

National Allegories: A Bicephalous Study of Aquin and Godbout

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Abstract

Published ten years apart, *Prochain Épisode* by Hubert Aquin and *Les Têtes à Papineau* nonetheless belong to the same genre, that of national allegory. First coined by Fredric Jameson in 1979, national allegory is a genre that "tends to be focused on the lives of ordinary people, however, rather than heads of state or aristocracy, using their mundane daily struggles as a means of illustrating the state of the nation" (Buchanan N.p.). This essay's purpose is to explain how these two novels fit into the genre of national allegory, as well as to contrast the difference in the picture both novels paint of Quebec, differences that can be attributed to the socio-political changes that happened in-between the publication of each novel. After an initial analysis of the presence and function of allegorical characters in the novels, the focus is put on two popular nationalist discourses of the time: the discourse of the double and the discourse of the "fatigue culturelle," a discourse originally developed by Hubert Aquin. The way both novels use these discourses to talk about the situation in the province solidify their status as national allegories of Quebec.

[National allegory is a] type of narrative whose essential subject is the nation state. Because the life of a nation, large or small, exceeds the capacity of what any novel can actually accommodate, narrative fiction of this type uses allegory as a means of expressing a dimension of existence greater than that of the lives of its individual characters. National allegory tends to be focused on the lives of ordinary people, however, rather than heads of state or aristocracy, using their mundane daily struggles as a means of illustrating the state of the nation. (Buchanan, N.p.)

This passage can be found under "National Allegory" in 2010's "A Dictionary of Critical Theory" published by the Oxford University Press. A concept originating from postcolonial studies, national allegory has gone through its share of controversy because the critic who first coined the term, Fredric Jameson (in 1979's "Fables of Aggression,") stated in the same breath

that all works coming from "Third World" literatures were national allegory¹. While I agree that was one generalization too many, national allegory does exist and should be accepted as such. While Quebec is by no means a Third World country (some scholars, such as Stephen Slemon, would use the term Second World to describe it) but due to its peculiar situation of double colonization and linguistic tensions, a situation often termed "la question nationale," it shares similar decolonization issues with Third World countries.

Because of these issues, national allegories are found in sizeable numbers in Quebec. Interestingly enough, these allegories are not all the same, even if they fundamentally argue the same nationalist position. One of the best examples of this fact is the classic allegorical novels *Prochain Épisode* and *Les Têtes à Papineau*, written respectively by Hubert Aquin in 1965 and Jacques Godbout in 1981. Politically, a lot ties Godbout and Aquin together. They were both politically involved with the independence movement, but in two different parties (Aquin was part of the Rassemblement pour l'Indépendance Nationale while Godbout was a member of the Mouvement Souveraineté-Association). They were both involved with the journal "Liberté," Aquin as editor-in-chief and Godbout as a co-founder. It should come as no surprise then that they both wrote novels that function as perfect national allegories – flawless mirrors of their social and national reality. But there are multiple differences between the two works, most of them having to do with the fact that 16 years and a failed referendum separates *Prochain Épisode* from *Les Têtes à Papineau*. Aquin was writing at the dawn of the Quiet Revolution, Godbout at its twilight. The Quebec they paint in their novels is not the same Quebec. Stylistically, there is also a divergence: Aquin's work was bleak and depressed while Godbout's traded on wits and dark humour. In the coming pages, I will analyze and point out some differences in allegorical content and tone. But despite all those differences, there are a number of similarities, a number

¹ For more information on such criticism, see the third chapter of "In Theory" by Aijaz Ahmad (1992).

of elements that had not changed in the decade and a half of social evolution that bridges the two novels. I will focus on extracting and analyzing those similarities, to show how both novels are national allegories of Quebec. I'll start by analyzing the characters of each allegory, followed by an analysis of the concept of the double and a comparison of the presence of a cultural fatigue in both works. By cultural fatigue, I mean the concept described in Hubert Aquin's 1964 essay "La Fatigue culturelle du Canada français:" "Ai-je besoin d'évoquer, dans ce sens, tous les corollaires psychologiques de la prise de conscience de cette situation minoritaire: l'auto-punition, le masochisme, l'auto-dévaluation, la "dépression," le manque d'enthousiasme et de vigueur, autant de sous-attitudes dépossédées que des anthropologues ont déjà baptisées de 'fatigue culturelle'" ("La Fatigue culturelle" 314).

