



The literary journalist Gabrielle Roy (1909–1983)
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Towards a History of Reportage in French Canada: From the Beginning of the Twentieth Century to Gabrielle Roy

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Abstract: Quebec and French Canada do not have a historiography of reportage, which might appear surprising insofar as this journalistic genre has enjoyed much success in the Western press. But the literary history of Quebec nevertheless remembers the articles published by the major novelist, Gabrielle Roy. For six years, from 1939 to 1945—before her first novel was published in 1945, *Bonheur d'occasion* (The Tin Flute), which brought her immediate fame—Roy wrote reportages and short stories for several Montreal newspapers and periodicals, including *Le Canada*, *Le Jour*, *Le Bulletin des agriculteurs*, the *Revue moderne*, and, in particular, the *Revue populaire*. Her reportages dealt with urban and social questions, the farming world, and French Canadian immigration, among other subjects. A quick survey of the francophone press of the first half of the century shows that reportage was well and truly being practiced, and that Roy falls within this tradition of the writing of reality. But we also discover, in this initial general approach to the genre in Quebec (one which remains to be carried out systematically), that subjects such as the life of ethnic communities, or the social conditions of francophone farmers and workers, constituted the subjects of choice for reporters from French Canada from the beginning of the century. Roy thus appropriates one of the inflections of the genre, which for her constituted a great schooling in writing, and which would amply nourish her first novel.

Keywords: history of reportage – French Canada – Quebec – Gabrielle Roy – literary history – Germaine Guèvremont – *Revue moderne* – *La Presse* – *Le Matin* – grand reportage

Quebec and French Canada do not have a historiography of reportage. As surprising as it may seem, in a country where literature was forged in the crucible of journalism, where the literary culture is wholly attached to the culture of the periodical, we know nothing, or nearly nothing, of the leading genre of news information in Quebec. If it is accepted that there came into being in a relatively synchronous manner, everywhere in the West, sometime in the heart of the nineteenth century, new methods of practicing journalism, of tackling the real, of making its effects felt and of immersing oneself in it, and that this global movement gave rise to a kind of golden age of written reportage in the first half of the following century, we nevertheless know nothing of the ways in which French Canada contributed to it. No historian or literary critic has ventured to produce a history of francophone reportage, of the writings and imaginaries convoked. If this latter genre remains unconsidered by North American francophone research, it is perhaps because it does not have—at first sight at least—as clear a link with literature as it was able to establish, or even continues to enjoy today, in France and in the United States. Moreover, it seems that in the contemporary world of news information in Quebec, “reportage” is synonymous with something more immediately and factually “realist,” and that the work of writing, a concern for style, or the construction of an original perspective on the world, are not the elements that characterize it. As such, it can still appear incongruous to include reportage in a general study of journalistic poetics.

Yet there remains, miraculously preserved, a small peak of earth emerging from this submerged continent, a corpus, that of the novelist Gabrielle Roy. Such a miracle nonetheless has an explanation: it is obvious that the recognition of the novelistic oeuvre has benefited the journalistic oeuvre, that a little light drawn here has enabled a slight illumination of that which was found there, and that once again it has been necessary to pass through the recognized work to return to the lesser known oeuvre. Roy, who published her first novel, *Bonheur d'occasion*, in 1945 (published as *The Tin Flute* in English), a novel that brought her immediate fame, thus entered into literature via journalism. Born in 1909 in Manitoba, in the center of Canada, the writer published her first series of articles at the end of the 1930s, notably four “Letters from London” in *La Liberté et le Patriote* (Freedom and the Patriot), a Franco-Manitoban newspaper.¹

But on her return from an eighteen-month sojourn in England and France, in spring 1939, Roy did not go back to Manitoba and instead settled in Montreal. Without an income, she wished to establish herself in journalism, while also getting two articles published in Paris, in *Je suis partout* (I Am Everywhere).² She soon embarked on six years of journalism, which

would lead her to the threshold of *Bonheur d'occasion*, a major social novel on working-class Montreal in which her experience with urban reportage would be decisive.

