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“Speck’s Idea,” by / par Mavis Gallant

Aritha van Herk

homage to M. Gallant — homage à M. Gallant

Mavis Gallant’s stories present themselves to readers like an array of confections in a *pâtisserie*, deceptively tempting, and relentlessly precise. There are definite *règles* for such displays. *Millefeuille* cannot resemble *cannelé*, which must be distinct from the *chouquette*. North American barbarians believe that a bakery is nothing more than a bakery, but in Gallant’s world the difference between *pâtisserie* and *boulangerie* is exact and indicative.

The streets and *arrondissements* through which Gallant’s stories saunter stage far more than setting: the auras of roads and boulevards carry as much weight as her characters and their motivations. Does one go to a Mavis Gallant story to learn about Paris? Perhaps not, but there are worse references to attend for information. No one offers the riddles behind the facade of that complex city more slyly, or with more observant acerbity, than Gallant. Paris is home to her fiction, and as place-regent of her writing, she furnishes its ambience with her wit. “In no other capital city does the population wait more trustfully for the mystery to be solved, the conspiracy theory laid bare, the explanation of every sort of vexation to be supplied: why money slumps, why prices climb, why it rains in August, why children are ungrateful” (“Speck’s Idea” in *Paris Stories*, 156).¹ Her awareness of Paris’s “gentle ugliness”² becomes the sieve through which she strains impeccable observations, turning the page into more than a discursive unit, a *flâneuse*’s progress cool and aloof, but intimate in its keen discernment. Reading Gallant’s work requires many pauses where it becomes necessary for the reader to put the book down and laugh in bemused admiration.

While choosing just one Gallant story is unspeakably difficult, the *Paris Stories* offer an exemplary immersion, and “Speck’s Idea” performs as an excursion into Paris as imaginary dream, a set in a black and white movie, close to Noir, but with its own inimitable twists and political darkness. At night, when Speck rolls down the shutters of his art gallery, “the street resembled a set in a French film designed for export, what

1) Gallant, Mavis. *Paris Stories*. Penguin Modern Classics, 2002. All references are to this story and this edition.

2) In her 1981 essay “Paris: The Taste of a New Age,” Gallant writes of “a small, dim chapel of gentle ugliness.” Available at <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1981/04/paris-the-taste-of-a-new-age/667145/>



with the policeman's white rain capes aesthetically gleaming and the lights of the bookstore, the restaurant, and the gallery reflected, quivering, in European-looking puddles" (148). Besides Speck's art gallery, there is on this street only a frugally aged restaurant and a right-wing bookstore, frequented by men with "the weak eyes, long chins, and sparse sparrow-coloured hair. . . associated with low governmental salaries" (150). Boom! These men are more than a type; they are to be found in dog-eared libraries and second-hand bookstores all over the world.

I was first drawn to "Speck's Idea" by his gallery's location in an "eighteenth-century *hôtel particulier* built around an elegant court now let out as a parking concession. The building had long before been cut up into dirty, decaying apartments," occupied by "spiteful, quarrelsome and avaricious tenants" (144). I know well the ubiquity of such renovated *hôtels particuliers*; I have visited in the heart of Toulouse and Paris the occupants of such rented rooms, climbed grim staircases and noted the peeling walls as remnants of a more graceful vintage. The eponymous Dr. Sandor Speck moves to that expensive parish hoping to improve his own situation, and even sending his devout Swiss assistant, Walter, to light a candle in St. Clotilde's, as a plea for better business. In essence, Speck is a leatherette art dealer whose ambition out-measures his means or ability. He wishes to sustain a reputation as an expert, but he is merely expert on the "late-middle-traditional Paris school" (161), and thus both his reputation and his influence are sketchy, more related to dubious New Right politics than is savoury. His wife, Henriette, has left him, calling him in summation, "'You Fascist!'" (147). She had earlier "declared that Speck appraising an artist's work made her think of a real-estate loan officer examining Chartres Cathedral for leaks" (175). Ouch. In summary, Speck is an expert on "barges, bridges, cafés at twilight, nudes on striped counterpanes" (161), those comforting subjects that the gauche or nouveau riche purchase to claim a measure of artistic sensibility.

