

# IRVING LAYTON

## *Apocalypse in Montreal*

*Elizabeth Waterston*

**M**ONTREAL IS A GOOD MOTHER for mystics. She presents essences: serenity, brassiness, squalor; slum, cathedral, suburb; glare of neon, gloom of mountain, slime of waterfront. She is “full of perverse appetites / devout, beautiful / cobras in the snow, / white foxes, priests’ surplices”.

But Montreal, having bombarded the senses with experience, presents multiple ways of imaging the stimuli. Double-language signs act as the inescapable reminder to every child that there are at least two ways of naming everything in the city. If the growing child in Montreal is Jewish, he will add two further languages as the channels for his sense of the world — Yiddish, the mamma-language, and Hebrew, the language of ritual and learning. And if the young man is a poet, tending to concentrate with extra sensitivity not only on the world about him but on his own response to that world and on his own power to express response, he will be encouraged by such a city as Montreal into a readiness to work through symbols. For here is the manifest city of dreams. Here is the city that corresponds to a sociologist’s archetype, a city of visible levels and limits, of discernible hinterland and heart. Such a city reinforces the poet’s anagogic sense of the oneness of the world of dreams and the world of experience.

In several major poems, Irving Layton has moved from mystic contemplation of a moment in his experience in Montreal into a powerful universal vision. Sometimes he swells into the fury of an apocalypse. (Such a fury burns in “Improved Binoculars”). Other poems (such as “Reconciliation”) begin “betwixt the harbour and the great Crucifix”, but lead to a delirium of love rather than of destruction. In “I saw a faun on Somerled Avenue”, he presents a comic subur-

ban fantasia, with a wry aftermath. Finally, in recent years, he has reduced the turbulence of Montreal to a memory of the city, seen from far away (“On this Far Shore”), or remembered as a vast echoing emptiness — a memory that brings “joyful peace and wonder” (“Silent Joy”).

Now that Layton has left Montreal, both physically and poetically, it is worth taking a look at his work to date, to see what he has made of the city — and what it has made of him. In *The Whole Bloody Bird*, Layton has structured an entire volume around his sense of place. Notes or observations crystallized from his travels lead to a set of aphorisms, and finally spin off into poems; the whole process begins each time with response to a particular locale. So too, in the main body of Layton’s earlier work, the process of poetic refinement — from fact to idea to poem — begins most often with a particularized sense of place. And the place, for the younger Layton, was Montreal.

I R VING LAYTON’S earliest volumes *Here and Now*, *Now is the Place*, *The Black Huntsman*, *Cerberus*, and *Love, the Conqueror Worm*, exposed the zones of Montreal life that would stir the young poet. De Bullion Street, shoddy habitat of rouged whore and transient soldier, “rich / Suburban Westmount that squats upon a slum” (“Excursion”); Mont Rolland, the Laurentian antithesis to the daemonic city-centre; St. Helen’s Island, a place of nightmare memory to “Odysseus in Limbo”; McGill, where Apollonian values are desecrated in “Philosophy 34”; “the lighted cross / that shines steadfast upon the city / with the faith of its shareholders” (“Compliments of the Season”) — these are the places named in the earliest poems.

But it is in “Reconciliation” that Layton makes his first full use of the city. This poem notes the physical poles of height and depth. In a sweeping vision it sees the wintry tensions of Montreal, the antithetic whiteness of fox furs and surplices, the Cross on the mountain suggesting both suffering and light, the perverse appetites for devotion and for beauty. Yet the city, in winter, conciliates and cancels these oppositions:

Betwixt the harbour  
And the great Crucifix  
the snow falls  
white and astringent.

The poet finds in this Montreal a metaphor for human oppositions:

You are like my city  
full of perverse appetites . . .

He concludes the poem with a brilliant consummation, both personal and civic, a “double marvel”:

and in the tinfoil air  
I doubly marvel  
that after estrangement  
should come  
such fine unhopd-for  
delirium.

