THE SILENT CRY: EMPATHY AND ELEGY IN MAVIS GALLANT'S NOVELS

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Though the short story is clearly Mavis Gallant's genre of choice, she has also written two novels to date, and a third is in progress. Fictions that fall somewhere between the story and the novel in terms of length also populate Gallant's story collections: she includes a novella in *From the Fifteenth District* (though we are not told which story is classified as such); *The Pegnitz Junction* contains a novella by the same name; and "Its Image on the Mirror," sub-titled "A Short Novel," is collected in *My Heart is Broken*. With the longer fictional form, Gallant is able to complicate her characters to the extent that they become more fully human, more accessible to the reader than her story characters tend to be. Our sustained involvement with an individual character allows us to develop an empathetic attachment that Gallant does not always permit the reader of the shorter fictions. The emotionally provocative narratives of *Green Water, Green Sky*, "Its Image on the Mirror" and *A Fairly Good Time* portray the griefs and losses of protagonists Flor (Fairley) Harris, Jean Price and Shirley (Higgins) Perrigny, respectively, in relatively plotless frameworks; the structuring principle of these texts, with their themes of abandonment and betrayal, is an elegiac pattern of loss and (variously successful) recovery. Such elegiac elements are Gallantian trademarks of her shorter fiction as well, the brevity of which makes them more immediately recognizable; but if what is sacrificed in the broadened fictional scope of the novels is the precision of the elegiac structure that is attainable in the short story form, then what is gained for the reader is a more complete empathetic experience of witnessing the works of mourning that the longer elegiac fictions enact.

Gallant's narrative strategies invite our empathic participa-

tion in these texts. J. Brooks Bouson discusses the reader's empathic experience in theoretical terms:

> At once affective and cognitive, the empathic event involves a dynamic interplay between objective and subjective, conscious and unconscious, the verbalizable and the unverbalizable. . . . Empathic reading also makes us aware of our affective and collusive involvements with literature, . . . and of the ways in which we may act out our own self-dramas when we interpret literary works. (171)

While Constance Rooke has commented on what she perceives as a "chilling" aspect of Gallant's narratives (267), there is in fact an emotional range in her work in general which has not received due attention. There is little that is "chilling" about these elegiac novels; rather, the reader is invited to experience what may be called "mimpathy," a term which combines concepts of mimesis and empathy (as Bouson describes the latter), and which refers to the acting-out of "our own self-dramas" when interpreting the suffering of a literary character. The conditions of mimpathy require that the suffering

> must already be given in some form before it is possible for anyone to become a fellow sufferer. Pity and sympathy as experienced are always subsequent to the already apprehended and understood experience of another person who is pitied. (*Dictionary of Philosophy*)

Gallant portrays characters as they experience the apprehended "after-affects" of loss (rather than portraying the actual experience of loss), inducing the reader to understand that experience in the course of mimpathic involvement, in giving form to that experience outside of the story's frame of reference.

As somewhat experimental elegists, Gallant's characters and narrators seek appropriate forms of expression for emotion and for representing experience. When silence seems to be the only option for a character, Gallant either uses a narrator to elegize on behalf of that character (as does George in *Green Water, Green Sky*), or provides the character with a displaced form of self-expression (such as the monologue for Jean Price, or the epistle for Shirley Perrigny). In all of these novels, then, the "silent cry" of each protagonist is ultimately voiced.

Loss and Language

Donald Jewison describes Gallant's techniques in *Green Water, Green Sky*[1] and "Its Image on the Mirror" as "the methodology of . . . modernist realism," which, he says, creates a "tone of irony and elegy" (109). *Green Water, Green Sky* is particulary Woolfian in form and content; Jewison compares it to *Mrs. Dalloway* with its themes of "ecstasy and madness" (95), but it is thematically and stylistically closer to *Jacob's Room* or even *The Waves* in that it consists of fragmented narrative, with a dislocated speaking subject and multiple points of view. Interestingly, the novella alludes to Woolf's *The Voyage Out,* with descriptions of Flor's metaphoric "journey out" (67), the "journey away from shore" (82) that describes her movement into madness.

In *The Voyage Out,* Terence claims that he wants to "write a novel about Silence" (262). In a sense, Gallant's novel, composed of the four linked stories, is a literalization of Terence's desire in that it is about silence, about emotions withheld and withdrawn. It also renders silence through the narrative style of elision and transformation of point of view. The third-person speaker both describes and inscribes absence and loss in the text. The absence described is that of Flor's father, whose abandonment of Flor and Bonnie precipitates an incurable mourning in his daughter, such that she loses her sanity.

