SPATIAL PATTERNS OF OPPRESSION IN MAVIS GALLANT'S LINNET MUIR SEQUENCE[1]

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A wealth of references to spatial constituents charges the atmosphere of Mavis Gallant's Linnet Muir sequence Home Truths (*HT* 217-330).[2] As those stories are the sublimated product of memory,[3] numerous crucial images call on spatial polarities.[4] These terms combined with other stylistic devices expose local cultural phenomena with precision: laying out the stories' fictional landscape amounts to determining what Linnet, the protagonist /narrator, senses as the social, religious and cultural limitations imposed on all the characters. This reality emerges from her recollections of her life in Montreal as a child and then as a late teenager, that is, in the nineteen-twenties and forties.[5] A fictionalised projection of Gallant at the time (*HT* xxii), Linnet gives a rather grim picture of her compatriots and their outlook on life, as if time had not erased the memory of the frustrations she (and thus Gallant too) experienced in her youth. Significantly, Linnet perceives the space in which the characters move as shrunken, a concomitant of the local cultural, social and religious oppressiveness: definitely not overwhelmed by nostalgia, Gallant resorts to spatially laden language to throw an ironic light on those restrictions.[6]

In the representation of the city, which is "not so much. . . a physical location as a psychological state" (Jarrett 174), the spatial references are coloured with numerous undertones. The emotional coloration of spatial elements plays a considerable role in the (re)constructions of locations. For instance, while in New York, Linnet is longing for a heavily distorted Montreal:

> My memory of Montreal took shape while I was there. It was not a jumble of rooms. . . , but the faithful record of the true survivor. I retained, I rebuilt a superior civilization. In that

> drowned world, Sherbrooke Street seemed to be glittering and white; the vision of a house upon that street was so painful that I was obliged to banish it from the memorial. The small hot rooms of a summer cottage became enormous and cool. If I say that Cleopatra floated down the Chateauguay River, that the Winter Palace was stormed on Sherbrooke Street, that Trafalgar was fought on Lake St. Louis, I mean it naturally; they were the natural backgrounds of my exile and fidelity. (*HT* 223)

Linnet could not describe more clearly how memory works, how its beautifying process involves spatial changes: "small" becomes "enormous," "hot" becomes "cool,"[7] a "drowned world" seems "glittering and white," and movement renders common places magical. The initial verb "took shape" even points to spatial invention/ spatial memory. Once actual comparison cannot challenge it, memory embellishes the remembered object, place or person and even sets out to negate the existence of "the jumble of rooms" in which the Muirs used to live, and opposes to it the pretended faithfulness of real memory—the memory generating positive reminiscences. In comparison with the clarity of perception *du vécu hic et nunc*—that is, of the present experience—the past becomes a "drowned world" whose haziness alters and modifies things for the better; by referring to her expanding memory, Linnet makes Montreal look small. Similarly, the achromatic purity ("glittering and white") of the recollection imparts Linnet's will to forget the stronger chromatic, unpleasant, components of her past. Actual evidence of modification backs up the argument: houses—essential components of the urban landscape—are obliterated. Yet they "[bear] the essence of the notion of home" (Bachelard 5), which amounts to bringing a sheltering and reassuring warmth. That she equates her remembrances with a memorial evokes a parallel between them and funeral orations where defects, weaknesses and shortcomings are left unmentioned and/or beautified (*HT* 6). The long balanced sentence (*HT* 7-8) at the end punctuates the earnest yet illusory perception of the past as do the initial phrases "*seemed to be* " and "*became enormous.*" The first dramatic section (*HT* 7) with its periodic structure paralleling three "that" clauses of pure geographic fantasy postpones the main idea and stresses its importance: no harm is meant; imagination is allowed licence. The second section (*HT* 8), a shorter and thus more powerful main clause, restates the first one in objective, explanatory, abstract terms and no longer in

spatial visual images: "exile" and "fidelity" merge to sharpen the nostalgic yearning for an otherwise disillusioned world.

> Montreal, in memory, was a leafy citadel where I knew every tree. . . . Sherbrooke Street had been the dream street, pure white. . . . It was a moat I was not allowed to cross alone; it was lined with gigantic spreading trees through which light fell like a rain of coins. (*HT* 235)

The sense of space and nature present in the description marks the magic quality of Linnet's recollection, its expansion into myth. Glittering colours, magnitude, vegetation—these transform remembrances for the better. Memory's actual counterpart, it appears from the next quotation, lacks grandeur, indeed might as well not exist:

> One day, standing at a corner, waiting for the light to change, I understood that the Sherbrooke Street of my exile—my Mecca, my Jerusalem—was. . . . *only* this. The limitless green where in a perpetual spring I had been taken to play was the campus of McGill University. A house, whose beauty had brought tears to my sleep. . . was a narrow stone thing with a shop on the ground floor and offices above. . . . Through the bare panes of what might have been the sitting room, with its private window seats, I saw neon striplighting along a ceiling. Reality, as always, was narrow and dull. (*HT* 235-236)

Linnet exposes the shock of disillusionment by humorously contrasting the sordid reality with the magnificent picture of her memory equated with mystic places of worship. Boundless expanse in unchanging propitious weather materialises as grounds which the reader soon recognises as bounded and exposed to harsh weather. The magnificent house capable of moving Linnet to extreme emotions turns out to be an unqualifiable building, at the most cramped and unpoetic. Crude artificial lighting replaces warm and comfortable decorations. Only bleakness prevails as marked by the repetition of the adjective "narrow." The accumulation of confining terms related to the actual setting serving as a basis for memories is striking. The contrast between the "aesthetically comfortable" (*HT* 292) character of her recollections and the spatial discovery that the word city means "drab, filthy, flat, or that city blocks could turn into dull squares without mystery" (*HT* 292) shakes Linnet with dismay, as the cumulative disparaging adjectives emphasise.

