

# MAVIS GALLANT:

## *Returning Home:*

Amongst writers, the reputation of Mavis Gallant is well established--as it should be. She has published over one one hundred short stories, two novels, two novellas and two documentaries (one on the Gabrielle Russier affair in France and the other on the Paris "Events in May" of 1968), as well as many newspaper articles when she was a reporter for the Montreal Standard. How is it, then, that with this fine body of work to her credit, she is not better known among the reading public or even in the academic world? Part of the reason is that, although a Canadian, she has lived abroad since 1950, mostly in Paris and publishes the majority of her short stories in The New Yorker, often seeming to write with an American audience in mind. At the moment she is working on a history of the Dreyfus case, so perhaps the French will yet claim her as theirs, even though she writes in English. However, there are at least two critical studies on her fiction at Canadian publishers at the moment. In addition, Canadian Fiction Magazine is bringing out a special issue on Gallant during the summer. Perhaps she will soon be as familiar to the Canadian reader as she deserves.

With a writer as prolific and brilliant as Gallant, many possible approaches are available to her work. For instance, there is the progression in her fictional forms from realism to internal psychological fragmentation. Similarly, her short stories can be seen

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as poems in which an imagistic pattern often counters the narrative line. In this paper, however, I wish to pursue the thesis that although the bulk of Gallant's fiction constitutes a brilliant critique of romantic individualism, Gallant herself has recently become dissatisfied with the "negative" qualities of this critique. During the last few years her stories show her moving beyond her earlier "classical" portrayals to a new, personal style which describes her own involvement in the breakdown of the larger social frame. As will be seen presently, Gallant's recent series of "Montreal stories" appearing in The New Yorker reverses many of her previous directions.

First, however, it is necessary to look at her earlier material. In a typical Gallant story, the characters are sad, repressed and generally incapable of breaking free of stultifying conventions. Paradoxically, however, they also desire to rebel against their circumstances. Much of the force in Gallant's fiction develops from her portrayal of the way in which the rebellion itself becomes part of the middle-class convention to erase life's rough surfaces. Gallant's portraits reveal that the positive correlation between "individual" and "social" has degenerated into the wasteland of "personal-impersonal." It turns out that the im-personal society is the creation of persons who lack true individuality. Indeed, in many of the stories, Gal-

lant's artistry is such that it is impossible to tell where the individual ends and society begins. As a result, many of Gallant's early stories of the 1950s embody that quality of "épaisseur triste" which René Char, poet and writer, coined in Feuillets d'Hypnos to describe the "sad opaqueness" of individuals who once enjoyed a public goal, but are now weightless, centred only on a private life.(1)

One of the best stories to show this pattern is "The Other Paris," of 1953, where the young American girl, Carol, has "unoriginal plans" to marry but is actually looking for the other, "romantic," Paris that has disappeared after the war.(2) When given the chance to find a new kind of "other" Paris in the form of Felix, a black marketeer, Carol recognizes for a moment that here is the chance to live the exciting life for which she has searched. But she turns down the opportunity for what she considers the best of reasons. Carol desires neither luxuries nor material goods, although these are involved. Ultimately what matters is independence. With her fiancé, "no one could point to them, or criticize them, or humiliate them by offering to help."(3) In other words, the old goal of the pioneers, self-sufficiency, has led to a noble cul-de-sac in which Carol prefers the social dignity that comes from independence rather than the love that comes from dependence.

How then is the conflict between desire for love and the desire for indepen-

dence resolved? Not by a sudden confrontation. With Gallant, the individual erases the confrontation, so that it seems never to have appeared. As Gallant comments of Carol, hastening away from Felix, "After a while, happily married, mercifully removed in time, she would remember it and describe it and finally believe it as it had never been at all." (4) As the piling up of clauses reveals, Carol closes her own circle of self-destruction: the representative of the educated middle class shuts out the possibilities of intimacy with Felix, the representative of a repressed class. For such people, the private life is actually only a surface play of static social conventions; there can be no life that links directly with the social forces which are actually in the process of shaping the world.

As I mentioned earlier, Gallant is interested, not only in the plight of the Carols of the world, but in what happens to entire nations when they are composed of Carols. Inevitably, this leads Gallant in the years 1963 to 1972 to write a series of short stories set in Germany, which, taken together, are clearly attempts to probe something of the German character in the post-war period. Gallant herself has said that she was attempting to explain the reasons for World War II, which had its psychological roots, she believes, in middle class attitudes. In 1973, some of the stories were col-

lected, and along with the novella "The Pegnitz Junction," were published in the book of that title. It is quite an extraordinary work, exuding a sinister feeling of an entire nation being involved in a capitulation to a state of mind that is dead and yet at the same time alive with the most destructive forces. As Gallant reveals, the individual-social axis has been replaced by a style of life in which individuals, cut off from social involvement, develop the impersonal kind of social life that renders them helpless, mere mind-webs without social extension. In one sense, Gallant's thesis is still middle-class enervation but now the stories reveal how enervation leads, not just to the destruction of an individual, but to the participation of an entire people in a monstrous "colouration." It is Alexander Pope's paradox of the "inertly strong" forces of dullness, or even the classical notion of the vis inertiae, as the stuff of the world. While the stories are not about the beginning of the war, but about post-war conditions, the patterns of behaviour suggest that the same thing could happen again.

