

Zeitschrift: SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature
Band: 23 (2009)

Artikel: "Living in quotation marks" : the rhetorical second self of Mavis Gallant and Nancy Huston
Autor: Sigrist, Ilona
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-389622>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. [Siehe Rechtliche Hinweise.](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. [Voir Informations légales.](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. [See Legal notice.](#)

Download PDF: 09.11.2024

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

“Living in Quotation Marks”: The Rhetorical Second Self of Mavis Gallant and Nancy Huston

Ilona Sigrist

In their autobiographical writings, both Nancy Huston and Mavis Gallant construct a rhetorical “second self” to perform the feeling of otherness – the gap between themselves and their society – that constitutes them as women writers. Their autobiographical writings take the guise of various other genres, situating themselves between what Gallant calls the Zero of autobiography and the One of fiction, letter, or journal. The “I” they create is a child in a vanished city or an “impostor” in a foreign culture and language, destined to “not only speak but also *live* in quotation marks,” as Huston has written. Through these images the writers articulate versions of themselves performing the “real” as though it were other. The autobiographical theory of John Paul Eakin and Georges Gusdorf and Paul de Man’s discussion of irony are used to elucidate the “doubled” self as it is constructed and performs itself rhetorically through specific images of containment (for example, in houses). Images of place (elsewhere, exile) and time (the past, from which the present narrating self has “escaped”) figure the “self-creation” of a woman writer.

This article will explore how two contemporary woman writers “perform” their private history through the public act of autobiography, and examine the reasons that motivate this performance¹. Contemporary Canadian writers of fiction and essays Mavis Gallant and Nancy Huston dramatize topoi of temporal alienation, self-writing and the ironic fragmentation of the writing/speaking “I” within the language constructions

¹ I take this opportunity of thanking several people – in particular Beverly Maeder and Peter Halter – whose careful readings of this paper provided stimulating insights and shed light on the difficult areas.

of a patriarchal society. Their autobiographical writings perform the writers' sense of a gap between themselves as woman writers and the language they write in, as well as between their former and present selves, and their textual and writing selves. In performing this gap, the writings also interrogate it, and seek, not to represent the self as a unified or foreclosed entity, but to construct a coherent textual voice from the experience of division and fragmentation.

Georges Gusdorf is one of the founding and foremost theorists in the study of autobiography precisely because he locates the genesis of the autobiographical project in the self's perception that it is divided and "inconsistent." The writing of autobiography, according to Gusdorf in his introduction to *Lignes de vie*, is not motivated by the intention of producing a stable and fixed representation of a "true" self (10-11). Instead, autobiography brings out and explores "l'inconstance et l'inconsistance de la conscience de soi," the "distance et [. . .] dissidence de soi à soi, [. . .] la pluralité des mondes intérieurs" (26-27). The autobiographical act is thus a stage for exteriorizing the "fluid and unresolved" ("fluide et irrésolu," 30), "secret" (23) interior space through the transformative act of writing: "L'usage de la plume tend à extérioriser une conscience intime qui, en se projetant sur le papier, *adopte une consistance nouvelle*" (22, my emphasis). My argument will be that Huston's and Gallant's autobiographical texts provide the writers with a stage on which they can perform, through the intermediary of a rhetorical second self, a metamorphosis: they write themselves into being as authors in a new culture.

Gusdorf situates the beginning of the desire to write the self in the individual's sense of incoherence, of alienation: "l'identité personnelle est mise en question [. . .]; le sujet découvre qu'il vivait dans le malentendu" (23). On a literal level, both Huston and Gallant enacted a radical rupture in their lives by deciding to leave North America and live and write in France. Huston further accentuated this rupture with her past and her native culture by choosing to write in French, a language she learned as an adult. To understand Huston's and Gallant's presentation of the self as divided, and to identify what is at stake in their experience of this divide, I would like to begin by looking closely at two passages in which Huston and Gallant articulate a gap between their identity as woman writers and their identity in society. The society Huston feels alienated from is the European culture she has adopted, and which shaped her as a writer. The society Gallant is in conflict with is the Montreal culture she grew up in but left behind, which is the culture that shaped *her* as a

writer. The writers’ autobiographical selves, their written or textual “doubles,” will come into being through their articulation of this gap that they perceive between themselves as creative artists, and the culture that shaped their decision to become writers.

