

# STRUCTURAL PATTERNS OF ALIENATION & DISJUNCTION

*Mavis Gallant's Firmly-Structured Stories*

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GALLANT ONCE REMARKED THAT "style is inseparable from structure" ("What is Style?" 6), so that both the expression and presentation of events, feelings, thoughts and conversations convey the message of fictional pieces. The correlation between presentation and message would seem to imply that firm textual strategies accompany accounts of well-structured lives. Yet, in Mavis Gallant's fiction, firm structural patterns frame disjunction. The main characters of her firmly-structured stories turn out to be totally alienated from their human environment where they lead marginal lives. Their marginality confirms O'Connor's observation that "in the short story, there is this sense of outlawed figures wandering about the fringes of society . . . [The] intense awareness of human loneliness" (19) that emerges from short stories in fact results from the organisation of materials, at least in Gallant's case. Indeed, a number of her stories firmly mark out a route to discover human isolation. Thus, an analysis of several firmly-structured stories brings one reality to the fore: their apparent "firmness" conveys patterns of fragmentation, disconnection or alienation. The following discussion of three stories<sup>1</sup> with different structural patterns — ranging from a variety of sections with shifting focus through a linear development with temporal and geographical stages to a triangular design — reveals that even within a solid frame, within a chronological narrative, disconnectedness may prevail. Representatives of respectively childhood, adolescence and early adulthood, the protagonist(s) of each story move about haphazardly, evolve without a goal, and end up being totally estranged from one another and/or from the other characters.

Theories on the creation of stories abound. But most writers have their own approach and their views on the process of writing vary considerably. In one of her scarce comments, Mavis Gallant suggests how her stories come to existence:

I wouldn't choose a theme and write about it. A story usually begins, for me, with people in a situation, like that. (Locks ringers together). The knot either relaxes or becomes locked in another way . . . The situation has a beginning and as much ending as any situation in life.<sup>2</sup>

One may doubt, however, that her selection and arrangement of details is genuinely spontaneous. Indeed, some of her stories give indications as to how they are built: more often than not, they include comments that can be read on two levels — the purely fictional relation of events and the metafictional interest in the process of creation. Of course, such double reading does not suffice to determine how her stories function. But an understanding can be gained from the temporal succession and causality, the *story's* (Bal, 5) points of departure and arrival together with the intervening sequences of action, their relations to one another, their locale, and their suggestive significance. Silences, and information held back, too, should be detected: unmentioned relations are often more significant than explicit, and thus less subtle, revelations. Once taken into account, these considerations contribute to the deeper meaning of each story; for it goes without saying that the principles of organisation underlying Gallant's texts and their ways of conveying meaning are interdependent.

"About Geneva" (*The Other Paris*, 190-198),<sup>3</sup> for instance, illustrates how a story built on a firm pattern can nevertheless reflect the characters' disconnectedness: detachment characterises the structure of both the story and the family depicted, though the narration is strictly chronological.<sup>4</sup> True, the external retroversions — "about Geneva" as the title indicates — could be said to disrupt the chronology, but in fact the story is based on those very *rétroversions*: the story would not be if it were not for them. The story basically recounts how two grown-ups are fishing for information about two children's first stay at their father's in Geneva. Still in their innocent childhood days, Ursula and Colin go back to their *meubl * in Nice where their mother and grandmother welcome them. Immediately, the adults start cross-examining the children for facts "about Geneva." The shifting focus of their enquiry contributes to the increasing detachment between the children and the adults while the implicit tension between the set-ups in Nice and Geneva adds to the chaotic relationships within the family. In its exposition of the struggle for power taking place between the father and the grandmother/mother pair over the two children, the story lays bare, through the text's structure, the fortress of the children's minds and their resistance to infiltration even from close relatives.