The best place to see this in operation is in the story, "The Pegnitz Junction," which Gallant considers one of her better works. On the surface, it is simply the description of a train journey from Paris to Strasbourg taken by Christine, her older lover Herbert, and his son, called little Bert. They never reach their destination but along the way

we gradually become aware that nothing is right or normal in the journey or between the people. Moreover, by the end of the novella, so many stories have been introduced within stories that everything seems to be flying apart. The storyline resembles the course of Germany itself with the young people on board a train that is continually rerouted. The people themselves, with no clear purpose, are shunted in all sorts of odd directions by the trivia of the moment.

By itself, the metaphor of the train taking people on a journey over which they have no control works well to give a sense of political anarchy. For Gallant, however, society is never just an abstraction, and thus she introduces examples of personal relationships breaking down, so that the political metaphor is informed with its psychic and even metaphysical dimensions. History becomes human lives in action. On the surface, Herbert, Christine and Little Bert are a family, but in fact all traditional bonds holding them together are gone: while Herbert would like to be the paterfamilias, Christine feels the need to guard herself against his domination; in turn Little Bert is both spoiled and tyrannized. The family situation is totally fragmented with no traditional bonds, and no acceptance of pattern in relationships. As the same sort of dislocation occurs with the political metaphor of the journey, it is impossible to tell where the psychic dimension

leaves off and the political one begins.

Authority--as opposed to power--is clearly one of Gallant's main concerns as can be seen in her characterization of Herbert, the engineer, who is perceptively critical but lacking in courage and humanity. In Herbert, Gallant is describing the technocrat's cynical journey through fascism (along with the German governing classes) during the pre-war years when they acceded to the fanatics whom they despised but were confident they could eventually control. A similar example occurs when the train conductor, who seems at first a harmless, jovial person learns to terrorize the older passengers with assumed power. A word from Christine is all it takes to subdue the conductor's wild antics and for a moment essential humanity triumphs but it is a small incident in what appears to be the development of a Joycean Nighttown.

In this strange situation where the individual no longer gains his individuality by his participation in society, but is merely a discrete person adrift in impersonality, it is impossible for characters to develop the autonomy to use their knowledge of the past to enlighten the present or direct the future. An immensely funny, yet sinister, example of this is the manner in which a tour guide first consoles his group for the erratic train schedule by mentioning "one hundred familiar names," like Bach, Brahms and Mozart,

and then leads them back into acute anxiety by introducing "the Adolf time."(5) The leader plays on the people's emotions and they follow into contradictions without end. The past is no longer a tradition or a synthesis of events but a collection of names, each of which is capable of producing an emotional reaction.

In some ways Christine is the exemplum of modern woman, in that, while engaged to a theology student, she is also the lover of Herbert, the engineer. She cannot make up her mind whether to embrace religion, with its metaphysical solace, or applied science, with its manipulation of present-day reality. At the end, Christine's future remains unclear. The trio has reached the Pegnitz Junction, where they are to catch the connecting train home. But at this crucial moment Herbert becomes separated from Christine and Little Bert. Strangely enough, in the midst of confusion, Christine calmly begins to tell the story--one she had attempted to tell the child earlier--about a family with four sons, all named George. To tell them apart, the family pronounces the name differently in each case--a suggestion of the brotherhood of man. For a moment, the reader wonders whether Christine is not reaching out to the child in a gesture of kindness that she has been unable to give so far. This is perhaps the case but she chooses the very moment when action is needed to catch the train. From a liberal viewpoint, her story-telling



MAVIS GALLANT

might be seen as a positive gesture but Gallant, I suggest, has radicalized us well beyond such liberal, utopian possibilities. Most readers will see Christine's action as a retreat to the abstract realm of the mind, of reason, when the requirement is a confrontation with the present moment.

After this brilliant novella documenting the decline of the West, the question really becomes--what will, or can, Gallant do next? The answer is a surprising one, for, as I suggested earlier, Gallant turns from objective accounts of people quite different from herself to the creation of the character Linnet Muir and her childhood experiences in Montreal. In these

stories the fact is brought home to us that Gallant's earlier fiction had really told little about the author herself. The same thought seems to have occurred to the author and in these stories she traces something of her own story in relation to cultural dynamics.

The Montreal stories contain two innovative features. First, unlike so many of Gallant's characters, Linnet is perceptive, strong and forthright. Second, Linnet offers a powerful critique of the Canadian society of her childhood--a superb view of Canada during the late thirties and early forties. For instance, in the first of these stories, "In Youth is Pleasure," Linnet can see that Canadians live a perversely public life. As she says succinctly: "Their upbringing is intended for a crisis." Such an education, of course, has advantages, for in a crisis, "keeping a straight face makes life tolerable." But Linnet recognizes that it makes only "public life tolerable." For the greater part of life, "the dead of heart and spirit litter the landscape." (6) To a large degree, Linnet's picture of Canada in the early years of World War II rings true, corroborating what other writers such as Alice Munro and Robertson Davies have shown about the stifling middle-class ethos. Moreover, Linnet appears to be saying overtly, in propositional form, what Gallant had formerly shown through her fictions.

