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## **Hector de Saint-Denys Garneau and the Drama of Poetic Creativity**

the magic domain of poetry is alien to me. It exists outside my ability!

No figure in the history of French-Canadian literature has been the subject of as much discussion and disagreement as Hector de Saint-Denys Garneau whom Jacques Blais has called, quite simply, "the most controversial of our poets."<sup>2</sup>

Garneau's life (1912-43) was the stuff of myth and drama. Bearer of an unusual literary and cultural heritage,<sup>3</sup> he was described as being aristocratic, well-to-do, handsome, sensitive and actively interested in the arts, but also given to melancholy and long periods of silence. He had already won prizes for his poetic work by the time he was sixteen, a year which marked both the beginning of his dream of becoming a great poet and the discovery that premature death was inevitable. In 1934 he was finding his confidence as a poet and as a painter when his heart ailment forced him to abandon the classical studies which were the mark of an educated person in Quebec at that time. Negative capability is often the mark of a committed artist; weakened by a tired heart and encouraged by his circumstances to withdraw into seclusion, the young writer devoted most of his time and energy to writing. Later he would comment: "I was awakened to the world of words. I heard their call. I felt the terrible demands of words crying out for substance. I had to fulfil them, nourish them with my own body" (*Oeuvres*, 289).<sup>4</sup>

This period of intense activity culminated in 1937 with the publication by the author of *Regards et jeux dans l'espace*, his only volume of poems. A generation later Jean Le Moyne declared that the publication "stands out in our own literature as the first product of an authentic necessity."<sup>5</sup> The Garneau legend probably began when the poet withdrew his book, shortly after its publication, and burned some of the copies. He told his friends that he was renouncing poetry and

travelled briefly in France. His return to Quebec marked the beginning of an ascetic existence which silenced the writer before he was thirty. He spent the last two years of his life in isolation and died in 1943 from an apparent heart attack, alone at night in a boat on a river.

An observation by Guy Sylvestre exposes the dynamics of criticism and helps to explain why Garneau's "scandalous withdrawal"<sup>6</sup> received so much attention during the years which immediately followed his death: "If he had lived he would have become famous less quickly, for death confers upon poets a prestige which cannot be acquired in life."<sup>7</sup> Certain of the critical assessments of this period were made by "terrorists," the name which Jean Paulhan, a precursor of the New Critics in France, had given in 1941 to a large class of critics who "begin by forcing the author into bed with their little (or big) personal philosophy: they measure him against Social Progress, Virtue, Truth, even God—then they trim or stretch him as required, ripping off a foot or dislocating his neck."<sup>8</sup> It seems that for some critics appreciation of the poet's work was impossible because points of view were polarized by fundamental questions: Was Garneau a great poet or a symbol of Quebec's alienation? Was he a precursor of Albert Camus's "outsider" or a depressive recluse with suicidal tendencies?<sup>9</sup>

Garneau's worth as a writer was not doubted by certain contemporary poets. Robert Charbonneau saw in his poems the "lucid perfection" of a mystic who renounced poetry in order to seek and understand God<sup>10</sup> and Alain Grandbois thought that Garneau's work was "authentic poetry" which defies logic and which is characterized by "perfect simplicity" and "crystalline lucidity."<sup>11</sup> Perhaps the reaction of most readers was best captured by W.E. Collin, who described Garneau in 1949 as "the most difficult of recent poets since in him metaphysical anguish is most acute."<sup>12</sup>

The Garneau legend lost popularity during the early years of the Quiet Revolution,<sup>13</sup> when many critics were inclined to repress theses like the one offered by Jean Le Moyne who argued that the poet had been the victim of a "characteristic French-Canadian anguish" and that he had succumbed to guilt, alienation and self-negation.<sup>14</sup> Interest in Garneau has been encouraged by recent publications such as Jacques Blais's comprehensive *Dossier* (1971, See note 2); a critical edition of his poetry, articles, journal and correspondence, published by Jacques Brault and Benoît Lacroix (1971, Note 1); and studies which propose assessments of the poet's art without overlooking his "scandalous withdrawal."<sup>15</sup> Critical interest has not subsided in the eighties: particularly noteworthy publications are an issue of *Etudes*

*Françaises* (1984-85, Note 13) and translations by Peter Sanger of certain of Garneau's reflections on poetry, writing, painting and music which appeared in *The Antigone Review* (1986, Note 1).

Readers of Garneau who hold differing opinions regarding the value of his contribution to his culture might well agree that many of his most interesting texts are those in which he reflects on the nature of poetic creativity. Henry James argued that "it often happens that a valid artist utters his mystery, flashes upon us for a moment the light by which he works."<sup>16</sup> Readers of French poetry will think immediately of texts which seem to be deliberate reflections on the poet's aesthetic, real or ideal: Baudelaire's *Correspondances*, Apollinaire's *La Jolie Rousse* or Valéry's *Cantique des colonnes* will serve as examples. Such texts are encountered frequently in the work of Garneau, who spent much of his life attempting to understand "the magic domain of poetry." In his writing Garneau articulated his search for poetry; consideration of his work affords a coherent series of views on the relationship between poets and their art. Henry James cautions us to realize that "the first artists, in any line, are doubtless not those whose general ideas about their art are most often on their lips." Those who question the value of Garneau's poetry might also be the first to argue that the quality of his art is diminished by the drama of its creator. However, the clear articulation of the drama of poetic creativity is possibly Garneau's most significant contribution to his culture and to succeeding generations of artists.

