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**Chiaroscuro: Neige noire/Hamlet's Twin**

Hubert Aquin's latest and, regrettably, last book, *Neige noire* (1974), just translated into English by Sheila Fischman under the title *Hamlet's Twin*,<sup>1</sup> improves upon re-reading, partly because, like all of Aquin's novels, it is constructed spirally—they must all be re-read—but particularly because the sado-pornographic melodrama which inevitably dominates the reader's initial responses can then be seen in the context of the baroque intentions and decadent-symbolist sensibilities which make up this bizarre and uneven, but strikingly effective fiction, comparable with the best work of such contemporary Romantic Agonists as Robbe-Grillet, Mishima, and Genet. *Neige noire* is in many ways the most accessible and even the most attractive of Aquin's novels. It has the most clearly unified narrative—oh, dear, yes! it tells a story!—despite puzzling discontinuities in the obsessive patterns of doubling and oxymoron (Aquin's title stresses the latter; the translator's title the former) and shifting, partial, perhaps misleading and certainly confusingly intermittent analogues between the novel and its chief inner artifact, a production of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The centrality of *Hamlet*, however, gives us an enormous advantage over the often baffled and irritated readers of Aquin's other works, who had to struggle with inner narratives being constructed before their eyes, or with relatively arcane artifacts like Holbein's *The Ambassadors* (plus anadiplosis). *Hamlet*, in contrast, we all know by heart.

Modern literature is full of books which play upon our experience in interpreting Hamlet's elliptical relationships to outer texts; one of them is a splendid, little-known dramatic monologue by the Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert, which could, as we shall see, supply a third title for Aquin's book: it is called "Elegy of Fortinbras." Aquin's hero, Nicolas Vanesse, plays not Hamlet but Fortinbras in the TV production of *Hamlet* which is the focal point of the book, especially—perhaps excessively—under its English title. "Hamlet's

Twin"<sup>2</sup> stresses the relationship of story to inner artifact at the expense of "chiaroscuro," not only the meteorological oxymoron of "black snow" throughout the text, but, more important, the "black and white" of photography, essential to the cinematic metaphor of Aquin's narrative structure.

Fortinbras, to be sure, by Aquin's deployment of sections of Saxo Grammaticus, elegantly faked for his own purposes, is Hamlet's twin brother; it may prove more significant that he is Hamlet's "negative."<sup>3</sup> Nicolas, TV actor-turned-producer, can act out Hamletic compulsions in his own life, the material of his film scenario; he is playing Hyde to Hamlet's Jekyll. Much of Aquin's book appears to be made up of this scenario, in which the rehearsal and showing of parts of the TV *Hamlet* are key episodes. The selections from *Hamlet* which we see, or to which Nicolas refers in other contexts, are either Fortinbras' skimpy scenes or scenes of Hamlet with Gertrude or Ophelia, or lines which, out of context, can be taken as relating to such scenes: for example, a version of the "graveyard scene," in which "Ophelia" is present, and thus all-too-well-able to pick up the morbid resonances of Hamlet's lines. This scene extrapolates the major parallel between *Hamlet* and the frame story: Nicolas, like Hamlet, feels betrayed by an incestuous woman, and takes out his hurt, sadistically, upon "Ophelia." That we never see the face of the TV actor playing Hamlet, nor do we find a character equivalent to him in the "story" itself, facilitates the transfer of many of his feelings and problems to twin Fortinbras. *Hamlet* without the Prince! Nicolas reminds us, however, that Fortinbras is "already there, but we don't see him" (p. 136); similarly, the shadow-Hamlet must be in our minds throughout, despite long stretches without allusion or obvious parallel, and despite the rather arbitrary nature of some recurrences and reminders.

The inner artifact provides a sort of Marowitzian mini-*Hamlet* which gives classical resonance to and classical rationalization of Nicolas' murder of his incestuous wife, Sylvie. Sylvie herself, early on, is uncritically thrilled by the possibility of such an inner structure: "I've got the feeling that you just have to line up the names and profound new realities will develop" (p. 45). Another Ophelia-like character, Eva, is savvier: "I even wondered if all those remarks about Hamlet had any meaning. I wondered if you hadn't inserted that element simply to mystify the viewer..." (p. 155). Aquin of course makes the blur quite clear: "The two images are not in focus at the same time, as though vainly seeking each other...The only syn-

chronism between him [Nicolas] and his reflection occurs when he says: 'Where is this sight?' "(pp. 15, 12).

