

PERILS OF COMPASSION

Peter Stevens

IN ALL THE HOOPLA of publicity and promotion afforded novels over recent years in Canada, Mavis Gallant's third novel, *A Fairly Good Time* (1970), went virtually unnoticed in the review columns. Some nodding acceptance of her as one of our better writers of prose is made by anthologists, for her short stories are chosen to appear in most Canadian collections, a half-hearted recognition of her skill as a short-story writer. But surely it is time to look more closely at the work of Mavis Gallant and in particular at her novels, which are more thoroughly ignored than most recent Canadian writing.

Those who know Mavis Gallant's stories will remember that many of them revolve around one dominant theme: the stress of relationships within families, particularly the relation between parents and children, although she herself claims that this is not a conscious choice on her part.¹ This recurrence seems to arise from her interest in people "trying to get out of a situation", because the family situation can be so inhibiting and confining and because people constantly want to break from the family while finding comfort within it as well. A family can paralyse and give false security; it can protect but shelter a person from the too insistent demands of an outside reality. It can lead to both domination and betrayal, withdrawal and smugness. All of these factors occur to a greater or lesser degree in Mavis Gallant's characters and their situations.

One of the most interesting ways Mavis Gallant develops the consequences of family relationship is to suggest that within a family people know too much about each other. A phrase she uses to describe the source of present-day problems in *A Fairly Good Time* is "complete comprehension". Within a family this comprehension acts in ambivalent ways. In this same book, talking of a mother's relation to her son, she says:

She had the complete knowledge that puts parents at a loss finally: she knew all about him except his opinion of her. . . . He didn't know all about her. How could he? She was a grown person with the habit of secrets before he was even conscious

of her. He only knew what he could expect of her. . . . How can you be someone's friend when you have had twenty years' authority over him and he has never had one second's authority over you?

THIS DOUBLE-EDGED THEME of closeness and domination, together with the will to escape from the role imposed by a relationship, is the primary theme of Mavis Gallant's first novel *Green Water, Green Sky* (1959). The theme is sounded fairly early in the book: "Once you were in a family, you were in to stay: death, divorce, scandal — nothing operated, nothing cut you away."

The novel centres around a middle-aged mother, Bonnie, a divorcee who has been pottering around Europe with her attractive daughter, Flor. They have been together for years, becoming intolerably close to each other until Flor tries to break from this stifling situation by marrying, but this does not work for her, as her husband is too amenable and is sucked into the tight relationship of mother and daughter. Eventually Flor withdraws from the world, keeping to herself in her shuttered room until at the end of novel we learn that she is in some kind of institution for the mentally sick.

The novel is told in four segments. The opening one covers the span of events from the time when Flor is fourteen to the time of her marriage. But it is told rather obliquely and spasmodically, seeming to focus on George, a cousin of Flor's. George, at the age of seven, is left by his parents for a day in Bonnie's care. He feels this as a kind of desertion, and it sets it up in an ironic way the struggle Flor will go through to escape the grip of her mother.

There is a strange interdependence between mother and daughter: Bonnie needs to protect her fatherless daughter; Flor needs to stay with her mother to prevent her from ruining her life in solitariness. At one point Flor says pathetically:

I can't leave my mother, and she won't go. Maybe I don't dare. She used to need me. Maybe now I need her. What would I do at home? My grandmother is dead. I haven't got a home. I know I sound as if I feel sorry for myself, but I haven't got anything.

Yet behind her statements of protection and love for her mother lurks an unconscious rejection of her. When Flor says, "I'll always keep her with me", the novelist adds this comment: "It was a solemn promise, a cry of despair, love and resentment so woven together that even Flor couldn't tell them apart." This

phrase, "love and resentment" is related to the title, almost as if they are undistinguishable, or, at least, strong polarities of the relationship pulling with equal force: "the twin pictures, love and resentment, were always there, one reflecting the other, water under sky".

There is a simple incident very early in the story which illustrates what Mavis Gallant herself can do within a very small compass. Flor weighs herself on a scale that releases a card with her fortune; this trivial act takes on a meaning within the context of the Bonnie-Flor relation when Flor suddenly says, "'Mama's waiting' . . . throwing her fortune away."