One of Quebec's most respected intellectuals, Jacques Ferron, has likened the controversial poet to Arthur Rimbaud, Emile Nelligan and the mythical Orpheus. Like his literary ancestors the Orpheus of the thirties was a poet of great promise who became silent. Ferron contends that Rimbaud, Nelligan and Garneau all stopped writing to confront the underworld of the mind and returned to earth to live out their personal despair, Rimbaud in Abyssinia and the two Quebec poets on the shores of the Saint Lawrence River.<sup>17</sup> Garneau can be compared to Orpheus because he resigned himself to a total and unexplained silence; it could also be argued that he resembled Orpheus because art was a condition of his very existence, and comprehension of art had become a vocation. The reader who confronts a poem must reconstruct the dispersed music of Orpheus, whose lyre has been shattered, in a manner which makes sense in terms of his own critical language.<sup>18</sup> Consideration of his search for the very essence of poetry will help us to appreciate some of that which is unique in the poetic experience of Hector de Saint-Denys Garneau.

The early poems (1925-33) are the work of a precocious and sensitive writer not unlike the narrator of the following undated text:

For my damnation the Devil  
Has let me glimpse the stage  
Through the opening between the curtains.  
Playing with me,  
He lifted the edge of the veil  
Which hides life (*Oeuvres*, 186).

These introspective poems evoke states of mind rather than events and many describe silence and solitude. The reader should not be surprised to discover themes which have an adolescent character: the silent anguish and muted passion of a young man abandoned by the object of his affections;<sup>19</sup> nature as confidante to a troubled soul;<sup>20</sup> and the evocation of empty spaces charged with memories.<sup>21</sup> When Garneau wrote "La Lune" (45) he was fourteen. The four stanzas evoke the rhythm of the seasons, broken by one brief human intervention: "Entwined, mad with desire, two lovers sigh." One gesture in (the Canadian) summer and the rest is splendor and silence. The effacement of man by nature is suggested most effectively in "Neige" (65-6), written by a fifteen-year-old disciple of Verlaine, the poet's "most cherished brother" (692). In a graveyard the snow slowly erases the path, the monuments to humanity and the odor of life as both narrator and reader are also ushered by the wind into the white space beyond the text at the end of the poem:

The snow falls,  
And the wind  
Passes,  
Slow.

As in the work of Verlaine lyricism overtakes syntax and music is the medium which will transform anguish into beauty.<sup>22</sup> If we accept the graveyard as a metaphor for life the tone of this early poem becomes metaphysical. The consistent theme of human impotence in his first poems is more an indication of a turbulent future than a proof of poetic immaturity.

The impotence of the artist himself was also a concern for the young poet. "Les Heures" (48-50) suggests something more than the sudden mood swings of its adolescent author:

My soul drunken with immense happiness  
.....  
Soars so high! . . .

...  
 Suddenly I fall and my sad lyre,  
 Utters a sigh which is long  
 Mournful and langorous at the tips of my poor fingers  
 Powerless and cold.

The lament of a lyre over which the musician has no control anticipates the poet's alienation from his art and the confessions of inadequacy which one encounters in his *Journal* (305-629). This evocation of poetic impotence stands out in dramatic contrast to the young poet's artistic aspirations.

For Garneau sincerity was both an artistic principle and a moral imperative. In an early published text he admired the orator Demosthenes whose "word and heart were one" (236) and at the height of the crisis which followed the withdrawal of his book he would write: "What guides me in fact is the need to be sincere" (536). Several texts are very critical of the insincerity of his time,<sup>23</sup> an age which could compromise the best of intentions: "To be sincere one must know oneself, which requires lengthy reflection. And we do not have time to reflect: life carries us into its turmoil and there is no time for meditation" (234, published when he was nineteen). Consideration of Garneau's ideal of harmony of heart and word, and his fear of compromising this principle, can help us to understand the intensity of his anguish and to anticipate uncompromising idealism and candor regarding questions of creativity.

The young Garneau also admired Demosthenes because the orator's "life and heart were passionately devoted to an idea" (236). The poet aspired to a state of "engagement," or involvement, which has a prominent place in existential philosophies.<sup>24</sup> He described his state of mind when he listened to a sermon in 1930 as "one of those ecstasies which I seek because they allow me to be completely engaged by an idea, a feeling, an impression, something which is not self-centred" (725). His analyses of the work of great artists are predicated upon the importance of achieving a state of "exaltation" which can suggest in French the physical excitement of ecstasy, the intensity of psychic commitment, or a process of glorification. His reflections attest to both the demands and the power of art.

A note in Garneau's *Journal* refers to "The rôle of mystery, of the undefinable in Keats, Proust, Debussy. Mystery which is, in precise terms, pure poetry" (355). He alludes to Debussy's desire to understand "the mystery of exaltation" and to the composer's belief in "the mysterious concordances between nature and the imagination" (356).

