

## AN INTERVIEW WITH MAVIS GALLANT

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Although she has lived in Paris for over forty years, Mavis Gallant (Montreal, 1922) still projects her Canadian identity from a cosmopolitan perspective. She has published two novels, eleven collections of short fiction and a play. She is, undoubtedly, one of the contemporary masters of the short story. Her ironical and detached narrative voice are recognizably Canadian, yet her work may be linked to the European and North American comedy of manners of Jane Austen, Chekhov, Henry James and Katherine Mansfield.

Her acute social, political and historical sense finds expression in her exploration of two areas central to human experience in our century: the world of women and history-as-everyday-living. Her characters are expatriates, refugees or displaced people who live their existences in the malaise generated by the European wars of this century. She left a career as a journalist to travel around Europe in the early fifties, in a pilgrimage that led her to Spain. She lived here for almost two years, associating herself with Spaniards as hard up as she. The literary outcome of this stay are two stories, "Señor Pinedo" and "When We Were Nearly Young", which contain autobiographical material. In this interview, which was conducted at the Café Dôme in Paris on July 26, 1999, Gallant explains why she was "fascinated" with Spain, talks about her Spanish stories, and gives her view of Spanish life under Franco in the early fifties.

*Why did you decide to write your stories about Spain?*

One does not write fiction for any reason, other than a desire to write about a particular thing. One should make the mistake of confusing fiction and essays or reporting.

*ATLANTIS*

*Vol. XXII Núm. 1 (Junio 2000): 205-14.*

*ISSN 0210-6124*

Fiction is not reporting. The stories I wrote about Spain are fiction but they are based on fact. But it is not factual fact, as I'm telling you now. Because if I wrote a story about Málaga as it was, it would be based on that, but I would not be in it. I might say "I", but it wouldn't be *I, me*. The feel of daily life is described in the small amount of fiction I wrote. I wish, now, that I had written more.

*How was the presence of Franco felt in the Spain you lived in?*

I knew fairly well what to expect when I came to Spain, although I was not prepared for the degree of poverty I encountered —except, of course, in the middle and upper-middle classes. But I had come to Spain from Italy, where the same social conditions prevailed. One had to attribute to Spanish Government policy only what could be attributable (e.g., the censored newspapers) but not necessarily the fact that there existed poor and hungry children. Conditions in Sicily and Calabria and in Andalusia were interchangeable. So that one could not blame Franco (putting it in simple terms) for centuries of Mediterranean poverty and social neglect; one could only blame him for not attempting to do something about it. But then, one could blame the Italian state for the same lack of social imagination. The difference between the two societies was that in Italy journalists could write about it, dissenting voices could be heard and opposition parties could demonstrate in the streets. In Spain there was nothing but silence. Actually, there is a great deal more to say, but it would call for an essay.

*Did you really go to Spain, as Janice Kulyk Keefer points out in her book Reading Mavis Gallant, attracted by the low cost of living? Was that the only reason?*

No, that was not why I stayed, because there was a very low cost of living in the South of Italy too. Also, if I had wanted to live somewhere only because it was cheap, I would have stayed in Austria.

*Then what attracted you to our country?*

I was very *fascinated*. I wanted to know, I wanted to see it. I When I came to Europe I had two or three things in mind, politically. First, on top of my mind was Franco, because it was my first political experience when I was nearly fourteen and the war broke out, the Spanish Civil War. And I remember the radio and the faces of the adults, because I wasn't an adult then, I was a young adolescent, and they looked very grey. Today, they wouldn't, because we are all so used to it. I was looking at the adult people and listening to the radio and it was in the summer, and I looked at their faces, and I thought, this is something *serious*, but now if it happened, it would only be the Balkans, or Bosnia or something else, and people would say: "the same thing again". But then it was really shocking, shocking. And then Canada

