

ARTISTRY IN MAVIS GALLANT'S "GREEN WATER, GREEN SKY"

The Composition of Structure, Pattern, and Gyre

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MICHEL BUTOR, IN HIS essays "The Novel as Research" (1960) and "Research on the Technique of the Novel" (1964), contends that the distinctive element of contemporary life to which the novel must adapt is the extraordinary amount of information that all individuals engaged actively in the world about them must address and accommodate to what they have observed and experienced for themselves. To keep pace with contemporary life and to avoid becoming an anachronism, the novel, particularly through its structure, must exploit its intrinsic tendency "toward its own elucidation"¹ by becoming its own testing ground for any truths that it professes: "The only way to tell the truth, to search for the truth, is to confront tirelessly, methodically, what we habitually say with what we see, with the information we receive, in other words to 'work' on narrative" (Butor, 16). Such tireless and methodical confrontation between perceived and received truths does not culminate in the writer's discovery and enunciation of any absolute truth but rather in the desire and need to suggest life's "*compossibility* — the capacity of one thing to coexist with another thing or to concur in time and space or in conception."² For Butor, the novel thus becomes a "mobile structure," allowing problems to "admit of several solutions" by anticipating "within the novel's structure, different trajectories of reading, as in a cathedral or a town." To engage the contemporary reader, over-burdened with information, the novelist "must then control the work in all its different versions, take responsibility for them, much like the sculptor, who is responsible for all the angles from which his statue might be photographed, and for the movements which connect all these views" (Butor 24).

Herein lies the difficulty for the contemporary novelist confined to "the book as commercial object" with the restrictions imposed by the horizontal and vertical axes of the page and the "third axis in depth, perpendicular to the other two" that is the construction of the bound volume itself (Butor 41). In his essay "The Book as Object" (1964), Butor addresses in theory the restrictions imposed by these three

dimensions, restrictions that have become an invigorating practical challenge for him and other *avant-garde* postmodernists such as Vonnegut, Barthelme, and Federman. These writers have met the challenge by experimenting with the physical restrictions of the novel's medium and, in so doing, have found occasion to dip into the visual artist's toolbox to borrow canvas, brush, and colour. Mavis Gallant, in contrast, has eschewed non-verbal devices, finding her freedom through the traditional medium of language. She aims for the same "optical realism" as many French and American postmodernists, realism that Butor notes has "caused so much surprise" (22-23), but does so by adapting in language techniques of colour, light and dark, line, composition, and framing to create those visual analogies that allow her to explore her thematic concerns.³

Gallant's adaptation of these techniques of the visual artist has been essential to her depiction of the compossibility of subjective and objective, perceived and received, truths. From those earliest stories that appeared in the *New Yorker* throughout the 1950's (the best of which are now contained in *The Other Paris*, originally published in 1956) to the stories appearing, still primarily in the *New Yorker*, throughout the 1980's, Gallant's main thematic concerns have been generated by the confrontation between an imagined world, which her characters create to protect themselves, and the jagged edges of raw reality. In her earliest short stories, the often satiric tone rests in Gallant's delighted exposing of romantic and idealized images of self against the harsh and prosaic light of experienced reality. These stories capture her characters in a suspended or caught moment in a manner reminiscent of Harry Levin's description of Joyce's *Dubliners*:

Things almost happen. The characters are arrested in mid-air; the author deliberately avoids anything like an event. . . . Joyce's slow-motion narrative is timed to his paralyzed subject. . . . The author merely watches, the characters are merely revealed, and the emphasis is on the technique of exposure.⁴

Because they can see no escape from the bleakness of contemporary life, the characters in Gallant's earliest stories usually retreat to the often sentimental but reassuringly safe world of imagined reality, blocking off access to or awareness of experienced reality, slicing the continuity between perceived and received truths, denying the compossibility of these truths. They enclose or frame themselves within their own subjectivity.

Green Water, Green Sky (1959) is a pivotal work in Mavis Gallant's canon because the medium of the novel allows Gallant to manipulate her characters in a less enclosed, more open and fluid space than the short story has yet provided for her. The frame has been broken: the characters must test the truth of perceived images of self and others against received images. The characters cannot retreat: they must adapt to the compossibility of these truths or be overcome by the inconsistencies and paradoxes that such compossibility produces.

The six characters of *Green Water, Green Sky* naturally group themselves into three pairs according to the way they perceive themselves and perceive and react in their relationships: Doris Fischer and Bob Harris are the structured characters with a structured perception; Wishart and Bonnie McCarthy fit into a patterned perception of self and relationships; George Fairlie and Florence are caught in a gyral perception. Although Gallant explores a number of relationships in this short novel, of particular importance are the two concentric circles that form around self: the family and the cities of Cannes and Paris, which are the main settings of the novel.⁵ By exploiting and adapting the techniques of the visual artist, Mavis Gallant confronts and tests, with a high degree of "optical realism," the compossibility of the perceived and received truths experienced by her six characters.

Bob Harris, the husband of the central character Florence, and Doris Fischer, a visiting American living in the same apartment house as the Harrises, are the structured characters in the novel: their images of self and others are harmoniously composed in a linear construct that is uncomplicated by obtrusive colours or shading; their harmonious compositions are fluid and able to withstand tension and change. Doris and Bob have successfully integrated their private images of self with the public images they project, largely because neither "had much feeling for the importance of time: either of them could have been persuaded that the world began the day he was born." Therefore, although they are alike, they are not "perfectly matched . . . not in a way that could draw them together."⁶ They are both structured individuals, but their structures run on two parallel planes, planes that cannot meet.

