EXILES IN TIME

Gallant's "My Heart is Broken"

David O'Rourke

As is often the case when attention is first turned to a neglected writer, a good deal of the criticism which has been written on Mavis Gallant has been influenced by those personal glimpses which the author has allowed of herself. To be sure, the biographical approach is valuable in illuminating certain aspects of Gallant's fiction. Her interest in familiar relationships might be assigned to the fact that she was left orphaned at an early age. Her own attendance at seventeen different schools might account for some of the transients who drift through her fiction. An early and unhappy marriage might explain the presence of so many young widows and divorcees in her work. Every writer draws from personal experience, but the problem with the biographical approach is that it is often just too convenient. Anything may be drawn upon to explain anything else. With Mavis Gallant and the theme of exile, this is particularly the case. Gallant is a Canadian who lives in Paris and publishes in the *New Yorker*. Because many commentators view her in the romantic sense of expatriate or exile, a kind of hangover from the twenties, there has been an unfortunate tendency to look for romantic exile in her work. In short, there has been a great deal of wishful supposition.[1] It is quite possible that the author lives in Paris because it is an exciting and vibrant city — briefly, because she likes it — not because she feels unable to return to a geographical home. It is true that Gallant's fiction is populated with exiles, but the process of identification in this regard is not difficult; more debatable is the implicit suggestion that their rootlessness is tied to some sort of physical alienation. To say that Gallant's exiles are "out of place" simply because they have left one country for another is to state a half-truth: metaphorically quite correct, but on a literal plane without much meaning.

Exile may well be Gallant's preoccupation, but it is not so much an exile of space as it is one of time. Her characters have typically taken a wrong turn in life and are unable to go back. In *My Heart Is Broken* (1964), Gallant fuses technique and theme in order to portray this universal dilemma. A careful analysis of each story reveals the unity of the collection and clarifies the Gallant "exile" as a person who is locked into a present situation, condition, stage of personal history, from which escape is difficult, and sometimes impossible.

"Acceptance of Their Ways" is set against the backdrop of winter, "the dead season," in an Italian Riviera pension distinguished by the smell of "decay." The story covers the span of one evening and the morning after. During Mrs. Garnett's "last meal" before her departure from the pension, an argument erupts between her and the owner, Mrs. Freeport. Watching the owner, water lily in hat, shouting at Mrs. Garnett reminds the only other guest, Lily Littel, of similar fights with her former husband. Mrs. Garnett finally, and literally, buckles under the verbal onslaught of Mrs. Freeport. After the rather orgasmic triumph, the victor becomes very loving toward the sobbing Mrs. Garnett. This tenderness is shown again the next day at Mrs. Garnett's farewell. It is when Mrs. Freeport is feeling her most wretched and, perhaps, most human, that Lily delivers the blow of her next-day departure for Nice. It should be remembered that "Mrs. Freeport couldn't live without Lily, not more than one day." Mrs. Freeport comes to the realization that eventually she will be abandoned completely. "Instead of answering," Lily adjusts Mrs. Freeport's water lily, "which was familiar of her." Not surprisingly, Lily becomes identified with the water lily. As Mrs. Freeport has cruelly triumphed over Mrs. Garnett, so Lily has won at the expense of her instructress, Mrs. Freeport. Lily has come to accept their antiseptic ways. She has become adept at stinging in a gentlewomanly, sophisticated fashion.

