

A FOREST OF SYMBOLS:

*An Introduction to
Saint-Denys Garneau*

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A NEW ERA in French-Canadian poetry began when Saint-Denys Garneau published a volume of twenty-eight poems early in 1937. The significance of the appearance of *Regards et jeux dans l'espace* was not immediately apparent; indeed, the reputation of this young man, whom Etienne Gilson has called French Canada's greatest poet, dates, for all except a handful of his friends, from the past decade. His *Poésies complètes* (not quite complete, of course) appeared in 1949; his *Journal* (substantially less complete) was published in 1954. Six years later it has become impossible to speak of twentieth-century French-Canadian poetry without mentioning his name.

But Canadian life and literature, as Quebec's first premier noted nearly a century ago, find their image in the great double spiral staircase of the Château de Chambord, which two persons can mount simultaneously without ever meeting. It is not surprising that Saint-Denys Garneau, except for a few pages of translated selections and one or two brief critical notices,¹ is almost unknown in English-speaking Canada.

¹ Translations by Jean Beaupré and Gael Turnbull in *The Canadian Forum* xxxvi (Feb. 1957), p. 255; by John Glassco in *Fiddlehead* xxxvi (Spring 1958), pp. 3-5, in *The Tamarack Review* viii (Summer 1958), pp. 17-35, and in *The Waterloo Review* ii 2 (Winter 1960), pp. 50-52; by F. R. Scott in *The Tamarack Review* iv (Summer 1957), pp. 55-59, and in his *Events and Signals*, Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1954, p. 22.

Professor W. E. Collin discussed the *Journal* in "Letters in Canada 1954" in the *University of Toronto Quarterly* xxiv, 3 (April 1955), pp. 321-324.

Born in Montreal on June 13, 1912, Hector de Saint-Denys Garneau was on the paternal side a great-grandson of the historian, François-Xavier Garneau and a grandson of the poet Alfred Garneau; on his mother's side he claimed descent from Jean Juchereau, a contemporary of Champlain and ancestor of one of French Canada's "first families". The young Hector seems to have been baptized "de Saint-Denys" after an illustrious forbear, Nicolas Juchereau de Saint-Denys, to whom Louis XIV granted letters of nobility for his gallantry in the defense of Quebec in 1690.

Saint-Denys Garneau spent his childhood at the ancestral manor-house at Sainte-Catherine de Fossambault, about twenty-five miles north of Quebec. When he was eleven, he was returned to Montreal to take his secondary schooling at a Jesuit classical college. Already his talents for poetry and sketching were apparent, and during some of these years he attended classes at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts de Montréal. His literary début occurred at the age of thirteen, when he submitted a thirteen-stanza poem in a children's literary competition organized by a Montreal department store. His entry, accompanied by a fearsome sketch, was entitled "Dinosaurus", and it began:

Il était gigantesque
Et son nom je vous dis
Était presque
Aussi grand que lui

Except for the lack of punctuation, which remained a characteristic of all his later poetry, this early effort is evidence of precocity and little else. In 1928, however, a Hugolian mood poem with Baudelairian overtones, "L'automne", won for him first prize in a poetry contest conducted by the Canadian Authors' Association. Other poems of this adolescent period show the impact upon him of his reading of various nineteenth-century French poets as well as of his compatriot, Emile Nelligan, but the emancipation of his verse form, which he may owe to Péguy, had not yet taken place.

His classical course was interrupted in 1934 on his doctor's orders because of a rheumatic heart condition. Devoting himself to painting and writing, he now had the leisure to attend concerts, public lectures and art exhibitions. That same year he joined Robert Charbonneau and

others to found a literary magazine, *La Relève*, which was patronized by Jacques Maritain and which lasted, under a rejuvenated title, for fourteen years. During the first three of those years, Garneau contributed essays, book reviews, art criticism and poems to *La Relève*; except for the poetry, these contributions have not been collected in volume form.