had a quite large contingent of volunteers for a tiny country, we were only seventeen million people, which is not a lot. And it was a large contingent who went over to help the Republic, mostly Communists, and the Communist Party was not encouraged in Canada, but, anyway, they were there, and by the time they came back it was four years later and I met them. And I remember they said, "well you don't know what it is to be part of a defeated army." And they turned, very much the few that I met, into what we call *soldiers*, and when you went to their apartments, their houses, they had Spanish posters, *No pasarán*, you know, they lived in that. And the songs, and so on, they lived in that. The second thing I wanted to know about was the Second World War, I wanted to know *exactly* what had happened in Germany, and I wanted to know it for myself. But Spain was my first preoccupation, with Germany, I didn't even want to go. And I was also passionately interested in the Irish question, but not as much as I would be now. I wanted to know really what the English had done there. But I wasn't uttermost, in fact, I didn't go till the sixties.

*Why were you so fascinated with Germany and Spain?*

Because it was so outside Europe, it was completely different from everywhere else, politically, culturally, because there was nothing going on. You know, the bookstores were very censored, there was censorship. And people looked, they didn't look defeated, they just looked very slowed-down, very slowed-down.

*In your story "Señor Pinedo" you include some details about the Falange which prove that you were well acquainted with Spanish history. Where did you get this knowledge?*

Oh, I'd been reading for years. I'd read Orwell.... I read all that long before I came, I was always political. I was fascinated from the moment the announcement came on the radio. I was nearly fourteen, and this always haunted me. I remember going to Spain and you had to change trains at Port Bou because the tracks were wider in Spain. I got into this train and it was early spring, but there were just a few trees in bloom. And I thought, this earth is soaked in blood. Spain is soaked in blood, I remember thinking that, the blood of the people who died in that terrible war. And then, thinking I was very dramatic and I was very silly because it is a dramatic thought. It was symbolic. After I'd been in Spain, I read *La colmena* by Cela. I couldn't read Spanish, I'd need a dictionary. But then I read it straight off in an English translation with the Spanish text, you know, that I'd compare, and I read the Spanish through the English translation. He wrote it in 1948, but Spain in 1952 was just like that. Madrid was.

*When did you arrive in Spain and how long were you there for?*

I arrived at the beginning of 1952. I went first to Barcelona, but I didn't stay there, I went right on, and then on to Madrid. I stayed in Spain about two years, I came out a couple of times to France, and then I went back again, I was completely fascinated, fascinated. I left definitely at the end of 53.

*Did you just live in Madrid, or you did you go to other places as well?*

I also lived in Málaga, I lived in an apartment in Málaga for a few months. Then the two summers I was there I rented once in Mallorca, and next year I was on the Barcelona coast, but I can't remember the name of the place. It had been a fishing village, and they were beginning to rent their houses and rooms out, and there was about two hotels. There were many British tourists, mostly, who had never been abroad before, they were there because it was cheap. I travelled around. I travelled fourth class. There was a fourth class. And it was wooden slats, wooden benches that you sat on, and these were very slow trains, slow, it took a day and a night to go from Barcelona to Madrid. And the people brought their food, they ate, they ate all day. In the night they slept, and sometimes, I remember someone would wake up in the night and they started singing, and then go back to sleep. And the first sentence I ever understood was *Si tú no te callas, te tiras por la ventana*. I was going to Barcelona from Port Bou, and there was an officer, a Spanish officer, or maybe a Master Sergeant, because I wasn't very good at reading the insignia, but, anyway, he was not an ordinary grade and he was rather stout. And I wrote it phonetically in my notebook and I thought I can speak, I can understand.

*Did you end up talking Spanish?*

I pick up languages easily but not very grammatically, it's imitation, you imitate what you hear. Somebody told me when I went to Málaga that I had a Madrid accent, and I said, listen, if I could have *any* accent.

*One of your Spanish stories, "When We Were Nearly Young" begins "In Madrid, nine years ago, we lived on the thought of money". Did that have to do with your own economical situation while in Spain or the country's poverty?*

I didn't have any money, I may say, I was travelling around with absolutely no money, I don't even know how I survived. I had a typewriter and a suitcase and I didn't have any summer clothes. I think I left them thinking I was going back to Rome. But nobody in Spain had any money, except the rich. There was no money, very tiny salaries, very tiny salaries and no future.