The same correction of reality marks Linnet's memory of Dr.

Chauchard's house. The only one to grasp her sensitivity and grant her marked favours, Dr. Chauchard is the person closest to her except for an old *bonne* (also a French-Canadian of a good old Québécois family, who has fallen on hard times).

> The house he came to remained for a long time enormous in my memory, though the few like it still standing—"still living," I nearly say—are narrow, with thin, steep staircases and close, high-ceilinged rooms. (*HT* 302)

The description of her recollection and of the actual house again shows how selective—and even corrective—memory is. This confrontation of remembrance and its object confers fluidity to the perception of culture. What is and what might ideally be—the difference between the adult's perception of space and the child's naturally deformed remembrance of it[8]—thus alternatively evoked, produce the undulating motion of self-enquiry. Significantly, the above quotation also discloses a spatial reality, namely that Montreal's architecture in part illustrates the harsh principles of Presbyterianism. Some areas still display houses with Scottish characteristics like Chauchard's: "narrow, with thin, steep staircases and close, high-ceilinged rooms, [they are] the work of Edinburgh architects and [date] from when Montreal was a Scottish city" (*HT* 302). Their narrowness and height convey the imperative that people should follow the narrow path and look upwards "to open [their] eyes unto the heavens" (Knox 4: 294) so as to be "delivered from all fear, all torment and all temptation" (Knox 2: 109). As they are given no space to expand either physically or spiritually, they have neither free choice nor freedom to exist (Sartre, 73-102).

In "Between Zero and One" (*HT* 238-260), the prevalent restrictions on emotional freedom, perceived by the narrator and protagonist if not by the other characters, are reflected in the topographical details. The decor in which the action—or rather inaction—takes place is described in spatial terms of restrictive psychological impact. Linnet makes revealing comments on the atmosphere at work:

> I remember a day of dark spring snowstorms, ourselves reflected on the black windows, the pools of warm light here and there, the green-shaded lamps, the dramatic hiss and gurgle of the radiators that always sounded like the background to some emotional outburst, the sudden slackening at the end of the

> afternoon when every molecule of oxygen in the room had turned into poison. (*HT* 240)

The protagonist's associative memory has lost none of the irritating sounds, smells, colours and heat. Rather than offering comfort in contrast to the unfavourable climate, the interior locale Linnet describes seems to reproduce it. In spite of occasional patches of shaded light, the pictures evoke a dark, stifling atmosphere punctuated by the infuriating noises of the radiators. These depresssing images piled up in the loose sentence echo the characters' frustrations with their meaningless lives. When—if at all—will an "emotional outburst" liberate them? One can hardly imagine their lives without the slow moving lift, a symbol for the exiguity, smallness, and limitedness of their world:

> I climbed to the office in a slow reassuring elevator with iron grille doors, sharing it with inexpressive women and men—clearly the trodden-on. No matter how familiar our faces became, we never spoke. The only sound, apart from the creaking cable, was the gasping and choking of a poor man who had been gassed at the Somme and whose lungs were said to be in shreds. He had an old man's pale eyes and wore a high stiff collar and stared straight before him, like everyone else. (*HT* 246)

Imprisoned in life as in the lift with an iron fence preventing emotions from coming out, the characters follow the path society designated them. Linnet makes fun of the normative rules that dictate the slow pace of the flock. Communication between people who have not been formally introduced is impossible. The only person who departs from the norm is the gassed veteran from the First World War but then his is a message of oppression, a cry for emotional and physical freedom. However, apart from his gasp for air and his choking which may be seen as an incapacity rather than as a symptom of restricting social norms, he conforms. His collar is stiff and the look on his face is as blank as a fish's. Clearly, real communication cannot exist among citizens abiding by the local inhibitions which religion exacerbates. Whatever they do, they are overcome with their sense of sin, for man is "never able to fulfil the works of the Law in perfection" (Knox 2: 107) so that they live in the terror of God, in the terror of the "plagues to fall upon [them] in particular for [their] grievous offences" (Knox 4: 295).[9] Bearing the stamp of imported pre-war British behavioural patterns, the characters have

typically cool, shy and repressed attitudes registered in the physical background.

With the subtle collage of random memories from her past life and extra-temporal reflections on cultural issues, Linnet evokes a provincial world where emotions, rather than having a positive effect on mores, have to be repressed. As soon as she mentions crossing the border between the United States and Canada, spatial and human barrenness strike the reader: Linnet discovers "a curiously *empty* country, where the faces of people [give] nothing away" (*HT* 222; emphasis added). It soon appears, from the accumulation of comments in passing, that "'like' and 'don't like' [are such] heavy emotional statements" (*HT* 229) that Canadians keep "their reactions, like their lovemaking, *in the dark* " (*HT* 230; emphasis added). The confinement in the dark of their shameful and unavowed self marks the national repression, predominant in all fields. Questioning her country's ban on spontaneous responses, Linnet eventually discloses the ironic advantages of composure, in a detached voice rather like that of an anthropologist assessing the value of social behaviour in some far-off country:

> Now, of course there is much to be said on the other side: people who do not display what they feel have practical advantages [1]. They can go away to be killed as if they didn't mind [2]; they can see their sons off to war without a blink [3]. Their upbringing is intended for a crisis [4]. When it comes, they behave themselves [5]. But it is murder in everyday life—truly murder [6]. The dead of heart and spirit litter the landscape [7]. Still, keeping a straight face makes life tolerable under stress [8]. It makes *public life* tolerable—that is all I am saying [9]; because in private people still got drunk, went after each other with bottles and knives. . . [10]. (*HT* 227-228; numbers between brackets added).

