# RE-READING LINDA HUTCHEON ON *BEAUTIFUL LOSERS, PROCHAIN ÉPISODE* AND *TROU DE MÉMOIRE*

*David Leahy*

## "[D]riven underground into discourse"

Hubert Aquin's *Prochain Épisode* (*PE*) and *Trou de Mémoire* (*TM*) and Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers* (*BL*) are frequently identified as major signposts of the advent of the postmodern novel in Canada and Quebec. The influence of these texts upon writers, readers and critics has been profound, especially in terms of how we think about the form and cultural work of postmodern literature within the two respective literary canons. An important case in point is Linda Hutcheon's influential work *Narcissistic Narrative* (*NN*), the final chapter of which uses the aforementioned novels to attempt to prove how reading "the narcissistic novel as incitement to revolutionary activity would be the ultimate defence of self-conscious fiction against claims of self-preening introversion" (155). Hutcheon's political claims for the event potential of Cohen's *Beautiful Losers* are much more muted in her more recent work, *The Canadian Postmodern* (*TCP*); more cognizant of the political limitations of literary discourse. Nevertheless, her critique in The Canadian Postmodern of Stephen Scobie's argument "that readers of Beautiful Losers are not allowed to participate in the action, that we are held outside, prevented from indulging in the usual novelistic identification," still places a surprising amount of faith in the reader's inevitable "*participat[ion]*, even if we do not *identify* " (original emphasis, 27).

How such "participation" is supposed to lead to readers' appropriation of postmodern fictions as a "vehicle of change" (*NN* 3), as Hutcheon broadly characterizes their cultural function, unless they "identify" on some ideological level remains unclear, but this qualifier is suggestive of her gradual critical movement away from political idealism. This article does not deal substantively with this

trajectory as evidenced in Hutcheon's *The Canadian Postmodern* or *The Politics of Postmodernism*: 1) because I am as interested in trying to call for a materialist purchase of the cited novels as I am for Canadian and Québécois literary criticism, and 2) because I believe that my critiques of her earlier "political" readings of said novels are worthwhile insofar as *Narcissistic Narrative* will obviously continue to be influential for some time to come. The latter point is particularly related to my skepticism about placing too much faith in a presumed general awareness of the "progress/ ion/ iveness" of her thought. For instance, as most teachers are especially aware, many students' appropriation of critical texts often pay little attention to the historical development of a critical thinker's œuvre. Clearly, Linda Hutcheon's contributions to contemporary critical studies are great enough to warrant beginning to attempt to historicize her critical development and I hope this brief article will encourage others to do so, whether out of agreement, adversity, or both.

Hutcheon's readings in *Narcissistic Narrative* of *Beautiful Losers*, *Prochain Épisode* and *Trou de Mémoire* leave little doubt that these novels mark radical formal shifts and that their discourses regarding sexual morals and practices, "the sexualization of politics" (159), and Quebec nationalism were radical in their contemporary context. However, what exactly is "revolutionary" about what the *ideal* reader/participant is incited to do in these texts? Incitement is no "ultimate defence," especially if it is based upon faulty or contradictory political analyses, or complicit in perpetuating ethnic chauvinism, sexism, or bourgeois values. Nor can the potential political meanings and the ideological effects of novels be ultimately reduced to a binary opposition between declarative or interrogative texts, or reading strategies; an idea which is implicit in Hutcheon's suggestion that "we only run into difficulty if we insist on reading" *Beautiful Losers*—or, I presume, the likes of Aquin's texts—"as a realist novel" (*TCP* 27).

Hutcheon's "revolutionary" agenda for the "narcissistic" or "post-modern" text idealistically privileges the individual subject/ reader over socially contradictory, material circumstances, implicitly centering the basis of social revolution in the individual imagination rather than in social practice. The influence of the Roland Barthes of the period from *Elements of Semiology* (1967) through to *The Pleasure of the Text* (1975) is very much evident here; the post-*Mythologies* Barthes of that heady *Tel quel* period when the reader

was recognized as free to co-produce texts with little concern for intentionality or the signified; when the pleasure of the text was imagined as reaching a climactic *jouissance* in the death of meaning. However, *Narcissistic Narrative*'s appropriation of Barthes appears to underplay his caution that the writerly text only exists in theory. So too, Hutcheon's sidelong glances to Brecht's aesthetic of *Verfremdung*, or *estrangement effect*, and his faith in formal play, could have perhaps been well served by a greater attention to his critique of Lukács's formalism "as a therapeutic warning against the permanent temptation of idealism present in any ideological analysis as such, [that] professional proclivity of intellectuals for methods that need no external verification" (Jameson, "Reflections" 200). Without this lens Brecht's materialist notions of revolution are transubstantiated into a faith in an ahistorical, nonconjunctural, revolutionary subject.

