



## Journal of the Short Story in English

Les Cahiers de la nouvelle

69 | Autumn 2017

Varia

---

# Communities of Self: Mavis Gallant's Linnet Muir Cycle

Tamas Dobozy

---



### Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/1862>

ISSN: 1969-6108

### Publisher

Presses universitaires de Rennes

### Printed version

Date of publication: 1 December 2017

Number of pages: 111-131

ISBN: 978-2-7535-6516-6

ISSN: 0294-04442

### Electronic reference

Tamas Dobozy, « Communities of Self: Mavis Gallant's Linnet Muir Cycle », *Journal of the Short Story in English* [Online], 69 | Autumn 2017, Online since 01 December 2019, connection on 03 December 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/1862>

---

This text was automatically generated on 3 December 2020.

© All rights reserved

---

# Communities of Self: Mavis Gallant's Linnet Muir Cycle

Tamas Dobozy

---

## Introduction: Cycles of Commitment

- 1 Since Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, first published in 1919, critics have grappled with "locating unifying elements" (Kennedy, "Poetics" 11) that might define linked short stories as a genre. James M. Cox argues that if the novel "federalizes," or subordinates variety to a central and overriding logic, then the short story serves to decentralize control: "As a convention, the novel, with its federalizing plot, tends always to subordinate the parts to the whole, whereas the collection of short stories does precisely the opposite" (Cox 781-82). Nowhere is the tension between part and whole so fruitful than in linked stories, which balance discreteness against assimilation, offering a "structural dynamic of connection and disconnection" (Kennedy, "Semblance" 195). Linked stories rely on a balancing of "centrifugal and centripetal impulses and on the ambiguous interplay between [...] discrete narrative parts and the formal or aesthetic whole" (Kennedy, "Introduction" xi). Cox's claim politicizes linked stories, suggesting a unity based not on the centralizing agenda of "federalism," but rather dispersal—constant negotiation rather than subordination.
- 2 The political organization hinted at by Cox's comment is most usefully represented by the term "short story cycle." Suzanne Ferguson observes that "A cycle by its name should 'go around' something—in time, in the consideration of a theme (returning to its point of origin?); [whereas] a sequence should be linked by development (going from one place to another), whether in time or theme" (104). The teleology that marks the "sequence" subordinates the stories to a logic external to each particular story, to "larger unifying strategies that transcend the apparent gaps between stories" (Luscher 150). In contrast, the "cycle" offers a continual return to a beginning, to another equal but different variation on the subject matter.

- 3 Lorna Irvine characterizes the “Linnet Muir” cycle as one that allows “the author to emphasize beginnings [as] each story structurally starts again, while the content, autobiography, emphasizes beginnings” (252). Each story reconsiders Linnet’s “beginnings” until it becomes apparent that origin, rather than being absolute, is always renegotiated by context. While the sequence posits individual stories in a progressive revelation of a unifying logic, the cycle posits individual stories as challenging such logic. The “Linnet Muir” cycle thus works to critique the “larger meanings” that would subsume individual stories. This critique becomes most visible in Gallant’s depiction of self, whose parameters are always renegotiated. It is here that Gallant locates the agency of her narrator, Linnet Muir, who, in allowing the voices of her childhood to speak through her, demonstrates that self is not arrayed against social forces but indivisible from them. Yet, it is precisely in bringing the voices of her community together that she enables herself to escape their deterministic logic, precisely because the voices are always in dialogue, negotiating a reality on which they do not agree, and because their coming together always creates yet another variation on past and present. It is in this near-infinite variability that Linnet grasps her agency and escapes from what others would have her be, i.e. from the “federal logic” that would subordinate her story and thus her self. In place of this federalism, then, Gallant’s cycle offers a radical pluralism, a “community of self.” She uniquely adapts the short story cycle to a particular political vision: that of subjective agency realized in and through oppressive community.

## States of Disorientation

- 4 Gallant thereby writes against the modernist short story sequence, which is “assembled partly in response to the writer’s alienated position within the system of literary production” (Kennedy 195). The “writer’s alienation” that J. Gerald Kennedy finds in *Winesburg, Ohio* emblemizes the fear of modernist writers: namely, that mass appeal equated to a dangerous and numbing conformity to the status quo (Schaub 16), as if appealing to the “lowest common denominator,” was a surrender to uniformity and the doctrinaire. The modernist writer, in Kennedy’s estimation, chose the genre of the sequence precisely because it gave play to this alienation.
- 5 The “Linnet Muir” cycle discloses an even greater fear: namely, that there is no longer any way to separate the individual, even through alienation, from the anonymous citizenry of the state. As Gallant notes, in “The Writer in the State,” when “you approach the structure [the 20<sup>th</sup> century democratic state]—the smooth wall, seen from within as a smooth, large surface—you will notice it dissolves into thousands of people, not one of whom seems authorized to take down a message” (101). While Gallant sees society as made up of individuals, not one of them has the agency to address (“message”) the state they constitute. The democratic state, dispersed across its constituents, is unlocatable. Linnet describes her experience in Montreal as “being part of something that was not really mine” (280), an experience of the *polis*, and its citizenry, she is part of but cannot claim. For Gallant, this is the basis of the loss of “authority” within democracy: since everyone, in theory, has a vote, authority and responsibility are dispersed across a spectrum of citizens, which makes it impossible to locate the site of the authority to whom one might address a “message,” a “status quo” that would allow the author a “monolithic” (92) presence to rail against. Any

exemption from society is illusory, based upon an unsustainable differentiation. No longer does alienation offer the privilege of standing outside a given social structure, as it does in Anderson, because alienation is society. Alienation is the basis of "assimilation" (95), since everyone is unified in the state on the basis of an irremediable atomization. Even writing cannot exempt itself from the state, because it too is borne in alienation: "But in the Ideal [political situation], if it ever came about, no one would ever write a word. Perfect societies must be like an anaesthetic" ("State" 97). The proximity of a nation to utopia is inversely proportional to an author's capacity to write, which means that an author's creations exist precisely in the mutual experience of atomization, another community of self. It is in embracing this experience that Linnet Muir will find a way to make peace with it.

