

The Image of the Local
in Early Modern
Canadian Poetry

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The Search for Local Representation

[. . .]

Lurid and lofty and vast it seems;
It hath no rounded name that rings,
But I have heard it called in dreams
The City of the End of Things.

Its roofs and iron towers have grown
None knoweth how high within the night,
But in its murky streets far down
A flaming terrible and bright
Shakes all the stalking shadows there,
Across the walls, across the floors,
And shifts upon the upper air
From out a thousand furnace doors;
And all the while an awful sound
Keeps roaring on continually,
And crashes in the ceaseless round
Of a gigantic harmony. . . (Lampman, 84)

Archibald Lampman's "City of the End of Things," which appeared in his last collection of poems entitled *Alcyone* (1899), is a fairly predictable example of how the emerging modern city had come to be predominantly abstracted as the overwhelming site of oppression and human degradation by the English-Canadian poets of the late nineteenth century. A similar condemnation of the evils of urban life had also been penned by Eustache Prudhomme, more than a quarter century earlier, in a poem entitled "A Night in the City" (1866).

The shadows drift over the city!
Smoke rises and spreads
Above the rooftops
In the vaporous and quiet air.
....

Here, the clamouring Impiety.
The loud voices of the passions
The nightly sounds of the orgy
Fill me with strange shivers;
...
For when the gloom
Unfurls itself over the city
It carries in its dismal folds
The symbol of humanity
Of man with his harmony
And that which troubles him
Of man with all his genius
Of man with all his nothingness.
... (Prudhomme 1866) ¹

Both of these early poems about the city reflect the moral indignation of Canadian poets in response to modernity's unrestrained appetite for social transformation, a disorienting phenomenon that Marx summed up succinctly in the now famous (and overused) phrase "All that is solid melts into air" (Marx-Engels, 476). For Canadian artists, both English and French, the real and tangible events of the modern experience would occur in the cities, and Montréal in particular, between 1920 and 1950. A few facts are instructive in this regard. It has often been noted that urbanization came late to Québec (P. Linteau et al. 1989). In 1921, more than half the population of the province lived in urban centres while by 1941, this number had risen to more than 60 per cent. This population was concentrated in Montréal with Québec City assuming an urban role of secondary importance. Already, by 1931, the population of Montréal alone comprised 36 per cent of the total population of the province and 61 per cent of its urban population. In spite of the tremendous social problems brought about by the economic crisis of the 1930s, including abject poverty, unemployment, and dismal living conditions for many who, in search for work, had either immigrated to the city from abroad or been part of the large scale rural exodus of the 1920s, Montréal still remained the industrial centre of the province to the extent that two-thirds of all industrial production in the province of Québec came from its factories, workshops, and other economic activities.

While the abstract poetic appeal to traditional moral values of the first Canadian urban poems might have satisfied polite Romantic sensibilities, the unprecedented transformations inscribed by urbanization and industrialization on the Canadian way of life demanded a new expressive order that could convey the existential realities of modern existence. Shunning the romantic

idealism of thematized Nature that had dominated nineteenth-century verse, the early modern poets, most of whom lived in Montréal, turned to what Louis Dudek aptly termed “contemporary realism” (Dudek 1968) and made their city one of the dominant recurring preoccupations in their work, an orientation which was described, somewhat belatedly, by Desmond Pacey as follows:

The world of slums, soda-fountains, and pool-parlors which the young Montréal poets such as Scott, Klein and Smith were introducing to poetry was a world of which he [Sir Charles G. D., Roberts] knew nothing; their temper of anxiety, anger or bitter scepticism was not and could not be his temper. (Pacey 1958)

In practical terms, this new “poetry of the city,” was shaped by the theories of Imagism and Vorticism in English and Fauvism, Cubism, and Surrealism in French, and these movements, which all focused on a distinctive effect of the modern experience, were successively assimilated into the emerging modern poetic discourse of the city. Central to all these expressive experiments was the gradual recognition of the aesthetic significance and creative usefulness of everyday practices and common places, what Pierre Bourdieu has termed the *habitus* and post-contemporary theorists refer to as *the local*.

This paper will examine how the idea of the local came to find expression, between 1920 and 1950, in early poetic texts about the city of Montréal. By examining the poetry of A.M. Klein, Jean Narrache and Clément Marchand, we can follow the singular intuition that animates this inquiry, namely that the discourse of the local, now so prevalent in the late-modern continental critical theory of Foucault (1974), Lyotard (1984), de Certeau (1984) and Lefebvre (1991), amongst others, is but the conceptual elaboration of the necessary relationship to the immanent exigencies of time and place upon which modern collective practices have come to ground themselves in their moment of signifying revelation. In other words, by carefully examining the texts before us, we can anticipate the theoretical articulation of a privileged order of resistance and opposition in the name of singularity and difference, and glimpse, however fleetingly, the ever-contested relationships to the lifeworld and community to which the poet must give voice in the name of alterity.

