

Mavis Gallant and Thea Astley on Home Truths, Home Folk

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THE CANADIAN WRITER Mavis Gallant collected her short fiction from the past twenty-five years into a single volume and called it *Home Truths* (1981). The Australian novelist Thea Astley had a few years earlier named her novel about some hurricane trapped people *A Boat Load of Home Folk* (1968). But I suppose so slight a coincidence as using "home" to modify "truths" and "folk" makes a thin case for a comparative study of Mavis Gallant's and Thea Astley's work, especially considering that a close reading suggests several more solid areas of inquiry.

For example, when D. B. Jewison in a recent article outlines the qualities that distinguish Gallant's writing, he could also be speaking of Astley's work:

... subtle, even enigmatic characterization; a plot which focuses upon a few significant moments of the lives of the characters and leaves the long stretches between to be dealt with by brief allusions or not at all; suggestive but unforced use of images that edge towards symbols but never become rigid or entirely predictable; themes of imprisonment. . . . (94)

Although describing Gallant's style, the *Kirkus* reviewer might well be talking about Astley's: "... miraculous cloisonné prose: a rich mingle of affecting insurrections and astringent accommodations, always confined within shrewd, razor-edge scrutinies" (100).

What Kerryn Goldsworthy says of Astley's fiction could easily serve to comment on Gallant's: "... full of ambiguous dualities, ironic reversals and polar extremes" (478). And when Vernon Young delineates Astley's style, he might also be summing up Gallant's: "It is possible to conclude that Miss Astley is intrinsi-

cally a poet. Not that she can't tell a story . . . but she is most impressive when she writes in autonomous clusters of prose like free verse sequences . . ." (12).

And perhaps Astley's remark should be considered as well: that the North American "short story school has had me captive a long time, for the incision of writers like Cheever, Gallant . . . sets a standard I'd like to come within shouting distance of . . ." ("The Idiot Question" 7).

Still, a dutiful tallying of similarities in characterization, plot, style and theme might produce more tedium than insight. Or an influence study, always nebulous, would probably lend little to a clearer understanding of either writer's work.

Such possibilities set aside, I am left with that familiar noun used as an adjective: home — home truths, home folk. Of course "home" by itself carried a special connotation in countries once part of the Empire, for "home" meant Great Britain, not such countries as Australia or Canada. Because Astley and Gallant delight in ridiculing vestiges of colonialism, examining home in this context might have merit, even though *The Macquarie Dictionary* assures that the empire-like usage of home is now obsolete in Australia at least. Yet taking the word in this sense seems apt when one looks at passages typical of both writers. In *Home Truths* the narrator Linnet Muir explains, with candor, the Canadian version of ancestor worship in the 1940s:

To the Canadian grandchildren the unknown grandfather was seven foot tall with a beard like George V, while the grandmother came through weepy and prissy and not very interesting. It was the father's Father, never met, never heard, who made Heaven and earth and Eve and Adam. The father in Canada seemed no more than an apostle transmitting a paternal message from the Father in England — the Father of us all. (269)

Astley, as well, takes the opportunity in *A Boat Load of Home Folk* to point up the fatuousness of the Empire at work in a vignette of formal ceremonies at a remote South Sea island government house:

The bishop uttered perfunctory heat-fever grace and they went out to the bungalow veranda and looked across the hill-slope to the British residency. In the paddock around the office buildings,

some ritualistic martial ceremony was going on and the native band was walloping "Colonel Bogey" while Leslie Tucker-Brown in incredible formal dress and plumed helmet took the salute. . . . The last strains of "Colonel Bogey" died away on the parade ground — one of the natives had fainted in his full-dress uniform. . . . (23-25)

But dwelling on the mockery of empire, although amusing, might be feckless in the long run.

Possibly, an exploration of what "home" means to the exile would be in order, for both works portray people away from home, some permanently, some temporarily, others accidentally, and many metaphorically. But such an approach, like the others, ignores that in both titles the writers have actually employed idioms whose meaning comes from linking "home" with another word. *The Longman Dictionary of English Idioms* labels "a home truth" as "not formal" language, and defines it as "a fact or true statement about someone that is unpleasant or hurts him when he is told it," then adds that the expression often takes the plural and usually appears after the verb "tell." The *OED* cites Mary Lewis's observation in *Pretty Girls* (1881): "What a nice word 'home' is, and everything connected with it . . . all except home-truths." "Home folk," according to the *American Dialect Dictionary*, describes "one's immediate family" or "common people."

Neither Gallant nor Astley allow their characters to avoid the unpleasant or the hurtful in their quest to discover meaning amid uncertainties, to grasp order in chaos, to find love unfettered with cruelty, to view themselves with seriousness — to say nothing of dignity. Whatever higher truth the characters seek, they most often find themselves surfeited with the ugliest and meanest of "home truths." And those about whom Gallant and Astley write are the common people, the "home folk," whose ordinary and bleak lives appear in many-sided fragments that imply but leave untold great blocks of experience, likely just as ordinary and bleak. Astley has pointed out "that literary truth is derived from the parish, and if it is truth it will be universal" ("Being a Queenslander" 255). In another article she defined her aim as a writer: "Only to describe people, . . . bums and old ladies and

people who are unsuccessful. I haven't travelled but I assume — is this presumptuous? — that there must also be Upper Mongolian and North Vietnamese Mrs Everages and Sandy Stones" ("The Idiot Question" 5).

So these familiar idioms, used in the two titles — only two titles of the authors' many, I propose, hold the key to that which makes Gallant's and Astley's work alike. They both write about "home folk," ordinary, yet universal in their longing. They both force these "folk" into facing the unpleasant, the hurtful, indeed "home truths."

