EMILE NELLIGAN

A Dreamer Passing By

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THOUGH HIS FLAME OF GENIUS flickered so briefly, the romantic, tragic and mad Emile Nelligan (1879-1941) captured the imagination of Quebec as no writer before or after. The critic, Jean-Ethier Blais, once remarked, "ne peut-on pas croire que c'est tout notre sensibilité qui vit à son ombre?"

Nelligan spent his youth in Montreal. His father, absent most of the year on behalf of the postal service, was a tyrannical Irishman who refused to learn French, while his mother, a gentle, musical French Canadian, protected her son. As a boy Nelligan seemed indifferent to his studies and as a young man showed no inclination to find regular employment, much to the annoyance of his father. From age sixteen to nineteen he devoted himself exclusively to writing poetry, affecting a bohemian life style. Then he succumbed to the schizophrenia that had been slowly engulfing him and waited out the rest of his days in mental institutions, never writing another word of poetry. One can see, given Nelligan's background and futile rebellion, how his schizophrenia assumed a mythic quality in Quebec, how it came to symbolize the oppressive theocracy and uneasy dual heritage.

Far surpassing any other Quebec author and, in stark contrast to English Canadian writers, Nelligan has been celebrated, analyzed, and immortalized. In his *Bibliographie descriptive et critique d'Emile Nelligan* (1973) Paul Wyczynski painstakingly details the numerous colloquia, conferences, and publications of all types from reviews to films. Nelligan's poems have been translated into English, set to music by Quebec chansonniers, recreated in the watercolours of Louis Pelletier, and inspired pieces by composers. His most famous poem, "Le Vaisseau d'or" lent its name to Mayor Jean Drapeau's restaurant, now bankrupt. He has been the subject of a ballet "Nelligan" by Ann Ditchburn. In December 1974, "Le Patriote" in Montreal presented Monique Leyrac's "Spectacle Emile Nelligan," one of several such spectacles. There is also an "Editions Emile Nelligan" and, in 1979, Le Prix Emile Nelligan for poetry was first awarded. The poet has also been a recurring figure in contemporary literary work — Réjean Ducharme's *Le Nez qui voque* and Lazar Sarna's *The Man Who Lived Near Emile Nelligan.*

Part of this adulation stems from Nelligan's eloquent expression of images and themes that continue to obsess Quebec artists: entrapment, isolation, alienation,

exile, ambivalence towards one's Catholic heritage which nevertheless supplies a bottomless fount of aesthetic images. But this tribute also arises from the recognition that Nelligan heralds the arrival of modernism in Quebec. In his poetry, the fetters of a moribund patriotism and artificial romanticism are thrown off, revealing the possibilities of the symbolic use of language and the psychological examination of one's inner being. This is not to deny that Nelligan was — as any youthful poet inevitably is — strongly imitative of his masters — the French and Belgian poets of the parnassian and symbolist schools, as well as Byron and Poe. Despite the conventional, if well-crafted poetic forms (in particular, the sonnet) and the echoes from continental poets, a desperate and moving inner struggle illuminates Nelligan's poems. Unlike earlier Quebec poets, he sought to portray the state of his soul, to reveal the often divided images of the self; thus he created a landscape of the soul that reverberates in the poems of Alain Grandbois, Saint-Denys-Garneau, and Anne Hébert.

Both Nelligan's and Quebec's literary awakening were occasioned in part by the appearance of the Ecole littéraire de Montréal, founded in 1895 and lasting in varying degrees of intensity until 1935. The story goes that a group of young lawyers, disgusted by the "canadianismes," "anglicismes," and "lieux communs"[1] polluting a political banquet they were attending, began to gather together on Saturday nights at the Café Ayotte on Ste. Catherine St. Because of their addiction to huge glasses of draught beer they became known as the "six éponges."[2] These young men, thus inspired, resolved to undertake to "raviver chez nous l'intérêt aux choses de l'esprit et d'apprendre à notre langage des formules plus neuves."[3] This was the origin of l'Ecole.

The impetus behind the Montreal movement, aside from the desire of several young poets to provide a "foyer" where they could discuss and recite their poetry, was a concern with improving and renewing the French language and literature in Quebec. At first, the school set up a programme of studying ten pages of the dictionary per week in order to improve the vocabulary of its members. L'Ecole was envisioned, particularly by its progenitors, as a movement of artistic awakening; it was to signal a new literary epoch in which the romanticism and patriotism of their elders would be discarded. One of the participants, Albert Ferland, described the society:

> Cercle d'étude, d'un esprit très éclectique qui n'avait pour objet que de grouper, sans distinction d'école, classiques, parnassiens ou symbolistes, tous les jeunes écrivains de l'heure . . . Deux tendances partageaient les tenants de cette école: les uns n'avaient que le souci d'exprimer leur âme (Lozeau, Nelligan, Melançon, Demers, Charbonneau, Beauregard) ; les autres désiraient donner à leur poésie la couleur et la saveur du terroir: c'étaient Albert Ferland, Doucet, Léveillé, Gill, Tremblay, Desaulniers.[4]

With typical French precision and flair, the school set about instigating programs,

inviting members, publishing its lectures and sessions, and holding lively meetings in the Château de Ramezay, formerly the governer's palace, built in 1705. What began as a gathering of a small number of people interested in poetry blossomed into a large organization that included lawyers, journalists, a doctor, a notary, a painter and an engraver.

In 1897, the young Emile Nelligan was invited by his friend, Arthur de Bussières, to join the group. Although he participated only sporadically, l'Ecole gave him an opportunity to present his verse to the public. On December 29, 1898, he gave his first public reading before a receptive crowd. At the third session, April 7, 1899, Jean Charbonneau gave a talk on symbolism, where he eschewed the principles of symbolism, a stance he later regretted. On May 26, 1899, Nelligan read his "Romance du vin," his moment of triumph. Louis Dantin, Nelligan's mentor and dedicated editor, described how: "J'ai vu un soir Nelligan en pleine gloire. . . . Quand l'oeil flambant, le geste élargi par l'effort intime, il clama d'une voix passionnée sa *Romance du vin*, une émotion vraie étreignit la salle, et les applaudissements prirent la fureur d'une ovation."[5] Like a victor, Nelligan was heroically lifted onto the shoulders of his fellow poets and carried home.