A second text, devoted entirely to Debussy, contains the same quotation<sup>25</sup> as well as comments which show the relationship between the poet's exaltation and his metaphysical quest:

The poet reaches his<sup>26</sup> exaltation through the creative act, but what is the source of this exaltation? Is it not his intuition of the mysterious links among things, the immaterial harmony? Thus, in reaching his exaltation he is not seeking his own self but through himself the intuition, since knowledge is impossible, of this mysterious higher region (360).

A major text in which Garneau discussed the state of fine arts in Canada in 1935<sup>27</sup> lends clarity to his expectations: art is "independent of morality," "degraded by being subordinated to moral, national and political utility," "one of the supreme human forms of freedom" and "transcendental"; the function of art is "to seize the secret rapports among things and make the immaterial harmony intelligible"; and a work of art is worthy for "its capacity to harmonize and to realize a spiritual order" (418-9). He then criticizes teachers who do not encourage each young artist "to discover his vision" and who do not weed out those who lack the necessary abilities, "not of the hand but of the soul" (421).<sup>28</sup> These reflections leave us in no doubt regarding Garneau's expectations of the composer, the painter and the poet who aspire to recognition as great artists. They must be intensely committed to their task, be able to tap their intuition and possess a capacity for exaltation, all of which are characteristics essential to an artistic vision which will allow them to create an aesthetic space that has a spiritual dimension. Their experience will be intensely personal but the rewards, both for them and their "spectators," will be metaphysical.

In a text entitled "Surrealism, Art, Aesthetics" Garneau defines the work of art as a space where the "spectator" encounters the "spectacle," where ". . . each has his own way of exerting his presence as well as his freedom. This presence through all creation is the ubiquity of genius, which is present as the image of God" (432). In recognizing the rôle of the "spectator" who brings his own interpretative capacities to a work of art Garneau anticipates French critics such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Blanchot.<sup>29</sup> His view that the activity of interpretation can allow one to sense a divine presence also confirms that this modern mystic was embarked on an uncompromising quest for artistic purity.

The term *génie* was once used to circumscribe destiny or to describe a supernatural ability invested in man by the gods, whereas in modern usage the term refers to an exceptional ability or even to those charac-

teristics which particularize an individual. Both former and modern uses of the term are implicit in Garneau's ideal of spiritual communication, which is the objective of the artist who seeks to capture the genius of life, its intimate and hidden relationships and meanings which, when they are assumed through creativity and reinterpretation, bring both the artist and the spectator closer to God. The "genius" of an artist depends upon the ability to intuit the "genius" of people and things: "The vision of the artist is a rapport between him and the particular landscape with all its interior possibilities . . . a personal accent, a personal contribution which characterizes the artist" (440-1). Garneau pays tribute in his *Journal* to the communicative genius of artists whose commitment, intuition and capacity for exaltation have allowed them to play the rôle of clairvoyant mediator between their subject and their spectators.

Renoir pleases Garneau more than does Cézanne because he "is 'with' what he loves: he has a great talent for possession, for communication with nature; he moves within the form of beings" (444). Elsewhere Garneau quotes an anonymous painter who described his art as " 'expressing in things their desire to speak' " (570). He admires Katherine Mansfield who "searches tirelessly for love in everything . . . looks for the inner rhythm which is the source of beauty," whose objective is "to express, grasp, the mysterious concordance between nature and the imagination" (355-6). On the other hand, he criticizes Raymond Bernard's 1934 film adaptation of *Les Misérables* because it presents "mannequins" rather than people (375); he blames "disastrous theories of art for art's sake" for divorcing art from life (241); and he confesses his own powerlessness, his "inability to reach for long periods life and the beauty of things" (360). He argued that the "genius" of artists who have reached this high objective is reflected by their capacity to have us feel the particular "genius," or character, of their work, and supported this view with references to great musicians. Bach captured "the sense of mystic love," Beethoven makes us feel a "sense of certain victory" and we admire the "suave serenity" of Mozart (329).

This idealized form of communication, which should occur both in and through art, is a corollary of Garneau's quest for sincerity and is much more than a theme reserved for adolescent poetry. It is true that Garneau laments, as late as 1937, a society where "so many dialogues die before they are finished and one voice continues to intone in the deepening absence" (287). However, from his mystical perspective the experience of art can afford spiritual as well as social fulfilment, if the artist seeks to "purify the eye which observes . . . which does not stop at

carnal form but penetrates to the source of salvation," and if he undertakes "the passionate search for the soul of others, the life of others, the joyous being in others which can be saved" (400). Just as Garneau the critic felt uplifted by "the divine Mozart" (355), by "pantheistic<sup>30</sup> Proust" who seeks "the immaterial being" masked by reality (354), or by "the essence of joy" in Renoir (433), so he believed that any listener, reader or observer of art who encounters a work of genius can enter a "spiritual relationship" with "the spectacle of art," become the mediator between the spectacle and the artist's vision and thereby reaffirm "the dignity of his own perfection" (441).<sup>31</sup>

The poet who aspired to spiritual communication in and through art was also haunted by the spectre of alienation. He was driven by the need "to capture reality, to possess it in another realm, more perfectly, eternally" and realized, at least by 1936, that the creation of a spiritual space through art would compromise his relationships with others, that "art depends on choices which are never or rarely compatible with life with another person" (442). Thus he confirmed his "Duty to Withdraw" which had been the subject of an early text (742-3).