The greater part of Saint-Denys Garneau's writing was done before he was thirty, in the five years from 1934 to 1939. In addition to his work for *La Relève*, he was writing poetry and making meticulous preparations for the publication of *Regards et jeux dans l'espace*; about sixty poems not included in that volume or composed subsequently are contained in the collected edition of 1949. He was also keeping the famous *Journal* which caused such a sensation in French-Canadian literary circles when it was published by his friends Robert Elie and Jean Le Moyne in 1954. The published *Journal* extends from January 1935 to January 1939, although we are led to believe that it may have been carried on for another year or two.

By the end of the thirties the still youthful Saint-Denys Garneau was living in quiet retirement. In the summer of 1937 he had set off for Europe, but had returned unexpectedly after spending only three weeks abroad, largely in Paris. Already the spiritual questionings which were to become an obsession with him were making it difficult for him to live and move in ordinary society; withdrawing more and more, he wrote poetry, painted a little, and confided his anguish to his diary. By the end of 1938 even the writing of poetry had stopped. Declining health and increasing periods of depression caused him to retire to the family manor-house where he lived as a recluse, cared for by his parents. On October 24, 1943, overcome by restlessness, he left the house to paddle his canoe to an island in the river, where he sometimes camped out. He seems to have felt unwell and to have called at a nearby house in the hope of finding a telephone. The next day his body was discovered beside a creek in an adjoining field.

In December, 1944, in an attempt to save him from oblivion, his friends of *La Nouvelle Relève* brought out a special issue of the magazine in his honour. It included three short critical studies, a few unpublished poems, and tributes from his cousin Anne Hébert and from Raissa Maritain, who did not hesitate to rank him beside French authors like Alain-Fournier and Paul Eluard. A similar special issue was devoted to him by

the Montreal newspaper *Notre Temps* in May, 1947.

The real vogue of Saint-Denys Garneau began, however, in 1949, launched by Professor M. B. Ellis in her book-length study of the 1937 edition. Later that year, the collected edition of Garneau's poems appeared, and since that time two more books² and a steady stream of articles have been devoted to him.

Admittedly, much of the interest shown in Saint-Denys Garneau has been psychological or religious, occasionally almost hagiological, rather than literary. The revelations of the *Journal*, illuminating as they do the soul-searching of many of the poems, give an unprecedented insight into the spiritual itinerary of a young Canadian intellectual of a particularly sensitive and introspective type, who, while groping for self-realization, feels himself gradually overwhelmed by his irremediable solitude. In April 1931, while still in his teens, he had written to a friend:

Solitude! Solitude! nous sommes des isolés, des aveugles, des muets qui mourons avec le secret de notre terrible nuit.³

In those years solitude had not yet become an obsession for the student confident in the invigorating realization of his intellectual power. By the spring of 1934, he was expressing in *Le Relève* his ambitions for a great spiritual revolution under the aegis of Art:

Dans la grande révolution qui s'ébauche, et qui devra être le retour de l'humanité au spirituel, il s'impose que l'art, cette couronne de l'homme, l'expression suprême de son âme et de sa volonté, retrouve son sens perdu et soit l'expression splendide de cet élan vers en haut. (Lacroix, p. 37).

That Art failed him, or that he failed Art, is only too clear from passages like the following one in the *Journal* after the publication of *Regards et jeux dans l'espace*:

C'est ainsi que mon livre ne peut exister puisque je n'existe pas. Il ne peut sans mentir avoir de grandeur ou d'originalité. (p. 124).

² M. B. ELLIS, *De Saint-Denys Garneau; art et réalisme*. Montréal. Eds Chantecler, 1949.

FRÈRE LEVIS FORTIER, *Le message poétique de Saint-Denys Garneau*, Ottawa. Eds de l'Université, 1954. (Bibliography, pp. 225-230).

ROMAIN LEGARE, O.F.M., *L'aventure poétique et spirituelle de Saint-Denys Garneau*. Montréal. Fides, 1957.

³ BENOIT LACROIX, *Saint-Denys-Garneau; choix de textes . . .* Montréal: Fides, 1956, p. 21.

