



Writers and their Translators: the Case of Mavis Gallant

Judith Woodsworth

Volume 1, Number 2, 2e semestre 1988

La traduction et son public

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/037017ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/037017ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières

ISSN

0835-8443 (print)

1708-2188 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Woodsworth, J. (1988). Writers and their Translators: the Case of Mavis Gallant.

TTR : traduction, terminologie, rédaction, 1(2), 47–57.

<https://doi.org/10.7202/037017ar>

Tous droits réservés © TTR: traduction, terminologie, rédaction — Les auteurs, 1988

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

Writers and their Translators: the Case of Mavis Gallant

Judith Woodsworth

Introduction

In discussions on the various constraints to which translation is subjected, and the ways in which translations fit into the literary system of the target culture, little attention has been paid to the influence of the writer of the original text.

The relationship between writers and translators is usually positive, productive and *mutually* nurturing. Writers, when they are alive and involved in the translation process, generally appreciate the respect and admiration shown by their translators and respond with a certain degree of gratitude or cooperation. There are numerous examples of this kind of positive relationship. Elmar Tophoven, Samuel Beckett's German translator, has said, for example, that Beckett was not only involved in the translation of his work, but even taught him everything he knows about translation. Isaac Bashevis Singer (1971) has written about the importance of working closely with one's translators. There are notable Canadian examples as well. Philip Stratford has spoken and written about his relations with Antonine Maillet. Roch Carrier and Sheila Fischman are known for their «rewarding partnership» (Lawrence, 1988).¹

One of the striking exceptions to this pattern is Mavis Gallant. She has done little to facilitate the work of her translator(s), and, to some extent at least, can even be said to have rendered the translation of her work more difficult.

The purpose of this paper is to present a case study: an account of the translation of Mavis Gallant's *Home Truths* and the role that the author has played in the process. I shall briefly outline the history

of the translation of *Home Truths* and describe some of the problems that have arisen in producing and publishing it. These difficulties will be examined in the light of Gallant's attitudes to language and translation, as well as her particular cultural situation.

The case study is based on conversations I had with the author in Paris, on interviews I have conducted with the translator and publisher, as well as on some of Gallant's writings themselves.²

Who is Mavis Gallant?

Mavis Gallant has established an international reputation as a writer. She has published novels, but is perhaps best known for her short stories. Some of her most highly acclaimed works include: *My Heart is Broken*, *From the Fifteenth District*, and the collection of short stories I have chosen to focus on, *Home Truths*. Gallant is well-known in English Canada, of course: in 1981 she received the Order of Canada for her contribution to Canadian literature and the Governor General's Award for *Home Truths*. She is known in the United States as a long-time contributor to *The New Yorker*. She has been anthologized in collections of short stories, and has been invited to speak and read her work at numerous gatherings throughout the world.

Mavis Gallant is far less known to French-speaking readers, however. Unlike other English-Canadian writers such as Margaret Atwood and Alice Munro, Mavis Gallant has gone almost unnoticed both in Québec and in France, as suggested in a recent article in *Le Monde*:

Depuis trente-sept années, elle habite Paris, rive gauche, dans le quartier des éditeurs, et aucun de ses livres n'a été traduit en français. Pourtant Mavis Gallant est célèbre. Considérée depuis des décennies comme un des grands auteurs de nouvelles. Connue davantage à New-York qu'à Montréal, sa ville natale. Inconnue à Paris. (Zand, 1987)

Translations of Mavis Gallant

Until the publication of translations in France in the past few months, which we shall discuss later, Mavis Gallant remained untranslated and virtually unknown to French-speaking readers. At the time of my initial conversations with her in the fall of 1986, and indeed at the time of writing of this paper, her work had not yet appeared in French translation. Over the years, however, there has been some attempt to translate her work, culminating in the rather considerable effort to translate *Home Truths*.