The demands of creativity can alienate the poet from himself as well as from others. Maurice Blanchot explains that "the poet only exists poetically" and that

when he writes the artist enters the affirmation of his own solitude where fascination lurks. He gives in to the danger of the absence of time, to the reign of the eternal beginning. He changes from "I" to "he."<sup>32</sup>

Garneau shows his awareness and fear of this phenomenon when he describes the artist's search for his own genius, "his uniqueness towards which all his human activity will be directed." He explains that the commitment will demand of the artist "a perfection foreign to his destiny" and that his anguish will be the measure of his capacity for abnegation: "Hence the inner conflict of the artist who deserts himself to enter the centre of his work, a character, an impression" (385). Garneau's appreciation of Debussy contains a lucid description of the state of mind of the artist who has known "inspiration, exaltation . . . poetry," has been "dispossessed" after the event and "only retains the sensation of an incomparable beatitude and unbearable nostalgia" (360).<sup>33</sup> Everyday life is painful for the artist whose creative powers have allowed him to glimpse the spiritual realm. Garneau explains that the artist is a person who has attempted to "de-personalize" God but has found himself "de-personalized" by the exalting act of creation (355-6), lives in a state of alienation and "can only wait for the return of



grace" (360). It is thus not surprising that the theme of anticipation (*Pattente*) is prominent in his writing.

Suspended between condemnation and grace, man awaits a resolution of the contradictions of existence. This Jansenist outlook informed Garneau's view of Baudelaire, the father of modern French poetry, as a person "without hope. But he cannot despair. He waits" (740).<sup>34</sup> The anticipation of grace is a recurrent theme in his *Journal*: "Can God refuse this constant attention, this waiting? It seems to me that I am worthy for that alone" (407).<sup>35</sup> Numerous poems celebrate anticipation of the consummation of an absolute experience, whether it be love, death or a union with God, and grace seems to be both imminent and inaccessible: "And my soul is troubled as in a church / Where one senses that God is about to speak" (93-4).<sup>36</sup> The theme of anticipation receives its fullest expression in "Waiting for Horror": linked by the lament "J'attends," a series of highly descriptive and somewhat musical invocations convey a desperate desire to experience passion, both as a form of extreme suffering and as an intense affective state. The rhythm is agitated to suggest anticipation, whereas it is serene for the evocation of visions which have allowed the narrator to assume his suffering in poetic terms. The poem expresses a need for psychic involvement, for self-actualization and for a dramatic change which would render the narrator capable of exaltation and able to divine metaphysical realities:

I await the immense fever of my mind which yearns for life  
And the growing fire which will consume my waiting heart,

. . .  
I await the vision, the fever, the madness,  
When my haggard eye will seize the night,

. . .  
I am waiting for life! (100)

The unpublished poems from the period 1930-35 reflect the young artist's quest for poetic exaltation. "Sinking" ("Sombrier," 1930) conveys the intensely pleasurable fascination experienced by the poet who contemplates, in the manner of Baudelaire, death and the "bottomless chasms" (112-3). "Impression of Autumn" (1930), also reminiscent of Baudelaire, evokes the pervasive presence of death ("The immense silent adieu of beings and things") and the exhilarating terror experienced by the living who approach the edge of the abyss (113). These poems are an invitation to experience and a celebration of anticipation. "The Silence of Empty Houses" (1931) is interesting both for its treatment of silence and for the poetic maturity of its young author.

Silence is celebrated, not presented as a cause or a symptom of alienation. Deeper than the silence of death, the quiet of empty houses suggests both eternity and the spiritual space of art. The empty house becomes a "crystallized present" suspended forever between "the future and the past . . . two closed doors" (115) just as, in the words of Maurice Blanchot, the work of art is "forever original and a continual beginning," hinting at both an inspiration from the past and "the inaccessible truth of the future."<sup>37</sup> The reader enters a poem as if the artistic space were that of an empty house, aware of experience which is imminent but not visible and anxious to call up his intuition in order to hear the "gaping silence" (116). The space is Orphic, silent but demanding meaning, dispersed yet begging for reconstruction, where the newly arrived spectator is "suspended . . . between memory / And desire" ("Towards the Golden Past," 1931, 116). The reader intends to reconstruct the past in the image of his own experience, but movement "towards the past" is projected into the future, where he will articulate meanings which are new yet significant, and as personal as they are eternal. This prospect is exhilarating, for the reader anticipates not only the apprehension of beauty but also the promise of salvation.

Garneau completed "O Poésie enfin trouvée" ("I Have Finally Discovered Poetry") in 1931, at the age of nineteen. The reader is struck by images of suffering and martyrdom (the route to discovery) and the poem is a tribute to Poetry, which is exalting and redemptive. Poetry is "a light which changes everything," which shines through the "ragged wound" caused by "all the open and bleeding scars." The poet is a Christ figure whom Poetry will lead to Beauty and to God. Unlike many of the earlier poems which simply described the pathetic experience of an alienated young man, this work confirms the realization that a great poem consecrates the experience of alienation, that art is a new reality, an experience in itself.

