

# Montreal's Jewish Mountains

by Michael Greenstein

**D**AVID Roskies, a native of Montreal and currently editor of a leading Jewish journal, *Prooftexts*, looks back on his childhood city as both the Jerusalem of Canada and the Vilna of the New World: "a surrogate city in French Canada, with its Catholic churches, its river and mountain, its babble of tongues, somehow intimated the loss of the birthplace I never knew. There was even an old City though it lacked a wall." A generation earlier, on a visit to the newly established Israeli consulate in Montreal, A.M. Klein wryly remarked: "What more natural than that in a city in which saints meet at every street-corner there should also be a parcel of Holy Land." As much as French babble impinged on the ears of immigrants, so Mount Royal with its crucifix impressed itself on Jewish eyes, and this audiovisual combination created a landscape unique among North American cities. When the inhabitants of St. Urban's ghetto cast their gaze upward, they were forced to accommodate the mountain and its cross by transforming them into pre-Christian archetypes from Ararat to Sinai.

Klein climaxes his poem "Montreal" with an apostrophe to the mountain: "And you above the city, scintillant, / Mount Royal, are my spirit's mother." Like the Romantic poets at the end of the eighteenth century, Klein associates the mountain with the Sublime — the landscape's ladder to heaven. But where the Romantic poets viewed the Alps as distant from their urban centre, Klein confronts his personal height within the city. Moreover, if Mount Royal is "almative, poirinate," or suggestive of the maternal breast, it also belongs within his historical imagination as a reincarnation of Ararat, Moriah, and Sinai. That is, it functions as a haven, a place of sacrifice, and a locus of law and revelation, even as geographically it forms a "Pendant most brilliant on Laurentian cord!" Klein's maternal spirit or inspirational music will continue to influence a number of his poems.

In "Lookout: Mount Royal" Klein further investigates his past association with this city's dominant feature. Remembering his own childhood — "the boy in blouse and kneecaps on the road/trailing his stick over the hoppedotched sun" — the poet invokes a pastoral scene that cannot but recall biblical precedents for Abraham Moses Klein. From the Olympian heights, Klein never loses sight of mankind, never loses himself in the mystical moment. Instead he grounds the scene in photographic realism: "to click the eye on motion forever stopped;/ the photographer's tripod and his sudden faces." And the geometric shapes in the landscape resemble a cubist canvas which leads to a first vanishing point: "making its way to the sought point, his home/ home recognized: there: to be returned to—".

Ever conscious of exile, Klein seeks a return homeward, not just to Montreal's ghetto at the base of the mountain but to historical promised lands around Ararat or Sinai. For even as he domesticates apocalyptic vision by keeping both feet on the slope of the mountain where his "lookout" becomes a moral beacon, so he concludes in a transcendent view of a "water-tower'd coast." Indeed, images of birds, water, and animals that recur through the poem suggest a "sunken parallel" with Noah and the Flood. Thus, the second and final vanishing point archetypally transcends Mount Royal in the unknown direction of Ararat: "then, to the remote rhapsodic mountains; then, /—and to be lost —/ to clouds like white slow friendly animals." This loss is simultaneously a gain, for Klein succeeds in moving mountains, in shifting perspectives, and in displacing the landscape of exile.

## Mountain Translates Geography to History

These hints of translation from geography to history, from Klein's boyhood to the trajectory of a people, recur in "The Mountain" which opens with a general, externalized view:

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Who knows it only by the famous cross which bleeds  
into the fifty miles of night its light  
knows a night-scene;  
and who upon a postcard knows its shape —  
the buffalo straggled of the laurentian herd, —  
holds in his hand a postcard.

This kind of view offered in the first stanza is as superficial as a postcard, and as misrepresentative as the electric light which replaces the bleeding of crucifixion.

By the second stanza the poet introduces a more personal note and a corrective to postcard surfaces:

In layers of mountains the history of mankind,  
and in Mount Royal  
which daily in a streetcar I surround  
my youth, my childhood.

