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**"Westmount's Sinai":
Projecting a Jewish Landscape onto Montreal
through Fiction**

Abstract:

For Canadian Jewish authors, every peak and every valley, every lake and every island, every forest and every plain, is a potential locus for mythic energy. In this brief article, I wish to offer a glimpse into the implicit means by which Jewish authors project a specifically Jewish landscape onto their surroundings. Through a short study of Chava Rosenfarb's Edgia's Revenge and Leonard Cohen's The Favourite Game, I will explore both authors' uses of Mount Royal and the Laurentian Mountains as sacred spaces in the tradition of earlier Jewish stories involving mountains and wilderness. These similarities are especially poignant when we consider Cohen and Rosenfarb's very different experiences of being Jewish in the world—one a wealthy uptown Jew from Montreal and the other a survivor of the Holocaust.

Résumé:

Pour les auteurs juifs canadiens, chaque sommet et vallée, chaque lac et île, chaque forêt et plaine, est un lieu potentiel d'énergie mythique. Dans ce bref article, je souhaite offrir un aperçu des moyens implicites par lesquels les auteurs juifs projettent un paysage spécifiquement juif sur leur environnement. À travers une brève étude d'Edgia's Revenge de Chava Rosenfarb et The Favourite Game de Leonard Cohen, j'explorerai les usages par les deux auteurs du Mont Royal et des Laurentides en tant qu'espaces sacrés dans la tradition d'histoires juives antérieures sur les montagnes et la nature. Ces similitudes sont particulièrement probantes lorsque nous considérons les expériences très différentes de Cohen et Rosenfarb de vivre leur judéité — l'un un juif nanti élevé à Westmount et l'autre une survivante de l'Holocauste.

For Canadian Jewish authors, every peak and every valley, every lake and every island, every forest and every plain, is a potential locus for mythic energy. Canadian Jewish literary thinkers like Michael Greenstein and David Roskies make passing reference to the idea that Jewish fiction authors have a tendency, conscious or unconscious, to superimpose a Jewish landscape onto whichever place they sojourn. For instance, Greenstein, always poetic in his writing, refers to Leonard Cohen's Mount Royal as "Westmount's Sinai,"⁷¹ while he projects another feature of Jewish mythic geography, the legendary Sabbath river Sambation, onto the Canadian landscape elsewhere. We read in the conclusion to his *Third Solitudes*, "Sambation flows endlessly with hidden undercurrents; its Canadian tributaries are the St Lawrence, and further west, Ludwig's, Waddington's, and Wiseman's Assiniboine, Mandel's Souris, and Kreisel's Saskatchewan."⁷² Roskies, on the other hand, writes much more directly about the mindset these authors might have had:

Though my parents had left Vilna in 1930, almost two decades before I was born, its people and places were more real to me than those of Montreal. In our family, distances were measured according to a prewar map: a shopping expedition to St. Catherine Street in Montreal, for example, was described in terms of the distance from my mother's former house on Zavalne, corner of Troke, to the Vilna train station.³

We even find Jewish Montrealers outside the literary realm utilizing this sort of transplanted and metaphorical Jewish geography. In an open letter to David Ben Gurion, posted in the *Canadian Jewish Chronicle* on May 26, 1961, Charles Lazarus encourages the Israeli Prime Minister, "As you travel through this beautiful and historic community, I might suggest that you take in the panorama from the top of Mount Royal, our own modest 'mountain,' and notice how similar it is in many ways to the view from Mount Carmel over Haifa."⁴ For Jews in the diaspora, projecting a distinctly Jewish geography onto their local surroundings would be a key way to situate one's at-homeness in a land far from their ancestors and even, at times, their immediate families.

The desire to conceptualize one's surroundings in a familiar way, especially in thinking about the aftermath of the trauma of the Holocaust, is simple enough to understand. As in Lazarus's letter to Ben Gurion, perhaps a perceived physical connection between the old world and the new could offer a sense of togetherness—apart. But the ways in which Jewish authors project a Jewish landscape onto their surroundings are not always as explicit as thinking about Montreal in Vilna terms, or referring to Mount Royal as Sinai or Carmel. Rather, this projection manifests in a variety of implicit ways.

