Mavis Gallant: The Strange Journey of the Son of a Limey Bride Drifting “Up North”

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Mavis Gallant’s short story “Up North” was originally published on November 21st, 1959 in *The New Yorker*, before it found its way into the award-winning collection *Home Truths* in 1981. The transatlantic dimension of the story is perceptible in the slang word assigned to the bride: “Limey [British sailor] bride” is an offensive expression, showing disapproval in a sarcastic way concerning how the North Americans view the British. However, the story does not focus on the transatlantic passage itself. It takes up the journey after the bride and her son have arrived in Canada and start venturing north on board a train. This strange journey “Up North,” “miles north of Montreal,” is imbued with an oneiric quality. It takes place in-between night and dawn, in-between dream and daydreaming, in-between two places as suits a train journey taking along a young boy and his mother in search of the boy’s father. They meet a father-substitute, Roy McLaughlin, who takes no small part in this peculiar encounter between fellow travellers. Visions of the great north of Canada offer to fertile imaginations the free space of an adventure, of an exploration in which mythical figures loom large and among which the mythical figure par excellence—that of the father—are all hazily perceived through a child’s eyes, as well as through adults’ perceptions. The quest for origins, that of the child and that of a country, accompany the quest for a literature in the making, with the mother and the child drifting away from the former “motherland,” Britain. Barren land, snow and fog offer ample space for imaginative elaboration and the magnetic attraction of the unknown requires an entirely different way of reconfiguring the land. The text is a nomadic text, bent on lines of escape, drifting from territory to territory, mapping a new country: that of a mind, and that of a fictitious territory replacing the known one. This instance of deterritorialization, rhizome-like, produces a text which stands at the margins of its own conditions of possibility. Fiction is on the move, following the erratic lines of the travellers, who are decentered far from “home”: “I keep on moving north,” (Gallant 54)
says Roy McLaughlin. Their trajectories map a new country of the mind, and create a diversion based on attraction and distraction.

1. An Itinerary of Initiation

The story stands as the classic instance of an itinerary as befits an initiation rite, going from A to B: “It was a dirty, rickety train, going up to Abitibi” (50). All the ingredients are there: the staple characters of this type of story, a child and his mother travelling on a train in a foreign country, for one hour. A strong male character named Roy McLaughlin looms large. Unity of space (the car), of time (one hour), of action (going up north). Yet there is more to it than meets the eye. And writing changes it all, one more time.

This portion of the journey lasts a little over one hour after a long night. It takes place at dawn, once the travellers have left their berth and are now sitting in the carriage. It is a diversion on their route as they are temporarily going west before resuming their progress up north (51). The child, Dennis, is going to learn important things during this interval of temporary change of direction. The north, and its magnetic pole, are symbolically related to negative notions such as: cold, death, evil. The sun setting in the west also signifies death. Yet this cold territory is where the father is supposed to be found.

The text reads as a birth, as a coming into life as the first paragraph shows. Other pointers in the text insist on the process of being born: the repetition of “waking up,” and above all the insistent homophonia produced by the use of “berth” while mother and son share the same bed. This is confirmed when McLaughlin sees Dennis’s eyes as “the eyes of a newly born child” (53) as “[Dennis] was rushing on this train into an existence” (53). Both mother and child are encapsulated in an enclosed space, restricted to the berth they share and everything is black, sooty, and dirty as opposed to the mother’s blond hair: soot is repeated three times, a dirty dawn sees the beginning of light coming after night. The mother cries, sobs, is dishevelled. “She had been through the worst of the air raids, yet this was the worst, this waking in the cold, this dark, this dirty dawn, everything dirty she touched” (49). The text insists on seeing and knowing and the child who has not seen anything yet is told: “You’ll be seeing plenty of everything now,” as McLaughlin adopts a father’s gesture, swinging “the child in his arms” (55). Thus the child finds himself truly poised between two worlds. At the beginning, it was difficult for him to keep “his footing on the rocking train, putting out a few fingers to the window sill only for the form of the thing” (53). At the end, he is “determined not to leave the train and clung to the window sill” (55), for he is afraid of this second birth awaiting him in this new world, and of what there is to fear in it, impressed by what McLaughlin told him.

