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The Central European journal of Canadian studies. 2016, vol. 10-11, iss. [1], pp. 31-40

ISBN 978-80-210-8690-6

ISSN 1213-7715 (print); ISSN 2336-4556 (online)

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/138474>

Access Date: 29. 11. 2024

Version: 20220831

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Mavis Gallant's Paris

Le Paris de Mavis Gallant

Éva Zsizsmann

Abstract

“All immigration is based on misapprehension,” says Gallant in *Paris Stories* (2002). Despite the title, the stories in the collection take place all over Europe, catching the behaviour of the out-of-place citizen. Most of the characters are permanent wanderers whose peripatetic fate is equally peripatetic. They are shown to inhabit transient states, dwelling in the zone between thought and possible action. The article focuses on memory, place and belonging, exploring “A State of Affairs” and “Forain,” each written in 1991 and each figuring Polish immigrants in Paris after the Second World War. I propose to discuss the way in which Gallant’s texts feature the workings of memory and the working of language on the events of the past, in the context of the immigrant experience. I also focus on Gallant’s preoccupation with narratives of aging and the construction of the self.

Keywords: Mavis Gallant, memory, *Paris Stories*, transitions

Résumé

« Toute l’immigration est basée sur un malentendu », dit Mavis Gallant dans *Paris Stories* (2002). Malgré le titre, les nouvelles de ce recueil se concentrent sur le comportement du citoyen déplacé dans toute l’Europe. La plupart des personnages sont des vagabonds permanents, dont le destin péripatétique n’est pas intentionnel. Ils sont dans des états transitoires ; ils habitent la zone entre la pensée et l’action possible. L’article met l’accent sur la mémoire, le lieu et l’appartenance, l’exploration de deux nouvelles, toutes deux écrites en 1991, et les immigrants polonais à Paris après la Seconde Guerre mondiale. Je propose de discuter de la manière dont les textes présentent le fonctionnement de la mémoire et le fonctionnement du langage dans le contexte de l’expérience de l’immigrant. Je m’intéresse aussi aux récits sur le vieillissement et la construction du soi qui occupent une place importante chez Gallant.

Mots-clés : Mavis Gallant, mémoire, *Paris Stories*, transitions

In an earlier form, this article was first presented as a paper at a conference entitled “Multiculturalism in Canada: Changing Perspectives”, which was organized by Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary and Eötvös Loránd University on 24–25 November 2016.



Introduction

In the Preface to her *Collected Stories* (1996) Gallant recalls the joy of supplying a voice to a large colony of paper dolls, playing the ventriloquist. Another episode remembered is her ‘apprenticeship’ as a journalist in Montreal, during which she “amassed an enormous mental catalogue of places and people, information that still seeps” into her stories (Gallant, vi). Looking back to her beginnings, the French convent school in Quebec, the English storybooks from home and her ability to translate English to French at sight, she concludes: “It left me with two systems of behaviour, divided by syntax and tradition [...]; two codes of social behaviour; much practical experience of the difference between a rule and a moral point. Somewhere in this duality may be the exact point of the beginning of writing” (vii).

Born in Montreal and settled in Paris, Mavis Gallant published almost all of her short fiction in *The New Yorker*, which implies a certain generic feature. As Carolyn See points out in a 1993 review entitled “Paris as Prison,” “Almost by definition, these stories lack adventure and plot. If things started happening in them, they wouldn’t be *New Yorker* stories; the characters wouldn’t be boxed in by the circumstances of their lives. The appeal of these narratives must lie in the exquisitely perceived details [...]” Gallant’s Paris is slow-moving, over-furnished, stagnant, a place of desperate loneliness.

Though Gallant’s published collections received distinguished literary prizes, she had a small readership. John McGahern suggested that the reason of this disparity might be Gallant’s merciless, ironic voice: she was a “scalpel-sharp anatomizer of various forms of stupidity, and while this skilfulness can often seem just and very funny, sometimes it leaves behind an unpleasant aftertaste, as if the witty, controlled prose is functioning at the expense of her characters” (McGahern).

In a 2008 review Andrew Saikali nuances this view somewhat, underlining that the narrator treats her characters with sympathy and understanding:

Ex-pats, émigrés, displaced persons, and transients – the moved, the removed, and those on-the-move – have all sprung from Gallant’s fertile imagination, arriving fully formed on the page, in stories that betray both a keen, unsentimental, journalist’s eye and a humane artistic vision. (Saikali)

“A State of Affairs” (1991)

I propose a reading of the short story as a narrative about aging, the expatriate condition, memory and the construction of the self. “A State of Affairs” is a portrait of a member of a vanishing generation of Polish émigrés, composed of fragments of the



thoughts, memories, reflections and silent conversations in M. Maciek Wroblewski's stream of consciousness. We find out bits and pieces about his identity as the flow of memory throws light onto distant episodes in his life: a casual reference to Nansen passports (the internationally recognized refugee travel documents first issued by the League of Nations to stateless refugees) reveals that he is a Polish political refugee living in Paris, whereas a passage of free indirect discourse rendering his ruminations on old age makes it clear that he was in Dachau for ten months, the last winter and spring of the Second World War.