Given Klein's final depression and his picture of the lonely poet at the bottom of the sea in "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape," we can see the importance of mountains and childhood exuberance for the aging man. Both as his spirit's mother and as the layered history of mankind, Klein strings earlier mountains on his Laurentian cord and shepherds other creatures toward the laurentian herd. Through his metaphoric mountain Klein joins his namesakes Abraham and Moses, while immersing himself in Montreal's reality on the slope and threshold of a never-reached promised land. For the drowning poet of the Diaspora, Ararat offered one hope of saving his voice.

## Layton Carries On Klein's Tradition

Klein's younger friend Irving Layton picks up the broken tablets, shatters some of his own, and etches into the fragments biting satire and ethical humanism derived from the Jewish prophetic tradition. In "Mont Rolland" Layton identifies with the mountain that is pitiless towards men but filled with pity for trees, one of which has such enormous boughs "it might have remembered Absalom." Like Klein, Layton remembers his biblical heritage when he comes down from Quebec's mountains.

The liberal poet who accepts Jesus as his Jewish brother achieves an I-Thou relationship with his Christian city in "Reconciliation":

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

Like the snow falling between heaven and earth, the poet stands on his mountain — a "zwischenmensch" — between two worlds symbolized by the polarities of active harbour and religious mountain. The snow is

stringent in more than one sense of the word: it is severe as well as binding, for nature reconciles poet and city, crucifix and harbour, Christian and Jew.

The poet enters this scene in the second stanza where he initiates a process of dialectical reconciliation between himself and his estranged surroundings.

I can not cancel  
this wind  
nor the wild cries  
of the pitiful men  
that fling themselves  
against the Cross  
hang there a moment  
lighted Christs  
and fall like tears  
down the mountain's sides.

The shrewd dialectician finds himself powerless in the face of nature and a Christian majority that crucifies itself briefly before falling like the snow down Mount Royal.

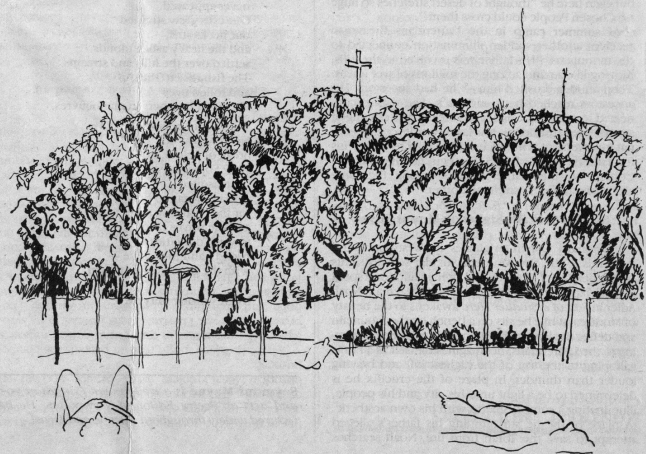
In the penultimate stanza the poet turns to his lover, an unidentified "You" who resembles Montreal with its devout, beautiful, and perverse appetites. Layton concludes his poem with an image borrowed from Klein's "shaken tinfol air":

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

The poet who began betwixt and between works out "doubly" his astringent reconciliation and his I-Thou dialogue against a backdrop of Mount Royal highlighted by a foil cross. Those initial images of crucifixion end in another kind of resurrection — a spiritual delirium after an engagement with the reality of Montreal.

## Mount Royal Grips its Burning Cross

Layton satirizes blind faith in "Montreal" which begins with a description of Sainte Thérèse "who died of that or this/Hath made a miracle for us." Just as the cause of her death is unknown, so the results of her martyrdom are shrouded in the mysterious superstition of the blind, mute, and crippled who look to her image to be healed. "And like a swarthy Jesuit/ Mount Royal grips its burning cross" while poverty finds no cure. Layton concludes with an ironic rhyme where God looks on indifferently at his impoverished handiwork: "After a famine or a fire/God for a toothpick plucks a spire!" And the Jewish poet demystifies the spirit and the cross with a different sermon on the mount. **continued on page 8**



## MONTREAL'S MOUNTAINS

Continued from page 7

In "Winter Fantasy" Layton again reduces and humanizes his Cross-capped mountain, transforming it from commercial notions of Christmas to an earlier meaningful time:

I made, lo! the Cross which inflames our city  
plunge hideously through the electric air  
and turn into windlights which glowed only  
through the recollection of a former brightness.

