

The Cell Phone and the Virgin (2018): A Montreal Odyssey

By [Edward Curtin](#)

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*“And the sun pours down like honey on our lady of the harbor
And she shows you where to look among the garbage and the flowers
There are heroes in the seaweed, there are children in the morning
They are leaning out for love and they will lean that way forever
While Suzanne holds her mirror”*

- Leonard Cohen, “Suzanne”

“Before this historical chasm, a mind like that of Adams felt itself helpless; he turned from the Virgin to the Dynamo as though he were a Branly coherer. On one side, at the Louvre and at Chartres, as he knew by the record of work actually done and still before his eyes, was the highest energy ever known to man, the creator of four-fifths of his noblest art, exercising vastly more attraction over the human mind than all the steam-engines and dynamos ever dreamed of; and yet this energy was unknown to the American mind. An American Virgin would never dare command; an American Venus would never dare exist.” - Henry Adams, “The Dynamo and the Virgin” (1900) in The Education of Henry Adams

“The voices blend and fuse in clouded silence; silence that is infinite of space: and swiftly, silently the sound is wafted over regions of cycles of cycles of generations that have lived.” - James Joyce, Ulysses

The first thing the writer noticed as he walked around downtown Montreal was the grotesque new architecture that was destroying the charming and humane ambience the city once embodied and that allowed for human thoughts and feelings. He had not been in the city for many years but remembered a more human scale that had entranced him. He wondered if his memory were playing tricks on him but realized it was not. Everywhere he looked, massive glass-skinned towers stood over the streets, sentinels for the financial, insurance, and real estate speculators, a post-modern world of abstractions.



Looking deep into the construction sites that were everywhere, he marveled at the modern feats of engineering that would raise more glass cathedrals to the heavens. The power of modern technology astounded him. The City of Saints had turned into the city of money, even while the streets maintained their saintly names and the beautiful churches held their ground despite dwindling worshippers.

Curtin stood in front of Notre-Dame-de-Bon-Secours Chapel (image below), looking up at the Virgin glimmering in the afternoon sun. The old port. The sailor's church. Like Henry Adams, he thought of the powerful force of the Virgin throughout history. Her protection across life's tempestuous seas.



And Leonard Cohen, the Montrealer, who as a young man would come to this chapel and sit in meditation and write his beautiful song, "Suzanne," invoking "our lady of the harbor." Leonard, who would stand in awe of the woman as protectress, as mother, as lover, as muse: As in "Night Comes On":

I said, Mother I'm frightened
The thunder and the lightning
I'll never come through this alone
She said, I'll be with you
My shawl wrapped around you
My hand on your head when you go

Curtin understood the fear, the protective power, and the creative inspiration of the Blessed Mother down through the ages. He recalled the Miraculous Medal (the Medal of Our Lady of Graces) he wore as a teenager. Like so much, it had disappeared, and he didn't know where it went. Who had abandoned whom? While all around him tourists were using cell phones to capture the image of the Virgin's chapel, as if they could bottle the spirit and be on their way. He wondered if God had a cell phone; how far did wireless communications extend? He marveled at the way the owners of these devices - which seemed to be everyone but him - took for granted the power of the new technology that had "conquered time and space" and redesigned the world and their minds. Everywhere they went, they held these little rectangles in front of their faces repetitively trying in vain to capture something they were not sure of, including their own images. Their connection to these little boxes seemed anatomical, and the power they contained almost divine. He could hear the clashing of an unspoken war as he observed his surroundings.

