

THE GARDEN AND THE CAGE

Hugo McPherson

THE ACHIEVEMENT OF GABRIELLE ROY

I
N THIS CENTURY, echoes of Alfred de Musset's despairing cry, "*Je suis venu trop tard dans un monde trop vieux*," have begun to reverberate through the great new democracies of North America. The bright hymns of our patriots ("sweet land of liberty", "the true North, strong and free") have more and more been drowned in a dark chorus of disillusion. We have met Scott Fitzgerald's sad young heroes of the Jazz Age; Faulkner's sacrificial victim, the idiot Benjy, in *The Sound and the Fury*; Morley Callaghan's benighted journalist of *The Loved and the Lost*, searching vainly for a vanished church; and Jack Kerouac's frantic voyagers, crossing and re-crossing "the great American night." We have met few novelists, however, who have looked with visionary clarity at the plight of wholly ordinary people in our modern cities.

Gabrielle Roy is one of these writers, and Theodore Dreiser (though he must bow to Zola as an influence in her work) is her chief American predecessor. But where Dreiser's typical hero is Clyde Griffiths, the sad dreamer of *An American Tragedy*, Gabrielle Roy's central figure is the frail banker Alexandre Chenevert, an experienced teller of our nation's true accounts. And though, like Dreiser, Gabrielle Roy recognizes that truth-telling is unwelcome to customers who hope for a large credit balance, she looks beyond mathematical calculations in a way that Dreiser does not. In the midst of this commercial Canadian time and place she is able to make a quiet affirmation. Her statement is more important than we have recognized.

AT SIXTEEN Gabrielle Roy had her first troubled premonition of the isolation and pain that a serious story-teller (especially, perhaps, in a country as young as Canada) must encounter. In "The Voice of the Pools," one of the most moving chapters of *Street of Riches*, her fictional alter-ego Christine, *la Petite Misère*, tells her mother that she intends to be a writer. "Writing is hard," Maman replies. It is "like cutting yourself in two, as it were — one half trying to live, the other watching, weighing . . . I think other people never forgive it." Years later, remembering this critical moment in her development, Christine makes as poignant a statement of the artist's loneliness as we can find in fiction:

I still hoped that I could have everything: both a warm and true life, like a shelter — at times, too, unbearable with harsh truth — and also time to capture its reverberations in the depths of the soul; time to walk, and time to halt that I might understand; time to withhold myself a little along the road, and then to catch up with the others, to rejoin them and to cry joyously, "Here I am, and here is what I've found for you along the way! . . . Have you waited for me? . . . Aren't you waiting for me? . . . Oh, do wait for me! . . ."

The artist's ineluctable choice lies between sharing fully the life of his fellows, and the lonely process of taking "time to halt" — time to understand and record what Henry James called "the look of things . . . the look that conveys their meaning." For Gabrielle Roy this choice was made before she could fully envisage its consequences. Writing was her vocation.

But if the mere fact of embracing a vocation and following it uncompromisingly is in some degree isolating, the nature of Gabrielle Roy's vision has further cut her off both from her fellow artists and from the popular audience. The typical heroes of Canadian fiction are intellectuals who search loquaciously for their own identity or Canada's, or "superior" observers who smile condescendingly at Canadian manners, or various sorts of crusaders, pioneers and rebels who face life boldly and bring it triumphantly to heel. Gabrielle Roy knows that such exceptional people do exist, but her whole concern is for the unnumbered thousands who "lead lives of quiet desperation" — the terrible meek. And she records their plight with a tolerance and compassion that rests not on patriotism, humanism or religiosity, but on a deep love of mankind. In the same way,

though she shares the existential concern for the individual of such French contemporaries as Sartre, Camus, Malraux and De Beauvoir, she does not wield the scapel of intellect with their clinical vigour. Gabrielle Roy *feels* rather than analyzes, and a sense of wonder and of mystery is always with her. She is a "witness" to the aches of her century and her culture rather than a reformer; and she believes that only *Love* can redeem the time.

Thus in her fiction Gabrielle Roy has held the mirror up to nature in the only way possible to her, but the image which she captures has been less and less a picture which Canadians understand or esteem. Her most popular book is *The Tin Flute* (*Bonheur d'occasion*, 1945), a story of Montreal slum dwellers. Its success, however, derives largely from its stunning documentary quality. Even in a decade enthralled by the *exposé* this book had a stinging authority. It arraigned the monster of big-city poverty with an accuracy that caught the last syllable of the market-vendor's cry and the tragic rhetoric of the Saint-Henri bum; and for English-speaking readers it revealed a backyard squalor which, though unpalatable at home, was vicariously exciting when spiced with *un zeste de Québec*. The works that followed, though welcomed by a few critics, lacked its topical appeal, and were proportionately less well received. *Where Nests the Water Hen* (*La Petite Poule d'Eau*, 1951) and *Street of Riches* (*Rue Deschambault*, 1957) were thought of as romantic retreats into a charmingly simple but irrecoverably *passé* frontier. And *The Cashier* (*Alexandre Chenevert*, 1955) — her most important work — was rejected as an altogether too painful case history.

