Gabrielle Roy's Vision of Childhood

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The tragic beauty of childhood has drawn Gabrielle Roy to explore its dimensions and expose its enigmas. Roy's vision of childhood stands fully revealed in her two works of autobiographical fiction: *Street of Riches* and *The Road Past Altamont*; it is a tragic vision shaped by three factors--the child Christine's Quebecois ancestry, her Prairie environment, and her artistic imagination, all of which contribute to her loneliness and isolation. Roy's children, in these two books and her pure fiction, are innocent for a short time, if at all. What innocence there is, is under constant siege and threat of betrayal. Christine is burdened by a series of discoveries about life, love, marriage, old age, the generations, time, and death, and the futility of trying to apprehend these things intellectually. The adult narrator understands what moved the child, but the child frequently finds herself weeping for sorrows yet unknown. Growing up means learning more of these sorrows and acquiring the tools for articulating and shaping what has been learned.

One critic has written of the "peculiarly pathological character"[1] of the parent-child relationship in Quebec. While Mlle. Roy does not come close to writers like Anne Hébert, Marie-Claire Blais, or Claire Martin in revealing this pathology, she does fill in enough family background to account for Christine's early sense of suffering. Caught between a fatalistic, brooding father and an imaginative, sometimes flighty mother, she feels herself torn in two, instinctively leaning toward the mother, but never fully able to throw off the influence of the father. In *Street of Riches*, she recalls how her father named her "Petite Misère" when she was very young. Inwardly she rebelled against the name because it seemed to foreordain her, "because of him, to suffering." The least disturbance in the house, even a tinkle of laughter, could arouse the father's anger. Only later, the narrator explains, "I understood that, constantly fearing for us both the least and the worst of evils, he especially wanted to put us early on quard against too great a yearning for happiness."[2] This distrust of earthly happiness is one of the motifs in Quebecois writing, the everlasting theme of priestly sermons.

The distrust is extended to include suspicion of the couple and of the dream of romantic love and fulfillment. Christine is aware of her parents' incompatibility, if only intuitively. "To Prevent a Marriage" is the story of the parents' attempt to keep their grown daughter Georgianna from making an imprudent marriage. With her mother, Christine sets out on their mission to a small town in Saskatchewan. The trip is a great adventure for the child, and through her memory of the incident and the responses the mother gives to her innocent but probing questions, we can sketch in many aspects of the parents' relationship which the narrator never speaks of directly. From an adjoining room, Christine overhears her mother pleading. Georgianna simply repeats that she loves him, and ever since that time, Christine has "been unable to hear a human being say, 'I love ...' without feeling [her] heart contract with fear, and wanting with both arms to clasp that so sadly vulnerable being and protect it."[3] Maman warns Georgianna of love's transcience -- "when it goes ... if there is nothing to take its place ... it's

horrible!"[4] The child is confused by all she has heard. On the train home, she questions her Maman:

> "Don't you know it -- for good and all - when you're in love?"
> "Sometimes not," Maman answered.
> "You knew it, though?"
> "I thought I knew..."

Then my mother became vexed. She seemed very put out with me. She said: "You're too prying! It's not your problem...all that...Forget it...Go to sleep..."[5]

There is a continual conspiracy on the part of adults to protect the child from the "unpleasant" side of life or at least to save themselves the embarrassment of having to explain their own failings or uncertainties. When Christine's sister, Alicia, becomes mentally ill in the aftermath of a childhood disease, the parents pretend in front of Christine that there is nothing wrong with her and Christine cries out against their duplicity. "Is this what constitutes childhood: by means of lies, to be kept in a world apart?"[6] They cannot prevent her questioning which leads her back to their world. Nor can they make her accept Alicia's eventual death as an act of God's mercy.

