

# The Impossible Anamnesis

## Memory versus History in Hubert Aquin's *Blackout*

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### ■ ABSTRACT ■

Soon after joining the Canadian Confederation in 1867, the province of Quebec adopted the phrase *Je me souviens* (“As I recall”) as its ‘national’ motto, although many Québécois do not remember today what they were supposed to memorize, as collective subject, when their government voted this motion. My thesis is that contrary to other countries which have a strong sense of history based on a secular tradition, this process was more complicated in Quebec — as if a collective memory loss lied at the heart of its history. Through a rereading of Hubert Aquin’s cult novel, *Trou de mémoire* (in its English translation *Blackout*), first published in 1968, I try to illustrate this paradox and to emphasize the heuristic functions of memory blanks, gaps and lapses in certain postmodern narratives, after the historical breakdown of “the great narratives” (Lyotard). In this perspective, the example of Quebec, through the voice of one of its more gifted yet controversial novelist, can be seen as emblematic of what happens when the mnemonic impossibility of rewriting history opens up new possibilities for writing fiction.

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#### Key Words

French Canadian Literature, Quebec, Hubert Aquin, Memory, History, Anamnesis, Anamorphosis

Shortly after joining the Canadian Confederation in 1867, the province of Quebec adopted the statement *Je me souviens* (literally: 'I remember') as its national motto. Strangely enough though, many if not most Québécois do not recall nowadays what they were asked to remember, as collective subject, after their government voted this motion. "As I recall" (a recent English translation of the motto) actually stands for 'I don't recall, but I do remember that I'm supposed to have memorized something very important about our past...' It is closer to 'I will not forget' — in the colloquial sense of 'I won't forget,' that is 'I hold a grudge against History' — than 'I remember'.

My thesis is that, contrary to other countries which have a strong sense of history based on a secular tradition, allowing for the subject to define itself in continuation or rupture with this tradition but without feeling excluded from the process of History itself, the same process has been somewhat more problematic in Quebec. It seems as if a collective memory loss, unspoken — maybe even unspeakable —, still lies at the heart of its history as a nation. Through a rereading of Hubert Aquin's novel, *Trou de mémoire* (in its English translation *Blackout*), first published in 1968, I would like to illustrate this paradox and emphasize the heuristic functions of memory blanks, gaps and lapses in postmodern fictions, after the historical breakdown of "the great narratives<sup>1)</sup>". In this perspective, the example of Quebec, through the voice of one of its more gifted yet controversial novelist, can be seen as emblematic of what happens when the mnemonic impossibility of re-writing history opens up new possibilities for writing fiction.

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1) The expression was coined by French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard in his famous "report on knowledge" written for the Government of Quebec, *La condition postmoderne*.

## 1. The Plot

In order to discuss more in depth the intricate relationship between history and memory in Hubert Aquin's novel, it is necessary to summarize its entangled plot and the complex formal treatment it received from the author. Aquin started working on his novel in 1962, at a time when he was engaged in the political struggle to achieve Quebec's independence. The same year, Vladimir Nabokov published *Pale Fire*, one of his more complex novels from a structural point of view. In an entry of his *Journal* (October 26, 1962), Aquin shows himself deeply concerned, even disturbed, upon finding out that Nabokov had just published *the* novel he was planning and had already started to work on. In a way, he felt cheated by his predecessor, for whom he nourished a profound admiration, as if the great Russian-born American writer had in fact stolen his idea, recalling the case of anticipated plagiarism expounded recently by Pierre Bayard<sup>2</sup>). To avoid the risk of he himself being accused of plagiarism, Aquin decided to take the project one step further, that is to surpass his *model* in writing a novel of greater invention, at least as regard to form<sup>3</sup>).

*Blackout* is the alleged autobiography of Pierre X. Magnant, a French Canadian revolutionary who fantasizes about committing the perfect crime. In his somewhat deranged mind — he abuses of drugs he can easily provide for himself, being a pharmacist, and shows signs of megalomania related to psychotic disorder — the “perfect crime” embraces multiple meanings: to kill (after raping her) his mistress Joan Ruskin who, being an Anglophone, represents to his eyes the secular enemy; to achieve the goal of Quebec's revolution, namely its political sovereignty; and to write a readable yet illegible novel — a puzzling detective story that will end without an end, depriving the reader of learning the real (secret) identity of the criminal. A letter sent to him by an African colleague, Olympe

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2) See Pierre Bayard, *Le plagiat par anticipation*.

