

# An interview with Pierre Nepveu: Thinking About Land

## When did you start writing poetry?

I was around 15 or 16 when I started. It was the only way I could say something significant. I was so silent, so secretive; I didn't express any of my emotions. I was just quiet, like many teenagers would be. I had a teacher in grade 11 or grade 12 who taught literature and mostly poetry. We were able to choose our final project, whether it was an essay or something creative, and I made a small collection of poems that the teacher liked. It became a necessity for me. After that, I never stopped.

## What inspired you to write *Mirabel*, a book about the construction of the controversial Montreal airport that destroyed so many rural communities?

There were two things: the first one is that I've always been sensitive to the ways in which ordinary people can be displaced by those who have political power. Since the 19th century, modern progress has usually shown indifference and even contempt for the urban lower classes and rural populations. Mirabel airport was a flagrant example of that, and it made no sense — it was a failure. The second reason is that I had a link to that area — all four of my grandparents were born near Mirabel in different villages. When I was young, we still had family living there, and I spent an entire summer there when I was 13. When I came back to the city, I wanted to be a farmer. That didn't last! It's hard to know when a book really starts. It just came naturally. I began to write on the landscape — the airport itself — and then began to imagine its construction. Slowly it took shape.

## Why has the landscape been so important in poetry from Quebec?

I think for all poets, it's our concrete environment that grounds us. Often now with younger poets, the environment is urban, the city is more important — the violence, poverty, everything. But for the poets of Gaston Miron's generation, most were born in the countryside — they came to Montreal to work and write. They identified not only with nature, but also with a collective story. Their culture was born in that landscape. In the 1960s, poets began to link the landscape with a political statement, to what is called "la poésie du pays" with its search for a place to live, a place for human life, a political space for Quebec.

## Could you recommend specific poems that capture this?

There are so many examples. Alfred DesRochers' "Hymne au vent du Nord" uses the landscape, the natural elements, the climate, to build an epic identity. Here is a typical Quebec and Canadian mythology, suggesting that this Northern land carries and requires energy, a need for its inhabitants to stand up and fight. Even more importantly, this winter land seems to be a school of moral values: it raises straightforwardness, purity, and elevation of the soul. Gaston Miron's "Compagnon des Amériques" also has an epic tone, but the relation between the land and identity is more complex: it has a social and political dimension that is not present or explicit in DesRochers' poem. Miron's land is not only full of energy and passion, but it is also vulnerable, isolated, deprived, so that it requires compassion and responsibility.



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More generally, this relation between the land and identity is common to a lot of poets, whatever their origin. See, for example, Acadian poet Herménégilde Chiasson: his poem "Outremer" deals with the whole uncertainty of Acadian identity. Here, the landscape, including the sea, is linked to the difficulty of inheriting values from the older generation, from the father and the mother. You would find the same among many Caribbean and African poets: nature and landscape always embody a specific history, a culture, a way of living and a certain sensitivity to the outside world.

Watch Pierre Nepveu discuss how he chose the poems in our French anthology: [lesvoixdelapoésie.com](http://lesvoixdelapoésie.com)