Janice Kulyk Keefer suggests that Flor's insanity is directly related to the unstable lifestyle that was inflicted upon her by her mother: "[l]oss of one's native familial ground—of the past itself—is tantamount to loss of any convincing sense of self" (79). The inscription of Flor's subjective absence is accomplished by a parallel seeming absence of the narrator; the reader is aware of its existence only by its absence, or rather its elusive presence. Each shift in point of view indicates that a speaker is at work, though the multiplicity of voices it projects obscures its own identity.[2] The unspoken in the text is an important part of its structure; Gallant employs a semiotic silence to represent both Flor's absence and her silent cry.

The speaker plays a game of *fort/da* with the reader, who must reconstruct the plot of the fiction from the fragments of achronological remembrances. John Moss states that "[t]he reader seems to be inside the fiction, like a ghost inside other lives" (85). In *Green Water, Green Sky,* the reader's role as spectral spectator is foregrounded—we see Flor alternately through the eyes of Bonnie,

Wishart, Bob and the two Georges (at the narrated ages of seven and seventeen), but the perspectives are not framed so as to enable the reader to situate him or herself easily in the text. Instead, the reader is abandoned to her own resources, an abandonment which parallels the fact that Flor has been abandoned by her parents at different times and in different ways.

Loss affects Flor to the point where, seemingly, there is no order left in life on any level, including that of language, society, or time:

> Human cunning was keeping the ruin of Paris concealed. The ivy below Notre Dame had swelled through the city's painted crust: it was the tender covering of a ruin.... [T]here was no present here. (52)

Flor's mind is like a mirror on the world, reflecting back "forms exploding with nothing to hold them together," like Bob's newly acquired painting, which she thinks is "absolute proof that the universe was disintegrating and that it was vain and foolish to cry for help" (43). The title of the novel describes how Flor perceives the world: "'Everything was so clear and green, green water, even the sky looked green to me,'" she says to George (17). Interior worlds are indistinguishable from reality for Flor. Her cry is a silent one, internalized and unspoken, because as she tells her husband, "'Sometimes when I want to speak ... something comes between my thoughts and the words'" (67).

Flor remembers fragments of poetry, reminders of the girlhood she spent reading (28). While Ronald Hatch, in discussing Gallant's modernistic methods, does recognize Flor's attempt to use words to "shore against her ruin" (52), he does not acknowledge the fact that Flor's is a failed attempt; it fails because it cannot resist a totalizing, negative vision of "a narrowing shore, an encroaching sea" (28). Literature and language are inadequate means of consolation and expression, respectively, for Flor's experience of melancholy. Julia Kristeva writes that melancholy may often "[end] up in asymbolia, in loss of meaning: if I am no longer capable of translating or metaphorizing, I become silent and I die" (*Black Sun* 42). While Flor is capable of creating mental images that represent her state of mind (such as the green water, green sky analogy), she cannot read or identify the signified with the signifier; she cannot recognize reality, let alone translate it into words that will communicate her experience to others. She remembers a

childhood fantasy, but "she could not convey this picture, an image of torment, nostalgia, and unbearable pain" (55). Flor is not a writer-figure in the elegy, but someone who is removed from the realm of language, incapable of using it in order to seek consolation in self-expression.

In rendering a mind driven mad by loss, Gallant does not use a modernistic stream-of-consciousness method, then, but one that simultaneously describes and enacts the impossibility of language representing this state of mind. She suggests that, for Flor, consolation may not be accessible in language at all. In fact, Flor's only consolation is found in what Jewison calls her "psychic rootlessness" (95), in a pre-symbolic[3] condition of early childhood that protects Flor from the pain she experienced as an older child and adult. Her regression takes her to a point in life prior to the "mirror stage," when the division of self from mother occurs and the infant enters into the world of language, by recognizing the self as an image;[4] but Flor cannot recognize the image on the mirror as an image of herself, thinking instead that her reflection is some other person watching and witnessing her (77). With her imagination she inhabits "a watery world of perceptions," of floating signifiers, and feels "a concrete sensation of happiness, as if happiness could be felt, lifted, carried around" (111).

The epigraph to *Green Water, Green Sky* is from *As You Like It*, and encapsulates the theme of the elegiac novel:

> *Ay, now am I in Arden; the more fool I; when I was at home, I was in a better place: but travellers must be content.*

If to lose "home" is to experience psychic dislocation, then exiled "travellers" must find contentment—consolation—in imaginary realms. While Gallant is clearly not advocating madness as a solution to grief, Flor's construction of a consoling scene wherein she "emerged in triumph . . . and into her father's arms" (85), a result of a psychic introjection, is a pathological example of using memory and the imagination to achieve a tenuous continuity with the past. Flor's language, separated from "reality," does not depict or represent the past—for her, it constitutes the past itself. In *Green Water, Green Sky*, it is the other characters who enact versions of the work of mourning in and through memory and language. Flor's husband Bob is portrayed as an emotionally detached man: "Feeling came to him in blocks, compact. When he held on to one emotion there was no room for another" (36).