Gallant paints a portrait of Doris Fischer as an ascetic whose prudent left-wing sympathies (73) make her uncomfortable with any sign of indulgence or ostentation. Like the "blond-wood exports from sanitary Sweden" (42) that she favours in furniture and the clear, unobstructed light she prefers (42, 45), the image of herself that Doris perceives and projects is a plain and sensible young woman (43). But Doris, the exponent of "hard, sunny reality; the opponent of dreams," is forced to test her structured, unilateral view of life (70). Her husband, the "cameraman" or "film technician" or "special consultant," has temporarily left her and so challenges her to adapt her images to a new frame (44). At first, she attempts to fit into the structure of the Harris family and life in Paris, but when Flor locks her out, she realizes that "what is needed is not slow suffering or hanging on to someone else, but a solution . . . and the solution was a decision and so now I am going home. I am not going *away* but going *home*" (83). For Doris, even with the threat of her husband's having left her, the structure holds together; all the fragments of her life fall deftly into place as she returns to her family and friends in America, a return that is not a regression but simply a continuation of a linear structure that began when she was born.

BOB HARRIS TOO IS A structured, cheerful individual, who has been able to integrate private and public images of self because he lacks a historical sense and hence can build a linear structure that takes himself as its origin and focus.⁷ Unlike Doris, however, he is somewhat of a hedonist, revealing a complacent satisfaction with his having harmonized commercial and aesthetic values. The contrast between Bob and Doris emerges clearly in a scene in which they observe a modern painting purchased by Bob. Doris, while relieved to be viewing a modern painting because “she disliked the past,” sees it in a stereotypical way: puerilely composed and exorbitantly priced (42-4). Bob perfectly understands the meaning of the painting for him: “Bob looked at a rising investment that, at the same time, gave him aesthetic pleasure; that was the way to wrap up life, to get the best of everything” (43).

Bob’s structured view of self and life is based on his successful balancing of a safe materialism and a safe hedonism. Although in his patronage of the arts he harmoniously combines the two elements of money and pleasure, in his profession — he runs the French side of his father’s American-based wine-importing firm — he integrates a third element: family. Bob has cultivated a still tightly structured but less ascetic image of self than Doris because, although relations and friends are the “breath of life for him,” they are all “of the same quality”: “he did not distinguish between the random and the intense” (110). There can be no colour, no shade, in this world that is clearly defined in terms of black and white, dark and light.

With the advent of Flor into this world, Bob must test the truth of his colourless, shadeless images, which fit so well into his structured world.⁸ He perceives Cannes, where he and Flor have met, as a shadowless, black-and-white composition: Manet’s *The Balcony*, with its starkly lit figures in the foreground on the balcony and the mysteriously dark interior of the room in the background, corresponds with Bob’s perception. Two years later, Bob and Flor, now married, are living in Bob’s white, well lit world of Paris (33-35). As Flor, advancing towards a mental breakdown, closes herself in her darkened room, Bob judges this “shutting-out of light” to be “wicked,” the “nature of sin” (36), however, Bob sought this very darkness through Flor when he first saw her at “the far table of the dark café in Cannes” and she “looked up and before becoming aware that a man was watching her let him see on her drowned face everything he was prepared to pursue — passion, discipline, darkness” (37). Bob’s perception does not permit light and dark to blend as they might through the filter of a curtain; rather, they are blocked into bars or slats, structured evenly as light passes through shutters (65, 67-68, 109-111). Bob seeks to experience passion, but his journey into darkness will be safe, controlled by what he perceives to be the discipline of materialism and family.

For Bob, such discipline comes through ownership. He creates his own structured

composition into which all elements fit neatly, this structure in turn fitting just as neatly into the structured world in which he lives. His original conception of the ideal woman to fit into this structure is of “some minor Germanic princess,” who wears the “printed silk” and “pearls” provided by her family as she waits with “patient supplication until a husband can be found” (105) to whom the deed of ownership can be passed. His ideal woman is transplanted into the twentieth century from the Biedermeier tradition.⁹ But because Flor cannot have children, she does not fit this image of domesticity; so Bob accommodates the image to Flor, and she instead becomes, not the supplicating domesticated object of the Biedermeier tradition, but the more radiant sexual object of the Impressionist tradition:

He had prized her beauty. It had made her an object as cherished as anything he might buy. In museums he had come upon paintings of women — the luminous women of the Impressionists — in which some detail reminded him of Flor, the thick hair, the skin, the glance slipping away, and this had increased his sense of possession and love. (37)

Two years later, Bob thinks Flor has “destroyed this beauty, joyfully, willfully, as if to force him to value her on other terms” (37-38) and sees her “hair, loose on the pillow,” and the shuttered windows as “a parody of Cannes” (65). For Bob, Flor no longer has the tamed, coy seductiveness of a Renoir nude or bather;¹⁰ she has become as sordid as Manet’s vacuous *Olympia* on a crumpled, yellow sheet.¹¹

