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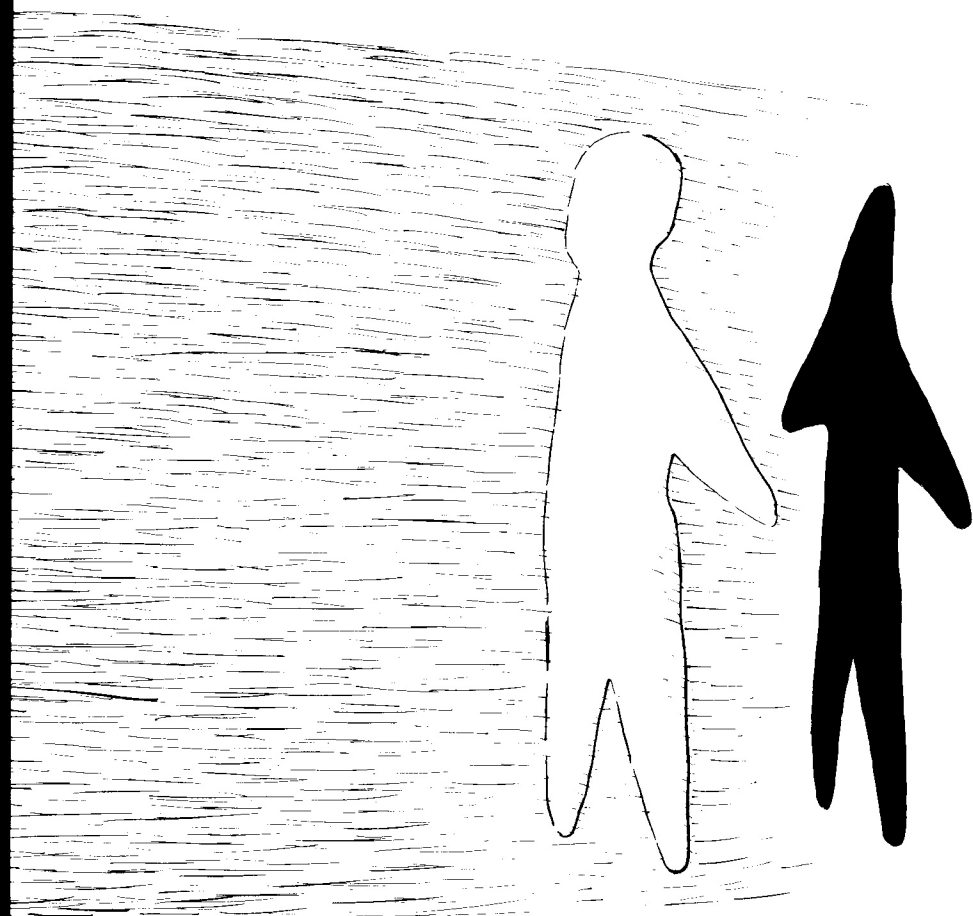




Photo by John Mastrodonato

An Interview with Mavis Gallant

Mavis Gallant, nee Young, was born in 1922 in Montreal to Anglo-Scottish parents. When she was ten, her father died, precipitating her years of wandering. Starting in Ontario, she attended seventeen schools in eight years, finishing highschool in New York in 1940. From there she returned to Montreal, where she was married for a short time, and where she worked for the Montreal Standard. In 1944 her first two short stories were published in Preview. Six years later, in the same year that The New Yorker first accepted her work, she left Canada for Europe. After stays in Vienna, Sicily, Spain, Southern France, Italy, Austria and Switzerland, in 1961 she settled into her present apartment in the Montparnasse area of Paris. Although Mavis Gallant wrote enough fiction to support herself for three decades, she didn't receive the attention she deserved in Canada until the Macmillan publication (facsimile of the American edition) of From the Fifteenth District in 1979. Her most recent collection of short stories, Home Truths, received the 1981 Governor General's Award.

The following interview was recorded on 1 March 1984 in Mavis Gallant's office at New College, University of Toronto, where she was Writer-in-Residence for the academic year 1983-84. It was cold that Thursday afternoon, and Toronto was not behaving like Toronto at all because there was snow. In fact, our planned dinner had been cancelled the night before because Gallant had not wanted to go out in the snowstorm. On the way to her office, I stopped to buy white wine. Forgetting that I was in Ontario, where wine is often stored upright, I bought the most expensive wine on their list. I had counted on the cold weather to chill the wine on my way over, but it didn't. When I presented my gift, along with two store-dusty glasses and a corkscrew, it was received graciously. Gallant tried to make the best of it; she cleaned the glasses while I tried to open the wine so we could put it outside her window to chill. I couldn't pull the cork.

There was a lot of embarrassment at this point. We both tugged our hardest and oddly enough, we both held off laughing. I proposed getting a larger person to do it, perhaps someone in a neighbouring office? No, this would not do, she

did not want them to know she was drinking in her office, with someone who appeared to be a student. Imagine the talk! In the end I snuck the bottle out, pretended I was a student surprising a friend on her birthday, and watched the first man I encountered push the dry cork in.

The interview began over two small glasses of lukewarm white wine with bits of cork floating in them, in an austere office (white concrete, and they had taken away her typewriter) chilled by the open window.

INTERVIEWER

I am not going to ask you when the Dreyfus book is going to be done, I'm going to ask you what you are doing...

GALLANT

Oh, no no no, lay off. I am absolutely sick to death of the subject.

INTERVIEWER

But, what are you doing on the Dreyfus book, what is your focus?

GALLANT

Oh, I can talk about the focus. The focus is simply what happened from the fifth of October to when Dreyfus had his second trial in 1899. It is what happened year by year, as best we know. At the beginning there is an essay that situates it in its time in Paris, and then at the end I'm having a short thing on what became of all the people afterwards.

But I've been on it a very long time and there are many reasons why I simply haven't had time to work on it as I would.

INTERVIEWER

About the focus. Not all works on Dreyfus deal with racism or anti-semitism. For instance, the 1954 edition of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* does not mention that Dreyfus was Jewish until they describe the attempted assassination in 1908 at a ceremony for Zola, which is after they describe the arrest and trial.