A.M. Klein - Illusory Communities and The Alchemy of Language

Most critical appraisals of A.M. Klein’s poetry tend to evaluate his work in terms of two distinct periods, commonly referred to as the Jewish period, during which he wrote *Hath Not a Jew...*, (1940), *The Hittleriad* (1944),

and *Poems* (1944), and what Tom Marshall identified as the “Canadian Period” (Marshall, 29), during which Klein’s most acclaimed and recognized poetry was published in *The Rocking Chair and Other Poems* (1948). Although each period can be seen to address a number of unique preoccupations and respond to particular cultural and intellectual exigencies and influences, it is possible nonetheless to view these as the ongoing development of certain themes, namely the relationship between the individual and his community, the social role and status of the poet, the questionable value and function of traditional cultural practices in the face of modernity’s relentless production of social crises, and the resulting emerging self-consciousness of individuals as historical beings. It is within this highly indeterminate web of intuitions, avocations, dismissals, and oversights that one can begin to glimpse Klein’s ambiguous conception of the local as an enduring devotion to faith, hope, and community bound by the irreducible filaments of a language that alienates as the condition of its own emancipation.

One of Klein’s great assets was his keen eye for the distinctiveness of social types, expressed in the tradition of English literary portraiture, the eighteenth-century concept, to quote Miriam Waddington, “of man in nature as the human aspect of landscape” (Waddington, 93) which sought, in the name of realism, to develop a wide variety of types within precisely articulated understanding of class, race or ethnicity, all distinct markers of community. For instance, one of Klein’s early poems, published in the *Haboneh* (Klein, 160) affords a richly intimate yet estranged commentary on the Jewish community of Boulevard St-Laurent, the Main, where the poet grew up. At first reading, there is a sensual, tactile, and almost visceral dimension to this poetic vision of a community frozen in the perennial chronotope of its immigrant existence, bound by traditions that transcend time and place in the expression of a collective will to presence.

It being no longer Sabbath, angels scrawl
The stars upon the sky; and Main Street thrives.
The butcher-shops are so many hives,
And full is every delicatessen stall.
Obese Jewesses, wheeling triplets, crawl
Along the gibbering thoroughfare. Fat wives
Lead little husbands, while the progeny dives
Among this corpulence in shouting frisky sprawl.
The whole street quivers with a million hums.
Hebraic arms tell jokes that are not funny.
Upon the corner stand the pool-room bums.
Most valiantly girl-taggers smile for money.

From out a radio loud-speaker comes:
O, *Eli, Eli, lama zabachthani!* (Klein, 29)

The last line, which translates as “My God, My God, why hath thou forsaken me” resonates, however, with the alienated pathos of incommensurate cultural ambiguities, at once the last anguished words of the Christian God on the cross and the refrain of a popular Yiddish song borrowed from the scriptures (Psalm 22.2), a reflection of the impossible cleavages that culture and religion impose on *being-with-others*, (thinking with Heidegger) and how language itself, the identity of local expression, is both the origin and limit of the communal.

While “Saturday Night” places the emphasis on the troubling ordinariness and predictability of everyday cultural practices and characters as the undoing of communal possibility, the poem “Autobiographical” (Klein, 89), composed nearly a decade later, evokes the enduring imprint of *communitas*, as Victor Turner has defined it, the crucible of personal identity and experience (Turner 1969), now imagined by the poet through “Space’s vapours and Time’s haze.” Here, the vision of the ideal “first” community is condensed, through the vagaries of reminiscence, to its irreducible symbols, characters, and sites.

Out of the ghetto streets where a Jewboy
Dreamed pavements into pleasant bible-land
Out of the Yiddish slums where childhood met
The friendly beard, the loutish Sabbath-goy,
Or followed proud, the Torah-escorting band,
Out of the jargonning city I regret,
Rise memories, like sparrows rising from
the gutter-scattered oats,
Like sadness sweet of synagogal hum,
Like Hebrew violins
Sobbing delight upon their eastern notes.

The enduring effect of dwelling as essential formative experience becomes a manifestation of the local, which transcends itself as it is spun into mythological tale and utopian vision. Basking in the sensual glow of memory, the ghetto streets are transformed into the promised bible-land, the spice cellar becomes a magical cave worthy of a thousand-and-one tales and the candy stores, bakeries, and fruit stalls that, in reality, speak to the poverty and duress of daily working class immigrant life of the thirties, now materialize as the reclaimed symbols of abundance and youthful desire, the promise of life itself which now falters in the inexorable condensing of human time into metaphor and apologue.

Again they ring their little bells, those doors
Deemed by the tender-year'd, magnificent:
Old Askenazi's cellar, sharp with spice;
The widows' double-parloured candy-stores
And nuggets sweet bought for one sweaty cent;
The warm fresh-smelling bakery, its pies,
Its cakes, its navel'd bellies of black bread;
The lintels candy-poled
Of barber-shop, bright-bottled, green, blue, red;
And fruit-stall piled, exotic,
And the big synagogue door, with letters of gold.

