

GABRIELLE ROY AND CHEKHOV'S "STRANGE ALCHEMY"

Darlene Kelly

St. Thomas More College, University of Saskatchewan

Gabrielle Roy, French Canada's grande dame of letters, won France's prestigious Prix Fémina for her novel *Bonheur d'occasion* (1945) and numerous awards at home, particularly Quebec. By a strange twist of literary genealogy, however, she proved to be less inspired by the great French authors of Canada and France than she was by a Russian playwright and short-story writer who had died before she was born. The cosmopolitan Roy was open about her mentor: asked which literary work had most influenced her, she promptly identified it as Anton Chekhov's novella *The Steppe*, a story whose "charme secret" from childhood on had changed the way she perceived the world: "Longtemps, longtemps, cette lointaine lecture a pénétré mes pensées, m'a façonné, si je puis dire, une manière de voir, de regarder et de saisir le réel" (*Roman canadien-français* 303) ("For a long, long time this reading from my distant past had occupied my thoughts, had fashioned, if I may so put it, a way of seeing, of looking at and grasping what was real").¹ She later expressed confusion about just when this fashioning of her perceptions began. A Chekhovian motif that a critic had noted in her fiction, for example, had its origins not in literature, she argued, but in certain experiences that predated her reading of the great Russian author. Her earlier statement that she had read Chekhov in childhood was now declared wrong. Roy conjectured that "une mystérieuse alchimie du temps . . . m'a amenée à fausser légèrement les faits réels. Je n'ai probablement pas lu *La steppe* avant l'âge de dix-sept ou dix-huit ans" (as qtd. in Gagné 164) ("a strange alchemy of time led me slightly to distort the actual facts. I probably didn't read *The Steppe* before the age of seventeen or eighteen years old"). Adolescence, it now seemed, was the time of her first contact.

In the alchemical image used here by Roy, time is the transmuting agent. This same metaphor also captures the various other ways in which Chekhov subtly but surely

189

infiltrated Roy's imagination. So profoundly did he alter her creative sensibility that she was at times uncertain as to whether her life had imitated his art or whether his art had anticipated her life. Moreover, as she herself candidly admitted, her interest in the human condition was derived "à son insu" ("without her being fully aware of it") from Chekhov, in particular "les silences, les soupirs, la voix feutrée sans éclats pour surprendre la vérité des êtres dans leur pente la plus ordinaire" (Légaré 226) ("the silences, the sighs, the quiet voice unobtrusively revealing the essence of human beings as shown in their most ordinary tendencies"). Not surprisingly, Roy's depiction of twentieth-century Canada, especially the prairies, strongly recalls Chekhov's reverent attention to the humblest details of the Russian countryside and its people a century earlier. Just how, why, and where this important influence, one which went far beyond *The Steppe*, came to permeate Roy's work is the subject of this paper.

Of course no writer is ever affected by merely one person. The chemistry of influence is more complex than a simple *mélange à deux*: authors read widely. Moreover, 190 Roy had eclectic tastes, leading her to range across Shakespeare, Homer, Goethe, Bunyan, Dickens, Sigrid Undset, Proust, and Miguel de Unamuno, to name a few of the best known. Nor was Chekhov the only Russian writer she knew. Her private life had often been illuminated by Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Gorki, and Gogol. Her manic-depressive Uncle Excide, for example, was to her mind distinctly Slavic: "When I came to read the Russian authors I found him, with his bouts of giddy merriment and a moody side plunging him abruptly into devastating silences, to be the image of so many of their characters . . ." (*Enchantment* 43). She pointed out that her father not only looked like Tolstoy, whose first name he bore, but also shared Tolstoy's interest in Canada's Doukhobor emigrants (*Enchantment* 71). Léon Roy's tales about the Doukhobors whose settlements he helped as a government official to establish could have been found verbatim in Gogol. Hence, as Roy pointed out, "when in later years I read *Dead Souls*, I was not as astonished as some western readers. Tchitchikov's adventures seemed somehow familiar to me" ("Manitoba Heritage" 153).

The most touching application of Russian literature to her life occurred at the bedside of her sister Bernadette, a Catholic nun dying of cancer. In an effort to distract Bernadette from her pain, Roy would discourse at length on what she had seen in her travels throughout Europe, and on the interesting things she had read. One inspired anecdote was her comparison of the vast Manitoba sky to the boundless heavens contemplated by the wounded Prince Andrei in Tolstoy's most famous novel: "In Russia, too," I went on, "there must be something about the sky that gets inside you, because in *War and Peace* Tolstoy speaks of the 'towering sky' through Prince Andrei as he lies gazing up at it, mortally wounded in battle and dreaming of peace and harmony" (*Enchantment* 127). Roy's memory served her well. Tolstoy's "immeasurably lofty sky" (*War and Peace* 244) does in fact lead Prince Andrei to imagine the peaceful world which stretched endlessly beyond the turmoil of this one, enabling him to see that "All is vanity, all falsehood, except that infinite sky. There is nothing, nothing, but that. But even it does not exist, there is nothing but quiet and peace. Thank God!