While there are instances in which Hutcheon has distanced herself from the *Tel quel* group—i.e., in her refusal "to determine the value or validity of the group's theory or practice" (*NN* 125), or in her doubts about the effectiveness of the transgressions of their "more radical texts" (*TCP* 83)—her approach and its contradictions in *Narcissistic Narrative* are quite consistent with the transition from the Structuralist-Marxist and Freudian-Marxist tendencies of *Tel quel* between 1966-1977, when literature was defined as a form of social practice and individualism was rejected but ever present via a rather naive faith in sexual liberation; to the continued emphasis during the declining years of *Tel quel* (1977-1982) upon textual discontinuities and indeterminacies which became reconciled with the performative "I," individualist oriented genres and what might be characterized as a neo-liberal rejection of emancipatory politics. Hutcheon's absorption of these contradictory tendencies are perhaps most evident in the tentativeness of even her most "revolutionary" claims for postmodernism. This is most clearly signalled by a prefatory remark to her readings of Cohen's and Aquin's novels in *Narcissistic Narrative* : "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" (155). The adverbs "perhaps" and "even," the verb "lure," and the transitive verb "seduced," not only suggest the self-conscious guardedness of this closing thesis of *Narcissistic Narrative*, but the doubt that readers can be artistically "seduced" into "direct political action."

As Bruce Robbins suggests regarding the politics of theory, "it is only the configuration of forces at the given moment, and not some universal criterion, that determines the political value of a given . . . interpretive authority" (8-9); or, I might add, of a given fictive referent or discourse. Part of Terry Eagleton's critique of Barthes' The Pleasure of the Text as a sign of revolutionary disillusionment in the aftermath of the failure of May 1968 is also worth recalling:

> . . . all theory, ideology, determinate meaning, social commitment have become, it appears, inherently terroristic, and 'writing' is the answer to them all. Writing, or reading-as-writing, is the last uncolonized enclave in which the intellectual can play, savouring the sumptuousness of the signifier in heady disregard of whatever might be going on in the Elysée palace or the Renault factories . . . . The student movement was flushed off the streets and driven underground into discourse. (141-42)

"Novelistic 'reality'," Hutcheon writes, "has always been fictive," and "[y]et it is a paradigmatic order" (*NN* 47). But because it is a paradigmatic order, that is to say because it performs cultural work, it is not necessarily consistent or coherent in its ideological implications or receptions. In other words, as much as Hutcheon's analysis is quite successful in proving that the works in question are not as self-absorbed as has sometimes been argued, *Narcissistic Narrative* too readily accepts these novels' self-referential revolutionary potential as facts—and in the process fails to take enough account of their, and her own, historically bound discourses and contradictions.

Central to Hutcheon's analysis is the idea that "it is the new role of the reader that is the vehicle of . . . change" (*NN* 3). In what Hutcheon calls "metafictional narcissism," "[t]he reader is . . . forced to face his responsibility toward the text, that is, toward the novelistic world he is creating through the accumulated fictive referents of literary language" (*NN* 27). The accumulation of these referents is said to "gradually construct a 'heterocosm', that is, another cosmos, an ordered and harmonious system" (*NN* 88). Accordingly, Hutcheon privileges the fact that "[b]oth [Cohen and Aquin] work to frustrate the reader's attempts to systematize" (*NN* 157). Yet aside from the novelistic attempts to deconstruct and challenge unitary notions of subjectivity, what is revolutionary about this aesthetic and epistemological strategy within a social order which, from a cultural-materialist perspective, can be con-

ceived of as socio-economically and ideologically anti-systemic to the point of fracturing individual identities at the expense of collective social action? Aquin may urge "the modern writer to abandon any expressivity . . . any message" (*NN* 156), but this is no guarantee that the texts' discourses are not laden with retrogressive or at least contradictory messages which may be consumed and validated under the aegis of postmodernist ambiguity. Similarly, Cohen's *Beautiful Losers* may frustrate "conventional notions of narrative" in the "merg[ing]" of "characters" and "time sequences" (*NN* 158), but the resultant synchronism can also be read as reinforcing a conservative metaphysic which is as fraught with philosophical and ideological problems as any social-realist aesthetic.