In this brief article, I wish to offer a glimpse into the implicit means by which Jewish authors project a specifically Jewish landscape onto their surroundings. Through a short study of Chava Rosenfarb's *Edgia's Revenge* and Leonard Cohen's *The Favourite Game*, I will explore both authors' uses of Mount Royal and the Laurentian Mountains as sacred spaces in the tradition of earlier Jewish stories involving mountains and wilderness. These similarities are especially poignant when we consider Cohen and Rosenfarb's very different experiences of being Jewish in the world—one a wealthy uptown Jew from Montreal and the other a survivor of the Holocaust.

Lianne Moyes points out that Mount Royal is an important site for Canadian writers of all backgrounds, writing that "a character who is given a view from [Mount Royal] is often, although not always, a figure for the external narrator or a *porte-parole* for the writer."⁵ But mountains have long been quintessentially sacred spaces in the Jewish imaginary: going back to biblical tales, we see Mount Sinai, Mount Moriah, Mount Carmel, and the Temple Mount, among others, as essential to the relationship between Israel and their God.

Later on, the tales of the Baal Shem Tov, a figure of massive importance in the cultural imaginary of Ashkenazi Jews who immigrated to Canada, were rife with references to his fondness for the solitude and seclusion he found in the mountains. During his seven years of wandering after his marriage to Rabbi Gershon's sister Chana, the Besht "arranged for a place in which she could live, and he secluded himself in the great mountains."⁶ As part of his daily routine, "after he brought brandy to his wife he would cross the river Prut and retire into seclusion in a house-like crevice that was cut into the mountains."⁷ Not only did he find his desired solitude in the mountains, but he was said to be able to control their geological features as well. In one tale, the Besht was walking on a mountain, lost in his thoughts, about to make his way right off a cliff when we read,

When he came near the edge, the other mountain moved towards him and the ground became level. He continued to walk, and the two mountains were divided behind him as they were previously. On his return, when he came to the edge, one mountain moved toward the other and it became flat. And so it happened several times during his walk back and forth.⁸

Though we will focus shortly on Rosenfarb and Cohen, they are not the only Jewish authors to give special status to Montreal's mountains. A.M. Klein's short story "A Myriad-Minded Man," for instance, revolves around a curious professorial figure whom the protagonist thinks of as something of a mystic. The man, Isaiah Ellenbogen, comes in and out of the protagonist's thoughts throughout the years, and seems to be something of an elevated thinker, at least in the mind of the protagonist. Ellenbogen himself, according to our protagonist, does indeed think of himself as a mystic, with Klein writing that "He imagined himself . . . an oriental magician, seeking to bottle up again in their reeking and fatal tube, the evil djinns that industry conjured up."⁹ Of particular interest to us here is Klein's initial introduction of the protagonist's thoughts about Ellenbogen:

Alone, sometimes, in the solitude of my office . . . or again, when upon my brief vacation, I find myself alone upon a peak in the Laurentians, with nothing to think about except space, time, man, God and the next meal, the curious and absurd figure of Isaiah Ellenbogen will rise before me, to puzzle and bewilder me with the mysticism which emanated from him and from the thought of him.¹⁰

Here, Klein makes explicit the connection between Montreal's surrounding mountains and some form of elevated mystical thought. First, it is clear that the protagonist thinks most deeply when afforded the opportunity to meditate in solitude on the peak of a Laurentian mountain. Secondly, the place to which his mind wanders during those moments on mountain peaks is to "the mysticism which emanated" from the object of his reverence, Ellenbogen.

In *The Favourite Game*, Cohen affords special status to both the Laurentian Mountains and Mount Royal itself. In fact, Moyes includes this work on a list of Canadian stories that "stage—on the mountain—encounters between and within Montreal communities, and inquire into the relation of characters to urban social space."¹¹ Indeed, encounters between Cohen's protagonist and his community—his family, their demons, and their overarching brand of Jewishness—do take place on Montreal's eponymous mountain in this story, as we will see.

