

*The Aporias of Lily Littel:
Mavis Gallant's
"Acceptance of Their Ways"*

HELMUT BONHEIM

"PRODDED" IS THE FIRST word of Mavis Gallant's short story, "Acceptance of Their Ways."¹ The word suggests the manipulation, the pressures, to which the central character, Lily Littel, feels herself to be subjected. Although she is a paying guest in a pension on the Italian Riviera, she is in various ways "prodded" by Mrs. Vanessa Freeport, as though she were not a guest or companion but a mere servant. Lily accepts Mrs. Freeport's ungentle ways because, as she confides to her diary, "I live with gentlewomen now" (206). And that fact, as she thinks, is due reward for her patience. But Mrs. Freeport, the prodder, is a trying teacher. The reader cannot help but wonder whether Lily does well to accept her as a model of the ways of gentility.

These ways are not presented as altogether amiable, so that "acceptance of their ways" is made difficult for the reader as well as for Lily. For gentility turns out to involve being poor and "picky" (205). It means being tight-fisted, bossy, intolerant, quixotic and undependable, capricious in "sudden animal quarrels," and almost insufferably "meaner and queerer by the minute" (208). Can these qualities constitute Lily's ideal, the model she hopes to imitate? The story gives no clear answer. Like Moll Flanders, another "paid companion" who decides to become a gentlewoman, but so early in life that she cannot know that she is mistaken in her model, Lily seems not altogether aware of the nature of her ideal. The ideal of gentility is of course attractive to this girl with a London accent — her story is that of a social climber — but it is also an ideal so repulsive in practice that it is hard for Lily to achieve "acceptance."

Lily's life in Mrs. Freeport's pension and her feelings about that life are full of contradictory elements. On a first reading one may miss the steady line and hard thrust of these contradictions, formulated as they are in a series of witty and well-turned phrases. Students are apparently puzzled to know what exactly the story is about. But once the reader sees the pattern, the details fall into place. A deconstructive reading reveals the dichotomous nature of the portrait which Mavis Gallant has drawn. For Lily contains both a civilized but false Dr. Jekyll and terrible Mr. Hyde who, as the name implies, has to be kept hidden away. The Dr. Jekyll in Lily "held her still" (208) vis-à-vis Mrs. Freeport; the Mr. Hyde in her, by contrast, revels in memories of the tongue-lashings to which she subjected Cliff Littel, the husband she had jettisoned years earlier by taking "advantage of the disorders of war" (227). Lily reminisces: "How I could let fly — poor old Cliff" (210) and recalls her former, uncontrolled and tempestuous self.

To find the thematic nodes of the story we need to reverse the values implied by Lily's self-control — the quality in her which corresponds to Dr. Jekyll. These values are deftly suggested in almost every one of the opening sentences:

Prodded by a remark from Mrs. Freeport, Lily Littel got up and fetched the plate of cheese. It was in her to say, "Go get it yourself," but a reputation for coolness held her still. Only the paucity of her income, at which *The Sunday Express* horoscope jeered with its smart talk of pleasure and gain, kept her at Mrs. Freeport's, on the Italian side of the frontier. The coarse and grubby gaiety of the French Riviera would have suited her better, and was not far away; unfortunately it came high. At Mrs. Freeport's, which was cheaper, there was a whiff of infirm nicety to be breathed, a suggestion of regularly aired decay; weakly, because it was respectable, Lily craved that, too. (203)

Lily's "reputation for coolness" implies the rage that is in her, but which she knows how to keep under control ("Talk leads to overconfidence and errors" [205]); "the paucity of her income" implies the riches for which she yearns; even the horoscope's "smart talk" implies the humdrum conversation that Lily normally gets to hear, as the story goes on to show. If life "came high" on the French Riviera, the cheap tawdriness of the Italian side of the

frontier is indicated; the "whiff of infirm nicety" suggests the health Lily feels in herself; the suggestion of regularly aired decay" is, paradoxically enough, "respectable," but it is foreign to the alcoholic sprees which the "gay holiday Lily" (203) spends in Nice, when her anarchic, whirl-wind hunger for fresh air and freedom makes her flee the prison-cell of gentility and drown herself in those alcoholic binges which, odd as that seems, bring out the best in her. As Mrs. Freeport says to her, "Your visits seem to do you so much good" (204), not knowing that Lily's favoured relative is a series of emptied bottles.

The vocabulary of the last dozen lines of the story can be just as easily mined for the metals of which they are constructed:

"I'm off to Nice tomorrow," said Lily, the stray. "My sister is expecting me."

"You are so devoted," said Mrs. Freeport, looking wildly for her handkerchief, which had fallen on the gravel path. Her hat was askew. The house was empty. "So devoted . . . I suppose that one day you will want to live in Nice, to be near her. I suppose that day will come."