In citing Aquin on the new role of the reader, Hutcheon suggests that "[t]he equation of reading and writing, the 'échange entre le lecteur et l'écrivain' . . . is what allows for a total breaking out of the limits of introverted self-informing narcissism" (*NN* 161). Unfortunately, Hutcheon neglects to quote Aquin's immediate qualifying statement that this "échange . . . correspond au degrée d'implication et de compréhension du lecteur" (Aquin, Bloc Éraqitues 147-8). To assume that the reader's paradoxical distance from and potential revels in the referents and artificiality of the metafictional text will lead them to revolutionary action is to assume a pretextual, or co-terminus, revolutionary consciousness on the part of the reader—including a sufficient knowledge of history, politics and theory—which will allow the *lecteur/lectrice* to translate the formal and revolutionary potential of the *écrit* into a theoretical and social practice. The formalist driven notion that metafictional texts necessarily allow such "a total breaking out" is also questionable when, ironically, contemporary post-structuralist theories have done so much to clarify the contradictory multiplicities of our many subject positions. As reception theory suggests, a multivalent text like *Prochain Épisode* is only one of a multiplicity of affective "texts"—including one's familial myths/ narratives, the authority of interpellative State Apparatuses, gender positions, *et*-cetera—experienced during the highly interdiscursive and multivalent act/s of reading. We are constantly constructing and being re-constructed in the act of reading/co-producing. The anti-mimetic postmodernist text's formal play may lend itself to being co-produced, but in more un/conscious ways than can lend themselves to one stable theoretical, ideological, or critical reading.

This is not to deny the imaginative stimulus nor the event potential of a challenging metafictional work, but to query the political idealism of the appropriation of Aquin, or any other postmodernist writer, in the assumption that a metafictional text's effect upon a "co-productive," potentially "revolutionary" reader is as influential or primary as other material and discursive factors— such as one's class, trade or profession, gender, ethnicity, or degrees of active political engagement.

Hutcheon's *interrogative* aesthetic also leads to another quandary. She notes that "[n]o one demands that Tolkien's Middle Earth be a counter to our empirical world, just that it be a coherent heterocosm"(*NN* 92). This observation is obviously pertinent to the decentred, radically anti-subjective content and modes of *Beautiful Losers, Prochain Épisode* and *Trou de Mémoire.* Yet as Fredric Jameson has observed, what often makes a fictive heterocosm coherent for a reader is its reproduction of or adherence to, and hence its interpellative shoring up of existent, recognizable ideologies and their material imperatives (see Jameson, "Reflections"). This is just as true at the level of form, when "form is apprehended as content" or "sedimented content" (Jameson, *Political Unconscious* 99).

A case in point is Cohen's and Aquin's parodic use of various modes of recording personal impressions, such as the epistolary, journal and memoir genres. In *Narcissistic Narrative,* and in her other works, Hutcheon identifies much of metafiction's revolutionary impetus with parody: "as a way to new form which is just as serious and valid . . . as the form it dialectically attempts to surpass" (*NN* 25). In *Beautiful Losers, Prochain Épisode* and *Trou de Mémoire* we are offered a wide range of generic parodies of the anthropological essay, biography, and pornography; the murder mystery, spy, history and travelogue genres; the *roman à cléf* and even political speeches. These personal forms of genre structurally dominate and frame much of *Beautiful Losers* and *Trou de Mémoire,* allowing the authors to present characters without intruding and, especially in *Trou de Mémoire,* several contradictory points of view of the same events. But there are moments when these parodies become almost too implausible, as when the excessive psychopathic memoirs punningly referred to in the title of *Trou de Mémoire* can be read as part of a terrorist's elaborate scam to assume a new identity. But it is also these very tendencies of self-absorbed, deceptively honest, verbose scribbling which have historically plagued the

memoir, journal and epistolary genres which Cohen and Aquin, through parody, frequently turn into a strong suit; as when the novels' parodic self-referentiality, and the implausibilities of the discourses, discourage us from naively identifying with the texts.

