GABRIELLE ROY AND THE SILKEN NOOSE

Phyllis Grosskurth

I HAVE BEEN SO DEPRESSED by the self-indulgent writing that has been coming out of Quebec in the past few years that I recently turned back to Gabrielle Roy for reassurance. I re-read all her books and I think I found what I was looking for: a delicate, vibrant prose; an understanding of the longings of the heart; and a warm compassion for human beings. These simple attributes comforted me after the plethora of neurotic anti-heroes raging about the universe from psychotic wards or prison cells once they had made their supremely gratuitous gesture of igniting bombs which probably injured innocent people.

But I must confess, at the risk of sounding hopelessly impressionable, that I experienced a further reaction. As a reviewer my reading is riotously catholic in its comprehensiveness. Immediately after finishing the last of Gabrielle Roy's books I picked up *The Brighton Belle*, a collection of short stories by Francis King, a writer I have long admired who is not sufficiently known on this side of the Atlantic. These stories are an attempt to capture *genius loci*; no travel book could more successfully convey the Utrillo-like effect of Brighton on a summer day: the stark white Regency buildings outlined against a dazzling sky, the fanciful absurdity of the Pavilion, and the quaintness of the meandering Lanes. But Francis King is interested in something far more profound than writing picturesque travel vignettes for Britain Today. Behind the elegant Regency façades he reveals the dual nature of man. As Rebecca West once remarked, only part of us is sane. "The other half of us is nearly mad," she went on to say. "It prefers the disagreeable to the agreeable, loves pain and its darker night despair, and wants to die in a catastrophe that will set back life to its beginnings and leave nothing of our house save its blackened foundations."

What Francis King and Rebecca West are talking about is evil, no matter what

esoteric psychological terminology we apply to it in order not to appear hopelessly old-fashioned or a trifle naive. And it is precisely this aspect of reality from which Gabrielle Roy firmly averts her eyes. I found her attitude noble because her books told me that stoical man would not be defeated by the forces ranged against him so long as he possessed courage. I found them charming because they assured me that love and gentleness could create an oasis sufficient unto itself. They allowed me to indulge a pleasant wistfulness in the reflection that death is followed by renewal. As Plato said, "Everything that deceives may be said to enchant."

What in effect she was telling me was a fairy-tale. In a fairy tale all manner of misfortunes may befall the protagonists, but we know that they are protected by magic talismans. They are essentially good at heart, so while they may be sadder and wiser at the end, nothing very terrible has happened to them. The witches and ogres slink off ignominiously or are punished in some particularly revolting fashion. This is the sort of distortion that is implied in the view of reality we present to our children. But I am an adult and I know that this is a half-truth, a bulwark we set up to shield our children from a knowledge we hopelessly pray will never confront them. Whether we view evil as a force possessing permanent reality, or whether we regard it as an inconvenience to be handled pragmatically, an unfortunate aspect of contingent circumstances, few adults would deny that its disorderly presence forces itself upon our horrified attention from time to time. Gabrielle Roy will not admit this. Her characters are shielded from the encounter with the stalking familiar. They are treated as children not yet capable of venturing into the more sombre areas of existence.

Essentially Gabrielle Roy possesses a mother's-eye view of the world. The area of action in which her characters move is limited and conditioned both spatially and psychologically by the imposition such a focus places upon them. The predominant figure of her books is the earth-mother. In relation to her own characters, in her loving and protective concern Gabrielle Roy is an extension of this earth-mother. It is this *weltanschauung* which gives her novels their distinctively "feminine" quality.

The settings of her novels are Montreal, St. Boniface, and the wilds of northern Canada. An extensive arena, admittedly. But if one examines her novels closely, are her characters free to range within as wide a region as appears at first sight?