7

... Never was I more alive.
All days thereafter are a dying-off,
A wandering away
From home and the familiar. The years doff
Their innocence.
No other day is like that day. (Klein, 87-88)

The lost illusion of innocence and freedom returns as the failure of faith to redeem the everyday and rescue the experience of community from the dark embrace of reality, an impossible opening up of self to alterity through narrative and imagination. Esther Trépanier (1996), in her study of the Jewish painters of this period in Montréal, such as Louis Muhlstock, Jack Beder and Sam Borenstein, has proposed that, unlike their literary counterparts, they refused to paint the urban pathos, concentrating rather on the formal expressions of urban life as the play of light, colour, and geometry. She writes:

The absence of figures, and particularly of figures identifiable with the community also illustrates that these artist are, first and foremost, concerned with the geometric and atmospheric effects, the colours and the textures of these streets which, by the way, are not unique to the Jewish neighbourhood, but can be found downtown, in the west-end, in Point St-Charles, and so forth. (Trépanier, 183)

This observation, which has also been discussed by Pierre Nepveu in his study of the image of the city in Montréal's Jewish literature (Nepveu 1991), is telling because it offers insight into the expressive limitations of modern aesthetic practices as these encounter the specific horizons of cultural tolerance, habit, and even dogma. While it is possible to imagine Klein's

poem “Saturday Night” as the mimetic counterpart to Jack Bader’s “And by Night They Resume Their Existence” or “Scène de Café,” the preponderance of urban scenes painted at this time are of empty backstreets, laneways, and street corners, that is to say, a city without people, almost a non-place, *any city — anywhere* (Augé 1984). This practice not only illustrates the powerful universalizing imperative of modern aesthetic theories and practices on the plastic arts, evident in the global circulation and reproduction of similar concerns, conceits, and techniques (here one thinks of immigration as a determining factor in this process of reproduction and institutionalization of an expressive and interpretive normative order). It also foregrounds the unique ability of literature, of all the art forms, to speak the local as the intimate and irreducible relation between language and experience, a relationship which will prove highly significant in Klein’s mature work.

While it appears reasonable from the work cited to date to propose, as others have (Klein, xi), that Klein’s overdetermining theme is that of community, it is nonetheless a community of deeply divided political ambition and allegiance located at the intersection of seemingly incommensurate social forces and cultural interests. Indeed, Klein inherits and lives three literary traditions, Jewish, English, and Canadian, as well as two cultures, Jewish and English; and, in the words of Miriam Waddington, the poet inhabits, from birth, “a situation crowded with five languages” (Waddington, 7). This uniquely fateful configuration will, at once, endlessly frustrate the poet’s desire for recognition and acceptance because of the radical indeterminacy of its opening to alterity, while providing the ground and matter for his most significant and enduring work, an uncanny linguistic synthesis whose sheer poetic brilliance has certainly never been better imagined and expressed in (English-) Canadian literature. At the limit, therefore, Klein’s experience of community is a structure of exposure, an open communication that initiates a relation that cannot be thought in terms of the passions of historically defined existence or the metaphysics of subjectivity. It is not the subsistent common measure for being-in-common, but a liminal that asserts itself in its infinite resistance to a closure measured by the nearness of the word as it slowly traces out the defining horizon of its meaning.

Klein’s almost exclusive emphasis on Jewish themes and forms in his earlier writings has been taken by Pacey as a sign of deep religious faith (Pacey, 287) and by Dudek as a youthful commitment to traditional Jewish moral values based on “the idealism of a growing mind. . .” (Dudek 1950). For his part, John Sutherland described the tension in Klein’s poetry as the efforts of writing “against a tradition. . . from within it” (Sutherland 1946). As if answering the question himself, Klein wondered:

What does, what should a poet write about? Only about what he feels and what he knows. Borrowed emotions will not do. Unassimilated knowledge will not do. Rilke once made a pertinent and indeed very profound remark when he said that all poetry is an attempt to recapture one's youth and even one's childhood. For me that means recapturing the nostalgia and beauty of my childhood which was a Yiddish-speaking and Hebrew-thinking one. . . . The theology. . . has vanished but the tradition has remained. (Klein 1987, xiii)

Beyond those themes, which speak to the immanence of everyday Jewish cultural life in Montréal in the 1930s and 40s, it is the unique relationship to language itself that is constantly at stake in Klein's poetry following his insight that language not only expresses the world, but can also create it. The poet imagines what might be termed "a linguistic alchemy," the reciprocal *translation* of the culture of one community into the language of another, a dialectic at the heart of utterance, which Klein explains in the following terms:

One of the chief factors in the creation of poetry is language: my mind is full of linguistic echoes from Chaucer and Shakespeare, even as it is of the thought-forms of the prophets. . . (Klein 1987, xiii)

