

# French Fascism and History in “Speck’s Idea”

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WHEN MAVIS GALLANT was in her early twenties, she worked as a feature writer for the *Montreal Standard*. One day in the spring of 1945, the newspaper’s art director called her into his office to look at some photos for an upcoming supplement. In the era before television, lavish picture sections were a staple of weeklies such as the *Standard*. No prior supplement, however, prepared Gallant for what she saw. Spread across the art director’s desk were the first images of concentration camps taken by British and American army photographers. They showed mounds of bodies alongside prisoners so numb and emaciated, it was impossible to distinguish the living from the dead.

“One thing you truly cannot imagine was what the first concentration camp pictures were for someone my age,” Gallant told an interviewer years later. “That’s something you can’t imagine because you’ve seen them all your life” (Hancock 98). Unlike those born after the war, members of Gallant’s generation had to assimilate their knowledge of the camps into their existing conception of Germany. In Gallant’s case, while she was staunchly anti-fascist, “there was hardly a culture or a civilization I would have placed as high as the German” (99). Now she was handed the pictures and given a perfectly impossible assignment: write the photo captions and an accompanying essay, on deadline and in less than 750 words.

Gallant resolved not to discuss the grisly visual details. In her mind they were not the pictures’ most important aspect. They forced the viewer to ask not *what* had happened but *why*. How did the country of Bach and Goethe become the country of Bergen-Belsen? Why had German culture, religion, and art all failed to function as a restraint? Gallant dutifully handed in an essay focusing on these questions. Her editors killed it and ran a story lingering over the images of corpses instead. When Gallant asked why, one of them blew up at her: “Culture! Our readers never went to high school and you’re talking about culture? All the Germans are bastards and that’s that” (Hancock 100).

Gallant's experience at the *Standard* highlights the historical context that shaped her work. That context was one in which the catastrophe of fascism was central. As she told her interviewer, for members of her generation, it cried out for explanation, at a level deeper than proclaiming all Germans bastards. While countless nonfiction writers have sought to diagnose the reasons for fascism's rise, less noted has been that Gallant has also taken up this question and, using the less programmatic and more indirect tools of fiction, offered her own answer.

Nowhere is this truer than in "Speck's Idea." First published in the *New Yorker* in 1979 and since anthologized many times, it is Gallant's most widely published story. Funny, sad, and beautiful, it is arguably her masterpiece, the one story that most warrants re-reading in the wake of her death. Critics have often interpreted it as a cautionary tale about the commodification of art.<sup>1</sup> To read the story carefully, however, is to note an abiding preoccupation with far-right extremism. The title character of the story, which is set in Paris in the 1970s, seems to slowly embrace fascism. Yet there are also details in the story that seem to undermine his association with fascist ideology. A conspicuous feature of the character in question is that he is introduced in a sympathetic way — the opposite of a bastard. The overall result is an enigmatic text, with evidence both supporting and undermining a straightforward interpretation of its protagonist as a fascist. A major interpretive challenge the story poses is to make legible the politics of its protagonist.

The best answer to that challenge is one that ultimately marks him as a fascist, but of a particular, non-ideological type. In the 1970s, France was finally reckoning with the full legacy of World War II. Historians and documentarians were calling the country to admit that its encounter with fascism had not been defined by valiant resistance alone, but also included many different forms of collaboration.<sup>2</sup> Gallant's story is informed by this debate. This is evident most obviously in its references to French writers and artists who enthusiastically supported fascism. But another important feature of the story is its dramatization of how a segment of the French population, which its central character represents, could tolerate and condone fascism for reasons other than a deep attraction to fascist ideas. These reasons include indifference and self-interest. Gallant's protagonist ultimately illustrates how fascism drew not merely on ideological, but also on opportunistic, motivations.

Gallant's focus, however, is not just backward looking. Her story also depicts pitfalls of understanding particular to our post-fascist age. These pitfalls all involve distorting historical truth in one way or another. The most straightforward form occurs when events of the fascist period are suppressed or whitewashed. By contrast, Gallant's story calls to mind more insidious failures of understanding. These include explanations of fascism that emphasize the uniquely monstrous character of its adherents or denunciations of the work of fascist intellectuals that are so indiscriminate and prejudicial that they take a step toward fascism in the very moment of opposing it. Gallant's story does not locate fascism's allure in the warped character of national groups that embraced it but in habits of mind that remain popular. Among these habits of mind is credulity toward historical narratives that perpetuate false and exclusionary national identities. In this way Gallant's story ultimately provokes reflection on the unfinished project of constructing maximally inclusive conceptions of belonging.

### The Fascist Riddle of "Speck's Idea"

Sandor Speck runs an art gallery in Paris that specializes in the work of undistinguished and little-known artists. Early in the story, Speck's wife divorces him while shouting, "Fascist! Fascist! Fascist!" The story ends shortly after Speck hurls the same insult at another character. The action of the story takes place between these symmetrically placed denunciations and revolves around Speck's attempt to mount a show by an obscure French painter who turns out to have supported the Nazis during the war. When Speck discovers that his painter was pro-fascist, he appears comfortable with this information. This and other details suggest that Speck is not entirely opposed to fascism himself.

