

## News and Gender in Gabrielle Roy

**G**abrielle Roy featured the newspaper prominently in both her Montreal novels, *Bonheur d'occasion* (1945) and *Alexandre Chenevert* (1954), and continued such attention years later in the short story, "Un jardin au bout du monde" (1975). Within all three texts, the newspaper is used to characterize the husbands in Roy's fiction and their relationships with their wives: men react aggressively to newspapers and radio bulletins, connecting far more passionately with the world in general than with their family. Whether reacting to newspapers, or more generally, men demonstrate macho reactions conforming to an ideology of dominant masculinity. Roy's women are defined by very different texts, so that all three works exhibit a strongly gendered dichotomy.

"Un jardin au bout du monde" allows a ready distillation of elements signified by newspapers. The story depicts an old Ukrainian couple, Stépan and Martha Yaramko, living in an isolated corner of Alberta where they spend every evening in the same way. While Martha, who is devoted to her flower garden, reads the seed section in an Eaton's catalogue, Stépan's attention and emotional commitment are absorbed by the newspaper: "Stépan, d'une pile d'un journal en langue ukrainienne imprimé à Codessa, tirait un vieux numéro, peu important lequel, il les avait tous lus. Néanmoins, en enchaînant péniblement les mots et les phrases, il arrivait à se mettre encore en colère contre cet absurde effort des hommes partout dans le monde pour améliorer leur sort" (127). The husband's interest is in the world at large while his wife is concerned with the home and family.<sup>1</sup> The difference between the two is so acute that they no longer speak, thus providing, as Pierrette

Daviau has observed, an “image parfaite de l’incommunicabilité” (81). Trapped in this mute relationship, Martha suffers the profound alienation of one whose deeper feelings remain uncommunicated: “Comment font donc les sentiments que l’on n’exprime jamais, qui vivent repliés dans les plus lointaines retraites de l’âme, que l’on ne nomme même pas, comment font-ils pour ne pas mourir?” (128). Stépan’s alienation fuels his egotism, filling him with a sense of superiority over a world he views with contempt. He reacts with anger and his aggressive feelings are often turned against his wife. Martha’s illness and approaching death produce, however, a change of heart in her husband, whose softened approach finds expression in a strongly suggestive gesture. He sacrifices his old newspapers to her flower garden, protecting her plants from the frost by wrapping them with his precious nightly reading matter. The conclusion of this story questions Stépan’s whole value system and perception of reality. For many years, he had scorned Martha’s flower garden,<sup>2</sup> preferring instead what was reported to him by newspapers, despite their being so out of date as to have lost all relevance. His reversal of values at the end of the story shows that he has at last grasped the greater importance of a real and present relationship.

As in “Un jardin au bout du monde,” both Roy’s city novels depict males strongly interested in newspapers. In *Bonheur d’occasion*, men are pictured with one tucked under the arm (253) or under the epaulette of a uniform (396). They are shown reading the newspaper in a variety of settings: in the *Deux Records* café (44, 154, 252) which has “de nombreux journaux, hebdomadaires, quotidiens, illustrés et périodiques” hanging above the counter (41); at home (91, 366); in the street (252, 401); in overcrowded streetcars where passengers are described in such a limited way—“des bras levés, des journaux dépliés, des dos affaissés” (78)—as to be reduced visually to the mere essence of newspaper readers. The radio equivalent, regular news bulletins, are even more pervasive since they fill the air and completely surround the city dweller, as Emmanuel finds when he walks the streets:

De chaque boutique, grande ouverte sur son passage, s’échappait une voix métallique et forte. Une phrase se perdait; de la boutique suivante, la même voix continuait une autre phrase décousue. Cent appareils de radio, à sa droite, à sa gauche, derrière lui, devant lui, lançaient des bribes de nouvelles et faisaient de leur mieux pour lui rappeler l’agonie dans laquelle le monde se débattait. (316)<sup>3</sup>

