Space and Memory Construction in Robert Majzels's *City of Forgetting*

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Positioning and background

Robert Majzels belongs to a generation of writers that belong to what Linda Leith calls the Québec "Anglo-Literary Revival" (151) in the 1990s. Majzels notes,

> […] the particular situation of English-language writers in Québec opens up opportunities for a vigorous life affirming artistic practise, a radical attention to language, to the way it constructs us and our possible relationship to the world. The search for a way or ways to explore this opportunity has been the work of a persistent if small minority within the minority of English-language writers in Québec. And that exploration has produced a number of valuable textual experiments deploying a variety of writing strategies and concerns. For several years, I have thought of myself as part of that minority-within-a-minority. … I accept as normal the fact of being marginalized within the anglophone community, and viewed with a mixture of bemusement and suspicion by the francophone majority. (67)

A large number of the authors who are part of the "Anglo-Literary Revival" find their inspiration in the multifaceted character of Montreal; the portrayal of the city is often the focus of their interest following their predecessors, who include Mordecai Richler, Leonard Cohen, Hugh Hood, and Scott Symon. Silenced both, in and outside Québec, the authors are part of the "Anglo-Literary Revival" deserving more attention among them David Homel, Gail Scott, Marianne Ackerman, Ann Charney, Ann Diamond, and John Brooke who have often been sparked by the city of Montreal. Sherry Simon reminds us, "Increasing diversity in the representations of cultural space [urban space] reflects the plurality of discourses and interests which seek expression within the borders of Quebec culture" ("Its Values" 167). In a similar vein, Justin D. Edwards and Douglas Ivison contend, "There is a tradition of urban writing within Canadian literature that requires more attention if the perception of Canadian literature is to change, if Canadian literature is to seem more relevant to those of us living and reading *cities*" (8; emphasis added).

Robert Majzels's novel, *City of Forgetting* (1997) under scrutiny here, is a good example of urban writing in Quebec. Leith observes, "Caught up as no other English-Canadian writers have been caught up in the maelstrom of change, and

living as no other Canadian-English Canadian writers live in a society with a French face, these writers have produced a body of work distinct in some ways from other contemporary English-Canadian fiction" ("Marginality" 95). Powerful and particular distinctiveness is undoubtedly one of the characteristic features of Majzels's highly engaging novel.

Majzels, interestingly enough, situates himself between the two famous solitudes, English and French, by maintaining the status of Barbarophones "those folks from Asia Minor whose speech, to Greek ears, was an incomprehensible *bara bara*" (qtd. in Moyes "Unexpected" 168). This remark echoes his statement about the intriguing stance of his being part of a minority within a minority. He may as well refer to his uncommon writing technique that for most readers is, indeed, a hard task to unravel; the 159-page *City of Forgetting* has 155 notes to it. The text navigates different places and spaces, in order to help the potential readers, Majzels places a simplified map of a particular area of Montreal to be discovered in the course of the novel on the very first page. Graham Huggan says,

> The map as an icon is usually situated at the frontispiece of the text, directing the reader' attention towards the importance of geographical location in the text that follows, but also supplying the reader with a referential guide to the text. The map operates as a source of information but, more importantly, it challenges the reader to match his/her experience of the text with the 'reality' represented by the map. The map, in this sense, supplies an organizational principle for the reading of the text […] (24).

Maps have often been used in world literature and their significance is commented upon in a multitude of ways by authors and critics alike. J.B. Harley, for example, notes, "As mediators between an inner mental world and an outer physical world, maps are fundamental in helping the human mind make sense of its universe at various scales" (1). City of Forgetting reaches far beyond the mere description of the city yet its philosophical concerns are deeply embedded in the cityscape, therefore the map in the novel is a legitimate tool to help understand the process of exploring the emotional and affective implications around which the text unfolds.

Ambivalent mapping of the metropolis

My aim is to demonstrate the idiosyncrasies of Majzels's reading of the city of Montreal. His approach to the city is based rather on verticality in contrast with

the common, horizontal and roughly West (Anglophone) and East (Francophone) division of the metropolis with the by now multicultural Boulevard St. Lawrence (The Main) in the middle. His vision focuses on Mount Royal and from there on towards downtown, the old city and the waterfront. Right at the very beginning of the novel, our attention is called to Mount Royal together with its famous cross on top, overlooking the city: "To her right, on a crest facing the east: Mount Royal's cross, a Tatlinesque monument of steel girders outlined in electric white light and suspended in space above the city" (9). The cruciform configuration occupies a particular position all through the novel, it evokes places in the metropolitan complexity in multifarious ways. Most of the novel's spatial markers are not ideology free. According to Simon, "Tatlinesque" refers to "The celebrated project by Vladimir Tatlin for a leaning, transparent tower symbolized the idealism of the Third International, and its pretensions to a universality as vast that sought by the builders of the tower of Bable. [...] Majzels's reference to the Tatlin tower disengages the cross from religious imagery and redefines it as a symbol of 'The Idea'" ("Translating" 195-6). What is more, Tatlin's tower was never built; thus Majzels subverts what originally was meant as a religious symbol, set up in 1924, atop the mountain.

