Mavis Gallant's *Overhead in a Balloon:* Politics and Religion, Language and Art[1]

Daniel Woolford

Mavis Gallant left her job as a journalist in Montreal in 1950 to go to Paris. She had been deeply affected by the photographs she had seen of concentration camps, and was determined to find out *why* such a horrific phenomenon could have taken place (Woodcock, 83; Kulyck Keefer, 204). This explains why many of the stories she has published since that time are so concerned with the interpenetration of private memory and public history (Stuewe, 37); in her "dense dramas of individual lives broken up by the sweep of history" (Gabriel 1989, 29), she is determined to uncover "the origin of the worm," to lay bare "[n]ot the historical causes of Fascism—just its small possibilities in people" (Hancock, 41).

Gallant came from an English-speaking family in Montreal, where she was sent to a variety of French schools; in at least one of these she was the only English-speaking child, and, she tells us, "for more than half of my life I have heard and spoken more French than English" (Gallant 1981, xvi, xvii). Thus it is not surprising that, as an expatriate writer, so many of her stories deal with frontiers that are not only geographical, but also cultural and linguistic. Indeed, her exploration of private and public history is prosecuted with a sharp understanding of the importance of the role of language; in the same article, she points out, "A deeper culture is contained in memory. Memory is something that cannot be subsidized or ordained. It can, however, be destroyed; and it is inseparable from language" (xv). Thus, in "Virus X" (Gallant 1981), a Canadian of German descent is drawn towards confronting her past by her Ukrainian-Canadian companion. But

Lottie is isolated both from self-awareness and from a true understanding of Europe (she is, supposedly, a sociologist) by remaining fixed in her own cultural constructs, which blind her to the realities around her. Meanwhile, in "The Four Seasons" (Gallant 1979), the lack of understanding and cruel exploitations of an Italian servant girl by British expatriates in an Italian province on the French border is set, in precise historical detail, against the rise of Fascism and the outbreak of World War II. In stories like these, there is a recurrent sense in which "language is situation," a realization that comes to a character in Gallant's novel *A Fairly Good Time*: as one critic explains, "This does not mean simply that different situations require different languages, but that the language itself creates situation" (Hatch 62). This idea has developed out of the work of the linguist Saussure, whose influence on post-structuralist criticism has been immense (Belsey 38ff; Bullock 523). It seem appropriate, therefore, to employ some of the vocabulary of such criticism in relation to Gallant's work, in terms of language and culture not only as discussed within her work, but also as represented by it.

Gallant's most recent collection, *Overhead in a Balloon: Stories of Paris* (1985), has many of the characteristics we have come to expect from her: the intense preoccupation with politics at both personal and historical levels, the explorations of memory and personal experience arising from the Second World War, and the force and potential pitfalls of language. But, as Besner points out, "Paris becomes another kind of home ground in this book. It is no longer the city to which Gallant's North American characters travel" (Besner 1988, 140). The frontier motif remains, but here the frontiers are cultural and philosophical, political in the ideological rather than the geographical sense. We still have the collisions between the French and "foreigners": an au pair and a novelist from London, an artist's wife from the perspective of the "natives." Gallant the young, journalistically-minded visitor has given way with time to Gallant the mature and established writer. This also explains the increasingly self-reflexive element—of the twelve stories in the collection, only four (those grouped around the characters of Edouard and Magdalena) deal specifically with

the War and its aftermath, while six (two featuring Speck and Walter, four dealing with Miss Pugh and the French author Henri Grippes) are concerned with art, and in the case of Grippes, with literature itself. Of the two stories which stand alone, one is (among other things) a wry look at the generation gap, while the other ("The Assembly") reveals, in play-script form, the prejudices and preoccupations of a group of Parisian apartment dwellers, meeting to discuss security after a tenant has been sexually assaulted. In this essay, I will examine the Speck stories and "Luc and his Father," with a glance also at the Grippes group, to determine what Gallant has to say about politics, religion, language, and art.