Studying Roy's reportage is an invitation to take an open and decompartmentalized look at her oeuvre, at least at that of her beginnings, because the novelist practiced journalism for only six years, 1939–1945, before abandoning it in favor of the novel. But this gaze toward the future, to see in journalism the impetus behind the novel, can also be reversed. Is not *Gabrielle Roy, journalist*, in fact a kind of terminal point for another history, a history yet to be written, this blank page of the literary history of French Canada, and to which I alluded at the beginning, that of the genre of reportage? How are we to understand this young woman, hesitating between theater, literature, and teaching, at the threshold of the 1940s, finding her path by passing through journalism? And not just any journalism—not the type of journalism that media culture had for a long time generally entrusted to women—but indeed this field of reportage, the journalism of exploration, of travel? And must we thus concur with Roy's biographer, François Ricard, who seems to make of this journalism a unique case in Quebec?

The journalism practiced by Gabrielle Roy stands apart from . . . that practiced by the majority of her male colleagues. Rare are they among them, the genuine reporters who venture out far from their editing desks, who are one step ahead of people and things and give themselves up, as it were, to the disorder and the surprises of the world. Gabrielle Roy, in this respect, represents a unique case, she who works in the “American style,” one might say, a little like an Ernest Hemingway did formerly, or as a Steinbeck or a Dos Passos were doing more or less during the same era as hers.³

We are thus once again up against this nonexistence of reportage in Quebec, this blind task that sketches in counter-relief a context in which the practice of Roy is singularly incongruous.

You Will Be a Journalist

Several clues lead one to believe that this observation only imperfectly traces the contours of the real situation in which Roy found herself. I would first of all like to start by going to look at the fiction—not that of the author of *Bonheur d'occasion*, but in that of one of her predecessors, Germaine Guèvremont—for some clues about a more complex situation, a little more confused and richer than is generally thought. Guèvremont wrote a novel, which is an exact contemporary of Gabrielle Roy's beginnings in reportage, published in the monthly *Paysana* in 1939 and 1940. This novel is called *Tu seras journaliste* (*You Will Be a Journalist*), and introduces a kind of double of

Guèvremont, Caroline, a young woman who is just starting out in journalism as the correspondent of a Montreal newspaper, in a small town which we surmise is Sorel, where the author in fact lived. In the second chapter, published in May 1939, the narrator confides her fascination for the French *grand reportage*, which could serve as a model for a young female writer, as well as its difficulties: “When she read the great reports of the French journalists, she had the certitude that she could reach their level. Grappling with the profession, she was less sure of it. She was moving towards journalism with the ardor of a neophyte, ready to give it her best. She would make of it a calling.”⁴

It seems almost certain that French reportage was read and admired in Quebec, but one would need to retrace with more clarity the circulation, on the other side of the ocean, of the collections of major reportages published in Paris. As for the effective practice of the genre by journalists in Montreal and Quebec, where the principal francophone newspapers were based, the material needs to be sifted through, but a quick survey rapidly reveals that the situation must have been more nuanced than Roy’s biographer first thought.

If reportage is relatively rare in French Canada—and that observation would need to be backed up—it is by no means nonexistent. Little is known about the real practices of these field journalists, and Jean de Bonville’s major survey of the Quebec press, 1884–1914, has no equivalent for the following years.⁵ The field is even more sparse when one looks to carry out research into journalistic poetics, beyond book reviewing and column writing, which are better covered by literary history. But a few signposts demonstrate that since the beginning of the century, major reportage was indeed being produced in the daily press as much as in certain periodicals. I have elsewhere shown the importance assumed by a genuine international spectacle, the 1901 race around the world carried out by a dozen or so journalists—a stunt in which they competed to beat the fictional record Jules Verne’s character Phileas Fogg achieves in the 1873 adventure novel, *Around the World in 80 Days*. Two correspondents from *La Presse*, Lorenzo Prince and Auguste Marion, picked up the challenge issued by the Parisian Gaston Stiegler of the newspaper *Le Matin*.⁶ Other corpuses must be explored and in certain cases reread with the new analytical methods stemming from the literary history of the press, for example those of Jules Fournier or Jean-Charles Harvey in the 1910s and 1920s, the latter being the single reporter figure fleetingly cited by the collective *La Vie littéraire* in Quebec.⁷ Ongoing surveys of the material for the 1870–1939 period will doubtless confirm the French Canadian appropriation of a globalized journalistic genre.⁸

