

RAOUL VANEIGEM:

*Self-Portraits and Caricatures
of the Situationist International*

Translated by NOT BORED!

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Translator's Preface

“Because, since the common occurrences of life could never, in the nature of things, steadily look one way and tell one story, as flags in the trade-wind; hence, if the conviction of a Providence, for instance, were in any way made dependent upon such variabilities as everyday events, the degree of that conviction would, in thinking minds, be subject to fluctuations akin to those of the stock-exchange during a long and uncertain war.” – Herman Melville, *The Confidence-Man* (1857).

To date, though there have been dozens of detailed histories written about the development of the Situationist International (the “SI”), which went through three overlapping phases between 1957 and 1972, none of them were written by a former member. Furthermore, none of the historians of the SI have been personally acquainted with the most important situationists (Michèle Bernstein, Guy Debord, Asger Jorn, Mustapha Khayati, René Viénet and Raoul Vaneigem), and so they weren't able to offer accurate portraits of what these semi-legendary revolutionaries were like as people.

Always the exception, Guy Debord – the only co-founder of the organization still a member of it when it disbanded – commented often and extensively about certain moments in the SI's history (cf. “Notes to serve towards the history of the SI from 1969 to 1971”) and told his readers a good deal about what he himself was like (cf. *Panegyric*). And so, for a great many years, those who are interested in the situationists as both historical actors and as people have really only been acquainted with Debord and Debord's evaluations of the others, about whom we've known little or nothing other than what Debord himself said about them. Almost unavoidably, Debord has become the face of the SI and the SI has been semi-successfully presented as just one of Debord's many artistic creations.

With the very recent arrival of what amounts to Raoul Vaneigem's autobiography – *Rien n'est fini, tout commence* (“Nothing has ended, everything begins”), published by Editions Allia in October 2014 – all this will have to change. Thanks to Vaneigem, who has given a few interviews before, but has never spoken at such great length about the SI or such “personal” subjects as his parents, his ex-wife, his alcoholism, and so forth, readers can now not only get a sense of what *he's* like as a person, but Debord, Bernstein, Khayati and Viénet, as well.

In its original form, this book is credited to both Raoul Vaneigem and Gérard Berréby, who put it together “with the help of Sébastien Coffy and Fabienne Lesage.” Indeed, *Rien n'est fini* presents itself as a kind of collaboration between Vaneigem and Berréby, as if the two men were equals with respect to the subject at hand. In addition to asking Vaneigem questions and recording and transcribing his answers, Berréby speaks about his own life and opines on a large number of subjects; he footnotes his own remarks (as well as those of Vaneigem); and he adds a large number of photographs and supplementary texts, some of them by Vaneigem himself or others members of the SI, others by people who were close to the situs but not members of the organization (Pierre Lotrous, Jacques Le Glou, Yves Raynaud, Clairette Schock, and Thérèse Dubrule, aka the former Mrs. Raoul Vaneigem), and still others by authors who weren't situationists and sometimes had little or no relevance to them. As a result, *Rien n'est fini* ends up being 393 pages long, with every page and every margin stuffed with something.

And yet, despite this great length, density and apparent comprehensiveness, the book's chronology stops in the mid-1970s, even though Vaneigem wrote and published the vast majority of his 25-odd books since the 1990s. Furthermore, the book lacks most of the standard or traditional elements: there's no preface, no bibliography and no index. In short, *Rien n'est fini* is a deformed creation – deformed by the ego of Gérard Berréby, who, it would seem, is ready to rest on his laurels for having published 15 situationist-related titles (as well as dozens of others) over the course of the last 30 years.

My translation tries to ameliorate this deformity. On the one hand, I have removed – that is to say, I have declined to translate – everything that is not relevant to Raoul Vaneigem himself and/or the SI as a whole. Here the reader should not worry: there were no gray areas; no texts that I had reservations about deleting. (As for the texts by the other situationists, they, too, have been translated, but have been posted as separate texts on the NOT BORED! website. Via hypertext links, my footnotes point the reader towards these texts at appropriate moments in the interview.) On the other hand, I have provided an index, a bibliography and this preface. As a result, *Raoul Vaneigem: Self-Portraits and Caricatures of the Situationist International* is shorter, leaner and easier to use than *Rien n'est fini*.

I'm sorry to say that, despite these improvements, this remains a deformed work, precisely because Vaneigem's own testimony runs in two different directions. On the one hand, as he recounts his life from his childhood to his decision to join in the SI in 1961 and beyond (as late as 1967, when the book for which he is best known, *Traité de savoir-vivre à l'usage des jeunes generations*, was published), he is focused, perceptive, interesting and informative, and solidly in favor and proud of what the SI said and did while he was a member of it. But on the other hand, when the chronology crosses 1967 into 1968, he goes back over this same ground and – in remarks that sometimes seem distracted, shallow, tedious and politically correct – condemns not only particular texts (the denunciation of Henri Lefebvre in 1963, the illustrations for “España en el corazón” in 1964, and even the *Traité* itself, which was completed in 1965), but also the situationist movement as a whole, which he alleges, fell victim to the ideology of “situationism” as early as 1963.

At the end of this rather peculiar, contradictory back and forth, all that is left is Vaneigem himself and the promises that he made to himself “with an unshakeable conviction” when he resigned from the SI in November 1970: “Never again in a group, never again in a community. I will pursue my work alone”; “I focus on individual autonomy, on the creativity of each person.” For his part, Gérard Berréby agrees with the appropriateness of this simultaneous rejection of “community” and embrace of the autonomous “individual” as a strategy. The last lines of his interview with Frédérique Roussel, published by *Libération* on 1 October 2014, are, “For me, there is no other outcome than an individual solution, which will go against all that these movements have developed. In these times, one only thinks of the collective.”

But the people who are interested in Vaneigem and his books today are interested in him and them *because he was a situationist* (indeed, one of the most important ones). Generally speaking – and the decision to end the chronology in the 1970s supports the assertion that – people are not particularly interested in what Vaneigem has done on his own since then (even though a couple of his books from the 1980s and 1990s are as good as, if not better than, the texts he published in the 1960s).

And so, to ameliorate the various deformities within Vaneigem's testimony – his patent rejection of the SI post-1963 and his concomitant rejection of collective engagement as such – I have used dozens of “translator's notes” to show what unstunted growth might have looked like

(especially during and after 1968). I have also used these footnotes to provide directly relevant, accurate and useful information; to clear up or point out potential ambiguities; and to indicate some of what Vaneigem has accomplished since the 1970s.

As a result of all this meddling, this book isn't so much my translation of *Rien n'est fini* into English, but a *détournement* of it. To paraphrase Lautréamont's *Poésies* (and Thesis 207 of Guy Debord's *La Société du Spectacle*), I have held tightly to the text of *Rien n'est fini*, used its expressions, erased its false ideas, and replaced them with the correct ones. The final result has been called *Self-Portraits and Caricatures* because that is exactly what Vaneigem offers in it: portraits of himself and caricatures of the others.

* * *

Some technical notes.

In the interests of clarity, I have broken the interview into six major chapters and have given each one a simple, descriptive title.

All footnotes are by the interviewer/publisher, except where noted.

All words in brackets [thus] are mine; these brackets either contain words that seem to be missing or the original French.

In my use of ellipses, I have deviated from the usual rule that distinguishes between sentences that trail off but end and sentences that trail off but don't end (four "dots" or three "dots," respectively), and I have used three dots in all instances. Though irregular, a one-size-fits-all ellipsis seems appropriate for the transcript of a conversation, in which it is hard to know if the speaker has ended, trailed off, interrupted himself, been interrupted, etc.

I have also used the three-dot ellipsis within Vaneigem's remarks to indicate when an entire "question" has been skipped over. I can assure the reader that such deletions have not at all affected the sense or the continuity of Vaneigem's answers (he himself sometimes completely ignores the questions he's been asked).

I have strictly reserved the use of three dots between brackets [...] to mark deletions within the interviewer's questions.

In no case have I abridged or deleted a remark by Vaneigem himself.

I have been greatly assisted in this endeavor by Anthony Hayes and Susan Hull.

Bill Not Bored
15 January 2015

Chapter I: Childhood

In 1961, when I was a professor at the École Normale in Nivelles, a colleague thought it would be good to denounce me to the director of the establishment by drawing his attention to a photograph that had been published in *Le Soir* or *La Libre Belgique*, I think. It showed me among a group of demonstrators. The informer even had the zeal to encircle my face with a felt-tipped pen. . . .

In 1961, you were twenty-seven.

Yes. Belgium was then in the midst of a large strike that I participated in! A quite violent strike.

You crossed paths with Guy Debord in the social and historical context of large-scale agitation. But you had already officially met him in Paris by that point, I believe.¹

Michèle Bernstein and Guy Debord had come to Brussels on that occasion. If the strikes couldn't be compared to an event on the scale of Spartacus, the specter of insurrection was present. In the revolutionary imaginary that carried us along back then, this event represented a great deal. In any case, it gave coherence to a project that, once scattered in the past, was now verified in a present that we finally had in our hands.

I'm reminded of the dark humor of Kurt Tucholsky when he deplored the failure of the Spartakist revolt: "Due to unfavorable weather conditions, the German Revolution will take place in the form of music." We must recall that Spartakus – led by Karl Liebknecht, Rosa Luxembourg and Leo Jogiches – was opposed to the imperialistic Great War and tried to make it into a revolutionary one through the instauration of workers' councils. And even if you do not know of its bloody repression, which was orchestrated by the Social Democrats, the Berlin Commune, for example, fed your imagination during the strikes of 61. But before returning to this key event, let us speak a little of the beginning, that is to say, your childhood. . . . You were born, Raoul, on 21 March 1934 in Lessines, Belgium.

At the time, it was a small workers' town.

Louis Scutenaire, though not your contemporary, was also born not far from there.

He lived in Ollignies, a village located five kilometers away from Lessines; quarries everywhere. They are a strong theme in his work. Magritte was also born in Lessines. But he didn't live there. He was barely two years old when his family moved to Gilly.

¹ *Translator's note:* Vaneigem made first contact with Debord and the other situationists in January 1961. Cf. Debord's letter to him dated 31 January 1961: <http://www.notbored.org/debord-31January1961.html>.

How do you feel in that environment, the climate, the landscape, the quarries. . . . Did the aesthetics of those spaces affect you?

I felt at once joyous and oppressed. Oppressed because it was a town completely folded upon itself, with its particular rhythms and cycles of gossip. It wasn't, strictly speaking, a beautiful place, but it was less sinister than Borinage with its colliery. Our slag heaps weren't made of coal, but piles of earth that came from quarries and were called "clods." These were wooded, artificial hills, very green, that were used as meeting places. We found our first little friends there! All the teenagers went there to discover love; the adults, too. . . . It was almost a tradition to do so! As for the quarry, it offered a huge gaping hole from which porphyry, a beautiful volcanic rock, was extracted.

Through some conversations that I was able to have with Scutenaire, I understand that he was very attached to his hometown. And I have also found out that the Prince de Ligne,² who also lived nearby, in the Chateau de Beloeil, was also very attached to the region. Finally, you, Raoul, you are strongly tied to it, since you live there – it was there that I met you, in Flobecq, several hundred meters from your hometown. It is a region whose beauty we can only affirm with difficulty. The countryside there is, in sum, quite ordinary. Lessines remains a small provincial town in which, as you have said, the people live folded upon themselves, with their rites and their boredom. Nevertheless, we cannot stop ourselves from discerning a real tie to the place. In your opinion, how can we explain the fact that people such as them, yourself included, feel that way?

As for myself, it was there that I found, as an adult and a little by accident – but no doubt there are no accidents – a house to my liking. And, it is true, it is located not far from Lessines, in the region of the [aforementioned] hills. Nevertheless, I wonder if the attachment isn't, at the beginning, of a rather linguistic nature.

Regional *talk* has always been dear to me. I was raised by a father, named Paul, who spoke perfect Picard and by a mother who was herself Picardian. She was originally from Tournai, but who was horrified by this patois! It seemed vulgar to her. She even scolded me when I attempted to use it! For her, it was the language of scoundrels. When I spoke Picard with my father, she suffered: "You need not exaggerate, all the same!" she would say. Even when we'd explain to her that, at the end of the day, the two accorded perfectly, she prided herself on her impeccable French. You must remember that Picard was prohibited in school. We only spoke it more! All conversations between friends were in dialect.

Our Picard, which we wanted to keep pure, degenerated progressively because French words came into it at the expense of Picardian words. The Belgian French that confused "to know how" with "to be able" remained the vernacular. Our "Picardisms" and language errors inclined us to a certain rigor. We were ceaselessly compelled to correct our way of expressing ourselves. It isn't by chance that two of the greatest grammarians – Joseph Hanse and Maurice Grevisse – are Belgian! We were thus attentive to our second native language that, like any patois, is much more receptive to emotional expression than French. I used to love to speak Picard with a farmer

² *La meilleure séduction est de n'en employer aucune.* Charles-Joseph Lamoral, Prince de Ligne (Brussels, 1734 – Vienna, 1814).

and baker from Flobecq – they are dead now, unfortunately, and my Picard is in escheat. It is a very rich language, even if it doesn't inspire cult worship.

You spoke it as a form of defiance?

It was also the languages of the bars, the language of the proletariat. We took a slightly vain glory in speaking Picard in opposition to the town's rich bourgeois, who spoke affected French without an accent.

Louis Scutenaire, who proclaimed his attachment to Picard, mentions this defiance in his writings.

It happened I was able to speak to Scutenaire about this. He said he was very happy to have been raised speaking both Picard and French. He was thrilled to spend an evening speaking Picard with me. He showed the greatest respect for this regional language, this local patois. He even said that this attachment motivated him to master French, even if it was a universal language. Thus we felt a strong attachment to this language in which we were steeped as children and which, thanks to its slightly brutal expressions, expressed what we were feeling much better than French did.

In that region, there was also the Groupe surréaliste du Hainaut, with Achille Chavée.³

It was in La Louvière, which is effectively in Hainaut. . . . A den of surrealists: Achille Chavée, Fernand Dumont, and Marcel Havrenne. La Louvière had an avant-garde tradition, with everything beneficial [*positif*] to the epoch that the word implies, of course.

A region that was avant-gardist, but also very working-class.

Carried by the violence of the social struggle and a very sharp proletarian consciousness, oscillating between anarchism and Communism . . .

³ The Surrealist Group of Hainaut was founded in 1939 in the small mining town of La Louvière. Before it, the group called Rupture, founded by Achille Chavée (1906-1969) in 1934, had already assembled intellectuals and artists who wanted to take part in the workers' struggles, and fixed literary and political objectives for themselves and sought to ally Surrealism and Marxism in an attempt to liberate mankind through poetic creation. The Third International Exposition of Surrealism was organized in La Louvière in 1935. Rupture broke up in 1939. The Surrealist Group of Hainaut formed around two tutelary figures: Achille Chavée, who'd just returned from the Spanish front, where he'd been a part of the International Brigades for three years, and Fernand Dumont (1906-1945). Pol Bury, Marcel Lefrancq, Armand Simon and Louis Van de Spiegele rallied to the movement. At a time when the hardcore of Surrealism gravitated to Paris or Brussels, the Hainaut Group tried to set itself off and impose its own dynamic. La Louvière would remain one of the two breeding grounds for the Surrealist movement in Belgium. The movements based in Brussels and Hainaut had a somewhat testy relationship.

Syndicalism, the natural extension of the working-class condition, no doubt also began to emerge . . .

A very dynamic syndicalism, and [also] a socialism that was already a Social Democracy, the softness of which was criticized. There was also a working-class current represented by Alfred Defuisseaux, who was an individualist, at the margins of the socialist movement. He'd written *Le Catéchisme du peuple*, a work of considerable influence. My father, Paul, had a copy of it. It began with, "Who are you, worker?" The response was, "I am a slave."⁴

What an appetizer!

It was quite thrilling at the time! Defuisseaux drew down the thunderbolts of the Belgian Labor Party, which found him too left. He was excluded.

Everyday life and working-class militancy were closely connected then. Celebrations took place in la Maison du Peuple almost every Saturday. The Socialist brass band paraded, while all the militants packed the sidewalks. We went to every bar in the town. It was always festive, joyous. Even more so on May Day, the general celebration of downtown, the working class, against uptown, the bourgeoisie.

⁴ Published in Belgium in 1886 by Alfred Defuisseaux. What follows is an extract from the first lesson in Chapter I, "De la Condition du Peuple et de son esclavage."

1. Who are you? I am a slave.
2. You aren't a man? From humanity's point of view, I am a man, but with respect to society, I am a slave.
3. What is a slave? A slave is a creature in whom one recognizes a single duty, which is to work and suffer for others.
4. Do slaves have rights? No.
5. What is the difference physically between a slave and a free person? None; like the free person, the slave must drink, eat, sleep, and wear clothing. He has the same animal needs, the same diseases, the same origin, the same end.
6. What is a free man? Someone who lives under a regime of laws to which he has willingly submitted.
7. In Belgium, how can you tell a free man from a slave? In Belgium, the free man is rich, and the slave is poor.
8. Does slavery exist in every country? No. The French Republic, the Swiss Republic, the Republic of the United States and many others are only composed of free men. All citizens make the laws and all submit themselves to them.
9. What would it take to make a slave into a free man? The right to vote, that is to say, universal suffrage.
10. What is universal suffrage? It is the right of every male citizen of proper age to designate his deputy and give him the mission of making laws for the workers.
11. How are the laws made in Belgium? For the rich and against the poor.
12. Can you express your thinking in another way? Yes. In Belgium, the laws are made by those who do nothing and against those who work.
13. On what does our governmental system rest? Money.

A classic dichotomy in towns. . . . It is like the gap between the East and the West, but at a completely different level. We see – by observing completely different countries – that very often the west side of a city shelters the bourgeoisie, while the east side welcomes the working classes.

Everyone started from la Maison du Peuple, located [all the way] downtown. A kind of pole, a small “genius loci.” And then we worked our way up la Grand’rue. The majority of the bars were socialist. But when one reached the top. . . .

What do you mean, “The majority of the bars were socialist”? Today, when one speaks of a bar, one thinks of commerce, patrons, the sale of drinks, profit.

All the bars were politicized.

Not anymore! Can you describe the ambiance for us?

At a certain moment, Lessines, a town of eight thousand inhabitants, had no less than 400 bars!

A frightening ratio indeed! Either celebrations all the time, with everybody friends, wanting to get together, or a bunch of alcoholics!

Work was omnipresent. Many bars surrounded the quarries, of course. Tradition demanded that the young workers would get kegs of beer and bring them down into the quarries, where the specialized workers worked upon the boulders, dynamiting the inside walls and cutting the useful rocks into cobblestones. They turned them over to other workers, who finally produced perfectly calibrated stones. Paving stones were still very popular at the time. They were also used in the macadam and tarmacs. The “cut” [“*taille*”] revealed a veritable *savoir-faire*.

All the bars were filled. In the middle of la Grand’rue was the Catholic area and several bars of bigots that we didn’t go into. Uptown, the bars were owned by Liberals. Three large political parties co-existed: the Belgian Labor Party, the Catholic Party, then very conservative, and the Liberal Party. There weren’t any Christian Democrats at the time. . . .

The Catholic Party relied upon slogans that were very conservative, very reactionary, very prudish. . . .

Everything that we detested. Just as we detested the uptown residents, the Liberals, affiliates of the Liberal Party – the equivalent of today’s U.M.P.⁵ in France. At the time, even if the fierce anti-clericalism of the Liberals made them almost likable, this made them no less bourgeois. Thus, as the procession made its way towards uptown, discord increased. On the other hand, the animosity was tempered by the fact that one of my uncles, a Liberal, owned one of the bars. It was a family place, and so we went there all the same! I had Socialist uncles, Liberal uncles, Catholic uncles. . . .

⁵ *Translator’s note:* The *Union pour un mouvement populaire*, a center-right political party founded in 2002 by Jacques Chirac.

On which side?

Especially on my father's side. My mother, Marguerite Tilte, being from Tournai – her family was rather Socialist. But in Lessines, my father had many cousins, including a fascist one, killed during the war. This whole crew would fraternize during big family get-togethers. . . . I have always had a singular regard for the family. When there were a great many celebrations, the women would systematically take the lead: “No politics!” they would warn. It would all begin very joyously, very drunkenly. And then there always came a moment when remarks went too far. The siblings would fight and insult each other. They would be within an inch of coming to blows before they finally calmed down for desert, coffee, and Dutch gin. Before leaving, everyone would embrace and say, “See you next time.” There was something bizarre in this familial solidarity that managed to win out over some very real differences! My father never refrained from grumbling, “It's those Liberals, it's those bourgeois.” The Catholics were collectively treated as hypocrites. Finally, everything happened as if the family network – almost in the sense of a “clan” – tolerated polemic without wanting to overdo or stop it.

Were there already tensions between Walloon and Flanders at this time?

Very little in Walloon. Rather than go to Ath, the neighboring Walloon town, to go to school, we took the train to the market in Grammont, a Flemish town. Relations between Walloons and Flemings were very good. I never felt around me any animosity at all towards the Flemings. There was no Walloon nationalism at the time. Social awareness prevented that putrefaction of thinking.

People spoke Dutch or French indifferently?

In Lessines, other than patois, we only spoke French. We didn't know Dutch (the academic form of it). I learned it at college. In Grammont, people spoke Flemish amongst themselves. But they spoke to us in French. No one ever made ironic comments about the language.

How did you perceive these Flemish and Walloon histories?

We didn't . . .

For you, this didn't exist?

The social [question] carried it away. In Grammont, the workers' quarter was already pretty big. There was a kind of fraternity there, between railway workers, for example.

When you say, “The social [question] carried it away,” I understand you well. But I think that, at the time, the Flemings were rejected by history. Many of them lived in poverty socially. They were subjected to the economic arrogance of the Walloons. One mustn't forget that the Walloons dominated all of Belgium, especially industrially, up until the decline of the mines. During the First World War, the Flemings were sent to the front lines. Instructions were given in French; quite often they didn't understand them! Someone told me this striking anecdote: an employee at

a Flemish home was brought before a court for a trifle – the theft of silverware or something like that – and he had to suffer a penalty – a fine or even prison time – without even understanding the language in which the sanction was pronounced! And then there were reversals of the situation.