## Canadian Cycles

- 6 The political ramifications of Gallant's writing are further touched on by Gerald Lynch, who suggests that Canadian short story cycles are "wary of the traditional novel's grander ambitions—suspicious of its totalizations, of its coherent plot, neatly linear sense of time and drive towards closure," or characterized by a "unity in disunity" (18). These generic features, as W.H. New further elaborates, are at least partly explained by cultural discourse in Canada during Gallant's lifetime:

There were some who denied the existence of Canadian culture; there were others who claimed it existed only to so narrowly define it as to leave out most Canadians or so widely define it as to include everyone else. But the multiplicity was the common denominator: multiculturalism, bilingualism, regionalism—all such isms (even separatism) were asserting the need to accept variation. The society was polymorphic, yet growing a recognizable tradition. And the fiction that took the culture as at least one level of its subject—that is to say, some fiction, not all fiction—sought a generic method for expressing the shifting multiple set. (96)

- 7 New speaks to "fragmentation" (96) as an emergent feature of Canadian writing, pertinent to the experience embodied in "Linnet Muir," with its associative shifts that suggest Linnet is sifting bits and pieces of memory and experience. "Shifting multiple set" is likewise pertinent to Gallant's structure and content. "Set" suggests not only the discrete unit in relation to other units that constitute the "set," but also "social set," the focus of much attention in "Linnet Muir." The phrase indicates a malleable form, a "shifting" "multiplicity," that still presents itself as a "set," containing a limited number of elements. Canadian writers were faced with a vision of community based not in fixed relations between a centre (federal government) and margin (geographical regions) but in mobility itself. The "form," then, becomes less a "what" than a "how," less a determinate position than a process. To satisfy the "common denominator" of "multiplicity" that informs Canadian literature at the time—which is New's privileging of both the discrete and the mutual—one had not only to construe "variation" *within* the text but the text as variation.
- 8 Thus, we have Janice Kulyk Keefer's identification of Gallant's style with movement: "Were it not for the sharpness and rightness of the language these narratives might collapse at their joints, work themselves loose, and rattle away from both characters and readers. They tend to be filled with unexpected, unconnected observations and incidents" (67). Variation and "multiplicity" are kept in check by a "rightness of language" which counterbalances what Danielle Schaub calls the "asides, voices,

abstract considerations, [and] anachrony of multiple voices" ("Squeezed" 57) in the stories. The refusal of Gallant's stories to cohere under a unified voice or vision says as much about her writing as the specific meanings embedded in the words. The "Linnet Muir" cycle employs her stylistic incoherence on the level of structure itself, since the stories, rather than recording the trajectory of Linnet's maturation—the realization of herself—instead depict her jettisoning the frames—familial, societal, historical—that provide overarching meaning for experience, a central interpretative frame. The stories are anti-deterministic. As opposed to naturalist authors, who trace the inevitable internalization of social forces to the point where the protagonist is a machine acting out the role demanded of her by society, Gallant demonstrates that the proliferation of interpretative frames, the multiplicity of social roles, permit an undoing of naturalistic fatalism.

## Montreal, Quebec

- 9 The "Linnet Muir" cycle is deeply embedded in the politics and culture of its moment—Montreal, Quebec, Canada during World War Two—and marked by an obsessive examination of selfhood as political and civic category and liability. Linnet Muir has returned to Montreal, her birthplace, on the cusp of adulthood, seeking emancipation from her family background, as well as economic independence, to realize her self beyond the artificial barriers imposed by poverty and gender. One understands that she does not remain in Montreal for long; that her marriage (to a character we never see directly, since he leaves for war) does not last; that her work, largely for radio and newspapers, is a stepping stone not an end goal. Beyond this, the stories themselves are a hybrid of narrative, memoir, and cultural essay, and thus exceedingly difficult to summarize. There seems little progression within stories, never mind from story to story, so that they can be read in any order (a point I will return to later on), and suggest writing from a remove. Primarily, they deal with Linnet's awakening to the cultural and historical forces that beset her parents and which both shaped her and permitted her escape.
- 10 The first story in the sequence, "In Youth is Pleasure," deals with Linnet's uncovering of the circumstances of her father's death, when she was a child, and which turned her life "into a helpless migration" (253).<sup>1</sup> Part of this "helplessness" is her realization that the ultimate truth of her background, and who she is, cannot be uncovered, which prevents her emergence in a world governed by pre-emptive definitions: "In Canada you were whatever your father happened to be, which in my case was English" (253). The story is everywhere marked by identifications imposed rather than actual. Part of this imposition is the "prison" of her childhood self, a source of early oppression she is determined to free herself from (259). In the end, Linnet realizes that what saves her is not the truth of her origins, but the work of time (272), the inevitable change that makes a mockery of any enforced identity. This stands in contradistinction to what one male character in a later story remarks: "Change is always for the worse" (282). Unlike many of the men she meets, who cling to static modes of self-definition, Linnet comes to revel in the empowering force of change, in the alteration, transfiguration, reiteration of identity wrought by time.
- 11 The next story, "Between Zero and One," explores Linnet's place within the gendered environment of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, where she lands a job. The

drama of the story derives from Mrs. Ireland, who competes in the male-dominated workplace by being even more misogynistic than the men she rises above. The title refers to Linnet's musing, throughout, on the question of selfhood, the idea of being somewhere between nothing ("zero") and fully realized ("one"): "What occupied the space between Zero and One? It must be something arbitrary, not in the natural order of numbers" (295). Ultimately it is this uncertainty upon which the story ends: Linnet figuring her passage from zero to one not as an arrival at selfhood, but selfhood as a perpetual question: "And what will happen at one? Yes, what will happen?" (298). This lack of arrival provides agency in the form of a perpetual self-fashioning, freed from permanent attachment to a fixed sense of identity.