In an initiation rite, there arises the question of the gift and counter-gift, a question which keeps recurring in the story when the mother, for instance, warns Dennis: “You start your fairy tales with your Dad and I don’t know what he’ll give you” (54), meaning you’ll get scolded or worse in exchange for the lies you tell. The father-substitute promises to give Dennis a present to make him get off the train but in the end, he does not give him anything: “But he slapped his pockets and found nothing to give” (55). The mother herself builds up this fiction of a father-image which is reinforced by the narrator’s explanation: “It was this mythical, towering, half-remembered figure they were now travelling to join up north” (50). The sense of an initiation, of a ritual
undertaken by the child accompanied by his mother is brought about by the allusions to myths, fairy tales, and to a towering figure, the image of a tower triggering images of medieval battles. Montreal “half-remembered” is also half-forgotten and this drifting into space maps a journey into memory, an initiation trip back to one’s origins. The child and the reader have to learn about one’s future, one’s origins, one’s identity, one’s mythical origin, one’s birth and parents, one’s country’s history. The child has to find his father, that is, he has to go back to his origin, before his birth. And this origin will be found at the end of the journey once the short story has been told. This trajectory obeys a pattern of reversal too.

6 Absorbed in the contemplation of the landscape, the child feels disorientated, for he has lost his bearings: “It was so strange to him, so singular, that he could not have said an hour later which feature of the scene was in the foreground or to the left or right” (51). The importance of seeing and perceiving is foregrounded, and the child’s perspective is rendered through his speech: “D’you know what I sor in the night” is repeated three times and he insists that he “Sor them” (50). However, in the midst of confusion, when he wants to stay on the train towards the end of the text, he eventually gives in, saying that he “never saw anything” (54). His seeing things is what worries his mother.

7 The preternatural dimension of the journey is suggested through the presence of the mirror-like window, a transitional space which reveals the world through its transparent threshold. The child’s own reflection on the window of the train is reversed as it would be in a mirror: “It was still dark enough outside for Dennis to see his face in the window and for the light from the windows to fall in pale squares on the upturned vanishing faces and on the little trees” (51). The window stands as a metaphor of the passage from the inside to the outside. It is a transient separation which points in the direction of a passage, both a screen and a frame. After his journey inside the train, Dennis will have to go outside in order to achieve his final expulsion, he will “struggle[d] out” (55). His final getting off the train is a painful way of being cast out in the big wide world and to end his drifting for a while. To find oneself and to know oneself, one has to know one’s origins, one’s roots. The clothes that the child wears are outlandish, not suited to his new environment. To Roy, the boy’s clothes are inadequate, and their function is articulated in terms of space and speed: “He outdistanced his clothes; he was better than they were. But he was rushing on this train into an existence where his clothes would be too good for him” (53). Two worlds are thus confronted: one is too cheap, the other one will be too hard. To find his identity in this world, Dennis will have to abandon readymade clothes and clichés, beginning with his British clothes: his little jacket which makes him look like a little city man, his cap: “the Tweedle Dum cap” reminiscent of Alice in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass. The twin characters (seen as such by Tenniel) are always ready to battle but never do so: they are a metaphor for pusillanimity and the confusion of identity. Dennis will have to separate from his twin image in the mirror in order to come into his own.

2. A Nomadic Text

8 The text shows the temporary formation of a makeshift family. The journey is undertaken in search of a father. On his way, Dennis finds a father-substitute, Roy McLaughlin. He is the one who tries to place the child’s origins through the observation of the clothes he wears, whereas he himself fails to wear regular, well-suited clothes: “He had to pad the length of the car in a trench coat and city shoes” (50). McLaughlin has no family ties and
keeps on drifting “up north” where this blank cold country lies. Yet, gradually during the journey he feels some kind of compassion for the child. A temporary relationship and bond are reached, for both seem to see otherworldly creatures no one else sees: Dennis sees some kind of a ghost while McLaughlin sees that of a dog. The mother senses this understanding: she couples them with “you two,” underlining their father-and-son union, and she applies the word “coarse” to both of them. Moreover they both have blue eyes, although Roy’s are lighter. To McLaughlin’s mind, Dennis’s “Indian hair” signifies a drifter, and in an effort to ascertain the boy’s origin, he asks for the father’s name:

“Cameron. Donald Cameron.”

