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Strange Fashions of Forsaking: Criticism and the Fiction of Mavis Gallant

Mavis Gallant is among the most accomplished and least accommodating of contemporary writers; this may explain why she has so often been failed, if not traduced, by her critics in Canada and elsewhere. Formal recognition from Canada's literary establishment she has, of course, recently had: after more than twenty years of publishing fiction in *The New Yorker*, Gallant has been awarded the Governor General's award and appointed as writer in residence at the University of Toronto. But of critical justice—recognition of the significance of her literary achievement, and engagement with the contentious nature of her fiction's presentation of experience—she has had surprisingly little.

Since the publication of *From the Fifteenth District* (1979) and more particularly, *Home Truths* (1981), Gallant has been treated to those gushes of enthusiasm for established Canadian writers which so often pass for criticism in our newspapers and glossier journals. "I'm certain there isn't a finer living writer of fiction in the English language. There couldn't be!"¹ exclaims a reviewer of *Fifteenth District*, who goes on to demand why Gallant isn't a shoo-in for the Nobel Prize. Curiously enough, it has been the technical mastery and verbal aplomb over which this reviewer raves, that have either deflected critics from raising essential questions of context and value in Gallant's *oeuvre*, or that have actively repelled them. From scholars and reviewers, Mavis Gallant has never received the sustained attention and, as importantly, the respectful affection paid to her literary peer, Alice Munro. What Peter Stevens observed of Gallant's fictions in 1973—that they are "more thoroughly ignored than most recent Canadian writing"²—remains essentially true more than a decade later. It may be that Gallant writes for a severely restricted audience, an élite, while Munro, particularly in her earlier work, makes herself deliberately accessible. Yet nothing like the critical divisiveness, confusion and plain ill-feeling

that have grown up around Gallant's writing have ever attached to Munro's.

Critical responses to Gallant's work, such as there have been, fall into four main categories. First there are those critics whose highly selective regard for Gallant's fiction is a product of that nationalism which Gallant herself abhors. Anything that smacks of national or even regional focus in Gallant's fiction, they seize upon; anything that gives no immediate entrée into the revolving door of Canadian Identity, remains ignored or slighted. Next, there is that critical school which, disregarding Gallant's own contention that "content, meaning, intention and form" make up the fictional whole³, concentrates on style or narrative devices to the evasion or the trivialization of what we might call Gallant's "vision"—the particular view this writer gives us of the reality we share with her. A concomitant response has been to concede Gallant's technical sophistication and polished manner in order to attack what is construed as her damningly restricted view of life and the rebarbative irony which sets her characteristic tone. Often these opposed critical views generate such clouds of contradiction that one cannot believe their starting points to be the same texts, the same author. Finally, there is a modicum of illuminating criticism that gestures towards that achievement on which, I will argue, her status as a major writer depends: an acute social, political and historical sense which finds expression in her detailed exploration of two areas central to human experience in our century: the world of women and that collective memory of shattering events we own as history.

This essay will attempt to provide an overview of that vexed criticism which has hampered recognition of Mavis Gallant's true accomplishment and status as a writer of fiction. It will also try to map at least the outlines of those relatively neglected areas of Gallant's fictive world whose sustained exploration will reward and challenge both reader and critic.

II

Given Gallant's anomalous position in the literary world—expatriate Canadian woman writer, living in Paris, writing only in English, publishing for the most part in a select American magazine—it may not seem surprising to find a dearth of critical writing on her considerable *oeuvre*. An M.A. thesis and a slim volume in a minor series on Canadian writers;⁴ scattered reviews, occasional interviews and lately, rhapsodic "retrospectives" whenever a Canadian publisher re-issues a collection of Gallant's stories previously out of print. Of course Gallant's "buried" literary life may be interpreted as a direct conse-

quence of her preference for “the insulation of privacy and anonymity”⁵ over the kind of media hype which has given women writers, especially, a chance to become household words. Yet though Gallant’s desire for privacy may be as strong as Samuel Beckett’s, it should not, by the same token, have precluded conspicuous recognition and discussion of her work. Nor should it have resulted in misconceptions of the central concerns and the very scope of her fiction. That this has been a persistent feature of Gallant criticism we shall see in turning to examine, at greater length, the “fashions of forsaking” prevalent among readers who have discovered and commented upon this writer’s work.

