

THE WRITING OF FUTURE REVOLT IN
BLAIS'S *UNE SAISON DANS LA VIE
D'EMMANUEL* AND AQUIN'S
PROCHAIN ÉPISODE

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Le commencement n'est le commencement qu'à
la fin.

Schelling¹

At first glance Hubert Aquin's *Prochain épisode* and Marie-Claire Blais's *Une Saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel* seem to have little in common. They differ vastly in style, and their authors do not share a political milieu. And yet upon closer examination these novels, both published in 1965, are strikingly similar in their emphasis on death and writing² as a theme of the future. The future looms large despite the centrality of death because both texts figure death as being infinitely readable, as having no terminus point. The thematics of death and writing are furthermore presented with a reader in mind, a reader who will pick up where the novel left off and take on the 'future' indicated by the text, who will, in other words, read the lack of closure. The reader—and herein these novels seek to and succeed in communicating their 'project' to the reader—becomes embroiled not in death, but in the continuity of each of these two texts, in the "prochain épisode," in this future which is suggested but not written in the text. Aquin's novel ends with tentative closure, with reference to the next episode which cannot yet be written; Blais's novel ends with an ellipsis following the reiteration of the death of its hero. Her novel suggests but does not write the future life of Emmanuel.

To underline similarities between *Une Saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel* and *Prochain épisode* is not only, however, to examine

themes common to both narratives. It is also implicitly to extract these texts from a context and a discourse which pitted them against each other, and to suggest that looking back now upon these novels of the 60s reveals a historical context of which they both partake and an agenda presented in their writings which is not wholly dissimilar. It is furthermore to suggest that these two authors can be read together whereas to this date Aquin has been treated as a political writer and Marie-Claire Blais has not.³ Her texts have had a wide and varied reception but they have rarely been seen as addressing the political context of Quebec in the 1960s. I will begin this article by showing that these texts have a common theme, namely that of death and future revolt. I will then analyse the status of this future revolt as it is articulated in each text and argue that Blais's novel is not only predicated upon the need for change (if not revolution) as is Aquin's, but also that it is readable as being more "revolutionary" in fact than Aquin's more overtly political text.

It is necessary here to backtrack in order to explain the centrality of death in Aquin's open-ended, future-oriented text, since the theme of death is initially less apparent in *Prochain épisode* than it is in Blais's novel. In *Prochain épisode*, the narrator is writing a spy novel to pass the time he is spending under house arrest in a psychiatric clinic, a dead time. This novel is there "pour peupler mon vide" (11) the narrator writes. But the act of writing is not a meaningless task. For while its role is partly to fill in a void, it is nevertheless productive for that very reason: "J'écris à perte," the narrator admits, "Mais je mens, car depuis quelques minutes, je sais bien que je gagne quelque chose à ce jeu, je gagne du temps: un temps mort que je couvre de biffures et de phonèmes" (15). The spy novel he is writing—a deadly tale that fills in this 'dead' time—is, in its turn, predicated on the act of killing. For the hero of this novel within a novel, a revolutionary, is assigned the task of killing the counter-revolutionary spy H. de Heutz. No simple task, this, since the 'other' (H. de Heutz, the counterrevolutionary) proves to be very possibly identical to the hero. To kill him would then be an act of suicide, and, where revolutionary politics are concerned, also an act of self-betrayal. This suggests, as Ross Chambers has written, that the Quebec Revolution that Aquin's novel is ostensibly about is caught in a difficult bind and possibly

condemned to failure: if the counter-revolutionary is oneself, the other cannot be killed without destroying the self who has taken on this revolutionary task in the first place (115). In an article which appeared in the 1961 issue of *Liberté*, Aquin had indeed referred to French Canadians as a people made into "des contre-révolutionnaires heureux et reconnaissants" by two centuries of conquest (49).⁴