One of the longer pieces in the collection, "Luc and his Father" pokes gentle fun at a middle-aged couple, Roger and Simone, and the teenage son, whose academic failure disappoints them as much as his ventures into sexuality disturb them. From the outset, characters are described in terms of their political orientation. For example, Roger blames de Gaulle for Luc's failure at school: "If de Gaulle had not opened up the schools to hordes of qualified but otherwise uninteresting people, teachers would have more time to spare for Luc" (72). Clearly, Roger is no socialist and, as it transpires, he retains values that can only be described as imperialist: "Like his wife, Roger had never got over the loss of Algeria. When the price of fresh fruit went high, as it did every winter, the Clairvoies told each other it was because of the loss of all those Algerian orchards" (72). In what his wife calls "the year of shocks" (75), a Socialist government comes to power, "even though all three Clairvoies had voted against it" (76). Roger is also a fervent nationalist; he responds with irritation to a reference in a letter from Luc's girlfriend to "One more little Frenchman," and decides that Katia must be a foreigner (84). That his son might be involved with a foreign girl is deeply upsetting to him; "Luc was entangled in a foreign love affair; he was already alien, estranged" (84). Gallant has written elsewhere, ". . . nationalism . . . I distrust and reject absolutely" (Gallant 1981, xv); in this story she retains a sympathy for the people who hold such ideas (the story is told from the perspective of Roger and, to

a lesser extent, of Simone) while exposing their conservatism. As Henderson says, "In [this] most compassionate collection, she is kind to her characters' fears and fantasies even as she deflates them" (81). See, for example, this conversation with Cassandra, the English visitor, in which Roger's professional ethics are just so deflated:

> "Years ago, when there was a grave shortage of telephones, thanks to President de Gaulle—" Roger began. "Do you recall that unhappy time?"
>
> "I'm afraid I'm dreffly ignorant."
>
> "I was good at getting friends off the waiting list. That was what I did best." (87)

Of a piece with his conservatism is Roger's sexism: he thinks, "It was not true that women were devoted guardians of tradition. They rode every new wave like so much plankton. My father was right, he decided. He said it was always a mistake to give them the vote. He said they have no ideas—just notions" (79). His insistence on an oppressive patriarchal order is reflected in his musings on the changing forms of woman as sexual symbol: "From the great courtesans of his grandfather's time to the prettiest children of the poor in bordellos to a girl glimpsed as she stood drying herself—what a decline! Here was the true comedown, the real debasement of the middle class" (90-91). Simone sends Roger to gather intelligence about Luc's sex life, but in the conversation with his son, Roger places women squarely in the category of sex objects to be economically exploited, and finally delivers a monologue of reminiscences about prostitutes:

> "It was often thought, in my day, mainly by foreigners who had never been to France, that young men began their lives with their mother's best friend. Absurd, when you consider it. Why pick an old woman when you can have a young one?" *Buy* a young one, he had been about to say, by mistake . . . . "In my day, we had a miserable amount of spending money, but we had the girls in the Rue Spontini. Long after the bordellos were closed, there was the Rue

> Spontini . . . . There were Belgian girls, Spanish girls from Algeria. Some were young—oh, very young." (99-100)

Patriarchy and imperialism are brought here into close conjunction, as they are a few sentences later, in a different way. Soon after this conversation, the incident is recounted which occurred in Algeria before Roger and Simone's wedding, when Roger pays Simone an "unwelcome call":

> Her parents, listening at the door, took it for granted Roger had caught a venereal disease in a North African brothel and wanted the wedding postponed; Simone supposed he had met a richer and prettier girl. All Roger had to say was that he had seen an Algerian prisoner being tortured to death. Simon had often asked Roger, since then, why he had tried to frighten her with something that had so little bearing on their future. Roger could not remember what his reasons had been. (100)

Roger is at ease with the prostitutes in the Bois because prostitution maintains the dominance of the patriarchal order: "He knew some of the older women by sight, and he addressed them courteously; and they, of course, were polite to him" (75). But he is disconcerted by the male prostitutes that he encounters, once while walking with Simone, once with Cassandra—perhaps because homosexuality presents a threat to the stability of this order.

