

The Hub (1995)

The novel, another novel is set in the city, I don't know any other place well. Besides, isn't urban density a ferment of fictions, of literature?

The city in question is not Montreal or New York, these poles of my existence that are also its simultaneous centers. The space of the novel again is a city without a name, but its description can produce a magnifying or surreal impression, a New York effect. This composite place, that did not restrain the imagination of the writing and does not restrain the imagination of the reading, offers a glimpse of some urban ills and dramas, seen as faults of the contemporary world.

I'm a child of the city. I grew up in a neighborhood of Montreal that a novel entitled *La Petite patrie* introduced into fiction a long time ago, thus adding to the workings of my memory; and I have lived in New York for twenty years, long enough to have started internalizing this city as well. At times, Montreal appears in the background of my novels, a setting so unquestionable and unavoidable that it goes without describing; at other times, it imposes itself as a subjective location, a "Here" that tends towards the universal by saying a "Self" in the world, and that coincides with a sensation of the place. With distance, my hometown doesn't start looking like an old faded letter, with transparent folds; rather, it takes on the strength of an implicit and constant conviction, maybe frozen unfortunately at the time of my departure, but that's not so clear...

Often, what a sweet irony! I seem to be less troubled about my origins than I would be if I lived in Montreal, which I left at the time I was starting my first novel. From the beginning, my writing adapted easily to traveling, and it does not stop crossing and recrossing the American border to explore this continent of which New York City, all nerve and muscle, is one of the vital centers. If, in my situation as a foreigner, I apply myself to making the unknown generate what's known, the place I speak from is always urban.

The city organizes my sense of humanity, specifically the big city with its suburbs, housing projects and inner-cities, whose geography and architecture call out for inclusion and tolerance, specifically the megapolis which has the expanse of a novel and the density of poetry. With an inquisitive eye on other cities, Los Angeles, Mexico, Marseille... I constantly readjust my basic notion of urbanity, while being aware that I'm observing the present of the world. Intense present where history is accelerating and where the past is an abandoned building; chattering present where only personal stories ring true, take a tone of lament and salutary insolence, opaque and pregnant present that is conducive to violence, because barbaric inequality too often is the way of diversity; present whose agitated power exacerbates the fragility of the self, points inward, points to art and literature.

A place defined by the profusion of texts, by the one-upmanship of discourses and by all-out "fictionalization", the city also transforms without respite my sense of culture, is also for me a way to experience language. Wherefrom the attractiveness of the most swelling, the most extended and compact urban centers; wherefrom the seductiveness of ethnic overlappings, of language crossings, of pacific collisions. This one, this woman here, on the alert

for *mises-en-scène* and words which make up the self of our time, the city exalts her, body and mind. It consumes her like a passion or an affliction. It sees her enamored with her fatigues, the trembling ones as well as the disillusioned ones, like a dancer who remained on the dance floor till the wee hours.

In the face of volatile scandals, of daily news always less horrifying than media-perfect, of sound bites always falling short of their official truths; amid the antique neons and the video-clips, the dust of digital advertising, the signs that repaint our public and private decors in layer over layer — a thousand times more familiar than the novel as desiring machines, as signal-boxes of the imagination; in front of the ephemeral if not disposable products of pro-active celebrity, autobiographies and memoirs by transient personalities — ultimate triumph of a television appearance; before the millions of tête-à-tête with computers, whose dialogues are carried by light, which are all of consuming urgency but of deferred intimacy, devoid of the dangerous immediacy of the human voice; confronted with the discharge of catchy and thrilling information, more entertaining than invented dramas; in front of the proliferation of lightweight and trite signs, of all that constitutes the consciousness of our time... the novelist measures herself against the din of the city, unable to turn away from this hub of discourses, she writes against the disastrous rhetoric of commerce, in dissent from the cult of effect, she cannot be out to tell a story.

That is why occasionally, in her literary quest that feels like a wild enterprise, an absurd or extravagant challenge vying in power with silence, she finds herself in sympathy with an English author of the beginning of the century, as she tells herself: "Alas, the novel must have a plot..."¹

In the great market of the provisional, from streets variegated with signs hanging more closely than fish scales and hiding one another, to the urban savannahs planted with mountain ranges of residential buildings, to the plains inlaid with bottle shards and refuse, all wide open to a dry desolation, the novelist immerses herself in the constructions and the common narratives of humanity, she grasps its stimulating or harrowing reality. Not stopping dead at the foot of the high rises' cliffs, where salaried life devotes itself to the national and international economy; not passing round at safe thruway speeds the busted-up outskirts, where the city becomes anaemic as surely as from a continuous blood-letting, where poverty is so well isolated that failure and crime become part of people's identity, the pride of gansta rappers and of young children, she reinterprets the writings of civilization which are always in the present tense, she takes them apart and reconstructs them as she inscribes them in time, as she confronts them with her own history, she contributes modestly to the invention of the novel.