- 12 "Varieties of Exile" deals with refugees, from the war or otherwise, each one figured as a "book" (299) she attempts to read, and defined by national, religious and political tags: "Belgian, French, Catholic German, Socialist German, Jewish, German, Czech" (299). The story is taken up with Linnet's relationship to one refugee in particular, a "remittance man," Frank Cairns, from England, disowned by his family for an unnamed sin (305) and sent into exile in Canada with a meagre allowance. Cairns ultimately dies fighting in Italy, leading Linnet to remark upon her tendency to regard the lives of others as "plots" in novels, or stereotypes enacted in fictions (300), which is her way of dealing with what she cannot "decipher" in life (300). Cairns's death makes her remark that this strategy of "putting life through a sieve and then discarding it" is itself "another variety of exile" (322). Life is, in fact, what cannot be "sieved," or made coherent. It resists encapsulation in plot.
- 13 "Voices Lost in Snow" tells of Linnet's early life with her parents, prior to their divorce and the death of her father, Archie. The story treats the relationship between Archie and her godmother, nicknamed Georgie, who are on the cusp of an affair. The central scene—though the story ranges far and wide over the distant past—takes place in Georgie's living room, where Archie tests her love for him. Ultimately, it is the presence of Linnet that prevents the affair. The relationship is compared to a game, in which Linnet, Archie's daughter by another woman, is the "card" Georgie will not "gamble" on (337). Once again, social standards intervene on the realization of a life outside the sanctioned plot. That this life is compared to a card game underscores both the formal strictures under which characters conduct their relationships, but also the "play" that everywhere marks the cycle, where roles and friendships can be "discarded" (330) as if there were no more actuality to them than a parlor game. The experience reminds Linnet of the way "the most pointless sort of training" can be made to "seem a natural way of life" (328). The game, in other words, is real insofar as everyone participates in playing it.
- 14 The penultimate story, "The Doctor," dwells on art (painting and writing) as a means of arresting the flux of life. The story depicts Linnet's relations with Dr. Chauchard, her childhood physician, who, it turns out, has led a triple life: one as physician and friend to the Anglophone circle of Linnet's parents; one as a Francophone doctor; and one as a published writer of poetry. Like the other stories, "The Doctor" dwells on the "pretense (339) of an intrinsic selfhood: "I called [...] believing still that *moi* would take me anywhere" (341) says Linnet, learning late that there is no "*moi*" in the sense of an autonomous selfhood, but only the roles we are permitted to play. The story revisits categorical definitions derived from national, cultural and civic associations: "Montreal was a Scottish city" (346); "French was his language for medicine; I never heard him

give an opinion in English" (346); "It did not enter the mind of any English speaker that the French were at a constant disadvantage" (348); "Once you have jumped out of a social enclosure, your eye is bound to be on a real, a geographical elsewhere; theirs seemed to consist of a few cities of Europe with agreeable sounding names like Vienna and Venice" (350). The "real" is a function of the "social enclosure," the expectations of a particular social set. If there is any "transcendence" of this (362), the story suggests at the end, it is through the collision of the expectations of the different social sets to which one belongs.

15 Last, "With a Capital T" follows Linnet's work for a newspaper, *The Lantern*. It opens with a long disquisition on the skills required to caption photographs in the paper, with the subversion that accompanies any deviation from the literal (365). The story culminates in Linnet's meeting, once again, with Georgie, whom she has to interview for her work on a "committee" aiding the war effort. Both women fail to recognize each other beyond the social roles and stereotypes each attributes to the other. Georgie's apartment building emblemizes imperial hegemony: "Designed to impress on the minds of indigenous populations that the builders had come to stay" (373). She brings this imperial imposition to her relationship with Linnet. Her smile is one of her many "instruments of repression" (375). But Linnet herself is capable of stereotypes: "How do you deal with life? her particular Canadian catechism asked. By ignoring its claims on feeling" (375). In the final passages we find that beyond the official account of Georgie's committee work there is nothing to bind the two women, and that this account, in fact, establishes their "final remove from each other" (377). The official record eclipses any potential living relationship they might have had, but then that has always been the problem—the refusal of Georgie to regard Linnet as anything other than what her culture has conditioned her to regard in the younger woman.

16 For Linnet, then, Montreal is the scene of incompatible ideologies—English and French—whose meeting, rather than being a scene of confusion, enables her to offset one socially proscribed role against another (*Selected XV*). This "meeting," and the opportunity it offers for subversion, is articulated throughout the cycle:

This overlapping in one room of French and English, of Catholic and Protestant—my parents' way of being, and so to me life itself—was as unlikely, as unnatural to the Montreal climate as a school of tropical fish. Only later would I discover that most other people simply floated in mossy little ponds labeled "French and Catholic" or "English and Protestant," never wondering what it might be like to step ashore [...] To be out of the pond is to be in unmapped territory [...] My parents and their friends were, in their way, explorers [...] Explorers like Dr. Chauchard and Mrs. Erskine and my mother and the rest recognized each other on sight; the recognition cut through disguisements of class, profession, religion, language, and even what poll takers call "other interests." (349-50)

17 Linnet's parents and their friends find themselves in "unmapped territory" because they have dared to mingle irreconcilable social sets. The "recognition" this enables exposes "class, profession, religion, language" as "disguisements," or roles. What emerges here is similar to what emerges from my earlier considerations of Gallant's style, namely, that the human is not a stable content or a specific *anything*, but an action—a manipulation of various disguisements through which it articulates itself but to which it is never reducible. The mention of "poll takers" further complicates the easy transaction between the state and its machinery—such as the census—and that uncategorizable residue of agency, "other interests," that always exceed the determinative categories statistics offers as an index of being. There is always a residue



that results from categories brought to bear on any given person, e.g. something the category cannot account for, or which is anomalous in it. Here, statistics attempts to explain away this residue with the term, "other interests," but "other" is so inchoate that, in the story, it indicates the provisionality of any category, including English/Protestant or French/Catholic. These people are a community based on something "other" than the sanctioned ones. In fact, their affiliation rests on being "explorers," those who transgress given limits to discover the new or unheard of. The divisions necessary to maintain categories are played upon, destabilized, cut through, though it is the very existence of categories that makes this possible.