Roger's attempts to get Luc started on a degree in engineering are an attempt to induct him into this patriarchal tradition: "'Luc has got to pass his entrance examination,' said Roger. 'After he gets his degree he can marry anyone he likes'" (83). And he tells his son: "Your future. If you fail. A poor degree is worse than none. Thousands of embittered young men, all voting Socialist. If you fail, you will sink into the swamp from which there is no rising" (77). Luc, meanwhile, has his own political perspective: "Only the word 'Socialist' seemed to stir Luc. 'We need a good little civil war,' he declared, as someone who has never been near the ocean might announce, 'We need a good little tidal wave'—so Roger thought" (77-78). Luc's political views are never made explicit in the text; we are told that all three

Clairvoies voted against the Socialists, while Luc himself joins a political group which meets "on winter afternoons to discuss the false starts of history" (74). This group is set against the parents' program for Luc: "it was curious to see how Luc could grasp a slippery, allusive message so easily when he could not keep in mind his own private destiny as an engineer" (74). Luc's participation in the group consists of "sitting on the floor of a pale room, with a soft-voiced old man telling him about an older, truer Europe. Luc was learning a Europe in amber, unchanging, with trees for gods. There was no law against paganism and politics, or soft-voiced old men" (85). Perhaps these lines hint at the Aryan philosophy of National Socialism as well as the New Right of contemporary France—that Luc himself is inclined even further to the Right than his parents is also hinted at in the photo of Hitler tacked to the wall near his bed (79) and in the fact that he reads a paperback on private ownership (96). But the group is, for Luc, ultimately just another "false start": Luc tells Roger, "'. . . that fell apart. All the people they ever talked about were already dead. And some of the parents were worried. You were the only parents who never interfered.' 'We wanted you to live your own life,' said Roger" (97). The irony is, of course, that this is precisely what they don't want Luc to do.

Simone also participates in the campaign to "make a man" of Luc; it is she who suggests "masculine, virile surroundings" (77) for Roger and Luc's talk, and she redecorates his room "[i]n order to give Luc a fully virile image" (78). The richness of Gallant's comic irony here goes beyond that of a *woman* creating virility for a man; it is that Simone is actually participating in the same patriarchal order:

> She took down the photograph of Roger's graduating class and hung a framed poster of Che Guevara. Stepping back to see the effect, she realized Che would never do. The face was feminine, soft. She wondered if the whole legend was not a hoax and if Guevara had been a woman in disguise. Guevara had no political significance, of course; he had become manly, decorative kitsch. (The salesman had assured her of this; otherwise she would never have run the risk of offending Roger.) (78)

Again, Gallant sets up a multi-layered irony—the "narrator," who shared Simone's perspective and buys along with her the salesman's explanation, is distanced from Gallant herself, to whom the poster *does* have a political significance. She functions metonymically as a symbol of revolution; his poster is eventually replaced by one of the Foreign Legion, a metonym for imperialism and the nationalist, patriarchal tradition. Meanwhile, Roger takes down the photo of Hitler, "without saying anything . . . . He didn't want Luc quite that manly" (79). Besner has noted that

> [i]t is striking how often in Gallant's fiction readers are alerted to paintings, to pictures, and to characters watching them (as well as inventing them) . . . . And then there is the apparent insistence upon the objectivity, the truth, if not the verisimilitude of these portraits and reflections, even as these surfaces announce themselves, not as covers, but as subjects, inventions.
>
> Gallant has remarked that "fiction, like painting, consists entirely of more than meets the eye; otherwise it is not worth a second's consideration." (1986, 95-96).

He goes on to articulate the importance of examining the ways in which such subjects, be they paintings or fictional characters, are constructed, "perhaps before they designate things or contents, or correspondences beyond themselves" (96). In the comic business of the pictures in Luc's room, a similar discussion takes place; we are invited to look at the posters as ideological icons, signs that may be constructed in different ways. Che may be constructed as manly, decorative kitsch or as revolutionary liberator of the people. But for Gallant, it is clear that there is some kind of history that stands outside discourse, that the word Hitler (or his photo) has a material and identifiable meaning, that it refers to something historical outside the text itself. She is aware that ideology is mediated by and contained in language, but insists on the power of language to denote something outside of itself.

