

Gabrielle Roy's *La route d'Altamont* and Canadian Highway Narrative

J.N. NODELMAN

CRITICS HAVE OFTEN CELEBRATED Gabrielle Roy's *La route d'Altamont*,¹ a short-story cycle in which a maturing young woman redefines her relationships with her grandmother and her mother while eventually leaving Manitoba to study in France, for how vividly it evokes a natural Canadian landscape that takes on a certain symbolic importance. Carol Harvey, for instance, writes that, for the author, "Les collines et la plaine ne sont pas, toutefois, de simples éléments topographiques. L'espace géographique décrit par Gabrielle Roy avec tant de fidélité et d'amour se révèle comme un décor sur lequel est projeté le paysage de l'âme" (207). I argue, however, that Roy's 1966 volume of four interconnected stories is not merely about natural terrain per se, nor are all its accomplishments purely literary ones. Instead, *Altamont* concerns people's engagements with landscape through various built means of transport; in doing so, it makes a particularly challenging contribution to a broader cultural discourse about transportation infrastructure that has played a significant part in Canadian society.

La route d'Altamont actually involves a whole succession of transportation experiences, including walking on stilts, riding on a horse-drawn moving cart, taking a train, and finally (and most prominently) driving an automobile. Again and again, the specific vantage points these technologies provide lead the characters to reflect on the geography they traverse in ways that they might not otherwise. When Christine and her mother drive across the plains, for instance, from behind the windshield they see "depuis des heures déjà défiler sous nos yeux un peu lassés les grands horizons toujours plats," an experience that leads the older woman to wonder, "Dans toute cette plaine immense, comment se fait-il, Christine, que Dieu n'a pas songé à mettre au moins quelques petites collines?" (193). Significantly, as will become apparent, such insights by no means emerge out of a cultural or political vacuum. The post-war era in which *Altamont* appeared saw the unprecedented reconstruction of

the nation's entire road network, including the completion of the Trans-Canada Highway in 1962. Regarding this technology, the architectural critic Stephanie White argues from a contemporary Material Culture Studies framework that the Canadian highway plays a “performative role”: besides being a road, [it] performs as a viewpoint from which to see the country — the nation state, and the ‘countryside’ — the landscape, the geomorphology and flora and fauna of middle North America. The ‘seeing’ is both controlled by the road and is a performative enactment of the road (263-64). The historian Jonathan Vance, moreover, has persuasively pointed out in *Building Canada* (2006) that mechanical means of conveyance have often been heavily implicated in constructing the Canadian national imaginary: from very early on, “Anyone who imagined a British North America that would be more than just a scattered collection began to see that an infrastructure, in addition to its immense practical value, had psychological value” (xii).² On the basis of the critical theory and cultural evidence cited below, I would extend this insight as follows: not only do such networks have psychological value, but in a sense they are psychological phenomena — as well as intellectual, cultural, and political ones.

Furthermore, these technologies, I continue to contend here as elsewhere,³ cannot function, even in the most basic sense of conveying people between discrete places, or in that of extending a political-industrial complex's control over a geographical area, without the help of enabling cultural narratives to render intelligible the unfolding progression of fragmentary impressions that characterizes their operation. As it was, *Altamont* was released in the midst of a flourishing national highway discourse. Although extended publications devoted to Canadian roads began to emerge as far back as T.W. Wilby's groundbreaking *A Motor Tour Through Canada* (1914), Roy's book arrived soon after the NFB's promotional documentary *Trans-Canada Summer* (1958) and Edward McCourt's book *The Road Across Canada* (1965) but just before John M. Mitchell and Mrs. H.B. Illsey's *Coast to Coast Across Canada* (1967) and Don Shebib's genre-defining film *Goin' Down the Road* (1970). In fact, Roy's volume was published the very same year as Edwin C. Guillet's *The Story of Canadian Roads*, a work that was to remain the standard history of its subject for almost four decades.⁴ Among other things, I venture, *Altamont* is deeply implicated in, and at the same time

somewhat in tension with, the ongoing revision of precisely such function-defining texts about Canadian highways.

Granted, the 1960s saw many other significant developments in Canadian literature, things with which Roy's book is certainly in discussion as well. *Altamont* takes, for instance, the form of the short-story cycle, which, according to Gerald Lynch, is "a distinctly Canadian genre" that for many Canadian writers "allows for a new kind of unity in disunity, reflecting a fragmented temporal sense" (18) and the expression of "simultaneous multiple perspectives in a manner paralleling that of cubist painting" (24). Given this choice of form, it would indeed be possible to locate *Altamont* alongside such similarly structured works as Margaret Laurence's *A Bird in the House* (1963) and Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971), a move that would emphasize its achievements as an aesthetic work and its influence on future literary writers. Such a genre-based critical approach, however, would overlook the book's profound engagements with a prominent discourse called for, and moulded by, the functional contours of an incipient spatial technology built to fulfill a particular cultural role.