- 18 The scene is one of "overlapping," yet without diminishing the categories that overlap. "Life itself" is a "way of being" determined by social enclosures: French Catholic, English Protestant. "Life itself" is the play of intersecting cultural systems. More to the point, "self," here, is not ontologically figured; rather, Gallant recognizes that selfhood appears in variously assigned social roles, foreshadowing Judith Butler's similar assessment, fifteen years later, that selfhood exists only as "discursive practices" or performances of socially assigned roles (148). The "fishpond" scene is characterized by hybridity, in which, by virtue of the mingling of mutually exclusive performances, the idea of an intrinsic identity is destabilized. Self appears as a social "practice"; as such, it becomes open to the particularities of the scene of that practice, permitting it to be deformed and subverted. A new kind of society emerges: pluralistic, improvisatory, experimental. The self, likewise, becomes the scene of a pluralistic voicing of multiplicity in the form of various disguisements.
- 19 Lesley D. Clement argues that these displacements reflect "the value of perspective, proportion, context, composition, and coloration in projecting [a] vision of the world where multiplicity, depth, and the invisible must be acknowledged" (168). While Clement is speaking of what Gallant, in the alter ego of Linnet, knows as a writer, she demonstrates how the stories undermine "federalism" by continually recalling the point of view in any "composition" of scene. Questions of "perspective," "proportion," "context" lead to an "acknowledgment" of "multiplicity," "depth" and the "invisible." In bringing together various viewpoints, Gallant "acknowledges" a "multiplicity" that breaks down social norms. By mingling and transecting normative categories, in other words by enacting "multiplicity," these people undermine sanction itself. Their ways of life have "depth" and are "invisible" since they do not openly oppose or stand apart from the social order but rather redistribute elements of it in unexpected ways. There is no abiding in categories.

## Is that "I" or is it "Me?"

- 20 In Gallant, then, the "scene of disjunction" that features so prominently in Andersen (i.e. where the individual stands in opposition to society) is untenable. Gallant's cycle does not set an internal subjectivity against an external society, but collapses the boundary between them. Linnet is a community, the scene of a radical mingling. Thus, at the end of "The Doctor," she presents us with the difference between the dream of an essential self and a self always emerging in the variations of sanctioned performance. This arises in her discussion of Dr. Chauchard's secret lives:

I am sure that it was his real voice, the voice that transcends this or that language. His French-speaking friends did not hear it for a long time [...] while his English-



speaking friends never heard it at all. But I should have heard it then, at the start, standing on tiptoe to reach the doorbell, calling through the letter box every way I could think of, "I, me." I ought to have heard it when I was still under ten and had all my wits about me. (*Truths* 362)

- 21 The "real voice" that "transcends" language is what Linnet feels she should have heard in her own "call," the "I, me" that, instead of recognizing a singular selfhood recognizes self as a series of options provided by social education: self articulated in "every way [Linnet] could think of." What "transcends," paradoxically, is the sheer variety of possible articulations, which seems to breach the limits of confinement. This is precisely Chauchard's "true self": the imaginative exercise of a multi-faceted identity. It is also, not accidentally, what writers do: enact other possible contexts for and combinations of identity/identities. It is Linnet's desire to be seen and heard that is transcendent, the call as yet unarrived to definitive identity, unappeased by any given category, always in exile. Ronald Hatch comments on this vis-à-vis "Varieties of Exile": "The act of writing, then, has been a kind of exile, an exile from life" (112). Note that I am not talking here of writing as "refuge" from life, but as the material trace of a desire to exceed the given. One of the ironies here is that writing in fact concretizes "the story," sets it into "plot," makes character as inalterable as ink on the page. Gallant's challenge is to create a mode of writing that always calls itself into question: displacing the dream of a definitive self with the possibility of unexpected transformation and fragmentation. The "Linnet Muir" cycle reminds us, through language and structure, of the inevitable passing and transformation and misprecision of any assertion of selfhood, which never articulates the "I, me" definitively, but only through the "many ways" given us to "think of."

## Stories like Doorways

- 22 In each of the stories that constitute the "Linnet Muir" cycle, Gallant examines the disparity between the materiality of text and the fleeting voice. Critics have noted that Gallant's texts are frequently the scene of a writing against definitive rendering. Danielle Schaub argues that Gallant's syntax and structure work to reinforce the limitations and entrapment of the social, political and economic life of Montreal (Schaub, *Gallant* 100-01); at the same time, by an effect of "layering" disjunctive elements ("memory," "historical time," and "spatial reflection"), the prose also works against the emergence of a monolithic frame of reference. The stories disclose the "multiple facets" of experience (*Gallant* 111). Karen Smythe comments that Gallant's stories, despite being materially stable, prevent a "single reading" ("Home" 107), and connects this with the lack of "consensus" over what constitutes the Canadian, and that "truth" is not a permanent condition but an unending process, the generation of "stories" (Smythe, "Home" 109). Neil Besner suggests that the ending of "The Doctor" draws attention to a "language defeated by time" (138), recognizing the transformation of utterance by historicity. Janice Kulyk Keefer argues that Gallant illuminates the "insubstantiality not of language, but of human definitions and evasions of time" (58). Thus, language is substance, or substantial, but to be distinguished from what we attempt to render in language: ephemerality itself. Our definitions cannot stand for long. For all its materiality, Gallant's language reflects "her recognition of the inefficacy of our power over time, of our attempts, through memory and fictions, to control the past and direct the future" (Keefer 58). What becomes visible in her text is a

medium at odds with itself, yet another irresolvable conflict, or scene of discordance, that articulates another kind of many-voicedness.

