

## Dates and Details in Mavis Gallant's "Its Image on the Mirror"

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In "Speaking of Mirrors: Imagery and Narrative in two Novellas by Mavis Gallant," (*SCL* 10 [1985]: 94-109), D.B. Jewison claims in his discussion of "Its Image on the Mirror" that "a careful reading reveals there is considerable confusion over dates in Jean's narrative" (Jewison 101). He goes on to draw some significant conclusions from this premise. My own reading of the text suggests, however, that "considerable confusion" is a decided exaggeration. Before we accept Jewison's conclusions, it is important that we check the facts upon which they are based. The most convenient way of doing this is to quote Jewison's arguments in order and comment on their validity.

1. "One of the clearest [of Jean's contradictions] is the date of Isobel's second marriage which Jean alternately [alternatively?] dates as 1949 and 1948" (Jewison 102).

This is, I believe, the only instance of an undoubted discrepancy. Jean clearly states that Isobel's marriage to Alfredo and her departure for Caracas took place "the fourth summer after the end of the war."<sup>1</sup> This suggests 1949. A subsequent reference, "Six years later, when the Allenton house was sold . . ." (Gallant 64), also fits a 1949 dating, since Jean has already dated the sale as July 1955 (Gallant 57). Later, however, we are told that "Isobel vanished to Venezuela in 1948" (Gallant 94). Jewison is clearly justified here in noting a discrepancy.

2. "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 the earlier 'correction'" (Jewison 102).

Not so. The argument concerning Suzanne's age takes place in February 1945 on the day that the sisters learn of the

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<sup>1</sup> Mavis Gallant, "Its Image on the Mirror," *My Heart is Broken* (New York: Random, 1964) 63. The most accessible edition, *New Press Canadian Classics* (Toronto: General, 1982), has identical pagination. Jewison, incidentally, gives the date of the General edition as 1961 (Jewison 101), which is impossible. He also claims in his text (Jewison 102) that the novella first appeared in 1961, but I know of no evidence for this; none appears in the Gallant check-lists and bibliography.

death of their brother Frank. Isobel claims that it is Suzanne's twenty-third birthday, while Jean maintains that it is her twenty-fourth (Gallant 125). The next reference, though later in the text (Gallant 141), is set earlier in time, at the beginning of January 1945. "She was twenty-three then," Jean recalls, and this is perfectly consistent with her previous statement. Indeed, this detail is evidence of the care with which, in general, both Mavis Gallant and her narrator, Jean Price, handle dates within the novella.

3. "She tells us Poppy Duncan was an adolescent when the family was reunited on Labour Day 1955, but Poppy was born in late 1945" (Jewison 102).

Again, Jewison is mistaken. Frank is home on embarkation leave at Christmas 1944, and we are then told that he "had left behind [in England] a girl whose daughter had since been born" (Gallant 133: see also 145). Jewison is further confused on the subject of Frank's marriage when he writes: "Although Jean more than once speaks of Poppy's mother as Frank's wife, she suggests later that the child is illegitimate. . . . It seems unlikely that Frank was in England long enough before his death to marry anyone" (Jewison 104). In fact, it is implied (Gallant 133) that Frank volunteers to return to overseas service so that he can marry Enid and thus legitimize Poppy. He was killed, according to Jean, in an accident while "on leave in Brighton, with his bride" (Gallant 118), who had already been described as "a war widow" (Gallant 74) when she brought Poppy to Canada. Of course, we have Jean's word only for all this, but her version is thoroughly consistent. Poppy was clearly born in late 1944, and would therefore be almost eleven on the Labour Day weekend in 1955. "Adolescent" is Jewison's word, not Gallant's. Jean describes Poppy as "neither child nor grownup" (Gallant 73), surely a reasonable description of a precocious girl with a taste for Shostakovich and Sibelius who is within a few weeks of her eleventh birthday. Jewison argues that "Jean's remark that at eleven Poppy wore orange lipstick . . . seems to refer to something that had already happened before the last reunion at the lake" (Jewison 102), but it reads to me as part of a generalized account of Poppy's unhappy youth. Nor can I understand why Jewison questions (Jewison 104) why Poppy, running away from school in Vancouver to return to her grandmother in Quebec, would be found in Detroit; she is headed roughly in the right direction, and after all, hitch-hikers cannot always follow the most direct route.