Nelligan's verse seems all the more modern when set against the backdrop of nineteenth-century Quebec. Unless one had contacts with France or had visited her, it was difficult in that church-dominated society to keep abreast of new literary movements. The press[6] was naturally conservative, and therefore, not until 1895 and the creation of l'Ecole did the parnassian and symbolist movements, long flourishing in France, combine to influence the direction of Quebec art. The two major dailies, *La Patrie* and *La Minerve*, published articles on art, while two journals in particular, *Le Monde illustré* and *Le Samedi* (both of which published verse by Nelligan), contained poems and articles on literature. From 1884 to 1894, *Le Monde illustré* concentrated on Victor Hugo and François Coppée with rarely a poem even by Lamartine or de Musset. Finally in 1895 Sully Prudhomme, Hérédia, and Rodenbach began to make an appearance and a poem of Baudelaire's — "Le Port" — was published in 1899. *Le Samedi* was a little more adventurous and through 1895-96, poems by Baudelaire and Verlaine were included. Nelligan probably found many of the sources for his poetic inspiration among these poems.

Nelligan's poems were not collected and published until after his incarceration, although his manuscripts show that he had been arranging his poems into a volume. Louis Dantin, at that time still a priest, spent several years compiling a volume of Nelligan's poems. When his disapproving superiors discovered his activities, Dantin handed the manuscripts and printed papers to Nelligan's mother, who along with Charles Gill gave them to the publisher, Beauchemin. These were then published in 1904 as *Emile Nelligan et son oeuvre* with a preface by Dantin. Dantin, partly because of this incident, exiled himself to Cambridge, Massachusetts, and left the church. Then in 1952, Luc Lacourcière brought out *Poésies*

complètes which contained the one hundred and seven poems gathered together by Dantin, plus thirty-five poems that had appeared in journals from 1896 to 1939 (friends who had received poems from Nelligan published them after he was hospitalized) and twenty-one poems from the Nelligan-Corbeil manuscripts now at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Montreal. In 1968, Beaudoin Burger published seven poems from the Carnets d'Hôpital;[7] two were variants of poems in the *Poesies complètes* and one, "Baudelaire," by Fernand Gregh, was incorrectly attributed to Nelligan.

Nelligan had intended to entitle his collection of poems "Motifs du récital des anges" and had listed the sections as follows: "Prélude aux anges," "Clavecin céleste," "Villa d'enfance," "Petite chapelle," "Vesprées mystiques," "Mysticisme," "Choses mystiques," "Intermezzo," "Lied," "Les Pieds sur les chenets."[8] Dantin, apparently with recourse to a later list, entitled the sections: "L'Ame du poête," "Le Jardin de l'enfance," "Amours d'élite," "Les Pieds sur les chenets," "Virgiliennes," "Eaux-fortes funéraires," "Petite chapelle," "Pastels et Porcelaines," "Vêpres tragiques," "Tristia," titles which reflect the thematic and formal concerns of the poet, particularly the religious motif. In his edition, Lacourcière maintained Dantin's order, with the addition of "Pièces retrouvées" and "Poèmes posthumes," culled from manuscripts and journals.

By examining the spatial symbols that dominate Nelligan's poems and tracing their development throughout his poetry, we will have a better understanding of Nelligan's main themes, his poetic process, his modernism, and the reason he has had such a strong impact on the Quebec imagination.

Heir to the three great literary movements of the nineteenth century, Nelligan drew out essential characteristics of each that suited his temperament and his art. From romanticism came the concept of the agony of creation and the significance of subjective impressions; from the parnassians came the emphasis on clarity of image; and from the symbolists, the encouragement to pillage nature for symbols to express ideality and intense subjectivity. The symbolists, particularly Baudelaire and Verlaine, provided the rationale for a complex and unnatural use of symbols from nature: they wished to create a literature "in which the visible world is no longer a reality and the unseen world no longer a dream."[9] Nature, then, became a source of symbolic forms and Nelligan's expression of nature is symbolic and far removed from the natural world. Indeed, the concept of ideality is pervasive in Nelligan who constantly strives to flee "La Matière aux yeux ensorcelants / Aux plages de Thulé vers l'île des Mensonges." With true Mallarmean horror of "la brute nature," Nelligan wishes to escape the ugly realities of winter, stormy seas, and the "earth," symbolically recoiling from "too much reality":

Et ne vous souillez pas à contempler les plèbes.

However, the contours of Nelligan's ideal remain vaguely defined; occasionally, this ideal resides in the golden age — the personal one of childhood or the historical one of days of chivalry and romance, and occasionally in the future, in the golden Jerusalem. Since the ideal can be visited most freely through "le rêve," the loose but implicit coherence of dreams structures the ideal.

In his poem "Rêve d'artiste," Nelligan presents the process by which he seeks the space that is his ideal world. Disarmingly, he describes how, were he to possess the elusive muse "une soeur angélique au sourire discret," he would fashion an equally angelic and beautiful garden — his poem.

Et pour qui je ferai si j'aborde à la gloire
Fleurir tout un jardin de lys et de soleils
Dans l'azur d'un poème offert à sa mémoire.

Invoking the familiar symbolist vision of "un autre pays" or "un pays absolu" through the common image of "azur" which he combines with the religious and romantic images of "lys," "soleil," "gloire" (all symbols of creative energy), Nelligan promises us a distant, ideal space that is both poem and dwelling place. The distance and improbability of the realm are emphasized because Nelligan addresses the reader, not the "soeur bonne et tendre," thus setting the possibility of "poem" and personal "glory" in a remote time and place. The "Rêve d'artiste" is an exposition of the development of the conditions of artistic creation and of his vision of an "ideal poetic space."