Regardless, this generic strategy has problems which are not resolved by the authors' recourse to parody. Firstly, it limits the characters to monologues which, while "internally dialogic" in their "continued sideways glance at another person" (Bakhtin 32) and their "preservation of a gap" of incomplete understanding or "imperfect translation" (Bakhtin xxxii-iii)—as when the editor of Magnant's ravings in *Trou de Mémoire* has trouble making sense of them—still militate against textual counter-narratives. Secondly, consistent with the general lack of counter-narratives, none of the letters in these texts has an explicit respondent. The lack of counter-narratives and respondents can be credited to the authors' contract with the reader as co-creator, and these absences/silences might be read as signifying the alienation of the characters. However, while the plurilinguistic mode is obviously more predominant in Cohen's *Beautiful Losers* than in Aquin's more narrativistically controlled texts, the Jesuits' voices are monochromatically devout and hypocritical at the same time. In other words, their binary discourse is made no more complex than is necessary to a rather mechanical parody. This is an important reminder of how one should not confuse "la pluralité des discours dans le roman, qui est un processus de stratification, avec le dialogisme" (Belleau 161).

It can also be argued that whatever parodic potential exists in *Beautiful Losers* ' rather carnivalesque scene at the "Main Shooting and Game Alley" is greatly undercut by the novel's closing paragraph which, while ostensibly "rented to the Jesuits" (259), reads like one of Cohen's typical subjective love lyrics. Coupled as it is with a religiously loaded signifying chain—"He will uncover His face. He will not leave me alone. I will spread His name in Parliament. I will welcome His silence in pain" (259-60)—this first-person closure can be read as romantically privileging the genius of the author who may "[w]elcome . . . you who read me today," but who assures us that "you . . . miss me forever in your trip to the end" (260). Even granting the ambiguous potential of this sudden reappearance of a first-person speaker—whose discourse is too confident to be taken for that of the "I" of Book I—

the religiously romantic signs and discourse are hardly revolutionary in terms of their sedimented content.

## The traffic in women

A feminist or a Bakhtinian perspective should also cause us to query these texts' limited or silenced female discourses, be they direct, indirect, or cited, in all three of the novels in question. According to Allon White and Peter Stallybrass "what is socially peripheral is . . . frequently *symbolically* central . . . . The low-Other is despised and denied at the level of political organization and social being whilst it is instrumentally constitutive of the shared imaginary repertoires of the dominant culture" (5-6). I am hard pressed to find better literary examples of this contradictory phenomenon than in Cohen's and Aquin's symbolic privileging of women. Both authors' texts evidence several disturbing instances of highly symbolic females being made simultaneously peripheral and/or disappeared. For instance, throughout *Beautiful Losers* women are presented as being *jouissance* incarnate. (Or should we refer to them as phallocentric muses for male orgasmic writing?) By these sights *Beautiful Losers'* closure can be read as imploding into its own mythopoesis only *after* the old man—a thinly veiled combination of I, F and Tekakwitha's Uncle—sexually eats the incarnation of Tekakwitha-Edith-Isis in her "fast car." In *The Canadian Postmodern* Hutcheon reads the subsequent pop culture transformation of the old man "into a movie of Ray Charles" (*BL* 258) as per- haps allegorically signaling Canada's "future fate (turning into an American fiction)" (*TCP* 29). But what is to prevent a reader from constructing this tableau as a symbol of metaphysical transcendence, as a number of my undergraduate students have frequently done? Especially since the trinitarian woman as saint, wife and fertility goddess can be read as the romantic vehicle and holy manna en route to male transcendence. If, on the other hand, one chooses to read these mythopoetic signifiers as being indicative of fictionality taking precedence over other potential signifieds, the question remains as to how this literary practice and its ambiguous semiotic field/s can be translated within our present historical context into progressive political thought, let alone practice, unless one reads against the grain of *Beautiful Losers'* mythopoetics.

