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What Gallant Didn't Say: Rereading Gallant's Fiction  
with Post-Saussurian Theory

BY

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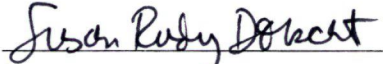
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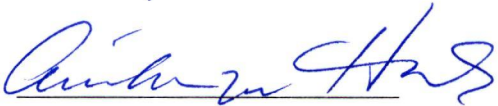
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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled, "What Gallant Didn't Say: Rereading Gallant's Fiction with Post-Saussurian Theory " submitted by Betty Hersberger in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

  
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## Abstract

Mavis Gallant has been acknowledged as one of the finest living writers of English fiction. She has been praised for her unparalleled skill in writing in the English language. Yet many readers are frustrated with her work, finding it elusive. Gallant's stories, they complain, seem to be missing something. For approximately forty years, Mavis Gallant has lived in France and has written in English. Although fluent in both English and French since she was a child, Gallant questions the desirability of being bilingual. She suggests that knowing one language thoroughly is preferable to being bilingual.

Post-Saussurian theories of language argue that language is not simply a tool we use to describe a reality that already exists; rather, language constructs reality and us, and different languages construct different realities. Further, language does not exist in its entirety within one person or even within a community but in a state of perpetual shift. This thesis contends that Gallant's reader is never able to 'see' the reality constructed by the narrator's language; rather, reality is a construction of the interaction between the narrator's language and the reader's language; further, the reality constructed by these languages is (like language) in a state of

perpetual shift. Chapter one considers the difficulties specific to Gallant's characters who are bilingual, specifically those who have been denied the use of their first language. The denial of language is, for these characters, the denial of reality. Chapter two looks at the difficulties specific to the children of Gallant's fiction, characters who are still learning their first language. Without a thorough knowledge of even one language, these children do not yet have access to the reality that is apparent to the adults in their lives. As chapter three discusses, although adults may have a more sophisticated understanding of a language than do children, they cannot have a *complete* understanding of any one language. Further, no two people can have the *same* understanding of a single language; therefore, no two people can experience the same reality. Finally, in the conclusion, I argue that re-reading Mavis Gallant in light of post-Saussurian language theory offers the reader an understanding of the narrative gaps that frustrate many readers and show those gaps to be not empty holes, but openings onto the multiplicity of meaning available in language.

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## Dedication

This work is dedicated to the memory of my mother, Marion Garratt  
Hersberger and of my husband, Wallace J. Koczka.

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## Introduction

### What Gallant Said

I wonder, even, if [being bilingual] is desirable: one needs a strong, complete language, fully understood, to anchor one's understanding. (*Home Truths* xvii)

The above quotation is what Mavis Gallant said in the introduction to *Home Truths*, a collection of short stories that won her the 1981 Governor General's Award for Fiction. Mavis Gallant is bilingual; she learned her first language, English, from her parents, but "[a]s far back as [she] can remember, [she] read and spoke English and French, at about the same level" (*Home Truths* xv). She is certainly in a position to comment on bilingualism. As a young woman working for the *Montreal Standard* she did not keep her second language in the bottom drawer of her desk to be pulled out in the unusual event that French rather than English might be required. Rather, as Janice Kulyk Keefer observes in *Reading Mavis Gallant*, "Gallant's bilingualism gave her the obvious advantage of being able to write incisively and intelligently about aspects of French-Canadian

life that her unilingual colleagues on the *Standard* would have been unable to explore” (198). Keefer describes Gallant as one who “switched from one language and culture to another with an ease and flexibility that can be described as natural” (198). Given this ease and flexibility, it is odd that she questions the desirability of being bilingual.

In her late twenties Gallant moved to Europe. She could have made her home in any city, and eventually she chose Paris. In an interview with Geoff Hancock she explains that “had [she] liked Munich better, [she’d] have learned better German and gone there” (83). She chose Paris because she “found [it] the most open city, the one that [left her] alone the most, the one where [she could] live exactly as [she] liked” (80). Independence, such as Paris offered, has always been important to Gallant: “My one desire from the age of about 10 [she explains to Hancock] was to grow up and become independent and not have anyone try and tell me what to do” (89). Later in the interview, Gallant reveals that being bilingual has contributed to her independence. She says that she “live[s] in a language that is not the language [she] write[s] in” (117). She explains that this “situation has given [her] the most marvellous peace and quiet” (117). This marvellous peace and quiet is a direct result of Gallant’s bilingualism and, again, one wonders

why Gallant questions its desirability.

In the introduction to *Home Truths*, Gallant prefaces her questioning of bilingualism with a recollection from her childhood, a story about a bilingual child who finds herself in an argument with her teacher. The adult has translated “The Joyous Travellers” (a book title) into “Les Joyeux Travailleurs,” or “The Happy Workers.” The adult considers the child’s objection to the incorrect translation to be insolence. The child, Gallant, is right to object; she also *knows* she is right. In spite of this, she (after being deprived of food) is made to “[own] up that ‘travellers’ somehow meant the same thing as ‘workers’ ” (*Home Truths* xvi). Had Gallant and her teacher each spoken one language, and that the same, this ‘misunderstanding’ need not have occurred. Rather, her knowledge of two languages (and her willingness to share that knowledge) results in her punishment; one begins to see why Gallant questions the desirability of bilingualism.

My interest in writing about Gallant began with reading what Gallant said about being bilingual and about needing a strong, complete language. Many of her characters are bilingual; I became interested in discovering how an understanding of how language works would affect my reading of Gallant’s works. I drew on post-Saussurian language theory to achieve this

end. Important in these theories is the idea that language is not simply a tool used to describe the world around us. Rather, language constructs our worlds, and different languages construct different worlds. We do not ‘see’ and ‘hear’ our world as it ‘is’ — rather, we ‘see’ and ‘hear’ our world as our language constructs the world. In speaking our language, we contribute to the construction of our reality.

Proceeding on the basis of these ideas, I examined how Gallant’s characters ‘see’ and ‘hear’ their worlds. Gallant often uses metaphors involving the senses, or, rather, the absence or blocking of senses, to describe her characters’ encounters with a language that is not their own. When Piotr, a Polish scholar lecturing in France, confronts “[r]emarks in a foreign language [he is often left] facing an imaginary brick wall” (*From the 15th District* 173). When Rose’s grandmother reads to her granddaughter in German, “there [is] a heavy brown veil between [them]” (“Rose” 35). Gerard, when speaking French, speaks “as if through a muslin curtain” (*Home Truths* 39). Rose and Piotr can ‘see’, but a brown veil and a brick wall prevent them from ‘seeing’ what is being constructed by the foreign language; they see the veil or wall instead. By using metaphors of blocked ‘senses’ (the ‘five senses’ or the ‘common senses’), Gallant demonstrates that her charac-

ters' 'sense' (understanding or consciousness) of their surroundings is also blocked. They need an understanding of the foreign language before they can become conscious (gain an understanding) of the world constructed by that language.

In light of post-Saussurian language theory, chapter one discusses the idea that language *produces* reality rather than *describes* reality; language is not "a way of naming things which already exist, but a system of differences with no positive terms" (Belsey 38). Chapter one also considers the Saussurian argument that there are no "exact equivalents in meaning from one language to the next" (Saussure 116). Given that different languages create different 'realities', what implications does the idea of two languages (two realities) have for the bilingual speaker? Gallant's fiction considers this question.

Chapters two and three look more closely at the second part of Gallant's statement: that "one needs a strong, complete language, fully understood to anchor one's understanding." I argue in chapter two that while many children in Gallant's fiction may not be bilingual, as children, they are without the "strong, complete language" prescribed. In light of Saussurian theory, I argue that children are language apprentices and, therefore, can-

not yet have a “strong, complete language.” Further, with only limited knowledge of the language spoken by the adults around them, children have only limited access to the reality experienced by adults.

In chapter three, I consider whether, even for adult monolingual speakers, a “strong, complete language, fully understood” is attainable. Gallant’s statement may prescribe such a language, but her fiction suggests that her prescription cannot be filled. Her fiction further suggests that although two monolingual speakers may share the same language, those same two speakers do not always share the same reality.

In my conclusion, I further consider the connections between language and reality. Keefer points out that many critical reviews state a “definite unease and dissatisfaction with significant aspects of Gallant’s fiction” (*Reading Mavis Gallant* 39). For example, John Moss, in *A Reader’s Guide to the Canadian Novel*, notes that there is “a translucent quality to [Gallant’s] writing, as if it is all happening within the reader’s mind, that makes what she has to say in this novella [“Its Image on the Mirror”] an immediate experience, yet strangely elusive” (125). In a review of *The Pegnitz Junction*, Aviva Layton asks “What . . . is missing from these stories?” She concludes that Gallant writes with a numbness that “seems to pervade

the form and structure of her stories and makes them — the saddest comment of all — too easy to put aside” (C3). Timothy Foote suggests that one “reason for lack of popularity may be that Gallant rarely leaves helpful signs and messages that readers tend to expect of ‘literature’ ” (86). Keefer further suggests that “[l]egitimate dissatisfaction with Gallant’s work stems from the reader’s recognition that so fine a writer, with such brilliant gifts at her disposal, uses them so relentlessly to box us in, to shave down or pare away what little sense of positive or even new possibilities we believe ourselves to possess” (39). The paring away and shaving down, to which Gallant herself admits in her interview with Geoff Hancock, often leave the reader feeling that she has been given very little indeed. (Does any reader of “Virus X” discover why the tins of aspirin Vera receives from home are each missing one aspirin?) What Gallant says often makes the reader consider what has not been said.

William Pritchard, in his review of *The Pegnitz Junction*, comments that Gallant “refuses to make . . . connections for us, refuses to speak as a thoughtful omnipresence behind her characters. . .” (4). That Pritchard uses the verb “refuses” suggests that Gallant has a choice: though able “to speak as a thoughtful omnipresence,” Gallant chooses not to. Constance

Rooke, in “Fear of the Open Heart,” perceptively comments that “though we may feel that the full truth of the matter has eluded *us*, we rarely . . . feel that it has eluded Gallant. She seems to claim a larger intelligence than she imputes to the reader” (267). Gallant’s authorial distance from her work serves also to distance her reader. Keefer observes that “within the finished text allusions are often made to incidents, images, structures of meaning that are never elucidated, remaining baffling gaps in the narrative line” (71). Although Gallant chooses not to “speak as a thoughtful omnipresence,” clearly her narrator is omniscient, knowing all, but saying only enough to alert her reader to what has not been said. In an article on *Green Water, Green Sky*, Karen Smythe notes that this novel “is about things that are not said, about a silent discourse” (82). In my readings of Gallant’s fiction I use post-Saussurian language theory to discover if any of her silent discourse can be made audible.

This thesis does not present a close reading of all of Gallant’s works; rather, it concentrates on selected readings from her fiction and from some essays in *Paris Notebooks* and, of course, from her introduction to *Home Truths*. My chapter titles are taken from Gallant’s fiction. They are concerned with ‘seeing and not seeing’ (Peering in the Dark), ‘hearing and not

hearing', 'saying and not saying' (Between the Mute and the Deaf, Dialogue of the Deaf). These titles reflect the 'senses' (the common senses) which are also metaphors of the difficulties Gallant's characters have in 'sensing' (understanding) their worlds. The titles of my introduction and conclusion are of 'saying and not saying', and they reflect the contradiction between What Gallant Said, "that one needs a strong, complete language, fully understood, to anchor one's understanding," and What Gallant Didn't Say (but what my reading of her work suggests), that such language is unattainable. This contradiction perhaps produces the distance from Gallant that her readers sense: a feeling that we don't understand Gallant's language, that we cannot 'see' the world her language constructs for us. I begin with a discussion of two of Gallant's bilingual characters whose adopted family refuse to 'see' the world constructed by the language of these two orphans.

## Chapter I

### Peering in the Dark

Language was black, until they forgot their English. Until they spoke French, nothing but French, the family pretended not to understand them, and stared as if they were peering in the dark.

(*Home Truths* 60)

In her introduction to *Home Truths*, Gallant questions the desirability of being bilingual. This chapter discusses the implications of being bilingual and of not having a strong ‘anchoring’ in a single language. Characters who speak two languages are found throughout Gallant’s fiction, and their bilingualism is a significant factor in their positions within the narrative. To understand the importance and implications of the bilingual status of these characters, I will read Gallant’s stories in light of post-Saussurian language theory. Specific to this chapter are the Saussurian claims that language is not a nomenclature and that there are no exact equivalences between two languages. Further, I will consider the interconnections between language and ideology. Important to this discussion is the idea that “[w]ithout lan-

guage, thought is a vague, uncharted nebula. There are no pre-existing ideas, and nothing is distinct before the appearance of language" (Sausure 112). We do not use language to describe our experiences; rather, language creates the 'reality' which we experience. Further, different languages create different realities. Without knowledge of a second language, hearing that language is like "peering in the dark."

