

INSITE

Place d'Armes

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SCOTT SYMONS' *Place d'Armes* is an experimental novel whose typographical variety, maps and diary format reflect a McLuhanesque aesthetic sense of the specialized use of the word in its physical context. Yet beneath the word game the novel demonstrates a unity of purpose expressed in structural pattern and multi-layered metaphor. A probe of the pattern and metaphors reveals that Symons has set out to clarify his conception of Canada and the Canadian.

Hugh Anderson, the central character in the novel, seeks identity on several levels at once: Canadian identity, personal identity and sexual identity. The structural scheme of the novel combines these aspects into a single tour that Anderson begins in Toronto and completes at the centre of Place d'Armes. Anderson's particular perception of buildings, places and objects provides rich metaphors for the search and there is a clear relationship between the objects and the structure of the narrative.

Anderson's movement spirals into the maze of old Montreal and his private self in an ascending fashion as he comes closer to a breakthrough combining understanding and feeling that will clarify his personality and end his search for Canada. At the same time he discovers that he must free himself from the limits of monogamy and accept his "homosapient" self. The complete opening up of self involves body as well as mind. This leads to the passages of near blasphemy when Hugh stresses the relationship between Body and Blood in the mass, homosexual surrender and the surrender of the mind needed to understand the Canadian nation. He describes his homosexual surrender to André on Day Twenty in terms of a tour of La Place and surrounding area.

Symons' solution to the problem of keeping the quest active is to set up a number of different points of view. These are arranged so that they fit inside one an-

other like zones in a maze. Like a maze they hold false trails as the personalities of Hugh Anderson and Hugh's creation Andrew Harrison become confused and finally merge.

The external point of view is the omniscient narrative printed in six point type. Within this frame (which is not symmetrical but occurs on various occasions in the novel) the next level is Hugh Anderson's Combat Journal that begins on Day Two and is printed in twelve point type. The Journal book was bought by Anderson six years before the trip described in *Place d'Armes* and had been left empty while he lived in Toronto. The third level of narrative is provided by Anderson's notebooks and is printed in twelve point italic type. The notebook refers to Andrew Harrison in the third person ("I'll call him Andrew — Andrew what? Just Andrew for now."¹) as Hugh speculates on the novel he will write based upon the notebooks. The twelve point type also serves as Andrew's notebooks when it occurs in passages surrounded by the twelve point bold-face type of the novel which Hugh is writing about Andrew. This situation occurs on Days Thirteen and Fourteen but Symons blends the two notebooks into one as he moves to blur the separate points of view in the closing days of the quest. Andrew begins to write the diary on Day Twenty-One but towards the end of the entry it has become Hugh's musing on the problem of the novelette he is writing about Andrew.

(and as I type this diary now I realize that my novelette is in fact some deeper assault on reality than I cared to admit.) (pp. 265-66.)

The existence of these various levels of narrative adds a good deal of variety to the potentially static situation of contemplating objects so that they reveal their meaning. (Symons has since done a more extensive formal study of the meaning of *objets d'art* in his fine book on Canadiana, *Heritage*.)

Anderson's autobiography reveals his sensitivity to the Canadian past as it is evinced in art:

... author of *Essays in Canadian Taste: a Study in the Relationship of the Arts and Politics from 1812 to 1914*. (p. 18.)

The emphasis on places, *objets d'art* and buildings is natural in a man with a highly developed aesthetic sense and makes a most suitable basis for the perceptions that Anderson himself tells his friend Luc (poet, cineaste, Separatist ... French Canadian!) are far more than cold criticism.

"It is a matter of eye eating site — I call it eyesite: it is carnivorous. Omnivorous. Sometimes you choke. You're eaten by what you eat."

.....

"You eat the site till it is inside you, then you are inside it, and your relationship

is no longer one of juxtaposition . . . but an unending series of internalities.”
(p. 68.)

Each Building was a style and each Style was an Era: and all of them was a Person — a Real Presence. (p. 120.)

Anderson's aesthetic sense helps to reveal his struggles for identity. Three of the locations which the novel treats: the antique shop Anderson calls the Flesh Market, the old Bank of Montreal and the Church of Notre Dame, will serve as illustrations of his perceptions.

Anderson's first experience in the Flesh Market occurs on Day Four of his twenty-two day search for himself and his country. As he watches the customers come and go he sits in a rocking chair that yields the security he needs when challenged by the presence of English Canadians.

I hubnub the rocker turnings — quick Canadian chaplet — protection against this infidel. (p. 57.)