In her five semi-autobiographical short stories,² Gallant dramatizes a figure of the apprentice writer (“a kind of summary of some of the things I once was,” Gallant and Hancock 28). Linnet Muir, her alter ego, grows up in another dramatization, “the reconstruction of a city which no longer exists,” that is, the Montreal of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s (Hancock 28). The story “Between Zero and One” shows the writer enacting a tension between her identity as a young woman and an artist, and her native society, which is diametrically opposed to her. She works in a wartime civil engineering office whose ill, embittered male staff are hostages to the past and their memories of the previous war, World War I. The office and its engineers function as a microcosm of an enclosed, obsolescent society, incarnated by Montreal, where “anything that befell the young, even dying, was bound to be trivial” (125). The following passages are taken, respectively, from the beginning and end of the story:

When I was young I thought that men had small lives of their own creation. I could not see why, born enfranchised, without the constraints and obstacles attendant on women, they set such close limits on themselves. [. . .] There was a space of life I used to call “between Zero and One” and then came a long mystery. I supposed that men came up to their wall [. . .] quite a long way after One. (125)

The recollection [. . .] had to do with the men, with squares and walls and limits and numbers. How do you stand if you stand upon Zero? What will the passage be like between Zero and One? And what will happen at One? Yes, what will happen at One? (147)

Linnet speaks from “Zero,” the positionless position of youth, female gender and artistic ability. She is thus the figuration of an absence, the blind spot that her hidebound and patriarchal society cannot see or does not recognize. As Wlad Godzich contends in his introduction to Paul de Man’s *Blindness and Insight*, “the blind spot of the text [is] the organizer of the space of the vision contained in the text” (xxix). If we take the term

² These stories, which constitute a sort of fragmentary *Bildungsroman*, are “The Doctor,” “Voices Lost in Snow,” “In Youth is Pleasure,” “Between Zero and One” and “Varieties of Exile,” published in *The New Yorker* in the 1970s and collected in *Varieties of Exile*. This article will only look at “Between Zero and One.” The title of the story already announces a paradoxical fissure where none is usually perceived.

text in Godzich's phrase to be analogous to any signifying system, then we can say that the society represented in the Linnet Muir stories is a signifying system which is paradoxically organized around the very elements it seeks to exclude: the repressed voices of the contemporary, the new, the subaltern. These elements, the blind spot of postwar Montreal, are presented in the stories as forces of creativity and change precisely because of their excluded position in the dominant society.

Linnet, as a woman, bridges the gap between what men, "born enfranchised," could accomplish in society if they wished, and the "close limits" they nevertheless voluntarily "set" on themselves. Her dynamic presence in the office throws into relief the social freedom that men, with "small lives of their own creation," have and could use to change society but are unwilling to exercise. Linnet imagines the incoherencies she perceives in her society as another organizing blind spot, the space between Zero and One. This space exists, but, like the social injustices and exclusions that Montreal of the 1950s is founded on, it can easily be ignored, or accepted as a logical unquestioned sequence, which it would be unthinkable to interrogate or deconstruct.

As an artist, Linnet embodies a voice, a position, an identity that her society elides. Her creative spirit has no place in the Cartesian world of "squares and walls and limits and numbers" (125) represented by the encircling office and, beyond that, the encircling city and its patriarchal, religious and political enclosures. The five Linnet Muir stories are a sketch of the artist's life before she breaks out of the societal and cultural confinements represented, in her eyes, by the condition of being young, and makes her own, much wider and freer life.³ But for the time of the stories, the time of the writer's apprenticeship to writing, only the narrator's allusive metonymical style and lucid perception provide a covert but sustained counter-model to this Cartesian world view. The writing flows around and through meaning, evades while evoking sequence, definition, and all the means by which discourse can be slotted into essentializing boxes.

