

## A POST CARD FROM CHICOUTIMI

by  
D. G. Jones

This peculiar post card was initially addressed to an audience in Chicoutimi. I'd never been there before. Yet in another sense I'd spent a lot of time over the years in the Lac Saint Jean-Saguenay Region, especially during the previous winter when I was translating poems by Paul-Marie Lapointe. He was born in St. Félicien, not far from Mistassini and Peribonca, the country of Maria Chapdelaine.

George Vincent Fournier, an old friend, comes from the village of Laterrière, next door to Chicoutimi. He was first introduced to me at a party, years ago, as George V, and ever since he's carried a vague air of royalty.

An overnight guest originally from this area once cooked a Sunday breakfast of enormous crêpe made according to the local recipe, but lacking the blueberries it called for. I'm told that the biggest blueberries in the world grow around Lac Saint Jean.

I've seen pictures of white whales, the *baluga*, in the mouth of the Saguenay. And I remember a strange film by Paul Almond in which Geneviève Bujold leaps into the river somewhere between the 17th and 19th centuries and crawls out on the rocks somewhere in the 20th.

In the 19th century, Charles Sangster canoed from Lake Ontario to the Saguenay in 110 verses. In those "long corridors of rock and sky," a small house against the cliff looked like "Patience slumbering at the feet of Death." Cap Trinité and Cap Eternité, as in the poems of Louis Fréchette and Charles Gill, evoked the paradoxes of time and eternity, the prodigality of the seemingly barren rock. Under the shadow of Cap Trinité, Sangster's true-love obscurely disappears forever. Still, he claims his love is "strong as yon enduring rock."

Frankly, the whole region appears to have been a difficult place for lovers — apart from black flies and long winters.

Louis Hémon's Maria and Félix-Antoine Savard's Marie, in *Menaud, maître draveur*, do of course find husbands. But they are not the girls' first or most passionate choice. François Paradis disappears in the snow. Le Délié, obviously a quite unsuitable fellow, a *vendu*, disappears among *les anglais*. But it is curious, especially in Savard, how the passionate, even erotic, vitality of the land, which is the most large and positive presence in the book, becomes negative in the human sphere, must be frustrated and

reformed. Head curbs heart. Eros, which becomes only too easily associated with death and delinquency, must be put in its place.

The situation is reversed, however, with Paul-Marie Lapointe's *Le Vierge incendié* (1948), where "*les cuisses rompent les digues de sagesse dans la tête des lacs.*" *C'est le débâcle*, the spring break-up. *Eros a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît pas.*

In a few books associated with this region we could sketch the basic revolution over the past century in Québec literature — and life. Should we conclude that Chicoutimi or the Saguenay-Lac Saint Jean Region is the centre of the world? Why not?

If the association with the region is less direct in Paul-Marie Lapointe's work, it is nonetheless there — one might say, inevitably.

The influential critic Northrop Frye has spent most of his life at the University of Toronto, but his earliest years were spent in Sherbrooke, and on a recent CBC-TV program he remarked that for him the Garden of Eden will always be on the other side of the St. Francis River.

I suppose for me it will always be in the Laurentian foothills halfway between North Bay and Lake Ontario. And I suppose for Paul-Marie Lapointe it will always be on one side or the other of Lac Saint Jean or the Saguenay.

Frye left Eden when his family moved to Moncton, Lapointe when he left for Chicoutimi — or more certainly, for Montréal. I presume we find this reflected in one of the poems in *Le Vierge incendié*:

train de nuit qui va toujours le même chemin et qui  
me traîne par les cheveux j'ai quitté mon village  
tranquille avec les lampes par la fenêtre et le  
sommeil clair des berceuses de rotin train de nuit  
des malles coffres de larmes et les yeux de la gare  
dans mon front ils dorment ceux qui voyagent  
marchent en dormant il y a celui de la tête dans les  
bras l'autre a mis ses pieds contre la vitre du pay-  
sage vertigineux les exils des abandons dans les arrêts  
prolongés et tous ceux de nos liens avec leur bagage et  
ce coeur qui prend toute la place que nous n'avons pas  
pris

You will notice that when Frye finished high school in Moncton, even when he finished university in Toronto, even after he'd heard about the Université de Sherbrooke, he didn't return to Eden.

