Martin Kuester

Two Solitudes or More: Intertextuality in Claire Holden Rothman's Novels

Résumé

Claire Holden Rothman est une écrivaine montréalaise anglophone qui traite des aspects sociaux et littéraires de la population de Montréal, une situation pour laquelle Hugh MacLennan créa le titre Deux solitudes *en 1945. Ici se rencontrent, entre autres, les valeurs anglophones et francophones, catholiques et protestantes. Le sujet traditionnel de ces solitudes est évident dans* My October *(2014) qui traite de la crise d'Octobre de 1970; la question des différences religieuses entre catholiques et juifs montréalais est un des thèmes de* Lear's Shadow *(2018), et la question de l'accès des femmes à l'éducation universitaire domine* The Heart Specialist *(2009). Cette analyse des romans de Rothman est tout d'abord une lecture thématique des confrontations sociales, mais elle applique également les théories intertextuelles de Linda Hutcheon. Les intertextes utilisés par Rothman sont de provenance politique, scientifique et historiographe (dans* My October *et* The Heart Specialist*) et – finalement – littéraire (*King Lear *de Shakespeare dans* Lear's Shadow*). Rothman décrit des familles montréalaises divisées entre anglophonie et francophonie, mais elle inclut aussi les antagonismes entre générations, affinités religieuses et choix de mode de vie et vues politiques.* My October *dépeint le monde des activistes québécois et de la « bonne société » anglophone des années 1960 et 1970.* The Heart Specialist *s'occupe des droits des femmes et de leur rôle dans le système universitaire.* Lear's Shadow, *en se servant du modèle shakespearien, traite plutôt des problèmes intergénérationnels.*

Abstract

Claire Holden Rothman is an anglophone Montreal writer who deals with various social and literary aspects in the society of Montreal, a topic that Hugh MacLennan proverbially dealt with in his novel Two Solitudes *(1945), where the values of anglophone and francophone, Catholic and Protestant families clash. In Rothman's fiction, there is, on the one hand, the traditional theme of the anglophone vs. francophone solitudes, as for example shown in* My October *(2014) about the October Crisis of 1970, but there is also the question of religious majorities and minorities such as Roman Catholic vs. Jewish Montrealers in* Lear's Shadow *(2018) and that of women's rights and their access to education in the earlier novel* The Heart Specialist *(2009). While my approach to Rothman's novels is on the one hand thematic in focusing on the themes of confrontation and solidarity, it*

primarily – with the help of theories such as those developed by Linda Hutcheon in her A Theory of Parody *– studies the use Rothman makes of strategies of intertextuality or parodic "repetition with a difference". These stretch from references to non-fictional political and historiographic texts to the discussion of these intertexts in the paratexts of* The Heart Specialist *and their verbatim integration into* My October *to finally an open discussion of Shakespearean parallels by the narrator of* Lear's Shadow. *We see Rothman's Montreal families torn between their anglophone and francophone backgrounds as MacLennan had thematized them over sixty years earlier, but the novels also display generation conflicts and religious antagonisms as well as choices of lifestyle and nutrition, politics, and culture harrowing the main characters' families.*

Introduction[1]

Claire Holden Rothman is an anglophone Montreal writer of short stories and novels who in her oeuvre deals with social and cultural aspects of ethnic, linguistic and religious groups of contemporary Montreal society. This topic had been proverbially treated by Hugh MacLennan in his novel *Two Solitudes* (1945), where the values of anglophone and francophone, Catholic and Protestant families in the province of Quebec clash.

Hugh MacLennan's view of the identity of the inhabitants of the province of Quebec as being dominated by "two solitudes" is based on a quotation from early twentieth-century Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke, but it is probably no longer a valid one, or at least it is no longer as valid as it was almost eighty years ago in 1945. As for MacLennan's source, in a letter to the young Austrian soldier and poet Franz Xaver Kappus, published in his *Letters to a Young Poet*, Rilke had described love in the following way: "daß zwei Einsamkeiten einander schützen, grenzen und grüßen" (Rilke, *Briefe* 42).[2]