The initial balanced sentence [1] considers the impact of countenance in abstract terms and concedes it a beneficial function. The examples of advantages emphasized by the loose structures of sentences [2] and the verbs of motion show the tip of the iceberg: they assert with insistence the importance of the façade and relegate feelings to a dark corner. The next purposefully short simple sentence [3] sets out a theorem that the narrator subsequently proves by reducing it to the absurd [4-8]. By first delaying and preparing the way for the main thought, namely the ability to behave in cold blood, the next

periodic sentence [5] alerts the reader to the assumed importance of repressed emotional responses. However, the following statement [6] brings the reduction to the real crisis: murder. (Playing the momentary crisis against murder in everyday life ironically punctuates the ridiculous attachment to apathy). The resulting waste invades the emotional landscape: a purely spatial image [7] involving no motion whatsoever ("litter the landscape") enhances the climactic message. But then, as if to tease the reader somewhat more, Linnet praises impassiveness [8]: it "makes life tolerable under stress." The concession, though, is short-lived: it is immediately corrected and restricted to the italicised public life [9]. And the correction reinforced in the re-statement [10] suddenly echoes a different voice. Linnet gets involved and recollects violent—and thus energetic—scenes of private lives, which annihilates the hypothetical value of restraint and denounces it.

And indeed the numerous references to behavioural responses interspersed here and there cynically show the negative effect self-control has on human beings. Most of the characters are about to lose their sanity from frustration and repression:

> . . . the winter tunnels, the sudden darkness that April day, the years he'd had of this long green room, the knowledge that he would die and be buried "Assistant Chief Engineer Grade II" without having overtaken Chief Engineer McCreery had simply snapped the twig, the frail matchstick in the head that is all we have to keep us sensible. (*HT* 240)

The cumulative spatial descriptions of depressing restrictive impact pave the way for the final metaphor pointing to the precariousness of people's psychological balance. Linnet equates repression with the dark winter weather whose spatiality is made palpable through the tunnel image. Further comments of spatial impact prove that her colleagues' psychological imbalance results from their education and its success in "[making them] invisible to [themselves]" (*HT* 243). Adults thus live in a "world of falsehood and evasion" (*HT* 229) where everything is "hushed, muffled, disguised" (*HT* 230). The overwhelming anger resulting from the age-old-inflicted "deprivation of the senses, mortification of mind and body" (*HT* 245) is anything but surprising. "Easily angry, easily offended" (*HT* 247), married women are especially prone to be bitter. These, the reader is told, keep "[yelling]—to husbands, to children, to dogs,

to postmen, to a neighbor's child" (*HT* 263). The epitome of what restriction and lack of opening both privately and professionally do to people is to be found in Mrs. Ireland, one of Linnet's colleagues. Named after the battered wife of England—the normative ruler whose inhibiting repression causes discontent—she is a battered wife too.[10] In spite of all her degrees, she does not know any better than to explode in wrath at any moment. One can but appreciate the double pun contained in her name—an evocation of a fragile psychological and political landscape—and understand the sarcastic criticism of the still pervasive constraining British norms.

Linnet's recollection of the population whether it evokes past or present situations deforms the picture derisively. She repeatedly ridicules the emptiness of her compatriots' lives in spatial terms that incidentally determine the difference between men and women:

> When I was young I thought that men had small lives of their own creation. I could not see why, born enfranchised, without the obstacles and constraints attendant on women, they set such close limits for themselves and why, once the limits had been reached, they seemed so taken aback . . . . There was a space of life I used to call "between Zero and One" and then came a long mystery. I supposed that men came up to their wall, their terminal point, quite a long way after One. (*HT* 238)

The images conjured up in this passage evidently reveal what Linnet thinks of the people around her. A posteriori, the vague reference to age intimates that the narrator is considerably removed from her childhood and teens. Indeed, it points to the distance between the time when Linnet, the protagonist, perceives facts and the time when Linnet, the narrator, relates them. From the start men's lives are shown as exiguous of their own volition. Linnet's incomprehension of such a narrow choice—their "close limits"—is marked by the opposition between men being "born enfranchised" and "the obstacles and constraints attendant on women." Spatial polarities thus immediately allude to the inequality of the sexes as well as to her puzzlement over the men's surprise at being limited. Life is also considered in terms of space and numbers, but the latter leave so little scope that it suggests how little Linnet expects from life. She cannot decode the "long mystery" after One either for her age, or for her sex. And yet, ironically, men do not seem to go beyond One, at least if one considers what the male characters do with their lives:

> Why didn't they move, walk, stretch, run? Each of them seemed to inhabit an invisible square; the square was shared with *my* desk, *my* graph, *my* elastic bands. The contents of the square were tested each morning. . . . Sometimes one glimpsed another world, like an extra room ("It was my daughter made me lunch today"—said with a shrug, lest it be taken for boasting) or a wish outdistanced, reduced, shrunken, trailing somewhere in the mind: "I often wanted. . . ." (*HT* 246-247)

The initial question and its asyndeton enhance the lack of scope characteristic of men's lives: the succession of negated and non-coordinated verbs of motion reduces their range to virtually nothing. And indeed the next comment defines their world as "an invisible square" whose confines are reminiscent of nests through the latter's association with "primal images" that "bring out the primitiveness" (Bachelard 91) in man. The men's careful checking of their belongings each morning is indeed not far from a bird's feverish struggle to build a perfect nest for itself and its next of kin. The irony, though, lies in the totally selfish character of the endeavour stressed by the italicised first-person possessive pronoun. However an opening seems to lead onto another secret room, one whose existence is immediately denied for fear of revealing one's feelings. Emotions cannot come to the fore as obviously reflected in the meaningless content of the reported speech: it simply reveals an insignificant scene in the life of a supposedly free man. Further confirmation of the negative character attributed to emotions appears in the comparison of this other world to "a wish outdistanced, reduced, shrunken, trailing somewhere in the mind," namely to a microscopic hidden corner of one's heart signalled by the past participles of spatial contraction.