This phrase, "peering in the dark," from "Orphans' Progress," describes the reaction of a French-speaking family to their adopted cousins who try to speak to them in English. The narrator suggests that the French-speaking family are well able to understand the little girls' English, but they simply choose to pretend not to understand. The image of peering in the dark is a powerful one. The girls speak, but receive no acknowledgement of being understood. Whatever they have to offer is offered in the wrong language. The family's reaction, staring at the girls as if peering in the dark, serves to negate the girls' language and, as Janice Kulyk Keefer suggests, it eventually destroys their memories. In a discussion of the symbiosis of language and memory in "Orphans' Progress," Keefer outlines the situation of these two sisters who are bilingual:

The sisters originally speak a flexible blend of the two tongues: it is only when they are put into environments that demand an either/or response to these languages — one and not so much a hint of the other — that their memories become confused and then finally erased altogether. (*Reading Mavis Gallant* 15)

Cathie and Mildred are raised initially by their mother who speaks to them in both French and English. Later, when they are made to live with their paternal grandmother in Ontario, what they are told about their life with their mother (that is, the versions they hear in English from the maid, the social worker, their grandmother and other relatives) is quite different from their own understanding of the world in which they had lived. In their grandmother's house, where any French uttered by the little girls is responded to in English, they hear versions of their childhood which suggest that they lived in "unsheltered conditions." Hearing these different versions distorts their memories, but hearing only English has a more profound effect. Had they been allowed to continue hearing and speaking both French and English, they would have been afforded a symbiosis between their present experiences and the memory of the time when they

lived with their mother. However, because one of these languages, French, is no longer available to them, they no longer have access to the world of their childhood, a world which was in part constructed out of the French language.

In *Critical Practice*, Catherine Belsey reminds her reader of the Saussurian position that "language is not a nomenclature, a way of naming things which already exist, but a system of differences with no positive terms" (38). She goes on to say that "Saussure's argument depends on the different division of the chain of meaning in different languages" (39). She quotes Saussure: "[i]f words stood for pre-existing concepts, they would all have exact equivalents in meaning from one language to the next; but this is not true" (39). Given that there are no "exact equivalents in meaning from one language to the next," it becomes impossible for Mildred and Cathie to translate accurately into English those experiences of their childhood that had been constructed in French. Once they have forgotten their French, whatever experiences they have been able to translate into and retain in English must necessarily be altered by that translation. Further, other experiences which cannot be translated will be lost from memory once the girls' knowledge of French is lost.

After their grandmother's death, they are returned to Montreal where they are taken in by the family of their mother's brother. Here language becomes

black, until they [forget] their English. Until they [speak] French, nothing but French, the family [pretend] not to understand them, and [stare] as if they [are] peering in the dark. They very soon [forget] their English. (*Home Truths* 60)

One might assume that returning to Montreal, where once again they may speak French, Mildred and Cathie would regain access to the childhood world lost to them in English-speaking Ontario. However, when they return they "[do] not see anything that remind[s] them of Montreal, and [do] not recall their mother" (59). The language and the experience they had once lost cannot be recalled. The city where they once lived with their mother, Montreal, is experienced as a 'new' city, just as the French they now learn is experienced as a 'new' language; they do not 'rediscover' their lost world, but experience a new one that (seemingly) has nothing to do with their forgotten past.

Further, their new family's refusal to allow them to speak English re-

sults in the loss of what was left of their mother's world. The experiences which the girls had been retaught and those which they had translated (albeit incompletely) were retained in English. When the girls lose their English, they must also lose the memory of these experiences. In effect, they lose all memory of the time they lived with their mother. As Keefer points out, there is one English word that Mildred clings to and keeps in secret: "Mummy." When she is punished for using this word, she also loses it. Without the word, the memory disappears; the mother who had been physically absent but was still a presence in the little girl's memory now is not merely absent, but has never existed. When Mildred is adopted, she calls her new parent "Maman," a word that carries nothing with it from Mildred's past, not because she called her real mother "Mummy," but because she no longer has a past; she never had a mother. When taken by her adoptive parents to the garage apartment where she and her sister had lived with their mother, she "ha[s] no reason to believe she had seen it before, or would ever again" (62). Because Mildred and Cathie are originally bilingual and then are forced to relinquish first one language and then the other, "[t]heir memories of childhood — the apartment over the garage in which they had lived with their mother, the bed they had shared with her,

and then with each other — are not so much distorted as destroyed by their loss of language” (Keefer, *Reading Mavis Gallant* 15). Had the little girls’ mother, grandmother and uncle (and therefore Mildred and Cathie as well) all spoken only one language and that language the same language, the girls may well have been told different versions of their early years, but none would have had the power to completely erase their childhood.

The Saussurian position that words do not stand for pre-existing concepts, rather, that concepts exist because of words, allows a reading of “Orphans’ Progress” that examines the difficulties associated with functioning in two languages. Another story from the *Home Truths* collection, ‘Saturday,’ deals with the question of bilingualism not only in terms of losing a language, but also in terms of losing an ideology. It also considers how language and ideology are interwoven. McCormick, Waller and Flower provide the following definition of ideology:

This very important (and often very misunderstood) word [ideology] means those common values, practices, ideas, and assumptions of a particular society that, in fact, hold it together—the deeply ingrained, sometimes only partly conscious, habits, beliefs, and

lifestyles of a particular time and place. What we are terming **general ideology** is all those practices that most of a society's inhabitants take for granted as "natural," or "universal," or always true, even if . . . they are not natural or universal but rather are very specific to a particular culture. (16)

Belsey argues that

in so far as language is a way of articulating experience, it necessarily participates in *ideology*, the sum of the ways in which people both live and represent to themselves their relationship to the conditions of their existence. Ideology is *inscribed in signifying practices*—in discourses, myths, presentations and representations of the way 'things' 'are'—and to this extent it is inscribed in the language. (42)

Ideology then is not 'natural' but is culturally specific. And, the language and other systems of the culture that give rise to ideology do so in a way that makes ideology appear natural.

This connection between language and ideology is apparent in "Saturday," a story from the *Home Truths* collection. In her introduction to this

collection, Gallant calls her reader's attention to Gérard, a boy who lives in a home where English is spoken, but it is not the first language of his parents. Gallant says of Gérard that "[d]eprived of the all-important first language, he is intellectually maimed" (xviii). From the story itself, the reader learns that Gérard's family

had not deserted French for social betterment, or for business reasons, but on the matter of belief that set them apart. His mother wanted English to be freedom, at least from the Church. There were no public secular schools, but that was only part of it. Church and language were inextricably enmeshed, and you had to leave language if you wanted your children brought up some other way. That was how it was. It was as simple, and as complex, as that. (*Home Truths* 33)

This passage illustrates the Saussurian position that language is indeed more than a nomenclature simply connecting word and pre-existing concept; rather, it points out what Belsey describes as an "important element of Saussure's general thesis: language is a social fact" (41), and "in so far as language is a way of articulating experience, it necessarily participates

in *ideology* . . .” (42). Gérard’s mother intuitively recognizes the interconnections between the French language and the ideology that is Quebec Roman Catholicism.

As an orphan, she had a convent upbringing and at age eighteen married a man thirty-one years her senior. The marriage produced seven children, all of whom were “conceived in horror” (38). Although she tells her daughters that she could have left them all as babies “in their hospital cots and not looked back” (38), she does bring them home to raise them. In her determination to break from the confines of Quebec Roman Catholicism, to prevent them from becoming “narrow and warped” (38), her home becomes one where only English is spoken.

However, what she does not predict and what she is dismayed to discover is that her five daughters simply trade the restrictions of one ideology, Quebec Catholicism, for those of another, English Protestantism. The mother understands that there is a connection between the French language and the ideology of Quebec Roman Catholicism, but because she does not understand the nature of the connection, that “[i]deology is *inscribed in signifying practices* . . . and to this extent it is inscribed in the language” (Belsey 42), she is not prepared for the fact that leaving the French language does not al-

low for the freedom she had wanted to find in English. One cannot function as a social being and remain outside language, and of course the mother does not even consider this; rather, she trades one language (French) for another (English) and in doing so discovers that English Protestantism is not without its narrowness too.

But of course the trade is incomplete. Unlike the girls in "Orphans' Progress" she does not lose her French nor the influence of the ideology inscribed in the French language. Her daughters laugh at her: "[s]he is French-Canadian, whether she likes it or not" (*Home Truths* 38). However much she tries to break from the ideology that shaped her youth, she cannot, and therefore she can never wholly enter a new ideology. In consequence, her son Gérard, "who speaks French as if through a muslin curtain, or as if translating from another language . . ." (39), and who has learned English from parents whose first language is French, has no "strong, complete language, fully understood, to anchor [his] understanding" (xvii). He has not, as Neil Besner states, "lost his home language" (*The Light of Imagination* 119); rather, he has never had one to begin with. Unlike Mildred and Cathie who "originally speak a flexible blend" (Keefer, *Reading Mavis Gallant* 15) of French and English, Gérard does not have a

solid anchoring in either language. Gallant's introduction describes him as being "intellectually maimed" because he has been "[d]eprived of the all-important first language . . ." (*Home Truths* xviii). I understand Gallant's term "first language" and Besner's term "home language" both to refer to that language which initially enables a child to construct her world; Belsey, as we will see, uses the term "native language."

What is at issue here is not so much bilingualism, as the absence of an understanding of any one "strong, complete language." "In learning its native language the child learns a set of differentiating concepts which identify not *given entities* but *socially constructed signifieds*" (Belsey 44). The child in this case is Gérard who has difficulty distinguishing between life and dream. Not only is Gérard unsure, but his parents also search for clues to determine whether the funeral he saw was witnessed in life or in dream. The reader may also search for clues, but Gallant's narrator does not allow for any surety on the reader's part. By comparing the original *New Yorker* version with the revised version published thirteen years later in *Home Truths*, Besner illustrates how "virtually all of [Gallant's] revisions consist of cuts in the expository passages which had clarified the distinction between Gérard's dreams and his waking reality" (*The Light of Imagination*

119). In effect, this narrative strategy “immerses readers in a disorientation similar to Gérard’s ” (*Light* 120). The reader never knows with certainty whether she is reading a dreamed experience or a life experience.

Further, when Gérard protests to the priest, his mother’s dinner guest, that he “know[s] the difference between seeing and dreaming” (*Home Truths* 45), the priest replies, “Well, it was a waking dream” (45). The contradictory notion of a “waking dream” further blurs the distinction between dream and life suggesting that there may be no identifiable point where one begins and the other ends. Indeed, given the idea of a waking dream and the possibility of its opposite, a dreamed life, one begins to question the division between these two concepts. Is there a line that occurs ‘naturally’ between ‘dream’ and ‘life’ or has such a line been imposed by ideology? In his *Course in General Linguistics* Saussure notes that

[p]hilosophers and linguists have always agreed in recognizing that without the help of signs we would be unable to make a clear-cut, consistent distinction between two ideas. Without language, thought is a vague, uncharted nebula. There are no pre-existing ideas, and nothing is distinct before the appearance

of language. (Saussure 111-12)

Gérard is not of course without language, and so he is able to make some progress towards 'charting the nebula.' But because he has been [d]eprived of the all-important first language," (*Home Truths* xviii) he is not as skilled at charting the nebula as are those who have a "complete language."

If, as Belsey claims, a child, in learning its native language "learns a set of differentiating concepts which identify not *given entities* but *socially constructed signifieds*" (44), then Gérard, who has been deprived of his native language, is also deprived of the socially constructed signifieds by which those around him (family and community) function. The narrator describes Gérard as speaking French "as if through a muslin curtain" (39). The curtain metaphor is an important one for it suggests that Gérard is cut off and separate from the rest of the world. Behind the curtain, he (like Cathie and Mildred in "Orphans' Progress") is experiencing a sensory deprivation: he cannot hear and see and feel the world around him with the same clarity available to his family and community. Clearly, without a knowledge of the language of a community, participation in that community is difficult indeed.