*In that story, you give a lot of information about food and the eating habits of the Spaniards.*

Food was cheap. There was the eight-peseta place, and there was the twelve-peseta place. If you had a bottle of Valdepeñas wine, and you took the empty bottle back to the store, you got eight pesetas, which then was a lot, you could eat a meal for eight pesetas.

A whole meal, the two courses, and some wine and some coffee. And the really good restaurant, which was luxury for me, was the twelve-peseta place.

*Did these people complain about their situation?*

I never heard them say they were poor or anything like that, they just were. And this was not working class, this was a lower-bourgeoisie. The upper bourgeoisie benefited under Franco. But there was a lower bourgeoisie, what they called the *gagne-petit*, they didn't earn very much, but they were not working class. And they had very little money, they wore shabby clothes. The men might own two ties and one jacket. And it was there where I really had my first vision of the European bourgeoisie before the War, from the twenties and thirties, because they were still the same way, very contemptuous of the lower classes. I'd seen that in Italy, too, but not to the extent that I saw it in Madrid.

*In that story, "When We Were Nearly Young", the characters are very passive, paralysed. Was that your impression of Spanish people?*

They were slow, slow. They walked slowly, they weren't quick.

*How much material from "When We Were Nearly Young" is autobiographical?*

The autobiographical material is disguised, you know. There were the three Spanish people, that was absolutely true. We were together a lot. The young woman, Pilar, who, I don't know if I said it in the story, had a baby, actually, she was a widow. Her husband died, but he died an actual death, I've forgotten what he died of, he was a young man, I think pneumonia or something. One of the two young men was a relative of hers. And the two men were friends. One was a student, one of these students who goes on forever, studying law, for ever and ever, and the other one worked somewhere, he had a job, it was either in an insurance company, or a bank, or I've forgotten, but he had a very small salary.

*This story, "When We Were Nearly Young", is about people in their late twenties. You have said that thirty years old seemed to you like a cutoff edge, a very important turning point.*

To me it was enormous. It's enormous. But, you know, what is young, what is considered young has considerably changed because people live longer now. There is a new king of Morocco and people keep saying *ce jeune homme*. But thirty, forty years ago, no one would have said *ce jeune homme*, they would have said he waited

a long time, he's going to be forty. Because people were dying at sixty, and now we are all living till more than eighty, so that thirty-five is really half-way through your life. Thirty seemed to me to be the end of youth.

*The characters are very afraid of getting to be thirty.*

Well, in your thirties, you were supposed to have cruised your whole life, people got married young, you know. Women now get married older, and they wait to have children till they are in their thirties because they can wait. There are hormones, there are different things they can do... Thirty is like a landmark and, of course, thirty is not eighteen. So there was a slice of life, to me, that went between seventeen and twenty-two, about, and that was one slice, then you went from twenty-two to thirty. And thirty was like a wall.

*And one was supposed to do something important before that age.*

If you are going to do it, do it before. And I remember that was a subject of conversation, I do remember that, about being thirty. About someone who was studying for ever and ever and God, he's going to be thirty and he is still studying!

*The girl in the story, Pilar, did not seem too worried about her future, either. She spent her time with the narrator at the Museo Romántico in Madrid.*

She used to pretend she lived there. She was the girl I was friendly with. That was true. She was like a little fairy tale creature because there was never anybody there. We'd go there together. There was lovely furniture and there wasn't even a guardian. I described it in one story, because I do remember looking out of the window into Madrid and thinking, I musn't get too involved in this, of her make-believe that she lives there. I was worried because instead of trying to do something with her life, she just pretended, like a fairy tale. She wasn't educated, what could she do.