More than a century before at the Great Exposition in Paris, Henry Adams had stood and

also wondered; he, about the Branly coherer, the first radio wave detector used widely for radio communications. The first wireless. Being an American, Adams knew that technology and gadgets would take preference over the Virgin when help was needed. And he felt torn himself. After all these years, Curtin also knew that if most people wanted help, they would turn to their phones, the little gods they carried everywhere. Notre-Dame-de Bon Secours (Our Lady of Good Help) was only for sailors of old, men afraid of drowning, and sophisticated moderns did not think like the shipwrecked, those who Ortega y Gasset said were the lost ones, who have recognized that to live is to be lost, and realizing that “will look round for something to which to cling, and that tragic, ruthless glance, absolutely sincere, because it is a question of his [their] salvation” will lead them not to embrace a machine, but the spirit of all life. Leonard Cohen sang to Curtin as he stood there musing:

And Jesus was a sailor when he walked upon the water
And he spent a long time watching from his lonely wooden tower
And when he knew for certain only drowning men could see him
He said all men will be sailors then until the sea shall free them
But he himself was broken, long before the sky would open
Forsaken, almost human, he sank beneath your wisdom like a stone

But no one else heard the singer, for what are a dead poet’s words remembered by heart worth in an age when one can “google it”? Just standing, looking, and listening seemed so out of date, like the Virgin looking down upon the tourists as they scurried next store to the Bonsecours Market, a large commercial hall where rather than receive the good help of spiritual sustenance, they could buy apparel and accessories in the church of commerce. Tourists swam safely through the place, finding help and salvation in a buyer’s paradise, the current wisdom.

So he turned and walked away, climbing the crosstown streets that would take him to the neighborhood around McGill University. In *The Word* bookstore, he spent an hour looking through the used books and talking with the owner Adrian. Here he felt at home, greeted as he was by a black and white framed photo of Leonard Cohen that welcomes all poets and dreamers who frequent this intimate storefront housed in a unprepossessing nineteenth century brick building. He overheard a woman ask Adrian for directions, and his reply gave Curtin reason to hope. Adrian said to the woman, “Well, you can always get lost and see what you find. That may be more interesting.” And he chuckled. But the woman wanted the straight way, the road more traveled, nothing serendipitous; getting lost was not on her agenda. And after a few minutes, she went outside the store to wait for her companion who was still looking at books. The woman was studying something on her cell. Curtin imagined it was the bars.

The way the bookstore was arranged seemed to mirror his mind, a mind that seemed out of tune with the times. For his mind moved from one category of thought to another, as the books on the shelves moved from art to poetry to philosophy without signs signifying a change. They flowed into each other. He knew, of course, that all thought was one continuous stream fed by tributaries, and even many of the tributaries couldn’t be found since they ran underground. It was only the modern mind that wished to categorize and control, the instrumental reasoning mind that had come to dominate the Western world and had proclaimed that humans were machines, that wished for signs declaring separable categories of life and thought. He knew that the best writers in the books that surrounded him wrote so many of their truest words when they thought they were writing something

else. This inadvertent way of living seemed to make the woman looking for directions nervous.

Curtin often got lost, for he didn't have a smart phone to give him directions. A colleague he had met for lunch laughed when he told him that. These phones are really indispensable, he had said; you really should get one. And then he showed him photographs he had stored on the machine. He had hundreds. Its power was awe inspiring, a small device that allowed world-wide communication in a flash anywhere you were. You could capture the past with it; travel the world in an ethereal instant without moving; never be out of "touch" without being touched. It made him wonder: Where does true power lie? Was he out of touch? What did he want to touch?

On he walked through the City of Saints, passing McGill University, where he noticed the innocent appearance of students walking to and fro. He wondered what it must be like to be beginning one's studies. Did they learn anything about what had gone on at their university? Did they learn about the deep currents that informed history, the true nature of current affairs, or were their professors spouting superficial nonsense that kept them safe in cushy positions? From his experience in academia, Curtin knew that the university had been co-opted by the state and now functioned as an appendage of the war makers. Liberal arts now meant neo-liberalism and political correctness. Dissent meant dismissal, and so he realized that only those students who might browse through used bookstores like *The Word* might serendipitously discover the truth about their world. Most would be brainwashed. But they won't know it.

