Mavis Gallant: The Eye and the Ear

Marta Dvořák

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In *Mavis Gallant: The Eye and the Ear* Marta Dvořák blends the personal and the critical as she closely examines many of the works of this Paris-based Canadian, who, between 1951 and 1995, published over 100 stories in *The New Yorker*. These days, Gallant is less read than she should be.

Thanks to their "twenty-year-long friendship in a shared Paris/French habitat," Dvořák was privy to "Mavis's backstage views on art and life" (14). She dons two hats in this volume: that of the literary critic and that of the devoted friend. To keep things clear, Dvořák uses "Mavis" for the person she knew and "'Gallant' for the more scholarly analysis" (5, footnote 4). *The Eye and the Ear* is chock-full of anecdotes, quotations from personal letters, and snippets of conversation. However, Dvořák serves up no superfluous information. For example, when we read that Gallant used to "hop" from the south of France "to gamble in San Remo" (44, footnote 27), it is not gossip but biographical information meant to rebut *New Yorker* concerns about whether Gallant could write about Italy in her 1965 story "Paola and Renata."

Gallant and Dvořák share a remarkable cultural range, and the *Eye* and the *Ear* of the book's title refer to more than Gallant's impeccable rhythm and knack for the telling detail. We learn which books Gallant owned and adored (plenty of 19th-century Russians, but also Austrian writer Joseph Roth), which music she listened to (Richard Wagner, Duke Ellington, Marlene Dietrich, Georges Brassens, and, cutely, *Singin' in the Rain*), and which artists she respected and sometimes knew personally (among them, Dadaists Max Ernst and Man Ray). Dvořák, thankfully, goes beyond cultural laundry lists and convincingly shows how varied artists helped shape Gallant's crystalline sentences.

Gallant's celebrated deadpan satire and irony are grounded in observation. For my money her barbs outdo Hemingway's, because her punchy sentences are always layered, often ironical. It is, however, not merely her keen expatriate eye that "make[s] Gallant such a remarkable ironist"; it also her unmatched "skills of distortion" (197). These

caricature skills are, at least sometimes, inspired by caricaturist George Grosz and *New Yorker* cartoonist Saul Steinberg. Gallant "*combines the reduction with exaggerated weighting, a cocktail of distortion which characterizes the ironist and caricaturist*" (196) (Dvořák aids the reader by italicizing many of her key ideas). Lines such as "She tossed her head, as a nervous pony might" ("Potter," 1977) evince this ability. I've chosen this equine example, but Dvořák has lent me the skills to see why Gallant's throwaway description shimmers. Indeed, Dvořák has succeeded in answering her question: "How does Gallant's work *work*?" (13).

The Eye and the Ear is most exciting when Dvořák shows the craft that underlies Gallant's genius. Before reading this book, I tended merely to gawp and golly at Gallant's peerless prose, as if admiring a cascade or a sunset. Dvořák's overview of how Gallant uses metaphor is superb, as is her sustained argument about Gallant's "multivocality and Multiview" (84), and her Cubist-like ability to portray simultaneously "*the latent and the manifest* – in line with Picasso's definition of Cubist art: painting not what you see but what you know is there" (109).

Dvořák shines when explaining how Gallant deals with time, for Gallant can make a character's voice span several decades in an instant. A line near the start of "In Youth Is Pleasure" (1975) reads: "It was much the way I would be *later* with men I fell out of love with, but I was too young to know that *then*" (169; Dvořák's italics). Such a sentence melds the future and the past, allowing the "voice to slide freely between the anterior and the simultaneous" (169).

It must be admitted, however, that *The Eye and the Ear* is not an easy read. The first sentence I happened upon was this: "It plugs into an era's logic of the heterogeneous and the heteroclite, inherent to the bricoleur who – like me with respect to my original acrostic – adopts, adapts, and recombines the tools and materials at hand, even when these result from anterior constructions and destructions and are not originally designed for the operation at hand (Lévi-Strauss 31; Derrida 409–28)" (5). Seth's latest graphic novel had just arrived in the mail, so I decided to cool off with *Clyde Fans* before turning to Dvořák's very academic tome.

Dvořák's erudition is phenomenal and catholic. She skips from the visual arts, to critical theory, to music and composers (including her own translations from Béla Bartók's letters in Hungarian). Mercifully, she glosses terms that might be unfamiliar to us or that we may have forgotten – terms such as "anamnesis, which conjoins two time periods to the extent that the past events are re-experienced rather than remembered" (165), "*hypotyposis* (which renders a scene as visible as a picture)" (77), and "*paralipsis* (in which the narrative sidesteps an element)" (91). Also to her credit, she brings in theorists only when necessary, never as fetishistic name-dropping.

However, sometimes there are a few too many names. The opening paragraph of Chapter Five, "Text/image borderblur & Cubist realism," refers to fin-de-siècle

author Henry James, post-impressionist painter Paul Cézanne, modernist writer Ernest Hemingway, mid-century art critic Arthur Danto, "the Freudian revolution" (112), 17th-century philosopher John Locke, 16th-century German transplant painter Hans Holbein the Younger, 18th-century Prussian philosopher Emmanuel Kant, phenomenologist Edmund Husserl, and painter Pablo Picasso. To steal from Groucho Marx and the too-many-in-the-berth scene in *A Night at the Opera*, "Is it my imagination, or is it getting crowded in this paragraph?"

Footnotes come fast and furious in *The Eye and the Ear* (chapter one runs 28 pages and boasts 67 discursive footnotes). They are worth reading. Footnote 16 of chapter five: "When we had dinner together at her favourite cafés and restaurants on the Left Bank, Mavis would then insist on dropping me off by taxi at my apartment on the Right Bank before circling back to her Left Bank apartment […]" (128, note 16). Why? Because a Parisian taxi driver would refuse a short fare. This detail surfaces in Gallant's 1970 novel *A Fairly Good Time*, when a character takes a load of dirty clothes to "'a laundry on the far side of Paris" (*FGT* 12) – a step apparently illogical, but actually sensible, grounded in Mavis's real-life reasoning and practice" (128). Dvořák's anecdote is a reminder that absolutely nothing happens by accident in Gallant's prose.

The Eye and the Ear has done me two great favours: It taught me how and why Gallant is one of the great stylists of the 20th century. Also, it reminded me that there is plenty of Gallant to be discovered or re-discovered. I interrupted my reading a few times to read or re-read "Voices Lost in Snow" (1976), "Cost of Living" (1962), "The Fenton Child" (1993), and "From the Fifteenth District" (1978). Dvořák is a sharp-eyed critic but also a fine and necessary promoter of one of Canada's greatest authors.