Nancy Huston, like Mavis Gallant through the voice of Linnet Muir, also uses autobiographical writings to create a textual self that is split between certain social roles the writer has to perform, and a writerly identity that is closer to Huston's personal vision of herself. The gap between "inner" or writerly and "outer" or social self is enacted (and

³ For the image of the condition of youth itself as representing helpless or unwilling, but enforced, subjection to an oppressive society, see the end of another Linnet Muir story, "In Youth is Pleasure": "[. . .] I had been correct about one thing in my youth, which I now considered ended: Time had been on my side, faithfully, and unless you died, you were always bound to escape" (124).

exacerbated) by the fact that Huston writes in an acquired language. The non-mother tongue, French, a language Huston learned in the process of becoming a writer, is always a stage that, regardless of what text Huston is performing on it (novel, essay, etc.) points to the act of writing itself as a virtuoso performance in an idiom that is sharply delineated from original and unreflective speech in the mother tongue. In the autobiographical text *Losing North*, Huston compares English to the “emotional, romantic, manipulative, sentimental and crude” piano, whereas French, like the harpsichord, is “neutral, intellectual [. . .] [it] require[s] control, restraint and delicate mastery” (50). Both languages are assimilated to the non-referential artistic language of music, but there is a nuance: French requires a more critical effort and, above all, control on the part of the speaking subject.⁴

Huston’s use of French is thus informed by the unspeakable breach created within the French text by the absent but always implied mother tongue. As a result, one aspect of her textual double is the figure of the exile, who enacts the rupture the writer experiences in the fabric of her daily life insofar as daily life takes place through and in a foreign language. The writer’s Canadian origins make her an alien figure in the apparently unified world of the French language and culture. The following passage has Huston’s textual double articulating the sense of incongruity that marks her experience of her surroundings. It is taken from one of Huston’s letters to another woman writer in exile, Leïla Sebbar:

Mais les mots déteignent vite sur les choses. On ne peut pas être constamment en train de braquer la lumière sur les tournures linguistiques sans questionner aussi les . . . modes de vie qu’elles reflètent. D’où le fait que j’ai l’impression non seulement de parler mais de *vivre* entre guillemets. . . . quand je reviens à “ma” maison . . . ce “ma” sera encore et toujours entre guillemets, car cette maison, c’est [mon mari] qui l’a choisie, achetée, meublée . . . Mettons, ce soir, je décide de faire une pâte feuilletée. . . . Pendant ce temps, [ma fille] m’observe. Je me vois en train d’observer ma propre mère faire une pâte feuilletée. Je me dis: oui, mais ma mère le faisait au premier degré, alors que moi je le fais au deuxième. Bien sûr, pour Léa, je le fais au premier degré. Il n’empêche que je suis en fait une intellectuelle qui

⁴ Huston’s comparison of language to music recalls Kristeva’s, but with a difference. Kristeva also points out that the subject entertains an artificial and constructed relation – as Huston says, one of “mastery” – with the acquired language: “Vous vous perfectionnez dans un autre instrument, comme on s’exprime avec l’algèbre ou le violon. Vous pouvez devenir virtuose avec ce nouvel artifice . . .” (Kristeva 27). However, Huston *also* compares the mother tongue to music, although played on a different instrument, thus suggesting that even the mother tongue is a cultural acquisition rather than a natural fact. The acquired tongue is thus not a prosthesis for Huston but indeed a frame, a stage, which represents the “natural” while marking a distance from it.

joue à la ménagère. . . . Donc, je ne fais pas vraiment une pâte feuilletée, je “fais une pâte feuilletée.” (*Lettres parisiennes* 169-171)

Huston presents herself as an exile but also as a woman “intellectual” whom patriarchal structures dispossess of the male privilege of appropriating one’s own dwelling place, and even living and acting as a unified self. The split she senses in her experience of daily life is initially represented as a split between two languages, but then becomes a split within language that patriarchal culture creates within the female speaking subject. Huston represents herself as figuratively dispossessed of the right to ownership, as women have been literally dispossessed of the right to own property. The fact that “her” house is in fact her husband’s house distorts language itself and makes possession or action within the usurped domestic space a figure of speech or an act of interpretation. Her own identity, not in quotation marks, as an intellectual, creates a gap between herself and other identities that physical and social needs impose on her. The space of this gap is the space of the quotation marks, which turn her literal actions into figurative gestures with a meaning other than what she intends.