Instead of answering, Lily set Mrs. Freeport's water lily straight, which was familiar of her; but they were both in such a state, for different reasons, that neither of them thought it strange. (211)

"Lily, the stray" suggests her nature as an animal that wanders away from the flock and thus, by contrast, suggests too the security, the acceptance she also seeks. "My sister" is a Bunbury-character, and an excuse for the break-out from sterile gentility: "You are so devoted" (since it is totally mistaken) indicates Lily's lack of dutifulness to any person other than herself. For a brief moment Lily is "familiar" instead of persisting in her pretended respect for Mrs. Freeport — both women are "in a state" rather than in that steady state of equanimity which "gentility" implies — and the "strange" relationship into which they momentarily lapse points by implication to the sense of easy familiarity which friendship might suggest but which their mistress-servant relationship makes impossible. On the other hand, there is perhaps a hint in "neither of them thought it strange" of an "acceptance" of Mrs. Freeport in one of her more human, less genteel and stately moments, and she is brought nearer to the reader as well as to

Lily in that the final sentence lapses for a moment into a changed focalization, which gives us a direct glimpse into Mrs. Freeport's as well as Lily's mind.

It is not difficult to play the game of "teasing out . . . warring forces of signification within the text" (Johnson, 2), of locating in these passages their inherent self-contradictions. And the process is necessary, since the text contains no explicit formulation to help us open the door to its treasures. So the contradictions are not mere rhetorical ornaments but the very keys to the story's central meanings.

The story suggests that Lily will not be successful in the "acceptance of their ways" — and ought not to be. For a lady's companion she must constantly pretend that prodding agrees with her — that she can succeed in pretending to be the opposite of what she actually is. Her very name is paradox: the given name, Lily, suggests the wholeness and perfection of the flower; the surname, Littel, her insignificant, subordinate position, which the "gentlewomen" make it so difficult for Lily to accept. This is the central conflict in the story. For "acceptance of their ways" is both what Lily wants to bring herself to and what an intelligent and independent young woman ought to refuse, having seen the dark underside of what passes in Mrs. Freeport's establishment for a superior way of life.

The deconstructivist approach could be extended. For the story is a kind of anti-pastoral. Pastoral, as Empson puts it, assumes a "beautiful relation between rich and poor" (17). This is what life on the Riviera does *not* allow Lily to achieve. The anti-pastoral is based on an ideologeme² of *ressentiment*: the class conflict which is reflected in Lily's uneasy position vis-à-vis Mrs. Freeport, who offers her a haven (free port) and a model of deportment. Lily is torn between sympathy and revulsion, humility and exasperation, loyalty and revolution. This is no pastoral idyll — much of the story consists of a sequence of trying challenges to Lily's temper.

The anti-pastoral in this story results from Lily's situation as a kind of Freudian "split" of her hostess. Both Lily and Mrs. Freeport have inherited enough to provide them with an economic foundation, though precarious. But whereas Lily, who bears the

name of a servant girl, is lower class, Mrs. Freeport has pretensions, as her name, Vanessa, an appellation with *cachet*, suggests. The result is a dissatisfied and schizophrenic Lily. She is dedicated to a systematic hypocrisy. She adds "to her expression a permanent-looking smile" (203), trying to "wear their cast-off manners as her own" (208), a compulsively "two-faced Lily Littell" (208). Mrs. Freeport can express her genuine self, but that of her counter-image, Lily, is persistently repressed.

The pension harbours another guest, Edith Garnett. She too is a kind of "split" of the other two women. Like Mrs. Freeport, she has her genteel airs and "ways." Like both Mrs. Freeport and Lily, she is a quixotic woman of deceits and self-deceptions: she cannot get through a book called *Optimism Unlimited* in months of reading, but when asked what the book is about, answers, "I'm afraid it is philosophy" (206). The implication is that her mental horizons are too lofty for the likes of her sparring partners.

The reader is invited to look down on both Mrs. Garnett and her "philosophy." In fact, however, this "new philosophy, counselling restraint in all things, but recommending smiles" (206) is Lily's philosophy exactly. Or at least it is the one she is doggedly trying to follow. The dogma of restraint and smiles is hard to observe, for all three women are actively engaged, tooth and claw, in a female power game. Mrs. Garnett is the weakest of the three. Like Mrs. Freeport, she plays a patronizing role in the trio, but she is another Lily Littell in her dependence: the Suez crisis has made it impossible for her to spend her Mediterranean holidays there any more, so she has come to depend on Vanessa Freeport's hospitality instead. Like Lily, she devotes much of her energy to keeping up the pretenses of gentility. In other words, all three women are trapped in each other's insufficiencies.

