

# OCCUPATION: WRITER

## Hubert Aquin

(1963)

*From the time this  
consular investiture*

was put on my passport, I have not ceased committing sacrileges against it, until it reached a point at which I enjoyed cheating with my calling, and even began transforming systematically into an absolute non-writer. While I repeat that I am no longer in word management, it has not escaped my notice that I harboured the hypocritical ambition of surprising my customers by a return no less unexpected than staggering...But the time has come to change professions other than on my passport, and I have had to face up to the fact that, for my interlocutors, my former activities constitute me as a man of letters. A few commissioned texts, an all but irreversible enlistment in the *Société des Auteurs*: this is how little it took to remind me that henceforth - I am caught without oil, in a mechanism which throws me back into place. A rather vicious circle, this social-biographical circuit of mine! I have experimented with it, and, distressed, I set about writing again, as a postman delivers letters. The gaze of others makes me feel like a Jew. I bear my Jewish trace like a scar; it is -decidedly! -written across my features. Never have I felt so less a writer, yet I continue to write. And if fortune or my laziness do not throw me out of my social seat as a writer, I intend to have its majesty pay dearly for my partly dead language, my syntactic incarceration and the asphyxiation that threatens me; yes, I plan to take my revenge through glib expressions, on that fine career which opens before me in the manner of a mine that closes over whoever goes in deeper. I am prey to destructive urges against the nasty French language, in all its majesty rated second! Writing kills me. I don't wish to write any longer, nor juggle words words words, nor clearly state the inconceivable, nor premeditate the unfolding of the verbal crime, nor search a dark room for a black cat, especially when there is none to be found...This being said, one might justifiably ask why it is that I now write these easily disproven thoughts. The truth is, I myself hardly know why, tending to consider my conscription to "Parti Pris" as a traffic accident<sup>1</sup>. And I certainly have the right to lapse into illogicality once I get free of any semiological mission. In this disintegrated country which resembles a brothel in names, writing amounts to recitation of ones breviary while seated on a nitroglycerine bomb that is set to go off when the big hand advances five minutes. Each of us is free, and I am convinced I can invoke the civic rights to recognize the right of any citizen, if necessary, to write his breviary whenever he pleases.

*There are some  
who will think I*

am in flames like a crepe suzette, and that my non-writing is determined by possible neurotic factors. These sincere readers will not be convinced of the contrary by me, and I remain no less persuaded that, by standing like an antechrist amid the tropical vegetation of words on a white page, I am not the one being tailed, but the agent! I make a conscious choice, I respond in passing to a given historical challenge. In December 1963, Paul Comptois being Lieutenant-Governor of Gallilee<sup>2</sup> and I being what I am, in this dormant period and confusion-ridden province, solemnly affirm that one fine intellectual work and one novel good for the Governor General's award, invariably purport that literature is a function of our national organism. Now aren't we disorganized, or so it would seem...We might just as well admit that the originality of a writing stands in direct proportion to the ignorance of its readers: there is no originality: written works are transfers (which, it goes without saying, are functional in a society consuming great amounts of leisure, and endowed with pulp, moreover) pressed from effaced countertypes which derive from other *originals* transferred from transfers which are faithful copies of old forgeries with which one need not be acquainted to understand that they were not archetypes, but mere variants. A cruel invariance governs the serial production of variants which we are accustomed to calling original works. History itself transfers. Originality is as impossible there as in literature. Originality does not exist, it is an illusion. Fashion is all there is covering that which differentiates fashion, the film-like veil, the deceptively diaphanous surface, the garment-screen used for covering beings identical in their nakedness. A few trivial details serve to differentiate me from an ill Hungarian who, one May evening, would endeavour to write an article in order to exorcize his constant brain fatigue. About 1913, this man doubtless wore a double-breasted jacket and a false collar; unable to write in front of a small television screen, he doubtless darkened his Austrian brand paper while drinking a German beer in the Cafe Mozart.