A few months later he has abandoned all hope of self-realization through art: "C'est cela qui ne va pas: faire ma vie avec mon art, mon esprit" (p. 202). Meantime his sense of solitude has been growing. In the early pages of the *Journal* he had reported a spiritual crisis involving both a sense of abandonment and exhaustion and a moral revelation:

J'ai connu la semaine dernière [i.e., at the end of January, 1935] une expérience intérieure de délaissement, d'humiliation, de solitude . . . J'ai, la semaine dernière, été mis en face du dilemme du bien et du mal, et d'une façon si nette dans la vue des deux termes, qu'il m'était *impossible* de choisir le mal. (pp. 51-52).

By 1937 the obsessive character of his sense of solitude is evident: "Je suis traqué. Je me sens traqué comme un criminel. Depuis longtemps. Mais cela devient vraiment insupportable" (p. 119). He tries desperately to strengthen his spiritual intention, to seek the path to God, but feels himself "rompu, brisé, pulverisé" (p. 135). He clings to his diary as a means of stabilizing himself, and records with satisfaction his brief moods of serenity, of communication with Jesus Christ. On days when he does not detect the presence of God in any way, he is plunged into despair. In a more tranquil period in October, 1937 he imagines himself approaching a state of spiritual "engagement", and he aspires to make the gift of himself. "Il me faut m'engager et jusqu'aux os. A vrai dire, il ne me reste plus que les os" (p. 183). But a new disillusionment follows, and in January 1938 he feels submerged by the weight of despair, hoping for nothing, aware of nothing. He scrutinizes his poems and rejects the majority of them as insignificant and insincere. Despite the fleeting comfort of the presence of the Communion of Saints, he now sees himself as a lifeless hulk, amputated and meaningless, like a tree with its branches lopped off. "Maintenant, c'est l'idée de l'épine dorsale avec cette impression en plus d'une hache qui (sans douleur) en détache les côtes, l'impression d'être ébranché" (p. 237). And so the published *Journal* trails off into silence; its last fragmentary lines are references to death and suicide in Baudelaire and Bernanos.

Despite the undoubted fascination of his spiritual adventure, it is probably for his poetic theories and achievements that Saint-Denys Garneau will retain a place in the history of French-Canadian letters. In poetic theory he belongs to the long tradition of Symbolism in the widest sense, a tradition that links Baudelaire and Mallarmé, Claudel and Valéry.

Under the influence of Maritain's *Art et scolastique*, Saint-Denys Garneau at first spoke of art in Thomistic terms, although confessing in the *Journal* (p. 250) his limited comprehension of Thomism. "L'art est harmonie", he wrote in 1934; "il est vérité ordonnée parfaitement" "Mais la vérité en art", he hastened to add, "n'est pas dans les choses tant que dans la façon de les envisager, le sens qu'on leur donne".⁴ Thus he rejected both Romantic emotionalism and Parnassian realism in favour of the "Idéal" of the Symbolists:

Celui qui est sensible aux chatoiements de la couleur, à l'agitation tumultueuse de la passion, ne peut pas être placé sur le même plan que celui qui recherche la pureté dégagée de la forme et l'éternelle sérénité de l'idée. L'un parle davantage aux sens, l'autre davantage à l'esprit. (*ibid.*).

The artist takes possession of the world in its mysterious reality. "Ce que je cherche, c'est une sorte de possession du monde par l'esprit au moyen de l'art" (Lacroix, p. 89). Art is thus an inverted form of metaphysics:

Le métaphysicien atteint le particulier, l'intimité unique des choses à force de général, d'universel. L'artiste atteint à l'universel à force de particulier, d'unicité . . . Ainsi compris, l'art est un mode d'assomption du monde. (*Journal*, p. 153).

The business of the artist is to detect the beauty of reality under the appearances that, in the eyes of other men, pass for reality. "Il a vocation de reconnaître la beauté à travers la création" (Lacroix, p. 90). What the artist then presents as his work of art must be "transparent à la beauté" (*Journal*, p. 158), since it reveals "la transparence de la forme à l'être" (p. 175). The two levels of "transparency" are explained in an essay on Alphonse de Chateaubriant:

. . . Transparence d'abord [du style] aux choses dans un effort à y mouler l'expression, à en restituer la vie dans l'exactitude de sa forme.

