



Journal of the Short Story in English

Les Cahiers de la nouvelle

32 | Spring 1999

Jewish identity and otherness in the modern short story

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Édition électronique

URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/176>

ISSN : 1969-6108

Éditeur

Presses universitaires de Rennes

Édition imprimée

Date de publication : 1 mars 1999

ISSN : 0294-04442

Référence électronique

Mary Condé, « "Pichipoi" in Mavis Gallant's "Malcolm and Bea" », *Journal of the Short Story in English* [En ligne], 32 | Spring 1999, mis en ligne le 01 juillet 2008, consulté le 03 décembre 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/jsse/176>

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Mary Condé

- 1 Mavis Gallant is a writer profoundly influenced by the Holocaust, by "the first pictures of death camps" which, she wrote in 1972, "stopped a whole generation in its tracks" (Gallant 1972 196). In her "Paris Notebook" of the student riots of 1968 she records the seventeen-year-old Barbara's remark that the German students who are being deported are needed: "*...Oui, nous avons besoin des allemands.*" Gallant comments,

Her mother, who spent the war years in a concentration camp, says nothing. I feel as if I were watching two screens simultaneously (Gallant 1968 15).
- 2 In a review of Günter Grass from 1973 she recalls that he

had been a prisoner of war at 17, and the Americans had forced him to look at Dachau: it is something he mentions when he is interviewed. Occasionally he will say that he broke with his youthful past at that moment; in this book he says he did not believe what he saw. Probably both are true (Gallant 1973 205).
- 3 In her observations on these two seventeen-year-olds we sense the same engagement with the managing of memories which is central to the story "Malcolm and Bea".
- 4 Gallant is also constantly alert in her journalism to French anti-Semitism (e.g. Gallant 1968 33, 45, 66, 89, 1983 239). She observes in parenthesis in a review that

(The persistent French fantasy about Jewish ears might be worth an anthropologist's attention: they are supposed to stick out, like President Kennedy's, or to be set low on the head, like those of Pope John XXIII, or to have attached earlobes, like Virginia Woolf's.) (Gallant 1973 146)
- 5 In another parenthesis, in another review, she says of 1985, that

(the most popular radio station in France is occupied for much of its daytime broadcasting by a teller of scatological and racist jokes. Jews, a constant butt, do not complain, because, apparently, they do not wish to be seen as spoilsports.) (Gallant 1985 182)
- 6 She wrote in a review of 1976:

The respectability of French anti-Semitism is its longest taproot. The educated and intelligent Robert Brasillach wrote, with pride, "Anti-Semitism is not a German

invention, it is French tradition." Every country breeds a virus of racist jokes for amusement; a strain circulating in France for about a year now has been based on puns to do with deportation - this in a city where ghosts of deported children haunt the railway stations; ghosts visible, alas, to fewer and fewer of the living (Gallant 1976 218).

- 7 'Malcolm and Bea', a story originally published in *The New Yorker* on 23 March 1968, included in Gallant's 1988 collection *In Transit*, but omitted from her recent *Selected Stories*, is permeated with references to nationality and race. In the first paragraph the Englishman Malcolm Armitage, in France with NATO, places children at play as American, and he himself is placed as 'not French' (77). He once, before he learnt not to tease her, asked his Canadian wife "'Who do you hate most, Bea? The English, the French, or the Americans?'" (78) Bea lies in telling Malcolm that her mother was French-Canadian, rather than Native Canadian (86). His friend Leonard Baum self-pityingly tells Malcolm that "... My life today makes no more sense than a sweeper's in India" (89) Leonard's wife Verna, reproaching Malcolm and Bea for what she perceives as their incompetence, says to them with the sublime irrelevance and lack of irony so typical of Gallant's characters,

... If intelligent young parents like you two can't do the right things, what can you expect from people like the Congolese? I don't mean that racially(92)