Speck's gloomy introspection leans on his experience more than on fine art. "In his experience, love affairs and marriages perished between seven and eight o'clock, the hour of rain and no taxis" (146) – exactly the scene when Speck's wife departed. Now he is unmoored. "As he approached the age of forty he felt that his own intellect needed not just a direction but retaining walls" (147). Left with only Walter, Speck struggles to face his own impending insolvency, and how to "save" his gallery and his self-respect.

With limited currency in the art world, Speck must resort to subterfuge, deviously unearthing the widows of minor painters and attempting to extract from them work that has been left behind in various ateliers. He is convinced that he has a "knack with artists' widows" although "most dealers hated them. They were considered vain, greedy, unrealistic, and tougher than bulldogs" (162). The trope of an artist's widow who "had lived through the artist's drinking, his avarice, his



affairs, his obsession with constipation, his feuds and quarrels, his cowardice with dealers, his hypocrisy, his depression" (162) only to gloriously out-live him appears to be a form of poetic justice. Into that fraught aperture Speck inserts his pale and sepulchrous presence, hoping to extract untapped, unpurchased, and possibly unfinished work which he can market as undiscovered art by an under-recognized genius. Playing on the notion that intemperate artists were but devoted husbands, Speck brings the widows flowers and pastries and his tactful patience; but "he never lost track of his purpose – the prying of paintings out of a dusty studio on terms anesthetizing to the artist's widow and satisfactory to himself" (163). Not quite a necrophiliac, he is nevertheless a performative grave robber, seeking not body parts but artistic reputations.

The story sets out to undo Speck's priggish snobbishness through his encounter with a ferocious widow. Lydia Cruche is a woman quietly gauging, "governessy" in her manners, and resistant to exploitation. He makes innumerable assumptions about her (on the basis of his experience) but is completely trounced by her answer when Speck asks her indirectly where she is from, and she replies simply, "Saskatchewan" (168). This is the apocalypse, the point where the story pivots toward satiric flex, a place that Speck has never heard of or imagined as crossing his supercilious precinct. "As soon as he got back to the gallery, he [looked] up Saskatchewan in an atlas. Its austere oblong shape turned his heart to ice" (168). Although she speaks it beautifully, she hates French, and tells him, "I don't speak it if I don't have to. I never liked it" (167). She believes that there should be no retrospective show of her husband's work because of God's injunction against graven images. This widow comes from Saskatchewan; she is flat, practical, and he is no match for her.

The progress of Speck's "idea" for a Cruche exhibition proceeds through negotiation, an intricate *pas de deux* between aesthetics and *l'argent*. That he believes he has triumphed may be part of his delusion, part of the social allegory offered by Paris and its gritty suburbs, part of the many disappointments of those who succumb to confusion and double-dealing. Speck is portrayed as a lost man, seeking to reinvent his fortunes with an "invented" show; but the very real Lydia Cruche, from Saskatchewan, proves herself the artist of business and human seduction. There, between the many snuff boxes and rainy nights that sprinkle Gallant's stories, in the political leaflet thrust into Speck's hand at the end of the story, muddling the French politics of left, right, and centre, we see the brilliance of a writer who is both dissectionist and vivisectionist, as bold as a brisk prairie wind. Although, despite its usefulness, Mavis Gallant likely never visited Saskatchewan.



Aritha van Herk

“Speck’s Idea,” by Mavis Gallant

Best known as the author of over a dozen books of fiction, non-fiction, and ficto-criticism, **ARITHA VAN HERK** holds a university professorship at the University of Calgary. She is a member of the Order of Canada and has been awarded the Alberta Order of Excellence, among many other accolades. Her novels include *Judith* (1978), winner of the Seal Book Award, *No Fixed Address: An Amorous Journey* (1986), which was nominated for the Governor General’s Award, and *Restlessness* (1998). Her experiments in creative non-fiction and ficto-criticism are available in *A Frozen Tongue* (1992), *In Visible Ink* (1991), and *Places Far from Ellesmere: A Geografictione* (1990). Her latest publications are *Prairie Gothic*, *In This Place* (with photographer George Webber), and the prose/poetry work *Stampede and the Westness of West*. She has published hundreds of articles, reviews and essays on Canadian culture and the Canadian West.

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