An allegorical story needs allegorical characters, and both novels have them in spades. Each novel focuses on two characters that function as mirrored doubles of each other – the narrator and H. de Heutz in Aquin, Charles and François in Godbout. I will expand later in this text on the presence of the double in each novel. For the time being, I shall focus on the other characters. Interestingly enough, there is only one other major character in *Prochain Épisode*: K, the lover of the narrator. K can be said to represent Quebec. Not Quebec as Aquin sees it to be in the present, but Quebec as he wishes it were – strong, beautiful and, most important of all, independent:

Tu sais, depuis que j'ai obtenu ma séparation, je vois les choses plus froidement qu'avant... Le désastre ne me fait plus peur désormais. J'ai le sentiment que je ne traverserai jamais de période aussi noire que les douze derniers mois que j'ai passés dans des chambres d'hôtel de Manchester, Londres, Bruxelles, Bernes ou Genève, en transit dans chaque ville et obligée de garder la face. Je crois que j'ai fait une grande dépression... Maintenant, c'est fini. (*Prochain Épisode* 36)²

² It was pointed out to me that this passage could be interpreted as coming from the narrator and not K. In my version of the text, the structure of the dialogue and the conjugation of some verbs later on in the passage seem

In this passage, K admits to having been depressed, a probable allusion to Aquin's own concept of cultural fatigue, but affirms she is now much better and sees things much more clearly since her separation. In Quebec, this last word is very loaded, and the fact that the novel never states what K separated from is a clear sign that Aquin wanted the reader to read the word with all its "separatist" connotations. In other words, this whole passage is a mirror of Quebec's separation that Aquin hoped was just around the corner. But as much as she is idealized, K is also a very ambiguous character – hints of her duplicitous character are scattered throughout the story. In the second half of the novel, the narrator falls into a trap sprung on him by H. de Heutz and his acolyte, which the narrator describes as a blonde woman. Since K was previously described as a blonde, shall we assume that she is also H. de Heutz' partner in crime? That interpretation does not seem so unlikely in the light of Aquin's previous writing: "Le Canadien français est, au sens propre et figuré, un agent double" ("La Fatigue culturelle" 320). A last shred of ambiguity surrounding K is this peculiar description of her hair as being "léonine" (*Prochain Épisode* 25). This allusion to the lion brings to mind the extensive use British heraldry made of the lion or the famous English King Richard the Lionheart, a figure belonging both to history and legends. However, since the association between the lion and kingship dates all the way back to Mesopotamia, at the very least, the reference in *Prochain Épisode* could be seen as a larger criticism of colonial power in general. Or it could be seen as a positive reference to the noble and regal character of a free Quebec.

to point strongly toward the speaker being K, but this is not enough evidence to erase any possible doubts, since these elements could be due to editing errors. Considering this and having no easy access to the original edition, I must, for the sake of academic honesty, acknowledge the possibility that this passage could be from the narrator. I will, however, continue to write under the assumption that it is coming from K.