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That such dimensions of engagement have been previously overlooked speaks to the longstanding influence of the mode of Canadian literature studies inaugurated by Northrop Frye, Margaret Atwood, and others in the 1960s and 1970s. Scholars in this tradition, of course, held that a distinctively Canadian experience of landscape as vast, unknowable, and threatening uniquely influences the nation's literatures. Such a conception relies on the notion that human presence (at least that of European settlers) on the Canadian landscape is tenuous at best. The land, the argument goes, is inherently savage and uncongenial, to the degree that Canadian writers have not responded to geography through the means previous humans have developed to inhabit it but directly to nature itself. Douglas LePan's famous 1948 statement that "No monuments or landmarks guide the stranger" travelling through this "country without a mythology" (309) emblemizes this idea. Correspondingly, Laurence Ricou observed in *Vertical Man/Horizontal World* (1973) that, in general, "Again and again the prairie writer gave unusual prominence to landscape; often it became almost an obsession" (ix), and that, in *La route d'Altamont* in particular, "Although Roy provides the details of

the prairie with loving precision, the landscape is completely universalized" (124). Moreover, for poets and critics alike, Canada's landscape often seemed to be speaking, albeit in an incomprehensible language. As F.R. Scott holds forth in "Laurentian Shield," "The Land stares at the sun in a huge silence / Endlessly repeating something we cannot hear. / Inarticulate, arctic, / Not written on by history, empty as paper" (284). Such impressions imply that translating this mysterious speech into the coherent voice of an organized landscape lies entirely in infrastructural modifications and psychic adaptations to come in the future, not in any existing ones.⁵

Over the past decade, though, the way Canadian literary scholars approach the intersections of space, text, and culture has changed; in the process, a number of challenges to the "garrison mentality" thesis have been raised. A notable one, for instance, is Susan Glickman's *The Picturesque and the Sublime: A Poetics of the Canadian Landscape* (1998), which pursues the argument that many poets have found Canadian nature less antagonistic and hostile than previously thought. Other critics, moreover, being informed by interdisciplinary approaches to landscape drawn from such theorists as Walter Benjamin, Henry Lefebvre, Yi-Fu Tuan, Michel Foucault, and Edward W. Soja, have articulated previously overlooked cultural and political dimensions to all sorts of Canadian landscape characterizations. For such thinkers, space itself is not composed of mere physical forms, but of the interplay between material features, cultural practices, and representations. Lefebvre, for instance, argues for a "unitary theory" incorporating the physical, mental, and social dimensions of space; such a theory would acknowledge a "logico-epistemological space, the space of social practice, the space occupied by sensory phenomena, including products of the imagination such as products and projections, symbols and utopias" (11-12). In W.H. New's *LandSliding* (1997), such theoretics inform an erudite overview of the multiform ways in which twentieth-century Canadian writers have grappled with land as it relates to writing, representation, and power (5). In New's view, "Land functions in cultural discourse . . . both as an icon of stability and as a medium of change. Fixity vies recurrently with fluidity, position with positionality, the place of social residence with the condition of being there" (6).⁶ Crucially, such thinking conceptualizes the traditional ideas about Canadian landscape cited above

not as autonomous insights but as notions imbricated within a larger field of cultural production, ones that may play decidedly exclusionary or contestatory roles.⁷

For all that, the canonical notion that classic Canadian writing responds directly to an untouched natural landscape continues to have considerable influence on Gabrielle Roy's interpreters. As recently as 2001, Richard Dillman has characterized *La route d'Altamont* as depicting the Manitoba plains to be "unmistakably harsh, overwhelmingly spacious, and marked by a frequently difficult climate. It is indeed a place that diminishes the significance of the individual, while it also seems to elicit the individual's most heroic efforts to survive" (122). For such critics, Roy's natural prairie stubbornly resists being neatly represented by cartography or managed by technology. Dillman does discuss the grid road system as a conceptual framework through which Roy's characters develop their relationship to the land. However, in his view, "All roads are alike, and all have the potential to lead anywhere" (119): they act as much to disorient people as to organize the landscape for them. Accordingly, this built framework supposedly does not significantly mediate how people, in Roy's view, ultimately understand their natural surroundings: "Indeed, readers are left without certainty, without a map, and without route names or numbers, lost somewhere on the vast, poorly charted expanses of the Manitoba prairie, longing for something vertical on the flat horizon, wondering where here is" (121).