Clearly Gabrielle Roy's development has not been directed by any desire for popular acclaim. It is time, therefore, that we attempted to look steadily at the vision of life which she has created — that we pause long enough to *see* what it is that she has found for us "along the way."

ALAN BROWN is the critic who has come closest to a broad definition of Gabrielle Roy's vision. Writing in *The Tamarack Review*,¹ he said:

¹ Issue I, Autumn, 1956, 61-70.

The first and third novels of Gabrielle Roy [*The Tin Flute* and *The Cashier*] tell about the impact of poverty, war, and the twentieth century on a few unsuspecting inhabitants of Montreal. The second and fourth describe the relatively simple lives of country people and children in Manitoba. Taken together, they might be said to form a dialogue of experience and innocence . . . What seems to interest Gabrielle Roy is the interaction of the two conditions . . . Man expels himself from the Garden but can never quite forget the significance of the time he passed there. On the other hand, because of circumstances peculiar to life in large modern cities, it may be increasingly hard to recall that such a thing as a garden ever existed.

In Gabrielle Roy's imaginative landscape, that is, big-city living, with its soot and noise, its mechanical routine and impersonality, suggests simultaneously both the pains of adulthood and the dislocations of this unhappy century. By contrast, the warm and simple life of the frontier and the provincial town is becoming a thing of the past — as dear, and as irrevocably lost as childhood or innocence.

This perception of the controlling pattern in Gabrielle Roy's work is essential to an understanding of her statement. The values of the garden, childhood, innocence, and the past, array themselves against the forces of the city, adulthood, "experience," and the present. Mr. Brown's ceiling closes in, however, when he suggests that fulfilment is possible only in the green reaches of the frontier ("Whether it is rural Manitoba or the Garden of Eden would seem to be immaterial, so long as it is not a twentieth-century city"). It is true that, like Willa Cather, Gabrielle Roy endorses the values of the past and the frontier. The happiest character in all her fiction is the Capucin priest of the Little Water Hen country, Father Joseph Marie, a shepherd who never doubts that God's Providence is ultimately benign: "The world's pain remained inviolable for him, always inexplicable; but the same held true for joy and love." Unlike Cather, however, Gabrielle Roy is unflinchingly aware that there is no real escape from the present. *Here* and *now* is where Everyman lives; and his greatest gifts in a world where both faith and justice have perished are his ability to endure and to love. The critics who have regarded *Street of Riches* and *Where Nests the Water Hen* as day-dreaming retreats from the present, then, are mistaken; these works are rediscoveries, deceptively gentle and subjective, of the meaning of valour, pain, aspiration and love. They are, for Gabrielle Roy, exact equivalents of Alexandre Chenevert's trip to Lac Vert which I shall discuss below. The "dialogue"

of which Mr. Brown speaks is less a dialogue of innocence and experience than a debate between the steely voice of the urban present and the secret voice of the self which knows that values *do exist*, however cruelly the world appears to deny them.

But there is another feature of Gabrielle Roy's imaginative landscape which her critics have overlooked. If the garden and the past constantly draw her characters away from the cage — the grid-like pattern of the modern city — the prospect of the *future* constantly beckons to them and entices them. For the ingenuous Everyman, indeed, the future is a shining hope — a world of grandiose dream and fantasy in which suffering will magically end; and it is always just ahead. Thus one group of Miss Roy's characters look backward: Nick Sluzick, the irascible Ukrainian of the remote Water Hen country flies farther and farther North to escape civilization; the Russian trapper in *The Cashier* is equally a fugitive; and even Rose-Anna, the all-suffering mother of the Lacasse brood in *The Tin Flute* yearns (with a deadly awareness of the futility of her yearning) for a return to the sugar-maple farm of her girlhood. But a second group, the slaves of the future, are more important to Gabrielle Roy's vision. Florentine Lacasse, the dime-store waitress, never abandons her dream of comfort and wealth; her father, in the act of giving himself up to the machine of war, is sure that good fortune is just ahead; and her seducer, Jean Lévesque, believes that he can climb to happiness on the heights of Westmount. The hope of the future is a greater consolation to Everyman than the dream of the past, but Gabrielle Roy's narrative makes it clear that both past and future are insecure anchors. The present is inescapable; it is *now*; the past and the future are delusions.