Let us begin with those critics who, trying to ride patriotic hobby horses over the fields of Gallant’s fiction, have decided *a priori*, that Gallant’s most effective work is connected with Canadians in Canada. One can trace this precept back to Robert Fulford’s 1964 review of *My Heart is Broken*, in which he states that Gallant’s “best stories . . . amount to a unique chronicle of the Quebec Anglo-Saxons, and for this reason, among others, she should be valued by Canadian readers.”⁶ Almost twenty years later a reviewer can still be found arguing that Gallant’s stories about pre-war and wartime Montreal (the “Linnet Muir” sequence presented in *Home Truths*) possess “a resonance you don’t get from her European stories”⁷—and this despite the fact that, as one American has observed, “the farther away from her native Canada she takes her people, the more indelibly Canadian they become”⁸ and the fact that resonance is a relative value. If Canadians, but not Americans or Britishers, find *Home Truths* more resonant than *The Pognitz Junction* (1973) which, with its references to recent German history excited interest in Europe but fell flat in North America⁹, does this have to do with the intrinsic quality of either text, or with the European ignorance of Canadian society—or conversely, with the historical insulation of the North American mind?

One can thankfully point to critics who, like Wayne Grady, insist that a work such as *Home Truths* gives us a vision not of Canada, but “of the world, of life” or like John Ayre, who deplors the use of criteria based on “nationalist ideologies” to deny or ignore Gallant’s “considerable abilities in creating stories about *any* social reality”¹⁰—critical limitations which Gallant herself alluded to in her introduction to *Home Truths*. And yet, as John Metcalf pointed out in a recent blast against the xenophobic judgements of the Canlit establishment,¹¹ the lunacy seems to persist: Gallant was awarded the Governor-General’s prize not for the earlier work, *Fifteenth District*—in many eyes a more distinguished and challenging work than *Home Truths* which, apart from the Linnet Muir stories, consists of fictions published as early as

the late fifties and presumably collected in this format because they appeared to be more "Canadian" than others. Gallant herself, in an interview with Geoff Hancock in *Canadian Fiction Magazine*, has some devastating remarks to make on "spiteful" Canadian reviews of her work: "If I were not Canadian I wouldn't read them. But then if I weren't Canadian they wouldn't be so small-minded either" (*CFM*,60). She goes on to define herself not as a Canadian writer but, like Katherine Mansfield as "a writer in the English language" (*CFM*,61).

Now that the Prodigal has come home, however temporarily, and taken a bite of the fatted calf prepared for her, one may hope that the "Canada First" current will be stilled, so that more important questions of critical practice vis à vis Gallant's work can be attended to. One of these questions is the tendency for critics to look preponderantly at theme or else at technique in Gallant's work, thus trying to shatter that inseparability of style and structure on which Gallant insists, and breeding spurious contradictions in the process. A look at general trends in and particular manifestations of, these kinds of criticism will tease out these contradictions and their repercussions.

The themes run to ground in Gallant's *oeuvre* are varied enough: Gallant is said to treat the family and marriage, à la Austen; personal relationships, à la Bloomsbury; or the "inner conflicts" of bewildered compromised, feckless individuals, à la Chekhov.¹² She is also construed as being on the track of a related, equally traditional but more positive theme: the individual's problematic quest for freedom from middle-class norms and expectations.¹³ Or she is preoccupied with exile and all its nihilistic or existentialist paraphernalia, so that she can be seen as clinging to the coat-tails of Camus, or clutching the "rag-end of modernism".¹⁴ Conversely, she is a writer whose concerns are obstinately social and political, rather than metaphysical: "the grasp of a society, the refusal to treat it as freakishly unrelated to other societies and the rest of life" are what truly distinguish her fiction.¹⁵ Finally, Gallant's obsession with time—not only as this inaugurates that backward spiral by which she structures her narratives, but also as time becomes the "principal hero or villain" in her fiction—is declared to be at the thematic heart of her *oeuvre*.¹⁶

The problem with such feet in the door of Gallant's fictive world is that they are largely seen as mutually exclusive by the critics who put them there—no satisfactory integration of these themes has yet been made. To indicate the limitations of a selective and exclusively thematic approach, a brief look at the one extended treatment of theme in Gallant's fiction that we do possess will not come amiss.

