

Black Snow: The Arctic Infernos of Hubert Aquin and Denys Chabot

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Snow is frozen water, and water is black; therefore, snow also is black.

–Anaxagoras

Tu te fondais à lui comme une neige au feu:

Tes grandes visions étranglaient ta parole

Et l'Infini terrible effara ton oeil bleu!

–Rimbaud, "Ophélie"

. . .white, although considered as *no color*. . . is a symbol of a world from which all colors have disappeared. . . a cold, indescribably wall going on into the infinite. . . like pauses in music that . . . break the melody. White has the appeal of the nothingness that is before birth, of the world in the ice age. [T]he ground-note of black is a silence with no possibilities. . . the silence of death. A blend of black and white produces gray, which. . . is silent and motionless. . . The darker the gray the more preponderant becomes this feeling of desolation and strangulation.

–Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*

In an interview with André Bastien, conducted in October of 1975, Yves Thériault discussed the genesis of *Agaguk* (1958). Originally the story of an American Métis fleeing captivity with a young Seminole to an island in the Everglades, the proto-novel was reset, shortly after Thériault's return from his Arctic travels, on the tundra. "The Tropics became the Arctic," said Thériault; "the isle changed into an igloo" (unpaginated; all translations mine). As the topsy-turvy history of its composition may serve to suggest, Thériault's elaborate romance of tribal cannibals, voracious civilization and the ideal Inuk (Man), reflecting as it does the eternal conflict between self-reliant man and the "millennial atavism" (324), has more in common with Montaigne's search for the Stoical virtue in his essay "Des cannibales" and the contiguous tradition of Renaissance utopia than with any factual account of Arctic journeying. The commentary of like-minded critics ironically illuminates the motifs informing the author's imaginative journey. In Laurent Mailhot's view, Thériault is *Agaguk*, at once hunter and prey, substance and shadow, "the adventurer and the adventure" (14). Similarly, the authors of *Le roman canadien-français du vingtième siècle* (1966) insist upon the irrelevance of latitude and longitude to Thériault's poetics of self-discovery, implying that the writer

who, in Victor-Lévy Beaulieu's appraisal, had sketched "the great map of all our geographies" (37), was both pursuer and pursued, artificer and artifice, in the act of marrying Tropic and Arctic extremes to Québec's literary topography. The reader who would apprehend in this early naturalistic novel an untrustworthy chart by which to plot a northward course would find further dizzying confirmation in later *québécois* explorations of the baroque imaginary. Mirroring the "infinite progression" and "regression" through a "looking-glass world" by which Rosalie L. Colie figures the "self-cancelling action" of Renaissance paradox (18, 14, 40), Hubert Aquin's *Neige Noir* (1974) and Denys Chabot's *L'Eldorado dans les glaces* (1978) can be read as extended meditations on the learned ignorance of the *coincidentia oppositorum*, the mystical Cusan principle of the 'coincidence of opposites.'¹ So construed, these novels launch the reader on a roundabout trip to that zero point where polar contraries balance and annul each other to infinity. The following study of 'le pur style baroque'² seeks to elucidate some of its coincidences with Renaissance and post-Renaissance English and French literary culture.

Chabot's *L'Eldorado dans les glaces* records the hypnotic soliloquies of a monomaniac who, much like Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, accost a distraught narrator on transatlantic crossing from Le Havre to Montreal. But, unlike the Ancient Mariner, who eventually prays for wakefulness and trusts in his Pilot to bring him safely home to port, this lunatic subscribes to the dreamy, nighttime logic of Emile Nelligan's "Le Vaisseau d'or," wherein the poet's heart, "a desolate ship," tempest-tost and lulled by siren song, "has foundered in the abyss of Dream" (13, 14). The storyteller's fantastic avatars, whose names invoke the works of Marlowe, Goethe and Blake, double, multiply and gainsay one another, as they shed the dubious light of circular unreason on each other's relations in the intoxicating play of shattered mirrors that makes up Chabot's *L'Eldorado dans les glaces*. The mystical sum of these paradoxes quite deliberately confounds the additions of logic, "enemy. . . of all mystery" (21). Proceeding "[p]ar voie d'analogie," or analogically, just as Chabot's soliloquiser tosses his "monocle" coin-like from one eye to the other, the narration conflates reason and folly, dream and reality, self and other, like and unlike, within the space of a baroque *mise-en-abyme*: "who finds his double loses himself," goes the subtitle to Chabot's first chapter (21, 32). Such two-way mirror-work, however, a mere "illusion of symmetry," courts "the grey disolation of ennui" (144). "Together and at opposite poles, each wanted to uncover the unnatural bestiality of someone else," says the Circe-like Béate (129). On the other hand and by the same token, the skeptic perforce works "at cross-purposes" (127), practising that studied unscience which neither apes the vagaries of opinion, nor again the rationalism and the quixotism portrayed in previous narrations but, on the contrary, individualizes and

particularizes.

