A Politics of Location: Subjectivity and Origins in the work of Mavis Gallant, Alice Munro and Margaret Atwood

Thesis submitted for the degree of Ph.D.

Charlotte Jane Sturgess

Queen Mary and Westfield College, London, 1993
This thesis attempts to discover the links between concepts of identity and origins, and Canadian women's writing. The work of three English-speaking Canadian women writers, Mavis Gallant, Margaret Atwood and Alice Munro, will be examined in order to discover the ways in which their writings problematize feminine subjecthood, and in doing so shed light on a specifically Canadian 'discourse' of identity. I posit thereby, that perceiving the absences and silences structuring their modes of representation is a (symbolic) means of perceiving Canada as a dualistic, fractured, and contradictory unity. This implies a dialogue between text and context: a reading of one through the other.

The three writers in question draw on diverse, and often opposing, centres of cultural and personal consciousness. I shall attempt to demonstrate, however, that the problematical concept of origins and its relation to location and to feminine self- hood defines all three. To do so I have chosen those texts, whether novel or short story, which to my mind best articulate the social, cultural and symbolic discourses informing the definition 'English-speaking Canadian Women's writing'. Other works not included would undoubtedly have proved of interest, but the type of 'close reading' which such themes required entailed an automatic limitation on the range of fiction under scrutiny.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank the British Academy for the Fees Award which enabled me to pursue the Ph.D. course of study at London University.

I am grateful to the Centre for Canadian Studies at the Université Paris III-La Sorbonne Nouvelle, and Professor Michel Fabre, for encouraging my efforts and making my research trip to Canada financially possible.

Kathryn Harper proved the most loyal of friends, giving up her computer for the cause. I do not think I could have managed otherwise.

Finally my most heartfelt thanks go to my supervisor Dr. Mary Condé, whose professionalism, tolerance and good humour make her a shining example to the teaching profession. Her kindness and support have been invaluable to me.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1- Canadian Women's Writing: the founding consciousness.</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2- i) Alice Munro's Men and Women: Missing Links.</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii) Feminine Representation and Performance in <em>The Beggar Maid.</em></td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3- i) Mavis Gallant's Narrative Voice.</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii) Voices of History in <em>The Pegnitz Junction</em></td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iii) Representation and Narrative in <em>Overhead in a Balloon.</em></td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4- i) Mavis Gallant's <em>In Transit</em>: Stories from Exile.</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii) Personal and Cultural disinheritance.</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-i) Text, Territory and Displacement in Margaret Atwood's Short Stories.</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii) The feminine 'inner word' and the masculine 'outer world'.</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6-i) 'Other' countries: Female dystopia in
*The Handmaid's Tale.*
ii) The Word, words and women.
iii) Individual identity and forms of the past.
iv) Personal Time and Empire Time.

7-i) Disparate Codes: the encounter of French and
English culture in Mavis Gallant's fiction.
ii) The quest for 'information': a Canadian allegory.
iii) Stories of childhood and memory.
iv) Mothers and Daughters.

8-i) The female body and its disguises in *Lady Oracle.*
ii) Genre, Process and Product.
iii) Gothic and the Real: the maze as a subversive fiction.
iv) Consuming passions, consumer politics:
the language of specularity and identity in *The Edible Woman.*
v) *Bodily Harm*: inscribing feminine exile.

9- i) Alice Munro's *The Progress of Love*:
the parameters of secrecy.
ii) The Flat's Road and women's represented roles.
iii) Body/Language: a trope of 'the feminine'.
iv) Metaphors of identity and paradigms of absence.

**CONCLUSION**

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**
Canadian Women’s Writing: the founding consciousness

Canadian fiction, particularly contemporary writing from the nineteen-fifties onwards, is noteworthy for its quantity of women writers. One of the foremost is Margaret Laurence, considered the foremother of the English-speaking feminine literary tradition, whose Manawaka cycle of novels¹ explores the ties of family and region through the historical perspective of a Scots-Canadian ancestry. Her heroines are, as W.J. Keith points out, an extension of the pioneering breed of woman negotiating and recording survival in an alien territory. Focussing the relation between roots and place they establish the theme of identity, both personal and collective, as a particularly Canadian one. But, as Keith continues, Laurence’s main contribution is more explicitly literary and involves the control of voice that expresses a peculiarly Canadian sensibility.²

The link between a problematical sense of place, and an attention to a tone and register of fictional voice, is reflected in the work of Mavis Gallant, whose stories, as I will demonstrate later, translate both a 'placed' and 'placeless' quality. The former in the sense of poised and true, and the latter in the sense of coming from a problematical 'elsewhere', outside the confines of a historicized, represented locale. If, however, a certain cultural experience and

---

¹ Margaret Laurence's 'Manawaka' cycle refers to the series of five novels published in the period 1964 - 74.
² W.J. Keith, Canadian Literature in English (Longman: London/New York, 1985), 159.
a certain landscape has forged a distinctive literary identity, in what ways does this experience differ from that of Canada's neighbour on the North American continent; the United States? Whilst both emerged as nations from the pioneer and settler communities, Canada forged an essentially different imaginary topography from its neighbour. The United States' turbulent and resolute separation from British colonization structured the nation in a founding myth of a new Eden, an overarching ideology moulding economic and social realities into a homogenous nation state. By contrast, Canada did not develop within such centralized discourses and ideological centrality. Instead, it came out of a ragged colonization by both British and French, and maintained a long-lasting loyalty to British history and traditions, tied up with the lack of a revolutionary break from the 'Mother' country. Indeed, during the American civil war Canada became the safe haven for fleeing rebel 'loyalists'.

As Ramsay Cook remarks:

_The country was founded on two distinct European cultures. One, the French, had been separated from Europe not by choice, but by conquest....Together these communities were small and divided in almost everything that counts: language, religion, and culture. They were united, mainly, in the conviction that they did not wish to become part of the United States._

This last statement is particularly important for the imaginative development of Canadian literature. A marked propensity to

---

1 Ramsay Cook, "Imagining a North American Garden: Some Parallels and Differences in Canadian and American Culture" in Canadian Literature, 103 (Winter,1984), 11.
self-define against other cultural influences, and perhaps to see-saw between a powerful southern neighbour and a distant but strong European tie, characterizes Canadian history, and by extension the Canadian imagination. The vastly divergent responses to nature in the founding myths of the two nations demonstrates this divide. For American pioneers the wilderness was the physical territory of expansion and the imaginary territory of transformation; material for the production of an ideology of freedom and liberty. The 'garrison mentality' of the Canadian pioneers evoked a diametrically opposed relation to nature. Chaos and disorder may reign outside, but inside British order and balanced government carried out the task of reproducing Britain in a new hostile environment. Both Catherine Parr Traill and Susanna Moodie, the two Victorian pioneers who kept literary accounts of their encounter with Canada, looked back towards England for the parameters of literary inspiration. Their two best-known works, Moodie's *Roughing it in the Bush* and Traill's *The Backwoods of Canada*, lay out in different forms the gentrified Victorian lady's attempt to adjust to the new continent.¹

In *The Backwoods of Canada* Traill bemoans:

---

¹ Susanna Moodie is best-known for *Roughing it in the Bush* [1852] and *Life in the Clearings* [1853]. (Although, as Coral Ann Howells has pointed out in *Private and Fictional Words* citing John Thurston, the former work was a collaborative effort of Moodie, her husband and her publishers). Catherine Parr Traill is best-known for *The Backwoods of Canada* [1836].
Here there are no historical associations, no legendary tales of those that come before us. Fancy would starve for marvellous food to keep her alive in the backwoods.¹

If 'Americanisation' took place within an ethos of frontiers as limits to expand and extend under God's benevolent supervision, this is far from the problematical Canadian context of overdetermined boundaries of power and allegiance, signifying overlapping and shifting imaginary perspectives. Concerned rather with the threat of submersion in American culture through an ambivalent closeness and distance from such dominant discourses, 'borders' signify a defensive protection from a culture seen as both threatening and attractive Other.²

It is women writers who, in my opinion, best articulate this relation of Canadian cultural and historical discourse to fictional discourses. The attention to power plays and their threat to authenticity can be seen in Margaret Atwood's work, and is most straightforwardly rendered in her second novel _Surfacing_,³ to which I

---

² The 'Other', or 'Otherness', will refer in this work to two interrelated, theoretical concepts. The first, deriving from French feminist theory, sees the feminine subject in Western discourse as the negative, hierarchically inferior slot in a binary opposition which posits the masculine subject as superior. As sexual difference and subjecthood is tied to language itself, such theory sees meaning as inseparable from patriarchal transcendent identity, and 'lack' as the repressed, erased condition of feminine identity. The second use of the 'Other' (which is an extension of the first) refers to the cultural condition of colonialism in which the imperial 'centre' designates the colonies as symbolic, economic, social and politically 'Other'. Thus the colonies' erased national identities become the very condition for imperial identity and meaning.
³ Margaret Atwood, _Surfacing_ [1972] (London: Virago, 1979). All further references are in the text of the thesis.
will return later in this chapter. The second border or boundary inscribing distance and separation is, as has already been mentioned, the one between Canada and Europe. The complexities of affiliation and filiation which structure the historical and imaginary links of the 'New' continent to the 'Mother' country initially grounded Canadian literary models in Victorian genres such as the historical romance. Not least among the factors contributing to the continuation of English literary paradigms was Canada's continuing dependence on a British audience and economic market for its literary production. (This is still true to a large degree, in the sense that the external market for Canadian authors remains potentially a much more profitable one than the relatively limited internal market. Such is obviously the set of market forces and relations governing all the 'New Literatures', resulting in an ambivalent relation of author to audience.)

If the mould of English literary models has long been superseded by a rich and diverse national literature, problems of filiation and affiliation have entered the textual domain of Canada's contemporary fiction as both theme and form. Mavis Gallant in particular examines the cultural, historical and epistemological hiatus that the colonial consciousness produces. Enmeshed in a colonial history where the source is always 'elsewhere', outside the epistemological boundaries of the nation state, but where the effects are always 'here', Canada's problems of continuity are not only explored across an external colonial/historical border. Gaps in knowledge are also inscribed across the internal French/English border, splitting the concept of a Canadian consciousness in two. Duality takes on the aspect of a 'double',
implying a rift and an aspect of unresolvability between the two parts of a politically unified nation state. The very separateness of one cultural half from the other creates each as the ghostly Other, whereby, when English-speaking Canada is focussed, a set of assumptions of language and culture spring to mind that posit a natural cohesion and unity. But this cohesion is radically questioned and undermined when one takes Quebec into account, where a totally different set of cultural codes presents itself. It is therefore extremely difficult to apprehend Canada as an ideological or metaphysical unity, and this has of course formed and informed a Canadian literary consciousness.

This problematical duality/unity has been explored by the English-speaking writer Hugh MacLennan in his ground-breaking novel *Two Solitudes* [1945], dealing with the uneasy affiliation (because of distinct cultural filiations) of the two communities. The 'double' aspect of an imaginary projection of Canada, implying hierarchy and the symbolic occlusion at the heart of Canada itself can be aligned with the masculine/feminine hierarchisation and binary opposition of patriarchal society. Many French-Canadian women authors, generally more radically feminist in their writings than their English counterparts, have symbolically equated Quebec with the negative slot in a hierarchical structure of meaning. This positioning lends politically engaged feminist authors such as Nicole Brossard or Maire-Claire Blais an imaginatively potent metaphor in which to invest radical feminist subversive meaning. Borders between French and English-speaking political and economic realities are thus conflated with borders in society refusing women the legitimacy of difference.
There are therefore, on both sides of the French/English divide, women authors articulating Canada as a troubled representation, both an uneasy unity and a failed separation. This historical gap which constantly reiterates the question of origins is reworked in women's writing as a politics of origins, investigating the repression which is inherent in patriarchal unified meaning. We thus have the terms of a Canadian fiction developing across the schism of Empire, of divided communities, of a vast uncharted landscape which boasts two hundred and fifty thousand unnamed lakes in Ontario alone\(^1\), and within shifting power structures from without and within. Reading women's writing through the 'text' of their country's history in the light of problematical or repressed knowledges, is to investigate the feminine 'self' as a schismatic representation. Feminine psychoanalytic theory has fruitfully explored the relation of subjecthood to language, and has worked to retrieve 'woman' from her place as the submerged Other in canonical male-authored texts, as well as exploring the representational modes of women's writing. It is towards an exploration of the split\(^2\) post-colonial feminine subject that this research tends, through critical readings of the work of the English-speaking Canadian writers;


\(^2\) The 'split' or 'schismatic' feminine subject refers to the inherently self-divided nature of women's psychic reality posited by feminist psychoanalytic theory. Woman's place in society, thus in patriarchal meaning, is in conflict with feminine desire, drives and (hypothetical) identity for in such theory the 'feminine' is the repressed Other of meaning itself.
Margaret Atwood, Mavis Gallant and Alice Munro. The three writers speak in diverse ways of history and consciousness, of the ways 'place' can be theoretically linked to its negation 'no place'. They are therefore in the Canadian tradition of harnessing identity to locality, but this locality is not necessarily Canadian geographic territory, and even if it is, can be scripted as a radical absence of meaning, denying the continuity which establishes the self to a material location. As more and more women writers accede to a public voice in Canada, the very relation between nationhood and the individual is questioned and revitalized, as ontological and epistemological certainty is destabilized. It is the very lack of a 'where' in literary canonical terms which mirrors, in very creative fashion, the woman's writer's sense of being an outsider on male territory.

Thus the writer and critic Aritha Van Herk started to write on the metaphorical exile of women, (e.g. No Fixed Address [1989]), at the point when she encountered Robert Kroetsch's The Studhorse Man [1969]; the moment when, Someone had dared to write about a place I knew, about me. I finally had a map.  

Canada in the process of national identity-seeking and literary establishment bodied forth, particularly from the nineteen-sixties onwards, a group of female writers who aptly expressed the paradox inhering to the experience of 'place' as 'placelessness', creating a Canadian literary history from this lack. What emerges from this historical and ideological instance is a feminine

---

writing-of-the-nation, and the most overt ideological instance of this textual discovery and recovery of the 'sixties is Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*. In this quest novel *part of the protagonist's quest for self-hood, self-recognition and completion is a metaphoric search for her mother, whose 'legacy' if she can attain it will be 'simple...final'*.¹

The interlocking themes of patriarchal domination, the risk of American 'colonization', and the transformation brought about through feminist awareness, all make *Surfacing* the novel of a critical historical moment. Atwood moreover managed to translate a Canadian identity crisis on to a larger stage, expressing the shifts in perceptions and politics that globally characterized the late sixties. As far as themes are concerned Atwood's work has apparently little in common with that of Mavis Gallant, whose short stories reflect a 'fifties post-war Canada or Europe, and whose later stories deal with the quirks and foibles of Parisians. The history of the writer informs the work, and Mavis Gallant's choice of residence in Paris is radically removed from Atwood's or Munro's life experience. Many of her stories appeared first in *The New Yorker* magazine and have only recently been published in the form of a collection, which of course influences the reading experience, as they are both 'new' and yet belong to another era; the heavily colonial world of their genesis. But such is the originality of Gallant's style and form that her work conjures and inscribes fantasies of upheaval and

decimated meaning which invoke our post-structuralist crises of representation. The schisms in historical continuity and the relation of self to locality are thus a mark of a Canadian sensibility. Not only a defining of the self in national territory as in Atwood's *Surfacing*, but the haunting spectre of a divided self across geographic borders and boundaries of exile. As Atwood's other novels show, underlying the teleological quest for nationhood is the detective-like search for a constantly doubled, mirrored and uncanny and evasive self, implicating narrative directly in the attempts to structure a viable feminine subject.

Exile from origins is tied up with exile from language as a maternal source, and Gallant's déracinés are lost in the m(O)therland of fractured colonialism and personal dispossession of language. Canada is to be perceived as the fantasized site of the Other; of ill-achieved separation and loss structuring an elusive discourse of the nation. This impossible unity which comes through so strongly in Gallant's work can be seen in analogy with an impossible wholeness in an imaginary landscape which is in some way '(hole)ness'. Such is Irigaray's formulation of feminine symbolisation:

> According to Lacan/Freud, ... woman 'functions as a hole ... in the elaboration of imaginary and symbolic processes; woman's lack or deficiency constitutes sexual difference and supplies the blank text on which man can trace his positive, phallic identity.'

---

Seen as a symbolic domain or process women's (hole)ness is the absence of a master signifier or discourse to articulate her, rather than his/its¹ discursive priority. Writing, and being a woman, is then in some sense dealing in and with alien signifying territory; Other to writing and the Other of representation, woman is already 'written on' in the language she is struggling to appropriate. This play of problematic symbolization, where separation and individuation are privileged over the maternal, bodily connection, signifies the feminine subject's representation in language. One which is:

- a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning.²

The critic Laura Mulvey's study of film and sexuality throws light on the type of fantasies both explored and challenged in Atwood's work. The medium of film as voyeuristic scopophilia; the (masculine) lens as a means of investing fantasies of control, is taken up in Surfacing. Similarly, the photographic eye in The Edible Woman and mediatic control in The Handmaid's Tale thematize such fantasies. The split narrating consciousness which characterizes her heroines often involves a paranoid chase through multiple narratives (as in Lady Oracle); a flight both from, and into a causal absence, which the narratives

---

¹ 'Neutrality' to Irigaray implies a masculine symbolisation, just as in feminist terms political and social 'neutrality' does not exist; it is always a function of a dominant discourse masquerading as a given.

problematize. The aporia of the maze which has no centre in *Lady Oracle*, or Rennie's unresolved fate at the end of *Bodily Harm*, where the reader is left none the wiser whether the political imbroglio is at least partly fantasized by the heroine, indicates 'hysterical' meaning; i.e. meaning out of control. In these narratives a quasi-detective mode is employed. The heroines are trying to escape a vaguely-perceived fate for which they are in some undefined way responsible. In neurotic fashion the narratives take on the investigation of the crime in which the murder victim, the 'body' so to speak, is absent. Instead, ghosts and doubles abound in Atwood's work, leading the narratives back in upon themselves to work and rework these paranoid meanings.

Jonathan Culler's deconstruction of the Oedipus myth seems pertinent to the way Atwood's narratives are caught up in contradiction and the dilemma of causal origins. He demonstrates that it is in fact the discursive forces at work in the Oedipus narrative, *the interweaving of prophesies and the demands of narrative coherence* \(^1\) which render Oedipus' guilt imperative both for the reader and for the hero himself. The lack of evidence of such guilt is secondary to the demands of the narrative itself, its causal working-through of the plot. As Culler further points out, this contradictory logic is at the root of Freud's reading of the 'Oedipus Complex' neurosis. For it is in fact guilt

---

arising from a submerged desire to kill the father which logically prece¬s the imagined act.

We can link this to Atwood's narratives, where a neurotic compulsion drives the characters forward, for their propensity to be culpable seems to prece¬ any logically grounded action. As effect replaces cause, the 'gap' or absent 'body' (to retain the detective analogy) traces the absence at the heart of the narratives themselves; the missing knowledge which would clarify all, but which the workings of narrative serves to obscure. This particular structuring of a quest for the origins of narrative can further be examined from a feminist psychoanalytic perspective. From such a view-point Western civilisation and meaning are structured on the Phallus as transcendent signifier. In this schema 'woman' symbolizes the maternal body of pleasure and desire which must be repressed in order to constitute transcendent meaning. The origin of meaning is the feminine body which both conditions language and which must be repressed for language to emerge as meaning. The hysterical, excessive relation of the self to language in Atwood's narratives, the fantasies of drowning, of bodies, of undifferentiated language in which the heroine will be submerged, emerge from the sexual economy of pre-symbolic signification. Furthermore, as Mulvey points out, citing Julia Kristeva, repressed meaning can be attributed to both a maternal and a paternal symbolic economy:

*Julia Kristeva has discussed the phenomenon of horror and disgust as a culture returning under the aegis of a pre-Oedipal mother, a body without boundary, 'an unspeakable',*
hardly even achieving symbolisation in the collective fantasy of popular culture, is the threat embodied by the primal father.\textsuperscript{1}

The paternal inheritance shapes and motivates the cultural narrative of continuation and the law. Atwood's narratives re-enact the crises of meaning between an unreasoned guilt of the 'law' and the watery depths of the maternal, which, in *Surfacing* at least, houses the corpse of the father supposedly drowned in the lake. The irretrievable core of the pre-symbolic, and the constraints of discursive realism, akin to the dichotomous *father [who] explained everything, [while the heroine's] mother explained nothing* \textsuperscript{2} of the novel, can be contrasted with the obsessive thematization of origins in Gallant's work. The latter's world of the colonial exile hinges on the concept of muddled causality, returning a post-colonial Canadian imaginary to the cauterizing influences of Victorian ethics and social codes. The radical split between Calvinistic and Catholic orthodoxy spells out the divide between English and French-speaking communities in her work. The post-war setting of many of the stories brings into relief the divide between a New World of technology and progress, and an Old World collapsed into refugeedom and decline. The individuals of her stories travel like underground survivors of the holocaust between these two realities, inscribing loss and longing, desire and resistance for Empire as a strong Phallic Mother, signifier of British colonialism, and of an

\textsuperscript{1} Visual, 199.

\textsuperscript{2} Catherine Sheldrick Ross,"Nancy Drew as Shaman: Atwood's *Surfacing*" in *Canadian Literature*, 84 (Spring,1980),10.
irretrievable ordered discourse of the nation. Grounded in the
displaced discourse of Empire the narrating voice in these stories
reverberates through a shattered mirror of a fragmented colonial
ideal. Poles of attraction and resistance to the fantasy of unity
permeate the multiple shifts in perspective and the troubled
silences they articulate. The way the narrating consciousness
defines distance and alienation, posits a source of meaning within
the nostalgic fantasy of a Canada relegated to the effects of
colonisation. Her narratives thus speak from the repressed
underbelly of Empire, telling of an insufficient national
symbolization which gave rise to an incompatible duality. The
liminality of juxtaposing world-views and conflicting ideologies,
brought into play in Gallant's stories, transposes the pleasure of a
unified 'closed' realism to the edges of language itself. If post-
colonial separation implies an authentic self-image in political
and cultural terms, it designates a renunciation of the Mother
country as an authoritative structuring discourse. Gallant's
fiction is one of transit, as the title of one of her collections, *In
Transit*, implies. Besides propelling her characters into perpetual
transit between one or more cultures, Gallant sets up channels of
perception negotiating the passage from the surface to depths of
memory and fragments of dreams, often relinquishing a
sympathetic focus for the clash of dissonant borders. This
'colonial' voice, controlling through the disintegration of meaning
that her plots and waver ing characters convey, is hierarchically
above the conflict of meanings, and beyond the historical collapse
her stories so often thematize. To locate a source of knowledge in
her work is to ponder the relation between master discourses
and personal identity. The quest for stable meanings which leads
Atwood into myths of origins and the split feminine subject, finds expression in Mavis Gallant's writing in the disembodied no man's land of repressed history. Her narrators serve to enact a scenario of abandonment by language itself. Displaced on to the stage of Empire and decline, of characters wandering across Europe, language is recovered in a liminal zone between cultures and continents, shadowed by ghosts of other places and other times.

Mavis Gallant's own personal history as one of cultural indeterminacy can, I think, be read as text across the historical text of her stories. A childhood spent in institutions, tossed from one side to the other of the Canadian linguistic divide informs her prose, constituting a particularly overdetermined instance of cultural alienation.

The French/English writer Nicole Ward Jouve speaks at length about the experience of bi-lingualism. A native of Marseilles, having spent her adult life in England, she defines her imaginative and psychological consciousness as 'Moitié de poulet', [half a chicken]:

\[\text{Half is half. My presence in one country, one language always means my absence from the other.}\]

Similarly the Ukrainian/Canadian writer Janice Kulyk Keefer states:

\[\text{I think that a great part of my sense of myself as a writer, ... comes from my early awareness of being caught in}\]

---

Mavis Gallant's experience of the radical separation of the two Canadian cultures, which she acknowledges as a gulf between worlds in the 'forties and 'fifties (the period she grew up in) can be perceived in her work as the uneasy marriage of symbols to meaning, threatening the slippage of 'fixed' concepts from the words which vehicle them in fictional worlds where the 'unsaid' is the thin ice of reality. Nicole Ward Jouve speaks of translation from one language to the other as an activity by means of which the 'natural' bond 'meaning-language' can be transgressed....Translation=no man's land=woman's land?  

However, like Gallant, she relies precisely on the separation between her two signifying worlds, fearing the undifferentiation of language that translation promotes. The symbol of this cultural/linguistic separation for her is the grey waters of the English channel, a material passageway between two boundaries, allowing her the transformation from one code to another. Living between two cultures then has to do with the constant confrontation with the 'stranger' within oneself; the unconscious and ever mobile desires and drives. Speaking a foreign language and living in a culture that is not one's own means symbolically speaking the language of the 'stranger', implying a splitting of the subjective 'I' which both commands an unfamiliar body of

meaning, and simultaneously holds in abeyance the mother tongue. 'I' thus becomes the place where the 'I' speaking am not. Nicole Ward Jouve's way of negotiating the alienation of crossing the internal border between cultures is to radically trace the outer, material boundary, to physically cross the 'Channel' between the two. For fear of losing herself on route from a too close proximity, distance and partition is vital. Gallant, perfectly bi-lingual and living in France, separates her 'strong' primary language of writing from that of her environment. Wary of the possible seepage of Gallic into her prose, she rigorously patrols the border between the two. Perhaps the source of the control in her fiction, governing the imminent intrusion of the 'Other' culture, the Gallic slip into undifferentiated territory, is the narrating voice. Whilst guarding against the schizophrenia of language Gallant's channel of communication is shot through with the ghost of an impossible unity, the dream of a French/English maternal semiotics, separated under the rule of Empire. The falling away of history in her stories, and the discordant gaps and elisions fracturing and splitting perceptions of the self, draws the narratives into a crisis of meaning where the death of language itself is the danger to be reckoned with.

The cosmopolitanism of Gallant's settings are in sharp contrast to Alice Munro's rural Ontario. Munro's place of action is the confines of small-town life, contrasting also with Atwood's mainly urban concrete settings. The resemblance between Munro's small-town Canada and the American writer Flannery O'Connor's Deep South is striking. They each have characters ranging from the eccentric, mentally-retarded, or marginally insane in rural communities professing small-town respectability. In Munro's
fiction 'unspeakable' events fold into the matrix of community life, without the hierarchisation of an ironic narrative stance, or an alienated narrative consciousness. But this quasi-romantic image of organic unity is undermined by the female narrators' gradual awareness of the limits and laws imposed by the semblance of calm unity. Munro's fictional world is subversive in its capacity to absorb conflicting codes of conduct and ideologies within an elastic narration. The forms and boundaries of her realism posit a hermetically sealed 'inside' opposed to a disruptive 'outside', echoing the metaphors of a 'space' of identity to be found in Canadian and other post-colonial texts.

V.S. Naipaul's novel *A House for Mr Biswas* [1969] places the image of the house as an analogy of national and personal emergence, at the heart of empowering imaginary projections. In the Canadian literary topography, Sinclair Ross' *As For Me and My House* [1941], set in the small, duplicitous town of Horizon against the back-drop of the prairies, establishes the house as metaphor in much the same way. In Munro's domestic scenarios the self is encoded within the parameters of women's lived experience, and domestic images are thus linked to awareness in much the same way. The factor which unsettles the image is their obviously feminine source, one in which negotiations between outer limits of society and inner desires of the heroines destabilize identity. The story cycles which give us such characters as Flo and Rose are above all concerned with the possibility or non-possibility of enunciating women's experience. In this context much of the socially 'unspeakable' material is clustered around these domestic images of the feminine self. Incest, botched abortions and childhood pregnancies are part and
parcel of a silent female knowledge, conditioning the structure of domesticity itself. Social silence on the subject of women's bodies is displaced on to language, where the 'unsaid' renders problematic the 'public' discursivity of realistic representation. The deviant excess and monstrosities of 'female'ness finds its way into the linear narrative flow, destabilizing the material world; drawing the readers' attention to metonymic associations that set indeterminacy in motion, leaving gaps and fissures through which 'underground' connections can be made. Blank spaces cluster around Munro's rhetoric as functions of a feminine self deemed fragmentary (therefore liable to exceed representation) and disruptive. Official discourses and the codes of secrecy circulating within the narratives belong to two separate areas of meaning. The first feeds into the historical narrative of continuity, genealogy, property and propriety. The other poses the question of the condition of such seamless knowledge, establishing an alternative context of unresolved meanings. While the images of house/womb/self are maternal metaphors, owing much to founding patriarchal myths of pioneer settlement\(^1\), the transgressive site of Munro's realism is the propensity to undo the romance of such key images. Her fiction addresses women's desires as at least partially the desire for the other, for something/somewhere else, a desire extended along an

\[\text{\footnotesize \(^1\)}\text{ For a comprehensive discussion on the myths and realities of women's pioneer settlement see Annette Kolodny, }\textit{The Land Before Her: fantasy and experience of the American frontiers 1630 - 1860} \text{ (Chapel Hill/London: University of North Carolina Press, 1984).}\]
indefinite chain if signifiers by substitution, by a displacement that wanders off the subject.  

The 'wrong side of the tracks' which produces Munro's heroine/narrators contributes to subversive subtexts in her narratives. For them, origins have to be overcome through education and middle-class socialization. Language is the 'natural' acquisition of the middle-classes; it articulates an appropriation of power and means which characters like Rose can only mimic. The performance of language's inherently class-laden dialogue with power serves to denaturalize the link, plagiarizing the middle-class appropriation of concepts. As her characters strive to emulate and then integrate another milieu, characters are riven to their play of rhetoric, and signs themselves become the drama of the individual. The two-way pull of settled community and the unsettling 'feminine' signifier, constantly erupting into routine existence, leaves her stories in a state of flux. Her female characters fall away from language when their marginalised sense of self finds inadequate symbolisation. It is lack of available modes of signification, of a 'master' discourse, which becomes the dilemma preventing a codified expression of their alienation. The Canadian landscape as a boundaryless 'unwritten' expanse enters her narratives to connote this lack of codified meaning. The threatening 'outside' which Atwood associates with a Canadian imagination in her

---

critical work  *Survival* ¹ is brought to bear in Munro's work as a transgressive move across the safe, domestic self/womb of community ordering, into a liminal zone of sensory perceptions. The eroticized images serve to 'overwrite' Munro's heroines' problematical inscription in the represented world. Landscape has often been the scene of battle where male fantasies of domination confront Otherness in the form of the wilderness. In Canadian terms, as Atwood points out, the hero is often the victim of this overwhelming and hostile environment. There is an admission therefore, in the Canadian literary imagination, that appropriation of nature (and the construction of master discourses) is a problematical affair. Lent to a feminine authorship the Canadian prairies, lakes and rural townships are frequently energized as a 'natural' extension of the self. The equating of power with an active/passive dichotomy is common to both Munro and Atwood. They also both work to deconstruct this opposition in ways which appropriate Canada as the possibility of a different discourse. A discourse which would be other than central, governing, all-masterful. In the case of Gallant, if 'location' as a source of identity is repressed by the dislocation of the individual from the community, the problem of 'location' as a concept raises itself all the more acutely. 'Canada' comes through rather as a discursive impossibility, the gap at the centre of characters' personal history.

---

In speaking of the founding generation of Canadian literature, Matt Cohen designates three common characteristics which also speak for a Canadian consciousness:

*First, that the most hidden secret, the secret that could not be told, yet was completely obsessing, was sexuality. Secondly, that the bond no one could articulate ... was the bond to the land. Finally, that although the characters in the books lived their lives as best they could, their lives were largely unlived.*

These three areas of knowledge and repression are evident in the three writers under scrutiny. The epistemological categories of place, sexuality and subjecthood are fraught with the ethical and historically repressive functions of the church, imperialism and national disunity. The exacerbated, tension-ridden splitting and shifting of ontological centres of focus in their fiction speaks of, and through, the Canadian dilemma. What they have in common is what, in a discursive, ideological sense, Canada lacks. Furthermore, as 'lack' is, since Lacan, an epistemological category in its own right of which 'the feminine' is the signifier, the post-coloniality of Canada can be theorized through a parallel investigation of feminine conditions of meaning.

---

1 Matt Cohen, "Realism in Modern English Canadian Fiction" in *A Sense of Place*, 60.
2 'Lack' is used by Lacanian psychoanalysts to refer to the position allocated to women within the resolution of the Oedipal crisis. It has come to be identified with women's insufficient symbolisation; their problematical access to meaning and representation.
3 'The feminine' refers to the economy of problematical symbolisation associated in French feminist theory with women's marginalisation, and also with anarchic writing. 'Feminine' can be used in this sense, and also within the opposition 'feminine'/'masculine' as opposed to 'male'/'female'; the former being a gender definition, (thus socially, philosophically and politically conditioned), while the latter is a biological determination.
The ongoing dialogue between text and context is implicit in the chapters which follow. The choice of particular stories or novels to the exclusion of others is motivated by this context of reading, in which the text is both informing, and informed by the discourses of religion, the nation and the social formation. This type of reading involves an attention to those overdetermined instances when narrative doubles back on itself, thus obfuscating those questions of origins it is simultaneously posing. For example, Mavis Gallant's Linnet Muir cycle in her collection *Home Truths*, conjures the conflict of personal voice and historical silence, as does *The Pegnitz Junction*, a collection sealed in the trauma of post-war Germany. Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women* and *The Progress of Love* script the problem of women's sexuality and their presence and absence on the stage of patriarchal symbolisation. Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle* and *The Edible Woman* confront the schizophrenia of women writing; her fictional strategies of mirroring and doubling turning narrative back on itself and delivering the feminine subject as schismed identity. Likewise her siting of the female body as the object of patriarchal control also elides control, multiplying codes and deferring closure. Harnessing these diverse texts to questions of origins and the location of these origins in the discourse of a post-colonial nation, is to attempt to disclose discourse itself as inflected through politics and gender. 'Canada' as a political, discursive knowledge is thus shaped as a narrative of absence across the absences informing the texts.

Nonetheless, if the writer of this thesis professes to 'read' such absences at this particular juncture in twentieth-century post-Freudian, post-structuralist Western consciousness, it is precisely
because the narrative of the subject and the nation of one historical moment is inevitably the story of another political project. As such, the chapters which follow are intentionally inscribed within my own late twentieth-century feminist ethos. My readings of these three Canadian women writers are thus to be situated within the contingent and provisional narrative of the feminine subject-in-process, seen from the historicized perspective of one feminine subject.
Munro's stories are those of women; their continuity and permutations, grafted on to the drive of history and the seeping away of domestic time. But these stories are for the main part caught on the question of life with men, the inevitable and yet confusing reality of marital partnership. Stories are about both men's presence in the lives of women, and their absence. The male is father, lover or husband, and yet, while women grow up, evolve, transform and degenerate into senility or broken health, men seem to remain untouched by domestic wear.

The social world takes its toll of women as they contort and adjust to the *modus vivendi* imposed by factors of health and patriarchal domination. At the centre of such lives is the male, and the subtext of such narratives is a questioning of the transcendent authority of masculine law governing relations between the sexes. Such a subtext resides above all in the speculations and tales of women, fictionalizing the play of gender relations in order to interrogate this authority.

The sliding and gaps; double perspectives and doubling back typical of Munro's fictional spaces are negotiations of reality. Such negotiations mean testing the parameters of relations between the sexes and the social constraints woven into these relations. It means accommodating desire within the politics of power relations in which women's voices are silenced. The transgression of boundaries set up by such social codes is shown to be heady and dangerous, an empowering of the female libido and a reversal of positive/negative dichotomies.
Dangerous because, as Smaro Kamboureli points out, \textit{feminine desire has no prescribed object}\textsuperscript{1}. Therefore it is always upsetting to male paradigms of sameness and closure. In Munro's stories men dominate women's desires and fantasies, just as they are the determinants of social closure and conformism. Discursively they represent the norm of language, the comprehensible and the contained. Yet the representation of men is problematical for they evolve through women's imagination as ambivalence, excitement and the unknown. They permeate the narration through hearsay, as a violent father or a strange uncle, yet have scant profile as characters in their own right. They confer, within the structures of community, the status of abstract truth defining women, just as they are themselves imaginatively rendered by women. Created through the eyes of a female narrator the male presence is a primary focus and an enigma, both investigated by narrative, and underpinning its premises.

Munro's collection \textit{Friend of My Youth} \textsuperscript{2} contains several stories in which men play a leading part in forging the narrator's perceptions and inviting questions on the links that tie women's fates to those of men. One such story is "Oh What Avails" in which Morris, who has lost the use of one eye in a childhood accident, stays on in a small town while Joan, his sister, leaves for the city. Why Morris, now a wealthy man, does not have cosmetic

\textsuperscript{1} Smaro Kamboureli, "The Body as Audience and Performance in the writing of Alice Munro" in \textit{AMazing Space: Writing Canadian Women Writing}, eds. Shirley Neuman and Smaro Kamboureli (Edmonton: Longspoon Press, 1986), 36.

\textsuperscript{2} Alice Munro, \textit{Friend of My Youth} [1990] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991). All further references are in the text of the thesis.
surgery on the damaged eye, just as his mother did nothing when it happened, remains an enigma. As the narrator muses:

_All it would entail is Morris's admission that he'd like a change. That isn't shameful, to try to turn in the badge misfortune has hung on you._ (182)

Two distinct world views, or ideologies, are played out by Morris and Joan. One is grounded in caution, foresight, security and capital, the other in a less acquisitive, but more hazardous existence. Morris prefers humiliation to change, putting up with the nick-name _Deadeye Dick_ from a contemptuous neighbour when he calls on her beautiful daughter Matilda, a girl of the captive-princess kind. (186)

E.D. Blodgett sees Rose of the story "Simon's Luck", in _a role as scene, the place where Simon, not Rose, enters and disappears._

This commentary could equally apply to Morris as he accommodates the inconsistencies of the women in his life. Time passing has left him with the look of

_-bachelor sons who have cared for old parents, particularly mothers? A closed-in, patient look that verges on humility?_ (194)

The beautiful Matilda, who ran off with a bigamist and then came back to Logan to live with her mother, eventually becomes strange and solitary. Morris accompanies her to dinner dances in a self-effacing way, as _...she couldn't go with a man who might get ideas, not understanding how things stood._ (204) Yet although his own narrative seems to have been determined by

---

1 E.D. Blodgett, _Alice Munro_ (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1988), 100.
the accident and his own reaction to it, as *Deadeye Dick* becomes his lot, Matilda suffers a similar fate. Frozen from childhood in the frame of the captive heroine Rapunzel, her beauty is also a handicap:

...beauty marked you - in Logan, anyway - as a limp might, or a speech impediment. It isolated you - more severely, perhaps, than a mild deformity, because it could be seen as a reproach. (188)

Both characters are trapped in a logic of the 'meant to be', their names and the narrative itself are wrapped around fairy tales and versification. In a fundamental way Morris merely exists as a pole of attachment for the several strands of female history articulated through, and despite himself. So that, whilst being a focus of the story he is simultaneously erased, glimpsed palimpsestically in a search for causes and motives. The questions surrounding Morris's motives - for not fixing his eye, for not marrying, for remaining an escort to two women whose affections are invested elsewhere - are part and parcel of his opacity. As such he is set apart from the adventures of life just as Matilda is set apart. Both have relinquished the present plot to the past of collective mythology, respectively obeying the formulaic obsessions of fairy tale narrative:

*Morris in love with Matilda - in that stern, unfulfilled lifelong way - and she in love with her bigamist, stubbornly obsessed with her own mistake and disgrace.* (205)

Yet precisely at the moment Matilda gives up her fantasies, Morris is no longer interested:

*She had lost interest in her affliction. She had lost her nerve to continue as she was. And in her simple, dazzling folly, she had lost his love.* (213)
The narrator is perplexed at the perversity of human nature, of characters who seemingly obey an unreasoning, contradictory logic of behaviour. These resistances against elucidation, or, as Blodgett says the zones of non-meaning which reside within character foci and in interstitial silences, render her stories suspended in a kind of archeology of temporal zones, each zone possessing a significance. This also involves the gesture of return, the effort to reach ... the 'other country' as if the self would remain sealed in its own opacity if it could not draw the other somehow into its own signifying space.

The 'other country' of which Morris is a part to a narrator looking back through the prism of domestic time and historical change, is 'Other' because trapped in curtailed development. He is unable to leap into the 'now' of a self in process, and can only repeat obsessive patterns. Thus Matilda's *Scram out of here Deadeye Dick* is the echo of all the women of influence over him. They play, and he registers, the same tune in varying harmonies. The zones of temporal significance in the narrative, either the rubble of the past or the splendours of technological progress depending on the focus, are conflicting layers of a temporal archeology in which the past is embedded and discovered. Memory performs in such a way that recurrence and repetition negate loss, bringing it back transformed, even as the everyday march of history is traced. Morris himself is captured in verse and echo from another

---

1Alice Munro, 85.
2Alice Munro, 130.
3Alice Munro, 130.
time in history, blending in the rural landscape into which are folded half-articulated desires and resistances for Matilda, a domineering mother and a more adventurous sister. His loss of self is the desire to find the self through the presence of the other in the discourse of the self,¹ blurring his persona and creating the erotic border play of language so familiar in Munro’s work. The complex interplay of desire and loss registered when personal narratives confront clarity are her hallmarks. Applied to the treacherous ground of male/female relationships such narrative texture deals in interstitial commentary, the dichotomy of public and private, and missing links of causality.

The story "Differently" is one in which Munro presents the contradictions not only within emotions but between emotions and behaviour.² It is the story of two couples; Georgia and Ben and Raymond and Maya. On another level of perception it is the story of Maya herself. On still another it relates the friendship between the two women, and the betrayal of one by the other. Within the complex overlapping of these personal narratives four characters are caught up together in producing a narrative of love, deception and loss. The story begins with a cryptic encoding of the act of writing and narrative possibility. Georgia’s creative-writing instructor criticizes her work; apparently it is too full of things and people. On her next attempt the story seems a fake, and Georgia made a long list of all the things that

¹ Alice Munro, 71.
² Helen Hoy, "Dull, Simple, Amazing and Unfathomable: Paradox and Double Vision in Alice Munro’s Fiction" in Studies in Canadian Literature, 5 (Spring, 1980), 100.
had been left out and handed it in as an appendix to the story. (216)

This encoding refers the ensuing narrative to the left out information, the meanings slipped under linear discourse, alluded to and yet inconclusive. The narrative is also full of doubling back; affirmations and then negations create a decentred palimpsest scripting the subversive nature of human relationships. Just as Peter Brooks' theory of narrativity charts the swerve of delays and closure as symptomatic of human drives of desire and deferral,¹ so "Differently" scripts narrative drive, delay and death. Even the title points to other possibilities, the inconclusiveness of choice as one reality crumbles to reveal another.

Just as "Differently" functions as a deferral of truth, it also examines women's mistrust of such a concept. Georgia and Maya hold distinct roles, public and private: On the first level, they were friends as wives; on the second as themselves. (226)

These separate roles carry their share of secrets and ambiguity, and split perspectives carry through the entire story. When Georgia visits Raymond after many years the narrator confirms this:

Raymond opens the door ... and introduces his wife, Anne. He says he has told her what great friends they were, Georgia and Ben and he and Maya. Great friends. Maya is dead. Georgia and Ben are long divorced. (217)

¹ See Peter Brooks, Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative (New York: Knopf, 1984), which applies Freudian psychoanalytic theory to narrativity.
The way Raymond has glossed the past, suppressing dishonesty and manipulation by imposing another dishonest version, is revealed when talking of Maya. He mentions the garden Maya designed in the last months of her life, and which a young artist laid for her:

'...the instant he was finished, off he went'.

Raymond continued:

It would have been nice of him to make her think that it hadn't just been a case of hired friendship, ...

Raymond is smiling. He cannot repress, or perhaps is not aware of, this smile. (221/2)

This complex show of hypocrisy and delight, a displaced revenge for Maya's infidelities, emerges from the past of buried reprisals, just as Maya and Georgia smiled at each other primly in the company of their husbands, concealing Maya's love-affairs and her abortion. In the pattern of interlocking levels of revelation and concealment the latter is perceived as the central emotional focus. This retrospective appeal to memory through the prism of the present as it delineates her illness and death, presents similarities with "The Peace of Utrecht". The latter story in which two daughters come to terms with their mother's death, and which crystalizes memory, carrying secrecy, remorse and despair in its wake. In "Differently" Maya's death also fixes and congeals experience, exposing rifts and differences. The double vision of memory, that gives scope for the irony and paradox that are the hallmark of her mature work, deals in both process and product.

---

1 W.R. Martin, Alice Munro: Paradox and Parallel (Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press, 1987), 44.
the fixed and the mobile. There are old grievances at work in the narrative but they also operate the process of change. When Maya betrays Georgia, sleeping with her lover and thus ending the friendship, she also triggers the latter's awareness of her sham marriage, a world of ceremony, of safety, of gestures, concealment. (241)

The fluid relationships between order and disorder, between stillness and movement, ... between revelation and secrecy,¹ are tied up in the absence left by death, and its presence in memory which continually scripts over this absence thus deferring its conclusion. Georgia brings about many changes in her life, invoking both 'real' and 'dishonest' transformations that nonetheless cannot affect the order of the past or its emotional logic. ...she knows that whatever she did she would have to do it again,... (242)

This story is exemplary of what Lorna Irvine sees as a typical feminine writing strategy, that is, the elaborated motif of change in women's narratives:

Such concentration on social transformation insists on a fluid narrative, one that refuses closure in order to allow the female characters room to alter the insistent endings of, for example, the nineteenth century novel where women's fates are closed: death or marriage? ²

In Munro's narratives the will to leave small-town claustrophobia invades the narrative flow of past and present, investing

---

² "Changing",101.
temporal sites with the emotions inhering in women's desires for transformation. The landscape lends itself to social time, embracing the metaphor of women's enablement. By 'landscape' is posited both the seeping transformations of "Oh What Avails"; enormous fields, the vistas of corn or beans or wheat or clover, or later the townscape: ...you can see the shadows, the light, the brick walls, ... you can see all these things in their temporary separateness, all connected underneath...(198/208) In such descriptions, as in the gaps juxtaposing disparate temporal spheres, 'place' signifies 'space', in the sense of a feminine economy of writing and identity. In such scripts of release from tradition, as characters leave the past for an urban present, relationships are transitory and marriages often temporary. As in "Differently", Georgia and Maya have in common a dual language; one is turned towards their respective marriages, the other, a wider and sharper-edged code of friendship, is tuned in to the outside world. That a growing awareness of the self implies the upheaval of marital ties is reflected in such duality. The boundaries of the domestic are transgressed and the marital scenario is subverted, equally undermining belief in the order of realism's closure. Uprooting these assumptions means detaching women's needs and desires from the reproduction of social harmony which binds them, and positions them in regard to men. If "Differently" ironizes the ideology of the domestic 'natural' state, it is through the tactics of re-appraisal of the male world, seen in the light of official discourse:

Maya said that whenever they had people in for dinner or the evening, Raymond would pick out beforehand the records he thought suitable and put them in a suitable
order. 'I think sometime he'll hand out conversational topics at the door', Maya said. (228)

As Beverly Rasporich points out: [T]he female faith in romantic love as total commitment is an absolute fiction. However, women's commitment to such fictions can be seen as a way of subverting, through 'performance' the entrapment of representation. Such a logic of doubling and role-playing is prevalent in Munro's heroines as they deal with patriarchy. Although loss of identity would seem to be the price to pay for such life/performances, role-playing suggests ways in which women are trained to view themselves objectively. In the same vein another critic states:

'Mimesis' entails taking up the role historically assigned to the feminine - Freud's 'masquerade of femininity'. Irigaray claims that in the reproduction of this role there always remains an excess, a part which is not accounted for in masculine speculations.

The thematic and theoretical ramifications of Munro's performance modes will be examined later. Concentrating here on the ambivalence of connections between the sexes, and the way they are staged representatively, "Bardon Bus" is a good example of this. It is a story in which the narrator both relives and reflects upon her lost relationship with X, or ex, a sign of disconnection.

