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## “High Altitude Plain Vanilla: On Mavis Gallant” An interview with Marta Dvořák

« Une simplicité surplombante : Mavis Gallant »  
Entretien avec Marta Dvořák

Interviewed by / Interviewée par Jason Blake

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**JB** You were close friends with Mavis Gallant for two decades. When you read her work, do you hear her personal voice?

**MD** Oh yes, when I reread MG’s work, or letters, I hear her voice clearly. Hmm, I see I’ve already said something implicit as well as explicit. I said “work or letters.” Because MG’s voice was the same in her essays and fiction as it was in her letters and speech. The same voice, fresh, warm, distinctive, vibrant, almost girlish. She wrote the way she talked – just better than most of us. Wasted no words; always used the right one. Bull’s eye. Authentic plain vanilla – no long fancy words. But with poetic or imagistic touches that made you see how she saw – differently, truer, alive. Her voice was melodic and as rhythmic as breath. When I read her today, I still hear her in my head, and feel her presence.

**JB** Was the fact that you were each living abroad, going through life in a foreign language, a red thread of your friendship?

**MD** Well, French was not really a foreign language for MG. In (bilingual) Montreal the small Mavis had a French-Canadian nurse and was fluent in both languages by the age of four when she was put into a French-speaking boarding school. That said, I’m sure the outsider experience was a red thread, as you point out. We shared that fascination for Paris and French culture that drew both of us here from elsewhere. From Canada of course. But on my side it was actually a return to Europe, to origins. Origins that MG shared on a longer timeline. My roots in Hungary, in the ex-Austro-Hungarian Empire, attracted her from our very first meeting at the Village Voice Bookshop. Made her think of her mother’s father. Made her think of home and beyond.



**JB** Which ongoing historical event do you think MG would be most interested in and, more importantly for us, which event might she best illuminate for us? I'm thinking here, for example, of how she covered Paris '68, with such style, objectivity and insight. I first read an extract in *Queen's Quarterly* in about 2004. Only later did I realize that this was writing done *in the moment*. I couldn't believe it – I figured she wrote the piece with decades of hindsight and rearview-mirrorism. I can't think of any other writer who is simultaneously present and distanced; in her diaries MG seems to be looking at herself from a ten-metre distance even as she experiences poverty and pain.

**MD** I couldn't agree with you more. You could count on MG being intensely in the moment, focussed and alert, but with that extra lucidity of high altitude. She could be surrounded by trees, but would always see the forest. That's an interesting query about her interest in an on-going historical event if she were still with us. MG was so keenly connected to new developments and their repercussions that she would be sure to have strong opinions on a whole spectrum of current evolutions.

You may naturally have been thinking of Russia, the Ukraine, war. You know she came from the left, but experienced many disillusionments which could be brought into play here. But for MG, everything was political. She'd have positions on the social media, on France's neo/post-feminists, on gender negotiations, schools, green parties, nuclear energy, migration and shifting demographics, you name it. She kept up with events even when she became ill and bed-ridden. And was often one step ahead of political commentators. I remember for instance the 2012 sex scandal that cost Dominique Strauss-Kahn his candidacy for the French Presidential elections (and probable victory). Commentators from the U.S. to France were all vying with one another in outrage and indignation. Mavis told me in a firm voice, "Oh, he was framed." It took me weeks to realize she had seen right through the complex web of ambitions and manipulations, well before anyone else. I miss her illuminations, but cannot presume to put myself in her place.

**JB** "But for MG, everything was political" is fascinating because one can't easily read her politics from her works. The moral thumb of the author, which is a phrase from D.H. Laurence, I believe, doesn't come down too heavily in her case. Did you ever have discussion about how politics and literature intersect?

**MD** I like your expression "moral thumb." And "coming down heavily." That's exactly what doesn't happen with MG, I agree. She used to say she reported what she noticed. (And she noticed everything!) But you never find her making explicit statements on the page. When I introduced her to Carol Shields, they got on like a house on fire, because neither of them followed "the natural way of the world, half of humanity



bent on improving the other half" (Shields).<sup>1</sup> They simply showed the spectacle of the human comedy from a high altitude. They told the truth about the world but had no illusions about reforming it.

For MG writing was *implicitly* political. Reread a story and you'll see how the politics are implicit in the backdrop, in the acutely-observed-and-rendered details, the texture, the atmosphere, the dialogue. In the things you first think aren't important. Often between the lines or in what is *not* said.

**JB** Perhaps that subtlety is why MG is so often regarded as a "writer's writer" – one who has such a remarkable list of fans (Michael Ondaatje, Margaret Atwood, Lisa and Lorrie Moore, Karen Russell, etc., etc.). The writer-fans also span generations. Can you think of any reason why she remains less of a household name than, say, Updike and Cheever?

