John Glassco

***Complete Poems of Saint Denys Garneau*, translated with an introduction by John Glassco, Oberon Press, 1975.**

INTRODUCTION

Today, 30 years after his death, Saint-Denys-Garneau still shares with Emile Nelligan the first place in the poetry of French Canada. The similarity of their careers–the almost overnight flowering of creativity, and its no less sudden withering away–is coincidental, and the two have nothing in common beyond being a good deal more than merely "poets of Quebec"; and they are in fact the only poets of their nation whose accomplishment transcends nationality. But Nelligan marks the culmination of a trend: his word stands as the high-water mark of French-Canadian romanticism; while Saint-Denys-Garneau initiates a new era of both sensibility and prosody, and invokes and announces the future.

This is not to overlook the cultural importance of the third major poet of Quebec, Alain Grandbois, whom contemporary French-Canadian poets have chosen to follow on the path of an eloquence verging on fustian, a sensibility approaching sentimentality and a magnificent rejection of ideas. But while Grandbois is the poet of the splendours of the Word, who has almost singlehandedly freed French-Canadian poetry from what has been called "the prison of the self-regarding self," Saint-Denys-Garneau is still the poet of the Idea, who has plumbed the depths of consciousness and conscience alike, and in doing so has, I believe, raised for himself a more lasting monument. As theoreticians of the art of poetry itself, they can of course sustain no contest: one has only to compare the luminous insights that stud Saint-Denys-Garneau's *Journal* with the civilized clichés of Grandbois in *Avant le chaos* and in his occasional contributions to periodicals. Their views of poetry are in fact as divergent as their practice. Both, as true poets, are spokesmen of an individual suffering and joy; but while Grandbois' ecstasy and anguish are of the flesh and the affections, Saint-Denys-Garneau's are of the soul and the intellect.

Of these three outstanding names in French-Canadian poetry, then–to which one must

add those of Paul Morin, Robert Choquette and Alfred DesRoches, none of whom however, like Nelligan, has had any influence on the contemporary poetry of Quebec–Saint-Denys-Garneau remains the one who seems worthiest of a translation into English of his entire mature poetic output.

The translation of poetry, as I noted in the Introduction to the *Poetry of French Canada in Translation* (1970), is often decried, mainly on the grounds alleged by Robert Frost, that "what gets losts is the poetry itself." This allegation is simply not true: Northrop Fry has even gone so far as to say it is the opposite of the truth. But let us look at the facts. The best poetry has always reached its widest audience through the medium of translation, and its various messages–though inevitably lacking the original music and verbal magic–have come through, the skeletons of its forms and movement are retained, the ideas and images that are its lifeblood are transmitted. "The massy trunk of sentiment," as Dr. Johnson says, "is safe by its solidity, but the blossoms of elocution easily drop away." And since faithful translation would thus seem a kind of test and ultimate screening of all poetry–how else have the good poets managed to survive?–we must conclude that any poem that dies under the hands of the most skilful and sympathetic translator has a prime constitutional defect, and that the poets who rely on verbal hermetics, apocalyptic surprises, typographical innovations and simple sonorities (to the neglect of those essentials of form and meaning which transcend language and are, as it were, the universals of human communication) must resign themselves to cultivating a provincial garden–as indeed so many of the contemporary poets of Quebec seem content to do. Such qualities of *le restrictif*, which Saint-Denys-Garneau condemned in his *Journal*, have no place in his own poetry, any more than in that of Nelligan or Grandbois; and this common rejection of parochialism–one might call it *québécisme*–is what situates them in the mainstream of poetry, not as poets of Quebec but of the world.

It is some 35 years since Msgr. Camille Roy dismissed the poetry of Saint-Denys-Garneau as a "collection of poems in the style of Valéry–that is to say, more or less incomprehensible." "In these poems [he goes on] there is undoubtedly an attempt, however laboured, either at introspection or at the interpretation of the external. But this attempt all too often results in unintelligibility. For some readers, the hermetic partakes of the sublime.