"The Titanic" shows a humorous side to the adult conspiracy. On a stormy night, friends and relatives gather round the kitchen table to moralize on the sinking of the Titanic. There is a consensus that it was a case of God's wrath. Man had overstepped his bounds. One Monsieur Elie is particularly "pleased about God's wrath" to Christine's total mystification. She is spellbound by the story and wants to know what a honeymoon is, since so many of the victims were honeymooners. Her uncle explains it as:

> "The time of love, at the beginning of a marriage, when all is beautiful....."
> "Later on does it become less beautiful?"
> Everyone laughed a bit, but sheepishly, and exchanged glances that were none too open.[7]

Gabrielle Roy alternates between memories of poignant sadness and memories of lighter moments as the grown artist shows her awareness of the child's capacity for suffering but also for self-dramatization and egocentricity. When she remembers her father crying in anger: "Oh! Why did I ever have any children!"[8] the narrator inserts a warning to parents before recording the child's reaction:

> Parents may think that such words, well beyond the understanding of children, do them no harm; but precisely because they are only half intelligble to them, children ponder them and make of them a torture.[9]

The child-Christine flees to her attic and wills herself dead (They will be sorry); the adult-Christine leavens the moment by recalling that after many hours face-down, she turned on her back--the "face-down position was really too uncomfortable."[10] Sulking in the attic, Christine decides she is an unwanted child. She remembers her mother's comments on a woman, ill and with many children, who had just borne another: "It's hard but that is duty. What can you do? She certainly must do her duty!"[11] Christine, "not yet aware of the terrible meaning it contained,

"decides that she too is a child of duty: "And the very sound of this word sufficed to make me weep anew, for sorrows I did not yet know."[12]

Many times Christine finds herself sobbing "without knowing exactly why," as though she were weighed down by the future--"the whole, long, terrible future of a child."[13] Weights and burdens are the images used repeatedly in connection with childhood. Yet through her own "poor child's sorrow", she is able to "gain a notion of [her] father's so much weightier sadness, the heaviness of life itself."[14] If life is a heavy burden, and the child must bear its share, why have children at all? Christine, when young, is amazed at her Aunt Thérésina Veilleux who, too ill to care for her children, continued to bring them into the world. "But at my age then, could anyone understand that life is furiously concerned to propagate itself, even under the most painful circumstances? And indeed, at a later age, does one understand much better?"[15] Christine grows up with a distrust of marriage and childbearing and a tendency to exalt the woman or the dutiful mother alone.

In Gabrielle Roy's fiction, the father is notably ineffectual, the mother strong and loving. Still, in *Street of Riches*, the reader is very much aware of the father's presence. Christine, herself, acknowledges that she has many of her finest thoughts at night, the time identified with the father, although words flow more easily during the day, the time dominated by the mother. Yet in *The Road Past Altamont*, the father is non-existent; the four stories involve Christine, her mother, her grandmother, a few strangers, but the rest of the immediate family play no part. It is a distinctly feminine universe.

The Road Past Altamont, explained Gabrielle Roy in an interview, "is the meeting of people after the present ... a sort of narrowed circle, where you understand your mother when you reach the age when she said such a thing and you were not able to understand...You reach one another, but late in time...."[16]

The conflict of generations is presented metaphorically through a contrast between the landscapes of their childhoods. The grandmother left Quebec as wife and mother, uprooted herself to follow her husband's dream of settling the West, a dream she outwardly rejected all her life; the mother left the hills of Quebec as a child to voyage in a covered wagon across the vast prairie which was to be her home; Christine was born and grew up on the prairie, her imagination shaped by its secret openness and its many-voiced wind. Quebecois have often seen themselves as exiles in the New World, a people dispossessed of land and heritage. The Prairie has always fought against settlers, forcing them, too, to see themselves as exiles in the desert. A Quebecois on the Prairie would seem, then, to be doomed to a sense of double exile.

Christine, "the little sickly one," spends part of her sixth summer with her grandmother in a small Manitoba village and learns something of the old woman's loneliness. She notices "her rather curious way of speaking," which she discovers many years later dated "back to the time when the first settlers came to Canada from France."[17] She and Mémère find themselves "alone in the little house, listening to the lamentations of the prairie wind."[18] The child is overwhelmed by

melancholy, "for in the complete immobility of the prairie, one had the sense of being drawn forward on a sort of voyage across an endless land of everlasting sameness",[19] and in sorrow, as usual not understood, she bursts into tears. To console her, the Grandmother makes a doll from old scraps, a miraculous creation which Christine identifies with God and which gives the story its title, "My Almighty Grandmother." "You're like God," she cries to the old woman and in her naive comparison is truth. Imagination is the family gift that Christine will inherit. But Mémère is not happy, even with her power. Her children has scattered, her grandchildren make fleeting appearances when they pass through. She berates her late husband for dying before her, "leaving [her] all alone on this western prairie, in exile." But Christine protests, "Manitoba isn't exile.....It's home."[20]

