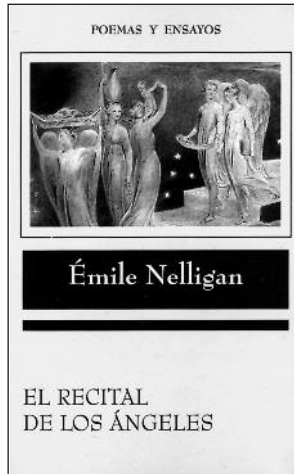


Reviews



El recital de los ángeles

(Recital of the Angels)

Émile Nelligan

Bilingual edition (French-Spanish)

Claude Beausoleil, ed.

Marco Antonio Campos, León Plascencia Ñol and

Françoise Roy, trans.

Coordinación de Humanidades, UNAM-Écrits des Forges-

Editorial Aldus

Mexico City, 1999, 161 pp.

Je suis le *Ténébreux*,—le Veuf,—l'Inconsolé,
Le Prince d'Aquitaine à la Tour abolie:
Ma seule Étoile est morte, —et mon luth constellé
Porte le *Soleil noir* de la *Mélancolie*.
Gérard de Nerval, “*El desdichado*”

In the vast museum of literature, some people's destiny is marked by unhappiness. Émile Nelligan (Montreal, 1879-1941), the precursor of modern French-Canadian poetry, is one of these. His life and work can be summed up in ten words: a poet ahead of his time, misunderstood by his contemporaries. Since his life and his work alike personified poetry and the poet, they both drew criticism. The brevity of his productive literary life contrasts with his prolonged stays—42 years—in two psychiatric hospitals.

The literary prestige and value of his work—that dips into romanticism, Parnassianism, decadentism and symbolism, all reworked in his own way—lies in the fact that he was the first Quebequois poet to use the poetic “I” (in his case, the critics call it “symbolic intimism”), an element that many of his fellow Quebequois poets would later use, each in their own way.¹

A great deal of his poetry reflects the tribulations of his life and artistic anguish: among them, an untiring search for Beauty as a poetic ideal from which pure Poetry can be derived.

His themes are recurring, like a leitmotif: sadness, failure, restlessness, a yearning for childhood, beauty, pain, music and poetry (Nelligan said, “Poetry cannot be communicated without music”), Eden as an allegory for a longed-for place of pleasure and the Manicheanism incarnated in the angels of goodness and evil.

Most of his verses were fashioned in the classical sonnet form, or as songs, rondeaus, prose poems and, here and there, a different foot of verse, such as “La romance du vin” (The Romance of Wine), which can be read as a bacchanalian poem like *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, but which is also “an impassioned response to the detractors of poetry.”²

Nelligan's body of work includes 170 poems, 50 of them included in the very fortunate selection edited and published in Quebec by Claude Beausoleil, *Le Récital des anges* (Recital of the Angels), in 1991 to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the death of the poet, the so-called Arthur Rimbaud or Gérard de Nerval of Quebec. The title is one Nelligan himself would probably have approved of. This is the original that Marco Antonio Campos, León Plascencia Ñol and Françoise Roy applied their poetic efforts to in a bilingual French-Spanish edition that is the object of this review.

El recital de los ángeles is divided into five parts. In the first part, Nelligan pays homage to “Poetry” and three of its masters: Dante, Georges Rodenbach and Charles Baudelaire, to whom he owes a poetic debt. *Maître, il est beau ton Vers; ciseleur sans pareil/ Tu nous charmes toujours par ta grâce nouvelle./* (Master, beauteous is your verse; unique chisel-

er,/You charm us always with your new grace...); *Et tu vivras, ô Dante, autant que Dieu lui-même,/ Car les Cieux ont appris aussi bien que l'Enfer/ À balbutier les chants de ton divin Poème* (And you shall live, oh Dante, as long as God himself,/for the heavens learned, as did Hell,/ to stammer the songs of your divine Poem).

In the second part, he honors “Childhood,” and we hear the lamentations from the doorway of the memory of a gone childhood. *Et bien loin, par les soirs révolus et latents,/ Suivons là-bas, devers les idéales côtes,/ La fuite de l'Enfance au vaisseau des Vingt ans* (And very far, in the nights now past and secret,/we continue to the perfect coasts,/ to childhood's flight in the ship of twenty years). Here, he emphasizes the image of an angelical mother.

In the third part, “Music,” the word “Eden” expresses Nelligan's poetic likeness: it is a metaphor for the lost paradise of childhood, of fleeting happiness, mercurial and impossible to grasp, creating verses on a par with melancholic musical motifs. *Et c'est pour vous que sont pleurées/ Au luth âpre de votre amant/ Tant de musiques explorées* (and sheds its tears for you/ the ungentle lover's lute/ in so much disconsolate music).

In the section dedicated to “Time,” space cannot be overlooked. The poet's surroundings, usually adverse because of the climate, influence his moods, pushing him to desperation, the breaking point, despair and evasion. *Ah! puisses-tu vers l'espoir calme/ Faire surgir comme une palme/ Mon coeur cristallisé de givre!* (Ah, that you, for calm hope,/ might make my heart, a frosted glass,/ burst forth in recompense).

In the last section, “Life, Death,” the reader hears grief, can feel the tedium and see the sad, dying fluttering of a soul on the mental edge.³ *Quelqu'un pleure dans le silence/ Morne des nuits d'avril;/ Quelqu'un pleure la somnolence/ Longue de son exil./ Quelqu'un pleure sa douleur/ Et c'est mon coeur...* (Someone weeps in the sad/ silence of the April nights;/ someone weeps for the long/ doze of his exile;/ someone weeps his pain,/ and it is my heart...).

In the spacious museum of literature, some writers—like Thomas de Quincey and Friedrich Hölderlin, or the Latin Americans Macedonio Fernández and José Antonio Ramos Sucre, just to name a few—lead parallel lives, writers who, like Nelligan, have known madness in the form of neurosis, insomnia, hallucinations, loneliness or being misunderstood. Any of them could call the other, in Baudelaire's words, “my brother, my fellow.”

Émile Nelligan, an angel thrown into the abyss by his nightmares, transcends the regional and projects himself universally and timelessly like another of the poets of pain. His spirit is spread through the pages of *El recital de los ángeles*. Part of it is touched on in Nerval's epigraph, and the rest, in a few verses of “*Mon Âme*” (My Soul), in which he laments having celestial candor and the purity of February snow; in which he grieves for having a subtle, sensitive soul, so sweet and mystically tender that it makes him *...de tous les maux souffrir;/ Dans le regret de vivre et l'effroi de mourir;/ Et d'espérer, de croire...et de toujours attendre!* (suffer all the evils/ of the dislike for living and the terror of dying/ and of waiting, of believing... and always of waiting!). ■■■

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NOTES

¹ Étienne Shalom, “Le poète tourmenté,” *Horizon Canada*, vol. 10 (Quebec: Centre d'Études en Enseignement du Canada-Université Laval, 1987), p. 2736.

² Nina Milner, “Archives de poésie canadienne. Émile Nelligan (1879-1941),” at <http://www.nlc.bnc.c/canvers/bios/fnelligan.htm>, 25 May 2000, p. 2.

³ William Styron, *Esa visible oscuridad. Memoria de la locura*, Salustiano Masó, trans. (Mexico City: Grijalbo, 1992).