...”(*War and Peace* 244).² The Tolstoyan imagery worked its magic, and Bernadette’s infirmary window consequently became “a symbol of opening and liberation” (127).

For all her interest in various Russian writers, however, it was Anton Chekhov that Roy revered. His influence was most obvious in her diverse applications of his work to herself and to her family. She reflected, for instance, on how her elder sister Anna, a woman whose “exceptional gifts were gradually stifled by a dreary, stultifying existence . . . always made [her] think of Chekhov’s *Three Sisters*” (*Enchantment* 106). In a memoir of her youthful acting experiences with the Cercle Molière in Manitoba, Roy pondered the way in which the actors resembled “des gens de Tchekhov [sic], soupirant souvent, faisant peu de bruit, cherchant une issue à nos vies délaissées en des vies encore plus délaissées” (*Chapeau Bas* 124) (“the characters of Chekhov, sighing frequently, attracting little notice, seeking an escape from our neglected lives in other lives that were even more neglected”) (*Hats Off* 124). Elsewhere, in describing her days as a drama student in London, England, she dilated upon a memorable theatre production of Chekhov’s other famous play, *The Seagull*. The characters on the stage seemed somehow to be her alter ego: “Better than I could have done myself, I felt this performance expressing my own loneliness, my almost constant bewilderment wherever I was, our inability to understand ourselves, all seen through a fine mist of tears . . . [which] came from the curious happiness we feel at hearing ourselves expressed so perfectly” (*Enchantment* 223). Between the acts, she struck up a conversation about Chekhov with a bright young man in the audience. After the play they said good night and went their separate ways. The episode was banal, but Roy transmuted it into a Chekhovian moment: “One would have said that Chekhov, having brought us together, had doomed us to the fate of so many of his characters, vacillating, lost in indecision, incapable of reaching out unreservedly to one another with a spontaneity that would set them free” (*Enchantment* 225). The alchemy here is not all that mysterious: it is the tendency of youth to aggrandize themselves by association with a celebrity. All the same, Roy’s use of Chekhov to elucidate her private experiences marks the beginning of a new way of seeing life—through the eyes of a great writer.

191

A similar exercise in Chekhovian discernment can be found in Roy’s account of her mother’s emigration from Quebec to Manitoba. Mrs. Roy’s first glimpse of a housetop on the prairie reminded her daughter of the young Yegorushka’s sighting of a distant windmill in the course of his travels across the Russian steppe. As a young child seated on her mother’s lap during the story of this great journey, Roy vividly imagined the pitching of the wagon bearing her mother westward and the horizon’s oceanic rise and fall. Only after she discovered Chekhov, however, did the full significance of that distant windmill become clear:

Later, when I read Chekhov’s *The Steppe* I felt myself in exactly the same atmosphere as in my mother’s story. Everything was there: the rapture at the sight of the great, flat expanse of land, inviting as an open book and yet obscure to the mind; the touching unexpectedness in this monotonous unfolding landscape, of the least sign of human

presence—in the Russian story the windmill, visible from so far and for so long; in my mother's version, the roof of a house appearing at last in the distance of this uninhabited country—and even the feeling that this elusive horizon, constantly calling, constantly retreating, was perhaps the symbol and image of the ideal in our lives, or of the future as it appears to the eyes of our youth, full of promises that will always be renewed. ("My Manitoba Heritage" 144)

Roy's final lines evince an acute appreciation of Chekhov's use of symbolism. One day, as we shall see, she would apply this technique to the portrayal of her own Canadian landscape.

192 Despite her admiration for Chekhov, Roy was occasionally nettled by questions about his influence on her. In two separate interviews, one by Paul Wyczynski published in 1964 and the other by Marc Gagné on January 28, 1970, she acknowledged her awareness of Chekhov's works but not at the expense of her own originality. Gagné, for example, suggested that a memorable poplar in *The Steppe* which onlookers mistake for a person had inspired her own symbolic use of trees (163). Roy countered by saying that her own experience rather than Chekhov was the source of the scenes he had in mind. In "Garden in the Wind," for example, the dying Martha contemplates a little tree which seems to be in perpetual motion against the distant horizon. Nature plays a similar trick, she noted, in *The Road Past Altamont* when Christine finds that what she thought was running water outside her window was only rustling leaves. This awareness of nature's deceptiveness dated back to when, visiting her uncle's farm as a child, she once spied a remote figure walking toward his house; when the walker made no progress, however, she realized that this was an optical illusion created by a distant tree. If the image of trees in her work had any one source, she told Gagné, it was this *trompe l'oeil* on the Manitoba prairie (167).