Bob’s structured composition is challenged not only by the shade and colour that coexist with the light and dark and the black and white, but also by the oblique lines that counter his parallel linear view of life. Bob thinks that if Flor is not on the same plane as he is, moving in the same parallel line, she must be on a different plane, moving in a different line (36-37). There is, however, a third option: perhaps they are on the same plane, but their lines are oblique; oblique lines on the same plane will eventually cross, but each has its own autonomous existence and direction. At a critical point in the novel, as the “faint summer light” creeps “in between the slats of the shutters” of their room, their lines almost cross. Flor sees that for a moment whatever usually protects Bob (money and charm) has left him; “he seemed pitiable and without confidence.” During this moment, Bob has remembered “what it was to be sick with love,” and his usual structured perception of their relationship as superimposed lines becomes vertiginous. As he experiences the vertigo that characterizes Flor’s existence, he even thinks he tastes the salt of the sea that is closing in on the drowning Flor. Flor, meanwhile, experiences a moment of calm from her usual turmoil. But Bob does not accept the challenge of the nauseating momentum of this vertiginous gyre and sets their lines back in their now separate planes by having them “resume their new roles: the tiresome wife, the patient husband” (65-68).¹² The moment has passed: dark and light are restored to their chequered places, lines to their separate planes. The harmony of

Bob's structured composition has been preserved. Bob has been given the moment to pursue the passion and darkness — or, to borrow Prufrock's words, "to force the moment to its crisis" — but fear of the dangers of the vertiginous gyre sends him scurrying back to the discipline of the orderly structure. "And would it have been worth it, after all" is a question they both go on to ask (69).

FLOR'S MOTHER, Bonnie McCarthy, and Wishart, Bonnie's summer friend, are as much survivors as Bob and Doris, all understanding and conforming to the requirements of life. Neither Bob nor Doris is an idealist, and therefore only rarely does either harbour any "lingering vapors of adolescent nostalgia — that fruitless, formless yearning for God knows what" (35). Whereas their perspective is firmly fixed and enclosed within a structured frame of here and now (although fluid within this frame), Bonnie has the appearance of waiting for "some elegant paradise" beyond the frame, and Wishart, in her presence, reflects the same "air of waiting" (92-94). Wishart later comes to think that Bonnie's "air of expectancy" is false and that she has been waiting for something within the frame, not beyond it (113). What emerges, however, is that despite the multiplicity of images of self that each perceives and projects, a clear image of a past self gives a pattern to what might otherwise be a chaotic array of fragmented images — a chaotic array of colours, light and shade, lines, and shapes — in their lives.

Wishart is the only character to remain outside the Paris scenes and family circle. Cannes is his natural *milieu* because it provides a holiday existence, constantly in flux, with no need to form attachments. Wishart can enact the many roles he has perfected in the ever-changing tableaux of Cannes. He is an artiste (even his name is contrived) who might be unmasked should he posture too long in one place or allow any member of his audience too close an examination of his mask.

Wishart's role in the novel, however, is not to be observed but to observe, and most of the third section is devoted to his perception of the Bonnie-Flor-Bob composition. This section opens with the statement, "Dreams of chaos were Wishart's meat" (86), and his dream of the sinking ferryboat, presented immediately after the dream that has sent Flor into an asylum, might seem to forecast another victim of the storm. But from this "deplorable confusion" Wishart strides, a survivor who has remained unscathed by remaining detached (86-87). Wishart prides himself in his dreams, products of a creative subconscious, and sees this particular dream as "a ballet . . . or, better still, because of the black and white groupings and the unmoving light, an experimental film . . ." (87). A pattern emerges from what might have been a chaotic series of tableaux because of Wishart's steady perspective, which constantly enlarges to take in the whole scene.

First, Wishart adapts his images of Cannes. Unlike Bob's black-and-white composition, Wishart's has shading and light:

... at first sight, Cannes looked as it had sounded when he said the word in London, a composition in clear chalk colors, blue, yellow, white. Everything was intensely shaded or intensely bright, hard and yellow on the streets, or dark as velvet inside the bars. (94)

He must now enlarge his perspective to accommodate in this composition the new images he is receiving: "the milling, sweating, sunburned crowd . . . the sour-milk smelling cafés" (94); the blue and sparkling sea which is probably full of germs, and the sky violated by an airplane writing the name of a drink (98); the sand, cigarette butts, and smears of oil that coexist with the light, dark, and blueness (113). After several weeks in Cannes, it seems that Wishart will become a victim of the chaos of perceived and received truths, not only of Cannes but of Bonnie, Flor, Bob, and himself. Masks are constantly slipping. Images of raw reality attempt to displace those artistic images that compose themselves into a harmonious tableau: Bonnie as peach-coloured hostess; Flor as Venus; Bob as worshipping victim; himself as English gentleman sought after by the hostesses of Europe.

Whereas Bob's moment of crisis is marked by the vertigo of the parallel lines holding his structured view together, Wishart's moment of crisis is marked by the garishness of the bright colours contained in his patterned composition. "Everything trembled and changed," as glaring realities jostle with clear tones in "this new landscape" and threaten the harmony of the old pattern. Wishart has not been "victim of such a fright" for years, but he now composes himself: he wades out into the cluttered sea, once again becomes the detached observer and reporter of this absurd and chaotic world, and returns to shore, inspired to assume a new mask in a new tableau (122-23). Outside the frame of this and all his tableaux, however, lies an image that, although it controls his art and is the very *raison d'être* of the tableaux, must never intrude on the tableau itself: the image of himself as a dirty slum child hanging on the dress of his servant sister, Glad.