Huston’s sense of being at odds with the domestic space she occupies, like Gallant’s sense of being at odds with the professional space she occupies, is part of a wider unease with the structures of society and family. As Gallant has Linnet deconstruct a numerical sequence to reveal that it is “not necessarily so,” Huston deconstructs the generational transmission of image and knowledge, figured by her interaction with her daughter. Léa observes Huston making pastry as Huston observed her own mother. However, her daughter is witnessing not just an act, but a gender-determined negotiation of the space between action and self-perception. Watching her mother take part in daily life, she is unconsciously watching her mother play a role. But for Léa, the role is her “real” mother: although Huston experiences herself as troped, “au deuxième degré,” Léa perceives her as literal, “au premier degré.”

Huston attributes her sense of alienation not just to being an intellectual, but also to being in exile. Her double identity frequently puts her at a remove from life in a different culture and a male society, and the unease provoked by this double identity gives rise to the image of herself as a figure of speech rather than literal or transparent language. Here it is textuality that creates “life”: it is Huston’s experience of re-creating herself, or versions of herself, in a foreign language (“braquer la lumière sur les tournures linguistiques”) that makes her life resemble language. Putting language into question, she begins to put the life that language reflects into question too. Thus, her life is absorbed into her language,

and she becomes her textual double, a figure of speech created from and living through typographical marks.

It is striking that both Gallant and Huston represent the disjunctures society creates in the self by using an image of textual signs, like numbers or quotation marks. The written “I” engages in sociological interactions, such as making pastry or doing office work, but also engages with its own materiality, standing on a line of numbers or moving about within quotation marks. This mixing of typographical and figural registers prevents the reader from being able to interpret the scenes as entirely literal. Textual signs convey meaning through marks that are formal and referential. The images’ comic incongruity provides another insight into the narrated selves’ conflict with society. It is a conflict that is partly artificial and encoded, like typographical signs, but like typographical signs this conflict has an effect. It causes the writers to “change their meaning” as persons. As quotation marks call into question the literal sense of the term they enclose, so the patriarchal society that encloses the writers causes them to assume other, troped or non-authentic identities. It is the ideological nature of the writers’ malaise with society that forces them into textuality, turns them into written signs and thus creates the autobiographical self. Although the speaking subject is always already split by being in language,⁵ the female subject is doubly split within the language structures of patriarchal society. Thus, within the signifying system of these writers’ culture, to articulate themselves is also, immediately, to articulate the gap.

I have made a comparison between these two passages because they show a moment when the writers pass into textuality and become figures of speech, their own textual doubles. But I have also juxtaposed these passages because of the *differences* in their presentation of the writers’ sense of alienation. The variety of ways the writers represent rupture or “seek the gap” (“écart”), as Huston puts it (*Lettres* 210), suggests that this gap is partly phantasmagoric. Both writers represent, in varied images, a split between their true identity and an assumed social one, or between their past and present identities, or between their life in Canada and their life in Europe. But the real gap that haunts their autobiographical writings is the spectre of a latent division in the autobiographical project itself. This division is certainly in part a consequence of the materiality of the autobiographical gesture – the use of language itself; but it is also inherent in the writing subject’s temporal and creative relation to its represented self. Writing the gap between writing and written

⁵ Huston, as mentioned above, exploits and interrogates the language split by her use of French, making conscious and overt uses of language that native speakers may accept as “natural” (*Lettres* 14).

selves over and over again is an acknowledgement of the impossibility of self-creation through writing. The gap is the impossible tension between the writing self's desire to make itself new, by an act of will and intention, and the processes of memory, culture, heritage and contingency that have shaped the individual since birth in ways that are beyond her control or even knowledge.