Douglas Malcolm's examination of exile in Gallant's writing sets out to establish this theme both as a metaphor for the metaphysical

underpinning of Gallant's vision (that the individual is painfully alienated from the cosmos) and as the source of Gallant's celebrated irony—since the individual either remains oblivious to or only intermittently aware of this formative condition of exile. Malcolm's approach is useful in underlining the attention Gallant pays to the "societal, familial, and national perimeters of external reality,"¹⁷ but doesn't quite succeed in establishing the special qualities or vital importance of Gallant's treatment of exile. This may be because the presupposition Malcolm attributes to Gallant's fiction—"that man is a spiritual exile and that . . . he can never integrate his individual consciousness within a sphere of external reality"¹⁸—has been a truism at least since the inception of the novel as a genre, if Georg Lukacs' *The Theory of the Novel* is to be trusted. Although Malcolm makes some interesting sidetracks into, for example, the impact of the last war on Gallant's fiction, his thesis, by and large, is an exercise in schematizing: we are taken through the various stages and conditions of exile developed in Gallant's writing and are given a neat summary of precise degrees of alienation and irony, but little perception of how Gallant's treatment of exile distinguishes her work from that of any other twentieth-century writer, and no indication of whether the "quiet despair" Malcolm imputes to Gallant over our "ironic state of spiritual exile"¹⁹ is either convincing or significant given the contexts Gallant's fiction emerges from and creates.

Consideration of theme-tracking brings us face to face with its formal counterpart: structure-chasing. If Douglas Malcolm exhibits a fondness for schematizing, Graziana Merler displays a fanaticism on the subject: her "preliminary guide" to narrative patterns and devices in Gallant's fiction, though it shelters under the skirts of Structuralist literary practice, reads ultimately like a comprehensive plot summary of Gallant's extant fictions, lavishly furnished with appropriate tables, arrows and charts. This is not to deny the validity of many of Merler's insights into Gallant's narrative techniques—her comments on Gallant's relative dismissal of plot and character development in favour of the analysis of specific situations and the reconstruction of states of mind and heart, are as apposite as her reflection that Gallant's imagination works to "stylize and synthesize rather than enlarge", making her a brilliant short-story writer rather than novelist.²⁰ What it does take issue with, however, is the often illogical and damagingly reductive nature of this critic's approach and the follow-ups she advises. Merler's post-modernist avowal of the self-reflexiveness of fiction—"The author, by writing, indirectly probes the art of writing. It is at this level that her work acquires its meaning"—is, for example, made in the same breath as a disavowal of the very notion of "meaning" in Gal-

lant's texts: "What is essential in the author's work is not the vision of the world it presents, but the incisive grasp of the human dance, of its choreography."²¹ One might stop to ponder the fact that the blind don't generally make good ballet masters, but a further point to be pressed is that, while professing structuralist methods and objectives, Merler herself emerges as an avid theme-and-motif hunter without, however, giving herself the conceptual room to do anything much with her quarry. Moreover, she seems to have stopped up her critical ears, passively accepting as normative or even prescriptive certain of Gallant's *données*—utter, disabling lack of communication between people, the abandonment of children by parents and the betrayal of parents by children—*données* at whose obsessiveness and even facility other critics have protested. Merler goes out of her way to deny any but an aesthetic motivation to Gallant's fictional process: "Mavis Gallant unmasks pretension and sham, not to give a clear vision of what truth might be or to differentiate a likeable from an unlikeable character, but to fix the intricate weaving of human reactions and relations. Sham is uncovered, to show not brightness or darkness, but the even shade of ambiguity."²²

I quote Merler on these points to suggest not only the limitations and contradictions of her methodology, but also to indicate that other trap into which so many of Gallant's admirers and detractors fall. This trap is the impulse to make of Mavis Gallant an aesthetic *sur-doué*, a dilettante where fundamental human needs and passions are concerned, a coolly disengaged spectator taking small and idle bets on the human horse race.²³ Even a critic such as George Woodcock, who draws attention to Gallant's historical sense and narrative commitment to "psychic openness" and "collectivity"²⁴ rather than closure and alienation seems happiest with the image of Gallant as successor to writers like Woolf—not the Virginia of the feminists, but the amiably aesthetic Mrs. Woolf of traditional criticism. Woodcock's urbane appreciations of the texture and surface polish of Gallant's art dovetail with his insistence on her mature work as being "in no way male and ideological"—the product of "intellectual deliberation"—but rather, as "feminine and intuitive", with the striking "rightness of detail and surface" coming from an irrational but . . . true" sense of "rightness".²⁵ This would appear to stand in flagrant contradiction to the judgement of such critics as G.D. Killam that Gallant's is a "vision of life derived through intellectual contemplation and marked by coherence"²⁶; more importantly it works to reduce the scope and thus the general importance of Gallant's work. Ultimately, Woodcock presents Gallant as a practitioner of the kind of comedy of manners dear to Austen and Peacock, aestheticised by Woolf, and rendered respectable in this

minimalist and marginalist age by its "painterly" manipulations of surface and texture which create fascinating illusions of depth and range.

