Speaking of Mirrors: Imagery and Narration in two Novellas by Mavis Gallant

D.B. Jewison

Most of Mavis Gallant's fiction consists of pieces of twenty thousand words or fewer. Even "Potter," the reputed "novella" of *The Fifteenth District,* exceeds this by only a few pages. There are, besides the full-length study of the Dreyfus case she is now writing, four exceptions: "The Pegnitz Junction" from the book of that title, the full-length novel—*A Fairly Good Time,* and two pieces from the period of the late fifties and early sixties—*Green Water, Green Sky* and "Its Image in the Mirror," the latter first published in the collection *My Heart is Broken.* It is this last-mentioned pair that I shall discuss. They illustrate forcefully two dominant technical elements in the predominantly modernist mode that persists in Gallant's fiction—subtlety of imagery and narrative voice.

I

Green Water, Green Sky, the short novel Mavis Gallant published in 1959 when she was thirty-five, contains the germ of much of her later writing: subtle, even enigmatic characterization; a plot which focuses upon a few significant moments of the lives of the characters and leaves the long stretches between to be dealt with by brief allusions or not at all; suggestive but unforced use of images that edge towards symbols but never become rigid or entirely predictable; themes of imprisonment and deracination, of people who frequently became mere ends to those whose weaknesses make them dangerous, of escape from, or entrapment in, time, and the related theme of memory. Above all, this story which portrays the destructive relationship between Bonnie McCarthy and her daughter, Florence, contains, as Desmond McCarthy once said of *Uncle Vanya,* real tragedy because it captures both the flatness and poignancy of life.

At fourteen, Flor is in Venice with her mother, her seven-year-old American cousin George Fairlie and his parents. She is thin, sunburned, haughty, and she despises her young cousin.

From this time in his life George especially remembers one scene that seems in retrospect to be a prognostication of the disaster of Flor's life. Before Florence has the necklace which her mother just bought her around her neck, she has broken the string, intentionally George believes. She pointedly throws the beads away, embarrassing her mother with her wild gestures. George further displeases Flor by retrieving some of them, and holds onto one for more than a decade, regarding it as both a talisman and the symbol of that day when "someone once wished him dead" (6).[1] Flor's "mad" behaviour indicates her rejection of being appropriated by her mother and George into the clan of the Fairlies. It is the first indication of her symbolic rebellion and real capitulation which ends in madness. It is a scene that twelve years later George remembers as a "wild girl breaking a necklace, the circle of life closing in at fourteen, the family, the mother, the husband to come" (142-43). By the time she is twenty-six, she suffers from vertigo and only pretends to read because by now the reading which was once her refuge from her uprooted state is impossible; she can no longer relate sentence to sentence. She sees a painting as exploding forms and, like a suicidal character from a novel by Virginia Woolf, believes that human ingenuity is concealing the ruin of Paris, a city in which, for her, there is no present.[2] Her vision of a "ruined, abandoned city" eventually drives her to the darkness of her shuttered bedroom where she searches for the dreams that will allow her escape. A moment of ecstacy came at the age of twenty-four when, in the hotel room in Cannes with Bob Harris, she felt a "concrete sensation of happiness" that she believed was caused by "the passage of light." During this state of dark happiness she was "in a watery world of perception where impulses, doubts, intentions, detached from their roots, rise to the surface" (111). The reader is thus prepared for her approaching madness in which her psyche achieves the rootlessness of her physical existence. The image of a "watery world" is again interesting in relation to Virginia Woolf. In *Mrs. Dalloway,* for instance, perceptions of the world as if it were under water suggest both ecstacy and madness. Water, used by Woolf extensively as a symbol of unity, often signifies reconciliation through death and is therefore dangerously ambiguous. Eventually, Flor, whose rejection of life extends, apparently, even to a psychosomatic avoidance of puberty, ("She never had her periods" (111), her mother confides to Wishart), escapes into a world of water and dreams, of green water and green sky.

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[1] Mavis Gallant, *Green Water, Green Sky* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1959). References to this novel will be given parenthetically.

[2] Compare Rhoda's feeling in *The Waves* that she is blown outside the loop of time, or passages in *Mrs. Dalloway* where Septimus Smith expresses anxieties similar to Flor's.

