The theme of isolation in the fiction of Mavis Gallant.

Don. Stone

University of Windsor

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THE THEME OF ISOLATION IN THE
FICTION OF MAVIS GALLANT

BY
DONAL B. STONE

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies through the
Department of English in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
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ABSTRACT

The fiction of Mavis Gallant, both in her short stories and novels, primarily employs in dominant roles the figure of the exile. This study determines the main thematic patterns which suggest the nature of such isolation in her work, and attempts to trace the causes and effects, as well as the narrative technique, which place and maintain Gallant's characters in that position of alienation.

All six of Gallant's books have been used to illustrate her themes: the primary examples are based upon twenty of the stories from the collections; each of the four themes discussed, as well as the examination of Gallant's narrative method, refers to a story from each of the four collections. The novels are discussed separately in order to show the integration of these themes in her longer narratives. In addition, further illustrations from other collected and recent uncollected stories are used wherever applicable.

The study suggests that there are four distinct but related patterns operating in Gallant's overall theme of exile. The first centres on the family as a source of alienation: that group acts at once as both protector and prisoner; familiarity and true knowledge of the others within it can lead to destruction. The second pattern points out the individual's inability to communicate with and to reveal him-
self to others. A third feature deals with the problems confronted by the individual who finds himself in new territory, and with his attempts to find a comfortable place of refuge. A final pattern emerges which is based upon the individual's inability to construct and maintain unselfish bonds of closeness with others. It is further suggested that the narrative technique used by Gallant underscores the tone of irony which permeates all four themes.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Although Mavis Gallant has been a companion of mine for some years now through the pages of The New Yorker, it was in fact Peter Stevens who suggested that this writer's work might be a worthwhile subject of investigation. The task, as it turned out, was both rewarding and, I think, worthwhile, and I offer him my thanks for pointing the way.

I am grateful, too, for the unpublished material Professor Stevens was able to obtain for my use. This includes two transcripts of interviews with Mavis Gallant done by the C.B.C. and Geoffrey Hancock. The more recent of these interviews, along with an article by Professor Stevens which I refer to later in this thesis, will soon be published in a special Gallant edition of Canadian Fiction Magazine.

My thanks as well go to Professors John Ditsky and Adrian Van der Hoven for their helpful comments and suggestions.

Finally, thanks are due to Doreen Truant and to my wife Marie, without whose help this manuscript would no doubt never have materialized.
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CHAPTER I

THE EXILE: AN INTRODUCTION

"'I like to be anonymous,' she says. 'I want to be known only for my work.'"¹ These remarks, quoted by Geoff Hancock in a recent issue of Books in Canada, come from Mavis Gallant, one of Canada's finest writers of fiction. For the casual reader whose total experience with Gallant's work may consist only of the occasional short story run across in the pages of The New Yorker, perhaps a certain irony in her comments may be detected.

Doubtlessly, she is very much anonymous, mostly by her own choice. Since her move to Paris in the early 1950's, she has resisted interviews and literary consultations with a good deal of success. In this sense of Gallant as the solitary woman, she reminds us of some of her own fictional characters. Ironically, though, the work through which she says she wishes to be known tends to share in her personal anonymity. Not all of her short stories have been collected, her first novel (Green Water, Green Sky) is out of print, only two of her six books (My Heart Is Broken and The End

¹Geoff Hancock, "Mavis Tries Harder," Books in Canada, Vol. 7, No. 6 (June-July, 1978), p. 5. This is likely the best of the very few biographical accounts available on Gallant.
of the World) have found their way into the hands of Canadian publishers, and only a comparatively few of her approximately 100 stories appear in Canadian anthologies. The body of Gallant criticism fares little better: aside from the usual cursory book reviews, only two critical articles, both by Peter Stevens (and referred to later in this study), an introduction (by Robert Weaver for The End of the World), and the profile by Geoff Hancock mentioned above make up the total of published criticism on Gallant. A special edition of Canadian Fiction Magazine featuring Gallant will shortly be added to this small critical accumulation.

The purpose of this study is to examine Gallant's collected fiction with a view toward suggesting the main thematic thrust found in virtually all her novels and short stories, and briefly to indicate some of the narrative techniques she uses to communicate these themes. Obviously, the length of this paper imposes certain limitations on both the thematic content which can be discussed and the number of specific story illustrations used. To be as representative as possible, I have chosen for examples of Gallant's four main themes one story from each of the collections. Since the discussion of each theme employs illustrations from different parts of the writer's publishing career, it is implied that her interests in these thematic ideas are continuing ones.

Another problem which grows from the spatial limitations of this paper lies in the fact that any single one of the stories is likely to be concerned in at least a minor way
with three of the other four themes which are central to this investigation. Convenience therefore dictates that each story used in illustration will be confined to its application to the theme being discussed at that point. In order to show that Gallant does in fact concern herself with all four themes as they pertain to the concept of the exile, a separate section will treat the integration of those themes within her two major works of fiction: Green Water, Green Sky, and A Fairly Good Time.

Finally, since matters of technique are so closely related to the themes themselves and the prevailing tone of irony which exists throughout Gallant's fiction, a concluding chapter is devoted to the relationship of method and theme. Here again, a story from each of the four collections is used in illustration. Throughout this study, in addition to the twenty stories and two novels used as examples, references to additional stories, some uncollected, are made wherever germane to the issues being considered.

In reading Gallant's fiction, one is always tempted to interpret her work as strongly autobiographic. Her main characters are often women, often living in places away from their places of birth, often capable of communicating in more than one language, and so on; in fact, the issue comes up immediately in Chapter II of this paper. Even though there is perhaps some evidence, especially in her recent uncollected Linnet Muir stories (five stories in which the narrator recalls her early life in Montreal, the effects on her of family
and friends, her desire to become a writer, and her early years away from home), that her stories do in some ways contain herself, this particular study will try to conform to Gallant's own wish as stated above: "I want to be known only for my work."

In examining any of Gallant's fiction, then, the reader must certainly be aware of that feature which typifies so many of her characters: they are predominantly outsiders, isolates, exiles. Never sure of their place in the world, they grope toward the hope of stability and the security of home, friends, and family. Their problem is not so much contained in seeking their identity as much as it is in finding a comfortable niche for it; consequently, Gallant's characters are frequently found in transit. They travel from place to place, and we continually catch them between permanent homes, satisfactory marriages, periods of life, lovers, and the like.

Of course, the theme of isolation is not new to the literature of this century. The fact of being cut adrift is a problem confronting many of this century's fictional characters: Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Camus' Meursault in *L'Etranger*, Kafka's Joseph K. in *The Trial* are cases in point. Canadian literature, too, has reflected this dilemma of the isolate, especially through the fiction which sees the hero engaged in a search for some proof of his belonging in a world which seems to have no place for him: such figures include Brian Moore's Ginger
Coffey, Speigel in Martin Myers' *The Assignment*, Jake Hersh in Richler's *St. Urbain's Horseman* and Uncle Melech in A. M. Klein's *The Second Scroll*.

The whole question of alienation and isolation is one which has been the area of a good deal of critical inquiry, the causes and effects of the problem being as numerous as the investigations concerning it. Colin Wilson suggests in *The Outsider* that the problem of the exile may be seen in terms of existentialism, an approach already taken by Sartre. In another opinion, contained in the author's conclusion to *In Praise of Older Women*, Stephen Vizinczey points out that his protagonist's problem of alienation is paradoxically rooted in his quest for absolute freedom: "The man who is not bound to anyone has no one bound to him; as he renounces his obligations to others, so he forfeits his claim upon them." Still another critic, Northrop Frye, would have the problem of the isolate associated with the necessity of defending the garrison, a metaphor he uses in part to suggest the walls Canadian figures in fiction build around themselves for their own protection but which also cut them off from the rest of the world.

While not excluding the possibility that these causes and effects of isolation do operate at times in Gallant's own fiction, there emerges more clearly from her work the individual who, as indicated above, is really searching for

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a place to establish himself, a place he can call home. A Susanna Moodie who has been locked out of the garrison and must come to terms with the wilderness might be a closer approximation to the Gallant construction of the refuge. It is with this kind of person that her writing concerns itself. Thematically, the isolate's problem, its causes and effects, may be thought of as following four distinct but related patterns. The sources of the exile's detachment are found in and are perpetuated by family relationships; by the character's inability to love or to be loved in any kind of extended, viable situation; by the problems and attempted solutions to his exile in a foreign land; and by his inability to communicate so as to reveal himself to others.

The following chapters will discuss each of these themes as well as the narrative method which Gallant uses to convey them.
CHAPTER II
EXILE WITHIN THE FAMILY

In a recent interview with Mavis Gallant, Geoffrey Hancock told her that he had noticed that her "fictional world is pervaded by a sense of family, especially a family that doesn't communicate." "Is that right?" she responded, "I don't know . . . I don't begin with a theory." 1 If Gallant is to be taken at her word, her lack of awareness of one of her central frames of reference is most curious. The facts of her own life also run counter to what one might expect from a writer who has used this "sense of family" so often throughout her works: she has no brothers or sisters, and her parents died early. The real source of any personal family concepts we can only guess at, then; what we do have is the very strong evidence from her own writing that the family provides not only a strong backdrop for her main characters but is also a major contributor to and reflection of their isolation.

Four factors would seem to stand out most strongly in this process. First, the family is portrayed not as a supportive group which could provide the security and reassurance of blood ties but rather as a prison in which the

1Geoffrey Hancock. Unpublished. Refer to Acknowledgments earlier in this thesis.
main character is trapped. This prison need not take the form of the family home, either; in fact, most often the main character has already made attempts to strike out on his own for a life independent of his origins. The main problem here, though, is that the character remains unable to cut the ties that keep him bound to his family. In this sense, the family becomes a self-imposed prison.

A second feature of this theme is the perception that being together in the family group ironically tends to create a distance among the members. As Mrs. Norrington observes in A Fairly Good Time, "You can't 'understand' anyone without interfering with that person's privacy." It seems evident that the more the characters learn about each other, the farther they drift apart. Consequently, family ties seem to remain intact best when communication is worst. Parents and children share family memories which are not consistent from one person to another; interpretations of facts, of other people, of themselves become distorted through their personal perceptions; frequently, conversations become monologues. Under such conditions, the revelation of a family truth or the first understanding by an individual about his relationship within the family can be accompanied by a severe shock. More often than not, though, this stage of understanding is never reached and thus the grip of the family is never relaxed.

The corollary to this principle of existing incommunicado

within your own family is that this kind of life ironically offers survival. There is a certain safety attached to familiarity, no matter what its cost. The price of this apparent security, of course, is atrophy, resignation, and dependency; it is the same kind of security one might expect to find in any prison and it has the same potential for crushing the human spirit. It is not uncommon, then, to find many of Gallant's characters—parents, brothers, sisters—clinging to each other not so much out of reasons of love but of self-interest, desperation, or even economics (as in the case of the remittance man in Gallant's more recent uncollected story "Varieties of Exile").

The fourth factor in the family theme involves the methods of escape. Aside from the occasional husband and father who disappears abruptly before the chronological events of the story even begin (as, for example, in the story "The End of the World," discussed below), getting out from under is not really possible. Neither marriage nor moving seems to allow the beginning of a totally new life: the old values are still there, the mistakes of the past, the letters home, the visits of family friends, the demands of blood. In short, there is no total escape.

These elements of isolation suggest themselves strongly in many of Gallant's stories and novellas, but examples from each of her story collections will serve to illustrate here.

Again, it should be noticed that the stories selected do not represent a single period of Gallant's career but rather suggest that these interests cut through all her writing. The stories to be considered are "The Cost of Living," "The Legacy," "The End of the World," and "O Lasting Peace."

Central to "The Cost of Living" is a pair of sisters—33 year old Patricia (Puss) Tate and her sister, older by five years, Louise (Lulu). Puss, the narrator, introduces her sister in the shades of light and dark, the grey areas Gallant is so fond of. Lulu has come to Paris to live with her sister who has already tried to strike out on her own from Australia. What quickly becomes obvious to us, though, are not the blacks and whites, the differences between the girls, but the greys—they are curiously introduced through their similarities. There is a physical similarity, particularly around the eyes. We first see Lulu on the stairs, her arms full of books, cough medicine, a scarf, an armful half of which belongs to her sister. Even her out-of-place bike has been dragged from their home in Australia. So have the family characteristics: the mother's side of the family, says Puss, "had given us something bleached and cold." Puss tells us, too, that she dresses like her sister. What is established throughout the narration is the distinct feeling that the two girls are chained to each other irrevocably, and that no

"Mavis Gallant, My Heart Is Broken: Eight Stories and a Short Novel (New York: Random House, 1964), p. 159. Subsequent references are to this edition and are indicated parenthetically."
geographic removal will make any difference in their relationship to each other. As children in Australia, Puss recalls, they hated each other. If nothing else has changed, the implication is that that aspect hasn’t really altered either. This distancing element is not the only one which comes from the family unit into their relationship in Paris: "I had inherited the vanity, the stubbornness, without the will; I was too proud to follow and too lame to command," (p. 159) says Puss, but surely these qualities are reflected equally in Lulu. Geography changes, years pass, but such a relationship as these sisters have remained frozen.

It is with the introduction of Silvie, the sluttish, carefree child of Paris, that the contrast between freedom and personal confinement becomes strongly delineated. Past and future have little meaning for this girl; she is a free spirit. We never get the feeling that her life could admit to the kind of coldness reflected in Puss’s keeping track of her sister’s account ledgers or suggested through the calluses on the widowed Lulu’s wedding-ring finger, the only reminder of a marriage that never touched her life.

This contrast is extended further with the description of Lulu’s relationship with Patrick, a pick-up lover; it is brief and without any chance for a relationship which has any real focus. What memories Puss has of him are equally vague. Silvie seems the only real human, giving element in the story. She makes an interesting comparison to the apparent generosity of the two sisters: Puss gives grudgingly,
possessively; where Lulu is concerned, "The two went together, the giving and the lying" (p. 181), according to Puss. Here again it is important to remember that they are mirror images of each other; where they cannot give love, they give trinkets. Gallant suggests, in fact, a parallel between the necklace bought by Lulu for Silvie but given by Puss, and Silvie herself. The French girl becomes the bauble of the sisters: "The charm of the necklace was in its rough, careless appearance and the warm color of the stones... I was accustomed to wanting what I could not have" (p. 179).

