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## *Mirroring the Canadas: Mavis Gallant's Fiction*

by LORNA IRVINE

**I**N HIS PLAY, *The Shadowy Waters*, written in 1911 to be performed in his rejuvenated Irish Theatre, the poet William Butler Yeats has one of the characters say:

I can see nothing plain; all's mystery.  
Yet sometimes there's a torch inside my head  
That makes all clear, but when the light is gone  
I have but images, analogies . . . (152)

Mavis Gallant uses another passage from this play for the epigraph and title of her novella, "Its Image on the Mirror." "Fellow-wanderer,/ Could we but mix ourselves into a dream / Not in its image on the mirror!" Apart from emphasizing Yeats's fascination with the occult, and his creation of impressionistic ambiguity, I believe that Gallant is drawn to Yeats because of the poet's interest in politics. I am not arguing that Gallant wants to begin a national theatre in Canada as Yeats did in Ireland. Nor am I suggesting that national pride motivates her writing. In fact, she is outspokenly critical of nationalism. What I do want to point to, however, is the political focus of "Its Image on the Mirror."

Superficially, this seven-part novella reflects, from the perspective of one of the daughters, the life of an English-Canadian family living in Quebec. Part One takes place in 1955 and is built around the selling of the family home in Allenton, a town near Montreal. The narrator, Jean, now married and a mother, has come to help her parents move out of the house which has been sold to the Roman Catholic Church. Several religious themes dominate the first section of Part One, the most significant for my purposes being the reference to Daniel's reading, for King Belshazzar, of the mysterious hieroglyphics on the wall of his banquet hall. The walls of the Allenton house, it seems to me, are also symbolically marked with hieroglyphics that need to be deciphered by the reader. As well, we learn that the priests who occupy the house following its 1955 sale have translated the grass into gravel and white stones. They have also removed the family's beech tree, replacing it with a statue of St. Therese of Lisieux. They keep the windows tightly shut, although the narrator claims to have heard their murmuring tones coming through the cracks. Jean also reports her parents' move into an apartment in Montreal and mentions a proposed family reunion to take place at the family cottage on the coming Labor Day weekend. Although the brother is dead, the other family member, Isobel, will be there. For the past six years, Isobel has lived in Venezuela with Alfredo, her Italian husband, a doctor. As she allows this wider

canvas to emerge, Jean's own biases become more obvious. She allies herself with her British, Protestant mother, whose stiff upper lip and dislike of "emotional rot" (65) has profoundly affected the narrator.

Part Two of the story focuses on the reunion. Filled with tension, this section articulates striking contrasts between Isobel and her family, and Jean and hers. Focused on strained and often broken communication, this section, seemingly heavily repressed, implies violence simmering under a placid family surface. Once again, the intrusion of a larger world casts its shadow over the secluded cottage.

Part Three moves back to the past, to the years just before and during the Second World War. Although family psychology is briefly presented—for example, the father trying to make a man of his son—the section mainly dramatizes once again tension between the two sisters. Casting herself in the part of a "glum-faced" onlooker watching her sister Isobel, cast as the fairy-tale princess and heroine, Jean recalls a specific episode from 1944. In it she meets on the snowy streets of Montreal her sister with a lover, a married man much older than Isobel, a poet. Chronologically out of place (we have scarcely heard anything yet about Jean's and Isobel's husbands who, in 1944, are away at war), the episode clearly dominates Jean's imagination, representing a passion she has never known. Confusing moral and narrative categories, it obsessively distorts Jean's perspective, making her narration suspiciously unreliable.

The central episode of Part Four should be Jean's marriage, but her report of this marriage is oddly positioned, dramatically understated. It was, she tells us, a "temporary interruption" (104). Partly, Jean means that her new husband almost immediately left for the war; but her failure to focus on her marriage also emphasizes one of the story's psychological cruces, that her husband, Tom, had first proposed to Isobel and been rejected. Her mother does not give Jean this piece of information until after she has married. Following this confession, Jean devotes herself to describing the overpowering female presence of a city partially emptied of men. One of the ghosts of this story is the Second World War.