Woodcock's penchant for treating Gallant's work in exclusively stylistic and technical terms leads us to those reviewers who merely lap Gallant in laurels for her fictions' "acuteness of insight, exactness of detail, radiance of imagery".²⁷ Gallant's talent for understatement and ellipsis, her ability to encapsulate the essentials of each fictional situation she evokes or to compress dictionaries of description into one epigrammatic entry on a character or scene have also been applauded. Yet it is at the point where technique turns into tone that even Gallant's afficionados express certain doubts, and that conflicting judgements re-emerge. Gallant's impersonality has indeed been praised as "objective, unsentimental" sympathy, as laudable accuracy to the laws of human relationships, but has also been damned as "emotional anesthesia", and "ostentatious withholding of judgement": "by cultivating incongruities, juxtaposing voices and memories that fit together in only the craziest way, the author might seem to evade responsibility for saying or caring very much about her characters and their situation".²⁸ Even more detrimental to Gallant's critical reception than her authorial impersonality is that irony of tone—variously described as mordant, sardonic, bitchy, gloating—which has come to be recognized as her trademark.²⁹

One of the most daunting aspects of such an ironic attitude as Gallant's is the insecurity and downright fear it engenders in the reader. In Alice Munro's fiction we have the ultimately consoling sense that the narrator somehow implicates herself in the judgements she makes of the steady human aptitude for smallness, failure, betrayal, loss: it seems to be a distinctive feature of Munro's tone. All are punished and thus, in some transcendent sense, absolved. Readers of Gallant's work, on the other hand, perceive that author's presence over their shoulder rather as a netted insect must regard the shadow of the collector ready to skewer him on a pin.

A less "personal" attack on Gallant's irony has been voiced by critics who feel that it fatally limits the imaginative world this writer's fiction creates. Thus, for every critic who declares that "If [Gallant] is limited, it is because she limits herself and wrings her wit dry of grotesquerie and exaggeration", another is to be found declaring that "Gallant's art is in the service of a narrow view of life—too much is left out of the world of [her] stories."³⁰ Even Gallant's acknowledged strengths are used as ammunition against her. Critics have found her subtleties too finicky: "one simply cannot put down a piece before finishing it—for fear of forgetting what it is about"; "she writes as if to the mannerism

born".³¹ One might shrug off the remarks as Philistine—as Gallant herself did, on hearing of a critic who had described her work as “too clever, too oblique, too arty for its own moral and human good.”³² They seem, after all, to be the same kind of pebbles as were cast at Henry James by his contemporaries. Yet Joseph Conrad, in defending James against similar charges, was quick to insist that “Technical perfection, unless there is some real glow to illumine and warm it from within, must necessarily be cold.” He cites James as “an idealizer” whose “heart shows itself in the delicacy of his handling”³³. Mavis Gallant however, is no idealizer—her hapless characters are presented not so much with delicacy as with deadly precision; moreover, there is considerable disagreement as to whether her writing does possess any saving glow or warmth at all.

Voices have been found to assert this writer’s “compassionate yet detached understanding” of her characters and the situations in which they find themselves, and to vouch for the fact that though one may be in great distress in the world according to Gallant, one is never out of reach of love.³⁴ Yet when we find a writer like Mark Abley establishing the fact of Gallant’s compassion with the observation that, although merciless with the complacent, she is with others, “especially children bruised by neglect . . . patient and even kind,”³⁵ we may find the quality of mercy somewhat strained. A careful reading of her fiction shows Gallant to be ambivalent towards many of these “bruised” children, especially those who are simply adults *manqués*. The reservations of Gallant’s critics are peculiarly compelling to anyone who has read a quantity of Gallant’s fictions at one sitting, for the world they create can indeed appear as “almost claustrophobically narrow” and “stifling”, with Gallant seeming to load the dice against her characters, making meaningless their losses and defeats since, by implication, any valid happiness, kindness, love, even forward motion or change in life is not to be found this side of a Harlequin romance.³⁶ Her fiction, one reviewer has found, does not ultimately touch us: “Why aren’t the stories painfully moving, though the people are so recognizably decent, . . . in their lonely plights so jauntily sad? Because none of them wants to take the risk of getting involved, even the author, really. She is a wonderful observer of the ordinary grotesqueries of human encounters that leave hearts bruised and obscurely aching. But not broken—nothing is really changed by these encounters; nothing is added to the sum of life.”³⁷ Again, the contrast to Munro seems both obvious and inevitable.