If men lead limited lives, women enjoy even less scope.[11] As Linnet caustically remarks, their opportunities are painfully restricted because of the "obstacles and constraints" hampering them. Theirs is the constricted space "between Zero and One," as marked by the space allocated to them:

> A few girls equipped with rackety typewriters and adding machines sat grouped at the far end of the room, separated from the men by a balustrade. I was the first woman ever permitted to work on the men's side of the fence. A pigeon among the cats was how it sometimes felt. (*HT* 242)

The secretaries' remote location in the room and the physical separa-

tion between them and the men stress the hopelessness of their banishment. The strikingly short sentence with the reversed cliché stressing the foray into the animal world appropriately conveys Linnet's feeling of entrapment in a world that does not grant women any rights. Further descriptions of their situation in "the darkest part, away from the window" (*HT* 255) spatially confirm the minimal respect granted them. Linnet resents the separation and equates it to women being "penned in like sheep" (*HT* 226) or "parked like third-class immigrants" (*HT* 255)--two phrases proclaiming the spatial constraints imposed on them and her revulsion at their degraded status. Men so deeply resent the uniqueness of Linnet's position "on the men's side of the fence" that they cannot refrain from venting their feelings: she repeatedly hears, "if it hadn't been for the god-damned war we would never have hired even one of the god-damned women" (*HT* 317). Linnet goes on to disclose that even outside work, "where women were concerned men were satisfied with next to nothing. If every woman was a situation, she was somehow always the same situation, and what was expected from the woman—the situation—was so limited it was insulting" (*HT* 262). Considering the nonexistent respect for women at work, their humiliating reduction to an abstract concept of unchanging nature is anything but surprising.

The variations on the theme "a pigeon among the cats" illustrate "that there are two races, those who tread on people's lives, and the others" (*HT* 244). Thus Linnet's first appearance at work arouses her male colleagues' resentment against her presence:

> And so, in an ambience of doubt, apprehension, foreboding, incipient danger, and plain hostility, for the first time in the history of the office a girl was allowed to sit with the men. And it was here, at the desk facing Bertie Knox's, on the only uncomfortable chair in the room, that I felt for the first time that almost palpable atmosphere of sexual curiosity, sexual resentment, and sexual fear that the presence of a woman can create where she is not wanted. If part of the resentment vanished when it became clear that I did not know what I was doing, the feeling that women were "trouble" never disappeared. (*HT* 243-244)

In this passage, the succession of periodic sentences increases the weight of the final main clauses whose offensiveness echoes the hostile male discourse. As she sits opposite Bertie Knox, the fictional counterpart of John Knox whose teachings established "the divinely ordained superiority of men over women" (Ridley 270), the spatial

confrontation takes on a further dimension:[12] religion confirms the inferiority of women and justifies male contempt. The piling up of feelings with overlapping meanings also makes for a tangible perception of the atmosphere, so much so that the reader shudders from revolt: the cumulative pinning down of male antagonism to women reinforces its extent, indeed universalizes it.

Worse still, women discriminate too. Battered as she is, Mrs. Ireland does not seek support from other women; she makes their situation worse:

> "Girl?" She [Mrs.Ireland] could never keep her voice down, ever. "There'll not be a girl in this office again, if I have a say. Girls make me sick, sore, and weary."
>
> I thought about that for a long time. I had believed it was only because of the men that girls were parked like third-class immigrants at the far end of the room—the darkest part, away from the windows—with the indignity of being watched by Supervisor, whose sole function was just that. But there, up on the life raft, stepping on girls' fingers, was Mrs. Ireland, too. If that was so, why didn't Mrs. Ireland get along with the men, and why did they positively and openly hate her . . . ? (*HT* 255)

Mrs. Ireland's rejection of "girls" (the commonly masculine derogatory term for women) and the double metaphor ("life raft" and "stepping on girls' fingers") enhance the secretaries' hopeless exclusion from professional recognition. Mrs. Ireland's revulsion paralleled with male arrogance only reinforces the abominable reality made palpable through the relegation to obscure and remote areas. The first metaphor concerning Mrs. Ireland's position "up on the life raft" spatially proclaims the universality of the age-old discrimination—whether women come first or last. The puzzling question as to why the men do not esteem Mrs. Ireland, their equal in intelligence and education—if not their superior—confirms the inequality, indeed poses its inescapability. As to the second image showing Mrs. Ireland fighting for her own survival, it just confines all the more women's, not to say "girls'", scope for responsible action.

No more welcome than women, children live in a confined atmosphere. Their situation is so undesirable that Linnet sums up her own experiences as those undergone in the "prison of childhood" (*HT* 225): parents—or rather adults in general—are inflexibly strict with children, as if to punish them for some primeval sin linked with their actual birth.[13]

> Halfway between our two great wars, parents whose own early years had been shaped with Edwardian firmness were apt to lend a tone of finality to quite simple remarks: "Because I say so" was the answer to "Why?," and a child's response to "What did I just tell you?" could seldom be anything but "Not to"—not to say, do, touch, remove, go out, argue, reject, eat, pick up, open, shout, appear to sulk, appear to be cross. Dark riddles filled the corners of life because no enlightenment was thought required. Asking questions was "being tiresome," while persistent curiosity got one nowhere, at least nowhere of interest. (*HT* 282)

Translated in visual images, the detached sociological comment on educational methods derides the rigid reality of children's lives. No perspective is granted to children; the adults' final retorts allow no opening. Repressive threats and orders mar relations for good, for children cannot be themselves nor move about freely. Any natural instinct has to be curbed: the series of juxtaposed prohibited actions highlights the overwhelming ban on spontaneous reactions. Overpowered, children do not even have a little bright corner to hide in: they are brought up in total darkness, with no possible escape nor enlightening discovery. Parents' answer to their children's need to know the reason for a decision "seems to speak out of the lights, the stones, the snow; out of the crucial second when inner and outer forces join, and the environment becomes part of the enemy too" (*HT* 293). Far from abating the children's wretchedness, the spatial analogy and the enmity of outer space exposes their predicament more acutely.

