Emile Nelligan, *Poète Maudit* of Quebec: 
The Pervasion of Black and White Coldness

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The son of a French-Canadian mother and an Irish father, Emile Nelligan was born in 1879, lived most of his life in Montreal, died intellectually in 1899 when he was interned for mental disorders, and died in 1941. Almost all of his poetry was composed between 1896, when he was still a student at the Collège Sainte-Marie, and 1899, when he was sent to the Retraite Saint-Benoît, leaving it in 1925 for St.-Jean-de-Dieu where he later died. Nelligan never visited France—other than one short trip to England, he never even left Quebec—but his entire poetic career was imbued with French literary influences.

In 1905 there appeared in Paris an article in *La Revue d'Europe et des colonies* entitled “Un Poète maudit: Emile Nelligan.” The author of the article placed the Quebecois poet in a direct line of French symbolist poets and named as his clearest influences Heredia and Verlaine. The major contemporary critic of Nelligan’s poetry, Paul Wyczynski, in his massive work *Emile Nelligan: Sources et originalité de son œuvre*, goes far beyond the 1905 assessment and exactingly describes, chronologically, thematically, and in reference to individual poems, the influences of, especially, Baudelaire, Verlaine, Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Rodenbach, Poe, and Rollinat.

But whichever influence was the profoundest on any particular poem, it remains evident that Nelligan was essentially a French symbolist poet and, specifically, a *poète maudit*. True to Verlaine’s original meaning of *malédiction*, Nelligan saw himself as a poor misunderstood genius scorned by the majority of his fellow “vulgar” Quebecois, isolated in an aesthetic world of his own and dreaming of an absolute purity by means of poetry. His poems express an inner revolt and pathetic cry, more musical than intellectual, against his obsessions with the cruel world, *la nostalgie du berceau*, the passing of time, sensations of *le spleen* and *le gouffre*, and inevitable death. They complain of the impossibility of attaining absolute perfection in art but attest to the poet’s wishes to continue the struggle. And, above all, Nelligan’s poetry chronicles his macabre voyage toward insanity.

He has always been considered more French than French-Canadian. Living at a time in Canada when almost all artistic endeavors were modeled on those of
the French, Nelligan was representative of the vast period of time before the growth of Quebecois national consciousness that began in the mid twentieth century. Although for this reason alone he is important to the history of Quebecois literature, it is equally interesting to analyze his poetry in order to discover if any elements reveal his Canadian origins. A pervasion of black and white coldness appears to be the sole link.

The predominance of poetic themes such as winter, snow, ice, frost, night, a distant past and future, pure unattainable or sterile ideals, le gouffre, la névrose, insanity, and death—all painted either in black or in white in an absence of color and of warmth—can be viewed as exterior or interior psychological décors. They are to be treated, especially when used as interior descriptions of the poet’s heart and mind, as maudit obsessions. But, in their frequency as exterior décors for his poems, they stress primarily the Canadian landscape, permeating the inner self through a dual window overlooking both wintery scenes and the shuddering soul.

Of 177 known poems by Nelligan, a large percentage are concerned with the presence of an exterior coldness, specifically mentioning winter, the white snow, ice, and frost. The opening verse of “Soir d’hiver” offers the reader an idea of the constant décor of Nelligan’s poetry: “Ah! comme la neige a neigé!” Similarily, in “Frisson d’hiver,” the poet sees “le givre qui s’éternise / Hivernalement” (p. 96). In many of Nelligan’s poems, this white coldness, associated with purity, possesses positive characteristics; it is good and desired and, perhaps, the only possible warmth available to the poet. “Que le froid des hivers nous réchauffe les cœurs!” cries Nelligan in “Hiver sentimental” (p. 93); and in another poem dedicated to la froideur blanche he speaks of “l’immaculé / De ce décor en blanc,” a cold décor filled with ice and snow (“Caprice blanc,” p. 66).