In 1954, '55, and '56, volumes repeat the range of place references, but change the emphasis, and change also the metaphoric application of Montreal places to human problems. In *Cold Green Element*, *In the Midst of My Fever*, *The Long Pea-Shooter*, *The Blue Propellor*, *The Bull Calf*, and *The Improved Binoculars*, certain place names sharpen the poet's focus on Montreal's centre. He introduces “The Main Street that leads to the Mountain” (in “Personae”), the Westmount of “Lacquered Westmount Doll”, Place d'Armes, where the poet, turned statue, witnesses the terror of the city (in “God, when you speak”). This focus on the centre of Montreal is climaxed in “Winter Fantasy”.

“Winter Fantasy” specifies “the explosion of Peel and St. Catherine” as the scene of a terrifying vision. The choice of this down-town corner, rather than of the mountain or the slum, reflects the poet's growing sexual tension and his dread of that fury, the modern woman. Peel and Ste. Catherine: an intersection deeply symbolic. Peel, the business street, male, English-speaking, leads down to Windsor Hotel and the Canadian Pacific Railway Station, or up to McGill University; Ste. Catherine, the glittering French and feminine street of shops, moves beyond Eaton's and Morgan's to The Gayety, Dupuis Frères, and the Church of Ste. Marie. Of course the intersection is an explosion! Yet here the poet pitches his poem, under green neon signs. Here ghosts arise, ravens shriek at the poet's “distaste for winter”, and at his dread of the frenzied shoppers and of his consuming spouse. Against the terror of this hectic and love-lost corner, the poet raises his hand.

. . . raising my hand . . .  
I made lo! the Cross which inflames our city  
plunge hideously through the electric air  
and turn into windowlights which glowed only  
through the recollection of former brightness.

The Cross here, I think, implies the persistence of form (whether religious, marital, civic, or commercial). The city inflamed by this cross is a purgatory. In this city, tramcar and newsvendor, cigarette butts and shawled women are all variant versions of the motif of reduction and abandonment and wastage. All are shells, all are like the "white columns of lost & found". And all accrue at the "explosion of Peel & St. Catherine". In the down-town centre of Montreal Layton finds a symbol of his emerging vision of modern marriage.

The snow-covered mountain can still offer a momentary panacea. "Mount Royal" presents a vision of delight and affection. On the mountain the fast-moving skis and the shouts of the skiers lead the poet from his "litanies of sorrow".

Approach, fill your pockets  
with so much free affection;  
praise this mood  
more fragile than a poet's oath.

Further poems from this period specify and respond to the Montreal suburbs. Here the city's map becomes a medium for social rather than for personal revelations. In "Lachine, Que.", blast furnaces and red-brick houses of the workmen's suburb lie "glistening / at the foot / of the highway". In Côte St. Luc, early morning peace and construction, children's dreams and quiet study all jostle for room in the poet's mind, against memories of

the black bitter men —  
my kin —  
the inconsolable, the far-seeing  
(*"Early Morning in Côte St. Luc"*)

The poet is uneasy and hostile in the suburbs. "One of the better suburbs of Montreal" furnishes the ironic scene of "Me, and P.M., and the Stars". The poet passes on the word that God is slowly decomposing, leaving only an odour "in the better churches of the city".

Those "better churches", and their secular equivalents, are specified, and rejected also. Notre Dame Cathedral, "this immense and ugly edifice" houses incongruously the statuettes of Ezekiel and Jeremiah, "incensed", captive in the spidery church. "Drunk on McGill Campus" again mocks the University as dessicator of joy; "University Buildings" add the "pale yellow, geometric" hives of Université de Montréal to the picture of institutional failure. "Pine Avenue Analyst" briefly

and sardonically adds the Montreal address of the modern psychiatric priesthood.

The specific localism of these poems, however, was being supplemented in the mid-'50s by a more universalized poetry. The down-town street of "Composition in Late Spring", the tenement room of "Eros Where the Rents aren't High", the suburban garden of "Summer Idyll", the burning orphanage of "Improved Binoculars" — these scenes, though redolent of Montreal to the Montrealer, are really without specific placing. They might map *any* modern city.

There are, however, two poems of around 1956 which show an important transition in Layton's response to Montreal in particular. The first is "Spikes". This strange poem begins in a night without moon or stars, when "suburban windows gleam like tombstones". The poet, meditating on this dark city, "sullen and arbitrary", finds a new message of continuity, in spite of death and difference, from father to son. He puzzles over his child's level glance, wondering if he has won this peace for his child through his own encounter with the city; because

so often with white face I have wept  
in your great empty pall-black squares.