Flor's image of "a watery world of perception" at her moment of happiness enriches the fox image through which she explains to herself her difficulty with reality. She attributes her vertigo, "The effort of lines to change their form" (30), to "the triumph of the little fox" (30), a torment that began when she first found herself uprooted and wandering across Europe with her mother. When she is inhabited by the fox, the ordinary power of language fails her. "'Sometimes when I want to speak . . . something comes between my thoughts and words.' She loathed herself at this moment. She believed she gave off a rank smell. She was the sick redhead; the dying, quivering fox" (67). She recovers in this instance and the fox departs. Later, when she reads in Doris's letter "All children eventually make their parents pay, and pay, and pay" (84), she has no time or desire to say, "they have paid" (84), but immediately senses her own triumph and sees the fox departing, its head breaking the water as it swims out to sea, while she leaves the sea behind and goes in the other direction into a memory of childhood where she is the perfect child welcomed into her father's arms. The irony is that it is Flor who is truly at sea, submerging as she does the pain of her rejection by her father when she was about to enter puberty in her own watery world of perception, just as she did earlier during the concrete sensation of happiness that she felt in the hotel room at Cannes. Her incompleted puberty shows how intensely she has clung to her "perfect" self. She is, in a sense, an extreme version of her mother who also would like to maintain her own self-image of innocence. Flor's vision of reconciliation with her father is the dream she has been searching for, although the reader might not at first be aware of this because of the way Gallant has interrupted chronology by reversing the order of events in Chapters II and III. The phrase "into her father's arms" (85), while coming just a few pages past the exact middle of the book, is the last of Flor's thoughts ever recorded. It is indeed ironic that her mother once tried to establish the Flor-as-Venus version of her daughter; rather than being born out of the waves, she disappears into them, despite her vision that it is the fox who is vanishing.

Bonnie McCarthy, a "lost, sallow, frightened" woman who wanders "from city to city in Europe, clutching her daugther by the hand" (123) after her husband divorced her for the silly affair with a man she had not in the least loved, retreats in her private moments into the role of a child. Or else, alternating between self-images of innocent young bride and wicked older woman with rolling violet blue eyes, she finds herself fragmented and unreconciled. Her self-contradictory comments about people reveal not her unfounded pride in her idea of what it is to be a Fairlie but her generally confused personality. He nephew

George finds her insensitive to her son-in-law, Bob Harris, after Flor has been committed, and he is repulsed by her ability to say whatever is useful for the moment, as in "Florence loved the Paris night" (138). "As a matter of fact [Florence] hardly ever went out at night" (145). But George has the option of dismissing her. Her daughter cannot and pays a great price.

Flor and her mother are tied by a mutually destructive dependence. Flor's statement at the age of fourteen, "I'll always keep her with me" (11), is a mixture of solemn promise and cry of despair; it is love and resentment so mingled "that even Flor couldn't tell them apart" (11). Ten years later, George sees Flor's breaking of the necklace as a sign that his cousin knew she would spend the rest of her life with Bonnie. Flor's disillusionment comes slowly, and, although by the age of twenty-six she is able to reflect bitterly to herself that she "used to believe [Bonnie] was God" (50), she remains unable to take charge of her own life and overcome her dependence. The effect of Bonnie's continued presence in her daughter's life is perhaps most poignantly stated when, at the moment Flor might have said something to her husband to alter the situation between them, Bonnie comes into the room and throws open the shutters, shattering the "delicate goblet" of past love. The narrator's suggestion that perhaps nothing would have happened anyway does not erase the irony of "terribly" in Bonnie's later boast to George, "'I mattered terribly in their marriage, dear'" (135). No one sees the insidious nature of Bonnie's mother-love more clearly than George, who eventually realizes that Bonnie, impervious to seeing the results of her own actions, wants to use him to replace Flor and create "an unmarred Florence, and through her a spotless Bonnie" (147). Bonnie's friend Wishart, a man with more than anyone's required share of inadequacies, sees in the Flor-Bonnie relationship merely a spoilt and demanding child of twenty-four and is disgusted by what he takes to be the world of women, "an area dimly lighted and faintly disgusting, like a kitchen in a slum. It was a world of migraines, miscarriage, disorder, and tears" (114).