Montreal is the background for her first and third novels, *The Tin Flute* and *The Cashier*. A large, pulsating city throbs behind the action: but how does it function in the lives of the characters? The major point Gabrielle Roy is making about the Lacasse family is the inhibiting confinement of their lives. The riches

and the excitement of Montreal might as well be on the moon so far as they are available to the slum-dwellers of Saint-Henri. In a bitter harangue the unemployed Alphonse protests against being choked off from life's feast:

> Have any of you guys ever walked on St. Catherine Street without a cent in your pocket and looked at all the stuff in the shop-windows? I guess so. Well, I have too. And I've seen some fine things, boys, as fine as you can see anywhere. I can hardly describe all the fine things I've seen while tramping up and down St. Catherine Street! Packards, Buicks, racing cars, sports cars. I've seen mannequins in beautiful evening dresses, and others without a stitch on . . . But that's not all, my friends. Society spreads everything out before us, all the finest things in the world. But don't get the idea that's all. Ah no! They urge us to buy too. You'd think they were scared we weren't tempted enough . . .

In *The Tin Flute* poverty assumes a terrifying presence that conditions lives and shapes character. Zola described his characters as subject to the same forces as the stone on the road — that is, helpless objects crushed by vast impersonal forces over which they have no control. A similar strain of fatalism runs through *The Tin Flute*. There are constant references to the feeling of imprisonment experienced by the inhabitants of Saint-Henri. Their only outlet is helpless rage, distorted ambitions, foolish day-dreams, or grim resignation. As Florentine, expecting her illegitimate baby, reflects: "She had made her choice, knowing full well that she could no more have done anything different than stop breathing."

Desperation to flee Saint-Henri only drives the characters into further imprisonment. By joining the army, young men escape destitution for probable death. When Azarius realizes that he can no longer regain self-respect as the wage-earner of his family, he too goes off to war, but it will mean the break-up of family unity. Florentine, with her frivolous day-dreams of luxury and romance, allows herself to be seduced by an ambitious mechanic who deserts her lest he be trapped into a life in Saint-Henri which an involvement with such a girl would imply. Consequently for the sake of her unknown baby, she marries Emmanuel who is thereby condemned to a loveless marriage with a capricious, sullen wife. There is no exit from this imprisoning circle of contingency.

Like a steady, gentle flame, the figure of Rose-Anna glows at the heart of the Lacasse family. Her tenacious strength and devotion provide the little ones with the only security they know. Yet she too represents imprisonment. When Florentine reacts in horror to the realization that her mother is expecting her twelfth child, Rose-Anna murmurs, "One can only do one's best." Additional children

mean a continuing round of poverty, yet Florentine herself perpetuates the cycle and it is significant that at the end of the book she returns to share a home with her mother.

Rose-Anna is able to resign herself to the fact that Eugène has joined the army because of what his allowance will mean to the younger children. (It is grimly ironical that Eugène takes the money away from her to spend on a trollop). For many years Azarius has regarded his role as father as a failure to provide for hungry mouths. Unless he enlists there will be further babies. Rose-Anna represents a continuation of his sense of imprisonment. Incidentally, her attitude towards the war is revelatory of the narrow encompassment of her view: she sees it essentially as a host of suffering mothers like herself.

The question is, does Gabrielle Roy understand these implications in Rose-Anna? She depicts her as a figure of fortitude, an earth-mother whose natural habitat is in the country with growing things. Fecund and vigorous, her natural role is to produce children, but she is thwarted in her need for happy fulfilment.

Gabrielle Roy seems to accept the traditional French-Canadian view of the mother as the strong centrifugal force in the home. Rose-Anna is planted firmly at the centre of the novel. Florentine works in the dime store, a microcosm of the larger world perhaps, yet her mother is able to visit her there. Daniel is taken away from her to die in the remote hospital on the mountain, and at the same time she gives birth to another child who will take his place. Azarius goes off to war — more as her son than her husband — but at this point the book ends. There is to be no consideration of a world beyond Rose-Anna's orbit. Finally, one must not forget that Jean Lévesque's drive to impel himself into the world of the city transports him beyond the scope of the novel. An unencumbered orphan, he possesses a lever of freedom that transcends his skills as a machinist.

