

FEMME(S) FOCAL(S): GAIL SCOTT'S *MAIN BRIDES* AND THE POST-IDENTITY NARRATIVE

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[T]o say that narrative is the production of Oedipus is to say that each reader—male or female—is constrained and defined within the two positions of a sexual difference thus conceived: male-hero-human, on the side of the subject; and female-obstacle-boundary-space, on the other.

Teresa de Lauretis, "Desire in Narrative"

[G]ender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results.

Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*

Lydia sips slowly. Smiling at the thought that women travelers, like sleepwalkers, move unerringly. Always packing up, and going here and there. Also—by being into change—exerting great control on their existence. Because always able to choose the exact moment in which to re-become anonymous.

Gail Scott, *Main Brides*

Gail Scott's second novel, as these epigraphs suggest, can be read as a text that displaces the narrative quest(ion) for/of identity. In *Main Brides*, identities, rather than being discovered in a plumbing of depths, are the effects of a fantasizing production that takes place at the 'level' of focalization.¹ Truth as depth, as expressive inner essence, is reformulated as a fantasy spun from a reading of surfaces. The text reverses the traditional location of value in the depth/surface opposition, and surface is newly valued as the side that provides possibilities for self-invention, movement and hope for women in a social context of rampant misogynist violence. This de-ontologizing reversal has consequences for narrative structure:

the quest structure that fixes gender identities is replaced in *Main Brides* with a “concentric constellation” of shifting identities (Scott 110).²

With a gaze that takes in the corporeal surfaces of other women—gestures, flashes of skin, ornamentation, various modes of self-styling—a *femme focale* produces fantasized ‘inner depths’ for other women passing through her space in a bar-café on Montreal’s boulevard St Laurent, otherwise known as *The Main*. This gaze belongs to Lydia, a character who is only made accessible to us through the portraits of other women that she fabricates from intriguing surface details. Nothing ‘happens’ in this novel, for Lydia’s only movement is her slippage in and out of identifications with these women as she waits out an afternoon and evening sipping wine, trying to recover from the shock of spotting a girl’s corpse in the park at the beginning of her day. Lydia’s portraits—fantasies of who the other women might be, weighted with memory and desire—blur the distinctions between perception and imagination, self and other, so that it is often unclear whether the subject of the portrait is the other woman or a projection of Lydia herself. The discrete identities which are necessary to a dialectical resurrection of the boundaries of a (male) self after a passage through (female) otherness are lost to an organizing principle of porosity. The only possible candidate for a central point of reference—Lydia, the agent of the look—is in an unanchored centre, without a proper identity.

We encounter Lydia as the anonymous pair of eyes through which the first scene of the frame narrative unfolds. Not long afterwards, this internal focalization through Lydia switches to external focalization on her.

The woman (her name is Lydia) stares out the window. Occasional clients might confuse her with a Portugese woman, slightly older. Who comes in every day, keys twirling, waiting for her lover. Elegant in a European way. Dressed in crisp white blouse, slim skirt, like Lydia. Who (at 39) is already a little out of fashion. Compared to the students parading down the sidewalk. (31)

As seen through the eyes of other patrons, Lydia is an object distinguishable through the same details of vesture—“crisp white blouse, slim skirt”—which permit her to be confused with another woman, “Portugese.” Lydia’s identity is a permanently unsettled

question. The text maintains a caginess around the issue of her ethnicity, in revealing/concealing descriptions such as the following: "her eye (traced with a curved line of black, particularly decisive at the outer corner like on a Greek frieze, indicating the strain of Mediterranean in her)"—where there is no assurance of a real ethnicity underneath the makeup that copies a Mediterranean look (132). The nature of her desire is also uncertain, as the narrative discourse acknowledges: "What she did for sex? True, it went missing from the facts" (167). There are indications that she has desired both men and women: confusingly, whilst still dressing in "purple clothes," she *was* an advocate of "loving women" and yet, in the present of the text, looking "like someone from a Simone de Beauvoir novel" ". . . only hat[ing] the stockings," she *intends* to become a lesbian (147, 158, 138, 32).

Lydia does not acquire depth and solidity as the result of excursions into otherness but is, rather, dispersed in her fantasized portraits of other women. A vertical seepage between layered focalizing perspectives is doubled by a porosity along the horizontal axis of the text, in uncanny reappearances of phrases from one portrait to the next. A move such as "walk[ing] over to the phone and putt[ing] a quarter in. Trying not to sound desperate" is repeated in multiple contexts; likewise, kicking back a chair is a gesture that is resignified at various points across the space of the text with the repetition/dislocation of Derridean *différance*. The revenge attack of which one woman dreams is carried out many portraits later—seemingly with the same weapon—by a different woman, not as an act of revenge but of self-defense. Lydia is not the sovereign source of these fantasized narrative fragments but rather a point of refraction in a field of signifying bodies/surfaces, a re-reader of "tropes" circulating in the bar—configurations of cultural, linguistic, sexual and gender signs which are already readings of other texts. There is Norma Jean, for instance, modeling a self on Marilyn Monroe, an icon that is already "a trope for something currently in the air"—or Z. the drag artist, a "woman in some ways impossible to grasp . . . Always appearing in ambivalent and parsimonious fragments" (181, 136). Lydia, too, is a text and not an originary consciousness, a relational subject-effect functioning as a focalizing perspective.

