

Editorial

Soyez mystérieuses

Laurie Ricou

I have met Mavis Gallant perhaps four times. Two meetings were of the routine introduce-the-guest-writer sort. Surprise marked our first encounter and made it memorable. It was spring 1983; my family and I had been in Strasbourg less than an hour, but I was already in the streets searching for a hotel to which we might escape from our own dingy two-star and its seemingly hostile staff. I recognized Gallant crossing the street—I'm not sure how—and hailed her (quite uncharacteristically): "S'il vous plait, Madame Gallant? Is there any room in your hotel?" At once, Gallant took me and my 10-year-old son to her hotel, and when we found it full, she guided us down nearby streets to introduce us at two others. Gallant, I have since heard, has some reputation for prickliness. But, to a total stranger that day, she was understanding and reassuring. We did not find a better room, but we found a generous gesture in which to be happy.

This experience came back to me in April 2005, as I was warming to the noticeable pan-European warmth of Gallant's city. Seventy teachers and writers assembled at a conference in Paris focused on the short story, on Gallant's signature genre. The conference had many fine moments—a ringing salute to Alistair MacLeod's Celtic orality, an affectionate tracing of inter-textual intricacies in David Malouf, a challenging call to agree to a moratorium on the political in post-colonial analyses. We heard established short story writers—David Arnason's wry reinventing of the Icelandic Saga—and newer voices—Tamas Dobozy honing the flat voice into a knife of in-between-ness; Warren Cariou teaching the puzzle of belongingness. The

conference—titled *colloque*—was entirely in plenary format: a small group of writers and students shared the same events for three days. The exigencies of product-based travel funding and CV-upholstering make such events rare in the 21st century academy. Multiple sessions, racing presentations, and scraps of chatter as the elevator ascends from the Mezzanine to the 10th floor often seem the standard forms of academic exchange.

In this case, participants had time to reflect over breakfast, to extend the discussion during coffee, and to reconfigure the argument at lunch. For me, two highlights: one was an animated reading of poems and stories by a group of 12 students, tutored for about two days by David Arnason. Most of them were writing in a second language. Listening to apprenticing writers, listening to writers writing out of two languages—in Gallant’s city—was a perfect way to end a conference. Wrote Malik Ferdinand in a poem titled “Post-colored Girl”: “Banished in my own tears, I cannot touch the deaf Seine color. / But I am still going overboard for these pearls in blessed eyes.” In a story by Fiona McCann, a young woman overhears herself: “Why—just listen and see if you can explain this—Why in tennis do women players get less prize money than men? . . . Does she not train as much as him? Sweat as much? Take as many drugs?” In such moments, I fancied I could hear young writers beginning to try the ironies of Arnason and Gallant.

The other highlight was a reading by Gallant herself, and by two writers I wanted to style (on that occasion at least) as her followers—the reading was held at the Centre Culturel du Canada on rue de Constantine. Artwork surrounded us—short films reeling into under-exposure; three-dimensional maps in mixed media. Several of the pieces were teasingly iconic; thoughtful installations emerged from corners. I know they deserved more time.

But the reception in the gallery slipped easily into a reading in another space—darkened room, cabaret style seating, wine bottles circulating, and spotlight on a slightly raised platform. “I want to stand up to do my reading,” Gallant said almost immediately. “Will that podium support me?”

Kristjana Gunnars read first. She read sympathetically about an old man trying to find his wife who had disappeared without explanation from her nursing home. Well, he *remembered* the *finding*. Janice Kulyk Keefer read next. Could a Ukrainian community re-configure the ethnic family reunion, her story wondered. After the readings, all questions were directed to Gallant, as much as she encouraged the audience and her stage mates to join in. I wanted to ask Gunnars and Kulyk Keefer for their reaction. As writers, I speculated, they might be admiring Gallant, and reworking, or imagining,

Editorial

a story as they listened. But then again, maybe their stories should already be heard as mysterious, happy homage.

Gallant herself read what she described as the final phase of the Grippe and Poche story. It was politically astute, in the way she so often is—examining the big events (in this case the introduction of the Euro currency and the new community) as they figure in local streetscapes. Surprise hovered in the cadences of a Gallant sentence, in the *hearing* of that French-inflected English, in the writer's own surprised voice. In the cadences lie the irony and the politics. Gallant's story was, most impressively—and here especially the generosity of the writer emerged—so evidently materially, artistically *in progress*. She held up the scratch outs, she thrilled to new words she'd discovered, some pages were cut into pieces, she stumbled over her own inked-in corrections. "I love the Paris streets," she explained. "I am often startled in North America, in Canada, to realize I can see no other person on a given street. My stories often emerge from that feeling of a street life, of the glimpsed connections and the imagined stories."

I thought then of our first encounter in the street. Later, I sat across from Mavis at the concluding banquet, in the vaulted halls of *Le Train Bleu*. "I don't like spinach," she blurted. "It's the only vegetable I can't stand." And it's the only mildly prickly thing I've heard her say. After dinner, many people drifted away. Some paused to study the restaurant's grandiose murals. A few watched the cat wandering among the tables. Gallant stayed on, and on, talking with her fans.

The day after the conference, I joined the long queue to visit the Musée d'Orsay. I spent a lot of time looking at Paul Gauguin's *Porte d'entrée de la maison de jouir*, the imposing door carved out of sequoia wood. Somehow Gallant's stories place us at the door of the *maison de jouir*. Over the frame, Gauguin's motto:

Soyez mystérieuses
Soyez amoureuses et vous serez heureuses