The overlapping cast of the story is made up of "Fortinbras," three "Ophelias," no Hamlet and two "Poloniuses." The incestuous father is named "Lewandowski"; the fatherly lover of the stage Ophelia is called "Stanislas Parisé" (a touch of Laertes here?). Such geographically allegorical names are a hallmark of Aquinian preciosity in his other novels as well.

Why Fortinbras? He is victorious, Nicolas reminds us, and like "an obsession" (p. 44) he survives. Our Fortinbras avenges his betrayal by the incestuous "Ophelia" and escapes scot-free, although he confesses the crime in his own scenario, which is read with close attention by the father/lover and by the two surviving Ophelias (one of whom, Linda, plays the role in the TV film and is cast to play the part of Sylvie in Nicolas' movie, the other of whom, Eva, takes Sylvie's place in Nicolas' life). The father kills himself (I give my reasons for supposing so later), while Eva and Linda fear that actually filming the scenario will necessarily involve the ritual repetition of the ritual slaying of Sylvie: "the intrusion of reality into the imaginary" (p. 114). The two women escape into each other's arms—this is doubtless the surprise ending at which Aquin hints from time to time—while Nicolas is simply elided out of the plot. He goes off to Repulse Bay (NWT) to make his film, with other actresses playing the roles of Sylvie, Eva and Linda. We are not, I think, to suppose that he lives happily ever after. Aquin's invented Fortinbras committed incest with his mother, Gertrude, in that same lost, mystical place-out-of-time, Undensacre, towards which Eva and Linda are heading in the ecstatically mystical and erotic coda of the book. Fortinbras' reign was short; he is buried at Undensacre in a grave which, like Sylvie's grave in Spitzbergen, can never be found. So the incest pattern turns out to be chiasmic: mother and son of legend are reduplicated in father and daughter of narrative. Nicolas is asymmetrically placed; the son-lover whose immortal, if perverse, love earned him Aquin's version of paradise, becomes the "negative" or avenging husband whose sadistic variant upon normal love seems merely deathly. As in the more complex inner duplications of his other books, Aquin is careful to keep the lines of analogy "pas...trop également parallèles".<sup>4</sup>

As the commentary on *Hamlet* (courtesy of the faked Saxo) is to the *Hamlet* we know, so Aquin's very lengthy parenthetical commentaries are to Nicolas' scenario: the first two make up the inner artifact, the

second two make up the outer one. The four together make up Aquin's novel.<sup>5</sup> Aquin's interruptions often begin as specific technical instructions to the producer and camera-man on the filming of the scene—i.e. they are a legitimate part of the scenario—but they soon slip over into descriptive, discursive supplements to or substitutes for filmed action, and then into asides to the viewer (the role into which, willy-nilly, the reader is co-opted) on his relationship to the cinematic events, along with novelistic directions for psychology, plot connections, and quite unfilmable reflections on time, sensuality, reality, love, art and the cinema. The confidence-trick is neatly played; although most readers will have realized that they are reading a book, not a scenario, let alone watching a movie, somewhat earlier than the next-to-last page (on which Aquin concedes the point), Aquin takes good advantage of our well-developed capacities for understanding scene and action in cinematic terms. Despite the ceaseless interruptions, we are lured into visualizing a movie; by using cinema as his structural metaphor, rather than the antiphonal texts of earlier novels, Aquin has (as he did by choosing *Hamlet* as his inner artifact) markedly increased the accessibility of the book.

*Neige noire* is undoubtedly a repertory of cinematic allusions and parodies as much as it is of literary ones. Familiar from innumerable movies are the rapid cuttings back and forth from the "actual" setting to one in the hero's mind, from Montreal to Norwegian alps and fjords; from Nicolas' present to his past (flashbacks) or his future (obsessive imaginings, circling through his own mental cinema). Linda is tied to the bed in a mild rehearsal for his later torture of Sylvie; innumerable versions of the Linda scene punctuate the wedding journey up to its very last stages, not quite telling us what to expect, not quite specifying Nicolas' dark intentions. The false scenes, first of Sylvie's accidental fall, then of her suicide, are "filmed" for us as they await replacement in his mind, and then in the written confession of the scenario, by the climactic scenes of the actual murder. Scenes of Sylvie's infidelities with Michel Lewandowski are among the most vivid of those taking place in Nicolas' head; the hero as sadistic voyeur torments himself with all these imaginings, and the viewer is asked to be a voyeur also.

As the readers of opera libretti imagine the music and action necessary to complete the work, so we, reading the "scenario," turn on a movie in our minds. Aquin has made a significant contribution to a new genre (by analogy with the closet-drama), the closet-scenario.

