

The Problem of Language and the Difficulty of Writing in the Literary Works of Gabrielle Roy

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Born in 1909 in Saint-Boniface, Manitoba, Gabrielle Roy is a major figure in the history of Canadian literature. Her prominent role in the development of Canadian literature was established with the publication, in 1945, of her first socio-realist, urban novel, *Bonheur d'occasion*, a novel that earned her the Governor General's Award. She was also awarded medals by the Académie Française and the Académie Canadienne Française, as well as the much coveted Prix Femina. In spite of the numerous prizes and awards that she received for the literary merits of her works, Roy's preoccupation with the problem of language and with the difficulty of writing did not cease until her death in 1983. Today, six years after her death, the task falls to us, her readers, to examine her relentless struggle with her medium.

Critical analyses of Roy's work number over a thousand. However, most of these analyses have overlooked the degree to which her works explore representational codes. Most of her critics (Jacques Allard, Gérard Bessette, Marc Gagné, John Murphy, and Hugo McPherson, to mention only a few) have focused their interest on the thematic concerns of her works. Consequently, her modes of representation, that is, the ways in which her works produce meaning, remain largely unexplored. The present paper begins to fill this void by examining one of the major facets of her creative artistry: her recurrent preoccupation and relentless struggle with the problem of writing.

In her autobiographical short stories in *Rue Deschambault*, and in two of her novels, *La Petite Poule d'Eau* and *Ces enfants de ma vie*, she explores the difficult task of writing, through the use of metaphors. Frequently, the problem of writing is associated either with a writing lesson or with the difficulty of learning the letters of the alphabet. In *La Petite Poule d'Eau*,¹ for instance, we find Edmond's well-written letter to his friend (128-30), as well as references to Luzina's letter to the Depart-

¹ (Montréal: Beauchemin, 1950). Hereafter *PPE*.

ment of Education (65-66), little Claire-Armelle's extremely careful and childishly accurate handwriting (163-64), and Josephine's careful and well-formed handwriting (161-62). In all these cases, the difficulties of composition and of transposition are relegated to a secondary importance. For example:

Joséphine s'exprimait aussi bien que dans les livres. Sa calligraphie droite et méticuleuse donnait du poids, selon Luzina, aux sentiments déjà si bien tournés. Le sommet du difficile pour elle, c'étaient des mots savants tracés d'une main sûre en caractère bien moulés. . . . Elle le contemplait aussi dans les lettres d'Edmond, mais moins éclatant; Edmond n'avait pas une belle écriture. (*PPE* 161-62)

Again for little Demetrioff in *Ces enfants de ma vie*,² a Russian boy whose father is amazed at his discovery of letters and who is able to reproduce the whole alphabet—small letters and capitals without a single mistake in their order—the difficulty of writing is limited to the mere problem of handwriting and reproduction of characters. In this novel, letter writing becomes a metaphor for creative writing. Luzina's destiny to write until the end of her days represents, metaphorically, the fate of the author:

Elle aimait naturellement écrire des lettres. D'écrire [sic] au gouvernement ne l'avait pas trop embarrassée. . . . Les réponses du gouvernement, dactylographiées et en anglais, ne l'avaient pas énormément troublée. C'était la lettre de la maîtresse, d'une belle calligraphie absolument droite et sans ratures qui, lui révélant la perfection que pouvait atteindre une lettre dans la forme et dans le fond, accablait Luzina. Désormais elle ne serait plus tout à fait heureuse en écrivant. Mais le sort en était jeté. . . . Sa destinée serait maintenant d'écrire. D'écrire sans fin. D'écrire jusqu'au bout de ses jours. (*CEV* 65-66)

The short story "La Voix des étangs" in *Rue Deschambault*³ is devoted entirely to the act of writing. It focuses on the specific moment in the life of the narrator-heroine, Christine, when she discovers her vocation and decides to become a writer:

² (Montréal: Beauchemin, 1972) 79-83, 86-88. Hereafter *CEV*

³ (Montréal: Beauchemin, 1971). Hereafter *RD*.