In this vision, Alexandre Chenevert, the anonymous Cashier whose teller's cage becomes a symbol of our money-counting society, dreams of the unspoiled life of nature, and imagines vainly that he can repossess that simplicity by returning (in the future) to the uncomplicated life of the pioneer. His experiment, of course, is a failure. He is a city man, and he must find out how to live in the sooty slums and smog-filled canyons which are the setting of twentieth-century life. Gabrielle Roy sees with frightening clarity, that is, that the flux of life (which optimists call "progress") cannot be stopped or turned back. Youth goes forward blindly and joyfully into the travail of the future, never imagining that it will be, in Lampman's phrase, "the city of the dreadful night". Thus, in earlier

days when the banks of the Lachine canal were still sunny and green, Pitou, the droll little musician of *The Tin Flute*, ran desperately after his older playmates, calling in tragic innocence: "Wait for me. I'm coming too." But the playmates, intent on life's games, could not wait for their musician Pitou (or for *la Petite Misère*, their artist). The future beckons. It is Everyman's character to hope and aspire; it is his fate, apparently, to learn that his power to achieve is tragically short of his ability to dream.

This is Gabrielle Roy's vision of life. It is far more significant, I think, than the vision of many novels which are more self-consciously "Canadian", and far more pertinent than the statistical "firsts" which our press uses to shore up our wavering identity. The world may be mildly impressed to know that we have more nickel and better wheat than anyone else; that we have the Mounties, the Seaway, the C.P.R. and Social Credit. But these externals are no more than guideposts to the labyrinth that Gabrielle Roy has explored, for she has told us something about *ourselves* — about Man.

But a greater question remains. Is the urbanized life which we are so busy creating totally dismal — a dark valley between the sunny hilltops of past and future — or can the cage of adult and urban life be made bearable? To answer this we must look searchingly at Gabrielle Roy's two novels of city life.

Since *The Tin Flute* was Gabrielle Roy's first major statement, we shall turn to it first.² Its original title, *Bonheur d'occasion*, has no English equivalent. The blues singer might translate it freely as "Happiness is a some-time thing", for it implies "chance" happiness, "grab-bag" happiness and "bargain" happiness — a deceptive, fleeting joy. Its heroine is Florentine Lacasse, daughter of a poverty-stricken Montreal family who live precariously amid the factory whistles, railway crossings, slaughterhouse smells and soot of the St. Henri quartier. Appropriately, the name Lacasse suggests a "box" or "locker," for these people are thwarted — caged — born into a world of ugliness and want which they are powerless to escape. But all of them, in individual ways, dream of a happier world. Azarius, the father, childishly protects his *amour propre* by under-

² I am indebted to McClelland & Stewart Ltd. for permission to use some of the material from my "Introduction" to the New Canadian Library edition of *The Tin Flute*. Toronto: 1958, v-xi.

taking a succession of impractical ventures which he believes will make his fortune overnight; Florentine imagines extravagantly that she will marry a rich gallant; nine-year-old Yvonne asks no more than to become a nun; and little Daniel — dying of leukemia — finds his hospital ward the happiest place that he has known, and a tin flute which has been given him the most beautiful possession imaginable.

The central situation of the story records Florentine's seduction by a ruthless young orphan, Jean Lévesque (Mr. "Bishop"), her desperation when she learns that she is pregnant and unwanted, and her reluctant marriage to Lévesque's shy friend Emmanuel Létourneau ("a starling"). It is in this situation, and in the excruciating history of Florentine's parents, Rose-Anna and Azarius, that Gabrielle Roy's irony reaches its deepest level. Jean Lévesque is a calculating young opportunist; and Florentine is a yearning, empty-headed little fool. Yet they both, finally, strike us as disarmingly pathetic, for neither the opportunist nor his victim is really in control of his destiny, and neither realizes that wealth, if it is not somehow warmed by compassion and love, can be as hideous as poverty. The novel's central perception and its chief irony is its depiction of the nature of poverty, the scourge which blinds its victims to all motives but acquisition.