3) See Hubert Aquin, *Journal 1948-1971*, p. 248.

Ghezso-Quénum, a pharmacist who is also involved in political activities in his native Côte d'Ivoire, precedes the autobiographic narrative of Pierre X. Magnant. This character will reappear towards the end of the novel, providing two fragments of his diary to the story. Meanwhile, the editor of Pierre X. Magnant's narrative — in this respect he plays the same role as that of the commentator in Nabokov's *Pale Fire* — is doing the job he is trained for: adding footnotes to the author's text that will provide reliable data for what is allegedly missing. At first the notes are brief and objective in character, as expected from an impartial editor, but as the narrative unfolds they become more and more elaborate and conspicuously personal in tone. The editor claims to know the author very well, even intimately, to the point that he can supply information lacking in the original manuscript (thus becoming a narrator to the second degree). The mystery surrounding the relationship between the author and his editor will eventually be solved, but in the meantime another character, even more unreliable it seems than this unprofessional editor, will have made his (or rather her) discrete appearance in the text. RR (the initials by which she signals her insidious presence) starts off by editing the editor's footnotes, often contradicting his version of the author's story, before adding an apocryphal fragment of her own to the polymorphous text composed of Ghezso-Quénum's letter and diary, Magnant's autobiography and Mullahy's (the editor's pseudonym) commentaries. She will ultimately finish the novel by adding one last chapter to the plot, signing it off with a final riddle.

## 2. The Title

Before pursuing with the analysis of the novel, let me discuss the translator's felicitous choice of *Blackout* to render the meaning of the original title, *Trou de mémoire* (literally: 'memory hole'). A more literal

translation would have given something like 'Memory Blank' or 'Memory Gap' or even 'Memory Lapse'. These expressions are not quite synonymous but they all pertain to the same idea of a temporary (or even permanent) loss of memory. But each, in turn, generates its own specific constellation of meaning: a blank refers to a space on the page which is "not written on," a void in the text that is nevertheless not necessarily devoid of meaning; a gap marks "a break in continuity, an interruption" in the narrative that will (or will not) be filled; a lapse is "a slip or minor mistake" in speech, be it deliberate or unconscious. In Hubert Aquin's novel, we encounter all three forms of memory failure: the blanks are abundant in the various narratives that constitute the novel and are usually signalled by suspension dots in the text; there are many gaps from one narrative to the other, even when the narrator remains apparently the same person; and every character, at one point or another of his or her story, makes a Freudian slip.

Had the translator chosen one of the three literal options at his disposal, he would have come closer to the original meaning in French, but by the same token would have been lost the polyphonic aura surrounding the *hole* through which memory is engulfed throughout the novel. By choosing instead the word 'blackout' (which incidentally can also be associated with the expression 'black hole' in physics), the translator Alan Brown suggested both the literal sense of the original title and its literary meaning, which lies at the heart of the story<sup>4</sup>). To suffer a blackout is to experience "a temporary loss of consciousness or memory". The

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4) If translation is always, to a certain degree, treason, it can sometime surpass the original in creative meaning, just as a film adaptation of a novel, often considered poorer than the text it is drawn from, can enrich its meaning. Such is the case with Alan Brown's translation of Hubert Aquin's *Trou de mémoire*, starting with its polyvalent title *Blackout*. Aside from the numerous meanings stated in this article, we could stress the fact that the hero's counterpart or other self is Black and that he is also the author of a "black notebook". See Hubert Aquin, *Blackout*, p. 89 and 91.

meaning of the English title comes very close to the original French, except for the implied transitory effect, which, in Aquin, tends to become permanent (at times even fatal). But a blackout is also “the sudden darkening of the stage in a theatrical performance”. This meaning alludes to an important episode of the novel, which deals with the destructive power of *anamorphosis*. The anamorphosis itself, represented in the novel by Hans Holbein The Younger’s famous painting *The Ambassadors*, is the key to the impossible anamnesis that structures the text, in its relation to history, as a formidable *mise en abyme* of the whole novel.