He had no phone, but Curtin could hear the screams and groans coming from McGill, the people screaming no, no, no from Dr. Donald Ewen Cameron's "Sleep Room," as he fed hallucinogens and electrical shocks to "patients," the victims of his notorious CIA MKUltra mind control experiments in which he wiped the brain clean of so-called negative thoughts and replaced them with "good ones." He was not dreaming. He heard Val Orlikow screaming, as the good doctor, the President of the American and Canadian Psychiatric Associations, made her mind a blank slate by erasing any memory of her husband and reducing her to toddler status. She thought she was being treated for post-partum depression. The sounds of torture rattled his mind, the sounds of human desperation and the sounds of Cameron's taped messages fed to almost comatose patients in what he called "psychic driving." The prototypical experiments for the age of digital dementia. Black sites. He saw Cameron smile, his legacy secure.

Curtin felt immensely sad as he saw a young college student cross in front of him. She seemed to be in a trance and almost bumped into him. She was beautiful, and her ears were plugged with ear buds, and when he turned to see her walk away, he noticed her backpack had a small pink teddy bear hanging from it. And he remembered the concluding lines to Cohen's "Suzanne":

And you want to travel with her, and you want to travel blind
And you know that you can trust her
For she's touched your perfect body with her mind

Walking brought memories, associations, reveries, and thoughts. Drugs and technology could erase them. He realized that there was as much worth forgetting as remembering, as

both were arts that opposed the sick science and technology that had overtaken so much of society. But what to remember and what to forget? Was that student trying to remember or forget something with that teddy bear that hung as a talisman? Were those earbuds drowning out memories or dangerous thoughts? Who had touched her mind? Thoreau had said it's very hard to forget what's worse than useless to remember. And Curtin realized that he had honed his own forgettery to rid his mind of all the useless data the corporate mass media were pumping out, data used to create chaos and confusion, when much was so obvious if one just opened one's eyes to the truth. If he had a cell phone, he mused, he might never have to remember or forget. The secret to communication might be solved. Maybe someday he could be downloaded or uploaded into a phone, whichever it is, and all his problems would be solved.

"Come here, I want to see you," Alexander Graham Bell said to Watson in the first telephone call. Watson remembered it differently. He recalled Bell saying, "Come here I want you." So much wanting and forgetting and remembering made Curtin's head spin. So much desire for the presence of the absent other. But whom to call? How? Or was it the absence of the present other? Could one turn and say, "What is it you want?"

He and his wife kept walking toward the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts where there was an exhibit of Picasso's use of African art and artifacts: "From Africa to the Americas: Face-To-Face Picasso, Past and Present." Picasso, a believer in magic and the occult, was notoriously opposed to reason and logic and understanding. He once said that "people who try to explain pictures are usually barking up the wrong tree." Curtin and his wife had once attended a gala opening of a large Picasso retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The galleries were filled with celebrities, their masks intact, oohing and ahing at the art work. At the time he wondered what they would say if he asked them how they understood this or that piece. Did they just stand or understand? Would they say, "What a genius; he had the magic touch?"

Curtin had admired a goat sculpture that spoke to him. He can't remember what it said, but he remembered wondering if he were the goat surrounded by brilliant minds who could decipher art far beyond his pedestrian ability. Now he wondered what Picasso might communicate to him with his African inspired works. Should he try to understand them, or was that too plebian? Was there some esoteric trick to it all? Could Picasso shed light on the enigma that perplexed Adams and Curtin? Or was there nothing to understand? Was it all just a mystery beyond comprehension? Beyond explanation? Beyond communication? Was it simply art appreciation or magic?

He hoped that maybe before his odyssey around Montreal was over he would discover the answer to the dilemma that perplexed him: Was it in the cell phone or the Virgin that true power lay? Digital or sacred force? Adams never truly resolved it; maybe he could. Or had a century and more made it more difficult? Impossible?