As Gallant's metaphor suggests, not knowing the language of one's community is not unlike being deprived of the full use of one's senses. *The Oxford English Dictionary* gives the following definition of sense:

Each of the special faculties, connected with a bodily organ, by which man and other animals perceive external objects and changes in the condition of their own bodies. Usually reckoned as five — sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch. Also called *outward or external sense*.

The loss or impairment of one or more of these senses results in a diminishing or, at the very least, a change in one's perception of external objects, in the condition of one's own body. Gallant's narrators use the sensory deprivation metaphors to describe what their characters experience when they must speak a second language in order to be understood by the members of the community in which they live, or, in the case of Gérard, when one does not have even the "all-important first language." It is language, then, by which one perceives not only external objects and changes in the condition of one's own body, but also, in an abstract sense, the ideology of one's family and community. When Mildred and Cathie speak in English

to their French-speaking family, the little girls disappear, for their family reacts by staring at them as if "peering in the dark" (*Home Truths* 60). Gérard, who speaks French as if "through a muslin curtain," is unable to distinguish a dreamed experience from a life experience. None of these characters perceives the same environment as do the members of their families, and, therefore, are viewed by their families as misfits.

"Saturday" is the story that Gallant herself uses in her introduction to consider her question about the desirability of bilingualism, but support can also be discovered in numerous of her other short stories. "Orphans' Progress," already discussed, is one example; "Careless Talk" is another. In "Careless Talk," Iris and Mary are two native English speakers who have discovered each other in France. Mary spends her summers in a pink house on property which neighbours Iris's husband's farm. Iris, who lives in a world she believes is "intended for men" (*In Transit* 123), will never leave the farm. Her husband, Marcel, "had been made to go to England for his wedding, but it was his only trip abroad. On his sole seaside holiday he had met Iris, and his marriage involved a journey, too. He did not see why he should go beyond the village again" (129-28). Marcel has no reason to speak English; the only opportunity Iris has to speak her "all-

important first language” is when Mary comes to visit. Iris has not even taught English to her two children:

Marcel did not want his children to be strangers — that was the reason Iris gave. Iris had always felt like Iris, never doubted what being Iris meant, until now, talking French to her own children.

“He only suggested it, but it was really an order. Sometimes I don’t feel like myself at all.” (127)

Having no one with whom to speak English, Iris loses a part of herself in much the same way that Mildred, in “Orphans’ Progress,” loses her childhood. Iris’s case, however, is not as extreme; she does not suffer a memory loss because she does not forget her English. But she is unable to use her English; she is unable to speak English even to her children. She now lives on an isolated farm in France where the “stones of the house [understand] nothing but French . . .” (129-30), where the “mud in the courtyard [is] French, soaked in French” (130), where a “chair [is] not a chair now, because it [is] *une chaise*” (124). Iris is no longer Iris, because she is Mme Drouin. Iris’s task is not to learn the French words for those

signifieds for which she knows English words. Such a task is impossible: “[t]he truth is that different languages divide or articulate the world in different ways” (Belsey 39). Iris, in learning and living in a new language, is learning a new set of “differentiating concepts which identify not *given entities* but *socially constructed signifieds*” (Belsey 44). Not only the words or signifiers have changed, but the signifieds as well; Iris, herself, is one of those signifieds. It is little wonder that Iris begins to doubt what being Iris means.

Had Iris never become bilingual, had she kept to one “strong, complete language, fully understood,” she might have remained ‘anchored’. However, in the isolated French countryside, “Iris and Mary [are] an island, an English fortress, here in hostile France” (127); “French was quicksand and English the rock” (124). When Mary leaves her pink house to spend her winters in Paris, Iris is left with no English at all; she must live on “stored talk” (125). The narrator alters the island metaphor slightly when describing the women’s friendship: “[Iris clings] to Mary as though she were sinking, but sometimes of her own accord Iris [lets] go the boat, and Mary never [knows] why” (127). This metaphor of Iris in the water clinging to the side of Mary’s boat is found in two other places in the narrative (127, 138). It is clear

that, as a second language, French provides no solid ground for Iris. When English was Iris's only language, she was anchored; it was a "language that made sense" (125). Iris has not lost the language that provided an anchor for her understanding, but she has lost the opportunity to use it. When Mary is with Iris, they become a community of two; to use the narrator's metaphor, they are an island. Without Mary, Iris is 'at sea.' English may well be "the rock," but without the community, there is no rock to cling to, and Iris must flounder in this hostile environment until Mary returns and Iris can once more cling to the side of the boat.

"[S]afety [comes] down to language now" (124); for Iris, learning a second language has resulted in an erosion of the first language. Iris can no longer find the solid ground that her first language, English, had provided. She, like Mildred and Gérard, is a misfit. Mary, however, is better adjusted to the strange and hostile environment. Mary, whose "parents had come over from Ireland in the early twenties, [had been] born some ten years later" (125). She had grown up in the environment and had learned how to survive: she is in the boat. That Mary's first language is English, however, is made clear in the first line of the story: "Their language — English — drew them together" (123). This commonality is not apparent to either

of them when they first meet: Mary assumes Iris to be French and is not sure if she is the wife of the young man or his father who sit at Iris's table "shovelling boiled beef" (123). It is not until Iris speaks that Mary understands: "[w]hen Iris talked French her mouth was full of iron filings; that was how it sounded and felt" (123). Iris's accent clarifies things for Mary: Iris's "dreadful accent gave the question depth, like more and more gauze curtains going up" (127). The gauze curtains are reminiscent of the muslin curtains from behind which Gérard ("Saturday") speaks. On hearing Iris speak French with an English accent, Mary discovers their commonality: their language is English. This discovery has the effect of removing a barrier to the senses that Mary had assumed was between them: the gauze curtains.

As in "Saturday" and "Orphans' Progress," "Careless Talk" suggests that language constructs reality and that learning a language allows one to perceive that reality. Different languages present different perceptions and, therefore, different realities. Characters who speak two languages are faced with two different, often contradictory, perceptions of themselves and their environments. In the case of Mildred and Cathie, the loss of one and then the other of their languages results in the erosion of their perception of

their childhood. Gérard, who is exposed to two languages, but has no solid anchoring in either, cannot perceive the “*socially constructed signifieds*” that are easily discerned by those around him. Finally Iris, whose first language is English, but who may speak English only when Mary visits in the summer, finds herself in a hostile environment where nothing is the same as it was in English, including Iris herself.

Gallant’s fiction, supported by post-Saussurian language theory, invites the reader to consider the desirability of speaking a second language at the exclusion of one’s first language. Gallant’s statement in her introduction suggests that what is needed is: “a strong, complete language, fully understood, to anchor one’s understanding” (*Home Truths* xvii). As this chapter suggests, and as Gallant herself claims, Gérard is without such a language and, as a result, has difficulty functioning within his family and community. Chapter two will examine other characters who are without that “strong, complete language” and consider how being without such a language affects their ability to function as members of a family and a community.

## Chapter II

### Between the Mute and the Deaf

I thought I might help — interpret between generations, between the mute and the deaf so to speak. . . . (*The Pegnitz Junction* 109)

Chapter one considered the desirability of being bilingual and the difficulties of not having a strong ‘anchoring’ in a single language. This chapter focuses on the children who speak only one language and, in light of post-Saussurian theory, examines the ways the language of children is not yet a “strong, complete language, fully understood.” I consider how being a ‘language apprentice’ affects the child’s position within the social hierarchy and how the reader’s understanding of this position can shed new light on Gallant’s fiction.

The one “strong, complete language, fully understood” that Gallant suggests is required to “anchor one’s understanding” does not arrive in a neat, brown package along with the baby. Rather, according to Saussurian theory, “the individual must always serve an apprenticeship in order to

learn the functioning of language . . .” (Saussure 14). As an apprentice, the child is in the early stages of language acquisition, unlike adults who, it is assumed, have served their apprenticeships. The assumption that adults have acquired a complete language will be more closely examined in chapter three, but for the purposes of this chapter, I will proceed under the Saussurian claim that the child is indeed the apprentice and that adults, therefore, have assimilated much more than have children.

What does it mean then for a child to be a language apprentice? Saussurian theory suggests that there “are no pre-existing ideas, and nothing is distinct before the appearance of language” (Saussure 112). The child then, who is acquiring her first language, is not learning to name the reality that exists around her, for no such reality exists. Eagleton explains that “meaning is not simply something ‘expressed’ or ‘reflected’ in language: it is actually *produced* by it” (Eagleton 60). Acquiring language does not allow a child to name reality, but produces reality for the child. Belsey describes learning one’s first language as learning “a set of differentiating concepts which identify not *given entities* but *socially constructed signifieds*” (44). The child’s reality then is constructed by the language of her society. But as a language apprentice, the child has not yet assimilated as

much knowledge of either the language or the functioning of language as have the adults in her society. Therefore, the construction of the reality within which the adults function is not yet complete for the child. The child's reality is a much smaller one than that of the adults.

Language, which creates reality for the child, also allows the child to describe her experiences of that reality. Belsey suggests that on "the basis of Saussure's work it is possible to argue that in so far as language is a way of articulating experience, it necessarily participates in *ideology*, the sum of the ways in which people both live and represent to themselves their relationship to the conditions of their existence" (42). If, as Belsey suggests, "language . . . necessarily participates in *ideology*," what implications does this suggestion have for the child as a language apprentice? To answer this question we must first look more closely at ideology. Recall, from chapter one, McCormick, Waller and Flower's suggestion that ideology consists of those "values, practices, ideas, and assumptions" that a society takes for granted as natural.

In light of this concept of ideology and of Belsey's view of the connection between language and ideology, one can see that if the child is an apprentice to language she is also an apprentice to ideology. That is, the

“common values, practices, ideas, and assumptions” of her society are not yet completely hers. Without a knowledge of the language that creates these values, practices, ideas, and assumptions she cannot participate in them. In looking at the relationship between the child and society, Belsey claims that if the child

is to participate in the society into which it is born, to be able to act deliberately within the social formation, the child must enter into the symbolic order, the set of signifying systems of culture of which the supreme example is language. The child who refuses to learn the language is ‘sick’, unable to become a full member of the family and of society. (60)

One enters into and participates in one’s society through language; without language, full entry is difficult if not impossible. Although the child, who is still in the early stages of language acquisition, may well be in the process of entering into society through language, the process is not yet complete. As an apprentice, she cannot yet be a full member of society. In terms of Gallant’s statement, without having yet achieved that “strong, complete language, fully understood” the child cannot be ‘anchored’.

To return to McCormick, Waller and Flower's definition of general ideology, it is important to note that a society believes its practices to be "natural" or "universal." Eagleton offers an explanation for this by recognizing that "one of the functions of ideology [is] to 'naturalize' social reality, to make it seem as innocent and unchangeable as Nature itself" (135). Belsey supports this by saying that "while ideology cannot be reduced to language and, more important, language certainly cannot be reduced to ideology, the signifying system can have an important role in naturalizing the way things are" (42). The idea that ideology and social reality are 'naturalized' in part through language has important implications for the child who is still in the early stages of acquiring the language of her society. A concept seen as 'natural' by adults cannot be seen at all by the child if she has not yet acquired the language that brings the concept into reality. But the adults, because they not only see the concept but also see it as 'natural' and 'universal,' have no understanding of why the child refuses to see what is 'clearly obvious'.

Often, adults do not consider questioning what is 'clearly obvious' any more than they consider questioning the idea that language is something other than a "naming-process only—a list of words, each corresponding

to the thing that it names" (Saussure 65). Language, for these adults, is "just a set of tokens which like money allow[s a person] to exchange [his or her] meaning-commodity with another individual who [is] also a private proprietor of meaning" (Eagleton 115), what Eagleton refers to as the " 'market' view of language" (115). Because adults usually have a much larger "set of tokens" than does the child, they consider themselves to be expert communicators; they presume to be able to 'interpret' a child's often confused and confusing speech.

The presumption that adults are able to interpret the speech of a child is borne out in some of the literature on children's language acquisition. In an essay entitled "The language of the mother-child relationship," Catherine E. Snow assures her reader that "[a]dults seem to be very sensitive to [expressions of noncomprehension] from children, and to keep modifying their speech styles until the inattention, the lack of comprehension, and the questioning disappear" (76). This statement presupposes that adults are able to discern a child's "lack of comprehension." Literature on child language acquisition also presupposes that adults have the advanced language skills (and the inclination to use them) required to resolve any questioning. It further presupposes that language indeed has the power to make the

“questioning disappear.” Post-Saussurian theory gives no such assurances; neither does Gallant’s fiction.

