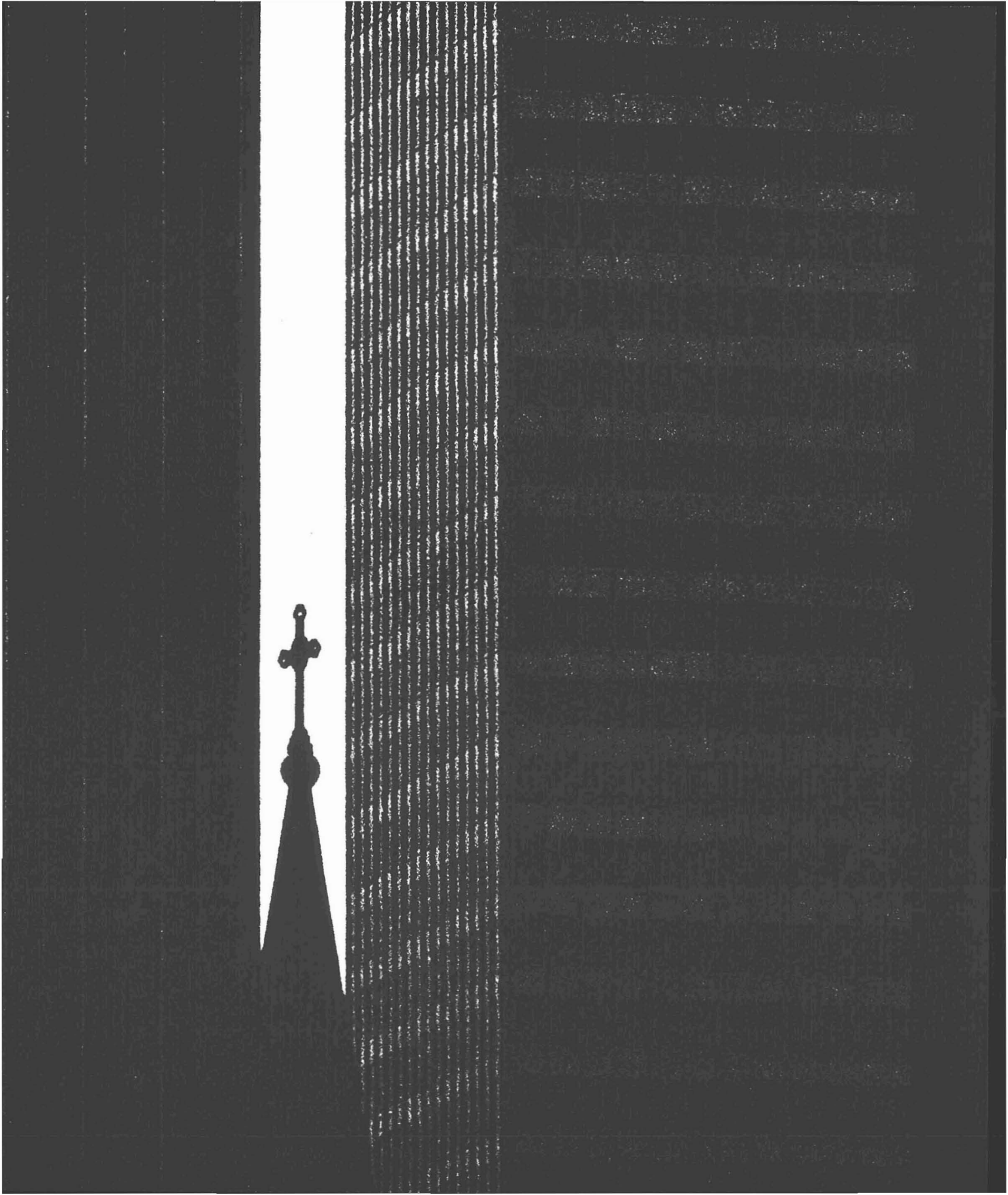


Montréal By Night

Robert Schwartzwald

(What follows is a transcription of a plenary address delivered in Montréal at the convention of the Northeast Modern Language Association.)