Regarding MacLennan's application of Rilke's concept of two solitudes to the description of Montreal society, not all contemporary writers would agree to its viability any longer. For example, Sherry Simon sees the relationship between anglophone and francophone Montrealers in a more positive way. She writes in 2006 that "writing the story of Montreal was a way to acknowledge what the city has given me – a chance to set up house on the border between languages" (Simon ix), and she thus speaks out in favour of bridging the gap that MacLennan had seen between the two

1 I would like to thank the editors of *ZKS* as well as the anonymous peer reviewers for helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

2 This definition of love is translated into English as "two solitudes protecting, defining and welcoming one another" in the relatively new Penguin Classics translation (Rilke, *Letters* pos. 610), while MacLennan had chosen a translation in which the two solitudes "greet each other" (for the German "grüßen"). Offering yet another version in English, M.D. Herter Norton chose the words "salute each other" in her 1934 translation (59).

solitudes. Similar points have been made by several other scholars in recent studies: For example, Jeffery Vacante writes in 2016 about MacLennan's *Two Solitudes* that "the novel, which was once considered a fresh and insightful portrait of Canada's duality, is very often dismissed today as an old-fashioned and didactic piece of work" (2016, 43). And while MacLennan had insisted on the existence of "two race legends" (1979, 411) co-existing in French Canada, Myra Bloom writes in 2017 that "[o]ver the past several decades, the relationship between anglophones and francophones in Quebec has become increasingly depolarized" (51), and she sees an "anglophone desire for *rapprochement* within the context of Quebec's 'shift to a form of diversity paradigm'" (51–52).[3]

In Rothman's fiction, we meet several couples which bring together what had once been representatives of the traditional anglophone vs. francophone solitudes within a Montreal family or household. This is for example shown in *My October* (2014), a novel about the repercussions of the October Crisis of 1970 that last well into the twenty-first century and shake the foundations of a family of mixed anglophone and francophone origins, but there is also the question of religious groups such as Roman Catholics vs. Jewish Montrealers in her recent novel entitled *Lear's Shadow* (2018) and that of women's rights and women's access to education in Rothman's earlier novel *The Heart Specialist* (2009), which had established her as a first-rate writer.

While my approach to Rothman's novels is on the one hand thematic in focusing on the topics of confrontation and solidarity in Montreal society, it also, and primarily – with the help of theories such as those developed by Linda Hutcheon in seminal works such as *A Theory of Parody* – studies the use that Rothman makes of strategies of intertextuality or parodic "repetition with difference" (Hutcheon 1985, 32) of earlier, often seminal literary texts. Hutcheon sees the parodic, though not necessarily humorous integration of earlier texts as "an integrated structural modeling process of revising, replaying, inverting, and 'trans-contextualizing' previous works of art" (1985, 11).[4] In the context of Rothman's novels, her intertextual or parodic strategies of working with models from the literary past, I claim, stretch from references to (including the open discussion of) non-fictional political and historiographic texts in *The Heart Specialist* to the verbatim integration of non-fictional intertexts into *My October* to finally a discussion of Shakespearean parallels and repetitions with a difference by the narrator of *Lear's Shadow*.[5]

3 In addition to being a creative writer, Claire Holden Rothman has also done her share in moderating between the anglophone and francophone groups within the province of Québec, as she is a prize-winning literary translator who won the John Glassco Translation Prize for her translation of an early French-Canadian novel in 1994.

4 I already worked on this type of intertextual or parodic appropriation of earlier texts – or the trans-contextualization of literary models into new literary environments – in my study *Framing Truths* (1992), which focuses, amongst others, on historical novels by George Bowering, Timothy Findley and Margaret Atwood.

5 In the following text, the titles of Rothman's novels will be abbreviated in the parenthetical references: *HS* for *The Heart Specialist*, *MO* for *My October*, *LS* for *Lear's Shadow*.