Yes! Rosa Luxemburg said something like, “the Flemish worker is the only one who is dispossessed of his language.” We must understand this to mean that the workers had to accustom themselves to the fact that the engineers spoke to them in French without them understanding . . . The contempt of the Walloons for the Flemings, which was strong then, was linked, in other words, to the contempt felt by the working class towards the peasantry. With the exception of people from Ghent and Antwerp, the Flemish were considered to be hicks, backwards people, Catholics who made their devotions fervently. But I never picked up on any of this at home. I was not steeped in anti-Flemish discourse.

Finally, what was the structure of your family, its orientation, that prevented such porosity?

Lessines is not very far from Flanders, and Grammont is in Flanders. Today, this is no longer the case. The nationalism of the N-VA⁶ and the fascistic *Vlaams Belang*⁷ carry the day.

Although located 40 kilometers from Lille and 68 km from Brussels, you still come from an isolated region. Was the Flemish presence there important?

The Lessines region is not isolated. It is a frontier region. We certainly weren't very far from Flanders, but no one spoke Flemish.

Today, the Flemish have gotten rich and have bought not a few things in Walloon. But all this isn't particularly annoying. In Flobecq, where a minority of Flemings live, the street signs are bilingual. The nationalistic rage that the Flemish have displayed and is no doubt a reaction to all the contempt and exploitation [they'd experienced], didn't exist here. To really understand the process, we must not forget that, before the Italians, the Flemish mineworkers had been super-exploited. They worked in the lowest levels of the mines where the danger of collapse was constant. They were the first ones to bear the consequences.

It is not a matter of justifying the extreme Flemish nationalism that developed for several decades before reaching its apogee today, but what you say explains the roots of such a phenomenon. It is here that extremism has found its legitimacy, if I can say so.

First fleeing Mussolini, then again in 1946, the Italians worked in appalling conditions.

One is always someone's Negro.

⁶ The *Alliance néo-flamande*.

⁷ Once called the *Vlaams Blok*, even more extreme than the N-VA.

Then came the Turks, the Arabs. Now that Walloon has become an economic desert, the Walloons have become – in the vengeful imaginary of the Flemish nationalists – Negros, slackers, parasites.

*Did you learn Dutch at the Athénée?*⁸

It was obligatory. I studied it for six years. It was a course we didn't want to take. We disrupted it a lot. Not due to Walloonism but because it was a language in which – outside of Claus and a few others – there were few authors to read. We didn't know Paul van Ostaïjen at the time. On the other hand, we knew Guido Gezelle, the poet-priest, and he was nothing to get excited about. We preferred English literature. Our refusal had to do with that deficiency.

In Belgium, were there Germanic and English influences circulating, if only through Ostend?

All the same, the first language to study remained Dutch.

I would like to tell you about my observations following several trips that I was able to make to Belgium. [...]

Thereafter, I only knew a few snippets of Flemish. Often when I began a phrase in Flemish, I would finish it in English. And as my English was very bad, the results weren't convincing! On the other hand, if I go to Flanders, I make an effort to speak Flemish. Good: it's a matter of *twee pintjes alsjeblieft*, which is "two beers, please." In Ghent, when I strive to speak Flemish, quite often I am responded to in French!

Which do you remember better, the Greek or the Latin that you learned at school – or Dutch?

Latin, no doubt. Latin and Greek are universal. Flemish gives one the impression of an insular language, without openings, a provincial language of some kind. The Dutch make fun of the Flemings and the Flemings detest the Dutch. There was, in school, in any case, a real lack of interest in Flemish. But things have changed.

It is a generational phenomenon. [...] When I suggest to my Walloon friends, who are a little older, that they would do well to take day or night classes if they want to continue to live here, that it will become difficult for them to get by without speaking two languages, they laugh in my face.

The younger generation doesn't have this problem. That makes it even stranger that nationalistic oppositions between the Walloons and the Flemings have become more pronounced.

Personally, I find this behavior very positive.

Nationalism has no other future than self-destruction. What is closed in upon itself rots. All the Flemish intellectuals are hostile to the little Milosevics in power. At our home, the conversations

⁸ *Translator's note:* Equivalent of the French high school.

took place in Picard! Personally, I refuse all regionalisms. I execrate the folklore that consists in saying “It’s our country, our language, our soil.” It develops with a nationalistic background that wishes to be picturesque but is only repugnant. I’ve never fallen for it. Being able to identify, from the distance of French, the roots of certain words and becoming aware of the respect that one devotes to them, without imprisoning them in a soil or regionalism – that’s what’s prevented me from falling for it. For me, language has never marked a national belonging. I never had the feeling of being a Picard. I refuse to consider myself a Walloon, or a Belgian, and I think that humanity will have made great progress when everyone’s identity papers are burned. I refused to be “inserted.” But language has importance. It is true that there is a familial colorfulness in speaking Picard.

Let’s return to your father, if you’d like. He was a railway worker, right?

He was a railway worker, union-member – the workers’ union – and a fervent socialist.

Militant?

He always was. He belonged to the Workers Party. The union with which he was affiliated today is called the Fédération Générale du Travail de Belgique.⁹

He no doubt exerted a direct influence on you, supplied you with narratives of past and present experiences.

He never gave any political speeches to me. Except for later on, when I was tempted by Communism . . . I especially remember his discussions with the Liberals about exploitation . . . The vocabulary still remained quite Marxist, one might say, without including quotations from Marx himself.

And so, ever since your tender youth, you have bathed in political rhetoric! I mean by that political discussions, polemics, contradictions, fights . . .

In sum, the exploitation of many by man. Yes, the theme regularly resurfaces.

All of these terms – “proletarian consciousness,” “working class,” “resistance” – were widely spread through ordinary daily language.

These weren’t speeches, but everyday words, said to anyone who would listen. And then we must keep in mind that life in Lessines, above all else a quarry town, was punctuated by the “song” of the sirens that organized the workday. We could distinguish the sound emitted by each one and we could soon quote the name of the quarry with which it was associated. This signal, I don’t know why, was called *ours*, perhaps a deformation of the Picardian word *heure*. It was the *ours* for four hours, the *ours* for 11 hours. It wasn’t the church bells that punctuated time, but the sirens of the quarries! The church had very little importance. I do not even remember having ever heard the bells sound. They were far away.

⁹ The F.G.T.B. played a major role in the strikes during the winter of 1960-1961.

All the same, it is amusing to think of the unfolding of the day, habitually determined by the “blows” of the church’s bells, in a precise number, growing then fading away, ringing, here punctuated by the quarries’ sirens!

A troubling phenomenon also existed: when a siren sounded outside of the traditional hours – it sounded in a different way – it meant that an accident, more or less serious, had taken place in a quarry. The sinister impression of an alarm dominated – Scutenaire tells about it in *Les Vacances d’un enfant*.¹⁰ At such moments, everyone went to the quarry. People came out of their homes, demanding in Picard: “Dé qué trô?” which means “In which hole?” “In which quarry?” We’d respond, “the Unies” or “the Cosyns” or “the Notté.” We ran to worry ourselves about what had happened.

One of my cousins died in such a way . . . He was in charge of dynamiting the rocks. The explosion didn’t take place. He went to check the fuse. The explosion happened and he was completely burned. We went to see him at the clinic and, to make a long story short, while he was dying, we gathered around him as best we could, and he said to my father, “Make me happy, give me a beer, give me a big glass of beer.” The doctor said, “Especially not! He’s going to die!” My father retorted, “Then why not?” And so he drank a glass of beer and died almost immediately . . . Such events fed my rage against bosses.

You began to clench your fists, to forge a character for yourself.

One needed hatred. Mine was the hatred of [socio-economic] classes. Yet everything remained relative: I hung out with my cousins who were in the Liberal Party or the Catholic Party without problems. But hatred of exploitation was my black light.

This hatred gave you legitimacy, a reason for living, for affirming yourself.

No doubt it was a way of affirming myself against the world, in a fight whose nuances I obviously didn’t yet perceive.

This also injected strength.

This generated energy, yes, that’s for sure. I believe that, in case of civil war, all the kids would have taken up arms! I plunged into the first conflict that came along, even if it was absurd. The kids of Hourraing fought each other, using rocks, stones from the rue de l’Abattoir, which was

¹⁰ “When I was very young, workplace accidents were so frequent in my country that the people, after the passage of a dead person followed by a train of mourners, didn’t ask, ‘Who is it?’ but, with their black irony, ‘Which hole?’ that is to say, ‘In which quarry was he killed?’ As if all these deaths weren’t enough, during strikes, the cops would fire on the workers. I remember a demonstration that I followed on the shoulders of Grandma Diablot. The cops fired and, throwing ourselves upon the ground, we advanced on our flat bellies for three hundred meters. Next to me, a big guy dressed in velvet, screamed in his riotous enthusiasm and danced on the ground.” Louis Scutenaire, *Mes Inscriptions 1945-63*, 1976.

close to our neighborhood. We came out of it bruised. The war also fought against the scouts, who were Catholics who camped out in the pastures. It was common to cut the cords of their tents, to pull their pants off and push them into the nettles, kid stuff like that! You couldn't speak of class consciousness here. And yet the violence was a bit oriented, all the same . . . Not in the wars between neighborhoods, which were purely playful. With the scouts, we found a pretext to attack the Catholics!

A background, an ulterior motive, gave its colors to the conflict.

It was also a tradition to go down to the Grand'rue, as a group, obviously, never alone, and, with great fanfare, stop in front of and piss on the Catholic Circle, which was the home of the priests. This didn't provoke any reactions . . . They were used to it, I suppose! One of my uncles left me his reed cane. This made me part of the "The Hammy Fear" group.

In these anecdotes about your childhood, one can already discern – not a realization concerning – but a sensitivity to the workers' cause, to resistance, to opposition to the bourgeois and the property-owners. One can see an anti-clerical temperament form. Because even if it is very funny to piss on the wall of the Catholic Circle, this gesture has a meaning and a political significance, all the same. These things, added together, the militancy of your father plus other events, created a more than favorable terrain.

These things were, above all, actually experienced. My awareness of them came later. It's a logical process . . .

My mother was Christian. She didn't go to Mass. Nevertheless, she tried to make me learn a prayer, "I greet you, Mary." I was disgusted by the phrase, "the fruit of your womb"! I imagined a pear in the belly of a woman, a particularly disgusting image. She did not insist. She wanted me to take solemn communion. "Out of the question," my father said.

He had already given in once concerning your baptism.

He didn't want to give in a second time! He reassured me: "I know that the others will receive gifts. You will also get them, but without having to fuck around with the catechism!" At school, I was proud to announce to the others, entangled in that stupidity, that I received my gifts without having to go there. I have kept a good memory of the anti-clericalism of my father. When we went to a funeral, we never went into the church. We waited patiently in the bar next door.

Thus there was a family split that separated those who went into the church from those who waited at the bar.

This didn't pose a problem. My father was one of the "Reds." The others were "Blues" or "Yellows," the Catholics. This didn't stop us from finding ourselves together at the cemetery. It would end in a general feast. The women began by crying, then everyone gave in to laughter.

How did you like the idea of finding yourself in a bar with Paul, your father?

It was pleasant.

You were amused?

Oh, yes! When we met up with a priest, we greeted him with a great *caw caw*.¹¹

At what age?

Oh, this began early on. I must have been 7 or 8 years old. It was during the war.

Thus the personality of your father had a determinant influence on you. Was he distant with you?

No . . . We certainly used the formal form of address, but in the Picard spoken in Lessines, the informal form of address doesn't exist. When my mother was upset, she also used the formal form with me . . . All the same, my father was quite authoritarian. My relationship with him was less emotional than it was with my mother. He was a man who had a proletarian consciousness. He made it felt quite clearly through his ethics.

And he communicated this to you when you were very young?

He always took what I said into account, without ever considering me "too young to understand." He was in every way a socialist militant, at a time, finally, in which socialism still entertained certain links with a vaguely anarchist base. My grandfather, Augustin, seems to have been more libertarian. He didn't belong to any political party. On the other hand, fighting with the cops and unleashing strikes was . . . his daily bread, in a certain way! But I knew him very little. He had little time to relay his ideas to me. But I no doubt inherited them through the intermediary of my father.

And what was your mother's personality like? Who was she? What did she relay to you?

With my father, she formed one of the classic workers' couples. At our home, women had to be respected. I don't know if my father had read August Bebel, the author of *La Femme et le socialisme*, which advocated equality between men and women. Even if she was off base, it was unacceptable to hit or insult a woman. We thought very poorly of the men who, under the pretext of alcoholic crises, insulted or struck their companions. This never took place at our home. Some have claimed that, at the time, misogyny was widespread, but this isn't acceptable to me. People have used this claim apropos of Rabelais' contempt for women. How can we not critique it when, in his time, two defenses of women had been written, and one of them was directed at Rabelais and was written by one of his friends. Rabelais is attacked with much virulence in it.

We must recall that, back then, it was a quite banal and widespread thing to beat one's wife, and in the social and cultural milieus, too.

¹¹ *Translator's note:* The sound a crow makes.

My father was convinced of the superiority of men over women. He avoided showing it in public. But it took place between my parents. There were many quarrels when my father returned home very late or very drunk. But in general my mother accompanied him on his sorties.

We need not lose the idea that the liberalization of women comes from the economic will of capitalist society: get the women out of the home and make consumers of them.

Send them off to work.

[...] *The notion of “liberalization” is often paradoxical.*

Despite the ambient misogyny, women reacted with much humor to the clumsy and coarse jokes by the men. Today, such an attitude would be charged with being politically incorrect. At the time, it all flowed down the sewer . . .

That misogyny, which was anchored in a particular historical moment, colored elegance, irony and humor.

At first such a thing appears harmless, but while my father was totally against my playing with little toy soldiers, my mother and grandmother went out and bought them for me. This betrayed an emotional side to my mother, a little mother hen, that tendency that was so often repeated: “Pay attention to this, to that.” I broke the figure on the bicycle twice. Soon after my mother forbid my use of them: “No question. Too dangerous. You are too hopeless.” She had decided. To escape this affective weight, I had to develop the art of dissimulation. For example, I’d learned to swim with friends. They would drop me in the water. No doubt I floundered a bit. And the canal they’d thrown me in was really filthy. If my mother had known! I grew up with phrases that always exasperated me: “You’ll end up killing us” or “You will put us in our graves.” My skillfulness in diverting her attention had the merit of removing suspicions of my guilt.

A classic!

I had a friend who had the nerve to retort to my mother, “Start dying, then we’ll see.” I would never have dared to say such a thing! In the family setting, feelings were more important than exchanges of ideas. You didn’t hug other men at the time. My father never hugged me, except at New Year’s. But the women! You had to hug all the women, all the mothers. Feminine contact – certainly pleasant – was common currency. With my father, with men in general – even if I don’t like to say this in such a fashion – contact was dry, always a little distant. A false difference, nevertheless, because with him, despite everything, many things took place through discussions.

All this is part of the image of assured virility.

With my mother, expressions of feelings were foremost. In a certain way, my father and mother performed¹² their respective parental roles without being opposed to each other. My mother was

¹² *Translator’s note:* the French here, *se complétaient*, means both completed each other and complemented each other.

also the first one to give me a little spending money, without the knowledge of my father, who provided a very precise, very limited sum because the financial means of the family were slight. She added a little to my share. It was a game between us. My mother, being the woman of the house – my father gave her a certain sum with which she had to manage. My mother didn't hesitate to steal from my father's wallet: "It will be seen more than once in a bar," she would say. Through these words, she was finally able to win the right to dig through it! This wasn't theft, but an unstated game they played. From time to time, I'd hear my father exclaim, "But you've taken my money!" I happened to know that this was true, but I didn't want to get mixed up in it. I knew their desire – both of them – to never fall into some kind of dramatic scene. There were never any fights or crying – at most a few confrontations, but . . . My father always lost. "I can say whatever I want, but she is always right." My mother would puff herself up. And that was the last word.

Your mother was originally from the Tournai region.

From Blandain, to be exact. The people from Tournai are proud that they come from a bourgeois town – a very bourgeois town, in fact – Catholic and bourgeois. My mother never wanted to mix with workers. It was a point of honor with her to only speak refined language. She was originally from an area close to the French border and spoke a language that was less crude than the local morals. And she loved to make that distinction.

What type of family did she come from?

I regularly saw my maternal grandparents, yet less often than I saw my paternal grandmother, Valérie, who lived with us. My maternal grandfather was a plumber, zinc worker and roofer. He was in fact an artisan who kept a certain contempt for the working classes . . . Even if he worked hard, he didn't consider himself to be a worker . . . He was a notable person in the village. He wasn't Catholic, but . . .

The influence that your mother had on you still isn't clear to me.

She was a bit mysterious, no doubt something proper to women and that didn't stop fascinating the men: her mood changes, her way of avoiding conflict with my father by using her head. She was an emancipated woman for the times. She worked for women's right to vote and was very active in the Socialist Party. She put a lot into the Oeuvre de l'Enfance, which was a Socialist benevolent association that worked with newborns, with women who didn't have the elemental structures that would allow them to assume their responsibilities as mothers . . . They taught women how to swaddle their babies, how to wash and care for them. My mother went there three times a week. If my father was often absent, it was because of assignments as a replacement at work that he had to honor. This is why I can say that I was raised by two women: my paternal grandmother and my mother. Perhaps it is because of this, shall we say, slightly polygamous arrangement that things went as they did later on.

[...] *This arrangement does not tend to produce the same type of personalities [as normal].*

The risk is spoiled children.

Were you an only child?

Yes! From whence comes a certain egotism or an egocentrism that the “family cocoon” both exacerbated and attenuated.

You had a modest, pampered and tranquil adolescence.

In my adolescence, not having to rebel against my father or mother favored the social orientation of my rebelliousness. Thanks to my parents’ ideas, the militancy of the era and the feeling of being part of the “workers’ aristocracy” that reigned in Lessines, my awareness of [the importance of] engagement was very strong. It was in fact through it that I escaped the classic revolt of adolescence . . . Many of my memories date from after the war. But the little that I remember of the pre-war period confirms that things were already like that. I’ve kept in memory one family evening, among others, that was very tense because Nazism had arisen. One of my uncles, overtly fascist, drew general reprobation. But as he was full of good will and conciliatory, there were no consequences, in any case not at that moment.

Such a memory comes from when you were approximately seven years old?

I was six – six when the war began. This uncle was killed by the Resistance while my cousin Armand, whom I liked very much, watched. We avoided mentioning this barbarity, which was very common at the time.

What memories do you have of your childhood during the war and the beginning of your adolescence?

Several very clear ones: the bombs that repeatedly fell on Lessines, which was “lightly bombarded.” The church burned. Running for shelter with distraught people – this paradoxically counts among my happy memories . . . It was a game for us, not a drama! If one doesn’t see the fear in the faces of the others. The anguish of running for shelter in the middle of the night . . .

. . . which inevitably has direct or indirect repercussions on children.

Yes, but bizarrely without touching us deeply. It wasn’t fundamentally dramatic for us. I didn’t suffer from hunger, either. Although I remember feeling a certain animosity towards the peasants, an animosity already promulgated by the Workers Party. At the time, the peasantry was, in a general way, conservative, Catholic and very cruel. During the war, since we lived in a little town, we had to think about provisions. My mother carried me on her bicycle through the surrounding villages, where sometimes we had to wait hours to buy what would end up being only six eggs, a bit of lard, some vegetables – in the midst of the scorn of feasting people. For a long time afterwards, these humiliating personal experiences made me opposed to the peasantry when it indulges in the arrogance of wealth. The peasants – not the big ones, but the ones in the middle [of the social hierarchy] – lived relatively well. They had food to eat and they were paid very dearly by the townspeople for the aid that they gave them. On the other hand, the workers’ milieu practiced solidarity. People offered gifts, they shared things willingly. The peasantry of

the time lived folded upon itself, forming a caste that, in a certain way, took revenge upon the working classes that lived in town, for which the peasants felt contempt.

Such experiences, which sometimes were humiliating – because this unfortunately revealed such a process – did they forge a certain consciousness?

One can't speak of revolutionary consciousness at six years old. But an injustice was experienced, leaving the impression that something was wrong with the world. This wasn't about children, the war, German soldiers . . . all that came a bit later. But at the time, at the beginning, in 1941-42, what affected me was that confrontation with the rich – both the bourgeois of the town and the peasants of the countryside. It isn't very pleasant to tell the truth, but they didn't deprive themselves of the opportunity to make their difference weigh down upon us.

What about your childhood games, your playmates? Did you make friends easily? What distinctive or foundational memories do you have of this first period in which you confronted the outside world, that is to say, with other kids your age?

We formed a happy band. Near home there was a stonecutter. We would meet on a big field strewn with gravestones. That was our playground. Once the workday had ended, at around 4 or 5 pm, we had complete freedom. Our only constraint was that we had to be home for dinner at around 9:30 or 10 pm. I obeyed with good grace. My first experiences with puberty took place there. There were several girls in our group. Around 13 or 14 years old, the little sexual adventures increased in number but without puritanism, in complete innocence. Only the terror of getting a girl pregnant haunted us.

You are speaking of 1948-50. The pill wasn't invented yet.

There were only condoms. We objected to using them but OK . . . A great freedom existed at the time, thanks to the Socialist and workers' milieu. Puritanism had no currency. There was a rejection of homosexuality but quite vaguely. We didn't speak of it too much!

You didn't hurl anathema at an adolescent if he or she had had sexual relations.

No! But the parents didn't want to know about it. No discussion was possible. This is what was later called *the unsaid*, with all the repressive connotations that the term has. You didn't speak of it, that's all. At the time, I knew of no discussion about the behavior of adolescents. There was, quite simply, a very strict framework. You had to come home by 10 pm. A framework of efficiency, too: be good at school. With these reservations, everyone benefited from very large wide of unsupervised freedom.