According to received wisdom, Montréal is a divided city, and until very recently, it was really on one side of that divide that self-confident literary evocations of it at night were to be found. Reaching a position of surveillance at the summit of Mount Royal, Morley Callaghan's hero in *The Many Colored Coat* (1960), for example, looks out over his beloved city, embracing it in an affectionate gesture of possession:

> At the end of the street where the slope was steep there was a flight of steps and Harry climbed them so quickly he had to stop and get his breath and there below him was the pattern of city lights, Mollie's city and his; what good times they had had there! How often they had agreed it was one of the exciting cities of the world, and he was so moved he had a lump in his throat.

The bird's-eye view with its celebratory affect is hard to come by in writing about the city in French. This writing moves through the city tentatively, in the manner of an alien who feels that she is still knocking at the door, and for whom the sense of civic place is marked by experiences of dispossession and colonization.

Perhaps the text most singularly associated with this kind of writing is Jacques Ferron's *La Nuit*. (1965). A doctor by profession, Ferron is easily enlisted in that respectable constellation of physician-writers whose work is most admirable in short pithy pieces. *La Nuit* is a novella that tells the story of a quintessential "bridge and tunnel person," François Ménard, a forty-something bank worker living in Montréal's south shore suburbs, and his encounter in the night with a police agent who, years earlier, had arrested him at a political demonstration on Montréal's boulevard Saint-Laurent, the Main, the traditional dividing line between the English and French-speaking parts of the city. Summoned on the phone by Frank in the middle of the night, François gets into a cab driven by an Italian Montrealer, Carone, whose name and intermediary function recall Charon, who ferries the souls of the dead across the Acheron, the river of woe. As the taxi approaches Montréal, the city resembles a fortress-castle, with the Jacques Cartier bridge that links it to François' suburb, an endless drawbridge. François has the feeling of stealing into a guarded camp when its vigilance is down, driven by a belated but irrepressible curiosity: "At forty-three years of age, isn't it normal to want to know what the night is about?" he asks. Up until now, he had contented himself with the Marxist truisms of his youth whereby the night:

> played a social and hygienic role: it prepared for the next day a reconditioned population, ready to return to work, its lungs filled with the oxygen of resignation, a population without memory, without a future, content to humbly start over with each new day...

It is Ferron's irony that François, now a mid-level bank employee, but once a Marxist militant, was symbolically arrested on the Main. Its liminal status in relation to the English and French-speaking communities made it a fitting site for his youthful optimism that class struggle politics would "transcend" national antagonisms, but things don't turn out that way. At his trial, François is not convicted, so even the State refuses to recognize the political intention of his act. Profoundly humiliated, François tells us he "lost his soul" as a consequence. In fact, he adds, he has survived the intervening years by sharing his *wife's* soul. Now, long years of sedation in the suburbs are about to come to a sudden end in a dreamlike nocturnal landscape: François murders Frank with a poisoned gift, a jar of quince preserves he has brought along with him. This act is

presented as the confirmation of his evolution from colonial emasculation to emancipatory revirilization. It has only become possible after his lovemaking with Barbara, a black woman whom he meets at the Alcazar, a club to which Frank has taken him. After François sleeps with her, she sends him on his way, reassuring him, "Go on, now; you're not a child anymore!". Interestingly enough, this is presented as a redemption from a state of inversion, for after all, does not the condition of sharing his wife's soul mark him with the very conceit of inversion, "a woman's soul in a man's body?" From the time of his acquittal until the night of this new urban foray, François' marriage has been exemplary of Hubert Aquin's anxiety about the *inverted* character of seemingly heterosexual situations, depicted in Québec fiction as a dissimulation of sexual impotence wrought through political subjugation (Schwartzwald 1991). François' settling of accounts in the Montréal night sets matters straight, as it were. After only a few hours, he leaves the city. The experience has little to do with the appropriation of urban space; instead, the island metropolis has served as a vehicle of regeneration through a kind of "shock therapy." François does, however, receive an intimation of things to come. On his way back to the suburbs, he crosses a young man in the street busy spraying paint over the English words on a traffic sign. In this nationalist militant, he recognizes his future: "After a great night, there's a beautiful day, and I'll devote the years I have left to its sequel." When he awakens the next morning and discovers among his affairs evidence to confirm that his anti-colonial gesture has been no mere dream, François knows he is "whole" again, and can give his wife back her soul.