Paul-Marie Lapointe didn't return to St. Félicien.

I didn't return to Bancroft, Ontario. Rather, I've ended up in Frye's Eden — or close to it, since the Université de Sherbrooke is on one side, perhaps not the right side, of the St. Francis River.

But probably Frye was wise not to come back. There has been a lot of

development in Eden since he left — a development sometimes referred to as urban sprawl.

Frye's Eden no longer exists.

But did it ever exist? Did Lapointe's village with the lamps in the windows and the cradles full of untroubled sleep really exist?

Well, yes and no. Our gardens of Eden exist in much the same way as the country of *Maria Chapdelaine* or of *Menaud, maître draveur* exist. They are a mixture of memory and desire, just as those novels are a mixture of memory and desire and anxiety or fear.

Frye's Eden is not so much a place on the other side of the St. Francis river as it is a place inside him. Even as he leaves, he takes it with him. Just as Paul-Marie Lapointe takes the wooden houses, the lamps, the wicker cradle and trees, thousands of trees.

The place where we live as human beings is as much the kind of place we find in literature as it is the kind of place we find on a map. If we want to know where people in Peribonca lived early in the century it will be more helpful to ask Louis Hémon than someone in the Department of Mines and Surveys. If we want to know where we are now, it will probably be more helpful to run through Hémon, Savard and Lapointe than to run to the nearest service station to pick up a road map.

Even maps are fictions.

Northrop Frye also said during that recent TV program that the most persistent question for Canadians has been the question, "Where is here?" For Frye, the question was partly suggested by a map of Canada that he had to study in his geography class at school. First of all, it was a flat map that blew Canada up larger than life, so that it loomed over the United States as an enormous territory with hardly anyone in it. Secondly, apart from the little U.S.A. underneath, it was in the middle of nowhere. East and west there was nothing but ocean. North there was the arctic ice, the North Pole, and then empty space — or the edge of the page.

People who first came to Canada, says Frye, got swallowed up in the St. Lawrence River; they went on and on until they were somewhere inside a vast continent like Jonah in the belly of the whale. "Where are we," they wondered. "Where is here?"

It took until the 20th century and the arrival of the airplane to map this country and provide one kind of answer to that question. Only now, says Frye, are Canadians beginning to realize that they are not in the middle of nowhere but of a kind of triangle made up of Asia, America and the European Common Market.

This is a little more like the world of Paul-Marie Lapointe's "ICBM" than Hémon's *Maria Chapdelaine*.

In one way, Frye suggested, Canadians always knew where they were; they were a branch-plant linked to some distant head office. Today many Canadians work for ITT or Imperial Oil or General Motors with their head offices in New York or Detroit or somewhere else. Cana-

dians in the past, explorers, missionaries, fur-traders, worked for the King or the Church or the Hudson's Bay Company whose head office was in Paris or London or Rome. One way or another Canada was a *succursale à l'étranger*.

The centre was elsewhere.

When someone wanted to know where he stood he added up his accounts, so many made beaver, so many souls saved, and sent them off to Paris, London or Rome. Canadians, says Frye, don't like to make money; they like to audit it. We are a nation of accountants. Leacock's Peter Pupkin, Gabrielle Roy's André Chênevert, the Toronto poet Raymond Souster, who went to work for the Standard Bank of Canada in 1927 and retired from the Bank of Commerce in 1959 — are these our typical Canadians? "*Nous ne sommes pas des comptables*," said Saint-Denys-Garneau in "Le Jeu," speaking of children and poets. But he became one, later, setting out to take an inventory of his bones, because obviously there was a deficit somewhere. One kept strict accounts, whether with God or Man, because sooner or later they had to go to the head office.

Part of what we see in *Maria Chapdelaine* and *Menaud* is a competition between two different branch-plant economies, one with its head office in heaven, the other on earth.

There is also a temptation to say that the head office is here, *au Québec*. Early in the book Menaud says:

Ici toutes les choses que nous avons apportées avec nous, notre culte, notre langue, nos vertus et jusqu'à nos faiblesses deviennent des choses sacrées, intangibles et qui devront demeurer jusqu'à la fin.