Continuing the theme of Klein's brand of mysticism, Cohen makes it clear that the Baal Shem Tov is on his mind as he describes his protagonist Lawrence Breavman's time at camp in the Laurentians: "he sat thinking that he could never do as well, never be so calm and magical. And that's what he wanted to be: the gentle hero the folk come to love, the man who talks to animals, the Baal Shem Tov who carried children piggy-back."¹² It is notable that Cohen makes this specific reference to the Baal Shem Tov while he himself is in the mountains, given the Hasidic master's aforementioned enthusiasm for his native mountain range. Once again, the mountains around Montreal are both associated and imbued with a certain mystic energy, in Breavman's distinct calmness and his harkening back to the stories of the Baal Shem Tov.

But it is Cohen's treatment of Mount Royal in this novel that is of particular interest to this discussion. Throughout the story, Montreal's Holy Mountain is associated with Breavman's father, a figure who, along with Breavman's uncles, is viewed as emblematic of the stuffy, insincere, grotesque form of the Jew. Looking at a photo of his father after his death, Breavman notes that his "hazel eyes are a little too soft and staring, the mouth too full, Semitic, hurt,"¹³ and that he is "one of the princes of Breavman's private religion, double-natured and arbitrary."¹⁴ Looking at his uncles, Breavman asks, "why do you look so confident when you pray? . . . Why are your confessions so easy?"¹⁵ Greenstein notes that, in leaving Montreal, Breavman "has to leap over the shallow preceding generation to return to the moral passion of the prophets (Isaiah) and the fervour of a Hassidic tradition (Baal Shem Tov)."¹⁶ Breavman's thoughts about his father are intimately connected to mountains. At the beginning of the story, his father spends all his time in a hospital bed, but the one time he takes his son out, Greenstein notes, they go to Mount Royal.¹⁷ Here, Breavman is obsessed with the volcanic violence of the Mountain. Later in the story, Breavman has another mystical experience in the Laurentians. We read,

He began to circle one of the playing fields. The tall pines around the field and hills gave him the impression of a bowl which contained him. There was one black hill that seemed so connected with his father that he could hardly bear to look up at it as he came round and round, stumbling like a drunk.

The rain hazed the electric lights isolated here and there. An indescribable feeling of shame overwhelmed him. 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. He completed circle after circle in the mud.

He stumbled and collapsed, tasting the ground. . . Something very important was going to happen in this arena.¹⁸

Cohen's protagonist, in his hurry to escape his traditional Westmount Jewishness—that Jewishness that he views as insincere, inauthentic, illegitimate—comes to a profound realization of the fundamental alterity and arcaneness of his ancestors while entranced at the foot of a hill, one analogous to the ancient crater that captured his imagination as a child. He comes to this realization while making ritualistic, trance-like gestures, spinning round and round in the mud.

Mountains are central motifs in this story, but the general theme of verticality is similarly important. Breavman's obsession with high places, notably including balconies, as Greenstein observes, allows him to literally look down on the masses, akin to his figurative looking down on the way his family engages in this bastardized version of an original mysticism that he imagines—correctly or incorrectly—to have come first.¹⁹ This theme is central to such a degree that any image of Breavman at a lower level feels significant. By the end of the story, there is evidence that he has gained some measure of humility: in the final chapter, he starts from the bottom of the mountain and works his way up, admiring the last remaining vestiges of an old (albeit Christian) spirituality in the gargoyles he sees along the way, finally ending with a mystic note as he climbs the mountain:

they were beautiful. They were the only beauty, the last magic. Breavman knew what he knew, that their bodies never died. Everything else was fiction. It was the beauty they carried. He remembered them all, there was nothing lost. To serve them. His mind sang praise as he climbed a street to the mountain.²⁰