Part Five reports the brother's death, not as a war hero, but in a trivial driving accident in England. This information is also treated peripherally, and the narration almost immediately, and by now clearly obsessively, moves again to Jean's relationship with Isobel. Searching for Isobel to give her the news of Frank's death, Jean finds herself in Isobel's territory, at this point in time a house owned by Isobel's employer, Madame Tessignier, described by Jean as "small, fat, and round, her hair dyed blue, her face pink, pressed into shape like soft wax" (121). Struggling to maintain her perspective in what seems to her to be foreign territory, Jean, who unlike her siblings has never learned French, echoes more obviously her mother's English voice. She tells us: "I sounded like our mother: flat and calm and certain I was right" (125).

Part of the sixth section and all of the final seventh section of the story take place in the Allenton house just after Frank's death (in February 1945). Part Six reviews the Christmas that the family had spent together six weeks earlier. During that time, Frank had tried to assert his role as head of the family, following

up this assertion with a visit to his sisters in Montreal on his way back to his post in England. During that Christmas Isobel, in love, seemed to Jean to inhabit a "warmer world" that, while Jean envies it, was beyond her northern grasp. More clearly now the "symbol of English Canada" (143), as she describes herself, Jean also appears, as another character says, a "hopeless provincial" (142).

Having established this perspective, Jean moves into the story's seventh and final section, where she narrates a moment when she and Isobel come face to face, six weeks after their brother's death. At this point Jean attempts to establish the mirror image that she believes will help her define her own existence. Presented as a prelude to understanding, a possible epiphany, the sisters' conversation in Frank's old bedroom in fact illustrates Jean's failure to find a language capable of communicating her sister's experience. Having been sought out by Isobel so that she could have Jean's whole attention while she tells her about her pregnancy, Jean announces to her readers that "from that moment I stopped being the stranger on the dark street and I moved into the bright rooms of my sister's life" (147). But Jean's attempted uniting of experience and meaning, of literal speech and image, of content and form, fails. Jean's comment, before she tries to capture the image on the mirror, alerts us to her failure: "one night I saw, or thought I saw, or may have dreamed" (147). This example of unreliable narration is repeated throughout the section. Jean cannot remember Isobel's exact words and admits herself that there is a "flaw in the story" (152). From her British perspective, she simply cannot see clearly. "Leave us there," she instructs the reader, "with the lamp like a ship and the anchors around the shade, and the map on the wall with the Empire in pink" (153). This striking image, and request, modulate the whole of the story they conclude.

I have tried to summarize the tensions emphasized by most critics of "Its Image on the Mirror." In *Fear of the Open Heart* (this title is taken from Gallant's novella), Constance Rooke argues that the most interesting point about the story is the narrator's inability to overcome the puritan inheritance of the Scots-Presbyterianism embraced by her family. Rooke suggests that Jean represents Canada's garrison mentality; she comments on the interesting pairing of the two sisters (Isobel as Jean's mirror image, the romantic, idealized character who has discovered her sexuality) and suggests that Isobel like Jean is a failed searcher who ends up in a restrictive marriage to an Italian doctor, her life in Venezuela a "women's prison of her own" (13). Rooke argues that the story illustrates men's failure to protect women from the difficulties at loose in the world and suggests that both sisters originally yearn for such protection. From this perspective the novella seems to Rooke exemplary of Gallant's interpretation of Canada, a chilly vision of love that perhaps reflects Canada's winter climate. Rooke even wonders whether both sisters represent parts of the writer herself, "the reckless traveller and the cautious observer," and (Rooke's thesis revolves around fear of the open heart) whether "the two images converge in the coldness that results from Isobel's denial of Jean" (14).

Janice Kulyk Keefer, in *Reading Mavis Gallant*, declares that the story is narrated by a "prim, prissy" (63) character who, before the story opens, has come

to the realization that “she is dead in life” (63) and that “neither this recognition nor her telling of her story has had any cathartic effect; a passively ironic recognition would seem to be the only response to this revelation of her profound disaffection from love and from life has engendered in her” (63). Keefer also reads the story as “a wonderfully incisive account of the deathly nexus of family life, and of the inability of people to leave one another alone” (64). What strikes me as particularly interesting in both these accounts of the novella—and there are others—is the neglect of what seems to me to be the political tension at the story’s center.