The story of Rose-Anna, Florentine's mother, is at once more painful and more reassuring. Rose-Anna has been able to forgive all of her husband's failures, but when he abandons his family in order to bequeath them the regular income of an Army Private's allowances (a "fortune" in St. Henri terms) she feels his action as a betrayal. In the last analysis, the love-pain nexus that binds people together is more important than the digits of a bank account. Rose-Anna, we feel, is an image of the universal *mater dolorosa*, the infinitely loving mother whose "poverty of spirit" will inherit the earth. Yet her secret is not a conscious formula; it is simply a question of unpremeditated giving. In existentialist terms she is totally *engagé* — committed to a way of life in which the moment is all-important, and in which fortitude, compassion and love are the essential values.

But if these are the only values that can triumph over the squalor of St. Henri, *The Tin Flute* does not affirm that the world will accept them easily as a remedy for mankind's suffering. Rose-Anna ends her career in the same pose as her mother, a woman who has lived her life in the "garden" of a Quebec farmstead; each of them, with the stoicism of

resignation, rubs her fingers abstractedly against the seat of her hard wooden chair. Even Emmanuel Létourneau, whose vision is close to Rose-Anna's, finds no confident solution to the enigma of the human situation. His wife, Florentine, is incapable of understanding a love devoid of ulterior motives, and as he goes off to fight in a dubious war he sees from the train windows a desolate city: "Low on the horizon, a bank of heavy clouds foretold a storm." "Emmanuel" is prepared to give his life to save his fellows, but he cannot be certain that his sacrifice will redeem the time.

The statement of *The Tin Flute* is veiled; Gabrielle Roy allowed "the look of things" to convey its own meaning without authorial comment. In *Street of Riches* and *Where Nests the Water Hen* she adopts a highly personal, subjective manner. These are works of "spiritual autobiography", but their insights are not essentially different from the documentary histories of the Lacasse family and Alexandre Chenevert. Gabrielle Roy's experience has taught her that life offers an endless series of storms and mischances, whether they be blizzards in the remote Water Hen country, snowstorms that cut the arteries of Winnipeg's life, or cruel Arctic winds that sweep through the quartier of St. Henri. (The image of the storm, indeed, is a leading motif in these novels.) In country places, however, we see life in its simplest form — stripped of the complexities of the city.

But if country life is a spring of revelation, there is no stopping the cycle of history from frontier to provincial town to big city — or from canoe to Titanic to space-ship. Rightly or wrongly, wisely or stupidly, man aspires. And hence a final question arises. Is the idea of progress an illusion? Is there no possibility of turning the cage into a blessed garden? Gabrielle Roy answers this ultimate question by describing the ordeal of Alexandre Chenevert, the Cashier.

IT WOULD be difficult to imagine a less promising subject for fiction than the career of Alexandre Chenevert, for he is a man to whom virtually *nothing* happens — a nonentity who breaks down under the pressures of city life, escapes briefly to the "earthly paradise"

of Lac Vert, and returns home to die. Yet from the very first sentence he has an almost hypnotic fascination for us:

It was still dark. The bed was warm, and the room quiet. Alexandre Chenevert had been awakened by what he thought was a noise, but was really a nagging recollection. One of his overcoat buttons was dangling loose by a single thread. And then too, it was spring. Spring reminded him of the income tax. "If I should forget to have that button sewn on . . ." he reflected, and then the notion occurred to him that perhaps there wouldn't be any war, simply because the weapons of today have such terrific killing power.

This little man, his mind awash in an endless tide of anxieties, is much more than a nameless Montreal clerk who suffers from insomnia and the aches of urban life; he is the neighbor across the street or the stranger who sits across from us in the cafeteria. Alexandre is *us* — Everyman. The doctor whom he consults when he can no longer disguise his illness recognizes with painful clarity that the little bank clerk's malady is a condition that medicine cannot cure:

Of a sudden he realized how this man could so greatly plague him: it was because his name, indeed, was legion.

Every morning at a set hour he walked down a thousand staircases at once, running from every corner of the city toward bulging streetcars. He crowded into them by the hundreds and thousands. From tram to tram, from street to street, you could see him standing in public conveyances, his hands slipped through leather straps, his arms stretched in a curious likeness to a prisoner at the whipping post.

Alexandre's malady is simply the human condition.

But Gabrielle Roy does not, as a number of her critics have argued, intend her story as a simple condemnation of urban living, for the cage of the bank (and the city) in which Alexandre passes his days is in its deepest sense the cage of adult life — of experience. Thus his trip to Lac Vert and the pristine beauty of nature is not a rejection of the abrasive facts of experience but an attempt to reassure himself that happiness and peace are genuine possibilities. "Are you thinking of settling down here for good?" asks the Lac Vert farmer:

"No . . . that is . . . well, no."