Apart from some speculation about Jean Price's age at the time of narration, which is inconclusive and, in any case, confused by Jewison's attribution of the story to a 1961 instead of

1964 publication date, these are all the "contradictions" of fact that are cited. According to my reading, the only clear discrepancy is the 1948 date (Gallant 94). Could this be a misprint? I have noted a dozen others in the book. Or perhaps a momentary slip on Gallant's part? At any event, an error in a single digit is scant evidence upon which to build a literary interpretation.

Of course, Jewison bases his argument not only on these supposed contradictions but also on various places in the text where dates and reliability of memory are challenged. These are numerous, and it is worthwhile noting the main instances. At the beginning of the novella, as Jewison points out, Jean immediately acknowledges that her memory of the move from Allenton is not necessarily accurate: "My mother says I saw nothing of the kind" (Gallant 58). A few pages later, when the father takes an unwanted painting to give to the Presbyterian Church, Mrs. Duncan clearly questions his version of its origin: "He thinks that picture was a wedding present from his side of the family. Let him give it to the minister, if he wants to" (Gallant 65). Isobel's vanishing "to Venezuela in 1948" (or 1949) leads to false rumours that she "died in a sailing accident" or "of a kidney disease" or even that it was Jean who died (Gallant 94). Jean herself admits to constructing imaginary and contradictory biographies for Isobel's male friends (Gallant 97). When Isobel first married "two days before her nineteenth birthday, . . . some people said she was seventeen, or even sixteen" (Gallant 106). The argument over Suzanne's age has already been mentioned (Isobel's insistence that Suzanne and herself were "the same age" [Gallant 125] is two years out by Jean's chronology). At the time of Frank's death, Jean recalls uncertainly: "I saw, or thought I saw, or may have dreamed, that my father sat on the stairs weeping" (Gallant 147). And finally, just before the end, as Jewison notes, Jean admits that her husband dates the last meeting with Isobel as "1958 and not 1955, as I tell it" (Gallant 154).

What are we to make of these constant reminders of alternative versions? They surely represent an insistence, on the part of Mavis Gallant as well as Jean Price, that all human memories are fallible, that we all remember the past in a different way. That Gallant places her most disturbing challenges to Jean's version at the beginning and the end of the narrative is strategically apt. We are warned that Jean's version is affected by her family origins, her temperament, and the shape of her whole life. Much of the pleasure of reading "Its Image on the Mirror" derives from our amused recognition of Jean's prejudices and predictable responses. Jean herself is partly—but only partly—aware of these, and Gallant's method of making Jean re-

veal more about herself than she knows is Jamesian in its narrative subtlety.

Personally, I do not think that we can safely venture beyond that general awareness. As a narrator Jean may be "unreliable" in the way that we all are, but we cannot, I think, properly regard her unreliability as in any way culpable or excessive. She is continually imagining and dreaming, as the title and the epigraph from Yeats underline, but she never knowingly deceives. I should say at this point that I find the greater part of Jewison's discussion convincing and valuable. But the contradictions over dates and details are certainly not as prominent as he thinks and may not even exist at all. If we accept that Jean Price is an honest but fallible narrator, who is aware of at least some of her partialities, we shall better appreciate the pathos of her character and situation. Gallant never, I think, invites us to consider our own reading of the narrative as in any way superior to Jean's. Her assessments should certainly be regarded with "suspicion"—only an impossibly naive reader would accept them all at face value—but I would argue that we should not, with Jewison, regard them, even "sometimes," with "contempt" (Jewison 104). She possesses the strengths, as well as the weaknesses, of her origins. Moreover, she is aware of this, and this awareness encourages us to interpret her story cautiously, but also with compassion.

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