*These few differences  
are minor, and*

could not hide our sorry resemblance, our implacably similar national syphilis, and the distress at coming to see who we are in a world where exhibiting politeness means putting oneself in parentheses, if not in a jar. Unfortunately, Freud did not psychoanalyze the Hongritude<sup>3</sup> of an arrogant Vienna, which was characterized by its will to repress the Hungarians living there, with their minority bad breath, and their music which nobody took the time to differentiate from that of the gypsies - which shows all too clearly the will of the Viennese to view their historical partners only as nomads. In any situation of an ethnifying domination, the lower group seems to be the most musical of the two: the Hungarians, whose musicality was vaunted by their masters, the American blacks, even the French Canadians, who have a gypsy's calling to face

### Translator's Preface

Profession: *écrivain*, as the title reads in French, is neither a title or theme, but a name attached to a group whose constituents occupy themselves with writing. The references in this essay to the writing of "variants" allude to its stylistic aspects. Aquin, through the use of neologisms, adding suffixes, using technical and medical terminology, exploits style as a mode, in other words, treats it like a mode, in the production of idioms.

In what is perhaps an old debate, Aquin writes that the blasphemy occupies the place of national heritage, or serves as a *lieu de mémoire* for the Quebecois. The French reads, "tient lieu d'héritage national". The use of puns and word play might be given the same significance: the substitution for an absence. There is a brief essay in which Aquin calls the *écrivain* *maudit*, a writer who bristles at every benediction. In the following translation, the title is not only a benediction, but a naming, all too formally for Aquin, of a body of individuals. Aquin does not want to insist that it be a political body. But the writing of variants is, like the blasphemy, almost always the vehicle of political questioning. Theme is less important than expression when speaking of the variant, since there is an emphasis on saying what has been said, again, in a different way (a translator's bias, perhaps). Variants seek to avoid recognizing and naming their origin.

What Aquin suggests in speaking of blasphemy is that the idiomatic has its place in a writing which is still anxious. When compared to another essay, written in the previous year, and translated in 1979 as "The Cultural Fatigue of French Canada", by L. Shouldice in *Contemporary Quebec Criticism*, the present essay appears to test the limits of expression. The idiosyncracies of Aquin's writing style come into full play.

Aquin continued to write novels and articles until his death in 1977. To list them here would be impossible. The four novels he wrote, *Prochain Episode* (1965), *Trou de mémoire* (1968), *L'Antiphonaire* (1969), *Neige noire* (1974), have been discussed by many critics, English and French. He is less well known as an essayist.

members of the higher group, who in turn make a well behaved audience. The domination of one human group over another, places too much emphasis on the harmless strengths of the lower group: sex, propensity for the arts, natural talents for music and creating ...Don't we French Canadians take an interest in Eskimo Art and the mythology of the American Indians who we keep on reserves? That is the blind compensation of the dominated: that there is a group beneath it which allows it to show its domination without a hint of bad conscience.

*Is the important thing that I be*

gifted in the arts? No, rather that I know I am gifted in the arts by the very fact that I am dominated, that all my fellow people are dominated and that the dominating like them as gypsies, singing, artistic to the tips of their fingers, naturally inclined to work toward the most deficient social activities. I refuse to write works of art, after years of conditioning in this direction, because I basically refuse the signification taken on by art in an equivocal world. As artist I would play the role attributed to me: that of the dominated artist who has some talent. Now, I refuse this talent, perhaps confusedly, because I simply refuse my domination. I might as well say, should I continue to write the present article, that I am going to strive inwardly for an article which contains everything that should not be found in the article expected from me. By unenthusiastically pursuing this endeavour, I do my best to bring to light my artistic inadequacy, and to prove through my divagation that I am no longer effected by domination, that I have no taste for its historical insignificance, nor its security either, and that I oppose it in every way provided they be shocking. The good French Canadian, promised a brilliant future in the frivolous arts, endeavours all of a sudden to produce a writing dominated by a thematic of refusal to write, a meaningless gesture which could only attain meaning by the simultaneous explosion of every stick of dynamite now rotting in the Province of Quebec's arsenals. There are serious disadvantages brought on by the explosion, one of them being that it causes any historical structure situated along a radius of the shock wave to fly into pieces. Structure must be detected, even in a literary astructure of the Robbe-Grillet type. Astructuring amounts to structuring if it relates to a like sphere of activity, to literature, for example. In my case, if the structure bursts out from the fire in me, it does so not in order to leave room for a literary counter structure, but to leave no room for a literature which, if I were to give way to its charms, would express merely the domination which I have *taken after* for two generations. A lame excuse, one might say, to have pardon for a simple absence of talent...But such an objection, irrefutable because situated on another level, does not pertain to me, for even the poverty of talent here could be considered, true to the line of domination, as a show of bad temper on the part of the dominated, who, though not very certain why, shuns a calling which he believes is personal, but which is historical; in the same manner, the talent of the dominated comes from a desire for artistic revolution, for want of the power to bring about an historical revolution.