The story's tripartite organisation with flashbacks discloses the children's unwillingness to communicate, asserting their determination to rule their lives alone. Divided into three parts of unequal length, the narration discloses an episode in the family confrontation while reproducing the order of the *fabula* (Bal, 5). Each part focuses on one character at a time, thus emphasizing how divided the family is. The first part gives precedence to the overbearing grandmother: "Granny" not only presides over the opening but also manipulates each character so as to hear just what she wants to. In about four pages (OP 190-beginning 195), she manages to exert her control over the entire family and go against her daughter's express

request not to be inquisitive openly nor to formulate criticism. By starting the first line with her name — that of a function, not an emotional relation<sup>5</sup> — the story immediately establishes her power over the family: from the very first minute, she causes the children and her daughter to have feelings of guilt. The family network is immediately highlighted as the children conceal their uneasiness and discontent through misbehaviour, while their mother fakes cheerfulness. The theatrical reception lasts a page and a half before they are allowed in, as if to signify its unwelcoming quality. The selection of minute details makes this explicit :

She (the mother) came in *at last*, drew off her gloves, looked around *as if she*, and not the children, *had been away*, (OP 191, my italics).

In the lapse of time between their arrival and their entrance, the grandmother hardly allows her daughter to speak. Then suspicion and contempt alternate in a concert of voices whose soloist, the grandmother, sets the tone. She elicits information from the children with her insidious questions and comments and keeps the conversation going, in spite of the children's unwillingness to cooperate.

Unexpectedly the spotlight is then turned on Ursula whose revelations make up the second part of the story (OP 194-beginning 196). But her revelations say less "about Geneva" than about herself. What she has gained from her stay abroad is her newly-acquired literary inclination. Like her father, she has developed a genuine enthusiasm for what she is writing — her play "The Grand Duke." She has even already suppressed her memories of Geneva and replaced them with her fantasies: "everything about the trip, in the end, (crystallizes) around Tatiana and the Grand Duke. Already, Ursula (is) Tatiana" (OP 196). Whatever she says is waved aside for she takes after her father, the other. "By the simple act of creating Tatiana and the Grand Duke, she (has) removed herself from the ranks of reliable witnesses" (OP 197). And so she ceases to be the focus of attention in favour of Colin whose memories are recorded in the third and final part (OP 196-198). However, he too has already started erasing Geneva from his memories:

"I fed the swans," Colin suddenly shouted.

There, he had told about Geneva. He sat up and kicked his heels on the carpet as if the noise would drown out the consequence of what he had revealed. As he said it, the image became static : a grey sky, a gray lake, and a swan wonderfully turning upside down with the black rubber feet showing above the water. His father was not in the picture at all ; neither was *she*. But Geneva was fixed for the rest of his life: gray, lake, swan, (OP 196)

What his subconscious retains is a static image without human figures: his grey picture of the place is indicative of his indifference to people. "Having delivered his secret, he [has] nothing more to tell" (OP 196). The revelations "about Geneva" thus reach an end, for Ursula is not a reliable witness and Colin starts inventing. The focus slowly shifts to the children's mother who, now alone with Colin, tries

to figure out "why her husband [has] left her" (OP 198). The incursions into her mind show how she has combined the various images of Geneva that her mother, daughter and son have evoked in turn. Totally fixed, the picture nevertheless arouses her envy and resentment at being left behind. Her eagerness to know more might lead to another, though unlikely, revealing discussion with Colin. Her final doubts, just before the end, leave a bitter taste of disillusionment, corresponding to her relegation to a position of less than secondary importance :

nothing had come back from the trip but her own feelings of longing and envy, the longing and envy she felt at night, seeing, at a crossroad or over a bridge, the lighted windows of a train sweep by. Her children had nothing to tell her. Perhaps, as she had said, one day Colin would say something, produce the image of Geneva, tell her about the lake, the boats, the swans, and why her husband had left her. Perhaps he could tell her, but, really, she doubted it. And, already, so did he. (OP 198)

Thus the purpose of the trip is disclosed in a final interior monologue that mirrors the utter dissolution of a family whose members cannot and will not communicate. The final sentence ("And, already, so did he") gives the story a circular character: Colin is about to close the door to communication, which has led the children to be sent to Geneva. Cut off from the others, he reproduces his father's pattern of isolation and transfers the process of alienation into the next generation : an alien to his mother, he is not any closer to his father whom he "kills" in a Freudian sense by erasing him from all his memories. Slowly but surely, the revelation "about Geneva" disclose the vicious circle of the family estrangement. The seemingly linear narration ends up closing in with its external rétroversions that emphasize the repeated patterns of alienation.<sup>6</sup> The recurrence of short-lived attempts at communicating offers a frame clearly corresponding to the characters' role in the family: authoritative, the grandmother holds the floor before Ursula opposes her in the name of her father whose literary talents she has inherited. Rejected for its literariness, her response is further counteracted by Colin's, which is invented, as is the mother's picture of things. Like a whirlpool, the subsequent round of dialogues of the deaf awaits its turn to end up in the same awareness of the characters' disconnectedness.