Despite her self-imposed restraint, Lily occasionally reveals her true self. For she repeatedly breaks out in virtual speech and virtual action (see Bonheim 34-36) — in flights of fancy which form an alternative world to the one she imposes on herself. These reflect, if not an actual depravity, an alternative set of actions which provide the story with humour and, oddly enough, makes Lily at times a refreshingly sympathetic figure:

It was in her to say, "Go get it yourself." (203)

In imagination, Lily became a punishing statue and raised a heavy marble arm. . . . (203)

. . . then watch the old tiger! (203)

. . . she had dreamed of being a poisoner, but decided to leave that for the loonies. . . . (205)

. . . Lily could have bitten a real pearl in two and enjoyed the pieces. . . . (205)

In Lily's opinion, Mrs. Freeport ought to have cleared out long ago. . . . (205)

Let others thicken their figures and damage their souls. (206)

Lily saw her, without any emotion, doubled in two and shoved in a sack. (206)

Lily could have matched the expression if she had cared to. . . . (209)

Some of these flights are startling indeed. They suggest the kind of "fabulation" — the urge of a fictional character to produce fiction of his own — which Scholes has recently called a hallmark of the postmoderns, except that Lily's fictions are all too brief: epiphanies and anecdotes, as it were, rather than stories.

These mini-fabulations are echoed in the chronological and stylistic structures of the story. There are the analeptic passages (cf. Genette, 48-66) which represent real as well as fancied life alternatives: Lily's life as Mrs. Cliff, her period as paid companion to another "lonely, fretful widow" (207), of whose death Lily feels vaguely guilty. Then there are those week-end binges in Nice when the arrival of her dividends allows a brief extravagance. Balancing such analepses are the prolepses: these are presented in a sequence of increasingly shorter "reach": they include references to Lily's possible flight from Mrs. Freeport in the remote future, the return of Mrs. Garnett the next year, and finally the imminent trip to Nice that Lily announces to Mrs. Freeport when they leave the station together after seeing Mrs. Garnett off. These prolepses cannot be called flash-forwards, just as the analepses are not flashbacks: they are not worked out scenically. They are, rather, separate fragments of an exposition to the story. For there is no exposition at the beginning; rather it is fed to

the reader morsel by morsel, and only after the scene has been firmly set.

The exposition-by-instalments-method is most effective. The first scene, which constitutes the bulk of the story, shows the struggle between the two old women. Lily hardly participates except as a witness. This scene is punctuated at the story level by references to the cheese with which the meal is to be concluded. For in the opening paragraph, Lily is asked to bring the cheese. A series of expository elements follow. The fourth paragraph begins with Lily's "Well there you are" and her slapping the plate of cheese down on the table. We now realize that the opening page of the story covers an elapsed time of only a few seconds — "the time it took her to pick up the cheese and face the table again" (203).

Two pages later, Lily is just uncovering the cheese. Then Mrs. Freeport says, "Cheese, Edith" and pushes it along the table to Mrs. Garnett. Another two pages later (the story is now more than half over), Lily nibbles at her portion of the cheese. The serving and eating of the cheese, then, constitutes the clock by which the narrated time of the first scene is measured. It reflects a temporal progression of minute steps spaced out with extended pauses. The scene closes with a crisis, set off by Mrs. Garnett's defiant sugaring of her yoghurt: then the guest has a hysterical fit and is bundled off to bed. So the chronometer of the story level is the recurrent striking of the cheese theme, whereas the discourse level³ is punctuated by a series of analeptic interruptions: the *hic et nunc* of the scene is departed from and Lily remembers past scenes. She comments on details, or she engages in flights of fancy. The technique is that of James Joyce. Joyce also allows his centres of consciousness in *Ulysses*, Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom, alternately to take in bits of the real world (perception) and let these perceptions spark off internal processes (apperceptions) until the real world intrudes once more. The effect is to stretch narrative time and to shrink narrated time to minutes, if not, in some sections, to seconds. This ratio of story to discourse time gives Gallant's narrative a distinctly modernist flavour.

The final page of the story conveys the second scene: Lily and Mrs. Freeport converse in front of the train station; in real time

this scene would take another minute. If Mrs. Freeport was catty and aggressive in the first scene, in the second she is all hysterical regret, softness, solicitude and acceptance. The reversal is surprising: both attitudes are extreme, so much so as to be barely believable. The blatant inconsistency of Mrs. Freeport's behaviour in the two scenes is a dramatic and effective sampling of "their ways." The reader may be entertained, but Lily needs the sturdy philosophy of *Optimism Unlimited* to stand all this. She has a response of her own in the scene outside the train station to the "capriciousness" (206) of the older ladies. Lily announces her visit the next day to the mythical sister in Nice. Mrs. Freeport, in response, foresees Lily leaving her one day for good. Lily does not answer, but sets Mrs. Freeport's hat straight, a final gesture of reconciliation, perhaps also of acceptance. But whether in the scene at the table or outside the train station, Lily is absolute mistress of the rule, "restraint in all things," a two-faced Lily Littel capable of answering the most outrageous challenge to her equanimity with a smile.