He "tried to reconstruct their past, not sentimentally, but as a living structure of hair, skin, breath" (67), but now finds Flor's "hair . . . a parody of Cannes" (65)—a parody of her old self, and of the past. Bob's reconstruction is a parody of elegy. The memories that he does have lead him to an epiphanic moment of re-experiencing their relationship in Cannes, to the point that "he thought he tasted salt" (68); but the memory sickens him: "he felt as if he might vomit. . . . He was appalled at the tenderness of the wound. He remembered what it was to be sick with love" (68). His work of mourning is incomplete; he is a failed mourner.

George later believes that Bob's distant attitude "was probably a way of not hurting himself more than he could help" (146). For Bob, memory is too difficult, but memory is crucial to the work of mourning, and to the process of writing grief, of elegizing. For him, as for Bonnie (they have a "joint feeling" about Flor), "[n]o present horror equaled the potential suffering of the past. Reliving the past, with full knowledge of what was to come, was a test too strong for their powers. It would have been too strong for anyone; they were not magical; they were only human beings" (69). Gallant does not make it clear if this last comment is an external judgement or the thoughts of the characters, but since the narrator is so detached we might assume the latter, and so evaluate critically the values of Bonnie and Bob as mourners of Flor. Keefer states that the novel achieves an "accusatory order" (83), and I agree; however, while the characters are indirectly criticized, their limitations are also contextualized such that we, as "mimpathic" readers, can understand their limitations, and in our own model of mourning, surpass them.

Bob prefers rooms that "contained no memories" (109), because he is a literal collector, not a recollector or an interpreter of the past. Even Flor had been, to him, "an object as cherished as anything he might buy" (37); for him, possession and love are synonyms. Bonnie, however, is capable of not only recreating, but actually creating the past; while Bob, George and Bonnie all "manufacture a past they can live with," as Neil Besner writes (57), it is the process of manufacturing that interests Gallant. Bonnie's self-centred construction of the past includes imagining an emotional bond between herself and Flor that may not have existed (especially from Flor's point of view): "Later, this was one of her most anguished memories. She forgot the time and the year and who was with them, remembering only that on a lost day, with her

lost, loved, girl, there had existed a moment of unity while crossing a bridge" (52). This *ekphrastic* moment is subverted since the narrator shows the truth-value of the image to be deficient. When Bonnie and Bob discuss Flor in the past tense, in a eulogistic manner, "as though Florence were dead" (151), George thinks that "they were creating an unmarred Florence, and through her a spotless Bonnie" (147). None of their memories are to be trusted, in other words—not even George's memories.

George knows, though, "that his isolated memories of Flor were right and Aunt Bonnie's fantasies wrong" (152). George is an empathic interpreter, who reads his past as "a piling-up of hallucinations, things heard and seen that were untrue or of no use to him" (139). He is a survivor-figure,[5] and two of the four stories are told mainly through his point of view; the novel could be seen as *his* elegy for Flor, in this sense, as it demonstrates his developing understanding of loss, memory and consolation. George's "authentic hallucination" at the end of *Green Water, Green Sky* is representative of the entire novel's theme and structure, and of his entire sense of the past: details and images fuse, so that the past itself (not just images of Bonnie, Flor and others) becomes "a changeable figure" (154) of suffering given form. George's hallucination is a more truthful prosopopoetic construction, in that the image of the past is changeable and encompasses many perspectives and time periods, but is not fixed as an image of Flor's idealized face.

A Mourner's Monologue

"Its Image on the Mirror" (*My Heart is Broken*, 1957) is subtitled "A Short Novel," and, like Gallant's lengthier novels, it is an extended (and sequential) elegy wherein a female protagonist mourns for multiple losses. Jean Price, the narrator-elegist, mourns her dead brother and the "equally lost" sister (60) who, she thinks, has abandoned her. She also mourns her lost "unlived self," as Jewison notes (103).[6] The plot trigger of the story is the sale of the house where the narrator, Jean Price, grew up with her brother Frank and sister Isobel. The dramatic monologue form establishes the reader in the role of listener (and eavesdropper), as an audience that is given "misleading impressions" (101) and edited or "corrected thought[s]" (103).

Though John Moss claims that Jean's "reason for speaking is

never apparent" (84), it is the telling itself that is its own raison d'etre. Jean's narrative is a prolonged, performative work of mourning, occasioned by the sale of the house and the incomplete mourning for her brother; through it she confronts "the problem of [her] sister" (62), seeking some understanding of her self, life and death. The narrative has the basic structure of an elegiac romance, wherein the narrator ostensibly narrates the biography of a dead or lost hero-figure; the biographical story is a thin disguise for the autobiography of the narrator, however, who survives the hero and who wishes to adopt the hero's identity for his/her own.[7] The monologuic "Its Image on the Mirror" is like an apostrophe to Isa; but Isa will not speak to Jean "out of her own death," or even in Jean's dreams (97), and little is learned of this elusive sister by Jean or by the reader. By telling the tale, Jean hopes to create a "[d]ead-and-buried Isobel" (62) who could no longer threaten her sense of self within the family or with her husband Tom.