Puis, à mesure d'un approfondissement, transparence des choses à ce que nous pourrions appeler *l'arrière-fond mystérieux de leur vie dans une correspondance à l'humain*.

Et jusqu'à ne plus faire des choses que des signes non plus seulement transparents à leur vie profonde et à l'harmonie métaphysique qu'elles figurent, mais des symboles, des représentants d'idées, de faits spirituels, de lois.⁵

⁴ "L'art spiritualiste", *La Relève* I (1934), p. 40. (Quoted in Lacroix, p. 36).

⁵ *La Relève* II (1936), p. 253 (Quoted in Légaré, p. 141).

The same theory of transparency could be illustrated from Saint-Denys Garneau's criticism of music and painting. Mozart and Debussy delight him by the "simplicité transparente des thèmes" (*Journal*, p. 57); Beethoven, on the other hand, is too emotional, Handel diffuse. In painting he admires the clear vision of Matisse, and in Renoir "l'intention et le spectacle sont dès l'abord sur le même plan transparent . . ." (p. 95). But Picasso's abstractions or "la féroce caricature de Rouault" leave him bewildered (Lacroix, p. 53).

In Saint-Denys Garneau's view, transparency implies Symbolism. His jottings in the *Journal* and elsewhere often provide unconscious echoes of passages from Symbolist theorists.⁶ For Mallarmé, "tout, au monde, existe pour aboutir à un livre"; for Saint-Denys Garneau, ". . . tout est poème; il s'agit qu'il y ait un poète" (Lacroix, p. 89). Speaking of the underlying unity of all existence as expressed by the artist, Charles Morice had written in 1889, "Ce retour à la simplicité, c'est tout l'art"; in 1935, Saint-Denys Garneau was urging "un grand retour général à la simplicité" (Lacroix, p. 39). Saint-Pol-Roux had related Beauty to God: "La beauté étant la forme de Dieu, il appert que la chercher induit à chercher Dieu, que la montrer, c'est le montrer"; Saint-Denys Garneau confesses in his *Journal* "Et quand je saisis la Beauté, je ne puis le voir opposé à Dieu, au salut" (p. 169). It is unlikely that there is any direct imitation in these passages; they are merely indications of Saint-Denys Garneau's general sympathy with Symbolist point of view.

In his own poems, Saint-Denys Garneau had a habit of using a certain symbol in a few poems while he was absorbed by a certain problem — the parallel passages can usually be traced in the *Journal* — and then abandoning it, although retaining almost unconsciously some of the images into which the original symbol had ramified in his mind. His symbols thus tend to group themselves about the themes which concerned him at various times: poetic creation, solitude, authenticity and death.

The first of these, poetic creation, will serve to illustrate both the ramification process, and the parallel preoccupations of the poems and the *Journal*. This theme is dominant in the period preceding the publication

⁶ GUY MICHAUD, *La doctrine symboliste (documents)*. Paris: Nizet, 1947. The quotations from Mallarmé, Morice and Saint-Pol-Roux are found on pp. 16, 17 and 42 respectively.

of *Regards et jeux dans l'espace* early in 1937, at which time his *Journal* is filled with discussions of aesthetic problems. As the title of the collection suggests, poetic creation is seen as a combination of the artist's insight ("le regard") and his representation of the reality he perceives. ("les jeux du poète"). It is by his "regard" that the poet seeks to take possession of reality and to make contact with humanity.

Quelle grande chose qu'un regard pur, non pas cette recherche chez les passants de ce qui en eux correspond à notre bassesse, mais l'avidité de l'âme des autres, de la vie des autres, de l'être salvable et joyeux dans les autres! Le regard transparent qui est comme une bonne parole. Le regard qui ne s'arrête pas au sens charnel des formes, mais qui pénètre jusqu'aux éléments de salut.