The ciné-roman, a readers' version of the more purely utilitarian "scenario," is a well-known genre in itself. One of its most notable creators is of course Alain Robbe-Grillet, who hovers like a dark angel over many aspects of Aquin's work. Aquin was himself a maker of slightly Robbe-Grilletish films; compare the mask-like dark sunglasses, indicating (rather than providing) disguise, in his own "camp" terrorist film, starring himself, with similar devices in Robbe-Grillet's *Trans-Europ Express* (1966), featuring Robbe-Grillet, and in *L'Immortelle*, (1963). The more technical instructions of the *Neige noire* scenario are like those in *Marienbad* and *L'Immortelle*; the ciné-roman, *Glissements progressifs du plaisir* (1974) has numerous thematic parallels with *Neige noire*, as well as occasional comments intended for the reader rather than the producer.<sup>6</sup>

Variant scenes, like those of the binding of Linda in *Neige noire*, get steadily more important in Robbe-Grillet's films; in *Glissements* they make up most of the action. Tricks like the plaster cast on Nicolas' wrist (made necessary by an otherwise quite pointless minor accident) seem deliberately parodic of the same device as used in *L'Immortelle*, for marking off present (cast) time from past or hypothetical time. One device in particular, the huge poster of a woman, torn (i.e. mutilated) in certain crucial places (p. 26), is a Robbe-Grilletish mise-en-abyme of future action; it is thematically central in a way which links *Neige noire* not only to Robbe-Grillet's movies but also to his novels.

The movie poster in *Le Voyeur*, with the broken doll in the corner, and the torn billboard in *Neige noire*, provide the first clue in each book to the culminating action. They are details that Mathias and Nicolas "choose" to notice; all along their visual choices maneuver us towards a knowledge of the sex-slaying which, in each case, takes place within a gap in the narrative, one only gradually filled in, as the struggle between repression and fragmented recollections is staged within each (guilty) central consciousness. While in temperament and mental processes Nicolas is perhaps more like the obsessive narrator of *La Jalousie*, the shape and contents of the gap are like those of *Le voyeur*: Mathias ties down the girl, spread-eagled; the cigarette burns on the body masquerade as bruises; cannibal sea animals mutilate the "tender parts" of her body; there are joky hints of ritual sacrifice in the villagers' tales of primitive virgins sacrificed to the gods.

The poster in *Le Voyeur*, like the event it foreshadows, is a delicate anticipation of what the mutilated female body was to become in the ciné-romans and deliquescent nouveaux romans of Robbe-Grillet's

more recent career as a highbrow pornographer. For inspiration for *Neige Noire*, Aquin would have had to rely on the relatively varied and ingenious details of *La Maison de rendez-vous* (1965) and *Projet pour une révolution à New York* (1970). *Projet*, for instance, employs the same colour patterns of black and white, heavily punctuated with red (but with few other colours) which in Aquin as in Robbe-Grillet serve as cinematic metaphor for sex and violence; *Projet* also provides even closer models for the torn billboard. Such inner duplications of the motif of "la belle captive" (tied down, spread-eagled, sexually mutilated, anatomized, and tortured to death) haunt Robbe-Grillet's later works, *La belle captive* (1976), *Topologie d'une cité fantôme* (1976) (where the unserious ritual nature of the virgin sacrifice elaborates the hint in *Le voyeur*), and, above all, in *Souvenirs du triangle d'or* (1978), which is single-mindedly, and only, an account of the woman tied down, etc. Such material is doubtless the staple of pornography at all levels of sophistication, but the highbrow pornography fashionable among the French intelligentsia, the literary tradition founded by the Marquis de Sade and developed by Octave Mirbeau, Georges Bataille, "Pauline Réage's" *L'Histoire d'O*, Jean de Berg's *L'Image* and countless others, finds a sort of culmination both of monotony and of apparant literary respectability in these most recent fictions by Robbe-Grillet.

Perhaps not surprisingly the pornographic theme has made its way into the heart of contemporary critical theory, by way of critical metaphors which Aquin's commentary exploits to the full. As Nicolas is to Sylvie, so writer is to text and so Aquin is to the reader; (Nicolas)-writer is, first, the rapist or seducer of the (Sylvie)-text, and then of the reader, who, viewer and then voyeur from the first lines of the book, now becomes victim as well. Aquin would lend himself well to fuller analysis in terms of the connections between incest, sado-masochism, suicide, dismemberment, and the requirements of the neo-modernist self-reflexive text.<sup>7</sup>

The sexuality in all of Aquin's books is, if normal, sadistically violent; kindlier sex, like the incest and lesbianism of *Neige noire*, is, conversely, seen as perverse. Both kinds are observed with the unemotional, cynical eye of the pornographer. The conventional iconography of the pornographic repertoire seems more central here than in his other works, though the spirit is similar in all of them.