More importantly, in abandoning—at least momentarily—the monographic approach centered on the major literary figures, and in carrying

out more exhaustive surveys of the material, new discoveries will not fail to emerge. In the 1930s, for example, reportage can regularly be found in periodicals such as *Revue moderne* (Roy contributed several stories to this publication between 1939 and 1942; I will return to them later.) The *Revue moderne*, founded in 1919 by Madeleine (Anne-Marie Gleason), published fiction, criticism, international news, and subjects of interest for women—in short, a finely crafted magazine, amply illustrated. There were numerous short, autonomous reportages, sometimes called “Documentaries,” which do not go beyond one installment. The subjects, as the genre demanded, were varied: presentations of low-paid jobs and occasionally of social destitution,⁹ explorations of Quebec regions,¹⁰ tourist sites,¹¹ particular urban areas (for instance, a series was published on “Cosmopolitan Montreal” in 1937, which announced Roy’s debut in reportage, to which I shall also return),¹² following public figures on holiday or abroad,¹³ cultural news,¹⁴ and the life of institutions.¹⁵ The expression “grand reportage,” rarer than the term “reportage,” was convoked for a series of three long articles of nineteen pages, entitled “Au cœur de l’Islam” (“At the Heart of Islam”),¹⁶ immersing the reader in the reality of Mecca and its region. Also, in 1936, under the banner “Exclusive report,” was Hollywood reportage.¹⁷

In such a corpus, certain items belong to the classics of the genre: the articles on Hollywood and Mecca, social and urban investigations, or going down a mine. One of the major topics of reportage, we find a good example of mining coverage in the October 1932 installment entitled, “Au fond de la mine d’Eustis-Capelton. À quinze minutes de Sherbrooke” (At the Bottom of the Eustis-Capelton Mine: Fifteen Minutes Away from Sherbrooke). Signed by an “attorney,” Léonidas Bachand, this article in the *Revue moderne* activates all the poetic aspects of the reportage genre: descending into a mine is one of the major matrixes of reportage, whose imaginary immerses itself in the France of the nineteenth century. Since the 1860s, in fact, journalists often descended down mineshafts, which enabled two major motifs of reportage to be brought together, the exploration of working-class life (a world readers would not often be familiar with), as well as the representation of the body of the reporter, as a form of “sensualist” testimony to the accuracy of the facts reported.¹⁸ Evoking Dante’s descent into Hell, the reporters placed themselves in danger for the benefit of their readers, and would subsequently metaphorically call upon the imaginary of this “descent,” the exploration of the margins of society and its “lowest depths.”¹⁹ In a reportage he produced in Argentina, Albert Londres wrote: “I wanted to descend into the pits where society gets rid of that which threatens it and that which it cannot feed off.”²⁰ This imagery is thus skillfully made use of in its turn by the amateur reporter

of the *Revue moderne*, convoking the lot: danger, the interminable descent into the pits, the darkness of the mine galleries, the nether regions. He writes, concerning the excavating machines, that they “make a sound from hell—I tell you that we are very close to it, believe me. . . .”²¹