Bonnie's perspective too is fixed on an image from the past, outside the frame of present reality, that acts "as a timid anchor to Bonnie's ballooning notion of the infinite" (24) and enables her to give a pattern to the "petty disorder" (25), the untidiness of her life (28). Unlike Wishart, however, who dares not expose this image for fear of being exposed, Bonnie has the image of herself "in her wedding dress, authentically innocent, with a wreath of miniature roses straight across her brow" (22). What looms nastily, threatening to obscure this image now well in the background, is the image of herself involved in a "surpassingly silly affair," which has created a "fragmented, unreconciled" conception (23) of herself by severing the continuity of past and present.

To establish a sense of continuity in her life, Bonnie, like Wishart, has created a number of masks, all softened by filtered or shaded light (2, 38, 125) and complemented by different coloured voices — blue, violet, green, coral (38, 46), nothing harsh or garish — which tie past and present together by suggesting what Venus Bonnie might have become had not her life been ruined. The first section of the novel to be devoted entirely to Bonnie reveals her sitting before a triptych: a three-panelled mirror, no panel ever reflecting a violated Bonnie, although such an image occasionally threatens to take form. Trying on a “chaste blue” hat, Bonnie appears “slightly demented, a college girl aged overnight,” but she drops the hat on the dressing table “among the framed pictures and the pots of cream” (22), themselves symbols of artifice, preferring her recently perfected mask of a frowning, pouting child that one panel of the mirror reflects (21). Another panel reveals the image of a “super-Bonnie,” “a kind of American Mrs. Hauksbee, witty and thin, with those great rolling violet blue eyes” (22-23). The centre panel of the triptych, however, is devoted to the “authentically innocent” Bonnie, a “lost Bonnie” whom she seeks “to duplicate every time she look[s] in the glass” (22) and for whom the present Bonnie is in mourning.¹³

The triptych is Bonnie’s creation, her work of art, but surrounding it is the chaos of life, the clutter of Bonnie’s dressing table, which, although it makes an “oblique stab” at Bob’s desire for structure (25), is a clutter that has meaning and pattern for Bonnie. Among this clutter, mostly pictures representing the disorder of Flor’s and Bonnie’s life, “two small likenesses” are isolated to one side “in curious juxtaposition.” The significance of the “monster” Bob, clad in his tartan bathing costume and outfitted in underwater fishing gear, is clear enough: after all, Bonnie has abnegated one of her images — that of self-sacrificing mother, protecting her drowning daughter (49) — to Flor’s new protector, Bob (68). The other likeness is that of “a tinted image of St. Teresa of the Infant Jesus,” the “Little Flower,” a saint having “little function in Bonnie’s life, except to act as a timid anchor to Bonnie’s ballooning notion of the infinite” (23-24). This image of Teresa of Lisieux (1873-1897; canonized 1925), the most popular saint in the twentieth century, who had constantly to fight depression and the threat of nervous breakdown because of her neurotic condition,¹⁴ must surely be associated with Florence, whose name suggests not only one of the greatest cities of art, but also its Latin root, flora. Bonnie seeks to retain an image of an unblemished self both in the panels of her triptych-mirror and, with more serious consequences, in the image she projects on her daughter. Through Flor, an inviolate Flor, Bonnie may re-establish the continuity of past and present and thus absolve herself from the guilt of the infidelity that has caused a fragmented conception of self as well as the breakdown of her marriage and the impending breakdown of her daughter, who was exposed to her infidelity and then forced to live a wandering lifestyle. Whereas Bob sees Flor as an object necessary to confirm his structured perception, Bonnie sees her as an object necessary to con-

firm her patterned perception. Flor becomes a projection of Bonnie's desire to be *une belle dame sans merci*, a sensual yet spiritual Venus (96, 105-06), a muse for a Burne-Jones or a Rossetti.¹⁵

Bonnie too must test this image and her first moment of crisis comes as she transfers her ownership of the image of Flor to Bob. Her main concern, however, is whether there will be a place for her in this new pattern, for if she is not in the composition, she sees nothing at all, as her reaction to Bob's modern painting well illustrates (43). Lines, colours, and shapes are secondary to her perspective, to how she perceives her own place in a new tableau. The test comes at Cannes through a dream in which she envisions Flor as a mermaid — not a Siren in “‘the blue sea, and the grottoes, everything coral and blue. Coral green and coral blue,’” not “‘*la belle Florence*, floating and drifting, the bright hair spread,’” as some members of Queen Bonnie's court on the beach suggest — but rather a monster with “‘an ugly fish tail, like a carp's’” (121-22). That image of herself that she has kept alive through Venus Flor, like those feet that she has tended, risks violation:

She was perplexed by the truth that had bothered her all her life, that there was no distance between time and events. Everything raced to a point beyond her reach and sight. Everyone slid out of her grasp: her husband, her daughter, her friends. She let herself fall back. Her field of vision closed in and from the left came the first, swimming molecules of pain. (124)

That evening, Flor comes to Bonnie's room, and although Bonnie still fears that she is to lose her image of innocence, she is given a reprieve. Stroking Flor's hair, she thinks, “My mermaid, my prize. The carp had vanished from the dream, leaving an iridescent Flor. No one was good enough for Florence. That was the meaning of the dream. ‘Your hair hair is so stiff, honey, it's full of salt’” (129). Unlike Bob who actually tastes the salt, Bonnie remains outside the suffering: for the moment, the pattern holds, although it will be retested as Flor slips further away from her (for example, 47-48). But by adjusting her perspective, Bonnie can always rework the composition to accommodate any new figures or changes in the tableau. With an image of her past self firmly fixed, a pattern emerges from the chaos of life.