To be fair, some of Roy's own statements outside *La route d'Altamont* do appear to justify the view that Roy mainly stages European-Canadian encounters with a fundamentally unaltered, uninhabited landscape. For one, in her semi-autobiographical novel *Rue Deschambault* (1955), we see Roy's father, who worked for the federal Ministry of Colonization, helping to settle homesteaders from all over the world on the Canadian prairie. He differs with people of particular immigrant cultures regarding their supposedly frustrating insistence on using their old practices to build communities in the new world: one eyebrow-raising passage describes a trusting group of Ruthenians whose settlement prospers under his benevolent guidance because, Roy writes, "Ce n'étaient pas des gens perdues d'ennui comme les Doukhobors" (125). For another, in *Un jardin au bout du monde* (1975), one character looks out over "ce grand flot de graminées" and perceives that "la plaine était absorbée dans un grand rêve de choses à venir, et chantait la patience et la

promesse que tout, en temps et lieu, serait accompli” (180-81) — hardly a sensitive acknowledgement of the existing several-thousand-year legacy of human presence in the area. Likewise, in her essay “Mon héritage du Manitoba” (1970), Roy describes the province’s famous Bird’s Hill as a purely undisturbed site, calling it the shore of “une ancienne ligne d’eau laissée en arrière par la mer Agassiz des temps immémoriaux, alors que le Manitoba, presque entièrement sous l’eau, n’était encore qu’un songe” (157). On the basis of such moments, Carol Harvey is perhaps justified in arguing that Roy’s novels delineate a symbolic world of metaphors “d’une cohérence remarquable,” all drawn directly from nature: “L’eau, source de toute vie et symbole de l’unité foncière du monde, est assimilée par l’auteure à la plaine; les deux constituent les éléments fondamentaux d’une fresque sur laquelle d’autres symboles sont dessinés: l’arbre et l’oiseau, les collines, l’horizon” (214-15).

However, in “Mon héritage du Manitoba” Roy also writes of her love for “la silhouette particulière, en deux pans, de nos silos à céréales, leur ombre bleue découpée sur un ciel brouillé de chaleur, seule, pars les jours d’été, à signaler au loin les villages de l’immensité plate” (157). The prairie often becomes interesting to her, that is, only at the moment of being perceived through a human-built frame; through it, Roy sees not only “les *bluffs* assemblés comme pour causer dans le désert du monde,” but also “la variété humaine à l’infini” (157). *La route d’Altamont*, likewise, contains many explorations of how the Manitoba landscape changes according to the infrastructural frameworks through which characters experience it. Take, for instance, the moment when Christine arrives at the Lake Winnipeg station by train:

Alors, tout à coup, le petit train lança un coup de sifflet hardi et joyeux, comme s’il annonçait: Attention, vous allez voir du merveilleux, du neuf, et qui en vaut la peine! Il prenait en même temps, assez vite, un court tournant. J’aperçus alors — ou crus apercevoir — une immense nappe de bleu tendre, vivant, profond, lisse et, me sembla-t-il, liquide. (106)

Upon viewing this sight, she exclaims, elegiacally, “Mon âme pour l’accueillir s’élargit” (66). At this point, then, Christine not only observes a natural scene from the vantage point of the train, but ascertains the presence of one that appears to be have been spoken into existence by the great machine itself.

And yet, in light of the theoretical approaches cited above, there is more to be done here than only pointing out the importance of built works and machines within *Altamont*'s imaginative fabric. Instead, these approaches suggest that we consider how textual explorations of built forms and spatial perception like those of "Mon héritage du Manitoba" and *Altamont* play a fundamental role in helping to *constitute* the spaces they depict. A railroad does not disturb an existing prairie; it creates a whole new one, of a completely different scale and social function. Yet we never come to know this new prairie as a static field of simultaneities, for we must experience it as a process of disclosure. Narratives like Roy's must be composed to fill out, challenge, or rework the meaning of such progressions on various intellectual, ideological, and aesthetic registers, in order to render such spaces coherent. It is to this wider discourse about infrastructure and its possibilities, I venture, not only to a strictly literary one regarding natural landscape in general, that *La route d'Altamont* makes its most challenging and poignant contributions.