Of Gallant’s fiction, Keefer remarks that “the experience and perspective of childhood are constant preoccupations . . .” (*Reading Mavis Gallant* 109). Language is also a preoccupation for Gallant and few reviewers can discuss her work without remarking on “ ‘the marvellous way’ she uses language” (McGoogan). The rest of this chapter considers her perspective on childhood in light of her sensitivity to language. In *Paris Notebooks*, Gallant says that “[c]hildren are regularly abused and ill-treated and some of them die of their wounds” (130). Although some of the children in her fiction are physically abused (beaten, starved, locked in closets), Gallant more often writes of wounds that are not physical, but are equally destructive. The term ‘verbal abuse’ is not adequate to describe the source of the emotional wounds and scarring of the children of Gallant’s fiction. The source of many of these wounds, however, can often be found in language, or more specifically, in the position of the child with regard to language in relation to the adults who control her life.

Gallant’s fiction repeatedly reminds the reader that the child is a language apprentice and asks the reader to consider what this means to the

child. In “An Autobiography” the narrator tells of a twenty-six month old baby whose parents leave her with strangers (the narrator and the couple with whom she lives) for most of one day (*The Pegnitz Junction*). The worst of the parents’ crime is not that they leave her, but that they do so through trickery. Others distract the baby while the parents and their older children sneak away unnoticed by the little girl. The narrator imparts how the little girl would “implore our help, in words no one understood” (*The Pegnitz Junction* 108). Later, waking from her nap, she would speak “unintelligible words” (108). But not all of her words are completely unintelligible; she says “something that sound[s] like ‘Mama-come-auto’ ”(108). Other than with these few words and with others which are deemed “unintelligible” the child is not yet able to use language to articulate her experience; she is, in effect, mute, unable to speak. She can only cry and, in an effort to make her distress known, “[take] the hand of the former ski instructor and [drag] it to her face so that he [can] feel her tears” (108-09). Her understanding is that the former ski instructor must be both blind and deaf and, therefore, she tries to help him to understand through his sense of touch.

In Saussurian terms, this child is clearly in the very early stages of language apprenticeship. As discussed earlier in this chapter, because the child

is a language apprentice, she has not yet assimilated as much knowledge of either the language or the functioning of language as have the adults in her society. The child is, therefore, functioning within a much smaller reality than are the adults. What then is her reality? Her parents are absent. She does not even see them go, they simply disappear and no effort is made to explain to the child that her family is gone only for the day and will assuredly return by evening. It is unclear whether or not she would understand such an explanation, but the assumption of the adults in the story is that she would not and so no explanation is offered. She is in a house with strangers who cannot understand her and who "behave as if she [has] been living here forever and [has] never known anyone but [them]" (108). It is little wonder that, as the narrator perceptively remarks, "[i]t must have been plain to [the child] that [her parents] would never return" (108). Just as she is confined to the house of the former ski instructor, her reality is confined to the concrete present for she does not yet have the language needed to expand her reality.

That the former ski instructor and his wife have no conception of the child's limited reality is reflected in their own justification of the treatment of the child: 'they [tell] each other that if she had not been lied to and

deceived, then the mother would never have had a day's rest; she [has] been shut up in the rain in a chalet with this absolute tyrant of a child" (108). Because it is obvious to them that the child is in safe hands until her parents' promised return, they see no reason for her tears and her distress and so label her a tyrant and even consider spanking her. But she does not receive the spanking and is not awake to hear them refer to her as a tyrant. The abuse she endures is neither physical nor verbal. Rather, it is related to her position with regard to language in relation to the adults who control her life. As apprentice, she cannot yet see the larger reality that is 'clearly obvious' to the adults; neither can the adults recognize her limited reality. Finally, as an apprentice, her limited knowledge of language prevents her from articulating her distress and discourages the adults from even attempting an explanation that might alleviate that distress.

She is an apprentice; her language is not yet complete and fully understood and so she is trapped inside a small world indeed. Without language she is neither able to escape her tiny world of abandonment, nor is she able to conceive of a larger world into which she might escape or from which her parents might return. Although they see her distress, her captors cannot see the reason for her distress and, therefore, cannot allay her fears. There

is no one to interpret between the mute and the deaf.

The baby in "An Autobiography" has acquired far less knowledge of language and its function than has Oliver in "An Emergency Case." But Oliver too is a language apprentice and, like the little girl, is functioning in a world that is a much smaller one than that occupied by the adults in his life. The concrete present for Oliver is an emergency room in a Geneva hospital where he is recovering from a car accident which also killed his parents. Oliver cannot yet read and write, nor can he tell time, but he learns the routine of the emergency room. He knows "when they [will] come to wash him, when they [will] wheel in the cart with his lunch, and when they [will] bring the glass of milk after his afternoon sleep" (*In Transit* 34). He has also observed and noted the physical details of his room: the beds, screens, photographs, charts. His parents are not present in the room with him but they remain part of his reality. Unlike the baby in "An Autobiography," he does not conclude that because his parents are absent, they will be absent forever. Rather, in the same way that he confidently predicts that lunch will be "vegetable broth and a bit of meat with two vegetables, kept hot over a dish of warm water" (36), he is confident that his parents will eventually fetch him home. They always have. Although

his concrete present is the emergency room, Oliver, who is further along in his language apprenticeship than is the baby, realizes that other places do exist. He speaks of "a place called Bedlington Gardens, where everything [is] bigger, better and cost[s] more than anything in the emergency room" (36). He also speaks of Walberswich, where his family goes in the summer. In explaining about Walberswich to his roommate Mrs Chapman, he thinks it "strange that she shouldn't know" this information (41). Oliver has acquired enough language to conceptualize a world beyond the concrete present, but believes that everyone else has the same conception. We shall see that in this respect he is not unlike the adults around him.

Whereas Oliver is able to conceptualize a reality beyond the emergency room, it is still a very limited one. But he knows there is more and knows that he can discover more through language. When Oliver and Mrs Chapman become roommates, the first question he asks about her is "Did she have an accident?" (37), but he gets no reply from the waitress who speaks no English. Next he tries a nurse who comes in to check on Mrs Chapman; to the same question he again gets no reply. Rather than answer Oliver's question, the nurse explains to Mrs Chapman that "[t]here is a little boy in the room . . . but he goes tomorrow" (37). Finally, Oliver asks Mrs

Chapman herself. In response “[t]he two women [laugh] together. ‘Mrs Chapman found a baby in a cabbage in the garden,’ [says] the nurse” (38). This time it is Oliver who does not reply.

Earlier, another nurse, Mme Beatrice, told him that the emergency room is kept “for people who [come] to the hospital unexpectedly . . .” (34). Later, when Oliver hears the first conversation Mrs Chapman has with the nurse, he learns that the hospital staff “were not expecting [her] just yet” (37). Oliver knows that both he and Mrs Chapman came to the hospital unexpectedly and because of this they are both in the emergency room. Oliver also knows that he is there because he had an accident. He concludes that Mrs Chapman had an accident as well. The information about finding a baby in a cabbage does not fit with anything in Oliver’s reality. In an effort to make this new piece of information fit, he quite logically asks if finding the baby is what made Mrs Chapman sick. She explains to Oliver that “[she] didn’t find the baby. [She] had it” (38). This, however, does not clarify things for Oliver who cannot know that the word *had* in *I had a baby* means something quite different from *had* in *I had an accident*. Mrs Chapman then goes on to explain what happened after she had her baby: “about two hours after, I had to have an operation. That’s

what made me sick. Understand?" (39). Oliver nods: but it is unclear as to how much he understands. In her attempt to use language that an apprentice will understand, she gives a very simplified version of why she is in the emergency room. She certainly has not explained birth to the boy as she and the nurse understand it; but to her credit she has dismissed the story about finding her baby in a cabbage in the garden. She has also communicated to Oliver that she is willing to show him some of the larger reality that is hers.

Oliver, who "never once ask[s] for anything" (34) of the hospital staff, asks Mrs Chapman: "What else is there?" (39). She replies, "You mean what else about me?" (39). Oliver "[isn't] sure what he mean[s]" (39). He is aware that much of what Saussure terms the "vague, uncharted nebula" (112) remains uncharted, but he does not have the language with which to ask about how it is perceived by those around him. Mrs Chapman, mother of five children, understands something of Oliver's limitations and supplies both questions and answers for the boy. The questions and answers may not explain the mysteries of life to the boy as they are understood by Mrs Chapman, but they are questions and answers nonetheless and the two "[smile] comfortably at each other" (40).

Mrs Chapman realizes that there are some concepts Oliver cannot understand because he does not yet have the language that brings such concepts (birth, for example) into existence. The doctor, on the other hand, is unaware of Oliver's limited reality and, assuming the boy is capable of understanding the concept of death, tells Oliver that his "parents [are] now in Heaven . . . " (33). Having done so, the doctor and the medical staff are secure in their belief that Oliver fully realizes all that "in Heaven" implies. However, concepts such as birth and death do not yet exist within this child's reality. Oliver may have been told that his "parents [are] now in Heaven; but Geneva, and going home soon, and the car's having turned over twice [are] the facts Oliver [retains]" (33-34). He retains these last three pieces of information because they fit into his limited charting of the nebula. As a result, on the day of his discharge from the hospital, he expects not his Auntie Cath but his mother. As he understands and explains it; "She [Auntie Cath] can't take me home. We don't even live in the same place" (40).

Not only does the doctor incorrectly assume Oliver's reality to be much larger than it is, but he also subscribes to what Eagleton describes as the 'market' view of language. He assumes that Oliver will know what "in

Heaven” means and he also believes that it will mean for Oliver exactly what it means for himself. If language truly worked this way, if Oliver and the doctor both had the same concept listed under “in Heaven” in their verbal filing system, then Oliver would know that parents in Heaven are neither allowed to fetch their little boys home nor allowed to reside anywhere but in Heaven. However, the doctor does not consider that his words, his verbal signs, may undergo a transformation in meaning rather than remain frozen. He certainly does not consider that they will have no meaning at all for the boy.

That the doctor himself is not good at reading signs, verbal or otherwise, is suggested when he mistakes Oliver’s drawing of a “cats’ bathtub for a motorcar and [thinks] that Oliver [has] been drawing the automobile in which his parents were killed” (35). Neither does he consider that words may be “‘multi-accentual’ . . . they [are] always the words of one particular human subject for another . . .” (Eagleton 117). He repeatedly tosses out the verbal signifier *Miss Redfern* to Oliver and is repeatedly confused when he discovers that this signifier has no signified in Oliver’s system. The doctor eventually tries the signifier *Aunt Catherine* which Oliver is able to transform into *Auntie Cath*. *Miss Redfern* and *Auntie Cath* are

indeed different concepts and therefore it is appropriate that there are two different verbal signs for them, but the doctor, with his 'market' view of language, sees only a one-to-one correspondence between verbal sign and concept, between signifier and signified, and has no appreciation for how a sign is "transformed through a process of social conflict and dialogue into meaning" (Eagleton 118). The doctor believes that the signifiers he sends to Oliver are received intact. It is this misconception that contributes to Oliver's confusion and to the medical staff's subsequent inappropriate reaction to his behavior on the day of his discharge.

Mrs Chapman understands something of this confusion and, like the narrator of "An Autobiography," becomes an interpreter between the mute and the deaf. Oliver, who is still a language apprentice, does not yet have the sufficiently developed language skills that would enable him to articulate his experience and his confusion. Indeed, the reader is told he has "never once asked for anything" (*In Transit* 34). He does, however, ask if Mrs Chapman had an accident, but his questions go unheard by the medical staff as does much of what he says: the nurse and waitress do not hear this question about Mrs Chapman. Oliver does not get an answer to this question until he asks Mrs Chapman herself.

Similarly, the doctor does not hear him say “we’ve got a bigger car than you have at home” (35). The “we” of this sentence surely refers to Oliver and his parents; the car is probably the car that rolled over twice; and home, of course, is no longer a place to which Oliver can return. Had the doctor ‘heard’ this statement, he might have realized that Oliver had not understood the explanation of his parents’ death. Mrs Chapman is the only person who understands this, but the hospital staff is deaf to her as well: “ ‘He’s never been like this,’ the nurse kept saying, and Mrs Chapman kept answering, ‘I’m sure it hasn’t been properly explained’ ” (41). There appears to be an obstruction (not unlike the muslin curtains and the layers of gauze discussed in chapter one) between Oliver and the medical staff, an obstruction that Mrs Chapman is attempting to remove. This obstruction results from Oliver’s not yet having a “strong, complete language, fully understood.” Oliver is still in the process of learning “not *given entities* but *socially constructed signifieds*” (Belsey 44); he cannot yet ‘see’ and ‘hear’ all that is apparent to the hospital staff who, on seeing Oliver’s interest in Mrs Chapman, “put the screen between the two beds, so that Oliver [can’t] see” (37). It is Mrs Chapman who, on hearing Oliver’s story, asks that the screen be removed. Mrs Chapman is the only person

in the boy's life who is attempting to remove the barriers between Oliver and the world she inhabits, the world that is a construct of the language she speaks.