But the influence of a great writer is far more pervasive than an equation of one image with another. Roy instinctively knew this. In another statement, she admitted that it was impossible to say exactly where Chekhov's vision ended and hers began:

[*La Steppe*] m'était apparue toute pleine de grands paysages plats, un peu dénudés, assez pareils aux plaines du Manitoba que j'avais alors sous les yeux, toute pleine aussi de songeries un peu tristes sur ce que l'avenir peut réserver à chacun, comme si la steppe infinie et l'âme du jeune garçon dont il est question dans cette nouvelle, poursuivaient ensemble presque la même rêverie. C'est peut-être de ce temps que date mon penchant à unir des paysages aux états d'âme. Mais peut-être l'avais-je déjà, et cette lecture n'a-t-elle fait que le renforcer ou l'illuminer. Je donne cet exemple comme preuve de notre extrême et miraculeuse vulnérabilité, parfois, à l'égard de certaines oeuvres. (*Roman canadien-français* 303-04)

(To me [*The Steppe*] seemed to be full of vast flat landscapes, a bit sparse, rather like the Manitoba prairies that were right before my eyes, and full as well of the somewhat gloomy meditations on what the future might have in store for each person, as if the boundless steppe and the soul of the young boy in the story were pursuing in concert an almost identical dream. It is possibly from that time that my penchant emerged for

fusing together landscapes and various inner modes of being. Yet perhaps I had [this tendency] already, and my reading [of Chekhov] merely reinforced or shed light on it. I mention this as an instance of our extreme and miraculous susceptibility at times to certain works.)

While Roy concedes that Chekhov may have inspired her representations of the natural world, she also speculates that she gravitated to his stories because she saw in them what her gifts had already predisposed her to attempt. Both possibilities seem more plausible than her claim of complete originality. After all, who could separate what the alchemy of influence, here defined as that "miraculous susceptibility at times to certain works," unites?

This chemistry was clearly visible in the effect on Roy of *The Steppe*, that enchanting story she praised so frequently. Predictably critics have tried to identify which of her works most closely resembles it. In his biography of Roy, François Ricard called *The Steppe* "a text that would forever remain a beacon for her, an ultimate model . . ." (124). Elsewhere he mentions in passing that the influence of *The Steppe* is nowhere more evident than in *Where Nests the Water Hen* (307). Although he provides no specific examples, several come to mind. Chekhov's travelling Orthodox priest, for example, has many things in common with Roy's itinerant Capuchin Father Joseph-Marie, including piety and several languages. Also, the two men become unsalaried brokers for people incapable of bargaining effectively for themselves. Father Christopher looks after the interests of his son-in-law Michael, a foolish young person who had begged the priest to obtain a good price for his wool, saying, "I'm no good at these things" (*The Steppe* 33). Outraged by the trifling sum paid to the Métis hunters for their furs by an unscrupulous merchant, Father Joseph-Marie takes their goods to Toronto to obtain a decent price for them. Both clerics, although bumbling and naive, are good shepherds. 193

The Jewish characters in both *The Steppe* and *Where Nests the Water Hen* are also similar in the way both authors use them to combat prejudice. Chekhov's Yegorushka is repelled by the malodorous inn run by the Jewish Moisey Moisevitch and his family, for example, yet they are essentially sympathetic figures. Moisey's kind wife pities the orphaned Yegorushka and gives him a heart-shaped rye cake that had been stowed in a dresser drawer, presumably a treat intended for the several children crammed into a nearby bed. Moisey's brother Solomon presents a far more startling challenge to received opinion about Jews. Enraged to be seen stereotypically by others, he burns his inheritance of six thousand roubles in the stove. This act, he argues, proves his superiority to the wealthy Varlamov: "... he is a dirty Yid at heart. Moneys and gain are his whole life, but I burnt mine in the stove. . . . So I am wiser than your Varlamov and more of a man" (*The Steppe* 38). That both his family and Father Christopher see him as unhinged adds pathos to Chekhov's depiction of this Jewish anti-type.

In drawing her own Jewish characters, Roy like Chekhov rejects certain commonly held views of them. Although the merchant Abe Zlutkin who accepts Luzina

as a passenger in his wagon is said to be “tormented” by his business transactions, his love in life is not money but the fiancée whose photo he proudly displays. Disposed by Luzina’s warm and motherly enquiries about his life to see that he has several “reasons for being happy,” he converses with her in an agreeable way about many “pleasant things” (WNWH 27). His affability confirms her belief (naive but touching) that “human nature everywhere is excellent. The Jews were about the only folk she had had no opportunity to study; yet [she decided] on the basis of her fur merchant that they were rather on the likable side . . .” (27).