GALLANT

It doesn't mention that he's Jewish? Well, what do they think the thing was about? Isn't that extraordinary? I don't think that it happened *because* he was Jewish. I don't think he was *arrested* because he was Jewish. I think that from the moment a newspaper published the headline "Jewish Officer Arrested For Treason" the heat was on. The press created the Jewish element, and once that was created, it was a snowball. Dreyfus himself didn't want to... he was horrified at the idea. He was very French and very patriotic and very army and... When he's still on Devil's Island, he gets a letter from one of his brothers, saying, "You're going to come back to a very changed France where people are at each other's throats." It is the last thing Dreyfus wants. He's horrified. And you know, the French were lucky that he was such a passive character, because he could have led a political party, he could have led a revolution, he could have led anything. The pro-Dreyfus force was so strong, and they believed in that naive way...

Is it naive? The French—it's not like Canadians—the French believe that when they vote it is an existential act. It's going to change their lives. That's why elections take on such drama in France. It is not the kitchen politics of Canada, it is something else completely. They really believe their lives are going to be changed, with a sweeping movement. Then, two weeks after the election, their lives are as before, and they turn on the people in office—I'm not joking—saying, "you don't change my life, as I had thought." Mitterand didn't change their lives, except to raise their taxes. There was no fundamental change. They think that by doing this, the next day they will be different people.

INTERVIEWER

Is that what you were getting at in your May '68 Journals?*

GALLANT

I have not reread them, so I have no idea what I said in them. I had lent the originals to a friend who is at Oxford University, because he was writing a book about the thing. He kept them about eight years, and so during those eight years I didn't read them. He brought them

* Gallant's journal was published as "Reflections: The Events in May: A Paris Notebook" in *The New Yorker* 14 & 21 September 1968, and the journal itself is held in the rare books library of Robarts Library, University of Toronto.

back just last summer, and I reread a little bit because I presented them to the University of Toronto library. When I reread a bit, all that struck me was that there was a rapidity in it. I remembered that I was out in the street all the time, all the time, all the time.

There were a lot of pamphlets in it that people had given me and I had picked up and so forth, and these suddenly were all shabby and shoddy, and they looked like something that had been around fifty years. Suddenly all this was old old old—that's what struck me. But that's not what you wanted.

INTERVIEWER

After de Gaulle spoke, people were saying, "what was it all for?" and "is this all there is?" and there was a sense of letdown because the revolution didn't change anything.

GALLANT

It's very hard to talk about now because it sounds so idiotic. But there was a moment, I don't think it lasted more than an afternoon. It was on the famous thirteenth of May, the day there was the great mass of people who came up from the Gare de l'Est and Place de la République. I, even I, and I don't succumb as easily to existential belief, thought that something was happening. I thought, "the French are going to do this intelligently, there's going to be no bloody revolution, and it is not even political. I didn't see it as political at that point. It was just a desire to stem and divert the awful thing that life had become since the last war, since 1948—the tension, the ugliness, the materialism. It suddenly looked good for one afternoon. Even I was swept away by it.

But that was when I was standing in a crowd. I was in the middle of Boulevard Saint-Michel—I was on one of those concrete traffic islands, with a lot of other people who were all hanging onto this sort of pole [borne] in the middle of the road at the intersection of Boulevard du Montparnasse. Anyway, there we all were, and this crowd broke as it... There were people there saying "quiet, there is a hospital." So the crowd was silent because there was a veteran's hospital nearby, and it stopped. We could see way way way down to the Seine, because it was on a slope, and you could see the heads and banners and things coming up, and then silence would fall, and they would move silently. It was very impressive.

I thought, "My God, this is it, mankind, mankind is having a change for the better." It is hard to believe that I could have thought

it for one minute, but I did. You know, when you're caught up, obviously. And I thought this was wonderful. But it lasted only...

The crowd went up to Place Denfert-Rochereau. At Denfert-Rochereau the Communist Party was weeding out their people and getting them into the factories to occupy them. It was back to 1934 or something. The Communist Party will always be mired in that, you know, 1934.

INTERVIEWER

You also mentioned in your Journal that you were afraid that the press, again, was going to make it into a racist issue, because the students at one point were saying, "We too are German Jews."

GALLANT

That was the most amazing thing that you can imagine.

INTERVIEWER

That they would say that?

GALLANT

"Nous sommes tous des juifs allemands." It was absolutely incredible. Well, now it is a catchword. Students will say we are all Arab Jews, and that's about the worst thing they can say of everything.

Long before, in the month of March, I had cut out, from *Le Monde*, this little article which said "the students of Nanterre are going on strike over a German Jew who is being expelled from France." That was the famous one, the one with the red hair, the one who was the leader of the...

INTERVIEWER

Cohn-Bendit?

GALLANT

Cohn-Bendit, yes; he is now a fat, tiresome man. I don't think his name was even in the piece. This seemed to me so un-French in behaviour, that they would *bother* about a foreigner, that they would *think* about a foreigner, that they would go on strike for a foreigner, that I cut it out, and I put it in an envelope. It's funny, I've still got this little cutting in Paris. So that was even before the month of May. I certainly did not predict or think that anything would come of it. I just thought, "isn't this extraordinary, this is a mutation almost."

Well, I wouldn't think it odd now because since then there has been so much racism and anti-racism, and the students don't go one way or go the other. I think they are passive now, except about their own careers.

But don't forget, in 1968 there was still full prosperity, people could still drop out. They could bring the economy to a standstill and it would pick up again. It picked up for another four years, five years, until 1973, when it started to decline. What was happening then, in '68, was happening in a very rich economy, everywhere, all over the western world. It'll never come back, and it seems like a dream.

INTERVIEWER

It'll never come back? Isn't that pessimistic?

GALLANT

It's not pessimistic, it is realistic. How can it? The whole thing is kaput now.

INTERVIEWER

I picked up the last *Passion*, and read the reprint of the 1958 *Esquire* article about the Americanisation of France, and I was wondering if, when you were in Paris, you noticed that at all, if that was an issue?