Thus we have an identity-sketch of Gallant’s fiction as seen by the critics: a fiction technically brilliant, thematically rich—if ever the themes could be brought together—yet vitiated by a tone and vision to

which an appreciable number of critics would apply the terms nasty, brutish and short. Do we then shrug our shoulders with murmurs of "de gustibus . . ."; cleave to the glowing appreciations which give us the supple skin but leave out the flesh and bone of Gallant's fiction; wave away the buzz of negative criticism? I would argue that to rescue the fiction of Mavis Gallant from these confusing waters we must consider two areas of her *oeuvre* which bring together these salient aspects of theme, tone, structure and vision and which restore Gallant's fiction to a context the understanding of which will help us to make rewarding analyses and valid judgements of her work. To these areas—the world of female experience, and that of historical forces, we shall now, however summarily, turn.

III

A brief glance at Gallant's imaginative attention to the layout and dimensions of female experience will help us to assess complaints about the miniaturized, claustrophobic or stagnant world in which Gallant seems to trap her characters, and about those characters' own irremediable ineptness and almost listless cruelty. An accusation such as Patricia MacManus' that Gallant misses an essential point in her fiction—"what people do *with* time, not what element that indifferent element does with people, would seem to be the issue . . . in all fiction and in life"³⁸—could thus be countered by pointing to the particular context in which Gallant deals with time and character.

The vast majority of Gallant's fictions have to do with what is named in the novel of which MacManus complains—*Green Water, Green Sky* (1959)—"the world of woman . . . a world of migraines, miscarriage, disorder and tears"—and likened by one of the novel's male characters to "a kitchen in a slum"³⁹. One of the *données* of that world, in the fashioning and maintenance of which Gallant implicates both men and women, is that its inhabitants are as helpless and passive as it is stifling and solid. Gallant, we remember, left North America in the early fifties when what she has called the "Eisenhower mentality"⁴⁰ was working to create among other noxious products, that "Feminine Mystique" which Betty Friedan anatomized in 1963.

In a perceptive essay published ten years after *The Feminine Mystique*, John Ayre asserts that Gallant's early 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." He goes on to describe these typical Gallant heroines:

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 laydlike behaviour The only form of rebellion they can manage is to fall apart within the shell of the code that traps them.⁴¹

Ayre concludes that "the total image of Gallant's early fiction reflects an upper middle class culture in the 1950's, gouged out of the suburbs and transplanted in an alien European society where it sours and dies."⁴² It is an image with which the reader of *The Other Paris*, *Green Water*, *Green Sky*, and such stories as "Virus X" and "The Ice Wagon Going Down the Street" will have become familiar.

Given this context, then, it would seem that comments on the narrowness of Gallant's vision, the bitchiness of her ironic tone, the closure of her fictive worlds, are both fundamentally correct and yet, in their animadversion, mistaken. These qualities are intrinsic to Gallant's fiction by what we might call mimetic right—in what other manner, and from what other perspective could one write about a kitchen in a slum? One would no more expect dewy vistas of freed possibility or encouraging huzzas for the struggling female protagonists of *Green Water*, *Green Sky* or even *A Fairly Good Time* (1970)—both of which focus on the emotional slum-kitchen and the social glass-cabinet which comprise the perimeters of female experience in the late 50's and 60's—than one would expect from *Nicholas Nickleby* a glowing premonition of the brave new educational world around the corner from Dotheboys Hall, in the shape of A.S. Neill's Summerhill. It is true, of course, that in these fictions of Gallant's one looks in vain for the saving alternative that Dickens does provide via Kate and Nicholas and the Brothers Cheeryble—that of the virtuous mind and caring human heart—but this is because Gallant sees the world of woman as a prison from which possibilities of escape are so rare as to seem positively gratuitous when they do occur. Moreover, she is careful to present a bi-partisan view of sexual politics: as she remarks in a biography of Colette, "it might be prudent to reflect that if an unqualified wife-victim is hard to find, so is an unqualified husband-monster."⁴³ Gallant's own history comes into play at this point; an exceptional woman, she achieved financial and social independence on her own remarkable terms. As she asserts in an interview for *Canadian Fiction Magazine*: "I am a Canadian and a writer and a woman. If the basic facts of my existence created problems for me, I would not be myself but a character in someone else's fiction" (*CFM*, 62). The closest Gallant ever seems to have come to this fate is with

Linnet Muir, her fictional *Doppelgänger*, and almost the only one of all her women characters who eschews the slum kitchen and glass cabinet to achieve a kind of personal-independence-in-progress.

