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# *All Roads Pass Through Jubilee: Gabrielle Roy's La Route d'Altamont and Alice Munro's Lives of Girls and Women*

by PAULA RUTH GILBERT\*

IT IS POSTMODERNISTICALLY (not forgetting post-colonialistically and feministically) correct to be ambiguous, uncertain, decentered, ex-centric, dialogistic, unstable, intertextual, parodic—one could continue indefinitely. How to find the “truth” in all of this? There is no truth, we are told, so one should be content with multiplicity, plurality, diversity, and alterity—we are now back to the beginning—no, there is neither a single origin nor a certain finality.

So what is one to do when analyzing two texts, one Québécois and one Canadian? Placing each one in its own characteristic box is simplistic at best. “Pushing” comparisons is equally problematic. It is undoubtedly preferable to speak of “cross-overs” and “hybrids” (Smart, Irvine, and Lewis), especially if, as Sherrill Grace points out, Canada (add Québec) is the perfect dialogistic space for such studies (131). So one rereads Roy's *La Route d'Altamont* and Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women*, initially seeing two novels (collections of short stories?—ah! ambiguity) that *seem* so different (yes they are both first-person narratives about a young girl growing up, as seen by her adult narrative self—are they *Bildungsromans* or *Kunstlerromans*?) and yet with subsequent readings *seem* increasingly similar to the point that they can be read beautifully together. Modern? Postmodern? Post-colonial? Feminist? Well—characteristics of all of these *and* of their “pre” states. If as Lori Saint-Martin interestingly states, the privileged subject matter of Roy's semi-autobiographical texts is “the lives of girls and women” (319), then what we have is a fluid merging between two texts (how feminist), so different and yet so similar in their (re)discoveries of what Hirsch calls a “new psychic geography of feminist consciousness” (130): an interior/external time/space narrative construct that stresses what Munro calls “layer[s] of reality” (140), culminating in a power play between reality and fiction.

Since it is not important where one starts, one may as well begin with the still scant research on comparative Québec and Canadian literatures. As Philip Stratford points out in *All the Polarities*, two schools of thought have until recently dominated this field (3-4): Sutherland's, stressing the underlying likeness of the two literatures (23); Falardeau's (echoed by Giguère), speaking of horizontal English-Canadian literature—“la relation homme-milieu ou homme-

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société"—and vertical Québec literature—"la relation homme-destin ou homme-absolu" (58). Stratford, first writing of two parallel lines/literatures that never meet, eventually uses the symbol of the polarity, implying "not just connections and contrasts along one central axis, but multiple relationships" (9). In a later article, "No Clear Strait of Anian," however, he validates Falardeau's distinctions: Canadian use of a definite time and place, historical realism, action, and a reader identifying with the hero, related to a milieu and society; Québec's lack of a specific time and place, construction of a personal reality with less detail, symbolic characters who deal in a dreamlike fashion with ideas, destiny, and the absolute, and a reader who enters into the hero's mind (297, 303, 306).

In a 1984 article, "L'Espace de nos fictions," Patricia Smart proposes as an emblem of the two cultures Nicole Brossard's beautiful image of two women in contact but not fused, distinctly identifiable but with exchanges, in contiguous but not common space. She then suggests a comparative approach that focuses upon space—territories of the real, the imaginary, and language: English Canada, both colonizer and colonized, with its historical, realistic, open, social literature of nature and the landscape; Québec, the land of utopia and despair, with its closed and circular literature obsessed with language, national identity, and a quest for the self. Most significantly, Smart ends her piece with the belief that these two literatures are increasingly "crossing over," exhibiting one another's characteristics (29-35). Three years later Barbara Godard, in her "Mapmaking," distinguishes first between Canadian literary language as the transposition of reality and Québécois as a system of symbols that structure reality, but then she stresses both as a quest for rebirth and reintegration, a search for origins in a lost world of female power (feminism) through a revolt of marginal groups (post-colonialism) (13-14).