Now what is the situation in *The Cashier*? Alexandre Chenevert works in the heart of the heart of the city — the Savings Bank of the City and Island of Montreal. He feels completely trapped in his Kafka-like cell within the vault of a building into which a sudden shaft of sunlight arouses startled heads. On the streets and in the bus, he finds only further forms of imprisonment. He is incapable of handling a bewildering urban environment. Unable to sleep, he stands helplessly before the cold impersonality of the refrigerator: "Alexandre sensed his utter inferiority as a man, with all his little stomach troubles, his endless colds, his confused problems." He has never managed to function outside the protection of the womb. His continual self-pampering is an extension of the uterine embrace. In the dream-fantasy that finally sends him off to sleep, "A feeling of restfulness

overwhelmed his soul as it found ease in the absence of all but vegetable life." Again, when he falls asleep at Lac Vert, the Freudian imagery is unmistakable:

> The intoxication of sinking between secret shores, more thickly green than the night! How ravishing the blue fronds which curled about his limbs and then slipped by! The quality of the silence in this muffled land! The unutterable absence of all life, except for the water's even and continuous murmur.

The memory of his strong-minded mother threads in and out of his thoughts. He remembers her perpetual lament about what would become of him when she was gone. She too had been wracked by nagging ailments; is it too much to speculate that in the robustly healthy Edmondine he finds the mother he had always craved?

> He had turned toward Edmondine's kindly countenance. It was to her he was furnishing his explanation. For if Edmondine was awesome in her commands, she was not in the least so in her face, which was moon-shaped, open, and smiling.

The two books set in the wide open spaces might seem exceptions to the theme of enclosure. The structure of *Where Nests the Water Hen*, however, is revealing. The first section, "Luzina Takes a Holiday," is an account of Luzina's annual pilgrimage from her lonely island to the comparative civilization of Sainte Rose du Lac to give birth to another addition to her enormous family. The next section, "The School on the Little Water Hen," is concerned with Luzina's attempts to bring learning to their isolation. The final section, "The Capuchin from Toutes Aides," while it centres on the activities of Father Joseph-Marie, is linked structurally and thematically to the earlier episodes.

The first section opens with a sense of remote isolation, of an immensity beyond the beyond. Yet note the pattern of development: we move progressively from open space to the inner island to our final destination, the enveloping warmth of the Tousignants' cabin.

When Luzina leaves for her annual delivery, her final view of her family is an image of desolation: "All five of them were huddled together, so that they made one minute spot against the widest and most deserted of the world's horizons." When she returns the heart of the home is restored.

In establishing a school on Little Water Hen, Luzina brings the outside world within her orbit. By the end of Part II we see Luzina almost alone now that her children are turning their faces gradually but inexorably toward the outside world. But we are never shown the children coping with the world beyond the Little

Water Hen. The last lines of Part II emphasize the ties that still hold them to their mother through her letters:

> And Luzina's educated children momentarily felt their hearts contract, as though their childhood back there, on the island in the Little Water Hen, had reproached them for their high estate.

Part III focuses on the activities of Father Joseph-Marie. But note that chronological time is abandoned in this final section, in which the priest's visit to Little Water Hen occurs while Luzina is still surrounded by her chldren. When Luzina comes to him for confession, he has an impulse to touch her cheek:

> Yet to this paternal emotion was added man's old hunger to be coddled, fondled, protected by a woman's wholly motherly affection. And it was at once to his daughter and to the woman's protective soul that he spoke: "Yes, my child!"

The earth-mother is the centrifugal force, the centre of a loving radius, embracing all those whose lives she touches.

Incidentally, after the unrelieved bleakness of *The Tin Flute*, *Where Nests the Water Hen* exhibits a genuinely humourous vein. The type of humour is significant. Gabrielle Roy laughs affectionately at the child-like qualities of Luzina and Father Joseph-Marie. The laugh has the ring of a parent's indulgent tolerance of a child's solemnity.

The Hidden Mountain is one book by Gabrielle Roy in which we do not find the figure of the protective strong woman. Here she is concerned with man alone in the freest possible environment. But it is only through contact with other people that character can be revealed and developed. Even in novels in which the interior monologue technique is employed, the character reveals himself through his reactions to the external populated world. Pierre remains a cipher because there are no other characters on whom he can hone himself.

The last part of the book, the account of Pierre's life in Paris, is a lamentable failure. It is a disaster precisely because there has been no opportunity in the major part of the book for his character to be established. His friendship with the young artist Stanislas is inadequate artistically, entirely unconvincing emotionally, since it is simply hero-worship on the younger man's part.

Pierre is completely incapable of adapting himself to an urban environment. His only response is to create in his flat a replica of an enclosed cabin on the Mackenzie River. He can paint Paris only as though it were transplanted to the banks of the Mackenzie. In sum, there is a failure of nerve on his creator's part.

