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Schizophrenic Narratives:
The Dissolution of Self and Agency in
Audrey Thomas's Mrs. Blood
And Hubert Aquin's Prochain Épisode

par

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Composition du jury

SCHIZOPHRENIC NARRATIVES: THE DISSOLUTION OF SELF AND AGENCY IN AUDREY THOMAS’S MRS. BLOOD AND HUBERT AQUIN’S PROCHAIN ÉPISODE

JOANNA M. DAXELL-VIVIEN

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RÉSUMÉ

Dans ce mémoire, j'explore les affinités que je perçois entre des théories contemporaines de la schizophrénie et deux romans canadiens : Mrs. Blood écrit par l'auteure canadienne Audrey Thomas et Prochain épisode écrit par l'auteur québécois Hubert Aquin. Ces deux livres peuvent être difficile à lire non seulement à cause d'un manque déconcertant d'unité dans la narration, mais aussi en raison d'une subjectivité fougueuse qui provoque une insécurité ontologique persévérant chez les deux narrateurs et protagonistes. Cette angoisse abstraite a ébranlé leur conscience de soi, a produit un gouffre interne, et a aussi suscité les narrateurs à inventer d'autres identités pour eux-mêmes dans le but de soulager leur inquiétude. On trouve chez les individus schizophréniques la même stratégie pour faire face à l'insécurité ontologique et pour l'exprimer.

Dans cette étude, j'ai choisi d'examiner certaines théories portant sur la schizophrénie dans les domaines de la psychologie, de la sociologie et de la littérature par des théoriciens comme : R.D. Laing, Louis A. Sass, Anthony Giddens, Frederic Jameson, et Brian McHale. Ces théoriciens ont établi des corrélations entre les cultures moderne et postmoderne et la schizophrénie qui sont applicables aux deux romans. Plusieurs critiques littéraires ont établi un lien entre la schizophrénie et la rupture interne des protagonistes dans les deux romans. Cependant, aucun d'entre eux n'a exploré ce lien avec la perspective que je propose ici. J'interroge les relations entre les représentations ontologiques que les narrateurs font d'eux-mêmes et de leur monde respectif afin
d’arriver à comprendre comment et pourquoi les stratégies que ces personnages utilisent pour affronter des situations difficiles montrent de si importantes affinités avec la schizophrénie. J’examine ce que le psychiatre anglais R.D. Laing a appelé leur being in the world – leur façon d’exister dans le monde – et je montre comment leur being in the world constitue une preuve de leur résistance envers les conventions sociales et culturelles par lesquelles ils sont définis en tant que citoyens de leur société. Mrs. Blood montre les difficultés auxquelles beaucoup de femmes ont à faire face à cause des rôles qu’elles sont obligées de remplir dans la société. Prochain épisode critique la colonialisation du Québec et la « fatigue culturelle » de son peuple.

Dans cette étude, je ne suggère pas que les auteurs, ni les protagonistes et narrateurs font preuve de schizophrénie; mon approche se veut phénoménologique et regarde la schizophrénie comme une réponse valable et significative, bien que peu appropriée, à la vie en société. Dans chacun des livres, j’explore les stratégies postmodernes et les modes d’expressions dites schizophréniques (Purdy 103, McHale 190).

La schizophrénie inclut plusieurs affections caractéristiques de la culture et des arts modernes et postmodernes. Celles-ci sont aussi des aspects significatifs dans l’œuvre de Thomas et d’Aquino. Ils sont l’aliénation, une attitude de défi envers l’autorité, la fragmentation, l’hyper-réflexivité, un détachement extrême, une anxiété ontologique et une préférence pour la forme narrative spatiale plutôt que la forme temporelle.

Les deux narrateurs sont confiés dans l’espace. Cette immobilité provoque chez ces derniers non seulement un sentiment d’impuissance, mais aussi une dissociation avec le monde. Pour ne pas avoir à faire face à une réalité trop difficile à supporter, les
protagonistes se sont refermés sur eux-mêmes. Dans leur monde intérieur, ils arrivent d’abord à se sentir doués et puissants. Comme ceci n’est qu’une illusion, leur dissociation avec le monde extérieur commence rapidement à ébranler la représentation qu’ils se font d’eux-mêmes; par conséquent, ils perdent le contrôle de leur monde imaginatif.
ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the parallel between the ontological insecurity of schizophrenia, according to contemporary theories of the condition and the worldviews of protagonists/narrators in Audrey Thomas’s *Mrs. Blood* and Hubert Aquin’s *Prochain épisode*. The grounds for the comparison is a common preoccupation with ontological insecurity. In lived experience, schizophrenia causes a maladaptive response to the stressors of everyday experience. In the novels, schizophrenic elements emerge as a way of *being in the world*. The focus of the analysis will be how the dissolution of self and agency in the novels is communicated through narrative strategies that mimic schizophrenia.

The narrators/protagonists are both confined. Aquin’s narrator is incarcerated in a mental asylum awaiting trial; Thomas’s narrator is confined to a hospital bed due to a complicated pregnancy. To alleviate the anxiety and powerlessness they are experiencing they dissociate from the external world to an inner world over which they at first have full control. However, as human beings with both body and mind, they cannot fully retreat without also experiencing a cleft inside. Their dissociation from the exterior world undermines their sense of self and as this happens they begin to lose control over their inner world. In addition to a discussion of the narrator’s ontological anxiety and of the ensuing dissolution of their selves, I will discuss how the form of the novels deploys doubling and splitting through multiple narratives, fragmentation and postmodernity.

The non-diagnostic nature of this study makes it possible to examine these features from a phenomenological perspective rather than from a psychopathological
approach. I examine both the ontological insecurity of characters and the postmodernist mode of expression deployed in each novel in the light of contemporary theories of schizophrenia that view the illness as resulting from the incompatibility between an individual's *being in the world* and the cultural and social conventions by which the person is defined. The discussion of the phenomenological and existential aspects of schizophrenia in this thesis is informed by contemporary theories of the condition by Louis A. Sass, R.D. Laing, Anthony Giddens, and Brian McHale.

Popular ideas of schizophrenia as split personality or as an illness marked solely by delusions and paranoia as well as romanticized views of madness have skewed critical discussions of schizophrenia and literature. More contemporary knowledge of the condition reveals a considerably more complex image of an affliction with many symptoms that can also be found in modern and postmodern literature, among which are hyper-reflexivity, fragmentation, adversarial form, fluidity of perspective and self, apathy, subversion, dissociation, a sense of unreality, and disorganized narrative structure.

I examine the ways in which these novels by Thomas and Aquin explore the features just mentioned to critique social and cultural conventions through characterization and narrative structure. Thomas's text points to the special challenges faced by women because of the reality imposed on them by social roles. Aquin's novel critiques the colonization of Quebec and its people's 'cultural fatigue.' This thesis demonstrates how both novels can be read as schizophrenic narratives that mimic aspects of schizophrenia in order to demonstrate the dissolution of self and agency in different colonial and cultural contexts.
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Introduction

i. The Construction of Madness in Fiction

Schizophrenia is the malady of isolation. The schizophrenic is a man for whom the world has become so comfortless, so empty of “relationship and love,” that, in order to preserve himself, he retires to some inaccessible place in his mind, conversing no longer with others now, but with his own fantasy.

(Paul Zweig, The Heresy of Self-Love 216)

[Madness] is, to be sure, a self-deceiving condition, but one that is generated from within rationality itself rather than by the loss of rationality. (Louis A. Sass, The Paradoxes of Delusion 12)

In this thesis I want to explore the affinities I have found between contemporary theories of schizophrenia and the ontological insecurity and representational strategies in two Canadian novels, Mrs. Blood by the Canadian author Audrey Thomas and Prochain épisode by the Québécois author Hubert Aquin. Both these novels can be a challenge to the reader, not only because of the often disconcerting lack of narrative unity, but also due to the impetuous subjectivity which gives rise to the persistent ontological insecurity that plagues the narrators. By ontological insecurity I mean the uncertainty that is likely to occur if we put into question those aspects of everyday life we take for granted and that we must depend on in order to function: for example, our sense of agency, the belief
that our thoughts and actions are our own and our sense of self something that has a consistent nature. The narrator of Prochain épisode gives a clear description of what this ontological anxiety may involve: “J’ai peur de me réveiller dégénéré, complètement désidentifié, anéanti” (PE 43). It is thus a fear concerned with reality itself: that we will not wake up alive each morning, that people around us will not regard us as rational human beings, etc. The abstract anxiety described by Aquin’s narrator has undermined the narrators’ sense of self in both novels and has caused the narrators to split or to conjure up other selves as a coping strategy. This way of coping with and expressing ontological insecurity resembles what happens in schizophrenia, but occurs to a lesser degree in non-schizophrenic subjects.

The British psychiatrist R.D. Laing suggests in The Divided Self that “[. . .] the split in the experience of one’s own being into unembodied and embodied parts is no more an index of latent psychosis than is total embodiment of sanity” (71). This feeling is thus not exclusive to schizophrenia. Anybody can at some point or other feel this way and it may often seem to be the only viable defense mechanism to ward off excessive stress.

As a framework for my study I have chosen to use selected theories of schizophrenia proposed in the fields of psychology, sociology and literature by theorists such as R.D. Laing, Louis A. Sass, Anthony Giddens, Frederic Jameson, and Brian McHale who have established a number of interrelations between modern/postmodern culture and schizophrenia, which can be applied to Thomas’s and Aquin’s novels. Several literary critics have established a connection between schizophrenia and the narrators’ dislocated selfhood. Lorna Irvine, Anthony Boxill and Joan Coldwell see
schizophrenia as a manifestation of split personality in Thomas’s novel. Anthony Purdy discusses schizophrenia in relation to the narrative voice in Aquin. However, none of these theorists or critics has looked at this link from my perspective. I look at schizophrenia in relation to the characters’ ontological construction of themselves and their worlds in order to come to an understanding of how and why these characters’ ways of coping with difficult situations show such strong affinities with schizophrenia. I examine what Laing describes as their “being in the world.” I show how their being in the world shows their resistance to the social and cultural conventions that define them. This is not a diagnostic or psychoanalytical approach that reads schizophrenia as pathology in the characters or author, but rather a phenomenological approach that looks at schizophrenia as a valid and meaningful, though maladaptive, response to being within society. In addition to looking at the characters’ worldviews and self images in relation to schizophrenia, I will also look at the postmodernist narrative strategies in each novel in relation to what some have called schizophrenic modes of expression and even narrative schizophrenia (Purdy 103) or schizophrenic texts (McHale 190).

Literary critics such as Irvine, Boxill, Coldwell and Purdy have used the term schizophrenia in reference to these novels to describe the splitting or dissociation that the characters experience. However, using the term schizophrenia as a label simply to indicate the coexistence of disparate or antagonistic qualities or identities within the characters does not help the reader understand the social logic behind such representations. Nor does it answer the question why the author has chosen to portray his or her characters in this way. I will probe not only the function of Thomas’s and Aquin’s characters being portrayed in this fashion, but also how these narrative styles
problematize female and political identity through the images of the divided sense of selfhood.

In my study, I am not suggesting that Thomas, Aquin, or any characters in their work show clinical signs of schizophrenia; whether such claims can be justified or not is not my concern here. I do not believe such a "diagnostic" study would further our understanding of the texts. Instead, I examine how each text constructs madness and how madness in the form of elements of schizophrenia is manifest in the text as resistance to culturally imposed identity constructions. Since there is little or no textual evidence that the authors are suggesting their characters are schizophrenic, it becomes important to show how such a comparison would be fruitful and add to the scholarship on these novels. To do this I will not just have to situate myself and my understanding of schizophrenia in regards to theories of schizophrenia, but I will also need to examine the cultural construction of madness in order to show why I believe schizophrenia will give the reader a more comprehensive understanding of what takes place in the novels in terms of disturbances of self, alienation, ontological insecurity etc. In drawing parallels between schizophrenia and the characters’ being in the world I try to explore many aspects of modern/postmodern culture that may otherwise go unnoticed or remain ambiguous. For example, fragmented and nonlinear narratives and multiple or split narrators can be explained and understood not only as postmodern play, but also as more or less creative or maladaptive coping mechanisms to deal with stress and ontological insecurity.

Hubert Aquin’s narrator is incarcerated in a psychiatric clinic and feels he is going mad. Audrey Thomas’s narrator is also in a hospital, unable to leave by her own
accord. Her stay, however, is due to a physical problem, complications related to her pregnancy. In the tradition of the Victorian novel Thomas depicts women’s powerlessness in patriarchal society and how it pushes them toward madness and the monstrous. Her narrator makes many references to her perceived madness, but also to other women’s madness as in her memories of the mental institution where she worked at age seventeen. For example, she recalls how these women at the time “weren’t really women to me, you know, just screaming, kicking monstrosities or parodies of human beings. Sometimes you wondered how they got that way […]” (172). These extreme images of the madwoman/monster recall the dehumanized bestial image of the wife in the attic in *Jane Eyre* and signal a strange affinity between women and madness.

Both Thomas’s and Aquin’s protagonists find the situation they are in so distressing that they feel it could cause them to go mad. This madness is, thus, according to the narrators, due to their stressful situation. It is, in fact, stress arising from their social situations as a woman and a national revolutionary, respectively, that provokes the splitting or dissociation of the characters. Laing argues that “[t]he experience and behaviour that gets labeled schizophrenic is a special strategy that a person invents in order to live in an unlivable situation” (*The Politics of Experience* 95).

Splitting and dissociation are significant clinical indicators of many mental diseases, including schizophrenia, but are not exclusive to this illness. Contrary to many critics who consider these clinical signs enough of a rationale to talk about schizophrenia in the novels, I have chosen to compare the state of being in these novels to schizophrenia only partly for this reason. These signs may give the first clue and are the most visible
indicator of schizophrenia; however, a closer look at schizophrenia will show the similarities on a deeper level.

Schizophrenia encompasses many of the ailments said to characterize modern and postmodern culture and the arts that also are significant aspects of Thomas’s and Aquín’s novels such as alienation, defiance of authority, fragmentation, hyper-reflexivity, extreme detachment, ontological anxiety, and a preference for spatial rather than narrative form. While any of these facets of schizophrenia and modern and postmodern culture could be discussed separately, I believe that the concept of schizophrenia as a form of being can be used as a framework for inquiry that will show the interrelation between the stress of social roles and the dissolution and splitting of self in postmodernity. The clinical symptoms of schizophrenia and most other mental illnesses may be seen as exaggerations of some of the modes of experience we all encounter in our lives. We have all experienced the ontological anxiety brought on by traumatizing events, both personal, such as unexpected death and illness, and public events that have affected most of us, such as the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. It is normal to react to abnormal situations that bring chaos to everyday life. But, as Anthony Giddens points out: “What makes a given response ‘appropriate’ or ‘acceptable’ necessitates a shared – but unproven and unprovable – framework of reality” (36). Mental illness can in this way be described in terms of the degree to which a person’s response falls outside the norms of what the others in his or her society have deemed as a normal response. Mental illness is often misunderstood by the general public. Deviancy is often regarded as something that needs to be controlled rather than understood.
In the recent movie *A Beautiful Mind* (2001), the audience is fooled into believing that John Nash, the famous mathematician and Nobel laureate, is a secret agent. It is a surprise to everyone when it is finally revealed that John Nash, who suffers from schizophrenia, only believed he was a secret agent. The story plot seems credible; John Nash could very well have been recruited by the CIA to do the work his delusions suggest. The wartime setting would have made it even more believable. While he was committed, Nash considered himself "a political prisoner." (Nasar 260).

In a PBS¹ documentary on schizophrenia and John Nash, "A Brilliant Madness," the American psychologist Louis A. Sass explains that schizophrenic breaks often occur when the individual is under an excessive amount of stress. Just before his psychotic break, the oversensitive Nash had a few professional setbacks by which he may have been overly dismayed. He had also recently married and was expecting a child. Nash’s delusion could be explained as his attempt to deal with a stressful situation and to find a way to empower himself and feel he had a purpose.

This example bears an interesting resemblance to Aquin’s novel in which the incarcerated narrator thinks up a spy novel to pass his time. Because of the terrorist activities that got him arrested in the first place he, like Nash, feels he should be considered a political prisoner. His difficulties coping with his incarceration cause him to begin writing his spy novel in much the same way that Nash invents an alternative reality for himself in order to deal with a stressful life situation.

Schizophrenic individuals react to what they perceive as abnormal situations, or from the opposite perspective, overreact to what other individuals find normal. Using theories of schizophrenia, it is possible to study the sometimes very abstract notions of

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¹ The American Public Television (Public Broadcasting System)
alienation, fragmentation, dissociation etc., and to ultimately reach a better understanding of the world and form of the novels, but also of schizophrenia itself and thus hopefully refrain from perpetuating an erroneous understanding of the condition in this comparative study. This comparison of narratives to schizophrenia also brings another level of social logic to the postmodernist strategies of fragmentation in the novels since it locates splitting in a psychosocial as well as textual space.

The protagonists in Aquin's and Thomas's novels walk the fine line between normalcy and madness. The madness depicted cannot, however, be described as a clear example of schizophrenic madness and should not, in my opinion, be read as case studies of any type of mental illness. Instead, the novels explore popular visions of madness based on irrationality and deviance, and, to a certain extent, subscribe to the 19th century Romantic notion linking madness and creativity. Aquin's novel shows at times affinities with the Romantic notion of the creative mad poet and of madness as both a compassionate and elevated existence far from abject rationality. He refers to writing as madness and the failure to act in the real vs. the textual world as sublime. Thomas writes in the tradition of Charlotte Brontë, Kate Chopin, Charlotte Perkins Gilman and other women who provided a critique of patriarchal society, of the culturally prescribed roles given to women within a society that stifled their expression, and of the biological linking of women and madness. Thomas's critique of normalcy is made especially evident in the intertextual play with Lewis Carroll's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland because the relativity of madness is raised.
ii. Madness in Literature

Thus, the discourse of madness in general is clearly present in both novels and is as such inscribed in a relationship with a long history. Writers have explored the theme of madness since Homer. Discussions of madness and the literary imagination have overlapped throughout history. Literature has historically served as a way to better understand madness among mental health professionals (psychoanalysts, psychologists, psychiatrists, etc.). Freud frequently illustrated his essays with fictional characters taken from literature. His analysis of *Oedipus Rex* and *Hamlet* is the most well known of his literary analysis (*The Basic Writing of Sigmund Freud* 275-279). In fact, his interest in literature was, according to Paul-Laurent Assoun, author of *Littérature et psychoanalyse: Freud et la création littéraire*, unusually great: “Ce qui frappe en effet est l’étendue considérable des intérêts de l’homme Freud pour la littérature” (8). R.D. Laing’s *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* discusses ontological security using Lionel Trilling’s literary analysis of Shakespeare, Keats and Kafka as an example to point to the differences between ontological security and insecurity. Further, Laing gives his own example using Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (42). Another example of the fascination of theorists of the mind for literature is the German psychiatrist Karl Jasper’s pathographical case study of *Strindberg and van Gogh*.

This type of interaction between the humanities and the behavioral sciences has unfortunately partly been lost in the last few decades. An article in the *Journal of Practical Psychiatry and Behavioral Health* (July 1998) addresses this lack of interaction

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2 "The retrospective study, often by a physician, of the possible influence and effects of disease on the life and work of a historical personage or group." (*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 3rd Ed, 1992).
between the humanities and psychiatry in the United States. The authors of "Psychiatry and the Humanities in the Age of Prozac" point out how, until the late 70's, literary works and figures were often used as "sources of clinical information" (209). Metzl and Riba show how psychiatry has become more scientific and medical and lost its once strong connection with the humanities; the authors also mention how this type of interdisciplinary interaction, which promotes "holistic approaches to patient care," has been lost in much of contemporary psychiatric practice (Metzl and Riba 209-218).