One incriminating detail involves a bookstore across the street from Speck's gallery that specializes in the writing of Mussolini and other far-right authors. The store's political orientation makes it a regular target of left-wing commandos, who smash its windows and beat its customers with iron bars. Speck has long grown used to the sound of violent clashes on his street, "the hoarse imprecation of the Left and shriller keening of the Right" (Gallant 5). But whenever the police come around to ask him and his gallery assistant if they have seen anything, both refuse to get involved. Speck's assistant justifies staying silent on the comically ludicrous grounds that he is Swiss. In Speck's case, his

justification for quietism is that “the commerce of art is without bias” (5). Both characters thus respond to political extremism with neutrality.

Speck is more directly associated with fascism during a scene in his gallery in which he angrily demands that his assistant remove a Turkey carpet.<sup>3</sup> “Speck raised his voice to the Right Wing pitch heard during street fights: ‘Get it out! Get it out of my gallery! . . . I won’t have my gallery stuffed with filth’” (37). Speck’s tone associates him with the fascists who patronize the bookstore. That the object of his ire is culturally foreign and that he uses the term “filth,” the rhetorical power of which the Nazis well understood, only reinforce the dark associations of his outburst. The result of this and other incidents involving Speck is that, as critic Danielle Schaub has aptly observed, “the reader feels that he rather agrees with fascist ideas, especially in the light of the insult proffered by his wife” (133).<sup>4</sup>

And yet other details in the story complicate Speck’s fascism. Chief among these is his use of “fascist” as a term of abuse. The obscure far-right painter whose work Speck hopes to show is named Hubert Cruche, and the character whom Speck denounces is Cruche’s widow. Much of the story’s rich comedy and drama consists in Speck’s delicate but determined campaign to obtain permission for his show from the obstinate old woman. Eventually, she outsmarts Speck and arranges for another dealer to display Cruche’s work on more lucrative terms. This means the other dealer will have all the glory. Speck responds by pleading with the Widow not to go through with it, but this is no use and Speck’s plan is undone.

Speck makes his way to a bus stop in a daze, where he reflects on the scope of his failure. But then he hears someone calling out to him. It is the Widow Cruche, “her raincoat open and flying, waving a battered black umbrella, [bearing] down on him out of the dark” (44). In a moving scene, the Widow tells the broken and defeated Speck that he can have his show after all. Her manner now is tender, as though they will soon be not just partners but lovers. Speck agrees to go through with the show. But because the Widow has made it known she could work with another dealer, she can now negotiate more favourable arrangements from Speck. Any retrospective of her husband’s work will be on her terms, even though such a retrospective was Speck’s idea, as the story’s title denotes. Just as his bus is pulling away, Speck is overcome with frustration at having been outfoxed.<sup>5</sup> He brings his face up to the

window and yells, "Fascist! Fascist! Fascist!" While doing so, he pauses to note how satisfying the denunciation feels: "It was amazing how it cleared the mind, tearing out weeds and tree stumps, flattening the live stuff along with the dead. 'Fascist' advanced like a regiment of tanks" (45).

An analysis of Speck must explain how, if he is a fascist, he can use "fascist" as an insult. It should also explain something else. After Speck gets off the bus, a young man presses a pamphlet into his hand bearing a strange political message:

FRENCHMEN!  
FOR THE SAKE OF EUROPE, FIGHT  
THE GERMANO-AMERICANO-ISRAELO  
HEGEMONY!  
Germans in Germany!  
Americans in America!  
Jews in Israel!  
For a True Europe, for One Europe,  
Death to the Anti-European Hegemony! (47)

As Speck reads the confusing message, he wonders what it means: "Was it a [fascist] statement or an anti-[fascist] plea? There was no way of knowing" (47). Fascism was an international movement, but insofar as the pamphlet expresses a coherent political thought, it would appear to be the rabidly nationalist one that France must be uncontaminated by foreign influence of any kind. The story ends with Speck turning the pamphlet over and writing catalogue copy on it for his show, which he has resolved will go on despite everything. This suggests an association between Speck and the cryptic politics of the pamphlet.

The reader is ultimately left with a puzzle. Who is Sandor Speck, and what exactly does he represent?

### A Speck of France

If Speck is associated in a complex way with fascism, he has a more straightforward association with France. In order to clarify his relationship with fascism, it is helpful to first note his specifically French attributes. As we will see, these attributes do much to associate Speck with France not only of the 1970s but of the 1930s and 40s as well. This association is evident from the story's opening paragraph, which sets

in motion several thematic preoccupations that each link Speck with a different aspect of French identity:

Sandor Speck's first art gallery in Paris was on the Right Bank, near the Church of St. Elisabeth, on a street too narrow for cars. When his block was wiped off the map to make way for a five-story garage, Speck crossed the Seine to the shadow of Saint-Julien-le-Pauvre, where he set up shop in a picturesque slum protected by law from demolition. When this gallery was blown up by Basque separatists, who had mistaken it for a travel agency exploiting the beauty of their coast, he collected his insurance money and moved to the Faubourg Saint-Germain. (1)

Speck is introduced as a hapless and vulnerable figure, scrambling from one gallery to the next, at the mercy of social forces more powerful than himself. This is in keeping with many details associating Speck with smallness. They include not only his name, Sandor Speck, which evokes sand and specks of dust, but also his insignificance on a professional level. A small-time art dealer in terms of gallery size, he also specializes in minor artists, a professional niche which has "earned him the admiration given the devoted miniaturist who is no threat to anyone" (17).