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Again, *La route d'Altamont* comprises a series of stories in which Christine re-encounters the prairie through differing mechanical means. By the time she tells us that the prairie grid roads "composent comme une sorte de vaste jeu troublant et, si on s'y trompe une seule fois, l'erreur va ensuite se multipliant à l'infini. Mais peut-être était-ce cela même que je souhaitais" (200), she has already traversed the landscape by a variety of other technologies. It is true that near the outset of the first story, "Ma grand-mère toute-puissante," we see a mythical vision, available with each sunset at Christine's grandmother's house, of a prairie that the waning daylight empties "comme de toute présence humaine," thus returning it "peut-être aux songes sauvages du temps où elle vivait dans sa solitude complète. On aurait dit alors que la plaine ne voulait pas sur elle de gens, de maisons, de villages . . . comme autrefois, fière et solitaire" (15). In this ahistorical milieu, all movement is meaningless: "on peut avoir l'impression d'être entraîné en une sorte de traversée d'un infini pays monotone, toujours pareil à lui-même" (16). So far, then, the book presents its readers with an markedly traditional, entirely LePan-like evocation of an unmediated, identity-dissolving Canadian landscape. Significantly, though, this is only a starting point.

Christine's grandmother, in her house set on this all-encompassing plain, first appears as a fully accomplished person able to weave together all the threads of her life into one remarkable whole: her granddaughter is so astonished to see her skill in making a doll from scratch out of meticulously saved scraps of several generations of family clothing that she likens the older woman to God. And yet what immediately surfaces is that Christine's grandmother feels a profound sense of dislocation and dissatisfaction. The Manitoba prairie, Christine learns, is a kind of "exile" to her elder, who misses the Quebec landscape she had left during her youth to accompany her husband out west. Moreover, the older woman's skills soon begin to desert her: advancing age forces her to give up her house and move in with Christine and her mother. By the end, Christine's grandmother is unable to speak and seems almost wholly unaware of her state, leaving Christine with the poignant task of putting names to the faces in a family photo album for her, a service her aged ancestor is barely able to acknowledge. The moment calls for some means by which Roy's characters might move toward reconnecting with their dislocated histories. Crucially, it is specifically through travel via various mechanical technologies that these reunions occur.

Precisely when alternate means of locomotion start to appear in the next story, "Le vieillard et l'enfant," in fact, the book begins to cast the elements of time, history, and choice in a different light. At the beginning, Christine appears walking on stilts. "D'où venait chez les enfants de par chez nous, en ce-temps-là, le goût de se haut percher?" asks Roy. "Était-ce pour voir loin dans la plaine unie? . . . Ou plus loin encore, dans une sorte d'avenir?" (62). For Ricou, in this scene "The prairie child on stilts is emphasizing his verticality, insisting, as it were, on his own existence" (124). I suggest, though, that what is most at stake in Christine's use of a particular technology to experience the landscape is not only her existence at a particular moment but over time — that is, her eventual becoming, not her current being. She does, of course, speak here of using this very basic enhanced means of conveyance to see into her own future. The scene thus evokes the degree of agency she can assert in her own becoming: whether disparate times can be brought together by the individual will through mechanical means that both enable and frustrate one's sense of possibility.

In the story that follows, Christine befriends an elderly man named M. Saint-Hilaire; in the stifling heat of the prairie summer, the two

take a day trip on the train, with Christine's mother's grudging permission, from St. Boniface north to the beach at Lake Winnipeg. It is Christine's first chance to see this majestic body of water, while for M. Saint-Hilaire it is a rare opportunity to visit a favourite destination of his earlier years for perhaps the final time. In the process, "Le vieillard et l'enfant"'s question quickly becomes whether our passages across the landscape are cyclical (in the sense that we can experience several different times of our own lives, and those of others, at once) or linear (meaning that the past is forever lost, and the generations cannot truly connect). Phyllis Grosskurth contends that the book bears out the former: for Roy, "The movement of life is cyclical and repetitive. Each of us traverses a familiar road, each of us recognizes the past in what we become" (51). M.G. Hesse effectively concurs, arguing that "Essentially time is conceived as a cycle, so that the future contains the past while the past anticipates the future. Both retrospective and prospective views are present"⁸ (43). For Paula Gilbert Lewis, however, "It is frequent that the circular routes chosen by or forced upon Royan characters imply a lack of any forward movement" (207). In fact, since they are *attempts* at circularity, at recapturing formerly experienced joy, "they are either only temporarily successful or totally disastrous" (208). It is precisely because life is not cyclical, contends Lewis, that journeying is frightening, as one can never go home.