In an interview with Geoff Hancock, Gallant talks a little about growing up in Montreal. “I’ve never lived in a city exactly as Montreal was then,” she says. “It was unique, unclassifiable. All those small worlds of race and language and religion and class, all shut away from one another. A series of airtight compartments” (85). She assures Hancock that she’s “*extremely* interested in politics” (94). In her Paris apartment she daily reads newspapers from all over the world. In her preface to another collection of stories, *Home Truths*, she discusses her familiarity with Canada’s languages: “As far back as I can remember, I read and spoke in English and French, at about the same level. I had very young parents and they found it amusing to give me a simple text in English and have me rattle it off in French; it must have been like having a mechanical doll. At my first boarding school, in Montreal, I was the only English-speaking child” (xvi). She mentions the hatred of “an alien sound” (xvii) that once greeted a French recitation in an English-Canadian classroom. Obviously, differences in languages intrigue her. She mentions the French taste for what she calls abstraction, a tendency that often seems insincere to English ears, and the English taste for endless illustrative anecdotes, frequently boring to a mind trained in French. In a recent 1990 interview Gallant reiterates her fascination with bilingualism. She talks about publishing her first French books in 1988 and, for a brief time, losing some of her English syntax. Concerned, she undertook a strict regime. When she gets up in the morning, she now listens to, speaks, and reads only English, saving French for later in the day. Her interest in languages extends beyond French and English. She speaks a little German, used to speak Spanish and still reads it quite well, and reads Italian.

Aware of Gallant’s interest in Canada’s bifurcated identity, I have emphasized in my summary of “Its Image” what Sylvia Söderlind asserts as “a commonplace,” that is the belief, shared I think by Gallant, of “the preference in the literature of Quebec for myth and imagination as opposed to the realist bent of the Canadian (English) imagination” (209). The narrator, Jean, is clearly a realist, while her sister Isobel can be read allegorically as the imagination. The novella also demonstrates in a number of ways the politics of language, certainly not as dramatically as Nicole Brossard does in *Mauve Desert*—there is no attention to translation, for example—but as an illustration of “homelessness” and deterritorialization. Many of the characters feel as if they are foreigners in their own land.

Reading the story politically makes us more aware, for example, of the initial

taking over of the story's "British Stronghold," the Allenton house, by French-speaking Roman Catholic men. The narrator reports massive deterioration of the house and dramatically accuses her mother of having pushed the family's Anglo-Scottish inheritance "over a cliff" (60). In fact, Jean confesses that when her sister, brother, and herself were children they thought there was a "difference in physical substance between people who spoke English exactly as we did, and the rest of mankind" (59). Her parents, she tells us, still believe this, and it seems likely that Jean does too. She is pleased to be like her mother and to roll her "r's" in the same way. The Christmas albums that the family buys in England; the fact that Frank marries one of the girls from the pages of these books; the mother's collection of Staffordshire china—all attest to imperial connections. Jean describes herself as "historically permitted, morally correct" (100), with her "kind Canadian stare" (97) and her conviction of always being "in the right" (129). For this family, "England was a permitted emotional channel" (133) and "Scottish blood was the best in the country" (138). They make a virtue of prudence, level-headedness, and self-denial (138), a mark of difference with the large French-Canadian families who are, particularly for Jean and her mother, unplaceable. The white cliffs of Dover, Prime Minister Churchill, and the king and queen represent a war that Suzanne Moreau, a woman who has never been out of Quebec in her life, calls "an English-Canadian affair" (127), while Jean and her English-Canadian roommate Alma appear to be "a little island in a sea of foreign names" (107).