This story not only reminds the reader of the barrier experienced by the child who does not yet have one "strong, complete language, fully understood," but also reminds the reader that learning that language is not a matter of learning "pre-existing, given concepts, but changeable and contingent concepts . . ." (Belsey 44). Few, if any, of the characters in "An Emergency Case" are aware of the mutable qualities of signifiers. We have already seen that the doctor, with his 'market' view of language, is under the false impression that the signifiers he sends out remain frozen and arrive at their destination intact. It is important to note that the story itself makes no such assumptions about the 'market' view of language. For example, the nurse explains to Oliver that the emergency room is sometimes used "for ordinary cases when the floors [are] crowded" (*In Transit* 34). When the nurse says "the floors [are] crowded" she is referring to wards in the hospital that are full of patients. However, by the time this signifier reaches Oliver, it has transformed into something else: "Oliver's version of a crowded floor [is] a linoleum nursery floor covered with little tanks" (34).

The nurse is completely unaware of how 'crowded floor' has been transformed into a meaning quite different from the one intended. By showing the reader 'crowded floors' in the nurse's mind and then showing that same signifier once it has reached Oliver's mind, the narrator has alerted the reader to the transformation that has taken place.

The reader is also asked to consider the transformation of the signifier 'home': "Any day now, the doctor had said, Oliver would be going home" (33). When the doctor says 'home' in this statement, it is likely that he means nothing more than 'away from the hospital'. The narrator points out that 'home' for Oliver has become the emergency room: "he much preferred being inside, in the room he now accepted as home" (34). Later, when told that his Auntie Cath is coming to take him home, he is confused because his understanding of 'home' does not include his aunt. Further, when Oliver argues with the doctor about his drawing, he shouts "we've got a bigger car than you have at home" (35). 'Home' in this last pronouncement is the home Oliver shared with his parents, the home to which he cannot return. By showing her reader that the signifier 'home' is subject to transformation (as are all signifiers), Gallant suggests that the 'market' view of language is, at best, naive, at worst, misleading.

“An Emergency Case” is not the only story whose narrator asks the reader to consider how signifiers undergo transformation. In “About Geneva,” two children of divorced parents return home from a visit to their father and his new wife in Geneva. ‘Home’ is an apartment in Nice they share with their mother and grandmother. The boy, Colin, has had his “lovely golden hair” cut off (*The End of the World and Other Stories* 46), much to the disapproval of Granny who remarks, “When you send a child off for a visit you expect at the very least to have him returned exactly as he left” (46). But of course this is as unreasonable as expecting to send a word off and have it returned exactly as it was sent. Like “An Emergency Case,” this story asks the reader to consider the impossibility of this ‘market’ view of language and to consider what happens to a sign when it becomes a part of dialogue and social conflict.

Although the mother has informed Granny that the children are to be asked no direct questions, both women, nonetheless, want to know about Geneva:

“Did you go boating, Ursula?” said Granny, not counting this as a direct question. “When I visited Geneva, as a girl,

we went boating on the lake.” She went on about white water birds, a parasol, a boat heaped with cushions.

“Oh, Granny, no,” said Ursula. There weren’t even any big boats, let alone little ones. It was cold.” (*End of the World* 47)

This was Ursula’s version; later, Colin tells his own.

“I fed the swans,” Colin suddenly shouted.

There, he had told about Geneva. He sat up and kicked his heels on the carpet as if the noise would drown out the consequence of what he had revealed. As he said it, the image became static; a gray sky, a gray lake, and a swan wonderfully turning upside down with the black rubber feet showing above the water. His father was not in the picture at all; neither was *she*. But Geneva was fixed for the rest of his life: gray, lake, swan. (*End of the World* 50)

While Geneva may be fixed as such in Colin’s mind, the picture that his words evoke in his mother’s mind is one of “sunshine, a blue lake, and the boats Granny had described, heaped with colored cushions. She [sees] her husband and someone else (probably in white, she [thinks], ridiculously

bouffant, the origin of Tatiana) and Colin with his curls shorn, revealing ears surprisingly large" (*End of the World* 50). With each description, Geneva is transformed into something new, and each person holds a different meaning for Geneva.

Similarly, the myth of Colin's airsickness is transformed from fiction to fact. Upon hearing that the children received chocolate to eat on the plane, Granny remarks that it "might very well have made [the children] airsick" (*End of the World* 48). Ursula immediately insists that neither she nor Colin were sick on the plane. Later, however, Colin, having told all he has to tell about Geneva, begins to invent and announces that he was sick on the plane. Having heard a different story from each child, the mother, as she is getting Colin ready for bed, asks him if he really was sick on the plane. Because Ursula "by the one simple act of creating Tatiana and the Grand Duke . . . remove[s] herself from the ranks of reliable witnesses" (*End of the World* 50) and because Colin replies in the affirmative, their mother is convinced that her son had been sick on the plane. Granny agrees: " 'I thought so,' [she says]. 'That, at least, is a fact' " (*End of the World* 51).

"About Geneva" asks the reader to consider how words are "transformed through a process of social conflict and dialogue into meaning" (Eagleton

118). By changing Granny's notion about Colin's airsickness into fact, this story also asks the reader to consider how 'reality' can be transformed. Granny and the children's mother may believe that their questions (direct or indirect) are 'getting at' the truth, but they are actually constructing the truth. Here again we see reflected the post-Saussurian claim that language constructs reality. Although Colin indeed says that he was sick on the plane, it is Granny who first suggests airsickness as a possibility and Granny who finalizes it.

The post-Saussurian view that reality is a construction is also demonstrated in "An Autobiography." Here again the reader discovers that the adults' 'clearly obvious' version of reality takes precedence over the child's. The narrator, who earlier tells the story of the baby abandoned in the home of the former ski instructor, now tells of Veronique who, like Colin and Ursula, is made to fly alone from one parent to another. Once again the reader is reminded that the child's smaller reality is not considered by most adults.

The narrator asks her reader to consider the child's reality when she describes Veronique "gaz[ing] onto a plateau of food nearly at shoulder level, and pick[ing] up a knife and fork the size of gardening tools" (*The*

*Pegnitz Junction* 112). She also tells her reader of the “voice that had welcomed [them] in Paris and implored Veronique and [her] to put out [their] cigarettes . . .” (112). The plane trip is an adult reality: the large utensils, the command to extinguish cigarettes, may well be meaningful to adults, but have little to offer Veronique who is, nonetheless, abandoned in this reality and expected to cope.

She is abandoned not only by her parents but also by the stewardess who allows the child to leave the plane “as if she had never seen Veronique before . . .” (114). Fortunately for the child, the narrator becomes her self-appointed guardian during the child’s trip from one parent to another which she describes as “the bright arc through space, the trusting flight without wings” (110). She performs such acts of kindness as buckling the child’s seat belt, finding her sweater when she is cold, cutting her meat. However, when the plane lands and Veronique becomes the charge of Mme Bataille, the reader is again shown that it is the adult’s ‘clearly obvious’ version of reality that takes precedence over the child’s. The narrator, seated on the same bus as Veronique and Mme Bataille, witnesses how the woman forces her ‘clearly obvious’ version of reality onto Veronique. Mme Bataille, firm in her conviction that it was the stewardess who cut the child’s meat, will

not consider a different version:

"It was the stewardess who cut up your meat," said Mme. Bataille.

"No, a lady."

"A lady in a uniform. The lady you were with when I met you."

"No."

. . . . .

Presently, all but giving in, Mme. Bataille said, "Well, she was nice, the lady. I mean, the stewardess."

Two ideas collided: Veronique remembered the woman fairly well, even though the flight no longer existed, but Mme. Bataille knew it was the stewardess.

"I came all alone," said Veronique.

"Who cut your meat, then?"

"I did," said Veronique, and there was no shaking her. (114-15)

In this passage, the narrator does not say that Mme Bataille 'believed'

or 'thought' that it was the stewardess who cut the child's meat; rather, she says that Mme Bataille "knew" it was the stewardess. Mme Bataille, who was not present when the event in question took place, has constructed the particulars of the event and forced them onto Veronique. Veronique does not yet have sufficient language skills with which to counter Mme Bataille's construction, and, rather than accept the new construction, Veronique creates a new one by insisting that she cut her meat herself. She constructed the only version of her experience that she, as a language apprentice, was able to. Having done so, "there was no shaking her" (115).

Veronique's memory undergoes a distortion similar to the distortion of memory experienced by Cathie and Mildred in "Orphans' Progress." The difference is that Cathie's and Mildred's memory loss is a result of the loss of their 'mother' tongue; Veronique's is a result of not yet having a "strong, complete language, fully understood to anchor [her] understanding." Had Veronique not been a language apprentice, had she been able to articulate to Mme Bataille that her fellow passenger had cut her meat, she would not have had to insist that she had done the cutting herself. But with limited language skills, she is mute and Mme Bataille, it would appear, is deaf to the few phrases the child is able to articulate. The narrator, who is also

Veronique's fellow passenger, had "thought [she] might help — interpret between generations, between the mute and the deaf, so to speak . . ." (109), but is unable to do so. With no interpreter, it is difficult indeed for adult and child to communicate. This difficulty is faced by all the children discussed in this chapter: the baby in the care of the former ski instructor and his wife, Oliver, Colin and Ursula, and, finally, Veronique. As language apprentices, they are, for the most part, mute. When they are able to articulate their experience, the adults to whom they speak appear to be unable to hear them.

One chapter in Keefer's book *Reading Mavis Gallant*, is entitled "The Prison of Childhood." She takes her title from Gallant's story "In Youth Is Pleasure" where Linnet Muir calls childhood a prolonged stay in prison, the guards being those who are "physically larger and legally sovereign" (*Home Truths* 225). The children I discuss in this chapter are all prisoners. The realities inside which they are trapped are only as large as their current language acquisition allows. Their jailers are largely unsympathetic because their advanced language acquisition does not allow them to see that their larger reality is a construction which cannot yet be perceived by the children. The 'market' view of language largely held by many adults

does nothing to break down the walls of the prison and often serves to add to the confusion and distress of the imprisoned child.

The question I now address is the following: is there an end to apprenticeship? Having seen the barriers that exist for people who are denied access to their first language and for children who are serving their “apprenticeship in order to learn the functioning of language . . .” (Saussure 14), I will consider, in the next chapter, the extent to which these barriers can be broken down: is it possible to acquire a “strong, complete language, fully understood”?

## Chapter III

### Dialogue of the Deaf

The correspondence between mother and daughter, Montreal and Paris, was an uninterrupted dialogue of the deaf. (*A Fairly Good Time* 45)

Chapters one and two examined how, in Gallant's fiction, the acquisition of a second language at the exclusion of the first, and the incomplete acquisition of one's first language are experiences not unlike being sensorially deprived. This metaphor suggests that the world is, in fact, 'out there', but cannot be fully experienced by those who are linguistically deprived. If one accepts that language is not a tool we use to describe the world which surrounds us, rather, "we only have a 'world' at all because we have language to signify it . . ." (Eagleton 136), then my previous statement appears to be inaccurate. Language, however, predates the individual; language has already constructed a 'world' into which the individual enters as a member of a family and of a society. In order to interact with that 'world' the individual must learn the language from which that world is

constructed. Until the individual has learned this language, she is unable "to become a full member of the family and of society" (Belsey 60). The language of the family and of society has constructed a 'world', but that 'world' cannot be fully experienced by those who have not yet learned the language.

Because language predates the individual and because it is within the nature of language to present itself as the 'natural' and 'correct' way of 'viewing' the world, it is difficult to recognize that the 'world' is a construction of language. It is in the nature of the sign to be understood "as a translucent window on to the object, or on to the mind. It is quite neutral and colorless in itself: its only job is to represent something else, become the vehicle of a meaning conceived quite independently of itself . . ." (Eagleton 136). If the sign were a translucent window on to the object or the mind, then one might assume that knowing all the signs would eliminate the muslin curtain and the need for an interpreter.