- 8 It seems clear that the Baums themselves are Jewish, although this is never made explicit; in a story from 1979, 'Baum, Gabriel, 1935 - ()', which has some analogies with 'Malcolm and Bea', Gabriel Baum's parents are presumed murdered in concentration camps in 1943 (Gallant 1997 455). Since her marriage Verna Baum has converted to Catholicism, and they are described as 'a raggle-taggle international family' (88), moving from country to country with Leonard's various postings. It is Leonard Baum who first proposes 'Pichipoi' as a controlling idea in human life, and thus for Gallant's story, by telling Malcolm that one of the statements in his own projected obituary would be 'All his life he thought he was going to Pichipoi.'
- 9 Leonard asks Malcolm if he knows what Pichipoi means, and Malcolm thinks to himself:
I know about Pichipoi. It was the name of an unknown place. The Jews in Paris invented it. It was their destination, but it was a place that might not be any worse than the present. Some of them thought it might even be better, because no one had come back yet to say it was worse. They couldn't imagine it. It was half magic. Sometimes in their transit camps they'd say, "Let's get to Pichipoi and get it over with" (89).
- 10 Malcolm and Leonard, two men oppressed by unsatisfactory marriages, are at this point in a tunnel in a traffic jam, on their way back to the temporary homes in a foreign country they are about to leave for temporary homes in two other foreign countries. Malcolm at first explicitly rejects any connection between Leonard, and by association himself, and the Jews who thought about Pichipoi, although this explicit rejection may of course suggest the seduction of such a connection. Malcolm reasons with himself, first, that Leonard was not in France at the time of the deportation of the Jews, but 'must have been in Canada, in college.' Secondly, 'Leonard is still in control of his life.' Thirdly, although he is miserable because his girlfriend has tried to kill herself, because his name is now known to the police, because he has to go home to face his wife, and because he is being forced to leave France because 'the French have kicked us out and they hate us', his future is not going to get any worse. Fourthly, Malcolm feels that

Leonard should not say 'Pichipoi' since it is a word that is, after all, 'entirely magic' because children invented it. Malcolm concludes his thoughts:

It is a sacred word. But it was such a long time ago, as long ago as the Children's Crusade. Leonard is generous; he knows he is presuming. He is on sacred ground, with his shoes on. They were on their way to dying. If every person thought his life was a deportation, that he had no say in where he was going, or what would happen once he got there, the air would be filled with invisible trains and we would collide in our dreams (89).

- 11 Malcolm is thinking here, as from time to time he narrates, in the first person. It is one of Gallant's achievements as a storyteller that the shifts from first to third person in her narratives brilliantly suggest the illogical and self-interested interpolations of individuals into a clear and rational discourse on history. Malcolm makes sensible distinctions between Leonard's situation and the situation of the beleaguered Jews in wartime Paris, but his consoling aside to himself that

it was such a long time ago, as long ago as the Children's Crusade

- 12 shows how faint to his perceptions are the ghosts of deported French children haunting the railway stations. That doomed assault on Jerusalem had tragic consequences for thousands of children, but it took place in 1212. To consign the deported French children to the same shadowy realms of the past indicates, ironically enough, the same abnegation of responsibility as Malcolm's historically accurate assessment that he himself would have been "what - four, five? Roy's age?" (89) Debórah Dwork, in her study *Children With A Star: Jewish Youth in Nazi Europe* (1991) claims that the focus of all the histories of the Holocaust, written over a period of almost fifty years, is adults: "Children are conspicuously, glaringly, and screamingly silently absent" (Dwork 253). This is not true of "Malcolm and Bea", for Malcolm's attitude to his small stepson Roy is one of the moral touchstones of the story. Roy himself, however, is remarkably silent as a character, and remains an enigma to his stepfather.

- 13 Leonard never explicitly defines what "Pichipoi" means to him, and Malcolm's analysis of the word is significantly different from that of most historians. Annette Wieviorka records that the first convoy of Jews left Drancy for Auschwitz on 27 March 1942, and that it was in an infirmary, around September 1942, that some Jewish children came up with the word "Pichipoi", which was then adopted by all deportees. She explains that

Originally, it designated an imaginary place in Yiddish folklore and a popular children's rhyme. Made up from the Polish words *pich* ("drink") and *poi* ("give the livestock water"), this fantastic hamlet came to stand for their last hope (Wieviorka 137).