***The Heart Specialist* (2009)**

The Heart Specialist, Claire Holden Rothman's first novel, which established her literary reputation, draws our attention to questions of women's rights and of the access of female students to universities and the scientific world by fictionally re-telling the story of Canadian pioneer medical scientist Maude Abbott, whose "work paved the way for women in medicine and laid the foundation for modern heart surgery" (Young 2008). As Rothman puts it in her interview with Ian Thomas Shaw, "that novel necessarily examines male-female dynamics and relationships" (2015). The novel presents the life of a woman who in the novel is called Agnes White. Although deserted for some obscure reason by her father – a medical professional in his own right at McGill University in Montreal – as a child, Agnes White succeeds in finally being admitted to a Canadian medical school as one of the first women. She works her way up to becoming a professor at McGill University in Montreal, running the university's medical museum, and she even succeeds in becoming an internationally renowned heart specialist.[6]

The intertextual references integrated into this novel are most visible in the chapter epigraphs, but they also appear in rather unexpected references to literary texts, amongst others, Laurence Sterne's eighteenth-century *Sentimental Journey* or Charlotte Brontë's nineteenth-century *Jane Eyre*. In addition to there being references to the famous scientist William Osler and, of course, to Maude Abbott's own scientific writing, there are also numerous literary quotations and references, especially to Keats's famous long poem "The Eve of St. Agnes", which turns out to be the most important literary intertext underlying the structure of the novel and a quotation from which appears as the epigraph to the very first chapter of *The Heart Specialist*.

As for Laurence Sterne's *Sentimental Journey*, when Agnes White follows her disappeared father's tracks in northern France and finally succeeds in finding him in Calais, only to be once again rejected by him, her text follows the traces of Sterne's sentimental traveller in places such as the small town of Montreuil-sur-Mer in the North of France. For example, her Montreal colleague Jakob Hertzlich is the first one to let her know that her father had moved to France after leaving her family behind under a cloud. Hertzlich reports on a visit to the battlefields of northern France that he had undertaken with Agnes White's mentor, her father's earlier friend and colleague Sir William Howlett:

> The inn at which they stopped in the town of Montreuil was where Laurence Sterne had slept on the first night of his *Sentimental Journey*. The next morning they resumed what Jakob had since come to realize was Howlett's own sentimental journey, and drove north to Calais. (*HS* 263)

6 Carmen Birkle refers to her, or rather her real-life model Maude Abbott, as one of the "icons of women's success in the profession" (2014, 128) and gives a meticulous list of her achievements in her essay on *The Heart Specialist* in *Zeitschrift für Kanada-Studien*.

Unfortunately, the intertextually exposed traces of Agnes White's travels do not turn the quest for her father, her own sentimental journey, into a success beyond giving the philologically inclined reader – rather than the desperate daughter inside the novel – the chance to check off yet another intertextual reference. While Laurence Sterne deconstructs his contemporaries' infatuation with going on the Grand Tour and visiting the continent as well as writing about it, these literary overtones, although mentioned in Rothman's text, may thus be interesting for Claire Holden Rothman's reader but not necessarily for Agnes White's mental composure.

Although Agnes White seems to be married to her job rather than any man, there possibly might be a hint at a happy ending also in her personal life. This is offered by another intertextual reference, which is probably the most important one in the novel: the reference to John Keats's romantic poem "The Eve of St. Agnes". Keats's poem can be seen as a structural model that is used by Claire Holden Rothman. The structural relationship exists on various levels: that of the protagonist's name, Agnes, as well as that of the legend of the saint and of the story told in the poem, which gives us a somewhat ambiguous vision of a final union and escape of the two lovers in Keats's poem. While in "The Eve of St. Agnes" the future of the escaped lovers is rather doubtful, Rothman's Agnes White finally meets again her former Montreal colleague and one-time lover Jakob Hertzlich at the end of the novel, just before he is supposed to leave for England. This seems to be in sync with the old Saint Agnes tradition that Agnes had learned about from her friend Miss Skerry when she was a child in the very first chapter of the novel and which would have predicted a future love relationship:

> "You're supposed to retire early on an empty stomach and lie completely still, looking up at the ceiling."
> […] "And then Saint Agnes comes with the man you are to marry." (*HS* 26)

The ending of the novel then picks up the Saint Agnes motif, as on January 20, 1919, i.e., on Saint Agnes' Eve, on board of an ocean steamer taking her back from France to Canada, Agnes dreams of her former colleague Jakob Hertzlich at the McGill medical museum:

> That night, however, I did dream. […] I was no longer aboard ship but back in Montreal at the museum, surrounded by shelves of specimen bottles. […] And there too was Jakob Hertzlich. (*HS* 312–13)