While this interaction is lacking in contemporary psychiatry, there is still a strong connection between the humanities and psychology through interdisciplinary studies of mental illness in literature and in the use of literary works or authors in case studies. I am thinking of the work of psychologists such as Kay Redfield Jamison, whose book *Touched with Fire: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament* draws from the lives of writers such as Byron, Melville, Hemingway and Virginia Woolf. Jamison examines the links between manic-depression and creativity. Louis A. Sass's study on schizophrenia and modern and postmodern culture as reflected in literature and art, *Madness and Modernism: Insanity in the Light of Modern Art, Literature, and Thought*, is of particular interest to my thesis. Contrary to medical and psychoanalytic models, Sass does not subscribe to a romanticized view of madness, nor does he think of schizophrenia as a form of dementia. He does not believe that schizophrenic experience is impossible to understand but sees it rather as a maladaptive response to the stressors all people in a modern/postmodern society are confronted with in their daily interactions.

Sass uses writers and artists as case studies in a few instances, as in his study of Antonin Artaud and Charles Baudelaire; but more often he uses the work of modern and
postmodern writers such as Jarry, Kafka, Sarraute and Robbe-Grillet in his argument that schizophrenia is not impossible to understand, and is not a form of dementia as some medical professionals have claimed.

The interrelation between madness and literature is, of course, of great interest to the literary scholar, who, constantly confronted with literary characters' existential quests, is perhaps particularly apt at seeing the importance of literary analysis in examining the influence of modern culture and society on the individual. For example, Shoshana Felman, Lacanian psychoanalyst, feminist, and French literary scholar, discusses writing and madness in *La Folie et la Chose Littéraire* and the representation of women and madness in literature in her article: "Women and Madness: The Critical Phallacy." The article explores the implications of the culturally assigned roles of women in society. In *Madness and Literature*, Lilian Feder argues that literature can be both therapeutic and serve as a vehicle for the understanding of delusion. In *Les Fous de Papier*, Robert Viau examines different kinds of literary madness, such as political and feminine madness. Viau's analysis shows an affinity between his work and the anti-psychiatric movement that believes mental illness to be a cultural construct.  

Other critics take a more popular approach to mental illness, which at times, instead of furthering the knowledge and understanding of mental illness, re-inscribes erroneous or over-simplified responses to madness in literature, such as regarding schizophrenia as simply split personality or solely an illness marked by delusions and paranoia. This is not the case with James Vernon, who makes the link between literature of the 20th century and schizophrenia in *The Garden and the Map: Schizophrenia in*  

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3 The anti-psychiatry movement regards mental illness as a construct created by the psychiatric institution. It opposes institutionalization, medication, and psychoanalysis.
Twentieth-Century Literature and Culture. Vernon examines two modes of consciousness that also describe the paradox of schizophrenia, in which two opposing worldviews can co-exist: the integrative “garden” worldview, representing the schizophrenic tendency to hold many different perspectives in the mind at the same time and the segregative “map” worldview, representing the fragmentation in schizophrenia which keeps the schizophrenic from recreating a meaningful reality out of his or her experience. While certain critics have read madness or schizophrenia as both “symptom and symbol” of ontological insecurity (Reid np., Felman, Giddens), my analysis goes further by exploring the social logic of schizophrenia in light of the characters’ response to the ontological insecurity and stress they experience as a result of their resistance toward social and cultural conventions. By resisting these conventions they recognize that there are other ways in which to perceive reality. By allowing themselves to recognize alternative ways of being in the world, the characters inevitably face the ontological insecurity that comes with the uncertainty of reality in the modern/postmodern world.

In Touched with Fire, Jamison gives a reason why the communication between literature and psychiatry has waned:

Almost by definition, the idea of using formal psychiatric diagnostic criteria in the arts has been anathema [sic], and, in any event, biological psychiatrists have displayed relatively little interest in studying mood disorders in artists, writers, or musicians. (3)

This could explain some of the unease that my comparison between schizophrenia and literature may evoke. However, I do not advocate a biological explanation of
schizophrenia; instead, I support the idea of schizophrenia as a "socially-constituted category" (Scher 2). Schizophrenia then becomes a culturally mediated manifestation. This then allows us to look at the social and cultural expectations and conventions that promote schizophrenic modes of being or of which schizophrenia is a reflection as Sass suggests.

The German psychiatrist and philosopher Karl Jaspers (1883-1969) believed that schizophrenic experience was not to be understood since "any attempt at unriddling the enigmas of schizophrenic consciousness was doomed to failure" (qtd. in Sass, MM: 7). This negative attitude has been prevalent in medical science, where there has been more interest in finding the underlying causes of mental disease and in categorizing, classifying and ranking its symptoms than in understanding the symptoms of the illness. Michael Scher, a cultural anthropologist, believes the attempts to find if "social factors, biologic factors, genetic factors, formative-years factors [. . ]" are at the origin of the condition have been failures because schizophrenia is a cultural phenomenon: "[. . ] there is a cultural category 'schizophrenia' and [. . ] persons placed in that category are so placed primarily for a particular kind of divergence from 'normal' cultural understandings" (7).

My understanding of schizophrenia is greatly influenced by the American psychologist Louis A. Sass. I use the theoretical framework proposed by Sass to inform my comparison between literary texts and schizophrenic modes of expression. In regards to the intelligibility of schizophrenia, Sass takes the position of the British psychiatrist R.D. Laing, who, contrary to Jaspers, did not dismiss the potential of analysis in discerning the psychological processes that characterize schizophrenia. In Madness and Modernism Sass, a leading contemporary theorist in the field, uncovers in schizophrenia
and modern art and literature similar philosophical reasoning. For instance, both the
modernist artist and the schizophrenic are characterized by a pronounced drive to
deconstruct the world and to subjectively reconstruct human experience without reference
to objective reality. Layers of reality exist side by side, frequently fusing into each other,
and the acute self-awareness Sass calls hyper-reflexivity, as well as a profound sense of
alienation from the empirical world, run rampant.

Sass defines schizophrenia in relation to the modernist culture in which, according
to him, schizophrenia first emerged. He places schizophrenic experience based on
clinical examples and the art and texts of modernists and postmodernists side by side.
Using an existential-phenomenological approach, he describes the different stages in
schizophrenia through extensive quotes from individuals suffering from the condition.
Sass does not agree with the romantic idea of madness as a source of insight and
inspiration, nor does he subscribe to the deficit view of schizophrenia, which is supported
by psychiatry and anti-psychiatry alike. Using the affinities he sees between the disease
and modernism, he challenges the traditional views of schizophrenia, and shows how
what has been interpreted as “primitive or deteriorated is far more complex and
interesting—and self-aware—than is usually acknowledged” (Sass, MM 9). Further, he
demonstrates the conspicuous similarities between schizophrenic symptoms and
modernist and postmodernist attitudes, all of which show a paradoxical heterogeneity,
and “have a dialectical, almost contradictory nature, and are quite capable of undermining
themselves or even, of turning into their opposites”(Sass, MM 29). These insights allow
my study to go beyond a simple recognition of the similarities and contrasts between
schizophrenia and the novels, to look at ways in which cultural context and the aesthetics of postmodernity influence Aquin’s and Thomas’s depiction of madness.

In *Modernity and Self-Identity*, Anthony Giddens explores the implications of modernity on the individual, describing modernity as post-traditional. In a society where conventions and customs of previous generations are set aside, questions about the self in relation to society become utterly important: “What to do? How to act? Who to be?” (70). In such a society the individual may become disoriented. Without the secure foundation of traditional society, the modern individual is forced to develop a sense of trust in order to feel ontologically secure. While in traditional society this trust was based on clearly defined conventions, trust in modernity is based on abstract notions of a shared reality. As long as all individuals in the society agree on the nature of this reality, each individual may be able to take most aspects of this reality for granted and, consequently, feel secure. But because of the fragile nature of this state, both society as a whole and the individual are likely to experience ontological anxiety whenever there is a change in the shared reality. Giddens believes we all need a sense of creativity in order to cope with this anxiety; we need to be able to “act or think innovatively. […]” Trust itself, by its very nature, is in a certain sense creative, because it entails a commitment that is a ‘leap into the unknown’ […]” (41). According to Giddens, the development of schizophrenia is closely related to an inability to think creatively and develop the trust necessary to cope with ontological insecurity in a non-disruptive fashion. The result is not only a fracture between the individual and society but between the individual and his or her integrity. This leads to the excessive self-scrutiny and self-reflexivity Sass and Laing theorize in their studies of schizophrenia.
In “Postmodernism and Consumer Society” Frederic Jameson, a Marxist theorist and cultural critic, refers to Lacan’s theory of language, which suggests that schizophrenia is “essentially a language disorder” related to language acquisition (118). Jameson’s exploration of schizophrenia serves to clarify two major aspects of postmodernism: “the transformation of reality into images, and the fragmentation of time into a series of perpetual presents” (125). It should be noted that Jameson in no way claims to give a “clinically accurate” description of schizophrenia. Schizophrenics do not, according to Jameson, make the connection between words and signifiers which is necessary in order to have a sense of temporality. According to Lacan “human time, past, present, memory, the persistence of personal identity over months and years – this existential or experimental feeling of time itself – is also an effect of language” (119). This is, then, according to Jameson, why schizophrenics have a poor conception of their self-identity. It is also why the schizophrenic individual has a fragmented sense of reality. The present takes on such an overwhelming importance that, what to the non-schizophrenic person is just everyday experience, comes to be felt as unreal to the schizophrenic.

Although the postmodernist theorist Brian McHale does not deal with schizophrenia other than briefly in his book Postmodernist Fiction, his thesis is of interest to my research. McHale compares postmodernist fiction and “socially-constructed reality” which he compares to “a jigsaw puzzle of ‘subuniverses of meaning’: the jostling world-views of different social classes, castes, religious sects, occupations etc” (37). McHale calls “schizoid text[s]” those texts preoccupied with spatial form such as the split or parallel text that leaves the reader asking in what order the text should be read. These
texts are similar to puzzles and images. They are no longer narratives but physical objects that continuously remind the reader of their ontological status as objects. In *A Certain Difficulty of Being* Anthony Purdy describes what he refers to in Aquin as:

narrative schizophrenia, an explicit splitting of the narrative subject into the “I” of the narrator and the “I” of the hero and of the narrative impulse into discourse (the narrative situation) and story (the world of the spy novel). \( \text{\textdagger} \) (103)

The schizophrenic aspects of Thomas’s *Mrs. Blood* and Hubert Aquin’s *Prochain épisode* shares the same underlying narrative structure with its postmodern aspects; although they are presented in a slightly different fashion in each novel. In Aquin’s novel the obvious splitting depends on the narrator’s inability to separate his fantasy from his reality. The initial splitting between the novel’s two narrators is not as evident in Aquin as it is in Thomas. In *Mrs. Blood* the splitting is clear from the outset and stems from Isobel’s inability to deal with her reality without creating alternative personae (Mrs. Blood and Mrs. Thing) through which she hopes to be able to deal with her everyday experiences.

In *Prochain épisode*, the narrator uses a narrative-within-the-narrative to explore and resist cultural and social conventions from a perspective outside the author’s and even outside the narrator’s reality. The modes of expression used in *Mrs. Blood* are similar to those used in Aquin’s text. The novel gives two perspectives of the same situation through the split narrator, Mrs. Thing and Mrs. Blood. Both novels explore the construction of self through multiple perspectives and interchangeable characters, none of which has a clear sense of identity. The construction of time is equally subjective. With
the exception of biological time, which for obvious reasons is important to Mrs. Blood’s narrative (the main character is pregnant) time is of no essence, not clearly defined and not used to sustain a linear narrative in either of the novels.

iii. Gender and Madness

Audrey Thomas’s fiction reflects her own diverse experiences, as an American expatriate, a Canadian west coast writer, a woman and mother. “If One Green Bottle...” is a precursor to *Mrs. Blood* and *Blown Figures*. Like the later novels, the short story deals with Africa and a miscarriage. Although Thomas has said that her fiction is autobiographical in nature, I have chosen not to look at her novel as autobiographical. I believe Mrs. Blood extends far beyond the autobiographical account of one woman’s life, and constitutes an exploration of woman’s psyche.

Women’s writing often exposes the construction of History as male-centered just by its existence. Women’s texts write from the void created by the patriarchal discourse, which devalues or even excludes the female element. As Lorraine McCullen points out, patriarchal discourse “cast[s] women in opposing roles: virgin and seductress [. . .] good and evil, fair and dark, representing the alternating attraction and repulsion of ‘the other’” (*The Divided Self* 53). Helene Cixous suggests that it is in “male writing” that women have been repressed “in a manner that’s frightening since it’s often hidden or adorned with the mystifying charms of fiction” and in which they have never been given a chance to speak (“The Laugh of the Medusa” 350).

The crisis in representation which we associate with postmodernism arrives much earlier in women’s writing that already from the outset exists outside the master narrative
and History. For instance, many Victorian women writers struggled to be considered simply as *writers*, with no categorizing modifier, which would inevitably put into question their abilities as writers. Many adopted male pseudonyms or published anonymously like George Eliot (Marian Evans) and M. E. Coleridge (Mary Elisabeth).

Women's writing was filled with subversive discourse and comprised many of the characteristics of postmodern writing long before the "postmodern age." It contains, according to Barbara Godard, a female voice that undermines the "hierarchizing discourse of men" ("The Language of Difference" 45), and demonstrates a preoccupation with language and meaning. "[W]omen's meaning," argues Godard, "developed from a specific context of their lives, can never be encoded as normal, accepted meaning but will always remain that of a subculture, a colonized, deterritorialized minority" (45). Nor can it be reduced, she argues, to a transient fad in literary history. In other words, women's writing cannot but be an expression of women's particular situation and will, as such, always differ from writing by men in one way or another.

Godard echoes Cixous who believes it is impossible to "define a feminine practice of writing" (253). Women's writing shares this elusive character with schizophrenia, which, because of what Sass describes as its "daunting heterogeneity," is nearly impossible to define (25). Like women's writing, which does not fit the mold proposed by patriarchal literary tradition, schizophrenia upsets the taxonomy of pathological classification (Sass 25). It is thus important not to use an essentialist approach when discussing schizophrenia or women's writing. My reading of Thomas does not suggest that this is how all women in the narrator's situation would react. It does, however, show the social logic of one possible way of reacting to one's *being in the world*. 
Literary history is, according to Cixous, "one with the phallic-centric tradition," and has taken its legitimacy from its jumbled relation to the history of reason (350). Women's writing, like schizophrenic discourse, already exists outside patriarchal society's cultural norms of what is to be considered as normal. Female discourse differs from the discourse of the male-centered society in much the same way that "schizophrenic speech adheres to a langue particular to the schizophrenic, often differing from their host culture's langue in predictable ways" (Wrobel qtd. in Scher par. 18). Just as women's writing is not necessarily postmodern, women's writing is not the writing of madness. It is difficult to define what postmodern writing or schizophrenic writing are. This is also true for women's writing which, as Christl Verduyn points out in a discussion of women's writing in Québec, is difficult to characterize ("Lunatic Vistas? Contemporary Women's Writing in Québec). She suggests that this is why women's writing exhibits what may be regarded as the writing of madness while "it would be more exact to say that the new women's writing aims at a 'textual subversion' by transgressing logic and temporal order [. . .] thus [a]n attempt to look at the world from a different angle" (72). It is, thus, suggestive of different ways of being in the world.

While the coupling of women's writing with madness is problematic, certain feminist theories have stressed the affinities between women's writing and modernity and postmodernity. Both Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue that "women writers are the major precursors of all 20th-century modernists" and even express "exuberance at precisely the breakdown of traditional structures that was disturbing male artists" (1,3). This effaces the already questionable boundary between modernism and postmodernism unless we want to create different sets of rules, or separate literary canons and histories,
when discussing writing by women and writing by men. Gilbert and Gubar come to what is largely such a conclusion—they believe that women and men had by early 20th century "evolved two entirely different versions of the world, visions so different [...] we had to speak of [...] masculinist and feminist modernisms"(12).

Postmodern discourse opens up the possibility for alternative ways of looking at the world, thus creating a bridge between the fundamentally different ways of understanding the world of the schizophrenic and more culturally accepted worldviews. Postmodernist literature may not be less male-centered than previous literatures, in fact, as Linda Hutcheon points out, "early constructions of the postmodern were resolutely male," (O'Grady interview 21); it opens up, however, the possibility for other forms of expression; more fragmented, less linear and logical then the realist tradition. Postmodernism does not promote any particular fixed mode of expression but experiments with breaking the walls of conventions that previously kept subversive discourse out of the canon. Women's experiments with postmodernism have begun to occupy a significant role in literary history: "Now women return from afar, from always, from 'without,' from the heath where witches are kept alive; from below, from beyond 'culture,' from their childhood." (Cixous 348).

While certain forms of feminist discourse use modes of expression similar to those of the postmodern: fragmentation, multiple points of views, unconventional narrative techniques etc., to give a voice to the female experience and resist conventionality, schizophrenic discourse also reflects the postmodernist preoccupation with alternative realities, language, and subjectivity. Schizophrenia, however, is not aimed at subverting or exposing socially or culturally constructed standards of normality
in society, other than inadvertently. It may, however, serve another purpose similar to feminist discourse. According to Sass, who quotes Manfred Bleuler:

[schizophrenic] individuals may feel the need to ‘separate themselves from the commonly accepted norms of intercourse and of thinking that have substance and validity in everyday life,’ as a way of establishing a strongly felt sense of individuality—in order[...] ‘to remain themselves.’

(139-40)

By studying how Audrey Thomas’s writing mimics schizophrenia, I will expose the constructedness of gender in patriarchal society as it is reflected in the novel and show how it has forced upon Thomas’s main character Isobel Cleary a way of being in the world that has alienated her from her own sense of self.

The history of women bears an eerie resemblance to the history of madness, a likeness that cannot be ignored, and that gives us some clues to why women’s writing in the modern era shares many features with schizophrenic discourse. The French historian Genviève Fraisse discusses the history of women in Reason’s Muse: Sexual Difference and the Birth of Democracy. Before the Romantic era, Fraisse tells us, women were regarded, in their cognitive processing, as similar to madmen who, only because of their inherent aberration, violated the laws of Nature.

Although the relation between madness and art has been a common topic since ancient Greece, it is not until the early 19th century and the arrival of the Romantics that one can clearly see a positive affinity between the two, an affinity that is still with us today and that can be seen especially in the idealization of the link between madness and creativity. George Becker traces the history of madness and genius in his article, “The
it was the romantic movement in literature that provided the single most powerful impetus for the judgment of clinical madness...by selectively adopting and refining certain cultural axioms from the past, the romantics produced not only a logical connection between creativity and madness but also one in which madness was simultaneously a piteous and exalted condition that stood in sharp contrast to what they regarded as dreaded normality. (Becker 45)

The view of women did not change with the Romantics, and what separated the women from the mad was only women’s understanding and acceptance of their “naturally” inferior status. A woman gone mad in the romantic period did not show signs of creativity as with a mad man, but of animality due to woman’s propensity to lose her already volatile reason. Thus, the female voice continued to be repressed. When, on occasion, woman’s voice surfaced, it was not as the voice of woman but as the voice of unreason.