Montreal's mountains as sites of transformation are one of the central underlying motifs of Chava Rosenfarb's short story, *Edgia's Revenge*. Unlike her novel-length fiction which takes place in the Old World, Goldie Morgentaler makes note of the fact that Rosenfarb permits Canada to play a role in her short fiction, where "the survivors of the holocaust play out the tragedy's last act."²¹ This story fits that description, dealing with a Holocaust survivor's experience living in Montreal after the war in a social group of other survivors, and the power dynamic between the protagonist, Rella, and her friend Edgia based on the secret they share: Rella was a *kapo* in the camps, and Edgia is the only one who knows because Rella spared her life. Within

their social group, Rella is beloved and Edgia is seen as essentially nothing; if not for her boisterous husband Lolek, she would hardly exist in the minds of her friends. Rosenfarb writes, "There was something in her manner which cancelled her out. She belonged to that type of woman who blends into her surroundings like an object to which the eye grows quickly accustomed and stops noticing. She was there and yet not there."²² She spends her time in the kitchen during their gatherings, and Lolek and Rella openly have a sexual affair.

In the first half of the story, the mountains again act as a site for contemplating escape from a perceived Jewishness, as they do in Cohen's novel. Reflecting on the group's experiments with Hatha Yoga and day trips to visit a guru in his ashram in the Laurentians, we read, "In our zeal we tried to effect a spiritual escape not only from the outmoded Jewish shtetl but also from the Jewish mentality that had once inhabited the east European metropolis. If culture symbolized a bridge, it had to be a bridge that led away from the past."²³ Shortly thereafter, discussing how the rest of the group had evolved and moved into other districts, Rella reflects that "Lolek and Edgia were still stuck on Esplanade in the district of the Mountain, as we Jews called the neighbourhood near Mount Royal. This was the part of town where we greenhorns had settled just after our arrival in Canada."²⁴ As in Cohen's novel, the protagonist associates Montreal's mountains with an undesirable and outdated form of Jewishness—this time that of the Shtetl Jew—which looms in the background.

But around the midpoint of the story, the mountains become pointed sites of role reversal, liminality, and transformation. In the first half of the story, Rella notes that "as a rule, [she and Edgia] talked about insignificant daily matters and never touched on our shared experiences, not even remotely."²⁵ This first half of the story also serves as a macroscopic survey of a ten-year period, rarely spending time on prolonged microscopic moments. This all changes one night by the light of Mount Royal's cross. Waiting for Lolek to return home and take Rella out for her birthday, she and Edgia have their first honest conversation of the story. Looking out onto the mountain and its cross, Edgia reflects on the day Rella spared her life, noting that she was "the midwife at one of my births, or rather rebirths."²⁶ She then reflects on the cross and her relationship with Lolek, with Rella noting, "she sounded so sincere that the laughter died within me as a chill passed up and down the spine."²⁷ Morgentaler notes that the symbol of the cross holds great importance here as it "alludes obliquely to the place of the Jews in Western history as well as to their victimization, which culminated in the holocaust," and that "it seems to allude, not merely to human sacrifice, but to the never-ending need for resolution."²⁸ Indeed, the lack of resolution is a central feature of this story and its conclusion.

When Lolek finally arrives that night, he takes Rella—where else?—to the top of the mountain, under the cross. There, she convinces him to spend the night at her place

for the first time, asserting her total dominance over Edgia. The story returns to a macro view, briefly describing the summer that ensued before Lolek dies in a tragic accident on an icy stairwell at the start of winter. Following his death, Edgia is edged out of their social circle. The next time Rella sees Edgia, however, Edgia is a completely new woman—cultured, beautiful, well dressed, a successful businesswoman. She re-enters the group and takes on a new role as the one the men want and the women want to be. Rella makes this explicit, lamenting, “I felt even worse than the other women. Edgia humiliated me by usurping my position in the group.”²⁹ Again, the macro-storytelling returns to the micro at the top of Mount Royal as they begin to form a new and genuine bond for the first time, another change in roles. Every Saturday, the two women jog to the top of the mountain, then proceed to Edgia’s house at its foot, where they cook breakfast, listen to music, chat and joke while “sometimes also discussing more serious matters of the heart.”³⁰