Florence, however, has had so many images projected upon her without ever being given the opportunity to develop any authentic image of self that the colours, lights, lines, and shapes, which for her husband form an enclosed structure and for her mother an expanding pattern, become a circle that ultimately develops into a destructive gyre. As she loses her grasp on reality, Flor tells Doris, “‘I'm a Victorian heroine’” (72); she is not, however, the Victorian heroine of the Biedermeier, Impressionist, or Pre-Raphaelite traditions. She sees herself as “the sick redhead; the dying, quivering fox,” giving off a rank odour that both defines her as a woman and disgusts her (32, 67).¹⁶ In some respects, Flor resembles Munch's *The Sick Child* (1885), with her orange-red hair loose on the pillow, this orange-red being reflected in the table that juts in from the left foreground and the glass that seems

to float in the right foreground, all these splashes of orange-red attempting to emerge from the overwhelming dark greens of the picture. Munch's painting departs from the usual pathos of the dying child in so many lesser Victorian paintings to offer a still life of pain. But the pain comes through the rounded shoulders of the mother, not the serene, brightly lit face of the dying girl whose gaze is cast beyond the mother. This cannot be Flor whose habitual "waking look" is one of "horror" (44). No, *The Sick Child*, despite the extreme suffering conveyed, is not the final image of Flor that the novel projects; rather, Flor is the shorn, contorted head of Munch's *The Scream* (1893), caught in a swirling world of lights, colours, lines, and shapes that do not compose themselves into any recognizable image for Flor. Bonnie thinks, "That was how you became, living for Flor. Impossible, illogical pictures leaped upward in the mind and remained fixed, shining with more brilliance and clarity than the obvious facts" (40-41). Therefore, Flor does not have any particular moment of crisis in which she tests her perception; she is constantly testing perceived against received truths.

CONTRARY TO WHAT BOB thinks, the world into which Flor yearns to escape is not a dark world devoid of light but rather a shadowed one in which light and dark coexist. Whereas two years previously Bob sought darkness through the mysterious Flor, Flor sought light through the structured Bob who "had no attachments to the past." One night in Cannes, Flor woke up in the dark and a bar of light from a car's lights swept across the ceiling and walls of the room. Flor perceived this as a beacon of concrete happiness. She saw that her own family, "the chain of fathers and daughters and mothers and sons," had been "powerless as a charm" against suffering and believed that, lacking her own "emotional country, it might be possible to consider another person one's home" (111-12). She accepted the imperfection of her lover, but two years later, as Flor's trust in Bob's ability to provide light and focus in her life has been betrayed, she seeks relief in the shaded, gray world of dreams. Light and dark are "outside the scope of her fears" (65); only "dreams experienced in the grey terrain between oblivion and life" (30) can provide her with the calm she now seeks.

Within the chaotic world of bright lights and colours in which she finds herself (29, 106-07), Flor can neither define nor place herself. Thus she attempts to assert her existence in "wide-skirted dresses in brilliant tones" — corals and reds (27). The two colours consistently associated with Flor are the complementary colours of green and red: green eyes, red hair. Significantly, these colours are what identify her as a McCarthy (151-52) and distinguish her from her mother's family, the Fairlies, with their "light blue eyes, and pale brows, lashes, and hair" (139; cf.

15-16, 140)— features to which Flor aspires with her insistence that she is anemic (60, 67). While giving Flor a unique beauty, which Bob sees as luminous and Bonnie as alluring, red and green, being complementary, are ultimately destructive: when mixed, these pigments cancel one another out, leaving a gray tone or black.

Meanwhile, however, the colour red is Flor's assurance that the ruin is incomplete as when she imagines Paris as having perished and the red geranium as "the only color on the gray street" (79-80; cf. 52). And the only image, among all those imposed on her, that Flor can grasp of herself is that of a little red fox. In the dream that marks Flor's final slipping into insanity, the red fox departs in the green sea. Flor finds the "right direction" as she turns away from this red image, which, having merged with the green sea, must now be a gray-black speck, and grasps at yet another image of light.¹⁷ Riding her pony through a tunnel of green trees, she attains the perfection that Bob and Bonnie have demanded. In her dream, however, it is neither Bob nor Bonnie who greets her, but her father, a figure beyond the vanishing point formed by the parallel lines in the world of here and now (84-85). This is the "image of torment, nostalgia, and unbearable pain" (55) that she has kept enclosed, suppressed, for so many years.

The image of the fox is associated with the vertigo that Flor experiences in her attempt to make parallel lines perform as they should in a structured world: tapering until they meet at the horizon. Both the fox and vertiginous lines are symbols of the "torment" that Flor began to experience when she was twelve (30), thus being consequent to her exposure to her mother's infidelity and her father's rejection of them both (10) and coincident with her arrested sexual development (114). Like Touchstone from *As You Like It*, a passage from whom Gallant quotes for her epigraph to the novel, Flor is seeking a "better place." By fourteen, she strives to break "the circle of life closing in . . . the family, the mother, the husband to come" (143) and so destroys the necklace of glass beads. Flor is caught in the centre, however, and her breaking of the necklace only sets the scene in spinning motion: "the air was full of pigeons and bells and the movement of Flor breaking something because she wanted something broken" (19; cf. 4-5, 142).

