

## GAIL SCOTT

interviewed by Andy Fitch

*After publishing my Sixty Morning Talks interview collection, I have begun work on a more focused, single-press interview series, offering a comprehensive oral history (a cinéma vérité, in prose) of Nightboat Books' diverse and ambitious output over its first decade of publication. For this newer project, it particularly interests me to track interpersonal and intertextual constellations that have helped to shape the work done by Nightboat's authors, publishers and designers. This interview focuses on Gail Scott's The Obituary.*

**Andy Fitch:** Since your epigraph invokes a foundational component in the thinking of Nicolas Abraham and Mária Török, the concept of a transgenerational crypt, whereby the undisclosed, unprocessed trauma of one's parents (or, more broadly, one's preceding generation) produces inherited (though again unrecognized, misunderstood) symptomatic responses in the present, could you discuss how the tacit legacies of European colonization, the forced assimilation of Indigenous peoples in Canada, the agonistic multilingual/multicultural heterodoxies of Quebec, and/or the Benjaminian historical wreckage concretized amid Montréal's architectural textures manifest within *The Obituary's* highly distinctive discursive form? We could consider gestures of erasure, or the polyphonic ventriloquy sometimes within a single sentence, or how the sole photographic entry seems to give this quite playful novel additional nonfictional gravitas, or the citations/embellishments/inventions efficiently acknowledged in the afterword, or the feminized image of a novelistic space opening "Wide as the legs of a porn queen," but could we somehow trace a cryptology or cryptologies pushing from broader social forces to the most localized registers of idiom, syntax, formatting? And hopefully along the way we will have provided context for compressed, crystalline formulations such as this: "Whole tale's omissions contributing to succeeding generations' inability to communicate with open-mindedness, understanding, steadfastness of principles, consequently, always putting up defence walls of near paranoia."

**Gail Scott:** It is in fact an interest we apparently share in the question of ventriloquy that led me to Abraham and Török. They offered new itineraries for my reconnoitering the traces of the unsaid and unsayable in language, notably in shifting from emphasis on the interiority of the individual in Freud's bourgeois family, to the scene of the social. I greatly admire the work they did on the question of where intrinsic meets extrinsic in language. Your question

points, perspicaciously, towards an association with Bergman's *Wild Strawberries*. I wasn't thinking of *Wild Strawberries* while writing *The Obituary*, yet, corny as it may sound, at the age of 17, I danced all the way home after seeing the movie in a repertory theatre. It represented, in the period, both license to step outside of narrative as concerned everyday life, and a starting point for my fledging and long-simmered artistic project. For years I was haunted by the grainy death street you mention, and it has reappeared in a current work in progress as a space of excess, of excrescence. So yes, in a way, *The Obituary's* story operates as if the couch—a sleeper's couch as much as a psychoanalyst's couch—has moved into the grainy death street of *Wild Strawberries*. If it's death, it's Death as in the Tarot card, or as in Benjamin's dialectical image: a clash, a risk taken or a great danger faced, offering an awakening, or the possibility thereof. I love the Grim Reaper's grin. Furthermore, to mix up the dead and the living in tight syntactic and narrative proximity is to extract narration from the Western paradigm, as per, among others, Indigenous storytelling. I can see no better way of embracing history in the present than by allowing for the characters or the figures in this novel to be both dead yet moving about the urban space "in the flesh." And this collapsing of linear time was particularly useful for trying to grasp the consequences of forced Indigenous assimilation, while remaining consistently in the contemporary.

The question of how to write caused much pain and many years of experimentation. Like many left-leaning contemporary authors, I have followed the century-long trail of avant-garde interest in cutting up and remixing, the better to perform, along the re-sutured space, what is not being said—a project more manifest in poetry than prose on this continent. I have chosen to work in prose, and what is cut up is forward movement. If one sees the spaces between sentences and/or paragraphs, or sections, as cusps where the unsayable can emerge, one is closer to poetry. I'm not sure if many readers of poetry are aware of how difficult it is to attempt this in a prose context where narrative expectation of "progress" from sentence to sentence goes quite unchallenged. While stealing from poetry, *The Obituary*, by virtue of length, of attempted interpretation or explanation (however mannerist), by virtue of a certain engagement with the social, also places one in the space of the novel. Eileen Myles says the difference between poems and a poet's novel is that the latter is *long + social*.

