Atlantis Vol. 10 No. 2
Spring printemps 1985

Mavis Gallant's World of Women: A Feminist Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the *oeuvre* of Mavis Gallant as creative of a fictive "world of women" which can be read as an imaginative recording of—and recoiling from—the North American Feminine Mystique. By analysing a representative number of Gallant's fictions produced over the last thirty years, and by examining her views on women and society as expressed in interviews and in her non-fiction works, the article explores the questions of to what degree Gallant can be considered a feminist writer; in what manner her fiction has been misconstrued and delimited by the "pro-masculine" critic; and of what enduring value Gallant's writing—which sets strict limits on women's possibilities of escaping from their "kitchen in a slum"—can have for feminists.

> Most writers old enough to have a career of any length behind them grew up when it was still assumed that a woman's place was in the home and nowhere else....These writers accomplished what they did by themselves, often at great personal expense. In order to write at all, they had to defy other women's as well as men's ideas of what was proper....There's a great temptation [for them] to say to feminists, "Where were you when I really needed you?" or "It's too late for me now."...No matter that a lot of what they say can be taken by the theorists of the movement as supporting evidence, useful analysis, and so forth. Their own inspiration was not theoretical; it came from wherever all writing comes from. Call it experience and imagination. These writers...don't want to be wrongly identified as the children of a movement that did not give birth to them. Being adopted is not the same as being born.[1]
>
> Margaret Atwood
> "Paradoxes and Dilemmas: The Woman as Writer"

This paper intends neither to adopt nor to kidnap the fiction of Mavis Gallant for feminism. Rather, it will direct attention to a relatively neglected feature of this writer's work: her tenacious exploration of the lives of girls and women, as these lives are defined by the roles women have inherited from a patriachal society, and in which they become blindly cocooned. To read Gallant in this way is to enrich our responses to the texts themselves, and to focus certain problematic aspects of critical practice *vis à vis* Gallant and her *oeuvre*. Moreover, to view Gallant from a feminist perspective, to attempt to define her attitudes towards women

and "the movement," is to help rescue her from the literary limbo into which she has been thrust, and thanks to which she has been compared with safely dead writers—Austen, Mansfield—but rarely to her *consoeurs*—Munro or Lessing, Spark or Atwood. What this paper ultimately proposes is that one of the most challenging and significant features of Gallant's *oeuvre*—one which makes it particularly disquieting, if not downright unlikeable to critics—is the way in which it continues to defy our ideas, whether we are feminists, partriarchs or common readers, of what is proper or desirable in the artist's fashioning of reality. Gallant's fiction concedes nothing to either sex: her integrity—the product of experience, the instrument of imagination—is as ruthless as her prose is virtuoso. And that combination is one which cannot help but engage, even as it vexes or unnerves, the critic.

I

> Would I describe myself as a feminist? Well, if you mean would I march down the street and throw stones, no, or that I hate men, no. I like men, I like the company of men....Women suffer a lot from women.[2]
>
> Mavis Gallant, interviewed by Karen Lawrence

In her introduction to *Home Truths*, Mavis Gallant warns us that each of the stories collected therein "needs to be read against its own time." Text and context cannot be severed, no more than style and structure: together they form "part of the conformation of whatever the author has to say." What, then, is the time against which we read Gallant's fiction? In biographical terms it is that period between the early 1950s—when Gallant put her project for personal independence into successful motion by leaving Canada and settling in Europe—and, let us say, the early 1980s, by which time she'd received a Governor General's Award for *Home Truths*, and been offered a stint as writer-in-residence at the University of Toronto. In the socio-historical terms that represent a watershed for women writers and readers, this period encompasses both the burgeoning and full bloom, in North America, of what Betty Friedan has established as the Feminine Mystique, and the development of a deep-rooted women's movement which has spawned, among other issues, distinctive feminist forms and theories of literary production. Gallant's *oeuvre* can be said to comprehend these different developments, in idiosyncratic fashion. Her earliest work details the fogged consciousness and curtailed possibilities of daughters and sisters, working girls and wives who've laid their bets for happiness or at least comfort on generally lacklustre representatives of masculine authority and power. Her latest fiction—the Linnet Muir sequence assembled in *Home Truths*—represents a backwards spiral into the consciousness and experience of a heroine who serves as Gallant's literary Doppelganger. Linnet Muir's cumulative adventure is a declaration of personal independence not only from the maddening weave of her personal past, but also from that stymied world of women in which Gallant's earliest heroines had been lodged.

In interviews with Karen Lawrence and Geoff Hancock, Mavis Gallant appears to suggest that discrimination against her as a working woman persuaded her to quit Canada soon after the end of the Second World War.[5] Another interviewer has Gallant explain her translocation as a deliberate rejection of the "stupid and materialistic" "Eisenhower mentality" that dominated post-war North American life.[6] Her decision was, of course, a complex one involving not only personal needs and ambitions, but also, an awareness of what effects the regression of a political system would have on the culture it controlled. What must also be stressed in the context of feminism is Gallant's implicit sense of how much the stupidity of the Eisenhower mentality had to do with Mamie, as well as with Ike. As Gallant has stated, her ambitions to maintain herself on her own in Europe, to live by writing, met active opposition and ill-will from women and men alike. Her "bid for freedom" was seen

as a threat by those who had been too fearful to take risks:

> The failure of a woman reassures men just as men. It reassures the women who have hung onto safe jobs, boring husbands. One's defeat will reassure.[7]

Perhaps this is one of the least palatable aspects of Gallant's vision for a feminist: the denial of "sisterhood" except as expressed in the abrasive and ironic terms of such works as "The Cost of Living," "Its Image on the Mirror" or "Acceptance of Their Ways." In the first two stories, actual sisters mingle active resentment and oblique affection in their dealings with one another before they pass into a state of ultimate, mutual indifference; in the last, a trio of widows squabble and scrabble among themselves for a position of mastery, which, since all three remain emotionally and economically dependent on their dead husbands, becomes an absurd exercise in petty cruelties and ludicrous loyalties. Throughout, Gallant's fiction flays the hidebound Victorian myth of the moral superiority of women over men; both sexes, she reveals, are adept at inflicting pain and witholding essential support, psychological and physical.

Yet what Gallant does concede throughout her fiction, and what she spells out through the persona of Linnet Muir, is the enormous discrepancy in status—as great as that between master and slave—between men and women. At the start of her working life Linnet remarks:

> I did not think men better than women—only that they did more interesting work and got more money from it. In my journals I called other girls "coolies." I did not know if life made them bearers or if they had been born with a natural gift for giving in. "Coolie" must have been the secret expression of one of my deepest fears. (*HT*, 226)

Instead of meekly joining the coolies—girl office workers "parked like third class immigrants" at the far and dark end of the office (*HT*, 255) Linnet insists on a desk and a job that will place her squarely in the ranks of her male co-workers—even if she is being paid significantly less than them for doing the same sort of—generally meaningless—work. Linnet comes to realize, however that there is a worse fate than "cooliehood"—that of ending up a "sensitive housewife...who listens to Brahms while she does the ironing, and reads all the new books still in their jackets." (*HT*, 278). Linnet's secret name for the shrill, miserable and manipulative married women of her acquaintance is "Red Queens," after the frenzied, harrying monster of *Through the Looking Glass*. As for the traditional womanly means of fulfillment and self-expression—the bearing and rearing of children—Linnet's rejection of it is as concise as it is closed: "the promise of children all stamped with the same face, cast in the same genetic mold, seemed a cruel waste of possibilities." (*HT*, 263).

But it is not just the status accorded to working women, nor is it the grotesque delimitations of the roles they later assume which terrifies and repells Linnet Muir. It is also the very nature of the relation between the sexes, as defined by men. Linnet sums up the situation accordingly:

> where women were concerned, men were satisfied with next to nothing. If every woman was a situation, she was somehow always the same situation, and what was expected from the woman—the situation—was so limited it was insulting. (*HT*, 262)

It has been Gallant's experience that the "situation" in her chosen home, France, is no better than that of wartime Montréal: "The Annals of Justice," a lengthy article written apropos the Gabrielle Russier affair makes this clear. The French, Gallant reminds us near the beginning of her analysis, hold to the belief "that a Don Juan is simply exercising a normal

role in society, whereas women have been troublemakers ever since *Genesis*."[8] In the matter of Russier's involvement, as a thirtyish divorcée and mother of two, with a young but physically imposing lycée student, Gallant does draw our attention to how large a part of Russier's punishment—her imprisonment, loss of job, accumulation of mountainous debt, eventual suicide—stemmed from the simple fact of her being a woman in a society in which family life is crushingly patriarchal, and in which, until extremely recently, women were denied independent economic and legal status, as well as any effective political voice. Yet it is Russier's relation to French society as a whole, her class and racial status with which Gallant is ultimately concerned. Gallant establishes the fact that Russier was comparatively sheltered and aided by the rigidity of the French class system and the racism of French society as a whole. Had Russier been, instead of a middle-class, university educated white, an Algerian street-sweeper, no one in France would have heard—or expected to have heard—of her once she'd set foot in the sleazy labyrinth of the French legal code and penal system.