In other words, the project of the writer of an autobiographical text is to represent herself as *both* historical and contextual, that is, as a self in progress over a period of her lifetime, *and* as a self that is always making itself anew through the very act of writing. This task is obviously impossible on any level other than the rhetorical, because the self cannot, on a literal level, be both outside of time and self-generating, and at the same time grounded in the passage of time and historical circumstance. In order to understand how the written self, the product of the autobiographical act, functions to fulfil these two contradictory imperatives of being both always new and self-generated, and historical, we need to look at the relation of the writer or the writing self to her written self.

This relationship is mutually constitutive. As we have seen, Gallant creates a written version of herself in the figure of Linnet Muir, a young woman at odds with the stultifying society she grew up in. Linnet is Gallant's response to the incoherence of a society which politically segregates the French-Catholic majority, suppresses the voices of the young and of women and validates the past to the detriment of the future. Linnet, bilingual, bicultural and a young woman, is an artist who is able to articulate the divisions her native society refuses to acknowledge. As an incarnation of aspects of Gallant's past self, but also as a character in a series of short stories, Linnet remains in existence as a written trace, neither a strictly autobiographical figure nor a strictly fictional entity but a textual witness to Gallant's simultaneous move into fiction and into the more congenial cultural space of Europe.

Huston also creates written versions of her past self. Through letters and essays, she writes the self she has been – the English-speaking, Canadian self – as it evolves into a hybrid being, a French-speaking intellectual and writer, a French-speaking parent with a linguistic and cultural background that is different from her children's. Again, these written versions of herself textualize the process whereby Huston differentiates herself from social images imposed on her by her adopted and native cultures.

The writers create these written versions of themselves to witness to a continuity of being between their pre-writing, pre-exile selves, and their present identities as writers. But as I said, the relation between writer and written self is mutually constitutive. The writer creates textual versions of herself, rhetorical "other" selves, but the act of writing these

selves and the presence of autobiographical texts in the writers’ oeuvre also creates the writer. It is now necessary to look at how we can say that the written self “writes” the writer, and what role the written self plays in constituting the writer as a writing subject.

Huston and Gallant present themselves, in interviews and in their autobiographical writings, as self-made. Gallant has articulated a personal mythology, which over the years has remained very consistent, representing herself as springing, as it were, fully formed from nowhere. Fatherless as of age ten and brought up by an inadequate mother, sent to seventeen boarding schools before age eighteen with no relatives, no roots or attachments and almost no money, she abandoned her job as a reporter to move to Paris with the intention of making her living as a writer of fiction. And she succeeded.

Huston too was partly orphaned in the specific sense that her mother left the family to pursue a career when Huston was six. She moved to Paris, shedding her “cowboy” roots and culture to become part of the French intelligentsia and write in a foreign language. This was done in a deliberate attempt to renounce family and personal heritage and remake herself in her own image. Referring to Sartre and other existentialists who preferred the illusion of intellectual self-creation to biological lineage and sought to engender themselves through art and literature, she writes: “. . . it has also been my model. When I put on my francophone mask and took up residence in a foreign culture, was I not declaring my preference for freedom and autonomy? . . . My plan is to invent myself, day by day and year by year” (*Losing North* 53-54).

Both writers seem to have willed themselves into being in a new country in response to an urgent vocational summons, to become writers. This self-presentation is so compelling and so insistent that it can be best understood as a form of conversion narrative, in the sense of Gusdorf’s claim that all autobiographical writing is a quest for self-transformation through the articulation of self-knowledge: “[. . . les écritures du moi [. . .] sont mues par une résolution qui, si elle met en cause le passé et le présent dans leur devenir réel, obéit à l’exigence d’un devoir être. [. . .] Le projet de se connaître soi-même [. . .] invoque l’intention d’une mutation, dans le sens d’une amélioration de l’homme dans le monde” (14-15). In writing their personal history, Gallant and Huston consolidate rhetorically their conversion to a new life, a new identity, which represents a radical rupture with their original, pre-exile, pre-writing selves. As Augustine’s *Confessions* is a rhetorical re-enactment of his conversion from a sinful original self to a man of God, so Gallant’s and Huston’s autobiographical writings repeat the unique moment of their “turning away” from the uncultured space of their native country, their “turning towards” (*con-version*) a new intellectual life.

