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The Rapport between Matrilineal Ties and Writing's Redemptive Power In Gabrielle Roy's Autobiography

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J'écris parce qu'ils ont laissé en moi leur marque indélébile et que la trace en est l'écriture [. . .]

Georges Perec

My considerations focus on the two texts that make up Gabrielle Roy's autobiography, namely *La détresse et l'enchantement* and *Le temps qui m'a manqué*. These texts, dealing with her life to 1939, were published in 1984 as *La détresse et l'enchantement*. In addition to this completed and revised manuscript, Roy left an unfinished manuscript that constitutes the beginnings of part three and concerns the years 1939-43. This manuscript was published in 1997 as *Le temps qui m'a manqué*. My study examines the relation between two preoccupations that lie at the heart of the autobiography: the redemptive power of writing and the mother/daughter relationship. We will see why these issues were so closely intertwined and why they were both a blessing and a curse in Roy's life.

Matrilineal ties are central to most of Roy's writing from her first novel, *Bonheur d'occasion*, dedicated to her mother Mélina, to *Le temps qui m'a manqué*, her last manuscript that centers around the mother's death in 1943. Critical studies concerned with the role of matrilineal ties in Roy's works generally focus on Roy's fictional works (see Harvey, Lewis, Smart and Whitfield), or treat fiction and autobiography as the same text. Saint-Martin, for example, referring to Roy's fictional texts and to *La détresse et l'enchantement*, states that "le récit [. . .] est toujours le même" (1995, 119). In an effort to interpret Roy as a feminist voice, these studies tend to offer a positive view of the mother/daughter relationship, and gloss over the troubling effects of matrilineal ties in

Roy's life. It should be possible, however, to interpret Roy's works from a feminist viewpoint and at the same time consider the problematic side of the ties to the mother. An entirely positive interpretation of the mother/daughter relationship, an interpretation that may work for the fictional works, actually becomes problematic when applied within the framework of the autobiography. I do not agree with the suggestion that the story is always the same. The autobiography calls for a different kind of reading since its content and composition are directly linked to Roy's life experience.

I propose that in the texts that make up the autobiography, *La détresse et l'enchantement* and *Le temps qui m'a manqué*, Roy deliberately revisits both the enchanting and the burdensome aspects of the mother/daughter legacy and considers the bearing of this legacy on her writing, precisely because her previous texts, although often treating autobiographical themes and events, had not resolved these issues that underpin Roy's creative life. The autobiography imposes a problematic that cannot be ignored: although Roy's mother and the bond of affection that linked mother and daughter were an unwavering source of inspiration to Roy throughout her life, in order to realize her dream of becoming a writer, she had to separate from the physical bond that tied her to her mother. Through this effort, the tie that was Roy's anchor at the same time became a source of burden and guilt. Whereas on the one hand Roy hoped to avenge her mother's sufferings and to ease the mother's financial deprivations through her success as a writer, on the other hand, her absence contributed to the mother's sorrow and loneliness.

The reader meets Roy's mother on the first page of *La détresse et l'enchantement*. In the second sentence we read "maman et moi," two words that appear together often, as if they were an expression referring to one person. The reader immediately seizes the intimate tie between mother and daughter. As the last of eleven children and separated from the previous surviving child by seven years, Gabrielle enjoys a particularly close rapport with the mother. During Gabrielle's childhood, the mother's and the daughter's happiness consists of being together. Despite their poverty, Gabrielle sees herself and her mother as rich in shared optimism and confidence, "ces riches que nous étions, maman et moi, au milieu de la pauvreté maussade" (*Détresse* 37). The opening pages of the autobiography center around mother and daughter who together confront the hostile outside world as they leave the security of their French-Canadian set-

tlement of Saint-Boniface, their "milieu naturel" (*Détresse* 16), to enter the world of English speaking Winnipeg. These excursions most often begin as a happy and promising adventure. Leaving behind worries and obligations, the mother seems rejuvenated and confident. As soon as they enter Winnipeg, however, much of this confidence evaporates. The bustle of the big city, and people who turn around to look when they overhear Gabrielle and her mother speaking French, leave them feeling insignificant, humiliated, and inferior in their condition as "Canadiens français du Manitoba" (*Détresse* 17).