194 A more decisive rejection of the Jewish stereotype occurs later on in the book when Father Joseph Marie praises his gregarious Jewish driver Isaac Boussorvski, a man who like certain other Jews, we are told, “talk as much with the hands as with the mouth and tell funny stories about themselves; the Capuchin could not reconcile these pleasant traits with a basic rapacity or a pinchpenny attitude” (156). He notes with further approval that, while Isaac bargains well, the farmers with whom he trades get their fair share. For his part, Isaac is so impressed that a begging friar did not ask him for any money that he gives him a donation. The inner thoughts of both men on this occasion are delightfully comic: Isaac hopes that his generous act will shelter him “for life” against future importunities, while the grateful priest silently wishes on him more occasions of philanthropy: “Today Isaac gives me two dollars. The habit of giving comes from giving. Another opportunity will perhaps arise. The next time the Lord will guide Isaac’s hand to the bottom of his pocket toward a five-dollar bill” (162). It is worth remembering in this connection that the only truly grasping trader in the book, Bessette, is not Jewish at all, but French Canadian. As Ben Zion-Shek observed, Roy refuses to caricature Jewish people, creating instead “life-like characters, each having his quirks and shortcomings, but being no worse than any other and as good as anyone else” (“The Jew in the French-Canadian Novel” 32).

Although certain characters in *The Steppe* have counterparts in *Where Nests the Water Hen*, a far more compelling likeness between the two works is the brooding omnipresence of the land, a personality in its own right with moods and emotions that mimic those of its inhabitants. The very titles of both books attest to its importance. Roy’s French designation *La petite poule d’eau* refers not just to the local fowl but also to the correct geographical name of the area in which the Tousignant family live, a region pointedly celebrated in the English title. Page after page of *The Steppe* is given over to a detailed description of the Russian plains, an evocation that at several intervals rises to the level of poetry. In some passages the steppe sparkles with jewel-like intensity at dawn, while in others an intense heat makes it wither into dryness; elsewhere, its trees and boulders assume menacing shapes, and in yet other places the plain is electrified by a harrowing storm. But it is the steppe on July evenings that especially allows Canadian readers to see the kinship between Chekhov’s Russian steppe and Roy’s Water Hen country:

Hardly has the sun gone down, hardly has darkness enfolded the earth when the day's misery is forgotten, all is forgiven, and the prairies breathe a faint sigh from their broad bosom. In the grass—as if it can no longer tell how old it is in the dark—a merry, youthful trilling, unknown by day, arises. The chattering, the whistling, the scratching, the bass, tenor and treble voices of the steppe—all blend in a continuous monotonous boom, a fine background to memories and melancholy. The monotonous chirring soothes like a lullaby. (*The Steppe* 42)

How reminiscent this is of Roy's "wilderness of grass and wind" (*WNWH* 10) where you canoe down a river "wholly wrapped in such silence as is seldom found on earth—or rather in the rustle of sedges, the beat of wings, in the thousands of tiny, hidden, secret, timid sounds, producing an effect in some way as restful as silence itself" (11). Roy also imitated Chekhov in using birds to comment on the human condition, but her examples, as we shall later demonstrate, were not restricted to *The Steppe*.

While François Ricard's assertion that *The Steppe* influenced *Where Nests the Water Hen* is entirely plausible, one cannot as readily see the link between Chekhov's tale and a story in *Garden in the Wind* suggested by Marc Gagné: "La lecture de 'La steppe' de Tchekhov a toujours ému Gabrielle Roy. Elle-même devait d'ailleurs écrire sa propre 'Steppe': elle s'appelle 'La vallée Houdou'" (118) ("Roy was always moved by her reading of Chekhov's 'The Steppe.' She herself was destined later to write her own 'Steppe': a work entitled 'Hoodoo Valley'"). "Hoodoo Valley" is about the decision taken by a group of Doukhobor emigrants to settle on an infertile piece of land. They are tricked by the setting sun's chimeric transformation of that unpromising locale into a glowing version of their homeland, with the clouds mounded behind it recalling the hills of their beloved Old World. Gagné quotes at length from Roy's story, but provides no details from *The Steppe* to justify the comparison. The one point of similarity might be that the steppe is often altered, sometimes radiantly, sometimes menacingly, in the nature-as-trickster convention which Roy also used, but Gagné does not explore this or any other parallel. 195

The same critic establishes a more convincing comparison between *The Steppe* and Roy's novel of romantic quest, *The Hidden Mountain*. He quotes, for example, a passage from Chekhov in which the steppe, hidden from the world at large, cries out for singers to celebrate its beauty (194). Gagné argues that Roy's mountain demands a similar immortality at the hands of the artist: "Son cri est tout semblable à celui de la steppe dans la nouvelle du même nom de Tchekhov" (194) ("Its cry is very like that of the steppe in the novel of the same name by Chekhov"). This comparison of Chekhov's unjustly ignored steppe to Roy's hidden mountain, both of which plead for recognition, is genuinely perceptive.