"Acceptance of Their Ways" offers a portrait of three rather genteel widows. Mrs. Freeport lives in a state of poverty in order to remain close to "someone precious" in a nearby cemetery. Mrs. Garnett's thoughts are never far away from her dead husband, William Henry. It is not clear whether Cliff Little died during the war but, for Lily Littel, he might as well have. The claustrophobic scene is set in winter to accentuate the near-to-death existence of the three characters. For Freeport and Garnett, after the death of their husbands, life is essentially over. One lives near Bordighera to be close to a corpse, the other cannot help but retreat to the past in simple conversation. The younger Lily willingly adopts the sterile lifestyle. As a "widow" herself, it is likely that she has come to identify with the older women. It is also quite clear that she is attracted by a certain aura of snobbery, having long ago changed her name from Little to Littel. Although apparently more innately vicious than either Freeport or Garnett, having deliberately chosen her course, Lily is still able to escape the vestiges of decay through a kind of schizophrenic existence. "Two-faced Lily Littel" has a secret life in Nice. Under the pretext of visiting her sister, she becomes the "old forgotten Lily-girl" caught in "the coarse and grubby gaiety of the French Riviera." This escape to a more youthful, liberated self is always short-lived — not unlike the effects of alcohol.

In "Bernadette," Robbie and Nora Knight, although considerably younger than Mrs. Freeport and Garnett, are also exiled from the vitality of their youth. They have come to live a façade: a picture of the liberal WASP, bourgeois lifestyle. Their maid, Bernadette, is everything that they are not — she stands for spontaneity and life, as opposed to analytical dissection. Bernadette is given books to read but, unlike Lily Littel, is not a very good student. She chooses not to accept the Knights' ways. Rather than trying to understand things to death, Bernadette stands in awe of the mysteries of life. She represents a youth that is ultimately compelling in attraction for Robbie, but a threat at the core for Nora. The reason is that Bernadette symbolizes something they might both have become. After college, Robbie and Nora sacrificed authentic feelings and desires in order to programme themselves for a materialistically rewarding existence. The route taken has left both discontented, resulting in a very precarious sort of marriage.

The time of the story is late December. The living-room has been set for a post-Christmas, discussion-group party. It is ironically described as being "like a room prepared for a colour photo in a magazine."[1] As "Acceptance of Their Ways" builds to a climax in which a character loses all composure, so Nora loses control when the party gets out of hand. Throughout, Robbie's temperature rises. It is significant that his illness is a cold:

> Because he had a cold and Nora had gone out and left him on a snowy miserable afternoon, he saw in this picture [Orwell's portrait of a working-class interior] everything missing in his life. He felt frozen and left out.

Winter is used to depict the decline of the Knight marriage; that it is the end of the year does not suggest a very optimistic future for Robbie and Nora as a couple. But winter is also employed to represent a stage in life into which Robbie, particularly, finds himself locked. It is not a coincidence that Robbie has a cold and feels frozen at the same time he is trying to get back to the warm centre of his school days. He has left behind an important vitality — "the only result of his reading was a sense of loss." By contrast, the younger Bernadette represents "an atmosphere of warmth and comfort": "She was the world they had missed sixteen years before, and they, stupidly, had been trying to make her read books."

Like "Acceptance of Their Ways," the story covers a time-span of just under two days. On the second, Nora confronts Bernadette with the knowledge of the latter's pregnancy. She tries to dissect the situation in the same way that she dissects her relationship with Robbie. Not surprisingly, she is shaken by the prospect of Bernadette's harbouring new life. Her mistake comes in assuming that Robbie is the father. It leads Robbie and Nora to individually admit that their marriage is a sham — like their living-room, a picture lacking much substance.

Bernadette, like Lily Littel, flowers outside of a claustrophobic boarding house. She leads a secret, and double, life in which emotions are given full reign. She is also able to find refuge in fantasy. Sitting in a theatre, she identifies with the people in the film who are looking on, never expecting the "picture" to become true for herself. In this sense, she lives the authentic life compared to the Knights' rather empty existence. She feels nothing but warmth for the child, aware that it will become an "angel" awaiting death — very similar to her own situation, trapped in an environment and culture neither of which is conducive to life.

"THE MOABITESS" is also set in winter; it is November, and again out-of-season on the Riviera. Miss Horeham's identification is clearly with this time of year:

> She was thinking about the Bible and the old days, and of what a nice time of year this was; in spite of what she had said about its being off-season, it was really the period she liked best. ... In Miss Horeham's vision of life this was the climate in which everything took place. On November nights, the world closed comfortably in.