What better container, then, than a leaky crypt to contain an equivocal tale of both oppression and lust? "What haunts are not the dead but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others" reads the epigraph. Information is power: the secret, the lack of knowing, scores the figure emerging from the novel

space as a *hybrid...melancholic, always on a line between appearing and disappearing*. The novel's obsession with said *line* makes of Montréal a perfect novel site, since to live in a city of overlapping languages is to live on a cusp between tango-ing notions of "real" or "authentic." (Abraham and Török investigated, among other things, the impact on the psychoanalytic itinerary of the Wolf Man's multilingual verbarium). Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* with its collage or montage approach, provided a *modus operandi* for re-distribution of narrative. For me the focus is on the re-suture procedure, a kind of pretexting of story, rife with failures and fruitful leaks. At the heart of Benjamin's *Arcades* project is his notion of *profane illumination*, with its aesthetic and revolutionary implications, surfacing with the Surrealists, but rejigged through an extremely fluid deployment of certain elements of Marxism, notably, the aforementioned dialectical image. The process—and here I acknowledge the ghost of modernism—aims less for a thing to be "seen," than for a *prise de conscience* when moments, concepts, movements collide on multiple levels (class, gender, culture, language). My hope in *The Obituary* was that the sparks created by the elbowing of time and voices and cultures and various approaches to recounting "the facts" might shed some light on the terrible genocide we have wrought, which continues to impact the First Nations people of this continent in face of our continued attitude of studied indifference. I wanted the novel to be some kind of convulsive space, the better to shed light, as does, sometimes, the contemplation of an image—before we actually attempt to put it into words.

The photo, by the way, is a picture of my mother, aged three or four. It does, for me, as you suggest, tell the story, without comment.

**AF:** I'd love to hear more about what you elsewhere have described as the narrative "counterpoint" constructed by your prose. And given your preceding conceptions of so-called serious writing as a form that explores "the question of writing in its relation to time," I wondered if we could outline a model of how temporality plays out in *The Obituary*. Often when the protagonist Rosine (fragmented, of course, into multiple personages engaged in various pursuits across the city) appears simply as a figure spotted in the window, I recall the vertiginous perspectivism by which, let's say, a Virginia Woolf character suddenly might find herself similarly framed. But Woolf's orchestration of a complex urban simultaneity often seems the inverse of the dispersive temporality that you present. In *The Obituary*, Aristotelian unities of time and place perpetually dissolve upon themselves. Montréal, as presented in your book, juxtaposes all seasons, all histories, within a single scene of story. So in terms of cutting up and remixing here, cinematic montage seems perhaps to

offer an illuminating model. Or given your past engagements with Paris, a story/space like Jean-Luc Godard's *Two or Three Things I Know about Her* stands out, with its cacophonous (or musical, danceable, depending on one's sensibility) layering of decontextualized vignettes, appropriated set-pieces, ghostly urban tableaux and whispered choral presences. Even your two investigators ensconced in an internal staircase seem to pick up on the Bouvard and Pécuchet figures in Godard's *La Chinoise*. We don't have to dwell on Godard or film here, but what other models of montage also anticipate *The Obituary's* constructions of novelistic counterpoint?

**GS:** Not everyone sees, as you do, the humor in this work, which playfulness I have tried to achieve in part by an abundance of awkward sentences set on a somewhat accidental terrain. Right away, this distances me from Woolf. The inevitable inconsistencies of a hybrid figure ever trying to please all camps at once results in speaking in omissions or displacements that amount to lies not quite on the surface, manifesting as the earlier cited "omissions contributing to succeeding generations' inability to communicate with open-mindedness, understanding, steadfastness of principles, consequently, always putting up defence walls of near paranoia." Another device was that of recounting social and historical factoids from the basement of the story, by a conscientious lesbian (she's the modernist here!) ever trying to keep a modicum of control over the ids and the egos adrift in the tale. I should mention that instead of a main character you have Rosine divided by three: the maybe-dead woman on the bed; her animus, a very horny male fly on the wall; and the aforementioned lesbian. The sentences needed to be flexible enough to allow a certain ventriloquy, and in a different way this extends an investigation started in *My Paris* regarding the necessary instability of grammar. All that noise, the voices from the street, from the past (arising out of the fissures of the site—the triplex's cracked plaster, for instance), arrives in disintegrating utterances, blocking the usual novel reader-response of psychological attachment to character. The characters become shards of time and culture, embedded in uncomfortably conjuncted languages (NOT fragments, as some critics have said, but cumulative arrangements, which are different than fragments). This approach to composing the "novel" also, as critic Jane Malcolm has written, deprives the novel of that old creative-writing school saw of POV. Rather, there are "various portholes" through which the leaky crypt's partial tales are perceived. In my most intense period of reading theory, not in the academy, but in conjunction with feminist and queer, and in earlier years, left and *indépendantiste*, militancy, I stumbled through a lot of Derrida, and to this day I am indebted to notions like: "I absolutely refuse a discourse that would assign me a single code, a single language game, a single context, a single situation;

and I claim this right not simply out of caprice or because it is to my taste, but for ethical and political reasons.”