But the Chekhovian aspect of Gabrielle Roy's work goes well beyond this detail or that. It is also found in her technique, broadly understood as the disposition of material into a form that conveys her vision of life. The production of *The Seagull* which she saw in London, for example, exuded for her "the sweet magic of what was

really most ordinary” (*Enchantment* 224), a “sweet magic” that she herself would later explore in the humdrum lives of her Canadian characters. Quotidian reality is “more powerful than the tumult of high drama, no doubt because it’s so much closer to us” (*Enchantment* 223), she wrote. In the course of a talk given to the Alliance Française in Montreal on December 1, 1955, she defined more precisely the kind of ordinary experience which Chekhov and other Russian authors influenced by Gogol made immortal:

Et qu’il devait y avoir de tendre pitié pour les malheureux au sein de ce peuple puisque c’est chez lui qu’apparurent Tchekhov et Gogol; Tchekhov, l’ami de ceux qui s’ennuient, l’ami de presque tous, l’ami de ceux dont la vie s’exhale en soupirs. Et Gogol, lui qui fut le premier à exprimer en littérature le pathétique du banal quotidien. (“Jeux du romancier et des lecteurs” 268).

196

(And how there must have been the most tender compassion for the unfortunate in the hearts of the [Russian] people for there to have appeared among them Chekhov and Gogol; Chekhov, the friend of the lonely, the friend of virtually everyone, the friend of those whose lives are exhaled in sighs; and Gogol, the first to express in literature the pathos of the banal quotidian. “The Interplay between the Novelist and the Readers”)

Roy then refers to Tolstoy’s famous dictum that all of Russian literature had its source in Gogol’s story *The Overcoat*, adding that Chekhov and his fellow-novelists found their deepest creative impulse expressed “dans ce beau conte qui ne dit rien de plus que la petite misère de chaque jour, la plus vraie parce que la plus répandue, la vie du plus grand nombre ayant en commun un sort ordinaire” (268) (“in this beautiful story which consists of nothing more than small diurnal miseries, most true because so widespread, the life of the greatest number of people who share a common fate”). This subject, Roy insisted, should fully engage the writer’s imagination. Beyond question, it engaged hers.

To depict the small trials of every day, Chekhov carefully chose, as Roy justly observed, “words any of us might say on any ordinary day, interspersed with sighs and silences just as in life, where a faraway look through a window suddenly says more than words” (*Enchantment* 223). The formula is one that Roy came to master. In her best work, the diction remains the most transparent of French. As well, she fixed brilliantly on the precise image to embody her themes, a technique which one of her American contemporaries poetically elaborated:

For all the history of grief
An empty doorway and a maple leaf.

For love,
The leaning grasses and two lights above the sea—(107)

Archibald MacLeish's examples bring Roy's own to mind. For the desire to escape the constraints of life, "a faraway look through a window." And for life in all its fragility, for freedom and for freedom denied - a seagull.

Not surprisingly, this famous Chekhovian symbol which so deeply impressed Roy found an echo in several of her works. Roy's attempts to emulate her mentor, however, were not always successful. It would be years before the fledgling author could apply with sufficient skill the lessons learned from Chekhov's play. Her inexpertise was evident, for example, in a short story entitled "Le joli miracle" ("The Beauteous Miracle") and written under the pseudonym Aline Lubac which appeared in the December, 1940 edition of *Le bulletin des agriculteurs*, a journal to which Roy regularly contributed articles as well as stories. It describes the plight of the young pianist Loubka who quits her job in a Montreal nightclub to avoid the unwelcome advances of the patrons. The artist who lives in the garret above her room buys a broken-down piano (the best he can afford) for her to play in the hope that she will be more receptive to his offer of marriage. Seeing in this gift that his love is the high-minded sort "qui songe à donner plus qu'à recevoir" (29) ("that seeks to give more than to receive"), she instantly accepts his proposal. As the summary of this hackneyed plot makes clear, the story would not merit republishing. It contains one interesting moment, however, when Loubka, seeking to divert herself with a book, chooses Chekhov's *The Seagull*. Leafing desultorily through it, she suddenly fixes on a speech by the womanizing Trigorin, a man whose only redeeming quality is a commitment to his art. Since this story is not easily accessible, the passage is reproduced here in its entirety:

Le frugal repas du soir expédié, Loubka relisait quelquefois les trois ou quatre volumes de sa collection. Cette fois, elle choisit machinalement "La Mouette" de Tchekhov. Et l'ouvrant au hasard, elle tomba sur ce passage dans lequel Trigorine dit: "Qu'y a-t-il d'extraordinaire à ma vie? Jour et nuit me poursuit une pensée absorbante; il faut écrire; il faut écrire; il le faut. A peine ai-je fini un conte, je dois en écrire un autre, je ne sais pourquoi, puis un troisième, et après le troisième un quatrième. J'écris sans interruption comme on court à la poste; et je ne peux faire autrement."