He knew that from photography and the phonograph to the computerized cell phone, memory had achieved a strange jailbreak from the body that made writing seem like a crude form by comparison. Could visual art reveal the truth? Picasso? McGill's Dr. Cameron and his CIA accomplices had mastered the black arts of disassociating the personality (as Picasso had done with art), of erasing memories and implanting new ones, of using drugs, technology and the occult to materialize the psychic and control volition and memory - they were masters of the electronic mind-body interface and worldview warfare that their Nazi friends had bequeathed to them. They had taken the lessons of black magic and the

machine god adored by the fascist Marinetti and his “Futurism” art movement, with its superstitious occult roots hidden behind its pseudo-scientific mumbo jumbo, and made it their own. They had conjured up a satanic brew of technology and hallucinatory drugs and rituals to promote the idea that the supernatural machine ruled mankind and they controlled the machine, and no one could defeat them. They considered themselves the spearhead of the new colonial imperial powers, who colonized the minds of the masses. It seemed to Curtin that at some unconscious level all the people he saw with cell phones had been disassociated but didn’t know it. They were victims of the latest version of MKUltra on a vast scale. They had been invaded by “special forces.”

Here he was on a few days’ vacation, and his mind whirled with all these perplexing thoughts. He needed to communicate, and he wondered who would hear him if he cried out, if he spoke to the air. Rilke’s words came to him:

Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the Angelic Orders? And even if one were to suddenly take me to its heart, I would vanish into its stronger existence. For beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror, that we are still able to bear, and we revere it so, because it calmly disdains to destroy us. Every Angel is terror. And so I hold myself back and swallow the cry of a darkened sobbing.

But he held his tears and walked on, resolved to solve the enigma before the day was up.

When they arrived at the museum, Curtin was again struck by the thought that museums were very strange places. He always felt as though he were entering a graveyard, where art was isolated from the living. This funereal quality was amplified by the required silence, as if one were in the presence of ghosts or gods who required adoration. Museums seemed to him to be temples of the rich where the art was their war booty on display, the victims of their conquests antiseptically absent. He felt half-dead when in them.

This particular exhibit came to be because the European colonial powers had looted their colonies for art and artifacts that they brought back to their home countries and locked up in museums and in the homes of the rich. Spoils of war. It happened that in 1907 Pablo Picasso visited a dusty museum in Paris, the Musee d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro, where he was startled by the African art and artifacts he saw there. He later said:

The greatest artistic emotion I have felt was when I was suddenly struck by the sublime beauty of the sculptures carved by anonymous artists in Africa. Passionately religious, yet rigorously logical, these works are the most powerful and most beautiful things ever produced by the human imagination.

Then he proceeded to appropriate the appropriated art, and some of the results lined the walls of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. Curtin couldn’t help noticing Picasso’s doubling down on rigorous logic in his opportunistic “borrowing.” But the “passionately religious” nature of the artist’s work that graced the gallery escaped him, unless the museum had become the new cathedral. This seemed quite probable. He doubted that Picasso shared Adams’ lofty assessment of Chartres Cathedral, since Picasso considered African sculpture “the most beautiful things produced by the human imagination,” and his attitude toward the “religious” was colored by its foreign and exotic qualities, elements absent from the European Christian or Islamic heritage of his homeland of Spain, or from France and Europe

as a whole.

Picasso did most of this African-inspired work between 1906 and 1909, before turning to what has been called his Cubist period, which only lasted until the “War to End All Wars” ended the lives of over 20 million people, while wounding even more. Like Picasso’s African and Cubist work, the war surely offered a different perspective. It was all so logical and technological, the height of modern efficiency, yet seemed conjured up from the darkest pit of hell. It gave one a different understanding of time and space, and relativized plenty of bromides. Curtin remembered reading with sardonic amusement the words of Freud, who was so disappointed by the great white man’s betrayal of his highest “ideals” by waging the First World War:

We had expected the great world-dominating nations of white race upon whom the leadership of the human species has fallen, who were known to have world-wide interests as their concern, to whose creative powers were due not only our technical advances towards the control of nature but the artistic and scientific standards of civilization – we had expected these people to succeed in discovering another way of settling misunderstandings and conflicts of interest.