Instead, he fills this place by a group of squatters in ragged clothes living in "makeshift shelter (s) patched together from scraps of wood and tin and branches. The forest is dotted with perhaps a dozen similar constructions [...]" (13). Lianne Moyes suggests, "Following Foucault, the camp might be called a heterotopia, that is, a real, socially-defined space, distinct from a utopia and capable of holding within it several incompatible times and spaces" (Foucault 24-6) ("Homelessness" 132). Indeed, these weird fictional characters inhabiting the creepy and ghastly place turn themselves into ambiguous historical figures, among them Lady Macbeth, Le Corbusier, Che Guevara, de Maisonneuve, and Suzy Creamcheez. The text consists of unrelated narratives but it is hyper-realistic at the same time; the author's detailed portrayal of the mountain top is indeed a faithful and genuine representation of the original sight. It is here that these freaky people leisurely loaf around the Belvedere, the lookout and the Chalet while constantly being watched by the ever-returning helicopters zooming in on them from above: "A helicopter circles above them (the small group of people) and back over the downtown traffic" (95). Their homelessness is a lived experience but as Moyes suggests it is also the metaphor of exile ("Unexpected" 171). She adds, "This homelessness is metaphorical (there is no place for their emancipatory narratives in the late twentieth century Montreal) but it is also very real (theirs are the local struggles of finding food and shelter, and fighting to survive)" ("Homelessness" 122). Maude Lapierre, however, emphasizes that they "form a fluid and mobile commu-

nity" ("Miscomprehension"). Yes, indeed, they live on top of the mountain but they often descend to the inner city that is constantly being scrutinized by them from above: "Slowly and with an exaggerated air of nonchalance, Suzy saunters along the crescent's edge, stretching her arms like some morning jogger casually surveying the city" (11). They need to explore the horrid, dismal but money-saving possibilities offered by the inner city: "Meanwhile, within the very core of a few safe havens, the hungry, the destitute, without work or dignity, with neither heat nor clean water, jammed together in the wretched hovels of the inner city, begging for scraps with their backs against the shop windows and their eyes on the passing indifference of the rich" (20). Majzels explains,

> The homeless are real people and if you write about homeless people you face the difficulty of doing it without objectifying them. I did not want to escape that problem. I wanted to indicate it. Tying them to real people is a way of indicating that homelessness is not an abstract idea, that I recognize I am appropriating a condition which is real, physical and horrible in our city. ("Interview" 132)

The homeless' lives are: "Caught between the cross and the city below. Crossed out, double-crossed, transported, collected, condemned to scrabble up and down this Mount-Royal, this worn-down mountain, really no more than a muddy hill, a city's shrugging shoulder" (15). All of them are examples of *la flânerie*; while following their meanderings along the streets the reader gains a comprehensive insight into the cityscape, thus the city itself is turned into one of the major characters, the urban space appears as a collective protagonist. Suzzy spends much of her time downtown collecting garbage, begging for money and in a way entertaining herself: "So she's been scavenging. Probably there is no house, no place to go. ... Running through the streets, running from what? From the law. Outlaw's legs" (35-6). While she is running away from the police a large and detailed section of the city appears in front of the readers' eyes. She runs on Duluth towards Hôtel-de-Ville, "left down treeless Coloniale, leaving les bains Coloniale behind her, fleeing wildly now thinking cutting back east for a couple of blocks on Roy to Laval dodging through more traffic across l'avenue des Pins to Prince Arthur the cobblestones and restaurant terraces and a sudden halt to face with Lady Macbeth" (79). Moyes observes, "The novel's characters are recognizable as homeless people from the streets of Montreal, for example, the woman [Lady Macbeth] who plays the harmonica on Prince Arthur or the man who travels on a tricycle with a dog, a cat and a rack of prints and paintings. Theirs are the local, everyday struggles of

