

Painting what is not there:  
Vision and narrative in  
Mavis Gallant's story "The Doctor"

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"Literature is no more and nothing less than a matter of life and death."  
Mavis Gallant

"Memory is something that cannot be subsidized or ordained. It can,  
however, be destroyed; and it is inseparable from language."  
Mavis Gallant

The interpretation of boundary as a mobile term freed from the inexorable grip of binary oppositions is one of the tenets of post-structural criticism. It is related to a view of reality as fluid and to a conception of words as indeterminate, caught up in the dynamic delineation of possible meanings without predestined or predictable end. Yet, and as the story "The Doctor" by Mavis Gallant suggests, the act of narration demands footholds, provisional stances over the unavoidable "seams and cracks" (503)<sup>1</sup> of life, the gaps which demand the never ending braiding of memory and language to continue. "The Doctor" is about the vulnerability of such stances and their necessary re-adjustments for the narrative to accommodate – in fits and starts – former misreading, false memories and partial understandings. For Gallant, who has been compared to Proust, the question is not so much to write in search of lost time but rather to find truthful ways of showing the irretrievable nature

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<sup>1</sup> The page numbers refer to "The Doctor" in Mavis Gallant's collection of 1989, *Overhead in a Balloon and Other Stories* (London, Boston: Faber and Faber, 1989) 484-505.

of the past which resists memory and narrative appropriation. In this way, and as the critic Karen E. Smythe aptly points out, high demands are made on the reader who becomes a necessary presence in the evaluation of the story: "Gallant's narrator and character elegists... most often use memory to escape from the past rather than to understand it... Thus a judgement of character and of self is implicitly demanded of the reader of Gallant's work". (1992:11).

"The Doctor" was written in 1977 and belongs to the Linnet Muir cycle, six short stories featuring the eponymous female character. The stories first appeared in *The New Yorker* between 1975 and 1977 and were published together in Gallant's collection *Home Truths: Selected Canadian Stories* of 1981 (Lynch, 2004: 1). Entitled "In Youth is Pleasure" (1975), "Between Zero and One" (1975), "Varieties of Exile" (1976), "Voices Lost in Snow" (1976), "The Doctor" (1977) and "With a Capital T" (1977), all the stories use autobiographical material: the Montreal of Gallant's childhood and youth.

Mavis Gallant was born in 1922 in Montreal, Quebec, to English-speaking parents. Raised as a Protestant, and in English, she was sent to a Catholic French boarding-school at the age of four. The overlapping of bi-lingual, bi-religious and bi-cultural realities were part of her upbringing and an exception at the time – the decades after the First World War – when, the English speaking and French speaking communities in Montreal were hostile or simply ignored one another.<sup>2</sup> In "Preface" to *The Collected Stories*, the author stresses the peculiar cultural coordinates of her identity in Canada: "there is no such thing as a Canadian childhood. One's beginnings are regional. Mine are wholly Quebec, English and Protestant, yes, but with a strong current of French and Catholic. My parents sent me off on that current by placing me in a French convent school.... It was a singular thing to do and in those days unheard of. It left

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<sup>2</sup> In "The Doctor", this is how the narrator defines the society of Montreal: "... most other people simply floated in mossy little ponds labelled "French and Catholic" or "English and Protestant", never wondering what it might be like to step ashore; or wondering, perhaps, but weighing up the danger. To be out of a pond is to be in unmapped territory". (494).

me with two systems of behaviour, divided by syntax and tradition; two environments to consider, one becalmed in a long twilight of nineteenth-century religiosity; two codes of social behaviour; much practical experience of the difference between a rule and a moral point" (1996, XV).