Robbe-Grillet once supplied an interviewer with an archly cynical faux-naïf explanation of the binding of "la belle captive": "The woman kept moving around so much that the man just had to tie her

down to stop that movement."<sup>8</sup> The explanation echoes the semi-pornographic attitude of our ancestors "ladies don't move," as well as reminding us, in crude form, of a more honorable literary tradition allied to and overlapping with that of highbrow pornography, with which it shares numerous themes and motifs: what Mario Praz christened the "Romantic Agony." There too, though in a much less linguistically sophisticated way, pornographic themes often become analogues for art as well as expressions of art; this may or may not render them morally endurable, but they quite often become aesthetically so. Aquin is a romantic agonist; heir of Baudelaire, not de Sade, and more like Genet and Mishima (perhaps also John Hawkes and Leonard Cohen) in temperament than like Robbe-Grillet, for all his indebtedness to the latter in matters of form and detail.

The romantic theme of the intertwining of love and death is implied on every page of Aquin's text. The description of the honeymoon journey is redolent with the anticipatory irony of "Kill[ing] during a wedding trip" (p. 170); the Wildean cliché, "For each man kills the thing he loves...The kindest use a knife," is perhaps the most familiar analogue, but it is watered-down Baudelaire. The evidently Hamletic elements in Nicolas' vengeance are blended with the sadistic details of Baudelaire's "A Celle qui est trop gaie," in which the colourful beauty and mobility of the heroine outrage the poet to the point of committing a murder which is also sexual consummation and mutilation. Sylvie, always brightly dressed in red, has not only enchanted Nicolas with her mobility, brightness and beauty, but also used it to cause him both physical and mental anguish.<sup>9</sup> Aquin, if not Nicolas, had Baudelaire's poem in mind as he set up the Catullian image for Nicolas' murderous frenzy: "Odi et amo...Is it possible to push Catullian [sic] virulence to the point of murder? Perhaps, after all, when we recall how he was betrayed by the madwoman he was mad about" (p. 183). Evidently Catullus reached Aquin with Baudelairean associations attached:

Folle dont je suis affolé,  
Je te hais autant que je t'aime!  
("A Celle qui est trop gaie")

Nicolas is Baudelairean artist as well as Baudelairean lover. Beauty, deeply corrupt (as Sylvie is corrupted by her incest), will be punished by its own decay, yet Beauty, equated with the ideal, must also be collected and preserved (cf. John Fowles' debased Gothic ver-

sion of this theme, in *The Collector*). The artist's victim is also the subject and object of his art. Nicolas vengefully reifying the all-too-motile being (as in "A Celle qui est trop gaie") joins with Nicolas the Gothic artist-hero (as in, for instance, Hawthorne, James or Gombrowicz, whose key text on the subject is called *Pornografia*), who proceeds to perfect the Form at the cost of the Life. Nicolas is at least as much like the speaker of Baudelaire's "Une Charogne" as he is like the Hamlet of the Graveyard scene when he terrifies his beloved with the view of the carrion to which, "let her paint herself an inch thick," she too must come—unless he chooses to preserve (in film) the "form and divine essence of his decomposed loves."

His mutilation of Sylvie before he administers the killing blow is partly genital mutilation and partly a carving of her body and face to resemble a kind of ritual mask, a simple design that turns her tears bloody and makes her own features hard to distinguish. Sadistic pleasure and erotic import give way to the need to turn her from an individual into a form, a pattern, a mask, and to turn her killing from a personal act into a ceremony, a Black Mass for the consumption of her body and blood. Aquin's readers, once he identifies them as "succubi," are also implicated in Nicolas' deed.

Nicolas is a sentimental idealist of tortured sensibility, an old-fashioned decadent sadist,<sup>10</sup> not so much impersonal as narcissistic. "No one ever knows anyone. I didn't know Sylvie" (p. 112). Aquin, editorially, agrees. But Nicolas looks into the mirror every twenty pages or so, as if, like Mallarmé, to verify his own existence: "I need to see myself in this mirror... [without it] I would become Nothingness again . . . [even though] the mirror in which the image of being appeared to me was most often Horror."<sup>11</sup>