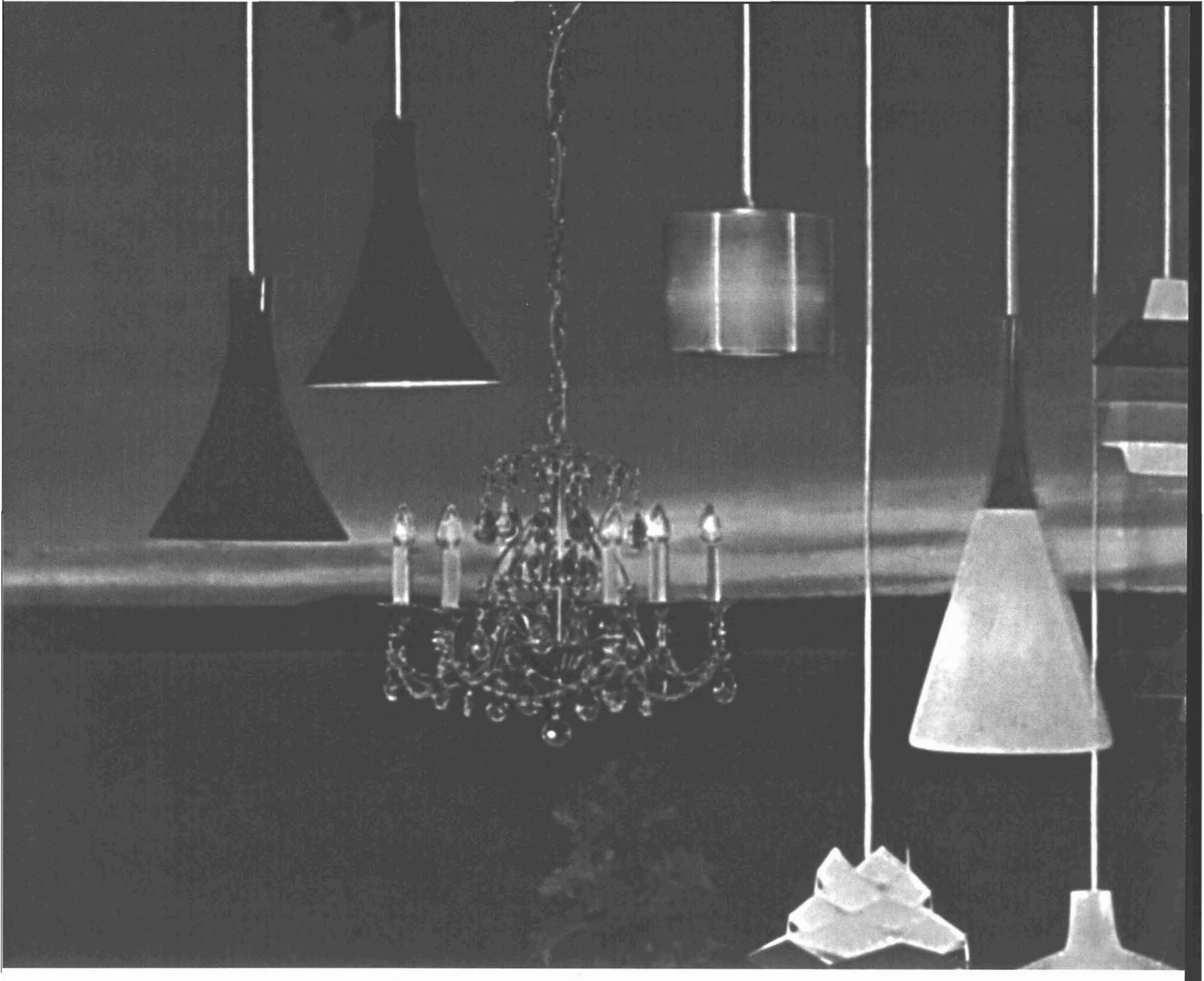
If, in *La Nuit*, anticolonially-figured political consciousness redeems the hero as he traverses a dreamlike urban landscape, in Jacques Renaud's *Le Cassé* (1964) (as in "broke"), the night provides the occasion for Ti-Jean, a young, lumpen man to murder a purported rival after succumbing to false reports of his girlfriend Philomène's infidelity. *Le Cassé* is a classically humanist narrative in its denunciation of the alienation of urban life and the indignities to which a subproletariat of uneducated, unskilled French-Québécois has been reduced. *Le Cassé* stands out from most other canonized realist narratives, however, through its *misérabiliste* aesthetic, the unrelenting violence of its action, and especially its provocative use of *joual*, the street language of East Montréal that many considered a debased form of French. Here, too, Montréal is depicted as an essentially malignant body, best — but impossible — for the poor to avoid: "Montréal is a death rattle. The bawling of babies. It never ends ... a tortured, beaten island hideous in its paralytic polio. Hear the wounded cries of Montréal beneath the moon."