- 23 The stories of “Linnet Muir” circle around this treatment of the ephemerality, amorphousness and structurelessness of time (75) in relation to individual agency (77). In speaking of Gallant’s “novel,” *Green Water, Green Sky* (itself a collection of discrete stories), Keefer enlarges upon the failure of containing experience within narrative limits, the failure of “self-definition through closure” (142). As the end of “The Doctor” tells us, rather than mobilizing closure for the purposes of delimiting self, and thus *having* a self, Linnet reminds us that one is, more often than not, enabled precisely by *resisting* closure, and its limiting of self to determinate coordinates. As Smythe writes, “If to lose ‘home’ is to experience psychic dislocation, then exiled ‘travellers’ must find contentment—consolation—in imaginary realms” (Smythe, *Grief* 52). “Contentment” and “consolation” are not to be found in physical locations, but in the “imaginary,” in cognitive release from precedent. To continually embark is to resist the entrapment of having arrived.

## Homeward Bound

- 24 The loss of home Smythe remarks on is a continual process throughout the “Linnet Muir” cycle. Exile most notably informs the story “Varieties of Exile,” which probes various forms of displacement. From the “refugees” (*Truth* 299) that appear in the first sentence, to Linnet’s fascination with exile (300), to Frank Cairns the “remittance man” (305), to the veterans with whom Linnet works and who are reminded by Linnet’s marriage of their own “war and separation” (318), the stories everywhere evoke deracination. The story also points out that exile can be, given a certain disposition, liberating. Linnet derides the “same situation” (300) that encompasses all women in Canada, connecting definition and location in her critique. To be located, to be spatially fixed, is detrimental. Even biological succession, with its genetic inheritance, is an enclosure: “As for a family, the promise of children all stamped with the same face, cast in the same genetic mold, seemed a cruel waste of possibilities. I would never have voiced this to anyone, for it would have been thought unnatural, even monstrous” (301). Linnet would prefer to “voice” “possibility”; as the story and cycle suggest, possibility is continually voiced only by de-situating the self, making instrumental use of our mutual state of exile.
- 25 Frank Cairns allows himself to be determined by one specific plot, mistaking the condition of his story with his *actual* condition. Linnet, by contrast, recognizes that we are never “at home” in any given plot, and thus can always escape: “Like all superfluous and marginal persons, remittance men were characters in a plot. The plot began with a fixed scene, an immutable first chapter, which described a powerful father’s taking umbrage at his son’s misconduct and ordering him out of the country” (305). Cairns’s problem—as his name indicates—is that he permits himself to become a memorial to a cultural practice; he has taken residence within his exile, has accepted the dominance of the “home” nation that determines his “plot.” His exile institutes a fixed condition. It is not surprising that he dies fighting for a colony. In contrast, Linnet determines a way out of this condition not by envisaging exile as an unnatural remove from where we belong, but as our inability to *ever* achieve belonging, or what Diane Simmons refers to as the “full infirmity” of an “inner sense of exile” (29).

26 Throughout the cycle, Gallant questions the delimitation of self either by an internalizing of geo-political coordinates, or by an isolation of self from one's current social and geographical condition. Instead, we have a selfhood of competing social forces, which, because of the contextual particularities of every scene wherein this competition occurs, always interact to *different* effect, calling into question their ability to produce a stable category of subject. This idea—in which the multiplicity of forces acting upon/enacted by the individual short circuit determinism—fits with the “negotiated” subject Margot Kelley describes in her essay on “novels-in-stories”:

By foregrounding the constructedness of the characters' identities, and by recapitulating the formal discontinuities at the level of characterization, novel-in-stories writers prompt us to think about the characters (and, by extension, the subjects more generally) as multiply identified, as entities for whom identity is relational and, equally significant, negotiated. (305)

27 Kelley's gendered reading of the short story cycle and Gallant “foregrounds” the inseparability of subject from social context. This is evident in Gallant in the aforementioned fishpond scene where various cultural voices compete with, and contradict, and cancel, each other's privilege. While her subjects rely on various discourses to articulate themselves, the discourses are unable to gain primacy because their conflict and interdependence allow them to be recombined in unexpected and thus uncontrollable ways. As Kelley says, the “subject is aware of its multiple, ideologically interpolated subject-positions and, in fact, consequently is able to act subversively” (305). The knowledge that one has only the variety of social discourses to work with, rather than being a source of despair, is a source of power, since it foregrounds the disconnect between subject and category, permitting a play upon rather than adherence to social categories.

28 Thus, Gallant's short story cycle demonstrates that “identity is constituted through relations with other subjects, and is continually negotiated and renegotiated, making identity itself a somewhat evanescent phenomenon” (Kelley 306). “The Doctor” makes evident how the continual “renegotiation” of identity, in all its “evanescence,” liberates the subject from definitive position. The performance of selfhood undermines the culture that sets the standards of and demands that performance. “Voices Lost in Snow” depicts Linnet's escape, through memory, from the “web” (331) of surveillance and education foisted upon children (326). By recalling the “voices lost,” Linnet becomes conscious of herself not as a seamless subject, blind to the forces acting upon her, but as a node of competing voices which she can manage by playing them off one another. “In Youth is Pleasure” details Linnet's “fascination” with the absence of “cause and effect,” first vis-à-vis her mother's behavior (251), then its manufacture and maintenance in the capitalist and patriarchal world (260) of Montreal to enforce a banal reality. Against this positivistic plot, Linnet mobilizes chance, luck, and the arbitrary, until reality becomes a proliferation of questions that can only be dealt with by an acceptance of “irrational endings to life” (270)—the absence of causality. “Between Zero and One” comments upon the determination of self by a society that ascribes presence to the masculine and absence to the feminine, with Linnet coming to understand that she dwells within the infinite space—the fractions of fractions—between nullity and an indivisible (but illusory) presence. Working at the CBC, in whose offices much of the story takes place, she describes the regard there for women: “The salary was seventy-five dollars a month, which was less than a man's if he was doing the same work [...] When I protested that I had the same expenses as any bachelor and