At the age of twenty seven – in 1950 – and after some years as a journalist in Montréal, Gallant left for Paris in order to become a writer. In this she succeeded, writing mostly for *The New Yorker*, a fact which has contributed to the late recognition of the author in Canada. From the 1980s onward, however, Gallant has been acknowledged as one of Canada's most important short story writers. Among her many awards, the most significant, in November 2006, is the Prix Athanase-David, an award from the province of Quebec that, for the first time in 38 years of existence, was given to a Canadian author writing in English.<sup>3</sup>

Gallant, who still lives in Paris, is a polyglot. She speaks predominantly French, but her writing is done in English, which she defines as the language of the imagination linked to her childhood: "I owe it to children's books ... that I absorbed once and for all the rhythm of English prose, the order of words in an English sentence and how they are spelled. I was eight before I was taught to write and spell English in any formal way, and what I was taught I already knew. By then, English was irremovably entrenched as the language of imagination." (1996: XVI). The author is adamant about the unique nature of each language – "the unbridgeable inequalities of language" – and stresses the asymmetric relationship between French and English. In the introduction to *Home Truths*, she states: "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 thing. Words have an association that the primary, dictionary definitions cannot provide, and that are all translations usually offer." (1997, 235).

The fierceness with which Mavis Gallant maintains French and English in separate compartments echoes the way the author defends her writing from her private life. One could argue that, living in a foreign

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<sup>3</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mavis\\_Gallant](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mavis_Gallant).

country yet sustained by her mother tongue, Mavis Gallant is in a privileged position to portray the dislocations of characters lost in “varieties of exile”<sup>4</sup>. In the fissures between languages, cultures and homelands, the possibilities of connectedness and communication meet their limits and threaten to disintegrate. The critic Ronald Bryden writes that “Transit, noise and the symbiosis between them ....are Mavis Gallant’s major themes – noise, that is, in the philosopher’s definition of data that carry no meaning to the senses they fall on”. (1989, 2).<sup>5</sup>

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“The Doctor” is a first person narrative in which the twenty two year old Linnet Muir tries to make sense of herself by calling up successive scenes from her childhood: the world of herself and her parents in Montreal, her parents’ friends, houses, interests, and secret games. The myriad elements of those memories gravitate around the exclusive relationship Linnet remembers having had, as a very small child, with her paediatrician, Dr. Raoul Chauchard, also a personal friend of her parents. When Dr. Chauchard gives her the engraving of a doctor watching over a dying girl, the four year old Linnet thinks he is giving her a portrait of himself, “timeless, like God the Father” (485). Reminiscing later about the incident, Linnet will trace the stages of her growth into awareness as the gradual dislocation from the centre of the picture to a place where she is obliged to face “a feeling of loss, of helpless sadness” (500).

Unlike Henry James’s character in *What Maisie knew*<sup>6</sup> which is upheld by an almost invisible third person narrator, in “The Doctor” the love of the small child for the paediatrician is told by Linnet’s twenty year

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<sup>4</sup> “Varieties of exile” is the title of one of the Linnet Muir stories and was chosen for the New York Review of Books’ edition of a Mavis Gallant collection. *Varieties of Exile* (New York: NRB, 2003). It is the perfect expression to synthesize Gallant’s work.

<sup>5</sup> It is no coincidence that Mavis Gallant starts the “Preface” to *The Collected Stories* with a comparison between herself and Samuel Beckett: “Samuel Beckett, answering a hopeless question from a Paris newspaper – “Why do you write?” – said it was all he was good for: ‘Bon qu’à ça.’”[sic]. (1996, IX).

<sup>6</sup> Henry James. *What Maisie Knew*. 1897 ( Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics, 1998).

old self whose vision of the past is rendered in a lucid, pitiless tone. This makes for painful<sup>7</sup> reading, because the reader's access to the child is barred by ironic, sometimes caustic portrayals forcefully controlled by the narrative stance. However, the story is itself the narrative of its own necessarily provisional nature and thus allows for "seams and cracks" where the reader may glimpse maladjustments between former experience and later remembrances.