Telling the story is a way of burying the past, and of forcing "life to begin," something for which Jean "had waited years" (63). There is a sense that her story is not only a delayed reaction to her losses, but a reaction that perpetuates delay, that postpones an absolute confrontation with her self. The flashbacks and achronology also work to subvert plot progression, to stop time and problematize the textual position of potentially epiphanic revelations. But the potential for success using any method of mourning is limited by the capacity of the "mourner" to comprehend, and to act on that comprehension—the former being a dead-end for Jean. The efficacy of elegiac fiction depends upon the inducement of mimpathic comprehension on the part of the reader, a goal which, despite her character's nature in this novella, Gallant is able to achieve with this novella.

Jean draws attention to her role as storyteller and elegist: "I am the only person who can tell the truth about anything now, because I am, in a sense, the survivor," she thinks (141). As the survivor, the elegist stages a response to loss and grief, and works through mourning in the act of staging, of writing. Jean's work is silent, though, and the entire fiction is in effect a mental composition, since expression of emotion for Jean is nearly impossible. The Duncan family all suffered from "a fear of the open heart" (89), and even though the text *is* a work of mourning, Jean would never admit it as such—rather, she ironically claims at the end that

the entire "story could wait. I might never tell it" (153).

In claiming that "there is something in waiting for the final word," she is repeating her life pattern of waiting, which turns her life into a kind of death.[8] In this sense Jean is incapable of achieving the consolation that comes with acting on revelation. As Keefer writes, the telling of the story has no cathartic effect on Jean, but leads only to a "passively ironic recognition" of her death-in-life condition (63). Her reconstruction of memories is somewhat mechanical, in that it produces not active emotion but tableaux; one such example is the memory of her "last sight of the house at Allenton," which she compares to "those crowded religious paintings that tell a story" (57). Jean's memories *do* tell a story, but rather than producing a consoling fiction, they often produce "discrete still-lifes," as Besner refers to them (31).

Besner states that "Jean approaches her memories in a manner similar to the way in which readers approach fiction" (37), as if they are not real, not her own. Though such detachment is an identifiable part of the mourning process, Jean's unchanging approach to memories is undercut by Gallant, in that her methodology of memory and mourning is clearly so inadequate and stilted that we, as readers, construct other versions that "work." The reader becomes empathically involved while Jean remains emotionally reticent, paradoxically silent within her retrospective discursiveness.

The story is prompted by the sale of the Allenton house, which becomes a prosopopoetic figure that contains all deaths and losses for Jean: "Even before the house was sold . . . it began to die. . . . Ghosts moved in the deserted rooms, opening drawers, tweaking curtains aside. We never saw the ghosts, but we knew they were there. We were unable to account for them: no one had lived here but our family, and none of us had died in Allenton" (59)—none except Jean's emotional self, that is. Since a ghost watched Jean watching herself in the glass on one occasion (60), at least one of those unaccountable spectres is Jean's lost version of herself, the one that had dreams of a possible love that might surpass what she finds in her real life.

The elegiac markers are evident from the start. The first mention of Jean's brother is made almost parenthetically, in relation to an anecdote about "poor Isobel" (61). It is Isa's near-death (threatened by a kidney ailment) that is narrated first, its significance established through a long digression that also describes her

marriage to Alfredo. Isobel is almost a real ghost, returning from the dead as she "tricked [the family] by not dying" (62). She definitely haunts Jean, who tries to live Isa's life vicariously (she even marries Tom, who proposed to Isa first), and Jean only partially exorcises her past. Her expectation of "true justice," of achieving revenge for the past through her children, backfires as Isobel remains unimpressed, and "thankful she had escaped" (77).

Frank escapes the narrow world of Allenton first through service in the war, then by dying. His death is mentioned again only parenthetically in the second part of the novel, with variants on the phrase "dead brother" preceding his name, such as "our dead brother Frank" (71) and "my dead brother's daughter" (73). Frank's death is the explicit cause for grief in section five, though Jean here admits that she "scarcely mourned" him, and "ought to pay for [her] indifference" (129): "I withdrew from my brother's death into a living country of wrangles and arrangements and sharing taxis.... Although I speak now of his death, his death did not occur" (129). Speaking now of his death is, unbeknownst to Jean, her acknowledgement of that death, as well as a version of delayed mourning. Her memory of the family scene reveals her mind performing this belated work: "The panes went black and reflected us: Isobel reading, our mother erect by the door, our father mourning and small. We were in a lighted cage. We could be seen from the street" (131).