Do you recall the amorous, sexual or amicable experiences of your group, two or three determining factors in who you would become?

Not really, unless it was the absence of puritanism, of guilt, especially. When I had sufficient distance to be able to judge the trajectories of my friends and the awareness that had been inculcated in them by Christianity, I understood the difference. They lived in an awareness of

sin. Under the watch of God and the priest. I have never submitted to the yoke of the least Christian discourse. My membership in the Jeunes Gardes socialistes got added to these adolescent adventures. We paraded in the streets, insulting the bourgeois. Militancy guaranteed violence. We wore red scarves. Another way of channeling adolescent revolt towards social questions¹³ . . . Re-reading Carson McCullers and Virginia Woolf, and discovering the tormented character of the adolescents in their books, I came to realize that we were ignorant of these types of psychological depths because we had a single goal: to liquidate the old world. Our revolt was not blind.

It had meaning.

Perhaps I did not perceive it clearly at the time, but our struggle had meaning: “the emancipation of the proletariat.” I don’t know if the exact words were known to us, but their meaning was.

What is striking is that you speak of it this way, but you were only 13 or 14 years old.

We were steeped in the atmosphere of the workers’ milieu. The quarry sirens that punctuated the day predisposed us to a certain approach to the land, perhaps to a reconquest of it. Another element played a role in my personal history. I had great affection for my godmother, Julia de Saint-Martin, my baptismal godmother, as one says in Belgium. She and her husband were very close to me. I regularly went to eat at their place. She cooked very well, unlike my mother, who was a mediocre cook! Julia had a brother, Eloi, who joined the International Brigades in 1936 and was killed at Teruel in 1939. My whole childhood was nurtured by her stories of the Spanish Revolution! I didn’t know Eloi, but I was very young at the time. Julia adopted two street kids, a little boy and a little girl, both Spanish, and everything in their universe turned around Spain. I believe that Franco was one of the most hated people in my childhood. I grew up hearing his abominable name . . . a kind of personified horror, a monster to be destroyed.

From the pleasant and slightly nostalgic manner with which you relay them, these stories that your godmother told you seem to resemble everything except brainwashing.

¹³ *Translator’s note:* elsewhere in *Rien n’est fini, tout commence*, there is a relevant excerpt from “Interview de ‘blousons noirs,’” published in *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, #32, April-June 1961. It begins with the following “quotation from a newspaper”: “This kind of demonstration is the work of provocateurs foreign to the strike, the leather jackets.” Then there is the following exchange: “Are you the foreign elements, the agitators who stir up trouble at dignified and peaceful demonstrations with your provocations?” “Of course it’s us. Always at the front. You might say that we lead the corteges.” “You lead them?” “Yes, we are the ones who animate the street demonstrations. But you can believe that the others follow us. Quite simply, they are a little too old, too moderate – they need young people to shake them up.” “How old are you?” “Between 17 and 20, but there are also some who are between 22 and 25.” “What milieus do you come from?” “All of them: apprentices, workers, warehousemen, postal workers, college kids and high schoolers.” “Isn’t it the J[eunes] G[ardes] S[ocialistes] who are regularly at the front of the demonstrations?” “It’s true, the J.G.S. played and still play a very great role in leading the crowd and coining slogans. Incidentally, some of us are also in the J.G.S., but not all of us.”

They were the stories of a world about which we had very little information.

As a child, you listened to these stories as if they were stories about adventures, brigands, thieves . . .

They were better than tales or legends, and these stories had the merit of being true! For me, they were part of an epic poem. And for a long time afterwards, I kept Spain as a vision of an epic country in which a final struggle was being fought.

It became an ideal for you?

An ideal against the forces of death. It was my godmother who first repeated to me the words of José Millan-Astray:¹⁴ *Viva la muerte*.¹⁵

Your phrase “against the forces of death” – it isn’t gratuitous – it goes beyond the forces of evil, all forms of oppression, simple governmental authority . . .

There’s nothing Manichean about it. Obviously the fight was between the Socialists and the Right, fascism. But my godmother didn’t recount it as a political struggle, but as a report about the horrors that took place down there and were intolerable. With the result that names such as Franco and Queipo de Llano¹⁶ ended up entering my childhood pantheon . . . As a result, I can remember such faraway names and events. And while Julia told me about the Spanish saga and Franco’s abominations, my father told me the saga of Fourmies. The shootings at Fourmies, which took place in 1908,¹⁷ I believe. A dozen people were killed, including a 15-year-old girl, during the repression of a large strike. The episode of Fourmies contributed not a little to proletarian mythology. Today, it is no longer well known. For me, it was a keyword.

I don’t know about it. Was it a workers’ revolt?

It was a peaceful workers’ revolt against which the army was unleashed. The soldiers were drunk. They fired on the crowd. Eight or ten people – I no longer remember how many – were killed . . . My father spoke of it constantly. I heard the adults mention the event among themselves: “If we move, it will be Fourmies. We must avoid that.” I had to see the town whose history my childhood had been steeped in. I went there, very late, with a friend, the proletarian writer André Pierrard.¹⁸ It is now a completely deserted mining town. You at most find there a few inscriptions, a few commemorative signs. Fourmies-like excesses took place during what one later called the [period of the] Royal Question. King Leopold III, a pro-Nazi, sped off to

¹⁴ *Translator’s note:* A Spanish fascist military leader. Born 1879. Founded the Foreign Legion in 1920 and took part in the July 1936 uprising that led to civil war. He is also infamous for the slogan, “Death to the intellectuals!”

¹⁵ *Translator’s note:* “Long live death,” in Spanish.

¹⁶ *Translator’s note:* virulently anti-Jewish Spanish military leader (1875-1951).

¹⁷ *Translator’s note:* 1 May 1891, France.

¹⁸ Jean-Louis Chappat and André Pierrard, *La Fusillade de Fourmies*, Lille, Editions Miroirs, 1991.

Switzerland at the moment of the Liberation. After trying to make himself forgotten, at a given moment he returned and chased away the Prince Regent, his brother Charles, who was quite modest, a joker who drank his beer in Brussels and didn't bother anyone. Anti-Leopold and republican Walloon was violently opposed to the return of Leopold III while conservative Flanders supported it . . . At the Maison du Peuple in Lessines, a truck had been chartered and a machinegun was installed on it. When we, the Jeunes Gardes socialistes, paraded through the upper parts of town, the bourgeois said, "There go the red scoundrels." We were very proud of this. It was our title of nobility. We wore it like a flower in our buttonholes. We broke windows on occasion. The red scoundrels were part of the workers' aristocracy. It was our chivalrous side. Thus we in the Jeunes Gardes were very wound up, ready to attack Brussels. Weapons, which until then we'd known nothing about, appeared. It was very curious. Sten machineguns, no doubt left over from the Resistance. All of a sudden, they were everywhere! At the conclusion of a big debate, the Socialists decreed that blood risked being spilled due to the increase in military roadblocks. The Socialist leaders declared: "We can't start Fourmies again." It had strongly marked people's minds. We tangled with those old cowards, the Social-Democrats. Insults burst out. We were called "little cretins." The question was settled when shooting broke out at Liège, in Grâce-Berleur. The gendarmes killed three workers. The event chilled everyone and the ambiance [of revolt] collapsed. At the end of a political debate, Leopold III abdicated in favor of Baudouin. Calm returned. Under the pretext of the Royal Question, which we finally didn't care about, the movement gained and then soon afterwards lost insurrectional vigor. I addressed reproaches to my father. "You Socialists talk about the Cause, the Cause, but you do nothing, you've never done anything!" My father explained to me that the Socialists had revolted in Vienna in 1934. He told me about Dollfuss, who joined the hated people in my pantheon of assassins . . . In Vienna, I wanted to see the working-class neighborhoods that he had bombed with heavy artillery. They were crushed in the blood of the revolt of 34. He'd had Social-Democrats hanged. In the publications that my father showed me, I could see a photo of the Social-Democrats executed by Dollfuss. "Do not say that Socialists have never moved," he retorted. And the discussion went on from there. Neither speeches nor theories, just bits of history. I never had open conflict with my father. He was proud of very rarely making use of his paternal authority, except to say, "You must go to school," "You must bathe yourself." Even later on, when I attacked his Social-Democratic side in the name of Communism, he discouraged me by saying, "You don't even know what you're talking about. You haven't even heard people speak about the strikes in Vorkouta," which were repressed by Stalin. He flabbergasted me because I was indeed ignorant. The Socialists had a very good awareness of Stalinism, and my father very quickly warned me of the dangers of this current. He repeated, "Stalinism is neither Socialism nor freedom, but terror." At the beginning, we had several inflamed political discussions. I found his remarks close to Social-Democratic calumny, even bourgeois calumny. But he never said, "Shut up. I am your father." Certainly he could have treated me like I was a "little cretin." "Do you at least know what you are talking about?" A little later, I learned that the strikes at Vorkouta had become Stalin's first massacre of workers. The Socialists knew about such things.

Much later, when people said, “Yes, but we didn’t know anything about it – the gulags, etc.” it was a lie. Even if people in the workers’ milieu hadn’t read Ante Ciliga or Victor Serge,¹⁹ they knew. They knew about the existence of the gulags, Stalin’s massacres, the trials. They knew it in a different way than the one by which the bourgeois press and the Right contrived to attack Stalinism. And this was important.

The everyday atmosphere . . . it didn’t at all include plated discourse of this type: “You will be a Leftist, a Social-Democrat or an anarchist.” Not at all.

I was never subjected to indoctrination of any sort.

That is what is interesting. Most often the indoctrination of children causes the inverse psychological effect, that is to say, rejection.

Not here. This was almost part of a basic mythology whose founding events have today sunk into oblivion when, for us, they were almost banal . . . It is true that my father never reprimanded me for what I said about the Socialist Party. My feelings about it came from lived experience. Lessines was a workers’ town, very festive. The alcoholic excesses, the brawls, certain everyday instances of violence, the women beaten, the men drinking the balance of their two weeks’ pay before giving the remainder to their families – all of it was common currency. There were scenes. “One doesn’t strike a woman. You have to be a scoundrel to strike a woman.” – Those were virtually the only slightly moralistic words that my father ever said to me. The party didn’t fail to teach a lesson to the workers who mistreated their wives.

It was a form of civic education that, even if it had a moralizing side, wasn’t insignificant.

At the time, they were already using the phrase “proletarian consciousness.” This consciousness was expressed in laws. “Don’t drink with a boss or a strikebreaker, that is to say, a non-worker. Don’t drink with just anyone.” Such were the laws. At the beginning of my adolescence, my father said to me, “You can drink as much as you want, but, the next day, you must go to school and the results must be good”; “You can go out with girls, that’s not a problem, but you must not bring any pregnant girls home”; “Drink what you want, but I don’t want you babbling or losing your awareness or intelligence.” He detested drunks.

At the time, there was what one called a workers’ morality: you must adopt an irreproachable comportment with respect to bosses and the bourgeois so as to be able to confront all forms of oppression [...]

My father wanted to be an engineer. His father wasn’t able to pay for his studies and so he had to content himself with being a railroad worker, employed by the Société Nationale des Chemins de fer Belges.²⁰ But he also kept his dreams alive. He wanted me to become an engineer. I was terrible at mathematics, so he didn’t insist!

¹⁹ *Translator’s note:* Ante Ciliga (1898-1992), a Croatian Communist, author of *The Russian Enigma* (1940). Victor Serge (1890-1947), a Russian revolutionary.

²⁰ *Translator’s note:* Belgian National Railroad Company.

A classic line of descent.

He also relayed another value to me at an early age: “Don’t betray your class.” For a child, this had a “chivalrous” side. We had a real contempt for the bourgeois in the upper part of town who drank poorly, had orgies, were hypocrites . . . This didn’t make us moral puritans because, as I’ve said, morals were very free in Lessines. There was no political correctness. The basis – and I believe that this is what is important in my evolution – was everyday life itself. The bars, discussion halls, and places to live contributed to our education. This obviously often degenerated into political quarrel. But something, something very positive, was circulating. This meant drinking a lot. And even if there certainly were idiotic and doddering drunks, they were in the minority. The majority drank while holding a discussion. They perpetuated a non-coercive and very rudimentary workers’ morality that allowed them to defend themselves against the enemy – the Catholics and their hypocrisy: “Do what I say but don’t do what I do.”

You are quoting from the Gospel according to Matthew.²¹

Paradoxically, as a child I didn’t have very good memories of the Saturday excursions on which my parents would bring me to the bar, on the condition that I left them in peace. I followed their very adult conversations, which, it goes without saying, were very drunken. Most of the time it went above my head or bored me, but – no doubt about it – these things had to seep in. I invariably ended up asleep at a corner of the table.

[...] *What did your father do during the war? Was he called up?*

He was called up at the end of the war of 1914. He was part of the Belgian troops that occupied Germany. It went very well for him. He fraternized with the Germans. He didn’t see how the conflict concerned him. In 1941, due to his hatred of fascism, he entered into what one called “the Secret Army,”²² otherwise known as the Resistance. He worked at the Lessines train station as a rail worker. He never spoke about the rest of it. Neither my mother nor I ever knew anything about it at the time. We only learned about his activities at the end of the war, when he was a uniformed member of the Resistance.

He’d been loyal to the notion of a Secret Army.

He never spoke of it. His work consisted of making [incendiary bombs,] little boxes with acid and paper, thick paper, inside them. These bottles were thrown at the freight trains carrying munitions and armaments that passed through the station. You had to calculate the time it took the acid to eat through the paper and reach the phosphorous, I guess. I don’t know the precise process. But it took at least one hour. The mechanism exploded far from the train station where the operation took place.

²¹ *Translator’s note:* Matthew 23:3.

²² Formed in August 1940 as a combination of the Légion belge and the Armée belge. Active as an armed resistance group by the end of 1941, it took on the name “Armée secrète” on 1 June 1944.

An explosion took place?

The trains were burned, in any event.

Your father participated in such attacks?

Yes, attacks against military trains, trains carrying supplies. He never killed anyone. One day, at four in the morning, when the Germans came banging on every door, I saw him jump into the garden from the back window. He was in his nightshirt and he ran through the stubble-field. Later on, he told me he didn't injure his feet, even though the stalks are terrible when you walk on them! He ran because he panicked, and he found a railroad cabin that wasn't very far away. A kilometer, all the same . . . It is the only thing I remember that worried me about his participation in the Resistance.

He managed to escape that time!

When the Germans came, my mother simply said, "He's working, he's at the rail yards, he's at work." The Germans went off to make a quick check . . . That's how he escaped them.

In Belgium, was the Resistance widespread or limited during the War? [...]

In Belgium, especially in the workers' milieu, the Resistance was very active. There were several "Secret Armies." My father was a part of the one sponsored by the Socialists. Several bourgeois also participated in it, but their presence remained rare . . . The fraternization of the people with the Germans was less frequent in Walloon than in France. We were, all the same, a very working-class region . . . There were also collaborators. A Walloon Rexist Party – an extreme Right movement, a rival of the Catholic Party, principally active in the 1930s and '40s, known for its collaborationist politics – enrolled men on the Eastern Front. But many of the inhabitants of the region known for its mines, quarries and metallurgy joined the Resistance . . .

Without anyone telling you directly, when you were a child, just at the threshold of your adolescence, your father was a militant. You understood this but you didn't really learn it until after the war . . .

At the time, we almost never spoke of politics. A general distrust overtook people. An uneasiness hovered over the subject . . . It was a bit of a black hole. The opposition between Walloon and Flanders became obvious. Flanders mostly rallied in favor of the Nazi occupation. In the name of nationalism . . . Certainly in towns like Ghent, which was a working-class town, the Resistance was active. In Antwerp, the dockworkers resisted, too. But traditional Flanders was pro-German. One finds traces of it in today's Flemish nationalism . . . There was rallying to the Germans in the name of a kind of Greater Germany, an already-existing pan-Germany. . .

[...] You heard bombs exploding not very far away; your father was in the Resistance, but, all the same, the war unfolded quite tranquilly for you.

There were roundups. My father escaped being [arrested and] deported. No member of my family was. Several Socialist leaders were arrested and died in concentration camps, but we only knew this later on. The German troops who crossed the streets in cadenced steps, a certain fear, the banging on doors with sticks – it created a powerful impression – those are *my* memories of the era.

One day, going to school with a neighbor, we saw a man arrive on a bicycle, and then another guy whom we'd seen from time to time, someone we recognized, and the first guy killed the second one with a pistol and then told us as he fled, "You didn't see anything!" And then he rode off. The vision of that man on the ground – a quiet little gentleman wearing a nice overcoat and carrying a satchel, with blood spurting out of him – remained with me. And the memory of his hand, agitating the ground . . . We continued on our route to school without saying anything.

Someone had been killed under your eyes.

Someone whom we knew by sight, in fact a collaborator, an informer, was executed by the Resistance. Opposite our house, on an electric pole, a small sign said, "So and so was judged for treason and informing. He was executed."

At the time, during the war, did you continue to go to school?

I went to middle school on foot, via small roads. Lessines was occupied, but the Germans didn't commit any massacres there. One day, at the train station, my father saw the arrival of a German soldier with his rifle and greatcoat. He came without anyone greeting him. Everyone had ostracized him, until the day my father – who had been in occupied Germany [after WWI] and spoke the language – proposed that they go to a café together. They started to chat. My father kept a traumatic memory of this episode. At a particular moment, the German said to him, "I didn't ask to be here – the war – I prefer to be at home," and my father retorted, "Yes, but all the same, you commit horrors. You arrest people. You shoot them. You send them off to who-knows-where. You are responsible for these types of things!" The soldier said, "But reflect a little: we don't know anyone here. We have received two hundred letters of denunciation at the *Kommandantur*.²³ These must be verified, but it is you who give us the information in the first place. We know nothing. It is your fellow citizens who indicate X or Y as members of the Resistance." If there were two hundred denunciations in a working-class town . . . This was a lot for a town that we'd imagined was resisting!

Very instructive concerning human nature . . .

A town more working class than bourgeois. My father never went back there.

The German soldier's remarks were well considered and just.

They kept a kind of affection between them. At the moment of the Liberation, the resisters started to fire – a bit late – on withdrawing German troops. It could have become a massacre.

²³ *Translator's note:* "garrison headquarters," in German.

Fortunately, the British arrived. To my great pleasure, and the pleasure of my friends, there was a brief battle at Hourraing. Young boys and girls collected the [spent] cartridge cases . . . The adults were horrified but for us it was a laugh. There weren't many deaths, in fact. I keep the memory of my mother closing the eyes of a dead SS officer. His cap seemed really cool to me. I grabbed it. This earned me a rare smack from my mother! There was some stupidity, too. Like trying to explode machinegun bullets with a nail and a hammer. Until one of us blew his hand off. We stopped soon after . . . The Liberation led to acts of barbarity. On la Grand'place in Lessines, there was a big music store. Women who had slept with Germans were brought there to have their heads shaved. This behavior, which was like lynching, was repulsive. My father didn't want me to go. Obviously, we – all of 11 years old – went anyway. He was very angry about it [when he found out]. He thought it was ignominious. The real resisters, those who had started fighting early, were against it. The latecomers, those who had more or less fraternized with the occupiers and got off the hook, were the most ferocious proponents of it. We called them “resisters at the last minute.” I have the impression that I saw a public execution, something that I have fortunately never seen [since]. It was monstrous.

Thus we come to the end of the war. You began to enter adolescence. Did you note any changes in the ambience of the town?

There was always a festive side to Lessines, but it had turned to debauchery. One of my distant cousins was joyfully jumped in a back alley by an American she'd met. Morals themselves were jumping.²⁴

[...] *When individuals no longer have their customary bearings, one sees excesses, all kinds of excesses.*

As for sexual excesses, we only saw them from the outside. This was also the era in which we first saw Blacks.

You'd never seen Blacks before? Was this your first time?

They offered us chocolate, and so they were very well thought of. Racism wasn't very prevalent at the time. The Socialists were fiercely opposed to the colonization of the Congo. Leopold II was among my top enemies. The Socialists detested him.

He was redoubtable.

A true war criminal.

To complete the décor of the ensemble: how was Leopold II seen in your region?

Very badly. In the workers' milieu, in any case! First of all for the good reason that he'd made military service obligatory. All the workers had to leave their jobs to do their military service.

²⁴ *Translator's note:* Vaneigem is punning on *sauter/bondir*, both of which mean to jump: “les mœurs se débondaient.”

Two or three years, at the time.

Everyone in Walloon spat upon Leopold II. La Louvière had a bigger population than Lessines, which has 10,000 inhabitants today, and had 8,000 at the time. Despite its 15-20,000 inhabitants, La Louvière has long been considered a village for the good reason that Leopold II was welcomed there with tomatoes during an official visit. The opposition had been virulent! He refused La Louvière the status of a town! There was always an immediate opposition to Leopold II, to his arrogance . . . When he annexed the Congo, the denunciations of the atrocities perpetrated down there were very strong in the Socialist milieu. The bourgeoisie wasn't offended by them. It saw in Leopold the Builder King. He had opened up several beautiful avenues and built several nice spots in Brussels . . .

Beautiful avenues . . . Brussels has been destroyed bit by bit. The [automobile] tunnels have destroyed the town.

That was later on . . . We must recognize that Leopold II initiated the construction of several parks . . . This has contributed to his reputation. At school, there must have been Socialist teachers who knew, but didn't insist on [calling him] the Colonizer King.

[...] *I believe that Hugo Claus wrote a very ferocious play about King Leopold II and his acts of violence.* [...]

I don't know that play. What Claus recounts in *Le Chagrin des Belges*²⁵ is the story of this poor guy who enlists in the Nazi army, whom everyone takes revenge on, when he is only a half-wit . . . This was a bit of the climate among us. The book doesn't mention the Grammont region, but the atmosphere is very similar. By re-reading *Le Chagrin des Belges*, I managed to recall memories of everyday life in Lessines at the time. A very beautiful book.

[...] *What you say only confirms my impressions* [...]

In Lessines as well, several half-wits took sides with Nazism. They paid for it very dearly. Some of them were lynched.

To close the subject: was there a Jewish community in the region at the time?