And in "Mount Royal" Layton omits any religious references and celebrates instead the sheer beauty of skiers on the mountain; lyricism and spontaneity now replace any satiric tones.

### Leonard Cohen Dwells on Mountains

Layton's friend, Leonard Cohen, dwells on mountains, especially in his first novel, *The Favourite Game*. Lawrence Brevaman, the protagonist of this autobiographical novel, grows up in Westmount and divides his time between the Laurentians and the St. Lawrence River, the romantic and realistic polarities in his name. Betwixt the harbour and the cross, and the comparative mythologies of two testaments, Lawrence Brevaman poses a rhetorical question: "Can't you see me crucified on a maple tree at the top of Mount Royal?" If this "brief-man" or "bereaved" son sees himself as a Christ-like martyr, his father resembles an Old Testament figure who "took his cane... and led his son over Mount Royal. Here was the ancient crater. Two iron and stone cannon rested in the gentle grassy scoop which was once a pit of boiling lava. Brevaman wanted to dwell on the violence." On the slopes of Mount Royal, Cohen reenacts events from Genesis to Deuteronomy, controlling violence through lyrical visions.

Studying his central character between the saintliness of his central character's St. Lawrence River and the priestly function of his own name. "He looked in awe at the expanse of the night-green foliage, the austere lights of the city, the dull gleam of the St. Lawrence. A city was a great achievement, bridges were fine things to build. But the street, harbour, spikes of stone were ultimately lost in the wider cradle of mountain and sky." So the poet turns to nature to transcend the mechanical routine of his city.

### Westmount Park a "Green Heart"

For Brevaman, Westmount's park is a "green heart" where loving couples imagine poetry. In the midst of his mountain, skeptical Brevaman questions his uncles' smug confidence in prayer: "When the curtains of the Holy Ark are drawn apart and gold-crowned Torah scrolls revealed, and all the men of the altar wear white clothes, why don't your eyes let go of the ritual?" Brevaman creates his own Sinai to attack his family's worship of golden calves, nature's altitude replaces the institutional altar in Cohen's subversive ritual; and Westmount's Lookout provides the scene for revelations and epiphanies. As part of his apprenticeship, Brevaman has to descend from Westmount and immerse himself in a harsher reality near the river, but even here he "thought of desert stretches so huge no Chosen People could cross them."

At summer camp in the Laurentians Brevaman receives another sudden illumination connected to the mountains. "His father was involved in the hills, moving like a wind among the millions of wet leaves. Then an idea crushed him — he had ancestors! His ancestors reached back and back, like daisies connected in a necklace." Indeed, Brevaman's coming of age revolves around this revelation and its consequential involvement with ancestral mountains where his forefathers came of age. In their family romance Cohen's spiritual father resides among the same elevations as Klein's spiritual mother.

### Richler Sets His Sights on Mount Royal

If Leonard Cohen originates in Westmount and descends to the city, Mordecai Richler sets his sights on the heights of Mount Royal after a childhood spent in St. Urbain's ghetto. Like Lawrence Brevaman, Noah Adler in *Son of a Smaller Hero* awakens to the beauty of Montreal while he sits on a bench on the mountain and defies the laws of his grandfather Melech. Escaping to the Laurentians, he imagines himself as a horse galloping to the top of the highest hill and braying louder than thunder. In place of the crucifix he is determined to be a light upon his city and his people, illuminating a sombre ghetto with his own aesthetic. In place of the lie surrounding his father's alleged attempt to save the Torah from fire, Noah searches

heroically for the burning truth with newer laws in an ark of his own choosing. Both Richler and Cohen exchange a socio-economic Westmount for a higher historical ideal replete with beauty and moral purpose.

Where Richler's tough realism propels his characters up the mountain in quest of a vertical mosaic's pretensions, Yves Thériault turns instead to its symbolic and archetypal dimensions in *Aaron*. Thériault's novel combines twentieth-century Mount timeless mélange: "C'est un caractère que la spéciale de Montréal, cette montagne sauvage, bien servie, insécable... Symbole de la sauvegarde du peuple, du Canada... Un simple parc que ce Mont-Royal." Just as the experience at Sinai provided the People as a whole with a rite of passage from the desert towards settlement in Israel, so Mount Royal opens up a future for Aaron who falls in love with Viedna. Aaron transforms the mountain into an oasis in the Negev even as Thériault enjoys it as a backdrop for his own leap into the Jewish imagination.