"Nous souffrons de ne pouvoir fixer notre chagrin," said Genet,<sup>12</sup> summarizing much of Baudelaire's murderous anguish, in the converse of Robbe-Grillet's callous proposition about "la belle captive." "Fixer...chagrin" is, oddly enough, just what Nicolas attempts to do, as he seeks especially to mutilate Sylvie's "most expressive feature," the "muscles of chagrin" which raise the eyebrows at an angle. Again and again throughout the book, Nicolas harks back to those muscles, seemingly a synecdoche for the death scene, and thus a suggestion of the degree to which, haunted by the dead, he continues to carry the image of Sylvie around with him in a suitcase-coffin. Perhaps Aquin's intertextuality also includes a Balzacian echo for "chagrin"; "living kills" says Aquin (p. 87), and Nicolas declares that "I write the screen-play as I live it. And I haven't finished living, so the screen-



play is incomplete”(p. 121), i.e. a sort of “peau de chagrin” of a life reduced in proportion as one fully lives it, or a “picture of Dorian Gray,” where the inner artifact betrays the sins of the outer man, or a text, like Christine’s historical essay in *L’Antiphonaire*, which takes on the sufferings of its narrator. No wonder Nicolas’ “recherche de l’absolu” (Nn, p. 83) is such a frenzied one.

Aquin shares not only many features of his post-Baudelairean sensibility and aesthetic, including an intense “search for the absolute”, but many details of his psycho-biography with the modern Japanese novelist Yukio Mishima. Both authors, after careers punctuated by marginal, extremist political entanglements, not always in easy harmony with their primary artistic commitments, killed themselves, in scenes no less final and sincere for being well-staged. The culminating and concluding act of Mishima’s life was a political gesture doomed to—perhaps even designed for—conspicuous and public failure. Shortly before Aquin’s death, the respectable side of Quebec separatism in fact won an election, which may, paradoxically, have compounded Aquin’s private sense of failure. Mishima was forty-five when he died (in 1970); Aquin was forty-seven (in 1977).

Both men, before their suicides, felt that they had finished writing: Mishima that he had said all he wanted to say; Aquin that he was unable to write more. Both had been foreshadowing suicide in all their works, Mishima in a more overtly ritualistic and idealized way. And both made films—of terrorism for Aquin, or politically motivated suicide for Mishima—that were, in effect, rehearsals for life. “The actor’s daily life [is] supported with the make-believe of his stage performance,” said Mishima;<sup>13</sup> Aquin would have agreed. Of the two, Aquin was by far the more innovative and experimental in form, Mishima by far the more prolific and the more famous.

Baudelairean, and indeed Wildean, elements are conspicuous in all Mishima’s work, perhaps in purer form than in Aquin. Chief among the themes they share are the beauty of cruelty and the cruelty of beauty, the sado-masochism exemplified in the image of St. Sebastian, the aesthetic merits of sexual perversion, and the inevitable analogues between art and voyeurism. Cannibalism can be part of a supreme sexual act in Aquin and Mishima (as it can also in Genet and Robbe-Grillet). The Kabuki theatre as inner artifact gave Mishima “a stylized, grotesquely tragic world, luridly coloured” (Mishima, p. 144) not unlike the *Hamlet* world of this book, or the baroque theatricals of Aquin’s other books. The curious pleasures of

anatomizing the loved one, who is being killed to punish his / her betrayal of an ideal, provide the chief *frisson* of both *Neige noire* and *The Sailor who fell from Grace with the Sea*, while the inner artifact of the Golden Pavilion, with a wonderful writerly economy, doubles as the loved object whose beauty can in Baudelairean (or Wildean) terms only be known and rendered permanent in its destruction. Mishima's "Une Charogne" is the mad acolyte's book about how he burned down the Golden Pavilion, as Aquin's is Nicolas' scenario of the "life" he has made out of Sylvie's death. Both Aquin and Mishima are masters of the self-destructing artist-parable as image of the overlap between the creative and the insane.

Aquin would surely have agreed, on more than literary grounds, with Mishima's rendering of the Gothic artist-parable in these terms: "The unification of art and life is such a dangerous thing, because it seems to destroy life as well as art."<sup>14</sup> Both writers masked their own passionate involvements under the cool surfaces of assorted artifices: all Aquin's books are, like Mishima's, *Confessions of a Mask*.