Knowing all the signs is, of course, impossible. Even if it were possible to know all the signs of a single language, one would discover that having all the signs at one's disposal is not enough to eliminate the muslin curtain or the need for an interpreter. Language is more complex and complicated

than having all the pieces of a puzzle and putting them together. The boy Hal, in "Statues Taken Down," has "an egg puzzle of polished wood that [comes] apart and [cannot] be put together . . ." (*In Transit* 165). The narrator does not say that the boy cannot solve the puzzle, rather the puzzle cannot be solved; it cannot be put together.

Hal's egg is reminiscent of the egg in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*, Humpty Dumpty. Both eggs come apart, but neither can be put together again. The last paragraph in the story again refers to the boy and his puzzle: "Hal stolidly trie[s] to put together the egg puzzle he had bought in the early days, at the Palais-Royal. He ha[s] all the pieces, nothing [is] missing, but still [cannot] make it whole" (*In Transit* 170). The mysteries of the wooden egg puzzle are much like the mysteries of language: having all the pieces (knowing all the signs) of the language puzzle does not guarantee being able to make the puzzle whole.

In Gallant's "Kingdom Come," Dr. Dominic Missierna, a linguist, tries to collect all the pieces of the Saltnatek tongue. Having discovered "in a remote village [this] allophylian language unknown except to its speakers" (32), he has "asked for a governmental ruling to put a clamp on the language: the vocabulary must not grow during the period of his field work.

Expansion would confuse the word count" (34). Later, he returns to Europe with "one more [language] system, and no one [knows] how to make the old ones work" (32). Language, for Dr. Missierna, is much like the wooden egg puzzle which "[comes] apart and [cannot] be put together" (*In Transit* 165). Like the boy Hal, Dr. Missierna "[has] all the pieces, nothing [is] missing, but still [cannot] make it whole" (170). Of course Dr. Missierna can never really have all the pieces even with a government order to "put a clamp on the language." Further, the shapes of the pieces of the language puzzle keep changing, making a final or ultimate 'solution' impossible.

Humpty Dumpty is not the only one of Lewis Carroll's characters who can be found in Gallant's fiction. "[Linnett Muir's] private name for married women [is] Red Queens. They [look to her] like the Red Queen in *Through the Looking-Glass*, chasing after other people and minding their business for them" (*Home Truths* 262). The Dormouse, who, with Alice and the March Hare, is a guest at the Hatter's tea party (*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*), appears in the person of Crystal in *A Fairly Good Time*: "In a few minutes, she thought, they will have Crystal's head in a teapot and she will say drowsily, 'Twinkle, twinkle' "(63). I call attention to these references to Carroll's works because both *Alice's Adventures*

*in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* are stories about language. Both Gallant's fiction and Carroll's call the reader's attention to the "Saussurean insight that the sign is always a matter of historical and cultural convention" (Eagleton 135) and to the idea that each "sign in the chain of meaning is somehow scored over or traced through with all the others, to form a complex tissue which is never exhaustible; and to this extent no sign is ever 'pure' or 'fully meaningful' "(128).

Readers of *Through the Looking-Glass* are shown how the meaning of a word can be transformed. The following conversation between the Red Queen, the White Queen and Alice is an illustration (albeit a rather silly one) of how words undergo a transformation as they pass from speaker to hearer and back again.

Here the Red Queen began again. 'Can you answer useful questions?' she said. 'How is bread made?'

'I know *that!*' Alice cried eagerly. 'You take some flour—'

'Where do you pick the flower?' the White Queen asked. 'In a garden or in the hedges?'

'Well, it isn't *picked* at all,' Alice explained: 'it's *ground*—'

‘How many acres of ground?’ said the White Queen. ‘You mustn’t leave out so many things.’

‘Fan her head!’ the Red Queen anxiously interrupted. ‘She’ll be feverish after so much thinking.’ So they set to work and fanned her with bunches of leaves, till she had to beg them to leave off, it blew her hair about so.

‘She’s all right again now,’ said the Red Queen. ‘Do you know Languages? What’s the French for fiddle-de-dee?’

‘Fiddle-de-dee’s not English,’ Alice replied gravely.

‘Who ever said it was?’ said the Red Queen.

Alice thought she saw a way out of the difficulty, this time. ‘If you’ll tell me what language “fiddle-de-dee” is, I’ll tell you the French for it!’ she exclaimed triumphantly.

But the Red Queen drew herself up rather stiffly, and said ‘Queens never make bargains.’ (Carroll 227-28)

This passage points out that, potentially, the meaning of a word is modified every time it is used. I do not suggest that a speaker or writer can assign any meaning he or she desires to a word. Language is not a private function

under the control of the individual. Rather, it is a social phenomenon. All members of the community must be in agreement about the functioning of language including the meanings of the words contained in it. Belsey explains that "agreement is not explicitly sought but merely manifested in the fact that certain linguistic units are used and understood" (41). Similarly, in *Through the Looking-Glass*, Alice tries, unsuccessfully, to explain to Humpty Dumpty that language is not a private function under his control:

'I don't know what you mean by "glory," ' Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. 'Of course you don't—till I tell you. I meant "there's a nice knock-down argument for you!" '

'But "glory" doesn't mean "a nice knock-down argument," ' Alice objected.

'When *I* use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.'

'The question is,' said Alice, 'whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.'

‘The question is,’ said Humpty Dumpty, ‘which is to be master—that’s all.’ (Carroll 190)

Humpty Dumpty is under the misguided assumption that he can assign whatever meaning he chooses to a word, that he can control (be master of) language. Language, however, is “outside the individual who can never create nor modify it by himself; it exists only by virtue of a sort of contract signed by the members of a community” (Saussure 14). If Humpty Dumpty insists on a word meaning just what he chooses it to mean, then he will find no one able to understand him.

Although the linguistic community must agree upon the usage and meaning of any sign, no sign is ever ‘pure’ or ‘fully meaningful’. This statement appears to be contradictory: how can the meaning of a sign be agreed upon when no sign is fully meaningful? As we saw with Alice and the Queens, members of a community may have a common vocabulary, but each member’s individual experiences with the ways certain words are used will modify the meaning of the words that make up that vocabulary. The example of the ‘crowded floor’ given in chapter two demonstrates how both Oliver and the nurse are using the words ‘crowded’ and ‘floor’ in a manner

agreed upon by the community, but their different experiences of the uses of these words modify the words in different ways.

*The Oxford English Dictionary* lists a number of definitions for the word 'crowd', one of them being "to collect, bring, or pack closely together." For the nurse, it is patients who are packed closely together; for Oliver, it is his war toys. 'Floor' also has many definitions listed in the same dictionary; two of them are as follows: 1.) "The layer of boards, brick, stone, etc. in an apartment, on which people tread; the under surface of the interior of a room;" 2.) "A set of rooms and landings in a house on the same or nearly the same level; a story." Oliver and the nurse are both using meanings agreed upon by the community but the community has agreed upon more than one meaning. The nurse is, no doubt, familiar with both meanings, but the context in which the word 'floor' is used suggests the latter and further suggests that it is patients who are doing the crowding. Oliver has not yet acquired the latter meaning. He does, however, understand the former, and his concept of the former is not only a surface "on which people tread," but also a surface 'on which little boys play', and what Oliver plays with are war toys.

The reader understands both Oliver's and the nurse's interpretations of

'crowded floor' because other words in the narrative modify the meaning of 'crowded floor' to allow both interpretations. Oliver's and the nurse's experience of the words 'crowded floor' are different and therefore the concepts that these words produce are different. But the words in the narrative produce *both* concepts for the reader.

They kept [the room] for people who came to the hospital unexpectedly, as Oliver had done, but they also used it for ordinary cases when the floors were crowded. Oliver's version of a crowded floor was a linoleum nursery floor covered with little tanks. (*In Transit* 34)

I do not suggest that all readers have exactly the same understanding of Oliver's concept of 'crowded floors' and the nurse's concept of 'crowded floors'. In the same way that Oliver's concept differs from the nurse's, one reader's concept will differ from another's. Without agreement on the meaning of a word, reading would be impossible, but no reading is definitive because for each reader, words undergo a different transformation. The meaning of the word *reading* used twice in the previous sentence is modified by the words that make up the sentence as well as by the experience of the

reader. There will never be a time when the word *reading* will undergo an ultimate modification and will remain static for all readers and for all time.

A scene in "Questions and Answers" demonstrates how the meanings of words are modified by the words around them. The character, Marie, is a Rumanian expatriate in Paris trying to emigrate to the United States. She fills out the forms given to her at the American consulate and receives a letter which reads:

"You are not legible."

"How funny," [says] the girl in the consulate when Marie and Amalia [return] with the letter. "They mean eligible."

"What does it mean?" [says] Marie.

"It is a mistake, but it means you can't go to the United States. Not as your situation is now."

"If it is a mistake —"

"One word is a mistake."

"Then the whole letter might be wrong." (*In Transit* 181)

This passage suggests that if one word is wrong then any and all other words may be wrong. The passage also suggests that one incorrect word can alter

the meaning of the whole letter; it can alter the meaning of any or all the words that make up the letter. Recall Eagleton who claims that “no sign is ever ‘pure’ or ‘fully meaningful’ ” (128). The meaning of each word in Marie’s letter from the consulate “is always somehow suspended, something deferred or still to come: one signifier relays [the reader] to another, and that to another, earlier meanings are modified by later ones, and although the sentence [or letter] may come to an end the process of language itself does not” (Eagleton 128).

The character Linnet Muir, for whom the last section of *Home Truths* is named, is highly interested in the process of language. In these stories the adult Linnet reflects on her childhood and on the time when, as a young woman, she returned to live and work in the city of her childhood, Montreal. In her words, childhood is a “stay in prison.” By examining the process of language, Linnet gains insight into her past and into her childhood relationships with those “people who were physically larger and legally sovereign” (225). Her journals are full of “but what he *really* must have meant was . . .”(248). She gives no examples of journal entries, but the six stories that make up this section give numerous examples of ‘what was meant’ (as we will see).

In "The Doctor," Linnet describes a street recollected from her childhood that has changed considerably:

The street where Dr. Chauchard lived began to decline around the same time as the popularity of "The Doctor" [a 1891 painting] and is now a slum. No citizens' committee can restore the natural elegance of those gray stone houses, the swept steps, the glittering windows, because, short of a miracle, it cannot resurrect the kind of upper-bourgeois French Canadians who used to live there. (297)

Words, Linnet notes, go through a similar and equally irreversible transformation. She points out to her reader that the "word 'diplomat' had greater cachet then than it has now" (308); when she tells of Bertie Knox recounting how "the Jocks played [the 1918 Allied victory parade] up for all they was worth . . ." she reminds her readers that " 'Jocks' were Scots in those days — nothing more" (246). The signifiers (diplomat and Jock) may be familiar, but they no longer match up with the same signifieds. Sometimes it is the signifier that changes: " 'Bolshevik' [is] now 'Bolshie,' to make it harmless" (307). Linnet also notices some changes that are more

personal, more specific to her own vocabulary. She recalls the beauty and tranquility of reddish brown stone houses against a peacock blue sky after a fresh snowfall. "This [scene] is what [she] saw when [she] read 'city' in a book; [she] 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). The adult Linnet is aware that signifiers do not simply mirror the signified, and it is with this insight that she looks back at her childhood.

She explains to herself as much as to her readers the euphemisms she had heard in her childhood: "mysterious maladies that had no names . . . were called in obituaries 'a long illness bravely borne' "(306). Olivia, Linnet's nurse, was able to "do anything" with her as a child, "which merely meant an ability to provoke from a child behavior convenient for adults" (286). This last example is one of the many instances throughout the "Linnet Muir" series where Linnet tells her reader what is *meant*. For example, Dr Chauchard "used the most advanced methods imported from the United States, or, as one would have said then, 'from Boston,' which meant both stylish and impeccably right" (299). During the war, Linnet works at the office of:

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which means, she is informed by a colleague, “[s]weet buggerall” (242). She hears another colleague complain that “ ‘You can’t run a wartime agency with *that* going on’ . . . ‘That’ meant poor Mr. Tracy and me” (256). Linnet is introducing her reader to the language of another time and place, giving the reader insight into Linnet’s past. More important, Linnet is telling her reader to be aware of the mutability of language. This warning is not restricted to the Linnet Muir stories.