What is striking about these narratives, written in the midst of the Quiet Revolution, Québec's leap into modernity some thirty years ago, is how deeply they underscore the foreigness of Montréal to its linguistic majority. Here, francophones are still very much interlopers; a few have the good fortune to be able to leave the island and go home at the end of the day (or night), but most are trapped into taking up residence there. They find themselves pressed into the daily miseries that await an unskilled labor force. From Gabrielle Roy's *Bonheur d'occasion* (1945) to *Le Cassé*, the canon of francophone urban fiction in Québec effectively challenges the hegemony of agriculturalist ideology. Nevertheless, in these works the imaginary appropriation of urban space remains highly problematic. At best, there are moments of tranquillity to be coaxed out of the city, as in Thérèse Masson's chronicle "Montréal by Night," published in the journal *Liberté* in 1963. Here, the night is savored because it provides a haven from the *un*splendid squalor of the city, all too visible in the light of day. There is a kind of safety at night, air to breathe in uncrowded streets, and time to admire the glimpses of humanity one might come across in the course of one's perambulations. And yet, there is something else in Masson's account, a sense of exclusion and especially of belatedness. As Masson walks down the Main, she compares it to "an enormous colon by which the city absorbs and digests newcomers and expels those who will

soon leave." This deliberately ugly metaphor leaves no room for her, she who is neither an immigrant newly arrived on the Main, nor a successful descendant setting off to more verdant, suburban pastures. Instead, she is excreted back into the city. Pursuing the corporeal metaphor, she attributes her melancholia to the moral "purges" of the 1950s, when Montréal was "cleaned up" by the zealous campaigns of a young lawyer-become-Mayor, Jean Drapeau, and his chief of police, Pacifique "Pax" Plante. Thanks to them, Montréal isn't what it used to be, she tells us. She leads us from nightclub to coffee house to *boîte à chanson*, but all are somehow *ersatz*, pale imitations of the 1940s "open city" of legend. Looking over the crowd at a newly opened *boîte*, she mourns: "The youngsters are trying so hard to act like beatniks, it's really pitiful." — and hammers home the final nail in the coffin: "*Très Toronto!*". She does find a few cafes, "noisy, cosmopolitan, where expresso and long discussions go hand in hand." They are "the sole remnants of Montréal's so-called existentialist period." But, all in all, "Montréal at night is a taciturn city. Her beautiful head stays out of trouble, but her body is agitated and enervated. Her heart is tired and bored."