### Canadian Jewish Writers Fixated on "Magic Mountain"

Not only Montreal's writers are fixated by this Canadian mountain: two of Winnipeg's Jewish novelists — Adele Wiseman and Jack Ludwig — recreate its presence. Even though Wiseman's first novel, *The Sacrifice*, is ostensibly set in Winnipeg, an invented

Mad Mountain dominates the unnamed city and assumes biblical proportions from the asylum of Law at Sinai. Ludwig's third novel, *A Woman of Her Age*, is set in Montreal and was originally subtitled "Down from the Mountain" since its opening focuses on Mount Royal's Lookout.

In "Literature and Ethnicity" Harvard ethnologist Werner Sollors comments that the tenement rooftop settings in Jewish-American writing function as stages its idylls and conflicts between Old World past and New World future, between Old and New Testaments, and betwixt harbour and crucifix — on magic mountains. Imagining Moses on a Canadian Sinai, Isaac spared on Moriah, and Noah saved on Ararat, last northern tribe gains added vision from the summit's blinding light. Through her dream telescope Miriam Waddington achieves this vision of a counter-apocalypse:

When this century  
rolls around  
to marvellous  
diverge zero  
it will be  
at the foot  
of a very old  
mosesmountain.

On a different level, the background of Covenant and Commandment obscures the Crucifixion. ■

## POETRY

### Last Chance

He ushered them all in hurriedly  
and wondered — had he done right?  
Why was he obeying the loud commands  
given in the dead of darkness?  
Why not abandon everyone  
to shriek and howl  
as the waves begin to rise  
and water rushes in  
to flush out mole, weasel and worm?  
Let everything drown.  
There will be no other time  
or need to bring down  
the doom of wrath.  
Whoever broke this upon us,  
let Him also starve  
into the abyss of despair —  
this is His last chance.

### Covenant

The rainbow we were supposed  
to behold the next day  
or the day after  
never appeared.  
Our eyes grew strained,  
our necks stiff,  
and the heavy ashen clouds  
settled over the hills and streams.  
The fish rose to the top  
and rolled over  
like silver bombers in manoeuvres.  
Who could believe it?  
No rainbow, no  
break of colour, no  
sign? Someone's forgotten  
we reasoned.  
And we began to pray  
for the cleansing rains again  
and the waves rising  
to wash our cities —  
friend's and foe's alike —  
with the green tow of return.

by Seymour Mayne

Seymour Mayne is a well-known Canadian poet, and acts as Poetry Editor of Viewpoints. He has lectured widely throughout Europe and Israel.

### The Bagel Factory

We have a yen for a bagel.  
Which to choose? The options  
weigh heavily on our mind:  
star-war decisions in  
a state-of-emergency cabinet.  
What smells! A mehiah!  
A shoe factory  
smells like leather.  
A garment factory  
smells like textiles.  
A glue factory  
smells like glue.  
Ah, but a bagel factory  
smells like heaven.  
With fingers sensitive  
as antennae, we poke and prod  
the crusty creatures.  
The baker manipulates  
his wooden sheba-board  
like a delicate button, coaxing  
exhalations of melodic fragrance.  
It's a gastronomic symphony.  
Flames lick the dough  
a succulent toasty color.  
Poppy seeds fan the air  
with oilyfactory zest.  
Time stops for a sniff.  
The finest Chablis wine could never  
compete with such a bouquet.  
Property values rise  
in the entire neighbourhood.  
The baker bakes, his red face  
gleaming in the light of the stove.  
He looks like a medieval cook  
pulling pies out of the oven  
for knights and ladies and their retinue.  
Clutching the warm bags and squeezing  
the delicious, fleshy rings of dough,  
we make our way out of the shop  
and back into the twentieth century.

by Mona Elaine Adilman

Mona Elaine Adilman is a well-known poet living in Montreal. Her work has been widely published in various countries. She has appeared in several previous issues of Viewpoints.