And so it is that Puss and Lulu are able to make contact with others only through buying their affection or by hurting them (Puss delivers the ultimate blow to Silvie by opening a letter from Patrick to the girl—his real lover). The sisters never seem to be really aware that they have trapped themselves in their own darkness, that what motivates their actions is not "goodness, innocence, courage, or generosity" (p. 187) at all. Lulu, near the end of the story, comes close to such a self-revelation when she recounts her dreams: they are a cry from someone who is stranded, who wishes she could exchange her life with someone else, who is pleading for an escape which will never happen. Images of escape are frequent in Gallant's fiction, as for example in the trains of The Pegnitz Junction, or in Flor's dream horse in Green Water, Green Sky. Here, Lulu sees in her dream the figure of Louise (the projection of herself) desperately searching for Patrick in railway stations and running along the shore after departed
ships. (earlier, Gallant had described Patrick and Puss in their last meeting as standing on opposite shores); she sees, too, the wings on Silvie that she herself will never have. Her dream is her life—one "of labyrinths, of search, of missed chances, of people standing on opposite shores" (p. 188). The sisters have each other, but little else. They are trapped in their own prison, and the term is for life.

In another collection of stories, "The Legacy" addresses itself to very similar problems caused and perpetuated by family: self-exile through entrapment, psychological distancing of the self from the other family members, paying the price of atrophy to maintain personal or family survival, and ultimately never being able to escape. Like "The Cost of Living," this story also focuses on the family sibling group, expanded here to include a sister, her two brothers, and a sister-in-law. The narrative revolves around the concept that Marina has wasted her life in order that Victor, her younger brother, could be saved from criminal disgrace.

Gallant underlines the fragmentation of the family right from the outset of the story, which begins at the end of the mother's funeral. There is a grim irony in the fact that the cemetery holds what will be the closest thing to togetherness this family will ever have: the family plot. Not only has it brought the dead mother and father Boldescu together, but it has reserved places for the living children who have buried

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5Mavis Gallant, The Other Paris (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin, 1956), p. 156. Subsequent references are to this edition and are indicated parenthetically.
the mother and is designed to accommodate even the yet-to-be-conceived offspring.

The history of the family, a chronology run backward for the reader through flashback, memory, and conversation, is a family album of strangers. Their real aloofness to one another suggests itself as soon as the four survivors leave the cemetery. Victor, the youngest, drives back alone several blocks ahead of the car occupied by Marina, Carol and Georgie. Even at Mrs. Boldescu's death bed, we learn during the journey, Marina had watched her brothers "as if they came from an alien land" (p. 157). To them, it appeared, the dying woman might easily have been a total stranger.

Their reaction seems to be a fairly logical extension of their relationship toward their mother when she was alive. As a grown man, Victor's association with her consisted mostly of a monthly cheque: many of Gallant's characters have this habit of using money in an attempt to patch, maintain, or establish a relationship with others, whether it takes the form of a gift of jewellery or the price of a cafe lunch; not surprisingly, it pulls the relationships further apart. Victor's cheques do no more to keep the family intact in spirit than Marina's "gift" to Victor of her life's savings could, or even the legacy itself which deals the final blow to the unity of the family. The junk presents to Mrs. Boldescu are Carol and Georgie's contribution; the gifts represent more

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6Money and possessions may also be used as weapons. See Chapter VII.
their "lack of common sense and taste" (p. 157) than their generosity. Perhaps the most grotesque image of this attitude toward the power money seems to have as a substitute for truly caring for others is contained in the image of Georgie, standing in front of the family store after the funeral, throwing a handful of quarters at the neighbourhood children.

It is within this family context that Marina serves her exile from the world and it is really on her that the story focuses. Inside the store, an old calendar hangs on the dark green walls behind the "Romania Fancy Groceries"-signed front. It serves as a permanent symbol of that point when Marina's life froze. Instead of the scholarship to Grenoble, virtually her ticket to freedom and escape from the confines of an oppressive family and way of life, she is forced to give up her savings as a payoff in order to keep the police away from Victor. That trip was to have freed her from the drudgery of the family store and the weekly medals labelled "Perfection" which she received from school. Once this last door toward freedom is closed to her, she becomes a teacher in a local school instead. Her reaction to the children out at the front of the store is hardly surprising: Georgie observes that they look afraid of her and asks cynically if she beats them; "I'd like to," Marina replies (p. 159).

The brothers, of course, are completely insensitive to the significance of the missed trip to France; to them, it was as if it were a month's vacation which could be picked
up at some other time. To Marina, it was a last chance. That the narrative takes place on the day of a funeral seems to be singularly appropriate, for Marina's real legacy is no more than the continuation of a life which is really no life at all. Like Puss in "The Cost of Living," she is the prisoner of missed chances, wandering in the labyrinth of her own existence, in a maze that no longer has an exit. This very concept is underlined at the conclusion of the story. Even as Marina flings away the key to the store which the boys had decided to give to her, "She looked around as if to find, once more, the path away from St. Eulalie Street, the shifting and treacherous path that described a circle . . ." (p. 173).

In a third story, "The End of the World," Gallant again echoes her attraction to the paradox in family relationships which contain the magnetism of being held together through mutual security, the feeling of a past, or an unwritten notion that the unit is inviolable, yet at the same time are relationships which also contain a member or members which are desperate to be apart. In short, the family is a prison you can neither exist within nor without.

The central figures in such a paradox in this story are William and his father, Mr. Apostolesco. As with other Gallant stories, the names of the children in the family are truly children's names; William is known as Billy by his father, and

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Mavis Gallant, *The End of the World and Other Stories* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), p. 88. Subsequent references are to this edition and are indicated parenthetically.
his brother is Kenny (and in the two stories discussed above, Gallant picks the juvenile names Puss, Lulu, and Georgie). Such naming seems to underscore the connections these grown characters have to an earlier time which they cannot be rid of, that "prison of childhood," as Linnet Muir calls it in a later Gallant story. Certainly, Mr. Apostolesco makes a concerted effort to put his past and his family behind him simply by desertion; even here, though, the escape is not entirely successful, for he calls upon his youngest son William to come to his hospital in France and be with him at his death, at the end of his world.

But the story's real focus is on William and the more figurative meaning of the end of another kind of world. On the one hand, we are presented with a character who is very much aware of who he is and where he belongs. Like Puss and Marina, he is the stable, reliable person of the family. When his father runs, it is William who, according to him, singlehandedly supports the rest of the family from the time he is twelve. Much of what he silently brings to his dying father is the deep resentment he feels for having been placed in a trap like that; at least an apology is in order (but he never gets it). William knows, too, that Canada is his home. He never likes to leave Canada, he says, so the running after his brother Kenny who has gotten himself into trouble in Buffalo bothers him doubly: "William dislikes going where he

8Mavis Gallant, "In Youth Is Pleasure," The New Yorker, Nov. 24, 1975, p. 46.
doesn't belong (the "No Canadians" signs reported to be displayed in Florida particularly disturb him), and he can't really understand why Kenny could get into trouble with the law (the problem is connected with money again, this time in the form of a stolen credit card, that is, of Kenny's attempt to pass himself off as someone he wasn't). Kenny's comment to William's lecture on the values of family unity is "If I had more than one of each [a mother and a father], I think I'd still be running" (p. 89). But the idea of being a runner is lost on William's fixed ideas of what a family should mean and what the world is all about. In this context of his belief, then, it is only logical that he should find his father in a French hospital which is old, dirty, bug-ridden, and lonely: "This is what a person gets for leaving home" (p. 89), William tells himself.

On the other hand, leaving does not necessarily mean separation from the family. Not only does the father assume that William will come to France and virtually pick up where they left off; Mr. Apostolescu never even gives any indication that he has been wrong in doing what he did in deserting. Such an admission of regret would have confirmed for William his own notion of the rightness of the world. He never gets the "I'm sorry" he expects, and his father never makes the confessions of guilt William assumes he must have about his debts, his illegitimate children. William's concept of perfection begins to erode rapidly as he hears his father tell him never to want something that isn't perfect, for it is
just this philosophy which has ruined the old man: "Nothing is perfect" (p. 92), William says finally. He says it, but he really never comes to terms with that concept until his father dies and the nurse, a stranger, says she is sorry; then, William knows that the statement has no importance. Desertion, betrayal, lies—that is the way of the world, and the family offers no protection from it. Either within the family, or in clinging to the appearance of being without it, we are vulnerable.

Of the characters in the four family-oriented stories being considered here, William comes closest to a realization of the nature of his captivity. He has at least reached the stage which Douglas Malcolm sees as the third (and usual, at least in Gallant's shorter works) level of Gallant's conflict of realities—that momentary consciousness of responsibility for and understanding of his own position.9 William exists as a member of a unit he cannot feel comfortable within or run away from; he has hidden behind it and protected it at the same time; he has never really understood the very people he considers his own family. In contrast, the Gallant character in these four pieces who least seems to grasp the nature of her exile is Hilde, in "O Lasting Peace."10

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Hilde, like William, has also lost a father through desertion. He left when he was 63 years old with only an apple. That left Hilde's burden somewhat larger than Puss's, Marina's, or William's, at least in the number of people in the family which she was left with and who depended upon her for support: her mother Traudi, her aunt Charlotte, and her uncle Theo. Typically, she sees in them only what she wishes to see, and none of it is good. Hilde narrates the story, and through her own comments it quickly becomes obvious to the reader that she looks for the worst in everyone but herself. She assumes that little, harmless Theo had been up to something on the night her father walked out. At her job, she refuses to cash a traveller's cheque because of a quibble over a signature; her real objection seems to be connected with the presence of a woman, evidently not the wife of her customer, waiting outside the door. She turns in a fellow worker, her assistant, for reading a newspaper secretly tucked into his desk drawer. And she does all this on Christmas Eve. Uncle Theo tries to prevent her from ruining Christmas by imploring her not to think of sad things. Hilde's reply (Gallant emphasizes it by using it twice as a narrative connector) is "What else is there?" (p. 157).

Unlike the others in her family, Hilde lives in a vague awareness of being trapped in sadness. Other than hiding within the shell of bitterness she has built around herself, she lacks the defence mechanisms used by the others when reality becomes too much for them: her mother simply locks
everyone out when she becomes upset; Aunt Charlotte throws her apron over her face to make unpleasantness disappear, or she loses herself in tending to her plants; Uncle Theo slips off into reveries and fragmented, distorted memories of India. But Hilde cannot escape from her recurring depressions, her thoughts of childhood during the war and of the firebombings.

Beneath the surface of the poison with which she guards herself from others, she wants a different existence. Again, though, Gallant creates the same paradox found in her other stories using a family framework: the main character cannot bring herself to run and yet cannot bear to stay. Arguing with Theo about the suitor he had brought home to her, Hilde snaps "Don't you understand that I can't leave you?" (p. 166). She is referring to such matters as paying the rent and otherwise helping a totally helpless family to survive; Gallant also implies that Hilde is as chained to her family as they are to her. At the same time, Hilde has an urge to shout "Come back!" to that very suitor she had contemptibly described as a peasant. Here again is one of those "missed chances" that Puss had noticed in "The Cost of Living." Yet Hilde never quite manages to come to a point of self-understanding and the conscious knowledge that she is her own prisoner, exiled for the rest of her life. The duality of her situation eludes her; the last line of the story is Hilde's comment "I've forgotten why I wanted to mention this" (p. 166).

These four stories illustrate the main threads of Gallant's use of the family as part of her overall framework
of the exile theme. Other interesting variations may be found elsewhere in her fiction, and with other combinations of family members (the father-daughter pair in "The Prodigal Parent" or the mother-daughter pair in "Going Ashore," to mention just two). Within all of them, however, the same principles pertain: the family provides the same security as a prison, the members within it maintain only a superficial appearance of closeness, the price to be paid for being bound in by the family is the waste of life itself, and finally, there exists no viable means of escape. To be part of a Gallant family is to be an alien in your own country, with much the same kind of dual attraction Margaret Atwood notices in Susanna Moodie's dislocation and attraction in a larger family, Canada itself.
CHAPTER III

THE PRISONERS OF SILENCE

One of the great ironies in Gallant's fiction stems from her adroitness in the use of direct speech to convey matters of character and theme. Although marked by clarity, precision, and sensitivity, this ability to communicate is a skill not possessed by her own characters. It is interesting to speculate on the influences in Gallant's life which may have sharpened her perceptions toward the way people communicate with each other: there is her childhood in bilingual Quebec, her work on the Montreal Standard as media commentator, her contacts during her continental travels, her eventual move to Paris, and her own admission that she picks up language easily. The purpose of this chapter, however, is to examine the other side of the paradox—the difficulty and sometimes total inability her characters have in getting through to each other, in receiving, handling, and sending information. For it is this dialogue of the deaf that is one of the major factors that causes and perpetuates the states of personal isolation found throughout Gallant's work.

Several characteristics of the isolating qualities ironically inherent in the communication process suggest
themselves through Gallant's stories, but the major features will be emphasized here. First of all, talk itself is dangerous. It tends to reveal more of one character to another than he would wish. The more people talk to each other, therefore, the more vulnerable they become and the more open they lay themselves to the likelihood of psychological and spiritual harm. The alternative, of course, is silence. This pose is in one sense a useful shield against others; at the same time, however, such a defense very surely cuts one off from the rest of the world. Somewhere between these two extremes lies another possibility: fabrication of the self to others. In effect, though, the results of prevarication are the same, since the escape into anonymity is still the desired end and isolation its inevitable byproduct.

A second curious feature associated with Gallant's view of communication grows from the material being communicated. That is, information itself is usually unreliable: it comes from a variety of sources depending on the sensitivity of the receiver and may even originate from telepathic or visionary powers. Often, the information contained in messages is misinterpreted or incomplete; this holds true with both sending and receiving, and frequently such communication breakdown manifests itself in notes, letters, and documents. The third feature involved here follows from the first two: the greater the inability to communicate, the deeper the sense of exile.
These aspects of communication (or non-communication) underlie most of Gallant's work. For the purposes of this study, a story from each of her collections will be used as illustration: "Acceptance of Their Ways," "The Picnic," "New Year's Eve," and the novella "The Pegnitz Junction."