### 3. Historical Background

Hubert Aquin wrote his second novel published during his lifetime in the period, which is recorded in Quebec’s history as the Quiet Revolution. Although the radical changes that took place in French Canadian society during the Sixties were conducted peacefully, it is also the only era in that province recent history to have witnessed the uprising of terrorism. Himself a militant suspected of having engaged in terrorist activities, Aquin was arrested in 1964. While in detention in an asylum (the Prévost Institute, just north of Montreal), he wrote part of his first novel, *Prochain épisode* (*Next Episode*), published the following year. After its — and his — release, he succeeded in completing the previous novel he had left unfinished.

Like many of his contemporaries who advocated the separation of Quebec from the rest of Canada, Aquin was deeply influenced by the discourse of decolonization and by the struggle for independence that was taking place in several African colonies at the same time. He had read the works of Frantz Fanon, *Les damnés de la terre* (*The Wretched of the Earth*) and Albert Memmi, *Portrait du colonisé* (*Portrait of the Colonized*), and had come to the conclusion that the French Canadians were just as much

colonized as their Black 'brothers'. Fanon had previously written his semi-autobiographical book, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (*Black Skin, White Masks*), which dealt with his frustrations with racism. During the Sixties, another separatist, Pierre Vallières, wrote in the same vein, but a quite different context, *Nègres blancs d'Amérique* (*White niggers of America*), an autobiographical essay in which the felquist<sup>5</sup>) claimed that the French Canadians were more or less the 'white slaves' of America. In creating the character of Olympe Ghezso-Quénum, whose name recalls a Fon king (Ghezso) and a contemporary writer of Dahomey (Olympe Bhêly-Quénum)<sup>6</sup>), Aquin made explicit his intention of linking *Blackout* to the broader context of decolonization in Africa. Part of the story does actually take place between Nigeria (Lagos) and the Ivory Coast (Grand-Bassam), but more important there are constant cross-references between the narrative of Pierre X. Magnant, the French Canadian revolutionary, and the story of his African counterpart, Olympe Ghezso-Quénum, who appears as his black other self.

On another level of history, Pierre X. Magnant's call for revolution echoes the uprising of the French Canadian Patriots in 1837-38. During that period, the Patriots, lead by Louis-Joseph Papineau, fought against the British Government in an attempt to create a French Canadian Republic within the boundaries of what is now the province of Quebec (formally known as Lower Canada). The insurrection failed and was easily repressed by the colonial forces. Soon after, the British Government sent Lord Durham as Governor-general of Canada, asking for an inquest on the internal problems of the colony. In his infamous *Report* (1839), Lord Durham suggested that the main problem was of ethnic nature, due to the fact that the French Canadians, after the Conquest in 1760 by the British and the severance of the historical bond linking them to France, had

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5) Member of the FLQ (Front for the Liberation of Quebec): a terrorist organization active in the Sixties and early Seventies.

6) See the introduction to the critical edition of Hubert Aquin's *Trou de mémoire*.

become a degenerate race. Coining his notorious phrase, “a people without history and without literature,” he concluded that they would be better off if the English Canadians simply assimilated them. Fortunately, his recommendation was not carried out by London, but the resentment it created in the colony served paradoxically the growth of French Canadian nationalism, as so wittily noted Jacques Ferron<sup>7</sup>).