In *Women and Madness*, Phyllis Chesler shows how this view of women has been internalized by women in late 20th century America, thus, suggesting that the once recognizably constructed gender role had been naturalized and seen as an innate part of what it was to be a woman (Chesler 281). The connection between madness and creativity that emerged during the romantic era did not change the deficiency view of women, which persisted and lingers in patriarchal discourse even today. According to Chesler a woman has to accept the gender-controlled role she has been given in order to
stay “healthy,” regardless of whether she wants to do so or not (68-9). This mirrors Gilbert & Gubar’s opinion: “To be trained in renunciation is almost to be trained to ill health” (42). The double life of many women, characterized by outward conformity and inner rebellion resembles what mental health professionals calls “dissociation” – the ability to hold two contradictory ideas in the mind at the same time and give them equal value “through voluntary thought suppression, minimization, and sometimes outright denial, [in order] to alter an unbearable reality” (Herman 1). Women are particularly apt at this kind of thinking in their relation to society. In fact, the construction of gender in patriarchal society promotes the practice of women having a form of split personalities – an inner self which needs to be suppressed and a public self governed by an externally regulated conduct. Furthermore, many forms of feminist writing have exploited these assumptions and used split consciousness and doubles to reflect women’s ontological insecurity and the dissolution of self that result from this splitting.

iv. Manifestations of Madness in the Novels

In *Mrs. Blood*, Isobel finds herself in a traumatic situation as she is hospitalized in an effort to save her unborn child. Far away from her homeland, she becomes increasingly anxious as her condition worsens. However, as if her circumstances were not difficult enough, she also has to deal with the double bind of a white woman in Africa, which puts her in a very challenging position. She feels like an outsider and is uncertain of how to behave:

It would be impossible to tell what they really think of me because they always treat me like a guest and it is this that embarrasses me and not the
fact that they gaze upon my naked body. They do not speak to the others in quite the same way. (46-7)

At a later moment, in the second chapter, Isobel is taking her children to a birthday party. She says that she has “become almost neurotic about not exerting” herself, fearing that this would provoke a miscarriage. That one of the other mothers at the party finds her caution justified gives Isobel assurance: “And if she [. . .] feels that way then somehow it must be the right way to feel” (139). Isobel is so unsure of her own responses that she needs the constant affirmation of others in order to validate her own feelings.

At several points in the story, Mrs. Blood says she is “like an old log thrown up by the sea, and the past clings to me like barnacles. Weighted down, encrusted with them so that only the vague outline of my original shape remains.” She is stuck in her past searching for a way to come to terms with this past. While Mrs. Thing’s response is that of an autistic, and apathetic individual, Mrs. Blood carries her emotions à fleur du peau, and may even suffer the nervous breakdown of which Mrs. Thing has been terrified all along.

It is Isobel’s difficult pregnancy and the imminent miscarriage that have brought her past to the present. Her ambivalence in regards to the unborn child, which she at one point in the novel refers to as Caliban – the monstrous slave in Shakespeare’s The Tempest; he is the son of a witch, which goes together with Isobel’s reference to the witches in Macbeth at the end of the novel. As a mother, Isobel is expected to define herself through her children. By distancing herself from her role as a mother, Isobel has to distance herself from her public/outer self since it embodies the idea that she as a
idea that she as a woman has to define herself through others. In turn, this creates a sense of inner emptiness and of ontological insecurity.

Her splitting into Mrs. Blood and Mrs. Thing to narrate the novel permits her to deal with the conflicting feelings evoked by her situation as a woman who finds herself in an extremely vulnerable position – fearing for her life and the life of her unborn child. Irvine argues that the splitting “allow[s] conventional female representation and subversive aggression”(57). It allows Isobel to be both the irrational Mrs. Blood and the observing Mrs. Thing in a fashion similar to that of the schizophrenic who keeps her or his inner self separated from her or his outer/public self/selves. It is, however, interesting to note that the public self is just as important to the makeup of the schizophrenic and what constitutes the illness, as is the inner self. Therefore, we cannot regard Mrs. Thing as “healthier” than Mrs. Blood, or as the part of Isobel that is least affected by the situation. The splitting of the self is indubitably a maladaptive way of dealing with an anxiety provoking situation. However, Thomas’s novel suggests that this coping strategy may be the only way for someone like Isobel to respond to severe stress. She does not only have to deal with the ontological anxiety that has plagued her all her life but while she is displaced from her familiar surroundings and isolated she has to deal with an acutely difficult situation.

While gender is not the focus of Aquin’s novel, the motifs of splitting, doubles, and the dissolution of self are used in Prochain épisode to signal the effects of colonization and political impotence on a Québécois writer who is a failed revolutionary. Prochain épisode is two novels in one: the spy novel within the postmodern novel about a failed revolutionary writing a spy novel. In the former, the protagonist at first seems to
counteract the author’s failure to act in the real world, as a revolutionary, but as the novel progresses the protagonist turns out to be just as incapable of agency as the spy novel’s author. The self-reflexive postmodern narrative exposes the narrator’s difficulties, not only with his incarceration, with his inertia, and his inadequacy as a revolutionary, but also in writing his spy novel. Allegorically, the writer/revolutionary’s difficulties with agency pertain to national identity, nationhood, and national history. The narrator’s being in the world and his difficulty to act mirrors not only the novel’s characters and Hubert Aquin, who is being detained under similar circumstances while writing Prochain épisode, but also what Aquin considers Québec’s difficulty in asserting its specificity as a nation apart from English Canada. This immediate mise en abyme allows for the both allegorical and direct commentaries on Québec’s political and cultural situation.

The self-reflexive narrative and the narrative-within-the-narrative – the spy novel – are interwoven and point to the constructedness of reality. The spy story “naturally” questions reality; the suspense of the story depends on the ontological insecurity which the narrative evokes. Aquin uses this to the level of the absurd. By incorporating the spy novel in the self-reflexive narrative, Aquin is able to use the narrative strategy of the genre to disclose its constructedness and problematize the creative process involved in writing fiction. To the narrator it is a game; he is writing his novel at a “table de jeu,” Louis Hébert and Hajdukowski-Ahmed (151) suggests that it is a game to kill time.4

4 In his article “Analyse et modernité : Fragments de Prochain épisode” Louis Hébert suggests that the H in H de Heutz is what he calls a “chrononyme” that stands for hour. He points to the alternative spelling of H de Heutz as H de Heute (Heute = today in German). The novel is set in Switzerland a country so intrinsically associated with timepieces and with the emergence of the late 19th century anarchist movement, founded by Swiss watchmakers. « Nulle distraction ne peut donc se substituer à l’horlogerie de mon obsession, ni me faire dévier de mon parcours écrit (PE 5).
Patricia Smart quotes the narrator saying he “is gaining time in the game, dead time,” to express the same idea in a very different way (43).

The spy novel replaces reality and becomes a space in which the narrator constructs the narrative; a stage on which each of his characters plays multiple roles, and where the allegorical play about Québec can be performed. *Prochain épisode* uses the conventions of the spy story as a place of resistance. The Québécois writer cannot affirm his self within non-Québécois conventions and must therefore resist them in order to solidify his sense of who he is. The writing of the spy novel takes on a specific importance to the paralytic narrator as it is the only place where he can act, where he can react against the establishment who has put him in the clinic. This situation seems very different from the one Aquin describes in his essay “La fatigue culturelle du Canada français” where he describes Trudeau’s idea of French Canada’s importance in the federation: “Selon cette perspective, le Canada français détiendrait un rôle, le premier à l’occasion, dans une histoire dont il ne serait jamais l’auteur” (BE 92). But as Anthony Purdy explains in “The Politics of Incoherence: Narrative Failure and the Invention of History in Hubert Aquin’s Prochain épisode,” the narrator’s failure to construct the spy story within the postmodern novel mirrors the inability of the Québécois, as colonized people, to write their own history (88).

Anthony Giddens discusses the “world of the spy” in *Modernity and Self-Identity*:

[The spy,] in the interest of self-preservation, cannot accept the range of normal appearances in the way that other people usually do. The spy suspends part of the generalized trust which is ordinarily vested in ‘things as they are’, and suffers tortuous anxieties about what would otherwise be
mundane events. To the ordinary person a wrong number may be a minor irritation, but to the undercover agent it may be a disturbing sign that causes alarm.

The same holds true for the spy novel’s narrator and for individuals suffering from schizophrenia. As discussed earlier, in the recent film, *A Beautiful Mind*, about the schizophrenic mathematician John Nash, Nash’s preoccupation with numbers and hidden messages constitutes the break of his psychosis. Unable to function, his life begins to imitate art as he becomes a secret agent in his deluded mind. Everything around him takes on special significance: men wearing red ties seem to be part of a conspiracy and the headlines of newspapers bear hidden messages, which Nash spends all his waking hours trying to decipher. Coincidentally when authorities could no longer hold Nash hospitalized against his will, he escapes to Geneva, where he attempts to gain refugee status fearing he may be drafted if he goes back to the United States. During five months he spends his time in a desolate hotel room writing letter and filling out forms (Nasar 273).

The narrator of *Prochain épisode* tries to escape his “cultural fatigue” when he goes to Switzerland. Conversely the protagonist of Mrs. Blood is not escaping anything when she goes to Africa; in fact, she is expected to play the role of accompanying spouse since her husband is a visiting professor at the local university. Unlike Aquin’s narrator who refers to Québec as a colonized land, Thomas’s narrator becomes the colonizer in Africa. This does not give her a greater sense of power or freedom; instead, it increases her feeling of powerlessness as she is unfamiliar with the rules that govern this colonial society and women’s role within it. She feels like Carroll’s Alice dropped into the dark
African continent. The source of her dislocation is not the difference of African culture, however, but the more stringent expectations placed on white women’s role within the colony: for example she fears she will not be able, or even want to do what is expected of her as one of the colonial women who are perfect mothers and homemakers, always going the extra mile to make sure they give a good impression. She is, in fact, happy she doesn’t “have to compete with these capable ladies” (161). Aquin’s narrator, on the other hand, is feeling the colonizer’s presence even when he is in Switzerland. As a colonized subject he has internalized and thus carries with him, even in exile, the sense of inferiority and powerlessness that accompanies colonization — in the same way he carries with him the love of his land.

The protagonists share an ontological insecurity that has to do with their sense of alienation and cultural displacement. Their futile attempts to deal with their anxiety through the dissolution of their selves renders them both powerless and apathetic. The schizophrenic narratives mimic the characters’ inner rifts through the split narrators, fragmentation, incoherence, non-linear development, word play and hyper-reflexivity. These are all aspects that issue from a postmodern aesthetic, but that play a double role of suggesting madness in these texts.
Body/Mind Split: The Social Logic of Schizophrenia in

Audrey Thomas's *Mrs. Blood*

Find R.D. Laing. Go inwards.

(Thomas, *Blown Figures* 15)

“I’m afraid,” said Isobel to the shrink, “I’m afraid all the time. Of everything.”

(Thomas, *Blown Figures* 20)

Sometimes I wake up frightened in the middle of my mind.

(*Mrs. Blood* 193)

Audrey Thomas's novel *Mrs. Blood* takes the reader on a journey through the mind of Isobel Cleary as she lies bedridden in an African hospital, unable to leave by her own accord, far away from her native Canada. She is bleeding due to a complicated pregnancy that will end in miscarriage by the end of the novel. Unable to escape this reality, the narrator has split; Mrs. Blood and Mrs. Thing are two different parts of Isobel who share the fictional space and tell their/her stories, which are only elusively analogous, by taking turns, ostensibly unaware of each other's existence. That Thomas's narrator is a Canadian woman, trapped in an African world, brings to the surface some of the more important themes of the novel: gender, class, colonialism and culture. Thomas's text
points to the special crises of identity many women face because of the reality imposed on them by social, colonial and cultural authority.

In this chapter, I consider the affinities between the world view of characters in the novel, the narrative structure and contemporary theories of schizophrenia. My goal is to probe the reasons behind these similarities. I will show how women's being in the world, as represented by Isobel, is adversely affected by cultural and social codes to such a degree that her responses seem to mimic that of the schizophrenic individual. Isobel is thrust into a position of “otherness” as a white woman in an African hospital, adding to her sense of alienation. She also occupies another difficult position since she is unable to walk and sit due to the risks her unborn child is facing. She is suffering from ontological anxiety, a nondescript fear that engulfs her whole being. Her immobile position in the hospital mirrors that of her position as a woman who feels the cultural and social rules of patriarchy are imposing a way of being in the world on her and other women that does not necessarily correspond to the way they perceive their place in the world.

The novel is divided into three very uneven parts, Part One has 129 pages, Part Two, 67 pages and Part Three, 17 pages. Part One begins soon after Isobel is hospitalized and oscillates between Mrs. Thing's rather matter-of-fact narrative, dealing primarily with her everyday experience, and Mrs. Blood’s hyper-reflexive narrative, infused with memories and fantasies. By the second part, Isobel’s condition has improved and she is allowed to go home to the house she shares with her husband Jason, a visiting professor at the local university, her two children Mary and Nicholas, and their African servant, Joseph. She is not able to remember the way home from the hospital; she gives “the taxi driver our new address” and tells him that the family has moved since
she was hospitalized (133). That is, however, a claim that is not corroborated anywhere in the text. This type of uncertainty is present throughout the text.

Once home Isobel spends most of her time in bed. She is fearful for her unborn baby but may also be using her condition to free herself from social obligations. She is not eager to reconnect with the community and would rather stay home than joining her husband and children when they go out. It is clear that she has not established herself in her new surroundings. She is neither a part of the African community, nor of the British colonial community and is thus doubly excluded, if not triply excluded as she at the hospital is kept behind a curtain most of the time and can therefore not interact with the other women on the ward. At home she listens to what goes on around her from her second floor bedroom. This cultural alienation combined with Isobel’s already poor sense of self and her inability to share her fears with anyone, including her husband, leads to profound ontological anxiety.

Isobel’s return home is only temporary, as she starts to bleed again, and is forced to return to the hospital. The heightened anxiety Isobel is experiencing causes the narrative to become increasingly dominated by Mrs. Blood who, on the whole, speaks more from the body, memory, and emotions than Mrs. Thing who tends to speak more matter of factly, as an observer. The two are, however, not clearly distinct because the splitting is not logical, neat, or readily apparent, but a bit of a puzzle to the reader. The narrative also becomes more and more fragmented and incongruous. Except for a brief passage at the onset of Part Three, Mrs. Blood eventually takes over. By the end, the narrative has fallen apart completely, as the miscarriage becomes inevitable and Isobel dissociates from Mrs. Thing, who has been her connection to the reality of everyday life.
An allusion at the end of the novel suggests that the anxiety and guilt Mrs. Blood has been feeling is associated with an abortion she had a long time ago. She remembers a parallel episode of pregnancy in her life in which she told her ex-lover she was pregnant and he replied "Get rid of it" (220).

Several critics such as Lorna Irvine, Anthony Boxill and Joan Coldwell have referred to the psychological splitting that occurs in Mrs. Blood as schizophrenic due to the splitting of the main character, but also to explicit references to madness in Thomas’s work. However, the only textual connection to schizophrenia is found in another of Thomas’s novels about Isobel, Blown Figures and that is an indirect allusion cited earlier in the epigraph to this chapter. In Blown Figures, the main character Isobel makes a list of the things she should do while on an extended visit to London: “Meanwhile stay on in London, get a job in a Corner House, live in a hostel for Ladies in Reduced Circumstances. Find R.D. Laing. Go inwards” (15). By referring to her search for R.D. Laing, radical British psychologist and the author of The Divided Self, Isobel is alluding to a classic in the field which aspires to make the world of schizophrenic individuals comprehensible.

Lorna Irvine speaks of the novel’s “schizophrenic narrator” (27) but does not elaborate on the subject of schizophrenia or her understanding of the condition. In his review of Mrs. Blood, Anthony Boxill argues that it, along with another of Thomas’s novels, Munchmeyer and Prospero on the Beach, reflects Thomas’s concern about the writer/artist and her place in society; he notes that the main characters in Mrs. Blood are not artists, but argues that Isobel’s pregnancy shows her involvement in the creation process. Yet I would argue that Isobel is not able to create: her child is stillborn and the
narrative of the novel, an abortive enterprise. It is an open-ended story and an anti-story that leaves the reader without knowing what will happen to Isobel after the miscarriage.

The British sociologist Anthony Giddens believes that people need to be creatively involved with each other and with the world in order to be healthy. When this is not possible because the person is either caught in rituals which stifle creativity, or feels ontologically insecure, Giddens claims that “chronic melancholic or schizophrenic tendencies are likely to result” (41).

Boxill points to the narrator’s “schizophrenic state of mind” in the first line of the novel: “Some days my name is Mrs. Blood; some days it’s Mrs. Thing” (Boxill 14, Mrs. Blood ite). He argues that Mrs. Blood’s “insistence on reliving her past in her mind” serves to feed her guilt and prevents her from being creative (114). Obviously, the return to the past will bring forth unpleasant and undesired memories. However, I disagree with Boxill, and believe that Mrs. Blood recalls past events in order not to take part in the present. When reality becomes too hard to handle for the oversensitive Isobel and she fails to control the situation through Mrs. Thing, Mrs. Blood takes over the narrative and takes Isobel away to a fantasy world made up of fragments from her past. This coping strategy does not always work, which becomes clear already towards the end of Part One. During an emotionally difficult time, just before Isobel is “forced” to return home, the reader sees how traumatizing reality and home may be for Isobel. Mrs. Thing tells us how she had to leave her bed to have a blood test (113). Leaving the safety of her bed is obviously a source of inquietude for Isobel: “This minuscule trip had exhausted and confused me. I just wanted to lie still and tread water. Any sudden demands and I might drown” (114). In this instance, Mrs. Thing is forced to deal with
reality and cannot dissociate from what is happening around her. As long as she stays in her usual apathetic state she has nothing to fear and can rely on Mrs. Blood to help her dissociate from reality. Instead of pulling herself together in a difficult situation, her immediate response to an anxiety provoking situation is, thus, to abandon herself to the dissolution of self and agency as suggested by the image of treading water. There is an interesting dialogue between Mrs. Thing and her doctor, which in a significant way describes Isobel’s mental state at this point in the narrative. Dr. Biswas comes to see Isobel and comments on her negativity. He feels she has become “too introspective” (121). The conversation makes Isobel cry:

“But what is the matter?”

“Nothing, I don’t know.”

“I think,” he gives me a traitor’s smile, “it is time for you to go home.”

“Home?”

(122)

Mrs. Thing feels she is being abandoned and betrayed by her doctor when he says she should go home, but her narrative does not show us how this makes her feel. Mrs. Thing does not show emotions but transfer her emotions onto other people when she finds the situation traumatic: “Why am I crying? Dr. Biswas is obviously exasperated” (121); “And if I lose the baby? Screaming in an upstairs room, windows wide open against the heat, the compound listening and Jason losing face forever” (122).

Early on, Mrs. Thing talks about how she must not cry “because once started I knew I would be carried screaming to a place far worse than this” (36). Thus, it is Mrs. Blood who protects Mrs. Thing from becoming irrational and prevents her from reacting in what Mrs. Thing would consider an inappropriate fashion. Mrs. Thing does not show
fear, we can observe Isobel’s dissociation from the traumatic idea of returning home in Mrs. Blood’s narrative. The chapter ends with Mrs. Blood’s fragmented clippings from the local newspaper. The recollection of past events is here no longer sufficient to keep out the overwhelming emotions that will keep Isobel from “drowning” or, in other words, losing her sense of self. For Boxill, the return home puts an end to what he calls Mrs. Blood’s “morbid imagery” (114). I believe Isobel’s inability to possess her own emotions, as is suggested by Mrs. Thing’s transference and Mrs. Blood’s ensuing fragmentation, serves to silence the female voice. It is not Mrs. Thing’s emotions that are validated in her narrative but the emotions she transfers onto the men.

