The Measure of Paris
by Stephen Scobie

Reviewed by Carmelo Militano

Stephen Scobie is a poet, critic, and teacher. He taught at the Universities of Alberta and Victoria before recently retiring. His publications include critical works on Leonard Cohen, Bob Dylan, bpNichol, and Sheila Watson. He has also published some fifteen books of poetry, in 1980 winning the Governor General’s Award for Poetry for McAlmon’s Chinese Opera, a series of dramatic monologues using the voice of the Robert McAlmon, an American writer living in Paris during what is now considered its golden years, the 1920s.

Scobie’s focus on McAlmon suggests a long-time interest in Paris and its writers. In fact, it is reasonable to say that Scobie’s interest has turned to love and part of the intent of The Measure of Paris is to express this love by examining the many ways in which Paris can be “measured”: that is, experienced, understood, viewed, appreciated, and fondly collected in memory and art – in short, the way a lover recalls his mistress. Scobie’s approach is multidimensional and he appreciates that ultimately Paris is unattainable. To paraphrase the British writer John Berger, Paris is an older woman loved by a young man, and in this case it is Scobie who is the young man.

It is also a book about seeing (after all, are not one’s feelings about the beloved based on how she appears?) the city through the eyes of past and contemporary writers as well as through the very personal eye/I of Scobie near the end of the book.

The book thus is layered, or works like a mosaic with a series of sharp, well-defined but varied tiles, allowing for a complete picture only when the viewer pulls back.

One layer is a meditation on historical Paris, “Paris perdue,” Paris lost. There are bookshelves of writing based on the nostalgic feeling of what Paris was in contrast to what it has become, depending on the writing. There is, for example, the Paris before Haussmann, with its warren-like narrow streets, shabby hotels, and worn-out markets on the Left Bank, and Paris after Haussmann, with its wide boulevards and elegant cafés such as Maxim’s on Rue Royale on the Right Bank. Haussman indeed is credited with transforming the Parisian skyline with its grey slate rooftops and wrought-iron balconies and creamy white apartment blocks.

There is the example of Paris with the Eiffel Tower, now an international icon of Paris, and Paris without the Eiffel Tower. Scobie reminds us that in the late 19th century many members of the intellectual and artistic community in Paris wanted the tower torn down.

Writers such as McAlmon or the Canadian John Glassco, the author of the duplicitous Memoirs of Montparnasse, show us, according to Scobie, how they too are capable of using the “Paris perdue” trope to enhance their experience and by extension their writing. Glassco’s memoir was written many years after his Paris years and is a sly poke at the inflated Paris lost evoked by the likes of Hemingway in A Moveable Feast and Callaghan’s That Summer in Paris.

But the interesting question is why the “Paris perdue” trope exists at all. Why is Paris especially prone to this kind of reflection? A similar question can be asked of Scobie’s discussion on street walking and naming.
Writers, whether French or foreign, when writing about Paris, almost inevitably go to great lengths describing their walks about the city, naming the streets and cafés. Why is Paris, unlike so many other cities (except perhaps London or New York) so lovingly evoked this way to the point that it is a convention of writing about the city? The city almost becomes a character itself in the texts and films. The result of this mythologizing is that many people, literary or not, have no trouble connecting the Champs Élysées with Paris or the brasserie La Coupole with the Paris of the ’20s or the Café Deux Magots with the Paris of the ’40s. But Scobie, alas, suggests only a partial answer in his discussion of the flâneur.

The concept of the flâneur is not easy to translate into English. It used to suggest an idler or lounger or layabout, but Scobie shows us that it was Baudelaire who transformed the notion of a flâneur into a gentleman walker who is both apart from and part of the crowds and cityscape. In other words, someone who is both an active and passive observer and in this role is similar to the writer or artist.

Scobie focuses on three Canadian flâneur-like writers: Sheila Watson, Mavis Gallant, and Gail Scott. Each in her way exploits street names and place to enhance her writing by connecting her stories to the rich associations inherent in street names. In the latter part of the book Scobie also discusses poet and food writer Gerry Shikatani’s work Aqueduct.

The discussion about writers is an analysis of each one’s Parisian writing. The writing in these chapters resembles more an academic discourse than a broad historical and cultural analysis. Scobie looks at each writer’s techniques of evoking and exploring Paris and the circumstances of their writing.

Near the end the book takes another turn, becoming a personal reflection on the meaning of Paris to Scobie himself and the pleasures shared and lost after the death of his wife.

The book is very much like a flâneur’s lengthy stroll through the streets of Paris and as we follow along it becomes clear that Scobie has read a great deal about Paris from Baudelaire to Walter Benjamin and Richard Cobbs, to name a few. The structure of the book, historical, cultural and literary, and personal, in other words, offers a multidimensional viewing of Paris.

Scobie is good at connecting the dots and seeing ironic associations to the point that you sometimes sense his desire to see the rich complexity of Paris as overwrought and unnecessary. I am thinking, for example, of his discussion on Gertrude Stein.

Some notable writers on Paris, such as Henry Miller (Tropic of Cancer), George Orwell (Down and Out in London and Paris), and Harold Stearns (Confessions of a Harvard Man: Paris and New York in the 1920s & 30s) are absent from Scobie’s discussion. Miller in particular seems to fit the bill of the classic flâneur and rich in detail about the underbelly of Paris. On the other hand, a day’s walk in Paris must limit its scope.

The ancient Greeks thought of sacred Delphi as the “omphalos,” the navel of the ancient world, but Scobie’s book clearly demonstrates that for many writers Paris was/is the cultural belly button of the modern world. 🍃

Carmelo Militano is a Winnipeg writer and poet. His latest work is the poetry chapbook Weather Reports (Olive Press, 2011).

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