Newspapers or radio bulletins are equally present in *Alexandre Chenevert*. Since this novel focuses far more on a single character than does *Bonheur d’occasion*, the role of newspapers is largely shown through Alexandre’s

intense preoccupation with them. His mind overflows with current affairs. From the cold war to a dockers' strike, from the arms race to a plane crash, reports so crowd Alexandre's mind that his view of the world matches the disjointed opening scenes of an MGM newsreel: "Un lion rugit; une danseuse lève la cuisse, un tank s'enflamme" (9-10). Alexandre has fallen completely under the spell of newspapers, which are shown to dominate the city: a newspaper van goes by with its advertising hoarding: "LISEZ L'AVENIR DU PAYS" (206); a kiosk selling newspapers "de presque toutes les capitales du monde" offers headlines which cry out to be read (206-07). The disembodied voice of the newsreader becomes so familiar to Alexandre that each radio presenter has become one: "Or, cette voix de radio, à travers les années, paraissait la même à Alexandre, toujours souple, toujours persuasive" (12). Moreover, Alexandre participates himself in the dissemination of news by imitating the newsreader style over lunch. Newspaper in hand, Alexandre updates his friend Godias on world affairs, prefacing each point with a reference to his reading: "Je viens de lire" (51); "J'ai lu" (52); "As-tu lu?" (54). Though Godias is opposed to Alexandre's choice of newspaper, he is nonetheless devoted to another daily, *Le Pays*, a copy of which he brings to the cafeteria (56). The news has infiltrated city life to such a degree that, on three separate occasions, it forms part of the meal ritual. Thus the bank manager, Emery Fontaine, listens to "le journal parlé en beurrant ses toasts" (72); at the cafeteria, Alexandre places a newspaper against the salt shaker and, despite the horrifying headlines, proceeds to eat lunch: "Et tout en mangeant son pain, il lut que dix officiers étaient pendus en Palestine pour chaque condamné à mort" (49); in a café, taxi drivers listen robotically to horrifying news reports while eating their sandwiches: "Les mâchoires fonctionnaient au rythme des nouvelles énoncées" (206). For these taxi drivers, the news reader, unseen and enclosed within a sound-proof studio, has taken on a Big Brother status. The news has so intruded upon their lives that—"mâchant des paroles débitées par un speaker invisible" (206)—they seem to be eating the very words they hear.

Though ever present in both novels, the newspaper is read by men and not women. Thus while men in the *Deux Records* café are absorbed in their newspaper, the proprietor's wife, Anita Latour, prefers to leaf through a magazine (154). In *Alexandre Chenevert*, the contrast is again drawn along gender lines, Eugénie expressing impatience with her husband's fascination: "Je te l'ai déjà dit: tu lis trop, Alexandre! Des meurtres, des calamités" (19). Gendered reading choices are again evident in a scene from *Bonheur d'occasion*

where Rose-Anna's attention is caught by a newspaper hoarding: "Et cette femme, qui ne lisait jamais que son livre d'heures, fit une chose extraordinaire. Elle traversa rapidement la chaussée en fouillant déjà dans son sac à main; et à peine arrivée sur le trottoir d'en face, elle tendit trois sous au vendeur de journaux et déplia aussitôt la gazette humide qu'il lui avait remise" (239-40). The only time a woman buys a newspaper in either city novel is in this episode,<sup>4</sup> but Rose-Anna's sole motivation is to learn of news which may impact upon her son, a soldier who may soon be sent to war. Patricia Smart has seen that this episode clearly distinguishes masculine and feminine polarities in the novel: war, the topic most mentioned by newspapers in either novel, is thus sharply contrasted with maternal love (199). Rose-Anna's exclusive dependence on her prayer book is a natural extension of her maternal love<sup>5</sup> since it is easy to guess the subject of any prayer offered by this long-suffering and saintly mother. Eugénie Chenevert also eschews newspapers. She greatly prefers radio serials over news broadcasts, Alexandre often protesting "en agitant les feuilles de son journal" (105). These serials are no doubt highly sentimentalized dramas typical of the period. They reflect a strongly romantic streak in Eugénie which is especially evident following her hospitalization for a menopausal complaint. Her illness seems to have produced avid longings worthy of a *Madame Bovary*. Everything that Alexandre has failed to provide—"une tendresse constamment visible, des prévenances, la joie d'être comprise entièrement, la gaieté, des paroles exquises, des soins charmants"—Eugénie "le voulait pour ainsi dire sur-le-champ" (90). Newspapers and radio serials are thus contrasted in order to differentiate this couple, one whose attention is fully trained upon world events and the other who desires the "attention profonde et constante" (102) of a husband who seems the very antithesis of the romantic hero she seeks.