The images which most obviously tie together many elements of the novel, including Flor's and Bonnie's mutually ambivalent relationship, are those of mirrors. The first mirror image occurs in the novel's title and, throughout, Gallant uses them to explore the entrapment, relationships, narcissism and identity, as well as the reality and illusion in the situations she presents.

Geroge relates the sky and the water to the time Flor broke the string of beads in Venice. "Because of her, the twin pictures,

love and resentment, were always there, one reflecting the other, water under sky" (19).

Wishart, husbanding his limited resources, works at being ingratiating: "when he was doubtful, or simply at rest, he became a sort of mirror. Reflected in this mirror, Bonnie McCarthy saw that she was still pretty and smart" (94). He also searches for his own image to confirm his position, and his relationship with Bonnie goes awry when, after an earlier successful sighting, he can no longer find himself in her sunglassed eyes. "The dark glasses that seemed to condense the long curve of the beach in a miniature image were averted now. Even a diminished penitent now Wishart could not find his own reflection" (118). He knows that he has deluded himself and that Bonnie has never believed in him. "He had believed that the exact miniature he saw in her sunglasses was the Wishart she accepted, the gentleman he had glimpsed in the store window that first day" (123).

Bonnie too searches for herself in the mirror but, significantly, has trouble focusing on a single image. She is looking for the lost Bonnie of her New York days, "pretty, pert, outrageously admired" (22), but finds instead a triple reflection consisting of the innocent young woman and the middle-aged "Mrs. Hauksbee with rolling violet eyes," and somewhere between the two, something approaching the truth. At another time she sees a triptych of herself reflected in a three-part mirror and has a vision of a woman aging and dependent. Almost like a character in a Beckett play, she finds a focus for her dissatisfaction and says out loud, "'This just isn't a normal hat'" (22). This gazing into mirrors suggests an inability to cope with reality. In Gallant's only full-length novel, *A Fairly Good Time,* Shirley prefers to deal with the image of Marie-Therese in the Mirror rather than the real person sitting with her in the room. In *Green Water, Green Sky,* the mirror-related image of the photograph foretells Atwood's later use of mirrors and photos. Flor thinks that, although human cunning keeps "the ruin of Paris concealed" (52), the strangers invading the city are like busloads of tourists arriving in Pompeii who record with their cameras because they are trying "not to live the day but to fix a day not their own" (52). Flor sees the tourist as she sees herself, one for whom "there was no present" (52).

Flor has the most significant encounters with mirrors in the novel. She moves "out of range" of the looking glass in her mother's room to avoid being witnessed by Bonnie who is actually away at Deauville, but she also sees in the "long glass" an image of "a pale rose model in a fashion magazine, neat, sweet, a porcelain figure, intended to suggest that it suffices to be de-

sirable that the dream of love is preferable to love in life" (77). That Flor's image in the glass is related to her movement into her world of dreams and madness is suggested by the addition to this scene of, "and still she hadn't achieved the dreams she desired." Her rejection of reality is pointed up when she tells her future husband in Cannes that the room they made love in was "like a place she had imagined. The only difference was that her imagined room was spangled, bright, perfectly silent, and full of mirrors" (110). Two related passages help reveal the complexity of the image. Wishart sees Flor and Bob kiss on the beach and notices that Flor remains outside the kiss. At the same moment, Flor is wondering what it is like for a man to kiss her, and the narrator comments: "It was a narcissism so shameful that she opened her eyes and saw Wishart" (120). This is the same egotism that led her to say to her cousin George about Venice, "'Do you remember how green it was all the time? . . . Everything was so clear and green, green water, even the sky looked green to me.'" Flor's description not only does emotional violence to how she actually felt at the time, but goes further and suggests that she has projected her fantasy world onto the past, for in the next sentence the narrator links Flor's apparently distorted memory to her general vision: "[George] had been staring, but now he looked inadvertently into her eyes, dark-lashed, green as the lagoon had been" (17), thereby suggesting that the mirror world of the novel's title is Flor's essence.