The first of these stories, "Acceptance of Their Ways," revolves around the characters' attempts to project self-images which function to deceive not only others but themselves as well. The central character knows that talk could be dangerous and revealing: "Talk leads to overconfidence and errors. Lily had guided her life to this quiet shore by knowing when to open her mouth and when to keep it closed." Thus, Lily Littel, now boarding on the Italian Riviera (in actual fact, Mrs. Cliff Little originally of Bayswater, a background she does not choose to reveal), prides herself on her coolness and silence in the presence of others, even if it forces her into a servile role. It is only during her occasional binges in Nice when her small income cheques arrive that she permits herself to reveal the real Lily, "an old forgotten Lily-girl, tender and warm, able to shed a happy tear and open a closed fist" (p. 5). Otherwise, she is in the process of projecting an image of herself that is as phony as the imitation pearls screwed on to her ears.

A good deal of this image comes from Optimism Unlimited, a

\[\text{\footnotesize Mavis Gallant, My Heart Is Broken: Eight Stories and a Short Novel (New York: Random House, 1964), p. 5. Subsequent references are to this edition and are indicated parenthetically.}\]
book Mrs. Garnett has been reading for four months, which counsels restraint and smiles. The image becomes even more ludicrous to the reader through Gallant's inclusion of the highlights of Lily's eight-year rise to the status of gentlewoman, scrambling up the social plateaus of "trains, bars, éclairs," and cafes where one could get "Every Friday Sausages and Mashéd" (p. 8). In fact, for Lily the dinner at the boardinghouse is part of the process of learning to be a gentlewoman, and she must bear the discomfort of having to repress the urge to pick her teeth.

This, then, is the Lily Littel she wishes to communicate to those around her. She even manages to sell herself the false image she has created. She writes in her diary with an air of finality that now she lived with gentlewomen, a statement "that implied acceptance of their ways" (p. 6). But the difficulty here is that Lily has misinterpreted the information about the refined, good life she receives from the "gentlewomen" with whom she lives. Mrs. Freeport, the owner of the boarding house, with her sapphire earrings and her practicality with food, and Mrs. Garnett, the other boarder, with her blued curls, her moist baby's mouth, and her pathetic complaints about being tormented by clerks and conductors, both have a distinct ring of sadness to them.

Although this is the message the reader intercepts, it is not the one Lily receives. For most of the story, Lily does not accept the implications for her own life that she perceives in the "sudden animal quarrels" (p. 10) of the other ladies,
nor will she accept her own observation that they are "ailing, peevish elderly children whose fancies and delusions must be humored by the sane" (p. 5).

Lily's refusal to communicate, either through words or actions, her own realities to others, and her tendency to use her romantic notion about what it takes to be a gentlewoman in order to bend the information she receives from Mrs. Freeport and Mrs. Garnett, ultimately doom her to a future of guaranteed isolation and loneliness. That Lily would eventually become another exile like Mrs. Freeport is suggested through their mutual possession of the lily image—the one in Lily's name, the other worn in Mrs. Freeport's hat. At the end of the story, Mrs. Garnett has just left and Mrs. Freeport, in tears, is convinced that Lily too will finally leave her. Gallant has shown Mrs. Freeport to be increasingly hateful and empty, and now, finally, stupid. The last paragraph suggests the possibility that, in Mrs. Freeport, Lily has at last gotten a glimpse of herself and her empty future:

Instead of answering, Lily set Mrs. Freeport's water lily straight, which was familiar of her; but they were both in such a state, for different reasons, that neither of them thought it strange (p. 13).

The ironic tone of this conclusion is typical to Gallant's narrations; her pervasive mode of irony is discussed further in Chapter VII in connection with her narrative technique.

The concepts of communication as dangerous, information as fragmented and unreliable, and silence as isolating are again taken up by Gallant in her longer story, "The Pegnitz
Junction." Christine, the central character of the novella, seems to have two functions: first of all, she exists as a character; secondly, she becomes a kind of antenna which receives signals from a variety of sources. The two roles meet in her inability to process and really understand the information being communicated to her from such a diversity of sources: internal feelings, external images, psychic sounds and pictures. "She seemed unchanging and passive in life," we are told, and indeed, she gives the impression of one whose life has stopped or has come to a turning point. The relationship between Christine and her lover Herbert lacks vitality and warmth, and in many ways appears to be much like the association between Herbert's son Bert and the sponge the boy picked up for companionship and "conversation"; Christine tells Bert that his ersatz friend Bruno is an "obedient sponge" (p. 24). The two lovers seem totally incapable of revealing anything of importance about themselves to each other, and the whole train journey back from Paris which provides the controlling framework of the story continues to be marked with a resulting coldness and indifference. Herbert can't even hear himself when he speaks, much less Christine; he makes promises to her that he seems unaware of:

2Cf. Peter Stevens, "The Flexible Form," unpublished; see Acknowledgements. Stevens describes this function as "an all-seeing eye and consciousness."

"... his words did not come back to him, not even as an echo" (p. 46).

The irony about the silence between them is that the entire trip is marked by noise; that is, they are in the center of a continual bombardment of information, although it is Christine who acts as the receiver of all these messages. The air comes alive with bits of information like a snowstorm consisting of "fine silver crystals forming a pattern, dancing, separating, dissolving . . . more beautiful and less durable than snowflakes" (p. 23). These pieces of information, like the infinite bubbles filled with poisonous trash which Herbert explains as an engineering process intended for clearing waste from rivers, become a mosaic of post-war middle-class Germany. What Christine perceives but cannot really find a pattern in is, like her own life; a world in pieces; her reading and study of theology do not seem to provide her with answers either. From the outset of the story, with her view from a Paris hotel window of a statue of a cardinal lying on its side and a sawed-up chestnut tree, right through the train journey, Christine is immersed in destruction, decay, and coldness. Her Dante-esque trip is punctuated by idiotic conductors, fires, lack of food and drink, unpleasant and materialistic people. The jump taken by Gallant from this milieu into the surreal extension of making Christine a kind of telepathic receiver of thought waves, a seer of dead pasts and probable futures, seems strangely credible despite the otherwise realistic basis of
the story.

Those "silver crystals" initially take their substance from a fellow train passenger, a heavy lady with a constant intake of food and an intermittent transmission of signals which reveal a life firmly entrenched in materialism and sourness. She is not simply an isolated case. Gallant's description of Herbert's mother returned from wartime arrest repeats the image of post-war Germany: "a bloated sick women eating sugar and telling bitter stories" (p. 13). But Christine simply picks up the message without consciously realizing any particular meaning from it. She seems to have no control over her "information"; proximity to the sender is enough to set things off. She picks up fragments of a letter in a pregnant girl's purse as she might get "a new tone on a different channel" (p. 75). Herbert sends out "information" about his ex-wife, not floating like silver crystals but falling "like dirty cinders" (p. 85). Besides sounds, Christine picks up visionary pictures as well. A mock-Gothic castle emits images of a decaying German aristocratic life. She sees conscripts and their future failed lives—"the decline of the next generation" (p. 42). Another of her visions is the man with the hairline scarred by the barbed wire, whose facial expression "was one of infinite sorrow" (p. 60). An opera group sends messages which are only echoes of Germany's cultural past. For the reader, though, all this information adds up to Gallant's metaphor of a post-war Germany which is itself a refugee and an exile.
In the long run, however, all these information crystals mean little to Christine. They tell her nothing about her own life and future, even though the reader is left with little hope for her relationship with Herbert and, on a wider scale, little faith that there is much of value left in the ashes of Germany. Christine wonders if nothing passes unobserved, whether someone records "The faces you think no one sees" (p. 12). She, of course, is the recorder but not the interpreter. On more than one occasion in the story, Christine wonders if her lips had moved, if her own mind was speaking. But it doesn't, neither to others nor to herself. Her inability to sort out the information she receives is much like the confusion expressed by the cousin-in-law of the lady on the train who could never understand television because "the good ones" and "the bad ones" dressed alike.

Since, as Christine's theology text says, "Only against God can man know good and evil" (p. 87), Gallant seems to suggest that this yardstick doesn't exist. Understanding is blocked by corruption, apathy, and materialism. Or as Christine says to little Bert at the novella's conclusion, "I don't know ... I'm sorry to be so uncertain" (p. 87).

Christine's inability to process and therefore to understand the messages sent by the people and things around her cuts her off from them. Her own powerlessness to communicate or to interpret what is being communicated is a major cause of her isolation. Paula Marshall, in "The Picnic," has the same problem. Like Christine, she too is capable of
transmissions from the future. It seems unnecessary for Gallant to use Paula's "sudden prophetic vision of the day ahead" simply as a narrative device; one gets the feeling that, even armed with the knowledge of what is to come, Paula does not have the power to stop it. Certainly that is part of the thematic fabric of the isolation concept used throughout Gallant's work. Here, it grows from the communication problem which exists not only within an American Army public relations officer's family but also between the countries represented by the post-war U.S. Army base personnel and the local residents of the French community in which they operate. The answer to the problem of greater understanding and communication between the people of these two countries, according to the plan of the Americans, is to be a great communal picnic.

The probable failure of the picnic as a device to bring people together is suggested early in the story by Gallant's portrayal of a family divided by communication problems of its own. The key to Mrs. Marshall's conversations with her children and her husband, the Major, is that they should be avoided or put off wherever possible. She lays out the children's clothes every morning so that they would be able to dress without having to ask questions. Paula tells her husband "But tomorrow you and I must have a long talk. About everything" (p. 117), and we realize that that is as

"Mavis Gallant, The Other Paris (Cambridge, Massachussets: Houghton Mifflin, 1956), p. 120. Subsequent references are to this edition and are indicated parenthetically.
close as they will ever really get to discussing the matter of their children's upbringing. If conversation can't be avoided completely, the next best method is to come at it by circumlocution: "She had been trained in the school of indirect suggestion" (p. 104).

The whole question of any ability to communicate in a meaningful way to anybody else seems lost not just on Mrs. Marshall but on all the Americans. The planning of the speech the Major intends to give at the picnic is extremely painful; he is torn between giving it in English (and therefore alienating the French who are present) or in French (a language beyond his grasp). "We are gathered together" is the best line he can manage. The line itself is completely ironic, as other failures of one culture to make contact with another suggest. Disaster in maintaining open avenues of contact between the two nationalities is indicated in earlier events, as for example in the issue between the house's owner, Mme. Pégurin, and the previous tenants, the Goulds, over a spoiled cauliflower. In that case, Mme. Pégurin's impressions about American waste and insult could not have been worse than the impression conveyed through Mrs. Barings, another American, who would "if pressed, say a few words in that language [French]—a confidence that was for Madame Pégurin the depth of the afternoon" (p. 119).

Thus the gap between the two countries is doomed to remain as wide as the traditional distance between the Army officer and the enlisted man (a parallel Gallant herself
suggests in the story). The space between Mme. Pégurin and the Marshalls, between France and the United States, is a psychological space, not simply a personal or geographic one. The decor of the house and gardens is foreign to Mrs. Marshall; the children are reminded constantly that nothing there belongs to them. Trying to close the gaps between people by using a picnic as a communication device is doomed by the very nature of the event. The picnic lunches and the hotdogs just won't do, nor will the baseball game as the symbol of unity between the two countries (with the local soccer team fuming on the sidelines). Where communication finally becomes such a wretched task, as it does here, Paula Marshall's "vision" is bound to be prophetic: "There would be fresh misunderstandings and further scandals" (p. 121).

Netta, the central character in the more recent uncollected story Gallant calls "The Moslem Wife," rather wishfully observes about her marriage that "She knew, having heard other couples all her life, that at least she and Jack never made the conjugal sounds that passed for conversation and that might as well have been bowwow and quackquack."5 That kind of noise which punctuates an otherwise silent union between an old married couple who drift about in the diplomatic circles of Moscow becomes the central issue in the last of the four stories under consideration here: "New Year's

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Eve." Their isolation is to be the initiation for Amabel, their young guest, into the world of the exile.

At the beginning of the story, Amabel decides that what would happen to her on that New Year's Eve at the opera in Moscow with the Plummers would happen every day for a year. "The opera announced was neither of those they had promised," and neither is her visit to Russia. She is totally dependent on Col. Plummer and his wife, the parents of a dead school friend; they don't talk to each other in the usual sense of the word—"the habit of loudness had taken hold" (p. 131)—and they don't really talk to her. Even their letter agreeing to have Amabel for a visit was really a message to stay away. At the opera, Amabel is placed between the two: she might as well be alone. Indeed, this is what seems to be in store for her for that year in the future she is thinking about. Her model for such a future exists in Frances, the Colonel's wife, who holds a somewhat different concept of the days ahead: "The persistence of memory determines what each day of the year will be like" (p. 131). We can easily picture Frances as a young Amabel gradually going sour over the years, dragged along through strange countries and foreign languages (she refuses to learn any) by her marriage, until she has soured on life. In the old days, when she was still speaking to her husband, her communication with him was

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6 Mavis Gallant, The End of the World and Other Stories (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), p. 130. Subsequent references are to this edition and are indicated parenthetically.
based on reminiscences; then, red wine had made her aggressive and whiskey had turned him vague. For Frances, though, even the past had gone bad. When their only child Catherine died, she gave away the girl's clothes and books, and had her dog killed; the death she blamed, somehow obscurely, on her husband's inattentiveness.

The Colonel's ability to communicate, too, is superficial at best. Although he is adept in any language once he has a dictionary and a few pages of prose, his skill is really useless. For him, language creates "ghosts," not meanings. At one point during the opera, in fact, he can't even remember Amabel's name. By that time of their life with which the story concerns itself, the Colonel and his wife live in two completely different worlds which never touch or speak except for diplomatic show.

It is within this context of silence that Amabel finds herself placed. At the opera, she asks the Colonel a question which he doesn't answer, prompting her to wonder if he is hard of hearing. She can't know, as the irony suggests, that he is by now a burned-out shell, an old soldier who still lives in the happier days of the regiment of his memory, whose relationship with his wife Gallant describes "as if they were strangers in a crush somewhere and her earring had caught on his coat" (p. 134). When Mrs. Plummer had responded earlier to a comment by Amabel about Catherine's untimely death, she had said "Most lives are wasted. All are short changed. A few are tragic" (p. 135). She is correct on all three counts;
however, the tag is intended by Gallant to be hung more on Frances' own marriage than on her daughter's life. Foreigners in a strange land, the Plummers lived in spiritual isolation from each other "as though they were imbedded in a large block of ice" (p. 135).

Although this message about two frozen lives is the one communicated to the reader, it is not the message Amabel receives. She sees their silence as "a loving conspiracy" (p. 136); consequently, she feels discarded, left out of their presence, and jealous. All the signals coming to her are misinterpreted. Her incorrect translation of reality closes in on her. At the same time, she begins to think of herself as easy prey for the Russian police and becomes fixed with the idea that she will be arrested during the night. The thrust of the story simply emphasizes this concept: on the eve of her grown life, there is the suggestion of an entrapment within herself—she has already become a prisoner of silence.

