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**NEGOTIATING LANGUAGES AND IDENTITIES  
IN THE FICTION OF MAVIS GALLANT**

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### *List of Abbreviations*\*

AB	<i>Across the Bridge: New Stories</i> (1993)
AFGT	<i>A Fairly Good Time</i> (1970)
CL	<i>The Cost of Living</i> (2009)
EW	<i>The End of the World</i> (1974)
FFD	<i>From the Fifteenth District</i> (1979)
GA	<i>Going Ashore</i> (2009)
GWGS	<i>Green Water, Green Sky</i> (1959)
HT	<i>Home Truths</i> (1981)
IT	<i>In Transit</i> (1988)
MHB	<i>My Heart is Broken</i> (1964)
MS	<i>Montreal Stories</i> (2004)
MW	<i>The Moslem Wife</i> (1994)
OB	<i>Overhead in a Balloon</i> (1985)
OP	<i>The Other Paris</i> (1956)
PJ	<i>The Pegnitz Junction</i> (1973)
PN	<i>Paris Notebooks</i> (1986)
PS	<i>Paris Stories</i> (2002)
SS	<i>The Selected Stories of Mavis Gallant</i> (1996)
VE	<i>Varieties of Exile</i> (2003)
WBD	<i>What is to be Done?</i> (1983)

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\* Detailed bibliographical references to the above collections are listed in the section “Works by Mavis Gallant” of the “Selected Bibliography” at the end of the present work.

## Introduction

“Why aren’t people ever clear?  
Why don’t they say what they mean?”

Mavis Gallant, *A Fairly Good Time*

In the 1976 short story “Varieties of Exile”, the character of Linnet Muir says: “everything I could not decipher I turned into fiction, which was my way of untangling knots” (HT: 261). Stating, as agreed by most critics, that Linnet is Gallant’s literary *alter ego*, one of the things that the writer could not decipher is certainly hinted at in the questions contained in the above epigraph. The answers are countless in general, and several are provided specifically by Gallant, whose fictions often revolve around language, not so much to point at its inefficacy (which the writer in fact never laments), but rather to show that, because language encompasses unlimited potentialities, these include both the positive and the negative ones. Describing her immersion in the German post-war reality, which results in a series of stories published together in the collection *The Pegnitz Junction* (1973), Gallant claimed that she decided to deal with Nazism and its consequences precisely “pour essayer de comprendre”, ‘to try to understand’

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(Girard and Valette 2003). This aspiration certainly extends to all the range of situations she gives attention to, not only the crimes of wartime. Also and foremost, Gallant has always been interested in the circumstances of everyday life: observing the difficulties that undermine clear communication, and incomprehensions or miscomprehensions among people, Gallant magisterially points at the moment in which conversations fail, words mislead, and signs lose their meaning. Each and every time, when she illustrates it, her handling of language is so astoundingly accurate that it never fails *her*. This paradox fascinated me, and spurred me to focus in my thesis on this and on a manifold of strictly related aspects. My decision moved also from realizing that critics, who often quote language as one of Gallant's core issues, rarely embarked on a deeper analysis of this subject.

Questions about Gallant's ways of dealing with language are several, and they 'speak' from the pages of her fiction as well as from her nonfictional texts. To reply to them, that is "pour essayer de comprendre", I decided to write the present work. In order to investigate the fiction of Mavis Gallant under the lenses of her assorted uses of language, I selected another theme that is particularly insisted in the fiction of the writer: 'identity', meant as a broad label to encompass several related aspects, among which are the perception and the representation of the self. The almost unlimited meanings and implications attached to 'language' and 'identity' would normally recommend a call for restriction; conversely, I opted for an expansion of both terms, which I put therefore in their plural form. I discuss such pluralisation in Chapter 2, where I present the theoretical framework for my thesis. In short, for different *languages* I intend first of all the several languages which Gallant mentions and the so called 'questions of language', such as bilingualism and translation. Pluralisation goes much further: on the one hand, I consider diamesic variations connected with written forms, either texts written by the characters or their literary background, which resurfaces in form of quotations and misquotations of a myriad of literary works. On the other hand, I analyse nonverbal languages, the 'language of clothing' and the 'language of food' in particular, trying to describe the ways in which characters 'speak' through their outfits or 'dialogue' in contexts in which food is involved. In dealing with

*identities*, I consider different aspects connected with personal, social, and cultural identity, e.g. perception, representation, misrepresentation, and disguise. I give therefore attention to the self as well as to the interactions among characters, all of which result frequently in miscommunication, incomprehension, and lack of mutual understanding. These considerations bring me to focus on the choice of ‘negotiating’ as a verb to encompass interaction and interrelation at different levels. The term ‘negotiation’, usually associated to political contexts, is also quite popular in semiotic studies, where theoreticians made a vast use of the term to represent the moment when a message, passing from ‘encoding’ to ‘decoding’ practices (Hall 1973), is received and understood. The dangers connected with these passages are several, and Gallant is well aware of them all. As Hulme ‘speculated’ in 1924, “language is by its very nature a communal thing; that is, it expresses never the exact thing but a compromise”.

Such compromise, which is synonym to ‘negotiation’, exists also at the level of the relationship between the writer and her readers. In Chapter 1, I propose a full account of Gallant’s life, in order to disclose the *identity* of the woman behind the writer. My biographical survey does not report the writer’s life indiscriminately, but centres around those episodes that had an impact on her fiction, either on thematic or stylistic level (Section 2), with particular reference to the main concerns of the present work. Stress falls on her bilingual upbringing (2.3) and her early interest in reading and writing, on the relationship with her parents (2.2), her apprenticeship as a journalist (2.4), and the radical and never regretted decision to ‘fly’ to Europe in order to devote her life entirely to writing. Section 3 is an attempt to offer a critical reading of Gallant’s relationship with privacy, and her *negotiation* of her private and public personae: I argue that such complex and articulate process results in a ‘fictionalized’ version of herself, which I have labelled ‘fictional biography’.

Chapter 2 is a first step into the core issue of my thesis: the relationship(s) between language(s) and identit(ies). As said, by pluralizing both terms, I expand the present under-explored field of study in several directions. My

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multidisciplinary approach is applied at the end of the Chapter to a few case studies, all sharing a similar thematic pattern.

*Green Water, Green Sky* (1959) and *A Fairly Good Time* (1970), the two narratives which I analyse in Chapter 3, develop along a similar thematic line. Because they have been investigated more often and more deeply than other fictions by Gallant, but never in this light, they constitute a cogent example for the validation of my theory, and possibly provide evidence for its originality. Due to their peculiarities, at the beginning of the chapter I question their belonging to the genre of the novel and propose an interpretation of the *identity* of the literary genre in Gallant.

A final “Selected Bibliography” offers an idea of the variety of texts which I read before and while writing the present work. It first of all accounts for the multidisciplinary approach of my study; besides, it mirrors the vastness of themes and concerns which Gallant herself devoted her attention to in both her life and fiction.

There are no long “Introduction” and “Conclusion” to this thesis, because each chapter contains its own premises and achievements, and I did not want to fill this study with useless and repetitious sections. Following Gallant’s suggestion, I have tried to leave only “les [...] temps forts” (Gerard and Valette 2003).

The next page contains a “List of Abbreviations” of Gallant’s collections: I have used them to simplify quotations from Gallant’s works, which are therefore given parenthetically inside the text. “Notes and References” at the end of each chapter are often meant to represent insights into concerns that could not be developed within the core text, but that I deemed nonetheless of a certain importance. Some of the remarks pinpoint aspects of Gallant’s fiction which have received little critical attention so far, or suggest paths that critics have not walked through yet. Unless otherwise specified, translations from French and from Italian are mine.

CHAPTER 1

**Mavis Gallant:**  
**the Identity of a Writer**

“All lives are interesting;  
no one life is more interesting than another.  
Its fascination depends on how much is revealed,  
and in what manner”

Mavis Gallant, *Paris Notebooks*<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Why, when, and what interest in Gallant's biography?

Literature of all times abounds in biographies. The reasons why this genre is so widely appreciated by readers are various; the simplest is perhaps that most of us have a natural bent for curiosity. The desire to peep at the lives of people like writers, politicians, actors, or historical characters is as strong as (or even stronger than) the urge to discover something secret about a neighbour or a colleague at work. Though Marie Curie once suggested that we should “be less curious about people and more curious about ideas”<sup>2</sup>, ideas spring out of people's minds; therefore curiosity about people, when it does not turn into mere gossip, is ultimately an interest in their ideas. To focus restrictively on writers, a foray into personal experience usually aims at establishing a relation with writing. Such an operation, while following a biographical tradition, may disclose aspects relevant to their fiction. However, it can as well deviate from a close reading of the text (if we stand on the side of Formalists)<sup>3</sup>, or from its readership (according to critics like Derrida, Foucault, and Roland Barthes, who proclaimed “The Death of the Author” in 1977).

Turning attention to biographical criticism, I am inclined to agree with Jajdelki. The critic argues that

debates about the place of the author's biography in the interpretation of his or her literary writing have clearly lost the urgency they used to have in theoretical reflection on literature during much of the last century. The particularity of the author as a person is now more welcome in sophisticated readings of literature, and inferences from what we otherwise know about his or her life are no longer forbidden or treated with suspicion as introducing impurity into a suitably aesthetic appreciation of his or her art (2006: 140).

No matter how sound a theoretical stance is, it is not without jeopardy: critics can make the mistake of trying to force correspondences with personal experience, thus exposing themselves to the risk of forgetting that a writer is capable of writing about things other than his own life, given that life is not the only source for fiction, and that, even more significantly, stating that life and

fiction are almost alike might result in a denial of the very meaning of literature (or, in the least, of style). Such a claim can even drift to drastic conclusions such as putting on the same level novels and diaries, short stories and reports: no critical approach would maintain that Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and his *Congo Diary*, analogous in content, are equivalent in literary value.

The soundest evidence of the key role of biographical information in literary criticism is its broad employment in current analyses: it is a common practice to begin the study of a writer's fiction with a chapter introducing his or her life. Most of the monographs on Gallant's work are organized this way (see for instance Keefer 1989, Grant 1990, and Schaub 1998). Schaub's first chapter, "Life as Exile", discusses events in Gallant's life that had significant impact on her fiction. Prior to the critic's dense and remarkable study, however, she agrees with Keefer, who claimed that "it's doubtful that intimate knowledge of Gallant's own life would in any authentic way illuminate her work. [...] We have no need to drag in biographical fact to improve [its] eloquence" (1998: 1, quoting Keefer 1988: 197-198).

I concur with their assertion only partially. Surely, if emphasis falls on such words as "illuminate" or "authentic" I have necessarily to agree with them: the quality of Gallant's fiction will probably not be enhanced by our familiarity with her life (and, at any rate, her fiction would certainly not need any sort of enhancement); nevertheless, our understanding of her writings might be eventually increased by a wider knowledge of some aspects of her life. Whether this happens or not depends in particular on how and from which angle we look at them, and also on the meaning we attribute to the information collected. The simple, fact-driven position of J.J. Lipski provided a theoretical guide to my venture into Gallant's life<sup>4</sup>. It includes a good deal of common sense and a cautious, systematic analysis of biographical information that avoids extremes (these would comprise, for instance, a mere description of autobiographical inspiration, or the employment of corpora to calculate its percentage. Both procedures are not in the least capable of providing any decisive answer to the questions and doubts that often arise from reading Gallant's fiction). The most

remarkable biographical influence does not operate on the surface, in the one-to-one correspondence of life and fiction, but fluctuates from thematic to structural, from stylistic to expressive features<sup>5</sup>. Equally wrong is the attempt to support any interpretation relying *exclusively* on inference from the author's life. It can be a valid starting point for a critical work, but this has, at one point, to look closer at the text.

Limits are brought along by any critical theory, but Gallant, whose aversion toward academics is not limited to those who take interest in the life-writing interplay<sup>6</sup>, is particularly explicit in her dislike of critical biographers. Hers does not look like a negotiable position:

The more readers and critics think they know of a writer's private life, the more they misunderstand his or her work. The way they try to match it to the life and they get it wrong. It doesn't tell you anything (Todd 2009).

Gallant does not want us to put together her own experience with her writing, nor to add meaning to the writer's work through or because of the woman's life. This is what she says, though her praxis amply contradicts her theoretical postulates. First and foremost, she is the first to establish possible associations between particular events in her life and chief aspects of her fiction (as we shall see in detail throughout this chapter). Secondly, it is highly likely that Gallant's open declarations cover up her hidden agenda, which consists in trying to keep our interest away from her 'private' life.

Indeed, one may argue that no writer would like to be subjected to close scrutiny. Instead, Gallant's case certainly excluded, literature is full of examples of authors who self-attribute an aura of mystery and magic, trying deliberately to boost interest in their fiction, for the more disparate reasons. Or else, and more simply, there are writers who conceive writing as a full experience in a manner that is opposite to Gallant's. Margaret Atwood stands, in this respect as well as in several others, at the opposite side of her less famous compatriot who is the object

of this study. York's recent book on literary celebrity in Canada, in which Atwood is primarily considered<sup>7</sup>, is enlightening in this respect, and it is said to be "the first book in an emerging field of study" (Deshaye 2008: 251). Gallant does not belong to the group of celebrity writers, but she does not fit in what York defines "notorious privacy-seeking, solitary scribblers" either (2007: 5): during her career as a writer, she has been engaged in politics of negotiation of her private and public image, which I shall discuss in detail in the third section of this chapter.

### 1.1 A voice lost in snow: brief survey on early critical interest

If "curiosity about the writer's life kills interest in the work itself" (Schaub 1998: 1)<sup>8</sup>, as Gallant argued in relation to Simone de Beauvoir, its opposite may yield an even less enviable outcome: in Gallant's case in particular, anonymity contributed significantly to the long-term lack of interest in and popularity of her fiction. While the world was becoming familiar with contemporary writers such as Alice Munro or the already cited Margaret Atwood (both Canadian women writers to whom Gallant's fiction would be equated in terms of mastery only much later), Gallant's persona and her writing had remained almost completely unknown to the general public. Even the niche of *The New Yorker's* assiduous readers, the few who used to read her short stories since the Fifties, might have found out how Mavis Gallant looked only in 1965, when she appeared in the CBC Programme *Telescope* interviewed by Fletcher Markle. Had they missed that cursory appearance, they would not see that unfamiliar face (and name, to many, especially in the Canadian scenario) until much later, as the following dates attest: the first translation into French of one of Gallant's collections (the example is more relevant than any other as Gallant has been living in Paris from the Fifties) was released in 1988, whereas *The Other Paris*, her first collection, had been in print more than thirty years before, in 1956<sup>9</sup>. The first of her books ever published in her homeland, *The End of the World and Other Stories*, appeared in 1974, when editor Douglas Gibson almost proclaimed himself Gallant's Canadian agent<sup>10</sup>. It

took him another seven years to conceive, propose, and then publish *Home Truths. Selected Canadian Stories*, the first of Gallant's collections specifically created for the Canadian market<sup>11</sup>. The book immediately raised the attention of the academic world, and Canadian authorities, finally acknowledging Gallant's mastery, conferred on her the prestigious Governor's General Award. It was only the first of several prizes, awards, and titles she would receive in the next thirty years<sup>12</sup>. Before that, only a very few had noticed the extraordinary talent of the writer, and even fewer had bothered to give notice<sup>13</sup>. It was only in 1978 that Geoff Hancock, the well known interviewer of Canadian writers and artists, put Mavis Gallant on his list and published the first long interview released by the writer. In the same year, Gallant was granted for the first time systematic critical attention: Grazia Merler published an early monograph on her fiction.

When interest about Gallant finally began to take off<sup>14</sup>, with a significant concentration in the Nineties, academics started to write essays and books (to quote but the most famous, see Besner 1988, Keefer 1989, and Schaub 1998), while journalists began to be sent frequently to the writer's flat in Montparnasse, and – from a certain moment on, when she did not receive people *chez elle* anymore – to cafés and restaurants down the road or in central Paris, among which *Le Dôme* and *La Coupole*<sup>15</sup> seem to be her favourite<sup>16</sup>. Articles have been written, conversations have been transcribed. Every word uttered in public by Madame Gallant is recorded in magazines, academic reviews, and books; even a monograph has been recently published with the transcription of a two-day interview (Evain and Bertail 2009)<sup>17</sup>.

Whenever scholars turn attention to the life of Gallant, Hancock's interview is no doubt among the most frequently quoted documents. And though I have not looked for numerical evidence, I estimate that even more attention is devoted to her "Introduction" to *Home Truths*, which contains the first detailed introspection into the writer's life, and focuses on issues such as Canadianness and bilingualism. Later, in 1996, another "Preface" was published, which immediately became – and still is – the most valuable document in terms of quality and quantity of information given by the writer to her readers. It is the "Preface" to

what Gallant calls “the Big Book”<sup>18</sup>, a collection which took the name of *Collected Stories* in the U.S. and was more aptly<sup>19</sup> labelled *Selected Stories* when published for the Canadian and U.K. market. Asked about “events in [her] own private life that do have bearing on [her] creativity”, Gallant clearly and unequivocally replies:

Just what I put in the preface. I thought about it a lot last year when I was writing that preface; I spent three months on it, not working on anything else; it’s the first time I ever talked about my work, and I wanted to get it right once and for all. I think the essential point is having books very young. I was taught to read very young, and nobody has ever written who doesn’t read (Schenk 1998).

If “What is Style?”<sup>20</sup> is Gallant’s poetic and stylistic manifesto, and the “Introduction” to *Home Truths* is her coming to terms with her homeland, the “Preface” is certainly Gallant’s literary will. It seems not incidental that towards its end, including a suggestion for reading her stories, the writer explains it this way: “I am doing it now, because I may never have another occasion” (SS: xviii). Luckily, this was in 1996, and she has been given another fifteen years to reveal details about her life and fiction. But nothing significant has been published afterward which overcomes the “Preface” in value.

## 1.2 Preliminary remarks

Preliminary remarks are needed when one wants to make an incursion into Gallant’s life: a person’s life is not, necessarily and exclusively, a person’s private life. A line can be drawn, in every person’s experience, among something that is ‘public’ (like the schools you have attended or a job you have applied for), intermediate aspects that one may generally call ‘personal’ (whose discretion or openness depends on the subject’s personal inclination), and what could be considered ‘private’ (that is the sphere of close relationships and intimate habits

that one may want to keep secret, and rightly so): Gallant often reclaims “a right to privacy, which has nothing to do with creating an aura of secrecy” (Schaub 1998: 185n. 2)<sup>21</sup>. A discrete amount of information on Gallant’s ‘public’ and ‘personal’ life is available. Conversely, we know very little about her ‘private’ life and, respectfully, I intend to keep the present state of affairs.

Reading, watching, and listening to interviews, conversations, and commentaries for the past three years and more, looking for information that could help me trace the influence of autobiographical elements and events on the fiction of Mavis Gallant, I collected the significant amount of data that will be presented in the following section. It does not look like a proper biography, and it contains gaps that will probably remain unfilled. However, the result of a process of systematic collation of non-fictional *and* fictional texts is not as limited as I would have expected when, giving credit to the repeated claim that Gallant is one of the most elusive writers of our times, I began to bring together information on her life. A detailed reconstruction of the life of Mavis Gallant, containing a complete assemblage of materials scattered in the sources listed below, has not been written so far. Mine is meant to be as comprehensive as possible, but it lays no claims to be the most extensive account of the life of the writer, its chiefly concern being a focus on elements and events in Gallant’s life which have tangible influence on her fiction, and not an account of Gallant’s life altogether. Nevertheless, it ultimately reveals that attention has never been devoted so far to assembling *all* existing biographical information on the writer.

Undoubtedly, data would increase exponentially if one devoted time to interview people who are or have been familiar with Gallant (the writer operated similarly when she begun her research on Alfred Dreyfus), an operation that has not been conducted so far, and will probably not be done within a few years, as Gallant has not authorized a biography<sup>22</sup>. The boundary between scientific research and curiosity (or, even worse, violation of privacy) is very subtle. Gallant, possibly afraid of attracting this kind of attention, decided to donate all her manuscripts, typescripts and papers to the Thomas Fisher Library at the

University of Toronto, where they will become available to researchers only 25 years after her death. By now, we should content ourselves with what is published.

I have catalogued the information available on Gallant's life as follows:

- interviews and conversations;
- prefaces and introductions;
- non-fictional works;
- fiction, especially the semi-autobiographical stories of Linnet Muir.

In these texts, data vary from Gallant's childhood and upbringing to articulate descriptions of her creative process, from daily habits to literary tastes, from her work as a journalist to her writing method. Readers might be induced to confuse and mix the writer's declarations about her life and those pertaining to her fiction. We have instead to bear in mind that, even if they are to be found in the same texts and are linked by in-depth interconnections, statements *by* a writer are not necessarily statements *on* that writer. Actually, in the case of Gallant, they rarely are.

In this context, as in many others of the same kind, one may speculate endlessly on the facets of the relationship between life and fiction, wondering whether a writer uses autobiographical data or not, or what is the actual degree of life's influence on fiction. After endless speculation, we are likely to achieve no result at all. The most straightforward of all conclusions possibly – and curiously<sup>23</sup> – lays in the writer's own words: "it is evident that reality supports fiction", she once said in an interview (Girard and Valette 2003), but it is also clear from her words that the two do not correspond perfectly:

A writer's life stands in relation to his work as a house does to a garden, related but distinct. It is the business of the critical biography to make the two overlap – to bring some furniture out to the garden, as it were, and spread flowers all over the house (PN: 234).

This statement, that Gallant wrote when she reviewed Elizabeth Bowen's biography by Victoria Glendinning<sup>24</sup>, is employed frequently by critics in relation to the influence of life on writing. It is so in the *incipit* of Keefer's chapter on Gallant's biography, "A Literary Life" (1989: 1), and the same excerpt was also quoted by Marta Dvorak at the end of her 2009 interview. "Thank you for mingling house and garden for us", concludes Dvorak (22). But is it what Gallant really does in her interviews and conversations, fiction and non-fiction? And, if so, is Gallant good at doing the gardening?

## **2. The several lives of Mavis Gallant**

### **2.1 Contents and aims of a new biography**

Prior to analysing how Gallant manages to handle information about her life, this section will draw up a biography of the writer, meanwhile pinpointing core points of my interest. Some aspects which specifically concern this thesis, such as the quest for identity, its perception, and its representation, have already received a certain degree of consideration in previous critical analyses; conversely, concerns that are crucial to my argument (e.g. the way in which Gallant elaborates theoretically on language and meaning)<sup>25</sup> have only cursorily been hinted at so far, but they have never been approached systematically.

Emphasis will be given to childhood and upbringing, as well as to the years of Gallant's apprenticeship as a reporter in the now defunct *Montreal Standard*, due to the important place that they occupy in the writer's past life. Practically speaking, Gallant is quite exhaustive about these periods, whereas she becomes increasingly reluctant to reveal what happened later. As a matter of fact, data about her life begin to decrease from the Fifties. The more Gallant shaped herself

into what she thinks a proper writer should be like or, better said, what she thought of herself as a writer (not necessarily of all writers) – i.e. someone devoting her life entirely and almost exclusively to writing – the more any kind of information about her ‘new’ life became almost inaccessible or, at least, very limited. The outside world that she is so eager to observe has been systematically cut out from her private, intimate environment. She likes to stare at us, to study all of us as *characters*, but does not allow us to see her, afraid, perhaps, that we would turn her into a character or, even worse, into a *caricature*<sup>26</sup>. However, the temptation to peep into her living room like the eye of the camera did almost fifty years ago for *Telescope* is very strong. As we are not permitted to do so, I shall limit myself to comparing existing data, in order to assemble a biography of Madame Gallant as much detailed as any respectful incursion into the life of a reserved person would consent to, meanwhile struggling to restrain my own bent for curiosity.

The choice of plural in the title of this section is meant to reflect the variety of experiences Gallant has undergone since she was a child, among which we shall look in order to delineate her identities. First of all, it is a quote from Gallant’s “In Youth is Pleasure”<sup>27</sup>, a story in which an inquisitive Linnet recalls the last eight years of her life as “several lives” (HT: 232). Furthermore, it recalls the latest biography of Joseph Conrad<sup>28</sup>, a writer who has been compared to Gallant due to several analogies in their personal experience: a ‘voluntary exile’, bilingualism, and the decision to ultimately devote their lives almost exclusively to writing<sup>29</sup> are among the most relevant. To Gallant’s several lives correspond several identities, at times conflicting one another. During her long life, Gallant has been more than one person and one persona, as there were several in the Polish writer. But whereas Conrad’s negotiation among them results in a continuous shifting, almost floating, from public to private, from Polish to British, from exiled to settled, from mariner to writer, Gallant’s multiple facets, which the definition by Randy Boyagoda (2007) successfully summarises in “Paris-based-expatriate-Quebecer-anglo-phone-Canadian-Protestant-female-short-story-writer”, finally reconcile all her personae in a dialectic way, to leave us with the identity that Gallant prefers: “‘simply’ a writer”<sup>30</sup>.

## 2.2 Parents and life at home

Mavis Gallant was born Mavis Young<sup>31</sup> on August, 11 1922 in Montreal. Her father, Steward Young, was born in England from British and Scottish parents<sup>32</sup>, and then sent to Canada, like several other British remittance men<sup>33</sup>. Her mother was a Canadian of German, Breton, and Rumanian origins raised in the United States.

Gallant's family lived in Montreal, a city then split in two unequal halves, one French and Catholic (the dominant side), the other English and Protestant, the minority population. Her parents belonged to the latter, knew very little of the other (including its language), and, regardless of the common practice to keep these two communities separate, decided to create their own "mixed society" (HT: 304). Subsequently, they raised their only daughter from the very beginning in between two worlds, providing what would be considered an uncommon bilingual and bicultural upbringing. But more than to family routine, Gallant's French half was due to her nurse and her schooling. Commenting on her beginnings, she once wrote: "mine are wholly Quebec, English and Protestant, yes, but with a strong current of French and Catholic" (SS: xv). Gallant's parents showed no deep affection nor interest in her, so she was "an unwelcome guest in her parents' house" (Schaub 1988: 2) every time she came back from one of the numerous boarding schools she was sent to<sup>34</sup>.

Gallant's parents were in the habit of giving parties, to which local artists – both Anglo and French-Canadian – were invited. Glimpses of this period are captured in "The Doctor", one of the stories belonging to the Linnet Muir cycle<sup>35</sup>:

This overlapping in one room of French and English, of Catholic and Protestant – my parent's way of being, and so to me life itself – was as unlikely 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. My parents and their friends were, in their way, explorers. They had in common a fear for being bored. [...] The winter circle shared [...] a certain vocabulary of the mind (HT: 305).

A mixture of fascination and disappointment pervades Gallant's accounts: fascination seems to have occurred only later, when she realized how atypical such environment was in a city strictly divided in watertight compartments, and how brave (perhaps reckless) these young "explorers" were during those years, in a context that Gallant often depicts, in fiction and recollections, as old fashion and narrow minded (in contrast with the atmosphere she would eventually benefit from in historically grounded and culturally founded Europe, but also very different from multicultural and modern United States). Disappointment, instead, designates her attitude towards grown-ups. Indeed, it also accounts for the other way round: when it came to children, the typical behaviour of adults was (actually Gallant seems to suggest it never changed)<sup>36</sup> a list of unexplained don'ts, which she refers to as "'not to' – not to say, do, touch, remove, go out, argue, reject, eat, pick up, open, shout, appear to sulk, appear to be cross" (HT: 202). As a direct consequence, "dark riddles filled the corners of life because no enlightenment was thought required" (HT: 282). Linnet puts down to her "being young" the fact that she was the last person to whom anyone owed an explanation (HT: 282-283).

Parties were the best situations for her selfish mother (whose occupation in life remains unknown) to step on the 'stage', and the presence of her young daughter was never part of the script. So young Mavis was sent to bed, possibly addressed like Linnet: "wouldn't you be better off in your room?" (HT: 307). The little *enfant prodige* raised her parents' attention only when they could play with her as if she were "a mechanical doll" (HT: xvi): because she "read and spoke English and French, at about the same level [...], they found it amusing to give [her] a simple text in English and have [her] rattle it off in French" (HT: xv-xvi). This linguistic duality, the capability of understanding, from the very beginning, that English and French were not only and simply two different languages, but entailed different cultural codes and dissimilar ways of thinking, representing reality, and expressing feelings, came to Gallant's mind and was fully understood only later, but as a matter of fact she grew up somehow aware that for everything in life it is feasible to find another perspective, a double, opposite, or mirroring image (Schaub 1998: 2)<sup>37</sup>.

Referring to her own unusual upbringing, which included unfair and incongruous rules, Gallant reveals that “it left [her] with two systems of behaviour, divided by syntax and tradition [...]. Somewhere in this duality may be the exact point of the beginning of writing” (SS: xv). Being brought up almost perfectly bilingual is not perceived by Gallant exclusively as an opportunity: not sure that such thing as “perfect bilingualism” really exists, she “wonder[s], even, if it is desirable: one needs a strong, complete language, fully understood, to anchor one’s understanding” (HT: xvii). Gallant seems to look at language expecting (perhaps hoping) it would work as a unifying component, capable of mending someone’s identity, meanwhile averting internal fragmentation. Linguistic split contributed instead to Gallant’s directly experienced “lack of roots” – as a character in “The Wedding Ring”<sup>38</sup> (CL: 297) calls it – which frequently (re)appears in her narrative, variously fictionalized. Recurrently, in her stories, characters do not belong, do not want to belong, or do not know how to belong to the places or the situations they live in. Not rarely, these situations differently revolve around linguistic ambiguity (bilingualism, incapability to learn a foreign language, or code-mixing, to quote but a few). Thacker argues that

her stories are never about belonging but about isolation or random encounters in places that are both real and unreal, with people who are seen but not really seen, speaking across gaps of language and understanding (2009: 368).

To escape from a situation analogous to the ones she explores in her fiction, thus distinguishing herself from the majority of her own ‘tethered’ characters, Gallant moved to Europe when she was not thirty yet, and settled, physically and emotionally, in Paris. A reflection of the writer’s personal experience remains in her child characters, who cannot comprehend their parents’ obscure, unexplained, selfish, and often insane decisions, and even less resist them. Were this not enough already, children often undergo, in life as much as in fiction, enduring shocks: in what Linnet Muir calls “the prison of childhood” (HT: 268), amongst any sort of ill-treatments – all connected with the impossibility to resist adults unfairly exerting control over them – “the incomparable trauma of rejection”

stands over the others in cruelty. In *Green Water, Green Sky*, Gallant's first novel published in 1959, little George is left for one day with his aunt and cousin in Venice. The separation from his parents does not last long, but he will never forget the way they left him, unexpectedly and almost unawares. Large attention and importance are given to the scene, eloquently coinciding with the opening of the whole novel: "They went off for the day and left him, in the slyest, sneakiest way you could imagine" (GWGS: 1); bewilderment is a feeling that the writer deeply examines throughout the chapter and in the whole novel. Perhaps, in George's, Gallant reflected her own bewilderment: when her mother brought her to school for the first time, she had her sit on a chair and never came back to pick her up. "My mother brought me there. She told me: 'I will come back in ten minutes' and she never did" (Girard and Valette 2003)<sup>39</sup>.

Lack of communication, misinterpreting, and lack of understanding, which are insisted in the stories dealing with the familiar pattern of child-parent relations (but which, to some extent, encompass nearly every relationship in Gallant's fictional world), noticeably trace back to Gallant's early years.

Even if Gallant seems to point at both her parents for failing in their parental role<sup>40</sup>, her tone becomes more indulgent when she speaks about her father<sup>41</sup>, while she feels and shows a more deep-rooted hatred towards her mother. Due to her being the exact opposite of what Mavis wanted to become (or, more correctly, inspiring Gallant anything she would not become), Gallant's mother, both in fiction and recollections, is confined to the role of a blurred figure in the background, "not even an X in the diary" (HT: 314)<sup>42</sup>. It is a retaliatory punishment (a case of *contrapasso*)<sup>43</sup> for someone who liked to spend all her time in the spotlight. In the eloquent introduction to the woman's fictionalized persona, Linnet declares: "I won't begin to describe her, it would never end" (HT: 230). Glimpses of what the woman was like are mainly to be found in "In Youth is Pleasure" and in "The Doctor":

My mother [...] smiled, talked, charmed anyone she didn't happen to be related to, swam in scandal like a partisan among people. She made herself the central figure in loud,

spectacular dramas which she played with the houselights on; you could see the audience too (HT: 230).

As soon as Mavis grew up, she hastened to switch those lights off. On her own admission, Gallant reacted to her mother's total disinterest in privacy by becoming a very reserved person, rigorous in preventing journalists to take the same route as the woman, who was in the habit of going "through [her] things like a beaver" (Lahiri 2009b: 120), "digging into [her] diaries and notebooks" (HT: 219). Becoming antithetical to her mother was a tenet that Gallant has been pursuing lifelong. She also tried to emancipate very early in order to set free from her mother, who was not any less eager in getting rid of her unwanted daughter. Rare glimpses of appreciation towards the woman are motivated by her interest in and passion for books. In "Voices Lost in Snow", Linnet's mother is reserved an unusually indulgent description, which partially seems to forgive – or in the least to understand – the woman, mainly on account of her ingenuity. In this description, Linnet's mother recalls Shirley Perrigny of *A Fairly Good Time*, the two women being affected by a similar optical and figurative myopia<sup>44</sup>.

More often, Gallant's mother leaves negative traces in her daughter's fiction. She is likely to have inspired characters like selfish parents who discard their own children, drag them around, or exploit them egoistically. It is so, for instance, in the early story "Going Ashore"<sup>45</sup>, where Lila Ellenger, a youngish mother, focuses on the satisfaction of her related sexual and social appetites. Her daughter Emma is good-looking in her white dress (one of the few clothes her mother bothered to bring on a cruise trip), but to her mother she is good only at helping her hook some rich man, disposed to support them both. Not entirely self-sufficient economically and psychologically, children and adolescents like Emma still rely on their unreliable parents, because they know no other way of leaving, have not been taught one: "Lila has not bothered to teach Emma the social language that will both protect and advance her" (Keefer 1989: 112), no more than Gallant's mother had bothered to do with her own daughter.

Mavis's father was "an amateur painter", whose lack of authentic talent came to represent one of Gallant's main worries for a long time. Assuming that talent is something that you can inherit, and lack of talent is potentially inheritable as well, she was worried to become, like him, someone who confines the writing of fiction to spare time (SS: xii). For a long time, Gallant did not realize that he had a job allowing him to earn a living for his family, and that he could not sustain his wife and daughter by being exclusively a painter. Perhaps, it is before this discovery that Gallant developed her 'naïve' project to become 'simply' a writer. But it was not with equal naïveté that she pursued her aim and finally reached her goal.

Her father's passion influenced Gallant in the form of visual imagination, and, more generally speaking, curiosity for paintings, painters, and visual arts, together with a documented predominance of sight over the other senses, as Lesley Clement (2000) among others has magisterially shown in her monograph *Learning to Look. A Visual Response to Mavis Gallant*<sup>46</sup>. Gallant's father used to bring her to museums and galleries, and to teach her how to look at paintings. He gave his daughter paint boxes, encouraging her to cultivate her artistic skills<sup>47</sup>.

Recollections of her father often include some degree of affection, but she does not spare him from criticism. However, because he died when she was very young, she bestowed on him the kind of admiration dead people often inspire. His was a suspicious death: when Mavis was about ten, he went away, and she was told he would come back, but he did not. Three years later, when she was still waiting, she was revealed the truth<sup>48</sup>. Steward had died mysteriously, and rumours were circulating that he had committed suicide. "In Youth is Pleasure" is a sort of detective story where Linnet carries out an investigation into her father's death. Indeed, the entire cycle is a quest for the woman's origins, conducted to set Linnet free from an overwhelming past, so as to let the writer-in-her unfold her wings and flight away, to begin "her journey into a new life and a dream past" (HT: 228). The episode of her father's death was to leave deep signs in Gallant's soul. Yet the news, received with affected indifference, was so intimately felt as a dramatic shock, that it resulted even in a physical reaction:

I had not foreseen [...] the verbal violence of the scene or the effect it might have. The storm that seemed to break in my head, my need to maintain the pose of indifference [...] were such a strain that I had physical reactions, like stigmata, which doctors would hopelessly treat on and off for years and which vanished when I became independent (HT: 228-229)<sup>49</sup>.

Linnet's investigation does not bring a definitive solution: after inquiring of three men who were among her father's closest friends, she "arrived at something about tuberculosis of the spine and a butchery of an operation". Linnet goes on like this:

He started back to England to die there but either changed his mind or was too ill to begin the journey; at Quebec City, where he was to have taken ship, he shot himself in a public park at five o'clock in the morning. That was one version; another was that he died at sea and the gun was found in his luggage. The revolver figured in all three accounts. [...] Before July was out I had settled his fate in my mind and I never varied: I thought he had died of homesickness; sickness for England was the consumption, the gun, the everything (HT: 234-235).

Through Linnet, Mavis chooses to catalogue his death as "homesickness", a 'disease' not quite uncommon among her characters. Unlike the writer, yet like her father, many of her characters live at undesired distance from their homeland. They are not only remittance men like him, but also (and more often) immigrants, exiled people, soldiers and prisoners of different kinds, and even when people's destiny is not subdued to any external obstacle, for some reason or another they feel abroad, adrift, ashore, longing for a place to call 'home', where they desperately try to go (back) to, yet without putting real effort in their pursuit. Because dislocation can be either a physical condition, like the one just described, or an emotional, inner, intimate state, characters may be living as well on their native soil, and nonetheless feel uneasy, and a sense of non belonging.

For all these reasons, the role of physical space, and the relationship between characters and the context in which they are plunged in, are relevant in their quest for identity. Where is home? What is home? (Who am I? Where is here?)<sup>50</sup> are questions which receive no other answer but the provocative or

paradoxical statement “home is in your mind” (Collinge and Vernadakis 2003: 7). In their quest for identity, where boundaries of individuals and places no longer exist, or, worse, ‘who’ and ‘where’ superimpose, the end of the journey does not coincide with the end of the quest; therefore, it does not offer interior rest. On the contrary, it brings about further disillusionment<sup>51</sup>. It is not so in Gallant’s personal experience: if, like Carol Frazier, the protagonist of the early story “The Other Paris”<sup>52</sup>, Gallant was initially attracted by Paris because of the movies and had shaped in her mind the image of a romantic metropolitan city, unlike the American girl (to some extent here a fictional ‘double’), she was not disappointed when her dream-like destination turned into a tangible urban assemblage. Using her early-learnt adaptability, she felt immediately at home. Moreover, Paris was a place of opportunities, culture, freedom, and Gallant could not have desired more (see Hancock 1978a). It also “offered her anonymity, at least until 1988, when she appeared in *Apostrophes*, the most widely watched literary television panel in France” (Schaub 1998: 2)<sup>53</sup>.

Whatever her feelings towards *la ville lumière*, or any other place she visited and could have decided to move to at that time, Gallant has never questioned her Canadianness. This is an issue that would probably deserve a deeper, almost endless investigation, and partially this has already been done, as Gallant’s degree of Canadianness has been debated frequently<sup>54</sup>. When it comes to Canada, for some reason, any discourse on national and cultural identity seems to become more relevant, almost crucial. Aware of this peculiarity, Gallant discussed the issue thoroughly and unequivocally in the first session of her “Introduction” to *Home Truths*. Despite being labelled an ‘international’ or ‘cosmopolitan’ writer, more often an ‘expatriate’ or even an ‘expatriot’<sup>55</sup>, Gallant puts down the issue of citizenship to being still, and simply, “a Canadian who is living abroad” (Ondaatje 2002: v). As Howells has pointed out, she “challenges any narrowly nationalist definition of Canadianness, as lifestyle or literary style” (1987: 8). To a wider extent, she *gallantly* refuses any other classification (and this could apply to several concerns other than nationality), claiming that she has “never been anything else” but Canadian (HT: xiii), and maintaining that, because she can go back to Canada whenever she wants, she has never felt in exile<sup>56</sup>. It is potentially

so, but was never such in practice: Gallant visited Canada several times, but she has never planned to go back for good, and in opposition to her relentless moves as a child, she has been living in the very same flat for about sixty years now, in 14 Rue Jean Ferrandi, in the 6<sup>th</sup> district, which the French call *arrondissement*.

### 2.3 The school of life

Mavis Gallant was sent to seventeen boarding schools “in Quebec, Ontario, Connecticut, New York State, and one other state” (Grant 1990: 1). The first was the French Pensionnat Saint-Louis de Gonzague, in Sherbrooke Avenue East, where she was inexplicably<sup>57</sup> enrolled as a boarder, “packed there [...] from the age of four” (HT: 299), though the building was situated just down the road to where she lived. From then on, she alternately attended French and English schools, feeling each time not completely belonging to either world. From this experience she learnt an instructive lesson: she developed the capability to adapt to every new context very quickly, and to feel never completely alien to *any* context thereafter. “There’s no milieu I don’t feel comfortable in, that I don’t immediately understand”, she revealed to Geoff Hancock (1978a: 23)<sup>58</sup>. Later, with equal easiness, she would spend her thirties travelling around Europe, adapting to poverty in Spain (when she did not know yet what her destiny would be like), and feeling immediately at home in unknown Paris.

When her mother remarried, after her father’s death, Gallant moved to New York, where she completed her studies. For most of her teenage years, she was staying with a guardian, a psychiatrist who lived in New York with his wife. While an assistant of Freud, the man had been analysed by him. He probably instilled in Gallant an interest in Freud and psychoanalysis, an interest highly responsible for the vast space and relevance given to dreams and dream-like episodes in her fiction, and also to characters who suffer from mental disorders (one example encompassing both aspects is Florence’s schizophrenia and her

unremittingly attempt to reconcile with her father through dreams in *Green Water, Green Sky*). This is perhaps the stage in Gallant's life which we know least about. There is no apparent reason for not describing in detail this part of her life, if not, perhaps, an attempt to harbour one of the few happy memories of her past<sup>59</sup>. Gallant in person seems to sustain my hypothesis when she writes: "it was in New York, at fourteen, that I understood for the first time there was a possibility in life of being happy" (HT: xiv). I also postulate that a veiled, rather ironical homage to the man is contained in the short story "April Fish"<sup>60</sup>, where, in addition to recollections of a dream, the protagonist receives "an original letter written by Dr. Sigmund Freud" to a friend (SS: 307).

America (namely New York, rather than Ontario, that in Linnet's descriptions is closer to Canada in mentality and habits, HT: 227-228) is seen through the eyes of an eighteen year-old young woman with an urge for independence. It is therefore a celebration of freedom as opposed to Canada's gloomy atmosphere of Victorian-like close-mindedness. Freedom is presented as "loud" showing of feelings, framed in "people laughing in a cinema" (HT: 227); it is also of a more intellectual kind, like the possibility to "refuse to salute the flag", a "stubborn" behaviour for which Linnet was not punished (HT: 220).

At school, Gallant learnt not only two languages, but also "two systems of behaviour", magisterially recalled in the paragraph of "Between Zero and One" quoted above. Unlike the majority of the population of French and English who lived in Montreal, and who "knew nothing whatever about each other" (HT: 245), Mavis early developed a natural bent for understanding diversity, and for putting herself into someone else's place. Such capability, almost a gift, never abandoned her. It results in her stories as an uninterrupted ebb and tide from very different – even opposite – points of view, a shifting that never sounds artificial, or mechanical. It is also evident in the writer's 'sociological' analysis of habits and reactions, and in her ability to 'envision' (the word is a Gallantian one) and describe characters in their very context<sup>61</sup>. Gallant's skills in portraying the quintessence of the context in which her stories are set (to Somacarrera Íñigo she said: "I can't imagine writing except within a sociological context", 2000: 205)<sup>62</sup>,

enabled her to take us back to Montreal of the Thirties and the Forties, or to Paris in the late Sixties, as if these contexts still existed, a certain atmosphere being utterly recreated within a few words. Fictional and non-fictional writings reveal her profound interest in history and politics: Gallant has described herself as “*extremely* interested in politics” (Hancock 1978a: 94), though her juvenile socialist passion has left room to a more composed left-wing attitude<sup>63</sup>. Her double detachment from Europe and Canada<sup>64</sup> – one cultural, the other physical – results in her piercing glance, which is able to capture the nonsense of what she observes with the eye of the reporter, and then shapes thanks to the sensitivity and the mastery of the writer.

While Gallant writes, she personally travels back in time to specific historical moments that provide background to her stories, as if she were physically there. In “Memory and Invention”, an essay first published in the Italian collection *Varietà di Esilio*, recalling the genesis of one of her stories, she quotes a significant episode, very curious indeed:

Once, it must have been at about 1992, when I happened to be working all day, everyday, on a story set in the Paris of 1953, I was stunned and bewildered to step outside and discover the shape of the cars, the casual clothing and clean façades of the nineteen-nineties. This shock – a true shock, for it brought me to a standstill – lasted no more than a couple of seconds (Evain and Bertail 2009: 29).

A time and space framework is indisputably unavoidable to her; similarly to what she revealed to Somacarrera Íñigo in 2000, she spoke to Lahiri almost ten years later: “I can’t imagine writing something that doesn’t have a time attached and I don’t like reading something that could happen anytime, anywhere” (2009b: 147). This is ultimately the most literal way of interpreting her statement that “reality informs fiction”, which I quoted in the previous section.

The years of schooling are crucial to Gallant’s relationship with reading. The writer has shown deep interest in books from a surprisingly early age. Though she admitted that, when little, she was unable to do ‘practical’ things, such as

telling the time or separating left from right, she reveals that she began to read when she was only three<sup>65</sup>, and cannot recall a time without books thereafter. If anybody were ever to recreate her virtual library and write down a list of all the books she read, it would necessarily begin with her children books<sup>66</sup>. In the gloomy and rigid atmosphere of “the first, the darkest” of her boarding schools (HT: 236)<sup>67</sup>, nuns double-checked for approval everything that children did or owned, and French books were therefore banned when judged inappropriate. But when it came to English books, they were usually accepted: funnily enough, none of the English teachers knew English, and books were only cursorily leafed through, their appropriateness determined merely from their pictures.

These stories, which she read passionately, are to Gallant her first literary models: “I don’t know that I was conscious of having models, but I think literary models start with the very first books you read, as a child. There are wonderful children’s books in English” (Boyce 1990), and they are responsible for shaping Gallant’s imagination. To some extent it is due to them if today we have an English writer and not a French one. Relentlessly, Gallant has declared that she would have not become a writer if she did not write in English, because English is “irremovably entrenched as the language of imagination” (SS: xvi):

I owe it to children’s books – picture books, storybooks, then English and American classics – that I absorbed once and for all the rhythm of English prose, the order of words in an English sentence and how they are spelled. [...] Nothing supposed, daydreamed, created, or invented would enter my mind by way of French (SS: xvi).

French and English are, to Gallant, profoundly different. It is not only a matter of words and syntax: they demand a completely different way of conceiving, verbalizing, and representing reality (HT: xvii-xviii)<sup>68</sup>. When she elaborates on these aspects, Gallant often turns her attention to translation, a field which has been little studied so far<sup>69</sup>, despite the writer’s sustained interest and a conspicuous number of thought-provoking remarks. “Just as a French conversation is utterly different from a conversation in English, French translations can’t reflect what one writes in English. I want a translation to be good French, and not word-

for-word English” (Kalotay 1999). Very collaborative with her translators<sup>70</sup>, Gallant refuses to self-translate her work, claiming that she would be unable to do it: “Je manquerais de profondeur, de nuance”, she revealed to Girard and Valette (2003). To Marta Dvorak, who has been able to interrogate Gallant quite thoroughly on the issue of translation, she once said, in her typical dry wit: “it would be like eating the same dish twice in a row – and the second time cold!” (1995: 101). Were she ever to embark on such challenge, she believes it would entail a considerable amount of rewriting. She harshly criticizes Marguerite Yourcenar, one of her favourite writers and a woman she immensely admires, because she never agreed to have her work translated other than literally. Gallant blames this attitude for the marginal place Yourcenar occupies in the literary panorama of the United States: “She had said she didn’t want to be betrayed, but if you translate word for word into English, it reads like cement” (Kalotay 1999)<sup>71</sup>. On the contrary, she appreciates Checkov’s translation in English, and maintains that “anybody who has the English language and doesn’t read the wonderful translations of Checkov is an idiot” (Allardice 2009).

Asked about her reaction in reading her own work in another language, she also reveals:

Reading my own work, in French, had a bizarre effect on my English. I began to construct a kind of expatriate written English, using French syntax. It didn’t last, of course, but I began to wonder if the overlap of the two languages – something I had always dreaded – had finally come about. Now, I speak, read, or listen only to English in the morning. It starts the day on the English track, so to speak (Boyce 1990).

Very committed to her work, Gallant has spent each and every day of her life reading and writing, militarily disciplined, resembling in this Alfred Dreyfus, the much studied protagonist of her not-yet published latest book<sup>72</sup>. “It is not a burden. It’s a way of life”, called Gallant in conversation with Daphne Kalotay (1999), to whom she revealed details about her writing habits and her favourite practices<sup>73</sup>. Being immersed in a French environment, she needs to be very strict with herself, in order to protect her English, to keep it alive, natural and reliable.

Resembling several other aspects of her life, her daily routine is split in two halves: she spends her morning in an English-speaking enclave, reading exclusively in English and writing or editing her papers. She then allows herself to be part of the surrounding world, and French becomes her means to communicate with people. Writing on Marguerite Yourcenar<sup>74</sup>, Gallant said that writers in exile “usually treat their language like a delicate timepiece, making certain it runs exactly and that no dust gets inside” (PN: 189). So far, no “dust” has been allowed to enter the mechanism, though Gallant’s latest story was published in mid-Nineties, and we do not know if she succeeded in keeping the two languages distinct after that date. As far as interviews are concerned, I noticed a more frequent use of French expressions in the latest long interviews (see Dvorak and Lahiri, both released in 2009). Lahiri underlines this *petite nuance* of Gallant’s speech when she frames the woman in a preliminary description:

Her accent, soft but proper in the English manner, evoked, to my ear, the graceful and sophisticated speech of 1940s cinema. Her laughter, less formal, erupts frequently as a hearty expulsion of breath. French, the language that has surrounded her for over half a lifetime, occasionally adorns and accompanies her English (2009b: 106)<sup>75</sup>.

If anything has entered Gallant’s English prose, verbs like “adorn” and “accompany” suggest it has not damaged it as anything like “dust” would have probably done.

Gallant has often been asked about her reading habits and her favourite writers. Her well assorted quotes often include Flaubert, Proust, Chekov, Céline, Katherine Mansfield, Marguerite Yourcenar, Gide, Nabokov, Fitzgerald, and Hemingway. The list is almost endless, and many of these writers have also been compared to Gallant or reckoned as literary models<sup>76</sup>, though, as said, Gallant claims that literary influence does not operate for long: “I doubt very much if anyone my age can be influenced by an author; ‘influence’, for what it amounts to, enters the mind when one is very young” (Samway 1987: 486). In “What is Style?”, the writer offers the clearest definition of “influences”, which she calls “acquisitions”:

There is no such a thing as a writer who has escaped being influenced. I have never heard a professional writer of any quality or standing talk about ‘pure’ style, or say he would not read this or that for fear of corrupting or affecting his own; but I have heard it from would-be writers and amateurs. Corruption – if that is the word – sets in from the moment a child learns to speak and to hear language used and misused. A young person who does not read, and read widely, will never write anything – at least, nothing of interest. From time to time, in France, a novel is published purporting to come from a shepherd whose only influence has been the baaing of lambs on some God – forsaken slope of the Pyrenees. His artless and untampered – with mode of expression arouses the hope that there will be many more like him, but as a rule he is never heard from again. For ‘influences’ I would be inclined to substitute ‘acquisitions’. What they consist of, and amount to, are affected by taste and environment, preferences and upbringing (even, and sometimes particularly, where the latter has been rejected), instinctive selection. The beginning writer has to choose, tear to pieces, spit out, chew up and assimilate as naturally as a young animal – as naturally and as ruthlessly. Style cannot be copied, except by the untalented. It is, finally, the distillation of a lifetime of reading and listening, of selection and rejection. But if it is not a true voice, it is nothing (PN: 178-179).

In advising the students of her classes when she was writer in residence at the University of Toronto in 1983-1984, she would give no suggestion other than this: “read books”. “When I was writer-in-residence at a large Canadian university”, she recalls in an interview, “I would tell the students who came to see me, ‘Read’. Often they would answer, ‘Read what?’ Young adults. I could hardly believe it” (Samway 1987: 487)<sup>77</sup>. Elsewhere, asked “What would your advice be to someone who wants to become a writer?”, Gallant replied: “To read. To read and to write. What else can I say? A born writer doesn’t need to be told how to ‘become’ a writer. There’s no such thing as advice” (Boyce 1990)<sup>78</sup>.

## 2.4 Mavis at work

Significantly, Pasternak's credo that "only personal independence matters", so often quoted in essays and articles on Gallant, has been chosen by the writer as epigraph to *Home Truths*, her attempt to come to terms with her past and origins. It represented from an early age a credo for Gallant herself, and it soon became for her also a way of living. When she completed her studies and came back from the States, Gallant was still a minor. Economic independence was a necessary prerequisite to live the way she wanted. Trying to pass herself off a twenty-one year old, she began to work, in order to support herself and avoid being assigned another guardian. No matter how difficult it must have been, she never complained for being "solely responsible for [her] economic survival". She merely observes that "no living person felt duty toward [her]" (HT: 219).

When Gallant came back to Canada, several people thought she was dead. A story was circulating about a girl who had drowned in a river closed to where she used to live. That was instead the tragic destiny of a young boy, as Linnet tells us in "In Youth is Pleasure", but the reaction of her nurse when Mavis knocked at her door was of authentic shock and surprise. "Tu vis?" ('you are alive?'), the older woman asked in French, the language the two had shared long time before. It had been almost completely forgotten, but it came back fluently in a while, due to Gallant's natural vocation for languages<sup>79</sup>.

Gallant rented a room in her nurse's flat, and begun a new, independent life. The Second World War, one of the darkest historical times ever, was full of opportunities for women, opportunities otherwise reserved to men, who had been sent to fight overseas. John or Johnny Gallant, a Winnipeg jazz player<sup>80</sup> whom she was married to for five years (from 1943 to 1948) was among them. He spent most part of the marriage away from home. Lack of employers gave Gallant the chance to work initially at the National Film Board<sup>81</sup> in Ottawa (1943-1944), in the section of negative-cutting, and then at a newspaper, the *Montreal Standard* (1944-1950). One day at work she "overheard an editor say: 'If it hadn't been for the goddamned war, we wouldn't have hired even one of the goddamned women'" (SS: xiii). Gallant's comments on the unfair treatment reserved to young

women like her give evidence to her feminism: she stood up for the equality of the sexes and, rather than taking a manifest political turn on the issue, she supported women's right to equality and, from her part, simply strived hard to take over the reins of her own life and let nobody else decide on her behalf<sup>82</sup>.

Journalism represents Gallant's fundamental training as a writer, what she calls her "apprenticeship" (SS: xiii): it taught her how to look at things from different angles, and how much you can discover about life by "digging out facts and putting them together" (Schaub 1998: 4). While a young reporter, she never agreed to write the stories she was assigned, and always asked for something different. Her colleagues and boss kept complaining about that girl someone once had called "that Marxist enfant terrible" (SS: xiv). This is one of the stages in Gallant's life that she recalls copiously and quite enthusiastically, though at the journal, once more, she was the object of people's envy and resistance. Grievance, almost expected from the few men who had not been sent to the front, was not exclusively theirs: strict hierarchy of society, with its rules and roles, was so deeply rooted in people's mentality that even her female colleagues dispraised Gallant's independent attitude and wished she would convert to the dictates of the *Feminine Mystique* slavishly followed by the members of the middle class.

In this climate of hostility, that is utterly recreated in the "fictionalized versions of these years" (Besner 1988: 4) "Between Zero and One" and "With the Capital T", Gallant spent the time of her apprenticeship never handing over the management of her own life, and never repudiating her principles, nor changing her way of doing things, as a reporter as well as a woman. She won her battle, as she was never fired, nor reduced in rank. Apart from her gender (unchangeable) and her temper (deliberately unchanged), there would have been no other reason: when she recalls this time, she remembers being very good at doing her job. She was the only reporter in the journal able to interview personalities belonging to the French-Canadian environment, and her attention often turned to people no one else was interested in interviewing, could interview, or even knew existed (SS: xiv). Furthermore, she was full of creativity and very quick at finding new stories to tell, though not as quick at writing them down. "I was always on the edge of a

deadline, and even on the wrong side” (SS: xiv). In conversation with Pleuke Boyce (1990), she confessed: “I have always been a slow writer”. The way she writes has not changed throughout the years, and it is another element connecting *le metier* of the journalist to that of the writer (SS: xiv).