In the end, the mirrors fail Flor and she seeks her dreams in madness, but this is only a further stage in her journey. Like the tourists, she has been trying to cope with a time and place not her own. She has, in fact, no place in the world. Bob Harris's imminent departure from Cannes throws at her the eternal question facing Gallant's protagonists: "Why did you come to this place?" The paragraph continues:

> Until now, she had known: she was somewhere or other with her mother because her mother could not settle down, because every rented flat and villa was a horrible parody of home, or the home she ought to have given Flor. When he had gone she would know without illusion that she was in Cannes in a rotting season, the rot was reality, and there was no hope in the mirrored room. (126)

In her desperation, she decides a person can be a country, and so she marries Bob Harris. But when that attempt to define where is here fails, she dismounts from her girlhood pony and runs into the dream-arms of her father. Perhaps it is too harsh a judgement, certainly it is an incomplete view, to say that her associ-

ation with water marks her as a female Narcissus rather than the Venus of her mother's hopes, but Flor is not born of the waves; she dies into the reflecting pool. Bonnie should have been able to see more of the truth and not distort the meaning of her dream of Flor as a mermaid with the ugly tail of a carp. Because of the distortions created by her own egotism, she saw the dream as meaning that "No one was good enough for Florence" (129). The dream could have revealed to Bonnie her own destructive part in her daughter's life: "'It was an ugly fish tail, like a carp's. It was just like a carp's and the whole thing was a great handicap. The girl simply couldn't walk'" (122). But Bonnie avoids the truth assiduously, and her daughter is too weak to avoid her except in dreams.

Flor finds in her diary the record of Father Doyle's advice: "If you look in the mirror too much you will see the devil" (71). But rather than turn to face life, she flees into a permanent dream, finding in her own way the goal announced in Yeats's "The Shadowy Waters" which Gallant uses as the epigraph for "Its Image on the Mirror":

> What is love itself
> Even though it be the lightest of love
> But dreams that hurry from beyond the world
> To make low laughter more than meat and drink,
> Though it but set us sighing? Fellow-wanderer,
> Could we but mix ourselves into a dream
> Not in its image on the mirror!

Yeats's poem suggests a Platonic world of true dreams in contrast to the mere emanation that is the image on the mirror. I do not believe that Gallant wants the reader to accept the existence of a metaphysical realm so that he may read her text, but the poem, with its reference to "Fellow-traveller" and its longing for a reality that is apparently forever beyond reach, operates as a telling epigraph not only for Flor and her mother, but for a host of Gallant's characters who wander in times not theirs and places unfamiliar, indeed much like the figures of the neo-Platonic vision exiled in this life from their starry home.

II

"Its Image on the Mirror" is the story of Jean Price's attempt to mix herself into the dream (in Yeats's sense) which is her sister Isobel's life, and of the walls of family life that prevent communication. There was, according to Jean, who narrates the story, a single time when she was able to understand what it is

like to be Isobel, the "most beautiful . . . the most elusive, the most loved" (153). But this state did not last.

Gallant calls "Its Image on the Mirror" a short novel although it is only four thousand words shorter than the "novel" *Green Water, Green Sky.* In this case, Gallant's typical subtlety and ambiguity, those qualities that give her stories their elusive quality, arise not so much out of the complexity and suggestiveness of the imagery, as in *Green Water, Green Sky,* as from the questionable authority of the narrative presence. In the opening page of the story, Jean Price recounts the day her parents left their home in the town of Allenton near the Vermont border to move to Montreal. She recalls the day as "a tableau of gestures," but following her account she adds that her mother says that the priest, gardener and cleaning woman were not there. This at first glance seems an unimportant detail, but it is the first instance of an important pattern. For example, much later in the narration Jean says she saw or thought she saw her father sitting on the stairs weeping after his son Frank's death but thinks she might have dreamed the scene. Gallant apparently wants her readers to look carefully at the narrator to see if she can be trusted. On the surface, it would appear that a narrator who tells us that her mother disagrees with her about what happened is at least honest if not entirely sure, her self-doubt being a good device to deflect criticism. Her apparent honesty is noticeable elsewhere too. For instance, she corrects herself in the following passage: "If she were my sister I'd take a strap to her: I mean correcting the thought—if I were her brother" (130).[3] Elsewhere, she admits that another thought, "'I've been trying to catch up with you [Isobel],'" should be "'I am trying to catch you'" (88), as in catch you out. But the second correction only points out Jean could not say anything, because even if she had told her sister that she was only trying to catch up to her, Isobel would have rightly assumed her guilty of the meaner motive. The revised thought about stapping Isobel, as will become more obvious later, is a transparent attempt on Jean's part to cover up her true feelings.