Conversion narratives are thus public performances of the subject's self-willed "birth" as a new person: a solipsistic, originary and single moment of vocation and rupture with society. Autobiography as conversion narrative first reenacts the birth of the new self in writing and then ensures that a rhetorical continuum, the autobiographical text, consolidates and permanently witnesses to the continued reality and effectiveness of the self-creation. The conversion narrative, like the willed act of exile, is also the space where Huston and Gallant perform their desire for a perpetually new "good" place – the page, or Paris – in which to give birth to the new, creative, liberated self.

This "good" or utopic place is defined by the writers in contradistinction to the old, "bad" or dystopic place they came from, their origins, represented in Gallant's writings as the Montreal of the 1940s and in Huston's writings as the Calgary of the 1960s.⁶ Returning to North America for a visit, Huston remarks, "[. . .] c'est moi – le moi que j'ai fui –, ce sont toutes les platitudes de mon enfance dans les Prairies plates, les mêmes inanités religieuses, les mêmes chansons débiles [. . .]: mon pays me donne la nausée" (*Lettres parisiennes* 24). Gallant critiques the "stifling genteelism" that prevailed in the Montreal she left behind (*Interview* 42). The writers would seem here to renounce their Canadian origins with as much fervor as Augustine the Christian renounces his original sinful self.

However, if the conversion narrative is a rhetorical means of re-enacting the unique and unrepeatable moment of conversion, it is also, paradoxically, the rhetorical means of re-visiting and re-living the very past that is being repudiated. As she returns to Paris after her visit to North America, Huston laments "d'avoir à quitter ces êtres qui me connaissent et qui me comprennent, au fond, mieux que les Français ne le feront jamais [. . .]; je pleure la langue anglaise qui m'a accueillie avec tant de naturel" (*Lettres parisiennes* 24). Gallant too, in spite of her critical remarks about her native country, states, "My feelings about Canada are something else. I don't allow foreigners to criticize Canada" (*Interview* 44). Representing their place of origin as a dystopia legitimates the writers' desire to re-invent themselves; however, the very movement back to origins is structurally a *nostalgic* return, even if it is only accomplished in order to retrace the movement away. That is, to rewrite the original self in order to renounce it is, paradoxically, also to reclaim the original self.

Thus, the autobiographical act is profoundly ambiguous. The rhetorical performance of the writers' desire to "invent [themselves]," in Huston's phrase, is accomplished in an ironic tension with the represen-

⁶ I owe my use of the term "dystopic place" as well as the impetus for the following discussion of it to Beverly Maeder.

tation of memory, of personal history. Narrating the events of a life implies a process, which re-inscribes the written self back into the larger context of its culture. As de Man specifies, “articulation is precisely the structure that prevents origination from taking place” (122). The act of writing whereby the writers seek to create themselves – origination – both mirrors and is subverted by the historical process of articulation which the writers narrate, the unfolding of their own lives.

The writers’ unease with the dual nature of the self represented in autobiography influences the genres they use to write their life history. Both displace what Gallant calls “straight” autobiography – which she said she felt readers would consider “boring” – onto other modes (Hancock 28).⁷ In written fictions, published journals or letters, and the oral fictions of interviews, the writers rework memory and reshape it into personal mythologies. In this way they signal textually their difference from – in fact, their superiority to – their lived autobiography, that is, the system of historical articulation.