The words "seams and cracks" belong to the narrator and appear at the end of the story, when, as an adult, Linnet's image of Dr. Chauchard is shocked out of its self-complacency when she learns, from his obituaries, that the doctor was also a poet and a founder member of "The Arts and Letters Society of Quebec" (502). It is something that Linnet's English speaking parents were ignorant of and that Dr. Chauchard could never tell them, forced as he was to obliterate the French part of himself when mixing with the English-speaking cultural elite of Montreal of the twenties: "In mixed society, such little of it as existed, English seemed to be the social rule. It did not enter the mind of any English speaker that the French were at a constant disadvantage, like a team obliged to play all their matches away from home" (493).

What language belongs to what group, which language determines the intimacy of a relationship, and the perplexities resulting from having to move constantly between identities marked by different languages, are the recurrent obstacles that Linnet must learn to recognize and make sense of in order to retrieve a sense of self.<sup>8</sup> The story, "The Doctor", is precisely that, a sequence of scenes which are put together in a way that

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<sup>7</sup> "If, for the most part, Gallant's irony feels to the reader more like an affliction than a pleasure of the text, it may be because, in Blanchot's phrase 'Affliction is the loss of a dwelling place'" Nicole Côté, "Introduction", Nicole Côté and Peter Sabor, eds, *Varieties of Exile. New Essays on Mavis Gallant* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002) 3.

<sup>8</sup> The child Linnet's perplexities are reminiscent of *David Copperfield*, especially the scene where David tries to make sense of how the people of Mr. Pegotty's household are connected. There are more echoes of Dickens' novel in Gallant's story, inevitable perhaps, as *David Copperfield* is the paradigm of the child lost and ordered about by adults. There is a connection with Luke Fildes who was the illustrator of Dickens' last and unfinished novel: *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*.

allows for the small child to sail through and around the bewilderingly complex world of the adults which conveys puzzlement, fear and even sadness, all safely kept at a distance through wit and irony.

When Linnet finally learns that Dr. Chauchard was also a writer, however, the impact of this new piece of information forces her to acknowledge the partial point of view of her childhood memories and reveals the concomitant erroneous nature of her narrative. The discovery is said to be “an earthquake, the collapse of the cities we build over the past to cover seams and cracks we cannot account for” (502). As a consequence, the reader is thrown back to the beginning of the story and made to glimpse, beyond the caustic tone, the absences in Linnet’s tale which now become visible in the seams of the narrative texture as a “figure of grief” (Karen Smythe, 1992).<sup>9</sup> Linnet goes so far as to recognize her sorrow herself and the story ends upon a lament, a lament for not having heard, as a child, Dr. Chauchard’s “real voice, the voice that transcends this or that language ....I ought to have heard it when I was still under ten and had all my wits around me” (505).

The story, “The Doctor” may thus be said to be a portrayal of the artist as a young Canadian woman – the critic Gerald Lynch calls the Linnet Muir cycle a *Künstlerroman* in the tradition of Joyce (Lynch: 2004, 1) – who must distance herself from the past and get in touch with it through successive imaginative recreations. Indeed, the ending of the story reaches out to what, at the beginning, is scorned as infantile omnipotence: the love of the child Linnet for Dr. Chauchard.

Dr. Chauchard is introduced in the story as a figure in a picture which only later in the story is identified as a reproduction of a painting of 1891 by Luke Fildes., “The Doctor”.<sup>10</sup> Determined to distance herself

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<sup>9</sup> The elegiac nature of Mavis Gallant’s use of irony is discussed in Karen A. Smythe, *Figuring Grief. Gallant, Munro and the Poetics of Grief* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s UP, 1992).

<sup>10</sup> “The Doctor” by Sir Luke Fildes, R. A. (1844-1927) ... was once one of the best-known of all late-Victorian paintings, in part because reproductions of it hung in many doctor’s offices” cf. [www.victorianweb.org/painting/fildes/](http://www.victorianweb.org/painting/fildes/). The painting was commissioned by Henry Tate and Fildes was inspired by the doctor who watched

from the childish longings that, as a child, Linnet projected into the engraving, the narrator disparages Fildes' English and late Victorian mimetic art. Reproductions of the picture are said to flow "into every crevice and corner of North America and the British Empire" (484) as if its foreign – British and colonial – sentimentality were a viscous glue that deceitfully unifies the irregularities in real and mental landscape: "Who can remember now a picture called, 'The Doctor'? From 1891, when the original was painted, to the middle period of the Depression, when it went finally out of style, reproductions of this work, flowed into every crevice and corner of North America and the British Empire, swamping continents." (484).