During the evening, the Colonel hears two Russian girls behind them ask about happiness: "I am twenty-one years old and I have not succeeded . . ." (p. 140) is all he gets from their conversation. "It was as though he listened to stones, or snow, or trees speaking" (p. 140). Amabel, who is twenty-two, misses this just as she has missed the message of the Plummers. After the opera, she drives with them "back to the heart of their isolation, where there was no room for a third person; but the third person knew nothing about this, and
so for Amabel the year was saved" (p. 141).

Gallant's characters are confronted with terrifying realities, with worlds containing dark, raging storms and rough seas battering the rocks. But if safety from life can only be had by tearing down all lines of communication with the rest of the world, the ironic price which must be paid for it is isolation. This dilemma of choice is reflected upon by Mrs. Unwin, a character in a recent uncollected Gallant story, "The Four Seasons":

No escape from it—marriage, childbirth, patriotism, the dark. The same circle—baptism, confirmation, prayers for the dead. Or else, silence."

\[\text{Mavis Gallant, "The Four Seasons," The New Yorker, June 16, 1975, p. 37.}\]
CHAPTER IV
THE REFUGEE

Somewhere between being here and being there, in the no
man's land between the barbed wire fences, exists a world of
the wanderer, the homeless, the exile. That world occupies
a place of importance in Gallant's fiction, for it serves
as the concentration camp for a good number of her characters.
In fact, her stories abound with transients and people who
really don't fit in: an English family in a French-Canadian
community; an Australian girl in Paris, a young girl in an
engineer's office filled with old men, pregnant girls without
husbands, a little girl on an adult-dominated passenger liner,
soldiers without wars, Italian, French, or Spanish servants
working in the houses of foreigners—the list goes on. Many
of Gallant's characters are captured in mid-journey or in
attempting to find a place they can call home. In all, these
characters live in that space "between zero and one" as
Linnet Muir calls it in a recent uncollected story of Gallant.¹
It is a space neither nowhere nor somewhere.

These cases, though, suggest the obvious examples of
characters in exile throughout Gallant's fiction. More

¹Mavis Gallant, "Between Zero and One," The New Yorker
Dec. 8, 1975, p. 46.
significantly, there exists a thematic pattern which cuts across the illustrations mentioned and runs right through the entire Gallant opus wherever she employs the concept of the refugee in order to suggest the homelessness of the person living in this century. The wanderings of the refugee always imply a goal, an ultimate escape into some form of security. Often, this involves a literal geographic displacement; invariably, the goal is never quite reached, at least not in terms of any spiritual or psychological safety we would consider viable. The usual sanctuaries are not so much sought after by Gallant's characters as much as unconsciously or unwillingly slipped into by default. Three main ones will be examined here: one possibility is for the character to find a home in a time other than the one in which he lives; another is the creation of a new world altogether, a world of fantasy; the third route is withdrawal inward which does not simply change reality, but ignores it. Four stories will be used here as examples, again taken from each of Gallant's collections: they are "The Moabitess," "Ernst in Civilian Clothes," "The Other Paris," and "The Prodigal Parent."

Miss Moreham, in "The Moabitess," is a runner. She has run all her life, first for her father with whom she lived, then from him as he deteriorated with age into the helpless patient of his daughter. As the years pass, Miss

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2Mavis Gallant, My Heart Is Broken: Eight Stories and a Short Novel (New York: Random House, 1964), p. 42. Subsequent references are from this edition and are indicated parenthetically.
Moreham slips deeper and more surely into the role of spinster lady, finally moving from England to a boarding house on the Riviera. There she finds a measure of security, we assume, from obligation, from sexual contact, from any kind of involvement in her associations with others. Her retreat is more than just geographic; it takes the form of an inward withdrawal which she hopes will protect her. Her studied ignorance of what is going on around her is really more than that: it is an absolute refusal to come to terms with reality. For Miss Moreham, reality is "the blurry world beyond her field of vision" (p. 52).

This matter of sight Gallant employs in the story as a metaphor for Miss Moreham's creation of a shield which she can use against the Medusa of a world she refuses to recognize. The irony, of course, is that she is turning to stone anyway, or to use one of Gallant's images, more precisely she is like "the last of the zinnias in the garden... being battered into the ground" (p. 45). Her perception gives her only what she wants. She can look at things without seeing them, as she does when she looks at the newspaper of Mr. Wynn, another boarder: "She had a small, particular field of vision, as if her eye were eternally pressed to a knothole. Everything else was quite blurred" (p. 45). But this is characteristic of everything Miss Moreham sees: she can't accept the probable liaison Mr. Wynn has with the wife of another resident, nor can she see that a stone thrown by that woman's child is part of a tantrum and not a gift.
for her. In her brushing against the world of all her boardinghouse figures, especially Mr. Wynn, Mr. and Mrs. Oxley and their son Tom with his doll, because they intrude on her peace, Miss Horeham refuses to see the implications and possibilities in those lives around her. In this connection, the themes examined in the previous two chapters of this thesis help to clarify Gallant's purpose in using the setting of the boardinghouse or pension not only here but throughout her fiction. The boardinghouse becomes a kind of substitute family and possesses many of the characteristics and dangers associated with it. Moreover, life in a pension puts characters into the dangerous position of revealing themselves to others.

In addition to her blocking of reality toward a means of escape within herself, this character also exhibits the other two tendencies taken by many of Gallant's refugee figures. Miss Horeham slips into the past when threatened. This sanctuary is contained in her trunk, full of secrets, full of junk. Her world is one of remnants: her father's old butterfly collection, a silk scarf from a vacation in Sicily years ago, her grandfather's waistcoat buttons, pre-war stamps and other items with dates on them, old letters from her father when she was still a schoolgirl—each object a frozen moment in time.

The third avenue of retreat for this refugee, as suggested, lies in the creation of her own reality, one she can handle now. Her vision, though, is one she drags up from
her past, and her favorite image of herself is the one created by her father; she is the Old Testament Ruth, with her ear hoops and veils. This is her image in the mirror into which she flees, her "dreams as thick as walls" (p. 50). The illusion is strengthened by her ritualistic repetition of passages she still remembers from the Bible.

These three devices give Miss Horeham a way out, but they also obviously close her off from the rest of the world: "The world drew into itself, became smaller and smaller, was limited to her room, her table in the dining room, her own eyes in the mirror, her own hand curved around a glass" (p. 49). There is no question that the three methods used here (or elsewhere, in fact) by Gallant's characters are efficacious, either in combination, as with Miss Horeham, or separately as with others; the central irony for the refugee is that these methods of protection build around them a smothering wall of cement. With the kind of sight attributed to Miss Horeham, it is evident that, in all other respects, she is blind. Gallant makes this clear in the story's conclusion:

Staring in the mirror, she did not see her dressing gown or the yellow-gray curls. She saw her own eyes, until she was dazzled by the very sight of them. Everything else fell away. Her eyes were the center of the house, of the world (p. 54).

Probably the clearest picture of the refugee comes to us through the main character in "Ernst In Civilian Clothes."  

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Not only does Ernst strike the posture of the homeless one, the remnant from the Second World War, he also suggests a microcosm of post-war Europe itself—a world with its roots torn up, searching for an identity. His is a universe in which, like the afternoon sky he sees from the room of his friend and protector Willi, nothing moves. In a voice which sounds like it is about to narrate "the start of a tragedy" (p. 138), a woman in the courtyard below Ernst's window is actually only inviting a neighbour over to watch the television program called "L'Homme du Siècle." The women don't realize, of course, that Ernst is the embodiment of that tragedy; in fact, they are not even aware of his existence.

For Gallant, then, Ernst represents the displaced person of our time. His identity papers give him little reassurance about who he is or what he was. Worse, if nobody wants to look at his documents, how can he even be sure that what little information contained in them is the truth? What if his papers mean nothing? Not only does Ernst feel that his paper identity is questionable, he can't even trust his own memory. He seems to know almost nothing about his own past: bits and pieces of his military service, vague recollections of family, memories of someone trapped (himself, if he only realized it) calling for help in a dream, occasionally surface momentarily in his consciousness; but he feels somehow that they are not to be trusted. The absence of a past is further emphasized by the narrative tense of the story itself; Gallant, in choosing the present tense, gives the impression
that, for Ernst, it is only the present that exists. He never even had a childhood; at age seven, he was a Werewolf, a member of the Hitler youth.

Other information we are given about Ernst deepens the sense of displacement Gallant intends to convey, not just as it applies to Ernst but to Germany as a whole. Indeed, the whole of The Pegnitz Junction sees Germany as symbolic of the refugee. It views an entire country as people in exile. In this story, then, Ernst has served in the Foreign Legion in an army not his own, in a country foreign to him. Now that he has been discharged, he is living temporarily in Paris, a foreign city, among people who speak a language he can't really grasp. His civilian clothes, the first he has worn since he was seven years old, are borrowed. Even when he was a soldier, his life was a series of retreats, failures, and imprisonment. He has always fought on the losing side:

"He has fought for Germany and for France and, according to what he has been told each time, for civilization" (p. 135). Gallant seems to suggest, too, that Ernst as a symbol of twentieth-century man not only lost his fight, he didn't even know what he was fighting for. The statues in the Tuileries of the figures in classical mythology and of the Roman emperors, suggestive of the spiritual, political, and cultural sources of Ernst's civilization, are no more than trees to him.

As someone had told Ernst, as a prisoner, "You may never go home again" (p. 141). There is no sanctuary, no retreat
into a doubtful past. The documents, the photos, the survi-
vors "could have been invented or dreamed" (p. 143). Al-
though Ernst needs some "rational person" (p. 143) to confirm
the existence of the past, he has no one he can turn to, not
even Willi. Ernst's decision, therefore, is that the only
truth in the world is the truth he invents himself. The
story ends on that note. If Gallant's stories were to suggest
more optimism than they do, perhaps we could see Ernst's
solution to the problem of being an exile as a workable one.
Perhaps a life of detached individuality, a life which
ignores and therefore creates a different reality, is to be
preferred as an alternative. Gallant has noted elsewhere
that pessimism (at least in women) is the settling for what
actually exists, an observation which should be recalled
later in this paper as it applies to Shirley in the conclu-
sion of A Fairly Good Time. However, her ambivalence toward
this problem, if not her suggestion that Ernst will remain
in the role of the homeless waif despite his new life-plan,
seems to be contained in her intended parallel between Ernst,
the voice in his dream crying "Mutti," and the same calls by
the beaten French child for his Maman: the situation of Ernst
Zimmermann, ex-Legionnaire, becomes another of those unheard,
unanswered cries for help.5

5See Peter Stevens, "The Flexible Form" (Unpublished: refer to Acknowledgments). Stevens sees both advantages
and disadvantages in Gallant's ambivalence in attitude toward
the role of the refugee.
In the cases of the two refugee figures considered thus far, it seems highly questionable that the homes they search for can be of much value to them in terms of any kind of total human fulfillment. Miss Hörehm's flight into the past and Ernst's refusal of it appear to be dead-end roads. In "The Other Paris," Gallant deals with another alternative for one who is adrift in a world which is foreign. In this case, home exists in a self-created fantasy world far better than the one which offers only ugly reality.

Like those other two characters, and typical of so many of Gallant's figures, Carol finds herself far removed from her real homeland. At twenty-two, she has begun a new life in Paris. The city she seeks is not the Paris that really exists, though; it is the other Paris, the Paris of travel posters and romantic stories. Although constantly confronted with the reality of the city, Carol convinces herself that the place she wants so desperately to exist must in fact be out there somewhere. She just hasn't looked in the right places yet. Simply by opening the right door she would discover cute shops, neat streets, and above all, love.

At the opening of the story, Carol is on the brink of a marriage to a man named Howard—practical, sensible, nice. But she is troubled with their relationship; she doesn't

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6Mavis Gallant, The Other Paris (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin, 1956), p.3. Subsequent references are to this edition and are indicated parenthetically.
really feel that she loves Howard, but then "falling in love" is again only a matter of finding the right door to open. Presumably, if Carol wanders long enough, she will eventually find all these doors.

The first part of Gallant's story deals with such romantic notions of Carol. They are like the white flowers on the wedding dress she is trying on. These are set off, though, by the contrapuntal image found at the story's conclusion, the dying violets. In contrast, then, there is the real Paris, the one which Carol refuses to recognize: it contains the shabby theatre in the Second Arrondissement, the cold and the rain, Carol's French friend Odile ("past thirty") and her young, shabby-looking lover Felix with his filthy room and old coffee, the Arab quarter and its leering, threatening-looking occupants, and "shabby girls bundled into raincoats . . . or men who needed a haircut" (p. 7). How could anyone love such people, Carol wonders.

Clearly, this problem of love is what keeps Carol caught between two worlds: the one that exists but which she won't recognize, and the one which doesn't but which she refuses to admit is a fantasy. Odile knows that Carol's notion of romance is silly; she tells Carol that the affair is "terribly romantic" but "It penetrated at last that Odile was making fun of her" (p. 3). Even for Howard, the matter was really a practical one; he didn't consider love a "reliable emotion" (p. 6). But neither Odile's nor Howard's attitudes seem to break into Carol's fantasy world. Love
could exist, Carol believed, "if only it would stop raining" (p. 4); it only needed the right conditions. Like Paris, love was just a matter of opening the right door, too.

Sadly, the Gallant wanderer is an ironic one. Specifically, the irony stems from the matter of making the wrong choice. Frequently, when such an individual comes upon an opportunity for refuge and security, that open door is missed and the wrong choice is made. Carol, for example, wouldn't know the right door if she saw it since she is too preoccupied with creating her own worlds of fantasy. One very important "right door," Gallant implies, could have been learned through Felix and his relationship with Odile: he knew about the "ability to love" (p. 29). Seldom is a helping hand offered to one of Gallant's refugees, but when one is, it is either not recognized or it is refused. Such is the case with Carol.