#### 4. Historical Anamnesis

In Pierre X. Magnant’s narrative, there are numerous references to the Patriots of 1837-38. Learning later on in the novel that the ‘secret’ X of his Christian name stands for Xavier (a common French Canadian name in the Nineteen Century), one cannot help but link it to the middle name of François-Xavier Garneau, author of a *History of Canada* (1840-1845), written in reaction to Durham’s *Report*. It also serves to create a link between the French Canadian revolutionary and the African American leader, Malcolm X. Nevertheless, Pierre-Xavier Magnant, who identifies with Louis-Joseph Papineau and the cause of Quebec nationalism, has very harsh words about French Canadian identity. He feels that the French Canadian is still in the position of “the absolutely conquered man” who cannot “understand the incredible way in which he is buggered by history” (27). To describe the situation of modern French Canadian culture, he paraphrases Lord Durham’s *Report* rather than Garneau’s *History*: “this country has said nothing and written nothing. [...] My country is and will remain for a long time in the zone of sub-literature and sub-history.” (40) As the description unfolds, he parodies Shakespeare (*Hamlet* and *Macbeth*), rather than Racine or Corneille, to criticize the French Canadians’ problematic relationship to history:

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7) See Jacques Ferron, *Du fond de mon arrière-cuisine*, p. 88.



Quebec is a poor troop of stuttering players afflicted with amnesia, who stare at each other with questioning looks and seem as haunted by the platitude as Hamlet was by the ghost. They don't even recognize the scene of the drama when they see it, and fail to remember the first word of the first line of the viscous play which, because it can't get started, will never end. Everyone has the text at the tip of his tongue, but as soon as you set foot on stage where the other characters in this story-beyond-words are standing around like bumps on a log, really you don't know what to say nor where to start nor what magic word to offer to make them all suddenly recover their memories as well as the thread of the plot. (40-41)

Magnant's appeal to History to ground his own narrative is in turn undermined by a collective memory blank. He too has taken the French Canadian motto *Je me souviens* as his source of inspiration, but his failing memory leads him astray in the process of transcribing his memories. Like his African counterpart Olympe Ghezso-Quénum, Pierre X. Magnant is the faithful portrait of the colonized man, whom he tries, in vain, to decolonize. After molesting his submissive lover Joan in London, under "the Queen Anne street-lamps" (46) close to Buckingham Palace, but prior to raping and murdering her, Pierre X. Magnant confesses: "I finally put on my own identity. That royal crime-park did no more than throw back to me, like a black mirror, the Dogon mask of my true face." (64) Although he claims to identify with the conqueror instead of the conquered, his real identity cannot elude him: "Dear lost country, how like you I am." (95) It will, moreover, impede him of writing the political mystery novel he was planning in which would have been reflected the "perfect crime" (Joan's murder): "I certainly do not have the energy to undertake the inconceivable mystery story that would reflect a Quebec shuddering under its own efforts to attain a revolutionary spasm that never comes." (95) Yet, we, as readers, are conscious of reading such a novel. Hence where does this unsuspected success come from? I suggest we consider

the blanks, gaps and lapses, which constitute the very fabric of the text, for an answer to this crucial question. What Pierre X. Magnant, similar in that respect to his compatriots he stigmatizes, was unable to achieve, Hubert Aquin will have brought to an *untimely* finish.

## 5. Blanks, Gaps and Lapses

Throughout the novel, as mentioned previously, there are many forms of memory failure, which affect each character in turn in his or her respective narrative. The more common form is a blank left in the text. It usually corresponds to a loss of memory, whether conscious or not, on the narrator's part. As a narrative device, it permeates the whole novel and affects each narrator by turns. A more insidious form is the gap created between two fragments of a narration, when a passage of the text the editor felt was too indecent or vulgar for publication is suppressed, often to return in another part of the narrative as, for example, the scene of Joan's rape and murder. We encounter the latter in Pierre X. Magnant's "autobiography," expurgated by his editor of its more scabrous passages (cf. pages 28, 43, 91-92). Still another form is the gap to the second degree, when the commentary on a text abruptly ends without making sense, suggesting some sort of auto-censorship or self-disavowal from the narrator, maybe even a secretive manipulation of the text by another writer. Such gaps are to be found in the editor's explanatory comments (cf. pages 96 and 117), Olympe Ghezze-Quénum's diary as edited by his lover RR (cf. page 153), and even RR's own narrative (cf. page 107).