"On the Fine Arts Considered as Murder": this twist of a Wildean formulation could head a chapter on the aesthetics of cruelty in Mishima or Aquin. In fact it is Sartre's title for part of his massive book on Jean Genet, another authority on masks and murder. At one point Aquin adapts Baudelaire's "hypocrite [spectateur], mon semblable, mon frère" into a Genet-like image of cinema viewers, all masked so that they may indulge freely in their empathy with the screen performance (p. 129). Genet and Aquin have in common many such baroque devices, as well as a similarly intense energy and overt involvement,<sup>15</sup> greater than Mishima's apparent coolness, far greater than the chilly detachment of Robbe-Grillet. One way to illustrate their affinity is to cite some critics of Genet, whose perceptions (like Sartre's) seem remarkably applicable to Aquin. Jean Gitenet's views on the ritual nature of the evil act in Genet offer, for instance, a possible way of elucidating Aquin's surprise ending. Ritual is the gateway to the ideal; the failed sacrifice in this world is an efficacious ritual in the ideal (or fictional) world; the "profane failure" may thus be seen as a "sacred success."<sup>16</sup> It is as if Nicolas' sacrifice of Sylvie's life, happiness, and beauty, an evidently inefficacious offering in the here and now, were mysteriously necessary (a sort of *felix culpa*) to its own transcendence in the ideal union of Eva and Linda. Elide Nicolas; he has done what he was needed for. Although the seemingly random survival rate of minor characters, after an almost equally random slaughter of major characters, is a familiar feature in

Aquin's books, this may be the first book in which it constitutes a "hyperbolic movement leading towards solitude, where ecstasy and illusion reign" (Gitenet, p. 173), the closest Aquin has come to a happy ending.

Genet's relationship to the Romantic Agony could be put in two essentially identical ways, one pejorative, the other approving: Genet's books are imbued by "the same hocus-pocus in which madness, quackery and mysticism meet," but the mixture works, as it so often has for the Romantic Agonists. Aquin's recipe could be rewritten as "hermetic mystification, camp grand guignol and not always significant evocative eroticism": it works, too. To put their relationship to the Romantic Agony in less loaded terms, one could say that Hubert Aquin, as well as Jean Genet,

in a great flourish of lyricism, has gradually become the master of ceremonies of a frenzied plunge into annihilation...[in his work] an ornate [baroque] temple... is [made of] an "architecture of emptiness and words" (*Les Nègres*).<sup>17</sup>

The collocation of emptiness and words is nowhere more evident than in the Arctic wedding journey of Nicolas and Sylvie, where, as Genet puts it (*The Thief's Journal*), one "would penetrate less into a country than into the interior of an image." Aquin's bleak ice-scapes are as near as possible to the Pole, to the Absolute, to the end of the world—a good deal nearer than California and Switzerland, the Other Place of romantic experience found in his earlier books. The Arctic is not only a special place, "anywhere out of the world," as Baudelaire would say, but also a special time, the "tempus continuatum," the locus of the "crumbling of the time patterns." The "light seeps deep into the night" (p. 51), for the night does *not* come during the Arctic summer. Black night and overcrowding in Montreal; white night and emptiness in the Arctic. Spleen et Idéal? Not quite. The wedding journey, punctuated by the cracking and collapsing glaciers of the fjords, already half-reveals its destructive ending. The landscape is a psycho-topography; like similarly subjectively chosen, loaded, exotic settings in, say, the novels of Robbe-Grillet, they underline their own fancifulness, and undermine their own almost travelogue-like fullness and accuracy of detail, to keep reminding us that they are images of Nicolas' feelings and intentions. Aquin mixes allegedly real legendary-mythical locations together with actually real ones that he then attempts to palm off on a "delirious

cartographer" (p. 119). There are some pure fantasies, like Nicolas' hallucination of an Italian theatre-city in the middle of Lapland, and its Aquinian counterpart, the unlocatable Undensacre, the place of transcendent love; one in Nicolas' mind, the other in Aquin's allegory. Yet for many pages the whole account of the wedding-journey could pass for an account—even a banal one—of a Scandinavian journey Aquin might actually have taken.

As in "Le Voyage" of Baudelaire, "it's enough to want to leave" (p. 134) on this romantic-symbolist journey towards death and artistic transcendence. No journey so full of both whiteness and absence could fail to remind us, again, of Mallarmé:

The landscape is being obliterated, the white combes of Spitzbergen grow dark under the effect of a sad song. If possible, everything must be abolished. . . The rest comes from the obsessive song that replaces what cannot be represented. The image [of Sylvie in despair] is only an absence, the negative of a cherished phantom. (p. 153)

Similarly, "the Island of Spitzbergen is a reverse image of Undensacre [which is] ... a suspensive vision of time" (p. 205). This reverse or mirror image is like the "negative" of Sylvie, or like that other improbable locus of incestuous love, Natchez-Under-the-Hill, the engraving of which "slowly becomes its own negative" (p. 179). We are invited to see the conjunction of opposites in terms of photography, which renders them equal: "the sands...under the effect of filters, resemble the fine sand of Undensacre and the black snow of Spitzbergen" (p. 161); "a shot of layer of snow [is] suddenly transformed into a vitrified black texture" (p. 126). "Black snow" this crucial oxymoron comes about through the efforts of artifice, imaged in terms of photographic filters.