Though "[t]he ghost in the Allenton house cannot be Frank's," since "[h]e left no trace" at all (131), Jean narrates a few days he spent with her and Isa to provide a sense of his presence—to invent a ghost and, with words, to replace the missing "trace" of her brother. But she also *dis*places that ghost, and focuses yet again on Isa's ghost and on her capacity for love, which is so elusive to Jean that she can only be "warmed by the sudden presence of love" which she "could sense but not capture" (136). Jean's need for revenge on her sister is closer to a need for consolation, a need that is almost fulfilled as she thinks: "I felt, that afternoon, the closest feeling I have to happiness. It is a sensation of contentment because everyone round me is doing the right thing. The pattern is whole" (75). However, this "pattern" seems negative, a symptom of a complacent and mechanistic condition, and because Jean's use of memory and its translation to narrative are similarly attempts at making the pattern "whole" but not necessarily "true," the work of mourning is not completed. In-

stead it is endless, as cyclical as Tom's need to repeat his "parent's cycle—family into family: the interlocking circles" (79). Jean's recollection of the line Davy Sullivan quoted from *Anna Karenina*—"happy families are all the same" (79)—is, for the reader, ironic. The most that the Duncan and Price families can say is "we were still alive" (81).

This sentence about survival is juxtaposed with the start of the third section, which provides details about Frank's childhood and character; the information Jean gives contradicts her statement made later in the text that she "had never known him" (145). Frank is a sign of absence for Jean, not only through his own death, but in his relationship to Isa: she had written her name in his childhood books. Jean's mother says "poor Frank" and "poor Isa" as if both offspring had been killed. Jean, reading these books to her children, notes that their inheritance from her will be "the assurance that there are no magic solutions" (84). Here her limitations are becoming evident, and her ability to find consolation in the reconstruction of memories will surely be considered "stupid and a bore," as the fairy tales are to her (85).

The reading of these books recalls memories for Jean of living "on the edge of [Isa's] life" (86), of putting herself in Isa's place, "adopting her credulousness, and even her memories, [which] I saw, could be made mine" (84). This adoption—typical for the narrator of an elegiac romance—had been part of her earlier effort to repair the wound of losing her sister's affection, a wound that affected her to the point where she referred to herself in the third person: "Isobel's sister, Jean Price, sits down, crosses her ankles, clasps her hands, smiles" (95). Jean cannot be consoled for the separation from her sister—from her entrance into the "real" world, and her exit from the world of love and dreams; she tries to regress to a time before this division occurred.

Reading the childhood books provokes memory-digressions about Isobel and *not* Frank in this section of the elegy, even though it is his absence that is the ostensible occasion for this narrative segment. Isobel's affair with Alec Campbell remains at the heart of Jean's grief: the real love she witnessed between the couple was a sight that awakened anguish in Jean (100), and still does. The story of her own marriage, described in part four, is eclipsed by Isobel, who, even there, "was the center of things" (106). In this first-person story, the autobiographical —often a part of elegy, with the speaker's focus displaced onto him/herself, the survivor—

alternates with the biographical, and seems to consist of a narrative of denial, delay, and *waiting* for mourning—a silent cry—rather than a performance to that end.

In the last section of the story, Frank's death is connected to Isa's pregnancy, which will be aborted. Isa confesses to Jean in Frank's empty bedroom, where Jean is to sleep (148); she has become Isa's confessor, taking Frank's place—she stands in for his ghost. The epiphanic moment for Jean occurs when Isa explains her ideas about love, which seemed "astonishing and greatly intimate," and paradoxically cause her to understand "the inevitability of dying" (151). The union that Jean feels with Isa is the only possible consolation for her. Without it, she thinks, "we might as well die" (153). Jean's memory of this emotion remains in the present and is narrated in the present tense, as she thinks of the scene: "There remains Isobel, then, cheek on hand, a little tired" (152). But Isa's rejection of Jean's hand signifies the return of death, of stagnation and the cold: "winter was still here and might never come to an end" (154).

In other words, Jean's life continues to be a survival, but little more:

> I suspected, then, sitting in Frank's unhaunted room, that all of us, save my brother, were obliged to survive. . . . I knew, that night, we would not be shed, but would remain, because that was the way it was. We would survive, and waking—because there was not help for it—forget our dreams and return to life. (155)

That there is "no help" for Jean is due to her refusal to dream of real love, her decision to believe that "a union of that sort was too fantastic to exist" (98). While Besner suggests that Jean's conclusion demonstrates the fact that "survivors must wake up to history" (87), Jean's "awakening" has not been revelatory or consoling. Gallant's elegy suggests that a different kind of awakening is required—that the "auditor" (Yeats's "Fellow-wanderer") must take the risk as advised in the epigraph from Yeats's "The Shadowy Waters": to "mix ourselves into a dream / Not in its image on the mirror!"—for "[b]eyond the world," there are possibilities for love and for life of which Jean cannot even allow herself to dream.