A careful reading reveals that there is considerable confusion over dates in Jean's narrative. There are two ways of looking at this—the problem is either Gallant's or the narrator's. It makes more sense to see it as Jean's. It is hard to believe that a writer as careful as Gallant obviously is about every word in her text would inadvertently confuse her reader. She creates ambiguities, not confusions. Some of Jean's contradictions are so

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[3] Mavis Gallant, "Its Image on the Mirror," *My Heart is Broken* (Toronto: General, 1961.)

obvious that they cannot be authorial mistakes. One of the clearest is the date of Isobel's second marriage which Jean alternately dates as 1949 and 1948. Also, she "corrects" her sister when Isobel says their friend Suzanne is twenty-three then later says herself that Suzanne was twenty-three at the time, obviously having forgotten about her earlier "correction." She tells us Poppy Duncan was an adolescent when the family was reunited on Labour Day 1955, but Poppy was born in late 1945. Then, having insisted on the 1955 date for this reunion throughout her narrative, she records near the end that her husband Tom says it happened in 1958, a date which actually would make Poppy the adolescent she is supposed to be and would help account for her annoyance at being sent to eat with the children. It would also make sense of Jean's remark that at eleven Poppy wore orange lipstick since the remark seems to refer to something that had already happened before the last reunion at the lake. We do not know exactly how old Jean is when she tells her story but since it is probably set somewhere after 1958 and it was published in 1961, she must be about forty-two. The oldest she sees herself in her narrative is thirty-eight in what she says is 1955. She reports that her mother says she is closer to forty than thirty at the reunion. But if this scene occurred in 1958, she was forty-one. One wonders who is shaving off the years, Jean or her mother. Some confusion over dates and ages is not in itself very important, unless the purpose behind it is to warn the reader further that Jean's narration cannot always be accepted at face value. What we have is a dramatic monologue rather than stream of consciousness. Jean has a sense of audience, although no one actually hears her, or else she would not consciously make corrections. The presence of any audience, implied or otherwise, indicates that censoring will occur. But she is not writing things down. She obviously has not gone back over her material and edited. Many of the judgements she makes about people are very questionable, although it is sometimes difficult to tell just where the truth lies. With dates, the difference between fact and misstatement is clear, and thus Jean's authority is severely undermined.

While Jean must be the focus of the reader's attention, she is understandable only within the context of the family that she describes. Perhaps a key to her own feelings about the family can be found in her early comment that when the house in Allenton was sold to a seminary, the change from house to institution was not abrupt. Her account of the family is, in effect, a comment on the taunt that Davy Sullivan, Isobel's first husband, has stolen from *Anna Karenina:* "'Happy families are all alike'" (66). If the Duncans truly were a happy family, Jean would not be narrating her story.

The parents, and to lesser and varying degrees their three children, are wrapped in the comfort of a clannish self-satisfacion based upon the certainty that they are different from (and better than) those who do not have the advantage of being Anglo-Scots Presbyterian. This pride is similar to the Fairlie pride in *Green Water, Green Sky.* Jean comments perceptively upon the effect of the family ethos on herself as a young woman when she recalls that since Suzanne was no blood relation, she expected her to be "different." However, it is not completely impossible to break into this clan. Tom Price, Jean's husband, gets in, but then he was the one who (displaying the same naive and foolish distortion of Calvinism that was responsible for the witch-hunts of seventeenth-century New Englan) once said that bad things don't happen to decent people. Davy Sullivan is not accepted, and even Jean cannot tell us why. His name was probably enough to damn him. Alfredo, Isobel's second husband (Italian—worse than Irish), is dismissed by Jean as a shad fly of a man.

The emotional limitations of family are especially noticeable in association with death. Isobel unaccountably does not die as expected and leaves the family "all looking like fools" (62) because they have spoken of feelings never acknowledged before or after. Of the time her mother phoned to tell her that her brother Frank has been killed, Jean records: "It was for this conversation that I had learned to go blank in the presence of worry and pain, and had been taught it was foolish to weep" (118). Love is as great a trial as death to the Duncans: "We would rather say we adore: it is so exaggerated it can't be true. Adore equals like, but love is compromising, eternal" (105).