But the temptation is not exactly there. All these things that one wishes to preserve here have been brought from somewhere else — *apportées avec nous* — and they connect one with that somewhere else: France, Rome, Heaven — but not, of course, with the CIP. What really connects Menaud and others to Québec, and no where else, is the land, which keeps saying, in effect, this is the source of your vitality, this is your centre. Menaud keeps talking about *notre langue* and *notre culte*. But these remain relatively vague. What speaks with great particularity, variety and eloquence is the land, to the point where half the thoughts of Menaud are hardly thoughts at all, but the images, sensations, moods of the natural world. And these speak through the body, the senses.

Normally, I suppose, one is rooted in his body. And as long as one holds on to that, one can say, "I'm here," and sit down and make oneself more or less at home in the world.

But that reminds me that Saint-Denys-Garneau wrote, "*Je ne suis pas bien du tout assis sur cette chaise*." He didn't want to be here or there, fixed to the earth, but constantly in motion — like a man leaping from one stone to another crossing a torrent, like a lumberjack leaping from log to log. *Il*

voulait "trouvait l'équilibre imponderable entre les deux." "C'est là sans appui que je me repose."

Saint-Denys-Garneau wasn't at home in his body, and so he wasn't at home anywhere on earth, not even in his childhood Eden, in the family house at Saint Catherine de Fossambault, which became *une maison fermée, étouffante*.

Partly, of course, he distrusted his body because he had a bad heart. But that, one suspects, only confirmed the real reason; the body was the seat of sin, *la chair, le siège de la mort. Le siège de la vie était ailleurs*.

Like François in Anne Hébert's "Le Torrent," *il était un enfant dépossédé du monde*. Like Alain Grandbois, *il était le veuf d'une invisible terre*. Like Nelligan, who wanted to fly off to some *castel de nos idéals blancs*, he wanted to fly off to some *Au-delà*. To be here was to be nowhere. We might say that Saint-Denys-Garneau saw even his own body as a kind of branch-plant, but worse, he wasn't sure where or how to find the head office.

In desperation, like Nelligan, he might invent it: "*Créer par ingéniosité un espace analogue à l'Au-delà/ Et trouver dans ce réduit matière/ Pour vivre et l'art.*"

As Roland Giguère was to suggest in "La Vie dévisagée," this is an exhausting and difficult balancing act to try and keep up.

Il nous faut sans cesse tenir l'équilibre  
entre l'horizon disparu et l'horizon imaginé  
avec la crainte de perdre pied à la terre  
de n'avoir plus le pied marin  
de ne pouvoir plus marcher sur les fils de fer  
de ne savoir plus marcher sur les mains

malheureux fils d'équilibristes  
nés en plein ciel  
au temps memorable de l'absence des filets

Louis Dudek, a poet at McGill, once said that the problem with Canadian poetry was that the French never get their feet on the ground and the English never get off the ground.

From Crémazie to Grandbois the question "Where is here?" appears to have been a tough question. Whether it's Crémazie wandering about *Europe*, or in his "*Promenade des trois morts*," or Alain Grandbois wandering among "*Les îles de la nuit*," it's neither France nor Canada, neither the world of the living nor the world of the dead, neither in Heaven or on Earth. One has a vision of a lot of people floating around like lost souls in limbo.

Sometime during the past generation they all started coming down to earth, so that by 1960 Gatién Lapointe could write, "*J'ai planté mon corps dans la terre.*"

That statement signals a revolution in the cultural imagination, a revolution whereby the body became good not bad, a source of life and not merely of death. For Anne Hébert it meant a revolution in emphasis within her traditional religious culture, from God in His high Heaven to God incarnate in His Creation. Generally it was a revolution which made it possible to see *l'idéal* in the flesh, here and now, and not elsewhere, in some *Au-delà*. It was announced in *Le Vierge incendié* in 1948, when Lapointe wrote:

un monde va faire l'habitation ronde  
 la sphère d'une main  
 la balle du gamin tout l'idéal en pomme  
 et goûter le corps universel

Apples suddenly went up in price. Anne Hébert celebrates Eve, the apple-lady.

Earlier, according to Gilles Hénault's "Petite Genèse apocryphe":

Dieu protégeait son verger  
 Car s'il a de l'amour  
 pour ses enfants, les hommes  
 Il aime encore bien mieux  
 La confiture aux pommes.