The use of the formal salutation ("M. Wroblewski" – i.e. "Monsieur") throughout the text is a sign of respectability; however, it also suggests his alienation on account of old age and the expatriate condition: "Unfortunately, most of M. Wroblewski's Paris acquaintances have vanished or moved away to remote towns and suburbs [...] or retired to a region of the mind that must be like a twisted, hollow shell" (644).

Wroblewski's surviving friends in Poland are "dispirited, mistrustful" (642), complaining about the decline in the quality of life back home, the rudeness of the young, the debased spoken language and rising anti-Semitism. Wroblewski refuses dark visions, using euphemisms and fantasies as survival tools against difficulties. 'State of affairs' replaces 'problem' in his vocabulary and he never utters the term 'dementia' when talking about his wife's condition. The mirrored walls of a building across from his favourite café, the Atelier in Montparnasse, function as metaphors of refraction, his coping strategy – that is, the method of distancing himself from dangers, the ultimate threat: "A sheet of black glass means nothing. It is not a cloud or the sky [...]. From that distance, the dark has no power. It has no life of its own. It is a reflection" (673). Multiplication or double life is another coping strategy, symbolised by the medallion of the young French bank clerk in a later scene:

"Your accounts are in fine shape," she said. "That must be something off your mind. We could allow . . . At any rate, come back and see me if you have a problem."

"My problem is my own death," he said, smiling.

"You mustn't think such things." She touched her talisman, Gemini, as if it really could allow her a double life: one with vexations and one without. (654)

Wroblewski's wife, Magda, is taken care of by a young Martinique woman and seems to be hopeless; however, her occasional, unexpected remarks spell out truth. Her pronouncements, like those of blind Tiresias, are cryptic but never wrong. The awkward question, "Are they coming home for Christmas?" (644) becomes the synonym of belonging, a key concept in the short story.



Wroblewski imagines meeting his old Jewish friend from Warsaw, composing several letters to him in his mind. Home for him is conversation, shared memories as in this cosy scene he conjures up:

He would like to be able to send his friend a plane ticket to Paris, find him a comfortable room and discreetly settle the bill, invite him to dinner: M. Wroblewski, his friend, and Magda around the little table in the living room, with the green lampshade glowing and the green curtains drawn; or at Chez Marcel, where he used to go with Magda. The owner would remember them, offer free glasses of cognac with their coffee: jovial, generous, welcoming – One Europe, One World. (643)

The three characters represent different stages in alertness, in the process of aging conceived as a journey. The old friend from Warsaw, who received a death threat after speaking about his wartime ghetto experience in a radio talk, has “an amazing memory of events, sorted out, in sequence [...] he would find a historical context for everything” (643). Magda, the wife is the other extreme: “poised on the moment between dark and light [...]. She lives that split second all day long” (644). Wroblewski negotiates his own variant of the wakeful-sleepy state, watching himself for signs of aging.

Wroblewski's euphemistic phrase, ‘chinks of light’, epitomising the refusal of a negative vision, is coupled with rewriting past events or simply forgetting them, disposing of burdensome memories. Contingency is shown to be an organizing principle of memory and the construction of the self:

Shreds of episodes shrugged off, left behind, strewed the roads. Only someone pledged to gray dawns would turn back to examine them. You might as well collect every letter you see lying stained in a gutter and call the assortment an autobiography. (646)

The scene where Wroblewski looks back to his life, pondering “his exact due”, asking himself whether he has ever “crawled” or “begged for favour,” points to the volatile nature of self-conception, our constantly changing self-image: “Of course he had begged. He had entreated for enough to eat, relief from pain, a passport, employment” (646). It also raises the question of virtue, pride, gain by fraud and deceit.

As Esther Harriott points out, “A State of Affairs” was written with Gallant's characteristic double vision: it is a portrait of Wroblewski in old age and the enduring effects of the war on the life of the émigrés (116). Wroblewski recalls a series of absurd scenarios resulting from the whims of bureaucracy, from encounters with bureaucracy. When he filed a claim for damages, on the grounds of ten months spent



in a concentration camp, the German lawyer explained that he was not entitled to it: “He cannot plead that the ten months were an irreparable break, with a before and after, or even a waste of life” (648). The calling in of the Nansen passports is another absurd situation: “The bureau that handles those rare and special passports is closing down. Polish political refugees do not exist any longer” (648). An engraver in his eighties gives voice to his indignation: “What are they going to do with us? Ship us back to Poland? Are we part of a quota now? At our age, we are better off stateless” (649).

