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Articles

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The Vision of Montréal in Gail Scott's Novels

the city's incandescence
flickers
(Sonja Skarstedt)

Abstract

My intention in this paper is to analyse Gail Scott's two novels Heroine *(1987) and* Main Brides *(1993). I regard the two novels as existing in a unique symbiosis as city novels. After some theoretical clarification, I examine on the one hand how the cityscape of Montréal becomes internalized in the protagonists' psyches, and on the other hand, how it becomes a character of its own in the process of narrating its/their individual identity/ies. The paper focuses on the idiosyncratic representations in each novel of the engendered female space in which Montréal becomes a peculiar "collective" protagonist. The social, cultural, political, linguistic (bilingual) and ethnic spaces in the two novels are approached in accordance with the multifarious cityscape from a bi and multicultural point of view.*

Résumé

Mon intention dans le présent article est d'analyser deux romans de Gail Scott: Heroine *(1987) et* Main Brides *(1993). Je considère que ces romans vivent dans une symbiose unique comme romans urbains. Après quelques clarifications théoriques j'examine d'une part la façon dont l'espace urbain du Montréal est internalisé par les protagonistes, et d'autre part, la manière dont il devient un caractère propre pendant la narration de l'identité (ou* des *identités) individuelle(s) appartenant à soi (elle)-même. L'article met en relief dans chacun des romans les représentations caractéristiques de l'espace feminin dans lequel Montréal devient tout de même un protagoniste collectif particulier. Les espaces social, culturel, politique, linguistique (bilingue) et éthnique présents dans les romans sont traités conformément à l'espace urbain multi-colore, d'un point de vue bi-et multiculturel.*

Much critical attention has been paid to Gail Scott's two novels *Heroine* (1987) and *Main Brides* (1993), focusing primarily on their mixture of *l'écriture féministe* and *l'écriture au féminin* embedded in fiction theory. The two pieces have not been interpreted as city novels as yet. In the following, my intention is to view the two novels as representatives of this fluid genre as well.

Before turning to the two novels some theoretical clarifications are in order. The city as a phenomenon on its own has been researched by social scientists and urban geographers. The literary connections have to be borne in mind too. According to Wirth-Nesher

> The development of the novel and the rise of modern cities have taken place concurrently. As society has tended more and more to become

> concentrated in what we call cities, the novel has been a major literary response, concerning itself with the complex interaction among individuals in groups and between individuals and society. (Wirth-Nesher, 91)

There have been different literary responses to the urban experience: the prose poem, imagism, stream of consciousness and so on (Brooker, 20). Also, the city novel as such has been categorized in different ways: as a "portrait novel" (a kind of initiation story), a "synoptic novel" (a portrait of the novel as a character on its own) and as an "ecological" novel concentrating on a neighbourhood, a spatial unit (Gelfant, 11). Heinz Ickstadt talks about "urban fiction: obviously a narrative in which the city is topos and/or setting, dominating individual consciousness and language, constituting a 'whole way of life'" (Ickstadt, 164). As far as Scott's novels are concerned, *Heroine* has a lot in common with the "portrait novel" since we view the city through the eyes of a young woman, who goes to Montréal from a small place in Ontario. *Main Brides* is close to the "ecological" category, focusing as it does on the street in Montréal known as the Main; however, the *tour d'horizon* it provides of the city and even beyond is much broader indeed. Thus, we can consider the two novels as breaking through these artificially set boundaries. Both novels are of and about the city.

Blanche Housman Gelfant has differentiated between the local color writer and the city novelist: "Unlike a local color writer, the city novelist sees urban life as an organic whole, and he expresses a coherent, organized, and total vision of the city" (Gelfant, 6). Again, we can only say that neither of these novels would fall into these well-defined categories: they belong to both of them. The city as a multifaceted phenomenon has been described from a countless number of perspectives. Robert Park's definition is the following:

> The city is ... something more than the congeries of individual men and social convenience ... something more, also, than a mere constellation of institutions and administrative devices. ... The city is, rather, a *state of mind*, a body of customs and traditions, and of the organized attitudes and sentiments that inhere ... in this tradition. (Park, 1)

In view of what has been said so far, I can only partially agree with Lorraine M. York, who claims that we "lack theory of place" and "rhetoric of place" (York, 321-322).