The story's opening suggests that Speck is conservative. This association is evident in his decision to finally locate his gallery in the Faubourg Saint-Germain. This Left Bank neighbourhood has long been associated with the French aristocracy. Not only was it their traditional home before the revolution, but in the early nineteenth century it also became home to conservatives bent on restoring the monarchy. As historian Stephen Kale notes, "the term *le faubourg Saint-Germain*, or simply *le faubourg*, became political shorthand for organized ultra-royalist. . . . The public knew by instinct that the term referred not just to the concrete reality of a predominantly aristocratic neighbourhood but 'to all those who wanted to revive prerevolutionary France'" (122).

The suggestion of conservatism contained in Speck's choice of neighbourhood is reinforced throughout the story. His gallery, for example, occupies a decaying and subdivided *hôtel particulier*, as the grand urban homes of the nobility were called. The other tenants are down-at-the-heels aristocrats, whose failings Speck forgives "for the sake of being the Count of this and the Prince of that" (1). Similarly, when Speck gazes out at the right-wing bookstore, he finds himself admiring it because it is painted royal blue, "a conservative colour he found reassuring" (2).

Speck's attraction to aristocracy has strong political overtones. Within France, the French Revolution is normally seen as a great breakthrough that not only brought France into the modern world but created the modern world itself. Speck's indifference to this and his attraction to France's old order is one of many personal traits that align his values with the French right, whose chauvinist nationalism he shares: "French education had left him with the certainty that he was a logical, fair minded person imbued with a culture from which every other Western nation was obliged to take its bearings. French was his first language; he did not really approve of any other" (22).

Finally, in addition to smallness and conservatism, the story's opening foreshadows a thematic preoccupation with left-wing radicalism. This is suggested by the Basque separatists who destroy Speck's second gallery. At the time of the story's publication, the Basque group most responsible for terrorism was Basque Homeland and Freedom, known by its Spanish acronym ETA. That the ETA was historically a Marxist-Leninist organization means that Gallant's opening can be taken to contain the first of many references to communism. Speck's gallery in the Saint-Germain, for example, shares a street with three "Marxist embassies," while his ex-wife is described as a book critic for an uncompromising political weekly (4). One of her articles, "A Marxist Considers Sweets," attacked sugar on ideological grounds (and suggests a less than perky personality).

In each of these ways, Speck typifies France during the 1970s. The country was in a period of decline. In the 1870s, France had been the centre of a colonial empire, second in size only to Britain. During the 1960s, France lost the Algerian war and saw all of its major colonies declare independence, so that by the 1970s, it was left with only French Guiana and scattered island territories, the so-called confetti of empire. As the country's political importance shrank, so did its cultural significance. Speck works in the art market, which Paris once dominated, both artistically and economically. By the 1970s, the rise of New York as the new centre of the art world, which began in the 1940s, had achieved completion, a transformation to which Gallant's story draws attention with mentions of New York as the place where French dealers and artists now dream of making their fortune.

Speck, despite being conservative, is married to a Marxist. The political polarization of Speck's marriage thus mirrors a longstanding

feature of French politics, which for decades lacked a strong liberal or centrist party. As intellectual historian Mark Lilla has observed, after the French Revolution, European societies were deeply divided over its legacy. In each one, there sprang up “a counterrevolutionary party defending Church and Crown and hoping to restore their authority; opposing them was an equally determined party wishing more radical forms of democracy to accomplish what the French Revolution had already begun. As time passed the two parties shared little apart from their hostility to liberalism” (9). French politics during the 1970s still followed this broad pattern, with the Socialist party competing for power with the Republicans and other right-wing parties representing a form of conservatism that, while it no longer sought to undo the Revolution, left little space for moderation.

Speck’s drift toward fascism is best analyzed against the backdrop of his Frenchness. Viewed this way, his fascist sympathies not only represent the political impulses of one individual but also symbolize the larger career of French right-wing extremism, which witnessed a turning point in the 1970s. Nineteen seventy-two saw the birth of the National Front (NF), whose leader, Jean-Marie Le Pen, would become an enduring force in French politics, making countless xenophobic statements about immigrants, gays, and Muslims. France in the early 1970s also underwent a major policy change on immigration. During the post-war period, it had actively encouraged permanent immigration. Following the 1973 oil crisis, however, it not only discouraged immigration but, in a move that Le Pen would have appreciated, even tried to encourage immigrants to leave. Although that particular policy came to naught, the shift in focus was maintained, to the point that, as French immigration analyst Virginie Guiraudon observed in 2001, “since 1973 immigration [debate] in France has focused on stemming and deterring migration.” If there are far-right groups doing battle in Speck’s street, it is because their membership rolls, like that of the NF in 1970s France or Golden Dawn in Greece today, have historically swelled in periods of economic decline, a phenomenon that economically insecure and culturally intolerant Speck typifies.

But the story does more than comment on the wider society in which it was written, important as that function is. It also intervenes in the debate France was undergoing in the 1970s about its wartime past. Prior to this time, discussion of the war had exaggerated French resistance



and downplayed collaboration.<sup>6</sup> Contrary views struggled to receive a hearing. Hence the famous scandal of *The Sorrow and the Pity* (1969), a documentary on French collaboration, not being shown on French television for years after its production. Finally, by the end of the 1970s, a wide-ranging debate was set off by historians who sought to give an honest accounting of France's Vichy period.