Although the bond of affection between Gabrielle and her mother is very strong, Gabrielle's emotions are a mixture of love, devotion, sadness, and also embarrassment. Instances of embarrassment are mainly linked to situations where the family's poverty becomes an issue. When it is necessary to awaken sympathy for their plight, the mother does not shy away from telling what Roy calls "l'histoire de notre vie" (*Détresse* 20). This story summarized the circumstances of their life: after her husband lost his job (because of questions of political loyalty), the family had to survive on what little the older children could earn and what the mother could contribute by taking in sewing and mending jobs she worked on in the evenings and nights: "Elle allait raconter l'histoire de notre vie qui me remplissait chaque fois d'une confusion et d'une détresse qui ne semblaient pouvoir se dissoudre ni en larmes ni en paroles" (*Détresse* 20).

Besides their poverty, the experience of language barriers further contributed to Gabrielle's embarrassment. When such barriers caused problems in communication in stores, and salespeople and other shoppers crowded around to try to help, Gabrielle and her mother often grew so frustrated, they simply slipped away. On occasion, as they fled the scene, mother and daughter were greatly amused by their adventure, sometimes even shaking with laughter. Looking back on such an incident from the vantage point of old age, Roy comments: "Ces fous rires qu'elle me communiquait malgré moi, aujourd'hui je sais qu'ils étaient un bienfait, nous repêchant de la tristesse, mais alors j'en avais un peu honte" (*Détresse* 14-15). At the age of twelve, Gabrielle does not have the insight of old age and she criticizes her mother for her behavior: "[J]e me suis fâchée contre maman, et lui ai dit qu'elle nous faisait mal voir à la fin, et que, si toutes deux rions, nous faisons aussi rire de nous" (*Détresse* 15). In response to Gabrielle's criticism, the mother explains that it isn't Gabrielle's position to reproach her, since the daughter has all the oppor-

tunities the mother did not have. Gabrielle's education and mastery of English will open doors of opportunity and will enable her to improve her situation and get out of the isolated and limited position that has defined the mother's life. The mother sees in Gabrielle her consolation, even a kind of salvation. Gabrielle's successes by proxy become the mother's accomplishments, the successes of which she herself had dreamed and which she was not able to achieve because of the humble and restricting circumstances of her life. Speaking of her mother, Roy writes: "Elle avait cruellement souffert de sa condition et ne s'était consolée qu'en imaginant ses enfants parvenus là où elle aurait voulu se hausser" (*Détresse* 15). As the years pass, the mother's greatest hopes are invested in her youngest daughter. By providing Gabrielle the opportunity to learn English and to obtain a good education, she finds satisfaction in seeing her daughter overcome the barriers that curtailed her own life.

This tendency of mothers to see their children, especially their daughters, as an extension of themselves, is an attribute shared by many women, and has been the focus of various studies concerning the psychological development of women (Chodorow, Hirsch). Regarding the link between mother and daughter, Chodorow proposes that "at some level mothers and daughters tend to remain emotionally bound up with each other in what might be called a semisymbiotic relationship, in which neither ever quite sees herself or the other as a separate person" (109). Girls often remain attached to the primary mother-child relationship and "experience themselves as less differentiated than boys" (167). They define and experience themselves as continuous with others and emphasize the importance of interpersonal relations in the formation of self (Chodorow 169). Some of Roy's fictional texts seem to illustrate this tendency as they depict "cette vision morale de sollicitude, d'interdépendence, de moralité bienveillante et de responsabilité partagée" between mothers and daughters (Saint-Martin 30).

Such a rapport of "sollicitude, d'interdépendence, de moralité et de responsabilité" also characterizes Gabrielle and her mother during Gabrielle's early years. With time the relationship becomes problematic, however. Their situation appears less and less idyllic to Gabrielle as she becomes more and more aware of the marks of hardship and sorrow in her mother's face and demeanor: "Mais alors que le visage de maman, penchée sur moi, se trouva tout proche du mien, je pus y voir, comme à la loupe, la fatigue de sa vie, la marque des calculs, le griffonnage laissé