Exiled in the twenties, children cannot aspire to a better position in the forties:

> How much has changed? Observe the drift of words descending from adult to child—the fall of personal questions, observations, unnecessary instructions. Before long the listener seems blanketed. He must hear the voice as authority muffled, a hum through snow. The tone has changed—it may be coaxing, even plaintive—but the words have barely altered. They still claim the ancient right-of-way through a young life. (*HT* 282)

Invited to participate in the sociological enquiry, the reader soon discovers that adults still use their hierarchical authority (like God's in paradise) to sentence children to life imprisonment. The apposition of drifting words and its asyndeton render the forcefulness with

which adults exert their power: interestingly expressed in terms of space (the "drift of words *descending* " and the "*fall* of questions"), their control announces further cosmic imagery involving heaven and hell.[14] No longer addressed directly, the reader visualizes, indeed physically experiences, the "drift of words" as blanketing. The drowned out voice of authority thus aptly evokes an insignificant change: authoritarian vigour has withdrawn in favour of luring and lament.[15] But the content of the discourse remains the same; parental prerogative cannot be done away with—a mocking hint at the universally abusive character of education.

Under the adverse circumstances, children feel miserable. Linnet indirectly reports her own helplessness in the description of the time lapse *entre chien et loup:*

> There was one sunken hour on January afternoons, just before the street lamps were lighted, that was the gray of true wretchedness, as if one's heart and stomach had turned into the same dull, cottony stuff as the sky; it was attached to a feeling of loss, of helpless sadness, unknown to children in other latitudes. (*HT* 311)

Equated with the distressing atmosphere of winter twilight, children's despair becomes an inescapable fact; the more so as the loose sentence echoes their neglect and the emptiness of their lives: they experience their inner space—"one's heart and stomach"—as equally revolting as their outer space—"the dull, cottony stuff [of] the sky." However, the source of Linnet's injured, indeed repressed, sensitivity, her depressing lot bears fruit. Drop by drop, she filters her emotions as if through "the cottony stuff of the sky," the spatial symbol of her unhappiness that will eventually engender her art.[16] Her childhood experiences indeed contribute to the pervading spatial imagery of her stories: her visual rendering of emotions colours the narration of her past anxieties. Another cause for anguish, Linnet's childhood excursions to town with her father are remembered in terms of space:

> These Saturdays have turned into one whitish afternoon, a windless snowfall, a steep street. Two persons descend the street, stepping carefully. The child, reminded every day to keep her hands still, gesticulates wildly—there is the flash of a red mitten. I will never overtake this pair. Their voices are lost in snow. (*HT* 283)

Memory turns numerous outings into one, assimilating them all with one spatial perception; achromatic, without a breath of air but enough

snow to drown voices, it characteristically takes the walkers downward, for it recalls unpleasant moments. The red mitten flashing in the white surrounding—a striking colour in the otherwise white, thus emotionless, landscape—stresses the child's vitality confirmed by her erratic movements. But this image belongs to the past and cannot be retraced: time has changed the data—the father no longer is; the child has grown into an adult. Their voices, like their figures, are drowned in snow: past events belong to an inaccessible time where spatial and temporal components merge in haziness. The excursions often take the pair to a doctor or a teacher with whom the child stays while the father runs errands or pays visits to friends. The subsequent meetings at the station traumatize the child for fear she should be late and miss both her father and the train. Her dreams after her father's death clearly translate her obsessive anxiety in spatial terms:

> . . . after his death, which would not be long in coming, I would dream that someone important had taken a train without me. My route to the meeting place—deviated, betrayed by stopped clocks—was always downhill. As soon as I was old enough to understand from my reading of myths and legends that this journey was a pursuit of darkness, its terminal point a sunless underworld, the dream vanished. (*HT* 284)

Darkness, abandonment, deviation, obstacles, declivity, all these dominate Linnet's dreams and pave the route of childhood, another descent into hell.

Movement is evoked throughout the sequence since Linnet moves back and forth between the past and the present as the shift in tenses implies. Her past experiences—almost forgotten or at least removed from her—weigh on her in such a way that returning home is like embarking on a "journey into a new life and a past dream" (*HT* 228): movement thus translates her eagerness to plunge into life. She even has "a sensation of loud, ruthless power, like an enormous waterfall. The past, the part [she] would rather not have lived, [becomes] small and remote, a dark pinpoint" (*HT* 225). Life and its opportunities lie ahead: the energetic spatial simile expresses her hope for a better future. The past and its unpleasant reality disappear: reduced to nought, they cease to have an impact on her. "A gate shut on a part of [her] life" (*HT* 221), she moves on with optimism. Thus in the stream of life with its inevitable hardships, she is heard saying: "Sink or swim? Of course I swam"

(226), thereby extending the preceding water imagery with the implicit determination to overcome adversity.

> My life was my own revolution—the tyrants deposed, the constitution wrenched from unwilling hands; I was, all by myself, the liberated crowd setting the palace on fire; I was the flags, the trees, the bannered windows, the flower-decked trains. The singing and the skyrockets of the 1848 [revolution] I so trustingly believed would emerge out of the war were me, no one but me; and, as in the lyrical first days of any revolution, as in the first days of any love affair, there wasn't the whisper of a voice to tell me, "You might compromise." (*HT* 225-226)

Suggestive of the intense determination with which she fights, the extended metaphor and its spatial components leave no doubt about Linnet's designs. The first section in the enumeration announces her will to change, indeed to purge the country of its despots in charge of wielding antiquated, yet cherished, dogmas. The second one symbolises the individual character of her enterprise while the third one pays tribute to her freedom, authenticity, openness and evolution. "The singing and the skyrockets" proclaim her acute happiness while the parallel between love and revolution rejects concessions. In short, the passage confirms her firm intention to change things and not to let narrow-minded dicta undermine her self-confidence.

