

## MANIFOLD BORDERS AND ENCOUNTERS: CANADA AND MONTREAL IN MAVIS GALLANT'S 'LINNET MUIR'

Isabella MARTINI

Lecturer, PhD, University of Pisa, Italy  
Corresponding author: correcta.edicion@gmail.com

*"As my own train crossed the border to Canada I expected to sense at once an air of calm and grit and dedication, but the only changes were from prosperous to shabby, from painted to unpainted, from smiling to dour. I was entering a poorer and a curiously empty country, where the faces of people gave nothing away".*

M. Gallant, *Home Truths*, Toronto, Macmillan of Canada, 1981, p. 222.

As Linnet Muir crosses the US border and enters Canada in the opening short story of the eponymous sequence by the Anglo-Canadian writer Mavis Gallant, the image described is far from the idea of contemporary Canadian reality, multifaceted, multicultural, modern, technological. In the summer of 1941, the border between US and Canada divided not only different economies, but also social convention, attitudes – even towards war – and cultural activities. Place as Ashcroft, Griffiths e Tiffin [1] recall, is a complex interaction of language, history and environment, and it is marked by a sense of displacement. Particularly in Gallant's stories, space and places, selected and filtered by narrator's or characters' perception, contribute to shape a complex and thorough system of meaning, where its decoding is essential for text interpretation. Besides, Gallant's is a narrative of exile(s): places, spaces of exile and their relation with characters are decisive in their being exiles. Furthermore, a simultaneous superimposition of a double past vision of Montreal reveals itself to be the strategy of search and recomposition of Linnet's father figure. Places in this 'return sequence' map the past of Linnet and the fully aware growth of her new identity as a woman, a journalist and as a writer.

As Brian McHale suggests in one of his seminal studies, «different dominants emerge depending

upon which questions we ask of the text and the position from which we interrogate it» [2]. Therefore, the six stories of 'Linnet Muir' were examined in order to make a topological dominant explicit. As a more accurate topographical grid surfaced, it was evident that places – *i.e.*, their features and functions – directed the textual interpretation, as they provide answers to the queries pertaining both their ontologic and their epistemological dimensions.

«How did my father die?»: that is the starting query of the investigation which is the reason for Linnet to come back to Montreal, together with the desire to sever all connections with her mother. She needed the city and its public and private places to recall her memories and to seek those who witnessed the events that led to the disintegration of her family. However, the different accounts that she obtained from her father's acquaintances and from her partial and sketchy memories led her to a version of her past which is neither definite nor truthful, already at the end of "In Youth Is Pleasure". Her inquiry then shifted from an openly epistemological level to an ontologic one, because her core queries became: «Who was my father? Who am I? In relation to which worlds can I define myself as an individual?»

As it was impossible for Linnet to elicit irrefutable answers from people, she shifted her

search towards the places connected to her memories of her father. Her queries then changed: «Where was (and is) my father?», «Where was (and am) I?», «In relation to my worlds (past and present), how can I define myself as an individual?». A dialectic is established between the places of her childhood and the same places that she found when she returned to Montreal. Indeed, places supplied her with the only empirical data from which to start her search again.

Linnet's investigations display a crossing of manifold borders. They proceed from a time contemporary to the narrating voice, where an older Linnet, presumably speaking in the Seventies, questions two other different time levels, both of them past, confronting each other on the same ground, *i.e.* Montreal. To the topologically overlapping childhood and young years of Linnet correspond two images of Montreal used by the narrator to recreate the complexity of her past and her identity.

The dialectic is then among present (the time of the ulterior narration whence Linnet recalls the events), recent past and remote past (the two time level of the story where the narrated events took place). Linnet projects two different memories of herself and of the city of Montreal to certify the authenticity of the two time levels on which her memory works. If Linnet had centred her investigation just on her childhood memories, recreating places would not have had the value of reality that her memories of a closer past ensure. In fact, they belong to a threshold to adulthood and, theoretically, they are factual, true – exempt from the distortion acting on remote childhood memories.