*By thus disaligning myself from*  
 literature, I do myself a disservice, and what I write is condemned in advance to be a mere unfaithful expression of my refusal to write. Now literary works are characterized by the formal necessity - the urgency - invoked by their authors. Writers are primarily formalists, despite the recurring protestations of non-formalism, in that the forms they use are handmaidens of their existence, and cast authors together in their uniqueness. With the possible exception of aligned literature, the form of the written work comes to be secondary, unimportant and often chosen circumstantially; or, in the present case not chosen and unwanted. Something else is important; for me, a literary *beyond* which is neither a meta-literature, nor a new disguise for our old ambition, but the destruction of an historical conditioning in which I come to be dominated. By rejecting domination I refuse literature, the bread par excellence of the dominated, a symbolic production, of which the dominated are granted the monopoly, which inevitably leads to overproduction. Has it not been remarked that in colonized countries there invariably emerges an overproduction of literature? In the absence of realities symbols are overproduced; understandable, moreover, is that even if colonized peoples were content to produce normally they would still not compensate for an utter unproductiveness. Overproduce or die. Survive or disappear. Surprise or possess nothing: so many vital dilemmas for the dominated. He does live a novel written in advance: the dominated conforms to some nicely ambiguous gestures so that their meaning is lost on him. For example, the dominated shows up as a challenger but does not see to what degree the challenger and his master are complementary, nor does he size up the benevolence shown by the latter in agreeing to play beside him, while giving away for the challenger to claim the match sometimes...All part of the invisible coherence, which if refused, amounts to the complete, irreversible choice of incoherence. Revolution brings about withdrawal from the dialogue between the dominated and dominating: strictly speaking, it is a divagation. The terrorist speaks on his own. Like Hamlet, who imagined Gertrude's lover behind every curtain, the revolutionary chooses to be accused of madness like the sweet prince of rotten kingdom. The revolutionary breaks with the coherence of domination and rashly engages in a monologue interrupted at each word, nurtured as much by hesitation as by the distance it maintains from the dominant reason. Hesitation engenders the monologue; at the theatre, only characters in the throws of the distorting solitude of the revolutionary, or of the alienated, must give monologues. It takes incoherence for there to be true monologues. Incoherence is here a modality of the revolution just as the monologue constitutes its unmistakable sign.

*Incoherence corresponds, at least in*  
 this case - of Hamlet - to an irreversible shift away from the old idea of coherence. Hamlet incoheres suddenly. And since he acts outside of all coherence-ridden law, he then ceases to be a man "in the complete sense of the term" and earns this remark made about him by the psychoanalyst André Lussier. Freud, I know, knew himself to be Jewish, and by a transcendentalist will for coherence he overcame this detail as one does myopia to possess no Jewish trace, expand the horizon, see Austrian...The French Canadian who can go no farther, tries to see farther and to lose himself in a non-group, whose dominating position he does not discern, and which generously furnishes him with a coherent non-identity. Literary practice in its *coloniform*<sup>4</sup> situation expresses an attitude of acceptance. The rituals of literary creation are, moreover, generally recongized for their therapeutic effect: after a more than slow night of ecstasy the dancer lacks strength to answer the colonial sphinx. The dance of words along the horizon of a ritual article reconciles man with his unreality by exhausting him. In our disintegrated country, I refuse the calming that I have too often sought in the stammering ceremony of writing. Once the disintegration has been tasted, I feel a dispassionate longing to participate in the rot of our crudbly society; an urge comes over me for communion in both kinds taken over the body of foreigners that gathers mould during the royal proceedings of a twenty-second multilingual inquiry and, by contagion, makes me sweat.