GALLANT

In 1958? No. It is now, but it's sort of a joke. When were you last in Paris?

INTERVIEWER

I've never been in Paris.

GALLANT

Oh. I see. Well, the whole Champs Elysées is just hamburger and fast food places. If you call that Americanisation—but it's just world-wide modernisation. I can't really get very excited about that. It would excite me, it would infuriate—I would react if they cut the trees down in the Champs Elysées and there were no more trees.

But you can't keep it a museum. You can keep something like Venice as a museum, but young Venetians have to go away to work, because there are no jobs in the museum, just the museum keepers. Not that I wish to see hamburger signs in Piazza San Marco.

INTERVIEWER

In the May '68 *Journal* there were references to hostility to American ideas. For instance, J.P. explains to students that in Peking, the university programme consists of a major and a minor subject. When you told him that programme was the American university system, he replied that he couldn't say that it was American because they would never have accepted it.

GALLANT

Oh, I don't remember. Don't forget this is a long time ago, it was 15 years ago. You would probably get something else now. It is very easy to stir up anti-Americanism in France, among French. In Europe, at the moment, with the arms and the nuclear issue, this is completely different. It is very easy to stir up anti anything anywhere, though, isn't it?

INTERVIEWER

It is. It is too easy. I know you are interested in politics, so you have said in interviews, but I was wondering if that interest formed a broader vision, or made itself known in your work somehow.

GALLANT

Well, if it is known in my work, that is up to the reader to see. I would think that everything is political, in a certain sense, in people's lives. They don't always realise it; they're either the victims of it or not aware of it. I don't know, I can't say what readers see. They sometimes see the very opposite of what one intended. I don't think I could consider people, even in a small domestic entanglement—even if I didn't mention it or write about it—without saying what the structure was that they lived in, and what created it, and what at that particular moment was acting on it, and what that... Although one is writing a short story and not an essay. It is a different pattern. But I probably think like that very much. I'm wondering, when I'm talking to people, what they think, what they would say. It is much more difficult to discover in Canada what people think about these subjects. They often get very heated and angry, which is not fun, or they avoid it completely.

INTERVIEWER

Yes. I noticed in "The Pegnitz Junction" and in "From the Fif-

teenth District" that you were playing around with the form. In both of them there was more than one voice, or they had stories within stories within...

GALLANT

Oh, "The Pegnitz Junction" is just a story within a story within a story within a story...

INTERVIEWER

Yes, it's wonderful. What interested me was the play of voices, that there were several voices in one story.

GALLANT

It is more in "The Pegnitz" because you've got the voice of the woman who lived in Muggendorf, who hardly speaks German, and whose whole life history Christine gets. I did not mean that Christine was schizophrenic or anything. She heard it. In that story you have to accept that there were short circuits of thought. It is the story that I had the most enjoyment writing of anything I've written. I adored writing that. I wrote it in high spirits, and it was such fun to write because a great deal of it has some references to German writing—parodies and take-offs and skits and all sorts of things that people didn't get—but it amused me to do that anyway. It is one of the few things I can ever reread. I don't reread. I sometimes reread that a bit, just a bit of it here and there. I don't know why, but I adored writing it. I wrote it very very fast.

INTERVIEWER

Really? Even though you were making allusions?

GALLANT

Well, I wrote the initial part very fast. I had a great deal of enjoyment writing it, and it amused me to write, and I wrote at a pretty good clip. I started it in Germany, one summer that I was there. I wrote constantly, and finally irritated the person who was taking me round to see the sights, because I just sat in the car scribbling. I didn't go out and look at the beautiful Renaissance statue or whatever.

INTERVIEWER

Do you know George Woodcock at all?

GALLANT

I met him only once.

INTERVIEWER

He said of "The Pegnitz Junction" that he thought it was all about how the war, how Nazism, put up a wall, and that the Germans you were writing about in "The Pegnitz Junction" were without memory, without a past.

GALLANT

Oh, absolutely. I don't think that is what it is entirely about. But that is true. I wrote that at the end of the sixties. The generation of the sixties, there was a wall behind them. Their parents were absolutely silent. They grew up puzzled and amnesic. In a place that had been bombed, everything that they were handling, practically, was new; cups, saucers. There was nothing, there was no reminder. I was fascinated by that, that there was no reminder. Yet there was a great deal on television. They could look at television and see. They were constantly running documentaries and documentation about concentration camps and so forth. It is not true that there was nothing. They could see it if they *wanted* to. But there was no connection between that, present life, and their parents. Now they are making a connection, but they are making a connection with their grandparents.

INTERVIEWER

"From the Fifteenth District": you said many readers were baffled and irritated by it. Why?

GALLANT

"Many," I don't know about, but some people were. The other day someone who was interviewing me said it was *fey*, *f-e-y*. It is not *fey* at all, that woman isn't *fey*. The idea of the living pursuing the dead is not *fey*.

"From the Fifteenth District," I remember, was much longer originally. I had something in my mind and I never wrote it. There is an *arrondissement* in France that's an administrative... In the story, it's a place where the dead complain to the police of being haunted by the living. They were histories that could happen anywhere, those three stories, of the soldier, the Arab woman who wants her death to be described as something absolutely beautiful and not the horror that it obviously was, and Mrs Essling. But I wanted to write... [interruption of telephone].

INTERVIEWER

Were you surprised then that some people would be irritated by it?

GALLANT

You never know what's going to irritate people. For a couple of years, '80, '81, into '82, I wrote in the *New Yorker* only humour, short humorous pieces, because I was writing Dreyfus and I just didn't... Many people didn't like it, they were irritated because it was satire. In fact, I remember in 1981 I was reading at UBC and a professor got up, a teacher, and asked me most passionately if I would please stop writing this stuff.

INTERVIEWER

Why?

GALLANT

Well, "it isn't what you do, we don't understand it." Eventually I started doing other things again, so it was all right.