The political importance of language is clearly seen in the character of Simone, whose participation in the bourgeois patriarchal system is aided by her acute aphasia; she repeatedly mis-hears language. For example, Father Rousseau tells the

parents that Luc has "a fragmented image of women. On the Rorschach test, for instance, he had seen a ballet skirt and a pair of legs, and a female head in a fishing net" (76). But as Simone removes the Che poster from the wall, she notices a peep-hole allowing Luc a partial view of the bathroom used by the *au pairs*; she sees this not as a confirmation or an explanation of the priest's concern, but a refutation of it. She exclaims, "Who says Luc has no view of women?" (78) (The comic irony is all the more acute if we consider that such a "fragmented view" of a naked woman glimpsed through a hole in the wall constitutes a more extreme reductionism than Roger's own sexism; not only is woman reduced to sex object, her body is dissected into more and less "interesting" [i.e. erogenous] zones.)

Similarly, when Rousseau says that "[n]o one can concentrate on an exam and a woman" (82) at the same time, Simon cries, "'Women, . . . what women?' 'Woman,' corrected Roger, unheard" (78). And she is unaware of the potential slight to her husband when she points out, "meaning by this nothing unkind or offensive, any male model for Luc was better than none" (84). Funniest of all is her misconstruction of Luc's spurious *avis* on his helmet: "'IN CASE OF ACCIDENT DO NOT REMOVE.' 'You see, he does think of things,' his mother said. 'Luc thinks of good, useful things'" (74). Thus Roger's ideology of sexism is, like all ideology, self-confirming; well could it be said of his wife that she has "no ideas—just notions" (79).

If Simone suffers from one kind of aphasia, Cassandra seems to suffer from another (perhaps they correspond to those of selection and contexture—see Bullock, 523). Consider the two versions of her walk with Roger towards the Bois:

> He clutched at her arm, dragging her out of the way of buses and taxis that rushed from the left while Cassandra looked hopelessly right . . . .
>
> Sylvestre loped, snuffling, into the club of dusty shrubbery. He gave a yelp and came waddling out. All Roger saw of the person who had kicked him was a flash of white boot.
>
> "You have them in England?" said Roger.

> "Have what?"
>
> "That. Male, female. Prostitutes."
>
> "Yes, of course. But they aren't vile to animals."
>
> "You like the modern art?" Roger asked, breathless, as they plodded up the stalled escalators of the Beaubourg museum.
>
> "I'm horribly old-fashioned, I'm afraid."
>
> Halfway, he paused to let his heart rest. His heart was an old pump, clogged and filthy. Cassandra's was of bright new metal; it beat more quickly and regularly than any clock. (88)

In answer to her question, Rogers tells Cassandra that the place reminds him of young lovers; this is because he is preoccupied with Luc and Katia, and, catching sight of a pair of lovers below, is thinking of them when Cassandra asks the question. This is the narrator's version and arguably Roger's version too, since, throughout, the story privileges his point of view. But the wonderfully observed verisimilitude of Cassandra's always looking the wrong way at street corners suggests that the narrative bears a certainty objectivity. Cassandra's version is somewhat different:

> "The Baron has sex on the brain," Simone read. "Even a museum reminds him of sex. In the Bois de Boulogne he tried to twist the conversation around to sex and bestiality. You have to be careful every minute. Each time we cross the road he tries to squeeze my arm." (88)

If Roger is French, patriarchal, and xenophobic, Cassandra is English, homophobic and perhaps xenophobic herself—she "reads" (or rather, writes) situations according to her own cultural constructs, or according to judgements of character that may be true in general but that do not apply in the particular case. This plurality of readings of situations, this collision of different ideological perspectives, makes of the story an "interrogative text," in which the reader is "alternately interpolated, drawn into the events, and distanced, pulling out of the fixity of ideology and into active critical debate" (Belsey 85, 94). In other words, Gallant is inviting us to consider the ideological positions encoded

in two reconstructions of certain events, a process which allows us greater perspective on our own ideological baggage.

A similar process is at work, on a larger scale, in "Speck's Idea," the first and longest story in the collection, and in the one that follows it, "Overhead in a Balloon," which shares some characters with the first, and gives the collection its title. As Besner puts it,

> both [stories] place their respective characters' reflections on art and its uses in the context of their political, ideological, and religious convictions—or lack of same—so that their conceptions of art and its uses also become comments on relationships between church and state, on secular humanism, the culture industry, and the loss of any metaphysical bearings, and on the interior landscapes of their private lives. (1988, 141)

The two stories set up a triad of intersecting axes—politics, art, and religion—and explore their interactions. Along each axis is a continuum running between two extremes; in terms of politics, the extremes are Fascism and Marxism; in terms of art they are art-as-commodity and art-as-redemption, and in terms of religion, literalist fundamentalism versus rationalist atheism. The text articulates a variety of positions along each of these continua, in various combinations; sometimes different positions may be articulated in the same character.