"Everyone calls barbarism what does not conform to one's habits," remarks Montaigne in "Des cannibales," framing his own vision of the ideal republic within a discussion of the peculiar virtues of the stoical savage (*Essais* 1.31.234). And he underscores his point with the characteristic irony, when he writes, "Not to lie, at our expense, these men are really savages; for, either they are. . . or we are" (1.31.243). Reflecting on the utopias of Plato, Rousseau, Crèvecoeur, Campanella, Fourier and Fénelon, Chabot's narrator comes to a similar conclusion: "everything occurs within the mind, journeys and savageries alike" (24). A female Diogenes, Chabot's skeptic counts herself, like Montaigne, amongst "those who know that they sleep" (127). For the "fractured binocle" of her husband Faustus, she substitutes a vision infused with the "mystical obscurities" of a "visionary opium," involving the reader in the smoky concatenations of a "content" and a "container" winding like a boa "in a half-knot. . . a cat's paw and a pig's tail" (152, 163, 164, 155-65). Endlessly self-reflexive, Chabot's "gay science"—"a perpetual confession of ignorance," in Montaigne's expression (*Essais* 2.12.560)—lulls "the dying conscience of those who regain the lethargic fever, the sweet and motionless sleep," with the musical thinking so conducive to the inner consolations of (un)reason. Chabot's fantasy perpetually inscribes spheres within spheres within spheres, "those pure creations of the spirit which knows how to dream, and dreams to know even more" (164-65). While the narrator promises his readers that "these enigmas will elucidate themselves," the illumination reflexively conferred by paradox can only be, by analogy, twilight (3).

In a similar fashion, Aquin's work evolves the ironic matrix of Kierkegaardian Existentialism cited in its epigraph—"I must now at once be and not be"—in and through Hamlet's famous dilemma. In the astute appraisal of one critic, Aquin's fictional world implicates "a metonymic playhouse in which author of one critic, persona, and spectator-reader don masks and play a roundabout game of metaphysical hide-and-seek," the gamesters mutually "ensnared in an endlessly ironic exploration for the truth or untruth of their roles" (La Bossière 32). Such a description, applied to the perpetual game of cloak-and-dagger in Aquin's *Prochain Épisode* (1965), extends almost organically from the plottings and counter-plottings of *Hamlet* to the contrapuntal movements of *Neige Noire's discordia concors*, for Hamlet and Fortinbras are twins in Aquin's rewriting, suggesting the ambivalent status of political identities throughout the novel. Written in the form of an actor-director's autobiographical film script and interspersed with reflections on the nature of cinema as a specular medium—Aquin's *Neige Noire* (1974), translated as *Hamlet's Twin*, frames its successive perspectives within the key paradox of

the *theatrum mundi*, "that illuminated theatre. . . concerning which one does not know whether it is the outside or the inside that is illuminated" (155, 152). In the manner of anamorphic Renaissance art, with its elaborate use of optical contraptions, peculiar perspectives and *trompe l'oeil*, the equally elaborate scenario of *Neige Noire* deploys the visual pyrotechnics, camera angles and trick optics of modern cinematography so as to "redimension all structures in the stuff of an anti-structure, the stuff that dreams are made on," to invoke Jackson L. Cope's rendering of *The Theater and the Dream* (212). "The world is a dream and the dream is a world," says the Hamlet of Aquin's fiction (184). By alternately shooting its sequences with the lenses of illusion and reality, world and dream, "as one turns the barrel of a revolver," Huber Aquin's spectral conjuration of *Hamlet*, a baroque game of Russian roulette, reflexively calls into question both the being of art and its percipient (71).³