In Scott's case the city appears as semanticized from a female point of view. Norbert H. Platz observes that in most European languages the grammatical gender of the city is female: *polis* in Greek, *urbs* in Latin, *la ville* in French, *la citta* in Italian, *die Stadt* in German (Platz, 23-24). He also remarks:

> If we go back to St John's Revelation we encounter two semantically opposed versions of the feminine character of the city. The city is imagined either as the "Whore of Babylon" or as the "New Jerusalem". According to St. John, "new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven" is made ready like a *bride* adorned for her husband. (Platz, 21-22)

In this connection, it is interesting to note what Ann Diamond says about Montréal in her short story called "Roses":

> Montréal was the only city in North America with a feminine soul. Women could live there, even flourish, on the psychic level, she'd heard.

> It had to do with the French influence, the sense of style, a preoccupation with the "background". (Diamond, 70)

Despite the engendered female space in both novels, I think that the perception of the city, the interaction between character and setting, reflect a mental condition in which the urban space appears as a collective protagonist. As Fries claims, "The city is simultaneously a collective and an individual entity" (Fries, 62). The city in both novels serves as text and context in which the public (urban) and private spaces are textualized. I can only agree with Helmut Schroeder-Lanz, whose approach to the city as an informational entity is based on the "city-gestalt" theory, according to which "each city has its own personality which is determined by a set of specific features (representing a gestalt but not necessarily a pattern)" (Schroeder-Lang, 79). Among these features Schroeder mentions the following: buildings and their specific locations; history as documented in the diversity of architectural design and style; population and life styles: races, ethnicities, languages, religions, social groups; physical environment such as landforms; waterfront; type of economy.

Of particular interest in connection with this topic is an article by Michael Benazon called "Senses of Insecurity: Montreal Writers View their City" (1995), both for what it offered and what it did not. He neatly differentiates between the literary cultures of English and French Montréalers, calling attention to the isolated literary output of "several ethnic or religious communities" within these groups without emphasizing the importance of those who belong to the English minority and who try and bridge gaps, among them Scott. He examines the different literatures focusing on their city imagery and thus claims the following:

> They are stimulated by the unusual geographical setting of the city, and also by the architectural variety which emerged partly from the differing social and cultural needs of the principal communities, partly from the different architectural traditions (principally British, French, and American) that they have inherited, and partly from the blatant rivalries and competitions between the French and English communities which initiated and continue to initiate spectacular or monumental buildings that assert a cultural or even a political presence in key areas of the city. (Benazon, 97)

Not many critics have so far recognized the real significance of the city as a character in Scott's work. The throbbing life of Montréal permeates the text of *Heroine*, and I would certainly add to that text *Main Brides*. We experience in our reading the two novels the lives different characters lead, be it the bag ladies, the artists, the prostitutes or the homeless.

I regard the two novels as each other's continuations. The heroine in the novel called *Heroine* appears in *Main Brides* as "The Main Bride who remembers Halifax" (*MB*, 50). And one of the Main Brides is already present in *Heroine*: "The operative expression is live and let live. S, the Main Bride who wore a black tam over her wiry auburn hair, had it for a motto" (*H*, 51-52).

Also, I would consider both novels pieces of, in Linda Hutcheon's terms, historiographical metafiction - fiction that is "intensely, self-reflexively art, but is also grounded in historical, social, and political realities" (Hutcheon, 13). Both novels are deeply immersed in their Montréal background, which is there for them as a well-marked cultural space. In *Heroine* the narrator delivers her internal monologue in a bathtub; her flashbacks evoke the events of the 1970s in Québec. In *Main Brides* the narrator is sitting in a bar on the

Main and imagines the lives of women around her. In both cases the exact time of the spirally unfolding narrative is transmitted through the radio. "On the radio a voice says: 'Bonsoir, mes amis. Nous voici déjà à dix ans de la Crise d'octobre. Par ailleurs, une tempête de neige commencera vers 20 heures'" we hear in *Heroine* (83). In a similar fashion Lydia's attention is caught by an announcement: "On the airwaves [some local radio station] the barely audible late-night news. Trouble brewing in the community of Oka - due to a golf course being extended onto sacred Mohawk ground" (*MB*, 200). Both texts are period texts, but *Main Brides* is less politicized. In both cases we view the city from the point of view of an Anglophone protagonist, who has assimilated herself to the French milieu of the city. In *Heroine* the narrator decides to go to Montréal and wants to become part of the city. Thus Bensman's remark holds true for her.