Gallant's story draws attention to this debate. When Speck discovers that Hubert Cruche's politics were far right, he reflects on what it means, and why it may not be a barrier to his planned retrospective. Speck's ruminations do much to clarify how Speck himself should be seen:

Nowadays the Paris intelligentsia drew new lines across the past, separating coarse collaborators from fine-drawn intellectual Fascists. One could no longer lump together young hotheads whose passionate belief in Europe had led them straight to the Charlemagne division of the Waffen-S.S. and the soft middle class that had stayed behind to make money on the black market. Speck could not quite remember why *pure* Fascism had been better for civilization than the other kind, but somewhere on the safe side of the barrier there was bound to be a slot for Cruche. (36)

Members of the Charlemagne division were French volunteers who fought for Germany. Profiteers who stayed in France after the occupation did so because of the economic opportunity it represented. Speck's reflection is in keeping with one of the story's central preoccupations, which is to draw attention to the motivations on which French support for fascism drew, both explicitly ideological and crudely opportunistic.

Gallant highlights both motivations in an important scene recounting a vision Speck has. "Though he appreciated style," she writes of Speck, "he craved stability even more" (2). Speck's yearning for stability causes him to grow concerned about the violence outside the bookstore. While walking by it one night, he imagines the patrons of the shop lying beaten in the street, only to get up and storm his gallery, "determined to make Speck pay for injuries inflicted on them by total strangers" (7). In this anxious vision, he sees his "only early Chagall (quite likely authentic) ripped from its frame" by right-wing thugs who scream "Down with foreign art!" When the thugs attack Speck's assistant with a set of books, it turns out to be "the complete Charles Maurras, fourteen volumes, full morocco" (7).

The historical figures conjured up in Speck's vision have unmistakable associations. Chagall has been called the quintessential Jewish artist of the twentieth century. It is no surprise that right-wing hooligans would tear out his painting. Nor is it an accident that they would use the works of Charles Maurras as a bludgeon. Maurras, in addition to being a critic and poet, was the founder of the far-right group *Action Française* and a hysterical anti-Semite. When French authorities introduced a law in 1940 depriving Jews of citizenship and sending them to internment camps, his only criticism was that the law did not go far enough. Speck's vision of the marauding right-wing thugs clearly depicts them as a menace. Yet what disturbs Speck is not their political motivations, but their potential to disrupt the local order. His concern, in short, is less political than prudential.

This is in keeping with the attitude toward fascism that Speck displays throughout most of the story. At one point, for example, he toys with the idea of showing the work of a wartime artist who does not actually exist but is rather Speck's own invention. This show would display paintings by his imaginary painter alongside correspondence and ephemera belonging to famous figures, presented to suggest they knew Speck's subject. The correspondence Speck envisions "straddle[s] half a century, from Degas to Cocteau. The scrawl posted by Drieu la Rochelle just before his suicide would be particularly effective on black. Céline was good; all that crowd was back in vogue now" (10). After the Dreyfus affair, Degas broke off all friendship with Jews and refused to use any model who might be Jewish. The novelists Drieu la Rochelle and Céline were both enthusiastic collaborators. In the wake of the liberation, Drieu la Rochelle had to go into hiding before killing himself; Céline wrote pamphlets denouncing the "international Jewish conspiracy" and grew so closely identified with the Vichy government that after its fall he would join the surviving members in exile in Germany. The vogue crowd Speck has in mind is composed of French fascists of the pure kind.

Yet Speck does not imagine decorating his gallery exclusively with the spittle of Nazis. "There would be a word from the Left, too," in the form of postcards from communist poets and left-wing political leaders (10). It is thus not because he is attracted to Nazism on ideological grounds that Speck wants to display letters by Céline and his sinister cohort: it is because they are in vogue. For the same reason, Speck is

happy to throw in some communist scribblings. Speck as ever takes a pragmatic view, eager to appeal to both forms of extremism that do battle in his street. His envisioned art show would happily employ fascist material because of its appeal to potential buyers.

This aspect of Speck's character appears to explain his ex-wife's denunciation. Right before calling him a fascist, she makes it known that "Speck appraising an artist's work made her think of a real estate loan officer examining Chartres cathedral for leaks" (29). Her insult thus expresses her revulsion at Speck's pragmatic view of art. This incident again highlights the manner in which Speck approaches not only his fictional art show, but more or less everything. At one point, for example, he decides to attend a Masonic lodge ceremony, on the grounds that the Grand Architect of the Universe and his well-connected Masonic worshippers could potentially be of benefit to him. A similar thought causes him to want his assistant to join the Communist Party, which could also benefit the gallery. If Speck is open to fascism, he is equally open to Masonry, communism, or any other worldview that might be good for business. Whatever is good for business is good for Speck.

Speck's particular brand of fascism should now be clear. If, at first glance, it appears puzzling, it is because it grows out of more banal and familiar objectives. Speck reconciles himself to fascism due to a desire to get ahead, which is a desire most of us recognize. This makes it harder to view him and the dark political ideas he tolerates, and at times embodies, as entirely alien. Gallant's story rather offers the salutary reminder that fascism could find support in traditionally liberal democratic states such as France, birthplace of the Rights of Man, due to its ability to satisfy the psychic needs not of historically unique monsters, but of ordinary men and women.