Here winter does not represent the kind of sterility exhibited in "Acceptance of Their Ways" and "Bernadette." Miss Horeham is elderly and ready to die, and hence winter offers more of a tranquil dream-state than an abrupt death. What is interesting is the imaginative, treasure-box world Miss Horeham has created to obtain some comfort in the desolation of life. Like Lily and Bernadette, Miss Horeham juxtaposes a meek and mild public life and a secret world of her own. The major difference is one of tense. Miss Horeham moves from a day-to-day present, characterized by change, into an idyllic past where she is once again the daughter-wife of her father. In this way, nothing is lost or left behind. The important treasures of the past are always under lock and key in the present.

"An Unmarried Man's Summer" presents yet another character against a background of the off-season Riviera months, by now clearly a motif in *My Heart Is Broken*:

> He is surrounded by the faces of women. Their eyes are fixed on his dotingly, but in homage to another man: a young lover killed in the 1914 war; an adored but faithless son. ... Walter must be wicked, for part of the memory of every vanished husband or lover or son is the print of his cruelty.

But Walter is not the only window on the past. "An Unmarried Man's Summer" turns on the irony that Walter employs the elderly women for exactly the same purpose: "Once, he had loved a woman much older than himself. He saw her, by chance, after many years, when she was sixty."

An event equal in importance in shaping Walter's life occurred during the war when his body was burnt from head to foot. The author does not draw a lot of attention to this event, but it surely goes a long way towards explaining why

Walter prefers the winter months with elderly women to frolicking on the beach each summer: " — for it had all of it gone, and he wanted nothing but the oasis of peace, the admiration of undemanding old women, the winter months." It is tempting to say that Walter's scars are symbolic — that, having once been "burnt," he does not seek to venture into the realms of love and affection again. But, more likely, he has been rendered physically incapacitated to return sexual love. The women are "undemanding." Even if Walter could have sex, he has probably accepted the fact that his scorched body is not very appealing. He has adjusted to this situation and gives the appearance of being carefree, but he is still seen to mutter such unheard remarks as: "I wish it had been finished off for me in the last war."

In "Bernadette" and "The Moabitess," fragile, make-believe worlds are shaken at their roots by some realistic intrusion. In "An Unmarried Man's Summer," the visit of Walter Henderson's family serves as a "revolution" ("nothing to do with politics, just a wild upheaval of some kind") which upsets the "mosaic picture" Walter has formed of himself. It forces an epiphany of his empty existence, and leads Walter to the key question of what he will do at sixty. His life has no direction; it wanders in seasonal cycles. At sixty, he will be asked to vacate his house. Removal will be tantamount to abandoning what little life he has left: "Look at the house I live in. Ugly box, really. I never complain. . . . No heat in winter. Not an anemone in the garden."

Walter is able to ride out the revolution by means of great cruelty to his servant, Angelo: yet another "angel" given more to warmth and life than to the sterility exemplified by his master. With the return of winter, Walter resumes his orderly, vacuous existence. Like Robbie and Nora, however, he has been shaken by a vision of an energetic past, a past that is no longer accessible to him. He is left locked in the present, apprehensive of what is to come.

"Its Image on the Mirror" is of novella length, yet the story line is relatively simple. The lives of two sisters — one vital and spontaneous, the other prim and predictable — are traced more for reasons of contrast than to arrive at any specific point in plot. This is not to say that "Its Image on the Mirror" is a simple story. Gallant orchestrates several levels of time and provides a well-intentioned but not totally reliable narrator in the person of the prudent sister, Jean Price.