---

1 Beverly J. Rasporich, *Dance of the Sexes: Art and Gender in the Fiction of Alice Munro* (Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press, 1990), 56.
3 Clair Wills, "Upsetting the public: carn'val, hysteria and women's texts" in *Bakhtin and cultural theory*, eds. Ken Hirschkop and David Shepherd (Manchester/New York: Manchester University Press, 1989), 144.
4 Alice Munro, 116.
She fantasizes in the first section (for the narrative is divided into thirteen segments) her life as an old maid in Victorian times. This image, the belief in perfect mastery, provides the leitmotif for the story's pull to govern its fragments, as the entire structure ponders connections. The themes of the story; love, desire and their flawed representations, are tied in with meaning. The narrator is at a loss to make sense of her love affair with X and the story evolves in jigsaw fashion, interrogating her experience and its signification. While the story-line tries to harmonize the flow of desire with the flow of narrative, as the story progresses the pieces of information become more opaque and disconnected. Interwoven with the narrator's story is Kay's, who, *seems to have a sustaining force the narrator lacks, particularly in surviving love relationships.*\(^1\) As in other narratives, "Bardon Bus" doubles back on itself, inverting time frames to accommodate dreams and erratic temporal sequences. As in all Munro's stories, links are forged through an emotional causality sunk in a stratum of relationships, often at odds with the superficial, public discourse. "Bardon Bus" gives the reader the impression of working and reworking the gaps in coherence, and the result is a constant touching on the genesis of storytelling itself. Tension is maintained through the equation of relationships to narrative; the former standing as multiple versions of stories made and remade. For the first passages elaborate the world of sexual encounters through fantasy (the stuff of narrative) through the narrator dreaming of a man who

\(^1\) *Alice Munro,*117.
could be anybody. The importance of this faceless encounter to her is the fantasy of obliteration; the moment when you give yourself over, to the assault which is guaranteed to finish off everything you’ve been before.¹ The vignette of the Victorian spinster in her virginity and madness, captures the problematical libidinous flow of Munro’s work. The dreamlike quality of such images ponder sexual Otherness, seeing the everyday world as governed by inexplicable moves and shifts in a narrative where unlimited power threatens formlessness.² Imminent dispersal of form privileges the liquid undertow of discourse rather than its scaffolding. The connections posited by the narrative are scenes remembered and later recounted in fragments: He too would bring things home: conversations on the bus; word derivations; connections he had found. (113) It is as if language itself were the connection sought in random detailing, both for the characters and the reader, as we piece together the fragments and try for cohesion. But if the interpretative enterprise seeks to recreate a holistic ‘body’ of any story, “Bardon Bus” designs a topography rather than a history. It obeys the dictates of a landscape, posited as entity but accessible only through metaphor, and, as with the other spaces in Munro, whether house or farm or vista, the unmasterable body of the narrative structure is coterminous with the topography of women’s bodies:

¹ Alice Munro, "Bardon Bus" in The Moons of Jupiter [1982] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), 111. All further references are in the text of the thesis.
... the kind that Freud found, in another sort of dream. 'The complicated topography of the female genital parts,' he said in the same lecture, makes one understand how they are often represented as landscapes...¹

Such fluid connections refuse definitive forms of knowledge and allows for contradiction as a narrative model. In "Bardon Bus", Kay falls in and out of love, suffering the onset of gloom, the doubts and anguish. But she is also apparently favoured, ...not condemned to living with reservations and withdrawals, long-drawn-out dissatisfactions, inarticulate wavering miseries. (116)

This, as in other Munro stories, is a model of contradiction as a specifically feminine problematic; the danger to selfhood that disruption of secure boundaries implies. The narrator embarks on a path of living without responsibility, without a future, in freedom, with generosity, in constant but not wearying celebration. (113)

Later this exhilaration turns to nightmare as the narrator is haunted by images of X. I can't continue to move my body along the streets unless I exist in his mind and in his eyes. (126) But in another contrary move she experiences uncalled for pleasure in seeing how the design wouldn't fit and the structure wouldn't stand (127/8), her emotional scenario mirroring the narrative's efforts at unity, as the structure of longing and loss crumbles.

Yet at the last, undermining this new beginning is Kay's meeting with Alex (X?) bringing the story full circle and denying closure.

As Blodgett remarks:

Even if she will not oscillate between the illusory pole of self-loss and self-mastery that are the risks of love, nothing guarantees freedom from contradiction, accident, and the abrupt transformations that inhere in process.¹

So it is that the terms of such feminine process requires 'double-talk', opening up the seams of the narrative to the silence registered by oxymoronic confrontation. As the narrator of "Bardon Bus" twists and turns in oppositional frames of mood and action, meaning is suspended as segments confront each other discordantly. The ruling denominator becomes synonymous with Kristeva's 'semiotic' inscribed in language as a pressure ... as contradictions, meaninglessness, silence and absence. The semiotic works within signification, indicating what is lacking in codified representation.²

If closure is deferred in this story to a final image of repeating history, the story "Accident" ironizes its title as the heroine realizes at the end of the story that the accident of destiny was in fact linked to a long chain of things, many of them hidden from her, ... (106/7) The voices of public and private knowledge transmit Frances' love-affair with Ted, a married man. Her own cover-up of their affair is systematically denied by the voice of small-town gossip, where other people's doings are the groundwork of social interaction. Frances herself ... has the outsider's innocent way of supposing herself unobserved... (81)

While public and private spheres of influence confront each other

¹ Alice Munro, 118.
² Sara Mills, Lynne Pierce, Sue Spaull and Elaine Millard, Feminist Readings Feminists Reading (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), 165.
³ Alice Munro, "Accident" in The Moons of Jupiter. All further references are in the text of the thesis.
in perceptions of time and event, Ted's own choices and motivations disrupt secure boundaries of awareness. The 'accident' of the title refers to the death of Ted's son who is hit by a car, and the event is also the turning-point in Ted and Frances' affair. The voice of a guilty conscience—\textit{give up Frances, give her up for good, and Bobby would not die} (88)—is pitted against his rational judgement. The most likely story ending, one involving remorse and reconciliation with his Finnish wife, gives way to the final, unexpected resolution, for Ted and Francis go away together. That several discourses, from the reprobatory to the condoning, are held in play simultaneously is the strength of the story. The matrix of the small-town community, generating contradiction as the official version is stripped away, reveals the network of interlocking voices at work. Gossip and revelation surround the accident, portending the end of the couple's relationship. Yet it is the accident which triggers the reverse of popular expectations as Ted stands up to his school principal and the town:

\textit{Ted jumped up, to the principal's amazement, and said this was harassment, and he would not put up with it ...  
[H]is relationships were entirely his own affair, and marriage was nothing anyway but an antiquated custom promoted by the authorities of the church,...} (104)

At this point, when the narrative folds back on itself to invert readers' expectations, Frances herself defines the shift as she realizes that \textit{he had been made necessary to him} implying that Ted's story required her presence to make sense of his destiny. Throughout the story, discourse is fore-grounded as supposition and hearsay, a web of half-articulations, questions and confidences, meanings are arbitrary, 'accidents' resolved after the
fact. The narrative has the immediacy of oral expression, interrogating events in the light of the community's telling and retelling. These folk perspectives are clustered around shifting centres of interest, re-'reading' the town as history in the making. The sense that event is conjured up only through the interaction of community voices is linked to a 'coming-into-being' of language. The town itself as a hermetic, self-enclosed system, denying the pertinence of a 'beyond' can be seen as an analogy for the circuit of community gossip, suppressing other forms of knowledge, and other possibilities:

He had gone away. He could be anywhere, outside this town; he had stopped existing for her, except in the ridiculous agony of memory. (96)

The borders between inside and outside, self and other, presence and absence is here elaborated in terms of the network of community influence which imposes codes of behaviour, and beyond which there is the unwritten, non-discursive extra-mural space. The demarcation line of the known and the familiar is breached as the couple leave the town and their past behind, and the discursive embroidering on their scandalous relationship is curtailed.

Such radically inscribed boundaries challenge the concept of the 'real'. Change often involves the characters in loss of epistemological space as well as loss of continuity. But in Munroesque scenarios people also return from the 'outside'; old feuds are forgotten or inscribed within the annals of the town as canonical social history. It is the characters themselves, as figures of 'be'ing, which "Accident" inscribes, drawing attention to their gapped and incomplete knowledge. The way Frances and Ted discover their own future together at the point where
narrative twists confer them motivation as characters, makes it seem as though their future is a function of them 'becoming' in a fundamental way. In this way the narrative turns in upon itself, interrogating its own ontological status.

"Material", in the collection *Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You*,¹ deals with relationships, and, in a more oblique way, with the duality life/writing. It is a first-person account of the narrator's ambivalence towards her ex-husband Hugo, as she charts his rise to fame in the world of letters. The fact that the 'material' for his work has been plundered from their life together, ties in with the problem of women's identity in a world which leaves her at the mercy of life while men have decided what to do about everything they run across in this world,... (48) Simultaneously it is a narrative about expectations, deceptions and incomplete knowledge. Switching from the present of the narrator's marriage to Gabriel, a mysterious Rumanian of whom she says, *he does not disturb me, any more than he is disturbed himself*, the reader discovers her first husband Hugo, the writer, who *from time to time would give me a poison rash*. (33)

As the story progressively renders fragments of Hugo's personality, their life together, and the subsequent official persona constructed as the image of a famous writer, "Material" becomes enmeshed in several strands of fictionalizing. The narrator's bitterness over the lies, the half-lies, the absurdities

which compose Hugo's representation as a writer, are factors which made a fiction of their life together. Just as the narrator masks her identity as a nameless speaker opposed to the extremely visible Hugo, apparently creating an objective focus on the past, so this level of appearance is undone in the process of narrating. According to Blodgett she

is in the process of acquiring identity - even visibility- and she chooses to do it not only by revealing the degree to which she is not detached, but also by suggesting that the meaning she makes for herself is deeply implicated in Hugo's writing.  

1

Therefore, knowing Hugo becomes the process of knowing the narrator, and the subject/object definitions are blurred. Our attention is drawn to the mythologizing character of celebrity-building: "He lives on the side of a mountain above Vancouver" It sounds as if he lives in a wilderness cabin,...(35) The 'fictional' Hugo has fashioned the narrator, who sees herself as one of the girls and women who fall in love with such men, they imagine there is a power in them. (30) The narrating self is, however, not the self narrated. The narrator as subject attempts, in the telling, to apprehend herself as self narrated within Hugo's life and fame. Thus as the narrator addresses an absent Hugo, her voice returns to herself. The absent 'you' of the story becomes a questioning of the relation of past to present; the ways in which the narrator's own causality, like a missing piece of a puzzle, is traced through the telling. Dotty, the down-at-heel housewife/prostitute in the basement of the house the couple lived in, provided the subject

1 Alice Munro, 66.
matter of Hugo's story which marked the beginning of his literary career. Having listened to Dotty's tales of her former husbands, their illnesses, and the state of her womb, the narrator was in the habit of relating Dotty's problems to her apparently indifferent husband. It is however Hugo, and not the narrator, who finds a voice, who scripts Dotty's experiences and reaps the rewards. The narratorial function is complex here. In telling of Hugo's writing she scripts the narrative of her own inability to write; a quest for expression which falls under erasure as silence. The narrator is the locus where these diverse foci converge, and questions of women and their relation to art offer themselves to interpretation. If, in the final analysis, her second husband and Hugo are not really so unalike, and the narrator is left marking test-papers instead of creating a fictional world, it is obvious that while one task is deemed 'worthy', the other spells masculine empowerment. The useless baggage of the narrator's past which has been transformed by Hugo into a paying investment, further defines the cultural hiatus in perception which makes of women's work the material with which male careers are fabricated. The opening description of academe is filtered through the story as the rules of a game in which bloated, opinionated, untidy men, are made viable by wives who are always buying groceries or cleaning up messes. (30)

While the writer's coming-into-being is revealed as a narrative process, brought to us as partial information; fragments of memory and the narrator's own frustrated desires, the state of women's social reality is shown to be unchanged. Social awareness and enablement are posited as ideals, but in the discourse of such cultural progress women's labour is
redistributed not re-evaluated, seemingly always trapped in the same concept of identity, shoring up the cultural discourses of patriarchy. As one critic says, *a good mother is not a perfect being but a patriarchal construct*.¹ The giver of food and care in "Material" is herself trapped as the 'good' mother to her husbands' careers. It is through this grounding principle of women's subordination that the heroine questions the premises of Hugo's life and values, and in doing so speaks to the silence of her own voice. Such an exclusion from the governing voice of culture operates here as the traces of textual erasure and an implied quest for female authorship. The feminine 'I' subject is the subtext glimpsed through the feminine absence from representation in the story.

**Feminine Representation and Performance in *The Beggar Maid***

If Munro's narratives work as metaphors for the erotic landscapes of the mind and female sexuality, a prevalent aspect of her story-telling concerns the relation performance bears to these two. Both Smaro Kamboureli and E.D. Blodgett have linked the role-playing in her work to questions of fictional representation, although the former is more particularly concerned with the articulation of 'the feminine' in

The collection *The Beggar Maid* is engaged in the exploration of role-playing as the heroine Rose acts on the 'stage' of her own narrative inscription.

The collection as a whole charts a young girl's (Rose's) development, just as *Lives of Girls and Women* traces Del's, and the maternal figure is equally important in the former as in the latter. In *The Beggar Maid* Flo is a step-mother, having taken charge of Rose as a baby. Her authority is ambivalent, routinely dispensed through threats and tales of foreboding, or, in times of crisis, deferred to the language of corporal punishment meted out to Rose by her father. Rose and Flo are enmeshed in layers of signification more problematical still than those linking Del to her mother:

> It is a relationship whose meaning is played out in various modes throughout the whole text and links them almost as doubles. Both their names suggest "flower", and what the relationship lacks in cosanguinity is compensated for by congruity.

Both Flo and Rose are, narratively speaking, split, reliant on self-representation through mimicry and theatre in order to function as characters. If, as Irigaray says, mimicry connotes women's representation and is their best arm against patriarchy, Flo and Rose are equally at play in the theatre of gender representation, marking out territories of subversion on the fault lines of their

---

1 See Alice Munro, chapter 5: "The Self Unraveled", and also "The Body as Audience".
3 Alice Munro, 87.
inscription in the plot. Their propensity to stage meanings lays the characters themselves open to encoding or decoding. The original title of the collection, *Who Do You Think You Are?* naturally directs the reader towards a questioning of the referential 'real'. Just as *Lives of Girls and Women* functions as a series of interrelated but distinct episodes, so *The Beggar Maid* presents a pattern in which one episode responds to plays of meaning in the others, and can do so because the characters' 'real' is less privileged than 'performance'; the art of making real. The title *The Beggar Maid* also refers the reader to intertextual contexts.

As the title story renders explicit, Rose functions as an ideal image for her boyfriend Patrick, set up in the iconographic mode of masculine fantasizing about women. The painterly and lyric implications of "The Beggar Maid" as an already existing ballad and poem, injects Munro's collection with the ghostly presence of a double, as the narrative metaphorically mimes its antecedents. Rose therefore also performs intertextually in a discursive arena that is a romantic, folkloric 'elsewhere'. The title and multiple subsequent references proclaim courtly gestures and stylized romance, and language itself performs the courtly dance of *The Beggar Maid* as both Munro's narrative and a cultural artefact. The texts of Percy and Tennyson are gestured as her stories work to master and integrate mythic/folkloric fragments. Rose's theatre of the self figures the everyday as a quasi-romantic image, frozen in 'royal' iconography. Flo's ambivalent authority, part tyrant, part role-model, is equally adept at role-playing. The ironically encoded "Royal Beatings" introduces the primary actors on the stage of Rose's childhood; Flo, her father, and the
town of West Hanratty. As the first sentences imply, a 'Royal Beating' is attached to a ritual, extending beyond the corporal punishment it designates. It belongs to the world of words which 'perform', opening themselves to other-worldly speculations in which fantasy landscapes of the mind overtake the mundane brutality the words imply. The violence of blood ...leaping out of the royal image recalls Del's deflowering in Lives of Girls and Women where the act itself is re-enacted as an image of savagery, an urge towards repetition ... in the order of the imaginary. ¹ Rose also repeats, not from act to words but from words to acts of imagination, destroying the original grounds of representation in order to give new meaning to language. Here words are not abstract symbols but a metonymy of the body; its theatre so to speak. If Rose's father is king of the royal beatings she is in a way his queen, participating in the ceremony unwillingly but with an exacerbated consciousness of the part she has to play. The death of Rose's mother is encapsulated in her last words which lend themselves to the word-play of the story, speaking of the blood clot on her lung as being like a boiled egg ... with the shell left on. But Flo, normally avid to create drama out of deathbed horrors, denies this particular metaphorical power, reducing it to its literal terms as if Rose's mother really was the kind of person who might think you could swallow an egg whole .(4)

Just as the mother's memory is erased, the gentler and more ceremonious time is replaced by the ceremonies of the beatings

¹ "The Body as Audience", 37.
in which the actors conform to ritual. Rose's constant delight in words, particularly if they take on the vertiginous dimensions of pickled arseholes which are shaped rather like octopuses, begins the cycle of rage in which all those involved know the outcome. As in a pattern of repetition words are the trigger, acting out old hurts in which the performance itself displaces causality. The victim position is exploited by Rose in order to stage herself as beggar maid later, when she would queen it over people who wished they had been poor, and hadn't been. (25) As step follows step; the changes in voice, the bodily moves and familiar poses, her father on the verge of rejecting the role he has to play (17), all three are caught up in the seduction of mimesis and the control it vehicles. The trio defamiliarize the fictional world by their acting out, creating an ironic distance in the narrative, as such mimesis calls up the function of realistic fiction as 'likeness' and mastery of the world. Repetition as control creates the texture of the beatings, just as repression works to deny misery even as misery encroaches:

Flo had saved up, and had a bathroom put in, but there was no place to put it except in a corner of the kitchen ... They were all familiar with each other's nether voices, not only in their more explosive moments but in their intimate sighs and growls and pleas and statements. ... So no one ever seemed to hear, or be listening, and no reference was made. (6)

Violence irrupts in the voice in a similar way as the nether voices and subsides again as daily life takes over and the 'unspeakable' settles into aftermath. The jagged edges of the real are folded into continuity when performance loses potency.

That the scenarios of violence are linked to both the dangers and pleasures of language and split perceptions, means that the
process of narration itself defers to drama as an unstitching of the seams of continuity. Flo's story-telling which revels in incest and butchery is both real and askew, its force and pertinence lies in 'unspeakable' deeds caught up in a studied technique, a tone of regret, caution, her face soft and thoughtful, tantalizing, warning.

(9) The teller becomes part of her narration, registering the shifts and curves of her tales as event and narrator blend one into the other. The tales Flo relates have the quality of folk mythology, their colour and farfetchedness seemingly unrelated to the present. The townspeople who figure in them - Becky the cripple, Hat Nettleton the horsewhipper and others - carry the evidence of this lurid past but it is Flo who 'creates' them in narrative form, imbuing tension and suspense, and in doing so 'authors' herself within them. In the same way Rose's punishments set up a scene of action which inscribes the actors as participants in a particular code. As Blodgett remarks: Rose's acting is her story; narrative discourse her stage.¹

The world of the town's history becomes, in the telling, a narrative economy which ponders the ontological problem of 'who do you think you are?' This is a pervasive questioning, affecting the narration in its entirety as characters' identities are marked by radical erasure; [p]resent people could not be fitted into the past (10) as Rose says, citing the gaps in continuity that such puzzled ontology arouses. Past history refuses to reflect the characters' present in the elaboration of 'who they are' and self-identity is rendered problematical. Such estrangement from the

¹ Alice Munro, 87.
continuity of the self in time is both a falling-away of identity and its constant restaging as surprise or revelation. These rifts allow performance to undo linearity.

In "Privilege" and "Half a Grapefruit" the narrator scripts Rose's entry into the social world of school, by which is implied the chance to climb out of West Hanratty. 'Entrance class' designates the bridge from life as a maid or butcher to that of higher education, with its connotations of escape from working-class hardship. [B]uilding up the first store of things she could never tell (26), the local primary school is a step into institutionalized anarchy, dispelling the comfort of life behind the shop and its primitive order. The law at school is all-masterful because rigid systems of control and defense have mutated chaos into locked doors behind which teachers play blind and deaf. The turds copious or lonesome, preserved as if under glass (25), which litter the outside toilets, is one aspect. Another is the spectacle of incest, [r]elations performing, to a crowd of children while the teacher takes refuge in the classroom. Here the barriers separating public from private are down, and middle-class rectitude holds no sway. Religion is a pretext for a fight and incest is another type of theatre; its importance above all its qualities of spectacle. This is woven into folklore by Flo:

...Flo said that people had gone dotty, been known to eat boiled hay, and performed with their too-close relations. Before Rose understood what was meant she used to imagine some makeshift stage, some rickety old barn stage, where members of a family got up and gave silly songs and recitation. 'What a performance'. (27)

As in the case of Becky Tyde of "Royal Beatings" this rape/performance requires an idiotic, saintly whore, a victim of
continual assault figuring as the object of male fantasies and violence, as the marginalised Other. That such an absolute victim circulates under different names from story to story in Munro’s work, radically inscribed within the trope 'saintly/whore', designates feminine subjecthood as self-divided, caught in internal contradiction and colonized by a displaced masculine centre. As in all imperialistic ventures, the centre transposes its own internal conflicts on to the territory of the Other. As 'saintly/whores' both Fanny McGill and Becky Tyde are unclosable in representative terms, unable to be digested in the logic of the town's history. They both are displayed as the village idiots; at once central and marginal, effaced as subjects but constantly escaping classification and integration. The soothing blankness of male representations of the 'saintly/whore' involves, as Rose points out, a blotting out of the female body, the breathing and the spit and the teeth (28) which is the site of male fantasies.

Such oxymorons, obsessive in their recurrence in Munro's stories, are a stapling to the surface of narration the problem of women as realism's underbelly, its 'unspeakable', and their inner contradiction disturbs its 'soothing blankness'. As it transpires, in "Privilege" Franny would get pregnant, be taken away, come back and get pregnant again, be taken away, come back, get pregnant, be taken away again. (28) This way of throwing the town's misdeeds back at them will finally end in illness and death as in fact she had no general significance, no bearing on what could happen to anyone else. It was only further abuse. (29)

Rose will later try to mould such figures into a feasible causality as she interprets her past for the benefit of middle-class friends.
Her proximity to, and participation in personal and institutional abuse, and her emergence through the performances of the body to performer of language involves acts of translation, a moving from codes of controlled anarchy to an economy of words and their symbolic abstraction. If disruption is the norm at school, nonetheless, *[some people learned to spell.* The high school is a bright, clean one and the teacher is suitably worried about diet and health. Yet if Rose has already partially transcended the deprivation of West Hanratty, the subsequent division of rural or urban milieu carved out at high school redefines old barriers. Performance is the bridge spanning the social divide. An inversion of roles operates as Rose is now the story-teller, transforming experience into lore: *The change in Rose, once she left the scene, crossed the bridge, changed herself into chronicler, was remarkable.* (42)

The play of mirroring between Flo and Rose is not only a problematical design of feminine self-hood, the writer/reader interrelation is also gestured. For the spectacle of story-telling is confirmed as such by the 'listening' reader, and the constant chain of story-telling in these stories, as responsibility is transferred from Flo to Rose, also opens up the space of readership as active process. Such doubling of the writing/reading activity of literature posits a process of change and exchange, a ghosting of the fictional narratee. 'Performance' itself becomes subject to doubling, splitting the concept of audience to engage the 'real' reader as audience. This blurs the boundary between text and interpretation, and the narrative itself becomes the stage of its cultural inscribing; the moment
when the written is read as writing within, and inseparable from, the act of reading.

As Rose begins to tell the same type of tales Flo used to, albeit now Ruby Carruthers provides the material, it is as if the past were the audience of the speaking present, receiving present versions of the town jokers, collapsing temporality into the theatre of immediacy. Old identities fuse with new ones privileging associations and configurations. This lends a formulaic quality to these stories as they mime patterns of myth and folklore, deploying narrative energies in the service of the oral and immediate. Obsessive imitation becomes the mode of metonymy, placing sequences side by side as likeness, recalling former sequences through shared aspects, partaking of the characters' constant return to the scene of an event:

*Flo had to take the men's dinner to them in the far field. The husband opened it up and said, 'why is there no pie in this dinner?' 'If you want any pie you can make it yourself', said Flo, in the exact words and tone of her mistress when they were packing the dinner.* (45)

The father is equally prone to forms of performance, albeit repressed:

*All the things he had beaten down, successfully submerged, in himself, had surfaced again in her, and she was showing no will to combat them.* (48)

If schooling announces the discrepancy between Rose's background and her future, played out, as it were, across the bridge of irony and satire which make such a discrepancy tolerable, *The Beggar Maid* as a collection opposes Flo and West Hanratty to the discourse of middle-class rationalisation and posits Rose is a dual-faced go-between. Gone now is the storytelling of local Hanratty scenarios. Rose has moved into the world
of classification and fixed genres where she will sit uneasily among Dr. Henshawe's scholars:

*She could not really decide how much she liked being at Dr. Henshawe's. At times she felt discouraged, ... eating from five white plates on blue placemats... Before she came to Dr. Henshawe's, Rose had never heard of the working class. She took the designation home.*

'Performance' has now become the pitting of disparate life-styles against each other. Rose's ascendance destroyed the naturalness, the taken-for-granted background of home. (70) Both environments are tainted with knowledge which exposes the other, and the distance of education and refinement has encoded former surroundings, making them 'stand for' values or lack of values:

*Poverty was not just wretchedness, ... It meant having those ugly tube lights and being proud of them. ... It meant pride and jealousy flaring over something like the new pair of plastic curtains, imitating lace, that Flo had bought for the front window.*

Split between Dr. Henshawe's world and West Hanratty, each partially represented in the other, Rose tries to re-'present' herself to each by denying the other. She cannot 'cross the bridge' from outside to inside, from codes of the institution to those more familiar of home. She now inhabits the world of her boy-friend Patrick, who is attracted to her as the Beggar Maid, meek and voluptuous, with her shy white feet. (80)

With the double standard of complicity and rebellion Rose is caught within the sign of love/submission: *She could not turn Patrick down ... It was not the amount of money but the amount of love he offered that she could not ignore...* (80)
Patrick's worship of his 'beggar maid' intertextually cites Tennyson's images:

She in her poor attire was seen: One praised her ankles, one her eyes,...

King Cophetia sware a royal oath: This beggar maid shall be my queen! ¹

Patrick's single-minded adoration of a 'unique' image also conforms to the critic Lorraine Weir's reading of patriarchal generic simplicity in their choice of canonical poetic imagery:

For Narcissus only one image will do. It is however, unlikely that he will drown, for in a patriarchal society his image is writ large and its power to exact conformity evident especially to all those whose images are other. ²

Patrick persists in seeking the poetic image at the heart of Rose, some obedient image that she herself could not see, (85) thus aligning himself with patriarchal stability and folding Rose into his poem. Already and always read as divine object, Rose is the trope of women's split image, predicated as 'good/helpless/bountiful' and simultaneously silenced. But the silence is also an act of concealment, the [e]nergy, laziness, vanity, discontent, (86) which could revise Rose's poetic encoding are disguised and result in her 'acting out' her own absence from this encoding. Drawn into the world of ease and comfort of Patrick's family Rose stifles, losing identity. Patrick's mother is down-to-earth in a fashion strikingly similar to Flo, but

she dislikes any fanciful, speculative, abstract discourse, thus denying the theatre of word-making which grounds Flo's reality. Patrick's words seek to contain a fixed meaning, and it is the blindness of his words to the treachery of reality that causes problems. If Rose were to articulate the language of his worship she would have to locate the echo of those terms within herself. Instead the oxymoron asserts itself; Patrick's ideal image against her own perceptions. Conflicting terms tend to undermine each other, positing a questioning gap:

It was a miracle; it was a mistake. It was what she had dreamed of; it was not what she wanted. (81)

Struggling to move to the side of coherence and closure, to prove Patrick a 'man' and by the same token herself a 'woman', the body's performance as sexual instrument is engaged. Her twisting and fluttering eagerness is another fraud against fear of exposure. But her body undoes her, taking on its own particular dance of pleasure, refusing to be fooled. If the desire for mimicry is the motivating force of "The Beggar Maid", as different levels of parody are announced, the body's performance as pre-figuring the discursive, seeking to inverse the terms of mimesis, is also a constant in the text.

Rose and Patrick finally marry and later divorce. The story "Mischief" speaks of a passage of their life together, and a friendship with a couple, Jocelyn and Clifford is woven through, creating a play of mirrors in which perspectives constantly shift to revise Rose's relation to her social environment and the people in it. In such a way that the premises of Rose's social recognition undergo changes and reversals. Shared values, or inversely, the distance between disparate value systems are put to the test.
The characters are left open to question as they appear to shed skins, each social identity as meaningful as the next and therefore as deceptive. What evolves as a message of the story is the suspicion that traits of personality may be as fashion dictates, changing and unharnessed to an essential core. Such uncertainty in the premises of knowledge means that by turns language in the story is shared, shown to be part of a mutually recognised code, or alternatively it separates; tracing out the barriers of class and taste. At the beginning of the story, when Rose and Jocelyn first meet in the maternity ward of a hospital, a complicity of language is established against the domestic enclave of the other mothers:

_It was one of those luxuriant intimacies that spring up in institutions; in schools, at camp, in prison._ (104)

If Jocelyn initially appears unconventional her radical views rapidly revert to the mainstream on the question of women's expression; her _women aren't great artists_ astounds the poorly educated Rose. However, the undermining irony does not lie in two opposing viewpoints, but in the representative structure, suddenly laid bare in the following dialogue between the two:

_Jocelyn said to her, much later in their friendship, that one of the reasons she found it so interesting to talk to Rose, ... was that Rose had ideas but was uneducated. Rose was surprised at this, and mentioned the college she had attended in Western Ontario. Then she saw ... that that was exactly what Jocelyn had meant._ (107)

In a rapid deconstructive move Munro shows that Rose's lack does not lie in her want of education, but in her lack of access to the middle-class hierarchies of taste and convention which order and encode reality. Rose's problems will continue to be caught up with middle-class mores, her desire to accede to these dominant
forms of knowledge and her uncertainty as to where the 'real' lies. As the middle-class Patrick seamlessly changes values to suit his chosen roles, it appears that he, like Jocelyn, are folded into a superior discourse, one where an implicit superior logic governs their representation. They are both in the final instance protected, innocent and whole.

Patrick, the erstwhile liberal student is now a purveyor of harsh opinions and wholesale condemnations, which Rose mistakenly understands on the level of her own problematical aspirations.

[She thought she knew that he didn't really want to be whatever he was zealously making himself into. (108)]

His innate protection, not from inconsistency, but from the troubling self-image that inconsistency causes Rose, denotes his 'natural' inscription in representation; a possessor of 'full' language, whereas Rose and Clifford are shifty pieces of business.(115)

In "Mischief" words once again take on flesh, and Munro plays on those who are professional purveyors of words:

'Cyril is awful', the woman writer said. 'Cyril thinks he has to try to act like a poet.'...

'Is he a poet?' Rose said.

The lecturer in English Literature said, 'He told me he had burned all his poems.'

'How flamboyant of him', Rose said. She was delighted with herself for saying this,' and with them for laughing. (110)

Poets, dons and bons mots are all at work on the slippery surface of language involved in its production and reproduction. If Rose and the violinist Clifford share the weariness, suppleness, deviousness, meanness, common to a class, (115) they remain at risk to the fatal attraction of words and their promise of empowerment or subversion.
Oppositions of class are thus taken to levels of meaning and, by extension, to the characters' own 'predictable' or 'shifty' status as narrative figures. Throughout Munro's work the female heroines are enamoured of words but will never be in charge of meaning, and they are split between their submission to a governing discourse, always out of reach, and their mimicry of each form they come in contact with. Paralleling this dilemma, Rachel Bowlby's article "Breakfast in America" examines the inherent moral separation between Topsy and Eva in Uncle Tom's Cabin:

*But where Topsy is 'virgin soil', a neutral territory yet to be sown with humanizing plants, Eva is a fully formed moral being from the beginning. Where Topsy has no meaning to attach to her words... Eva does not have the words to express a meaning already there.*  

The same type of opposition, motivates the performance mode of Munro's stories:

*[T]he core of Patrick, Rose believed, was simple, pure and trustworthy.* (112)

Like 'pure' language, his morals and values are of the type that cannot be acquired but are already morally 'written'.

Part and parcel of the pleasures sneaked from under lawful codes is the anticipated love-affair between Rose and Clifford who plan to meet at Powell River where Clifford is giving a concert. As it is, the promised delight of the weekend is curtailed and Rose is left stranded, her starring role reduced to *ordinary mischief* by Clifford's sudden change of heart. The passing of time and

---

narrative sequence weave back and forth over the two couples and their changing fortunes as Clifford and Jocelyn finally make good, and join the consumer society they so heartily despised. By the end of the story memory has closed over old hurts and whereas Rose is in the process of separating from Patrick, bonds between the couples are still holding. Yet closure is undermined in another instance of deception when, after a party years later Rose Clifford and Jocelyn make love together. Afterwards, Rose felt that they had made a fool of her, cheated her, shown her a glaring lack...(136)

One critical interpretation of this is Rose's failure to see the other as anything but instrumental, as subordinate to her own maneuvers.¹

Valid as this is in interpreting her interaction with other characters, the final narrative reversal into misunderstanding serves once again to posit a displacement on the level of narrative itself rather than its themes. For Rose functions in the story as a sign through which the suppression and appropriation of language in the story is articulated. Her blindness to the way language functions as power, her belief in 'pure' codes of conduct, and her subsequent deception, are set against her own self-proclaimed deceitfulness. Relying on the certainty of a hierarchically superior type of social and cultural discourse in order to motivate her own, Rose's own deceitfulness ceases to be valid as the codes of language to which she deferred prove themselves caught up in the same game of fabrication and

¹ Alice Munro,98.
pleasurable subterfuge. Instead of subverting control, she reflects the flaws of language's ordering, suppression and appropriation. Rose articulates a context of power and opposition, and equally signals its collapse into lack of value when suppression is lifted and the underpinnings of power are revealed.

This falls in line with the Blodgett's further statement:

Rose is the name for a certain shifting focus through which discourse is organized, and this becomes apparent from "The Beggar Maid" on.¹

The story "Providence" bears this statement out, continuing the weave of the heroine into the texture of story, creating the doubling and absences which figure her narrative splitting. As Héliane Ventura says, deception moulds itself to the mountainside; an unlikely but highly symbolic locus for a Munro narrative:

The mountain site embeds and embodies deception and from the origin of settlement to individual relationship ... it seems to mirror fraud into infinity.²

Rose finds herself working in the Kootenay mountains after leaving Patrick. Her choice of venue is motivated by the vague prospect of an affair with a married man Tom. During the course of her stay in the mountains she will be joined by her daughter Anna. Leaving her former house and lifestyle behind in Vancouver, the mountain location is conducive to fantasizing her place outside time itself. It is almost as if some people have got together and said,'Let's play Town'. You think that nobody could die there. (140) More and more given over to a theatre of the

¹ Alice Munro,99.
² Héliane Ventura, "Delusion, Deception and Disillusionment in the Mountains: Alice Munro's 'Providence'" Etudes Canadiennes,31(1991),111.
self, Rose's several thwarted attempts to meet Tom take on the guise of a quest to match fantasizing with the 'real', in a psychic theatre where they remain resolutely mismatched:

The sheer piling up of obstacles and the reiteration of the process over three attempts finally turns the time-honoured plot of the star crossed lovers into a grotesque parody. 1

The story in its entirety seems to obey a compulsive logic of detours, frustrating the participants' desires. Tom only exists in the narration through his signalled absence, by letters and telephone calls justifying his frustrated efforts. As if Rose and Tom were psychological projections of one another, disappearing on the horizon of perception each time the reality of meeting is feasible, the mountain itself is rendered an accomplice, folding and shifting silently, dismissing tracks under snow-falls, creating deceptive landscapes. It is the symbolic site of an archaic consciousness; the locus of dream material. If a radical 'nowhere' is offered here, the 'real' is the temporary structure of home that Rose sets over her sense of loss:

The apartment which she found - the upstairs of a brown brick house halfway up the mountainside - was stained and shabby, but she immediately set to work to fix it up ... What she had, when all this was finished, was a place which belonged quite recognizably to a woman, living alone, probably no longer young, who was connected, or hoped to be connected, with a college or the arts.(139/40)

As Rose labours under the loss of familiar landmarks as wife, mother and housekeeper which formerly defined her, the

1 "Delusion, Deception",110.
stripping away of these functions leaves her on the margins of social discourse. Unlike Patrick, Rose's place in a domestic arena has disintegrated leaving her almost literally decentred, in a geographical space unlike any other she inhabits in the collection. Striking up a friendship with another more-or-less single woman, Rose tries to meet up with Tom first at a conference in Vancouver and then in Calgary. By now her daughter Anna is living with her, lending a temporary meaning to her existence, for Anna will finally revert to living with Patrick and his new wife.

The third trip out of the mountains is intended to take her to a weekend tryst in Banff where the inflammatory lovemaking which Rose loved reading and writing would have been realized. As the snow begins to fall, the mountains close in and public transport stops. The childminder cancels, and finally both Rose and Anna are left stranded waiting for a bus at midnight. As these multiple occurrences collude with the treacherous mountain to distance the couple from each other, another symbolically charged event serves to reinscribe the lost energies of desire and need back on to the plane of the self. Significantly, a bounty is showered on Anna from a pay phone, refilling every time she closed it as it might in a dream or a fairy tale ...

'It must be from a long distance call', said Rose. 'The money didn't go through'. (153/4)

Just as Rose's own message didn't 'get through' to its destination, the windfall showered on mother and daughter is a release from the absence of Tom, who, we are led to believe, by the very fantasizing nature of their relations, is destined only to satisfy a hankering after loss itself. For Rose had to admit, in pondering
the reality of a weekend with him, she had suspected the slippery edge of failure.

As Ventura says, "Providence" is the story of a *one-year lull, a one-year transit* ¹ between the West Coast and the East where, in "Simon's Luck", Rose will be living a bachelor life again. It corresponds to the period of destructuration following the break-up of a relationship and the break-down of former social discourses in which the heroine was inscribed. Her pleasures of performance enter a professional phase, and the 'real' which formerly existed as an oppositional mode to be mimicked, progressively falls away. Her increasingly tenuous grip on a permanence of place and relationships that evolves in this latter half of the story cycle serves to underscore how much of the 'real' for women is constituted by domestic experience, even if such experience is markedly problematical.

In *The Beggar Maid* the energy of narrative performance, fuelled by conflicting desires and ambivalent power relations, is progressively allied with an abandoning of the heroine by the characters and settings to which she had been domestically and narratively affiliated. Women's plots of 'aloneness' are often 'loneliness'; a falling away of the structures in which they were formerly inscribed.

If Rose loses plausibility in the playing out of fantasies against impossible happy endings, this is seen by Nancy K. Miller's reading of women's plots not as a failure of representation, in its

---

¹ "Delusion, Deception", 107.
loss of a viable plot, but the citing, in muted terms, of *a world outside love* which proves to be out of the world altogether. ¹

"Simon's Luck" continues the falling away of her history even as she moves to a city, gains recognition as an actress and begins social life as a single woman. Paradoxically, if professional role-playing has by now afforded recognition, the pattern of Rose's development outside her roles is injected with uncertainty and seemingly plotless. The story designs Simon himself as the motivation for Rose's emotional coming-to-life, but the affair is radically, and mysteriously curtailed. An extended flash-forward in the story reveals how, having met at a party and spent a day and night together Rose waits for Simons's return which never materializes. If most of the narrative 'reads' Simon as the site where Rose will attain meaning, the outcome obviously posits a self-fulfillment in constant deferral. Simon himself is portrayed as a man of many disguises:

> *This was the Humble Workman. Some others were The Old Philosopher, who bowed low to her ... and, when appropriate ,The Mad Satyr, nuzzling and leaping,...*(165/6)

In the brief interlude they are together Simon takes over the house and garden, spending the day planting vegetables and making a work-plan for the garden. A permanence is grafted on to the impermanence of Rose's life as the draughty house is re-encoded through Simon's perceptions. She swiftly envisages Simon there for life, tending her garden and being *the peg on*

which her hopes were hung for she could never manage now to turn him back into himself. (171) Time frames are shattered as Rose anticipates, while waiting for him the following weekend, an endless period of waiting. Narrative signals temporal seizure, the present attaining depth and gravity as Rose prepares dinner for two with style and care, or inversely it shifts to discover a vacuum:

*Things were more askew here than Rose had noticed before. ... People worked thirty or forty miles away, in factories, in the Provincial Mental Hospital, or they didn't work at all, they lived a mysterious life on the borders of criminality or a life of orderly craziness in the shade of the Holiness Center.* (170/1)

So displaced time and absence determine action in "Simon's Luck", setting in motion a cycle of deferral which will prompt Rose herself to leave town, thus further deferring the closure implied by Simon's absence. When the owner of the local shop drops in and tells Rose's fortune she is not

>'able to get anything in focus' ... 'I can't locate him'. '
>'Can't locate him?'[says Rose]
>'In your future. I'm beat'. (170)

As Rose picks up and leaves, driving westwards to an undetermined destination, the narrative itself seems caught up in referential indeterminacy:

*And so it was, back and forth, as if the rear end of the car was held by a magnetic force, which ebbed and strengthened, ebbed and strengthened again, but the strength was never quite enough to make her turn,...* (174)

As it transpires, Rose's blind trail goes to the outer edge and halts in Vancouver where another chance encounter means a job and a new life. Multiple instances of self-fabrication reverberate back along the narrative trail, for, having written to her employer
inventing a fortuitous acting engagement, Rose is then offered a part in a television series; one which charts a fictional life-story very close to her own:

\[
\text{It ... concerned a family, or pseudo-family, of eccentrics and drifters using an old house on Salt Spring Island as their home ... Rose got the role of the woman who owned the house, the pseudo-mother. (175/6)}
\]

But if powerlessness has become a narrative dilemma, closure makes sense of Simon's non-return, offering the possibility of understanding his absence. Learning of his illness and death, *memento mori*, which he repeatedly intoned during their day together, now makes ghostly sense. This is the missing piece of history which has cancelled the meaning of Rose's waiting, and troubles the primary motivation for the story "Simon's Luck". As Simon's death is a final cause, he is destined from the beginning to figure as the 'lack' of story, plunging the narrative into total powerlessness; a powerlessness ironically indicated by Rose's comment at the end:

\[
\text{It was preposterous, it was unfair, that such a chunk of information should have been left out, and that Rose ... could have thought herself the only person who could seriously lack power. (177)}
\]

Incomplete knowledge as a textual device, harnessing the concepts of silence and absence, adumbrates Rose's own falling-away from a continuous narrative thread, and her ever-increasingly isolated present. The news of the death announces the gap at the core of the narrative, pertaining to an inability to state, in fictional terms, the hiatus of Rose as single woman within mainstream culture. She is out of love, outside a domestic scenario and therefore reduced in historical breadth. The
question of where to locate a continuous, historicized feminine self outside such boundaries, is the one which the constant inscribing of absence and deferral throws up. Simon's death is concrete and locatable; it serves as absence erected as meaning. The following narratives in *The Beggar Maid* revert to Flo and Rose in an uncanny reworking of former performances. The Flo and Rose of "Royal Beatings", taking part in the ritualistic dance of words, have reverted to the performance of language, but Flo is now senile and in the County Home. Here, as presaged in "Royal Beatings" she *spent most of her time sitting in a corner of her crib, looking crafty and disagreeable, not answering anybody*. (24) She is now one of those going off the track, muddling the very situations and contexts, which she formerly studied in detail.

"Spelling" normally denoting a child's entry into the logic of language, ironically refers to an old lady's last ditch hold on the world outside. The story as a whole encodes this regressive movement over the edge of language to a non-differentiation between subject and symbol. Flo has finally fallen victim to her own discourse in which she was always precariously inscribed as a character. Rose is now the critic of this discourse, interpreting her old childhood haunts through the study of its neglect and decay. Yet she is simultaneously expelled from Flo's psychic reality as the latter does not recognise her step-daughter when she comes to visit:

*You're that woman they were sending to look after me.*
*Yes*
*You aren't from around here?*
*No* (180)
Blanked out from Flo's consciousness, Rose participates in a play of recognition and misrecognition which defines the two women as figures of language, alternately effaced and then resurfacing. This play of alterity brings to the limits of narratability Munro's textual working of language and women's identity. As Flo, the ardent story-teller metaphorically descends into muteness while literally ascending to the upper storey of the County Home, a dream revives the founding image of the collection, that of a 'royal' performance. This is associatively connected to the heritage of England and Empire, and, perhaps more pertinently, to the elisions and suppressions of women's voices which characterize that era:

But as she went on the cages got larger and more elaborate, they were like enormous wicker birdcages, Victorian birdcages, fancifully shaped and decorated ...Then in one of the cages Rose spotted Flo, who was handsomely seated on a thronelike chair, spelling out words in a clear authoritative voice... (188)

Such tropes of jumbled reality, invoking a maternal figure, radical disorder and ornate boxes/containers play a similar function in Mavis Gallant's fiction, erupting in narrative to signal a repressed female sexuality and the legacy of history. In "Spelling", occurring at the end of the collection, the image encapsulates the splitting and border play at work throughout. Flo's sorry life, reduced to reproaches painfully truly meant about Rose's appearance in a Greek play with one breast laid bare, expresses the gulf of perception and refinement between the two women. Yet Flo's shame at such a performance is echoed by a troubling sense of failure qualifying Rose's sense of self; sometimes Rose was deeply, unaccountably ashamed. 'Shame'
then, would seem to connote both limitations imposed by outer realities of class and condition and those governing structures of the self. The delight and the danger of language itself that "Spelling" thematizes, is revealed to be the only structuring agent of reality left for the Home inmates:

*Then she would sit waiting; ... till up from somewhere popped another word. She would encompass it, bend all her energy to master it. ...Were they like words in dreams or in the minds of children, each one marvelous and distinct and alive as a new animal?* (188)

In the final story "Who Do You Think You Are?" the town of Hanratty is recovered from memory as the place most fitting for a narrative deliberation of Rose's ontological status. It does so by addressing the question raised by the title in several ways, and by simultaneously throwing the title open to interpretation as the site of public, communal identity and a private, individual one. The answer to this fundamental question, which each story in the collection has both pondered and complicated, is here invested in the misnamed Milton Homer. As the designated village idiot of Hanratty, and an unwitting, ironical figure of a displaced literary tradition, he serves to investigate public conventions and the terms of private 'be'ing. In the same way that "The Beggar Maid" alludes to an origin in canonical history, both revising and referring obliquely to an already present narrative/painting, Milton Homer as the carnivalesque figure of "Who Do You Think You Are?" speaks to the same literary tradition. Judged aggressive, unpredictable and lewd in normal life, Milton Homer's two official functions are to preside at the ritual of birth where, holding the baby, he *delivered a set speech*, and also to cavort in parades:
... he varied his place in it from time to time, stepping out behind King Billy or the Black Knights or the step-dancers or the shy orange-sashed children who carried the banners. (196)

Both the town's familiar rituals, and literature as a cultural ritual of reaffirmation of values, are invested in the character Milton Homer. As fool and arch performer/mimic he both gestures and subverts canonical social and literary forms. Fully assimilated into Hanratty's annual parades and festivities as the 'outsider' although silent convention and conspiracy rejects him the rest of the time, this kaleidoscopic figure articulates Rose's own ontological problems. He mirrors her troubled representation as a helpless 'Beggar Maid', which, from the beginning sealed and encoded her, and to which her relationship with Patrick complied. The prescribed nature of power relations between the sexes is ironically focussed through the overdetermination of Rose as 'beggar maid' in somebody else's royal domain, and Milton Homer fulfills much the same function as court jester and half-feared joker.