Frequently this ideal space is described as "un rêve enclos" or a "jardin sentimental" or a "jardin d'antan" nostalgically evoking the sheltered innocence of childhood and a traditional pastoralism (because derived from literature). However, this ideal space is Janus-faced for, on the one hand, Nelligan seeks refuge in "chapelles" and "jardins" (religious and childhood sanctuaries):

Nous étions là deux enfants blêmes
Devant les grands autels à franges,
Où sainte Marie et ses anges
Riaient parmi les chrysanthèmes.

("Chapelle dans les bois")

Here in an idyllic retreat in the woods, the poet recalls his pure and innocent childhood, the steady rhythmic flow of the quatrains echoing the sad, distant "voix de la petite chapelle." But, on the other hand, the refuge, like Nelligan's soul, has its shadowy, macabre side. In another poem, the "Chapelle dans les bois" is transformed by the poet's delicately balanced imagination into a "Chapelle de la morte." In a manner reminiscent of Gaston Bachelard's depiction of houses as souls, Nelligan's "chapelle" in "Chapelle de la morte" assumes "les traits / De ton âme qu'elle a humée." The fear and trembling within the soul are projected

outward and the abstract blackness of the soul is often transferred to the concrete ruins of "chapelles" and keeps: "mon âme est un donjon noir." A "berceuse," symbol of protected childhood, becomes the deadly "cercueil" and the "tombeau," e.g.:

> De mon berceau d'enfant j'ai fait l'autre berceau
> Où ma Muse s'endort dans des trilles d'oiseau,
> Ma Muse en robe blanche, ô ma toute maîtresse!
>
> Oyez nos baisers d'or aux grands soirs familiers . . .
> Mais chut! j'entends déjà la mégère Détresse
> A notre seuil faisant craquer ses noirs souliers!
>
> ("Le Berceau de la muse")

Similarly the peaceful cloister is occasionally transformed into a ghoulish monastery. "Le Cloître noir" is a haunting and ambivalent portrait of monks filing into a chapel that captures, through the rhythmic correspondence of chants and marching feet, the process of attaining grace and salvation. This sonnet rises to a symbolic, surprise open ending so common to Nelligan, which focuses the entire poem and which sends the startled reader back to explore its symbolic evocations. Note, for example, the significance of the difference in the ending between the original 1897 poem "Moines en défilade" and the revised version "Le Cloître noir." First, "Moines en défilade":

> rien ne les emeut,
> . . . .
> Pas même les appels de l'infernal esprit,
> Suprême Tentateur des passions rebelles
> De ces silencieux Spectres de Jésus Christ.

Second, "Le Cloître noir" which is more positive and affirmative:

> La lumière céleste emplit leur large esprit,
> Car l'Espoir triomphant creusa les solitudes
> De ces silencieux spectres de Jésus Christ.[10]

The two versions of "Le Cloître noir" are interesting in the light of Nelligan's occasionally demonic vision of the "Church" and because we can see how, here as in other places, Nelligan is torn between the black and the macabre and the pure and the holy. Yet which is more terrifying: the vision of hell and temptation in the earlier poem or the ghostly emptiness of salvation in the latter one?

Here, then, are the two facets that balance the scale pans of Nelligan's precarious soul. First we encounter "l'abîme" with its "Suprême Tentateur" and second, l'abîme with "l'espoir triomphant." Nelligan's soul is weighed down on one side with exoticism and nostalgia represented by the "bibelots," "négresses," parrots, pieces of Chopin, Liszt, "missels d'ivoire," and portraits of his mother. The other side is weighed down with morbidity and death, represented by images in which

the past appears "claquant leurs vieux os," or in which the poet gloats over his coffin and approaching death. Either by a retreat into exoticism or nostalgia or by succumbing to morbidity and death, Nelligan seeks to escape reality.

Thus, while Nelligan inhabited and desired to inhabit another reality — a dream world constructed out of his imagination and out of the past recollected in turbulence — that this other reality eventually overwhelmed him is evident in his descent into mental illness. It is clear that Nelligan had little interest in the practical, everyday world and felt trapped and horrified by it: "Je me sens des bras funèbres / M'asservir au Réel." In his recollection of Nelligan, Jean Charbonneau pointed out Nelligan's ethereality:

> Grand, mince, les cheveux en broussaille, majestueux, un pli d'amertume à la commissure des lèvres, les yeux perdus dans l'infini, il n'avait pas l'air de tenir au monde materiel.[11]

Wavering between ecstasy and desperation, Nelligan subscribes to the notion dominant among the romantic and symbolist poets that the poet is seer, that he is possessed by superhuman qualities (poetic genius) by which he can reveal to the ordinary man the ideal lurking in the real world. This "angélisme" is present in Nelligan's ironic description of "the poet" and his reception by society:

> c'est un rêveur qui passe.
> C'est une âme angélique ouverte sur l'espace.
> Qui porte en elle un ciel de printemps auroral.
>
> ("Un Poète")

The poet, a dreamer passing by, goes unrecognized or mocked by the philistine crowd, and achieves recognition only "dans le pays où le bon Dieu demeure." The concept of the poet as more perceptive and tuned to other universes is a recurring motif in Nelligan's poems and further supplements his aura of otherworldliness.