The picture is not even introduced as a work of art but as a didactic image of "Christian submission or Christian pessimism, depending on the beholder" (484) and immediately rejected as kitsch for the false hope it promises: "the monochrome promise that existence is insoluble, tragedy static, poverty endearing and heavenly justice a total mystery" (484).<sup>11</sup>

Fildes' painting – a narrative picture of a deathbed scene in a workman's cottage with, in the foreground, the sitting figure of a doctor watching over a dying or very ill child – is therefore violently rejected.<sup>12</sup>

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over his own dying son. "The painting shows a concerned physician watching a dying child. *The Doctor* was acclaimed by critics and became one of the best-selling engravings of the Victorian era. One doctor told his fellow students that a library of books would not do what this picture has done and will do for the medical profession in making the hearts of our fellow men warm to us in confidence and affection." [www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/fildes.htm](http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/fildes.htm).

<sup>11</sup> In his discussion of "KITSCH" in *The Dictionary of Art* (London: Macmillan, 1998), Dennis Dutton cites Clive Bell who in *Art* (1913) "denied that Sir Luke Fildes' *The Doctor* (1891, London, Tate) was a work of art because its effect relies wholly on its sentimental subject-matter: the painting is 'worse than nugatory because the emotion it suggests is false. What it suggests is not pity and admiration but a sense of complacency in our own pitifulness and generosity.'" ([www.denisdutton.com/kitsch-macmillan.htm/](http://www.denisdutton.com/kitsch-macmillan.htm/)).

<sup>12</sup> Contrary to Gallant's story, Fildes' painting inspired the English poet U. A. Fanthorpe to write a poem, "The Doctor", which celebrates the ethics of the aesthetic gaze. It is

The conventional deathbed scene and the perspective of the light falling on the faces of the doctor and the child, bringing them together in affective intimacy, are stylistically disdained as sentimental regression. Continents like North America and the British Empire, the text suggests, require an art that does not obliterate the roughness and angularity with flowing sentiment. As such, “The Doctor” is also a story about finding new forms that will do justice to the irreconcilable realities the narrator inhabits. It is a way of inventing a Canadian art that, to be truthful, must break with the homogeneity of the traditions that dominate it. Thus, and trying to find a reason why Dr. Chauchard did not tell his English friends that he was a poet, the narrator remembers how, to her parents’ generation, the concept itself of a Canadian art was unthinkable: “French books were from France; English books from England or the United States. It would not have entered their minds that the languages that they heard spoken around them could be written, too” (502).

The incapability of Linnet’s parents and their friends to conceive of themselves as non-colonised, i.e. as autonomous from their home countries – France and England – reflects, in a sense, Margaret Atwood’s thesis on Canadian literature, aptly called *Survival* in which she claims that “Canada isn’t a self-respecting nation” (2004, 21),<sup>13</sup> and that whereas American Literature may be said to have a central symbol called “The Frontier” (40)

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the introductory poem of Fanthorpe’s collection *A Watching Brief* (London: Peterloo Press, 1987) which has Fildes’ picture on the cover. In Canada, the writer, Alice Munro also alludes to Fildes’ picture. In her novel of 1971, *Lives of Girls and Women*, a *Bildungsroman* of a young Canadian woman artist, the main character isolates herself in her parents’ front room to study for the exams: “...I noticed nothing, only noticed, without being aware of it, the things in that room, which was my cell or chapel. The faded pattern of the rug... and two pictures –one of the Castle of Chillon, dark out of the pearly lake, and the other of a little girl lying on two unmatched chairs, in a rosy light, parents weeping in the shadows behind and a doctor beside her looking tranquil, but not optimistic.” (Alice Munro, *Lives of Girls and Women*. 1971 (London: Penguin Books, 1973) 175-238, 204. Emphasis added. A comparison between Munro, Gallant and Fanthorpe in relation to Fildes’ picture is a forthcoming project.