Gallant’s creativity originated long before she became a reporter. As an only child, she used to spend a lot of time in her own room, making up a language and a fictional world populated by characters. These people, “paper dolls” cut out of magazines (SS: ix), spoke an invented language which she gave the name of “talking marigold”. It consisted of a mixture of English, French, and a few Italian syllables “in recordings of bel canto, which [her] mother liked and often played” (SS: xvi). This practice, which her mother mistook for an insane habit of talking to herself<sup>83</sup>, testifies to Gallant’s natural bent for inventing stories, a talent that developed very early and never vanished. “I have been writing or just thinking about things to write since I was a child” (SS: ix). She never suffered from creative impasse, thus never ceased to be inspired with new plots. She started to write fiction and, before that, poetry, when she was very young, but then destroyed the picnic hamper containing most of her papers when she moved to Europe<sup>84</sup>.

As a reporter, Gallant tried on several different genres<sup>85</sup>. When they turn to these years, critics rightly focus on the influence of journalism on Gallant’s fiction, especially on themes and style. The rhythm of her prose and the conciseness of her sentences are certainly praiseworthy qualities that we can find as well – despite obvious differences of genre – in the writing of features and articles, many of which investigate aspects of the life of refugees, immigrants, displaced people, all human types that would later inhabit her fictional world. Undoubtedly, the years at the newspaper became a repository for “an enormous mental catalogue of places, people, information that still seeps into [her] stories” (SS: xiv).

Though being a reporter was not her deepest and strongest passion, Gallant put deep and strong passion in every interview she conducted and in every article she wrote, and her techniques, attitude, and method as a reporter left further deep

traces in her style as a writer, in addition to those just quoted. An essayistic trait<sup>86</sup>, quite uncommon in short fiction, is perhaps the utmost specific result in style (though a bent for interplaying genres is more variously explored in Gallant's writing), while, methodologically, two elements account for the impact of journalism: first of all, a writer, like a reporter, is not someone who simply transcribes facts, limiting his work to mere description. Therefore, there has to be (and in her stories there is) the pursuit of a goal, the desire – almost an urge – to discover, and then to reveal, something that we (and perhaps also the writer) did not know before. In other words, like journalism, fiction “consist entirely about more than meets the eye: otherwise, it is not worth a second's consideration” (HT: xii)<sup>87</sup>. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly,

my method of getting something on paper was the same as for the fiction I wrote at home: I could not move on to a second sentence until the first sounded true. True to what? Some arrangements in my head, I suppose. I wrote by hand, in pencil, made multitudinous changes, erased, filled in, typed a clean page, corrected, typed (SS: xiv).

Her method (in practice, and, more significantly, in theorization, stating that such a thing, explicitly denied, exists within Gallant's poetics) has remained unvaried. Even now, in the era of computers, Gallant never converted to technology. She is worried that a sudden change in her method, so well-established within several decades of practice, might jeopardize the uninterrupted flow of her ideas, or, else, affect her way of writing and undermine her creativity. Gallant cautiously tries to cocoon her imagination and her talent, as much as she does with her literary language, as if all these elements were flimsy or fragile, thus potentially breakable. For this reason, she enacts the strategies that I have already explained to guarantee the preservation of each and every aspect of her well-established writing routine.

The writer Graham Greene wrote on Joseph Conrad: “that blasted Pole makes me green with envy because he writes literature when he's trying to write journalism and I write journalism when I'm trying to write literature” (Kealks 2006: 466). It would be difficult for anyone who happened to read any piece of

Gallant's non-fiction to think that this quote would not, with only a few changes (just Canadian for Pole, and she for he), perfectly suit Gallant's case. Yet, once we have established the coincidences between writing journalism and writing fiction, we cannot help turning our attention to their differences:

The distinction between journalism and fiction is the difference between within and without. Journalism recounts as exactly and economically as possible the weather in the street; fiction takes no notice of that particular weather but brings to life a distillation of all weathers, a climate of the mind (SS: ix)<sup>88</sup>.

At one point of her career as a reporter, Gallant turned her attention to a couple of practices quite common in those times: captions and photo features. The latter consists of a very simple technique, something resembling a proto-cinematic feature, based on pictures (reporters were usually accompanied by a photographer when they were sent out to cover a story) which required explicative captions in order to link them to one another. Two main aspects of these practices had tangible effects on her writing: on the one hand, there is a close relationship with the way Gallant tries to describe the process of writing, something she labels as "indescribable", but that she ultimately brings back to "a freeze frame". In her own words,

the first flash of fiction arrives without words. It consists of a fixed image, like a slide or (closer still) a freeze frame, showing characters in a simple situation. [...] The scene does not appear in the story but remains like an old snapshot or a picture in a newspaper, with a caption giving all the names (SS: xvi).

On the other hand, captions raised in Gallant the problem of attaching a meaning to an image, and, in general terms, the problem of how things (happenings, incidents in life, situations, feelings, relationships, or whatsoever) are given a certain, often not univocal, meaning. One of the texts that is more notable in this respect is the story "With a Capital T", which concludes Linnet Muir's cycle in *Home Truths*, and is almost inexplicably cut out from the *Selected*

*Stories*<sup>89</sup>. While working at *The Lantern*<sup>90</sup> (the fictional *Standard*), Linnet was assigned her first job: she had to “write what goes under the pictures”. The image of a “boy eat[ing] a bun as a bear looks on” (HT: 318) caused her first problems. I shall return to this point later. By now, it is sufficient to focus on the strong importance given to the meaning of what is said and of what is going on, that made Gallant investigate the possibility – or, more likely, the impossibility – of understanding a situation, an utterance, or even a single word in one way only. This became soon one of the main concerns in her fiction (and in her life as well), language being intimately connected with the perception and the representation of one’s identity, and its deceitfulness being something that might undermine consistently the way we decide to represent ourselves to others. We can manipulate words deliberately, but a message sent and a message received are by no means the same thing. Moreover, even when people speak the same verbal language, other ‘languages’ may endanger the success of their communication.

## 2.5 Flying Mavis

While she was still working for the *Standard*, Gallant developed a sense of dissatisfaction which soon turned into an urge to change. “Journalism was a life I liked, but not the one I wanted” (SS: xiv); moreover, she was paid and considered half the value of a man doing identical job. For all these reasons, she resigned and moved on. Someone told her that she was a fool, that she was out of her mind, and that “it was no use training women, they always leave; one day [she] would come creeping back, begging for [her] old job” (SS: xiii). However, she had already made up her mind, and flew to Europe in search of fortune. The account of her life-choice is, not surprisingly, more appealing in Gallant’s words than in mine:

I was twenty-seven and becoming exactly what I did not want to be: a journalist who wrote fiction along some margin of spare time. I thought the question of writing or stopping altogether had to be decided before thirty. The only solution seemed to be a clean break

and a try: I would give it two years. What I was to live during the two years does not seem to have troubled me. Looking back, I think my entire concentration was fixed on setting off (SS: xii-xiii).

If one relies only on Gallant's statements, she never aimed at becoming a famous writer, or, to be more realistic and less naïve, she never put the plan to come back (let alone rich and acclaimed) on top of her to-do list. All she wanted was to live her life the way she had dreamt of so long, that was (and it still is) devoting it entirely to writing.

Gallant's life is split in two halves, and 1950 is its indisputable turning point. Not yet thirty, she decided to give herself two years to try to earn a living from writing. It never came to her mind that she could fail; at any rate, were it to happen, she would have adapted to any other kind of life. During her latest interview, Marta Dvorak (2009) kindly remarked: "I think you'd be competent in anything you took up, but I can't imagine you doing anything else than writing". Because all that she wanted in life was to become a writer, she deliberately removed every obstacle possibly preventing her, in some way or another, to live life the way she wanted (Girard and Valette 2003), e.g. having a husband, children, or another job. Discussing the role of men in her life, Gallant usually maintains that she has not been on her own at all after the divorce from John Gallant in the late Forties. Yet, as the short story is her favourite measure in fiction, it seems to be also her preferred choice in love. As for children, instead, there is no evidence attesting that she deliberately refused to have any because of her experience as a discarded daughter; her opinion on motherhood is best condensed in what she said to Paula Todd in 2009:

'I didn't want that life. I wouldn't have been able to write'. Nor did she long for children. 'You don't miss what you've never had. [...] I would have made a good grandmother but I don't think I would have made a good mother'. She chuckles. 'I might have run away!' But can women be fulfilled without giving birth? 'Oh, bugger', and she instantly names satisfied, successful female writers who didn't reproduce.

Elsewhere, she claims that she usually establishes good relationships with young people. This may happen partly because children and writers share, in her opinion, a visionary quality, allowing both to see life through lenses that are more clear than adults' spectacles. Although children occupy a disadvantaged position in Gallant's narratives, in fact, Gallant depicts them also as somehow privileged characters: more precisely, it is their perception of reality which is a privileged one; they have a special sense of "what's going on with the grown-ups, without knowing exactly what it is" (Evain and Bertail 2009: 102). Children are endowed, in Gallant's opinion, with a visionary yet lucid capability to penetrate reality, a capability they share with writers: "fiction", writes Gallant in her essay "What is Style?", "takes the measure of a life, a season, a look exchanged, the turning point, desire as brief as a dream, the grief and terror that after childhood we cease to express" (PN: 176)<sup>91</sup>. To reinforce a possible identification, she adds: "perhaps a writer is [...] a child in disguise, with a child's lucid view of grown-ups, accurate as to atmosphere, improvising when it tries to make sense of an adult behaviour" (SS: x)<sup>92</sup>. With a difficult childhood like hers, we shall suppose that the "sense of what is going on" sprung earlier in Gallant, developed more quickly and to a greater extent than any other child's, and never abandoned her, thus allowing her to be at her best when she takes the viewpoint of the youngest, because it has always been her own.

Despite her attachment to Paris, Gallant has travelled a lot during the past fifty or sixty years, both in France and abroad. Before moving to her place, she spent two years in precarious conditions in Spain, mainly in Madrid, and then went to visit the Italian Riviera. The first provides the setting for a couple of stories, the semi-autobiographical "Señor Pinedo" and "When We Were Nearly Young"<sup>93</sup>. The Italian coast shelters hordes of British characters, all trying to escape from (what they perceive as) an inhospitable country, and attempting at recreating *morceaux* of their fatherland abroad. Gallant sets many of her stories in an Italian environment, though only two take serious interest in Italian characters: in "The Four Seasons"<sup>94</sup> a family exploits the poor Italian servant Carmela, paying her in considerable delay the exact amount she was due, yet in the undervalued money circulating before the war. In "An Unmarried Man's Summer"<sup>95</sup>, the

servant Angelo seems an Italian maschera, a fusion between a picaresque and the traditional young servant of Spanish Señor.

Travels have always inspired Gallant, who is apparently unable to write about anything she has not seen herself: “You need to be a genius like Kafka to describe New York if you’ve never been there” (Evain and Bertail 2009: 93). Also, as her fiction is informed by historical, sociological, and contextual details, she does not want to fall into contradictions when describing situations, places, or habits that do not correspond to something that could eventually exist. One prominent quality which she wants her fiction to be informed by is reliability; therefore she has her work double-checked every time she takes the part of people (e.g. a man, a foreigner) about whose language or lifestyle she is not completely sure. She adds:

I don’t think I’d be able to write about Albanians getting on a boat and going to Italy. I could not put myself into the skins of people in Hong Kong. I could not put myself in the place of a Vietnamese farmer. It’s true people are very much the same the world over, each different and distinctive, but my characters live in places I’ve been to and can make my way through, and I have lived amongst them (Schenk 1998).

At different times, travels (during which Gallant, once in the habit of writing, now only takes notes) have been motivated differently: Gallant usually went away or abroad to visit friends or places. For a long time, she went every year to Bayreuth, in Bavaria, to attend the Music Festival there (she has a passion for Wagner, as stated in Dvorak 2009). The main reason why Gallant turned her attention to Germany, however, has not to do with music, and was instead a profound desire to understand the horrors of Nazism. If fiction is, in Linnet’s words, a “way of untangling knots” (HT: 261), Gallant used the stories grouped in *The Pegnitz Junction* to grasp the very meaning of something that was, in everyone’s mind, completely meaningless. Her interest had begun long time before, when, working for the *Standard*, she was permitted to see the first pictures of the Nazis camps. Shocked by what she saw, she was involved in the debate on what to write in the captions to those images. In her opinion, it had to be done

“sans adverbs et sans adjectifs”. Later, as part of the same journey towards comprehension, she would go to Germany “pour essayer de comprendre” (Girard and Valette 2003)<sup>96</sup>.

The result of her investigation is the most discomfiting of all her acquisitions as a reporter and a writer altogether: she came to the conclusion that Fascism did not spread out of a handful of insane fanatics; it was, instead, the casual result and following exacerbation of “the fascism of everyday life”<sup>97</sup>, a little germ of cruelty inhabiting all human souls, ready to spread like wildfire in any time and place, in war and peace time, in poor and wealthy countries alike<sup>98</sup>. Indeed, Gallant was interested “not in the historical causes of Fascism – just in its small possibilities in people” (Hancock 1978a: 41):

I was trying to understand what had taken place long before that. For the next 10 years, I kept going back to Germany, getting to know people, trying to understand. I came to the conclusion – if there is a conclusion – that people do not remember what they have done, but only what was done to them (Boyce 1990)<sup>99</sup>.

Gallant’s collections are often marked geographically (or by the nationality of their characters): the German stories of the late Seventies were immediately followed by Canadian and then French ones; the unifying theme of each book, instead, is more likely to be contained in its title, and often echoes an image of uprootedness, as many stories do<sup>100</sup>.

Whatever arrangement they found in the collections, the short stories of Mavis Gallant were nearly all first published in *The New Yorker*, the well-known American journal of fiction. Mavis Gallant is unquestionably the writer with the longest collaboration of all time with the magazine. She published more than anybody else, and she is also the oldest writer ever<sup>101</sup>. It all begun when she was still in Quebec, and sent one story to the editor. It was not her first attempt to publish, and few early writings had already been accepted by local revues<sup>102</sup>. But *The New Yorker* potentially offered a much wider distribution, and the importance

of being included in such a famous magazine was incomparable to any previous experience in publishing.

The first story was sent back for being “too Canadian” (Grant 1990: 3). They asked for a second one. This is how “Madeline’s Birthday” accommodated at page 20 of the issue of 1 September 1951<sup>103</sup>. Mavis Gallant did not see the copy when it was printed, nor did she receive the advance of royalties that she was given through her agent<sup>104</sup>: the man, an impostor, had told her that her stories had not been accepted and had meanwhile kept selling them, finally running away with all the money. Gallant had moved to Spain by that time, and she came across a copy of *The New Yorker* almost by chance, while doing some research in a library in Madrid. Finding one of her stories published there, she wrote to the editor asking for an explanation: she actually did not complain for the money, but was disappointed because she had not been sent the proofs. The man replied that he had been trying to get in contact with her for a long time, but he did not know how to do so (her agent had given them an address in Capri). The editor was the legendary William Maxwell, with whom Gallant would establish a lifelong, close friendship. “I owe him everything” is repeated twice in the now much quoted “Preface” to the *Selected Stories*. Together with Douglas Gibson, who encouraged Gallant to publish the ‘Canadian book’ and made her finally widely known to the Canadian readers<sup>105</sup>, Maxwell represents a pivotal figure in the writing career of Madame Gallant:

William Maxwell [...] read my first story and every other for twenty-five years. [...] He asked just a few questions and let me think it was perfectly natural to throw up one’s job and all one’s friends and everything familiar and go thousands of miles away to write. He made it seem no more absurd or unusual than taking a bus or visit a museum. [...] I felt suddenly like a stranded army with an unexpected ally (SS: xviii).

Gallant has, for sure, made other allies during her long and intense life, but perhaps they are secretly confined to the more private part of her life. For sure, we know that, “like many, many writers, [she] didn’t much enjoy the company of other writers (as [she] did of painters, for instance)” (Dvorak 2009)<sup>106</sup>, and even

less to discuss her work with them. Painters are not the only friends Gallant made, both in her English and French worlds. One of the cleverest ways to gather information on her friendships is perhaps the one undertaken by Grant, who listed and introduced all the people whom her books and stories are dedicated to (Grant 1990: 4-5).

A high number of episodes recalled here and there in papers would offer further insights on Gallant's life, part of which reverberates on her fiction. However, for reasons of space, for any further information about the life of Mavis Gallant I shall simply cross-refer to the several texts quoted in the footnotes and listed in the final critical bibliography.

## **2.6 Gallant today**

On her way to step in her nineties, Madame Gallant is still a bright mind and a polite, fine, beautiful woman. At least, this is how she is described by journalists and friends who recently had the opportunity and the honour to meet her. Conversely, her health is not good, and during the last few years Gallant has spent several months in hospitals. In recent interviews, she stressed the positive outcomes of being hospitalized (see Lahiri 2009b: 137): she had time to read (and re-read) books, a practice that she has always enjoyed, but she has to limit when in good health, because she is always working on several projects and she lacks time. I will not delve into the accounts of her now difficult routine, with her apartment populated by nurses and doctors, compromising – at least slowing down – her publishing plans (see Todd 2009). She suffers from arthritis, osteoporosis, and diabetes, and her conditions influence and check her work. From the late Eighties, her production has become less and less copious, and from the Nineties she begun to promise further publishing that she has not yet released. A consistent number of republications – which entail editing most of the time – together with several books she has been working on for a long time (the one on the Affair Dreyfus in

particular) kept her busy. From time to time, in interviews, we find hints at a novel (written from the point of view of a Canadian man), but it is unlikely that such thing as a ready-to-be-published piece of long fiction exists. Rather, we would expect to read another story on Henry Grippes, one of the characters, himself a writer, whom Gallant is more attached to.

Gallant's future appointments include a conference in Paris in June 2012, where she has been asked by Marta Dvorak to come as keynote speaker.

### **2.7 How to look at these data?**

All things considered, the one on Gallant's life is not the poorest repertoire that has been collected about a writer. Though estimators and critics are eagerly waiting for the fifty-year five-volume diaries she has been editing for the last twenty years, Gallant's life is not completely unknown to us. But how should we really look at these data? In the following section, I will propose an alternative approach to look at the relationship between the author's life and her fiction, arguing that Gallant takes personal responsibility in the interest that her life arouses. My approach is meant to fill a significant void in the critical studies on the writer's life, which have not gone much further than reporting the writer's life and establishing connections between life and fiction in terms of inspiration. Mine is, conversely, an attempt to show that, along with an influence of her life in her fiction (which the above biography clearly shows), there is also, in some way, an influence of her fiction on her life, at least on the version that she allows us to know.

### 3. A case of ‘fictional biography’

The biography of the writer detailed in Section 2 has attempted to present the several identities corresponding to the several lives of Mavis Gallant. The result of the negotiation of all her private and artistic personae in the ‘simply a writer’ self-proclaimed status may ultimately be read as a mask that she has carved to tally with her explicit and repeated call for privacy.

To affirm that Gallant does not like to be a public person does not imply that she refuses to be one: aware that the success of her fiction passes through her notoriety as a writer, she has allowed being interviewed during the several years of her career and, therefore, she has been repeatedly asked, almost forced, to offer her readers an image of herself. But it was Gallant who decided what kind of image she would offer to her readers and also how she would present it.

The final result of the deliberate manoeuvre that I will try to make clear in the following pages combines positive and negative outcomes: Gallant’s poetic tone, so proficient at engaging the readers of her fiction, raised an unwanted attention in her life, because it is told likewise. As a matter of fact, Gallant takes direct responsibility in engaging her readership’s attention to her life. However, the kind of image that she offered is accurately screened and constrained, and, to some extent, fictionalized. She does not come in front of her public completely exposed and unprotected; on the contrary, she wears a fictional mask like the ones she is so good at drawing for her own characters or that her characters are, in turn, involved in shaping for themselves or for someone else: like her mother (in the fictional version of the Linnet stories), who did it all her life, Gallant “often rewrote other people’s lives” (HT: 287), starting from her own.

In three steps (namely ‘coherence’, ‘control’, and ‘style’), I shall explain in detail why it is possible to define Gallant’s a ‘fictional biography’.

### 3.1 Step 1: 'coherence'. Notes on reliability

The protagonist of a cycle of stories set in Canada, Linnet has been recognized by everyone, including the writer, as the most autobiographical of all her characters. Other characters have been accredited an autobiographical *Ursprung* (children and young women in relation to her mother, Netta Asher in "The Moslem Wife"<sup>107</sup>, Henry Gripes in the funny stories published in *Overhead in a Balloon*), but Linnet is the only literary *alter ego* of Mavis:

The only things really autobiographical are the [...] Linnet Muir stories. Those things did happen to a young woman, as I can vouch for, but there is also fiction. If it had been straightforward autobiography I would have used my own name. I used Linnet because it's the name of a bird, and Mavis is the name of a thrush. At this distance, it all becomes fiction (Schenk 1998).

Thacker argues that the cycle "is also an example of semi-fictional life writing, for Gallant gives us a series of portraits of the artist as a young woman and also as a child and her realization of unbelonging in her home town" (2009: 369). To some extent, Gallant's semi-autobiographical stories could also fit the genre of creative non-fiction that is so much appreciated and practiced by contemporary Canadian women writers such as Edwards or Atwood<sup>108</sup>, to quote but very well known examples.

Coincidences between Linnet and Mavis further than their bird-like names are so relevant that I have deliberately included these stories among the sources used to write Gallant's biography, crediting them the same degree of reliability given to her statements. To tell the truth, unless research on Gallant's life is conducted on historical documents, her interviews are, potentially, no less misleading than her fiction. To look at an amount of papers like the one classified above, in fact, is one of the most delicate manoeuvres one could possibly embark on. Risks are several: among them, it often happens, in investigating the life of writers or their claims about style and fiction, to stumble on contradictory statements, among which it is quite difficult to operate a choice. It is the task of

the critic to give an order to what is revealed, and try to find explanations, even for the contradictions themselves. Usually, critics end up with two main conclusions: on the one hand, a writer contradicts himself deliberately in order to conceal something he is not satisfied with; therefore, what is put into words often clashes with what the text reveals. Critical investigation, in this case, operates to disclose the writer's machinations, either deliberate or unconscious (or both). On the other hand, sound differences in writers' explicatory statements are described in evolutionary terms: a writer elaborates differently about the same topic when he finds himself at different stages of his poetics.

When we come to Gallant, none of these is the case: an unusual coherence seems to inform her work as a whole. By stating that coherence in her work is 'unusual', I am not insinuating that Gallant feels undisclosed dissatisfaction about her lifelong career, nor am I advocating a reading of Gallant's work that denies manifest differences between early and late fiction: differences undoubtedly exist, both at the immediately recognizable level of themes, and at the deeper level of style and structural patterns (see Besner 1988), as Gallant herself has sometimes maintained.

However, where the texts we are examining are concerned, these remarks do not work. Accounts of her childhood or explanations of the ways and whys she writes fiction resonate from one page to another, arranged in almost identical shape, and sentences that have been pronounced in the late Seventies are to be found, almost unchanged, in interviews released two years ago.

The simplest explanation substantiating such concurrence is offered by the writer herself: "because one is asked the same question all the time one almost unconsciously develops answers that are *passé-partout*" (Kalotay 1999)<sup>109</sup>. Partially contented with this answer, we should nonetheless postulate that there might be more than an automatic reaction to the journalists' lack of inventiveness (or to the lack of in-depth research on previous interviews and well-known information)<sup>110</sup>. In his "Introduction" to paperback edition of *Mother Night* (1966), Kurt Vonnegut argued that "we are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be". Gallant has been very careful for more than

fifty years, not getting involved in something as extreme as disguising her true self (indeed, I would not claim that such thing exists as a true self), but, due to her reserve in speaking about her life, certainly selecting cautiously and meticulously which data to offer to her readership and critics. The survey of the texts put together to form Gallant's biography shows contradictory results: on the one hand, the amount of information is not as limited as Gallant's reputation would account for, and I have therefore been allowed to bring together a comprehensive spectrum of events and data (which, in effect, were I not limiting my investigation to language and identity, would have certainly been much wider). However, when we look at the number of interviews and realistically ponder how many different things Gallant could have talked about in so many occasions (far more than thirty interviews are recorded, articles included), then we come to the conclusion that papers are rich in number but that they are often quite repetitive, and suspiciously homogeneous in content. Such a prolific writer, who published more than one hundred short stories in *The New Yorker* and in other reviews, two novels, articles since she was a journalist in the Thirties and Forties, non-fiction, reviews, a play, and other pieces of writing, is highly unlikely to deserve an accusation of lack of imagination. It seems even more surprising that, when it comes to her own life, both the variety of episodes and the set of words to describe them are restricted, almost limited. Necessarily, there has to be an explanation to the writer's use of a 'formulaic'. Mine entails a component of intentionality and an attempt to control.

### **3.2 Step 2: 'control'. Who is interviewing whom?**

Once, when she was young and working for the *Standard*, Gallant had come to know that Jean Paul Sartre was in Montreal, and promptly asked to interview him. Not discouraged by the refusal of her editor, she went to another who was over the first, and this time her interview was approved. Gallant's encounter with the writer became a milestone in her career as a journalist, and a memento in her life as a writer to be:

He was simplicité itself and gentillesse, he gave me time. [...] I thought, that is how a great person should behave with a young writer, with a young reporter. [...] And then I thought, one day [...] they will interview me. And I would be very nice to young people and I would never snob them (Dvorak 2009)<sup>111</sup>.

Despite this early resolution, during the years it must have been hard at times to be “very nice with young people”, especially when they were inexperienced reporters only remotely interested in her fiction, who had been sent by their editors to interview someone who had just published a new book. Sometimes, in fact, it is not only Gallant’s comments that keep repeating: it is the journalists’ questions that recur, and this must be very irritating, especially to someone who is not particularly inclined to release interviews.

With the time passing, Gallant’s compromise between what she would have wanted (a degree zero of notoriety? This is still questionable) and what her editors and readers asked for (perhaps an Atwood-like public persona) resulted in a perfect balance of politeness and firmness, though the latter always prevails. In interviews, journalists and critics nonetheless approach the master storyteller with some sort of fright, originating in her “daunting reputation” (Wachtel 2008): Gallant’s gentle physical aspects, her impeccable outfit, and her courteous smile possibly deceive the inexperienced journalists, but when they inadvertently or incautiously step into the deceitful terrain of private life – an incursion Gallant has never appreciated and never allowed – she does not spare anyone her sharp remarks. Within the years of her literary career, her attitude rarely belied her reputation. But even when she is capable of embarrassing her interviewers, her wry irony, making us laugh, prevents her from verging on bad manners:

Canada seems so very far away on this silky spring day in the heart of Paris and I earn my only scolding when I ask whether she might come back one day. ‘Why would a smart woman like you ask a question like that?’ She waves a hand at me. ‘Oh, say I might’ (Todd 2009).

It is not difficult to imagine that being addressed like this is not pure fun. Eleanor Wachtel, not an inexperienced journalist at all, was not immune to this treatment:

I do remember once, years ago, when I asked her about love – one of her characters had compared it to practising scales on the piano – she said, ‘Eleanor, are you asking me if I think that? I’m ashamed of you’. This was in front a TV crew that flinched en masse and yet I knew even then that she would continue and elaborate on the question (Wachtel 2008).

When interviews become conversations<sup>112</sup>, Gallant is at her best, brisk when answering questions about writers she admires and books she has just read, or historic and social events she is invited to comment on. These are the things she has always been interested in: life, in its manifold aspects, music, art, and, of course, literature, politics, social issues, and journalism, her first love. In all these circumstances (see Lahiri 2009b, for instance), she becomes an interviewer as much as she is the interviewed one, and one can almost grasp her palpable enthusiasm jumping off the page:

In some instances, especially during this recent conversation, she was so eager she would scarcely wait for me to finish my question. And although in one way she doesn’t like to talk about her work or her working methods, in another, she is very forthcoming about the germ of a story, its opening image or an actual incident, someone she knew or a story she heard that launched it in her mind. She will give you every detail (Wachtel 2008).

Though it seems that, to some extent, the atmosphere in Gallant’s latest interviews is more relaxed, and that the writer is now nearly welcoming and willing to speak about herself, these documents are checked for approval just like the others, each and every utterance modified when it does not correspond to Gallant’s expectations. Several journalists have hinted at the writer firm intention to read interviews for consent, and her unremitting revising informs her interviews and her non-fiction as much as it is typical of her literary texts<sup>113</sup>. She may not be

relentlessly looking for *le mot juste*, but she does certainly not allow any *mot 'injuste'*.

More generally speaking, the significant recurrence of certain episodes – often retold with the very same words – made me assume that Gallant limits her accounts to a constrained and constraining code of events and sentences, a template corresponding to a safe territory of self declaration and self description, in which she presents a version of her own identity that is, if not constrained, at least controlled. This control is outsized for any reasonable mask anyone would wear in any public situation. Gallant treats herself like a fictional persona; she therefore gives herself a reliability that is not the result of strict adherence to what she is actually like, but emerges out of a deliberate erection of a representative identity.

### 3.3 Step 3: 'style'. Is Gallant good at doing the gardening?

In her essay “What is Style?” Gallant writes that “style is inseparable from structure, part of the conformation of whatever the author has to say” (PN: 177). From what has been put together so far, it emerges that in interviews and conversations, despite her self-proclaimed unwillingness to reveal herself, Gallant is caught by a natural bent for telling stories, and her style surfaces not only due to its brightness, but also to its inseparableness from “what the author has to say”. It is all the more so in the written texts, among which Linnet’s stories (obviously, because they *are* fiction), but also Gallant’s “Introduction” to her first ‘Canadian collection’, *Home Truths*, and the extensive “Preface” to her *Collected/Selected Stories*. All these texts contain, as I said, information on her life, her main concerns as a writer (among which identity, Canadianness, and language), details on the process of writing, literary influences, etc. In other words, they incorporate all kinds of information readers are usually interested in. As we would expect from a writer of her stature, these texts engage the reader as much as her fiction

does, and, possibly, increase in her readers a desire to learn more about the writer's life. If, as Gallant wrote, the "fascination" of a life "depends on how much is revealed, and in what manner" (PN: 142), Gallant has fallen into her own trap, and, by describing her own life with the remarkable style that made her "one of the great short-story writers of our time"<sup>14</sup>, she has introduced herself to her readers as nobody but one of her literary characters, so utterly real that we are not able anymore to separate fiction from life, and we keep looking up for the next 'story'. As Jumpa Lahiri put it, "she is a spirited and agile interlocutor who tells stories as she writes them: bristling with drama, thick with dialogue, vividly rendered and studded with astringent aperçus" (2009b: 106). Perhaps, in the end, it is Gallant's fault if we cannot leave her alone, because it is not her fiction that is like her life, but it is her life that is told us like her fiction, and therefore, not surprisingly, we would always want more. Gallant is not only a great writer; she is also very good at doing the gardening. One may ultimately wonder whether she is happy with her green thumb or not, and if the one we have been allowed to see is really her own garden.

## *Notes and References to Chapter 1*

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<sup>1</sup> The quote is taken from Gallant's article "Paul Léautaud, 1872-1956", first published in *The New York Times Book Review*, 9 September 1973, and reprinted in PN: 142-152 (142).

<sup>2</sup> Apparently, this was Curie's standard advice to reporters seeking interviews.

<sup>3</sup> In Gallant's studies, this is the case of Grazia Merler's monograph (1978), which offers a classification of the writer's stories based on Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale*.

<sup>4</sup> For an explanation of Lipksi's theories see Jajdelski 2006.

<sup>5</sup> One example would be Gallant's trauma of being abandoned. In her fiction (especially in her early stories) situations in which children are left by their parents with no apparent explanation abound, and they clearly elaborate on a concern that the writer experienced firsthand (on this aspect, see Keith 1988: 101). An analysis of the stories where these situations are narrated reveals that structural patterns and narrative strategies concur in recreating in the reader's mind a bewilderment which recalls the children's in the stories (see Schaub 1998, and Borgna 2011). Gallant's traumatizing experience in early life informs her fiction at the level of its structural patterns, which is far more intrinsic than the situational similarities recognizable at first sight.

<sup>6</sup> She often put down theories and assumptions, either stating that she never thought of a particular character or setting in a certain way or, even more explicitly, claiming that some scholar's thesis was completely wrong. See, for instance, Gallant's comments during a roundtable on her work (Whitfield 2002b). Recollecting his conversation with Gallant, Randy Boyagoda (2007) attests to the writer's criticism of the methods of academics: "She once dismissed academic commentaries, in a piece reprinted in *Paris Notebooks*, her collected non-fiction, as 'the fleas of literature'. Reminded of this dismissal, she was immediately amused. 'Did I?' she said with a smile, her eyebrows turned up. 'Well I believe it, because I'm apt to say things are 'the fleas of''. The self-effacement quickly gave way to stronger feelings. 'I'll tell you what my thing is with academics', she continued in a harder tone. 'They take something that is complete, say a story, that is not material to work with – it's complete; it is to the writer anyway – and they take it as crude ore that they're taking out of the ground, to suit some purpose of their own, and I find this outrageous'".

<sup>7</sup> The book considers also Michael Ondaatje and Carol Shields, and it highlights the different routes to celebrity of these writers.

<sup>8</sup> See also Schaub's endnote referring to the quote.

<sup>9</sup> *The Other Paris* was published in Boston by Houghton Mifflin and the next year in London by André Deutsch.

<sup>10</sup> Gallant's collection appeared in the New Canadian Library. Gallant told the story of her encounter with Gibson in several circumstances. A particularly detailed account is contained in Evain and Bertail 2009: 41-43. Gibson recalls his offer to publish Gallant in Canada and his subsequent purpose to publish a 'Canadian book' in Evain 2007: 35-39.

<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, when published for the American market, the collection's subtitle was changed into *Sixteen Stories* (see Section 1 of "Selected Bibliography" for details).

<sup>12</sup> Prizes and awards received by Gallant are usually listed in her biographies, including online versions. A Prize for non-fiction has been named after the writer and is awarded every year.

<sup>13</sup> For a bibliography of early criticism, see Gallant's annotated bibliographies (Malcom 1978, and Grant and Malcom 1984).

<sup>14</sup> The very first interviews that have been recorded by critics are the TV Programme *Telescope* hosted by Fletcher Markle in 1965 for CBC-TV (24 May) and Earl Beattie's radio broadcast four years later, in 1969 for CBC *Anthology* (22 and 29 January). Curiously, contradictory information come from Besner 1988, Keefer 1989, and Schaub 1998, who record these two interviews differently. As far as I have investigated, Hancock's is one of the first written interviews altogether, and certainly the very first long one.

<sup>15</sup> In past times, these restaurants, especially the latter, have hosted famous painters and writers. In the website of *La Coupole*, it is said that they count among their guests "les peintres Derain, Léger, Soutine, Man Ray, Brassai, Kisling, Picasso". They also claim that "Aragon rencontre Elsa, Simenon dîne avec Joséphine Baker. Breton soufflette Chirico, Kessel croque les verres. Un inconnu aux petites lunettes rondes, Henry Miller, prend son petit déjeuner au bar; Matisse boit de la bière, Joyce aligne les whiskies". Bertrand de Saint Vincent. "L'atelier favori des artistes du Montparnasse". Available from: <<http://www.lacoupole-paris.com/fr/la-legende-de-la-coupole.html>> [Accessed 20/12/2011].

<sup>16</sup> As a matter of fact, she also met journalists in book shops and released interviews when she was away from Paris. She has been in several radio interviews and a few TV programmes, and she replies to journalists' questions by mail and by phone.

<sup>17</sup> Evain and Bertail's book is a praiseworthy assemblage of their two-day interview, which focuses on the genesis of Gallant's stories: it is prefaced by the authors and by one of Gallant's essays, "Memory and Invention". It also provides synopses of the stories the interviewers based their questions upon. All stories are taken from SS.

<sup>18</sup> It is Gallant herself who labelled her own book as such (Lahiri 2009b: 152).

<sup>19</sup> Appraisal for the choice of the term ‘selection’ rather than ‘collection’ came from various voices, including Ronald Hatch: reviewing the book, he claimed that “clearly the Canadian title of ‘Selected Stories’ is much more accurate” (1999).

<sup>20</sup> First published in *The Canadian Forum*, September 1982. Reprinted in PN:176-179.

<sup>21</sup> In interviewing Gallant in 1983, Jean Royer wrote: “I perceived, at the end of the meal, that she had not spoken very much about herself. It is this slightly reserved and secretive woman, who laughs easily, whom I went to interview a few days later in her apartment. I got to know Mavis Gallant better through her reserve than through her responses, but I think that you will be able to get to know her between the lines” (1996: 73).

<sup>22</sup> Replying to Dvorak’s question, Gallant stated: “Actually, my biography problems consist of trying to prevent people in Canada from writing mine!! It is a serious problem for anyone who is still writing. Some writers have managed it by more or less giving the biographer a friendly but limited view. I have strong views on the subject, but well outside the purpose of your conference. When writers are experiencing the process of imagination they feel as if they’re in a glass room, an enclosed space with a micro-climate, and nothing else exists. They don’t need people standing outside the glass wall, breathing all over it, getting sticky fingers all over it. Academics on the whole don’t seem to know how fiction is written or understand how fragile the mainspring is. A biography undertaken during a writer’s working life can destroy the mainspring” (1995: 103).

<sup>23</sup> What is curious is that this statement partially contradicts the radical claims quoted above. It gives further evidence to the writer’s hidden agenda, and reinforces the value of a serious and systematic use of all kinds of writings to investigate the life and poetics of the author.

<sup>24</sup> Review of *Elizabeth Bowen* by Victoria Glendinning (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1978). First published in *The New York Times Book Review* (15 January 1978): 232-235.

<sup>25</sup> Deeper insight on these aspects is contained in Chapter 2.

<sup>26</sup> A real caricature of Mavis Gallant was drawn by illustrator David Levine and first included in the issue of *The New York Review of Books* published on 17 October 1996 with the article “That’s Life” by Gabriele Annan. One can look at the drawing by visiting the following webpage: <<http://www.nybooks.com/galleries/david-levine-illustrator/1996/oct/17/mavis-gallant/>> [Accessed 20/12/2011].

<sup>27</sup> The Linnet Muir’s sequence was first published as follows: “In Youth is Pleasure”, *The New Yorker*, 24 November 1975 (46-54); “Between Zero and One”, *The New Yorker*, 8 December 1975 (38-47); “Varieties of Exile”, *The New Yorker*, 19 January 1976 (26-35); “Voices Lost in Snow”, *The New Yorker*, 5 April 1976 (38-43); “The Doctor”, *The New Yorker*, 20 June 1977 (33-42); “With a Capital T”: *Canadian Fiction Magazine* 28, 1978.

<sup>28</sup> J.H. Stape. *The Several Lives of Joseph Conrad*. London: Heinemann, 2007.

<sup>29</sup> I am sure that coincidences do not end here, but they are likely to extend to the level of thematic similarities, rather than biographical correspondence. A comparison of Gallant and Conrad in biographical terms has been proposed by Irvine in her essay “Starting from the Beginning Every Time” (1986).

<sup>30</sup> I first defined Gallant in this way in Borgna 2011: 212. Clearly, the adverb ‘simply’ is employed ironically here, since there is nothing simple in being only a writer. However, Gallant has always spoken about becoming a writer as the most natural of all choices, and this other meaning of ‘simply’ is also encompassed here.

<sup>31</sup> Some sources refer to Mavis Leslie, while others add de Trafford to Young as surname. Gallant is an Acadian name, and the stress of the accent falls on the last syllable. Leslie Schenk (1998) writes: “I began by checking how her last name was properly pronounced”. Gallant explains that her name should be read “like the English word, but with the accent on the last syllable. [...] I was once married to a Mr. Gallant. The name is Acadian”.

<sup>32</sup> In “In Youth is Pleasure”, Angus, Linnet’s father, “was half Scot, but British by birth, by mother, by instinct” (HT: 220).

<sup>33</sup> The figure of the remittance man was quite common in those times. For a detailed description, see the beginning of “Varieties of Exile”, which reads like an essay on the main characteristics of such figure (HT: 266-270).

<sup>34</sup> “I was home weekends, but by no means every weekend” (HT: 311). Elsewhere, Linnet remembers that she used to spend some weekends in her nurse’s house (HT: 233).

<sup>35</sup> Linnet Muir is the semi-autobiographical character created by Gallant, whose adventures have a consistent autobiographical source. Though Linnet is described by the writer as “quite another person” (HT: xxii), many coincidences prove that she is Gallant’s most autobiographical character. The writer debated in several occasion the relationship between herself and her literary *alter ego*. See, among others, Hancock 1978a. An interesting analysis of the cycle in relation to its autobiographical sources is proposed by Peter Stevens in his 2004 essay “An ‘I’ for an Evanescent Eye: The Personal and the Private-Autobiography, Essay and Story”.

<sup>36</sup> “How much has changed? [...] 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).

<sup>37</sup> Schaub interestingly claims that Gallant developed very early the “awareness that whatever she saw, heard, and said could be interpreted in two diametrically opposed manners”, and this “led her to realize that she herself could not utter, let alone write, anything without having an ironic inner smile, mirroring the ‘other’ position” (1998: 2).

<sup>38</sup> *The New Yorker*, 28 June 1969: 41-42.

<sup>39</sup> “Ma mère m’a emmenée là-bas. Elle m’a dit: ‘Je revien dans dix minutes’ et elle n’est pas revenue”.

<sup>40</sup> Apparently, a more serious commitment to Gallant’s education was taken by her grandmother (on her mother’s side). But the only description of the woman is given in fiction. “Voices Lost in Snow” contains an interesting paragraph describing the woman and her relationship with Linnet (HT: 286). Supposing that Linnet’s grandmother is Gallant’s, she is, together with her nurse, a figure more maternal than the writer’s own mother.

<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, the writer’s attitude is fluctuating: negative remarks hint at her father’s uncommunicativeness and his lack of interest for the outside world. Particularly remarkable in the light of his disinterest towards little Mavis is Linnet’s account of the employment of similar, almost identical instructions to her and to her father’s dog: “My father sat back in a deep, chintz-covered chair and said hardly anything except for an occasional ‘Down’ to his dog” (HT: 303). “‘Down I said, sit down; did you hear what I’ve just said to you? I said, sit down, *down*’. There came a point like convergent lines finally meeting where orders to dogs and instructions to children were given in the same voice. The only difference was that a dog got ‘Down, damn it’, and of course, no one ever swore at me” (HT: 305).

<sup>42</sup> Here is the entire quote: “‘Poor Charlotte’ – not even an X in the diary, finally – had once been the heart of the play. The plot must have taken a full turning after she left the stage” (HT: 314). In this text, again, the writer associates Linnet’s mother with theatre.

<sup>43</sup> In Dante’s *Inferno*, sinners are punished “by a process either resembling or contrasting with the sin itself” (Musa 1984: 37-38). When contrapasso works through analogy, the punishment resembles (usually amplifies) the sin. Conversely, when a sinner is given a punishment opposed to his own sin, it is called contrapasso by contrast, which is the case of Gallant’s mother.

<sup>44</sup> For Gallant’s mother, see description in HT: 285-286. For Shirley Perrigny, see analysis in Chapter 3.

<sup>45</sup> *The New Yorker*, 18 December 1954: 32-58.

<sup>46</sup> I argue that, notwithstanding the unquestionable importance of sight, its predominance is actually challenged by hearing, which is remarkable at different levels. As a matter of fact, in the process of artistic creation, Gallant ‘envisions’ her characters and simultaneously ‘hears them speak’. In the final result of this process, which corresponds to the edited piece of fiction, she achieves the Conradian aim “to make you hear, to make you feel, and, above all, to make you see” (Joseph Conrad, “Preface” to *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”*: x). A further development of the clairvoyant quality of the writer occurs when Gallant discusses the process of ‘interferences’ in “The Pegnitz Junction”. In this

case, characters are not heard speaking, they are heard thinking (see Evain and Bertail 2009: 78).

<sup>47</sup> See, among others, Dvorak 2009, and Girard and Valette 2003.

<sup>48</sup> “My father’s death had been kept from me. I did not know its exact circumstances or even the date. He died when I was ten. At thirteen I was still expected to believe a fable about his being in England” (HT: 228).

<sup>49</sup> In this circumstance, I do not vouch for the correspondence of the episode to real life. Yet it is unlikely that Gallant, who circumscribed her incursion into the realm of magic to “The Pegnitz Junction” and “From the Fifteenth District”, included in her story the account of unreliable circumstances. Supposing that the episode is plausible, as far as I have been able to find out there is no evidence that anything similar happened to the writer in real life.

<sup>50</sup> “Where is here?” is a famous question posed by Northrop Frye in his 1965 “Conclusion” to the *Literary History of Canada* (Klink 1965: 826). It is supposed to replace the “who am I?” question when referring to the search for identity in any Canadian context. As Dobson stated, “Frye suggests that this question is the central one in any inquiry into Canadian identity, one that foregrounds the geographical dimension of being Canadian” (2009: 32).

<sup>51</sup> In this as in few other occasions in this thesis, I draw on my own essay “‘The *Prison of Childhood*’: Identity and Identification in Mavis Gallant” (2011), which was an early attempt to deal with Gallant and identity in fictional and non-fictional texts. Though similar elements are called into question, they served completely different purposes in the essay.

<sup>52</sup> *The New Yorker*, 11 April 1953: 27-36.

<sup>53</sup> 1988 is also the date of her first publication in France. Before then, even her closest French friends, who knew she was a writer, had not read any of her fiction.

<sup>54</sup> Each and every critic who has devoted attention to Gallant has, at one point, discussed this issue. I shall refer to Howells 1987 as a text where Gallant’s Canadianness is discussed within the context of Canadian women writers.

<sup>55</sup> See, among others, Gallant herself in the “Introduction” to *Home Truths*, her first ‘Canadian’ book. Grant defined her “a supranational phenomenon” (1990: 9). Necessarily, Canadianness also rises the problem of the relationship of Gallant with the Canadian literary scenario. On this issue, complex and widely debated, see Howells 1987, but also Thacker 2009. The issue has been debated elsewhere so many times that it would be difficult to suggest a preferential context to look at, not inviting at one particular reading.

<sup>56</sup> In “The Events in May: A Paris Notebook by Mavis Gallant II”, Gallant writes: “thank God I am not a refugee; I can pick up and leave whenever I like” (PN: 90).

<sup>57</sup> Gallant says that her parents sent her off to a boarding school (moreover, a French Catholic one) “for reasons never made plain”. Nevertheless, she argues that possible explanations include money (that school was cheaper than any other in the nearby). Through her fictional double, she adds other explanations: “‘To make you tolerant’ was a lame excuse” as was ‘French’, for I spoke fluent French with Olivia, and I could read in two languages before I was four. Discipline might have been one reason – God knows, the nuns provided plenty of that – but according to Olivia I did not need any. It cannot have been for the quality of the teaching, which was lamentable. I suspect that it was something like sending a dog to a trainer (they were passionate in their concern for animals, especially dogs), but I am not certain it ever brought me to heel” (HT: 236). In “The Doctor”, she ascribes the unusual decision to her mother. Due to her jealousy for another woman, Mrs Erskine, she sent Linnet to school to learn French, so that she could “overtake her through me: if she had been unique in her generation, then I would be in mine” (HT: 310). She also brings back to Doctor Chauchard the suggestion of that very school: “it was he who gave my mother the name of a convent where Jansenist discipline still had a foot on the neck of twentieth century and where, as an added enchantment, I was certainly not to hear a word of English. He never dreamed, I’m sure, that I would be packed off there as a boarder from the age of four” (HT: 299).

<sup>58</sup> An exception is revealed to Kalotay (1999): “I felt [uncomfortable] when I visited the Soviet Union; I felt then that there was no contact possible. It was under Brezhnev. And, oddly enough, I felt that there was no contact possible once when traveling in Finland. I used to travel a lot alone by car: I’d fly somewhere, rent a car and go around by myself. But in Finland I had no language contact – French was a dead loss, and I was surprised how many people didn’t speak English”.

<sup>59</sup> The only information we have been given are collected in Besner’s monograph. The critic writes that the doctor and his wife “became her legal guardians after meeting her at one of the boarding schools Gallant had attended in the United States” (1988: 3). Besner’s information come from Markle’s TV interview (1965 – though Besner dates it 1969). In Markle’s interview transcribed by Besner, Gallant declares: “‘I was brought up partly by a psychiatrist who was an assistant of Freud – had been analysed by Freud’. She says that Freud was ‘gospel’ to her at certain periods in her life, that she ‘went through a great period of Freud’ and thought of his work ‘almost like a code’” (1988: 155n. 7).

<sup>60</sup> *The New Yorker*, 10 February 1968: 27-28.

<sup>61</sup> In explaining her creative process Gallant states: “The quick arrival and departure of the silent image can be likened to the first moments of a play, before anything is said. The difference is that the characters in the frame are not seen, but *envisioned*, and do not have to speak to be explained” (HT: xvi-xvii, emphasis added).

<sup>62</sup> A similar remark is contained in an earlier interview: “I cannot imagine writing something which is not the reflection of a group within society. I cannot imagine writing in a vacuum, in darkness” (Royer 1996: 77).

<sup>63</sup> “I don’t want to seem pretentious in saying this, but for me, everything that I have written has had a sociological or political content” (Royer 1996: 74).

<sup>64</sup> “Speaking as an insider and as someone who has lived outside the country for a long time, her view of Canada is always seen from a distance, as Canada remembered somewhere else” (Howells 1987: 91). Howells also argues that “the Canadian problem of identity may not be the problem of having no identity but rather of having multiple identities, so that any single national self-image is reductive and always open to revision” (26). Moreover, the Canadian context is particularly fertile in the light of the relation language-identity. As Comellini has pointed out, “che il tema del linguaggio sia legato al concetto di identità è fortemente rilevabile nella produzione letteraria canadese, pervasa, come è, di allusioni, riferimenti e conessioni, anche metaforiche e simboliche, proprio al linguaggio” (‘it is strongly evident that in Canadian literature language is connected to identity. Canadian literature is, in fact, pervaded by hints, references and connections – also metaphoric and symbolic ones – to identity’) (2009: 183).

<sup>65</sup> The episode of her father holding a book while teaching her how to read is among the most quoted about her early childhood.

<sup>66</sup> Gallant praises her mother only for giving her books, “endless books – which I’d finish reading by Boxing Day” (Dvorak 2009). Noteworthy remarks on the books in French, completely different from the ones in English, are to be found in “The Doctor” (HT: 300).

<sup>67</sup> Her teachers belonged to “a semi-cloistered order of teaching and missionary nuns” (SS: xvi). “When I heard, years later, it had been demolished, it was like the burial of a witch. I had remembered it penitentiary size” (HT: 236).

<sup>68</sup> These remarks are relevant to some main concerns of my thesis. They will be discussed thoroughly in the following chapter.

<sup>69</sup> Bibliographical sources on Gallant and translation include Dvorak 1995: 100-103, Gallant’s own remarks on the topic (especially the transcription of the roundtable quoted as Whitfield 2002b), and the praiseworthy analysis by Judith Woodsworth of the French translation of HT (1988).

<sup>70</sup> On French translations, see Evain and Bertail 2009: 91. In Italy, Gallant has been translated by Ettore Capriolo for Bompiani in 1989 (title and content of the collection, *Sospeso in un pallone*, correspond exactly to the original book, *Overhead in a Balloon*). A gap of more than ten years marks Gallant’s absence from Italian literary market. In 2000, Giovanna Scocchera was hired for translating Gallant for Rizzoli. She worked on three different collections for BUR. Scocchera had direct contacts with the writer, both on the phone and via mail, but they never met (I did personally contact Scocchera via e-mail

in 2010. She kindly gave me information about her relationship with Gallant. She described the act of translating surprisingly ‘natural’, which stands in contradiction with what Gallant declares about her other translators). Recently, in 2011, a new collection has been published by BUR, but it is translated by Chiara Gabutti and the layout of the cover is completely different. It includes Ondaatje’s afterward. Other Italian translations are printed in Mochi 2007: “In Italia” (translation of “In Italy” by Carla Vannuccini), “Pesce d’aprile” (translation of “April’s Fish” by Elisabetta Messina), and “Un caso d’emergenza” (translation of “An Emergency Case” by Maria Letizia Cingottini).

The editorial history of Gallant’s translations, as well as the history of her publishing altogether, would deserve further and deeper investigation, since it reveals appalling aspects of the relationship between Gallant and the publishing world. Quite strange is, for instance, the relationship between the U.S. market on one side and the Anglo-Canadian one on the other. The strategy of republishing early and short stories in 2009, to give but one example, was shared by Bloomsbury and Random House. The two collections, *The Cost of Living: Early and Uncollected Stories* and *Going Ashore*, share a surprisingly high number of stories, and as internet selling has modified the market of books (i.e. a book published in Canada is equally sold on amazon.ca, amazon.co.uk, and amazon.com and, even more to the point, a reader can purchase the same book from any of these places, no matter where he lives), it is difficult to find it worth publishing two books that have very similar content, while, on the other hand, a reprint of *Green Water, Green Sky* or *A Fairly Good Time* has not been planned recently (GWGS was last reprinted in 1995, while AFGT, currently out of print, was not reprinted after 1986).

Gallant has often discussed her relationship with Maxwell and Gibson, but very little is known about her agents, whom I have unsuccessfully tried to contact in these years. Though very firm on her ideas on what to publish and where, Gallant cannot follow personally the way her stories go through to being published. Thus, any analysis of her publishing history must take into consideration that at least part of the selections and choices are not the result of her direct choice.

Kindle editions of Gallant’s fiction have only recently been made available. Funnily enough, the first edition available is the Spanish translation of SS, *Los Cuentos* (translated by Sergio Lledó. Barcelona: Lumen, 2009). Equally strange are the results of my research on the different on-line shops of ‘amazon’ (world, UK, Europe, Canada). From <amazon.com> one can buy: PS, VE, and CL (since 27 April 2011), HT (since 18 May 2011); MW (since 1 June 2011), FFD (since 29 June 2011), *Los Cuentos* (since 8 October 2010). Almost identical results are obtained from <amazon.it> (Italy), <amazon.de> (Germany), <amazon.fr> (France), <amazon.es> (Spain). Different, and surprisingly so, is the case of <amazon.co.uk>, where one can buy only MW, CL, and again *Los Cuentos*. Incredibly, you cannot buy any kindle edition from <amazon.ca> (Canada), where the Kindle store is not available yet [Accessed: 20/12/2011].

<sup>71</sup> Gallant discusses Yourcenar’s translations also in her essay on the French writer, “Limpid Pessimism: Marguerite Yourcenar”. PN: 180-191 (190).

<sup>72</sup> To see how this comparison works, read Gallant on the genesis and dynamics of her research on the Affair (HT: xix-xx).

<sup>73</sup> Kalotay's interview is indeed the most complete source to date to get information on Gallant's writing practices, though several data were contained also in previous interviews.

<sup>74</sup> The same paragraph is quoted with similar intent by Peter Stevens (2004), whose essay claims that Yourcenar's work and life influenced Gallant on several aspects.

<sup>75</sup> A slightly different example is the two-day interview released to Evain and Bertail. The text is full of French expressions and even full sentences, but it has to be remembered that the interviewers are both French. A particular case in the cluster of interviews analysed is no doubt the 1983 interview released to Jean Royer (1996). The interview is translated in English, but was originally in French. In *Interviews to Literature*, where the interview is transcribed, it takes the form of an account, and only a few direct parts are recorded. Though it begins with gross inexactness, including Gallant's date of birth (it is said to be 1933) and the publishing year of GWGS and AFGT (1983 in both cases), this document is extraordinary in terms of content: obviously, there are points of contact between this and other interviews, but the amount of new information is certainly amazing.

<sup>76</sup> Among the most complete surveys on the writers that Gallant reads and admires, I would certainly include Dvorak's recent interview (2009). In the section of her book entitled "Tradition and Milieu", Grant devoted systematic attention to Gallant's readings, dividing them in groups according to the years in which Gallant read them or was interested in a particular group of writers (1990: 6-9). It should be noted that Grant is frequently quoted here in reference to biographical data: hers is perhaps one of the most complete biographies on Mavis Gallant, and it is definitely among the most engaging. This is due mainly to her being a writer, but also a biographer. Among her books, one that is certainly worth quoting in this context is *Robertson Davies: Man of Myth* (1994).