Further to this plot of the 'outsider' is Rose's childhood friend and male alter ego Ralph Gillespie, whose mimicry of Milton Homer takes the chain of displacement and performance one remove further. He used to be Rose's role-model for she wanted to fill up in that magical, releasing way, transform herself. (204) That Gillespie, war hero and later alcoholic, stays on in Hanratty and takes on, through performance, the buffoon tradition of Homer himself, stands in contrast to Rose's escape from the town and her professional performing career. The interconnecting links between the three both defer and keep in play narrative chains representing, and simultaneously 'reading' the process of this
representing. Focussing the community's elisions and complicities with self-staging, the narrative is increasingly shown to be a fictional world and a setting of plot in which the heroine's place will always be ambivalent; a part of it necessarily a mistake in Rose's terms, or a mis-'take', in the sense of always escaping the very act of total capture which narrative designs. Rose's place in a setting in which, although the main character, she is never 'at home' on the territory on which she doubles and feints enclosure, finds a corollary in the partial, indeterminate, muted quality of women's expression.
Mavis Gallant is often considered the ' Outsider ' of Canadian Literature, both in her choice of Paris as her home since the 1950's, and the themes of her stories. These seem concomitant with this choice, displaying a wry, perspective on the world, a detached 'outsider's' eye. She has therefore never been preoccupied with the Canadian ontological problem, the "who are we?" as a particularly local source of inspiration, but her work nonetheless explores this particular facet of a Canadian mind-set by dealing with cultural and personal alienation, doing so with the distance of the impartial observer. Just as she details the idiosyncrasies of the French in collections such as Overhead in a Balloon, the troubled post-war psyche of the Germans comes under scrutiny in The Pegnitz Junction. As the critic Heather Murray says:

Gallant is placed both within and without the mainstream, liminally situated by gender, genre, and geography, seen as the foreign writer of 'home truths', holding the mirror to a Canadian cultural identity.¹

Her fiction is obsessed with the meaning of belonging to a culture or an origins, precisely because her stories negate such possibilities.² The historical blank of discontinuity, through which 'foreignness' surfaces as a metaphor of the unresolved

¹ Heather Murray, "Its Image on the Mirror': Canada, Canonicity, the Uncanny" in Essays on Canadian Writing : Mavis Gallant Issue ,42 (Winter, 1990),102.

² On the question of exile, alienation and the concept of home as it pertains to the writer who chooses not to work in his/her native land see Andrew Gurr Writing in Exile: The Identity of Home in Modern Literature (Brighton: Harvester, 1981).
tensions such discontinuity implies, has much to do with the quality of the controlling narrative voice in her work. This voice traces a design of self-division and rupture, involving concepts of "within" and "without". Her narratives are not, however, exploded, fragmentary discourses. They narrativize such rupture as a fundamental break-down in communication between characters, and between characters and the medium of language in which they take root. The reader registers this communication gap at all levels; socially, between the rootless cosmopolitan and his environment; culturally, between the French and English-speaking communities in her stories; individually, between husband and wife or parent and child.

Cutting through these categories to present another form of division is that of public versus private authority or 'truth', and between the past and the present in the ways they also represent a form of authority and truth. This disunity translates as a discrepancy between what 'could be' and what, in reality, 'is'.

Mavis Gallant's voice sounds from an experiential position firmly rooted in the city. The geographical site varies from story to story, and with it the social mores of the group under scrutiny. Her characters act within circumscribed limits of self-enclosure and self-absorption coterminous with a negative, although perhaps accurate, appraisal of city life. The pervading aura of loss and abandon, of a sense of community become mere fantasy,

---

1 For an analysis of voice opposing 'public' to 'private' see Michel Fabre, "Orphans' Progress, Reader's Progress: Le 'On dit' et le Non-dit chez Mavis Gallant" in RANAM, XVI (1973).
accompanies her travellers to the Riviera as well as Paris, on winding train journeys as well as in Montreal.

This dislocated experience is contained in Gallant's narrating voices, whose position of apparent detachment and yet over-riding authority raises the problem of form itself. By inscribing shifts and breaks, confidence and betrayal, narrative will and anti-narrative contention this voice works to reveal but offers no solution. To quote Janice Kulyk Keefer:

\begin{quote}
_Gallant does not use language to evade or rage against the fact that human life is at the same time an experience of time-the watch that ticks on and on-and an expression of closure-the inevitable point at which our individual 'story' runs down while the clock ticks on. Rather, she admits this state of affairs and asserts it through the very shape and style of her fiction._\end{quote}

Within this form of story her characters are destined to occupy space rather than to act within it. They are not only ineffectual as agents of their own destiny, but are accorded very little narrative space in which to record their presence. By denying her characters access to direct voice the narrator refuses them self-determination. Thus relieved of intent and purpose they serve more to underscore the multiple codes governing their existence than to convince in their own right. These codes are both the stultifying ones of tradition and social necessity represented in the stories, and the codes of fictional convention. For the inconsistency of the represented world which foregrounds the artificial structure thus reveals the artifice of

---

1 Janice Kulyk Keefer, _Reading Mavis Gallant_ (Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 1989), 59.
fiction. The question of narrative voice becomes then, as in much post-colonial fiction, the cross-roads of two realities; the text's and ours, no longer sharply defined. The disbelief anchored at the core of her narratives is the final cause of narrators who frustrate our will as readers to be guided and reassured; in sum to be 'centred' within the comfort of her vocal management. Whilst Mavis Gallant uses a poetics of temporal cohesion within her stories, for the narratives move through a clearly-defined chronology towards closure, the meanderings of the narrator present a subtext of defiance to such closure. Her way of suspending time, calling a halt on meaning itself, both within the minds of her characters and within the 'significant' moment which is a hall-mark of Gallant's method, also imposes the immediacy of voice over historical continuity. For if it is the narrator who creates continuity, it is the same who slides in and out of the characters' psyches, blending her voice with theirs. This defusing of the characters' capacity to think, speak and move through their own individual time, renders them as static zones of consciousness through which we hear above all, the echo of voice coming from outside their control. Positing the stance of objective bystander the narrator does not plunge us into the figural consciousness by a psychological commentary which could establish depth. She rather violates their identity by permeation, establishing a network of conflicting perspectives from behind their facade. Narratorial commentary thus becomes a way of precluding insight whilst feigning to deliver it. Masking the transition between figural thoughts and narrative focus this manipulation of voice produces what Dorrit Cohn calls the seamless junction between narrated monologues and their
narrative context.\textsuperscript{1} (‘Narrated monologues’ are for Cohn the specifically non-verbal rendering of the mental workings of a character's mind through the narrator in free indirect style. This she opposes to free indirect speech which translates, through the narrator, a character's spoken discourse.) As she says, the narrated monologue implies a whole realm of consciousness of which only a small part is open to the reader. In Gallant's work the narrator's frequent forays into non-verbalized spaces of consciousness, as she entwines her narrative thread with that of a character's thoughts, reveals the frequent use of this technique. It serves to highlight the way the characters do not accede to autonomous expression. The relation between thought and speech remains problematical, as does the definition of the source of voice. It confers a twilight quality on the narration, suspended on the brink of verbalization and forefronting the illimited zone of consciousness beyond.

In the light of voice and perspective, of multiple and singular, the story "Voices Lost in Snow" is exemplary. The narrative is one of the Linnet Muir cycle; first-person accounts of childhood set in Montreal. The first passage of this story reveals the extent of discontinuity between voices of the past and those of the present:

\begin{quote}
Halfway between our two great wars, parents whose own early years had been shaped with Edwardian firmness were apt to lend a tone of finality to quite simple remarks: 'Because I say so' was the answer to 'Why?' and a child's
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{1} For a theoretical analysis of the relation between voice and figural consciousness see Dorrit Cohn, \textit{Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978).
response to 'What did I just tell you?' could seldom be anything but 'Not to' - not to say, do, touch, remove, ... Dark riddles filled the corners of life because no enlightenment was thought required. Asking questions was 'being tiresome', while persistent curiosity got one nowhere, at least nowhere of interest. How much has changed? Observe the drift of words descending from adult to child - the fall of personal questions, observations, unnecessary instructions. Before long the listener seems blanketed. He must hear the voice as authority muffled, a hum through snow. The tone has changed - it may be coaxing, even plaintive - but the words have barely altered. They still claim the ancient right-of-way through a young life. ¹

This opening to the story begins in the didactic mode of an observer of a socio/cultural state of affairs. We the readers are addressed to witness and take heed of elements presented with the authority of a disinterested yet knowledgeable voice of her time. From behind this voice relating the generation gap and its problems, is the voice of the implicated narrator, the adult experienced subject to her own inexperienced childhood. This subjective interest appears with: not to say, do, touch, remove and so on. The focus has deepened, the voice has changed, we are no longer in the domain of the general but the particular. The register has altered with the injection of emotive response. Yet ambivalence reigns, for the indirect way of transposing the speech act creates a focus centred on the very act of telling as the adult voice of the past reverberates through the consciousness of the child listening, and reaches us intact through the channel of

¹ Mavis Gallant, "Voices lost in Snow" in Home Truths (Toronto: Macmillan, 1987), 282. All further references are in the text of the thesis.
the narrator. At such moments where memory imposes on narration the temporality of 'now' dissolves. Chronology, for all that it is clearly defined, collapses into the fundamental issue of identity, and the question of resolving the past in the present. Source and direction are baffled in the process as the slide from an impersonal narration to a particular experience ends in this multiple focus. Just as our sympathy is aroused by the dark riddles of the past which we equate with the narrator's former experience, the subsequent use of the impersonal one would take us back to the arena of collective experience with the automatic distancing this implies. It is at this juncture that the focus shifts from past experience to us, the readers, for the narrator ask us directly: How much has changed? Yet instead of an insight into the narrator's present situation our focus is directed to an imagistic sequence of voices drifting and falling like snow. The attraction of metaphor works to deliver the language from its realistic premises; we are caught in the atemporal image of the snow-drift, and simultaneously in the flow of social commentary. Once again the voice of subjective experience is decentered; we as listeners are drawn into the scene of this suspended language which seems to include us as the audience which is blanketed.¹

Thus from one sentence to the next we register split-levels of discourse, indefinite and multiple focusing which freezes the

¹For a reading of the relation between image and reader in the short story see Clare Hanson, ed. "A Poetics of Short Fiction" in Re-Reading the Short Story (London: Macmillan, 1989).
narration in the very act of giving voice. Not knowing where to locate the narrator's sympathy and challenged by narration caught in its network of opposing terms, we are left suspended at the scene of the conflict.

In Gallant's stories paragraphs end on notes of incomprehension suggesting incompleteness, and these breaks in understanding signal self-division in the narrative, or otherwise they end in a 'home truth' as a comment which ends and dismisses a particular chapter of understanding. This also encloses the passage and implies a limit. "Voices Lost in Snow" draws attention to rifts and breaks in continuity in this way:

As soon as I was old enough to understand from my reading of myths and legends that this journey was a pursuit of darkness, its terminal point a sunless underworld, the dream vanished. (284)

I don't know where my father spent his waking life: just elsewhere. (285)

...she was the daughter of such a sensible, truthful, pessimistic woman - pessimistic in the way women become when they settle for what actually exists. (286)

I had no means of knowing that 'city' one day would also mean drab, filthy, flat, or that city blocks could turn into dull squares without mystery. (292)

These foreclosures seem to preclude narrative continuity; they are always marking limits on what can or will be said or understood. Just as voices are destined to be lost, they are only retrieved in patchwork recollection or relived event, theirs are the only authentic voices Linnet possesses.

This would seem to be the thematized avowal of a central issue in Mavis Gallant's stories. They are concerned with voice just as they concerned with the absence of a voice adequate to the task of voicing this concern. The issue becomes one of 'how' or 'where'
to locate voice rather than 'what' to tell. As such they participate in the quest for language and narrative (which) coexists with the narrative of quest as a Canadian phenomena. As Lorna Irvine says further:

_Mavis Gallant pits loss against narrative sequence, showing how the ego struggles to master plot._

This loss at the centre is reflected in the narrator's self-effacement from the centre of her story which requires a simulation of absence. Within the finely-constructed convention of an absence of narrative authority, the narrator's voice is opaque. It comes to us as emotionless and guarded, screening and draining the fictional world of colour. Her role is not to draw us towards a 'centre', be it psychological discovery, or even a 'centre' divined through suggestion and hiatus. Gaps are not covering solutions or complete knowledge, or pointing to a truth beyond, but they do suggest the potentiality of voice, just as they register its failure to sound out.

"Virus X", a third-person narration in _Home Truths_ articulates this absence of voice as the historical and cultural absence of meaning for two Canadian girls Lottie and Vera as they meet across the class and culture divide in Paris. Vera has been shipped abroad after an unwanted pregnancy, and is trapped in a rootless life-style of no return and little future. Lottie has come over on a scholarship towards a doctoral thesis on the assimilation of ethnic minorities in society. Rapidly her cultural

---

1 Lorna Irvine, "Starting from the Beginning Every Time" in _AMazing Space_, 249.
certainties begin to fall apart as she is subjected to the pull and sway of Vera-induced bohemia. She gradually becomes aware, through the shattering of her neat, academic 'assimilation' theory, of her own German roots and their importance. Vera comes from a Ukranian background and knows at first-hand what being an undesirable immigrant means.

It is the meeting of these opposed attitudes and expectations shown through shifting and split foci that is interesting. One example is the scene in a restaurant in Paris where Lottie meets Vera for the first time since they were at school together in Canada:

'Une jeune fille très elegante', the frizzy redhead down at the desk remarked. Lottie had to smile at that. No one here could know that Vera was only a girl from Winnipeg who had flunked out of high school and, on a suspicion of pregnancy, been shipped abroad to an exile without glamour. Some of the men in her family called themselves Rodney, and at least one was in politics. End syllables had been dropped from the name in any case, to make it less specifically Ukranian ...

Vera had made falsies out of a bra and gym socks - there were boys could vouch for it. In cooking class it turned out that she thought creamed carrots were made with real cream. She didn't know what white sauce was because they had never eaten it at home. That spoke volumes for the sort of home it must be.¹

An ironic shift in appraisal leads us into Lottie's thoughts, but once again the voice of social disapprobation colludes with what we could take to be Lottie's reflections. Vera's affairs are the

¹) Mavis Gallant, "Virus X" in Home Truths,176.
object of smalltown gossip which we divine through the murmurs of a scandalized community. Yet it is an impartial narrator who describes Vera until: Vera had make falsies out of a bra and gym socks - there were boys could vouch for it projects us into the realm of schoolgirl gossip. It would seem to take us back into the past, into the whisper confidences of the prim Lottie. Finally we have the crashing denunciation of the whole of Vera's family in their ignorance of creamed carrots. They are dismissed to the margins of Canadian society by the self-righteous voice of the town, which in fact implies a dialogue. One between a perplexed Vera and the cooking instructor as the former justifies not knowing how to make white sauce. Cultural prejudice, the plural voice of the town wielding singular authority, and the personal rendering of experience are channeled across rifts in understanding. Lottie and Vera appear to be positioned at opposing poles of Canadian experience, addressing each other in codes of mutual misunderstanding. Yet one of the strengths of this story is the way Lottie's heritage reveals itself as 'flawed' as Vera's, just as her knowledge of this past gradually surfaces from repression. The narrative's preoccupation with identity and origins is evident in a passage in which Vera describes Al, a Polish boyfriend who should be joining her in Strasburg:

Lottie looked at a round face and enormous dark eyes with fixed staring pupils. He seemed drugged or startled. 'His

---

eyes are blue', said Vera. 'They look dark with that fancy lighting. I've been out to the refugee college, asking around. He's got it all wrong. It's only a dorm. They go to the university for classes. It sounded funny in the first place, teaching Slav lit to Slavs. Maybe he's found something else to do. Or not to do, more like it. He's got in with some Poles who live outside Paris and do weaving. They may also have prayer and patriotic evenings. Right Wing Bohemia', said Vera, looking down her large nose, 'lives in the country and weaves its own skirts. You know.' Over Lottie's cringing mind crept the fear that Vera might be some sort of radical. Ukranians were extreme one way or the other. You would have to know which of the Uke papers Vera's parents subscribed to, and even that wouldn't help unless you could read the language. 'Get this', said Vera, and, adopting a manner Lottie assumed must be Al's, she read aloud, 'You cannot imagine what a change it is for me - yesterday 'le grand luxe' in Roma, today here. But I must say, even though I have the palate of a gourmet, I find nothing wrong with the cooking'.

The world evoked here spans five cultures from Slav Lit. to Polish weaving in Paris, through Ukranian politics to Canadian ideology. It ends on a foray through Italian tastes in luxury to Parisian tastes in cooking. This multi-layered discourse is refracted through the prism of Lottie's cliché-ridden ideas, just as the absent Pole Al is interpreted through Vera. The languages and cultures hold no weight, are not elaborated upon as part of a coherent fictional reality. They represent arbitrary markers on a map of Paris, as much part of the landscape as the gastronomical restaurants. Through Vera and Lottie they interact within a

1 "Virus X", 201/2.
Canadian reality, they are 'set' in Paris as it were, and resound within the world of the two girls, participating in their conflicts of views. Lottie has adhered to a Canadian, even if small-minded and bigoted, sense of self. She has done so at the expense of a repressed German heritage. Vera has turned her back on the possibility of a sense of self within her Ukrainian-Canadian context. Vera can assimilate in any surroundings except her own, Lottie has to actively refuse all other space but the narrow path carved out at home. Voices of the past are lost or they impede progress, creating discontinuity of vital understanding. Voices of the present reverberate with the echo of these lost references; they come to us the readers through narratives registering absence through presence. We register a will to speak displaced in the opaque, because effaced, narratorial presence. By refusing the 'centre', this voice is all the more apt to carry, influencing by subterfuge.

Voices of history in *The Pegnitz Junction*

*The Pegnitz Junction* is often set apart in the body of Gallant's fiction for its particular treatment of time and history. The collection evolved from Mavis Gallant's own need to discover the source of fascism, not as a particularly German historical propensity but, as she puts it, *its small possibilities in people*.1 The rubble and disaster of war are in this collection the explicit historical consciousness to which the narratives refer. This

---

1 Geoff Hancock, "Interview with Mavis Gallant" in *Canadian Writers at Work* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987), 100.
provides, within *The shambles of civilization, of history itself, that supposedly linear progression of intelligible cause and proportionate effect*¹ the backdrop of the annihilation and implosion of values that surfaces as a historical blank in her other collections.

Here the source of voice, and the discontinuous pattern of memory are accommodated in the mirror image of the war as a historical discontinuity, a destruction of our modes of self-representation. The distortion of memory, its omissions and repressions, find a palpable ground for exposition in *The Pegnitz Junction*. The collective German memory is at stake, backgrounding the characters' individual grappling with their past.

The title story is the only one in which Gallant employs an overtly post-modernist narrative frame, through which consciousness itself becomes a fluid medium.² It opens with a scene in a hotel room in Paris where Christine, a young German woman who is engaged to a theology student, has just spent a week's holiday with her divorced lover Herbert and his son little Bert. The already floundering holiday ends in catastrophe when the threesome are expelled from the hotel by the Germanophobe porter, and, because of an airport strike, are forced to go home by train. The plot traces the stages of their journey from Paris to the Pegnitz Junction where, the reader surmises, the couple will go their separate ways.

---

¹ *Reading Mavis Gallant*, 159.
² See *Reading Mavis Gallant*, chapter 6.
So thematically the voyage can be seen as a metaphor for life, in this case one in which communication lags and missed connections run apace with those that beset the journey itself. It is also a symbolic reworking of the past by traversing the plains of German history, and this cultural conscience finds voice in several episodes which question Germany's liberal progressive solutions to their dilemma of identity. This paradigm of itinerary of the personal and collective kind is harnessed to time as a structuring property, defining choice and direction. A causal agent which is mirrored in the train journey as a temporal vehicle; a microcosmic register of beginnings and endings, of stops and starts and of unrelenting motion. Within this frame of the journey as a metaphor of time itself, the narrative opens up to multiple chronology through Christine who acts as a vector for the other passengers' 'mind' narratives. These forays into the zones of internal processes commence on a note of discord between Christine and Herbert's respective perceptions of reality. This triggers *fabulations*;¹ lifestories or episodes presented as if they are called up involuntarily by Christine, reaching us through her consciousness, apparently unmediated by subjective motivation:

*Trying not to smoke, Herbert folded his hands and said he was an engineer. He described a method of clearing waste from rivers which consisted of causing an infinite number of tiny bubbles to rise from the bottom of the waters, each little bubble gathering and bearing upwards a particle of*

---

poisonous trash, which could then be raked off at the top. Herbert's information stopped there.

... Christine thought that she knew what 'information' truly was, and had known for some time. She could see it plainly, in fact; it consisted of fine silver crystals forming a pattern, dancing, separating, dissolving in a glittering trail along the window. The crystals flowed swiftly, faster than smoke, more beautiful and less durable than snowflakes. The woman in the corner said 'Chck chck', admiring Herbert's method, and unfolded a new shopping bag labelled YOUR BEAUTICIAN HAS THE ANSWERS.

It was from the woman that the silvery crystals took their substance; she was the source; 'It started this way', Christine understood. She looked carefully at the woman who was creating information, all the while peeling paper stuck to a cream bun. She licked her fingers before taking the first bite. 'This was the beginning. Two first cousins from Muggendorf married two first cousins from Doos. Emigrated to the U.S.A. all four together.' ¹ [My single quotes here indicate italics in the text].

If Herbert's water purification system is metaphorically positing the past as a controlled system of dismissal, Christine sees the flow of time as erratic and fugitive, dependent for coherence on the moment seized and revealed within a pattern of experience. His information is the laboratory of controlled experiment, hers is the free play of stories in the mind. The old German lady's life as an emigré in the United States before and during the war, and her subsequent return to Germany, is related in the first person, but it is an unknowing 'I', a narrator drained of subjective intention and motivation. It is unclear in the story whether

Christine is imagining scenarios around her fellow passengers, or whether narrative is literally seeping out of them in a voice freed of the constraints of aligning them to a central unified viewpoint. These intra-conscious projections read like direct speech, with a vocal quality which owes nothing to the monological meanderings of a mind which the reader is supposed to be capturing unaware, tuned in to itself. Rather the contrary. Their chronology is not the fragmented pulsing of introspection but the ordered flow of dates and times which seem all the more concrete for the use of historical event which colludes with the reader's own references.¹ To whom are these spoken narratives directed? If Christine translates them on the level of plot it is not her voice that is heard but that of a disembodied source. This has the effect of establishing different levels and tones of voice within the text and the disembodied quality plunges the narrative into 'uncannyness' - the surfacing of familiar yet unfamiliar elements for interpretation. In the case of "The Pegnitz Junction", as Heather Murray points out, the whole story is a case study in uncannyness as the plot is folded into the ghostly consciousness of the entire German population. 'Reading' is here inevitably travelling through inexplicit strands of repressed history.² Throughout the story Gallant uses a favourite technique of 'floating' the focus of speech acts, in which an

² For a discussion of the 'uncanny' in Mavis Gallant's writing see "Its Image on the Mirror": Canada", 102-30.
apparently external narrator reveals himself to be the mouthpiece for Christine's internal voice.

As in a passage when a ticket inspector passes through the carriages:

'No standing in first class!' This voice, growing louder and nearer, was so comically Bavarian that even the two adults had to laugh, though more discreetly than the children, who were simply doubled over. The voice was very like Herbert's, imitating a celebrated Bavarian politician addressing a congress of peasants. But Herbert was not unexpectedly being funny out there in the corridor, and the voice belonged to the conductor, now seen for the first time. He stumbled along saying 'No standing,' quite hopelessly, not really expecting anyone to obey, for who could possibly be afraid of such a jolly little person? He was only repeating something out of a tiresome rules book, and the children knew it. (20/1)

This is the *hic and nunc* of the story-line in which the faltering threads of communication between the couple and the child are pitted against different modes of self-questioning and reflection which, even if not addressed directly to us, imply our presence as the ear closest to the narration. Thus we have the paradox of sub-texts which have all the trappings of documentary realism in which the sequence of events is paramount to its coherence, and in which order is an uninterrupted movement of regular chronology, whilst the present is shown to be all hesitation and indecision. In the case of the old German woman sitting opposite Christine, her identity is defined by the lists of meals cooked and consumed, signalling the changes in life-style in a country of exile, and her estranged status is the element that forges links with the other life-stories:

*I cooked around seventeen thousand suppers, all told.*

*Never a disagreement. Never an angry word. Nothing but*
good food and family loyalty. I cooked fresh chicken soup, pea soup with bacon, my own goulash soup, hot beer soup, soup with dumplings, soup with rice, soup with noodles, prepared my own cabbage in brine, made fresh celery salad, potato salad our way,... (24) [ In italics in the text].

Thus we are told with irony, although time goes on, the voices of those who are unable to break through the screen of the war period are left steadily retreating. The very rupture imposed by the narrative form employed in this story, relegates the characters to an immobile ghost territory severed from the present.

On the level of 'real' time, that of the present of the narration, lapses and gaps, intermittent strokes of the narrative clock contrast with the overt pacing and tightly-knit workings of the other-worldly temporalities. The three main characters are embarked on a journey in which they are subject to disruption, their itinerary rendered chaotic and themselves the passive victims of unscheduled changes. The surprises along their route are all unpleasant ones, in which the exigencies of reality run counter to their good intentions. Herbert's exacerbated sense of truth proves inadequate in a situation ruled by chance and opportunity, and little Bert becomes progressively absorbed in his own fantasy land constructed around a sponge called Bruno.

On the level of the narrative thread of time it is precisely the couple's inability to produce 'story' material together that opens these gaps to the invading forces of information from other lives and other times. Unable to feed into history and the past they are assailed by the ghosts of this past which are encoded as 'interference':
'I do love you', she said. 'But there has been too much interference.'
'What, poor little Bert?'
No, she had not meant interference of that kind. (45)

As the narrative advances, bringing with it the failed continuum of the couple's personal sequence, so their fissured narrative present is intruded upon and interfered with. So, increasingly, Christine declares herself on the fault-line between her own destiny and a reflector mirroring a historical breach; the dark curtain of the war drawn across the past.¹ Yet she is also capable of fabulating, veering into an indeterminate area of meaning that evades realism. One such instance is when, watching the countryside speeding past, she takes the reader into a gothic tale of Uncle Ludwig and his henchman Jurgen on a visit to a castle with an eccentric family party. The imaginary plot which covers three generation in narrated time in fact only covers a moment in narration time. For the passage begins:

To escape the Norwegian's staring, Christine went out to the corridor and stood with her arms resting on the lowered window. She could see a road, a low wall, and a private park filled with shade trees sloping up to a small mock-Gothic castle built of reddish stone. (27)

Six pages later the story ends, the gangster Jurgen is stabbed and we rejoin the 'real' world with:

¹ The cultural amnesia affecting the relation of past to present is a source of the temporal disjunction found in Gallant's stories. The author has commented on the way Western culture's lack of interest in the cause of fascism motivated her trip to Germany after the war, to conduct a kind of personal research.

Canadian Writers at Work, 98.
The train trembled and skid round a curve, out of sight of the dappled lawn and the people climbing slowly up to the castle, on their last excursion together. (34)

It is obvious that in fact only a few minutes have elapsed between Christine seeing the castle and it disappearing out of sight, yet the moments in between are elastic, expanding into dynasties and shrinking again to minutes when temporal order is reinstated. Thus what constitutes a moment of narrating time gives way to an expanded chronology of story like a fissure opened in the bedrock of the present, revealing worlds underneath like a mirage, and then closing again as if they had never been. The texts within a text which compose "The Pegnitz Junction" are not moments from a life which reveal a signifying episode of that life, but voices from the past which Gallant's technique has raised, unmediated, into the present. It would seem logical to see "The Pegnitz Junction" as a social comment on the inability of modern life to provide meaningful frames of reference based on the lessons of the past. But we could also call it a story about and around story-telling, in which the narratives which plunder the space of Christine's narrative not only prevent her from speech but propel her towards the junction where she does, in the end find the beginning of the continuation of the story begun before.

**Representation and Narrative in Overhead in a Balloon**

Unlike the nostalgia of Canada in the 'fifties of Home Truths or the interplay of history and memory in the Pegnitz Junction stories, the collection Overhead in a Balloon is concerned with Paris and the Parisians; in particular the fate of a gallery-owner
Sandor Speck and his assistant Walter. Belonging to her later fiction, these are stories where the continuum of time as a cultural and individual consciousness is disregarded. The characters in these stories are meticulously detailed in their foibles and habits whilst the past is represented in its institutionalized forms— the Church, Art, and Politics—which are also catalogued according to type and practice. These stories read as interpretations, in that the very trappings of our society are presented as codes; closed circuits of communication cut off from the roots of personal or collective memory. To cite Bernice Shrank:

Gallant is particularly interested in exploring the ways by which modern technology and popular culture collaborate in shaping the individual sensibility, often in the direction of social conformity and political quietism. Thus, in studying the foibles of unfocused, unhappy, or unhinged characters, Gallant also investigates some of the machinery of social control, what Gallant has referred to in another context as the authoritarian potential inherent in contemporary life.

One of the ways this authoritarian tendency is manifested in our over-riding need to represent the world to ourselves, to master it through these very institutions. Religion and Art, the Media and Politics are the mirrors we use to stabilize, and, Gallant would seem to posit, to invent our world. The two stories "Overhead in a Balloon", and "Speck's Idea" involve the characters in this need to represent and ties them up in the crisis of their own representation.

1 Bernice Shrank, "Popular Culture and Political Consciousness in Mavis Gallant's My Heart is Broken" in Essays on Canadian Writing, 42, 58.
"Overhead in a Balloon" is set in Paris and concerns Walter, a disgruntled Art gallery assistant who hopes to escape his job, his boss whom he calls Troutface, and his dreary lot in general, when he encounters Aymeric. Aymeric is a painter on the decline who lives in his family's apartments near the Luxembourg gardens, flats they have occupied forever. The plot develops in and around this centralized space, where the different characters are caught in a flux of time passing but where nothing changes.

Walter's main preoccupation seems to be how to give up his job, and worrying about being kicked out of the flat he has rented in the family apartments. Robert, Aymeric's cousin, spends most of his time dividing and sub-dividing this family space.

"Overhead in a Balloon" is concerned with the way in which forms and modes are a method of narration. The detached narrator and his shifting view-point mean that the reader has no unified view, either moral or psychological, with which he can identify. This lack of narratorial support for the characters which leaves them 'floating' corresponds to the thematic development of their lives as ones which lack firm support. The actors which people the story are all caught up in their own personal identity crisis. So the paradox of the narrative method in the story is that in withdrawing the narrator's authority the reader is all the more conscious of his necessity as a structural mainstay of the narrative process. This is one of the ways in which the narrative is self-conscious, drawing attention to its own form and status as fiction. The second way is linked to the spatio-temporal conventions of the narrative. For if the characters are given no adequate development, and the narrator shows no adequate responsibility within the story, it remains a highly realistic
fictional frame. This is because Gallant leans heavily on the temporal and spatial mechanisms of representation itself to lend credibility to the universe she creates. The concept of space is both a theme in the story, (for the characters are constantly dividing and re-dividing their flat), and a form which encodes representation. Paintings, engravings, and material objects which are studied in detail, and constantly shifted around, make up a universe in which chronology is present, but is devoured by its context.

The second paragraph begins with the narrator describing Aymeric through the description of his pictorial representations:

*Painting portraits on commission had seen Aymeric through the sunnier decades, but there were fewer clients now, at least in Europe. After a brief late flowering of Moroccan princes and Pakistani generals, he had given up. Now he painted country houses. Usually he showed the front with the white shutters and all the ivy, and a stretch of lawn with white chairs and a teapot and cups, and some scattered pages of 'Le Figaro' - the only newspaper, often the only anything, his patrons read. He had a hairline touch and could reproduce 'Le Figaro's social calendar, in which he cleverly embedded his client's name and his own. Some patrons kept a large magnifying glass on a table under the picture, so that guests, peering respectfully, could appreciate their host's permanent place in art. 1*

This process of *mise en abîme,* 2 predominates in Gallant's stories of the art world. In this passage the painter and client are both

---


inside and outside the picture, and the boundary which separates this inside and outside is presented as the differentiation between artifice and reality. Further on in the narrative, questions of space are thematically the centre of debate:

Robert, [Aymeric's] cousin owned much of the space. It was space one carved up, doled out anew, remodelled; it was space on which one was taxed ... Over the years, as so many single, forsaken adults had tried to construct something nestlike, cushioning, clusters of small living quarters had evolved, almost naturally, like clusters of coral. All the apartments connected; one could walk from end to end of the floor without having to step out to a landing. They never locked their doors. Members of the same family do not steal from one another, and they have nothing to hide. Aymeric said this almost sternly. Robert's wife had died, he added, just as Walter opened his mouth to ask. Death was the same thing as desertion.(53)

This environment is the family's space of memory, for their past and present revolve in and around the dividing and redividing of their living quarters. The individual members of the family each have their own territory, and the boundaries are clearly marked out. At the same time their cellular existence, their lack of clear personal identification by the narrator, and the way they submit to the eternal demands of the space in which they live, promotes an image of fusion. Robert, Aymeric's cousin, escapes the flat plane of his existence by floating in an balloon which resembles the hermetic world of the apartments. But in this bubble he metaphorically loses touch with the ground. Walter, on the other hand, is thoroughly grounded in Calvinistic dogma, unable to find
a metaphysical solution to life and reluctant to take psychoanalysis as the answer. Whereas he is tied to cumbersome sentiments and unreliable loyalties Robert, Aymeric, and his aunt live in a self-involved vacuum. Within this family constellation the aunt, in her role as the maternal figure and historical source, sows havoc in any semblance of rational order. She roams the house at night displacing some objects and hiding others, and acts as a figure of jumbled memory within the family history. Her irrational behaviour, and the way she trails chaos around the house, counters the extreme realism of the narrative development. The objects in her wake which find themselves in strange places, seem to possess the narrative dimensions that the characters lack; they have contours and depth, the capacity to surprise and mystify by their caprices, and the way they subvert order within the household. The mother-figure who commands them from within the unconscious realms of sleep is at the head of an army of unspoken messages which cannot reach the surface of the narration in another way. She serves as an imaginative escape from the narrative's deadlock of horizontal manoeuvers. For if the characters in the story are left in isolated 'balloons' of existence, lacking a source of meaning to make sense of their lives, the narrative form suffers from the same dilemma of interpretation. The search for a space above is also the narrative's quest to escape its spare, realistic form through its constant working of that form. As the narrator tells us:

Walter could see them overhead, St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, drifting and swaying. He had no wish to ascend in a balloon. He had seen enough balloons in engravings. Virtually anything portrayed as art turned his
stomach. There was hardly anything he could look at without feeling sick. (66)

Towards the end of the story Robert tells of his forthcoming marriage:

Robert said only that his first marriage had been so happy that he could hardly wait to start over. The others sat staring at him. Walter had a crazy idea, which he kept to himself: Would Robert get married overhead in a balloon? 'I am happy', Robert said, once or twice. Walter fixed his eyes on the bright, silent screen. (67)

The rapid shifts in focus from one character to the other present a filmic, scanning aspect which is analogous to the episode of Dallas the family have been watching. The narration produces the effect of moving pictures without sound, mirroring the ones the family are watching on the bright silent screen. The words are there but meaning is absent and we have the feeling that a vital contact has been broken between meaning and its expression; that what is said and heard only serves to draw attention to a failure in communication.

Just as "Overhead in a Balloon" articulates the characters' crisis of being through the French institutions of cultural heritage (property ownership being a very important part of this heritage), "Speck's Idea" attacks the problem of representation through the bias of the art world and history, and their interlocking systems of perceptions.

The late Hubert Cruche, a French painter in the story, is an idea in Sandor Speck's mind. As the narrative progresses he will be subjected to the same dilemma of representation he presumably wrestled with as a painter. The difference is that now he is the representative object, received in the narrative on the same hierarchical level as his 'oeuvre', historically bound to his
painterly act of apprehending and framing reality. Sandor Speck is bent on finding, not the artistic consciousness of anonymous masterpieces, but the figure of a historical question locatable at the centre of his inspired catalogues. Documents which profile the coming 'happening' in Speck's gallery, read this historical blank as follows:

'Born in France, worked in Paris, went his own way, unmindful of fashion, knowing his hour would strike, his vision be vindicated. Catholic, as this retrospective so eloquently... 'Just how does 'catholic' come in, Speck wondered, forking up raw carrots. Because of ubiquity, the ubiquity of genius? No; not genius- leave that for the critics. His sense of harmony, then-his discretion.

Easy, Speck told himself. Easy on the discretion. this isn't interior decoration. ¹

Not only is this structure of an artistic happening designed to wrest Speck from the jaws of ever-pressing creditors, but it is intimately linked with the malaise of the French population at large, targeted to satisfy an ideological crisis of the nation's self-image. Hubert Cruche and his work will therefore, in true rhetorical fashion, usher in a new era of civilisation to a Europe in need of a renewed self-representation. For the bigger question to which Speck ostensibly has found the answer, even if the answer is so far the 'form' awaiting the secondary ontological 'content', was si(gh)ted by him in Le Monde newspaper as:

*Redemption Through Art-Last Hope for the West?*

¹ "Speck's Idea" in Overhead, 8. All further page references are in the text of the thesis.
This journalistic question had been followed by others, of an equally disturbing nature:

*Must the flowering gardens of Western European culture wilt and die along with the decadent political systems, the exhausted parliaments, the shambling elections, ...? What of the man in the street, too modest and confused to mention his cravings? Was he not gasping for one remedy and one only-artistic renovation?* (8)

The quest Speck has set himself is therefore a critical one. French Culture is in danger of disappearing in the crack of its own failing modes of representation; the individual 'I' disbelieving the collective 'we', and the wager Speck takes up is to provide the ultimate solution - a subject scripted into his own historical narrative, which discourse, structured and mediated by Speck himself, will minister to the common good in a semblance of transparent artistry.

Speck's world, the one in which the artist will surface as a historical text arranged and annotated, is manifestly a post-structuralist one; an 'already written' text of constant interpretation and deferral of closure. In this case the artist in absentia, embedded in his fluctuating biography, subjected to the erasures and digressions of Speck's pen, is the point at which meaning will be arrested. He is sited in the frame of Speck's particular arrangement of time and event, but it is a provisional one only, subject to reinterpretation.

In the mean-time Sandor Speck is left with the problem, not of the unsigned painting, but the unsigned life, the missing consciousness to fit to the discourse. For as he ponders:

*Whose time? Which hour? Yes-whose, which, what? That was where he was stuck.* (11)
Whereas Speck is finding the body to fit the structure, the painter to suit the cultural canvas which, in postmodern terms, will already have been painted by the multiple determinants of the time, Walter, his gallery assistant, is searching for metaphysical sustenance. This he finds in the figure of St. Joseph at the church St. Clotilde, having been expertly guided and oft restrained by Speck himself, who, having been obliged to pluck his assistant out of Unitarian waters had then towed him to transubstantiation and back. (5) The gallery owner prefers the Masonic Lodge, where more pragmatic concerns mould transcendence to meet the tastes of those not addicted to either devotion or penance. It is through the Lodge and its multiple contacts that he first hears of one portion of the Cruche collection, stacked in Senator Bellefeuille's ancestral residence, washed up from a brief epoch of notoriety. As the senator informs Speck he had:

*bought everything Hubert Cruche produced for sixteen years - the oils, the gouaches, the pastels, the watercolors, the etchings, the drawings, the woodcuts, the posters, the cartoons, the book illustrations. Everything.* (15/6)

Thus the figure of the artist in absentia is recovered on the surface of Speck's discourse. From absent presence, defined by the space of his position as a signalled but masked trace in the evolving biography that seeks him as its object, Cruche emerges as a named concrete body of work defining the end of Speck's quest.

However, the artist himself is relegated to the secondary slot of meaning; the place of the referent which hinges the sign to reality. For the story is concerned with finding the artist's palette as it were, the structure of his oeuvre in the right stage of
mediocrity which slots into the awaiting biographical frame; the cultural suit which will then be given a nip and a tuck by the crafty Speck. (Whose name, in turn, seems ideally suited to the task of 'spec'ulation.) Hubert Cruche is by this time a name to pin to an enterprise which has very little to do with an artist at work. As Speck rejoices on the way home, he once more revises the catalogue-to-be, pondering the providence that has sent Cruche his way:

Cruche, Cruche, Hubert Cruche, sang Speck's heart as he drove homeward. Cruche's hour had just struck, along with Sandor Speck's. At the core of the May-June retrospective would be his lodge brother's key collection: .... Recalling the little he knew of Cruche's obscure career, Speck make a few changes in the imaginary catalogue, substituting with some disappointment 'The Power Station at Gagny-sur-orme' for 'Misia Sert on Her House-boat,' and 'Peasant Woman Sorting Turnips' for 'Serge Lifar as Petrouchka'. He wondered if he could call Cruche heaven-sent. (16)

As such, when Speck re-'presents' him to the public eye the artist will represent that public eye; the mirror image mediated by the controlling voice of capitalist exchange alias Sandor Speck. But giving them what they want, or in other free market terms, convincing them that they want what you have to give, is not to prove a straightforward affair. For Cruche, even if he did seemingly appear providentially from nowhere, rising from a space sited between Speck's desires and the Senator's capital, a space that left Speck feeling as if he were on a distant shore, calling across deep cultural waters, will prove ever more elusive as the story continues. For the gates to the temple of culture are guarded by the artist's widow, repository of the major part of the collection, one of an infamous breed, the worst of which,
according to Speck's experience, *were those whose husbands had somehow managed the rough crossing to recognition only to become washed up at the wrong end of the beach. There the widow waited, guarding the wreckage.* (17)

It seems pertinent to digress for a moment, into the concept of the 'foreigner', the 'stranger', and by extension the 'uncanny' in Mavis Gallant's work, in order to relate it to "Speck's Idea". The critic Heather Murray sees Freud's theory on the presence of uncanniness as the passage of the unconscious in narrative, as directly relevant to a reading of Gallant's stories. As she says this applies to the 'landscape' of thematic elements which constantly tap the sources of the *return of the repressed* such as ghosts and memories, prescience and *déjà vu*, images of doubling, twinning, and splitting. ¹ These leave the reader in the simultaneous seizure of familiar and strange, known and unknown. But as Murray points out, this problem in the critical mastery of Gallant's work, lies also in the sense that the narrative mode creates a surplus that cannot be accounted for by the means critics commonly have available to them. ²

This generic escape which overflows attempts at hemeneutic containment, provides a looped reading through Gallant herself and back to the text again. As such she is:

*Canada's reversed and reversing image on the mirror- famous and anonymous, the visible double, the inner voice. 'Gallant' as*

---

¹ "'Its Image on the Mirror':Canada",115.
² "'Its Image on the Mirror': Canada",116.
she is constructed in literary discourse, is present through her absence and is suspiciously knowing. She is the stranger; she is the writer of those home truths that Freud has characterized as the uncanny.¹

To return to the story in hand, "Speck's Idea" does, in a typically Gallant way, signal an elsewhere, a heterogeneous supplement as the Joker's role in cards, turning up as extra or as substitute, unsettling the fixed image by profiling itself on the border of the story discourse itself and an Otherness; the site of the outsider. Speck's discovery of Cruche who, at the crux of the paradox exists because it has been necessary to invent [him] ², who is narratively placed on the border of history and Speck's imagination, yet also curiously masked by the widow, the collection and the rewriting, posits a space which is that of the outsider. Such a reading, looking from the outside in, as Gallant's tunnel-like voice always seems to do, discovers Cruche's embedded place in the story by surprise, overlapping to an astonishing degree the painter in the yellow notebook, where Speck had mapped out, and textually induced the artist's coming back from the past.

Yet Cruche the artist also recedes as he is discovered; buried under Speck's ever-transformatory pen, disguised in multiple description and caught on the financial considerations and the widow's religious dogma, which, from sequence to sequence, traces his presence just as he seems to recede further from view.

¹ "Its Image on the Mirror': Canada", 109.
² "Its Image on the Mirror': Canada", 126.
As such, Speck's distant shore, the cultural waters operating a divide and a splitting, the gap through which Cruche is both invented and returned on the wave of Speck's ingeniousness, rehearses the metaphorical position of the outsider within Gallant's own history; herself the metaphorically 'outside' Canadian writer.

When Lydia, the Cruche widow, is finally tracked down, she proves to be as opaque, as difficult to read, as her husband. A Canadian from Saskatchewan, displaced to a mundane suburb of Paris, the senator's description of her as an erstwhile stunning beauty with red-gold hair a tiny waist and a smile like a fox confronts the vision of a short and quite round woman whose distinguishing trait was the utter blankness of her expression.

The cultural gulf that yawns between them, retaining Speck on that distant shore as he apprehends, and tries to comprehend, her mode of being, sends him rushing back to the gallery where Walter is sent hotfoot to the atlas:

*Its austere oblong shape turned his heart to ice. Walter said that it was one of the right-angled territories that so frequently contain oil. Oil seemed to Speck to improve the oblong.* (23)

The silence of the gap between the two worlds is deafening.

Speck, whose *French education had left him the certainty that he was a logical, fair-minded person imbued with a culture from which every other Western nation was obliged to take its bearings*, (22) confronts Lydia who has lived in France for fifty years, doesn't speak French unless she has to, hasn't been into Paris for three years, and buys pizzas and maple syrup from the supermarket next door. His cultural, social and political assumptions, taken for granted as stable territory, fragment as
Lydia not only claims 'foreign' space within this territory, but stakes the coloniser's claim in complete disregard for her environment. The impossibility of mediating this deadlock, of gaining a grasp on Lydia who defies Speck's attempts at representation, is relieved when, hearing her speak French, he suddenly recognizes the sound of - silver bells. Everything about her had changed - voice, posture, expression. If he still could not see the Lydia Cruche of the Senator's vision, at least he could believe in her. (25/6)

Lydia will send Speck round in circles as her foreign cultural references escape his catalogues, whereas her husband slides between further annotations. When the gallery-owner has finally viewed the collection of paintings, we find that [his] conception of the show had been slightly altered, and for the better, by the total Cruche. He began to rewrite the catalogue notes ...(30) This, however, does not mark the represented arrival in Parisian reality of the known yet undiscovered Cruche. As Lydia ducks and swerves, standing in for the elusive artist, inscribing him glyphically in a language that Speck can only recognize in terms of what he misrecognizes, the Cruche show is first subjected to Japhethite interdiction on the graven image, (for Lydia is herself a Japhethite), and then is promised to an Italian who has managed a canny re-reading of the bible. Speck, hearing of Lydia's sell-out to Signor Vigorelli while driving back to Paris, promptly crashes into a tree in the Bois de Boulogne and returns to her suburbia:

Lydia did not seem at all surprised to see him. 'I'd invite you to supper,' she said. 'But all I've got is a tiny pizza and some of the leftover cake.'