If the poet is referring to Canada in most of these poems, he sees his homeland as related to other northern countries in a fraternal bond. He mentions Belgium, Flanders, and Norway, in particular, all viewed as snowy, white, and cold, as well as melancholy under gray skies. And he identifies himself almost as a Canadian Norwegian when he writes “Je suis la nouvelle Norvège / D’où les blonds ciels s’en sont allés” (p. 82). There is only one poem in which Nelligan truly localizes his wintery landscape. In “Notre-Dame-des-Neiges,” Ville-Marie, that is, Montreal, is described as “Ma ville d’argent au collier de neige,” protected by Sainte-Marie, whereas Canada is seen as a “pays de givre.” But, true to his love for France, Nelligan ends his poem with a wish that the Virgin Mary soon see “refleurir en même jardin / Sa France et sa Ville-Marie,” when she chases out the Protestant, English-speaking conqueror (pp. 148–49). If Emile Nelligan is the poet of the cold, white winter, he is equally the poet of the cold, black night. At least one quarter of his poems are specifically de-
scribed as nocturnal. In a few instances that night serves a calm and soothing function for the poet, a form of preferred consolation and inspiration (pp. 134, 210, 215, 218, 219, 234, 247). But generally night is feared. It is a hallucinatory night whose progressive invasion engenders the sensation of a black void, of eternity. It is always a winter night, described as “vos soirs affreux, ô Décembres!” (“Soirs hypochondriques,” p. 277) in which “Des sons / Gémissent sous le noir des nocturnes frissons” (“La Cloche dans la brume,” p. 188). It is often seen as evening at the time of vespers just before the death of day when all possible light disappears.

Despite his terror of the encroaching black coldness, this nocturnal poet is obsessed with the absolute blackness of the winter night. Like Mallarmé, haunted by his vision of the frightening sky of his ideals, Nelligan utters the same desperate cry in “Confession nocturne”: “je suis hanté.” And like the French symbolist poet who immediately clarifies his haunting vision (“L’Azur! l’Azur! l’Azur! l’Azur!”), the Quebecois symbolist poet immediately explains: “c’est la nuit dans la ville,” a silent night punctuated by the sounds of Lucifer, prowling “En le parc hivernal” (p. 126).

Just as twilight serves as a transition between daytime and its death into night, October, or autumn, is often used by Nelligan to symbolize the season immediately preceding the death of nature into winter. If the white snowy coldness of Canadian winters represents at times purity and warmth, more often it can be seen as precipitating the cold blackness of nature’s death. Nature herself shudders “avec des frissons noirs” (“Prêtre du soir,” p. 151) or a “sinistre frisson” (“Soir d’hiver,” p. 82), since all of her living organisms will soon be frozen under “l’immobilité glaciale des jets d’eau” (“Five o’clock,” p. 85).

Winter can be dangerous both to nature and to man; Nelligan paints a typically stark scene in “Paysage fauve”: “La bise hurle; il grèle; il fait noir, tout est sombre.” He had turned to the cold white snow as toward some form of purity, but now, overcome by the cold, he falls “sur les neiges arctiques” in the middle of “Un farouche troupeau de grands loups affamés”; for “C’est l’Hiver; c’est la Mort” (p. 158). The Quebecois Nelligan had hoped that his snowy white or nocturnal exterior cold décor would inspire him in his poetic dreams, but he was bitterly deceived. All he discovered was cold black death lying beneath the cold white snow:

Sûrs vous pourrez y vivre
Sans peur des soirs de givre,
Morne flambeau!
Souventes fois, cortège
Qu’un vent trop dur assèche,
Vous trouvez sous la neige
Votre tombeau.

[“Les Petits Oiseaux,” p. 111]
One additional type of exterior coldness surrounding the poet should be mentioned, especially since it appears in Nelligan’s best-known poem, “La Romance du vin.” Here the poet haughtily complains of the coldness of the Canadian public toward him and his art. As a poète maudit, it is his destiny “De se savoir poète et l’objet du mépris, / De se savoir un cœur et de n’être compris.” But cynically he addresses the mediocre crowd: “Je bois à vous surtout, hommes aux fronts moroses / Qui dédaignez ma vie et repoussez ma main!” (pp. 198–99). Such a situation was, of course, typically maudit, although also Canadian in that the average Quebeccois of the late nineteenth century neither understood nor accepted such French intellectual literary thoughts. Nelligan’s reaction to this exterior coldness was also typical: he withdrew into himself, into his own world of artistic dreams and, eventually, into insanity, only to discover, once again, a permeating white and black cold.

Paul Wyczynski states in several of his critical works on Nelligan that the color (or absence of color) white symbolized for the poet his nostalgically remembered childhood, his mother, and, therefore, his former happiness and secure warmth. Despite the truth of this observation, substantiated in several poems, it is also evident that this past life is now dead and, therefore, although still white, cold and silent. The poet recognizes this state when he wanders to a cemetery “où git ma belle enfance au glacial tombeau” (“Ténèbres,” p. 197). Similarly, religion, and especially his beloved Sainte Cécile, are described by Nelligan as being pure and white, but in a form of “cold warmth,” distant from the poet and offering him little consolation.

This distant white but cold purity is associated not only with past happiness and memories but also, and predominantly, with the future. Like so many poets before and contemporary to him, Nelligan constantly viewed ideal beauty, both female and artistic, as white, pure, and virginal. For Nelligan in particular, all female beauty, be it real or absolute, was cold and unapproachable. All of his women remained at a distance.