Gallant's collection of "home truths," divided into three parts, opens with a group of six stories set in Canada, called "At Home." The next four stories, under the heading "Canadians Abroad," take up those who have left their homeland's security for promise of richer experience abroad. The last group of six stories, called "Linnet Muir" after the woman who narrates each, examines what being female meant in Canada during the 1940s and 1950s. The Canadians at home and abroad emerge a mixed group, all desperate in varying degrees, lonely, torn.

But no more so than Astley's "boat load of home folk" who arrive from Australia for a holiday on a South Sea island, unidentified except for its "bleached houses, the green smoke of trees and a sprawl of native stores, pub, mission buildings, hospital and prison . . . [and] far too many palms" (1). Like the visitors, those Anglo-Saxons who call the island home suffer from their own spiritual ills. As a hurricane strikes the island, each of the characters — whose lives have become intertwined through inadvertent contact — face an inner storm outlasting the natural turbulence that traps them for a few hours.

Misfits, outsiders, expatriates, lonely and absurd old women, pompous and shallow men, bores of both sexes, unhappy, discontented wives and husbands people both works. What they all share is a quest for answers to questions unarticulated; what they all find is conflicting, incomplete, and cruel. But such quirks determine "home truths," which are, after all, a form of irony: they offer the opposite of what is sought, the contradiction between what is and what should be.

In a number of Gallant's stories this irony prevails. "Thank You for the Lovely Tea" recounts how the mistress of a school girl's father takes the girl to tea, but the child dominates and makes the older woman question her precarious position. "In the Tunnel" traces the adventures of a Canadian woman seeking romance on the French Riviera. Soon she moves in with a dull Britisher, formerly a jail inspector in England's Asian Empire. After a few weeks with the aging lover and his unbearable expatriate friends, she flees home to Canada, only to take up with a man "in terrible trouble — back taxes, ex-wife seizing his salary" (105). While having so much love to give that she could not use up its "capital," she finds herself doomed to failure and the knowledge that "some summer or other would always be walking on her grave" (106). Lottie in "Virus X" goes from Canada to France to research a thesis, but instead falls under the influence of another Canadian, a girl sent abroad to conceal her pregnancy from those at home. After wandering around Europe, Lottie falls ill, then is rescued by her boy friend from home: "A conservative Canadian type, and the words made her want to marry him" (212). So her dreams of escape from provincial Canada crumble. "The Prodigal Parent," as the title suggests, takes up a reversal of the adult-child relationship, the daughter finding herself embarrassed over her father's behaviour and lack of responsibility.

Astley's characters face the same ironic shifts in their lives, often in a more direct way, because she sharpens the reversals and makes piercing the home truths. One by one, the island visitors and dwellers reveal their past lives — through memory, which remains a dominant strain in both works. Kathleen Seabrook recalls how she had trapped her husband Gerald in adultery, and during what should have been her moment of triumph she "could think of nothing but his torn underwear and the rather sad extrusion of wrinkled buttock" (47). A moment later her husband humiliates her and further undermines the moral exaltation she had longed for when he says: "I never suspected you of such vulgarity" (47). The homosexual priest, Father Lake, who had served on the island for years, discovers that the loss of his religious orders through a fondness for boys hardly matches his larger loss: the death of faith, so that "He wanted to howl aloud.

He was weak enough these days for easy tears, but it was less for self-pity than for loss" (169). In search of the island's volcano, which might clarify her image of hell and eternal punishment, the aged, sagging and painted Miss Trumper sets off through the heat to the volcanic rim, only to be caught in the hurricane, then robbed by a native. When she pleads that he not rape her, he replies: "Oh, no! You very ugly laydee" and "— he did not know these words had been the final killer" (211). Symbolism drawn from Roman Catholicism pervades the novel, not as a direct means to salvation but in distorted form as an ironic device. This reaches a peak when Miss Paradise, one of the other old, painted ladies from the ship, stirs up a white sauce with shreds of a cereal box floating in it and serves the ersatz wafers to some of the hurricane survivors: "he took his communion from priestess Paradise who watched, spooning herself, her punishment shared about" (182).

Yet Gallant and Astley cannot be accused of a gratuitous cruelty, a patronizing air toward the "home folk," or an altogether negative assessment of the human condition in their telling of "home truths." Higher truths do exist, glimpsed rarely, then vanish. Gallant's "The Ice Wagon Going Down the Street" suggests such a possibility, just as Astley's work hints at a remote deliverance. Peter Frazier, a pretentious Canadian with family background but no money, and his wife have returned to Toronto after a failed attempt to do "the international thing" (107). At the end of the recounting through memory of their disastrous years abroad, first in Europe, then in Asia, Peter sits in his sister's Toronto apartment and remembers a Canadian woman named Agnes with whom he had worked in Switzerland. One night when they had nearly made love or could have — he had thought of her at the moment as "poor quality, really" (129), she had told him how as a girl she had risen early in a dreary Canadian plains town to see the ice wagon going down the street: "You get up early in the morning in the summer and it's you, you, once in your life alone in the universe. You think you know everything that can happen. . . . Nothing is ever like that again." The hint that the ice wagon contains some kind of metaphysical truth melts away when at the end of the story Peter recalls Agnes's

confession. "Who wants to be alone in the universe?" Peter asks, then reminds himself, "No, begin at the beginning: Peter lost Agnes. Agnes says to herself somewhere, Peter is lost."

Lost, the "home folk" seek. And once in awhile catch a glimpse of "the ice wagon going down the street."

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