"We wake sleeping, and sleep waking," writes Montaigne in his "Apologie de Raimond Sebond," whose sceptical syntax lapsing into Cicero's "Cimmerian obscurities" provides the main motif for Aquin's *Neige Noire*: "If you establish that snow is black, [the Pyrrhonians] argue in return that it is white. If you say that it is neither one nor the other, it falls upon them to argue in return that it is both," Montaigne gleans from Sextus Empiricus reading Anaxagoras (*Essais* 2.12.672, 558). The learned ignorance of the artistic follower of Pyrrho neither categorically affirms nor denies, unless, conversely, it categorically affirms and denies. "Men are so necessarily mad that it would be doubly mad not to be mad," Aquin's Fortinbras answers to his shadowy "semblable" (185), citing from Pascal's Foucault's lyrical history of madness in the age of reason, a rewriting of Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*. Quite appropriately, given the ironies involved in Foucault's own undertaking—"to write. . . the archaeology of that silence [of unreason]" (xiii), in the words of the preface to the English translation of 1965—his *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* begins with extended references to Brandt's *Narrenschiiff* and its figural counterparts, which mythical Ships of Fools the learned scholar of unknowing claims truly existed. Chabot's lunatic revellers in *La Province lunaire* (1981) are embarked on just such a ship, to which the author provides the Romantic analogues found in Coleridge, Rimbaud and Nelligan (34-35). In Montaigne the skeptic, Chabot, Aquin, Pascal and Foucault all have a faithful sea-mate on their journey into the night of nescience. As his self-portrayal as ungainly navigator on Catallus' choppy seas serves to illustrate, the ceaseless drift of Montaigne's "Apologie," as he oscillates between contrary judgements, is designed so as to rock the dreamer of lyrical unreason to sleep: "All I do is go to and fro: my judgement does not always make headway; it floats, it wavers, 'like a frail ship surprised on the immense seas by a furious wind'" (*Essais* 2.12.635). As the most concise

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expression of the phantasmagoria of the doubting mind, Montaigne's "Who knows?" is quite appropriately emblematised by a balance, signifying the relativity and the duplicity of all knowledge suspended in the *branloire perenne* of the mental traveller's world (2.12.588).

"Doubt is an endomorphosis," writes Aquin in his own fiction of shifting, topsy-turvy landscapes (154). Just as Denmark's harassed state makes "night joint-labourer with the day" (*Hamlet* 1.1.81), so, too, the nuptials of Aquin's fiction, symbolically rendered as a quest to uncover Fortinbras' grave through a pilgrimage to Ultima Thule, "the specter of a frozen continent," take place in "a sunlit night. . . thus realizing the marriage of day and night" (88, 71). As the camera charts out "the greying intensity" of the viewer's journey to the Absolute, the sheer profusion of anthropomorphic vistas multiplies specular surfaces *as nauseam* (167). Following the archetypal patterns of Christian iconography, Sylvie, the betrothed, embodies the person of Mary—"the woman-woman, the mirror of love. . . the work of works"—in the spectator's *mappa mundi* (51). And yet, as he analogically transposes the contours of Alaska, Sverdrup and Repulse Bay for those of Isfjorden, Cape Mitra and Kongsfjorden, Aquin's "delicious cartographer" and his "Renaissance decor" so dissect reality by way cinematic *trompe l'oeil*, zoom-backs and fade-outs as to suggest rather the idea of "self-mutilation" and "the obverse of a decor" (153, 154). Nicolas' cannibalizing of his intended at the centre of a "a black hell" merging with and eclipsing "a hell of whiteness and silence" in the "black snow" of Spitzbergen rounds out these contraries reconciled to a zero, signifying at once totality, infinity and nothingness: "The incarnation corresponds to death, the origin to its term, recovering, by such circularity, the veiled structure of the film" (163, 182, 138). The catastrophic voyage of the *Erebus* and the *Terror*, coupled with the spectre of cannibalism lurking in several accounts of Franklin's last expeditions, rhymes with Aquin's own voyage: fact coincides with fiction, fiction with fact. As Blake writes tellingly across the margins of Boyd's *Historical Notes* on Dante's *Inferno*, concerning the boundlessness of infernal logic, "the extreme of black is white. . . of good Evil & of Nothing Something" (635).