<sup>13</sup> Atwood’s emphasis

and English Literature "The Island" (41), Canadian literature is dominated by the symbol of "Survival, *La Survivance*" (41)<sup>14</sup>.

Although Gallant may be called a writer who shows the exhilarations of life on the margin – after all, she went abroad in order to write – in the story "The Doctor" the rejection of Fildes' picture implies the refusal of a pure and unique English tradition, also and especially when, "to overseas visitors ... 'The Doctor' is incarnated as an oil painting in the Tate Gallery in London, in the company of other Victorian miseries, entitled 'Hopeless Dawn' and 'The Last day in the Old Home'" (485). In the new context, however, the painting does not acquire artistic value but doubly confirms its falsity, now also as a work of art: "In museum surroundings – classified, ticketed – 'The Doctor' conveyed a new instruction: Death is sentimental, art is pretense" (485).

What is no pretence, however, is the small child's desire to be the centre of attention, the possibility of which she glimpses in Fildes' picture. The child's totalizing vision is thus projected into a work of art that is confused with reality: "When he took the engraving down from the wall of his office, I understood him to be offering me a portrait of himself" (485). It is a false art, however, which the grown up Linnet will reject as a child's magical thinking: "What I was sensitive to is nearly too plain to be signalled: the dying girl, a child, is the heart of the composition. The parents are in the shadow where they belong. Their function is to be sorry. The doctor has only one patient: light from a tipped lampshade falls on her and her alone" (485-86).

True art will be her own story, the story of herself "learning to look" (Clement, 2000) bringing into the foreground the parents and their love games which include Dr. Chauchard who is coveted by Linnet's mother. Thus, and as the doctor is drawn into the exclusive group of the small English speaking Montreal elite, he gradually sides with the parents against Linnet who still believes that, as in Fildes' picture, she and the doctor are bound as equals in a unique relationship carried out in French. "Open the door: *c'est moi*", she calls through the letter-box of the doctor's office, when, still a little girl she cannot yet reach the bell: "His front door,

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<sup>14</sup> Atwood's emphasis

painted in that gloomy shade my father called Montreal green, is seen from below, at an angle – a bell too high for me during the first visits, a letter box through which I called, “Open the door; *c’est moi*,” believing still that *moi* would take me anywhere (486-7)<sup>15</sup>.

Thematically, the scene echoes Fildes’ picture in the role that the main character claims for herself: “moi”, the centre of the universe, suspended and upheld by the doctor’s gaze. Formally, however, the scene is depicted from the outside: the narrator shows the child’s point of view through a series of concrete objects whose inaccessibility exposes the delusion of the child’s sense of omnipotence. In extension, all points of view that pretend to embrace the whole picture – Fildes’, for example – are denounced as false. In a very literal way, Gallant’s story replaces the centralizing composition of Victorian art with an aesthetic which allows for displacement, fragmentation and incompleteness. The techniques of modernism are required to picture Linnet’s growing sense of loss when the confrontations with the mysteries of the adult world gradually pull her out of the centre and displace her, first to a French Catholic boarding school and, when at home, to her room or outdoors play. The particular variety of exile that is Linnet’s is the exile of small children in the world of the grown ups, the way they are ordered about, dismissed, coveted and rejected in turn.