finding food and shelter, and fighting to survive" ("Homelessness" 126). Suzzy spots Lady Macbeth on Prince Arthur where she usually plays her harmonica: "Clutching her harmonica between her lips and two fingers, she plays whether the street is full or empty. Plays for no one, least of all herself" (33). The almost plotless novel abounds in very long, detailed descriptions of certain parts/neighborhoods in the city that remind us of a possible surrealistic filmic representation of Montreal. Simon notes, "Majzels's characters are too self-observed to take full advantage of their wanderings in the city" ("Translation" 200). It is the readers' task to grasp the meaning/s of "the jumble of spaces" (Simon "Translating" 200) they traverse. While strolling in the city, they occasionally bump into each other either recognizing the other or not; they live after all in a "city of forgetting" that is lost in time, where many people's mental state is deeply disturbed. Simon notes, "the characters mark out their particular territories in the city below" [Mount Royal] ("Translating" 197). These drifting people create their own spaces to survive in particular, neighbourhoods that they tend to regularly return to.

Le Corbusier, a most famous modernist architect, urban planner, and Chomdey de Maisonneuve, first governor of Montreal, have their close but separate shabby dwellings in Old Montreal at the waterfront. Both of them are aware of the often rising water but they react differently; while La Corbusier is very busy with his drafting table, de Maisonneuve relentlessly prays. His favourite spot is close to Pointe-à-Callière, a museum of archaeology and history that was founded in 1992 as part of the 350th anniversary of Montreal's birthday. This place should not go unnoticed; Domenic Beneventi views it as "a richly layered symbolic space that has effectively effaced the Native settlement of Hochelaga beneath it and reproduced it for tourist consumption" (118). This is where the third governor of Montreal, Louis-Hector de Callière, who played a most important role in the Iroquois war, used to live. It is not by chance that this is on this site that de Maissoneuve says: "Faith is our only weapon" (22). It is the old port from where they start out to move around the city but with different purposes: "Le Corbusier collects things. But not just anything; he searches out the geometrical forms of standardized objects [...]" (23). He thinks, "Man is a geometrical animal!" (24). The shape of the objects he is after assumes great significance; this structuring motif renders places significant for him and it is critical to the text. His well-known invention of the *Modulor* is a controlling metaphor over the course of the novel and notably in Chapter 22 called *The Average Hero* fully devoted to architectural discourse. The modulor signifying a possible scale of architectural proportions based primarily on the proportion of the human body is not only seriously questioned but also unanimously refused by the characters; thus Le Corbusier's design philosophy turns out to be deficient. Therefore, his imagined "Radiant City" (27) that would have had a

cruciform shape, too, is doomed to failure implying that both modern architectural perceptions and older religious concerns are out of place in our present world. Neither of them can impose order on our contemporary urban life. Beneventi safely suggests, "Indeed, Le Corbusier's unwavering faith in the Modular (sic) and in the geometric city is undermined by a scene in which he becomes disoriented in Montreal's maze of shopping malls and commercial displays; the great architect of international modernism becomes a prisoner in the urban labyrinth" (118). The shopping mall referred to is the cruciform Place Ville-Marie: "Soon he is lost in a maze of boutiques. As far as he can tell he is still in the east block of the cruciform, but there is no way of knowing for sure" (66). He is trapped by the architectural design, the cruciform shape, that he thinks is the ideal for survival in the future. Moyes remarks, "Le Corbusier becomes a walking contradiction who speaks and thinks in terms of standardization, social order and private property yet who has no access to the technologies or positions of influence needed to realize his plans" ("Homelessness" 130).

Le Corbusier's neighbour, de Maisonneuve, also roams the city in order to be able to carry his cross up to the mountain. The heaviness of this burden upon his shoulders is repeatedly emphasized and it looms large all through the text.

> The crucifix itself is a jumble of metal, plastic, wood and glass, patched together with wire and rope, tin tubing from an oil furnace, half a car fender and a strip of blown tire, slices of broken window pane, brown-leafed branches scavenged from a dying maple, busted bits of recycling bin, the jagged pole of a stop sign... Standing straight up, it measures almost a metre across the more than two metres high, but de Maisonneuve will be resting the crossbeam on his shoulder and dragging the long stem behind. (73)

It is not only the weight but the impurity of the material/s that the cross is made from that questions the purpose of this "broken" (88) pilgrimage. Like a disoriented tourist guide, zig-zagging across the city, minutely and recognizably delineated, de Maisonneuve is flabbergasted and frustrated when he realizes that his statue on Place d'Armes represents him as "the vain feathered Governor" (75) instead of the missionary he persistently and assuredly claims himself to be; the differences are instructive. His (ambivalent) duty, he assumes, is that of converting people without governing them. However, Sieur de Maisonneuve's discourse is the most overtly colonizing, since his desire to convert First Nation populations to Christianity assumes that his religion is superior to theirs (Lapierre "Miscomprehension").