*Your time in Spain was decisive for you in the sense that you were waiting to see whether you could make enough money with your stories to earn your living as a writer.*

I was already living as a writer, but I didn't have any money. When I was in Madrid I had an agent in New York who was a crook. He was selling my stories and not giving me the money. I was very, very hard up and I didn't know that he had sold them. I was already writing for *The New Yorker*, and he had told them that I lived in Capri, so *The New Yorker* was writing to me in Capri and the letters kept coming back and they just thought I was eccentric. And I was writing to this agent saying, "I don't understand it, what is happening, *The New Yorker* seemed to like my work". And he would write and say that he loved my work but nobody else

appreciated it, and I kept sending him stories and I was desperate. And then, I saw a copy of *The New Yorker* at the American Library and there was a story of mine. This was in 52. So I wrote to *The New Yorker* and I didn't ask them about money, I asked them, why they hadn't shown me the proofs, because there were some changes, that was the only thing that bothered me. And I had an answer, I was getting my mail at American Express or something like that because Calle Hortaleza wasn't a permanent address. Anyway, I had to go, and I had a letter from *The New Yorker* saying, "at last we know where you are. What is more important, did you get your money for the two stories?" So they had taken two stories and I hadn't had a penny. And then I found out he sold the story to *Esquire*, he had sold the story to a magazine called *Glamour* and he was selling my work everywhere. So that was a very, very bad experience and I really, really had nothing.

*How did you manage to make ends meet?*

I had just a bit, and I had sold a couple of stories to *The New Yorker* and I still had some of that and, I didn't do any reportage on Spain, but I had done a bit in Paris, and I could live on nothing, on a very small amount of money. My important thing was always to pay my rent. But there I suddenly got from *The New Yorker* a lot of money because they advanced me money on my next work, which I hadn't done, which meant that they were trusting me to write more, which was a very good sign for me. All of a sudden I was free to think about what to do. It was getting very hot in Madrid, so I went to Mallorca, which I'd been told about. So I went there and I was able to rent a house.

*Did you live in a pension, like the people in your Spanish stories?*

I lived in a pension on calle Hortaleza. It was a big one and the address was given to me by a French girl on the train and she was dressed very existential: she had a black pullover with a high black collar and black trousers and she looked as though she'd been around Friedrich Nietzsche. She gave that address, and she said that it was a good place to stay. It was a very nice, big apartment. I couldn't speak any Spanish, and, of course, I spoke French, but I got along, I always made myself understood. I remember they had this apartment, it was a bourgeois family, they had a huge kitchen, and a bathroom. In the bathroom, unlike France, you could have your baths without paying anything. In France they charged for hot water by the cubic metre!

*What kind of people lived in this pension?*

Well, there was a room, where there was an impresario for bullfighters.

*This is a character in "Señor Pinedo", isn't it?*

Yes, the first night I slept in his room, because I hadn't got mine ready and he wasn't there. I had all these posters, and it seemed to me very exotic to be in the room with the impresario for a bullfight. And then, there was a woman with a baby who used to sing to it, and there was a man who was a sort of apologist for the regime and nobody ever argued with him. We didn't eat together, or anything like that, you know, everybody ate separately. I don't know how we met, I think in the corridor or something, I tend to talk to people, and he was a sort of apologist, he would say that people said that foreigners thought bad things...

*About Spain?*

About Franco. And I wasn't stupid, I never said anything. On the first place, I didn't go there to preach or to talk about politics. I went there to see.

*Yet to live in a fascist country on your own at those very difficult times seems to me a very challenging thing to do.*

I don't know, I couldn't really explain how one does things. Don't forget I was on my own, I did not have to apologize to anyone or say, do you want to go there or anything, I just did it. I wasn't frightened of people or anything. Now I'd be more careful, you see. Because Europe has changed, so it's not as safe as it was.