Mrs. Thing’s unease with the colonial environment in which she finds herself is reflected in the section where her husband is doing woodwork on the veranda. She describes what she perceives as Joseph’s unease: “Poor Joseph! He would be happier, I think, with an engineer or perhaps a scientist. Jason is constantly shattering his stereotype of the white man.” (188). Without a table cloth to cover the scratches on the table, “twenty-one side dishes” like in the old days, or a “white mess jacket,” she feels he thinks their evening party is “doomed to failure” (188). She wishes she could make their African servant feel at ease by reassuring him that everything will be fine. “But” she adds, “that might be the crowning blow which would shatter his psyche forever” (189). She ends the section with a quote from Matthew Arnold’s poem Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse, which reminds her of the colonial situation in which Joseph was born: “‘between two worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be born’ ”(189). I would argue that this section shows, once again, Mrs. Thing’s tendency to transfer her own feelings onto others whenever these feelings make her uneasy. In the scene above, however, there
is truth in the parallel between Joseph’s dis-ease with their colonial relationship and her own dis-ease with her class and gender role within the colony. Throughout the text the reader can feel how uncomfortable she is with the colonial situation in her new surroundings. She criticizes the woman who seems to think the nurses are servants. She is appalled by her neighbors who beat their servants. She is also uncomfortable with having a cook, not because she feels it is wrong or too bourgeois but because Isobel, unlike her neighbors, does not feel she would be able to manage without Joseph; it’s easy for them, she thinks, because they could do without their cooks, having servants is just a convenience for them. Isobel, on the other hand, depends on him to keep up her appearance as a capable housewife. The end quote from Arnold may serve to illustrate Joseph’s situation, but is it not also a description of Isobel’s own situation, caught between her personal past and her present, that is a past abortion and her present pregnancy? She is wandering in her mind between her past that in many senses belongs to her dead baby and the present that belongs primarily to her unborn child. The history that she reacts against most frequently is not the official or public history of colonialism, but her personal history and the history of her body as a woman.

Barbara Godard does not use the term schizophrenia in her analysis of the novel but finds it more appropriate to speak of *Mrs. Blood’s* narrator “as nonsensical, in a world where all is in flux” (AT 26). This view is reminiscent of the anti-psychiatric movement which considers all mental illness as a construct of the medical establishment without biological basis. According to this belief, what is considered madness is a natural and sane response to living in an insane world. Although this may be true, it does not help
the individual to cope with reality or explain why some people react to this "insane world" in the way Isobel reacts.

While critics recognize the possibility that the narrator may be schizophrenic, or as Godard claims, "nonsensical," they do not, however, further the discussion of schizophrenia in the novel. Labeling the narrator as schizophrenic becomes an impasse and does not contribute to our understanding of Isobel. The term schizophrenic is also used in an overly simplified manner, only to describe the splitting into two personalities without considering the complexity of schizophrenia as a mental disease, the implications of which go far beyond the split personality Isobel is manifesting. The type of splitting that critics like Boxill refer to is not schizophrenic but part of the clinical description of Dissociative Disorder (what used to be called Multiple Personality Disorder). The main clinical criteria for this disorder are, according to the DSM-IV:

- The patient has at least two distinct identities or personality states. Each of these has its own, relatively lasting pattern of sensing, thinking about and relating to self and environment.
- At least two of these personalities repeatedly assume control of the patient's behavior.

(Morrison par. 1)

R.D. Laing gives the following description of the kind of splitting that occurs in schizophrenia:

The term schizoid refers to an individual the totality of whose experience is split in two main ways: in the first place, there is a rent in his relation

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3 The DSM-IV is the Diagnostic and Statistic Manual used by mental health professionals to diagnose mental disorders and illness.
with his world and, in the second, there is a disruption of his relation with himself. Such a person is not able to experience himself 'together with' others or 'at home in' the world but, on the contrary, he experiences himself in despairing aloneness and isolation; moreover he does not experience himself as a complete person but rather as 'split' in various ways, perhaps as a mind more or less tenuously linked to a body, as two or more selves, and so one.\footnote{The term schizoid refers here to the individual suffering from schizophrenia.}

(15)

Based on both descriptions of two distinct mental disorders one can, I believe, see a distinct relation between Thomas's characterization and the schizophrenic form of splitting on a more profound level that relates to ontological insecurity. In *Mrs. Blood*, Isobel cannot relate to the world around her, in part because of her situation which prevents her from interacting on a physical level, but also because of the cultural alienation she feels in her new surroundings. In order to deal with this rift, which inevitably causes her anxiety, she has split in a fashion similar to that experienced by the schizoid individual in Laing's example: that is, into two selves – one closely linked to the body, Mrs. Blood and one linked to her mind, Mrs. Thing.

The novel refers to madness on numerous occasions, but does not explore the possibility of Isobel being mad, even though Isobel often thinks of herself as going mad. Her idea of herself, however, has more to do with her ontological insecurity, which prevents her from taking part in social interactions without feeling inadequate or overly self-aware. Rather, the novel describes the narrator's response to her world without passing judgment on the degree to which Isobel's reaction to her surroundings is a maladjusted response. Numerous intertextual references to Lewis Carroll's *Alice's*
Adventures in Wonderland give us a hint of how we are to think of madness in the novel as relative. We may even want to look at Carroll’s story as a parallel text to Mrs. Blood. As in Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland what seems nonsensical and unimportant, such as the intertextual fragments from Carroll, is in Mrs. Blood, essential to the understanding of the novel and gives the reader clues on how to read it.

The novel’s opening epigraph (from Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland) suggests that we read the novel as a story of a displaced and disoriented woman trapped in what she perceives to be a “mad world”:

“But I don’t want to go among mad people,” Alice remarked.

“Oh, you can’t help that,” said the Cat: “we’re all mad here. I’m mad. You’re mad.”

“How do you know I’m mad?” said Alice.

“You must be,” said the Cat, “or you wouldn’t have come here.”

(Mrs. Blood 9)

Of course, in Mrs. Blood the world isn’t really mad; it only appears mad in Isobel’s mind because it is foreign and she is uncertain of its cultural and social rules. Isobel also projects her dis-ease with her own body onto the unfamiliar society in which she finds herself. She cannot feel at ease because she cannot feel at ease with herself. She cannot feel at ease with her own body since, because of the pregnancy and the complications, it is reacting in ways she is unfamiliar with and this causes her much fear and anxiety. This situation makes her not only highly attuned to what is happening in her body (and causes much of her introspection) but also highly attuned to anything unusual in her surrounding. This hyper-awareness also gets projected onto her surrounding. However,
because she is so focused on noticing anything unusual, she misinterprets other people’s normal behavior as imbued with a significance that is uncalled for as when she thinks the women do not think of her as one of them. She also believes others have the same awareness and that they are constantly judging her. In *Mrs. Blood* Alice becomes Isobel, who like Alice “falls” into a world where she is a stranger. She is the outsider that doesn’t fit in and who feels her behaviour is constantly being scrutinized.

Reflecting on the journey aboard the boat going to Africa, Mrs. Thing makes a comment which clearly lets the reader know that this is not an ordinary story: “Once you’re well and truly down the rabbit hole nothing seems incredible” (19). Dr. Biswah plays the role of the Cheshire Cat in *Mrs. Blood*; he is always coming and going and is the person with whom Isobel converses the most. Isobel dresses her children as Alice and the White Rabbit for Halloween. As in Alice’s story “things here aren’t always what they seem to be” (11). Both Carroll’s and Isobel’s worlds are fantasy worlds. Like Alice, Isobel used to love to go to parties, but now she would rather stay home. The other colonial women at the compound where she lives are always able to arrange fancy tea parties, no matter what hardship they would have to go through to bake cakes or scones. To Isobel these parties must feel somewhat like the Mad Hatter’s party in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. She certainly does not fit in and is afraid that once she is not physically handicapped like she is now she will be expected to be as tough and resilient as the other colonial wives and mothers.

Godard’s description of *Mrs. Blood*’s protagonist Isobel as “nonsensical” does not conflict with my understanding of schizophrenia. I am not suggesting that Isobel is schizophrenic, whether such claims can be justified or not is not my concern here.
Indeed, as Laing puts it in his book *The Divided Self*, "[. . .] the split in the experience of one's own being into unembodied and embodied parts is no more an index of latent psychosis than is total embodiment any guarantee of sanity" (71). Anybody can at some point or other feel this way; it is often the only defense mechanism available to a distressed individual. I use contemporary theories of schizophrenia as a framework to help me understand Isobel's splitting. Isobel's two parts correspond to the "embodied and unembodied self" which Laing describes in *The Divided Self*:

The embodied person has a sense of being flesh and blood and bones, of being biologically alive and real: he knows himself to be substantial. [. . .] He will experience himself as subject to the dangers that threaten his body, the danger of attack, mutilation, disease, decay and death. (69)

The unembodied self, as onlooker at all the body does, engages in nothing directly. Its functions come to be observation, control, and criticism *vis-à-vis* what the body is experiencing and doing, and those operations which are usually spoken of as purely 'mental'.

The unembodied self becomes hyper-conscious. (71)

I suggest that Isobel's splitting simulates an unmediated split of consciousness. This split reflects the conflict that many women experience and is, to a large extent, the result of the cultural double bind imposed on women by patriarchal society. My reading of *Mrs. Blood* differs from a French feminist reading, however, as I prefer a non-romanticized view of madness. The madness in *Mrs. Blood* is not libidary. Instead, similar to what happens in schizophrenia, Thomas's excessively self-reflexive narrative renders the conflict between cultural expectations and the individual impossible to
resolve. In the text schizophrenia serves as a metaphor for the considerable difficulties encountered by many women as they, like Isobel, try to mediate society's predetermined expectations of women with their, often unconscious, need for self affirmation and actualization. Isobel did not choose to become pregnant, in fact, she warns her husband that if she becomes pregnant she will not follow him to Africa.

Sass points to the "critical stance" manifest in schizophrenics, which shines light on aspects of our social reality we usually do not question (MM 7). In a similar but more conscious and purposeful fashion Thomas’s novel has the ability to make the reader aware of the incongruities between conventions of society and the individual’s being in the world. Isobel’s reaction to her situation and her surroundings becomes more comprehensible, not because it is symptomatic of disease but because it is a failed attempt to relieve the dis-ease brought on by the situation in which she finds herself. It is only with this in mind that we may begin to ask some questions fundamental to the understanding of the text: Wherein lies Isobel’s incapacity to function? What has caused her to split? What is the purpose of this splitting? How does the splitting affect the reader’s understanding of the novel?

We are not likely to have an answer to any of these questions simply by diagnosing Isobel as schizophrenic, regardless of whether we believe schizophrenia to be a biological disorder or a cultural dis-ease. Nor by considering the psychological splitting as a natural response to a traumatic event, as Joan Coldwell, who suggests that “[t]he miscarriage suffered in Mrs. Blood has haunted the narrator with guilt and loss until she has gone mad,” without considering the reasons why the narrator is responding to a particular event in this fashion (48). Coldwell’s interpretation is similar to that of
Boxill’s, who also sees the coping strategy Mrs. Blood is using when she dissociates herself from her present by returning to her past experiences as a maladaptive response. I would argue that Isobel’s splitting has little to do with her feelings of guilt. Her splitting is suggestive of her inability to take possession of her own feelings when faced with a situation that will inevitably jeopardize the little sense of ontological security she possesses. She fears that her emotional responses are considered irrational and inappropriate, for example when she hides her tears after one of Dr. Biswas’s visits: “He is right. We must stick to the patterns. Big girls don’t cry. Madame mustn’t cry in the presence of natives” (91). Her obsession with her own feelings engenders the hyper-reflexive state that makes it nearly impossible for her to interact with other individuals around her, regardless of what she thinks of the people she encounters. She is lacking the skills necessary to function socially, or at least she believes she is as when she says she is not “very sociable” and compares herself to an “eastern bride who is taken out West to live alongside her rancher husband” (161). This is of course purely in her mind, and only a sign of her lack of agency and her severed selfhood. She also fails to act as an agent of change in her own life, succumbing instead to a paralyzing self-reflection.

We will not have an answer to any of the questions mentioned earlier by attributing the “irrationality” found in the text to an adherence to feminist theory that celebrates madness, since this might erroneously re-inscribe the association between women and madness as natural. In fact, what characterizes early schizophrenia is less the irrational and subversive behavior of the romantic mad man/woman, but rather the chameleonic ability to conform to the expectations of parents and others (including society) – in reality, an inability to form a distinct and separate self (Laing, Sass). (This
is not unlike the role society prescribes to women). Even before Isobel came to Africa, she had problems with her self-identity. She recalls how she, after Jason left for work in the morning, would find it almost impossible to occupy herself: “It was as though, when he left the house, he took the real me with him and I was just a stand-in, waiting in another person’s part” (146).

I have previously shown how Mrs. Thing transfers her feelings onto other people close to her. She admits to doing this and explains why:

It is impossible for me to see other people as separate from myself.

Jason is my husband, Mary, my daughter, Nichols, my son. I can only imagine what they are thinking by imagining what I would think if I were in Jason’s position – which is quite different from imagining what I would think if I were Jason.

Thus when I was in the hospital, ashamed and defensive because of my physical weakness, I saw Jason as ashamed and embarrassed too. (191)

Thomas’s writing exists outside patriarchal society’s cultural norms of what is to be considered as normal and testifies, through Isobel’s discourse, to the role of woman in society and to her reactions to that society. Thomas’s postmodern literary style alone does not make her writing unconventional; her choice of miscarriage as a subject is also unconventional for the literary canon. Margaret Atwood calls it “‘gynecological’ fiction” (Bowering, qtd in Godard 9). In her study of Audrey Thomas, Godard remarks on Thomas’s allusion “to the very blurred boundaries between revolutionary art and insanity, both of which challenge our understanding of rules and order while presenting reality in
cryptic symbols” in one of her short stories, “Salon des réfuses,” which deals with a mental asylum (AT 29). Among Mrs. Blood’s recurring memories are her recollections from the time when she worked with geriatric and mentally disturbed female patients.

Mrs. Blood shares some of the characteristics that Sass sees in schizophrenic discourse such as “unconventional language, use of ambiguous words and phrases as well as disorganized narrative techniques” and what Sass calls the “daunting heterogeneity” of schizophrenic discourse that makes it near impossible to define (MM 176-80). Mrs. Blood’s narrative is especially unconventional and at times incomprehensible such as when it consists of unknown quotes or text fragments from the newspaper. It demands of the reader that he or she is familiar with the many intertextual references in order to make any sense of the narrative. Schizophrenic individuals may use references and words that are known only to them, making any attempt at a reciprocal conversation utterly difficult. Sass gives the example of an interview between a psychiatrist and a patient to illustrate similar aspect of schizophrenic language which deals with meaning:

**INTERVIEWER:** What does it mean ... Don't cry over spilt milk?

**PATIENT:** I did today.

**INTERVIEWER:** What happened today?

**PATIENT:** Today happened today.

**INTERVIEWER:** To what aim do you refer?

**PATIENT:** I do not refer; fur is ... fur is a cover for the animal kingdom.

(MM 206)
Although everything the patient says is logical, together these associations are nonsensical. This type of language is, of course, one of the things that is explored by Carroll in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. One can also find this kind of nonsensical narrative in postmodern literature. *Mrs. Blood* is no exception. Isobel frequently transforms intertextual references, and makes punning remarks: “Give us today our barely dead”(171). “Avez-vous du pain” (147). Mrs. Blood lists perfectly sensible statements, but without any inner or outer coherence in the text:

These things I know to be true.

1. Fragile or perishable articles are not subject to indemnity against damage.

2. *Le numéro de l’appartement complète l’adresse.* . . . (103)

Thomas’s texts are puzzles, but they are different from the kind of enigma one encounters in the spy or detective novel, where the aim is to solve the puzzle. There is no solution to be found in Thomas’s work, only a quest for the truth – but not in any traditional sense of questing, rather in a postmodern sense that problematizes the quest itself.

In his book *The Paradox of Meaning*, John Moss suggests that the two opposite poles of narrative structure are the labyrinth and the jigsaw puzzle. As both Moss and Susan Rudy Dorscht point out, Thomas makes use of these structures in her writing. Dorscht argues that these “two opposing metaphors” suggest that there are two different language theories at work in Thomas’s novel. “[T]he puzzle metaphor,” reasons Dorscht, “suggests that language is fully meaningful; the other, the labyrinth metaphor, suggests that language consists of an outward, disseminating, infinity of absence and deferral”
For example, when Mrs. Blood's narrative at the end of the novel becomes increasingly fragmented and interspersed with intertextual references, Thomas uses the idea of the puzzle to show how it becomes practically impossible for Isobel to name the unspeakable. Instead her discourse dissolves into fragments of socially and culturally acceptable discourse. The dissolution of narrative coherence mirrors the dissolution of self and agency.

In many postmodern feminist texts, the conscious use of fragmented narratives to illustrate the vicissitudes of women's lives points to a resistance toward realist and master narratives. Sass argues that the world, or rather the universality of the world and experience as it is portrayed in these narratives ceases to exist when its constructedness is exposed, similar to the way the puzzle stays a puzzle even when it is completed. Reality as we know it can no longer be taken for granted when alternative perspectives of reality come into view. In schizophrenia what Sass calls, quoting Heidegger, the "unworlding of the world" – or derealization – causes the subject to look for means to relieve this insecurity (33). As we see in Thomas's novel, this can be done in several ways: from giving increased importance to an inner reality to dissociating from external reality. For example, Mrs. Blood's self-reflexive narrative increasingly dominates the narrative. As Isobel is reminded of the unspeakable, her previous abortion, she is unable to sustain the disinterested and dissociated narrative of Mrs. Thing. Her pain makes this even more likely as it lowers her ability to dissociate. She may try, as she does when she is at home and starts bleeding again in Part II: "'Jason.' (And the other me saying, hissing, don't cry out, don't name it and it will go away)" (195). While it is unclear who this "other me" may be, it could be Mrs. Thing. The only time, then, that Mrs. Blood shows that she is
aware of her other self is when this other is not able to make a voice loud enough to break through the narrative.

At times *Mrs. Blood* is more like a collage than a story, reminiscent of the type of spatial rather than temporal narrative structure found in schizophrenic narratives and of course, the jigsaw puzzle. The narrative is not linear and, like the pieces of a puzzle, exists in only one dimension. In such a narrative, past, present, and future may be presented as a set of unrelated and staged images, each of which has its own center and which does not rely on the other pieces to exist.

In *Mrs Blood* the narrative slowly but surely leads the reader toward the center of the maze where the unspeakable truth seems to be waiting. I suggest that Mrs. Blood has her own symbolic Minotaur in the center of the labyrinth. The blood, I would argue, which signifies the unborn baby, is the visible sign of guilt. Mrs. Blood’s guilt, however, is more than just a feeling of guilt related to the abortion Isobel has undergone years before and which the reader does not discover until the end of the novel. As the miscarriage is unfolding at the end of *Mrs. Blood*, the words of her former lover come back to haunt her: “Get rid of it” (220). This is the sign of the unspeakable but because it has become taboo, Isobel does not feel guilty about the abortion. Her guilt is existential and something she cannot get away from. It resembles the guilt many schizoid individuals or schizophrenics experience. Laing suggests that the guilt is not so much in respect to specific thoughts or acts...it is superseded by a much more inclusive sense of badness or worthlessness which attacks their very right to *be* in any respect. [. . .] His [or her] guilt is the urgent factor
in preventing active participation in life, and in ‘maintaining the ‘self’ in isolation, in pushing it into further withdrawal. (169)

Mrs. Blood’s unborn child reminds her of her “badness.” For instance, using the words of Shakespeare she tells her husband: “Jason, my love, I have done a deed without a name” (218). The quote refers to a scene in Macbeth where the three witches, the most evil and powerful of Macbeth’s characters answer Macbeth who is asking what they are concocting:

Macbeth. How now, you secret, black, and midnight hags!

What is ’t you do?