J'ai vu alors, non pas ce que je deviendrais plus tard, mais ce qu'il me fallait mettre en route pour le devenir. . . .

Ainsi, j'ai eu l'idée d'écrire. Quoi et pour-quoi, je n'en savais rien. J'écrirais. . . . Tout autour de moi étaient les livres de mon enfance, que j'avais ici même lus et relus dans un rayon dansant de poussière, tombé de la haute lucarne comme un trait du soleil. Et le bonheur que les livres m'avaient donné, je voulais le rendre. J'avais été l'enfant qui lit en cachette de tous, et à présent je voulais être moi-même ce livre chéri, cette vie des pages entre les mains d'un être anonyme, femme, enfant, compagnon que je retiendrais à moi quelques heures. Y a-t-il possession qui vaille celle-ci? Y a-t-il un silence plus amical, une entente plus parfaite?" (RD 244-45)⁴

In *Rue Deschambault*, Roy's preoccupation with language and writing is focused on the difficult condition of the writer rather than on language's inadequacy as a general signifying system. The issues of content and code are relegated to a subordinate and a secondary position. Eveline, Christine's mother, who has sensitized her to the "power of images, the wonder of a thing revealed by the right word, and all the love that one simple and beautiful sentence may contain" (RD 246), tries to dissuade Christine from becoming a writer.⁵ Aware of the anguish inherent in the writing process, she reminds the protagonist of how taxing and lonely a writer's life can be:

"—Ecrire, me dit-elle tristement, c'est dur. Ce doit être ce qu'il y a de plus exigeant au monde . . . pour que ce soit vrai, tu comprends! . . .

"—D'abord, il faut le don; si l'on ne l'a pas, c'est un crève-cœur; mais, si on l'a, c'est peut-être également terrible. . . . Ce don, c'est un peu comme une malchance qui éloigne les autres, qui nous sépare de presque tous. . . .

⁴ "The desire to establish a sense of communication between the author and the reader, an anonymous person whose existence and approval Gabrielle Roy found she had to visualize in order to write, as well as a readiness, and openness for experience," are essential for the vocation of a writer, according to Marc Gagné, "Jeux du romancier et des lecteurs," *Visages de Gabrielle Roy* (Montréal: Beauchemin, 1973) 263-72. Also, see Donald Cameron, *Conversation With Canadian Novelists 2* (Toronto: MacMillan, 1973) 139.

⁵ Roy underlines the instrumental role of her mother in her own decision to become a writer: see Alice Parizeau, "Gabrielle Roy, la grande romancière canadienne," *Châteline* avril 1966: 118. Roy says: "What would I be without the memory of my mother? If she had not been as she was, would I have been capable of transcending facts? I doubt it." Roy's youthful aspiration to become a writer or an artist, though transfigured, is echoed throughout "La Voix des étangs" and also "Gagner ma vie" (281-84), the final selection of *Rue Deschambault*.

"—Ecrire, . . . est-ce que ce n'est pas en définitive être loin des autres . . . être toute seule pauvre enfant!" (RD 246)

In *La Route d'Altamont*,⁶ Eveline tries to further discourage her daughter from breaking off family ties by leaving for Europe. She tells Christine that all a writer really needs is a scribbler, a room, and herself:

"D'abord, si tu veux écrire tu n'as pas besoin de courir au bout du monde. Notre petite ville est composée d'êtres humains. Ici comme ailleurs il y a à d'écrire la joie, les chagrins, les séparations. . .

"—Mais pour le voir, ne faut-il pas que je m'éloigne? . . .

"—Un écrivain n'a vraiment besoin que d'une chambre tranquille, de papier et de soi-même. . . .

"—Soi-même, tu le dis bien!

"—Et pour être toi-même, tu entends donc tout briser? . . .