From this vantage point he sees several groups of English Canadian shoppers come and go. He realizes that they are stiff and lifeless and discovers, as one of the men touches a diamond point armoire, that they are drawing sustenance from the French furniture. This leads Hugh to think of the mass and label the shop the Flesh Market because of the B&B, body and blood, that it provides to the English. The act of communion holds in combination the elements of the French-English dichotomy, the idea of French Canadian sacrifice and the impotence which contact with things Canadien can cure. The description is overtly sexual:

Till now I see his hand run amok, running down the front of a diamondface, fondling it in a mutual moan from both of them as they are abruptly in touch with armoire us and all the shop ignites about them conjugal. (p. 61.)

The antique shop is a near-perfect metaphor for the Canadian predicament, the English coming to take the beauty and vitality of the French in an act which is close to the buying of flesh. In the shop as much as in the rest of the novel Anderson tries to be outside the English tradition but cannot become wholly a member of the French culture. He is fiercely critical of the English Cubes (the three dimensional versions of the American square) who come into the shop. He describes the gentleman from Toronto in terms of the landmarks of the province.

I know it because the gentleman in the blue waistcoat is the Toronto Parliament Buildings, the City Hall (old and new!), the armouries . . . is a mutation of Premier Robarts and of the Ontario Flag (Red Ensign Canadian) — (p. 63.)

Yet Hugh has a grudging respect for the High Tory Canadian, his own class:

No — these Cubes may be constipated: but they are redeemable. They may simply be Squares full of shit . . . but it is a Holy Shit then, and thus the Canadian remains a Square-plus-Something which is better than the square-root-of-fuck-all. (p. 65.)

All the elements of Anderson's search are present in the Flesh Market. There are sexual overtones to the passage about the armoire and in Hugh's brief contact with the shop girl. There is a personal and religious context in the mention of the mass and the taking of sustenance as the English take from French Canada, using their financial power to commit cultural rape. Hugh feels that he does not fully belong on either side of the French-English dichotomy for his background and his sympathies lie on opposite sides in the conflict.

THE Old Bank of Montreal Building and the Church of Notre Dame face each other across Place d'Armes. Hugh sees the Bank as the ponderous mother of Canada, a description which is confirmed pictorially by the breast-like dome of the building. He always sees relationships between forms and their meaning and he trusts his perceptions implicitly.

Always trust the object . . . objects *never* lie — never. And objects always personify the people they master. (p. 151.)

When he catalogues the buildings in the area he reveals the sequence of thought which leads to his opinion of the Bank.

Bank of Montreal — Merchantman's Neo-Classic — British North America — Responsible Governor. (p. 121.)

He sees the history of the collaboration between the conservative elements of Quebec and English capital in the stolid building which rules one side of the Place at the heart of Canada.

They [Montreal 'habitants'] were the rag-tag ends of the old peasant-Church axis that had sustained Duplessis' dictatorial power for nearly two decades. Behind them the Bank of Montreal rose significantly. The Bank had helped Duplessis too. (p. 125.)

Although he dislikes the English Canadian Businessman he sees in the Bank at the carol-singing, Anderson recognizes the Bank as one facet of the Canadian whole in a remarkable passage which blends sexual experience with his discovery of Canada.

while Mommy Bank remains implacably complicit . . .
 I've been had I've been had I start
 to hue and
 cry, but stop in full halleluia — the Church,
 the Church . . . I've just
 penetrated my Church and it is
 La Place d'Armes! (p. 205.)

On the final day of the *Combat Journal* Anderson sees in the stonework detail on the Bank the perfect emblem for English Canada.

And so aptly, atop the crest of Montreal itself . . . the beaver — the Complete Canadian Cube . . . the symbol of the state — substantial, diligent, sure, sobre, comestible (but only by the tail) . . . and, of course, it could be fleeced — the Canadian Golden Fleece. (p. 277.)

In the final action of the novel Hugh bursts out of Notre Dame and runs to the centre of the square. At this moment he envisions even the beaver as active, participating in the Canadian experience. This is in perfect accord with the premise that objects never lie, for the Mommy Bank is in Place d'Armes just as the English fact is in Canada. Hugh does not deny this at any point even if he feels that the bank represents the "Cubes" of English Canada.

The most important building in *Place d'Armes* is the Church of Notre Dame. For Anderson it represents the French presence in Quebec both in terms of history and the present time. He relates the Church to Bartlett's 1835 print of the interior, pointing out that the print reduced the interior by leaving out its baroque characteristic of multiple foci.

Bartlett had failed to insite the Church . . . While in Bartlett's church I feel cameo constraint. (p. 111.)

That it [Notre Dame] was simply a cubicle, thoroughly overdecorated. A distanced cubicle. One that conveniently took place out of him [Hugh]. (p. 125.)