Thus, "The Annals of Justice" is not a feminist critique but rather an overview of the legal structures and political reflexes of an entire society, and an incisive analysis of some of the more repellent ways and means by which that society sustains itself. And finally, it is not the peculiarly female, but rather the comprehensively human implications of the Russier affair which Gallant brings home to us: that unanalyzable "mystery of what a couple *is*"; the distinct certainty of human limitation and hypocrisy: "If every weakness and subterfuge for which infatuation is responsible were punishable by law, no prison in the world would be big enough."[9]

A summary of preliminary points may be offered *vis à vis* Mavis Gallant, the Feminine Mystique, and Feminism. In terms of her own experience, she has given these minefields a wide berth; imaginatively, through her fiction and journalism, she has engaged with both. Moreover, while fully aware of the denigratory fashion in which men have traditionally perceived and treated women, she has always maintained a bi-partisan approach to our human capacity for cruelty, betrayal and failure.[10] Her fiction recognizes not only the various ways in which women have been fated to a dullness that amounts to death-in-life by their fathers, husbands and brothers, but also the casual complicity of women in this fate. As Gallant concludes in a review of a biography of Colette, "if an unqualified wife-victim is hard to find, so is an unqualified husband-monster."[11] A story such as "Saturday," in which an older man and his much younger wife are said to have, first, "her physical horror of him and his knowledge of it" and then, "all their children," in common (*HT*, 45) perfectly encapsulates this caustic, "prudent" viewpoint. It is, perhaps, this stated sexual neutrality which has diverted critics from any sustained examination and assessment of Gallant's *oeuvre* in terms of her portrayal of women, yet since the bulk of her fiction intimately maps the world of women, since even works like *The Pegnitz Junction* or *From the Fifteenth District* explore political and historical events of an international significance through, by and large, the filter of female experience, this diversion seems anomalous, at best. At worst, as we shall see, it has confused and even thwarted adequate recognition of Gallant as a major contemporary writer.

II

Mavis Gallant's writing has elicited what can only be called a desultory response from critics: scattered reviews, rare interviews, an M.A. thesis and a slim volume in a series on Canadian writers; and most recently, gnashes or gushes over re-issues of Gallant's fictions that have long been out-of-print. There has been relatively little analysis or discussion of "the conformation of [what] the author has to say." This omission can

ultimately be traced to a disjunction in our responses to Gallant: we adore her technique but suspect her tone; we savour her wit but recoil from the vision which engenders it.

Gallant's consummate skill as a writer of fiction, that flawlessness of style, mastery of manner and complexity of form upon which so many reviewers have remarked, I take as a *donnée*. What can be questioned is the place Gallant occupies in our literary awareness and affections. For, where writers such as Margaret Lawrence and Alice Munro are almost cherished by their readers, and an Atwood or a Thomas relished, Mavis Gallant is admired—and let go, like a sprig of deadly night-shade. As Eliot remarked, human beings cannot bear too much reality—particularly when that reality is of a rebarbative kind that implicates rather than edifies the reader. As it is primarily Gallant's tone and vision which alienate readers and incense critics, it is to these two elements I shall now turn.

Though a few critics have described as "compassionate yet detached"[12] Gallant's presentation of her characters, most have stressed her "reserve" and "coolness."[13] Consider the terms used to fix Gallant's characteristic tone: "sardonic asperity," "bitchy impatience," "mordant irony," "surgeon's detachment," "chilling indifference" and, to cap all, "a kind of floating nastiness," an evident enjoyment of "the embarrassment of her self-righteous characters."[14] Even Robertson Davies, in remarking on how Gallant's work "enlarges and cleanses one's understanding of life,"[15] manages to conjure up the image of one of the grittier kinds of bathroom cleansers, or else the kind of laundry soap that abrades the skin of one's fingers, as well as the grime of one's clothes. As Elizabeth Jennings has phrased it, Mavis Gallant is "a master of the hurtful nuance"[16]; the question is, then, what exactly does she hurt?

Our human penchant for the easy-way-out of sentimentality would be too vague an answer; the male ego, accustomed to being soothed and plumped by female hands, would be too crude—although such feckless, parasitical characters as Walter of "An Unmarried Man's Summer," or Wishart of *Green Water, Green Sky*, are hardly *beau idéals*. What Mavis Gallant does savage, is our society's general expectation of the feminine sensibility as lodged in the heart and pen of the Woman Writer. The Angel of the House of Art must devote her talents to the maintenance of deference and decorum; to tender nurturing and gentle admonishment, as befits a Ruskinian—not a Red—Queen. Perhaps echoing Virginia Woolf, Gallant has one of her characters, a woman subsumed by the inexhaustible demands of her husband and children, declare: "Angels are created, not born. Nowhere in any written testimony will you find a scrap of proof that angels are 'good'. Some are merely messengers; others have a paramilitary function. All are stupid." (*FD*, 167).

As many times as Gallant has been likened to Mansfield or Chekhov, has she been compared to Jane Austen, that celebrated miniaturist and mistress of the comedy of manners.[17] And perhaps it is with the Austen of "regulated hatred," if not the Jane of prosy parlours, that we find an accurate analogy for the general critical trepidation *vis à vis* Gallant's art. As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have shown, Austen was able through her "self-proclaimed and celebrated acceptance of the limits of her art" to mask a subversive critique of those "forms of self-expression available to her both as an artist and as a woman."[18] Laughter is the form which Austen's subversion assumes: ridicule of society's accepted conventions and constructs, and those who uncritically endorse them. As Virginia Woolf recounts of Austen, before writing *Pride and Prejudice* she was "no more regarded in society than a poker or firescreen...." After the publication of her novel, things abruptly changed: as a contemporary remarked, "she is still a poker—but a poker of whom everybody is afraid...A wit,

a delineator of character, who does not talk is terrific indeed!"[19]

Mavis Gallant, of course, does talk—moreover, she listens and tells, and what we have to hear about ourselves and the world we've made is dedicatedly uncharitable. The sensibility which one reviewer praised for its "admirably feminine discretion, tact, humor, self-confidence and kindness"[20] also produces the kind of vision which Robert Weaver distinguishes as being "fascinating, irritating and frighteningly human,"[21] and as we have seen, marked by a characteristically "bitchy impatience. Bitchiness is the corollary of female subversiveness: as Gilbert and Gubar remind us, "Feminine propriety, reserve and politeness can give way to bitchiness, since the bitch is what the young lady's role and value imply from the beginning, built—as we have seen them to be—out of complicity, manipulation, and deceit."[22] We recall the introductory essay composed for *Home Truths*, in which Gallant describes how, as a young child, she was taught in a Jansenist convent school to call black white if she wanted to be fed her supper; we remember Linnet Muir in her white piqué suit and mandatory white gloves, going to an office Dickensian in its decrepitude, and having pornographic pictures popped on her desk by a male co-worker; we think of the child, Linnet, displaying the correct manners thanks to which she may be included in her father's afternoon call on his mistress, or allowed, grudgingly, to stay up for her parents' parties, and the risqué conversation to be overheard there.

Bitchiness of tone, then, is not a blemish or lapse in Gallant's writing, but as Weaver assumes, the very watermark of every page. As understood in feminist terms, however, it can be seen not to sour, but rather to clarify and ultimately to ground her texts, implicating the reader, making it impossible for her or him to slip through her imaginative filter unchanged or at least unscathed. Yet what of the claustrophobic narrowness of Gallant's vision, its "incompassionate clarity?"[23] The radical unease felt by many of Gallant's critics and reviewers may be traced to the manner in which she radically limits and impoverishes human reality. Her *oeuvre* allows us a choice between disgust and dis-illusionment: between the wife's grouse in the story "Malcolm and Bea"—"Birth was ugly. Death was another ugly mystery...[M]ost of everything is just dirt and pain" (*EW*, 118) and the disconsolate conclusion drawn by the elderly widow, Irina, in the story which bears her name— "...whatever she saw and thought and attempted was still fluid and vague. The shape of a table against afternoon light still held a mystery...You looked for clarity...and the answer you had was paleness..." (*FD*, 230) there is little to choose.