The wanderer, blinded with his own devices, and making the wrong choices, is doomed to continue wandering in pursuit of an unobtainable world, and thus Carol's story inevitably runs its course. Both the sunrise from Sacré-Coeur which she wanted to see so badly (it is raining and cold that morning) and the carol singing in the Place Vendôme (the choristers sang the same phrase over and over for voice level tests; the surroundings are punctuated with plaster angels) are both romantic disasters. After a concert, Carol can't bring herself to tell Howard "what a ruin the afternoon had been" (p. 18). When she says she wants to go home, she means to the United States; Howard thinks she means to her apartment.
Confronted with establishing herself in such a world, Carol thus retreats into a personal vision of Paris, the other Paris which hides the real one and accepts neither wilted violets nor human relationships which, in her eyes, are less than perfect; later, "she would remember it [Paris] and describe it and finally believe it as it had never been at all" (p. 30).

Thus far, I have attempted to indicate the usual avenues of escape sought by the Gallant refugee, dubious as their results seem. If one is cut off geographically, socially, or spiritually from the rest of the world, the tendency is to seek out a new world in which the realities of existence are less painful: this would be home, finally, for the individual who feels himself in exile. The runner may simply ignore the sources of his misery, he may create a place of safety for himself in the past, or he may simply devise a new reality from his own fantasies.

One final problem remains, and that centres itself on the refugee who cannot or will not take any of these courses. In this person, Gallant presents her most pitiable portrait of the exile, for this is the refugee who is stripped of everything: he is without home, without family, without communication, without love, and he has come to the end of the line. There simply remains nowhere else to run to, neither to others nor inward to himself. This extreme, I think, may best be found in the example of the father in
"The Prodigal Parent." 7

Right from the first paragraph, the point is made clear that the father, who must narrate his own story, has gone as far as he can go, "without running my car into the sea" (p. 120). He has come as far as West Vancouver Island and has consequently reached a geographic stop. The brink at which he has arrived also includes having put more than just Canada at his back: he has given up worrying about matters of loss, about elegance of behavior, or about what he personally owes to others. He has come to the end of the line.

Finally, then, his journey brings him to his daughter Rhoda's home. But there is no welcome for him there. Instead, he is an embarrassment to her. She is immediately irritated by him, especially by his "accent." Although he is a Canadian, what he says to her is picked up in garbled, absurd phrases one might mistranslate from a foreigner's speech, like "Oxbow was a Cheswick charmer." He doesn't sound British (he says) but he doesn't sound Canadian (she says). A man neither here nor there, he walks into a different life which has problems of its own and has no room for any more. Rhoda is in the process of sorting out her own problems of not belonging: "He's [her lover] Irish, he's married, and he's got no money. Four children. He doesn't sleep with his wife" (p. 120). The conversations he has with

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7Mavis Gallant, *The End of the World and Other Stories* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), p. 120. Subsequent references are to this edition and are indicated parenthetically.
his daughter he describes as "collisions" (p. 122); when he
laughs, that is when she is being serious. His advice is
not wanted, nor is he: "You're no use to me" (p. 122),
Rhoda tells him.

The parallel Gallant strikes between the father and
Shakespeare's Lear, although somewhat obvious, is highly
appropriate. Joanne, the other daughter, had repatriated
her father from England; she didn't want him either. Why
did he go west? "Because Regan sent me on to Goneril, I
suppose" (p. 123). The parallel is extended further: he
tells Rhoda, only half in jest, we gather, that he will wander
around begging. She refuses to be shamed by a "poor old
blind bum" who claims to be her father. Rhoda belittles him
by telling him that "Nothing's ever happened to you" (p. 123);
in his mind he answers "No, nothing" (p. 123) and we recall
Lear's "Nothing will come of nothing."

Despite his precarious position of confidant and
advisor, Rhoda's father accuses her lover of being beneath
her, that he was giving her "bad habits": "Voluntary barren-
ness—someone else had had his children. Playing house, a
Peter-and-Wendy game, a life he would never dare at home.
That's the real meaning of Peter, by the way" (p. 125), he
explains. Of course, this exactly describes himself and his
own life, the life of the wandering gigolo, the continual
adolescent. He has played house all his life; now he has
none. Whether the father is able to articulate this speci-
fically as part of the cause of his status as refugee is not
clear; at least we know that the appropriate connection is made in his memory, even if the implication doesn't register consciously; earlier in the story, he recalls having taken Rhoda as a girl to a London performance of Peter Pan; she was put off with it; he remembers, because she expected Peter to be not only a male but Canadian as well.

Vancouver Island is no Pegnitz Junction. There are no other connections, no other possible routes: this is the end of the line. In this story, there is no comfortable past into which the runner may slip, and in the face of his predicament there is no fantasy in which he can hide; the Peter Pan days are gone. The reality of loneliness remains. Rhoda lets her father stay but, as she says ironically, not as a prisoner: "You're only my father. That's all you are" (p. 125). But he's a father without a loving daughter, a wife, a country, or a home in which he has any sense of belonging. Gallant has left him with absolutely nothing.
CHAPTER V

SANS AMOUR, ON EST RIEN TOUT

In a sense, most of Mavis Gallant's stories are love stories. Certainly, this is true in the broader context in which the characters in her fiction grope toward each other seeking relationships which they hope will dispel the feelings they have of being outsiders or strangers. Virtually the same search goes on in the stories which more obviously focus on particular relationships—between husband and wife, parent and child, or close friends, for example; only in the ironic sense, though, may such stories be called tales of love. Most of Gallant's characters are incapable either of fully loving another or of accepting love themselves.

The absence of love as a characteristic of Gallant people has manifested itself throughout her fiction in the last quarter century. Of the four main themes of exile in those stories to which this study addresses itself, probably this particular theme of the inability to love has increasingly taken up a greater portion of the emphasis. Although Gallant's more recent uncollected stories seem to be more and more concerned with this theme, they are really beyond the perimeters set for this investigation. Nonetheless, a story like "Potter" deserves mention if only to stress the concept that Gallant is focusing on this aspect rather more consciously
as a major force in her fiction, and that these concerns find their beginnings very solidly throughout her collected works.

Piotr, the central figure, demonstrates clearly the damage done to a person who has been without a capacity for love all his life. As he had learned in prison, fasting, like any deprivation, makes fulness impossible:

He had been sick after eating an apple; it was like eating a wet stone. The solitude of prison made anyone else's presence exhausting, and the absence of love in his life now made love the transformed apple—the wet stone he could not taste or digest.¹

Isolation and absence of love are linked here as companions. No wonder: they have a solid family tree of precedents from Gallant's earlier fiction. Only four of the short stories will be examined at this point, though: "Going Ashore," "Bernadette," "Malcolm and Bea," and "An Alien Flower."

Briefly, there are several facets to the problem of love which are demonstrated in these and other stories concerned with the same theme. It would be interesting to speculate on the environment—social, familial, and otherwise—of the numerous children who fill so many of Gallant's pages, but conclusions as to the origins of the problem in the adult characters could only be guesswork. Nonetheless, the inability of love often seems to trace itself to selfishness and unrealistic or frustrated expectations in others. Perhaps these things account for the preoccupation of Gallant's characters in using each other for their own ends. Another

feature of the dynamics involved suggests itself through the idea that the people in question really know nothing of importance about each other. In fact, they seem to prefer it that way and actually work toward maintaining such ignorance. Self-deception goes hand in hand with their refusal to be aware of others. One consequence of indifference (or, in many cases, of just stupidity) is inevitably that it keeps people apart. Confronted with the terror of becoming an exile, then, the last feature of the inability to love grows from the practical necessity for living: if you can't love, at least pretend that you can. That's not much of a solution, but it's better than being alone.

Many of the characteristics mentioned here appeared in Gallant's fiction as early as 1954, the year The New Yorker published "Going Ashore." In this story, the central relationship involves a divorced mother, Mrs. Ellenger, and her daughter Emma (a relationship, by the way, very similar to that between Bonnie and Flor in the later novella Green Water, Green Sky). The two of them are on a cruise ship, and although the itinerary does specify routes and ports-of-call, we get the impression that this is a pair of wanderers, one desperately seeking the companionship of a male who will be able to change the course of her life, the other being pulled along as a kind of security blanket, a listener where there is no one else to talk to. Without a husband, without a boyfriend since her last, Jimmy Salter, walked out on her, Mrs. Ellenger lives in frantic pursuit of someone who will
pay attention to her. The ship's hairdresser does ("a sympathetic girl, a good listener"), and so does the bartender, a Eurasian called Eddy. But then, they are paid for listening. Typically, they interest Mrs. Ellenger only if no one else is available; the central incident in the story involves Eddy being cruelly ignored by her in Tangier during a meeting ashore which Emma had arranged for the three of them. The woman's preoccupation with herself virtually cuts her off from any possibility of affection from others.

One of Gallant's favorite devices, the mirror image, underlines Mrs. Ellenger's emotional detachment from people: "The surface of her sunglasses, mirrored, gave back a small, distorted public square, a tiny Eddy, and Emma, anguished, in gloves and hat" (p. 86). Such imagery also suggests the connection between self-interest and self-deceit. On board the ship, "She looked at herself in the glass and, covering the dry, darkening skin below her eyes, decided she was still pretty " (p. 75). As she uses others, Mrs. Ellenger also sees herself as a commodity to sell, if only she could get someone to become interested.

Just as Mrs. Ellenger is incapable of forming any real attachment with others, her own daughter exists simply as another piece of flashy baggage to be lugged along. The narrator informs us that Emma, although too old for dolls, has

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2Mavis Gallant, The Other Paris (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin), 1956, p. 75. Subsequent references are to this edition and are indicated parenthetically.
one with no name which "had moved about with her as long as she could remember" (p. 77). The metaphor intended, of course, is that Emma is the little doll without an identity that Mrs. Ellenger drags around, to talk to when lonely, to ignore when convenient. The child had been raised in white (including shoes, bunny coats, and buggy), primped the way one would a favorite doll, but in an emotionless vacuum, and by the time of the cruise, she is without a father, without a loving mother, even without "Uncle" Jimmy. To Mrs. Ellenger, her daughter is little more than a stranger.

The impressions which Emma picks up through hearing other passengers talking about their trip ashore create an illusion about Tangier, that it would be "like some strange, imagined city, full of hazard and adventure" (p. 95), that in fact all of Africa would be deserts, jungle vines, and camels. She learns better, though; her sole experience with the continent involves a cafe and a souvenir shop. Mrs. Ellenger, too, has an illusion about the world; however, hers remains virtually intact. Like Carol in "The Other Paris," somehow she believes love will simply drop into her lap without her having to do a thing. She brings all the wrong clothes for the weather at that time of year; she is equally unprepared to make any kind of emotional commitment to anyone. Instead, she waits for the miracle: "The new life was always there, just before them, like a note indefinitely suspended or a wave about to break. It was there, but nothing happened" (p. 78).
Although the frustrated expectations of Mrs. Ellenger presumably continue to condemn her to an unremitting life without love, Gallant seems to suggest that Emma need not share that fate. After leaving Tangier, the ship heads north toward Gibraltar. Emma's mother has just experienced another setback in her pursuit of a man who might have been her miracle, but by now Emma has put such illusions behind her. Ahead lies Gibraltar, "a shape, a rock, a whole continent untouched and unexplored" (p. 103). In later works, Gallant will tend toward endings which might be interpreted as more ironic and pessimistic; here, though, she provides evidence which seems to suggest that there might be a change in Emma's life, that she will not make her mother's mistake and substitute love for illusion. For instance, she decided not to call her mother's new boyfriend "uncle" if she is asked; she takes her souvenir "African tiger" out of hiding and realizes that there is nothing special or magical about it; in addition, the story ends with an emphasis on the time of year—the Nativity. Whether Emma will find something to fill the emotional vacuum in which her first years have been spent is not made clear. At least, though, there is a chance for a new beginning: "A tide of newness came in with the salty air: she thought of new land, new dresses, clean, untouched, unworn. A new life. She knelt, patient, holding the curtain, waiting to see the approach to shore" (p. 103).

Selfishness and frustrated expectations, maintenance of an ignorance about others and about the self, relationships
with people as if they were objects to be manipulated, indifference to the emotional needs of even those who are close—these are the manifestations of frozen love often to be found in a Gallant story. They reappear in basically the same forms over the next twenty-five years of her work; the only perceptible change seems to be in acuteness and, at times, the recognition that a world without love is perhaps the norm and, under such circumstances, salvation comes with simply learning to live without it even at the price of isolation. "Bernadette," for instance, picks up the same themes in Gallant's next story collection.

Nora and Robbie Knight, the couple whose relationship is central to this narrative and put into perspective by the problems of their house-girl Bernadette, are characterized by their self-centeredness. Robbie is fond of explaining his children to others in terms of himself: "Selfish, they were. . . . Selfish like their father."3 In this regard, husband and wife are two of a kind. Their marriage is based not on love but on the concept that, together, the world revolves around them. Married nearly sixteen years,

They considered themselves solidly united. Like many people no longer in love, they cemented their relationship with opinions, pet prejudices, secret meanings, a private vocabulary that enabled them to exchange amused glances over a dinner table and make them feel a shade superior to the world outside the house (p. 16).

These are the devices which provide security from the demands of human relationships, not only with others but between themselves. As a whole, such protection is little enough. Robbie needs the additional safeguard of keeping emotional distances from others, especially from his wife, by avoiding involvement in other people's feelings (which he thinks of as unreasonable emotional behavior). The fact that his wife, unlike other women, also keeps herself emotionally aloof reinforces Robbie's respect for her.

Nora's taste in furniture corresponds to her taste in husbands. Her discovery of French-Canadian furniture "enabled her to refer to her rooms in terms of the simple, the charming, even the amusing" (p. 21). Evidently her relationship with Robbie fares little better. Indeed, the tendency she has in treating all people in terms of furniture is a metaphor Gallant employs throughout the story. Robbie, during one of their parties, almost expects Nora to say of the journalists present "I found them in an old barn and bought them for five dollars each. I've sandpapered and waxed them, and there they are". (p. 30). The German doctor friend is referred to as "one of her ethnic treasures" (p. 32). Her family is "long discarded" (p. 33). Again, the concept underlined here is Nora's sense of others as possessions, not as objects of affection or love.

Certainly this is the role Bernadette finds herself in. Functionally, she serves in the story not only as just another object of indifference to the Knights but also as a counter-
point to their empty marriage. Bernadette is the obvious lost soul, the girl without the subtleties to disguise her despair in a world without love. She has been used by a casual pick-up and is pregnant. Ignorance and fear of others are her main characteristics. They effectively cut her off from emotional contact with everything but the romantic fantasies she can get from films (in much the same way that Mrs. Thompson and Jeannie cling to their own film-world fantasies in "My Heart Is Broken"). Her detachment from any kind of emotional sharing is suggested as she sits in the movie identifying with the spectators of the lovers on the screen rather than with the heroine. This was the kind of love she believed in. At that moment, her baby's first move makes her think of death, not life. The song she listens to which is sung on her radio—"Sans amour, on est rien du tout"—sums up not just her own isolation but the Knights' as well.

