

MUSIC AND MEDICINE

Michael Beausang

THE SEARCH FOR NATIONAL AND PERSONAL IDENTITY, those precarious and related modes of being essential to action, dominates all that Hubert Aquin has written. Yet, as is true of all major writers committed to a cause, his art successfully transcends the self-imposed limits of a *littérature engagée*. This is not to say that his novels should be bowdlerized of their political message in order to appeal to English-speaking Canadians. Apart from insulting the intelligence of prospective readers, such a proceeding would misrepresent his work as a whole. Still, it appears to be true that from a critical point of view Aquin's dedication to the cause of Quebec separatism has produced an excessive political bias in assessments of his work, with the result that the reasons given for his genuine distinction as a novelist are often the wrong ones, and few concerted efforts have been made to come to terms with either *Trou de memoire* or *L'Antiphonaire*.

To explore a relatively uncharted area has its compensations. It also has its dangers. *L'Antiphonaire* is an extremely complex book and a brief attempt to summarize the plot, though bound to betray the sophistication of its sexual wit, is unfortunately necessary to our argument. Initially a straightforward story narrated by an ex-medical student, Christine, married to an epileptic named Jean-William Forestier, it quickly develops into an involved account of rape, murder and destruction, in which alternating personalities, living in different historical periods, echo and counterpoint one another in a clever, if bitter, antiphonal exercise. The nub of much of this activity is Christine's thesis — a survey of medical science in the sixteenth century which singles out for special attention Jules-Cesar Beausang, a disciple of Paracelsus, who, among other things, advocated the adoption of the experimental method, and penned a notable description of epilepsy.

Shortly after the opening of the novel, Christine's husband undergoes an epileptic attack, his ninth, and in the course of her efforts to obtain drugs for

him she is "violated" by a Californian pharmacist. Parallel with these events, in literary space if not in time, Renata Belmissieri, a Renaissance courtesan whom Christine describes as her double, sets out to deliver Beausang's final manuscript *Traité des maladies nouvelles* to a Chivasso printer, Carlo Zimara. Raped by Carlo, Renata sees justice done when Carlo is stabbed to death by his wife, Antonella. But her troubles have only begun. She is next sexually molested by Chigi, an abbé of Turin, who hands her over to the police as Zimara's killer, and, doubling for both the printer and Beausang, heads off to France with the unrepentant Antonella, leaving Renata to be hanged for a crime she never committed. Once in Lyon, Chigi *alias* Zimara *alias* Beausang, manages to make a living on the strength of Beausang's reputation and manuscript, and ironically, and aptly enough, dies of syphilis, one of the new diseases described by the great doctor.

This is, roughly summarized, the Renaissance wing in Aquin's picaresque comedy. On the modern side, Christine manages to make herself the focal point of as disastrous a web of events as those enveloping her Renaissance counterpart, Renata. Jean-William, having discovered the identity of the pharmacist who violated his wife, shoots him. But Christine has more than one beau to her string. She returns from California to Montreal to her lover, Robert Bernatchez, an ambitious Quebec politician. Jean-William follows, and guns down Bernatchez who is committed to the Sacré Coeur hospital with severe damage to the head and central nervous system. Somewhat disconcerted at the prospect of having a second invalid on her hands, Christine compromises herself by capitulating before the sexual advances of Robert's doctor, Albert Franconi. But by now she is a tortured, demoralized, not to say, abused, young woman, and unable to equate her acts with her ideal self, she commits suicide. Jean-William follows suit, and the final entry in the novel is a letter from Franconi to his wife Suzanne, informing her that he, too, is about to put an end to his days.

Clearly, Beausang's *Traité des maladies nouvelles*, Christine's "La science médicale au XVIème siècle", and Aquin's novel, are all one and the same, related mirror-images of the creator reflecting upon his own work. What we are reading is at one level a political allegory in which Christine's "crucifixion" symbolizes the exploitation of Quebec, both by her own politicians (Robert Bernatchez) and American interests (Christine's abortive affair with Robert W. Shact and her rape by the California pharmacist). Her pregnancy by Jean-William at a time when, as we shall see, she herself appears to have contracted syphilis, would seem to convey Aquin's reservations about the direction events are

taking in Quebec. In a word, Quebec is ill, and the extensive medical and pharmaceutical drama culminating in the death of Christine might well be taken as a fictional *memento mori* of the province's aspirations to political and social independence. Thus, infidelity is the key-note of the novel in so far as the human relationships are concerned, but politically this "lack of faith" would appear to reflect Aquin's disenchantment with the betrayal of a revolution.