This memory of the great white father’s racist thoughts so discombobulated his mind that for a few minutes he had to find a seat and close his eyes in meditation. He remembered that Freud, the atheist, had his consulting room filled with hundreds of ancient figurines of gods and goddesses that created the effect of an eerie sacred chamber where religious rites were performed. Like a temple or a museum, he meant this room to suggest that this art and these artifacts from other times and places and the land of memory could effect magical cures on those who came for the cure of their souls. For a minute he thought he was in Freud’s consulting room and was free-associating. Then he opened his eyes to see Picasso’s mask staring down at him.

Curtin mused about these connections as he read the anthropological wall plaques explaining how, over a century or more, “the decolonization of the colonial gaze” has been taking place. He thought this very good, and was looking forward to the parallel exhibit – “Here We Are Here: Black Canadian Contemporary Art” – that was meant to exhibit this change. He wondered if the artists who created this new art of the decolonized gaze grasped the nature of the new colonialism, if they knew of the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM) and NATO countries’ military penetration of the African continent, of the World Bank’s and the International Monetary Fund’s control, of the NGO’s work with the CIA and USAID and foundations that were masks to hide the true nature of continued Western control without the use of the term “colonies.” Taking back the gaze was but a first step.

Curtin’s primary odyssey, however, was to try to unmask the true font of power in the contemporary world. The world had suffered a series of radical breaks with historical continuity and loss of identity with place, starting shortly after Adams was born in the mid-nineteenth century. Space and time had been contracted by the new technology. Adams had contemplated the dynamo. The computerized cell phone was its current symbol, and its evil twin the concentrated power of nuclear weapons. The modern mind had suffered severe dislocation and confusion. All the ruins, antiques, and artifacts of the past that were collected and commodified over the last 150 years could no more restore lost identities than could the prolific growth in museums in the same period. The museums were the

mausoleums of societies dying from within. As he walked around the exhibit, he realized that Picasso, for all his obvious talent, and especially with the works that comprised this show, had no solution. He was a symptom of the depth of the problem, the neurotic symptom that allowed for an ersatz solution, which was, of course, no solution. Like a neurotic who goes for help with his symptoms that have squeezed the life out of him but help him hide from his true problems, Picasso's masks, distortions, and play-acting art were impotent. Seemingly potent and wildly celebrated, they hid the "extinction of living inner religiousness," as Spengler put it, that was disappearing from so much of the world, particularly Europe and the United States, the countries that have embraced militarism and war-making as their nihilistic *modi operandi*. Even the women that populate so much of Picasso's work - "For me there are only two kinds of women," he said, "goddesses and doormats." - these women of all shapes and poses, do not offer us a true clue to the power of the Virgin Adams was contemplating alongside the dynamo.

As an only brother with seven sisters, Curtin had grown up among women. He learned that they, like him, were complex, surely neither goddesses nor doormats. One of his sisters had been an artist of rare power. She wished to live as a liberated woman before society sanctioned this. Her art couldn't save her. She died by her own hand, terribly torn between a depraved and distorted religious orthodoxy and dreams of spiritual and artistic freedom. She seemed to him to be a genuine symbol of the nature of modern life, where people yo-yoed back and forth between equally false solutions without grasping the larger cultural and social forces at work. He sensed her tragedy was the tragedy of so much history, where a reactionary cycle seemed to operate. Technology, colonialism, industrialization, the relativization of thought and religion preceded Picasso's grasping of African art and what was perceived as its magical qualities. France for years had been abuzz with the occult, esoterica, magic, trances, etc. Madame Blavatsky and her ilk were celebrated as liberators. Then came the Cubist revolution that ended in France in 1914. The war that brought such vast physical suffering and death ushered in a death in the soul, what John Berger called "inverted suffering," that created vast confusion in people's minds as they became lost within themselves trying to comprehend the absurdities that ensued and what it all could possibly mean. Logic had been turned on its head where it remains, but technology has triumphed. Or so it thinks.