Men are so preoccupied with the world beyond their home that, as with Yaramkos, all verbal communication seems to have ceased within their relationships. At home with Rose-Anna following his latest loss of employment, Azarius shuts himself away in a world of dreams. Significantly, Rose-Anna's gaze is fixed on Azarius while his own attention is entirely consumed by the outside world, as shown by his opened newspaper: "Elle le regarda fumer sa cigarette par petites bouffées, assis tranquillement auprès du poêle de cuisine, le journal de la veille déplié sur ses genoux, et elle éprouva de l'amertume" (91). Rose-Anna's dependence upon her husband is as evident as Azarius' remoteness, and while she is unhappy because of her husband's unreliability, he cheerfully excludes her from his mind and recalls a life beyond the home:

“Il eut un soupir de bien-être, songeant à ces matins froids où, de son taxi en station, il guettait les passants” (91). It is extraordinary that in the midst of Rose-Anna’s anger about her husband’s unemployment, Azarius can so unashamedly find comfort in gilded memories of what has actually been a highly erratic work record. The newspaper is thus used to picture this man’s ability to transport himself away from the demands of a relationship and to invent a rewarding identity through endless “jongleries” (92). Unable to penetrate Azarius’ universe of dream and self-deceit, Rose-Anna sees her husband as perpetually committed to “vivre dans le vague” (172). Little wonder that, as we saw with Martha Yaramko, Rose-Anna despairs of ever being able to communicate within her marriage: “Au fond, la plus grande souffrance de sa vie de mariage tenait peut-être justement à ce sentiment que, dans les décisions importantes, elle ne pouvait prendre appui sur aucun des siens” (172).

Eugénie Chenevert is no less frustrated by an inability to share her more intimate feelings. Following a period in hospital where she chats freely with other women, she is tempted to do the same with her husband: “Une idée lui ayant traversé la tête, elle pensait: ‘Tiens, cela intéressera peut-être Alexandre’” (105). But Alexandre, forever concentrated on the calamitous state of the world, discourages her with his “visage maussade” (105). Thus the Chenevert marriage anticipates its mute Albertan counterpart in “Un jardin au bout du monde,” Alexandre at one point concluding: “Pour s’entendre entre mari et femme, entre collègues, entre amis . . . , il ne devait y avoir que ce moyen: le silence” (92).

Not only is the newspaper allowed to monopolize a husband’s mind and thus frustrate his wife, but it also supports the conventions of the dominant male. Reporting as it does in *Bonheur d’occasion* on World War II, the newspaper is seized upon by men to boost their ego and aggression. At home, Azarius is a very different being from the voluble and self-opinionated habitué of the *Deux Records* café. This inconsistency in his behaviour is especially evident in his voice:

Dans cet homme contrit, tassé auprès du feu, il eût été difficile de reconnaître, même de loin, le discoureur des Deux Records. . . . Sa voix même n’était plus celle qu’il employait au dehors pour donner son avis, exprimer ses vues audacieuses et généreuses. C’était un timbre conciliant, presque humble et où l’on aurait pu saisir parfois un accent de défaite. (92-93)

As Lori Saint-Martin has seen in this novel, women are excluded from male “lieux de parole” where affairs of the world are discussed (Portrait 521). Thus in the café, Azarius’ voice is restored. He takes an active part in