As to the stylistic high jinks of the story: the flashbacks together with the passages of virtual speech and virtual action are flights from Lily's present reality which make up a large proportion of the story. Thus the narrative lives on its achronies as well as on the thin line of the "action" on which a series of such flights are hung. The supporting rhetorical figures consist of various forms of paradox, chiasmus and hyperbaton which echo the contradictions made explicit in the plot and implicit in Lily's character: "coarse and grubby variety," "regularly aired decay," "elderly children," "bullying with servility" and the like.

A similar set of contradictions is established in the imagery: partly it refers to the softness of feminine textiles and flowers, partly to fire — "blazing eyes" (209), and "she was marvellous, blazing" (210). There are images of conflict — "this is how murders came about" (206), "carrying banners to another field" (209) — and to combatants hard as stone — Lily as "a punishing statue" who raises "a heavy marble arm" (203), Mrs. Garnett's "effect on Lily of a stone in the shoe" (205), and Mrs. Freeport's eyes as "stones" (206) which react to her adversary

with a “pebbly stare” (208). The pretenses of friendship and companionship are maintained in a crackling atmosphere of animosity and violent contradictions. These are reflected in a series of oxymora, which show Gallant’s gift for surprising concatenations: the women are of a “race of ailing, peevish elderly children” (204) and give off a “whiff of infirm nicety” (203). Mrs. Freeport makes her guest responsible for “The wreck of the lettuce. The destruction of the pudding” (208). These are what are called “daring” metaphors: incompatible terms are yoked, collocation rules defied; the incompatibles are in part also witty touches of catachresis, like the “ironed-out Bayswater” accent (203) with which Lily confronts the “bleached existence” (205) she has decided to settle for.

Finally the question can be put whether the story suggests a way out of the aporia it presents. It seems not. Lily prefers her life as a hypocrite to the more conventional lives she has left behind her. She fails to notice, as the narrator says, that the two words in the term “paid companion” are contradictory — that it is not given Lily that her mercenary attachments turn into genuine ones. She positively seeks to become the impassive mask she wears. For that is how she hopes to rise to what she considers a higher form of life: one without deep attachments or encumbering commitments, one in which the tiger in her is kept caged.

The story presents one pole on a globe of choices as to how Lily Littell might live her life. The opposite pole is not presented. Of course the reader’s fantasy could supply it: a different Lily might conceivably want a proper independence and self-confidence, might return to London and take a bed-sitter in her native Bayswater. She might then find a job as shop assistant or secretary and try to earn an honest living. She might transcend her epigonality, move outwardly to the “rejection of their ways” which she feels but does not show. But such possibilities have no basis in the story. Lily is a professional expatriate, doomed to remain an exile from any world in which she might adopt an alternative set of pretenses, not to speak of one in which she might choose an autonomous instead of a “bleached” existence. That is her tragedy, Mavis Gallant’s comedy.

NOTES

- ¹ The story first appeared in *The New Yorker*, 30 January 1960; it was reprinted in Gallant's *My Heart is Broken* and in *The End of the World*.
- ² This is a term of Medvedev, which Julia Kristeva has popularized; it is a central ideological "figure" in a work. Cf. Lavers 172.
- ³ See Chatman. The pair of terms, *story* and *discourse*, is roughly equivalent to that between *fabula* and *sujet* in the Russian formalists, or *histoire* and *discours* in the French structuralists. For a contrastive survey of such dualistic concepts of narrative, see Korte.

WORKS CITED

- Bonheim, Helmut. *The Narrative Modes*. Cambridge: Brewer, 1982.
- Chatman, Seymour. *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1978.
- Empson, William. *Some Versions of Pastoral*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966.
- Gallant, Mavis. "Acceptance of Their Ways." In: Alex Lucas, ed., *Great Canadian Short Stories*. Ed. Alex Lucas. New York: Dell, 1971. 203-11.
- Genette, Gérard. *Narrative Discourse*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1980.
- Johnson, Barbara. "The Critical Difference." *Diacritics* 8.2 (1978): 2-9.
- Korte, Barbara. "Tiefen- und Oberflächenstrukturen in der Narrativik." *Literatur in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 18 (1985): 331-52.
- Lavers, Annette. *Roland Barthes: Structuralism and After*. London: Methuen, 1982.
- Scholes, Robert. *Fabulation and Metafiction*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1980.