Given the mutable qualities of language, acquisition of one “strong, complete language, fully understood” appears to be difficult indeed. This acquisition is further complicated by the interconnections between language and ideology. Two speakers may share a common language, but it is unlikely that they have appropriated identical vocabularies from that language. Further, meanings of words common to both vocabularies may have

undergone dissimilar transformations. Similarly, persons may share a common ideology, but they appropriate “from that ideology their particular **repertoires**” (McCormick, Waller and Flower 16). Repertoire is defined in *Reading Texts* as a “complex (and perhaps never fully analyzable) set of expectations, desires, prejudices, and former experiences . . .”(14); a “text’s particular appropriation of ideology [is] its repertoire, a term that refers to the particular combination of ideas, experiences, habits, norms, conventions, and assumptions that allows the text to be written”(15). The act of reading involves the interface of the text’s repertoire with that of the reader. “The way readers respond to texts will depend on how their general and literary repertoires interact with those of the text”(16). This matching of repertoires is not restricted to the act of reading. It also occurs when people interact with each other. The manner in which two people respond to each other depends on the ways in which their repertoires match. Although their repertoires may have their sources in the same ideology, what one person has experienced, taken and combined from that ideology may differ greatly from what the other person has appropriated.

Further, the “values, practices, ideas, and assumptions ”(McCormick, Waller and Flower 16) that comprise an ideology can be in conflict with

one another and can result in conflict between the repertoires of text and reader, conflict between two speakers, and even conflict within an individual. McCormick, Waller and Flower illustrate these conflicts in an analysis of the television animation of the children's story *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* by Dr. Seuss (254-58). Their analysis points out that this story "evokes for viewers a quasi-spiritual myth of Christmas that clashes with the materialism of the holiday" (254). This clash is depicted as a conflict between two communities within the society, the Whos and the Grinch, (the Grinch being a community of one). The conflict also occurs within one individual, Cindy Lou Who, who "embodies both the spiritual and the consumerist values that are contradictorally affirmed by the program" (255).

Cindy Lou is a child, but the conflict between the spiritual and consumerist values in the story is not a result of her being a language apprentice, nor is it a result of the deprivation of a first language. The conflict occurs within the ideology itself. When Eagleton says "that we inhabit many different 'languages' simultaneously, some of them perhaps mutually conflicting" (115), he is not suggesting that we are multilingual. Rather, within one language (English for example) there are many positions from

which to speak, positions all appropriated from the society's ideology.

Another way of referring to the word 'language' as Eagleton uses it, and which he places in inverted commas, is to use the term *langage*. To understand the concept of *langage* it is necessary to also understand *langue* and *parole*, terms introduced by Saussure in his *Course in General Linguistics*. Allen Thiher's chapter on Saussure and Derrida in *Words in Reflection* offers the following discussion of these terms:

*Langage*, as distinguished from *langue*, is the faculty of speech as opposed to a given natural "tongue" or *langue*. *Langage* can also mean a repository of signs or techniques for communication (in the sense of, say, *langage cinématographique*). *Langue* is, for Saussure, the system of the individual language such as French or English, whereas *parole* is the individualized utterance of the *langue* or language system. (69)

*Langue*, then, is the communication system that pre-dates the individual; it exists outside the individual and is outside of the individual's control. *Parole* is the act of speaking, an act which is executed by the individual. *Langage*, like repertoire, is an appropriation. In order to enter a discourse

community and to make meaningful utterances (*parole*) within that community; one must speak the *langue* (English for example) spoken by the community, but one must also understand the *langage* of that community. To understand what a group of English speaking computer scientists are discussing, it is not enough to have a working knowledge of English. One must also understand their *langage*, their discourse, in order for a matching of repertoires to occur. To return to Eagleton's statement "that we inhabit many different 'languages' simultaneously, some of them perhaps mutually conflicting" (115), we understand 'languages' here as *langages*.

Eagleton points out that "someone may not only be a 'member of society' but also a woman, shop-steward, Catholic, mother, immigrant and disarmament campaigner . . ." (115). The different roles inhabited by this 'member of society' are not always compatible. The inhabitant of these roles speaks the 'languages' (*langages*) that created them. These 'languages' (*langages*), too, are often in conflict one with another. Speaking only one language (*langue*), English, for example, does not guarantee the anchoring of one's understanding because within one language (*langue*) are many 'languages' (*langages*). It is difficult to imagine speaking from only one of these 'languages' (*langages*) exclusively (shop-steward, for example), but if such

a feat were possible one could only speak to a person who inhabited that 'language' (*langage*) exclusive of all others. But, to quote Eagleton again, "we inhabit many different 'languages' [*langages*] simultaneously, some of them perhaps mutually conflicting"(115).

A poignant example of one person inhabiting conflicting roles is that of the mother in "Ernst in Civilian Clothes:"

The caught child screams. If the house were burning, if there were lions on the stairs, he could not scream more. All round the court the neighbors stay well away from their windows. It is no one's concern. When his mother beats him, the child calls for help, and calls "*Maman*." His true mother will surely arrive and take him away from his mother transformed. Who else can he appeal to? It makes sense. (*The Pegnitz Junction* 139)

The woman, who is both protector and tormentor of her child, is inhabiting two mutually conflicting roles. The child addresses the protector in a *langage* that is not understood and, therefore, not heard by the woman in her role as tormentor. Like the children discussed in chapter two, this child, too, needs someone to interpret between the mute and the deaf.

If any child is "to participate in the society into which it is born, to be able to act deliberately within the social formations, the child must enter into the symbolic order, the set of signifying systems of culture of which the supreme example is language" (Belsey 60). Children learn the *langue* of their families and societies, but they appropriate from this *langue* specific *langages*. The daughter in *A Fairly Good Time*, Shirley Perrigny, is not a child. She is bilingual, but has not been denied the use of her first language. She grew up in Montreal and is now married and living in Paris, working as a translator in a department store. Shirley exchanges letters with her mother, who is in Montreal, but the "correspondence between mother and daughter, Montreal and Paris, [is] an uninterrupted dialogue of the deaf" (45). Shirley has written a letter to her mother telling of the difficulties of her marriage. Shirley's mother receives this letter, which is accompanied by a "sadly macerated and decomposed" flower (3), and "assume[s] this is what [her daughter's] nine-page letter [is] about" (4). She "count[s] a dozen question marks and [takes] them to indicate anxious queries re *Endymion non-scriptus*" (6). (*Endymion non-scriptus* is, according to Shirley's mother, the common blue bell.) Shirley, at breakfast with a friend of her mother's who is visiting Paris, puzzles over her mother's

response to her letter:

“I’ve had this *long letter*. It came yesterday but I didn’t get a chance to read it until today. It’s about bluebells, all the history of bluebells. I don’t know why. She says she can’t make out my handwriting.”

“She’s great on botany,” Mrs. Castle said.

“I told her I thought I was messing up my marriage, doing all the wrong things. I can read *her* writing but I don’t always know what she’s driving at. One time she asked me to mark the Grandes Rousses on a map and send her the map airmail. Who was to know they were mountains? They could have been nude dancers.” (*A Fairly Good Time* 34)

Mother and daughter speak the same *langue* but they do not always speak the same *langage*. Both are communicating in English, but each has appropriated different *langages* from English. Being able to understand a *langue* does not guarantee being able to understand a *langage* appropriated from that *langue*. Shirley’s mother claims to be unable to decipher her daughter’s handwriting which seems to her “to be an early Teutonic alpha-

bet" (4). Rather than decipher the writing, Shirley's mother appropriates from the contents of the envelope (*Endymion non-scriptus* and the question marks) a *langue* she understands.

Shirley, however, is able to read her mother's handwriting. Nonetheless, she is unable to understand what her mother "is driving at." She does not understand her mother's *langage*. Mother and daughter communicate, but neither receives what was sent: their correspondance is truly a "dialogue of the deaf."

The phrase, "dialogue of the deaf," is from *A Fairly Good Time*, but it can be applied to the conversations (not just those between mother and daughter) of many other characters in Gallant's fiction. The characters are not, of course, deaf in the literal sense. Although speakers share a common first *langue*, they do not always understand each other's *langage*.

All the characters in "In the Tunnel" are capable of *parole* and all speak the same *langue*. Sarah, a Canadian sent to Europe by her father to forget an unsuitable suitor, discovers she does not speak the same *langage* as Roy, the "former prison inspector whose career [has] been spent in an Asian colony" (*Home Truths* 76). Neither does she speak the *langage* of Roy's landlords, Meg and Tim Reeves, British expatriates living on the

French Riviera. Sarah knows the *langage* of her father from which a "certain kind of conversation between them was bound to run down, wind up, run down again: you are, I'm not, yes, no, you should, I won't, you'll be sorry" (72). She also knows the "useful language" of Professor Downcast, a sociologist and the suitor disapproved of by her father. Sarah discovers that neither of these *langages* facilitates a matching of repertoires with anyone she encounters in *The Tunnel*.

At Sarah's first meeting with Roy, they move "slowly along . . . dragging [their] shapeless conversation between them . . ." (74). Later, their conversation becomes "locked; an effort would be needed to pull it in two, almost a tug-of-war" (76). This conversation hardly represents a matching of repertoires. Roy, the former prison inspector, is better understood by Lisbet who drives "as if pursuing escaped prisoners" (95). When Sarah describes to Lisbet and Roy a painting "of Judas after he hung himself," the two reply immediately and together, "Hanged" (90). Theirs is the *langage* of prisons and executions. Eventually, Sarah becomes "a prisoner impaled on [this] foreign language" (98).

The *langage* of the Reeves, although it is not as dangerous to Sarah as is Roy's and Lisbet's, is equally foreign to her. Sarah is interested in their

*langage* and although she does not ‘speak’ this language, she does want to use Professor Downcast’s *langage* to record it:

She want[s] to record that Mr. Reeve said “heith” and “strenth” and that they [use] a baby language with each other — walkies, tummy, spend-a-penny. When Sarah [says] “cookie” it [makes] them laugh: a minute later, feeding the dogs a chocolate cookie, Meg [says], “Here, have a chockie bicky.” If Tim [tries] to explain anything, his wife [interrupts] with “Come on, get to Friday.” Nobody [can] remember the origin of the phrase; it [serves] merely to rattle him. (85)

She loses the sociologist’s *langage* temporarily, but eventually it returns: “‘Necessity for imparting status information,’ she record[s], and add[s] ‘erroneous’ between ‘imparting’ and ‘status’ ” (93). As puzzling as the Reeves’ *langage* is to her, her own *langage* is equally puzzling to the Reeves: “Her way of asking plain questions [freezes] the others. They [look] as if winter had swept over the little terrace and caught them” (88). Meg Reeve announces that their niece, Lisbet, is coming for the weekend and explains that she is an interviewer: “She had stiff training — had to see a trick

cyclist for a year." Sarah responds by saying that a "didactic analysis is a waste of time . . . chilling them all once more" (89). The obese Meg counters by "heaving her vast garments so Sarah was cut out" (89). Sarah's own *langage* erects barriers between herself and the others.

It is not until Sarah is leaving The Tunnel that she realizes that matching repertoires with these people is, for her, impossible. She finally understands what Tim means when he says of Meg and himself "We haven't often lived together" (102), but he does not understand what she means when she says "Roy needs help" (104). In this final conversation between the two, it is apparent that Tim does "not know her euphemisms any more than she [understands] his" (104). It becomes obvious to Sarah that Tim has "no idea what he [is] saying anymore, and so she [gives] up talking . . ." (105). For Sarah, a conversation with anyone in The Tunnel is truly a dialogue of the deaf. There is no one with a repertoire that might match her own and, therefore, no point in her staying.

Similarly, in "Ice Wagon Going Down the Street," Peter and Agnes, Canadians working as civil servants in Geneva, have a common *langue*, but their rapport is far from perfect. In their office in the Palais de Nations, there are no barriers between their desks, only space. But Agnes erects a

barrier: she is in the “habit of covering her mouth when she talk[s]. Even at the telephone she put[s] up her hand as if afraid of losing anything, even a word” (*Home Truths* 118). Although Peter and Agnes are capable of *parole*, little information is exchanged when the two speak to each other. Peter teases Agnes and Agnes apologizes for asking Peter to do his job. Peter learns more about Agnes from the “large black Bible, which she unwrap[s] lovingly and place[s] on the left-hand corner of her desk” (117-18) than he does from any conversation they have.

Eventually, Agnes removes the barrier. At work after the Burleighs’ party, Agnes feels compelled to speak to Peter about her behavior on the night of the party. Agnes had had too much to drink and Peter, at Madge Burleigh’s request, had seen Agnes back to her apartment. After changing into a “dressing gown of orphanage wool” (129), Agnes had pressed her face against Peter’s shoulder. They had the following conversation:

“I shouldn’t be over here. In my family we didn’t drink or smoke. My mother wanted a lot from me, more than from Harry and the others.”