conversations which, informed by the newspaper and the radio, centre almost exclusively on war. Its proprietor, Sam Latour, sets the tone: “il aimait parler guerre et politique” (42). He even plays at war with Azarius, the café counter standing for the Maginot line which separates the two men, one representing France and the other Germany. As the novel progresses, aggression intensifies within both these men, as they feed on news from abroad. In an extended description of Latour’s response to a news broadcast, Roy depicts to the point of caricature a man fully consumed by hatred. He swears: “Cré bateau . . . Quand est-ce qu’ils vont les arrêter, ces diables de Boches-là?” (250); he adopts threatening poses: “Sam hochait la tête et ponctuait ses réflexions d’un balancement de ses fortes épaules ou bien portait les mains sur son ventre et tirait sa ceinture d’un geste belliqueux et déterminé” (251); his fury recalls “de grosses colères d’enfant” (251) and “un béliet irrité” (251). Earlier a “gros homme jovial, les joues pleines, le rire facile” (42), Sam Latour has now become so dehumanized that he roars like a lion (252) and has adopted an entirely bestial body language: “Il donnait des coups de mâchoire en tirant sur son col comme un animal pris dans les brancards” (252). Latour’s bellicosity is matched, however, and even exceeded by Azarius who displays an increasing appetite for newspapers: “Azarius en achetait maintenant un ou deux tous les jours” (366). In the climactic last chapter, both men are at the railway station to see off the departing soldiers. It is the only occasion when Latour is seen outside his café, which has become a kind of war headquarters, complete with a map of Europe pinned to the wall (252). But for all Latour’s bravado and “violentes invectives” (396) against the enemy, his voice is not the loudest. Among soldiers heading off for war, Azarius is the most aggressive, his booming voice reflecting a fully restored confidence:

Mais plus forte et persuasive que toutes s’élevait la voix d’Azarius Lacasse. Avec l’autorité d’un sergent, il allait entre les militaires et les apostrophait en petits groupes. “Dites-leur, en France, de tenir bon d’icitte à ce qu’on arrive.” Il tira un journal plié sous l’épaulette de son uniforme. Il l’ouvrit en grand et découvrit une manchette: Les alliés se replient sur Dunkerque. Alors Azarius frappa de tout son poing dans la feuille qui se fendit. (396)

Newspaper in hand, Azarius then approaches a young soldier: “Toi . . . , t’es bon pour en tuer une trentaine, hein, d’Allemands!” (397). Azarius desires more, however, than a military victory. He wants the opportunity to kill Germans personally: “Mais tue-les pas toutes, laisse-moi-z-en une couple, toujours. Finissez-la pas trop vite c’tte guerre-là!” (397).

A similar self-importance and aggression<sup>6</sup> are evident in Alexandre, and, like Azarius, he will use newspapers to urge himself on. His apparently altruistic concern for the world is actually motivated, as Paula Ruth Gilbert has noted, by an “egocentric superiority” and a hostile intolerance toward those, especially Eugénie and Godias, who fail to share his understanding (104-06). Thus the insomniac Alexandre assumes a quarrelsome superciliousness over his wife who manages to sleep so soundly at night: “Pour dormir aussi complètement ne fallait-il pas être sans réflexion et sans réelle sensibilité?” (13). Likewise with Godias over lunch, Alexandre’s condescension knows no bounds. He lectures his friend endlessly, “en marquant sa supériorité par un petit coup sec du menton” (53) and is deeply offended that Godias has failed “s’enrichir au contact des pensées, des lectures qu’il lui communiquait” (54). Not only does Alexandre’s gesture with his chin recall that of Sam Latour, but the bank teller has also taken on Latour’s animal belligerence: “Le nez assez long, un peu recourbé, lui donnait quelque ressemblance avec ces oiseaux de proie très solitaires, peut-être malheureux, et que l’on dit méchants” (15). He also shares with the café owner the same abusive expression when apostrophizing enemy nations, both men using the term “traîtres” (*Alexandre* 18, *Bonheur* 243, 244).