Back in Montreal after crossing the Atlantic, she then meets Hertzlich again, and a happy ending that makes the promise of the dream of Saint Agnes' Eve come true seems to be possible, although Keats's own ending of his poem about the love of Porphyro and Madeline would seem to be rather tragic in spite of the escape of the lovers, who "fled away into the storm" (Keats, l. 371). Such a less optimistic interpretation is at least suggested by Herbert G. Wright (1945) in his interpretation of "The Eve

of St. Agnes". I, however, would read the communion of Agnes White and Jakob Hertzlich over tea and the kissing of palms as positive, although the kissing of palms might also remind readers of another tragic couple – Shakespeare's Romeo kissing Juliet's palms in a play with a decidedly tragic ending:

> We sat in silence for a minute or two, simply looking at each other. Jakob Hertzlich's eyes were particularly warm and dark that day, set off against his full brown beard. I reached out and stroked the wiry bristles. He responded by taking my hand in his and kissing the palm. Then he smiled and signalled the waitress to bring more hot water for our tea. (*HS* 325)

In *The Heart Specialist*, Claire Holden Rothman thus uses the intertextual technique of parody as defined by Linda Hutcheon as "repetition with difference" (1985, 11), integrating Keatsian and Shakespearean echoes into the universe of the aspiring heart specialist by turning possibly tragic endings into more hopeful ones.

***My October* (2014)**

My October, Claire Holden Rothman's second novel, was shortlisted for the Governor General's Award and reflects the clash between the worlds of francophone Québécois political activists (some of them terrorists) and the anglophone establishment in 1960s' and 70s' Montreal. The clashing political views are also mirrored through the integration of actual characters from political and literary life into the novel.

In *My October*, a mixed Anglo-Canadian/Québécois family comes close to breaking apart at the beginning of the twenty-first century, suffering from the long-term effects of the 1970 October Crisis. As is to be expected, Quebec separatism and the FLQ terrorists are viewed quite differently by various family members, depending on their ethnic and political backgrounds. Whereas there is a strong reliance on the Keatsian literary intertext in *The Heart Specialist* and – as I am going to show – an equally strong reliance on the Shakespearean literary intertext in *Lear's Shadow*, *My October* presents a different situation in relying on a non-fictional rather than fictional intertext. It starts with a quotation from a non-fictional historical document by James Cross, the British trade commissioner in Montreal who had been kidnapped by the *Front de libération du Québec* and held captive for 59 days in 1970, while a member of the Quebec provincial government who had been kidnapped by another terrorist group died. This led to the declaration of the War Measures Act by Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau and to the suppression of civil rights for several months.

This is what James Cross writes about the October Crisis in a non-fiction text which Rothman includes as testimony leading into her novel:

> *October 5th was a typical bright Montreal Autumn day. […] I […] heard a ring of the doorbell and was surprised that anybody would arrive that early*

> *in the morning. My wife suggested that it was probably Hydro Quebec come to read the meter so I took no further notice. I then heard raised voices but did not pay much attention as our maid was inclined to speak loudly sometimes to her small child. The next thing I knew was as I was walking back towards the bathroom dressed only in shirt and underpants. A man came through from the opposite side holding a gun and said, "Get down on the floor or you'll be fucking dead."* (quoted in Rothman, *MO* ix–x)[7]

In the novel, the historical events are linked to the history of a fictional family which mirrors the divided structure of Québécois society. Hannah, the narrator, is from an anglophone Montreal family of Jewish descent. Her husband, Luc, is of Québécois stock, and his last name reverberates with historical connections: it is Lévesque. According to Myra Bloom, "Luc is a composite of famous writers of the Quiet Revolution, including Hubert Aquin and Réjean Ducharme" (2017, 55). Furthermore, he identifies with the literary heritage of Montreal as represented by Gabrielle Roy's *Bonheur d'occasion*; he "was hailed across the province as the literary heir to Gabrielle Roy" (*MO* 56); in fact, at one point, he decides to set up his office in a building mentioned by Roy in her novel:

> He was standing inside a *place* he had imagined in loving detail, had never failed to mention to every class in a decade of teaching. A place of legend […]. It was exactly as Gabrielle Roy had described. (*MO* 25)

Luc is a leading Québécois writer and intellectual fighting for Quebec independence, while his wife serves as his literary translator into English, his voice in the other Canadian language. Their son Hugo (or Hugh, as he prefers to call himself later) insists on using his mother's last name, Stern, in order to mark his difference from his schoolmates in an elite francophone school, where he raises a major scandal by smuggling a gun onto the school grounds. He even goes so far in distancing himself from Quebec society as to hitchhike to Toronto to be with his grandfather who, after having played an important role prosecuting Québécois nationalists during the October Crisis, had later left the province behind because of the language laws of the 70s and 80s that were meant to make Quebec unilingually French.