For example, Sandor Speck's position is avowedly apolitical: "Nothing political had ever struck Speck as being above the level of a low-grade comic strip" (6). But from the perspective of the left, this position is itself political, and conservative at that. And Speck is, in fact, a conservative. He forgives his fellow tenants their spite, quarrels, and avarice for the sake of their "being the Count of this and the Prince of that" (1). He "crave[s] stability" (2), and the royal blue paint of the bookshop opposite is "a conservative color he found reassuring" (2). By contrast, the Marxist embassies along the street "required the presence of armed police the clock around" (2); they represent a threat to stability and the status quo. Speck believes that "the commerce of art is without bias," and happily "creates" arts for consumption by the public; he

tells Lydia Cruche, "I invented Hubert Cruche. There would be no Hubert Cruche without Sandor Speck" (41). But even this "invention" is, ultimately, a political act, as he himself senses; as he begins his negotiations with Lydia Cruche, "He cupped his hands round the telephone, as if spies from the embassies down the street were trying to overhear" (19). His wife, who once wrote a paper entitled "A Marxist Considers Sweets" (18), screams "Fascist! Fascist! Fascist!" (4) at Speck as she disappears in a taxi, leaving him. He applies the same epithet to Lydia Cruche after he "realizes that [she] has outmanipulated him and will now be able to bargain for better terms" (Besner 1988). And he locates himself in the political "low-grade comic strip" when, in his final triumph, "He saw himself at the centre of a shadeless drawing, hero of a sort of cartoon strip" (46) (see Leith 37). Both Besner and Leith have commented on where all this locates him in the political continuum, "The connection between the ostensibly apolitical commerce and the new right has been illuminated" (Leith 37); "his parting cries of 'Fascist!' at her deftly complete the story's symmetrical shape as a comment on several kinds of 'fascism'—Speck's and Lydia's—in relation to their interests in the world of art" (Besner 1988, 143).

If Speck and Lydia occupy similar positions on the political axis as such, their religious positions differ somewhat. Speck has "in his bones a mistrust of the bogs and quicksands that lie beyond reality perceived" (2), and, at one point, "[h]ad he been Walter and superstitious, he might have crossed his fingers; being Speck and rational, he merely shuddered" (36). For Besner, Speck's rejection of "the numinous" is a rejection of "one traditional context for the imagination," ultimately a betrayal of art in its natural state as a repository of "beauty, grace, inspiration, or spiritual values" (Besner 1988, 142, 143), untainted by market considerations. Speck is practically as well as philosophically materialistic, and employs a rationalistic justification of his own self-interest; consider the way he "rationalizes" the fact that Cruche was of the far Right: "Of course, there was Right and Right, thought Speck as he triple-locked the front door . . . . 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" (35-36).

Nevertheless, Speck's rationalistic agnosticism sometimes wavers; "Unless his thoughts were nailed down by gallery business, they had a tendency to glide away to the swamps of imagination, behind which stretch the steamier marshlands of metaphysics" (4). And he is willing to accept "[t]he Masonic Grand Architect of the Universe," who "seemed content to exist as a mere possibility" (13). The text flirts with this idea in a number of places; when Speck has his "idea" of presenting Cruche in an exhibition, he is "rapped over the head" by "the Grand Architect of the Universe" (16). But later "he wondered if he could call Cruche heaven-sent. No; he would not put a foot beyond coincidence" (16). The debate is taken up by Lydia, who affirms, "Coincidence is God's plan" (26). When she refuses the idea of an exhibition on the grounds that God said so, Speck's immediate reaction is to think that "the Grand Architect of the Universe had granted Lydia Cruche something so far withheld from Sandor Speck: a plain statement of intention" (31).