In *Prochain Épisode* and *Trou de Mémoire,* the female figures of K and Joan are respectively associated with, and symbolic of, what the male revolutionaries are fighting for, but especially sex as a liberating activity—as revolution itself. "Quelle violente et douce prémonition de la révolution nationale s'opérait sur cette étroite couche recouverte de couleurs et de nos deux corps nus, flambants, unis dans leur démence rythmée" (*PE* 72). In *Prochain Épisode* K is symbolic of Kébec itself, of the land as woman, and woman as body as novel—"ton corps merveilleux que je réinvente" (11). In *Trou de Mémoire* Joan's corpse is also a symbol of Québec as "un cadavre encombrant" (48). Like the intertextual discourse in *Prochain Épisode* on Balzac's supposed impotence and "la puissance triomphale de Ferragus pour venger l'inavouable défaite" (53), male potency and empowerment are consistently associated with the penetration and conquest of the female body, while the extended metaphor of woman *qua* "pays natal" constantly naturalizes the male physical occupation and possession of the female.

It would be comforting if Cohen and Aquin could be proven—as Hutcheon has sweepingly written of "women and American black artists"—to be "us[ing] parody to challenge the male white tradition from within, [in] their use of irony to implicate and yet to critique" ("Beginning" 21). F's confession to I of his "Telephone Dance" with Edith, "our index fingers . . . in each other's ears" (31-2) is clearly a transgression which resists "that most ignoble form of real estate, the possessive occupation and tyranny over two square inches of human flesh, the wife's cunt" (13). But Hutcheon's reading of "[Joan's] murder" in *Trou de Mémoire* as "both an attempt to destroy a dominating force and a sign of the impotence of the dominated" (*NN* 159) fails to address how this symbolic usurpation of Anglo power is also dependent upon a misogynistic scenario. Such erasure is also indicative of how women are written in these texts but they do not write. The possible exception is Rachel Ruskin of *Trou de Mémoire* who supposedly edits Magnant's and Olympe's writings (I say supposedly, because Rachel may just be another cypher for Magnant). Rachel is also a victim of rape by Magnant: "qui, s'ennuyant follement de Joan, est venu jusqu'à Lagos pour en retrouver l'image—cherchant en vain l'éclat de sa chevelure dans mes cheveux" (203). Hutcheon reads "hope for the future—[in] Rachel's child of rape" (*NN* 159), but it can be co-produced as an assimilationist "hope for the future" which implictly denies the de-

sirability or validity of ethnic difference. Consistent with other reactionary aspects of the text's nationalist discourse Rachel's acceptance of her child of rape is associated with the erasure of her Anglophone self and the denial of her past as the only way to end the cycle of ethno-linguistic violence: "Il a fallu beaucoup de morts pour abolir mon passé, tout ce passé . . . . Et je veux que mon enfant soit plus heureux que son père et qu'il n'apprenne jamais comment il a été conçu, ni mon ancien nom" (203-204). Whether we read these or other passages as the words of Magnant passing himself off as Rachel, or as those of Rachel, s/he is still defining herself, or being defined, in terms of Magnant's phallic power over her. The allowance can be made that conventionally the masculine pronoun "il" includes the feminine. However, Aquin's historically limited masculinist language is hardly known for being cognizant of the revolutionary potential of the deconstructive "doubleness" of gendered *différance*. Magnant's/Rachel's discourse is also problematic insofar as it assumes that s/he will give birth to a male child.

The pervasiveness of the violence against women in these texts, the constitution of all of the subjects within phallocentric terms of reference, and the silencing of female subjectivity due to a lack of female discourses, suggest that the supposedly ironic sexual self-consciousness of these texts is more accurately indicative of sixties male dominant youth culture and the very kind of male sexual liberation which gave the modern women's movement much of its impetus; the very kind of romantic Left chauvinism which imagined "nos frères mourront dans les embuscades et que les femmes seront seules à fêter le 24 juin" (*PE* 94); the very kind of *Tel quel* literary marxism where the revolutionary rejection of individualism "est cependant réintroduite par la volonté d'émancipation sexuelle et instinctuelle (celle du mâle étouffé sous le joug de la 'mère bourgeoise', . . . de la mère tout court)" (Gagné 487).