- 14 She goes on to quote from Georges Wellers' documentary account *De Drancy à Auschwitz* (1946):

In the camp at Drancy, Pichipoi represented the unknown place where you were being sent, where things would be better and easier (Wellers 68),

- 15 and from André Schwarz-Bart's novel *The Last of the Just* (1973):

So it was that at Drancy a belief was current in a distant kingdom called Pichipoi, where the Jews, guided by the staves of their blond shepherds, would be permitted to graze industriously on the grass of a fresh start (Schwarz-Bart 351).

- 16 Schwarz-Bart makes it clear that their real destination was literally incredible to the Jews (Schwarz-Bart 395-396), and that "Pichipoi", despite its disquieting overtones of Jews as animals, however kindly treated, is emphatically a good place. Malcolm defines

it, in far more pessimistic terms, as "a place that might not be any worse than the present".

- 17 Another word which has resonance for the concentration camps is "Canada", the name given to the storehouses in which the property stolen from the prisoners as they arrived was collected (Höss 95, Vrba 266). Bea is reading *Montcalm and Wolfe*, Parkman's nineteenth-century history of her country, a choice which suggests that she, like Malcolm, has little investment in contemporary history, and she tells Malcolm that she has got up to the part about Canada being the prey of jackals (78). This is near the beginning of the second volume, so that unless Bea is merely being provocative, she is an assiduous reader; Parkman remarks of the mid-eighteenth century that "Canada was the prey of official jackals" (Parkman II 19). The connections between the two Canadas here, both standing for theft on a colossal scale, suggest another potential identification with the Jews.
- 18 Malcolm's judgement that in using a word which children invented Leonard "is on sacred ground, with his shoes on" is curiously linked to the "sacred grass" of the story's opening sentence, the grass between the apartment blocks, the "holy grass" on which the American wives stand in bare feet drinking coffee and on which the American children play. The *gardien*, "a bad-tempered old man in a dirty collar" (78), futilely blows his whistle to drive both groups off, and is goaded into rage by the American wives, "furiously whistling, like a lifeguard who for some reason was unable to launch a boat", and literally dancing with rage (90). The sacredness of the ground here is clearly nothing more than a bureaucratic figment, monitored by a figure who is not only impotent but ridiculous. It is also curious that the terms Malcolm uses of the Jewish children, that they were on their way to dying, and that they had no say in where they were going, are applicable to himself. By the end of the story, too, as Janice Kulyk Keefer has pointed out, Malcolm "makes his own appropriation" of "Pichipoi" (Keefer 170). Denying its specific historical association, he identifies its real meaning as being alone, as each person being flung separately into a room without windows (94).
- 19 Karen Smythe has identified Gallant's project as a writer as the presentation of "segments of contemporary life as seen from her distinctly ironic perspective" (Smythe 22), and Neil Besner has spoken of her "stories in which memory makes history into home" (Besner 93) in "Malcolm and Bea" Gallant shows how contemporary life and the memory of history are self-indulgently merged by characters in search of the stability of home. Bea, who sometimes describes "a house and a garden and a set of parents" in her past (81) as if Malcolm had never seen the reality, has, after all, nothing intrinsic to do with the plight of eighteenth-century Canada. When she tells Malcolm she has read *Montcalm and Wolfe* up to the part where it says Canada was the prey of jackals,
she looks as if he were the jackal, because he was born in England. She looks as if she had access to historical information Malcolm will never understand (78).
- 20 This ludicrous version of historical information as privileged memory is matched by a darkly comic moment of forgetfulness when Leonard Baum, declaiming about his responsibilities to his family, despite his possession of a mistress, cannot remember his own wife's name (88). Similarly, Bea, planning a hypothetical separation from Malcolm, says to him, "'All right, you take Roy, I'll keep Ruth'", forgetting that Roy is not Malcolm's child (81). Roy himself, at the end of the story, is absorbed not in his own memories, but the "Kodachrome holiday memories" (91) of the Baums.