Similarly ambiguous and allegorical characters can be found in *Les Têtes à Papineau*, starting with Alain-Auguste, the father of the eponymous "têtes," conjoined twins Charles and François. Alain-Auguste's cowboy boots, trusty colts and trigger-happy nature are tell-tale signs that he allegorically represents the USA. Alain Auguste is also tied to the USA by his inclination towards show business and marketing, activities the novel links explicitly to the Americans when the Fontaine family makes its appearance: "[Fontaine était] leur nom véritable, il y avait des nains canadiens-français! bien [sic] que l'on se demandât parfois s'ils n'étaient pas américains, avec ce talent fabuleux qu'ils déployaient pour le spectacle" (Godbout 77). Add to this his favoured nickname, AA, which is not without reminding the reader of the common phrase "All-American" and the fact that his mother was born in the U.S. to French-Canadian exiles, and you have an allegorical slam-dunk. So obvious are the parallels that one could accuse AA of being a caricature rather than an allegory. But this criticism is made void with this passage, in which AA is not easily identifiable as American:

Au fond papa a toujours été comme du papier recouvert de sel d'argent. Impressionnable. Trop. Il a toujours été fragile. Cow-boy au coeur sensible, il souffre avec tous les exploités et tous les torturés de la terre. À l'époque, il avait mal aux Nègres, aux Indiens, aujourd'hui aux Cambodgiens, aux Palestiniens... C'est une souffrance qui n'a jamais de fin. (Godbout 60)

This can be read as a call-back to the nationalism of the early sixties where it was common for pro-independence writers and thinkers to draw parallels between Québécois and other oppressed minorities. Such writers included: Hubert Aquin, who very early on in *Prochain Épisode* namedrops Cuba (5), Wolofs (6) and "Felicidade," a carnival song linked to black Brazilians (16); Paul Chamberland who in *L'Afficheur Hurlé* (1969) stated "je suis cubain je suis nègre nègre-blanc québécois" (71); and Paul Vallières, who wrote an autobiographical novel called *Nègres Blancs de l'Amérique* (1968), published while imprisoned in the United States. The tone

of the passage seems to indicate that Godbout is critical of this practice. This personality trait of AA could be Godbout's way of disagreeing with some tenets of the nationalist movement. Or it could be Godbout's way of distancing the Québécois's fight for emancipation from the American civil rights and anti-war movements of the sixties and seventies, which a more global focus than simply national survival. What is important here is not what interpretation one chooses to accept, but that Godbout voluntarily multiplies possible interpretations of the character of Alain-Auguste, making the character an allegory rather than the caricature he seems to be at first glance.

Marie Lalonde is also an ambiguous figure, despite what seems to be a straightforwardly allegorical name. "Marie, la mère par excellence de l'Église Catholique, Lalonde, nom qui indique 'la localité d'origine', la terre mère donc" (Galery 255). If Marie Lalonde is the Mother/Land, then she has to be an allegorical representation of Quebec's actual motherland, France. Before the French Revolution, France was often referred to as the eldest daughter of the Catholic Church³, which fits perfectly with the name Marie. But ambiguity sets in when Marie's later life takes on a very modern turn that seems incompatible with the connotations of traditions and roots usually attributed to the mother/land: "

Parce que Bébée lui ressemblait, et que ses gènes l'avaient emporté dans le deuxième round, maman, comme des milliers de femmes de son âge, choisit, quand la Révolution tranquille le permit, et dans l'ordre, la pilule anticonceptionnelle, une profession qui l'amena hors du foyer, puis la ligature des trompes....Puis elle se passionna rapidement de travaux électroniques....La libération de maman passait cependant par notre solitude. (Godbout 37-8)

³ This designation comes from the fact that French kings are descendants of Clovis I, first "barbarian" king to convert to Catholicism.

In this passage, Marie seems to initially lose her qualities of motherland, of origins and roots, in favour of becoming a representation of the rapid progress made by Quebec society since the Duplessis era ended twenty years before the novel was written. The reference to electronics, however, seems to link her with the U.S., represented as said before by Alain-Auguste, which was the then leader of the computer industry. Finally, the last line seems to bring the character back to being an allegory of France. Indeed, this line mirrors the resentment some French-Canadians feel towards France for "abandoning" Quebec to the hands of the English, preferring to focus on their other colonies (namely in Africa and the Caribbean). To summarize, in both novels we have a piling up of allegorical layers that makes every character multicephalous and ambiguous. Because the national question is so complex, any good allegory must retain a part of this complexity. Both Aquin and Godbout seem convinced that it takes more than a quick glance to understand Quebec, and mirror this conviction in their allegorical rendition of it. This is also the author's way of forcing their readers to interact with their novel "sans faire l'économie de la littéralité au profit de la seule lecture allégorique ou connotative" (Piette 113).