As the old woman grows senile a short time later, she loses her power; Christine discovers but can make little sense of the meaning of old age. Maman recalls Mémère when she was young and Christine is astounded--she believed her grandmother had always been old. Her own mother ages, becomes sad, with her memories. The child is confused, can "make almost nothing more of this coming and going of one human being through the memory of another."[21] The confusion increases as Mémère nears death and becomes childlike herself. Christine does not know what death is--"To my mind it was a simple matter of disappearance."[22]

She explores the conditions of old age still further in her touching relationship with octogenarian Monsieur St. Hilaire during her oppressively hot and dusty eighth summer. In "The Old Man and the Child," she is able to articulate her questions, so she and the old man spend their season in metaphysical dialogue about age and death. Humanly, they fill a void in one another's lives. Christine is inexplicably drawn to the aged, perhaps by "a sort of prescience [she] had of their approaching disappearance."[23]

When the old man suggests a trip to Lake Winnipeg, Christine is overjoyed. She has never seen it; the old man has not seen it for many years. For the child, it is a real voyage to replace all the imaginary voyages in the dusty streets; for M. St. Hilaire, it is a return to happier times when he was young, a man of the world, before he alienated his children and was left alone to grow old.

At Lake Winnipeg, beside the water, removed from the Prairie, Christine learns many things. She is seized by an impossible desire to see M. St. Hilaire's time--"which [she] imagined perhaps as resembling him--restored to him now." She asks, "Times, things like that, can they be found again?"[24] She wonders about the extent of the lake, are they sitting at the beginning or the end? The old man ponders, "The end or the beginning. And if they are fundamentally the same..."[25] Slowly, Christine realizes that she does not wish to grow old--"I wished to know everything without growing old; but above all, I imagine, I did not wish to see others grow old around me"[26] She feels a weight of grief "at having come so close finally to understanding the truth about old age and what it leads to."[27] And all she learned makes her wish "to be no more than a little child."[28]

At the age of eleven, Christine feels the urge to go on another

voyage, with a local mover on his wagon, at least partly because she wants to relive her mother's experience as a child moving out West. She has questioned her mother many times about how she felt and her mother has admitted she was attracted, "attracted by the space, the great bare sky, the way the tiniest tree was visible in this solitude for miles....I was very much attracted."[29] Christine's desire to feel the same sensation leads her to go with the movers, without permission, one early morning. From the wagon, she looks down and says to herself, "I am the past, I am times gone by." Christine is always trying to imagine the past of historical figures or of her own family. She does not yet realize that the past cannot be relived physically, but only imaginatively. The trip is a disillusionment. Far from being an idyllic journey, it moves a poverty-stricken family from one wretched suburban slum to a worse one, showing Christine a side of life of which she knew nothing.

In the final and title story, "The Road Past Altamont," Christine, now an adult about to take her own path, is astonished to see her mother, grown old, "pass over her adult existence in Manitoba to go to the most remote part of her life,"[30] in the hills of Quebec. More than anything else, she yearns for a glimpse of her childhood landscape. By chance, turning the car onto an unknown road, they find themselves in the midst of the Pembina Mountains, rising out of the prairie. Maman is moved. Christine wonders, "Did the hills really give Maman back her joyous childhood heart? And why is it that a human being knows no greater happiness in old age than to find in himself once more the face he wore as a child?"[31] For Christine, the enigma of the prairie is its openness, its lack of secretiveness, which at the same time reflects all of infinity. This open prospect represents her life--the joys that lie ahead are all intact upon the horizon. Her mother's joys lie all behind, hidden in the hills of Quebec.