- 21 Memory is demonstrated as arbitrary, both in terms of the characters' own lives and in the relevance they attach to historical events; for this reason Gallant assigns the same notion of sacred ground to the idea of doomed Jewish children and to a pointless and often broken rule. The word "Pichipoi" itself is remembered inaccurately by Malcolm, and used, first by Leonard and then by himself, to express a self-pitying view of what are relatively safe and affluent lives.
- 22 There is a parallel here with Bea's treatment of her son Roy. She is alert to what he should not watch on television, exclaiming angrily, "'The goddamn mother's died. Roy shouldn't be looking at that'" (93), but at the same time quite capable of telling the child that she brought the wrong baby home from hospital:
"I had a lovely boy but some other mother got him. They gave me Roy by mistake" (79).
- 23 She will protect Roy only against fictional but not real cruelty, just as Malcolm will engage with "Pichipoi" only on a sentimental level. It is the horror of the story "Baum, Gabriel, 1935-()" that Gabriel Baum acquires "a variety of victim experiences":
Gabriel had been shot, stoned, drowned, suffocated, and marked off for hanging; had been insulted and betrayed; had been shoved aboard trains and dragged out of them; had been flung from the back of a truck with such accidental violence that he had broken his collarbone (Gallant 1997 462).
- 24 The horror here is that Gabriel is acting out all the possibilities of his parents' death on film, for an audience, "some eating their dinner" (Gallant 1997 462).
- 25 In "Malcolm and Bea" Leonard Baum has discarded his Jewish identity, just as Bea has decided not to trust Malcolm (86) and has discarded her Native Canadian identity. But Leonard resumes a kind of ersatz Hollywood identity as a Jew by appropriating "Pichipoi" in the midst of his torrent of clichés about his life. Malcolm, a more sympathetic character than Leonard, who partly narrates the story and in doing so establishes himself in control of some of its ironies, comes a little closer to a consideration of what the word really connotes, but ultimately shows that the ghosts of deported children haunting the railway stations are invisible to him too. His reflection on Leonard's use of the word "Pichipoi", that
If every person thought his life was a deportation, that he had no say in where he was going, or what would happen once he got there, the air would be filled with invisible trains and we would collide in our dreams (89),
26 suggests, finally, that the air is indeed filled with invisible trains. The warring aspirations of the married couples could certainly be aptly described as collisions in dreams, but they are colluding in their denial of a real and atrocious suffering.
- 27 The fact that "Malcolm and Bea" was not reprinted in Gallant's recent *Selected Stories* may indicate that she is now dissatisfied with it (Gallant 1997 XVIII), but it is a fine and very disturbing story. When *In Transit* was published in Britain, a critic commented on all the stories in the collection that
Children here do not share a secret language or code; left clinging to the spars of adult wreckage they enjoy no such luxury as a common cause (Wordsworth 13).
- 28 In "Malcolm and Bea" the secret meaning of "Pichipoi" is cracked open, and then utterly degraded.

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RÉSUMÉS

Le mot 'Pichipoi' est d'une importance centrale dans la nouvelle de Mavis Gallant, "Malcolm and Bea", tirée du recueil *In Transit*, publié en 1988. "Pichipoi", le nom d'un endroit inconnu, a été inventé par des enfants juifs qui, en 1942, attendaient à Drancy la déportation vers les camps de concentration ; ce nom servait à décrire leur destination. 'Pichipoi' se percevait, initialement, comme un endroit de bonheur, mais Gallant lui donne une connotation plutôt neutre dans sa nouvelle; Leonard Baum, un personnage qui nie clairement son identité juive, l'utilise pour s'apitoyer sur son propre sort. Dès lors, ce mot devient la métaphore directrice dans la vie de deux couples mariés, expatriés et en transit entre la France et d'autres endroits de l'Europe. Gallant, qui fait fréquemment référence à l'anti-sémitisme dans son journalisme, explore dans "Malcolm and Bea" la signification de l'oblitération du souvenir de l'holocauste : ses personnages se rappellent avec une passion égale la Croisade des Enfants de 1212, et le pillage du Canada par les puissances européennes au dix-huitième siècle. La perte de la mémoire tourne à l'humour noir quand Leonard Baum oublie le nom de sa propre femme, en plein milieu d'une déclaration de fidélité.

"Malcolm and Bea" est une méditation sur l'identité juive, dans le contexte de la responsabilité morale, et en particulier notre responsabilité morale envers les enfants.

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