> [T]hese new urban communities are voluntary in nature, based on a choice of dwelling within the frame work of selected values, institutions, and cultures rather than a residential space per se. Here the locality where one lives is less an accident of birth than an individual choice. (Bensman, 2)

In a conversation with Ken McGoogan, Scott remarks that in *Main Brides* she is "much more interested in exploring the fabric of the city and how people fit into that fabric" (n.p.) than in Heroine. I would, however, suggest that the city reveals itself as a personality in both novels. Despite the fact that the heroine sits in a bathtub she does remember how she participated in the life of the city, how she absorbed it in her own way. The "future heroine" on the last page of the novel keeps observing: "In the grey light, she's standing on the sidewalk (snowy of course), her pale red curls her one sign of beauty. Looking to the left, the right" (*H*, 183). Likewise, Lydia "just" sits in a bar and observes people around her and imagines their lives in and outside the city, but it has become fully integrated into her identity. I find Kevin Lynch's definition appropriate for these two novels:

> Like a piece of architecture, the city is a temporal art form - construction, like a novel - that is never experienced in its totality, but perpetually offers new angles of visions, and new vistas, much like the experience of reading and rereading. (Lynch, 1)

I would like to demonstrate Scott's technique of creating an urban atmosphere in accordance with the two perspectives that are differentiated by Wirth concerning cities in general: "sociological, the city as a particular form of human interaction, and architectural, the city as a particular arrangement of man-made forms in space" (Wirth, 92). Both novels abound in exact references to concrete names of streets and buildings. The spatial dimension of the city is delineated more in a mosaic than in a panoramic form. In spite of the static positions of each narrator, we are constantly on the move together with the characters in and outside the city. In connection with the dynamism of the city, it is interesting to note that Philip Marchand regards the open-ended processes present in *Main Brides* as dominating forces in the novel (n.p.). In my view they are present in *Heroine* as well. According to him the grammatical structures corresponding to it are the frequent use of the present participle and the parenthesis (n.p.). Scott's technique of simultaneity further intensifies the throbbing vigour of the city. A sense of movement is created and thus we become part of a process of getting to know the city in its own development. As Gelfant notes, "The unchangeable element in city life seems to be change itself" (Gelfant, 33). I use only a random sample to illustrate how the topographical specificity of Montréal comes alive in each novel. In *Heroine*, where the sentence "This is the city" is repeated several times, we gain a view

from a Waikiki tourist room and walk along Esplanade, St. Denis, the Main, rue Notre Dame, St-Dominique, Sherbrooke, Dorchester, Ste-Catherine, St-André, Joseph Boulevard and many more only to stop occasionally at Figaro's Café, Place Ville Marie, a dépanneur on St. Henri, the Bistro, the Blue Café, Harvey's-on-the-Main, the Cargo and Cracow bar, the Bagels' restaurant, the Gare Centrale, and so on. It is no mere accident that the narrator and her friends in the process of writing automatic poems drop a coin on the map of Montreal, about which they are supposed to write a poem.

> My surrealist coin, sign of conflict between the power of the unconscious and our objective condition of existence, falls on the McGill Gates. Ugh, English Montréal. Reluctantly, I go over. The Waspies have just stepped from their student coves to enjoy spring. (*H*, 76)

The dichotomy between the mountain and the river is more emphasized in *Heroine* than in *Main Brides* and the images correspond to Barbara Godard's view:

> According to the conventional toponymical syntax of Montréal, those who desire stability cling to the mountain, taking refuge under its cross, while those who seek change head towards the river, where the waters from north and west of the continent converge and flow to the sea. (Godard, 51)

The heroine finds peace up in the mountain while she is strenuous in the harbour. As she says:

> I know, I'll go to the mountain. Out the door. Across the park. This steep path up will open up the tightness of the lungs. ... I'll climb the steps to the chalet on the top. (*H*, 74)

> I write smaller and faster, like I did my love sitting in the Harbour Restaurant, with you listening to the sound of ships moving up and down. (*H*, 64)

In the course of the heroine's exploration of the city we acquire an acute knowledge of both the French and the English parts of the city.

The route we take in *Main Brides* is very similar: from the Main, to Park Avenue, the Berri Metro station, glancing at the mountain, going down rue Ste-Catherine, stopping at a Greek restaurant, and so on. Without going into further details here, I would like to pause, however, at one of the most important architectural scenes in the novel, emphasizing the fact that Lydia is a keen observer of her environment from apparently a Portuguese bar, which actually can be considered as an amalgam of all the bars on the Main. What is more, the only person she does speak to during her meditations is an

> unemployed architectural historian she knew (before the boxed-in winter). Who, on opening the door of the bar (the sun fairly bright in the sky), came directly to her table. Then stood there, restlessly, as if he'd made an error. "What's that?" she'd asked quickly, conversationally, pointing out the window.

