Les sables mouvants/Shifting Sands
by Hubert Aquin (trans. by Joseph Jones)

Reviewed by Ronald Charles Epstein

In the 1960s and ’70s, many Quebec authors believed that their province should become an independent republic. Hubert Aquin, a novelist who worked for the National Film Board of Canada, seemed to view independence as an absolute necessity. This led him to burn many bridges. When the Rassemblement pour l’Indépendance Nationale was absorbed into the Parti Québécois, the RIN militant denounced the merger, alienating many, including Péquiste leader René Lévesque. He refused the Governor General’s Award for his novel Blackout. He worked for Éditions La Presse in the 1970s, but a public dispute with his federalist employer, Roger Lemelin, ended that association. The desperate writer committed suicide in 1977, at the age of 48.

Ironically, the same frustrations that drove him to suicide still remain. Twenty-three years later, sovereignty has not been achieved, which means that Aquin’s works are still classified – and judged – as “Canadian literature.” Yet he has won a posthumous victory with the appearance of this book. The original manuscript was written in 1953, a time in which its “[f]rank sexuality, images of the grotesque and biographical implications . . . helped to keep this story from previously being published” (back cover).

A bilingual edition is now available. Its French text is supplemented by notes and annotations, which make it useful for advanced French-language classes. The translator’s critical essay invites teachers of Canadian, Québécois or French literature to also use this volume. The current time permits its appearance; the preparation renders it suitable for different types of study.

Shifting Sands may surprise or disappoint readers who know Aquin through his 1965 separatist spy novel Next Episode. They may dismiss it as too “apolitical,” though it may be more accurately described as “prepolitical,” since it was written long before the modern separatist movement began.
The author skilfully stages the situation, drawing the reader into multiple levels of despair. The protagonist is a middle-aged man named François, who is staying “alone in this hotel that resembles a funeral parlor . . . to wait for the bugs” (11). His lodgings are in Naples, a city located in one of the less fortunate regions of Italy, which was still recovering from World War II. Hope is embodied by his lover, Hélène, whom he has arranged to meet and hopes to take to a “little inn, near Sorrento” (13). The contrast between the man’s sense of confinement and his dreams of romantic liberation evoke memories and reveal emotions.

Sensual satisfaction is stymied by Hélène’s “way of never losing composure” (35). François needs to have his lover acknowledge his physical prowess and is frustrated when she fails to do so. The situation is exacerbated by the fact that François apparently has no employment or connection to anyone but Hélène. She appears to be the only presence in his life, which renders him dangerously dependent on her love. He is a gambler who has bet his soul on a woman who may not share his feelings for her.

This idea is confirmed when he travels to the railroad station, where he sees her at the terminal, but the two do not meet. He follows her through town and spots her “jumping on a streetcar” (63). What does this apparent wild-goose chase reveal about their relationship? If she had truly not been interested in him, she would not have showed up at all. Was she honestly unable to recognize him or was she taunting him? Her previous aloofness suggests the latter. He is psychologically undermined, his soul and their relationship threatened in the process.

Translator and critic Joseph Jones characterizes this deterioration as a “maleficent vision” (87), his term for François’s distorted perception of Hélène. He tries to further readers’ understanding of this concept by examining critical studies and other stories. Jones’s purpose may have been to showcase the history of a literary device, but his essay’s side effect is to set Aquin’s place in world literature by comparing him to other authors, such as Oscar Wilde, Robert Musil and J. Meade Falkner.

Few Canadian authors are lucky enough to have their works translated into the other official language. Hubert Aquin is presented in an annotated, critically examined bilingual edition. Other deceased authors belong to the ages, while he is delivered into the custody of academics, language teachers and other interested professionals.
Ronald Charles Epstein has reviewed books by Gerald Godin, Jacques Godbout and other Québécois authors.

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