Dialogues With the Deaf and the Dead

Those Gallant protagonists who literally or figuratively write of their dislocated pasts are, in effect, elegists of exile. In *A Fairly Good Time* (1970), Shirley subtextually mourns her mother, her first husband Pete Higgins, and her second husband Philippe Perrigny.[9] Since critics have commented on the novel as a "comedy of manners,"[10] with characteristic "hilarity,"[11] my designation of the novel as elegy may seem extreme; but Gallant uses the comic mode, I suggest, as a trope in the subtext of grief, one that counters the sadness and loss that is figured in the text.[12] The comic also undercuts the status of literature as a totalizing construction of consolation.[13]

Gallant uses the structure of the subtext of loss as a trope of elegy in this novel. Michael Riffaterre writes that "[t]he narrative is to the subtext as an object is to its sign" (28); in other words, the subtextual elegies in *A Fairly Good Time* are exemplary moments in the story, "signs" that signify the larger meaning of the text proper, as well as its status as a construct. While Moss's overall evaluation of *A Fairly Good Time* is true—he says that it "is not a novel of psychological realism"—his suggestion that Gallant "never delves into the complexities of motivation or feeling" is dismissive (87). These aspects of "feeling" are exactly what Gallant does "delve into."

The epigraph Gallant uses for the novel ironically guides the reader away from the cynicism it advises:

> *"There are lots of ways of being miserable, but there's only one way of being comfortable, and that is to stop running round after happiness. If you make up your mind not to be happy there's no reason why you shouldn't have a fairly good time."*
>
> *Edith Wharton* (THE LAST ASSET)

The epigraph reads like a parable and establishes the allegorical structure of the novel at the outset. The novel depicts an allegory of the search for happiness. Shirley's search for happiness is an affirmative one, and her consolation for losses sustained in her life—her need "'to be loved more'" (208)—is found in the "chase for happiness" that Nietzsche suggests is what "keep[s] alive in any sense the will to live" ("The Use and Abuse of History" 8).

It is Philippe's attitude that is captured in the epigraph, one that he assumed Shirley also held:

> She could speak without weeping about her dead father, she never mentioned her dead young husband, she was not crying now, and so he believed that she cast sorrow off easily and that grief was a temporary arrangement of her feelings. He thought this to be an American fact [though Shirley is Canadian] which made for a comfortable existence, without memory and without remorse. (49)

For Philippe, who lacks any empathic ability, "you built a life around other people's leavings. . . . You built around a past of glass cases, shabby lighting, a foul-smelling guardian saying 'It is forbidden'" (154), whereas Shirley builds her life around love. Her chase for happiness eventually entails a Nietzschean "power of forgetting." On this subject, Nietzsche writes that

> [o]ne who cannot leave himself behind on the threshold of the moment and forget the past, who cannot stand on a single point, like a goddess of victory, without fear or giddiness, will never know what happiness is, and, worse still, will never do anything to make others happy. ("The Use and Abuse of History" 8)

For Nietzsche and for Gallant, acting spontaneously does not mean acting immorally, and personally responsible action, not manipulative carelessness, is the intended ideal. Shirley does, indeed, respond "to situations as she-is-at-the-moment, not as some created *persona* who stands beside her," as Hatch writes (59). But finally, through her digressive narrational performance, she finds the balance between forgetting fact and remembering "truth," and between caring for others and taking care of herself.

She has achieved the first kind of balance in her acceptance of Pete's death. Pete "did not exist, [but] stood in past time with heavy light around him" (154). In the imaginary letter to Philippe, Gallant devotes several pages of Shirley's thoughts to her first husband, his death, and her reaction to it.[14] "I am thinking years later now," she notes (231), when recounting what she put on his gravestone, and why. The narrative describing their honeymoon is a segment of the novel that shows what it is to have more than "a fairly good time": their activities "were all doing, using up your life; yes, it was a matter of living" (235), she thinks, which contrasts the rigid list-making life Philippe had planned and expected of marriage. In "In Transit," a story which had originally been part of the novel and which is the title story of Gallant's 1988

collection,[15] we hear that Philippe thinks "as if love and travel were opposed to living, were a dream" (157).

Shirley's recollection of her mourning for Pete is, appropriately, distanced from the event; she remembers realizing that "[e]ven if I were to visit the cemetery every day, he would never speak. . . . The destination of a soul was of no interest. The death of a voice—now that was real" (241-42). Shirley does not try to revive Pete's voice, to speak for his silence or to attempt an artificial resurrection using apostrophe or prosopopoeia. She "forget[s] him for months" (245), and feeling "responsible for something—for surviving, perhaps" (245)—which are typical guilt-feelings of the survivor inscribed in elegy—and accepts the fact that part of herself died with Pete. She ends this part of her dream-epistle by thinking: "She was someone belonging to me who had gone over to him. I knew I had lost two people, not one" (246). In reading about Shirley's life with Philippe, we become aware of this other, lost Shirley, and her elegy also mourns this loss of a past self, and the life that she might have led.