The rigidity with which everything is set comes out even in art. Like other countries with split-up communities, the titles of art works are "identified in two languages" (*HT* 299), even when they do not call for translation. The physical presence on paper of both titles ridicules the immutable refusal to make an effort, a cold refusal to understand the other group. Unfortunately such limitations take away the poetical breath of any writer:

> I could write without hearing anyone, but poetry was leaving me. It was not an abrupt removal but like a recurring tide whose high-water mark recedes inch by inch. Presently I was deep inland and the sea was gone. (*HT* 248)

An echo to the set of rules imposed on journalists flowing from a dried up "intellectual bath" (*HT* 320-321), the sea imagery aptly conveys Linnet's progressively declining literary inspiration. It also reverberates with James Joyce's imagery: inland, poetic inspiration perishes as paralysis prevails; at sea, paralysis is defeated

by new, and unconstraining, horizons. Freedom of thought and lyric creativeness can only be restored through the rhythmic rocking of the waves. But originality is not looked for in Canada: Linnet's audition with Miss Urn, whose name recalls Keats' ode and its celebration of beauty in static art (Jarrett 177n4), ironically illustrates Canada's attachment to old values:

> Miss Urn received me in a small room of a dingy office suite on St. Catherine Street. We sat down on opposite sides of a table. I was rendered shy by her bearing, which had a headmistress quality, and perplexed by her accent—it was the voice any North American actor will pick up after six months of looking for work in the West End, but I did not know that. (*HT* 250)

The small space in which the audition takes place mirrors the narrow-mindedness of artistic demand. The location in town reminds the readers of prudish maidens venerating St. Catherine in the hope of finding a husband while the actual street exhibiting sex shops calls for a further comic comparison. The stress put on the spatial opposition that separates Miss Urn and Linnet also marks a contrast in their outlook. Free of taboo and open to novelty, Linnet reads a passage of Thornton Wilder's *The Skin of Our Teeth.* Her choice of a play then on show in New York is a first offence. That it is a "self-conscious" play,[17] and therefore a challenge, rules it out in the eyes of Miss Urn, who favours Dodie Smith's unthreatening, cosy family play *Dear Octopus.* To make matters worse, Linnet on her different wave length misreads the second play as she mistakes it for a parody. Genuine creativity is thus annihilated since bigotry and intolerance control art.

Open-mindedness definitely does not distinguish WASP Canadians. Strictly adhering to British norms, they have also adopted their model's imperialist attitudes. Whatever is not English is met with contempt and rejection as not "part of the Empire and the Crown" (*HT* 245). In a sardonic mood, Linnet defines their insularism in opposition to her parents' innovative approach:

> This overlapping in one room of French and English, of Catholic and Protestant—my parents' way of being, and so to me life itself—was as unlikely, as unnatural to the Montreal climate as a school of tropical fish. Only later would I discover that most other people simply floated in mossy little ponds labelled "French and Catholic" or "English and Protestant," never wondering

> what it might be like to step ashore; or wondering, perhaps, but weighing up the danger. To be out of a pond is to be in unmapped territory. The earth might be flat; you could fall over the edge quite easily. (*HT* 305)

The comparison of bilingual, and at the same time bi-confessional, groups in Montreal to "a school of tropical fish" spatially establishes that the "two tribes [know] nothing whatsoever about each other" (*HT* 245). The localization of each community in "mossy little ponds" extends the piscatorial and spatial simile. That they are labelled accordingly merely evidences the local ossification and fear of assimilation. The latter prevents any one of them from edging through the tangles of moss towards the other pond. The previously spatially laden image is further expanded upon in geographical terms. The passage implies that, frightened to be left on their own, they seek the security of the label of the group. Floating rather than following a definite course, the spatial equivalent of "being" rather than "existing" (Sartre 73-102), they cannot possibly consider opening themselves up, for their attachment to the community confers assurance, if not arrogance, on them and a feeling of superiority recalling their forefathers' when they landed in Canada.

In a country characterized by its "national pigheadedness" (*HT* 261), outsiders have no access to real citizenship. Immigrants are easy to spot for origins can never be discarded in a society abiding by strict normative rules. Immigrants are so badly received that if a Canadian woman of old stock marries an immigrant she had better keep her maiden name, at least if she wants to succeed professionally. As Linnet explains: "in Canada you [are] also whatever your father [happened] to be, which in my case [is] English" (*HT* 220). Accents of course can betray one's origins; Linnet herself shows how it functions in Canada:

> I can see every face, hear every syllable, which evoked, for me, a street, a suburb, a kind of schooling. I could just hear out of someone saying to me, "Say, Linnet, couja just gimme a hand here, please?" born here, born in Glasgow; immigrated early, late; raised in Montreal, no, farther west. (*HT* 239)

Linnet directs her wit at her own ability to localize people's origins by their accents and to pin them down to a type of education, area or even street. As in all rural and provincial communities, it is of the utmost significance to know if one really belongs, what

landmarks one can claim. Once part and parcel of the community, it is essential to safeguard its cohesion and specificity by protecting it against intruders.

To make matters worse some people cultivate their "foreignness." Linnet remembers her father refusing the process of cultural integration out of pride of his origins, just as many British citizens living in the colonies. And indeed, after years of residence in Canada, this Englishman by birth dies more British than Canadian. But what is true for him should not necessarily hold for his offspring. Nevertheless, owing to the system, Linnet is considered an immigrant on two counts for her return also turns her into a newcomer for those long established. Significantly, at the beginning of "In Youth Is Pleasure," Linnet reveals that her father's "death turned [her] life into a helpless migration" (*HT* 219), a spatial image involving reductive movement. Thus both his birth and death contribute to isolate her from others and to take her on the road paved by outcasts. She ends up "being an outsider in her own home" (Howells 102) for she "[has] neither the wealth nor the influence a provincial society requires to make a passport valid" (*HT* 232).