. . . . .

She said, "It's no use staying here, is it?"

"If you mean what I think, no."

"It wouldn't be better anywhere." (129)

Agnes then ran a bath and Peter went home to his wife. Back at work at the Palais de Nations, Agnes asks Peter not to tell what happened that night in her apartment.

"Nothing happened," he said.

"I behaved in a silly way. I had no right to. I led you to think I might do something wrong."

"I might have tried something," he said gallantly. "But that would be my fault and not yours."

She put her knuckle to her mouth and he could scarcely hear.

"It was because of you. I was afraid you might be blamed, or else you'd blame yourself."

"There's no question of any blame," he said. "Nothing happened. We'd both had a lot to drink. Forget about it. Nothing happened. You'd remember if it had."

*She put her hand down.* (Italics mine.) There was an ex-

pression on her face. Now she sees me, he thought. She had never looked at him after the first day. . . . She sees me now, he thought. What does she see?

She said, "I'm from a big family. I'm not used to being alone. I'm not a suicidal person, but I could have done something after that party, just not to see anymore, or think or listen or expect anything." (131-32)

The narrator does not relate Peter's response, only that they "talked that day, and afterward nothing else was said" (132). The narrator then poses a question and the reader cannot be sure if the question belongs to Peter, Agnes, the reader or the narrator herself: "But what were they talking about that day, so quietly, such old friends? . . . . God knows what they were telling each other. Anyway, nothing happened" (133). Agnes, who habitually covers her mouth when she speaks, purposefully removes this barrier between herself and Peter. When she does so, Peter understands that he is now *visible* to her. Agnes wants to see Peter, wants Peter to hear her words. But this conversation too is a perfectly dovetailed dialogue of the deaf. Agnes's conversation is about suicide; Peter's is about extra-marital

affairs. They understand each other's *langue*, but neither understands what the other has appropriated from that *langue*. If their signs are windows, these windows have the blinds pulled down.

Further, the narrator does not enlighten the reader about what Peter and Agnes say to each other. Rather, she asks "what were they talking about" (133). She makes suggestions but concludes that "God knows what they were telling each other" (133). In the previous paragraph I suggest that their conversation was about suicide and extra-marital affairs. The narrator gives me no assurance that this reading is correct. Nor am I told it is incorrect. The narrator doesn't say. I understand the narrator's *langue*; I also understand Peter's and Agnes's *langue*. I am not sure that I understand their *langage*. However, like Shirley Perrigny's mother, I appropriate from their conversation a *langage* I *do* understand. Unlike Linnett Muir (*Home Truths*), the narrator of "Ice Wagon Going Down the Street" does not say what either Peter or Agnes 'mean.' Like Hal in "Statues Taken Down," the reader has the puzzle pieces, but cannot put them together. Even when the pieces seem to fit, as in Peter's and Agnes's dialogue of the deaf, the reader is aware the fit may well be a misfit.

As I have noted insistently, in her introduction to *Home Truths*, Gal-

lant says that “one needs a strong, complete language, fully understood, to anchor one’s understanding” (xvii). What she does not say in that introduction, but what is suggested in her fiction, is that it is impossible to fulfill that need. Her reader is repeatedly reminded that language is mutable, that “language is not complete in any speaker; it exists perfectly only within a collectivity” (Saussure 14). In Eagleton’s discussion of healthy signs, he refers to Roland Barthes’s ‘double’ sign as one “which gestures to its own material existence at the same time as it conveys a meaning . . .” (136). Similarly, Gallant’s fiction calls the reader’s attention to the mutability of language while using that language to construct a story. McCormick, Waller and Flower suggest that a “work of literature . . . shows us language in conflict with itself” (47) as Gallant’s fiction certainly does.

Chapter one of this thesis discussed the implications of speaking a second language at the exclusion of one’s first. Chapter two, focusing on the children of Gallant’s fiction who are, in Saussurian terms, language apprentices, discussed the implications of being a language apprentice. This chapter has focused on the idea that all speakers are language apprentices, that no speaker is able to have “one strong, complete language, fully understood, to anchor [her] understanding” (*Home Truths* xvii). In my conclusion, I will

consider how the reader too is a language apprentice and will consider her position as apprentice.

## Conclusion

### What Gallant Didn't Say

For some time now she had been accumulating material for a second work she intended to call "What Effie Didn't Say."

(*A Fairly Good Time* 46)

The above citation refers to a pamphlet never written by Mrs. Norrington, Shirley Perrigny's mother (a member of "a family of militant, university-trained prairie women") who, as a young woman, had published a thesis entitled "What Ruskin Missed" (*A Fairly Good Time* 46). "Effie" refers to Effie Gray, Ruskin's wife. Barbara Godard, in "Modalities of the Edge: Mavis Gallant's Fiction," recognizes that "Mrs Norrington's scholarly work . . . teaches us to be as aware as she is of the gaps and silences between sentences" (27). Were I to follow Mrs. Norrington's lead, my thesis would be entitled "What Gallant Missed." Gallant, however, misses very little. Rather, it is Gallant's readers who feel that they have missed something. Anatole Broyard, in a review of *From the Fifteenth District*, remarks that "Miss Gallant's stories keep threatening to speak to us, to

come to terms with our imagination, and then turn away in impatience at our simplicity" (9). Something may have been missed, but not because Gallant has failed to say something; perhaps the reader has failed to hear something.

Keefer has commented that "[l]anguage as masterful as Gallant's exerts a commanding authority over the reader; one cannot dispute the summations of her narrators without suspecting oneself [sic] to be as self-deceived, as enmeshed in confused desire, as her characters are (*Reading Mavis Gallant* 65). The answer, Gallant seems to suggest, to the reader who wants to eschew self-deception and enmeshment, is found in language, in "a strong, complete language, fully understood, [that anchors] one's understanding." However, Gallant's fiction relentlessly informs her reader that such a language, such an understanding, does not exist. The reader, like Piotr ("Potter"), is left facing a brick wall, and what is most disconcerting about being on this side of the brick wall is that the reader is aware that Gallant is on the other side.

The reader often finds herself in a position experienced by many of Gallant's characters. Like Iris, who clings to the side of Mary's boat, the reader often feels 'at sea'. Whereas the waters in which Iris flounders

are the waters of a second language, Keefer, in a discussion of *A Fairly Good Time*, suggests that the depths in which Gallant's reader flounders are those of "language itself — one is simply carried off on a flood tide of verbal invention, and one clutches at whatever flotsam and jetsam of meaning happen to rush by" (*Reading Mavis Gallant* 84). This metaphor implies that more than one sea-farer has been shipwrecked on Gallant's sea of language.

Keefer also uses a metaphor of sight to describe the position in which Gallant's reader may find herself. In a discussion of "The Cost of Living," Keefer notes that "[l]ike the narrator, [the readers] are left out in the cold and dark about essentials. . . ." (71). When Cathie and Mildred speak to their adopted family in a language their family understands but chooses not to recognize, the family stare at the little girls "as if they were peering in the dark." Because the girls' language is understood but not recognized, the little girls are in effect "left out in the . . . dark." Gallant's reader is left in the dark, not because the narrator refuses to recognize the language of the reader, but because the narrator refuses to make the assumption that language can describe a permanent, fixed reality. In her essay "What is Style" (where she, in fact, discusses "what style is not"), Gallant comments

that what the author of fiction says about fiction “is that something is taking place and that nothing lasts” (*Paris Notebooks* 177). Gallant’s reader knows well enough that ‘something’ is taking place, but does not always know what that ‘something’ is. Like Oliver, in “An Emergency Case”, the reader knows something is happening on the other side of the screen, but Gallant’s narrators make no effort to remove the screen. The medical staff laugh at Oliver and do not bother to answer his questions. The medical staff assume that whatever information they have chosen to give Oliver is adequate to explain the situation to the boy. The story makes clear that Oliver does not understand; the boy, like the reader, needs someone to interpret between the mute and the deaf.

Similarly, there are times that we, Gallant’s readers, sense her “laughing behind her hands at us” (Rooke 268). She assumes we have been given adequate information to understand the text and if not, then perhaps we, like Oliver, don’t need to understand. There are other times when Gallant allows her narrator to interpret for the reader. Like Linnet Muir who finds her childhood journals full of “but what he *really* must have meant was . . .” (*Home Truths* 248), other of Gallant’s narrators interpret for the reader, telling ‘what was meant.’ The narrator of *A Fairly Good Time* often

interprets for the reader, explaining what various signs, linguistic and other, mean: "A light left burning, a scorched brown stain on the lampshade, meant that he [Phillipe] had either dressed and departed before dawn . . . or had never been to bed at all" (11). In the same novel, the narrator explains that a "rotten scruff of carpets and curtains enabled the place to be called 'furnished,' which meant only that the tenant could be expelled at the landlord's liking" (88). In "Potter," Maria, "an old sculptress [Piotr's] parents had known before the war (188)," does not "praise Piotr's lecture but [says] only, 'I heard every word,' meaning, 'I was listening' " (*From the Fifteenth District* 188-89).

The numerous examples of 'what is meant' found throughout Gallant's work suggest to the reader that, without the narrator's interpretations, understanding 'what is meant' is difficult indeed. Whereas some of the narrator's 'meaning' serves to clarify, other does not. When the reader learns that "I heard every word" means "I was listening," she is tempted to ask what "I was listening" means. One is put in mind of Margaret ("The Picnic"), the little girl who has received a brooch from Madame Pégurin. When Margaret's mother is shown the brooch she remarks,

'How nice of Madame Pégurin to think of a little girl. It will look much nicer later on, when you're a little older.' She had been trained in the school of indirect suggestion, and so skillful had she become that her children sometimes had no idea what she was driving at. (*The Other Paris* 105)

Like Margaret, the reader often has no idea 'what was meant'; unlike Margaret, whose response to her mother is " 'I guess so' . . . [as she firmly fastens] the brooch to her shorts" (105), the reader wants to know 'what is meant'.

Learning that 'furnished' means that "the tenant could be expelled at the landlord's liking," the reader may well hear echos of Humpty Dumpty's claim that 'glory' means "there's a nice knock-down argument for you!" Recall that Humpty Dumpty claims that when he uses a word "it means just what [he chooses] it to mean" (Carroll 190). I do not suggest that Gallant assumes (as does Dr. Missierna) that she can control language. I suggest that Gallant is highly aware of the mutability of language, of the tremendous potential of words, of the the idea that "the material body of the sign [is] transformed through a process of social conflict and dia-

logue into meaning" (Eagleton 118). Further, Gallant wants her *reader* to be equally aware of the above; one must be careful when reading Gallant. When we ask Gallant, 'What do you mean?' we would do well to consider Eagleton who suggests that to ask 'What do you mean?' is to ask "what effect . . . language is trying to bring about" (114). If the reader regards Gallant's writing as a puzzle to be solved, then she may suffer the same fate as do Dr. Missierna ("Kingdom Come") and Hal ("Statues Taken Down") or even Humpty Dumpty. It is impossible to pick up the pieces of Gallant's fiction and fit them together in a definitive way. When Gallant offers a piece of her puzzle, she warns us to beware — the piece may not be what it appears to be; and it may change into something quite different from what it appears to be now; you can never know for certain and Gallant isn't saying.

Smythe suggests, in "Gallant's Paracritical Preface: A Case Study of Irony and Intent," that "Gallant uses the genre to undercut its own intentions, and (subtextually) ridicules the very form that she employs. She works *against* the privileging of authorial intention in criticism and tries to counter such influence with irony" (19). What Gallant doesn't say is not hidden within the text waiting to be discovered, but is within the reader,

within the language of the reader. Recall the narrator of "The Ice Wagon Going Down the Street" who asks of Peter's and Agnes's dialogue of the deaf:

But what were they talking about that day, so quietly, such old friends? They talked about dying, about being ambitious, about being religious, about different kinds of love. What did she see when she looked at him — taking her knuckle slowly away from her mouth, bringing her hand down to the desk, letting it rest there? They were both Canadians, so they had this much together — the knowledge of the little you dare admit. Death, near-death, the best thing, the wrong thing — God knows what they were telling each other. (*Home Truths* 133)

"God knows" the narrator says. The reader can ask neither God nor the narrator, but can ask Gallant and (as Janeway suggests) Gallant replies, "Oh, you want to know what it means? Well, what do *you* think?" (45).

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