No, not at all. I only learned about the existence of Jews relatively late.

You learned quite late about the existence of the [world's] oldest people!

I believe that anti-Jewish Nazi propaganda didn't penetrate among us. There weren't any Jews. There were Communists and Socialists who were feared, but apart from them . . . One more

²⁵ *Translator's note:* a novel, first published in 1983 in Dutch as *Het verdriet van België*, and translated into English as *The Sorrow of Belgium* by Arnold J. Pomerans that same year.

thing: as an adolescent, I knew about “red rubber.”²⁶ I’d heard about it before I’d read Mark Twain.²⁷ My father was violently anti-colonialist. For us, racism had no reason to exist. Instead – and this wasn’t racism – we felt class hatred, hatred of the bourgeoisie. It was later that I discovered Mark Twain’s attack on Leopold II. It took Adam Hochschild and the book²⁸ that he’d recently written against Leopold II to create a stir in Belgium. People defended the Sovereign King by saying, “Oh, no! That’s an exaggeration!” A million people killed – just a detail!

Starting in 1948, you were at the Athénée?

I had to leave Lessines. I took the train, 10 minutes, got off at Ath, which passed for a bourgeois town.

Over the course of your education, were there books – or a professor who played a role, who had an influence – and so determined some of your choices, some of your notable orientations?

Not in school, but from my father. In the Lessines train station, there was a little newspaper stand, an *aubette* as one says in Belgium, run by a railroad retiree. In addition to newspapers, there were books, sometimes a little worn out. I remember there was a copy of Stefan Zweig’s *Combat avec le démon*, which introduced me to Hölderlin, Nietzsche and Kleist, who have remained my favorite authors. I often stopped there [at the *aubette*] when I waited for my father at the station (my mother sometimes sent me to find him, to catch up with him and bring him home so that he didn’t visit too many bars!).

But you made something of the wait, all the same!

We made something of it . . . At any rate, I waited for him.

What did you drink?

I learned to drink very quickly! Especially playing in the *Harmonie des prolétaires* band. At the *Maison du peuple* bar, we’d already begun to drink – a local beer.

A local beer . . . but you weren’t more than 10 years old!

What do you want from me? Music, brass bands, contributed to the ambience. The *Harmonie* stopped at every socialist bar. There were many of them! Several more uptown, and they were pleasant. When we went back downtown, we were in quite a state . . . I learned to play the trumpet and to drink beer. It wasn’t very strong beer . . . Anyway we had to keep quite rigorously to the sheet music and play . . .

²⁶ *Translator’s note:* The rubber plants in the Belgian Congo.

²⁷ “King Leopold’s Soliloquy” (1905).

²⁸ *Translator’s note:* Hochschild is an American and his book, *King Leopold’s Ghost*, was published in 1998.

Drinking beer at 10 or 11 years old – that must have produced a certain effect . . . It wasn't water!

No! But we could take it!

This must have produced a new reaction in you. A very slight drunkenness.

Yes, drunkenness. But this wasn't every day. It was permitted on Saturdays; it was part of the décor.

Chapter II: College and Early Professional Career

How old were you when you started college?

Seventeen.

And so you went to Brussels. How was your arrival? You must have felt a difference.

I hooked up with friends from the Athénée in Ath. We formed a group. I went to the capital with my father, who told me, "Good, no problem with making the trip every day." He rented a small room for me in Brussels. Not very expensive – the least expensive, in fact – but good.

A cot, as with many students?

Yes. And for spending money, my parents gave me 20 Belgian francs a week, I believe, the current equivalent of half a euro. Leaving the train, I went to the flea markets on the place du Jeu de Balle, where I made various purchases . . .

Nearby the Gare du Midi?

Book purchases. The majority of my money went there, and I survived on what remained!

In what neighborhood did you live?

Etterbeek, a very pleasant neighborhood. There were not a few bars there . . . I went to the university on foot. It took 15 minutes.

You went to the Université Libre de Bruxelles – the ULB.

There was no other one for me. It was the anti-clerical university. It was opposed to the UCL – the Université Catholique de Louvain. Today the UCL is not very Catholic at all.

No. [But] it is at a very high level.

It is a very good university, but at the time . . .

So you arrived.²⁹ Did your father accompany you?

At Brussels, I registered with him there with me. After that, one thing followed another. I'd leave Sunday evening or Monday morning and return home every weekend.

You were becoming autonomous.

At first, there was great freedom and then we had what one today calls an identity reflex, that is to say, we found ourselves among people from Ath, from Lessines . . .

Among Picards.

Without constituting a group, but, if the inhabitants of Brussels annoyed us, we knew how to respond . . . But there weren't many linguistic quarrels. They weren't common.

What discipline did you study at the ULB?

My father suggested that I study law, but this didn't interest me any more than mathematics or engineering. He didn't insist. Since he was a union leader in Lessines, he knew union members in Tournai, people who were slightly untouchable, who suggested to him that I study medicine in order to become an eye specialist and assured him that all of my studies would be paid for by the union. He proposed it to me; I said there was no question of it.

It is amusing to see how a destiny can lie ahead: one becomes an eye specialist because one's studies were paid for by the union.

Everything would be paid by the union, and so my father said, "Think about it, all the same."

Although said in passing, this proves that back then the unions had a certain power to be able to propose such studies to their members' children.

Even later on, when I got married, the union helped me obtain an apartment in a pro-union council estate . . . This was a social benefit from something that, at the time, still claimed to be a democracy, before it became the union bureaucracy that it is today.

After shrugging off engineering, law, and medicine, what career path did you finally take?

I asked my father if I could study what, in Belgium, is called Roman Philology. There were classes in old French that strongly interested us since Picard comes from Old French. We read texts together. We studied the history of French literature; we attended conferences. I had an

²⁹ *Translator's note:* the French word used here, *déboules*, can mean "burst into view," "turned up," or "took off."

extraordinary professor who, for two years, taught classes that analyzed Mallarmé. I learned more with her than with my other professors.

What was her name?

Émilie Carner-Nouet. She was, as she loved to recall, one of Paul Valéry's mistresses. She'd married a Catalan poet, Josef Carner, an exile from Francoist Spain. She had remarkable erudition.

At the time, classes in Roman Philology at the ULB were very popular, and at a certain level.

A very good level.

So you studied Old French, French literature . . . Latin, too?

Latin and Greek. I'd continued studying Latin with a really crazy professor named Léon Herrmann. He'd recomposed Virgil's poems, claiming that Virgil couldn't have written this or that verse, that he wasn't in his place. Herrmann transformed the entire work . . . He was very funny. He advanced completely bizarre theses. He was attacked by all the other Latinists but we really liked him.

Perhaps it was a way of getting you interested in the material.

Absolutely! We were fascinated by his stories. I re-read them recently. They are completely absurd. So few of the other classes were fascinating. Herrmann's classes had that merit, at least . . . I also had the opportunity to have Armand Abel – this was his last year – who wasn't only a champion of free thinking, but also a ferocious anti-cleric. He launched diatribes punctuated with “the name of the God of the priests.” He gave an extremely interesting class on the history of religion, which he demolished forever. All the same, I should make clear that there was at the ULB an extremely significant movement called the Cercle du Libre Examen.³⁰ I was part of it for all four years that I was there. The Circle published a journal called *Libre Examen*.³¹ All the arguments against the Church were made in it, in a very scholarly fashion. There was also a slightly simplistic article about toleration for attacks against the Cercle Thomas More – made up of Catholics – who enjoyed free expression. The Libre Examen greatly contributed to a certain mental awakening. This prevented a kind of sectarianism, but not entirely, because a mini-bureaucracy, which was quite active when it came to strikes or taking positions, ran this little Circle, which we sometimes had to confront.

There were discussions?

³⁰ *Translator's note:* the Circle for Free Inquiry.

³¹ “As we have explained in the Editorial, our journal will be a journal of opinions, ideas, and general culture that will not duplicate any other existing one. It will never be a political organ, which does not mean that we will not make a place in it for political and sociological questions.” [*Translator's note:* this unattributed text appears underneath a reproduction of the front cover of the first issue of *Libre Examen*, dated March 1937.]

A conference every week. Sartre was invited. Lucien Goldmann came to speak about the Left in Port-Royal.

And so ideas came in from all sides.

Much more in the margins of the classes than in the classes themselves, which were very traditional. The history of [French] literature stopped at Rimbaud. We got together to study the history of surrealism and drink. The first work we read was Maurice Nadeau's *Histoire du Surréalisme*, which Breton criticized strongly. I learned enormously from it.

It is a good book.

A very good book. The Cercle du Libre Examen offered discussions and drinks.

Discussions and alcohol.

Much later I found the same conjunction among the situationists.

There was a natural link between the bars in Lessines, where you accompanied your father, where you sometimes went by yourself, to have a drink with friends, and the turn things took at the university.

I would say that there's a continuity from adolescence to today: drinking and discussions go together!

[...] *Among the students whom you met, with which of them were you linked – were there any who played a determinant role in opening your eyes to other things?*

No, not really.

You played hooky?

Oh yes, a lot! I narrowly completed my first year. But my father had warned me. He'd told me that he could pay for a year at the university, but not two. And so I was free!

And you entered your second year . . .

The further I advanced, the more I organized things so that I did the minimum amount of work necessary to get from one year to the next.

Free with respect to the arrangement with your father.

It was much more profound than a simple constraint: I couldn't possibly let down someone who had made sacrifices for me. But leaving the family behind in itself wasn't too complicated. I

discovered a certain freedom. I also reached a kind of opening. Brussels wasn't Paris, but it wasn't Lessines, all the same!

So you were in your second year. You began to choose your subjects, to take initiatives.

I spent a brief time with Michelet in my second year. But Lautréamont began to impassion me. Thus I made him the subject of my dissertation.

How did you come to Lautréamont?

I came upon the extracts from the *Chants de Maldoror*, prefaced by [Philippe] Soupault, in the "Poets of Today" collection published by Editions Seghers. Thus it was through my discovery of surrealism, Breton and the rest of the group. Curiously, no Belgian surrealists belonged to it at the time. I discovered them much later.

They were, however, close at hand! Scutenaire lived on the rue de la Luzerne, in Schaerbeek.

I had no contact with them. I was only really interested in Belgian surrealism after college. Here, it was Breton, Péret . . . Péret influenced me a lot. I found my violence in it.

. . . *anticlerical.*

At a flea market, I discovered a pamphlet by Péret before it was reprinted. It was quite rare at the time. The amusing thing was that, when one of us discovered a rarity, it had to circulate.

Was it Mort aux vaches et au champ d'honneur or Les Syndicats contre la révolution?

It was *Je ne mange pas de ce pain-là*, which was published in a numbered edition. It was through the intermediary of the French surrealists that I came to read Lautréamont. I no longer remember in what edition. And while I was at it, I found – perhaps a year later – the beautiful edition of *Les Chants de Maldoror* illustrated by Magritte, which I have kept.

I read *Les Chants de Maldoror*, then *Poésies*, for which I was passionate. Thus I decided to dedicate my dissertation to Isidore Ducasse, count of Lautréamont.³² I proposed the subject. All the professors refused: "We don't want this, it isn't suitable." Finally, it was formulated in another way. It was Émilie Carner-Noulet who told me, "The risks and dangers are yours, but I want to supervise your thesis. From time to time you will show me what you are doing. It will be a little slippery, because all of my colleagues do not share this point of view." It was at a time when one didn't suspect prudery . . . I was scolded at the examination because I'd spoken of Sade apropos of Diderot. "But how can you read such crap?" the university professor threw at me.

³² Written in 1955-56, refused in June 56 and accepted at a second session in September of that same year.

Thus you threw yourself headfirst into the unfathomed work of Lautréamont at the very beginning of the 1950s.

As I had succeeded in my first two years, I received a grant. My father said to me, “With that, you can take a little trip to Paris to go to the Bibliothèque Nationale.” I stayed at the university dormitory, on the boulevard Jourdan. I obtained authorization to conduct my research at the B.N.

What did they consist of?

To study everything that Lautréamont cited in *Poésies*. The names of the people with whom he associated, notably the “octopus with the look of silk,” who is his friend Dazet.³³ I finally completed a work of research that was quite scholarly in form. When I presented it, my last year in school, it was scandalous. I had passed all my exams in the first go. Until then, everything had gone very well, but my thesis was refused for “outrages.” My memory is that it was only accepted after being censored.³⁴ Émilie Carner-Noulet told me, “Come see me because there are

³³ “Dazet reaches us in his surreality, as the ‘friend,’ ‘kindred spirit,’ of Isidore, no doubt, but also ‘sexual partner holding on to the dominant sensation of fellatio.’ Understood in the inverse sense, the process makes obvious the passage from raw reality to artistic expression, and disengages the primordial role of the image. (...) The phrase ‘octopus with the look of silk which reigns over a seraglio of one hundred suction pads’ remains enigmatic to the superficial reader. The free, the bizarre, the absurd are attached to this image – it is important to destroy it by removing the words as Ducasse consciously constructed them. The octopus – come straight from Hugo, whose *Travailleurs de la mer*’ was published in 1866 – faithfully transcribes the friendship with multiple interconnections that, beyond interdiction, at the center of an energetic knot of love, a seraglio in which tentacles (even better: their most active parts) proliferate: suction pads, insatiable suckers. And the monstrous erotic machine lives. It clenches, breathes, crushes, pulls a perpetual orgasm, which his moist silky pupils reflect. Octopus with the look of silk: this is what made the Duke of Blangis himself turn pale with delight.” Raoul Vaneigem, *Isidore Ducasse, Compte de Lautréamont*.

³⁴ Reading over this 188-page-long dissertation, one is struck by the aplomb with which young Raoul Vaneigem addresses his attacks, which are lively and well-supported, against the imposing figures of the intellectual milieu of the era, who were his favorite targets: “No less did Lautréamont allow the disassociation between the man and the writer; to write is his condition and from his shackled liberty spurts the virulence of his expression. (...) To ignore the character of such a revolt, of the Revolt; to take hold of the word, to attach it thoughtlessly to the backs of the stage actors with sickly individualities vomited forth by the post-War world; this adds the viscous bile of the Philistine to idealist fog, a painless operation, like the crackling of deliquescence. Because urinating, drinking, are called ‘revolt,’ because literature is open to saliva, to urine, while the writer tries not to soil the wooden floor, Caillois cries fraud – happy to be doing so – he giggles, denounces, shrieks, pushes a scalp dance in front of the insurgents before willy-nilly excommunicating revolutionaries and ‘rebels,’ Marxists and Stirnerians, greasing the garrote for the irregulars Rimbaud and Lautréamont, and this thanks to very old saliva. Rimbaud and Lautréamont are killed off . . . The true revolt is in the renunciation. By all evidence, this seems less dangerous to Caillois. Curious like some others to understand the hygiene of literature.” Other big shots of thought and names from the world of literature cross

problems. They find it obscene, scatological . . .” I had simply evoked Lautréamont’s probable homosexuality. It is true that I also attacked people who were friends of my professors, like Roger Caillois. Émilie Carner-Noulet told me, “Listen, there’s only one thing to do: make cuts. You have only to write in a different way.” I made a second draft, preceded by an explanatory preface. Without it I wouldn’t have graduated.

In your research at the time, did you understand Lautréamont’s method of writing – you discovered it later, certainly – in other words, that it was détournement?

He recopied entire pages about birds from Doctor Chenu’s *Encyclopedia*. Later I was thrilled to discover, in *Lèvres nues*, the founding text on détournement by Debord and Wolman.

One must know that the great founding texts of the SI were actually written and co-signed by Debord and Wolman.³⁵ When you wrote your dissertation, were you already executing détournements without using the term?

the path of the young student who, in order to dismiss them, doesn’t hesitate to place himself in the footsteps of his illustrious predecessor, using his voice to prolong the prosodic eloquence of Isidore Ducasse: “Lautréamont gives his century and those to come a thrashing with green wood that his contemporary and future readers would do well to remember: Chateaubriand, the Melancholic Mohican; Sénancourt, the man in the Petticoat; Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the Socialist Grinch; Ann Radcliffe, the Crazy Ghost; Edgar Poe, the Mameluke of Alcoholic Dreams; Saint-John Perse, the Flint Suckled by the Moon; Montherlant, the Unfrosted Priest in Heat; Mauriac, the Cockroach on the Cross; Claudel, the Cretin of the Holy See; Cocteau, the Green Star of Pederasty; Supervielle, the Duck With Four Legs; Etiemble, the Hygienist in a Chamber Pot; Anouilh, the Leprous Corpse-Eater Deducted by Saliva . . . Why not? (...) No, no more than Dumas, Camus, the author of *Nausea*, or Anouilh could draft ‘speeches on prize distributions,’ educational principles for the young, reasons to live, sources of dreams and actions, blasts of laughter about octopuses. And each person knows that it isn’t in the name of narrow and decadent bourgeois morality that we reject them, like a nightmare of flabby cellos, in their insipid liquefaction, but against the morality and the bourgeois class itself, which seems to satisfy them fiendishly, happy that they pour forth piss and phlegm through some mold, a mediocre, poor and fetid thought whose only reason for existing precisely clings to the monolith that they praise backwards. The true revolt has pure hands and a fortiori [a pure] brain.” “At our feet liquefies the hermetic carcass of metaphors, the old ladies of surrealism, which aligns popes and poets in a harmony close to the liturgies, fingers bluish on the mouth of the sky, from Grosjean, from Yves Bonnefoy to Saint-John-Perse.” Confronted with so much irreverence, the appeals to linguistic moderation – coming from his thesis director, Émilie Carner-Noulet, who was worried about preserving Raoul’s dissertation committee – that were made in the text’s margins became ever more insistent: “Please do not vex these gentlemen,” “Let’s see more kindness!” “More blood! More shit! Of distinction!” and even “More sex!” and “Emasculate Ducasse!”

³⁵ The Parisian lettrists (Debord and Wolman) published important essays on the *dérive* and *détournement* in the Belgian journal *Les Lèvres nues*. Founded and directed by Marcel Mariën, this quarterly journal – the name of which was invented by Paul Nougé – published twelve issues and was characterized as much by its poetic urgency as by its political virulence (it is credited

Without using the word “détournement,” I made use of Lautréamont’s phrase that included the idea: “Plagiarism is necessary.” Doctor Chenu knew the flight of birds perfectly; he described it very well. Why deprive oneself of it? Why begin poorly from scratch what he had already expressed?

Perhaps at this moment you have still not revealed all of the détournements that he made?

The ones of Chenu were the most obvious.

He had precisely copied out such and such a page from the Encyclopédie. To demarcate the terrain a little, a kind of unconscious parallelism materialized in your future development. A field of shared interests whose existence you did not suspect.

It is true that many things take place through osmosis and resonance . . . For me, the experience of Lautréamont was important. Détournement allows one to correct the past: one takes a relatively well-known phrase and adapts it to one’s own criteria. It allows you to assert yourself by transgressing or subverting the past. It is precisely a technique of subversion, also a facility. But if it doesn’t bring something more to the original phrase, then it is a flop; it falls in the water.³⁶ There are many artists and writers who have made use of détournement. Later on, the SI greatly contributed to popularizing it – I would say almost vulgarizing it. But not everyone will excel in this exercise. The détourned phrase can be quite simple or complex; what matters is that it causes a shock, a realization. An old, well-known phrase, closed upon itself, suddenly opens upon another thing. It is a process of subversive creation. That is the use that we put it to. I am

with the invention of détourned advertisements). The first issue appeared in Brussels in April 1954. The publication ended in September 1958 with issues #10-#12. In addition to texts by Mariën himself, it published the writings of the irregulars of Belgian surrealism, such as Nougé and Scutenaire. Texts by the lettrists published in *Les Lèvres nues* are the following: Guy-Ernest Debord, “Introduction à une critique de la géographie urbaine” (#6, September 1955); Guy-Ernest Debord, “Grande fête de nuit” (#7, December 1955); Guy-Ernest Debord and Gil J Wolman (“Mode d’emploi du détournement” (#8, May 1956); Guy-Ernest Debord, “Théorie de la dérive,” [#9, November 1956] which would also appear in issue #2 of *Internationale situationniste*, December 1958; [unsigned,] “Deux comptes rendus de dérive,” and Guy-Ernest Debord, “Position du Continent Contrescarpe” (#9, November 1956).

³⁶ “Ducasse also takes up the quest for the truth alongside the systematic correction of past errors, a route that leads him first of all to revise traditionally accredited maxims and commonplaces, that is to say, by the force of things, on the obscure instances of Evil. In a new option, he takes up the matter and the model. Judge how he legitimates plagiarism: ‘If one corrects the sophisms in the meanings of the truths that correspond to these sophisms, it is only the correction that will be true, while the thing remade will have the right of no longer being false. The rest would be beyond the truth, with a trace of the false, consequently nothing, and necessarily considered as void.’ (...) Plagiarism, as Ducasse conceives it, appears – not in the smarmy sense of creative impotence – but as a handful of wheat completely offered to the hunger of men and through the still-weak voice of Bertolt Brecht: ‘All things belong to the ones who use them best.’” Raoul Vaneigem, *Isidore Ducasse, comte de Lautréamont*.

surprised that this social and literary quarrel that consists of accusing people of plagiarism reappears from time to time.

The principle of plagiarism such as one understands it here, is to integrate into a phrase or a line of reasoning an element that comes from elsewhere, removing the negative formulation or the inverse, and by thereby conferring upon it another perspective . . .

. . . another opening. A sudden opening that the initial remark did not contain if it is closed upon itself. Here one opens it and this unleashes another thing. I am also fond of Brecht's phrase: "All things belong to the ones who use them best."³⁷

[...] I find completely suspect the procedure that consists in putting intention on trial, in tracking every single word in a text. Such an attitude can end up in no longer analyzing the text for its contents and the repercussions that it causes on people's minds, but simply from the technical point of view. Finally, it is the best strategy for not having to respond to the text.

It is a mechanical vision of what a book is.

It kills all creation.

In the *Traité*,³⁸ I made many détournements. No one has ever made an exhaustive list of them. I myself have had difficulty finding them . . . I even remember having taken the end of a phrase drawn from a novel without great interest, because it described the way in which people survive. No one has ever noticed it.