This grandfather, Hannah's father, is a Jew who had escaped the Holocaust in Europe to become one of the leading Canadian law professionals. He lived in the elitist anglophone Montreal neighbourhood of Westmount, where Luc Lévesque, with whom Stern's daughter Hannah had fallen in love, feels quite out of place. In the context of the October Crisis, Stern becomes one of the leading prosecutors of Québécois militants, many of whom are jailed for no apparent reason beyond being suspected of being FLQ sympathizers or members.

7 The taped memoir can be found at a University of Cambridge website, see list of works cited.

As the name FLQ, *Front de libération du Québec*, indicates, the militants see themselves as part of a worldwide struggle against imperialism and colonialism. Among its intellectual leaders was the journalist Pierre Vallières, who wrote the book *Nègres blancs d'Amérique*, in which he compared the situation of the Québécois with that of the Afro-Americans who had been taken across the Atlantic Ocean as slaves. Luc at one point had

> attended the legendary rally at the Paul Sauvé Arena. He had shouted out "FLQ! FLQ! FLQ!" in the same delirium as everyone else. He had felt the rush of tribal belonging. When Pierre Vallières, Quebec's answer to Che, had stood up at that rally to speak, Luc had stood too, whistling and clapping until his hands hurt. (*MO* 98)

When Hugo comes to read Vallières's book as part of his school project, it

> had been a shock. He couldn't believe it had been published, let alone reached cult status among students and so-called intellectuals in Montreal. It was a rant against the people who ran things – the presidents of banks and corporations, the leaders of political parties. In one ten-page chapter, Vallières blazed through three hundred years of Canadian history, reducing thousands of stories to a simple fight between capitalists and workers – referred to by Vallières as "slaves". (*MO* 190)

After Cross was liberated during the October Crisis, his kidnappers were flown to Cuba, from where they finally returned to Canada and had to spend several years in jail. But some of them, like Jacques Lanctôt, finally return to political and cultural life, and Lanctôt even appears as a literary publisher in the pages of *My October*. The novel thus shows that the FLQ terrorists are viewed quite differently by Anglo-Canadians and Québécois, and it is Hannah and Luc's son Hugh/Hugo who finally succeeds in preparing a sort of *rapprochement* between these two groups by working on a school project, an interview with James Cross about his experience as a captive of the FLQ, for which Hugh/Hugo travels to England. This project is meant to repair the damage he had done to the school by smuggling a gun into it.

Probably in order to heighten the historical reliability of the novel, Rothman includes quotations from non-fictional texts (such as James Cross's) which are thus trans-contextualized (see Hutcheon 1985, *passim*) into the literary work and given a new personal meaning, at least for the members of Luc and Hannah's family for whom the struggle for Quebec independence has penetrated into their most personal life. However, Michel Basilières, who himself wrote a postmodern novel, *Black Bird*, about the ethnic and linguistic situation in Montreal, is not completely convinced by this "redemptive ending" of the novel. As he puts it, "*My October* has real strengths, and carries the reader effortlessly along, but it's undercut by plot elements that don't con-

vince, even if they allow a redemptive ending" (Basilières 2014). Other reviewers, such as Peter McCambridge (2020), praise the novel as "intertextuality and concern for perspective gives *My October* impressive depth, building layer upon layer of personal, family tension".