To deny the horrific clinch of Gallant's vision, to try, as some critics have done, to treat her work as a comedy of manners—a kindly petit-point of human presumptions and limitations—or as a belated contribution to the Post-Impressionist Quest of Significant Form, is to deny the power and acuity of Gallant's writing, to try to squeeze her prose back into the toothpaste tube of The Lady Writer. It is worthwhile noting that claustrophobic vision and rampant pessimism seem much more readily acceptable in a male writer than a female: we accept the sordidness of Beckett's imaginative world as somehow self-validating: his sitting on the act of Creation is Divine Discontent: Gallant's distrust of life is Bitchiness. And after all, women's work is supposed to be life-endowing or at least non-committal on matters beyond the domestic sphere of realism. Perhaps this is why two critics who have written on Gallant's *oeuvre* ignore or transform its distinctly contentious qualities, as well as the relation of those qualities to Gallant's perspective as a woman writer.

Let us examine these tendencies at closer range, for they provide significant insights into the ways in which male critics wanton with women's texts, betraying or ignoring their salient concerns. First consider the gentleman-cri-

tic, who sees Gallant as a latter-day Austen. Robertson Davies' essay, "The Novels of Mavis Gallant" begins with reassurances. "Mavis Gallant's kind of miserable women," he assures us, "stand apart from most writing of the kind because there is no current of anti-masculine grievance in them—no sound of an axe being remorselessly ground without ever achieving an edge..."[24]. The implication seems to be that Mavis's bitches bitch, all right, but not with any cause that could impugn, or effect that could unseat, the 'pro-masculine critic.' Secondly, Davies suggests that the central concern and driving force of Gallant's three novels can be summed up in that staple women's interest—love. Davies' blithe selectiveness is underscored by the remarkable fact that he can write of the novella, *The Pergnitz Junction*—which Gallant described as "a book about where Fascism came from"[25]—as if it were nothing more than a delineation of what he terms a "miserable" love affair between "strangers caught in a pretence of intimacy."[26] Davies goes on to praise Gallant's work for that aesthetic control and economy which, he claims, "have distinguished many of the finest women writers," though not male writers—not even those "of the highest order."[27] One would like, at this point, to tap the Master of Massey College on the shoulder and ask whatever happened to that other master, Henry James, in this context—surely his insistence on economy and control in fiction is at least as significant as that manifested by Jane Austen. One can only assume that Davies neglects to bring in James here because it would upset the distinctions between masculine and feminine writers he presupposes—distinctions which form a more sophisticated version of that same spurious dividing line used to separate "boys" from "girls" books in public schools and libraries.

All in all, Davies leaves us with the notion that Gallant is a "cool"—but never "tough"—"classic" writer, who uses "modern form" to teach us to understand life as it is, was, and ever shall be—wretched for those whose minds lack "scope" and "pause." Davies assures us of Gallant's perception that no one and nothing are to be blamed for this wretchedness; he does, however, suggest that consolation for aching hearts can be found in Gallant's perfect works of art.

George Woodcock's essay "Memory, Imagination, Artifice: the late short fiction of Mavis Gallant" offers a serious, extended and often perceptive look at Gallant's *oeuvre*. In particular, he displays a fine appreciation of the texture and surface of Gallant's rich and polished art—so much so, however, that he turns her into a latter day Woolf: not the feminist Virginia of *Three Guineas, A Room of One's Own, The Years*, but the delightful, decorous Mrs. Woolf of established criticism. Woodcock also describes Gallant's *forte* as the kind of comedy of manners practiced by Austen and Peacock—the one a safely "feminine," the other a satisfactorily minor, writer. Yet he significantly changes his tune in considering *The Pegnitz Junction* and the Linnet Muir series in *Home Truths*. Here he implies that Gallant's historical awareness and acute political sense lift these fictions beyond the confines of the comedy of manners, however charmingly and mischievously done. But, before one can say 'hey presto!' Woodcock reneges. Gallant's mature work, he concludes "is in no way male and ideological; it is feminine and intuitive, and the rightness of detail and surface which are so striking come not from intellectual deliberation but a sense of rightness as irrational but true as absolute pitch."[28] The Lady Writer, we conclude, doesn't bother her pretty head or sully her exquisite pen, by thinking hard and clear about politics and history, through her fiction.

Given Woodcock's need to categorize Gallant as a feminine writer, we may wish to ask him whether he considers Joseph Conrad—a writer whose fictional techniques can be described in much the same way as Woodcock has described Gallant's in the passage just quoted—as a feminine writer, too. The question has added reson-

ance when we consider that Conrad and Gallant share, not only aspects of technique and approach, but also, a grim, unaccommodating metaphysic, whose influence they see as blighting or skewing their characters' acts and desires.[29] Yet while critics accept Conrad's characteristic vision as, *tout court*, Conradian, they baulk at Gallant's as defeatist or even dilletantish. One critic, for example, chastises her for too easily and aesthetically accepting life's fogs and hazes, shielding herself and her characters from any real engagement with experience by the dexterous use of irony and masks. Another decrees her guilty of an "ostentatious witholding of judgement that begs the question. Why then write the story?" Still another accuses her of loading the dice against her characters in the interests of sustaining her narrowness of vision.[30] The result would seem to be that the losses and defeats of Gallant's characters are rendered meaningless, since she insists that happiness, joyous love, forward motion, valid success and legitimate accomplishment are, *a priori*, not to be found outside the covers of a Harlequin Romance.

Are these criticisms just Pollyanaish sniffs before an honestly intransigent pessimism, or are they expressions of an understandable bewilderment—and resentment—at the discrepancy between Gallant's art—the love she lavishes on language—and the hateful vision that art focusses?[31] Does Gallant's undeniable mastery of style and manner render her invulnerable from charges of undue and crippling detachment? Joseph Conrad, in defending Henry James from similar charges, asserts: "Technical perfection, unless there is some real glow to illumine and warm it from within, must necessarily be cold. I argue that in H.J. there is such a glow and not a dim one either."[32] Conrad describes James as "the most civilized of modern writers" but does not see James' choice of civilized over "primitive" emotions as damning him out of hand. Nor, we might argue, should Gallant's particular choice of emotional *ambiance* be a handicap. Yet Conrad himself, we remember, structured his fictions according to a dual vision, maintaining a vulnerable equilibrium between the pressure of his black metaphysics and the incessant stirrings of the barely redemptive force of human solidarity. Our most pressing question, then, is whether such negative criticism as I have cited has ignored or failed to perceive in Gallant's work something akin to Conrad's solidarity or his dual vision—some sort of access to that "mystery"—dirty or luminous—around which we and her characters grope. As two critics have noted, the answer to this question lies in that world of women within which Gallant so ruthlessly and systematically pins her butterflies.

In a mixed review of Gallant's second novel, *A Fairly Good Time*, Christopher Lehmann-Haupt follows an intriguing line of inquiry. In spite of what he calls the novel's "delicious episodes" and "inexhaustible playfulness", he finds something "flat and forgettable" about this work; something profoundly lacking in Gallant's choice of characters to portray—or rather, victims to skewer. "My real suspicion," he concludes, "is that, for all the richness of detail with which Shirley's character is drawn, Miss Gallant has denied us some deeper understanding. Or denied herself the expression of her true fury at a world that treats its women as children and nincompoops".[33]

John Ayre amplifies this insight in compelling fashion:

> Gallant's fiction presents a stagnant, woman-crowded world that is hinged on ritual, where the figures display a recurrent impotence in rebelling against a conservative code of feminine behaviour which is serving only to destroy them. The characters are almost uniformly presented as grown-up orphans...roaming Europe. Fragile and powerless, they seem trapped like faded toy ballerinas behind the glass door of an old wooden cabinet.