<sup>77</sup> "To those students who showed any promise she would give copies of Nabokov, or EM Forster, 'always for the good soul'. Otherwise, she would give them Raymond Carver" (Allardice 2009).

<sup>78</sup> Gallant often goes back to the distinction between a talented and an untalented writer, which originated in her own fear of being an untalented one. See, for instance, her remarks in the excerpt quoted here from "What is Style?".

<sup>79</sup> Gallant claims that she can read in Italian and Spanish, the languages she learnt when she travelled around Europe in the Fifties. German is also a language she is familiar with, and she can read Cyrillic, but does not understand the language. When she went to Finland, she felt enormously at odds with the linguistic gap and realized that she could have never lived there or in any other country where she could not speak – nor learn – the local language (see footnote 58).

<sup>80</sup> Basic information on the man, a jazz pianist who played in nightclubs in New York and Montreal, can be found in Besner (1988: 7). "She married John Gallant to be emancipated from her unpredictable mother" (Schaub 1998: 3). Relatively new information on the

man, his passion for music and his relationship with Gallant and her fiction are contained in Dvorak 2009, and in Evain and Bertail 2009: 44.

<sup>81</sup> Prior to that, she worked for the Canadian National Railways in 1941. Before, she was shortly employed as a “woman’s social secretary, then helped in a woman’s estate business” (Grant 1990: 2). “You took people who wanted to rent an apartment and you wrote down everything that’s in it (laughs) but these people didn’t understand English and they didn’t understand French. It was to me completely fascinating. They evolved into characters for future pieces” (Dvorak 2009). In the interview to Dvorak, Gallant traces back a Czech couple who were protagonist of one of her earliest stories from a real experience she had while working for the firm.

<sup>82</sup> This does not mean that Gallant was not political altogether. Her socialist ideas were a strong belief for a long time. Her comments on feminism are scattered in several texts. To quote but a few, talking to Girard and Valette (2003) Gallant offers a short yet in-depth overview of her ideas on feminism. But her feminism is, ultimately, only one of the facets of her concern for human rights. As Keith has aptly written, “her women are always human being first, women second” (1988: 98). Interesting comments are included in Royer 1996: “I am independent. That is probably why I am not a feminist. Probably I class people more by intellectual affinities than by sexual distinction. However, men have a different culture. You have an intimate culture which is completely different than that of women. Equal? What does that mean? Men and women are different, not equal” (75). The interview takes a quite political turn when Gallant, asked about the role of the writer in society, openly criticizes the ‘writer in State’ as it is determined by the Canadian policies of grants for artists. She develop her argument in “The Writer in the State” (1992).

<sup>83</sup> “Once, I was astonished to hear my mother say, ‘Oh, she talks to herself all the time’. I had not realized that that kind of speech could be overheard, and, of course, I was not talking but supplying a voice” (SS: ix). In “The Doctor”, where Gallant includes a similar description, Marigold is the name of a city and not of a language (HT: 311).

<sup>84</sup> The case of poetry is quite different. Gallant wrote poetry when she was an adolescent, then lost her inspiration completely. She maintains that poetry abandoned her. A connection remains in her deep-rooted habit to read some poetry every morning: “Reading some poetry early in the morning is a habit – I read it before I start to work. Whenever people say, Nobody reads poetry anymore, I think, Well, I do” (Kalotay 1999). A picnic hamper reappears in “In Youth is Peasure” when Linnet packs her belongings to go back to Canada from the U.S.. The description of what it contains is indicative of Gallant’s juvenile readings (HT: 220-221).

<sup>85</sup> For a detailed description of the different activities Gallant was following at the *Standard*, see Besner 1988: 4. For a list of nearly eighty articles published in the *Standard*, see Grant and Malcom 1984, or Merler’s detailed bibliography (1978: 71-74). Keefer’s chapter “Social Narratives” is the most complete survey and analysis of Gallant’s non-fiction to date. It offers insights on several articles published in the *Standard* (1989: 197-228).

<sup>86</sup> A cluster of examples should not leave aside the incipit of “The Doctor” and the first pages of “Varieties of Exile”: the first calls upon history of art, but entails a deeper sociological analysis (therefore it intertextually dialogues with the “Introduction” to HT in which the story is included); the second is an in-depth description of remittance men.

<sup>87</sup> Whereas the original comparison of Gallant was with painting, the extension to journalism is mine.

<sup>88</sup> The word ‘climate’ keeps reappearing in relation to Gallant, and it is also a word she seems to like particularly. In Gallant’s vocabulary, it has a meaning that is a mixture of its best known meanings (climate as weather and climate as ambience), perhaps difficult to explain but very easy to perceive every time we read one of Gallant’s stories and we feel plunged into a particular atmosphere, a realm where a setting and a feeling are comprised into a single perception, that is, ultimately, Gallant’s ‘definition’ for ‘climate’.

<sup>89</sup> There would be an explanation only if the stories in the SS had all been published in *The New Yorker*. “With a Capital T” is, in fact, the only one of the cycle which was first printed in the *Canadian Fiction Magazine*. Instead, Gallant tells us that “most of these stories were published in *The New Yorker*” (SS: xviii, italics mine), which leaves the question unexplained. At any rate, Martini rightly argues that the overall meaning of the cycle is incomplete, because “With a Capital T” is excluded. By putting the stories in chronological order, the connections and the inter/intratextual correspondences are altered (2011: 15). Original text: “disposti secondo l’ordine cronologico degli eventi narrati, quindi alterando i legami e le corrispondenze intratestuali stabilite dalla raccolta precedente, il senso generale della sequenza è incompleto”.

<sup>90</sup> *The Lantern* is obviously the correspondent of the *Montreal Standard*. Yet, as it often happens with Gallant, the newspaper’s name is not casual. A journal called *The Lantern* really exists: it first appeared in 1881 and was included in the School of Journalism in 1914. It is still published every day as the students’ newspaper of the Ohio State University.

<sup>91</sup> Similar remarks are contained in “The Doctor”: “Unconsciously, everyone under the age of ten knows everything. Under-ten can come into a room and sense at once everything felt, kept silent, held back in the way of love, hate, and desire, though he may not have the right words for such sentiments. It is part of the *clairvoyant immunity* to hypocrisy we are born with and that vanishes just before puberty” (HT: 304, italics mine). The employment of very similar expressions in a fictional and a non-fictional context should be stressed.

<sup>92</sup> I have already quoted the same excerpts with a similar connection in Borgna 2011.

<sup>93</sup> The stories were both published first in *The New Yorker* (9 January 1954 and 15 October 1960). Pilar Somacarrera Íñigo devoted the greatest attention to date to the Spanish period of Gallant. In particular, next to an essay on “When We Were Nearly Young”, Somacarrera Íñigo interviewed Gallant specifically on this topic (2000). Hers is

an atypical interview, because Gallant is more often asked questions about other topics. It is nonetheless among the most interesting interviews and it gave the scholar the opportunity to investigate aspects that are not strictly related to Spain, but that deal with Gallant's literary models and her political ideas.

<sup>94</sup> *The New Yorker*, 16 June 1975: 32-49.

<sup>95</sup> *The New Yorker*, 12 October 1963: 54-84.

<sup>96</sup> This is another episode that Gallant evokes frequently. See her description in Hancock 1978a and in Lahiri 2009b, to quote but two interviews, distant in time but very similar in content. Besner concentrates on the episode when discussing her "German stories" (1988: 68-69).

<sup>97</sup> "Mavis Gallant and the Fascism of Everyday Life" is a 1990 essay by Ronald Hatch that discusses Gallant's dealing with Fascism in a selection of stories, not exclusively the so called German ones, considering that "she portrays how fascism can captivate ordinary people everywhere" (11). It refers to the writer's statement that she was not so much interested in "the historical causes of Fascism" as she was in "its small possibilities in people" (Hancock 1978a: 41).

<sup>98</sup> Several critics have devoted their attention to this collection, giving prominence to the novella "The Pegnitz Junction" that is considered by Gallant her best and favourite piece of fiction so far. Specifically on the novella, see Sturgess 1990b, Wilkshire 2000, Brand 2004, and Toye 2011. On the whole collection, see Schaub 1990 and 1994.

<sup>99</sup> The episode she recalls is highly significant, and deserves to be quoted entirely: "Once, I was invited to lunch by a couple living near Frankfurt, who had two teen-aged daughters. I knew that the man, my host, had been in the SS. But he didn't know I knew. A relative of his wife's had told me. He was an engineer, he'd had a desk job, but it was still the SS. After lunch the two girls watched a TV documentary about the liberation of the concentration camps, and they saw what the liberating troops had discovered. And the two girls kept saying, 'But how could people do this?' and he said, sincerely, 'Only savages could do such things'. Savages. I looked at him: he was sincere. And I thought, People don't remember what they have done, or even what they have known" (Boyce 1990).

<sup>100</sup> This having been said, it is easier for anyone attempting at writing a critical analysis of Gallant's fiction to divide chapters in sheer correspondence to the collections, though it may not be the most correct way. On the one hand, I would be tempted to criticize a critical study that divides chapters according to collections, but on the other I could not suggest any better chronological division. We are not always able to date stories precisely, because the dates of publishing in review and the dates of publishing in collection are sometimes very different, not to speak of the gap between the time when the stories were conceived and then published. Decades elapse sometimes from one stage to another, from the "first flash of fiction" to the printed page. Even though it is

complex and difficult to trace back the actual origin of a text, it would nonetheless be very rewarding. Considering the case of Joseph Conrad, for instance, the possibility to reconstruct the genesis of his works given by his letters (see Davies 1983-2007) has contributed enormously to the study of his fiction.

<sup>101</sup> “Maintenant que John Cheever est mort, je suis devenue la plus ancienne ‘fictionnelle’ du *New Yorker*. Dernière moi vient Updike, qui a neuf ou dix ans de moins, mais qui a commencé à écrire très jeune” (Girard and Valette 2003). Gallant’s claim is considerably antecedent to Updike’s death (2009): it is therefore to be determined who is the most prolific to date. We know for sure that Gallant has had a reading contract with *The New Yorker* at least since 1964 (Grant 1990: 3), but we also know that the writer reduced consistently her contributions to the review in the last twenty or so years. Looking for data, I explored the website of the review, finding out that 144 entries match the search for “Mavis Gallant”, while there are 1084 (almost seven times more) quoting Updike. To obtain more exact data, the search should be refined, because the entries contain all the pages of the magazine in which the two writers are quoted, thus not necessarily texts *by* the two writers. If we were to attribute to Wikipedia any kind of relevance in this matter, its page on *The New Yorker* includes Updike in the list of famous contributors, but does not mention Gallant.

<sup>102</sup> For a reconstruction of Gallant’s very early publishing history, see any among Grant 1990, Keefer 1989 or Besner 1988.

<sup>103</sup> To view a scanned copy of the papers, visit <[http://www.newyorker.com/archive/1951/09/01/1951\\_09\\_01\\_020\\_TNY\\_CARDS\\_0002\\_31785](http://www.newyorker.com/archive/1951/09/01/1951_09_01_020_TNY_CARDS_0002_31785)> [Accessed 20/12/2011]. Subscribers of *The New Yorker* can flip through the pages, others will only see a sample in small print.

<sup>104</sup> The episode is thoroughly recalled in the long interview by Daphne Kalotay (1999), where Gallant points at the financial difficulties of becoming a writer (especially a writer of short-stories) and at her credulity as a young woman.

<sup>105</sup> The history of Gallant’s publishing in Canada is recalled and briefly analysed by Robert Fulford (2004).

<sup>106</sup> “MG: My friendship with Anne Hébert came about because Jean-Paul Lemieux and Madeleine Desrosiers (his wife), both painters, had asked me to call on her in her hotel in Menton. I’d met Jean-Paul Lemieux and Madeleine through Phillip Surrey who was a Montreal painter. Phillip Surrey was to me the Montreal painter; I still think so. He did those streets with the red brick houses and the snow – so absolutely true and real. He and his wife knew a lot of French-Canadian artists and his wife spoke good French. However I noticed that chez eux everyone spoke English! When they entertained the language somehow turned to English; I think that the French speakers just got sick of hearing broken French all the time so they turned to English.

MD: So even then you preferred to mix with painters.

MG: I was naturally drawn to them” (Dvorak 2009).

In a recent book on Anne Hébert, we are told that the writer met Mavis Gallant for the first time between 20 and 21 March 1955 in the Hotel ‘Aiglon’ in Menton (in Côte d’Azur, near the Italian border). Their friendship also had literary outcomes, such as Gallant’s “Introduction” to Hébert’s *Collected Later Novels* (Toronto: Anansi, 2003).

<sup>107</sup> *The New Yorker*, 23 August 1976: 28-45.

<sup>108</sup> During her career, Atwood overcame the boundaries of fiction and non-fiction in so many different ways that it is reductive to quote her in reference to creative non-fiction. An overview of her website <[www.margaretatwood.ca](http://www.margaretatwood.ca)> [Accessed 20/12/2011] immediately gives a sense of how Atwood challenges any definition of fiction, non-fiction, journalism, and similar. She has a Facebook page, a Twitter account and was recently involved in a project on digital signature at distance named “the Long Pen”. Her recent docufiction *In the Wake of the Flood* is but the latest example of her pioneering experimenting in genres. Conversely, Gallant’s presence on the internet is very limited. There is a fan page entitled on her name on Facebook, but nobody updates it systematically. Gallant is given some attention in Canadian websites on literature, where a short biography usually accompanies a list of books published and, sometimes, a section on her literary awards. A few videos and podcasts are available for download. A Wikipedia page exists in four languages: English, French, Italian, and Suomi. Information there are not exhaustive, though quite updated (due to the site policies). For a study of Atwood’s public persona, see Howells 2006. See also York 2007 for a reading of literary celebrity in Canada. Though the book does not mention Gallant, it is nonetheless interesting in this context, as it has already been noticed.

<sup>109</sup> Similarly, she spoke to Boyce in 1990 when she was asked to explain the creation of fiction: “I must warn you that I’ve often been asked the same question, and so my answer won’t be original”.

<sup>110</sup> “She’s funny, astute and articulate; so where is the hermit, the self-exiled expat, the prize-winning short-story writer who ‘suffers no fools’ and cuts short interviews without a backward glance? ‘I can be very bothered at times with various things, and very often journalists come to Paris with a list of Canadian names and they have nothing to ask, really’. She is demanding of journalism, because she understands the profession. ‘I am an ex-reporter. It has never left me’” (Todd 2009).

<sup>111</sup> To think that one day she would have been interviewed is indeed an admission that she was thinking at writing as a ‘career’. But we have to go back to context and think that Gallant was very young when she interviewed Sartre.

<sup>112</sup> The distinction is mine, and it has nothing to do with the label given by interviewers. It is, instead, a classification that derives from the tone and ‘climate’ that one can imagine by reading the transcriptions, an interview thus being something that remains confined to the margins of the questions&answers scheme, while a conversation being some kind of friendly ‘chat’, a moment of interaction in which Gallant becomes interested in her

## CHAPTER 1

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interlocutor as much as he or she is interested in her, and she starts asking questions as well and replying in a more relaxed (therefore more outgoing) way.

<sup>113</sup> See, among others, Dvorak 2009.

<sup>114</sup> This statement by Michael Ondaatje appeared in several reviews, and it is often quoted in the covers of Gallant's books (see SS, and Côté and Sabor 2002).

CHAPTER 2

***Identifying Language(s):***  
**essential theoretical framework**  
**and exemplificative case studies**

“Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language;  
and this is only the beginning of what they will do;  
and nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them.  
Come, let us go down, and there confuse their language,  
that they may not understand one another’s speech”

*Genesis, 11: 6-7*

Barbara Gabriel's 1994 essay "Gallant Language" reports a lack of interest in Gallant's readership and critics for what she identifies as the writer's "near obsession with the question of language" (3). In accordance with what I illustrated in the previous chapter, Gabriel points at both Gallant's fiction in general and the "Introduction" to *Home Truths* in particular as *loci* that gather the writer's considerations on language<sup>1</sup>.

Little has changed since that critic's complaint: no systematic study has been conducted so far, and only intermittent attention has been devoted in these years to language and to linguistic aspects closely related to or interwoven with language, including bilingualism and translation. With a few exceptions, such as W.J. Keith's chapter on Gallant in his *A Sense of Style*, and the slightly different case of language conceived as voice and its functions in narratological terms<sup>2</sup>, there remains a lot to be said on the relationship between Gallant and language. Keith's claim that "a whole book could be written about [Gallant's] treatment of the human effects of language" (1988: 102) is perhaps even reductive.

My aim here is to doubly pluralize Gabriel's statement, in order to prove Gallant's fascination with questions of languages. Stretched out in two directions, therefore multiplied rather than merely added to one another, the outcomes of an investigation on these concerns would hardly be contained in a single study. To offer an insight into Gallant's fiction in which language is not relegated to its role as a system of communication (and its related functions) but is regarded foremost as a subject matter in itself means to venture in a whole multidisciplinary field of study, rather than to limit analysis to a single critical approach.

Some corroborative evidence for my choice to expand the notion of language comes from the writer herself, who not only repeatedly commented on the centrality of this issue in her life and fiction, but also put it in close relation to other aspects that she deems fundamental, among which are memory, invention, and style, as I have already illustrated in Chapter 1.

## 1. The word and the world: a theory on theory

The much quoted remark that “memory [...] is inseparable from language” (HT: xv) or the already cited comments on translation and bilingualism, are not gold dust in the writer’s theoretical and fictional scenarios, as they are instead in the critical studies *on* Gallant<sup>3</sup>. Remarkably, we can borrow the writer’s very words to define language a “vital” issue (HT: xvi); even more notably, this comment is part of a broader discussion on the relationship between language and meaning, to which Gallant gives repeated attention in her fiction. I intend therefore to give it utmost importance in my critical approach. An almost obsessive recurrence of the word “meaning” informs the writer’s pages: we find stress on “political meaning” in “A Recollection”<sup>4</sup>, exploration of “the meaning of a situation” in “The Captive Niece”<sup>5</sup>, emphasis on some “erotic meaning” in “The Colonel’s Child”<sup>6</sup> and on “a deep religious meaning” in “Speck’s Idea”, and there are “secret meanings” in more than one story. The expression appears at least twice: in “Kingdom Come”<sup>7</sup>, a story centred around a professor of linguistics who is himself, metafictionally speaking, interested in the very meaning of words, but who, ironically, keeps failing in reading the ‘text’ of his own life, and in “Bernadette”<sup>8</sup>, where

the Knights [who] had been married for nearly sixteen years [...] considered themselves solidly united. Like many people no longer in love, they cemented their relationship with opinions, pet prejudices, secret meanings, a private vocabulary that enabled them to exchange amused glances over a dinner table and made them feel a shade superior to the world outside their house (CL: 130).

Yet the story reveals that, like a significant number of other couples in Gallant’s fiction, the Knights are only seemingly compliant, and their capability to understand each other is only superficial, albeit their common languages are more than one.

A study of corpora extracted from *The Selected Stories*, a corpus of texts broad enough to represent a sizeable sample, reveals that the word “meaning” occurs 55 times there, itself with various meanings. It is perhaps not the most

recurrent word: the combination of “word”/”words” – an example relevant to our concern with language<sup>9</sup> – is, for instance, three times higher. However, within the examples analysed, several stress Gallant’s ‘theoretical’ approach to language and her uncommon interest in processes of signification, which I will try to unravel in these pages. The writer never ventured into explicit linguistic (let alone semiotic) theorization; however, several comments which she pronounced, wrote, or which she put into her characters’ mouth prove that, unlike one of her characters, who “did not know the meaning of words, their precision, their power” (such is the case of Laurie in “Potter”<sup>10</sup>, SS: 428), Gallant is well aware of all these features of language. She emphasises them not only when she deals with signs and their components (signifier and signified), but also when she highlights the difficulty to “grasp the meaning of words” (“The Fenton Child”), or the key role played by the possibility to give “another meaning” (“Varieties of Exile”), perhaps “any meaning to our time” (“A Flying Start”)<sup>11</sup> and our world, and the more frequent consideration that the world “might have no meaning” at all. This quote is from “Grippes and Poche”<sup>12</sup>, but the expression “no meaning” also occurs in other stories, among which “O Lasting Peace”<sup>13</sup>, “The Other Paris”, “The End of the World”<sup>14</sup>, and “The Ice Wagon Going Down the Street”<sup>15</sup>. In general, the intense focalization on meaning certainly sheds light on all those passages in which characters rename objects, concepts and situations, giving their own meaning to what they see (or projecting expectations on what they have not seen yet), which is one of Gallant’s favourite ways of displaying at least two of her most recurrent subject matters: the clash between expectations and reality, and the lack of mutual understanding. The latter is usually due to two or more characters’ divergent points of view on the same subject, which again revolves around what seems a common practice in her stories: giving different meanings to one single object, concept, or situation.

The title of this section is a quote from Marta Dvorak’s recent book on Canadian novelist Ernest Buckler, from which the following long extract is also taken. It helps provide essential theoretical framework to my investigation:

Michel Foucault has pointed out that humanity's original relationship to texts was identical to its relationship to things, consisting in both cases in perceiving, decoding, and interpreting visible marks or signs and their correspondences. [...] Objects and places belonged to a pattern or design governed by unity and sympathy, relations between the part and the whole governed by analogy and proportion. The world was a text that could be read and decoded – it was pregnant with significance, the microcosm echoing the macrocosm, the visible surface reflecting the invisible just as time reflected or was the mobile image of eternity. [...]

In a similar fashion, language before the ahistorical, mythical Babel was allegedly a perfectly transparent sign of things, which it resembled. After Babel, the transparency, this resemblance to things, was destroyed, and languages that we speak today are rooted in this lost similitude, in the space left void (Foucault 1966: 47-51). Language no longer directly resembles the things it names. As Emile Benveniste points out, nothing signifies anything by itself or through any natural vocation, but through combination regulated by a strict code – the structure of the whole conferring significance or function on the parts (1974: 65). The sign's lack of co-naturalness, remarks Hegel, is actually the source of the strength and richness of alphabetic language: the arbitrariness of the signifier liberates the imagination and allows arrangements not possible in a hieroglyphic language. But even if it no longer resembles the things it names, Foucault argues, language is not separated from the world. It continues to be part of the space in which truth manifests itself, and its relationship with the world it is as much that of analogy as that of signifying. Nevertheless, Benveniste remarks a serious difficulty that Saussure encountered but did not resolve: knowing if and how we get from the sign to 'la parole' (Saussure 1969: 148, 172), Benveniste points out that the world of sign is closed, that from the sign to the sentence there is no transition, that the hiatus separates them (2001: 102-103).

In the light of these premises, Dvorak's conclusion that "in his writing, Buckler seems to be trying to explore this relationship, to bridge the hiatus" applies as well to Gallant. Further confirmation of adaptability comes from the critic's use elsewhere of analogous theoretical apparatus to describe Gallant's fiction; towards the end of her essay on Gallant, Dvorak explains that "this symbolic perception of the world as a cipher is present in Gallant's texts, which are both cipher and hermeneutic instruments with which to read and interpret the cipher of the world" (2002: 73).

Gallant's reflections upon how one can represent reality are contained in non-fictional and fictional (con)texts alike, with the author also wondering to what extent, for which aim, and with what degree of reliability and plausibility this happens. In the last of the Linnet Muir stories, "With a Capital T", she explicitly casts doubt on the existence of such thing as truth with a capital T. In so doing, and to do so, significantly, she steps into the deceitful realm of words and meanings, having language become the very subject matter of her reflections, wherein special focus goes on the representation of reality. "I still believed", says

Linnet referring to when she was aged under twenty, “that most people meant what they said” (HT: 317); a remark of this kind on her juvenile naïveté entails, by contrast, that once she grew up she lost such confidence. The relationship between truth and its opposite – whatever it is – reverberates from Gallant’s quote of Jean Cocteau’s statement “*Je suis un mensonge qui dit la vérité*”, to her assuming that “memory can spell a name wrong and still convey the truth” (HT: xxii). It percolates in the texture of her fiction, with language playing a key-role in texts referring to fallacy and uncertainty in comprehension and communication, or dealing with misrepresentation of the self and ‘mis-recollection’ of the past. “The true meaning” of words and things (“Across the Bridge”)<sup>16</sup> is often replaced by “a meaning unconnected” with the one decided by others (“By the Sea”)<sup>17</sup>, “at least [...] the meaning [they] selected” (“The Captive Niece”). If anything is asked, “it has to be answered in a word”, but the reply offered, “everything/nothing” (“April’s Fish”), functions as a line stretched from any meaning to none, within which Gallant encompasses all its nuances and shades.

In “With a Capital T”, Gallant’s fictional double is asked to add captions to some images. The practice of captioning, very common in the years when Mavis/Linnet was working as a reporter, was usually considered less creative (therefore not as appealing or important) than writing articles or interviewing people. Yet the woman found it no less interesting, and, more relevantly to this context, pointed out that describing images was difficult, even pernicious. In turning attention to the possibility of reporting a single situation in different ways, Gallant simultaneously highlights language’s positive and negative potential. Here is Linnet trying to caption a picture framing a boy, a bun, and a bear:

There is no trick to it. You just repeat what the picture has told you like this:

‘Boy eats bun as bear looks on’.

The reason why anything has to go under the picture at all is that a reader might wonder, ‘Is that a bear looking on?’ It looks like a bear, but that is not enough reason for saying so. Pasted across the back of the photo you have been given is a strip of paper on which you can read: ‘Saskatoon, Sask. 23 Nov. Boy eats bun as bear looks on’. Whoever composed this knows two things more than you do – a place and a time.

You have a space to fill in which the words must come out even. The space may be tight; in that case, you can remove ‘as’ and substitute a comma, though that makes the kind of terse statement to which your reader is apt to reply, ‘So what?’ Most of the time, the Truth with a Capital T is a matter of elongation: ‘Blond boy eats small bun as large bear looks on’.

‘Blond boy eats buttered bun’, is livelier, but unscrupulous. You have been given no information about the butter. ‘Boy eats bun as hungry bear looks on’, has the beginnings of a plot, but it may inspire your reader to protest: ‘That boy must be a mean sort of kid if he won’t share his food with a starving creature’. Child-lovers, though less prone to fits of anguish than animal-lovers, may be distressed by the word ‘hungry’ for a different reason, believing ‘boy’ subject to attack from ‘bear’. You must not lose your head and type, ‘Blond bear eats large boy as hungry bear looks on’, because your reader may notice, and write a letter saying ‘Some of you guys around there think you’re pretty smart, don’t you?’ while another will try to enrich your caption with, ‘Re your bun write-up, my wife has taken better pictures than that in the very area you mention’ (HT: 318-319).

Beside the ironic tone of this quote, several serious concerns are embedded in between its lines. The writer here seems to maintain that even what appears like “the most straightforward incident” cannot be described “without risking ambiguity and misunderstanding”, because providing “a clear and watertight account” of it is impossible (Keith 1988: 113). By reflecting upon the possibility to attribute different meanings to one single situation, stress implicitly falls on the opportunities that language offers to pluralize, amplify, and multiply reality, but at the same time Gallant succeeds in detecting a perilous counterpart: there is no fixed rule imposing a representation of reality which corresponds univocally to such observed reality. In more than one way, observation, reproduction, and account of reality are likely to be unreliable, misleading, and illusory. Besides, it is its observers who might decide not to describe it trustworthily, acting in bad faith or aiming at accomplishing their own interests. Even when no such thing as *mala fide* underlies somebody’s actions, they might – perhaps unconsciously – filter what they see with their deep-rooted prejudices or, simply and not negatively, with the set of rules that constitutes their *modus essendi*.

Even when honesty, integrity, or – more often – ingenuity inspire someone’s behaviour, they do not guarantee a correct verbalization (or understanding) of reality, basically because no such thing exists, all the more so in Gallant’s fiction, where this aspect is given insistent emphasis by over-exaggerating incomprehension, misunderstanding, “dialogue[s] of the deaf” (AFGT: 45), personal and cultural clashes, and *similia*.

Gallant's preoccupations are not in the least new. Nevertheless, they can be considered at least atypical within a fictional context, as they usually pertain to linguistic theorization rather than narrative horizons. I do not maintain that a concern for arbitrariness in its broader meaning is (to be) confined to theoretical spaces, nor to state that the history of literature does lack examples of this kind. William Shakespeare, the father of English literature, often centred his tragedies around linguistic misunderstanding and the duplicity of words' meaning. Joseph Conrad, whom I use comparatively, also constructed plots inspired by dichotomies such as light versus darkness, or truth versus falsehood, with language playing an important role and shuffling the cards of what actually is (and what means) one thing and what its declared opposite. In all these cases, the search for and the discovery of truth stand in opposition to the creation of meaning. These and other examples considered, Gallant's degree of interest in these matters and her insightfulness remain nonetheless, if not unique, at least rare and peculiar. Most of all, it is the writer's remarkable *awareness* about these aspects that advocates a reading of Gallant's fiction which takes them into high consideration.

Ultimately, it has also to be remarked that linguistics is merely the field in which these concerns merge, and only one of the possible points of view from which to read and interpret the writer's stories and novels. In the case of Gallant, reading is never maimed by lack of specialized knowledge, and this applies to any field (including – as we shall see – literary allusions). Readers are never forced to delve into specific linguistic concerns; the writer is, in fact, always willing and magisterially able to elevate the problem from the level of words to the level of world<sup>18</sup>.

## 2. The Identity of Language(s): pluralizing in different directions

The world of Gallant, populated by remittance men, refugees, emigrates and travellers, houses situations which revolve around linguistic issues, many of which contain difficulties to overcome or have negative outcomes. There are, for instance, characters who speak more than one language: in their case, either there are frequent code switching modalities or different languages entail completely different worlds and different identities; the most sizeable group in the cluster of Gallant's speakers is perhaps the one composed by those who live in contexts where their mother tongue is hardly spoken, or even not spoken at all. Keith maintains that Gallant

concentrates on types or groups who are especially vulnerable. These include children bombarded and frustrated by words whose meanings are never explained, or disoriented by the discovery that the same words have varying meanings or nuances in different places; articulate adults rendered literally wordless by finding themselves in a community whose language is incomprehensible; whole peoples (French-Canadians are Gallant's favourite examples for obvious reasons) fated to witness their own language altered, defamiliarized, and possibly undermined by a strong linguistic influence, and forced to master a foreign tongue in order to survive (1988: 102).

Rather than trying to learn the language of the locals, as Keith possibly suggests, they more often refuse it altogether: even if the Colonel in "The Colonel's Child" "was able to learn the structure of every language, given a few pages of colloquial prose and a dictionary", Gallant stresses that "his wife was deaf to strangers, and she barely noticed the people she could not understand" (SS: 362). The "hatred of an alien sound", which Gallant refers to in her "Introduction" to *Home Truths* (xvii)<sup>19</sup>, is the most common feeling, and one of the reasons why people opt for isolation rather than integration. When possible, that is when people who speak the same language are not on their own in a foreign context, rather than trying to communicate they cling to their linguistic community: language works on the one hand as a sign which openly attests their difference; on the other hand,

it is the most reassuring anchor to prevent them from ‘going ashore’. In “Acceptance of their ways”<sup>20</sup>, Mrs. Vanessa Freeport accepts Lily Littel’s *way* of speaking, albeit her accent, because “she could not stand Italy without the sound of an English voice in the house. In the hush of the dead season, Mrs. Freeport preferred Lily’s ironed-out Bayswater to no English at all” (MHB: 4). Generally, language reinforces internal isolation of a group; furthermore, it contributes to develop suspiciousness when it is not understood. In a late story like “The Fenton Child”, by reinforcing cultural isolation, language offers a protection from external incursion in the life of the Abbots. In describing one of the secondary characters’ job, the narrator says: “During working hours they were expected to speak English, even to one another. The elder Macfarlane harboured the fear that anything said in an unknown language could be about him” (SS: 80). The example suggests that in bilingual contexts “hatred of an alien sound” becomes also ‘fear of an other meaning’: the potentialities of what is being said are unlimited, and they obviously include a wide range of negative options. When characters do not understand what is being said, their lack of understanding makes them suspicious, and ready to strike back even to attacks which have never been formulated.

Morbid attachment to a language can result in extreme instances like deterioration and out-of-date versions, cases in which English, in particular, can become a different language altogether. Netta Asher, the protagonist of “The Moslem Wife” is said to speak “the English of expatriate children, as if reading aloud” (SS: 17), and though the girl “saw herself as profoundly English” she sounded “suddenly foreign and gassy” in conversation with non equally anachronistic English peers, to such an extent that the narrator describes her expressions as “hopelessly un-English” (SS: 18). In the story, which opens with a homage to Katherine Mansfield<sup>21</sup> reinforced by setting the narration in a hotel in the south of France, the writer depicts the controversial story of love and forgiveness between Netta and her inept and unfaithful husband Jack, a story which originated from linguistic and cultural isolation when the two protagonists were both very young. Linguistically separated from the rest of the world, thus almost compelled to get closer to each other, Netta and her husband undergo a

process of partial identification which, quite oddly, works only through language and proximity:

Netta took it for granted, now she was married, that Jack felt as she did about light, dark, death, and love. They were as alike in some ways (none of them physical) as a couple of twins, spoke much the same language in the same accents, had the same jokes – mostly about other people – and had been together as much as their families would let them for most of their lives. Other men seemed dull to Netta – slower, perhaps, lacking the spoken shorthand she had with Jack. She never mentioned this. For one thing, both of them had the idea that, being English, one must not say too much. Born abroad, they worked hard at an Englishness that was innocently inaccurate, rooted mostly in attitudes (SS: 5-6).

Within their private environment, whose boundaries are determined by language and by physically circumscribed spaces (such as the hotel ‘insula’ and their bedroom), Netta and Jack are compliant and safe, with Netta having “a special antenna for Jack, for his shades of meaning” (SS: 9); but their connection does not work when they separate, or even when they are just about to:

Netta could not understand why, loving Jack as she did, she did not look more like him. It had troubled her in the past when they did not think exactly the same thing at almost the same time. During the secret meetings of their long engagement she had noticed how even before a parting they were nearly apart - they had begun to ‘unmesh’, as she called it (SS: 8).

Alienation can be also produced by one’s own language (rather than a foreign one), as it happens in “The Burgundy Weekend”<sup>22</sup> when Lucie reveals that her homesickness is the result of linguistic distance. “France was worse than any foreign country because the language was the same as her own. And yet it was not the same. It had a flat and glassy surface here. She felt better with her own people” (CL: 316). Reference to a “glassy surface” suggests that the meaning of words is not easy to grasp, whatever the language. Further warnings about similar worries include Bernadette’s fear of the English language: “Bernadette had been warned about the licentious English – reserved on the surface, hypocritical, infinitely wicked underneath” (CL: 143). In the same story, even a native English

speaker, Robbie Knight, is “afraid of words” (134), a paradox even bigger if we consider his lifelong attempted career as playwright.

All these and several other examples considered, it emerges that, in her stories, Gallant explores a large spectrum of possible situations, indulging in the descriptions of accents, intonations, and other “paralinguistic signs” (Ruesc and Kees 1970), with possibly equal or even higher concern for the ‘how’ than for the ‘what’ of a conversation. She also draws almost systematic attention to linguistic inaccuracy and imprecision, semantic ambivalence and ambiguousness, either in bilingual contexts or – perhaps even more so – when characters speak the same language. Understanding – more often misunderstanding or non-understanding<sup>23</sup> – might well be a matter of translation, as it happens to Puss and Sylvie in “The Cost of Living”<sup>24</sup>, where the first “forgot every word [she] had ever known in French, and told it in English, which Sylvie could not understand” (CL: 220), or of accent, as it is in “In the Tunnel”<sup>25</sup> between Meg Reeves and Sarah Holmes. But it is more often an issue related to something less palpable and identifiable, something that is usually difficult to grasp exactly. In other words, rather than the incapacity to “understand what it [i]s said” (“The Four Seasons”), Gallant points at the inability to “understand what it [i]s about” (New Year’s Eve”)<sup>26</sup>. It is also interesting that ‘understand’, recurrently followed by ‘that’, ‘why’, ‘what’, or the names of people and things, mainly appears in negative sentences: it goes without saying that accent falls on what is *not* understood more often than on what is. In “The Remission”<sup>27</sup>, a story where the foreign language is definitely not the uppermost motive of incomprehension, “Alec would have understood [Wilkinson’s] language, but not the person behind it” (CL: 247).

In her fiction, Gallant describes several languages: there is a predominance of English speakers (either native or not, variously British, Irish, Canadian, American, etc.), but there is also a vast group of people who speak French. Many (not exclusively in the German stories) speak German, but Italian and Spanish are also mentioned more than once. In her pages, we hear Greek, Polish, Russian, Czech, Lithuanian, Japanese, and several other tongues. Usually – at least often – Gallant specifies what language each character speaks, facing quite major

difficulties in dealing with coherent explanation of who is saying what and in what language, especially when other characters might not share the same language. Gallant's attention to the plausibility of the situations described is challenged by her typical suppression of the "connective tissue", and the sole display of what she calls "les [...] temps forts" (Girard and Valette 2003). Not leaving room for any superfluous word, Gallant's struggle with clarity is not always won, but when it is not, it achieves the further aim of reflecting the characters' bewilderment on her readership<sup>28</sup>.

Gallant never forgets to specify further details about the accent, the vocabulary, or the peculiarities that mark out each speaker. In "Scarves, Beads, and Sandals"<sup>29</sup>, one of the characters "spoke a coarse, neutral, urban French – the Paris accent was dying out" (SS: 673), while in "A Remission" the language spoken in the place where the Webbs have moved is "a Ligurian dialect with some Spanish and Arabic expressions mixed in" (SS: 218). In "The Doctor", the narrator notices in French the "fake diminution of authority characteristic of the Latin tongues which never works in English" (HT: 301). Though not a linguist, as I have said, Gallant is nonetheless a keen listener, as much as she is an attentive observer. Interest in the way people speak emerges also from her description of the creation of fiction:

Every character comes into being with a *name* (which I may change), an *age*, a *nationality*, a *profession*, a particular *voice* and *accent*, a *family background*, a *personal history*, a *destination*, *qualities*, *secrets*, an *attitude toward love*, *ambition*, *money*, *religion*, and a *private centre of gravity*. Over the next several days I take down long passages of dialogue. Whole scenes then follow, complete in themselves but like disconnected parts of a film. I do not deliberately invent any of this: It occurs. [...] I do not hear anything: I know what is being said. Finally (I am describing a long and complex process as simply as I can), the story will seem to be entire, in the sense that nearly everything needed has been written. It is entire but unreadable. Nothing fits. A close analogy would be an unedited film (HT: xvi-xvii, emphasis added).

It is tough to establish to what extent Gallant's engaging description of her own creative process, best described in the above quote from the "Preface" to her *Selected Stories*, is romanticized or fictionalized, and maybe it is of little interest

in this circumstance<sup>30</sup>. It would perhaps be more relevant to determine whether the features listed by the writer in that occasion<sup>31</sup> (see italics in the text) are comprehensive or not of all the characteristics she attaches to identity. For all that matters here, they are certainly crucial to the writer's view, as much as they are to the definition of 'identity' shared by main critical approaches. What is also remarkable here is the stress on "voice and accent" and the importance of nationality, which itself usually entails direct connections to a specific language.

Languages spoken in Gallant's texts do not only include plain and properly spoken native or second languages. There is also plenty of private codes and vocabularies, which are not in the least more comprehensible or less deceiving. In any case, stress keeps falling on a varieties of situations in which Gallant illustrates languages' deficiencies, gaps in comprehension or even in expression, pointing at someone who "could not understand the language they spoke" ("The Remission"), someone else who "spoke their language badly" ("Questions and Answers")<sup>32</sup>, or even foreigners speaking better than natives. In "The Alien Flower"<sup>33</sup>, the protagonist Bibi is

reading a speech Julius was to make at a congress where English would be the working language. [...] Her English was better than Julius's, but he said it was too perfect. Afterwards he would alter half the changes she had made, saying 'It might be good English, but nobody talks that way' (SS: 336-337).

Later on, however, when she is about to answer a man's question in a book shop, Bibi finds out that "the English Julius had considered 'too perfect' turned out to be full of holes", and she mentions a sign reading "gas at city prices" as something "which she never understood and which became the symbol of everything she never would grasp over there" (SS: 339). Here language becomes a metaphor for life, where even a simple sign is open to interpretation when one lacks – like Bibi – a "family background" and "a private centre of gravity".

Within the group of French-Canadians and their bilingual peculiarities, a group that Keith, in the above quote, calls Gallant's "favourite examples", the

story “The Doctor” contains several remarkable aspects in connection to language. The story reads, among other things, as an account of Linnet’s bewilderment in discovering Doctor Chauchard’s several identities<sup>34</sup>, some of which were unknown to the girl until the publication of the man’s obituary: “there were three separate death notices, as if to affirm that Chauchard had been three men. All three were in a French newspaper; he neither lived nor died in English” (SS: 696). The discovery, which is more upsetting for the girl than the man’s death itself, accounts for the incompleteness of her relationship with him, and in general terms introduces the problem of multiple identities, their coexistence, interaction, and possible clash. When Linnet meets a certain Louis, a marginal figure for the development of the plot, she finds out that her interlocutor knew Chauchard only as “the poet R.É. of the third notice” (SS: 697). “For that one conversation Louis and I wondered what our appearance on stage several scenes apart might make us to each other” (SS: 698)<sup>35</sup>.

Particularly interesting within the object of our discussion is the interaction of identity with language: each of the doctor’s identities exists in one language only; thus, Chauchard is French as a doctor, but also as a poet (the identity previously unknown to Linnet), but when interpreting the role of friend of Linnet’s parents, he is a young and jovial man who speaks only English. In English, his vocabulary, tone, and mode are completely different:

French was his language for medicine; I never heard him give an opinion in English. It was evidently the language to which he retreated if one became a nuisance, his back to a wall of white marble syntax. And when it came to filial devotion he was one with the red-covered books. Calling on my parents, not as my doctor but as their friend, he spoke another language. It was not merely English instead of French but the private dialect of a younger person who was playful, charming, who smoked cigarettes in a black-and-silver holder, looking round to see the effect of his puns and jokes (HT: 302).

In his case, language creates a boundary each identity cannot separate itself from. You need to play another role in order to use a different language or, seen the other way round, in certain languages you can only be certain personae. The gap is emphatically connoted as unbridgeable.

It is Linnet's belief that she has a special relationship with Chauchard that makes her believe that at one point in her life she heard his "real voice, the one that transcends this or that language" (SS: 699). Linnet includes in the list of "this or that language" not only French and English, but also other 'languages': "Think of your unfortunate parents', Dr. Chauchard had said in the sort of language that had no meaning to me, though I am sure it was authentic to him" (SS: 696). But characters seldom speak in 'authentic voices', no matter if they communicate in their own, in a foreign, or in any other language.

### **2.1 Things are not always said in words: non-verbal languages**

When I refer to other languages, I do not only mean natural languages. My aim in this work, in fact, is to pluralize language in further ways: bearing on the background several well known semiotic and structuralist theories, in the following pages I shall explore the relationship between verbal (i.e. natural) and non-verbal languages, mainly food and clothing, with hints at objects, furniture, climate, and others, given that "the word 'language' does not simply refer to a verbal system, but involves all those sign systems with which human beings give shape to their relation to the world" (Calefato 2004: 5). In doing so, I will show that verbalization is not always the way characters privilege to express opinions, describe things, or, more simply and more generally speaking, communicate. It is even less so when characters enact practices of self-perception and representation of the world – which figure among Gallant's central preoccupations – with natural languages usually presented as ineffectual or incomplete, all the more so in bilingual or trans-cultural circumstances. Patterns of this kind keep repeating in the writer's fiction, almost like indigestible meals, at times exacerbated or aggravated by the display of consequences that any incomplete overlapping of form and meaning brings about. In particular, perception and representation are observed in this thesis in relation to identity. A core issue in Gallant, as I have partially endeavoured to demonstrate in Chapter 1, identity is implicated here first

and foremost because of its intimate relation with language. Besides, as said, language as subject matter, explored from several points of view, becomes a very extensive issue, even too extensive to be contained in a single study. A call for restriction is therefore necessarily advocated, and because I refuse any a priori limitation on my remarks on language, I shall confine my investigation differently, imposing thematic boundaries, and focusing on language only (or mainly) in relation to identity: my close reading of texts will aim at relating language(s) to both perception and representation of identity, what James in his *Principles of Psychology* (1890) called “the social self”, in order to establish in what ways people come to terms with burning issues such as their role in the world and their interaction with others.

Beyond basic homogeneity, identity is, critically speaking, one of the most controversial and multifaceted concepts of all times, as it is both difficult to define and mutable. Identities are usually fragmented, so is their study. According to different critical approaches, stress moves considerably from inside to outside subjects, from their psychological scaffolds to their cultural and sociological backgrounds. Any overview attempting at providing essential theoretical framework should acknowledge that identity, both split in some of its main components and observed in cultural and social contexts, never operates by neat separation amongst different areas of investigation. Hence the possibility to affirm, more appropriately perhaps, that identities are usually interconnected, so *are their studies*<sup>36</sup>.

In Gallant, a key-role in defining identity in psychological terms is played by personal identity (Noonan 2003): questions dealing with ‘what makes one the person one is’ are various. In particular, emphasis is usually given to two related aspects: first of all, identity is a multidimensional structure, consisting of the complex of facets coexisting simultaneously in an individual in a certain *hic et nunc*. A second notable aspect, commonly called evolution, deals with how and to what extent or aim any individual changes with the passing of time. Inside the articulate world of Gallant’s fiction, the combination of these two strictly related aspects brings focus on the shaping of identity, its loss, and the search for a new –

thought as more suitable – identity. In Gallant’s conception, identity is not a fixed, immutable status, the emblem of unity and stability. Conversely, it is something in continuous development, determined by the subjects’ unquenchable desire for reshaping and redefining themselves according to both their own expectations and those of the outside world. In this ‘quest for identity’, self-perception implicates fragmentation, hybridization, incompleteness. Thus, it contributes significantly to threaten people’s stability or, inversely said, does not contribute at all to prevent, avoid, or treat instability. Usually,

quest for identity [...] means finding a way to bring into concordance fulfilment of individual aspirations and needs on the one hand, and compliance with the norms established by society on the other hand. Yet, wherever and whenever these norms hinder an individual’s development by restricting the realm of his growth, these norms are bound to be questioned, attacked, and – sometimes forcefully – changed both in literature and in life (Neher 1989: 18).

In situations marked by bilingualism or lack of competence in the foreign languages spoken in the countries where characters have moved, language becomes paradigmatic expression of internal fracture and, linguistically but also psychologically, coalescence is a Grail.

Very often in the writer’s fiction, the quest for identity is also physical, or it is motivated by physical displacement. It is rare to find, among her characters, people who share the writer’s non belligerent, her (at least seemingly) non hostile relation with the motherland<sup>37</sup> or with a place they (are forced to) move to. Frequently, in fact, Gallant’s characters are trapped in worlds where self-definition in relation to a place – in other words, ‘being’ as ‘belonging’ – seems unattainable. Undoubtedly, many of her characters are interested in or willing to belong to a cultural group (be it a community, a nation, a people or any other kind of group); yet it is perhaps more frequent the case of people almost compelled to make others fit into a category, which is often culture-bound. Associations established as such, in which narrow-mindedness is a prevailing basic attitude, result in stereotypical labels. A combination of bigotry and intolerance, Gallant’s

characters easily “fix” others “in a formulated phrase”, and those who are labelled stereotypically or, in Eliot’s words, “formulated”, feel compelled, for some intrinsic – frequently inexplicable – reason, to correspond to the label they have been attached<sup>38</sup>. Whereas in social contexts disguising or role-playing may be related to the metaphor of social mask, this case deals with what the Italian tradition refers to as *maschera*, a different kind of theatrical role-playing based on cultural typecasting traits, immediately recognizable and easily classified thereby. It goes without saying that cultural clashes, which Merler defines “the most typical source of estrangement” in Gallant’s texts (1978: 3), are often dressed in comic tones. Readers get the writer’s irony, at times subtle rather than outstanding, wry and sardonic, or trenchant and sharp. It may verge on sarcasm, or else satire, gallows humour and witticism, even bitterness. Gallantian irony, which is at times Gallantesque<sup>39</sup>, becomes “less innocent”, when it degenerates into “that irresistible practice of ‘amusing oneself at the expense of others’ [...], a kind of humour that leaves us feeling slightly guilty as we exercise it” (Keefer 1989: 47-48). As Keefer says, *we* might feel guilty, but guilt does not seem what most of Gallant’s characters feel. They are more likely to enjoy daily cruelty, as much as they like exerting control over others, especially those whom Keefer describes as trapped characters<sup>40</sup>. When forced to move, these defenceless beings might rightly feel displaced, uprooted; for their part, however, they rarely put any effort in trying to adapt to a new context. Even one step out with the aim of discovering what the unknown environment is like would be praiseworthy, but it is rarely what they do. They are not the “explorers” that, at a deeper look, neither Gallant’s parents are. At its extreme, this hermetic sealing-attitude results in characters like Madame Pégurin, the French landlady in “The Picnic”<sup>41</sup>, for whom denying diversity equals removing foreigners altogether. The woman’s attitude is applied, unvaried, to foreigners living in her own country (the American families lodging in her own house) and in their own country:

She disliked foreigners [...]. Madame Pégurin had tried, as well as she could, to ignore the presence of the Americans in Virolun, just as, long ago, when she travelled, she had overlooked the natives of whichever country she happened to be in. She had ignored the Italians in Italy and the Swiss in Switzerland (CL: 38).

In other stories, rejection of others takes less extreme and more plausible forms, among which cultural clashes or self-enclosures, with language generally working as reinforcement of both. The cases of “The Picnic” and “In the Tunnel” analysed in the following section are sound examples of these two attitudes.

Among an individual’s main concerns, perception (and self-perception) keeps pace with representation, which is a key element in interpersonal and social contexts in particular. Usually, when individuals interact with others, they do not behave spontaneously. Any variation in behaviour can be given several explanations, some of which are context-driven without being negative. However, because every individual usually plays one or more social roles, they often behave accordingly. Gallant often points at subjects who try to mislead others, by replacing their identity with another, which is thought to be more suitable, acceptable, agreeable, appealing, etc. Fictionalized self-constructions are elaborated in the attempt to please others, to coincide with both one’s own and someone else’s expectations. One of the most emblematic cases is undoubtedly the character of Wishart, Bonnie’s friend in *Green Water, Green Sky*: an English teacher of drama who works in America in winter and manages to be invited to Europe every summer by rich middle-aged women to whom he provides entertainment and company, Wishart (whose name is itself self-made) is welcomed in every context he joins only because, behaving according to the simplest of stereotypes, his attitude is reassuring for the others. Being an actor in his life (professionally just in half of it, but basically all his life is a never ending performance), Wishart hides his identity by replacing it with interchangeable masks, Pirandellianly speaking. Holding to Pirandello, he is ‘a character in search of an author’, ready to play the parts his friend Bonnie suggests. Parasites as well as actors (professional or not) like him, including Walter Henderson of “An Unmarried Man’s Summer” and Eric Wilkinson in “The Remission”, rely economically and emotionally on others, but ‘pay’ their rent by giving their hosts something which does not exist in real life, and is one of the most reassuring feelings: the correspondence of expectations and reality, especially in terms of stereotypes. Through the introduction of the character of Bob Harris in *Green Water, Green Sky*, Gallant almost theorizes on this aspect:

Nothing is more reassuring to a European than the national who fits his national character: the waspish Frenchmen, the jolly Hollander, the blunted Swiss, the sly Romanian – each of these paper dolls can find a niche. Bob Harris corresponded, superficially, to the French pattern for an American male – ‘un grande gosse’ – and so he got on famously (41-42).

Not surprisingly, the correspondence between expectations and reality may not work even in the case of artificial characters: James Chichalides in *A Fairly Good Time* is a man of Greek origin who desperately tries to pass himself off as an English gentleman, convinced that “everyone hates” English people, but “everyone likes to being mistaken for them” (AFGT: 56). Struggling with pronunciation, idiomatic expressions and typical garments, he fights his daily battle for attempted Britishness which his speech and garments equally give away:

He sounded like those stateless Egyptians who always replied, when asked what they were, ‘My culture is French; I have read Racine’. James’s clothes were English, but so flawless that they could only have come from a Marrie England boutique on the continent. [...] He wanted to be taken for something he was not, but what was he? ‘That Greek upstairs’, was what Philippe called him (AFGT: 55).

Further than the few examples given, a plethora of characters populating Gallant’s pages are involved in more or less conscious, more or less deliberate, and more or less manifest practices of hiding, superimposing, or overlapping identities, which may result in their decision to change their consolidated linguistic and behavioural practices, their attitude, habits, garments, and even their name. When focus falls on this concern, the original ‘who am I’ question, which regards self-perception, is immediately replaced by the ‘who do you think I am’ one, that has to do with someone else’s perception. Its paradoxical reply, which Cooley (1902), more than one century ago, formulated as “I am not what I think I am and I am not what you think I am; I am what I think that you think I am”<sup>42</sup>, introduces the well-known looking-glass self theory, which often finds warm welcoming in literary studies, not only due to its literary-inspired name. In the case of Gallant’s fictions, in particular, where *Alice in Wonderland* is reserved a special place (based on a kind of quoting and misquoting habit)<sup>43</sup>, Cooley’s

symbolic image seems to fit the analysis of the writer because it works as counter image to the frequent, almost obsessive presence of mirrors in her pages. Gallant's craving for ironic reversing, however, challenges even the traditional meaning of symbols, so that mirrors do not always operate as reliable lenses, but rather double-deceive their observers, all the more so because they did not expect things to be other than reflected. Again, it is not difficult to see that similar comments apply to language.

In her book *The Clothed Body*, Patrizia Calefato points at

the symbolic function of non-verbal sign systems, like food and clothing. Sign systems [...] manifest their functional mechanisms as generators of relations between individuals, devices for shaping the world and sources of meaning and value. It is in this sense that sign systems may be called communication systems (2004: 10).

These sign systems or 'languages', in both their symbolic value and as "communication systems", consist, as said, of non-verbal elements traditionally conceived as signifiers of personal and cultural identity<sup>44</sup>; moving from the pioneering studies of Lévi-Strauss in the 60s and their immediate development through Roland Barthes, Mary Douglas and others, and following the path of more recent theories, such as social semiotics<sup>45</sup>, we will consider interdisciplinary approaches including psychology and psychoanalysis, sociology, anthropology, iconography, and a variety of other disciplines which have offered significant contributions to the understanding of language and its relationship with identity, in terms of definition, localization, dramatization, etc., and present a "study of how people convey ideas for themselves and to one another, whether through words, food, clothing, objects" (Leeds-Hurwitz 1993: xvi). The assumption that people represent themselves to others by the way they speak, by what they wear (Barthes 1967, Kaiser 1985, Calefato 2004) and eat (Lévi-Strauss 1966, Douglas 1972, Fischler 1988, Lupton 1996) and by the places they live in or by the objects they carry along or are surrounded by might indeed be very simple and basic, but it is the combination among all these elements in Gallant's writing which is anything but simple and therefore it is worth investigating. Rereading Gallant's fiction

bearing in mind these signifiers one would easily recognize the crucial role they are given by the writer. Indeed they work like proper languages, either reinforcing verbal assumptions or conveying a meaning that clashes with the one formulated in words. Most of time, they overcome the impact of what is said, capturing the reader's attention: this happens mainly because their role does not limit to establishing symbolic allusions; in fact, they carry on a proper, often independent 'discourse', which the reader may become fully aware of only at the end of the stories, or when focused rereading is carried out. When more than one non-verbal language is implied, the degree of inter and intra-textual density raises; together with Gallant's manipulation of the point of view and with practices like time-shifting, "duplicative time" and "parallactic narration" (Nagel 2001: 48), this creates texts which are difficult to decipher, often overstuffed with meaning. Such an outcome is all the more extraordinary if we consider that Gallant's fictions do not offer imaginary settings or fantastic plots, nor are they the accounts of extraordinary people or circumstances; conversely, in presenting situations only rarely exceptional<sup>46</sup>, they work very much like everyday life, with its continuous confirmation of "Fascism[']s] small possibilities in people" (Hancock 1978a: 41).