The second section is the longest and most direct in the novel. We are given a much clearer insight into Bonnie. She lacks a real identity because she cannot face her own situation in the present. She sees herself as she was in the past, a fresh and unspoiled child or as she would like to be, a sophisticated provocative temptress. Bonnie has lived an untidy life: she was divorced when her husband discovered she was having an affair — an affair she was taking very casually. Since that time Bonnie has wavered between her child-image and her temptress-image, whereas the truth is that she is really "a lost, sallow, frightened Bonnie wandering from city to city in Europe, clutching her daughter by the hand".

Because she leans heavily on her daughter (note the ambiguity of the word "clutching" in that last quotation — the reader wonders just which one needs the support), Flor has been robbed of any sense of her own identity. She is forced into being possessed by her mother, as well as feeling possessive about her. She is constantly looking in windows to see if she is really there. The world around her is collapsing, and holding on to Bonnie is no help, for her mother's world is an untidy chaos. An immense feeling of dislocation overtakes her. She senses Paris collapsing around her and experiences a terrifying moment when the sidewalk moves in front of her in "a soundless upheaval". (This is perhaps reminiscent of a similar incident experienced by another dislocated youngster, Holden Caulfield, towards the end of *The Catcher In The Rye*.) The outside world is no longer secure; Bonnie has uprooted her from her home, so she complains to an imagined Bonnie, "I might have been a person, but you made me a foreigner". She retreats into her own cloistered room when she is left alone in Paris. The section closes with Flor's dream or hallucination of herself riding her boisterous pony, perfectly in control and triumphant in a smiling world, sliding from the saddle into the arms of her father, a man Bonnie has taught her daughter to hate.

The third segment shifts to the oblique view again, and at this point it seems a weakness. It is a kind of comic interlude to begin with, as a new character is

introduced: Wishart. As his name suggests, he is a man who lives out a fantasy. He has created a character for himself, as he did not like his own identity and past. He lives off European women as a kind of middle-aged gigolo. Bonnie misunderstands him so much that she sees him as a solid husband for Flor, someone who would also be a father-figure for her; the reader can see that Wishart would be a total disaster as a husband for Flor. He is living out a performance and sees the reality around him simply as material for the invention of clever anecdotes to amuse his audience.

Wishart appears and disappears too suddenly, and he seems merely another example of those drifting parasites trying to live at ease at the expense of others. But it is a hollow life, since Wishart finds that his hosts themselves are sometimes unreliable. Such a character allows us another oblique view of the life Bonnie and Flor live, revealing Bonnie's pathetic attempt to provide some kind of support for Flor without any real understanding of either her daughter or Wishart. But the shift of emphasis to Wishart, though it provides some comedy, disturbs the balance of the story. Apart from this third segment, *Green Water, Green Sky* is a story admirably controlled within narrow limits: a deliberate study of a few characters. Bonnie and Flor work well within such limits; one of the interesting technical devices is the way in which Flor fades from the story, as if the sense of her own individuality slipping is emphasized by her retreat from the story. It is also suggested that her madness has allowed her to slip from the grasp of her husband and particularly from her mother's life, so that the reader has a strangely ambiguous feeling about Flor's insanity: she is insane, yes, but she has escaped.

MAVIS GALLANT's next novel, *Its Image in the Mirror*, which appears in *My Heart is Broken* (1964) is a study of two sisters; Jean, the narrator, has lived in the shadow of Isobel, who is younger, more attractive and more lively. Jean has always regarded Isobel as living a bohemian life, full of romance and glamour; Isobel is the one who breaks away by an early marriage, who has an affair with a married man when her husband is away during the war.

But the usual Gallant irony operates; we discover that Isobel's life is not in fact at all glamorous. The married man is no dashing lover; he becomes an

assistant headmaster with a "failed poet's face concave with discontent". Isobel herself marries a second time and is living in what sounds like a romantic ambience — married to an Italian doctor in Venezuela. But when Isobel visits Jean with her family, the children are no different from Jean's, and Alfredo, her husband, turns out to be a finicky snob. Isobel, seen by Jean as the one who escaped from the narrow confines of the family, seems to have trapped herself within other situations just as confining.