[...] To return to the question of plagiarism, I think it is obvious that the work of an author is never solely composed of his own words. Consciously or not, it is also the result of all his reading, of all his influences. A quotation without its source is also often a form of homage by the author to the masters.

It is common that someone is denounced for plagiarism. No doubt there are several forms of plagiarism: one among them stands out for its inventiveness. When there is a supplementary contribution of meaning, I am not sure that one can speak of "plagiarism." But what surprises me is that the incriminated author doesn't react violently. Me, if I had consciously or not taken all of my goods from elsewhere, I did so to end up with a text that was totally mine . . . with the result that it can be restituted to everyone . . .

So you claim!

Assuredly!

³⁷ Bertolt Brecht, "Le Cercle de craie caucasien," *Sinn und Form I*, Berlin, 1949.

³⁸ *Translator's note: Vaneigem's Traité de savoir-vivre à l'usage des jeunes générations*, known in English as *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, was written between 1963 and 1965, and published by Gallimard in 1967.

You don't feel the need to justify yourself . . . Many defend themselves this way: "It was in my notes and I forgot to put quotation marks and to indicate the name of the author."

I hold to Lautréamont's discovery: "Plagiarism is necessary, progress demands it." One couldn't be clearer! No one [other than the SI] has brandished this phrase to my knowledge. What they call plagiarism is simply what Lautréamont did and demanded. Certainly, in many cases, the final result is worse than the initial example . . .

I no longer remember who were the novelists recently accused but I do not believe that they were great authors . . .

We must distinguish between the apprentice writer whose ambition is to create a work and who stuffs his text with phrases stolen from all over the place because, quite simply, he lacks ideas, and the author whose creative space is supported by these types of détournements.

Can you tell us a little about the manner in which you entered this work. How did you inhabit it? What effect did it have on you? Any adolescent who penetrates into this work with a certain excitement, by submitting to its influence, comes out completely transformed. A metamorphosis takes place.

Right away I recognized myself in *Maldoror*. I found myself perfectly at ease in its violence. From *Poésies* I took the idea of the "reversal of perspective," which I applied in the *Traité*. An apocalyptic vision of the world and its overturning, its surpassing.³⁹ I begrudge Camus for the stupidity that is his book *L'Homme révolté*. In it he almost accuses Lautréamont of becoming bourgeois, of renouncing his convictions. He understood nothing about *Poésies*!

The Poésies are, to my mind, with respect to Les Chants de Maldoror, a writing of violent rupture because it is extremely cold and programmatic.

Something radically new emerges there.

The true stakes are posed.

Contrary to what Camus and *tutti quanti*⁴⁰ say, it is the beginning of a new era. Despite a few naïve expressions, there's a will to surpass useless and nihilist Maldororian violence and build beyond it. The experience of chaos ends up in a surpassing. That's the importance of the *Poésies*.

I have the feeling that the Poésies sanction the end of an era and the entrance into something else. I believe that the power of Lautréamont resides precisely in his programmatic Poésies, in the faculty of having seized hold of the end of an era. From whence comes the importance that one can accord him, at least to me.

³⁹ *Translator's note:* here and elsewhere, I have rendered *dépassement* (which typically means physically overtaking, overcharging, or overspending) as surpassing. Other translations have preferred to render it as "superseding."

⁴⁰ *Translator's note:* Italian for "all the rest."

Today it remains a considerable work. People have often said to me, “You put the accent on Lautréamont and you do not linger on Rimbaud.” It is true that I feel much closer to the works of Lautréamont, to his personality, as well – although it still remains a bit mysterious – than to Rimbaud, who ended up a merchant in slaves and guns.

I do not completely agree. For the establishment of thought and theory in the 20th Century, poetry holds a determinant, foundational place. I have the feeling that Rimbaud, in his time, had done the best that he could do with his poems. He wasn't aware of the end of an era as Lautréamont was, but this doesn't at all diminish the value of his work. Because an era was ending, because one was in the process of entering another one in which the stakes were opposed, Lautréamont's vision surpasses that of Rimbaud. He presses the poetic approach, and that type of writing opens upon an impasse. The importance of Lautréamont is located here.

As for Rimbaud, he experienced the impasse in the most dramatic fashion.

Nevertheless he knew how to save himself with glory to the extent that he didn't persist in a poetic career that was, no doubt, null and void [...]

He spared himself from a certain kind of decline.

[...] *You have worked on the subject, what do you think?*

The *Poésies* are an opening on another world.

*I am permitted to make this digression because you said that you'd drawn a part of the *Traité* from it.*

My “reversal of perspective” is inspired by Lautréamont's *Poésies*. After *Maldoror*, I found the need to analyze the negative and its role in the elaboration of thought. It's not a question of establishing a positive foundation beyond the negative that prepares for it. One must leave behind that negativity, so indispensable itself, to arrive at something constructive. Obviously we are still groping our way, a groping that one finds in the *Poésies* in which the ambiguity of the speech on the distribution of prizes has constantly glided, a humorous way of accounting for what is important in the naïve enthusiasm of faith in mankind.

[...] *It seems that Lautréamont gave you the keys, or one of the keys, to write what would be your first book, which, moreover, became the object of a cult following and a foundational book.*

I believe that he arrived at a key moment, indeed, at the conjunction of a desire for personal emancipation and an era that favored it. This was part of the phenomena of internal progress that, suddenly, corresponds to an external progress – an always slightly surprising osmosis!

[...] *To return to the Université Libre de Bruxelles: you encountered some difficulties and then, with the help of a benevolent professor, you obtained the degree that you'd been seeking . . .*

I got my degree in 1956 and, one week later, I took up a position as professor at the École Normale de Nivelles, a position that I kept until 1964. My parents were obviously very happy.

You'd succeeded.

I had a position, a function – the whole thing!

To be a professor – that's something, all the same. Socially you were elevated. The new generations have great difficulty imagining that being a professor was eminently respectable in the workers' milieu.

A “useful” profession, as well. My father had a great awareness of social utility. He spent a lot of time at the bar nearby the train station, but when the train came, everyone was at their posts. The train left on time. My father had a sense of social service, a will to do good.

In the labor union and political mentality of the time, it was looked down upon to not do your job correctly. You opened yourself to criticism and remonstrance from management. But an irreproachable worker could risk protesting, could demand explanations, could be a union delegate. No one risked being faulted for his labor. Such was the mentality of the time.

Work still had a meaning . . .

You have almost nothing “utilitarian” to say, as this has become a hackneyed notion!

Today, the vast majority of work is parasitical.

We must place things in context with the values of the era and the meaning that words take in it.

It wasn't the defense of work as such that mattered but the defense of socially useful work. One could draw satisfaction from it, perhaps not from the task accomplished, but . . . At the time, the word “professor” implied the idea that work had a social utility . . .

Thus you became a young professor at Nivelles.

Yes. At first I taught courses in Latin.

How old were your students?

Most were older than I was.

At the École Normale?

A number of them had begun at the Université and stopped for different reasons. They took their chances at the École Normale . . .

It was, nevertheless, a big change in your life. You had responsibilities; you spoke before young people your own age, if not slightly older; you received a salary.

I insisted on giving my first paycheck to my father. Workers' tradition demanded it. But my father turned it down: "It is good that you thought of it, but keep it."

This was part of a certain code of honor, a moral code.

The first paycheck went to the parents. It's not at all a sacrifice. Nor is it a ritual. A simple gift.

[...] *There is a "moral" meaning to it. I deliberately use this word, which is completely outdated today. This had meaning. The meaning of the links between individuals in a given class.*

This also revealed a social morality that has completely disintegrated . . . Today, "morality" and "social" have difficulty being in harmony. We must place this vocabulary in its historical context. That's where the wealth (whose gradual loss we will show) is situated.

As a young professor . . . it is one's responsibility to speak in front of a class . . .

It was fascinating.

You taught co-ed classes?

Yes.

That must not have gone without problems, I suppose . . .

The problems came later.

How so?

I had an adventure with one of my students. I got fired for it . . . What is extraordinary in the trade of professor – so decried, so maltreated today – is the feeling of nourishing one's students. We offered nourishment. As I taught at an upper level, the stakes of a final exam weren't involved. There were no tests.

Then I taught courses in French. I've always been happy to enter a classroom. As my students were old enough, we sometimes went out together to a bar to drink and pursue the discussion. To me, instruction is truly fascinating. But what has always exasperated me has been management. The director wouldn't see me. At the time, wearing a tie was required. I made a point of arriving in a leather jacket – the black shirt of the times – and tying my tie when I passed by him in the hall. I conspicuously put my tie on when I entered the classroom! It was a war between him and I. The bureaucratic side exasperated me. On the other hand, when I was with my students, I felt happy. I managed to establish a relationship with my class in which power was effaced. Upon my entry into the room, the students would stand up. I would say, "sit down." There was neither despotism nor servility there.

It was a manner of greeting.

A “good day.” Nothing that could be embarrassing. Today, the greeting has disappeared without being replaced with anything. My only possible authority was simply knowing more about the subject than they did and being able to relay it to them.

This is the very foundation of teaching.

It appears essential to me. In fact, that’s what you are doing when you write a book. You do it in your corner [of the world] but it is . . .

It is like speaking to an assembly, making oneself heard and understood . . . Except that in the case of writing, one touches each reader individually. They aren’t physically present.

That makes a difference. I have neither the nature nor the talent to be an orator. Therefore collective dialogues are called for.

*Your job as professor didn’t make you forget your research. When did you publish the article that you devoted to Lautréamont and that was published in the journal Synthèses?*⁴¹

After the rejection of my first [draft of my] dissertation, Émilie Carner-Noulet proposed that I write an article about Lautréamont, saying to me, “I will make sure it gets to my friend Maurice Lambilliotte⁴² at *Synthèses*.” That’s how it was published!

Did you receive any echoes, any reactions to your article?

I don’t believe so, no.

Was it your first publication? Did your dissertation remain with the university?

Yes, I never read it again.

⁴¹ *Translator’s note:* “Isidore Ducasse and the Count of Lautréamont in the *Poésies*,” excerpts published elsewhere in *Rien n’est fini, tout commence*, and translated into English here: Cf. <http://www.notbored.org/ducasse.pdf>.

⁴² An erudite man, Maurice Lambilliotte occupied a high position in Belgium’s *Mutuelle socialiste*. He was very close to Paul-Henri Spaak, Minister of Foreign Affairs and the first Belgian General Secretary of NATO. He was also the publisher of *Synthèses*, which was widely distributed and brought together many different contributors. In 1953, *De Meridiaan* – founded in 1951 by Clara and Gentil Haesaert and generously supported by Maurice Lambilliotte – published a special issue titled *Wyckaert et l’espace intérieur dans la peinture non-figurative*. It was dedicated to Françoise, Lambilliotte’s daughter and the wife of future situationist Maurice Wyckaert, and recognized his son-in-law’s “Flemish and agricultural heredity.” But, in 1958, when he published his essay in *Synthèses*, Vaneigem did not know of the Lambilliotte/Wyckaert connection and, in any case, Wyckaert didn’t join the SI until 1959 or 1960.

Thereafter you published articles in three subsequent issues of Synthèses.

Critiques of paintings and sculpture. One of them concerned the paintings of Anita de Caro.⁴³ Another was about Pol Bury⁴⁴ – an artist I like very much. The last one was titled, “Coup d’oeil sur la peinture de Tim Osborne.”⁴⁵ I published these at the request of *Synthèses*. I met the painters – that was fun. Until then it had been something unfamiliar to me. I wrote my first articles about the painters whose pictures I liked. Open artists, with whom one could speak. Then it became, “Why don’t you write an article about so-and-so? He’s a friend.” I completed the series with an article about Tim Osborne, an adorable man. I have no idea what became of him. I loved his paintings. “You are getting paid for this article?” he asked me. I was to be paid, but not much. “I won’t pay you,” he said to me, “but I will give you a sum to spend on books. Give me a list of the books you want, and I will buy them all for you.”

Did you begin to feel a desire to develop your writing?

Like everyone else, I tried to write a novel, an exercise in which I was quite useless. I began a detective novel and abandoned it. I realized that, if I were going to improve my writing, I would have to concentrate on analysis. I’d had a slightly political past – I was not a militant because I have never been an activist – but then . . . the search for knowledge . . . I tried a more analytical, pared-down form of writing when I reworked my text on Lautréamont. I felt more at ease with it. Lautréamont offers a pretext for social critique and psychological analysis, which is a form of wealth I haven’t found in imaginative storylines.

Chapter III: Henri Lefebvre and the Situationist International

So you were already making a certain use of rhetoric?

A little later, I don’t remember exactly when, I drafted an essay called “Poésies et Révolution,”⁴⁶ inspired by Lautréamont’s *Poésies*, founded on the principle of art-for-everyone, an art of revolt. It included an analysis of poetic phenomena, and an essay in verse accompanied by music – lettrist ranting in the background – and was supposed to be agit-prop, to kindle the anger of the masses. The text had unintended consequences. I was suffocating in Lessines, far from everything, far from Paris. Brussels didn’t seem to me to be the place from which to be heard. The article in *Synthèses* led to requests that bored me very quickly. As my fascination for Paris endured, I thought it would be a good thing to send my essay to Henri Lefebvre, whose *Critique*

⁴³ *Translator’s note:* American, 1909-1998.

⁴⁴ *Translator’s note:* Belgian, 1922-2005.

⁴⁵ *Translator’s note:* British, 1909-1992.

⁴⁶ The title was in fact “Fragments pour une poétique.” The following dedication appears on its title page: “To Isidore Ducasse, Charles Lassailly and Ernest Coerderoy.”

de la vie quotidienne and *La Somme et le Reste* I'd read when they were published.⁴⁷ I asked his opinion.

How did you discover Henri Lefebvre, how did you come to read his books? What echoes did the theses he developed in the Critique de la vie quotidienne elicit in you? Finally, how did you come to feel in sufficient agreement with him to think it was a good idea to send him the text you'd written?

I don't remember where I found his books. There was good word-of-mouth concerning the *Critique*. I made a summary exploration of the political ideas, but the existential problems – as one came to call them – remained unresolved. That someone had established links between everyday existence, ideology and an analysis of the world – *that* was what interested me! Thus I read with a lot of passion the books that opened up not a few doors and that I estimate to be essential reading.

You had the feeling that they responded to the questions that you had posed more or less confusedly.

The interest of the debate was that it broached themes that had never been taken into account by the political ideologies in which we are steeped. Even philosophy doesn't respond to the question, "But to what use can I put it?" I have always loved Marx's statement – "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in diverse manners; what is important is *transforming* it."⁴⁸

That is the last of the "Theses on Feuerbach."

It's an essential phrase for me. Lefebvre provided, not a solution, but an opening towards something that had never been discussed in depth. I'd written this short practical essay in which I tried to mix poetry and working-class agitation together . . . a comprehensible text, lettrist texts, lettrist music . . . The projection of images from films, a form of total art, with the naivety that this implies . . . I sent it to Henri Lefebvre through his publisher.

At that moment, did you know who he was or what he'd done?

I supposed that he was a professor somewhere at a university, nothing more than that. I addressed a handwritten letter to him via Editions de l'Arche, which had published *Critique de la vie quotidienne*.

In your letter to him, dated 18 July 1960, you expressed yourself this way:

I have drafted these pages in the most absolute solitude, but it is a solitude in which the naked heart registers even the least cries of joy, suffering and hatred

⁴⁷ *Translator's note:* volume I of the *Critique of Everyday Life* was published in 1947; volume II in 1961. *La Somme et le reste* (not yet translated into English) was published in 1959.

⁴⁸ "Theses on Feuerbach," 1845; published by Engels in 1888.

that escape from the oppressive rumblings of the world. Don't be surprised to encounter in it revolt, a certain naïveté, ideas that are valuable or not . . . and the spirit of your works. I don't know if you appreciate the [existence of] echoes of them in the anarchist stew in which they've become mixed. Nevertheless, I have conceived my work with the love and the attention to detail of a terrorist preparing a bomb: it must explode, because it has no value on its own. I don't know if it is important work, but I am certain it could become so, as I am certain that future creation will be collective or nothing at all.

You were 26 years old.

I was happily surprised to receive a very quick reply from Lefebvre that said, “Your essay has kept my attention. I don't know if it is publishable, because . . .” A very sincere, very honest response . . . “But I have a friend to whom I have showed it, and he is interested in the idea of meeting you. His name is Guy Debord and his address is . . .” So I wrote to Debord.

Consulting your archives allows us to situate that event. The first letter you sent to Guy Debord was dated 24 January 1961.⁴⁹ And he responded seven days later, on 31 January 1961.⁵⁰ On 19 February 1961, you wrote back.⁵¹

No doubt there was, at the time, a slightly too-Parisian side to these remarks [by Debord]. I did not know the majority of the people to whom criticism was addressed. They were sometimes part of a very precise context, at the heart of friendly or unfriendly relationships of which I was ignorant and about which I only learned by spending time with Debord. He initiated me into that type of relationship, which was completely unknown to me until then. One mustn't forget that I came from a province in which relationships of this style didn't exist.

[...] *When Debord mentioned [Attila] Kotányi to you, did you already know him?*

I'd met Kotányi through a mutual friend in Brussels, Harry Torrekens. Kotányi was in disarray. He and his family had fled Hungary.⁵² They'd ended up in Brussels. Harry Torrekens, Thérèse [Dubrule] (my wife) and I ended up finding them a room . . .

How many children did they have at the time?

Three. Christophe, little Magda and little Sophie who must have been four or five years old.⁵³

Why did Kotányi leave Hungary?

⁴⁹ *Translator's note:* our translation of it is here: <http://www.notbored.org/vaneigem-debord.pdf>.

⁵⁰ *Translator's note:* <http://www.notbored.org/debord-31January1961.html>.

⁵¹ *Translator's note:* <http://www.notbored.org/vaneigem-19February1961.pdf>.

⁵² *Translator's note:* because of fear of repression in the wake of the Hungarian Revolution (Oct-Nov 1956), in which Attila had actively participated.

⁵³ *Translator's note:* in 1997, Sophie Kotányi released *Amor Fati*, a film she'd directed about her experiences as a refugee.

He'd left the country after the Revolution – in dramatic conditions, crossing the border, through the snow, carrying cases of manuscripts. The border had been permanently illuminated. The soldiers fired their machine guns at anything that moved. They had to dodge two barrages and two sets of sweeping searchlights . . . The family ended up in Austria in a refugee camp. Kotányi loved to recount that he – who'd never appreciated ties, a bourgeois privilege – wore one in the camp because he had to keep a certain appearance, a dignity, to display civility in a place where all humanity has been refused to him and where people were treated like animals . . . It was his way of marking the distance between an animal, cooped up in a camp, and being a human being – his way of affirming himself through such a harmless detail as a tie . . . Then he came to Belgium. He had a Hungarian friend in Brussels, Lajos Szabo,⁵⁴ a philosopher, a master whom Kotányi venerated. He stayed at Szabo's place, but then the arrangement didn't work out. Szabo had little money. Their coexistence wasn't easy. Kotányi was quite "temperamental" [*caractériel*]. That's around when I met him – and when little Sophie was adopted by my mother in Lessines.

How'd that come about?

Her parents were experiencing such difficulties that my mother said, "She can come live with us!" The parents of my ex-wife took care of Christophe, Kotányi's 12-year-old son, and my parents took in little Sophie. As Attila wasn't very much of a *pater familias*,⁵⁵ his wife Magda took care of the children and worked so that, let's say, he was free to think about the revolution. This new arrangement allowed him to look for a job . . .

So, if I understand you correctly, Attila's children were raised by your mother, on the one hand, and your mother-in-law, on the other.

They'd lived in Lessines for almost two years. One day [years later] Sophie sent me a short note: "I must come to Belgium and nothing would give me greater pleasure than seeing your mother again." I met her at the Ath train station and took her to my mother, who still lived in the same house. After this great and warm reunion, Sophie confided in me: "I spent the happiest years of my life here." She added: "The word that I have most detested and that I continue to detest is 'Revolution.' Because, in the name of the Revolution, I was left to fend for myself."⁵⁶

What kind of man was Kotányi when you first met him?

He impressed me! He was tall, with a slightly ascetic face, and he spoke . . . I wouldn't say mumbo-jumbo, but a French that was as approximate as it was peremptory. Yes, he had the gift of being able to unsettle, even terrify, his listeners. But his approximations – he often used one word in place of another – gave birth to a poetry that gave weight to his remarks. His chaotic way of articulating words and coupling them together petrified some people. He had a tested

⁵⁴ *Translator's note:* 1902-1967.

⁵⁵ *Translator's note:* father of the family, owner of the family estate, in Latin.

⁵⁶ *Translator's note:* literally "They made me live anything at all" (*on m'a fait vivre n'importe quoi*).

sense for formulae. His findings were often pure delights of expression. He wanted us to correct them. [We'd say:] "No! Out of the question! Go on!" He spoke in aphorisms, some of which remained mysterious to those who were unfamiliar with his language. He also possessed great knowledge, notably in heretical matters.

Heresies?

He was the first to speak to me of the "brothers and sisters of the Free Spirit."⁵⁷

In whom you'd previously had no interest?

He drew my attention to the existence of this anti-religious movement in an epoch traditionally credited with being profoundly religious. Myths began to tremble on their bases. How couldn't my relationship with Kotányi impassion me?

[...] *The origin of your curiosity for this theme came from him.*

No doubt.

*On the other hand – but we can return to this later – the critique of myth can be found in some of the reflections that you make in the *Traité de savoir-vivre* [...]*

It was Kotányi who first proposed to call society "*Gangland*,"⁵⁸ the country of *gangsters*,⁵⁹ mafia society, which is splendidly ironic today. He'd been educated to be an architect. The art of building fascinated him. He drew our attention because his children had an innate talent for construction. If you gave them three bricks and a heap of mud, they could build a palace! Attila himself had a radical vision of architecture as the construction of everyday life. He wanted to awaken awareness so that people could gather their forces together and develop, on their own, the ability to construct their lives as they would construct their houses. He was the first to have established the basis for the notion of unitary urbanism.