par les veillées de raccommodages, et ce fut plus que je ne pouvais supporter" (*Détresse* 35). The recognition of her mother's plight makes Gabrielle want to flee to a region where she would no longer be pursued by "dépenses, les frais, les honoraires" (*Détresse* 35). At a later point, Gabrielle will indeed flee, but at this young age, she feels a great sense of responsibility towards her mother and is concerned about being a burden as the last child, born when the mother was already forty-three years old, "alors qu'[elle] [the mother] se croyait libérée enfin" (*Le temps* 100). When the mother leaves her after a visit to the hospital where Gabrielle is recuperating after an operation, Gabrielle watches her mother from the back. In this view she discovers how her mother has aged. Pushed by her own sense of powerlessness, Gabrielle resolves to avenge her mother through the only means available to her, namely excellence in her performance in school: "mais à surprendre sur son visage la trace d'une désolation qu'elle n'avait pas eu le temps de faire disparaître, je songeai à m'engager envers elle par la seule promesse dont j'étais sûre qu'elle lui redonnerait courage. Alors je lui annonçais qu'à l'école, dès lors, je serais toujours la première de ma classe" (*Détresse* 37).

To bring joy to her mother, Gabrielle dedicates herself almost exclusively to her schoolwork and brings home trophy after trophy which her mother carefully stores in a drawer where she can admire them at her leisure. After she receives her first medal for finishing the school year at the top of her class, the mother's expression of joy is unforgettable for Gabrielle: "Aussitôt ce fut comme si lui était enlevé le poids des années passées, l'angoisse des années à venir. Elle rayonna [. . .] Ses yeux brillaient comme rarement je les avais vus, deux grands puits de lumière tendre d'où semblait avoir été retirée toute eau mauvaise des jours durs. C'était enivrant de me voir à si peu de frais lui alléger ainsi la vie" (*Détresse* 68).

One day the mother, an extremely talented storyteller, tells Gabrielle the story of their ancestors, the Acadians, who followed promises of land and opportunity and moved from Connecticut to Québec and on to Manitoba, without ever finding a true homeland. The strength of ancestral ties is apparent in both mother and daughter as the mother refers to their forebears as "we" and Gabrielle finds this strangely consoling (*Détresse* 26). Although Roy refers to both female and male ancestry, the text emphasizes and privileges the daughter's link through the mother, and through her to preceding mothers. Gabrielle's awareness of these ties

is awakened through the mother's telling of her own experience, and it is the mother who impresses upon young Gabrielle the responsibility "de nous venger tous" (*Détresse* 15). Her preference to think of herself as descended solely from the Landry side, the mother's side, further underlines the matrilineal attachment: "Je m'imaginai issue des Landry seulement, cette race plus légère, riieuse, rêveuse, comme un peu aérienne, aimante, tendre, et passionnée" (*Détresse* 96).

As Gabrielle adopts the mother's story as part of her own mythos, her perception of self and of her world, and her hopes and desires for her own future are all influenced by the powerful matrilineal consciousness. Gabrielle sees herself and her mother as part of the endless exodus. All the generations are present to her and accompany her: "Dans la rue déserte, nous allons ensemble, eux peut-être consolés de nous trouver attentives encore à leurs vies écoulées, et nous, de ne pas nous retrouver seules" (*Détresse* 24).

Concerning matrilineal ties, Carl G. Jung proposes the following:

The conscious experience of these ties produces the feeling that their life is spread out over generations—the first step towards the immediate experience and conviction of being outside of time, which brings with it a feeling of immortality. This leads to restoration of the lives of her ancestors, who now, through the bridge of the momentary individual, pass down into the generations of the future. An experience of this kind gives the individual a place and a meaning in the life of the generations, so that all unnecessary obstacles are cleared out of the way of the life-stream that is to flow through her. At the same time the individual is rescued from her isolation and restored to wholeness. (162)

Gabrielle feels directly linked to those who preceded her and feels such pain for their plight that she extends her role as avenger through her mother to preceding generations: "Je vengerais aussi mon père et ceux de Beaumont, et ceux de Saint-Jacques-l'Achigan et, avant, ceux du Connecticut. Je m'en allais loin dans le passé chercher la misère dont j'étais issue, et je m'en faisais une volonté qui parvenait à me faire avancer" (*Détresse* 30-31). This responsibility becomes a strength to her as it pushes her towards future accomplishments. She envisions that the moth-

er and all those who went before, who didn't have the opportunities she enjoys, will be redeemed through her accomplishments. The daughter will in their stead overcome the obstacles of language, prejudice, isolation, and poverty.