The bulk of the novel concerns Isobel during the war. Jean has been influenced by her, has married a man first interested in Isobel, and goes to live in Montreal while her husband has gone off to the war, trying to find there the imaginary life of romance. During the novel all the images of romantic life are broken down to a flat reality. Jean takes an apartment, "a bohemian, almost glamorous thing to do", but shares it with another girl and their life is the close, closeted life of two women living closely together:

We had nothing in common except that we were women, and we had to make that do.

From this Sargasso of scarves, stockings, lipsticks, damp towels, pins, uncapped toothpaste tubes, we emerged every morning side by side, clean, smooth, impeccable as eggs. . . . Home again, we became like our rooms. We assumed the shapelessness, the deliberate sloppiness of rooms shared by women whose hopes are somewhere else.

Jean meets no romance, but only a furtive, fumbling Lesbian approach. The war produces no hero; only an epileptic veteran. Frank, her brother, goes to war and is killed, not in glorious action but in a freak accident. There are parties the sisters go to, peopled with what might be thought of as exotic foreigners; they turn out to be layabouts or pretentious artists without talent.

In all this ironic *mélange*, Jean still sees Isobel's affair with Alec Campbell as possessing the possibilities of a truly romantic world. In a kind of epiphany at the centre of the novel Jean sees Isobel and Alec walking out of the dark on a Montreal street. Before they see her, they are enclosed in a world in which romance and reality seem to meld, and for once Jean senses a romantic love existing, the love her mother has always rejected as being undesirable and "too fantastic to exist".

They leaned inward as they walked, as if both had received an injury and were helping each other stand up. Isobel's face was a flower. Everything wary and closed, removed and mistrustful had disappeared. . . . He was an ordinary looking man, but that made their love affair seem all the more extraordinary.

This picture of ideal love is broken when the lovers see Jean but the tableau of their union remains in Jean's mind. It presses upon her that all that she has thought about her sister's bohemian life was true, even though she herself has not experienced it, even though she is constantly though unconsciously resenting Isobel's illicit love-life, an attitude not unlike the confusion of love and resentment that Flor feels in *Green Water, Green Sky*.

At the end of the novel Jean is let into Isobel's life. Isobel calls on Jean to tell her she is pregnant and wants Jean to help her through the pregnancy. After Isobel's confession and her plea for complete attention, Jean reaches to Isobel, feeling sisterly, trying to take her hand. But Isobel sees this as too intimate or too sentimental a gesture and withdraws her hand from Jean's. There follows a very revealing paragraph which includes this comment by Jean: "She wanted my attention, and would pay for it." And so Jean seizes her opportunity. After being in Isobel's shadow for most of her life, she now is prepared to get the most out of her hold over Isobel.

But even this revelation of Jean's use of her sister's situation has already been undercut. Jean's power over her sister does not last and does not allow her to escape from her own position. Earlier in the novel there is an episode in which Isobel visits the family summer cottage with her children and her second husband. It is a disaster as a family gathering, and Jean narrates it with a kind of caustic humour. But, in spite of Jean's critical view of Isobel's later marriage, her distaste for Isobel's undisciplined life, her belief that her own married life has been more successful, there lingers the idea that in her own way Isobel has succeeded. Thus, in the end the power Isobel seemed to place in Jean's hands is empty, for when Isobel returns to the cottage several years later, Jean realizes that she has never had any control over Isobel. Isobel has retained her own individuality and broken through the barriers of the family relationship for good: "I was part of a wall of cordial family faces, and Isobel was not hurt by her failure, or impressed by my success, but thankful she had escaped". So the reversal at the end of the novel is doubly ironic.

Another way of looking at this novel is to see it, as Mavis Gallant herself sees it, as a study in domination. Isobel has dominated Jean for most of her life, and in a way Jean's telling of the story is a kind of exorcism of the dominance of her sister's spirit, though we have seen that, ironically, this has not really existed. There is also the domination of the mother over her two daughters, something that Isobel recognizes and breaks away from and Jean herself eventually comes to see.

