

JACQUES FERRON'S CANADA

Jacques Ferron's Moncton: A City's Transition from Description to Literary Myth

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Introduction

A city cannot be fully perceived and understood until, as well as being described, its reality is also inscribed into literature by writers. In this regard, Moncton's literary destiny is quite unique, since modern-day Moncton, expressed so vividly in the writing of the late Gérard Leblanc, was first expressed in a dysphoric mode (or at least it would so appear) by the Québécois writer Jacques Ferron. It is clear that Acadie, and in particular Moncton, inhabit an important space in Ferron's imaginary cartography. Ferron rarely travelled outside Québec; at the beginning of his medical career, he did, however, cross the entire country from the east coast to the west. Besides this pan-Canadian odyssey, which reinforced his sovereigntist outlook, Ferron only left Québec on a few occasions. Among his travels were a trip to the Acadian Peninsula in July 1968, and a much more distant trip to Warsaw in October 1973. All the same, he did come three times to Moncton, the first time while he wrote for a newspaper of the medical profession, *L'information médicale et paramédicale*, to report on the National Congress on Mental Retardation held there in September 1966, and again in 1972 and 1974, when invited by Pierre L'Hérault, who was at that time a professor in the Département d'études françaises at the Université de Moncton.

In other words, Moncton occupies an entirely unique position in the imaginary cartography of Ferron, and in particular in what constitutes his urban geography. In this article, I hope to show that, even if Ferron's image of Moncton seems to symbolize a form of urban impossibility, a point of no return for the Acadian community, this image nonetheless

develops into a fundamental dimension of the Acadian reality, if only because, in writing about Moncton, Ferron also raised the city to a new level of symbolic existence, and in this sense contributed, in his own way, to the positioning of the image of the city in the foreground of contemporary Acadian literature. Further to this, I will be setting Ferron's Moncton against that of Victor-Lévy Beaulieu, as it is outlined in his biography essay entitled *Docteur Ferron*,¹ and drawing comparisons between the two representations of the city.

1. Jacques Ferron's Moncton

Several of Ferron's texts echo his experiences during his trip to Moncton in 1966. Naturally, we need to consider the series of reports he published in *L'information médicale et paramédicale* between October 18, 1966 and August 15, 1967, in which he shares his basic impressions of his travels and of his vision of Moncton. Jacques Ferron drew inspiration from these articles when he wrote his novel *Les roses sauvages* (*Wild Roses*),² published in 1971, as well as in two articles which were published in the French-language magazine *Le Maclean* in July and August 1972. The two sets of articles have since been gathered together in the volume *Le contentieux de l'Acadie*.³

From the outset, it is evident that the Moncton described by Jacques Ferron is perceived and presented in a dim light, as a bizarre and incongruous reality that exists only as an empty space. In a pastiche of the expression "How can anybody be a Persian?" popularized by Montesquieu in his Persian Letters, Ferron asks himself: "How can anybody go

i All translations from *Le contentieux de l'Acadie* are by Jo Anne Elder.

to Moncton?" (*Le contentieux*, p. 33)ⁱ For Ferron, the answer to this question is far from obvious. He even asks himself another question, yet more fundamental than the previous one: "Can anybody go to Moncton?" (*Le contentieux*, p. 33). He goes so far as to ask this question of an Acadian woman of his acquaintance, from Bouctouche (could this be Antonine Maillet?), who replies: "To Moncton? Why to Moncton? There isn't much in Moncton. Apart from Magnetic Hill and the Red Sea, there is hardly anything at all there." (*Le contentieux*, p. 33) This negative view of Moncton is also reinforced by the fact the city has been chosen as the site of a conference on the problems of mental retardation, an event that would seem to be "a rather sombre fate" for the city (*Le contentieux*, p. 34), in the eyes of the Acadian woman from Bouctouche. She also expresses her concerns about the phenomenon of assimilation, which she feels characterizes Moncton. When Ferron asks her: "There are surely Acadians in Moncton, aren't there?" (p. 34), she answers him, "Yes, but you might say they're English Acadians, a little like you have your English Canadians around here." (*Le contentieux*, p. 34)