Years pass, and again we return to the mountain. Edgia has remarried with another man from their social circle, Pavel, and Rella finds out that Edgia has now moved to the other side of the mountain. She takes an opportunity to visit the new couple. Edgia and Pavel, it seems, have taken on the roles that Lolek and Edgia once inhabited, only this time with the gender roles reversed. Edgia boisterously entertains their guests while Pavel silently occupies the host role, complete with the little putdowns and negative comments that Lolek used to send Edgia’s way. Not only that, but Pavel has also taken on the role of Edgia’s formerly abused and now-deceased cat, complete with the pet name *Loverboy* that she used for the unfortunate feline. Rella’s relation of this visit ends with a familiar motif: we read, “The mountain, topped by its large cross, loomed just outside the window.”³¹

At the end of the story, the site of sacred terrain returns to the Laurentians. On their vacations to the mountains, they climb a hill handpicked by Edgia each morning. Returning to the motif of the Laurentians as a site for reflection on Shtetl life, Rella notes, “When it came to the beauty of the Canadian landscape, I might as well have been blind. . . . The landscape reminded me too strongly of the district that lies at the foot of the Carpathian Mountains, where I had used to spend summer vacations in my childhood.”³² Again, the top of a mountain is one of the only times that Edgia breaks their unspoken rule and discusses their time in the camps. On one of these trips to the Laurentians, preparing to climb a new hill, Pavel collapses, once again transforming Edgia. In the hospital room, Rella notes, “I realized that I had yet another Edgia before me, a completely new person with a new emotional make-up, a new knowledge, which had no connection to the sort of knowledge that I and our friends had so eagerly pursued. Who was this new Edgia? I was very much afraid of her.”³³ In that hospital room, Edgia once more speaks honestly to Rella, thanking her for saving her life but terminating their “sick, poisonous, impossible friendship.”³⁴

Looking at the structure of *Edgia's Revenge*, the story could be described as a macrocosmic account of decades in the life of a Holocaust survivor, with momentary parachuting on the part of the reader into microcosmic instants. Nearly all of these moments have at their centre either Mount Royal or the Laurentian mountains, whether they take place at the top of a mountain or in someone's home at its foot. Even when a scene is in someone's home, Rosenfarb never forgets to mention the mountain and its cross looming in the background.

Similar to Cohen and Klein, Rosenfarb imbues Montreal's mountains with a great amount of implicit cosmic power. For all three authors, Mount Royal and its siblings in the Laurentians are ancient sites of reflection, honesty, liminality, and transformation in the tradition of the Baal Shem Tov and other Jewish tales. For Klein, the peak of a Laurentian mountain serves as his protagonist's paramount notion of a locus of peace, reflection, and mystical musings, not unlike the Baal Shem Tov's house-like crevice in the Carpathians. These same Carpathians later serve as a grim reminder of pre-war idyllic beauty for Rosenfarb's Rella. In these moments, Rosenfarb explicitly projects the old-world Jewish geography of the Carpathians onto the Laurentians of her adopted home, though in this case for the purpose of negative affect.

For Cohen, Mount Royal starts as a symbol of the archaic and outdated manner in which his family goes about its Jewishness. After his transcendent experience on a hill in the Laurentians, the Mountain takes its rightful place as a zone of seclusion and meditation. For Rosenfarb, the Laurentians begin as an escape from that archaic notion of Jewishness (until they become too familiarly Carpathian in appearance), while the Holy Mountain, Mount Royal, looms in the background of every interaction and features in every twist and turn of Rella and Edgia's somersaulting roleplay as a rare zone of honesty in a relationship that is otherwise sick, poisonous, and impossible.

Rosenfarb and Cohen came from wildly different backgrounds: one a well-to-do Westmount boy raised in relative luxury, the other a Holocaust survivor who made it through hell to arrive in a new home. Between these two types of experience, we find A. M. Klein, one of the elder statesmen of Canadian Jewish literature, whose family escaped violence in Eastern Europe when he was an infant, and who was able to make a name for himself in Montreal from a young age despite a modest upbringing in a poor and working-class Jewish neighbourhood. It is fascinating, then, that these three authors find level footing in the mountains—special places, zones of alterity where the atypical, the unusual, and the unspoken are brought to the forefront.

1

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