Yet the author herself seems dissatisfied with it as a novel. She has complained that what is wrong with the novel is that Jean, as narrator, is "too lucid". Yet, for all Jean's lucidity, does she really know what is happening and, most particularly, does she know what is happening to herself? Her voice gives the impression of order and control, but scattered through the narrative are stray phrases which indicate that she is not as sure of events as the lucid tone suggests, so that one of the deepest ironies of the book may be the discrepancy between Jean's apparent comprehension of these events and her failure to see the reality as it exists. It is possible to see the story as a distortion: phrases such as "I suppose", "I must have dreamed", "I think", "I expect" occur at times. Jean even admits at the beginning (thus establishing that she is a deluded narrator) that the opening tableau of the empty house may be an invention on her part: "My mother says I saw nothing of the kind."

If there is this ambivalence in Jean's narrative voice, then the final paragraphs take on a more sinister tone. At the end Jean thinks she will write a letter to her husband Tom about Isobel's pregnancy in order to destroy any lingering idealism Tom may have about Isobel. But apparently she does not send the letter. In one sense it seems an act of kindness because "it would be Isobel delivered, Isobel destroyed." But there is something malicious about Jean's subsequent remarks: "The story could wait. It would always be there to tell." This implies that she will have it ready to use, even though she says "I might never tell it." Early in the story she has revealed the power she possesses. "It has often been in my power to destroy my sister — to destroy, that is, an idea people might have about her — but something has held back my hand. I think it is the instinct that tells me Isobel will betray herself." But the irony goes deeper still, because we have seen the later Isobel early in the story and she has not betrayed herself. She seems totally unaffected by the earlier experience and in fact by living in Caracas with her family she has removed herself from the sphere of influence of Jean's threatening knowledge.

One further thing should be mentioned about Jean. Although she holds up to herself as an idea Isobel's golden bohemian life, though she suggests she herself married in order to escape from the grip of her family, throughout the story she admits that she is really a re-incarnation of her mother. She sees that their gestures are alike, even their voices are similar. She remarks, "I am pleased to be like her. There is no one I admire more." Her lucidity, what she considers her real apprehension, is an inheritance from her mother: "I sounded like our

mother: flat and calm and certain I was right." She repeats the notion a little later: "I am the only person who can tell the truth about anything now."

The structure of *Its Image in the Mirror* is a very important element in the development of our perception of the characters and their relationships. This is true of all Mavis Gallant's novels. Not one of them is told in a strict chronological unfolding, but each one seesaws between past and present with glimpses offered here and there, a full revelation not being possible until all the pieces can be placed together when the reader reaches the last page. Such a method leaves a lot of play for irony, perhaps the most important technical element in any Gallant novel but it places a strain on the reader, making him try to hold these disparate bits together through the course of the novel. *A Fairly Good Time*, her longest and most ambitious novel, causes special problems because the point of view varies, and even though there is a kind of chronological framework of the span of a few days in the life of the heroine, there are some dizzying recollections from the past as well as quick changes of place. A first reading of this last novel tends to leave the reader dissatisfied, but on close examination it reveals itself as a very carefully wrought book, full of incisive characterizations and penetrating ironies, with perhaps a more sympathetic attitude towards the main character than we find in the other novels.

The narrative framework of *A Fairly Good Time* concerns a few days in the life of Shirley, whose second husband has just left her. The last two chapters are a kind of epilogue, taking place about nine months later, as she returns to Paris, now divorced, to sort out the effects left in her apartment.

Shirley has not had a very happy life. Her first husband, Peter, was killed in a freak accident. She married Philippe Perrigny, but does not fit into his scheme of life. The people who surround her are people who cling to her for help; even her own personal crisis starts with her spending the night with Renata, who has tried to commit suicide. She is taken up by a strange French girl, Claudie Maurel, and through her she meets the rest of the Maurel family, all perverse and neurotic. She seeks comfort from her Greek neighbour, James, who had been her lover previously and who is now living an enigmatic life surrounded by young nubile girls.