The movement of Bernadette and the Knights back and forth through the illusion and the reality of what love is all about is perhaps best contained in the picture Robbie gets from an Orwell essay which suggests to him an idyllic, sentimental image of a French-Canadian family, father in the rocking chair on a winter evening in front of the fire, mother with her sewing, children happy with their mumhugs, the doll on a rag mat. Robbie sees in this picture "everything missing in his life. He felt frozen and left out" (p. 25). Ironically, that kind of family exists only as a romantic illusion.
Bernadette knows better. The world she came from was the same world of indifference the Knights live in under more affluent circumstances; her picture had the smell of men's boots, essentials always on the table, the wailing of babies, the mother in unlaced tennis shoes. The irony implied in this contrasting picture is that Bernadette's new life with the Knights places her little further ahead. She remains cut off from the sources of love.

By the time of the publication of "Malcolm and Bea" in The New Yorker in 1968, Gallant seems to have resigned herself to relationships which, to no avail, struggle to be loving ones. Apparently, she is trying to reach beyond the purposelessness of the clashes between people which so often serve as love. Other stories from the collection The End of the World," like "Malcolm and Bea," also seem to indicate that lengthy relationships between two people (the Reeves in "In the Tunnel," for instance, or the father and daughter in "The Prodigal Parent") survive despite the lack of love. Perhaps necessity or survival outweighs the disadvantages of eating away at each other. If one is nothing without love, one could be even worse off with no one at all. The paradox remains: whether to be lonely with someone else, or whether to be exiled without the company of someone in the same predicament. "Malcolm and Bea" deals with this issue and provides,

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"Mavis Gallant, The End of the World and Other Stories (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart), 1974, p. 106. Subsequent references are to this edition and are indicated parenthetically."
at least in part, an answer.

Love means possession, and marriage is a war in which the victor and the vanquished constantly maneuver to determine who is what. At the opening of the story, this concept is suggested through the book Bea is reading: Montcalm and Wolfe; Malcolm is the outsider, the English, "the jackal," and Bea is his prey. Both of them have had relationships before (one is the survivor of an affair which left her with a child, the other is a rebound from a broken marriage); at this point in their lives, it seems that a second major relationship is about to go sour. The first reaction they have to their problem is the old Gallant one: run.

In this story, breaking away is intended to find its destination in Pichipoi, "the unknown place": "it was a place that might not be any worse than the present" (p. 115), a kind of pessimist's utopia. It was first an escape for Beatrice from the kitchen, then from the lover who ran from her when he found out she was pregnant, then from her father and sisters whom she evidently had little affection for ("a taciturn man who was anchored in the last war: two silly girls" (p. 112). But there really is no escape—she has her small son Roy who, despite his adoption by Mac, remains a source of desperation for her. In a fight with him, she declares that he is not hers: "He can't be. They made a mistake in the hospital" (p. 107). However, there is always the past, even if there is no Pichipoi, and that past makes Roy and Bea each other's prisoners: "He was hers like the
crickets she kept in plastic cages" (p. 107). As indicated earlier in Chapter IV, one of the problems with the past is that a life cannot be entirely spent burning the bridges to it. Malcolm, the narrator of the story, suggests that Bea has destroyed the old to build the new: "By the time we were married and she went away to start a new life with me, the household, the life in it, had been killed, or had committed suicide; anyway, it was dead" (p. 114). The real problem, then, exists in the fact that your past is always a minute old, and you just can't keep destroying forever. If you can't love others today, no Pichipo is going to solve your problems tomorrow.

Despite everything, Gallant suggests, there must be an end. All trains have to stop somewhere, so even though Malcolm has a gnawing feeling that he wants to leave Bea, he comes closer and closer to the realization that "she can't go farther than herself, and Malcolm can't go any farther than Bea" (p. 110). This seems to be a principle that will confront the characters in Gallant's later fiction, too, and they will have to make the same decision that Malcolm does: survive in a bad situation just as Shirley will do by the end of A Fairly Good Time, or move to something worse. Whichever the choice, it is an isolating one.

Parallel lives of desperation are found in Malcolm and Bea's friends Leonard and Verna. He, too, is looking for Pichipo, although he would say that such an idea was presumptuous; "If every person thought his life was a deportation,
that he had no say in where he was going, or what would happen once he got there, the air would be filled with invisible trains and we would collide in our dreams" (p. 115). But invisible trains headed for what are often indeterminate destinations, even possibly destructive ones, abound in Gallant. Leonard is wrong: the world is like that.

At the point when Malcolm decides to run, to find the better world, he is struck with the real meaning of Pichipo: "being alone. It means each of us flung separately—Roy, Ruth, Bea—into a room without windows. It can't be done. It can't be permitted, I mean. No jumping off the train" (p. 119). We are doomed to being together, single refugees jammed into the same freight car, destination unknown. And, for our own survival, we had better learn to live with it, for absolute solitariness is the worst of all human conditions, despite the pain of being together. Pichipo is the true death camp.

Although every story in which Gallant writes about people whose lives are gradually being eaten away by the acid of indifference involves to some degree a sense of waste and unfulfillment, the more recent "An Alien Flower" makes a singularly strong statement about the atrophy of a life without love. The story, like "Bernadette," deals basically with two relationships: one between the narrator Helga and her

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husband Julius, the other between themselves and Bibi, their servant (or as Helga would prefer, their family friend). Both relationships are loveless ones but they are resolved in two different ways. In the marriage without love, Julius and Helga arrive at a tacit understanding that life must go on and that two strangers together are at least better than two strangers apart; again here is the sad irony of Gallant's world. Bibi, however, has no such option. After being pushed further and further from them, having been betrayed by Julius in an affair and by Helga's cruelty in the incident with Bibi and the mirror in which Bibi is told that she looks like a piglet dressed like an actress, and after a lonely self-exile abroad, Bibi's relationship with the two ends with the ultimate act of alienation, suicide.

Their destinies are reached through the usual avenues involved in Gallant stories which deal with the absence of love and affection. From the outset, it is apparent that no one really knows Bibi, nor do they really care to, for knowledge results in proximity. Living in the residue of a "joint past that lay all around us in heaps of charred stone," where "The streets still smelled of terror and ashes" (p. 168), fantasy is safer than understanding. The same image is used later to underline again the danger of admitting to reality; Helga knows that she would have to live in "ruins and ashes forever" (p. 176) if she confronted Julius with his infidelity.

And so it is in a self-imposed ignorance that Helga maintains a relationship with Bibi. Ironically, Helga
believed that Bibi wasn't any good at hiding what she thought. It never seems to dawn on her that she herself has an immense blind spot whenever it is convenient to maintain the barriers of understanding between herself and others. Helga assumes that Bibi never wanted to marry since "She never mentioned it" (p. 169). Of course, she is as far from the truth in this belief as she is in buying sandals for Bibi's "enormous" feet. (Evidently, this gift meant more to Bibi since she kept them until she died, wrapped in tissue paper.) "I discovered that she kept a journal, but it told me nothing" (p. 179), Helga comments, but the journal is a document which screams loneliness and an empty life.

Helga's understanding of her husband is little better. "I knew a great deal about Julius; not everything" (p. 186), she says. The implication is that comprehension of another person can be dangerous, a notion which will be discussed further in Chapter VI in relation to *A Fairly Good Time.* But here, such comprehension is absent. Julius suggests that the cause of Bibi's first suicide attempt was that she had run away with a young engineer, and that after the successful suicide the autopsy report mentioned that Bibi had an incurable disease; Helga assumes that Julius is "never mistaken" (p. 192).

Just as Julius helped others only when it helped his company, so Helga uses Bibi. Her stated motives for taking her in as a refugee are suspect. After all, Bibi is the family servant and often, the family joke (and at one time, for
Julius, his personal plaything). A constant meddler, Helga doesn't mind dumping Bibi's handbag and replacing or throwing out its contents; she interferes with Bibi's drinking and her talking at parties. The central metaphor for Bibi, the outsider, is found in Helga's high school elementary biology book: "the picture of an upright, splendid, native plant, and next to it the photograph of a spindly thing that never bloomed and that was in some way an alien flower" (p. 173). Nurtured in an artificial atmosphere of affection, such a flower is bound to wither and die; Helga and Julius's relationship, also existing in a sterile environment, is similarly doomed to extinction. At the big house, the lilies in the pool are grown by allowing their roots to "feed on a chemical mixture encased in a sphere. Even with flowers the pool looks sterile" (p. 189). (In "The Pegnitz Junction," Gallant uses a variation of this sterile water metaphor in Herbert's description of clearing water of its poison by using bubbles.) Thus, by the story's end, Bibi has died because the sources of affection have been severed beyond repair, and the marriage of Helga and Julius has been reduced to the absurdity of the gestures of two people who can no longer touch each other's hearts. Helga's final intimation to Julius about the truth in what she had done to Bibi goes unheard, and her mocking attempts to get through to him fall like the sound of one hand clapping as she drones on, "... and tigers and zebras and ants and bees ..." (p. 193). For them, now, there is nothing.
CHAPTER VI

TWO LONGER WORKS: THEMES AND VARIATIONS

Despite the eleven year interval between the publication of Gallant's two novels, Green Water, Green Sky and A Fairly Good Time, the same thematic interests evident in her short fiction and in her more recent stories continue to provide the focus of her work. Apparent changes in her writing over these years seem to exist really in a greater sense of structural control over her material in the second novel (if, indeed, it is possible to make such a judgment on the basis of only two novels) and in her increased complexity of the integration of her themes. The characterization of the individual cut adrift in an alien world continues to provide the cornerstones in these two long stories; their structures are each variations of the concerns discussed so far: the confinement/protection of the family, the problem of communication, the inability to love, and the quandary of the runner.

As Linnet Muir, the narrator of "The Doctor" observes, "Unconsciously, everyone under the age of ten knows everything." She is referring to the kind of wordless intuition some young children seem to have about their condition. Georgie, in


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Green Water, Green Sky,² even at the age of six notices that the kind of affection around him and particularly that kind of bond promoted between Flor and her cousins was a family, not a personal thing. This was the kind of closeness that unified and enclosed at the same time. Once in this kind of family, "you were in to stay: death, divorce, scandal—nothing operated, nothing cut you away" (GWGS, p. 15).

Not only does membership in such a family means a life imprisonment, it also dictates a member's behavioral patterns, since attitudes and perceptions held through life will have been decided even before birth. The Fairlie apartment in Paris becomes a metaphor for this concept of the burden of the family: "The room seemed full of inherited furniture no one knew how to get rid of" (GWGS, p. 39). Even the physical features of the family tended to bind the members closer. These were "a concrete heritage . . . that passed without visible friction from one unit to the next" (GWGS, p. 140). Eventually, the real world becomes cut off from the individual so hemmed in by this group. The personal concept of the family becomes more important than objective reality.

Flor is only one of many in this novel who refuse to see the world objectively. Years later, when George tells her the story of how she broke the string of beads (he had saved one of them), she cannot accept the account: "I know

²Mavis Gallant, Green Water, Green Sky (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959). Abbreviated references to this edition will be indicated parenthetically in this chapter.
it can't be real. That just isn't me. It didn't happen" (GWGS, p. 19). Thus, as Peter Stevens has noted, 3 the family situation has two important facets. Not only does it paralyze the individual, it "can protect but shelter a person from the too insistent demands of an outside reality" as well. Doris, neighbour and self-appointed friend of Bonnie and Flor, is well aware of the kind of security a family may offer. Since she has problems of her own to contend with, she attempts to ingratiate herself with the Fairlies. Even as an outsider she knows that "Within the family, on whatever bankrupt terms, she was at least somewhere" (GWGS, p. 57). When her plan fails, she flees back to the United States and back to her own real family. Bonnie, too, is aware of the security provided by family. She was always willing to make her son-in-law Bob, whom she otherwise never really liked, an ally whenever the common existence of the family was threatened by discoveries about it by outsiders, as we learn, for example, during the cab ride back to the flat.

One way to maintain control within a family and to prevent escape from it is with money. "The burden of the child" (GWGS, p. 115) is imposed on Bonnie by her father, who tied up Flor's money until she was thirty; even though he was dead, he effectively kept the two together. But Bonnie knows that control is reciprocal. Many things have prices which

don't simply involve money, and thus "All children eventually make their parents pay, and pay, and pay" (GWGS, p. 84).

The trap of the family remains effectively closed for all those caught in it. Even though George, in the novel's final paragraph, believes he has finally renounced all claim to Flor as a family member, his "authentic hallucination" (GWGS, p. 154) makes it clear that she will continue to exist in Bonnie, just as Flor had announced at the beginning of the novel: "'I'll always keep her with me'" (GWGS, p. 11).

These characteristic problems and doubtful benefits of family life are echoed in A Fairly Good Time. By this time, though, the emphasis has shifted slightly away from the aspects of the family as a place of confinement and toward the attempts of various characters to escape from that enclosure. The greater length of this novel, too, allows Gallant to expand the variations on her theme; here, she increases the number of family groups to four: Shirley's, her first husband Pete's, Philippe's, and the Maurels.

Although Shirley's mother never appears in person, Mrs. Norrington's presence imposed itself on the girl's life through letters from home. Advice and admonitions continue to hold Shirley. A P.S. in one letter tells Shirley that George the Fifth "who was notoriously stingy, mean, a stranger to culture, and hard on his children" (FGT, p. 8) was other-

"Mavis Gallant, A Fairly Good Time (New York: Random House, 1970). Abbreviated references to this edition will be indicated parenthetically in this chapter."
wise like the writer's own father. This and other letters, however, suggest that these traits are the very ones possessed by Mrs. Norrington herself. Yet Shirley continues the correspondence.

Philippe seems equally incapable of breaking away from his mother. The double poles of attraction and repulsion apply to him as they did to Flor. He wouldn't quarrel with Shirley because "He had wanted a way of being that was unlike his mother's" (FGT, p. 128) yet he goes right back to his mother when he walks out on his marriage. Shirley comes to understand that Philippe never thought they were really married but that he was just in transit: "He may have used me to get away from home" (FGT, p. 283). In Gallant, though, weak marriages (or affairs) are never stronger than the pull of the family.