Which one called the "Bureau for Unitary Urbanism"! What exactly was this Bureau?

A critique of traditional urbanism, that is to say, a critique of the grid arrangement [*quadrillage*] of towns by which power substitute towns controlled by the State and market totalitarianism for living ones. The expression "Bureau of Unitary Urbanism" is one of Kotányi's. Its activity consists in rediscovering the town in what is alive in it, in favoring active centers – back alleys, passageways, passionate spaces – against the [on-going] Haussmannization of Paris – [against] the new urbanists who only reproduce this austerity, which is maladroitly hidden by a bit of

⁵⁷ *Translator's note:* two of the books that Vaneigem has devoted to these subjects – *Movement of the Free Spirit* (1986) and *Resistance to Christianity* (1993) – have been translated into English.

⁵⁸ *Translator's note:* English in original. Cf. "Gangland et Philosophe," *Internationale Situationniste* #4 (1960).

⁵⁹ *Translator's note:* English in original.

Gaudi-like building. Kotányi was a precursor in his denunciations of everything that surrounds us and that, according to him, is part of a vast mythology. What we call “society” is in reality a country of gangsters dominated by a State as its organizer.

*This surpasses the critique of architecture already formulated by Constant.*⁶⁰

Assuredly! The exclusion of Constant⁶¹ from the group that united us – I mean the Situationist International – wasn’t gratuitous. It punished the falsification of a project. The most important thing was implicit. A process that, today, we would call self-construction, without the ideology that it implies. In a straight line from surrealism, we obviously wanted to worship Postman Cheval.⁶²

*Postman Cheval had already been mentioned in Potlatch.*⁶³

I only saw the Ideal Palace much later, but did so with the amazement that he told me that I would experience. To return to Kotányi, his knowledge of Kabala hardly interested me. Same with Debord and [René] Viénet. Michèle Bernstein could be sensitive to it, but she didn’t show any particular interest in the subject. Kotányi, on the other hand, insisted on a precise point. I remember when we led an open campaign against the journal called *Planète*, a reactionary, erotic-mystical bitchiness . . .

With Louis Pauwels . . .

Jacques Bergier and company. We’d written, “If you read *Planète* out loud, your mouth will stink!”⁶⁴ Kotányi declared: “We’re right. But I must tell you that we leave these people to set up camp on a territory that should be ours.” This was both meaningful and ambiguous. It is true that the mystical approach – which Breton had cultivated at a certain moment, in *Les Grands Transparents*⁶⁵ – was something worth exploring. Confronted with this subject, we felt a certain

⁶⁰ *Translator’s note:* Constant Nieuwenhuys (1920–2005), a Dutch painter, architect and futurist. A long-time friend of Asger Jorn, he co-founded the COBRA group in 1948. Constant was a member of the Situationist International between 1958 and 1960. Among his most important contributions to it was the concept of unitary urbanism: cf. Debord’s text “Constant and the Path of Unitary Urbanism” (1959): <http://www.notbored.org/constant-debord.html>.

⁶¹ *Translator’s note:* Constant *resigned* from the SI, and, as can be seen from Debord’s letter to him dated 11 August 1960 (<http://www.notbored.org/debord-11August1960.html>), Debord wanted to continue to remain in contact and on good terms with him.

⁶² *Translator’s note:* Ferdinand Cheval, a French postman, who constructed his fantastic “Ideal Palace” in his garden.

⁶³ Number 4, 13 July 1954 (Paris).

⁶⁴ *Internationale situationniste*, #7, April 1962. [*Translator’s note:* Vaneigem’s recollection of the phrase, i.e., “Si vous lisez *Planète* à haute voix, vous puerez de la bouche,” differs from what was actually published in 1962 and reprinted elsewhere in *Rien n’est fini*: “Si vous lisez *Planète* à haute voix, vous sentirez mauvais de la bouche” (your mouth will feel bad).]

⁶⁵ *Translator’s note:* circa 1947.

unease. What was valid in mysticism? It was Kotányi who introduced me to Meister Eckhart.⁶⁶ He had me read his writings. In it I found phrases like this: “I pray that God will rid me of God himself.” Debord also knew the work of Meister Eckhart. But Kotányi was right to insist, “With *Planète*, we are attacking people of little importance, but they are in the process of camping upon a territory that we must cultivate.”

It was abandoned to them.

Exactly. We abandoned to them that part of everyday life, not esoteric, but always a little mysterious as far as the manner in which things come together. It wasn't by chance that, at the time, we were big readers of Kierkegaard. We still are. Kierkegaard was at the limit of religious bullshit⁶⁷ when he spoke of . . .

. . . *the fear of God.*

Shepherds and the fear of God, among other exasperating things. At the same time, Kierkegaard cast a lucid glance upon the mysteries of existence, on the vampire that is guiltiness, which he tried to get rid of. The danger with Kotányi was that his thinking quite rapidly led to mysticism. A threshold was crossed [*la frontière était tenue*].

The SI's error was that it got rid of this critique by reducing it to pure mysticism.

We threw the baby out with the bathwater.⁶⁸

What was the tenor of your discussions?

Attila ardently defended the idea that the critique of religion also involved the critiques of myth and mythology. By “myth” I mean what Roland Barthes later popularized in *Mythologies*.⁶⁹ A more profound way of attacking myth. There's a new world in front of us all, but it is deformed by something important, something very powerful, that exerts an overriding influence upon people. Thus any critique of politics must begin with a critique of mythology. The problem with Kotányi was that his *radicality*⁷⁰ got involved with a very particular critique of a vision of the world and slowly got stuck in it. From whence came the reproach of mysticism. The use of the

⁶⁶ *Translator's note:* cf. Chapter 32 of Vaneigem's *The Resistance to Christianity*: <http://www.notbored.org/resistance-32.html>.

⁶⁷ *Translator's note:* the French word used here, *bondieuserie*, can be translated literally as “Good-God-ism.”

⁶⁸ *Translator's note:* Attila Kotányi was excluded from the SI on 27 October 1963. The tract *On the Exclusion of Attila Kotányi* was published in December 1963, but never reprinted in the SI's journal. <http://www.notbored.org/Kotányi-exclusion.html>.

⁶⁹ *Translator's note:* published in 1957.

⁷⁰ *Translator's note:* I realize that “radicality” is not a word in English, but “radicalness” (an adjective) doesn't quite capture the meaning of Vaneigem's *radicalité* (a noun). Furthermore, for Vaneigem, “*radicalisme*” is the ideology of “*radicalité*,” and so the two must be carefully distinguished.

word “mysticism” wasn’t at all pertinent, but it allowed us to denounce a specialized form of thinking that increasingly distanced itself from the critique of everyday life to which I aspired. At the same time, it is true that, in our everyday lives, we are also the prey of mythologies that influence our conduct. In this, Kotányi’s input remains essential. His knowledge of philosophy inspired me to read (or re-read) Hegel and the Frankfurt School. In the final analysis, Attila played the role of trigger, even if the sparks went in all different directions. He wandered around in his speculations, and I deliberately use the term “speculations” in the strong sense of the word. His great sense for speculative delirium lead him to be completely mistaken. And if any speculative delirium is worthy of interest, there was in his attitude something that suggested “flight”:⁷¹ his way of behaving towards his wife Magda, their children, was casual, at least.

No awareness of his responsibilities?

None. He was very happy that my parents took care of Sophie. Good Magda, too, but we went to see her and Christophe. It didn’t bother him. What he wanted was to accede to a notion of individual freedom that was very ambiguous. His “function” as radical thinker supposed – I wouldn’t say contempt – but at least a certain condescension towards everything that surrounded him.

He didn’t want to be mixed up with everyday and material contingencies.

He wasn’t too far from thinking that he was above these contingencies and that *someone* had to look after them because he was “the Thinker.” I imagine that this was horrible for Magda!

He had an immoderate ego?

Yes, with a great sense of power. Like Debord, but different . . . He certainly had a radical critique. Certainly sometimes confused, but we were all confused, in search of a radicality that we still couldn’t situate in the right spot. There was all this with Kotányi. But his ambiguousness became heavy, with the weight of contempt for everything that didn’t directly concern him. That was the first time that I understood that someone could be a remarkable thinker and totally lacking humanity.

Because he’d apparently impressed you on the theoretical, philosophical plane, in the domain of critique.

He had a slightly icy side. He never joked around, he was always very inflexible during our meetings and he had – I wouldn’t say sufficient culture – but an erudition that went in all directions. Paradoxically, the human factor was almost secondary in him, even though I was fascinated by his brilliant thoughts.

In other words, the detestable side of Attila – if one can say so – was transcended by his intellectual faculties?

⁷¹ *Translator’s note:* the French word *fuite* means both flight and evasion.

“Detestable” is exaggerated. He wasn’t odious. He had an inconsiderate side, as if everything was due him. But without extreme arrogance, because, if he had the intelligence of contempt, at least, he made good use of it. He knew who to display it to.

In the right dosage . . .

He rejected and scorned Harry Torrekens for his futilities. Harry was gentle, forgiving and welcoming, but he didn’t have Kotányi’s brilliant intelligence. And Attila had no idea what this guy had done for him. He was discarded like a useless object.

What did he [Attila Kotányi] live on?

Magda’s work.

Well, that has the advantage of being clear! What did Magda do at the time? Do you remember?

Small jobs . . . jobs at galleries: secretary or thesis advisor – I don’t know.

What was in the cases brought in from Hungary – you mentioned them a little while ago. Because almost nothing else by Kotányi is currently available.

No one knows. He spoke of important notes he’d taken. He pressed us to publish them. He never did anything with them, contenting himself with vague references. He should have limited himself to writing his *Critique of Unitary Urbanism*.

Some of his texts were published in Internationale Situationniste, but that’s all.

On the occasion of her visit, I gave his daughter Sophie a letter for her father. I was bringing him news and hoped to receive some. His reply was abominably disconcerting. This was in 1995, a little after Debord’s suicide. He wrote: “Debord hanged himself from a branch of a tree that he found under my window.” This was how he interpreted Debord’s suicide, and he added, “He made the only suitable gesture . . .” Kotányi also said that his only interest at the time was deepening the notion of the Sabbath.⁷² The letter exuded such hatred that it revolted me. I never responded.

That was icy, at least . . .

More than icy. A total lack of humanity. A nasty delirium. I’d been ready to renew ties with him, to see him again, but that put an end to it.

You participated in his exclusion [from the SI]. How did that come about?

⁷² *Translator’s note:* in Judaism, it is forbidden to work on the Sabbath.

It took place in December 1963 after the exhibition that we staged in Randers.⁷³ This was already in the background. He'd really irritated Debord at a certain moment. Kotányi had then been living in unbridled passion with a young woman named Jenny. His refrain was, "Jenny is very radical. She hasn't read anything. She is essentially radical. She merits being in the SI." And so we had to apply the old principle: "Being the girlfriend of a situationist doesn't make you a situationist."⁷⁴ This wasn't misogynist – even if there were very few women in the SI, but that's another story. Thus we had to rebuff Kotányi and reject his demand. In addition to this, he kept bugging us with the idea that the study of Kabala is a [necessary] preliminary for the conception of the revolutionary project.

OK, his thinking degenerated, but we can't deny his input. It was through him that you met Debord.

He told me, "I've met someone in Paris who you must meet. His name is Guy Debord." He's also the one who sent me copies of *Internationale Situationniste*.⁷⁵ But that's it. It was Lefebvre who really helped establish the relationship.⁷⁶

Thus we have Kotányi, on the one hand, and Lefebvre, on the other. They don't know each other, but both of them think that you must take the same course . . . Quite striking! OK, so you began to exchange letters with Debord, and then you came to Paris to meet him. How did your first meeting go? Was he living on the rue Saint-Martin?

A singular friendship was established between Debord and I. He lived in a small apartment on the rue Saint-Martin. For me, our first meeting was a virtual wonder. I did not find someone who sought to impose an ideology, an already conceived idea, but a man plunged into the same research as I was . . . I had the feeling of finally being able to discuss my existential problems with someone.

The subjects you'd been pursuing found echoes in this new acquaintance. He seemed to share the same preoccupations, to be on the same wavelength as you . . .

Exactly! I'd never experienced anything like it before. I'd known agreements, modes of consensus, but this was the first time that there'd been a real reflection on radicality, on what

⁷³ *Translator's note:* the "Destruction of the RSG-6" exhibition in Denmark, 22 June to 7 July 1963. Though staged by the Situationist International, Vaneigem wasn't personally involved in it.

⁷⁴ *Translator's note:* cf. Debord's discussion of "the problem of girlfriends" in his letter to Mustapha Khayati dated 13 February 1966 <http://www.notbored.org/debord-13February1966.html>.

⁷⁵ *Translator's note:* Kotányi was part of the various editorial committees that produced issues #5 (December 1960), #6 (August 1961), #7 (April 1962), and #8 (January 1963). He, Debord and Vaneigem were also the co-authors of "The Hamburg Theses" (September 1961) and "Theses on the Paris Commune" (March 1962).

⁷⁶ *Translator's note:* for Lefebvre's recounting of the story, see his interview with Kristin Ross circa 1983: <http://www.notbored.org/lefebvre-interview.html>.

radicality is . . . We agreed on situating it in everyday life. I rediscovered what had interested me in Lefebvre's book with an occasion to go further! Lefebvre had produced an interesting sociological book . . . an analysis, certainly . . . but unsatisfying in that it limited itself to an assessment. It didn't ask the question, "How can we go beyond this assessment?" With Debord, on the other hand, there was a will to change the world! He'd had so much more experience than I'd had. I was still full of ignorance, steeped in provincial ways . . . He had been part of the Lettrist movement. When he told me – with respect to what he'd actually experienced – the history of this movement, about which I knew little (even if it had inspired me in my essay), a kind of "blastoff" [*décollage*] took place! I knew about surrealism. He spent entire days explaining lettrism to me! He was full of anecdotes that were always rich in meaning. He'd kept a kind of fascination for Isou,⁷⁷ even though he'd rejected him. This could be seen when Debord brought up *La Mécanique des femmes*,⁷⁸ a book that was more ridiculous than odious. He spoke of Lemaître,⁷⁹ and explained how his way of dynamiting language was a way of approaching a radical language. But the radicality of words wasn't enough, of course.

[...] *You must have felt dubbed in some way.*

Dubbed? I would instead say reassured – yes, reassured and comforted. If something fascinated me about him, it was his self-assurance, a character trait that I didn't possess. I arrived quite timid, quite hesitant, full of self-doubts. And he was an individual with very strong determination. A shared hatred for the Old World united us from the beginning. Though our approaches to radical critique were different, there was an intellectual bond between us that would only weaken after many years. We shared the same ferocity concerning market society. It stirred flashes of *Maldoror* in me. But Guy cultivated an interest in Cardinal de Retz.

How did he speak, how did he express himself?

Always very precisely . . . With a sense of mockery that he handled easily at the time. . . . Michèle Bernstein was a model in this respect.

At this first meeting, was he alone or with Michèle, his wife?

I met him with Michèle, with whom I fell madly in love . . . I had a secret and slightly clumsy passion for her. It always seemed to me that the seductiveness that Michèle Bernstein exerted upon men and women didn't displease Guy, provided that he remained the master of the game. She didn't hold herself in reserve. She'd already intervened and continued to do so afterwards. She was at the center of the discussions. Must I make clear that, at the time, she was the only woman in the SI? Subsequently, there weren't ever very many, right?

⁷⁷ *Translator's note:* Isidore Isou, born Ioan Isidore Goldstein (1925-2007), the inventor of lettrism in all of its forms: poetry, music, the graphic arts, films, et al.

⁷⁸ Published in 1949, this book was judged obscene by the authorities on 9 May 1950. Isou was sentenced to eight months in prison (suspended), a fine of 2,000 francs, and the destruction of all copies of the book.

⁷⁹ *Translator's note:* Maurice Lemaître (born 1926) is a painter and filmmaker who has been closely associated with Isou and lettrism since the early 1950s.

When you joined, what was your impression?

I was completely fascinated by Michèle's beauty, her intelligence and witty remarks. It remained a Platonic love, but . . . She had a radiant side that smiled [*rejaillissait*] upon Guy, who also had an affable side. When I arrived, Debord opened an armoire and said, "There's plenty of this!" There were about 15 bottles of wine, which we drank in short order. I had been in friendly drinking bouts before, but they were, let us say, superficial. We drank. There were several discussions about the Libre Examen, political subjects, but never very deep. We generally fell back on traditional political schemas. Among Michèle and Guy, commensality was inseparable from the critical analyses that directly concerned us. It went on for four or five hours while I was there . . .

The first person who I heard use the word "commensality," which I didn't know, was Louis Scutenaire.

It is a very beautiful word, I find.

Me, too. I have adopted it.

This meeting was a kind of permanent festival!

You must have been passably drunk.

Every time we got together, we went to the limits of drunkenness, but without losing either the purpose or the acuity of the critique. In addition to mockery, laughter . . . It was a time when we could still allow ourselves to play the fool! After the first meeting at the apartment on rue Saint-Martin, I often returned on the *weekends*.⁸⁰ I would leave my job as professor at Nivelles and hitchhike to Paris. I would return Monday morning to teach my afternoon classes at school. There were brief but intense trips . . .

[...] *He must have brought you up to date.* [...]

I no longer remember if Guy gave me the collection of *Les Lèvres nues* or if I'd already possessed them due to my interest in surrealism, but it was Guy, I believe, who showed me the text on *détournement*. We discussed it a lot at the time. My ignorance was dissipated over the course of those visits.

Like you add missing pieces to a puzzle . . .

For someone who, until then, had been treated as incoherent or muddled, it was quite fascinating to realize one's own pertinence for the first time. Kotányi, who hadn't failed to criticize my apparent disorder, which hadn't shocked me, but, all the same, made me wonder . . . He told me,

⁸⁰ *Translator's note:* English in original.

“You go in all directions. You will never make a coherent work. You disperse yourself in your critiques . . . You don’t have the sense of synthesis.”

This is like what you yourself said about him.

Oh, yes!

Did Debord speak of another lettrist, someone named Wolman?

He had to. He especially spoke of Chtcheglov. He initiated me into a part of avant-garde culture that I knew nothing about . . . His manner of recounting all this wasn’t literary or documentary. It was based on lived experiences, his hatreds, and his precise relationships with [certain] individuals. It was a “down to earth” critique, in the interesting and literal senses of the phrase. I had read almost the entire collection of *Internationale situationniste*. He proposed that I join the movement and get involved in issue #6.

[...] *I’d like to return to the Belgian strikes of 61.*

Debord came to Belgium with Michèle. She couldn’t resist teasing me because my wife, Thérèse, was pregnant with Ariane. “But how can you have children in such a world?” My father said similar things. He hadn’t wanted children. I was an accident. He never regretted it.

You were the only one of this generation to have children . . .

I have always been “given” [*passé*] the children whom I’ve had . . . René Viénet had children later on; Mustapha Khayati, too. But at the time, I was the only one to have them and claim them as mine! But to return to the strikes in Belgium: Debord made the trip. They were truly were important. In addition, they started completely spontaneously, outside of the unions and even against their wishes. It was a movement with strong demands that had been interrupted by ferocious repression: four killed in Liège . . . Everything collapsed after that, but something endured. We discovered the pertinence of workers’ councils. At the barricades in Dresden,⁸¹ they’d invoked Bakunin but the young Wagner, too . . . All this probably contributed to the fusion of what was radical in the artistic movements and the more political radicality that appeared in a still latent, immature fashion in 1960-61. Debord was in contact with André Frankin, an anarchist from Liege who has since disappeared. There must be letters between them⁸² . . .

They are in the first volume of Guy Debord’s letters – the volume in which the most interesting letters appear . . .

An anarchist grouping evolved around Frankin. He dreamed, in a slightly uneven way, certainly, of a movement in favor of self-management. I believe I only saw him once. He, too, was

⁸¹ *Translator’s note:* May 1849.

⁸² *Translator’s note:* these letters date back to 1954: cf. <http://www.notbored.org/debord-8December1954.html>.

temperamental. Thus he didn't last long with Guy.⁸³ I believe that they quarreled – and right at the moment that they (Guy, Robert Dehoux and his wife, Clairette Schock)⁸⁴ had begun to write a short text called “Alternative.” The final version formed the content of a small eponymous journal that was published after the Belgian strikes.

Who was Robert Dehoux?

An old engineer from the Miners' Union who had left the Congo or had been chased from it because of his anti-colonialist views. He'd opened a bar in Brussels called L'Estro Armonico. His wife, Clairette, worked behind the bar and he worked in the kitchen. It quite rapidly became a select spot, slightly chic, where Debord and I used to go to drink and eat, graciously welcomed, of course.

[...] *After the meeting in Belgium, when you first met Frankin and Dehoux, who were the first members [of the SI] with whom you associated?*

René Viénet, at Debord's place. He's said to be from Le Havre originally, from a family of dockworkers. I have never known if this is true.

It is true . . . He arrived along with those whom were called the “Havre clan.” Michèle was from Le Havre. Her sister knew René. It was through this connection that René had discovered one or several back issues of I.S. It was a very happy time. Every encounter had to be warm, festive.

This coherence between the festive character and the radical critique of the world, this intransigence towards all forms of compromise, were reassuring on every point. We were in the process of building a citadel that had its reasons for existing even if it ended up enclosing us, but we still didn't know this. We were in a hostile world . . . Michèle Bernstein loved to recall to us, not without humor, Luther's *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott*,⁸⁵ the choral of which states “A mighty fortress is our God.”

Thus there were several advance signs, traces of humor that allow us to glimpse what would take place several years later.

Here René Viénet played an important role. I remember something he said after 1968: “In any case, if we must all go to prison, I hope that we won't be placed in the same cell!” In fact this wasn't a bad image since we indeed got bogged down in notions such as “beachhead” and then the-group-in-danger.

For a joke, Viénet's remark was charged with meaning!

⁸³ *Translator's note:* they remained in communication with each other as late as 1961: <http://www.notbored.org/debord-8September1961.html>.