Of course there are differences between the two bodies of literature as between the two cultures of Canada and between two canon formations (with Québec's focus on discourse and discourse theory and Canada's emphasis on "value as a function of representation"—Lecker 14), but generalities are dangerous in literary analysis, and stark divisions can be simplistic. Of course there are similarities between the two literatures: after all they do more or less coexist in the same country (as of this writing) and are both part of the (post)modern scene. But seeing only likeness is an equally dangerous trap. What is significant is that both Québec and Canadian writers increasingly exhibit varying characteristics of both cultures, precisely as a result of a global literary environment, whether it is feminist, post-colonial, or postmodern.

The debates will surely continue, but how do Gabrielle Roy and Alice Munro fit into this ambiguous whole? By focusing on narrative structure, narrator, reader, act of writing, language, time/space, and reality and fiction, this paper will briefly show that both Munro and Roy are—to differing degrees—post-colonial writers. Roy, however, is triply colonized, since her status as a Franco-Manitoban provides her with no real country/space from which to speak (see *La Détresse et l'enchantement* and Socken). In several ways, *La Route d'Altamont* is more postmodern than *Lives of Girls and Women*, although similar textual

strategies are present in the two works. Perhaps even more interestingly, Roy's "place" as a Franco-Manitoban writer living in Québec seems to provide her with the freedom to "play" with the textual strategies of both English-Canadian and Québécois writings, exhibiting aspects of both literary cultures and making it fruitful to compare her works to those of an English-Canadian writer like Munro. Yes, Munro is a feminist writer (see especially Rasporich and Carrington), but so is Roy. Several critics in recent studies have noted this aspect of Roy's writings (Lewis, "Trois générations de femmes" and "Inscriptions of the Feminine"; Saint-Martin; Smart, *Ecrire dans la maison*; Shek; Kroetsch), but a thorough reading of *La Route d'Altamont* will show her as an even more radical feminist writer than previously believed—at the level of the text. A reading of Roy in light of a reading of Munro will also point to a writer more postmodern and post-colonial—or at least "pre-post"—than previously thought. The reading of two texts together deepens an understanding of both.

Much has been written about the overall narrative structure of both *La Route d'Altamont* and *Lives of Girls and Women*, and, if one reads these critiques carefully, one notes significant similarities. Despite the fact that on the surface they are so different—in many fewer words, the Royan text is poetically, simply, and beautifully composed, with almost naively stated but rich comments upon the passages of life and death; the Munro text is much more detailed and dense in description, overflowing with words, lists, satire, parody, and often photographic realism (examples of the characteristic distinctions of English-Canadian and Québec literatures, along with a francophone emptying out and an anglophone filling up)—critics ultimately use similar terms to characterize the two texts. Munro's work displays an "interrupted sequential form" with an "aesthetic of discontinuities" where opposites are alike and parallels are divergent (New 48, 50). The narrative structure exhibits patterns of organic interplay leading toward a resolution (Martin 47), with the juxtaposition of moments of recognition and understanding in this "episodic novel" (Rasporich 161), "open-form novel," or interlocking stories (Carrington 3). Roy's text has been described as a "linked story-sequence" where in a "series of lyric instants" the moment of epiphany in each story has the quality of a "frozen instant" (Williams 176, 178)—moments of recognition and understanding?

Such complexities of narrative are not immediately evident in either text: the Roy pieces appear to be simple, graceful stories (theatrical scenes, film vignettes, snapshots?) of the youth and young adulthood of the narrator; the Munro collection tells a good story (theater, film, photograph?) about a narrator, her family and friends. Yet upon further analysis, it becomes clear that both narrative structures hide additional stories—typical narrative strategies of women (Irvine 105; Howells 185-86), post-colonial (the new discourse at the interstices of the text—Ashcroft 186), and postmodern (narratives that propose rather than impose—Todorov 253) writers. Examples are frequent in the "simple" Royan text of complex narratives in which an adult narrator comments upon/assumes what she must have felt at a young age (21), remembers her young self listening to her mother recounting *her* youth and painting a picture of *her* young mother

(34-39). Which is the “real” story? As for Munro’s text, similar narrative complexities are hidden within the straightforward text (90-91).