## **2.2 Renarration as rewriting: functions and dysfunctions of written language(s)**

Problematizing matters of language(s) within Gallant's fiction includes dealing with diamesic variations, giving emphasis to the specific traits of written language. Written texts contained in the writer's stories mainly consist of letters, pieces of writing (novels, articles), notes, and similar scripts written by the characters; there is also a sizeable apparatus of literary texts that the writer playfully embeds in her short stories and novels, making ample use of quoting and misquoting procedures. The abundant employment of inter-textual and intra-textual references, metafiction and dialogic interplay with literary (classics and fairy tales in particular), but also non-literary texts, has a function that critics have

underestimated and that we are all still very far from understanding – let alone analysing and classifying – thoroughly. Notwithstanding Gallant’s explicit claim that “it would never enter my head to write a novelist’s reply to another novel” (Whitfield 2002b: 110)<sup>47</sup>, there is certainly an open dialogue between Gallant’s prose and several pieces of fiction, of her own as much as of previous times. Intertextuality does not only operate at the level of allusions and quotes; there is also a competent combination of different texts within a single piece of writing. We have in fact to agree with Dvorak, who describes Gallant’s texts as “non-linear, multilayered, multidimensional, multi-genre constructions shifting among the mode of narrative, essay, fictional autobiography, and satire” (2002: 64).

Practices like renarration and retelling, which Gallant’s characters are accustomed to, usually constitute means of deliberate distortion of reality, in which events take shape in ways more suitable to the characters’ own expectations or purposes. According to Schaub, “Gallant accommodates the present by reinscribing the past in such a way as to satisfy the needs of the characters; since the latter cannot cope with the traditional versions of the past, they are shown reinventing it” (2002: 32).

From these premises I argue that when Gallant declares that “*il y a la fiction dans la fiction*” (Whitfield 2002b: 103), the first ‘fiction’ is unquestionably polysemic. First of all, it refers to the most straightforward of meanings, thus it entails that her writings are pervaded by fictions within the fiction, i.e. narratives (fictional texts) contained in a main narrative text. For sure, it also considers fiction as ‘pretence’, dissimulation, and within this second meaning it includes characters behaving insincerely when interacting with one another. Finally, dealing with fiction as ‘invention’, it refers to characters retelling what happened in their past, or making conjectures about what may happen in their future. In their accounts, characters mostly activate a more or less conscious degree of manipulation, modifying what really happened in previous times. In her chapter on Gallant, Smythe claims that in the story “Wing’s Chip”<sup>48</sup> “the narrator explicitly draws attention to the fact that past events are not the same as remembered events”. Save the narrator’s awareness, which may be vacant or not

made explicit in other circumstances, the critic's assumption applies to the whole corpus of Gallant's stories. In addition, the case illustrated in the story "is like a parable for the reader, advising us not to believe the story as told, for the events are likely different from the image retained and narrated as history" (1992: 32). At this point, one may well bring in the reader as further interpreter, or re-writer of the stories, as Grant suggests when she writes that "conscious rewriting of the past is analogous to the reader's interpretative act" (1989: 14), with readers standing in equal position to all those characters who are listeners or receivers of the stories told inside Gallant's stories. Nicole Côte argues that

il y [a] un hiatus qui se crée du point de vue purement sémantique, puisque qu'on a l'impression que l'auteure laisse une grande place au lecteur pour reconstruire le texte, ce qui pose un problème d'interprétation (Whitfield 2002b: 80)<sup>49</sup>.

A good example within the writer's fiction is the story "About Geneva"<sup>50</sup>, where two siblings are sent to the Swiss city to spend a weekend with their father, who has divorced his wife and now lives with another woman. Both children renarrate the holiday to their mother and grandmother to accommodate their own expectations and desires, and when the elder sister turns the account into a play resembling a fairy tale or a ballet (*Swan Lake* comes to mind and, I argue, is consciously hinted at), the mother chooses to interpret the story in her own way, adding meanings which are not conveyed by the young teller, but which she is desperately looking for. In another story, "The Moabites"<sup>51</sup>, Miss Horeham misreads a line from the Bible in order to use it as an authoritative justification for her virginity<sup>52</sup>.

People may operate selectively on memory for a variety of reasons: in the stories where early traumas have been experienced, or war occupies the largest room in uncomfortable memories, subconscious has removed an unbearably reality, and renarration becomes therefore part of the characters' self-defence. In "Night and Day"<sup>53</sup>, a story inspired by an autobiographical experience<sup>54</sup>, a man who regains consciousness after surgery suffers from temporary amnesia. In this

condition, which he calls *la belle indifférence*, the man finds relief: “‘I have no past and no memories’, he thought. ‘This is what it means to be free’” (CL: 240). What is relevant in the description of the few hours following the man’s waking up is the mental process undermining his progressive reacquisition of self-awareness: when he finds himself in the unknown place, the first element he grasps on to summon up his own identity is language.

In general, erasing what they once were gives people the illusion that they will be allowed to become something different, that they will be given the chance to turn into what they have always wanted to be. To show that this is illusory (and even *by* showing it), Gallant populates her fictional world with a number of Late Matia Pascals, people who deny their own past and choose a new identity – often coinciding with a new place of abode – in order to become someone else. At this point, rather than allowing them to step in, the writer shows that reality is unrewarding, even punishing. Her characters end up trapped in nightmarish ‘in-betweens’ of space, time, or identity, where they are not permitted to become new selves, nor to get back to their previous identity. Still, they think that if they can get rid of their old clothes, they can wear new garments, and, by dressing up as someone else, effectively assume a new, longed-for identity. Gallant shows that this attempt is also illusory: their original identity is not a dress, therefore exchangeable, and even fixable. On the contrary, it is an indelible tattoo on the skin, and in the most unpleasant of cases, it is either a brand, a bleeding wound, or a scar. No matter how intense is the desire to hide them, and how determined characters are to do so, they have only few possibilities to succeed. More often, they are condemned to deal with its impossibility.

In most of the stories examined in this and in the following chapter, the protagonists are young women involved in relationships (marriage, affair, or other) negatively connoted by a complete lack of communication, a condition which is not the result of a deterioration occurring after a long time. Rather, it often exists from the very beginning, because no ice-breaking moment really ever happens to help establish intimacy within the couple, at both levels of language and dialogue, and in their interactional dynamics. As Gadpaille puts it, “Gallant’s

deft evocation of the language and gesture of such characters highlights the limited nature of communication that results from [...] isolation and alienation” (1988: 38). Relationships like these are the norm within the whole ensemble of Gallant’s stories, even when characters are not young women but children or soldiers, refugees or bachelors. These girls in particular constitute a well-filled group including Shirley and Flor, the protagonists of Gallant’s two novels: the writer stresses their lack of insightfulness and interior stability, and marks them by a superficial and not highly consistent attitude towards life. Yet Gallant, who some critics have described as judgemental<sup>55</sup>, does not point at their temperamental wickedness as something which should be punished. She rather suggests that these women are exposed to ill-treatment like children, because they behave like them. Also, they behave like children right because they are treated like them. In any case, they do not possess intellectual weapons to shield themselves from the strikes of life. When told how to behave, they find it difficult to learn the lesson and even more difficult to retain it. Referring to the novels (but stating something which would perfectly apply to all these stories), Davies suggests that they are “all stories about women who love unworthy men, but who are themselves in some way difficult in love” (1978: 70). They first try to find refuge in these men’s arms and, once they recognize that these men provide further disillusionment instead of the protection they were expected to offer, they take shelter in a different time-frame, be it the past (e.g. Florence in *GWGS*) or the future (e.g. Carol in “The Other Paris”)<sup>56</sup>. Their lives are thus renarrated to accommodate their more suitable versions, either those which are considered consistent with their expectations, or those which they think will simply enable them to endure the unwelcoming present they live in. To quote but one example, the case of Sarah Holmes, the protagonist of “In the Tunnel”, displays this aspect very clearly:

She abandoned the future and *arranged their short history to suit herself*. Every word was recollected later in primrose light. Did it rain every Sunday? Was there an invasion of ants? *She refused the memory*. The Reeves’ garden incinerator which was never cleaned out, set oily smoke to sit at their table like a third person. She drank her coffee unaware of this guest, seeing nothing but butterflies dancing over the lavender hedge (SS: 380, emphasis added).

Allowing life's rewriting does not erase memory altogether: especially when it deals with someone's childhood, even when buried under sand, memory resurfaces (the case of Wishart is emblematic in this respect). This often happens through hints at fairy tales and children books which are part of the fund of experience and intellectual background each person carries along; it is a repository accumulated during life, which helps keep alive the individuals' bonds with their familial and cultural identities. Children books, whose importance has already been stressed in Chapter 1, are particularly significant, especially (though not exclusively) in the stories where children are involved: in "A Day Like Any Other"<sup>57</sup>, Gallant fictionalizes her own experience with the nuns<sup>58</sup> by having Mrs. Kennedy ban the Baboon's book, which she deems inappropriate only by its pictures. Her daughters cling to Frau Stengel, their governess, because the woman tells them the same stories all over again: notwithstanding their content, full of pain, sorrow, and dead people, the girls find them reassuring because "her stories, [...] like the room and the atmosphere, [...] never varied" (CL: 56). Mrs. Kennedy's daughters, unsettled from the beginning of their lives due to their selfish hypochondriac father and his long confinement in hospitals, look for stability, albeit consisting in sad memories of the war. Unsatisfied by the present she lives in and by her own life in general, Mrs. Kennedy takes refuge in her wild imagination and keeps 'writing' her daughters' future, thus clearly resembling Jane Austen's Mrs. Bennet. In open contrast to the woman's expectations, her daughters enter a phase of rebellion and questioning, which the woman cannot sort out, because she depends on her husband's still undecided conduct about their daughters' education. Disfigured even physically, as they "seem all pinched" rather than the perfect "little Renoirs" they previously were (CL: 64), the two little sisters finally exacerbate their need for replies by physically acting as a language, laying asleep "like two question marks" (CL: 66).

In Gallant's writing, even books can be endowed with a plurality of identities, as it happens in the already quoted "The Doctor", where one of the doctor's books is subjected to several transformations, corresponding to its temporary owners: it first belonged to the doctor's mother, then welcomes the

doctor dedication (“Pour ma petite Linnet”), and finally undergoes a process of Englishization when Linnet’s father modifies it.

At home, I would paste inside the front cover the plate my father had designed for me, which had ‘Linnet: Her Book’ as ex libris, and the drawing of a stream flowing between grassy banks – memory of the unhurried movement of England, no reflection of anything known to me in Quebec – bearing a single autumn leaf. Under the stream came the lines

Time, Time which none can bind  
While flowing fast leaves love  
behind (HT: 300-301).

The quote is from Stevenson’s “To Willie and Henrietta”, a poem of *A Child’s Garden of Verses* (1885). Because it is her father who writes the quote, it is likely to be part of the literary repertoire of his own childhood. This would explain the hardly noticeable misquotes, in that Gallant does not write the quote herself, but imagines it remembered by heart by the man<sup>59</sup>. A similar, yet even more relevant example is the case of Cat Castle (itself a fairy-tale name) in *A Fairly Good Time*: when the woman meets Shirley in a French Café called Pons, she gives her a book which has undergone analogous transformations. A soon to be piece of antiquity, the book first belonged to “Charlotte S. Mackie” in 1873, then was given to “Little Cathie Murray Pryor”, the future Cat Castle, and finally, “with a biro pen, came Mrs. Castle’s long scrawl: ‘For Shirley Norrington, souvenir of a meeting in Paris, this book comes back to by rights’” (AFGT: 39-40). Mrs. Castle gives Shirley the book because she deems it “all the heritage [she is] likely to see”<sup>60</sup>. “With the exception of my name, and your mother’s being skipped because she was overlooked, this is your female line. It sure shows it’s a man’s world” (40). Mrs. Castle’s almost forcible inscription of Shirley in a family line which is hers only in part – or with Mrs. Castle having been included in one she did not belong to – gives Shirley a past she has never known and a family background she has not been provided while young (and it is too late to go back to it now). The choice for matriarchal line speaking in contrast with the “man’s world” is not the only contradiction of Mrs. Castle<sup>61</sup>, whose choices and answers are at least disputable: the book she gives to Shirley is curious and appalling at the

same time. Providing a kind of education Shirley's mother would never have taught her, the book is eagerly received by the girl, who is always looking for answers from her mother and never receives plain ones. The book is *The Peep of the Day*, a text by F.L. Mortimer published in 1925, containing "a series of the earliest religious instructions the infant mind is capable of receiving" (41). The text, which Mrs. Castle does not want Shirley to "read", immediately enters the girl's "infant mind", influencing her way of 'reading' the surrounding world. Shirley's childlike attitude toward life instructions is well described by presenting the slavish way in which she follows the anachronistic dictates contained in the text, a behaviour clashing with her incapability to respect her husband's simple rules. The superimposition of this text with the novel written by her husband's platonic lover Geneviève, together with Shirley's continuous elaboration of fictional counterparts to real life, makes this novel the soundest example of inter and intrafictional, transfictional, metafictional, and parafictional narrative in Gallant's whole work, as it will be shown in Chapter 3.

Another text which deserves sustained attention in the light of fictions within the fiction is the novella "The Pegnitz Junction", a story published in the homonymous collection with no prior appearance in review<sup>62</sup>, and which Gallant considers her best piece of fiction so far (see for instance Evain and Bertail 2009: 76-77). The importance of language in the story is immediately recognizable; in addition, all the facets defining language and identity which have been illustrated in this chapter are identifiable in this novella. The whole story is a 'paranormal' stream of consciousness which the protagonist Christine receives and reports, unfiltered, from the other passengers both on board of her train and just outside it; so we are told a sequence of stories within the main story which are not always clearly introduced (italics usually signal the switch, but the separation is not always so neat). The first one is the flow of thoughts of a middle-aged bulimic woman whose mind, while she uninterruptedly eats, is focused on the recollection of the meals she prepared for the members of her family in America during the war, and on their tastes. The double reference to food – one eaten and one cooked (and recollected) – speaks antithetically: while the woman's account of her meals

places her inside her family dynamics, her obsession with uninterrupted self-feeding speaks for the void she presently feels and wants to fill. Schaub states that

her meanness – both in the fictional past and narrative present – is reflected in her obsession with food. While the old woman rots in her repressed resentment, the smell of rot (PJ: 26) that she has caused in the compartment offends others' nostrils, but does not seem to affect her (1998: 43).

The second received story is a parody of Kafka's short story "The Castle" (1926): the main plot interrupts to welcome the description of a whole family visiting a castle (ironically presented as a museum) just outside one of the train stations where the train stops (see Evain and Bertail 2009: 77). Here the main text works simply as a frame to the other story, but further inter-textual playfulness lays in Gallant's deliberate choice to give to some characters names inspired by the source-text. These and several other narratives disturb the main plot, which develops – despite the protagonist Christine being caught by what she calls "interferences"<sup>63</sup> – among the girl, her lover Herbert, and his son, little Bert. The three spend first a week-end in Paris (where they undergo Fascist-like treatment by the concierge of their hotel), and then travel back to Germany on a Holocaust-like train. Little Bert explores his relationship with the girl by retelling the adventures of a sponge, which he gives a name (Bruno) and a proper identity, partially substituting his own or overlapping with it. From the very beginning it is clear that his controlling but worshipping father, unlike Christine, has completely lost innocence, and does not succeed in activating Coleridgean "suspension of disbelief". So the girl, an intermediary for the narratives, functions as a connector also between father and son. Herbert's down-to-earth perspective, orientated to imposing good-manners and concreteness, leaves no room for imagination, much needed in the post war Germany context where the story is set (and which a whole vocabulary of Nazi terms continuously recalls). Following a reiterated dynamic, every time Bert asks for a new adventure of Bruno, Christine's unreliable stories are criticized by Herbert, with Bert trying to tell his own version, to shape his own

identity in contrast with the one his father wants to impose on him, but also with the one Christine kindly suggests to him.

The use of written texts is various: in the first pages, we have Christine reading a volume of essays by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German Lutheran pastor, theologian and martyr involved in the plans to kill Adolf Hitler. The content of the book is not explained, though knowing what the essays are about may determine the way readers approach the text. Gallant's narratives are multilayered, kaleidoscopic, whirlpool-like, but never elitist. In discussing the use of German history and German literature in "The Pegnitz Junction", Gallant declared: "I didn't realize when I was writing it that not everybody had read what I had read. That's a great mistake one makes" (Evain and Bertail 2009: 76). Accumulation constantly works to enhance the levels and planes of narration, at the same time enriching and thickening an already complex texture of meanings, to such an extent that one may rightly wonder whether to catch literary allusions (more than this one in particular, all the undisclosed ones) is a reward or a disadvantage. Also, as it is the case of historical contextualization, literary references compel the reader "to bring back to memory [a] web of emotional, historical, and political facts" (1998: 39), but these, alone, are not enough to offer the tourist guide that helps us out of the maze of Gallant's fiction.

Together with its theoretical and theological framework, Bonhoeffer's book is supposed to replace Christine's absent boyfriend, a student in theology. Being brought to Paris, the book should function doubly, through its physical presence and its content, but is not strong enough to 'speak' for the absent boy and actually fails at both levels. As it is "a book for an examination" (SS: 523), it stands for the young man's university exam, but also for Christine's life exam, which she apparently fails, too. Nevertheless, towards the end of the story, we find out through the way she behaves with little Bert, adult Herbert and the ticket inspector (another Fascist-like figure) that hers is not a complete failure.

### 3. From theory to practice: selected case studies

Those illustrated so far are only a few among the possible combinations of language and identity. One of the difficulties which I had to overcome while writing this work was to operate a selection, drawing the boundaries of a possible theoretical framework. Then, what stories would suit closer examination has been even more complex to decide; frustrating on the one hand, this operation has proved nonetheless encouraging: verifying that every story contained, in some way or another, all the elements described so far, offered a consistent validation for my framework. The possibility to quote almost haphazardly from early and late fiction, from stories set in different countries, even continents, and describing indiscriminately characters who are children, women, or men of different social statuses (though Gallant prevalently and Jamesianly depicts members of the middle-class), background, language, personal history and similar, provided further evidence for my claim that the interrelation between language and identity is one of the hallmarks of Gallant's fiction as a whole. Though it may have been developed differently at different times, this interrelation is not withdrawn to one phase of her fiction or one selected group of texts. The few examples presented in the following pages are meant to account for the plurality of combinations of identity and language; however, my selection is not in the least comprehensive of all the texts which I intended to include, and has therefore to be read as a sample, rather than a proper selection. To give my work as much coherence as possible, I decided to devote particular attention to a few stories which, like the two novels analysed in the following chapter, portray the quest for identity of displaced young women, caught in the process of construction, deconstruction, reconstruction and substitution of their fragmented selves, in which languages play a crucial role. Through these and other characters, the stories also deal with other aspects, among which cultural clashes and linguistic enclosure, which I have examined at the beginning of this chapter.

In “The Picnic” (CL: 34-48), cultural diversity is emphasised by the display of failure in attempted integration. Total incompatibility is stressed by focusing on an ice-breaking picnic organized by a group of American soldiers stationing in France with their families, who are expected to integrate with French locals: the happening has been organized to function as “the symbol of unity between two nations” (36), but results in sound evidence of the impossibility to bridge cultures. Gallant acutely decides to centre the story around the hours preceding the picnic, and to focus on one single family, the Marshalls, who live with “coquettish elderly French lady” Madame Pégurin (Gadpaille 1988: 39), atypical representative of what “American research workers” have reputed “the most typically French town” (36). It is typical of the writer to make focus move from one main event to a secondary one. In this case, she confines the display of the disastrous outcomes of the initiative to Mrs. Marshall’s final premonition, and by describing belligerent daily routine (the picnic is hardly hinted at), she makes the problem shift from the impossibility of occasional cultural mixing to the failure of every day cultural and linguistical negotiation.

Whereas the original scope of the picnic was to get acquainted with each other, Americans and French alike feel it a priority to concentrate on and proudly display their own culture, driven by equal narrow mindedness and patriotism, or just by the simple – and never questioned – conviction that their culture, being the best, is the only one possible<sup>64</sup>. When asked to organize some “folk dances as a further symbol of unity” (36), Major Marshall replies that “baseball had already been agreed on as an easily recognized symbol” (37), obviously mistaking Americanness for unity. The result of failed assimilation is a confirmation of every stereotypical mannerism. This story, like many others, demonstrates that when people move to a new country, they hang to their previous habits, and reject any possibility of integration, opting instead for imposing their own way of living on others. It also shows that countries which receive foreigners of any kind are usually not welcoming, in that they feel ‘invaded’, ‘colonized’. Gallant’s frequent use of war and battle terminology, in this and in other stories (cases to be quoted, among several others, are “Acceptance of their ways”, “The Pegnitz Junction”,

and “Autumn Day”, described hereafter), creates a belligerent subtext which reinforces the stress on frequently contrasting relationships among characters.

External environments are rarely perceived as welcoming habitats; more often, they are seen as artificial contexts to keep away from. Borrowing botanic terms, not only do people who move abroad make sure that, when transplanted, they keep rooted to the whole clod they have been living until then; also, any new house looks more like a *greenhouse* than a proper home. It is so for Paula Marshall, the Major’s wife, who feels threatened by everything unknown or unusual, even by Madame Pégurin’s colourful furniture (the walls in the living room have “made me so uncomfortable all summer that I haven’t enjoyed a single meal”, 43). Equally, she is jeopardized by her *à la mode* Parisian garments; on the contrary, the woman’s eccentric outfits attract Paula’s children, thus contaminating their standardized American culture and menacing what their mother reposes their most correct upbringing. Children, who potentially represent the only tiny bridge among two unbridgeable communities, ironically embrace the French landlady’s position altogether, becoming more French than the French, and immediately judgemental towards their mother, whose habits they evaluate from Madame Pégurin’s point of view, yet lacking awareness of cultural diversity which marks – and perhaps finally saves from complete disaster – forced intercultural exchanges of this kind<sup>65</sup>.

In the story, stress keeps falling on linguistic diversity, suggesting that any cultural discourse is more likely to work when it is written in its corresponding linguistic code, or even if it does not work, it is closely bound to its corresponding language: when turned into English, Madame Pégurin’s comments lose the politeness they contained in their French version and become harsh, even impolite, to such an extent that they provoke one of the former lodgers’ cry. “The message seemed to Madame Pégurin so fair, so unanswerable, that she could not understand why Mrs. Gould, after a moment of horrified silence, burst into tears” (42). Gallant often remarks that translation from one language to another (French and English are her most recurrent cases) is difficult, but were it to be attempted, it should entail deep cultural transformation. The writer’s remarks include a clear

definition of English and French conversation, and their differences (see for instance Girard and Valette 2003)<sup>66</sup>. When represented in her fiction, however, translation is always literal, therefore impossible or incomplete; in worse circumstances, it brings along further cultural and interpersonal clashes. Aware or not of her own behaviour, Madame Pégurin is not tolerant, nor inclined to understand someone else's cultural ignorance; thus, instead of bearing the Barings' present – a subscription for the *Reader's Digest* in French – she emphasises the fact that she feels offended by it, and she feels even more outraged by the Colonel's declaration that “his wife spoke excellent French and would, if pressed, say a few words in that language” (45). That integration should pass through linguistic comprehension and exchange does not enter the mind of any of the characters. When the picnic is approaching, and Major Marshall rehearses his concise last-minute speech, he only briefly wonders whether he should attempt at writing it in French or not. His wife reassures him by declaring “You won't need to give it in French [...] because, you see, the mayor will speak in French, and that's quite enough” (47). Agreeing, he concludes: “I can say in French, ‘Our good French friends will excuse this little talk in English’” (48).

Food is at the centre of the story from the very beginning, in that the picnic is meant to be a cultural interaction through food. Potentially, the event could develop in any direction, and we do not actually know what will happen, because the further development of the event is never told; however, together with Paula's premonition, an insisted hint at the baskets in which food will be brought (“the Major had declared the basket lunch to be typically American”, 46) insinuates that every group will remain boxed in its own “basket”, that will therefore remain foreign to others. No exchange of food is previewed, no new taste will be tried. In other words, we are likely to forecast that closure will prevail over any cross-cultural negotiation to be attempted around the “cross-legged picnic tables [...] being erected in Virolun community soccer field” (41). On the menu is a “coming battle” (47), as the narrator calls it. Yet another conflict, more like a ‘cold war’, takes place inside Madame Pégurin's old fashioned, once rich *maison*. The landlady confronts her female antagonist, Paula Marshall, on the crumby soil of children's education. Food, together with clothing, is the language with which the

two women virtually write manuals of life-instructions containing, in one case, the middle-class American stereotype and, in the other, Louis 14<sup>th</sup>-inspired lasciviousness. Mrs. Marshall

was suspicious of extravagant tastes or pleasures. She enjoyed the nursery fare she gave the children, sharing without question their peas and lamb chops, their bland and innocent desserts. Once, long ago, she had broken off an engagement only because she had detected in the young man's eyes a look of sensuous bliss as he ate strawberries and cream. And now her own children came to the table full of rum-soaked sponge cake and looked with condescension at their lemon Jello (44).

In listening to his wife's complaint, the Major counters that the French woman only gives their children "a taste of life they might never have had" (44), something that, in his wife's opinion, they *should* never have had. Considering with Fischler that dietary regimes may be adopted to restore "normative logic" into their eating (1988: 290-291) as much as into their living habits, Paula's monochromatic and plain menu aims at restoring her "bland and innocent" lifestyle<sup>67</sup>:

Such is particularly the case with children. In the psychology of eating behaviour, the term neophobia is used to define a young child's tendency to accept only a limited range of familiar foods and to refuse foods which lie outside it, whether they be unknown, unusual, ill-identified or simply mixed with others. The behaviour which has just been described is associated with neophobia [...]. It has been demonstrated that children's neophobic behaviour follows a phase of much less 'prudent' exploratory behaviour during which the repertoire of familiar foods (those which subsequently escape neophobia) is established. However, this 'distrustful' behaviour can also be observed in adults when the usual social constraints are partially lifted (e.g. in a self-service restaurant) or when the subject is in an unknown territory. [...] The problem in fact arises from a strictly cultural difficulty of identification and classification (282-283).

Major Marshall is completely unaware of the female skirmish going on in his domestic battlefield in the form of an antagonistic unspoken dialogue. He simply appreciates Madame Pégurin's attitude with his children but, in so doing, he implicitly denies his wife a chief role in household, a role either taken by the landlady, or by her replacing domestic Louise. Thus, Paula is deprived of her

principal familial identities (as household and as mother), and, to some extent, she is no more in complete favour of her beloved husband. Through her charming attitude, Madame Pégurin has succeeded in stealing the woman's role without taking her identity, which she dislikes and criticizes indirectly: she comments in a roundabout way remarking "what a good idea it was for Mrs. Marshall not to bother about her appearance, running as she did all day after the children" (39), but she also reinforces her opinion by displaying an opposite attitude and a more tidy and fascinating outfit, which charms the Major. He is not sexually interested in the woman, who is much older than him. Rather, it is what her presence evokes that Paula feels inconvenient, and both her children and the Major find quite appealing instead:

He admired Madame Pégurin, confusing her, because she was old and French and had once been rich, with courts and courtesans and the eighteen century. In her presence, his mind took a literary turn, and he thought of vanished glories, something fine that would never return, gallant fluttering banners, and the rest of it (43).

Paula is only partially aware of what is going on: despite her desire "to furnish a house of her own" (both practically and metaphorically) with "pictures of the children in frames" (43), she is cut out from the picture of her family, as described in one of the last scenes. While she is in the kitchen preparing a meal which is no more the one 'eaten' by her family, her husband looks out of the window, where he sees his children laying at Madame Pégurin's feet:

Madame Pégurin [...] descended from the shuttered gloom of her room and went out to the garden, trailing wings of gray chiffon, and followed by the children and Louise, who were bearing iced tea, a folding chair, a parasol, a hassock, and a blanket. Under the brim of her hat her hair was drawn into tangerine-coloured scallops. She sat down on the chair and put her feet on the hassock. At her feet, Margaret and Ellen lay prone, propped on their elbows. John sat beside them, eating something. The little Goulds, identical in striped jerseys, stood apart, holding a ball and bat. [...]

'You should see them all in the garden', he said, cheering up. 'Madame Pégurin and the kids. What a picture! The Photographer should have been there. He's never around when you want him'. Describing this scene, which he had watched from the dining-room windows, the Major was careful to leave out any phrases that might annoy his wife, omitting with regret the filtered sunlight, the golden summer garden, and the blue shade of

the parasol. It had pleased him to observe, although he did not repeat this either, that even a stranger could have detected which children were the little Goulds and which the little Marshalls. 'I closed the dining-room shutters', he added. 'The sun seems to have moved around'. He had become protective of Madame Pégurin's house, extending his care to the carpets (44-47).

No matter how carefully the Major tries not to irritate his wife, he cannot conceal his approval of and devotion to the French landlady, which extends symbolically to the furniture of her house.

The "little Goulds" are the children of the former lodger with whom Madame Pégurin had come in bad terms with. Though she dislikes their presence, the French woman displays her *savoir-faire* and pretends that nothing upsets her. If we read the picture as a prefiguration of the picnic, with the Marshalls playing the part of little Pégurins and posing, together with their putative mother, for a French impressionist painting *en plein air*, then we shall notice that, as it often happens in Gallant's pictures, there is a fly in the corner: the Goulds, resisting integration, are emissaries of proud Americanness, sent by their mother to parade their new house where "the maid does everything" (45); standing apart, holding a ball and a bat, they embody "an easily recognizable symbol", either of Americanness or, as a deeper look reveals, of separation and conflict.

Paula Marshall's instruments to pay back her rival would be several, but she does not ponder to put any of them into practice. Her only attempt is confined to the realm of fiction: she revels in hoping that "they take [Madame Pégurin's] picture eating a hot dog" (39), hinting again at assimilating a country's culture through eating its food. Paula probably thinks so, too, for she rejects French food and considers it harmful to her children. In his "Food, self and identity", Claude Fischler argues that

each act of incorporation implies not only a risk but also a chance and a hope – of becoming more what one is – or what one would like to be. Food makes the eater: it is therefore natural that the eater should try to make himself by eating. From this principle of the making of the eater by his food stems the vital necessity of identifying foods, again in both literal and figurative senses. This is the clear consequence of the principle of

incorporation: if we do not know what we eat, how can we know who we are? (1988: 281-282).

As her food choices attest, Paula Marshall is still looking for being reassured by tasteless routine, unable to try “a taste of life [she] might never have had”. What the other members of her family perceive as seductive, she feels dangerous, wild and indecorous: it is to her like a foreign tongue, which she is unable to understand, therefore she refuses it altogether, as her suggestion to leave the Major’s speech untranslated amply shows. In an opposite way, this theory applies also to her children, who assimilate, together with Madame Pégurin’s “sugared almonds and pistachio creams and sponge cakes soaked in rum” (37), all the influence of the French environment.

A child-like attitude like Paula’s appears also in other stories, among which “Autumn Day” (CL: 97-114), published three years later, where another married couple is at the centre of the plot. The first person narrator Cecilia (nicknamed Cissy) Rowe is a young girl about to begin her married life with Walt, a soldier “posted with the Army of Occupation” to Salzburg (97)<sup>68</sup>. Fearing responsibilities of grownup life, mainly because she is uninstructed about marriage, Cissy tries to lower her husband’s sexual interest by looking much younger:

I looked down at my camel’s-hair coat and my scuffed, familiar moccasins, and I thought, What’s wrong with looking young? Walt didn’t know, of course, that my married sister had already scolded me for dressing like a little girl instead of a grownup. [...] ‘You’re not getting ready to go back to school, Cissy’, she’d said. ‘You’re married. You’re going over there to be with your husband. [...] And for goodness’ sake stop sucking your pearls. Of all the baby habits!’ [...] I had always been the baby of the family, the motherless child; even my wedding had seemed a kind of game, like dressing up for a party. Now they were pushing me out, buying luggage, criticizing my clothes, sending me off to live thousands of miles away with a strange man. I couldn’t understand the change. It turned all my poses into real feelings: I became truly stubborn, and honestly perplexed. I took the trousseau check my father had given me and bought exactly the sort of clothes I’d always worn, the skirts and sweaters, the blouses with Peter Pan collars. There wasn’t one grown-up dress, not even a pair of high-heeled shoes. I wanted to make my sister sorry, to make her see that

I was too young to be going away. Then, too, I couldn't imagine another way of dressing. I felt safer in my girlhood uniform, the way you feel in a familiar house (98).

As one would easily perceive from the extract above, Cissy refuses the new identity she is compelled to take; rather than verbally, she exhibits her discontent by clinging to childish behaviours and, even more clearly and intentionally, by anchoring to her previous dressing code, which makes her feel 'safer' and is, not by accident, her "girlhood uniform". It is perhaps more frequent to have people wanting to take off their uniform, rather than wearing it in situations in which it is not required. In Gallant, however, Cissy's is not the only opposite case, as we shall see in analysing Shirley Perrigny's similar choice in the following chapter. Alison Lurie observes that

to take off a uniform is usually a relief, just as it is a relief to abandon official speech; sometimes it is also a sign of defiance. [...] In certain circumstances, however, putting on a uniform may be a relief, or even an agreeable experience. It can ease the transition from one role to another. [...] It is also true that both physical and psychological disadvantage can be concealed by a uniform, or even cancelled out (1992: 19).

The stress on "Peter Pan collars" (the collar could as well have been a Middy)<sup>69</sup>, with its immediate reference to Barrie's character who refuses to grow up, may well be accidental. However, Gallant's allusion to fairy tales is so abundant in her fiction that it is hard to believe it is so. At any rate, Cissy's desire to remain a little girl, "the baby of the family", is balanced against her equal aspiration to grow up, to learn the language of a life she has not been prepared for, like so many of Gallant's characters<sup>70</sup>. Waiting for a proper place to live, Walt and his babyish wife spend three months in a farmhouse outside Salzburg, a sort of training, "just the preliminary" of marriage, not "married life" yet (114). There, Cissy experiences for the first time the routine of married life, which, as said, is completely unknown to her. "You don't know how people are", she is told, "you don't know what the world is" (106). To the girl, this life (and the world in general) seems written in an unknown language, which she tries to decipher but

constantly fails, because she lacks proper contact with reality and the kind of awareness an experienced person has already acquired at her age. Cissy is nonetheless willing to learn, and tries the only way she knows, that is behaving like the good girl she has always been within her family. This implies following slavishly life instruction which Walt dictates and she notes down, like a diligent school girl or, as she is depicted later on, “like a little girl on a visit” (106). School practises are applied, unaltered, to marriage. The rules include: “Don’t talk war. Avoid people from farm. Meet Army wives” (99). Beside comprehensible diffidence in war times, these norms are indicators of distrust and cultural closure characterizing every nationality in every time alike. The scene of the dinner at the beginning of the story is an over paradoxical example of exaggerated suspiciousness. Sitting by the table with the landlords and the other guests (a couple of Hungarians and a family from Vienna), Cissy is lead to the conclusion that the other commensals have probably been given similar life instructions. Referring to the children of the Viennese, “all four [wearing] the Salzburg costume” (therefore “look[ing] like rabbits dressed up”), Cissy observes:

Sometimes I smiled at the two children, but they never smiled back. I wondered if they had been told not to, and if they had a list of instructions like mine: Don’t mix with the Americans. Don’t talk to Army wives... (100).

Her confrontation is with the children because, in her mind, she is equivalent to them rather than to their parents: in fact, she feels she still belongs to a filial rather than to a marital status. Such self-perception also explains further naïve behaviours and beliefs, including her being unaware of the potentiality that Walt’s night incursions in her bed may lead to pregnancy.

When conversation with other grown ups begins, which happens very rarely, it is inopportune or misunderstood, as it is when Mr. de Kende, an Hungarian seller of dental supplies, asks Cissy what is her opinion about the Yalta justice and she replies that her brother-in-law is a dental surgeon just because, not having understood his question, she relies on his job for replying. Signals of conflict do

not show through the man's tone as, quite unusually for Gallant, it is not reported, but they become clear from the gesture of pointing his fork at the girl, so that the table becomes another example of battlefield, with "the others all suddenly star[ing] at me, alert and silent, waiting for my reply" (100). Gallant's urge to include socio-political issues in her fiction relies not so much in the man's reference to recent political events, but in the fact that a few pages later we associate his interest with his being a Jew, and with the revelation that he and his wife (who tells the "terrible secret" to Cissy, and then unjustly accuses her of having revealed it) had to change their name. Thus, deeper issues of reconfiguration of identity lay in the background of the story; the clash they produce when put close to Cissy's futile preoccupations is perhaps more evident than it could be in any story centring around major political issues as they are. Gallant often points at the non-sense of life in its daily routine, and at the repetition of behaviours inborn in any human being, no matter what happens in the world they are surrounded by. Life in wartime is not completely different from life in peacetime, as the macro-level of a conflict or of any other historical event is only partially perceived by people, who keep living in their narrow and petty space/mind. "Although they could easily achieve some sort of contact with the brutal reality of history, which permeates the stor[ies], they prefer to remain within their own limited world" (Evain and Bertail 2009: 149)<sup>71</sup>.

For a different reason from the de Kende (namely marriage), Cissy has a new name, but the new status attached to it seems falling apart, so that when she prepares her letter for the mysterious Miss West, she writes down her signature twice ("Cecilia Rowe, Mrs. Walter T. Rowe"), and then "copied it out on the monogrammed paper", as if she needed to confirm her new identity, or rather, to convince herself of her new status (109).

Desperate for a girlfriend who, in her opinion, would be able to understand her (something which her husband is totally incapable of), Cissy relies on the mysterious Miss West<sup>72</sup>, an American opera singer whom she never meets, not least because of her landlord's deliberate delay in giving her a note left by the woman in reply to the girl's letter. Miss West's name is, deliberately and

ironically, the result of the simplest symbolism, the only one that Cissy would be able to create by herself; but the woman, who represents a chimera to Cissy – all the more so because the two never meet – is only seemingly a link with her past and her language: not only was the girl unsatisfied with her past (therefore not longing to go back to it); also, Miss West never speaks English in the story, singing instead in a variety of languages (French, German, Italian and English), none of which the girl understands, because of the pronunciation required by opera. Nonetheless, identification between the two women eventually comes through a song, an adaptation of Rilke's poem "Herbsttag", 'Autumn day', translated for the girl by Herr Enrich, the farmer. Cissy judges the translation "slow and clumsy", and defective because it

didn't rhyme the way a real poem should. But when he came to the part about it being autumn and not having a house to live in, I suddenly felt that this poem had something to do with me. It was autumn here, and Walt and I didn't have a house, either. It was the first time I had ever had this feeling about a poem – that it had something to do with me. I got Herr Enrich to write it down in German, and I memorized the line, '*Wer jetzt kein Haus hat, baut sich keines mehr*'. The rest was all about writing letters and going for lonely walks – exactly the life I was leading (104-105).

The text contains, according to Cissy's interpretation, something about her. But when she comes to the line she decides to learn by heart, her choice is at least bewildering. Rilke's line states that those who have not a house so far (which applies to Walt and his wife) will never build one. Gallant uses the inappropriate quote either to further suggest Herr Enrich's teasing of the girl, or to stress that her inability to read texts mirrors her ineptitude to understand ('read') life. Understanding is not a matter of language here, because Cissy proves unable to understand *any* language, English – her mother tongue – included.

Partly different is the case of her quick learning of the 'language of marriage', because it turns out to be a one-to-one code, something which her simple mind can grasp: "I decided to remember that: if I'm sick, he'll be nice" (109). Working like the short and direct rules that Walt established for her, this language is well handled by Cissy who, feeling and behaving like a child, lacks

(or pretends to lack) the capability to understand the polysemic cipher of the world.

Cissy is another displaced character, and a case of transient identity, trapped in between two worlds, neither of them hospitable or welcoming. This ‘in-between’ state, where being as belonging is negated, is stressed again and again by the hint at an apartment which is said (by her sister and by her husband) to be the heal-all that “would make everything right” (102). But Cissy’s instability, her hybrid status, is only seemingly related to her physical unsettlement. Rather, it has more to do with her incomplete, unfinished status, which marriage does not change. As Keefer suggests, “marriage [...] doesn’t ‘settle’ anything, but rather, makes life ‘untidy and inexplicably frightening’” (1989: 141). What Conrad termed the “shadow line”, or its corresponding state in Gallant, is referred to again and again in the story. Similarities with Conrad’s concept are striking. Here is Conrad’s definition:

One closes behind one the little gate of mere boyishness – and enters an enchanted garden. Its very shades glow with promise. Every turn of the path has its seduction. And it isn’t because it is an undiscovered country. One knows well enough that all mankind had streamed that way. It is the charm of universal experience from which one expects an uncommon or personal sensation – a bit of one’s own. One goes on recognizing the landmarks of the predecessors, excited, amused, taking the hard luck and the good luck together – the kicks and the halfpence, as the saying is – the picturesque common lot that holds so many possibilities for the deserving or perhaps for the lucky. Yes. One goes on. And the time, too, goes on – till one perceives ahead a shadowline warning one that the region of early youth, too, must be left behind. This is the period of life in which such moments of which I have spoken are likely to come. What moments? Why, the moments of boredom, of weariness, of dissatisfaction. Rash moments. I mean moments when the still young are inclined to commit rash actions, such as getting married suddenly or else throwing up a job for no reason. This is not a marriage story. It wasn’t so bad as that with me (1955: 3).

Gallant initially describes this intermediate stage quite differently, as “a special little lifetime, neither girlhood nor marriage. It was a time when I didn’t like what I was, but didn’t know what I wanted to be” (99). But in the closing passage of “Autumn Day”, Cissy says:

Your girlhood doesn't vanish overnight. I know, now, what a lot of wavering goes on, how you step forward and back again. The frontier is invisible; sometimes you're over without knowing it. I do know that some change began then, at that moment, and I felt an almost unbearable nostalgia for the figure I was leaving behind, the shell of the girl who had got down from the train in September, the pretty girl with all the blue plaid luggage. I could never be that girl again, not entirely. Too much had happened in between (114).

As this is “a story of transition” (Keefer 1989: 141), it is in this ‘in-between’ that Cissy finds out new things, a new manual of life, made of the instructions left by her husband, but also of the lessons she has learnt: not only does she find what the language of her marriage is like; she is even able to give ‘marriage’ a meaning of her own, a caption to an image she sees in Mrs. de Kende’s room and associates to her sister’s bedroom. Significantly, it is not an image of happiness or hope; rather, it relates to previously quoted “untidy and inexplicably frightening” feelings and is more reliable than the final “dubious assurances from the older Cissy that marriage is a success, that she no longer feels [...] the sadness of lost hopes and abandoned possibilities evoked by the ‘herbsttag’ song” (Keefer 1989: 141).

Places here are of great importance, not only because stability relies in a desired apartment, but also because every character’s place is in direct correspondence to its owner. Therefore Mrs. de Kende’s room is filthy like her garments and hair, and Laura (the wife of Malv, Walt’s best friend) “lived in a furnished apartment full of glass and china shelves, which seemed to take up all the air and light” (108), which may allude either at the sensation felt by Cissy every time she went to visit the girl, or to Laura’s sense of suffocation related to her own unfaithful marriage. As for her own apartment, the “small, cold, and coldly clean room they have mirrors the couple’s lack of communication” (Schaub 1998: 117). In other words, every space ‘speaks’ the same language of its owner/inhabitant. The symbolism is again very simple, because it is Cissy who settles this one, too: in this first person narration, associations are presented through the eyes<sup>73</sup> (and reported in the words) of the young girl, and Gallant’s narrative ability lays not only in remarking the clash between the juvenile candour of a not yet twenty and an eight-year older narrator, now partially aware of her former naïveté (or involved in marriage’s dynamics enough to acknowledge how

they should be and behaving consequently)<sup>74</sup>. More interestingly, Gallant is able to step in her character's shoes, 'remember' a previous period of life as Cissy would do, and tell it accordingly, rather than creating a more realistic setting for the story, as a third person narrator would perhaps have done. In a somewhat similar way, the protagonist is able to step out from her own role and see herself as if she were an omniscient narrator in two different occasions, at the beginning and towards the end of the story. Remarkably, in both cases she is wearing quite the same clothes, a clear hint at her unchanged status. There needs to be a moment of self recognition – the final scene with her husband, with the final passing of the “shadow line” – to enter a new stage in life, where awareness is introduced and, though ingenuousness has not completely disappeared yet, it has begun to be in the shade.

It is instead in full light that another story begins: in “In the Tunnel” (SS: 369-395), a story published in the Seventies, we are told the adventures of Sarah Holmes, a young Canadian who spends the summer in South France, disobeying her father, who had “sent her to Grenoble to learn about French civilization – actually, to get away from a man he always pretended to think was called Professor Downcast” (369). Sarah finds herself involved and then stuck in an unlucky love affair with British bachelor Roy Cooper, a former prison inspector in Asia. The whiteness of Roy's dress (379), a Colonial outfit quite improper in the new context, makes the young Sarah mistake him for “the ambassador of a place where nothing mattered but charm and freedom” (371), a kind for Mister Right. But whereas Sarah is blinded by the brightness of the man's garments and by his charming behaviour, readers do not fail in detecting that Roy Cooper's measured moves are part of the ritual of a predator in search for his victim: even if the girl initially plans to “eat her lunch, get up” and “coolly stroll away” (371), she is then fascinated by Roy's manners and discourses, and, though “not as innocent as her father still hoped she might turn out to be” (374), she is not experienced enough to get the signals. Thus, she is caught in his trap, lured by the man's trite flattery and his astute choice to keep her at the right distance, “about the distance of the blue

tablecloth” of their first lunch together (372). Poor Sarah fails in realizing that Roy is wearing a mask and playing a part, because, being a “natural *amoureuse*” (369), she naïvely believes that “love refused all forms of fancy dress. In love she had to show her own face, and speak in a true voice” (369). Roy’s mask corresponds to the fictionalized version of himself he has created in order to hold on a past life he is not able to separate from. His part entails a socio-historical setting, related to the British Empire he is devoted to and longs to recreate. Roy invites the girl in what turns out to be symbolically, but also physically, a tunnel. The physical place – “a low building [...] like an Indian lodge [...] half under a plane tree [which] made the house and its terrace seem microscopic” (373) – belongs to the Reeves. This couple of old English people emigrated near Nice “because of taxes and Labour” (377) are described as Roy’s “friends, landlords, and neighbors” (374). It is to their *dépendance* (and dependence)<sup>75</sup> that Roy comes back every time he has a new baby fiancée. In the house where they live, a small cottage surrounded by mosquitoes and the smoke of an incinerator “sit[ting] at their table as a third person” (380), they have recreated a little English colony, based on English habits and homeland-inspired everyday routine, including a “diet of tea and toast and jam and gin” (376). They live in a island linguistically and culturally boxed in a mainland that, because of linguistic and cultural differences, is perceived as hostile; thus, they try to preserve their original cultural identity by sticking with disproportionate devotion to their former lifestyle, which includes linguistic and eating habits. Lunch at the Reeves’, to which Sarah and Roy are invited, is described indirectly (a typical device in Gallant’s narrative method) by the latter, who has repeatedly been asked to attend his friends’ culinary ritual. The meal could not be anything but “a good old fry-up” (375), a full English breakfast described in full detail:

A large black pan the Reeves had brought to France from England when they emigrated because of taxes and Labour would be dragged out of the oven; its partner, a jam jar of bacon fat, stratified in a wide extent of suety whites, had its permanent place on top of the stove. The lowest, or Ur, line of fat marked the very first fry-up in France. A few spoonfuls of this grease, releasing blue smoke, received tomatoes, more bacon, eggs, sausages, cold boiled potatoes. To get the proper sausages they had to go to a shop that imported them, in Monte Carlo (377).

Mr. Reeve, who complains about the cost of his car's petrol and hardly makes an effort to keep his garden alive or his house tidy, does not bother to drive to Monte Carlo just to buy English food. Memories of the couple's life in France are stratified in fat lines, and they 'speak' English, with the first English breakfast indicated by the lowest line of fat in the jar ("Ur" as 'origin'). For all that matters to them, until they can get "proper sausages", their English clod could be transplanted anywhere. The environment outside their wires (which are "tense and new", perhaps attesting for the Reeves' preoccupation to keep themselves enclosed) is refused; they do not even look at the Mediterranean sea when they drive past, judging it "not an interesting sea" because "it had no tides" (378).

The importance of actions concerning food, such as purchasing, cooking and eating is stressed in the following comment by Rebecca O'Connell:

Food has been recognised as a medium through which family relationships can be negotiated and constructed. Whilst providing and eating food are not the only ways in which people construct identities through consumption, the exploration of mealtimes and foodways more generally is nevertheless a particularly fruitful means of examining them [...]. Because food mediates and expresses social relations, consideration of the consumption of food within the home can shed light on the situated daily practices of individual and household identity formation and identity crises (2010: 564-565).

As their reiterated food practices show, the Reeves' identity is never subjected to a crisis, and it is never questioned; however, Mrs. Reeve's planning to stop cooking after her husband's death suggests that food is the 'recipe' that allows their marriage to survive, to endure "one another's flaws and pretensions, cruelties and stupidities" and "a certain tenderness of infelicity" which are "the result[s] of a couple's lifelong knowledge" (Keefer 1989: 19).

Yet food, in their case, is far more than morbid perpetration of a ritual: it is a proper mode of communication, a language itself, therefore supplied with a related vocabulary. Communicating in what Woodcock defined "an absurd private language" (1978: 78), "they used baby language with each other – walkies, tummy, spend-a-penny" (379), but also with their children-like (children-

replacing?) dogs, “two little yappers up on the sofa, the colour of teddy-bear stuffing”, whom Mrs. Reeve offers “chockie bits for boys with bad manners” (376). The woman is both surprised and disappointed when “the wretched girl” (this is how she hints at Sarah), calls the biscuits correctly: “When Sarah said ‘cookie’ it made them laugh; a minute later, feeding the dogs a chocolate cookie, Meg said, ‘Here, have a chockie bicky’”. “Instead of French civilization taught in airless classroom”, Sarah decides that “she would study expatriates at first hand”, thus she tries to record the situation for Professor Downcast, the man she was depending on academically and emotionally. “Sarah meant to record this, but Professor Downcast’s useful language had left her”; therefore she realizes that she cannot explain the situation but in words “so homespun and plain she was ashamed to set them down” (379). Nevertheless, she tries to communicate in any possible way, both verbally and through her gestures and actions. Roy, instead, once the few idyllic moments at the beginning of his relationship with Sarah have come to an end, is caught again in the routine of his mental disorder, which includes a progressive withdrawal from speech. All the efforts of the girl to interrupt his *descensus ad inferos* are ineffective, because Roy’s relationship with *all* women is pathologic: thinking she is the problem, Sarah tries to treat him, but because on her own admission “she was more of an *amoureuse* than a psycho-anything” (395), she fails. The man “had an attitude about people she had never heard of: nothing must ever go wrong. An accident is degrading to the victim” (388): thus, Sarah’s domestic incident and consequently broken ankle and the fact that she felt sick after occasional drinking make him hate her, as much or even more than “he hated the sea, the Reeves, the dogs, the blue plumbago...” (389).

Looking for possible allied, Sarah can find none. From the very beginning, in fact, the girl is opposed in every way to Tim and Meg Reeve. Satirized in her over exaggerated traits, with her loud voice tone and strange habits, Mrs. Reeve is depicted as a rival, an opponent to Sarah. The two women speak different languages, not only in terms of English varieties: Mrs. Reeve does not or pretends not to understand Sarah because she is Canadian, but there is also a difference in the use of irony and conversation in general, which stands for personal and

cultural distance, underlined in situations in which, for instance, “her way of asking plain questions froze the others” (381).

When Sarah sees Mr. Reeve for the first time, she noticed that he “was gaunt and tall, and looked oddly starched, like a nurse coming on duty. ‘Jack Sprat could eat no fat’ came to Sarah’s mind. Mrs. Reeve was – she supposed – obese” (375). The reference to the nursery rhyme is not alone in the text (Lisbet’s, the Reeves’ niece, has a Little orphan Annie’s wig); its iconographical association to slim husband and fat wife works well for Mrs. Reeve who, though never openly described as overweight, is indirectly hinted at in these terms (e.g. when she was “dressed in a bathrobe that looked like a dark parachute”, 375). Sarah realizes that the habit of giving people comic names is not something she has developed autonomously, but belonged to her father (386), to whom she also owed her sense of humour (388). The relationship between the girl and her father is complicated, and it moves from extremes of love (that takes also the forms of need and dependence) and hate (which brings about detachment and silence). For this reason, her childish desire to go home (“in her heart she said, in a quavering spoiled child’s voice, I want to go home”, 376) does not come true, and it cannot even be verbalized: all her requests for help are contained in letters to her father which are either unsent or even unwritten, as it constantly happens to Gallant’s characters. Since she cannot change her reality, she has to try to make it match with her expectations. Thus, in order to achieve her goal, she begins to play the part she thinks she should play, and diligently does the housework, washing the laundry and buying exaggerated foodstuffs:

Love compelled her to buy enough food for a family of seven. The refrigerator was a wheezy old thing, and sometimes Roy got up and turned it off in the night because he could not sleep for its sighing. In the morning Sarah piled the incinerator with spoiled meat, cheese, and peaches, and went out at six o’clock to buy more and more. She was never so bathed in love as when she stood among a little crowd of villagers at the bus stop – the point of creation, it seemed – with her empty baskets; she desperately hoped to be taken for what the Reeves called ‘part of the local populace’. [...] She could have easily [...] had everything sent from the shops, but she was inventing fidelities (380).

At first sight, one might be surprised to find in Gallant's panorama a character willing to integrate with the locals. Yet, deeper examination reveals that Sarah is only pretending to, for she does not try to learn the language or make friends among the locals. She is playing a part in her own plot, substituting the unsatisfying routine Roy has progressively introduced her to. As it happens in the paradigmatic case of Carol Frazer, Sarah experiences the clash between expectations and reality: having resemanticized the word "Riviera" before going there in a way that "predicted yellow mornings and snowy boats, and crowds filling the streets in the way dancers fill a stage", the girl has then to observe reality through "her moralist's eye [which] selected whatever was bound to disappoint" (370). Also, soon after coming to Europe, Sarah

had decided beforehand that the Alps were shabby, the cultural atmosphere in France was morbid and stifling, and that every girl she met would be taking the civilization course for the wrong reason (369-370).

No matter how they work, whether they are expectations as in the first example or prejudices like the latter, mental images of places and situations never match with their real correspondents, even when people make a real effort to make the correspondence work.

When she realizes that nothing more can be done, Sarah decides to leave. But before going back for good, she makes a last attempt to save her relationship:

Then Roy gave up eating and lay on the bed looking up at the ceiling. She still went on shopping, but now it took hours. Mornings, before leaving, she would place a bowl of coffee for him, like an offering; it was still there, at the bedside, cold and oily-looking now, when she came back. She covered a tray with leaves from the plane tree [...] and she put cheese on the leaves, and white cheese covered with pepper, a Camembert, a salty goat cheese he had liked. He did not touch any. Out of a sort of a desperate sentiment, she kept the tray for days, picking chalky pieces off as the goat cheese grew harder and harder and became a fossil (390).

The moment described is highly significant: on the one hand, we come again to words suggesting that Sarah is a victim, Atwoodianly speaking, but that to some extent hers is a form of abnegation and self-sacrifice. On the other hand, the clear symbolism of cheese, and the final image of the fossil are the objective correlative of her relationship with Roy, which has now come to an end.

Even if in the last scene we are presented a version of Sarah finally able to re-appropriate of her life and logos, she has nonetheless experienced something which would leave deep traces in her psychological scaffold. The narrator makes it clear when, towards the end of the story, he describes an excursion that Sarah organizes with Roy and with Lisbet, the Reeves' niece, a woman who succeeds in what Sarah had kept failing: capturing Roy's attention. Relegating Sarah in the back of the car and cutting her out from every conversation and compliant look, Lisbet makes Sarah feel like "a prisoner impaled in a foreign language" (389). In a church, the three see an image of hanged Judas<sup>76</sup>, and Roy, who hardly speaks to Sarah now and rarely looks at her, comments mischievously: "that man must have eaten Sarah's cooking, [...] a risk many have taken" (388). Only much later, writing in the back of a stolen postcard of the painting an invitation to dinner to a new lover, would Sarah "understand what the entire message was about" (395). Yet the act of continuing to write the invitation on that very piece of paper represents an implicit confirmation that Sarah is a "natural *amoureuse*": the narrator seems to give a 'pathologic' meaning to the term, and in this light the act of overwriting stands symbolically for her inability to 'write' (and live) a different story. The girl's behaviour thus suggests that even if Sarah is finally out of Roy's 'tunnel', she has not learnt her lesson properly, and we might imagine her entering another tunnel soon.