The last segment of Shirley's elegiac epistle is entitled "How I Happened to Write My Mother a Personal Letter." Linda Kauffman's general description of the epistolary genre relates it to the elegy: "the genre I shall question is epistolary; the mood is amorous and elegiac; the situation is the aftermath of abandonment. The heroine's discourse is meant as a performance to be spoken, a letter to be read" (26). In *A Fairly Good Time*, meaning must be extracted from the fragments of narrative, and the meaning of Shirley's relationship to her mother surfaces as a significant subtext ("'There's only one mother in anybody's life,'" Shirley is reminded by Cat Castle, her mother's friend [33]). Shirley's imagined letter of explanation to Philippe is simultaneously an apostrophe to her now-deceased mother, whose death we are informed of at the end of the novel (300), and a gesture of self-disclosure and hoped-for understanding and love.[16]

Though there is a genealogical "female line" (40) between Shirley and her mother, a line of communication is never established. One morning after being abandoned by Philippe, Shirley experiences a hallucinatory vision of her parents, who also abandoned her—first through emotional neglect, then in dying:

> A milder lumination—of imagination this time—surrounded two middle-aged persons cycling steadily up an English hill.

> . . . The flower fragrance altered and resembled the scent of the aging lovers, of soap and of death. . . . Her parents, a lost pair, cycled off into the dark. . . . What she required this morning was not a reminder of the past but a harmless substitute for it. (9-10)

Shirley voices this aesthetic of Gallantian elegy: reminders of the past are inadequate forms of consolation; the past may be vitalized figuratively, however, by an empathic relationship with another person who would allow the mourner-elegist to narrativize the past and the emotional pain caused by loss—to tell a story.

Reflecting on the actual letters sent between her mother and herself, Shirley thinks that they participated in "an uninterrupted dialogue of the deaf" (45)—just as her marriage was conducted in "a white silence" (125)—and that her letters to her mother were screams for attention (249). Shirley's bluebell letter, which is a request for confirmation of her values, requires an empathic reader, though her mother is incapable of fulfilling this role.

Shirley had experienced an epiphanic moment while picking the bluebells, one of which she included in her letter to Mrs. Norris:

> Suddenly I saw a lake of blue. The blond girl clutched her golden heart and turned at the same moment. For a second only, the new, sweet fragrance that rose from the blue lake was a secret between us. . . . [T]his color was true and the scent was real, and as I crouched down the better to see and touch I believed that you [Philippe] had led me outside the city after all. (249)

Neither Philippe nor his friends attempt to understand Shirley's experience of pastoral-like bliss, nor she their values, their "Get all you can" philosophy (249). She sends a bluebell to her mother inside a letter, because, she says, "I thought that when she saw it she would know everything" (249). Ronald Hatch writes that "what appears to be merely an aesthetic experience for Shirley may well have moral and social ramifications," and that Shirley's story is that of "the individual struggle to claim victory over life" (64). But the decay of the flowers coincides with the final disintegration of her marriage; she kept them "in water three days alive and four days dead, and then you [Philippe] left me," she remembers (250). The bluebells signify love to Shirley, then, and they are also connected to her father: "She remembered how her

elderly father had called her Belle, first because he disliked the name Shirley, then because Belle corresponded to a generation and a measure of female beauty" (66). The flower is Shirley's real name, then, not a symbol of love but a metonymic marker of identity; it provides her with the *anagnoristic*[17] sense of her real self, and allows her to reclaim part of the self that she had lost in her life with Philippe.

Mrs. Norris's letter, written in response to Shirley's cry for help (though she disregards the cry entirely), is accidentally incorporated into the novel within the novel, fragments of the text written by Philippe's friend Genevieve (appropriately entitled *A Life Within A Life*). Genevieve's novel is also a fictionalized cry, but is a narcissistic parody of Shirley's; that her mother's letter of "good counsel" (25) becomes part of this novel demonstrates its lack of value for grief-stricken Shirley. Shirley recognizes that "Genevieve's language was a situation in itself," and thinks that "Language is Situation. . . . The Silent Cry" (22-23). Gallant suggests that if language is indeed situation, then Shirley's sad situation is rendered indirectly in a rhetoric of mourning.