'The Italian,' said Speck.
'Yes?'
'I've heard him. On the radio. He says he's got Cruche. That he discovered him. My car is piled up in Boy. I tried to turn around and come back here.' ...
'Sit down,' said Lydia. 'There, on the sofa. Signor Vigorelli is having a big Cruche show in Milan next March.'
'He can't' said Speck.
'Why can't he?'
'Because Cruche is mine. He was my idea. No one can have my idea. Not until after June.' (40/1)

But Lydia, whose personality is always there where Speck is not ready to meet it, and always elsewhere when Speck tries confrontation, fragments and multiplies, crossing the borders of culture and understanding to lull him into a false security as the familiar tones ring out:

Speck sank back and closed his eyes. He could hear Lydia dialling; then she began to speak. He listened, exactly as Cruche must have listened, while Lydia, her voice full of silver bells, dealt with creditors and dealers and Cruche's cast-off girlfriends and a Senator Bellefeuille more than forty years younger (42)

This is the thread of continuity, the familiar map of French culture fitting into Speck's frames of reference, the voice upholding the idea of Cruche lodged in his mind but still eluding him. However Lydia is also the outsider, inhabiting the incomprehensible for Speck, apt to veer, as she does next, into that place off his particular map and into the zone of the topographical metaphor which best represents the dilemma:

He searched her face, as he had often, looking for irony, or playfulness- a gleam of light. There floated between them the cold oblong on the map and the Chirico chessboard moving along to its Arctic destination. Trees dwindled to shrubs and shrubs to moss and moss to nothing. Speck had been defeated by a landscape. (43)
To be defeated by a landscape seems a particularly Canadian dilemma, and the irresolvable personality of the widow, always evading categorization, articulates the duality and mutual incompatibility of French/English forms of knowledge. At the end of the story Lydia will metaphorically return from this landscape, just as Hubert Cruche will finally become a visual reality in Speck's gallery. But the last draft of the notebook will read, not as a manifesto to save France from the transatlantic blight, its European purity from American hegemony, but the brief for a trans-Atlantic pact operating through the artist. So Cruche finds yet another representative form in the mind and manoeuvres of Speck, but this time he will be Speck's alone, framed in the eloquent prose of a recovered and reinvented life.
As Barbara Godard has pointed out, expatriation is a metaphor, not an unmediated reality. The reality of this metaphor is however, the opening of a gap in the sign nation/home which is the perceptual privilege of those who have stood outside the borders of the family/familiar culture. But because it is a metaphor, one can be in exile on home territory, and at home in a foreign land, or any number of different permutations. Mavis Gallant, because she lives at the centre of the paradox home/away perceives the gap between signifier 'nation' and signified 'home' and displaces the bearings of these concepts. In many of her stories this displacement rests on a trope of destruction linked to the war, in others the concept of history as home territory is displaced. Combined with these 'transit' stories; a fitting metaphor for the deferral of closure inferred in such a world-view, is a perfectly mastered discourse of the voice, the eye, the tone, through which the narrators of her stories script a world in which the characters play out a fiction of loss; the fact, according to Gallant herself, that in fiction something is taking place and that nothing lasts. What could be called an ongoing erasure is a part of the narrative process, taking place within the shifts and twists of her distinctive often tunnel-like voice. This trope of destruction is omnipresent, whether, as in her Linnet Muir cycle, memory is linked with childhood and a vision of

1) Barbara Godard "Modalities of the Edge Towards a Semiotics of Irony: The case of Mavis Gallant" in Essays on Canadian Writing, 42,76.
Montreal, or, as in other stories like "Malcolm and Bea" or "The Ice Wagon Going Down the Street", memory is linked to the experience of love. The characters who follow their own destinies under the sign of this pessimistic foreclosure are governed not by the language they speak, but the language which speaks through them, coming from an indeterminate elsewhere, referring their destiny to a determinism unresolved by the plot itself.

In this context, the story "April Fish" from In Transit. is particularly relevant. It is not one of her better-known stories, nor necessarily one of her best. It does, however, raise the problem of authorial voice, and narrativity in a particularly acute way. It is a text of which Kulyk Keefer says the mode of first person narration seems to radically interrupt our overhearing of the story,¹ and the character is a passive recorder of an already dealt hand. Both these factors contribute to the strange impression that it is a story suspended over an abyss; we ask ourselves from what space and to whom the narrative speaks.²

The narrative, four pages long, is virtually plotless, like a certain number of Gallant's stories. We, the readers, are projected into the birthday scene of a woman named April on her fifty-fifth birthday. This woman lives in Switzerland, has adopted several children of various nationalities, and wishes to adopt another, a Vietnamese child this time, although apparently she has absolutely no maternal feeling for those refugees already in her

¹ Reading Mavis Gallant, 63

² For a discussion on history and loss in "April Fish" see my "Mavis Gallant's In Transit-stories from the border" in BJCS, 6, 2 (1991), 313-18.
care. Touches like the Red-Cross blanket on the bed signal references to war and privation, personal and public suffering, but this all remains unelucidated, a kind of monolithic blank across the narrative. We, as readers, witness what amounts in narrated time to a few minutes of her reflections on her existence, (which appears, at least financially, to be a particularly privileged one). Within this scene the narrator seems to refer herself and her life to a giant collapse of meaning, which is reflected on the surface of the narrative as a collapse of language. Her adopted or foster children, in her words, all left behind by careless parents and picked up by a woman they call 'Maman', are caught on the cultural fault-line of humanitarian practices, ones which seem emptied of affective substance.

The narrator's attitude in fact erases the very principles of caring which we would normally take as the causal premises for her adoption of the children. Thus the assumption both of pathos and inherent goodness which we read into the drama of abandoned children finding a home, is turned on its head here. Indeed it is as though April herself has no idea why she is in charge of a group of displaced children. In the story she becomes as much an object of her own self-questioning as the children become the object of a double abandonment; that of their culture of origins, and of their causal trace in the discourse of the story itself. They are detached from the signifying structures of Western values and our fixed meanings, and are rejected beyond our comfortable ideas of historical continuity. It is as though the narrative throws up traces of their inscription in an Other space of reference, hazardous and unpredictable, one in which the idea of continuity is merely literary allegory.
As the story closes we are not at all aware of why the narrative event has occurred. The narrator herself is a voice cut off from a referential presence; the 'I' in circulation within the story does not refer back to an 'I' which we the readers can imagine, because of this fundamental lack of the narrator's own place in narrating time and in our own. Where does April come from? Why does she adopt children she despises? What is the meaning behind a narrative 'set' that places them in a historical no-man's-land, linked to April who appears to be herself a hostage; the Other of some partially apprehended cultural discourse. The causal lynch-pins on which the narrative is suspended in the absence of a plot is a dream, on which the narrative opens, and a letter from Sigmund Freud to a colleague which April's brother has sent her as a birthday present. Psychoanalytically, the space of a dream sequence is a condensed economy of displaced desire and wish-fulfillment. It is also a hermetically closed space, functioning outside the subject's conscious motivations. It functions like a text, but one in which the reconstruction of the narrative, and the re-emergence of the narrating voice is in the hands of the interpreter, the analyst. The dream represents a coded language, a secret discourse requiring a heuristic of reading.

April's dream refers to terror and loss and raises still more questions:

*I still have nightmares, but the kind of terror has changed.*

*In the hanging dream I am no longer the victim. Someone else is hanged. Last night, in one harrowing dream, one of my own adopted children drowned, there, outside the window, in the Lake of Geneva. I rushed about on the grass, among the swans. I felt dew on my bare feet; the hem of my velvet dressing gown was dark with it. ... My hair came*
loose and tumbled down my back. I can still feel the warmth and the comfort of it. It was auburn, leaf-colored, as it used to be. I think I saved Igor; ¹

More questions are posed by this dream. Why the recurrence of a death motif? Does it refer to a time of true victimisation; that of exile or war? None of this is elucidated. We only have the impression that the key to the narrator's persona is encapsulated in this associative economy, awaiting interpretation in order for it to become causal.

The second clue, the letter from Freud, is written in German and therefore April cannot read it. Yet it glyphically refers back to the question posed by the first dream code, for who better to interpret than Freud himself? However, both remain opaque to the narrative itself, for in the final analysis the plot can neither elucidate the letter nor the causality inhering in the dream. We can only refer the letter to the dream as a glyphic code, one which is blind to the eyes of April the reader, who instead launches into a graphological interpretation of Freud:

The writing paper is ugly and cheap - you all see that, do you? - which means that he was a miser, or poor, or lacked aesthetic feeling, or did not lend importance to worldly matters. The long pointed loops mean a strong sense of spiritual values, and the slope of the lines means a pessimistic nature. ... I am sorry to say that the signature denotes conceit. But he was a great man, quite right to be sure of himself. ²


² "April Fish", 29.
In "April Fish" the story is held together on the relation between beginning and end, the density of the dream as a submerged knowledge, and the opacity of the Freudian letter as an underground communication with the dream; an interpretation addressed to a suppressed area of knowledge. The multiple cultural voices signalled in the narrative seem themselves also to be glyphs of an underground code; they are addressed to an Other libidinal economy of desire, one which could reinstate a pattern of coherence in April's subjective motivations. Between April's adopted homeland Switzerland, bearable only for tax reasons, her past which belongs to an indefinite cultural space imagined as a nightmare, and the children denoting other times and places all over the world, the only pattern that emerges is that of 'displacement' itself. All of the characters in the story seem to function as signifiers, alienated from cultural roots and social practice. Their displacement appears as alterity, stretching out, in the gap of social and cultural disinheritance, to the shadow of history which emerges as a question across all of Gallant's texts.

The end of the story sees April erasing the traces of the fragile links tying her to the world of humanist values and closed meaning. For as she says of her children:

To tell the truth, I don't really want them. I don't even want the Freud letter. I wanted the little Vietnam girl. Yes, what I really want is a girl with beautiful manners, I have wanted her all my life, but no one will ever give me one.¹

¹ "April Fish", 30.
This is a fitting end to a strange story; one in which the whole narrative seems to stand over an irreparable flaw separating the individual from collective meaning. The narrative is worked on, and worked through by an agent of erasure, moving through the gaps of severed tradition and values and undermining realistic form. Not through disruption of sequence and event, but in a fundamental divorce of realism from the world views sustaining it. The edges of discourse that do not fit together in Gallant's work allow the emergence of a profound imaginative territorial loss, which is scripted in a matrix of crisis.

**Personal and Cultural disinheritance**

Thus alterity and textual erasure, as hall marks of cultural disinheritance, constitute the traces of eroded values and debased ideals separating the individual from the community voice as the couple nation/home break down in Gallant's fiction. Many of the stories in the collection *In Transit* situate this break-down on family territory where intimate tales of divorce, separation, and loss play out the vestiges of colonial culture. "The End of the World" is one such story, in which a Canadian, William Apostolesco, is summoned to a port in France where his father lies dying. The story begins curiously with an anecdote related by the narrator on a bill-board sign, presumably sighted in the United States, saying: *No Canadians.* The narrator then relates his father's desertion of the family during the last war, a brief meeting some time later, and then the final confrontation at his death-bed. The seedy old-fashioned hospital in France prompts the narrator to comment: *This is what a person gets for leaving*
home. Yet ironically, as the narrator also points out, this place where an alienated father has been left to die is the Europe which \textit{our grandfathers had been glad to get out of ... It took my father to go back}.\footnote{"The End of the World" in \textit{In Transit.},\footnote{Not included in 1988 edition}1. First published in the collection: \textit{The End of the World and Other Stories}, [1974]. All further references are in the text of the thesis.} The grief the father has come to is apparently the price to pay for leaving Canada; for leaving home. Yet the foreign territory he has gravitated to is nonetheless the familiar site of origins. The Europe of escape and separation is also the map of conquest, Empire and decline; the France of the story is, in the view of the first-person narrator, the crumbling post-war structure of economic disintegration. Yet its failing representation as an imperial centre, no longer writing its own destiny on the periphery, has nonetheless left traces - the \textit{No Canadians} anecdote makes sense in the light of a Eurocentric reflecting gaze. In such a gaze there would indeed be no Canadians, even to Canadians themselves, caught within the double bind of outside control or internalized values.

Gallant's work is, in large part, shot through with such traces, destabilizing the purchase of realism as it destabilizes ethnocentric comfort, showing in her stories the inability of representation's binary opposites to absorb third terms. Just as for the son in the story 'Canada' implies both the rejection of Europe and yet a continuing expectation of both a personal and national paternal influence, intimately linked to the war and Europe, so the narration is ironized as the difficult co-existence of
both the discourse of origins and that of separation surfaces. Gallant's characters are alienated within the system of values that posits unity and continuity. They run adrift as their past cannot be absorbed into this field of unitary vision. The father in "The End of the World" is an absent presence, having left Canada and his family; existing in the son's discourse as the one who went away. On their meeting downtown in Montreal ... after the War ... [h]e didn't ask how anyone was at home. (9) 'Home' has been effaced in the discourse of the father, introducing a rift in the code of continuity and stability which the son takes for granted as a mark of family meaning and closure.

This problem of place and its designated meaning continually surfaces in the story. The narrator tells us the son had to leave Canada to be with [his] father when he died. (9) The Canada that the narrator has so much difficulty in leaving seems to exist as a hermetically sealed space, eclipsed at moments when it is not directly in focus. The ever present danger of Canada's annihilation within a Eurocentric discourse and the difficulty of its self-representation, comes up in varying ways throughout Mavis Gallant's work. This corresponds to E.D. Blodgett's designation of Canadian textual space as being both involved in silence, in that historically it existed as a metaphor translated through the codes of European settlement, and in the ideological conflicts invested in this silence.¹ Problematical relations of

¹ See E.D. Blodgett's article "After Pierre Berton what? In search of a Canadian Literature" in Essays on Canadian Writing, 30(Winter,1984/5), 60-80.
affinity or separation from an Anglophone cultural hegemony and a French-speaking minority, render flawed self-images. This can be linked up to Stephen Slemon's designation of Realism as:

[A] convention in representation and interpretation, not a marker of actual inhabitation in the sphere of the 'real'.

[Realism thus] stabilizes the dominant social values of the work's time and place..¹

One could posit that the stable referent which Stephon Slemon cites as the realistic 'contract' held between author and reader, is questioned in the instability of Gallant's time and place; her designating Canada as a place and a socio/political discourse which only seems to exist to its inhabitants, falling underneath the trope of a declining Europe when the two boundaries meet in her stories. In "The End of the World" the concept of home is clearly a troublesome one, linked to the genealogy of family origins. When the news comes to Canada that the father is in hospital, the narrator says:

*My name was on the back page of his passport. 'In case of accident or death notify WILLIAM APOSTOLESCO. Relationship: Son.*(9)

For him, the dirty sheets and towels, the unfamiliar food and coffee in France were the fitting price for desertion. Yet the narrator's consciousness of reality and that of his father's are literally worlds apart. In the two worlds, the son's, (Canada, home, values and responsibilities), and the father's, (the Old Country, banishment and/or escape from responsibility), play out

the typical colonial dialectic in curiously reversing forms; it is the son who assumes Canada as the 'centre' to Europe the periphery. Just as in the past sons were banished to the colonies for misdemeanors troubling the family's sense of proprieties, so here the case is inversed:

_One of the advantages of having an Old Country in the family is you can always say the relations that give you trouble have gone there._ ... _He couldn't speak above a whisper some days, and he was careful how he pronounced words. It wasn't a snobbish or an English accent - nothing that would make you grit your teeth. He just sounded like a stranger._ (11)

Somewhere between these two poles of influence, Canada and Europe, and the inherent problem of belonging, self-division emerges as a legacy of the past. The son waits for revelation and story; something to resolve the question of desertion and silence. But there is no confiding. Instead it seems the father has erased the past, inventing his own in the shadow of the 'Old Country' as he tells the life-story of a fellow patient whose husband had deserted her and yet sees no parallel in his own desertion of his family. The whole narrative is balanced on the fact that distance and separation are somehow coterminous with suppression of a part of a story or a portion of the past, as is the case in many of Gallant's stories. The surfacing of narrative presents disparate halves which attempt to cancel each other out as each lays claim to the truth. This suppression corresponds imaginatively to Blodgett's definition of an importance facet of Canadian writing and consciousness, and also, by extension, of feminine/feminist consciousness:

_It [Canadian literature] is a tradition profoundly marked by the inability to repress in some unifying manner the
other language, whatever it is called, that would encourage official versions.¹

It also corresponds to the problem inherent in realism:

It posits an unfractured world of 'progressive discovery', order, coherence, and 'Culture'. And such a world is inherently imperialistic, ... because it is incapable of recognizing the condition of broken semiosis and multiple layering which, ... characterizes the world of colonial and post-colonial cultures.²

Both continuity and closure are a problem at the centre of Gallant's work for, in negotiating the subject of heritage and history, one discourse, one centre, cannot prevail as a holistic self-reflecting entity. Instead the vision of the missing element emerges as testimony to a partial gaze, casting shadows on the Other, occluded side of the world. It is interesting that the son's fear of the end of the world is abated as he lies about death itself, paradoxically compromising his father's trust in order to say what he wants to hear:

'You've got a violent kind of t.b. They had no place else to put you except here.'...
'I'm looking you straight in the face,' ... 'and I swear you have this unusual kind of t.b., and you're almost cured.'
'I knew you wouldn't lie to me', my father said. 'That's why I wanted you, not the others.' (16)

It is a strange shift from resistance to a version of history which disturbs and threatens his own bid for a viable story and closure,

¹ "After Pierre Berton What?", 78.

² Homi Bhabha, "Representations and the Colonial Text: A Critical Exploration of Some Forms of Mimeticism" cited in Wilson Harris: The Uncompromising Imagination, 74.
to acquiescence in the lie which unites him with his father in a space outside truth and its prescriptive logic; a space where error resides as a symbolic resonance, transgressing either/or determinations. The lie, or error, confirms exile as the place where the father has always resided in relation to his Canadian past, by inhabiting the locus of repressed and silent knowledge metaphorically translated as Europe. The ending to the story can therefore be seen as a form of symbolic recognition just as it is a gap radically inscribed between forms of discourse; versions of one reality and another that do not coalesce but cast obscuring shadows.

Another story in *In Transit* which demonstrates the seemingly impossible coexistence of differing forms of personal history is "Malcolm and Bea".

Janice Kulyk Keefer looks at the way Gallant hinges the story on 'Pichipoi', the French Jewish children's term for their unknown wartime destination, (in fact concentration camps), which symbolizes the characters' dilemmas:

...'Pichipoi' is invoked to signify a refuge to which one can jump from the crowding expectations and recriminations of family life. Yet it is also 'a room without windows'. 'Pichipoi' and life as a hellish journey on a deportation train - these become ambivalently clouded images. We participate in the confusion of characters who misuse their own historical inheritance in much the same way one would misuse a book taking it off a shelf not to read, but to provide a hard surface on which to scribble one's own notes or letters. ¹

---

¹ *Reading Mavis Gallant*, 171.
The war and destruction are once again at the heart of both personal and public concern in the story. They become tropes to signify the failure of intimate ties, just as they surely signify the breakdown of collective social and moral responsibility. The basis on which this rests is the concept of partial knowledge, implying the characters' respective partial self-determination. This implies a part lying out of reach buried in memory beyond the flaw of destruction. Yet of course, narratively, it is the metaphor of the war which is a beginning; the tension point at the inception of many of her stories. It posits a broken semiosis as the status quo, and therefore the memory which is so often obliquely or overtly referred to seems to constitute a textual economy from which story begins, and to which it returns. It is somehow outside time and history and yet perhaps a direct effect of the temporal workings of narrative itself. The uncanniness of Gallant's use of broken memory as repeating trauma, and the seeming tendency of the narrative in its entirety to repeat, becoming the concrete manifestation of a 'transcendent' history, is perhaps a pointer to the seeming undecidability of many of the questions raised by Gallant's stories. In "Malcolm and Bea" 'pichipoi' denotes a very real historical event, one of a network which traces threads leading to the reason for NATO personnel in Europe, those displaced international families which the story speaks of. Yet this displacement, because its centre is emotional and psychological, inevitably refers to a cause outside the characters' autonomous motivation. Displacement is a state of being and perception rather than the automatic result of changing countries. Therefore, 'pichipoi' represents more than historical documentation and fictional metaphor. The unknown
destination, encapsulated in the Jewish term seems to be the central energy around which the story builds as Malcolm, an English NATO administrator and Bea, his Canadian wife exist in a cultural vacuum in a Paris full of embattled children who tear over the grass shooting and killing.¹ These children, (war orphans?), whose place will soon be taken by respectable French families, signal, as in many of Gallant's stories, both the human debris of war and a surplus which the war has left stranded. They are part of the network of thematic elements which point to beginnings, but these beginnings arise from an only partially rendered truth; the attested effects of devastation which Western cultures have had to absorb and integrate. Beyond this partial truth is a repeating mechanism of emptiness which the narrative seems unable to absorb; ruptured families and ruptured continuity leading back to something buried or lost. The narrative itself attempts to make sense out of these partially explained elements - for 'story' implies a form of continuity working towards harmony - but, fails to do so adequately. Just as the children are adrift, 'left over' from history, so the couple are abandoned within their own story. For there are also broken ties here, of which, as the narrator says:

Bea's outrageousness is part of the coloration of their marriage, their substitute for a plot. (79)

Bea and Malcolm's meeting in Canada is itself full of tangled perceptions of time and memory, in which the present moment is

¹ "Malcolm and Bea" in In Transit, 77/8. (Not included in 1988 edition.) All further references are in the text of the thesis.
perceived as a retrospective one in Malcolm's mind, for he had mentally already left Canada:

...as if I had already left Canada (I was, already, trying to do just that) and was getting ready to remember Bea, whom I hadn't met ... I understood I had met the right people too late, for Canada had been a mistake, and it was already part of the past in my mind. (84)

This play on time, positing a premonitory past, serves to cancel out the present, draining it of spontaneity and possibilities. Malcolm has already forgotten a presence not yet announced as present, in a country he deems a mistake. Bea, who already has a son Roy by a man who then deserted her seemed curiously innocent - did not understand her sisters' jokes, or the words that sounded like other words and made them laugh. (86)

Their relationship begins within the meshes of history, in the gaps that allow unlikely beginnings but flawed ones. Both Malcolm and Bea seem to be obeying the dictates of their historical circumstances which finally land them in France. Going away also means killing the past, as if continuity were incompatible with change:

Before we left she took her cat away to be destroyed. She had already stopped watering the plants, and the birdcages were empty. By the time we were married and she went away to start a new life with me, the household, the life in it, had been killed, or had committed suicide; anyway, it was dead. (87/8)

It is this anachronism of having dropped out of one's own history by being caught up in 'History' which determines Malcolm and Bea's plotless marriage. Gaps in time are also gaps in reality suspending sequence; it is because at each turn the couple destroys the past by destroying memory that this past cannot
settle into sequence and continuity. Instead it repeats, coming back as moments which interrupt the idea of continuity. These moment hypothesize destruction even as they deny its possibility within the mundane lives of the couple and their NATO friends. When Leonard, part of another raggle-taggle international family has to face the suicide attempt of his mistress and feels his world is falling apart, the fate of the Jewish children and Leonard's personal crisis are juxtaposed:

...he knows he is presuming. He is on sacred ground, with his shoes on. They were on their way to dying. If every person thought his life was a deportation, that he had no say in where he was going, or what would happen once he got there, the air would be filled with invisible trains and we would collide in our dreams. (89)

Yet in a certain kind of way that is exactly what the story is about - people colliding in dreams as the sense of values upholding their present and future collapses under the strain of the past.

As the characters in Gallant's stories move on to another destination on the route of migrants, they can never arrive because they can never go back. At each stage they erase the traces. They are effectively left 'in transit', out of kilter with the time and place around them, and on a collision course with their own dreams.

Another narrative of multiple beginnings which deals with the question of home, memory, and the 'reinvention' of the self is the third-person story "The Statues Taken Down". This story does not concern displacement and destruction linked to the war or its after-effects. Yet it is about representing the past, this time through the eyes of a poet and those of a child. Set
in Paris, it is the story of a man's escape from responsibility; the question of beginnings and reinvention is a philosophical one, delineated as a subtext to the plot, folded into the opposition between men and women's sense of self in relation to the world, and to the difference between child and adult perceptions. George Crawley is an English poet living in Paris whose links to a tangible past are the children of an American wife who visit him every three years, and, (although these do not appear in the story), his two older children by an English wife. On this particular visit Hal and Dorothy are taken regularly to the Palais-Royal gardens and left to entertain themselves. Dorothy is now of an age to question motives, and the story progresses around this questioning, as the central focus in the narrative is her attempt to align disparate and often contradictory pieces of information, in order to construct a viable image of her father. The third-person narrational voice is permeated by Dorothy's, and debates the divide of gender and the misinterpretation involved between the sexes. Here again the problem is one of representation. Crawley reinvents himself at each turn through women, projecting a Hardyesque\(^1\) ideal of womanhood incorporating beauty, nature and a risk of corruption for the male artist that he is:

*But when George talked about women he said, 'That was a real woman,' as though anyone else was only pretending. He said 'Natasha,' or 'Portia', or 'Felicia' - real women had names that ended in 'a'. The names evoked, for his* 

---

\(^1\)This is reminiscent of Thomas Hardy's *The Well-Beloved* dealing with the artist, woman as ideal image and problems of representation. (London/Basingstoke: New Wessex Ed., 1975).
daughter, their large breasts and abundant hair, their repeated pregnancies, and their chain-smoking.¹

The women in Crawley's life, real women, are constructs of the male fantasy stereotype, written into the poet's literary output, crossing the divide from the world around him to the world inside, and reinvented in his image as poetry. Woman as sign, as reified Other through which the poet appropriates their bodies to his own imaginary powers, is a way of renewing and rewriting the self, but is also the world of words in silence which acts as a screen separating the father from Dorothy:

Nothing she wanted to know, either about her sudden fear or her sudden cruelty-the way she wanted to be rid of Hal—had been explained in her father's poems. (36)

One of the most interesting facets of this story is the way Crawley's representative guises - one of which is of course his role as a writer dealing in poetic images - are at each point deconstructed by the child's vision which repeatedly calls attention to lapses in coherence, to partial explanations and contradictions, thus picking up the threads of Crawley's beginnings in order to try and make sense of them. Her own attempts at the construction of a fixed image through which to order her reality in fact unpicks the seams of pretence characterizing the way Crawley perceives his women, his children and his lodger in the story:

They had not, as Crawley imagined children must have, any kind of secret language or code. ...

¹ "The Statues Taken Down" in In Transit, 37. All further references are in the text of the thesis.
He looked from one face to the other and was looking not at his own children but at images of Victorian children in repose, between reprimands, ... The trace of his, [the lodger's] presence was humble, such as a nylon shirt dripping at the kitchen window, or a hairbrush he kept (it seemed its permanent abode) on the edge of the tub. This brush ...told Dorothy, the elder of the children, that George suffered from a kind of blindness. He saw only what he wanted to; otherwise, he would surely have told the lodger to keep his personal stuff in a drawer. (31-3)

The child Dorothy occupies a space of memory which the poet suppresses by transformation into art. She inhabits the troubled zone of conflicting versions in the story and equally inhabits the blind spot in her father’s perceptions as he overwrites the past with his own ‘artistic’ version. She is symbolically ‘colonized’ with such versions for no dialogue is possible; she is simply left with information she could not use and did not understand.

Information she does not understand is in the main the subterfuges addressed by her respective parents to an absent party; the way her father dialogues through art to his fantasy women and her mother creates multiple versions of the recalcitrant Crawley:

‘George’ thought he was the centre of the universe and the planets, highly polished and lighted from within, circled round him, chanting his praises. But ‘your father’ was also generous and impulsive and unreliable and famous ... If true, then why the lodger? Why no cleaning woman, and why furniture sagging or cigarette-burned or mended with glue? (34)

This again recalls Blodgett’s analysis of language, culture and the co-existence, or impossible co-existence of warring versions of reality. Here, as in so much of Gallant’s work, one section is
'written over' by another; the daughter's apprehension of events in her grasp of continuity, is placed in opposition to Crawley's need for transformation and transcendence. One version automatically becomes the private versus the public one, the subversive versus the official. This silencing of one voice, one language, by another creates a troubled consciousness within the economy of the narrator's voice. For one view to prevail, that of Crawley's invention of his world, another one, Dorothy's, must figure as silenced, muted, supporting the public view yet undoing it at the same time.

Although all muted voices in Gallant's works are by no means submissive feminine versus dominant masculine ones, this story is a good example of prescribed and polarized gender roles. The male, the artist, fashions women in the light of his own ego, creating their life stories from his own pen, conceiving them as empty vessels to be filled with poetic meaning. According to Susan Gubar:

This model of the pen-penis writing on the virgin page participates in a long tradition identifying the author as a male who is primary and the female as his passive creation— a secondary object lacking autonomy, endowed with often contradictory meaning but denied intentionality. Clearly this tradition excludes woman from the creation of culture, even as it reifies her as an artifact within culture.¹

The blank page signifying this position of woman as artistic object, is admirably demonstrated in the role of Crawley to his

muses. Natasha, the latest of these, is also part of a story that he has blurred in the telling and Dorothy herself is primed to fill the role of nurse in his last days for he mentioned the things his loyal daughter would bring him when the time came: 'Soap, a razor, rubbing alcohol, and a toothbrush.' (39)

This very construction of major and minor, apparent, and disguised or silenced within the narrator's field of operation, both suppresses the other view and is prisoner to it. The critic Ronald Hatch has aptly diagnosed Gallant's stories as a continual battle between concept and percept  

To extend the opposition of concept and percept to the narrative as a whole, areas of knowledge that are unclaimed by the characters' perceptions are retrieved on the level of concept in the texture of the narration. Conflicting attempts to dominate the narrating vision make of the narrator's voice a terrain, devoid of a central focusing agency and subject to seizure as warring forces vie for priority of viewpoint. An inability to resolve, to tie up the ends and provide a channel for 'entente' between these forces, leaves nodes of enigma which point to their own radical disharmony. A disharmony in which the ideal 'feminine' is constructed in language and art as landscape/muse/mother/mistress.

"The Captive Niece" debates the same problems of gender and voice as "The Statues Taken Down". The budding actress living in a hotel room in Paris with a married man twice her age, is ironically profiled in the title as captive, first of her aunt, and

---

1 Ronald Hatch, "Mavis Gallant and the Fascism of Everyday Life" in Essays on Canadian Writing, 42, 13.
later, in a continuation of the childish passive role, of her drifting lover. Here again the characters seem subject to 'higher knowledge' outside the reach of their own perceptions. We the readers are informed in glimpses that the characters are acting waywardly, childishly or with perception that could heighten their awareness were they only more in tune with the situation. These views of possibilities outside the characters' immediate reach, point to the narrator's lack of authority in bringing a judgement to bear, or in providing the information which Gallant's characters are so often in need of. But, looking at it another way, the narrator becomes a presence pointing to, if not speaking from a conceptual view-point, thus rising above the level of characters and plot, and bidding us to align his/her presence with a broader cultural landscape. The problem remains one of identification; how to construct a cohesive narratorial identity from this landscape even though the cogency of the story relies on there being such a site or sites of elucidation.

Carl Malmgren's theorizing of narrative space are also pertinent to the texture of Gallant's narration:

The density of the narrative derives from the imaginative (and occasionally imaginary) connections that the reader necessarily interpolates in the 'space' between the sections so as to make of them a continuous and coherent whole. The narrative 'fractures' its fictional space in such a way as to enact the motif of Absence and to implicate significantly the reader in matters of narrative management and meaning.  

Questions of motivation traverse the *narrational space* ¹ of all Mavis Gallant's fiction, (save perhaps those stories with an explicit historical background i.e.*The Pegnitz Junction* collection). Generally speaking 'home' is a concept which, from the opening lines on, is already radically displaced. No longer joined to its 'natural' roots of country, culture, language and values it is an unhinged concept; knowledge in search of a centralizing force. The characters' predicament reflect this displacement, where the limits of their ability to act or change meets the *dissolving* surface of their narrative leadership.² We therefore tend to ask ourselves, as in "The Captive Niece", to what narrating consciousness, and, in the final analysis, to what 'authority' does the story belong? Does not the very opening gambit of a Gallant story defy the effort of the reader to bring normative judgements to bear? For if it is true that fiction which denies a central viewpoint is one in which the reader has an ever greater part to play in bridging gaps in interpretive logic, the premises from which the reader starts reading stories like "The Captive Niece", tends to suppress historical premises bound up with country, culture, and value judgements. The reader seems destined to fill in the blanks from an inherently 'valueless' reading position. These are radically 'orphaned' stories in which the mosaic of differential

---

¹ Malmgren's term *narrational space* refers to the space of the narrator/teller of the tale as opposed to that of the events in the represented world which he terms *narratival space*.

² Term used by Malgren to designate a type of narration whereby the narrator's voice seeps into the character's and out again.
narratorial voice management, the sliding over the social scale of comment, approbation and judgement, stands in for the social, cultural author-ity we expect to find. If so then the plot-line, and the characters' imbeddedness within the plot, is destined to search out the absent author-ity, in the sense of a stable social matrix. In Gallant's writing the partial explanations, the gaps in resolution and the blindness of the characters to their own shape and form as autonomous actors of the represented world, devises a telos of ideological repression shaping the narrative forces in play. Displacement therefore, as the starting point of story, can be deemed to state the grounds of the narratives within a pattern of ideological 'absence' shaping closure in Mavis Gallant's work. "In Italy" discusses the colonial and post-colonial reality of British expatriates, and calls attention to the disparity of the 'then' and 'now' of Imperialism. Henry is a survivor of the 'old school', who used to be quite different when he still believed the world was made for people of his sort. (145) Living out most of the year in Italy, returning to England only long enough to avoid paying taxes, Henry occupies both the position of a rootless exile in the story, and that of the lucky escapee from a Britain of bad weather and a dreary lifestyle. Both views are in fact sustained in the story. His young wife, deluded into marriage by the vague expectation of material and psychological security, finds herself divested of both:

*It had not been Stella's ambition to marry money. She had cherished a great reverence for family and background, and she believed, deeply, in happiness, comfort, and endless romance ...*

*She hadn't married money; the trouble was that during their courtship Henry had seduced her with talk of money. He talked stocks, shares, and Rhodesian Electric. He talked*
South Africa, and how it was the only sound place left for investment in the world. He spoke of the family trust and how he had broken it years before, and what a good life it had given him. (149)

The story is a complex structure of attitudes and clichés; frozen social mores attached to British class and culture limits and thresholds. When Stella, the lower middle-class girl, *self-made and with self-made rules of gentility*, embarks on marriage with Henry, she becomes involved in codes of conduct implying absent historical causes that shape her destiny. She is unable to perceive or grasp the forces at work behind Henry's erratic conduct; forces of Empire and decline, of individuals out of kilter in a changed collective destiny. Stella herself has been fashioned in the mode of the hierarchical pyramid of a seemingly indestructable era. Instead of choosing the *nice man in chemicals* or the boy in her father's business, in keeping with notions of her class or station, Stella falls for the image of a superior class and superior knowledge only to discover a sham. While her life in Italy seems romantic to those living in England, Stella herself dreams of small neat English gardens transposed intact with the help of *Gardening in Happy Lands*. Unarmed for the climate in Italy, the palm-trees that savage her attempts at English landscaping and the upheaval of her moral certitudes, Stella is shown to be a complementary 'other half' for Henry. For she is equally subject to an ideology of stable class distinctions and class barriers; unquestioned values filtered down from the top and upheld from below. As such, "In Italy" reflects on the programme of conditioning at the root of cultural 'givens' and, as is the case with Henry and Stella, the 'centre' is constructed in the reflecting gaze of its negative, hierarchically inferior Other. At the
basis of their relationship is a void around which is structured a fractured network of relations linking rootlessness to a pathetic displacement of 'Englishness'. The paucity of texture of this world is reflected in the characters' frozen dialogue, sunk in precepts which rightly belong to another era but which still hold sway. Henry feeds off the cheap Italian labour in a debased version of the colonial prerogative. His life-style however does not now work for him. For colonial domination ideally means the purchase of an articulate and systematic colonialist 'pre-text'.

This pre-text is obviously missing in the case of Henry in Italy, for if an Italian life-style is cheaper than an English one, unlike the colonies it does not serve uniquely to shore up the identity of British Imperialism. Rather it serves in the story to show up Henry's social attitudes and his wasted existence. The narrowness of vision that underlies colonialism itself, figured in Henry's eroded values and the dead weight of his transported and transposed world, is rendered ironically in his apparent aversion to people who:

\[\text{spend all their time and all of their income trying to create a bit of England on the Mediterranean. (147)}\]

When the limits and cracks appear in the couple's world the feudal nature of their relationship surfaces, just as the feudal nature of a colonial dialectic surfaces evincing any dynamic possibilities. Henry and Stella are locked into a system of communication which precludes progress and development, which works along fixed lines of action and reaction as Stella tries

\[1 \text{ "Wilson Harris",75.}\]
to bolster the image that she and Henry have mutually created. That only one of the characters' viewpoints can prevail to the exclusion of other dialogic and dynamic possibilities, is set against layers of a submerged landscape of Empire surfacing in fragments, revealed through the characters' fantasies. Henry's attitude to his environment, his daughter and her dwindled inheritance, and his child-bride, is bound up with fantasies about himself, the delusion of total freedom and the 'rightness' of his status as an expatriate. This scenario collapses as soon as reality intrudes, as soon as the other side of the matter is broached. It is in fact Peggy, Henry's daughter who raises the other side of the matter in the story, who sounds the voice of common sense. It is she who explodes the myth of Henry's desire to know and experience Italian culture:

'Doesn't Max Beerbohm live near here?' she said. 'I expect everyone asks that.' 'We know no one of that name', said Stella soberly. 'Henry says he came to Italy to meet Italians.' ...

[Peggy] 'How like the poor old boy to think he can go native', she said. 'Actually, he chose this part of the coast because it was full of English. They must be doddering, most of them. It must be ghastly for you, at your age.' (142)

Another passage reveals the paucity of Stella's borrowed phrases as she lamely defends Henry's choices:

'We adore Italy' said Stella now, playing her sad, tattered card. What were some of the arguments Henry used? 'Servants are so loyal,' she said. 'Where can you get that loyalty nowadays?' 'I don't know what you mean by loyalty now,' said Peggy. 'You are much too young to remember loyalty then.' (145)

Likewise Stella attempts to uphold the self-created vision of marital bliss with the 'older man':
It was offensive, being ordered about in one's own home this way, having Henry referred to as a grasping old man, almost a drunk. ... Stella was anxious to get Henry alone, to place him on her side, if she could, in the tug of war with his daughter. ... She simply wanted him to acknowledge her, in front of the others, mistress of the house and mother of the heir. (146)

The closed system of fictions that Henry and Stella have created as displaced individuals pertain to a frozen romantic image, in the sense that the mythology of the older worldly man and the young dewy-eyed bride they have created, only survives in a hermetically closed emotional environment resembling the romantic ideology of Mills and Boon rhetoric. Their relationship cannot be enriched by the world outside its boundaries, for even Italy only provides cheap labour and detested palm-trees, mosquitoes and a tax haven; qualities to be set against England, not savoured in their own right. Not surprisingly Stella's choice of a marriage partner was decided on her mother's cliché of the world:

'When Henry asked me to marry him, my mother said, 'It's better to be an old man's darling than a young man's slave.'

(152)

Such expressions only reflect back on themselves and have no referential status.¹ Neither based on awareness or judgement they bear no relation to either personal or collective wisdom. They rather belong to a defunct moral ethos through which the notion of duty is harnessed to that of class and social station. The

¹ See "Popular Culture and Political Consciousness" for a discussion of social conformity and genteel angst in Gallant's work.
self-righteousness Stella displays when confronted with Peggy's plain speaking gives her the comfort of feeling morally 'better' than those she sees intrinsically as her betters in class and status. The force of this value-system is an ideological 'set', shaping their future and reproduced across the narrative in Stella's meaningless expressions and Henry's meaningless attitudes. The ideological underpinnings of his world-views, the inheritances he has squandered, the displaced individualism against a back-drop of inherited rights and inherited wealth, is the subtext both upholding and restraining his actions. As such the traces of Empire produce incoherencies and gaps where they cling to story, rendering clear-sighted Peggy a witness to the couple caught in mental blindness.

The story "Better Times" works in much the same way as "In Italy". The Osbornes, an expatriate couple called Guy and Susan, (once again the older man and the young girl), are staying in the unfashionable part of the French Riviera in a draughty villa loaned by Susan's aunt, with thirty bottles of cheap gin for company and no money. The war veteran Guy whose 'finest hour' had left him a hero unable to adapt to normal life, spends his time waiting for a letter which does not arrive. Various jobs in various parts of the world either do not materialize or, for one reason or another, not Guy's doing, they never held up.

Guy's only real job was as a fighter pilot in the war as the hero/martyr transcending reality for house, hearth and country. Afterwards however, a remittance from mother is the long leash around his neck, allowing him to admire anyone's dream, whether it was the private dream that led to Monte Carlo and a
yacht or the dream of Major Terry, who said 'mem-sahib' and inhabited empires. (157)

In this story it is the young bride herself who is lent insight into the world of sham, at least up to the limits where such perceptions risk dislodging Guy's fictions entirely. At that point she chooses to believe in make-believe rather than face reality alone. The closing description testifying to the barrenness of their future, draws attention to its opening counterpart at the beginning of the narrative. It echoes back to the image of a crumbling house under assault from

*an army of red ants*. ...
One day the house would fall, the walls tunnelled to paper. If it collapsed down on their heads at this moment, at lunch, Aunt Val would not have been surprised. Every crumb of wood, every floating speck of dust was disastrous. (153)

In encoded fashion this metaphorical trace of cataclysmic disaster resurfaces when Susan finally comes face to face with reality:

*The wind dragged at her hair. She felt everything swept back and away; her marriage was knocked down and the threadroots picked up by the wind. In the drawing room was the wreckage of the short quarrel- the smashed clock.* (167)

Once again, in this story, the shifts, the narrating energy, comes from beyond the characters' own perceptions or sense of destiny. The disparate fragments of an outworn social and historical agenda stitch up the edges of their inconsistent behaviour, or as Barbara Godard puts it, they inhabit the space where inside and
outside reverse themselves, so that what seems seams up the edges of appearance and reality. ¹

But these fragments, coming back insistentely as ghosts of the past meet silence. They cannot motivate the story-line and lead to awareness, but instead endlessly repeat and redistribute their message.

¹ "Modalities of the Edge: Towards a Semiotics of Irony", 74.
Margaret Atwood is the author of two collections of short stories, of which *Dancing Girls* is the first. Better known for her novels, particularly *Surfacing*, Atwood writes about men and women in everyday situations, engaging with hostile environments and unkind fates. Her plots are quests for the master code of existence and often indicate the presence of multiple narratives, but deterministically withhold revelation.

These codes take the form of palimpsestic readings of the past, or cryptic references to a narrative of origins. Their presence defines a strong socio/political awareness in Atwood's work, at one with the historical thrust of her own feminist views, but at odds with the open-endedness of theme and structure. The 'language as process' implied in these narratives lends impetus to the 'truth' which is promised the reader at the end. Nonetheless, the 'set' of her characters' inscription within their environment, the effect of containment and limits that this social reality engenders, also points to a fundamental stasis. This belies resolution, and narrative closure in her stories only emerges as an irresolute/irresolvable move away from the realistic premises of the quest. Solitary vision is induced as an end to story where the characters seem to have nowhere to go.

Atwood's narratives are centred around displaced persons moving in concrete superstructures which work as a metaphor of
form. The form to which these mazes refer is that of institutional society as the author sees it. Atwood's urban jungles are mysteries of power-structure. She 'broods' over material space in much the way Hardy did, and we understand that her characters are sacrificed to the demands of these blind power-structures. Their individual potential is tested against 'the system', and they inevitably fall back as victims. Atwood's strong identity politics come through this polarization of society and the individual, and her awareness succeeds where her characters, in their fictional quests, do not. Her nationalism and feminism are a text against which the dilemmas of her stories can be read. Although full of pessimism for the ways things are, this philosophy is a master code, essential in the decrypting of her intrigues. For across the grain of her characters' displacement we read the viable centre of Atwood's ideology. Grounded in theories of the sign linking words and experience as interlocking systems of meaning, the belief in language as a system engaged in social and political process seeks to over-ride the static quality of her themes. This opposition between the idea of an ongoing process and the failure of individual destiny is played out in her stories by harnessing a character to metaphors of systems. The radical displacement of characters directs our reading to the networks of metaphors of space and form, and articulates Atwood's message of twentieth century gloom, which, however, allows for the possibility of change.

1The term is borrowed from Terry Eagleton's reference to Hardy and 19th century ideological formations, in his chapter "Ideology and Literary Form" in Criticism and Ideology, (London: Verso, 1986).
Two stories from *Dancing Girls*, "Polarities" and "The Man from Mars", demonstrate ways in which displacement is a function of narrative procedure and lends itself to Atwood's own feminist, political ethos.

"Polarities", as the title implies, works on a play of radical opposition and interdependency. Louise lives and circulates in a city structure which is metaphorically the object of her quest for self-completion. Its polarities are instrumental in her own fantasized search for 'the circle'; a holistic vision of urban space as a way of making sense of her life. As she says at one point in the story to Morrison, her boyfriend:

'You can't go in that door,' she said. 'It's facing the wrong way. It's the wrong door.'

'What's the matter with it?' Morrison asked. ...

'It faces east,' she said. 'Don't you know? The city is polarized north and south; the river splits it in two; the poles are the gas plant and the power plant. Haven't you ever noticed the bridge joins them together? That's how the current gets across. We have to keep the poles in our brains lined up with the poles of the city, that's what Blake's poetry is all about. You can't break the current.' 1

Louise's paranoia, working against her awareness, is intricately folded into the larger issue of city and system which dictates the attitudes of both the main characters. Morrison is relegated to identification with the status quo since he cannot identify with or transform Louise's 'excess'. For just as Louise is shown to be mad, she also vehiculates the opposition between creativity and female desire on one hand, and rationality and male containment on the

---

1 Margaret Atwood, *Dancing Girls and Other Stories* [1977] (Toronto: Seal, 1978), 52. All further references are in the text of the thesis.
other. As a character Louise makes sense within the terms of her displacement, throwing the smooth exterior of form open to scrutiny, laying bare strategies of modern life and values. She irrupts from nowhere in the beginning of the story and disappears behind the institutional screen of a mental asylum at the end. Her causal function in the narrative is to contain and sustain this metaphor of the city which works on several levels. On a symbolic plane the references to Blake and the obsession with a holistic universe naturally opposes Morrison's rationality and the disjuncted alienation of urban life. This opposition is clearly set up as confronting value systems within a network of metaphor in which Louise, the creative spirit, is the 'excess' defying limits and retreating into madness for it. That she is a woman from nowhere is inscribed from the beginning when Morrison visits her apartment and the narrator tells us:

*He had not known what to expect of Louise's room. He had never visualized her as living anywhere, even though he had collected her and dropped her off outside the house a number of times.*

This apartment is part and parcel of the enigma of Louise for Morrison.

He discovers later that her mystery is connected to an indeterminacy; the fact that she *had been trying to construct herself out of the other people she had met.* (59) The texture of the city/system metaphor is woven around Louise's persona as she moves through the narrative, and the imaginative space of the story opens through her mad quest. She seems to motivate the narrative which in fact reads against herself and informs us of chaos and abandon. The disaster of the everyday is thus foregrounded as the intolerable distance between language and
the 'truth'. Her status as polar opposite, allowing us to read Atwood's ideology through the gap, is ambivalent in fictional terms. For her visionary madness is both extremely coherent and yet rendered totally redundant. Moreover, in direct contradiction to the outcome, she is depicted as both brisk and efficient at the beginning, the contrary of the nice loosely structured girl with ungroomed seedy breasts more thing than idea,(43) that Morrison is seeking. Her madness develops in submission to the flowering of the city space which over-rides the characters' plot-line. At the end, closure reveals Louise as a victim, and final vision is projected on to the blank surface of Morrison's consciousness, for there would seem to be no grounds for growth and revelation in their conflict.