The word *déchirure* appears three times in the poem and suggests a lacerated wound (experience) as well as a torn surface (the poem itself, which is occasioned by a violent change of perspective, and promises discovery and illumination). Garneau anticipated by more than twenty years Maurice Blanchot, who also called upon the notion of *déchirure* to suggest the space of the literary work bordered, but not limited, by contrary moods and themes. In his words the work of art is "an exalting alliance of opposites' . . . the intimate and violent tension of contrary movements which are never reconciled and never at peace, as long as the work is a work." Blanchot describes the work as *une intimité déchirée*, explains that the author and the reader search for

each other in the literary space or *déchirure*, and envisages their dialogue as *l'unité déchirée*, a dispersed union which demands reconstruction through interpretation.<sup>38</sup> Art requires tensions, just as it gives new form and meaning to the tensions and contradictions of experience. These tensions allow the physical work to project towards the inquiring reader an immaterial space (*la déchirure*) through which a light may shine. The poet who has discovered poetry now realizes that the light which glows in our darkness shows the way towards a new perception of experience: "And finally I see clearly." For Garneau the light is also a reminder of God's imminent presence and in the final stanza Poetry is described as a "lady of flesh" who has become an angel (119). This metaphor allows us to anticipate a new rôle for the poet. He is an alchemist who transforms words into Symbols, prefers evocations to descriptions, seeks to replace simple prosody by incantation and views his art as a route to spiritual experience.

Poetry must be more than the documentation of experience. As art it is change and the agent of change. "The Sixteenth Century" (1933) evokes the replacement of religious ritual by natural and affective experience, as the aurora borealis purges the poet of the "holy terrors" experienced in cathedrals (120). "Melody has Frightened away the Caesura" (undated) is a playful text which advocates the triumph of intensive poetic experience over the constraints of form and tradition. Melody pushes the caesura off the end of the poetic line, just as the wind once pushed ships off the flat earth. This poem of adventure also throws syntax to the four winds and the final dismembered lines are perhaps a coherent evocation of our human disarray (134-5).<sup>39</sup> A poem on the theme of dismemberment presents the adventuresome character and analytical activity of the poet, whose ultimate objective is metaphysical: "We will detach our limbs and put them in a row and do an inventory / To find out what is missing . . ." (177). "Silence" (1935) is an evocation of the mysterious process whereby words become Symbols, and reminds us not only of the poet's rôle but also of his power. The silence of life which alienated the powerless young man is now the very source of creativity, as the poet no longer utters "temporal, transitory words" but fashions "words outside of time / Which represent time forever." This poem conveys the confidence and satisfaction of the artist who has discovered that symbols are keys to the spiritual life:

My mouth is closed like a chest  
 On things hidden in my very soul  
 Which keeps them and possesses them

In secret  
 In some other place (156)

Sure of his art, the poet creates an immaterial space which can be the meeting-place of souls.

By 1935 Garneau had discovered and articulated the uniqueness and the power of poetry.<sup>40</sup> *Regards et jeux dans l'espace*, the volume of poems published and withdrawn in 1937, attests to his ability to put his insights into practice. The fact that these poems have afforded a valid aesthetic experience for many readers and critics for close to two generations is now a matter of record. Several of them seem to illuminate in particular the exaltation of their creator.

"Restless" (9) is the first poem in the volume and can be read as a statement of intention and an invitation to adventure. The poet's "worst discomfort" is an armchair, a metaphor for passivity. He prefers a life of change and innovation as he bounds from rock to rock over a raging stream, in search of "the imponderable equilibrium." Like a tightrope artist, the poet cannot work without risk. He is both powerful and vulnerable as he manipulates opposing forces in order to circumscribe a new artistic space. Garneau had read Pascal and there is something very Pascalian about the poet's view of himself as a creature of contradictions seeking the equilibrium of grace through art.<sup>41</sup>

"Le Jeu" (10-11) celebrates the poet as a child and creativity as a game. In Garneau's work the child becomes a metaphor for the artist, a "child who has refused to die" (170-1). Awakened to the power of words, Garneau was "like a child seated and listening to perfect tales" (289) and he admired a poem by Verlaine which captured the "marvellous astonishment of a child" (402). Painters who project "mass without spirit" were criticized as "sad children . . . who do not know how to play" (415) and Garneau was impressed above all by "the extraordinary rôle of the metaphysical in the life of the child" (411). The child's intuitive capacity for spirituality makes him a model for the artist, provided that both are free.

Freedom is a recurring concern in Garneau's *Journal*. He notes that freedom is "wonderful" and "rare" and that it attests to "the highest nobility of man and beyond . . . The poet, the artist offer us the spectacle of freedom." Since they are "gifted and ascetic," they offer us their work as an "assumption" of freedom. Without freedom there cannot be choice, which is "the basis of art . . . It is through the principle of choice that art becomes poetry" (430-2). Elsewhere he points to the rôle of freedom in the compositions of Debussy (415) and

in the paintings of Renoir (434). His assessment of the place of freedom in the poetry of Baudelaire is of particular interest. He believed that in Baudelaire's work freedom of choice triumphs over fate and that the poet has affirmed "the spiritual act of choosing, his very will and his capacity for choice, his identity as a free being. *Uniqueness*."<sup>42</sup> Freedom is essential to the "assumption" of an artist's genius, and the work "is more or less pure according to whether it obeys principles of selection more or less faithful to the objective of the art" (430). In other words the purest art can seem like child's play.