### 3.1 Final remarks

Several other stories could be analysed in this chapter, as many – if not all – of Gallant’s writings contain elements which are worth citing within the interplay of language and identity. I could perhaps discuss in more detail the language of clothing, and deal with the Balenciaga dress in “An Ice Wagon Going Down the Street”, which functions as social passepartout for the Fraziers, “their talisman, their treasure” (SS: 193) in combination with their oriental dressing gowns, and in opposition to Agnès’s worn out clothes. At the same time, an engaging discourse of identification is sewed in the pages of “Forain”, a story where the editor of a publishing house specialized in translations of Eastern-European writers undergoes progressive identification with the late Tremski, a writer from Poland. The overlapping of the two men’s identities passes from wearing the latter’s trench coat to innocently flirting with his wife and finally finishing his novel. Similarly, in “Its Image on the Mirror”, identification of two sisters works thanks to Jean Prize having her sister Isobel (or Isa) wear a “dressing gown” that “belonged to both of us years before” (MHB: 149). The story also expands on identification through an extensive use of mirrors and by the hint at their dead brother’s book of fairy tales, which marks out the two sister’s different visions of life, their different positions, one in front of the mirror, the other “always on the far side of the looking-glass” (Rooke 1989: 259). Identification is a matter of clothing also in “The Other Paris”: the story opens with Carol Frazer at the tailor’s atelier, adjusting her wedding dress. This operation works as an objective correlative of what the girl constantly does mentally: she keeps ‘rewriting’ the script of her life to make it fit with her expectations. On the contrary, through her friend’s cousin Martine, who refuses to wear Carol’s green dress at her concert, Paris refuses to wear the outfit Carol has chosen for the city. Analogously, the weather does not change to welcome the images of films and magazines which inhabit Carol’s mind, and she vainly sticks to the idea that she will fall in love when it will be sunny, as much as Cecilia Rowe naïvely thinks that she will feel married when she will have her own apartment. In reality, Paris is more like the clothes of Odile, Carol’s French friend, who “looked sallow and pathetic, huddled into a sweater and coat, turning over samples of lace with a disapproving air”, and

who “seemed all of a piece with the day’s weather and the chilly air of the dressmaker’s flat” (SS: 99).

The overall impression we receive from a selective reading of Gallant’s fiction, selective in that it groups stories according to thematic isotopies, is that the much quoted and much dissected metaphor of the mosaic informing the critical studies on Canadian cultural identity (a metaphor repeatedly deconstructed and reconstructed according to the critical approach it is considered from each time) fits perfectly with the writer’s idea of fragmentation: identity, in Gallant’s picture, is not the combination of pieces which, put together, form a unity. It is instead an artificial assemblage of tiles, each of them coming from a different place, uprooted from a context and transplanted in another, as most of her characters are. Whatever the result, even if seemingly natural, harmonious, and reconciling, it is nonetheless a ‘Babel of tiles’, each of which, were they ever to speak, would talk in a different language.

## *Notes and References to Chapter 2*

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<sup>1</sup> I argue that Gallant's concern for language is also present in a variety of other texts, including her non-fictional essays collected in PN, and her articles for the *Standard* and for other journals. It is also to be noted that Gabriel's essay was written two years before Gallant published her "Preface" to SS, which contains some of the writer's more interesting remarks on language.

<sup>2</sup> Though not a main part of my thesis, 'voice' should not be cut from any discourse revolving around language in relation to Gallant. Narratological aspects connected with the presence of heteroglossia in her novels have been often investigated. Gallant is also keen in manipulating the narrator and the characters' point of view in order to question the reliability of authorship and of 'voice' itself. 'Who is speaking?' is probably one of the most recurrent doubts raised by Gallant's fiction; thus, critics put enormous effort in trying to establish the interconnections among discourses. At a more technical level, investigation also delves into the connections between first and third person narrators, or Gallant's mastery in the use of free indirect speech to deceive her readers' impressions (see, among others, Merler 1978, Schaub 1990 and 1998, Sturgess 1990b, Wilkshire 2000, and Winther 2004). After recognizing that "Gallant is most commonly commended for an uncanny mastery of language", also Keefer claims that "language, in fiction, is primarily a matter of narrative voice" (1989: 56). Whether we agree with this statement or not, it is to be admitted that this is a position shared by several other scholars.

<sup>3</sup> Basically, every work on Gallant's fiction stresses the importance of language. Yet they rarely go any further than recognizing such importance.

<sup>4</sup> *The New Yorker*, 22 August 1983: 28-32.

<sup>5</sup> *The New Yorker*, 4 January 1969: 28-32.

<sup>6</sup> *The New Yorker*, 10 October 1983: 44-47.

<sup>7</sup> *The New Yorker*, 8 September 1986: 32-35.

<sup>8</sup> *The New Yorker*, 12 January 1957: 24-34.

<sup>9</sup> The word 'language' (both singular and plural) occurs 65 times, itself a significant figure, given that 'language', unlike 'meaning', does not exist as a verb ('meaning' intended as the present participle of 'to mean' has been included in the above figure).

<sup>10</sup> *The New Yorker*, 21 March 1977: 36-75.

<sup>11</sup> *The New Yorker*, 13 September 1982: 39-44.

<sup>12</sup> *The New Yorker*, 29 November 1982: 42-50.

<sup>13</sup> *The New Yorker*, 8 January 1972: 34-40.

<sup>14</sup> *The New Yorker*, 10 June 1967: 36-39.

<sup>15</sup> *The New Yorker*, 14 December 1963: 54-79.

<sup>16</sup> *The New Yorker*, 18 March 1991: 38-56.

<sup>17</sup> *The New Yorker*, 17 July 1954: 27-30.

<sup>18</sup> My study is not linguistic at all, and uses well known linguistic theories only as starting point. I lay no claims to being an expert in linguistics, and I leave to linguists any study related to more specific issues. Yet I firmly believe that, in the light of comparative studies, a multidisciplinary approach should set comparisons at every level, and indiscriminately draw on whatever discipline able to help decipher the text.

<sup>19</sup> Gallant “mentions the ‘hatred of an alien sound’ (HT: xvii) that once greeted recitation [of a poem in French] in an English-Canadian classroom” (Irvine 1993: 122).

<sup>20</sup> *The New Yorker*, 30 January 1960: 25-28.

<sup>21</sup> For a deep comparative analysis of Gallant and Mansfield’s lives and fictions, see the remarkable essay by Janice Keefer “La Dame Seule meets the Angel of History: Katherine Mansfield and Mavis Gallant” (2007). In her essay, Keefer carries on a metaphor of clothing which is not exactly what I look at in my thesis, but is nonetheless interesting in this regard.

<sup>22</sup> *Tamarack Review* 76, Winter 1979.

<sup>23</sup> As a matter of fact, the use of the verb ‘to understand’ is more frequent in negative sentences, at least as far as the examples I have examined are concerned.

<sup>24</sup> *The New Yorker*, 3 March 1962: 34-90.

<sup>25</sup> *The New Yorker*, 18 September 1971: 34-47.

<sup>26</sup> *The New Yorker*, 10 January 1970: 25-30.

<sup>27</sup> *The New Yorker*, 13 August 1979: 28-59.

<sup>28</sup> On this point, see Schaub’s theory, which she explores throughout her monographic study (1998). I have drawn on Schaub’s point to develop my argument in Borgna 2011.

<sup>29</sup> *The New Yorker*, 20 February 1995: 240-250.

<sup>30</sup> I have already discussed this point in Borgna 2011.

<sup>31</sup> Gallant repeatedly stated that she deems theorization on her own fiction unbearable, even impossible; in partial contradiction to her open claims, she often describes the process of creating fiction, including the way she ‘envisions’ characters and situations for the first time. It might be interesting to underline, with reference to the argument discussed in Chapter 1, that these comments often share the same vocabulary and there is a repetition of exact phrases which recur in this context more than in others.

<sup>32</sup> *The New Yorker*, 28 May 1966: 33-38.

<sup>33</sup> *The New Yorker*, 7 October 1972: 34-44.

<sup>34</sup> Particularly interesting in the light of my concern with meaning and interpretation is the position of Howells, who offers a range of possible keys to interpret the story: “though ‘The Doctor’ may be read as social history or fictionalized autobiography, it may also be read as being about language and art and interpretation, a kind of metafictional discourse made into a short story, as Gallant’s meditation on the relation between art and life, or her indirect commentary on her own fictions” (1987: 103).

<sup>35</sup> At this ‘stage’, the theatricality of Gallant’s fiction should be considered, as it is a strong component of the way she has her characters interact with one another. Also, Gallant often deals with characters whose representation of identity, rather than aiming at displaying their authentic self, verges on the creation of a version compatible with their expectations. Gallant’s only experience with theatre (1983 play “What is to be done?”) is certainly not her sole piece of fiction which contains theatrical elements. An interest in the plausibility of her dialogues and scenes certainly explains the ‘utterability’ of the sentences pronounced by her characters, sentences which are never too literary to be ‘performed’ (see Schnell-Hornby 1996). A study of these aspects is certainly advocated within the analyses of Gallant’s fiction, but it has not been conducted so far. Though several scholars have hinted at this issue, none of them has considered it in some detail. The examples in Gallant’s fiction are numerous and diversified, and the writer often uses a specific terminology related to theatre. *A Fairly Good Time* is the text which, perhaps more than any other, offers interesting elements for opening up a discussion on Gallant and theatre. A few aspects of the theatrical elements of the novel are discussed in Chapter 3.

<sup>36</sup> The variety of names, texts and perspectives is so wide that any incursion into this theoretical dominion pursuing comprehensiveness risks to transfer main focus from language to identity, treating the latter as the study’s main concern, rather than keeping it confined to its role as exemplificative paradigm. Nevertheless, an ample bibliographical section at the end of this thesis accounts for my wide-ranging research in this field. For a survey of critical approaches on different kinds of identity and the development of

theoretical studies on this subject matter, see, among several others, Schwartz, Zamboanga, and Weisskirch 2008, and Côté 2006.

<sup>37</sup> Interrogated on the relationship with her homeland, Gallant said to Geoff Hancock: “being Canadian is one of the facts in my life. [...] I have no identity problem concerning Canada” (1978a: 86). This stance is but one example out of several analogous (some of which have already been cited in Chapter 1) which give evidence to the writer’s position about her own nationality. Being Canadian is something that she might consider, evaluate (also in negative terms), but that she never questions. Her attitude is mirrored in a few characters, among which Shirley Perrigny’s parents in AFGT. The couple “had never doubted themselves or questioned their origins or denied the rightness of their own conduct; they could be judged but never displaced” (AFGT: 65).

<sup>38</sup> The quote is from “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”, a poem published in *Prufrock and other Observations* (1915). Examples abound, especially within the stories set in the Italian Riviera or in the South of France, where representative of Anglophone communities travel in temporary or permanent exile.

<sup>39</sup> I have manipulated the ending of this adjective (‘Gallantian’ is the adjective usually associated with the writer) to hint at Bakhtin’s well-known concept of Carnavalesque (see Bakhtin 1941). Though this point would certainly deserve a more accurate description, it would nonetheless deviate from the focus of the present analysis. Moreover, irony in Gallant’s fiction is already the object of several studies; among them, see Godard 1990, Besner 2004, Schaub 2001 and 2002. For an interesting approach to irony in Canadian fiction, see Hutcheon 1991 and 1992.

<sup>40</sup> According to Keefer, “Gallant’s sympathies are for the exploited and oppressed, those disadvantaged by the prevailing hypocrisy of those who form an élite – women as well as men – in any given society” (1989: 128).

<sup>41</sup> *The New Yorker*, 9 August 1952: 23-28.

<sup>42</sup> For the first use of the expression “looking-glass self”, see Cooley 1902: 183-184.

<sup>43</sup> A brief investigation of the role of Carroll’s texts in Gallant’s narrative is presented in Chapter 3. However, I believe that a more in-depth comparison should be attempted, since the outcomes of Gallant’s interaction with his texts are visible at different levels.

<sup>44</sup> Clement’s position stands in partial contradiction to my thesis. She claims in fact that “Mavis Gallant [...] has eschewed non-verbal devices, finding her freedom through the traditional medium of language” (1991: 58). It remains to be evaluated what Clement meant by ‘non-verbal’, and keep her sentence in context, which makes it only partly conflict with my statement.

<sup>45</sup> “There had been a respectable tradition in the area of semiotics which had ways of talking about gestural, bodily, animal and other non-linguistic ways of meaning making

(Eco 1976 and 1984, Sebeok 1994), while in the French strand referred to as ‘semiology’ (Barthes 1977, Metz 1974 and 1977) a concern with images and film had for quite some time been prominent. The relevance of Barthes’ and Eco’s work for what came to be termed ‘social semiotics’ is very evident in, for example, Thibault’s and Van Leeuwen’s work” (Iedelma 2003: 51n. 4).

<sup>46</sup> If we exclude “The Pegnitz Junction” and a few stories in *The Fifteenth District*, Gallant always devoted great importance to guarantee the reliability and the plausibility of her plots, relying on her own memory most of the time (“memory can spell a name wrong and still convey the truth”, HT: xxii), but also supporting it through historical research.

<sup>47</sup> This remark constituted the reply to the request of explanation sent by an American professor working on intertextuality, who asked Gallant if *A Fairly Good Time* was written as a reply to James’s *Portrait of a Lady*. For a detailed explanation, read the whole paragraph in Whitfield 2002b.

<sup>48</sup> *The New Yorker*, 17 April 1954: 35-38.

<sup>49</sup> ‘A semantic gap generated, since we have the impression that the author leaves a wide space to her readers to recreate the text, and this creates a problem in interpreting it’. I discuss this point in depth in Chapter 3, Section 3.

<sup>50</sup> *Charm*, March 1953.

<sup>51</sup> *The New Yorker*, 2 November 1957: 42-46.

<sup>52</sup> This latter case is, however, slightly different, as it deals with interpretation of literary (or similar) texts. Because this aspect is crucial to texts like *A Fairly Good Time*, it is analysed in the next chapter.

<sup>53</sup> *The New Yorker*, 17 March 1962: 48-50.

<sup>54</sup> The story has sound autobiographical inspiration. The experience is described in the “Introduction” to HT, in which Gallant’s description of her own experience contains several details coinciding with those included in the story. Moreover, a closer analysis of the text shows that the elements that the man progressively recalls are included in Gallant’s ‘list’ of identity (HT: xvi-xvii).

<sup>55</sup> As Keith recalls, Keefer accused Davies and George Woodcock of having “presented Gallant as a white-gloved Queen of Fiction, unacquainted with those sub-aesthetic thugs, politics and history” (1988: 98, quoting Keefer 1986: 283).

<sup>56</sup> Similarly, Hallvard argues that “again and again in Gallant’s fiction, in stories [and] in her two novels, the state of marriage creates for the wife a painful state of exile, the

solution to which is frequently fantasy, promiscuity, or a rootlessness such as that reflected in GWGS” (1986: 123-124).

<sup>57</sup> *The New Yorker*, 7 November 1953: 37-44.

<sup>58</sup> See Chapter 1, Section 2.3.

<sup>59</sup> “Time” repeated twice here and a missing “away”, though not incorrect, have to be nonetheless considered improper quotes. Crediting Gallant’s precision, which she gave continuous evidence of, I argue that this kind of misquoting accounts for the fact that she imagines Linnet’s father writing the quote without checking, recalling it from his own childhood’s repertoire. As far as my research has revealed, this version of the poem does not exist. However, my attempt to give it an explanation does not consider the possibility that it is Gallant herself who remembered the quote partially wrong and quoted it without double-checking, in which case my remarks on Linnet’s father should be applied to Gallant. I credit the first version relying on the fact that accuracy has always been and still is nowadays one of the writer’s concerns: in August 2011, Gallant published a comment on *Granta On-line*. It is a short introduction to a republished version of her essay “Memory and Invention”, originally published as “Memoria e invenzione” in an Italian edition of her stories (*Varietà di Esilio*. Translated by Giovanna Scocchera. Milano: BUR, 2007, 7-12) and republished in 2009 at the beginning of Evain and Bertail (39-31). Quoting Fitzgerald’s story “A Sensible Thing”, Gallant claims that “the punctuation is exactly Fitzgerald’s. I copied it carefully many years ago”. Gallant, Mavis. “Memory and Invention”. *Granta. Online Only*. Available from: <<http://www.granta.com/Online-Only/Memory-and-Invention>> [Accessed: 20/12/2011].

<sup>60</sup> This idea is stressed again when the woman says: “I feel if I don’t give you this you’ll never have anything” (AFGT: 39).

<sup>61</sup> A specific study of the character of Cat Castle, which includes a flashback to her youth through the information provided by Mrs. Norrington in one of her letters, reveals that the woman carries along a feminist subtext. Together with Mrs. Norrington, yet differently, she is the spokeswoman of a feminist vocation which is completely absent in Shirley, a lack for which she is openly criticized by the narrator.

<sup>62</sup> For an account of Maxwell refusing to publish the story and his letter of apology which he sent twenty years later, see Evain and Bertail 2009: 77.

<sup>63</sup> It is remarkable that the sentence “there is too much interference” (SS: 545), which Christine pronounces in reference with her received narratives, is misinterpreted by Herbert. The egocentric point of view which informs Herbert’s behaviour makes him assume that ‘interference’ has to do with the presence of his son Bert. Similarly, readers at this point of the story may not be completely aware of the meaning of the statement, as the procedure of interference has only been introduced so far, and not disclosed completely yet.

<sup>64</sup> Similar conclusions are to be referred to the party in AFGT where the Greek relatives of James meet the Maurels. The happening is discussed towards the end of Chapter 3.

<sup>65</sup> From the text: “They, fortunately, did not consider themselves foreign, and had pictured instead dark men with curling beards” (CL: 38).

<sup>66</sup> “Pour moi, le français est avant tout la langue de la conversation. Les Anglais ne savent pas amener une conversation, c’est un art qui leur échappe”. ‘For me, French is above all the language of conversation. English people do not know how to carry on a conversation, it is a thing they lack’.

<sup>67</sup> In his study on French women and their children’s diets, Fischler claims that “a true dietetic balance seemed to result from equilibria of another nature, i.e., as it were, of a moral order. Balance, in more than one way, could indeed be viewed as an almost ethical requirement. What must be balanced, the interviewers believed, was pleasure and health, gratification and duty, appetite and reason” (1986: 961).

<sup>68</sup> The episode certainly has autobiographic source: Gallant once spent a few months in Austria, living in a farmhouse with a boyfriend. Yet what is interesting here has certainly not to do with the inspiration of the story. For an account of the inspiration of the stories contained in SS, see Evain and Bertail 2009. For other stories, several sources should be examined, with particular attention to interviews and prefaces.

<sup>69</sup> From the 20s, “‘school dresses’ – sturdy, modesty trimmed, and easy to wash and iron – became much more important. As more schools added physical education to the curriculum, middy blouses and bloomers became the standard uniform” (Forman-Brunell 2001: 129).

<sup>70</sup> See for instance Emma in “Going Ashore”, about whom similar remarks have been formulated in Chapter 1.

<sup>71</sup> The quote originally referred to “The Pegnitz Junction” only.

<sup>72</sup> As it often happens in Gallant, names remind of other people. I have no evidence that this is deliberate, though I am quite convinced it is. In this case, the full name of the singer is Dorothy West, which is the name of the American writer born in 1908 in Boston, representative of the Harlem Renaissance.

<sup>73</sup> When a story is told from the point of view of characters, i.e. when it is a first person narration, Gallant wants to make her readers *see* through the very eyes of the characters who are speaking: in order to do so, she hints frequently at details of eyes, eyelids and eyelashes, hair and hairs, describing the effects produced by the light, by tears, or by objects very close to the speaker/observer’s eye. In addition, their sight is often disturbed, distorted, or partially obstructed by something standing in between them and what they look at. Obviously, this kind of obstacle has a meaning which is both physical and, more importantly, metaphorical.

<sup>74</sup> Narratively, when stories are narrated in third person, the narrator rarely remains omniscient and detached. More often, it switches from one point of view to the other, showing a seemingly compliant attitude.

<sup>75</sup> The relationship between Roy and the Reeves is never made utterly clear; a few comments suggest that it is far more than mutual convenience or friendship, and that there is something morbid about it. See the quote in the text accounting for Roy's reaction when Sarah offers her first impressions of the couple. When asked about the nature of the Reeve's marriage, Roy overreacts "as if he were very young and she had asked an intimate question about his father and mother" (378).

<sup>76</sup> Describing the paintings in the church, Sarah says that there is "one of Judas after he hung himself", at which point Lisbet and Roy say "hanged" in unison (383).

CHAPTER 3

**Silent words and speaking objects in  
Mavis Gallant's 'novels'**

“A first impression is always wrong:  
so is the second, third and twentieth”

Mavis Gallant, *A Fairly Good Time*

In this chapter, I shall apply my theoretical framework to two of Gallant's best-known pieces of fiction: *Green Water, Green Sky*, published in 1959, and *A Fairly Good Time*, which was first printed in 1970. The texts in question have often been studied by critics in these years, even though, quite surprisingly, a monographic study has not been published yet on either of them. My decision to deal with these two texts rather than others (considering that, conversely, there are short stories which have received little critical attention yet), is motivated by various reasons and aims at the same time to satisfy various purposes: not only do their plots fit into the category of young, emotionally instable women/foreign setting/unsuccessful marriage<sup>1</sup> from which I have isolated my case studies so far; also, notwithstanding repeated attention from the critics, they have never been read from the point of view of the combination between different languages and the search for/fragmentation of identities which I have tried to delineate so far. The sum of these two ingredients possibly makes my investigation of *Green Water, Green Sky* and *A Fairly Good Time* the soundest evidence of the innovative contribution that my thesis aims at offering to Gallant's studies. In particular, a comparative close reading of these two fictions has never been attempted before: even though they have often been studied inside the same section or essay (see, for instance, Besner 1988, Keefer 1989, Irvine 1986, Smythe 1990, Schaub 1998, *et alia*)<sup>2</sup>, there exists no extensive comparison as the one I shall propose in the following pages.

So far, I have deliberately tried to avoid naming *Green Water, Green Sky* and *A Fairly Good Time* as novels, though that is what they are usually called. This because my preliminary concern here is to find out whether these two texts can be considered novels, or if, conversely, they are something different, something else, and, if so, try to identify and define what they actually are.

## 1. Fragmented identity of a genre

It is complicated to define ‘novels’ in relation to Gallant’s other fictions, and critics have rarely agreed upon what texts to include under this label. While I was gathering critical materials for this chapter, I kept stumbling on essays or sections which present themselves as studies on Gallant’s novels, but which include also analyses of texts that I would rather call novellas or, in other cases, long short stories. Gallant herself, adding subtitles to her collections, labelled “Its Image on the Mirror” a “short novel” and “The Pegnitz Junction”, a piece of similar length, “a novella”<sup>3</sup>. Randomly looking for examples, one will find out that Smythe, for instance, includes “Its Image on the Mirror” in her study of “empathy and elegy in Mavis Gallant’s novels” (1990)<sup>4</sup>, while Robertson Davies offers an analysis of “The Novels of Mavis Gallant” (1978) which considers GWGS, AFGT and “The Pegnitz Junction”. Even more interestingly, Jewison (1985) classifies AFGT as a “full-length novel”, meanwhile treating GWGS as a novella. Without digging into the impervious territory of narratological labels, a rapid survey of the critical studies devoting attention to the problem of classification of Gallant’s fiction certainly highlights a lack of unity and coherence, which consequently means that it is difficult to isolate GWGS as well as AFGT from her other texts, especially those of a certain length. This suggests, among other things, that in the operation of labelling, length is not what has been primarily considered in any of these cases, including the writer’s own classification: indeed, it would be limiting to define a novel according only to its number of words, and, were we to operate so, GWGS would probably not be included in the category of Gallant’s novels (or, conversely, other texts should be added).

All this considered, let us conventionally begin by defining only GWGS and AFGT as ‘novels’; in this way, we call ‘novels’ the only two long fictions which have been published independently. Though I am aware this is not a scientific parameter at all, even if it fits the case of Gallant, I have no other choice than working *à rebours*, from label to definition.

Gallant once declared:

La nouvelle est un genre qui convient a mon tempérament, qui me satisfait pleinement. [...] Le roman a besoin de tisser des liens entre les événements, et il faut être Stendhal ou, mieux encore, Flaubert, pour réussir à rendre chaque passage intéressant. Par contre, dans la nouvelle, tout le ‘connective tissue’, c’est-à-dire ce qui lie les muscles aux os, est supprimé. [...] Il n’y reste que les quatre temps forts, j’ai éliminé le reste (Girard and Valette 2003)<sup>5</sup>.

The simplest deduction one can infer from reading Gallant’s explanation is that novels differ from shorter narratives because they display the “connective tissue” elsewhere “supprimé”. These two examples show nonetheless that eliminating the “rest” might sometimes implicate a ‘waste’, since between the folds of Gallant’s “tissue” there is still something that would be really worth saving, that is worth saying. These two novels are texts in which, from my point of view – partially contradicting authoritative critical voices<sup>6</sup> – Gallant feels at ease, even if they do not constitute her usual and certainly favourite narrative measure; otherwise, she would have *measured* again and again with this genre in the following years; instead, we are still waiting for a much promised third novel. At the same time, had she not felt comfortable in these longer narratives, she would not have so bravely ventured into the realm of genre interplay, and in the exploration of new narrative and structural techniques, and she would certainly not have attempted so widely (and wildly, perhaps) at a more articulate structuralization and destructuralization of characters which also includes, more than in the short stories, secondary characters<sup>7</sup>. But all this seems to me, still, a discourse on length, not on genre. Once one has decided which are the novels and which not, the problem remains to distinguish them, to isolate these texts from the rest of the writer’s fiction thanks to some peculiar features. It is still difficult to recognize in AFGT and – even more so – in GWGS the most conventional patterns of the genre, such as the “more rounded portraits traditionally associated with the narrative and temporal amplitudes of the novel” (Besner 1988: 48). Conversely, when looking at both novels, stress falls most of the time on those elements which mark Gallant as a master in the short story, or as a great writer in general, and not so much varies thematically, stylistically, and even structurally, in her handling of narrative materials from her shortest to her longest fiction. The two novels are “reminiscent in some ways of certain stories” (Schaub 1998: 55), and, in the end, both could be considered, to some extent, experimental versions

or extended versions of her 'usual' genre (either in the form of a single short story or in the more or less complex interpolation which results in short-story cycles), rather than more or less traditional samples of the other. Considering our concern with language, Smythe's definition is particularly fitting, since she claims that Gallant's "longer works consist not of fragments but of syntagmatically connected fictions" (1992: 30), stating, in some way, that GWGS and AFGT are longer, perhaps more complex 'discourses'.

Discussing GWGS, the critic states that "the book could also be described as 'a-novelistic', a term used by John Graham to describe Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*" (Smythe 1992: 50). Woodcock considered GWGS as "episodic", and as "a cycle of related stories" (1983: 285). As we shall see more in detail in the following section, metafictionally GWGS discloses the very process of assemblage in its simplified version, with the chapters corresponding to the stories, and the clear device of inversion of two chapters (second and third) creating chronological disorder and adding, through a structural variation, to the accumulation of meaning of the whole story<sup>8</sup>. Showing the essential structure of GWGS, Gallant certainly plays with the genre itself, an attitude which is mirrored in the continuous internal mixing of different genres. To some extent, we might read GWGS as a practical example of the process of editing fiction as theoretically explained in the "Preface" to SS<sup>9</sup>. In this light, GWGS could be classified as an intermediate step between a short story cycle and a novel, or an 'extended', 'long short story'.

So far, we have simply recognized that Gallant's so called novels are surely not novels in the traditional sense; we have also acknowledged that they are not short stories either. What are they, then? What is their 'identity'? George Woodcock, whose position is the one I feel closest to, observes that

there is no real generic division so far as Gallant is concerned between short stories, novellas and novels. She rarely writes the kind of story which Chekhov and de Maupassant so often produced, in which an episode is treated as if it were a detached fragment of life, and the psychological insight or the moving symbol or even the ironic quip at existence it presents is regarded as sufficient justification for the telling. Mavis Gallant never produces

this kind of fictional aphorism. She is neither an episodic nor an intentional symbolist, though in her own way she is certainly an ironist. Her stories are rarely bounded by time or place. Where the overt action is trapped in brief encounter at one place, memory is always there to deepen and to extend whatever action we have seen [...]. Gallant's novellas, her novels, only differ from the short stories in their greater complexity and in the fact that more life is worked out within the observer present in the fiction (1978: 76-77).

It follows that conventions of genre are somehow secondary for Gallant: she does not modify the hallmarks of her fiction according to the type of text she opts for each time, and labels come down, in the end, to trivial parameters, including the separated publishing which we have used, initially, only as a conventional marker, or length, which we had rejected a priori to help determine the genre. In the very end, labels come down, in Gallant's case, to a mere matter of labels.

In GWGS, as it happens in AFGT, the writer encloses a variety of different genres, either fictional and non-fictional, including letters, novels, more or less famous, existing or invented literary works, essays, articles, fairy tales and nursery rhymes, notes, theses, dictionaries, manuals, *et alia*<sup>10</sup>. The insistent reference to these materials aims at satisfying a variety of purposes: at times, these texts are meant to replace the characters' voice, to 'speak' for them when they lack the right words or the courage, the capability, or even the possibility to utter them. Sometimes, they are endowed with meanings that they did not contain originally, therefore they undergo resematization by the characters: the new meaning can either depend on their high competence, or on their complete lack of expertise; in both cases, examples fall within the spectrum of Kristeva's "transposition" (1984). In an almost endless cluster of cases I could choose from, I decided to quote here an extract in which Shirley Perrigny, the protagonist of AFGT, speaks with Madame Roux, proprietor of an antiquity shop near the girl's apartment:

'A woman of seven-and-twenty can never hope to feel or inspire affection again', Shirley had quoted, answering her. 'Say it in French', said Madame Roux. Shirley did her best with it. 'True', said Madame Roux, 'but at the same time, nonsense. The truth lies in the picture the woman has of herself. Only the objective truth can prevent her from behaving like a madwoman'. Madame Roux was partial to phrases like 'the objective truth', which she picked up from the front-page editorials of the morning papers, and which Shirley did not understand at all. 'Who were you quoting?' said Madame Roux, rather severely, afraid of having been caught out. 'Balzac?' Jane Austen said it. Who was Jane Austen? The author of

*Wuthering Heights*? No – Jane Eyre was the author of *Wuthering Heights*. Had Laurence Olivier played in that? Yes, Shirley thought he had (94).

Shirley is “a woman of seven-and-twenty”, so she identifies with the text she quotes, becoming nearly obsessed with it, to such an extent that the quote reappears in several occasions; it is also hinted at in the short story “In Transit”. Gallant’s *savant* irony makes us culturally oppose Madame Roux and Shirley – one quoting from “the front-page editorials of the morning papers”, the other from literary sources. However, we are almost compelled to revise our judgement when Shirley’s incompetence is disclosed as she doubts the authorship of such well-known piece of fiction as *Wuthering Heights*. Also, ironic reversion lays in the fact that Madame Roux’s quote is much more relevant and enlightening than Shirley’s. As we shall see by analysing the two novels, Gallant often aims at showing that in life everything is “true [...] but, at the same time, nonsense”, and that “the first impression is always wrong”, but there is no chance to correct it on a second glance, since “so is the second, third, and twentieth” (250).

The same applies both to her novels, which at times resemble short stories, and to her short stories, that might indeed look like novels. Each piece of fiction, like every character, is unique, and giving a name, attaching a label – which means, in the end, attributing an identity – is difficult and perhaps useless. As Gallant once wandered, “pourquoi s’occuper de ce qui n’est pas nécessaire?”, ‘why deal with something unnecessary?’ (Girard and Valette 2003). Interestingly, or funnily perhaps, this is part of Gallant’s reply on her predilection for the short story over the ‘novel’<sup>11</sup>. A question remains: what texts was she referring to?

## **2. Several lives within several lives, or on the identity of these stories' writer: deciphering transtextual and narrative strategies**

The above long quote is but one example out of a broad variety. Previous critical studies have not failed in recognizing abundant recurrence of these practices in Gallant's fictions, which embrace the whole range of Genette's types of transtextuality<sup>12</sup>. The two novels in question certainly are, in this respect, among the most significant cases, as in them intertextuality works at different levels, first of all at the macro-level of their structure.

GWGS, the earlier and shorter of Gallant's two novels, is composed of four chapters. The first three have been published separately as independent short stories in the *New Yorker*. As Neil Besner among others has pointed out, it is not unusual to find in Gallant's fiction groups of stories which constitute either a cycle, or what the scholar calls "linked stories" (1988: 158n. 4)<sup>13</sup>. The case of the independent stories assembled in GWGS, however, is slightly different from others. We do not have a shared thematic here that stands over the others significantly; we are obviously in presence of 'shared characters', but the focus shifts from one to the other uninterruptedly, so that it is quite difficult to establish unequivocally which is the protagonist of each story. The whole novel, instead, is clearly centred around Florence McCarthy, an American girl who suffers from schizophrenia and is described as she vanishes progressively, in presence and speech, while remaining the pivotal figure of the plot, an 'absent presence' in the story<sup>14</sup>. Similarly, in AFGT we have an 'absent-present' figure: it is Shirley's husband, who leaves the house at the beginning of chapter 2 to come back, for a brief moment, only in chapter 13 (out of 15). In the rest of the story, he exists almost exclusively in recollections and projections of the protagonist Shirley, his wife.

Structurally, GWGS keeps the 'skeleton' of the stories separate<sup>15</sup>, even in the case of the last chapter, which is the only one that did not exist as a story on its own before the final editing, or at least was never published independently. Rather than being first conceived as a self-sufficient narrative that would only later

become part of a novel, the fourth chapter is the only one explicitly written with the aim of completing an already existent, then unfinished narrative<sup>16</sup>. However, readers will stumble on the emphatic repetition of family relationships at the very beginning of the chapter, and these are relationships with which, at this point of the story, all readers – even the most distracted ones – should be widely familiar with. This unexpected, incongruous, and unnecessary repetition challenges the above assumption; by extension, the entire definition of novel as a united or fluid narrative<sup>17</sup> is put into question. Further than thematically, narratively, and psychologically, therefore, fragmentation acts also at the level of structural patterns<sup>18</sup>, and we recognize that “the forms of the short stories remain to govern the structure of the novel” (Besner 1988: 49). In addition, even though, as Keefer has aptly noted, the “four self-contained sections [are] linked by an artful fluidity of narrative line”, and “events in one section are mirrored by or refracted in other sections” (1989: 80), we have to bear in mind that mirrors in Gallant’s world are, as we have already seen, deceiving, and they rarely reproduce faithfully what is being reflected. Though mirrors are frequently present in both novels (not only as physical objects)<sup>19</sup>, among the four chapters the phenomenon of refraction prevails over reflection, not least because of the continuous change in the point of view. The uninterrupted shift from one perspective to another is a pattern that becomes almost obsessive in this novel: Gallant uses it with the deliberate aim of confusing her readers and challenging their comprehension of the text. Extending this remark to both novels, Schaub affirms that “the form of these two novels suits the mental confusion of the characters, indeed structurally reflects their fragmentation” (1998: 55).

AFGT, a much longer piece of fiction, indeed her longest so far, is the account of the end of the marriage between North American twenty-seven year-old Shirley Norrington/Higgins/Perrigny and her husband, French journalist Philippe Perrigny. Though the story counts more than three hundred pages, with many daily events happening while their break-up takes place, and with a number of flashbacks and renarrations to challenge the actual chronology of the bare plot, Keefer claims that “the whole action of the novel is cerebral” (1989: 83)<sup>20</sup>; if not the whole action, indeed the main plot is very scanty, if one considers the overall

length of the story. In line with Gallant's shortest fictions, in which often almost anything happens, what Gallant points at in this story is not the account of a series of events, but the effects of a few events on a single person, who often adds extra narrative subplots to the main plot, all of which are the result of her fervid imagination and of her inclination for reshuffling reality and invention, either in the form of renarration of the past or foresight of future events. In some way, the novel counts more than one narrator, and could be read as a frame-like collection of short stories, recalling the structure of such narratives as Boccaccio's *Decameron* or *The Arabian Nights*<sup>21</sup>. Shirley is, at the same time, the main storyteller (who is not very good at choosing her listeners or at least not keen on deciding what can be disclosed and what should better be kept private)<sup>22</sup> and a listener: she listens to her friend and lover James, to her rescues Renata and Claudie and to every member of the latter's family, to Cat Castle, her mother's friend from Canada, to Madame Roux, the most eager *écouteuse* of her own stories, and to marginal characters who happen to appear no more than once or twice in the narrative<sup>23</sup>. As a listener, Shirley is inapt, too, as she keeps understanding situations in the wrong way, due to her temptation to take the discourse always down to herself. It is not a matter of egotism; rather, it is a sign of her insecurity: it is always so with her mother (see for instance Mrs. Norrington's reference to Effie Gray in comparison to Shirley, which the latter takes as a comment on Ruskin in comparison to Philippe, 46-47), but this happens also with other people, as the following example attests: when

Rose told her that there were not enough men to go around, that clever men chose stupid women because of their restful qualities, and that anyone left over was subaltern, [s]he mean James and herself; that was what Rose was talking about. But Shirley had taken it as a reference to Philippe, and she understood that she was the uninteresting girl keeping an intelligent person out of the hands of a woman more suited to him (54).

Shirley is convinced that Philippe is far 'more' than her: more clever, more tidy and settled, more everything. Her conviction, together with the idea that "she had been meant to save him and that this was what their marriage was about" (48-49) is what brings Shirley close to her husband for quite a long time.

Shirley's inventive skills result in fictions of praiseworthy quality, told either in the third or in the first person; her own fictions are so vivid that they become more real than life itself, 'physically' transferring the subject of the invented plot in the space in which such plot is set. When she is in a Café called Pons with Cat Castle, the description of "fifteen used plates [...] now rinsed and stacked in her mother-in-law's kitchen" seems the result of direct observation, while what the girl is actually doing is described as a projection of her mind: "she *imagined* herself here, in Pons, summoning a portable phone" and "she *saw* herself dialling her mother-in-law's number" (31, italics mine), as if detached, as if narrating someone else's story<sup>24</sup>. All the time, even before having being told so, she seems to follow Mrs. Castle's predicament to "tell [...] the truth if it sounds realistic. Otherwise invent something better" (36); the latter becomes her usual way because "each time the story she was composing [...] touched the truth, it became improbable" (50).

The impact of this "something better" is incredibly strong: it can affect reality at different levels, manipulate memories of the past (even replace them), or have consequences on future events. When not pleased with her outfit, Shirley imagines being dressed differently:

She was absurd. The belt of her macintosh trailed. On a glowing June morning she was prepared for rain and night. Not caring for this memory, she rearranged it, and had herself proceeding up the rue du Bac adequately clothed (51).

The practice of "daydreaming" (67), as the narrator of AFGT calls it in relation to Shirley, is one of the reasons of her distraction, half-attention, and limited participation in conversations: the girl is living in between two dimensions, one real and one fictionalized, but in the end she does not inhabit either of them completely. The definition well adapts to Florence, in its literary meaning of 'day-dreaming', 'dreaming during the day', which is the girl's main concern ever since her health starts deteriorating. In GWGS, manipulation of the past has a more serious value: it is only through the practice of renarration that the protagonist Flor can come to terms (or, better said, she manages to avoid coming

to terms) with her past. The whole story centres around renarrations/rewriting of childhood experiences: seventeen year-old George Fairlie, the cousin of protagonist Florence McCarthy, recalls an episode of his childhood, a day out in Venice in which Flor first bought a necklace made of glass beads, then broke it on purpose, and finally “unstrung the beads still in her hand and flung them after the others, making a wild upward movement with her palm” (5). Clearly, the gesture symbolically represents her desire to break “the suffocating tie between Flor and her mother” (Irvine 1986: 247). George’s recollection is in line with the narrator’s – which means, we assume, it is the true one – but his memory, constantly challenged by other people, does not correspond to Flor’s: when offered one of the glass beads<sup>25</sup>, she denies having broken the necklace with a simple “I’m not a person who breaks things” (22). By stressing the unreliability of memory, Flor simultaneously points at the possibility to see the same thing through different perspectives, but also to recall/retell it differently: “We don’t remember the same things” (24)<sup>26</sup>, she concludes. In this sentence, the girl condenses a meaning that is much wider than the close reference to a single episode would entail. As a matter of fact, at the very end of the story, George symbolically, but also physically, replaces Flor’s absence, and, by behaving on her behalf, finally manages to free the girl from her suffocating mother when he declares that, had he still got the bead (meanwhile lost), he would have got rid of it now. Crossing Paris in a real tour, which is doubled by his mental journey, George finally sees an image, in fact an hallucination. In this image George comprises his auntie, his cousin, and an unknown, attractive girl he has seen a few minutes before:

He saw Aunt Bonnie and Flor and the girl on the Quai Anatole France as one person. She was a changeable figure, now menacing, now dear; a minute later behaving like a queen in exile, plaintive and haughty, eccentric by birth, unaware, or not caring, that the others were laughing behind their hands (182-183).

The end of the novel accommodates, within a single image, what the whole text has tried to display: fragmented identities intertwine, superimpose, fuse to such an extent that we do not know, at this point, nor in any other one throughout the text, who is who and what role is he/she playing. In this specific case, it is not

even clear whether it is the mysterious figure that is changing (the observed subject) or the observer himself (see Rooke 1986: 268). The space of narration invades the space of narrated characters, so as to project on the readers the same sense of hallucination that George is experiencing, in a typical Gallantian manner.

By now, Flor has been confined to an asylum: when we last see her, the girl is in her apartment in Paris, alone. The episode ends with Flor re-joining her father in dreams: “she emerged in triumph from the little wood and came off Chief, her pony, and into her father’s arms” (101). We leave Flor at the very point when she achieves to create in dreams the identity which she thinks would have prevented her father from abandoning her. By substituting her past memories with the manipulated recollection (rather a re-creation, or at least we are likely to think it is such) of an ideal self, she rewrites her own past completely. Part of this process involves her denial of having been a person who breaks things (on purpose), as George<sup>27</sup> stated during their last meeting.

In analysing “how women portray themselves in a psychiatric interview”, Branca Telles Ribeiro and Maria Tereza Lopes Dantas show that

patients display a sense of self that is fragmented and multiple. Often these different aspects of self are contradictory (such as, ‘the good wife’ and ‘the one who betrays’). We will argue that, in order to have a sense of self, a sense of who they are, these women frequently refer to an ‘ideal me’ or an ‘ideal other’, where identity seems to emerge in a rather fixed representation, though layered in many contradictions (2007: 190).

Opportunely adapted, these comments apply perfectly to Flor’s personality. Also, Flor has been “trying to reconstruct her own past”, and her attempts “dr[o]ve her to create a fictive golden world”. This is another reason why she refuses George’s initial memory: it “does not fit in with the picture of herself she has drawn in order to please her mother” (Keefer 1989: 79), neither with the idyllic, fairy-tale family tableau she has built up in her mind and sees, represented outside a shop window as if it were performed like a play, when she goes out for a walk with her mother and her new American friend Doris (63-64).

Opposite to Flor, who restlessly tries to bring back the past *through* dreams, the character of Wishart, Bonnie's friend (whom the latter brings with her during the summer in Cannes), fights an endless battle to erase his past: memory, in his case, is challenged *in* dreams, where his subconscious brings back images of his sister Glad and a "baby boy who hung on her dress, whose fingers she had to pry loose one at the time [...], clinging, whining, crying 'Stay with me'" (154)<sup>28</sup>. "A totally fabricated identity, a totally invented persona, as 'art' created out of a wish", Wishart is "the antithesis of any essentialist conception of a 'genuine' or authentic identity and [he] has gone several steps further than any other character in totally denying his real past" (Besner 1988: 55). Also, within the metaphor of the sea floating over the whole story, while Flor's process is a long way towards a final drowning, Wishart's is an unsuccessful battle against resurfacing.

Barbara Godard's definition of Carol Frazier of "The Other Paris" as "a woman who has confused life with plots" (1990: 89) can surely be extended to several other characters, certainly to Wishart, to Flor and, even more aptly, to Shirley, who proves that, as much as the past can be renarrated, the future can be affected by imagination, and soon turned into a past which fits the characters' expectations or necessities: the previously quoted episode in Pons continues with Shirley's description of the Perrignys' place, depicted, as we said, as seen directly. It includes their hospital-like dining room, where

she *saw* today's sun shooting straight over Paris. It missed Madame Perrignys' dining room, which remained dark as the sea [...]. The Perrignys' windows were shut against drafts and the noise of traffic, and their white net curtains were drawn tight lest someone flying low in a helicopter try to peer in and see the Perrignys were having lunch (31, italics mine).

Irony hits the Perrignys' exaggerated self enclosure, which is not determined by cultural isolation as in the cases we have already analysed, such as the Reeves of "In the Tunnel" (though a social superiority is certainly entailed in several of their behaviours). Conversely, it resides mainly in an irrational fear of a possible contagion, to come principally through food, but also from any outside incursion which has not been sterilized. If, so far, Shirley's account relies upon her

memories of previous meals, all of which are likely to have been alike, what follows is instead a made-up story: the girl quickly invents from scratch a situation in sequences, like a film script, in which she would send flowers to her mother-in-law to apologize for her absence. When picking them up, the woman would pin her thumb and be sent to the nearest hospital (32). Once she has made up the happening in full detail, Shirley considers it better not to go, and can finally disburden herself, and “move away from guilt and disaster” (32). The ‘invented past’ becomes ‘real’ past, and there is no need to question its reliability. This happens again in the case of the unknown identity of her landlady:

Shirley had never known who the proprietor might be, and had never inquired. [...] Shirley imagined her landlady to be old, eccentric, avaricious, obese, half-crippled and chauffeur-driven. Once she had decided this, she accepted it as the sole possibility and thought of it no more (88-89).

Had she “thought of it”, perhaps Shirley would have found out that the landlady was, in fact, Madame Roux; she would have signed a contract (something which Philippe did, instead), and been allowed to keep her apartment. But Shirley seems not interested in practical things, as it is clearly exemplified by her description of the ‘laundry process’, whose utility she does not see and which she therefore defines “lunatic” (12). Her lack of meticulousness with the linen is a good example of her attitude in general, which systematically clashes with Philippe’s maniac tidiness and physical/mental order.

For Shirley (as much as for Flor), the importance of the fictionalized versions of life often overcomes that of real existence. On their first date, Philippe brings Shirley to a nice restaurant, a place she knows well because she used to be a close friend of the owners. Her comment about her former friends is enlightening:

They simply stopped making me welcome. [...] First I mourned, then I forgot all about them. When I stopped coming here they simply stopped being real people. [...] When I saw them again I was merely astonished that anyone I forgot could still go on existing (271).

In GWGS, Wishart thinks in almost identical terms: “he had an innocent faith that the past, severed from him, could not persist in a life of its own” (106). In his mind, the man also composes a suitable version of his time with Bonnie, adjusting memories or removing parts of them unsuitable to his final version, which he would use “describing for future audiences the summer at Cannes” (146).

In Shirley’s world, life constantly melds with fiction: when she does not create her own narratives, fiction takes the form of literature (or its adaptations), something which is, were we to analyse Shirley’s ‘narrative style’, one of its distinctive features. When she met Philippe, “I translated us both from the beginning into characters out of books, but they were children’s books he had never heard of. Under the umbrella, I was Jo, and he was Professor Baer” (267). Shirley’s choice in this case (one out of an impressive number) is interesting for different reasons: on the one hand, I find it difficult to explain Shirley’s choice to associate Philippe with Professor Baer (or Baher), who is described as unattractive and much older than Jo, and with whom the ‘little woman’ is in a relation that Alcott herself depicted as “a funny match”<sup>29</sup>. Though also the combination Shirley-Philippe is undeniably “a funny match”, the professor does not correspond at all with Philippe in the immediate confrontation, which is what generally spurs a comparison. In the couple, in fact, Shirley thinks of herself as the unattractive one, and she often remarks on Philippe’s good-looking aspect; on the other hand, however, Jo and her lover had a project in common (i.e. a boarding school for boys), which is perhaps what fascinates Shirley. This interpretation has been elaborated endowing Shirley with a certain competence in literature. Since she quotes non-stop, and brings everything down to literary examples, we have to suppose that, living aside a few funny hints at her involuntary pastiche (like the above example of *Wuthering Heights*), she masters what was to her a “family language” (220)<sup>30</sup>. Shirley’s knowledge of literature comes from her mother, whose exemplum, as we shall see in Section 3, she refuses altogether. Mrs. Norrington’s

comprehension of the world came out of literature – the only form of art she trusted. As a result, Shirley’s suspicion of ideas was as nothing to her dislike of poetry: the very sight of her mother’s books, their dark green and maroon bindings, their tarnished gold titles, and the opaque bricks of words they contained, could raise but one desire in her mind – Resist! She had too often seen her mother pushing through the pages until her long hand stopped at the lines she wanted (100-101).

Significantly, when she dies, Mrs. Norrington leaves Shirley “nothing except her library” (301), but all that her daughter would have wanted are her children’s books, which, instead, “had vanished ages ago” (301). In Flor’s case, it is not her childhood’s library that disappears, but her ability to read. When she hears an American family speaking, she is reminded of a line from Shakespeare’s *Timon of Athens* (V, ii: 219), which she welcomes as “words out of the old days, when she could still read, and relate every sentence to the sentence it followed” (GWGS: 33). At this point, Flor’s refuge in books is impossible, and she only pretends to read (Jewison 1985: 95). Also speaking becomes more and more difficult to the girl, and in the intermediate passage between voice and silence she feels an internal interference, as if “someone were actually speaking for her”. “Sometimes when I want to speak [...] something comes between my thoughts and the words” (80). Also in Shirley’s case there are interferences between thoughts and words, but these generally occur in the process of translation: when she tries to speak French, she feels maimed, disadvantaged, and the psychological pressure to arrange a sentence properly decreases her self-confidence and worsens the final outcome of her utterance.

In another of her early encounters with Philippe, Shirley quotes “Fabrice” and “Linda”, provoking Philippe’s question “Who are they?” The girl replies: “Don’t you know *The Pursuit of Love*? It was part of my folklore too’. [...] ‘I don’t know them’, he said severely. He must have thought I was describing close friends” (269). This time it is Philippe who takes life for literature, but the mistake is again Shirley’s. Even when she tries to approach linguistically and culturally, and the discourse switches to French – either language or literature – the situation does not improve. In the case of language, the narrator continuously stresses episodes in which Philippe corrects Shirley’s imprecision or, as said, the girl feels that language does not allow her to state exactly nor clearly what she thinks. In the

case of French literature, the situation does not improve because “here again a mistake had been made, for the authors she had been taught to consider important had turned out to be despised in Paris, at least by Philippe’s generation” (180). Interestingly, Shirley’s favourite writers – or the ones she deems important – are usually listed among Gallant’s favourite authors. Here, as much as in many other passages from the book, Gallant takes the chance to present her criticism of French cultural establishment, as part of her socio-political involvement that underlies, like a vicious subtext, the whole narrative (and not this one only). AFGT is one of the fictions in which ‘big issues’ are presented as somehow ‘necessary’ matters; what is even more interesting in this respect is that Gallant succeeds in underlining their significance not so much by referring to Philippe’s constant interest and standardized point of view, but rather by unremittingly stressing the Shirley’s disinterest in everything connected with the social, the political, the historical<sup>31</sup> (this is part of what I define Gallant’s ‘indirect technique’).

In line with Gallant’s inclination to create ‘frame narratives’, the incomprehension which occurs during Shirley and Philippe’s first date with the “children’s books he had never heard of” is mirrored in their last meeting, thus pointing at incommunicability as one of the hallmarks of the relationship, which closeness and intimacy have not managed to overcome:

‘So you’ve come back!’ He could not know that this was only the hellfire preacher in *Cold Comfort Farm* addressing his cringing flock. Once again, fatally this time, she had reflected their life in a joke he could never share, framed with a private folklore he knew nothing about (276).

Significantly, in one of the rare occasions in which the narrator takes Philippe’s point of view on his story with Shirley, that is when the man has to recollect their honeymoon (a trip to Berlin for one of Philippe’s assignments during which Shirley has a miscarriage), Philippe decides to erase the woman altogether, to obscure her presence from his past:

He could not really describe a honeymoon where the wife was some twelve weeks pregnant, while referring to Shirley as someone easily carsick made her sound tiresome. In the end he eliminated Shirley altogether. In the long first-person account of the trip that appeared in *Le Mirroir* it was clear that Philippe had travelled alone (38).

If renarration is a way to reshape life in the most suitable version for the subject, to Shirley's idyllic love story corresponds Philippe's desire to erase marriage from the very beginning.

At an upper, more external level, Gallant includes in AFGT further interesting structural 'complications', which reverberate from structure to content significantly. She incorporates, in fact, within the narrative, a chapter previously published as an independent short story, entitled "The Accident" (1967)<sup>32</sup>. The story becomes, in the economy of the whole plot, a flashback to the honeymoon and the premature death of the first husband of the protagonist. The value of any text as a separated piece of fiction or as integrated within another plot is, obviously, very different. However, it seems quite strange that critics have not so much underlined the crucial role that this specific part of the novel holds as a semantic modifier of the previous portion of text, a role not paired by any other flashback. The flashback, not the sole in the narrative, is in fact unique, not only because it seems one of the few entirely reliable versions of the past, but also because it operates the deepest modification on our approach to the novel, and in particular on our perception of the character of Shirley: by positioning it on pages 230-245 of 307, the narrator has managed so far to have readers become sick of Shirley's inconsistencies, and their support is verging towards "poor Philippe" (249), the patient, rational, down-to-earth, prototypical husband. He has been depicted as a man who restrains his passion for other partners, confining his extramarital affairs to their fictionalized versions; Shirley, instead, has an affair with her Greek neighbour James, and leaves Philippe alone to go to parties with her friends and acquaintances.

Through the account of Shirley's previous life, instead, readers become aware of some aspects of Shirley's personality and temper which the accident has completely destroyed or, supposing they have not completely disappeared, they

are surely confined to a realm of her mind which seems frozen, hardened. Shirley, presented in the previous pages as the unreliable rescuer of life's outcasts, from now on becomes a survivor, herself a rescue from a world of death which was not her own, but from which she has not survived completely. Referring to Peter she says:

He never came back to me except in dreams, and then only after his mother died. There was a young girl with him. He said, 'Everything I could feel has been killed'. 'But *I* am here', I cried. He never looked at me. The girl was not Mrs. Higgins, not even Mrs. Higgins disguised. In their private coldness he and the girl had eyes only for each other. She was someone belonging to me who had gone over to him. I knew I had lost two people, not one (245-246).

In a few pages we are presented a different Shirley, one of the girl's identities which does not exist anymore, if not in her name, Higgins (which keeps reappearing in her suit's tag and in her mail-box)<sup>33</sup>. All this is clear to the reader, now, but not to Philippe. Driven by cultural stereotypes, he interprets his wife's lack of emotionalism as a typical American aridity:

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 which made for a comfortable existence, without memory and without remorse (49).

Instead, as the narrator adds, "she was not as careless as he seemed to want her to be" (49): to look backwards at the 230 pages full of Shirley's inconsistencies, therefore, involves congruous revision, a re-reading or, in the light of our discourse, a re-writing. The account of her love story with Pete is told in a tone completely different from the rest of Shirley's life, in phrases as elegiac as the rest of the novel rarely becomes, and the girl is endowed with pitches of insightfulness we had not thought her capable of. The flashback<sup>34</sup> compels the reader to re-evaluate the whole story and the character of Shirley as we have known her so far, and to give her credit when she says, not long after this chapter,

“I am not incompetent, I seem so, but I’m not” (250). Seeming versus being, appearance and deceitfulness of impressions (the first as well as the twentieth), of sight, and of meaning is what this novel, the other one, and Gallant’s fiction in general often revolve around. We are never finished with the text and its possible interpretations, not even when we come to the last page. Such is the case, again, of AFGT: there exists, in fact, a ‘sequel’ to the novel called “In Transit”, a very short text which is, opposite to “The Accident”, a flash-forward on Philippe’s second marriage. The story, originally meant to be included in the novel, was published only separately, because it did not fit in the final scheme elaborated by the writer<sup>35</sup>. Interestingly, it was written (at least published) before the novel; focusing on this “backwards chronology” (Merler 1978: 7), Merler argues that it is part of Gallant’s common practice to have “stories go backwards in time rather than forward” (8). In my opinion, this is rather emblematic of a perception of time which is only seldom chronological and varies, more often, according to the perception of each individual portrayed in the writer’s fiction. For her characters, even time can be the result of personal perception: in contrast with the actual date, “in Shirley’s calendar of time this was a Sunday in the past. She fixed a point, a beginning of time, and put a finger on the circle as the minute hand began its sweep around” (72-73). Unreliable or self-determined perception of time (either a part of the day, a particular day, month, or season) is also hinted at in GWGS, where Flor “was not making the division between days and nights clearly” (87), and a subtle allusion at this concern lays principally (though not exclusively) in the association between George – who in the story represents the present<sup>36</sup> – and the White Rabbit of Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*. This seems a text Gallant particularly likes, though there is no specific evidence of this in any document, save a more general, often declared passion for children books and stories. George’s perception of time is also un-chronological: “the space between his having been seventeen, and at home, and being nineteen, and abroad, could not be measured by any system known to him” (159). As Edward Said wrote in his “Reflections on Exile”, “a life of exile moves according to a different calendar, and is less seasonal and settled than a life at home” (1984: 160).