Towards the end of the novel, we finally learn that Pierre X. Magnant and Charles Edouard Mullahy, his so-called editor, are in fact the same person, the author haven staged his suicide in order to "rise again and do his work more safely, in the perfect clandestinity of death." (164) Ironically, it is Olympe Ghezze-Quénum, Pierre X. Magnant *other* alter

ego, which solves this part of the mystery. By then, the discrepancies between the various narratives have become so entangled that they are nearly impossible to untwine. Are we to accept, as a plausible explanation for these textual inconsistencies, the author's own theory of psychotic delirium, which makes him pass from a state of "absolute amnesia" (20) to that of "mnemogenic intoxication" (21)? Or should we suspect an attempt on someone else's part (and if so, who) to deliberately confound the reader by a constant shift from criminal avowal to psychoanalytical disavowal? Whatever be the case, it has become clear that we cannot rely on any narrator's memory, nor for that matter on anyone's authority — be it that of the Author himself or of a Model Reader —, if we are to find out the truth about the bewildering tale that is unwinding before our eyes. Our only chance of understanding at least where the truth lies, is to investigate even deeper the dark recesses of the text.

Let's shift then our attention to the different lapses imbedded in the various narratives, starting with those of Olympe Ghezso-Quénum. In the opening letter of the novel he addresses to Pierre X. Magnant, one finds an interesting clue. The old typewriter on which Ghezso-Quénum is writing his missive has a problem: "the 'q' invariably creates a traffic jam" (7). This letter, in the strictest sense of the word, is one of the two initials forming his patronym, but it is also the main initial used by the postal service of the federal government of Canada at the time to designate the province of Quebec (P.Q.). The mystery letter, conspicuous yet hidden in the tapestry of the text, offers an analogy with Edgar Allan Poe's *Purloined Letter*. The subtle link established between Ghezso-Quénum's identity and the unspeakable name of that "country which does not exist" (105) encountered later on in the novel, incites us to believe that Pierre X. Magnant's counterpart may be nothing more than a fragment of the French Canadian revolutionary's warped imagination. This version of the story is suspected by the editor and at one time corroborated by the elusive RR, when she refers to "the pseudo-diary

of Monsieur Ghezso-Quénum” (153, n. 1). In the diary itself, Ghezso-Quénum almost writes “Lagos,” which is in Nigeria, instead of “Ouchy” (122), in Switzerland, where he has supposedly taken refuge with RR. At the last minute he corrects his mistake, but a few pages after he makes another lapse much more incriminating: he substitutes Joan’s name for that of her younger sister Rachel. Revealing her knowledge of Freudian slips, RR notes: “This is a rather disturbing *lapsus calami*” (128, n. 1). All the clues seem to point to the guiltiness of Olympe Ghezso-Quénum, guilty that is of being Pierre X. Magnant’s “Dogon mask”. Nevertheless, RR will disavow that version of the story at the very end of the novel.

Obviously, the key to the mystery lies with this enigmatic figure we have too briefly presented to the reader: RR, alias Rachel Ruskin. She knows too much, and yet she too lapses occasionally, committing interesting Freudian slips. After fleeing with Olympe Ghezso-Quénum to Ouchy, she is allegedly raped (just like her sister Joan) by Pierre X. Magnant, who had been on the lovers’ trail for a certain time. Placed under sub-narcosis by her jealous lover, she is unable to recall how the rape took place, but she unwillingly confesses the identity of her aggressor, “Pierre-Xavier” (149), and the fact that she enjoyed the experience. She will even (or so it seems) end up being pregnant because of him. The final enigma of the novel concerns apparently RR’s true identity, and by way of logic, of her yet-to-be-born child. Like Pierre X. Magnant who changed his identity to Charles Edouard Mullahy before killing himself a second time (this time for good, alongside Olympe Ghezso-Quénum), Rachel Ruskin is about to change her name in order to start a new life. Furthermore, in memory of her dead sister Joan, she has “changed languages and become a French Canadian, 100% Québécoise!” (166) She hopes her child, who will bear Magnant’s name, will not be “afraid of his own name” (168) and that he will be happier than his father. She also wishes he’ll never “discover how he was conceived, nor what was [her] former name...”