***Lear's Shadow* (2018)**

Lear's Shadow, the third and latest novel by Claire Holden Rothman that I am analyzing in this article, focuses on more private family spheres and generational and old-age problems in contemporary Montreal society. The novel was awarded the 2019 Vine Award for Canadian Jewish Literature in Fiction (English-Loeb 2019). It tells the story of Beatrice Rose, the daughter of Sol Rose, a wealthy Jewish Montreal businessman who had worked his way up from working-class Saint-Urbain Street to elitist Westmount but is now suffering from dementia. Bea herself, suffering from a cleft palate since birth, undergoes a sort of midlife crisis around her fortieth birthday (*LS* 11), as she, who in her youth had been "the Rose family nomad" (*LS* 28) and had wandered through Asia and acquired a solid knowledge of Asian culture, especially of yoga techniques, is forced to sell her yoga school when her business and life partner Jean-Christian leaves her for another, younger and more attractive yoga instructor.

Quotations from Shakespeare's *King Lear* precede all the novel's "acts" as epigraphs. The beginning of the novel shows us a demented old man, Shakespeare's Lear transplanted from a wild heath in England to Park Avenue in contemporary Montreal. The following passage renders Sol Rose's unbalanced mental state, when he is no longer able to drive and control his car as if he were "crazy or blind or both" (*LS* 3), his mental state being not unlike that of King Lear in Shakespeare's play:

> THE OLD MAN KNOWS he should watch the road, but he can't. His eyes keep drifting to the black churn of cloud overhead. Nightfall is still an hour away, but the sky is so dark he can't see the white lines on the pavement. He curses, gropes for the headlight switch, pressing buttons and turning knobs to no visible effect. The car plunges through the shadows down the final stretch of Pine Avenue, past the Royal Victoria Hospital and the grimy stone archway of the Neurological Institute. It weaves across the lanes as though driven by someone crazy or blind or both. (*LS* 3)

Further parallels arise, for example, between Lear's irrational behaviour towards his daughters and Sol's own treatment of Bea and her sister. Some of Lear's lines taken from the play and integrated into the novel seem to be directly addressed to Bea. Whereas Shakespeare's Lear has three daughters, Goneril, Regan and Cordelia, Sol has only two, Bea and Cara. Cara owns a vegan restaurant, *Crudivore*, together with her French husband, Didier Ignace Malraux. There are obvious parallels between Bea's fate and that of Cordelia in Shakespeare's *King Lear*. These parallels also find their way into the plot of the novel as Bea, after having to give up the yoga school, takes up a

lowly-paid job as assistant stage manager of a theatre company performing *King Lear* in various parks in and around Montreal during the summer. References to student protests with their sound of *casseroles* (*LS* 14) or "pots and pans", as they were called by the anglophone press, suggest that the action takes place in 2012.

Bea's father's increasing dementia parallels the madness of King Lear in Shakespeare's tragedy, and in the performances, Bea turns into "Lear's Shadow" on at least two levels: first, as the stage manager looking after the aging and alcoholic actor Phil Burns playing the king in the performances of Shakespeare in the park and, second, as the daughter returning to her invalid father's Westmount home to look after him, just as Shakespeare's Cordelia had returned to Lear's England. In Shakespeare's play, it had been the Fool rather than the daughter who takes over the role of "Lear's Shadow", as Rothman's motto to the second "act" of the novel indicates:

> KING LEAR: Who is it that can tell me who I am?
> FOOL: Lear's shadow. (I.4.220–21) (*LS* 119)

Sol's relationship to his other daughter, Cara, might be compared to King Lear's visits with his daughters in their respective kingdoms, during which he asks them to support not only himself but also the knights of his court. Goneril, however, sees Lear as an "idle old man, / That still would manage those authorities / That he hath given away" (*King Lear* I.2.16-18). Claire Holden Rothman combines Goneril and Regan, Lear's two elder daughters, into Bea's only sister, Cara. Shakespeare's Goneril and Regan at first flatteringly pretend to love their father to only then distance themselves from him when they feel haunted by his demands and presence. While Goneril and Regan had felt haunted by King Lear, Cara has a similar impression after Sol's ghostlike appearance in the neighbourhood of her restaurant, although her attitude towards her father is in no way as unfriendly as Goneril's and Regan's had been towards Lear:

> "Something weird has been going on with him," said Cara after a moment […]. "He's been coming by Crudivore. I don't mean for lunch, which he's done for a couple of times, although he always complains about the food." […]. "I mean, late, after dark. It's happened twice now – well, twice that we're aware of. He hasn't come inside, just skulked around on Rachel Street, looking in the windows […]." (*LS* 55)