Lydia's fundamentalist interpretation of the graven-image Commandment stems from her adherence to Japhethitism, an obscure and racially based interpretation of Old Testament lore—she claims that "[p]resent-day Jews are imposters" (32). This motif offers a satirical glance at other forms of fundamentalism—white supremacism and Naziism included. Speck does some research into the matter, and in doing so finds that reading the Bible raises his spirits:

> He understood now why Walter found it consoling, for much in it consisted of the assurance of downing one's enemies, dashing them against stones, seeing their children reduced to beggary and their wives to despair. Still, he was not drawn to deep belief: he remained rational, sceptical, anxious, and subject to colds. (33)

The fascist propensity for violence and oppression is shown here as having a scriptural basis (although this is of course a selective

and reductive reading of scripture, as is characteristic of fundamentalism).

But the text as a whole refuses to line up in easy categories of fascism/religion/oppression versus socialism/rationalism liberation. For it is the rationalist Speck who exploits his employee, the philosophically idealistic Walter. Speck knows that Walter is indispensable to him even as he plots to get rid of him: "'What would the gallery do without you?' he would ask on the very morning he had been meaning to say, 'Walter, sit down, please. I've got something to tell you'" (5). In "Overhead in a Balloon," we are given Walter's perspective; he "hates" Speck (53), feels exploited by him (51), has dreams about his downfall (54, 59, 71). And Speck takes the snuff box that Robert's mother has given Walter and locks it in his safe (56), an event which causes Walter to threaten Speck with the police: "Robert could not understand the story—something incoherent to do with the office safe" (68). Walter's handing over of the keys of his apartment to Robert before leaving on holiday occasions a direct parallel with this incident: "Handing them over, he was reminded of another gesture—his hand, outstretched, opening to reveal the snuffbox" (69). In both cases, a gesture of giving is met with its opposite, a selfish grasping; when Walter returns, he finds a note from Robert saying "Dream of badger taking man hostage means a change of residence, for which the dreamer should be prepared" (71). Robert himself, while nominally a Catholic, prefers ballooning and reading his dream-book on Sundays to devotional activities, and is uninterested in Walter's proffered books on theology. Indeed, "Robert's favourite topic was not God but the administration of the city of Paris, to which he felt bound by the ownership of so many square metres of urban space" (61). Neither of Walter's oppressors, then, is as pious as their victim. Thus the religious question is not settled by a simplistic equation of metaphysical and ethical or non-ethical positions.

Similarly with the political axis. The propensity for violence is represented as belonging as much to the far Left as to the far Right; in "Speck's Idea" it is the *right-wing* bookshop that is attacked "by commandos wielding iron bars" (5) and

Chassepoule, its proprietor, who "seemed to spend most of his time wiping blood off the collected speeches of Mussolini, bandaging customers, and sweeping up glass" (5). Of course, this passage is not without its own irony; there is an appropriateness to the image of blood on Mussolini's speeches that can only be read in terms of an anti-fascist perspective. Nevertheless, Gallant recognizes a sense in which certain types of rhetoric from either end of the political continuum are interchangeable. Towards the end of the story, Speck is handed a flyer with nationalistic slogans crudely printed on it: "Speck stared at this without comprehending it. Was it a Chassepoule statement or an anti-Chassepoule plea? There was no way of knowing" (47). This is not to say that Gallant does not favour one political stance over another; it is to say that she finds suspect a political credo from either side that overrides the question of good and evil in a particular situation.

Moving outside the text for a moment, Gallant was asked, in the context of the Second World War, if her interest in politics aligned her with the Left or the Right. She replied, "Those words haven't the meaning they had then. Don't forget the war was 'Fascism or else!' The situation has so changed that now that we'd be hours talking about it" (Hancock, 33). This sidestepping of the question does more than suggest that Gallant's own position is "non-aligned"; it underlines the lack of fixity in language itself, as different ideological modes of discourse jostle and are jostled by history.

On the religious question, too, Gallant is equivocal. While insisting that she is not "a practising anything," she does aver that "I can't completely—and this is nobody's business—take seriously a philosophy that excludes the possibility of divine intervention" (Hancock 53). The explicitly private nature of this avowal sets it at a considerable remove from the sometimes politically suspect complacency and self-righteousness of the Church, and indeed from the whole orthodoxy of the Judeo-Christian tradition. And it removes any possibility that Gallant's fiction may have a religious axe to grind.