(168) We, as reader, learn that secret name of Irish descent (Anne-Lise Jamieson), but are left with the enigma concerning the identity of the real father: is it Pierre X. Magnant, alias Charles Edouard Mullahy, or Olympe Ghezso-Quénum? If the three egos, as in the persons of the Trinity, form but one identity, than the mystery is solved and there is no point in pursuing the investigation. But if the white revolutionary and his black counterpart are two different persons, as stated in the end by RR, than the mystery concerning the paternity of the unborn child persists. Unless the real mystery lies somewhere else in the text...

## 6. The Anamorphosis

RR's impossible anamnesis has a suggestive graphic equivalent in the text: the anamorphosis of death in Holbein's painting *The Ambassadors*, with its elongated skull in the middle of the tableau depicting the common theme of *Vanitas Vanitatum* ('all is vanity'). The passage where it occurs, written by RR as a "semi-final" to the story she is by then editing (and most probably rewriting), is the most puzzling from a point of view of narration. When we reach this bewildering passage in the novel, we have already gotten accustomed to her presence in the text, adding footnotes to rectify the editor's mistakes. We might have suspected also that she would eventually come forward to become a narrator to the third degree. We could have guessed her real identity (Rachel Ruskin), if we had kept a recollection of Olympe Ghezso-Quénum's opening letter to Pierre X. Magnant where she is mentioned *en passant* (cf. page 8). Nevertheless, as we start reading her literary piece, we cannot help doubting again the identity of every character we have encountered so far, including hers. First of all, she states that her initials are not really RR: "This is a kind of abridged pseudonym in which I've dolled myself up, and which to a certain degree expresses my first impulse to treat myself on

the level of fiction.” (97) She goes on pretending to have written the whole novel disguised as Pierre X. Magnant, a character who doesn't exist outside her imagination. Then she admits having had an affair with the so-called Joan, “under another name and with certain details altered” (99). All this will be disavowed later on by her, as she proceeds in her cat-and-mouse game with the editor whom she has guessed to be Pierre X. Magnant in disguise, but before reaching that point in the story she will have committed one last Freudian slip on which rests the most hidden enigma of the novel — it's *apocalypse*, in the original sense of ‘revelation’.

In RR's fictitious version of Magnant's story, Joan “is the great specialist in theatrical illusion” (102) who teaches her pupil the secrets of anamorphosis. What is interesting in this passage is not so much the editor's subsequent interpretation of Holbein's anamorphosis, as valid as it may be, but its other interpretation merely suggested by the female narrator. In the editor's point of view, “Joan, a mortuary blazon and centrepiece to the book, plays the role of the invisible skull between the two ‘Ambassadors.’” (115) Her murder constitutes thus an anamorphic *mise en abyme* of Pierre X. Magnant's autobiography pointing to his culpability. In RR's narrative, however, the painting takes another dimension. As she describes at length the picture, insisting on every detail of its composition so as to lead the reader astray, she casually mentions “the two ambassadors of a country which does not exist.” (105) Of course, we know (and so does the editor, alias the author) that the noblemen in Holbein's painting were French ambassadors to the court of Henry VIII in England. Yet, the editor doesn't notice RR's strange *lapsus calami*. If, as reader to the fourth degree, we interpret RR's role in the novel as that of the Sphinx, we can reread this curious lapse as a historical riddle: what country of French origin didn't exist yet in 1533, date of execution of Holbein's painting, and still doesn't exist in 1968, date of publication of Aquin's novel? The answer, of course, is Quebec, discovered as Canada by Jacques Cartier in 1534, but still a Canadian province included

in the Commonwealth when Hubert Aquin, along with many of his compatriots, was struggling to achieve its independence.

Actually, Pierre X. Magnant had provided a clue to the riddle's solution when he wrote apocalyptically: "Our country is a cumbersome corpse." (35) Reflected in Joan — "a woman unconquered but violated" (30) —, Quebec was "the hidden form" (107) of the "perfect crime" he was seeking to accomplish but could not perpetrate since it had already taken place. Cheated by History itself, all he could achieve was a form of historical compensation: to try and erase Quebec's other memory, just as it had served to obliterate that country-to-be history.

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