Solid structure, it appears, does in no way exclude patterns of alienation. Built on a number of sections with shifting focus allowing the characters to voice their views, the story evidently conveys fragmentation.

STORIES BASED ON A CHRONOLOGICAL SUCCESSION of sections devoted each to a different character<sup>7</sup> enable dissolution to emerge. Linear stories emphasizing various stages in the slow loss of identity of the characters considered together also offer such a possibility. In spite of the various parts announced by

temporal and/or spatial references, such stories have a smooth relation for their one and only narrative thread. "Orphans' Progress" (*Home Truths*, 56-62),<sup>8</sup> for instance, follows a linear progression that nevertheless evidences dislocation.<sup>9</sup> In fact, bar a long flashback, the linear structure accompanies the slow psychic disintegration of two young girls after their widowed mother has been refused custody for inadequate care. Marking stages in their progress to total dissolution of ties, temporal and geographical references disclose the linearity of the story. Carried out in stages, the disjunction implies the degradation of blood ties resulting from social restraint. The *text* (Rimmon-Kenan, 3) seems to suggest that emotional misery comes with affluence. Although every new roof provides the girls with better material circumstances, every move engenders a further estrangement from each other and the past. Prior to the time span covered by the plot, the sisters felt their mother's warmth and loved her, slovenly though she might have been. They were then part of a nucleus and shared everything with her : her presence, her moods, her bed and dirty sheets, her language and even the lack of food. Separation engenders an irrevocable, alienating process. From their filthy food. Separation engenders an irrevocable, alienating process. From their filthy these underfed children, and [makes] them drink goat's milk" (HT 56). But the place is not heated evenly: the grandmother saves money by not heating all the rooms. At their grandmother's, their past is negated. Defamatory rumours make them look back on it in a different light: their mother was not up to standard, "they were living under . . . unsheltered conditions" (HT 57). Yet they never resented them and have retained the memory of a warm and close relationship (so that the elder objects). On the other hand, "what they [remember] afterwards of their grandmother [is] goat's milk, goat eyes, and the frightened man" (HT 56), that is, scrupulous nutrition, no contact, and fear — definitely not loving kindness. Back in Montreal, they are not give any chance to identify with the place nor to feel at home, for the atmosphere and the surroundings are totally different. Their relatives' exhibited wealth and resentment cause fear and darkness to prevail in the girls' lives (HT 59). And they themselves now even resent each other's company : they fight over the blanket on their bed. After this, disconnection is then carried on one step further at the convent school where expressing feelings and making references to one's family ties are offences. Humiliated for mentioning her mother to a fellow boarder and confusing her whereabouts, Mildred no longer relates to her mother: the term "'Mummy' had meaning" (HT 61 ) only until she got punished. Similarly, the bond of sisterhood is broken: no longer sharing a room, let alone a bed, the sisters stop being on the same wavelength. The school system parts them: during breaks, Mildred can only catch glimpses of Cathie, whose age is more appropriate to serious walks. Furthermore, Cathie, who prays for almost unknown relatives and outsiders, "[forgets] Mildred in her prayers" (HT 61). After a seven years' separation, the girls no longer get through to each

other (HT 62). Restraining social norms have erased their deviant, yet warm, past life. "Natural," that is, instinctive and spontaneous sisterly feelings cease to be part of their experience. Their identity is lost. The slow disconnecting process has reached its peak.

The linguistic environment, too, contributes to the girls' gradual loss of affective response and identity. Each stage in their peregrination means rejection of their previous command of language and shows that the process of unlearning coincides with further estrangement from their mother's influence.<sup>10</sup> After their easy-going bilingual upbringing with their French-Canadian mother, they become repeatedly aware of one linguistic intolerance after the other. Their silent appraisal of the status of language is first made clear at their grandmother's.