She cannot trust him to launch out into the world with a complex personality and independent life of his own.

The two recollections of her childhood, *Street of Riches* and *The Road Past Altamont*, contain Gabrielle Roy's most overt treatment of dominant, protective motherhood. Although it is never named, one assumes that the town in the background is St. Boniface. Yet what a shadowy place it is! Christine's family live on the edge of town. In "The Move," one of the stories in *The Road Past Altamont*, Christine only on this single occasion passes through the town, but from the top of the cart it has the appearance of a mirage: "All the houses seemed to be still asleep, bathed in a curious and peaceful atmosphere of withdrawal. I had never seen our little town wearing this absent, gentle air of remoteness."

All the action radiates from the house on Rue Deschambault in which Maman plays the central role. In *The Road Past Altamont* Christine talks of breaking away to the wider world. In *Street of Riches* she moves only as far as Cardinal, but in *The Road Past Altamont* she speaks of having journeyed as far as Europe. However, we have never seen her leave and we have no idea what life on her own would be like. Before she leaves she battles Maman for her freedom. Maman struggles to keep her because she knows that once she has lost Christine, life is effectively over for her. "My mother failed very quickly. No doubt she died of illness, but, as so many people do fundamentally, of grief too, a little." In this book for the first time Gabrielle Roy faces the imprisoning noose of motherhood. In part she is endeavouring to understand and perhaps to forgive. Yet her attitude is ambiguous for home also means the security to which we all look back nostalgically from time to time. *The Road Past Altamont* is written in retrospect; we assume that Christine has already lived far away, yet the writing of the book is a pilgrimage to her past, to the roots that bind and cling.

There are other aspects of this circumscribed world which should be considered. Repeatedly Gabrielle Roy explores the illusion of individual freedom. Her characters are frequently torn between a longing for a more expansive existence and the undeniable circumstances which restrict them. This dichotomy is particularly true of Maman in the two St. Boniface books. Sometimes man is depicted as engaged in a struggle for existence which sets daily bounds on the opportunities available to him. Rose-Anna has mutely accepted the toil and the responsibility, the burdens that will accompany her as far as the grave. In *The Hidden Mountain* Pierre seems the freest of Gabrielle Roy's characters yet he is forced to accept the cruel fact that he must kill in order to survive.

In a sense Gabrielle Roy maintains the same loving yet firm control on her

characters as her various earth-mothers exert over their offspring. The virtues which she extols are fortitude, endurance, concern for others; these are the negative virtues, those necessary in a world in which man is at the mercy of forces beyond his control. Her characters act intuitively; they do not engage in rational or irrational analysis; they are not torn by mental conflict; they are uninterested in ideas. We find obsession in Pierre's creative urge and in Maman's eagerness to embrace a life she has not yet comprehended. But we never see any of them devastated by sexual desire, exalted by religious ardour, excited by intellectual passion or stirred by the darker passions. Gabrielle Roy's is not an easy world for her characters; yet its challenges are comparatively straightforward.

I have emphasized that they are never faced with agonizing moral problems; like Faulkner's Dilsey, they "endure." Her characters are lovable, gentle creatures, but they are simple and childlike. Gabrielle Roy totally ignores the darker spectres that inhabit men's souls; only occasionally, as with Florentine's pregnancy, she allows her characters to experience one of those sudden revelations which unexpectedly opens a precipice at our feet. Alexandre Chenevert frets about the death of Gandhi; yet there is some justification for Eugénie's remonstrance, "After all, he was no relative of ours!"

It is for these limitations that we must deny her a place with the greatest novelists. Tolstoi gives us the illusion that Anna Karenina is activated by a vitality of her own, that she exists in her own right. She must make real moral decisions; in her impellent drive to self-destruction, she is permitted to wreck her own life.

One cannot say that Gabrielle Roy's is a vision of the world before the Fall, even in what critics have described as her "pastoral" novels. Man is not in a garden where all good things are simply within reach. Her characters have been banished from Eden, but the most important step in the process has been ignored. These childlike creatures have never tasted the forbidden fruit of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. They are bewildered, innocent exiles banished by a capricious God.