This reminder is worth recalling given the way fascism has at times been characterized since Gallant's story was published. To take one prominent example, consider the debate over Daniel Goldhagen's 1996 book *Hitler's Willing Executioners*. Goldhagen's account emphasizes annihilationist anti-Semitism as the fundamental motivation behind the Holocaust. This view has attracted criticism, not because anyone believes anti-Semitism played no role in support of fascism, but because other factors were also involved. In the words of Hitler biographer Ian Kershaw, "The road to Auschwitz was built by hate, but paved with

indifference" (5). According to Kershaw and other historians, while the Nazi leadership was ruthlessly anti-Jewish, the general population was by and large indifferent to the fate of the Jews.

Indifference, like pragmatism, is a trait that did not disappear with the fall of the Third Reich. In recalling this fact, we come to see supporters of fascism and its projects less as inhumane freaks and more as people similar to ourselves. Goldhagen's view downplays this disturbing affinity, which some critics have suggested is the reason why his book could become a bestseller, particularly in Germany. In the words of Ruth Bettina Birn, former chief of Canada's war-crimes unit, "It's a vision which is palatable for North American and German readers 50 years after the fact. . . . If it's just these evil guys, hallucinatory demonological anti-Semites, why should I be bothered?" (qtd. in Fine A1).

Gallant's story delivers the opposite message. Speck tolerates and at times embraces fascist symbols and ideas, not because he is demonic, but because he is ordinary. Rather than cartoonishly evil, he is often appealingly vulnerable. Gallant at one point movingly describes him closing up his art gallery on a wet night, reflecting on the breakup of his marriage: "The faint, floating sadness he always felt while locking up had to do with the time. In his experience, love affairs and marriages perished between seven and eight o'clock, the hour of rain and no taxis" (3). Speck's emotional state here and elsewhere is finely drawn. Like the best fictional characters, he is someone the reader can identify with. It is a sign of the power of the story that this identification lingers even after we realize that Speck is politically sinister.

It is no accident that Speck is both emotionally wounded and politically extreme. In linking these two aspects of his character, Gallant recalls Hannah Arendt's observation that totalitarianism "bases itself on loneliness, on the experience of not belonging to the world at all, which is one of the most radical and desperate experiences of man" (612). Arendt had in mind a political conception of loneliness. In her view, the atomizing forces of modern life deprived us of the experience of deep belonging, creating an opening which collectivist authoritarianism could exploit. The more personal form of loneliness Gallant depicts in Speck is not quite the same. Yet it, too, makes individuals susceptible to the false lure of fascist community. Speck, thus, serves as a reminder of the way fascism takes advantage of our yearning for fellowship and other vital human needs. In rooting fascism's appeal not

merely in hate-driven ideology but also in this and other aspects of our communal nature, Gallant offers a historical explanation more subtle than Goldhagen's, which when compared to hers seems a sophisticated version of "all Germans are bastards."

The overall portrait of Speck we are left with is the embodiment of a kind of indirect and loosely worn fascism. Indirect, because it grows out of motives that are not themselves inherently sinister. Loosely worn, because Speck is just as happy to embrace anti-fascist beliefs and symbols when it is to his advantage. His outburst concerning the Turkey carpet suggests that he does not always keep fascist modes of thought entirely at arm's length. After a certain point, the boundary between pragmatic and pure fascism will blur. Nevertheless, Speck most often manages to stay on the "safe side of the barrier" separating the two.

### **Fascist! Fascist! Fascist!**

This returns us to Speck's use of "fascist" as an insult. In part, it reflects his general lack of scrupulousness concerning historical accuracy. We are familiar with "fascist" as an all-purpose term of abuse, whereby this or that opponent is likened to a Nazi. On one level, Speck's remark reflects this usage. But it also has a more particular meaning, one which helps make sense of the bizarre pamphlet Speck receives.

"Speck's Idea" frequently suggests affinities between sharply opposing political ideologies. This is evident in the description of the violence outside the bookstore, which involves left-wing commandos. If their right-wing opponents are "shriller," this suggests that they embody the worse form of extremism. The leftist street fighters' tendency to violence is nonetheless something they share with their far-right counterparts.

A similar affinity between left and right is suggested when Speck first decides to mount his show. He is motivated to do so by newspaper articles calling for something new in the art world. These calls are "poignant and patriotic on the right, neo-nationalist and pugnacious on the left," suggesting a nationalistic overlap between the two viewpoints (7). Speck is especially influenced by an article in *Le Monde* with the headline "Redemption Through Art — Last Hope for the West?" that describes the contemporary cultural scene in apocalyptic terms: "Must the flowering gardens of Western European culture wilt and die along with the decadent political systems, the exhausted parliaments, the shambling elections, the tired liberal impulses?" (8). Whether the

author's message comes from the left or the right is not stated. What is clear is the hostility to liberalism associated by Lilla with both poles of French politics.