> What unifies them all as characters is their central mediocrity and their lack of vitality. Freed from financial worries by small amounts of cash from trust funds or alimony, they are, ironically, tied even more rigidly in their exile to the old North American code of ladylike behaviour. ... The only form of rebellion they can manage is to fall apart in the shell of the code that traps them.[34]

What I will argue in the remainder of this paper is that Gallant's *oeuvre* manifests a particular kind of solidarity with the world of women, a solidarity structured on her comprehension of how doltishly the world treats women, and of how women accommodate themselves to this treatment. Moreover, I intend to show how Gallant, in her later work, moves from simply polishing the glass walls in which her toy ballerinas are so grotesquely trapped, to envisioning ways in which glass cabinets can be avoided, altogether.

III

> If he let his thoughts move without restraint into the world of women, he discovered an area dimly lighted and faintly disgusting, like a kitchen in a slum. It was a world of migraines, miscarriage, disorder and tears. (*GWGS, 114*)

Gallant's *oeuvre* can be roughly divided into three phases. The first comprises the publication of those terse, often acrid stories collected under the titles *The Other Paris* (1956) and *My Heart Is Broken* (1964), as well as the novels *Green Water, Green Sky* (1959) and *A Fairly Good Time* (1970). The second phase of Gallant's work is represented by the collections, *The Pegnitz Junction* (1973) and *From the Fifteenth District* (1979), in which she turns her attention away, for the most part, from North Americans abroad, and toward Europeans on their own home ground just before, during and soon after the Second World War. The historical sense which permeates these books, and stray, precarious perceptions in *Fifteenth District* of what can only be called beauty and freedom, make them for many critics the most challenging and rewarding of all her fictions. Finally, a third phase comes into being with the latter section of Gallant's latest collection, *Home Truths* (1981), the rest of which consists of random stories on arguably Canadian subjects, and all but one of which were published before 1970. The "Linnet Muir" stories of *Home Truths* compose a quasi-autobiographical series written between 1975 and 1981, and treat the protagonist's early childhood and working life in "old" Montréal. These stories are remarkable in Gallant's *oeuvre* for a softness of tone and a form of characterization to which in certain instances, the term tenderness—though never sentimentality—could be applied.

Yet throughout these different phases of Gallant's work one thing remains constant: the nature and fixtures of Gallant's world of women. Whether pictured as a glass cabinet or a kitchen in a slum, this world is neither smashed nor demolished. Such enduring solidity and stability demands examination.

The most important feature of this woman's world is the way in which, regardless of their economic condition or social class, women are permanently anchored by personal relationships. Daughters, wives, sisters, mothers, widows—all are pegged by the roles they assume toward the men in their lives, and the roles, as Gallant evokes them, are encyclopaedic in range. An assembly on this printed page of Gallant's full cast of female characters would resemble one of those supersaturated paintings of the aged Victoria surrounded by her burdensomely fertile progeny; therefore I will simply list the various female types to be found—over and over again—in Gallant's fiction.

Let us fix "husbands" as a nominal dividing line: to one side of it we have an array of daughters, sisters and working women—teachers, office

workers or servant girls. On centre line sit the wives, mothers and grandmothers; on the other side, fall the shadows: widows and divorcées. Circling the whole are the *amoureuses*, a term Gallant coined for the feckless and pathetic heroine of "In the Tunnel." The vocation of the *amoureuse* is to harbour—erratically, masochistically and perpetually—a host of shiftless, worthless, temporary lovers.

Variations in these roles are infinite: the daughter can, for example, be the dream-caught eight-year-old Irmgard of "Jorinda and Jorindel" or the eightyish Miss Horeham of "The Moabitess," knit to her dead father's memory by a web of shared fables and dissimulation. She can appear as orphaned, as does the ill-shod and poorly clad Molly of "The Remission", or as embalmed, as does Claudie Maurel in *A Fairly Good Time*: "She seemed wax, as if she had died young and had been preserved...under glass..." (p. 73). Wives can be the dog-like German sort, who fetch and carry for their husband-masters, as does Helga in "An Alien Flower" or Grete Toeppler in "The Latehomecomer"; others are the less servile North American variety, who've taken college courses in love and marriage, like Carol in "The Other Paris". Still others are "Moslem wives" who permit their husbands to tap their telephones and choose their wardrobes, as does Isobel Duncan in "Its Image on the Mirror". Then there are the scatty, beautiful, ambiguously faithless ones, like Barbara in "The Remission" or Sheilah in "The Ice Wagon Going Down the Road". Mothers can be literally deranged, as is mad Aunt Vera of "The Moslem Wife", slothful to within an inch of psychosis, like Bonnie in *Green Water, Green Sky*, or else grimly efficient, like Mrs. Duncan in "Its Image". Only the *amoureuses* seem to be cut out of the same cloth—they are losers, Mary Magdalenes running up against their lovers' *noli me tangere* just at the moment they're most in need of comfort; their love, pity and sexual energy are described in terms of emotional capital which cannot be hoarded or invested, but which must recklessly be spent on the most fickle and feckless of lovers.

As for the situations in which these women are locked, they compass the criminally banal and the routinely violent. Daughters are trapped, like their brothers, in "the prison of childhood" (*HT*, 225); women enter marriages which infantalize or mutilate them and their husbands—the Thompsons in "My Heart is Broken" and the protagonists of "Malcolm and Bea" provide cases in point. Servant girls are harassed—psychologically, if not sexually—by their masters. Mothers cripple their children physically, as in "The Four Seasons" or mentally as in *Green Water, Green Sky*. Even the *amoureuses* fall into the trap: they are regularly abandoned, ignored or betrayed by the lovers they seem almost incidentally to have adopted. Sexual passion as evoked by Gallant seems hardly redemptive: Jean Ducan, having tardily parted with her virginity on the dock of her parents' cottage, feels impelled to scrape away the bloodstains with a knife, and later is doubled in two with pain; Flor, woken for conjugal lovemaking from near-perpetual sleep, behaves "like a prisoner roused for questioning." (*GWGS*, 65).[35] Rape is obliquely treated in "My Heart is Broken"; father-daughter incest in *A Fairly Good Time*, and wife-beating in "Between Zero and One." And, in the Linnet Muir series, Gallant presents full-face two standard forms of male aggression: a tramp molests Linnet in a railway station just as she arrives in Montréal to start her new life, and a male colleague at her office presents her with photos of a naked woman—his wife—"in a baby carriage with her legs spread over the sides, pretending to drink out of an infant's bottle" (*HT*, 240). "The unknown that this represented," Linnet observes, "was infinite."

Gallant seems to be providing her readers with an unadulterated account of female experience that comes close to being an imaginative correlative to Friedan's *Feminine Mystique*. While adopting neither Friedan's regulated fury nor

her enthusiastic optimism for the imminent demystification of North American women, Gallant does treat the salient effects of the Mystique: a loss of independent identity and any inherent sense of personal worth; a false concept of female sexuality which decrees that woman's only and entire fulfillment is to be found in sexual intercourse and perpetual pregnancy; finally, a distorted concept of maternity which imprisons and debilitates mother and child alike. As the following analysis will show, Gallant's project in her fiction is not so much to tear down as to rend the veil of the Feminine Mystique in representing its changing manifestations.

"The Other Paris," a story first published in 1953, is almost a paradigm of this project. The main characters are Carol, a young, middle-class American girl primly but earnestly on the track of romance and love in post-war Paris, Odile, a shabby-genteel and thirtyish *amoureuse*, and her lover, Felix, a displaced German boy, stranded in France without a work permit or a visa—the prototype of the rootless and historically dispossessed young Germans who will figure in Gallant's later fiction. Carol, an early adept of the Feminine Mystique, has been taught that love is like a geranium: given "a good climate, enough money, and a pair of good-natured, *intelligent* (her college lectures had stressed this) people, one had only to sit back and watch it grow" (*EW*, 17). Paris proves refractory: the winter city bestows on Howard, her corporation-man fiancé, grippe instead of glamour; it reveals to Carol the same rude people, dull food and Coca-Cola signs she might have met in New York. One of Gallant's trademarks is not so much the reversal as the excoriation of expectation, as the following example shows:

> No wonder she was not in love...Where was the Paris she had read about? Where were the elegant and expensive-looking women? Where, above all, were the men with their gay good looks and snatches of merry song, the delight of English lady novelists? Travelling through Paris to and from work, she saw only shabby girls bundled into raincoats hurrying along in the rain, or men who needed a haircut. In the famous parks, under the drizzly trees, children whined peevishly and were slapped. (*EW*, 18)

It is the last sentence—quintessential Gallant—which, more than anything, deflates those "English lady novelists" among whom, *pace* Robertson Davies, Gallant never designs to figure.