In view of his religious studies, Klein was certainly acquainted with *gematria*, the study of the Cabbala, in which new combinations of the numerical positions of the letters in the Hebrew alphabet are used to make new words and to generate new meanings as well as to uncover the hidden purpose of objects (Hall 1977). Implicit in this usage of the Cabbala is an understanding of the arresting or generative dimensions of magical practices and the tangible effect of words to contain and convey energy in the real world. While arresting magic refers to the imposition of spells to interrupt discourse, generative magic is oriented to the disruption and recreation of articulate power. The poet, forever questioning his role as visionary outcast and his expressive relationship to collective life, would certainly wish, much like the prophet or the sorcerer, to use his words to invoke the unseen in order to redress the balance of the seen. It is thus the "composing imagination" of the author who dreams the sympathetic magic inherent in the transmutation of linguistic symbolism into social action that allows Klein to pursue, in his own work, what he termed in referring to Joyce's *Ulysses*, the "completely successful literary merger of the values of two cultures" (Klein 1987, xi). Klein was, however, acutely conscious of the instrumental limitations and imperatives of everyday linguistic practices as these might thwart his project. In the poem "Basic English," he considers the English spoken around him, likely the hastily acquired ESL of immigrant exigency, with the stoic objectivity of

his disbelief and ironic despair. If the fundamental function of language, for the poet, is the cultivation of the human soul in the breath of utterance, then the debasement of the most basic currency of community as communication reveals an unbearable cultural danger against which the poet must respond, first in self-consciousness, then in expressive practice.

[. . .]

Exporters's argot, small talk of small trade,
The agent's slang
Bartering Beads
This is the very language of nursery blocks,
Pidgin palaver, grunt of Caliban
By no means the awaited syllables
For even lesser breeds.

Reducing motion to mere come and go,
Narrowing act,
To give and get,
Flowers no longer flower in the mind;
Fades from the eyes nuance; and eloquence
Sticks in the throat. The dumb are merely raised
To the inarticulate. (Klein 1997, 94)

Harsh words, which, no doubt, express a prophetic awareness of the destructive potential of global languages on the local expressive practices of autonomous cultural communities. In this moment of epiphany, one can imagine Klein's movement of empathic solidarity towards the French-Canadian culture, which much like his own had to constantly *travail* in the translatability of cultural difference through the forever inadequate medium of "other" languages. What better way, therefore, to avoid the vertiginous assimilating entropy of altering speech (speech that makes one "other") than to deploy one's mimetic imagination in the elaboration of new linguistic celebrations of imagined relationships whose hybridizing effects represent the triumph of distinctiveness rather than the acquiescence of commonality. In the introduction to one of the most eloquent expressions of this "thought-form," a poem entitled "Montreal," Klein explained:

Suiting language to the theme, the following verse, — as will be noted, is written in a vocabulary which is not exactly orthodox English. It is written so that any Englishman who knows no French, and any Frenchman who knows no English (save prepositions — the pantomime of inflection) can

read it intelligently. It contains not a word, substantive, adjectival, or operative, which is neither similar to, derivative from, or akin to a French word of like import; in short, a bilingual poem. (Klein 1997, 172-173)

The poem “Montreal,” as well as many others in the collection, represents what Québécois might ironically describe as “*un tour de phrase*,” an expressive *détournement* intended to force language to turn on itself in search of its originary intent and meaning. Here, one need only think in terms of Plato’s mimetic theory of language, cratylism, reconceived in terms of Gerard Genette’s mimologism, in which the real is reproduced through a signifier that resembles the thing that it designates, either through the relationship of analogy, trace, sympathy, or signature (Genette 1995).

1
O city metropole, isle riverain!
Your ancient pavages and sainted routs
Traverse my spirit’s conjured avenues!
Splendor erabic of your promenades
Foliates there, and there your maisonry
Of pendent balcon and escalier’d march,
Unique midst English habitat,
is vivid Normandy!

5
Such your suaver voice, hushed Hochelaga!
But for me also sound your potentices,
fortissimos of sirens fluvial,
Bruits of manufactory, and thunder
From foundry issuant, all puissant tone
Implenishing your hebdomad; and then
Sanct silence and your argent belfries
Clamant in Orison! (Klein 1997, 89-91)

At first glance, the poem is not so much incomprehensible as estranging, words suspended in the amorphous chiasmus of their own language game, frozen between the communicative exigencies of two alienated communities, and one is struck with a certain childlike wonder that follows the mind’s halting movement through word-play and image. In the silence of reading, the uncanny promise of the utterance is only half-fulfilled and one is compelled, however reluctantly, to voice aloud the mysterious intonations and rhythms of the text, line by line, over and over, until the transcendent imperative of

community that lies at the limit of speech inscribes the ecstasy of language with the passion of alterity. As Nancy reminds us, “only a discourse of community, exhausting itself, can indicate the sovereignty of its sharing,” that is to say, the other, who is always community, appears in the consciousness of the experience of sharing at the limit of language (Nancy 1991, 23).