The pamphlet Speck receives is in keeping with the story's suggestion that while right-wing illiberalism is ultimately in a class of its own, the Stalinist segment of French communism still bears similarities to it.<sup>7</sup> In addition to a mutual antipathy to liberalism, both are happy to appropriate nationalism. In the case of communism, this is evident in the exhibition Speck's gallery is showing on the night he locks up in a melancholy mood: "Paris and Its Influence on the Tirana School, 1931-2" (3). Before the fall of the Berlin Wall, tiny Albania was often depicted as offering a humane form of communism. A show depicting Paris's influence on painters in the Albanian capital would thus flatter France's superiority complex, but in a way that would also appeal to politically correct Parisians such as Speck's ex-wife. (The ridiculousness of a retrospective devoted to a two-year period also brings out Speck's small-mindedness with a comic flourish). If Speck thus receives a pamphlet at the end of the story that could be either far-left or far-right, it is because he inhabits a political universe in which the two are often indistinguishable. Similarly, Speck's use of "fascist" as an insult is in keeping with Gallant's thematic preoccupation with seemingly opposed ideologies that blur and overlap.

The Widow was married to a fascist artist toward whom she still feels protective. The problem with Speck's insult thus is not that it misidentifies her — she likely is a fascist. It is rather the way Speck delivers it. His denunciation moves forward "like a regiment of tanks" (45). The military image highlights the insult's function as an offensive act. Speck may be denouncing someone as a fascist, but in so doing, he himself employs a rhetoric of assault, one that favours verbal violence over dialogue and negotiation. Ironically, something of the spirit of fascism shines through Speck in the very moment he denounces fascism. This serves as a reminder that anti-fascism is more than a matter of finding the right words. It is also a question of conducting oneself in the right way.

### **Pitfalls of Post-Fascism**

As we have seen, a possible pitfall of the post-fascist age, as illustrated by Goldhagen, is to depict fascism entirely as an ideology of subhuman

monsters. But another pitfall is to think that because fascism was so obviously a moral disaster, we can never be too adamant and uncompromising in our opposition to fascists and all their artistic and intellectual work. Gallant's story has bearing on recent debates over the work of fascist intellectuals that have called this simplistic idea into question.

In recent decades we have become familiar with exposés of prominent intellectuals who lived through the fascist period. Years after achieving international prominence, lost or suppressed writings emerge betraying their support for National Socialism, Martin Heidegger and Paul de Man being two well-known examples. After the thinkers in question are exposed, debates ensue about how their work should be read.

One answer to this question is to view the thinker's entire corpus as fatally compromised. Such a stance is taken by French philosopher Emmanuel Faye, author of a 2005 book on Heidegger's fascism. Faye concludes that Heidegger's complete works represent "a collection of texts containing principles that are racist, eugenic, and radically deleterious to the existence of human reason. Such a work cannot continue to be placed in the philosophy section of libraries; its place is rather in the historical archives of Nazism and Hitlerism" (319). According to Faye, no matter how abstract Heidegger's writings at times become, and no matter how far they stray from political questions, they are to be viewed without exception as Nazi documents.

Yet there is an alternative approach. It is exemplified by the Jewish-Romanian novelist Norman Manea. Like Faye, Manea has exposed the far-right sympathies of a well-known intellectual: fellow Romanian Mircea Eliade. Affiliated for many years with the University of Chicago, Eliade was perhaps best known for his three-volume work *A History of Religious Ideas* (1978-1985). After Eliade's death in 1986, Manea published a widely discussed article documenting his previously unknown support for the Iron Guard, Romania's fascist party. Manea unearthed passages from Eliade's writings of the 1930s that praised the "discipline" and "dignity" of the Guard; characterized the "liquidation of democracy" in positive terms; and lamented that "Jews have overrun" Romanian villages and cities (108-09).

Manea's exposé of Eliade was unflinching. But despite his opposition to Eliade's politics, Manea was nonetheless careful not to suggest that all of Eliade's writings were compromised by his political views. As Manea

puts it, “To draw a connection between his scholarship and his ‘fascist’ period, to cast an inquisitorial eye on ‘suspect’ details in his many learned studies, would be to provide a perfect example of totalitarian methodology” (110).

This remark is worth lingering over. It suggests that in rooting out totalitarianism, we should take care not to fall victim to totalitarian habits of mind ourselves. Such is the danger Speck falls victim to in denouncing the Widow. Like Manea, Gallant alerts us to the danger of what can be termed “fascist anti-fascism.” For Manea, this danger occurs when suspicion and pre-judgment prevail over the careful investigation of textual evidence. In Speck’s case, it occurs when he treats the Widow as an enemy worthy of full-throated hate. Each stance in its own way is a form of intolerance, whether toward a body of writings or a person. Both need to be transcended if our opposition to fascism is to be complete.

### Imagined Communities

Speck is not especially concerned with getting the details of France’s past correct, let alone reckoning with its disturbing elements. He will portray Cruche as an ideological or opportunistic fascist, depending on which version turns out to be more acceptable. Speck is thus a kind of meta-pragmatist, willing to employ the distinction between pragmatic and non-pragmatic fascists in whichever way proves most useful. In this way he exhibits a tendency to construct a false account of the past driven by the needs of the present.

This aspect of the story is connected to its broader concern with fascism. Charles Maurras famously saw modern France as defined by decadence and lost grandeur. The Enlightenment, the Revolution, and what Maurras termed “anti-France,” made up of the “four confederate states” of Protestants, Jews, Freemasons, and foreigners, were all negative forces responsible for France’s decline (Baycroft 33). Maurras thus invented a tradition of continuity between his vision of France and a purported lost golden age. Gallant’s story, however, suggests that the invention of tradition is not confined to fascists. It is also undertaken in different ways by other ideologues, particularly those who seek to define a political community in narrow or exclusionary terms. Subtle details in the story suggest an alternative, more inclusive conception of society, one that is better able to avoid mythologizing the past.