GIVEN THE SYMBOLIST EMPHASIS on the symbolic possibilities of such natural elements as water, trees, birds, autumn, and on the vivid reconstruction of spiritual worlds through the use of these symbols, it is no wonder that Nelligan found in their poems and in their methods, congenial modes of expressing his dream world. But most of Nelligan's nature symbols are developed from his literary experience rather than his experience of the Canadian landscape. Only with "snow" in "Soir d'hiver" and "Hiver sentimental," does Nelligan infuse his image with a local relevance, though cold and even snow are certainly favourite symbolist metaphors. But even with "neige," it is the verbal possibilities of the image that intrigue Nelligan, rather than its "real" properties. As Gérard Bessette has observed:

> On voit donc qu'une analyse foncière des images naturelles de Nelligan confirme ce

> que notre tableau formel nous laissait entrevoir: notre poète ne se sent pas à l'aise dans la nature et l'évite le plus possible.... De même que la nature, parce que généralisée ou effleurée, nous semble chez Nelligan aussi revée que vue.... Il ne s'identifie pas d'ailleurs à eux les [phénomènes généraux], mais les regarde de loin, avec admiration, parfois avec terreur, jamais filialement ou fraternellement.[12]

The world of literature is, for the poet, a sacred space. And so is dream. The sacred space is constructed by the poet and, as Verlaine said, "tout le reste est littérature," all the rest is profane, worldly, and of little consequence. As archetype, sacred space is inner, and profane space, outer. In his use of images Nelligan continually makes this distinction between the inner, sacred reality, and the outer, profane reality.[13]

Although Nelligan is concerned with illuminating the self, he prefers to view the self from the outside as separate and often abstract. For example, when in "La Fuite de l'enfance," the desire of the poet to escape earthly bounds is rendered as "La Fuite de l'enfance au vaisseau des vingt ans," the self is distanced, abstracted as "Enfance." But as Bessette points out, Nelligan's greatness lies in his ability to combine the abstract with the self, and more significantly the abstract with the concrete. Therefore, in this poem, the "vaisseau" become the concrete representation of the soul; it is also a recurring symbol for the soul adrift on the seas of change throughout his poetry.

> au jour où nous prendrons vaisseau
> Sur la mer idéale où l'ouragan se ferle.
> ("Placet")

> dans un grand vaisseau vert,
> Nous rêvions de monter aux astres de Vesper.
> ("Jardin sentimental")

> Et je rêve toujours au vaisseau des vingt ans,
> Depuis qu'il a sombré dans la mer des Etoiles.
> ("Ténèbres")

> Lent comme un monstre cadavre
> Mon coeur vaisseau s'amarre au havre
> De toute hétéromorphe engeance.
> ("Je veux m'éluder")

Through spatial metaphors of the heavens, abysses, seas, the self is indirectly revealed. These often clichéd metaphors catch our attention first because they do reveal the self, and second, because of their fine verbal quality.

The spatial direction in Nelligan is predominantly vertical: up to the heavens, down into the abyss or the sea; and it is complemented by those metaphors of space (sea, abyss, heavens) that are the recipients of this vertical movement.[14] This preference for the "vertical" further emphasizes Nelligan's desire to evade the real world and to escape into higher realms of being. Although Nelligan does

deal with universal themes — "La Fuite du temps," death, nostalgia — it is always within the frame of the self; to intimate the stages of his soul and the tenuousness of his life is the concern of Nelligan's art.

As a consequence, Nelligan's nature pieces are symbolic inner landscapes avoiding any direct involvement with the natural world which is distanced either by window frames or by literary convention. Bessette comments that

> Tout moyen lui est bon qui le délivre de la réalité. Il n'hésite pas à recourir à des réminiscences littéraires ou mythologiques plûtot que de peindre directement.[15]

Nelligan does not develop a region-spirit or genius loci; he is a visionary poet who projects the poetic genius which absorbs his whole vision upon place rather than seeking to merge his poetic spirit with the spirit of the place. Moreover, although his "space" is inevitably shaped by clearly delineated Catholic and conservative forces, Nelligan creates a psychological or inner space that requires little in the way of concrete physical ties to the outer space in order to express itself. Thus Nelligan's landscapes are conventional and symbolic. Enclosed gardens, pastoral vistas, and winter scenes predominate, frequently succumbing to macabre visions or formless and vacant landscapes where the Baudelarian nightmare of "le gouffre" affirms its dreadful primacy. In Nelligan's poetry, the line of development, therefore, is from "le rêve blanc" to "le rêve noir," from a fanciful to a gloomier symbolism: the morbid strain is always present in Nelligan's symbolism and, in "Paysage fauve" or "Le Corbeil," verbal and thematic elements reveal more of the morbid than of the fanciful or idyllic.

In Nelligan's hands, the pastoral constitutes an artificial world where simplicity, love, the golden age and rural retirement are ideals bolstered by traditional symbols of pastoral flocks (cows), shepherds, and shepherdesses (Gretchen), Pan, song, gardens, flowers. The motifs weaving their way through the pastoral poems are childhood (the past, the golden age); the season of loss and sadness (autumn), the season of death (winter), and of love (summer and spring); song, gardens, and religious faith revealed by the recurring image of bells. These themes and images unite and intermingle to represent a sense of longing, usually for a simpler, happier past. When the tone saddens and the vision darkens, the longing turns towards death.

In "Les Angéliques"[16] the shepherd-poet, "un berger-poète au coeur sentimental," wanders nervously in the forest of his mind. The forest is hardly local ("des forêts de santal") but because of the presence of "chapelles" and "angélus" a sense of place is created. The landscape is symbolic, its contours associated with certain memories, and with faith. First, the poet portrays an angelic landscape where natural and angelic objects merge in a dreamlike fashion:

> Et les Anges, à flots de longs timbres moroses,
> Ebranlent les bourdons, au vent occidental.

Nelligan's clever play on the word "angélus" and "angéliques" suggests that the ringing bells become, in the poet's mind, the singing of angels. But the landscape is not merely angelic, it also projects the inner landscape of the poet, and Nelligan uses "lande" in both these senses: "j'errais en lande hors du hameau natal" and "ta lande intime." The onomatopoeic metaphor of "mes troupeaux de névroses / Vagabondaient le long des forêts de santal" completes the association of the inner and outer landscapes by comparing the poet's anxieties to a flock of sheep.