Carol does, against her better judgement, speak to the right person (Felix) turn down an unexpected street (on the down-and-out and dirty Left Bank) open the right door (into the seamy hotel room in which Odile and Felix hold their tryst) and, discovering the real Paris, fall in love. After a fitting with her dressmaker to try on the regulation white-lace wedding gown, Carol accompanies Odile to Felix's room, where she is given coffee and the only other hospitality that can be offered—confirmation of the fact that Odile and Felix are lovers. The realization sickens the American girl, partly because theirs is such a slummy passion, partly because Carol discovers in herself the stirrings of love (and not the geranium variety, either) for Felix. Nevertheless, Carol returns to her Howard and her visions of the exquisitely well-papered apartment in which they'll foster conjugal bliss; the present reality of Paris: "rain...unshared confusion and loneliness" is already being displaced by "the comforting vision of Paris as she had once imagined it." "[H]appily married, mercifully removed in time, she would remember [Paris] and describe it and finally believe it as it had never been at all." (*EW*, 33)

The Janus-face of memory—our use of it to paper-over as well as to trace reality—is at the perceptual heart of Gallant's fiction. "The Other Paris" roots this central awareness of the duplicity of memory, and the distinction between what is meretriciously accurate and what is true,

deeply within the world of typically female experience. The "untrue" is identified with what we might call "interior decoration"—the psychological reality of American marriage à la mode, circa 1950, while the "true" finds expression in the illicit and distasteful—whatever romantic convention and sentimental cliché cannot accommodate.

In *Green Water, Green Sky,* Gallant integrates this complex of percepts regarding truth, memory and marriage, into an analysis of a spectacularly disastrous mother-daughter relationship. Bonnie, a witless, pretty, impecunious divorcée, drags her adolescent child Flor, like a handbag on too long a strap, hither and thither across the Continent, hoping eventually to marry her off to a worthy suitor—someone with fairy-tale wealth, power, good looks and social standing. Flor listlessly outwits her mother by sleeping with and marrying Bob, the son of a moderately wealthy, Jewish-American wine merchant. In marriage, Flor seeks the physical and psychological "home ground" that her peregrinations with her mother have so ruthlessly deprived her of. The ingrained symbiosis between mother and daughter, and Flor's latent schizziness prove stronger than the four walls of marriage: Flor disintegrates rapidly into psychosis and ends up in a decorous insane asylum while Bonnie, the archetypal clinging vine, winds herself even more inextricably around her son-in-law's life.

Perhaps the first thing any critic would remark about this kind of novel is its extraordinarily regressive nature. After all, Gallant's theme is not a startlingly new one: at least since the days of *Daisy Miller,* or more appositely, *The Awkward Age,* we have found daughters trying to wrest the control of their own lives from mothers who are either passively silly or seductively powerful. D. H. Lawrence's short story, "Mother and Daughter," in which the daughter neither dies, nor renounces sexual passion in the course of her self-liberation, but rather cuts through the coil of her mother's love with the psychological equivalent of a double-bladed axe, underscores the deliberate feebleness of Gallant's Flor, who evades her mother's manipulations and her husband's demands through a madness which lands her, at the novel's close, in the phantom arms of the father who had abandoned her. The novel's closing image—little Flor riding towards her Daddy on her very own pony—seems almost a parodic throwback to Rhett and Bonnie Butler of *Gone With the Wind.* Moreover, when compared with, for example, Woolf's portrayal of Septimus' madness in *Mrs. Dalloway,* Flor's derangement, though poignant, appears etiolated and ultimately trivial. Septimus, after all, has the collective madness of World War I to give resonance and general significance to his perceptions; Flor has only the nebulous disquiet of the Feminine Mystique.

That Flor is the very flower of this mystique seems incontestable. "She looked," we are told, "like a pale rose model in a fashion magazine, neat, sweet, a porcelain figure, intended to suggest that it suffices to be desirable—that the dream of love is preferable to love in life" (*GWGS,* 77). So carefully groomed has Flor been for her role as woman-child, that she never matures at all: we are repeatedly told that she's never able to menstruate, and thus can never have children. Aware ever since her mother's divorce, of Bonnie's absolute dependence on her for status and a liveable future, becoming equally dependent in her own turn, Flor becomes consumed by the fear that she is turning invisible: she dresses garishly and constantly "steal[s] glimpses of herself in shop windows, an existence asserted in coral and red" (27); she fantasizes about a dream-house in which she would be surrounded by mirrors (110).

Her husband, trying to keep her within his own feminine ideal—"some minor Germanic princess, whose nickname might be Mousie, who seems to wear the same costume, and the same air of patient supplication until a husband can be found" (105)—precipitates Flor's self-

destruction. Soon after her marriage, Flor "joyfully, willingly" destroys those good looks which had made her "an object as cherished as anything he might buy", "as if to force him to value her on other terms. The wreckage was futile, a vandalism without cause. He would never understand and he was not sure that he ought to try." (37-38). Flor ultimately refuses her wifely role, abjuring any sensual contact with Bob, refusing to accompany him on business-trips or dinners. Bonnie shoulders the responsibilities of "homemaker"—"the stage business" of trying to create an "attractive atmosphere for them all" (39) while not so much the floor as the ceiling of their world cracks wide open.

Yet if Bob cannot shelter and protect his "Mousie" from herself or her mother, and if his sexual demands on Flor further vitiate the slender sanity remaining to her, women prove equally noxious to Flor: the psychoanalyst, Dr. Linnetti, Flor contemptuously dismisses as a "cheat from a know tribe, subject to the same indignities...practicing the same essential deceits" with husband and children (32); Doris, an egregious American girl deserted by her philandering husband, first hides Flor's sleeping pills to prevent any attempted suicide, and then almost gratuitously restores them to Flor when she decides to take the decisive step of leaving the husband who's already abandoned her. Gallant underscores the spiral of entrapment inherent in female experience by having the defiant Doris exclaim,

> I have made a decision and I have called my father and he is cabling the money and I am going home. (83)

Like Doris, Flor, in her hallucinations, calls on her father and goes to the only home she possesses—that of memory, however sentimentalized or deluded.

Gallant ends *Green Water, Green Sky* with an image of woman—a composite of Bonnie, Flor, and a strange girl glimpsed on a Paris *quai*:

> She was a changeable figure, now menacing, now dear; a minute later behaving like a queen in exile, plaintive and haughty, eccentric by birth, unaware, or not caring, that the others were laughing behind their hands. (154)

It is the consummate portrait of the *femme idèale* as construed by the "Eisehower mentality", and as giving the merest glimmer of menace from within her locked glass cabinet. What Gallant's next novel, *A Fairly Good Time*, presents us with, is an altogether different specimen from this *fine fleur*, and yet one who, like Flor, keeps to her cabinet. If Gallant is adamant about keeping her heroines in what was, after all, as form-fitting a trap as an Iron Maiden, she at least allows Shirley Perrigny a picaresque wit and vitality of gesture, if not freedom of movement.

At first glance Shirley would see to have thumbed her nose at the rubric of the Mystique. "Comfortable in chaos," she watches her marriage to the fastidious Philippe fall apart due to what can only be called "Bad Housekeeping." She doesn't rebel against the role of *femme du foyer* personified by her mother-in-law, a widow who looks as if she had a "life's savings sewn up in her corsets" (*AFGT*, 154). Shirley simply hasn't a clue, due to her own mother's domestic eccentricities, as to what the housewife's role entails. Shirley, it emerges, is really an *amoureuse* with a touch of Lady Bountiful thrown in (she herself draws a comparison between her own neglect of dress and that of Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch*). She sleeps with her next door neighbour in the same way you'd pour out a dish of milk for a stray cat, or stroke a lapdog in winter—to get close to something soft and warm. She rescues people who aren't worth the saving and who make no appeal to be saved; her insights into experience are arbitrary and

evanescent; altogether, hers does seem "an imbecile life, not worth caring about" (187). Shirley's mother is kindlier, or at least less destructive, than Flor's, mainly because she keeps a continent away from her daughter, geographically and emotionally.