*One day, who knows, we might*

be given to write sanely; to write, and let it be something other than an exorcism or a dissociating diversion. If, at the end of my cartesian flight, it has been understood that I preach obligatory political engagement for writers, then I am entitled, dear reader, to seek your imposition. I abhor obligatory military service, and, what's more, it prepares for defeat. The same is true of obligatory intellectual service for citizens of age 18 years and over who can live a great passion on the typist's keys. No writer is obliged to align his work with the efficiency of this or that political system, any more than, for that matter, he is not engaged by his maximizing profession to swear an oath of historical fidelity and strive only for an autarkic and posthumous work of art. Jean Simard describes the literary endeavour as the "most exciting of all the adventures: the adventure of our inner world. From book to book the writer pursues within himself an unending prospecting. The entire being is engaged in a determined search; each one after his own truth." (*Le Devoir*, December 7, 1963, p. 11). A better formulation of the inalienable right of the writer to arrange for evenings at home could not be found. The inner world symbolizes the cage which one does not leave, unless to get

another stock of books from the Dominican bookstore, always closed on Sunday, that were written by other writers who valorized their capsule-universes. Profaner that I am, the "inner" adventure evokes the steamy adventure of emissaries of belligerent countries. Or rather: the writer's inner adventure is the migration of the vital yolk beneath the egg's hermetic shell, a viscous adventure, a battle to finish between the abortable yolk and its albuminous sphincter. However poignant it proves to be, his endeavour of euphemisation, the writer who believes he the high sea as he cruises his dames lake, can not get away unpunished from his juridico-dull situation as the inventor of variants in his hesitant country, the scene of mass fever attacks and delayed dementia. The "inner" adventure of French Canada alters even them who choose to specialize in their literary micro-adventure. The altered statutes of Elizabeth II, Queen of Canada and of (Northern!) Ireland, matriloquacious queen of each province and of unilingual Saint-Jérôme and Québec sur cap à Madeleine, do not provide that it is forbidden to play Mozart's "Turkish march", fixed to one spot, at the height of a political crisis. The revised or exploded statutes (oh, that reminds me...) of Lord Snowdon's sister-in-law do not allow any punitive legislation for those who tend the flowers of style as the nation's pulse presages concussion, if not the fatal haemorrhage of our system. A queen's politeness, this civilly coded silence concerning the crypto-gaelic writer's inner world in times of trouble. What is not strictly forbidden in the letter of the law is implicitly authorized and legitimate. To thus write maxim-ridden pieces with the help of phenomena authenticated by dictionaries is permitted. Writers can therefore feel at ease should their libido bring them to do some knitting. It goes without saying that knitting does not preclude ceramics, for no segregation permits those who penelope on their Smith-Corona to believe they are superior to those with a marked penchant for the kiln. In all the cases of inner adventure taken day in and day out, like the minutes, all is permitted; each one's talent is given free reign. And there can be no doubt that the "inner adventure" which Jean Simard, recently dubbed writer<sup>5</sup>, speaks of, demands, a certain measure of perseverance and courage for the simple reason that it is devoid of strong motivation, and because it allows one to continue the greater work only by sanctifying the duty to write.

*The writer does not choose his country*  
of birth, but the "inner" adventurer is wrong to live there as if living in another country, through a transferal to a mark-time country, in a continual state of denaturalization. To every word written by the un-habitant. To every word designed a coefficient "n" of possible sublime nothingness. To this coefficient can then be added a power which would permit us

to cost the work (its market and resale values) as we do each day with an ordinary share. We do not choose the country of our birth; no matter, it is better to take root and enrich ourselves, by symbiosis, on this soil cold over which we have travelled since childhood. More worthwhile for the writer carried along by his inner adventure as others are by foam padding, rather than the cork surface that protected Proust to the end, more worthwhile for him to inhabit, rather than be transported into an artistic and grammatical non-country in which each foreigner enjoys literary privilege. The non-country does not flourish its people. The 1917 model beadle of the Byalorussian mind favours the pursuit of inner adventures - on condition they are codified according to disarming canons. But even if the writer can venture into these parts as he wishes, with breakfast in bed and impeccable hotel xenophobia, this inner microbeadle is still nothing but a coffin decorated like the Place des Arts. In the country the preference is to hate one's country, not to be abstracted from it, while none the less hopeful of expressing it. How is one to express an inadequacy? There is the real problem. Adulterous love of one's country seems even more beautiful to me than abstention in the name of an "engaging in the Work itself and the detailing of self for the sake of the work", in the words of Mr. Simard, cf.: *Devoir*, Saturday, October 26, 1963.