If Aquin points to a revolution at the end of his text, it is one which would come about once this fundamental obstacle is overcome. For now, the "prochain épisode" articulated by the narrator is not yet concluded (as it cannot be), but rather deferred by the narrator/revolutionary to a future time: "Non, je ne finirai pas ce livre inédit: le dernier chapitre manque" (172). The writing of this future, the next episode of the story, will be coterminous with revolution itself: "Les pages s'écriront d'elles mêmes à la mitraille: les mots siffleront au-dessus de nos têtes, les phrases se fracasseront dans l'air" (173). Only then it may be possible to finish the book, to kill H. de Heutz without killing oneself and without killing the future possibility of revolution. Only this will be the denouement of the story, says the revolutionary/narrator, writing now, at the very end of the text, in the future tense: "C'est ce que je dirai dans la dernière phrase du roman. Et, quelques lignes plus bas, j'inscrirai en lettres majuscules le mot: FIN" (174). The envisioned ending—at once an ending to this text and a "prochain épisode"—remains to be written in the future. It will be an end constituted through death, which will bring about the end of writing, its "FIN."

What is interesting in Aquin's and Blais's theme is not merely writing as a force which counters death. This notion is obviously one of long standing. Rather, my point is that writing in these texts is connected with a very particular projection of a future—a future for the revolutionary and for Quebec. It is because this writing is tied to future revolutionary change that the writing of this future is at once impossible and essential. What is produced then is an incomplete text, a text in limbo, but a text which nevertheless has, as Aquin puts it, "confiance aveuglement" (172). In Blais's text the future, precarious as it is, is figured as a hopeful spring after a dreadful and deadly winter season. This latter novel ends without closure but it is a hopeful document. What Chambers says of Aquin's text can also be said of *Une*

Saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel, that the narrative "is posited on there being, beyond the death of the subject, a prochain épisode that will be the scene of reading of the posthumous text, the livre à venir" (172-73).

It is true that Blais's *Une Saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel* does not figure the future explicitly as revolution. But Blais is not merely presenting an anachronistic and folkloric depiction of Quebec at the expense of a revolutionary discourse such as the one presented in Aquin's work. The future figured in Blais's novel is clearly presented through a desire and a need for change. This novel can furthermore be seen to add an interesting element that does not exist in Aquin's text: in *Une Saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel* we encounter not only a type of writing which is inseparable from life (as it is from death) via the central character of Jean Le Maigre; we are also—after his death—provided with a reading, the reading of Jean Le Maigre's manuscripts, poems, and prophecies. Though this will be in large part a reading of the past, of Jean Le Maigre's life, it is also, situationally, a reading directed toward the future. The reading of Jean Le Maigre's works, doubling the reading of the text as a whole, is a way by which the reader's involvement is addressed and solicited to participate in the future.

The character of Jean Le Maigre has received a great deal of attention by critics as an individual who represents the oppositional and redemptive power of writing. For some he exemplifies the "poète maudit" (Nadeau) and highlights the necessity to create an internal fantasy world to combat the harsh reality of poverty (Kertzer). Other critics have examined his attempt to assert himself through language (Gould) and to reveal that which is repressed through the art of writing (Gordon). Regardless of the different emphases, it is the centrality of Jean Le Maigre that is continually affirmed. It is after all Jean Le Maigre's autobiography which occupies the central and largest portion of the text as the fourth of seven chapters. Flanked by three chapters on each side, this middle, autobiographical portion culminates in the death of its author. The first three chapters offer us samples of Jean Le Maigre's creativity: poems, fragments of various works in progress, and biographical writings about family members. These initial chapters carefully articulate the oppositional place writing occupies within this family and within the society the family inhabits. Reading and writing both are endangered, and Jean Le

Maigre must find a way to create despite the hostile environment. The last three chapters recount the lives of family members after Jean Le Maigre's death, and detail the effect of Jean Le Maigre's death, especially on Grand-Mère Antoinette, who reads his manuscripts. These concluding chapters also elaborate on the similar fate (creative yet tragic) of Emmanuel, who, more and more, comes to resemble his dead brother.