That meant nothing, still; McLaughlin had worked in a place on James Bay where the Indians were named MacDonald and Ogilvie and had an unconquered genetic strain of blue eyes. (52)

But the name “MacDonald,” a mixture of McLaughlin and of the father’s name Donald, suggests the fusion of the two fathers.

Hence, the text shows the temporary reunion of a “family” for a period of one hour. McLaughlin’s first name, Roy, makes a king of him (the utmost father figure) and he comes from Montreal “sunk beneath remembrance.” Like the natural father, he is “half-remembered.” But McLaughlin is also “conspicuous and alone” (50), a telling phrase signalling his noticeable size, colour, and position, and also pointing to the paradox of the presence of an absence (“conspicuous by their absence”). Additionally, Roy is said to be “in construction” like an engineer, and as such he stands as a positive figure at this point of the narrative, able to construct and repair things and having some scientific knowledge or skill, but the expression also suggests the idea of something “in the making,” an unfinished process that is still going on.

The description of McLaughlin “[padding] the length of the car in a trench coat and city shoes” is equally significant. To pad means to protect, to make less hard, to give a different shape. In the context of writing it also means to make a piece of writing or speech longer by using a word or information that is unnecessary. That is exactly McLaughlin’s narrative function: without him there would be no story for he has “to pad the length of the car.” Thanks to McLaughlin’s character, the short story can be written, can exist: his glance at the boy and mother opens the story. In the final scene, he puts on a protective role. His role is to be always on the alert, always on the move, which also makes him first and foremost a drifter, refusing the sedate life of a “home.” And so, too, is the child’s father who “fell into the vast pool of casual labor, drifters” (52). The mother explains that the father keeps drifting from place to place: “He isn’t there now. He hates towns. He seems to move about a great deal. He drives a bulldozer, you see” (52). Both McLaughlin and the father are nomadic figures but in complete contrast to McLaughlin who is “in construction,” the father demolishes, destroys. He drives a bulldozer “for another man” and is this other man’s substitute just as McLaughlin is for Dennis.

Ultimately the two father figures are difficult to pin down, for they are two figures of absence of a slippery kind: “I keep on moving north,” insists McLaughlin, escaping human presence. His chosen way of life is a nomadic one. This transience makes it difficult for the child to identify with one or the other and so he clings to the mirror-substitute of the window to retain an image he can identify with, the “McLaughlin seen in the window” (52) beside Dennis and his mother when it was still dark outside and the light in the carriage was on. He can only resort to imagination, make-believe and ghosts, flimsy creatures who are, in the end, like his ghost-like father:
“D’you know about any ghosts?” said the boy again. “Oh, sure,” said McLaughlin, and shivered, for he still felt sick, even though he was sharing a bottle with the Limey bride. He said, “Indians see them,” which was as close as he could come to being crafty.” (53)

For he has made up his mind that Dennis might be of Indian origin. The child seemed to have strange powers and to take refuge in his imagination: “I’ll tell you a strange thing about Dennis,” said his mother. “It’s this. There’s times he gives me the creeps” (53).

But the mother too is ready to move and find her own line of flight:

“If I don’t like it I can clear out. I was a waitress. There’s always work.”

“Or find another man,” McLaughlin said. “Only it won’t be me girlie. I’ll be far away.” (53)

Drifting and substituting one man for another man seem easy and logical to him, whereas she does not answer him and changes the subject:

“Den says that when the train stopped he saw a lot of elves” she said, complaining.

“Not elves—men” said Dennis. (53)

Thus the text drifts, veers off, changes direction all the time. Like the father image, it is not fixed once and for all. When Dennis’s mother is confronted with a degraded mirror-image of herself she violently rejects it:

Two women wearing army battle jackets over their dresses, with their hair piled up in front like his mother’s, called and giggled to someone they had put on the train. They were fat and dark—grinny. His mother looked at them with detestation, recognizing what they were, for she hated whores. She had always acted on the desire of the moment without thought of gain, and she had taken the consequences (Dennis) without complaint. (51)

True to her own line of flight, Dennis’s mother has always followed her own desire. Now that she has come to this white country to meet Dennis’s father, she is equally ready to take her own flight once more if she needs to.