Duality has always been a concept central to any discussion of Canada and Quebec. Canada is often referred to as having two founding peoples (or founding races in older works) and the term two solitudes has become a cliché since Hugh MacLennan popularized it in his 1945 novel of the same name. English and French-speaking citizens of the country have a long tradition of being represented and of representing themselves in a binary relationship, one against the other, us versus them, *moi et l'autre*. It should not come off as a surprise then that the two allegories of Quebec under study here have, at their very core, a dual character. In *Prochain Épisode*, the narrator represents the French-Canadians, the colonized trying to overthrow the oppressor. His nemesis, H. de Heutz, is a representation of English-Canadians – the colonizer,

the powers-that-be. They are, on the surface, two separate characters, but the line between the two starts blurring very quickly when the narrator confronts H. de Heutz in the Coppet woods and H. tells the narrator the exact same cover story the narrator told H. earlier in the novel, which destabilizes the narrator and forces him to admit that H. de Heutz could easily convince him that they are connected: "si je n'étais pas sur mes gardes, il m'aurait à coup sûr et pourrait me convaincre qu'il est mon frère, que nous étions nés pour nous rencontrer et pour nous comprendre. J'ai vraiment affaire au diable" (Prochain Épisode 80). This line establishes a possible family relationship between the allegorical French-Canadian and English-Canadian, but it is a tie the narrator refuses. Anthony Purdy writes that this line suggests an even more intrinsic link between the narrator and H. de Heutz than one of a sibling: "Diable ou frère, l'historien finit par fasciner, par séduire le héros. Moyennant un renversement insidieux du procédé schizophrénique, les deux hommes, ennemis implacables, se fondent en un seul: identité anti-dialectique et déréalisante" (Purdy 116). This insidious takeover or merging of H. de Heutz with the narrator would be echoed five years later by Jean Bouthillette in his essay "Le Canadien français et son double:" "Le Canadien français est un homme qui a deux ombres. Et c'est en vain que nous feignons d'y échapper: l'ombre anglaise nous accompagne toujours partout. Et dans cette ombre nous devenons ombre" (15). This fusion of the two opponents as a single double-faceted individual becomes more and more explicit as the novel goes on. The narrator even starts to recognize the fusion – "Moi, agent révolutionnaire par deux fois pris au dépourvu, j'étais en quelque sorte déguisé en H. de Heutz, revêtu de sa cuirasse bleue, muni des fausses identités et porteur de ses clés héraldiques" (Prochain Épisode 111) – shortly before he admits that he needs H. de Heutz: "J'ai besoin de H. de Heutz. S'il n'arrive pas, que vais-je devenir" (Aquin *Prochain* 133)? The narrator needs H. de Heutz for two reasons. First, because H. de Heutz is a part of

himself, of his inner psyche. Second, because he needs H. de Heutz to be there so he can kill him, and by this murder transform from a schizophrenic bisected individual to a pure French-Canadian.