When we first meet Jean Le Maigre he is reading under the table as an argument about the importance of reading takes place above. "Je vais brûler son livre, dit la voix du père. Je te le dis, Grand-Mère, nous n'avons pas besoin de livres dans cette maison" (16), to which the grandmother retorts by asserting Jean Le Maigre's talent. Still under the table, the reader in question has found at least three modes of resistance. The first is to 'disappear' into his book: "Tu ne peux pas me voir puisque personne ne me voit quand je lis, dit Jean Le Maigre" (17). Feigning death is another tactic—"Je ne suis pas là," he insists as he reads, "Je suis mort" (17). Or else, the book disappears 'into' him. This is again a tactic undertaken as the father threatens to tear the book away from Jean Le Maigre's hands. Pointing to his forehead he defiantly retorts: "Il est trop tard, j'ai lu toutes les pages. On ne peut pas brûler les pages que j'ai lues. Elles sont écrites là!" (18). One can be consumed by reading, feign death while reading, or consume what one is reading.

This way of reading, these tactics of reading, and reading in the face of repression, are repeated in the concluding chapters of *Une Saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel*. After Jean Le Maigre's death Grand-Mère Antoinette goes to the noviciate where he had spent his last days and gathers his manuscripts:

Chaque cahier trahissait un moment de la maladie de Jean Le Maigre, une ardeur heureuse et triste, sur le point de se tarir. Grand-Mère Antoinette eût voulu serrer contre son coeur ces pages, afin que chacune s'inscrive en elle pour toujours avec sa morsure fraîche, son secret féroce. (106)

If, duplicating Jean Le Maigre's tactics, Grand-Mère Antoinette harbors the same desire to absorb the work into her (literally to have the pages inscribe themselves upon her), she also harbors the same hostility toward the father. She accuses him of both Jean Le Maigre's death and of not knowing how to read (116). She also

guards the manuscripts closely “dans la crainte qu’une main ingrate les jette au feu” (116). A religious woman, Grand-Mère Antoinette even chooses to ignore the parish priest’s opinion that Jean Le Maigre’s works are blasphemous. We read of this in a passage, days after Jean Le Maigre’s death, in which the grandmother hovers over these manuscripts which to her are alive. They permit her—posthumous works though they are—to insist on “Jean Le Maigre vivant,” and her desire to keep Jean Le Maigre alive through the reading of his manuscripts is stronger than her loyalty to the parish priest: “M. le Curé a raison, il faut vite déchirer ces cahiers! Mais elle tardait toujours à le faire, et tournant les pages avec impatience, elle remontait encore plus loin, vers la vie de son petit-fils” (117). Not following the priest’s verdict—blasphemy—she goes even further, “plus loin,” toward her grandson, not letting go despite the judgement of religious authority which she acknowledges but ignores. It is not, of course, that Grand-Mère Antoinette suddenly objects to religious authority but that the reading of Jean Le Maigre’s works has positioned her in such a way that she must choose between the writing of the dead and the verbal invectives of the living (the father, the priest). She opts for the former.

Grand-Mère Antoinette’s stance and her opposition to the ‘law of the Father’ is not a purely individual or personal response. She is, in this text, a powerful figure, a matriarch of mythic proportion. Protecting the children of the family from the father’s diatribes against education and from the mother’s passivity, Grand-Mère Antoinette serves as a mediating figure between the past and the future. Her immortality, as figured in the novel, makes of her a symbolic mediator between the old and the new, between the dead and the living, between past and future. Clearly the most powerful person of this impoverished family, she defers only to the parish priest. Yet by the end of the novel she has gone against his explicit condemnation of Jean Le Maigre’s works and has affirmed a new generation. If Jean Le Maigre is dead, another favorite son will gain her support: Emmanuel, whose importance is expressed by his prominence in the novel’s title. It is his future which Blais’s text demands that we ponder, and it is his future which Grand-Mère Antoinette will enable.