Cinematic time, however, is considered throughout the commentaries in much more abstract terms; these sections, along with occasional flourishes like "the nuptial system of symbols," are the last refuge of the joky pedantry so much more prominent in Aquin's other books. They form an anthology, or collage, probably as parodic of Aquin's numerous philosophical sources as much of the rest of the book is of cinematic and literary sources: the elegiac sensuality of cinematic time, its subjectivity, the illusions it provides of both continuity and discontinuity, and of course its classical-Baudelairean role as "Time the Devourer:" "Spleen contaminates everything; no one escapes its bite" (p. 153) are all included. These commentaries will

allegedly reveal "the veiled structure of the film" and its essential "circularity" (p. 105).

The "corticality" of the cinema, referred to on several occasions, suggests again a veneer, a mask, a mode of separation inherent in the cinematic image. It fits well, as an image, with all the veneers of Aquin's particular style and structures, teasing the reader with not-quite-symmetrical patterns, games, mirrors, masks, and all the other devices of artifice, internal contradictions, and even the cold pornographic patterns, the artifice-soaked detachment of an elaborate and teasing style. It is the tension between these veneers on the one hand and the erotic passions and griefs, often slipping over into frenzies, which gives the book its real power. Nicolas, within the story, cannot control either that tension or those passions; he is a failed artist. Aquin within the book can control them; his is the successful artist-parable. The tension between veneer and passion, which one could re-phrase as the delicate ratio between cynicism and suffering, has been tipped too far in favor of cynicism and veneer by the high-brow pornographers; Aquin is among the several writers who have restored the balance, and thereby re-asserted artistic integrity.

#### APPENDIX ON THE TRANSLATION:

In this on the whole distinctly good translation, I found just enough errors, misjudgments, and questions of tone to blur the impact of Aquin's text for the Anglophone reader. The most significant cases relate to the re-translation into English of Aquin's quotations from Shakespeare. Obviously the normal procedure for a translator is to quote Shakespeare directly, but Aquin has booby-trapped this part of the text. On the whole he seems to follow Gide's translation of *Hamlet*, with some paraphrases or possible misremembrances of no special significance, as they translate readily enough back into Shakespeare. But Aquin, diverging sharply from Gide (and Shakespeare), changes the meanings of words at least three times:

(I must be cruel only to be) *juste* (Nn 171) "kind," say Shakespeare and the translator; "avec tendresse" says Gide.

(There's rosemary, that's for) *la convenance* (Nn 27) "remembrance," say Shakespeare and the translator; "souvenance," says Gide.

*Le temps* te souillera (Nn p. 168) "Thou shalt not escape calumny," say Shakespeare and the translator; "La calomnie te souillera," says Gide.

Nicolas evidently thinks of justice, propriety and time (in a Baudelairean sense) in Shakespeare's contexts, for good reasons, given his own purposes and needs. But the Anglophone reader will not know it.

Other failures to follow Aquin rather than Shakespeare are less significant: translating Gide's chiasmic "Malheur à moi! d'avoir vu, de voir, ce qu j'ai vu, ce que je vois" on one occasion literally (p. 17—it is rather hard to understand in English) but later in the familiar Ophelian version (p. 138) is confusing. She omits a significant repetition, "oui, je vous ai vraiment aimée" (Nn 136), presumably because it is not in Shakespeare; she omits three rather shadowy and not very good extra lines given to Fortinbras early on (Nn 8), but leaves in four equally bad ones later (pp. 141-42), perhaps because they are necessary for cues. As other reviewers have noted, she omits the inscrutable epigraph attributed to Kierkegaard, another Hamlet-soaked author, "Je dois maintenant à la fois être et ne pas être" (neither I nor any other reviewer has yet been willing to cite the exact source of this epigraph), and quite inadvertently, I assume, she leaves out the qualifying "avec Fortinbras" without which we have no idea (until much later) of what sort Gertrude's secret relationships were (p. 159). She unavoidably loses some pleasantly euphonious puns available in the French: décor - décorative; dérive—dérivative; effeuille; le fou (for chess bishop); and incarnation (for reddening). But only one such loss of multiple implication is potentially crucial to following the text. If perchance, instead of "rushing out of," Michel Lewandowski "hurls himself from [the window of] his twelfth floor office into the street," an odd but sustainable secondary meaning for the French "il s'est précipité de son bureau du douzième étage dans la rue Saint-Francois-Xavier," then we know why he never reappears, why he leaves no message, what the consequences are of his explicit remorse over his part in the death of Sylvie—"she's dragged me into the precipice with her"—and why it is important to mention not only that the office is on the twelfth floor but that its windows can be opened. Aquin is much given to tidying up loose ends in this fashion: compare the car-crash suicide of Dr. Franconi (a character not unlike Lewandowski) at the end of *L'Antiphonaire*. Further, if the meaning is quite unequivocally "rushed out," then the point of the structural parallel with Sylvie's attempted suicide and with her attributed suicide is lost.