All the women in this novel are exorbitantly passive: Claudie, who could have aborted her father's child, but who hadn't the wit or energy to ask for the money to do so; the various girlfriends of Shirley's Greek neighbour, shuffling in and out of his bed like jokers soon to be discarded from a pack of cards; Renata, who seemingly goes through the motions of a suicide attempt because her boyfriend wasn't around when she wanted him (224); the landlady, Mme. Roux, who urges Shirley to marry Philippe so that she need never be alone on a Sunday afternoon—though she does despair of the Canadian girl's dogged ignorance of such necessities as formal marriage contracts and separation of property agreements. Shirley spends the whole of the novel waiting for her husband to come back to her—she refuses to leave the conjugal apartment even when it's patent that Philippe has left her forever.[36] From her former "bright, strong, sure" self, she has become a "beaten dog" whose identity is tied up with that of her emotional master.

> I live *here*. I have a house and furniture and...a husband and all that. I'm not a tourist. I'm not somebody who keeps moving on. I'm somebody's wife. (199)

As the novel ends, however, Shirley is packing to go, having been literally evicted from her apartment. Her last act in walking out of the apartment building is to post a letter to her husband in care of his mother—a letter she realizes is an "irretrievable error" (308). Walking off into a wind that "blew straight from Russia" she expresses her expectation of seeing Philippe again in that evasive realm of "dream and recollections" in which, as "The Other Paris" and *Green Water, Green Sky* suggest, fictions and truths coalesce in deceptive and destructive ways.

The mirror image of this impasse stumbled on by Shirley—an undesired freedom in which she spirals as if in some Arctic limbo—is presented in the last story collected in *The Pegnitz Junction*, a work heralded by many as a new departure for Gallant into more ambitious, historically charged, and infinitely broader territory. Yet it is significant that four of the six stories, including the novella which gives the collection its name, are woman-anchored; in other words, the experience of history is presented through distinctively female eyes and voices. "An Alien Flower," the story to which I wish briefly to refer, concerns itself with a wife who, despite her husbands innumerable infidelities and his concerted neglect of her, can never bring herself to leave him. Helga marries Julius (whose gradual rise to power in a post-war German pharmaceutical corporation resembles that of an ambitious young officer in the *Waffen SS*) believing him to be a divinity, and herself, too stupid to be worthy of him. Discovering the fact of his "other women"—"poor things, sometimes barely literate" (*PJ*, 175-6), Helga's first response is "*Now I am Free*"; her damning second thought, "the new, beautiful house he had promised, with the clock from Holland, the wallpaper from France, the swimming-pool tiles from Italy" (174-5). Helga, whom the war has abruptly and entirely orphaned, keeps reassuring herself, over the years, that she really does want to live forever with Julius; she never openly contradicts or ridicules him, as does her daughter, who describes him to his face as "a little dog begging for sugar" (182), or his former mistress and Helga's former housekeeper, Bibi, who, having attempted suicide at her pain over her betrayal of Julius' wife, publicly defines Julius' vaunted "spiritual mission" in life as "encouraging people to buy synthetic products they don't really need" (182). Helga, locked in her silence, can only suffer "paralytic seizures" each time Julius gives her an order (186). Her triumph is to have the promised

dream home finally bought and put in her own name. "Every windowpane," she assets, "belongs to me." Inside her glass cabinet, Helga talks to herself of her injustices and injuries, watches Julius preen himself like a peacock before the mirror, and dreams that her husband, who has reached the position of general in his company, is "nothing but a little dog who [keeps] on barking," and who has to be thrashed into silence. (193)

Gallant's next collection of fiction, *From the Fifteenth District*, represents a continuation and expansion of the larger historical concerns first structured in *The Pegnitz Junction*. In "The Moslem Wife," Gallant portrays a woman whose marriage with a "tribal, paternal" (*FD*, 44) and faithless husband is shattered by the interruption of World War II. Jack's virtual desertion of Netta precipitates the dangerous and painful acquisition of something she'd never suspected herself of wanting—freedom. Yet when Jack returns, after the war has ended and the rubble has been tidied over, Netta surrenders her freedom under the force of "a powerful adolescent craving for something simple, such as true love." (73)

"[T]here was no freedom except to cease to love" (*FD*, 113) decides a young adolescent girl in "The Remission," another story collected in *From the Fifteenth District*. It is to this freedom which, after a lifetime spent lavishing love and care on a husband and five children, the protagonist of the last story in this collection, moves. Irina, in whom, Gallant has said, there is much of herself in attitude, if not in actual experience,[37] has embraced her chance of independence in the tardy form in which it has come to her. Having married, as a girl of nineteen, a forty-year old, famous writer who gave her, not interesting books to read but "five darling zeros" (235); having spent the next forty or so years in caring for these children and then, for her senile husband, Irina, whom her children expect to be "burned dry and consumed" (227) by the rituals of wifehood and mothering, blossoms with "a sudden April brightness" in her widowhood (229). The woman whom her children have always seen as under-educated and reticient countermands her husband's will and becomes his literary executor, grants intelligent interviews, and comes to the conclusion that the journals she is editing show her husband's "moral and political patterns" to be "fossils of liberalism" that have changed or triumphed over nothing of importance (230). She begins to form her own opinions as to what is and what is not important in her life; she, whom her husband had "shielded from decisions, [allowing her] to grow in the sun and shade of male protection" (228), buys herself her own apartment in a small Swiss village and writes to her children that she wishes to be left alone, on her own.

One of the things she tells the young grandson who has come to visit her at Christmas is an anecdote about a ring given her by her dying mother to keep for herself—to sell, whenever she had need of money. When Irina does try to pawn the ring, years later, she is told first, that she cannot sell anything without her husband's consent, and second, that the ring is virtually worthless, since the original stones have been prised out and replaced with paste imitations—most probably by Irina's own father or grandfather.

> The women in the family never wondered if the men were lying, [Irina] said. They never questioned being dispossessed. They were taught that lies were a joke on the liar. That was why they lost out. (240)

These women, Irina explains, were "handed like parcels from their fathers to their husbands. To make the parcel look attractive it was decked with curls and piano lessons...and banknotes and shares. After appraising all the decoration, the new owner would undo the knots" (239).

Irina, after a lifetime of dispossession and dependence begins to undo the knots on the

parcel of herself. To do so she must first divest herself of the decorations and strings and appurtenances with which marriage has encrusted her. She offers her homesick grandson no emotional comfort, but something immeasurably more important—the acknowledgement that he is or should be, "Independent. No one has to tell you what to do" (242). Putting him to bed for the night, she refrains from interfering with even his "sunken mind, his unconscious movements," and the story ends with an uncharacteristically free and joyous image: the boy's mind, "in a sunny icicle rightness, was...flying" (243). It is one of the rare instances in Gallant's *oeuvre* in which an adult and a child do not exasperate or betray one another, but co-exist in a mutual separateness so unassertive that it can be called affection.

IV

"Only personal independence matters." Gallant chose Pasternak's credo as the epigraph for her introducation to *Home Truths* as if only now, some thirty years after her departure from, not only in Canada, but also from the world of Red Queens and coolies, she were able to declare herself truly homefree, her ambition—"to write and be absolutely free and independent"[38]—fully realized. It is also as though she had vicariously to live through the trammelled experience of her various female characters, and to achieve the ultimate tranquility and repossession she attributes to the elderly widow, Irina, before she could give voice, in her fiction, to the antithesis of all the Flors and Shirleys and Nettas and Carols: Linnet Muir. In describing her break with mother, family past, and putative "home", Linnet insists: "It involved giddy risks and changes, stepping off the edge blind-folded" (*HT*, 226). These were risks that few women were prepared to take in those days—the hey-day of the Feminine Mystique. Gallant reminds us that in going off to Europe and living by her pen, she was no Doris, underwritten by Daddy's dollops of cash, or by a mother-in-law's legacy.[39] There was no woman's movement either to give her moral support, or to help create the public who would buy and read her stories about women's lives and woman's world. Personal independence for Gallant is something women achieve only through the breaking or refusal of all blood ties and roles—daughter, wife, mother. Friendship, not love, is all that is permitted in the way of emotional attachment.[40]

Perhaps it is envy of this personal achievement—a way of life based on complete emotional independence—that skews our criticism of Gallant's fiction. Grimness of visions, bitchiness of tone: are these not simply the currency with which any honest expression of human life is purchased? Do male critics who ignore or recoil from this honesty do so because, unlike Beckett's, it is not safely cosmic, inseparable from the universal "human condition", but because it is so relentlessly caught up with actual social conditions—the kitchen in the slum?