The fictional space is the closed space of the train berth later extended to the carriage, and ultimately to the station. Those closed spaces contrast with the wide-open space outside. Yet, out there, the “unchanging landscape of swamp and bracken and stunted trees” (52) seems to indicate that the protagonists’ journey is taking place in and through a space which apparently does not change. Though carried away by a speeding carriage, the characters realize everything seems to remain immobile and unchanging in a country of paradoxes: “she had been attracted to the scenery, whose persistent sameness she could no longer ignore.” “‘It’s not proper country,’ she said, ‘It’s bare’” (54). Strange occurrences are expected to take place in such unusual surroundings.

3. A Hybrid Text in-between Two Worlds, the Old and the New, Britain and Canada, Reality and Vision

The text wavers between different poles, like the child who is thought to be a half-breed by McLaughlin, perhaps Indian and English because of his dark hair, and like the time of day and the train carriage. The reader experiences a state of confusion through an ambiguous use of colours in a sentence such as this: “there was a swamp with bristling black rushes, red as ink.” The reader is left to wonder while the mother hesitates too: what is “red as ink?” the rushes we have just been told are usually black and the common phrase is “black as ink.” But then the sentence drifts away from the swamp to the rushes,
and back to the swamp, which is deemed “red as red ink” probably because of the red rising sun which pervades it all. Red is also the colour which is associated with McLaughlin: he has red hair on his arms.

McLaughlin fantasises that the child is of mixed blood reuniting two major components: his alleged father’s land and his mother’s land. Dennis has “an unconquered genetic strain of blue eyes” according to McLaughlin (52) and this, together with his black hair, makes him embody Indian/British genetic heritage. Several nations are evoked: French, British, Canadian, American and Indian and a kind of kinship is established as the child (and McLaughlin) sees Indians who are also believed to have the power to see ghosts.

The characters are therefore mixed, representing populations on the move for two main reasons: first of all, with the war having ended over a year before, they are trying to readjust and to recompose families. Secondly, this is Canada, part of the then Commonwealth: the short story depicting the decentering of the subject also therefore stands for the opposition between “home” and exile while the characters are going “up north”—where ironically Britain (motherland) is after all—but also the location of the deserted and hostile North Pole. The centre is opposed to the margins of what was Empire. The population seems to waver between here and then, history and History, the individual and the collective. The origin of the nation, represented by the Indians here, is confronted with references to colonization thanks to the mentioning of James Bay and of Montreal which is both British and French. The Indians were named after their conquerors and bear Scottish names, according to McLaughlin—MacDonald, Ogilvie—representing the trace of the conquerors in their Indian blood. They embody an alliance of opposites, the ever flowing drift of mixed blood and the impossibility of keeping people of different ethnic origins apart for very long. The “genetic strain of blue eyes” allegedly recognized by McLaughlin reappears like a fleeting ghost.

Drifting are the workers too, travelling to find jobs where they are available in a developing society. Theirs is a transient way of living like life itself, which is never fixed but keeps on changing, reflecting the nature of living elements. Nothing remains steady: the swamp, the train. During the story’s two stops, nomads and settlers appear to the child as visionary, initiating him to the past of his new country. Dennis sees Indians, nomads, migrants, and settlers on the go, all trying to find a piece of land or a job after the war following the Big Depression:

“Not elves—men” said Dennis. “Some of them had mattresses rolled up on their backs. They were little and bent over. They were talking French. They were going up north.”

McLaughlin coughed and said, “He means settlers. They were sent up on this same train during the depression. But it’s nine, ten years ago. It was supposed to clear unemployment out of the towns, get them off relief. But there wasn’t anything up there. The winters were terrible. A lot of them died.”

“He couldn’t know that,” said Mum edgily. “For that matter, how can he tell what is French? He’s never heard any.”