The poem ends with this memory of emptiness at the heart of the labyrinthine city.

The second poem, "Boardwalk at Verdun" looks outward, away from the city. Here at the riverfront,

birds  
fly far out  
over the water; and return.

So too the hot citizens on the Verdun ferry, the swimmers, the gulls, the insects, move out over the water. The diver "plunges knifelike to sever his roots". The poem is a meditation on motion and pattern. Beyond the meditation hovers the awareness that Montreal *is* an island, rimmed by possibilities of escape.

**F**OR THE TIME BEING, Layton remained in Montreal, writing in 1957 and 1958 a bitter series of poems on tension in marriage, hostility within the community, bickering among poets. The poems collected in *A Red Carpet for the Sun* end with a repeated rejection of the city — every city.

And leaving the city for the country  
and man's ungovernable appetite

for malice and his evil wit,  
 I am more at home among dead moles.  
 ("Warm Afterdark")

He moves (in "For Mao Tse-Tung") to a "remote and classic lake". He leaves only the façade of himself painted on "Venetian Blinds" ("bought from a merchant corner Craig and Main"). He rails at Westmount for bepraising false poets ("Transmogrification"). Then from this cluster of hostile poems a new Montreal place-name emerges: "Côte des Neiges Cemetery". Layton of course had written effectively about a cemetery in the earlier poem "Cemetery in August", but now the cemetery is named, and the poet fixes on the tomb of "Moise Wong, alien / and quaint among French Catholic names". "And this formal scene is a kind of Poetry", he notes — a poetry, we feel, peculiar to this alienating city.

Sociologists tell us of the death of modern cities: the loss of symbiotic interplay of regions and biotypes, the loss of ecosystem. Layton, poetically, is reflecting the general malaise of all modern cities, and adding his own baffled sense of the unreadiness of Montreal to find a place for him anywhere in its great concentric circles from summit to suburbs. In early poems he had ranged from the heart to the hinterland of Montreal and back, in flickering but passionate response. Now he was finding the sense of flexibility and renewal lessening, both in the city and in himself. Increasingly this city seemed "tomb-oriented" (in Lewis Mumford's phrase). For a poet — even a poet who would include "cemeteries" among the "List of my Delights" (*The Whole Bloody Bird*) — the cross of death as a civic nucleus could no longer vitalize the city, or the poem.

But beauty to be beauty  
 should be flawed  
 not dead.

Our last glimpse of the city in this group of poems is caught from the Lookout (in "Mute in the Wind"). Here, beneath the cold white balustrade is stretched a bleak canvas of snow, marked "*perennis*".

THE POET BEGAN his travels: to Rome, to Paris. *The Swinging Flesh*, and *Balls for a One-Armed Juggler*, mark his first travels, physical and mental, away from Montreal. He took with him Canadian touchstones. In "Piazza San Marco" he hears echoes from Ste. Agathe, and from Belmont Park. When he returned, he sprayed place-names in sardonic profusion: Hampstead,

where the “bored young wives” use their convertibles, and where eloquent bankers offer patronage; Victoria Square, where the stony Queen turns her back on manly reality; Ruby Foo’s, where Yom Kippur Jews from Côte St. Luc, Hampstead, and Town of Mount Royal do their “Stocktaking on the Day of Atonement”; Desjardins; Sherbrooke Street, where tourists stare (in “The Architect”); the Oratoire St. Joseph (in “Agnus Dei”). It seems as though the first trips abroad had confirmed Layton in his poetic method, confirmed him in the feeling that the very particularized allusions to Montreal places would serve to create a symbolic map of a recognizable city of modern consciousness. The map is surveyed now in a consistently ironic tone.

Abroad again, and new poems celebrate Spain. El Caudillo, Alicante, Denia: these are the place names of the 1964 poems of *Laughing Rooster*. They are capped, however, by the fantastic return to Montreal in “I saw a faun on Somerled Avenue”. Somerled is a long, broad, colourless, duplexed and triplexed street, leading west through Notre Dame de Grace (pronounced uncompromisingly by English-speaking Montrealers “Notter Dam de Grass”). Somerled leads not up to the mountain but to West Hill High School and to the new suburbs “out” in Côte St. Luc. On such a street, all Montreal’s people, menacing to a poet, appear: the disc jockey, the insurance agent, the social worker. But a wintry miracle of poetry occurs. A sparkling faun, prophetic, rejuvenates all values. “Even professors of Englit / when they pranced on the same spot sparkled.” But the faun is killed, melted, buried, and the poet adds

I . . . closed the window  
 on some broken stars  
 and made myself a cup of tea.