did not live at home, it was countered by a reasonable 'Where you live is up to you.' They looked on girls as parasites of a kind, always being taken to restaurants and fed by men" (293). She has no claim on the work men do, even if she is doing it, nor on the reward, even if she deserves it. When she says she has the same material needs as a man ("bachelor") she is not so much countered as unheard. They see her as "parasitical," existing only by virtue of the male presence. "Varieties of Exile" charts the power of fiction to make sense of the "knots" (300) of our historicity through the imaginative exercise of fictional rendering. Finally, "With a Capital T" explores the gap between meaning and what is said (363-64). The story examines how what is perceived and what is said cannot be made to match, so that "homesickness" (372) is the desire to recover *loss* whose vocabulary manifests in terms of *place*, with Linnet claiming that one's geographical location is not analogous to one's ontological condition. One is always embarking on the journey home, never arriving.

## Story to Story to Story

- 29 In keeping with the absence of home, or origin, the cycle remarks on its inability to be sequential, since there can be no journey from point A to point B if point A cannot be determined. In its first appearance, in the collection entitled *Home Truths*, the stories were presented in an order different from that found in the later *Selected Stories*, which instead presents them chronologically, and leaves out "With a Capital T," the story that earlier ended the cycle. This suggests that the stories can stand rearrangement. As Gallant remarks in the introduction to *Selected Stories*, even in this chronological presentation the stories are not to be thought of in the federalizing sequence: "Stories are not chapters of novels. They should not be read one after another, as if they were meant to follow along" (*Selected* xix). Since this volume includes almost all of the "Linnet Muir" cycle, Gallant clearly does not conceive of their narrative along a continuum, much less suggesting that they should be read as a set, without other unconnected stories intervening. Gallant encourages a random and even capricious reading and interpretive experience. This, in contrast to an arrangement that is authoritative, forcing the reader along predetermined linkages.
- 30 Thus the various relations between the stories suggest, in the absence of an A to B developmental sequence, or the wholesale dropping of stories altogether, that Linnet's "development" can be continually recomposed. Selfhood becomes radically contextual. While Linnet preserves her agency by tuning in, or tuning out, various voices, such as that of Mrs. Ireland at the end of "Between Zero and One" (297-98), disconnecting them from relevance to herself, Gallant suggests that self is exactly this occasion of "tuning." Mrs. Ireland advises her not to marry, that it's a trap preventing her emancipation, just as she herself is not free because of her oppressive marriage (297): "Don't you girls ever know when you're well off? Now you've got no one to lie to you, to belittle you, to make a fool of you, to stab you in the back" (298). Linnet remarks: "But we were different—different ages, different women, two lines of a graph that could never cross" (298). The takeaway, for Linnet, is not Mrs. Ireland's advice, but her failure to see Linnet at all, superimposing on the younger woman only her own experience with patriarchal oppression. In fact, Mrs. Ireland has tuned out Linnet from the start, and this is suggestive not of Linnet's failings, as Mrs. Ireland would have it, but of her own. By contrast, Linnet peers beyond her own horizon to realize something of her co-

worker: that self is always determined in reference to others. The self is less developmentally determined—moving experience by experience to full realization—than the scene of a constant negotiation, always in reference to material and temporal conditions, neither self-determining nor reducible to circumstance—always in “the passage [...] between Zero and One” (298).

- 31 Because self is the scene of competing voices, Gallant enacts selfhood as simultaneous participation in and distinction from given discourses. If, as Ferguson suggests, “[Sherwood] Anderson uses a recurrent principal character [in *Winesburg, Ohio*...] whose development is a thread throughout, and whose departure from Winesburg is the culminating moment, the ‘way out’ of the book” (107), then Linnet’s “development” is not the storing, compacting and summarizing of experience into a transcendental “way out” of historicity. Rather, “development” is an awareness of the individual—including individual memory—as always “inside,” negotiating selfhood in the processing of discourse, which constitute not only the tools through which self is articulated but its very substance. In Gallant’s stories, “reality [...] cannot be so easily dissociated from the perception of it” (Clement 166). Hatch also notes that Gallant’s “work reveals time and again the impossibility of divorcing content from perception” (93). The only scene of reality is the matter of its processing. Nor is the artist exempt from this.
- 32 “Linnet Muir” thus dramatizes one of the recurring problems in mid- to late-twentieth century literature: in the absence of a definitive “origin,” in the realization that “true voice” is nothing but an improvisation with given voices, how is one to politicize selfhood? How can there be a critique in the absence of definitive boundaries between artist and society? If Anderson regards the individual in exile *in the midst of society*, then Gallant regards the individual in exile from self, or at least the autonomous self that makes the alienation of *Winesburg, Ohio* possible.
- 33 To return to Cox, rather than a federalizing schema, in which a developmental logic exists outside of and organizes each of the stories to some end, Gallant’s cycle is democratic, organized not by supersession or subordination, but by an equal *right to speak and be heard*. This protest is evident in “The Doctor” when Linnet recalls, “There came a point like convergent lines finally meeting where orders to dogs and instructions to children were given in the same voice” (349). Children and dogs receive similar address, meant to negate their presence in adult company. The irony is that Linnet ultimately becomes the “voice” of these grown-ups in writing the story of their silencing her. In the end, everyone speaks, and Linnet is not a gradually accumulating but still singular self that parses experience and carries forward what is useful, but rather a node for voices, a community of self. There is no dispensing with, or escape from, community, because it is the possibility of selfhood.
- 34 The endings of each story bear out Linnet’s recognition of the community constituent of self. “In Youth is Pleasure” ends on a series of “mysteries” (271) around why her parents sent her to convent school: neither to make her “tolerant” (271); nor to help her with “French” (271), a language she was already fluent in; nor to provide the “discipline” she already had (272). There is only her parents’ decision, still informing her. “Between Zero and One” suggests that a fully realized selfhood will not be achieved (298), only a selfhood maintained by the “squares and walls and limits and numbers” (298) of her workplace, and the roles forced upon women by a patriarchal society (274). “Varieties of Exile” closes with Linnet’s admission that writing—“putting life through a sieve and then discarding it”—is “right and [...] natural” (322), suggesting