Anyway, Linnet has stopped living in Montreal since a long time, in the present of the narration. The comparison then is both between two remembered cities and between two past projections of Linnet herself. Linnet recreates her own self gradually. She needs first to recall her childhood city, then validate it with its image retained during her young adult years in order to repossess it and obtain a solid, substantial and undoubtable basis on which to build her own identity. Therefore, Linnet interposes her renewed self between her painful past and her will to build her own present time so that it

belongs to her only, she accomplishes her *Selbstbildung* [3] and fully becomes an independent woman and writer. Her remembered places, *i.e.* the existential strategy chosen by Linnet, relies on a delicate emotional balance: if this balance is missing, a caesura occurs between place and mind and instead of identification the same place may convey estrangement, as it happens with Linnet.

Actually, Linnet was looking for a city that had never existed, safe in her distorted memories: that is why a grown-up Linnet cannot appropriate of a city where she cannot recognize even the street where she used to live, Sherbrooke Street.

The houses of Linnet, of Dr. Chauchard (her paediatrician of whom her mother was slightly in love), of Georgie (her godmother, who was in love with Linnet's father and who discarded him because he did not want to separate from Linnet in order to go and live with her), the office where Linnet worked in her twenties, Windsor Station and Sherbrooke Street: these are the fundamental places whereby the dialectic between recent and remote past relies and on which the axiological system depends, created out of the opposition between their disphoric and euphoric connotations. Perceived through a double perspective (of a child and of an adult), houses embody a life *vs.* death symbolic dichotomy. Those places, once inhabited by those same grown-ups who decided Linnet's childhood, are still, shabby, impoverished, often empty. Linnet's childhood home, where she cannot access anymore as it is inhabited by strangers, is actually humble, while she recalled it as large and full of light and life, and such was the distortion performed by her happy memories that she hardly recognises it. Dr. Chauchard house is in a shabby area and lost every splendour of the generation who inhabited it until few years before. Moreover, Georgie's house is a mausoleum-house, isolated from the outer reality as if in a fortress and subjected to an increasing decline.

As far as plot is concerned, Linnet's journey may be traced as follows: Montreal (1920-1930 ca.) → Canada and United States (1930-1940 ca.) → Montreal (1940-1950 ca.), with the crisis of her family making Linnet crossing her first border.

1920-1930 ca.	1930 ca.	1930-1940 ca.	1940-1950 ca.
Starting Point	Crisis	Departure	Return
Intact family: Linnet, Angus and Charlotte; solidity. Identity.	The Muir family collapses.	Linnet follows her mother; instability; desire of rebellion/escape.	Linnet is alone. Estrangement.
Idyll – relative comfort.	Death of Linnet’s father turns her life into a «helpless migration» (219).	Exile – longing for the past; refusal of the present.	Disenchantment: present time does not come up to the past.

Windsor Station is the first place with which Linnet comes in contact when she returns to Montreal. There she finds again the statue of Lord Mount Stephen, founder of the Canadian Pacific Railway. That statue has an utterly symbolic value for her search: as a child, it was the meeting point where to meet her parents, in case she would get lost, while as a young adult it becomes the evidence that all her remembered world was not purely imagined. That spot is the fact out of which to start, even though the statue is divested of all safety. Now there is no one looking for her, and the station suffers a complete axiological inversion:

From	To
Meeting place	«Foreign, echoing, mysterious» (223)
Familiar place; safe	Attempted sexual harassment
Last happy memories of her father	Disappointing contact with the city

The opposition between identification and estrangement stands again when Linnet mentions the passage from an almost edenic image of Montreal and Sherbrooke Street – as it had crystallized in her memory – to her perception of the city at her return:

«dream past» (235)	«dull reality» (236)
--------------------	----------------------

The same spread between a euphoric connotation of a place in the remote past and a disphoric connotation of the same place in the recent past occurs as far as Linnet’s childhood home and adulthood home are concerned:

Beautiful, warm, large, «whose beauty had brought tears to my sleep, to which in sleep I’d returned» (235)	«a narrow stone thing with a shop on the groundfloor and offices above» (236)
--	---

Characters belong to places and share their fate: if a place declines, the same decay affects those who inhabit it.

Coherently to the search for her father, Linnet relates with areas of the urban texture connected to her father, in order to recreate his image through the comparison between the memory of the place she had associated with him when she was a child and its image of her recent past.