Les artistes dramatiques, les peintres, les musiciens, songea Loubka [...] sont soumis à une loi semblable. Mais ils sont dépendants. Un artiste dramatique dépend d'autres artistes, de l'ambiance d'un théâtre et d'une atmosphère particulière pour faire valoir sa création; un peintre ne peut rien sans couleurs, sans models; un musicien sans l'instrument qui lui est familier. L'écrivain seul, quant à cela, est indépendant. Tout au plus a-t-il besoin d'une plume et d'une feuille de papier pour donner forme à sa pensée. (30)

(Once the evening's frugal meal was over, Loubka sometimes reread the three or four books in her collection. This time, she chose mechanically Chekhov's *The Seagull*. Opening it at random, her eye fell upon the passage in which Trigorin says: "What is there that is exceptional about my life? Night and day I am haunted by one obsessive idea: I must write; I must write; it is essential. Before I have done with one story I feel I must write another, I don't know why, and then a third, and after the third a fourth. I write without stop as one runs to the postoffice; and I am not free to do otherwise."

Dramatic artists, painters, musicians, mused Loubka [,] are all subject to a similar law. But they are dependent. A dramatic artist needs other artists, the context of a theatre, and a particular ambiance for his [or her] work to be appreciated; a painter can do nothing without a tray of paints, without models; the same goes for a musician who lacks the familiar instrument. Only the writer, as far as it goes, is independent. The most he [or she] needs is a pen and a sheet of paper on which ideas can materialize.)

These musings cause Loubka to seek out, as its owner hoped she would, the piano which her artistic nature requires for its expression, thereby advancing the plot to its improbable end.

In the hands of an inexperienced writer, a literary allusion is a dangerous thing. Any reader familiar with *The Seagull* must feel uneasy when the villainous Trigorin is introduced into Loubka's story. Trigorin's lyrical evocation of the artistic soul was one with which Roy clearly identified, leading her to quote his speech verbatim. She seems to have overlooked the distracting parallel between Trigorin and the painter in her story: both men, after all, use their wives to lure an innocent young girl into entering a relationship with them. Of course Roy's high-minded painter who intends to marry Loubka is very different from the philandering Trigorin who seduces and then casts off the hapless Nina, an aspirant to the stage who bears him a stillborn child. None the less, the image of the artist as seducer works against Roy's intention in the story, and would best have been avoided.

By contrast, in Roy's masterful collection of short stories *Street of Riches* and in a posthumous memoir entitled *Le temps qui m'a manqué* (*The Time I Missed*), the use of seagull imagery is entirely successful. Here Roy moves beyond mere name-dropping to a deft manipulation of the image's symbolic possibilities as explored by Chekhov, namely freedom and its limitations. In the play, Trigorin obliquely expresses his intention to ruin Nina when he reads her a plot summary which he composes after seeing the body of a seagull killed by Konstantin, a young man in love with Nina: "On the shore of a lake lives a young girl like you," Trigorin tells the adoring young woman. "Like a seagull, she loves the lake, and she's happy and free like a seagull. But a man happens to come along and wrecks her life for want of anything better to do. As happened to this seagull" (*The Seagull* 257). By the end of the play Trigorin achieves his destruction of what is "happy and free," and the sadder but wiser Nina takes to signing her letters "Seagull," as if Chekhov feared that his symbolism would otherwise be missed. Trigorin's destructive act, which is underlined in the play by the stuffed dead bird, is doubly fatal: Nina's life is ruined, and Konstantin, devastated by her suffering at Trigorin's hands, commits suicide. Chekhov's symbol of life and freedom suffers a complete and very dark inversion of its initial meaning.

At the outset of a story from *Street of Riches* whose title is inaptly translated "The Gadabouts" (given the mother's guilt over her illicit trip, "The Deserters" would have been better, not to mention closer to the French title "Les déserteuses"), the narrator and her mother, Evelyn, stand on the Provencher bridge between Winnipeg and Saint Boniface. They are encircled by seagulls hovering over the Red River (49). The

meaning of these birds is not spelled out as in Trigorin's heavy-handed equations; nor does Roy make the kind of self-conscious allusions to Chekhov that she did in "Le joli miracle." Rather, the symbolism arises delicately out of the circumstances, a perfect "objective correlative," in T. S. Eliot's phrase, to Evelyn's freedom-starved soul.