As point of entry to this analysis, I offer a symptomatic reading of a *Globe and Mail* review. My purpose is not to preface a 'correct' reading of *Main Brides* with a misreading, but rather to draw upon the productive encounter of an old horizon with some new terrain.³ The 'old' in this case is a perspective which looks for ontological certainties in narrative, a perspective which is bound to be frustrated by Scott's reworking of the narrative grammar in which truths and identities are produced. Scott's first move is to refuse to represent a transcendental subject that would serve as source of meaning. The lack of such a sovereign and determining perspective in *Main Brides* troubles the *Globe and Mail's* reviewer.

Scott's framing device—imagined lives—works against her in the long run. The reader puzzles over how much these are independent representations (was Nanette really in the park? Was there a flasher?), how much Lydia's slightly soused musings. In either case, the method undercuts the author's and narrator's commitment to the characters, and not even a bit of post-modernist, self-referential razzle-dazzle will rescue us. (Persky C13)

What this reader desires to be rescued from is his uncertainty about the status of the narrative discourse. Stan Persky must decide whether the portraits are inside or outside of the frame narrative (the sections of the text entitled "the sky is what I want"), whether meaning is produced by an unreliable character (Lydia) or guaranteed by a sober, independent source. I propose that we read the sighting of something important within a huge oversight. Persky's hesitation points to a question that is not in fact posed in his review: *Is this a narrative designed to satisfy the desire to know, a narrative which proceeds toward truth by a peeling away of surfaces?* In the epistemological regime of the hermeneutic narrative, identity is an ontological category; as I shall argue, however, in *Main Brides* identities are produced as unstable, discontinuous, contingent surface effects. The "pediment" of the text's subtitle (*against ochre pediment and aztec sky*) is an emblem for its concern with ornamental truths: a decoration crowning the top of a building. The pediment is a fake because, like all the identities in this text, it has no depth. In *Main Brides*, even the cat is a "little fake" (182).

Scott's text plays allusively with a narrative genre that is organized around the gradual elimination of hesitation, the estab-

ishment of the truth-value of witnesses' discourse and the desire to know absolutely 'what was really.' The detective story would perhaps be the logical route for a narrative instigated, as is *Main Brides*, by the sighting in a park of a "lumpy shadow, with [a] blanket thrown over it" (61). However, Lydia prefers the *dérive* of drunken "voyeurism" (Scott "Interview" 4) to the fact-checking of detective work and the narrative takes a course in which "the 'line' of reason breaks [and] a person can do anything. Take in any number of impressions" (16). The detective story that would solve the mystery of the murdered woman in the park thus remains an evoked absence, an explicitly evaded route. In the narratological lexicon proposed by Gerard Genette, the missing detective story in *Main Brides* constitutes a paralipsis—an omission of information that is "necessary in principle" within the focalizing frame; the fantasized portraits are the opposite type of infraction, *paralepses* which give "information that should be left aside" (195). These terms are reserved by Genette for "isolated infractions" of a dominant, "coherent" organization of focalization (195). In the case of *Main Brides*, however, "infraction" is the rule: a paralyptical frame narrative, circling around an omitted detective story, alternates with *paraleptical* narrative fragments swerving off in unpredictable, implausible directions.

The detective story (the route which is present in the text through its marked absence) works as a metonym for the kind of reading—and the conception of knowledge that goes along with it—that is troubled by *Main Brides*. If the question of truth commits the one who wants to know to a search for the ultimate source of meaning, that source will be unlocatable in a text that works to produce hesitation rather than certainty.⁴ A hesitating reader is represented within the text in the figure of Lydia, whose fantasizing activity allows her to enter the scenarios she produces. Lydia is rarely in control of the boundaries between inside and outside, self and other, that would secure for her the distanced position of a voyeur. When she slips into these narrative fragments the usual distinction between focalizing subject and focalized object is blurred and a fantasized subject that is/is not Lydia is produced. The effacement of limits between self and other is a characteristic theme of the pole of fantastic literature that is centred on the self, according to Tzvetan Todorov (116-20). The psychoanalytic understanding of fantasy goes further than this effacement of limits,

suggesting that the other is absent in the scene of fantasy: in the self-centred form of pleasure that is proper to fantasy, the object of desire is abandoned and the subject does not so much occupy a desiring position as get “caught up [her]self in the sequence of images” (Laplanche and Pontalis 26).

Narratologists from Algirdas Greimas to Teresa de Lauretis agree that the basic structure of narrative is the subject’s pursuit of an object. In the fantasizing production staged by *Main Brides*, however, no object is pursued; it will not be surprising, then, if the subject positions “engaged in the cogs of narrative” (de Lauretis 106) are somewhat different from the binary relations of subject/object, self/other. Something happens to the old question of the source of signification, too, when the focalizer of the narrative gets lost in her own fantasized scenes. Genette’s discussion of different modalities of focalization takes into account the possibility of variable internal focalization—first one character, then another acting as a filter and determining the “mood” of the discourse (189). The model of variable focalization poses a problem for us, however, because it takes a character’s identity as given and thus presumes the discreteness of a focalizing frame. Genette does not address the possibility of *layered* internal focalization, the ground on which formal aspects of the fantastic genre and the psychical configuration in fantasy seem to meet, as the differentiation of subject and object breaks down. In *Main Brides* Scott has not given us a chain of focalizers set side by side, but rather a complex layering of focalizing frames in which the focalizing subject’s perspective slides underneath that of the focalized-fantasized other. The text offers us a metaphor for this layering in Lydia’s theory of being-in-the-world, spun out as she takes in the surface of a young woman in the bar.