In a similar way "The Man from Mars" articulates a causal narrative chain hinging on the advent of someone from nowhere. The story is about an Asian immigrant who appears one day on the campus of Christine's university:

_Halfway across the park she stopped to take off her cardigan. As she bent over to pick up her tennis racquet someone touched her on her freshly bared arm. Christine seldom screamed; she straightened up suddenly, gripping the handle of her racquet. It was not one of the old men, however; it was a dark-haired boy of twelve or so._

'Excuse me,' he said, 'I search for Economics Building. Is it there?' He motioned towards the west. Christine looked at him more closely. She had been mistaken: he was not young, just short. He came a little above her shoulder, but then, she was above the average height; 'statuesque,' her mother called it when she was straining. He was also what was referred to in their family as 'a person from another culture': oriental without a doubt, though perhaps not Chinese.(14)
This meeting will not resolve a mystery but become one. Working once again from a political and feminist ethos, this time using the inherent causal logic of the enigma/resolution plot, the mechanics of suspense are problematized. Suspense here is built up through a pursuit which has no grounds except the given assumption of cause and effect in any action, (and as the grounds for narrative process itself). We are implicated in Christine's bewilderment at the reason for the chase, learn nothing about the man, and there is no sense of heightened awareness at the end of the story. The narrative develops around Christine's heightened personal attraction for the stranger which in turn becomes a pivotal focus for the social structure around her. Once again the distance between two polarities is inscribed as a function of narrative, the cultural displacement of the Asian 'outsider' being set against, but also mirroring, Christine's middle-class background in which she is the 'outsider'; an image of a disappointing lack of femininine graces. The question of motive for the pursuit means the narrative focuses the see-sawing between two polarities and engenders an ideological message. For through Christine's encounter she is defamiliarized; detached from her middle-class surroundings and able both to represent and partially reflect on her milieu. This in turn radicalizes her social environment; it loses its individual shape and colour as a setting and becomes a politicized type and class. As in the scene when the stranger comes to tea:

'You are very rich', he said.
'No,' Christine protested, shaking her head, 'we're not'. She had never thought of her family as rich; it was one of her father's sayings that nobody made any money with the Government.
'Yes,' he repeated, 'you are very rich'. He sat back in his lawn chair, gazing about him as though dazed. (23)

At the end of the story we learn that the Asian is Vietnamese, and that he has been deported for harassing a Mother Superior in Montreal. He acquires narrative relief as hearsay, just as Christine has developed a desirable persona thanks to the fantasy surrounding the otherwise comic pursuit. The transformation tells the reader about the relations between the sexes, the preconceptions and misconceptions in a society in which we are to understand there are two sides of the fence. The Christine of 'before' the mysterious stranger, is courted to play tennis, buy her share of the beer, and be an exception to the rules of femininity; in sum 'one of the boys'. According to the male attitudes implied throughout the story, her inclusion in the rituals of male-bonding relies on her apparent absence of all suspicious traits of the 'feminine', including of course that of being sexually desirable. Yet this radical stance which we can take to be Atwood's, finds no successful resolution on the static plane of narrative evolution. Christine's only way to become the subject of her own story instead of the object of an invisible logic of event, is in flights of gothic fantasy. These images of blood drooling out of her neck and running in a little spiral down the drain (31), or ragged fingers at her throat allow her to overstep the limits of her rational consciousness and to sidestep the limits of the plot. They provide a channel of communication between Christine and desire, but concomitantly inscribe these images as a kind of 'excess' unable to be processed in the main narrative. There is disengagement operated in these flights of fancy which brackets any immediate moral or psychological implications on
the part of the characters, whilst investing it as a subtext. Narrative devices such as these gothic 'flights' alleviate the repression of realistic modes of narration and also imply that repression is systematic, an unavoidable result of our polarized world views. Images of crisis in which language is the centre of conflict absorb the conflict of such repression and denote, in imaginary terms at least, a release from the flatness of the characters' non destinies. In "Polarities" when Morrison finally leaves Louise at the clinic he fantasizes a submerging into language turned female body; an image of maternal identity played out through the mock chaos of language as an exultant and organic substance. Nature and verb collude to render the stereotype and mysteriously transform it in an ideologically resilient way. Such images seem to cover the for and against simultaneously, are innocent and subversive at once, showing the spirit of creativity and process that is denied the plot:

This picture at first elated, then horrified him. He saw that it was only the hopeless, mad Louise he wanted, the one devoid of any purpose or defence. ... So this was his dream girl then, his ideal woman found at last: a disintegration, mind returning to its component shards of matter, a defeated formless creature on which he could inflict himself like shovel on earth, axe on forest, use without being used, know without being known.(62)

I would agree with Linda Hutcheon that self-conscious fantasizing does not per se allow the reader to evade the work's moral implications.1 It can however cause experience to fail narratively

against the attraction of a crisis of form, represented by a dilemma which has no real grounds. In the case of the two stories cited, the woman as victim and the Vietnamese immigrant as victim cannot be taken seriously despite the transcendent musings at the end of each story. They both formalize a statement on the world and our society which is simultaneously undermined by the lack of ideological/historical urgency informing their plots. I would agree with Hutcheon that one of the main interests in Atwood's work is a structural one, in which she manipulates duality as a mode of designing her narratives along lines of static and dynamic, in which the build-up of concrete metaphor and organic reference present its own network. As an organizing principle, the concentration of coherent systems of reference, be they codes of the universe, the city labyrinths or the female body, are balanced against the pessimism of theme and elaborate territories of the self elsewhere.

Atwood's short story, "Unearthing Suite", in the collection Bluebeard's Egg defines the space of identity as national territory, working indirectly through her favourite theme of discovery and recovery as a quest for the retrieval of a national consciousness. This suggests paradigms of reading, or as Robert Kroetsch has suggested unreading, in order to find an authentic discourse; one attached to the idea of language as process rather than a system of fixed meanings.¹

¹Robert Kroetsch, Open Letter, 5th. Ser.,4 (Spring,1983), 17.
Atwood's writing has been analyzed by Linda Hutcheon as a play on the concept of duality, in order to polarize and render overt the aesthetically and morally problematic nature of artistic creation. According to Hutcheon her fiction theorizes on art's role of creating and simultaneously being condemned to artifice. This duality of perception reveals itself in "Unearthing Suite" as in her other work.

The story itself is without any plotline or moral or psychological progression on the part of the characters. It is a first-person account, (very much moulded on Atwood's early life), of the narrator's ambivalent relation to her parents' eccentric lifestyle. The father in the narrative is a biologist and the family rushes about Canada tending gardens and forests, building and repairing, while the narrator herself dreams of immobility. The concentration of images in the story throw up the opposition between form and process, civilisation as stasis and nature as regeneration. The narrative refers by extension of this idea to the dichotomy of the structured text; its \textit{status as artifact} on the one hand, and the possibly endless hermeneutic of reading on the other. This is thematically underlined by the narrator's sedentary occupation as a writer as opposed to her parents frenetic activity.

The story progresses structurally through a play of metaphor involving both the theme of organic renewal and the concept of

\footnote{See "From Poetic to Narrative Structures".}
limits and containment. One such metaphor is when the narrator herself explicates the meaning of the story-title:

My parents do not have houses, like other people. Instead they have earths. These look like houses but are not thought of as houses, exactly. Instead they are more like stopping places, seasonal dens, watering holes on some caravan route which my nomadic parents are always following, or about to follow, or have just come back from following.¹

Her view on her parents' lifestyle is avowedly problematical.

Her own house is, as she tells us:

*divided in two: a room full of paper, constantly in flux, where process, organicism, and fermentation rule and dustballs breed; and another room, formal in design, rigid in content, which is spotlessly clean and to which nothing is ever added.*(270)

Yet the story hinges not only on the continuity/stasis, nature/artifice argument buried in the metaphors which thematically structure the narrative, but on the way the deployment of this duality engenders a third term; one that seems to engage the narrative in the possibility of a step by step resolution of these conflicting polarities. Metaphor itself is the trope of narrative as Peter Brooks has pointed out. It is the *same-but-different*,² in the same way that the narrative process relies on appropriating disparate events to the plot, thus harnessing their contingency to its ends, and operating metaphorically. The

¹ Margaret Atwood, "Unearthing Suite" in the collection *Bluebeard's Egg and Other Stories* [1983] (Virago Press:London,1988), 268. All further references are in the text.

² *Reading for the Plot*, 91.
closed legible wholes towards which all narrative tends relies in the final analysis on the assumption of connectedness linking one action to the other, and however arbitrary that connection seems, we as readers accept the text as a coherent meaning. Atwood's construction of "Unearthing Suite" relies on the faculty of narrative to compose with difference, to simultaneously foreground and settle internal contradiction. The act of reading redeems contradictory discourses by collapsing them through sequence, lending them the totalizing coherence that comes only with the final reversal into form as 'the end' is signalled. It is in a way with this fictional paradox that "Unearthing Suite" could be read as a total metaphor, engaging step by step with the terms of fixed meaning and closure, and yet, on the way, positing the chaos of disrupted form. Working through her favourite model of nature versus civilisation, the narrator takes on herself the anxiety of constant flux, bringing not only creative renewal but requiring organisation and authority in order to be channeled:

All spring and summer my parents ricochet from garden to garden, mulching, watering, pulling up the polyphiloprogenitive weeds, 'until,' my mother says, 'I'm bent over like a coat hanger.' In the fall they harvest, usually much more than they can possibly eat. They preserve, store, chill, and freeze. They give away the surplus, to friends and family, and to the occasional stranger whom my father has selected as worthy. ... In the winter my parents dutifully chew their way through the end products of their summer's labour, since it would be a shame to waste anything. In the spring, fortified with ever newer and more fertile and rust-resistant varieties from the Stokes Seed Catalogue, they begin again. (276)

The parents' constant building and removal to their cyclical earths in different parts of the country generates an endless
process in which, ironically, their efforts are brought entirely to bear in civilizing, in maintaining a viable form, in keeping a primordial chaos at bay. It is the price they pay for reading nature's inexhaustable hermeneutic. As the narrator says of her father

he is better than magicians, since he explains everything. This is indeed one of his purposes: to explain everything, when possible. He wants to see, he wants to know, only to see and to know. (266)

By contrast the narrator herself practices the art of passive resistance to effort, conditioned since childhood in the protective quality of immobility.

As she says she wrote small books which ... began with the words 'The End'. She needed to know the end was guaranteed. (270)

The narrator, however, also places herself on the margins of this dualistic territory and thus creates a further polarity. Even if she opposes passive resistance to her parents' activity she has, by choosing language, chosen another system:

Sooner or later I will have to renouce my motionlessness, give up those habits of reverie, speculation, and lethargy by which I currently subsist. I will have to come to grips with the real world, which is composed, I know, not of words but of drainpipes, holes in the ground, furiously multiplying weeds, hunks of granite, stacks of more or less heavy matter which must be moved from one point to the other, usually uphill. (279)

The narrator in fact stands both outside and inside her parents' world. She submits to the story at the same time as she metaphorically transmutes it into words. She thereby creates another space on the border of her own involvement in her parents' narrative. This recalls Sherrill Grace's analysis of
Atwood's intentions. According to Grace her fiction explores the polarities of self and the world, and attempts to substitute for this anintegrated system of complementary, interdependent elements, functioning together continually to produce a whole that is more than its parts, a system where everything 'fits in' ¹

In "Unearthing Suite" the narrator boths posits the divide separating herself from the 'real world' as she terms her parents eccentric lifestyle, and is simultaneously scripting the passage from her parents' earths to narrative metaphor. Paradoxically, the world she interprets is in itself a re-sighting or re-vision of reality. For her parents have chosen to organise their space against the logic of the civilized environment. They are in fact story-tellers of a different mode; discovering, carving a trail anew out of the undergrowth. Believers in life as process they are engaged like the story-teller in metaphorizing, improvising life out of both similar and disparate elements. Their various habitats deal in terms of both stability and impermanence, and thus unite functions of society with a denial of society's values. The poetics of this recurrent narrative device ties in with the qualification of metaphor as a trope of transformation, as a double operation on time, suspending its movement in a semblance of fixity. Seen as a narrative strategy the couple's itinerary opens and then dissolves the space they take up within the sequence of seasons, undermining closure in a constant

¹ Sherrill E. Grace, "Articulating the 'Space between':Atwood's Untold Stories and Fresh Beginnings"in Margaret Atwood: Language, Text and System,11.
reopening and revision of territory. We can consider the narrative unravelling of "Unearthing Suite" as a working of Atwood's favourite theme of man's self as co-extensive with the environment, denying the static ego or fixed meanings which create subject/object divisions.

In Violent Duality Sherrill Grace explores Atwood's way of working language, thus the creative region of the 'self', without renouncing the 'objective' principle of the realistic mode. As she says, Atwood's prose is both expressive and mimetic. ¹ One of the ways in which Atwood negotiates this duality in "Unearthing Suite" is by using the territory of the natural and objective world which the narrator's parents 'discover' and as a paradigm of reading the narrative process, therefore as a reflection of the expressive discovery, recovery and unstable quality of language. This is perhaps a way of understanding the elements of parody traversing this story and much of her fiction. In this context, the first image of her parents is a defamiliarized one; they are portrayed as half man and half bird, and this sets the ironic tone, denying them status as 'rounded' characters in a plot where they would be fully subjected to realism. From the beginning, the story borders on self-parody, presenting a world in which, we are to understand, the narrator as the artist, views her parents as part and parcel of their landscape. Behind this assumption is the meta-discourse of Atwood presenting characters moulded in a textual landscape. The parents and the narrator are given up

through parody to Atwood's theory on writing and the world. This allows for a second-level reading speaking to us about narrative's *duplicity*, its double code as fiction and realism.\(^1\)

The introduction, sets our 'reader's contract' and the narrator begins with this description:

*As they have grown older their eyes have become lighter and lighter and more and more bright, as if time is leeching them of darkness, experience clarifying them until they have reached the transparency of stream water. Possibly this is an illusion caused by the whitening of their hair. In any case their eyes are now round and shiny, like the glass-bead eyes of stuffed animals. Not for the first time it occurs to me that I could not have been born, like other people, but must have been hatched out of an egg.* (263)

As the parents go on to voice their decision to be cremated, the narrator, addressing us the readers, takes off in a flight of fancy which throws the narrative into parody:

*We are way beyond funerals and mourning, or possibly we have by-passed them. I am thinking about the chase, and being arrested, and how I will foil the authorities: already I am concocting fictions. My father is thinking about fertilizer, in the same tone in which other people think about union with the Infinite. My mother is thinking about the wind.* (265)

One could trace this opposition between fiction and the world along the multiple references to writing, contemplation and immobility which the narrator addresses to the reader. We are frequently invited to witness the process of narrative alongside

\(^1\) *Violent Duality,* 3.
the narrator. At such moments our complicity is required in
order to witness the role of the narrator between two modes, that
of actor and author, and the shifts between the two modes allow
the parents' experience to function as the extension of nature's
symbolic ritual. The accumulation of references to ceremony, to
nature as a living memory, also indirectly recall the writerly
drawing on culture as a collective source. His/her ordering of
materials entails, at least for Atwood, a final sense of harmony.
Another strategy, bordering on fantasy, and recurring in
different ways throughout the story, links the mother or the
father to images of adventure drawn to cinematographic
proportions on the one hand, and to the idea of nature on the
other. In this way fantasy, an overtly textual device, is coloured
and colours the idea of nature as 'objective' territory. When, for
example, the narrator describes her parents' first meeting and
subsequent courtship:

Photographs have never done justice to my mother.
This is because they stop time; to really reflect her
they would have to show her as a blur. ... Her only
discoverable ambition as a child was to be able to fly,
and much of her subsequent life has been spent in
various attempts to take off. Stories of her youth
involve scenes in trees and on barn roofs, break-neck
dashes on frothy-mouthed runaway horses, speed-
skating races, and, when she was older, climbs out of
windows onto forbidden fire escapes, done more for
the height and adventure than for the end result, ...
My father first saw her sliding down a banister—I
imagine, in the 1920s, that she would have done this
side-saddle—and resolved then and there to marry
her; though it took him a while to track her down,
stalking her from tree to tree, crouching behind
bushes, butterfly net at the ready. (265/6)
This mirrors a similar passage later on when the father is described on one of the family trips across new territory:

*During these trips my father would drive as fast as he could, hurling the car forward it seemed by strength of will, pursued by all the unpulled weeds in his gardens, all the caterpillars uncollected in his forests, all the nails that needed to be hammered in, all the loads of dirt that had to be shifted from one place to another. ... Perhaps it was then that I began the translation of the world into words. It was something you could do without moving.* (271)

"Unearthing Suite" traces a pattern moving through metaphor as a textual figure and as a symptom of Atwood's dualistic perception of reality, to a meta-textual level. One in which her philosophy of man's organic link to nature is mirrored in narrative. Narrative is thus seen as grounded in an imaginative territory, which returns to itself through an interpretation of the natural world. Through spatial imagery and self-parody, much of Atwood's fiction works to reconcile the expressive and the objective; her perception of the inner word and the outer world.

*The feminine 'inner word' and the masculine 'outer world'.*

*The first information we receive in Dancing Girls is carried by its paradigmatic title - not girls who dance but dancing girls. These women are not silhouettes on beer glasses, or on the stages of cabarets and lounges. They are the other female performers, filling social roles they have stumbled*
I would add to this critique that the heroines of the cryptically entitled *Dancing Girls* are engaged in two worlds or two processes, one concerns their seemingly deterministic plights, hinging, as Davey also remarks, on a death, (of a person or a relationship), and on the heroines' seeming victimisation. The other is the 'underground' aspect of their inner life, which, is cut off from the surface world of everyday reality. The autobiographical mode of many of these stories provides a fitting channel for the epitaph-like scripting of something or someone already lost, although a third-person story like "The Man from Mars" is equally reliant on some form of absent cause motivating the characters in ways that the plot does not elucidate. Whether first or third person, what many of the stories have in common is a narrative voice speaking from the centre of this 'underground' or absence, perhaps because this allows Atwood to privilege the word as expression rather than definition. The stories posit loss - of love, of self-determination - as a cause which the narratives retrace towards conclusions looping back to the original premises. As Sherrill Grace notes: *One characteristic which they have in common is the disturbing, inconclusive ending.*

---


2 *Margaret Atwood: A Feminist Poetics,* 131.

3 *Violent Duality,* 81.
Although these narratives deny our expectations of a resolution of the profoundly pessimistic themes, by doing so, as in Gallant's fiction, they privilege the 'space' of narrative voice as an ontologically contested domain, and as a mobile economy. If, as Frank Davey says, Atwood's stories are about dancing girls, (to other people's tunes), this does apprehend a split subjectivity within the narrating texture or consciousness of the stories. The fact that these 'dancing girls' posit an absent cause to their predicament, implies a voice both caught up in the tenets of realism, an 'I' of the story itself, and another vocal surface, engaged elsewhere, registering the effects of this 'underground' movement which pierces the narratives in gothic flights of fancy from time to time, but remains outside the plot's grasp. This aspect of the stories, apart from the exceptional "The War in the Bathroom", (which plays upon a schizoid narrating voice, an 'I' and a 'she', and thus plays the reader along, until closure reveals that they belong to one and the same character), offers, as I have said, an epitaphal repeating surface, seemingly obsessively, and mournfully rewriting the terms of mimetic fiction as the inevitable covering over of this 'underground' source.

The story "The Grave of the Famous Poet" is an example of Atwood's use of death and commemoration as a sign, referring back to an original loss, and projecting forward to the two protagonists' imminent break-up. It is a sign of absence in that, underpinning the theme of a visit to Dylan Thomas' grave, is the connoted emotional break-up of the couple which has yet to happen. The visit to the grave and the poet's former house allows a network of references linking the entire narrative to the concept of absence, hollowing out the dynamic expectation of a
story-line. Such signs have the curious function of 'bringing death up', repeating it in a way, and yet by doing so establishing the conditions of meaning which bury the original event deeper.¹ The pilgrimage of the story to the grave can be seen as an allegory of the imminent death of the couple's relationship. The couple's waning love affair is a death without a 'body', a loss in which absence has not yet been registered, mourning has not been properly accomplished. The uncanniness this invokes is possibly one way in which silence registers as the textual trace of something being brought back in an indeterminate way. As J. Hillis Miller says this tends to:

involve the reader's innocence or guilt....Any repetitive structure of the 'uncanny' sort whether in real life or in words, tends to generate an irrational sense of guilt in the one who experiences it. I have not done anything (or have I?) and yet what I witness makes demands on me which I cannot fulfill.²

In the case of Atwood's story, acknowledgement of the true cause for commemoration is impossible; it is the pilgrimage itself which both masks and stands in for the couple's depression, and thus displaces the mourning of the demise of their own relationship. The reader therefore grasps the premonitory significance of the visit as emblematic of an event which is in the future, yet hierarchically governing the repeating surface of the grave

---

¹ For a compelling reading of this repeating function of the sign see J. Hillis Miller, Fiction and Repetition (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982). In particular chapter 3: "Wuthering Heights: Repetition and the 'Uncanny'".

² Fiction and Repetition, 69.
emblems. This introduces a strangeness, encapsulated in the female narrator's line at the graveside:

_They take us for granted, neither approaching nor avoiding us: we are strangers and as such part of this landscape._

Just as her companion has:

_become not more familiar to me as he should have but more alien. Close up, he's a strange terrain, pores and hairs; but he isn't nearer, he's further away, like the moon when you've finally landed on it._ (84)

It would seem that what the narrative is seeking out here is not the origins of a loss, but the loss of origins, of a plot, (and of history?).

In "Hair Jewellery" the female narrator _ponder's_ a past relationship in the light of a, (we are left to surmise), successful present. Yet confronted with the reality of her choices for stability, a career and a normal married life, she is faced also with the demise of her impossible and equally seductive love-affair. This is also, obliquely, a story about the loss of youth and the capacity to invest outer reality with inner fantasy and believe it. As the narrator says:

_You were, of course, the perfect object. No banal shadow of lawnmowers and bungalows lurked in your melancholy eyes, opaque as black marble, recondite as urns, you coughed like Roderick Usher, you were, in your own eyes and therefore in mine, doomed and restless as Dracula._

This apparently never totally reconcilable reality is Atwood's favourite theme, leading into language as a site of contradiction

1 "The Grave of the Famous Poet" in _Dancing Girls_, 81. All further references are in the text of the thesis.
2 "Hair Jewellery" in _Dancing Girls_, 109. All further references are in the text of the thesis.
harbouring, not harmonizing this duality. It is Atwood's poetic resolution, relying on the sign's schizophrenia as it translates both the order of the defining world and the expressive resonance of the inner word. Yet Atwood also leads out of the poetic propensity of language into gothic as a way of relieving the tyranny of realistic narrative. The male protagonist in the story is the reflecting marker of the narrator's own transformation within the world of academia, (the archetypal world of words), from a position of passivity to that of mastery. This correlates, in Atwood's perceptions, with the difference between a present (poetic) reality and a retrospective (mimetic) one. This direct correlation between people's relationship to the world, and the linguistic sign's relationship to outer reality is a trait which follows through in all her short fiction. As the narrator says in "Hair Jewellery", looking back on her romantic attachment:

Our problem, I thought, was that neither the world around us nor the future stretching before us contained any image of what we might conceivably become. We were stranded in the present as in a stalled, otherwise empty subway train, and in this isolation we clutched morosely at each other's shadows.(111)

Years after the narrator has been left waiting for him in a cold hotel room, only to learn he is living with another woman, their meeting at a conference does not exorcise the past but renders it more potent:

But when I returned from the conference to the house where I live, which is not a bungalow but a two-storey colonial and in which, ever since I moved in, you have occupied the cellar, you were not gone. I expected you to have been dispelled, exorcised: you had become real, you had a wife and three snapshots, and banality is after all the magic antidote for unrequited love.(123)
"War in the Bathroom" is cited as one of Atwood's best stories. Certainly because the tension created between the two separate centres of consciousness, which reveal themselves as belonging to the same narrator, sets up a dialectic of voice and silence within discourse itself. The 'I' and 'she' waging war on a old man, for rights to the bathroom in a rooming house, spell out Atwood's problem of where and how to create a unified subjecthood and perception. The split here is within the old lady's psyche and this provides a ground for textual investigation of the absence underpinning all discursive, and thus symbolic structures of significance. The linguistic 'I' in circulation here points to an alienated consciousness, one which partially refers back to itself but also to an Otherness" the 'she' of an alienated schismmed perception. The void this uncovers, and which implicates the reader as the story progresses and our belief in the narrator's unified vision begins to vacillate, is, in this case invested in a character's psyche. The phenomenological conflict which is left hanging in her other stories as a hollowness of voice and a problematical determinism is given a sense of causal identity. The shifts in perception as the controlling 'I' governs a hierarchy in which 'she' and the woman with two voices disperse into polyphony, creates an internal dialogue which the reader slowly proceeds to gloss as the strangeness of the narration becomes apparent:

Later, when she had got up and put on the clothes she went downstairs to get the milk from the refrigerator. The old man had arranged the letters on the hall table: one letter in each corner of the table, and one in the centre. I must remember to have her fill out a change-of-address card. Several times during the morning the woman with the two voices came into the bathroom. She seemed to be emptying
pails or saucepans of water into the basin. Again I could hear the high voice and the harsh whisper. Talking to oneself is a bad habit. (6)

Here the source of story is not thrown into contradiction as such. Language is not used to denote one thing and connote another, producing a secondary chain of signifiers from the signs of epitaphs, grave-stones and the like. The rifts in language refer to a psychological one; a rift in the consciousness of the character, which is reflected in language as the symbolic domain which expresses this consciousness. The inner world is ruptured and the outer word is an effect of this primary defect. The silence implied is a psyche at odds with itself not language at odds with itself. In a way "The War in the Bathroom" is the short story in which words seem best suited to the world as Atwood sees it. For here she is not articulating loss and death as a loss of plot or history which the story repeats in some way but fails to elucidate. In "The War in the Bathroom" there is a viable centre of focus and a psychological interpretation.

Atwood's short stories constantly work on the breakdown of meaning between the word and the world; human beings who threaten to pierce the mirror image of the objective world represented by relationships, society and power structures. The 'unsaid' of this representative world is a silence beyond death, which her stories repeat through an obsessional repeating of motifs of death and decay; a lack which remains unassuaged and formless at closure. The vagaries of the story-line according to Peter Brooks, can be seen as a compulsion desiring the end and involved in repetition to defer that end. Her narratives can also be said to connote a pre-historical, pre-linguistic organic territory
implied by the use of natural imagery. We could ask of many of her short stories: 'Where do they come from?' for the realistic underpinnings often seem insufficient to justify them. The title story of the collection "Dancing Girls" glosses the problem of city alienation, immigrant despair, and the dark spaces of misunderstanding that all urban dwellers encounter. Sherrill Grace's comment that the story does not provide adequate foundations for the heroine's misgivings\(^1\) is not entirely justified. On the contrary, this appears one of the strongest narratives in the collection because a separate cultural identity is alluded to, a secondary silent voice is referred to, that of the 'exotic' Arab called upon to don 'native costume' for the benefit of the landlady's children. This rift in understanding between cultures in which one is relegated to the position of the Other, is as irreconcilable as the American city outside is to Ann, a Canadian studying architecture. The poignancy of the story lies in the marginalisation of the nameless Arab, relegated to a token exotic status. He is a 'foreigner' and as such is already on the 'Other' side of the parameters set by Mrs Nolan's fear and distrust. Ann herself glimpses his despair and fantasizes on his predicament as a struggling student:

'He's lost his nerve,' Ann thought. 'He'll fail'. It was too late in the year for him ever to catch up. ... She could see he was drowning but there was nothing she could do. Unless you were good at it you shouldn't even try,

\(^1\) Sherrill Grace, *Violent Duality*, 84.
she was wise enough to know that. All you could do for the drowning was to make sure you were not one of them.¹

When the anonymous the lodger throws a party and is subsequently thrown out, the landlady finds an empty suitcase; a metaphorical sum of the past, present and future of the immigrant’s investment capital in Western terms. This story, as I have said, opens up the trail of a secondary narrative, to relieve the ghosts in Atwood’s stories, and thus offers others horizons and sources of silent knowledge founded in multicultural territory. The ideological deadlock is thus partially lifted to glimpse the historical subtext which galvanises Atwood’s creative energies, in the same way that her more overtly feminist texts do.

¹ "Dancing Girls" in Dancing Girls, 220.
Chapter 6

'Other' countries: Female dystopia in The Handmaid's Tale

The Handmaid's Tale ¹ is a vision of a society in which a totalitarianism constitutes the body politic, regulating a highly sophisticated system of control over its subjects. At the heart of this control is the appropriation of women's bodies in the interest of the state. One aspect of the division of women's labour in this dystopia is the closely monitored and isolated function of reproduction, set up as a crucial political goal following the ravages of a global nuclear war. The Handmaid of the novel is one of those young and fit enough to be recruited in the effort to repopulate the Empire of Gilead; a hegemonic territory on the site of the United States of America at the turn of the twentieth century. Ironically, many of the dystopic elements in the novel are familiar to women in various parts of the world today. The novel presents a world-view gathering in social practices and sectarian doctrines of control which figure both in the edicts of Islamic law and in Christian anti-abortion crusades. It is a radical example of the undermining of women's civil liberties which in certain cultures (where the right to work, hold a bank-account, drive a car or even eat at the same table as men are privileges still denied women) have not yet reached the stage of rights. The novel therefore also speaks to women's present across the divide of cultures, as well as representing a radical vision of a negative future.

Ensuring the central workings of the system of power in *The Handmaid's Tale* entails a complex division and sub-division of labour. Society is hierarchically stratified, emblazoned with colour-coded uniforms, and the preferment of privilege for the male population is also a regimented code of rank and grade. In this scheme of things where women are part of central political design, some are more 'equal' than others. The Commanders' wives are at the top of the pyramid and hold the status of householder with the domestic responsibilities entailed. Under their authority women's roles are distributed in forms of service; Marthas as domestic workers, and the Handmaids as wombs for the nation. Outside the household further divisions of labour control the supply and training of Handmaids by Aunts, preparing them for service in the Red Centre. The sign of 'gyne', that is, woman as reproductive function, governs the symbolic codes at work in the narrative. The Red Centre and red robes characterize the Handmaids and set off a chain of meaning; the colour of life but also that of death, of menses and childbirth, and also the blood of traitors to the regime, among them doctors who formerly practised abortions. A political source of contention, 'gyne' clusters several themes around it and is embedded in a dense symbolic matrix, structured as it is upon the religiously encoded yet nonetheless organic process of fertilization and procreation. Red and white dominate the narrative in parallel to their organic counterparts semen and blood, which play such an important part in the ritual ceremonies of the Empire.

Passing the wall where traitors are displayed to the public the narrator says:
The men wear white coats, like those worn by doctors or scientists. ... Each has a placard hung around his neck to show why he has been executed: a drawing of a human foetus. ... I look at the one red smile. The red of the smile is the same as the red of the tulips in Serena Joy's garden, ... The red is the same but there is no connection. (43)

Speaking of the childbirth metaphor in relation to female creativity Susan Stanford Friedman asserts:

Instead of contributing to the reification of Western culture, the female metaphor expresses a fundamental rebellion against it. It represents a defiance of historical realities and a symbolic reunion of mind and body, creation and procreation. ¹

Ironically, childbirth in The Handmaid's Tale is a focussing on the very separation of mind and body attributable to a male logic. Women in the novel are either ideal, chaste vessels or Babylonian whores. Unwomen, those tainted with the spirit of rebellion or impure desires, find themselves either sent to colonies full of nuclear debris, or the local brothel. The myth of woman as chaste vessel upheld in the Bible also affects the male population in the novel. Assaults on the female body are punishable by death. As is sexual intercourse unless the officer is of the rank to be allowed a female sexual partner. Thus 'gyne' is an overdetermined space of biological functions where political ends are folded into religious transcendence. A gap is opened between 'woman' as a material entity, and the social, symbolic and biological discourses defining 'woman'. Radically politicised she

takes on new meanings according to the context, mediated by cultural forces at work within the Gileadian Empire to camouflage the failures of the system.

In many instances in the novel the charged issues of women's autonomy and women's desires are questioned and shown to be implicated in a political and social context. *Context is all,* (154) as the Handmaid realizes. Rather than a diatribe against a dystopic male world order, the narrative examines the politics of woman's place in society, how she is a function of a network of power relations implying a position rather than an essentialist subject/object dichotomy. Woman as victim in *The Handmaid's Tale* follows the prescriptions of Atwood' critical study of Canadian literature:

> The tone of Canadian literature as a whole is, of course, the dark background: ... But in that literature there are elements which, although they are rooted in this negativity, transcend it - the collective hero, the halting but authentic break-throughs made by characters who are almost hopelessly trapped, the moments of affirmation that neither deny the negative ground nor succumb to it. ¹

The totalitarian powers in the novel, vested in the transcendence of the Empire of God labels women as commodities. The subtlety of the narrative is to show that 'Empire' is always constructed on the site of the Other, its centrality is a mark of repression, and simultaneously the trace of its dependency on that which it represses. The Empire of Gilead has no consensus approval, no known material boundaries for these are constantly shifting, and

¹ *Survival,* 245.
no self-proclaimed rulers. It simply 'is' everywhere, for its ideology is centred but has no material visible centre open to concensus or contestation:

This is the heart of Gilead, where the war cannot intrude except on television. Where the edges are we aren't sure, ... but this is the centre where nothing moves. The Republic of Gilead, said Aunt Lydia, knows no bounds. Gilead is within you. (33)

The Empire is founded, like the British Empire over which 'the sun never set', on a transcendent ideal translated into a dominant moral discourse feeding on the repression of difference. One of the strands of the narrative engages in undoing the 'good of the people' discourse and discovering the edges where repression is incomplete, the point where the concept of Empire fragments.

The Word, words and women

The ideology underpinning the Empire of Gilead as a religious state institutes a politics of God's Word, implying a biblical transparency, giving itself up to a singular interpretation. The preface of the novel sets out the terms of Gilead's interpretation with a passage from Genesis conferring a ceremonial status on the practice of polygyny, and sanctifying the male seed. The sacred Empire defines itself against the ungodliness of 'before'. Pornography is classed with literacy, they are both social practices which threaten the moral fibre of the community; the first because it degrades women and the second because knowledge had proved too dangerous for, Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression. (233)
Access to language has become a privilege, the domain of the abstract versus the performative, mind versus matter. Women themselves represent the Word made flesh, their bodies enacting a symbolic language of ceremony and ritual, whereas the world of symbols is denied them. As in Atwood's other work, in *The Handmaid's Tale* language becomes organic substance, allied to the natural world. The empowerment of language takes on a subterranean quality in the narrative as a feminine 'underground' process, whereas in contrast *masculinity has ceased to regenerate itself.*

At one moment the Commander, head of the Handmaid's household, divulges the state's takeover to be a result of men's feeling of inadequacy:

\[ T \]here was nothing for them to do with women ...

*There was nothing to work for, nothing to fight for.* (221)

Atwood's brand of articulated feminism overtly states the terms of male ascendancy as a fragile virility. Dependent on the mirroring function of women, *the boundaries of a woman's body represent the limits of social power.* 'The feminine' as the site of repressed social fears and desires defines the phallus as unique signifier. In the story, the pre-revolutionary epoch represents a society in which a male supremacy has been eroded. Women's access to education, work and financial independence has shifted the balance of power between the sexes. Yet, and such is Atwood's ironical appraisal of technological progress, the infra-

---

2 *Border Traffic*, 5.
structure of this late capitalist society facilitates the take-over, and the immediate withdrawal of women's rights, through its very centralisation and control. In an age where currency has been replaced by Compucards, women's financial independence can be erased in one fell swoop. As Moira, a friend of the Handmaid's from the past explains at the time of the 'coup':

*Any account with an F on it instead of an M. All they needed to do is push a few buttons. We're cut off.* (187)

By severing women from the lifelines of independence, the regime situates women at the margins of representation, dividing them up into the signifying categories that correspond to male fantasies. Although under the regime the 'Pornycorners' dispensing sex are abolished, the underground model of a nineteenth-century brothel is reinstated for the Commanders. A place where taboos are lifted momentarily in order to restate the boundaries of propriety, 'Jezebels' is a club catering to the party elite, housing females who either transgressed state laws or were formerly 'professional' prostitutes.

The opposing manifestation of male fantasies is that of the virgin birth, played out through the Handmaids' symbolic chastity, their only function being the holy crusade of reproduction. The ritualistic monthly ceremony of insemination folds sexuality and motherhood into a discourse of separate categories. In these displaced categories of sexual meaning the Commanders' wives are mothers but not procreators, their Handmaid servants are fecund wombs but not sexual partners. Both operate within the strict prescription of the law which is the properly colonial one of
'divide and rule'. As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar make clear in their study *No Man’s Land*, the dangerous/desirable woman as Other exceeding male control has a long heritage, encompassing texts such as Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and the social phenomenon Jack the Ripper.

*Even his name Kurtz, with it incorporation of Kôr, suggests not only, as the German implies, that he has been cut off or curtailed, but also that he is ultimately meant to signify the nightmare corpse at the core of the anxious patriarchal/imperialist mind, the dead father who has been ‘blasted’ into impotence by ‘the horror, the horror’, of otherness.*

In the case of the notorious Jack the Ripper, Gilbert and Gubar posit the public’s fascination as

* [a] grotesque elaboration of male artists’ rebellion against the femme fatale, [in that ] the Ripper myth implicitly presented male hostility toward women as a necessary retaliation against female erotic power.*

The Commander’s ceremonial ritual of intercourse with the Handmaid exemplifies the male homophobic fantasy of being alone at the origin, bypassing ‘woman’, and the novel is concerned with the ways in which such a fantasy is given political structure through the either active or passive roles of women. As Hélène Cixous theorizes:

*She [woman] has not been able to live in her ‘own’ house, her very body ...*

---

2 *No Man’s Land*, 45.
3 *No Man’s Land*, 48.
Your continent is dark. Dark is dangerous. You can't see anything in the dark, you are afraid. ...
And we have internalized this fear of the dark. Women haven't had eyes for themselves ... Their sex still frightens them. Their bodies, which they haven't dared enjoy, have been colonized. Woman is disgusted by woman and fears her.

The ceremony preserves the image of the 'holy' Mother, that of the loyal wife, and simultaneously contains and controls the (en)chaining logic of the natural world in the appropriated space; the womb detached and dispossessed, awaiting the seed in order to signify. The Handmaid 'standing in' for the wife is the potent sign of deficiency and the righting of that deficiency. It represents the state-controlled symbolic erasure of both the wife and the Handmaid's identity; the former's because she fails to fulfill her most important function, and the latter's because she is unfit to be but a surrogate. The element healing the breach between these two female deficiencies is the transcendent male sperm. The male state of being is therefore the beginning:

*It all comes back to man - to his torment, his desire to be ...the origin. Back to the father ...*

*Their old dream: to be god the mother; The best mother, the second mother, the one who gives the second birth.*

Seeing, speaking and naming are part of the hierarchy of state hegemony. The 'Eyes' in the novel are the secret service in charge of subversion control, the Aunts are directly responsible for indoctrinating the women. Names are refused the Handmaids,

---


they have no individual subjecthood; taking on the patronymic of their 'host' household for the time they are there. Thus both a part of, and outside, the family unit, devoid of status and nameless, isolated and feared by the Commanders' wives, they serve to anonymously fuel the production system whilst held at the margins of the system. Separating woman as outside from woman as inside, the Empire resolves the dilemma of unpredictable and chaotic place in culture and nature:

> [W]omen are allied with what is regular, according to the rules, since they are wives and mothers, and allied as well with those natural disturbances, their regular periods, which are the epitome of paradox, order and disorder.¹

The 'natural disturbances' are equally the subtext of Munro's fiction, tracing the paradox of women's natural functions as the underside of culture. In *The Handmaid's Tale* the paradox is foregrounded in the discourse of state manipulation. In order to survive psychologically the narrator has tuned into the rhythms and inner movements presaging physical change:

> I'm a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping ...

> Every month there is a moon, gigantic, round, heavy, an omen. It transits, pauses, continues on and passes out of sight, and I see despair coming. ... I listen to my heart, wave upon wave, salty and red, continuing on and on, marking time. (84)

Atwood's organic language of the body has been extensively analysed in relation to the male gaze, the Eye/I denoting distance and control. In *The Handmaid's Tale* the heroine is plunged

¹ *The Newly Born Woman*, 8.
entirely into the realm of the male ego, caught within the visual perimeters of a hegemonic Eye/I. Her opposition to the system is played out within the prison walls, in this case within the confines of the object of censorship and definition, her body. The image of blood marking time, either full, significant womb moments or empty time passing, shifts the balance from a coveted object of the phallocentric Eye to a fluid traversal of boundaries; an alternative version of time and history. The alterity implied by Atwood's move from fixed gaze to the fluid, rhythmic medium of blood, both signifies going beyond the law of the all-seeing system, and being 'beside' oneself; in a space other than the imprisoned body. Such images introduce the double of women's representations; order versus chaos, nature versus culture, and also design a liminal space between the two opposites. Thus Atwood works with the male fetishisation of the woman's body; its surfaceself-reverential, according to Mulvey, admitting of no interior, in order precisely to set up an interior language or consciousness. The language of the female cycle also regulates and orders the Commander's household, intent as it is on the process of reproduction. 'Female time' is the causal centre of the Empire, for regeneration and continuity are the conditions for the Empire's growth and power. While the narrative examines the silent centre, where the analogy of the womb as a symbolic identity of the nation holds sway, outside these silent boundaries time is fragmented and limits undefined. Information leaked back to the centre tells of unspecified 'colonies', of wars and disaster, the epitome of a feared 'outside'. In the centre of the Empire each event concerning reproduction is presented as a spectacle in which the Handmaids themselves are
a rhetorical sign of their political function. Their ideological mission, and its inherently theatrical staging, serves to channel and direct the repression of subversion within the regime. One such ceremony, *Particution*, a representation on the themes of crimes against womanhood, serves both to release aggression and to eliminate political subversives:

'This man', says Aunt Lydia, 'has been convicted of rape'.
Her voice trembles with rage, and a kind of triumph ... A sigh goes up from us. ...
It's true, there is a bloodlust; I want to tear, gauge, rend ...
Ofglen is back beside me. Her face is tight, expressionless. ...
'Get control of yourself', she says ... 'Don't be stupid. He wasn't a rapist at all, he was a political. He was one of ours.
I knocked him out.' (290-2)

Reaffirming cohesion and hierarchy these stagings fold in and absorb possible subversive actions. The Handmaids cluster around them the repressed power struggles of the regime, and articulate them in a plausible discourse 'in the name of' women. Both engaged in reproduction, and reproducing the moral cohesion of the Empire, the women in the narrative are fully implicated in the production of meanings which organize the centre. The predominance of images of women edited and manipulated by the regime is another source of spectacle which presents the ways in which cultural meaning is produced. In the Red Centre, films of pornography and pro-abortion demonstrations from the past circumscribe the ills of 'before', while the mute sound-track effaces the actors' subjective presence. As in *Surfacing* Atwood exploits the vision of a totalizing technological apparatus, in order to expose a fundamental technology of feminine gender representation and limitation. Exploring the very epistemology of 'production' as it
pertains to nature, culture, and finally the workings of narrative itself, the narrator is obsessed with creativity and procreativity:

_ I would like to believe this is a story I'm telling. I need to believe it. I must believe it. ... If it's a story I'm telling, then I have control over the ending. Then there will be an ending, to the story, and real life will come after it._ (49)

Later in the story the narrator insists that this _is a reconstruction_ (150). Narratives become tied up with the conditions of narrativizing, as the narrator imagines an 'after' the rule of the Empire.

**Individual identity and forms of the past**

As the story proceeds the Handmaid discovers traces of the past within the strictures of her present, and a thread of the narrative concerns memory and personal identity. Discovering the phrase _Nolite te bastardes carborundorum_ scratched in the surface of her wardrobe, she later discovers its meaning and the continuity it signifies. This encoded message and warning - _Don't let the bastards get you down_ - conveys that she is retracing the steps of a former Handmaid and that her illicit tête-à-tête sessions with the Commander were also part of a pattern which led to her predecessor's suicide. Her nocturnal visits to the Commander's study are an act of transgression, a crossing of demarcation lines from official silencing to the world of communication associated with the past. It offers the delights of Scrabble sessions and out of date magazines, opening up monologic discourses to regain the pleasures of communication and exchange:

_ 'Prolix, quartz, quandary, sylph, rhythm,' all the old tricks with consonants I could dream up or remember. My tongue felt thick with the effort of spelling. It was like using a language I'd once known but had nearly forgotten, a_
language having to do with customs that had long before passed out of the world. (164)

In this forbidden space of language as communication and pleasure, the hegemony of the biblical Word is displaced. Cracks and fissures in the apparatus of state control begin to appear as the subtext of transgression develops. Thus the countering force of the individual is shown to surface through the corrupt, flawed system. But if Atwood sets up oppositions once again between the world as a process of the self and the world as technological form, the dividing line between the two is often questioned, and thus seeks to avoid a static victim/victimiser dichotomy. The Handmaid revels in the seduction of language to which her nightly forays into the Commander's territory gives her access, but she also revels in the outmoded trapping of garter belts and feathers which she dons to accompany the Commander to a brothel:

Now he shakes this out. It's a garment, apparently, and for a woman: there are the cups for the breasts, covered in purple sequins. ... The feathers are around the thigh holes, and along the top.

'You expect me to put that on?' I say ...

Yet there's an enticement in this thing, it carries with it the childish allure of dressing up. And it would be so flaunting, such a sneer at the Aunts, so sinful, so free. Freedom, like everything else, is relative. (242)

The pleasure of silk stockings is not here only attached to the concept of woman as object of desire. It is also in play as the empowering, if only momentary escape from the 'Eye' of the system. Here, escaping outside the borders of propriety involves the very trappings of representation which signify women's place as fetishised object in society. Once again context is the
determining factor, pointing to Atwood's philosophy of social and cultural positioning rather than essential determinants. The brothel trappings are uncanny; defamiliarized costumes from a past restaged in the present. *A movie about the past is not the same as the past* states the narrator. *I know it contained these things, but somehow the mix is different.* (247)

The carnivalesque play of masks represented by the sequins and feathers at Jezebel's, is one of the moments in the narrative when past and present collide in a post-modern splitting of consciousness. Problematizing continuity a static form of 'before' is re-enacted, divorced from the social fabric of the present and driven underground. Drawing attention to the fact that the past does not travel well, its uncanny return tells the story of the Empire's inner tensions. The women at Jezebel's are clownish, and their eyes look too big ... too dark and shimmering, their mouths too red, too wet, blood-dipped and glistening; (247) The scene has the excessive quality of a Brechtian theatre of the Absurd, the identity of history is questioned as its politics of apparently harmonious continuity is rendered problematic.

Peopled by outsiders of the regime; women prostitutes lawyers and militants alike, the brothel is doubly the scene of the Other. In Jezebel's, as in the Commander's study, the forces of desire and gratification, and the symbolic plays of communication and exchange are mobilized in a suspended temporality; within the limits of an unreal replay of the past. In Gilead the self-reflecting surface or screen is the only access to the world from the 'dead' centre. Likewise the Handmaid's transgression of borders back into the world of words and communication, is played out as a self-conscious code; a chain of signs caught in a
maze of language where the idea of a referential 'real' only leads to another rhetorical move of the Empire. In the brothel, a lesbian friend of the Handmaid reappears, having escaped the Red Centre and been recaptured. Moira tells of a resistance movement, the Underground Femaleroad, which organizes escape routes out of the Empire. She is connected to the Handmaid's former student days and to her mother, a feminist who was deported to the colonies during the initial purges. The 'system' is portrayed as a voracious one, and a constant trope in Atwood's novel is the theocratic 'cleansing' technology, proceeding in nightmare fashion from the socially and politically subversive to competing Christian sects:

'It was before the sectarian roundups began in earnest. As long as you said you were some sort of Christian and you were married, for the first time that is, they were still leaving you pretty much alone. They were concentrating first on the others. They got them more or less under control before they started in on everybody else. (259)

The women in the novel constitute a typology of nonconformism in an increasingly techno-centred worldview, governed by normative mediatised discourses. The nuclear family is the sole cultural model, and the way Atwood links it to an ever more reductive politics of exclusion can be seen, as Maggie Humm points out, as veering on the side of a fatalistic conservatism. (However, as pointed out previously, the serious possibility of a reversal of abortion rights in the United States, can only point to the fragility of the apparently firmly established authority of women over their own bodies).