His aesthetic ideals, dreams, and goals of reaching an absolute world were similarly sterile or unattainable. Many of his poems speak of his desires to flee “vers le château de nos Idéais blancs” but are immediately recognized as a flight “Aux plages de Thulé, vers l’île des Mensonges” (“Tristesse blanche,” p. 191). Although Nelligan is often the poet of escape, of the voyage toward the infinite and the absolute, his art soon becomes, as he himself interpreted that of Baudelaire, “un violon polaire,” a frigid musical poetry that, according to popular tradition, made dance the Aurora Borealis, the Northern Lights seen in northern latitudes (“Le Tombeau de Charles Baudelaire,” p. 241). If nature dies, frozen under the glacial immobility of water, so do the poet’s hopes, frozen and fallen like leaves from a tree in winter. And if “Tous les étangs gisent gelés,” Nelligan, “la nouvelle Norvège” from whom all sunny skies have departed, sees that “Tous ses espoirs gisent gelés” (“Soir d’hiver,” p. 82).
Not only are the poet’s artistic ideals described as pure and white (though cold and frozen), but Nelligan sees himself, at times, in an identical manner. In the midst of a perverted world, it is difficult “D’avoir une âme ainsi qu’une neige aux hivers” (“Mon Ame,” p. 42). And again, identifying himself as a northern poet in a fraternity with others of similar origins, Nelligan portrays Georges Rodenbach as a pure white swan flying toward the azure of the north, but living under the melancholy gray skies of Belgium (“A Georges Rodenbach,” p. 233).

It is noteworthy that Nelligan, himself living in a cold, wintery country, creates his inner artistic ideals as pure, white, and cold. He seldom expresses a desire to escape to a land of warmth and sunshine. His absolutes are not the exotic realms of inner light, but the cold, feared, but desired obsessions of art and the artist, expressed, ironically, in moving, personal tones. If there is any light present in his poetry, it is, although examples are rare, that of gold, itself a distant, harsh light, seen almost as white and viewed, in effect, as another “cold warmth.”

But if, as Wyczynski states, “le ciel serein trouve momentanément sa place dans le cœur du poète, il y doit changer et de résonance et de couleur. Nelligan est un artiste inquiet. Souvenir d’enfance [and future ideals], le rêve ensoleillé n’est qu’une évasion passagère. D’abord blanche et dorée, la tristesse devient vite grise et noire,” as one sees “le noir sentiment qui envahit son être.” As Nelligan looks around and sees the cold, white, wintery, nocturnal landscape, while dreaming of pure white aesthetic ideals, he examines his own inner being: his life, his thoughts, and his soul. He writes a poem to “La Vierge noire” and says, “Certes tu la connais, on l’appelle la Vie!” He composes the poem “Musique funèbres” in which the cold, black motif is pervasive in words such as “absent,” “noir,” “deuil,” “silence,” “clos,” “sanglots,” “plongeant,” “mort,” “me noyer,” “bière,” “croquemorts,” “fantômes,” “nuits,” “ombre,” “engouffrez,” “Enfer,” “descend,” “cercueil,” and, finally, “Ah! que je hais la vie et son noir Carillon!” (pp 276, 171–72). He experiences the occupational hazard of l’étouffement and of an inner, cold void. And he is, especially, obsessed with the sensation of depth, with falling into a deep, black, cold gouffre. “Mon âme est le donjon des mortels péchés noirs,” laments Nelligan (“Confession nocturne,” p. 126). As “un grand cygne noir,” the poet is haunted by hollow objects and sensations: “Dans le puits noir que tu vois là / Gît la source de tout ce drame” (“Le Cercueil,” p. 129; “Le Puits hanté,” p. 175).

Emile Nelligan’s obsession with falling into a cold, black abyss is dual, with both fates envisioned as inevitable and terrifying. Passing through stages of macabre hallucinations, he fell into la névrose, becoming insane, and, therefore, mentally dying well before his actual death. The poet predicted his own “mental shipwreck” in “Le Vaisseau d’or,” where the golden-white vessel, about to reach “l’azur, sur des mers inconnues,” was coldly struck by the night:
"Et le naufrage horrible inclina sa carène / Aux profondeurs du Gouffre, immuable cercueil." The treasured cargo of this vessel was revealed to be "Dégout, Haine et Névrose," and, finally:

Que reste-t-il de lui dans la tempête brève?
Qu'est devenu mon cœur, navire déserté?
Hélas! Il a sombré dans l'abîme du Rêve!