Regarding these profound ambiguities over whether Roy evokes life as either circular or linear, I add only that M. Saint-Hilaire enunciates his perspicacious reflection that Lake Winnipeg has no beginning and end, so that "tout arrive à former un grand cercle, la fin et le recommencement se rejoignant" (122) in direct counterpoint to his and Christine's trip to the lake on the train, a mechanical journey whose contours are set in steel. Like the stilts, this mode of travel offers a new viewpoint on the landscape, yet the only choice for the train passenger is whether or not to board; after that, the machine's trajectory is set. Christine's deepening sense that life is a great circle, in other words, begins to emerge acutely amid the possibilities and limitations of the specific means by which this circular route is travelled.

Christine's next journey, in "Le déménagement," is by horse-drawn cart. "Du haut de la charette," she first thinks while watching her friend's father use it to move furniture, "comme le monde . . . devait se transformer au regard" (161). "Et d'abord le voyage tint sa promesse," we

are told, and Christine feels herself to be travelling through “une ville absolument inconnue, lointaine et à découvrir” (171). Yet the trip takes a turn “au sordide” (176) when she sees the poverty of the people being moved. Their new house is just as sad as their former one, and “il me semblait avoir fait tout ce voyage pour rien. N’allions-nous pas en fin de compte aboutir à la cabane même dont j’avais espéré les tirer?” (184). As on the train, passage over a set route at first holds out the promise of changing the way people inhabit their surroundings, but only ends up confirming things as they are. Once more life’s trajectory is revealed to be circular, in the sense that no true transformation occurs for this latest group of people in transit, but here that insight takes on a decidedly more dystopian thrust. Given Christine’s increasingly hopeless sense of the futility of moving about on the prairie, from here Roy must suggest a way for her to escape.

Were Roy to do so by having Christine make a perfectly clean break with her apparently endless circling by embarking on a definite, purposeful path forward, the book would lose much of its conceptual and emotional richness. However, the final chapter, itself named “La route d’Altamont,” provides a more ambivalent resolution which is at once poignant and edifying. In it, Roy’s characters travel an automobile route through the Pembina Mountains that changes over time, depending, among other things, on the changing state of its travellers’ consciousness. Christine has bought a car, and she takes her mother on a trip through southern Manitoba to visit an uncle. Somewhat like F.R. Scott’s Laurentian Shield, the section roads themselves seem to speak, but silently, incoherently; she recalls “leur accolade muette, leur étonnement à se recontrer, à repartir déjà et vers quel but? Car d’où elles viennent, où elles vont, jamais elles n’en disent mot” (201) — just as earlier, M. Saint-Hilaire had reflected that Lake Winnipeg “parle, chante et sans cesse dit quelque chose, encore qu’on n’y entende rien de clair comme lorsque les gens parlent, par exemple” (88). Yet when they find themselves in the Pembina mountains, Christine’s mother asks her to pull over, excitedly gets out of the car, and climbs one of the hills. These landforms also seem to Christine to speak: “Mais que se dirent-elles, ce jour-là, maman et les petites collines?” (210). Because of the layout of “les petites routes rectilignes, inflexibles, qui sillonnent la Prairie canadienne et en font un immense quadrillage au-dessus duquel le ciel pensif a l’air de méditer depuis longtemps quelle pièce du jeu il déplacera” (199), Christine is

able at a crossroads to take a chance “dans celle des deux routes qui me parut la plus complètement étrangère” (200). This sense that a coherent enunciation of some kind lies off to the side of the road, just a little out of reach from inside the car, is of paramount importance regarding how narrative reworkings help produce the articulated spaces of modern highway travel.

Consider that the view from an automobile is markedly unlike that from a train, which, as the technological historian David E. Nye points out, narrates the landscape as a rolling panorama (15-19). Instead, it inescapably contrasts the relatively unchanging road ahead with the succession of different views passing by the wayside — most of which, since the eye is only perhaps four feet above the ground, is not so much panoramic as obscuring and mystifying.⁹ Furthermore, there is another fundamental tension in all highway driving between sameness and difference. A highway works by promising drivers that they will move between significantly differing locations (otherwise there would be no need to travel at all), but that the overall trip will be conceptually unified enough that one designation (classically, in Canada, the famous green route markers emblazoned with white maple leaves) will stand as a sign for the overall progression throughout.