*What were women's lives like at the time?*

In France women were wearing trousers, and they were wearing shorts, things that were unheard of in Spain, but the laws subjected them to their husbands. A woman in France until 1960 could not have a bank account if she was married without her husband's signature. The laws were very restrictive for the women in France, they didn't vote till 1946. In Canada from the First World War women voted, my mother voted when she was twenty-one. Women could drive cars in France, but sometimes their husbands didn't want them to learn, but in Spain I didn't see a woman driving a car until the mid-sixties I went once to Barcelona. There was a translators' conference in Barcelona, and I went with a translator I knew, and I saw them driving cars there. And I said, fifteen years ago, they would never have been driving cars, so it was a change. And I remember seeing a tourist woman in a bus in Madrid wearing trousers and people got up and went to the other side of the bus. And I wasn't there, but I was told by tourists that in San Sebastián, you couldn't go on the beach in a bikini because the police would tell you to put something on.

*Everything changed in the sixties with the massive arrival of tourists in Spain. But you are right, in the early fifties Spain had barely any contact with other countries.*



I know, I used to think of it as a country under a glass bell. You can see out, but you can't hear. It was also hard to get foreign newspapers, you could get certain ones, you could get *Figaro*.

*In your play What Is to Be Done, Franco comes up over and over again.*

Yes, it's meant as a joke. The women in the play say: "The first thing we do after the war is get rid of Franco, the men will never put up with it...". Of course, this was also women's point of view in those days. It was the men who were going to do things, they never thought *they* were going to do things, "the men will never put up with it". But that's already too late, I mean a generation now wouldn't know what I was talking about.

*It is ironical that Franco went on for almost forty years.*

He went on, of course. I wrote the play in 1980. So the sentence "The men would never put up with it" *is* ironical. By the way, a lot of people don't know the play is meant to be funny. Even the poem that this young girl recites on the stairs of the Lenin Library "When you said you'd be mine", this is meant to be funny.

*In "When We Were Nearly Young", you mention George Orwell. The narrator compares her financial situation to his by saying, "It was like Orwell, in Paris, revelling in his bedbugs". Orwell, as you know, has a book about Spain, Homage to Catalonia, and, in its essay-like quality, the story also seems close to George Orwell's The Road to Wigan Pier. William H. New has said that "When We Were Nearly Young" could be considered an essay about being hard-up in Madrid, and has even included it in an Anthology of Canadian essays. Were you ever conscious of the story's essay-like quality?*

I couldn't really judge it myself. Don't you think that is my journalist background, because I was very close to it then. And there is a desire to impart information which I have. In addition, I can't imagine writing except within a sociological context. I can't imagine writing "he said, she said". I want to know who *he* is, who *she* is, what sort of café they are in, and what time of day it is, what's going on around them. If I don't find that, I'm not interested in reading, I want all that. Look at how Chekhov gives it. It's also that I don't see other people as peculiar, you know, at all. Even though they might be foreign to me in the sense that they are brought up differently, I don't see them as anything but people. I don't see them as symbols.

*Have you read Christopher Isherwood's Goodbye to Berlin? It seems to me that your narrators in the two Spanish stories share with Isherwood's narrator the double role of observer and participant, the pension life, the precision of the observation and the setting in a community which is marked by a war.*

Well, of course I did. And *Mr. Norris Changes Trains*. Also Katherine Mansfield often sets her stories in a pension. But I wouldn't take anything from another writer.

*You have confessed that when you were young, you were very idealistic about politics. Have you become more distrustful?*

Well, you do get the feeling eventually, that comes with time, that you've seen before certain political things and they didn't work. But you can't tell that to young people because you have no right to tell them that, to begin with, they have to go see their own things. And you can't keep discouraging people because nobody would ever do anything. But, you know, ten years ago, the wall came down in Berlin. I never thought it would. And I thought that in order to free these people there would have to be a major war, and I didn't want a major war. I didn't think that Poles and East Germans or anybody would ever be free. And the hostilities were going to go on between the Soviet Union and America forever. And I often imagined what they wanted, in those countries, and I thought they wanted freedom of speech, freedom of newspapers, freedom to travel. But when the wall came down, all they wanted to do was shop, they just wanted to buy things and they wanted to go into malls. Now, my idea of hell is a mall. The cheap music, the cheap clothes, the cheap everything. And I thought, this is my last shock, I don't ever want to believe in anything again. It was a real shock.