Either the good Lord lost his taste for apple sauce or he decided to share a good thing with his children. In any case it suddenly became possible to celebrate Mother Eve, Mother Nature, the body of the world, love's body — as a source of life, for good or for evil.

And with the recovery of the body the world was no longer Sainte-Denys-Garneau's "*Monde irréremédiable désert.*" It was very like Menaud's country. Anne Hébert writes:

Ô saisons, rivière, aulnes et fougères, feuilles,  
 fleurs, bois mouillé, herbes bleues, tout notre  
 avoir saigne son parfum, bête odorante à notre  
 flanc.

It became a garden, full of trees, apple trees, pine trees, maples, all sorts of trees. "*J'écris arbre,*" says Paul-Marie Lapointe:

arbre d'orbe en cône et de sève en lumière  
 racines de la pluie et du beau temps terre animée

Some people make lumber and paper out of all these trees around Chicoutimi and Lac Saint Jean; Lapointe, with his childhood memories

and a little help from the federal government and its book on the trees of Canada, made a world — a world where:

les arbres sont couronnés d'enfants  
 tiennent chauds leurs nids  
 sont chargés de farine

dans l'ombre la faim sommeille  
 et le sourire multiplie ses feuilles

Rooted in the body and planted in the earth, the Quebecker becomes a tree: "*ton corps*," writes Gatien Lapointe, "*comme un arbre chantant*." Québec becomes a tree: "*Ma patrie*," he writes, "*est cet arbre dans le vent*." All these trees become human, become Man.

If you ask Gatien Lapointe, "Where is here?" he replies:

Et je situerai l'homme où naît mon harmonie  
 Ma langue est d'Amérique  
 Je suis né de ce paysage  
 J'ai pris souffle dans le limon du fleuve  
 Je suis de la terre et je suis la parole  
 Le soleil se lève à la plante de mes pieds  
 Le soleil s'endort sous ma tête  
 Mes bras sont deux océans le long de mon corps  
 La monde entier vient frapper à mes flancs

For Lapointe, there is no question about it, the head office is here.

Actually, this is rather amazing. What we can see in a century or so of Québec literature is the complete working out of an essential, perennial, archetypal myth-making process, whereby men make themselves at home in an often alien world by recreating it in their own image. That, for Northrop Frye, is a basic function of art or, more generally, of the human imagination. In the lines by Gatien Lapointe, the land is no longer simply a place through which he travels or does business or builds a house. There is no distinction between the speaker and the place — they are one and the same. Here is Me, or I am Here. The speaker draws his vitality from the land, and the land finds its articulate form through the speaker. That form is a human form — a vast body, a human body, where the sun rises and sets.

It is ironic, though, that at this moment, more than ever, *le monde qui vient frapper à ses flancs*, with money from Wall Street or the Middle East, with Pontiacs from the States, Renaults from France, Volkswagens from Germany, Hondas and Toyotas from Japan, is a world with its head offices in New York, Paris, Berlin, Tokyo. "Velly nice trees. Vous voulez faire

échange?" One can still hear Menaud crying, "*Les étrangers sont venus! Les étrangers sont venus!*" And they are not going to go away.

Ironically too, in so far as the Quebecker has identified himself exclusively with *Terre Québec*, he has often become more nationalistic, more *indépendantiste* or *séparatiste*, just at the moment when he begins to share with the English-Canadian something of the same world, the same problems, even, perhaps, something of the same point of view. And vice-versa.

Dennis Lee is a Toronto poet who has written an important long poem called "Civil Elegies" and an important article, first developed at the *Rencontre des écrivains québécois*, called "Cadence, Country, Silence: Writing in Colonial Space."

As a Canadian and as a writer, Lee identifies with Gaston Miron: his problem in relation to American culture is much the same as Miron's in relation to anglophone America.

Lee's "Civil Elegies" sounds in places like Savard's *Menaud*. And that temptation to ignore *les étrangers* by identifying with some spiritual absolute in the *Au-delà* is symbolized by Saint-Denys-Garneau. In rejecting that temptation in the same way so many Quebeckers have, he nonetheless pays tribute to Garneau:

And now across  
two decades and two nations de Saint-Denys-Garneau, my  
blessed stricken  
original, still haunted by the  
space between your ribs, maker and friend and comfortless, my  
lone heroic starter, out of my own wrong start I  
keep my distance and praise.