Here, the sublime is too closely veiled. *L'esprit français* will never lend itself to a thought it cannot perceive–the poet having hidden it under the bushel of an overly obscure symbolism. Moreover Monsieur Garneau writes without periods or commas." Roy seems to have missed the point entirely. Or has he? By his lights, this poetry was not "poetry" at all; and indeed it was not the voice of a Pamphile Lemay, a Chapman or a Nérée Beauchemin, the French-Canadian poets especially prized by this learned disciple of Brunetière. His verdict is nonetheless important, because it points up Saint-Denys-Garneau's definitive break with the past and with the worn-out body of French-Canadian literature which Roy supported with such eloquence and erudition; it marks a meeting of minds and epochs, and even raises the question of just what constitutes *l'esprit français*–something, we must note in passing, quite different from the still undetermined *esprit québécois*, which was admittedly the concern of neither writer. This "French spirit", we can see now, was in fact magnificently exemplified by Saint-Denys-Garneau–by his search for new symbols and formulas of expression, his clarity of thought and command of nuance and the absolute sincerity and painstaking of his art.

As for his place in Quebec literary history, the distinguished French critic Samuel de Sacy has announced flatly, "Insofar as any poetic tradition exists in French Canada, modern poetry, properly considered, begins with Saint-Denys-Garneau... He knew not only the experience of solitude, but solitude felt as something irremediable, as a fatality, a curse, an ineluctable destiny. Thus, by assuming the whole burden of the sentence, he brought salvation to a whole generation of youth and exposed, in his poetry, its feeling of being hunted, abandoned, scorned, divided against itself and reduced to helplessness. By speaking, he exorcised."

This was written in 1958. The generation whose demons he "exorcised" has now matured, and the succeeding wave of young Quebec writer have other demons, much more tangible, to fill the void and to minister to the constant need for something absolute, simple, authoritative and maternal, which is at once the spur and the crutch of *l'esprit québécois*. Mother Church has, for them, been replaced by Mother Quebec, by the incandescent ideal of an exploited and beleaguered land. In such a climate the tormented, inward-looking poetry

of Saint-Denys-Garneau is now found to be unsympathetic, outmoded, almost impertinent; moreover, the cool intelligence of the "Notes of Nationalism" in his *Journal* is unacceptable to the advocates of separatism. This has inevitably led to a certain downgrading of his poetry and to revaluation of his poetic stature, both of which are to some extent justified.

For Saint-Denys-Garneau is not a *great* poet. The very idea of being so "placed" would have horrified him. And his was no false modesty. He knew his limitations: his prophecy of the arrival of "*le créateur, le poète qui donnera au peuple canadien-français son image*," and who will appear "in his own good time", proves that he never thought of casting himself in such a role. It is even doubtful if he saw himself as a French-Canadian poet at all, if indeed he did not hold himself superior to the very spirit of French-Canadian poetry, or at least hold aloof from it. "I need hardly say," his friend Jean Le Moyne tells us, "that he saw our Canadian rhymesters for what they are: exactly nothing." His attitude was in this respect characteristically exclusive and fastidious; more important, his anguish was not localized in any sense of a vulgar emotional *dépaysement*, as in a Hertel or a Miron, but in that of the universal human being.

In fact, this habit of negation had always been one of his greatest strengths. His early ability to *discard* literary influences–Maeterlinck, Henri de Regnier, Claudel–is notable. As Roland Bourneuf has pointed out, he did not read widely, doubtless following the practice of those poets who see in their own suggestibility the greatest danger to their vision and their art. His utter rejection of the fashionable surrealism of his day indicates also the sureness of his taste: the method had nothing to offer him. He was looking always inward, forging his style out of his *entrailles*, pushing back his own horizon, always exploiting his originality, to which was tragically joined the sense of his solitude. From his study of Ramuz he had grasped the principle of an absolute and rigorous sincerity: "to be simply oneself in order to be more than oneself."