Toward the end of the novel we learn that Jean Le Maigre’s character will persist not only through his written works, works

which demand that one take a position vis-à-vis the authority of the father and of the church both, but that his attributes will be taken on by Emmanuel. Emmanuel has inherited the same illness Jean Le Maigre had, but he has also inherited his talent. And so Blais's text ends, suspended between these two central characters of the past and of the future:

Emmanuel n'avait plus froid. Le soleil brillait sur la terre. Une tranquille chaleur coulait dans ses veines, tandis que sa grand-mère le berçait. Emmanuel sortait de la nuit. Oui, ce sera un beau printemps, disait Grand-Mère Antoinette, mais Jean Le Maigre ne sera pas avec nous cette année . . . (165)

Like Aquin's text (which gestures at a next episode), Blais's text too is open-ended. But even more than Aquin's text (in which future revolution is posited as closure), Blais's novel emphasizes a greater lack of closure with its ellipsis: Jean Le Maigre is no longer alive though his 'double' Emmanuel is coming out of the hard winter. *Une Saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel* figures the open, endless text which will bring about an endless chain of writing and reading, of a future which must be continually filled in, and which must be pondered by its reader. For if the title suggests a limited timespan to be described—a season—the end of one season and the beginning of the next poses the question of how this life of Emmanuel will proceed. Specifically it asks the reader to consider whether the life of Emmanuel will represent a progression and thereby continue the process of revolt begun by Jean Le Maigre and assisted by Grand-Mère Antoinette; or whether, following the natural, seasonal motif of the novel which represents time as circular (from winter to spring, from death to life, etc.) Emmanuel's life will be but a repetition of Jean Le Maigre's creative but tragic end (again, assisted by Grand-Mère Antoinette). This is left to the reader's imagination. But herein precisely the text prefigures its own rupture as a break of the cycle of repetition it appears initially to be caught up in. For if Emmanuel is the future 'double' of Jean Le Maigre, the reader—simultaneously of Jean Le Maigre's works and of their reception—is an informed double of Grand-Mère Antoinette. The reader too is asked to take up an oppositional stance against the Father and to mediate a future.

But what kind of futures are we presented with here? In Aquin it

is an explicitly political, revolutionary future for Quebec; in Blais it is, on the surface, a more local future of a family, of an individual, and of, as I have suggested, an oppositional practice of writing which counters authority. But in Blais's text we are given no place names, no family names, no geography, whereas Aquin's text is replete with dates and geographical designations of revolutionary importance. Though I have insisted that Blais's text, in its turn, insists on the future through its thematization of death and writing, it is easy to see why the more overtly politicized text of *Prochain épisode* has received particular attention as a text oriented toward a (revolutionary) future, while it has been suggested that Blais's novel is 'folkloric' and realistic at the expense of revolutionary politics. Blais, in fact, has been criticized for her novel's regressive vision, especially after the novel's enthusiastic reception in Europe.⁵ It seems furthermore that this favorable reception of *Une saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel* abroad was itself taken as an indication that the novel was, in fact, simply a rural, local narrative whose appeal was due to its quaintness. The positive reception of Blais's novel in France and in the United States also served to further dissociate Blais from her native Quebec in the eyes of some Quebecois writers and critics, and thereby to deny her status as a representative writer of Quebec.

Writing in 1966, after Blais received the prestigious Prix Médicis prize for which Aquin's *Prochain épisode* was also nominated, Jean Basile suggests that Blais's enormous success in France is somewhat suspect, unwarranted, and disconcerting in its portrait of Québec.⁶ In his "Après l'attribution du Médicis à Marie-Claire Blais: Autopsie d'un prix" he refers to Blais as a child, her face always hidden behind wild hair, who "lasse de ne pas trouver au Québec un auditoire capable d'assouvir sa soif d'être entendue, elle était déjà partie aux Etats-Unis où elle vit toujours" (13). Referring simultaneously to Blais's shyness and to her greed for an audience as character flaws, Basile suggests that she has dissociated herself from Québec.⁷ He furthermore states that Blais is not part of any literary "school" and that she has received the prize because the jury chose that work which best corresponded to "une idée traditionnelle du Québec, pris sous l'angle de la révolte" (14). The fact that the French jury found even the portrayal of revolt in Blais's novel to be palatable suggests to Basile that the novel must not in fact be revolutionary