All. A deed without a name. (Macbeth, IV:1:47-49)

Comparing herself to Shakespeare’s evil witches, Isobel counts herself among the evil and powerful women that historically have challenged patriarchal society and have had to suffer for it, through society’s contempt or even their own death. However, it is uncertain if this is what Isobel is thinking; after all, she has internalized patriarchal society’s view of women, as is evident in Mrs. Thing’s obsession with how she acts and is perceived by others. It is ironic that the quote aligns Isobel with witches as evil and powerful agents when she, herself, is impotent to act. However, it is also a reminder of the close link that has been made in Western imagination between women and madness through the image of the witch.

As Mrs. Thing, Isobel is dissociated from her past, and from any feeling of guilt. Mrs. Thing has an existential fear that she has had as long as she can remember, but that is closely related to her abortion (even though the text does not mention the abortion until the end, the connection is clearly there from the outset.) It is also closer to paranoia or anxiety than to any feeling of guilt:
I can’t remember a time when I wasn’t afraid: and now I felt the hour had come round at last – and time has proved me right – and whatever it was that I had felt behind me stalking me, for all those years was nearly on me and I could almost smell it. (12)

Mrs. Blood, on the other hand, is very conscious of her guilt. The daily routine at the hospital is to Mrs. Blood an attempt by the people surrounding her to conceal her guilt. She is kept behind curtains where she is bathed and where she is made to spit into, what her nurse calls “the Nemesis basin.” In Greek mythology, Nemesis avenges any violation of sacred law. “Perhaps she’s right,” says Mrs. Blood and quotes Shakespeare’s Lady Macbeth: “All the perfumes of Arabia could [sic] not sweeten [. . .]” (15).7 By this quote, Mrs. Blood points out that there is no way her sin or guilt can be washed away. Lady Macbeth says just before this quote: “Here’s the smell of the blood still,” suggesting that Mrs. Blood believes that Isobel will always carry it with her. In fact, the smell of blood has become an essential thought, a repressed part of her. She calls herself Mrs. Blood and says at one point in the novel in a very postmodern and Descartian fashion: “I stink therefore I am ” (21).

One of Laing’s patients also complained about an intolerable smell, and later explained that it was really the way he had felt about himself. According to Laing, the man paid such attention to his smell and how it must smell to others around him as “a desperate attempt” to retain a sense of himself as “a being-for-others” (129-31). Although Mrs. Blood’s smell is both real and imagined, it is clear that the smell of blood is particularly disturbing to her because of her existential guilt and her fear of a

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7 The correct quote is : “Here’s the smell of the blood still: all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand.” V:1:24
miscarriage. It is also what distinguishes her from Mrs. Thing, who is not a "being-for-others." Like two of Laing's patients, who, overwhelmed by this existential guilt, felt "it was a mere pretense for them to be somebody and that the only honest course they could take was to become nobody" (169), Mrs. Thing is a nobody, a thing. She is an unengaged and disinterested observer to what happens to Isobel and to what is going on in the world around her. This is of course only a façade; it is Isobel's way of coping. Her hypersensitivity forces her to dissociate from the world around her and to transfer her emotions onto the people close to her.

The maze metaphor shows how Mrs. Blood, who wanders through the maze (she is going through her memories), and Mrs. Thing, who is observing from the outside (she stays in the present in most of her narrative), become increasingly separated without much hope of being reunited as Mrs. Blood loses her way in the labyrinth. Mrs. Thing is not present in the third part of the narrative because she would not have been able to cope with the increasingly strong emotions of which Mrs. Blood's fragmented narrative is a textual evidence.

As Moss and Dorsch point out, it is not only the maze that is present in Thomas's work. There is also the puzzle. Thomas's puzzle is made up of collages, juxtapositions, and other devices that, because they are taken out of context, are only parts of the whole, and resist the influence of a dominant culture. In Mrs. Blood and in Blown Figures, a later novel about Isobel, the reader is forced to decode, not only the text of the author, but also the multitude of fragments: comics strips, nursery rhymes, and ads, which are all part of conventional patriarchal narrative, but as fragments have lost their conventionality.
The intertextual fragments that are part of the novel may be regarded as similar in form to the auditory hallucinations schizophrenics may experience as the most characteristic and the most common type of hallucination in that they appear as a form of intrusion from the outside which becomes integrated (Sass 231). The fragments in the novel are spoken by one of the characters but do not originate from them. This process is similar to the thought insertions in schizophrenia, where what seem to be the words of someone else become part of the schizophrenic's own thoughts. In Mrs. Blood, these fragments are in a way thought insertions. All are part of the social and cultural discourse of patriarchal society that in its turn has become part of Isobel's thoughts. But Isobel is taking them out of the patriarchal discourse from which they originated. She subverts the original by using the fragments in her own way, to express her own feelings. This is, of course, a problematic idea, since this means she is not able to speak for herself outside of patriarchal language. She has no voice of her own. This is a common characteristic of postmodern fiction, which uses and subverts the master narratives in order to point to their constructedness.

In Mrs. Blood and even more so in Blown Figures, space replaces time as a structural device. Sass argues that spatial form in literature is paradoxical. On the one hand "the world is rendered more solid and dependable"; on the other hand, by focusing on how the world is constructed, spatial form exposes its constructedness and makes it less real (MM 161). The title itself, Blown Figures, refers to the memories that are evoked in the text, not in a linear narrative but as memory fragments. In Mrs. Blood, there is no one solution. The puzzle never ceases to be a puzzle even when all the pieces are joined together into a picture. The picture becomes the solution to the puzzle rather
than a representation of an alpine vista or blooming meadow or, as in *Mrs. Blood*, of Isobel’s biographical narrative. The bewildering spatial narrative removes the focus and linear order from the story, as the focus becomes the text itself and intertextual fragmentation the pieces of the puzzle. It resembles what goes on in the hyper-reflexive mind when the focus becomes the thought process and the thoughts the pieces of the puzzle rather than parts of the individual’s conscious *being in the world*. The conscious mind is then preoccupied with thinking instead of the material of which the thoughts are made up; it is similar to looking at a painting and instead of seeing the images focusing on the brushstrokes.

I would argue that the labyrinth is very similar to the puzzle as there is no way for the individual who is inside the labyrinth to have a global view of it. The act of finding one’s way through the labyrinth is similar to the hyper-reflexive state in schizophrenia that turns the attention of the individual inwards, into the maze of the mind. Like the puzzle, the world becomes a fragmented image without reference to time or reality. Isobel’s response to her past and present bears a striking resemblance to the response a schizophrenic may have to a picture, describing it as a world of its own in which characters can exist and be aware of themselves as nothing but representations in a picture, without grounding in the real world. Sass calls this “presentism” (MM 155). *Mrs. Blood* describes exactly the same phenomenon after she is hospitalized in the beginning of the novel. She reflects on her relationship with her husband and children, and instead of using a temporal reference, she uses a spatial reference: “They have not ceased to exist but they existed […] on another dimension altogether, like figures in an old daguerreotype or relatives they told me had gone to heaven” (14).
In *Mrs. Blood*, the narrative jumps back and forth in time. Christl Verduyn contends that it is common in women’s writing for the present to be frozen, while the past takes precedence: “It is lived time and not mechanical time that counts.” Lived time, instead of being linear is circular or spiral (72). Time is of no essence, not clearly defined and not used to sustain a linear narrative. Structurally the novel is dominated by “juxtaposition and discontinuous narrative” (Diotte 61). In the novel the present is told in a series of images that are largely a reflection of Isobel’s limited field of view, and which Mrs. Thing comments on: “The phenomenon of being ‘horizontal man’ for such a long time is – I am convinced of it – beginning to affect me” (28). She even says that because of her limited vision she can relate to someone who is blind (107). She is acutely aware of the smells and sounds around her:

I am losing interest in looking at the same old things [...] and find myself listening instead. And smelling. Morning is Dettol and Mansion Polish. [...] Afternoon: the heat hovering like wings, the fu-fu pounders, the smell of a cigarette in the corridor (Mrs. Owusu, my own stink as the freshness of the morning is canceled, sweat and blood, sometimes the smell of rain, Jason’s footsteps [...] ). (107-8)

Her present situation is her whole worldview, her perspective that of “horizontal man.” It is interesting to note that the Greek origin of the word ‘horizon’ comes from the verb ‘to limit’. Her horizon is limited by the “pale blue plastic curtains” surrounding her bed “to keep [her] pain in” (14-5). With such a limiting perspective, it is no wonder that she becomes increasingly introspective and apathetic. She is no longer in control of what is happening to her.
Isobel spends more and more of her time thinking about the past. Her past consists of jumbled memories provoked by an association to something in the present. Isobel’s story is, in fact, made up of fragmented moments in her past that exist outside time. Their exact place in Isobel’s past is of little importance to the narrative.

The words below of this schizophrenic man ring true for Isobel if we reflect on the fragmented nature of her being in the world in that both narratives are fragmented and do not follow the passing of time. Like the schizophrenic speaker below, Isobel’s memories are evoked by things in the present rather than linked together in the past: “I feel as if I’ve lost the continuity linking the events of my past. Instead of a series of events linked by continuity, my past just seems like dis-connected fragments” (qtd. in Sass, MM 156). The novel resists interpretation, since without resorting to conventional clues that would help the reader, it leaves it up to the reader to draw her or his own conclusions about what is going on in the text, based on descriptions, the non-linear narrative, and the subjective reality of the narrator. The reader’s task is made more difficult due to the subjective sense of time and space that exists within the narrative and forces the reader to join in the creation of the narrative, imposing his or her own rationale upon the text. Linda Hutcheon calls this “the game of imagination” – in which the reader has to decode the encoded text of the author (Hutcheon, NN 143). The reader, whose only access to the story is through the narrator, has a limited perspective of the world in the novel and can therefore not look for clues in the text to counteract and resolve the enigmatic narrative.

In Blown Figures, the narrator invites the reader into the creation of the text in an even more explicit manner than suggested above. Page 120 is an empty page except for
the following instruction: “THINK OF SOMETHING GOD’S BOOK TELLS YOU TO DO. THEN, IN THIS SPACE, DRAW YOURSELF DOING IT,” which invites the reader to make her or himself part of the text. Although it leaves room for expression outside the imposed narrative, it sets the conditions for such an expression. The text resists the conventions of literary narratives by exposing them, showing how cultural, or – as in the above example – religious, master narratives influence the reader.

What the reader may experience when reflecting on the influence that cultural conventions have on the way s(he) perceives her or his world, and how these conventions have become part of the reader’s belief system can be similar to, but in a much lesser degree, what schizophrenic patients experience when they express their belief that they are controlled by someone or something other than themselves. Doubting the source of agency, they may question their own selfhood as they discover that their ideas do not necessarily arise from their own mind.

The boundaries between the self and the world become less distinctive, and questions surrounding control and intention cause further ontological anxiety. As Sass suggests,

the cognito may come to seem the most dubious or evanescent of phenomena, and with the loss of awareness of one’s own subjectivity and capacity to will, there may occur a more general fragmentation, a dissolution of all sense of one’s own cohesiveness, separateness, or continuity in time. (Sass, MM 215)

According to Robert Diotte this loss of control is at the source of Isobel’s, in his opinion, deficient mind:
Her fatal flaw can be seen as the inability to control her dreams in the face of the reality around her. They eventually possess her. The dream tension of the Mrs. Blood – Mrs. Thing neural dialogue distorts the relationship Isobel had with Jason and mars the role she plays as mother.

Diotte’s comment reveals how cultural and social conventions have shaped the view of women and their bodies. His argument mirrors the judgments Mrs. Thing fears in the novel. What Diotte sees as an “inability to control” is, in fact, the only way Isobel can keep from going mad in the situation she finds herself in. Phyllis Chesler’s argument in *Women and Madness* that a woman has to accept the prescribed role in order to stay “healthy,” regardless of whether she wants to do so or not (68-9) is suggestive of the way women are made to think about their *being in the world*. It also suggests that in order not to display deviancy, and thus be judged negatively by society, a woman should suppress that part of herself that does not conform to the standards for “normal” behavior.

According to Eugene Bleuler – the first to use the term schizophrenia in 1908 – schizophrenic individuals, because of the tenuous nature of their selfhood, often feel the need to “separate themselves from the commonly accepted norms of intercourse and of thinking that have substance and validity in everyday life,” as a way of establishing a strongly felt sense of individuality—in order “to remain themselves” (qtd. in Sass: 139-40). This need is less of a choice than it is what seems to be the only way out of a situation which the individual perceives as a threat of annihilation. Mrs. Thing fears she will go mad unless she dissociates from what is happening to her.
In the novel, this paradoxical process, rather than providing greater insight, undermines Isobel’s sense of self in a way similar to the schizophrenic, who, as Sass points out “often seems to be caught up in an insolvable dilemma, driven for the search for the self yet likely to destroy it in the act of searching” (MM 237). This becomes very clear if we use the image of the labyrinth as reading strategy. In the process of searching for the self, which one hopes to find at the center of the maze, the individual gets lost and is unable to find the way back to the starting point. The goal of any treatment must then be to find a way back, because as Laing puts it, “the tragic paradox is that the more the self is defended in this way, the more it is destroyed” (80). Mrs. Thing’s description of herself resembles the existential plight of many schizophrenics for whom, as they become less and less involved with the external world and turn inwards, “external reality loses not its substantiality and otherness but its human resonance or significance [. . .]” (Sass, MM 33).

Mrs. Thing’s comment on her husband’s visits to the hospital is indicative of how Isobel, because she loses contact with the outer world, comes to lack a sense of connection to the people with whom she ordinarily would have a close relationship:

To him I am a creature from another planet and sometimes he talks too loudly at me [. . .]. And yet, his loud words come to me from far away as though I am already dead and buried [. . .]. And he shows me the drawings they have made me, which I stare at with the polite disinterest one shows to the accomplishments of other people’s children.

(43)
A schizophrenic Laing quotes in *The Divided Self* has a similar experience: “I felt as though I was in a bottle. I could feel that everything was outside and couldn’t touch me” (182). This defense mechanism shows a clear resemblance to what Isobel experiences in that she has dissociated herself from the outer reality and is unable to connect with it even when she tries to do so, as the quote above shows. Her dissociation not only protects her from the emotions she fears she would not be able to deal with, but unfortunately also from being close to her family. When Isobel, through dissociation, does not let herself respond to her reality, she can no longer feel the realness of reality. This does not mean she has no feelings; instead of being responsive to her involvement with the world and the people close to her, her feelings take on an objectless existential aspect. Instead of feeling guilty about something specific, Isobel has an existential guilt without an object about which to feel guilty.

Laing suggests that the distancing from the other, and from the world, serves as a protection against depersonalization. I would argue that this type of depersonalization has already taken place within Isobel:

It is not true to say, however, without careful qualification that he is losing ‘contact with’ reality, and withdrawing into himself. External events no longer affect him in the same way as they do others: it is not that they affect him less; on the contrary, frequently they affect him more. It is frequently not the case that he is becoming ‘indifferent’ and ‘withdrawn’. It may, however, be that the world of his experience comes to be one he can no longer share with other people. (Laing 44-5)
Isobel regards herself as an object, in fact as two objects – Mrs. Blood and Mrs. Thing – but because she does not want the people in her surrounding to feel the same way about her, instead like a schizophrenic individual “[s]he requires constant confirmation from others of [her] own existence as a person” (Laing 49). “To him I am a creature” she says, which is the complete opposite of being an object. However, by adding that she is “from another planet” she reminds the reader that no matter how powerful she might be in her own world, she is nothing but an outsider in this world – a foreigner to whom one needs to speak loudly for her to understand.

A person in this alienated state of mind, writes Laing, “is threatened with the possibility of becoming no more than a thing in the world of the other, without any life for oneself, without any being for oneself” (49). By distancing herself from the influence of her husband, Isobel enters a vicious circle in which her very attempt to keep her autonomy jeopardizes her subjectivity and objectifies her. As mentioned earlier, Isobel experiences a sense of a loss of self when Jason leaves for work. When, in the act of self-preservation, Isobel distances herself from everything emotionally, including Jason, she is also losing the only connection that could keep her grounded.

“Madness,” argues Shoshana Felman,” is the impasse confronting those whom cultural conditioning has deprived of the very means of protest or self-affirmation [. . .] a manifestation both of cultural impotence and political castration” (“Women and Madness: The Critical Phallacy” 8). Echoing this view, Chesler suggests that women’s madness is “an intense experience of female biological, sexual and cultural castration” (27). Madness, regardless of whether its origin is a medical dis-order or cultural dis-ease, is thus one form of being in the world similar to that of the culturally or socially deviant.
But as Mrs. Thing points out “poverty and disease are ‘acceptable’ in a way madness is not” (93).

I look beyond the apparent pathological splitting of the narrator and suggest that this splitting is a result of an irreconcilability between on one hand the social and cultural norms that have shaped the view of women and their body, and on the other hand the delusion of an autonomous self. “[W]omen’s education and upbringing” writes Verduyn, “aim at preparing them for the roles and places they are to assume within the framework of society in general and the family in particular” (AR 451). Laing’s description of the ontological insecurity one of his female patients experiences would easily be applicable to many women who feel defined by the role of mother and wife: “she could not be herself, by herself, and so could not really be herself at all” (61). Women are first and foremost wives, mothers, daughters, sisters, and caregivers; these are all roles that are incompatible with an autonomous self, but that have become embedded in women’s sense of self. ‘That’s still what our culture tells you to be’ ” (Wachtel 5). Women’s popular escape in this culture is what Mrs. Thing calls “a clean well-lighted mythology:” the idealistic image which magazines for women try to impose on their readers. In this manner, it fills the same role as “the clean well-lit place” in Ernest Hemingway’s story with the same name. In the story, a lonely old man uses the bar as a place to get away from his miserable life. A week earlier he tried to kill himself. Instead of liberating women, these magazines re-inscribe patriarchal expectations about women:

Life as it should be lived. Flowers on the dining table, angostura bitters in the Irish stew (“Sweet tricks with Bitters”), clever things to make your friends for Christmas – “It’s never too early to begin.” Escape literature.
Or is it really? Is it not sadism of a particularly nasty kind? Can you live up to this woman or that dress or this complicated recipe? And of course you can't. (67)

The narrative makes reference to Hemingway's story at another crucial point in the story which I have touched on on page 7. This time the comment is in reference to the colonial situation in which Isobel finds herself. She is commenting on her servant, Joseph, and on his experience as a colonized individual. It is a romanticized or ironic version which makes him look or pokes fun at his looking like the "noble savage": [...] the steady thud-thud is like the beat of the great heart of Africa which produced our Joseph [...] who has come in from the heart of darkness [a reference to Joseph Conrad's novel] and is frying onions in a clean well-lighted place" (189 italics added).

Mrs. Thing uses references to Conrad and Hemingway who focused on the construction of gender as masculinity in their work. They often represented men who did not show their feelings. In alluding to their work, Thomas is signaling the constructedness of gender in literature as well as the contrast between men's and women's internal struggles.

In an interview in *Books in Canada*, Thomas says that she thinks "women are neurotic, overcome by guilt if they want to be anything more than shadows." The novel reveals how the construction of gender in patriarchal society imposes a reality on women, which interferes with their view of themselves as individuals, provoking the ontological anxiety that has caused Isobel to split. Thus, it is not her dreams, as Diotte suggests, that mar her relationship with her family but the norms of society with which she has been force-fed since an early age. These norms are part of her make-up. Resistance to these
norms will cause Isobel, who lacks a strong sense of self, to split because they are a part of her.

The title of the novel, *Mrs. Blood*, along with the names of the two narrative voices, Mrs. Thing and Mrs. Blood, are examples of how a woman’s identity is altered as she marries and enters the role of the wife. When she marries, she loses the name by which she has come to be identified as an individual. Like many other women, Isobel is, throughout her life, defined by the roles she plays in the life of others: as the girlfriend who is told to have an abortion, as the wife who accompanies her husband to Africa and as the mother of her children, both born and unborn. As I have shown, we can see how these relationships define her sense of self, especially her relationship with Jason.