"Le Jeu" begins with a warning:

Don't bother me I am deeply occupied  
 A child is busy building a village  
 It's a city, a country  
 And who knows soon it could be a universe.  
 He's playing

The poet-child is resolutely secluded in happy alienation, jealous of his solitude, busy with profound child's play, activity which is vertical as well as horizontal, cerebral and physical, in a space which is spiritual as well as concrete. The artist is a child—a free, spiritual and powerful being. In fact his power seems to be unlimited. He undergoes a process of metamorphosis and dispossession which is complete when "I" has become "he."<sup>43</sup> Subsequent stanzas reveal the poet-child's spontaneity and freedom as he explores the infinite possibilities of language, moves with grace and emits "the clear burst of laughter / We thought was lost." Garneau believed in the "metaphysical value" of laughter (681) and admired the comic artist who is "an anarchist, a rebel, a disrespectful person" (546),<sup>44</sup> just as the poet-child of "Le Jeu" "does not have two sous worth of respect for the established order." As he plays with his "toybox full of words" we are invited to reflect on the artist's vulnerability ("do not step into the room / . . . if you do not wish to crush the most cherished invisible flower"); the contradictory nature of this "mischievous pleasure" which appears arbitrary despite its serious implications; the artist's ability to make us question our world ("He turns the room upside-down"); his apparent facility ("He arranges words for you as if they were simple songs"); the ability to fuse comedy with tragedy and his absurdist vision of political reality. Garneau's evocation of the game of creativity is also a song of exaltation.

"Spectacle de la danse" (12-13) equates creativity with dance and opens with a lament for urban "children" deprived of space, without which creativity is impossible. The poet conquers the world with his vision and then creates new rhythms, harmonies and tensions which

help us to enter a new artistic space: "The dance is a second measure and a second departure / After the initial victory / Of the eye." The activity engages the artist who is borne along by the dance, "paraphrase of vision," and it promises spiritual rewards: "Marriage of the eye with the heavens / Meeting infinities collision / Of marvels."

Two other poems convey in particular the excitement of the artist who has discovered the game and the dance of creativity. "Autrefois" (26-7) compares two poetic techniques:

Formerly I wrote poems  
Which contained the whole ray of light  
From the centre to the periphery and beyond  
As if there was no periphery but only the centre  
And as if I were the sun . . .

Earlier poems were descriptive and egocentric, commentaries on his own "life space" by a writer too sure of his powers of observation and composition. The new poet creates "word spaces" which generate their own internal life: "one learns that the earth is not flat / But a sphere whose centre is not in the middle / But in the centre . . ." He is fascinated by the new art which is autonomous and spiritual, but the resolution to develop promising new techniques is not made without anxiety:

I must become subtle so that, by dividing to infinity the tiny distance  
Between the bow and the string,  
I may create through ingeniousness a space similar to the Beyond  
And find within its confines sustenance  
For life and art.

"Accompagnement," the final poem of the published volume (34), represents the form of expression to which Garneau aspired and is perhaps the most successful evocation of the poet's own experience. "I walk beside a joy / A joy which is not mine / A joy which is mine but which I cannot grasp / . . ." The young man recounted his powerlessness and effacement by the silence of his country and the cosmos. The poet evokes his subtle and everchanging relationship with "joy," with a state of grace which is imminent but out of his grasp. Poetry is a route to grace and to God, and it gives form to the alienation, dismemberment and loss which are experienced in life: "I hear my footsteps joyous beside me / But I cannot change places on the sidewalk . . ." Albert Camus believed that "he who creates lives twice," and Garneau's narrator understands the link between the techniques of art and the quest for spiritual renewal. This urban and modern persona

contrive(s) secret exchanges  
 By means of every kind of operation and alchemy...balancing acts  
 So that one day, transposed,  
 I may be borne by the dance of those joyous footsteps...of a stranger  
 who departs by another street.

However, the act of writing brings both the promise of union with the Ideal and the threat of alienation in a new form.

Despite the fact that "Te voilà verbe" (158-9) was probably written in 1935, a year of triumph for Garneau<sup>45</sup>, the poem conveys both his lucid appreciation of the dynamics of creativity and his awareness of the alienation which can result. The artist is surprised by the sudden emergence of a poem ("There you are facing my being a poem facing me"), a creation of his most intimate being which has all the autonomy of an adversary ("A projection beyond me of my ulterior consciousness / A son of the type I had not expected / Unrecognizable being, enemy brother"). The poet who has overcome his passivity and given of his very being to the demands of art is subsequently thrown by his own creation into a new state of impotence because the poem calls out for meaning as if it had been created by someone else. Helpless and alienated, the author is a victim:

And the empty poem surrounds me  
 Thirsting from its terrible need for life,  
 It encircles me with a deadly tentacle,  
 Each word a sucking mouth, a bloodsucker  
 Pressing against me  
 Swelling from my blood.

The creative experience is both exhilarating and exhausting and the creator nourishes, from his most intimate confrontations with life, the tensions, hesitations and contradictions which are the very life of his work.