The woman sips her wine. Still admiring, from a corner of her eye, Nanette’s high cheekbones, her leather jacket with a slight rip in it. A sense of style, unique, yet guileless. A sign (she thinks) the girl has understood that to get beyond the difficulty of being self and pleasing others, you have to synthesize the inner and the outer. As in music. As in the notes of that clarinet spilling into the black night from the bar with faded musical notations for steps. Of course, in looking up all the time, the clouds begin to function as palimpsest. In the rhythm, almost, of modern “rap.” The small pink cloud backstepping over the grey one. Then forward again into blue. (19)

In this passage there is a drift from the question of how to be—"you have to synthesize the inner and the outer"—to issues of perception—"in looking up all the time, the clouds begin to function as palimpsest." With eyes trained "upward," Lydia thinks, one can catch sight of a sort of moving palimpsest which is like the way Nanette stylizes a self. The figure of a moving palimpsest seems to take from music in general the characteristic of a layered arrangement, and from rap music in particular the notion of a rhythmic sampling of different texts. Layering and sampling of identities, as I shall argue, replaces the concept of fixed identity in these portraits. For now, let us turn to a few examples of layered-sampled focalization to see how a palimpsest with "back"- and "forward"-stepping layers might work to subvert a search for a fixed point of reference.

In several portraits, a pretense of remembered focalization works to destabilize the ontological status of the focalized object. Instead of providing an archive of the other woman's existence or evoking the sense of a continuous identity, the recall of previous sightings and narrative fragments begs the question, "What lies behind?" (19). In the first portrait, Lydia's focalization on a young woman in the bar is intercut with memories of Nanette growing up in the neighbourhood. The connection between the young woman in the bar and the referent of memory is shaky: it is uncertain whether the observed "cheek in profile, looking out the bar window" is continuous with the fondly-remembered "pubescent cheek" of Nanette (17). Instead of confirming with a gesture of recognition the intimate knowledge of her which Lydia seems to possess, the woman in the bar "walk[s] by [Lydia's] table [and] sticks out her tongue" (30). Continuity between the woman in the bar and a remembered, earlier version is also doubtful in the portrait of Z.—another 'former acquaintance' who does not acknowledge Lydia. In this portrait, a procession of recollected fragments is occasionally stopped short by hesitant identification of the redhead in the bar: "[u]nless it isn't her" (152). The relation between corporeal surface and narrativized ('recollected') identity is as uncertain here as it was in the portrait of Nanette.

There are indications that these story-fragments have no point of reference prior to the moment of recall in the bar. In the portrait of Nanette, for instance, shuffled in with Lydia's remembered sightings of the girl are paraleptical 'samplings' of focalization by Nanette's friend, by her mother, by a neighbour—as

well as excursions into present-tense focalization by Nanette herself, equally impossible within the frame of Lydia's memory. The discourse of recollection not only undermines itself through implausibility; it also collapses occasionally to reveal the labour of fabrication: "[t]he woman (wanting wine) tries to think what happens next in the narrative" (27). Memory is thus revealed as a *trope* permitting fantasized narrative fragments to be passed off as recollected inner truths in these two portraits. The trope of retrieval inverts the relation of surface and depth that is at work in Lydia's narrativization of corporeal surfaces (whereby gestures, hair cuts and accessories function as the bases for the fabrication of inner truths). In a metaleptical substitution of effect for cause, of figure for ground, a hidden depth appears to figure itself on the surface of the body.⁵ But the text calls attention to its own game, puncturing the illusion of a depth recovered from memory with self-reflexive comments on the fictional process. Much later in the text, Lydia will cringe as she recalls the portrait of Nanette as one of those "times she let it unaesthetically hang out all over. Being too direct" (97). The auto-critique reminds us that Lydia can move in and out of this memory-trope; it also hints that there are other possible aesthetic techniques for producing identities.

In the text's staging of the fantasmatic production of identity as ground figuring itself on the body, we can read a performative critique of the metaphysics of deep inner cores. I am going to use Althusser's description of the empiricist conception of knowledge as an outline of the two acts in this production of identity. According to Althusser, underlying every object of knowledge is a conception of knowledge that in fact "makes knowledge what it is" (34). The empiricist model can be distinguished from other models by the process of discovery that it inscribes; this process *makes* knowledge by determining in advance the structure of the object, in this way leaving its mark on what is only later 'discovered.'⁶ (The mode of 'seeing' the object thus functions in much the same way as the Derridean signifying supplement which not only adds something to the signified but supplements a fundamental lack in it.)⁷ In the first act, the object is divided into an inner 'kernel' of meaning and an outer 'husk': in this division, ontological priority is given to whatever lies beneath the surface (37). In the second act, the surface layer is peeled away to reveal the real and essential inside. Empiricist knowledge is thus structured as dis-covery "taken