Lack of roots is certainly evoked by the expression ‘in transit’, which Gallant chose also for one of her collections. The homonymous story can be read as part of a transtextual project, a hybrid, an ejection or a rejection from the original plan. Also, its debris seem to remain in allusive sentences, as it happens when, having just been told by her friend and lover James that Philippe is “with a stupid young girl now” (AFGT: 282), Shirley describes her former marriage in these terms: “it was like being in transit between two flights” (282-283). Significantly, “In Transit” opens with the description of Philippe and Claire, his new wife, “in transit between two flights” at the airport of Helsinki: while they are waiting for boarding, an aged couple quarrels about their future destination and their past life together. In a voyeuristic attack, Philippe follows the scene, trying to interpret the woman’s reactions: interestingly, his considerations include a comparison with himself and his former wife (while the present one is completely forgotten for a few instants), and, though only temporarily, Shirley becomes in his mind his only ‘real’ wife. On the contrary, when Shirley thinks of herself as a married woman, she always thinks “‘married to Pete’” (154)<sup>37</sup>, an idea reinforced by her clinging to her former surname Higgins. In terms of content, the text fills gaps with details that the novel does not reveal: information are added on what happened when Philippe left and when he came back to the apartment to take away his stuff (SS 312). All this might not be interesting, if not for the fact that the text is partly a renarration of the same events from a previously missing point of view. More interesting seems indeed that Philippe gives Claire the explanations Shirley has often asked him for, though in the end his reply contains no explanation at all: “The mistake was that I married her. The mystery was why I ever married her” (SS: 312). This overlapping of the two women in Philippe’s mind goes much further: in another reference to ‘transit’ included in a previous paragraph of AFGT, we are revealed that “with Shirley he was in transit from his mother life to a life on his own” (256). In other words, the title of the short story and its immediate, denotative reference are at Philippe’s new wife, while the metaphoric meaning of the condition of being ‘in transit’, in what is a transient status rather than a proper journey, refers to Philippe in relation to Shirley: the explanation of the title offered in the short story, according to which being in transit was like “being shut up in a stalled lift with nothing to read” (SS: 313),

again refers to Shirley and not to Claire, who was “good if he said he was working, but puzzled and offended if he read” (312), and who was so unfamiliar with literature that he had to add the explanation “an English writer” (311) when he referred to Jane Austen. It is nevertheless to be remembered that Shirley, here implicitly referred to as the educated counterpart of Claire, could not distinguish between Jane Austen and Jane Eyre (94).

All things considered, we may accept Merler’s theory that “the novel and the two stories serve as appendices and give two opposing points of view” (1978: 8), but we may also add that a comparative analysis of the three texts suggests that this is another case of ‘refractive narrative’, through which the writer does not only explore the possibility of observing one event or person through different points of view, but also knowingly plays with the effects that different points of view create when they occasionally encroach one upon the other.

Very interestingly, the only part that is repeated in AFGT and in “In Transit” –almost with the same words – is the hint at Philippe’s assignments: the man has been writing, for some years now, a series of articles which he regularly entitled “The Silent Cry”, all beginning with the same incipit, no matter the topic. In “In Transit” we are told that “neither his paper nor he himself had become aware that it was repetitious” (311). Shirley, instead, has noticed it, but since she goes through her husband’s papers unauthorized, she cannot reveal what she finds out, and each time she has to hide the traces of her inattentive incursion: “underneath what you had written I added, ‘Honestly, Philippe, [...] I wouldn’t call it ‘The Soundless Cry’, because you have already called something else that” (214)<sup>38</sup>. When she finds the article in question (something about the “Tofulu Group”), Shirley can read its two versions: the first one, whose title is not “The Silent Cry”, is, according to the girl (readers would agree with her) better than the ‘stereotyped’ version. Philippe is much brighter than he appears as a journalist, as we can see from the unpublished versions of his articles, and from his appreciated work as a jazz columnist. But in both cases, he hides his identity, either lacking the courage to publish his authentic interpretation of events or writing his articles on music under a pseudonym (Bobby Crown). It is only when he prostrates to the

trite canons of the French intellectual establishment (which also happens when he works as a TV host) that his voice lowers and, no matter the topic or the means, his is ‘a silent cry’.

Another piece of “The Silent Cry” series was written on the “Canadian question”, about which Shirley knows nothing at all: the piece was the result of “information supplied [...] by a girl named Geneviève Deschranes” (269), a name that provokes “instant jealousy” in Shirley, later justified by the fact that Geneviève is Philippe’s platonic lover. Geneviève is also the authoress of an autobiographical ‘masterpiece’, a life-long life-replacing volume which the woman periodically sends to Philippe for feedback (the mechanism, dismantled, is a correspondence between the two, with love letters disguised as a literary exchange). The text, which Shirley regularly reads, unauthorized, is the cliché-based rewriting of Geneviève’s own life according to her own expectations and desires, where Shirley appears only to die “of a combination of drink and disaster”, as “a North-American slut by the name of Daisy [...] long before Chapter One” (20). But Shirley/Daisy changed her ‘status’ when, inadvertently, she scribbled a message to Philippe in the back of one of the novel’s pages. This overlapping of her life on another life, an example of ‘fiction within the fiction within the fiction’, is somehow complete. Or, perhaps, it has just begun.

Geneviève is one of the ‘indirect characters’ of the two novels: like Shirley’s mother, or Flor’s doctor, she is far more important than her ‘physical’ presence suggests. Not only is her place like a warehouse for Philippe’s records, something which he does not keep in his wife’s apartment; also, she is the ‘warewoman’ of his knowledge, especially everything connected with the English world, an odd fact if one considers that Shirley is Anglo-Saxon and Geneviève is not. Other than in his inquests, Geneviève is also involved in another of Philippe’s manias: the deciphering of nursery rhymes. “Goosie Gander”, in particular, has become in the years a nearly obsession for him. Despite Shirley’s attempt to bring it down to its denotative meaning and contextualization (it is a children’s text), he keeps looking for further references and meanings, convinced that “Goodside’s Gander” (this is how he and Geneviève spell it) is not the result of Geneviève’s

juvenile incompetence in the English language (which includes gross mistakes like “stares” for “stairs”), but contains some undiscovered cryptic, “prophetic meaning” (15). His analysis of the rhyme obviously stands as a metaphor for his consideration of the two women, as he mistrusts Shirley’s version and credits Miss Thule’s, Geneviève’s governess when she was a child, for “it was Miss Thule who had maintained that Goosey Gander held a universal key” (16). His obsession with the rhyme also stands for Gallant’s further critique of the self-labelling intelligentsia, who “rendering the local and contextualized in terms of historical relevance [...] display[s] the absurdity of intellectual dogma” (Sturgess 1993: 204). A critique as such further develops, for instance, in the report of Philippe’s TV programme and his debate with an American expert, in which the two men present the differences between French and American culture in terms of stereotypes. It is also through the presence of French characters like Madame Roux and the Maurels that different cultural discourses – and the related clashes when they happen to meet – are a decisive part of this narrative, while GWGS is a display of the internal fragmentation of one single national identity, in that it parades different, conflicting versions of Americanness<sup>39</sup>.

In the very last page of the novel, Shirley bumps again into some papers containing the rhyme and Philippe’s various lines of critical analysis. After having agreed on divorce for desertion (which is described as a kind gesture on Philippe’s behalf)<sup>40</sup>, having been to Greece on holiday and to her mother’s funeral in Canada, she is back in Paris and ready for a new life, which does not include Philippe (nor James or Claudie or Madame Roux, or any person present in her current life). All the papers she used to go through with the eager desire to discover ‘messages’ from Philippe have now a clear meaning for her, because they have no meaning to her. As a matter of fact, she is finally able to take the controversy of Goosie Gander in a less personal way, and to send a final letter to Philippe in which she writes: “Darling Philippe, I have finally come round to your way of thinking. G. Gander is without doubt concerned with loyalty, fidelity, passing the buck and the situation in Berlin” (308). Because the origin and meaning of the rhyme was the only previous “source of argument between them” (16), it was, implicitly, the only way they had to fight in their relationship, but

most of all to try to fight *for* it. Through her seemingly agreeing on the meaning of the rhyme, thus, Shirley stops struggling for the survival of a marriage that does not exist anymore, and detaches herself from Philippe once and for all, as if he were, to her, like the late Peter. The novel, in fact, ends with the woman's supposition that "they would see each other again in time, in dreams and recollections" (308), something she had already thought about her first husband (245).

Literature and children's rhymes also appear in *GWGS*, where stress falls repeatedly on Shakespearian works. At one point, for instance, a babyish version of Flor quotes from "Love's Labour's Lost":

She said in an excited voice, 'The Fox, the Ape, the Bumblebee, were all at odds, being three, and then the Goose came out the door, and stayed the odds by making four. We're like that. Mama's lovely bumblebee and I'm fox-colored'. This left Wishart the vexing choice between being a goose and an ape, and he was the more distressed to hear Bob say placidly that it wasn't the first time he had been called a big ape. All at once it seemed preferable to be an ape than a goose (122).

But Wishart also thinks he is an insect, invisible and unheard, who can overhear every word between Flor and Bob Harris during their first meetings in Cannes. Disgusted by their warmth, he concentrates on Bonnie: he amuses her by playing *with* her and *for* her (but also *against* her, to some extent). "They had worked out their code of intimate jokes", which included making "fun of the French jargon" (123), but also creating nicknames taken from well known literary works, such as "Baronne Putbus"<sup>41</sup> and "Lysistrata"<sup>42</sup> (110) or – but this is Flor's perspective – Oberon and Titania from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. According to Flor, Wishart "would love to have wings and power and have people do as he says" (124). Also, recalling the time when she moved to Europe, Flor tells Bob that "a robin [...] wasn't a robin anymore" (126), reversing Shakespeare's claim that a rose would be a rose even if it was called differently. The concern is particularly cogent in the context of Gallant's interest in signification and the arbitrariness of language, with the relationship signified/signifier always in

danger, and with the meaning of words, things, and feelings always manipulated or misunderstood.

Further references to animals are scattered throughout GWGS<sup>43</sup>: mainly because of her red hair, Flor is repeatedly referred to as the fox, but the fox is also the name that in her “private language” (81) the girl gives to her malaise, “the *vertige* she had felt on the street”, which “she called [...] ‘the little animal going to sleep’” (81).

Other texts in GWGS include Flor’s “green notebook in which she recorded [her] discoveries” (35), her “magic object” (84), a repository of disconnected and seemingly meaningless phrases which resembles Shirley’s pending lists<sup>44</sup>. The most relevant point of resemblance between the two novels is, however, the substantial presence of letters: letters are written by and to the two protagonists, but whereas Flor fears them (and she therefore avoids collecting her mail when left alone), Shirley is eager to receive through letters the replies to questions she has asked, relying mainly and erroneously upon her mother. One of Mrs. Norrington’s replies is the much studied botanic treaty on the bluebell, which is described, in the very first paragraph of the whole novel as “*Endymion non-scriptus*, or *Scilla nutans* or *non-scriptus*. Also called hyacinth, wood bell, wild hyacinth. It is, in short, the common European bluebell” (3)<sup>45</sup>. In the light of the concern with identity and its fragmentation, it is emblematic that the first image offered by the novel is one of a flower’s fragmented identity. The variety of names to label one single flower also recalls Shirley’s names, surnames, and nicknames, which are not one, but vary in time and place, pronunciation and meaning<sup>46</sup>. It seems also of some importance that both novels open with an image of rotten vegetation: in Venice, George is watching the “morning muck” floating in the canal, which includes “the orange halves, the pulpy melons, the rotting bits of lettuce, black under water, green above” (1), while Mrs. Norrington’s letters opens with “the sadly macerated and decomposed specimen you sent me” (3)<sup>47</sup>. Mrs. Norrington interweaves her description of the flower with random information – with no apparent logic connection – on historical, epistemological, even eschatological knowledge, bits of family history, her political orientation and

opinion on life and events. The woman's roundabout reply to her daughter's request for help is, as much as the latter's, unreadable, thus suggesting that the relationship among the two women is, as the narrator defines it (and critics often quote), "an uninterrupted dialogue of the deaf" (45), and that they both fail in understanding the other, no matter if their lack of comprehension is due to form or content. However, the repeated incomprehension, misunderstanding and lack of ability to 'read' each other's writing<sup>48</sup> does not spur the two women to interrupt their "uninterrupted dialogue". In this case, as it is in the relationship Bonnie-Flor, mother and daughter are bond together, and they cannot separate from one another, even if it would perhaps be better so: "their closeness had been a trap, and each could now think, If it hadn't been for you, my life would have been different. If only you had gone out of my life at the right time" (GWGS: 65).

Structurally, Mrs. Norrington's letter constitutes a frame to the novel, in that it coincides with the first chapter and is re-read by Shirley in the very last pages, having meanwhile acquired a meaning for the girl. Like the rhyme, the text becomes clear because Shirley has finally grown older, and has therefore acquired the capability to 'read' her mother's message. Indeed, she has become more capable of 'reading' the world, therefore she does no more need to rely on someone else's advice. Gallant seems to suggest, in this as much as in other circumstances, that the meaning of a text (this is true also of a word, or of an episode) lays not in its writer, but in its reader, and that it is most of all the act of interpretation that makes the difference and creates a gap in comprehension. In this reader-oriented approach, however, the most interesting suggestion comes from Cat Castle, who criticizes Shirley because "you are about like you always were [...], reading instead of listening. Life isn't in books" (43), suggests Gallant's through one of her most enigmatic characters; nor is it in letters, or in any other kind of written text.

Also Bonnie, Flor's mother, is in the habit of writing letters: when she writes to her daughter, hers are part of the unread letters which Flor refuses to collect from the mail box; to her brother and sister-in-law (George's parents) Bonnie writes instead an ideal version of her life, which fits with her custom to

reshape her daughter's image, adapting it to her ideal. When walking back home from the restaurant, in the final scene of the novel, Bonnie incongruously comments on Paris at night, stating that "Florence loved the Paris night" (163) but blatantly contradicting herself a few instants later, when she maintains that her daughter "hardly ever went out at night" (171). The narrator comments, from George's point of view, that "contradiction seemed to be typical of his aunt" (171). But when she scribbles pieces of paper that she tears apart and scatters in the envelope, Bonnie describes her daughter's critical situation and her precarious mental state realistically: "these scraps, about the size of a calling card, bore a minutely scrawled message which was what she really wanted to say" (31). On the one hand, the fragmentation of paper and of the comments Bonnie writes on them symbolically hint at the fragmented identity of both the subject and the object of the text. On the other hand, metaphorically speaking, Gallant seems to suggest that life cannot be the chronological, well-ordered account which is conveyed by a traditional text, but has to be fragmented, scattered, like the pieces of a torn letter, or, even more so, like the structure of her novels.

### **3. "Clothes [...] always mean something"<sup>49</sup>: through the fabric of self-identity and relationships**

In Gallant's pages, the importance and meaning given to clothing as a 'language' are manifold. The writer, herself interested in fashion and in the care of her own outfit<sup>50</sup>, often lingers in meticulous descriptions of the look of her characters. Very knowledgeable about garments, fabrics, accessories and fashion trends, Gallant achieves results at different levels when she employs her talent to "*tisser des liens entre les événements*" ('sew connections between events', emphasis added).

First, by hinting at a particular attire which was in fashion in a certain era, Gallant makes clothing become part of her highly appreciated capability in

capturing the vivid image of a sociological context. Her portrayals, which also include a photographic memory of the past, a journalistic angle of observation, and a particular care in reporting costumes and habits typical of a certain milieu, are certainly to be added to the long list of her fiction's most distinctive features. Part of her practice of contextualizing the plot includes the habit of making 'time' explicit. It often includes precise reference to a particular date or year, as it is in AFGT, whose first sentence is the heading of Mrs. Norrington's letter: "Montreal, May 26<sup>th</sup>, 1963" (3). Rarely, when fictions are not set in a precise time and space, Gallant uses other devices to let us know the time-frame of a story: in replacement of (but also in addition to) a certain date, a hint at a specific historic event may help readers place a story in some 'indirect' way. For instance, to refer to the year of her wedding, Mrs. Norrington mentions the funeral of George the Fifth (10)<sup>51</sup>. Occasionally, Gallant employs fashion analogously, so that variations in fashion trends can mark an epoch with precision: when Shirley remembers an episode of her youth, with her mother "holding a copy of *Vogue*", she claims: "I was about twelve, I suppose: it was the year when, without warning, skirts dropped to the ankle" (234)<sup>52</sup>. Similarly, in GWGS Bonnie refers to fashion trends to mark history. For Bonnie,

none of the clothes from America seemed normal to her now, because they no longer came from a known place. She had left her country between the end of the war and the onslaught of the New Look (this is how history was fixed in her memory) and, although she had been back for visits, the American scene of her mind's eye was populated with girls in short skirts and broad-shouldered coats—the war silhouette, 1-85, or whatever it was called. Her recollection of such details was faultless, but she could not have said under which President peace had been signed. The nation at war was not a permanent landscape: Bonnie's New York, the real New York, was a distant, gleaming city in a lost decade" (GWGS: 28)<sup>53</sup>.

More often than sociological, however, Gallant's interest in her character's outfit is connected with the representation of identity, either as a reinforcement of one's own perception, or as a means to disguise through the simplest of methods: dressing up. It goes without saying that the writer, who never dwells into meaningless details (nor even in her longer narratives), usually attributes to garments a meaning that is hardly ever descriptive only, and is enriched instead with semiotic, metaphorical, or symbolic implications, or even a mixture of them.

Generally speaking, the ‘language of clothing’ (as well as communication through food, furniture, or any other signifier) can ‘speak’ in accordance to the uttered statements or in partial/complete contradiction to them. Sometimes, an outfit can even replace a spoken discourse, since there are circumstances in which we cannot speak, or others when we would need or else “prefer for the clothes to do the ‘talking’ for us” (Kaiser 1985: 56). Kaiser also states that

the significance of clothing in interpersonal relations is its symbolism, which provides a means for communicating with others (that is, its value from the wearer’s perspective in conveying desired impressions). This process is known as *impression management*; it involves the control of appearance-related impressions that are communicated to others during social interaction. Impression management is a personal process resulting from perceptions we have about ourselves and from motives for our behaviour. Perceivers of a person wearing clothes select (often unconsciously) clothing cues to assist them in understanding that person’s motives for interaction and in predicting future actions. This implicit or unstated process is generally referred to as *impression formation*. This process includes the perceptions of others, using clothing and appearance as cues (19-20).

The character of James Chichalides in AFGT provides a good example: a Greek architect with a passion for minors, involved in the business of selling apartments (which makes him implicated, at an attantial level, in the mysterious selling of Shirley’s place), James Chichalides – an English name with a Greek surname – is the character who, perhaps more than any other, represents the attempt at declaring a desired identity through a matching outfit. He carries along his attempt by accompanying a careful selection (and repetitious change) of clothes with a strenuous work on his “English face”, behind which he “took cover” as if it were a proper mask (132), a vocabulary and accent, and a selected formulaic which is said to be ‘very English’:

James Chichalides, wearing a spy’s raincoat, carrying two croissants in a square of flimsy paper and a folder copy of *The Times*, put on his English face when he saw her. He had two favourite English remarks, which he could make apropos of nothing known to his hearers. These were ‘Brains, my dear fellow, brains’, meanwhile tapping his forehead, and ‘What, may I ask, is the meaning of this?’ (105).

James receives confirmation of his 'Englishness' by Shirley, though both his features and overall aspect do not match with the girl's polite reassurances (56), and 'speak' in open contrast with his English-fabric 'utterances':

he had a long nose and slightly troubled skin, as if he had scratched at chickenpox. His hair gleamed like a freshly washed blackboard; his hands had been given middle-class European care, which meant their owner did not wish to be thought of as someone who had ever had to change a tire. [...] 'What nationality would you think I was, if you didn't know?' he asked Shirley. [...] He wanted to be taken for something he was not, but what was he? 'That Greek upstairs', was what Philippe called him (55).

James was wearing a Merrie England gilt-buttoned blazer and a cool, camel-like English expression. Still, he seemed to her lavish and Oriental (187).

Indeed, the hope to be "taken for something [one is] not" is common in Gallant's 'line-up', and it turns into an apprehensive expectation each time characters rely on their made-up images to support their made-up identities. The desire to make appearances coincide with a self-created character, surrounded by a corresponding reality (like a setting to a fictionalized version of life, that is, in other words, life lived only in the form of life performed) is declined in different forms: in the case of James, as it is for Wishart, the artificial identity is meant to replace an existing one (refused? not accepted? the implications are several and interconnected); Bonnie McCarthy, instead, who is always trying to look younger than she is (and behaves girlish, even childishly sometimes), does not invent new identities, but struggles to re-enact her past selves. In her case, too, matching outfits are only part of a broader, more intricate project which entails the creation and presentation of a selection of often-rehearsed (once 'lived'), highly-elaborated characters:

Bonnie McCarthy opened a drawer of her dressing table and removed the hat her sister-in-law had sent from New York. [...] Bonnie pushed her lips forward in a pout. [...] The frown, the pout, the obstinate gestures, were those of a child. It was a deliberate performance, and new: after years of struggling to remain adult in a grown-up world, she had found it unrewarding, and, in her private moments, allowed herself the blissful luxury of being someone else. A lost Bonnie existed there, pretty and pert, outrageously admired. This was the Bonnie she sought to duplicate every time she looked in the glass – Bonnie tender-eyed, blurry with the sun of a perished afternoon; Bonnie in her wedding dress, authentically innocent, with a wreath of miniature roses straight across her brow. With time

– she was at this moment fifty-two – a second, super-Bonnie had emerged. Super-Bonnie was a classic, middle-aged charmer. She might have been out of Kipling – a kind of American Mrs. Hauksbee, witty and thin, with those great rolling violet blue eyes. When she was feeling liverish or had had a bad night, she knew this was off the mark, and that she had left off being tender Bonnie without achieving the safety of Mrs. Hauksbee. Then she would think of the woman she could have been, if her life hadn't been destroyed: and if she went on thinking about it too much, she gave up and consoled herself by playing at being a little girl (25-28).

Not only does Bonnie's disturbed personality create multiple identities to match with her ideal selves; also, the woman equips each of these personalities with a particular pose, a language or accent (George notices, for instance, that "she had levels of voice for her levels of truth", and when "she dropped into reality [...] her voice hardened and fell", 176), a wardrobe and even a different handwriting, thus creating characters that alternate in a public performance of life. Her performance continues, with almost unvaried care and precision, in moments of isolation, like the ones in front of her mirror.

While describing the variations in her handwriting, the narrator makes Bonnie's letters fit in the category of unreadable messages when he hints at a "nearly illegible" part:

She joined the last letter of each word on to the start of the next. All the vowels, as well as the letters n, m, and w, resembled u's. There were strings of letters that might as well have been nununu. Now her writing became elegant and clear, like the voice of someone trying on a new accent (30).

Gallant's interest in graphology is not occasional. The writer lingers in the description of her characters' handwriting in other circumstances, and also in AFGT she devotes attention to the way in which different characters write letters and messages: with specific reference to our concern, one may argue that the 'form' of a text stands in relation to its content as paralinguistic signs are connected to verbalization<sup>54</sup>. A specific interest in the interpretation of handwriting appears in the very short story "April's Fish", where the protagonist receives, among the presents for her birthday, an autograph letter written by Sigmund Freud:

I slipped on my reading glasses and spread the precious letter on the counterpane. “It is an original letter written by Dr. Sigmund Freud. He was a famous doctor, and that is his handwriting. Now I shall teach you how to judge from the evidence of letters. The writing paper is ugly and cheap – you all see that, do you? – which means that he was a miser, or poor, or lacked aesthetic feeling, or did not lend importance to worldly matters. The long pointed loops mean a strong sense of spiritual values, and the slope of the lines means a pessimistic nature. The margin widens at the bottom of the page, like the manuscript of Keats’s ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ (SS: 307).

The story, an overlapping of reality and visions, revolves around dreams and their interpretation at different levels (the same could be said to briefly describe GWGS), playing with the meaning itself of the word ‘interpretation’ through the introduction of the historical figure of Sigmund Freud and the shift from the use of his interpretation (namely of dreams) to *his* interpretation (i.e. his handwriting). Without deviating too much from my core issue here – as this text would tempt me to do – what Gallant displaces in the story (perhaps more clearly here than in the excerpt from GWGS) is that there exists no single meaning, not only in the written text, but also in the *way* it is written. The possibility that even the choice of a certain paper signifies “that he was a miser, *or* poor, *or* lacked aesthetic feeling, *or* did not lend importance to worldly matters” (italics mine), in other words everything and its actual opposite, hints again at the option to interpret a text in any possible way, and that no matter what were the original intentions of the writer, it is the reader who decides how to ‘read’ (or Gallant who makes him believe it can be so). I obtained similar outcomes from my attempt at explaining Bonnie’s handwriting. The “nununu” script of Bonnie, which to me sounded like a weeping, or an upside-down (mirror) image of what she actually writes, is instead, according to graphologists, a sign of receptivity (the ‘u’ is read as a chalice), reliability and openness, all attributes which do not correspond at all to the image of Bonnie we are presented in the novel. Yet, in some cases, it may also mean the actual opposite, ‘lack of reliability’ (Moracchini 1983), which constitutes indeed an explanation much more suitable to our perception of the character. No matter where my inaccurate analysis of Bonnie’s writing may lead to (it would certainly improve if I could examine her papers), its symbolical significance is nonetheless strong. Here again, by playing with overlapping and intertwining meanings, and with the meaning of meanings itself, Gallant enriches with further implications the

idea that form and content never univocally correspond: this is true at the level of words (in the association signified-signifier), and is confirmed at any other level, including the ‘metamesic’ or ‘paramesic’<sup>55</sup> suggestion of the writing’s ‘form’<sup>56</sup>.

The character-roles Bonnie plays (with their matching outfits and associated behaviours), correspond to self-imposed models. In general, they are replicas of her past selves, rehearsed with the intent of bringing her back to previous, happy moments of her life. Happy moments seem to have come to an end when “her husband had caught her out in a surpassingly silly affair [...] and had divorced her, so that her conception of herself was fragmented, unreconciled” (28). Because her husband’s new lover is much younger than her, Bonnie’s jealousy and her related near obsession with the first signs of ageing (are they really the first?)<sup>57</sup> are somehow understandable. Yet, her attempts at turning into a little girl are not always to be read accordingly. On the one hand, the woman’s private game is ascribable to her desire to free herself from parental responsibilities, which she has been left to deal with alone<sup>58</sup>; on the other hand, Bonnie’s anti-ageing mental journey seems an attempt to superimpose herself on her daughter. As Keefer has stated, “Bonnie shoulders the responsibility of ‘homemaker’, the ‘stage business’ of trying to create an ‘attractive atmosphere for them all’ [...] while both floor and ceiling of their world crack open” (1989: 143). Her attitude is approved by Bob, whose conventional education harmonizes with the representation of family put on stage by Bonnie, though the man cannot discard his desire to have it played by his own wife, rather than by her surrogate. At any rate, he should have foreseen the future substitution from his first encounter with Bonnie in Cannes: when Bonnie comes to Bob Harris’s room to meet the young man for the first time, the overlapping of mother and daughter, or, better said, of mother *over* daughter, does not need to be explained any further:

She came with Flor one afternoon, both dressed in white, white skirts like lampshades, Bonnie on waves of ‘Femme’. He saw for the first time that the two were alike and perhaps inseparable; they had a private and casual way of speaking and laughed at the same things. It was like seeing a college friend in his own background, set against his parents, his sisters, his mother’s taste in books (130).

In the wide selection of Bonnie's clothes presented in the novel, her final gear in the story, which she wears at the restaurant with her son-in-law Bob Harris and her nephew George, is certainly the most bizarre of her outfits:

Aunt Bonnie was pushing herself into a bolero of monkey fur [...]. Poor Aunt Bonnie had put herself in a costume so grotesque that anything she had to say was dimmed. Her clothes must have come out of a trunk: they smelled of camphor and the dark – the fur, the sagging dress of black chiffon, the ropes of amber and jet, her pointed satin shoes, the purse with its chain handle and amber clasp. [...] She got up and scraped together her scarf, purse, fan, gloves and tottered toward the door. She walked like a crone: she seemed to have made up her mind to be old and tactless, and dress like the Mad Woman of Chaillot (155, 158 and 163).

The whole dinner is a performance, in which Bonnie and Bob Harris play the part of “stricken people in mock mourning” (162)<sup>59</sup>, and the ‘death’ of Flor is signified by Bob's wearing two rings, as when one partner really dies (157). External signs of bereavement are more evident in the young man's behaviour and outfit. He is wearing “dark clothes” that make him look “older than his age” (157) and laying in a pose resembling Rodin's “The Thinker”<sup>60</sup>. Bonnie's feelings, instead, are contested by the narrator (who is speaking from George's point of view), for her unusual appetite apparently contradicts her declaration of sorrow: “in spite of her grief she had eaten melon, chicken, salad, cheese, and ice cream” (159). But further elements suggest that Bonnie's pain is genuine, and the woman's way to manifest her feelings is verbal and behavioural confusion. Contradictory statements in words correspond to equally contradicting behaviours and poses, and are exacerbated by her incongruous attire.

If so far I have investigated the relationship between verbal and non verbal statements, I shall now to look at a character in GWGS for whom this analysis is almost impossible. From a certain point on, Flor McCarthy ceases to speak, therefore she interrupts any form of verbal communication. As one of the symptoms of schizophrenia, language is abandoning her progressively<sup>61</sup>: the girl is going towards “a semiotic silence to represent both [her] absence and her silent cry” (Smythe 1992: 51). In her progressive going ashore and final drowning into

‘water’, clothes initially represent her last attempt to survive, giving to colours the task to keep her visible, to ‘state’ her presence in the world:

It was possible that she had become invisible. It would not have astonished her at all. Indeed, a fear that this might come about had caused her to buy, that summer, wide-skirted dresses in brilliant tones that (Bonnie said) made her look like a fortuneteller in a restaurant. All very well for Bonnie, who could be sure that she existed in black; who did not have to steal glimpses of herself in shop windows, an existence asserted in coral and red (32)<sup>62</sup>.

Doris, who was “trying to bring order through speech” (86), has failed, and has therefore been locked out the apartment<sup>63</sup>. Flor, who had already decreased her partaking in the world while in contact with other people, when alone gives up completely: her a-logic phase corresponds to disappearance from any other form of self-declaration; however, she is not completely silent yet. Again, she leaves to clothes the last ‘discourse’ she wants to ‘pronounce’: in the process of regression, which corresponds to her mental journey in the past, Flor enters her mother’s room, confused, almost in trance. She begins to ‘write her discourse’, which she elaborates by sewing:

She had to finish sewing a dress. She became brisk and busy and decided to make one dress of two, fastening the bodice of one to the skirt of the other. For two days she sewed this dress and in one took it apart. She unpicked it stitch by stitch and left the pieces on the floor. She was quite happy, humming, remembering the names of songs. She wandered into Bonnie’s room. The mothproof closet was open, as she had left it. She took down a heavy brocaded cocktail dress and with Bonnie’s nail scissors begun picking the seams apart. There was a snowdrift of threads on the parquet. The carpet had been taken away. When she went back to bed, she could sleep, but she was sleeping fitfully. There were no dreams (93-94).

The only self-image that Flor recognized so far was the one ‘sewed’ to her mother, whom she was tied to through “an unnatural, destructive bond” (Besner 1988: 50). A dismantling of such identity, reinforced by the final destruction of her mother’s “heavy brocaded cocktail dress”, creates “*quite* happy” moments in which she is “remembering the name of songs”, but creates also a void in dreams

which, according to psychoanalysis, happens when a child is in its mother's womb (Balin 1979: 49). It so seems that detachment from Bonnie is not complete yet, or, as Flor sees it, "the ruin was incomplete" (95)<sup>64</sup>. However, Flor's utterances are, for once, clear: the girl, no more 'sewed' to anyone, is ready to let herself go ashore, and drown in her desired dreams, an image evoked by the "snowdrift of threads on the parquet [where] the carpet had been taken away".

Refusal of the maternal identity passes through clothing also in AFGT, where the maternal figures are more than one: whereas in GWGS, a story which counts less *dramatis personae*, the relationship mother-daughter is a one-to-one situation, in AFGT the maternal identity undergoes fragmentation, and next to Mrs. Norrington, Shirley's natural mother, other women interact with the girl, exhibiting (doubtful) parental 'qualities'. In particular, maternal duties fall on Mrs. Cat Castle, emanation of Mrs. Norrington and her emissary in Europe, and on Mrs. Higgins, Shirley's first mother-in-law, who turns out to be the only person who behaves like an affectionate mother to Shirley. In this light, it is not by chance that the refusal of the maternal figure which occurs through the opposition to her aesthetic image (therefore primarily to her garments) does not apply to the case of Mrs. Higgins, who, on the contrary, is the only example that Shirley tries to emulate. The narrator describes Shirley looking at "Mrs. Higgins' impeccable dressing case" (238), and at the woman

poised and prepared in her linen coat, with her large handbag, and her cosmetics and airsickness tablets in her dressing case, and her diamond maple leaf so she wouldn't be mistaken for American, and [...] pale gloves lay[ing] folded over the clasp of the dressing case (239).

Spurred to try to be like her, Shirley dresses at her best, wearing "gloves, stockings, shoes", and though she "was not as elegant as Mrs. Higgins, [she] was not a source of embarrassment either" (239). In the light of Shirley's usual disregard for clothes, the result accounts for a big effort. Mrs. Higgins is a reassuring and welcoming figure, whose aspect perfectly matches with her verbal message: "you have a home with us. You mustn't forget" (241), is the sentence

she pronounces after her son's death. Her actions are coherent with every language she speaks: when she dies, she leaves Shirley a legacy, so that the girl has not to struggle with money, something she would not be able to do (in line with her natural mother). Due to the latter's inability to deal with money, which is a problem in common with Bonnie McCarthy, mother and daughter had to move when Mr. Norrington died: "economy had sent them – mother and daughter – to a house warmed by two Quebec heaters, one upstairs and one down" (104). The image of a cold place visually evokes the distance between the women, which is personal and cultural from the beginning, but which becomes also physical when Shirley moves to Europe. Nevertheless, the influence of Mrs. Norrington on her daughter is huge: Shirley's perception of her body, her constant feeling that she is inadequate or not beautiful enough, and even her tendency to put herself in continuous comparison with other women (a comparison which she loses every time), derives from the overwhelming personality of her mother, which compromised Shirley's self-esteem when she was very young. Looking for a theoretical confirmation of the reaction to eccentric mothers' outfits, we do not need to go any further than the novel itself. It is Shirley who offers here a sample of her essayistic capabilities:

In time Shirley discovered that no woman ever liked the way she had been forced to dress as a child, and that each was inclined to trace her fears and anomalies of feeling back to the fact that she once had not looked like other people; but what had become of the girls who *were* those other people? [...] Perhaps they had died of sameness before reaching maturity (102).

Through the generalization illustrated in the quote, Gallant claims that the one between mother and daughter is, in general and not only in these two cases, an impossible dialogue. What she also stresses here is a more complex discourse on the relationship between individuals and the society they live in, in terms of identification, representation and even standardization. Pointing at "sameness" as a mortal disease, she makes the discourse shift, as she is often prone to do, from local to general, from the story to *history*. Indeed, opposite to Shirley, who is not in the least interested in socio-political events, her mother politicizes everything,

and though she shows surprise in being called 'a socialist' by the Higginses, as atypical 'a socialist' she might be, she is nonetheless undoubtedly involved in politics:

In a society where eccentricity was not encouraged, she had acted out her beliefs; native of a country that welcomed neither passion nor poetry, she was shown to be naturally endowed for both, but she had somehow made her daughter suspicious of both (98).

Specifically relating to clothing, Mrs. Norrington

would buy anything if the seller were poor enough. She became the protector of a family of Bulgarians who painted flowers in oil paints all over rough linen. Material thus decorated was eminently useless, but that did not prevent Mrs. Norrington's buying yards and yards of it and having it made up in frocks. Her long figure encased in a linen tube, a support for clambering roses, once seen could not have been imagined otherwise. No one laughed. Her appearance was always inevitable. And she was at peace, because she had rewarded the Bortoloffs for having spent their time around the kitchen table employed in producing something preposterous (100).

But the woman's behaviour has serious consequences on Shirley:

The difference between Shirley and her mother was that while Mrs. Norrington did not see how other people were or guessed that her own appearance was in any way unusual, Shirley longed to dissolve in a crowd but did not know how to go about it. The same climbing roses that had been lent distinction by the very person of Mrs. Norrington had turned the child into a freak, and she grew up with the idea that this could never change (101-102).

A desire to disappear at the same unites and divides time Flor and Shirley, with the first initially struggling to survive in images and then deciding to let herself vanish, and the latter counterpointing her desire to remain physically unnoticed with an excess in verbal presence, a wordiness of words. Shirley's outfit, which she perceives as inadequate most of the time, *is* indeed such, with the only exception of her uniform from the department store where she works on and

off. A sober suit which she is supposed to wear at work only, her uniform becomes instead a life-uniform, and even when she is fired just because she wore the suit outside the department store, she leaves the place with the uniform still on, and goes to James's party in the same clothes. Whereas in cases like Cissy's in "Autumn Day" wearing a uniform expresses the undisclosed desire to stick to rules and feel reassured by them, in Shirley's case her uniform is only a ready-to-wear solution, an undemanding option meant to quickly sort out the problem of putting something on, anything rather than something in particular. This is a problem not because Shirley is not interested in looking good, but mainly because "more than half the garments she owned were useless because some part of them had gone astray" (210). The description of Shirley's clothes generally focuses on hanging threads, broken clasps, missing buttons, recalling Doris Fisher's shabby outfits in *GWGS*. The following excerpt contains, for instance, the image of Shirley described in the Sunday morning following "THE SATURDAY"<sup>65</sup> of Philippe's abandonment:

She sat in the bedroom with a letter in her hand, still dressed for a Saturday party in black chiffon that some ill-intentioned woman friend had urged her to buy. Over the dress was a Burberry with a button gone and a long thread dangling. A handbag, green velvet, a present from her husband's sister, lay on the counterpane spilling cigarettes. Wrenching it open just now to hung for her glasses she had broken the clasp (10-11).

In line with a vocation for theories that Shirley develops almost surprisingly (one would expect Philippe to be the theoretician in the house), the young woman is capable of elaborating complex thoughts about love (which include her complaining for the lack of French word for 'like', 169), relationships (interesting is her theory on the "Menstruation Mystique", 131-132) and several other topics, all of which would be worth considering. When she finds "a green silk dress with seven tiny buttonholes at the back of the neck" and realizes that "five of the buttons were missing", Shirley comments:

Buttons would have to be specially made. Somewhere in Paris existed a shop where they would match the silk – perhaps take a sliver from the hem. Would it not be simpler to give the dress away to Renata, thus transferring the problem? No, she remembered; the errand is everything. If I conquer the errand I subdue life. I shall take a bus or a taxi to this shop after finding out where it is, if such shop exists. In the meantime, the dress will be hanging in a non-season, between summer and winter clothes. One day the shop will ring me and say the buttons are ready. I shall cross Paris once again and collect the buttons and sew them on, providing I have found thread same shade of green. That is what growing older is about; that is what the movement of time means. My mother is a button-matcher; so is Mrs. Castle, so are Rose, Renata, Papa and Madame Maurel, certainly Marie-Thérèse. [...] Everybody except Claudie and me, and Claudie thinks I am. She wants to be like me, I wanted to be like Philippe, and Claudie would like to be me (210).

The ‘theory of buttons’, whose relevance goes far beyond clothing, and which elaborates on life, relationships and identification, is interesting at different levels, not least because in the image of “the dress [...] hanging in a non-season, between summer and winter clothes” one can easily recognize another metaphor of ‘transit’, or perhaps the identification of Shirley herself<sup>66</sup>. When she lists all the “button-matcher[s]” she knows, excluding herself and Claudie (who is partly identifying with her), Shirley realizes that she speaks a different language from every person she knows: it is not only English opposed to French in the context where she lives, which causes continuous misunderstanding with her husband and the difficulty to say exactly what she means every time. It is also the language of disorder opposed to the language of tidiness; it is the language of love opposed to the language of power; it is the language of altruism opposed to the language of selfishness, and several others. Or, even more simply, it is a proper discourse, but spoken to ‘the deaf’, like an unmatching button sewed to the wrong garment, or – worse – left unsewed. In a world where “the errand is everything”, Shirley keeps accomplishing every errand in her mind, but in her mind only, and once it has been done cerebrally (as Keefer suggested), it is done to her, and she even forgets what the errand was.

#### 4. Biting words and a few leftovers<sup>67</sup>

In GWGS, Gallant makes Bonnie explicitly utter the very well-known formula “you are what you eat”<sup>68</sup>, which is often used as an introductory statement in discourses on the role of food in linguistic, anthropological, sociological, and cultural studies. As typical of Gallant’s approach, the focus of the narrator shifts, soon after having Bonnie pronounce this sentence, from its literal meaning (in this case already a metaphoric one) to its related ironic implications: Bonnie optimistically foresees her daughter improving day by day thanks to “friendship, rest, good food, relaxing books” (60). All this would have as a result that “in the autumn, Flor would be a different girl” (60). Flor is indeed transformed, but in contrast with Bonnie’s statement and expectations, the girl is ready to be confined to mental hospital, and her transformation is irreversible (see the final ‘mourning’). Considering that, as Bonnie suggested, “diet was of great importance in mental equilibrium”, she should have followed Sarah Holmes’s example (“In the Tunnel”) and have left her daughter a crammed fridge. Instead, Doris, who was supposed to assist Flor, kept “open[ing] cans of soup and she never washed the saucepan or the cups” (87). If “you are what you eat” (60), then Doris certainly contributes to make Flor become ‘watery’. Not bringing nor cooking fresh food and leaving everything piled up by the sink, pan and cups, dirty and disordered, she does not help Flor’s recovery; conversely, she creates an atmosphere which the narrator compares to the Mad Tea Party<sup>69</sup>:

She came every day. She opened cans of soup in the kitchen and she never washed the saucepan or the cups. She took clean dishes from the cupboard each time, and it was like the Mad Tea Party; although even there, eventually, it must have become impossible to move along. The dishes here would finally reach an end too, and she would have to do something—go home, or follow her husband, whether he wanted her around or not, or stay here and wash cups. Flor was not making the division between days and nights clearly, but she knew that Doris came most frequently in the afternoon (87-88).

We cannot claim Doris to be at first sight similar to the Mad Hatter<sup>70</sup>, especially because, as we have noticed, she attempts to “bring order through speech” (86), while the Hatter is the representation of verbal disorder, with his

unanswered riddles and seemingly inconsistent and meaningless talks<sup>71</sup>. Yet Gallant keeps whispering at Carroll's text, having the woman "c[o]me most frequently in the afternoon", and, before Bonnie's departure, "for the few days that remained, she had tea every day in Bonnie's bedroom" (68). Also and foremost, her choice to put the sleeping pills – Flor's only essential 'nourishment' – into the box labelled "Recipes" (99) could sound like one of the Hatter's jokes and, as unaware as it might have been in the case of Doris, it is significant in symbolic terms: before her departure, she gives the pills back "almost gratuitously" (Keefer 1989: 143), thus leaving the girl potentially in danger, but she slips a letter under the door in which she offers Flor her 'life recipes': Flor interprets them in the only language she now knows, the language of dreams. The first suggestion is about relationships: "everybody makes someone else pay for something" (100), a notion crucial to the novel, as it helps understand the nature of several bonds between the characters, and refers both to money and to symbolic payments<sup>72</sup>. The second one is about 'home': she declares that she has made up her mind and she is going back home. Though Flor has no 'home' to go back to, she finally manages to take refuge in the one that she has made up in her dreams; in some way, though only metaphorically, she parallels Doris's behaviour, thus following her 'recipe'.

Gallant's fiction presents a wide range of homeless scenarios. Unlike Doris (who remarks that she is "not going *away* but going *home*", 99), Flor and Shirley both struggle to find a 'home'. In neither cases it is primarily a matter of physical place (though Shirley's apartment is a subject matter in itself in AFGT). Instead, the two girls share a desire to *feel* at home, and associate the feeling not so much to a place as to a person. 'Invited' by Madame Roux to go back to Canada, because in her opinion she has been "too long away from home", Shirley replies:

I can't just go home, as you say. I'm too old. I'm going to be twenty-seven. You don't go home at that age, not where I come from. Besides, it's not my home anymore. I live *here*. I have a house and furniture and... and a husband and all that. I'm not a tourist. I'm not somebody who keeps moving on. I'm somebody's wife (199)<sup>73</sup>.

Flor relies on Bob, and she thinks she can call him ‘her home’:

Lacking an emotional country, it might be possible to consider another person one’s home. She pressed her face against his unmoving arm, accepting everything imperfect, as one accepts a faulty but beloved country, or the language in which one thought’s are formed. It was the most dangerous of ideas, this ‘only you can save me’, but her need to think it was so overwhelming that she wondered if this was what men, in the past, had been trying to say when they had talked about love (133).

The “only you can save me” idea, which Flor will not put into practice because of Bob’s inability to support her other than economically, is something which also Shirley relies upon. When Philippe, during their first date, asks her “who’s responsible for you?”, she thinks that it is her destiny to be saved, and once more ‘translates’ herself into a fictional character, this time the protagonist of Girardoux’s novel *Suzanne et le Pacifique*, “a shipwrecked girl – another Shirley” (180). “‘*J’étais sauvée*’, said the girl simply” (180), and Shirley considers: “I have always been saved” (181). But despite her expectation that her husband “buil[t] a house for her, intellectually and sentimentally, and invite[d] her inside, it was her who invited him [in] an apartment where there was plenty of space but no room for anyone but Shirley” (50), and where the “box room” Philippe arranged to organize separated working spaces functions as the symbol of their neat division and lack of communication:

Between the two desks shelves climbed to the ceiling. A pair of neon strips hummed, flickered and spread their bilious light on stacks of *Le Miroir*, the fortnightly review that employed him, on coffee mugs filled with pens and pencils, over twin typewriters tucked up in plastic blankets made by Philippe’s mother, upon a temperance poster Shirley had stolen out of the Métro. For what was so humorous about a fragile child and his plea of FATHER DO NOT DRINK! THINK OF ME! When you consider that France had the highest number of alcoholics in western Europe and the greatest number of deaths resulting from drink? Philippe had written a series of three articles on infantile drunkenness in Normandy called “The Children of Calvados: A Silent Cry” (13).

The name “box room” is the result of “a hangover from English novels about little boys growing up and going to Cambridge” (13). It “sounded comic to

Shirley”, but Philippe “accepted [it] as one more of the Anglo-Saxon mysteries. Accepted only, which was not what she had intended; for it was like saying ‘We are sharing an apple because I have cut it in half’” (13). Shirley and Philippe’s ways of reading the poster are incompatible because they analyse it at different levels: while Shirley concentrates on the episode, Philippe looks for the explanation of the sign, which makes Shirley come to the conclusion that “it was impossible to talk to a man who took everything literally” (83).

If ‘recipes’ are considered in their non-culinary, therefore metaphoric, meaning of ‘life instructions’, Gallant’s novels, especially AFGT, are no doubt ‘cook books’. But even if we keep hold on its denotative meaning, food appears frequently in both texts. In particular, interest falls on the scenes of meals, which, compared, offer interesting elements for an analysis of the different characters, their representation of the self and their interaction with others. If, borrowing Mary Douglas’s words, “food categories encode social events” (1972: 36), at the same time social events connected with food can be employed to *decode* the interactions among diners.

In GWGS, when the narrator describes characters sitting at the dinner table, accent primarily falls on their behaviour, and only at a second glance can we recognize what is in their plates. People are portrayed in what is, each time, a regulated social performance. Examples include lunches at the Harrises, especially when Doris is disappointed with the menu – which, rather than a reminder of her meals at home, is an example of what she dismissively describes as “the diet of a later bohemia” composed of “spaghetti with wine” (53) – and when Bonnie, “combed, made up, corseted, prepared for a thousand eyes” (45), struggles (?) to replace her absent daughter, behaving according to what she deems one of her social duties. In each situation in which Flor is physically present, she is silent and eats “next to nothing” (53); she merely – and unhealthy – feeds herself when she realizes that she is losing too much weight (a perception she gets through her loose clothes)<sup>74</sup>: when left on her own in Paris, the description of an apocalyptic apartment with dying plants (94) perfectly matches with the unhealthy food she has been left to eat, only crumbs, open boxes and tins: the wreckage of a past life.

When she opens “a tin of mushrooms” (watery food again) and eats them “with her fingers” (88), we are reminded again of the magical food of Alice, but no transformation happens in this story, if not in dreams or in front of her mother’s mirror, which is, in the end, quite similar to what happened to Alice<sup>75</sup>. But whereas Carroll’s Alice inspects what is beyond the mirror, Flor does not want to look at her image, as if being reflected equalled being “witnessed” (92). According to Smythe, who draws on Lacan’s simplified version of ‘mirror stage’ theory,

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; 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 (1992: 52).

This “some other person watching and witnessing her” of whom Smythe speaks is indeed Bonnie, whose vision has just ‘spoken’ to her daughter’s confused mind (91). GWGS certainly makes a wide use of mirrors, both as physical objects and as symbolic reflections (Bonnie’s tripartite mirror in front of her dressing table, Wishart as mirror of Bonnie, water mirroring sky, *et alia*). AFGT also contains several situations which revolve around mirrors. In particular, a significant, only seemingly hilarious episode is certainly the accident in the restaurant where Shirley, after a few drinks with Claudie and her new boyfriend (whom she nicknames Marcel Proust)<sup>76</sup>, is deceived by the sight of “someone familiar”:

Just then she saw someone she knew. Shirley’s friend, a young woman wearing a belted raincoat, recognized her in the same instant and moved towards her. Shirley could not see her face – the other person was still across the room. She could distinguish nothing except the outline of someone familiar. It was not Mrs. Castle but someone much as Mrs. Castle must have been like when she married Ernie so as to get off the prairies. She was flooded with happiness, with relief, at seeing a person who knew her, who would not make mistakes with her name or ask for more than she could give. She walked toward the woman from home, unable to remember her old friend’s name, but confident it would come back to her during the first words of conversation. The friend was tactful and kind. Their identities would be established at once. [...] The woman smiled, as sure of Shirley as Shirley was of

her. Claudie's hand, which she violently tried to shrug away, prevented Shirley from walking into a large mirror (204).

Distracted as she always is, Shirley forgets her glasses, an omission that usually does not occur to people who, like her, really need them to see clearly. Most of the time, she wears her graduated sun glasses, dark lenses during evening events which provoke people's curiosity and spur their questions. Other times, she does not even wear them: therefore her perception of reality is blurred, out of focus, as much as it is her understanding of the world and of people's behaviour ('seeing' is thus considered in its double meaning of sight and comprehension). Not by chance, it was Philippe who compelled the girl to buy glasses, who gave her the opportunity to 'see'; however, in the text the double meaning 'sight-comprehension' is turned upside down, suggesting that Shirley could 'see' things much clearly when she lived with Pete, myopic like her.

In one other case, the woman interrogates her reflection, like a modern Snow White, in the "pretty gilt-framed mirror in the hall: Am I all right? she asked the mirror. Am I fit to be seen? Her face bore an unexpected resemblance to her mother's" (262). While in the first case Shirley involuntarily realizes that she can be the only friend of herself, in this second case her image manifests an undesired identification with her mother, an identification which is described as developing, considering that when she will speak to Monsieur Maurel for the last time (later in the story), the man will confront 'Mrs. Norrington' rather than Shirley (291). It is ultimately clear that both novels describe a process of identification of the two daughters with their mothers which is explicitly refused by the former, but which seems nonetheless, in both cases, inescapable. Such process works similarly in the two cases, through the superimposition of the physical image of Bonnie and Mrs. Norrington over Flor and Shirley, when they look themselves in the mirror.

Going back to our main concern here, in AFGT social situations connected with food are much more frequent than in GWGS. Even when they are not experienced directly, but just imagined (the Sunday lunch at the Perrignys) or

recalled (the Alsatians' gluttony and overeating evoked by Marie-Thérèse, Claudie's sister), the narrator describes the content of meals in full detail. "Any culinary system is attached to, or part of, a world view, a cosmogony", claims Fischler quoting Mary Douglas on food and culture. He adds "man eats, so to speak, within a culture, and this culture orders the world in a way that is specific to itself" (1988: 284). In critical scenarios, the link between food and identity is often based on ethnic parameters, with either the desire to show a certain culture's identity through its food (its preparation, the ritual of meals), or the aim to highlight cultural differences (this is especially insisted in stories such as "The Picnic" and "In the Tunnel"): if so, Shirley cooking what Philippe repute "an outlandish Scandinavian meal" (30) when she first invites her mother- and sister-in-law for dinner certainly matches with the girl's lack of any cultural awareness, which she is accused of by Canadian-conscious Cat Castle. In the story of Shirley and Philippe, national identity and cultural clashes are subdued to Philippe's stereotypical prejudices and Shirley's lack of clear cultural conscience. In some way, neither Shirley nor Philippe are completely aware of 'speaking' Canadian versus French, though they do it most of the time. Besides, though we can certainly affirm that Shirley is culturally very distant from Philippe, is she 'culturally conscious' or 'consciously Canadian'? If we draw from Sturgess, Shirley's dialogue with her mother is also and foremost a dialogue with her *motherland* (1993). If we rely on Philippe, on the contrary, we would probably not even find out what Shirley's motherland is: the man, who does not even understand the difference between American and North American, when told that Shirley is Canadian, comments: "Then *you* are French" (267). Simplifying, Shirley and Philippe's very distant cultures are deeply rooted in them, and their lack of communication reflects their cultural diversity and at the same time derives from it, but does not guide it. Other characters are definitely more culture-conscious than the couple. To quote but a few examples, Shirley's reference to "we [...] Americans" provokes Cat Castle's susceptible reaction: "I'm not American. To the best of my knowledge you weren't born one. If you're going to be that way, forgetting your heritage, I don't want to hear any more" (36). Mrs. Higgins displays a finer, though not less clear sign of national identification through "her diamond maple leaf" that avoids her being "mistaken for American".

Unlike her, Shirley's parents, though "eccentric, unconformable, entirely peculiar by Canadian standards, [...] had never doubted themselves or questioned their origins or denied the rightness of their own conduct; they could be judged but never displaced" (65). Conversely, she sees herself only as "a refugee" (65).

It seems that the culinary context is treated as a privileged scenario to make cultural distance emerge clearly: when he witnesses his wife's inability to host his demanding mother and sister, Philippe considers that he has to "beg[i]n her education". He ponders to find himself in short time sitting "at the head of the table and watch[ing] the passing round of the approved anaemic veal and the harmless sugary peas" and commenting: "My wife is North American, but I taught her about food" (31)<sup>77</sup>. Projecting himself forward in time in an approved social context, which is approved also because his mother-inspired food is served, Philippe does not say anything about teaching his wife 'how to cook'. He uses the expression "about food", meaning a more general education, including what food is about, and, by extension, what life itself is about. By contrast, he claims that North Americans do not know anything about both, a belief which he shares with his narrow minded friends, in whose company Shirley

had been daunted by the wave of hostility that rose to greet the stranger in Paris. 'We wanted to give you beans and jam for dinner to make you feel at home, but my wife refuses to do American cooking' – that was how Hervé, Philippe's best friend, had welcomed her (181).