One of the curious effects of the life the Duncans lead is that the house in Allenton is haunted even before Frank's death although no others have ever lived there. Jean mentions the ghosts a number of times, recording in one instance an experience that has a surface parallel to Flor's apprehension that she can be observed by the mirror in her mother's room. "'When I visited my parents for a weekend,'" Jean notes, "'a ghost in my old bedroom watched me watching myself in the glass'" (60). But the situation differs significantly from Flor's experience. It was the oppressive ghost of her mother (alive but away in Deauville), that haunted Flor. But what ghost is this that confronts Jean if not that of another self, an unlived self, perhaps a self from the dream world that she has left to return to what she accepts as life? These are possibilities that should be kept in the back of the mind till we get to the last paragraph of the story.

The destructive aspects of the Duncan family life are seen in Poppy, Frank Duncan's child, who, after her father's death was brought to Canada by her mother who later returned to England without her. Poppy has been raised by Mrs. Duncan and has predictably been rejected and despised—treated, in fact, as if she were entirely her mother's child and had nothing to do with Frank. Although Jean more than once speaks of Poppy's mother as Frank's wife, she suggests later that the child is illegitimate, a fact that the family would not be able to accommodate. It seems unlikely that Frank was in England long enough before his death to marry anyone. It is possible, but less likely, that Jean falsely suggests Poppy's illegitimacy in order to accommodate her own desire to exclude the child from the family. Emotionally isolated from the family, Poppy spends the Labour Day weekend of 1955 or 1958 annoying the family by playing records of Shostakovitch and Sibelius while hiding beneath a wig because her latest attempt at dyeing her hair has been a disaster. Jean relates that Poppy is temporarily between summer camp and boarding school, the two places where she spends her life. She runs away frequently. Sent to school in Vancouver, she is found in Detroit. Jean adds that Poppy always runs back to her mother (then why was she once found in Detroit?) without showing any real sympathy for the cause of Poppy's flight in the first place. She states this, in fact, as if everything were entirely to her mother's credit. For instance, she related that when Poppy threatens to go to her own mother in England, Mrs. Duncan gets out paper and pen so that Poppy can tell her mother she is coming. But is there any intentional irony in Jean's comment, "My mother was always fair" (74)? Perhaps it is reasonable to think that no one should stand in the way of Poppy's reuniting with her mother, but the reader is aware that by calling the girl's bluff Mrs. Duncan is cruelly reinforcing her painful knowledge that she is not wanted anywhere. Jean's comments on the situation, including her statement, "My mother had done the only thing possible" (74), provide a good example of how the reader, prepared by the narrator's confusion over even the factual matter of dates, knows that Jean's assessments must always be regarded with suspicion and sometimes with contempt.

When Poppy, refusing to eat at all if she must sit with the children, sits sulking on the floor of the porch and Alfredo takes her a slice of bread (Jean criticizes the way he butters it), Mrs. Duncan peevishly comments, "'He might have taken it for granted we know Poppy better than he does'" (73). But the family's knowledge of Poppy is all of the wrong sort and their relations with her are hostile. Jean is annoyed when Poppy subsequently announces she will marry someone like Alfredo—after she has fallen in love, she adds—and that he is better looking than

her aunt's husband, Tom Price. But Jean's subsequent admission of the method the family uses to get to "know" Poppy reveals that it merely wants to retaliate against this precocious outsider who listens to classical music and writes them all up in her diary: "and I heard Poppy accuse someone of reading her diary. No one answered. We had all read it, often" (77-78). Catching people out is a family preoccupation.

Perhaps the treatment of this orphan child is the most obvious test of the family's character. It does the "proper," even the expensive thing, when faced with the most vulnerable human being in its world, but in human terms it fails completely. The implicit judgement that Gallant renders reminds one of Dickens's handling of the recurring orphan theme in his novels and his tendency to use characters like Jo in *Bleak House* or *Oliver Twist* as basic moral touchstones by recording how the utterly defenceless are treated by the various characters of the novel.