Toward the middle of the Provencher Bridge, Maman and I found ourselves surrounded by sea gulls; they flew low over the Red River. Maman took my hand and clasped it tight, as though to convey to me a movement of her soul. A hundred times a day Maman got a lift of joy from the world around us; sometimes it was nothing more than the wind or the flight of a bird that delighted her. Leaning on the parapet we watched the gulls for a long while. And all of a sudden, on that bridge, Maman told me that she would like to be able to go whenever and wherever she might choose. Maman told me she still longed to be free; she told me that what died last in the human heart must be the liking for freedom; that even suffering and misfortune did not wear thin within her this inclination toward liberty . . . Maman quite frequently spoke to me of such notions, perhaps because I was too young to see anything wrong in them, perhaps also because she had no one else to whom she could speak of them.

199

Yet in the past Maman had already spoken of being free, and the only outcome had been even more children, much more sewing, much more work. As tied down as she was, why indeed did Maman never cease to wish for freedom?

As she watched the gulls, she began to smile, and she said to me, "One never knows! So many things happen! . . . Before I get really old, perhaps I'll travel, live through some adventure. . . ." (79-80)

Roy's restraint here is admirable. Evelyn's need to be as free as the birds in flight above her, if only briefly through a voyage home to Quebec, emerges simply and naturally by juxtaposition. Obvious explanations are avoided. What makes the scene especially moving is the child's obtuseness before Evelyn's desire to live fully by briefly shedding domestic care. The reader occupies a privileged position here, seeing the poignancy of Evelyn's entrapment as Christine cannot.

The seagull motif is maintained with similar delicacy throughout the story. After the father refuses to help Evelyn realize her ambition, either financially or otherwise, he returns to work in a neighbouring province, but she continues to hope: "Papa returned to his post, and the sea gulls returned to fly through our dreams and our thoughts" (87). Later, when mother and daughter cross the Saint Lawrence river during their actual trip, seagulls once again cross their path (101). The birds are not romanticized here but simply fade into the background of the Saint Lawrence river, with its floating greenery and the island of Saint Helen's. Interestingly, the symbol of freedom which had so compelled the attention of Evelyn the trapped housewife is hardly noticed by Evelyn the traveller. The reason is obvious: real freedom has enabled her to dispense with its symbol. Her indifference to the gulls is also due to the draining nature of her trip, in particular the sobering discovery that her friends and relatives suffer from bad marriages, loneliness, and poverty. Upon her return home

she placates her husband, who is still outraged by her “desertion,” with an edited version of her adventure. Her news of his Quebec home and family revives his long-forgotten past, and he suddenly asks if the old apple tree is still there, next to the barn, and if any part of the orchard remains. In the story’s beautiful final lines, the old Chekhovian symbol takes on a new complexity: “And Maman filled in the picture for him, lifelike and touching. Upon her face her memories were like birds in full flight” (111). The freedom which the gulls now represent for the once-more-confined Evelyn is the limited freedom conferred by the remembrance of things past.

On the day of her mother’s burial Roy recalled how the woman being lowered into her grave had once said, far more explicitly than her fictional counterpart, Evelyn, that the cry of the seagulls “appelait l’âme à la liberté comme nul autre cri au monde” (*Le temps qui m’a manqué* 60) (“invited the soul to embrace freedom like no other sound in the world”). A religious variation on the seagull image occurs when the mother calls miraculous the way in which the seagulls give people on the land-locked prairie a taste of the ocean, that symbol of infinity “dont nous n’aurions eu, sans elles, au milieu de nos terres, aucune idée. C’est elles qui nous en apportaient la nostalgie” (59) (“which without them we, in the middle of our land, would have had no idea. It is they who gave us a longing for it”). Just as Roy relives this moment, a flock of gulls suddenly swirls over the river near the cemetery. Her sisters, their eyes red and swollen with tears, stare in bafflement at the young author who follows the gulls’ swooping movements “en extase” (60), or in a state of ecstasy. She had received, she begins to understand, from her dead mother through “ce qu’elle avait aimé et m’avait fait aimer, plus encore peut-être que ce qu’elle m’avait donné au temps que nous appelions celui de sa vie” (59) (“what she loved and had brought me to love, even more perhaps than what she had given me during the period which we designated that of her life”). The seagulls are her inheritance, a symbol of the transmission of values from mother to daughter, in this case not just a sense of the importance of freedom in this world, but a hint of immortality in the next.