So much for creativity and spontaneity in the suburbs. Briefly, in “Winter Light”, the faun’s mood of shimmering freedom and brilliance is recaptured. Here passion, rather than poetry, fills the suburban street with an affirmation of the possibility of peace and joy:

Shiva dances on Somerled Avenue  
 and in our bedroom  
 A million roosters cry up the sun;  
 at night when we embrace  
 We hear the silence of God.

Further trips to Europe in 1968 brought disillusioned awareness of the “shat-

tered plinths” of human ideals. In this awareness the suburban promise of Somerled faded. The poet turned to the bitter lessons of Israel for his next poems.

He saw still from that far shore “the great city I love and hate”. “On this Far Shore” presents a reprise of the mood of “De Bullion Street”. Brutality, repulsion, outrage — with these the poet tries once more to shock the conformists out of civic pride. The sounds of De Bullion Street, the stink of its garbage pails, have their persisting equivalents:

. . . the brutal cries of hunger and love . . .  
and foulness that like an escaping gas  
issues from the defeated and the sick.

The rouged whore, young soldier, the Oriental, the shipjack of De Bullion Street, are replaced by a more bourgeois, and perhaps more perverted cast of characters:

Boy-lovers, typists, thieves, professors:  
they jostle each other in restaurants.

But the source of the poet’s ironic disillusionment is now not merely local, but universal. In “De Bullion Street”, the reptilian street invaded and perverted virgin consciousness. In the late poem, memory is invaded ultimately by the sound from the sky (“where poetry is”) of an Israeli youth on a propaganda mission, dropping a Torah from a helicopter, “on the small stones”. The city of the youthful poet thus remains in the maturing consciousness, but fused now with universal contemporary distress and confusion.

But finally, in 1969, Layton came back to a memory of his city in “Silent Joy”. “The great empty pall-black squares” seen at the heart of the city in “Spikes” now are remembered as a cathedral. The snow of early poems is gone; vines grow instead. The old menacing lanes, as of the De Bullion district, are cooled by shadows. In cemeteries there is a hum of persistent though meaningless life.

Remembering  
St. James Street, Sunday mornings  
— a vast empty cathedral,  
my footsteps echoing in the silent vaults  
rooms on quiet afternoons, alone  
or with one I love deeply —  
  
shadows, cool and long, in hot lanes  
  
insect-humming cemeteries



and light dripping from vines  
in globules of rose, of pale-green

I am so utterly filled  
with joyful peace and wonder  
my heart stops beating . . .

The gentle light in this poem is a fitting conclusion of the long, varied series of poems filled with the lights of Montreal. The series had begun with the vicious red lights of De Bullion Street:

Below this broad street inverted bell-jars  
Hanging from wooden crucifixes drop  
Tiny moons upon the shaven asphalt.

Then Layton had moved to dim the lights of suburbia, in "Me, the P.M. and the Stars":

The windowpanes yellow with warmth and light  
  made a perfect target  
for a piece of coal embedded  
in the white and innocent snow.

He had watched the city in flames through his "Improved Binoculars":

Then the dignitaries rode across the bridges  
under an auricle of light which delighted them,  
noting for later punishment those that went before.

He had rejoiced in the "melting-butter sun" in "Composition in Late Spring", but had recognized that in "Lachine, Que.,"

the skies  
crimson with sunset  
disappear  
into blast furnaces.

But in retrospect it seems he had caught best the "light show" of Montreal in "Winter Fantasy". In the last prophetic stanza of that fine poem, the hectic neon of the city, and the inflaming Cross, were replaced finally by a calmer glow:

All night, all night, the autos whizzed past me  
into heaven, till I met men going there  
    With golden nails and ravens whose wings  
brushed the night up the tall sides of buildings  
and behind them in the morninglight the windows shone  
like saints pleased with the genius that had painted them.