INTERVIEWER

I've noticed that your stories are open-ended. I want to know if they are open-ended because that is a form you choose, or if you think it is realistic, because in life situations go on, they don't end.

GALLANT

You mean it doesn't end with the line, "so he died, and his wife committed suicide, and his sister then got married and lived very happily in Mississauga, and she had two children called Kevin and Amy, and Amy was doing finger painting at the age of," no, that's open-ended too.

I don't know what is meant really by open-ended because there certainly is an indication, at least to me, of what next. I don't think there is any mystery of what next, there is never someone saying "and I didn't know what I was going to do next." You know pretty well what the situation is from then on, or what it is bound to be. Or barring a miracle, happened to be.

INTERVIEWER

Yes. I was thinking of *A Fairly Good Time*, at the end, I wasn't sure

if the character would ever change or if she would continue to be happy-go-lucky.

GALLANT

Well, I don't know that, but she certainly wouldn't be with him, would she?

INTERVIEWER

Yes, that is clear.

GALLANT

She does a very silly thing at the end to irritate him, sending a silly thing in the mail, and she obviously can't change, and he's not going to change either, and I think that is clear. There's a story I took out of that, it was longer, and there is a piece that I wrote as a story which ran in the *New Yorker*, where Philip is remarried, and he talks to his second wife about Shirley, but with a kind of nostalgia, and the younger, prettier wife is jealous.

INTERVIEWER

Why would he be nostalgic?

GALLANT

Because one is, that's life. He says she was absolutely awful, you couldn't do anything with her, she was absolutely hopeless, she was always... And yet the fact that on his honeymoon he will talk about her, makes the younger woman, although she is much more beautiful, younger, suddenly feel inadequate. But it is inadequate vis-à-vis the shadow of the first person. It takes place in an airport in Helsinki, they're on their honeymoon. "In Transit," that's what it is called.

INTERVIEWER

Because you don't reread your work, I'm going to give you an example for this one...

GALLANT

I have, excuse me, I have reread a number of things because I'm giving readings, so of course to give readings you do reread to the extent of finding out if the thing will read, so I've reread more this year, usually just the first page to see if it will read aloud, some things read

aloud and some things don't, so I have reread more than I would ever normally.

INTERVIEWER

This has to do with the past. I'm trying to get at what the relationship of the past is to the present in your work. For instance, you have characters like Flor, and the woman in "The Moslem Wife," and Potter, Piotr, how do you pronounce his name?

GALLANT

Piotr. I think the Poles or Slavs pronounce the 'r' differently than the French do. I can't really say it in a Slav way. It's just Peter.

INTERVIEWER

Those characters seem to be crippled or hampered in some way because they remember, they hang on to the past.

GALLANT

I don't think Piotr is a man hanging on to the past at all. I think he is trying to do everything he can to get away from it. He is not living with his wife. He's trying to get off with a younger woman. He's thinking of moving to a foreign country.

INTERVIEWER

OK, but I was thinking of the way he is puzzled and envious of Laurie's...

GALLANT

Piotr is not hanging on to the past, his country is hanging on to him. He can't get out of the country. How could he earn a living anywhere else? How could he earn a living? What could he do? He can't just come over with a suitcase. When he thinks of leaving and living with her, he thinks wildly he's going to get into the French teaching system; he can't. He is there as an exchange professor, don't forget. If he ever came back, what would he do, sweep the streets? He couldn't even do that. Oh no, he's trying, he's willing to do everything.

There is a part in the story which says his children even seem remote to him. He's very much in love. He envies her her *freedom*... well, he

hasn't got it. He is not hanging on to the past, the political system is hanging on to him.

INTERVIEWER

I see. Scratch Piotr.

GALLANT

Yes, well, scratch it, because you've got it wrong.

INTERVIEWER

But, Flor in *Green Water, Green Sky* and Netta in "The Moslem Wife"—there is one point where Netta says she is haunted by a dark, an accurate, a deadly memory, and is envious of her husband's lack of memory.

GALLANT

He has a lack of memory that can let him go from woman to woman, and let him come back to her as if nothing had ever happened. But men are often like that.

INTERVIEWER

You think so?

GALLANT

Yes, much more than women.

INTERVIEWER

Except for Laurie Bennett who goes from man to man.

GALLANT

Well I don't really know much about her.

INTERVIEWER

Your work often portrays refugees. Why this fascination with refugees?

GALLANT

Oh, I've written about that. I don't know. They just fascinated me. They seemed to me from Europe, from a different world, from

somewhere, something fascinating.

The very first two little fragments I ever published in my life, which were in *Preview* magazine, were about a young Austrian refugee man. The second thing that I had published was in the *Standard*, and it was also read over the CBC radio, and it was about a Czech refugee.

INTERVIEWER

That ties in with the war, which keeps reappearing in your fiction, as if you were fascinated by it also.

GALLANT

Fascinated? That was my generation.

It really was a great trench in life, before the war and after the war. Two worlds.

INTERVIEWER

Do you see it that clearly, in everything, even in families?

GALLANT

Oh yes, it was a deep trench. People's families meant nothing.

INTERVIEWER

But after the war?

GALLANT

People got together and tried the Great North American family baby boom thing.

INTERVIEWER

You did one play, and only one play. Why just one?

GALLANT

It is pretty recent.

INTERVIEWER

Yes. Will there be another play?

GALLANT

Yes.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have a favourite story that you wrote?

GALLANT

Perhaps "Speck's Idea." It was published in the *New Yorker* in 1979, and it was in *Best Short Stories 1980*, the American one and the Canadian one, and has been republished twice since. I've never been able to read it aloud because it is too long, it's very long.

INTERVIEWER

Why would you say it is your favourite?

GALLANT

Because it's about Paris. It's a lot of different things that I've been observing about Paris, and I got them all into this story. It's about a man who owns an art gallery in Paris. Lots and lots of things about Paris.

INTERVIEWER

Just because you got them all in?

GALLANT

Oh, I don't know really.

INTERVIEWER

Have you ever had, or been afraid of, writer's block?