Gabrielle's initial plan to avenge her mother and ancestors did not extend beyond her school years: "Mes études terminées, je n'apercevais plus rien de précis et de clair, seulement, devant moi, une route montante, comme solitaire, s'en allant dans je ne sais quel abandon sous un ciel nuageux" (*Détresse* 33). After she graduates and begins to work as a teacher, Gabrielle's plan evolves, however. She feels driven to embark upon this "route solitaire" and to leave Manitoba. Vague desires seem to push her to go: the need to be accepted, to feel at home somewhere, to feel a part of something, to finally find a "patrie," "la patrie," that her ancestors had "tant de fois cherchée, tant de fois perdue" (*Détresse* 50). Perhaps the most important motivation is her aspiration to write.

Matrilineal attachment plays a major role in this decision. Roy feels that the desire to leave doesn't originate from her alone, but that her ancestors press her to go.

Souvent [cette volonté de partir] me paraissait émaner de générations en arrière de moi ayant usé dans d'obscures existences injustes l'élan de leur âme et qui à travers ma vie poussaient enfin à l'accomplissement de leur libération. Serait-ce donc le vieux rêve de mon enfance, qui me tenait toujours, de venger les miens par le succès? (*Détresse* 182)

Her old childhood dream to avenge her ancestors by her success as a writer now seems to drive her from her home. The day of Gabrielle's departure for France brings with it a terrible realization, however. Matrilineal ties do indeed lie at the heart of this decision, but not in the anticipated manner. The true motivation behind her departure, the motivation that Gabrielle suspects her heart may have been secretly harboring all along, is not the noble desire to avenge her mother and forebears. It is the opposite: a desire to rid herself of the burden of matrilineal ties, to finally be free of the yoke. As the train pulls out of the station, Gabrielle watches her mother standing on the platform.

Je n'avais plus de regard que pour la petite silhouette seule au

milieu des êtres heureux. Elle me suivait de ses yeux éteints comme s'ils n'allaient cependant jamais me perdre—où j'irais!—au bout de leur regard. L'expression m'en devint insoutenable. J'y voyais trop bien qu'elle voyait que je ne reviendrais pas. Que le sort aujourd'hui me happait pour une toute autre vie. Le coeur me manqua. Car j'y saisis, tout au fond, que je ne partais pas pour la venger, comme j'avais tellement aimé le croire, mais, mon Dieu, n'était-ce pas plutôt pour la perdre enfin de vue? Elle et nos malheurs pressés autour d'elle, sous sa garde! (*Détresse* 242)

The solitary figure of the mother is joined by the imaginary faces of Roy's brothers and sisters. All reproach her for leaving and reproach her their own unhappy lives: "Pourquoi toi seulement? Pourquoi pas nous? N'aurions-nous pas nous aussi pu être heureux?" (*Détresse* 243). While still more faces join the crowd on the platform, Roy realizes her desire to break away includes the desire to sever her attachment to all of her "pauvre peuple dépossédé" (*Détresse* 243).

Puis, au bout du quai, surgie cette fois du passé, une petite foule en noir me parut se dessiner. C'étaient les grands-parents Landry, les Roy aussi, les exilés au Connecticut, leurs ancêtres déportés d'Acadie, les rapatriés à Saint-Jacques-L'Alchigan [. . .] Est-ce que je n'ai pas lu alors dans mon coeur le désir que j'avais peut-être toujours eu de m'échapper, de rompre avec la chaîne, avec mon pauvre peuple dépossédé? (*Détresse* 243)

As a child, Gabrielle wanted to flee into a dream realm where she could leave behind "dépenses, les frais, les honoraires" (*Détresse* 35). As an adult, she physically flees from the embodiment of her family's suffering, namely her mother. She flees into her writing and it is there that she will seek her "patrie"

Despite the insight into her real motivation, Roy holds on to her illusions. To appease her guilt in the face of her sisters' accusations that she is abandoning her mother and her family, Gabrielle reassures herself that she will be able to realize her dream and return with success: "[Le grand rêve consolateur] me peignait que j'aurais le temps de tout faire. Et d'abord de me sauver moi-même.—A qui est-on utile, soi-même noyé?—