There is no sentimental dramatizing of childhood loneliness in “The Doctor” but lucid pictures of parental double-binds and a child’s strong sense of injustice. It is also the record of how the child finds the resources to react through playing, when, alone in her room, she builds a “foreign”<sup>16</sup> city, called Marigold, which to “a visitor ... was a slum of empty boxes, serving trays, bottles, silver paper, overturned chairs” but to the little girl “streets and houses, churches and convents, restaurants and railway stations.” (500). It is here, in Marigold, with the assistance of Ruby the maid that she stages her first plots: “The insane Stepmother”, “The Rich, Selfish Cousins”, “The Death from Croup of Baby Sister”

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<sup>15</sup> Gallant’s emphasis

<sup>16</sup> My emphasis.

(500). It is no coincidence that Linnet finds solace in the presence of the maid, the only other powerless character in the household. The indifference of her parent's clique<sup>17</sup> towards someone like Ruby, a Canadian from the Maritimes, is emphasized by the inhuman epithet that defines her as "the homesick underpaid Newfoundlander" (492).<sup>18</sup> Differences of class and differences between adults and children are seen as analogous to colonial relationships: asymmetric, abusive, silencing.

Marigold is one of Linnet's first transformations of the confusion, loneliness and revolt of childhood, the translation into other languages of the "desires and secrets and second thoughts threading from person to person, from bachelor to married woman, from mother of none to somebody's father.... matted, invisible, and quite dangerous" (491).<sup>19</sup> It is related to the biography of the author, Mavis Gallant, who, in the "Preface" to *The Collected Stories* explains that "talking Marigold" was the name she gave to a language that she made up as a child, a mixture of English, French and Italian syllables: "I made up a mishmash of English, French, and the mysterious Italian syllables in recordings of belcanto, which my mother liked and often played. I called this mixture "talking Marigold." (CS, XVI). But just as Gallant had to abandon the mixture of languages and choose only one to become an author, Linnet's Marigold will be a step towards choosing better pictures of life, pictures that do

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<sup>17</sup> The narrator speaks of their "ruthless kind of exclusiveness" (494).

<sup>18</sup> A Newfoundlander is an inhabitant of Newfoundland but also the name of a breed of dogs. Thus Ruby and Linnet occupy the level of dogs: "down, *down*" (494) (narrator's emphasis). Linnet compares the way her father treats her to the way he treats his dogs: "Down" (492)... "There came a point ...where orders to dogs and instructions to children were given in the same voice. The only difference was that a dog got "Down, damn it," and of course, no one ever swore at me"." (494)

<sup>19</sup> I read into the story an unspoken allusion to Dr. Chauchard's homosexuality: he dies a bachelor, and although he is always accompanied by a female companion, Mrs. Erskine, (the child Linnet senses that "Dr. Chauchard and Mrs. Erskine were somehow together but never went out alone": 493), Mrs. Erskine's huge sexual appetite for younger men is extensively dwelled upon and positively evaluated by the narrator, so that the link between Dr. Chauchard and Mrs. Erskine may be seen as a cover up for non conformist versions of sexuality.

justice to what she calls “polychrome” life (503) as opposed to Fildes’ monochromic parable (484).

Such a picture is provided by her story, which, in a sense, pays homage to Fildes’ vision of doctor and child by transforming its harmony into an art that is more truthful to Linnet’s ambivalent and contradictory experience. It is an art that breaks up the absorption of the two figures and brings into the new picture the recognition of separateness and thus of loss. If Fildes’ painting conveys that death is sentimental and art pretence, as the narrator claims, in her own story death is real and art a necessary truth capable of creating pictures of life which are neither complete nor sentimentalized but bracing, capable and full of pain.

The title of Lesley Clement’s critical study, *Learning to Look* (2000) constitutes a perfect synthesis of “The Doctor”. Not only does it comment on the cinematographic structure of the story, it also emphasizes the difficulty inherent in “seeing”, be it of a painting or of people. “The Doctor” shows how looking is influenced by the passions and desires of the observer and thus always biased and incomplete. It also suggests that one only sees what one has concepts for and that, therefore, looking and seeing require language. The child Linnet intuits the secrets that circulate among her parents’ and their friends, but she cannot make sense of them because she cannot name them: “Unconsciously, everyone under the age of ten knows everything. Under-tens can come into a room and sense at once everything felt, kept silent, held back in the way of love, hate, desire, though he may not have the right words for such sentiments”. (493).