But, as we noted earlier, the subject of Aquin's revolutionary commitment has tended to divert attention from the technique of historical parallelism by which social and political comment are passed on to the reader. As the title of the novel suggests, the idea of manipulating a continuous parallel between a twentieth-century story and the different episodes comprising a sixteenth-century tale of intrigue, appears to have originated in the author's interest in music.

ANTIPHONY IS LITERALLY the art of "counter-sounding", of playing off one choral group against another. This, is, of course, exactly what Aquin does in *L'Antiphonaire*, where modern and Renaissance choral groups counterpoint one another across an acoustical gap of well over four hundred years. Such "musical accords" enable him to propose a resolution to the problem of time and history in the context of the novel, at the same time that they serve to illustrate what Ulrich and Pick, speaking of Hebrew responsorial singing, have called "the expression of one thought in two different ways".¹ However, despite the wide range of meanings acquired by the words "antiphon" and "antiphony" through the ages, it is, perhaps, most useful to interpret Aquin's art of counterpoint in the restricted sense of a sentence or passage sung by one choir in response to another.

As a musical form antiphony is of special interest to the writer because traditionally it places most emphasis on a faithful interpretation of the text. Indeed, until the eighth and ninth centuries Antiphonaries included nothing more than the texts, and under the influence of the sixteenth-century revival of interest in classical literature, the musical contemporaries of Jules-César Beausang applied themselves to the exegesis of liturgical texts with fresh energy. As for the texts featured in early Christian antiphonal singing, these were borrowed from the Jews, with each choral group singing successive verses of a psalm. But, in tracing the downfall of Christine, Aquin would appear to be especially interested in the Holy Week use of antiphons deriving from the Song of Songs.² By relating

Christine's promiscuity and syphilitic calvary to the liturgical theme of the *unio mystica* between Christ and the Church, and the impending crucifixion of Good Friday, Aquin reinforces his presentation of the Quebec situation and parodically reminds us that *séparatisme* aims at religious, as well as political emancipation. Here, again, one recognizes a savage portrayal of the violation of revolutionary trust for as Isidore Epstein reminds us, the original Canticle of Canticles "glorifies perfect love that remains constant and steadfast amid all allurements and seductive influences."³

Rhythm is basic to musical expression, yet it also has an important place in medicine and sexual activity. A patient's pulse-beat is an index to his state of health and an important aspect of Jules-César Beausang's contribution to medicine is his insistence on "l'aspect clinique de la médecine, l'auscultation". Yet, when two beat as one, as Dr. Franconi acknowledges to his wife, the keeping of rhythm becomes doubly difficult: "Notre harmonie s'est transformée en une discorde permanente." Christine also admits to a fear of having offended the reader with "mes harmonies discordantes, ma deformis conformitas". But the explicit analogy between sexual possession and surrender to music is most clearly drawn in the scene in which Renata is seduced by l'Abbé Chigi: "Renata se laissait bercer par la musique psalmodiée du Cantique des Cantiques: elle était ravie, elle voulait être la plus belle des femmes . . . Elle se laissait caresser divinement par son mystique époux." As John Hollander notes: "It is natural that the various meanings of the word ravish (violent sexual possession, bewilderment, ecstatic separation of the soul from body) should tend to cluster more about the erotic senses when applied to music. The overtones of 'rape' become increasingly prominent in its more generally applied cognates 'ravishe' and 'rapture' . . ."⁴ Yet what is most striking about Aquin's account of Chigi's exploitation of Renata is not the lascivious Abbe's sexual ineptitude, but the fact that his climax should be made synchronous with an epileptic seizure on Renata's part.

This startling equation between epilepsy and the sex act is undoubtedly one of the most significant organizational elements in the novel. We can begin to account for it by noting that the medical characteristics of seizure are often "musically" expressed as an interruption of the body's rhythms: "The rhythm of the body when orderly spells health. Dysrhythmia is a disease."⁵ Man is, in a sense, a musical instrument regulated by the automatic periodicity of his own heart-beat. Furthermore, as Dr. William Gordon Lennox points out: "Orgasm is a sensory-motor seizure, a fact succinctly phrased by the Romans: 'Coitus brevis

epilepsia est.’”⁶ But the notion that the sex act is a gentle epilepsy has an extremely long and well-documented history and the first indication of its widespread acceptance appears in its attribution to Democritus of Abdera by no less an authority than Galen. Reference has already been made to syphilis in the novel, and Owsei Temkin’s remark that “It did not escape the attention of the Renaissance physicians that many syphilitics developed epileptic convulsions”⁷ also helps to explain the simultaneous presence of both ailments in *l’Antiphonaire*.