At one point, the Widow Cruche informs Speck that she is a Japhethite, an offshoot of the obscure British Israelite religious movement. Named after Noah's son Japheth, her religion posits an alternative history in which Western Europeans are descended from the lost tribes of Israel. "Japheth's people settled in Scotland," the Widow informs Speck. "Present-day Jews are imposters" (34). The notion of British Israelism, which arose in the seventeenth century, is strongly contradicted by modern genetic and other evidence. Nevertheless, it attracted adherents for several hundred years and retains a few stray congregations today. Critics have suggested that the movement's appeal is based on a prejudicial view of history.<sup>8</sup> It offers a segregated view of human ancestry, according to which white Europeans can claim their own line of descent, separate from that of non-white races, who are envisioned as ancestors of Noah's other sons. It thus reassures Anglo-Saxons that they have a glorious genealogical past and come from racially superior stock.

Speck takes the same approach to political history as the Widow does to religion. Before he happened upon Cruche, he would have been happy to show the work of a wartime artist with a made-up biography. Here, again, Speck seems emblematic of a segment of the larger society in which he resides. Gallant's story mentions, for example, a minor character who authored a book about Vietnam called *When France Was at the Helm*, which is a perennial bestseller (13). The book's popularity suggests that it contains a pleasing message that, rather than raise troubling questions about French intervention in Indo-China, reassures its readers that French colonialism was benevolent. Somewhat similarly, a virus going around Paris is described as the Warsaw Flu, suggesting that Gallant's Parisians cannot admit that disease can originate within France (thereby exhibiting a form of prejudicial understanding historians have wryly dubbed "the foreignness of germs" [Markel and Stern 757]). French national identity is constructed so as to filter out unpleasant details.

Importantly, the self-understanding represented by both Speck and the wider society is depicted as being inaccurate. As we have seen, Speck is a chauvinist and views himself as monolithically French. Yet Speck's family background is not French. He rather descends from "generations of highly intellectual Central European agnostics and freethinkers" (2). There is even a moment when the reader wonders if Speck might be Jewish. (If so, he would then need only convert to Protestantism to achieve the impressive feat of embodying everything Maurras despised.)

When Speck exhibits a sense of Gallic imperialism, it is characterized as a moment of “second generation distress,” suggesting that his chauvinism may be compensation for feeling less than purely French himself (22).

Interestingly, Speck’s self-understanding recalls the influential strand of French nationalism known as republicanism. A notion with no real equivalent in English-speaking countries, Lilla describes it as “the least precise and most widely invoked concept in the French political lexicon” (9). Whereas republicanism originally referred to a belief in the Revolution and its ideals, during the nineteenth century, it became associated with the project of building the French nation, a project that has historically mixed progressive and exclusive elements. As Lilla details them, they include a commitment to secularism and a strong public school system. At the same time, however, republicanism also became associated with “a highly centralized, majoritarian government; a homogenous culture, achieved through national education but also through a slow war of attrition against signs of diversity (for example, the campaigns against regional French dialects). In short, republicanism was a syncretic mix of political principles, some universal and some chauvinistic” (9).

Speck’s view of himself as purely French mirrors the republican understanding of France’s identity. But the fact that Speck is the child of immigrants, and so has a more mixed identity than his self-image acknowledges, also reflects something about France. No country is culturally homogenous. Even in France, there have always been polyglot groups who undermine the monolithic view of the nation. This, again, is evident from the beginning of Gallant’s story. Basque separatists are French (and Spanish) citizens without wanting to be, simultaneously inside and outside the imagined community of France. Something similar is true of the two churches mentioned in Gallant’s opening paragraph. Saint-Julien-le-Pauvre, built in the thirteenth century, is one of the oldest churches in Paris, an enduring icon of France’s Catholic heritage. But in the nineteenth century, it was given to a congregation of Melkites, Byzantine-Rite Catholics from the Eastern Mediterranean, making the same church an emblem of France’s mixed cultural identity. The church of St. Elisabeth, having been built in the seventeenth century, also recalls France’s pre-revolutionary past. Its full name, however, is the Church of St. Elisabeth of Hungary, making it simultaneously a foreign symbol. Speck, whose first name, Sandor, is also Hungarian, is

similar to both churches in that his arch-French exterior masks a more complex inner reality. For Speck, as for France, a multicultural identity is submerged beneath a republican façade.

There is a moment in “Speck’s Idea” when a more inclusive understanding of national and personal identity briefly comes into view. It occurs when Cruche’s widow informs Speck that she is from Saskatchewan. In the context of the story, her Canadian nationality allows her to represent the Anglo-Saxon cultural hegemony that Speck resents, while also being anti-American, a quality she shares with her fascist husband. Speck is so ignorant of Canada that he has to look up Saskatchewan in an atlas. For anyone less ignorant, however, it will not escape notice that during the 1970s, the same decade in which the story takes place (and long after the Widow emigrated), Canada became the first society to embrace official multiculturalism — the opposite approach to community advanced by republicanism and nationalism, let alone Japhetism and fascism.