They understood, from their grandmother, and their grandmother's maid, and the social worker who came to see their grandmother but had little to say to them, that French was an inferior kind of speech. (HT 57)

Although they have now become familiar with the linguistic code prevalent in Ontario, their natural language remains French; so spontaneous expressions of discomfort, for example, will come out in French until they recover enough self-control to switch over to English (HT 57). That a foreign language can exclude affectivity appears in the combined announcement of the grandmother's death and of the girls' newly acquired ability to speak with an Ontario accent (HT 56-57). The statement does not make any room for emotions: it denies their existence. Back in Montreal they go through the same linguistic ordeal. The prevailing darkness adequately renders the devastating psychological impact of such narrowmindedness, so contrary to their original bilingual upbringing. Finally, the punishment inflicted upon Mildred at the convent school for uttering three words in English, not in French, also contributes to her detachment from her mother. This only paves the way for her accepting to be swallowed up in her new French-speaking family. As she is referred to as "Mildred's mother" (HT 62), the new mother soon supplants the real mother. Mildred may well be back in a French-speaking environment akin to her mother's, but the pressures endured to adjust split her from her natural background and true origins.

Similarly, through the story, words referring to ignorance and revelations mark the process alienating both Mildred and Cathie from their mother.<sup>11</sup> Before being taken away from her, "they loved [their mother] *without knowing* what the word implied" (HT 56).<sup>12</sup> But soon, they are made to consider her in a new light, by virtue of social criteria.

*They never knew, until told*, that they were uneducated and dirty and in danger. *Now they learned* that their mother never washed her own neck and that she dressed in layers of woollen stuff, covered with grease, and wore men's shoes because some man had left them behind and she liked the shape and comfort of them. *They did not know, until they were told*, that they had never been fed properly. (HT 57-58)

At this stage they still contradict rumours (HT 57). Objecting to the denigration of their lodgings, Cathie reveals other particulars of importance to them (such as their two cats, their mother's pictures and their own drawings on the wall). Some affectional space was given everyone in spite of the material scarcity. But already the little girl does "*not remember* having screamed or anything at all except the trip from Montreal by train" ( HT 58 ). Once they have moved to their cousins in Montreal "they [do] not see *anything that [reminds]* them of Montreal, and [*do*] *not recall their mother*" (HT 59). The children do not talk about her until their cousins try to frighten them: only then does Cathie speak about her; "Our mother wouldn't try to frighten us" (HT 59), she says still remembering their past feeling of security. A reverse feeling marks the ignorance and revelation of the meaning attached to the shears with which Mildred is "made to promenade through the classrooms" (HT 60) as a punishment for having told a lie.

She *did not know* the significance of the shears, nor, it seemed, did the nun who organised the punishment. It had always been associated with lying, and (*the nun suddenly remembered*) had something to do with cutting the liar's tongue.

(HT60-61 )

As to Cathie, she is so worried "about forgetting Mildred in her prayers" that she invents "a formula" (HT 61 ) :

Everyone I have *ever known* who is dead or alive, anyone / *know now* who is alive but might die, and anyone I *shall ever know* in the future, (HT 61 )

In other words, the girls go from carefree and happy ignorance to the awareness of their mother's inadequate handling of their upbringing before becoming conscious of their own shortcomings and inability to have any meaningful exchange. There is a story of initiation : brought about by knowledge, their initiation coincides with a kind of fall. As Christian theology has it, ignorance and innocence yield happiness while knowledge and experience provoke unhappiness and evil. On the stylistic level, abrupt transitions reinforce the existing disjunction. Take for instance the following passage :

"To the day I die," said the social worker from Montreal to her colleague in Ontario, "I won't forget the screams of Mildred when she was dragged out of that pigsty." This was said in the grandmother's parlor, where the three women — the two social workers, and the grandmother — sat with their feet freezing on the linoleum floor. The maid heard, and told. She had been in and out, serving coffee, coconut biscuits, and damson preserves in custard made of goat's milk. The room was heated once or twice a year: even the maid said her feet were cold. But "To the day I die" was a phrase worth hearing. She liked the sound of that, and said it to the children. The maid was from a place called Waterloo, where, to hear her tell it, no one behaved strangely and all the rooms heated. (HT 58)