According to Anthony Giddens the schizoid “individual only feels psychologically secure in his self-identity in so far as others recognize his behavior as appropriate or reasonable” (191). In *The Divided Self* Laing describes the implications which an overpowering parental influence or a near non-existing parental involvement may have on an individual and how later in life they may develop into schizophrenia. Without engaging in a discussion of the role of parents, if any, in the development of the disease, it is according to Laing clear that many schizophrenics have as children not been able to gain the autonomy necessary in order to achieve a sense of their own individuality as separate from the people around them. This continues later in life when the schizophrenics fail to define their selfhood other than through others. This inability “to be by oneself” (Laing 55) is not alleviated when the schizophrenic individual finds another person through whom he or she can have a sense of his or her own existence. Paradoxically, the weak self becomes threatened by the other and a new fear arises within
the schizophrenic – the fear of losing the little sense of self he or she has in the relationship with the other. One solution is then to split into one self that deals with the outside world and one that retreats and tends to the inner reality of the schizophrenic.

Lorraine McMullen suggests that women writers use the double in their female characterizations to disclose the ambivalence often felt by women, showing their “conflicting attitudes to [their] society and [their] role in it” (54). In *Mrs. Blood*, the narrator’s unstable self inevitably challenges cultural and social authorities’ claim that each individual embodies a fixed and distinct self by which to be defined. The inability to conform to society’s norms becomes unwittingly subversive as it suggests the possibility of alternative modes of being-in-the-world. Nevertheless, it also causes the ontological insecurity, which is common to post traditional, (post) modern experience and schizophrenia as discussed by Anthony Giddens, Brian McHale, R. D. Laing, and Louis A. Sass. “To answer even the simplest everyday query,” writes Giddens, “[. . .] demands the bracketing of a potentially almost infinite range of possibilities open to the individual. What makes a given response ‘appropriate’ or ‘acceptable’ necessitates a shared—but unproven and unprovable—framework of reality” (36). This reality may falter with devastating results. The world as we know it may cease to exist as other possible world views come into focus, or the world may seem as a subjective invention of the mind, and thus without grounding outside the mind.

By giving into an extreme form of self-reflection that, in Isobel’s case, is intensified by the insuperable situation in which she finds herself, there is an increased sense of distance between the real world and the private world of the narrator. This makes her feel even more alienated than before, and more likely to feel a rupture between
the private and the public self. "Disembodiment is," Giddens argues, "an attempt to transcend danger and be safe" (59), but also a more permanent answer to the equivocal expectations of society on women. Each person is expected to have an immutable self that governs the individual, but women are supposed to take on roles only in relation to others. I have shown how this works in Isobel's relationship with Jason. Because of the roles she has taken on in relation to him and the children, she is constantly confronted with something similar to the schizophrenic individual's dilemma: not being able to "sustain a sense of one's own being without the presence of other people" and yet feeling one's own subjectivity obliterated in the presence of others (Laing 55).

Mrs. Thing's passivity is one means that serves to relieve her ontological insecurity. She watches the world go by from her bed, but is rarely responding emotionally to what is happening around her. "[T]he essential feature of a thing as opposed to a person is that a thing has no subjectivity of its own, and hence can have no reciprocal intentions" (Laing 79). Sass describes the effect this passivization has on the ego: "[...] either it becomes an impotent observer of thinglike yet inner experiences—of sensations, images, and the like (derealization)—or else it is transformed into a machinelike entity placed in a world of static and neutral objects (unworlding)" (MM 33). The first example corresponds to Mrs. Blood who, lost in her memories, is not able to interact with the real world. The second example corresponds to Mrs. Thing—who, as her name implies, is an object dissociated from emotions. These two methods of coping with ontological insecurity are representative of the ways in which Mrs. Blood and Mrs. Thing interact with their reality. They reflect Joan Coldwell's description of the two narrators as: "Mrs. Thing, the "acted-upon," fearful, self-conscious wife of a
university teacher, and Mrs. Blood, a guilt-ridden bundle of memories and poetic visions, wracked by physical and psychic forces beyond her control” (47). However, I would argue that Mrs. Blood is “wracked” not only at the end of the narrative, but also before this point as her narrative serves to protect and relieve Mrs. Thing from stress.

By examining Isobel’s being in the world we can begin to understand the schizophreniform\(^8\) aspect of the novel. She may, for instance, experience the same “sense of detachment” as Sass suggests schizoids do, “giving them the feeling that [...] their feelings or actions are somehow unjustified, disruptive, or vaguely incorrect”. (MM 78). That Isobel is in a foreign land and in a different culture from her own aggravates her feelings of detachment. She is acutely aware of the way other women in the hospital or in the community “gaze at” her:

And I feel (most probably wrongly) that it is not quite “comme il faut” to have such pretty children. [...] Everything they say conspires to make me feel that I am not one of them (“She’s not really one of us, you know”) and that they find me puzzling and a bit decadent lying here and bleeding the afternoon away. [...] By the time they leave, I feel both angry and somehow humiliated. \(^{(28)}\)

The novel, set in Africa, “the heart of darkness” of Conrad’s male colonial narrative, in Thomas’s novel the dark womb within woman becomes “a metaphor for the unconscious” (Wachtel 5). It points to the impossibility of exposing the interior of women’s experience using a patriarchal narrative structure in much the same way it is impossible to elucidate the schizophrenic experience through ordinary language. This

\(^8\) “Having the form of or resembling schizophrenia.” (The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, 3rd ed. 1992.)
metaphor also points to Isobel’s difficulty in knowing the African culture with the tools
given her by western society. In African society, Isobel becomes an “other” among
strangers. In the hospital she is shut out by their conversations in the vernacular which
she does not understand. Diotte believes the African women around her see her as an
object (62). There are many signs of her differences and the way in which she is treated
differently. For example, she has to eat special “European-bland” food, although it is not
what she wants. The black nurses treat her differently from the way they treat the other
African women and constantly refer to her light skin. Mrs. Thing feels increasingly like
an object in the eyes of the others in the hospital. Although this objectification is due to
her skin colour, it also puts her on equal terms with the English women despite the fact
that she is Canadian. The English women, contrary to Isobel, feel it is natural for them to
be treated differently in the colonial tradition. Isobel does not want special treatment that
emphasizes her “otherness.” She feels insecure about the cultural and social rules she has
to follow as a white woman in the African hospital, and does not wish to be treated as a
“guest” (46). But Isobel is also doing everything she can to avoid thinking of herself as
an object in the world of the people around her. By being different she is drawing
attention to herself and exposes herself to the judgment of others. It is this fear of
becoming an object in the eyes of the “other” that causes her to split and become nobody
– Mrs Thing – in the real world. By creating an alternative self – Mrs. Blood – Isobel
can protect her inner self by dissociating from her outer-objectified self. She is then able
to “be herself,” not in the exterior world but in her own interior world.

In Hubert Aquin’s Prochain épisode, the narrator, a Québécois revolutionary,
faces a similar dilemma. While he is not the object of anyone’s direct gaze, his being in
the world is being put into question by the authorities that encarcerated him and by he himself as a disappointed revolutionary. By becoming somebody in his own fantasy he is able to conteract the feeling of being a nobody in the real world.
Schizophrenia and Revolutionary Impotence:

Hubert Aquin's *Prochain épisode*

*Je ne sais pas ce qui se passe en moi. Soudain j’ai des sueurs. Il me prend une envie folle d’éclater, de hurler aux loups et de donner des coups de pieds sur les murs lambrissés. Une angoisse intolérable s'empare de moi [...]*. *(Prochain épisode 129)*

This chapter explores the ways in which Aquin’s *Prochain épisode*, in its postmodern critique of Quebec’s colonization, mimics elements of schizophrenia. I will also explore how the structure of the novel, as described by Anthony Purdy in his book *A Certain Difficulty of Being*,

is characterized by what might be called a narrative schizophrenia, an explicit splitting of the narrative subject into the “I” of the narrator and the “I” of the hero and of the narrative impulse into discourse (the narrative situation) and story (the world of the spy novel). *(103)*

The similarities between the fragmentation that occurs in schizophrenia and that which is dramatized by Aquin as being an inherent part of Québécois identity are of particular interest to this study.

I examine the parallels between the narrator’s and the schizoid individual’s *being in the world* – a term used by Laing to point out the particularity of the existential phenomenological approach. Laing’s approach to schizophrenia is “to characterize the
nature of a person’s experience of his world and of himself [...]. to set all particular experiences within the context of his whole being in the world" (15). Rather than merely pathologizing the condition, Laing aims at understanding the social logic of schizophrenia as a response within a given social context. I wish to show that Aquin’s narrator reflects the schizoid individual’s ontological inquietude when the validity of his being in the world is put into question by himself as well as by the authorities that have incarcerated him. Although the two sides of the novel, the detective novel and the postmodern novel, obviously lack “narrative structure,” I will refer to them as narratives and show how their use of allegory, generic convention, intertextuality, and fragmentation creates two narratives in one, resulting in what Purdy calls narrative schizophrenia (103).

The narrator of Hubert Aquin’s novel Prochain épisode is a Québécois revolutionary who finds it difficult to endure his forced incarceration in a psychiatric clinic in Montréal. He has been arrested on weapons charges. The narrator feels he is not taken seriously because he is being detained in a psychiatric hospital rather than in a prison: “Ce n’est pas seulement la solitude que je combats ici, mais cet emprisonnement clinique qui conteste ma validité révolutionnaire” (PE 13). Forced into a submission that threatens to render him impotent and to make him lose his sanity, the narrator channels his revolutionary efforts into his writing. To distract himself, and as an act of self preservation, he begins to write a spy novel about a Québécois revolutionary like himself on a mission to Switzerland to kill the counter-revolutionary H. de Heutz. In the spy novel, the novel within the novel, the nameless protagonist and narrator, who is different from the narrator of the novel, pursues H. de Heutz, a man whose identity is uncertain
and operates under several names. It is, however, as H. de Heutz that he appears most frequently in the novel. When he appears under this name he is a historian, an important fact since one of the novel’s main themes is, as we shall see, the construction of History as it applies to Aquin’s perception of Québec’s historical situation.

When the protagonist finally catches up with his victim, it is instead the protagonist who finds himself looking down the barrel of H. de Heutz’s gun, becoming his prisoner. The protagonist manages, however, to overpower his opponent and is about to shoot when de Heutz plays a trick on him and escapes with the help of a girl with long blond hair. This girl looks very similar to the narrator’s lover and accomplice K. It is also K. who gives the protagonist information about H. de Heutz and sends him off on his mission. By the end of the novel, the protagonist, having failed in his mission to kill de Heutz is forced back to Montréal, where he is arrested in a church by undercover police.

In her article “Appropriated Discourse: Plagiarism and Decolonization,” Marilyn Randall, using Aquin’s work as an example, discusses the paradoxical and complex relationship between originality and cultural production as political statement. Aquin’s text shows what Randall calls “an explicit and self-conscious commitment to a politico-cultural project” in which the artist or writer attempts to “liberate [his] nation from the devastating effects of a history of colonial domination” (532). In “La fatigue culturelle du Canada français” Aquin argues that French Canadian culture has been reduced to simple artistic expressions without any political message (84). It is, thus, this status quo that he wishes to upset through his writing. The narrator is constantly making remarks about the lack of originality of his spy novel. “How do you make new when everything has already been written?” is one of the questions the narrator asks himself
throughout the narrative. The answer lies in the postmodern narrative that uses master narratives and subverts them, thus using them against themselves. The narrative oscillates between the incarcerated Québécois revolutionary’s comments on the spy novel he is writing, on the writing process and the self-reflexive and allegorical narrative concerned with the “cultural fatigue” he discusses in his essay.

The spy novel is an attempt to alleviate the ontological anxiety that the narrator struggles with during his imposed isolation. Although writing may seem like a good coping activity, it is a perilous one. The affirmation of the fictional reality of the spy novel rather than outer reality, his incarceration in a psychiatric clinic, creates an impossible situation in which the narrator increasingly detaches himself from reality and slowly loses the ontological security on which he has been depending:

L’édifice fragile que j’avais patiemment érigé pour affronter des heures et des heures de reclusion craque de toutes ses poutrelles, se tord sur lui-même et m’engloutit dans sa pulvérisation. Il ne me reste plus rien au monde que la notation de ma chute élémentaire. (PE 67)

Laing demonstrates in *The Divided Self*, how the “self” as it loses it’s grounding in reality because eroded: “[. . .] the withdrawal from reality results in the ‘self’ s’ own impoverishment. [The self’s] omnipotence is based on impotence. Its freedom operates in a vacuum. Its activity is without life” (153). This process can be observed in the novel. Although Aquin’s narrator is omnipotent as the creator of his story, the story exists only in his fantasy; none of the action is real. The purpose of the story is to fill the void the narrator feels inside of him because of his abated sense of self as a failed Québécois revolutionary. The narrator makes it very clear that he is aware of this
paradox at the onset of the novel when he describes how he intends to make life difficult for his protagonist:

L’ennui me guette si je ne rends pas la vie strictement impossible à mon personnage. Pour peupler mon vide, je vais amonceler les cadavres sur sa route, multiplier les attentats à sa vie, l’affoler par des appels anonymes et des poignards plantés dans la porte de sa chambre; je tueraï tous ceux à qui il aura adressé la parole [ . . ].

(PE 7)

As the author he is all powerful and can make anything happen. This is in stark contrast to his inability to act as a revolutionary agent in the real world and makes the narrator feel empowered as long as he remains within the narrative, or at least, this is his conviction as he sets out to write his spy novel. In reality, he is unable to separate his internal struggle that stems from the fact that he has been incarcerated for his revolutionary activities, from his protagonist’s undertakings in the fictional story. When reality imposes itself, the radical contrast between it and the fantasy heightens the narrator’s feeling of emptiness. This becomes evident in his preoccupations with the lack of originality he perceives in his work: “Ce roman métissé n’est qu’une variante désordonnée d’autres livres écrits par des écrivains inconnus. Pris dans un lit de glaïe, je suis le cours et ne l’invente jamais” (87). He cannot be the agent; instead, like the schizophrenic who believes his actions are not his own, Aquin’s narrator feels acted upon: “Je n’écris pas, je suis écrit” (85-6). Believing there is no room for creation in the world, the narrator becomes an impotent observer not only of the world around him but of his own actions.
Sass points out that schizophrenics are often aware of the paradox between what their delusions suggest is true and what is real in the external world. Sass quotes one of Bleuler’s patients, declaring that “[he] is God in Heaven,” and in the following instance taking it back: “Don’t write that down; it is a damned lie that I am God” (Bleuler, qtd in Sass 274). Schizophrenics with delusions of grandeur are often aware that they have no power in the real world, that it is only in their fantasy they are Napoleon or Alexander the Great. Sass goes on to remark how these patients often show a significant “apathy or indifference” in regards to their delusions (275). I believe the narrator’s doubts about the worth of writing the spy novel and the accompanied depression is in part due to his knowledge that what power he has as the author of the spy novel does not exist in reality.

Regardless of how unfairly the narrator thinks he has been treated by the authorities that incarcerated him, or how empty and disconnected he feels from the world around him, further dissociation from reality can only make the situation worse. Acting only in his own fantasy, he exists primarily in his own mind.

Once again, I am not suggesting that Aquin’s narrator is clinically schizophrenic. Using schizophrenic experience as a framework for comparison I align myself with literary critic Frederic Jameson who prefers a descriptive rather than diagnostic account of the illness (A Postmodern Reader 323), the American psychologist Louis A. Sass who uses a phenomenological approach to schizophrenia and sees many similarities between modernism, postmodernism and schizophrenia, as well as Michael B. Scher who calls schizophrenia “a condition of culture” (7). In thinking about schizophrenia in relation to Aquin’s novel, I have also found the work of R.D. Laing useful in that his approach attempts to make the schizoid condition comprehensible. This helps in understanding the
many aspects of Aquin’s novel which mimic schizophrenic experience such as fragmentation, hyper-reflexivity, and the adversarial stance Aquin’s narrator is displaying by his revolutionary discourse. (Of course, not all adversarial or revolutionary stances mimic schizophrenia – since this would pathologize cultural opposition.) Although the narrator may feel omnipotent in fantasy, it also makes him feel increasingly powerless and confined in the real world. He needs the spy novel to feel a sense of agency, however writing inevitably results in his own dissolution. The novel plays on this paradoxical state. The spy novel, because of its rules and restrictions becomes a literary prison: “Je me suis enfermé dans un système constellaire qui m’emprisonne sur un plan strictement littéraire [. . .]” (18). The narrator therefore needs to escape the imaginary world he has invented for himself as it creates another source of ontological anxiety. But instead of giving up his story, Aquin’s narrator becomes increasingly self-reflexive to the point where he not only disconnects from reality, but also loses control over the spy novel as the mental state of his fictive “other” begins to reflect his own state of mind and he is unable to keep the two apart. This happens at a crucial point in the story when the protagonist, confronted with H. de Heutz, invents a story about himself in an attempt to escape de Heutz. His story causes him to identify with the man he pretends to be and to take on the state of mind of the fictional author: “À vouloir me faire passer pour un autre, je deviens cet autre; les deux enfants qu’il a abandonnés, ils sont à moi soudain et j’ai honte. [. . .] drapé dans ma dépression de circonstance, je meurs d’inaction et d’impuissance” (PE 58-9). Playing cat and mouse with H. de Heutz without being able to kill him becomes one more sign of the narrator’s failure as a revolutionary after the narrative has turned its focus to the fictive author and his inner turmoil. However, killing
H. de Heutz would cause a problem for the narrator. Without H. de Heutz the spy novel would come to an end and the narrator would again have to face the reality of his incarceration. The possibility of this happening, along with the fact that not killing de Heutz points to his impotence as a revolutionary agent, puts the narrator in a paradoxical state of mind once he has captured de Heutz:

Cet homme, H. de Heutz ou von Ryndt, je ne l’ai pas encore tué et cela me déprime. J’éprouve une grande lassitude : un vague désir de suicide me revient [. . .]. Depuis quelques instants, le spleen m’inonde. Des images fugaces circulent en tous sens comme des anophèles dans ma jungle mentale. J’ai mal. Des heures et des heures se sont ajoutées au temps que je mets à tuer H. de Heutz. Et la vie recluse marque d’un coefficient de désespoir les mots qu’imprime ma mémoire cassée. L’envoiement brumaire me vide cruellement de mon élan révolutionnaire. (PE 63-5)

In *Prochain épisode* we see not only the dissolution of agency and revolutionary impotence, but also a tortuous self-reflexion or inaction.

Schizoid individuals tend to adapt a self-reflexive stance to deal with ontological insecurity in a fashion similar to that of the author of the spy novel in *Prochain épisode*. However, the schizoid individual’s self-reflexive mode of *being in the world*, which is one of the main features of schizophrenic thinking, suggests that what at first seems to be therapeutic is in fact counterproductive as it constitutes a maladaptive, ruminating response to ontological insecurity.
The narrator of *Prochain épisode* finds it difficult to continue his story; in fact, he realizes that he will not and cannot finish it. At the end of the story the narrator projects his fantasy of a revolution, but it is just wishful thinking on his part that does not materialize other than in an imagined future beyond the fictive story:

Mon récit est interrompu, parce que je ne connais pas le premier mot du prochain épisode. Mais tout se résoudra en beauté. J'ai confiance aveuglément, même si je ne connais rien du chapitre suivant, mais rien, sinon qu'il m'attend et qu'il m'emportera dans un tourbillon. (PE 165)

Jean-Pierre Boucher suggests in his article “Faire la bombe...ou la lancer? *Prochain épisode* de Hubert Aquin,” that Aquin's narrator realizes he is not a true revolutionary, “s'il parle tant de révolution c'est qu'il est incapable de la faire” (166).