"—Oserais-tu dire que pour découvrir il faut tout abandonner?" (RA 244-46)

In spite of the anticipated hardships, Christine accepts her fate and calling, and remains determined to pursue her goal of becoming a writer.⁷ While several of Roy's works are centred around the act of writing and reading, in *Rue Deschambault* she is preoccupied with the dual role of the narrator-heroine who tries to live ("tâche de vivre") and, at the same time, observes and judges ("regarde" et "juge"). In most of Roy's autobiographical works, as in the case of Christine, a certain "doubling of the self" accompanies the narrative act. The persona plays a double role in her own tale: she is both actor and narrator. It is precisely this "doubling" of the narratorial voice that is the main subject of Roy's short story "Le Déménagement" in *La Route d'Altamont*. For Roy, the difficult act of writing entails a deep inner conflict, a tragic division within the self. "Ecrire," as Christine's mother underlines: "N'est-ce pas se partager en deux, pour ainsi dire: un qui tâche de vivre, l'autre qui regarde,

⁶ (Montréal: Edition H.M.H., 1966). Hereafter RA.

⁷ Roy insists repeatedly on the concept of the artist's vocation. The artist is given a "command" or "summons" which he or she must obey. This insistent calling is evident not only in "La voix des étangs" of *Rue Deschambault* (243-47), but also in *La Route d'Altamont* (237-41) and in *La Montagne secrète* (Montréal: Beauchemin, 1974) 77, 111, 164. Hereafter MS. Roy underlined this urgent need to share and to communicate in her interview with Alice Parizeau: "Ecrire, c'est un besoin, c'est presque physique. On ne peut éviter de prendre la plume. De toucher à la page blanche qui est là étendue. Toute prête à recevoir. . . . Et on écrit justement parce qu'on veut donner. Parce qu'on veut partager avec les autres. Parce qu'on a ressenti, ou compris, la vérité de certains êtres et qu'on doit la dire." *Châtelaine* avril 1966: 137.

qui juge?" (RA 246). Indeed, in both *Rue Deschambault* and in *La Route d'Altamont*, Christine, like her creator, is torn between life and art, between living and writing. Art requires a certain aesthetic distancing from life; the exploration and recreation of reality through verbal images becomes, for Christine, an exhausting mental activity:

"Que je me souviens bien de cette année de ma vie, peut-être où j'ai vécu tout près des gens et des choses, non pas encore un peu retirée d'elle, comme il arrive malgré tout lorsqu'on s'adonne à la vouloir exprimer. . . . Je fus quelque temps encore à l'aise dans la vie. . . non pas un peu de côté. Et puis, après, rarement ai-je pu y revenir tout à fait, voir encore les choses et les êtres autrement qu'à travers les mots, lorsque j'eus appris à m'en servir comme des ponts fragiles pour l'exploration . . . et il est vrai, parfois aussi, pour la communication. Je suis devenue peu à peu une sorte de guetteuse des pensées et des êtres et cette passion pourtant sincère use l'insouciance qu'il faut pour vivre. . . . Maintenant, dès qu'elles me viennent, je m'imagine qu'elles sont un peu pour les autres, je les fouille, les travaille. Ainsi me sont-elles devenues une fatigue." (RA 238-39)

The difficulty of writing and the dissatisfaction with a common representational linguistic code are further explored by Roy in her "existentialist novel," *Alexandre Chenevert*.⁸ Experiencing a unique sense of peace at Lac Vert in the Laurentians, Alexandre considers it his duty to share his self-discoveries and his newly-found happiness.⁹ He decides to translate his thoughts into words by writing a letter to the press. Like a prisoner, he sits with his back to the lake, facing the wall: "comme un homme emprisonné" (251). In a desperate effort to "capture" his thoughts, and to convert them into words, Alexandre discovers the restricting and imprisoning nature of his medium. In his attempt to commit his thoughts to writing, he is confronted with the inescapable problem of self-expression:

Que dire des livres qu'il avait apportés et dont l'auteur, peut-être en poussière, continuait à charmer les longues soirées d'Alexandre. De

⁸ (Saint-Lambert, PQ: Collection "Québec dix sur dix," Editions internationales Alain Stanké, 1979). Hereafter AC.