And what of possible feminist objections? Gallant's fiction, after all, gives virtually no indication that the woman's movement, as it has developed over the past two decades, has substantially altered the world of women, or shattered the glass cabinet. Gallant may, between the writing of "The Other Paris" and "Irina," have come to envision the eventual freeing of woman's identity from the strings and seals of matrimony and patriarchy, but, as the Linnet Muir stories spell out, successful revolution must still be individual; true independence, personal. Does this not mean that Gallant is stranded at the high tide of the Feminine Mystique, when to have been born female was, for all but a few rare women, to be permanently pinned or tied down? Why is Gallant so repeatedly ruthless or at best, indifferent, to her heroines, as she watches them wriggle under the pins, or writhe inside the kitchens and cabinets she so meticulously realizes? For in all her fiction, there is none of that pathos which is so integral an element of, for example, Jean Rhys' treatment of the world of women.

We might begin to answer these plaints by urging that Gallant's intransigence *vis à vis* the achievements and rewards of feminism serves us as a timely reminder of and warning against the still-prehensile grasp of the Feminine Mystique. Women continue to be detoured or betrayed in their pursuit of freedom by cravings for "true love" of every description, as movements such as "Right to Life" and "Total Woman" remind us. We might even suggest that Gallant is no harder on her heroines than she must have been on herself. And, though she lacks the compassion for her characters which Jean Rhys' work so poignantly displays, she does share Rhys' unflickering honesty about the dinginess and psychological, as well as material, squalor of many women's lives. And perhaps Gallant plays Apollo to Rhys' Dionysus, committed not to uncanny empathy but to a far-reaching clarity which endows certain of her female characters with dignity and stature which Rhys' women—victims all—cannot reach. For, as we have seen in her writing on the Gabrielle Russier affair, Gallant's perception of the workings of sexual politics is firmly woven into her understanding of how Politics-in-General—economic and racial divisions of class—controls our access to any true freedom and fulfillment. This element of Gallant's total vision of the world she writes deserves an article all to itself; I will, however, conclude this article with a mere sketch of the way in which Gallant brings social and sexual politics, history, and the status of two peculiarly qualified women among her cast of characters, together.

The French-Canadian maid, Bernadette, and the Italian servant-girl, Carmela, of "The Four Seasons" are exploited in various ways by *bourgeoises* who are themselves inhabitants of psychological kitchens-in-a-slum. Yet a clear line is drawn between the flagrantly hypocritical Nora and the disintegrating Mrs. Unwin, on the one hand, and on the other, their servants, who are seen to belong to that open class of "the poor, the honest, the conscientious" who between them, bear the brunt of history,[41] and for whom Mavis Gallant reserves her respect. It is significant that in such stories as "Bernadette" and "The Four Seasons," Gallant's celebrated irony flays not the servants who are unable to fathom their employers' speeches or demands, but rather the masters, who cannot comprehend the mess they're making of their own lives, and the lives of those around them. Carmela and Bernadette are not victims of their employers, though Bernadette is a victim of the baroque *mythos* of old Québec. Carmela, the heroine of the more recent story, stands head and shoulders above such well-heeled characters as Flor and Shirley not because Gallant romanticises peasant life, but simply because Carmela by virtue of her family background and her country's history, has attained her own independence long before she enters the Unwin's service. It is no coincidence that she, among all of Gallant's characters, receives a blessing, however mysterious, from the doomed, Jewish Doctor Chaffee, at the out-break of World War II. This interchange between equals: "one smile, one gesture, one man's calm blessing" (*FD*, 35) comes as a rare gift to both character and reader, representing as it does one of the few moments in Gallant's *oeuvre* in which we are given the freedom to honestly breathe free. For the blessing Carmela receives lifts, however briefly, the boundaries between man's and woman's worlds, as it does those of personal and public history. And such an achievement bespeaks neither narrowness or bitchiness, but a luminous sense of openness, of possibility, which is all the blessing we can expect any writer to give; any reader to receive.

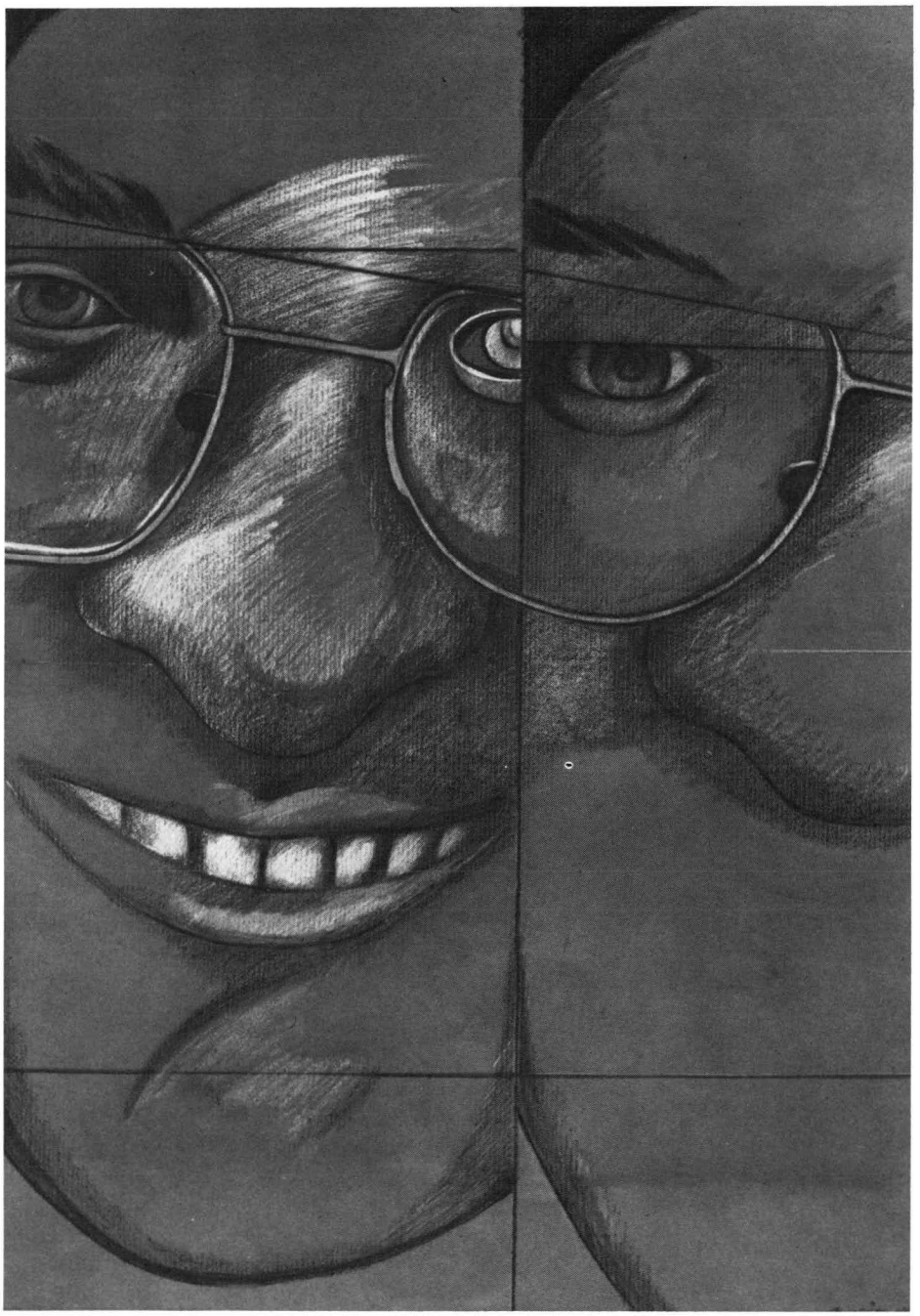
NOTES

1. Quoted in *Writing Prose: Techniques and Purposes*, Thomas Kane, ed. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 204.
2. *Branching Out*, Feb./March 1976, p. 19.
3. *Home Truths: Selected Canadian Stories* (Toronto: MacMillan, 1982), p. xviii.
   Textual references will be incorporated into the body of this article, using the following editions of Gallant's works, and system of abbreviation:
   GWGS Green Water, Green Sky (1959; rpt. Toronto: MacMillan, 1983);

AFGT A Fairly Good Time (1970; rpt. Toronto: MacMillan, 1983):
PJ The Pegnitz Junction (1973; rpt. Toronto: MacMillan, 1982);
EW The End of the World and Other Stories (Toronto: McClelland, 1974);
FD From the Fifteenth District (Toronto: MacMillan, 1979);
HT Home Truths: Selected Canadian Studies.