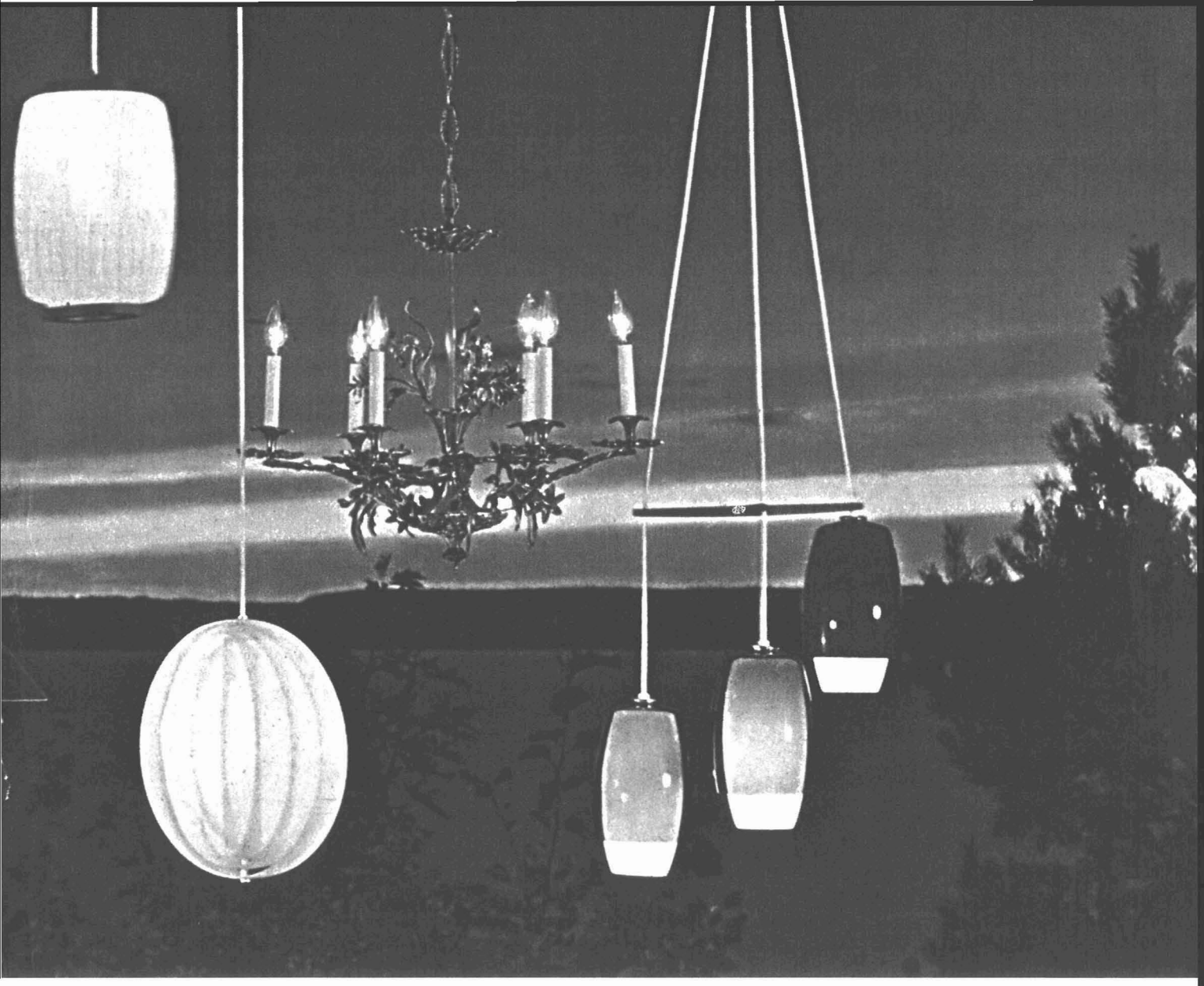
This trope of belatedness is one that is often associated with the inevitably disappointed newcomer. In Haitian-born Dany Laferrière's most recent novel, *Chronique de la dérive douce* (1994), the young immigrant is constantly told by an older compatriot that he has arrived five years too late! In Masson's account, the suppressed legacy of an earlier period may be glimpsed in traces of a Montréal possessed by excessive, antisocial bodies engaged in queerly productive nocturnal itineraries. Among Masson's signposts is the Arlequin club, where she sees "a hermaphrodite, a really nice boy, consoling a blonde in tears, and women-boys dancing with women-girls." But we need to go back to a novel such as André Béland's recently republished *Orage sur mon corps* (1944), and especially Berthelot Brunet's *Les Hypocrites* (1945), to fully appreciate how Montréal's urban topography may be brought into sympathetic relief by tuning in to such patterns of "vice." I use this word fully conscious of its period affect. It was not so long ago that almost all major North American cities had vice squads, and many still do. From the beginning, the surveillance of "bohemians", or "vagrants" as the most impecunious and chronically homeless of them were termed, and "known homosexuals" has been a major component of their police work. This charge also signals to what extent the modern city has implied a renegotiation of homosocial relations, of what it means to be a man in a setting no longer shaped by the traditional, rural sexual division of labor and cultural practices. In the 1940s, literary treatments of bohemianism bring young, middle-class francophone initiates into contact with a range of "unsavory" marginal types, offering them an escape from the timid conformism of their predictable professional destinies: lawyer, physician, notary, *fonctionnaire* (Schwartzwald 1993). Sometimes, the young men venturing into the night are already ripe for the homosexual demi-monde that awaits them, prepared as it were by an insalubrious upbringing in households ruled by dominating mothers and compliant, or absent, fathers. Often, though, it's implied that the encounter with homosexuality is therapeutic. Young men are 'exposed' to it, along with a series of other marginal forms of behaviour, much as one is inoculated with a small quantity of an infectious agent in order to better resist it in adult life.