If the first sentence records Mildred's misery upon parting from her mother, it also insists on the shabby lodgings as opposed to the cosier, yet unheated, parlour

where Mildred's feelings are considered. After the comment on the locale where the conversation takes place, the maid abruptly comes in, very much as she has come in and out of the room during the meeting. The narration then reverts to, and elaborates on, the temperature of the room, an annoyance which is however more than compensated for by the maid's overhearing an interesting phrase worth repeating. No sooner has she used the expression than another comment on the heating habits at the maid's original home base are voiced. The passage, with its almost exclusive use of the narrative present for loosely reported actions, has a striking impact. It reveals to the reader, as it must have to the girls, that as much importance is attached — if not more — to the temperature of a room and to the use of a new phrase as to the marks of a child's despair. There is simply no trace of compassion. The girls are made to understand that feelings are worth nothing compared with physical comfort and minor intellectual satisfactions. Likewise, events are often announced and followed straight away by asides or retrospective explanations that come in to disrupt the chronology, reducing the impact of emotions. In this way the death of the girls' grandmother is broken to them two pages before they actually witness it: expressions of suffering have no room owing to the interruption. Anachronies take the reader back to the period prior to the Ontario experience, then back to the Ontario period, before combining the recent and less recent past in revelatory speech presentation concerning the girls' acquisition of knowledge at the time. Insidiously, the effect is neglected in favour of external judgements based on material considerations. A similar distance is effected in the passage about Mildred's adoption.

Mildred was suddenly taken out of school and adopted. Their mother's sister, one of the aunts they had seldom seen, had lost a daughter by drowning. She said she would treat Mildred as she did her own small son, and Mildred, who wished to leave the convent school, but did not know if she cared to go and live in a place called Chicoutimi, did not decide. She made them decide, and made them take her away, (HT 62)

The reader is not allowed to rejoice over Mildred's new life. Immediately, an anachrony makes it clear that the adoption is meant as a balm for the aunt and adoptive mother, not for Mildred : the latter is only to replace her lost cousin. The following statement marks the lack of feeling involved in the transaction. And finally, the last step before the actual departure, Mildred shows she has become a master in the art of social interaction : for the sake of restraint, she remains aloof in a decision that involves her future — or rather the extension of her cousin's life. That she is only a substitute for her cousin is emphasized by her denial of her past when confronted with her original "dwelling." Restraint has first blurred her memories;<sup>13</sup> it ends up annihilating the past altogether. The abrupt ending closing in on her past like darkness on the world leaves no hope for the future. The disrupted organisation of the superficially linear third-person narration wipes off

affective responses, so much so that it negates the existence of the self. Based on a linear progression and punctuated by temporal or spatial stages, the story thus unfolds the characters' slow disintegration.

YET ANOTHER PATTERN EMERGES — triangular this time — from Gallant's short fiction. That type of story at first consists of general comments on experiences hardly related to the knot of the intrigue. The latter is only revealed in the story's midst before unfolding minor aspects whose impact on the characters is almost nought for want of understanding. This form of structural organisation comes to the fore in "My Heart is Broken" (*My Heart is Broken*, 194-202 )." The protagonist, Jeannie, sees her own experience reduced to a trivial event in the story's triangular presentation. Raped in the immediate narrative past, Jeannie is first subjected to the endless platitudes of an elderly woman who lives in the same road construction camp. When Jeannie's interlocutor, Mrs. Thompson, opens the dialogue by mentioning the effect the news of Jean Harlow's death had on her when she was about Jeannie's age, she probably unconsciously intends to neutralize the effects of the rape. She virtually puts her own experience and Jeannie's on a par in spite of the drastic emotional differences. Once the rape has been hinted at, Mrs. Thompson carries on lecturing Jeannie about her responsibilities in the crime. The emotional impact of the experience is thus nullified as total lack of understanding separates the two characters on stage.<sup>15</sup>

The internal organisation of paragraphs also echoes the indifference with which the rape is being met. The initial disclosure of Mrs. Thompson's reception of the actress's death mirrors the lack of continuity in her discourse and the irrelevance of her revelations.