since it is so widely accepted and celebrated. Not surprisingly he immediately thereupon makes reference to Aquin's "chute injuste," saying that any reader of Blais's novel would be quite astonished to read Aquin's without some kind of preamble (14). Blais's novel, in other words, would not prepare the reader for writing like that of Aquin's, which is, by contrast, 'truly' revolutionary and 'truly' representative of Quebec.

Though such criticism can easily be understood as an expression of political alliances in Québec in the 1960s, this opinion persists in contemporary criticism which polarizes the folkloric and the political. In an overview of Quebecois literature, Patrick Coleman distinguishes between writers who folklorize Quebec in their celebration of local customs and traditions and

the more acute intellectuals, notably those grouped around *Liberté*, a vital literary-political review founded in 1959, [who] recognized the limitations of such a perspective and strove to fashion a specifically French identity while rejecting fetishistic cultural ideals. (1051)

A folkloric description of Quebecois culture is referred to as introducing a "regressive element" into a political debate, whereas Aquin and other "more acute intellectuals" have the ability to recognize the short-sightedness of this approach and to reject the fetishization of culture by other, more naive (it is suggested), authors who lack political acumen. Though not directly designated here, Blais has been discussed precisely in terms of her folkloric depiction of Québec. Passages like the one cited above by Coleman continue to express this point of view by insisting that texts by Aquin posit a more sophisticated and more intellectually viable future for Quebec than texts like Blais's which, because of their folkloric element, can promote only a fetishistic, regressive future.

To pose the issue in this way is simplistic, however. It does not recognize—despite the sophistication of style—the ways in which a narrative future remains blocked in Aquin's novel, or the way in which the positing of a cultural identity could, in fact, be generated through folklore. The viability of this latter tack is all too apparent in contemporary debates about multiculturalism. One could argue for example, as Fredric Jameson has, that there is no dialectical movement in Aquin's novel, that *Prochain épisode* is

a desperate attempt to “fantasize narrative into being” (218). The attempt to generate narrative, it is suggested by Jameson, is not an acute and intellectually sophisticated tactic for positing revolution, but a strategy doomed to failure: “The failure to reach the new, the unforeseen, the event, the contingent, and the fatal return of a pseudonarrative fantasy into aimless circular rhythms that reproduce the initial impulse” (219). The circular rhythms and the repetition of narrative(s) rather than their progression is for Jameson a result of the material conditions within which this narrative is produced. For it is the product of the “impoverishment of the individual body in isolation” (218) or, as expressed by the narrator of *Prochain épisode* himself, the narrative is the product of the desire to “peupler mon vide” (11). Chambers, discussed earlier, locates oppositionality in Aquin’s *Prochain épisode*, through his insistence that Aquin’s narrative is capable of envisioning its own end, the next episode, or, in other words, revolution. The suicide of writing (which is Aquin’s vision of revolution as the end of discourse), argues Chambers, “has the sense of a buying of time for a revolution that is less defeated than it is deferred” (156).

What is disputable, however, is not really the oppositionality of Aquin’s narrative. It is not, in other words, its ability to envision revolution that is in question, but the viability of the suicide tactic as productive for the deferred revolution. This is the case for two reasons: first, because this suicide tactic is itself encapsulated within the play of doubles in the text in its duplication of the (initial) problem of the revolutionary who is synonymous with the counterrevolutionary he must kill. The revolution is thereby not deferred to a future time, but circular and contained within the text. Second, as Jameson’s argument makes apparent, even the capacity to envision revolution remains contextualized within the initial fantasy of producing a narrative about revolution.