Because the highway, in use, presents an incomplete organizing principle that tends not to reveal landscape as a coherent entity, specific narratives must come into existence to enable it to function intelligibly for travellers. Tellingly, Mitchell and Illsey are entirely aware that they are not only describing a landscape in their guidebook *Coast to Coast Across Canada*, but affecting how others will experience it in turn: as Mitchell writes in a preface, “There are so many people who would like to see more of this country. You are probably one of those. If ‘Across Canada’ should strengthen your desire and help you to resolve to make such a trip, the writer-photographer of this book will be happy, indeed” (n.pag.). They proceed to provide a series of both photographs and colourful, cartoon-like interpretive maps throughout the book, showing the thin strip of pavement, from which motor travellers cannot see all that much, as both geographically and historically “thick.” On these maps, the Trans-Canada highway appears to cut through swaths of Canadian geography about two hundred kilometres wide, populated with cheerfully informative comments ranging from “Winnipeg was built around Upper Fort Garry, chief center of Hudson’s Bay Co. trad-

ing post” to “The Okanagan Valley’s grape production is growing fast to keep up with the demands of the Okanagan wine industry.”

Edward McCourt, a University of Saskatchewan English professor who travelled the entire Trans-Canada Highway just as it was officially opened, addresses this frustrating sense of endlessly deferred promises somewhat differently. Instead of providing readers with access to the things they are supposedly missing from behind the wheel, *The Road Across Canada* takes the highway’s tendency to promise and then never quite deliver moments of fully realized vision as an occasion for certain kinds of intellectual meditation. McCourt notes, for instance, that “it must be remembered that the Highway is primarily a direct linking route between provinces and only incidentally a scenic driveway” (41), as if to console his own disappointment by assuring himself he had the wrong idea in the first place. Yet although he laments that we cannot experience time in depth on the highway itself but only off to one side, McCourt still celebrates the opportunity in Montreal to “make a quick middle-of-the-block turn off Sherbrooke Street, pop through an unobtrusive hole in a stone wall, and find ourselves in a quiet, uncluttered world a hundred miles and a century away from the madhouse outside the wall” (90). Such observations represent another approach to providing information about the natural and human features adjoining the highway that would help others to understand driving it as a revealing experience of transition.

“La route d’Altamont,” for its part, makes what is “spoken” by the road and the hills in their disorganization turn out to be the bond between generations. Marguerite A. Primeau’s ideas help explain how this message is formed. According to Primeau, Roy’s Manitoba prairie is not a backdrop but a composition of solid and fluid elements which demand certain types of actions. “Pour les personnages féminins de Gabrielle Roy,” she writes, “le monde lui-même est un objet *résistant*; il y a toujours un ou des obstacles à vaincre” (117). These characters’ vitality is established specifically by how they confront such obstacles: “Rien chez elles n’est passif ni statique, elles ont ‘quelque chose à faire’; elles sont propulsées ‘hors de l’être.’ Le but à atteindre, qui n’est autre que l’obstacle à vaincre, les occupe en entier et leur donne véritablement ‘un destin cosmique’” (117). The conditions of their existence do not offer them much repose, so they must find meaning and fulfilment in the midst of ongoing activity. Since Roy’s characters accommodate

themselves to different settings by enacting a restless series of transitions, they are not constructing settled, domestic environments for themselves, but reflective states in different locations. And yet whereas Canadian highway writing, as we have seen, so often takes pains to differentiate parts of the landscape in terms of geological features and local historical import, Roy's women notice that on the grid roads the landforms are unexpectedly and radically the same as others elsewhere; moreover, that these landforms are not strictly historical, in the sense that the human aspects of their past are necessarily lost but exist at a number of times at once.

On their next trip, the two women take the same road, and in the hills Christine's mother realizes that she can finally give full voice to her own deceased mother's thoughts and experiences. She reflects here, regarding her ancestors, that "On se recontre . . . mais si tard!" (231). However, the landscape along the road itself is by no means immutable; it changes as the notion of journey itself changes throughout the story. Earlier, Christine's mother tells her that "Il y a, Christine, des routes que l'on perd absolument" (213). Later, she scolds her daughter, warning, "tu devrais dessiner une carte de ces petites routes embrouillées, puisque tu refuses de demander des indications au départ ou en route, disant que c'est contraire à l'esprit du voyage, qu'il faut se fier à la route justement" (234). Her challenge to her daughter is to map landscape to make their passage across it reliably repeatable; if not, she worries, "tu finiras par perdre ma route d'Altamont" (234). Christine laughs it off at the time, but this unfortunate event indeed comes to pass.