Aquin's marrying of contraries in *Neige Noire* further invites comparison with the destructive and procreative "Fire-baptism" of Carlyle's "Shadow-hunter. . . Shadow-hunted" Teufelsdröckh in *Sartor Resartus*'s "Centre of Indifference" (122, 115). At that very point where Carlyle's "Everlasting Nay" answers to his "Everlasting Yea," individualists, suicides and homicides square off in paratactical "juxta-position," like the syllogisms of "cherubic reasoning" translated into a dialectical "Battle-field" (119, 121, 118); and there, poised under an Arctic "June Midnight," these dualists in the "logic" of the "UNFATHOMABLE" blast each other to bits and eternity, echoing to the

deadly "Silence" hovering over the "mirror" of the "infinite Brine" as the sunlight "shoot[s] downward to the abyss" (121-122). In the hyperborean world of *Neige Noire*, as well, "the silence. . . blackness, the opaque silence," accompanies every elusive image: "The image is only an absence, the negative of a phantom we cherish" (145, 196). Blackness itself being only an aggregate of whiteness, the blankness of snow, as in Melville's chapter on "The Whiteness of the Whale" in *Moby Dick*, "engenders an image of reality constituted as much by its own color as by the very absence of all color" (113). The gradual encroachment of universal nihilism finally shatters the darkened glass in which the "*cogito cogitatem*" finds no objective correlative except the infinite sadness sung by a melancholy "*Discorso*": "The mirror cantata has just shattered; nothing subsists. . . but the fragments of a mirror without a tain!" (196). "An ecstatic mysticism of contraries" (116), as René Lapiere describes Aquin's captive imagination in search of the unsayable, Aquin's ship seems bound for the "frozen continent" looming prominently in the second book of *Paradise Lost* (2. 587). In Aquin's "continent refroidi" as in Milton's frozen continent, extremes meet in annihilation (88); the "atarazic indifference" of Montaigne's skepticism has turned into the "voracious passivity" (*Neige Noire* 166) contemplated in Carlyle's "Everlasting No," wherein Teufelsdröckh's heart, deprived of substantial food-stuff, "smoulder[s] in sulphur-ous, slow-consuming fire" (114).

Among the clues to his own identity, Chabot's Oberlin finds some pages torn from an edition of Dante annotated by Swedenborg (26). In a figure apposite to the viciously circular logic animating Chabot's Eldorado, his Faustus presides over an island of "Dantesque prisoners" locked, like the Wrathful in the fifth circle of Dante's *Inferno* and the self-cannibalizing cannibals of Montaigne's "Des cannibales," in internecine warfare, "riveted beak to beak. . . like enclosed vultures grappling to the quick" (100). The enchanted island itself is compared to "an iceberg. . . drifting in its terrific equilibrium," as well as to the green *Paradiso* which Danish explorers dreamed of discovering, only to find "an inhabitable desert of ice" (85). The self-consuming nature of a Promethean doubt in which "every folly had to have its obverse as well as its reverse" gradually traces out the contour of Chabot's "L'Eldorado" (129), to which revellers ferry on rafts as over Milton's "Lethaean sound" in *Paradise Lost* (2.604). "[H]ell is the outward or external of heaven," in Blake's own circumscription of the ever-proliferating "convexities" in Swedenborg's *Heaven and Hell* (602). Coincidentally, in Chabot's *L'Eldorado dans les glaces*, the passage of time also draws a "wedged spiral" as it works out an entropic synthesis of self-cancelling opposites in "a superb maelstrom" that decapitates its logical proponents: "Confusion and assimilation of all things transforming into one another" (129, 113, 114). The image of the "white

flames" in Chabot's *L'Eldorado* (114), like the "fiery snow" of the *Inferno* which Carlyle revisits in "The Hero as Poet" (106), conjoins the extremes which by turns beset the inhabitants of his fiery-glacial Eldorado, where "the parching Air/ Burns froze, and cold performs the effect of Fire" (*Paradise Lost* 2.594-95). "[A]ll rounds itself off, into a kind of rhythmic coherence," says Carlyle of such musico-symbolical works, in which heaven and hell are two sides of one truth (126). A dreaming Tantalus, Chabot's Faustus strives in vain to grasp the oblivion conferred by the waters of Lethe, like "a drowned insomniac to whom death in deep waters could not impose sleep" (183). Undying unrest seems only too apposite a fate from one who wakes sleeping and sleeps waking.