Briefly stated, the chronology is all backwards. The story begins with a middle-aged Jean carefully trying to think back to the summer of 1955. She recalls helping her parents move from their Allenton home in July of that year, then remembers her sister's promise to join them at the cottage for the Labour Day weekend. The weekend is recounted in some detail before the reader is led even further back in time to a World War II Montreal. Still more light is shed on Jean and her Isadora Duncan-like sister, Isobel, before the reader is left "hanging" with a conclusion not unlike, in style, the ending of *The Great Gatsby*. Jean feels that, for the first time, Isobel needs her and, consequently, will never shut her out of her life again. Of course, this conclusion is quite ironic. The narrative has already shown that the sisters grow even further apart. Not only does Isobel end up moving to Venezuela, but Jean also becomes a perfect carbon copy of her mother.

"Its Image on the Mirror," being longer, magnifies the technique used in most of the short stories. References to the past are employed to inform the present. Middle-aged Jean, the picture of contentment, is revealed to be a very insecure person who is envious of her sister's rebellious spirit. Early in the story, Jean is seen to feel sorry for her father: "It seems hard to have your views shared by everyone around you all your life and then confounded in your old age." And yet there is a real danger of this happening to Jean. The narrative demonstrates that she clings to, and echoes, her mother's opinions like someone holding on to a lifeline. She has sacrificed spontaneity, vitality, in order to fulfill some preconceived notion of proper behaviour. Isobel is her opposite, and must be attacked and criticized, or Jean's life will be revealed for the sham that it is. Isobel is the person Jean might have become.

There are a number of rather remarkable similarities between "Its Image on the Mirror" and "The Cost of Living." In the former story, there is a five-year age difference between Isobel and Jean. When they meet at the summer cottage after a separation of six years, Isobel is thirty-three and Jean thirty-eight. In "The Cost of Living," Patricia and Louise also meet after a six-year separation; Patricia is thirty-three and Louise thirty-eight. Patricia describes herself as having been the "rebel" of her family: "I had inherited the vanity, the stubbornness, without the will; I was too proud to follow and too lame to command." In contrast, the older Louise is best described as "prudent." She has a predisposition towards proper behaviour, and frequently adopts not only her mother's stance but also her inflection. The echoes of "Its Image on the Mirror" are quite clear. Isobel and Jean are back with an important twist. Although Louise makes "a serious effort to know" Patricia, she eventually becomes more interested in Sylvie. The latter is described as "the coarse and grubby Degas dancer, the girl with the shoulder thrown back and the insolent chin": another Isadora Duncan. As the story unfolds, the differences from "Its Image on the Mirror" begin to multiply. In a sense, the other sides of an Isobel and a Jean are presented. Louise is prudent, but there can be little doubt about her warmth and love. Sylvie is energetic, but also selfish and immature. The most dramatic difference lies in the reaction of Louise to her own mother's death: "With every mouthful of biscuit and every swallow of tea, she celebrated our mother's death and her own release."

Louise's sudden liberation is like a springtime in winter. She meets Patrick on December 21st, falls in love, and begins to transfer the attention, previously paid to her invalid mother, to this new lover. It soon becomes apparent that Patrick represents to Louise more than simply his own person. After Patrick's departure, Louise says to Sylvie, "I've forgotten what he was like"; Patricia, the narrator, quickly notes, "But I knew it was Collie Louise had meant." Later, Patricia observes:

> Louise never mentioned him [Patrick]. Once she spoke of her lost young husband, but Collie would never reveal his face again. He had been more thoroughly forgotten than anyone deserves to be. Patrick and Collie merged into one occasion, where someone had failed. The failure was Louise's; the infidelity of memory, the easy defeat were hers.

In a theme typical of Gallant in *My Heart Is Broken*, one character employs another as a kind of double for a person who has been lost in the past. When Patrick rejects this love, Sylvie becomes the next emotional surrogate. In a sense, Louise's history has been one of displaced love — from Collie to her mother to two characters in Paris. It is significant that the narrator notes that Sylvie is young enough to be Louise's daughter: "Sylvie must have been born that year, the year Louise was married." The winter in Paris then becomes to Louise an opportunity to play out what might have been in her own life.