that “nature,” far from being an essential marker, is also a discourse. “Voices Lost in Snow” fades on the image of a card offered but not accepted, the preference of life lived according to a paradigm of “building”—conservative, safe, isolating—rather than “gambling”—risky, uncertain, unsanctioned (337). “The Doctor” finishes on the realization that Linnet should have heard the “true” voice when she was “under ten and had all [her] wits about [her]” (362), stressing again the importance of listening to what, for better or worse, offers a transcendence via the system, rather than to someplace outside it, by alerting Linnet to the many voices whose continual reactivation keeps alive a story in excess of its plot. It keeps alive all the possible stories, the choices that were made, the choices that weren’t, those that could be contained in the telling, those that could only be touched upon, and those that provide openings or questions never to be resolved.

- 35 “With a Capital T” finds Linnet making a final visit to her godmother, where she realizes that she “did not forget [Georgie], but [...] forgot *about her*” (377; italics mine). Here, what she forgets about her godmother, and thus calls on us to remember, is the “aboutness” that is necessary if we are to remember the other not as an existent within solipsistic memory, but in all her otherness, the particularities of her life that we are not privy to. Linnet’s last word on their relationship is one of “final remove” (377), while for her godmother she must have seemed “seamless, and as smooth as brass,” giving “no opening” (377). The refusal or inability to remember a person’s circumstances (“aboutness”) beyond our expectations of them is to remember nothing but a name, or the official record in a newspaper. The final paragraph of the story brings us back to the “dog” Linnet earlier compares her childhood self to: “Nobody spoke up for the one legacy the trustees would have relinquished: a dog named Minnie” (378) who belonged to Georgie, and was perhaps the one creature for whose life the old woman showed consideration (374). But of course, Linnet speaks up for her, and, through Linnet, Gallant. Even in Linnet’s inability to speak to Georgie’s final condition Linnet gives her voice, albeit one as mysterious and removed as her parents’ reasons for sending her to boarding school. That no one speaks for the dog speaks volumes about Georgie’s life, and the acuity with which we (as Linnet does) should attend to it.

## One of Many Possible Conclusions

- 36 Here, Gallant’s notion of community becomes most compelling. For if self is a series of discontinuous stories—the discrete moments occasioned by the various props and scripts given to us, and through which self appears—then self is made visible in interaction. These interactions, all of them presented as surfaces without cores (or surfaces to the core), in effect turn Linnet’s memory inside out, until it, too, becomes surface, another moment occasioned by interaction. By interaction I do not mean only the actions and reactions that pass between characters, but the indivisibility of self from other. Selfhood is never possessed but granted, occasioned through encounter. Thus, selfhood is dispersed between subjects, a matter of community. As a result, there is no possibility for alienation as Anderson presents it in *Winesburg, Ohio*, where it arises from atomization, from individuals’ isolation from one another and thus society. Instead, Gallant’s alienation arises in the context of indissociability, the impossibility of distinguishing self from other. In “Linnet Muir,” the short story cycle plays upon its contradictory characteristics of being discrete and yet unified, presenting stories that



suggest a larger narrative, but, because we cannot “tell them apart,” or devise a framework that would give them summative order, present us with the fear that terrorizes selfhood: the inability to tell ourselves apart from the people, places, and times through which we are variously made to appear.

- 37 Thus Gallant employs the short story cycle to de- and then re-situate the self in context. If linear progression marks the short story sequence, then Gallant's stories refuse to posit origin except in retrospect, based upon the current situation of the subject; she jettisons the model of causal development that permits for a concept of selfhood in isolation from its various occasions. What characterizes the stories is not the linkages that make them “belong together,” but the paucity of such linkages, how the stories drift and resist cohesion. There is no possible generalization to be made regarding the stories *en masse*, until what becomes remarkable is the failure of such a generalization to emerge. Gallant thus challenges the critic who would seek to address the short story sequence, forcing him or her toward the negative rather than positive side of “connection,” namely, that the stories might *not* connect, might, in fact, be held together only by the desire to transform doubt into certainty, question into definition, and then, in a twist, to celebrate this incapacity as the source of attendance on the voice, heard or unheard, of the other. What emerges is the importance of attending to the present, to the day-to-day, to the plurality of voices, the community, through which we articulate our selves, and through which those selves are, in the same gesture, articulated. This is the politic of “Linnet Muir,” and Gallant's signature contribution to the short story cycle.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anderson, Sherwood. *Winesburg, Ohio*. New York: Penguin, 1996. Print.
- Besner, Neil K. *The Light of the Imagination: Mavis Gallant's Fiction*. Vancouver: U British Columbia P, 1988. Print.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990. Print.
- Cox, James M. “Regionalism: A Diminished Thing.” *The Columbia Literary History of the United States*. Ed. Emory Elliott. New York: Columbia UP, 1988. 761-84. Print.
- Clement, Lesley D. *Learning to Look: A Visual Response to Mavis Gallant's Fiction*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 2000. Print.
- Ferguson, Suzanne. “Sequences, Anti-Sequences, Cycles, and Composite Novels: The Short Story in Genre Criticism.” *Journal of the Short Story in English* 41 (2003): 103-17. Print.
- Gallant, Mavis. *Green Water, Green Sky*. Toronto: MacMillan, 1983. Print.
- . “With a Capital T.” *Home Truths*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2001. Print.
- . *The Selected Stories of Mavis Gallant*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1996. Print.