Mavis Gallant was awarded an honorary doctorate by Glendon College at York University in June 1984. On this occasion, two advanced

students at the translation school presented Gallant with a French translation of the short story «My Heart is Broken». The story was translated as «J'ai le coeur brisé» under the supervision of Professor Christine Klein-Lataud. At the time the author admitted that there had been a previous attempt to translate the story but that she had been unhappy with the translation. She did not acknowledge this new effort in any way, however. No publication resulted and the students and teacher were not so much as thanked.

The translation of *Home Truths* and the politics of translation

Until recently there were more translations of French-Canadian literary works into English than of English-Canadian works into French, although in the field of non-literary (commercial and technical translation) the reverse is true. This phenomenon has been examined by a number of translators and scholars in the light of what Ray Ellenwood (1984) has called the «politics of translation»³.

The tendency for Québec readers to ignore English-Canadian literature has been reversed in the past two or three years. This has been attributed to «Québec's political coming of age» (Homel, 1988). At a time that might be described as «post-nationalist», Québec readers are no longer interested «solely in literature that is preoccupied with national identity».

Antoine del Busso, director of Boréal, the publishing company that has undertaken the translation of *Home Truths*, adds a sociological dimension to this phenomenon. Young Québécois, he feels, are not unlike other North Americans. As members of the «me-generation», they read what they like and are therefore more inclined than the preceding generation to take an interest in what has been written in English Canada.

It is not surprising in this context (at a time when Québec publishers are even beginning to produce translations of less mainstream authors such as Clark Blaise, Michael Ondaatje) that Mavis Gallant should also be published in French translation.

Mavis Gallant's works even have that Québec «angle» which is often necessary, according to Homel, for an English-Canadian book to sell in Québec. As a former Montrealer living in a French milieu, she has interesting insights into Canadians, whom she observes from a distance, as well as into the French, who are also seen from the distance of a foreigner living in their midst. *Home Truths* has particular appeal because of its content (the stories are about Canada or Canadians living abroad) and because it won the coveted Governor General's Award.

History of the translation of *Home Truths*

The translation of *Home Truths* by Boréal was initiated by publisher Antoine del Busso himself. The publishing company already had a certain image, a tradition of publishing scholarly books or literary works of a certain level, «ouvrages de plus longue durée». Del Busso considered Mavis Gallant to be an «auteur sûr» with sound literary value. He believed, in addition, that *Home Truths* was a masterpiece: «le chef-d'oeuvre le plus impeccable».

Three translators have been involved in the process. The first two, one man and one woman, both described by Mavis Gallant as «dreadful», were found to be unsatisfactory.

Michel Buttiens became the third translator to work on *Home Truths*. He holds a degree in translation from the University of Mons in Belgium. He has acquired a solid reputation as a professional translator and is currently employed at a large translation agency. Buttiens came to literary translation somewhat by chance through his acquaintance with Antoine del Busso, who suggested that he translate *Voyage of the Iceberg* by Richard Brown. In 1984, Buttiens won the Canada Council translation prize for this translation.

Around the fall of 1985 he began work on *Home Truths*. He was originally meant to revise the work of the previous translator who had received funding from the Canada Council, but whose translation was rejected by Mavis Gallant. It soon became apparent that it would not be possible to rework the translation, and that Buttiens would have to start all over again. Encouraged by the success of *Iceberg*, and anxious to try his hand at a work of somewhat greater stature, he approached the project with enthusiasm.

Buttiens spent 12-14 months working on the translation, to which he tentatively gave the title «De Bonaventure à Windsor». Mavis Gallant reacted with lavish praise and harsh criticism alternately, as illustrated by the following excerpts from her correspondence with the publisher:

I think he has done wonders, and -- as I told him -- «Samedi» and «Orphelines» actually gain in impact from translation... I am immensely pleased... (Letter of 10 March 1986 to Del Busso)

I think he has done a wonderful job with «le Virus X», which must have been murderously difficult. (Letter of 26 October 1986 to Del Busso)

At the same time, Mavis Gallant was very critical. Some of the criticism, of course, was constructive and justified. But in the end, although she said «I do not want to discourage M. Buttiens by picking at small things» (letter of 26 October 1986), she did just that and eventually rejected the entire manuscript.