Actual mistranslations are rare. Two passages, on "necessity" and "succession," are made more obscure in the English than they are in the French (pp. 18, 32); whether Linda asks Nicolas to "wait for" ("attends") his honeymoon, instead of, as in the English text, to "postpone" it (p. 24), of course makes some difference as to how we interpret her character. I would also suggest emendations on pp. 9, 153 (twice), 193, and 199, and would qualify the tone of phrases on pp. 71, 102 and 149, but otherwise the translation is highly competent and readable; it should do a great deal to help Aquin attain the audience he deserves.

## NOTES

1. *Neige noire: roman* (Montreal: Les Editions la Presse, 1974). *Hamlet's Twin* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1979). Page references in the text will be to the English edition, unless the French text is specified with the abbreviation Nn.
2. I would guess that the change of title was encouraged, if not actually enforced, by the presence on many Canadian bookshelves of Mikhael Bulgakov's theatrical novel, Englished as *Black Snow*.
3. See the back cover of the French edition for a "negative" of Aquin.
4. *Point de fuite* (Montreal: Le Cercle du livre de France, 1971), p.104.
5. Cf. the epigraph to *L'Antiphonaire*, where a similar quadrille schematizes character relationships.
6. The most Aquinian in theme of Robbe-Grillet's film projects is *Le magicien* (1964), printed as a synopsis in *Obliques* 16-17 (1978), 259-60. Violence moves from artifice out to reality as a film—director makes the movie of a composer killing the dancer (the director's wife) for whom he is composing a ballet. Whether Aquin could have had access to either this "projet" or to *Glissements* is hard to say.
7. See Roland Barthes, John Barth, William Gass and others for analogous use of these metaphors. Françoise Iqbal, *Hubert Aquin: Romancier* (Quebec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1978), pp. 241, 246, gives a fuller discussion of the Sylvie-écriture equivalence, and Susan Suleiman, "Reading Robbe-Grillet: Sadism and Text in *Projet pour une révolution à New York*," *Romanic Review* 68 (1977), 43-62, gives the best account do date of "the relation between Sadic fantasy and the theory of the self-engendered text." John J. Clayton, "Alain Robbe-Grillet: The Aesthetics of Sado-Masochism," *Massachusetts Review* 18 (1977), is especially good on the "frozen life of the aesthetic vision."
8. I have paraphrased and abridged from André Gardies' transcription of Robbe-Grillet's lengthy comment, in *Alain Robbe-Grillet Cinéma d'Aujourd'hui* 70 (Paris: Editions Seghers, 1972), 74.
9. Iqbal stresses the negative, Medusa-like, scarlet woman elements in Sylvie's character as well as her primary role as "la belle captive," or innocent victim.
10. His ritual sacrifice could be interestingly compared to the only other one to take place in the ice recently, D.H. Lawrence's in *The Woman Who Rode Away*, which Kate Millet, in *Sexual Politics* has already aptly compared to *The Story of O*.
11. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Selected Prose Poems, Essays, and Letters*, tr. & ed. Bradford Cook (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1956), pp. 91, 93. Mallarmé's prose is full of points apposite to reading Aquin: the symbolist Hamlet of *Hamlet* and *Hamlet and Fortinbras*, the "glaciers of aesthetics" the "threatening [glittering] peak of the Absolute," and many others.

12. From *Pompes Funèbres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1953), p.73.
13. "Onnagata," *Death in Midsummer* (New York: New Directions, 1963), p.145.
14. See Rikaturu Fukuda, *National Literature* 15:7 (1978), 11-12.
15. As Leonard Sugden has briefly pointed out, in "Hubert Aquin: Proteus in Despair," *Essays in Canadian Writing* 11 (1978), 73-96.
16. "Profane and Scared Reality in Jean Genet's Theatre," in *Genet: A Collection of Critical Essays*. ed. Peter Brooks and Joseph Halpern (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1979), p. 175.
17. Jacques Guicharnaud, *The Modern French Theatre* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1967), p. 274, 259.