Transcendent discourses in Gilead first create a distance between centre and margins, and then feed the centre from the margins.
Hélène Cixous speaks of this distancing in the context of gender, but it is also a strategy of the Empire. Thus woman is:

...kept at a distance so that he can enjoy the ambiguous advantages of the distance, so that she who is distance and postponement, will keep alive the enigma, the dangerous delight of seduction, in suspense, in the role of 'eloper',... 'outside'. But she cannot appropriate this 'outside'... it is his 'outside'. ...

Not only is she the portion of strangeness - inside his universe where she revives his restlessness and desire. Within his economy, she is the strangeness he likes to appropriate.¹

Desire for, and fear of, those that are different both threatens and enlivens the dead centre of Gilead, activating moral forces and serving to paper over the cracks in ideology.

**Personal Time and Empire Time**

The marking of time and memory links the Handmaid's consciousness to the Empire's history. There is the chronology of events, which overlaps and backtracks into the Handmaid's past as she pieces together a story from the questionable information available on what happened at the time of the coup. Loose ends of the truth encounter disinformation, and she is constantly obliged to question the veracity of her account, and further, to question whether a complete account is possible. Likewise, the epistemology of 'woman' is explored through the Handmaid's incursions into a past where the contours and consciousness of

¹ *The Newly Born Woman*, 68.
her self as an independent woman were entirely different. The puzzle of the Empire, its hierarchy and its fractures, is mapped through the fifteen sections of the narrative. These concern the static zone of Empire time. The epilogue of the narration - an academic reflection on Gilead after its demise - seals it as a defunct political hegemony, and places it in a retrospective analysis of historical causes. This postscript confers a larger frame of reference, positing historical continuity, ends, and new beginnings. The Handmaid's own tale however, knows no such closure, for her real identity remains undisclosed, as does her eventual fate:

Did our narrator reach the outside world safely and build a new life for herself? Or was she discovered in her attic hiding place, arrested, sent to the Colonies or to Jezebel's, or even executed? Our document, ... is on these subjects mute.

(323/4)

If the fifteen section headings have to do with a static present, imprisoned in the routines and ceremonies of Gilead, and punctuated by Night when the Handmaid subverts patriarchal control, the forty-six chapters running through them imply a different continuity. This rhythm breaches the hold of the present and concerns the narrator's consciousness; overlapping scenes of memory, moving from past to present and vice-versa. A constant strand in her reflections is to question her own identity; the forms of self-knowledge that she formerly took as givens. Revising her definitions of the gendered body as either a discursive construct or a biological given, her personal predicament becomes an exploration into 'woman' as subject and as representation. If the fifteen chapters 'contain' the female gender in a socio/political framework soaked in a biblical
discourse, inside the perimeters of this representation, the Handmaid struggles to come to terms with the regime's interruption of the world-views and values that signified her sense of self. The counterpoint set up by the dual focus-structures of the self versus structures of power- creates a dialectic between individual experience and collective discourses, between the 'inside' of the self and the 'outside' of representation. In the case of the Handmaid, the conflict between public and private perceptions splits her consciousness along temporal lines; 'before' signifies an inner self in process and 'now' an outer surface in which the fixed markers of identity disappear. In the space between the two worlds, words themselves fail. At the same time the Handmaid is involved in historiography, connecting history to narrative in her efforts to 'read' what happened to bring the Empire about, and how to make a valid story of it, one that would not be a fiction. One of the opening comments links reality to narrative as history-making:

*Each thing is valid and really there. It is through a field of such valid objects that I must pick my way, every day and in every way.* (43)

Later she questions how the revolution happened and what happened to her daughter:

*There must have been needles, pills, something like that. I couldn't have lost that much time without help ... You've killed her, I said. She looked like an angel, solemn, compact, made of air.* (49)

Fragments of the past re-emerge, as when the lady of the house, Serena Joy, shows the Handmaid a photograph of her daughter as coercion to sleep with the chauffeur and fall pregnant. (The Handmaid in fact falls in love with him, falls pregnant and is
helped to escape, or so we surmise). The Handmaid further pieces together the events that led to the revolution, by drawing our attention to the printed word as a dubious history:

*There were stories in the newspapers, of course, corpses in ditches or the woods, bludgeoned to death or mutilated ... The newspaper stories were like dreams to us, bad dreams dreamt by others ...We were the people who were not in the papers. We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of print.* (66)

Playing on textual constructions and ways of knowing, *the blank white spaces* refer us to the 'blank' of history; a nightmare of rhetoric which the Handmaid is caught up in. Working against the forces of propaganda entails activating memory as salvation; a space outside official discourses from which to evaluate the workings of the Empire. This space outside is of course inside the boundary of her story-telling, playing on the personal voice as truth against the public fictions constructed around her. The remnants of the past encountered as the narrative proceeds - a line of script, magazines, a photo, her friend Moira - fracture the totalizing rhetoric of the Empire and vie for narrative space. In such a way that the holistic discourse of central power tends towards dispersal as the fragments of memory accumulate. The Handmaid's reminiscences are caught in a web of belief/disbelief, doing/undoing, as when she remembers when she and her husband Luke tried to leave the country at the beginning of the regime:

*I believe Luke is lying face down in a thicket, a tangle of bracken, ... I also believe that Luke is sitting up, in a rectangle somewhere, grey cement, on a ledge or the edge of something, a bed or chair ... I also believe that they didn't catch him or catch up with him after all,...(114/5)*
The supreme irresolution of her plot, whether she escaped and rejoined her lover Nick, whether she ever saw her daughter again or was exterminated in the purges, is the final 'blank' bearing a dual, oppositional inscription:

And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light.

(307)

This is further embedded in uncertainty as the academic perspective of the end places the story in a past that remains unresolved:

...[T]he past is a great darkness, and filled with echoes. Voices may reach us from it; but what they say to us is imbued with the obscurity of the matrix out of which they come;(324)

Reminiscent of Gallant's voices, echoes and darkness, the problematical origins of this testimony from the past once more feeds into the dialectic between the text and historical origins of Canadian fiction.

*The Handmaid's Tale* is involved both with retrieval of the language of past experience, and the ideological mystification and erasure of official discourses. The feminine subject, embodied in the nameless heroine of the story is inscribed in both these languages, her body the place where society's ills are written. This involves both the play of representative forms, and a concentration on ways in which history is linked to narrative.
Disparate codes: the encounter of French and English culture in Mavis Gallant's fiction.

The juxtaposition of two cultural landscapes, French and English, figures in Gallant's work as potently as the scenario of exile. If the latter means crossing cultural boundaries in search of lost memories, and a constantly elusive self, the former foregrounds the borders of irreconcilable cultural perspectives.

The story "The Other Paris" conjures irony as much through the mutual blindness of divergent worldviews, as through the romantic self-delusions of the heroine Carol. In later stories, for example "Overhead in a Balloon", the sense of place and the characters moving within it have merged to such an extent that the latter seem to be a coded effect of Paris as a causal form. One has the impression that Walter is a product of the city's rhetorical structures, repeating them even as he seeks to question them. In "The Other Paris" place is established through a continuous examination of the links that bind one to a specific culture. Paris is obviously not in the image of the American Carol's desires, as she seeks romance on its streets and gardens. Yet, as the story slowly reveals, there is an 'Other' Paris, corresponding to her own repressed emotional landscape. The misrecognition on which the story functions, as Americans see only the post-war poverty of France, destabilizes ethnocentric comfort, showing up the conventions on which literary romance relies, and which are the

---

1 Mavis Gallant, "The Other Paris" in The Other Paris [1956](Toronto: Macmillan, 1986),1. All further references are in the text of the thesis.
model for Carol's expectations. As Gallant sets up successive layers of irony, establishing Carol's 'popular romance' vision, she does so only to undermine it from within, dismantling the premises on which 'Marriageship'¹ is based. Odile, the disinherited French girl financially supporting the tastes of a now pennyless aristocratic family, is the opposing focus, brought to the reader primarily through Carol's restricted perceptions. The story opens on the scene of Carol's wedding preparations, for she will shortly be marrying an American colleague Howard Mitchell. Both the romance of French folklore, embedded in the figure of the dressmaker Madame Germaine, and its opposite, the sceptical appraisal of Odile, are presented. The scraps of net and satin, the stacks of vogue; [her] professional look of anxiety (1) are the clichés of popular romance. In a series of misconceptions the heroine first endorses a Mills and Boon interpretation, and then confuses its codes of moonlight and roses with the equally powerful protestant ethic embodied in Howard Mitchell:²

Similar economic backgrounds, financial security, belonging to the same church - these were the pillars of the married union. (4)

In this game of mistaken identities the reader is invited to unravel their sources in social encodings. Carol's mistaken

---

¹ 'Marriageship' refers to Ellen Moers' definition of the heroine's role in Jane Austen's novels as the cautious investigation of a field of eligible males, the delicate maneuvering to meet them ... and the careful management, at the end of the story, which turns idle flirtation into a firm offer of marriage with a good settlement for life. In Literary Women, 71.

² In referring to Gallant's rereadings of marriage and romance plots I am indebted to Barbara Godard's article: "Modalities of the Edge" in RANAM, XXII (1989).
perceptions are the narrator's function; to detach the individual's belief system from the social structures underpinning its 'natural' flow. The narrator's concern in unveiling the assumptions at the centre of the couple's marriage plot is a contrary narrative movement to Carol's. As she progresses deeper into the complexities of Parisian life, where her attempts to fit standard patterns on to the vista of unfamiliar cultural patterns fail, the narrator is intent on a discovery of complex networks of connotation. For if Carol constantly defers and displaces confrontation with her literary fantasies, the narrator is involved in establishing successive layers of meaning. The shadow of 'another' Paris then rises out of memory, caught on the descriptions of restaurants where the food was lumpy and inadequate and the fluorescent lighting made everyone look ill. (8) Poverty, illness, refugees, and dilapidation make up the snatches of information about this shadow world; one which Carol cannot see even as she objectively looks:

There must be more to it than this, she would think. Was it possible that these badly groomed girls liked living in Paris? Surely the sentimental songs about the city had no meaning for them. (8)

This dual tension in the narrative means that cultural patterns that emerge as images of the city and the French, operate on two levels. Whereas through the eyes of Carol, a disappointed ideal vision yields utilitarian monotony, this same focus is the trace of a Paris sensed as subtext. The reader apprehends, through the partiality of this vision, the elements left out; elements lending themselves to a silent Paris surfacing in fragments. Such a Paris is a special kind of evening, and a secret, and if she spoke to the right person, or opened the right door, or turned down an
unexpected street, the city would reveal itself. (8/9) Carol's failure to perceive outside the limits of her own North American upbringing signals something beyond those limitations. Influencing the points of harmony or discord between Carol and Howard, or Carol and Odile, or Carol and the Austrian emigré is a double-sided vision, a consciousness of missing information, the 'secret' that could elucidate and clarify the city. Whereas in Munro's work the domain of secrets, thus of knowledge, is connected to 'women's business'; the unsayable of their lives, in Gallant's stories submerged knowledge is one stage in a slippage of memory. The doors metaphorically waiting to be opened by Carol become opportunities both partially acknowledged and partially ignored, and finally suppressed by the erasure of memory. Invited at last to what she sees as the long-awaited step into Parisian society, the second-rate concert put on by Odile's sister is in fact the demarcation line between 'family' and 'foreigners' which confirms Carol's status as an outsider. Even more unpalatable is her sharing this status with Felix the dispossessed, whose existence in Paris is a long wait behind doors for visas, jobs and black-market goods. Carol's expectations turn upon themselves as she stopped caring about Paris, or Odile, or her feelings for Howard. ... Soon she was able to walk by Felix without a tremor, and after a while she stopped noticing him at all. (20/1) The latter signifies the 'secret' world in the narrative and blends with the unsettling strangeness evoked by the city, undermining the comfort of a protestant work ethic: For Carol, the idea that one might not be permitted to work was preposterous. (24) In the interplay of cultural differences and the threat these pose to self-identity, belonging to a community
relies on appropriation or rejection of difference. As Danielle Schaub has remarked:

Once part and parcel of the community it is essential to safeguard its cohesion and specificity against intruders.¹

At the point where, in her encounter with Felix, Carol's static 'pond' of North American mores sends back ripples, the narrative identifies the parameters and limits of influence, and cultural certainties are questioned. If Carol's perceptions are the Paris of legend and cliché, hardened into silence, confronting the Paris of complex emotional and political realities, lying on the other side of language,² a universalizing silence speaks at the moment its representative borders encounter other modes of being. As she resolutely dismisses the threat of complexity which friendship with Odile and Felix offers, the narrative moves from the edges of language revealing discordant social forms, back to the opening scenario. The wedding-dress fitting is reinstated as a return from shifting ground to the cohesive centre of Carol and Howard's future together. In the radical split between the two possibilities; adventure or North American marital venture, an indecisive gap is announced. The narrative once more opens possibilities in French territory as Carol and Odile visit Felix in his shabby hotel room and Carol felt that she had at last opened the right door, turned down the right street, glimpsed the vision toward which she had struggled on winter evenings.(29)

² "Modalities of the Edge", 44.
But the 'other' Paris, signalled as Other, unsettling assumptions of reality, is irreconcilable with closure. To effect harmony Carol will construct an image of Paris, *a coherent picture, accurate but untrue*. (30) The French 'open door' will have been displaced, suppressed, repeated by the narrative and finally destroyed by appropriation and absorption into the cliché of a benign and comforting Europe.

The novel *A Fairly Good Time* ¹ expands the dilemmas of cross-cultural dialogues into a complex web of misunderstanding. The length of the novel form gives Gallant the scope to explore fully the relations between selfhood, national identity and language. Complicating further the interplay of cultural encodings, is the theme of problematical relations between a mother and daughter which traverses the narrative. This is played out as a transatlantic exchange, in which the reader hears one side of the correspondence through the heroine/narrator Shirley Higgins-Perrigny. The letters and listings are part of a volume of scripts within scripts that compose the narrative. Another part consists of a scripted record of her marriage to Philippe Perrigny, which Shirley reads his scholarly endeavours; themselves misapprehensions of Anglo-Saxon culture. These scholarly notes render Gallic flowing abstract interpretations of Anglo-Saxon common attitudes and expressions. As listings and letters intertwine, Shirley's own voice is overwhelmed and rendered contingent on the multiplying levels of interpretation to which

---

¹ Mavis Gallant, *A Fairly Good Time* [1970](Toronto: Laurentian Library, 1983). All further references are in the text of the thesis.
she is subjected, and the reader is thus embroiled in the act of reconstructing Shirley’s voice from the domain of silence which supports the edifice of words. Ironically THE SOUNDLESS CRY is

the title of Philippe’s research into the Canadian question:

’"It is a silent cry, torn from the lungs piercing as pain, rending the firmament." Surely that sounds like your country, as the situation is now?’ (268)

If Philippe, the intellectual’s milieu is the rhetorician’s ‘par excellence’, Shirley the Canadian is submerged in the maze of Parisian cultural codes, one which, like Atwood’s gothic maze without a centre in Lady Oracle, is not to be encountered on the empiricist grounds of Anglo-Saxon logic. Throughout A Fairly Good Time the two continents of disparate tastes and meanings are embedded in the various scripts, themselves embedded in the frame narrative. Encouraging concentration on the act of reading itself, these texts within texts function as a poetics of cultural disparity, creating tension by a constant see-sawing of coded meanings from French to North American and back again. The novel in fact begins with such a problematical script in the form of a series of definitions, in the guise of a letter from Shirley’s mother, on the ‘common bluebell’, also known as Edymion non-scriptus. The sadly macerated and decomposed specimen which is the object of analysis provides a cryptic commentary on language, erroneous interpretations and, obliquely, Shirley’s own drama as her marriage is breaking up. Non-scriptus, (the unwritten), is itself a displacement of the message which Shirley has presumably failed to communicate, asking her mother for information on a flower instead of for the emotional support she needs. Harnessing answers to unasked questions, the reply, written, but in a sense on and of the
unwritten subtext of their relationship, opens on to questions of war and cultural affiliation which the narrative will grapple with. As such the letter from her mother is not so much a reply to Shirley, as a referral of any intimate dialogue to the arena of history and national identity:

Well, nothing can alter the memory I have of the gloriously sunny day when Canada rallied to the Mother Country ... Your letter was stained and blotted ...
Don't cry whilst writing letters. The person receiving the letter is apt to take it as a reproach. (5-7)

Associations are forged between Mother, Mother country and New World, directing our attention to a larger continuum of history, of which the particular state of a failing cross-cultural marriage would be a link in a semiotic chain. Also involved in this textual production is the writer Geneviève Deschranes; a friend of Philippe's and authoress of A Life Within a Life.
Philippe's writing is mainly represented by multiple versions of the nursery rhyme Goosey Gander, rendered in incomprehensible code via misinterpretations of his former governess's tutoring. Goodside Gander further interprets into Goosey Gander, and according to Philippe is apparently connected to Churchill and the Greek inheritance. Rendering the local and contextualized in terms of historical relevance, the twistings of the nursery rhyme display the absurdity of intellectual dogma. A passion for 'text' in all its forms pervades the narrative and these repeated embeddings mark out the production, reproduction and reception
of the text. They become hermeneutic puzzles for the reader and induce the vertigo that is the subject of the critical essay. ¹ Highlighting the act of enunciation, they come progressively to signify the wordy medium in which Shirley loses herself, and to which the plot itself is subsumed. Representing an ironic play on the Cartesian mindset through the tenets of the 'nouveau roman', the comic mode as it appears in Gallant's work is, according to Karen Smythe a trope in the subtext of grief, one that counters the sadness and loss that is figured in the text. ² Shifted from a stable context in the story, fragments of the written find their way across boundaries into transformed contexts or even other languages. Cutting across borders of meaning does not however evolve into a post-modernist self-representing identity. The splicing of passages and their insertion in transformed contexts, much in the way of film editing, are in the interests of insertion and appropriation by another referential space and another voice. Origins are played out within the sign itself, as a matter of power and control, in which perspectives and territory can be ceaselessly modified. Shirley's parting message to her husband is written on top of a trunk she had not yet opened and now quite happily knew she never would. 'Darling Philippe ... G.Gander is without doubt concerned with loyalty, fidelity, passing the buck and the situation in Berlin'. (307/8) This last message significantly slipped through steel teeth concealed behind the

¹ "Modalities of the Edge",43/45.
mailslot and became an irretrievable error. Encoded and lost, secreted in a space of memory which is, like the trunk, never to see daylight, information is circulated, deferred and set up again with no sense of motivation or agency. The irretrievable error would seem to be the final shift of an orphaned cultural discourse in translation from one site of meaning to another. A Fairly Good Time relinquishes the authority of an accountable source. Language fails, messages are lost, future perspectives uninformed. Narrative is contained in such meta-discourses on the nature of writing itself, and symbolically closed off from development. The teleology of plot is turned back on itself and agency is referred to its own disappearance down the chute of history. The silent 'unsaid' that is the mark of reception of such directionless texts within texts implies a different scene of narration, opening the distance of an absent mother. This Mother is country and mother tongue, filiation and affiliation. The sign\(^1\) of this space is heterogeneous, vaulting temporal continuity and spatial enclosure as the elswhere of an absent mother/daughter/Canada takes place in the daughter's realm of a Mother Europe/foreign tongue/France. Lifted from secure moorings, language pulls away from central coherence and is circulated on the borders of partially submerged territories.

---

\(^1\) This pertains to Julia Kristeva's theory of the sign as polysemic and contextual, always subject to conflicts of power between interest groups. Cited in Toril Moi, Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory [1985] (London/New York: Routledge, 1991), chapter 8.
'Information' is an interpretative trope in Gallant's work. In the story "The Pegnitz Junction" it signifies lost history, dislocated from a coherent continuum as it surfaces in the heroine's consciousness. In *A Fairly Good Time* the missing information worked through Shirley Perrigny's life-plot is a lack of understanding of French culture and the codes of secrecy governing the working of bureaucracy and family tradition. From the beginning of the story she declares that in contrast to Philippe's quest for mystery in ideas the mystery of behaviour seemed ... the only riddle worth a mention. (17) This serves as a portent for the plot development when Philippe will disappear from her flat, leaving only the clues of his documented abstract reasoning. The portrayal of a zenophobic France, obsessed with social structures and wary of foreigners who introduce revisions of accepted norms, is echoed in Canada's cultural 'problem' as Mrs Castle, a Canadian family friend travelling in France relates:

'...in the train coming up from Rome I fell in with a French-Canadian, ... This boy kept running down his own family till I didn't know where to look ... I told him there were vulgar people in Saskatchewan'... He said, 'Well perhaps you always were vulgar. We only became vulgar because of our contact with the English.'

'What English?' said Shirley. (42)

The historical misapprehensions classifying English-speaking Canadians as the English to Quebecois, and Canadians as Americans to the French, troubles the issue of who Canadians are, to whom, and from what perspective. The paranoia manifested by the guardians of French tradition who fear invasion, is replicated in the French-Canadian response to English
domination. Such passages refer split allegiances and historical affinities to a constantly shifting ontology, where the seepage of American ideology and confusion of origins within power struggles renders national consciousness a troubled concept. Shirley's site of identity in the novel is likewise indeterminate, as her strange ways threaten a fossilized French sense of tradition. An 'outsider', who is nonetheless an 'insider' by marriage, she serves to illuminate the forces which silence through marginalisation.

The couple's honeymoon in Berlin where Philippe carries out a journalistic assignment, and where Shirley miscarry, goes significantly unrecorded in Philippe's official version:

*In the long first-person account of the trip that appeared in 'Le Miroir' it was clear that Philippe had traveled alone.*
(38)

Having lost her first husband in an accident, Shirley had expected [Philippe] to build a house for her, intellectually and sentimentally, and invite her inside. But as it turned out, it was she who invited him. (50)

Absence, death and discontinuity prevail; overdetermined sites of narrative foreclosure of which Shirley is an unwitting agent. She is seemingly following the pattern of a mother who invited everyone in and gave everything away, (which can also be interpreted as an ironic doubling of a common perception of Canada's role in power relations and international politics.) The feeding into and out of the plot that this doubling effects, is one reason why the narrative seems *like listening to five radios*
Reverberations cross the void opened by the systematic unhinging of stable territorial markers, as the heroine loses her husband, flat, and baby, and it becomes increasingly clear that she was always a transitory figure on Philippe's horizon. As her plot moves towards the break-up of her life in France, her involvement in the lives of the Maurel family present another mode of doubling. The adolescent Claudie Maurel, mother of a retarded child by, (or so it is implied), her own father, draws the Canadian to the centre of a family drama, not in spite of her being foreign, but because of it. (162)

Mr Maurel, or 'Papa', is the omniscient player in this secondary narrative of French family life and muddled genealogy. The theme of confused origins is embodied by the child Alain, whom Shirley attempts against the father's interdiction, to extricate from the family confusion. The failure of a 'proper' continuity, and the dissolution of morality links the family saga to the collapse of hierarchical structures of power and control. Shirley felt as if she had been invited to act in a play without having been told the name of it ... She came on stage wondering whether the plot was gently falling apart or rushing onward toward a solution. (180) A plot in which causality has collapsed through the collapse of ordered continuity, re-enacts Shirley's own scenario of disturbed cultural allegiance, and Canada's troubled sense of identity. The rifts and gaps in Shirley's uninterrupted dialogue of the deaf (45) with her mother, can be set against the

---

1 John Ayre, "The sophisticated world of Mavis Gallant" in Saturday Night, 88, 9 (Sept., 1973), 34.
incestuous disruption of social form in the Maurel household. The coming together of several levels of contesting ideological forces render a source of narrative voice, a determining world-view, unlocatable. The workings of another text of history residing outside the fictional universe persistently disrupts the bid for harmony.

Stories of childhood and memory

Problems of voice and origins are prevalent in Gallant's stories of childhood. "Orphans' Progress" centres on the role of language and the narrator's voice as factors in the elaboration of a narrative space of origins. The 'where' of the orphans' past posed in the narrative, becomes the 'where' of a determining world-view informing the narration as a whole. The duality which is a theme of the story once again refers suppressed knowledge and partial resolution to indeterminate cultural and historical grounds.

One cannot help looking at Mavis Gallant's own experience when dealing with fictions of childhood. She herself boarded in a convent at an early age and has referred to the story "Orphans' Progress" in an interview as picked up from a real situation, something that I saw. Closely allied to the writer's 'lived' history, the play of ghosts and doubles reverberates back into a shifting imaginary landscape, informed by the historical climate of post-war Montreal. This is informed by Gallant's own suffering

1 For a discussion on the influence of personal experience on Gallant's fictional themes and narrative voice see Michel Fabre, "Interview with Mavis Gallant" in Commonwealth, XI (Spring, 1989). See also Fabre's excellent discussion of voice in "Orphans' Progress."
in the nineteenth-century atmosphere of a French-speaking institution. The cultural atrophy of this period of Canadian history, the way a mother...often died after bearing her tenth child and the family was liquidated, is an insight into the story, Gallant's own past and history, conflating problems of identity and origins. Thus, the story's thematic duality feeds on a dual context of narrative and colonial history, woven together through the potency of personal experience.

The Collier girls of the story are taken from their French-Canadian mother, go to school in English-speaking Ontario, and are then sent to a French-speaking convent before finally being separated for ever. The confrontation of languages, and the destruction of memory this entails, is played out through the narrator's sliding focus. Although at times the voice of enunciation can be identified with a sympathetic medium for the children's feelings, at others it is allied to social norms, implying a totalizing institutional authority. In that the narratorial voice is often disembodied, neither reflecting a character's focus nor exposing an opposing world-view, it expresses the 'doxa' of official versions. The narrator is therefore at the centre of a conflict between official discourses and the individual. As the two orphans fall foul of the 'doxa' the emotional premises of their

1 Gallant speaking on Canadian society of the fifties in "Interview with Mavis Gallant".
2 Christine Brooke-Rose,(speaking of Thomas Hardy), conceptualizes a double-think world-view as a cinematic approach telling us ... too much when we would rather not know and ... blurring the very origin of knowledge when we want to know 'who speaks' (or why that camera angle). Christine Brooke-Rose, Stories, Theories and Things (Cambridge:Cambridge University Press,1991),122.
existence are progressively undermined by the infiltration of controversial knowledge. Controversial in the sense that 'knowledge' here enters into direct conflict with another subtextual message, privileging private convictions over public 'good':

*When the girls were living with their mother they know that sometimes she listened and sometimes could not hear; nevertheless, she was there... They never knew, until told, that they were uneducated and dirty and in danger.¹*

The stage of history which should provide a setting for the development of the girls' story is a grey area of flux in the narrative, yielding little background information with which to construct the whole picture. Yet at the same time, the narrative constantly infers an original site where we could know all and where memory could be restored. This fundamental uncertainty as to how or where truth could be identified renders the orphans a prey to a waivering narrative perspective. Uncertainty repeats itself across their story as a trauma of origins engendered by an unstable narrative ground or world-view. This 'weakness' at the centre opens the way for the exercise of authority as colonizing voices vie for control. From the time the two girls are taken to live with their English-speaking grandmother, memory is endangered, erased by the conflicting demands of the imposed language and cultural changes in their lives. They are later taken back to a suburb of Montreal where:

¹ Mavis Gallant, "Orphans' Progress" in *Home Truths*, 57. All further references are in the text of the *thesis*. 
[t]hey did not see anything that reminded them of Montreal, and did not recall their mother ... Language was black, until they forgot their English. Until they spoke French, nothing but French, the family pretended not to understand them...(59/60)

When Mildred, the younger girl, is adopted by an English-speaking family and taken out of the convent her name is changed, finalizing the rift between the sisters. The last lines of the story momentarily reinstate the girls' past by allusion to the place they presumably shared with their mother:

The parents craned at a garage, and at dirty-legged children with torn sneakers on their feet. Mildred glanced up and then back at her book. She had not reason to believe she had seen it before or would ever again. (62)

Within the debate on 'belonging' which is central to the plot, the narrator substitutes the blackness of language, in which meaning has been destroyed, for the characters' consciousness. The curiously filmic offscreen type of narration which is the effect of the distancing of the narrator from the dilemmas of her characters, emphasises voice itself as a construct, controlling through the disguise of transparency. The principal focus of lost origins and knowledge unavailable to the characters, is directed to another area of history, taking the dark of ghosts, whose transparent shadows stood round their bed, (60) as a script. But even ghosts belong to the domain of presence, and what this seems to refer us to is the overbearing weight of repression and its excessive quality, destabilizing representation.

The twins' exile in the dark of language which leads them finally to separation, can be seen as inscribed within the sign of colonization as 'excess' within cultural and psychoanalytic accounts of the relation of dominant to dominated. According to
post-colonial critics, 'excess' is the need to \textit{rule and conquer by endless repetition}.\footnote{Homi Bhabha and Sara Kofman cited in \textit{Border Traffic}, 72.} Of course the premises of such a theory, above all imply the overdetermination of race in relations of power. However, all stereotypical discourses of patriarchal rule are excessive, denoting a constantly repeated effort to contain and dominate the Other. In Gallant's fiction this domination concerns the codified discourses enshrining the characters in a defunct relation of Empire as the imperial power in its relation to the colonies. Governing the dialectic of official to intimate sources of knowledge, as one seeks to eliminate the other in the narrative, the dominant/dominated mode of struggle for language itself is a function of the rule of Empire.

The way the narrator provides an economy for a power struggle between vested interests, and the way the two girls are defeated by a struggle for language going on around them, renders the theme of appropriation and disappropriation pertinent to the word itself. Internal contradiction is a constant, as no sooner does the narrator posit one version of the 'truth' than another is implied, caught in the wake of the first as its necessary opposite, causing the narrator constantly to challenge her own story. Interestingly, the manuscript of the story bears the imprint of a significant suppression of information as the two published versions differ in important ways.\footnote{Michel Fabre brought the presence of two versions to my attention. The first was published in \textit{The New Yorker}, XLI( April 3rd, 1965), and appeared in \textit{Commonwealth Short Stories}, eds. Anna Rutherford and Donald Hannah (London/Basingstoke:Macmillan (International College ed.)1979). The other is the \textit{Home Truths} version.} In the second of these the
first-person commentary providing an insight into the mother's self-destructive pattern which led to the orphans' plight is absent from the narrative, as is a commentary on the ills of society itself, which reads as the opinion of a witness, an 'I' to which no subsequent authority is given. The elision of this 'I' as a stated subject of opinions leaves only the opinions themselves, woven into an anchorless indeterminacy of shifting appraisal. The first version thus announces an independent 'I/eye, denoting a presence looking on, and in possession of knowledge exceeding the characters' own understanding:

When women turn strange, it happens very rapidly... I have more than once seen women get into this state ...

The importance of a witnessing 'I/eye is figured in an image present in both versions at the start of the narrative when a garage attendant is frightened by the oblong eyes of a goat belonging to the orphans' grandmother. However, the girls were not reflected in the goats' eyes, as they were in each other's. (56)

The uncanniness of the image marks its force by displacing and tracing the problem of agency in the narrative as a whole; the burden of who sees, who knows and who speaks. The twins themselves are negated within the authoritative, but hardly identifiable forces which apparently hear and speak of them. The characters who have something to say on the subject of the girls' destinies are likewise involved in hearsay; second-hand accounts of what could or did transpire. The grandmother's maid

1 "Orphans' Progress" in Commonwealth Short Stories, 191.
listens at keyholes, and gossips about the dirty conditions they were said to have lived in with their mother; information overheard from a social worker who, it is inferred, was present at the time. Yet the absence of a reflective gaze establishing stable presence, signalled in the trope of dislocation which runs through the narrative and becomes the message of the narrative, is a clue to the orphans' evacuation from the centre of their own plot. The obsession with presence as seeing/knowing/being entity, united in the speaking subject, circulates in the narrative and deflects focussing to this area of tension. The twins are said to be known and seen by many but are not 'recognised', in the sense of being given a sympathetic reflecting presence within the narrator's speaking and telling accountability. The impression of 'impartiality' that Gallant's stories convey is rather one of partiality, in the sense that bonds of affiliation are inconclusively forged. The network of submerged knowledges implied by this deferral of confrontation with a narrative 'someone' who could know, see and speak 'true', also sets up the shadowy figure of a witnessing presence on the edge of the narrative arena who could say all were he/she to surface into representation. This complex web of cognitive presence and narrative representation replicates the dilemma of the post-colonial subject. The problem of the post-colonial Other in terms of visibility and empowerment is raised in such narratives. From such a position the Other encounters the defining gaze ...without
being seen ... The play of visibility and invisibility, silence and speech, is a complex one in relation to power and legitimation. ¹ Seen in this light "Orphans Progress" is an instance of theorizing on narrative authority and its relation to the (un)self-representing Other. The realistic contract of order and clarity breaks down when the narrative as a whole reveals ambivalent claims to control, and when the theme of mirroring/duality itself doubles or mirrors a split in a sustaining narrative vision or authority. Even as the problem of authority itself is suppressed through the denial of sympathy for the characters, this distancing, the refusal to take sides, masks the incompleteness of view, the partial focus. If the narrator in "Orphans' Progress" assumes the role of commentator, but simultaneously denies responsability, the displacement of causes posits an absent source of knowledge even as the concept of authority itself is undermined. The narrator herself is divorced from history and memory having undermined the premises upholding the teleology of plot, and the orphans' trajectory, destined to be made 'in error' as they fail to make their way back to beginnings, mirrors, thus lends unity to, the narration's own wandering away from a source of history. If the twins 'fall' into story in the process of creating narrative out of plotlessness, their epistemological fall constitutes the identity of the narrator, validating and shoring up her own plotted wandering. They can be seen as the effect of the narrator's own status of 'outsider',

performing a radical uncertainty in the narrative. The repeated duality and its implied repeated splitting, figured in the orphans' separation from each other and from an original body of meaning, installs the state of error and loss as an accrued surface control, sliding over questions of where such meaning could be found. The nuns at the convent inflict punishment when Mildred and Cathie use the 'wrong' language, a language given to falsehoods such as when Mildred imagines her former home; projecting the image on to a rooftop and skylight spotted from the dormitory window. When Mildred is accused of lying the nun who mete s out punishment has herself forgotten the significance of the shears which the girl is forced to carry around: Everyone was in the wrong. (61) Not only are the authorities in the wrong but language itself is suspect, its premise of meaning open to speculation, and what the accumulation of repeating divisions in "Orphans' Progress" seems to imply is that this process of mistakes on the part of the characters is on another level telling the story of the narrator's identity. Such a narrator is both observer and social authority, caught up in the meshes of a sign where the relation signifier/signified is interrupted.

If failure to establish continuity dogs the plot of "Orphans' Progress", the novella "Its Image on the Mirror" presents another trope of the double. Knowledge is not here a grey area of shattered origins. The longer novella forms allows articulated

---

1 Mavis Gallant, "Its Image on the Mirror" in My Heart is Broken (New York: Random House, 1964). All further references are in the text of the thesis.
connections to be made between cultural and familial ties and the structuring of identity.

The two sisters in the story are locked together in the play of mirror imaging the title implies. Jean Price, the younger of the two and the narrator, debates her problematical relationship with a dominant mother and her sister Isobel. This is filtered through the perspective of a larger dialectic of origins; that of a post-war Anglo-Scottish Canadian community in a changing cultural landscape. Although origins are not 'lost' in the sense of "Orphans' Progress", where the sign itself is threatened with collapse as the apparatus of contextual meaning collapses, the structure of family legitimation is foregrounded and pondered. The mother in the story, to whom Jean likens herself at several instances - [a]s I grow older I see that our gestures are alike, (65) - is the guardian of an Anglo-Scottish tradition, defining Canada in certain terms. The French-Canadian population are strangers, even though close neighbours, and Britain is the colonial role-model, even though her traditions belong to another time and space.

The father is a cipher, still mourning the son lost in the war. Beginning in the Quebec of 1955 and working backwards to wartime Montreal, the narrative presents the demise of confidence in a colonial tradition. The sale of the family home to French priests represents a gesture of total renunciation (60) marking the transition from a past of unquestioned values in a small Anglo-Scottish community, to an urban, dislocated post-war reality. As the narrative traces the boundaries of distrust and self-enclosure that have insulated the family, the suppressed Other is not only the French-speaking Quebec community, but any mark of
difference against which the family traditions can be defined. Even within the family itself traces of difference mark the borders of language:

'Quebec Highlander', muttered my father, giving the old wartime invective for a priest. I was grown before I realized that the difference between my parents was apparent in the use of a phrase like this. (67/8)

In "Its Image on the Mirror" limits are sharply defined and cohesion relies on oppositional positioning. Thus they are not English, although in those days being English-minded was respectable.(38) Neither are they Quebecois although living in Quebec. They are Protestant, but to be distinguished from The United Church. When Isobel, the rebel of the family, makes a second marriage to a doctor from Caracas and, years later, comes on a visit to Canada with him the narrator comments:

[M]y mother wore an expression that might have been suitable if lightening had got in the house. (71)

Isobel is the outsider while the narrator herself is identified by the continuity of filiation and affiliation. Yet in a way, the recalcitrant sister performs the absence which structures the whole family scenario. If the family are what they are not; structured over a void in which attempts at self-definition constantly slide into negation, Isobel acts out this repression, symbolically situated on the margin of the family horizon.

Between the two sisters is a wall of family knowledge ... Flowering in us was the dark bloom of the Old Country - the mistrust of pity, the contempt for weakness, the fear of the open heart .(88/9)

If the two sisters are apparently different they are nonetheless the same, and this sameness responds to the dark bloom of the
Old country as a problem interpreted in two opposing, but interdependent ways. For Jean there are moments when the pattern is whole, when her sister's presence is forgotten and the conflict between repression and disruption is elided. But if Jean cannot do with her sister's presence, she cannot do without her; her own self-presence relies precisely on the break in seamless representation that Isobel supplies: 

When she flew off to Caracas I thought, Well, she will never want to see any of us again, but instead of rejoicing I felt as though my own life drained away with her. (64)

The idea of Isobel escaping is intolerable for she 'covers' a part of Jean that the latter can only dis-cover heumeneutically through Isobel. The latter's status as an echo chamber, resonating with the incompatible tensions between decorum and impropriety is as such the overdetermined site of interpretation itself. The only way to stop the flow of an ever-circulating but ever-elusive knowledge would be through death itself. Isobel's near death from a kidney infection opens the door to fantasies of deliverance; her final departure would resolve discord into a harmonious recoding of reality:

Dead-and-buried Isobel ... the pretty Duncan sister, taken too soon to her Maker. (62)

Only death itself can resolve the vacillation of terms within a binary logic of inside/outside, here/there, which constitutes the duality of the sisters' relationship, and which exemplifies the colonial dialectic.

Mothers and Daughters

In many ways in "Its Image on the Mirror", as in A Fairly Good Time, the figure of the mother is both central and an enigma. Jean Price's narration is addressed to the problems of female
relationships and to failed links in understanding, *stilted and unnatural, filled with gaps and fissures, failed communications.*\(^1\) The women in the story all seem intent on severing links with their own particular past experience. *Nothing remains now in Allenton to remind me of the past* (589) says the narrator at the beginning, and this could signify as a leitmotif for the three women's perspective on time's relation to place. Although Jean is bonded to Isobel through shared experience, the governing common denominator within that experience is the maternal presence. The mother's signifying function bears similar traits to Irigaray's theory of women's sexuality in *Speculum of the other woman*:

\[T]\he concave mirror is ... a focal point, a lens that can concentrate light-rays so as to 'shed light on the secrets of caves' and to 'pierce the mystery of the woman's sex'.\(^2\)

Illuminating feminine absence as a structure of patriarchal logic, in which feminine subjecthood is subservient to the law of the Phallus, woman *constitutes the ground on which the theorist erects his specular constructs*.\(^3\)

Similarly, the narrative "Its Image on the Mirror" is intent on shedding light on the cultural inheritance which structures feminine subjecthood. It mobilizes the metaphor of the house as a way of exploring the central dilemma of women's identity.

*Ghosts moved in the deserted rooms ...We never saw the ghosts, but we knew they were there.* (59)

---

1 *Sub/Version*, 82.
2 Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the other woman* cited in *Sexual/Textual Politics*, 130.
3 *Sexual/Textual Politics*, 136.
She was leaving the house she had lived in forty-two years, and the town where she had spent her life. She said not a word about it. (65)

'You people are going to haunt this house', said Mr Braddock ...

'The house is full of ghosts as it is', my mother said pleasantly. 'There wouldn't be room for ours.' (67)

Both continuity and erasure thus characterize the mother's script. She is identifiable by an excessive lawfulness, upholding the traditions of a tight-knit community, and yet given to destroying the marks of this continuity. She likewise refuses introspection and by the same token refuses interpretation. Other characters' motivations or dissimulations are of no interest, only their compliance or non-compliance with rules of propriety. Yet at the same time there is something eminently 'improper' in her own disengagement from the emotional tenets underpinning family life, those of interest, affection and unity. When Isobel defies the rules of propriety by marrying outside the proper circles, and leaves for the other side of the world, she is effectively 'written off'. Tradition can go on without her, and although the thread of continuity has been challenged, genealogical succession is not affected; it has already failed with the death of the son and heir in the war.

If the mother prefers clarity to ambiguity, her own inscription in the plot is both tenuous and ambivalent. Represented in the eyes of Jean as the living script of the family history, she is the measure against which the daughters' problems of identity are inflected. As such the different narrative strands work through the maternal sign; the two daughters' problems with each other are embedded in, and refracted by the problems they share with
her. Her refusal to interpret and her love of simple solutions has nonetheless influenced the complicated escape patterns of her daughters. That she is the authority to whom the narrator defers, and who has modelled her existence, extends to Jean's choice of husband, as it also extends to Isobel's.

_She's thrown Tom and me together, I thought. She wanted this ... Isobel had refused him because he was too old, ... Both versions of what Isobel had to say came from my mother._ (104)

The uncertainty of where the truth lies connects with the image of the house:

_You can never be certain of that house, even if it has been standing twenty years._ (104)

It also comes back to 'the speculum' of women's sexuality as a distorted image in which women themselves are implicated as transmitters of the law.

If Jean suspects that her mother is the true author of her marriage to Tom, her sister's escape from the dutiful daughter's narrative is equally connected to the powerful maternal influence:

_For a short time my mother had the submissive daughter she had always dreamed of ... [A]t the end of August ... she married Alfredo. She left for Caracas by plane the same day, after ringing and asking me,...if I would mind telling our mother she was married._ (63)

What the ghosts that haunt the Duncan family signify is not elucidated, but their English colonial heritage with its ideology of the 'unsaid', condoned by a British 'stiff upper lip' tradition, has filtered down from mother to daughters as a shared emotional landscape. Responding to the dictates of this control and simultaneous lack of direction or guidance, the daughters' lives are interpretations of the maternal ambivalence. The latter
paradoxically wishes to cut off from the past by leaving the family home on the one hand, and on the other is a pillar of tradition and continuity. Both the mother's narrative and that of her daughters are denied a viable causality, their meanings are obscured by their involvement as cause of each other's plots. The merging of destinies leaves the reader searching for motivation, which then leads off into the house of ghosts. Thus the house, its shut-offness, its fullness and simultaneous emptiness, harbouring necessary information only perceived as shadow, stands as a figure for the narrative itself. It can be seen as a metaphor for the narrative as a whole, inviting and resisting penetration, sending the reader on circular routes which nonetheless do not clarify the ghosts or the doors shut against the past; It is like the family house at Allenton; closed and sold, setting the rules of the game from the beginning. "Its Image on the Mirror" is full of barriers erected against our inquiring eyes, just as Isobel walled herself against Jean's one pursuit ... [her] sister's life. (91)

Resisting the reader's desire for beginnings and endings the narrative covers its tracks, leaving meanings in the corners of others' lives, suppressing knowledge of 'why' or 'where' it all began, constantly escaping into another's past. Meaning is deferred from the site of one daughter's self-determination into the other's and through the necessary third term of the mother as author of narratives she is unable or unwilling to tell. That the characters in the narratives are strangers to each other, in the sense that they neither recognize their own place in historical continuity nor are given recognition by a higher narrating authority, accounts for the estranged relations between them. The denial of beginnings, as if narratives were a deferred end-in-
the-present, characterize Gallant's fictions, but as endings
necessarily imply beginnings this is the also the quest of her
narratives. To the point that, intent on telling us how
communication, relationships and language are in seizure, the
stories risk an endless, (because apparently beginningless),
formulaic repetition of crisis. Each crisis of language in fact
creates the semblance of new beginnings, but ones in which the
patterns of meaning remain unresolved, always looking for the
historical terms on which the characters' narratives would be
rendered coherent.

In the short story "The Wedding ring"¹ told in the first-person by
a nameless female narrator, the focus on the figure of the mother
is more direct. The narrator is speaking of a summer's day spent
in a cottage with her mother, an American cousin and a 'guest',
presumably her mother's lover. The situation is focussed through
the eyes of a child who nonetheless transmits what can often
only be a retrospective adult judgement. The estrangement
between mother and daughter, and the estrangement between
the mother and her own origins are overtly stated:

My mother remarks on my hair, my height, my teeth, my
French, and what I like to eat, as if she had never seen me
before ...

My mother is developing one of her favorite themes - her
lack of roots. (5)

In this case the mother's fabulating invents a version of
abandonment that is matched by the narrator's own:

¹ "The Wedding Ring" in In Transit. All further references are in the text
'I never felt I had any stake anywhere until my parents died and I had their graves' ...

Graves? [thinks the narrator] What does she mean? My grandmother is still alive. (5)

If the mother is prevented from feeling close to any country, this divorce ironically prefigures the narrative gap between grounds of truth; the reader's contract of a harmonious beginning, middle and end, and the narrative itself as fulfillment of the contract.

The 'country' of a narrative; the represented world, becomes familiar territory for the reader through the impression that the narrator is 'at home'; that it is his/her narrative act. In Gallant's stories the narrator seems alienated from the domain of narration, standing outside the closed doors of time in much the same way that the reader is left outside. The mother's wedding-ring in the story is thrown away in a rage at the end, implying a causal history we will not learn. Challenging the reader to find answers to the question of 'what' and 'where', to which the narrator has no response, the latter is sent away to stay with her cousin for a few days; a stay that will, in fact, be prolonged many months. (6) The narrator, like us, is obliged to retrieve meaning on the borders of the 'country' or landscape of memory, crossing borders into her mother's wandering in countries where she was not at home. The lack of substance of this narrated world condemns meaning to the interstices of past and present where one does not feed into and make sense of the other, but opens gaps. The narrator's perceptions of her childhood in the light of this episode remembered, shifts not towards understanding but away from such a possibility. Repressing continuity, the narrator creates a 'there' in time as a 'where' in self-knowledge, a site of continuous interrogation. The relation between mere...
successiveness, which we feel to be the chief characteristic in the ordinary going-on of time and the establishment of a significant relation between the moment and a remote origin and end, a concord of past, present, and future is troubled in Gallant's work. The fact that the mature narrator can only attempt to establish truth in a final image, that of her mother who made her speech, and flung the ring into the twilight, in a great spinning arc (7) as a legacy of time disappearing, denies the fullness of the past in the present. The most that the narrator can share with her mother is the realization that: [M]y mother's hands were small, like mine. (7) The breaking-away from the past, and its failure to anchor identity implies the narrator's own problematical place in time and history. She is effectively 'nowhere'; a constantly reiterated sign of the outside of things.

In Atwood's third novel *Lady Oracle*, coming after the overtly feminist and nationalistic *Surfacing*, the themes of female authorship and multiple narratives of identity continue her exploration into the feminine subject's access to expression. The female body in particular is a site of energy and transformation in this novel, scripting identity and disguise, and contributing to the multiple forms that inhabit the narrative.