⁹ Roy defines the duty of a writer as an act of self-discovery and of self-expression: "The duty of a writer is to write. His books speak for him." Alice Parizeau, "La Grande dame de la littérature québécoise," *La Presse* 23 juin 1967: 20.

l'encre, une plume, du papier, et lui aussi allait confier ses impressions!

Car tel était le projet qui avait soulevé son âme: s'acquitter envers les autres; leur donner ce qu'il avait de mieux à donner. . . .

Du lac Vert, il ferait entendre sa voix. Il écrirait. . . . Il dirait comment la paix vient, ensuite l'espoir. . . . Ce serait, comment dire très beau, émouvant et absolument sincère.

Tout cela n'était encore que dans le coeur d'Alexandre.

Sur la page blanche, il n'y avait rien. . . .

Rien ne lui venait. C'est-à-dire rien que des bouts de phrases qui avaient l'air de lui arriver en droite ligne de son journal à cinq cents, des slogans répandus dans les tramways. C'était loin de ce qu'il attendait de lui-même, ces banalités, comme par exemple: "Le silence répare les nerfs. . . . Nos tracas disparaissent d'eux-mêmes face à notre mère la nature. . . . Allez au fond des bois si vous voulez guérir. . . ." Il se faisait l'effet d'écrire dans le ton des messages publicitaires, et il était le premier à sentir que cela ne touche personne. . . . N'importe, il enfreindrait toutes les interdictions s'il le fallait, pour tirer de lui-même le meilleur. . . .

Il ne lui manquait que les mots. Et comment se faisait-il qu'une émotion aussi profonde, aussi sincère, n'appelât point les moyens qui l'eussent rendue communicable? . . . Les efforts de trois longues soirées lui avaient du moins appris la célérité avec laquelle il faut capter les pensées qui méritent d'être retenues.

Il trempa sa plume. Se penchant sur la feuille de papier, il tremblait de crainte autant que de détermination. (AC 250-53)

In *Alexandre Chenevert*, as in *La Montagne secrète*, the metaphors of capture and of imprisonment become intimately associated with the act of writing. In fact, Alexandre's most anguishing struggle is not his struggle with time, space, or existence, but rather his struggle with language.¹⁰ His difficulty with writing and his frustration with expressing himself are most effectively conveyed through the abrupt sentence structure of chapter fifteen. His failure to capture his thoughts, as well as his inability to transform them into language, forces Alexandre to

¹⁰ According to Gabrielle Roy, the artist is a pursued hunter: "L'artiste est un chasseur pourchassé. Un chasseur qui tente d'arracher le plus grand nombre possible d'êtres au temps qui passe. Il est de plus pourchassé par Dieu, le Créateur dont il doit immortaliser la création, et par le temps. En ce sens, l'artiste est un collaborateur. Mais il est aussi protestataire. Contre l'immense douleur du monde pour laquelle il a tendance à demander des comptes. . ." See Gagné 216.

have recourse to the syntagmatic dimension of language; that is, to the use of prescribed linguistic formulae. His creative attempt degenerates into a long list of formulaic verbiage. After writing the opening salutation of his letter, Alexandre is incapable of producing the desperately sought "beautiful phrases." His mind is flooded with stereotyped financial jargon:

Il écrivait: "Nous avons le plaisir de vous remettre inclus extrait de votre compte courant arrêté au 1er novembre et présentant en votre faveur un solde de \$100.25 (cent dollars et vingt cinq cents) dont nous vous créditons à nouveau." (AC 254)