Forever attuned to the dynamic and aleatory principles of expressive contingencies, the poet’s meditation on the nature of alienated modern existence, as the ephemera of collective displacement, is fascinated by the chatter of foreign tongues, each rich with the animus of discarded origin articulated to the destiny of impossible destination. The city resonates with the promise of meaning to come; open to the world, it is the living expression of community’s universal desire and longing for the intimacy of reciprocated speech unfurled in organic communion with its own essence.

4

Grand port of navigations, multiple
The lexicons uncargo’d at your quays,
Sonnant though strange to me; but chiefest, I,
Auditor of your music, cherish the
Joined double-melodies vocabulaire
Where English vocable and roil Ecosic,
Mollified by the parle of French
Bilinguifact your air! (Klein 1997, 90)

Beyond the arrested dialectic of form inscribed to function, poised between effect and meaning, the poet, now more landscape than ever,² invokes place and time as the enduring testimony for his solitary existence, affirming the dream of belonging that always haunted his fragile relation to dwelling.

6

You are part of me, O all your quarters —
And of dire pauvreté and of richesse —
To finished time my homage loyal claim;
You are locale of infancy, milieu
Vital of institutes that formed my fate;
And you above the city, scintillant,
Mount Royal, are my spirit’s mother,
Almative, poitrine! (Klein 1997, 91)

By the time he had completed his last book of poetry, entitled *Rocking Chair and Other Poems* (1948), Klein’s mature poetic speech had fully

developed an ethical vision which demanded that he both express the essence of local affinities, his own and others, on their own terms, as well as confront their limitations and failings. Only by addressing the fear of change and the acceptance of loss that subvert the redemptive energy of collective speech could the poet hope to fulfil, in the face of ongoing historical dismissal and personal betrayal, the project of self-creation he had undertaken. Because of the complex and often contradictory nature of his relationships with the various cultural and linguistic traditions and practices that he had inherited and embraced, Klein's poetic contributions to Canadian literature have always been considered a curiosity of secondary importance, never quite managing to fully claim the imagination of any of his would-be elective communities. Not Jewish, nor English, nor seemingly Canadian enough, Klein's work is exemplary of the paradoxical effect of the idea of the local on aesthetic practice, undone, in the end, by the very particularities and specificities of insight, intuition, and immanent expression that celebrate difference as the necessary closure of community to alterity. Forever the reluctant modernist setting forth from the ground of maintained traditions, Klein's vision of poetry as the moment and site when the translatability of individual experience might occur freely across the autonomous imaginations of cultural divides was summed up by the poet as follows:

Certainly, in a world where one culture impinges upon another, and where time and space have been considerably constricted, it is not surprising that the synthesis should be attempted. (Klein 1977, xiv)

The measure of the success or failure of Klein's project lies not, in the end, with the poet's ability to express the universalizing conceit of the modernist imperative or to unveil the hermetic thinking of disparate communities; rather, it lies in the way that his intimate experience of the local as language game (Lyotard 1984), *habitus* (Bourdieu 1990), and conflict and dislocation (de Certeau 1984; Lefebvre 1991) calls the reader forth beyond herself to the experience of freedom that the recognition of alterity inflicts on community.

Jean Narrache - Clément Marchand ·

The Urban Space and Place of Desire and Despair

The transition to modern forms of poetic expression from more traditional ones obviously belongs to a larger discursive project intended to rewrite the lifeworld in terms of the existential imperatives of newness, change, and transformation articulated to the social exigencies of distinctive cultural communities. As such, the very conception of what constituted modern

forms of poetic expression were (and still are) divided primarily, like the city of Montréal itself, along linguistic lines inscribed to ongoing cultural practices and traditions. For this reason, the idea of the local assumes a unique cultural significance as the ever-changing expression of particular collective relationships to the specificities of place. As dwelling, the local is understood as an irreducible ethics of *belonging-with-others*, however different “they” might appear to be. As we turn to the urban poetry of some of A.M. Klein’s French-Canadian contemporaries, Narrache and Marchand, we will now consider how the idea of the local might exist in the *translation* of elective affinities, a transformative movement across cultural and linguistic liminals, from the deeply reassuring habitus of tradition to the unsettling circumstances of modernity as these infix the localization of urban spaces.