The idea that a family is, in a sense, made up of strangers runs through this novel too. Through their ignorance of the realities of life (one is reminded of the little girls Jane and Ernestine in "A Day Like Any Other" curled up in bed "like two question marks"), the individuals just don't seem to understand their relationships to each other. For instance, in this novel's third family, Pete's mother thinks she was his friend. Shirley, though, wonders how that could be "when you have had twenty years' authority over him and he has never had one second's authority over you?" (FGT,

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5Mavis Gallant, The Other Paris, p. 240.
p. 231). Ironically, it takes the outsider like Shirley is with Pete's family (or like Wishart, in the other novel) to see what the family members cannot.

Pete's death relieves him of his family in a way he did not choose; the Maurels' attempts to be rid of their family are much more temporary. Marie-Thérèse complains that her family always tends to wander off, especially to restaurants, like "vagabonds, homeless, new-rich" (FGT, p. 150). Papa Maurel simply closes his eyes to be rid of the others. Despite the impression that Claudie gives as the one who tries the hardest to remove herself for good, Shirley is probably correct in her belief that Claudie cannot really break away: "Even when people say they want to be rescued they don't really" (FGT, p. 282).

That we can never confidently trust in what people say suggests Gallant's concern with the second feature which tends to keep her characters in isolation: the inability to communicate. It is difficult to find any part of either of the novels which does not include this obstacle to understanding. George stutters, Shirley is a translator despite her own admissions of difficulty with the language, Papa Maurel ordinarily refused to talk, Philippe's voice is heard only on a television set, Flor eventually becomes incapable of speech by way of madness, and the others spend their time lying either to others or to themselves. Since the variations on this theme appear so often, only a few of the directions they take will be illustrated here.
One pattern, mentioned earlier in connection with the short stories, is the mirror motif. The reflections cast back from windows, mirrors, glasses and the like are distortions of reality. The information provided by these phantom images is characteristically false; generally, the character before the glass sees only what he wants to see, not what is. For example, Flor needs the reassurance of the reflected image, like the image of herself in a shop window; it tells her she is still there. She, in turn, becomes like a mirror to those around her. Living with her gave one the habit of distorting reality: "Impossible, illogical pictures leaped upward in the mind and remained fixed, shining with more brilliance and clarity than the obvious facts" (GWGS, p. 41). Wishart, in turn, becomes Bonnie's mirror: "Reflected in this mirror, Bonnie McCarthy saw that she was still pretty and smart" (GWGS, p. 94).

In A Fairly Good Time, the characters are still getting misinformation reflected at them. Shirley finds in Philippe's desk a one-page condensed excerpt of Geneviève's "novel" (which itself is a mirror image of Shirley's situation with Philippe as she sees it). Typically, the heroine Flavia seems fixed in reassuring herself of a happy existence by looking in various mirrors and reflecting surfaces (she does this five times). Later, Shirley does not recognize her own image when she sees it across the room in a cafe; in her case, search for a particular identity is a stage beyond her at that point; for she is still unable to establish even her own
existence as an individual.

Letters, memos, memoirs, and writing of various kinds abound in both novels, yet seldom do they communicate anything of importance to their readers, if in fact they ever get that far; they are often destroyed or they go unread. The letter from Bonnie to George's parents is nearly illegible; the words are all joined and all the vowels and curved letters look like u’s. The message comes obliquely and is clear only with the addition of a tiny scrawled message on an enclosed scrap of paper which contains the real point of the message (not to send George to France). Flor eventually ignores the letters she receives from Bob; she doesn't even bother to open them "because she knew he was not saying anything to her" (GWGS, p. 78).

Written material of this type increases in the longer novel. Mrs. Norrington's letter to her daughter Shirley completely misinterprets the girl's reference to a blue wildflower in an earlier letter. A later communication from the mother concludes "Destroy this letter." In it, she had come dangerously close to being truthful to Shirley. Shirley's own letters to her mother bring constant complaints about illegible handwriting. In addition, Shirley's attempts to communicate to Philippe through ads in the Paris Herald-Tribune also fail; they go unnoticed, unanswered. Her search through Philippe's papers for some kind of message on that first morning when she misses him can be seen ostensibly as a search for some clue to or message about the man himself;
logically, his desk drawer would not be a place where he would leave a "normal" message for his wife. "She was searching for enlightenment he could not [my emphasis] willingly provide" (FGT, p.19). Philippe just isn't capable of openness and it is this inability to reveal himself to Shirley that sends her to wastebaskets and pockets for trivia. The evidence points out that he "could be mean, petty, vain, gullible and subject to pique" (FGT, p. 19).
Although these are all characteristics borne out by the evidence of the rest of the novel, they are not the things that Shirley is capable of reading.

The evidence of reality is always there in both novels. People see, people write, people talk, but nobody understands or listens. George is a typical character in this regard: "For all the reaction he was getting he might as well have been alone. When he spoke, no one replied" (GWGS, p. 131). Shirley's question to herself indicates how the problem is compounded: "Why aren't people ever clear? Why don't they say what they mean?" (FGT, p. 292). What greater isolation could there be than that of the deaf, dumb, and blind!

If, in this world of noise, Gallant suggests we live alone, silently, then the next thematic pattern would seem to follow logically: in a world without love, the most we can hope for is a fairly good time. Like silence, the absence of love also tends to close us in and cut us off. It becomes the kind of trap Gallant speaks of when she describes the relationship ("love" is never quite the right word with
Gallant) George's parents had for him; it was "a structure, and he was inside" (GWGS, p. 20). In all Gallant's writing, love, if it exists at all, is coloured by other factors: use of people, unrealistic expectations of others or self-deceit, overprotection, ignorance, or as in Flor's case, resentment. For her, it is so close to what might be love that she can't tell them apart; both are contained in her vow never to leave her mother. In fact, these two opposing tendencies form the central theme for that novel and suggest the title: they "were always there, one reflecting the other, water under sky" (GWGS, p. 19).

Flor, like the outwardly splendid peacocks in "The Ice Wagon Going Down the Street," 6 plays a role unconsciously intended by her and promoted by Bonnie to lure suitable young gentlemen. But for Flor, it was sufficient for her to be simply desirable, for "the dream of love is preferable to love in life" (GWGS, p. 77) since real love makes demands which Gallant's characters find too difficult to meet. The atrophy of that last month of the end of her sanity becomes a metaphor for a whole life without love. Like that season, her life without love didn't end as much as it simply got used up—"a love too long discussed or a desire deferred" (GWGS, p. 78). Maybe Flor's only really honest emotion was one of hate, for "she had hated Georgie Fairlie, whom everyone was supposed to love" (GWGS, p. 148) when she was just

6Mavis Gallant, My Heart Is Broken: Eight Stories and a Short Novel, p. 256.
fourteen. From then on, she seems to have discovered that at least the pretense of love, first with her many suitors, then finally with Bob ensures a kind of protection, impermanent as it turns out to be.

Bob himself appears to be equally incapable of maintaining a selfless relationship with his wife. The more he learns about Flor, the less he attempts to make love to her until he finally never tries at all. Here again, knowledge proves to be destructive. Unrealistically, he expects Flor to be returned by her psychiatrist a new woman, "more exciting than ever" (GWGS, p. 31). Throughout the novel, Bob never manages to distinguish between loving and using, either in regard to others or even to himself: "The more he was liked, and the more he was exploited, the more he was himself" (GWGS, p. 36). Of course, Bob is not the only one in the story who is adept at using others under the guise of love or friendship. Bonnie and Wishart are both specialists in manipulating people for their own ends. This propensity in Gallant’s characters, one established earlier in stories like "About Geneva," would continue to be a major factor in the theme of the exile right to the present Linnet Muir narratives.

Although A Fairly Good Time deals with similar obstacles in human relationships, a major variation is to be found in its focal female figure. If Flor’s biggest problem is her...
inability to love another, Shirley's main concern is in not receiving the love and attention she craves. She "wanted life to be passionate in itself and could only imagine this in terms of being loved" (FGT, p. 99). But her whole life seems to be a series of events designed to frustrate these hopes. From the beginning, Shirley appeared to be more bother than treasure; her pregnant mother had assumed the future Shirley to be a tumor. Even the naming of "Shirley Ann" was done by the doctor; the name was detested by her father and Mrs. Norrington had wanted a male name.

Shirley thereafter is unable to find any kind of lasting emotional relationship with a man. Her marriage to Pete is abruptly terminated by his early death. When Papa Maurel later asks Shirley if she has ever loved anyone, she gives him a short list of opportunists and gigolos; significantly, she fails to include both Pete and Philippe. Shirley tells her Canadian friend Mrs. Castle that her problem with Philippe is that she wanted to be loved more. "'You're old enough to be smarter than that!'" (FGT, p. 208) is the response. Becoming part of her neighbour James' "Coro di Ninfe" proves unsatisfactory as well, for with him, lovemaking is little more than reassurance of his own virility; it was "exorcism in its simplest form" (FGT, p. 130).

Although Shirley continues to struggle alone and helplessly in an unloving world, and although she is constantly surrounded by others who are very willing to use her for their own purposes, especially people like the Maurels, James, her
landlady Mrs. Roux, and her suicidal friend Renata, she remains totally ignorant as to what strong human relationships are all about. For Shirley, there is something artificial about the whole idea of love. She doesn't even say the word in bed with James since "Love" is easily damaged; she substitutes other words for it, like "mineral" or "Maurice" (FGT, p. 130). Moreover, Shirley is not really sure that what she is talking about isn't perhaps closer to the word "like," a distinction she feels the French language doesn't make.

Still trying to sort out the form from the real thing, she gives James a speech about the phoniness of women involved in sexual affairs; the game involves the woman always admitting to one previous lover but never more than two, for example. Alternatively, rather than being involved in the "risk of loving," Shirley wonders if "a permanent state of armed resistance" (FGT, p. 142) might not be the real salvation for everyone. As her illusions about love are attacked throughout the narrative, she comes to think that "real life" was "the middle-aged world without feeling, where no one was loved" (FGT, p. 234). By the novel's conclusion, Shirley views her life without love in terms of the image, discussed earlier in Chapter V, which Gallant will use later as the focus for "Alien Flower": it is like the flower "pulled out of the ground and left dying. The threadlike roots tried to draw strength from the air" (FGT, p. 277).

Thus, the characters in these two novels are cut adrift from others and from themselves. Imprisoned by family, con-
demned to that silent world without love or friendship which Philippe refers to as "the vacuum of ba and ba and ba" (FGT, p. 213), they become refugees drifting toward solutions which are less threatening than their immediate situations and more secure: some attempt to find sanctuary in the past, others in fantasy or madness, still others in rearranging or ignoring reality. A few examples from each novel should serve to illustrate these variations.

In Gallant's narratives, the past has little to recommend it. It serves less as a fond memory and more as a crutch (or as in "The Peggitz Junction," a moral lesson for those who can grasp its implications), and therefore dependence on the past inhibits living in the present. Paradoxically, as Erika in "An Autobiography" learns, one comes to feel adrift in a world where there is no past older than fifteen years. Flor, always taught that her support came from the past, topples into madness when she loses this crutch:

Now she saw that the chain of fathers and daughters and mothers and sons had been powerless as a charm; in trouble, mistrusting her own capacity to think or move or enjoy living, she was alone (GWGS, p. 112).

Unable to find strength elsewhere, Flor turns to Bob as her shelter. As the narrative puts it, "Lacking an emotional country, it might be possible to consider another person one's home" (GWGS, p. 112). But when Bob has to leave on business, this too is gone: "she would know without illusion that she was in Cannes in a rotting season, the rot was

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reality, and there was no hope in the mirrored room" (GWGS, p. 126). Sleep and dreams serve to block out this reality for a time, but the dream of the joyful horse ride toward the arms of the father who had deserted her eventually becomes the only reality Flor knows. She escapes into insanity.

For Bonnie, despite the superficial obsequiousness to her heritage, "No present horror equaled the potential suffering of the past" (GWGS, p. 69). She comes to develop a way of seeing only what she wants to see and interpreting reality in ways which are less threatening to her image of herself, since "reality was not what Bonnie demanded" (GWGS, p. 118). The fraudulent Wishart is kept on only as long as he continues to play the role assigned to him. Flor will continue to be her mother's darling, sought by men, a girl who grew up, according to Bonnie, spared from all the shocks of life.

These variations of escape by means of the past, by withdrawing from or changing reality, Gallant continues to develop in A Fairly Good Time. The same paradox of attraction/repulsion to the past exists in Philippe as it did in Bonnie. Although his obsession with orderliness is his way of eliminating the immediate past, he is not beyond escaping to the apartment of his mother and sister where nothing ever changed. We come to suspect that when Philippe cannot order reality to his own liking, at least the past provides a security without demands. He would probably fight with his sister Colette
over all the useless junk in that apartment after his mother dies, "each of them wanting to own their common past" (FGT, p. 121). Philippe simply cannot accept the world in terms other than his own. He insists, for example, that the gibberish of the Goosey Gander poem learned by his friend Genéviève in her childhood is accurate despite the obvious nonsense of her version; nonetheless, he is more intent on working out the enigma of that chaotic rhyme than he is in understanding the confusion that is Shirley's life.

Shirley, on the other hand, is "comfortable in chaos" (FGT, p. 12). It is this disorder which she needs, perhaps, to leave a mark on an otherwise unimpressionable reality. She objects to building a future on the past. That would be building a life around a "past of glass cases" in a museum where a guard tells you your efforts are forbidden; it would be built on other people's leftovers, like your family's or strangers'. But even though we destroy the past, Shirley thinks, the "residue in the mind would never be bombed away" (FGT, p. 154).

The past is no escape for her, then, but neither is ignoring reality. On the contrary, since meeting Philippe, she had worn glasses, but "Seeing created obligations: because she could now count every pebble in a handful, she felt as if she had to count them" (FGT, p. 145). Throughout the novel, Shirley tries to ignore the seriousness of her problems. She does not succeed as Bonnie does, though, for in the end the reality of those pebbles force upon her an
acceptance without much understanding. She seems resigned to continue living a life which she will likely never be able to understand or control. When her landlady Mrs. Roux tells her she should go home, Shirley says that at twenty-seven she can't, and besides, it is not her home any more: "I live here . . . I'm not a tourist. I'm not somebody who keeps moving on. I'm somebody's wife" (FGT, p. 199). Of course, she is wrong on all counts. Evidently, Shirley will continue unwittingly to head for mirrors which reflect images she can't correctly interpret. Although the comic tone throughout the novel undercuts any absolutely pessimistic future for Shirley, the title itself suggests a mildly optimistic but ironic note. After all, the best that she or any of us may hope for from life is just a fairly good time.
CHAPTER VII

PERSPECTIVES

Always below the surface of Gallant's work flow the undercurrents of irony, at times very obvious, at others quietly subtle. This irony lends to the narratives a tone which may move from tragic to comic, even within the same piece. As her four themes suggest, there exists a continual clash of reality and fantasy in the worlds of Gallant's characters. It is through that unifying technique of irony that these themes come together to create that single composite of the figure in exile.