"What d' you call that thing?
"A pe—?"
"A pediment," he answers. (*MB*, 137-38)

Earlier, the fact that Lydia loves to "think architecturally" (*MB*, 131) is elaborated on and is also demonstrated. Apart from architecture and cartography, Scott uses other means of enlivening the city. In *Heroine* we see the snapshots taken of the city by the heroine's lover.

Apart from a great many references to topographical entities in each novel Scott employs other means to vivify the city in each work. The interaction between setting and character is closely-knit. In her social vision, colours, clothing, speech patterns, documentation, social/political space (neighbourhood, ethnospace) exhibit a knowledge that can be acquired only by a bilingual narrator shifting in between the two cultures. It would be interesting to count the references Scott makes to colours and the different items of clothes in her novels. Concerning clothes we really see how people are dressed basically in black (and white, scarcely described otherwise) yet in an idiosyncratic manner. The fashion scene of Montréal becomes an integrated element in her concept of the city, one of the essential paraphernalia of urban existence. When she was asked about this by McGoogan, she replied:

> If I lived in Vancouver, I'd write about the way people dress there. In Montreal, I have lots of grist for my mill. Different ways of dressing. I find it fascinating, the ways people dress. It says so much about who you are. (McGoogan, n.p.)

In this connection Ann Diamond remarks: "Maybe Lydia's absolute obsession with fashion is a form of defiance: as if clothing (escape from anatomy into artifice) were woman's real destiny" (Diamond 1993, n.p.).

Mention should be made of how Scott uses colour as an affective means. Again it would be interesting to count all the references and the combination of colours she applies. The reader is overwhelmed by all these sensual images. Like Stephen Crane, who is considered to be one of the fathers of the city novel, Scott's use of colours can be described by sharp contrasts resembling the postimpressionist trend in painting known as pointillism; this was introduced by Seurat and features separated small dots of pure color applied to the picture surface, which become mixed by the viewer's eye with an effect of increased luminosity. The social vision in both novels is very strong and performs a function that is deeply integrated into Scott's city imagery. Apart from the main characters in each case she singles out a great many individuals who provide an immediate focus deeply embedded in the picture of the city. The social and cultural characteristics of the various neighbourhoods form an integral part of her depiction of the city. She puts a strong emphasis on the interaction between character and milieu.

Her social commentary is manifest in the extraordinarily wide range of characters she gathers in her novels. Among them there are hookers, tourists, hippies, Indians, Chileans, Spaniards, Greeks, Irishmen, battered women, the unemployed, a shrink, waitresses, Hassidic Jews, cops, artists, revolutionaries and refugees. Various layers of society are present and the reader becomes part of a real cacophony.

Scott also employs other means to show her deep knowledge of the city. Both novels abound in documentary elements: graffiti, banners, radio announcements, references to songs, photos. Scott's earlier vein, apparent in her career as a journalist, surfaces here too. As Ellen Symons remarks, "Scott goes far from traditional plot and deep into

imagination, but she does not go far from reality" (Symons, 13). Her cityscape is multifarious and involves all our senses: visual, olfactory, aural. As Scott says, "Making love to the city. Tasting, sucking, smelling, like a real (male?) poet" (*MB*, 199). The city in these novels has its own identity; it is certainly not a backdrop against which the narrative spirals. The bilingual nature of the texts also supports this purpose. Moving in and out of English and French conversations adds to the authentic representation of Montréal, with its multiple identity.

In harmony with the city's polyphony, its urban chaos, Scott's individual and collective concerns as an English-speaking Québécois female writer are well balanced. The highly mixed cultural, social, linguistic and political milieu of Montréal has served as a source of inspiration for her in both of these novels. In her manner of representation the inner and outer spaces are closely intertwined and conceptualized. Her literary exploration of the city is a testimony to the city's power of shaping behaviour. Let me finish with her own words from an interview with Linda Leith:

> We anglophones are the most privileged minority the country has and I am constantly appalled at our lack of generosity. We won't give an inch. I don't see how anyone can create from this position. An artist has to keep her pores open, sensitive to the pain, joy, sensuality – and to the creative works around her. (Leith, 24)

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