Beyond his immediate mental death, Nelligan was constantly haunted by his actual death. The cold, black night can only precipitate an identical catastrophe for the poet. Images of coffins, tombstones, hearse, mourning crapes, cemeteries, and skeletons abound in his poems. Death and the ensuing funeral procession always arrive on a cold, winter evening when "les noirs des musiques" can be heard. And since the cold rigidity of death is inevitable, Nelligan, already experiencing the black coldness of life and of encroaching insanity, may as well hasten the process:

Et de grands froids glacent mes membres:
Je cherche à me suicider
Par vos soirs affreux, ô Décembres!

["Soirs hypocondriaques," p. 277]

Using this stanza as an example, as well as considering all that has been discussed thus far, we may conclude that there exist many interdependences and fluctuations between exterior and interior coldness, both black and white, in the poetry of Nelligan. In anticipation of his cold, black insanity and eventual death, the poet often experiences a shudder (le frisson) of his soul, fearful of the future in a cold néant. This inner shuddering corresponds to the cold, white shudder of wintry nature in the black night. Similarly, in accord with the exterior landscape, Nelligan sees "Mon cœur cristallisé de givre!" ("Rêves enclos," p. 81). The pure white heart of the poet, melancholy and black with visions of macabre death, becomes immobile, sterile, frozen into the Canadian snow.

In order to effect the passage of this black and white coldness between both exterior and interior décors, the poet views these pervading relationships through a window, the Nelliganian counterpart of the Mallarméan vitre:

La nuit s'appropriait peu à peu les rideaux
Avec des frissons noirs à toutes les croisées,
Par ces soirs, et malgré les bûches embrasées,
Comme nous nous sentions soudain du froid au dos!

["Prière du soir." p. 151]

Like Mallarmé, Nelligan uses la vitre in order to contemplate both the landscape and the distant ideal azure skies. Through the window pass these exterior images into the claustrophobic room and into his closed heart. The
movement is, of course, reversible. But the windowpane serves also as a transparent obstacle, for the poet cannot reach his goals, either in the absolute realm of art or in the purity of snow. Everything he sees, touches, and dreams is frozen and imprisoned, "un soupir emprisonné dans la glace."\textsuperscript{19}

His passing life is also trapped in \textit{la vitre} or in a cold mirror, dating from his past. Like the Canadian landscape, it has become eternally frozen. Mallarmé, in "Frisson d’hiver," speaks of the "vitres usées," as well as of "ta glace de Venise, profonde comme une froide fontaine."\textsuperscript{20} Nelligan, in his poem of the same title, cries:

\begin{verbatim}
Quand le givre qui s’éternise
Hivernalement s’harmonise
Aux vieilles glaces de Venise.
\end{verbatim}

Both poets, although fearful of this cold reflection ("Loin des vitres!" warns Nelligan in "Hiver sentimental" [p. 93]), can never turn away from its haunting presence: "Mallarmé et Nelligan parlent tous les deux le langage des rêveurs emprisonnés dans leur propre moi,"\textsuperscript{21} or rather, for Nelligan, frozen within himself.

It remains accurate to state the Emile Nelligan was essentially a French symbolist \textit{poète maudit} who loved France and her literary traditions. But despite his overt disregard of his Québécois milieu, his poetry does betray the influence of his Canadian homeland. The poem "Soir d’hiver" could only have been written by a northern poet:

\begin{verbatim}
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 du 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!
\end{verbatim}

[PP. 82-83]


4. His love of Belgium is, of course, also related to his admiration of Belgian symbolist poets.

5. See also Wyczynski, *Sources et originalité*, pp. 139–41, where the critic offers examples of newspaper articles, contemporary to Nelligan’s poem, in which tributes to a beautiful Canada under the weight of ice and snow are given, as well as 1898 photographs in which the Virgin Mary is described as being covered with snow.


8. One is reminded, once again, of Mallarmé’s “Le Vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd’hui” (Mallarmé, pp. 67–68). The similarities in reference to the poet’s frozen hopes and dreams will also soon be seen.

9. See also Wyczynski, *Sources et originalité*, pp. 201–2; and idem, *Emile Nelligan*, pp. 57–59.


11. In Nelligan’s poetry, the purity, distance, and, above all, silence of this religion and, in particular, of Sainte Cécile, the leader of the angelic orchestra, can be likened to Mallarmé’s Sainte Cécile, the “Musicienne du silence.” See Mallarmé, “Sainte,” pp. 53–54; Nelligan, pp. 74, 75, 133–34, 135, 136, 137.

12. Thulé is the name given by the Romans to an island that marked the extreme northern limit of the known world.

13. See also p. 317. Such a result caused by his polar art can also be seen as a positive characteristic.


Molière est moins un homme que la conscience vivante d'une nation.

R. Fernandez, *Itinéraire français*

This essay was translated by Patricia Pecoy