in its most literal sense: removing the covering, as the husk is removed from the nut, the peel from the fruit, the veil from the girl" (37). In the reading of the portraits of Nanette and Z. that I have given above, the 'veil' is performatively removed from the 'girl' through the trope of recollection. In the text's staging of this mode of knowledge-production, Lydia plunges through the surface, into 'memory,' and retrieves the (albeit fragmented) story of the other woman in the bar. A fantasized identity is thus set up as the *source* of surface signification. However, *Main Brides* also unveils this fiction of unveiling; Lydia points to it, in the case of Nanette, as an unsuccessful aesthetic technique; in the portrait of Z., the concept of an inner core is de-naturalized, for the redhead in the bar and the referent of nostalgia are in fact both outer husks and the chase after an inner core only turns up a discontinuous chain of signifiers. The recollected Z. is already a trace, a stylization, a shifting image like the pink flamingo in the window across the street, which seems to have shifted inexplicably every time Lydia glances over. If the process of knowledge-constitution involves possessing the object once the veil is lifted, this process is foiled when, like Z., the girl-object proves to be an infinitude of veils, "impossible to grasp" (136).

Is the process inscribed in the empiricist model not a kind of narrative, the narrative of a subject's encounter with an object? The question takes us back to the missing detective story in *Main Brides*, for the genre that this text evokes and evades is a narrativization of the empiricist conception of knowledge. The subject of empiricist knowledge *par excellence*, a detective comes up against the obstacle of false appearances in his search for truth; he eliminates that obstacle "by a whole series of sortings, sievings, scrapings and rubbings" (Althusser 36). If de Lauretis is right, we should add penetrations to that list, for the "obstacle" is always on the *other* side of the pole of sexual difference—and the process of discovery in which it is conquered by a hero is the paradigmatic structure of narrative. In her feminist-structuralist analysis of the narrative form, de Lauretis argues that the boundary which every hero must pass through along the path toward the accomplishment of his identity marks the place of the non-man, the monster, the female in the topography of narrative. For de Lauretis every narrative is essentially a quest in which a hero "encounters [obstacles] on the path of life, on his way to manhood, wisdom, and power; they must be slain

or defeated so that he can go forward to fulfill his destiny—and his story” (110). Most interestingly, the threat posed by the original she-monster obstacles (the Sphinx, Medusa) is a threat to man’s *vision*. Here, then, is the meeting point of the obstacle in narrative and the husk in the empiricist model of knowledge, both impediments to vision (vision in the literal sense, vision in the philosophical sense of knowledge, and vision as trope for phallic power). Just as the object of empirical knowledge is constituted by an operation which passes through its inessential part, (male) identity is constituted in narrative in the hero’s act of conquering an obstacle. Only after prevailing over the she-monster, penetrating the outer husk, does the hero (or the empirically-minded detective) arrive at his destination.

Taking the myth of Oedipus as her model, de Lauretis argues that destination is an answer to the question of identity. Narrative is structured as a quest(tion) prompted by the desire to know—in particular, the desire to ‘know’ woman (111). This theory of the narrative form concurs with the logico-semiotic theory proposed by Greimas, in which a “deep grammar” is anthropomorphized and converted, in the surface narrative grammar, into the movement of a subject toward an object. De Lauretis shares Greimas’ sense of a deep structure of oppositions underneath a narrative surface. Up to a point her theory of narrative does not seem to have any argument with the polar logic of the empiricist conception of knowledge; in fact, it deploys the same oppositions— depth/surface, inside/outside, active/passive, passage/boundary, subject/object.⁸ De Lauretis sees sexual difference as constitutive of this series of oppositions and argues that male identity is made and remade in the narrative quest in a passage through female otherness. The theory works, I would suggest, as long as one is dealing with a narrative predicated on the empiricist conception of knowledge. But what if a narrative does not take a linear, interrogative form and furthermore, does not rely on a subject-object relation? What would a narrative look like, for instance, if sexual identity were not discovered at the end of a quest(ion), but performed, continually reinvented?

I have already hinted at the alternate route taken by *Main Brides*—that of fantasy, in which a desubjectivized form of subject gets “caught up . . . in [a] sequence of images” (Laplanche and Pontalis 26). Instead of a linear pursuit, *Main Brides* takes the form

of a palimpsest: narrative movement consists of the shiftings, the continual readjustments, the rhythmic back- and forward- stepping of different layers of focalization. From the beginning, boundaries are porous and we are hard pressed to find a definite "mover of the narrative, [a] center and term of reference of consciousness and desire" (de Lauretis 112), for we know Lydia only in displaced forms, substitutes, fantasies that supplement this shallow character. It is difficult to use the word shallow in this context without negative connotations, or to wrench depth away from the epistemological framework in which it is a value-laden concept associated with a real inner core. I have already noted that de Lauretis' theory of narrative shares a set of conceptual oppositions with the empiricist model of knowledge. But the affinity between structuralist narratology and the empiricist model goes further, for the grounding premise of the structuralist approach to narrative is the existence of a deep determining structure below the surface of the text, a structure which is given the value of origin. In Genette's lexicon, story is the name of this deep core, the "signified or narrative content" presumed to exist prior to the "signifier, statement, discourse or narrative text itself" (27). Fabula is the term Mieke Bal borrows from the Russian formalists for the narrative bedrock she describes as a "logic of events" with a homological relation to "connected series of human actions" in the "extra-literary" world (12-13).⁹ In this hypothetical raw material of narrative, events occur in chronological order at an invariable pace, and relationships between elements are "necessary," not yet "symbolic, allusive, etc." (7). The fabula is understood to be prior to the processes of arrangement and ordering through which it is transformed, at the next level, into a story, and then finally with the addition of linguistic signs at the uppermost level, into a narrative text (7-8). The structuralist narratologist is something of a geologist, studying transformations over time by isolating spatially distinct levels. The object of knowledge is pre-determined by the structuralist concept of the sign: an outer 'husk' (the "signifier, statement, discourse" [Genette 27]) beneath which an inner 'kernel' (a signified or fabula) can be discovered. Here we find the figure of metalepsis at work again, for what is in fact an effect of the structuralist knowledge apparatus—the fabula—is put in the position of cause and foundation.

