Conclusion and Speculations

Theory is a sign of ignorance. It becomes important when we are no longer sure what we are doing. We are passing through a time when all the "paradigms" of fiction are called into question and in consequence we begin to see the development of a poetics of fiction. Preferably the theory should be implicit in the novel, the poetics part of the poem.

Ronald Sukenick

At the end of his exhaustive examination of the *mise en abyme*, one of the major techniques of literary narcissism, Lucien Dallenbach is forced to concede that the "textes" of some contemporary French writers constitute a distinct rupture with what he calls "la pensée représentative," or what has been referred to here as (process and product) mimesis. But to reason from this rupture to an assertion that "the novel is dead" would be faulty logic. While such a statement is conveniently dismissive, it is inaccurate. That the novel has changed is undeniable, but then again, it never was static; no art form ever is. The self-reflective metafiction of today is not the product of a break or an eclipse in any novelistic tradition. It is rather a continuation of an already existing narcissistic trend in the novel as it began parodically in *Don Quijote* and was handed on, through eighteenth-century critical self-awareness to nineteenth-century self-mirroring. Within Romanticism lie the seeds of the challenge to the almost contemporaneous concept of novelistic "realism." Early in this century Virginia Woolf, Proust, Unamuno, and others began reminding their readers that, as Aristotle too had suggested, mimesis includes diegesis.

1 *Le Recit spéculaire* (Paris: Seuil, 1977), pp.205-206: "Or, éclairés par la logique proper de leur travail et l'avancée théorique qui s'est opérée partout entre 1960 et 1970, certains nouveaux romanciers ont pris conscience qu'ils ne quitteraient pas le terrain du réalisme tant qu'ils ne souscriraient pas à une pratique de l'écriture conçue comme expérience radicale du langage. Cette conviction portait à conséquence: faire sienne la notion d'écriture ainsi que celles, tout aussi fondamentales, de texte et de production, n'était-ce pas congédier, du même coup, l'ancienne mise en abyme fictionnelle?"
Although the roots of modern metafiction are obviously in such a realization, the primary distinction between the self-consciousness of the novels of Gide or of Huxley, and the modern auto-awareness of the novels of Fowles or of Ricardou, lies in the newly expanded scope of the "vital" mimetic contact between "art" and "life." In the earlier texts, the main interest is in the writing process and its product. The focus today broadens to include a parallel process of equal importance to the "concretization" of the text— that of reading. This equating of the two acts has been a recurring point in the analyses of metafiction in this study. This is so because it is this fact that sets modern metafiction apart from previous novelistic self-consciousness. In overtly or covertly baring its fictional and linguistic systems, narcissistic narrative transforms the authorial process of shaping, of making, into part of the pleasure and challenge of reading as a co-operative, interpretative experience.

That this textual self-awareness can lead to another form of literature has not been denied. Just as metafiction grew out of a tradition, it continues to develop and in its most extreme forms—that is, in what has here been called the covert linguistic mode—the challenge to the novel's identity as a representational genre is evident. This diachronic context can perhaps most succinctly be recalled and summarized in a visual manner:

The synchronic pattern here implied, while less symbolically decorative than Ricardou's auto-representational cross, is not intended as restrictive or normative in any way. Rather it is an attempt to make
room for as wide a range as possible of distinctive types of narrative self-consciousness. There is obviously still considerable room to move, even within the confines of a mimetic genre.

What this pattern does not reveal clearly, of course, except by implication, is the second major focus of this study. While its first intention was to investigate the modes, forms, and techniques of narrative narcissism—a task as yet not undertaken by critics of metafiction—its other aim was to study the implications of these formal observations both for the theory of the novel as a representational genre and also for the theory of the interpretative and creative functions of the act of reading. This investigation was conducted by means of metafictional texts themselves, particularly those overt forms which thematized these very theoretical issues. The problems raised by these works were then brought to bear on existing theories (both of the novel and of reading), not to provide a survey of modern criticism, but to investigate the changes in theory which the practice of fiction itself suggests, if not demands. There can be no "theory" of metafiction, only "implications" for theory; each self-informing work internalizes its own critical context. To ignore that is to falsify the text itself. Since this two-directional investigation has been guided by continual reference to these central points about the inner structures and theoretical repercussions of auto-referential texts, an alternative to a concluding summary of these arguments seems both possible and indeed desirable. Hugh Kenner recounts that Ezra Pound's advice to writers was always to finish their books by "opening out" and not by "closing in." One way of heeding this counsel is suggested by John Fowles's reminder that the novel is the most free and freeing literary form. In Chapter Four, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* was seen as allegorically presenting the theme of liberation through fictionmaking. This new involvement of the reader in a freedom-inducing act offers another potentially ideological implication of the paradox of intramurally and extramurally directed metafiction. If self-reflecting texts can actually lure the reader into participating in the creation of a novelistic universe, perhaps he can also be seduced into action—even direct political action. Two metafictional novels written in the mid-1960s by two Montreal writers imply that there might indeed be such a possibility; the narcissistic novel as incitement to revolutionary activity would be the ultimate defence of self-conscious fiction against claims of self-preening introversion.