**AF:** Of course we have way too much to cover, but could you say more, for those unfamiliar with such buildings, about the Montréal Triplex (I know you have done this before, but I have to admit that I still have some questions, like does everybody share roof access, the same sense of sky)? How does living in such a triplex make/echo the differential experience of living in Montréal rather than any other city (I realize San Francisco’s residential architecture does offer some similarities)? Again, could we consider the triplex, the half-breed, more broadly in relation to genre—perhaps as a way of situating this book within the larger Nightboat catalogue?

**GS:** As regards the Montréal Triplex, a stand-in for the crypt, I should say anecdotally that the novel began for me when a local historian, visiting the top floor of the triplex that is my home, informed me one evening that the building stood on the old Crystal Palace grounds, the Crystal Palace being a copy of a glass-and-iron World Fair building in nineteenth-century London. Rich, one imagines, in exhibited fruits of imperialism. Montréal’s Crystal Palace was likewise an expression of Anglo colonial wealth + power. When it burned the triplexes were built, housing waves of Anglos, Francos, immigrants over time—all occupants of stolen Indigenous territory. The triplex architecturally fosters both urban density and often unwanted intimacy of relations. What is somewhat unique is that the buildings were constructed so that each floor is considered a “house” with a private entrance (hence the stairs up the outside façades of the buildings). This made of the triplex the perfect story crypt (both closed and leaky). From it and within it, various story vectors rose and dispersed, as you put it, into the ice storm, into the city. The closed-in space allowed as well for an interior temporal collapsing of past and present that facilitated a leap over usual novel time. For example, one of the cops in the stairwell is surely a ghost, looking for Rosine’s native tap-dancer grandfather, with whom he is in love. His police-school student, also in the stairwell, with his computer, is skilled in electronic policing. The chapters are distinct enough that one need not necessarily read from beginning to end, though I believe that to get the picture, as it were, one must eventually read the whole thing in whatever order.

Towards the end, a chapter called “The Crypt’s Tale” attempts to bring and also refuses to bring the various vectors together. This is my favorite chapter; it was mostly written while I occupied a Québec Arts Council studio in Manhattan in 2008, and I love the impact on the writing produced by living

among the Downtown poets (notably those frequenting the Poetry Project and the first edition of the Bowery Poetry Club). Notwithstanding enthusiastic critical reception, in Canada I was having some difficulty finding a solid milieu of radical prose experimentation, at least what I consider radical prose experimentation (essentially devastating relations between usual genre components and syntax). A great many radical prose experiments end up being marketed as poetry. But I remain attached to the space of the novel. Did I take this novel to Nightboat because of its proximity to poetry? What I remember is the desire for a publisher whose list I feel at home with; Nightboat, with a certain devotion to avant-garde and avant queer work, was a good home for the novel in the U.S.

**Andy Fitch's** most recent books are *Sixty Morning Talks*, *Sixty Morning Walks*, and (with Amaranth Borsuk) *As We Know*. With Cristiana Baik, he recently assembled the *Letter Machine Book of Interviews*. He has dialogic books forthcoming from 1913 Press and Nightboat Books. He edits Essay Press, teaches in the University of Wyoming's MFA program, and directs the MA program in literature.

**Gail Scott** is an experimental novelist. *The Obituary* (New York, Nightboat, 2012; Coach House: 2010), a ghost story set in a Montréal triplex, was a 2011 finalist for Le Grand Prix du Livre de la Ville de Montréal. Other novels include *My Paris* (Dalkey Archive), about a sad diarist in conversation with Gertrude Stein and Walter Benjamin in late 20<sup>th</sup> Paris, *Main Brides* and *Heroïne*. *Spare Parts Plus 2* is a collection of stories and manifestoes. Essays are collected in *Spaces Like Stairs* and *la théorie, un dimanche*. (translated as *Sunday Theory* from Belladonna, NY, 2013). Scott's translation of Michael Delisle's *Le Déasarroi du matelot* was shortlisted for the Governor General's award [2001]. Scott co-founded the critical French-language journal *Spirale* (Montréal), and is co-editor of the New Narrative anthology: *Biting the Error: Writers Explore Narrative* (Toronto: Coach House, 2004).