Thus Mavis Gallant makes Linnet Muir the protagonist of a series of short stories to avoid having to reclaim Linnet as a purely autobiographical representation. Nothing in the Linnet Muir stories would justify the reader’s associating Linnet with Gallant. But in spite of Linnet’s existence as an autonomous fictional entity, the stories in which she figures are structured by a web of rhetoric that links the perceptions of the portrayed Linnet and the present, narrating “I.” They are full of phrases like “Mostly when people say ‘I know exactly how I felt’ it can’t be true, but here I am sure . . .” (147), or “I thought then, I think now” (127). These phrases create a concord of vision and voice that can close the temporal and geographical divide between past and present, narrated and writing selves. The narrating “I,” necessarily outside the framework of the story, may – or may not – be the real-life Mavis Gallant, but when the reader is aware of the links Gallant has made between herself and Linnet in interviews, the intrusive presence of the narrating “I” can work to break the generic boundary of the short story. It authorizes the reader to imagine that the narrated young artist has evolved into a successful writer, Gallant herself.

The process-oriented nature of Huston’s writing is also a way of validating the textual enactment of memory as part of an ongoing self-construction. In her copious and prolific use of modes – journals, letters

⁷ Speaking of the displacement of autobiography onto fiction, Gallant invokes the imperative quality of this displacement, as though the shift between fictional and “straight” modes were somehow latent in or integral to the autobiographical gesture: “Straight autobiography would be boring. It would bore me. It would bore the reader. These stories are a kind of reality *necessarily* transformed” (Hancock 28, Gallant’s emphasis).

– that signal the unfinished and the intimate and foreground the referential, Huston returns again and again to aspects of her present life in which the past resurfaces to give meaning and shape to the present, and provide fuel for further thought and action. “You mean to tell me that *on no real level* am I still stuck in that cramped apartment on the ground floor of a dilapidated building on 196th Street in the Bronx . . . ?” she writes in *Losing North*, and her self-writings resurrect that persona from the past that can no longer exist on any “real level,” but that does still, on a real level, inform the writing persona (93).

By displacing the mode of autobiography and mixing it with other forms, Gallant and Huston reject the strong referential link of “straight” autobiography, where the writer would reclaim the present voice’s authority over the past voice in an uncomplicated way. However, they covertly reintroduce this link by using rhetoric and the “not-straight” autobiographical modes in such a way as to keep a link between their present speaking voice and its textual incarnations. Thus, although the autobiographical act and the written self are marked by contradictions, absences and gaps, the textual self is still performed through writing as a readable living text for a contemporary audience.

Thus it is possible to say that one of the ways Huston and Gallant use autobiography is to present themselves as justified selves.⁸ For the actual writers establishing a career for themselves in a context where their audience does not share their language or background, writing the self is very important. It is a means to show that their voice is the expression of a real self with a cultural background and personal project. By showing where they came from and how they came to be writers living in Paris, Huston’s and Gallant’s autobiographical writings validate their presence on the literary scene by defining their move to Europe as a point of departure for their writing careers. The reenactment of memory through text is a repeatable and repeated act, a performance, and as such it has a certain legitimacy. Through their self-representations, the writers protect themselves from suspicions and fears – possibly their own suspicions and fears above all – that they are mere usurpers.

⁸ This phrase is taken from Eakin’s discussion of Sartre’s autobiography (126-180; the phrase occurs on 127). Eakin expands on the use of narrative, with its formal and teleological properties, to contain and re-create versions of the self that are not marked by the accidental or transitory but are structured as necessary, legitimate and durable because self-engendered. This vision of the written self as a formal and “emplotted” (163) entity that represents and thereby legitimizes the extra-textual self’s existence is very useful for understanding the dual nature – historical process versus/as well as single and originary – of the autobiographical gesture in Huston and Gallant.

A final way in which the textual self constitutes the writing self is by being a sort of spectral witness to the absolute necessity of the writing self. Not only do the writers represent themselves through diverse personal mythologies; they also show what they might have been had they remained in their original place and not written themselves into exile.

