

## Montreal: Its Role in the Beginnings of Modernism in Canada

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When considering the dynamics and factors that gave birth to modernist writing across Europe and North America, it seems that in each case, a major city—most often a capital—appears to have drawn writers, artists, and musicians who, when mixed together, appear to have fermented a unique and strange dynamic that energized and fuelled creative expression. In France, it was Paris; in Germany, Berlin; in England, it was London; in the States, of course, New York. And here, in Canada, it was Montreal.

Why Montreal? Louis Dudek—himself a major modernist poet, has pondered this question, given that

although it is the largest city in Canada, Montreal is not a central metropolis in relation to this country in the way that Paris or London are cultural capitals of their countries. The thin ribbon of Canadian life stretching along the border of the U.S. from Pacific to Atlantic could hardly have a physical centre of any kind. The bow of the ribbon is really in Southern Ontario, and Toronto is the economic knot that keeps it neatly tied. Montreal, moreover, is predominantly French in population, so that poetry in English would hardly be expected to find its natural home here. The English-reading audience for poetry in this city is veritably non-existent, and the newspapers habitually ignore poetry in their review pages. (8)

Yet, despite these facts, almost every major modernist Canadian poet either grew up in, lived in, or spent a considerable amount of time there during his/her formative writing period. From Frank Scott and A.J.M. Smith, to A.M. Klein, P.K. Page, Irving Layton, Louis Dudek, Raymond Souster, Leonard Cohen, Margaret Atwood, Alden Nowlan... the list goes on. But we still need to answer the question—why Montreal?

As I began to look more deeply into the issue I came to realize that the

reasons Montreal was the vortex of Canadian modernist poetry were many and multifaceted. Apart from the enormous political, economic, and social demographic shifts that took place in the city during the early part of the century, and the radical shifts in ideology that encompassed all aspects and all levels of Quebec society, the city was also a well-established port, located on a major shipping route, and therefore a highly industrialized and commercial centre. Because it was a port, Montreal welcomed huge numbers of immigrants after the war, who settled where they arrived. As a result, the city became a kaleidoscope of diverse communities and ghettos—the French, the English, the Jews, the Catholics, the Protestants, the Irish, the Greeks, the wealthy, the poor. Each group had its own part of Montreal with streets serving as boundary markers that separated it from the next.

This, in turn, contributed to the city's unique air of cosmopolitanism, with all the various older European influences being brought to bear on its architecture, streets, markets, and courtyards; its magnificent churches that tower above everything, and its people's seemingly innate sense of taste and flair.

Another major factor in the rise of modernist poetry in Montreal was *The McGill Fortnightly Review* (McGill University's newspaper), and *The Canadian Mercury*—two publications that in the 1940s, through the work of Frank Scott and Arthur Smith, established a new literary outlet for poets and writers who were experimenting with new techniques and forms in their writing, and who were unable to find publishers willing to take a chance on them.

In addition to all these things, William Weintraub argues that what set Montreal apart from the rest of the country was that it was a “wide-open town, uniquely sinful in strait-laced Canada” (61) especially with respect to gambling and prostitution. Because of wide-spread and deep-rooted corruption in the Montreal police force and municipal offices, a unique relationship developed between them and the city's criminals during the thirties and early forties. Weintraub states that “Raids on Montreal's many illegal gambling houses carried out by the well-bribed police, were an elaborate charade, designed to persuade the public that something was being done to combat rampant vice in the city” (59). Apparently, when police were ordered to shut down a residence in which gambling was going on, they would affix a padlock to a pre-arranged fake door or

cupboard door leaving the front door untouched and seizing an unplugged phone as gambling equipment. During a time in which

virtually all forms of gambling were forbidden [in Canada] where there were no legal casinos or lotteries, Montreal was an oasis in the desert for men and women who wanted to try their luck. The map of the city was studded with establishments that offered horse betting. Sports betting. Roulette, blackjack, chemin de fer, baccarat, craps and, of course, barbotte, the hugely popular dice game unique to Montreal. (Weintraub 61)

Although these activities were illegal, they went on unhindered in Montreal. Consequently, in the mid-1940s, it was estimated that there were, perhaps, nearly two hundred or more major gambling establishments operating in and around the city. Furthermore, each of these contributed, through payoffs and “fines,” to a substantial income for the city’s treasury. In recompense, targets of raids were always warned before the police arrived, and professional straw men and women, who took legal responsibility for their bosses’ criminal activities time and time again, were treated as first-offenders by the police who arrested them. Rather than going to prison, as anyone who broke the law more than twice was supposed to, these men returned to their place of business the next day.