When the structuralist horizon is replaced by one in which signs are seen to refer not to a prediscursive narrative content but rather to other signs, the premise of a fabula can no longer serve as the foundation of narrative. *Main Brides* is a text which troubles the notions of causality that underpin the concept of a fabula, a grammar (like the Oedipal one that de Lauretis sets out) moving in linear fashion towards a surface manifestation in language. Scott's text favours the "crooked line" (Z.'s sign), the "zigzag" of Lydia's inebriated step into the night at the end, signifying surfaces bouncing off one another (151, 228). It is the narrative discourse itself—the final, uppermost layer, in the terms of structuralist narratology—that operates as the (non-original) source of signification. Shifting nomenclatures and modes of address, a sometimes ambiguous use of the pronoun she, the shuffling-together of different verbal tenses produce events at the level of discourse. Linkages are effected through processes of repetition and metonymic accretion in an "ontology of accidental attributes" (Butler 24). For instance, the red tunic of a Kingston officer-boyfriend is pastiched by a red suit-jacket in the same portrait and then turns up in a later portrait in the form of the red A-line coat that gives away the Ontarian in Montreal. Also floating across the text is the cowgirl attire that is initially the *gauche* look of an Albertan lover but which turns up again and again on other women in details such as a check shirt, and the seductive "horsewomen" images in the background of a performance piece. Relations of *différance*—replacing the logic of cause-and-effect, the syntax of the predicative sentence—construct a plural, improper narrative form: an "*Installation with Muddy Frames*" (the idea for a book of portraits which is stolen from Lydia by a Toronto artist) (181). Instead of taking the form of a linear quest, then, narrative opens into identity-confusing "concentric constellations"—to use the text's figure for female orgasm (110). Such *mise en abymes* for its own reshaping of narrative form proliferate throughout the text; that re-shaping is involved in a larger project of producing public images of different desiring positions, in the interest of the new kind of history that Lydia describes as "smooth and gently moving (her hand makes a wavy motion in the air)" (199). In an earlier published version of one portrait, Scott works out an aesthetic of the lesbian embrace which is suggestive of the "gently moving" form of that awaited history: "'The Kiss' of two women (she remembers think-

ing) would have to be represented differently, yes as wavy, slowly submerging everything (albeit based clearly in the uterus). Wavy body wavy cheeks wavy eyes wavy clouds" ("The Kiss" 131).

Once the fabula has become a theoretical impossibility, focalization—that supposedly secondary operation converting a deep grammar into a narrative text—becomes a much more prominent aspect of signification: a mode of seeing that in fact supplements what is seen. In the text's first demonstration of productive focalization, Lydia's gaze effects a re-signification of the privileged sign of heterosexual and patriarchal ideology, the bridal portrait. In the opening section of the frame narrative, Lydia's glance takes in the image of a bride in the window of a Portuguese photo store (9). When the image is repeated twenty-six pages later, the bride has been cut out of the context in which she was the "Main thing in the picture for a single minute of her life" and pasted up against the sky with the pediments crowning the tops of buildings (10). Here she is a *permanently* fascinating woman, the first rebellious "woman-on-the-roof" to be created by Lydia's confusion of perception and imagination. Lydia's focalization does not consist of 'showing' positive phenomena from a particular, restricted point of view (the structuralist understanding of focalization), for hers is a constituting activity. The cutting and pasting that re-signifies the bridal image in the above example, making the image of an unknown woman a fascinating surface, a kind of heraldic sign, gets expanded in Lydia's narrativized portraits of women in the bar. Spinning off corporeal surfaces in her fantasizing focalization, Lydia inserts them in narrative fragments that blur distinctions between real, imagined and remembered, and between self and other.

What must also be accounted for in this post-structuralist approach to focalization is the fact that the focalizer is not a sovereign subject: "Lydia (*the portrait*)" is an intertextual construct that produces other texts in her reading of surfaces (197; my emphasis). In the terms that *Main Brides* proposes, personhood—far from being the integral state of a self-determining subject—is an extreme form of receptivity and porosity: "[a]n omen of sensations reassur[es] Lydia she's reached the real state of detachment, when one finally becomes a person. Free enough to take in all exterior impressions" (132). The ambiguous activity/passivity of this 'taking in' brings us back to the fantasmatic configuration in which the subject, not quite in control of the staging, gets "caught up" in

a sequence. When it comes to “knowing who is responsible for the setting,” Laplanche and Pontalis’ psychoanalytic account of fantasy falters and the question of who directs the scene is handed over to philosophy (27). Perhaps, though, this is a question for poststructuralist feminist narratology (not necessarily ‘instead’ of philosophy); it is with this in mind that I return to de Lauretis, in order to see how her theory of focalization would have to be adjusted to accommodate the layered, fantasized mode of focalization in *Main Brides*.