In Berthelot Brunet's *Les Hypocrites*, the anti-hero Philippe succumbs quickly to an addiction to a yellowish anti-depressant liquid he refers to as his *jaune*. As he embarks upon an endless search for the money he needs to procure his drug, we accompany him across a nocturnal Montréal landscape in which the city's monuments are its brothels, pharmacies, hospitals, cafes, and taverns. Montréal's rush hour seems to occur just before dawn, when people who know each other only too well cross paths in the comings and goings of their marginal "affairs." Glances are exchanged or averted among junkies, criminals, and of course that other category of



"excessively nervous men." All together, they are true urban denizens who have appropriated the city's core as their own. Indeed, for Brunet himself, the countryside was a distant reality that held no attraction. His friend Paul Toupin tells us that when Brunet saw the ocean for the first time, "he was overcome with panic and scampered right back to Montréal." Born in the seedy district near the train stations, he was a child of the city for whom "a brick wall could take the place of a landscape."

Of course, there is no need to accept a brick wall for a landscape in Montréal, a city endowed with its own, internal nature. If my earlier reference to Mount Royal relied upon the topic of



surveillance, it is now time to turn to the footpaths and clearings among its bushes, trees, and outcroppings of rock that offer a labyrinthine setting for contacts among men. The cruising for which *la montagne* is renowned is manneristically (some would say 'impossibly') staged in Denys Arcand's film, *Le déclin de l'empire américain*. Here René, an art historian, speaks rapturously about the excitement and joys of the nighttime prowl and the relief it brings from the routine of his diurnal academic pursuits. There are risks on Mount Royal: occasional gangs of gay-bashing youths, undercover police, and even cops on horseback. In Montréal's other great urban park, the more formal and sedate Parc Lafontaine, the city in its moral zeal has resorted to even more

drastic measures that provoke the wrath and defiance of Cuirette, the biker-lover of *Hosanna*, the eponymous drag-queen of Michel Tremblay's great drama of sexual authenticity and coming out. Returning from another frustrating walk through the park, where the newly installed floodlights have obliterated the shadows in which he used to cruise and have sex with other men, Cuirette vows, "From now on we're gonna do it in public, goddammit! We'll all get under the lights, drop our pants, and go to it right in the middle of the fuckin' baseball field!".

First performed in 1973, *Hosanna* recounts the "dressing down" of its protagonist by his fellow drag queens when, on the night of the "Great Women in History contest," they mock him by *all* dressing as Elizabeth Taylor in *Cleopatra*, that incomparably glamorous emanation to which he had long been laying exclusive claim. The metaphoric thrust of the play had always depended upon the encoding of Hosanna's obsession with Taylor/Cleopatra as a symbol for the alienated, colonized Québécois who was *mal dans sa peau*, uneasy in his own skin. By abandoning her drag to stand naked before her lover at the end of the play, Hosanna shows s/he accepts that it is *as a man* that he desires other men. Sexual desire thus performs as a metaphor for authenticity, in this case of the québécois who must assume his specificity, his *québécité*, before he can be *bien dans sa peau*, and an authentic interlocutor.[1]

Hosanna brings us back to the Main, as does Tremblay's recently published memoir of the night he set out to lose his virginity, *La Nuit des princes charmants* (1995). A frequenter of Parc Lafontaine himself, the young Michel has had enough of the furtive *attouchements*, the rapid groping, that goes on there. He resolves to look for an emotional attachment to the male attachment unit, as it were. Set contemporaneously with *Hosanna*, it's not difficult to imagine that the after-hours drag club where Michel finds himself, one of many stations on the way to his first fuck in a tourist room on Carré (or *Square*, as we're now told is proper!) Saint-Louis, is the one frequented by Hosanna and her vindictive friends. Michel watches as one of his heart-throbs, a young *chansonnier* with nationalist leanings, takes to the stage and is humiliated by the bored, impatient queens who cannot abide the earnestness of his performance.