GALLANT

I've never had it. I've had fatigue. I've never been where I didn't have something that I was doing or trying to do. I've never had a period as long that I wasn't writing as this one now, here. Five months and just one book review. It is a change of rhythm that has upset me. It is not a block. It's just that I can't seem to get the machine going the way I'm used to. I'm used to having lots and lots of time to write, and not quite as many other things to do. On the other hand, it seemed pointless to come all these miles and shut myself up, lock this door permanently and sit here and not see anyone, because then I might as well be in Paris under rather more comfortable circumstances. So that's bothering me. Then I found that when I sometimes arrange this stretch of time when I think I can work, well

you know, it's not a machine, you can't just turn the button on and say all right go.

No. No, the machine is backed up in some way. But it's not writer's block. I've heard people talk about writer's block. I've never had that, where they can't get anything down. The French call it the fear of the white sheet of paper: *le peur de feuille blanc*. Why put a sheet of white paper in front of you if you don't have anything to put on it? That sounds completely idiotic. I wouldn't get anything out unless I knew what I was going to write. That sounds completely insane.

INTERVIEWER

What is your usual working pattern?

GALLANT

In Paris I work all the time. You mean when I'm on my own? I'm working all the time. Last year I was getting ready to come here in September; I was writing four stories for the *New Yorker*, four connected stories. I barely did anything else. I didn't go outside because I should finish it. Then there would be periods when I would relax a bit more, and take a quick little holiday, not even a holiday, I would just take the train to see someone.

The lovely thing is if you take a train, in a very short time you are in a completely different environment. That's the lovely thing about Europe. You take a train and you're in Holland, in Italy, it's completely different and you forget everything.

INTERVIEWER

Not like Canada.

GALLANT

No, certainly. I've tried to explain that to friends in Europe. One of the things that puzzles me and them is that Canadians don't take very many holidays. And they work very hard, god they work hard, long long hours, and they work all their lives here. Go into a store and you are waited on by what seems to me old women. They work all their lives.

I've had students who tell me their parents work all their lives. Why don't they take longer holidays? It isn't that they can't afford them. You just can't. It takes four to five hours of plane flight—it's like flying from Paris to Leningrad, or Paris to Helsinki, every time you want a holiday. Instead of being somewhere else in an hour, like the Mediterranean. This is geography.

INTERVIEWER

It's not just geography, though, because...

GALLANT

It is a different rhythm.

INTERVIEWER

Yes. But the idea of working all your life is very accepted here.

GALLANT

I've been working all my life because, in the first place, I don't conceive it any other way, and then, I have no choice. I live on my writing. If my writing stops, I stop. But that's not the same thing. People work and work here forever.

When you think of France, where they have five or six weeks of paid holidays a year, and a 34 hour week. The result is that the economy is different here. They start late in the morning here. Stores open early in France; you go out on the streets, stores are open early. You can go out and do your shopping at eight o'clock in the morning, and come home, it's done.

Banks here don't open until ten o'clock. It's just lunch hour, it would have to be one's lunch hour, banking.

INTERVIEWER

Have you always known you would write?

GALLANT

Yes.

INTERVIEWER

Did you ever doubt your ability?

GALLANT

Every writer does. Yes. Every writer does.

INTERVIEWER

Wonder if you have the talent?

GALLANT

Mmhmm. Yes.

INTERVIEWER

Is there a long—I don't know if this is the right word for you—gestation, from when you get an idea to when...

GALLANT

Yes, sometimes yes, sometimes no. Thinking of the four stories I wrote last year, really like a novel, I had the idea in the autumn, and I thought about it a long time all winter, and I suddenly started to write in the spring. I was writing other things too. But on and off. And then suddenly in spring I began to write, and wrote steadily into August. Sometimes it takes much longer. Some stories have taken three years. On and off. I put them away. Things I started twenty years ago I'll probably never finish.

INTERVIEWER

Imagination: is it inspired by memory?

GALLANT

I don't know. No. Because when you are a child you imagine. Your wild imaginings, what can they be based on: stories you've been told, your own desires, things you've read. So memory, to that extent, maybe, what you've... A little child will tell you the most fabulous story—what is it based on? What he wishes might happen, perhaps. Very often.

Lack of imagination is tragic. Lots of people have no imagination. I read somewhere in an interview with Philip Roth—I've forgotten where it was—in which he said the difference between a writer and everyone else, is that the writer can imagine.

I think it is more than that. I think the difference between a writer and everyone else is the ability to put yourself in someone else's place, completely. I think that's more than imagination. To actually think, "if I were in the next office seeing a student, would it be like this, like that?" and so on. The most difficult thing, I think, for a writer, is when other people try to run your life for you. They say, "but why do you do that, why don't you do this and do that?" and go to places you don't want to go to. Writers don't live like other people, and, it is evident, they can't. People will try to live your life for you, and you can't possibly want that. They are absolutely incapable of putting themselves in your place. But I can put myself in theirs, still thinking, "why don't they shut up?"

INTERVIEWER

I think you just said what everybody who reads interviews wants to read; they all want to be reassured that the writer is somehow different, but yet not too different.

GALLANT

I don't really know. I never tried to approach writers when I was young, so I don't know. I had no idea what a writer was like. I know that the one writer I very much wanted to interview was Jean-Paul Sartre, when I was young. And I did. I was able to when he came to Canada. That was in what, '43? That was fascinating for me.

INTERVIEWER

That was for the *Montreal Standard*?

GALLANT

Yes. But I never tried to approach writers or anything. It never entered my head that that was the way to writing. It never entered my head that meeting a writer was a way to write.

INTERVIEWER

No. It's not.

GALLANT

No, of course it isn't. Of course it isn't.

INTERVIEWER

Can you think of any writers whom you would have read when you were very young, who might have influenced you, your outlook...

GALLANT

It is hard to say. I read a great deal. I'm always amazed when people can say, "Yes, I was influenced by James Joyce." I really don't know. There were so many. I read a lot of Chekhov, as I've said dozens of times.

INTERVIEWER

What about Katherine Mansfield?