In Alexandre's tragic struggle and failure, Roy expresses a deep dissatisfaction with language as a means of communication and of exploration. She challenges language's role as an adequate signifying system. Indeed, the metaphorical function of these stereotyped phrases or *paroles*, as Saussure would call them—billboards, names, announcements on loudspeakers, newspaper headlines, and various labels and messages that pollute the urban atmosphere—is to de-familiarize a reality that had been previously taken for granted by the reader. It is this process of estrangement, of *Verfremdung*, as Brecht would call it, of making the familiar seem strange, that distinguishes *Alexandre Chenevert* from Roy's other works. In this existentialist novel, objects and slogans are removed from the "automatism of perception" and of cognition. They are, thus, de-familiarized. Through a kind of *mise en scène*, they are distanced from the reader. The accent having been placed on the act of "looking" or "seeing," rather than on "knowing," it is the signifier rather than the signified that assumes primary importance. Language, for Alexandre, no longer remains a transparent, self-effacing instrument whose exclusive function is to represent what is "real." It becomes a tool for the exploration of reality.¹¹ As a result, the manner and the problem of representation become more important than the actual substance of representation.

Traces of such foregrounding can be found throughout the novel. Indeed, the critical deciphering of these stereotyped messages becomes the obsession of Alexandre. The examina-

¹¹ For Roy, art is a secret collaboration with God. This principle is derived from the notion that art is a form of "creation," rather than a mere objective reproduction of external reality. For Gabrielle Roy, imitation is the most primitive step in the creative process. "An authentic work of art must transcend objective reality." See Gabrielle Roy, "L'Arbre," *Cahiers de l'Académie canadienne française* 13 (Versions: Montréal, 1970): 19. Paraphrasing Matthew Arnold's definition of art in an interview with Gagné, Roy insists on the necessity of aesthetic distancing and says: "S'il veut réellement faire oeuvre d'art, l'artiste doit s'éloigner de sa source première d'inspiration et ne la retrouver que plus tard, dans le calme" (Gagné 183). See also *MS* 169.

tion of the linguistic medium becomes his main concern, right from the reading of the morning newspaper:

"'Indivisible, indivisible'," se mit à répéter Alexandre. Il scanda, détacha, compta les *syllabes* du mot. Cinq syllabes . . . Mais comment s'épelait Hyderabad? Deux *r* ou un seul *r* ?" (AC 11)

Alexandre is equally bombarded by the media. As the frequent repetition of the phrase "Alexandre had read that"¹² indicates, Roy's tragic protagonist relies almost totally on the printed word. Fully aware of his dependence on words, he has no alternative but to consider himself trapped. "Il rejeta tout ce qui est écrit, expliqué, répété, puis il y revint en esclave chercher un soutien" (AC 23). With this discovery, Alexandre's confidence in the written signifier is shaken. Words become for him "fragile bridges" (RA 223), unreliable signifiers.

The correspondence between signifier and signified breaks down totally as Alexandre considers the name of one of his clients, Auguste Charlemagne: "Signez, dit-il à un personnage bref qui se nommait—les pauvres hommes lui parurent loin d'avoir des noms leur convenant—monsieur Auguste Charlemagne" (AC 80). In contrast to this, rather than being an instrument of reflection, his everyday speech simply remains a habitual mode of action. His routine conversations with his clients at the savings bank are strictly instrumental. They are composed of simple, stereotyped formulae. His use of language to establish contact becomes devoid of content. Its emphasis is no longer on the transmission of ideas, but rather on the establishment and maintenance of contact. In Alexandre's conversation with M. Fontaine, for example, the content of his phrases of politeness and of his inquiries about the weather and health assumes a secondary importance. His conventional discourse, a mere exchange of words, is devoid of all creativity and expressivity. It serves a purely ritual function:

—"Quel ciel! quelle couleur!" s'exclama Alexandre dont le coeur battait toujours assez fort dès qu'il s'obligeait par bienséance à adresser quelques mots à son directeur. (AC 292)

Alexandre's linguistic preoccupation assumes a number of different forms as the novel progresses. It focuses on labels, on aspirin bottles, on cookie jars, on mundane objects, on bill-

¹² AC 15, 17, 20, 23, 27, 66, 70.