If both the Munro and Roy texts suggest these postmodern and post-colonial (with feminist underpinnings) characteristics, an additional aspect of their works confirms such tendencies: open, tentative, questioning endings. The four Royan stories end with a “peut-être” followed by ellipses (57), one last question asked about “ce qui passe . . . ce qui reste . . .” (151-52), an exclamation in the form of a rhetorical question (186), and a final “peut-être” (255). At least three of Munro’s stories have similar open endings: the narrator’s question asked both to herself and to the reader (97); the repetition/litany of the name of the narrator’s former boyfriend, following her “supposing” to get started on her real life (201); a simple “yes” instead of “thank you” that leaves the reader in no position to know the narrator’s perspective or future and possibly undermines the seemingly careful construction of all that has preceded (211).

Textual and narrative references to a work of art (Roy’s dolls, knitting, photographs, canvas/tapestry and Munro’s Gothic novel, plays, operetta, photography, poetry, and film) emphasize both the narrator’s position within and external to the text and subsequent play between reality and fiction: “l’histoire varia, grandit et se compliqua à mesure que la conteuse prenait de l’âge et du recul,” says Maman to Christine about the family’s trip to Manitoba (214-15)—substitute Del’s story about her family and people in Jubilee and Christine’s story about growing up in the Canadian West. If a Munro text is “the natural process of how people edit the narratives of their family’s lives until what ‘really’ happened disappears under multiple versions of the reconstructed past” (Carrington “A Borderline Case” 460) and if, as Spivak believes, the Western, imperialistic, phallogocentric narrative presents a rationalist, all-knowing subject who desires to bring others (readers) into *his* world (19), then both Munro and Roy in their nonlinear, unstable, and multiple narratives must both be seen as postmodern, post-colonial, and feminist writers. Interestingly, with variation, uncertainty, and “fictional truth” as textual signposts, Roy fits these categories somewhat better than Munro.

Although only a few critics have dealt with the narrator’s position in Roy’s works (Belleau, Babby, and Crochet), the greater number of critical analyses of the narrator in Munro’s works not only provides a better understanding of her texts but also serves as a starting point for further study of the narrative position in Roy’s works. In *Lives of Girls and Women*, a “Portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl,” Del is in the process of understanding, arranging, and shaping things and people around her (Martin 73, 102, 204); her adult and child perspectives develop into a spiral (what Crochet has said about *Altamont*), as she tries to distinguish between the strange and the familiar (51, 10). With everything filtered through Del’s (and Christine’s) eyes, whereby the double narrator guides/manipulates the reader as she herself changes, one can apply this attempt to understand the strange and the familiar to Christine when one thinks about events such as the making of the doll, the visit to the lake, the house move, and the trip to the Altamont hills—ordinary events opened to a deeper and mysterious meaning.

To Carrington, the dual narrator's manipulation of the narrative point of view stems from her own split into a participant and watcher/observer (4-8). As a child, Del is at the center of the story as told by her adult narrator self, but like Christine she also remains on the periphery of the central adult world, trying to understand and thus to control it. As the narrator watches, secrets are revealed to her—and then to the reader—as a result of a sudden split in the surface, an event that exposes a deeper “reality” and threatens her control (38). Similarly, sudden events occur in the life of Christine (the doll, the lake, the move, the hills—again the foci of the four stories) and thus reveal the secrets of life and death as they inevitably threaten her control over the narrative. Del will ultimately search for verbal control by making a story out of the event (77-85). Christine will follow suit. For Carrington, Del will become the photographer, the observer, the writer of Jubilee, becoming the outsider in the town in order to control it in her text (93-94, 209-10). Christine, too, will become the observer/writer of and outsider to her town of Saint Boniface—especially in *Rue Deschambault*—while in *Altamont* she will gain control over her own childhood and the pasts of her mother and grandmother. Carrington sees Del as similarly desiring to control her mother in this “exorcistic journey into the past” (193), as she seeks to write and edit the lives of the people around her, along with her own, in a series of unsure recollections. Christine seeks to control her female text/past as she announces her uncertainty of memory. We are back once again to characteristics of feminism and two posts.