Comme ce regard en effet transforme le monde, en fait un monde de joie et d'espérance, presque déjà ressuscité! (*Journal*, p. 82)

The process is not one of interpreting or of judging, but of perceiving; the poet withdraws into his own mind, into a tiny room in his skull "où l'on se retire de tout, de soi-même, pour s'asseoir et pour regarder. Là, on n'a plus affaire avec rien: on est étranger. On regarde seulement" (*Journal*, p. 106). But the "regard" is not directed only at the world outside. It is a double-edged sword.

Regard, la lame à double sens. La distance où il pénètre au dehors, il faut qu'il la perce au dedans, sans quoi voilà qu'il bascule et nous à sa suite, entraîné à un écoulement perfide, funeste.

Pour supporter la percée rétroactive du regard, il faut que le pays intérieur ait la profondeur, et la solidité, l'authenticité, la force et la santé . . .

(*Journal*, p. 228)

It was in the inward direction that Saint-Denys Garneau felt his own "regard" to be "bourbeux et dévasté" despite his longing for a "regard pur et libre" (p. 142).

In the poems, the "regard pur et libre" is frequently symbolized by the insight of a child:

Tout le monde peut voir une piastre de papier vert
Mais qui peut voir au travers

si ce n'est un enfant

Qui peu comme lui voit au travers et toute liberté . . .

(*Poésies complètes*, p. 38).

As early as 1932, Saint-Denys Garneau had written to a friend, "Je crois que si dans l'enfance on est plus éloigné des vérités, on est plus près

toutefois de la vérité.”⁷ The eyes of a child are “grands pour tout prendre” (*Poésies complètes*, p. 38). The child sees without difficulty, notices everything, “mais son regard est rarement dehors; il retourne aussitôt à la forge prochaine derrière de son imagination, où il est absorbé” (*Journal*, p. 220).

When the child looks outward, he takes possession of the world about him,

Il ne regarde que pour vous embrasser
Autrement il ne sait pas quoi faire
avec ses yeux
Où les poser

(*Poésies complètes*, p. 47)

The poet tries similarly to seize upon the essence of reality, the beauty of the world:

Et mon regard part en chasse effrénément
De cette splendeur qui s'en va
De la clarté qui s'échappe
Par les fissures du temps

(*Poésies complètes*, p. 86)

But as the poet moves farther and farther from the simplicity and inner tranquillity of a child, his “regard” is obscured; the world is too much with him, and

La ville coupe le regard au début
Coupe à l'épaule le regard manchot

(*Poésies complètes*, p. 39)

Even external nature ceases to satisfy his glance: “nos regards sont fatigués d'être fauchés / par les mêmes arbres” (p. 176), and he confesses despondently that he has failed in his attempt to take possession of reality:

Mes regards ne sont pas allés comme des glaneuses
Par le monde alentour
Faire des gerbes lourdes de choses
Ils ne rapportent rien pour peupler mes yeux déserts
Et c'est comme exactement s'ils étaient
demeurés en dedans
Et que la porte fût restée fermée.

(*Poésies complètes*, p. 150)

⁷ *La Nouvelle Relève* III (1944), p. 517.

The second stage of the poetic process is the representation of reality, the creation or construction by which the poet attempts to present the reality he has perceived:

De là, les jeux du poète, les jeux féconds du poète qui se met à raconter comme c'est beau, et qui s'y prend de mille manières, ne pouvant arriver à dire assez comme c'est beau. (*Journal*, pp. 251-2)

The poet's medium is language, but his words are not units of meaning in the simple sense:

Ses paroles qui ne sont pas du temps
Mais qui représentent le temps dans l'éternel,
Des manières de représentants
Ailleurs de ce qui passe ici,
Des manières de symboles
Des manières d'évidences de l'éternité qui passe ici.
(*Poésies complètes*, p. 122)

By an extension of the symbol of the poet-child, poetic creations become games: "l'art, lui, est une manifestation, un libre exercice, un jeu" (*Journal*, p. 230). The "play" theme is developed at length in the poem "Le jeu",