Atwood, like Munro, uses the female body as metaphorical territory in order to define the margins and borders of the sayable and the secret. Whereas in Munro's work, the secret trappings of femininity are a palimpsest to be read through the orderly appearance of small town life, Atwood's female body is a different kind of territory. In *Lady Oracle* the constraining reality of women's lives is subverted through a heroine's ever more complicated escape plots, disguising, not so much the Munroesque female realities of menstruation and childbirth, but the core of the heroine's identity itself.¹ The way this escape into the body allies itself with flight out of one lifestory and into another, and the way these multiple flights are governed by an absence of closure and certainty, crossing into territories of

---

¹ Coral Ann Howells links the Derridean "supplément" as the concealed trace of the 'Other' in Western discourse to Canadian Women's Writing. This in the sense of them being exiles on home territory because of women's marginalised status in relation to centres of power and authority. In "No transcendental Image: Canadianness in contemporary women's fictions in English". Paper given at the BACS conference in Nottingham (April, 1991), 1.
silence and revealed in ghostly presences, recalls Atwood's own views on the uncanny.¹

Throughout the stages of her unhappy and fat childhood, the heroine Joan Foster's body becomes the zone of contention through which her life of disguises takes on a search for meaning and identity. The body and mirror image are problematical however, involved in the 'I' seeing and the 'me' seen, the unfolding of the child's identity through the gaze of the outside world. In Joan's case, instead of registering the boundaries of her own identity Joan encounters the all-encompassing one of her mother. Engaged in protection devices against her mother's encroachment of territory Joan literally expands daily, thus pitting herself defiantly against her mother's disapproval and her fashion model appearance. The narrator records:

*my mother named me after Joan Crawford. ... Joan Crawford worked hard, she had willpower, she built herself up from nothing, according to my mother. Did she give me someone else's name because she wanted me never to have a name of my own? ... this is important: Joan Crawford was thin.*²

Joan's symbiotic relationship to her mother is central to the mirror-play, the subject/object dichotomy which extends to questions of narrative process and closure. The heroine's wrestle with mirrors, which becomes the narrative's obsession with

---

¹ Atwood's work abounds in ghosts, and she herself says about *Surfacing* that *the interesting thing in that book is the ghost in it*. In *Eleven Canadian Novelists: Interviewed by Graeme Gibson* (Toronto: Anansi, 1973), 23.

² Margaret Atwood, *Lady Oracle* [1976] (London: Virago, 1992), 42. All further references are in the text of the thesis.
reflections, splitting and duplicity, has its roots in this dyadic relationship. Barbara Godard terms this self-reflexivity in *Lady Oracle* a *metaphor of refraction* referring to Luce Irigaray's theory of the little girl's problematical passage through the mirror stage to the symbolic level of language. Disguise for Joan, from the beginning of the novel onwards, is the site of possible regression towards a non-differentiated self, marking as it does the way Joan has internalized the image of her mother as herself. But it is also through disguise that she is given the carnivalesque possibility that Bakhtin originally imagined to exist outside official discourses [and which] persists only in the form of an 'in between', an interstitial and relativising relationship to other meanings and identities.¹

Her ventures into multiple role-playing take up the dual challenge of putting the idea of fixed identity in play, thus opening up the maze of story, and the regressive hallucinatory facet of such border play; the fear of losing herself; folding into the 'monstrous mother'. As Barbara Godard defines this multiplicity of interacting feminine selves: *Lady Oracle* is the *lady within the mirror, alias the Great Goddess, alias mother, alias Joan.*²

Within the drama of occupation and resistance that Joan defines as a relationship where her mother was to be the manager, the

---


creator, the agent; while [she] was to be the product ... the disputed territory was [her] body (67-9), Joan takes on concealing layers. Just as the mother tries cunning persuasion and threats to encourage her to diet, so the latter doggedly eats and grows. The father of the family is absent, sharing the type of scenario of absence or impotence that is reproduced across Munro's and Gallant's fiction. He harbours painful secrets of wartime killings, and after his return from the front leads what seems to be a double life; as an anaesthetist, engaged both in putting people to sleep and bringing them back to life, and as a silent witness to the excesses of Joan's ambitious mother. As Joan goes from a rebellious childhood to her first sexual experience, and then to a slim adulthood, the men in her life are now the appropriating forces of her body/territory. Wrested from her mother for whom Joan realizes that her body and its contours had been the last available project, her relation to the past and her identification with the Fat Lady in the Freak Show which came to town continues to haunt her. Her slim self emerges during an affair with a man who calls himself the Polish Count, and the camouflage deepens with the political radical, Arthur, for by this time Joan not only has a fat unloved past but a career as a writer of Gothic romances to conceal.

Arthur never found out that I wrote Costume Gothics ... When I first met him he talked a lot about wanting a woman whose mind he could respect, and I knew that if he found out I'd written The Secret of Morgrave Manor he wouldn't respect mine. (33/4)

I had one picture of Aunt Lou. ... 'Is that your mother?'
"No, I said, 'that's my Aunt Lou' 'Who's the other one? The fat one.'... 'That's my other aunt' I said. (91)
Just as these lies about the 'shape' of her past serve to disguise and constantly form the figure of the double across the story, so, as Robert Lecker has pointed out, the men in Joan's history are also composed of more than one persona: Their split personalities dramatize their creator's multisidedness. In this sense Lady Oracle becomes a meta-fictional exploration of a writer who writes about writing and a meta-theatrical story about a dramatist/actor who participates in and comments on the process of playing to an audience.¹

Joan Foster's splitting and doubling is mirrored in the doubling personalities of her male companions. Arthur is knight-errant and political radical, the con-create artist The Royal Porcupine is alias Chuck Brewer, and the Polish count goes by the pseudonym Mavis Quilp when writing nurse romance fiction. Thus on both sides of the gender divide the characters are fictionalizing themselves, displacing fixed contours of identity by deferral. These troubled patterns of identity make of Joan a narrative marker registering shifting centres of representation as the men move in and out of her life, folding their indeterminate narratives into the frame of her own displacement. She thus attracts and dispenses parodic intent, as a fluid dimension wielding social satire as its subversive tool. It is because she is self-consciously the 'outsider' of her own tale, that parody works

as an extra dimension classifying her as a *Fool-Heroine* to cite Clara Thomas.¹

That Joan's evolving story addresses the gap inscribed in parody, is a function of the constant mirroring and deflecting process in the narrative, as it unhinges the characters from their realistic premises. The strange secondary characters who cross and recross Joan's path, such as the Fat Lady and the psychic medium, participate in the narrative play dealing in transformation and doubling, ghosts and splitting. Thus Leda Sprott the medium, from whom Joan takes her idea of Automatic Writing, (she will later go on to write a best-seller called *Lady Oracle* by 'other-worldly' intervention), resurfaces as the priest Eunice P. Revele. Likewise the Fat Lady, a motif for Joan's own neurosis, her 'Other' half who interrupts her best intentions, surfaces in fantasies to disrupt her reality:

> The Fat Lady skated out onto the ice. I couldn't help myself. It was one of the most important moments in my life, I should have been able to keep her away, but out she came in a pink skating costume, her head ornamented with swan's-down. (273)

The fantasy figures are a function of Joan's neurotic compulsion associating elements in her life (like her trip to the circus where she saw the Freak show) as a part of her imaginary constructs, in the same way her Gothic creations merge with her own life, and her mother 'repeats'; coming back to her in fantasy and in a

---

¹ Clara Thomas' article "Lady Oracle: The Narrative of a Fool-Heroine" interestingly examines the comic heroine of Atwood's novel as a female version in the buffoon tradition. In *The Art of Margaret Atwood: Essays in Criticism*, 159-75.
vision. The intertwining of past and present, presenting multiple figures and destabilizing identities, could be seen as a trope of Canadian dimensions. Such themes play out, in the light of a Canadian consciousness, a *dynamic construction which is continually reinvented in response to changing circumstances and ideological pressures*.1

It is in this way that reinvention can be seen as Joan's strategy and in a larger sense also as a Canadian/woman writer's strategy, in order to create a gap at the centre of fixed assumptions about identity. The questioning space at the heart of identity blurs story outlines and promotes re-'production' as a textual strategy. The Fat Lady, the Dancing Girl and the Fairy are enmeshed in the imaginary production of Joan the authoress, the escape-artist, the 'outsider' with occult writing powers. Any combination of these kaleidoscopic imaginary projections generates a tale of suppression and recurrence. That this multiplicity colludes with an image of Canadian territory as mindscape is apparent:

> Gradually, inch by inch, the Fat Lady proceeded along the wire, pausing to make sure of her balance, her pink umbrella raised defiantly above her head. Step by step I took her across, past the lumbering enterprises of the West Coast, over the wheatlands of the prairies, walking high above the mines and smokestacks of Ontario, appearing in the clouds like a pink vision to the poor farmers of the St. Lawrence Valley and the mackerel fishermen of the Maritimes. (102/3)

> ...it was digging itself out, like a huge blind mole, ... It was the Fat Lady. ... She rose into the air and descended on me

---

as I lay stretched out in the chair. For a moment she hovered around me like ectoplasm, like a gelatine shell, my ghost, my angel; then she settled and I was absorbed into her. Within my former body, I gasped for air. Disguised, concealed, white fur choking my nose and mouth. (321)

Boundaries of the animal and vegetable world, the human and the spiritual are transgressed in these imaginary forms. The images enact figures of ingestion and transcendence intermingling; empowered by a logic of surplus and overflow. Simultaneously the Fat Lady covers Canadian territory, imaginatively breaching boundaries of time in order to write the land in. Such images counter stasis and also counter the epistemological control of country and culture. Space, matter, non-matter, the substantive and the non-substantive coalesce and become the vortex sucking Joan under. The all-powerful Fat Lady as both imaginary construct and neurotic symptom preempt in inverted form, the fake suicide where Joan will surface anew. The ability to break through barriers of the real characterizes Lady Oracle. This breaking down of paradigms extends to the function of language itself and Frank Davey has remarked on the wordiness the verbal wastefulness of Atwood's prose, as opposed to her poetry.¹ This preoccupation with language out of control takes on the aspect of a represented world out of control. Towards the end of the story this resembles an endless fictionalizing which the heroine has set in motion, and which she attempts to break out of. Increasingly the gothic scenarios of her authorly production seep into the channel of her

¹ Margaret Atwood: A Feminist Poetics, 76.
own story and increasingly the two levels of narrative, the gothic and the real, build momentum. The fake suicide could therefore also be seen as an escape from the figures of language the heroine has set up and, as an authoress, the way this places her metafictionally on the border of the world of words in which she is inscribed, and the one she has created. It is perhaps this confusion of textual levels and thematic levels of apprehension, which gives *Lady Oracle* an obsessive quality.

**Genre, Process and Product**

Atwood's fiction has been extensively analysed as the exposé of two warring world-views. One privileges perception, the other objectivity. One is concerned with life and process, the other with form and death. Such dichotomies in her work have been examined as part of a systematic working through of Atwood's own philosophy on life, and a textual way of envisaging duality would be through the (now axiomatic) distinction made by Barthes between the 'writerly' text and the 'readerly' one; the latter composing with social representation and stasis and the former coming to grips with the ideological nature of discourse and the history's inscription in all discourse. Process therefore implies shifting centres of appraisal and interpretation, denying comfort and demanding the active participation of the reader. Yet if 'form' and 'system' are prerequisites of the object world, they are also a prerequisite of the written word, partaking of history and fashion, dominant ideologies and generic norms. That

---

1 On the dichotomy of process versus form see *Violent Duality*. 
Margaret Atwood should be preoccupied with the gap between language as expression and as object is a pointer towards her talent as a poet. In her prose this duality engages with Canadian writing which codified vast spatial expanses though it ultimately fossilized into a ponderous system \(^1\) and on the other hand narration as the scene of conflicting tendencies; a network of strategies seeking to escape the death of form. 

_**Lady Oracle**_ elaborates the theme of death in several ways, as do _Surfacing_ and _Bodily Harm_, using the schema of danger, escape, and death/revival motifs to symbolise the possibility of creative renewal. These are also the terms of the gothic fiction embedded in the frame narrative, and this overlapping of genre uses fixed 'dead' forms to undo social stereotypes. Joan's narrative thus comes apart on the borders of the gothic fictions she writes, and which subsequently reads into her own story. This shifting of genre codes is allied to all kinds of mirroring devices in the story, infiltrating the frame narrative in order to question its fictional/real premises, and using formulaic genres to unpick the seams of the realistic plot. As Godard says:

> *What results from all these techniques of repetition is that the text enters into dialogue with itself and represents the apparatus of its own interpretation.* \(^2\)

Joan's formulaic romances move in linear structure from vulnerable heroine through danger and imminent rape/death to rescue. Joan's own story uses the same typology of narrative

\(^1\) Barbara Godard, "Tales within Tales:Margaret Atwood's Folk Narratives" in _Canadian Literature_, 109 (Summer, 1986), 58.

\(^2\) "Tales within Tales", 61.
stimulus and response but instead of moving towards closure, she works regressively and 'archeologically' from final disguise back through layers of other disguises, in such a way that the gothic plot seems to be the central coherent energy. It draws in and codifies the disparate parts of Joan's own life-plot by presenting the bound 'gothic' text of women's reality as an analogy to women's lived reality. The gothic fictions are also part of Joan's secret life and are transgressive of the codes of her relationship with Arthur. The social fictions these stories encode, where, having worked through stages of pursuit and danger, the heroine and her lover/persecutor/rescuer are united, are tied up with concepts of narrative and meaning. The fixed formulae of gothic plots in which the heroine is ensnared, almost perishes, and is released, exposes and highlights those moments of narrative transformation which are the very workings of plot and closure. While Joan's own narrative of multiple entanglements and escape involves loss of identity and personal dilemma, the embedded gothic stories hang the tenets of the genre on such moments, as confirmation of the prescribed routes of socially and ideologically secured dramas. For gothic rehearses the social structures which erect women as Other, rereading such structures as a formulaic genre. The 'locked up' form of women's desires and destinies plays itself out in a pattern of repetition and ease in *Lady Oracle*. Speaking against this formulaic narrative is the heroine Joan's plight, questioned and questioning. Joan seeks the meaning of her life-plot as she hinges her future on transformation. These are the awaited moments when Arthur, the Royal Porcupine or the Polish Count will save her from herself. Their dualistic natures harbour the potential of her gothic
Lord Redmond to change from villain to lover or vice-versa, but they do not satisfy Joan's hankering after closure. Her own desire for self-expression in fact interrupts the rituals and comfort of her created fantasy, and, as she says of her best-selling 'serious' novel *Lady Oracle*:

> It was upside-down somehow ... there was no happy ending, no true love. (232)

That the writing of a book called *Lady Oracle* is a meta-textual comment the reader's novel *Lady Oracle* in which it is embedded is obvious. But the upside-downness is also a cryptic encoding of the absence inhabiting these meta-fictions; absence of the writer herself who is outside the represented world but whose presence is pondered by the work itself. This absent/presence is figured in the maze in *The Secret of Morgrave Manor*, a maze which apparently has no centre:

>'Some say as how there's no center to the maze.' (186)

Joan's life is then the area of instability encountering the structured form of gothic romance within the story. The 'wrongness' or 'upsidedown' quality of her existence is an ironical reversal of the closed hermetic gothic code. The ironic gap is gestured in the way Joan's life is manifestly decentred whereas her gothic romances have the authority of their limited manoeuvres and formulaic predictability. The maze of her romance that has no centre, takes part in the ideologically bound genre of plot resolution, allowing Joan to subvert such structures at the end of *Lady Oracle* when the gothic and her own reality overlap. This play of mirroring in which her own life, lacking subjective motivation, bears traits of a decentred fiction, ironizes
her place in the story, and further, ironizes the gap between
gothic containment and realism.
As Joan is shifted from the codes of realism to the narrative's
ironic margins, she articulates a space where different narratives
converge or diverge. The disbelief in secure codes of realism is
scripted more clearly as Joan's past life overtakes her, and her
place in the plot becomes the overdetermined site of forms
beyond her control. Thus her diverse personae operate as
'productions', thrown into play in a complex narrative network
involving the men in her life. These identities are, a tangled web
of studied deceptions separating the Self from selves.1 Thus Ann
Parsons analyzes the split between the character's desire for
authenticity and her multiplying subterfuges; the need to evade
self by inventing selves.2
Claire Kahane, in examining the gothic codes has sought to
deconstruct the interaction of the oedipal triangle in gothic
scenarios. Instead of the figure of patriarchal law she sees, at the
centre of the gothic structure, the figure of the feminine:

...the oedipal plot seems more a surface convention than a
latent fantasy exerting force, ...What I see repeatedly
locked into the forbidden center of the gothic which draws
me inward is the spectral presence of a dead-undead
mother, archaic and all encompassing, a ghost signifying the

---

1 Ann Parsons, "The Self-Inventing Self: Women Who Lie and Pose in the
Fiction of Margaret Atwood" in Gender Studies: New Directions in Feminist
Criticism, Ed. Judith Spector (Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular

2 "The Self-Inventing Self", 105.
The problematics of femininity which the heroine must confront.¹

The ultimate fear of non-differentiation, a mother imago who threatens all boundaries between self and other² is for Claire Kahane at the root of the gothic fantasy structure and this sexual ambivalence of sameness and difference informs both gothic and realistic narratives. As Joan multiplies she reproduces the dilemma of a mother figure who is both self and Other. The internalized figure of overbearing power is transposed on to the gothic narrative stage in its twists and turns, its labyrinthine maze which is seemingly both centreless and finally revealed as multiple feminine presences. In *The Secret of Morgrave Manor* these are the former Mrs Redmonds, each one discarded for a younger version. This also resembles Joan's mother's plot in so far as youth and beauty and dainty dancing girls constituted her feminine ideals; a self-image constructed through the male gaze. As Joan's life meets up with that of her heroines she is confronted by the narrative ghosting tales of seduction and happiness ever after. The closure she attempts to give her novels no longer felt right. As the gothic genre falls apart on the borders of her own closure the mother's tale of Prince Charming is revealed as Joan' tale of dread; dread of the vortex of her mother's despair and their shared fantasies:


² "The Gothic Mirror", 105.
It had been she standing behind me in the mirror, she was
the one who was waiting round each turn, ... She had been
the lady in the boat, the death barge, the tragic lady with
flowing hair and stricken eyes, the lady in the tower.
(329/30)

Gothic and the Real: the maze as a subversive fiction.

The tracking of the modes and conventions of realism represents
a subversive strand in Atwood's work. Yet the underground
quality associated with women's writing is not the feminine fluid
narratives centred on an inner consciousness. Atwood uses
narrative structures, and metaphors of structure such as the
maze in Lady Oracle, to destabilize meaning. She counters one
genre with another and invests her heroines with a warring
consciousness through which one genre and its structures of
representation confronts another. As the gothic codes break
down in Joan Foster's novels, the play of mimetic representation
is shaken and its ideological underpinnings are revealed. When
the similarities between the means by which both gothic
romances and realism produce meaning becomes apparent, (and
this is encapsulated in the figure of the maze with its
problematical centre), Joan herself is in jeopardy. As the world in
which she moves is displaced from its tenets of stability Joan's
paranoia mimes that of the lying/truth of realistic fiction.

1 Frank Davey points out that Atwood's novels, like Munro's but in a
different way, invest in alternate stories, secret scripts which characters
have written one for the other. Frank Davey, "Alternate Stories: The Short
Fiction of Audrey Thomas and Margaret Atwood" in Canadian Literature,
109 (Summer, 1986), 5.
Critics have pointed out that Atwood's heroines are both passive, displaying a kind of determinism, and liars:

*They tell lies in their professional work, they lie and fantasize as narrators of the novels, they fictionalize - on derivative models- their own lives to themselves.*

1

Taking lying in its subversive sense, that is, as a way of obeying an underlying logic that cannot be identified on the surface of discourse, we could say that the logic of Joan's paranoia and compulsive swerving away from the patterns imposed from the outside, is a function of her 'underground' subversive status. The leverage her liar's status operates is to forge a gap at the centre of the represented world, inscribing a subtext of an Other language. Joan's flights away from her destiny motivated by a refusal to obey the rules of realism but instead to reveal the scaffolding, set her apart.

As such she is both 'set up', in the sense of caught within the logic of closure, and she undermines this closure. Joan's compulsions and her passivity promote repetition; a return of the repressed through the mechanisms of story production, as narratives are produced from these compulsions. The gothic fictions she writes act as a doubling of the writing process for they serve as a pattern for the very transformations and mechanisms of story; highlighting the moments of danger and relief when threats turn to comfort, and the villain reveals himself as hero.

As Barbara Godard remarks:

---

1 *Margaret Atwood: A Feminist Poetics*, 65.
Joan's life is increasingly taken over by that of her fictional creations when she, as Felicia, moves into the labyrinth. Ultimately, there are no boundaries, only perpetual metamorphoses, for the writers are intrigued by the point at which one thing becomes another.\(^1\)

Rather than leading to closure, the gothic allows Joan, and Atwood, to explore the labyrinth of language and emerge again. They avoid a conformist plagiarizing edge\(^2\) and create a mobile subversive one from the interplay of codes.

Joan the authoress is manifestly hounded by characters of her own life/fiction; the life in which she lies to survive, just as the female characters of her romances are hounded. The difference is that while her heroines obey the structures they are shaped in, structures which display the seams of language and their implication in a politics of consumer ideology, she herself is destined to play out the realistic plot, constantly deferring her own absence of a centre by allusion to those highly fictional structures of the gothic. Blending one genre into another she alludes to the the Polish Count's flight from Eastern Europe and persecution by allusion once again to the figure of a labyrinth:

*Details would distract me, the candle stubs and bones of those who had gone before; in any labyrinth I would have let go of the thread in order to follow a wandering light, a fleeting voice.*

*In a fairy tale I would be one of the two stupid sisters who open the forbidden door and are shocked by the murdered wives* (152)

---

\(^1\) "My (M)Other My Self", 18.

\(^2\) Roland Barthes' *The Pleasure of the Text* cited in "My (M)Other My Self", 18.
There are multiple allusions to being lost, and to being found out:

[W]hy did I feel I had to be excused? Why did I want to be exempted, and what from? ...
If I brought the separate parts of my life together ... surely there would be an explosion. (217)

It is as if Joan continues to narrativize to avoid composing fully with the representation. Atwood thus engages with the schizophrenia of language, its Otherness and its conformism. She concentrates her heroines on the problematical question of narrative's source, its 'fictionality'. It is Joan's love of subversive tactics, her preference for deferral rather than conclusion, which gives Lady Oracle its underground quality. The heroine neither recognises responsibility nor is recognised by her partner/lovers from whom she hides diverse sections of her history and important facets of her identity.

Consuming Passions, consumer politics: the language of specularity and identity in The Edible Woman

Lady Oracle and The Edible woman are often classed together as novels concerned with the feminine ego through the specific devices of mirror imagery, splitting and dividing. Pamela S. Bromberg speaks of:

- The Edible Woman's counterplot ... told through specular metaphors. ...
- The language of vision - mirrors, reflection, surfaces, outsides, and images - permeate the text.  

---

The language of specularity is a convention for reducing two subjects to a subject/object dichotomy by distortion of one of them. It is therefore a specifically phallic dialectic: 

*harnessed to a phallogocentric tradition dedicated to valorizing sameness, symmetry, and most important of all, visibility. The Phallus as unique sexual standard.*

According to Irigaray, the mirror stage is not in any sense of the word neutral; the figure in the mirror is implicitly male.¹

The either/or logic of specular metaphors permeates both texts, crucially dividing woman as Subject or Object. In *Lady Oracle* this strategy of mirror imaging is woven into the fabric of the gothic narrative. However, in *The Edible Woman* realism and fantasy are not embedded plot conventions mutually reading into each other. This romantic quest plot is concerned with the male gaze and the female image as they govern the story of Peter, a lawyer, and the heroine Marian MacAlpin, a market researcher for Seymour Surveys.

In *The Edible Woman* the male scopic economy governs as the plot proceeds along lines of Marian’s conflict with, and attachment to, the dictates of the male gaze. For impending marriage to Peter places her critically between a desire to feed the narcissistic image of herself seen through his eyes; the

---

¹ Naomi Schor, "Eugénie Grandet: Mirrors and Melancholia" in *The (M)other Tongue*, 223.
passive status of woman as object, and the sense of danger to self-hood this role implies:

Women look so often in the mirror because their primary market value in the marriage exchange depends upon the lure of their images. Women, in this culture, are their images.¹

The result of this enclosure in the objectifying gaze of her boyfriend is loss of personal identity and loss of appetite. Marian's submission to Peter's specular authority, seeing her as a mirror image of his own persona, causes her to identify with products for consumption. This disintegration of her identity coincides with the structure of the narrative-divided into two sections-and with the concomitant switch in voice from first to third person narration. So in its entirety, The Edible Woman is a story of mirroring as a socially constructed gender issue. Through comic distancing Marian plays out women's entrapment in an inherently male scopic economy, to which she is an accomplice even as she attempts to displace its crucial terms.

At the beginning of the story Marian is herself entrenched in consumer politics, involved in testing and tasting, gauging the viability of target consumers for her employers' products. This is of course part of Atwood's distancing irony, working the narrative through the perspective of consumerism on all levels. Thus ingestion is linked to a politics of mastery and from there to the subject/object conflict. In her surveys interviewees are rated on their calculated levels of consumption as in the average-beer-

¹"Eugénie Grandet", 14.
consumption per week scale. 1 Duncan however, the student who upsets the pattern of Marian's vision of middle-class domesticity with Peter, subverts the order of ratings by subverting order itself. Having completed the beer questionnaire he then annuls its findings:

'You wanted me to pick a number.'... and six is my lucky number. I even got them to change the numbers on the apartments; this is really Number One, you know. '(49)

At the far end of the consumer/consumed dichotomy Peter brags of his hunting and killing prowess:

'So I let her off and Wham. One shot, right through the heart. ...Trigger said, 'You know how to gut them, you just slit her down the belly and give her a good hard shake and all the guts'll fall out.' (65)

In The Edible Woman, as in Atwood's other novels, the tension between process and product is an artistic paradox and a political positioning. They are be seen in terms of the contradictions of fixity/flux or product/process [which] is consistently the metaphoric ground in which this political dimension is rooted. 2 The world of product appraisal and revision, one in which scientific discourse is shown to be inadapted to the vagaries of human behaviour, is then the territory for political engagement in The Edible Woman. It is from the knowable in terms of mastery that Marian retreats in the latter part of the story; mastery contained in the concept of language as packaging, ordering and sorting. This is the code of her job at Seymour

1 Margaret Atwood, The Edible Woman [1969] (Toronto: Seal, 1978), 42. All further references are in the text of the thesis.
Surveys, but in its ironic connotation it is the discourse of a political, gendered perception. At the other end of the scale from this manageable discourse is the unfathomable ambivalent sign system of Duncan. As Frank Davey points out:

*Part of her attraction to Duncan lies in his suspicion of words ... and in his preference for iconic messages.*

Just as her job involves rendering language transparent, refining questions to leave no possibility of clouded interpretation, Duncan's world is the graduate studies' oppositional *welter of commas and shredded footnotes* which occasionally drives him to the tactile comfort of ironing. In contrast, Marian's relationship with Peter progresses along predictable stages of ritual courtship. His perceptions of reality are portrayed as clasped to official discourses of all types; those of advertising slogans as well as social mythologies of the right clothes, the right camera and the right location for 'spontaneous' love-making.

*Peter's abstraction on these occasions gave me the feeling that he liked doing them because he had read about them somewhere, but I could never locate the quotations. The field was, I guessed, a hunting story from one of the outdoorsy male magazines, ... The sheepskin I placed in one of the men's glossies, the kind with lust in pent-houses. But the bathtub? Possibly one of the murder mysteries he read as what he called 'escape literature'.* (56)

Peter is a compilation of intertextural second-order references to social norms of the type Roland Barthes deconstructed in *Mythologies* [1957]. Marian is constantly engaged in 'reading' these stereotypical codes, anticipating his desires and actions,

---

1 *Margaret Atwood: A Feminist Poetics,* 77.
participating in an already written script of socially acceptable behavior. Yet if Peter conforms to predictable narrative patterns, Marian is the 'blank page' on which the script is written, an accomplice nonetheless, as she shapes herself in his image. The idea that she is his reflection in the mirror can be extended to the references to cameras and photography throughout the story:

Peter was talking at full speed to Len about the different methods of taking self-portraits: with reflecting images in mirrors, self-timers that let you press the shutter-release and then run to position and pose, and long cable-releases with triggers and air-type releases with bulbs. (67)

These allusions to visual mastery as the subtext of photography fixes the problematic of the narrative itself as one of identity. The scopic authority of language, relying on sameness for comfort, is represented by the photographic medium which thus operates as metafiction. Linda Hutcheon analyses the Canadian preoccupation with photographic metaphors and metafiction. For her, Atwood's use of photography delineates paradoxical non-interventionist violence. She continues:

The protagonist of The Edible Woman not only comes to fear her hunter/photographer fiancé, but also makes an important connection between photography and acquisition.

In The Edible Woman, the camera eye, or rather Peter as camera eye, stands as a fictional comment on the hunter/victim theme of

---

1 See "The Blank Page", 292 - 313.
2 The Canadian Postmodern, 48.
the story.\textsuperscript{1} It also serves to connect the theme to the artistic conflict of process versus product in that, as Hutcheon argues, writing is a way of reducing imaginative immediacy to a framed 'dead' form. A reverse dynamics revitalizes the creative moment.\textsuperscript{2}

Thus there is a two-way pull operating through the prism of the photographic lens; the object of desire is 'killed', transfixed and impaled by the masculine authority which seeks to possess. Simultaneously the female author is inscribed as a signature of artistic reversal destabilizing existing orders of language and reviving the moment of creation. Such a signature is aptly described by Nancy Miller as a desire for another logic of plot which by definition cannot be narrated, [and which] looks elsewhere for expression: in the authorization provided by discourse, and in descriptive emblems tied to the representation of writing itself.\textsuperscript{3}

Nancy K. Miller is in fact referring to hieroglyphic emblems, a way of notating that which resists interpretation, an expressive device which Atwood uses in \textit{Surfacing}. However, other artistic modes of representation such as camera images stitched into the flow of narrative serve the same purpose; they introduce a medium which has been written in but which is not primarily of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{1} For a review of Atwood's camera images and their significance see: Sharon R. Wilson, "Camera Images in Margaret Atwood's Novels" in \textit{Margaret Atwood: Reflection and Reality}, ed. B. Mendez-Egle (Texas: Pan American University, 1987).
\item \textsuperscript{2} See \textit{The Canadian Postmodern}.
\item \textsuperscript{3} Nancy K. Miller, ed. "Arachnologies" in \textit{The Poetics of Gender} (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 278.
\end{itemize}
the written, suggesting an inpenetrability. Within this opaque texture is the metafictional moment, arresting the narrative on the grounds of a comment on the world/fiction. *The Edible Woman* assumes the masculine priority in a social and psychological representation of power relations between the sexes. Marion, by reading the discourses of this social text through Peter confronts this rigid positioning. The metafictional paradox is then the way of confronting and undermining the certainty of the word and the ballast of social encoding it vehicles. That Atwood's heroine is a comic one pertains to this double play; the narrator is in fact ironizing the gap between her feminine awareness and the social conventions she must comply with.

The boundary of the private is clearly delineated by Marian's subterfuges in order to adhere to Peter's conformist, public codes of conduct; ones that reject her to the status of object. Although the narrator is fully aware of the limits of her relationship, she seems simultaneously bound to operate a divorce between inner realization and outer action. Repeatedly suppressing her awareness of Peter's deficiencies, and thus complying with the outer reality his perceptions represent, Marian can be read both as a heroine in the labyrinth, caught in the maze of language, and as the emerging feminine consciousness retrieved from Peter's encoding. There is both a trapped and a liberatory thread to *The Edible Woman*, much like the psychoanalytic process in which the surfacing of patterns of behaviour both brings to light fugitive motivation and secret desires, and liberates the subject from his/her repression.
**Bodily Harm**: inscribing feminine exile.

*Bodily Harm* uses the theme of the prison narrative to explore the coincidence of geographical and feminine exile. The gothic genre of *Lady Oracle* as a fiction of female fantasies and their enclosure in a masculine economy, gives way in *Bodily Harm* to a socio/political intrigue.

Rennie the heroine has suffered the 'bodily harm' of a partial mastectomy. The psychological effects of this, and Rennie's subsequent actions are revealed in broken fragments; from her relationship falling apart to a mysterious hangman's noose found on her bed by two detectives, to her sudden departure for the Caribbean island of St. Antoine. On the pretext of doing a travel piece about the island's beaches and restaurants, Rennie escapes the collapsing structure of her former life, only to be caught up in a political intrigue. The first chapters alternate narrative from the island and Toronto. The dual narrative voice traces Rennie's relationship with Jake; a relationship which foundered on the reality of her cancer, and then relates her arrival in St. Antoine on the verge of elections. Having left the vacuum of her former life Rennie enters the displacement syndrome; the island is a haven precisely because it is not home. *In a way she's invisible. In a way she's safe.* But as a narrative of ironic and enigmatic tensions, the unfolding of the plot serves to deconstruct this confidence. On foreign territory Rennie will find herself a prey to the political machinations on the island and a victim of manipulation. To accommodate this alienation the disjointed consciousness of the heroine reaches us in sections fractured into distinct narrative segments. These gapped pieces of Rennie's
history deal with the sayable and the unsayable, pointing to the silence of portions left out or alternately reaching the reader in jigsaw fashion. The intersections of these passages spell out points of rupture within the narrative where it gives way to gaps in coherence; junctures where memory, loss, and the blanks of erased story continuum meet.

Another sign of Rennie's vacillating consciousness is the sliding from a first-person autobiographical mode into a third-person and back again. One reads the unstable flow of memory and recording of events as a discursive sign of Rennie's self-exile. This exile begins with the image of death, erected by the spectre of her cancer, and by the defeated self-image this reality unveils. In the eyes of her lover Jake, Rennie's body signifies her role as a fetish object relating her to the world of commodities; women as exchange objects between men.

...she'd told him, the operation had been scheduled, all in the same day. She could understand his shock and disgust and the effort he was making not to reveal them, since she felt the same way. ... He ran his hand over her breast a couple of times, the bad one. Then he began to cry.¹

The representation of her body as a product at the moment it becomes defective to Jake's needs and desires, fits Irigaray's definition of women as commodities:

- just as a commodity has no mirror it can use to reflect itself, so woman serves as reflection, as image of and for man, but lacks specific qualities of her own. Her value-

¹ Margaret Atwood, Bodily Harm [1981](London: Virago, 1983), 39. All further references are in the text of the thesis.
invested form amounts to what man inscribes in and on its matter: that is, her body.\(^1\)

When Rennie ceases to be the reflector of her lover's persona her own reality disjuncts. One feature of her alienation are the recurrent fantasies of death which pervade *Bodily Harm*. These images chart Rennie's anxiety over her cancer, her fantasy of the scar on her breast [which] splits open like a diseased fruit. (60)

The decay of the body signals Rennie's detachment from a unified persona. Her body is set up as a surface on to which are projected scenes of war. It becomes an individual statement from the site of women's invisibility in society on the plane of that which is visible; the body.

The second part of the novel confirms this disunity as Rennie relates her childhood. Old grandparents as guardians, abusive treatment, an absent father, are all explanations of 'bodily harm':

\[
\text{I know I will be shut in the cellar by myself. I'm afraid of that, I know what's down there ...}
\]

\[
\text{I'm crying because I'm afraid, I can't stop, and even if I hadn't done anything wrong I'd still be put down there, for making a noise, for crying. (53)}
\]

When Rennie and Lora, an acquaintance made on the island, are framed by political rackateers and imprisoned, the latter exposes her own childhood of abuse by a step-father. Both the mini-narratives are embedded in the story, and they pull together, by association, the themes of physical and psychological distress running through it. They seek to release the two women from the specular space of female as victim of society by exploring the

cause and effect of this reality. Both these first-person accounts are those of memory interrupting the main narratives in order to question its premises. When imprisoned, the two women's enclosure, the sequences from the past and the recurrent images of devasted matter, and the erasure which characterizes the narrative sequences, mirror earlier images in the narrative:

She moves the sticky hair away from the face, which isn't a face any more, ... the mouth looks like a piece of fruit that's been run over by a car, pulp, ... it's no one she recognizes, she has no connection with this, there's nothing she can do, it's the face of a stranger, someone without a name, the word Lora has come unhooked and is hovering in the air, ... she could lick this face, clean it off with her tongue.. (298)

Driving in the negation of the terms of recognition the narrator repeats earlier references to radical strangeness and negation. This erasure, the citing of someone as no one and furthermore that this someone is no one she recognises, echoes back to the faceless stranger of the hang-man's noose. The strict grandmother, the confinement in the prison of home are typical scenarios in which she was a faceless stranger. Another is the estrangement from the self in a sexist society which Rennie falls victim to through the 'bodily harm' of cancer, and its effects on her relationship. It is the blankness of this erasure of identity which forestalls closure as it plays on the edges of the plot, calling up fantasies of destruction. Contradicting this material escaping control is the pull of the plot-line displaying cool-headedness and irony:

Rennie decided that there were some things it was better not to know any more about than you had to. Surfaces, in many cases, were preferable to depths. (211)
Thus Rennie apparently obeys the dictates of the 'surface'; the ideology of realistic fiction, whilst fantasies and dreams work by condensation and displacement, bringing heterogeneous elements into play and enabling the plot to shift and overspill its territory.
Alice Munro's "The Progress of Love": the parameters of secrets.

The story "The Progress of Love", in the collection of the same name, is a tale about family secrets. It both recognizes as theme and connotes as a subtext an area of meaning linked to the 'unsayable'. Secrets contain an 'archeological' signification, in that they connote layers of meaning, and are linked to the very idea of interpretation.

The theme of "The Progress of Love" centres on the emotional convolutions and reversals of life in the small Canadian town of Ramsey, and the particular group of eccentric inhabitants residing there. As such, the diverse goings-on of the residents script the relations of power and the weight of repression contained in family drama. The fresco of social representation in this and many other of Munro's stories evolves out of the relational disparities and barriers set up between members and relatives of one family. Although there is a first-person narrator and the story primarily concerns the adult life of the narrator, Phemie, it centres on Phemie through the prism of the family structure of set codes of behaviour and ritual; articulating her awareness as part of a particular set of 'frozen' social parameters. Although the emotional focus is centred within Phemie's quest to make sense of her family history, and thus make sense of her own history, this search for identity is shaped through the community, through its laws and proprieties, within the social

fabric of the small town. This concerns, as all proprieties do, much that belongs to the 'unsaid'; knowledge shared by all but repressed in the interests of the status quo. The holistic self-enclosed world of the narrator is in play within a continuity seeking to establish roots and a past, whilst symbolically, other narrative allegiances are formed. The narrative is directed into secrets seeking to unsettle the codes and role-playing of the family scenario.

Frank Kermode in his essay "Secrets and Narrative Sequence" comments on the particular functions of secrets in fiction:

> Secrets, in short, are at odds with sequence, which is considered as an aspect of propriety; and a passion for sequence may result in the suppression of the secret. But it is there, and one way we can find the secret is to look out for evidence of suppression, which will sometimes tell us where the suppressed secret is located.

As he says, secrets are concerned with:

> ..material that is less manifestly under the control of authority, less easily subordinated to 'clearness and effect', more palpably the enemy of order, of interpretative consensus, of message.  

Representational images of women's roles, and it is a story dominated by women, come to us on the one hand through the circumscribed limits of their play within the social map of a small-town landscape. Against this circumscription the voice of the first-person narrator weaves a tale of doubt in the veracity of this social map, in its ability to correspond to her own subjective perceptions of experience and the world around her.

---

The adult narrator orders and controls a narrative wherein her own place is at times 'nameable', the site in which reposes the orderly tale that she is bringing us, and at times located in an 'unnameable' gap between cultural and social codes, and personal identity. Her very role as narrator designates her authority to tell, but what she 'knows' leads the reader outside and into contradiction with her story. This disparity of knowledge, or experience, and ordered historical scripting places her in the guise of many female narrators as one who appears to contain and direct both the silence of feminine experience and the limitation of social roles. We, the readers, come in contact with and implicitly accept the oxymoron\(^1\) mode of her voice and two levels of reading emerge; one the tale of Phemie's mother's youth and her grandparents' influence on her mother. This tale involves multiple interpretations as family history surfaces and we receive the different versions of why the mother, Marietta, burnt her inheritance. The story will back-track and overlap these interpretations, deepening the mystery which changes profile as the narrative progresses. It becomes the question of why Marietta hates her father which remains unanswered. This is the seam of the second level of reading, belying the discursive possibility of elucidation of the first as we move out of the objective, narratable and into the subjective/symbolic realm of Phemie's problematical identity. For the mother Marietta, her parents (Phemie's grandparents) and Phemie herself are all

enmeshed in the problem of love and hatred. A problem which the story does not elucidate for it belongs above all in the domain of the family secrets, circulating stray ends of meaning rather than feeding into logical closure. As the mosaic pieces contribute to the plot, we are progressively aware of an emotional landscape, dominated by the narrator's own common shared experience with the other women of the story. This involves Phemie in her quest of discovery, in a reading through this shared experience of womanhood as she attempts, in a motion of recovery, to lay bare the emotional tangle of her female genealogy. In doing so, the threads of interpretation multiply and we hear different versions of events. The linear progression of the plot does not build up to the solution of why Marietta did what she did, (the main ponderable of the story being the unsolved mystery of her burning her paternal inheritance and thus denying her daughter a college education). Instead the denial of closure, the threads left hanging and the secrets circulating underground, point us to the larger question of women's identity; their social and personal praxes, their emotional and political inscription in the texture of representation. This economy of meaning both overflows the plot and is informed by the plot, as tensions of representation split open on the very multiplicity and unaccountability of women's identity.

Phemie is giving voice to a family history, but her voice cracks into perfidy as each version opens a causal gap in the truth of this history. Her story then signals a move away from official versions, belying its own ability to conclude, resolve and harmonize.
As Coral Ann Howells says:

There is no plot line which can be summarised, and Phemie's mother's and grandmother's stories have spaces left all around them for their drifting meanings cannot be repressed or contained. They remain resistant to her urge to shape them into any kind of explanation for the woman she has herself become or to offer any confirmation of her role as family chronicler. ¹

Phemie's doubting, perfidious quest, as she undermines not only the reliability of her narration but the reliability of narrating modes themselves, is signalled at the beginning of the narrative with the news of her mother's death:

'I think your mother's gone'.
'I knew that 'gone' meant 'dead'. I knew that. But for a second or so I saw my mother in her black straw hat setting off down the lane. The word 'gone' seemed full of nothing but a deep relief and ambiguity and even an excitement - the excitement you feel when a door closes and your house sinks back to normal and you let yourself loose into all the free space around you. That was in my father's voice, too - behind the apology, a queer sound like a gulped breath. But my mother hadn't been a burden - she hadn't been sick a day - and far from feeling relieved at her death, my father took it hard. (3)

In this opening, the mother's death is tied to loss and absence but the sign linking mother to daughter is not caught up in the emotion of grief. The sign that is set up is an indeterminate one; does Phemie feel freedom or abandonment? As the story later reveals, freedom from the social strictures and codes which had determined the mother's role, entails to a certain extent the

falling away of Phemie's own representation within the world of women's role-playing. Awareness, autonomy, and retrieved identity for the narrator involves loss; a paradoxical loss of the set historical model which conflicts with Phemie's sense of self. Her 'own' space has no place within the social spectrum of the small community and, in the final analysis, the loss of her mother is the relinquishing of the link with paternal law and the strictures of community discourse. Phemie's haphazard piecing together of conflicting borders defines her own reality as a self-determining one; she is not merely subjected to the Phallic law instating women's cultural silence, but is able to interrogate its meaning and parameters. In searching for secrets, the undercover agents of bland reality, "The Progress of Love" speaks to the paradoxical. The absurd and the perfidious in Munro's fiction are heretical moves,¹ in order to establish bases or sites for the emergence of Otherness as a paradigm for the feminine.

At the beginning of the story, the news of Marietta's death sparks off the memory of her praying on her knees at midday, at night, and first thing in the morning. Every day opened up to her to have God's will done in it. Every night she toted up what she'd done and said and thought, to see how it squared with Him. (4) Marietta's absorption in religion, and her obsession with accountability, was a displacement for fantasies of desire and hatred for her father. We learn that her quasi-symbiotic fusion

¹ See E.D. Blodgett's article on narrative heresy in Gallant's fiction which is also pertinent to Munro's: E.D. Blodgett, "Heresy and Other Arts: A Measure of Mavis Gallant's Fiction" in Essays on Canadian Writing, 42 (Winter, 1990).
with religion of the bible-thumping variety began when she was fourteen- it coincided with the year her mother died. So the narrative moves through the death of Marietta into the death of the grandmother. The associative move takes us again into the altered, uncanny pattern of loss and abandonment. Marietta 'resolved' her mother's death by investing in religion, and it will become the signifying practice modelling and structuring the upbringing of her daughter. Discourses are set up which camouflage loss, desire and hatred; the mother pits her religious doctrine against that of her father who governs her life. Yet in refusing the paternal law, but unable to liberate herself from its emotional dictates, Marietta feeds her anger to the extent of one day burning the three thousand dollars left to her in his will. She is in fact, like Phemie, an orphan of represented models, having reneged on continuity and tradition, but, whereas she re-'covers' this breach through the structuration of another socially conformist discourse, religious dogma, Phemie operates a different narrative logic. She in fact, recuperates the past; that of her mother and grandmother. She seeks to interpret and make sense of it through a hermeneutic of discovery, attempting to lay bare the logical anomalies and gaps in the history of the family. This destructuring process reveals, as the story progresses, the conflicting versions of a history. It revises the map of narrative, seeking alternative concepts of culture and story in order to invoke a feminine source of origins. The fracturing of coherence can be seen as a cultural, ideologically significant act in women's writing.
Patricia Smart, in analysing a 'feminine' economy of writing, describes the conflict between the texture and the law in women's narratives:

Nous verrons que dans l'écriture romanesque cette lutte éminemment textuelle entre la texture et la Loi se répercute en effet sur l'instance narrative et se traduit dans les rapports entre les personnages masculins et féminins.¹

(In narrative prose, the confrontation between texture and the Law affects modes of representation and is at work in the interaction of masculine and feminine characters. ) [My translation].