**MD** First of all, I'd like to point your readers to Bill Richardson's Substack blog, in which he calls her his "pillar of fire." He argues very convincingly that it's reductive to classify MG as a writer's writer. That there's something for everyone. That a new wave of readers is (re)discovering her. Realizing that she mapped the twentieth century and brought to life all the issues we're still preoccupied with. That said, I agree that MG is not a household name, the way Updike and Eudora Welty and Flannery O'Connor or MG's fellow Canadians Margaret Atwood and Alice Munro can be said to be. One reason might be that she doesn't deploy sensational acts like murder, rape, incest, child molesting and so on, staple ingredients that Atwood herself draws attention to in "Alice Munro: An Appreciation."<sup>2</sup>

On top of issues (the matter), there's the manner (which I hinted at when I evoked the implicit). In my almost completed book *Delinquent Art, Cartoon Imaginations: Mavis Gallant & Co.* I put MG in dialogue with other satirists, and single out that odd couple, exaggeration and understatement – two sides of the ironic coin. I argue that Atwood as an engaged reformist opts for exaggeration, ironic signalling easier to spot than the understatement MG prefers. Understatement which is inside the hearing range of only the most alert readers.

**JB** Perhaps reductively, but with the noble aim of encouraging more people to read Gallant, I have asked several authors to name their favourite Gallant story and to explain, briefly, why they chose it. A dozen authors chose about ten different stories, from various decades. Mark Anthony Jarman chose the diaries ("Diaries, Franco's Spain, 1952."); Margaret Atwood chose the Linnet Muir Stories; Francine prose chose "The Ice Wagon

1) Carol Shields, "A View from the Edge of the Edge." *Carol Shields and the Extra-Ordinary*. Ed. Marta Dvořák, Manina Jones. Montreal/Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 2007. 17-29.

2) Margaret Atwood, "Alice Munro: an appreciation." *The Guardian*, 11 October 2008. Amended 14 October 2013. [www.theguardian.com/books/2008/oct/&&/alice-munro](http://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/oct/&&/alice-munro)



Going Down the Street” and Tamas Dobozy chose “The Latehomecomer.” In the case of Hemingway or Carver or Cheever, even Flannery O’Connor, the same core of stories are usually recommended. Why should people read MG?

**MD** I’d like to point your readers once more to Bill Richardson’s highly persuasive blog! Sometimes I jot down one of his memorable phrases, like Blog 17’s allusion to “MG’s gift as a pulse-taker, an interpreter of symptoms and maladies.”

**JB** Moving to younger readers ... How have students reacted to Gallant when you’ve taught her work in class? I remember teaching “The Ice Wagon Going Down the Street” and hearing one student say, “I don’t get it! Nothing happened between them ...”

**MD** I taught *Home Truths* to last year undergraduates and then Master’s students, along with Alice Munro’s first story collection, *Dance of the Happy Shades*. I also taught *Montreal Stories / Varieties of Exile* to French and Canadian postgraduates at a joint doctoral seminar I co-initiated between the Sorbonne and the University of Montreal. The students reacted enthusiastically to a mix of hands-on textual analysis and theoretical observations transferable to other texts. Such as the Linnet Muir recourse to life writing. Notably the device of retrospective first person narration – allowing the author to slide back and forth on the axis of time just as if she were omniscient. Without resorting to omniscience, which today’s readers find inauthentic. Also the way Gallant and Munro, who all the while mapping the society they emerge from, transform *story*-telling into stories about *telling*. Melding world and self, the perceiving subject. Very much a tenet of modernism and then postmodernism.

Naturally some students looking for traditional narrative grounded in event were disoriented. They tripped over MG’s multi-view, her ability to flit in and out of minds. But they quickly became interested in how the strategy displaced focus to subjectivity, to the phenomenon of consciousness. To reality as a mental, culturally-conditioned construct.

So personally I side with Margaret Atwood, whose favourite MG stories, you’ve said, are the Linnet Muir cycle. They were also very close to MG’s heart. Which is why she was delighted when I offered to reread them to her shortly before she died. You can read about our exchanges on “Voices Lost in Snow” in a piece I wrote for the journal *Canadian Literature* called “Reading to Mavis Gallant” (scheduled to appear in Issue 250 I believe).