Notre Dame comes to life for Hugh when his sensitivity is open and the church then becomes the central building in the process of understanding Place d'Armes in his various contexts. On the nineteenth day of his search Hugh is first brought into the close communion with the building, an experience which he describes in quasi-sexual fashion.

. . . And then he realized it was no longer in objective relationship with it [relation of object-Church with Object-intent,] . . . it had penetrated him, and at the same time, it projected from him, infinitely. (p. 210.)

Towards the close of the novel the experience of Notre Dame becomes an even greater revelation to Anderson.

This Church, this nave, this *is* the Body of the Habitant . . . of the Habitant-Seigneur-Cardinal-Canadien . . . Baroque Habitant . . . Ecce Homo . . . they couldn't finally hide that, even under the Cubicularity. This Church is the Canadien . . . my missing Man. My other Présence . . . Moi-même. (p. 266.)

For Anderson Notre Dame is the source of sustenance, symbolized by the Body and Blood of the mass. It is the personification of the French tradition in Canada. It expresses the openness Hugh finds once he gets past the "cubicle" aspect which Bartlett captured.

. . . the essential experience of the nave insofar as it is cubicular at all, is one of vertical upthrust. But even more important, the experience I feel more and more with it is one of warm liberation. (p. 111.)

Anderson's discovery in the novel closely resembles a religious surrender in which body and soul must be given completely in order to be regained anew. Thus when he stands in the centre of the Place in the final passage of the novel he is giving himself as the Host and describes himself as bleeding. It is only through this giving that he is made whole by being existentially open to all of the objects and people who surround him.

The achievement of *Place d'Armes* is its ability to hold the attention of the reader despite its aggressively blatant vulgar language, its repetitiousness and its singularly unlikeable principal character. Its success lies in the careful structural pattern which is created by the metaphors of place, buildings and other objects. I have shown how these metaphors are explained in unusual detail in the novel. Symons does not leave our observations to chance and a good deal of the strength of the work comes from the way that objects are shown in depth to reveal the historical dilemma of Canada and of Hugh Anderson's personal identity. Each station of Anderson's private Calvary is marked on the map provided at the front of the book. He moves in ever decreasing circles until he is in the centre of the Place at the final moment of understanding. His route is as much a maze as a set of decreasing circles because he often advances only to find himself rebuffed by a temporarily unattainable part of his goal. When this happens he can actually walk through the Place or into the buildings on his route without any effective emotional contact. He finds himself baulked as one would be in a maze when a false trail ran out.

The veil has come down in me, over my eyes. I am shut off — cannot see, nor hear, nor touch. Look again at the Place — no, it's just a postcard there now, . . . (p. 33.)

Symons is quite deliberate in making all of the narrators who seek to walk into Place d'Armes sound similar so that the book ultimately speaks with a single voice. Because Hugh Anderson eventually absorbs Andrew Harrison it is legiti-

mate to speculate that Scott Symons ("A Personal Narrative by Scott Symons" [title page]) absorbs both Hugh and Andrew, particularly in light of the strong sense of intimacy and personal passion conveyed by the difficulty of the search and the close correspondence between Symons' biography and those of his characters. Symons comes from an Ontario High Tory family, spent time in Montreal as a journalist sympathetic to French aspirations and is an expert on Canadian furniture, art and architecture. The novel has an inward spiralling pattern in terms of physical locations but it moves in the opposite direction in terms of the attention paid to the figures in it. Thus Andrew Harrison is the least detailed study while we know considerably more about Hugh Anderson and by implication all the points of view reflect outwards to Symons standing behind the omniscient narrator.

Place d'Armes is an intricately unified novel despite the presence of two central "characters" in Hugh Anderson and Andrew Harrison and by implication the presence of Symons behind the omniscient narrator. It is clear that all three are concerned with the same dilemmas and that they conduct the same search through old Montreal. Unity is promoted by the blending of metaphors so that the Body and Blood of the Antique Shop become the Body and Blood of the mass at Notre Dame and are intertwined with the sexual surrender of Hugh and Andrew. The novel moves towards a vanishing point in the centre of *Place d'Armes* and it is at that point where the details of the searches for sexual, personal and political identity coalesce into a geographical, personal and political whole for Andrew, Hugh and, by implication, Scott Symons. The highly poetic and metaphoric structure of the novel makes it one of the most complex investigations of Canadian identity yet undertaken by a novelist. Symons knows that identity is a quality of the whole man: sexual, aesthetic, intellectual and emotional. He has put the national search into all of these perceptive modes in a single novel.

NOTES

- ¹ Scott Symons, *Place d'Armes*, Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1967, p. 71. All succeeding quotations are from this volume.