- . "The Writer in the State." *Queen's Quarterly* 19.1 (1992): 91-104. Print.
- Hatch, Ronald. "The Three Stages of Mavis Gallant's Fiction." *Canadian Fiction Magazine* 28 (1978): 92-114. Print.
- Irvine, Lorna. "Starting from the Beginning Every Time." *Colby Quarterly* 29.2 (June 1993): 119-25. Print.
- Keefer, Janice Kulyk. *Reading Mavis Gallant*. Toronto: Toronto UP, 1989. Print.
- Kelley, Margot. "Gender and Genre: The Case of the Novel-in-Stories." *American Women Short Story Writers: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Julie Brown. New York: Garland, 1995. 295-310. Print.
- Kennedy, J. Gerald. "From Anderson's *Winesburg* to Carver's *Cathedral*: The Short Story Sequence and the Semblance of Community." *Modern American Short Story Sequences: Composite Fictions and Fictive Communities*. Ed. J. Gerald Kennedy. Cambridge: Cambridge UP. 194-215. Print.
- . "Introduction: The American Short Story Sequence—Definitions and Implications." *Modern American Short Story Sequences: Composite Fictions and Fictive Communities*. Ed. J. Gerald Kennedy. Cambridge: Cambridge UP. vii-xv. Print.
- . "Toward a Poetics of the Short Story Cycle." *Journal of the Short Story in English* 11 (1998): 9-25. Print.
- Luscher, Robert M. "The Short Story Sequence: An Open Book." *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads*. Eds. Susan Lohafer and Jo Ellyn Clarey. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1989. Print.
- Lynch, Gerald. *The One and the Many: English-Canadian Short Story Cycles*. Toronto: U Toronto P, 2001. Print.
- New, W.H. *Dreams of Speech and Violence: The Art of the Short Story in Canada and New Zealand*. Toronto: U Toronto P, 1987. Print.
- Schaub, Danielle. *Mavis Gallant*. New York: Twayne, 1998. Print.
- . "Squeezed 'Between Zero and One': Feminine Space in Mavis Gallant's *Home Truths*." *Recherches Anglaises et Nord Américaines* 22 (1989): 53-59. Print.
- Schaub, Thomas Hill. *American Fiction in the Cold War*. Madison: U Wisconsin P, 1991. Print.
- Simmons, Diane. "Remittance Men: Exile and Identity in the Short Stories of Mavis Gallant." *Canadian Women Writing Fiction*. Ed. Mickey Pearlman. Jackson: UP Mississippi, 1993. 28-40. Print.
- Smythe, Karen. *Figuring Grief: Gallant, Munro, and the Poetics of Elegy*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 1992. Print.
- . "The 'Home Truth' about Home Truths: Gallant's Ironic Introduction." *Double Talking: Essays on Verbal and Visual Ironies in Canadian Contemporary Art and Literature*. Ed. Linda Hutcheon. Toronto: ECW, 1992. 106-14. Print.

## NOTES

1. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations for the Linnet Muir cycle are taken from the volume, Gallant, Mavis. *Home Truths*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2001.

---

## ABSTRACTS

La série de nouvelles Linnet Muir de Mavis Gallant critique les « significations plus grandes » sensées inclure les histoires individuelles. Cette critique est particulièrement observable dans la description de l'individualité de Linnet, dont les paramètres sont constamment renégociés tout au long du cycle. En articulant les voix de la communauté dans laquelle elle a évolué pendant son enfance et lorsqu'elle était jeune adulte, Linnet suggère que le moi n'est pas construit en opposition face aux pressions sociales, mais qu'il en est indissociable. En même temps, le fait d'articuler les voix de sa communauté lui permet d'échapper à leur logique déterministe, précisément parce que les voix dialoguent continuellement, négociant une réalité sur laquelle elles sont en désaccord, et parce que leur orchestration crée toujours une variation supplémentaire quant à la signification première du passé et du présent. Dans cette variabilité presque infinie, Linnet saisit son libre arbitre et échappe à ce que les autres voudraient qu'elle soit, c'est-à-dire à la signification déterministe à laquelle on aimerait la subordonner, elle et son histoire. Au lieu de ce déterminisme, Gallant propose un pluralisme radical, une « communauté de moi ». Elle adapte la série de nouvelles à une vision politique dans laquelle le libre arbitre du sujet s'accomplit dans et à travers la communauté oppressante.

## AUTHORS

### TAMAS DOBOZY

Tamas Dobozy is a professor in the Department of English and Film Studies at Wilfrid Laurier University, Ontario, Canada. He has published three books of short fiction, *When X Equals Marylou*, *Last Notes and Other Stories*, and, most recently, *Siege 13: Stories*, which won the 2012 Rogers Writers Trust of Canada Fiction Prize, and was shortlisted for both the Governor General's Award: Fiction, and the 2013 Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award. He has published over fifty short stories in journals such as *One Story*, *Fiction*, *Agni*, and *Granta*, and won an O. Henry Prize in 2011. His scholarly work—on music, utopianism, American literature, the short story, and post-structuralism—have appeared in journals such as *Canadian Literature*, *Genre*, *The Canadian Review of American Studies*, *Mosaic*, and *Modern Fiction Studies*, among others.