## "You say you want a revolution"?

The ideal reader/participant of *Trou de Mémoire* is not only invited to realize the power of words—"les paroles sacrementelles qui, de fait, ont engendré plus de réalité que jamais mes entreprises ne l'avaient fait" (46)—but Magnant's discourse ennunciates a very particular kind of revolutionary ardour. In spite of the politically

sympathetic associative references to Cuba in *Prochain Épisode,* and Magnant's stirring calls for revolution in *Trou de Mémoire,* the revolutionary agenda in Aquin's texts, as Ben-Zion Shek has argued, is not "a social revolution . . . but rather a (bourgeois) *national* one" (281). Granted, Shek clearly overlooks the dramatic irony of the bourgeois fantasies of the protagonist of the novel within the novel in *Prochain Épisode,* as his creator languishes in a psychiatric prison cell—"Si j'étais millionnaire, j'achèterais une villa" (40); "j'achèterai une maison, tout près de La Nation . . . en retrait de l'histoire" (78-9). Shek also fails to take historical account of the profound influence of Frantz Fanon's thought on leftists in the 1960s and the related intentional shock value of "Magnant's contempt for his own people" (Shek 281) as a "sous-race de colonisés" (*PE* 32); a discourse which Hutcheon convincingly argues is a revolutionary strategy to manoeuvre the reader, like the text's anamorphosis leitmotif of Holbein's *Les ambassadeurs,* into recognizing the traumatic oppressive roots of Québécois cultural amnesia or *Trou de mémoire* (*NN* 161).

And yet, like the anamorphic death's head—which glaringly underlines the inevitable end of all power and life—the textual counters to Québécois cultural amnesia are predominantly from a nihilistic perspective. As a result, *Trou de Mémoire* never acknowledges the positive, popular historical forces of the epoch of the Quiet Revolution—the successes of the RIN, the rapidly growing and militant trade union movement, improvements in mass education,—without which a text like *Trou de Mémoire* would not likely have been written and published, let alone so well received. While it can be said that Aquin was too immersed in said historical moment to acknowledge or accept its positive socio-political aspects, my historical annotation foregrounds the potentially binary nihilism of Aquin's texts' cultural work. Similarly, Hutcheon's acceptance of F's conceptualization in *Beautiful Losers* of "the horrible truth about Canada" as a "chain of victimizers turned victims" (*NN* 158-9) underrates the complex nature of said cycle of oppression. *Beautiful Losers'* potentially most radical device is its relentless critique of the ideological biases of historical texts and of the writing of historiography, but in spite of this Canada's "conquests" are largely presented, no matter how parodically, as the results of antagonistic ethnic conflicts amongst the indigenes, the French, and the English which take precedence over their complex relations with patriarchy and capitalism.

This simplified vicious chain is also central to Aquin's two novels. A fundamental way it is made manifest in *Prochain Épisode* and *Trou de Mémoire* is that struggle for the nationalist cause is almost exclusively represented by clandestine, anarchic violence. Ironically, unlike Aquin's brilliant analysis of the tactics, successes and failures of the 1837-38 rebellion in his essay "L'art de la défaite", Magnant's anarchic strategy—"Revolution or Suicide"–and Magnant's and Olympe's suicides can be read as symbolically defeatist. For even if this very negativity, the anamorphic recognition of the tragedies of the colonized, can shock us into a rejection of political oppression does this mean we should accept or gloss over these texts' privileging of anarchic violence and the implicit denial of the revolutionary potential of democratic historical blocs? As I suggested above, we can hardly fault Aquin for writing these texts before more recent independent left analyses of the reasons for the setbacks and defeats of the New Left, the FLQ, and the sectarian left of the 1960s and 1970s. But it has become a truism in Quebec left nationalist circles that while the anarchic violence of the FLQ obviously forced the oppressive hand of the Canadian state, it also demonstrated the vulnerability and ultimate ineffectiveness of clandestine, inflexible tactics within an advanced capitalist context.

A similar problem arises when we consider Hutcheon's reading of the political/aesthetic *mise en abyme* of the Ray Charles movie in *Beautiful Losers*. It can be argued that contrary to Hutcheon's reading the "final movie image" of Ray Charles, the "ultimate beautiful loser," does not "quell the revolution". (NN 158-59), nor does "[t]he revolution of the 'second-chancers' fail" (TCP 32), since there is no symbol, character or event at the conclusion of the novel, other than an amorphous pop culture "Happening", which can be construed as representing a socially revolutionary alternative to the status quo. "F", the Québécois nationalist revolutionary, ostensibly escapes from the psychiatric wing of the prison hospital thanks to his comrades. But his subsequent metaphysical merging with the apolitical "I", and the resulting "IF's" transubstantiation into the transcendental effluence of a Ray Charles' movie, can be read as compromising the text's contestatory potential as much as it echoes the novel's discourse on the neo-colonial status of all oppressed peoples as "New Jews" who must confuse "nostalgic theories of Negro supremacy" (*BL* 172).