The analogy between drowning and homeward-bound dreamers drawn initially in Chabot's *L'Eldorado dans les glaces* invites further reflection upon the dangers and illusions which attend dream-voyagers on the seas of the synthetic imagination. While Edmund Burke's neoclassical *Reflections on the Revolution in France* balances opposite or discordant views in order to preserve "the equipoise of the vessel in which he sails" (308), the Romantic imaginary, in the words of Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*, properly "reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities" (14.174). In contradistinction to Burke's "equipoise," the latter might be imaged, as in Chabot's novel, as "a kind of shipwreck. . . in which the thought of our singular voyager had been engulfed" (2). As depicted in the opium-induced lyricisms of Rimbaud's "Le bateau ivre," the Romantic dreamer would be "a drowning ponderer" (89), drunkenly sailing the unnavigable seas of his nocturnal reveries, bereft of oar and rudder, "in the irrational coherence of a passionate quest," to cite Albert Béguin's twilight vision of *L'Âme romantique et le rêve* (1946, xv). Charting the confluence of the mysticism of Giordano Bruno and Nicholas of Cusa and the idealism of Herder, Hamann and Goethe in the endeavours of French poets to reconcile things "logically irreconcilable," Béguin's apology for Romanticism suggests the breadth of its attack on Enlightenment reason. And yet, as the return journey of the Ancient Mariner implies, the dichotomy so instituted between neoclassical reasoning and romantic synthesizing both reverses and annihilates itself.

There is much in his *Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* to suggest that Burke, and not Milton, was, as Blake says in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, "of the Devils party without knowing it" (35). In the aim of demonstrating how "darkness is more productive of sublime ideas than light," Burke's *Enquiry* turns to Milton's evocation of that "most incomprehensible of all beings," whose "throne" the poet girths, not with light, "but 'With the majesty of darkness round'" (2.14.80). For Burke, the sublime is a matter of blindness and insight. "Extreme light. . . obliterates all objects, so

as in its effect exactly to resemble darkness." Thus, Burke reasons, "two ideas as opposite as can be imagined [are] reconciled in the extremes of both" (2.14.81). Blake's mirror-wise gloss of the thirty-fourth canto of Dante's *Inferno*, in which glass the world appears "Upside Down When viewd from Hells Gate," and yet (inscribed backwards) "right When Viewd from Purgatory," provides the proper focus for such a misconstrual: "In Equivocal Worlds," writes Blake, "Up & Down are Equivocal" (690). Read in context, the passage from *Paradise Lost*, spoken by the fallen Mammon, shows Burke an unknowing agent of poetic misprision. Milton, in fact, portrays God in "his Glory unobscur'd"; it is the fallen archangels who would "his Light/Imitate" by proceeding from analogy ("Heav'n resembles Hell") to identity: "The mind is its own place, and in itself/Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n," as Satan would rhyme contraries (2.265, 269-70, 268, 1.254-55). In an apt comparison of neoclassical irony with romantic sublimity, Thomas Weiskel notes that "in the ironic notion of bathos the mock-heroic and the aesthetic of the sublime converge": in equivocal worlds, hypsos and bathos are equivocal (20). As Montaigne remarks in his "Apologie," apropos the sceptic's negative way: "The Pyrrhonians, when they say that the sovereign good is Ataraxia, which is the immobility of the judgement, they do not mean to say this in a positive fashion; but the same rocking of their soul which makes them eschew precipices. . . that very same presents to them this fantasy" (*Essais* 2.12.650). Similarly, the "equipoise" attained by Burke's ship by the end of the *Reflections* may be simply a fantasy, a function of the constant *bransle* or rocking of its antithetical logic, just as the Ancient Mariner of Coleridge's lilting ballad is condemned to retell his story time and again. Like the Arctic journeys of Aquin and Chabot, the infernal logic of Burke's *Enquiry* eventually leads him to ponder the "frozen continent" of Milton's hell (5.7.174).

The destination and logic of Aquin's *Neige Noir* is equally obscured and enlightened by its sceptical analogues. Like the text of Montaigne's "Apologie paradoxale" or "anti-essai," a synecdoche for the *Essai* as a whole according to Glauzer's *Montaigne paradoxal*, the plot of *Hamlet* abounds with figures of contraptions turning back upon the makers of their devising: engineers hoisted with their petards, woodcocks caught in their own springs, poisoners self-poisoned. In *Hamlet* as in the "Apologie de Raimond Sebond" and *Neige Noire*, the ceaseless questioning of the limits of human science goes beyond the order of verisimilitude and passes into the obscurity of the unsayable. In the lonely prospect of infinity, there gapes forth the dizzying vortices of universal nescience. Hamlet's dying words falter with the collapse of "The Mousetrap"—"the rest," we are told, "is silence" (5.2.363). In Aquin's *L'Antiphonaire* (1969), 16th century Italy and 20th century America converge in an

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antiphonal melody. The prose of the world and the music of the spheres are reduced in the end to the briefest echo of Hamlet's silence: "Le reste. . ." (179).