Certain motifs used by Gallant to underscore the alienation and isolation of her characters from others have already been mentioned within the thematic contexts of the stories in which they are used. Four such motifs seem to dominate. One appears in the construct of the characters as transients: trains, boats, and pensions suggest displacement and impermanence; individuals are caught by the writer in motion from one life to another, hopefully better one. A second recurring pattern emerges in the mirror imagery, in which Gallant's characters appear to be seeking reflections of dreams rather than reproductions of reality (this is the pattern discussed more fully in Chapter V as it applied to
"Going Ashore").

Another note sounded throughout Gallant's stories and novels has to do with money and valuables (and even, when used in the same context, food): possessions provide a weapon whereby individuals may attempt to exert control over others and thus, like a family, entrapping and alienating at the same time. The fourth motif is apparent in the mass of writing which is done by the characters, either for others or to themselves; these notes, memos, letters, books, articles, poems, memoirs, speeches, name plates, or whatever, all tend to obscure rather than to reveal the realities of existence necessary for anything other than a solitary life. These four patterns, like the narrative method Gallant uses, are of course strongly ironic. The characters are usually in transit but they never really get anywhere. Mirrors reflect one thing yet the onlookers see something different. Material things seldom bring the happiness they are intended to. Writing does more to cloud perception than to clarify it. Although these four motifs have been alluded to in earlier chapters, they seem to be important enough to warrant more investigation as subjects of a separate study.

These motifs, as well as other of Gallant's technical devices, combine to make up what might be described as a mosaic rather than a linear structure (although some stories are certainly designed in a linear way, too).¹ Thus, each

¹Peter Stevens has described the structure in Gallant's fiction in terms of concentric circles set in motion by
tile, large or small, becomes an important part in the overall structure, especially when they provide an ironic commentary on each other. For example, characters like Doris the American neighbor or Wishart, both in *Green Water, Green Sky*, exist not only on their own terms as characters but also to colour and to bring form to our perception of Bonnie and Flor as creatures of exile. Similarly, bits of dialogue and conversations, memories, fantasies, any mise en scène of a story (like the bar, cabin, and café scenes in "Going Ashore," for instance), or the pieces of writing by individuals in the narratives, all are necessary to form the overall moving collage from which emerges the notion of the solitary figure.

At times, especially in the short stories, Gallant tends to use virtually a single episode to stand for or to suggest the whole of the mosaic. Apparently this approach has disturbed some critics, notably Edmund Wilson, who feels that indirectness and the suggestion of a larger picture do not compensate for a larger whole complete in itself. Wilson writes that Gallant's stories "are likely to impress one as being not so much real short stories as episodes from some larger fiction . . . that she has not yet found out how to manage." ² While such episodes do seem to have the potential

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of expansion into parts of larger forms (as "The Accident" eventually becomes a part of A Fairly Good Time), the point here is that they are, at the same time, viable on their own, depending on their ability to suggest the thematic forms of isolation indicated throughout this study.

Perhaps the single greatest factor which may be thought of as the central control of Gallant's mosaics is the narrative voice employed in her stories. Although her narrative approach may vary from that of the involved first person (as in the recent Linnet Muir stories published in The New Yorker) to the "detached" reporter using third person narration, Gallant's story-telling method is characteristically marked throughout her work with "ironic distance," a term she uses in the uncollected story "The Four Seasons."³ The term suggests a gap between story-teller and subject; it is just this distance which so often produces the irony implicit in Gallant's themes of isolation. The creation of such a perspective of irony toward her themes, although a dominant trait right through her fiction, may be illustrated here with a few representative stories.

The narrator of "Señor Pinedo"⁴ is both unwilling (the noises of the Pinedo family intrude on the narrator through the thinnest of plaster walls) and nameless (in fact,


⁴Mavis Gallant, The Other Paris (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin, 1956), p. 200. Subsequent references are to this edition and are indicated parenthetically.
although we may assume that it is female, there is nothing in the story to confirm even the sex of the narrator. Not a native of Spain either, the narrator thus becomes very much removed from any personal understanding of the events and conversations around her. With no real background of her own or apparent connection with the other characters, this detached observer passes on to the reader subjective conclusions which seem to match the objectively observed facts about "these people, with their genteel pretensions, their gritty urban poverty" (p. 209).

Her balcony vantage point allows the narrator to observe the aftermath of the neighbour boy's accident which occurs as he is riding the elevator weight counterbalance. When Pinedo says "Terribly bad luck" (p. 215) we agree at her surprise "at this most Anglo-Saxon understatement" (p. 215). Only in the last paragraph of the story does the narrator allow the reader to judge the irony between the noise in the story and the confusion of the accident, and the silence following Pinedo's typical pronouncement that the government will take care of the problem: "'I guarantee it,' he said. 'I work in the office of pensions'" (p. 217). She withholds judgment on whether the silence of his listeners "was owing to respect, delight, apathy, or a sudden fury of some other emotion so great that only silence could contain it" (p. 217). The ironic distance created by the narrator thus allows the reader to recognize bitterness as that "other emotion." We are able to see the very great gap between Pinedo and his
people and to know that his lack of understanding of the reality of the situation makes him a very real isolate indeed.

The idea of a narrator who misses the point while allowing the reader to be the perceptive one can be varied. In "Its Image on the Mirror," a later story which Gallant calls a short novel, the narrator is given a distinct identity: Jean Duncan. Although she tells the story from her vantage point within her family, she is at times no more accurate in her subjective conclusions than is the impersonal narrator of "Señor Pinedo," and the reader must be careful to take into account the effects of Jean's own role as an isolated person (in terms of the themes examined in this study) as they help or hinder her in objective narration. Accordingly, the ironic distance in this story becomes greater proportionate to the varying degrees of alienation within the narrator herself.

The more Jean talks in the story, the more aware the reader becomes of the ironies of observation caused by such an unreliable witness. We are tipped off right from the start; Jean describes a family moving day in detail, then undercuts her own account by adding the comment that, in her mother's opinion, all those details never existed. She describes a picture of herself and her sister Isobel and brother Frank as children; although she comments "We look

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5Mavis Gallant, My Heart Is Broken: Eight Stories and a Short Novel (New York: Random House, 1964), P. 55. Subsequent references are to this edition and are indicated parenthetically.
happy enough" (p. 66), we suspect that this is not the case. Later information in the novel confirms this suspicion.

At other times, the novel's irony is maintained by putting Jean's remarks in direct contradiction with each other. Observing her mother and father holding hands in a restaurant, Jean swears she and her children will never be like her family (p. 70); shortly before, she says she is pleased to be just like her mother who is herself without a trace of "weakness or compassion or pity" (p. 66). Jean remarks that hers is a happy family and thinks of such groups as interlocking circles; later she feels that "No people are ever as divided as those of the same blood [because of the] wall of family knowledge" (p. 88).

And so the ironies of narration compound themselves. By the opening of Part 4 of this novella, the reader must take for fact what the narrator attempts to ignore when she says "I am afraid I have given two misleading impressions: one that I was jealous of my sister, the other that I married without love" (p. 100). The entire story, then, works conditionally upon the reader's grasp of the distance between the narrator and her "sham landscape" (p. 128) which is, of course, the reality she herself cannot perceive. It is precisely this ironic distance which enables Gallant's four major themes of alienation to work themselves out, and ultimately to reveal Jean as that solitary image in the mirror, a character in pursuit of dreams that never really existed, and the voice which says finally "... there is no one left
but me" (p. 155).

Another narrative method used by Gallant, although employed infrequently, should be mentioned here briefly. This is the rather cinematic device of a present tense third person observer-narrator, as used in "The Old Friends." The method allows for three points of view: the detached narrator's, the commissioner's, and a conditional/possible. The objectivity of all three is strengthened by framing the scene in the few brief moments of a luncheon on a restaurant terrace. The focus is on the relationship between Helena, an aging actress and a survivor of the war, and the commissioner, an ex-officer with the Germans: two old friends.

The ironic distance is maintained here during the duration of a cigarette (six pages); we are given glimpses of the destruction and terror of the past, and are then thrown back into the niceties of the present Alpine landscape. The narrative tone never changes. We begin to feel the entire scene undercut by the ironic absurdity of the one-time captor now become the protector of Helena. In larger terms, the commissioner is the conscience of post-war Germany, hoping that the atrocities could not have taken place on German soil or at the hands of Germans.

The dispassionate narration, in an atmosphere of champagne and pastry, continues to report Helena's pregnancy by

Subsequent references are to this edition and are indicated parenthetically."
an American soldier (thus, the boy in the story), her acting career, the transit camps and later interviews, and her first meeting with the commissioner on the train. (Indeed, it is the recurrence of similar episodes and images, as well as the recurring themes, which run throughout all the stories in The Pognitz Junction that give unity to the entire collection.) At one point, Helena seems to desert him momentarily when she refers to her grandmother's voice: "I must have heard it before she was killed" (p. 93) but returns with the next comment: "I was never raped" (p. 99) which soothes his conscience. In an otherwise coldly dispassionate but ironic interchange, Gallant concludes by inserting an image which drops the subtleties maintained throughout. Helena lets escape from an overturned glass a wasp the commissioner had captured earlier in the story.

A final example and one from a more recent collection of Gallant seems to me to be a particularly fine illustration of her ability to develop her themes of isolation through narrative technique: "In the Tunnel." In this story, she develops all four themes by way of the ironic distance maintained between subject, third person narrator, and reader.

The opening paragraph introduces two people, Sarah and her father Mr. Holmes. In it, the narrator establishes two important concepts. First, her father, a widower, is a

7 Mavis Gallant, The End of the World and Other Stories (Toronto: McClellan and Stewart, 1974), p. 142. Subsequent references are to this edition and are indicated parenthetically.
natural loner, "a born widower" (p. 142) and the ultimate guide and mentor of his daughter's life; Sarah, too, is portrayed as one who is unattached, without even a memory of her mother. Second, the girl is "a natural amoureuse" (p. 142), incapable of disguising whatever love she might feel, incapable of deceit.

This objective picture given by the narrator, then, supplies the two important elements needed for the story: the idea of a couple made up of two individuals fiercely steeled against the world with their own preconceptions of themselves as capable of coping alone; and the irony of one of the two being absolutely open, naive, and trusting even in a situation heavily veiled with deceit. The affair around which the story is built is further suggested by the title, The Tunnel being the name of the cottage Sarah and Roy, her lover, go to stay in. Like their affair, the place is dark, enclosed, confining. The probability of Sarah getting herself into such a situation is again signaled early in the narration; she has a knack for noticing those things which are "bound to disappoint: a stone beach skirted with sewage, a promenade that was really a through speedway, an eerie bar" (p. 142).

The narrator is careful to keep balanced the distance in understanding between the characters themselves and between the characters and the reader. For example, during Roy and Sarah's first meeting, the irony is drawn between Sarah's perceptions of Roy and our own. It is only the reader who
is allowed to catch the tone in Roy's voice and his ability "to slide it under another level of sound and make himself plain" (p. 144). Sarah is the "puppy asking for a game" (p. 145) and Roy, clearly, is the master who is in complete control: "He smiled, but still kept space between them, about the distance of the blue tablecloth" (p. 145). The arrangements made, the two move into The Tunnel where Roy reassures Sarah that if he ever feels remorseful, "you'll never know" (p. 147). This promise is partly true. It takes Sarah a long time to accept the truth that she has become boring to him. Despite the fact that Roy eventually stops speaking, eating, or even moving, Sarah clings to her notions of romance and ignores the obvious. Parallel in the narration to this breakdown between the two is Sarah's badly hurt ankle, again a situation she tries to ignore even though the injury continues to get worse.

For the duration of the affair, the narrator reveals certain aspects of character which ironically give more information to the reader than to Sarah. Roy has been a prison inspector, a man whose career was based on the concept of captivity. Later, Sarah is described as "a prisoner impaled on a foreign language" (p. 161). Illness or weakness of any kind makes Roy sick. Even the idea of a dead mosquito repels him, and we can assume that one of the reasons Roy is able to tolerate his landlords the Reeves is that they never get sick, especially Tim: "Never a headache, never a cold, no flu, no rheumatism, no gout, nothing" (p. 154). In fact,
any imperfection disgusts him, whether in things (like dust or chipped cups) or in people (like Lisbet, the visiting niece). Given this information, the reader is assured that the affair cannot last long. A final irony is saved for Sarah and the reader until almost the end of the story: Meg Reeves is, in fact, quite sick, and Tim has been impotent for years.

Although that summer didn't really change Sarah's nature—"... it was too late to change anything much" (p. 167)—her trip through the tunnel, a passage from ignorance to a kind of helpless knowledge about herself in a world of other strangers, does make her that Gallant character who, at least in the more recent fiction, arrives at a grudging acceptance that no matter how bad isolation may seem, being alone together is better than nothing. Sarah says to Tim "I can't stay in the same bed with someone who doesn't care . . . it isn't right" (p. 164). The response from Tim is in Gallant's voice: "It is what most people do."

Perhaps this is the most important irony of all. In the world of Gallant's fiction, not very much should be asked of the world. If we subscribe to this view, then maybe we can detect at least a mild note of optimism in her work. Given the problems suggested by the themes, Gallant seems to imply that, under the circumstances of our isolation, we do the best we can and that if we don't run too frantically toward that elusive goal of happiness, we might just get by. And although our family might keep us apart, our voices remain lost in snow, our attempts to give and receive affection
limited, and our paths out of the maze of isolation blocked, at least we have the comfort of knowing that we are all alone together.
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VITA AUCTORIS

1956 Graduated from Assumption High School, Windsor.
1960 Bachelor of Arts Degree in Psychology, University of Windsor, Ontario.
1961 Graduated from Ontario College of Education, University of Toronto.
1967 Specialist certificate in English, Ontario College of Education, University of Toronto; appointed Head of English Department, Riverside Secondary School, Windsor.
1978 "Steinbeck and Jung" accepted for publication in Steinbeck Quarterly.