In both texts the reader is consistently reminded of at least two levels of narrative simultaneously occurring: the “present” (where is that present and who is exactly speaking from where?) narrator interjects her comments, questions, judgments, and philosophical musings into her text. Such narrative commentary and temporal signposts are far more prevalent in the Royan text. Through the constant use of question marks (rhetorical questions asked to the reader or to herself), parentheses, dashes, quotation marks, and ellipses, the Royan narrator alerts the reader that the narrative is based upon memory. We are often certain neither of who is speaking in the narrative nor of the time from which that person is recounting. The Royan narrator uses confusing temporal signposts such as “aujourd’hui” (45) so that the reader is unsure if the words refer to some present time of the adult narrator or that of her mother, Eveline, retelling the past life of her own mother, Mémère. In a narrative that relates a “va-et-vient” in time and among female generations, the text itself mirrors that temporal oscillation and the separation/fusing of female narrators.

Narrative interventions and temporal confusion are also evident in the Munro text, although neither as frequent nor as apparent. We see the same use of devices such as parentheses, rhetorical questioning, and ellipses, with a preference for italics and repetition. Philosophical comments are also present but not frequent. Temporal markers are at times quite explicit—we know what grade Del is in at a given time—but at other times, temporal confusion is apparent: “later on”; “at present” (6); “then” (38); “last week” (42). It is as though the past is really the present, and the narrative being reconstructed from some present time gathers the

force of both its own present time and the past. Both Munro and Roy are destabilizing the narrative and playing a game with the reader.

In both texts the adult female narrator/future writer comments upon and judges (sometimes in a mocking way) her former self because she is the one selecting the events, stories, words, observations, varying the text as she wishes, proving that she is in verbal control of the situation—albeit in fiction. The text of *Lives of Girls and Women* frequently reflects such a preoccupation with a desire for narrative control. Every recounting within the larger story is filtered through the eyes of Del. Within the narrative itself, it is Del who guides her mother in their conversations and chooses what “might” happen if certain events occur in her relationship with Mr. Chamberlain. With Garnet French she admits that they both rearranged one another, each taking from the other what aspects they chose to love (183)—just as a narrator does with her tale. Del wants and needs to control the/her story: her first sexual encounter with Mr. Chamberlain remains untold (except in this text) so that it would not be reenacted, and no other version would be told (133-34). At other times, she needs to tell her story (in addition to this text) in order to remain in control of it: not telling Naomi until much later about Mr. Chamberlain’s masturbation in front of her prevents her from knowing what to do with it (144).

Del is admitting her uncertainty of control over her own narrative, threatened in the “Epilogue.” Here Del states that as a writer of her own novel, she changed facts, characters, and place and then “doomed them to fiction” (203); she changed Jubilee, “or picked out some features of it and ignored others” (205). The ending of her text clearly undermines all of these now unreliable structures (209) that she has so cleverly and carefully constructed.

For Christine, too, the certainty of recollection is at issue as she admits that she has been selecting certain aspects of the past, thus retaining control over the story and that past. She is, however, much more honest about not being sure of those memories. If Del uses the word “perhaps” only once in her narrative, leaving the reader uncertain only at the very end of the tale, Christine announces throughout the text the uncertainty of her recollections with her use of “peut-être,” “je pense,” “je crois,” “j’imagine,” “je suppose,” “il me semble.”

If, as Edward Said aptly states, in contemporary writing “to write a novel or a story . . . is a desire to *tell* a story much more than it is one for telling a *story*” (132), then both texts in question, with their focus on storytelling, language, the power of words, oral/written tales, and the recreation of the mother/female text can be seen as at least partially postmodern. Lewis has interpreted *La Route d’Altamont* as “une certaine reproduction du maternage”: “(re)créer ou (re)mettre au monde la grand-mère et la mère tout en leur donnant une voix, un langage de femme . . . par le moyen de la fiction, de son texte littéraire de fille” (“Trois générations” 172, 174). Bourbonnais has subsequently written of the Royan denial of the body, transferred to the power of creation (99-100, 107), while Saint-Martin states that the daughter’s story is the mother’s story, the story of writing (319, 304). Rasporich’s feminist reading of the Munro text sees Del’s mother as a powerful female goddess with whom the narrator tries to connect in

her quest of the body/language of woman as subject (46, 189-92). For Carrington, Del relies upon her power to control a situation through her ability to manipulate language, and, when she abandons that verbal control to the physical—as with Garnet French—her power is temporarily lost, regained only upon leaving him and ultimately Jubilee, a move from the regional to a more aesthetic level of language (20-23, 26, 30, 85-89). Ironically, Christine, like Del, leaves her town in search of herself as a female writer, but never having abandoned the verbal for the physical/the body, she can be seen as more successful in her attempts to reproduce the maternal female other and self.