⁸⁴ *Translator's note:* an extensive interview with Clairette Schock, conducted by Gérard Berréby on 30 April 2012, appears elsewhere in *Rien n'est fini, tout commence*. Cf. <http://www.notbored.org/schock.pdf>.

⁸⁵ *Translator's note:* a cantata by J. S. Bach to which Martin Luther added lyrics.

René Viénet had the artful ability to resolve tension when it flared up . . . Debord had moods, somber moods. He could suddenly turn taciturn, less joyful. Then Viénet would arrive and make us laugh by playing the fool, but not in the pejorative sense often given to this word. Among the Knights of the Round Table, Dagonet had a hilarious sense of humor . . . the ability to lighten the atmosphere.

I believe that, subsequently, you and René were quite close [...] What was your first impression of him?

I found him very likeable. He had a hilarious side. Moreover, radicality was never lacking in him – to the point of sometimes becoming a principle – tinged with a certain contempt for our enemies. We all had it, but he had more severity, a furious obstinacy. Contempt never pleased me . . . but it was also a way of marking our distance from the external world. We would say: “hard on the outside, flexible on the inside.” It was not so much a role than a game that came to him easily. René had a playful side, which he never lost . . . a seductive side, as well. Everyone always found him to be a good companion. A kind of big oaf. He had the traits of Le Grande Duduche.⁸⁶ As for his knowledge, he was very solid in the cinema, more uncertain in literature but – although he did not arrive with Kotányi’s credentials – he didn’t waste any time in correcting his deficiencies.

A bond connected you . . .

It’s true . . . Debord didn’t inspire you to take him into your confidence. There are people in whom one confides willingly what troubles or perturbs us. This wasn’t the case with Guy. I saw him once or twice in the disarray that follows a romantic breakup. His confidence had quickly faded. I suspected him of having seen a weakness [in himself] that an enemy could take advantage of. Given that, since he himself didn’t hesitate to make use of an intimate confession against an imprudent person, he no doubt imagined that a similar procedure could be used against him. Viénet wasn’t vulnerable to such blows. We didn’t have any secrets [between us]. At the time, he had a romantic passion for a woman who I also fancied. He enjoyed watching us make love. I have kept a touching memory of those idyllic encounters and, in moments of rest, I still see him bringing us big cups of hot chocolate. My impression of him remains a certain levity and innocence. I would even say that his libertine side faded [*s’estompait*] in the slightly pejorative sense of the word. A real affection circulated among us, as if everything was natural. With René, I had complete freedom in recounting intimate stories. I knew that he would keep them to himself. Unlike Guy, he would never use them against me. Debord never left libertinage behind; it was part of the role of the “last accursed artist,” which he played until his painful, noble and pathetic end.

Their social origins separated them, too. René was the son of a docker – that is to say, the son of a proletarian, in the rhetoric of the epoch. But that wasn’t the case with Debord.

⁸⁶ *Translator’s note:* a comic-strip character created by Cabu and published in *Pilote* in 1963.

Both of us, it is true, had a sense of being part of the proletarian aristocracy. While many people spoke of proles without knowing anything about them, we had actually lived in the workers' milieu.

And René's input?

He excelled at knocking down our triumphalist pretensions – as did Michèle Bernstein . . .

. . . whom he loved to tease by calling her the “Chic Den Mother”!

Michèle also rebuffed us, but in a different way, by warning us against the dangers of abstraction. This was important because some slopes indicated a probable landslide. Even if René was the object of banter and jibes that were worthy of a colleague, we knew that he also possessed an extremely well developed practical sense. He's the one who assured the SI's finances when money coming from Asger Jorn became rare. René had recourse to a number of scams to keep the machine running.

What kind of scams?

At least one of them was juicy. When he was still perfecting his Chinese, he succeeded in becoming a librarian at the Faculté des Langues O[rientales]. He bought duplicate copies of books and sold the extra ones to feed a “black cash register.”

He must have done pretty well!

We didn't go very far into the details of his little schemes. He had ways of getting by. I believe that he subsidized issue #11⁸⁷ through negotiations of that type. And, in passing, he succeeded at getting admitted to the Langues O., where he perfected his Chinese.

He was also a joker . . .

He doubted his own talents. Like Mustapha, he was always someone who lacked confidence. This is a plausible reason to work to subsidize the revolution. Then René invested in mining, made money, did business. He succeeded . . . At the time, it suited us. He had both a big mouth and a sense of discretion.

The paradoxes of his personality that you are pointing to perhaps exactly reveal the [nature of the] “proletarian aristocracy” that cultivated modesty as an essential moral quality.

Modesty went without saying. My father wanted me to escape the proletariat. He wanted me to study. But his fear was that I might betray my class by becoming an intellectual.

An intellectual being someone who puts himself forward, who swaggers.

⁸⁷ *Translator's note: Internationale Situationniste #11, October 1967.*

Also someone who becomes the “iron lance of the proletariat.”⁸⁸ That would be a real betrayal. One would have been shameful to give in to it. Proletarians learn to resist the spectacle of their own erudition, their own knowledge . . . But underneath his slightly coarse exterior, Viénet possessed real elegance. He always kept it, too.

And a sense of friendship and solidarity, too . . . He helped those close to him.

He was always elegant and generous. He had – and this is important – a real human presence. He had the ability to channel tension. Neither Debord nor I worried about projects that involved us. I am not being too hard on myself when, with hindsight, I take account of the ravages for which we were not responsible, in the guilty sense of the word, but that we allowed to take place. I tell myself that, with a little more lucidity concerning our own everyday lives – the everyday lives that we put at the center of our thinking – we might have avoided some damage . . .

. . . through an increased attention to the adequation between theory and practice – the key to the vault of the SI’s thinking.

It was a pertinent and radical conception, but the facts show that it evolved in the opposite direction.

So, if I was you, René was the exception to the rule. He was, perhaps, the most in accord with himself.

Until his thinking got diluted into commercialism. From that moment on, the critique of separation became a dead letter for him. There was something astonishing about seeing him associate with the son of Thang Kai-check⁸⁹ in Taiwan.

He was a representative of Cogema. He sold nuclear power [to the Chinese]. He was and today remains convinced of the necessity of nuclear power.

That’s paradoxical: split between his humanity and a calculating side that he justifies with a very ordinary cynicism: “Cheat the dominant society, since it cheats us!”

The wheeler-dealer revolution! He cheated it good.

Yes, he cheated it good, until the moment that he joined those who cheat. He did so in his own way, but, in any case, we can’t deny that he put us on our guard very often. He passed to the side

⁸⁸ *Translator’s note:* in *The Resistance to Christianity*, Vaneigem attributes this quote to Karl Marx (<http://www.notbored.org/resistance-42.html>) and to Wilhelm Weitling, who “proposed a general insurrection of the proletariat whose iron lance – constituted by criminals released from prison and transformed by their divine mission – would introduce into the cadaver of the old world the ferment of the egalitarian millennium” (<http://www.notbored.org/resistance-47.html>).

⁸⁹ *Translator’s note:* Chiang Ching-Kuo (1910-1988), the premier (1972-1978) and then the president (1978-1988) of the Republic of China.

of the exploiters with the good conscience of the cynic for whom games of life and games of death are interchangeable.

[...] *What was it that pushed you to write in a more precise, oriented and radical manner – beyond what you had already done to that point – within the SI, for its journal?*

Shortly after [the beginning of] my participation in the [editorial team of the] journal, the idea of “Basic Banalities”⁹⁰ was born . . . I was radicalized by contact with the journal . . . The drafting of “Basic Banalities” followed a development that was quite similar to the one that, later on, led me to write the *Traité*: a way of settling accounts – with myself, especially. I went through a period of great discomfort. I felt prisoner of an everyday life that –

– your work as a professor?

In and of itself, that didn’t displease me. Even if I hated rising early, being inspected by the director in the hallway, dealing with a hierarchy. I have always kept in mind the words of the miner and writer, Constant Malva.⁹¹ “There isn’t a morning that I don’t wake up without wanting to set the entire world on fire.”

He was an author whom Scutenaire valued very highly!

I really appreciate Malva. “Ma nuit au jour le jour,”⁹² for example. I learned very early that I prefer that everything collapse rather than give in to routine. My everyday life didn’t satisfy me. And yet I had an absolutely charming wife. It was she who allowed me to write the *Traité* because I couldn’t deprive myself of the male chauvinist casualness that had currency at the time.

I have the impression that you don’t find a balance with your aspirations.

I cannot tolerate regulated life, paved with pettiness, denuded of great passions. From whence comes my passion for a revolution that will bring about global change. This tendency hasn’t ceased exacerbating itself over the course of time. My parents had the habit of spending eight months out of the year in Spain, in Palma, at an orange grove where acquaintances would receive them. It was during a vacation there that I wrote “Basic Banalities.” I would get up around 4 am, go to a café and, instead of drinking hot tea, I drank hot cognac.

Impressive!

⁹⁰ The first 13 theses of it were published in issue #7 of *Internationale situationniste* in April 1962 and the remaining 17 theses, plus a “Summary of the Preceding Chapters,” were published in #8, January 1963. [Sometime later] the two parts were printed together, but without the original illustrations, by Ludd in Paris [...] Finally, in 2004, “Basic Banalities” was published anew by Editions Verticales in Paris [...].

⁹¹ Real name Alphonse Boulord, Belgian, 9 October 1903 – 15 May 1969.

⁹² *Translator’s note*: “My night in the light of day,” 1953.

Later on I drank absinthe! I kept a bottle at hand and I would write . . . By noon I was completely done in. I would sleep the rest of the day. Each day I would write in a kind of rage, imagining that the fusillade of words could . . . I had the feeling of becoming myself!

Such consumption must be beyond drunkenness. It was almost an alcoholic coma.

One morning, I woke up with red patches on my body. Thus I slightly relented on the frequency with which I absorbed strong drink. I had reached a stage of advanced self-destruction. In the SI, a slightly morbid joy lingered. Each of us had the idea and the feeling that we were in the process of working to fuck up this shitty world.

Allow me to make a hypothesis: in the idea of joyfully working to fuck up this shitty world, did you also dream of doing away with yourselves?

Without any doubt! The rage to destroy everything and myself at the same time produced such texts. With a certain elegance in the manner of putting an end to them! But all this would evolve later on. Already, in the slightly extreme consumption of alcohol, a joy for living is paradoxically nestled. This doesn't appear sufficiently in "Basic Banalities" and would be developed in the *Traité*. A slightly melodramatic side, which I evoke by speaking of the rage that animated us, that must be tempered by the fact that moments lived with the members of the SI were full of joy. We took pleasure in listening to music, singing, talking, eating and drinking.

[...] *Do you think that the individuals evolving here needed alcohol to liberate themselves?*

Yes, in the sense that alcohol gives a boost to self-confidence. And it helps megalomania get rid of its deficiencies.

[...] *Why haven't you spoken of alcohol before? Why do you feel the need to drink?*

I think that we were quite stuck in what Reich called "character armor."⁹³ Alcohol has the formidable therapeutic property of helping people open up – but also close upon themselves.

Everyone doesn't have the ability to drink to excess!

I myself had a kind of terrified reaction when I saw the precursory signs, the red patches that presaged something more serious. I diminished the quantities, but not to the point of stopping . . . Debord must have sensed the same thing. In fact, from the moment that he started writing *La Société du Spectacle*, he stopped drinking from one day to the next.

To my knowledge, he didn't drink a drop while writing it.

⁹³ "The role – Wilhelm Reich would say 'the armor' – guarantees the impotence of sexual enjoyment. Contradictorily, pleasure, the joy of living, and unbridled enjoyment break the shell, break the role." Raoul Vaneigem, *Traité*, 1967. [Translator: "character armor" is my attempt to render *carapace caractérielle*, which is a term of art, a bit of jargon. In the ordinary sense of the word, *caractérielle* means temperamental, even emotionally disturbed.]

Not a drop?! I'm flabbergasted. I would have been incapable of such a thing.

[...] *What was Debord's reaction to "Basic Banalities"?*

He published it right away.

What appreciation did he have of it?

Total agreement, without the slightest criticism.

With the publication of "Basic Banalities," which was an important critical input to the journal, an evolution began, but also a real turning point.

I don't know if it was a turning point . . . My vision of things is obviously subjective. For me, there was something essential about it – an inaugurating event – although the text was very dense and made for difficult reading. In it I satisfied the desire to go further, to be more precise. Perhaps my existential rage became refined. It is open to its opposite, inspired by Lautréamont's *Poésies* . . . This was why publishers criticized the *Traité* for a certain artificial character. My idea of the reversal of perspective went over poorly.

Reversals of perspective that directly derived from your reading of Lautréamont. One can sense the role played by Lautréamont in "Basic Banalities," his input, his influence on the writing.

"Basic Banalities" participates in *Maldoror's* perspective. In a completely different fashion, of course, but already with the argument about primitive societies . . . The *Traité* [by contrast] opens more on the poetic aspect: a reversal takes place. As with alcoholism, festive evenings – something important is revealed.

Something that is hallucinatory. Because when one reads Lautréamont, there's a hallucinatory dimension to him. What do you think?

Perhaps there was a hallucinatory side to the SI, to that handful of individuals who claimed to be the world's conscience and who took exception to the entire world in the name of an International that was quite mythical, at least . . .

. . . *a few soldiers of the light opera* . . .

An intrinsic and provocative [sense of] humor – yes!

An International formed by several Frenchmen, a Belgian, a Dane and an Italian . . . There was even a Congolese section . . .

. . . which was formed by two of my ex-students. Djangani Lungela and M'Belolo ya M'Piku, author of rhumbas against Mobutu. The paradox is that this prefabricated – some would say bogus [*de pacotille*] – International acquired a "universal" credibility. It contained a challenge, a

defiance, that had drawn poetry from delirium. The poetic and human aspect of our relationships no doubt constituted the most radical basis of the SI, a basis that, even today, resists the spell of confusion and chaos. At the time, we hadn't sufficiently analyzed the phenomenon. The pushing and pulling between the people who met and experienced things together were swept away by a vaster project whose danger, we knew, was falling into megalomania. Perhaps we didn't always resist it; perhaps we succumbed to it.

When one undertakes great things, megalomania is sometimes necessary.

It was, in any case, the symptom of a much more profound phenomenon: the aforementioned rage . . . When I speak of the rage that went into the writing of "Basic Banalities," it is a creative rage. It incited me to overturn the world. Expressed that way, it is a little naïve. Yet we felt it, without expressing it in such a simple way. But with Debord, with Khayati, even with people like [René] Riesel, there's the will to change everything.

An intimate conviction of being on the way to fucking up the foundations of the old world that spoiled your lives.

It was an intimate and shared feeling. To live it out, we had no need to express it in such a summary form.

[...] *Other people, who haven't produced journals, books and ideas, who haven't associated their names with a project, have nevertheless been motivated by this desire [to destroy the old world].*

The big difference is that we were aware of it. We were the catalysts of a disorder, a discontent, certainly, but one unlike the "great soft heads" of Existentialism. We didn't accept that dreadful assessment [of the human condition]. We laid the basis for a radically new society.

Assessment and change were confusedly felt by a generation of youth for whom you proclaimed yourselves to be the torchbearers and about whom you tried to theorize.

Many recognized themselves in our ideas.

How would you summarize "Basic Banalities"? Not in how it is pertinent to today, but [...] as you conceived and wrote it and as it was received immediately after publication.

Almost as an explosion, but a cold one, because one can be artistic in [the creation of] explosions, as in the case of Céline . . . I was carried away by a kind of coherence, an awareness of something volcanic! I believe I succeeded in controlling this turbulence and in giving it a finished form, in producing more reflective thoughts – a knife that had been sharpened so that it could penetrate better.

A will to do evil?

To express myself in a sharper language doesn't necessarily mean a literary vocation, but its opposite. I sought out the words that were capable of piercing shells. At the same time, my own shell, perhaps . . . To a certain extent, I exacerbated my own discontent, my own survival sickness. But this unblocked a desire to have done with an unacceptable world and found a response, an opening, in the will to create an acceptable one. I don't know if this option was already there in "Basic Banalities," but it is certainly present in the *Traité*.

[...] *I find "Basic Banalities" very masterful in its organization of a method that isn't at all uncertain. The content already seems to be transcended by a style . . .*

Yet it was written quite rapidly and in precarious conditions from the point of view of my psychological equilibrium.

You can write something in two days and still make a literary work. It isn't because you write for two years and suffer mightily that makes it better.

It is still not a literary work, in any case.

[...] *Whether it is "Basic Banalities" or the *Traité* – to stay focused on your early works – it is the real work of a writer [...]*

I repeat that I have not built a literary oeuvre. I am neither a writer nor a philosopher . . . I consider myself to be an artisan in search of the most obvious phrase, the formulation best suited to the thought I wish to express. I do not love the phrase for the phrase itself, but I am happy when a phrase corresponds exactly to the thought that I want to express through it. The form of a phrase is intimately tied to its content.

It is true that artists in the Renaissance envisioned themselves as artisans because they had knowledge of several different disciplines, but this didn't stop them from making works and being artists.

With this significant difference: as artists, they wanted to be pleasing.

[...] *For me they are, in a certain way, two facets of the same thing. On the one hand, there's someone whose concern was to be pleasing. You took the opposite path; your concern was to be displeasing.*

We had neither the desire to please or displease – that's different! We manifested a kind of rejection of both. I can't deny that, from time to time, some literary coquetties slipped in. This never produces the best phrases. When a phrase becomes a formula, it does so without the readiness to oblige. It isn't turned for pleasure. A pedagogical phrase is often much weaker. It has a meaning; it enlightens. But we were never animated by literary concerns. I read many novels. If something in a novel pleases me, I can draw from it –

*References to literary works and writers aren't lacking. In the first rank, we can place Kafka.*⁹⁴

Kafka was important to us. He remains so.

Speaking of Kafka, were you aware of the manner in which he dynamited the very process of the novel of the time?

No. What fascinated us about Kafka was his analysis of closed, bureaucratic societies.

That is, if I may so say, a slightly summary approach to his work.

Not literary, in any case. Our habit was less to consider a book's [style of] writing or literary genius than its contents. In a writer's work, the important thing isn't his place in literary history, but the radicality that he can relay to his readers.

In some ways you fed upon what a work offers, something almost artificial, marginal, even doctored . . . and got rid of the rest.

Yes, sometimes that was the case. You can also find nuggets in an otherwise very banal work. In Kafka, radicality is everywhere. He was a visionary. The Soviet and Nazi bureaucracies are heralded in his works.

But Kafka's works are extremely complex and can't be reduced to this element. There are connections to religion, the Talmud, and Hebrew grammar that are very important.

Of course there are different levels of reading. We chose one in particular.

To show his vision of the bureaucratic world, he had to find a literary procedure capable of dynamiting all of the old codes. Thus he gave birth to a form of modern novel that has influenced entire generations of writers. That is a dimension that isn't at all perceived [by you].

This didn't interest us at all. I don't read Kafka with his letter to his father as the background. Likewise, [James] Joyce isn't dear to me – I'm thinking of *Ulysses* – for his “revolutionary” way of writing, but the acuity of his analysis of everyday existence: that of Leopold Bloom and his wife, Molly. It is the simultaneous exploration of hell and paradise that I find impassioning. None of us [in the SI] had a taste for literary experimentation.

The only thing that interested you was what brought fuel to your fire.

⁹⁴ “For many years, the best artists and talented minds have deplored the gap between art and life. These same people were, generally speaking, rebels in their youth and, upon the approach of maturity, ‘success’ rendered them inoffensive. The individual is deprived of power. This is unavoidable. And the artist has a profound sense of his powerlessness. It makes him fail; he is cursed. In the writings of Kafka, the terrifying sense of alienation fills his works.” (*Internationale situationniste* #8, January 1963). [Translator's note: the text in question is Alexander Trocchi's “Technique du coupe du monde.”]

Yes. The “nourishment” that a work could effectively provide for us.

You picked here and there in a work and then abandoned the rest.

Yes, to the point of also choosing people who, literarily speaking, were not brilliant.

[...] *It is very candid on your part to say that you rejected a certain number of things because you considered them bourgeois, and yet nourished yourself upon others [...]*

Yes, but during the evening, I entertain myself. I devour so-called detective stories!

I have never considered the detective story to be a sub-genre.

I prefer Nordic authors – Mankell, Indridason, Staalesen.⁹⁵ It is difficult for me to be interested in a poorly written book: I’m not the only one, I suppose, who enters a bookstore, pages through the books and closes them after reading only three lines, because they discourage the desire to read any more. Like everyone else, I have literary standards. Same with music.

A phrase by Constant Malva remains a phrase from a novel and no one reads a novel for a phrase. There’s an entire construction that leads to the phrase and others.

Where Malva is concerned, the writing comes from his experiences as a miner. He writes what he feels. The dangerous criteria of sincerity and authenticity enter into play. Of course, one can let oneself fall into the trap of fake sincerity, prefabricated authenticity. The example of Céline – as dissected by Michel Bounan⁹⁶ – is illuminating in this respect. His *Voyage au bout de la Nuit* impressed us at the time. We went along with his emotional spiel. – I continue to believe that I don’t have a literary vocation, but this doesn’t mean that I don’t love to write.

Philip Roth says that the novel is a contemplative narrative in which one invents a story so as to use it to communicate philosophical content.

I don’t see myself describing the sound of the rain on a window, for example. I admire that talent among many other writers . . . By the same token, I refuse to pass for a philosopher. I’ve made mine this statement by Marx: “The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in diverse ways; what is important is *transforming* it.” If I have been concerned with analyzing the world, it is *stricto sensu*⁹⁷ to transform it. [As for the surpassing of philosophy:] the surpassing in fact conserves philosophical reasoning . . . So, if I claim to surpass literature, I know that it is

⁹⁵ *Translator’s note:* Henning Mankell, Swedish, born 1948; Arnaldur Indridason, Icelandic, born 1961; Gunnar Staalesen, Norwegian, born 1947.