But Louise's attraction for Sylvie probably goes even deeper. If "Its Image on the Mirror" is considered an expansion of this situation, we may conclude that Sylvie represents to Louise a certain vitality or exuberance which she herself lacks. The interest in Sylvie then becomes a fascination with an aspect of herself which has never been developed. The difference is that by living a life that might have been, Louise is better able to adjust to her present situation instead of being left with a vague sense of loss. She comes to recognize by contrast with Sylvie's irresponsibility her own distinct merits. She even goes so far as to encourage Sylvie to adopt some of her own rather old-fashioned (for bohemian Paris) attitudes: initiative and prudence in monetary matters. By April, a genuine spring, the narrator observes of Louise, "the ripped fabric of her life had mended." It has been a painful process, hence the title of the story, but she has been able to accomplish in physical encounter what is usually only attempted on the psychiatrist's couch. Having come to terms with the past, Louise is able to leave the stage of the present for what appears to be an optimistic future in Australia.

THE FEMALE CHARACTERS in "My Heart Is Broken" and "Sunday Afternoon" are not so fortunate. They appear as helpless victims of lives that have "gone wrong." In "My Heart Is Broken," Jeannie has been raped and beaten by an unidentified assailant. The assault is an implicit comment on the beating that Jeannie is taking at this stage of her life. She lies on the bed, pathetically still doing her nails. She is still trying to look pretty in an environment which steps on whim and penalizes any sign of sensuality. The stern and sexless Mrs. Thompson knowingly tolls "Winter soon," despite the fact that it is only August. She signals the reality that if Jeannie is to stay with her husband and adjust to the life presented in "My Heart Is Broken," she will have to abandon her youthful instincts, her wonderful naiveté. But the story is as much Mrs. Thompson's as it is that of Jeannie. It is not unreasonable to assume that Mrs. Thompson may once have been as vitally alive as Jeannie, prior to accepting the grotesque sentence of pushing a doll carriage. In this sense, Jeannie is Mrs. Thompson's window on the past. It is therefore natural for Mrs. Thompson, when she looks at Jeannie, to end up "trying to remember how she'd felt about things when she was twenty." Mrs. Thompson's state is even more pathetic than Jeannie's. The younger Jeannie still has her humanity, still feels pain, whereas all Mrs. Thompson can do is sit "wondering if her heart had ever been broken, too."

The setting of "Sunday Afternoon" is a "married scene in a winter room." As in "My Heart Is Broken," a brief sketch is offered of a young, and seemingly helpless, heroine trapped in a relationship — really a life situation — not older than five months. Veronica Baines clearly sees her forlorn position in the "black mirror" of the apartment window. Jim feels no more love for her than does the Algerian for the European girl being led from the Montparnasse café. Just as Jeannie wants to be liked, so would Veronica like to be loved. Unfortunately, she has to settle for "a ribbon or so, symbols of love" which she, herself, has to provide. The climax of the story arrives when Veronica discovers that not only has she not been sufficient reason for Jim to dip into his large cache of money, but in fact the money has been hidden for the express purpose of preventing her from spending it.

Veronica and Jeannie have much in common with the character of Sylvie in "The Cost of Living." All three are sensual women with child-like mentalities; they prefer to be taken care of as opposed to developing their own initiative. When something goes wrong, particularly in the case of Veronica and Jeannie, there is a tendency to stand bewildered rather than change course. They tragically lack the discipline of a Louise, and have not (yet) developed "double lives" to allow for the protection of what is vital in environments hostile to emotional growth.

It is appropriate that "The Ice Wagon Going Down the Street" is the final story in *My Heart Is Broken* because it brings together a number of the techniques and themes previously employed in the collection. The story begins in the present tense. It is once again a Sunday and, while Peter and Sheilah dote on the past, their hall-closet clothes become "crushed by winter overcoats." The bulk of the story is set in the past in order to illuminate the present domestic scene. The reader is led back via reminiscence to a lost paradise: a "fragile" Paris winter when the "dream of a marriage" held true. Once the dream falters and paradise is lost, the husband and wife find themselves "in exile" in Geneva. Eventually, Paris becomes to them not so much a geographical place as a period in time: "Paris was already a year in the past."