Indeed, I would suggest that Gallant's non-aligned position is what enables her to create a text that is truly "interrogative," that

engages the reader in considering the issues brought to attention, a text that is, in Barthe's terms *scriptible* (writable) rather than merely *lisible* (readable) (see Belsey 105). Returning to "Overhead in a Balloon," we can once again see how, rather than offering us a single, fixed, pre-packaged position which we are simply required to learn and accept, the text articulates a variety of possible positions for our consideration. Again, I am not suggesting that Gallant never makes value judgements; on the contrary, false or dangerous political positions are ruthlessly exposed. But there is not necessarily one position that merges as being *the* correct one.

With this in mind, let us consider the third axis of the triad, that of art itself, and the ways in which it intersects with the axes of politics and religion. Speck's perusal of the Bible in researching the Japhethites leads him to conclude that "art had never really flourished, even before Moses decided to put a stop to it" (32), raising doubts about art's role in the Judeo-Christian tradition. These doubts are elaborated by Walter in "Overhead in a Balloon":

> Immersion in art had kept him from spiritual knowledge. What he had mistaken for God's beckoning had been a dabbling in colors, sentiment cut loose and set afloat by the sight of a stained-glass window. Years before, when he was still training Walter, his employer had sent him to museums, with a list of things to examine and ponder. God is in art, Walter had decided; then, God *is* art. Today, he understood: art is God's enemy. God hates art, the trifling rival creation. (60)

But Walter also says he "hates art" (54), and there is a suggestion in the above passage that it is Speck's commercialization of art that has brought him to his present position. This idea is also touched upon in the article in *Le Monde* that sparks Speck's idea for a new exhibition:

> Its title, "Redemption through Art—Last Hope for the West?," had been followed by other disturbing questions: When would the merchants and dealers, compared rather unfairly to the money-changers driven from the temple, face

> up to their share of responsibility as the tattered century declined? 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? What of the man in the street, too modest and confused to mention his cravings? Was he not grasping for one remedy and one only—artistic renovation? (8)

The religious parallels that the article draws suggest a number of possibilities: that art is indeed a trifling rival creation, a distraction from the development of spiritual knowledge; or, on the contrary, that art, if released from the manipulations of the market place, can become the only means available in this age of providing the man in the street with the spiritual uplift he so desperately needs.

Speck himself responds to the article by beginning to invent an artist and an exhibition:

> He could see the notices, knew which of the critics would write "At last," and "It has taken Sandor Speck to remind us." Left, Right, and Center would unite on a single theme; how the taste of two full generations had been corrupted by foreign speculation, cosmopolitan decadence, and the cultural imperialism of the anglo-Saxon hegemony.(9)

He imagines the decor of the gallery: "He might use the early photograph of Céline in regimental dress uniform with a splendid helmet. Of course, there would be word from the Left, too, with postcards from Jean Jaurès, Léon Blum, and Paul Elouard . . ." (10). The idea of reuniting Left and Right is an important part of the formation of his idea: "For about a year now, Paris critics had been hinting at something missing from the world of art. These hints, poignant and patriotic on the Right, neo-nationalist and pugnacious on the Left, wistful but insistent dead Center, were all in essence saying the same thing: 'The time has come'" (7-8). And he triumphantly writes in the program notes for the Cruche exhibition, "That Cruche skirted the murky zone of partisan politics is a tribute to his . . ." (47-48). The notion that the uniting of Left and Right can constitute a desirable transcendence (or a dialectical synthesis) is itself *politically* suspect, particularly on the

nationalistic lines Gallant envisions it here. But *philosophically* it does offer the hope of a resolution of conflict, a reversal of the problems of life, and hence a kind of redemption. The problem is, firstly, that Speck's dreams of uniting Left and Right stem not from an altruistic desire to resolve conflict, but from a selfish desire to enhance his own reputation (Besner 1988, 143). Secondly, art itself cannot help but occupy some position on the political axis: Speck imagines being assailed by "acute Right Wing cries of 'Down with foreign art!'" (7). And he composes notes on the right-wing Cruche and the nude: "'Cruche-and-the-nude implies a definition of Woman . . . . Lilith, Eve, temptress, saint, child, mother, nurse—Cruche delineated the feminine factor once and for all'" (34). This fixing of woman into the Judeo-Christian patriarchal order is a political statement made as much by the critic as by the artist.