One of the former leaders of the Québec Rassemblement pour l'Indépendance Nationale, Hubert Aquin, wrote his first novel, *Prochain Episode* (Montréal: Le Cercle du livre de France, 1965), while under arrest for carrying arms. The equally subversive narrator of that first work, in a similar situation, also writes a novel and seems to sense by the end of it that the truly revolutionary act for him is that of
writing-writing the work the reader has just finished. Nevertheless, the title of the novel negates this and points explicitly to the next episode, the episode of guns, the real revolution to come after the writing and reading of the novel is over. In Aquin's second novel, *Trou de mémoire* (Montréal: Le Cercle du livre de France, 1968), however, the major writer and revolutionary figure, Pierre X. Magnant, appears willing to accept the fact that the act of writing itself is a truly revolutionary one. For the author, this insight involves no crude engagement on the level of political content; it is, in fact, through metafictional form that Aquin hopes to liberate his country and his literature. In an article the year after *Trou de mémoire* was written, he urged the modern writer to abandon any expressivity, any signification— that is, any message— or run the risk of finding himself "domestiqué et fonctionnalisé par la société." Narrative conventions are changing, argued Aquin, and the essential artifice of the genre must now be acknowledged, made manifest, and then gloried in by both author and reader.

In 1974 he further theorized upon this latter conjunction: "la littérature existe pleinement non pas quand l'oeuvre est écrite, mais quand un lecteur remonte le cours des phrases et des mots pour devenir, par ce moyen, cocréateur de l'oeuvre." Yet this same insight, politicized, was used earlier, both thematically and structurally, in *Trou de mémoire*. Both overtly and covertly, the author of that novel aims at transforming the way his reader reads and thinks— as the first step to transforming the political reality he lives in. The act of reading, as well as that of writing, is part of the very action of the plot, as the editor reads and comments upon the manuscript of the revolutionary, Pierre X. Magnant, and as the mysterious RR reads and comments upon the texts of both Magnant and the editor.

Just as Aquin employs the structures of the journal and the epistolary novel— both forms which again make self-conscious the acts of writing and reading— so does another Canadian novelist, writing at almost the same time, about almost the same things. Leonard Cohen's novel, *Beautiful Losers* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1966), also consists in part of a journal (of sorts) of a nameless narrator, and of a letter read by this same character, and written by a French-Canadian revolutionary.

The motives for this self-conscious writing, in both novels, seem paradoxical. On the one hand Cohen's nameless narrator and Aquin's murderer-revolutionary claim to write to come to terms with— that is, almost to forget— a dead woman, a lover. Magnant writes: "Je me vois écrire ce que j'écris, conscient à l'extrême de recouvrir le corps de Joan

3 "La Disparition éloquente du poète (Mallarme)," in *Blocs erratiques*, p. 266.
d'une grande pièce de toile damassée d'hyperboles et de syncopes: j'improvise un véritable tissu d'art, mot à mot, afin d'en vêtir celle qui est nue, mais morte. In an attempt to *cover* over Joan's death with words, Pierre X. Magnant, like the narrator of Book One of Cohen's novel, manages to *uncover* details for the reader, to reveal the "facts" of the past. This second direction, this revelatory unveiling for the reader (the reader both as a character in the novel and as an external agent) is explicitly the motive for writing for both the editor in Aquin's novel and for F., the revolutionary-magician-madman of *Beautiful Losers*.