The narrator tries to do in fiction what he cannot do in real life, but as we have seen he is not able, by the end of the novel, to accomplish what he set out to do. It is not difficult to understand the narrator's existential dilemma: he is aware that the story he is writing will not empower him other than in fiction. His narrative is also constantly undermined by his own state of mind as the narrative of the spy novel increasingly gives way to his self-reflexive anti-story. The protagonist's failure to kill H. de Heutz becomes a sign that the protagonist of the spy novel is the embodiment of the author:

Des heures et des heures se sont ajoutées au temps que je mets à tuer H. de Heutz.[... ] Mon passé s'éventre sous la pression hypocrite du verbe. J'agonise, drogué dans un lac à double fond, tandis que, par des hublots

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9 *Prochain épisode* exemplifies the dilemma of the modern novel in depicting action. A classic case would be Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* in which all action happens outside the narrative. All the reader gets is the narrator's account of what happened. Joseph Conrad's *A Secret Agent* is a more modern example that also shares the spy novel with Aquin. In the *Secret Agent* the main action – the bomb explosion – at the center of the novel, is absent from the narrative line and only appears in the narrative after the fact.
translucides, je n'aperçois qu'une masse protozoaire et gélatineuse qui m'épuise et me ressemble. (PE 64-5)

This type of self-reflexion is likely to cause an increased sense of distance between the real world and the private world of the individual, thus making him feel more alienated than before, and more likely to feel a rupture between the private and the public self. This situation is also illustrated in the text by the narrator's descent into Lac Leman: “Descendre mot à mot dans ma fosse à souvenirs [. . .] inventer d'autres compagnons qui déjà me préoccupent, m'entraînent dans un nœud de fausses pistes et finiront par m'exiler [. . .]” (PE 20), and shows the narrator's awareness of what happens when an individual becomes hyper-reflexive and disconnected. He is aware that his escape into fiction can but alienate him from reality, but knows there is no other solution available to him other then suicide as the many references to suicide throughout the novel suggest.

Individuals with schizophrenia often make use of a strategy similar to the one Aquin’s narrator is using to deal with his agonizing situation. In dealing with stressful situations in their lives, schizophrenic individuals are also prone to self-reflexive rumination with devastating result. According to Louis A. Sass:

To experience the world as an emanation from one’s mind, a private or purely mental object, is to forfeit the anchoring stability, and the source of vitality, that are inherent in consensual experience, practical activity, and the lived body. Whatever strategy one adopts, any sense of security and omnipotence must necessarily remain vulnerable to the possibility of a total reversal or collapse. (MM 303)
In Aquin’s novel this sense of disengagement causes the narrator to question the validity of revolutionary action:

La dépression me déminéralise insidieusement. Mer de glace je deviens lave engloutissante, miroir à suicide. Trente deniers, et je me suicide! En fait, je réduirais encore le prix pour me couper avec un morceau de vitre: et j’en aurais fini avec la dépression révolutionnaire! Oui, finies la maladie honteuse du conspirateur, la fracture mentale, la chute perpétrée dans les cellules de la Sûreté. (PE 30)

This vulnerability is felt throughout *Prochain épisode* as it becomes increasingly difficult for the narrator to keep a sense of reality outside his narrative, be it the spy novel or his self-reflexive narrative, which has little to do with his outer reality. The spy novel is always on the verge of collapsing into the self-reflexive narrative, which in the spy novel is represented by the Lake Léman.

The spy novel is according to Henri Tuchmeier the best way to describe reality as it is perceived by those who are opposed to a colonizing power. In his article “Hubert Aquin, *Prochain Épisode*: Oppression et Création” Tuchmeier explains Aquin’s choice of the spy novel in a Québécois context:

Pourquoi, peut-on se demander, vouloir écrire un roman d’espionnage? Rien de plus logique. Si l’air du temps est aux conspirations et aux polices secrètes, le roman d’espionnage est le véhicule idéal des récits qui décrivent les préparatifs de l’épopée libératrice. (326)

This seems very logical but quite simplistic as it does not explain why Aquin makes a parody of the spy novel in *Prochain épisode*. As Purdy points out, Aquin uses all the
traditional elements of the spy novel such as coded messages, car chases and love tringles by subverting them. "Parody," argues Brian McHale, "is a form of self-reflection and self-critique, a genre's way of thinking critically about itself" (142). But also through the use of irony, Aquin is able to critique the genre from within. Irony, argues Linda Hutcheon, has always been a critical mode, and "disrupt[s] our notions of meaning as something single, decidable, or stable" (13). In an article discussing the carnevalesque in Québec Literature, Maroussia Hajdukowski-Ahmed suggests that Aquin, using the detective novel, "deconstructs in a carnevalesque masquerade of narrative structure and characters" (150). It is the reader that, according to Hajdukowski-Ahmed, becomes the detective trying to figure out who is who in the novel (150). This ironic take on the genre is especially important. Irony, argues Linda Hutcheon, has always been a critical mode, and "disrupt[s] our notions of meaning as something single, decidable, or stable" (SI 13). Through irony Aquin is able to shine light not only on the constructedness of reality (and denaturalize our idea of reality as something unchangeable that is "out there," that does not change and that can be known), but also on the constructedness of the story itself as a way of relating reality.

The narrator says he first decided on the spy novel because he wanted to make something original in a genre that traditionally is governed by many rules and conventions. Because of a certain laziness on his part, he says, he gives up on this idea and decides that he will write according to the rules of the genre; he finds this reassuring. This feeling of reassurance is in response to what otherwise would be a source of anxiety for the narrator. The conventions of the genre serve to alleviate this tension and act as protection against an unknown reality. After all, this is what detective novels are all
about, searching for answers to mysteries. But instead of finding answers, the narrator finds existentialist questions about the act of writing: “Je reste ici figé, bien planté dans mon alphabet qui m’enchaîne; et je me pose des questions. Écrire un roman d’espionnage come on en lit, ce n’est pas loyal : c’est d’ailleurs impossible” (PE 7).

According to Anthony Purdy, Aquin chose the spy novel, with its rules and conventions and where no improvisation is allowed, because it was well suited to express Aquin’s and the French Canadian’s “dialectic fatigue” (CDB 92). This fatigue is similar to the “paresse” that makes him give up his first idea, that of making the novel original, going against the conventions of the genre. This “dialectic fatigue” is in reference to Aquin’s well known essay “La fatigue culturelle du Canada français.” Purdy describes Prochain épisode as “a lucid analysis of fatigue culturelle and its historical determinants” (WQ xx). Aquin’s novel is, in fact, an allegorical representation of what Aquin believes to be the state of a colonalized Québec. In Aquin’s allegory Prochain épisode’s narrator represents the Québécois people:

Chef national d’un peuple inédit! Je suis le symbole fracturé de la révolution du Québec, mais aussi son reflet désordonné et son incarnation suicidaire [. . .] En moi [. . .] toute une nation s’aplatis historiquement et raconte son enfance perdue, par bouffées de mots bégyés et de délires scripturaires [. . .]” (PE 21)

The narrator’s impotence corresponds to the “fatigue culturelle” of the people of Québec, and results, according to Aquin, from their colonized situation. His inability to write corresponds to what he believes to be the Québécois people’s inability to create a history for themselves.
The same splitting that occurs on many different levels in the text (for example, on the level of inner and outer reality, fiction and autobiography, history as fiction and History as master narrative) holds true for the analysis of nation, which is another important theme in the novel. Claude Lefort argues that "the task of the implicit generalization of knowledge and the implicit homogenization of experience," which any definition of nation is likely to contain, "could fall apart in the face of the unbearable ordeal of the collapse of certainty, of the vacillation of representation of discourse and as a result of the splitting of the subject" (qtd in Bhabha 298).

As fiction and reality are confounded in the novel so is the image of the lake in the spy novel with the idea of another reality hidden behind the reflective surface. Aquin uses these two images whenever the narrator meets with a problem he is unable to solve and decends into a state of depression in which he experiences his own cultural fatigue and impotence: "Coincé dans ma sphère close, je descend, comprimé, au fond du lac Léman [...]" (18). At this particular moment he is unable to decipher the message left on the wall of the hotel room. It is, however from this place that he is able to return to the spy novel with new energy.

In a comparative essay of other Canadian and Québécois novelists, Barbara Godard discusses the use of mirrors in the construction of self, which seems very similar to the way Aquin uses the image of the mirror image in Prochain épisode: "mirrors become symbols of the fragmented self, stealing one's sense of real or complete self, robbing one of an identity" (20). In Modernity and Self-Identity, Giddens discusses the mirror image in relation to schizophrenia:
Mirror image and self can effectively become reversed in more pronounced and semi-permanent schizoid personalities. The experience of agency is withdrawn from the body and attached to a fantasy world of narrative biography, separated from the intersecting of the imaginary and the reality principle upon which ordinary social activity depends. Self-identity is no longer integrated with the day-to-day routines in which the person is involved.

The dissolution of the self, and of the agent of change – the cloistered revolutionary, results in an undermined, fragmented self – a self impossible to contain. Like "lave engloutissante, miroir à suicide" the dissolved self conforms to the surface it covers and once it cools down becomes petrified, shaped by its surroundings. This image of self suggests the struggle of the revolutionary against a society that not only imprisons him for his beliefs but also, as in Aquin's case, confines him to a psychiatric institution that puts his ability to reason into question: "La psychiatrie est la science du déséquilibre individuel encadré dans une société impeccable. Elle valorise le conformiste, celui qui s'intègre et non celui qui refuse […]" (PE 13).

Aquin's paradoxical and split image of the self as a "mer de glace" and "lave engloutissante" seems very similar to the "lack of affect" and the "affective excess" that are such prominent features in schizophrenia. Sass's description of schizophrenia may be used to illuminate the paradox of the split self by explaining how these seemingly opposing descriptions are related and are reflected in the construction of the self in the text. With the narrative failure of the spy novel, the narrator is forced to look at himself, in a self-reflexive stance reminiscent of the Lacanian "stade du miroir," – the first step in
the formation of identity, in which the child recognizes its image in the mirror as distinct from that of the mother (Lacan 2). The author of the spy novel is forced to identify with the disarmed prisoner he has become.

The dissociation from reality and from nation also disrupts the narrator’s own sense of identity. If fictional reality can be tampered with so easily through the imagination, what then keeps the narrator’s identity from becoming as vulnerable? The narrative makes the construction of self as well as the construction of both time and space evident as they start to break apart:

J’ai peur de me réveiller dégénéré, complètement désidentifié, anéanti. Un autre que moi, les yeux hagards et le cerveau purgé de toute antériorité, franchira la grille le jour de ma libération [. . .] Tout fuit ici sauf moi. Les mots coulent, le temps, le paysage alpestre et les villages vaudois, mais moi je frémis dans mon immanence et j’exécute une danse de possession à l’intérieur d’un cercle prédit. (Aquín, PE 43-4)

When the construction of reality breaks apart for the protagonist so does the construction of the self, which has used this reality as its foundation. The ontological insecurity which arises from this breakdown is also present in schizophrenia. In this state, the individual regards life as a threat and living is reduced to survival (Laing 44). In Prochain épisode the narrator’s sense of self is threatened by his forced incarceration in a psychiatric clinic. Here not only the truth of revolutionary agency, but its very possibility is called into question.

His mental health is put into question by the irrefutable authority of the psychiatric staff. Unable to escape and to defend himself against this authority that has
the power to pass judgment on the validity of his being in the world, the narrator loses his sense of control: “Dérouté, je descends en moi-même mais je suis incapable de m’orienter, Orient. Emprisonné dans un sous-marin clinique, je m’engloutis sans heurt dans l’incertitude mortuaire” (PE 8). In an attempt to regain some sense of security, he becomes increasingly self-reflexive. Modernist and postmodernist narratives frequently acknowledge the danger of exaggerated self-reflexion – Aquin’s narrator constantly refers to his mind as a dark lake, “mouvance liquide qui tient lieu de subconscient,” in which he is slowly drowning. According to Henri Tuchmaïer the drowning metaphor symbolizes “l’exploration angoissée de l’enfer québécois” and is not simply a psychoanalytical exploration of the psyche (325).

Many critics express the belief that Aquin has his narrator write the spy novel as a cathartic occupation while he is incarcerated, and believe that the failure of the novel mirrors the failure of all revolutionary action and the failure of the novel to be a revolutionary act. Anthony Purdy argues that the narrator’s description of himself and the process of writing the spy novel shows that Aquin is questioning “the therapeutic and compensatory value of story-telling” which Aquin “measure[s] against the depth of cultural and psychological fatigue” that the narrator is experiencing (CDB 92):

Je reste ici figé, bien planté dans mon alphabet qui m’enchaîne; et je me pose des questions. Écrire un roman d’espionnage comme on en lit, ce n’est pas loyal : c’est d’ailleurs impossible. Écrire une histoire n’est rien, si cela ne devient pas la ponctuation quotidienne et détaillée de mon immobilité interminable et de ma chute ralentie dans cette fosse liquide.

(Aquin, qtd. in Purdy: CDB 92-3)
Aquín makes use of the characteristics of self-reflexive language to point to the constructedness of reality and to put into question the conventional views of reality as the only true and reasonable mode of experience. When the narrative cannot use a preconceived reality as a point of reference, the narrative breaks apart.

As the narrator in *Prochain épisode* lives through his narrative, his perception of both time and space changes. The protagonist sheds a disempowered, divided and fluid self in the world of the text to take on the position of the postmodern subject through textuality. Surrounded by the Swiss Alps he creates a narrative in which time is disrupted and the character's identities are uncertain, and where he can travel in time and space between his narrative and his memories from the past, between Montreal and Switzerland. The two narratives undermine the idea of one “true” reality. Instead, there is the subjective reality—the narrator’s inner reality—and the spy novel. This break with reality bears a striking resemblance to this schizophrenic’s words:

I look for immobility [...] The Earth, on the contrary, moves; doesn’t inspire any confidence in me. I attach importance only to solidity. A train passes by an embankment; the train does not exist for me; I wish only to construct the embankment. The past is the precipice. The future is the mountain. Thus I conceived of the idea of putting a buffer day between the past and the future [...] I will try to revive my impressions of fifteen years ago, to make time flow backward, to die with the same impression with which I was born, to make circular movements so as to not move too far away from the base in order not to be uprooted.

(Patient qtd in Minkowski, qtd in Sass : 160)
Aquín's narrator tries to escape the reality of his imprisonment by writing but he escapes into a state of alienation and fragmentation as he becomes the postmodern subject. Like the schizophrenic who withdraws into his own personal universe, the narrator creates a buffer zone between the past and the future. It is a mythical past and an equally indefinable future that is portrayed in the novel. This mythical past is not told in relation to its point in time but instead in relation to the woman K and her presence. The same thing that engenders the schizophrenic's inner dissolution and makes it impossible for him or her to feel part of the real world is what at first seems to help the narrator cope with his encarceration. An individual cannot, however, exist in this vacuum, in the no-man's land of fantasy, and not experience the erosion of the self that Aquín's narrator refers to throughout the text. The narrator shows all the symptoms Aquín mentions in his essay on the French-Canadian's "fatigue culturelle," which he argues are caused by "[...]la prise de conscience de cette situation minoritaire: l'autopunition, le masochisme, l'autodévaluation, la 'dépression', le manque d'enthousiasme et de vigueur [...] (BE 88). These kind of feelings are very common to the schizoid individual whose lack of a sense of self causes him or her to feel a profound ontological emptiness.

Aquín's description of French Canadians as colonized suggests that many of them not only have a poor sense of who they are, but also have a sense that they are being defined by their relation to English-Canada. They may feel that they lack an identity of their own when their identity, or parts thereof, is perceived to have been constructed through the eyes of the other. But French-Canadians are not suffering from
schizophrenia, instead they are confronted with the same kind of schizophrenogenic\textsuperscript{10} reality that according to many critics (Ihab Hassan, Anthony Giddens, Frederick Jameson, Charles Jencks, Louis A. Sass, etc.) promotes the manifestation of schizophrenia–like symptoms in postmodern society.

In his essay “Joual: Heaven or Hell” Aquin points out that the Québécois have an “obsession de l’identité nationale” and that many of them “se croient menacés de désidentification si toutes les composantes de l’identité nationale ne sont pas rigoureusement québécoises” (BE 139). The ontological insecurity caused by the threat of being engulfed by Anglophone culture is, according to Aquin, experienced by many Québécois. It bears a striking resemblance to R.D. Laing’s description of the ontologically insecure individual:

\ldots any and every relationship threatens the individual with loss of identity. One form this takes can be called engulfment. In this the individual dreads relatedness as such, with anyone or anything, or indeed, even with himself, because his uncertainty about the stability of his autonomy lays him open to the dread lest in any relationship he will lose his autonomy and identity. \hfill (Laing 45-6)

In the case of a colonized people, this fear is very real and is a normal response to a perceived threat. In the novel, the author of the spy novel is desperately trying to prevent engulfment as the recurring theme of drowning manifests. Curiously, the narrator of the postmodern novel also uses the image of engulfment to describe revolutionary agency

\textsuperscript{10} “Tending to produce or develop schizophrenia” (The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 3rd Ed, 1992).
and nation. For example, when the narrator makes reference to the Cuban revolution he associates the repetitive descent into lac Léman not only with his own engulfment and the dissolution of the self but also with the revolutionary act:

Encaissé dans ma barque funéraire et dans mon répertoire d’images, je n’ai plus qu’à continuer ma noyade écrite. Descendre est mon avenir, plonger mon gestuaire unique et ma profession. Je me noie. […] je n’ai qu’une chose à faire : ouvrir mes yeux, voir follement ce monde déversé, poursuivre jusqu’au bout celui que je cherche, et le tuer.

And his connection with the woman he loves, and the femme-patrie:

Pour la première fois, nous avons entremêlé nos deux vies dans la fleuve d’inspiration qui coule encore en moi cet après-midi, entre les plages éclatées du lac Léman. […] Emprisonné dans un sous-marin clinique, je m’engloutis sans heurt dans l’incertitude mortuaire. Il n’y a plus rien de certain que ton nom secret, rien d’autre que ta bouche chaude et humide […] (PE 8)

The antagonist H de Heutz is among other things a symbol for the English Canadian establishment. However, he also bears an odd resemblance to the narrator, thus suggesting that the difference between the English Canadian antagonist and the Québécois protagonist is difficult to assert, not so much because they are alike but because the Québécois narrator is confused about his own identity as a Québécois surrounded by English Canadian culture.

At the beginning the revolutionary hero of the spy novel shows none of the symptoms of engulfment. However, as Purdy points out, the novel reflects Aquin’s
argument that the French Canadian author must "assume all the difficulties of one's identity fully and painfully. French Canada [. . .] feels 'a certain difficulty in being'" (41). As a French Canadian writer it is thus, according to Aquin, of utmost importance that the writer expresses his and his people's collective being in the world before anything else – even if that being is impossible or undermined:

Le salaire de ma névrose ethnique, c'est l'impact de la monocoque et des feuilles d'acier lancées contre une tonne inébranlable d'obstacle.

Désormais, je suis dispensé d'agir de façon cohérente et exampté, une fois pour toutes, de faire un succès de ma vie. (PE 22)

Homi Bhabha's essay "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of The Modern Nation" is helpful in order to understand the roles of the narrator-writer and the narrator-agent in Prochain épisode in terms of nation. The narrators represent what Bhabha calls "the subject of cultural discourse." This subject is, as we have seen in "the agency of the people" of Québec "is split in the discursive ambivalence that emerges in the contestation of narrative authority between the pedagogical [or as in Aquin—allegorical] and the performative" (304). However, in Aquin's novel the subjects are not clearly defined and consequently the splitting between the two narrators is ambiguous. Aquin demonstrates through his use of the double narrative, the self-reflexive commentary and the failed spy novel, how Québec as a nation has become disempowered through loss of identity.