Two examples of the author's objections are given below. The first is an example of a change which is quite justified, whereas the second could be considered more questionable.

1. In English: «at that time women wore white gloves to work».
In French: «à cette époque, les femmes portaient des gants blancs pour travailler».

Mavis Gallant points out that it should read «pour aller au travail», adding the remark «we did not wear white gloves *in* the office».

2. Mavis Gallant has mentioned several times her objection to the use of «bon sang», about which she feels «strongly».

She is perhaps right in finding it unjustified as a translation for the English «oh», but she objects on the grounds that it is Québécois, whereas it is an expression that is also used in France. This reflects her tendency to eliminate from the translation all traces of regional, or what she considers to be regional, usage.

She seems very concerned with the quality of Buttiens' French. She fears, first, that it is Québécois and that it might hence appear comical to her Parisian friends, secondly that it is not really French at all: «Some of Mr. Buttiens' expressions are really not French and I can't help wondering if French is his first language» (Letter of 10 March 1986). In view of the translator's qualifications and European background, one cannot help but question Gallant's reservations, which stem perhaps from her own imperfect command of French.

The translation was completed in the fall of 1986. It still has not been published, although the publisher has been in negotiations with the author. Boréal's original intention was to co-publish *Home Truths* with a French publisher, but so far Mavis Gallant has not authorized the publication of this translation in France.

Buttiens and Del Busso made a last attempt to revise the translation, carefully trying to simplify the style, to adapt to Mavis Gallant's vision. They finally gave up, not knowing whether it would ever meet the approval of the author.

Mavis Gallant's involvement in the translation of *Home Truths*

Some of the problems in the translation of this book can be attributed to various psychological, cultural, and ideological factors which have come together in the strong personality of this writer to influence her view on language and translation.

She has maintained a «droit de regard» with respect to this manuscript:

I read everything he writes very carefully because I know French. If it were Hungarian or Japanese I wouldn't care, but my friends will see this.

And yet she has questioned the extent to which she should be involved in this process:

I do hope that someone in the editorial office will read the whole manuscript, not for accuracy of translation, but for French idiom and usage. It is not up to me to do this; and, if I began, I would end by rewriting the entire book. (Letter of 26 Oct. 88)

When asked why she didn't translate her own work, like Samuel Beckett, for example, she said, «No, that would be out of the question. Translating my own work would be like writing the same thing twice.» She is not the type of author, in fact, to rewrite or, for that matter, to even reread her own work, as she says in the introduction to *Home Truths* (p. xix). She believes, furthermore, and states explicitly in the same text, that it is nearly impossible to write in two languages:

I have never known anyone perfectly bilingual, and I wonder if such a phenomenon can exist this side of schizophrenia—leaving aside certain cases of genius: Samuel Beckett comes to mind. I wonder, even, if it is desirable: one needs a strong, complete language, fully understood, to anchor one's understanding. The rest is a luxury.

Thus Gallant is not at all interested in translating her work into French, nor in formally editing or rewriting the translation. Yet she does in effect end up going over the translator's work with a fine tooth comb and imposing a significant number of changes.

Attitudes toward language

Mavis Gallant's attitudes toward language and toward the English language, in particular, are interesting. She is somewhat of a cultural anomaly. As an expatriate Canadian, living in Paris, immersed in

French culture, with very few English-speaking friends, she lives her life in French. Nonetheless she clings to the English language.

There are professional reasons for this which she expresses in the *Le Monde* article. She says that she forces herself *not* to write in French «Je vis en français... Si je me mettais à écrire aussi en français, je perdrais mon métier» (Zand, 1987). It is in this way that she is able to maintain the purity of her language, which is one of the points she also makes in the introduction to *Home Truths*.

...it has never occurred to me to write in French. In fact, I do not write it at all well; I spell it atrociously and deliberately refrain from improvement. I have to keep a strong writing wall in place or move to a different country. I think, write, and usually dream in English, and in thirty years have only made only two idiomatic errors... (1981, p. xvii).