There seems to be yet another reason for writing, however. When the third-person narrator of the epilogue of Cohen's novel calls out: "Welcome to you who read me today," he is inviting the reader into the work, inviting him to participate, rather than to sit back and watch the recent fate of those initially active in the now dissipated Revolution of the "second chancers." In *Trou de mémoire*, the reader finally realizes that Pierre X. Magnant's pseudo-suicide has allowed him to return incognito to work for the revolution-by being the editor of his own manuscript. Is the reader to believe RR when she then claims that the "editor" has also committed suicide, by a strange coincidence, using the same method Magnant was supposed to have employed? Or has the revolutionary been secretly resurrected once again? After all, Aquin did write a note on January 19, 1967, to the effect that "P.X. Magnant est l'auteur et l'éditeur de ce *Trou de mémoire*." Note that he does not write that Magnant is the author and editor of Magnant's manuscript, but of the published novel, *Trou de mémoire*.

In both of these novels the reader is left literally to "make sense" of the willed ambiguities, the paradoxes, even contradictions, of the text. The details cannot be ordered by using traditional novelistic assumptions. To use Cohen's metaphor, the reader must learn to exercise "a kind of balance in the chaos," for "there is something arrogant and warlike in the notion of a man setting the universe in order." Both novelists work to frustrate the reader's attempts to systematize, his efforts to order the texts by conventional literary means. For instance, there are no single, individual, psychologically motivated characters in either novel. By the end of *Beautiful Losers*, a seventeenth-century Iroquois virgin, Catherine Tekakwitha, has merged with Edith, a twentieth-century Indian sexual virtuoso. Both come together in a central Isis figure whose final manifestation is a semi-naked, moccasin-wearing blonde who is-or rather who drives-the vehicle that takes the hero to his destiny. This hero, himself an amalgam of the

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4 *Trou de mémoire* (Montréal: Le Cercle du livre de France, 1968), p. 55. All subsequent page references will be in parentheses in the text.


6 *Beautiful Losers* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1966), p. 95. Subsequent page references will be in parentheses in the text.
nameless narrator, his friend, F., and Catherine's aged uncle, proceeds to metamorphose into a Ray Charles movie. However, the reader of Aquin's novel has no easier task, as P. X. Magnant, revolutionary pharmacist, and the editor of his manuscript are revealed to be one and the same person. The Black African revolutionary and pharmacist, Olympe Ghezzo-Quénum, then turns out to be his double. The Ruskin sisters, Joan and Rachel, are more than just sisters in the novel. In one version of RR's tale, they are lesbian lovers; in another, they too are doubles, as Rachel continues her dead sister's destiny beyond the last pages of the novel, as Anne-Lise Jamieson.

Should the reader try to cling to conventional notions of narrative time, there too he will be frustrated. The "long letter from F." which forms the second part of Beautiful Losers logically precedes the first part by several years, for it was to be given to the narrator five years after F.'s death. But just as Book One ends with the narrator fleeing to the treehouse F. left him in his will, so Book Two also ends with F.'s escape from the asylum-prison to that same treehouse outside Montreal. When, then, does the third part of the novel take place? It opens with a man in a treehouse. Who is he? He has burnt fingers, like the narrator, but he also has a missing thumb, like F. He is identified both with a local pervert and with a terrorist leader who escaped "yesterday." It is not only characters that merge, then, but also time sequences. This is also true in Aquin's novel, but the use of time is even more complex. The narrative clock and calendar work backwards, against even all plot logic, from Olympe's letter dated September 28, 1966 to his journal which begins May 14, 1966. This symbolic reversal serves to fill in the trou de mémoire, the traumatic rape that RR must face and which she only faces, she tells us, by reading the texts the reader too has read. However, the editor also claims that the events narrated by the otherwise very precise Olympe actually took place, not in 1966 as Olympe had obsessively written, but in 1967. And in a sense, the reader realizes, they did, since Aquin wrote them in 1967.

The frustrated and bewildered reader is not even allowed a linear plot for comfort. The hermeneutic difficulties multiply when he realizes that both novels operate on two distinct but simultaneous levels of discourse. On the one hand there is a private story— in both cases, a story of love, death, and sexual triangles, the familiar narrative staples. But on the other hand, both novels present a parallel public or political level. While seeking his own identity, Cohen's narrator stumbles across what he calls "the horrible truth about Canada." The cast of symbolic orphans in this novel includes one nameless English-Canadian historian, his Indian wife, Edith (and her historical surrogate, Catherine Tekakwitha), and their bisexual lover, F., the Québécois revolutionary Member of Parliament who, after his parliamentary disgrace, is incarcerated in an asylum for the criminally insane. He claims that this is an
English plot to silence him. This trio plays out the history and destiny of Canada, of her successive conquests (the deaths of the Indian, Edith, and the French, F.), and perhaps of her future fate (turning into an American movie). In Aquin's novel, the Québécois revolutionary strangles his stereotypical English-Canadian lover, who claims she wants to become a French-Canadian, a feat she actually does perform in death; Magnant, haunted by her corpse, writes: "Notre pays est un cadavre encombrant" (p.48). Her murder is both an attempt to destroy a dominating force and a sign of the impotence of the dominated.