Some critics have bewailed Gallant's refusal to allow her female characters to break loose and breathe free, but I would agree with John Ayre that Gallant rightly perceives this form of entrapment as ironic, not tragic. Ayre goes on to argue that Gallant saves the demands and dimensions of tragedy for a later and more complex phase of her fiction, one in which she jettisons the "rag-doll expatriates" of her first books in order to consider the state of an entire people, *chez eux*, as she does in *The Pegnitz Junction* (1973).⁴⁴ According to Ayre, the heroine of the title story in this collection is "undeniably lodged" not, as Gallant's previous heroines were, in some Grand Hotel Abyss, (to borrow Lukacs' epithet), but in "an anguishing apocalypse that encompasses both her mind and the chaotic reality around her."⁴⁵ As not only Ayre, but Woodcock and Ronald Hatch agree, the world of Gallant's later, "historical" fiction is broader and more profound than critics who complain of claustrophobic narrowness would admit. In collections such as *The Pegnitz Junction* and *Fifteenth District*, Gallant would seem to be working towards a vision of reality that definitively achieves that "interpenetration of public and private realms than is one of her most distinctive and brilliantly conveyed qualities".⁴⁶ Ronald Hatch seems to argue for a similar view in his article, "The Three Stages of Gallant's Fiction". He asserts Gallant has moved from a study of various individuals' entrapments in liberal, romantic ideals, on to an awareness, in *The Pegnitz Junction*, of how an entire nation may be enervated and destroyed; and finally to a synthesizing vision, in the Linnet Muir stories, of individuals as part of history, and not as mere outside commentators on a passing show.⁴⁷

Certainly it is true that many have cited, if few have dwelt on Gallant's impressive political and historical sense, her uncanny ability to "fix" in her fictions the feel of specific social phenomena or periods of history, be they World War II or the colonial wars, the disorienting "homecomings" of young German soldiers in the late 1940's, or that characteristically North American phenomenon, "the new postwar ticket-of-leave generation in its first years abroad."⁴⁸ Gallant, of course, is the author of various commentaries on the current state of French society; she is also completing a large-scale study of the Dreyfus affair.⁴⁹ It is not surprising, therefore, to find her insisting, in interviews, on her passion for politics, and on the dramatic impact one particular event—the Nazi concentration camps, as revealed to and assimilated by North Americans immediately after the war—has had on her work. The fact of the camps, she has said, made

such a "shambles" of the world in which she and her contemporaries had to live, that it became "desperately important" to find out "the why" of it, not just to concede its existence (*CFM*,40).

Given all this—and given the scope, power and sheer ambition of works like *The Pegnitz Junction* and *From the Fifteenth District*—why isn't Gallant considered as a major writer, of the rank of Lessing or Gordimer, rather than as a brilliant stylist and miniaturist comedian of manners? Why, too, have accusations of "chilling indifference" and "narrow view of life" been levelled, not only against her early fiction, but precisely at those texts which attempt an exigent integration of private and public experience? It may be the habitual reluctance of a male-dominated literary establishment to concede major status to a woman writer⁵⁰; it may be the discomfort of this establishment face to face with a woman writer who does not represent in her fiction the traditional "feminine" qualities of tenderness, discretion, nurturing and circumspection—it was, after all, a male critic, Robert Weaver, who, however circumspectly, used the term "bitchy" à propos Gallant's fiction, and who insisted that Gallant "finds politics distasteful".⁵¹ It may be legitimate to pose the question of whether those critics who accuse Gallant's fictive world of lack of breadth and warmth would say the same of Beckett's bathroom-in-a-slum. But it will be more rewarding to examine the validity of Gallant's abrasive vision in terms of the comprehensive context in which it develops, and which it explores.

John Ayre's assertion that, in the three years between *A Fairly Good Time* and *The Pegnitz Junction*, Gallant has jettisoned her "toy ballerinas" in order to enter a new and somehow separate area—a tragic and even apocalyptic sense of history in which the individual is inextricably bound—is deceptive. For it seems to me that what Gallant has done is not to jettison her former female characters but to approach the "shambles" of history from the perspective of female experience—a perspective which she had experimented with and brought to perfect focus in the two decades after 1950.

Given the distance women have always been made to keep not only from war itself, but also from an understanding of or participation in the political processes which bring wars about, one would expect a woman writer's presentation of history to be both despairing and oblique. Yet in stories such as "The Old Friends" or "An Alien Flower", "The Four Seasons" or "The Moslem Wife", Gallant has given us a rich and direct evocation of history as daily experiences—lived, accepted or withstood—which, in this nuclear age when the civilian, not the soldier, is the target of aggression, becomes both terrible and illuminating. Gallant also makes the bulk of her civilians

female—Helena, who has narrowly eluded extermination in a concentration camp and who tortures in the ‘friendliest’ way the middle-aged police commissioner who finds embarrassing and baffling her references to her Jewish background; Bibi and Helga, two German girls whose families and thus whose identities have been obliterated by the end of the Second World War; Carmela, a young Italian servant girl exploited by her frightened English masters at the outbreak of the same war on the Italian Riviera; Netta who, effectively deserted by her husband, survives the occupation of the Riviera hotel she owns, and briefly enjoys at the war’s end a ravaged but precious independence and clarity of mind which had always been impossible for her with her husband by her side. With these protagonists, Gallant provides us with a compelling new model for general human experience in our time. There is no grandeur, nobility or transcendence in Gallant’s vision of reality as lived history, rather than as read history-text. If the world of woman is a kitchen in a slum, then the world of all humanity is the slum itself—or perhaps only the bombed-out shambles of one.

