

Paula Gilbert Lewis

THE LITERARY VISION OF GABRIELLE ROY: AN ANALYSIS OF HER WORK

Birmingham, Al: Summa Publications, 1984. Pp. 319

Reviewed by Theresia Quigley

Gabrielle Roy's greatest goal was "to be classified no longer as a *Québécoise*, French-Canadian, or Canadian writer, but to belong to world literature" (p. 302), writes Paula Gilbert Lewis in the concluding chapter of what is quite probably the most comprehensive analysis to date, in either French or English, of this outstanding author's work. Throughout her study, Gilbert Lewis stresses Roy's universal vision. Stating that the aim of her analysis was to present "the diverse and disparate themes, images and concerns of Gabrielle Roy's numerous works of fiction," she shows that, while distinctly *Québécoise* and Canadian, Roy's literary vision was also definitely international in scope and representative of all of humanity.

Her study concentrates on Roy's world of children, women, men, the aged, sick, and dying. The importance of nature in Roy's work is also explored, with an emphasis on the role of animals and flowers. "Her characters are never truly alone," writes Gilbert Lewis, "if they can communicate with their milieu, if they can create or rediscover links with their friends in nature" (p. 190). However, as other scholars of Roy's work have also pointed out, her characters are often portrayed as caged creatures. "They do try to plant flowers in their world," writes Gilbert Lewis, "but such acts are still performed within an often claustrophobic cage" (p. 297). Thus positive relationships with their fellow men or the world of nature are often denied them until it is too late.

Gilbert Lewis emphasizes the cyclical nature of Roy's universe. She shows that a typical Royan character lives in the present, remembering the past and hoping for the future. An entire chapter of her book is devoted to the importance of memory, dreams, and daydreams in the Royan universe. These, according to Gilbert Lewis, are often associated with imagined travel by those of Roy's people who are prevented by circumstances beyond their control from obeying "the call of the open road" (p. 234).

It is impossible for any serious scholar of Roy's work not to remark on the various influences on her literary perception by fellow writers and thinkers of her time. Roy, herself, has acknowledged the influence upon her by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, who like Roy sought in nature the reasons for hope. Gilbert Lewis further points to Teilhard de Chardin and to Pope John XXIII as having profoundly influenced the evolution of Roy's religious thought. She also repeatedly claims to see influences of French Naturalism in a certain determinism or fate that binds Royan characters to their tragic condition, and despite Roy's denial of any acceptance of a philosophy of the absurd, she finds that the tone of many of Roy's works, particularly of her novels, is strikingly similar to that of Camus's writings.

Gilbert Lewis's analysis is remarkably detailed, dealing with the whole spectrum of the Royan universe, beginning with her earliest short stories and including an interesting personal interview with the author in June of 1980. The study does, however, tend to be somewhat repetitive, possibly due to the fact that the same major works are examined several times from different angles. All quotations from Roy's work and most from other sources are in French. Since Gilbert Lewis quotes extensively, the book could possibly present some problems for the unilingual scholar.

It is evident that Gilbert Lewis is an enthusiastic admirer of Gabrielle Roy's work. Her analysis shows sensitivity and insight. She has indeed made a considerable contribution to Canadian literature.

Roy K. Bird

WRIGHT MORRIS: MEMORY AND IMAGINATION

New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1985. Pp. 147. \$22.20

Reviewed by G. B. Crump

Perhaps a novelist becomes an established subject of scholarly study only when the author of a critical book feels he can comfortably forgo a book-by-book introduction to the novelist's canon in favor of a thematic focus. The best thing about Roy K. Bird's *Wright Morris: Memory and Imagination* is that it does just that. Bird examines Morris as a "self-conscious novelist" in

the sense defined by Robert Alter. That is, he examines how Morris's "novels mold a fictive world that mirrors and yet at the same time transforms perceived reality," while constantly reminding the reader of the inescapable fictive element in mimesis. Bird provides essays on Morris's use of "defamiliarizing techniques" to transform commonplace details and clichés, his efforts to "repossess" his past, his use of narrative voice to underscore the subjectivity of characters' perspectives, and his last two novels, *The Fork River Space Project* and *Plains Song*.

Bird's thesis is promising, and his choice of Alter as a model is especially apt because among contemporary novelists, Morris is the one who strikes the finest balance between conventional realism and the avant-garde aesthetics of metafiction, and Alter, unlike many critics of postmodernist fiction, also insists on that balance. Portions of Bird's study satisfy the promise of his thesis: his chapter on Morris's narrative voice is often excellent, and there are several good passages of explication (the analysis of a flour sack turned towel in *A Life*, for instance).

Unfortunately, the study also contains serious lapses. Although Bird sometimes cites fashionable theories to develop his analysis, Morris's own statements on such subjects as the transformation of clichés are clear enough without imposing ideas like Shklovsky's concept of *defamiliarization* on them, and the brief efforts to apply Marshall McLuhan and Harold Bloom are arbitrary and confusing. The chapter on Morris's use of the past says too little that is new about this much-discussed subject, and although he claims to examine the last two novels because they are representative of Morris, Bird's major reason for explicating them in detail seems to be that no one else has done it. Bird asserts his study is diachronic as well as synchronic, but it actually suggests Morris always felt the same way about the fictional status of vision as he does in *The Fork River Space Project*. The truth is that Morris has stressed this fictional quality more as he has grown older, and this late novel, far from being representative, is really his *most extreme treatment of the fictionality theme*.

The study also suffers from poor editing. It contains factual errors (for instance, Hodler, of *In Orbit*, is called "Holder," and Lawrence, of *The Huge Season*, is said to have died in a bullfight instead of shooting himself). It has no index but many unnecessary footnotes, and the bibliography section listing about eighty theoretical works on the novel is superfluous. Inside this short book, one or two astute and trenchant articles about Wright Morris are struggling to get out. They are what make this study worthwhile.