Ten years later, at Cannes, the circle has become an underground tunnel in which she is enclosed and watched over by such insect enemies as Wishart (120-21). Nor does her marriage to Bob provide a "better place," a home for her. In Paris, her movements are circumscribed within a "familiar triangle" (33). Only in her empty apartment, as she desperately seeks a dream world, can she broaden the tunnel, open up a vertex of the triangle, to form a funnel (82). But the vertex becomes a vortex, and as Flor attempts to escape the circle, tunnel, and triangle, these shapes are gyrating so rapidly that they have become a whirlpool or whirlwind and suck her into the eye of the storm.

Because Flor is inside the imprisoning shapes, but with no sense of self, she cannot

gain any perspective and her field of vision is gradually foreshortened as the shoreline narrows and the sea encroaches (28). Only the neutral gray world can stop the chaotic gyration of colours, lights, lines, and shapes that tosses her about like an alien piece of flotsam. Flor's image of the world is like Bob's modern painting, in which Flor sees no structure, no pattern, only exploding, floating forms, "absolute proof that the universe was disintegrating and that it was vain and foolish to cry for help" (43). She has become Munch's silent scream as the sea sweeps over her. There can be no "better place," but as for Timon, only an "everlasting mansion / Upon the beachèd verge of the salt flood, / Who once a day with his embossed froth / The turbulent surge shall cover."¹⁸

All the characters except Flor attain a perspective that enables them to accommodate received truths to perceived truths and thus to survive the "turbulent surge" of the compossibility of these truths. Through the narration of Flor's cousin, George Fairlie, in the fourth section, which takes place several weeks after Flor's breakdown, the victim and survivors of the storm are portrayed. For Bob, it is as if he has "come into a known station only to find all the trains going to the wrong places or leaving at impossible times: endlessly patient, he was waiting for the schedules to be rearranged" (137). Bonnie is trying out a new role, that of "a crone; she seemed to have made up her mind to be old and tactless, and dress like the Mad Woman of Chaillot" (138). Both of them, as they make their journey through the Paris night, are fixing an image of the new Flor into their structure or pattern: that of a tamed Flor, gentle and affectionate, feeding her husband little pieces of bread from her tray (136).

This image, however, George finds to be "a swampy horror on which his mind refuse[s] to alight" (142): he retains the image of the old, rebellious Flor, petulantly breaking her necklace, glass beads scattering, pigeons eddying, bells ringing. But George, because he has a sense of self gained through a sense of family and place (8, 20, 139-40, 151-52), has a perspective and therefore does not become a victim of the storm. He, like the survivors, finds structure and pattern in the world, but unlike them, he sees life whole. His is the eye of the truly kinetic artist through which, Naum Gabo insists, the fourth dimension — time — can genuinely, not just optically, be introduced.¹⁹ George does not simply adjust his focus or shift his position to attain an optical illusion of having accommodated new images into the structure or pattern. He actually sees through eyes other than his own. Although like Flor, the victim, he receives a multitude of exploding, fragmented images, unlike Flor who is caught in the centre with no focus, he does not become a victim but a transmitter of the compossibility, even the harmony, of the images within the whole picture. Thus his narrative becomes a "mobile structure" as he replicates the qualities of the glass bead that he no longer needs, receiving and transmitting colours, lights, lines, and shapes, which while gyrating, do so in a kaleidoscopic rather than tornadic fashion.

THE FIRST SECTION OF the novel, focusing on the day George's parents, while in Venice, go off on an excursion to see some "old pictures," leaving George with Bonnie and Flor, reveals the evolution of George's kinetic, kaleidoscopic perspective. This day is memorable because, as a child of seven, he moves from a simple two-dimensional, through a reflective three-dimensional, to a kaleidoscopic multi-dimensional view of life. The Grand Canal, in the opening scene, is a flat, green "hardly moving layer of morning muck." Similarly, his parents' faces are flat and expressionless; therefore, he has been unable to read "betrayal" under their composed masks. All is static, stagnating, the scene only being broken by his "churning across to the Lido" in an open boat with his aunt and cousin. Once on the beach, everything returns to its two-dimensional plane, although the memory of Bonnie has a sense of depth through the optical illusion of concentric circles: "She sat under a series of disks, in dwindling perspective; first an enormous beach umbrella, all in stripes, then her own faded parasol, then a neutral-colored straw hat" (1-2). The rest of the scene, even filtered through his memory, remains flat: Flor "sitting straight in the center of a round shadow"; the sea "so flat, so still, so thick with warmth you might have walked on it" (4).

What propels George from this flat two-dimensional perspective to a reflective three-dimensional one is the image of Flor "angry, and enjoying herself, all at once" as she breaks the encircling necklace of glass beads (4-5). The bead that George retrieves becomes "a powerful charm; a piece of a day; a reminder that someone had once wished him dead but that he was still alive" (5-6). In itself, however, the bead cannot produce a kinetic image; it is simply a three-dimensional object, each dimension dependent on the other.

But already the image of the bead is expanding, gaining a fourth dimension, because contained within it are not simply the images of green water, green sky, two two-dimensional images gaining a third dimension through reflection, but the associative value of all the images. Flor's eyes, as she looks at him, are "green as water, bright with dislike." His memory too adds a facet as he recalls "the heavy green water closing out the sky and the weight of clouds" on the day he fell into his grandmother Fairlie's pond (6-7). The images contained in this memory are placed over the images contained in the memory of Flor's green eyes looking at him with hate, and all are set in motion as he looks into the bead, "glass over glass" (7, 19). The associations gained through experience and memory have developed the bead into a multi-dimensional image.