Puis de revenir sauver les autres. Il me disait que le temps m'en serait accordé" (*Détresse* 243). *Le temps qui m'a manqué* opens with the same assurance: "Je m'en allais au loin chercher ce qu'il y avait de meilleur. Je le rapporterais à ma mère. Et elle en serait à jamais réjouie" (13). As Roy is writing these words, looking back 40 years, "maintenant, les faits en mains" (*Détresse* 154), she realizes the deceptive nature of this dream "qui m'a si longtemps trompée" (*Détresse* 243). At the time, however, the illusion offered her the necessary consolation and courage to pursue an autonomous life.

After she leaves Manitoba, Roy loses sight of her mother and sisters as she dedicates herself wholeheartedly to her writing. Earlier in this study, we saw that in the face of the mother's challenges and the disheartening story of the family's poverty, as a young girl Roy had felt "une détresse qui ne semblai[t] pouvoir se résoudre ni en larmes ni en paroles" (*Détresse* 20). There appears to be no way out until the day when Roy, feeling ecstatic over some particularly well-written lines, catches a glimpse of what may be writing's redemptive power: "Miracle! L'expression de la douleur vengerait-elle de la douleur? Ou de dire un peu ce qu'est la vie nous réconcilierait-il avec la vie?" (*Détresse* 143). Could deliverance from the seemingly unspeakable sorrow lie precisely in giving voice to this sorrow? Deliverance, in fact, lies in the "paroles," in being able to lose oneself in writing: "L'histoire que je me mis à écrire m'entraînait dans un mouvement irrésistible, me soustrayant à tout ce qui n'était pas elle, et ainsi me rendait au bonheur" (*Détresse* 392). Writing offers at least a temporary happiness.

The opposition between family and writing is revealingly illustrated by two letters that arrive for Roy within a short time of each other during her stay in the countryside near London. The first letter is from her mother. The mere sight of her mother's handwriting elicits a sense of dread. The feelings associated with this letter are expressed with the words "trembler," "souvenir de la douleur," "condamné à un devoir," "honte," "pleurer," and "tourment et détresse" (*Détresse* 408). The second letter arrives from Paris. It includes a check and announces that the first of Roy's articles has been accepted for publication. The words associated with this letter are "m'électriser," "mourir d'émotion," "folle d'excitation," "gloire," "triomphe," "chant et délivrance" (408). Although the mother's letter in no way reproaches Gabrielle, it resurrects an image that Gabrielle has been trying to suppress, the image of the mother's face

marked by "la souffrance de ne pouvoir m'aider et le désir infini de ne pas au moins m'accabler. Alors la honte d'avoir pu être heureuse alors qu'elle était si triste m'accabla" (408). In contrast, the second letter causes her to exult in her success: "Je ne pense pas m'être jamais autant sentie écrivain connu et reconnu que ce jour-là" (408). Giving herself over completely to her work is a means of banning the image of her suffering mother.

After spending two years in Europe, Roy settles in Montreal. During these years, her mother anxiously awaits Gabrielle's return, yet another three and a half years pass before Roy returns to Manitoba for a visit in the summer of 1942. In one of the mother's last letters before her death in June 1943, she tells Gabrielle that "elle avait hâte de me voir venir, mais quand ce serait possible, quand cela ne me dérangerait pas trop dans mon travail, surtout s'il allait bien [. . .] ainsi que je le souhaitais. Peut-être aimerais-je venir au printemps, quand il ferait beau" (*Le temps* 19). Roy postpones her next visit until it is too late: "Dans ma hâte d'apporter aux miens un secours, un soulagement ou un motif de fierté, je n'ai pas assez pris en garde qu'eux n'allaient pas pouvoir attendre" (*Détresse* 89).