Incidentally, it is interesting to note that Miron finds the poem impressive enough that he would like to publish a good translation in his *Editions de l'Hexagone*.

Dennis Lee, like a number of English-Canadians these days, has also become something of a vigorous nationalist. He is concerned in "Civil Elegies" about the selling out of the land and resources to *les étrangers* — and not only the land but a tradition. Parts of "Civil Elegies" might appear to echo an older Québec literature and the Québec motto, "*Je me souviens.*"

In fact, if one looks at the whole of Canadian literature, one can see that over the past hundred years English and French have changed places. Where the French-Canadian used to look to the past, he is now concerned to discover his future; and where the English-Canadian looked to the future, he is now concerned to discover his past. This is evident not only in poems like "Civil Elegies," but in novels like Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*, Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners*, and Harry Boyle's *The Great Canadian Novel*.



Perhaps in this process they may meet half way — that is, in the present.

I would suggest that more and more they tend to meet on a common ground, which is not simply the Laurentian Shield, but the Earth, the world of the body. Both are concerned to resist, not simply the United States on the grounds of a Canadian or Québec nationalism, but a technological culture — or an older religious culture — any culture that says this piece of land is of no significance unless we can make something out of it for the head office; these trees are of no significance unless we can make lumber or paper or crucifixes out of them; these bodies are of no significance unless we can make workers or redeemed souls, athletes or angels, guinea pigs or, at the very least, soap out of them.

As I hinted, such a view may modify our attitude toward time as well as space. Where an older Québec culture tended to sacrifice man to the past, the newer technological culture, whether Communist or Capitalist, tends to sacrifice man to the future. Both tend to locate the ideal or the real or the meaningful elsewhere, either in the past or in the future. It is to be simply preserved by repeating yesterday, or newly created — tomorrow. The one creates zombies or mummies; the other creates robots or androids.

We can see examples of the first in Anne Hébert's "Vie de Château" and "Il y a certainement quelqu'un qui m'a tuée" or in a poem by Paul-Marie Lapointe that makes a link between Québec and ancient Egypt.

### OS FRAPPÉ DE STUPEUR

pétrifiée  
debout  
yeux large ouverts

la concubine du mort  
en ses mains croisées  
tient un ventre d'ivoire

son pubis est un triangle triste  
une fleur séchée

This is a fate that Anne Hébert's heroine escapes from at the end of "Le Tombeau des rois."

The other fate is suggested in Lapointe's "ICBM," the world of missile technology, where our guardian angel stares through a bombsight and *le président, le pasteur*, watches on a TV screen while "*les enfants se recroquevillent comme des feuilles brûlées.*"

If Crémazie or Nelligan or Saint-Denys-Garneau's view makes the world, metaphorically, an *irréparable désert*, the view of technological man makes it literally a desert, as in Paul-Marie Lapointe's "Mission accomplie."

fanaux de la mort en mer  
à l'aube  
par temps plat

les hérissons du phosphore font des signaux jaunes  
aux bombardiers qui rentrent

lisses comme l'aire où se poser  
sont les villages éclatés

le robot n'est que mémoire  
et sérénité le métal

Despite modern medicine, despite our high standard of living, despite our liberated attitudes toward sex, the modern technological world, as Lapointe clearly knows, is no more healthy a world for bodies, or trees, than an older puritanical one — less healthy.

Both of these points of view imply a kind of cultural imperialism, which sees you or me as simply branch plants at the service of some head office that is always elsewhere — which sees you and me or the local trees as simply raw material to be exploited, *pour faire la confiture aux pommes ou la confiture aux hommes.*

The point of view we see developing in Lee or Lapointe would place a new emphasis on the particular body in space and the particular moment in time.

It does not say that the body is everything. But whatever spirit is, it is not opposed to body. It grows out of and is sustained by particular bodies and it serves to make those bodies and their world articulate. Spirit is articulate Earth.

What is real or important is not simply repeating eternal truths nor fabricating wholly new worlds out of meaningless matter, but carrying on an obscure, intimate never-ending dialogue with oneself and his world. It is discovering oneself in the world and the world in oneself. Here and now.