After a telescoping of ten years, the first section ends with George's account of an encounter with Flor in New York shortly after her marriage to Bob. George, now seventeen, is a well-adjusted individual and an astute observer (3, 16): for example, he accurately notes Bob's desire to possess Flor's beauty (16-17). When

Flor questions him about the accuracy of his memory, however, George seeks verification through the existence of his glass bead that “proves” he was “some-where” (20). Soon after this, George loses his talisman: his memory of Flor is so firmly implanted that it needs no objective verification; he is able to travel “through a hole in time” and be with Flor just as “one goes back to a lake, a room in a city, or the south” (142-43).

Because of this firmly fixed memory, George successfully undergoes the nightmare journey through Paris, guided by Bonnie and then Bob, confronting the “swampy horror” of the truth of the new, shorn Flor. He resembles the “White Rabbit” (139) in the world beyond the looking glass, a world in which received images do not correspond with perceived ones. Most importantly, George is responsible for preserving the image of the old Flor, which conflicts with this new image. At some points in the journey, George’s equilibrium is threatened as he experiences the same sensations as Flor (although his route does not parallel any of the journeys taken by Flor described in the novel). For example, he too has a sensation of a perished Paris: full of people, none of them belonging (138; cf. 52). The most precarious moment of the journey occurs when he becomes “physically aware of the absence of Flor”: “It would be nice to believe she was happier, calmer, more loving than ever, but he thought she was not anywhere.” Like Flor several months earlier, George now loses “hold of the real situation” and observes the trio of which he is part from the outside (145). But for George this is merely a temporary sensation because he has a clear idea of who he is and of what being George implies (133).

Although during this journey, George’s “shed youth” seems “a piling-up of hallucinations, things heard and seen that were untrue or of no use to him” (139), George does not allow anyone to impose false images on him; thus he resists Bonnie’s attempt to absolve her guilt by reversing his history with Flor’s (147-48). As George is flooded by the compossibility of truths about himself and the various relationships to which he has been exposed, he realizes that had he “still owned the bead he would have got rid of it now” (148). At the height of this onslaught, he hears Bob’s voicing a desire for a simple, structured life and Bonnie’s insistence that Flor was a *femme fatale*. “The Seine was moving faster; the reflection of bridges cracked and shook” (150). But the composition does not explode for George even though he knows, “When the three separated that night, Flor would be lost. Their conversation and their thoughts were the last of the old Flor. If she was cured, she would be different. He was sure of that” (152). George offers the image of Flor to Bob, as husband, to preserve, but Bob seems “unaware of the magnitude of the stroke” to put Flor outside the Fairlie family composition and into a composition with her husband (153-54). George cannot abnegate responsibility by simply shifting focus. And George has yet to confront the inhibiting effect that the image of Flor has had on his relationships with women (142-43, 148). As George recrosses

the bridge he has an “authentic hallucination.” Flor is not the ideal object of the Biedermeier, Impressionist, or Pre-Raphaelite traditions. George is a citizen of the twentieth century and his final image of Flor is a kinetic one:

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. (154)

Perhaps this mutability is forecast at the beginning of the night’s journey by the “funny light over the Louvre, as if beams of warm, theatrical color were being played from somewhere behind . . .” (132). The old Flor is no longer fixed as an object of art in a gallery of old paintings. She is no longer a spectacle at whom strangers daily stare. The image of the wild Flor has secured its place in a collective image of all displaced and suffering souls of whom Munch’s silent scream has taken possession.²⁰ Meanwhile the new Flor, a broken Flor, sits in an asylum feeding her husband pieces of bread from her tray. Gone is the reflective green image. It no longer suffices. The “last blaze of day” fades. “Nothing remained except a vanishing saffron cloud” (132).

The more *avant-garde* postmodernists of the last three decades have challenged what they perceive to be limitations imposed by the three-dimensional page and the written word through such mechanical devices as unbound pages that can be rearranged however the reader wills, unusual design and colour of print, and visual symbols and illustrations. Mavis Gallant neither chafes under the restrictions of a three-dimensional page nor sees the medium of language to be confining. Thus, Gallant has not felt compelled to dabble in the fashion of mixed media, but rather exploits the techniques of the visual artist — colour, shading, line, shape, framing, and ultimately fluidity — to compose, metaphorically, the structures, patterns, and gyres within her novel. In the hands of Mavis Gallant, a true literary artist capable of creating vibrant visual effects, the language of fiction moulds “mobile structures” that reflect the compossibility of truths and produce different trajectories for a reading of these truths.

NOTES

- ¹ Michel Butor, *Inventory: Essays by Michel Butor*, ed. Richard Howard (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), 30. All further references to Butor are from this collection.
- ² Richard Howard, “Foreword,” *Inventory: Essays by Michel Butor*, 10.
- ³ Mavis Gallant’s fascination with art is revealed throughout both her fictional and non-fictional works. Describing a museum located on the street on the Left Bank of Paris where she lives, Gallant notes that, “Nothing reveals the state of mind of a

class and a society quite so much as what it chooses to hang on the wall. The Hébert Museum is interesting not so much for a way of art but for a way of looking at life." "Paris Truths: On the street where she lives," *Destinations*, 1:4 (Winter 1986), 42. In his 1977 interview with Gallant, Geoff Hancock described some of the paintings and etchings on the walls of her apartment, conversed with her on the Surrealist movement, and, observing the visual quality of her stories, conjectured that she "might [have] liked to have been a painter at one time," to which Gallant replied that she often thinks in terms of being a painter and how she would respond to a scene were she a painter. "An Interview with Mavis Gallant," *Canadian Fiction Magazine*, 28 (1978), 19, 51, 55.