Nelligan takes advantage of the sonnet form to organize the inner and outer landscapes. In the octave he describes his wanderings through the moors, while in the sestet he then draws an analogy between those nocturnal wanderings and the poet's progression through life, and crystallizes the landscape of the octave into a memory in a corner of his soul. The poet has framed the poem by his images of evening, bells (angels), and moors — images of desolation and passage; but the larger frame is dream, "la nature parce que généralisée ou effleurée, nous semble chez Nelligan aussi rêvée que vue."[17]

Three winter pieces, "Soir d'hiver," "Hiver sentimental," and "Frisson d'hiver" contrast the cold outside with the warmth inside (a living heart): sacred and profane spaces. However, cold and death (in life and love) slowly invade the heart, and the poems "Paysage fauve" ("Pastels et porcelaines") and "Soirs hypochondriaques" ("Poèmes posthumes") become hallucinatory and wintery landscapes.

In the section "Virgiliennes" Nelligan repeats his themes of nostalgia, melancholy, innocence, childhood and longing after the ideal. The ringing of the angelus ("Automne," "Jardin sentimental") accompanies the poet's melancholy mood and signals the awakening of memories of the past. For Nelligan, the landscape, as seen repeatedly in these poems, is associated with churchbells and chapels; thus the countryside has a strong religious significance. In "Jardin sentimental," the continual reference to the angelus brings the garden close to another metaphor of enclosed and sacred space, the "chapelle" (which Nelligan portrays in the section "Petites chapelles"). The sacred space of the garden and the chapel are places for the poet to construct his dreams; they are also temporal in that they are places of childhood memory.

"Presque berger," along with "Petit hameau" (from "Poèmes posthumes") which may be a variant version, praises the bucolic life:

> Les grands boeufs sont rentrés. Ils meuglent dans l'étable
> Et la soupe qui fume a réjoui la table
>
> ....
>
> Oui, c'est délicieux, cela, d'être ainsi libre
> Et de vivre en berger presque. Un souvenir vibre
>
> En moi ... Là-bas, au temps de l'enfance, ma vie
> Coulait ainsi, loin des sentiers, blanche et ravie!

In these two poems which are a "juxtaposition de réalisme paysan et de rêverie poétique,"[18] there is, first of all, the conventional pastoral idealization of rural life in contrast to the city. Nelligan, in "Presque berger," compares the peaceful and distant peasant life to his idyllic youth, "ma vie / Coulait ainsi, loin des sentiers, blanche et ravie!" But another deeper level of meaning lies behind these poems: in these two bucolic poems, and, in the insistent repetition throughout all the pastoral poems of the ringing of the angelus, are firmly entrenched the central myths of Quebec: family, farm and priest. Inevitably underlying these poems is the agrarian myth (heightened by the messianism of the post-Confederation period) that idealized the continuation of rural life, the importance of large, closely-knit families, and the influence of the priest. Mother, land, and church are the binding images of this ideology which Nelligan defies by turning to the French symbolists. However, his bucolic poem eventually submits to "la hantise du noir" and the peaceable kingdom turns into a nightmare vision in a kind of anti-pastoral: "Un farouche troupeau de grands loups affamés" prowls the winter landscape in "Paysage fauve," and "Le Boeuf spectral" ("Vêpres tragiques") "hante là-bas la paix des champs."

In the sixth section, "Eaux-fortes funéraires," the sombre landscape dominates. The title recalls Verlaine's section in *Poèmes saturniens*, "Eauxfortes," which is also composed of gloomy landscapes. Surely there is verbal play in the composition of the phrase "Eaux-fortes": etching are pictures printed from an etched metal plate, the process being one in which "impressions" are produced from the plate. The process of etching, therefore, implies an objective distance since a landscape is being observed and recorded. In these poems, a scene is ordered by the poetic eye in such a way as to "impress" itself upon the reader. With the adjective, "funéraires," the motif of death appears and a macabre landscape is composed.

In "Tristia," the tenth section, "Rêve fantasque" ("Pièces retrouvées"), reminiscent of Verlaine's "La Nuit du Walpurgis classique"[19] with "Les beaux ifs langoureux" and "l'ypran qui s'attriste," the "jets d'eau moirés et fontaines bizarres"; "des cygnes blancs et noirs," "un cerf bronze," is a nocturnal landscape of the soul. Like Verlaine, who describes "Le jardin de Lenôtre' and then envisions his thoughts as phantoms dancing sadly, wildly, around the formal shapes of Versailles, Nelligan pictures a formal park against a melancholy night sky — "le ciel triste," "un bien sombre contour," "l'ypran qui s'attriste." But his thoughts are not directly objectified into phantoms; instead vague and distressing sounds rise up to disturb the poet, and he dreams of the sweetness of death until

> Avec ces vagues bruits fantasquement charmeurs
> Rentre dans le néant le rêve romanesque.

The poem is enclosed, as are the poet's dreams and thoughts, by the trees — les chêneaux, les ifs, et l'ypran; the landscape is an objectification of the state of the

poet's soul, and the symbols, literary and "unnatural" as they are, are meant to evoke, not to describe a mood.

The other pastoral image that Nelligan constantly employs is "Eden," generally associated with the colour gold. Always an evasion, it assumes many forms:

> . . . jardin de rêve où je m'en vais
> ("Sérénade triste")
> Serait-ce qu'un nouvel Eden s'opère en nous?
> ("Communion pascale")
> Et dans l'Eden de sa Louisiane,
> ("Fantaisie créole")
> Et l'Eden d'or de mon enfance
> ("Clavier d'antan")
> Que ton piano vibre et pleure
> Et que j'oublie avec toi l'heure
> Dans un Eden, on ne sait où. . . .
> ("Chopin")

Eden is an eclectic symbol, a hortus conclusus, which is occasionally a physical place (Louisiane), occasionally a manifestation of religious faith, a dream, a haven for artists, childhood, or musical ecstasy — but always imagined and always the poet's joy and despair to seek and to inhabit.