Ne me dérangez pas je suis profondément occupé

Un enfant est en train de bâtir un village
C'est une ville, un comté
Et qui sait
Tantôt l'univers.
Il joue
(*Poésies complètes*, p. 35)

The poet-child plays with his toy-box, "pleine de mots pour faire de merveilleux enlacements" (p. 36),

Il vous arrange les mots comme si c'étaient de simples chansons
Et dans ses yeux on peut lire son espiègle plaisir
A voir que sous les mots il déplace toutes choses . . . (p. 37)

In an essay entitled "Monologue fantaisiste sur le mot", published in *La Relève*⁸, Saint-Denys Garneau had stressed "la terrible exigence des

⁸ *La Relève* III (1937), pp. 71-73. The quotations in the remainder of this paragraph are all from this short essay. (Reproduced in Lacroix, pp. 63-66).

mots qui ont soif de substance". Words are not mere instruments of expression; "le mot contient toute une culture, toute une réflexion". One must strive to *enter* the word, to possess it, to draw upon its substance and to add to its substance in return. Culture consists in the possession of words in this intimate sense:

Le poète reconnaît le mot comme sien. Il est libre du mot pour en jouer. Il joue de tout par le mot. Le mot est l'instrument dont il joue pour rendre sensible le jeu qu'il fait de toute choses.

As Brother Lévis Fortier has shown⁹, Saint-Denys Garneau's treatment of poetic creation obviously owes a good deal to Valéry. But the symbols of the poet-child and his games probably go back much further, to Baudelaire, who is referred to more than a dozen times in the *Journal*. Robert Elie confirms that, after his spiritual crisis in 1935, Saint-Denys Garneau "ne lira plus ni Musset ni Loti, mais il découvrira Baudelaire, qui l'accompagnera jusqu'au bout de son aventure."¹⁰ As in *Les Fleurs du mal*, the opening poems of *Regards et jeux dans l'espace* examine the poet's function; in fact, the image of the poet-child occurs in the second poem of Baudelaire's volume ("Bénédictio") precisely as it does in Garneau's book. It is conceivable, however, that the "toy-and-game" symbolism has its source in an essay Baudelaire published in *Le Monde Littéraire* in 1853 and later included in *L'art romantique* under the title "Morale du joujou". In it Baudelaire maintains that "les enfants témoignent par leurs jeux de leur grande faculté d'abstraction et de leur haute puissance imaginative . . . Le joujou est la première initiation de l'enfant à l'art . . ." When a child wants to see what makes his toy work, "Je ne me sens pas le courage de blâmer cette manie enfantine: c'est une première tendance métaphysique . . ."¹¹ Most of the elements of Saint-Denys Garneau's poem "Le jeu" are to be found in these pages.

To continue the exploration of this single theme of poetic creation in Saint-Denys Garneau would lead us into intriguing byways such as the symbolism of the poet's right and left eyes:

Et pourtant dans son oeil gauche quand le droit rit
Une gravité de l'autre monde s'attache à la feuille d'un arbre . . .

(*Poésies complètes*, p. 37)

⁹ *Le message poétique de Saint-Denys-Garneau*, pp. 190-201.

¹⁰ *Revue Dominicaine* LVI (1950), p. 99.

¹¹ *L'art romantique*. Paris: Skira, 1945, pp. 143, 144, 148.

— or of the children's dance:

Mes enfants vous dansez mal
Il faut dire qu'il est difficile de danser ici
Dans ce manque d'air
Ici sans espace qui est toute la danse . . . (p. 39)

— or of the invisible flowers:

Et surtout n'allez pas mettre un pied dans la chambre
On ne sait jamais ce qui peut être dans ce coin
Et si vous n'allez pas écraser la plus chère des fleurs invisibles (p. 36)

But like a child chasing a butterfly, we should find ourselves wandering deeper into this "fôret de symboles" than we intended. In true Mallarmean fashion, Saint-Denys Garneau tempts his readers to try a "série de déchiffrements" which will unlock the mysteries of these half-transparent, half-hermetic poems, and thereby lures them back into the labyrinth of his *Journal* and of his spiritual adventure.