Canadians, of course, have long debated what precise form multiculturalism should take, and it would be simplistic to think that with multiculturalism all problems of historical understanding and belonging disappear. Nevertheless, Gallant’s story, with its highlighting of France’s unacknowledged multicultural identity, serves as an indirect reminder of multiculturalism’s appeal as an official policy. It replaces false myths of national homogeneity with an open acceptance of difference. A multicultural conception of belonging suggests an avenue of escape from the false traditions of cultural purity that hold Speck so firmly in their grip.

## Conclusion

Events in France since the publication of “Speck’s Idea” suggest that its themes remain all too relevant. The National Front has continued to peddle imaginary traditions of the kind Gallant’s story debunks. In 1991, for example, Jean Marie Le Pen said that the NF represented “the French people born with the baptism of Clovis in 496, who have carried this inextinguishable flame, which is the soul of a people, for almost one thousand five hundred years” (Geary 9).<sup>9</sup> In reality, were Clovis to return today, he would find French culture and politics deeply alien, not least because he did not speak French.

The majority of French people reject the vision of France that Le Pen so long represented before finally resigning his party’s leadership in

2011. After the National Front scored a breakthrough in the 2002 election, more than 900,000 people marched against the party in what were then the largest street demonstrations in France since the Liberation. But if Le Pen's extreme view never captured French reality, neither can it be said that France's self-understanding is as open to immigration and pluralism as it could be. While there have been times in France's history when it has taken in more immigrants per capita than the United States, France still does not see immigration as central to its identity. This is one reason why the country has seen a ban on Muslim head scarves and ongoing calls to further limit immigration. The disconnection between immigration as a fact of national life, but not of national self-understanding, has caused France to be grouped with other Western European states as "reluctant countries of immigration" (Cornelius et al. v). Gallant's story remains as pertinent as ever in understanding the specifically French version of that reluctance.

Yet the story's deepest theme is universal. This is clearest in the vivid moment near the end, in which a defeated Speck denounces the Widow as a fascist. The occasion for Speck's insult is that she has outwitted him in a business deal. Speck is a sharp operator who is willing to cut corners with the truth to get what he wants, an aspect of his character that eventually undermines the reader's sympathy. Now it turns out the Widow is more cunning still. Speck is thus prompted to call her a fascist because she asserts her interests at the expense of his. Hence the deep symmetry with his wife's earlier use of the same insult to denounce him and his loan-officer approach to art. In both instances, the fascist epithet is hurled at a character who is prudential to a fault.

Wheeling and dealing in order to advance one's interests are significant aspects of modern life. We burnish our resumé's, we wheedle and negotiate, we press our advantages in a thousand small ways. The motivations that drive Sandor Speck are the motivations that have resulted in the economic universe in which we live today, where "entrepreneurial," "competitive," and other terms that valorize the pursuit of self-interest denote glowing praise. Gallant's story, however, reminds us that it is possible to be a little too enamoured of our species' prudential motivation. For, in a different historical context, the same motivation enabled the spread of political evil. In forcing us to recognize this aspect of fascism's rise, the story issues the salutary warning that we should not be too quick to conceive of fascism's adherents as aliens or fiends. Millions of people reconciled themselves to fascism for reasons of prudence rather

than philosophy. The dangers of unprincipled pragmatism and quietism are not limited to a particular place and time. Take heed, Gallant's story reminds us. There is a speck of Sandor in us all.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Besner 143, Clement 223, and Smyth 76-77.

<sup>2</sup> Much of the debate was due to Robert Paxton's landmark book, *Vichy France*, published in English in 1972 and translated into French a year later. See Temkin for a discussion of the French reception of Paxton's book in the context of the censorship of Marcel Ophüls's famous documentary *The Sorrow and the Pity* (1969), which also offered a revisionist account of the scope of French collaboration. Barbara Gabriel interestingly compares the way Ophüls's film and Gallant's story "Baum, Gabriel, 1935 (-)" both treated the Vichy period as a trauma that had been repressed in France's national memory but which needed to be exposed and confronted.

<sup>3</sup> The story refers to a "Turkey carpet" rather than the more idiomatic "Turkish carpet."

<sup>4</sup> Woolford also identifies Speck as a fascist but without noting the deep connection between Speck's fascism and pragmatism that I argue for below. Hatch offers a lucid and informative discussion of Gallant's engagement with fascism but, again, approaches fascism in ideological rather than pragmatic terms and does not discuss "Speck's Idea."

<sup>5</sup> My understanding of this scene is informed by Woolford, who, in turn, draws on Besner.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Robert Aaron, *The Vichy Regime: 1940-44* (Boston: Beacon, 1969), originally published in French in 1955.

<sup>7</sup> An example of the Stalinist segment is Georges Marchais, General Secretary of the French Communist Party, who in 1974 denounced the French publication of *The Gulag Archipelago*. For the offensive by Marchais's party against Solzhenitsyn's book, see Christofferson 93-96. As Christofferson notes, the communist campaign against the book failed, in part because other left-wing voices rose to its defence, both inside and outside Marchais's party.

<sup>8</sup> See Parfitt 62.

<sup>9</sup> Clovis united the diverse Frankish tribes under one leader. In France, his conversion from Paganism to Christianity has traditionally been regarded as "the founding act of France," but in recent years, this view has been challenged for promoting a white and Catholic vision of French identity (Chaddock).

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