Bearing Witness to Advances Across the Continent

Other Canadian reportages are translations or adaptations of a globalized genre. Particularly characteristic of the local practice of reportage are concerns about the exploration of distant regions, the north of Quebec and colonization, bearing witness to the advances made by Canadians into the heart of a continent that had not yet been completely cleared, and everything falling within the economic reality of these same populations. I find the origins of these reportages at the beginning of the twentieth century, when French Canadian workers were participating in industrial enterprises in the eastern United States, and the settlers were advancing towards central and western Canada. This constituted a source of curiosity for Quebec newspapers, anxious to follow the evolution of the living conditions and development of Canadian francophone populations. One journalist who followed this reportage practice was Jules Fournier (1884–1918), who worked at *La Presse* in 1903, and then at *Canada* from 1904 to 1908, and on behalf of which he produced a series on the francophone peoples of New England and their living conditions. Entitled “Chez les Franco-américains” (“With the Franco-Americans”), the reportage was published in eighteen articles from October 30, 1905 to January 18, 1906. Another example is the work of Gilbert Larue, a young journalist who joined *La Presse* in 1905, and who from June 1910 was sent to report on the francophone communities of Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Alberta. The major reportage that resulted from this voyage, “Nos francophones dans l’Ouest Canadien” (“Our Francophones in Western Canada”), is a model of the genre, which invites us to return now to the corpus of Roy. We will be able to better understand to what extent the major novelist-journalist took her place in a media tradition that largely preceded her.

To begin, let us recall that it was with *Jour* (Day) that she made her debut as a regular contributor, the weekly run by Jean-Charles Harvey, author of *Les demi-civilisés* (The Half-civilized), a 1934 novel about journalism that was important in Quebec. In *Jour* she published articles for the woman’s page, some thirty or so in total, in which she drew on her memories of travel in particular. Still in 1939, she published stories in the *Revue moderne*, where she made the acquaintance of its literary director, Henri Girard, the beginning of a liaison that would last several years.²² Girard was a well-known figure

in the Montreal literary and media world, and he would guide Roy, open certain doors for her, notably those of the *Bulletin des agriculteurs* (Farmers’ Bulletin), in which Roy would publish the majority of her reportages. The *Bulletin*, launched in 1918, was a monthly that enjoyed enormous success in the 1940s, with a circulation of around 150,000 copies in 1948.²³ Intended for rural Quebec but devised in Montreal, the *Bulletin* offered varied content. Apart from agricultural questions, widely covered, there were columns, short stories, novels published in installments, and the news—Europe at war was obviously the center of attention when Roy was contributing to the *Bulletin*. In the last lines of her autobiography, which deals with her years of training, entitled *La détresse et l’enchantement* (Suffering and Enchantment), the novelist remembers the school of reportage, which would lead to the writing of *Bonheur d’occasion*, and what she would soon owe to the *Bulletin des agriculteurs*, “which would,” she writes, “provide me with the opportunity to handle subjects drawing me closer to facts, to reality, to the close observation of things.”²⁴ In 1941, Roy’s reportage on Montreal’s Saint-Henri neighborhood working class would constitute the backdrop to her first novel, in which she makes use of the imaginaries of urban reporting. She writes again of this neighborhood in *La détresse et l’enchantement*. After her four reportages were published under the title, “Tout-Montréal”²⁵ (“All Montreal”), she returned to it “to listen, to observe,” in order to put together the “subject matter of a novel.”²⁶ In Saint-Henri she discovered, as she writes this time in her reportage, “a nation of termites [that] lives at the heart of the great industrial inferno,” “Its horizon is sullied, restricted on all sides.”²⁷ Roy observed the existence of “thongs of female workers in overalls” who at day’s end threw themselves into “the rush for amusements,”²⁸ as would soon Florentine Lacasse, the heroine of *Bonheur d’occasion*. Between the work of journalist and novelist, the border was slender, and the writer-journalist had in a short period of time fully experienced the city, immersed herself in the crowd, and listened to and observed the life of a working-class neighborhood situated in the south of the island of Montreal.

Addressing Colonial Realities

How are we not to see a kinship in the reportages of the novelist and these investigations, which, since the beginning of the century, have addressed the francophone and colonial realities of the North American continent? For the *Bulletin des agriculteurs*, Roy produced several reportages about the far-off regions of Quebec. For instance, she followed several families who were leaving Îles-de-la-Madeleine, in the Gulf of Saint Lawrence, to participate in the clearing of Abitibi for the construction of a paper mill at

