grosse Femme is lifted from her depression, and all the pregnant women of the neighbourhood come to be reassured.

Stratford notes that the French Canadian novel is "unlikely to have an historical nature" (97). Clearly, the encircled community—the tribe, the neighbourhood, the family—lives by custom, habit and ritual, and therefore community truth must preempt historical truth. Historical events rarely impinge on the community, and even when they do, like the war in *La grosse femme*, they seem impossibly distant and fantastical. The war is relevant to the rue Fabre only in so far as it disturbs and restructures the habits and state of mind of the community, as do a missing husband, the presence of soldiers, a boom of pregnant women, and a change in the talk and attitude of the patrons of the tavern. The war itself, and history in general, are irrelevant. As *La grosse femme* reflects in its final passage, the community and the

state of mind of the community appeal beyond history; they appeal directly to the cosmos.

Rose, Violette et Mauve tricotaient. Leur balcon était plongé dans le noir mais leurs mains retrouvaient automatiquement les gestes justes et le bon rythme. Florence, leur mère . . . Elle écoutait en souriant les voix des sept femmes enceintes au-dessus d'elle. (329)

Fifth Business, with its symbiosis of particularity and universality, and its theorizing on the inter-relation of the mythic and the mundane, still manages to ignore the cosmos. Paradoxically, however, one of the main points of the novel is about the danger of ignoring the cosmos. Boy Staunton's atheism and Dunstan Ramsay's bookishness are cases in point. As McLuhan comments in *Understanding Media*:

Literate man, once having accepted an analytic technology of fragmentation, is not nearly so accessible to cosmic patterns as tribal man. He prefers separateness and compartmented spaces, rather than the open cosmos. (118)

Boy specializes in sugar and money and knows little else about the world. Dunstan's love of books and saints causes him to spend his life in cloisters, museums and libraries. It is only his association with Mrs. Dempster and later her son that saves him from missing life altogether. *Understanding Media* again applies.

Indifference to the cosmic, however, fosters intense concentration on minute segments and specialist tasks, which is the unique strength of Western man. For the specialist is one who never makes small mistakes while moving toward the grand fallacy. (118)

This indictment applies not only to the grandly senseless life of Boy Staunton but perhaps to the bookish old hagiographer who becomes the fifth business as well. The novel implies that though Dunstan may be a genius in books, he is a plain *Dunce* in the world. As Dunstan joins the oral/tribal world of the circus, he is at the perihelion of his journey toward the cosmic. However, neither

Dunstan nor Boy are capable of opening themselves up to the cosmos, as members of a tribe do naturally and automatically. The novel suggests that a mere glimpse of the cosmos killed Boy and gave Dunstan a heart attack.

As we review the polarities of *Fifth Business* and *La grosse femme*, we must conclude that in the warp of time and space, parallel lines do draw closer together. In *Fifth Business*, despite its detached, equitone style, we find a subtextual story of an individual struggling through the universalized, standardized values of modern, technological civilization toward a more communal, immediate and human form of existence—one which allows at least the possibility of cosmic influence. In *La grosse femme* we find the communal universe and natural transcendence for which Dunstan Ramsay's heart yearned. The general movement of *La grosse femme* is one of re-integration within the community, rather than toward visual culture. However, the book is, after all, a book, and therefore a part of the visual universe. Yet, as we attempt to converge oral and visual, French and English Canadian cultures in a phrase, mixed metaphors and paradox seem unavoidable. *La grosse femme* is a glimpse of the oral universe. *Fifth Business* strives to make us see what it would have us hear.

NOTES

¹ Michel Bélair, *Michel Tremblay* (Montréal: Les Presses de l'Université du Québec, 1972) 18.

² Michel Tremblay, from his lecture at Concordia University, Montréal, February 4, 1977.

³ Michel Tremblay, a lecture at Concordia University, Montréal, Feb. 4, 1977.

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