The final line of "Te voilà verbe" leaves no doubt regarding the price which can be paid by the artist who has discovered poetry: "I will nourish these equilibria with the marrow of my bones." This poem supports Maurice Blanchot's view that "the work of art does not refer to someone who might have been its creator." Furthermore, "the creator has no power over his work . . . he is dispossessed by the work just as he is, through the work, dispossessed of himself."<sup>46</sup> The price of exaltation can be alienation, from oneself as well as from others.

Garneau read reviews of his published volume "like a pursued criminal" (496). Convinced that he had acted in bad faith, he writes in

his *Journal* of "imposture" and of a "failed vocation." There are references to his having failed God and himself and he documents his painful awareness of "the need to love" and "the need to be sincere" (536). In late 1937 he documented the search for grace through poetry and the acceptance of his own defeat, in a poem which would be meaningful to most poets: "A poem murmured all day long and did not come." The frustrated idealist dreams of creating pure poetry: "Strident silence like a single note which annihilates the entire world / the key of light missing from the chest containing every treasure" (166-7). At about the same time he made what seems to be a final judgment of his poetry: "I had a certain sensitivity for beauty which I would have liked to seize and retain . . ." <sup>47</sup> The joy of creativity was all too elusive, and the former poet regrets the pride which caused him to write "dishonest compromises" and "the most dubious of incantations" (544). In his *Journal* he has recorded a project for a book concerning "an artist (who) believes he is a poet . . . But as his work becomes a reality, he perishes. Everything which is real kills him, for he is nonexistent." (490) While it may be true that Garneau was a victim of his uncompromising idealism it is also true that his analysis of the dynamics of poetic creativity was a significant contribution to the cultural and intellectual life of his country.

## NOTES

1. Hector de Saint-Denis Garneau, *Oeuvres*, ed. Jacques Brault and Benoit Lacroix (Montréal: Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1971), 992. Peter Sanger, trans., "Saint-Denis Garneau on Poetry, Writing, Painting and Music," *The Antigonish Review*, 64, Winter 1986, 87. Translations are my own unless indicated otherwise. Translations of Garneau's poetry have not been consulted, and similarities with existing translations are coincidental. John Glassco has translated *The Journal of Saint-Denis Garneau* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1962) and *The Complete Poems of Saint-Denis Garneau* (Ottawa: Oberon, 1975). Individual poems have been translated in various publications by F. R. Scott, George Ross Roy and Fred Cogswell. See also Sanger.
2. *Dossiers de documentation sur la littérature canadienne-française: Hector de Saint-Denis Garneau*, ed. Jacques Blais (Montréal: Fides, 1971), 1.
3. His grandfather was the poet, Alfred Garneau, and his great-grandfather, François-Xavier Garneau, was one of French Canada's great historians.
4. Further references to the *Oeuvres* will be cited in the text.
5. Jean Le Moyne, "Saint-Denis Garneau's Testimony to his Times," trans. Philip Stratford, *Canadian Literature*, 28, Spring 1966, 39.
6. See Marcel Dugas, "Saint-Denis Garneau," *Approches* (Québec: Editions du Chien d'Or, 1942); extract reprinted in *Dossiers*, 6. Representative critical judgments of Garneau's work have been included in the *Dossiers*.
7. Preface to Frère Lévis Fortier, *Le Message poétique de Saint-Denis Garneau* (Ottawa: Université d'Ottawa, 1954); quoted in *Dossiers*, 47.