GALLANT

Yes, I read her enormously when I was young, I haven't read her for years. I admired her greatly.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think you learned from her work?

GALLANT

Well, I wasn't a student sitting at a teacher's feet, I was just reading.

INTERVIEWER

You could still absorb...

GALLANT

Yes, it's hard for me to say because I don't know.

INTERVIEWER

The reason I ask is because she appears twice in your fiction as a geographical landmark.

GALLANT

Yes, I noticed that, too. I read aloud a story called "Virus X," and it was a scene with two girls going to her grave...

INTERVIEWER

Oh, that makes three.

GALLANT

What's the other?

INTERVIEWER

"The Moslem Wife" starts off by locating the hotel, and the other one is—oh, sorry, not a story—the May '68 Journal, you identify a hospital as the one where Mansfield underwent a useless cure.

GALLANT

No, not a hospital, a hotel. It is not very far from where I live. And I read her journals, and I read her correspondence, but I haven't read any of that for years.

INTERVIEWER

Why is Proust your favourite writer?

GALLANT

Just because he's great, fascinating. I don't know. Maybe one is drawn to something that is concerned with the things that one is concerned with, but it's unconscious.

I don't read for anything but pleasure. If I read for information, I'm looking for information and that's the end of that. I could never be a teacher, because teachers read without pleasure. It's terrifying to think that they teach literature that they have read without the slightest pleasure. The concept of pleasure does not even come into it.

INTERVIEWER

No, I don't think that's true.

GALLANT

I think it is true.

INTERVIEWER

I think the first reading is always with pleasure, and the second reading is when they begin to do the teaching.

GALLANT

I think they make no difference between what they like and what they don't like. Everything is taught at the same level. They are looking for things that have nothing to do with the pleasure of reading. And writers—if you don't read for pleasure, forget it.

INTERVIEWER

How about influences besides authors, for instance film, directors, art, music?

GALLANT

I've often wondered about that myself, and I don't know. And then, I've often wondered how late, at what point influence stops, how late. There is a writer I admire greatly called Joseph—not Philip—Joseph Roth. He's a Viennese novelist and journalist who died in 1940. I didn't come to him until late, until I was over forty. Someone introduced me to this writer. I've read everything I can that's translated in English and French. It seems to me that we are almost...twins.

And yet it is not the same thing, we are not at all alike. He is writing about the Austro-Hungarian Empire before the first World

War. And he died of alcoholism; the most unlikely thing that would ever happen to me, you know. He was a refugee, I'm not. But there's something about his work that absolutely fascinates me. I was greatly flattered when a German I know, reading something I wrote, said, "there's something about it like Joseph Roth, Joseph wrote this." I thought, is it possible that I could, at my age, still absorb something? It's not the work, it's not the style, it's not... There's just something about the thinking. And I think one is drawn to someone who you think... I've asked people who knew him, would I have liked him, and they've said "oh, no, he was always drunk and mad." But it's fascinating. Being drawn to someone who writes something that appeals to me. I read anything I could get my hands on, the way you do when you're an adolescent, but I was forty. It is amazing.

INTERVIEWER

Why not, though? There is no reason for you to be fixed and non-malleable.

GALLANT

I don't think it's as simple as that. I think that it is something that you think, "oh, I would have been interested in this subject, too," and you read it voraciously, this subject: frontiers, which fascinate me, people, foreigners. Anything that's different is interesting to me. I have at Massey a charming Chinese student, chemical engineer from Taiwan, who said to me, "why don't you go to Taiwan, why don't you go to Asia, and then you'll have another setting for your fiction." I said I couldn't begin to even attempt to write about Asians. Even if I were to stay a year, I could never put myself in the place, I said to him, of your mother, your father, yourself, your anything. I could only be always an outsider looking on. That's something I dread, I'd never write, because I'd only be writing about myself. So that's not interesting for me. For example, he told me that he—we were talking about another Chinese person—could tell that he is the youngest son. I said, "how can you tell, how do you know?" He said, "Just as Chinese people can tell that I'm the oldest son." And I said, "how? Because you're responsible and you're this and you're that?" It is something subtle. Now, I could never tell. I couldn't look at a Canadian and say he's the youngest in the family. You see, it is a question of looking for different things. I couldn't put myself in that place. I couldn't attempt to do it.

But I can get away with it with an Italian, with a Russian, with any

European. It's close enough, the same religions are practised. You can start off with that, it is the basis of our culture. There is a certain similarity, and then there is a deviation. You have to take that into account. You have to try to think how it would be if you came out of a society such as the Swiss who write, speak, work in two or three languages. That's a different kind of mentality *déjà*, but it's not all that different. Basically, it's instinct.

INTERVIEWER

You said a Russian. Russia you would include as European?

GALLANT

I would think that I was taking a great risk. I don't think I could put myself in the place of a dissident, because they're all fighting among themselves. Unless it was based on things they had told me. Sometimes you only begin to guess or to feel what they are thinking.

INTERVIEWER

I know people always ask you if you know other writers...

GALLANT

I don't talk about my friends.

INTERVIEWER

No, I don't want to talk about your friends, but I want to know if you are part of a community. For example, in Canada one of the most common complaints is that there is no sense of community, no sense of people knowing each other and being able to talk about their work.

GALLANT

I'm told that the writers' community in Toronto is altogether too chummy, that's what people say.

INTERVIEWER

That's Toronto. I meant Canada as a whole.

GALLANT

Heavens, look at it geographically. How do you think that a writer in Vancouver can drop in for a drink with a fellow from Saskatoon? It can't be done. And writing is a very solitary occupation. Writers don't work with one another.

Any writer friends I've had, it has been a coincidence that they happened to be writers, and we never talk about our work. I have a very good woman writer friend in Paris, and we don't talk about our writing until something is finished. She will call up and say, "I've finished," a novel or whatnot, and I usually send her flowers or something. But it's a coincidence. I probably have more painter than writer friends.

INTERVIEWER

What about reading your contemporaries?

GALLANT

I read what comes through my hands. I don't have a systematic way of reading, unless something strikes me as marvellous, and then I'll try to find everything and do it all at once. But that's very rare. There is a great deal of almost good writing.