The conversion of Montaigne's skepticism into Catholic faith, the mirror-like doubling of Aquin's twins by angelic sisters in the final pages of *Neige Noire* and the hints of providential care that crown *Hamlet*, all of these apparent reversals offer an ultimate paradox within this maze of paradoxes. Just as snow must be both white and black, living dying and dying living, the word an expression of silence and vice versa, the unlearning that affirms all contraries by way of their contraries must ultimately affirm faith by way of doubt. The metaphor of life-as-dream must finally be extended to encompass and enfold the full "plexus" of human involvements and entanglements within the *theatrum mundi*, "that illuminated theatre where the play represented is a parable in which all human works are enchased" (*Neige Noire* 44, 246). The twin paradoxes of life-as-dream and life-as-death, emblematised in *Neige Noire* by the circular, hyacinth-like pendant on Sylvie's necklace, are similarly intertwined in Donne's "Of the Progress of the Soul," which images the "stars" as "so many beads / Strung on one string" and the soul "through those Spheres, as through the beads, a string" descending and ascending: "So [that] by the soul doth death string heaven and earth" (207-10). The author of *Biathanatos*, a Sceptical defence of Stoical suicide, Donne opts, like Hamlet, for Stoic indifference rather than passive suicide: "When I must shipwrack I would do it at Sea, where mine impotencie might have some excuse; not in a sullen weedy lake [like Ophelia], where I could not have much exercise for my swimming. . . . For to chuse, is to do: but to be no part of any body, is to be nothing" (qtd in Colie 504-5). The metaphor, of course, "a paradox of a paradox of paradoxes" (505), in Colie's apt phrasing, necessarily equivocates: absolute self-annihilation creates, the extreme of nothing is something.

Rimbaud's "Ophélie" is the pale reflection of the poet's own self-abandon in "Le bateau ivre," "a white phantom, on the long black river" (6). Even as the Poet watches, "lying in her long veils [or sails], / The white Ophelia float, like a great lily," this spiritual envoy of France coalesces with the infinite brine which pours in and out of her blue eyes (35-6). "Let us flee towards our only motherland!" (264) the narrator of *Neige Noire* seems to answer to Thériault's question in the final pages of *Agaguk*: "To whom did the earth belong?" (327). To complete the evasions and silences of a narrative at the heart of which Québec has been "the absence of a presence. . . an unfinished mystery," Aquin's celestial sisters soar with the "white wings of the soul" into silent union with Christ in eternity (143, 263). By the very logic of *coincidentia oppositorum* which informs these reconciliations, however, such ascent into the airy infinite necessarily has as its obverse a descent into dark-

ness: in equivocal worlds, black and white, up and down, finite and infinite, are flip sides of the same doubloon. *Neige Noire* is the dark mirror in which the reader, like one of Aquin's characters, view *Hamlet* upside-down, as though through "a black Murano mirror" (180). In *L'Eldorado dans les glaces*, as well, "a polar light" entrances Chabot's avatar into "a dream" that marries "the terrifically white snow" with its opposite: "black" (190, 191).

As they drift fatefully towards England, Tom Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, for whom death, paradoxically, has become the only certainty, reflect that "Life in a box is better than no life at all"; and yet, as the rest of Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, in which inside and outside are turned inside out, serves to show, life "bounded in a nutshell," in the "infinite space" of frames within frames within frames, can also be a living hell (*Hamlet* 2.2.255). As in Aquin's fictional parable of the *theatrum mundi*, Chabot's Oberlin and Julie are also inescapably caught in "a theatrical representation," as the reader finds them in the final pages of *L'Eldorado* calmly attempting to balance contraries such as Faustus' whiteless eyes on the Arctic horizon, having realized the full extent of their solipsistic enclosure: "Dreams were the key to all things but in a closed world, without doors or key-holes" (175). In the final reckoning, the see-saw of plus and negative leaves the (un)knower nonplussed. By the end of Rimbaud's "Le bateau ivre," his ship has become "a frail ship" that a child drops in a puddle of cold black water, "[une] flache / Noire et froid" (176, 173-74).

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Notes

1. Colie devotes a good part of her study of "Paradoxes in Divine Ontology" to Nicholas of Cusa.
2. In a footnote to *Trou de mémoire*, Aquin states his intention to pursue the baroque both as an object of study and a method of composition (68).
3. Aquin had used the same image in *Prochain Épisode*, writing in the voice of his persona about the fictionalization of life: "My stratagem particularly resembled the Russian roulette" (113).

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