Throughout her fiction, Gallant achieves an interweaving of personal and public history in which female experience becomes not an alternative but an archetype; moreover, in works such as *The Fifteenth District* a significant transposition has taken place. It is as though we were reading a variant of *The Secret Agent* or *Nostromo* in which not Verloc but Winnie, not Nostromo, Gould or Monygham, but Emilia Gould or Linda were the agents and not the mere harvesters and witnesses of experience. Yet if historical experience can blow open the kitchen door or shatter the glass-cabinet, it is only to let in the air of the slum outside. And, since Gallant’s women have not been transfigured by any feminist revelation; because almost all remain in a state of fearful stupor—like “prisoner[s] roused for questioning”⁵²—there is in *The Pegnitz Junction* or *Fifteenth District* no panoramic sense, none of that intrigue—political or intellectual—one finds in modern “historical” fiction—Conrad’s *Nostromo*, for example, or Mann’s *Dr. Faustus*. What emerges from Gallant’s mature fiction is a fusion of her preoccupations with women and history which gives to her best work a paradoxical effect of breadth and closure: a vision both of human pettiness or mere puniness, and of the abyss across which human acts are stretched until they achieve the nightmare dimensions of extended shadows, or else, as at the end of one of her sharpest, yet most poignant stories “The Four Seasons”, a gesture of blessing which refracts, rather than mirrors the irony of the context in which it is made.

The imprisoning world of women and the shambles of history—these are the two interconnected areas which Mavis Gallant has claimed and explored in her fiction from the very start, as stories such as

"The Picnic" (1952) or "The Other Paris" (1953) reveal. Gallant's best fiction, in which these two areas merge like overlapping transparencies, presents a paradoxical world, both richly various and contracted, almost starved; the complex vision which structures this paradox may well be the most compelling as well as the most significant achievement of her fiction. It is to the mapping, analysis and questioning of these inter-dependent worlds, and to an elucidation of the vision which delineates them, that effective criticism of this major modern writer must turn.

NOTES

1. I.M. Owen, *Books in Canada*, 8 (October 1979), p. 14.
2. Peter Stevens, "Perils of Compassion", *Canadian Literature*, No. 56 (Spring 1963), p. 61.
3. "What is Style?", *Canadian Forum*, 62 (September 1982), p. 6.
4. Douglas Malcolm, *The Theme of Exile in Mavis Gallant's Fiction*, M.A. thesis, Carleton University, Department of English, Ottawa, 1975.
Graziana Merler, *Mavis Gallant: Narrative Patterns and Devices* (Ottawa: Tecumseh Press, 1978).
5. Geoff Hancock, "Mavis Gallant: Counterweight in Europe", *Canadian Fiction Magazine*, No. 28 (1978), p. 5.
6. Robert Fulford, "On Mavis Gallant's Best Fiction Yet: the memoirs of a WASP in wartime Montréal", *MacLean's*, 5 September 1964, p. 45.
7. Martin Knelman, "The Article Mavis Gallant Didn't Want Written", *Saturday Night*, 93 (November 1978), p. 25.
8. Charles Poore, "Mavis Gallant's Stories of Exiles and their Hearths", *The New York Times*, April 16, 1964, p. 35.
9. V. Geoff Hancock's interview with Mavis Gallant in *Canadian Fiction Magazine*, p. 64. Subsequent references to this interview will be incorporated into the text of this essay under the abbreviation: *CFM*.
10. Wayne Grady, "The Other Canada", *Books in Canada*, 10 (October 1981), p. 19; John Ayre, "The Sophisticated World of Mavis Gallant", *Saturday Night*, (September 1973), pp. 35-6.
11. V. John Metcalf, "What Happened to Canlit?", *Literary Supplement, The Globe and Mail*, Saturday 19 November, 1983.
12. V. Robertson Davies, "The Novels of Mavis Gallant", *Canadian Fiction Magazine*; Stevens and Knelman. V. also *Elizabeth Jennings*, "New Novels"; *The Listener*, August 18, 1960 p. 273; and Rose Feld, *Saturday Review*, February 25, 1956, pp. 17-18.
13. V. G.D. Killam, "A Thinking Stone", *Canadian Forum*, 60 (June-July 1980), pp. 30-31.
14. R. P. Bilan, *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 49 (Summer 1980), p. 326.
15. William H. Pritchard, *New York Times Book Review*, 24 June 1973, p. 4.
16. *Ibid.*
17. Malcolm, Thesis abstract.
18. Malcolm, p. 2.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 120.
20. Merler, pp. 2, 7.
21. *Ibid.*, pp. 68, 69.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
23. John Hofsess, in a review of *Canadian Fiction Magazine's* Special Issue on Mavis Gallant compares Gallant to Nabokov, as a similar kind of "literary aesthete", accepting life as "a fog-bound thing, making so little effort to live and write without shields of irony and masks," *Books in Canada*, 7 (November 1978), p. 21. William Pritchard (op. cit.) declares that Gallant is "perilously close" to residing in "the Palace of Art".
Brigid Elson, in a review of *From the Fifteenth District*, remarks on the "chilling" clarity of Gallant's vision and the "unsatisfactorily limited" nature of Gallant's characters, which she