That said, “Ice Wagon” is a masterpiece, and I’d like to challenge your student’s claim that “nothing happened between them.” When Peter escorts Agnes home and her mirror reflects their images together, his world cracks, and a tsunami erupts. Apocalyptic floods of seawater, lava covering vineyards, bridges snapping in two, trains floating like snow. MG propels you and me along with Peter into an uncanny parallel



reality. Soon an ocean separates Peter from the only other being on earth he – that day – has quietly shared views with on sublime issues: being and nothingness, choice, guilt, faith, right and wrong. I admit it's not obvious. MG never is. Your more curious students, the active, creative ones, need only reread to decode the unsaid. (For a little extra help they could also dip into my *Mavis Gallant: The Eye and the Ear*, bound to be in the university library! Also on Amazon!)

**JB** Did the matter of Canadian cultural nationalism of previous years ever come up? At one and the same time such nationalism seemed provincial ("Only read Canadian books!"), but perhaps it was a necessary step in the development of the arts. Were the two of you at all interested in the topic from over in Paris?

**MD** Oh, yes, and the question often cropped up at MG's readings. We were basically on the same wavelength, that promoting and foregrounding Canadian literature in publishing, bookshops, and reviews was necessary. For a time. Namely when American and British writing had pride of place and Canadians read maybe one Canadian novel a year. But the cultural nationalism became increasingly restrictive and excessive all the while that defining Canadianness became harder and harder. (Call up Thomas King and how he demonstrated how complicated it was to define Native literature and even Native identity. Same difference.)

As an expatriate addressing a global audience, MG (to borrow an eloquent term from Barbara Godard) became caught "in the crossfire of the *Tarzanist/cosmopolitan* debate in Canadian culture."<sup>3</sup> And was for a long while marginalized on a Canadian literary/media scene "obsessed with national textures" (Boyagoda).<sup>4</sup> And MG hated labels. Hated being put into a box. The women's writing box. The feminist box. The Canadian writer box. The regional box. Remember how when Geoff Hancock asked MG if she would call herself a Canadian writer or an international one, she put language over country. She replied, "I'm a writer in the English language. Was Katherine Mansfield a New Zealand writer to you?"<sup>5</sup> I think MG would have deplored the way the *Cambridge History of the English Short Story* labels Mansfield exactly that, plonking her back into the box of "settler postcolonial writer."<sup>6</sup> And within that into the smaller box of New Zealand. And MG herself into that other smaller box, Canada.

3) Barbara Godard, "Modalities of the Edge, Towards a Semiotics of Irony: The Case of Mavis Gallant." *Essays on Canadian Writing* 42 (special Gallant issue), winter 1990, 75.

4) Randy Boyagoda, "In Paris with Mavis Gallant, Writer." *The Walrus*, 12 July 2007. <https://thewalrus.ca/in-paris-with-mavis-gallant-writer/>

5) Gallant in Geoffrey Hancock, "An Interview with Mavis Gallant." Spec. Gallant issue, *Canadian Fiction Magazine* 28 (1978), 61.

6) Victoria Kuttainen, "Settler Stories: Postcolonial Short Fiction." *The Cambridge History of the English Short Story*. Ed. Dominic Head. Cambridge UP, 2016, 358.



You know, I'd like to thank you here for helping me discover the brilliant cartoonist Tom Gauld. In *Baking with Kafka*, one of his single-panel cartoons depicts would-be readers in a bookstore wandering from one section to another, absurdly labelled, “Poetry by Left-Handed Scandinavians,” “Cookbooks by Dog-Owning Atheists,” “Thrillers by Bearded Writers under 5'6”, “Short Stories by Divorced Celebrities,” and “Erotica by Authors with a Nut Allergy.” MG would have loved it. She did some cartooning herself, and deployed on the page many of the tricks of visual caricaturists and satirists like Gauld, such as defamiliarization through viewpoint. She and Gauld notably share the gift of escalating absurdity via the incongruous telling detail. You'll all have noted how he debunks with two punches. Not just Atheists but Dog-Owning Atheists, etc. I think I can conclude on this cheerful note. After all, MG was a writer who consistently set out to tell the truth about the world in the language of laughter.

Born in Budapest and raised in Canada, **MARTA DVOŘÁK** went on to become Professor of Canadian and Commonwealth Literatures at the Sorbonne. She has published over a hundred articles and has authored and edited 15 books focusing on (post)modernisms and a global circulation of influence, with a particular interest in the short story. Her latest books include *Mavis Gallant: the Eye and the Ear* (U of Toronto Press, 2019), *Translocated Modernisms* (with D. Irvine, U of Ottawa Press, 2016), *Crosstalk* (with D. Brydon, Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2012), *Tropes and Territories* (with W.H. New, McGill-Queen's UP, 2007) and *Carol Shields and the Extra-Ordinary* (with M. Jones, McGill-Queen's UP, 2007). She has contributed chapters to Cambridge UP's *Literary History of Canada* and *Companion* series, notably *The Cambridge Companion to Canadian Literature* (2016) and *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood* (2021).