The reader, it would seem, might have a better chance at "making sense" of these two levels of discourse if he were to adopt certain metaphoric unities, such as that provided in both novels by the theme of the sexualization of politics. Both Cohen and Aquin overtly present Québec political rally scenes and both do so in similar erotic terms. In the crowd at one rally, Cohen's narrator is literally and symbolically caressed and seduced, by an unknown, unseen female; similarly, the once promiscuous, and later sexually impotent Pierre X. Magnant, as revolutionary speaker, regards his audience as victims waiting to be raped: "Mon comportement sexuel est l'image d'un comportement national frappé d'impuissance: plus ça va, plus je sens bien que je veux violer" (p. 112). It is important that Aquin too claimed that he wanted to seduce, embrace, even rape his reader in Trou de mémoire.  

In both novels as well, there is a narrative rape that is part of the past, part of history, both public and private. As Cohen's Indian girl, Edith, is raped with pens, pipes, twigs, and fingers by the impotent Frenchmen in her village (pp. 58-61), so Pierre X. Magnant goes back in time to reverse the traumatic rape that is the symbol of the conquest of French Canada, by murdering his English lover, Joan, and raping her sister. The futility of this act of impotence for himself is counteracted by that hope for the future-Rachel's child of rape, "qui s'appellera Magnant . . . sans avoir peur de son nom" (p.204).

What Cohen sees as a Canadian historical chain of victimizers turned victims (the Indians defeated by the French who in turn are defeated by the English who are likely to be defeated by the Americans), Aquin perceives in terms of the colonizers and the colonized. Both the narrator of Beautiful Losers and Pierre X. Magnant claim to be specialists in the study of failure. Cohen's own contribution to the investigation of the psychology of the victim leads him to posit an ultimate "beautiful loser," Ray Charles, whose sung words, "Somebody said lift that bale," significantly form the novel's epigraph, but whose

7 "Aquin par Aquin," in Le Québec littéraire no. 2 (1976), 134: 'j'admets qu'il y a une 'danse de séduction' [avec le lecteur] . . . qu'il y a des procédés de mystification, j'admets que j'essaie d'étreindre le lecteur littéralement dans Trou de mémoire, ou de le violer même, a la limite, et de l'agresser pour ensuite le relâcher et le reprendre indefiniment. Malgré tout, c'est une opération dirigée vers le lecteur étant donne que c'est lui qui crée le livre."
final movie image quells the revolution. He is both a victim (a Black, a blind entertainer) and a symbol of American victimization of Canadian culture. Aquin too uses a Black-Olympe-but an African Black, and he too uses him as a symbol, but this time of a colonized mentality. Aquin's own fascination with the collective psychology of dominated peoples is seen in his interest in the theories of Frantz Fanon, Albert Memmi, and especially Jacques Berque. There is frequent mention made in the novel to "les Patriotes," whose defeat in the 1837 Rebellion in Canada Aquin sees as having "l'air d'un échec longuement prémédité, d'un chef-d'oeuvre de noircour et d'inconscience." That Magnant too sees himself as a Patriot is significant. That Olympe, Black revolutionary, identifies with Magnant is significant as well.

The African nations mentioned in the novel are almost all former parts of French West Africa. The issue Aquin raises here places the Canadian historical fact of the defeat and colonization of the French into an international context in which the French themselves were once colonizers. Olympe's schizoid alienated responses to both Europe and to his own culture and race-his pride and his scorn-echo Magnant's hatred and love for the English Joan. Olympe's flight from Africa to Europe echoes Magnant's earlier one from Montreal to London, where he finds the psychology of success in Sherlock Holmes and the perfect crime. But Montreal is the final scene of the death of both men, and also of the future birth of the child of Magnant's all too easy rape of Olympe's lover, Rachel. Aquin is careful, despite this similarity of fate, to point to the essential difference of race between his two characters. Like Cohen's Ray Charles, Olympe is doubly colonized-by an enslaving nation and by the white race.