Such a procedure might seem dangerous, for stories--as we all know--are supposed to show, not to tell. Yet as each of these Montreal stories develops and we follow the rebellious young Linnet in her desire to escape social restrictions, we slowly realize that each bid for freedom--and she does gain a kind of freedom--unwittingly traps her ever more deeply in history. For instance, in "Between Zero and One," Linnet is working at her first job. When first she looks around the office and sees the girls on one side and the men on the other, she decides immediately that she will accept a job only if she is to be among the men with their power and salary. In one sense this would seem to be an early blow for liberation: "For the first time in the history of the office a girl was allowed to sit with the men." (7) But as the story unfolds, we see that Linnet has blindly thrown herself, not into the powerful future, but a decaying backwater. Employed in a wartime agency, she imagines that the work will be efficient and gauged to winning the war. In looking back, however, the older Linnet can see that in fact the office is part of a decaying economic system in which individual success is always at the expense of others. The building in which she works, and where she is at first so proud of her position, exemplifies the system that is about to trap her: "Victorian, Edwardian, and early Georgian oil portraits of Canadian captains of industry, fleshed-out pirate faces,

adorned the staircase and halls--a daily reminder that there are two races, those who tread on people's lives, and the others." (8) In other words, the escape from one morass precipitates her into another, because, although as a young girl she could see the microcosm of history in man versus woman, she could not see the macrocosm of human versus human.

Of all the stories in the Montreal series, "Varieties of Exile" is most illuminating for what it says about Gallant's own struggles to become a successful writer. Linnet has the romantic desire to be included in an ideal larger than herself but in any actual situation, her fear of being trapped forces her to draw back. Engaged to be married three times in a year, she has feared marriage would turn her into a "Red-Queen," a wife from whom men would expect and demand nothing. Similarly, she is uninterested in having a family: "The promise of children all stamped with the same face, cast in the same genetic mold, seemed a cruel waste of possibilities." Abstract possibilities, however, fascinate her. For instance, she is entranced by the rosy dream that the new European refugees are "prophets of a promised social order that was to consist of justice, equality, art, personal relationships, courage, generosity." (9) Yet the refugees are interesting only as they symbolize the new order; they are not interesting as individuals.

As the story progresses we come to see Linnet, the writer, compulsively reducing the world around her to "short-hand," to patterns. And although these patterns are often brilliant in their own right, the older Linnet recognizes that they are lifeless. Much of the writing since the 1950s has been of this highly cerebral nature--one thinks of Nabokov and Borges--and these Montreal stories seem to reflect on that distressing fact. At the end of the story, Linnet says: "All this business of putting life through a sieve and then discarding it was another variety of exile; I knew that even then, but it seemed quite right and perfectly normal." (10) The act of writing, then, has been a kind of exile, an exile from life. But Gallant, because she has dispensed with her earlier use of the objective frame--with all its implications of a world that is knowable on its own terms without the contingencies of an observer--now offers us a narrator who is herself implicated, because she acts on her observations and thus changes what she observes. The older Linnet recognizes that writing is still a form of exile, but now implies that it no longer seems quite so right and natural. While there is sadness in the narrator's voice, there is also a new recognition of the need to develop a way of life, of writing, that permits the individual, not "to sieve," but to be part of the mesh. Perhaps in the natural parallels between Linnet and Gallant in this Montreal series, one can sense the act of writing it-

self becoming a process of participation.

While it is impossible to predict Gallant's future directions, it would seem that she will no longer be as concerned with the relation between weak characters and the breakdown of community. She will also show that strong characters, people like herself, form part of the same pattern. In other words, the creation of the impersonal from its opposite, the personal, does not result merely from weakness of character, but develops from a much more fundamental breakdown of the essence of individuality. At the heart

of this perception lies the notion that the progressivist liberal ideology is at fault for encouraging the individual to imagine that he can completely control his destiny, and that this control will ultimately benefit society. It would seem that Gallant is moving towards either the tragic view that the world, natural and social, always exists in "otherness" to the individual, or the religious view that sees the individual, through faith, achieving integration. It is yet too early to tell which direction Gallant will choose, but if a wager had to be laid, I would choose the latter.

#### NOTES

1. René Char, Feuillets d'Hypnos (Paris, 1946).
2. Mavis Gallant, The End of the World and Other Stories, ed. Robert Weaver (Toronto, 1974), p. 15.
3. The End of the World, p. 32.
4. The End of the World, p. 33.
5. The Pegnitz Junction (New York, 1973), pp. 69-70.
6. "In Youth is Pleasure," The New Yorker (November 24, 1975), p. 50.
7. "Between Zero and One," The New Yorker (December 8, 1975), p. 39.
8. "Between Zero and One," p. 40.
9. "Varieties of Exile," The New Yorker (January 19, 1976), p. 26.
10. "Varieties of Exile," p. 35.