This transformation from a double individual to a single one is also present in Godbout's novel. In fact, it is the central plot of the novel. Charles and François Papineau (CF as in *Canadien français*), the bicephalous protagonists of the novel, have decided that they cannot live with each other anymore, and thus volunteers for a surgery that will join them into a single individual. In short, they want to make true this passage from Bouthillette: "Canadien et français, dans notre Moi [*sic*] collectif, ne sont qu'une seule et même chose . Nous sommes indissolublement *Canadienfrançais*" (19). The fact that Charles and François are not individuals, but two opposing sides of the same being, creates more than a few complications. An interesting one is the impossibility for both heads to offer only one discourse:

Peu à peu nous apprenons à nous terroriser mutuellement. Même ce texte devient plus difficile à rédiger. Quand une idée, un souvenir, une remarque plaisent à François, cela horripile Charles. Doit-on le noter? Chacun des mots que nous enregistrons doit être approuvé par les deux têtes qui nous gouvernent. Les lois de nos cerveaux s'ajustent mal. Les discours se croisent, se bousculent, s'entrechoquent. (Godbout 119)

This is in contrast to Aquin, where H. de Heutz is revealed as being the double of the narrator through his assimilation of the narrator's discourse. Both writers see the binary existence of French and English Canadians as a problem, and both agree that it has to cease, that French-Canadians have to become their own entity separated from the "English shadow" of Bouthillette, but they do not agree on the reason that make this separation necessary. For Aquin, emancipation is needed because otherwise French-Canadians are losing their ability to produce a distinctive discourse. For Godbout, the impossibility for English and French-speaking Canadians to

establish a common discourse makes emancipation the only logical course of action. Interestingly enough though, Godbout also echoes Aquin's fear of discursive loss at the very end of his novel when the surgery ends up being a disaster. Rather than creation of a pure, emancipated French-Canadian, Charlesfrançois, the surgery results in an individual that can only speak English: Charles F. François is reduced to an initial, a footnote of History. Charles was the one who campaigned for the surgery – by letting the dominant power make the decision for him, François loses his discursive power forever, just like Aquin's narrator loses the fight with H. de Heutz when he let him take over his discursive power.

This lack of discursive power of the French-Canadians is one important component of the "fatigue culturelle" experienced by French-Canada according to Aquin: "Sa trajectoire politique serait infléchie d'avance par la majorité qui la lui concéderait et demeurerait une fonction d'un ensemble dans lequel il devra nécessairement s'insérer harmonieusement. Selon cette perspective, le Canada français détiendrait un rôle, le premier à l'occasion, dans une histoire dont il ne sera jamais l'auteur" (" La Fatigue culturelle" 317). *Prochain Épisode* is littered with references to this loss of authorship, to this impossibility for the French-Canadian narrator to escape the parameters of a (his)story already written, but none more transparent than this one:

Rien n'est libre ici: ni mon coup d'âme, ni la traction adipeuse de l'encre sur mon imaginaire, ni les mouvements pressentis de H. de Heutz, ni la liberté qui m'est dévolue de le tuer au bon moment. Rien n'est libre ici, rien: même pas cette évasion fougueuse que je téléguide du bout des doigts et que je crois conduire quand elle m'efface. . . . Quelque chose me dit qu'un modèle antérieur mon improvisation dans une forme atavique et qu'une alluvion ancienne étreint le fleuve instantané qui m'échappe. Je n'écris pas, je suis écrit. (85-6)

This passage is one of the most powerful of the novel, especially because of the last sentence. This sentence encapsulates in few words Aquin's entire view of the history of Quebec. In contrast, *Les Têtes à Papineau* mentions only briefly the problem of authorship:

Dans sa plus récente lettre, il [notre éditeur] affirme vouloir publier un livre sur notre métamorphose (il cite Kafka), car cette 'transformation' (les guillemets sont de lui) devra servir, écrit-il, à 'l'édification des générations futures'. Il est vraiment pudique! Mais sa magnifique pudeur ne l'empêchera pas de glisser notre livre entre un ouvrage sur la disparition du tabou de l'inceste et un autre (illustré) présentant les pratiques ancestrales de la nécrophilie dans le bas Saint-Laurent. Le tout dans une collection d'histoires 'vécues'. Vécues. (Godbout 27)