The exclusiveness and limitation of the Duncan family are encapsulated by an image which refers back to the story's title. Jean, Isobel and their parents are sitting on the glazed porch in February just after Frank has died. Jean recalls that, "The panes went black and reflected us; Isobel reading, our mother erect by the foor, our father mourning and small. We were in a lighted cage" (131). Such passages, revealing that Jean is, from time to time, capable of insight, add further subtlety to the narrative process.

If Poppy and the image of a family caged within the mirrors of its own self-satisfaction provide general comments on the family, Gallant's focus on the relationship between Isobel and Jean reveals significant differences between its two daughters. Jean becomes aware early in life that, despite her intractable nature, the pretty Isobel is her mother's favourite. This knowledge sets Jean on a course of vicarious life and voyeuristic love, leading her to admissions such as "I warmed my hands at her life" (92), and how she crept around the edge of Isobel's life, "glum-faced, apprehensive, barely in sight of my sister's secrets" (86). Early in her narration she records that when Isobel appeared to be dying she had two thoughts, the first, that if Isobel died she would surely die too, and the second, that if Isobel died she had every reason to live because her sister's death would remove the unattainable for her husband Tom, who was rejected by Isobel a scant two weeks before he proposed to Jean. Jean spends the rest of her life wavering between these two thoughts. Her sister is the beloved, but she is also gallingly the centre of attraction, even at Jean's own wedding. Jean's antagonism is very

clear during the Labour Day reunion and she never escapes her self-deception of that time. She says, for instance, that she was "so filled with pity for [Isobel] and her children that the pity was a physical pain." But the latter part of the same paragraph shows that the painful emotion is certainly not pity: "Isobel laughed, shrugged, examined her sandals, kissed the monkey-boy on her lap. [It is Jean who has decided Isobel's children look like monkeys] Everything about her spoke of wretchedness" (76). The disjunction between observation and judgement is obvious, and not even Jean's further comment that she knew her sister (most of the story shows she does not) whose tense shoulders eloquently displayed the unhappiness of "Isa, blessed at the cradle," can erase the impression that Isa's only unhappiness comes from having to spend the day with her family. The unhappiness of Isobel's marriage that Jean speaks of is entirely a matter of her wishing it so. But when she says to her mother, hoping for reinforcement for her desires, "'Do you think Isa is happy?'" the dispiriting reply comes back, "'Why wouldn't she be'" (78)?

It is, of course, Jean who is in the unhappy marriage, although she tries at one point to alter the impression she has created by denying that she is either jealous of her sister or that she married without love. Her assertion has some partial truth to it, but she cannot undo the effect of her earlier revelation about how she came to accept Tom as a way of escape from her family and her admission that when she was living in Montreal as a new bride whose husband at war, she would have found news of his death a release. And her comment that Tom was happy because he had the children he wanted is significant for what it doesn't say: that he wanted her.

When Poppy says she will marry a man like Alfredo and that he is better looking than Tom Price, that is difficult enough for Jean to swallow, but it is Poppy's additional comment that she will fall in love first that really hurts. Jean at other times records that until her marriage she wouldn't settle for anything less than "a certain kind of love" and that when Tom asked her she was ready to love anyone. When Poppy declares she will first fall in love, the family laughs as if "we were fortunate to have escaped." Jean continues: "I tried to meet my husband's eyes, to see what it had been for him to have Isobel here again; but he was already thinking about something else" (80). She knows that at the time of her marriage it was not Tom in himself that she loved, while he, still in love with her sister, had merely found his own way to creep around the edges of Isobel's life. The marriage of two vicarious souls living days not theirs is cruelly appropriate. Jean accomplishes nothing by telling herself that she

has succeeded where Isa has failed, because a moment later she has to admit that Isa seems not to care in the least. Success and failure are merely the terms Jean uses to try to convince herself. "My pride in my children was suddenly nothing. I was part of a wall of cordial family faces, and Isobel was not hurt by her failure, or impressed by my success, but thankful she had escaped" (77). Jean, on the other hand, by marrying the man her mother approved of, has insured that she cannot escape though she thinks at the time that is what she is doing.