To say that each life is rooted in a particular body, that each body is important, each place, each thing, is to create a revolution. It is to say that "Here is where our bodies are and this is central." Each person becomes his own head office, and each community, each region, each country, engaged as they are in a dialogue with their particular place and time.

Each of us is different. Still, we share a common dialogue with our world. Ideally, as Mr. Frye would say, or as Teilhard de Chardin might say, we would discover ourselves in the whole of Creation; we would discover the whole of Creation in ourselves.

Thus Dennis Lee ends "Civil Elegies," not with an appeal to Canada, but simply to Earth — and to the civil world, culture, which is what we make of it, its articulate human form and the context in which we continue the dialogue. It is a kind of prayer.

Earth, you nearest, allow me,  
 Green of the earth and civil grey:  
 within me, without me and moment by  
 moment allow me for to  
 be here is enough and earth you  
 strangest, you nearest, be home.

Still, one can note the emphasis on the here and now, and the suggestion that the immediate intercourse between the speaker and his world, inner and outer, is central, is enough.

Similarly, to come back to our trees, Paul-Marie Lapointe concludes, not with a maple leaf or Québec tree, but a cosmic tree.

And we may note again the emphasis on bodies, the attentive, intimate dialogue of bodies. And we may contrast Lapointe's emphasis with that of Saint-Denys-Garneau.

Where Lapointe says, "*la mesage de ton corps la création du monde*," it is evident from Saint-Denys-Garneau's work that the message of the body was: the destruction of the world. Once, metaphorically, he chopped away all the bones, arms, legs, ribs, as one might chop the branches off a tree, to strip away, to root out, the sources of corruption. Once when the bodies of two lovers came together it evoked a vision of shipwreck, of total isolation, of the end of the world.

Sous le ciel rouge de mes paupières  
 Les montagnes  
 Sont des compagnes de mes bras  
 Et les forêts qui brûlent dans l'ombre  
 Et les animaux sauvages  
 Passant aux griffes de tes doigts  
 O mes dents  
 Et toute la terre mourante étreinte

The body, the world's body, for Saint-Denys-Garneau was the Tree of Death.

For Lapointe it is the Tree of Life. It is especially love's body that is the Tree of Life, as is evident in the following love poem, where the coming together of the bodies of the lovers evokes a vision of total communion, of the whole living creation.

Vit-on autrement que la nuit

.....  
Vit-on autrefois que l'amour

.....  
Vit-on autrefois qu'en toi  
par la délire et la sagesse  
les corps croisés  
entés à l'arbre sucré  
de nos os?

Vit-on autrement qu'en la racine de cet arbre notre vie?  
où feuilles fleurs fruits  
captent l'oiseau?  
cet arbre à la mesure de l'univers

*Mais rien est simple*, as Lapointe says in the last poem of his latest book. Or, as Dennis Lee maintains, whatever we say, we must also say the opposite; whatever we say about the world, our words are never exactly the world; however far we may go, we must always come back to where we started from. If we are to know anything of the universal, it must always be in terms of the particular.

In orthodox Christian belief we find the doctrine of the resurrection of the body — a doctrine mysterious to most people and even shocking to some. Perhaps it is relevant here. If the universal or eternal is not to be an empty abstraction, it must also be particular, intimate, individual.

We can't escape from Here. And so we come back to Lac Saint Jean or Chicoutimi, wherever we are. And so Paul-Marie Lapointe sends us what he calls a post card, in which he comes back to something very like St. Félicien.

## CARTE POSTALE

un lac gelé dans la buée du couchant  
rose de pâques venue de l'au-delà  
me rappelle aux confins de la terre septentrionale  
(car une main fragile poursuit l'itinéraire  
son écriture me survit)

tremblement des jours amoncelés  
tendresses de la création poussière et sang dompté  
ardeur domestiquée du soleil et de tous les astres  
passion  
délire  
colère

à la façon des fleurs séchées les anges  
habitent des feuillets solitaires  
ne les quittent que pour d'austères envols  
rares fêtes  
missions de ressusciter l'enfance  
et le temps de vivre

de telle sorte que se manifeste  
épisodique  
la mémoire de dieu et les larmes  
la misère quotidienne d'être heureux

rien n'est simple  
ni l'âme du vieux couple dans le dernier village  
avant la fin des temps  
ni la chaleur d'aimer

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