The moment comes when she decides she will leave her mother to travel to France to study, a decision which leads her to ponder that "toujours en fut-il ainsi dans notre famille: une génération alla vers l'Ouest; la suivante fit le trajet inversement. Toujours nous sommes en migration" (248-49). The two women's relationship thereby becomes strained, and on a final car trip through the Pembina mountains, the landscape is utterly transformed into a dry dullness. Christine ends up wondering whether it was not one "de ces routes qu'on ne découvre jamais du moment qu'on s'applique trop à le vouloir?" (254) and whether running through the hills there might be "deux routes: l'une, légère et heureuse, en parcourant les sommets; et une autre, inférieure, au bas des contreforts, qui n'aurait fait que côtoyer, sans jamais y entrer, le petit pays secret?" (255). In the lack of set direction inherent to automobile

transportation, then, as opposed to that of trains or moving carts traveling on circular routes, lies the potential accident in which true connections may be made. No other mechanical means of conveyance requires people to deal with the difficult ethical choices which arise for adults in the absence of clear imperatives. Willfulness in addressing these matters, moreover, leads only to frustration. Such is life as we know it: these conditions cannot be overcome by doing away with technology, for there is in fact no landscape that can be comprehended outside of the dynamic means by which it is experienced. At least in this life, that is: when Christine's mother passes away, Roy hypothesizes that "Son âme capricieuse et jeune s'en alla en une région où il n'y a sans doute plus ni carrefours ni difficiles points de départ. Ou peut-être y a-t-il encore par-là des routes, mais toutes vont par Altamont" (261).

* * *

Near the end of her peregrinations, Christine finds herself on a road demarcated by "les indications routières en jaune clair, hautes sur pied, où figure l'image du bison — autrefois seigneur des Prairies, vagabond à travers ces étendues. Maintenant, sur ces plaques de tôles, il signale les grand-routes du Manitoba qu'il maintient dans le plus droit trajet possible de ville en ville" (256). The mighty bison has thus been wiped out and replaced with its image, now serving as a modernist sign of organization, efficiency, and territorial division. Yet in pointing this out, Roy is not unambiguously bemoaning how technology has harmed wildlife and separated people from the true, wild prairie. Instead, she is wistfully reflecting on the modern highway's reconfiguring of perception and dynamic spatial inhabitation. Crucially, in putting forth these observations, the book itself acts as a kind of "route marker": it adds its own, distinctly sophisticated, voice to a larger discourse required to render Canadian road travel coherent and viable. As we have seen, other works narrate the story of the Canadian highway as one where the country is both unique in its parts and yet unified, with the highway as the unchanging standard by which these tensions might be measured. For Roy, it is the roads which are not well marked and which change, and yet in the way they allow people to experience the landscape they suggest equivalencies, like the lake so big in "Le vieillard et l'enfant" that for Christine it might as well be the ocean. Her post-war Canadian prairie, as defined by the automobile and highway, may prompt others

to imagine ways of understanding and inhabiting it as a fixed, unobstructed plenitude; instead, it only draws those traversing it endlessly forward, backward, apart, together, and beyond.

NOTES

¹ *La route d'Altamont* was simultaneously published in French and, in an English translation by Joyce Marshall, as *The Road Past Altamont*. Although I quote herein from the novel's original French edition, a major part of this article's premise is that Marshall's English translation represented a significant contribution of its own to English-language writing about the Canadian highway in the 1960s. Roy herself collaborated closely with Marshall on translating her work; in her original introduction to the English edition, Marshall writes that "I should add a digression not generally known, the extent to which Gabrielle Roy collaborates with her translator. . . . She has an excellent and exacting ear for language: nothing extraneous or false is allowed to stand. It is an exhausting and stimulating process, and the final English text is as close to the original version as two brains can get it" (ix). It therefore seems fair to call this novel less a primarily French-language contribution to Canadian literature than an avowedly bilingual one. Notably, Claude Grenier's pensive 1985 National Film Board adaptation of the volume's second story, "Le vicillard et l'enfant," has also been made available in both French and English.

² A great body of twentieth-century statements emerging from official quarters confirm that this notion was widespread. See, for instance, the narrator of the NFB film *Trans-Canada Summer* (1958) holding forth on "a great problem that has always dogged Canada. Almost 5,000 miles separate this Atlantic coast from the Pacific in the west. Unless it be linked by transport overland, it has little meaning as a nation." Another well-known example is Prime Minister John George Diefenbaker's statement at the Trans-Canada Highway's 1962 opening ceremony that the new road marked "another step in the completion of the dreams of the Fathers of Confederation, dreams of a united and growing nation moving forward in faith that Canada's destiny is that of an ever-greater and always independent nation" (qtd. in Weber 32).