Other borders figure strikingly as well. Allenton itself crosses the American/Canadian border, part of it being in Quebec, the other in Vermont. Jean's sister, Isobel, refuses her Scots inheritance, marries an Italian, and moves to Venezuela. This sister has frequently disrupted the story. During the war years, when she like Jean lived in Montreal, her love affair obliterated the cold, Canadian landscape. Jean tells us that "Isobel was removed from us to a warmer world, to a climate I could sense but not capture, like a secret, muddled idea I had of Greece, or the south, or being warm" (137). Isobel's friends were often foreign; one of them, prim Jean tells us, could not pronounce "th." Another, a French Canadian, was "sullen and blasphemous" and, although of the same generation as Jean, of a class entirely unknown to her. When at the end of the story Isobel tries to let Jean into the warm rooms of her life, Jean imagines the effort to be like listening to someone trying to explain "in faulty English" or "someone who has lost his language" (152). Another wrong note is struck by Poppy Duncan, the daughter of the dead Frank. With her dyed hair and her insistence on playing Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony when people are trying to sleep, she is, as Jean says, "unlike any of us" (75). Although Jean believes that she is giving a "whole" story, in fact the story is filled with gaps and evasions.

Furthermore, we understand that the narrator is not reliable. Although Jean claims to speak from experience, again and again she contradicts herself, or admits to other versions. For example, several times she tells us that her mother does not agree with her daughter's version of events, as in the details of the move from Allenton when she announces that "my mother says I saw nothing of the

kind" (58). In other places she confuses her own memories with those of Isobel. Indeed, when she says, "I was always putting myself in my sister's place, adopting her credulousness" (84), she undercuts the apparent imperial omniscience of the story she tells. She admits to pure invention: "Say that it happened once," she begins, and goes on to make up a plausible story. In another place, after an apparently accurate description, she invents a supposed response: "I walked on brusquely, smiling back at them, saying something like . . ." (100). At the beginning of the fourth section, she admits to having given misleading impressions and, in other places, tells us that she does not always listen to the conversations that she reports. Even her eyesight is suspect: "One night I saw, or thought I saw, or may have dreamed, that my father sat on the stairs weeping" (147) or, later, "I may distort the remembered scene" (151). Her characters lie as well. "Both versions of what Tom had to say came from my mother," Jean tells us, adding that "perhaps Tom told her one story and Isobel another; perhaps she made the whole thing up" (104).

Apart from unreliable narration, the story is filled with ghosts. While its orientation is British (its narrator sees everything from a British perspective), these ghosts, as Frank Kermode so eloquently illustrates in his reading of Conrad's *Under Western Eyes*, persistently and fatally undercut the narration's imperial center by implying the presence of secrets and flaws that interfere with sequential plotting. Ghosts drift through the Allenton house, "opening drawers, tweaking curtains" (59), even the mother's existence "a draught of air too feeble to blow them away" (60). The soldiers in the war fight in a sham landscape, dissolving insubstantially in a "foreign rain" (128). Jean's father sits in the Allenton house, "physically shrunken" (131), rapidly turning into a ghost himself.

All of these devices undercut the omniscience of the British voice and perspective: the introduction of French-Canadian and foreign points of view, the obvious unreliability of the narration; the textual hauntings. Occasionally irony emerges. The relatively humorless Jean tells us that "the rats crossed the street from cellar to cellar. It occurred to me that South African and Indian and Australian railways were run from buildings like this and that they had the same night watchmen and invisible spies and the same armies of rats. That was the trace of Empire" (116). It appears, then, that Gallant decentralizes her story and the Canada about which she writes, a Canada that, as Mary Louise Pratt points out, was "still colonial in the 1950s" (1). "Its Image on the Mirror" takes place in one of Pratt's "contact zones," a social space "where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other" (4). Gallant insists on "transculturation," in order to deny a homogenous vision. She shows that the mirror must be shattered if heterogeneous cultures are to emerge. At the end of the story Jean describes the dream of a mother who died in childbirth and the conviction of survival that emerges from this dream. This political metaphor, developed throughout in the image of a family, in the reflections between mother and daughter and between two sisters (one British, one a Francophile) enunciates, however ambiguously, Gallant's vision of an emerging post-colonial Canada.

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