This same politicization of the interpretative act works on the reader not only in this thematic and structural way, forcing him to understand and extend certain key narrative metaphors, but also in forcing his awareness, on a formal, literal level, of the artifice, the artifacts that self-consciously constitute both of these novels. The trompe-l'oeil of Holbein's painting of the "Two Ambassadors" is given an allegorical reading by the editor within Aquin's novel: the two ambassadors are Joan and Magnant, linked only by this written fabric of words, like the oriental cloth the two men touch in the painting. The anamorphosis of the skull is, to his thinking, Joan's murder. The editor goes so far as to claim: "Je ne crains pas d'affirmer que Pierre X. Magnant s'est inspire de la composition de Holbein, non seulement dans son style, mais aussi dans la forme même du récit" (p. 145). The reader, however, might see another possible interpretation of the painting, one suggested by this last notion. The Holbein work could be seen as a mise en abyme, a

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9 "L'Art de la défaite" (1965), Blocs erratiques, p. 118.
mirroring microcosm, of the politics as well as the aesthetics of the novel. The two French ambassadors are painted in England; two colonizing nations meet, in the August presence of European art (the lute in the painting), religion (the hymnbook), and science (the globe, sundial, and quadrant). Some of these same objects of culture and power later fascinate the colonized African, Olympe, on a trip to a European museum. Given this perspective, the projected anamorphosis in the centre might represent the traumatic conquest, the act of colonization whose memory is erased by the cultural amnesia, the trou de mémoire. It too, like the skull, can only be perceived from a certain angle and from a certain distance, and it is Aquin's revolutionary aim to manoeuvre the reader into that position. For Cohen, the political/aesthetic mise en abyme is the Ray Charles movie, escaped from the System Theatre and projected this time against the sky. But in the text, the revolution is extinguished by the film. Everyone stops and sits back to watch: "Thank God it's only a movie" (p.242). Only the reader who does not turn passive can "make meaning" out of this final image.

Both Aquin and Cohen seem to want to force their texts, and by extension their readers, out of what Aquin calls the coherence of domination: "Faire la révolution, c'est sortir du dialogue dominé-dominateur." His subsequent description of the revolutionary's act is one which aptly fits both novels here: "[il] s'engage inconsciemment dans un monologue interrompu à chaque parole, nourri d'autant d'hésitations qu'il comporte de distance avec la raison dominante." At the end of Beautiful Losers, Cohen pulls his reader into his text and he enters or else risks missing him "forever" in his "trip to the end" (p. 243). Perhaps he must become a beautiful loser, balancing the chaos of meaning. Aquin asks him to go a step further, to become a real co-creator, as real as the editor and RR who literally co-create Magnant's text. In both novels the reader's position is a paradoxical one. On the one hand, as in the viewing of the Holbein painting, a certain distance is required of him. He must recognize and acknowledge the artifice, the self-conscious auto-referentiality of both texts. On the other hand, this very artificiality is revelled in, actually made sacred, "sacralisé." The equation of reading and writing, the "échange entre le lecteur et l'écrivain" that Aquin sees as the essence of the text, is what allows for a total breaking out of the limits of introverted selfinforming narcissism in both novels. As Magnant writes: "Par l'action matricielle de la parole, l'action passe à l'action" (p.57).

To read is to act; to act is both to interpret and to create anew- to be revolutionary, perhaps in political as well as literary terms. There is much freedom-inducing potential in metafiction generally, not when seen as a degenerate version of a moribund genre, but when recog-

10 "Profession: Ecrivain" (1963), Point de fuite, p. 53.
11 "La Mort de l'écrivain maudit" (1969), Blocs erratiques, p. 147
nized as a significant "vital" mimetic form of literature. In Aquin's words: "La parole est une forme de vie et, par ce biais magnifique, un mode d'action. Chose certaine, il n'y a pas plus de vanité à écrire qu'à agir, autant que ce qui relève de l'action émane d'un ordre créé par la penée." To "Ovidian" critics, Narcissus may die by the mirroring pool; but the fact remains that, in another sense, he also lives on, still self-regarding, received into the next world with open arms.

12 "Comprendre dangereusement" (1962), Blocs erratiques, p. 46.