There are two things at play here. First, Charles and François have no power over their own story – it is another entity that decides what part of their story will be published, and for what purpose. They too are written rather than writing. Second, French-Canadians are in danger of being remembered only as a footnote in history, a fear that I already alluded to when discussing the end of the novel and the result of the surgery. Surprisingly enough, this danger is rarely talked about in *Prochain Épisode*, and when it is, only indirectly. But this is not a theme exclusive to Godbout; some of his other contemporaries did not shy away from it either:

nous en serons bientôt à l'insémination artificielle, les hommes d'ici auront foutu le camp dans un livre d'entomologiste made in USA. ('Canadiens-français : espèce qui vécut de 1760 à 19...'). (Chamberland 70)

Another important element of cultural fatigue as lived by French-Canadians is the internalization of a discourse that renders French-Canada inferior to English-Canada; a discourse whose main premise is "désaxer la dialectique historique dans laquelle le Canada français se trouve impliqué, en situant le pôle supérieur [English-Canada] à un niveau très élevé. [...] L'invocation d'une réalité lointaine et idéale qui accable notre culture revient souvent chez nos idéologues et correspond, pratiquement, à une volonté de voir dans la culture canadienne-française une 'réalité réduite'" ("La Fatigue culturelle" 322). Both allegories show this principle by having the character representing English-Canada being dominant in his relationship with the character representing Quebec. In *Prochain Épisode*, H. de Heutz takes a mythical, mystical quality in the

eyes of the narrator: "Ce que je perçois de lui ne sera toujours qu'une infime portion de sa puissance. [...] Pétri d'in vraisemblance, H. de Heutz se meut dans la sorcellerie et le mystère... Son arme engagée sur sa poitrine n'est qu'une formalité: il puise sa force dans une arme secrète qui n'est peut-être, en dernière analyse, qu'une contre-feinte" (128). Interesting fact to note, despite the passage seemingly agreeing with the dominant discourse, the last line undermines it, suggesting that H. de Heutz superiority is only an illusion, his wizardry simple prestidigitation. This undermining is nowhere to be seen in *Les Têtes à Papineau* – Charles, the brother who can speak English without an accent (read: without sounding like a native French speaker) is seen as dominant throughout the novel: "Depuis le début du roman, Charles est le meneur du jeu : c'est toujours lui qui fait valoir sa volonté, c'est lui qui n'hésite jamais devant les conséquences de l'opération" (Galery 228). Charles is so dominant that he even tries to eat his brother François: "Charles a fait, il y a huit mois, une première crise d'anthropophagie. Il cherchait à mordre l'oreille de François, à lui manger le nez. S'il avait pu tourner la tête, soutient-il, il aurait tenté d'avalier François tout entier" (Godbout 129-130). In the end, Charles succeeds in swallowing François whole, as he is the only one of the two brothers to emerge from the surgery alive.

If we go back to the quote by Buchanan I began this essay with, we will remember that, in order to be a national allegory, a narrative must have as essential subject the nation. Both *Prochain Épisode* and *Les Têtes à Papineau* can be said to be about the nation first and foremost since the backbone of each novel is made of two very important nationalist discourses of the era. First, the discourse of the double, "Depuis deux siècles, nous ne sommes plus seuls dans notre pays. Non plus qu'en nous-mêmes" (Bouthillette 14), of the French-Canadian as a people whose psyche is divided between French and English mindsets. Second, the discourse of the "fatigue culturelle," a "sickness" deriving from the condition of being colonized and from the constant

struggle for survival against an enemy that always seems to "win." This sickness induces a loss of discursive power and an inferiority complex.

It is clear that those two novels are about the nation of Quebec – but are they allegories? Once again, I have to answer by the affirmative, since the various characters of both novels are not only representations of the various entities that have a part to play in the past- present and future of the province, they are complex, ambiguous, contradictory representations. This complexity is in and of itself an allegory for the tortuousness of the "question nationale." As such, I feel comfortable using the concept of national allegory to describe these novels.

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