That was not the big point. What mattered was that Lac Vert should exist, and that Alexandre should have seen it with his own eyes. Later on it would always remain his property. To believe in an earthly Paradise — that was what he had so deeply needed.

Given this reassurance that man's highest dream is not vain, Alexandre is ready to go home. A New Jerusalem is possible. He leaves Lac Vert "two days before the end of his vacation."

And then, as his bus brings him tortuously back to the tangled city of men, he sees a terrifying image:

A statue of Christ loomed up along the road. Electric wires linked it to a Hydro-Quebec pole. On its back you could glimpse a full-fledged installation: a network of twisted cables . . . and what was probably a fuse box. Alexandre wondered whether there was not likewise a meter, keeping track of the number of kilowatts the Christ might consume when it was illuminated at night; . . . Long after they had passed by, the electrified Christ continued to bother him.

This, perhaps, is the most ironic image in all of Gabrielle Roy's work. In modern life, even the figure of Christ — the symbol of brotherhood and *love* — has become a towering mechanical monster. In the cage of modern experience even Love has lost its way.

Yet this is not the end of Alexandre's ordeal. Soon after, he learns that Gandhi, the simplest and greatest man of the century, has been assassinated:

Now you could expect every sort of excess and violence, Gandhi no longer being here to condemn them with one stern look! A tiny slip of a man, feeble, sickly, Alexandre reflected tenderly. Oh! it was not always the sturdy ones who brought the most to pass in the world — far from it!

They had looked a bit alike; others had also noticed it; . . . It was certainly his own best self which today they had killed for him . . . but he would continue to suffer as a protest against violence, war, and murder. Why had he not earlier understood that his role in life, as Gandhi had pointed out for him, lay in meekness?

In these words we come once again to the very core of Gabrielle Roy's vision. There can be no return to the garden, but meekness and love can plant flowers in the cage and the wasteland. The poor in spirit — Mahatmas Gandhi, Alexandre Chenevert — have the secret. A final knowledge of Love's power comes to Alexandre as he lies in a hospital bed dying of cancer: the visits of his simple friends and clients reveal to him that his life has not been worthless or meaningless. In the face of his childlike helplessness, his friends abandon all past pettiness and rivalry: "Alexandre closed his eyelids. As Heaven, he could see nothing better than earth, now that men had become good neighbors."

But did the priest really not believe that men would come to love one another? Couldn't one see signs of this happening? Might not Heaven, after all, little by little, come to be on earth?

"No." The chaplain was categorical; . . . Men would never be ripe for heaven upon earth.

Perhaps Alexandre's dying vision was an hallucination. Gabrielle Roy does not intrude to debate the priest's official view. Nevertheless the spindly Alexandre Chenevert (Mr. Green Oak) stands as a compelling figure of Everyman, not unlike the tragic salesman Willy Loman, or the all-American failure Studs Lonigan, but rising above them in his final awareness. The money-counting world takes small notice of his passing, and yet this humble sufferer whose name suggests both a conqueror and a sturdy, growing tree, achieves a curious kind of immortality. For even now,

elsewhere than in churches, it happens still today, after these several years, that name is uttered — and is it not a thing tender and mysterious that to this name there should attach a bond? . . . It happens that here or there in the city someone says:

“. . . Alexandre Chenevert . . .”

IT IS IMPOSSIBLE on this occasion to notice a number of features of Gabrielle Roy's art which must qualify and modify our estimate of her achievement, but my primary purpose has been to explore her "importance" as a voice speaking in this Canadian place and time. I have omitted mention, for example, of the wry and tender understatement of her humor; I have ignored her tendency towards episodic narrative, and the occasional awkwardness in chronology which breaks the unity of *Where Nests the Water Hen* and *Street of Riches*. I have also been unable to weigh the losses incurred in translation — losses which seriously reduce the impact of *The Tin Flute* (Harry Binsse's translations of the later books are inspired).

At the moment these matters bulk large, because we are always in some degree the slaves of literary fashion. Our final judgment, however, will rest firmly on two things: has Gabrielle Roy had something signifi-

cant to say? and has she said it well? She falls short, I think, of the panoramic sweep of our greatest novelists, and she lacks something of the intensity which enables a Katherine Mansfield to distill the meaning of a world in the microcosm of a moment. She has, however, given us a vision of ourselves which is immeasurably more powerful than "the vision" of windy Prime Ministers and journalistic patriots. She convinces us, indeed, that the truth which Canada has revealed to her is a timeless truth. And she persuades us to bear witness to its importance.



WOOD ENGRAVING BY ALISTAIR BELL