³ See, for instance, Nodelman "Reading and Space."

⁴ Such publishing has since further flourished and even intensified: see, for example, Stephen McNamee's *Seven for the Road* (1968), Brian Doyle's brilliant young-adult novel *Hey, Dad!* (1978), Richard and Rochelle Wright's *Yellowhead Mileposts* (1980), Harold Fryer's *Magnificent Yellowhead Highway* (1980), James Reaney's *Take the Big Picture* (1986), Wes Rataushk's *Silver Highway* (1988), Kildare Dobbs's *Ribbon of Highway* (1992), Charles Gordon's *The Canada Trip* (1997), Dave Bidini's *On A Cold Road: Tales of Adventure in Canadian Rock* (1998), John Nicol's *Jack Haney* (1989) and later *The All-Red Route: From Halifax to Victoria in a 1912 Reo* (1999), David W. Monaghan's historical monograph *Canada's 'New Main Street': The Trans-Canada Highway as Idea and Reality* (2002), John Stackhouse's *Timbit Nation: A Hitchhiker's Guide to Canada* (2003), NFB documentary and companion book by Bob Weber titled *The Longest Road: Stories Along the Trans-Canada Highway* (2003), Will Ferguson's *Beauty Tips from Moose Jaw: Travels in Search of Canada* (2004), Daniel Francis's *A Road for Canada: The Illustrated Story of the Trans-Canada Highway* (2006), and a chapter on the Trans-Canada Highway in Vance's above-cited *Building Canada* (2006).

⁵At present, I need hardly rehearse that writing emphasizing the Canadian landscape's emptiness as a blank tableau to be settled by humans or as a field of pleasurable experiences lying open for travellers to enjoy serves ideologically to justify the forced replacement of existing First Nations societies with that of European settlers; as Eva Mackey usefully challenges us in her essay "Death by Landscape" (2000), "Of course we all want an identity, but whom are we using, abusing, and erasing in the process of creating one?" (9).

⁶See also the late Canadian critic Sylvia Bowerbank's thoughtful late-1990s call for Canadian scholars to take local modes of cultural practice, and, indeed, narration into greater account when studying Canadian landscape: "To understand the environmental behaviour of individuals, groups and communities, I would argue, researchers need to know much more about the various structures of feeling and knowledge . . . that motivate people in their daily and life-long habits in *relationship* to their local environments. People's stories encode these structures of feeling and knowledge" (n.pag.)

⁷For instance, Peter Dickinson argues in *Here is Queer* (1999) that "the identificatory *lack* upon which Canadian literary nationalism has historically been constructed — the 'where' of Frye's 'here,' for example — is in large part facilitated by, if not wholly dependent upon, a critical refusal to come to grips with the textual *superabundance* of a destabilizing and counter-normative sexuality" (4). As with New, for Dickinson Canadian landscape is not a pre-existing thing to be encountered and addressed but an institution formed in part by forms of (ideological, anxiety-ridden) discursive practice. In a somewhat similar vein, the Canadian scholar Dianne Chisholm's recent book *Queer Constellations* (2005), though not about Canadian locales per se, concerns what she terms "queer space" in major urban centres, a field which "demarcates a practice, production, and performance of space beyond just the mere habitation of built and fixed structures. Against the domination of space by abstract constructs of urban planning and the implementation of technologies of social surveillance, queer space designates an appropriation of space for bodily, especially sexual, pleasure" (10). Finally, for another useful example of recent theoretical approaches applied to Canadian landscape, culture, and text, see Kathleen Venema's article "Mapping Culture onto Geography" (1998), which cites cultural theorists such as Allan Pred and Mary Louise Pratt in arguing that the eighteenth-century Hudson's Bay Company explorer Samuel Hearne "reclassif[ies] space in all the ways that his ideological, discursive, and bodily allegiance to a European economic worldview requires" (11).

⁸Hesse does note that the characters do not always think this way themselves, so that Christine's mother is especially happy later on in the book when at the sight of the Pembina mountains, reminiscent of those of her own Quebec childhood, "life now presents itself to her as a cycle rather than a road ahead of her" (50).

⁹Or, for some commentators, totalizing, especially in terms of urban driving. Lefebvre, for instance, contends that the twentieth-century motorist operates within a total space wherein he or she "is concerned only with steering himself to his destination, and in looking about sees only what he needs to see for that purpose" (313).

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