References to social class and status nuance the larger picture of the multiethnic scene presented in the short story. We find out that “The Wroblewskis, neither prosperous nor in want, get their annual gift in a correct and legal way” (646). Honesty is therefore a key principle in Wroblewski’s system of values. His recollection of their annual Easter holidays in the South of France underlines their dignity: though they had modest means due to displacement during the war (they were travelling third class), they considered it important to be elegant. Still, the ritual of having dinner at the *pension* on their own points to their separation from wealthier Western Europeans: “After dinner, a visit to the casino – not to gamble but to watch the most civilized people in Western Europe throw their money around” (646).

Wroblewski belongs to the educated middle class; he had a job and an apartment in Paris. When the Nansen passports are called in, he decides to act in a defensive way, not to cause a riot but politely ask for French citizenship in a letter:

He [...] drew attention to the number of years he had lived in France, his fluent French, and his admiration for the culture. He spoke of the ancient historical links between Poland and France, touched briefly on the story of Napoleon and Mme. Waleska, and reminded the ministry that he had never been behind with the rent or overdrawn at the bank. (649)

The letter is met with “official silence” (649). The meeting with the young French bank clerk at the end of the short story, meanwhile, offers an external view of Wroblewski, dramatizing his loquacity and unfashionably formal speech; however, it is an affectionate portrait, as Gallant is sympathetic towards her character.

“Forain” (1991)

“Forain” is an ironic, subtle, extremely precise description of the mechanisms of publishing Central and Eastern European literature in the West and the changes that the turn in 1989 brought about in literary institutions. Blaise Forain, owner of a small press in Paris devoted to the translation and publication of works by Eastern



and Central European writers, had discovered a niche market that provided him with a modest income:

He was often described in the trade as poor but selfless. He had performed an immeasurable service to world culture, bringing to the West voices that had been muffled for decades in the East. Well, of course, his thimble-size firm had not been able to attract the leviathan prophets, the booming novelists, the great mentors and tireless definers. (634)

Later he realises that Cold War stories are increasingly difficult to be sold to a post-1989 audience. Gallant offers a brilliant description of the literary marketplace in France after the fall of the Berlin Wall:

The truth was that the destruction of the Wall – radiant paradigm – had all but demolished Forain. The difference was that Forain could not be hammered to still smaller pieces and sold all over the world. (636)

Most of the story takes place at the funeral of Adam Tremski, an emigré Polish Jew, one of the writers published by Forain. We see the group of elderly immigrants through Forain's reflections and observations: they live on the fringe of Montparnasse, "the wrong side of the Seine" (626); some of them "migrated to apartments in the outer suburbs, to deeper loneliness but cheaper rents" (630). The exiles' grief is shown to encompass past grievances: "tears came easily, not only for the lost friend but for all the broken ties and old, unwilling journeys" (627).

Architecture and interior design function as a metonymy of the immigrant condition, namely, they have a temporary, contingent aspect. Tremski's apartment is repeatedly described:

he stuck to his rented flat, a standard emigré dwelling of the 1950s, almost a period piece now: two rooms on a court, windowless kitchen, splintered floors, unbeatable bathroom, no elevator, intimidating landlord – a figure central to his comic anecdotes and private worries. (628)

Forain's inventory offered up instead of a last prayer at the funeral reveals the portrait of a man who failed to assimilate to the country to which he fled. He has lived a makeshift life ever since the end of the war:

In a corner, the chair piled with newspapers and journals that Tremski still intended to read. [...] Above it, the spread of photographs of his old friends. A window, and the sort of view that prisoners see. In front of the window, a drop-leaf table that had to be cleared for



meals. [...] On the wall, a charcoal drawing of Tremski – by an amateur artist, probably – dated June 1945. It was a face that had come through; only just. (638)

Forain's comment – “Even after Tremski could afford to move, he remained anchored to his seedy rooms” (628) – suggests stagnation, the inability to act, the zone between thought and possible action. As Michael Ondaatje writes about Gallant,

Her Europe is a place of “shipwrecks” – a word that occurs more than once in the stories. All characters are seemingly far from home. They belong, to be honest, nowhere. Most of them are permanent wanderers, though a nomadic fate was not part of their original intent. With no land to light on, they look back without nostalgia, and look forward with a frayed hope. (Ondaatje, vi)