In “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” T. S. Eliot famously argued that new works, whose originality could be appreciated only when set against the backdrop of traditional productions, in their turn altered the canonical texts. Accordingly, a study of Chekhov’s influence on Roy not only illuminates the Chekhovian side of Roy, but also a “Royan” element in Chekhov. This reciprocity seemed perfectly natural to Roy. So attuned to it was she that, as a young woman in London on the eve of World War II, she invited an admirer there to come and visit her someday on her Manitoban “steppes,” a word he comically mistook for “steps” (*Enchantment* 345). But the affinity between their writings consists of something that goes far beyond any simple equivalence of flat terrain; nor can it be reduced to a similar image here, a common theme there, or a like method. Through the “strange alchemy” exerted upon Roy’s imagination by the reading of Chekhov, the local Canadian landscape and characters that she depicted were made to appear exotically Russian, just as their Russian counterparts in Chekhov to Roy seemed strangely Canadian, both writers

having triumphantly dramatized, as Roy once said the "ideal" writer should, "dans les coeurs humains ce que chacun possède à la fois d'unique et de plus semblable à tous" (*Roman canadien -français* 303) ("in the human heart both that which is unique and that which every person shares in common with everyone else").

WORKS CITED

- Chekhov, Anton. *The Seagull. The Oxford Chekhov: Platonov, Ivanov, The Seagull*. Ed. and Trans. Ronald Hingley. Volume II. London: Oxford UP, 1967. 229-81.
- Chekhov, Anton. *The Steppe. The Oxford Chekhov: Stories 1888-1889*. Ed. and Trans. Ronald Hingley. Volume IV. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1980. 13-95.
- Gagné, Marc. *Visages de Gabrielle Roy: L'oeuvre et l'écrivain*. Montreal: Beauchemin, 1973.
- Légaré, Céline. "Gabrielle Roy, romancière de l'espoir et de la détresse." *Perspectives (La Presse)* 7 Oct. 1972. Reprinted in *Rencontres et entretiens avec Gabrielle Roy 1947-1979*. Ed. Nadine Bismuth et al. Montreal: Boréal, 2005.
- MacLeish, Archibald. *New and Collected Poems, 1917-1976*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1976.
- Ricard, François. *Gabrielle Roy: A Life*. Trans. Patricia Claxton. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1999.
- Roy, Gabrielle. *Enchantment and Sorrow: The Autobiography of Gabrielle Roy*. Trans. Patricia Claxton. Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1987.
- . Interview. "Gabrielle Roy." In *Le roman canadien-français: Evolution, témoignages, bibliographie*. Ed. Paul Wyczinski et al. Montreal: Fides, 1964. 302-06.
- . "Jeux du romancier et des lecteurs." Appendix A. Marc Gagné, *Visages de Gabrielle Roy: L'oeuvre et l'écrivain*. Montreal: Beauchemin, 1973. 263-72.
- . "Le Cercle Molière . . . porte ouverte . . . : Souvenirs du Cercle Molière, 1936-1938." *Chapeau Bas: Réminiscences de la vie théâtrale et musicale du Manitoba français*. Première partie. Saint Boniface: Les éditions du blé, 1980.
- . "Le joli miracle." *Le bulletin des agriculteurs* (December, 1940): 8, 29-30.
- . *Le temps qui m'a manqué*. Ed. François Richard, Dominique Fortier and Jane Everett. Montreal: Boréal, 1997.
- . "My Manitoba Heritage." *The Fragile Lights of Earth: Articles and Memories 1942-1970*. Trans. Alan Brown. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1982.
- . *Street of Riches*. Trans. Harry L. Binsse. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1957.
- . *Where Nests the Water Hen*. Trans. Harry L. Binsse. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1951.

ENDNOTES

- 1 All translations in parentheses are mine.
- 2 Although Roy on several occasions expressed an ardent admiration for Russian writers, in her talk to the Alliance Française on December 1, 1955, she indirectly admitted that the longer Russian classics sometimes made her feel impatient: "Qui n'a pas eu la tentation, en lisant *Les frères Karamazov*, d'aller voir au terme du chapitre si certaines conversations interminables ne sont pas à la veille de finir? En lisant *Guerre et Paix*, d'ignorer le compte rendu minutieux des tactiques de guerre de Napoléon ainsi que des Russes?" ("Jeux du romancier et des lecteurs" 266) ("Who has not been tempted, when reading *The Brothers Karamazov*, to skip ahead to the end of the chapter to see if certain endless conversations are not almost finished? In reading *War and Peace*, to pass over the tediously minute details of the war strategies of Napoleon as well as of the Russians?" "The Interplay between the Novelist and the Readers"). Non-Russians such as Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, John Bunyan, Miguel de Cervantes, Thomas Mann, Paul Claudel, and Roy's beloved Marcel Proust are also added to the ranks of the long-winded, but only so that she might vindicate them all in the end: "Ne faut-il pas une inlassable patience pour attendre que, tout à coup, au moment où on allait peut-être se lasser de cette avalanche, de cette cataracte de mots, descende sur nous une belle et noble image . . . une image vraiment irremplaçable!" ("Jeux du romancier et des lecteurs" 266) ("Does not a person need to be unremittingly patient in order to encounter, perhaps at the very moment one was preparing to escape this avalanche, this flood of words, a beautiful and noble image . . . an image that is truly irreplaceable!")