Of the other short stories, "The Ice Wagon Going Down the Street" is most closely allied in theme to "Bernadette," with particular parallels between Robbie and Peter, and Bernadette and Agnes. Although both Sheilah and Peter lament a "golden" period in the past, it is Peter who sees in Agnes something he might have become: "I'd be like Agnes if I didn't have Sheilah." Like Bernadette, Agnes is strictly working-class. When she hangs her university degree on the office wall, Peter notes, "It was one of the gritty, prideful gestures that stand for push, toil, and family sacrifice." Agnes lacks Bernadette's immediate warmth, but she has all the discipline and fortitude of a character like Louise. When Peter complains of the cold in Geneva, a complaint not unrelated to Robbie's condition in Montreal, Agnes replies, "Your blood has gotten thin." At the costume party, Agnes's directness, or honesty, is symbolically portrayed by the unassuming costume she wears. When the tramp outfit is later discarded for an "orphanage dressing gown," she comes even closer to a declaration of what she really is: a young Norwegian from Saskatchewan trying to make her way in the strange city of Geneva. Agnes is as much a transient as Peter, but whereas Peter looks back and is bewildered about why no one is helping him, Agnes is building toward a future on her own. The question raised is one of control. Agnes, as does Louise in "The Cost of Living," takes charge of her life without losing her humanity.

Like the conclusion of "Its Image on the Mirror," the ending of "The Ice Wagon Going Down the Street" is reminiscent of *The Great Gatsby*. Peter "thinks about families in the West as they were fifteen, twenty years ago — the iron-cold ambition, and every member pushing the next one on." He "wonders what they were doing over there in Geneva — not Sheilah and Peter, *Agnes* and Peter." Finally, he sees Agnes's "Western town" complete with "prairie trees" and "shadows on the sidewalk." This is a Nick Carraway who is realizing that a glamorous dream, in this case his own, has gone sour, and is looking to a period in the past for more stable values. The irony, of course, is that he does nothing with this epiphany. At the end of the story, he is back holding Sheilah's hand, trapped in the present.

Although the *New Yorker* stories collected in *My Heart Is Broken* range from the years 1957-63,[2] they achieve a tight unity through a repetition of theme and technique which approaches pattern. Throughout, Gallant is shown to be primarily interested in problems of the status quo. The sterility of an old order, frequently manifested by a pseudo-aristocratic gentility and symbolized by the season of winter, is contrasted with a vitality traditionally assigned to the working-classes and youth. Characters suffer "revolutions" in which they come close to losing "control," or lead "double lives" in order to conform to societal expectations and, at the same time, retain what is essentially human and true. This is not to say that all of the younger characters in *My Heart Is Broken* are paradigms of desired behaviour. Many lack the very "control" without which independence is impossable. What is called for is a balance, a determination, a flexibility which allow for continued growth.

NOTES

[1] Gallant employs photographs to depict "appearance" — veneers of existence — as well as to stop time. It is ironically employed here, as the scene described is a *living*-room.

[2] A chronology is as follows: "Bernadette," 12 Jan. 1957; "The Moabitess," 2 Nov. 1957; "Acceptance of Their Ways," 30 Jan. 1960; "My Heart Is Broken," 12 Aug. 1961; "The Cost of Living," 3 March 1962; "Sunday Afternoon," 24 Nov. 1962; "An Unmarried Man's Summer," 12 Oct. 1963; "The Ice Wagon Going Down the Street," 14 Dec. 1963. The date of publication of "Its Image on the Mirror" is 1964.

WINTER

Liliane Welch

Goosedown arms
raised against
the north wind —
winter crackles
in our walls.
Snow withers
the stars' track:
frozen dance.
All is blue cold
down to the pink
paperbirch skin.
We chop maple trunks
for evening fires
in our woodstove
and quiver
under heavy blankets,
inward dawns.