As a matter of fact, the only 'social situation' that Philippe offers to Shirley is not an approved one; it is not even approved by Shirley, who is usually unpretentious: during a lunch at Hervé's place (Philippe's mate in the Algerian war, a man much distant in social status but close to Philippe because "you know something you will never say", 247), Shirley and Philippe are offered "canned sardines (to you and to Hervé and his wife, a delicacy; to me, a food of the unemployed), and then steaks, and chips out of a cellophane packet". Finishing the meal with a mousse, "what my mother calls 'store pudding' [out of] the small plastic cups" (247), Hervé's wife shows her incapability to prepare any meal, not

only the American stereotypical food that was listed in Hervé's impolite remark. But in Philippe's opinion no meal can be worse than the first one at Shirley's: the dinner is a disaster from the very beginning because the Perrigny arrive twenty-five minutes earlier and Shirley, unable to prearrange anything, is not ready. To describe the untidy house, Gallant employs her widely used 'indirect technique': in those very twenty-five minutes, Shirley "would have made her bed, emptied the ashtrays and cleared the living room of its habitual scruff of scarves, newspapers, coat hangers, rainboots and dying flowers". Instead, "she was barefoot, dressed in a towel bathrobe she held shut with her left hand" (29). A comic interaction of bad food and bad manners, as its 'prologue' foreshadows, the meal is consumed suspiciously by the two Perrignys, who conceive any food as poisonous and potentially lethal. The choice for a meal is not determined by the taste of each dish, but by how much it may harm or deteriorate their internal organs. As in the case of Paula Marshall in "The Picnic", yet for different reasons, they avoid any unknown food, sticking to tasteless – in their opinion less dangerous – broth. The measure to judge food is condensed in a question that "the Mother" asks "the Daughter": "What is there on that dish that could harm us?". Peremptorily, her daughter replies: "Everything" (30). The vocabulary used to describe the meal refers, as often in connection with eating, to disease and pain, rather than to pleasures deriving from taste and food (28-29). It is not so much a matter of suspecting unknown or foreign food. In the case of the two women, it is food in general that makes them suspicious. The imagined lunch at the Perrigny, a chef-d'oeuvre in Gallant's ironic samples, is worth quoting in this respect:

They would wait for Shirley and then [...] begin with Colette's favourite hors d'oeuvres of egg in aspic. 'This is the worse thing I could be giving my liver', Colette would remark, mopping up the yolk with a bit of bread. They would eat sparingly the veal, for meat created cancer in Madame Perrigny's anxious universe. Much of the conversation [...] would centre on the danger of food, of eating in restaurants, of eating anywhere but here, and finally of what even this luncheon would cost in terms of languor, migraine, cramps, insomnia and digestive remorse. Philippe's mother cooked well, but only because she could not cook badly: she did not know how it was done. Yet the fact of eating alarmed her. Peristalsis was an enemy she had never mastered. Her intestines were of almost historical importance: soothed with bismuth, restored with charcoal, they were still as nothing to her stomach in which four-course meals remained for days, undigested, turning over and over like clothes forgotten in a tumble dryer. Colette sympathized with her mother's afflictions, often shared them, and added to them one of her own – a restless liver. If Colette's quiescent liver were suddenly roused by an egg, an ounce of chocolate, a glass of wine, or

even one dry biscuit too many, it stretched, doubled in size, and attempted to force its way out through her skin (28-29).

Though Madame Perrigny's aversion is not to cooking, but is limited to eating, her conception of food (even her own) as poisonous, shared by her daughter-replica Colette (a name reminding, with not much imagination, of the French 'colite', en. 'colitis') refers in particular to anything coming from outside. When Shirley comes to see Philippe and brings "a bottle of champagne, which they had often agreed to be a cure for everything" (119), his mother shuts her out. Philippe, in his mother's place with the excuse that he suffers from hepatitis, has been somehow 'raped' by the two women, who keep him from communicating with his wife, meanwhile 'depurating' him physically and emotionally from her influence. To Shirley's remark "It is only champagne!" Madame Perrigny replies: "It would finish him off" (121), reinforcing the lethal quality of anything that passes through the mouth and, by analogy, the house. As Fischler points out,

the mouth is often seen in our representations as the gateway of the organism, an orifice opening onto the inner depths of the body, the viscera. In fact, it functions much more like a safety chamber [...] the guardian of the organism. Food passes through it and is transformed in it, but is also examined and analysed in every respect before being allowed to cross the crucial threshold of swallowing and literally of in-corporation, i.e. the complex biological and psychological process of integrating nutritional matter into the self (1988: 282).

By stopping Shirley at the door, Madame Perrigny stresses the correspondence between their bodies and their home, where they live shut in, shutters down, and reject any incursion from outside (see previous quote, 31), be it on the phone (i.e. Shirley's failed attempts to speak to Philippe) or in person. As a matter of fact, "what Shirley", smelling the apartment from the front door, "had at first taken for curry", is instead "disinfectant" (122), so that "behind the barrier, steadily inhaling disinfectant, Philippe, safe from fresh air, listened to his mother dismissing his wife" (121). Through food and aseptic contact, a Madame Perrigny "in perpetual mourning for the living" (121)<sup>78</sup> has managed to recreate her past family, having both her grown children back at home, and keeping them safely out

of any dangerous external contact. She even speaks and acts for them: as a matter of fact, Philippe left his wife silently, and it is his mother who actually declares that her son's relationship with Shirley is over. When Shirley asks if her husband needs "anything from home", her mother-in-law replies: "'He is home' [...] and shut the door" (122).

The description of the woman's behaviour suggests that Madame Perrigny suffers from a form of OCD and she is a control freak; the woman is in 'good company' in a world, as the fictional universe of Gallant is, populated by people who suffer from any sort of mental disorder. Flor, the declared schizophrenic, treated medically by doctor Linetti, is only the most full-blown case; a survey of several other characters confirms the high number of neuroses, mental disorders and pathological situations, to detect which there is no need of expert eye. Bonnie and Mrs. Norrington are, with little doubt, varieties of narcissistic personalities, whose symptoms bear out visible consequences in their daughters, being partly responsible for their mental instability. Also Philippe, with his morbid devotion to his mother – a form of Oedipus complex – is nonetheless caught in between her adoration and rejection: while he states that "he recalled the delicious meals of his childhood", he also remembers "how he and Colette had been cautioned and made afraid of eating; he and Colette imagined their own stomachs awash with queer acids, poisonous and green" (155-156). When the recollection of his childhood goes further, Philippe speaks of "Thursday afternoons with Colette in a gravely little square, marooned by streets he and his sister were not allowed to cross. They had played without toys and without getting dust on their clothes" (156). And though he admits that he "was brought up to think far too much about food" and that "a long drive in the country that has no point to it but a long, slow meal is my idea of hell" (272), by his words Shirley cannot decide if his were "sad or happy memories" (156), and supposes that he would probably fight with his sister "like wildcats for everything in the place, even the useless can opener, each of them wanting to own their common past" (121)<sup>79</sup>. What is clear to the woman, at any rate, is that "he *did* love me [...] and he wanted someone unlike his mother. But in the end he wanted someone like her too. Anyway, not like me" (283).

In both novels, the mixing of linguistic codes involves also a use of metaphoric expressions or similes connected with the non-verbal languages we are concerned about in this thesis: Madame Perrigny's stomach is a drum, and, to Wishart, "boredom [...] was like having a dry biscuit stuffed in one's mouth" (GWGS 114); Doris Fisher "came into [the Harrises'] lives dragging her existence like a wet raincoat" (66) and Shirley's "private dialogues were *furnished* with scraps of prose recited out of context, like the disparate chairs, carpets and lamps adrift in her apartment" (179, italics mine). Examples abound; when we come to the specific reference to food, the act of eating is often used as a metaphor for the experience of life: in Pons, observing Cat Castle, her mother's friend, who has been sent by her children to Europe for a long trip, Shirley "saw the panic of age and the need to eat everything soon" (33). The metaphor of food chosen to encompass the whole experience of life is interesting here also because both the dialogue between the two women and the whole episode centre around food, with Mrs. Castle finally ordering *éclairs*, those with "the thickest and glossiest icing" (33), a double reference to taking the best out of every experience. Behind the curtains of an happy representation, however, Cat Castle's exploration of Europe takes the form of a frenzied ticking of her to-do list. The list is not only metaphorical: it is actually a real note scribbled in Mrs. Castle's notebook, where she writes a few words about each place she visits. The woman plans to "tell [it] into a tape recorder once I get home. I'll put the whole thing on a tape and I'll get my family together and they can spend a Sunday listening and then they'll *have had* it" (33, italics mine). Again, she 'has' the whole experience in a mouthful, so will her relatives<sup>80</sup>: though she is never explicit about it, Mrs. Castle conceives the experience as a punishment, like a bitter pill to swallow, and will pay her family back with their own coin. The English expression reads in Italian as 'rendere pan per focaccia' ('to give bread for cake', or maybe 'to get a cake and give bread back')<sup>81</sup>, which would certainly be more appropriate in the context of our culinary discourse. Once more, this example turns our attention to translation, a main concern in Gallant's fictions. The problem of Shirley, who always finds it difficult to communicate because of her incompetence in French, is presented by Gallant with her typical ironic tone, which flourishes in funny episodes like the following:

The waiter put before her a plate holding two slivers of ham and a pickle. Shirley formed a sentence, but she had been daydreaming in English and by the time she remembered the French word for ‘toast’, which was ‘toast’, he had vanished (67)<sup>82</sup>.

But even if she serves it with a comic dressing, Gallant’s concern for translation has often a bitter taste. Shirley’s complaint for her lack of competence in French does not only refer to her lack of comprehension; more often, what she laments is the impossibility to express what she really wants to say, which makes her feel puzzled, quite another person<sup>83</sup>. Yet the employment of another language is not always depriving and limiting of one’s expression: when Renata wakes up after her attempted suicide, Shirley witnesses the dialogue between Renata and her boyfriend Kerel:

She and Kerel started talking French. It’s not their common language; Kerel hardly knows any at all. As for Renata, you once said her French sounded like someone emerging from shock. But, you know, people will swallow any amount of absurdity so long as it’s in another language – any other. Kerel and Renata haven’t invented French, but they’ve invented a way of being together (223).

Shirley’s words seem almost to echo Kristeva’s claim that, “lacking the reins of a maternal tongue, the foreigner who learns a new language is capable of the most unforeseen audacities when using it” (1991: 31). What is interesting here lays beyond the correspondence ‘absurdity-audacities’; it lays in the reinforcement of Shirley’s comment on “another language” as “any language”. Though neither French nor English allow Shirley and Philippe to keep together (they actually contribute to their lack of understanding, since “when Philippe and I talk English he’s at disadvantage, and when it’s French I’m never sure”, 154), the couple, too, have ‘invented a language’. It is an unspoken dialogue composed of gestures, which have precise meanings, uniform and repeated by the ‘speaker’ (Philippe) and perfectly understood by the ‘receiver’ (Shirley). The girl’s complaints on their lack of mutual understanding, therefore, should not be accompanied by a complaint on the lack of communication in general. Philippe’s verbal parsimoniousness is indisputable, but his utterances are nonetheless replaced by the non-verbal messages he disseminates in the house:

When we have a fight he never fights. He just listens and corrects my French sometimes and then he gives me a couple of barb. When I saw them there in a saucer I knew he meant there was no fight, or else the fight was over (35).

The description of the kitchen on Sunday morning provides another good example of their unspoken dialogues:

A salad bowl and two yellowed slivers of chicory pasted to a wooden fork – an ugly bit of evidence about my housekeeping; but I was comfortable in chaos, and he knew it, whereas that unwashed cup left by Philippe seems like a moral slip. [...] She wandered if he had been trying to frighten her and if the lamp left burning, the two sleeping pills, the slum kitchen, were fragments of a final opinion (12-13, 23).

The signs are, in fact, the way Philippe hints at the definitiveness of their break-up. But whereas Shirley is able to understand Philippe's unsaid (like Cissy Rowe with the 'language of marriage'), she is not capable of replying or, when she does, she cannot deliver her messages: in one case, that is when her messages are the result of her intertextual incursions in her husband's papers, she has to tear them apart and cannot deliver them; in the other, that is when she is given the opportunity to 'speak' non-verbally, all that she conveys is the idea that she will not shape herself according to her husband's ideal, therefore every 'sentence' turns into an unspoken argument.

The situation portrayed in the novel shows that, despite the difficulties in understanding a foreign language and its nuances, communication is not a mere matter of translating: knowing the meaning of words (or of their correspondents) does not necessarily allow complete comprehension of their sequences, and even perfect understanding of a language – "any language" – does not prevent break-ups. "I understand every word", says Shirley referring to French, "but do I understand what French means? I might know every word in a sentence and still not add up the meaning" (154). The "uninterrupted dialogue of the deaf" used to describe the relationship Shirley-Mrs. Norrington is, in this case, 'an unspoken monologue *to* the deaf', Shirley, who refuses to 'listen', though she 'hears' and understands perfectly her husband's 'unspoken' messages. The Perrignys' *dia-*

logic problem turns out to be, in Philippe's words, only "a problem in *logic*" (90). In the flow of this reshaping of Gallant's definition, the case of Flor and Bob, who cannot communicate due to the girl's *a-logia* can be described as 'an unheard monologue of the mute'. Though Flor tries to 'speak', she is either unheard or unheeded, or, even worse, there is someone (namely her mother) speaking on her behalf, and usually misrepresenting her thoughts (which she adapts to her ideal image of her daughter).

Finally, it would be worth considering, though only cursorily, the whole subplot of the Maurel family, what Sturgess labels a "family saga" in a "secondary narrative" (1993: 209). The whole incursion of the Maurels into Shirley's life begins in a restaurant in Paris, where Shirley 'rescues' the strange Claudie, insolvent of a Pantagruelic meal with her sister's little dog; single mother of retarded Alain, Claudie, whom her own mother and father (probably the father of his 'grandson') pass off as his sister, is at the same time a victim and a victimizer inside a family trapped in "a web of interlocking neuroses" (Besner 1989: 62). In the light of her predilection for lies and drama, Claudie takes Shirley as a model to imitate, but she only manages to become her bad copy: in Claudie, Shirley sees, mirrored but exacerbated, all the defects and limits of her own persona. Claudie attempts at overlapping her own identity with Shirley's mainly by applying to Shirley her insane habit of stealing other people's sentences and stories. During a conversation with Claudie's sister Marie-Thérèse, Shirley finds out details about the origin of Claudie's recurrent phrases: "when she repeats anything it is not to spread calumnies. No, she repeats true stories, but with Claudie as the principal character" (258). "Papa may be going to die, I think", says the French girl at one point. But, as Shirley says: "It is not your father who is ill. It is my mother" (294).

This considered, the display of different degrees of identification as they appear in the novel could be summarized as follows: the old adage "you are what you eat" and its revised version "you are *where* you eat"<sup>84</sup> apply to characters like Philippe, who traces back his past in the family according to his memories of food (155-156), and finally goes back to his mother's house and French (hospice-like) menu; Shirley's would rather be described as a "you are what you *read*" case, and

Claudie, an ultimate stage, is the representative of the “you eat *who* you read”. Again, expanding from Fischler’s theory of ‘omnivore anxiety’ (1988), we could metaphorically verge on its extended adaptation: a ‘literary cannibalism’. But when Shirley is about to fall in the Maurels’ pan to replace the meagre dishes she is given for lunch, she jumps out the chopping board and breaks the spell of identification<sup>85</sup>. If Claudie can be read, as Besner rightly does, as “a reverse image of one of Shirley’s possible fates” (1988: 62), to Claudie’s final regression Shirley opposes her definitive emancipation from both the Maurels and her former husband. As a matter of fact, the story does not end when Philippe leaves Shirley, which he does at the beginning of the novel and in silence, but when Shirley makes up her mind to leave Philippe (or to accept that he left her), which she does, instead, almost at the end of the story and in written form. Looking back at her half written “four explanations”, what the girl finally writes down other than the table of contents of her imaginary discourse is only one sentence: the therapeutic admission that “I think that Philippe has left me and I know I have lost my job” (251). By putting a date (“End of July 1963”), that is by anchoring the event in real time, Shirley implicitly states that such event is real, rather than happening only in her fictional time-frame<sup>86</sup>. When she declares to Marie-Thérèse that “I know a lot of people but I don’t depend on anyone” (259), she further states her liberation from her ‘addiction’, from being both a rescuee and a rescuer. The relationship between Shirley and Claudie, in fact, was a forced friendship through which Shirley gave validation to the dictate that “he who forms a tie is lost”<sup>87</sup> – or gets lost, as Heyst is taught by his father at the beginning of Conrad’s *Victory*<sup>88</sup>. The bond had become closer only because Shirley had not been able to refuse progressive involvement in the family’s dynamics, in which she was caught by each member separately, “not in spite of her being foreign, but because of it” (162). Shirley covered inside the Maurel’s familial balance a vast range of roles: “First she had been a help, then a curiosity, then finally an intruder” (80), but in the time she became everyone’s confessor and “tutelary saint” (162), so that when she came to visit at the very end of the novel, “they were sorry when Shirley rose to leave” (303).

Shirley also comes to represent, in narrative terms, a sort of pivotal omniscient narrator, who receives everyone's visit and listens to their point of view on the other members of the family and on life in general. The interesting confrontation of the behaviour of each member (isolated from the rest of the family or observed with the other Maurels) includes their relationship with food: it is, for instance, the case of Marie-Thérèse<sup>89</sup> and her husband. To explain her relationship with Gérard, Marie-Thérèse, not used to discuss her private problems with strangers, describes her marriage indirectly, through their different eating habits. The antithetical cultural approach to food accounts for the couple's initial distance. The meals in her husband's family of origin (who are Alsatian) contrast with her own idea of moderate eating. The abundance and bulimic consumption of food disturbs the woman, who is sickened in particular by "the waste" (274). Marie-Thérèse seems to suggest that the couple have overcome their diversity: in particular, she recognizes her husband's effort and praises his devotion to her, which she identifies in his renounce to food, that verbally corresponds to his silence in a family that listens only to one (male) voice: Papa's. However, the man's submission to the Maurels' hierarchy is only apparent, as Shirley will realize when she will find out that Gérard has an affair. On her behalf, also Marie-Thérèse's concern with food has another explanation. It is not determined by her idea of waste, but by the trauma she endured when her mother was pregnant with Claudie, and she was told to feed herself or else die (265). Though Gérard and Marie-Thérèse try to conceal their real motivations through their 'culinary discourses', their marriage is ultimately a failure, as their authentic attitudes towards food clearly show.

The only patriarchal family in the novel, with Papa Maurel, the spoilt patriarch, dismissing Shirley's (actually inexistent) avances, the Maurels are actors in a bourgeois drama, all the more resembling characters of Hugo's *Les Misérables*. Having "been invited to act in a play without having been told the name of it" (179)<sup>90</sup>, Shirley can only replay her part a second time, giving herself "one or two good lines" (179) that her ineptitude in French had not allowed her to find impromptu:

'I have seen how you translate every word before your mind can take it in. We have the worst table in Paris, so it can't be the food that tempts you. Why do you keep coming back? Is it because you want me to make love to you?' 'Probably', she said. 'I have no time for you', he said. 'Not even an hour'. She went on speaking after he had left the room. [...] Let me invent a detail for you – miniature flags waving *langouste en mayonnaise*, a tribute to the mingling of nations. 'I have no time for you'. Imagine having made up a situation just because you had a good exit line. Imagine thinking. Imagine *saying* it! Oh, poor engineer! Poor Papa! (170-171)

The above quote provides a further example of the overlapping of different genres and re-narrations which I have discussed previously; meanwhile, it highlights the linguistic gap between Shirley and the French family. The “mingling of nations” suggested by Shirley is symbolized by a dish, a mixture of lobster, representing Canada, and mayonnaise, which stands for France. Such mixture will never be realized, neither in its sexual version (Shirley and Papa Maurel will never have an affair, though during a party Shirley thinks that “it was now merely a matter of when and where” and the narrator describes them as “slightly hostile lovers”, 182), nor in any cultural or culinary form. However, though only once, the “mingling of nations” is attained: it happens at the party where the Maurels meet James's family. France and Greece encounter on the basis that “the Maurels wanted airing, contact with a livelier universe, while the Mediterranean contingent kept complaining that they never met anyone French” (182). The description of the meal – an idyllic version of ‘the picnic’ – ‘speaks’ for itself as one of Gallant's successful (yet illusory) negotiations of cultural integration:

Warned by Claudie that her family expected the party to replace a meal, Shirley had summoned her Scandinavian caterer, dropped after the disaster with her sister- and mother-in-law. Gérald stationed himself at the table on which cold supper was laid and remained standing there with his mouth full of herring and bread and butter until his wife led him away. As for the rest of the family, unlike the Perrignys, they would try anything new providing they did not have to live with it, pay for it, or be reminded of it too often. The party went well (182).

Integration, which in Gallant's world happens very rarely, usually grows on a wrong basis. The conclusion of the description of the evening discloses the real meaning of success:

The Greeks thought they were better than the Maurels because they were more modern, and at least *looked* richer, while the Maurels knew *they* were superior because they were not foreign. This assumption of consequence made everyone cordial (182),

and represents one of the very few ways Gallant's characters know of having "a fairly good time".

## 5. What's new in the novels then?

Several other things could and perhaps should be discussed here, since Gallant's fictions in general, and these two in particular, are so dense that each rereading brings to light new aspects. Sometimes we are surprised at discovering a detail we had not spotted previously. Only seemingly insignificant, each and every new discovery adds to the meaning of these narratives, meanwhile accounting for Gallant's never accidental inclusion of certain elements, like ingredients and seasonings calculatngly added to her long-established 'recipes'<sup>91</sup>.

To reply to the question which is put as title of this section means, in the end, to display all the results which I have obtained so far, meanwhile denying them all: in this chapter, I have tried to demonstrate that the two novels written by Mavis Gallant are, at many levels, not a *rara avis* in the corpus of *rara Mavis's* fiction<sup>92</sup>, as they are more similar to the rest of her shorter fiction than it has been noticed so far. On the other hand, however, they represent a particular case, mainly because all the elements characterizing the interaction of language(s) and identity/ies are gathered together in a single text, whose complexity adds further meanings to a narrative that is already intrinsically polysemic. Besides, the intricate mixture of verbal and non verbal elements adds to the fragmentation of the characters as much as it does to the fragmentation of the texts. There is always

something new in Gallant's novel, as much as there is in any of her texts; and, at the same time, readers always have the feeling of being reminded of something they are familiar with, as it happens when we wear a new dress that had already been in fashion, or eat an exotic dish that our mother used to cook, or find ourselves in an unknown place that reminds us of home, like experiencing a mixture of *deja-vus*, "dreams and recollections" (AFGT: 308).

Perhaps, it would have been interesting to see how Gallant had developed the genre of the novel, had she been given the chance to edit and publish (perhaps to write) her much promised third novel. An overall, chronological look at her fiction possibly suggests that she could have written a novel about French characters in France, given that in the Seventies she did not consider herself confident enough to venture in the realm of French culture without the outside point of view of English speakers, but that *Overhead in a Balloon*, a collection which she published in 1984, is indeed a text that investigates French society from a French point of view, and so is most of her late published and unpublished non-fiction. A perspective lacking completely in GWGS (this could be just a matter of casualty, and lack of confidence might not be the reason at all here), albeit French settings (Paris and Cannes), the French perspective permeates the fabric of AFGT, especially its "connective tissue". The story of the Maurels, a self standing short fiction in which Shirley plays to some extent the role of a secondary character, proves the writer's success in cultural 'intrusion'. An intrusion which makes *rara Mavis* a *rara avis*, able to fly – an insect unnoticed as Wishart would have *wished* to be – from genre to genre, from culture to culture, from language to language.

### *Notes and References to Chapter 3*

<sup>1</sup> Besner's thematic definition of the novels is the one that, in my opinion, best sums up the unifying themes of the two texts. In Besner's words, "Gallant's two novels [...] reward consideration both for their divergent treatments of one of Gallant's major themes – the consequences for individuals of the preservation, reinvention, or annihilation of the past – and for their alternately tragic and comic depictions of individual identities on trial within the social structures of marriage, families, and cultures" (1988: 49).

<sup>2</sup> Critical studies on one or both novels include: Jewison 1985, Hatch 1985, Smythe 1989, 1990 and 1992, and Blodgett 1990b.

<sup>3</sup> Also *From the Fifteenth District* is subtitled "A Novella and Eight Short Stories". But which one is the novella there? The collection includes: "The Four Seasons", "The Moslem Wife", "The Remission", "The Latehomecomer", "Baum, Gabriel, 1935 – ( )", "From the Fifteenth District", "Potter", "His Mother", and "Irina".

<sup>4</sup> In an early attempt to analyse Gallant's longer fiction, Stevens defines "Its Image on the Mirror" a "novel" (1973: 64). In the same essay, he claims that AFGT is "Gallant's most completely textured novel [and] an advance for Mavis Gallant" (70).

<sup>5</sup> "The short story is a genre which fits my nature and satisfies me completely. [...] A novel needs to sew the connections among events, and one has to be Stendhal or, even better, Flaubert, to succeed in rendering each passage interesting. Conversely, in the short story, the whole 'connective tissue', that is what links the muscles to the bones, is suppressed. There remain only 'les quatre temps forts'. I have eliminated the rest".

<sup>6</sup> See for instance Keefer 1989.

<sup>7</sup> To explain why secondary characters are given more space is to recognize, as banal as it might be, that there is more space to be occupied (a novel is usually longer than a short story). But the role of the *dramatis personae* who surround and enrich the protagonists' stories is not confined to that of protagonists of subplots; conversely, they are given space, but also and foremost weight and importance in the economy of the whole plot, in that their lives intertwine with those of the protagonists so much that the 'tissue' becomes a 'tissu' (French for 'cloth', 'fabric'), due to Gallant's capability to 'tisser des liens entre les événements' ('sew connections between the events').

<sup>8</sup> This claim does not suggest that the process of assemblage or editing, to which Gallant dedicates most of her time and which she explains in interviews and prefaces, is as simple as the swapping of two chapters. Provocatively, it aims at suggesting that GWGS is

somehow an intermediate version between the cycles of stories and the full novel, a label which, in my opinion, only AFGT deserves.

<sup>9</sup> The whole excerpt is quoted in Chapter 2, Section 2.

<sup>10</sup> An inventory of these texts might perhaps be of little interest. Here I simply acknowledge that such work has not been done yet. In a wider perspective that aims at identifying Gallant's literary models systematically, or at recreating her virtual library, this would certainly be of some help.

<sup>11</sup> On the choice of the short story over the novel, see also Royer 1996. Gallant states: "at my age, I wonder if life isn't just a series of short stories. To say that 'life is a novel' is a lie" (74).

<sup>12</sup> Transtextual practices include: intertextuality, paratextuality, architextuality, metatextuality, and hypotextuality or hypertextuality (see, among others, the following chapters: "Five types of transtextuality, among which hypertextuality": 1-7, and "General chart of hypertextual practices": 24-30). As observed so far, Gallant's use of transtextual practices is complex and complete: it includes the use of paratextual elements. As a matter of fact, both novels contain an epigraph, which relates to the texts in various ways: the last line of GWGS's epigraph from Shakespeare's *As You Like It* is the original title of one of the stories, which in the novel becomes Chapter 3. In AFGT, Edith Wharton's *The Last Asset* works pretty much the same, but the last line is the title of the whole novel and not just of one section. In both cases, the relationship between epigraph and text involves content. This practice, which Gallant does not limit to her two novels but employs almost regularly in her fiction, has been employed in my thesis too, so that the epigraphs and the titles of chapters and sections are often related by paratextual connections. On the novels' epigraphs, see Smythe 1992: 55.

I also draw from Kristeva's notion of 'transposition', which seems particularly apt to describe what use of texts Gallant and her characters do. As Kristeva put it, "the term inter-textuality denotes the transposition of one (or several) sign system[s] into another; but since this term has often been understood in the banal sense of 'study of sources', we prefer the term transposition because it specifies that the passage from one signifying system to another demands a new articulation of the thetic – of enunciative and denotative positionality" (1984: 59-60).

<sup>13</sup> For a description of Gallant's 'declared' cycles and a purpose of other groups of stories, see Grant 1978: 17. For a theoretical approach on Gallant's short story-cycles, see for instance Martini 2009 and 2011.

<sup>14</sup> Godard asserts that Gallant's fiction contains "a number of absent presences, meaningful silences" (1990: 73).

<sup>15</sup> In recalling the publishing of GWGS with Lahiri, Gallant maintains that "*The New Yorker* published the first three parts. They didn't publish the fourth because you couldn't understand the fourth if you hadn't read the other three" (2009b: 116).

<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Besner claims that “this part of the novel could almost have stood alone, as the narrator recapitulates the plot of the previous three parts” (1988: 56).

<sup>17</sup> For critical definitions of ‘novel’ see, among others, Bakhtin 1981 (Chapter “About Novel”), Lukács 1971, and Watt 1957.

<sup>18</sup> It is quite strange that Gallant claimed that she did not publish the last story separately because to her it did not work as an autonomous piece of fiction. What I just mentioned about the repetition of surnames and family relations stands in partial contradiction to her claim. Anyway, contradictions between theory and practice are not rare.

<sup>19</sup> The various roles and meanings of mirrors have been investigated specifically in Besner 1988, Grant 1989, and Jewison 1985 (the last essay focuses mainly on “Its Image on the Mirror” and GWGS).

<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Irvine states that in GWGS “the plot goes nowhere”. Metafictionally speaking, I find it quite interesting to notice that she claims that Bonnie’s “sterile fascination with her own beginnings disastrously affects the *plot* of her daughter’s life story” (1986: 247, italics mine).

<sup>21</sup> Though AFGT is the most explicit of Gallant’s narratives in terms of sexuality, the allusion to these two fictions has nothing to do with content, but limits to their structural pattern and the devices connected with storytelling. At any rate, Gallant’s handling of scenes and aspects related to nakedness and sex is very limited in all her fictions. There is no description of sexual contact between characters in her pages, and when nakedness is hinted at, there is always something more important than sex on which to focus. One of the rare scenes in which a character is completely naked is to be found, again, in AFGT, where Shirley just had sex with James, her lover. Naked in bed, with only her glasses on, she imagines to write a letter to Philippe, in which she describes her ‘outfit’ to her husband. In this very moment, Shirley is watching Philippe on TV, commenting on his outfit and physical appearance, and on what he says. The scene is remarkable at different levels: first, James is fascinated by the TV programme more than Shirley (the girl is interested in Philippe only); read in the light of a deeper analysis of the character of James, this aspect is revelatory. Also, intimacy is transposed by Shirley from James to Philippe, whom she imagines staring at her directly through the screen. Gallant pioneeristically deals with the medium of television, breaking the screen/fifth wall and having Philippe observe Shirley directly. It is obviously only the girl’s impression. However, since, for once, she is wearing her glasses, the impression is not the result of Shirley’s defect of sight. Due to these and several other elements, the whole scene would deserve, in my opinion, closer examination.

<sup>22</sup> Shirley’s relationship with Madame Roux is an example of the girl’s incapability to separate the personal from the private, a concern that, on the contrary, Philippe has not even to deal with, since he takes everything for himself. This, however, is only partially true, because Madame Roux and Philippe become progressively closer and the man begins to reveal to the woman details about his private life. Shirley comments her

husband's change in these words: "Philippe the prudent, the discreet, had a topic in common with the woman in the shop downstairs – his marriage to Shirley" (90). Shirley's incapacity to avoid going into details with Madame Roux (which includes 'public reading' of excerpts from G enevi eve's novel) turns against her when Madame Roux reveals to Philippe the information received by Shirley. The girl had not realized where her behaviour was to lead her until too late. When she listens to her story retold by Madame Roux, Shirley is shown for the first time how awful it must have sounded in her husband's ears.

<sup>23</sup> This is, for instance, the case of Rose O'Hara, James's young lover, and even more so this comment applies to the German girl who lives with them, whom the narrator nicknames Crystal Lily. It is also the case of Kerel, Renata's boyfriend, and of G erald, Marie-Th er ese's husband.

<sup>24</sup> We already found this narrative feature in "Autumn Day", but it is also present in several other short stories. Certainly, the use of external observation of a first person narrator primarily suggests detachment, fragmentation, lack of a unitary perception of self; only later can it be appreciated as a 'narratological device'.

<sup>25</sup> During the years, George kept the bead as a talisman and "used to roll it about his palm before exams". The glass bead served several purposes: "it was a powerful charm", but it also worked as "a reminder that someone had once wanted him dead but that he was still alive" (6). Objects can represent evocative bridges to the past. By simply touching the bead, George was pervaded by a feeling of being back in Venice: "he had only to roll it in his hand to evoke images of Venice" (23). Finally, the bead represented to George the only reliable, undisputable memory, as one can infer from his reply to Flor, when she asked him why he kept the piece of necklace: "I guess it proves you were somewhere" (24).

<sup>26</sup> At the end of the first chapter, in the apartment in New York George is addressed by several relatives who remember his time in Venice differently from how he does: this becomes clear – with further emphasis given by the position of the sentence at the end of the chapter – when Flor says "we don't remember the same things" (24). Here the reader can see clearly that Gallant conceives "memory [as] inseparable from language" (HT: xv). Therefore language is of utmost importance in the dialogue with one's own past.

<sup>27</sup> George's relevance as a character is due to several elements: among others, he symbolises the present (as opposed to the past). Merler maintains that George "seems to mark the time, notably the present" (1978: 13). In addition, having been selected to become the only reappearing character (leaving aside the central trio composed by Bonnie, her daughter Flor and the latter's husband Bob Harris), he is central in narrative terms as he creates, temporarily and thematically, a frame to the novel. In AFGT a similar pattern is obtained not through a person but through an object: it is the letter written by Mrs. Norrington. The importance of the letter is repeatedly stated in my thesis.

<sup>28</sup> Reference to dreams of his sister began on page 109.

<sup>29</sup> Writing to Elizabeth Powell on 20 March 1869, Alcott explains her choice as follows: “‘Jo’ should have remained a literary spinster but so many enthusiastic young ladies wrote to me clamorously demanding that she should marry Laurie, or somebody, that I didn’t dare to refuse & out of perversity went & made a funny match for her” (1995: 124-125).

<sup>30</sup> Here is the whole quote: “I said to him, ‘Miss Brooks had that kind of beauty which seems to be thrown into relief by poor dress’. As you know, I have the habit of quotations from my mother. I didn’t know they were quotations until I started reading. I thought they were our family language. ‘At a village of La Mancha, whose name I do not wish to remember...’ was how we interrupted long stories. ‘They threatened its life with a railway share’ also had a family meaning; so did ‘I sit and wait for bouillabaisse’, pronounced, *chez nous*, bully-basse”. Shirley’s quotations are taken from: George Eliot’s novel *Middlemarch* (notice misspelt of Miss Brooke as Miss Brooks); Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*; Lewis Carroll’s poem “The Hunting of the Snark”; Thackeray’s “The Ballad of Bouillabaisse” (all other quotations are faithfully reproduced).

Similarly to Shirley, “it’s from [her] mother that Claudie has her taste for phrases” (263).

<sup>31</sup> Shirley’s worst nightmare is having people turn into animals. Here the narrator includes a comment addressed to Philippe (“if you hate dreams just skip this”) which reads as a direct advice to the reader (217). The role of dreams in the novel is connected mainly to the figure of Shirley’s father.

<sup>32</sup> The story was first published in *The New Yorker*, 28 October 1967: 55-59. The plot is summarized as such in the related on line page of the magazine: “Peter and Shirley Higgins, a young newly married couple, are honeymooning in Europe. They are killing time taking photos and eating bread in a small Italian town where they are waiting for a train to Nice. Bored Pete borrows a bike on the street for a short ride, is run over by a car and dies. Pete’s parents, Mr. and Mrs. Higgins come immediately to Europe, but Shirley does not return home with them. She goes to Paris and takes work as an interpreter in a department store. Several months later, Mrs. Higgins dies. Mr. Higgins remarries and visits Shirley in Paris on his wedding trip. He has begun life anew, like a clean will with everyone he loved cut out. She is trying to do the same, but is patient, waiting for someone to tell her what to write”. Available from: <[http://www.newyorker.com/archive/1967/10/28/1967\\_10\\_28\\_055\\_TNY\\_CARDS\\_000\\_289005](http://www.newyorker.com/archive/1967/10/28/1967_10_28_055_TNY_CARDS_000_289005)> [Accessed: 20/12/2011]. The summary contains a few imprecisions.

Grazia Merler has operated a collation of the two versions of the story, the one published separately and the one integrated in the novel: the result of the confrontation shows that “there are no modifications in the conversations, either in the interior monologue or in the dialogue. The modifications occur either in the descriptive passages or in the explanatory passages. This trait, once more, indicates how vividly defined in time and in space the situations are in the author’s mind” (1978: 8).

<sup>33</sup> The implications of Shirley’s name and surname are several, and they certainly deserve further analysis. Gallant’s interest in ‘naming’ does not limit to this case.

<sup>34</sup> Further, brief and circumscribed hints at Peter are included in the novel (119-120, 154, 202): they consist mainly in flashbacks to their past and his coming back in dreams. Structurally, it is as if these paragraphs represented extensions of “The Accident”, debris which have been scattered around and lay in the fabric of the novel, rather than keeping closer to their original text.

<sup>35</sup> In her interview to Geoff Hancock, Gallant tells that the story was originally part of the novel, “but I didn’t want it and I rewrote it as a story. That is, I rewrote the whole novel and it didn’t belong any more” (1978a: 58).

<sup>36</sup> See Merler’s comment quoted above.

<sup>37</sup> “Always she was thinking ‘married to Pete’ and not to Philippe” (154).

<sup>38</sup> The quote continues as follows: “As soon as I had scribbled my comment I realized I could not slip this back among the papers on your desk. I had taken it by accident. I was looking for letters from Geneviève, to tell you the truth” (214).

<sup>39</sup> Americanness is presented in several versions, but none of them satisfies the requisites to match the model offered by the Fairlies: “nowhere in Gallant’s earlier fiction is the power of the family – here, the Fairlie clan – anatomized more closely as a necessary prison, a structure which both confers and confines identity” (Besner 1988: 50). The Fairlies are described as a ‘clan’ all featuring similar physical traits (they are all blond and have blue eyes, and they also have big front teeth), and impose themselves as a paradigm for identity which the blond George embodies completely and Flor does not, having red hair and green eyes. Thanks to Doris’s presence, then, the texts further investigate on the issue of national identity. The first time the girl enters in the Harrises’ life, she is described as “a tall, round-faced young woman with blond hair, whose dress, voice, speech, and manner were so of a piece that she remained long afterward in Bob’s memory as ‘The American’, as though being American were exceptional or unique” (47). But the issue is not as simple as that. Though Doris soon declares “‘It’s marvellous to find other Americans here’” (48), none of the characters in the scene can be defined completely American. Even Doris, who is the one apparently corresponding much closer to the American stereotype, is described as a potential “Irish actress about to disclose that her father was a drunkard, her brother an anarchist, her mother a saint, et cetera” (48); irony here makes Gallant substitute a stereotype with another stereotype. Also Bob does not ‘look’ American: “he had a dark, soft face, and might have been a Greek or a Persian educated in England, if one took the sum of his face, his manner, his rings and his clothes. [...] He was familiar in a distinctly American way, but he was not the kind of American George had been brought up to know well” (157). In fact, “he was – and proud of it – a New York boy” (40). Finally, Bonnie and Flor do not share Doris nor Bob’s kind of Americanness: they are distant from *any* national identity.

<sup>40</sup> The socio-political subtext in AFGT includes references to abortion, which was legalized in 1975 (Article L2212-1), while the novel is set in 1963, and was first published in 1970.

<sup>41</sup> The Baronne Putbus is a secondary character in *À la recherche du temps perdu* by Proust, one of Gallant's favourite writers of all times. The duchess of Guermantes describes the Baronne as "a lié de la société". I argue that further connections could be established at various level between the characters of *À la recherche*, whom Gallant knows very well, and the characters of her own fiction, Wishart in particular. It is quite interesting that Bonnie surrounds herself with flattery and venerating characters (Doris seems to be another one). Wishart is described as "the chosen minstrel, the symbolic male, who would never cause 'trouble'" (108).

<sup>42</sup> Aristophane's *Lysistrata* (411 b.C.) is a comedy centred around the protagonist's suggestion to deny sexual privileges to their husbands in order to persuade them to end the war. Lysistrata is the second 'literary identity' assumed by Bonnie, who was initially (in front of her tripartite mirror) Mrs. Hauksbee, the protagonist of Kipling's stories. In Kipling's "Three And – An Extra" (1888), included in *Plain Tales from the Hills*, Mrs. Hauksbee "was clever, witty, brilliant, and sparkling beyond most of her kind; but possessed of many devils of malice and mischievousness. She could be nice, though, even to her own sex".

<sup>43</sup> In a dream, Bonnie imagines that her daughter has become a carp fish; Bob Harris's nickname among the Fairlies is "the seal"; Bob and Flor during the summer are described as "summer rats" (119) and "chattering squirrels" (123). Wishart is also an insect, and as such he is part of "a tiny, scuttling universe" (143). In AFGT, Madame Roux at one point is compared to a long list of animals: "Madame Roux was rat, serpent, lizard, spider, bitch, vixen, roach and louse" (157).

<sup>44</sup> The presence of disconnected, a-syntagmatic texts is not limited to this case. Further examples include Cat Castle's notes and Shirley's 'jumping reading' of Geneviève's novel. In GWGS the soundest example is the extract taken from Flor's diary.

<sup>45</sup> The range of names given to the flower is wider: it includes its French, German, and Spanish translation. An interesting association of the name of the flower with Shirley is offered by Smythe, who underlines that bluebell recalls Belle, the nickname Shirley was given by her father. Thus, Smythe argues, "the flower is Shirley's real name, [...] not a symbol of love but a metonymic marker of identity" (1992: 58). At this point, a necessary digression on Shirley's names seems necessary. First of all, the name Shirley is given in Geneviève's novel is Daisy, that is the name of another flower. It is perhaps just a coincidence (though I hardly believe in coincidences, when Gallant is involved), but the botanic vocabulary is not infrequent in Gallant's pages (it suffices to think of Flor in GWGS, whose name is the Latin for 'flower'), together with the use of birds' names (see first of all the cases of Mavis and Linnet). This just to begin a discourse on names (especially Shirley's) which would certainly deserve specific investigation.

A previous remarkable study of the letter is contained in Blodgett 1990c.

<sup>46</sup> This should be part of the discourse on Shirley's name which I have hinted at in the previous note.

<sup>47</sup> Interestingly, Schaub compares the process of decomposition of the flower to the writing of the story, claiming that “Shirley’s life has macerated in Gallant’s mind before being composed in bits and pieces, indeed de-composed” (1998: 59). In relation to my concern with food, it is interesting to underline that Schaub uses a vocabulary metaphorically connected with the act of eating in the same page: she asserts that “Shirley will have to *digest* for about 10 months the content of her mother’s rambling letter to see the light” (59, italics mine).

<sup>48</sup> Lorna Irvine claims that “illegible letters” are “a sign of ego instability in Gallant’s fiction” (1986, 247).

<sup>49</sup> James Laver was the curator of the Victoria and Albert Museum of London for more than twenty years. His contributions as an art historian are principally connected with the history of fashion.

<sup>50</sup> “At eighty-six, Mavis remains an elegant woman. Each day she was impeccably dressed in a woollen skirt, sweater, scarf, stockings and square-heeled pumps. A medium-length coat of black wool protected her from the Paris chill and beautiful rings, an opal one among them, adorned her fingers” (Lahiri 2009b: 106).

<sup>51</sup> Shirley proves deficient in literature and history notwithstanding her mother’s education, which we imagine based on literary and historical notions. Shirley associates King George, whom Mrs. Norrington mentions in one of her letters, with a coin (with the king’s effigy), and Galvani – her name/face for telephone – with “one of Napoleon’s generals” or someone “married to one of Napoleon’s sisters” (95).

<sup>52</sup> One can find out from the text that Shirley is twenty-seven in 1963. This means that she was twelve in 1948. The ‘New Look’, which Dior launched in Fall 1947, arrived in the United States only one year later, which was indeed 1948. For a description of the ‘New Look’, see Baker 2007: 56-59. For pictures of *Vogue* magazines of those years, see British *Vogue’s* Archive : <  
<http://www.vogue.co.uk/magazine/archive/search/Year/1947>> and <  
<http://www.vogue.co.uk/magazine/archive/search/Year/1947>> [Accessed: 20/12/2011].

<sup>53</sup> Though misquoted (1-85 for L-85), Bonnie’s reference is to a Regulation issued on 8 March 1942 which contained restrictions on women’s outfits in connection to other war’s restrictions. These were principally determined by the fact that fabrics were needed for war uniforms and similar (e.g. silk for parachutes). See for instance Baker 2007.

<sup>54</sup> In terms of verbal and non-verbal language, this thesis does only cursorily take in consideration ‘paralinguistic’ aspects, such as intonation and accent, which are crucial and insisted in Gallant’s fiction. I had necessarily to leave aside the apparatus of non-verbal signs which are commonly grouped under the name of kinesics, where kinesics is defined as “the science of eye and body motion in relation to communicative interaction”. It would nonetheless be very interesting to read certain situations described by Gallant under the lenses of kinesics, with particular attention to its main categories: proxemics,

that is “the distance and orientation of the position of the bodies of the interactants; posture, the inclination of the torso; head movement, like nodding and shaking; facial mimicry; eye gaze, the movement and fixation of the eyes; hand and arm gestures; motions of the shoulders, like the shrug; figurations made with the fingers; haptic, the touching behaviour; and the movement of the legs” (Von Raffler-Engel 1980: 3).

<sup>55</sup> I use the words ‘metamesic’ and ‘paramesic’, which the OED do not attest (not any other dictionary I have looked up), because I have not found a word that refers to the metareference of writing as a medium and to its related elements (‘para’). While ‘metawriting’ refers to a text explaining the procedure of how a text is written (the ‘how to write an essay’ kind of text), there is no term referring to the reflection of handwriting on itself. Using the prefix ‘meta’ and the adjective ‘mesic’ (which means ‘referring to a medium’), which linguists already use in the explanation of varieties, I have tried to coin a term suitable for my purposes.

<sup>56</sup> The text further elaborates on interpretation when the protagonist declares: “‘Perhaps it is an opinion about a patient’. ‘Can’t you read what it says?’ said Igor. I tried to think of a constructive answer, for ‘I can’t read German’ was too vague. ‘Someday you, and Robert, and even Ulrich will read German, and then you will read the letter, and we shall all know what Dr. Freud said to his colleague’” (SS: 308).

<sup>57</sup> When she describes the first signs of ageing, Bonnie is probably ‘wearing’ her own identity at forty something, a detail the narrator hints at only through this imperceptible, subtle element.

<sup>58</sup> She loves her daughter more than anybody else, but at the same time she feels limited by her. Their relationship is seen, by both parts, as a limitation and a conviction (65).

<sup>59</sup> The quite complex relationship between Bob and Bonnie evolves within the span of time described in the narrative. Bob, “the urban boy” (126) from New York, behaves according to the canons of the middle-class American society of the 1950s and of Jewish religion. Because he has lost his own mother, “he ha[s] elevated the notion of motherhood” (120) and this is the main reason why he accepted Bonnie in his marriage and keeps supporting her economically and emotionally even after his wife has been confined to the asylum. For her part, Bonnie is grateful to the guy even though he does not satisfy her requirements (nor the Fairlies’) as her daughter’s husband. In the light of what the narrator described as an “unspoken, antagonistic agreement” (74), they stand each other only because they both conceive as a priority in life to keep up appearances. Due to the description of several ‘comedies of manners’ which have been rehearsed in previous circumstances in the Harrises’ place (in front of Doris and Bob’s father, for instance, but also when nobody but the two is there), readers know that their attempt at keeping up appearances works like a well-known routine. But in suffering they “were looking away from each other. [...] Each was the witness of the other’s suffering and that must have been terrible to bear” (162).

<sup>60</sup> “His elbows were on the table, his face behind his hands” (GWGS: 155).

<sup>61</sup> In Irvine's words, "language fails her" (1986: 247).

<sup>62</sup> "Compton (1964) has suggested that clothes may function to help strengthen weak body-image boundaries in mentally disturbed patients" (Kaiser 1985: 63).

<sup>63</sup> Similarly, in AFGT, when Kerel (Renata's Fascist boyfriend) "began to eat like an animal", Shirley, whose worst nightmare is to see people transforming into animals, tried to find a way to make him "speak and bring [...] him back to a human form" (220).

<sup>64</sup> This comment is very interesting also in narratological terms. Though it is pronounced in a context in which the narrator is taking Flor's point of view, it nonetheless refers to Bob's perception, according to which Flor's progressive destruction was a "futile [...] wreckage", "a vandalism without cause".

<sup>65</sup> The use of capital letters in the text suggests that Shirley gives the expression the value of a title. It is in fact written with the same font of the titles of Philippe's articles cited throughout the book (212-213).

<sup>66</sup> If it is so, this image relates to Shirley's desire to go home and change winter and summer clothes, when she is at the Maurels' (80). The symbolic act of separating summer from winter clothes reappears again in the novel (209 and 210).

<sup>67</sup> This section focuses on the 'language of food'; however, a few comments refer to other languages, which I have not devoted specific analysis to, but which I deem nonetheless worth quoting (some are also hinted at in the endnotes).

<sup>68</sup> In her "Introduction" to *The CanLit Foodbook*, Margaret Atwood significantly states that "'You are what you eat' means one thing to a nutritionist, another to a novelist" (1988: 52). In the same context, she also claims that "eating is our earliest metaphor, preceding our consciousness of gender difference, race, nationality and language. We eat before we talk, all of which gives writers an enormous source of rich (as we say in the trade) material to work with, and work with it they have" (53). Comellini argues that if we agree with Atwood's above statement, then "anche il cibo si ricollega ad un'identità, esattamente come la lingua nativa è ricettacolo di tutta la cultura e tradizione che veicola. Altresì, non differentemente dalla lingua parlata d'origine, cibo e vino si prestano a manifestare l'espressione di un'identità altra" ('as much as any native language is the shelter for the culture and tradition it expresses, also food is connected to identity. Like our native tongue, eating and drinking can represent the 'other' in terms of identity').

<sup>69</sup> Keefer points at "digressions featuring a Mad Hatter's Tea Party kind of logic" in AFGT (1989: 83).

<sup>70</sup> Doris does not wear hats. It is Bonnie who often wears them. However, the decision of the writer to have Bonnie pondering to give Doris one of her hats might well be a deliberate pun: "Bonnie's little blue hat would have suited her well. Bonnie thought of this, and wondered how to offer it" (61). Hats recur in the novel: apart from this case, the

hat that Bonnie wears in Venice when she spends the day out on the beach creates multiple circles and shades; the image is analysed in depth by Clement (2000: 45). Another hat is significant, this time in symbolic terms. It is a hat Flor finds in Bob's first room in Cannes. It belonged to a Swedish girl he had an affair with. Though Bob does not attach any meaning to the past, Flor tries nonetheless to get rid of the object, which reappears.

<sup>71</sup> As Carroll wrote, "the Hatter's remark seemed to have no sort of meaning in it" (1865: Chapter vii).

<sup>72</sup> A long digression could be centred around money and the idea of paying someone back, both symbolically and economically. To give just a few hints at this topic, I should list a few examples of the situations in which money appears in the two novels. In *GWGS*, money is at the centre of Bonnie's relationship with Bob, who, in turn, has an economic dependence from his father. His interest in art, which implies the purchase of paintings, is subdued to his desire to make money out of the artistic objects he buys. In the relation Bonnie-Wishart, the latter is the representation of the typical parasite, who relies on Bonnie completely. When he discovers that the woman has no money, he leaves (the two things are not bound, but there are hints at their possible connection). In *AFGT*, money is the pretext thanks to which the plot moves on. Summing up: Shirley runs out of money when she goes to Renata's, so she cannot come back because she has not enough money for a taxi. The next morning in Pons, she asks money to Cat Castle who refuses to lend her some (see her interesting comments on Shirley's request); she then goes home and borrows some money from James (relevant aspects include where he hides his money and the dialogue between the two). With James's Francs, she has lunch in the restaurant where she meets Claudie, for whom she pays. Being indebted with Shirley is the excuse that Claudie uses to have the woman come back for lunch.

<sup>73</sup> An interesting argument on the relationship between Shirley and her mother/motherland is proposed by Sturgess (1993).

<sup>74</sup> "She saw from the fit of her dress that she had lost pounds" (94). Perception through clothes is explored by Gallant also in "The Other Paris", where Carol 'feels' Felix's eyes through the perception she has of her own garments: "she was suddenly acutely conscious of every bit of her clothing: the press of the belt at her waist, the pinch of her earrings, the weight of her dress, even her gloves, which felt as scratchy as sacking" (SS: 105).

<sup>75</sup> Alice's world keeps whispering from the following page, in which the narrator tells us that Flor "had a transient fear that Doris possessed a miraculous keys" (89). Allusions to Carroll's books are scattered throughout the novel, either in the form of explicit references and allusions, or in the more subtle recreation of an atmosphere of 'wonder'. Perhaps Doris *is* Alice entering in the world of the Harrises which is to her a wonderland. If so, or even if Flor is a deteriorated version of Alice, this wonderland is certainly a 'nightmare-land' or, at least, an 'otherland'. In *AFGT*, where Gallant includes further allusions to Carroll's texts, we find another explicit reference: "In a few minutes, she thought, they will have Crystal's head in a teapot and she will say drowsily, 'Twinkle,

twinkle” (63). In “Voices Lost in Snow”, Linnet recalls a lunch with her father at Pauzé’s, where they were served oysters “as in ‘The Walrus and the Carpenter’, with bread and butter, pepper and vinegar” (HT: 285).

<sup>76</sup> This character is very interesting in relation to literature. His reference to unknown – mainly inexistent – writers represents a playful challenge to Shirley’s knowledge of literature.

<sup>77</sup> Philippe carries on his stereotypical view of North Americans in his TV-show. He grounds his knowledge either on second-hand information (Geneviève’s) or on his own experience with his wife; thus, once more, he elevates his own examples at the level of general stereotype (see for instance the reference to “The American laundry problem” which is, instead, merely Shirley’s, 194). In short, Shirley does not understand why she has to be methodical with housekeeping. When it comes specifically to the laundry, “she could not understand why” she had to keep doing “a repetition of gestures that seemed to her lunatic but that Philippe assured her were almost the evidence of life” (12).

<sup>78</sup> Funnily enough, Madame Perrigny began to dress in mourning when her husband left her, and when he died “[her] choice in clothes was finally justified” (113).

<sup>79</sup> “Philippe said he detested everything in his apartment; he had told Shirley how nothing ever changed and that even the rusty can-opener in the kitchen had been there as long as he could remember. But he had grown up with the rugs and the stiff net curtains and the cold chandeliers and had never thought of leaving them or changing them until he was nearly twenty-nine. One day he and Colette would probably fight like wildcats for everything in the place, even the useless can opener, each of them wanting to own their common past” (121).

<sup>80</sup> Ordering first Scotch pancakes because “it so happens I have been in Scotland” (33), Mrs. Castle declares through her choice of food her trivial approach to Europe, which reduces Scotland to “green walls. Wicker. Red plush seats. Red carpet, pattern Prince of Wales feathers (or ferns?). Morning sun comes from park. Comes from entirely opposite direction. Fielding wrong. Satin shades on wall brackets. Like my bedroom. Geraniums – kind of peaky. Artistic tables. Mirrors look like old silvering” (33).

<sup>81</sup> The Italian motto is said to come from Latin correspondents, among which “par pro pari ferre”. It was included in Boccaccio’s *Decameron* (1349-1351), where Zeppa’s wife says to Spinelloccio’s wife: “Madonna, voi m’avete renduto pan per focaccia” (Day the Eight, the Eight Story). In Payne’s translation (1886), the expression reads as follows: “Madam, you have given me a loaf for my bannock” (405).

<sup>82</sup> Keith quotes the same extract and devotes some attention to language in his essay, with particular reference to translation. His remarkable analysis offers an insight into different aspects of translation (1988: 106-107).

<sup>83</sup> For instance, Monsieur Maurel “could never have guessed how shy and uncertain she was in French” (180).

<sup>84</sup> The expression is often used in books on ethnic food or restaurant guides.

<sup>85</sup> An explicit reference to Collodi’s *Pinocchio* is contained in the text: “Supposing she had asked Monsieur Maurel if he wanted to be fried in oil? Even if he remembered anything at all about *Pinocchio* he would certainly have been startled at her suddenly declaiming in English” (180).

<sup>86</sup> Similarly, she declares to Cat Castle that her relationship is over, because Philippe has left her. However, rather than to her statement, the phone call should be associated to Mrs. Norrinton’s letter, as both women do not (or pretend not to) understand: “Don’t hang up. Please, can’t I come? Where are you? Mrs. Castle, listen – Philippe left me and I’ve lost my job’. ‘I don’t hear. He did what?’” (208).