This leaves Québec and the narrator "condemned either to a sterile and disempowering repetition of the discourse of the colonizer or to cultural devalorization"
(Randall 533). Part of this cultural devalorization would be what Aquin calls "a kind of folklorization" of art, where the art of the colonized has no other value than aesthetic. "Art as an institution" argues, Peter Burger, "neutralizes the political content of the individual work" (qtd. in Randall 533). Aquin uses an "aesthetics of failure," used by the writers of the journal *Parti pris*, in order to negate the values of the colonial establishment. It serves, in Aquin’s novel, to resist the values of the dominant culture and to expose the "oppression of their situation" to the Québec people (Randall 534).

Opposition to authority or a tendency to view all positions as equal can be found in modernism, postmodernism, and schizophrenia. According to Patricia Smart, Aquin believed it to be the purpose of art to guide the reader and make the reader aware of all possible angles (Smart AD 20). Unlike the vacillation of schizophrenic perspectives, the postmodernist use of multiple perspectives, as in Aquin’s spy novel, resists and calls into question the validity of any authoritative perspective. *Prochain épisode* is for example "re-presenting the past” of Québec (Hutcheon PP 62). Instead of representing the past as History, it is a mythical past that is portrayed in the novel. This mythical past is not told in relation to time but instead in relation to woman K and her presence.

In total opposition to this view, and a good example of the paradoxical aspects of both schizophrenic modes of experience and modernist and postmodernist modes of expression, is the "hyperfocused introspection" that turns to the construction of experience itself and of which the self-reflexive narrative in *Prochain épisode* is a perfect example.

As Purdy suggests, we should not look at the novel as an autobiographical novel by Aquin, instead it is the narrator’s autobiographical novel, and by extension the
autobiographical and allegorical novel of French Canada. Aquin gives a voice to the culturally fatigued French Canada through the schizoid narrator, and to the "collective unconscious, the protean product of two centuries of repressed desire" (Purdy 1).

In *Postmodern Fiction*, Brian McHale describes the postmodern allegory as a parody of conventional allegories because in them "determinate meaning dissolves into indeterminacy, the two-level ontological hierarchy of metaphorical and literal begins to oscillate, to opalesce. [. . .] Again and again postmodernist allegorical worlds collapse into 'literal' texts" (141). This describes the allegory in Aquin's text. Rather than a failed spy novel the text is a pretext to write to and for the Québécois people as the narrator declares himself leader of his people, "Chef national d'un peuple inédit! Je suis le symbole fracturé de la révolution du Québec [. . .] par bouffées de mots bégayés et de délires scripturaires [. . .]" (PE 21). This quote, I would argue, also illustrates the language Aquin's personified version of Québec would have to use to tell its past; it is a fractured language lacking the structure necessary to sustain itself. It is also a reflection of the language and fragmented narrative used in the novel. The narrator comes back to the image of the Québec people and its fragmented past time and again.

The interrelated aspects of self, time, and space are very important to the self-reflexive narrative which deals not only with the individual's sense of self, but also with the nation's sense of identity. Winfried Siemerling does not think Aquin's novel can be read "independently of the historical situation of Québec" (Siemerling 63), thus, echoing Aquin's own words: "mon livre [. . .] n'est accessible à la compréhension qu'à condition de n'être pas détaché de la trame historique dans laquelle il s'insère tant bien que mal" (PE 90). In "La fatigue culturelle du Canada français" Aquin makes reference to Lord
Durham who wrote that Canada had no history and no literature, and says he does not believe Québec has a history either (PE, 90). Although this may seem to contradict both Siemerling’s and Aquin’s arguments for the importance of history to Québec, it gives a clue to why Aquin’s narrator is portrayed as having an ambiguous sense of self, detached from its place and time:

Je perds la notion du temps amoureux et la conscience même de ma fuite lente, car je n’ai pas de point de repère.[...] Rien ne se coagule devant ma vitrine : personnages et souvenirs se liquéfient dans l’inutile splendeur du lac alpestre où je cherche mes mots. (PE 9)

Aquin’s view of the history of Québec is a personal history. Aquin’s alienated narrator is devoid of a past with which to identify; his past consists of a series of memories—fragments, which instead of serving as a foundation on which to build, are lost in the narrator’s memory. As Marilyn Randall points out, this is maybe even more evident in another of Aquin’s novels, Trou de mémoire, in which “the identity of the colonized subject is complicated by the fatal loss of memory,” which gives rise to the “problematic self-identity, textual identity, and national identity” that are thematized in the novel (533). When Aquin writes that Québec has no history, he refers to the non-existence of a constructed history with which the Québécois people can identify. The history of Québec is similar to the history of most colonized countries, or totalitarian states, whose histories are synonymous with the history of the colonizing power.

According to Aquin, Québec’s history will come out of an inevitable revolution that will create a foundation on which to build a new Québec. The previously constructed history of Québec will be destroyed and reconstructed by the Québécois people who then will have a history with which to identify. About the novel Aquin writes: “Cet amas de feuilles est
un produit de l’histoire, fragment inachevé de ce que je suis moi-même et témoignage impur, par conséquent, de la révolution chancelante que je continue d’exprimer, à ma façon, par mon délire institutionnel” (PE 88).

I would argue that the postmodern experience best represents the Québécois experience of the ‘quiet revolution’ and that Aquin belongs to what Hutcheon describes as “histographic metafiction,” fiction that is intensely self-reflexively art, but is also grounded in historical, social and political realities” (CP 13). Postmodern narratives point to the constructedness of reality. Aquin’s narrative not only makes evident a constructed past, for example, in the story that the spy invents to escape H. de Heutz and that H. de Heutz makes his own, but also by suggesting that the view of history is constructed, he reveals history as a possible source of oppression. The protagonist is so troubled by the sincerity with which Heutz tells the story that even though he knows it is untrue it sounds believable to his ears. When H. de Heutz asks him to shoot him he hesitates:

L’histoire qu’il persiste à me raconter me pose une énigme. Pourquoi a-t-il choisi de me réciter exactement la même invraisemblance que je lui ai servie sans conviction ce matin même, alors qu’il me tenait en joue dans le grand salon du château d’Échandens? (PE 81)

The protagonist realizes that de Heutz must be retelling his story to make the protagonist waver, and question his mission to kill de Heutz. The only sensible thing to do is to shoot.

Through this allegory I would argue that Aquin suggests that there is, as the protagonist points out, no possible way for the protagonist and de Heutz to communicate
other than by shooting at each other. In the same fashion it is, according to Aquin, impossible for the Québécois people to accept the master narrative of history which is not an account of their history. Similar to the technical vocabulary of psychiatry, as described by R.D. Laing in *The Divided Self*, the words often used to describe Québec are part of a language that embodies the history of the colonizer and the dominant power, and can therefore not be used to tell the history of the decolonized Québec. The fragmented narrative is, however, due not only to the lack of a decolonized language, but also to the revolutionary act of writing which corresponds to the spy shooting H de Heutz in the novel.

Toward the end of the novel the narrator describes the kind of writing that will emerge with the arrival of the revolution and the “Prochain épisode:” “Les pages s’écriront d’elles-mêmes à la mitraillette : les mots siffleront au-dessus de nos têtes, les phrases se fracasseront dans l’air…” (PE 166-7).

Aquín’s novel is an anarchistic act, reminiscent of the “propagande par l’écrit” first used by the late 19th century anarchist movement in Europe, which coincidentally emerged in Switzerland among the members of the Jura Federation; almost all watchmakers. The Federation was without political aspirations but critical of State socialism and followed the Russian nihilist Bakounin’s teachings. Bakounin who was one of Aquin’s favorite writers\(^\text{11}\) is mentioned in the novel as a lost source of inspiration since the death of the anarchist “dans la prison de Berne” (PE 69). In *L’Agent double* (32) Patricia Smart points to a contradiction within the text. While it is clear that the narrator feels that writing is not a revolutionary act and that one has to be actively involved like the narrator of the spy novel, the three revolutionaries he mentions Mazzini,

\(^{11}\) Bakounin is mentioned as one of Aquin’s favorite authors on page 5 in *Trou de mémoire* (PE 197).
Tchernychevski and Bakounine are writers like him, proving that the written word also has a revolutionary force to be reckoned with.

In an article on schizophrenia and creativity, David Schuldberg draws the conclusion that revolutionary behavior and impulsivity often coexist with creativity in schizophrenia (11). While this behavior has yet to be explained, it is quiet clear why the same behavior often coexists with what François Lyotard describes as the postmodern condition, which may cause some individuals to become acutely aware of the discrepancies of social and cultural convention and actively oppose them. Aquin’s revolutionary narrator is not schizophrenic, but he has an ambiguous sense of identity, which is mirrored in the spy novel’s indistinct characters whose identities are often blurred. The protagonist is, in fact, the narrator’s projection of himself as a revolutionary agent.

Aquin’s narrator finds the situation he is in so distressing that it could cause him to go mad. He says that he writes to keep himself from thinking: “J’écris d’une écriture hautement automatique et pendant tout ce temps que je passe à m’épeler, j’évite la lucidité homicide “ (PE, 11). The text does not, however, try to explore his “impending” madness; instead, it uses the signs of madness to uncover the political and cultural conventions that cause his distress. In his study on madness in Québécois writing, Robert Viau sees a connection between madness, subjectivity, creativity and revolutionary resistance.

The narrator wants to identify with Balzac and his anti-hero Ferragus, but feels so inferior to Balzac that the comparison causes him more anxiety and distress: “Le tome IX des œuvres complètes de Balzac me décourage particulièrement [. . .] Cette phrase
inaugurale de l' *Histoire des Treize* me tue; ce début fulgurant me donne le goût d’en finir avec ma prose cumulative [...]” (PE 11).

In *Prochain épisode*, Aquin’s play on doubles challenges the idea that society is made up of clearly definable individuals. Not one of the characters in the novel is easily discernable. The narrator is both the self-reflexive individual that is incarcerated in a psychiatric clinic and the actor or actors of the story he is creating. In an article on Aquin and the political novel, Frederic Jameson suggests that:

This play on doubles is not narrative [...] but it is the desperate effort—in a radically nonnarrative situation: absence of other people and of the outside world—to fantasize narrative into being by an effort of will, to produce a whole concrete universe of the contingency of encounters with other people and the irreversibility of events and destines out of the impoverishment of the individual body in isolation. Such a body, such a literary walled monad, can easily project an alter ego over against itself [...] (218).

Interestingly enough Aquin describes the present stage of literature the same way. In his essay “Literature and Alienation” he argues that literature lacks “narrative structure” and that there is no longer any “chronological order or story” (qtd. in Purdy 83).

The narrator uses a narrative-within-the-narrative to explore and resist the establishment from a perspective outside the author’s and even outside the narrator’s reality, in a safe place where anything is possible in a way similar to that of the traditional spy novel. Yet Aquin challenges the genre of the spy novel from within by not following the conventions. Traditionally the text challenges and mediates a number of conflicting
view points in the spy novel, with the objective of resolution by the end. There is no resolution in Aquin, unless we call the failure of the secret agent a different kind of resolution and it is, thus, an anti-story in the postmodern tradition. As I have already mentioned this strategy comes from Aquin’s use of an “aesthetic of failure” (Randall 534). Aquin gives his readers the exact opposite of what they expect. The failure of the Québécois revolutionary to accomplish his mission is twofold. He is not the man of action the self-reflexive narrator imagined he was. Instead he is mirroring his paralytic creator, suggesting, in its most negative vein, that revolutionary activity is impossible for the Québécois revolutionaries because of their colonized state. The Québécois revolutionary cannot kill off H. de Heutz who represents not only the financial establishment (he is a banker) and History (de Heutz is a historian) but English Canada, without killing a part of himself. Patricia Smart argues that the revolutionary act in the novel has something of a parricide. Because French Canadians have not lived in a vacuum, Smart believes, they have inadvertently interiorized aspects of the Anglophone cultures present in Canada (36). Although, Aquin believes this has given them a poor sense of self, it is still part of their *being in the world* as French Canadians. The problem is similar to the lack of a sense of self in schizophrenic experience. R.D. Laing describes a similar occurrence in schizophrenia where as a last resort to escape engulfment the schizophrenic individual tries to murder his ‘self’ (158). When Aquin’s narrator “drowns” in his self-reflexive narrative he reaches the same kind of non-being in which the present reality of his every day life is canceled out. It also provokes his profound loss of agency which is maybe even greater than in *Mrs. Blood* where the dissolution of the self plays a more important role in the narrative.
Conclusion: Narrating Ontological Insecurity

Though on the surface these two novels seem to have very little in common, this inquiry into the parallels between their depictions of the dissolution of self and agency and the ontological anxiety of schizophrenia reveals many important similarities. The characters experience the same ontological insecurity because they are both confined and have, to a certain extent, chosen this confinement in their attempt to relieve the anxiety they are experiencing. By dissociating from the exterior reality, the protagonists have retreated into an inner world over which they at first have full control. However, as the dissociation from the exterior world starts to undermine each narrator’s own sense of self, they both lose control over their inner worlds. Aquin’s narrator cannot maintain the distance needed to separate his fictional world and his reality as a failed revolutionary. Thomas’s narrator is also unable to sustain the separation between her inner self and the exterior reality. Both narrators experience a break down not only of their ability to relate in the real world but also an ability to relate to themselves. This causes the severe dissolution of the self and of their capability of action in the exterior world.

The texts uses some of the same imagery to describe this loss of agency. Images of drowning, fluidity, dissolution and disintegration are some of the features that describe their self-disturbances. These images are also prevalent in schizophrenic experience as related by patients and theorists alike and that share these characters’ profound ontological anxiety and sense of loss of self through various forms of engulfment. Though schizophrenia is a chronic condition whose origins are as yet unknown, Sass argues that it may “be an extreme manifestation” of modern or postmodern sensibility and thus symptomatic of the insecurity engendered in these societies where previous
notions of the self as having a central unity have been eroded (10). The dissolution of self and agency in these texts and the parallels drawn here with schizophrenia are meant to highlight the social origin of the insecurity in each protagonist's life, though the sources of that insecurity are in one case, gender, and the other, colonization.

The narrator's confinement takes a different form in each novel. While Aquin's narrator is literally in solitary confinement in the psychiatric clinic in which he has been incarcerated, Thomas's narrator, Isobel Cleary, is doubly confined in her body and in the hospital and feels isolated both culturally and because of her gender. She is also isolated due to her pregnancy which causes some of the interiorization. Her body is the symbol for both her isolation and her confinement and keeps her senses attuned to her inner experiences rather than to her outer experiences. Her body is, however, the vehicle through which both her inner world of memories and past experiences and her present condition in the reality is channeled. Her physical pain makes her acutely aware of her body while her emotional pain keeps her disconnected from outer reality.

Aquín's narrator has chosen to turn inward as a means of passing the time while he is incarcerated. He is also doubly confined, but only partly by choice. He does not choose to be colonized by the English by being born Québécois but he chooses the confinement of his creation, the spy novel, which initially gives him a feeling of agency and omnipotence. He creates an inner world to compensate for his feeling of impotence as a revolutionary agent in outer reality.

Both protagonists have an extremely fragile perception of self. In order to avoid having their selves obliterated by the emotions that threaten to consume them, they have created alternative selves that help them deal with the emotional overload that they are
experiencing. Thomas’s character has split into one dissociated self which deals mainly with the outer reality and one self, highly attuned with the body and inner feelings. Although it may seem at first as if the inner self, Mrs. Blood, is the more fragile one, it is in fact the dissociated self, Mrs. Thing, who does not listen to the body and is preoccupied by the rules and conventions of society, who is the weaker self. This is mainly because she cannot function on her own but needs other people in order to define herself.

Aquín’s narrator has created fictional selves through which he hopes to gain strength, but because this strength is just an illusion it cannot be sustained. The failed revolutionary uses writing to gain a sense of purpose, yet the narrator is unable to identify with the characters of his spy novel. As the story moves forward, it is instead his creation that begins to reflect his impotence and lack of agency.

Schizophrenic individuals experience similar dissolution of self in their attempt to alleviate their ontological anxiety by creating a chasm within. The idea of a cohesive self as a space which can relate both to the psychic reality and to the outer reality is destroyed in this process. By dissociating from the external reality of everyday life and regarding only their inner experiences as real, they also create a separation between the physical self that exists in the external world and the psychic self which has turned all its attention inwards. While both protagonists live in their separate inner realities, Thomas’s narrator is forced to interact with people around her and Aquín’s narrator is constantly aware of his lack of agency in the external world. This causes an unexpected rift between the two “selves” which, in turn, causes the narrators to lose a sense of agency in the real world. Both novels compensate for the lack of historical or personal agency by setting the
stage for postmodern agency, whereby language and text are used to subvert reality. When the schizophrenic individual experiences an extreme rift between external and internal reality, he or she may enter a catatonic state. Similarly – but to a much lesser degree – the narrators of the novels find themselves in an extremely immobile and disabling situation in the worlds of each novel due to both confinement and temperament. In their attempts to deal with the powerlessness they experience in their interactions with the external world by dissociating from it, they have lost a sense of inner unity and are therefore unable to act as one person, whether as self-affirming woman or historical agent in the separatist movement in Quebec.

The novels are also similar to schizophrenia in their narrative structure. Both novels display a lack of unity and continuity grounded in ontological insecurity rather than merely postmodernist aesthetics. This, too, is similar to that which is present in schizophrenic experience and explains why some critics have referred to the works as narrative schizophrenia. Experiences in the past, present, and future are in schizophrenia often apperceived not in a temporal sense but in a spatial sense, as static picture-like descriptions. In Thomas’s novel the narrative is continuously interrupted by Mrs. Blood’s memories of the past, which are not ordered in time. Their internal relationship and their relation to the present is often uncertain and subjective. The narrative is also interspersed with intertextual fragments with unknown origin at times; especially toward the end of the novel, these fragments take over the narrative. They are the only signs that a reality exists outside of Mrs. Blood’s psychic reality. Fragmentation in Aquin’s novel results from the fictional spy novel that is interrupted with the narrator’s reflections on the story, his frustrations about his situation as an incarcerated Quebecois revolutionary
and his fluid memories from the past. Even the generic order of the spy novel is subverted by the disorderly thought patterns and self-reflexivity of the narrator, which go beyond postmodern play to express severe ontological insecurity, though not delusions. Many schizophrenics have delusions that involve being someone else and thinking that their thoughts belong not to them but to voices inserting themselves in their minds. Neither of the novels narrator’s are delusional; however, there are many intertextual references in the novels which sometimes manifest themselves as intruding voices or presences such as the intertextual elements in both novels. In Thomas these are mainly intertextual fragments in the form of newspaper clippings or loose quotes without references. In Aquin the presence of alternative narratives that have already become a part of the narrator’s thoughts suggests that is impossible for him to have any original thoughts of his own. In Thomas Alice in Wonderland serves as a parable to comment on the alienation and cultural displacement Isobel is experiencing. It also comments on the subjectivity of madness as an experience, something Thomas’s makes sure of already in the third sentence of the novel, ”[...] things here aren’t always what they seem to be and one must behave accordingly.” This, of course, also establishes the sense of ontological insecurity which prevails throughout the novel.

The novels comment on several aspects of modern life that, as I have shown, mimic schizophrenia. Schizophrenic experience is a useful frame of reference to understand the often puzzling, ambiguous, and hard to understand/impenetrable or inscrutable characters and their narratives. Using theories of schizophrenia as symptomatic of modernity and postmodernity, I have shown how both the novels and schizophrenia may be interpreted as responses to social and cultural conventions that may
interfere with an individual’s *being in the world*. What individuals experience when the world stops being a safe space to depend upon and becomes a threat to the self mimics the ontological insecurity felt by most schizophrenics. This experience is often described in the kind of schizophrenic narrative we see in modern and postmodern literature and of which Thomas’s and Aquin’s novels are both examples.
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