boards, slogans,¹³ newspaper headlines, and various other verbal messages, all graphically embossed on the printed page through the use of italics, capital letters, irregular spacing, and even through the juxtaposition of two linguistic systems—French and English. Through an act of foregrounding, these linguistic signs become de-automatized and de-familiarized. Thus, they assert their own presence, their own identity. The multitude of these capitalized linguistic commands and directives, "BUVEZ PEPSI-COLA . . . , LISEZ L'AVENIR DU PAYS. IL DIT LA VERITE" (270), attracts the attention of the reader. In a way, they represent a form of linguistic domination, for the majority of these messages are in the imperative. "ALLEZ-VOUS LAISSER LES ENFANTS GRECS MOURIR DE FAIM?" . . . Donne, entendait, lisait Alexandre: du sang à la Croix Rouge . . . ton obole au *Catholic Welfare* . . . tout au moins de vieux vêtements . . . *Give generously* . . ." (AC 273-74) or

DONNONS AU TRAVAIL
TOUTE L'ENERGIE DE NOS BRAS
APPLIQUONS NOTRE VOLONTE
A SUIVRE LE CHEMIN
QUE NOUS MONTRE LA RELIGION.
PUISONS NOTRE FORCE
DANS L'ESPRIT DE SACRIFICE
ET D'ECONOMIE
LA PROSPERITE ET LE BONHEUR
RECOMPENSERONT NOS EFFORTS. (AC 39)

Most of these verbal messages are characterized by a predominantly connotative function. Language is, primarily, intended here to act on its recipient. In fact, several of these messages are either linguistic hybrids or completely foreign to the text proper: "*Player's Mild, les plus douces au Canada*" (AC 263) or

SILENCE
HOPITAL
HOSPITAL ZONE. (AC 112)

Through the use of these linguistic hybrids, as well as through the insertion of a number of uniquely English messages, Roy dramatizes the cultural alienation of her protagonist.¹⁴

¹³ Especially the slogans of M. Fontaine in chapter VII. For example: "Play hard . . . work hard . . . était un de ses slogans. Il en avait plusieurs: Ne perdez pas une minute de temps, et le temps vous appartiendra; maintenez-vous en bonne santé, et la vie vous paraîtra digne d'être vécue" (AC 90).

¹⁴ As Francis Ambrière underlines (in "Gabrielle Roy, écrivain canadien," *La Revue de*

The problem and the validity of linguistic communication are equally explicit in Alexandre's conversations with his friend, Godias. Alexandre's reliance on verbal sources, rather than on the dictates of his own personal experience, implies a certain confidence in secondary sources. This confidence is undermined by the reaction of his friend who refuses to accept the reign of the printed word: "Va pas croire tout ce que tu lis Pauvre toi, comment est-ce que tu sais ce qu'il y a de vrai là-dedans?" (AC 293).

The struggle with words and the difficulty of expression and communication are further explored in Roy's short story "Un jardin au bout du monde." In this short tale written in the third person, two Ukrainian immigrants, Stépan and Martha Yaramko, no longer rely on a linguistic sign system for communication, for they have become aware of their inability to utilize it. Their linguistic interactions, which are quite rudimentary, are reduced to gestures and exclamations. For example: "Il espérait que tout se passerait sans qu'il eût à ouvrir la bouche. Car que dire? Et surtout comment la nommer, elle?" or

Il serait temps sans doute de parler. Là était le plus difficile. Tout le reste n'était rien auprès de cet effort. C'est qu'une fois abandonné, il devient presque impossible de le reprendre. [. . .] Et où faudrait-il recommencer? Là où le langage entre eux s'était interrompu; ou bien n'importe où, à propos de n'importe quoi, du temps qu'il faisait par exemple?¹⁵

Martha shares the linguistic problem of her husband. Although she tries to learn English from an Eaton's catalogue, her efforts prove to be unsuccessful, for the catalogue does not provide her with adequate tools for the expression of her feelings: "Comment font donc les sentiments que l'on n'exprime jamais, qui vivent repliés dans les plus lointaines retraites de l'âme, que l'on ne nomme même pas, comment font-ils pour ne pas tout à fait mourir?" (167).