The social consciousness that was evident in A. M. Klein’s more engaged poetry about Québec and Montréal was, itself, part of a more sustained trans-cultural critique of modernity, which identified the city with the degradation of human living conditions and the irreducible loss of traditional values and beliefs. Two poets, with widely divergent styles and approaches, became identified as the French-Canadian voices of poetic protest in a social environment that had, until then, showed little patience for opposition or dissent. In 1932, Émile Codère, under the pen name Jean Narrache, published *Quand j’ parl’ tout seul* followed in 1939 by *J’ parl’ pour parler* (Narrache 1961). The first slim volume of polemical and political satires, illustrated by Jean Pallardy, became a phenomenal success and the first printing of one thousand copies sold out within a month of its publication. There followed successive editions that brought total sales to six thousand copies, a figure hitherto unprecedented in the Québec publishing industry which was particularly hard hit by the Great Depression. Codère’s work was significant on two fronts: first, it expressed moral indignation at the bourgeoisie’s exploitation of the working classes by identifying it as the cause of the current abject social conditions of the disenfranchised, particularly in the city, offering a dissenting public voice, which until then had been largely absent from French-Canadian literature. Second, this “poeticized” social critique, viewed through recognizable popular events, scenes, and characters, was expressed in a “new language” that approximated the popular vernacular of the people it sought to represent, although still set in traditional metered rhyming verse. Focusing on the plight of the destitute from their own perspective Codère was a self-proclaimed “*poète du trottoir*” rather than “*du Terroir*.” Jean Narrache described his writing as:

...the cry of beggars for whom life is a perpetual crisis rather than a momentary one; the cry of those that no one listens to; the cry of those whose complaint,

either bantering or resigned, remains without echo in a society which doesn't seem to care. (Narrache 1993, 23)

As one might expect from such a populist approach, many of the themes and ideas of Jean Narrache's two seminal volumes of poetry *Quand j'parle tout seul* (1932) and *J'parle pour parler* (1937) are oriented to the everyday practices and beliefs of his imaginary constituency. In "Les Bals de Charité," the poet reflects on the hypocrisy of so-called benevolent social events where the cost for the dress of a society matron could feed an entire family through the winter (Narrache 1993, 63-64). Little escapes the ironic poetic commentary of Narrache. Reflecting on *La Fête de l'Armistice* (Armistice Day), the poet notes how the casket of the unknown soldier is covered in wreaths while those who survived and returned from the war are left to die in misery and poverty (Narrache, 66).

A typical urban poem by Jean Narrache might focus on an evening walk in a run-down working-class neighbourhood and contain empathetic observations of an ordinary working-class family's attempt to escape the stifling heat of their dwelling by sitting in their backyards (Narrache, 77-78). In this poem, as in most of his work, the poet captures in verse a certain inexorable fatalism, which seems to have overcome the French lower-working class in Québec ever since the Conquest, a numbing admixture of defeatism and defiance directed towards a seemingly inescapable impoverished form of existence; a class-bound attitude that was fostered, in great part, by the Catholic Church's teachings regarding the docile acceptance of one's lot in life in exchange for the rewards of the hereafter. Projecting his own version of "common-sense" populist psychology onto his subjects, Narrache describes, in this case, a couple watching, from their front porch, their "*marmaille ... sal's pis morveux*" (brats... dirty and full of snot) play at the corner of the street as the sun sets, the poet imagines their thoughts and feelings now enclosed "[d]ans l'*silenc' d'un rêve abruti*" (in the silence of a broken-down dream). This small scale and intimate portrait of urban life, imbued as it is for the poet with the realism of the conditions of working class existence is, nonetheless, in the words of the author, "*c'tableau plein de vie réelle/ Du bonheur simpl' du travailleur...*" (a scene filled with real life/ With the simple happiness of the worker) and the expression of hope against all odds. The reader, of course, is left to interpret the poem's apparent emotional contradictions in light of their own inclinations and experience, a subjective position that Narrache again and again cleverly exploits to its full potential.

Jean Narrache also engages in more universal thematic approaches to urban living, using, for example, one of the main streets of Montréal, in

“Soir D’Hivers dans la Rue Ste-Catherine,” as the stage for an elaborate and sophisticated piece of social analysis (Narrache, 19-23). As with his other work, we are immediately conscious of the formal qualities of the poem, first, linguistically, in the use of everyday working-class language as well as in terms of the traditional structure of the poem itself, composed in rhyming quatrain interrupted, from time to time, by similarly rhyming octets. These two formal qualities are intended to play against each other in a text that speaks, above all else, of the street as the site where social classes come face-to-face, a unique spatial feature of urban life where difference and distinction commingle and clash, if only on their way to somewhere else. The street is seen as a conduit, a portal, even perhaps, in Augé’s sense, a non-place, of movement and momentary kinetic ambiguity whose users are eventually indexically organized as social type articulated to particular destinations (Augé 1995). Taverns, shops, restaurants, and clubs are all metonyms for local practices and activities, which, in turn, are markers of distinctions in social status within a specific and specified historical period: modernity. Consequently, the street is full, as well, of the expected material signifiers of class and progress, such as automobiles, buses, crowds and films, storefronts and businesses. In this sense, Ste-Catherine Street becomes the generic big-city main street where, to paraphrase Baudrillard, everything and nothing are possible at once (Baudrillard 1983). It is the metaphor for the polymorphous aspirations as well as unforgiving deprivations of modern existence, a place whose only redemption, for the author, is to be found in the adherence to traditional values and practices, hence the idealistic young couple presented at the end of the poem with bittersweet irony, entranced by the domestic utopia of their window shopping.