INTERVIEWER

What do you mean by almost good writing?

GALLANT

Competent.

INTERVIEWER

For example, would Doris Lessing be "almost good"?

GALLANT

Oh, no, Doris Lessing is a first class writer. No, but there is a great deal of rather boring work.

INTERVIEWER

Do you remember much about your childhood?

GALLANT

You've read my work?

INTERVIEWER

Yes, but I always assumed that it is not you in the fiction.

GALLANT

Yes, I remember a great deal. Coming back to Canada once, someone said to me, "did you have an unhappy childhood?" and I said that it was unhappy like most people's. A couple of people I know said, "Well, mine was happy." Heavens, I'd rather have had mine than theirs. And I think they mean it.

INTERVIEWER

In the introduction to *Home Truths*, you said that it was in New York City that you discovered for the first time at the age of 14 that one could actually be happy. What did you mean by that?

GALLANT

Because I was in Ontario, and I'd had a very difficult—my father died and I was brought here, and I found it very strange and different. People were closed. I'm talking about before the war. I don't want to get into a great hassle with Canadians; I say this and that, and it's all taken out of context afterwards and thrown back at me. I really don't deserve it and I'm getting tired of it. Life was very different fifty years ago, which is when I'm talking about, and people were very tight and closed. I can't say that it was a very jolly place here.

I had come out of something perhaps livelier. I was coming to the conclusion that there was no way of being happy, and most of the people were unhappy, and that there was no solution. I didn't see anyone expressing joy or gaiety or optimism, or I never heard it, and I never saw it. I was thinking that the only happiness in life was just in books and imagining, and that people's lives were utterly drab. Even talking to you about it I feel bent down by that awful weight I used to feel, that there was no way out and life wasn't worth getting on with. I went to New York and that was a liberation. Simply because people were more cheerful—cheerful, that's all—they were just cheerful and happy. One of my first experiences was going to a movie in New York City, and hearing people, for the first time in my life, laugh in the cinema. I had never heard it.

INTERVIEWER

You're kidding.

GALLANT

I'm not kidding. I'd never heard it. If you go to a movie here now, I can't say that people laugh all that much, but they talk all the time. They talk on the same level as we are talking now, and they eat popcorn, and they talk as if they were in their own livingrooms. I don't know if they do it in Montreal, but they do it in Toronto. That's very very different. If there's something funny, yes, people do laugh. If you read, and you read something funny, people laugh. They are very different, it's not the same. This is two generations on, don't forget. I'm talking about people before the war, it was fifty years ago.

INTERVIEWER

How long were you in Ontario?

GALLANT

Oh, just long enough. It was a liberation in that sense. People were completely different. Now, I don't think that Americans have the optimism they had fifty years ago, either, because they've had Vietnam, and they've had a recession. They were in the Depression, but they were coming out of it, and I suppose I was too young to talk to people about economics. They weren't in the war yet. There was a jauntiness and bounciness and cheer, and everything was just around the corner and everything was lovely and it was giddy. I saw that there was a possibility of happiness in life. That was the American creed then: life was happy. What was it in Canada? You can't even say Canada, because Québec was different. In Ontario life was duty, life was earnestness. But that was a long time ago.

You're going to publish this and I know exactly what is going to happen. I'm going to give a reading, and somebody is going to throw it at me.

INTERVIEWER

I noticed in the Geoff Hancock interview that when he asked you what sort of childhood you had, you didn't say. You didn't talk about you, you talked about what other people said about you.

GALLANT

Because I don't know what sort of child I was. All children think they were ultrasensitive. All children thought they were sensitive creatures, tossed about by the storms of doubt, winds. I feel a certain pity for children. In fact, if I had a large fortune to leave, I would leave

it for the protection of children against the savagery of adults. And there would never be enough.

You should see what I get in some of the stories here from students. There is a lot of savagery against children still. Even if you make allowances for fantasy, the cruelty... What goes on inside a middle class house. Mothers, the descriptions of mothers...

INTERVIEWER

What about your parents?

GALLANT

They have nothing to do with my career or work.

INTERVIEWER

Not even the experience of death early in your life?

GALLANT

Oh yes, of course, I've a lot of curious material in fact that I've never wished to open.

Oh, of course. But then you know, the difficult is sometimes much smaller than the moments of difficulty you remember. It's awfully hard to say.

I've often found, when I was young, when I sometimes attempted to talk about things, that people would say, "Look, you couldn't have experienced that and that and that," and I'd think, "yes, but I did," so I gave up.

INTERVIEWER

Why would they say you couldn't have experienced that and that and...

GALLANT

Because it was a great deal—it was a great deal—and that's probably why I became more careful when I was older.

INTERVIEWER

Thinking again of the time period when you came to Montreal in the 1940s and 1950s, all the women I can think of who were young adults at that time, became housewives and mothers. None of them would ever dream of doing something like working for a newspaper.

Do you think your parents or teachers or even the class and milieu that you were in, would have had a certain attitude toward women that would have...

GALLANT

Not, not, well you see I was so young that I can't tell you about my parents. But the preparation, the life that was offered to me seemed to me to be very mediocre, and I had a great terror... I think my greatest fear is of the mediocre. Once I realised that life wasn't hopeless, and that there was a great deal to be had from it, I then thought that it was elsewhere, that it had to be in Europe or somewhere.

But I had a great fear. Because when I think of girls I was in school with, where are they now? But there were women working for newspapers. I wasn't the only one you know.

INTERVIEWER

But weren't those women dismissed with "oh, that was because of the war"?

GALLANT

That was made very clear to us. Some very bright girls lost their jobs. In fact, a friend was in Toronto a while ago, we worked together when she was 19 or 20. I said, "well, don't you know why you were fired?" She said, "I've never known." I said, "they were clearing you out to get the men in." She said, "oh, I never thought of that." They fired her with no reason. She wasn't the only one; there was a batch fired. There were two of us they kept—I'm not talking about the women's pages—as journalist reporters because we spoke French. We were useful.