In the final chapters of the novels, Alexandre behaves like Stépan Yaramko in valuing more dearly those closest to him than does the world at large. Azarius’ enlistment is a clear affirmation of a militaristic evolution. These starkly different choices are in part determined by how these men come to regard the truth and relevance of newspapers. In *Bonheur d’occasion*, men view newspapers as dogma, as evident in Alphonse’s reasons for enlisting: “Y a de l’avenir dans l’armée! que je me disais. Puisque le petit gars et le vieux et tous les journaux dans la ville le disent, ça doit être vrai” (328). Azarius’ increasing identification with what he reads in the newspaper eventually leads him as well to join the army. Though at first, self-delusion goes no further than his opinionated conversational style at the *Deux Records* café. He readily admits to Jean Lévesque that he is too old to go to war: “Ne trouvez-vous pas que c’est le devoir de la jeunesse d’aller se battre? Ah, si j’avais encore mes vingt ans!” (46). Azarius’ envy of young men is explained by the strong community approval accorded to those who, like his son, Eugène, have enlisted. Fittingly, in the *Deux Records* café, a number of men offer Eugène their “muette approbation” (252) now that he has joined the army, so transforming this hitherto undistinguished individual’s perception of himself into that of an almost mythical hero: “Il était la jeunesse vaillante et

combative en qui l'âge mûr, la vieillesse, les faibles, les irrésolus ont placé leur confiance. Un défenseur des opprimés, des femmes, des vieillards, voilà ce qu'il était. Le bras vengeur de la société outragée. Dans ses prunelles jaillit une ardeur agressive" (252). If the aging Azarius is to become such a valorous figure, he must firstly reappropriate youth. Once he finally decides to enlist, he at first keeps it from his wife, but she, ever intuitive, senses the man's rejuvenation: "Il allait d'un pas plus hardi, plus vif" (365). Azarius' behaviour warns Rose-Anna that something is brewing in the "inconcevable jeunesse de cette nature" (366). When, with unbridled jingoism, Azarius bids farewell to fellow soldiers at the railway station, his identity has completely merged with that of a young soldier. The transformation is physically evident, as Emmanuel observes. Not only has Azarius recaptured the vitality of youth, but Emmanuel also notices that he has also thrown off the weight of married responsibility: "Était-ce l'homme qu'il avait vu profondément accablé, il n'y avait pas plus d'une semaine? Était-ce le mari de Rose-Anna? Mais cet homme paraissait aujourd'hui à peine plus âgé que lui-même . . . Une vigueur émanait de lui, presque irrésistible" (397). This fictitious self overrides all else, even the pain he will cause Rose-Anna by enlisting, self-deceit extending to the belief that he is sacrificing for his wife. The full extent of Azarius' self-delusion may be gauged by the strong similarity between how he now regards himself and the reconstructed self-image Eugène had derived from joining the army:

Il évoqua jusqu'aux champs de bataille fumants de sang humain, mais où un homme se révélait dans sa force. Il eut un grand besoin d'aventures, de périls, de hasards, lui qui avait si misérablement échoué dans les petites choses. Et même, lui qui s'était trouvé incapable de secourir le malheur qui l'entourait, il fut saisi d'une fièvre intrépide à la pensée de combattre les grandes afflictions ravageant le monde. (393)

Within this distorted view of reality, Azarius conforms to the model of social masculinity, assuming the same youthfully heroic attributes as his son: strength, fearlessness and idealism.

While Azarius is drawn more and more into the world of macho fantasy, Alexandre inhabited this world from the outset. He becomes so worked up about international affairs and so self-important that he must remind himself, and then only grudgingly, that problems such as the Palestinian conflict are "hors de sa compétence et de sa responsabilité" (14). Likewise, he very reluctantly concedes that war, treaties, and the atomic bomb, "rien de tout cela n'était au pouvoir d'Alexandre" (14). This ridiculously inflated view of



himself explains his outrage that “l’on pourrait faire la guerre sans son consentement” (96). Like Azarius, Alexandre pictures himself as a hero: he is delighted by his physical resemblance with Gandhi (10) and declares that he would rather go to prison than pay his taxes in case they are used to buy armaments (97). This constant focus on the wider world allows Alexandre to imagine a connection with people he has never met, Godias taking offence at the “àpreté avec laquelle Alexandre défendait de parfaits inconnus” (52). But both men are worried about a world they do not know at first hand. They often quarrel “au sujet d’êtres et d’événements de plus en plus éloignés de leur entendement” (55). Such an almost exclusive concern for strangers to the detriment of his own family does not go unnoticed by Eugénie Chenevert when she criticizes her husband for fasting in response to Gandhi’s assassination: “on ne jeûne pas pour un Hindou” (219).