Because of its singular and unforgiving concern with the social conditions and the lived experiences of the poor and the working class in the crucible of the modern city of Montréal, Jean Narrache’s poetry shares many themes, insights and intuitions with the work of A. M. Klein. Obviously, there are differences between both authors, resulting from the exigencies of their individual cultural and religious environments and traditions. While Narrache still speaks of the local from the external perspective of a middle-class observer, however well intentioned, it is the internal optic of Klein’s discourse that compels us, as readers, to imagine the transformative power of alterity on individual and community, that is to say, the possibility of change that occurs from the inevitable encounter with the alien other. As well, while both poets’ use of language is highly imaginative and succeeds in approximating everyday speech as the medium for poetic discourse, Narrache’s primary concern is with the mimetic accuracy of his rendition of working-class pater while Klein, in his later poems, circumvents the strictures

of accepted enunciation and grammar in order to attain, if only for an instant, a truly emancipated moment of communication as the ground of all imagined community.

Clément Marchand is the second significant poet of dissent of this period and his book entitled *Les Soirs Rouges*, published in 1947, has been acclaimed, by Claude Beausoleil and others, as the first sustained poetic engagement with the modern city and the plight of modern urban existence. This collection of poems, many of which were written during the Great Depression, takes a profoundly nihilistic view of the psychological toll of progress and change on urban dwellers, and expresses many of the same concerns that the sociologists, philosophers, and psychologists of the period were voicing regarding the increasingly anomic state of collective life. The first poem of the book, "Prelude," is a nostalgic look back at a lost way of life, the life of traditional values and beliefs found in the small village of his youth, an evocation of the idea of the local as memory and loss. Marchand writes:

I will live the bitter life of cities,
Where new certainties are elaborated;
My voice will blend with the cries of the crowds
And I will share in their deadened anguish. (Marchand 2000, 35)

In the second poem of the collection, "Les Prolétaires," factory workers are the social actors whose very existence is absorbed and irreducibly transformed by their lived environment, a social order to which they must now fatefully orient, their hopes dashed and their dreams silenced by the inhumanity of the mechanistic imperatives of urban life. "These fallen kings" who were once seduced "in a moment of mindless vertigo" are now haunted by the clear memory of the earth that they once abandoned (Marchand, 42-45).

The first part of the book contains three more sections: "Cri des Hommes," "Vie d'un Quartier" and "Soir à Montréal." In these long poems, the city is presented as an evil character who continuously seeks to trap its inhabitants with the contradictory urban forces of attraction and repulsion, seduction and inevitability, promise and deception, alienation and solidarity. In "Cri des Hommes," the author imagines a spontaneous uprising of workers who, driven to despair and filled with hatred, undertake the violent ravaging of "the prodigious body of the monstrous city" (Marchand, 53). There follows a moment of mad solidarity during which the crowd, fuelled by the lust for revenge, seeks out in the ruined bounty of its rampage, the vestiges of the humanity still believed to have once been the great soul of the city (Marchand, 57).

Much like Jean Narrache, Marchand intuits that "*le quartier*" is the birthplace of the city and its only remaining hope for humanism. Marchand

therefore complements his longer poems of social dissent with a series of short sketches in which local characters, places, and moments become the metaphorical, not to say metaphysical, expressions for the life of a neighbourhood as experienced by its inhabitants (Marchand, 51-78). “Les Veillards,” “Les Boutiquiers,” “Dans Un Parc,” “Le Port,” “Fin d’Hiver” and “Les Cloches” are all vignettes in which ordinary individuals go about their everyday affairs in the shadow of the towering metropolis, offering, through the particularity of their actions, insights not only into the universality of the modern human condition but the necessity of living one’s life according to the elective affinities of local communities. This recognition of the necessity of developing and sustaining neighbourhoods as the organizing principles of collective urban life precedes the particular version of the local that will be proposed by Jane Jacobs and other progressive urban theorists in the last third of the twentieth century; it also connects, as *portraits de moeurs*, at the levels of form and idea, of sentiment and execution, with a number of Klein’s poems in *The Rocking Chair and Other Poems*, such as “The Cripples,” “For the Sisters of the Hotel Dieu,” “University de Montréal,” and “Political Meeting,” to name a few (Klein, 1997). Marchand’s poems are disguised as fables and morality tales where the shopkeeper, whose business has been sacrificed to the market of mass-produced goods, and the now-fragile pensioners who meet daily in the park, “accomplices in the same art of longevity” (Marchand, 70) regardless of their respective individual differences, all agree that:

... The world is in a pretty sad state.
Society is in shambles, too bad!
And the fate of the old universe,
In this century of unwanted change
Seems dangerously committed. (Marchand, 71)