Keefer writes: "Confusion, rampaging disorder, comic catastrophe reign supreme, and yet a kind of parity exists between the hapless Shirley, the author of all this entropy, and its helpless recipient, the reader" (83). Although the parity does exist, the reader certainly cannot be considered helpless; rather, he or she reconstructs the paradigm of mourning—an ethics of grieving—in an empathic encounter with Shirley, and with the text. The novel is "written" by a narrator, and the third-person construction of the elegy images the fact that Shirley is incapable of expressing her own grief. Language is situation, and Shirley's situation is one of loss and isolation, of silence. Hence her elegy is a silent one, and since it is not structured or "written" by Shirley, Gallant leaves it for the reader to reconstruct.

Shirley addresses Pete, her mother and Philippe in her elegiac epistle; her address to the absent is her silent cry, and as a result the past becomes "detached from her, and floated away like a balloon" (251). Her ability to remember, to write (or imagine writing), and then to forget and to continue seeking happiness is the model of mourning that the reader is able to decipher from the allegorical novel—a novel that consists of imagined dialogues with her mother (Irvine 248); with Philippe, either in memory, in "scribble[s]" (23), in epistles (211-50), or in absentia; and in "private

dialogues" (179) with herself: "I congratulate you, Shirley said to herself" (265). Ultimately, the reader addresses Shirley with the same speech act, affirming the affirmative.

In Gallant's novels, which are elegiac in theme, structure and language, the emotional and empathic elements of the fiction serve to involve the reader in the experiences of each mournful character. It is true that there is a judgemental quality to her fiction, in that the *un*involved reader is implicated in Gallant's critiques of non-comprehending, unempathetic beings (such as Mrs. Norris, Philippe, Bonnie and Bob). Consequently, we are urged to take responsibility for our own readings both of the literary realities of the fiction and of the literal reality it serves to illuminate—to listen for the silent cry.

NOTES

[1] The first three parts of the novel were published separately in *The New Yorker*, in June, July and August of 1959. Part IV was previously unpublished.

[2] I discuss this idea at greater length in "*Green Water, Green Sky*: Gallant's Discourse of Dislocation" (74).

[3] This is Kristeva's term for the stage of psychic life that precedes the entrance into "symbolic" language, where words and signs replace the severed relationship with the mother, and negate that loss. See *Desire in Language* 133.

[4] This is an admittedly over-simplified explanation of Lacan's theory, but for the purposes of this paper it will suffice. See Lacan 2.

[5] Early in the novel Flor's green eyes cause George to remember falling in a mossy pond as a very young child: "The most oppressive part of the memory was that he had lain there, passive, with the mossy water over his mouth" (6-7). He then contradicts this memory with the memory of being "fished" out, "not on his back at all, but on his face, splashing and floundering" (7).

[6] See Edward Engelberg's *Elegiac Fictions: The Motif of the Unlived Life* for discussion of this theme in nineteenth and twentieth-century literature.

[7] Kenneth Bruffee, who coined the name of the sub-genre, details the conventions of the elegiac romance. In Bruffee's schema, the prototype of this narrative form is *Heart of Darkness*. See his *Elegiac Romance*, where he explicates Conrad (and others) in light of his theory.

[8] The act of waiting is implicitly compared to the act of dying: "The feeling [in Montreal] was of waiting, as the feeling in Allenton, years later, was of death"

(108). Jean's life in Montreal is a stagnant one, and she is metaphorically dead in that she is waiting for her life to begin.

[9] Lorna Irvine states that "the novel is culturally allegorical, and Gallant's attention focuses on patriarchal systems, as opposed to matriarchal ones" (See "Starting from the Beginning Every Time" 249n7).

[10] See Besner 58 and Hatch 57.

[11] Leith, 215.

[12] Northrop Frye writes that, in Old Comedy, there is a catharsis of sympathy and ridicule that parallels the pity and fear of tragedy. See *Anatomy of Criticism* 43.

[13] Leith says that the novel "mocks its own pretensions" (220), and that Gallant is suggesting "[t]hat literature is of no more help than any other semiotic system" (219). While it is true that "we not only read about the failings of literature as a guide, we experience them" (Leith 219), I am arguing that, in Gallant's more personal (as opposed to political) fiction, writing does have the potential to console, since memories (once written and historicized) may then be forgotten, and the "un- historical" forgetting required of normal living resumed. In the more overtly political fiction, this is not the case: narrating and forgetting of the past constitutes an amoral refusal of history.

[14] This section of the novel is a revision of the previously published story "The Accident" (October 1967), collected in *The End of the World and Other Stories* as well.

[15] The story was published separately in August, 1965.

[16] The address is written/thought during "the dead period of daylight, midafternoon—the time of day when she always felt slightly nauseated," we are told (211); the conventional hour of the pastoral *otium* is thus used but subverted in Shirley's elegiac epistle.

[17] Abbie Findlay Potts translates this word as "'recognition,' 'revelation,' 'discovery,' or 'disclosure'" (36).

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