



IN GEVEB A JOURNAL OF YIDDISH STUDIES

ווינטער פֿאַרנאַכט • **Soir d'hiver**

by **Émile Nelligan**, translation by Sebastian Schulman

In geveb: A Journal of Yiddish Studies (July 2022)

For the online version of this article:

[<https://ingeveb.org/texts-and-translations/soir-dhiver>]

ווינטער פֿאַרנאַכט
Soir d’hiver

Émile Nelligan
translated by Sebastian Schulman

Introduction: There is an old trope that Canadian and Québécois society is divided between “two solitudes,” that life here is defined by an unbridgeable cultural divide between the country’s English and French-speaking populations. While pundits and politicians may debate the extent to which this characterization still holds true in general, in a recent essay francophone historian Pierre Anctil makes a convincing argument that this linguistic divide is still a defining feature of the field of Canadian Jewish Studies.¹ In his pointed but good-natured critique, Anctil details how anglophone scholars in the field have overlooked French-language scholarship and primary sources, built a historiography overly reliant on certain out-of-date monographs, and constructed analyses that are often based on ahistorical notions about French-Canadian history and its purportedly inherent anti-Semitism. In part as a creative response to Anctil’s latest *cri de coeur*, I offer here a translation of an iconic Québécois text into Yiddish for the first time, namely Émile Nelligan’s “*Soir d’hiver*” (Winter Evening).

This present translation project can be further situated within a history of cultural and political initiatives created over the last several decades that have sought to facilitate exchange, connection, and rapprochement between the historically Catholic francophone population of Québec and the province’s Jews. This includes organizations dating back to the late 1940s, such as *Le Cercle juif de la langue française*, a project of the now defunct Canadian Jewish Congress; the *Institut québécois sur la culture juive* and *Dialogue St-Urbain*, two organizations Anctil himself was involved with in the late 1980s and early 1990s; and the more recent Friends of Hutchison Street/*Les Amis de la rue Hutchison*, a project that began in 2011 to promote understanding between francophones and Hasidim in their shared Montreal neighbourhood of Outremont. My translation also harkens back to Goldie Morgentaler’s 1992 translation of Michel

¹ Pierre Anctil, “Which Canada Are We Talking About? An English-Language Polemic about French in Canadian Jewish History” in *No Better Home?: Jews, Canada, and the Sense of Belonging*, ed. David Koffman (University of Toronto Press, 2021), 284-296.

Tremblay's *Les Belles-soeurs*, a classic play depicting Québécois working class life and language that was staged as *Di shvigerins* by Montreal's Dora Wasserman Yiddish Theatre in that same year.

Émile Nelligan (1879-1941) has achieved the status of a national poet in Québec, his name gracing the sides of school buildings, government institutions, and [a major literary prize](#). His work, composed entirely during a short three-year period in his late teens, has drawn comparisons to Arthur Rimbaud for its youthful urgency, intensity, and lyricism. Nelligan's career was cut short by a diagnosis of schizophrenia at the age of 20 and decades of subsequent institutionalization, a fact that has spurred critics and scholars to read national and societal traumas into his biography and body of work. The twin afflictions of madness and genius, these readings seem to suggest, could have been caused by the presumed incompatibility of Nelligan's linguistic parentage (an abusive anglophone father and a doting francophone mother); the poet's inability to reconcile Catholic Québec's supposedly universal misogyny and anti-Semitism—some of which appears in his work itself—with his wider humanitarian values; and, in more recent interpretations, by his status as an allegedly queer writer, living closeted in a deeply conservative society. Despite, or perhaps because of these many possible contradictions and imaginative readings as well as the lushness of his verse, Nelligan's work remains widely read, studied, translated, sung, staged, and debated in Québec today.

Written in 1889 and first published in 1902, "*Soir d'hiver*" is one of Nelligan's most beloved texts, not only because it so clearly evokes the icy features of Québec's wintry climate, but also the mixed feelings of both melancholy and vigour that this weather can inspire. It was set to music by Claude Léveillée in 1965 and sung by the famed Québécoise diva Monique Leyrac. The present translation draws inspiration from the work of Canadian Yiddishist activist H.M. Caiserman (1884-1950). As Anctil and scholar/writer/translator Chantal Ringuet have uncovered, Caiserman saw the development of French-Canadian literature in the early twentieth century, with its resistance to assimilation into English, as a model for the survival of Yiddish culture in Canada. Caiserman is known to have translated several of Nelligan's literary contemporaries, but never published this work.² In a small way, this translation also complements the growing body of Yiddish literature now available in Québécois French as translated by Anctil, Ringuet, and others.

In my translation, an attempt has been made to retain much of the rhyme and rhythm of the original and to choose, in a few small instances, Yiddish dialectal forms that nod to Québécois French's non-standard status. The attentive reader will notice that many of the images in the original French have been reshaped or ellided as I attempted to

² Anctil, Pierre, "H.-M. Caiserman et l'École littéraire de Montréal. Vers une exploration en yiddish du Canada français." *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française*, 66(1), 65–83. <https://www.erudit.org/en/journals/haf/1900-v1-n1-haf01051/1021082ar.pdf>; Chantal Ringuet, "Translingual migrations : From monolingualism to "contrapuntual translation": Two Yiddish Case Studies (paper presented at The Association for Jewish Studies Conference, San Diego, California, December 18-20, 2016).

recreate Nelligan's form and prosody. At the same time, readers of Yiddish poetry may recognize an echo of the Symbolist poets of *Di yunge*, such as Mani Leyb and Moyshe-Leyb Halpern, whose style also influenced my translation choices. By bringing this text into Yiddish, I hope to underscore the necessity for more comparative, linguistically rich scholarship and to encourage Yiddish speakers and others invested in Canadian Jewish Studies to connect more fully with the work of francophone Quebeckers.

Soir d'hiver

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
À 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
À tout l'ennui que j'ai, que j'ai !...

ווינטער פֿאַרנאַכט

אוי ווי ס'האַט געשנייעט דער שניי!
מיין פֿענצטער אַ גאַרטן פֿון פֿראַסט
אוי ווי ס'האַט געשנייעט דער שניי!
ס'פֿלאַקערט דאָס לעבן פשוט און פֿראַסט
אַזוי ווי ס'פֿיניקט מיך דער וויי

אַלע אַזערעס— אייז
מיר איז שוואַרץ, ווי איך זאָל נישט גיין
און דאָס האָפֿן— אַ גרייז
איך בין דער צפֿון אַליין
ווי ס'טריפֿט הימלגאַלד טראַפֿנווייז

וויינט זשע, איר פֿייגל פֿון פֿעווראַל
פֿון אונדזערע קאַלטע צייטן
וויינט זשע, איר פֿייגל פֿון פֿעווראַל
באַוויינט די רויזן די ווייטע
וואָס הענגען אין שניין פֿון אַ שטראַל

אוי ווי ס'האַט געשנייעט דער שניי!
מיין פֿענצטער אַ גאַרטן פֿון פֿראַסט
אוי ווי ס'האַט געשנייעט דער שניי!
ס'פֿלאַקערט דאָס לעבן פשוט און פֿראַסט
אַזוי ווי ס'נאַגט אין מיר דער וויי!