- relates to Gallant's "unconvincing cosmic pessimism, her pre-supposition that "we are all doomed players in the random Existentialist crap game of life," *Queen's Quarterly*, 87 (Spring 1980), p. 161.
24. "Memory, Imagination, Artifice: the late short fiction of Mavis Gallant", *Canadian Fiction Magazine*, pp. 87-88.
 25. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
 26. Killam, p. 31.
 27. Doris Cowan, *Books in Canada*, 13 (January 1984), p. 22
 28. Mark Abley, *Maclean's*, 94 (November 9, 1981), p. 78; Helen Hoy, *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 51 p. 323; Eve Auchincloss, "Good Housekeeping," *New York Review of Books*, 25 June 1964, p. 18.
 29. V. Killam, p. 31; W.H. New, "The Art of Haunting Ghosts", *Canadian Literature*, 85 (Summer, 1980), p. 154; Robert Weaver, Introduction to *The End of the World and Other Stories* (Toronto: McClelland, 1974), p. 13; Fulford, p. 45.
 30. Elizabeth Janeway, *The New York Times Book Review*, June 7, 1970, p. 34; Bilan, p. 327.
 31. Hoy, p. 322; Elson, p. 160.
 32. Pritchard, p. 4.
 33. "Henry James: An Appreciation", *Notes on Life and Letters*, 1 (1921; rpt. London: Dent, 1949), pp. 270-1.
 34. Michael Thorpe, "A National Sense of Self", *Canadian Forum*, 61 (February 1982), p. 40; New, p. 155.
 35. Abley, p. 78.
 36. Bilan, p. 326; Elson, p. 161.
 37. Auchincloss, p. 18.
 38. *The New York Times Book Review*, 1 November, 1959, p. 41.
 39. *Green Water, Green Sky* (Toronto: MacMillan, 1983), p. 114.
 40. Knelman, p. 29.
 41. Ayre, p. 33.
 42. *Ibid.*
 43. *The New York Times Book Review*, 9 December, 1973, p. 26.
 44. Ayre, pp. 33, 34.
 45. *Ibid.*, p. 34.
 46. Paul Stuewe, "Mavis Gallant's Exocative Portraits", *Quill and Quire*, October 1981, p. 37.
 47. *Canadian Fiction Magazine*, pp. 92-114.
 48. Poore, p. 35.
 49. V. "Reflections: The Events in May: A Paris Notebook—I", *New Yorker*, 14 September, 1968, and "Reflections: The Events in May: A Paris Notebook—II", *New Yorker*, 21 September, 1968; "Annals of Justice: Immortal Gatitio", *New Yorker*, 20 June, 1971.
 50. Some of the titles under which Gallant's work has been reviewed by male—and female—critics, are revealing in this context: "Vanishing Creams", "Love's Grim Remains" and "Good Housekeeping". The first conjures up associations of wrinkle removers, the second, of Harlequin Romance and the third speaks for itself. Of this last title, Gallant has remarked: "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. I mention this in reviews whenever I can". Interview with Karen Lawrence, "From the Other Paris", *Branching Out*, February/March 1976, p. 19.
 51. Weaver, p. 10. In the Hancock interview in *Canadian Fiction Magazine*, Weaver's comments on Gallant's distaste for politics are described by Gallant as "hilarious" (p. 33).
 52. *Green Water, Green Sky*, p. 65.