- ⁴ *James Joyce: A Critical Introduction*, Revised and Augmented Edition (1941; rpt. New York: New Directions Paperback, 1960), 30.
- ⁵ In his 1964 essay "The Space of the Novel," Butor suggests that Paris is an important illustration that "[s]pace, as we experience it, is not at all the Euclidean space whose parts are mutually exclusive. Every site is the focal point of a horizon of other sites, the point of origin of a series of possible routes passing through other more or less determined regions" (37). Paris is not simply a sender of information or a receiver of information, but rather a city that both sends and receives, "thus establishing new relations between other places" (38). This idea is particularly pertinent to my discussion of the narrative voice of George Fairlie.
- ⁶ Mavis Gallant, *Green Water, Green Sky* (1959; rpt. Toronto: Macmillan, 1983), 46. Further references are to this edition.
- ⁷ See especially 33-36, the first portion of the novel to be devoted to Bob's viewpoint, as illustration of Bob's integration of public and private selves and his lack of historical sense.
- ⁸ The only time that colour appears with reference to Bob is in a scene in which Flor has lamented the lack of bright flashes of colour in Europe; in contrast, Bob sees "the sun flash off a speedboat and everywhere he looked he saw color and light. The cars moving along the Croisette were color enough" (107). Perhaps it is Bob's inability to distinguish between the random and intense that reduces everything to white or black — to a reflection of all colours or no colours.
- ⁹ This idea is developed in Edwin Mullins, *The Painted Witch: How Western Artists Have Viewed the Sexuality of Women* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1985), who although not addressing Biedermeier artists specifically, discusses how artists have traditionally outfitted women to enhance their "value as a man's possession. . . . She is a prize, a prized object" (106). A series of such women, adorned with pearls, jewels, silks, laces, and furs, can be seen in Joseph Karl Stieler's portraits, now housed in Schloss Nymphenburg, Munich; see illustrations in Günter Böhmer, *Die Welt des Biedermeier* (Munich: Verlag Kurt Desch, 1968), 241-43, and Stieler's portrait of the aristocratic *Amalie von Schintling* of which there is an excellent reproduction in Geraldine Norman, *Beidermeier Painting: 1815-1848* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1987), 127. Also helpful for defining this attitude towards women are Deborah Gorham, *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal* (London: Croom Helm, 1982), and Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1984), especially Chapter One.
- ¹⁰ Such paintings as Renoir's *Nude in the Sunlight* (1875) or the more pallid *Blonde Bathers* of the 1880's — note their wedding bands — well illustrate this. See reproductions of these in *Renoir* (New York: Harry N. Abrams/Arts Council of Great Britain, 1985), 75, 105, 107. Mullins, 84-85 comments generally about Renoir's attitude of taming and owning the loved object.

- ¹¹ Although attitudes towards Manet's *Olympia* differ greatly, Paul Valéry's comments in his introduction to the catalogue for the Manet centenary exhibition are noteworthy here: "Her empty head is separated from her essential being by a thin band of black velvet. Impurity personified — whose function demands the frank and placid absence of any sense of shame — is isolated by that pure and perfect stroke. A bestial Vestal of absolute nudity, she invokes a dream of all the primitive barbarity and ritual animality which lurks and lingers in the ways and workings of prostitution in the life of a great city." *Degas Manet Morisot*, trans. David Paul (New York: Pantheon Books, 1960), 109.
- ¹² This scene is carefully structured in blocks, with the alternating viewpoints running in a parallel — and then for a moment in an oblique — direction, to reinforce content.
- ¹³ Despite the delicately coloured images, Bonnie is usually pictured in *chic* black; see, for example, 27, 134.
- ¹⁴ *The Penguin Dictionary of Saints*, ed. Donald Attwater, 2nd edition (Middlesex: Penguin, 1983), 313-14; *The Saints: A Concise Biographical Dictionary*, ed. John Coulson (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1958), 425-27.
- ¹⁵ That Bonnie has ambitions this way is reinforced by the scene in which she has promised to help an artist who has a flattering portrait of her in her studio (63). It is interesting to note in this context the Pre-Raphaelites' preference for red-headed models for their Venus and Madonna figures, this particularly being the case with Rossetti and Burne-Jones.
- ¹⁶ As such, then, Florence sees herself in much the same way as many Victorian women. See, in particular, the second chapter of Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar.
- ¹⁷ See 29-30, 54-55, for the association with light of this image of the tunnel of trees.
- ¹⁸ William Shakespeare, *Timon of Athens* 5.4. 100-03, quoted in *Green Water, Green Sky*, 28.
- ¹⁹ "Russia and Constructivism" (An interview with Naum Gabo by Arbam Lassaw and Ilya Bolotowsky, 1956), *Gabo: Constructions, Sculpture, Paintings, Drawings, Engravings* (London: Lund Humphries, 1957), 160.
- ²⁰ Despite Janice Keefer's contention that Gallant's two novels are "period-piece histories of female experience and sensibility," the archetypal images created through Gallant's adaptation of the techniques of the visual artist surely place this novel in the context of Keefer's general thesis concerning Gallant's fiction, that "female experience, in which passivity, captive and sometimes complicit suffering have been traditionally the norm, becomes archetypal of the human experience of history" in today's world. Janice Kulyk Keefer, "Mavis Gallant and the Angel of History," *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 55:3 (Spring 1986), 301 n. 32, 296.