It is not only a problem of timing, however. It is mainly a problem of desire. What keeps Roy from making a trip to Manitoba? "Qu'est-ce qui m'en empêcha? Sans doute quelque chose qui alors me paraissait avoir de l'importance: des épreuves à corriger, la traduction en anglais d'un de mes livres à revoir avec le traducteur" (*Détresse* 170). Professional commitments win out over family responsibilities because professional commitments serve Roy's sense of autonomy and support her career and success as a writer. Family responsibilities, in contrast, reawaken the specter of suffering. Roy does not return to Manitoba sooner for fear of being suffocated by the insidious malaise of sorrow and poverty embodied by her family, a malaise that she senses also within herself: "Leur mal, trop pareil au mien que je sentais parfois vouloir renaître en leur contact, m'en levait la confiance qu'il m'aurait fallu avoir en moi-même pour leur porter secours. Il me faisait peur horriblement, comme si je risquais en restant près d'elles d'en être atteinte à jamais" (*Le temps* 73-74). When Roy returns briefly for the mother's funeral, she almost immediately takes renewed flight to escape the family's squabbles and misery: "Je pense bien encore une fois avoir pris la fuite" (*Le temps* 74).

The recognition of her lack of desire to come to her family's aid exacerbates Roy's sense of guilt. In a letter to her sister Adèle, written short-

ly after the mother's death, Roy expresses her grief: "Voilà donc le véritable regret: celui de n'avoir pas eu assez de bonté, assez d'affection, assez de tendresse. Voilà le pire, le plus terrible des regrets" (Ricard 247). Examining her life and motivations from the vantage point of old age, Roy sees neither her work nor her personal life as completely satisfactory: "Mes livres m'ont pris beaucoup de temps dérobé à l'amitié, à l'amour, aux devoirs humains. Mais pareillement l'amitié, l'amour, les devoirs m'ont pris beaucoup de temps que j'aurais pu donner à mes livres. En sorte que ni mes livres ni ma vie ne sont aujourd'hui contents de moi" (*Détresse* 170). Roy's dilemma lies in the conflict between two exigencies that are directly related to the effects of matrilineal ties. On the one hand, she is not content to remain near her hometown and family and to live the traditional female existence of her time and milieu. To realize her desire to write, she needs to strike out on her own and to leave behind mother and family. On the other hand, since she has always experienced herself as continuous with her mother, as "maman et moi," separation is problematic. Gabrielle achieves physical separation through her departure, but the matrilineal attachment remains intact. The mother's death sets the daughter free from material obligation but neither distance nor death severs the attachment. Roy senses that communication between them continues.

C'est en cette nuit de juin 1943 que commença entre ma mère et moi le singulier échange de voix où c'est pourtant moi seule qui reçois ses confidences à travers le silence, ou plutôt la longue quête inépuisable que l'on poursuit d'un être disparu, qui ne peut avoir de fin qu'avec notre propre fin, puisque ce n'est jamais qu'à travers notre seule expérience que nous connaissons la sienne, à travers notre maladie sa cruelle maladie, à travers notre ennui son intarissable ennui, à travers notre mort ses derniers instants solitaires. Ainsi est-il à jamais trop tard pour seulement faire savoir à l'être que nous aimons combien nous le comprenons et comprenons sa pauvre vie dont quelque détail jusque-là nous a toujours manqué. (*Le temps* 25-26)

The mother is gone, but her voice is not silenced. The daughter clings to

the ties that linked her to her mother. As she stands near the coffin to examine her mother's face, Roy rejects the notion that matrilineal attachment would end with death.

Peut-être que je n'existais même plus dans la conscience de ma mère. Cette pensée, de toutes celles que j'éprouvais alors, me fut sans doute la plus cruelle car elle laissa ses traces en moi pour toujours. Aujourd'hui encore j'en reconnais la blessure. Mais cette pensée que nous n'existons plus aux yeux de ceux qui nous ont aimés est trop atroce pour que nous l'acceptions totalement, car un instant plus tard je continuai à parler à ma mère en esprit comme si une part d'elle-même allait toujours être attentive à ma voix. (*Le temps* 102)

Roy remains "emotionally bound up" (Chodorow 109) with her mother and sisters. She feels a profound need to share success and joy with them. If success isn't shared, it loses some or all of its value: "Pour moi seule, que valait-elle au fond?" (*Détresse* 102). Joys similarly deflate quickly unless they can be shared: "De tout ce qui peut nous arriver, le triomphe est le plus difficile à endurer quand on est seul. Privé de témoins, il se dégonfle sans tarder" (*Détresse* 409). With each accomplishment after her family is gone, Gabrielle wishes she could bring back her mother and sisters to share her accomplishments with them.