Hector de Saint-Denys Garneau was born in Montreal on 13 June, 1912, of an old and prominent French-Canadian family. Through his mother he was connected with the Juchereau-Duchesnays, one of whom was granted a seigneury in recompense for military action during the siege of Quebec by Phipps in 1690; through his father he was descended

from the historian François-Xavier Garneau and related to the poet Alfred Garneau. His parents lived in Montreal, but had also purchased the seigneurial manor of the Juchereau-Deschesnays at Sainte-Cahterine-de-Fossambault near Quebec, where the poet refuge more and more frequently as his difficulty in communicating with the world increased.

He began to write at an early age, and also to paint. From 1924 to 1927 he attended classes at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Montreal, but had to discontinue them due to the pressure of his studies, though he did not stop painting. At school–or rather at several schools, for his instability led to frequent changes–he versified with zest and facility in the intervals of making fun of his teachers. He was then a handsome youth, full of gaiety and self-assurance, and frequently possessed by fits of an almost Dionysian ecstasy. But a few of his juvenile poems, written between 1929 and 1933, anticipated the sombre themes of his future work. For in 1928 he had suffered the heart injury which forced him to abandon his studies altogether in 1934 and was to be the immediate cause of his death some ten years later.

Thus, at the age of 22, he was brought face to face with his own imminent death; and the next nine years of his life–the last nine–were passed in intimate converse with a few close friends and in the feverish search for the religious certainty and the poetic "truth" that had always obsessed him. He had abandoned his studies without any hope of ever resuming them, and now had no outside occupation to distract him from his quest. For a year or two he led, outwardly at least, the life of a rich and idle young-man-about-town; but he was already devising and refining his methods of poetic composition, and in August 1935 produced his first original poems, the "Esquisses en plein air" of his first and only book of poems.

Tow years later, in 1937, he underwent the most devastating experience of his life–the publication of this book, the now famous *Regards et jeux dans l'espace*. No sooner had he seen the work in print than he was stricken with horror: he felt he had "exposed" himself in a manner so much at variance with his natural reserve, his shrinking from all display, that he suffered a nervous breakdown. He had, as he tells us in the *Journal*, the sensation of having actually violated and soiled himself. It did not matter that the book went almost unnoticed,

and that the few reviews were casual and cursory: his neurosis transformed its very appearance into an act of self-betrayal, a terrible *mistake*. However difficult it is to understand his feelings, they were of crucial importance to his literary career. He never published again.

In the same year he left for Europe, accompanied by his close friend Jean Le Moyne. No sooner had he set sail than he became deeply disturbed, and would even have landed at Father Point if Le Moyne had not restrained him. He spent three tormented weeks in France, and then returned home precipitately. His affliction now became for him the only reality: thenceforward he embraced a solitude which his friends found increasingly difficult to break in upon. After 1939 he withdrew entirely to Sainte-Catherine, where he composed the poems and fragments of *Les solitudes*, obviously with no more thought of their publication than of that of the *Journal* itself. He spent two winters alone in Sainte-Catherine, in 1940 and 1941, and for the next two years lived there altogether, with his parents.

On 24 October, 1943, after a dinner with some friends of the family during which he behaved with especial gaiety, he set out alone by canoe for an island where he had begun to build a cabin. On the way back he suffered a heart attack, reached the shore with great difficulty and made his way to a nearby farmhouse to telephone his parents. But there was no telephone. Some children found him the following day lying dead near the river. He was in his thirty-second year.

It is easy to see how, a generation later, this combination of elitist background, personal attraction, precarious health and premature death, could create a legendary and spurious image of the poet: as a person of noble extraction (an illusion he himself fostered by transmogrifying his name) and as the *jeune seigneur* of the Manoir of Sainte-Catherine, a role that amused him from time to time; the baseless story of his suicide was also part of the legend. But his minor vanities–satirized by Jacques Ferron in *Le ciel de Québec* with typical horseplay and venom–his uneventful life and casual death, are now of little importance: he lives only through his 2000-odd lines of verse, his few essays and his *Journal*, and will continue to live by them despite his own final and characteristically despairing verdict of his single book of poems: “I was parading in borrowed peacock’s

feathers; I was covering up my tracks, an utter emptiness clothed in brilliancy." His greatest tragedy was perhaps that he did not understand how good he was.