8. Jean Paulhan, *Petite Préface à toute critique* in *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Cercle du Livre Précieux, 1966), II, 278. The critic as terrorist is the principal theme of Paulhan's *Les Fleurs de Tarbes, ou la terreur dans les lettres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1941).
9. See *Dossiers*.
10. Robert Charbonneau, "De Saint-Denys Garneau," *La Nouvelle Relève*, III, 9, December 1944, 524; *Dossiers*, 5.
11. Alain Grandbois, "Saint-Denys Garneau," *Notre Temps*, II, 31, May 17, 1947, 3; *Dossiers*, 13-14.
12. W. E. Collin, "The Literary Renaissance of 1934 in French Canada," *Here and Now*, vol. 2, no. 4, 1949, 8.
13. See Robert Melançon, "Présentation," *Relire Saint-Denys Garneau, Etudes Françaises*, vol. 20, no. 3, Winter 1984-85, 5-6.
14. See Le Moyne, 45, 31-46.
15. A good example is Jean-Louis Major's assessment of Garneau's poetry as an "utopian activity" which is "marked . . . by models of an ideal practice of culture and creativity," an approach which has influenced this article ("Saint-Denys Garneau et la poésie," *Etudes Françaises*, vol. 8, no. 2, May 1972, 176-94).
16. Henry James, "Guy de Maupassant," *Fortnightly Review*, March, 1888. Reprinted in *The House of Fiction* (Hart-Davis, 1957), 139, quoted by Robert Gibson, ed., *Modern French Poets on Poetry* (Cambridge UP, 1961), 3.
17. Jacques Ferron, *Le Ciel de Québec* (Montréal: Editions du Jour, "Les Romanciers du jour," no. 51, 1969); *Dossiers*, 41-2.
18. This analogy is proposed by Maurice Blanchot, *L'Espace littéraire* (Paris: Gallimard, "Idées," no. 155).
19. Examples are "Cruelle" (39-40); "Lucille" (41); "Je t'adore" (47-7); "Partie" (58-9).
20. Examples are "Est-ce un rêve" (50-1); "Nature" (52-3); "Rêve gris" (56); "Désespoir" (57-8); "Maison fermée" (22-3); "Le Silence des maison vides" (115-6).
21. Examples are "La Vieille Roue du moulin" (43-4); "La Maison triste" (62-3); "L'Heure du souvenir" (87). See also the sketch of a short story which would have featured an elderly lady who has withdrawn into a decaying house. (376-80)
22. The poem is reminiscent of Verlaine's "Colloque sentimental." For an excellent appreciation of the importance of music to Garneau see Dujka Smoje, "Saint-Denys Garneau: écrits sur la musique," *Etudes Françaises*, vol. 20, no. 3, Winter 1984-5, 65-96.
23. See "La Vie moderne" (231-5). "Noël-Impressions" (237-9), "Société" (333-4), "Mercredi, 17 avril 1935" (350-2).
24. On one occasion he takes issue with Robert Charbonneau who, according to Garneau, approaches the work of Gabriel Marcel from "precisely the wrong point of view"; Garneau argues that intuition, rather than logic, allowed Marcel to approach metaphysical realities. (569-70)
25. The source is not documented, either by Garneau or by the editors of the critical edition. Readers might also be reminded of Baudelaire's theory of correspondences.
26. I have retained the possessive adjective in order to stress the personal character of the experience.
27. "A propos des beaux-arts," 412-25.
28. He observes later that those who are concerned with the survival of the French-Canadian people should stress the value of teaching that helps to develop "the inner life" (422). In a text entitled "Notes on nationalism" he argues that "the human problem far surpasses the national problem" (550-4). He argues elsewhere that patriotism can be a motive, but not a goal (581). He also criticizes art teachers who stress "académisme" and "décoration" (412-3). See also pp. 418-21.
29. See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que la littérature ?* (Paris: Gallimard, "Idées," no. 58, 1948) and Blanchot's *L'Espace Littéraire*. There are a number of parallels between Garneau's views and Blanchot's critical stance.
30. Pantheism attracted Garneau's attention more than once. See pp. 325, 354-5.
31. In view of the complexity of this text I reproduce it here: "Car la vision qui réalise le rapport spirituel entre le spectacle et le spectateur nous offre le spectateur comme lieu de ce rapport. Et la valeur du spectacle, indéfinie en soi, nous apparaît réalisée, nombrée en tant que le spectacle atteint à la dignité de perfection du spectateur." Note that the spectator functions as a *lieu*, a term which underscores Garneau's view that the work of art is a space where interpretative encounters can occur.

32. *L'Espace Littéraire*, 302, 331. Blanchot cites Kafka's "enchanted delight" on realizing that "he entered literature when he substituted 'He' for 'I.'" (321). One is reminded of Rimbaud's declaration, "I is another."
33. Blanchot draws upon Mallarmé for an analysis of "the expressive disappearance of the poet," a characteristic of the work of art. (294 and *passim*.)
34. "All of Baudelaire can be reduced to two poles: mysticism and blasphemy." (382)
35. See also, for example, pp. 275, 341, 400, and 745-6. He also showed interest in Pascal's wager and conversion. (966)
36. See also "Attente" (60); "Longue attente" (61-2); "Adieu" (83-4); "Regret" (85) and "Délire" (78-9).
37. *L'Espace Littéraire*, 305.
38. *L'Espace Littéraire*, 300-1. Blanchot quoted René Char. It is interesting to note his use of the word "exalting."
39. The editors note (1091) that this poem is "unfinished." Nevertheless, the form and theme of the text we have are in harmony with each other. One is reminded of Verlaine's exhortation, "Take Eloquence and wring its neck!"
40. On March 22, 1935 he wrote in his *Journal*: "I am escaping facile lyricism, which flows, carries you away; I am freeing myself from words." (347)
41. The published version bears the title "C'est là, sans appui" but the title "Restless" appeared in Garneau's *Journal*. (1050) It is reminiscent of his first known poem, "Le Pavyon de la France," written in 1925: "we fall asleep, to the sounds of our trumpets and drums, like in the little towns of France." (37) The notion of art as a harmony of opposites is particularly well conveyed by certain of the unpublished poems such as "Tous et chacun" (157), "Identité" (165) and "Monde irrémédiablement désert" (178). In his *Journal* he comments on the rôle of equilibrium in the visual arts. (344, 423)
42. Garneau underlined. In this analysis he anticipates Jean-Paul Sartre's *Baudelaire*, an existentialist biography and criticism.
43. See Note 32. A similar process occurs in "Je suis un enfant perdu" (132-3).
44. The text is devoted to Charlie Chaplin, whom Garneau admired for his "perfection" (546-8). Chaplin is also discussed on other occasions.
45. Various statements attest to this triumph. See pp. 289-91, 346, 399.
46. *L'Espace Littéraire*, 297, 306.
47. This statement is reminiscent of "Accompagnement," the final poem in his published volume.