INTERVIEWER

Would you say that literature has a moral responsibility?

GALLANT

What exactly do you mean? Do you mean the writer is supposed to write uplifting things that are supposed to take people up? No, I don't think one has the right to say, just because one is a writer, what literature ought to be, any more than a painter has the right to say what painting ought to be. I think a social worker can say what social work ought to be, but that's completely different. Writing is entirely individual. You are responsible in the sense that anyone in society is responsible.

INTERVIEWER

Why do writers and artists feel they have to declaim about art and literature? They do, but why do we encourage them to? We do in our society.

GALLANT

Yes. Yes. Probably because what everybody else says is so idiotic that the writer finally feels, "well, I'll get my two cents in, and I'll say something, and be a bit wiser about it." But it is completely individual. Writers are not a tribe. This is a completely mistaken idea. One belongs to a writers' union because of a kind of solidarity, for one thing, in Canada. I belong to an American union because it is one that helps writers when they are down and out, financially. I belong to that. And I belong to the PEN club because they help writers who are jailed in countries, who take up causes and things. I have no place in the communist union, they wouldn't accept me. I'm not a militant.

Writers declare because the society they live in accepts the declamation. In France it is considered important. I don't know whether in the United States and Canada the writer—I'm talking of North American society as a whole—if it is at all important what the writer has to say on the resignation of Trudeau, for example, or what it means to this, that, and the other. They seem to feel that other politicians have more to say. I'm not quite sure that that's true. Or generalists who specialise and have had the thing in the drawer for a couple of weeks, waiting.

INTERVIEWER

Do you see your fiction going in a new direction?

GALLANT

Oh, I don't know how to answer that. It is not that I don't wish to, but I don't think that I'm the one—it's for the readers or perhaps the editors I deal with to decide. It certainly isn't the same direction all the time, I'm aware of that. It changes, but I don't know why it changes. One doesn't simply get up in the morning and say now it is going to change. When I was writing, for two or three years, those little funny pieces for the *New Yorker*, and then when I began to write long stories again, they were humorous, and so I knew that something was being carried over from the shorter pieces. I didn't expect it to last, and it didn't, because last year I wrote some short stories which were anything but satirical.

I've started a lot of work since I've come, and some of it is Canadian, and I've noticed they are very short stories, short pieces, but they are not satirical. I wouldn't have the same point of view for Canadians because Canadians never strike me as people I would be funny about, probably because Canadians don't pose before the world as some Europeans do, such as the people in France. There is a position, "I am a Frenchman, I must do that." Canadians are mainly struggling for identity, to dutify.

INTERVIEWER

Is that a definition, or...?

GALLANT

I don't know. There is a great deal of this "what is a Canadian?" I reread "Virus X" recently, I read it aloud. I read it in the '70s. I wanted to see if I could read it while I was here. It was almost like reading someone else's work, at that point. "Virus X" was written in the late '50s. The events it describes take place in 1952. In 1952 the Canadians in it are talking about national identity, so you see it was going on even then. That struck me. Here are these characters saying to each other, "Well, what about our national identity?" and we are still talking about it. This idea that Canada is a mosaic, that it isn't a melting pot, but the place is falling apart because where is the cement to hold the mosaic together? We should probably all have been made to learn esperanto. Is there an esperanto movement here?

INTERVIEWER

I've met esperanto teachers. I sat next to one on a train once; he was ready to sign me up by the end of the train ride. He had faith that this is the way to universal peace.

GALLANT

That's fascinating. They are very determined about what they are doing. If we all speak the same language we will all somehow... The Irish all speak the same language and they don't get along. The Irish are to me the most terrifying example. It's like a terrible haemorrhage on the edge of Europe. It goes on and on. No one seems to know what to do about it. It is just like a machine that keeps on, a bloody machine that keeps on turning. It doesn't make any sense at all. There it is on the edge of Europe, and blood is constantly flowing. They say if you take too many aspirin each one is a little internal haemorrhage and you

end up being anaemic without knowing it, and it's like that, a tiny tiny haemorrhage each time. Vitality is flowing out of what's left of us in the West.

INTERVIEWER

Are you working on anything besides Dreyfus right now?

GALLANT

I'm going to throw you right out that window. I'm not talking about it. I'm going to throw you right out that window [laughter].

INTERVIEWER

When you go back to Paris? Will there ever be another novel?

GALLANT

Oh, of course, yes. In fact I've got one that is almost finished. Everything I have is almost finished: a play, a novel, a book of history, short stories. Everything is almost finished.

INTERVIEWER

What are you going to do when they are all finished?

GALLANT

By then I will be a very old lady.

INTERVIEWER

Have you done what you set out to do?

GALLANT

You mean in life?

INTERVIEWER

Yes, or in writing, whichever you prefer.

GALLANT

In writing, it's never... I don't think any writer can ever say, I did what I set out to do. And then, you don't set out to do, nobody sets out with a thing, thinking that twenty years from now I'm doing that. I set out, I certainly did set out to live as a writer, and I managed it. I think that's absolutely grand. It was a great risk. I only realize now how much it was a risk.

INTERVIEWER

Only now? Really?

GALLANT

Because I kept coming back to Canada, and people talked to me about it.

INTERVIEWER

Did, or do, people keep asking how on earth you survived when you got there?

GALLANT

With difficulty. With difficulty. That was a long time ago. Even now, the students, not the young students because they don't notice, but those who are part-time, the mature students around 28... There was a student in here the other day who pointed out that I gave up a good job. I said, "yes, of course I did, there was no other way of doing it." I wouldn't advise anybody to do it, because there is no job to come back to now, and not everybody is going to write better in Europe. Some people can write much better in Victoria B.C., and some people can write anywhere. It just happened to work for me. And perhaps I didn't do enough, I don't know, perhaps I didn't. I wrote a lot, but I don't think that means anything either. I don't think it matters if you published twenty-two books or ten or three; it is the work itself.

Are we through with this? Let's unplug it and have another glass of wine.

—Interview by Debra Martens