In any evaluation of the art of Saint-Denys-Garneau one must never forget that he was equally attracted by the life of religion. He was constantly tossed between the vocations of artist and ascetic, always fearful of his unfitness for either, always terrified both of the world and of hell. Out of this indecision and fear, these *balancements*, this shrinking and immoderate modesty, and out of his sense of the terrible discrepancy between life and art, and of the evanescence of both, he made his poetry. An unflinching moral dichotomist in the strictest Catholic tradition, he would compromise with no aspect of the Devil; yet, fatally attracted by the "evil" which he confronted in his own sexuality, he fell back on what seemed to him the redeeming beauty of human compassion and on the supernatural grace that somehow redeemed the carnal desire (and above all the auto-eroticism) which his ingrained Jansenism rejected and at least stifled. Overriding all these concepts is his stark terror of death and damnation; for him, the existence of a man like himself was only a way-station between nothingness and an eternity of torment, barely relieved by the fleeting beauty of nature and the forbidden ecstasy of carnal love. It was to poetry that he turned for relief. But poetry was for him communication above all things; and his anguish was thus purified by the most exhausting and consummate art, an art which became for him a quasi-religious duty. For the immediate and unrehearsed expression of his suffering he had recourse to his *Journal*, that terrible record of neurosis, guilt and despair.

This is not the place to discuss the *Journal*, except insofar as it illuminates his poetry, nor to inquire how far either of them reflected any but the most harrowing moments of his actual life–which seems indeed to have had many long periods of tranquility and even a kind of vegetable happiness; for, like most keepers of intimate journals, he tells us nothing–no more, indeed, than Baudelaire–of his moments of joy: these moments were obviously always private, self-sufficient, craving no record. But it was only in the *Journal* that his ideas on poetry were clearly set forth.

These ideas are comprised in the notion, originally drawn from his own aesthetic of painting and never relinquished, that the world of apperception is only a *transparency*

through which "being," or absolute reality, is grasped by means of the *signes* or symbols which the artist discerns and selects–in painting by his choice of pure colours, and in poetry by his *fresh* invention of images and rhythms. Full justice has already been done by David Hayne to his "forest of symbols"–those symbols of the pruned tree, the bones, the severed head, the man full of holes, the fleshly mask of the face–which revitalized French-Canadian poetry and permanently supplanted the nightingale, church-bell, ploughshare, snowstorm and so on, which had long burdened it. But his astonishing reshaping of poetic rhythms is no less important, and was accomplished by a virtuosity in devising the most daring combinations of line lengths and stresses, by which, alternating the grave with the gay and stateliness with speed, he gave his finished poems the further dimension of the dance. One of his favourite devices was the *pair-impair* rhythm in which he sought to outdo his master Verlaine by contriving a dazzling alternation of trochees and iambs, and so broke down everything that had heretofore stood between a poetic union of sound and sense. He made the lyric dance as well as sing, thus restoring the long-lost unity of the two disciplines and even, as he suggests in his *Journal*, equating poetic expression with that of David dancing before the Ark. Let us take, for example, the poem "Willows," the second to last of the "Esquisses en plein air," which begins with a dozen short, slow, impressionistic lines, then makes a four-line pause–a calculated hesitation–and then suddenly gathers speed and breaks up into a sparkling counterpoint of reversed stresses, anapaests and syllabic pyrotechnics that resembles nothing more than the close of one of Chopin's joyous impromptus. Or look at the long untitled poem, the first in the section *Sans titre*, where for the first two thirds the alternations of lines, ranging in length from a single foot to a classic alexandrine, reproduce the tension and weight of the tormented, breathless utterance of the poem itself, and where the last third opens out into long lines of a regular, continuous, rolling suavity that enhances, like a pavane, the solemnity of an accepted despair. Again, the opening metronomic four-foot beat of the witty *Commencement perpetuel* reproduces to perfection the idea of *counting*, only to be followed by a conscious disordering of that simple initial rhythm, as the man who is counting, rather amusingly, loses his count. But the finest examples of this marriage of rhythm and meaning occur in the famous *Accompagnement*, written in a kind of brilliant

dance-step further reinforced by the wry reiteration of the rhyming *joie* and *moi*, and in the still more famous *Cage d'oiseau*, where the desperate point is driven home, as if by the strokes of a hammer, in the recurrence of simple four-foot trochaic couplets with naive nursery-rhymes.