Thus, turned outward as the city demands, she takes in the intoxicating topics of the hour, the sale and electoral neurosis talks, the words of irate fear and fanaticism, of sovereign slightness and certainty, she tries to sail upon a sea of triumphant and perishing texts, which cancel each other out in a racket that is always promotional at first, but she also witnesses the unexpected outpourings, the spontaneous life summaries and the outbursts of a tenacious poetry, brought about by the sterile cruelty of the moment. Blooming graffiti by spray-paint artists, panhandlers' rehearsed melodramas, altars erected to the dead of urban violence, where folklore is mixed with things sacred and shoddy, pleadings of the hallucinating homeless, and other eddies of intimate source... the novelist receives the confidences, the raw or brutal points of view, the rushes of thought

sprung from the walls. Susceptible to the impulse to tell one's story, to make one's mark or to assume the rebellious power of a tag, in order to oppose the prevailing truths so disconnected from daily existence, she knows that there are no secure islands, that no group can manage alone, nor enjoy perfect immunity. Already, countries mirror the megalopolis, and western urban culture becomes transnational. It may be surprising to hear adolescents who, on the five continents, improvise in their own language raps inspired by the anger of the streets which cannot bear melodies; it may be distressing to see gangs born in Amerindian reservations, groups that take after those of the distant cities, and whose names and emblems couldn't be more foreign to tradition. But screens carry the same pictures all over, and the expansion of a ferocious capitalism takes care of the rest, together with faltering economies.

In my adoptive city, which is always on the verge of bankruptcy while the sumptuous excesses never stop, while the vehement spectacle of business never slows down, I sometimes find myself drifting on the streets with a boundless compassion. Being part of the procession, I sympathize with the diverted ardors and the throbbing angers, the combative dispositions gone wrong, I am affected by the indigence that causes stupefying pain, without any resistance or reflexes at times but a monstrous brutality, with an imagination run dry. In the indifferent hardness that sows rubble and debris, in the bleak and unhealthy landscapes crossed by lightning of luxury, or clustering around bright kernels of wealth, where the disarray of social services and the failures of the infrastructure are getting worse, as well as the assaults of an organically tenacious filthiness, I feel at home soaking in this bath of lucidity, but I barely dare to think of all that contributes in reverse to the vitality of the city, chaos regenerating itself. If I don't run away, it could be, like one of my characters suggests, that "these signs of decline connect me with the most tenebrous parts of my being, make tangible those somber thoughts that I most knowingly keep at bay, restore its inherent sadness to humanity". While the novelist gives way to her fascination, her writing explores "*l'imaginaire du manque*" (our imagination of need and want), a component of the novel as crucial as its uncertainty.

But there is more. So many other things hold me captive, keep me there. Because the city attracts the solitudes of artists who feed from each other's work, who produce an ocean of shifting visions. The art world, this vague urban entity which is up against the abundance of culture, exists at best as a hot spot, a danger zone where one stands in front of oneself without apologies, where one makes space for thoughts of the imaginary in order to experience oneself differently. The novelist, curious and passionately fond of ideas, but totally left to herself in the intimate dynamic of writing, exposes herself in the city to other paths of knowledge, meets with other works where the present opens up on history, where the enigma of the contemporary self thickens, without any desire for transparency. Sometimes, all it takes is a painting or a dance performance for her to find that she's at peace with the world, suddenly coinciding with herself. And her writing, which moves forward like science by making incursions into foreign territories, travels into fields other than its own, reconsiders itself through extraneous notions of figuration, of fictionalization and of narration.

The city, so permissive it gives one pluck and drive, also offers fine pleasures, but it contains so many other texts! close to the ground and at bird's-eye view, in its sediments of civilization and its strata of memory. Thus, when I fly over the leaden multitude of the Manhattan skyscrapers and see the uneven

clustered spikes of a circuitboard, I think at the same time of Henry James who compared the buildings to "extravagant pins in a cushion already overplanted, and stuck as in the dark, anywhere and anyhow".... By chance, the city is also a product of literature, where trivialization and dilution of meaning come to an end, where resistance is fomented.

Years go by. The novel, another novel comes out, which is set in the city rather than in a city. In my own way, I tend to particularize without specifying, I apply myself to identifying without romantic prejudice, but the point of view remains anchored, how could there be writing otherwise? If the setting was limited to New York, this mythical city capable of stealing the story from the characters, the fictional reality would probably seem a familiar ground, where everything could be explained. However, in each novel, the city demands to be the vital space and the refracting medium of the story, the light where its enigmas are revealed.

Because, of course, my novels also have a plot.

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1/ E.M. Forster, in *Aspects of the Novel*: "Yes, oh dear yes, the novel tells a story".