In addition to gambling, Montreal was also well-known for the number and variety of brothels it supported. “Again, in the city there was a long tradition of amiable relations between prostitutes and the police” (Weintraub 63). In fact, a few houses down from No 4 Police Station, stood 312 Ontario, the infamous three-storey brothel in which seventy-five to eighty prostitutes worked around the clock. While more chic establishments existed uptown, the red-light district was made up of bordellos on DeBullion Street (made famous by Irving Layton’s poem), south of Dorchester, and north toward St. Catherine, as well as on all the neighbouring streets in-between.

Many members of the police force were frequently customers at the residence they would pretend to raid; and they provided protection and support to the prostitutes who found themselves up against more aggressive or intoxicated customers. Furthermore, brothel owners, or Madames, who were well-known,

often wealthy, flamboyant figures in the city, were treated with warmth and respect by lawyers, clerks, and judges at the courthouse, as they paid the fines for their girls to be released.

In addition to these more sordid details, prohibition was in place in the United States during the 1920s and 1930s so leading gangsters, such as Al Capone, frequented Montreal. Even though it was illegal to drink alcoholic beverages in public places in Canada, Montreal boasted at least fifteen major nightclubs and twenty-five or more smaller lounges, all of which served liquor along with flamboyant floor shows. Most of these establishments were located on or near Montreal's main strip, St. Catherine Street, and they included the Venetian Gardens, the Pagoda, the Jardin de Danse, the Palais de Danse, the Brass Rail on Drummond Street, and the Frolics on St. Lawrence Main. During the 1940s new owners replaced the old names with the Latin Quarter, the Esquire, the Maroon Club, the Samovar, the Copacabana, the Top Hat, the Tic Toc, and the Normandie Roof. Big Band and Dixieland Jazz came first to Montreal where it was in full swing by the 1940s, and could be danced to at the Palais d'Or, the Verdun Pavilion, the Black Sheep Room at Ruby Foo's, the Bellevue Casino, and Dagwood's. It was at the Chez Maurice Danceland, however, above Dinty Moore's restaurant on St. Catherine Street, that the great big bands played, including Glenn Miller, Tommy Dorsey, Woody Herman, Cab Calloway and Stan Kenton. In Westmount, at Victoria Hall, Johnny Holmes and his orchestra played on Saturday nights, attracting large crowds and beginning the careers of such legendary musicians as trumpeter Maynard Ferguson, and pianist and trumpeter Oscar Peterson, who grew up in St. Henri, and attended Montreal High School. The most famous of all the clubs, however, was the El Morocco, which was where Lili St. Cyr most often performed.

Lili St. Cyr was not just a stripper; she was an actress and an artiste. When she arrived in Montreal in 1944 for her first performance, she immediately set about doing things differently. While other girls offered the usual bump and grind routines which, in themselves, were popular enough in Montreal at the time, Lili seduced her audiences. Her performances involved languorous music, complex stories, and exotic costumes and props. And Lili herself was very beautiful. For seven years, until Las Vegas began to beckon as the new entertainment centre, Lili

added an extra spice to Montreal, drawing businessmen and curious fans from across Canada to see her, and, in return, Montreal offered Lili a special haven.

Lili was one famous name among many others at the bars she loved. The frequenters after her last show were such individuals as hockey player Boom Boom Geoffrion, boxer Rocky Marciano, Eddie Quinn, the famous promoter, as well as wrestler Yvon Robert. Other big-name entertainers included Milton Berle and Dorothy Lamour; Harry Ship, who owned the Chez Paree and brought Frank Sinatra to Montreal. Red Skelton appeared at the Tic Toc, Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis performed at the Esquire, and Sammy Davis Jr. worked at the Chez Paree. In addition, Edith Piaf came to Montreal to sing at the Sans Souci, and Charles Aznavour played the Faisan Dore.

Racism was rampant in up-town Montreal, where only white performers were allowed to entertain, but down on St. Antoine Street and Mountain Street, black clubs, like Rockhead's Paradise and the Café St. Michel, which imported black musicians and entertainers from Harlem, were gaining popularity among white and black audiences alike. And it was at these clubs that a new kind of jazz could be heard. At Café St. Michel, Louis Metcalf, who had played trumpet with Duke Ellington's orchestra, brought bebop to Montreal.