It is no secret, moreover, that the greatest challenge to medical science in the Renaissance was that posed by syphilis. Now, Christine informs us that Jules-César Beausang’s concepts of medical practice were elaborated in the year 1530. Why this particular year should be invoked in the context of syphilis seems apparent from a number of references to Girolamo Fracastoro. It was in 1530 that Fracastoro’s poem, *Syphilis sive Morbus Gallicus* first appeared, giving the name “syphilis” to what was known to the Italians of the time as “the French disease”. Similarly, the reason for dubbing Beausang (an anticipation of Harvey?) Jules-César is probably that the Roman emperor represents a classical instance of epilepsy: “The aura mentioned . . . of tingling and trembling of one foot, spreading upward, suggests a cortical lesion, arising perhaps from his Caesarean delivery, or, as Barois suggested, from syphilis, for was he not the ‘husband of all the women in Rome?’”⁸

Renata Belmissieri, Christine’s double, is conjured up by her “quand je tente, par projection, d’imaginer et de figurer une femme en proie aux spasmes récurrents de la crise d’épilepsie.” Elsewhere, she is described by Antonella as a prostitute. Antonella herself is accused of prostitution by Robert Bernatchez while Christine admits that in Jean-William’s eyes “j’étais déjà pure putain . . . Depuis je semble me conformer à cette image de moi — mon comportement me fait horreur”. In so far as sixteenth-century values impinge upon the novel it is useful to recall Armen Carapetyan’s comment that “Never before had prostitution been granted the freedom and social sanction which it enjoyed in the Renaissance”.⁹ By all accounts one can make a strong case for regarding the text of *l’Antiphonaire* as the memoirs of an educated Montreal courtesan undergoing treatment for advanced syphilis. But if this is so, the memoirs also epitomize the political sickness and exploitation of Quebec both by her own “doctors” and outside “consultants”. No surprise, then if her condition fails to improve, and if, in Beausang’s words, “l’humanité toute entière continue d’attraper la Grande Vérole.”

The advantage of giving Christine’s physical and psychological sickness a Re-

naissance dimension is that it immediately brings into play a fundamental assumption of medicine in the period: that of the natural analogy between macrocosm and microcosm. For Paracelsus (and Beausang is, after all, a disciple of Bombastus) the health of the individual cannot be divorced from events in the outside world: "Earthquakes and falling sickness have the same causes . . . for the motion of the earth is also the motion of man and is experienced by all which grows on the earth",¹⁰ or as Beausang puts it in the novel: "La terre vit comme tous les êtres vivants; elle est une personne plus grande, plus vaste que les autres créatures de Dieu."

Rather surprisingly, then, Christine turns out to be French-Canada's Hotspur ("Diseased Nature oftentimes breaks forth/In strange eruptions"), and nothing could better describe the gamut of the author's attempts to imaginatively rehabilitate the patient than that ancient adage of Demetrius: "Medicine, to produce health, has to examine disease, and music, to create harmony, must investigate discord".¹¹ Whatever one's views on the state of the province, it is impossible to deny *l'Antiphonaire* its due place alongside the wittiest and best-conceived works to emerge from Quebec at this or any other time.

NOTES

- ¹ Homer Ulrich and Paul A. Pisk, *A history of music and musical and musical style* (New York and Chicago, 1963) p. 11.
- ² For the Song of Songs motif see pages 87-95, 117, 119, 123, 221, 224, 228, 233-234.
- ³ Isidore Epstein, *Judaism* (London, 1959) p. 77.
- ⁴ John Hollander, *The untuning of the sky* (New York, 1970) p. 200.
- ⁵ William Gordon Lennox, *Epilepsy and related disorders* (Boston and Toronto, 1960) Vol. I. p. 4.
- ⁶ Lennox, p. 3.
- ⁷ Owsei Temkin, *The falling sickness* (Baltimore and London, 1971) p. 187.
- ⁸ Lennox, *op. cit.* Vol. II p. 707.
- ⁹ Armen Carapetyan "Music and medicine in the Renaissance and in the 17th and 18th centuries" in *Music and Medicine* ed. Dorothy M. Schullian and Max Schoen (New York, 1948) p. 135.
- ¹⁰ Lennox, *op. cit.* Vol. I. p. 3.
- ¹¹ Plutarch, "Demetrius", in *The lives of the noble Grecians and Romans* trans. John Dryden, revised by Arthur Hugh Clough (New York, Modern Library, n.d.) p. 1073.