IN THE SYMBOLIST POETS, symbolic landscapes are essentially dream landscapes in which the reader follows a progression that is not logical but associative, and through the unusual combination of images, reinforced by inverted syntax and bizarre juxtapositions of words, is drawn into the poet's mental space. Symbolic dream landscapes were an appropriate mode for Nelligan, who in company with the French symbolists created

> dreamscapes in which despair, a sense of loss and fear, hunger for beauty and release, and a horrible awareness of sullen leaden reality pervade their work. Such awareness will lead to dream, to nightmare, to seeing the beautiful in the ugly (and vice versa) to boredom, to fatigue — *and* to the magnificent visions that lie beyond the window pane.[20]

These landscapes like the "Eden d'or" are enclosed gardens, sheltered from nature, located in another realm, beyond reality. For Nelligan, the wilderness that is both desolate country and the winter season, is a fearful, not a creative solitude, inhabited by fierce wild beasts and gruesome spectres. In keeping with his temperament Nelligan also has a predilection for the dying season, autumn, while winter becomes the season of despair when the landscape turns to nightmare and is haunted by ghosts. However, because of his ability to draw nuances from com-

mon symbols like roses, trees, pools, and to combine them in a rhythmic movement, Nelligan's symbolic landscapes arouse powerful emotions. The precision with which Nelligan treats language is shown in his emendations. In "Rêve d'artiste," the last stanza reads:

> Et pour qui je ferai, si j'aborde à la gloire
> Fleurir tout un jardin de lys et de soleils
> Dans l'azur d'un poème offert à sa memoire.

The earlier variant is less concrete and imaginative:

> Et pour qui je saurai, si j'aborde à la gloire
> Fleurir un immortel jardin plein de soleil
> Dans l'azur des beaux vers d'un livre à sa mémoire.[21]

The poem "Soir d'hiver," perhaps Nelligan's most celebrated, after "Vaisseau d'or," gives us the best example of his intricate use of the verbal and rhythmic qualities of images:

> Ah! comme la neige a neigé!
> Ma vitre est un jardin de givre,
> Ah! comme la neige a neigé!
> Qu'est-ce que le spasme de vivre
> A la douleur que j'ai, que j'ai!
>
> Tous les étangs gisent gelés,
> Mon âme est noire: Où vis-je? où vais-je?
> Tous ses espoirs gisent gelés:
> Je suis la nouvelle Norvège
> D'où les blonds ciels s'en sont allés.
>
> Pleurez, oiseaux de février,
> Au sinistre frisson des choses,
> Pleurez oiseaux de février,
> Pleurez mes pleurs, pleurez mes roses,
> Aux branches de genévrier.
>
> Ah! comme la neige a neigé!
> Ma vitre est un jardin de givre,
> Ah! comme la neige a neigé!
> Qu'est-ce que le spasme de vivre
> A tout l'ennui que j'ai, que j'ai. . . .

First of all, the poem is united by the image of "neige" which is both noun and verb, and by the rhythm provided by the repetition of the soft "g" which recurs in "j'ai," "gisent," "gelés," "Norvège," "genévrier." In the opening stanza, the first three lines describe the scene: by "la vitre" the poet separates himself from the described scene. The objective world is framed, but it is framed by the subjective, the self, "ma vitre." Ma vitre is also his soul which in its state of despair suggests a garden of ice — "Ma vitre est un jardin de givre." The next two lines are a "cri de coeur" aroused by the cold, distressing landscape outside.

The second stanza clarifies the relationship between the inner and outer landscape: the two are merged. First, the poet portrays the frozen ponds, "Tous les étangs gisent gelés," then shifts to his black soul. In the third line, the landscape becomes subjective when étang is replaced by espoirs — "Tous les espoirs gisent gelés." Although Nelligan does not hesitate to attribute human characteristics to natural objects, in this poem, the melancholy human state is portrayed by comparing it to a desolate landscape. The poet becomes, finally, wintery Norway deprived of sunlight as he completely transforms himself into a paysage.

Thus, in the third stanza, nature in the form of the birds of February is directly addressed — they are part of the same sad landscape — and requested to weep for the dying roses of the poet. The "roses" like "le spasme de vivre" are overwhelmed by cold and snow and so the poet succumbs to the sorrow of winter, or death, and of incapacity.

The last stanza, echoing the first, encloses the poem as the window frame encloses the frozen soul. Pain, "la douleur," however, has become "l'ennui" of the symbolists. In this poem, the poet appears to be looking out the window, but in actuality he is looking in, at his own soul. Here is the paradox of enclosed space. Except where it provides a vocabulary for the soul, nature, in Nelligan's poems, is stylized and conventional ("neige," "roses"). Bessette has pointed out that Nelligan was attached not to nature, but to artificial objects, particularly objects of cults and of music.[22]

The continual use of exotic and alien images rather than authentic native images to describe the self can be seen as another way of expressing alienation. Being derived from another culture, another land, these images project a distanced and alienated self. Moreover, exotic images of Paris salons, Louisiana, Egypt, Vienna, Spain are twice removed from the poet's reality because they are drawn from literature not experience.[23] This alienation is even more directly and consciously expressed by the images of death, mourning, and enclosure.

To mirror the separation of the subjective from the objective and to project subjective feelings onto a distant and objective space, Nelligan employs formal and imagistic devices in a persistently recurring pattern. His predominant mode of distancing is the window, particularly the frame of the window, which allows the poet to compose the landscape. The window is also a common symbolist metaphor for the poet's realization of the difference between himself, his ideal world and the reality besieging him, and one finds the poet looking out the window, not at the landscape, but at himself: he is

> alienated from an ideal world and also forever acutely conscious not only of this separation, but also of the sordid reality from whose perspective he is obliged to seek the azur of the ideal world. In short, the poet is trapped between his impulse to recover the transcendent world and his awareness of the utter impossibility of ever doing so, except by resorting to the illusion of windowpane.[24]

The window separates the sacred from the profane space, while permitting the poet, seated behind the window, to see both spaces and to follow a controlled exchange between the two different impressions. As already seen, Nelligan prefers to view the landscape through the window; in "Soir d'hiver," the "vitre" becomes a metaphor of the soul which is a framed, composed, winter landscape. To use this image is to deliberately separate subjective feelings from the objective phenomena. Even a metaphor as fused as "ma vitre est un jardin de givre" which makes a direct association between the self and the landscape (that is, the poet does not use a more detailed and conscious form of simile such as "ma vitre est *comme* un jardin de givre") insists upon a separation of the self and on the inevitability of a divided self. The self, because it is symbolized by a "vitre" which looks both inward and outward and is transparent, does not belong wholly to itself but is torn between the inner and outer and hovers at the fringe of the two worlds.