Like monsieur Emile, in "La Gatte de monsieur Emile" in *Cet été qui chantait*,¹⁶ a character who forges his own linguistic signifier, and who is "un homme porté à se créer des expressions à son goût pour désigner des choses selon lui mal nommées, ou dont il ne connaissait pas la définition d'après le

Paris déc. 1947: 136), Roy "has a great natural horror of banalities. She seems to nourish a great dread of crowds."

¹⁵ (Montréal: Beauchemin, 1975) 208, 212-13.

¹⁶ (Montréal et Québec: Éditions française, 1973).

dictionnaire" (27), Martha finds creative self-expression in a nonverbal code: a flower garden. This garden becomes her way of transcending time, her nonverbal way of telling "her" story. It is the discovery of this garden in full bloom that inspires the narrator-writer of the short story "Un jardin au bout du monde" to question the value and even the purpose of the difficult act of writing:

Ecrire m'était une fatigue. Pourquoi inventer une autre histoire, et serait-elle plus proche de la réalité que ne le sont en eux-mêmes les faits? Qui croit encore aux histoires? Du reste toutes n'ont-elles pas été racontées? (155)

The same anguish and the same fatigue are experienced by Elsa, the protagonist of *La Rivière sans repos*, as she attempts to write a letter to Madame Beaulieu. Elsa finds the difficult task of writing both physically and mentally taxing:

Elle se sentait lasse d'écrire d'ailleurs. Jamais elle n'aurait cru que cet effort usait autant. Rien qu'à force de tenir son crayon serré entre ses doigts elle en avait des crampes. L'esprit aussi était étrangement fatigué. Suivre ses pensées comme on suit la course des nuages, ou encore, indéfiniment, le fil de l'eau, était une chose; courir après, les traquer, les enfermer en des mots, en était une autre. Au beau milieu d'une phrase, elle s'arrêta, ne sachant plus comment s'en tirer, puis termina sans plus, en se disant, maintenant et pour toujours, 'une amie' Elsa.¹⁷

As the above communication problems and writing difficulties indicate, in Gabrielle Roy's works, the dissatisfaction with the representational code and the consciousness of the problem of writing are omnipresent. As her characters discover the inadequacy of the linguistic signifier, their urgent need for and possibility of self-expression are constantly undermined. This problem is most prevalent in Alexandre's inability to compose a letter to the press, in his inability to communicate his thoughts, in Martha's inability to express her sentiments, in Elsa's failure to "track down" her thoughts and convert them into language. In fact, most of Roy's characters are unable to communicate their inner thoughts and feelings through writing. Speaking of Pierre Cadorai, the painter-protagonist of *La Montagne secrète*, Gabrielle Roy has said:

¹⁷ (Québec: Stanké, 1979) 222-23.

I think a writer dreams, as Pierre of *The Hidden Mountain* hoped, of putting all subjects, briefly, in one undertaking. Of course he never arrives there. That is why there are always writers and always artists. They are all chasing the one thing. Mauriac had a very beautiful expression: he said that he was always striving to write the one book that would dispense him from writing others. Fundamentally what we hope is to get it all down in one book, or in one picture, or in one song, but of course something is always left out. That is why we start again. (Cameron 144)

Discovering their inability to create, to communicate, to write, to "tell their story," most of these characters are ultimately reduced to silence.

In conclusion, we may say that the struggle with language, self-discovery, self-expression, and the problem of writing are at the very heart of the majority of Roy's characters. Like Christine's grandmother, who fabricates an old-fashioned doll from everyday household items, in "Ma grand-mère toute puissante" of *La Route d'Altamont*, a woman who, like God the Father, "sai[t] faire tout de rien" (28), Gabrielle Roy's characters ardently desire to communicate, to create, to tell their story. They want to be heard, to be recognized, to be loved, to become significant and immortal. It is through their relentless struggle with the linguistic medium, through their unceasing exploration of both the limitations and the creative power of language, that these characters, like their creator, will achieve a degree of immortality, a sustained form of personal identity.

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