Alexandre Chenevert remains in thrall to newspapers, preferring them to everyday life, until a turning point in his development, catalyzed by the experience of lac Vert. Despite extensive analysis of this episode (Socken 11-36; 55-63, Shek 199, Ricard 92, Roy-Cyr and Della-Zazzera 119, Hughes 88-92), critics have failed to notice the place of newspapers in what happens at lac Vert. When Dr Hudon recommends a holiday for Alexandre, he seems to be advising a shedding of his patient’s old ways: “Partez, Monsieur Chenevert . . . Débarrassez-vous” (136). Alexandre wastes no time in taking the doctor’s advice, hurrying to buy a newspaper. Amazingly, this passionate consumer of news is interested only in the holiday classifieds: “Pour la première fois de sa vie, il ignore les manchettes, les gros titres. . . . Cette vaste humanité, toujours en brouille au sujet d’huile, de coton, de traités secrets, laissait tout à coup M. Chenevert indifférent, ennuyé. Il se plongea dans les petites annonces” (141). In the first chapter, this holiday is prefigured in Alexandre’s escapist musings about a retreat which, complete with forest, cabin, and the absence of newspapers and radio, will be perfectly realized at lac Vert: “Il imagina une forêt profonde. Il allait, se frayant un chemin dans un silence parfait. Il trouvait une cabane abandonnée. . . . Il n’y avait là ni journaux, ni radio, ni réveille-matin. Alexandre s’apaisait (20). The repetition of “ni” reinforces a definition by exclusion, heralding the actual experience of lac Vert, which will produce a purging: “absence de tout: des hommes, du passé, de l’avenir, du malheur, du bonheur; complet dépouillement” (157). Newspapers and the many concerns they constantly bring to Alexandre’s attention are thus set aside at lac Vert.

Once the influence of newspapers is removed, the masculine aspect of Alexandre's existence is weakened. He then becomes aware of the "maternelle sollicitude" (168) of nature, which, as Marie-Pierre Andron has shown, has a strongly feminizing effect upon Roy's characters (*imaginaire* 209-15). By visiting lac Vert, Alexandre experiences nature in a similar way to Martha in her garden. In her study of "Un jardin au bout du monde," Agnès Hafez-Ergaut has noted that Roy is among many writers who have portrayed the garden as a privileged space, symbolizing "la quête de soi," a process which leads the protagonist, like Voltaire's *Candide*, to accept "la réalité telle qu'elle est et non telle qu'il l'espère" (1). In this context, Edmondine Le Gardeur, the farmer's wife at lac Vert, functions, as noted by Andron, as a "leurre" and a "contre-modèle" in initiating Alexandre to a new view of life (*imaginaire* 30). He spends the evening with her and her children; though present, Edmondine's husband contributes nothing to the conversation and even dozes after dinner. It is thus an exclusively feminine influence which so affects Alexandre on this decisive occasion, helping him to throw off the old embittered self: "le vieil Alexandre ronchonneur, solitaire et insociable, était bien mort enfin. Un autre avait pris sa place" (187). Edmondine thus assists Alexandre to dismiss his tormented relationship with the world and to learn instead to cultivate real and intimate links to others: "Alexandre éprouva que lui-même, ce soir, en faveur d'Edmondine heureuse, en faveur d'un seul être heureux, pouvait enfin pardonner à Dieu la souffrance jetée si libéralement aux quatre coins du monde" (188). The lac Vert episode is clearly nuanced. After all, Alexandre's initial delight soon gives way to boredom (197). As well, Roy mocks the le Gardeur family for apparently finding such happiness in agricultural self-sufficiency (184). Though no advocate for such a narrow and selfish existence, the novelist nevertheless uses lac Vert to portray an important character development.