A city associated, from the beginning, with nothingness, with mental retardation and anglicization ("anglissement," in Ferron's parlance), Ferron's Moncton already bears a heavy handicap, even before he has a chance to see it and visit it. If, as Italo Calvino writes, "cities are nothing more than a form of time," the historical gaze that Ferron turns toward the city doesn't help matters any, given the list of offenses committed by Colonel Robert Monckton and his henchmen in 1758. Ferron states:

Because I had come to Moncton for a conference on retardation, I would come up to this city slowly, arriving backwards, that is, from the past. Nothing would give a better idea of its geographical site than the account of the expedition on the Petitcodiac River, written by the Commander of the Light Infantry and Cavalry, George Scott, on November 19, 1758, in his letter to General Monckton. (Le contentieux, p. 38)

It is, then, from this angle that Ferron will perceive the City of Moncton, with its procession of characters who are, to say the least, rather objectionable. There is, for instance, this "Mister Art Cumming," an important figure who has come to pick him up at the airport and take him to the Brunswick Hotel, or this "Mister A. W. LeBlanc," the clerk at the reception desk of that hotel. Not unexpectedly, it turns out that

Mister A. W. LeBlanc has been assimilated for a long time and can speak only English. Ferron does not show much more sensitivity towards certain Acadians in Moncton, especially the Chief of Staff at the Hôtel-Dieu Hospital, with whom he gets into an intellectual brawl and whose stupidity Ferron seems to take great pleasure in deploring. In his seventh article, entitled, "Enfin, les arriérés!" (this could translate as "At Last, the People Who Have Fallen Behind"), he persists with these words, which hardly need comment:

Acadians are gentle and steadfast; they don't ask for anything, they wait; inferiority still seems to be natural for them and therefore doesn't bother them; they remain pleasant and polite. They are not brothers, but slow-minded cousins that we can reach by travelling backwards through the past: fifty or so years ago, we were sort of like the Acadians are now, and they were not yet like anything. (Le contentieux, p. 58)

Despite his sharp barbs and his often grating disdain when he pokes fun at Moncton and at certain Acadians, especially at the Chiacs of Moncton, whom he describes as citizens who hide their identity and use French as their slang (*Le contentieux*, p. 102), Ferron does make a contribution to the creation of Moncton as a dynamic space in which various tensions play out. For instance, as he goes by the university campus, he exclaims to Mister Art Cumming, in reference to Acadians, "What! You mean to say you're letting them be educated? One of these days they'll give you a hard time." (*Le contentieux*, p. 51) Ferron is, moreover, struck by the deep gulf that separated Moncton, a city that seems to be mired in a mortal immobility, and the university campus, where the excitement reminds him of the atmosphere on campuses in Québec:

Hall's Creek is just a little stream. And yet it was the most incredible gulf when I crossed it. [...] The gulf between two Acadian populations, that of Monctonians – the two Chiacs with their elbows on the lunch counter should give you a good idea about them – and that of the student population, which seems to me to be no different from the students you'd meet on campus in Montréal or at Laval. (Le contentieux, p. 103)

This passage from an article is echoed in the novel:

[The University] is out of all proportion with Moncton itself, and a source of tension,

for the little stream called Hall's Creek is a yawning gulf, the city remaining fiercely English and unilingual, while the University is about as French as Sherbrooke, Quebec, or Montreal. (Wild Roses, p. 36)ⁱⁱ

It is also worthy of note that Ferron was literally fascinated by Moncton, not as much by the Chiac or Acadian Moncton as by old Moncton, the city of sprawling wood-frame Victorian houses, which conjure up in his mind the genteel world of small-town New England. In *Les roses sauvages*, Ferron devotes some of his most beautiful pages to walks taken by his character around Moncton:


And in the meantime they wandered through the streets of old Moncton, a city where, during the week, lovers never walk, either because they stay at home, or because they move about in cars or meet in the many private clubs. The sidewalks are used only by furtive passersby, who seem anxious to get where they are going. That is the mystery of old Moncton, which owes its beauty to its many-gabled wooden houses, all painted yellow or brown. (Wild Roses, p. 34-35)

The character of Baron, Ferron's alter ego, is fascinated by these "tall, gabled wooden houses,


which stood proud and austere" (p. 41), just as he is by the toponymy of the streets "with names like Lutz, Mechanic, Pearl, Steadman, Orange Lane, Botsford, Alma, Archibald, Bonaccord, which charmed the Montrealer." (p. 37)

This image of wandering around the space of Moncton, which evokes the image of the "flâneur" wandering around the city so dear to Walter Benjamin's thinking, prefigures the writing of poets like Gérald Leblanc. We need only think about the words to the song "Rue Dufferin" written later by Leblanc. Certainly, as I showed earlier, it would be erroneous to believe that Jacques Ferron was an unconditional fan of Moncton; it is, however, true that by writing the city and especially by describing it from the moving gaze of a pedestrian, a walker, a wanderer, he does contribute to the symbolic importance of the city, an importance that would continue to grow over the years. Too often, in fact, we forget that Ferron was one of the first writers to cast a truly literary gaze over Moncton. This is even more true when we consider that in *Les roses sauvages*, Ferron suggests a direct link between the gabled houses of Moncton and the *House of Seven Gables* by the celebrated American novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne. In this

ii All translations of passages from *Les roses sauvages* are taken from Betty Bednarski's 1976 English version, *Wild Roses*.



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way Baron, alias Ferron, navigates in a city that is not only physical but also imaginary and literary; significantly, he stops for a while in front of a house with six gables: "One more, and it would have been the house in Hawthorne's novel. Baron drew it with special care, from the middle of the deserted street." (*Wild Roses*, p. 42)

2. Ferron's Moncton Revisited: *Docteur Ferron* by Victor-Lévy Beaulieu

Twenty years after *Les roses sauvages* was published, in *Docteur Ferron*, a biography he describes as a pilgrimage, Victor-Lévy Beaulieu in turn dedicates several pages to Moncton. In the last few chapters of his book, Lévy Beaulieu also leads his alter ego, Abel Beauchemin, towards Moncton, following in the footsteps of Ferron. In Beaulieu's case, the outlook is the opposite of his mentor's; he tends to praise Acadie indiscriminately. Nonetheless, the gaze that Abel Beauchemin casts on Moncton would be a mimetic mirroring of that of Ferron.

Since we've been in Moncton [confides Samm, his travelling companion], it seems that Abel's eye is just the same as Ferron's, except that it's no longer 1967 or 1972, when Jacques Ferron came back to hold parliament at the university with his students. In 1990, the reality is completely different: Moncton looks like a big village over which Old Man Irving, god of oil and gas stations, still reigns. And unlike in 1967 and 1972, it is no longer obvious that the Chiacs are bent on making demands. (Docteur Ferron, p. 363)ⁱⁱⁱ

Abel replies:

"How could anyone bother, when they've seen their elite desert their country, starting with Antonine Maillet who, once anointed St. Author by Paris — and that was almost a misunderstanding — could think of nothing better than going off to take refuge in Québec, in Outremont, on a street that is named after her, which, ever since, allows her to be everywhere at once and at the same time nowhere at all? Still, what a deep land this Chiac country is!" (p. 363)

This depth, however, stands out in contrast to the image of degradation, the city where Jacques Ferron wandered the streets earlier. Beaulieu's Moncton is

a Moncton that has fallen apart, become dislocated, "en démanche," according to one of this writer's favourite expressions:

When I wrote about Herman Melville and then found myself in New England, in Pittsfield, in Cape Cod, in New Bedford, in Nantucket and in Plymouth, I wasn't disappointed. Why? Because that country has remained loyal to its origins, which means that it has preserved the deep memory of its roots, and that this memory continues to be alive in the daily lives of the people. That's why the houses in New England, however recently they might have been built, are so beautiful: their architecture is built on the past, which continues to nurture their lives and to raise everything up to the same level of beauty. In Québec and in Chiac New Brunswick, it's generally the opposite. Houses that are built there don't add anything new; they don't contribute anything more to what has already been lost somewhere in the great dead-end landscape of the ready-built, the pre-fab. (p. 364)

These reflections on the deep memory of origins help us to understand how Beaulieu, in his essay on Ferron, manages to consider *Les roses sauvages*, and, to a certain extent, the city of Moncton, which haunts the great writer so relentlessly, as both the accidental destination and the culmination of Ferron's entire body of work.

Conclusion

The particular importance attributed by Beaulieu to *Les roses sauvages* and Moncton in Ferron's work affords us a greater understanding of how these two Québécois authors have experienced Moncton, with a distress that stands out in sharp contrast against the tone of so many examples of contemporary Acadian writing. Jacques Ferron, in particular, considers Moncton from the point of view of a Québécois, and, moreover, a sovereigntist one; in this respect, his vision has more in common with that of a non-fiction writer like Michel Roy than with a fiction writer like France Daigle, for example. Nonetheless, it is difficult to have a full appreciation of the construction of Moncton, whether from a literary or a social point of view, without considering Ferron's writing, and particularly his *Roses sauvages*, which

ⁱⁱⁱ All translations from *Docteur Ferron* are by Jo Anne Elder.

helped make the city a literary-myth-in-progress. We also find, in this novel, tendencies that prefigure the writing of Gérald Leblanc, such as the perceptions of the “*flâneur*” wandering through the city, or the use of the American intertext, and even the writing of Daigle, especially in some of the descriptions of Dieppe or the “*refoule*” of the Petitcodiac River, the Tidal Bore. Certainly, Ferron presents Moncton as a setting, which acts as a foil and expresses the distressed awareness of urban space. But Moncton is also a space inscribed with liberty and mobility, and, hence, with revelation.

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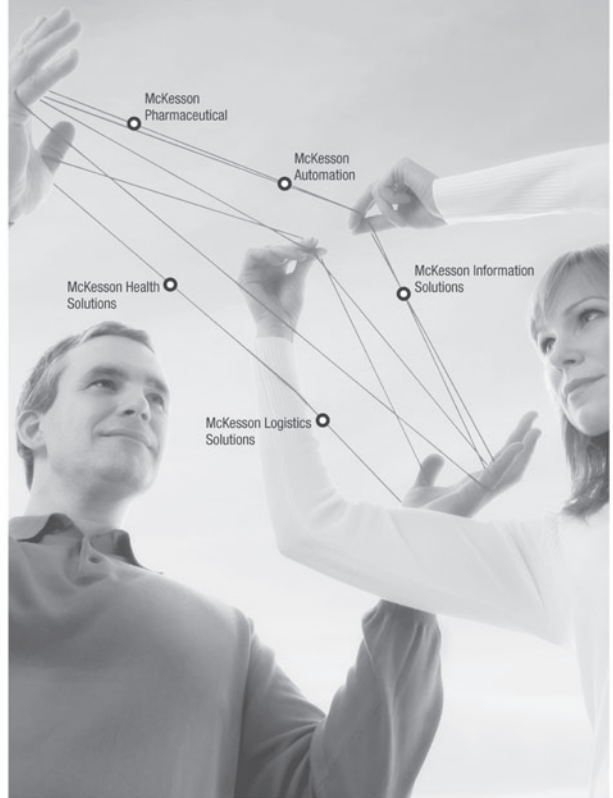
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