Her devotion to the English language is very deep-seated. She was placed in a French convent at the age of four. She has stressed the importance of this experience both in writing and in conversations with me. She learned French, but so bitter was her feeling of captivity and privation in that «iron institution» (1981, p. xvi) that she came to perceive English as the «language of freedom» (interview). There is thus a certain mythology of the English language in Gallant's view of herself.

Perception of translation

This disproportionate respect for the English language has coloured her view of translation. In her introduction to *Home Truths*, her comments about maintaining the purity of her written English are closely followed - in the same paragraph - by this statement about translatability:

There is no precise equivalent for much of anything between English and French, and that is why translations almost inevitably fall short. I cannot imagine any of my fiction in French, for it seems to me inextricably bound to English syntax, to the sound, resonance, and ambiguities of English vocabulary. If I were to write in French, not only would I put things differently, but I would never set out to say the same things. (1981, pp. xvii-xviii)

English and French, in fact, are the last two languages you can translate, she has said. This view of translation is at the very least subjective. It is the kind of value judgement made by those who are unaware of what translation theory - comparative stylistics, for example - might have to contribute to the question.

The 1988 work *Paris Notebooks* includes a number of book reviews previously published in the *New Yorker*. Gallant sometimes comments on the quality of the translation of the book she is reviewing. She is particularly adamant about literal translation, which she considers a «sub-speech called Translator's Word-for-Word» (1988, p. 209). And yet when asked whether works of literature should be translated by translators who are also writers, she remarked that this would not be real translation, but rather «variations on a theme».

It is perhaps this rather naive attachment to the English language and consequent failure to grasp the complexities of the translation process, which has led to unfruitful relations with her translators, making Gallant different from those writers who have contributed to the work of their translators.

Mavis Gallant's view on language and translation are linked to her particular cultural situation and consequent ideological bias. She remains attached to Canada: she goes home once a year, she keeps in touch with Canadian friends, she has proclaimed her «statutory and emotional» ties to Canada in her writing (1981, pp. xii-xiii). Inevitably, however, she is cut off from Canadian culture and from Québec culture in particular.

Gallant lives in one potential target culture - France, but distant from the other target culture - Québec, which she sees through the eyes of an English Canadian of some 40 years ago. According to Antoine del Busso, Mavis Gallant's view of Québécois is still that of a liberal, yet potentially condescending English Canadian of the 1950s. It is possible that this out-of-date or displaced ideology has led her to reject Québec readers as a possible target audience and to prefer a European target audience.

Future of the translation

It is not yet clear whether Buttiens' translation of *Home Truths* will ever be published. Del Busso is under some pressure to publish at least a small run in Québec, otherwise the Canada Council translation grant received by the translator who preceded Buttiens would have to be paid back.

The two articles in *Le Monde* which appeared in 1987 listed three forthcoming translations into French of Mavis Gallant's fiction, including *Home Truths* by Boréal. But Buttiens is more pessimistic and wants to forget about the whole nightmarish experience: «l'enterrer» was the term he used.

In recent months, two translations have in fact been published in France: the first a translation of *Paris Notebooks*, which contains

Gallant's first-hand accounts of the «événements» of May 1968 in addition to the book reviews mentioned above; the second *Rue de Lille*, a translation of a new collection of stories entitled *Overhead in a Balloon. Stories of Paris* (Caccia, 1988).

It is clear that Mavis Gallant, along with a number of other anglophone Canadian writers, has been «discovered» by the French, and that there has been commercial pressure exerted to translate and release some of her works quickly. It is interesting to note the choice of works: a collection of stories about Paris, and a collection of essays about May 68 published in time to mark the 20th anniversary of the famous events, the French title of which - *Chroniques de Mai 68* - is more specific than the English one. The French are interested in an English-speaking writer living in their midst and writing about them. One wonders whether the French will take over the task of publishing the very Canadian *Home Truths*, and whether it will fall into the hands of yet another translator.