Shirley is looking for some solution to her life, some salvation, and she is cut adrift by her husband's desertion of her. She comes to terms with herself and her life at the end of the book by realizing that she cannot live by trying to counsel others. Her advice does not work, especially for Claudie, and so there a feeling emerges within her that she should accept the flow of life, not try and live within

some schematic moral code, and should refuse to think about the future as an ordered existence. Shirley is an illustration of the epigraph of the novel: "there's only one way of being comfortable, and that is to stop running around after happiness". Through the novel Shirley keeps trying to arrange the events in her life to make sense of them; the longest chapter in the book is her own written explanations of "How It Happened", but they are very eccentric explanations. She seems trapped in a marriage in which her husband expects her to be rational and logical, but lives by her own system, which appears absurd to him: "this system, which worked successfully and required only an occasional effort, seemed irrational to Philippe."

Shirley admits she is "comfortable in chaos", whereas an "unwashed cup left by Philippe seems like a moral slip". Routine and repetition seem to her lunatic gestures; "the mystery of behaviour seemed . . . the only riddle worth a mention." Whereas her husband wants order, lists, sequence, Shirley suggests that a relationship will falter if too much is known. "Everything between two people is equivocal", she maintains, and at one point she feels "how much easier it was to talk to one's friends or someone in transit." This looseness of attitude explains why she has no compunction in returning to James's bed once her husband has left her, or in accepting James's invitation to go to Greece, even though she knows it will have no real consequences for her future.

Her outlook is essentially a comic one; to take what one can from life and cut one's losses. She seems to approve the behaviour of her former father-in-law who remarried late in life after his wife's death:

Mr. Higgins had drawn up a new way of life, like a clean will with everyone he loved cut out. I was trying to draw up a will too, but I was patient, waiting, waiting for someone to tell me what to write.

It takes some time to discover this for herself. In a sense the novel records the process within her of that discovery. She has no philosophic or religious scheme of life: "sane people live their whole lives like stones on a beach, rolling a little this way and that." She tries to find significant reasons for life, why, for instance, Renata should be brought back to life but she concludes, "I refused all belief in the value of suffering and I always will. I despise it."

At the end Shirley has cast off everyone. She is leaving her apartment, she dismisses once and for all the intellectual milieu of her husband, her mother has died, James she has left in Greece, Renata and Claudie seem to have faded out of her life. Myopic and naive, irrational and imaginative, she sees life awaken-

ing to spring in the final paragraph of the novel. She has emerged as herself, even though she recognizes that her individuality draws some strength from her past: "Tall as her grandmother, unshakeable as her mother, she spoke . . . out of a future."

A Fairly Good Time is Mavis Gallant's most complexly-textured novel. What is different about it, apart from the sympathetic portrayal of Shirley, is the use of dialogue. Mrs. Gallant has said that the sound of a character's voice is very important to her, for it reveals so much. In her other novels, although there is dialogue, it does not generally loom large. The author says that she has heard the dialogue herself and has transferred it into the texture of the writing.

Particularly memorable in *A Fairly Good Time* are the conversations. They are superbly handled, on occasions approaching a Pinter-like accuracy in their obliquity, as if each character were pursuing his own idea without reference to the other persons in the conversations. They cross and meet only at certain points. These dialogues in their shifts and illogicality are accurate and witty renderings, formalized within the convention of the novel, of real speech patterns.

A Fairly Good Time is an advance for Mavis Gallant. Those who think of her as a writer with a somewhat narrow range would do well to study this more thoroughly peopled novel with its variation of narrative voice and its concentration on a comic (but not pitilessly comic) heroine.

It augurs well for the future of her work. She has already created a body of fiction worthy of close critical consideration, and there is every sign that she will develop it into a canon of work of real significance.

NOTE

¹ All comments attributed to Mrs. Gallant in this article are taken from two CBC interviews, one with Earle Beattie for *Anthology* (May 24, 1969) and one with Fletcher Markle for *Telescope* (January 22 and 29, 1965). I am grateful to the CBC and in particular to Robert Weaver, who made tapes of these interviews available to me.