In "Hiver sentimental" (original title, "Le Givre dans les vitres") the poet beseeches his "mistress" to move

> Loin des vitres! clairs yeux dont je bois les liqueurs
> Et ne vous souillez pas à contempler les plèbes.

The window, slight and transparent protection though it be, serves to close the poet inside; it also composes and separates the reality outside. "Vieille romanesque" with its faded romanticism is a further variation on this theme. Later echoed in Anne Hébert's poems and stories on the anachronistic aristocracy of Quebec, this poem by Nelligan paints a scene in which Mademoiselle Adèle reads her Dumas novels inside a veritable museum of antiquities, "Cloître d'anciennetés, dont elle est le modèle." Absorbed in a romantic and nostalgic previous age, she does not see outside, "Dans la rue, un passant au visage moqueur / . . . / Le joueur glorieux d'orgue de Barbarie!" Nelligan was not without irony or perspicuity in this portrait of a retreat from life and the present.

Another frame image to reflect the troubled soul is the eye; he describes the monks in "Le Cloître noir":

> et dans leurs yeux sereins
> Comme les horizons vastes des cieux marins,
> Flambe l'austérité des froides habitudes.

Since the eye is a window to the soul, in these indirect ways, Nelligan is seeking to express essentially the same thing: a perspective on the inner state of a sensitive being.

GIVEN HIS BACKGROUND, Nelligan was naturally haunted by Catholicism; it pervaded his images, his invocations to prayer, his despair over salvation and the other world. This combined with his delight in visual imagery

provided another variation on "le vitre" — that of "le vitrail" or stained glass window. This image was particularly rich because "le vitrail" possessed its own integral design and colours as well as permitting the outer world to be reflected upon the inner sanctum. "Le vitrail" presented a clearly defined barrier to outer realities:

> Où de grands anges, peints aux vitraux verdelets
> Interdisent l'entrée aux terrestres scandales.
> ("Le Cloître noir")

In religious iconography and emblematic literature the church is a type of the soul, a constructed sacred place enclosed from the profane, as is the garden. In several poems Nelligan resorts to the image of the church as sanctuary and as symbol of the soul; thus "le vitrail," like the eye, is a window onto the soul, as is evident in the sonnet, "Amour immaculé," in which the poet describes a church:

> Je sais en une église un vitrail merveilleux
> Où quelque artiste illustre, inspiré des archanges,
> A peint d'une façon mystique, en robe à franges,
> Le front nimbe d'un astre, une Sainte aux yeux bleus.

Then, here, as in "Les Angéliques," the sestet internalizes the physical place:

> Telle sur le vitrail de mon coeur je t'ai peinte,
> Ma romanesque aimée, ô pâle et blonde sainte
> Toi, la seule que j'aime et toujours aimerai;
>
> Mais tu restes muette, impassible, et, trop fière
> Tu te plais à me voir, sombre et désespéré
> Errer dans mon amour comme en un cimetière.

Outside the sanctity of the church, unredeemed by love, beyond the glorious colours of the stained glass, lies "un cimetière." Similarly, in "Chapelle de la morte,"

> Et dans le vitrail, tes grands yeux
> M'illuminent ce cimetière
> De doux cierges mystérieux.

The images of the window and "le vitrail," by their very physicality, draw attention to another kind of space — the enclosed space of stuffy rooms or churches or trapped souls. Throughout Nelligan's poems, the enclosed space denotes a sacred place within the profane world of "brutes laideurs," a place in which to dream. While gardens, "au jardin clos, scellé, dans le jardin muet," are separated from the real world by paths, "Chapelles" ("le cloître noir"), circled by woods and warmed by prayer, are divided from the profane world by their stained glass windows. Houses, in the shape of villas, châteaux, castles, are protected by windows and represent the spaces of family life, dreams, idyllic childhood days, and sincere religious faith ("Prière du soir," "Devant le feu"). Associated with either

the cozy domesticity of familial houses or the glamorous relics of celebrated homes are the even more enclosed spaces of rooms and salons. Within these "circles" lie other small objects that have both temporal and psychological significance: cabinets of dusty memories ("Vieille armoire,") and vases ("Potiche,") containing relics of the soul and of the artistic endeavour —

> Mon âme est un potiche où pleurent, dédorés,
> De vieux espoirs mal peints sur sa fausse moulure;

Nelligan is more at home with objects, images, and scenes of the "inside" — of salons, cupboards, hearths with their lingering memories of the past than with the vast and energetic "outside." Another metaphor along these lines is the celebrated ship, the vaisseau d'or, both a vessel of salvation and a vessel of death, that carries the soul to its destiny.

> Ce fut un grand vaisseau taillé dans l'or massif:
> Ses mâts touchaient l'azur, sur des mers inconnues;
>
> . . . .
>
> Que reste-t-il de lui dans la tempête brève?
> Qu'est devenu mon coeur, navire déserté?
> Hélas! Il a sombré dans l'abîme du Rêve!
>
> ("Le Vaisseau d'or")

These enclosed spaces are claustrophobic as well as creative.

> Enfermons-nous mélancoliques
> Dans le frisson tiède des chambres.
>
> ("Reves enclos")

The vacant, airless chambers mirror the soul of the poet:

> J'ai toujours adoré plein de silence, à vivre
> En des appartements solennellement clos
> Où mon âme sonnant des cloches de sanglots,
> Et plongeant dans l'horreur. . . .
>
> ("Musiques funèbres")

This image of claustrophobia, a symbol of alienation and withdrawal from the creative forces, is also found later in Anne Hébert's and Saint-Denys-Garneau's images of "chambres de bois," tombs, and decaying ancestral manors, and may be symptomatic of the intellectual trapped by a stifling Quebec milieu. Thus, the metaphors of enclosed space degenerate from symbols of nostalgic memory to symbols of death and entrapment as the poet grows more despairing. The poet then emphasizes the morbid spectrum of metaphors of space such as "cercueils," "tombeaux," "corbillards," "chapelle de la morte," "chapelle ruinée" (as in "Banquet macabre," "Le Corbillard," "Le Cercueil," "Crêpe," "Tombeau de la négresse," "Homme aux cercueils," "Le Spectre"). Coffins and tombs are "closed" eternally.