Hutcheon rightfully observes that "[b]oth Cohen and Aquin overtly present Quebec political rally scenes and both do so in similar

erotic terms" (*NN* 159). But she does not address the possibility that in the process these scenarios may also inadvertently reduce politics to a mere substitute for the private libidinal act. Magnant's characterization of his audience at a nationalist rally as "me demandait, ni plus ni moins de la violer" is doubtless an ironic reference to his earlier wish that "[le] conquis absolu serait de comprendre pourquoi et de quelle incroyable façon il se fait enculer par l'histoire"; yet Magnant's nationalist audience is still disturbingly reduced to a slogan hungry willing rape victim. "I's" encounter in *Beautiful Losers* with a female nationalist fanatic can similarly be read as parodying male pornographic fantasies, insofar as the narrator's partner, "a female hand," "nylon-sheathed breasts" and other sundry parts, is unseen—disembodied—faceless—and disappeared before she is given a fully fledged human identity. In the process, the male fantasy of an unknown sexually accommodating female is associated with the life blood of nationalist politics. "Blood! Give us back our Blood!" shouts the crowd, while "I," the narrator, shouts "Rub harder!" to the "female hand" (121) as he frantically desires the engorgement of his penis. Even if we read such parodic sequences as humorous analogies of history as the sexually charged opiate of the people, they still make politics synonymous with libidinal drives—a 1960s trace of Reichian analysis perhaps, but one which needs to be more theorized in the light of more recent interest in the politics of the body. What is more, there is an implicit corollary in *Beautiful Losers* that it is libidinal drives, and not a complex web of historical, material forces (including the site of the body, as opposed to focussing on it), which are ultimately at the heart of politics, and especially the politics of protest.

*****

In closing, I trust it is apparent that the ways in which I have tried to co-produce the above novels and some of Linda Hutcheon's readings of them are not the only ways in which they can be reconstructed; that my system, no matter how eclectic, has only activated a finite number of questions and possibilities for all of the texts in question. This disclaimer is meant as yet another reminder of how, if we accept the notion that the narcissistic novel puts the onus upon a new role for the reader, we must not lose sight of the fact that the reader's act is still a secondary one—no matter how open-ended the text—and reliant upon, as Aquin

put it, "l'implication et le compréhension du lecteur." As I have tried to argue, in the flux, discontinuities, and contradictions of such *implication* and *comprehension*, the sexist and politically ambivalent discourses of Cohen's and Aquin's novels are just as likely to leave the reader ideologically confused, politically passive, and/or accepting of literature as a means of temporary fantasy, escapism, and formalistic play, unless the reader's personal, social, material conditions, and ideological commitments warrant or demand other kinds of readings.

Hutcheon's faith in the social influence of postmodern fiction's *interrogative* contract with the reader can be inspirational, but one has to seriously question the extent to which such texts necessarily lead to "a total breaking out of the limits of introverted self-informing narcissism" (*NN* 161). As I have tried to argue, the privileging of the metafictional exchange between the writer and reader can give it a relatively ahistoric primacy which does not take enough account of how we are constantly being constructed by other discourses and material factors. In the light of recent post-structuralist, feminist, and cultural studies theories the novels of Cohen or Aquin are rich postmodernist terrain, but we can neglect the discontinuities and ruptures of their original socio-cultural contexts and on-going reception to our peril. No text, from *Ur*, to Balzac's novels, to *Catcher in the Rye*, to *Trou de Mémoire* remains a constant Sign. Self-conscious fiction can help us become more conscious readers, but it is only one of many potentially contradictory tactics in our development of dealienating literary and social practices.

## NOTES

[1] The terms *declarative* and *interrogative* are borrowed from Catherine Belsey's appropriation of Benveniste's terminology. See *Critical Practice*. London: Methuen, 1980, 91-92. A "declarative" text, like the classic realist novel, seemingly "impart[s] 'knowledge' to a reader whose position is thereby stabilized" by the seeming transparence of the text. An "interrogative" text, like Cohen's or Aquin's novels, "disrupts the unity of the reader by discouraging identification with a unified subject

of the enunciation." (The Barthian terms the *lisible* and the *scriptible* are more or less equivalent.) Hutcheon's ideal reader/participant is an interrogative reader who is presumably empowered as such by the interrogative strategies of a text.