Added to all these enticements was an unending array of restaurants that could please every palate—from specialties made by French-trained chef, Francois Bouyeux, which catered to the tastes of wealthy epicureans, to corned beef and cabbage served at Dinty Moore's. Slitkin's and Slotkin's offered late-night dining and drinking, as did Ben's Delicatessen, which was open twenty-three hours a day. On the Decarie strip, numerous restaurants opened that offered all kinds of different types and prices of foods. The most famous of these was probably Ruby Foo's, which offered fine European food, in addition to a new gourmet-style Asian menu, to its several hundred diners—Ruby Foo's could seat 700 customers at a time, and it was often filled to capacity.

All around, in the 1940s and 1950s, in every aspect of the city's life—its economics, its politics, its crime, its music, its nightlife—Montreal pulsed with energy and life. It is no wonder, then, that many of Canada's finest writers of the period drew inspiration from the place. Gwethalyn Graham published *Earth and High Heaven* in 1944 to literary acclaim, winning the Governor General's Award (it is no longer in print). It exposes the deep-rooted anti-semitism that existed in

Montreal and in the country in the 1940s. In 1945, Hugh MacLennan published *Two Solitudes* which, again, explored the streets, sounds and smells of Montreal, in its treatment of the tensions that existed there between the English and French populations. The same year, Gabrielle Roy's novel, *Bonheur d'Occasion* (which was published in English as *The Tin Flute* (1947)) appeared, which describes the conditions of St. Henri, the French working-class district of Montreal.

Then, in the 1950s, Mordecai Richler appeared on the scene. His novels, *Son of a Smaller Hero*, *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, *Saint Urbain's Horseman*, etc. have the streets of Montreal as the backdrop for the lives of the city's Jewish immigrant population and their westward migration. And writing from an immigrant's perspective, only after living in Montreal for ten years, did Brian Moore feel comfortable enough to base his third novel, *The Luck of Ginger Coffey* (no longer in print) there.

Morley Callaghan is another author who used Montreal as the setting for a novel in the 1950s. *The Loved and the Lost* explores the segmentation that existed in the city between the black and white populations and the difficulty of bridging the two. And, of course, an author who wrote both novels and poetry, who swooped onto the Montreal literary scene in the 1950s, was Leonard Cohen. *Let Us Compare Mythologies* appeared in 1956 to enormous critical acclaim.

All these writers had a common setting—Montreal—and a common theme—the divisions and difficulties that existed in the city in the 1940s and 1950s that came from the enormous sociological, ethnic, political, and economic diversity that existed there. Before them all, however, many poets had been doing the same thing: Frank Scott, Arthur Smith, A.M. Klein, P.K. Page, Patrick Anderson, John Sutherland, Louis Dudek, Irving Layton, Raymond Souster, Miriam Waddington, Kay Smith, etc.

What brought these writers together? A common time and place and a need to record, self-consciously, the curious tensions and dynamics that surrounded them. During the early and middle parts of the century, Montreal was a cosmopolitan, tumultuous place, made up of fragments of various ethnic groups, and fired by enormous political and economic upheaval. It was a place of oppositions and diversity, where the very rich lived in the west and the poor in the east; where the Roman Catholic tradition collided with the Protestant, and where the Jewish community battled for recognition; where the Anglophone minority

dominated the Francophone majority; and where McGill University and later Concordia (then Sir George Williams University) provided a common meeting ground on which these groups might coalesce.

These oppositions fanned the spark of modernism in Canada as the tensions they created etched themselves on the brains of the poets and writers who would later articulate them and drive them forward. As Irving Layton has stated it,

Normal human vileness, philistine materialism, racial prejudice, anti-Semitism, hypocrisy and the relentless pursuit of ass in parliaments, universities, Salvation Army hostels, editorial offices, courthouses, hospitals and morgues—out of this glorious fecund rubbish heap and out of occasional glimpses of beauty, goodness and mercy I have made my poems. I have dipped my broomstick into the life swirling around me and written it into the hearts and speech of men. Yahoos, sex-drained executives, pimps and poetasters, limping critics, graceless sluts and the few, the rare few, who gave me moments of insight or ecstasy: I am crazy enough to think I have given them immortality. They will, I hope, never die. Not anyhow, for as long as style and passion are still valued; or the language which these have sometimes tinged with vitality and distinction... A poet has his images and symbols handed to him very early in life; his later poems are largely explorations he makes into the depths of his unconscious to unravel their meanings. Incontrovertibly my earliest impressions have coloured everything I've ever written. (n.pag.)

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