Conclusions: some theoretical considerations

Antoine Berman (1984, p. 15) talks about the «sacralisation de la langue maternelle» that has characterized European culture since the 16th century, bringing with it «problems of translation»: concerns about faithfulness of the translated text to the original text, and, in addition, extremely negative attitudes toward translation as compared with the act of creation itself. Mavis Gallant - paradoxically at a time when we are seeing more bi- or multi-lingual writers (Beckett, Nabokov, Conrad, Singer, etc.) - has remained so attached to her mother tongue, that she has stood in the way of French translations of her work.

Mavis Gallant, like many writers before her, has described translation metaphorically. In doing so she provides an additional example of the numerous negative metaphors which have been used throughout history to evoke translation⁴:

Translation is a painting on which they [the translators] outline in thick black crayon the design. But this may not be the most important thing about a work of art. The design is nothing without the colours. A translation of this kind runs the risk of being stark.

In an interview published in *Circuit magazine*, Michel Buttiens talks about the relationship between translation and creation. There is a fair bit of creativity involved in the translation process, which may be difficult for the reader, the author, and even the publisher to understand. Buttiens, too, uses a metaphor to evoke the translation process, comparable to the one used by Mavis Gallant because it

makes use of the painting theme. But Buttiens and Gallant differ in that he puts translation and creation on the same level whereas she sees translation as an inferior activity. In the words of Buttiens:

Nous travaillons sur un canevas et, sans vouloir parler d'adaptation, nous recréons parallèlement une oeuvre qui reflète le texte de départ, mais qui a son originalité également. J'hésite à dire «propre». Peut-être dans quelques années serai-je plus affirmatif. (Cloutier, 1986, p. 12)

One could argue that every translator will naturally give more importance to his or her work. But this has not always been the case. In the past, even translators had a negative opinion of their work. Buttiens is representative of a new generation of translators. His metaphor and comments illustrate the new stance of translators, involving not only the creation of a new work which is parallel to the original, but also a consciousness of the process.

Concordia University

Notes

1. I have examined the relations between writers and their translators elsewhere, in «Écrivains et traducteurs», *TTR*, vol. 1, n° 1, 1988.
2. Quotations which are not taken from the published articles listed below are drawn from my private conversations with Mavis Gallant, Michel Buttiens and Antoine del Busso.
3. See also Philip Stratford, *Bibliography of Canadian Books in Translation* (Ottawa, Humanities Research Council of Canada, 1975).
4. See my «Écrivains et traducteurs» and «Metaphor and Theory: Describing the Translation Process», paper presented at SSOTT III, Oslo, August 1988. To be published in the conference proceedings.

Références

- BERMAN, Antoine (1984). *L'Épreuve de l'étranger. Culture et traduction dans l'Allemagne romantique*. Paris, Gallimard.
- CACCIA, Fulvio (1988). «Les Vérités de Mavis Gallant». *La Presse*, Montréal, samedi 15 août.

- CLOUTIER, Pierre (1986). «Le Voyage de l'iceberg, le voyage du Titanic». *Circuit*, Montréal, 12, mars, pp. 11-12.
- ELLENWOOD, Ray (1984). «Some Notes on the Politics of Translation,» *Atkinson Review of Canadian Studies*, 2, no. 1.
- GALLANT, Mavis (1981). *Home Truths*. Toronto, Macmillan.
- (1988). *Paris Notebooks*. Toronto, Macmillan.
- HOMEL, David (1988). «Love Required», *The Gazette*, Montréal, Feb.6.
- SAUL, John (1987). «Le Canada des anglophones», traduit de l'anglais par Henri Robillot. *Le Monde*, Paris, vendredi 6 novembre.
- SINGER, Isaac Bashevis (1971). «On Translating My Books», in *The World of Translation*. Papers delivered at the Conference on Literary Translation. New York City, May 1970. New York, P.E.N.
- STRATFORD, Philip (1975). *Bibliography of Canadian Books in Translation*. Ottawa, Humanities Research Council of Canada.
- ZAND, Nicole (1987). «Mavis Gallant, Québécoise de langue anglaise». *Le Monde*, Paris, vendredi 13 novembre.