> Every generation is blind and deaf until in time we meet those who are dead, and we say, Oh, *now* I know. That's what *The Road Past Altamont* is about. It's a tragedy, and it's also a very beautiful thing, because *eventually* you do get there.[32]

One of the ways of recapturing the past is through art and, in many respects, Christine's story is a portrait of the artist as child. Attention has been drawn to Christine's walking on stilts to see across the prairie, to assert her presence.[33] Proust had written of age as "a pair of stilts which grow until their wearer, tottering precariously, suddenly falls"; still he has to "cling to them until he can recover in artistic form the meaning of the past."[34]

As a very young child, Christine listens to the prairie wind in all its moods; it seems to be speaking to her alone. After a bout of whooping cough, she spends an entire summer in her hammock, listening to her "glass song," pieces of glass that hang in a doorway and tinkle in the wind--"Yes, my soul aspired to listen to this soft music for children, without complex notes; with it in your ears, unknown forests spread before you ."[35] There is a notable absence of other children in Christine's life. In the hammock, she discovers other play to replace children's games, "the wind's play, for instance...A musician playing on telephone wires, tree branches, stalks of grass or a clothes line."[36] Her games always involve imagination and are usually solitary. She can be

La Verendrye on his voyage of discovery or she can play with Alicia in the corn stalks, pretending they are in a forest. But illness leaves Alicia unable to distinguish the real world from the world of escape and this of course separates the artist from the madman.

The musician wind blowing across the prairie stimulates the imagination of a sensitive, inquiring child and, with other messengers from nature, strengthens her resolve to be a writer. In "The Voice from the Pools," the voices of hundreds of frogs humming in a pool "summon her toward childhood" as she openly declares her ambition. Her mother warns her that it is "like cutting yourself in two, as it were--one half trying to live, the other watching, weighing."[37] Christine, though, hopes to have everything, and perhaps the solitude of her childhood was a preparation for that of the artist.

Gabrielle Roy sees childhood as a bittersweet mixture of joy and sorrow. As each person ages, a cyclical process makes childhood look sweeter and there is a nostalgic longing to return, to recapture a time that may never have existed at all. The paradox is that as we move farther from childhood, we also move closer. Memory attempts this return; art attempts to give form to the memory. Many of the attitudes towards life and love that influence the young Christine make her wary of marriage and children; her commitment to art may be a way of propagating herself without childbearing. Certainly, she grows up to affirm life, but she never ceases to lament its sentence of sorrow.

One day, early in Christine's teaching career, two young children struggle through a blizzard to school. Once inside, they are warm and happy:

> Right next to us the gale, like a misunderstood child, wept and stamped its feet outside the door. And I did not fully realize it yet--often our joys are slow in coming home to us--but I was living through one of the rarest happinesses of my life. Was not all the world a child? Were we not at the day's morning?[38]

For Roy, childhood is a metaphor with a wide range of possible meanings. What ties all the meanings together is a sense of being at the beginning of things, unformed. But "the end or the beginning. And if they are fundamentally the same."

NOTES

[1] Gerard Bessette, "French Canadian Society as Seen by Contemporary Novelists," *Queen's Quarterly*, LXIX (Spring, 1962), 191.

[2] Gabrielle Roy, *Street of Riches* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1957 repr. 1967), p. 15. Subsequent references are to this edition.

[3] *Streets of Riches*, p. 27

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 30

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 87

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 46

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 15

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] *Ibid.*

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 16.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 15.

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 18

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 20.

[15] *Ibid.*, p.97.

[16] Gabrielle Roy, "A Bird in the Prison Window," in Donald Cameron, *Conversations With Canadian Novelists*, Vol. 11 (Toronto: Macmillan, 1973), p. 142.

[17] Gabrielle Roy, *The Road Past Altamont* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1966), p. 3. Subsequent references are to this edition.

[18] *The Road Past Altamont*, p. 6.

[19] *Ibid.*, p. 7.

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 16.

[21] *Ibid.*, p. 19

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 29.

[23] *Ibid.*, p. 37.

[24] *Ibid.*, p. 63.

[25] *Ibid.*, p. 68.

[26] *Ibid.*, p. 75.

[27] *Ibid.*, p. 81.

[28] *Ibid.*

[29] *Ibid.*, p. 94.

[30] *Ibid.*

[31] *Ibid.*, p. 192.

[32] "A Bird in the Prison Window," p. 142.

[33] Laurence Ricou, *Vertical Man/Horizontal World* (Vancouver University of British Columbia Press, 1973), p. 124.

[34] Hugo McPherson, "First and Last Things," *Canadian Literature*, XXXII (Spring, 1967), 59.

[35] *Street of Riches*, p. 39.

[36] *Ibid.*, p. 40.

[37] *Ibid.*, p. 132.

[38] *Ibid.*, p. 158.

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