Despite the structuralist tendency of her essay, “Desire in Narrative,” de Lauretis does not assign a secondary role to focalization. Her interest in the filmic text permits her to consider the productive capacity of “point of view,” the ways in which a camera can articulate a “vision *for* the spectator”—in classical Hollywood narrative cinema, even *producing* the spectator “as Oedipus, male subject, restoring to him. . . a vision capable of exciting desire for” the image of woman (148). The production of the female spectator, however, is more complicated: de Lauretis evolves a theory of the duplicitous and contradictory positioning of the female spectator through an analysis of the play of identification in a filmic text. The specular structure of Hitchcock’s *Rebecca* involves both the diegetic image of a woman (a heroine) and an intradiegetic image, the portrait of a ‘true’ woman with whom the heroine identifies and whom the heroine also desires in her capacity as protagonist. For the spectator, then, the heroine is a prismatic point of identification, “sustaining the oscillation between ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity’”—between what de Lauretis calls the passive “woman position” in the topography of narrative and the Oedipal, desiring position, the “figure of narrative movement” (152, 144). The heroine with whom the spectator identifies does not just want to be the woman in the portrait, she also *wants* the woman in the portrait; identification with this prismatic point, therefore, involves the spectator in a productive confusion. What this reading of *Rebecca*’s specular structure contributes to the question of focalization is a problematization of the female spectator’s (or reader’s) identification with the “single image” of a “true” woman in a text (de Lauretis 155). However, de Lauretis’ schema not only sticks to binary frames—the principle of contradiction still relies on such oppositions as active/passive, having/being, masculine/feminine—it also fails to imagine the possibility of a narrative *not* organized as

(Oedipal) quest, with a subject pursuing an object and securing an identity in the process. Let us ask a question we have already asked, then, this time with a more specific interest. How would focalization work in a narrative in which identities are not discovered as truths, but acted out?

The "concentric constellations" of *Main Brides* involve not one but *multiple* intradiegetic images of women. These women do not offer pictures of the essence of womanhood, for their 'inner cores' are constructed in a fantasizing reading of corporeal surfaces, that is, produced as contingent, accidental effects. The intradiegetic images of women, furthermore, are not static landscapes but narrativized portraits; the subject of the portrait is herself a figure of narrative movement. Our heroine's (Lydia's) relation to the subjects of these portraits consists neither of an identification which consolidates a sense of self (the "feminine," passive side of de Lauretis' contradictory positioning) nor of a desire for possession (the "masculine" side). The relation is modelled on the fantasmagoric configuration in which the external object is abandoned and desire is articulated in a form of *mise-en-scène* that is autonomous, auto-hypnotic, even auto-erotic. The fantasizing subject

forms no representation of the desired object but is [her]self represented as participating in the scene although . . . [she] cannot be assigned any fixed place in it As a result, the subject, although always present in the fantasy, may be so in a desubjectivized form, that is to say, in the very syntax of the sequence in question. (Laplanche and Pontalis 26)

Lydia's presence in some portraits is discernible *only* as a layer of focalization, showing itself in the occasional appearance of details from the context of the frame narrative. These portraits in which Lydia no longer makes an appearance as *remembering* subject are modelled more purely along the lines of fantasy. Her focalizing perspective slides underneath another one, which it in fact produces, and gets carried away.

I will illustrate *Main Brides'* play with layered focalization through a reading of the third portrait in the text, "Dis-May." The text moves into this portrait by way of a hypothetical discourse at the end of a section of frame narrative. With her gaze fixed on a stranger in the bar she calls "the mambo-dancing woman" (because of her evident taste for the music being played), Lydia imagines

this woman on vacation in Cuba. Soon “it’s too late to stop” and the hypothetical discourse is taken over by an affirmative one as the text cuts from frame narrative to fantasy (66-67). “*Mambo!*”—the first line of the portrait—is the metonymic sign through which the text leaps into Cuba; instead of a cause-and-effect sequence, it is an accidental detail—the *mambo* tape being played in the bar—that motivates this cut. The word *mambo* in fact punctuates the entire portrait, resonating in multiple directions: it is a warning that sounds with each resurfacing of the memory of rape that the woman is trying to forget (in a *mise en abyme* of Lydia’s willed amnesia regarding the murdered body in the park); *mambo* is also the dance movement that this woman tries to pick up as a ritual of forgetting. “*Mam-bo*. Because you have to lighten up”; “[t]o get over trauma you just need to keep moving. *One-two, one-two*” (77, 85). But it also functions as a mark of Lydia in the bar where the *mambo* tape is playing, sharply quilting together the focalizing perspectives of Lydia and “the *mambo*-dancing woman” every time it appears and indicating that Lydia is present, somewhere, everywhere, in the sequence of images.