Upon his return to the city, Alexandre is once again drawn through habit to newspaper headlines. He is, however, quick to criticize himself: "Il avait très bien vécu sans [les manchettes de journaux] pendant quelques semaines. Pourquoi cette soudaine et fébrile curiosité pour les désastres?" (206) Similarly, when he encounters the taxi drivers listening to a news broadcast, Alexandre is shocked by the implausibility of the situation: "cette invraisemblable relation des humains plongea Alexandre dans l'effarement" (206). Like Alexandre before lac Vert, these city workers are focused on people far away and unknown to them. Shortly after, Alexandre confirms more explicitly his new

detachment from world affairs: “Qu’ils s’occupent de *leur* guerre, de *leur* paix, de *leur* sécurité” (218). Later in hospital, as he begins to connect with those nearest to him, it is plain that Alexandre has let go of the wider world in favour of his family and acquaintances: “Il s’était démis assez volontiers de celles de ses responsabilités qui . . . ne le concernaient pas du tout: la Palestine, l’Inde surpeuplée et mal nourrie, la possibilité d’une autre guerre. C’était même curieux à quel point tout cela avait cessé de le tracasser” (276-77).

Wary now of his reaction to newspapers, Alexandre rejects his imaginary and grandiose role in the world they depict. Unlike the increasingly egotistical Azarius, Alexandre eventually acknowledges his own self-centredness: “il fut bouleversé de se reconnaître plus égoïste qu’il ne l’avait cru” (268). Moreover, he takes the next step and moves closer to others in his entourage, trying “se mettre à leur place” (277). As Andron has noted, Alexandre becomes “un instrument de réconciliation, un petit homme qui réconcilie les hommes entre eux et leur fait accepter leur nature humaine et leur dimension vulnérable” (1996, 134). Patricia Smart’s comment on Jean Lévesque, whose “égoïsme” she sees as the means by which “l’homme se distancie du maternel-féminin” (212), clearly applies to Azarius’ abandonment of Rose-Anna at the end of *Bonheur d’occasion*. By contrast, Alexandre, whose wife had earlier complained about their marriage and “l’égoïsme des hommes” (94), tries to reach out to her from lac Vert by writing a letter. Significantly, he finds, following his evening with Edmondine Le Gardeur, that he cannot compose the letter he had long wanted to publish in the newspaper. It is not surprising that this man of no special intellectual talent is incapable of “un si grand projet” (191). Instead of high-minded advice on world peace, Alexandre can only produce jargonized fragments of sentences, “en droite ligne de son journal à cinq cents” (193), and these he rejects. His letter to his wife, containing trite advice on health and financial prudence, and even the wish that Eugénie consider jam-making as practised by Edmondine Le Gardeur, is clearly no masterpiece of expression. Alexandre cannot have been entirely happy with it as he never posts it, leaving Eugénie to discover it accidentally in the pocket of her husband’s suit in the last days of his life. Nevertheless, beginning “Ma bonne Eugénie, tu vas me trouver bien changé . . .” (274), the letter clearly communicates enough of the dying man’s intimate self for his wife to regret the imminent loss of someone she barely knew (274-275) and they at last discover, albeit awkwardly, their love for each other (p. 275).<sup>7</sup> Roy thus returns to the technique of contrasting two very different texts so as to distinguish masculine and feminine attitudes. Significantly, Alexandre has now turned from an often aggressive obsession

with the wider world toward a sincere engagement with those around him. This change helps to explain his new contentedness and why, so unlike Azarius, he aspires to neither youth nor heroism in order to be happy. The memory of ascending Mont Royal as a young man, one of the “joies anciennes” (9) so yearned for at the beginning of the novel, has lost all its appeal. Simple daily experiences now fill Alexandre with a new joy, “plus de joie même qu’en sa jeunesse, d’être jeune et indemne” (221).