“No, he couldn’t know. It was around ten years ago, when times were bad.” (53-54)

Thus, the generic status of the text wavers and drifts into the fantastic and unheimlich, for Dennis has seen what he cannot have seen, according to the adults: settlers during the depression who were sent there and died of cold and destitution. Dennis could not have seen them, for it had happened ten years before. An instance of anachronism, this episode functions as another twist in time. Dennis is denied his vision by his mother: “You didn’t see anyone. Now shut up” (50). The principle of reality is opposed to his eye’s testimony
and his own line of flight is cut short by his mother. Being drifters par excellence in between this world and the other one, the ghosts appear to have been those of settlers having found neither rest nor a place to settle in. But Dennis refuses his mother’s comfortable fairy-tale explanation and maintains that he saw men and not elves.

24 Story and History are thus mixed together and the confusion is reinforced by the use of the fantastic when the child pretends he has seen historical figures. The characters themselves are living in paradoxical times, for if a war means destruction it also may bring in money for reconstruction. McLaughlin got a job after the unemployment period due to the Great Depression and the crisis which brought it about and now, over a year later, there is “plenty of money to make” as McLaughlin’s roll of money confirms. Memory, remembering, viewing the world from inside the train after the Second World War is also reminiscent of the ghost of other trains. Hence too the nightmarish quality of the text and of the place where one can only see when it is dark and reality is derealized.

25 Yet, this is also the birth of a new world, the drawing of a new cartography replete with lines of flight. The figure of the train points to a rhizomatic pattern as its different lines, junctions and forking resemble the complex, ever-open and never-ended structure of a rhizome as theorized by Deleuze and Guattari:

> [the rhizome] is composed not of units but of dimensions, or rather directions in motion. It has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (milieu) from which it grows and it overspills. It constitutes linear multiplicities with n dimensions having neither object nor subject, which can be laid out on a plane of consistency, and from which one is always subtracted (n-1) […] The rhizome operates by variation, expansion, conquest, capture, offshoots […] the rhizome pertains to a map that […] is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entryways and exits and […] lines of flight […] the rhizome is an acentered nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system without […] an organizing memory or central automaton, defined solely by a circulation of states […] all manner of “becomings.” (Deleuze and Guattari 21)

26 Drifting in this immobile journey—for if the train keeps on moving nothing moves in the carriages (let us remember that Einstein got his notion of relativity in this way)—the child is initiated to change, History, geography and the history of his future country. Thus, he experiences his “becoming other.” Roy and his mother are trying to find their own crisscrossing lines of flight, as Deleuze articulates it, and they may be dangerous. As with many railway crossings and bifurcations, deterritorialization may eventually lead to the much sought-after magnetic father-image or may lead to more drifting and wondering in a new country for the Limey bride and her inspired son. “You will be seeing plenty of everything now” sounds like a promise made to the imaginative Dennis. He is born twice from two fathers, and is seen as the twin figure of Tweedle Dum by McLaughlin, inheriting two countries in the form of his fatherland and his motherland, and two literatures. Might he turn out to be a writer drawing his lines of flight on the blank page of “Up North”? The ghostly reflections flickering on the train window pane, those of Dennis first and foremost, are revealed by the end of the story to be ghostly figures after all, written/writerly ghosts, ghosts of words, ink and paper. But these same ghostly figures are now free to go “up north” and to haunt our imagination.
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ABSTRACTS

Cet étrange voyage nocturne dans le nord du Canada se déroule dans une atmosphère onirique. Un jeune garçon et sa mère sont en route pour retrouver le père de l’enfant. Un inconnu, rencontré dans le train, va jouer le rôle de substitut paternel. Cette nuit à travers un paysage aperçu depuis une fenêtre de wagon est chargée de mystère. Le point de vue de l’enfant forcément parcellaire, les perceptions des adultes et le jeu sur le discours décalé font que cette quête des origines, origines d’un enfant, mais aussi origines d’un pays, est modulée par une imagination fertile et une attirance pour l’inconnu et le spectral. C’est l’écriture qui fera de ce texte nomade glissant de territoire en territoire, l’occasion de dessiner une nouvelle carte d’un territoire intérieur qui se substituera par l’écriture à l’existant. Le texte se place aux marges de ses conditions d’existence même et suit les lignes de fuite des personnages, sans cesse décentrés d’eux-mêmes et éloignés de leur but, aiguillés sur des lignes de traverses imprévisibles, de déviation en déviation, jusqu’à l’inévitable séparation.

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