Plus tard, ce serait maman que je souhaiterais ressusciter pour m'entendre lui raconter l'extraordinaire bonne fortune de *Bonheur d'occasion* à laquelle, dans ce récit imaginaire que je lui en faisais, elle ne croyait pas, et j'insistais: "Voyons, maman, tu peux dormir en paix, je suis presque riche." Plus tard encore, ce fut ma soeur Anna que je désirai ramener un moment de la mort. Maintenant c'est Dédette que je rappelle en vain. (*Détresse* 102-03)

The conflict between these two needs, the need to live an autonomous life on the one hand, and on the other hand the need to share, to recall the dead, to hang on to the attachment to the mother, causes melancholy and regret. This tension and the resultant guilt is seen by some critics as the

driving force behind Roy's writing as a whole (Ricard 507, Wiktorowicz 201). For Roy, ties to family and the past are a burden, a bondage even. Her mother is a symbol of the family's suffering through the generations. Matrilineal ties may "give the individual a place and a meaning in the life of generations" (Jung 162), but they are also a yoke that binds the individual to a potentially crushing past. In order to write, Roy had to step out of "le terrible exode dans lequel [s]a mère [l]'a fait entrer" (*Détresse* 243) and establish herself as an "isolated, self-directed unit" (Brée 174).

This direction was also strewn with obstacles, however. Roy's autobiography shows that her decision to follow her own path took a tremendous toll in human terms. No distance, no success, and no number of years appeased her sense of guilt over not having lived up to the responsibilities imbued by matrilineal ties. Roy's last manuscript emphasizes the unchanging nature of this grief. Forty years after her mother's death, Roy writes: "Ainsi, par ma faute, maman et moi, avons vécu en pauvres chacune à notre bout du pays, et une sorte de remords ou de sourde révolte, je ne sais encore comment nommer ce sentiment, pénétrait en moi pour y prendre racine et ne jamais tout à fait me libérer" (*Le temps* 47, 99). Although throughout her life she feels that she did not have the right to save only herself (*Détresse* 408), this is precisely what happens. By following her dream and becoming a much read and admired author both in French and in English translation, she overcomes poverty and language barriers. The lives of her mother and sisters, however, are not fundamentally affected by her success. The different world to which she belongs after leaving Manitoba is apparent in a photograph showing Gabrielle and her sisters after the mother's funeral. Ricard describes this photograph as follows:

En les regardant on est surtout frappé par la ressemblance entre Adèle, Clémence et Anna, point trop jolies avec leurs coiffures sévères et leurs vêtements frustes, et par le contraste entre leur allure et le style moderne et distingué que donnent à Gabrielle son tailleur de bonne coupe, son sac de cuir en bandoulière, son maquillage et sa chevelure légère. Tout en elle annonce qu'elle vient d'ailleurs, de la grande ville, d'un monde qui n'a plus rien à voir avec celui de sa mère et de ses soeurs. (Ricard 246)

The mother/daughter tie shaped Roy's choice of career and colored much of the material about which she wrote. This influence in Roy's literary creation has been viewed as an illustration of the positive effects of matrilineal attachment. Saint-Martin proposes "une lecture au féminin" and suggests that "l'auteure [Gabrielle Roy] montre de quelle manière des générations de femmes, artistes de plein droit, communiquent leur force et leur créativité à leurs filles" (Saint-Martin 45). Roy is certainly aware both of her mother's influence and of the sacrifices her mother made for her. She pays tribute to her own mother and to preceding mothers when she lauds their efforts to improve female existence for the sake of their daughters: "La lumière à été longue à venir, à nous, femmes, à travers des siècles d'obscur silence. Mais il me semble parfois que rien en route n'a été perdu des efforts des plus énergiques de nos mères et de leur acharnement à vouloir la vie meilleure (*Détresse* 239).