*The axis of the native country and*

the axis of self awareness intersect stubbornly. I no longer believe in the scriptural privilege which dispenses the writer - engaged exclusively in his work - from inhabiting his country. It is sterile to use one's country in slices of life only, which, through their anthology-like status, neatly establish the uprootedness of the writer. That way the writer ends up furnishing his "inner" adventure with a special status, which amounts to disembowelling it in advance when he isn't soaking himself in a jar of formalin, such as a specimen of the poor *tourte*, a variety of bird going extinct - like us! In a country undergoing ontological gestation, the writer's vocation can not stay unchanged; nor can it be pursued, not even with courage, in accordance to the futile categories of the sublime and the important. The inner adventure that so many writers dream of leading, despite the cyclothymic existence of our group, is a prefabricated work, portable like a typewriter, finished in advance, an enclosure to add to the archives. yet there are many writers who continue to climb, word by word, the Laurentian calvary of the *Oeuvre*, with a capital "O" for obscurity! But will this number make any difference to them in their splendid aberration? The writer, the more so now that he is surrounded by a gangrenous uncertainty, can not have an episcopal status, nor an exemption from reality, nor a release from distress. Syntax, form, the sense of words are also set on fire. all is syncope, and the writer who endeavours to bring to life what kills him, does not write the Stendhalian story of the French Canadian Carbonari, but a work as uncertain and formally unwholesome as the impure work that fulfills its purpose within him and his country. The problem is not whether to be PSQ, RIN, PRQ etc.<sup>5</sup>, to stuff envelopes in a typically disorganized office, but to live in one's country, to die and revivify it. The revolution which operates mysteriously within us,

upsets the old French tongue, bursts the inherited structures which exercise a unilateral hegemony over the spirits by the very rigidity of the writers that respect them. Predictable, calm and organized according to the golden rule, the old idea of the work falls prey to the worst synopses, the likes of which my bygone country has known and dreads, so many necroses which might never be followed by geneses. During these times of trouble, how can the writer end his sentence as was predicted? Everything changes or threatens change: how can somebody who chooses to write, still persevere in his ideal of an unchanged and priority work...unless he condemn himself to the production of a historical monument of some kind? Not in the literary work, or in the collective adventure can anything transcendent be found. To avoid being a witness, or to witness by omitting segments of our life and obsession, is to witness nevertheless. The writing of novels uninfluenced by the intolerable dailyness of collective life, and in an antiseptic French, free of the shock that weakens the ground beneath our feet, is a waste of time. My passport, already expired, reads, Occupation: Writer. Even if I deny it, what is the good of completing some forms to state that I am no longer a writer, at least not the writer I wanted to be when, on September 23, 1958, I completed the questionnaire to obtain a passport? I will not leave my native country again. I wish to stay. I live in my country.

translated by Paul Gibson

#### Notes

1. The text was published in the journal, *Parti Pris*, in December 1963. (Editor's note, *Blocs Erratiques*) The essay was revised by Aquin for its publication in *Blocs Erratiques* (1977). The remark below concerning "one novel good for the Governor General's Award," refers to the novel *Trou de mémoire*, which won this award. Aquin declined to accept it. -Trans.
2. *Galilee*: i.e. Quebec. Paul Comptois was Lieutenant Governor of Quebec in 1963-64. - Trans.
3. *Hongritude*: coined after the expression of Aimé Césaire, *Négritude*. - Trans.
4. *coloniform*: a term coined by Aquin, which must be understood as an expression of unity, in the same sense as *Comminform countries* is understood. -Trans.
5. *PSQ, RIN, PRQ*: refer to the political bodies, *Parti socialiste du Québec*, the *Rassemblement pour l'indépendance nationale* (of which Aquin was a member), and the *Parti républicain de Québec*. -Trans.