In the celebrated destiny of "Vaisseau d'or" — "sombre dans l'abîme du rêve" — is epitomized the dream that has turned to nightmare and which has capsized the soul into death. The image of the empty and terrifying void of the Baudelairean gouffre permeates Nelligan's verse, a reminder of the perils of the imagination:

> Et nos coeurs sont profonds et vides comme un gouffre
> ("Tristesse blanche")
>
> Ainsi la vie humaine est un grand lac qui dort
> ("Le Lac")
>
> Dans le puits noir que tu vois là
> Gît la source de tout ce drame.
> Aux vents du soir le cerf qui brame
> Parmi les bois conte celà.
> ("Le Puits hanté")
>
> Rentre dans le néant le rêve romanesque
> ("Rêve fantasque")

From this outline of Nelligan's predominant symbols of space, one can see that his imagination is directed inwards into the self, into enclosed spaces which are unrelieved, for the most part, by the energizing and creative "green" (except for the bitter-sweet "La Romance du vin") and which eventually become the black and eternal enclosures of madness and death. The complex and yet coherent symbolic inner landscape Nelligan created struck and continues to strike a responsive chord in the imagination of the Quebecois. Although his own imagination became a macabre prison, his eloquent expression of it proved to be a liberating force for those who followed.

NOTES

[1] Jean Charbonneau, "Fondation de l'Ecole," *L'Ecole littéraire de Montréal* (Montréal: Albert Lévesque, 1935).

[2] A.D.L., "Aventures véridiques d'un groupe d'éponges," *Le Samedi*, 24 août 1895, p. 10; "Deuxième saturnale," *Le Samedi*, 21 septembre 1895, p. 3.

[3] Louis Dantin, "Préface" in Charbonneau, p. 8.

[4] Paul Wyczynski, "Héritage poétique de l'Ecole littéraire de Montréal," *La Poésie canadienne-française. Archives des lettres canadiennes*, t. IV (Montréal: Fides, 1969), p. 75, quoted from a ms. note of the poet, Albert Ferland, located in the "Centre de recherches de l'Université d'Ottawa."

[5] Luc Lacourcière, "Introduction," *Poésies complètes, 1896-1899* (Montréal: Fides, 1952), p. 15, quoting Louis Dantin.

[6] See Jean-Charles Bonenfant, "Le Canada français à la fin du XIX[e] siècle," *Etudes françaises*, III, 3 (aout 1967), 263-74.

[7] See Wyczynski, *Bibliographie*, pp. 27-30 for details of these manuscripts.

[8] See Lacourcière, *Poésies complètes*, pp. 279-82. All quotations from Nelligan's poems will be made from this edition.

[9] Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (New York: Dutton, 1958), p. 3.

[10] Another version occurs in Louis Dantin's Les Débats 24 août 1902; see *Poésies complètes*, p. 297:

L'imposture céleste emplit leur large esprit:
Car seul l'Espoir menteur creusa les solitudes
De ces silencieux spectres de Jésus Christ.

[11] Jean Charbonneau, "Emile Nelligan," pp. 119-20.

[12] Gérard Bessette, *Les Images en poésie canadienne française* (Montréal: Editions Beauchemin, 1960), pp. 246, 244.

[13] Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, trans. by Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1959).

[14] Paul Wyczynski in *Emile Nelligan, Sources et originalité de son oeuvre* (Montréal: Univ. d'Ottawa, 1935) discusses "le rêve horizontal" which moves to the left into the past, and to the right to the future. The "rêve vertical" rising upwards, carries the poet into the contemplation of God and mysticism, and plunging downwards into the depths, results in hallucination and despair. He shows Nelligan's primary direction to be horizontal (that is, his dreams revolve around the past and future) until the poet's disturbed state predominates and "ce ne sera que la suite du rêve horizontal que l'on verra cependant s'enfoncer dans les ténèbres de l'abîme" (pp. 161-243). But, in this discussion, we view dream as vertical, in that it probes the depths of the sub-conscious.

[15] Bessette, p. 224.

[16] The revealing earlier titles are: "Soirs angélisés," "Angélus du soir," "Soir de névrose."

[17] Bessette, p. 223.

[18] Wyczynski, in *Sources et originalité*, p. 196.

[19] See Wyczynski's phrase-by-phrase comparison of the two poems, ibid., pp. 56-61.

[20] Edward Engleberg, *The Symbolist Poem* (New York: Dutton, 1967), pp. 32-33.

[21] Lacourcière, *Poésies complètes*, pp. 287-88. Note also the two versions of "Soirs d'automne," p. 119 and p. 217 ("Rhythmes du soir"). The latter is the earlier version: "les soirs bleus" changes to "les longs soirs" to continue the nasal rhythm of the line; "le rêve lent des oiseaux solitaires" becomes the more visual "le rêve blanc des oiseaux solitaires" where the adjective connected with rêve actually describes the birds and thus creates a more complex mood. Similarly, "le lys cristallin épris du crépuscule" becomes "les lys cristallins pourprés de crépuscule." The last stanza shows the subtler art of fusing self and object in the second version. The substitution of "où" for "dont" in the last line "Pleurent les souvenirs dont mon âme se baigne" fuses the flowers and the soul and memory into a more integral relationship.

[22] Bessette, p. 249.

[23] Marcel Bélanger, "Poésie québécoise et l'art egyptien," Comparative Canadian Literature Association Meeting, Université Laval, Quebec, 26 May 1976.

[24] Engleberg, p. 32.