Similarly, the remittance man (a Briton banished young for some obscure disgrace[18]) Linnet meets one summer and observes in an attempt to understand her own reality, retains his Britishness till death.[19] Initially cut off from all his ties, he ends up totally isolated, for he "was raised to behave well in situations that might never occur, trained to become a genteel poor on continents where even the concept of genteel poverty never existed" (*HT* 269). To her, he is "a curio cabinet" (*HT* 275) from which she takes everything out "piece by piece, [examines] the objects [and sets] them down" (*HT* 275) once she has understood what it contains. She points out that remittance men are "like children, perpetually on their way to a harsh school... [who are] sent 'home' to childhoods of secret grieving among strangers" (*HT* 269). This spatial metaphor curiously echoes her own experience: she was sent to a convent at the age of four "where Jansenist discipline still had a foot on the neck of the twentieth century and where, as an added enchantment, [she] was certain not to hear a word of English" (*HT* 299; emphasis added). She too was totally cut off from her milieu and had to live by the rules of a world she could not relate to. Like the remittance man who "would never live in England, not as it is now" (*HT* 275) she feels "apart from everyone, isolated" (*HT* 280). So when

she hears that he died during the war she rejoices that he will never "be forced to relive his own past" (*HT* 280). One inevitably wonders how he could for he had no identity, therefore no past can be ascribed to him. This is made explicit when Linnet discovers the story she once wrote (although she does not remember when) about the remittance man's mysterious friend—"a man from *somewhere* living *elsewhere*" (*HT* 281; emphasis added).[20] He is thus positively different from the remittance man—but also, as the vague localizers imply, a fiction, an abstraction without real substance, indeed a man from nowhere living nowhere. The other immigrants she meets are equally trapped. They try to integrate by applying for citizenship, changing their names and eating cornflakes, but in vain. At any time, they may be reminded of their alien origins: they cannot shun the effects of xenophobia.[21]

To escape from such a stifling and incomprehensible atmosphere, Linnet turns to writing. "Anything [she cannot] decipher [she turns] into fiction, which [is] a way of untangling knots" (*HT* 261), the complex knots of her identity. To the reader's delight her suffering is transformed into art, the art revealed in the stories she casually narrates and defines through an extended spatial metaphor: "every day is a new parcel one unwraps, layer on layer of tissue paper covering bits of crystal, scraps of words in a foreign language, pure white stones" (*HT* 248). She filters, drop by drop, her recollections and reveals the jewels of her art. The reader follows her meandering path as she is looking for herself in others and opening the secret drawer of one character after another. But soon she is seen shutting it again promptly: she feels that she should not "[look] inside a drawer that [does] not belong to [her]" (*HT* 234), nor "[put] life through a sieve" (*HT* 281). Why she should not is in fact echoed by her recognition of the local smallness, the limits of an art bred by suggestions and inhibitions, and her latent awareness concerning her own self. Once she has grasped the emptiness of the immigrants' reality she is no longer interested in them because they can teach her nothing new. By then no one can serve her as a model to understand who or what she really is; she is another, different from others. For throughout her quest, she intuitively senses that in the end she will only find "another variety of exile" (*HT* 281).[22]

Estranged within her family, her hometown, her country, her sole remedy is writing. Generated by her need to understand herself and anchored in her re-discovery of her native Montreal, her

prose eventually discloses the multiple facets of her culture. It emerges from the three layers of memory and historical time involved in her narration: twice removed from her childhood, Linnet, the narrator, looks back on the memories of her childhood as a teenager. This contributes to the detachment with which she can extract the numerous components of Canadian culture whose spatial reflection plays an important role in delineating local limitations. Concerned with aspects of the three dimensions, the spatial polarities used divide the world essentially into high and low, up and down, above and below or beneath, leaving those related to length and width in the background, with sometimes a reference to lengthy routes or processes. The up/down polarity and its related expressions evoke images of survival and decline and as such enhance the cultural pressures. Often linked with Linnet's attitude to life, the concept "up" and its equivalents by and large imply endurance and vital force or refer to an imaginary or utopian reality, whereas the concept "down" and its corresponding phrases, associated with obtuse behaviour and drabness, point to dissolution and annihilation. Movement contrasts mobility with immobility, going up with going down, floating with drowning, ascending with falling: lack of movement is characteristic of restrained Canadians, while movement and water imagery stress Linnet's free response and willingness to live unhampered. Similarly, colours typify Linnet's lively and affective response, so that the achromatic black, white and grey seem to invade the landscape of emotional repression. Finally, Gallantian polarities involving measures and proportions comprise oppositions such as exiguous and vast, small and big, narrow and wide, close and far, limited and limitless, enclosed and open, fenced in and unfenced. Contrary to the first concept of this binary opposition evidencing the local constriction and narrow-mindedness, the second concept reinforces Linnet's desire to question dogmas, to live freely and fully. In short, the positive polarity of each spatial binary opposition refers to either Linnet's desire to keep body and soul together or to an imaginary/utopian reality; on the other hand, the negative one emphasizes either the latter's real dull counterpart or Linnet's fellow citizens' compliance with the local intolerance. It thus appears from the spatial imagery that any group—be it social, political, religious or linguistic—refuses to accept any intrusion, let alone admit the worth of a custom, attitude or belief different from the age-old approved norm. Gallant's consistent use of

spatial polarities tinged with irony confirms that what she explained about Montreal in an interview holds for her fictional Canada at large: "All those small worlds of race and language and religion and class, all shut away from one another. A series of airtight compartments" (Hancock 25). Enslaved by their blind obedience to social and religious rules, Gallant's Canadians can neither live nor let live. Those with scope flee from the place, as Mavis Gallant herself did in her twenties; the others stay behind and succumb to the weight of obligations and frustration. Their deep-rooted restraint and repression inherited from the first immigrants hamper communication and estranges them from themselves. Irreversibly inhibited, they have no future ahead: their bleak lives and their disappointing perspectives offer no outlet nor compensation. In the end, the spatial and achromatic illustration of the dryness, isolation and displacement at the heart of Gallant's Canadian experience derisively appears in all its oppressive and alienating reality.