An essential characteristic of this feminist, postmodern, and post-colonial recreation of female self and maternal other is the construction of time and space: “another time of *writing* . . . able to inscribe the ambivalent . . . intersections of time and place that constitute the problematic ‘modern’ experience of the western nation” (Bhabha 293; see also Holquist 37; Hutcheon *Poetics* 4, 39; Aschcroft 9-11; Huggan 133-34). Rasporich’s reading of *Lives* sees this text as exhibiting circular time, similar to the amorphous boundaries of a time-lapse camera, as a “maternal mythscape,” and a map of one’s state of mind (175-79, 122, 124-26, 141). Indeed, even with specific time indicators throughout the text (a camouflage?), Munro’s novel/collection ultimately breaks out of any sense of real time and into a new space, much as Miss Farris breaks out of her imprisoning time to commit her “real” act of drowning (118). This revised and recreated space is a borderline place, neither country nor city (like the Flats Road), stressing the narrator’s place both inside and outside the center, blurring boundaries (like the map of the cow’s hide), changing seats like those at school with the change of seasons, and finally being vacated as Del ventures forth without a map (like Benny in Toronto), only to return in order to make her town real with words (as her mother had once done and her uncle could not do), to annihilate and then to transform it into another layer of reality (or fiction?), dependent, as ever, upon the perspective of the teller—who, when, and from where.

*La Route d'Altamont* has been seen as the unrolling of time turned into space, “a timeless instant of sculptured stasis” (Williams 177-78); as a rebirthing of the female text in its encounter outside of time (Lewis, “Trois générations” 172-73); as intertextuality with Irigaray in a *va-et-vient* of one person through the memory of another (Saint-Martin 307-08). Indeed the narrative overflows with a blending of time and space, shifting boundaries of past and present, persistent and strange “jeux de la rencontre” outside of time, and borderline places where a daughter is situated in between two centers—she who gave birth and she to whom one has given birth—borderline spaces where frontiers are pushed and eventually crossed, until a final departure is imminent (into death? into a country of fiction?). If, as Christine believes, departures are both exhilarating and frightening, transforming the traveler’s perspective on the world and the past, the narrator/daughter needs signposts or maps in order to find her way through past time and future space—maps that can counter the permeability of boundaries. But like the road to Altamont—not on any map—there are “routes que l’on perd absolument” (Roy 208), countries that exist “seulement au bout de la confiance”



(223): "Comment en être sûre? Au vrai, cette route d'Altamont, elle était comme un songe" (248).

This road to Altamont, to Jubilee, to the past and the future, as told from some place in the present, is a feminist, and "post" narrative time/space construct that leads away from one's regional (post-colonial) and personal (feminist) space in which the narrator was both insider and outsider. For Del, all roads must pass through Jubilee: she must leave her past and that of her mother, family, and town in order to travel to a larger space of growth, only to return to her origins in Jubilee and transpose them into fiction. For Christine, the itinerary is more complicated: she must leave St. Boniface and Altamont in order to travel to a wider collective and familial past first in France and then in Québec, only to return to her origins as a Franco-Manitoban and rely upon her remembrance of a newly born space of reality to be transformed into fiction. Which one is "real"?