Curtin was exhausted. He grasped Adams' disillusionment. For years he had diligently studied and written about the three political assassinations that had marked his life: JFK, MLK, and RFK. Doing so had become a spiritual necessity for him. He knew why and how they were killed. He knew the culprit: the CIA, the masters of the dark arts. And he knew that the killers had used all the tricks and masks in the magician's playbook to confuse and confound the American public. They had used technology and drugs and art and artists and writers and culture and the mass media to sow bewilderment, to disassociate the minds of average people already confused by the unraveling of history and identity that started in Adams' day. It had been a long century and a long day.

He wished to report his findings, and thought of ending with the following paragraph, that while true, was not a very definitive ending, surely not an answer to the enigma that the day's wandering had brought him:

America has always taken tragedy lightly. Too busy to stop the activity of their twenty-million-horse-power society, Americans ignore tragic motives that would have overshadowed the Middle Ages; and the world learns to regard assassinations as a form of hysteria, and death as neurosis, to be treated by a

rest cure. Three hideous political murders, that would have fattened the Eumenides with horror, have thrown scarcely a shadow on the White House.

No doubt it would have made an eloquent conclusion, but since these were Adams' words, written in 1902, he thought best of it. The words are still true, and sent a shiver down his spine when he remembered them. But he knew they would not satisfy his restless, conspiratorial mind or anyone who might read it. He reminded himself that all his study had led him to the conclusion that life and history are far more obvious than the world prefers to believe. The problem is that people prefer unbelief to belief, mirages to water.

"The world is becoming a giant military base," wrote the great Latin American writer, Eduardo Galeano, "and that base is becoming a mental hospital the size of the world. Inside the nuthouse, which ones are crazy?"

Curtin was standing in the middle of the gallery lost in thought. An attendant came up to him and tapped him on the shoulder. "Sir," he said, "it's closing time."

So out of the museum Curtin and his wife walked. They found a little French restaurant where they ate a delicious meal accompanied by fragrant wine. All his dilemmas disappeared for the nonce. He forgot the purpose of his long odyssey around town. While walking back to their hotel under a resplendent full moon, he was at peace. The world was beautiful, as he knew it was. As they undressed, he promised himself he would dream the answer to his quest and in the morning would visit our lady of the harbor and tell her his dream.

But morning came with no breakthrough. But he had promised the lady a last visit, at least to apologize and to ask forgiveness for his ignorance. He walked to Notre-Dame-de-Bon-Secours. He glanced at his watch and realized he had first arrived here exactly twenty-four hours before. He was back where he started. He felt had gone in a circle and had no great insight to show for it. He glanced up to Our Lady a bit ashamed and entered the chapel. It was empty and silent. Curtin sat in a pew half-way down and let the silence envelop him as he meditated. He listened. Would she speak to him? Minutes passed, when he was startled by the sound of the door behind him opening. He heard footsteps as someone walked down the aisle. It felt like an intrusion, and he was irritated. A man slipped into the aisle next to him. It was the dead Leonard Cohen. He gave Curtin a wry smile. He didn't look any different. He said nothing and looked straight ahead. Then he started singing his angelic song, and Curtin knew he had arrived at an answer beyond explanation, but one that went so deep it didn't need one. The power of song; that was it. Curtin had long felt but never expressed that nothing moved and unsettled him more than songs, and so he had both fled and embraced them in an alternating cycle of futility down his days. Now his tears were tears of joy that overwhelmed him as he listened to Leonard sing "Suzanne."

He wishes to share with you such beauty, and wonders what Henry Adams would think. No doubt our lady of the harbor, Notre Dame, was enchanted.

Ladies and Gentlemen, here is Leonard Cohen, alive and well, singing [Suzanne](#).

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