Iroquois Falls. Another series of reportages looked at the “Peoples of Canada,” in which Roy explored the living conditions of several immigrant communities in western Canada. She also published reportages on the West, both Canadian and American, for the daily *Le Canada*.²⁹ The route she followed, which led her from Saint-Boniface, the small Manitoban francophone town of her childhood, as far as the borders of Alaska, echoes Gilbert Larue’s reportage, in particular the interest the journalist takes in the concrete realities of francophone settlers. But Roy is more original than her predecessor, thanks to her immersion in the various ethnic groups that crossed her path. She did not assign any specific mission to francophone settlers, if not that of participating with the other “minorities” (her term³⁰) at the heart of Canada in the sublime movement of foundation that so fascinated her.³¹

Through the impressionistic aspect of her reportages, through the sensitivity she deploys, and through her willingness to immerse herself in the real while being concerned with the effects of literature, and despite the relative brevity of her practice, Roy is certain to be aligned closely with the vast movement of “writer-journalists,” well studied by Myriam Boucharenc in the French case.³² The genre is complex and does not take shape without tensions and hybridizations among factual writing, the desire being to create a body of work within a process of legitimization. It is well known that literary reportage was in vogue far beyond the borders of France, drawing from its origins in the United States and spreading almost everywhere in the West,³³ including Belgium, for example.³⁴ Quebec was doubtless no exception. In the final analysis, Roy’s reportage was both the resumption by the future novelist of a journalistic genre that had a long tradition in Western newspapers, and a positioning in a typically Canadian filiation, that of an attentiveness to the continent’s francophone communities with a view to accompanying and understanding their dispersion over a vast territory.

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Notes

1. See the complete bibliography in François Ricard, *Gabrielle Roy, une vie*. Collection Compact (Montreal: Boréal, 2000), 596ff.
2. “Les Derniers nomades,” *Je suis partout*, October 21, 1938; and “Noëls canadiens-français,” *Je suis partout*, December 30, 1938. There is a third Roy article, “Comment nous sommes restés français au Manitoba,” *Je suis partout*, August 18, 1939.
3. Ricard, *Gabrielle Roy*, 227.
4. Germaine Guèvremont, *Tu seras journaliste et autres œuvres sur le journalisme*. Collection Les écrits de Germaine Guèvremont (Montreal: Presses de l’Université de Montréal, 2013), 79.
5. Jean de Bonville, *La Presse québécoise de 1884 à 1914. Genèse d’un média de masse* (Quebec: Presses de l’Université Laval, 1988).
6. See the pages which I devote to this event in Guillaume Pinson, *La Culture médiatique francophone en Europe et en Amérique du Nord, de 1760 à la veille de la Seconde Guerre mondiale*. Collection Cultures québécoises (Quebec, Presses de l’Université Laval, 2016), 292–304.
7. Denis Saint-Jacques and Lucie Robert, *La Vie littéraire au Québec*, vol. 6, 1919–1933 (Quebec, Presses de l’Université Laval, 2010), 89.
8. Working under joint supervision, Charlotte Biron (Université Laval and Université de Montpellier) is currently writing a doctoral thesis on literary reportage in Quebec, from Arthur Buies to Gabrielle Roy.
9. Léonidas Bachland, “Au fond de la mine d’Eustis-Capleton,” *Revue mod-*

erne, October 1932, 6, 7, 31; “Une visite au pénitencier de Saint-Vincent-de-Paul,” *Revue moderne*, May 1936, 8, 9, 55; “Guerre à la faim! Ou les cent masques de la misère,” *Revue moderne*, April 1937, 14, 15, 29.

10. Anne de Mishaegen, “Une chasse au caribou,” *Revue moderne*, March 1933, 5; Robert Rumilly, “Au cœur de la Mauricie. Reportage,” *Revue moderne*, September 1936, 9, 10, 53; *Revue moderne*, October 1936, 6, 7; and *Revue moderne*, November 1936, 21, 23, 24, 28; Damase Potvin, “Au pays des montagnes, des lacs et des fjords,” *Revue moderne*, June 1937, 12–13, 18; E. Juchereau-Duchesnay, “L’Île-aux-Grues,” *Revue moderne*, January 1938, 6–7.