Furthermore, he keeps hearing Mohawk prayers all through his journey wherever he happens to be in the city and they, through memory flashbacks, bewilderingly haunt him. As Moyes contends, "that Mohawk systems of belief haunt de Maisonneuve in *contemporary* Montreal suggests that the latter systems of belief come before and continue after the moment of European settlement on the island" (186; emphasis original). Lapierre goes even further when he notes, "the Mohawk voices Sieur de Maisonneuve hears adds another layer of meaning to the symbol of the cross, interpreting it as a sign 'of vengeance and murder' (139) and not the act of faith and foundation it is supposed to represent" ("Miscomprehension"). De Maisonneuve can only be somewhat consoled by Jean Mance's healing spirit, and persistent devotion to her mission. Shifting back both in place and time he converses with her companion, Jean Mance, who was the founder of the Hôtel-Dieu of Montreal (1645), the oldest hospital in the city. He keeps turning to Jean Mance while he is carrying his cross through the city amidst "gaping tourists" (28) not too far from la Basilique Notre-Dame, where his crucifix seems to have no significance and has been turned into an oddity of some sort. Similarly to La Corbusier, he is most troubled at the cruciform Place Ville Marie: "And the revolving glass doors too tight to pull the cross through. What to do then? To turn Back? ... The Iroqouis everywhere. Or dismantle the crucifix back into tin pipe, blown tire, leafy branches, glass shards, rusted street sign, and take it through the doors piece by piece? Blasphemy" (107). Indeed, the cruciform structure of Place Ville-Marie, built in the 1960s as Montreal's first signature skyscraper, has paradoxical associations with religion and colonialism (Simon "Translating" 200). Ville Marie was the name of the French fort that later became Montreal, therefore "the building [is] a dramatic reminder of the city's colonial conditions" (Simon "Translating" 200). Both Le Corbusier's and de Maisonneuve's missions remain uncompleted; neither of them can impose order on the world surrounding them as scientific or theological paradigms remain inadequate.

Not all the characters have such clearly defined aims in their everyday lives as de Maissoneuve and Le Corbusier. Among them is Clytemnestra who favours a "place for transit", "a fine spot for a pickpocket to earn her daily bread" (29.) The transit place becomes a fixed place for her pathetic daily activities. She frequents "Le métro Berri-de-Montigny, like some great steel cruciform, the shadow of the other cross, the one on atop Mount Royal, lies buried in the city's centre, as though a stake had been thrust straight through the hard paved surface of the streets and deep into Montreal's soft clay heart" (29). This metro station is also a product of the 1960s finished in 1966 and its cruciform shape is intentionally mentioned by the author. It makes a clear connection with the cross on top. The afore-mentioned vertical arrangement of the author's point of view comes to full circle: the cross on

top, Place Ville-Marie on the ground (part of it is underground though) and the subterranean metro station all sharing the geometrical shape of the crucifix. Simon says, "The cross pressed into the heart of the city represents the interpenetration of the heights, lofty ideals and the banalities of daily life" ("Translating" 198). One can only agree with Lapierre who claims that "the various symbols within the landscape ... recall that conversion was the initial purpose behind the European foundation of Montreal" ("Miscomprehension").

What possible further conversion/s the city faces is unclear towards the end of the novel describing people disappearing and most likely dying when the metropolis is shaken by an earthquake and the police puts down chaotic street riots. Moyes contends, "Fragmentation is key to the plotline of Majzels's novel insofar as it ends with an earthquake that leaves Montreal in ruins" ("Homelessness" 128). It is only Suzee who stays alive in the shelter of a library opening books whose title she finds difficult to make out. It is in "ancient French" (159) and called *Relations*, talking about "her city" (159) and is written by Jesuits. What missionary work *The Jesuit Relations* (1632-73), convinces her later to carry out is left open at the end of the novel; the story remains unresolved.

Conclusion

Robert Majzels's *City of Forgetting* breathes new life into the possible ways of delineating the cityscape of contemporary Montreal. To provide a framework for his exploration of the cityscape he resorts to modes of architectural expression and methods of urban planning on the one hand, and to the varied representations of discursive spaces of memory construction, on the other hand. The metropolitan space he makes knowable is "dystopic" (Beneventi 114) and "is a parodic reversal of all the ideals that Mount Royal represents" (Simon "Translating" 198). In his portrayal of the city "Place is [certainly] a space to which meaning has been ascribed" (Carter XII), however, the layered meaning/s remain ambiguous. The author's voice has a meandering tendency, in harmony with the characters' more often than not impatient investigation of the city; however, through Majzels's fictional lenses a Montreal opens up before the readers' eyes that is both new and compelling.

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