NOTES

[1] I am most indebted to the Israel Association for Canadian Studies without whose research grant this paper would not have seen the light.

[2] All references to the Linnet Muir sequence are incorporated into the text of the article using the abbreviation *HT*.

[3] Bachelard's theories and Proust's experiments have shown that, besides being time-bound, memory is an essentially spatially laden component of spiritual life.

[4] Weisgerber's book, *L'espace romanesque*, on which this study is based, offers a clear introduction to spatial analysis while abundantly illustrating the forms spatial components can take in fiction. He pays attention to and stresses the binary oppositions of the adverbs, prepositions, adjectives, nouns, verbs . . . that convey spatial realities. Other critics, like Bachelard, Ingarden, Lotman, Maatje, Matoré, Meyer and Spoerri have also significantly contributed to make readers aware of the existence of space in fiction, but do not offer a specific approach. In his bookThe *Linguistic Moment*, J. Hillis Miller also discusses space, but he restricts his study to "spatial images for time" (xvii).

[5] One should emphasise that the stories set in Canada are *pré-Révolution Tranquille*, that is, a period unshaken by the cultural changes non-British or Western European immigrants have brought about. Not out of dishonesty, but out of a lack of assimilated first-hand experience, Gallant's picture of Canada thus overlooks the

new multicultural nature of Canadian society, particularly in cities like Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver (Janice Kulyk Keefer, letter dated 27 July 1991). Personal conversations with Mavis Gallant make it obvious that she still sees Canada as it was—or almost—when she left the country in 1950. Needless to say, that does not detract from the stories' worth; but one should be aware of the standpoint chosen.

[6] An echo to the Muir sequence, the other Canadian stories also disclose the pervading stranglehold through their narrator's and/or characters' perception of the setting in which the action takes place. Like Linnet, they come to use what Matoré calls "the vocabulary of spatialized psychism" (90) to convey their outlook on life and the local limitations.

[7] Weisgerber includes temperatures, sounds, smells and lighting in the qualitative categories that contribute to the perception of space, though they are not strictly speaking spatial elements (18).

[8] One should remember Piaget's remarks that a child's awareness of space differs strikingly from the adult's: overwhelmed by what he/she senses as the enormous dimensions of the adult world, the child may well remember a radically strained environment.

[9] Echoing Calvin's theories that "there will never be plenitude or perfection" (Calvin 28), Knox' confirm God's "perpetual condemnation" (Knox 3: 166) of man. According to them, "if we say we have no sin, (even after we are regenerated), we deceive ourselves, and the verity of God is not into us" (Knox 2: 107). For "no man on earth (Jesus Christ excepted) has given, gives or shall give in work that obedience to the Law which the Law requires" (Knox 2: 108).

[10] Her appearance too partakes of the general restraint: she keeps her hair braided in an attempt to control it, just as she constantly wears a scarf to conceal an aspect of her private life, namely the bruises resulting from the violence her husband exerts on her.

[11] My article "Squeezed 'Between Zero and One': Feminine Space in Mavis Gallant's *Home Truths*" gives ampler information about the opportunities of women.

[12] Knox claimed that since "no animal [is] prepared to be ruled by his female" (Ridley 270), why should man be? So "to reign over man can never be the right to woman" (Percy 218).

[13] For an overview of the limitations attendant on the lives of children in Gallant's fiction at large, see Kulyk Keefer's chapter on "The Prison of Childhood" (89-118).

[14] These comprise the "descent into hell" (*HT* 284) which Linnet experiences as she anxiously walks to meet her father (see p.16) and the "fall over the edge" (*HT* 305) of the earth which monolingual Montrealers fear should they try to establish contact with the other linguistic community (see pp.18-19).

[15] Linnet further uses an eloquent image to define parental voices : "being constantly observed and corrected was like having a fly buzzing around one's plate"(*HT* 284). But adult conversations deal with "shut-in velvet-draped unaired low-voice problems" (*HT* 293), a spatial image whose palpable quality cannot es-

cape anyone. Charlotte Sturgess (217-218) gives an interesting interpretation of the voices heard in the two quotations concerning parental attitudes towards children.

[16] The spatial component of artistic creation will be further discussed on pp.17-18 and 21-22.

[17] Self-conscious plays are self-reflexive (Scholes 100), thus trying to lay bare their potential. Like metafictional novels or stories (Gass 25), they "systematically [draw] attention to [their] status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (Waugh 2).

[18] The cause of the banishment—or rather "the romantic crime" (*HT* 271)—is often "just the inability to sit for an examination, to stay at a university, to handle an allowance, to gain a toehold in any profession, or even to decide what he wanted to do —an ineptitude so maddening to live with that the Father preferred to shell out forever rather than watch his heir fall apart before his eyes" (*HT* 271).

[19] Linnet's comments revealingly confirm his origins. "Frank Cairns was stamped, labelled, ticketed by his tie (club? regiment? school?); by his voice, manner, haircut, suit; by the impression he gave of being stranded in a jungle, waiting for a rescue party— from England, of course" (*HT* 265).

[20] This calls to mind Linnet's comment on her father: "He was seldom present. I don't know where my father spent his waking life: just elsewhere" (*HT* 285), longing for his birthplace.

[21] My article on "Mavis Gallant's Montreal: A Harbour for Immigrants?" offers further views on immigrants and the space allotted to them in Canadian culture.

[22] Her awareness echoes Coral Ann Howells' reflection about Gallant's collection of Canadian stories: "the most disturbing home truth of all is that the condition of being dispossessed is as common in Canada as it is among Canadians abroad" (94).

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