The short story shows different generations of immigrants (the older generation, their predecessors and the new wave), underlining the contrast between an idealistic older generation followed by a more opportunistic one. Tremski and his fellow artists seem to be naive, idealistic, impractical:

Forain's own little flock, by contrast, seemed to have entered the world with no expectations. Apart from the odd, rare, humble complaint, they were content to be put up on the top story of a hotel with a steep, neglected staircase, a wealth of literary associations, and one bath to a floor. For recreation, they went to the cafe across the street, made a pot of hot water and a tea bag last two and a half hours, and, as Forain encouraged them to keep in mind, could watch the Market Economy saunter by. Docile, holding only a modest estimation of their own gifts, they still provided a handicap: Their names, like those of their characters, all sounded alike to barbaric Western ears. (634–5)

The second generation of immigrants, those born in Paris, appear to be more conscious of integration and assimilation, of becoming part of the new context. For example, Halina, Tremski's stepdaughter, was resentful of him, claiming that he spoke loud Polish in restaurants and had tried to keep her from achieving a French social identity. The recent arrivals from Poland, those who are not refugees but on the lookout for more exciting lives, do not seem to be interested in historical accuracy or the past:

Scholars who, looked disarmingly youthful, speaking the same language, but with a new, jarring vocabulary, were trekking to Western capitals – taping reminiscences, copying old letters. History turned out to be a plodding science. What most emigrés settled for now was the haphazard accuracy of a memory like Tremski's. In the end it was always a poem that ran through the mind – not a string of dates. (628–9)



History, the memory of the Second World War, is important for Gallant, and therefore she writes ironically about the literate and among them journalists (French political journalists included), who substitute “a few names, a date looked up, a notion of geography” for a thorough knowledge of the past:

It was remarkable, Tremski had said, the way literate people, reasonably well travelled and educated, comfortably off, could live adequate lives without wanting to know what had gone before or happened elsewhere. (630)

As the narrative unfolds, Forain's image gradually changes “from flawed protagonist to sanctimonious crook” (Harriott, 112) as we encounter different layers of discourse, plurivocality. The text is masterful in playing with degrees of uncertainty: rumours, intimations and the narrator's thoughts about himself are deliberately mixed: “Forain knew that some of Tremski's friends thought he was unreliable. He had a reputation for not paying authors their due” (633). As Ondaatje remarks in his Introduction to *Paris Stories*, “Gallant is brilliant at tilting a situation or a personality a few subliminal degrees in the mind of the reader so that he discovers himself located in a strange new place, seeing something from a more generous or more satirical position” (Ondaatje, vii).

Forain makes little money from his business, and so he is regularly accused of cheating his writers, while posing as a saviour of European culture. His image alters between petty swindler and cynical literary agent. The mind of the central character merges with the voice of the narrator outside the story and therefore the irony of the outside narrator overlaps with the self-irony of the central character:

Season after season, his stomach eaten up with anxiety, his heart pounding out hope, hope, hope, he produced a satirical novella set in Odessa; a dense, sober private journal, translated from the Rumanian, best understood by the author and his friends; or another wry glance at the harebrained makers of history. (635)

After the destruction of the Berlin Wall, Forain considers attempting to save his business by creating a new market in Third World countries: “Briefly, Forain pondered the possibility of unloading on readers in Senegal and Cameroon the entire edition of a subtle and allusive study of corruption in Minsk, set in 1973” (636).

“Forain” is remarkable through the use of devices linked to deception: it can be read as a story of human betrayal and deceit. Not only does Forain try to profit from naive, idealistic writers, we have the intimation that he wants to publish Tremski's last



unfinished work under his own name, in an attempt to save Blaise Editions. Iconic items of clothing reiterate the topic of betrayal:

Forain knew there was a mean joke abroad about his wearing dead men's clothes. It also applied to his professional life: He was supposed to have said he preferred the backlist of any dead writer to the stress and tension of trying to deal with a live one. (630)

At Tremski's funeral Forain wears a black cashmere coat, allegedly presented to him by a dying friend. Secondly, there is a reference to Tremski's only suit (he wore it for his wedding, at her wife's funeral and was supposed to be buried in it). By the end of the story, Forain's new secretary spreads the rumour that he took away Tremski's coat.

Paris, as we see it in Gallant's "Forain" and "A State of Affairs," is the Montparnasse inhabited by various ethnicities, mostly Central- and Eastern-European immigrants arriving in the city after the Second World War. As Michael Ondaatje points out, "The world Gallant depicts is cosmopolitan, and she is a writer of seemingly endless voices and personae, but in these stories she is also regional in the best sense. She has a brilliant sense of place" (Ondaatje, vii).

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