11. Auguste Galibois, “Tourisme dans le parc national des Laurentides,” *Revue moderne*, April 1936, 13, 26; Paul Renaud, “Du neuf en pays neuf. Reportage” (About a Hotel in Estérel, to the North of Montreal), *Revue moderne*, December 1937, 9–11, 26, 57.

12. Fernand Lacroix, “Rendez-vous chinois dans Montréal cosmopolite,” *Revue moderne*, March 1937, 5–6, 29; Fernand Lacroix, “Montréal cosmopolitique: le quartier juif,” *Revue moderne*, April 1937, 16–17, 28; see also Paul Renaud, “Souffles de mer” (On the Port of Montreal), *Revue moderne*, July 1937, 10–11, 17, as well as Marcelle Lepage, “Le jardin botanique de Montréal. Reportage,” *Revue moderne*, October 1938, 4–5.

13. Marise Achpise, “Nos souverains à Paris,” *Revue moderne*, September 1938, 6–7.

14. Jean Barois, “Les Immortels. Reportage sur l’Académie française,” *Revue moderne*, September 1938, 4–5, 42.

15. Jean Barois, “Le collège Stanislas. Reportage,” *Revue moderne*, November 1938, 4–5.

16. Jean Barois, “Au cœur de l’Islam. Grand reportage,” *Revue moderne*, September 1937, 4–7, 18–20, 26, 28; *Revue moderne*, October 1937, 6–7, 16, 18, 19, 24; and *Revue moderne*, November 1937, 6, 7, 38, 40.

17. Louise G.-Gilbert, “Le petit monde des artistes à Hollywood,” *Revue moderne*, June 1936, 9; and “Le petit monde des artistes à Hollywood. Reportage exclusif,” *Revue moderne*, July 1936, 7, 31.

18. See Marie-Ève Thérénty, “Dante reporter. La création d’un paradigme journalistique,” *Autour de Vallès*, no. 38 (2008): 57–72.

19. Dominique Kalifa, *Les Bas-fonds. Histoire d’un imaginaire*. Collection L’univers historique (Paris: Seuil, 2013).

20. Quoted by *ibid.*, 67.

21. Albert Londres, *Le Chemin de Buenos Aires (La Traite des blanches)*, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Arléa, 2007), 469, quoted by Thérénty, “Dante reporter,” 67.

22. See Ricard, *Gabrielle Roy*, 207.

23. *Ibid.*, 213.

24. Gabrielle Roy, *La Détresse et l’enchantement* (Montreal: Boréal, 1984), 505.

25. Gabrielle Roy, “Tout-Montréal,” *Bulletin des agriculteurs*, June, July, August, September 1941.

26. Roy, *La Détresse et l’enchantement*, 503.

27. Gabrielle Roy, “Du port au banquet,” *Bulletin* (August 1941), quoted in the series *Heureux les nomades et autres reportages 1940–1945*, eds. Antoine Boisclair and François Ricard, with the collaboration of Jane Everett and Sophie Marcotte, Collection Gabrielle Roy (Montreal: Boréal, 2007), 69.

28. *Ibid.*, 70.

29. On the complete reportages and Roy’s journalistic period, see Ricard, *Gabrielle Roy*, chapter 6, and the exhaustive bibliography at the end of the book.

30. Gabrielle Roy, “Le plus étonnant: les Huttérites,” *Bulletin des agriculteurs*, November 1942, 32, quoted by Ricard, *Gabrielle Roy*, 232; there is “a place for all the minorities,” she writes.

31. See Ricard, *Gabrielle Roy*, 233–234.

32. Myriam Boucharenc, *L’Écrivain-reporter au cœur des années trente* (Lille: Presses universitaires du Septentrion, 2004).

33. See Isabelle Meuret, “Le Journalisme littéraire à l’aube du XXI^e siècle: regards croisés entre mondes anglophone et francophone,” in “Le littéraire en régime journalistique,” eds. Paul Aron and Vanessa Gemis, special issue, *Contextes*, no. 11 (2012), <https://contextes.revues.org/5376>.

34. See Paul Aron ed., “Les Écrivains-journalistes,” special issue, *Textyles. Revue des lettres belges de langue française*, no. 39 (2010).