"When that Jean Harlow died," Mrs. Thompson said to Jeannie, "I was on the 83 streetcar with a big, heavy paper parcel in my arms. I hadn't been married for very long, and when I used to visit my mother she'd give me a lot of canned stuff and preserves. I was standing up in the streetcar because nobody's given me a seat. All the men were unemployed in those days, and they just sat down wherever they happened to be. You wouldn't remember what Montreal was like then. *You* weren't even on earth. To resume what I was saying to you, one of these men sitting down had an American paper — the *Daily News*, I guess it was — and I was sort of leaning over him, and I saw in big print 'JEAN HARLOW DEAD.' You can believe it or not, just as you want to, but that was the most terrible shock I ever had in my life. I never got over it. (MHB 194-95)

The opening line gives the impression that the matter at stake is the death of Jean Harlow. Yet halfway through the story, the actual reason for the two women's conversation — or rather Mrs. Thompson's monologue — establishes a drastic contrast: Mrs. Thompson's shock is sentimental and even mawkish; Jeannie's is physical and emotional, though suppressed. The former's sterile and incoherent

comments are matched by the "canned stuff and preserves" her mother used to give her. Like processed food, Mrs. Thompson's commonplaces should be swallowed without much chewing, for they are insubstantial.<sup>16</sup> The reference to her new marital status at the time, more or less comparable to Jeannie's situation in the narrative present, might seem to imply that she finds her feelings equivalent to Jeannie's. In fact, it establishes a close connection between the latter and the famous sex symbol. This parallel amounts to negating Jeannie's severe and traumatic experience. And the allusion to the interwar years in Canada add to the gap between their perceptions. Her transitional phrase taking her back to the issue of their conversation increases the awareness of her comments' *non sequitur* while her "most terrible shock" provokes a derisive smile in the readers.

Such long soliloquies silence Jeannie whose minimal retorts and careful handling of the nail polish bottle<sup>17</sup> confirm her will to distance herself from her unpleasant memories and from the nonsense Mrs. Thompson is talking. The descriptive passages that interrupt the latter's self-centred discourse not only give panoramic information that clarifies the situation but also reinforce the gap between the two women. Where Jeannie is pretty and appealing, Mrs. Thompson is a "plain, fat, consoling sort of person, with varcosed legs, shoes unlaced and slit for comfort, blue dressing gown worn at all hours, pudding-bowl haircut, and coarse gray hair" (MHB 195). Their friendship only results from their being together in a place cut off from civilisation. The description of the Thompsons' interior is also significant of their superficial orderliness contrasting Jeannie's messy and slovenly approach. In short, the descriptive passages reinforce the clash between their outlooks.

Further contrasts are evoked through the attempt at discussing Jeannie's rape and its causes, offered in part two after the climatic revelation. The exchange of ideas is very much like a pingpong match in which Mrs. Thompson's weighty attacks force Jeannie to be on the defensive.<sup>18</sup> This prevents Jeannie from scoring any points as, whenever she attempts to strengthen her position, her adversary smashes back. Either aggressive or inquisitive, the latter is anything but comforting contrary to her announced purpose ["I came over here, Jeannie, because I thought you might be needing me" (MHB 198)]. In fact, her aggressiveness and inquisitiveness both correspond to her fear of hearing who the victimiser is, lest it should be her husband whose delight at listening to bawdy songs makes him likely to be lecherous.

Were it not for Mrs. Thompson's report of a conversation overheard just before the narrative present, the story might not be triangular in its structure. Starting on a low with Mrs. Thompson's remembered shock over the death of a Hollywood star, the story reaches its peak with the allusion to Jeannie's rape and then proceeds downwards with Mrs. Thompson's reprimands until Jeannie manages to express her despair. The base of the triangle is then drawn when Mrs. Thompson thinks of her own youth, "Wondering if her heart had ever been broken, too" ( MHB 202 ).

The final consideration of her own past ironically takes the reader back to the laughable, "most terrible shock [she] ever had in [her] life" (MHB 194). As throughout the story physical descriptions enhance the similarity between the two Jeans, her friendliness towards Jeannie is made even more blatantly dubious. Punctuated by the motion of her rocking chair, her own life's meaninglessness is perceived in her incapacity to understand and comfort Jeannie. The latter can barely cry out of her despair over her utter isolation because social conventions muffle her own voice. The story opens with the news of a sex symbol's death — whose voice cannot be heard either — and ends with Jean's spiritual death. The two women die victims to the high-heeled peroxided image imposed on them by a heartless and macho society. The image of the canned stuff holds for both. As Jeannie's response to the rape is not what one would expect, she is not presented as a tragic or even pathetic character. But total desolation emerges from the mixture of trifles neutralising the effect of utter misery and from dialogues made of a minor character's long soliloquies barely answered by the protagonist's short and indifferent repartees. Thanks to the triangular development, the latter is aptly compared to a symbol whose reality shatters all hope.