Finally, in “Soir à Montréal,” the poet personally interpellates the city, becoming its aggressive interlocutor on behalf of an enslaved and alienated humanity. The entire poem bristles with the radical ambiguity of urban images and rhythms that first appear celebratory and then come to be understood as the occluding indices of antinomic forces. In a particular moment of feverish clarity, the author condemns the “urban hive” while paradoxically marvelling at its vitality and overwhelming power (Marchand, 84). The poetic imagery that Marchand employs in describing the city only further exacerbates the inexorable tension between the observer’s awed attraction to the social facts of modernity, a dazzling phenomenology of light, speed, and furious sound where “The heavy and massive sounds collide

in the air/The sharp whistles, the grinding of metal/Set the tempo for the dizzying whirling of the worlds” (Marchand, 84-85), and the social critic’s dire condemnation of its repulsive faults and nefarious effects. The city is the place where “life explodes in the light of the triumphant night” as well as the succubus who “with one hand, ministers to reason. . .” while “with the other, poisoning the heart” (Marchand, 87). It is a “Monstrous city,” “a voluptuous city,” “a city of deception” who, in spite of herself, still heralds the unfulfilled promises of emancipation, dignity, and freedom that, perversely, have now become its most seductive yet impossible features (Marchand, 53-55). Finally, in the image of the crowd, always moving, always excited and unpredictable, Marchand connects with, perhaps, the singular major symbolic trope of modernity, an image which, from Lebon, through Simmel, Freud, Baudelaire, and Benjamin, has haunted, with its alienated entropy, a collective whose imaginary is oriented to its own subjectivity, identity, and polysemic versions of individuated agency.³

Local Displacements

The intuition that guided this paper was that the idea of the local, a term which has most recently entered the lexicon of postmodern critique to mean, amongst other things, the reactionary nostalgia of lost community (Young 1990), the ethos of reclaimed cosmopolitanism (Massey 1994), or the anomic dispossession of hypermodern urban spaces (Davis 1988; Augé 1995) was, in fact, an interpretative rearticulation, albeit compromised, of the age-old conceptions of place and community, the uniquely transient chronotopic configurations that speak to the temporal and spatial contingencies of embodied existence as these are continuously re-etched on the expressive order of collective life. In this sense, in spite of the current rhetoric of absence and longing, the idea of the local remains the referent of origin, the locus of the desire for permanence and the reminder of the permanence of desire. The idea of the local, as place, reclaims the experience of dwelling from the restless ebb and flow of everyday occurrence and activity. At the intersection of space and memory, place appears as the existential engagement to the lifeworld, which seduces difference from unreflexive conformity. Heidegger’s conception of sameness is instructive in this regard, proposed as the “belonging together of what differs by a gathering by way of the difference.” Thus, it is only in the “carrying out and settling of differences that the gathering nature of sameness comes to light” (Heidegger 1975, 218-219). It is the fate of place, therefore, to be haunted by estranging intimacies, to offer the comforting illusion of stasis and consistency even as the numinous is revealed in the most ordinary and commonplace thought or action. The

local as place, is both practice and relationship, activity and understanding; it is the enduring epistemology of the familiar borne out of the indistinct entropy of routine and repetition. The “lure of the local,” to use Lucy Lippard’s phrase (Lippard 1997), speaks to a sense of place that has always confounded destination with destiny and transformation with identity, it is the will to belong forged from the sensuous kinaesthetic work of topography on the weary subject of the eternal return.

Notes

- 1 For better or for worse, all translations of poetic texts from French to English are mine, unless otherwise indicated.
- 2 This reference alludes to Klein's avowedly most famous poem entitled "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape" in which the poet examines his anonymous existence with bitter irony and self-deprecation. Taken by many to represent Klein's *ars poetica*, the poem is the expression not only of the alienating imperatives of his poetic vocation, but a meditation on the estranging effects of modernity on the expressive relationship of individual to community (Klein 1997, 99-101).
- 3 Each of these authors has discussed, in his own manner, "the crowd" as the prototypical modern phenomenon of urban existence and expressed varying concerns and interests regarding this type of social formation. With Lebon, it is the unpredictability of the crowd and its ability to be incited to irrational action through the deployment of powerful symbols and imagery that concerns the author. Freud will expand on Lebon's fears by focusing on the role of the leader in these amorphous types of social formations. While Simmel focuses on the effects of urban living, identifying the "blasé" attitude as one of its dominant features, both Baudelaire and Benjamin, each in their own way, will celebrate the anonymizing effect of the crowd. See G. Lebon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (Unwin, Ltd., 1925); S. Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, trans. James Strachey (International Psychoanalytic Press, 1922), 98-109; G. Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans. Kurt H. Wolff (New York: The Free Press, 1950), 409-424; C. Baudelaire, *Flowers of Evil and Other Works*, trans. Wallace Fowlie (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1963); W. Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire*, trans. Harry Zohn (London and New York: Verso, 1992).

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