[2] See Jorge Larrain's *The Concept of Ideology*. Athens, Georgia: U of Georgia P, 1979, chap. no.5: "Ideology and structural analysis", for a cogent critique of this kind of "revolutionary" idealism.

[3] "With a technique not unlike that of Brecht's alienation effect, the parody and self-reflection of narcissistic narrative . . . force a new, more active, thinking relationship upon [the reader]" (*NN* 49).

[4] See Marie Gagné's PhD Thesis (1990) for an impressive analysis of the evolution of the political, philosophical and aesthetic tendencies of *Tel quel* and its associates. In mentioning the ideological implications of the Barthian and Tel quelian influences upon *Narcissistic Narrative* I have not meant to imply that Barthes and *Tel quel* were not intimately linked. I merely found it to be a convenient shorthand way to include and problematize their general influences.

[5] This is there area where I find Belleau's posthumous text, *Notre Rabelais*, most disappointing. For instance, in response to Wilfrid Lemoine's questions as to why there is an absence of women in Rabelais's texts, Belleau responds that the reason is first and foremost aesthetic, that otherwise there would be no need for the quest in Rabelais's third, fourth and fifth books. His argument that Rabelais's texts uniquely affirm the equality of the sexes is just as unconvincing (see 44-49).

[6] I am grateful to Heather Murray for first making me aware of the text by Stallybrass and White and their cited critical paradigm.

[7] For instance, see Jacques Cossette-Trudel's comments on the FLQ's exclusion of women from direct action in "L'histoire séquestrée: 1) Quand le FLQ importe autant que 'le crime d'Ovide Plouffe.'" *Le Devoir* 12 septembre, 1990, 7.

[8] The parodic suicides of Thelma and Louise in the recent women's road movie, *Thelma and Louise*, can be read similarly; though I have to grant that its send-up of the blaze of glory endings of men's movies, such as that of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, probably more than makes up for the symbolic defeatism.

[9] Definitions of Antonio Gramsci's notion of "historical blocs" are notoriously open to interpretation. I am using it here as it has come to be used by Stuart Hall, as a sign for the necessary willingness of "progressive" groups to "compromise" and strategically ally, while respecting tactical and ideological differences, in mutually supportive struggles against dominant cultures and states.

[10] For instance, I think the animated dildo sequence of *Beautiful Losers* is less ideologically problematic (though many of my students have been skeptical about its psycho-sexual merits) if it is reads as a parody, like the "telephone dance" episode, of modern alienation from the body.

## WORKS CITED

Aquin, Hubert. *Blocs Érratiques*. Montréal: Les Éditions Quinze, 1977.

_____. *Prochain Épisode*. Le Cercle du Livre de France, 1965.

_____. *Trou de Mémoire*. Le Cercle du Livre de France, 1968.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis: UP of Minnesota, 1984.

Belleau, André. *Notre Rabelais*. Montréal: Boréal, 1990.

Cohen, Leonard. *Beautiful Losers*. New York: Viking P, 1966.

Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. London: Basil Blackwell, 1983.

Gagné, Marie. *Le Mouvement "Tel Quel": Neo-Avant-Garde et Postmodernité*. PhD Thesis, McGill University: Département de langue et littérature françaises, 1990.

Hutcheon, Linda. "Beginning to theorize postmodernism." *Textual Practice* 1.1 (1987): 10-31.

_____. *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction*. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1988.

_____. *Narcissistic Narrative: the metafictional paradox*. London: Methuen, 1984.

Jameson, Fredric. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981.

_____. "Reflections in Conclusion," *Aesthetics and Politicals*. Trans. and ed. Ronald Taylor. London: New Left Books, 1987.

_____. "Word-Reduction in LeGuin: The Emergency of Utopian Narrative." *Science-Fiction Studies*. 2.3 (Nov. 1975): 196-213.

Robbins, Bruce. "The Politics of Theory." *Social Text*. 6.3 (1987): 3-18

Shek, Ben-Zion. *Social Realism in the French-Canadian Novel*. Montréal: Harvest House, 1977.

White, Allon and Stallybrass, Peter. *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*. London: Methuen, 1986.