

Callaghan, Barry

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Mavis Gallant¹

Barry Callaghan

When I was asked to talk about Mavis Gallant, my heart sank.

I thought of a day some years ago when I received another call. It was from New York, an upstate city. I was asked to be the best man at a Mafia wedding. My heart sank then, too. A week later, in a cozy kitchen, Big Frankie the Mook told me how he and his brother had killed a drug courier from Toronto. “Yeah, we tied him up in bailing wire and burned him.” He patted my cheek and said, smiling, “Little Frank, my nephew, he says not for me to worry, you we can trust.”

A man can stand so much trust. I loved Little Frank, I liked Big Frankie. But I could tell that the Mook didn't really trust me. When he looked at me one of his eyes actually wandered. When it came back from its orbit, it was on me, hard.

I know Mavis trusts me. I think she trusts me. I hope she trusts me, after all, I like her, I admire her, but she can be disconcerting. She looks at you with those big steady brown eyes, and what do you see: all the virtues that seem to be long gone in our time – discretion, courtliness, a ready unsentimental compassion, a disdain for any sign of emotional incontinence.

So, the boys might say, “What's to worry? And anyway, she likes men.” Several knowing men have told me she likes men better than women. “Everybody knows that,” they say. But the last time I saw Mavis in Paris, it was a Sunday with that eggshell-white morning sunlight coming down, a late June morning, and I watched her come along rue de Seine, alone, unhurried, at her own pace, carrying freshly cut roses. I said to Claire, “Look, she's brought me roses.” As far as I knew, Mavis had no idea that Claire, too, was in town, so I went toward Mavis, hand out, warmed by those brown eyes, by that easing smile, but the smile was there to deflect me. She strode by me and handed the roses to Claire. I stared at the eggshell sky. “Of course she likes men *and* women,” I said to myself. “Everybody knows that.”

Trust me! After all, we had confided a thing or two, from time to time, over the years in restaurants in Rome and Paris. Once, at lunch in La Coupole, talking about a woman we both knew but always saw separately, a woman given to drink, I told Mavis about

1) This homage to Mavis Gallant was first published in Barry Callaghan's *Raise You on the River: Essays and Encounters 1964-2018*. It is reprinted here with the permission of the author.



a late night when our friend had slipped her hand down inside my trousers, taken hold of my backside, and Mavis said, “That’s the trouble with her these days, always coming at things from the wrong side.” I laughed out loud, who wouldn’t, but there it was, that tone of hers, absolutely apt to the story, not quite acidic, touched by pathos. I am wary of anybody who talks or writes a prose like that. That’s a prose that knows what it’s doing. That’s a prose that doesn’t make mistakes.

It’s not just the precision of her pose. Any mechanic can be precise. It’s the controlled paring down to the precision that gives her her tone. Tone! That’s the killer. You can’t teach tone. Tone is in the bones. And it’s in her bones to keep the mistakes, like the vermin, down by keeping her characters on a short leash. I sometimes think that it is this leash, her refusal to let her characters do anything she doesn’t want them to do, that gives her prose that icy feel that some readers complain of, as if there had been an overnight frost and the sun at dawn had not yet burned the rime off the prose.

When I think of Mavis’s tone, the pacing, her timing, one sentence on the heels of another, with a pause for effect if necessary, I often think of my mother. I think of a moment in my mother’s life when her tone and her timing were so perfect, so bang-on, that she was a Mavis Gallant character.

It was an afternoon in our family room. We were all talking, my father was, of course, talking. I was trying to horn in on Morley sidewise, while a very ambitious, pretty lady of some cultural television presence was berating both of us. My mother sat in a corner of the sofa listening with a repose Mavis would have appreciated. Suddenly, the woman turned on my mother and said, “You’re not liberated, you’re not a liberated woman.”

“Why not?” Loretto asked.

“Because you never say shit and fuck.”

Mother looked at her, hesitating before the pounce.

“That is true,” she said at last, “but I have done both.”

Pure Gallant. The domestic moment, the blurted word, the timing, the tone, the deflection.

The deflection that shifts everything. What was in kilter is out of kilter, not wildly, not wackily. Like warped glass.

It is this matter of deflection that fascinates me in her stories.

An intended look gets deflected.

An intended hand gets deflected.

Even the extermination of the Jews of France gets deflected ... as when a yellow star is found on a pavement in one of her stories and it is “moved aside like a wet leaf” by a woman’s umbrella point ...

Moved aside.

People carom without touching.



It's there in the carom where they don't touch that the mystery lies.

In that off-kilter moment, in that gap between words, in that silence between forgetting and remembering.

In that silence is the aloneness that haunts all her stories, her people so inexplicably alone.

(Sex is seldom a consolation, never redeeming.)

Aloneness.

Not loneliness, not sentimental self-regard.

A state of being, where each character is almost entire to himself or herself.

Almost, but then comes the carom, the deflection. The effect is sometimes quietly surreal, scary, as the silent unexpected shift is always scary. A shift into aloneness.

Once, in Rome, at the end of a happy garrulous supper – some six or seven people at Sabatino's – as she was about to step into a taxi, she kissed me on the cheek, saying, "Your father was the least sensual man I've known," and before I could return the kiss she was gone.

Deflection.

A provocation? Tease? Joke?

Sitting alone in her taxi, perhaps she herself did not know.

I did the only thing I could do. I laughed and went back into Sabatino's for a last drink, pondering on this aloneness that is in Mavis. But not an aloneness in her heart. I wouldn't presume to say that I know anything about that.

No, it is an aloneness that I associate, in fact, with my father, who was her old friend from the late 1940s and early 1950s in Montréal when they had sometimes hung out together in a joint called Slitkin's and Slotkin's, a place Big Frankie the Mook would have loved.

Morley was a rare bird.

He was a writer.

That was it.

He lived close to penniless for years, freelancing on the razor's edge. During the Depression years he had written short stories to stay alive. He'd sold short stories, he'd supported a wife and two children.

He was nothing more than a writer, which to him was everything. He was a writer on his own terms.

Mavis is a rare bird. She went to Paris. To be a writer. She lived close to penniless. She suffered cuts on the razor's edge a couple of times. She wrote stories, she supported herself.

She is nothing but a writer, which to her is everything. On her own terms.



You blink when someone who has stood alone and kept to the codes of courtesy and discretion, someone who has put so much trust in herself, says, Yes, you can talk about me, I trust you.

You blink.

But then, as Frankie the Mook said, “What’s to worry?” So I don’t worry, or maybe I worry a little. Whatever. I know Mavis will take what I have said strictly on her own terms. If I have caused her disappointment, then I will say, “Sorry ’bout that.” If she is pleased to know that her trust was well-placed, I’ll say, “I owe you a kiss.”

Either way, it will be okay. I have done both.

*Celebration of Mavis Gallant, with Ms. Gallant in attendance
International Festival of Authors, Toronto, 1993*

A member of the Order of Canada, **BARRY CALLAGHAN** is a true man of letters, one who is well-known for his many novels, short stories, essays, poems and documentaries as well as for his achievements as an anthologist and a translator from Croatian, French, Latvian and Serbian. He is also a painter. In addition, since 1972 he has furthered new voices from Canada and beyond by publishing *Exile: A Literary Quarterly (ELQ)*. The State University of New York awarded him an honorary Doctor of Letters in 1999, calling him “one of the most important forces in modern Canadian literature,” a man who “as a teacher, and as a cultural critic and a constant gadfly [has] done as much as any living writer to advance the profile of Canadian literature.”