<sup>87</sup> The habit to rescue outcasts, inherited from her mother – whom she despised right because of this practice – is what puts Shirley repeatedly into trouble. Like Baron Axel Heyst in *Victory*, a novel that Conrad published in 1915, she gets involved in “the Great Joke” without even realizing it, and when it is time to step back, for some reason she is unable to refuse to help people. “She tried to remember how she had met Renata: Renata had been a pickup – like this girl; like Philippe” (73). But whereas Heyst had been taught differently by his sceptical father (“he who forms a tie is lost”, he had said to his son right before dying), Shirley’s mother was herself a rescuer, and had spent her whole life trying to help what the narrator seem to hint at as quite undeserving people, among which the Team Browning. Their story is told in some detail in the novel (99).

According to my research, there is no evidence that Gallant read, let alone admires Conrad. However, as accidental as it might be, the affinity between these two writers often takes the form of uncanny similarities of phrasing. Apart from the expression “a fairly good time”, which occurs in Conrad’s *Under Western Eyes* (1911), I will not venture in any attempt to count all the occurrences of ‘water’ and ‘sky’ in his fiction (“lumps of cold green water toppled over the bulwark” in *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, 1897); though there is a lot of ‘greenery’ and much sky in Conrad’s fiction, no ‘green sky’ seems to be there. A quote from *Nostramo* (1904) seems particularly remarkable: “And between you three you have brought me here into this captivity to the sky and water. Nothing else. Sky and water”. Further Conradian references include the repetition of the possessive “my” in one of Shirley’s sentences, which recalls Kurtz’s famous cry: “You should have heard him say: ‘My intended, my ivory, my station, my river, my...’ Everything belonged to him” (Conrad 2010: 94). In AFGT, the quote reads as follows: “My purse, my cigarettes, my money, no, my gloves; [...] my hair, my wedding ring, my smile” (262).

<sup>88</sup> The journey to the Maurels’ place is a jumble of roads and signs, in which Shirley barely recognizes where she is. Once she comes to the place, she is not able to come back, and Claudie takes advantage of the situation and brings her back home by taxi. The taxi-driver, a marginal figure of no relevance for the plot, is nonetheless given importance in

relation to our concern with language and identity, especially within the discourse on foreignness, which is remarkable in the novel. Being foreign is a condition shared by Shirley and Flor (and by several other characters). In the case of the two protagonists, foreignness is not a matter of 'living abroad'. Rather, it is an intimate condition, deriving from an uprootedness connected to the lack of familial bonds, as underlined in the previous discussion about the idea of 'home'.

In AFGT, Gallant elaborates on the notion of 'foreignness' at different levels. First, it is related to language: in this light, being foreign means to be cut out of the comprehension of the language of the natives. But even on this point, the narrator can find exceptions. Such is the case of Cat Caste, who, "without a word of French or of regret, had got on the right bus – had been on the right buses all over Europe, in fact" (66). Shirley "was uneasy with people who talked about stolen children. A Swedish films had given her the impression that conversation in an unknown tongue consisted of nothing except 'Where is God?' and 'Should one have children?' although, in reality, everyone in those foreign countries was probably saying 'How much does it cost?' and 'Pass the salt'. Knowing that Shirley was not French, the girl might have been trying to sound foreign and enigmatic too. It made conversation as easy and aimless as swimming" (75). This conversation takes place in the taxi which is driving Shirley and Claudie to the latter's place. "The driver had not once turned, or even glanced at the mirror. [...] Shirley saw that he was Algerian. She and Claudie must have sounded to him as anyone did who could not speak his native language. What Claudie had said was not rubbish – it was merely foreign" (75-76). The driver introduces an aspect of foreignness which is rather sociological. Such discourse is underlined again in the following pages: 75, 77, 88, and 205.

<sup>89</sup> Furthermore, Marie-Thérèse finds that eating is a traumatising experience: when her mother was pregnant with Claudie, she stopped to devote attention to her elder daughter all in a sudden. Reserved the treatment of excessive attention that Shirley witnesses towards Alain and, in the final scene, towards Claudie, Marie-Thérèse is abruptly left alone, practically abandoned, and is told by her mother that she has to learn to feed herself or else die. The relationship between Marie-Thérèse and her family is explored thoroughly in the novel (especially in the second part), where the account of the woman's childhood and of the family patterns in which she is now involved is told by Marie-Thérèse, by Claudie, by their mother and father and also by their son-in-law. Interestingly in the light of my concern with the language of clothing, Marie-Thérèse carries on a 'dialogue' through her shoes, whose noise and characteristics are given a precise meaning.

<sup>90</sup> The reference to theatre in this novel is very frequent. There are characters performing parts, there are costumes and settings ready for a bourgeois drama, and also specific and explicit hints at theatre and its mechanisms (see for instance 179-180). See also Chapter 2, endnote 35.

<sup>91</sup> Besides, there are further aspects which cannot be explored completely within a generic overview, but should be devoted separate attention, and become the object of specific

studies. The endnotes above provide only a brief sample out of a larger number of topics and aspects.

<sup>92</sup> My pun is played on the basis of an article written by Pearl K. Bell “Rara Mavis”. *New Republic* 215.22 (25 November 1996). The pun has been recently employed by Keefer in her review of *Going Ashore*. *The Globe and Mail* (10 April 2009).

## Conclusion

When asked about her main preoccupation while writing, Gallant once declared: “All I think about is making everything clear” (Kalotay 1999). But what does she mean by ‘clear’? In *A Fairly Good Time*, the narrator says that “everything between two people is equivocal” (AFGT: 39). Only seemingly contradicting, these statements embrace the whole range of what this thesis has tried to demonstrate, which is, in the end, quite simple and straightforward: by analysing the deceitfulness of all languages, the struggles to perceive and represent identity and the gaps and obstacles in communication of any kind, Gallant ultimately manages to “make [it] clear” that “everything between two people is equivocal”. It can be a matter of translation, when characters find themselves trapped in linguistic realms which they do not understand; it can as well be an obstacle connected with the incapability to negotiate an image of themselves suitable to their own expectations, or, conversely, it is the display of a satisfying image, but such image is wrongly perceived by others. It may also be a message unsent, or badly formulated, or not received, or misinterpreted. Possibilities, as Gallant amply shows, are almost endless: whatever the language, whichever the identity, negotiation is a struggle, a battle with no winners of a kind.

In dealing with Gallant’s own identity, as a woman and particularly as a writer, I have tried to demonstrate in Chapter 1 that language and identity are part

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of her narrative because they were embroidered on her skin from the very beginning of her life. Reconstructing what is perhaps the most extensive biography of the writer so far (my materials would have allowed me to write an even longer account, but I limited them to those relevant to this context), I repeatedly stumbled on similar sentences and recurring statements, which made me suspect that there was a component of intentionality beyond the repetition expected from people who are frequently interviewed on similar topics. I have therefore considered this aspect to elaborate the results of my biography into a study on the relationship between Gallant's public and private personae, and on the continuous negotiations which these two (or even more) 'Gallants' have undergone in the years. This gives way, in my opinion, to a reading of Gallant's fictional and non-fictional materials in which autobiographical sources are not confined to the mere role of inspiration, but are given a further meaning, recognizing that "the death of the author" is only apparent in the case of Gallant, and that even when interpretation is left to her readership, it is only seemingly so, since she consciously handles and intentionally manipulates our reading of both her life and fiction. Her masterly handling of the English language, and her faith in the power of words to signify exactly what she wants to say speak in open contrast to the very many times in which, in her pages, characters or narrators lament the incapability of language to vehicle their thoughts clearly and unequivocally. As Keith once wrote, stating that Gallant complains for "the inadequacy of language" is to misread "her artistic principles" (1988: 114), among which language has undoubtedly a prime position. But in this, she is completely alone, a *rara Mavis* in the Babel of her (fictional) world.

In Chapter 2, I have presented a theoretical framework, which is not in the least comprehensive of all what I have read in these years (and which is partly listed in the selected bibliography at the end of the thesis). Some concepts have become part of my way of thinking, and I could not trace them all back or, had I done so, I should have filled my text with brackets and names, destroying what I have conceived as a discursive presentation of a framework, rather than a technical account of a method. Also, since mine is a multidisciplinary approach,

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some of the concepts draw back to more than one theory, and they often are the result of a fusion, better said a *negotiation* among them.

At the end of Chapter 2, I have selected a few texts with the aim of showing that each piece of Gallant's fiction can be read in the light of my framework. The selection does not include all the texts I would have liked to devote my attention to. In the future, I will certainly come back to a few stories which can be analysed in single papers or essays. These texts can either be well known and much studied texts, such as "The Pegnitz Junction", "The Other Paris" or "Its Image on the Mirror", or stories which so far have only been hinted at briefly by critics, like "April's Fish" or "Thieves and Rascals". At the same time, the analysis of the two 'novels' of Gallant (inverted commas underline my critical reading of the identity of the genre), which I arranged in Chapter 3, revealed interesting aspects to which specific attention should be devoted in the future. Not only do they relate to identity and language's issues; also, there is a lot to be said on secondary characters, who are no less important, and whom critics have only rarely centred their studies on. I claim that characters like Papa Maurel and his whole family in *A Fairly Good Time* are so well depicted and psychologically defined that they can well be studied separately. I also see correspondences among secondary figures of the novels and of the short stories which should be explored thoroughly. Several aspects which I have considered in the endnotes of each chapter are worth analysing in more depth as well. In particular, no research has been conducted so far on Gallant's publishing history, which includes her relationship with agents and editors, the degree of her involvement in the choice of content and form of each collection, and several important aspects related to the translation of her works. The Italian situation speaks paradigmatically for a fragmentation which needs to be reconstructed as soon as possible, before information get lost. Finally, there lacks a study of Gallant in systematic comparison with other writers, bar those of the Canadian field (especially women writers), and, even in this case, being studied 'together' does not necessarily entail a comparison. Beginning with the recreation of her virtual library, models and sources of inspiration can be traced back and become the starting point of further comparative studies

## CONCLUSION

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investigating the writer's fiction thematically, stylistically, or according to any other critical approach.

When I first began to read critical works on Mavis Gallant, I thought that the vast existing bibliography (Section 2 of my "Selected Bibliography" is, excluding reviews and articles in journals, almost complete) accounted for an already over-explored field of studies, in which several fictions are perhaps over-studied but still under-read. Instead, Gallantian studies are, though very praiseworthy, not at all complete, and there are several 'undiscovered countries'. Scholars still can, like Linnet's parents, become "explorers", and look at her life, and at her fictional and non-fictional works, pluralizing, expanding, and *negotiating* the meaning of her words – the spoken, the written, and even the unsaid ones.

SINOSSI IN LINGUA ITALIANA<sup>2</sup>

**La negoziazione  
dell'identità e dei linguaggi  
nella narrativa di Mavis Gallant**

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<sup>2</sup> Le abbreviazioni dei testi di Gallant fanno riferimento alla lista di abbreviazioni ("List of Abbreviations") riportata a pagina iv. Ad esse si aggiunga Mavis Gallant, *Al di là del ponte*. Traduzione di Giovanna Scocchera. Milano: BUR, 2005, e la relativa "Prefazione dell'autrice" (riportate in abbreviazione con la sigla AP). Laddove non diversamente specificato, le traduzioni si intendono di chi scrive.

## Abstract

Il presente lavoro si propone di offrire uno studio inedito sui diversi rapporti di interrelazione tra linguaggi e identità nella narrativa di Mavis Gallant.

Dando spazio ad una presentazione ragionata dell'autrice, focalizzata sulle tematiche portanti di questa tesi, il primo capitolo offre quella che è probabilmente, ad oggi, la sua più completa biografia. La raccolta dei dati biografici non ha tuttavia il mero scopo di raccontare la vita di Mavis Gallant; ponendosi nell'ottica di un inquadramento della relazione tra autobiografismo e creazione artistica, la ricostruzione dei principali eventi della vita della scrittrice si configura come uno studio delle reciproche influenze tra vita e opera.

Il secondo capitolo affronta il nucleo centrale del presente lavoro di tesi: la relazione tra linguaggi e identità. L'iniziale trattazione teorica, volta a definire e ad esplicitare nel dettaglio l'approccio multidisciplinare di riferimento, è seguita da una proposta di analisi particolareggiata di alcune storie, che mira non tanto a dimostrare la presenza di un *framework* di riferimento (il quale, di fatto, compare nella quasi totalità dei testi di Gallant), quanto piuttosto a mettere in risalto come in alcune storie campione l'interazione tra linguaggi e identità si manifesti con modalità e parametri ricorrenti. Per offrire una maggiore coerenza al lavoro, tutte le storie presentano quindi una tipologia simile di personaggi e tematiche.

La stessa tipologia accomuna anche i due testi che sono oggetto di studio del terzo ed ultimo capitolo. Per validare ulteriormente il costrutto teorico, infatti, si è scelto di offrire una lettura analitica di *Green Water, Green Sky* (1959) e di *A Fairy Good Time* (1970), due opere che la critica corrente denomina generalmente 'romanzi'. Questa definizione viene messa in discussione nel paragrafo iniziale, nel quale si mostra come, in ultima analisi, i due testi siano piuttosto estensioni o rielaborazioni del genere più congeniale a Gallant: il racconto. *Green Water,*

*Green Sky* (abbreviato GWGS) e *A Fairy Good Time* (da qui in avanti AFGT) si configurano come uno spazio relativamente circoscritto per poter affrontare l'indagine di un aspetto a rischio di infinita espansione, quale è appunto il rapporto tra identità e linguaggi, entrambi qui considerati nella loro pluralità di occorrenze e significati. In questo lavoro, infatti, non soltanto l'identità è colta nelle sue sfaccettature di rapporto con il sé e con gli altri, di identità sociale (la 'maschera' che gli individui indossano quando interagiscono in contesti interpersonali) e culturale. In parallelo, anche il termine 'linguaggio' viene pluralizzato: in tal modo, esso non viene considerato soltanto nella sua accezione di 'insieme di lingue naturali', con particolare riferimento all'inglese e al francese e a tutte le problematiche che emergono in contesti bilingui e in situazioni in cui compare la necessità di effettuare una traduzione; la tesi considera anche i linguaggi 'non verbali', in particolare quelli che costituiscono i marcatori dell'identità culturale, e tra questi soprattutto il cibo e l'abbigliamento. Viene inoltre presa in esame la varietà diamesica della lingua scritta, intesa anche in questo caso in una pluralità di accezioni.

L'apparato di note a fine capitolo costituisce uno spazio di approfondimento di alcuni aspetti che, per ragioni di pertinenza, non trovano collocazione nel corpus dell'elaborato. In particolare, tra gli elementi che meritano di essere approfonditi ulteriormente si annovera la questione editoriale di Gallant, assai complessa e controversa, come emerge da alcune note di approfondimento al capitolo primo e dalla corposa bibliografia finale, ripartita in tre sezioni (e in relative sottosezioni): opere di Mavis Gallant, opere su Mavis Gallant e altre opere.

## CAPITOLO PRIMO

**Mavis Gallant: l'identità di una scrittrice**

L'interesse per la vita degli scrittori ha da sempre superato la reale necessità di conoscere dettagli biografici indispensabili o quantomeno utili alla comprensione delle loro opere. Soprattutto dal punto di vista critico, un atteggiamento eccessivamente 'curioso' comporta il rischio di forzare l'analisi dei testi per adattarne il contenuto alle informazioni biografiche a disposizione. Intervistata da Paula Todd, Gallant ha espresso la sua inappellabile opinione in proposito, affermando che "tanto più i lettori e i critici pensano di conoscere la vita privata di uno scrittore, tanto più fraintendono la sua opera. Ogni qualvolta provano a far coincidere l'opera con la vita commettono degli errori. La vita non spiega nulla" (2009). Sembrerebbe inequivocabilmente chiaro, da questa e da analoghe dichiarazioni, che Gallant ci inviti a tenere nettamente separate vita e creazione artistica, a non aggiungere significati al testo per mezzo o a causa del dato biografico. La reticenza dichiarata a parlare di sé è la causa principale del lungo anonimato di Gallant nel panorama letterario canadese – e non solo – almeno fino alla fine degli anni Settanta. Il suo atteggiamento la pone in netto contrasto con le contemporanee scrittrici del cosiddetto *mainstream* canadese (prime tra tutte Margaret Atwood), che, diversamente da lei, hanno promosso in parallelo l'interesse per la loro opera e per la loro immagine pubblica.

Uno dei dubbi che però insorgono da un'analisi accurata della sua biografia (e, ancor più, di questa in relazione con le dichiarazioni esplicite al riguardo) è connesso con l'effettiva volontà e volontarietà della scrittrice di limitare la diffusione di informazioni sul proprio conto. Si dovrà di fatto notare una certa

discrepanza tra teoria e prassi: nonostante la reticenza spesso esplicitata da Gallant a parlare di sé e un numero elevato di dichiarazioni sulla netta separazione tra la vita e l'opera di uno scrittore, è lei stessa a istituire associazioni tra la sua vita e le sue opere, legittimando quindi un analogo comportamento da parte della critica. Va inoltre sottolineato che, poste al vaglio di una catalogazione capillare, le informazioni a nostra disposizione non sono scarse quanto ci si aspetterebbe dalle premesse sin qui esposte. Una collazione di tutti i materiali permette quindi una presentazione alquanto accurata della vita della scrittrice. La ricostruzione, che viene offerta al lettore nel secondo paragrafo di questo capitolo introduttivo, si incentra sugli aspetti biografici che hanno una consistente ricaduta a livello narrativo, con particolare riferimento alla lingua e all'identità, le due coordinate che inquadrano l'intero lavoro di tesi<sup>3</sup>.

Ho operato una catalogazione delle informazioni disponibili su Gallant secondo lo schema seguente:

- interviste e conversazioni (queste ultime sono interviste in cui la scrittrice, sentendosi più a suo agio perché in compagnia di qualche amico o di un giornalista particolarmente abile, si lascia andare a dichiarazioni più aperte). L'intervista a Geoff Hancock (1978a) si conferma dopo tanti anni uno dei momenti più interessanti per la critica, anche se recenti interviste (ad esempio quelle rilasciate nel 2009 alla scrittrice e ammiratrice Jumpa Lahiri e all'amica e critica Marta Dvorak) hanno ampliato notevolmente i dati in nostro possesso;
- opere di non fiction (prefazioni, introduzioni e articoli di giornale). In particolare si tratta dell'"Introduzione" a *Home Truths* (1981), la prima opera pensata specificamente per il mercato canadese, che contiene una riflessione sull'idea di canadesità e più in generale sul senso di appartenenza, e la "Prefazione" a *Selected Stories* (1996), la raccolta più corposa di racconti pubblicata ad oggi, nella quale si concentra il maggior numero di dettagli sull'infanzia di Gallant e alcune delle considerazioni più interessanti sulla lingua e sul processo creativo;

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<sup>3</sup> La biografia si limita contenutisticamente entro queste direttrici tematiche; se così non fosse, alla luce dei materiali raccolti, potrebbe essere ulteriormente ampliata.

- narrativa (soprattutto il ciclo di racconti semiautobiografici che hanno per protagonista Linnet Muir).

La ricostruzione della vita dell'autrice parte dall'infanzia, un periodo sul quale si ricavano molte informazioni soprattutto dal ciclo di racconti semiautobiografici di Linnet Muir. Nelle sei storie che hanno per protagonista Linnet si affrontano i grandi traumi della vita di Mavis: l'indagine infruttuosa sulla morte del padre, *remittance man*<sup>4</sup> inglese e aspirante pittore, i giorni dell'infanzia popolati dai 'grandi', noncuranti di una bambina precoce che inventava storie in quella che chiama la "lingua margherita"<sup>5</sup>, l'educazione nelle severe scuole francesi, mitigata solo dalla possibilità di leggere i libri per bambini in inglese, da allora in avanti "irremovibilmente cristallizzato come la lingua dell'immaginazione" (SS: xvi); all'età di quattro anni, infatti, Gallant entra in un convitto, il primo di diciassette diverse *boarding school* che frequenterà in Canada e negli Stati Uniti. A dispetto del grande divario esistente negli anni Venti tra Canada anglofono protestante e Canada francofono cattolico, la piccola Mavis viene iscritta in una scuola giansenista. Da questa insolita esperienza eredita, come ha dichiarato, "due sistemi di comportamento, divisi da sintassi e tradizione. Forse l'inizio della scrittura si colloca in un punto imprecisato di questo dualismo" (AP: 8). Impossibile risalire alle ragioni di una tale scelta (nel racconto autobiografico "The Doctor", la madre di Linnet lo fa per invidia personale nei confronti di una sua amica). Tuttavia è opportuno osservare che, sebbene Gallant non nasconda gli effetti fortemente negativi della sua educazione, è al contempo in grado di rilevarne gli enormi benefici, in particolare il bilinguismo perfetto e la grandissima capacità di adattamento: "non c'è luogo, contesto, in cui io non mi senta a mio agio, che non comprenda all'istante", dice Gallant a Geoff Hancock (1978a: 83). Non possiamo dimenticare di mettere in evidenza, però, che questo

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<sup>4</sup> Nello spiegare chi sono i "remittance men", Mavis Gallant li definisce come il prodotto di un istituto tipicamente britannico per mezzo del quale i giovani, generalmente figli maschi, venivano esiliati, senza che venisse data loro spiegazione dell'allontanamento. In attesa di tornare in una casa dove non erano desiderati, questi giovani vivevano un'esistenza segnata dalla precarietà e dalla sgradevole sensazione di aver fatto qualcosa di sbagliato, senza però riuscire mai a capire esattamente cosa. Le prime pagine della storia intitolata "Varieties of Exile" (HT: 266-270) si possono leggere quasi come un saggio critico sull'argomento. Gallant mostra le sue doti saggistiche anche in molte altre occasioni.

<sup>5</sup> In inglese "talking Marigold" (SS: xvi).

tipo di crescita l'ha trasformata, ancor prima di divenirne consapevole, in un'esule in patria, ingabbiata in quella che Linnet definisce "the prison of childhood", 'la prigione dell'infanzia' (HT: 225). Da qui trae origine quella che è, nelle sue pagine, quasi un'ossessione: la tendenza a popolare il proprio panorama narrativo di personaggi privi di una casa, da intendersi tanto come luogo fisico quanto come nucleo familiare. Non sono solo i bambini ad avere un rapporto difficile con il proprio 'nido'; anche da grandi, molti dei suoi personaggi sono *remittance men*, persone *in transit*, apolidi, stranieri, uomini colti nel difficile – spesso impossibile – atto di stabilire un contatto con un territorio diverso dalla terra natia (e pure nel caso della propria patria si sentono di non appartenere). La lingua interviene sempre a complicare, a ostacolare, persino a rendere impossibile il cambiamento.

La vita di Mavis Gallant, fatta salva la drammatica fase della crescita, costituisce un esempio in netto contrasto con il paradigma ricorrente nel suo universo finzionale. Nel suo caso, infatti, l'esilio rappresenta uno spartiacque fondamentale, un momento imprescindibile di rinascita, il punto di partenza per la (ri)costruzione di un'esistenza dove "solo l'indipendenza conta", come dice lei stessa citando Pasternak in epigrafe alla raccolta *Home Truths*. Il suo è stato di certo un esilio completamente volontario: non c'era, nel 1950, nessun elemento che la spingesse con forza lontano dal Canada all'età di ventotto anni. Aveva un incarico gratificante come giornalista presso il *Montreal Standard* e, sebbene donna e quindi sottopagata e sottovalutata come da prassi in quel contesto, al suo lavoro veniva riconosciuto un certo merito. Pubblicava, se non altro, quasi tutti i pezzi che proponeva ed ebbe opportunità importanti come la possibilità di intervistare, tra gli altri, Jean-Paul Sartre. La considerevole incidenza della formazione come giornalista è riconoscibile a vari livelli: dalla raccolta delle informazioni, eseguita con uguale puntigliosità per i testi giornalistici e quelli narrativi, alla maniacale perfezione nella descrizione del contesto storico e sociologico di riferimento. In linea generale, importanti tracce rimangono nella ricerca strenua della verosimiglianza e della plausibilità delle situazioni descritte, una ricerca che coinvolge anche la lingua parlata dai personaggi. Altro nodo cruciale che trae origine dalla carriera giornalistica è la messa in discussione del significato del messaggio comunicativo, che comprende una riflessione di matrice

squisitamente semiotica, nonostante la completa estraneità di Gallant da studi o interessi specificamente linguistici. Ciò deriva almeno in parte dal fatto che della carriera giornalistica fanno parte anche gli anni come didascalista (nella redazione di quelle che in inglese si chiamano *captions*), anni in cui Gallant ha potuto riflettere a lungo anche sulla relazione di significato tra parola e immagine, e sugli infiniti rischi di un 'equilibrio semantico' perennemente precario.

Va sottolineato che la ricerca della scrittrice parte sì da uno studio delle potenzialità del mezzo espressivo (tanto quello usato da lei nella scrittura quanto quello contenuto nelle parole fatte pronunciare o scrivere ai suoi personaggi), ma approda sempre ad una riflessione molto più ampia e complessa sull'uomo e sul mondo: il gioco di parole "word" ('parola') – "world" ('mondo') descrive bene i due estremi del raggio di interesse di Gallant.

Attrita da sempre da Parigi e facilitata dal perfetto bilinguismo, Mavis Gallant lasciò il Canada molto giovane (anche se non più giovanissima secondo i canoni dell'epoca), viaggiò per l'Europa (visitando Londra, la Spagna, la Germania, l'Italia e altri paesi) e poi si stabilì definitivamente nella capitale francese, dove vive tuttora nel quartiere di Montparnasse. Nel descrivere il momento forse più cruciale della sua vita, Gallant dichiara:

Ormai avevo varcato la soglia dei ventisette e stavo diventando proprio quello che non volevo essere: una giornalista che scriveva narrativa nei pochi ritagli di tempo libero. Ero convinta che la questione del continuare a scrivere o smettere del tutto dovesse essere decisa prima dei trent'anni. L'unica soluzione sembrava quella di una rottura decisiva, e di un tentativo: mi sarei concessa due anni di tempo. Di cosa avrei vissuto in quei due anni, a quanto pare non era un problema. Ripensandoci ora, credo che tutta la mia attenzione fosse concentrata sulla necessità di spiccare il volo (AP: 15-16).

Dopo il trasferimento, Gallant ha messo in pratica il dichiarato proposito di vivere solo *di* scrittura e immersa *nella* scrittura: non si è più risposata (il breve matrimonio con il jazzista John Gallant ha lasciato come traccia solo il cognome), non ha avuto figli, e ha sempre vissuto alternando l'esperienza della creazione artistica a una vita moderatamente mondana, tenuta però accuratamente lontana dai riflettori.

La biografia della scrittrice, tracciata qui per sommi capi e descritta nel dettaglio nel secondo paragrafo della tesi, è un tentativo di presentare le diverse identità corrispondenti alle diverse vite di Mavis Gallant<sup>6</sup>. La difficile negoziazione di tutte le sue identità private e artistiche culmina nell'auto-definizione "semplicemente scrittrice", un'etichetta che può essere letta come una maschera confezionata *ad hoc* per preservare la tanto cercata privacy. Da un lato, infatti, le informazioni sulla biografia gallantiana sono numericamente molte (e, come si è detto, persino maggiori delle aspettative); dall'altro, però, colpisce la ricorrenza con cui alcuni episodi si ripetono quasi con insistenza e spesso con identiche parole. La spiegazione offerta da Gallant (cioè che essere intervistata spesso sullo stesso argomento la porta altrettanto spesso a rispondere con le stesse parole) giustifica solo in parte quello che, ad un'attenta osservazione, si configura come un vero e proprio formulario, un frasario preconfezionato che preserva la scrittrice dal raccontare troppo di sé, rendendola immune da un'invasione della sua sfera privata. Affermare che Gallant non ama essere un personaggio pubblico non significa sperò ostendere al tempo stesso che si rifiuti di esserlo: consapevole che le dinamiche del mercato editoriale richiedono agli autori di essere un volto, oltre che una parola, Gallant ha accettato (sebbene non con entusiasmo e non con la frequenza che ha contraddistinto altri suoi colleghi più famosi) di essere intervistata. Ha perciò dovuto offrire ai suoi lettori un'immagine di sé. Posta di fronte a questa richiesta, tuttavia, Gallant ha deliberatamente scelto quale immagine presentare e ha costruito quest'immagine con la stessa maniacale cura con cui presenta i personaggi che abitano il suo mondo finzionale. Il risultato finale di una manovra che ha il forte sapore della premeditazione – e che nella tesi viene spiegata nel dettaglio attraverso la suddivisione in tre fasi (denominate 'coerenza', 'controllo' e 'stile') – è un insieme di riscontri positivi e negativi: il

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<sup>6</sup> La scelta di usare il plurale è pensata per riflettere la varietà di esperienze che Gallant ha vissuto a partire dall'infanzia. Queste esperienze in qualche modo sanciscono l'esistenza di vite separate, molto diverse tra loro. L'espressione è innanzitutto una citazione dal racconto "In Youth is Pleasure", una storia nella quale una Linnet quasi detective indaga sulle misteriose circostanze della morte del padre e ripensa agli ultimi otto anni della sua esistenza definendoli "diverse vite" (HT: 232). A ciò si aggiunga che l'espressione ricorda il titolo dell'ultima biografia di Joseph Conrad, scritta dal critico J.H. Stape (2007). Conrad è uno scrittore che è stato associato a Gallant soprattutto per via di alcune evidenti analogie biografiche: l'esilio volontario, il bilinguismo e la decisione di convertirsi alla scrittura dopo una precedente esperienza di vita (Conrad, è ben noto, svolse per molti anni l'attività di marinaio). Nell'ambito dello spirito comparatistico che questa tesi è chiamata a promuovere, Conrad viene preso in esame con paralleli e rimandi in alcuni punti del presente lavoro.

registro narrativo dell'autrice, così coinvolgente da attirare i lettori della sua narrativa, è lo stesso con cui Gallant parla di sé nelle interviste e più ancora nelle prefazioni. In virtù di ciò, la scrittrice si assume in qualche modo la diretta responsabilità dell'interessamento del pubblico nei confronti della propria vita privata. Impossibilitata ad arginare questo interesse, Gallant ha però potuto attuare sulle informazioni fornite un'operazione di manipolazione, offrendo un'immagine di sé accuratamente filtrata, elaborata, in qualche modo 'narratologizzata' – in inglese "fictionalized", da cui l'espressione "fictional biography" che costituisce la parola chiave della tesi che si vuole dimostrare in questo primo capitolo.

## CAPITOLO SECONDO

**Identificare i linguaggi:  
modello teorico essenziale e casi studio esemplificativi**

L'interesse di Mavis Gallant per le lingue e i linguaggi, intesi nelle più svariate accezioni, è stato rilevato da un numero consistente di critici che si sono occupati della sua opera. Tuttavia, è sorprendente come tale numero si riduca se si considerano solamente coloro che hanno effettuato analisi sistematiche o approfondite in questo campo<sup>7</sup> (e, anche in questo caso, l'attenzione dedicata all'argomento non raggiunge mai le dimensioni dello studio di carattere monografico). Inoltre, quando si parla di lingue o linguaggi (in inglese definiti con un unico termine, 'languages'), non si può non sottolineare la ristrettezza semantica con cui questi termini vengono presi in esame. Lingua e linguaggio sono infatti stati considerati finora soltanto in qualità di 'lingue naturali' o come 'voce' in senso narrativo (accezione, quest'ultima, che sebbene imprescindibilmente legata all'oggetto della nostra analisi, non è certamente centrale rispetto al problema in oggetto).

Il mio studio sui linguaggi in Gallant parte dalla constatazione che la sua riflessione sulla lingua si articola su più livelli, sconfinando persino in ambiti squisitamente linguistici – senza tuttavia divenire, come si è detto, trattazione teorica, né presentare mai velleità di tipo linguistico/semiotico nel senso tecnico del termine. Tuttavia, alcune riflessioni presenti nei testi della scrittrice hanno il sapore, se non della teoria pura, di una meditazione di certo approfondita sulla parola: la sua indagine spazia dal rapporto significato/significante alla polisemia, dall'incongruenza tra messaggio inviato e messaggio ricevuto alla manipolazione

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<sup>7</sup> Si vedano soprattutto Gabriel 1994 e Keith 1988.

del contenuto, dall'incomunicabilità alla mancanza di chiarezza nei rapporti di comunicazione tra gli individui, tanto con se stessi quanto con gli altri.

Dopo aver introdotto questi aspetti, la tesi presenta una panoramica dei linguaggi tradizionalmente intesi: le cosiddette lingue naturali. Oltre ad un numero sorprendente di lingue, le pagine di Gallant sono ricche di linguaggi e gerghi privati. Spesso il focus dell'autrice ricade, più che sulle lingue, sui problemi legati ad esse, come ad esempio le difficoltà comunicative che emergono in contesti bilingui o l'impossibilità di comunicare in una lingua non conosciuta (o anche solo non padroneggiata). 'Tradotti' da un contesto anglofono a Parigi, piuttosto che villeggianti di lunga data sulla Riviera ligure o lungodegenti in cliniche svizzere sulle Alpi, molti personaggi non parlano l'idioma locale o non pronunciano l'inglese con un accento riconoscibile. La loro è, non di rado, una lingua franca, un inglese degli emigranti o dei figli degli emigranti, come quello di Netta Asher, protagonista di "La moglie musulmana", che, appunto "si considerava profondamente inglese", ma in realtà "parlava l'inglese dei bambini emigrati, quasi leggesse ad alta voce" (AP: 60). La loro è una lingua che li costringe spesso a provare un certo grado di alienante estraneità e un senso scomodo di non appartenenza ovunque si trovino. Sono riconoscibilmente irriconoscibili e, poiché il luogo in qualche modo qualifica l'identità, essi ne sono privi, o quantomeno deficitarii.

Anche le problematiche legate a vari aspetti della traduzione costituiscono un elemento che Gallant considera con attenzione: la scrittrice si sofferma ad osservare la questione non solo dall'interno dei suoi testi, ma anche rispetto ad essi, con riflessioni puntuali sulla necessità di una traduzione che renda pienamente la polisemia del testo fonte.

Soprattutto se, come si è scelto effettivamente di fare, i linguaggi vengono considerati nella loro pluralità di significati, essi costituiscono un oggetto di studio a rischio di infinita espansione. Si è reso quindi necessario delimitare in qualche modo il campo di indagine, costruendo un contenitore tematico che facilitasse un'analisi circostanziata sia a livello teorico sia sul piano dell'analisi minuta dei testi. Stanti le premesse fin qui esposte, gli studi su Gallant hanno fatto emergere

quasi spontaneamente l' 'identità' come parametro tematico di riferimento. Se da un lato è indubbio che la preoccupazione linguistica di Gallant è centrale nella sua narrativa, d'altro canto non si può non considerare che questa non si esaurisce in direzione autoreferenziale, cioè non rimane mai al livello di un'indagine del linguaggio sul linguaggio; essa si rivela invece, come abbiamo visto, soltanto il punto di partenza imprescindibile della riflessione che la scrittrice compie sull'uomo. I suoi personaggi sono presi in esame sia quando si guardano allo specchio – reale o metaforico – per *scoprire* aspetti del proprio io, sia quando interagiscono con gli altri, industriandosi a *coprire* invece gli aspetti della propria personalità che non corrispondono all'immagine idealizzata di se stessi. L'identità viene pertanto colta nelle varie declinazioni di identità personale (e quindi negoziazione delle varie identità compresenti in un individuo), sociale e culturale, tutti aspetti che sono impossibili da analizzare o descrivere singolarmente, poiché si presentano sempre in relazioni strettamente intrecciate tra loro.

Per poter determinare i vari elementi legati alla percezione e alla rappresentazione del sé, nonché quelli connessi all'interazione tra gli individui nelle relazioni familiari e in contesti sociali, i linguaggi analizzati sono stati molteplici. Si è scelto da un lato di guardare ai linguaggi non verbali intesi soprattutto come marcatori dell'identità. Valutata la predominanza del cibo e dell'abbigliamento sia a livello teorico (si veda tra gli altri Calefato 2004) sia nelle opere di Gallant, si è dato risalto a questi due 'linguaggi' per mezzo di un approccio multidisciplinare (comprendente studi di psicologia, sociologia, antropologia, critica letteraria, linguistica, *cultural e social studies*, ecc.). Il modello teorico non è comprensivo di tutti gli studi effettuati in questi anni (e parzialmente elencati nella bibliografia finale), che sarebbe qui inopportuno indicare di volta in volta in liste parentetiche. Tali liste avrebbero l'inutile risultato di appesantire la lettura di quella che è stata pensata come la presentazione discorsiva di un *framework*, piuttosto che la descrizione tecnica di un metodo. Quello che si ricava è in qualche modo un modello, applicabile certamente a tutti i testi di Gallant e, per estensione, anche a quelli di altri autori. Tale sistema ha permesso di effettuare l'analisi di alcune storie campione, scelte non in quanto unici esempi di validazione del modello teorico di riferimento, ma solo perché,

nella difficoltà di operare una scelta (visto che tutti i racconti di Gallant contenevano almeno alcuni degli aspetti analizzati), si è optato per un'ulteriore unitarietà tematica: sono state quindi prese in esame storie contraddistinte dalla presenza di giovani donne che stanno vivendo momenti significativi della loro esistenza, che sono alle prese con una fase di cambiamento, preludio di una potenziale crescita (quasi mai pienamente raggiunta). Poiché analoghi contenuti ritornano poi anche nei due romanzi che sono oggetto di studio del terzo capitolo, il corpus delle opere contraddistinte da questa identità tematica si espande fino a creare una selezione contenutisticamente uniforme, alla quale potrebbero altresì essere aggiunte molte altre storie.

Prima dell'analisi dei testi, la tesi dedica un paragrafo ad un'ulteriore espansione dell'accezione di 'linguaggio'. Si tratta di un aspetto – quello della lingua scritta e narrativa – che certamente meriterebbe uno studio isolato, vista la ricchezza che i testi di Gallant presentano in termini di citazioni e di interscambio con opere di altri autori. La capacità citazionale di Gallant – frutto della vastità del suo panorama culturale – è tale da consentirle di utilizzare le citazioni e le allusioni con una naturalezza estrema, tanto che queste sfuggono spesso all'orecchio del lettore, per quanto attento e preparato. C'è però da sottolineare che la ricercatezza con cui Gallant intesse questi materiali nella propria trama non prende mai il sapore di un'operazione elitaria. La mancanza di riconoscimento del testo fonte non ostacola la lettura, e la comprensione piena dei testi di Gallant è un successo riservato a pochi, a prescindere dalla possibilità o meno di cogliere le allusioni ai modelli. Nella tesi, l'indagine di questi aspetti si accompagna allo studio dei testi 'scritti' dai personaggi. Questi testi presentano delle costanti, e in generale si configurano come i tentativi da parte dei protagonisti delle storie di costruire un'immagine di sé o del proprio vissuto più rispondente alle proprie esigenze o alle aspettative del momento. Un progetto revisionista attuato sul passato individuale (oltre che collettivo) è parte integrante di questo processo. I testi scritti (oppure le rielaborazioni orali) si pongono di solito in contrapposizione con il patrimonio culturale dei personaggi, fatto di citazioni (talvolta errate), legami con il passato e l'infanzia che riemergono con forza, spesso in contrasto

con la volontà dei singoli di cancellare la loro identità originaria e di sostituirla con una versione automodellata.

Nelle tre storie che sono oggetto del paragrafo contenente i casi studio vengono osservate da vicino le dinamiche secondo le quali Gallant muove le fila della sua narrativa: con una certa frequenza, la scrittrice mette in luce come anche nei casi di isolamento linguistico – che sono spesso casi di *autoisolamento* – l'impiego di un linguaggio condiviso non sempre dà gli esiti sperati di piena e reciproca comprensione. Il *focus* dell'autrice ricade quindi costantemente sull'incomunicabilità, a prescindere dalla lingua o dai linguaggi parlati. Inoltre, constatando l'impossibilità di un uso limpido, non equivoco della lingua, Gallant costringe i propri personaggi a 'comunicare' in altri modi.

In "The Picnic", la prima delle storie prese in esame, la famiglia Marshall è parte di un gruppo di soldati americani d'istanza in un piccolo paese della Francia. Lo scontro culturale viene sottolineato attraverso la descrizione dei preparativi di un picnic, pensato per promuovere l'integrazione tra le diverse culture, ma prefigurato attraverso gli occhi di Paula Marshall, moglie di un maggiore, come un disastroso 'discorso' (reale e metaforico) non tradotto. Ospiti della signora Pégurin, i piccoli figli dei Marshall si trovano intrappolati tra due culture. La madre cerca di assimilarli al prototipo americano anni Cinquanta (purezza incontaminata), tenendoli per quanto possibile lontani dalla lascivia francese (che, nelle descrizioni dei merletti di Madame Pégurin e dei suoi dolcetti al liquore, ricorda una corte settecentesca). Attraverso il cibo e i vestiti i bambini vengono però conquistati dalla dissolutezza che Paula identifica con la cultura d'oltralpe (e che la donna tenta inutilmente di combattere proponendo cibo incolore e insapore). La scena finale, che ricorda un quadro impressionista *en plein air*, sentenzia la vittoria di Madame Pégurin, che orgogliosamente si circonda dei mutati Marshall, perfettamente a loro agio tra golosi prodotti di pasticceria e abiti scintillanti. A Paula non rimane che consolarsi con la fantasia, immaginando la padrona di casa fotografata mentre contamina la propria identità culturale mangiando un hot dog in pubblico.

In “Autumn Day”, Cissy Rowe è una giovane donna data in sposa al taciturno marito Walt, soldato mandato in Austria durante la guerra. Costretti a vivere per alcuni mesi in una fattoria lontana dal mondo civilizzato, Cissy e il marito faticano a costruire intimità e complicità, e Cissy cerca di rimanere ancorata alla propria identità di bambina attraverso un abbigliamento marcatamente infantile, che ricorda un’uniforme scolastica. Tra i vari coinquilini della fattoria, che interagiscono a tavola in un clima di conflitto (versione in miniatura della guerra che fa da sfondo storico alla vicenda), Cissy rimane affascinata dalla misteriosa Miss West, che non incontrerà mai per via delle macchinazioni del proprietario del luogo. Questi l’aiuta a tradurre il testo di una poesia/canzone, “Autumn Day”, su cui Miss West si esercita nella sua stanza all’ultimo piano. Nelle parole della poesia di Rilke, che descrivono lo strazio di chi non avrà mai una casa, la giovane donna trova inspiegabilmente conforto. La speranza condivisa col marito di sistemare ogni aspetto inconcluso del loro rapporto quando troveranno finalmente un appartamento per conto loro si infrange di fronte alla constatazione del lettore che è la canzone, con i suoi versi pessimistici, a rispecchiare più realisticamente il futuro di Cissy e del marito.

Difficoltà relazionali sono al centro anche dell’ultima storia analizzata, “In the Tunnel”, dove la giovane Sarah Holmes viene irretita dal problematico ex carceriere Roy Cooper, figura ambigua e crudele che eserciterà una violenza psicologica sulla giovane donna, ingenua e innamorata. Subito dopo averla conosciuta, Roy la invita in Provenza, nella dependance di alcuni amici: si tratta dei Reeve, coppia di attempati inglesi trapiantati nel sud della Francia ma rimasti ancorati in modo viscerale alla madrepatria inglese. Ogni gesto e ogni rito dei Reeve sono una celebrazione dell’Inghilterra, a partire dal cibo, che acquistano percorrendo chilometri in auto e di cui parlano ossessivamente in privato, con un gergo infantile. Il racconto, un’interessante commistione di linguaggi, mostra come parlare la stessa lingua sia in realtà ininfluenza ai fini di una comunicazione ben riuscita. Sarah, canadese anglofona, è lontana da ogni modo di comunicare dei Reeve e di Roy, nell’accento, nell’umorismo, nel cibo e nell’abbigliamento. L’incapacità della giovane donna di rendersi conto di essere entrata in un tunnel pericoloso viene sottolineata non tanto nella descrizione della discesa agli inferi

pratica e psicologica cui la costringe il suo carnefice – chiaramente affetto da disturbi ossessivo-compulsivi – quanto piuttosto nella scena finale: qui il narratore ci mostra Sarah in procinto di incominciare una nuova storia, ma dai pochi indizi che ci vengono offerti la relazione si preannuncia come la ‘riscrittura’ della precedente.

L’analisi di queste storie non ha escluso l’allusione ad altri testi, come la famosa novella “The Pegnitz Junction” o l’autobiografica “Night and Day”, o ancora “A Day Like Any Other”. Gli esempi sono molti, così come molti sono gli aspetti trattati nel dettaglio durante l’analisi delle singole storie, aspetti che qui, per ragioni di spazio, non possono trovare adeguata espressione.

## CAPITOLO TERZO

**Parole silenziose e oggetti parlanti  
nei ‘romanzi’ di Mavis Gallant**

Per validare il paradigma teorico che sottende a questa tesi, mi è sembrato opportuno prendere in esame i due testi che hanno ricevuto maggiore attenzione dalla critica, mostrando come, nonostante un consistente numero di saggi critici sia già stato scritto su questi lavori, nessuno abbia mai condotto studi approfonditi in questa direzione. Le due opere in oggetto sono i due romanzi *Green Water, Green Sky* (pubblicato nel 1959), e *A Fairly Good Time* (edito nel 1970). Entrambe le opere, tradotte in francese e tedesco, rimangono per il momento inedite in Italia.

Prima di cimentarmi nell'analisi dei testi, ho ritenuto opportuno, nell'ambito di uno studio sull'identità che si è sviluppato a vari livelli (compreso, come si è visto, quello dell'identità della scrittrice), proporre una riflessione sull'identità del genere nella narrativa di Gallant. La riflessione ha origine dal fatto che GWGS e AFGT sono gli unici due testi che la critica (peraltro non sempre unanimemente) ha denominato ‘romanzi’. Senza entrare nel merito di questioni narratologiche particolarmente tecniche, alla luce di un'indagine delle caratteristiche principali dei due lavori, sono molto più spesso le somiglianze (tematiche, ma anche stilistiche e strutturali) ad emergere e non le differenze con il restante corpus dei testi di Gallant. Ciò è vero a tal punto che definirli ‘romanzi’ sembra non tanto riduttivo, ma quantomeno fuorviante. Meglio sarebbe parlare di estensioni o elaborazioni, o addirittura evoluzioni del genere più congeniale a Gallant: il racconto. Legata alla definizione di genere è senz'altro l'analisi delle complessità strutturali dei due testi, nei quali si riscontrano tutte le declinazioni della

transtestualità così come presentata da Genette. Il paragrafo relativo a questi aspetti si apre con una descrizione delle varie parti che compongono GWGS: rilievo viene dato non soltanto ai quattro macrocapitoli (tutti, tranne l'ultimo, pubblicati prima individualmente come racconti sul *New Yorker*, la nota rivista che da sempre accoglie le pubblicazioni di Gallant), ma anche e soprattutto al loro riposizionamento (l'ordine di pubblicazione in rivista non coincide con la disposizione nella versione 'a romanzo', né con l'ordine cronologico degli eventi narrati). Una valutazione di questo dato permette di asserire che GWGS è in qualche misura uno smascheramento divertito delle complessità di una struttura narrativa, semplificata ai minimi termini proprio per renderla immediatamente riconoscibile al pubblico di lettori, ai quali viene permesso quindi di cogliere il *divertissement* della scrittrice.

In AFGT, invece, il romanzo è posto in stretta relazione con due racconti brevi, che diversamente 'dialogano' con il testo principale. La short story "An Accident" è un flashback sul primo matrimonio della protagonista Shirley e sulla prematura scomparsa del giovane marito Peter Higgins durante la loro luna di miele in Italia. Il testo è stato pubblicato singolarmente, ma è anche integrato nel tessuto del romanzo con variazioni irrilevanti, che corrispondono ai minimi cambiamenti necessari alla sua inclusione. Diversa è invece la sorte toccata a "In Transit", breve narrazione che descrive Philippe Perrigny, il marito (ormai ex) di Shirley, in viaggio con la nuova moglie. speculari dal punto di vista contenutistico e temporale (sono un'analessi e una prolessi), i due racconti assumono una serie di valenze rispetto al romanzo; inoltre, si intrecciano al tessuto del testo 'sorgente' tanto da divenirne in qualche modo emanazioni, sebbene nel processo creativo entrambi costituiscano fasi antecedenti alla stesura del romanzo.

L'analisi degli aspetti transtestuali e metanarrativi si propone di mostrare al lettore in quanti e quali modi i due romanzi siano in grado di giocare con acutezza con altri testi, scritti dai personaggi, da altri autori o dalla stessa Gallant (come abbiamo visto nei casi sopra descritti). Un aspetto che emerge con forza in entrambi i romanzi è l'insistenza con cui i personaggi manipolano la realtà – tanto il passato quanto il futuro – al fine di ottenere versioni che meglio rispecchino le

loro aspettative e le loro esigenze. Tale è l'emblematico caso di Shirley Perrigny, sempre impegnata a riscrivere porzioni di vita vissuta; ma tale è anche la vicenda più profonda e infelice di Flor McCarthy, la protagonista di GWGS, la quale è affetta da una grave forma di schizofrenia e viene osservata nel suo progressivo distaccarsi dalle persone a lei vicine (la madre e il marito). Determinata a ricreare nei sogni la versione di una se stessa bambina riaccolta tra le braccia del padre (che nella realtà l'ha abbandonata), Flor intraprende un viaggio a metà tra il reale e l'onirico nel quale il contatto con la realtà viene a poco a poco perdendosi anche a causa della progressiva a-logia di cui è vittima e del suo distacco dalla comunicazione verbale.

Nel magma denso e ricco di citazioni, allusioni letterarie, testi scritti e resoconti manipolati è difficile scegliere in questa sede un esempio che renda pienamente la complessità della fitta trama di rimandi costruita da Gallant. A titolo esemplificativo è forse opportuno citare le lettere, che sono numerose in tutti i testi gallantiani, ma che in questi due casi specifici – e soprattutto in AFGT – rappresentano un valore aggiunto dei romanzi. Le loro implicazioni si diramano in numerose direzioni. Se prendiamo ad esempio la lettera scritta dalla madre di Shirley, Mrs. Norrington, possiamo osservare che il testo si presenta superficialmente come una trattazione botanica inizialmente incomprensibile alla figlia; questa però riesce a decifrare il messaggio 'nascosto' quando, alla fine del romanzo, raggiunge da sola la maturità per accettare l'abbandono del marito. La lettera, che apre la narrazione, si ritrova infatti anche nelle ultime pagine, configurandosi in tal modo come una cornice strutturale e al tempo stesso tematica.

L'“ininterrotto dialogo tra sordi” (AFGT: 45) con cui il narratore indica il rapporto madre-figlia nel romanzo è in realtà una definizione che ben si adatta a molti altri rapporti descritti in questa e in altre opere di Gallant. L'incomunicabilità è infatti un aspetto che la scrittrice non dimentica mai di mettere in luce, vuoi per mezzo di una scrittura indecifrabile (quella di Shirley agli occhi della madre) o di una mancanza di comprensione linguistica (tale sembrerebbe essere il caso di Shirley e Philippe, ostacolati dalle incompatibilità

tra inglese e francese), oppure per via di un'incapacità dell'emittente o della non volontà del ricevente di comprendere il messaggio a lui destinato. Qualunque sia la causa, la comunicazione è interrotta, privata, manipolata, distorta. Per questo è necessario far ricorso ad una rete di linguaggi non verbali, che costruiscono discorsi altri, paralleli o contrapposti a quelli espressi con il comune mezzo delle parole.

Lo studio di quello che ho definito il 'linguaggio dell'abbigliamento' abbraccia una serie molto eterogenea di casi, descrivendo di volta in volta come i personaggi facciano uso del loro abito per proporre un'immagine di sé al resto del mondo, ma anche – e forse soprattutto – per dialogare con se stessi. Questo è il caso di Flor in *GWGS*, la quale, nel momento che precede la crisi finale e il definitivo abbandono del mondo cosciente, riesce comunque a comunicare, a 'scrivere' il suo discorso attraverso l'atto simbolico della creazione (e successiva distruzione) di un vestito, che rappresenta il suo tentativo di chiudere i conti con la difficile figura materna, l'amata e odiata Bonnie. Anche nel caso di *AFGT* la scelta di un certo abbigliamento è la forte dichiarazione di rifiuto del modello materno, anche se l'accento cade con maggiore enfasi su un aspetto più profondo e radicato: il costante riferimento al proprio io 'scompagnato', che Shirley ben descrive elaborando una personale teoria sugli 'accoppiatori di bottoni'.

Nel paragrafo successivo, il cibo viene preso in esame per mostrare la molteplicità di risvolti sia dei singoli alimenti sia del momento che più di tutti è in grado di rivelare aspetti salienti dell'identità sociale: sono i pasti infatti ad avere un ruolo centrale in questo paragrafo, che prende però in considerazione il cibo anche a livello metaforico e l'uso che Gallant fa delle espressioni culinarie per moltiplicare i rimandi semantici disseminati nei suoi testi. L'attenzione al cibo come pericolo di contaminazione, così come è stato già presentato in "The Picnic", ben descrive il caso della madre e della sorella di Philippe, ossessionate da qualsiasi incursione proveniente dall'esterno. Alla bocca come ingresso del corpo corrisponde la porta come ingresso della loro casa: così come le due donne rifiutano il cibo cucinato da Shirley durante il loro primo incontro, allo stesso modo le impediscono di entrare nel loro spazio più intimo, la casa, e

concretizzano a fatti e a parole la separazione della coppia che Philippe non era stato in grado di portare a termine. In GWGS, Flor è protagonista di pasti sporadici e poco nutrienti, che l'amica Doris, lasciata a vigilare sul suo stato di salute psicofisica, ricava da scatolame e cibi pronti. L'unico 'cibo' che ingerirebbe volentieri sono le pillole per dormire, che Doris nasconde dentro la scatola delle ricette. Chiusa per questo fuori dall'appartamento e dalla vita dell'amica, Doris ritorna a 'casa', lasciando a Flor le sue 'ricette' di vita, che però non salvano la giovane protagonista dal tracollo finale. Nell'ultima scena, la madre e il marito di Flor (ormai confinata in un centro di salute mentale), a cena con il giovane George, danno voce al loro stato di 'lutto' tramite l'abbigliamento e il comportamento a tavola.

## Conclusioni

Un riassunto di poche pagine non può certamente rendere la complessità di un lavoro di tesi che si articola su una misura ben più ampia. Non può, soprattutto, dare misura dei singoli casi analizzati nel dettaglio, partendo da una lettura dei testi, delle singole parole che poi si distacca progressivamente e coglie, come una telecamera che via via si allontana, la globalità dell'opera di Gallant, e la stessa opera anche in relazione con la sua identità di donna e di scrittrice.

Interrogata sulla sua principale preoccupazione come scrittrice Gallant ha risposto che punta a rendere ogni cosa chiara (Kalotay 1999). Ma cosa intende per 'chiara'? In *A Fairly Good Time* il narratore afferma che "ogni cosa tra due persone è equivoca" (AFGT: 30). Solo apparentemente in contraddizione, queste due affermazioni abbracciano l'intero raggio di speculazione di questa tesi e si pongono alle estremità di ciò che il presente lavoro ha cercato di dimostrare: analizzando le difficoltà e le criticità del linguaggio, di tutti i linguaggi, le lotte per percepire e rappresentare la propria identità e infine i vuoti e gli ostacoli nella comunicazione, Gallant riesce a rendere 'chiaro' che "ogni cosa tra due persone è equivoca". Può trattarsi di una traduzione, nei casi in cui i personaggi si trovano intrappolati in universi linguistici incomprensibili, tra parlanti di lingue che non conoscono o che si rifiutano di imparare; oppure può trattarsi di ostacoli che si frappongono tra la capacità di *negoziare* un'immagine di sé rispondente alle proprie aspettative e la stessa immagine erroneamente percepita dagli altri. Potrebbe anche essere il caso di messaggi non inviati, o formulati scorrettamente, o non ricevuti, o mal interpretati. Le possibilità, come Gallant ci dimostra ampiamente, sono pressoché infinite: qualsiasi sia il linguaggio, qualsiasi l'identità, la *negoziazione* si trasforma in una lotta, una lotta senza vincitori.

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\* This section is a selection. For further bibliographical references on Gallant’s non-fictional texts, see Merler 1978, Besner 1983, Malcom and Grant 1984, Keefer 1989, *et alia*.

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