THE PRECEDING CONSIDERATION of structural patterns found has established a close link between organisation of materials and cumulative effect. In the above examples, the frame corresponds to a structured pattern of disintegration in the characters' experiences. The ultimate significance of their lives is thus reflected in the narrative pattern of the stories. To put it differently, the final effect gained by using a firm structure together with other specific devices is to enhance the general estrangement of the characters. Most of Gallant's stories have a circular twist to them — looping the loop —, a circularity which only reinforces the isolation the characters are trapped in. Like lions in a cage, they are seen going round in circles with no hope of ever escaping. Thus, through the very construction of her stories, Mavis Gallant conveys her theme.

It therefore seems that Mavis Gallant implicitly subscribes to Lotman's views that the structure of any given text shows "how the artistic text becomes a medium of a particular thought or idea, and how the structure of [the] text is related to the structure of this idea" (Lotman, 6). Edgar Allan Poe's assertion that the short story should contain "no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design" (108)<sup>19</sup> can easily be applied to the structure of Gallant's short fiction. The message conveyed through structural patterns is, in her case, pretty grim : nothing can be shared, life is to be lived alone, no hope remains. The general oppressive atmosphere that ensues gives rise to two diverging images. On the one hand, the unconnected episodes of the characters' biographies are like sketches of empty bottles hanging on a wall, purposeless and

indifferent, so that if one falls no one notices it. On the other hand, the progressive development of a given pattern paves the way for a vanishing sense of self, so that asked who they are, the characters only visualise a black pit for an answer. As the fictional world crumbles down, the reader is left with the disheartening picture of a person whose broken image in the mirror he/she cannot restore.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Originally published in *The New Yorker* respectively in 1955, ^65 and 1969, these stories were subsequently incorporated into different collections.
- <sup>2</sup> Views expounded in her interview with Geoff Hancock (45).
- <sup>3</sup> Further references to this collection will be incorporated into the text, using the abbreviation OP.
- <sup>4</sup> "Thank you for the Lovely Tea" (*Home Truths*, 2-16) could also have served for the study of his structural pattern.
- <sup>5</sup> The adults are all referred to as functions, not as individuals with essential characteristics. Their names evoke "their relations to each other within the family hierarchy" (Besner, 23).
- <sup>6</sup> Winfried Siemerling finds that "the story offers a carefully constructed picture of a maze" (146).
- <sup>7</sup> To put it differently, such stories present various narrative threads resulting from a shifting focus.
- <sup>8</sup> Further references to this collection will be incorporated into the text, using the abbreviation HT.
- <sup>9</sup> In the same vein, "Bernadette" (*My Heart is Broken*, 14-41) unfolds smoothly as the title character anxiously counts the days she has not menstruated. Parallel to her concern, he employers' attitudes are seen to evolve as the wife decides to interfere with Bernadette's life. Her interference is such that the latter's pregnancy becomes a family affair.
- <sup>D</sup> As Janice Kulyk Keefer remarks, their "emotional dislocation" is attributed to the "symbiosis of language and memory" ( 15).
- <sup>II</sup> For an enlightening interpretation of the voices heard in an earlier version of "Orphans' Progress," see Michel Fabre (150-160).
- <sup>2</sup> Italics mine. The same holds for the subsequent quotations.
- <sup>B</sup> As Grazia Merler puts it, she has "[learned] to blot out all memory as a way of protecting" (28) herself.
- <sup>#</sup> Further references to this collection will be incorporated into the text, using the abbreviation MHB.
- <sup>5</sup> At this stage a graph with the essential components of the narrative might be useful to clarify the triangular pattern :

rape hinted at ( 2 )

**A**

platitudes (1)      z .....\*.....\*-      further platitudes (3)

- <sup>6</sup> Mrs. Thompson is indeed "an emotional and intellectual pauper" (Schrank, 68).
- <sup>7</sup> The references to the nail polish indeed punctuate Mrs. Thompson's gibberish in the first part before the allusion to the rape as if to brighten things and suppress retrospective considerations of the crude act.
- <sup>8</sup> Most of Mrs. Thompson's harangues are substantially longer than Jeannie's replies.
- <sup>9</sup> Views expounded as part of a review of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*.

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