If undue emphasis seems to have been given here to Saint-Denys-Garneau's mastery of rhythms, it is because this may well be his highest and most lasting achievement. When his religious, neurotic and erotic agonies are forgotten, along with his often hysterical self-pity and his *bondieuserie*–that infantile, saccharine religiosity which occasionally disfigures his work–the marvellous prosody which never failed him may survive everything else: the formal *cachet* it imposed on everything he wrote was at any rate his salvation as a poet.

This technical control of image and emotion is however seen in little more than half of the 40-odd poems that he finished and approved. Much of his work, including over half of *Regards et jeux dans l'espace*, he either rightly repudiated in his *Journal* or left uncompleted in the manuscripts edited after his death by Elie and Le Moyne. And in fact all too many of the poems in *Les solitudes* are simply unrehearsed fragments, sometimes little more than jottings: they are often formless, at times distressingly awkward and incoherent; but there is no doubt they are, both actually and potentially, superior to the work published during his lifetime. It is impossible to appreciate his poetic stature without, for instance, the sections of *Les solitudes* entitled "Pouvoirs de la parole" and "La mort grandissante": these fragments one might say, he had shored against his ruins in the final self-imposed exile at Sainte-Catherine, and though we must regret they were never brought to completion we may at least be thankful they were not lost along with the many pages of his *Journal* that were destroyed by his mother after his death. These considerations have led me to include in this book every poem, finished or unfinished, that appears in the *Poésies complètes*, thus affording an uninterrupted view of his poetic development from the exquisitely finished two-dimensional impressionism of his earliest work to the profound and sombre canvases, mostly uncompleted, of his final period of reclusion.

Following the rule laid down in my anthology of French-Canadian poetry, I have not reproduced the original texts. My reasons for not doing so remain the same: the translation

of poetry should not be made the occasion for a lesson in a second language or a comparison of techniques; it is not a playground for philologists or students of linguistics; and, to quote Johnson once again, “the first excellence of a translator of poetry is that his versions be such as may be read with pleasure by those who do not know the originals.” In short, the translated poem must stand by itself, as something existing in its own right. The reasons seem even more cogent when it is a question of presenting the whole output of a single poet.

In translating the poems I have followed a course that was bound to result in the intrusion of my own personality. Such personal colouring, however unwelcome and however resisted, is inevitable: translations are done by men and women, not by machines; and translation is a search for an equivalent, not for a substitute. These renderings are faithful but not literal. In a few instances, especially in the fragments, they are partial re-creations which hew to their originals only in thought, image and rhythm. But in translating the great majority of the poems, above all those which the poet himself finally approved, I have reproduced his verbal patterns, and particularly his rhythms, with the greatest fidelity. In doing so I have not scrupled to steal many lines from earlier translations, since I see no reason why the mutual thievery of poets should be forbidden the translator of poetry. My outstanding victim has been F. R. Scott, whom I have pillaged of at least a dozen individual lines and more than as many isolated phrases, all of them quite beyond improvement.

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The text of this translation is based on that of the Poésies complètes *edited by Robert Elie and Jean Le Moyne (Montreal: Fides, 1949), and has been collated with that of the original edition of* Regards et jeux dans l’espace *(Monreal: privately printed, 1937) and with that of the definitive* Œuvres *edited by Jacques Brault and Benoît Lacroix (Montreal: Preses de l’Université de Montréal, 1971).*

Source : *Complete Poems of Saint Denys Garneau*, translated with an introduction by John Glassco, Canada, Oberon Press, c 1975, 172 p.