The utopian claim of gay relationships is played out when Michel winds up with Alan, a boy from Point-Saint-Charles, an English-speaking working class neighborhood of Montréal. The two boys from the two different linguistic communities first spy each other in a ticket queue for the opera, an aesthetically-coded common ground that is at once a political demilitarized zone and an (homo)erotic threshold. Tremblay humorously has national and sexual identities vie with each other in Michel's head while he decides if and how he can pursue Alan. Counterpointing anglophone writers who have so often found québécois men's accents in English to be exotically sexy,[2] it is Michel who finds Alan's broken French to be a turn-on. The linguistic exoticism of the encounter comes momentarily to a crashing halt when, well into their torrid scene, Alan suddenly interrupts the action and asks, "If there were a war between the French and English in Montréal, would you kill me?" Surely, the conjuncture of insecurity, depression, and paranoia engendered by the recent referendum on Québec's future lends Michel's response real poignancy in this recently published work: stunned by the question, the idea seems inconceivable to him. At least under night's protective dominion, desire seems able to supersede these tensions.

The park or the bed: Michel's earnest, sentimental juxtaposition of these options is that of the ingenue. In André Roy's poetry, we see instead how a sophisticated urban repertory of erotic possibility is constructed around notions of contingency, randomness, and performance. One poem I particularly admire from *Monsieur Désir* (1981) plays with these options:

> Night. A room. Or no room (bushes for pillows)...I have my dictionary of codes, and desires for each and every day, I know you will have loved me, and in spite of everything. Or the courage and the chance of loving you afterward. Or afterward each of us will begin again, always, though, on our own.

Roy's poem is a multi-sited evocation of the molecular geography of desire. It is a geography mapped by someone in control of their space without, however, resorting to the colonial topic of surveillance to organize it. That topic has also been subverted in contemporary English-language writing from Montréal. In Gail Scott's *Heroine* (1987), a black American tourist tries in vain to get a sense of the city from the lookout on Mount Royal, but without Canadian money, he can't see anything through the coin-operated telescope! The fact that he needs a different currency is a puzzlement to him, and it reminds us playfully of the city's resistance to being assimilated into the typical American urban mold. At the same time, it suggests how the historically oppressed are never afforded that coveted, panoramic and totalizing view from above.

In Scott's most recent novel, *Main Brides* (1993), we are once again on the boulevard Saint-Laurent. Here, too, there is surveillance but now it is undertaken laterally by Lydia, who spends her days in a bar ordering carafe after carafe of wine. She observes the younger women who come and go, imagining their lives and the stories they might tell. We are reminded that Bacchanalia such as Tremblay's and Roy's do not, of course, obviate the other sexual divide that marks Montréal, like all cities, by night. In *Main Brides*, it is young women, many lesbian, who reappropriate this urban space for Lydia, as they reconfigure its classical urban geography. Richler's rectangle is turned on its side, as if to attest to the work that has been done by these women as they open the city to their desire. No longer between mountain and river, but between mountain and the sprawling east end that once seemed so hopeless, so unforgiving, the new rectangle revitalizes the Main and embraces the new nocturnal hub of the rue Saint-Denis with its women's bars. Against the background of the warm, caressing voice of a woman on the radio spinning out melodies of joy and eroticism, an ever-threatening nocturnal violence against women meets its match in "Night Music," the final section of the novel:

> Lydia's eyes close in pleasure. As the last strains of the tango float out, towards the starry sky. She has the evening's repertoire in her head. The one, Malena, about the girl who put her whole heart into every line she sang (the only way you can); about women too angry now to love (actually it's men who are angry in this kind of music); about cigarettes, moonlit patios, empty cafés, highheeled boots with knives. En l'attendant j'ai bu indéfatigablement: the waitress puts a firm yet friendly hand on Lydia's shoulder...
> The guy walks up the stairs and into the ante-room.
> C. leans over and takes something gleaming from her boot.
> Kicking back her chair, with an impatient flick of her foot. Like Lydia, now, in the bar.
> Nous autres, nous continuerons à vivre.
> Lunging.
>
> Lydia steps (a zigzag, to the air of a tango) into the night.
>
> And now
> it is time for all of us
> to step into the night.

Notes

1 The most recent production in 1991 in fact complicated the issue of authenticity in a kind of miês-a-jour of the play's allegorical reference to the national subject. See Martin 1992 and Schwartzwald 1992.

2 Excellently documented in Robert K. Martin's pioneering article for *The Body Politic* (1977).

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