The new piece of information about Dr. Chauchard’s authorship presented at the very end of the story is a clue for all the things the child Linnet did not see when she thought herself to be the centre of the universe, the “I”/“Eye” in/of the picture. She did not hear Dr. Chauchard’s “real voice” (505), for example, “the voice that transcends this or that language” (505) although she was under ten and supposed to sense everything: “I ought to have heard it when I was still under ten and had all my wits about me” (505).<sup>20</sup> The concluding sentence of the story confirms

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<sup>20</sup> These are the concluding words of the story.

that Linnet's initial vision was an illusion and that the work of memory must take into account the time-bound nature of language and the shifting perspective of the observer. All narratives, the ending suggests, including "The Doctor", are necessarily bound up to incomplete understandings and partial views. Thus, what distinguishes Dr. Chauchard's "real voice" is not an otherworldly language analogous to the metaphysical illumination of Fildes' picture. Dr. Chauchard's "real voice" is the voice that lives independently of the narrator's projections and desires, the voice of an otherness that cannot be possessed. It is the voice that is heard for the first time in an obituary when the narrator is made aware of the inexorable nature of death and the irreversibility of time which, as an illuminating blow, bring to the foreground the irreplaceable singularity of the Doctor of which his poetry and diary are the (holy?) remains: "When I read the three obituaries it was the brass plate on the door I saw and 'Sur Rendez-vous.' That means 'no dropping in'. After the warning came the shut heron door and the shut swan door and, at another removal, the desk with the circle of lamplight and R. É.<sup>21</sup> himself, writing about X, Y, Z, and Mozart. A bit humdrum perhaps, a bit prosy, not nearly as good as his old winter Saturday self, but I am sure that it was his real voice, the voice that transcends this or that language. His French-speaking friends did not hear it for a long time (his first books of verse was not sold to anyone outside his immediate family), while his English-speaking friends never heard it at all. But I should have heard it then, at the start, standing on tiptoe to reach the doorbell, calling through the letterbox every way I could think of, "I, me". I ought to have heard it when I was still under ten and had all my wits about me." (504-405).

The story gives no access to Dr. Chauchard's art other than through Linnet's judgement, and yet, it restores what the hurtful irony of the narrative has tried to deny: Dr. Chauchard's recognition of Linnet's singularity as "*une sensible*"<sup>22</sup> (485) sealed by the gift of a Victorian engraving and Linnet's response to it by writing her own version of the

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<sup>21</sup> R. É. is how Dr. Chauchard appears in the obituary as a poet.

<sup>22</sup> Emphasis in the text.

scene. Using the strong art of modernism, the helpless dying girl of Fildes' painting steps out of the picture, walks away from the passive stance of a loved object and returns the gaze. She abandons the consolation of her magical projections, embraces the loneliness that relations of reciprocity require and becomes the doctor's fellow artist, albeit a different one. Through techniques of depersonalization, cinematographic editing, savage imagery and precision of language, Linnet creates an unassailable surface which echoes in its "seams and cracks" what the Victorian artist had to negate in order to paint the consoling deathbed scene and what the poet Chauchard could not bring himself to say, even to himself. In their place, the reader receives Linnet's vigorous story built in a sequence of juxtaposed scenes which "show" what it means to be displaced in affection, in language and in love and the strong art that can be made from those ingredients: an art about one's experience of dispossession in one's time and place, in one's own language(s); an art that does not smooth over "crevices and corners" (484), that is not "a lesson", "a statement of Christian submission" or "a parable" (484) but a work of art full of authority that precludes sentiment and demands to be seen.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> For the shift from negation to deletion in modernism, cf. "Modernism: Deletion versus Negation" in Maire Jaanus Kurrik, *Literature and Negation* (New York: Columbia Press, 1979).

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