The other side of Jean's relationship with Isobel is revealed by her belief that Isobel would one day speak, "and part of my character hidden from everyone but her would be revealed" (67). This is a painful expectation in the light of Jean's knowledge that Isobel "never laid eyes on me without wishing I were someone else" (90). It seems that Jean believes there is more to her than people see, but she has great trouble indicating what it is that would win Isobel's approval. She seems to have internalized her sister's view and wishes too that she were someone else. She wants Isobel to find something to establish an identity between them. "I wanted her to say, 'You and I are alike, and we are not like any other person in this room'. But, of course, she never did" (91). It is difficult to tell if Jean is aware that "of course" says not only that Isobel in particular would not say that but also that there is no basis in reality for anyone to.

Jean's pursuit of her sister reaches its culmination at the time Isobel is pregnant from her affair with Alec Campbell. Significantly, Jean records this event at the end of her narrative. Events recorded earlier but which happened later show that whatever communication developed at that time has since disappeared. For Jean, there is great sadness in having to record that on the Labour Day weekend, their last meeting, "Isobel . . . said nothing to me" (77), and this admission makes a mockery of her claim near the end of her narration that Isobel "would never shut the door again and leave me on the street" (153). On one occasion Jean overheard Isobel and Frank talking about the lover Isobel had at age seventeen. (Considering that Jean later follows her sister around the streets of Montreal, we know she was not on the stairs and outside Frank's room by accident). Frank says, "'Don't tell Jean,'" and Isobel replies, "'Jean!'" (103), as if the idea of telling her sister is too silly to contemplate. But now that Frank is dead, Isobel must turn to her. Isobel knows how to arrange the abortion but says, "I want somebody's whole attention" (152). In this scene, Jean accepts the other side of her ambiguous relationship with her sister and envisions "my sister and I between us going on to the horizon without a break. It was so plain and simple; and I thought that unless we could meet

across that landscape we might as well die" (153). In this encounter she sees herself moving into the "bright rooms of my sister's life" (149), overcoming "the common inheritance, the family walls," those of the house haunted by unlived lives. There is an echo of Flor's vision in "bright rooms." But the walls really do not come down, despite what Jean says. How could they when she regards Isobel's outpouring as her "defeat?" "Neither Suzanne nor Alec could give her what she could have from me: the whole attention. She needed it, and she would pay" (153). What Jean gets out of this in return is "something I had wanted to know" (151), namely, what it is like to be Isobel. When Isobel's surprising statement comes, Jean knows with a certainty that she has heard the truth: "You need to have someone between you and the rest," she said; "someone between you and the others, blotting out the light" (151). Again, the pattern of light and darkness recalls Flor and suggests a complex Isobel.

The last paragraph of Jean's story is dense with meaning. At one point she recorded that when she looked in an old book in which Isobel had written her florid childish autograph she felt "the old unquietness, as if I must run after her into infinity, saying, 'Wait, I am not the person you think at all'" (85). The work "infinity" suggests not only that she thinks she must pursue her sister forever, but also that the pursuit could be culminated only in a realm different from the reality of life as it is actually lived. For Jean, Isobel is the embodiment of the true form of love, not its image on the mirror. The concluding passage of Jean's narrative reinforces this idea while adding further meaning to the image of the family reflected in the black windows of the porch on a February evening.

> I suspected, then, sitting in Frank's unhaunted room, that all of us, save my brother, were obliged to survive. We had slipped into our winter as trustingly as every night we fell asleep. We woke from dreams of love remembered, a house recovered and lost, a climate imagined, a journey never made; we woke dreaming our mothers had died in childbirth and heard ourselves saying, "Then there is no one left but me!" We would waken thinking the earth must stop, now, so that we could not be shed, but would remain, because that was the way it was. We would survive, and waking—because there was no help for it—forget our dreams and return to life. (155)

Jean's narration is the record of her exile in what she calls life, the world where not love but its image on the mirror is her reality.

In these two early short novels or novellas, Mavis Gallant displays both the vision of dislocation and the subtlety of narration and image that inform so much of her later work. Further refinements were to lie ahead until she achieved the clarity and intensity of stories such as those collected in *From the Fifteenth District,* and occasionally, as in the title stories of *The Pegnitz Junction* and From the Fifteenth District, she would partially reach beyond the methodology of the modernist realism that she employs here. But the tone of irony and elegy and the prose rhythms that are at once gentle and falling which make these early works so distinctively hers, are later developed rather than altered into the prose of her maturity that is both lambent and suggestive.

University of Winnipeg