With such a practice, Linnet’s father turns into a fragmented figure, though not in a negative sense. As one or more fragments of his image can be associated to the same place, his image penetrates the city texture and overlaps the

places where he and Linnet lived together, therefore living again and metaphorically accompanying her daughter in her new life. The passage for her itinerary of conscience is now open and Linnet can reach her own full achievement. To the questions «Who am I?

Where was (am) I? In relation to which world can I define myself as a person?», now Linnet has elaborated and accepted her past and she can answer: «It’s me, here and now, but my younger self and my child self as well. I belong to the

world of my past and of my present time; anyway, I belong to my world».

Behind the seeming tautology lies the painful journey Linnet had to endure after being deprived of her existential centre, her family and her father, to replace it with a new and much stronger one: herself. She decides to care about her fragmented self as well, as soon as she understands that it is impossible to obtain a truthful account of events: it becomes clear, then, that only by feeding all her memories she can shape an image of her father and create the most solid version of herself.

In her journey of re-appropriation, Montreal is to Linnet a place of her memory, her past, her present, her search, her journey, her transitoriness and of her necessary pain to build her life. Places are centripetal cores of accumulation of memories, and Montreal is also the place of exile for WWII European refugees, for remittance men, for Linnet's father and for Linnet herself. Parallel to the rapport of attraction and rejection she experienced with her parents, Montreal keeps attracting and rejecting her at the same time.

Moreover, a further contrast between borders develops as far as Linnet's personal *Bildung* progresses, *i.e.* a contrast between Linnet and Montreal as opposite poles, the narrator representing positive qualities (energy, wealth, open-mindedness, wish for cultural enrichment) and negative qualities (stasis, gradual impoverishment, dullness, ignorance). There is no wilderness to contrast the city. Linnet's experience is urban: the only two places connected somewhat to countryside and nature are the Lakeshore, partial setting of "Varieties of Exile", and the cottage where Angus Muir removed his own family in the attempt to remove his wife from her lover in "Voices Lost in Snow". Both places are associated to the idea of a removal from Montreal, therefore from the centre of working, cultural and social activities, though they do not develop the topos of human fight against the wilderness, as it has been diversely expressed in Canadian literature.

Places are the landmarks of Linnet's journey to her childhood and give the necessary truth to her memories so that she can start a re-mapping of Montreal and a re-appropriation of its urban texture and of her identity as well, through the

story that those places tell about her family. Such mapping happens through a physical movement within the city and a mental journey through memory. Being both backwards movements crossing borders through time and space, they become «the ground for discovery and self- or historical consciousness» [4]. Even though at the beginning Linnet's two images of Montreal do not coincide, Linnet can recover possession of her places and rework the memory of it she had preserved. She then acknowledges the inaccuracies and the truth she retained of her city, before choosing to make it the palimpsestic starting point for her search, which can be the same starting point for our search in Gallant's stories.

## References

1. «Place and displacement are crucial features of post-colonial discourse. By 'Place' we do not simply mean 'landscape'. Indeed, the idea of 'landscape' is predicated upon a particular philosophic tradition in which the objective world is separated from the viewing subject. Rather 'place' in post-colonial societies is a complex interaction of language, history and environment. It is characterised firstly by a sense of displacement in those who have moved to the colonies, or the more widespread sense of displacement from the imported language, of a gap between the 'experienced' environment and descriptions the language provides, and, secondly, by a sense of the immense investment of culture in the construction of place», in AA. VV., „The Post-colonial Studies Reader“, a cura di B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, H. Tiffin, London, Routledge, 1995, p. 391.
2. B. McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, London, Routledge, 1989, p. 6.
3. S. Manferlotti, *La città degli immigrati. Spazio e memoria in Salman Rushdie e Hanif Kureishi*, in C. Pagetti (ed.), "La città senza confini. Studi sull'immaginario urbano nelle letterature in lingua inglese", Roma, Bulzoni, 1995, pp. 301-11.
5. Perosa, *Michael Ondaatje's In the Skin of a Lion and The Building of Cities*, in G. Bonanno e A. Gebbia (eds.), "Canada e Italia verso il Duemila: metropoli a confronto. Atti del 9° Convegno Internazionale di Studi Canadesi. Milano 22-25 aprile 1992", Fasano, Schena, 1994, vol. II, p. 26.