The issue of appropriate response is one that is also touched upon in the Henri Grippes group of stories. Without engaging in a full analysis of these stories, I would like to bring one or two points arising from them that are relevant to this discussion. In a sense, they share a common theme with the Speck and Walter stories, that of the relations between art and money, between creativity and commerce. Miss Pugh, patroness of artists and originator of the Mary Margaret Pugh Foundation, "did not believe in art, only in artists" (109). There is a certain parallel between Pugh and Speck in this regard—neither has ultimately much time for art's redemptive possibilities.

In "A Flying Start," Grippes is called upon to write an entry for a three-volume dictionary of literary biography on his sometime friend and arch-rival, the English writer Victor Prism. The story provides humorous comment on the politics of canon formation; as the people in charge of the project change, the dictionary changes its name from *Living Authors of the Fourth Republic* to *Living Authors of the Fifth Republic*, to *Contemporary Writers, Women and Others,* then to its original title but with the section on English writers replaced by a "division with potted biographies of eight hundred Irish poets favorable to France and the Common Market" (129)—it is now being edited by

an Irish scholar. Grippes writes, "Prism drew a blank sheet of paper toward him and began to write, 'Are we to take it for granted that the artist thinks he knows what he doing?'" (125). The issue raised is that of New Criticism and the Intentional Fallacy (see Belsey 15). Without taking a position on this question, the text calls it to our attention for consideration. Following from this, the post-structuralist notion that a text may articulate a truth despite the author's lacking a conscious awareness of it entails the danger, or perhaps the inevitability, of bringing one's own ideological baggage to the task of criticism. In "Grippes and Poche" Grippes ponders the critical reception of his first novel:

> The critics had found Karen-Sue's sociological context obscure. She seemed at a remove from events of her time, unaware of improved literacy figures in North Korea, never once mentioned, or that since the advent of Gaullism it cost twenty-five centimes to mail a letter. The Pill was still unheard of in much of Europe; readers could not understand what it was Karen-Sue kept forgetting to take, or why Grippes had devoted a contemplative no-action chapter to the abstract essence of risk. The professor had not given Karen-Sue the cultural and political enlightenment one might expect from the graduate of a pre-eminent Paris school. (132-133)

Thus although a political criticism is appropriate to the questions raised by the text as a whole, the cultural egocentricity and the importing of extraneous political agenda to an act of criticism as practised by these critics offer cautions to us all.

In conclusion, I should like to look at one more image in the collection, that of the title. If the title functions as an "envelope" (Gabriel 1987, 24), what does it contain? Various critics have read this image in various ways. Bradbury sees its suggested expansiveness as ironic, "a reference to something these characters cannot fulfil" (80). Buitenhuis sees Gallant saying, "'Let me take you up in my balloon and show you the real Paris' [not the one found in the guide-books]" (301). Besner, too, reads the word "overhead" as reflecting Gallant's "mock-Olympian perspective, comically distanced" (Besner 1988, 141). For Leith, it suggests the dialogue balloon over a cartoon character's head,

fitting in with other cartoon references in the collection. Leith also sees the balloon as "associated with the woebegone protagonist's need for salvation, or at least for a friend," and with Gallant's "playful levity" (38). I should like to add to these my own construction. The direct quotation is from Walter, who speculates on whether Robert will get married "overhead in a balloon" (67). It also appears that Robert decided to get married while floating in this balloon: "Balloons were quieter than helicopters. Swaying in silence, between the clouds and the Burgundy Canal, he had been able to reach a decision" (66). Walter imagines the lost books he has lent to Robert floating overhead: "St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, drifting and swaying" (66). But the image of the balloon also appears twice in "Luc and his Father," and both times it is associated with marriage; in a photograph of Simone, "taken at the time of her engagement," when "[h]er hair was in the upswept balloon style of the time" (98). And when Roger pays his unwelcome visit the night before their wedding, "Simone received him alone, in her dressing gown, wearing a fine net over her carefully ballooned hair" (100). This image is reinforced by Luc's having seen "a female head in a fishing net" in the Rorschach test (176). Given the kinds of oppositions that Gallant has set up in this collection—between patriarchy and feminism, religion and rationalism, idealism and materialism, fascism and Marxism—we may conclude that what takes place "overhead in a balloon" is a marriage—a marriage of different and conflicting ideological discourses. And the offspring of that marriage is art itself.

NOTE

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