While there is also a play of doubles in Blais (Jean Le Maigre and Emmanuel, Grand-Mère Antoinette and the reader of *Une Saison dans la vie d’Emmanuel*) this play is predicated on the presence of a reader of the narrative. This narrative is, in turn, based on both temporal or generational development and on the transformation of a key character who takes up an oppositional stance vis-à-vis oppressive figures of authority. Whereas there is no reader in Aquin’s hyperly self-reflexive text, the problematics of the reader are centrally figured in Blais’s novel. The reader of

Blais's text is not left to read as he/she will, but is given two anti-authoritarian models for reading: that of Jean Le Maigre and that of Grand-Mère Antoinette reading Jean Le Maigre. The reader envisioned in Blais's novel is that person who will read Grand-Mère Antoinette reading Jean Le Maigre, and who will ponder the future of Emmanuel as a transformation of Jean Le Maigre's life. Though Aquin's text appears initially as the more overtly revolutionary text because it explicitly posits its unconcluded end to be revolution, this future revolution remains implicitly contained within the initial narrative fantasy. *Une Saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel*, however, establishes an oppositional future through its narrative progression of the themes of writing and death. Although the future here is left unwritten, unlike Aquin's text, it is also left to be written, by Emmanuel and by the reader.

NOTES

¹ This quotation appears as the epigraph of Aquin's last and unfinished novel *Obombre*, and reiterates the central problematic of *Prochain épisode* (which also envisions its end as its beginning).

² The theme of writing is made quite explicit in the original edition of *Prochain épisode*: on the front cover we see a close-up of a hand-written page, presumably a page from the manuscript of the novel. The back cover shows the author, at his writing desk, in the act of writing. References to *Prochain épisode* in this article will be to the 1992 edition.

³ The way these two authors have been read, and the way the works of Aquin have been construed as 'political' whereas Blais's works have not, also has to do with the gender of the authors. Implicitly, the different reception of Blais and Aquin suggests in part that the personal is not considered to be political (the reverse is of course a commonplace of the women's movement and of feminist criticism more specifically). By bringing these two authors together and by studying both of their works as possessing a political dimension (to a greater or lesser extent) I hope to challenge any strict division between the 'revolutionary Aquin' and the 'withdrawn Blais.'

⁴ See Hubert Aquin, "Bonheur d'expression." The original article was published in *Liberté* 3,6 (Déc. 1961): 741-43.

⁵ See Eva-Marie Kröller's article on Marie-Claire Blais in *Canadian Writers Since 1960. First Series* which discusses criticism of Blais and of *Une Saison dans la vie d'*

Emmanuel by Jean Basile, Réjean Robidoux, and Victor-Lévy Beaulieu. In an interview with Blais entitled "Marie-Claire Blais: 'Je veux aller le plus loin possible,'" Gilles Marcotte obliquely refers to the lukewarm reception of Blais's novel in Québec, saying: "La critique. . . Si je me souviens bien, *Une Saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel* avait reçu au Québec un accueil moins enthousiaste qu'en France" (203).

⁶ In an earlier article, "Pour Jacques Hébert éditeur de Marie-Claire Blais," Basile congratulates Blais less than her editor, writing: "C'est pourtant grâce à Jacques Hébert que Marie-Claire Blais est là où elle est. Mais ainsi est le rôle ingrat de l'éditeur, et Jacques Hébert l'accepte en souriant" (2).

⁷ Quite unnecessarily Basile ridicules Blais, writing: "Son succès en France et aux États-Unis lui fera autant de tort que de bien. Mais elle continuera imperturbablement à courir pieds nus dans les sentiers feuillus de la campagne américaine et à regarder la mer de Cape Cod" ("Après l'attribution," 13). His portrait of Blais paints her as an innocent, impish girl who has forgotten her roots and is seeking fame and glory abroad.

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