In the course of the performances of Shakespeare in the park, Bea falls in love with Artie White, a childhood friend from the Westmount neighbourhood in which she grew up and who acts as the Fool in the summer productions of *King Lear*. He thus has a mirroring function acting as a foil for both Phil, playing the king within the play, and for Sol, Bea's father within the novel. Artie

> was completely caught up in his role, dancing around the aged king, excoriating him for handing over everything he owned – his lands, his regal title, all his worldly wealth – to his daughters. (*LS* 132)

Bea in fact "also found it hard to tell sometimes where real life left off and acting began for Phil Burns" (*LS* 133), the aging actor who – plagued by alcoholism and amnesia – seems to be an ideally problematic King Lear if one goes for method acting.

Shakespeare's *King Lear* is a congenial intertextual foil for the generation problems within a Jewish family in Montreal, even if some aspects of Jewish culture seem to be somewhat unbelievable as depicted in the novel, when for example Bea is unable to understand what her father is looking for during his bouts of sleepwalking when he utters the word *abba*. She does not at first make the connection that this is the Hebrew word for *father*, which she does, however, at the very end of the novel, finally understanding that it was not her that he was estranged from but rather his own father. In other words, Lear's condemnation of Cordelia that Bea had re-contextualized from Shakespeare's tragedy by putting it into her father's mouth as a condemnation of herself (Shakespeare, *King Lear* 1.1.232–33) had not in fact been addressed to herself:

> Bea leaned forward and traced with her fingertips the shape of the [i.e., her father's] unhappy mouth. For forty years she'd believed she was its cause.
> *Better thou hadst not been born than not t'have pleased me better.*
> She'd believed it was her face [somewhat disfigured by the traces of her cleft palate] that had hardened her father's heart, her damage he abhorred. There had been anguish in that conviction, but also bitter satisfaction. To be abhorred was, at least, to be seen.
> Yet the lingering memory of an old man being turned away from the door on Melville Avenue had always whispered to Bea of another, older, more bitter abhorrence. A yellowed obituary had given it a name. A dozen refused cheques wrapped in a dozen reproachful letters had confirmed it.
> She couldn't struggle anymore, not after seeing the truth written in shaky blue ink. When Sol's eyes had burned with rage and frustration at the mockery of her cleft, it was not, after all, Bea he was seeing. It was his own father. *Abba*. The weak. The imperfect. The intolerable. It wasn't Bea he had embraced in troubled dreams in the basement of his house. It was *Abba*. (*LS* 307)

Her father feels persecuted by the memories of his father, whom he had banned from his family's home, and who had thus rejected any financial support from his successful son.

In the course of the novel, intertextual parallels thus arise and are openly thematized by the narrator, between Shakespeare's *King Lear* and Sol Rose's relationship to his daughters. Yet, the generation conflicts that had haunted the Rose family seem to be appeased at the end of the novel in this "trans-contextualization", as Linda Hutcheon (1985, *passim*) would call it, or "revision of Shakespeare by way of contemporary Montreal" (Vine Award jury, quoted by English-Loeb 2019).

Conclusions

All in all, Rothman's fiction offers a highly readable mirror of contemporary Montreal. While it shows us different grounds for societal division in the fields of gender, ethnicity and family, it stands out by making different uses of intertextual parody *à la* Linda Hutcheon, integrating or re-contextualizing significant older passages, whether they be of scientific, biographical or literary origin, into contemporary texts in which – through their repetition with a difference – they provide special moments of insight to the readers, thus adding to the appeal of Rothman's writing. The intertexts that Claire Holden Rothman makes use of, whether they are of nonfictional origin – such as Maude Abbott's medical texts integrated into the fictional life of Agnes White – or of literary derivation – such as Shakespeare's *King Lear* or Keats's "Eve of St. Agnes" – serve as structuring devices in the new literary works. Their "repetition with difference" or "trans-contextualization" (Hutcheon 1985, *passim*) of fictional or non-fictional pre-texts within a new historical or thematic context enhances the pleasure of reading the literary text by discovering a wealth of more or less unexpected intertextual connections.

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