Many recent critical and theoretical observations on the trickster, the carnival, magic realism, and the blurring of boundaries between fiction and reality as mainstays of postmodern fiction can be applied to the two texts in question, especially to the central issue of the varying, changing, unstable narrative—dependent upon who is speaking/writing/controlling the text, in what kind of language, from where, and to whom—whether it is "real" or created as fiction. Roy's narrator admits more openly this boundary shifting and insecure recollection of the past both in her narrative commentaries and interjections and at the end with her reproduction of the female/maternal text as told from memory. The text, therefore, is more postmodern. Munro's narrator is not as "honest" in her narrative insertions, but she plays more with the reader with her insertions of fantasy, novelistic attempts, and admitted versions of reality. In another sense, *Lives of Girls and Women* is more overtly postmodern—it is clear from the beginning that it is a text about writing and "layers of reality"—while *La Route d'Altamont* is more "covertly" postmodern, since the reader does not know until the end that it is a narrative about the writing of a text.

Given Roy's fictional creators as storytellers, magicians, liars, Scheherezade, imposters, and the like, it is not surprising that *La Route d'Altamont* often revolves around a play between fiction and reality: making a cloth doll; showing a photographic album; games of encounter among generations outside of time; ordinary events transformed into magical and mysterious happenings; scenes that read like film vignettes; a town that seems unreal, "inconsistante et pâle comme une ville de cinéma . . . les maisons . . . de carton-pâté. . ." (234); hills that in retrospect become imperfect photographs.

Confirming critical observations of Munro's fiction as fascinated with the strange and the familiar, magic realism, a reconciliation of opposites, game imagery, paradoxes and parallels, and the borders between life and art, replete with mock mothers, carnivals, dolls, circuses, jokes, clowns, and puppets (see especially Irvine, Williams, Howells, Carrington, Martin, and Redekop), *Lives of Girls and Women* clearly displays a love for fiction of all sorts. Characters, with Del in the lead and filtering everything through her active lens, often act as though in a play or film: ritualistic and fantasmagoric with Mr. Chamberlain;

satiric with Jerry; “dull, simple, amazing and unfathomable—deep caves paved with kitchen linoleum” for the people of Jubilee (210). The rehearsing and performing of *The Pied Piper of Hamelin*, the operetta staged at Del’s school, pits fiction/passion against reality/geography/history until real time is destroyed. This play/fiction becomes essential as the students give devotion to “the manufacture of what was not true, but more important, once belief had been granted to it, than anything else we had” (110). Like the later pictures of people in Jubilee transformed into her novel, the play is fiction but seemed true to Del, “not real but true” (206). It is this last snapshot that remains true, thus altering all the others—the one that Del will ultimately write, attempting to fix in place her uncertain text.

This issue of narrative control lies at the heart of both works, causing both Del and Christine to want to turn reality into fiction and then to hedge, admitting that it is unstable. The key scene in *Lives* that illustrates this point occurs during Garnet’s violent attempt at baptizing Del in the river. Admitting that she could have played this game as a joke—after having given him his powers (as a good controlling narrator would do) and having preferred to keep him as magical—Del now realizes that she must fight against being buried alive, by working her way up through “layers of incredulity,” until she reaches reality (197-98). But where and what is that reality? She still continues to recall and retell her narrative, but like Christine in the hills of Altamont, wanting to control her mother and bring her back to her in the “present,” Del may have to lose all “real” control in the end—it’s all a game, fiction, anyway.

Since Del admits that she had changed Jubilee, had chosen (like Christine) certain features of it to recall, the town only *seemed* true, not real, as if she had discovered, rather than had made up, her story. Her novel has thus lost authority (and with it her authority over the text), since it was based upon an unreliable structure, upon a “few poor facts, and everything that was not told” (208). She had attempted to turn reality into fiction and to control that tale, but it “is a shock, when you have dealt so cunningly, powerfully, with reality, to come back and find it still there” (209). She meets the “reality” of Bobby Sherriff, and all her fictional structures and prior stories are placed in doubt. Like Christine, Del will leave her town, only to return to write yet another story about this past. “Reality” will persist in showing its “niggling considerations of fact” (206), since all autobiographical roads ultimately must pass through one’s past—through St. Boniface, through Altamont, through Jubilee. In the end, whether it is reality or fiction, like *The Pied Piper*, nothing is “true” unless one believes in it. To the feminist, postmodern, post-colonial reader to decide.

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