The portrait ends with the “*mambo*-dancing woman’s” realization that she has lost her “little sister”-companion,¹⁰ possibly to a tidal wave, in a moment of distraction on the beach. “You step forward. Look behind. My god where is she?” (95). This moment occurs at the very end of the portrait, on the brink of a cut back to Lydia in the bar. If this were a shot-reverse shot sequence in a classical narrative film, the terrified “[l]ook behind” would be followed by the reverse shot of a tidal wave carrying away the “sister.” The shot-reverse shot sequence in film is designed to create the illusion of spatial coherence on screen, by matching a character’s gaze with that which is seen. But in Scott’s text, the reverse shot gives us Lydia in the bar, instead of the horrifying image that has produced the reaction, “My god where is she?” in the portrait. The first line of the section of frame narrative that follows the shocking realization at the end of the portrait reads “What if she screamed out loud? Lydia looks, embarrassed, around the bar,” as if Lydia *herself* were reacting to the sight of the “sister” being swept away (96). The reverse shot is of another seer, instead of a picture of what is seen; this textual play with the ‘eyeline match’ of classical narrative film coordinates the “*mambo*-dancing woman’s” gaze with another gaze that is supposedly out-

side of the space of the portrait. As the palimpsest shifts, the space outside is revealed to be inside, as a layer of focalization.

Lydia's "embarrassing" scream resembles the reaction of the naïve film spectator whose suturing with a character on screen is so seamless as to permit a full integration into the filmic fiction. In such suturings the spectator loses awareness of the immediate spectating situation and forgets her 'self.' But as Lydia scrambles to re-assemble a coherent self after her scream, the reader, too, must regain footing, for the second-person address of the "Dis-May" portrait has collapsed the reader with the fantasized "you" of the portrait. When the reaction to what is seen by "you" on the beach is taken on by *Lydia*, the reader is then implicated in a palimpsest of different focalizing perspectives, 'caught up'—through the "you" of the portrait, through Lydia—in a concentric framework of points of view. Lydia, the fantasized "mambo-dancing woman" and the reader are subjects of the same surprised look—a situation which raises the question that troubles the *Globe and Mail* reviewer and causes Laplanche and Pontalis to hand the theorization of fantasy over to philosophy: Who directs the fantasy-narrative?

Interpellated by the second-person address of the "Dis-May" portrait, the reader appears to be slotted, along with the other woman in the bar, into a sequence of actions controlled by Lydia's fantasizing focalization. And as in the only other portrait to be narrated in the second person, the "you" of "Dis-May" marks a lesbian desiring position. In sentences such as "You stare at the darker of the two, . . . imagining her preference," then, the reader gazes with/as a lesbian subject, apparently through the agency of Lydia (81). But Lydia's involuntary scream at the end of the portrait demonstrates that the narrative is not entirely within her control: she is herself swept away by the sequence of images. There is, then, no controlling position outside of this constellation of lesbian looks: the gaze that Lydia projects in fantasy seems to be able to surprise her. It can also turn back to face her, as the portrait entitled "Donkey Riding" demonstrates. This time, the subject of the portrait is an *intrasubjective* other, a projection of Lydia's 'anglo' and, it appears, sexually abused self, but in the end she refuses the self/other distinction that Lydia has tried to maintain. This 'other,' whose name is Norma Jean, beats Lydia at her own game: as it turns out, she knows Lydia better than Lydia knows her(self). "[G]lancing ironically at Lydia," this projected version of

an old, painful part of the self reads in the fragmented notes which have slipped out of Lydia's hand " 'The Perfect Incest Dream'" (196).

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A detective of sorts, the *Globe and Mail* reviewer of *Main Brides* reads for depth; like the structuralist narratologist, he looks for a recognizable logic of events beneath the surface of the narrative text. The search does not prove satisfying but again, Persky's (non)findings are instructive, for his marking of the text's 'superficiality' draws in an important, related issue.

True, most of Scott's linked-tales carry an undertone of dread, reverberations of the violence experienced especially by women in contemporary society. It's also unfortunately true that not much happens in these stories, either in terms of plot or by way of a developing depth of language or feeling. (C13)

"Unfortunately true" here are both the pervasive threats of violence "especially" against women in our society and the lack of depth in the narrative fragments of *Main Brides*. Persky makes a connection here that touches on the text's feminist politics of surfaces—"exterior impressions" (132)—a politics that brings together a re-thinking of identity in terms of performative production and a concern with women's "(material) capacity for existence" in a social context of incest, rape and—what is impossible to forget in a text set in Montreal in the nineties—femicide (199). The theme of violence does indeed make its way into each of the portraits, whether it takes the form of a stalking stranger, the clenched fist of a homophobe, a father's hand or "the damned lumpy shadow, with . . . blanket thrown over it" that Lydia is trying to forget (61). But Scott moves the theme of violence away from the conventional survivor story, the personal story of pain which is operated by an epistemic/ontological regime that constructs and reifies identities such as that of "Incest survivor. Victim"—as *Main Brides* seems to suggest, locking women into the "rigid, even homicidal" history from which they would escape (199, 135). *Main Brides* reserves the language of depth for the description of symptoms of a past trauma in Lydia: a "huge solid mass like a giant turd trying to come out of the top of her head" (187). But Lydia fights against the consolation for such inner discomfort that

would be found in a retreat into the "MOI" (162), the fearful, defensive stasis of a project of recovery that attaches one to an 'inner child.' How can women resist the pressure to fix as deep truth the "inner anguish under" that comes from memories of incest and rape and the everyday experience of misogynist violence (130)? Lydia's trick is to find a "state of somnambulism-almost: head in the clouds, feet on the ground. Which state permits enlargement of exterior perception without interior disturbance" (100; my emphasis). In interview, Scott has called this state a "parenthesis" between writing and renewed (self)creation (4).