4. "What is Style?" *Canadian Forum*, 62 (Sept. '82), p. 6.
5. *Branching Out:* 'I began working as a subaltern for a Montréal newspaper when I was twenty-three. I soon realized that a male co-worker with less responsibility and doing less work than I, was making $18 a week more, and at that time $18 was a lot of money. When I went to my boss, I didn't ask 'pay him less' but 'pay me more,' and was told that the man needed the money more, "He's a man, he'll have a family to support." At that time I was the sole support of our family, my husband was a student. It broke my heart. I saw that's how it was in Canada.' (pp. 18-19)
"On the formation of the Montreal Press Club—" '...I looked forward to the camaraderie. But then women were excluded ...One of my friends said, "Look Mavis, we can't have you because we don't want our wives here." Then I realized that these men never went home, they got married and left their wives in the suburbs. Once a year, at an office party, they were allowed to come, with their hair done, their little black dress and pearls, all alike, and they were pests—then they'd retire to the suburbs for another year, have another baby named Ronald or Gary or Nelson. And I thought then, whatever God does with me, that's one thing He's not going to do, I will not be the little woman in the suburbs, waiting at home while he has his fun and his friends and his career...It had an enormous effect on me.'
See, too, Geoff Hancock, "Mavis Tries Harder," *Books in Canada*, 7 (June-July '78), p. 5.
6. Martin Knelman, *Saturday Night*, 93 (Nov. 1978), p. 29.
7. Interview with Geoff Hancock, *Canadian Fiction Magazine* No. 28, 1978, p. 32.
8. "Annals of Justice: Immortal Gatito," *The New Yorker*, 20 June, 1971, p. 47.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 50, 70.
10. It is not the intention of this paper to deny that Gallant successfully treats male characters or experience, but rather to assert that the great majority of her stories are "woman-centred" in terms of character and event. It is interesting to remark, however, that many of her most convincing male characters—George and Wishart of *Green Water, Green Sky*; Walter of "An Unmarried Man's Summer" seem Jamesian in their settled disassociation from those traditionally masculine preserves—business and politics.
11. Review of *Colette: The Difficulty of Loving* by Margaret Crosland, *New York Times Book Review*, Dec. 9, 1973, p. 26.
12. Michael Thorpe, "A National Sense of Self," *Canadian Forum*, 61 (Feb. '82) p. 40.
13. Doris Cowan, Review of *Green Water, Green Sky* and *A Fairly Good Time*, *Books in Canada*, 13 (Jan. '84), p. 22.
14. W.H. New, Review of *From the Fifteenth District*, *Canadian Literature*,No. 85 (Summer '80), p. 13.
Robert Weaver, Introduction to *The End of the World and Other Stories*, (Toronto: McClelland, 1974), p. 13.
G.D. Killam, Review of *Fifteenth District*, *Canadian Form*, 60 (June-July '80), p. 31.
Helen Hoy, Review of *Home Truths*, *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 51 (Summer '82), p. 323.
R.P. Bilan, Review of *Fifteenth District*, *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 49 (Summer, 1980), p. 327.
Robert Fulford, Review of *My Heart is Broken*, *MacLean's*, 5 Sept. 1964, p. 45.
15. Robertson Davies, "The Novels of Mavis Gallant," *Canadian Fiction Magazine*, No. 28, 1978, p. 73.
16. Elizabeth Jennings, Review of *Green Water, Green Sky*, *The Listener*, August 18, 1960, p. 273.
17. See, for example, Barry Cole's offhand concession to *A Fairly Good Time*, *The Spectator*, 18 July, 1970, p. 47: "...her first novel [*Green Water, Green Sky*] has been compared with the writings of Jane Austen. Twentieth century apart, I see no particular reason to quibble." or J. Mitchell Morse's rather condescending review of the same work in *Hudson Review*, 23 (Summer 1970), which does not name Austen, but summons her *aegis* in connection with Gallant":...a pleasant novel of maners...Miss Gallant has all the virtues of a good old-fashioned novelist: she can create characters and invent situations, she has a good ear for the way people talk, and she writes good clear unmessy articulate English prose. Bless her. Cherish her. Encourage her." (p. 337).
18. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 127.
19. "Jane Austen:, *Collected Essays* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1966), I, p. 144.
20. Eve Auchincloss, *Good Housekeeping*—Review of *My Heart is Broken*, *New York Review of Books*, 25 June 1964, p. 18.
Mavis Gallant's comments apropos the title of this review are revealing: "There was a review published in a prominent American magazine...reviewing my work along with that of Mary McCarthy and another woman with whom I had nothing in common except that we were women. They called it 'Good Housekeeping.' I never bought the magazine again and I mention this in reviews whenever I can.' *Branching Out*, *op. cit.*, p. 19.
21. Weaver, p. 13.
22. Gilbert and Gubar, p. 174.
23. Bilan, p. 326.
Brigid Elson, Review of *Fifteenth District*, *Queen's Quarterly*, 87 (Spring '80), p. 160.
24. Davies, p. 69.
25. Geoff Hancock: Interview with Mavis Gallant, *Canadian Fiction Magazine*, op. cit., p. 41.
26. Davies, p. 72.
27. *Ibid.*
28. *Canadian Fiction Magazine*, *op. cit.*, p. 82.
29. Gallant, unlike Conrad, concedes "the possibility of Divine Intervention" but also declares, "I find it hard to believe we're in a world where God walked. Don't you? Do you think God Incarnate walked here and left us? Look at us. Awful. Dreadful. Get in the Métro and look at people." *Canadian Fiction Magazine*, *op. cit.*, p. 35.
30. John Hofsess, Review of *Canadian Fiction Magazine*, special issue on Mavis Gallant, *Books in Canada*, 7 (Nov. '78), p. 21.
31. Beckett's minimalist vision of human reality is, of course, evoked in equally spare language. Gallant is prodigal, by comparison. She goes out of her way to plump for the English language: "...it's an absolutely fabulous language. It's so misused, so underused. For writing there's no comparison between English and French. When Beckett chose French, deliberately, it was because he wanted a tighter, smaller framework. I can't imagine anyone wanting that." *Canadian Fiction Magazine*, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

32. *Notes on Life and Letters* (1921; rpt. London: Dent, 1949) I, pp. 270-1.
33. Review of *A Fairly Good Time, New York Times,* 5 June, 1970, p. 33.
34. "The Sophisticated World of Mavis Gallant," *Saturday Night,* Sept. 1973, p. 33.
35. Only in such stories as "The Moslem Wife" and "In the Tunnel" does one receive the impression that sex can provide moments, if not of bliss then of satisfaction—though at an exorbitant price. There seems nothing in Gallant's work remotely like the perception voiced by the heroine of Alice Munro's "Thanks for the Ride" that sexual passion can create, however transitorily, a heaven in hell's despite.
36. Shirley's one independent act is to refuse an exceedingly tentative marriage offer from her Greek neighbour on the grounds that in Athens she would have never fitted in: "I couldn't have spent my life eating cakes and talking about movies, which is all there is for women." (*AFGT,* 303). Yet marriage seems as inevitable to Shirley as does losing buttons off her raincoat. "I wonder why we all got married so young?" is a question she asks only absently and never attempts to find an answer for (*AFGT,* 263).
37. *V. Canadian Fiction magazine, op. cit.,* p. 47.
38. Geoff Hancock, "Mavis Tries Harder," p. 8.
39. *Canadian Fiction Magazine, op. cit.* In her interview with Hancock, Gallant talks of having thrown up her job "without prospects. I didn't have anyone behind me. I didn't have a penny behind me." (p. 29).
40. "Mavis Tries Harder": "She...considers herself one of the few people with no family ties. 'My one desire as a child was to grow up and become independent,' she says." (p. 5).
41. *Canadian Fiction Magazine, op. cit.,* p. 36.



TWO-FACED MAN II, 26½″ x 19¼″ coloured pencil on coloured paper, by S. V. Gersovitz, Montreal.