The concept of what a “real man” should be is fundamental to the texts studied: Gabrielle Roy’s male characters drawing upon newspapers and the news media generally to focus upon the wider world and bolster their self-image. Presumably, Roy’s attitude is ambivalent given her unquestioned solidarity with all people in such texts as *Fragiles lumières de la terre*. Nevertheless, she warns of the danger of a one-sided theoretical interest in world events. In these works, she stresses males detaching themselves from a partner to bond with a world represented by newspapers. The perception that newspapers and other forms of news convey the only reality creates in turn an inauthentic self-perception in which husbands assume an imagined heroism which blocks meaningful communication with a spouse. While Azarius constructs such a deluded idea of self that he finally participates in the military adventures which newspapers describe, Alexandre eventually stops deceiving himself. Although Alexandre had always sought truth in newspapers (12, 19, 56, 206, 207), he finds it at last in the here and now of personal relations. This new certitude shows in his very appearance. Alexandre’s face, earlier so forbidding, exudes a “douceur” (290) at the end of his life, his entourage gathering from him that “la seule assurance, sur terre, vient de notre déraisonnable tendresse humaine” (290). The same strongly emotive words, “douceur” and “tendresse,” also constitute Martha Yaramko’s sole reality, her flowers: “elles semblaient soutenir qu’elles étaient le vrai de cette vie, sa douceur, sa beauté, sa tendresse. Oh, les petites folles! Elles avaient l’air de prétendre être elles seules dans le vrai” (130). Like Alexandre at the end of the novel, Martha has no interest in distant places. For her, Edmonton is “irréelle” (129) and she even questions whether, beyond her own locality, “il y eût des villes, de vastes agglomérations, et que tout cela, le monde, les pays, les sociétés humaines, existait en vérité” (129). Martha is certain however that the “vie de son âme” (167) is in her garden. Similarly, Alexandre learns through his own experience of nature at lac Vert that reality resides in one’s immediate surroundings, in everyday relationships. Martha’s flowers, rather than newspapers, have the last word.

## NOTES

- 1 Martha's fascination with Eaton's catalogue in "Un jardin au bout du monde" clearly reflects her maternal devotion since, when she first began reading it, she longingly studied the fashion pages, picturing herself elegantly dressed and able to "rejoindre ses enfants qui n'auraient plus eu honte d'elle" (127). Having lost almost all contact with her children, Martha's present interest in it is restricted to the seed pages, since, for the old woman, flowers are a substitute for her offspring: "De la main, Martha les caressait, comme elle eût caressé quelqu'un de trop naïf, de trop jeune pour comprendre, un enfant par exemple. Les fleurs n'étaient-elles pas, par leur naïveté, une sorte d'enfance éternelle de la création" (130).
- 2 As Sophie Montreuil has observed, "Toute l'hostilité de Stépan est ainsi dirigée contre le jardin de sa femme, d'où l'impact du rapprochement final, lorsque c'est à lui que Martha doit de voir ses fleurs 'intactes pour un jour encore', jour qui sera celui de sa mort" (360). See also Lori Saint-Martin (Portrait 518).
- 3 See also 251 and 298.
- 4 Indeed the only other time that a woman even reads a newspaper in either novel is when, toward the end of *Bonheur d'occasion*, Rose-Anna glances indifferently at a newspaper headline which refers to war refugees. Typically, she relates this news item to her own family situation: "Comme nous . . . en marche . . . toujours en marche" (366).
- 5 She also reads religious pamphlets ("toute sa vie spirituelle s'alimentait à de sèches brochures de piété" [362]), but these may be seen as a complement to the prayer book. See also Nicole Bourbonnais' discussion of Rose-Anna's maternal devotion (107-08).
- 6 The strong link in *Alexandre Chenevert* between newspapers and male aggression is symbolically represented when Alexandre makes a hat out of a newspaper for his grandson, Paul. Placing the hat on his head, the little boy takes up an imaginary rifle and shouts: "Pan! je te tue. T'es mort" (107).
- 7 This relationship, though improved, is far from perfect and is not presented without some qualification. Despite the somewhat ethereal character of the last pages of the book, Roy does not idealize marriage in this novel any more than she does so elsewhere in her writings (see Pierrette Daviau's observations on the antithetical nature of the Royan couple [61-92]). When Alexandre romantically proposes that they could both live at lac Vert, Eugénie only agrees in the knowledge that his terminal illness will never allow it (279). Similarly, her objection at the end of the novel to the anonymous donor of a mass for her late husband sounds a false note, underlining her failure to appreciate Alexandre's full worth (289). Roy's ambivalence towards marriage may also explain why she prefers to show Alexandre in close communion with Edmondine at lac Vert and with Violette Leduc in hospital (282-83), rather than with his wife.

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