The discourses that rule the social and conformist are in fact inadequate to any kind of making sense of Munro's stories. They serve, as in "The Progress of Love", to search elsewhere for surplus, silences, instances of contradiction which underpin the social and the readable as codified discourses and equally move to subvert them. It is only in reading through the gaps that Phemie as narrating presence can herself be 'read' into the text; that the praying of her mother and the mystery of her grandfather, can be associated to a feminine silence in the text. As such the progress of Phemie, like that of love, is read as a chain of signifiers, deferring the final version because Phemie is constructed across the differing and thus deferring versions of what is in fact a community tale. The story is a story of a 'what happened' which is never really told, and the space between

expectancy and resolution is one of shifts and balances which affect the texture of narrative itself. The emotionally charged narratives that Phemie cannot unravel also concern a childhood trauma of her mother's when the latter witnessed what she took for a suicide attempt on the part of her mother (Phemie's grandmother). In fact the actual drama of the (mock) suicide is only a fragment of the family story which continually throws out questions. Yet the version given by Marietta's sister Beryl undermines Marietta's, and the interpretations we are given between the three female characters who bring us the story conflict and confuse. The separate versions are unable to explain the sexual entanglements scripted in indeterminate form in, and around, the testimonies. As Phemie says:

I didn't have a problem right away with Beryl's story
...Why shouldn't Beryl's version of the same event be different from my mother's? Beryl was strange in every way—everything about her was slanted, seen from a new angle. It was my mother's version that held, for a time. It absorbed Beryl's story, closed over it. But Beryl's story didn't vanish; it stayed sealed off for years, but it wasn't gone.(23)

These unresolved mysteries maintain the women in indeterminacy; the strands of these imponderables cross at the intersection of their feminine identity; an identity itself heterogeneous and problematical. The narrator describes her awareness of her mother as two separate areas of reference - one is Mother, the maternal function which has no face, no individuality, for she says: When I was away from her I could not think what my mother's face was like and this frightened me.
The other is 'Marietta', the individual her mother once was who,
she says, was separate, not swallowed up in my mother's grown-up body. Marietta had lived as a child in a town where:

There were eleven hotels on the main street, where the loggers stayed, and drank. (9)

There were always places she hated to go past, let alone into, and that was the reason. Men laughing. Because of that, she hated barbershops, hated their smell. (11)

The child Marietta, distinct from the social function assigned by motherhood and marriage, is the area where the interplay of sexual connotation and secrecy registers. It is also where the boundaries of Phemie's identity blurs, risking the return to an undifferentiated maternal source. Stories from Marietta's past become entangled in Phemie's present through the seepage of old forgotten traumas into the present. Speaking of her mother, relating the suicide incident when Marietta went running up the main street in her nightgown, howling, Phemie says:

*Her heart was broken. That was what I always heard my mother say. That was the end of it. Those words lifted up the story and sealed it shut. I never asked, Who broke it? I never asked, What was the men's poison talk? What was the meaning of the word 'vile'? ...*

*I always had a feeling, with my mother's talk and stories, of something swelling out behind. Like a cloud you couldn't see through, or get to the end of. And when I grieved my mother, I became part of it. Then I would beat my head against my mother's stomach and breasts, against her tall, firm front, demanding to be forgiven. My mother would tell me to ask God. But it wasn't God, it was my mother I had to get straight with. It seemed as if she knew something about me that was worse, far worse, than ordinary lies and tricks and meanness; it was a really sickening shame. I beat against my mother's front to make her forget that.* (13)
What is the shame shared by mother and daughter? What does the men's poison talk of which the mother fantasizes refer to? The text provides no answers, only more innuendo, and this is one more edge of meaning binding the women together in a heterogeneous space of feminine experience. Phemie signifies as the daughter bled into the text of her mother, just as her mother manifestly remains encased in codes of the past which are inaccessible to the present. It is in this semiotic space,¹ that 'the feminine', an anarchic writing of the female body and repressed meaning, is signaled. Phemie's question is in fact 'where am I' within the schema of the past and the 'I' of which it is question is found in the site of silence, her mother's and her own, where the authority of their individual discourses cannot function and an Other 'textu(r)al' logic comes into play.

The Flats Road and women's represented roles

*Lives of Girls and Women* concerns the heroine as narrator of her process of change from girlhood to womanhood in a small Canadian town. The novel reads like a story cycle, progressing in episodes which chart the growth and development of the female narrator Del.

The topographical centres of the stories are the town of Jubilee, the narrator's childhood home; the Flats Road, lying on the outer

¹ In relation to the text, the female body and the concept of heterogeneity see Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Art and Literature* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981). 'Semiotic' space refers to the pre-symbolic, pre-linguistic stage of symbiosis between mother and infant, characterized by primary desires and drives. Kristeva has theoretically posited the semiotic as a feminine economy of meaning.
margins of the town, and Jenkins Bend; the home of Uncle Craig, which lies beyond the town limits. The articulation of centre, margin and beyond will sustain a social/symbolic focus in the novel, identifying the permutations and limitations of the represented universe. In fact the centre of the collection of stories is the community, and its presence, its voice, is once again the consensual one of a small town. Whilst the narrator Del measures herself against the voices of tradition that emanate from the formal and formalizing Aunts Elspeth and Grace, she is both the judge of attitudes and subject to those same pulls and sways of emotion and opinion. Throughout the narratives are moments when 'belonging', the lynchpin of small-town community survival, is undermined and 'estrangement' takes its place. Yet, one gives way to the other as if history and tradition were not rooted and causal, but layered, the stiff traditions governing the sense of belonging, covering a community void, unable to sustain tradition. This suggests an area responding to a different logic, different laws of appraisal which the narrator d'vines on the border of her own judgement, her own reading of reality.

"The Flats Road", the title of one of the stories in the collection, is neither inside a town nor outside. We are told it lies between the two, and Uncle Benny's place lies further into the bush, inhabiting an indeterminate swampland adjoining the river Wawanash. The story vacillates between the two areas of habitation and community, Del's home, the fox farm, and Uncle Benny's swampside shack, and the Flats road itself, a stretch of neglected, poor and eccentric houses, half-finished and abandoned. Uncle Benny is only one of the eccentric characters
living in and around the Flats Road, cut off from the town by the swamp. Del and her brother Owen play and fish there among the clutter of Benny's collected miscellanea; a dirty junk-heap of fifty or so years of family life but also other people's throwaways for as the narrator tells us Benny valued debris for its own sake. Del, leaving the ordered universe of home, finds at Benny's a world that functions on chaos; a material disorder which finds a clear discursive correlate in the stacks of old newspapers he keeps. These are not the city newspapers subscribed to by her family, but a tabloid leaving her bloated and giddy with revelations of evil, of its versatility and grand invention and horrific playfulness. But this view of the uncle's universe, coloured by the child's fantasizing, which disperses when confronted by the familiar traits of home, is in fact a proleptic recognition of the events that are to take place later in the story. It is as though the child's fantasy operates a self-fulfilling logic. For the chaos of the shack, housing the gothic tales of Benny's tabloid newspapers which transmute tragedy into sensation, is later the scene of a domestic tragedy. The rest of the narrative is in fact concerned with the story of Uncle Benny's marriage to a girl met through a matrimonial advertisement in the same 'gothic' newspaper whose headlines figure:

FATHER FEEDS TWIN DAUGHTERS TO HOGS
WOMAN GIVES BIRTH TO HUMAN MONKEY
VIRGIN RAPED ON CROSS BY CRAZED MONKS

1 Alice Munro, Lives of Girls and Women [1971] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), 5. All further references are in the text of the thesis.
SENDS HUSBAND'S TORSO BY MAIL

The wedding transaction (for Madeleine is treated solely as merchandise both by her brother who writes to Benny to arrange the wedding, and by the group of relatives at the Flats Road) erases the girl's subjective presence in the narrative. She is signalled by her position as object, first of all in relation to her brother (is he the incestuous father of her child?), then, via her inscription as an erased presence through her brother's writing 'in her name'. Throughout the story she will figure as a trope of an Other repressed area of knowledge, symbolically attached to the territory lying outside the town and outside ordered society, and linked to feminine sexuality in all its excessiveness. The community of the Flats Road are united in this story of misrecognition, in which events succeed each other as if driven to misunderstanding, at the root of which is the symbolic 'absence' of Madeleine herself.

When Uncle Benny decides to answer the classified advertisement Del's family discuss the union as an exchange of property between men:

'Well it is taking a chance,' said my father, when Uncle Benny showed us this letter at the dinner table. 'What makes you think this is the one you want?'
'I don't figure any harm in lookin' her over.'
'It looks to me as if the brother is pretty willing to get rid of her.'
'Take her to a doctor, have a medical examination,' said my mother firmly. (13)

Significantly, just as she does not subjectively come into her own in the story, Benny cannot approach her in his own name for he cannot write. Madeleine becomes the community's venture, in which the narrative seems to invest the sum of 'improper'
knowledge repressed in the community consciousness. Her coming to Benny's universe places her as the 'madwoman in the attic',1 invisible except in terms of rage or silence:

'What are you come spyin' around here for? You better get out of here.'

She started down the steps. ...

'You're a dirty little bugger. ... Dirty little spy-bugger, aren't you?'

Her short hair was not combed, she was wearing a ragged print dress on her flat young body. Her violence seemed calculated, theatrical; you wanted to stay to watch it, as if it were a show, and there was no doubt, either, when she raised the stove lifter over her head, that she would crack it down on my skull if she felt like it - that is, if she felt the scene demanded it. She was watching herself, I thought.

(17)

As the source of stories passed round the neighbourhood, Madeleine is, however, unlocateable within her own story. Her strange behaviour, characterized by either rage or silence, seems to mime a possible place in the represented universe that she cannot otherwise accede to. Logically 'set apart' from the universe in which she is inscribed, her violence seems to subvert the conventions of representation and invoke blows from an outraged feminine consciousness.

Just as we are given no clue as to where Madeleine emotionally and ontologically comes from, neither can we trace the history of

---

1 S.Gilbert and S. Gubar extensively analyse the presence, and simultaneous absence from the central plot, of 'mad' feminine figures in nineteen-century novels as a way of expressing and exorcising feminine rage and desire.

her daughter. They both erupt in the Flats Road as strangers from an undefined area of meaning and disappear at the end of the story. We learn later that Madeleine beats her daughter, re-enacting the abuse perpetrated on herself, further fitting her into the already signalled place of chaos and uncontrolled 'surplus' of Benny's shack outside the town.\textsuperscript{1} Within the logic of a topographical arena, corresponding to the scripting of a textual consciousness, she is the central focus of energy directing our attention to spaces or sites of signification lying outside the communal harmony represented by the small town. The unexplained actions, or rather lack of action of Benny when he finally discloses her abuse of the child, is one of the questions raised by the narrative. At this point Madeleine has already fled the house and Uncle Benny can only mumble half-wittedly. Seemingly deprived of means to act, he can only act out a prescribed role:

\begin{quote}
Whether he was afraid of the police, or just afraid of the public and official air of such a scheme, the words surrounding it, the alien places it would take him into, was impossible to tell. (21)
\end{quote}

The 'alien places', (meaning outside the Flats Road), are themselves a fulfillment of the prophetic linking of an alien presence, the girl, to Benny's shack on the swampland outside the town. That he would in fact have to search for her in 'alien places'

\textsuperscript{1}Mary Lynn Broe discusses women's exile, silence and incest in her article "My Art belongs to Daddy" in \textit{Women's writing in Exile}, eds. Mary Lynn Broe & Angela Ingram (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989).
when her estrangement from the narrative indicates her very inscription in the plot as 'alien' takes us out of the story-line and ponders the impossible resolution to Benny's dilemma. For in fact the narrator asks: *What is to be done?* and this could be addressed both to the reader and to the family; frozen in their blind, familiar roles. In a deconstructive move the narrative reveals Benny's problem as the problem of the narrative, in that Madeleine is a role within the narrative that the story-line cannot assume and close. As a symbolic emergence of the Other; the locus of anger and threatening surplus, she is riven to the signifying area of Benny, the chaos of his home, and the symbolic texture this implies. If in the narrative, it seems impossible for him to go after the fugitives or for action to be taken, as though other causal factors are in play, it is because Madeleine is the suppressed, marginalised other half of Benny's narrative persona - a half that cannot be admitted into the arena of the family story-telling, for it is beyond its control; reaching into unexplained and silent regions of desire and violence. As is often the case in Munro, the static frozen positions of the social arena are linked to a passage which relieves the tension by a mode of explication; an explication which designs another type of causal logic caught up in the story: *At this time of year the foxes were having their pups. If an airplane from the Air Force Training School on the lake came over too low, if a stranger appeared near the pens, if anything too startling or disruptive occurred, they might decide to kill them. Nobody knew whether they did this out of blind irritation, or out of roused and terrified maternal feeling - could they be wanting to take their pups, who still had not opened their eyes, out of the dangerous situation they*
might sense they had brought them into, in these pens? They were not like domestic animals. They had lived only a very few generations in captivity. (21/2)

This passage juxtaposes the fox cubs, the primal instinct of killing as protection, to save from being killed, within a symbolic reference that echoes back to Madeleine - the fear of revelation, the impossibility of breaking silence, of being penned into a dilemma of the self. Going further, this passage serves to explicate the problem Madeleine represents in narrative terms, by displacing its terms on to the foxes' danger and aggression.

The drama of the fox-cubs seams the two universes that otherwise do not meet; that of the social family, in which Uncle Benny is acceptable and accepted because familiar, and another universe, obeying a symbolic logic, in which Benny and Madeleine are one. Madeleine is the impossible discourse of the Other in the narrative which only poses questions, and thus deconstructs the themes working towards closure.

Benny, known for his wild unrealistic schemes does in fact go after the child Diana, once his mission is set in the same terms as all his other hair-brained ventures, and deemed hopeless. We can be sure from the onset that he will be unsuccessful, and that the illogical fantasy persona allotted to him will win out.

Uncle Benny, so terrified of taking legal and official action, was not in the least worried about undertaking what might turn out to be kidnapping. (22)

When Madeleine finally becomes hearsay, part of the Flats Road dose of eccentricity, her treatment of the child is brought out into the open and it is moulded into the familiar train of story-telling and gossip of the neighbourhood. We learn that when Benny actually went to Toronto to find mother and daughter, he never
found them. Driven, we are led to understand, into the defamiliarized city locus which fits the deterministic logic of the narrative, the plot closes in on Benny's intentions. He had got lost among factories, dead-end roads, warehouses, junkyards, railway tracks. Drawn to a landscape that parallels the disparate, chaotic surplus of his own (psychological) habitat; a region of waste and decay where primary forces are at work, he can only submit:

A map of the journey was burnt into his mind. And as he talked a different landscape - cars, billboards, industrial buildings, roads and locked gates and high wire fences, railway tracks, steep cindery embankments, tin sheds, ditches with a little brown water in them, also tin cans, mashed cardboard cartons, all kinds of clogged or barely floating waste - ...
and we could see it, we could see how it was to be lost there, how it was just not possible to find anything, or go on looking. (25)

The self-annihilating world of Uncle Benny - He was not our uncle or anybody's,(1) demands a form of misreading, against the grain of narrative belief and closure. Through this dual movement of narrative, we are obliged to accept that the tenets of the social/represented world are not the logical and causal structuration of Benny's world and are not the central focus of the story. The sequential 'this happened and so that happened', constantly gives way to another narrative space in which Benny's role outside society, receiving the couple of mother and daughter as figures of silence and violence, works through the logic of displacement and association in symbolic terms. That Benny does not, cannot, carry out the task of bringing the daughter back, only contributes to the deconstructive movement necessary
to his particular role in the narrative, a movement revealed and closed by the narrator at the end:

So lying alongside our world was Uncle Benny's world like a troubling distorted reflection, the same but never at all the same. (26)

Benny turns Madeleine into a something, or somebody, so long discarded at the end. Her story readily becomes part of the debris peopling his world of muddle and decay in the shack, and is in fact the returning of the narrative to its elementary confession of being founded on a space which is profoundly mis-understood, mis-named, mis-read. Madeleine is finally swallowed up in Benny's realm which correlates to a site of oral/anal drives - taking in and expelling; a stage concurring with the non-differentiation of oneself and the exterior. Benny's fusion with his environment is the attachment to his own debris.

In "The Flats Road", Madeleine is the figure through which erotic, alien, mad and mother share an uncomfortable bed, dismaying the community by their status as abused/abuser. She corresponds to a narrative dialogue with the unsayable, the outsider, the unnameable, which, signalled by the "spaces" left around and about,1 is a predominant feature of Munro's work. Madeleine cannot in fact be 'found' in Toronto because, in a certain sense Madeleine has never existed as an independent

---

consciousness in the Flats Road universe. Her place is on the other side of Benny's marginal existence. She fills the territory lying outside representable knowledge, outside the site of the familiar.

**Body/Language: a trope of the feminine.**

The female body occupies a historical and thematic area of enquiry in Munro's stories. Historical in a personal sense - details of bodily transformation marking the passage from childhood to adulthood, or from one state of awareness to another. Historical in a social communal sense - they are inscribed as tropes determining disparity of intimate knowledge and social recognition, marking the area of fantasy play that leads out of the social and into the secret. The way that the female body marks the junction between the possible and the inadmissable, affects the very texture of her stories. Figures of the body in her stories deal with a whole area of subterranean female knowledge, tracing codes of meaning, through that most intimate trace of female use and abuse. The body marks the narrative fault line or break determining boundaries, of accepted and acceptable social codes. Such boundaries, or differentiation, are equally adjudicated through the symbolic relevance of the female body as a territory, defining the very concept of borders between self and other, inside and outside.

In obvious extension to this is Munro's metaphorical rendering of the house as an essentially feminine space of identity and
therefore feminine narrative play. This particular trope of the feminine as 'house', and the images that issue from it will be dealt with in detail later. I intend here to examine the concept of 'the feminine' as it pertains to Munro's stories; traced as a surplus, or silence, or 'dangerous' overflowing of the female libido, and implying an under-current to the socially inscribed codes. As such the risk of disruption which such material both inscribes and averts, channels and simultaneously displaces the conflict between women's perceptions and social conventions.

Munro's depiction of sexuality, and in particular the female body, posits a 'landscape'; a topographical chart of the underlying strata upholding the stable codes of family life. Yet this landscape, embracing as it does both social convention and gothic fantasy, extends further than the bounds of metaphor and social comment. Whether sexuality is scripted as a subtext, as in the growing awareness of the adolescent narrator in the novel, *Lives of Girls and Women*, or whether it is the mystifying, because grotesque side of the tug-of-war between men and women involving power and manipulation, as in "The Moon in the Orange Street Skating Rink", it emerges as a capacity to mould the concept of time and therefore history differently. As Mary Condé rightly says: *It is women's bodies, ... [which] register the*

---

1 Munro herself comments on the importance of detail and setting, (often the house) in her work: *The way people live. The way houses are furnished and all the objects in them. I am crazy about doing this... .* Quoted in Michelle Gadpaille, *The Canadian Short Story* (Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 1988), 59.

2 See Mary Condé, "Women's Bodies in Alice Munro's 'The Progress of Love' " in *RANAM*, XXII.
capricious, unforeseeable leaps of time which are the basis of all Munro's plots. At the same time, women's sexuality, and by extension women's identity in Munro is subversive in that it is story that escapes the community signature, that occupies the realm of the grotesque or the gothic in her stories because it is a portion of reality which remains 'underground'.

Just as Del in Lives of Girls and Women encounters the world of male fantasies through Mr Chamberlain, his lightening grabs that nobody could see, which in its turn explicates the source of adult female dread as when, discussing Italian decadence and child prostitution, the [a]larm in [Del's] mother's voice was like the flap of rising wings. (148) Or in "Thanks for the Ride", the cryptic title for the sixteen-year old Lois' Saturday nights; presaging a future already played out against the hypocrisy of her mother, and the grotesque senility of a grandmother who sees her off for the evening with her latest pick-up:

"You can do what you like with my gran'daughter," she said... But you be careful. And you know what I mean? 2

The experience of sexual awakening, desire and fulfillment, as it is portrayed in "Baptizing" ties time down to the present as the narrator recounts first her fumbled sexual tussles with the brainy Jerry, and later the explosive desire of her first love, Garnet French. Yet for all the immediacy of this meeting of desire and the moment, it is a bracketed one for, as the end reveals, Del

---

1 "Women's Bodies", 88.
has never seriously entertained the idea of her lover in any other guise but *sewed up in his golden lover’s skin forever.* (234) The last lines of the story make this clear enough:

*Garnet French, Garnet French, Garnet French.*

*Real Life.* (238)

Munro's predilection for the oxymoron is here manifestly the sum of her meta-discourse on her own story i.e. Garnet French and real life exist for the narrator in the same experiential space but in distinct compartments which can only reflect the contents of the other in wry bemusement. They obviously do not operate in the same area of causality, and although the irruption of Garnet French in Del's adolescent life has affected her future (for she misses out on the long hoped for scholarship to college) he is not of the ilk to be a part of that future but will be relegated to the annals of her formative experience. We are therefore left with the evidence that sexuality and a particularly female perception of sexuality is not allied to harmonious continuity but posits disruption to the ordering of a career and 'public' future. The purpose of this body language would seem to be to recover the crucial determinants of a feminine consciousness working along the archeological precepts of women's bodies as the disputed, bartered, suppressed and repressed history of the community.

Working first of all on the layered topography of Munro's body language, the textual mapping, as we will see later, matches Margaret Atwood's rendering of a specifically female consciousness, articulated in a different way. Munro's discourse of the body focuses the female territory of the self, negotiating an identity within a represented universe elaborated along
masculine lines. This discourse constitutes a parallel sub-culture of female gossip which does not ruffle the surface of small-town life, although it is the sexual matrix on which the community is built. As an unsettling supplement, emphasizing women's ambivalent relation to history and tradition and their sense of being exiles on home territory,1 issues of gender and power surface through what could be seen as the delineation of these marginalized spaces in order, by inscribing this map of the feminine, to isolate, and thus historically retrieve women's function within language itself. For if women are exiled on home ground, i.e. the social/political community, they are also exiled or marginalised on the 'home ground' that language represents for all. The body/language in Munro is bound to the concept of the exile of women in discourse as constructed on binary oppositions. In Munro, this discourse of the body is the very coming into awareness of women's place and space as exile, supplement, surplus. It (most concretely) establishes the site of the Other as the ground on which language and culture has been built.

The novel Lives of Girls and Women and the collection The Progress of Love, are particularly implicated in the idea of the body as language and female territory, being the two works which foreground the burgeoning of women's affective and sexual awareness. In Lives of Girls and Women, the narrator moves through stages of sexual development, from child to adult, from fantasies to initiation. The first real contact with the sexual

1 Coral Ann Howells, "No Transcendental Image".5.
universe of adults comes for the narrator in the title story which scripts the relationship between Fern Dogherty the family lodger, and Mr Chamberlain, her 'friend'. The narrator herself, we imagine by now an adolescent, is caught up in fantasizing about the couple through the only domestic and domesticated discourses available. Her mother rejects the idea of Mr Chamberlain being more than just -

- 'Fern's friend ... They enjoy each other's company, ... They don't bother about any nonsense.'

Nonsense meant romance; it meant vulgarity; it meant sex. (144)

Sex is a Victorian discourse in the novel. Suppressed by domesticity, and repressed by a protestant ethic, it masks fantasies of male violence and fleeing heroines, revealing itself by topographical detail on the mutilating stage of childbirth and the 'woman's burden'. In the novel it represents a vital part of the female heroine's initiation. Her imagination feeds on the illicit discourse of pamphlets graphically and clinically detailing copulation. Finding bundles of Fern's papers she reads the itinerary of women's lives as a trail of disaster allying the gothic and the chillingly domestic. Talk about sexuality is the muted allusions referring to 'women's troubles'. Instructions on the muting, controlling and distorting of the female body is, however, omnipresent, constituting a veritable history that can be consulted and charted:

Another bundle was made up of several sheets of smudgy printing broken by blurred gray illustrations of what I thought at first were enema bags with tangled tubes, but which on reading the text I discovered to be cross sections of the male and female anatomy, with such things as pessaries, tampons, condoms (these proper terms were all new to me) being inserted or fitted on. I could not look at
these illustrations without feeling alarm and a strong local discomfort, so I started reading. I read about a poor farmer's wife in North Carolina throwing herself under a wagon when she discovered she was going to have her ninth child, about women dying in tenements from complications of pregnancy or childbirth or terrible failed abortions which they performed with hatpins, knitting needles, bubbles of air. ... All I read now about foam and jelly, even the use of the 'vagina,' made the whole business seem laborious and domesticated, somehow connected with ointments and bandages and hospitals, and it gave me the same feeling of disgusted, ridiculous helplessness I had when it was necessary to undress at the doctor's. (163)

We can compare this account with the description of Mrs Cryderman's pregnant body in "Jesse and Meribeth":

She pointed out the damage. First, the pale-brown blotches on her face and neck, which she said were all over her. They make me think of the flesh of pears beginning to go rotten - that soft discoloration, the discouraging faint deep bruises. Next, she showed her varicose veins, which kept her lying on the sofa. Cranberry-colored spiders, greenish lumps all over her legs. They turned black when she stood up. Before she put her feet to the floor, she had to wrap her legs in long, tight, rubbery bandages. 1

That these accounts are, in one way or another, a mute but unmistakeable testimony of women's history in the bi-lateral building of the world, leads on to the ontological preoccupation that women's bodies, in one way or another, are what the world has been built on. They are the reified artifacts of male history, bearing, like Mrs Cryderman, the imprints of the continuation of

1 Progress,170.
Mr Cryderman's genealogical line. The problem of the balance of power, the centre and the margins, is presented in what could be considered a meta-fiction when this same Mr Cryderman casually seduces the young narrator:

_He lays his hand on my knee, on my cotton skirt._

'_What about Mrs. Cryderman, Jessie? Do you think she'd be very happy if she could see us now?_'

_I take this to be a rhetorical question, but he repeats it, and I have to say, 'No.'_

'_Because I did to her what you might like me to do to you, she's going to have a baby, and she isn't going to have an easy time of it._

_He strokes my leg through the thin cotton. You're an impulsive girl, Jessie. You shouldn't go inside places like this with men just because they ask you. You shouldn't be so ready to let them kiss you. I think you're hot-blooded. Aren't you? You're hot-blooded. You've got some lessons to learn._'  

This scene of seduction re-'presents' the balance of sexual power and the male mythology of Eve the temptress inducing the fall from grace. The play of male self and female Other, resides, through the play of reflecting egos, not on what Jessie herself could take or not, desire or not, but in the manipulative play of Mr Cryderman's ego, one in which she is _caught out, (made to feel) foolish, ...enticed and scolded_. Her feelings are wrong in that they arouse sinful ones in the male sex. As such she is being initiated into one of the classic female postures; the projected fantasy/mythology of woman as dangerous Eros; the unknown, a fantasy delineating the figure of the male unconscious, in

1 "Progress", 184.
which 'woman' stands for that part which remains unrecognized in the male's own psyche. That is, his own Otherness.¹

Munro's writing abounds in scenarios of this type, representing the already scripted scene of the female victim's primary guilt. It is on the basis of this social script that a masculine logic 'reads', in the sense of interpreting, the female from the advantage of consensual approval. Just as Jesse's reactions are already codified, falling in with the patterns of Mr. Yderman's intentions, so in "The Flats Road" women and gothic tabloid report are synonymous.

Thus Uncle Benny's preferred reading features not the war or elections but the daily accounts of the multivarious bodily interpretations of womanhood:

- **FATHER FEEDS TWIN DAUGHTERS TO HOGS**
- **WOMAN GIVES BIRTH TO HUMAN MONKEY**
- **VIRGIN RAPED ON CROSS BY CRAZED MONKS**
- **SENDS HUSBAND'S TORSO BY MAIL** (5)

In them women's bodily experience is both the nightmare one of the underworld; backstreet abortionists, unwanted pregnancies and the whole silent history of women, and yet is also crushingly mundane. They are historical accounts of a common reality; two universes interacting within a discourse in which women and their bodies are being actively scripted. These tabloids are a

¹ In her article "For the Etruscans" Rachel Blau DuPlessis examines male fantasies and women's posing and posturing as a playing-out of such fantasies: *Invisibility, visibility, crossing the legs, uncrossing them. Knights in shining armour. Daddy to the rescue.* In *The New Feminist Criticism*, 272.
literal translation from body as object to body as the page on which history is written.¹ Just as in Lives of Girls and Women the senile father of Del's girl-friend 'reads' the biblical parable of the wise virgins, implying, in the narrator's words, it is all about sex as [H]is toothless mouth shut. Sly and proper as a baby's.

Yet these classic designs of female fears and female passivity are the discursive material with which Del will savour body language, her secret pleasure-poetic flow of words, displacing the locus of female dread on the plane of her own fantasy to that of anticipation and curiosity; the echo of Mr Chamberlain's signal, given where it will be understood. Impertinent violation, so perfectly sure of itself, so authoritative, clean of sentiment.. (159)

Where Del displaces the mythology surrounding the communal silence on women's desire, a silence which effaces their voices in order to subject them to being written through male fantasies, it is in fact the socio/historical scripting of women as child-bearing products of exchange that, in its stark references to genitalia, to hospitals and disastrous botched abortions, is in play. These historical documents of women's consciousness; secreted in cupboards, drawers and chests, whispered between women alone, are on the other side of the gap separating Del's own sexuality, her desired, because youthfully desiring language, from the other language of victimization which is heralded, at least for her mother, by male threats.

¹The relation of women's bodies to writing is analysed interestingly in "The Blank Page".
Del in fact revises this whole scenario, for her own sexual initiation is able to encompass the cursory violent and jubilatory, and when blood spills on the ground outside her house, the site of her deflowering, she calls on her mother to witness the glory of the episode as a glyph written in blood:

I said to my mother, 'There's blood on the ground at the side of the house.'

'Blood?'

"I saw a cat there yesterday tearing a bird apart. It was a big striped tom, I don't know where it came from.'

'Vicious beasts.'

'You should come and look at it.'

'What? I've got better things to do.' (224)

One of the unsolvables in Munro's narratives remains perhaps the possibility of uniting the charge of energy scripting the feminine subject as autonomous bearer of her 'own' language, and the elaboration of the roles assigned to womanhood within the represented social world. Whereas Del transforms story in the telling and therefore, through being the teller designs her own version, there is a radical discrepancy between what she sees; the testimony of women's represented roles in society, and how she herself avoids the pitfalls of the historical gap. This active, seeing consciousness which posits the subject in full evolution, and the contrary scenario of women's silence, is perhaps a part explanation for the gaps; the discursive oxymoron soldering the blank spaces together where continuity fails. Just as Del's girlfriend Naomi is, by the end of the narrative, following the route of resigned abdication to housewifery, her fantasies imploded under the enacted tabloid discourse of pregnancy, failed abortion and marriage as a kind of final closure, Del herself escapes all this. Her own arrival into womanhood is a sexual
blossoming, and despite its effects on her exams which, at the end of the narrative, preclude the university future dreamed of by her mother, and therefore would preclude the transformation of her socio-cultural milieu, she has emerged unscathed. The disparity between the narrating consciousness as a vector of the female process towards awareness, conferring autonomy and standing outside the tale, and the narrative world itself does seem to posit a radical split in consciousness. Through such a standing-off from the scripted pattern of women's lives, yet fully implicated in the search for identity which is the subtext of the narratives, the narrating subject, the feminine 'I', troubles the issue of her own ideological inscription in the text. Where is the link to be found between the feminine experience written in, and the female experience writing the tales?

In fact if we look closely at the mode of inscription of feminine experience in the novel, it displaces the concept of women's roles in that the main characters are all somewhat 'askew' in their designed slot, taking on the realistic world at a slant. This applies to the abused Madeleine, occupying Uncle Benny's chaotic space, Dell's own mother, renouncing her paternal heritage, (who also fills a space in which she does not 'fit'; that of wife and mother, to which she remains unsuited), and Del herself as the puzzling and puzzled product of relinquished foremothers. The women in the Flats Road are both the territory on which the community is scripted, and the suppressed voice of the community; the missing piece of the puzzle which surfaces with each reading by the narrator of stories that cannot be told, of questions left unanswered. The narrator herself questions this text of women's silence, hers is a narrative of resistance as she interrogates the
social mores, the internalized power structures in which women are mirrored negatively. The ideology of the 'woman's place' in society, kept alive by the community of women in the novel, is the discourse engaged by Del in her dealings with her own growth into womanhood. In search of a model she comes up against the codes of society/silence. Her itinerary is thus a paradigm of 'extravagance', the feminine/narrative swerving which is the criterion of all narrative. Yet the lack of viable models, their negative image of Del's own desires, causing a falling away of linear story, gives the elaboration of her persona the capacity to expand laterally, to suspend the ontological 'I' over structures of metaphor becoming at once feminine in coloration; imbued with Del's interrogation of the self.

Metaphors of identity and paradigms of absence

Everybody knows what a house does, how it encloses space and connections between one enclosed space and another and presents what is outside in a new way.

The house as a narrative economy allows, as Munro infers, for the shifting of perceptions of continuous time on to those of connections between disparate elements of meaning. It privileges the associative rather than sequential dynamics of narrative juxtaposition, and focuses on the borders joining these disparate elements.

---

1 Susan Hardy Aiken links Peter Brooks' theory of narrative dynamics to a principle of 'extra-vagance'; an inherently feminine dynamics of deferral of closure. "Writing (in) Exile" in Women Writing in Exile, 118.
2 Munro quoted in "Alice Munro's Art of Indeterminacy", 141.
Munro's images of the house as a space of identity defines it as a heterogeneous sign, displacing the community enigmas of unresolved secrets and gaps in continuity, and consequently displacing centres of textual power and energy. With the associative logic of such spaces language is the semiotic economy which blurs boundaries and revels in indeterminacy.¹

It is as though the energy deployed by unresolvable master discourses are absorbed; sucked into holistic, spatial images in which the connections of cause and event give way to the immediacy of sensation, and time is caught, arrested within the image. So, in "The Progress of Love", set amongst the disjointed discourses of the father, the mother and God, which Phemie tries unsuccessfully to harmonize and re-evaluate, is the function of the house, the 'showing', that in so doing can deny it is 'saying' and thus suspend meaning even as it is itself played out in sequence:

The house we lived in had big, high rooms, with dark-green blinds on the windows. When the blinds were pulled down against the sun, I used to like to move my head and catch the light flashing through the holes and cracks. Another thing I liked looking at was chimney stains, old or fresh, which I could turn into animals, people's faces, even distant cities.²

This release into the image of the house is followed by several passages in which the narrator remembers her mother's ambivalent moral attitudes: Hatred is always a sin, my mother told me. Remember that. One drop of hatred in your soul will

¹ See Desire in Language, 163, on the feminine heterogeneity of the sign.
² "Progress", 5. All further references are in the text of the thesis.
Yet hatred had manifestly spread and coloured her own perception. This passage gives on to the narrator's hatred of her own name Euphemia: *I was named Euphemia, after my mother's mother. A terrible name, such as nobody has nowadays.* The problematic relation of Phemie to her mother, to her grandmother, and to her own identity figures in these statements which tell the reader there are complicated emotional scenarios underlying the scant information we are offered. In "The Progress of Love" the images of houses and the layering of wallpaper, explicates the troubled network of relations through a metaphoric release from the tyranny of closure and meaning. Such is the palimpsestic tracing of memory in which none of the pieces of the puzzle 'fit' but nonetheless can be associated through the image:

The paper had a design of cornflowers on a white ground. My mother had got it at a reduced price, because it was the end of a lot. This meant we had trouble matching the pattern, and behind the door we had to do some tricky fitting with scraps and strips. ...We worked with the windows up, screens fitted under them, the front door open, the screen door closed. The country we could see through the mesh of screens and the wavery old window glass was all hot and flowering - milkweed and wild carrot in the pastures, mustard rampaging in the clover, some fields creamy with the buckwheat people grew then. My mother sang. She sang a song she said her own mother used to sing when she and Beryl were little girls. (7/8)

It is a function of these images of the house to inscribe an altered narrative mode; a way of reading its own narrative contradictions, and recodifying them implying both a shift in perception, and a release from the constraints of sequential cause and effect. The house is sensual, *hot and flowering, creamy,* for

*spread and discolor everything.*(6)
the countryside around is drawn into the house. There is an open door and a closed screen door, the pattern doesn't fit so the mother and daughter have to arrange the bits as best they can in order to finish the job and present an appearance. The mother is singing a song of an abandoned sweetheart, learnt from her mother. Matching this imagery with the first passage delineating the holes and cracks and stains, we have the family discourse said differently; the fragments that juxtapose silences, conflated in the liquid medium of the image in which pleasure of the eye, desire of the senses, loss and abandon, can co-exist without contradiction. The semiotic quality of such images privileges the sensory borders of disparate codes, in which the signifier is an unstable trace, allows the moulding and flowing of one code into another much as in a dream sequence, where sequences rise to consciousness as condensed, encoded messages of desire:

tous les abris, tous les refuges, toutes les chambres ont des valeurs d'onirisme consonnantes. ... La maison, comme le feu, comme l'eau, nous permettra d'évoquer, ... des lueurs de rêverie qui éclairent la synthèse de l'immémorial et du souvenir. Dans cette région lointaine, mémoire et imagination ne se laissent pas dissocier.1

Every shelter, every refuge, every room is imbued with a similar dream quality ... The house, like fire or water, conjures the glow of daydreams; illuminating

---

both memory and time immemorial. In this far off place, memory and imagination function as one.

[Translation mine.]
The images have an economy, a quantitative dimension of energy which emanates from disparate levels of information and perception. Whereas the spaces left in the story as the narrator has related it, require sequential historical determination in order to be socially inscribed, such discourses are glossed, re-read, within these images of the house, in which the enigmatic borders are themselves archeological traces of lack of meaning. The signifying gaps left around the holes and cracks relieve the tyranny of cause and effect, for they do not invite explication, yet metaphor, by the combining of disparate levels of apprehension, glosses the problems of the story as a whole. Thus the metaphorical function in the case of "The Progress of Love" is to absorb the irresolvable tail-ends which surround Marietta, creating a medium of repose. Within the layers of wallpaper is secreted the infinite versions of a family story that could be all of history because we will never know the 'truth' of it. The repository of memory, of experience; the covering, (which will be dis-'covered' later in the narrative when Phemie revisits her childhood haunts), expands and contracts the tenets of represented reality, and, by its shift, its uncanny quality, lent precisely through the possibility of discordant juxtaposition, taps at the heart of what cannot be said. The later scene in the farm, when Phemie rememorates her childhood, referring as it does back to the beginning of the narrative, to the first layer and the unfinished ends, englobes in circular fashion the unresolved and unresolvable family plot. We are left with a repetition of cracks
and stains as the same gaps appear around the edges of the story. In the end it is the story which folds over the secrets; a totalizing metaphor of transformation, burying the layers of time collapsed into the images. For if we look at the layering of temporal sequences within the story pattern which jumps from the present of the narrator relating the tale, to her childhood, and forward again, the chronological patterning, mirrors the covering/uncovering trope of the house images as one narrative sequence seems to re-place' the previous one.

Another example of the way Munro's spaces seem to re-place', (in the sense of shifting the balance of authority), the problem of women's viable represented and representative roles in narrative, is the story "Wild Swans".1 This time inside and outside, the play of personal space and socio/sexual codes, are not concerned with collapsing unresolved tensions within the image, but with building a liquid image involving disparate sensory perceptions designating Rose's body as a 'house', spilling sensation into the surroundings and retrieving it.

The story picks up the itinerary of Rose at the point where, having won a prize at school for an essay, she is taking a trip away from the shop in West Hanratty, and into Toronto. On the bus a man sits next to her, saying he is a United Church minister, and their conversation opens on the vision of a flock of swans he had seen heading north. As Rose becomes conscious that the tip of the newspaper brushing her leg is in fact a hand; a hand that slowly begins to travel up her leg and beyond, the narration

1"Wild Swans" in The Beggar Maid.
charts his exploration. In doing so, the inscribing discovering sense of the explorer is rendered as a topographical enterprise, and as the bus rolls along its own passage is recorded through the binding of images of the outside with what is happening to Rose inside the bus; the way Rose's body, her senses and the Canadian landscape are fused and harmonized. We seem therefore, not to be witnessing the illicit, and therefore titillating sexual experience of an adolescent, or rather, we are witnessing exactly that, and very explicitly, but this individual experience seems to share in and be shared by an erotics of space, energizing the outside and simultaneously drawing the disparate levels of reality into a holistic feminine identity:

> The minister's hand was not, or not yet, at all welcome to her. It made her feel uncomfortable, resentful, slightly disgusted, trapped and wary. But she could not take charge of it, to reject it. She could not insist that it was there, when he seemed to be insisting that it was not.¹

The hand is disembodied because the minister, feigning sleep, is, like Mr Cryderman in "Jesse and Meribeth", taking acquiescence as read, relying on Rose's respect for the law he represents. In this case, the minister, is eminently placed to represent the authority of universal truth. Rose's body is, in opposition, the blank page where a male hand is writing authoritatively. So, departing from the socially ostracizable, the marginal space where Rose's experiential truth meets social opposition, the journey of his hand on her body becomes the incursion into the centre of this paradox where the male authority of social taboos

¹ "Wild Swans",64.
confronts female personal reality and prevails. This will involve the crossing of boundaries of inhibition for Rose, above all, wants to see what will happen:

The hand began, over the next several miles, the delicate, the most timid, pressures and investigations. Not asleep. Or if he was, his hand wasn't. She did feel disgust. She felt a faint, wandering nausea. She thought of flesh: lumps of flesh, pink snouts, fat tongues, blunt fingers, all on their way trotting and creeping and lolling and rubbing, looking for their comfort. She thought of cats in heat rubbing themselves along the top of board fences, yowling with their miserable complaint. It was pitiful, infantile, this itching and shoving and squeezing. Spongy tissues, inflamed membranes, tormented nerve-ends, shameful smells; humiliation.

As the hand moves on, disowned, harbouring the 'natural' authority of its colonisation of her body, implying her tacit consent of its exploration, her fantasies also move through submission and domination but expand over the countryside, effectively seaming together the edges of the brutal and exhilarating, the shameful and inevitable nature of this invasion:

Her legs were never going to open.
But they were. They were. As the train crossed the Niagra Escarpment above Dundas, as they looked down at the preglacial valley, the silver-wooded rubble of little hills, as they came sliding down to the shores of Lake Ontario, she would make this slow, and silent, and definite, declaration, perhaps disappointing as much as satisfying the hand's owner.

---

1 "Wild Swans", 64.
2 "Wild Swans", 65.
Just as Rose claims the territory of the fictional and fantasy, and is able to do this because the minister, the 'official' version denies his own involvement, so this represents an empowering of a feminine erotics of the space of identity and space of landscape. Such scenes do in fact read the concern of women's fictions as a whole in that they chart the victim/victimiser dichotomy and seek an enabling way out of the deadlock. The scenario in which Rose is implicated opposes the effaced truth of women's experience to the official version, and the 'women as object' position is turned around. For Rose is fully implicated in the detached mapping of her body, and it is the very detachment which proves the most exciting. It is the disembodied quality of the event which allows her fantasy full rein. As in other Munro stories her experience represents a sexuality which has not been filtered through the medium of social consensus; it has not been transformed or tamed. This is the same shock of recognition of Mr. Chamberlain and Del, ("Jesse and Meribeth"), expressed in the signal given where it will be understood... It is the very strength of repression; the contradiction of willing/victim, which feeds the motor of Rose's adventure. As the metaphor reaches out, encompassing Glassco's Jams and Marmalades ... the big pulsating pipes of oil refineries and takes the reader finally to the gates and towers of the Exhibition Grounds where a flock of birds, wild swans, ... wakened under one big dome together, exploding from it, taking to the sky ¹, Rose will have produced a textual landscape. One which at the finish, closes womb-like over the

¹ "Wild Swans",65.
demands of time and sequence, bringing us back to the initial image of the swans, which Rose recovers, and, at the moment of orgasm, explodes into the full signification of 'wild' swans, thus converting the raw materials of masculine invasion and domination into a feminine imaginary holistic and empowered landscaping.
Conclusion

In this thesis I have attempted to establish links between three English-speaking Canadian women writers. At each stage my aim has been to cross the borders between their individual 'oeuvres' in order to investigate their shared epistemological, cultural and textual ground. It was therefore my intention to privilege modes of reading which would best illuminate the problematical writing-in of feminine selfhood and Canadian post-coloniality.

Such a task meant investigating the notions of place and placelessness, of dual/split cultural inheritances, and the concept of a schismmed feminine consciousness. Also in play were representations and discourses of empire, and their link to a post-colonial discontinuous history. The diverse challenges to representation thrown up by this network of influence and ideology were my primary focus throughout in that I have sought above all to forge those links between Margaret Atwood, Alice Munro and Mavis Gallant which insistently define them as women writers and as Canadian writers.

Such a project has in fact created a logic of its own, tending to cut across preoccupations with the ways in which the individual authors have developed through time, or how their work has modified or gained in complexity. The fact that Alice Munro's latest collection of stories *The Progress of Love* treats the theme of female relationships and desires in a particularly sensitive and insightful fashion, undoubtedly attests to the author's development of her favourite themes over the years. However, in juxtaposing this work with stories from earlier collections, it was my intention to focus on those lines of force common to the disparate texts, and most importantly, to show how they examine women's lives, social power and control in different contexts but similar ways.
Thus chapter three deals with stories from Gallant's *The Pegnitz Junction, Home Truths* and the more recent *Overhead in a Balloon*. It is true that the historical and cultural contexts of the three collections are very different, for while *The Pegnitz Junction* speaks to the trauma of post-war Germany, *Home Truths* gathers together stories of Canadians at home and abroad, while *Overhead in a Balloon* takes on the sophisticated world of Paris. Yet in crossing boundaries of context and chronology in this way I intended to shed light on the problematisation of origins at the heart of Gallant's work. A rift, or discontinuity informs both "The Pegnitz Junction" and "Voices lost in Snow" as a loss of a historicised, individual or collective voice, presaging forms of ideological colonisation and the breakdown of communication. The crucial sense of absence inhabiting these fictions is also played out in the stories from *Overhead in a Balloon*, in the way for example that "Specks Idea" incessantly works ideas of form and surface. Therefore, while I sought to establish points of contact within chapters between different texts and contexts, so the chapters themselves are self-contained 'satellite' instances of meaning projected from the 'launching-pad' of my central ideas on women's and post-colonial literature, gaining I hope, in force and pertinence, from their relation to other aspects of these problematics.

Interconnected then but not interdependent, the individual pieces owe allegiance to philosophical questions of 'who' and 'where', questions which gave rise to the title "A Politics of Location" in my bid to embrace both the identity of the 'self' and that of 'place' in a hybrid term. It was equally important to discover the traces (or absence of traces) of this 'who/where' at the interface of one cultural context and another as well as from one story to another, thus breaching unified, historical
developments in order to investigate margins, interstices and points of contact.

This has given the thesis a mosaic or 'mapping' structure, miming perhaps the separate-but-connected definition of the Canadian multiple identity itself which I explore in the first chapter. My strategy of 'mapping' tends inevitably to challenge the teleology of the scholarly critique by forging a landscaped plane of affinities and associations, rather than by following the process of entailment which drives an argument to closure. This approach has produced an open-ended web of filiations and affiliations, at one with the shifting centres of Canadian women's fictions and the metonymic links they privilege. If on route this project has engendered a somewhat 'decentred' thesis, it is my claim that a different logic is at work, spinning a web of connections, and shedding light on those seams where one thing becomes another and where difference itself can be recognized and evaluated.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

WORKS CITED

Full publishing history is given for Primary Sources. For Secondary/Critical Sources the edition consulted for the purpose of this thesis is indicated.

PRIMARY SOURCES

Atwood, Margaret.


Gallant, Mavis.

My Heart is Broken eight stories and a short novel (New York: Random House, 1964; Don Mills, Ontario: PaperJacks, 1974; Toronto: New Press Canadian


**Munro, Alice.**


**SECONDARY/CRITICAL SOURCES**

__________. Alice Munro (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1988).
Bowlby, Rachel."Breakfast in America" in Nation and Narration, 197 - 212.
Broe, Mary Lynn. "My Art belongs to Daddy" in Women's writing in Exile, 41 - 86.


Fabre, Michel "Interview with Mavis Gallant" in *Commonwealth*, 11 (Spring, 1989): 95-103.


________. "My (M)Other My Self: Strategies for Subversion in Atwood and Hébert" in Essays on Canadian Writing, 26 (Summer 1983): 13-44.
________. "Tales within Tales: Margaret Atwood's Folk Narratives" in Canadian Literature, 109 (Summer, 1986): 57-84.
Grace, Sherrill E. "Articulating the 'Space between': Atwood's Untold Stories and Fresh Beginnings" in Margaret Atwood: Language, Text and System, 1-16.


Hirschop, Ken, and David Shepherd, eds. *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory*.


______"In Violent Voice: the Trauma of Ethnicity in Recent Canadian Fiction" in *Multiple Voices: Recent Canadian Fiction*, 44-58.
Lecker, Robert. "Janus through the Looking Glass: Atwood's First Three Novels" in The Art of Margaret Atwood: Essays in Criticism, 177-203.
Murray, Heather. "'Its Image on the Mirror': Canada, Canonicity, the Uncanny" in Essays on Canadian Writing: Mavis Gallant Issue, 42 (Winter 1990): 102-130.
Ross, Catherine Sheldrick. "Nancy Drew as Shaman: Atwood's Surfacing" in Canadian Literature, 84 (Spring, 1980): 7-17.
Schor, Naomi. "Eugénie Grandet: Mirrors and Melancholia" in The (M)other Tongue.
Slemon, Stephen. "Wilson Harris and the 'Subject' of Realism" in Wilson Harris: The Uncompromising Imagination, 70-82.
Smart, Patricia. Écrire dans la maison du père (Montréal: Québec/Amérique, 1988).