In one of her last letters on exile to Leïla Sebbar, Huston confesses that she has always had a secret fear that one day the French authorities will realize that she can't really speak French, that she is an impostor. She is “condemned” to return to Calgary “and never leave it again,” giving up her “grotesque ambitions” of being a Parisian intellectual (194). An ambiguous image of a drowned girl or dead child haunts all of Gallant's references to her past life in Montreal. Is this child a figure of the present writer, or not? The language is never clear. Returning to Montreal, Gallant meets a man who refers to “some child, a girl, who had lived there [in a house next to Gallant's: this image uses a favored rhetorical strategy of Gallant's, metonymy by contiguity, or slippage from one allusion to another] a long time before and been drowned in the river. He gave me his great-aunt's telephone number . . . I never called. There was nothing to ask” (369). There is “nothing to ask,” yet imagery of water permeates the Afterword from which this quote is taken, and which opens with Gallant evoking herself as watery: “I have lived in writing, like a spoonful of water in a river, for more than forty-five years” (365).

This spectral self, the illegal alien or dead child, is a sort of aborted metonymy of the writers' other, successful textual selves like Linnet Muir or Huston's performing “I.” By representing the spectral self the writers imply that no productive alternative to self-creation as a writer was possible for them – only death or a barren life. That means that their choice of country, vocation and personality was not a choice but a necessity – even an inevitability.

To sum up, Huston's and Gallant's autobiographical representations – their justified or willed selves – are grounded in their need to prove that they belong where they have placed themselves, in Europe, as what they are, women writers. They use the autobiographical gesture to assert a difference between their written selves and their everyday, historical selves, and to affirm that their rhetorical selves are their “true” or necessary selves because they are the product of will and intention and the creative act of writing, rather than of mere contingency. Their self-

representations thus act as shaping and formalizing forces over the potentially random elements of temporal and geographical dispersion.

But the self created by the autobiographical act is an ironic self, in the sense that is “the pursuit of one’s own shadow,” the turning away of the desired self from the self that seeks to achieve self-representation (Gusdorf 22). The return to the past performed by the autobiographical act is an attempt to experience textually what cannot have ever been experienced in life – the moment of a self-creation that was really the long process of differentiation. “Lorsque l’homme se prend lui-même comme sujet-objet de ses écritures, il inaugure le nouvel espace de l’intimité [. . .] car le moi témoin n’est pas identique au moi tenu à distance,” writes Gusdorf (22). This “private space” that is produced by the act of self-representation *is* the written self, ironic because it is a gap, a distance that the writing self seeks to foreclose but that the act of writing is always opening up. Gallant’s and Huston’s textualization of memory is the performance of the self not as it was or is, but as what de Man calls “the positive power of an absence” (50): the creative space which allows us “to be a thousand different people in turn, and [. . .] name the sum of these people ‘I’ ” (*Losing North* 88).

References

- Belsey, Catherine. “Constructing the Subject: Deconstructing the Text.” *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991. 3rd printing 1996. 593-609.
- De Man, Paul. *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*. Introduction by Wlad Godzich. 2nd edition. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971, 1983.
- Eakin, John Paul. *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985.
- Gallant, Mavis. “Afterword.” *Paris Stories*. Selected and with an introduction by Michael Ondaatje. New York: New York Review Books, 2002. 365-378.
- . “Varieties of Exile.” *Varieties of Exile*. Selected and with an introduction, by Russell Banks. New York: New York Review Books, 2003. 149-170.
- and Geoffrey Hancock. “An Interview with Mavis Gallant.” *Canadian Fiction Magazine* 28 (Toronto, 1978): 18-68.
- Gusdorf, Georges. “Résumé des chapitres précédents.” *Les Ecritures du moi: Lignes de vie I*. Paris: Editions Odile Jacob, 1991. 7-28.
- Huston, Nancy. *Lettres parisiennes: Histoires d'exil*. Paris: Bernard Barrault, Editions J'ai lu, 1986.
- . *Losing North: Musings on Land, Tongue and Self*. Toronto: McArthur and Company, 2002.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Etrangers à nous-mêmes*. Paris: Gallimard, 1988.
- Olney, James. “A Theory of Autobiography: ‘My metaphysics . . . my physics’.” *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971. 3-50.