Judith Butler suggests that feminists look for a source of agency not in I-narratives anchoring 'inner cores,' but in a material production of identities that uses the body as an aesthetic surface. In this alternate survival strategy, "in and through the complex cultural exchanges among bodies, . . . identity itself is every-shifting, . . . constructed, disintegrated, and recirculated in a dynamic field of cultural relations" (127). Butler's theory of the performative production of identity learns from a history of theorizing about performative utterances but also from the drag artist's playful engagement with culturally-regulated gender identities.¹¹ The drag artist, as she notes, is a specialist in the re-signification of gender: a "spectre of discontinuity and incoherence" that dislodges the norms of intelligibility through which sexual identity is constituted as a pre-discursive, biological sex 'expressed' in gender (and in the sexuality that flows 'naturally' from that gender) (17). The figure of Z. in *Main Brides* is just such an incoherent configuration of signs, a perfectly-bilingual "kind of emaciated drag queen," "les-bienne," "guru," "Pierrot-like" performance artist, "Fe male junkie. *Vogue* model. Pisces woman. Aging punk" (142, 149, 146, 140, 139). Always 'sampling' popular culture in her corporeal signification, Z. substitutes the "crooked line" for the continuous line of the expressive model of identity; Z.'s sign suspends the origin. But besides Z. in *Main Brides* there is also Adèle, the train-travelling subject of the second portrait whose officer-chasing is a form of self-styling that mimics an obsession more legitimate in a nineteenth-century woman. Always on the move "in the many layers of clothing of a woman who travels light," she refuses to be proper to her time and place (42). And of course Lydia is herself "one of those people you meet travelling. Who feels better in another language. Spending hours in her room dressing up 'to pass'" (53).

As stultifying as the gender identity enforced by an epistemic/ontological regime are all fixed notions of the self based on “withdrawal[s] into a kind of egotism. I.e., . . . strong identifying narrative[s]” (Scott 162), including those of victim, bride, ‘anglo,’ heterosexual. As a portrait of Lydia, the text is *nothing but* props, substitutes, projections, displacements—a constant troping. Lydia ‘is’ (constituted in) an activity of re-reading the corporeal surfaces of others. If, as Butler writes, gender is a “cultural/corporeal action that requires a new vocabulary,” I would suggest that it also requires a new reading practice, one which is represented in Lydia’s fantasizing focalization (12). We have seen how any conception of knowledge entails a process of discovery (a method of reading) that prepares the mold for the object of knowledge, shaping it in advance. If we are going to do away with the kind of metaphysics of inner cores that postulates a prediscursive sex or, through a similar metalepsis in narratology, a fabula, it seems that something like Lydia’s fascinated gaze—de-ontologizing in its narrativization of surfaces, swept away by the very sequences it imagines—might serve as a model of reading. And, as a way of “[l]ooking for allusions, that is, attractive surface-images providing information on how to make an art out of [life],” a source of agency (55).

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NOTES

¹ Focalization is the term that Gerard Genette offers as remedy for the (for him) too specifically visual connotations of the Anglo-American term, point of view. While Genette’s expanded notion of focalization will be used in my discussion of *Main Brides*, I want to preserve the cinematic-visual connotations of point of view, along with the history of vision as a philosophical trope for truth-seeing.

² Unless otherwise indicated, all Scott citations will be from this text.

³ For a model of symptomatic reading which discovers an “old horizon” unwittingly producing a new question and changing terrain without knowing it, see Louis Althusser, especially 24-26.

⁴ For an argument that such hesitation between real and imaginary—especially when it is represented as a character's uncertainty—is the defining characteristic of fantastic literature, see Tzvetan Todorov.

⁵ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak uses the rhetorical term *metalepsis* to name the operation by which a "subject-effect" is posited as sovereign cause in "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography," 204-5.

⁶ According to Althusser, the empiricist conception of knowledge is the secular version of the religious 'vision' of essence expressed in existence. "The empiricist conception may be thought of as a variant of the conception of vision, with the mere difference that *transparency* is not given from the beginning, but is separated from itself precisely by the veil" (37). The notion of the proximity of the expressive and empiricist models is important in my reading of *Main Brides*. Although I read the structure of the detective story in terms of the empiricist model, I am in fact moving back and forth between the two models in my argument about the text's staging of the *metalepsis* through which surfaces come to 'express' inner essences.

⁷ See Derrida's "Structure, Sign and Play," especially 289-90.

⁸ Up to a point, because towards the end of "Desire in Narrative," when de Lauretis considers the position of the female film spectator, things loosen up and there is at least room for theorizing the productivity of a contradictory positioning.

⁹ The "logic of events" is given a different twist by Barthes' "proairetic code," which relates not to the actual order of events in the world but to the prescribed sequence of actions that a reader brings to the text from other texts, that is, the rule of order for the unfolding of actions culled from cultural models (82-83).

¹⁰ This hyphenated nomination is necessitated by the ambiguity of the relationship between the two women in the "Dis-May" portrait—"you" and "your sister. Not your real sister. But that's another story" (71). The narrative discourse will only say that the two are *passing* as sisters on their Cuban vacation.

¹¹ See J. L. Austin's analysis of the rigidly conventionalized type of utterance that 'does,' rather than describes, an act. Austin uses the wedding vow as an example of such an utterance which must obey precise conventions and be performed under rigorously prescribed conditions in order to have the peculiar force of a "speech act."

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