We see in Roy's autobiography that matrilineal ties were the source of both fulfillment and sorrow. Yes, ties to the mother and to ancestors inspired her writing. Roy writes: "Les mots qui me venaient aux lèvres, au bout de la plume, étaient de ma lignée, de ma solidarité ancestrale" (*Détresse* 392). Yes, from her mother, whom Roy calls "la Shéhérazade qui a charmé notre longue captivité dans la pauvreté," she inherited a creative spirit and a passion for storytelling (*Détresse* 143). Yes, mother and daughter are linked through a strong bond of love. And yes, the mother found joy and satisfaction in Gabrielle's accomplishments and successes. These accomplishments did indeed brighten her old age and perhaps even lightened her load for a moment. The daughter's accomplishments, however, did not make the mother's life less harsh; these accomplishments did not spare the mother a lonely and abandoned old age in poverty; they did not give her solace or company as she faced her own death alone. These autobiographical details are not pertinent to a reading of Roy's fictional texts. They are, however, vital to an interpretation of Roy's autobiography.

Roy's final manuscript, written in the face of her own declining health, returns to the image of the exodus that she rejected forty years earlier in order to pursue an autonomous life. Roy, herself now nearing death, writes concerning the months preceding her mother's death: "Mais bientôt, à tant penser à elle, je m'apaisais. C'était comme si elle m'eût rejointe pour faire route avec moi puisque nous allions dans le même sens, là où elle avait été heureuse, et auprès de moi, je ne sais par quelle magie, je la

sentais rajeunie, encore bien portante, et moi-même, de lui rapporter sa jeunesse, me sentais aussi soulagée" (*Le temps* 23). Mother and daughter again walk together each reassured by the other's presence. The passage suspends the forty years that lie between the mother's impending death and the writing of these words. The daughter, facing her own death, joins the mother in this timeless walk, both magically ageless and freed from the sorrows of this life.

As Roy becomes more and more engaged in the call to write, she observes: "La vraie vie était de plus en plus pour moi dans ce que je me racontais ou racontais à quelqu'un qui pourrait un jour s'y reconnaître, et alors peut-être, en silence, nous rejoindrions-nous, moi qui marchais seule et cet inconnu dans l'avenir, quelque part arrêté à attendre il ne savait quoi" (*Le temps* 90). The aim she embraces is to *tell* the joys and disappointments of life, of her own life and of the life of her ancestors who lived and disappeared "sans bruit et presque sans laisser de trace" (*Détresse* 56). Roy's words give life to the mother and to her tender, imaginative, and ever hopeful spirit. Roy's efforts to grasp "l'insaisissable essentiel" (*Détresse* 112) succeed as her writing grants a voice to those who have gone and who relive through Roy's words. With the insights gathered through the sorrows of her own life, Roy peels away the artificial guises that often mask human suffering and sorrow—as well as human joy—and with simplicity, tenderness, power, and courage, with "le ton juste" (*Détresse* 281), she tells the exaltations and disappointments of human existence—the sorrows and enchantments of our lives. The victory lies in affecting the reader. We join Roy and the people about whom she writes, "pour faire route avec [eux] puisque nous [allons] dans le même sens" (*Le temps* 23).

In 1981, at the age of seventy-two, Roy describes her life and motivation at the beginning of her career and draws a comparison between her goal then and now:

Engoncée dans un épais chandail à col roulé, les pieds enveloppés de laine, je tapais à ma petite machine portative de six à huit heures par jour. Mon vieux compagnon de vie, ma constante chimère, le sentiment que j'allais bientôt toucher au but, me tenait toujours lieu de soutien. Le même but vers lequel je cours encore à près de soixante-douze ans et dont je me demanderai sans doute si j'en ai le temps avant de mourir quel il était. (*Le temps* 19)

Artistic creation undoubtedly offered "une onde de bonheur" (*Détresse* 52) in the path that remained "le chemin difficile et solitaire qu'[elle] avai[t] aperçu dès [s]on enfance" (*Détresse* 86). In the end, Roy is still pondering the power and purpose of writing and creation: "L'expression de la douleur vengerait-elle de la douleur? Ou de dire un peu ce qu'est la vie nous réconcilierait-il avec la vie?" (*Détresse* 143). For the reader, the answer is found in the vibrant voice of Roy's creation. The autobiography seems to indicate, however, that for Gabrielle Roy, even after four decades of creation, the answer was not a resounding "yes."

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