⁹⁶ “A good question here isn’t how a libertarian came to team up with the Nazis but how such a person thought it would be good to disguise himself as a libertarian.” Michel Bounan, *L’Art de Céline et son temps*, 1997.

⁹⁷ *Translator’s note:* Latin for “in the strict sense.”

conserved in the surpassing of it. There was a time when, before writing something, I'd read a page or two of Diderot. Not innocent and yet very innocent.

[...] *I have the feeling that you've constructed a literary oeuvre that began with "Basic Banalities."* I associate this with *Lautréamont's approach – precisely his Poésies, in which one finds the same cold rage . . .*

The weapon of critique struggles against confusion. There's the will to dominate Maldororian chaos . . . It is a question of being precise – a precision that doesn't come under the heading of literary art, but an art of language, a style.

But style – that's literature!

Style is also important. A just formulation always finds a way to express itself in an adequate style.

For me, style determines everything. The style is the man! The style is the very man, Buffon says in his Discours sur la style.

In that case, it is true that one can find in the style of "Basic Banalities" the style of life to which I aspired – to extricate myself from an existence that "has no style"!

You mentioned Louis-Ferdinand Céline. How was he a model for you at the moment you began writing "Basic Banalities"?

After reading *Voyage au bout de la Nuit*, we were steeped in a mythology in which Céline effectively personified the completely false image of the prole who shouts out his truths to a corrupted world and refuses to accept it. The character of Bardamu communicates the idea of the generous doctor, which Céline wasn't . . . One might say, somewhat coarsely, "He has us!" We were fascinated by the sincerity, which we did not suspect of being a pure and simple fabrication. With *Voyage au bout de la Nuit*, Céline – with a kind of brutal subversiveness – entered into the black vision that we had of the world. The *Voyage* also allowed us, quite curiously, to get rid of *Bagatelle pour un massacre* and the rest of it.⁹⁸ I must note that we were superbly ignorant of that text . . . I only read it much later. Debord was attached to the song of the Swiss Guards in the *Voyage*.⁹⁹ I have never known if it was Céline's invention or if it really existed. It is a bit like the spirit one finds in the *Voyage*, and Debord always remained in the shadows where one can advance or disappear. We were fascinated by the shadowy and emotionally raw side of Céline. This was also the source of our interest in Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano* and the character of the consul, who in some ways remains loyal to his alcoholism, nobly leading himself towards his own ruin. This was part of our mythology at the time. I sanctified this feeling, just as I also made a lot of the Marquis de Sade's *La Philosophie dans le boudoir*, which, in a certain way, made his *120 journées de Sodome* disappear.

⁹⁸ *Translator's note:* the first of a series (1937-1941) of anti-Jewish pamphlets.

⁹⁹ *Translator's note:* "Our lives are a voyage / In winter at Night / We seek our passage / In the Sky where nothing shines." *Chansons des Gardes Suisses*, 1793.

I believe that this rage and distress that you felt so violently are the moods that determined what came out later.

To tell the truth, I found myself in the inconsistency of a world in which I felt I was erased, destroyed, denied. To write was a way of affirming myself – not to affirm myself as a writer, but to find a way out of the doldrums . . . I also had to earn my bread, to assure my survival. But this exasperating side sometimes sharpened my critique of work. I certainly had the opportunity to often go on vacation to a paradisiacal and sunny place – Palma. But this – more than any [material] poverty in a book by Emile Zola – only accentuated my unease with existence. Was *this* living? This routine in which nothing happened, in which the horrors of the world continued and one couldn't intervene?

*This was the foundation of the critique in your *Traité* and what followed it: a demolition of all that found grace in the eyes of this society, which you scrutinized in a pitiless fashion.*

It is true that nothing remains, except what we can do by going beyond that point. Finally, I have never been psychoanalyzed, but I performed a kind of self-analysis through my analysis of the world – my analysis, my critique of the roles to be played. Why can't one be oneself? Why is everything so complicated? Why must depressive states exist? Why are there such exercises of power, this way of requiring compliance with everything? All this is intolerable! To reveal the roots of the intolerable is also a way of liberating yourself from them. And it's true that there is something joyful in the way the *Traité* was written with the resolution to put an end to the Old World. An elementary and naïve response sharpened the acuity of my viewpoint and style beyond ordinary limits. This should give one pause.

[...] *A joyful relationship that didn't stop growing developed between you, Debord and Michèle*
[...]

The most passionate link – despite our completely different ways of communicating – resided in the consensus between us. Debord's language was always objective, with a philosophical rigor. Mine was more connected to subjective analysis: the notions of sacrifice, lived experience, authenticity . . . The two perfectly completed and complemented each other. There were never any clashes in our discussions – simply different approaches that corroborated each other's. We had confirmation of this from the moment that each of us began to write – Guy, *La Société du Spectacle*, me, the *Traité*. We never exchanged “copies” of our manuscripts. A tacit understanding between us nourished mutual trust.

You say, “We were different. He had a philosophical rigor, a calm tone. But I was a little more – not boiling, but” –

– more like riding horseback . . . on a tiger . . . on a wild animal.

To illustrate these differences, can you cite your respective favorite authors, although they would no doubt complement each other?

Here we quickly fall into caricatures. For Debord, it was Marx and Hegel. For me, Nietzsche, Bakunin, Max Stirner . . . Debord was never hostile to Bakunin, but he inclined more towards Marx's side. I brought to the table a kind of Nietzsche-ism that clashed slightly with the Hegelian-Marxist perspective, but which was complementary to, even in agreement with it. As for Viénet, he'd always been able to break that kind of artificial duality . . . I'd certainly read Hegel, too, but Debord quoted and possessed his writing better than I did . . . The interplay of complementaries had a great significance. I developed a passion for Fourier, whose writings Debord knew, obviously. But his passion for this philosopher was like the passion that the surrealists had for "the utopianist."

How did you speak of the surrealists?

Missing something. Like I was . . .

All of them?

With the exception of Péret, who, loyal to the surrealists, wrote in *Bief*: "These situationists, who have no other interest than finding a situation for themselves . . ." ¹⁰⁰

Why Benjamin Péret? For his anti-clericalism? His participation in the Spanish [Civil] War?

Péret was the only one [among the surrealists] to enlist in the Spanish Revolution, the only one to remain ferociously anti-clerical, the most radical. Breton never dared to criticize him . . . There's a trace of my sympathies here. I'm especially thinking of that photograph – real or fake [I don't know] – of Benjamin Péret insulting a priest . . .

[...] *But don't you think that, even at the moment that he displayed such well-justified anti-clericalism, it was already dated?*

No, not at all. I have often reproached freethinkers for judging a priest, for example, who jumps his maid or gives himself over to debauchery. Ecclesiastical libertinage – at the time it wasn't a question of pedophilia – is only obscene because of the hypocrisy with which it is practiced. Let's take the case of the priest, Meslier, ¹⁰¹ whom – along with Gengenbach – was hailed by the surrealists. I knew about them both before I joined the SI. Debord did, too. ¹⁰² He had a very good knowledge of surrealism's fascinating side issues. Gengenbach presented himself as a subversive

¹⁰⁰ "As long as science is not placed at the direct and immediate service of humanity, but keeps the possibility of being used against it, it is impossible to have the least confidence in its aims. Even if things were otherwise, there would still be no reason to accept science's tutelage, as has been proposed, for example, by a so-called 'Situationist International' that imagines itself to be the bearer of the new when it actually creates ambiguity and confusion. But isn't it in troubled waters that one fishes for a situation?" Benjamin Péret, *Bief*, #1, 15 November 1958.

¹⁰¹ *Translator's note*: cf. Chapter 48 of Vaneigem's *The Resistance to Christianity*: <http://www.notbored.org/resistance-48.html>.

¹⁰² *Translator's note*: cf. Debord's letter to Khayati dated 13 February 1966: <http://www.notbored.org/debord-13February1966.html>.

priest, even if a part of this mythology obscured his [true] personality. Was he completely fabricated? We never extended our research. I found his works to be amusing. His anti-clericalism is even more gratifying because his father was a priest. That's what was also fascinating about Meslier . . . but he was of a completely different stature!

The same Meslier whom you détourned . . .

Yes, and to whom I remain loyal.

*He's the one who coined a phrase that you so superbly took up and modified – "Humanity will finally be happy on the day that the last bishop has been hanged with the guts of the last prince" – which, in the *Traité*, becomes "Humanity will finally be happy on the day that the last bureaucrat has been hanged with the guts of the last Stalinist."*

That *détournement* is quite summary . . . But – it is an homage – it does not distort Meslier's thinking. I limited myself to adapting the phrase to modern conditions . . . To return to anti-clericalism, I think that it took root in me during my "primitive" life. It is rudimentary and useful. There will be a time that the imams are harassed by the Arabs!

We are far from that!

The "dated" aspect of this profound position can perhaps be explained by two things. Anti-clericalism – that is to say, the refusal of the representatives of a religious order – doesn't question religion itself. Christians can be anti-clerical. Anti-clericalism can [also] be paired with atheism. But most often it illustrates a kind of mysticism, a faith that claims to bypass the priests. In the Middle Ages, there was a violently anti-clerical current that didn't disavow religion as such. Furthermore, religion was still omnipresent in Péret's times, and it is no longer today. It has been reduced to a folklore, with the result that "primary" anti-clericalism has also fallen into disuse. But if religion has lost its substance, its cadaver continues to rot . . . I'm thinking of the American evangelists, the imams in certain countries, and even rabbis. There are truly beautiful anecdotes about the rejection of rabbis by the Jews themselves. Movements of extreme ferocity existed in and around the Bund.¹⁰³ There were demonstrations during the Sabbath where Jews strolled around, eating grilled pork sausage from small, movable kitchens. The impact was considerable. It was a refusal of the Jewish religion by the Jews themselves. I would really like it if such demonstrations reappeared in contemporary Israel.

¹⁰³ The Union of Jewish Workers from Poland, Lithuania and Russia, better known as the *Bund* – "link" or "liaison" in Yiddish – was founded clandestinely in Vilna in 1897, the same year that Zionism was founded. It was one of the founding groups of Russian Social-Democracy, from which Bolshevik power later emerged. The first Jewish political party – socialist, Marxist and nonreligious – the Bund brought together men who fought relentlessly against the Czarist autocracy. More than a simple political formation, the Bund developed into a cultural movement. Drawing upon the Jewish communities, whether religious, orthodox or not, Zionists, Communists and Liberals, the Bund fought against Russian, Soviet, Polish and Nazi oppression.

In Israel [...] there is a fringe of the population that is violently opposed to the domination of the rabbis. The opposition has been such that the government has been obligated to react [...]

I know about the limited side of anti-clericalism. But such a reaction in Israel is quite reassuring. Even if it doesn't have great radicality, it is, all the same, the manifestation of great exasperation . . . In the places that Islam is dominant – as you've rightly said – we are far from this. But a friend tells me that, in Rabat, there's a movement – the “fast-breakers” – whose members get together and courageously eat their sandwiches in a public place in the middle of Ramadan¹⁰⁴ . . . And in the places where religion's presence is still strong, anti-clericalism can signal the emergence of a rage directed against religious totalitarianism. It's a good sign. During the “Arab Spring,”¹⁰⁵ the Tunisian slogan – “Freedom of prayer, freedom to drink” – was a beautiful formation. It very quickly disappeared from the walls, as did the slogan “Neither Allah nor Master,”¹⁰⁶ but I'll wager they will return.

[...] To quote Nietzsche, an author dear to you: “There is no one more religious than the anti-religious, no bigger believer than the atheist, no one more militarist than the anti-militarist.” [...]

How could we not agree with Nietzsche here? Although I follow my primary anti-clerical reactions, I have never been anti-clerical. Jakob Böhme,¹⁰⁷ for example, has always fascinated me. Even in his obscurity.

He played a non-negligible role in the formation of Hegel's thinking [...]

The filiation [of Hegel] with Jakob Böhme, although accepted, has always struck me as a bit tenuous because of his mysticism . . . On the other hand, I discovered Swedenborg quite late.

[...] Reading such authors, a free spirit perceives that their interrogations went beyond [that point] and this returns us to one of your centers of interest: the Movement of the Free Spirit, the heretics . . .

Under the patronage of “God” – a dominant word that virtually no one at the time could escape – they expressed something that went beyond atheism.

[...] Our era has discovered another author about whom I have already spoken to you: Norman Cohn [...] Some of the extracts that he quotes are very close to Biblical writings, religious or mystical.

¹⁰⁴ *Translator's note:* cf. news reports about the Alternative Movement for Individual Liberty published 30 May 2010.

¹⁰⁵ *Translator's note:* circa 2010-2011.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. the film *Laïcité, inch'Allah*, 2011, by Nadia El Fani, originally titled *Neither Allah nor Master!*

¹⁰⁷ *Translator's note:* cf. Chapter 47, Vaneigem's *The Resistance to Christianity*: <http://www.notbored.org/resistance-47.html>.

In some of these texts, a veritable détournement of Biblical language was performed. Christopher Hill's *The World Upside Down*¹⁰⁸ furnishes important information about Winstanley . . . The Ranters were particularly dear to us because they'd developed a theory of revolution that even scandalized the Levelers and others who had a more "puritanical" outlook. We ourselves very rarely had recourse to détournements of the Bible. We followed Marx in this – "Let the dead bury the dead" – which is one of several phrases¹⁰⁹ that escaped the mystical-religious deluge of Biblical ignominy . . . To return to our discussion of anti-clericalism: I'd like to make clear that I have never defined myself as anti-anything. The only formulation that satisfies me comes from Prévert:¹¹⁰ "I have always been untouched by God."¹¹¹

We could extrapolate from what Nietzsche says: there is no cop like the delinquent, no pyromaniac like the firefighter! Here we touch upon problems of manipulation –

– that are important today. I'm thinking of the Black Bloc, of protest movements of that type, which establish implicit an understanding with the anti-riot squads. Two or three hours before the demonstrations in Thessaloniki in 2011, the cops arrested the Black Bloc people whom they knew. They were imprisoned, freed the next day, and it wouldn't be unimaginable for them to have said, "See you next time" when they left. An unhealthy game between militarists and anti-militarists forges a new obstacle to freedom.

Along the same lines, in 2007, of the three representatives sent by English anti-globalists to Warsaw to launch a G8 "counter-summit," two of them were undercover cops, including Mark Kennedy, who had informed three times on the Tarnac group. Finally, there was more than simple collusion involved.

An objective collusion that has nothing to do with the radicality of a movement in the course of development . . . It isn't a question of imitating the revolts of 16th century peasants when they waited at the summit of a hill so that God could come to help them while the armies of the nobles and princes marched upon them and crushed them down to the last person. They didn't fight. Between adopting the attitude of a martyr, which is deplorable, and constituting an anti-army army – an attitude that is also impressive, as we have seen everywhere that guerrilla armies are fighting – what is the solution? This is a debate that must take place.

¹⁰⁸ *Translator's note: The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution* was first published in English in 1972.

¹⁰⁹ *Translator's note: cf. Luke 9:60.*

¹¹⁰ *Translator's note: Jacques Prévert (1900-1977), a French screenwriter and poet.*

¹¹¹ "I have always been untouched by God and it has been a pure loss for his emissaries, commissioners, priests, directors of conscience, engineers of the soul and master thinkers who have tried their best to save me [...] And I go where I please, where people are happy even when it rains; and when, one time or another, they return with their bunches of key words, their padlocks for ideas, their explanations of the unexplainable, their refutations of the irrefutable, the negations of the undeniable, I smile and repeat, 'It isn't true!' and 'It is true that it isn't true!' And as they make me care nothing for their millenarian lies, I give them a thousand of my primary truths." Jacques Prévert, 1972.

To return to Péret, to Breton [...]

My positions with respect to the surrealists are also a little ambiguous. I oscillate between a critical posture and [a recognition of] the obviousness that these were people who opened doors . . . We owe them a lot. When I was in the SI, I shared its mixture of love and hatred for André Breton. We continued to quote him and read him, to refer to *Nadja* and other texts, but we always showed animosity to the man himself. This was justified because, aside from his own open, luminous writings, Breton fell into rigidity, sectarianism and political stupidity.

*Under the pseudonym of Jules-François Dupuis, you wrote the Histoire désinvolte du surrealism.*¹¹² *Can you speak to us about it?*

It was a request, a book intended for scholarly usage. Thus my recourse to a pseudonym. My critical eye took surrealism as a target. Describing it as “cavalier” allowed me a detachment, a freedom of approach, a distance. To my mind, the subject – not without humor – didn’t merit an extremely serious, rigorous or, in any case, a university-style study. I no longer remember when I wrote it.¹¹³ I only re-read it in 2013 for the reprinted edition. The book was written very quickly and sometimes very poorly. There are uncompleted phrases – I’d given the project to its initiator, an absolutely charming lady, who after about two weeks telephoned me to say, “I’m absolutely sorry, but the project has collapsed. Obviously you will get the manuscript back and can keep the advance payment.” The manuscript in hand, I went by an old friend, Claude Graza, to whom I said, “I’ll have nothing to do with this thing; put it in the bottom drawer.” It remained in Claude’s drawer for a long time. One day, the lady called me up. “Jean-Claude Hache, who works for éditions Verdier, is seeking manuscripts. I’ve spoken to him about your *Histoire désinvolte*; he’d like to publish it.” But the book wasn’t published by Verdier. It was Paul Vermont, also known as John Gelder, who took the initiative to publish it.

[...] *Did you let members of the SI read it? Did you show it to Debord?*

No, I didn’t show it to anyone, but everyone in the SI knew that I was working on it. This must have been the era in which Debord wrote a booklet for the *Encyclopédie du Monde Actuel* –

– *which some at the time called the Encyclopédie de la connerie actuelle.*¹¹⁴ *We can also speak of a settling of accounts where your book is concerned.*

Alas, yes. A settling of accounts . . . a big aggressive . . .

. . . *a bit harsh, in the form of what I’d call vindictive denunciation [...]*

Breton wasn’t ashamed of selling his own paintings, and so – yes, it’s true – I overdid it concerning his ferocious criticism of Max Ernst, who had simply participated in the Venice

¹¹² Written in two weeks and published in 1977 by Paul Vermont, reprinted in 1984 by éditions de l’Instant, and then reprinted again in 2013 by Libertalia under the author’s real name.

¹¹³ *Translator’s note:* circa 1970.

¹¹⁴ *Translator’s note:* the Encyclopedia of Current Stupidities.

Biennale.¹¹⁵ Denunciation was very chic at the time. My *Histoire désinvolte* did not make a mystery of Breton's bad faith – moreover, all forms of faith are bad!

For a "light" study, your book proposes a retrospective trip through the movement, using irony, critique, sarcasm . . . In the end, few people find grace in your eyes, if I'm not mistaken.

Except Benjamin Péret. The only one for whom I feel a certain affection. It is indeed an extremely partial book that also imposes a distance – the same one that is signified by the recourse to a pseudonym.

Wasn't Jules-François Dupuis Lautréamont's concierge?

Yes, that was the name of the concierge at Lautréamont's apartment and the one, it seems, who discovered his body and signed the death certificate. The choice of names gave me the freedom of an unvarnished malice . . . It's true that there's some injustice in my criticisms of surrealism. But the book is also a declaration that my compoment was obstinately artistic, if we understand this to mean rejecting the preceding avant-gardes and refusing to form a new one.

And yet the SI was, perhaps, the last avant-garde in the traditional use of the term.

By denying itself as such.

[...] *Such an avant-garde, due to its internal contradictions, had to disappear or dissolve at almost the very moment that you arrived. Therefore the SI didn't dissolve . . .*

It was surpassed.

[...] *I think that, if the SI didn't explode in 1962 or 1963, it was because there was a sufficiently solid pivot to assure the transition from the first part of the history of the SI to the second part, which was quite distinct – although there was continuity. And this pivot was none other than the crucial role played by Debord.*

Yes, and I would say that this "bridge" was precisely built by the critique of politics that followed upon the critique of art, which was part of the same line as the surpassing of art. The surpassing of politics – ideology and philosophy, in any case – constituted a stage that was logically inserted into this dynamic. One might in fact not manage to do it and explode like any other of the preceding avant-gardes, such as Lettrism or . . . A trend towards radicalization first led to the exclusion of the artists who, in the name of their [individual] freedom and novelty, were heading towards the commodification of their art. We were among the first thinkers to warn against this evolution of practice, which was sometimes unconscious. The passage to the critique of ideology and politics was thus a renewal that was also a break with the idea of the avant-garde. It was obvious that we did not want to be an avant-garde. Individuals who sowed

¹¹⁵ In 1954, Max Ernst won the Grand Prize in Painting at the 27th Venice Biennale. He was excluded from the surrealist group by André Breton.

radicality? Yes. But without ever becoming “the iron lance of the proletariat,” as the Stalinists used to repeat. Thus there was a renewal at every stage, until the SI [finally] died . . .

But at the beginning, notably in the emblematic figure of Asger Jorn, the SI was a movement made up of many artists . . .

Yes, but Debord and I rapidly came to agree on the critique of art, especially since I had already tried my hand at it – as I have mentioned – for reasons of survival. I quickly saw what it led to. The work of art was less important than the market that assured its sale . . . The question, once it was raised [in the SI], caused breaks. At Goteborg, we saw people of talent – the members of the Spur group and Jorgen Nash, Asger Jorn’s brother. They wanted to associate the “situationist” label with their works. We were resolved – and with good reason – not to accept it. Moreover, that’s the type of exclusion that I continue to approve of.

Quite quickly you were stationed at an outpost [...]

There existed between us a profound agreement, a coherence with two voices . . . We shared the same conception of the surpassing of art and the surpassing of philosophy. Art as a specialized domain didn’t interest us. We had other ambitions.

How were things on the human level with Debord?

Sometimes he projected the image of a distant person. He wasn’t one, in any case, during this period. He hadn’t always been very sensitive. He had the modesty of his emotions. A great suffering afflicted him. I don’t know its origin. It never left him.

What qualities did you find in him then?

Intelligence, critical sense, warmth . . . I always had great affection for Michèle. She played an essential role. She was never in Debord’s shadow. She sometimes passed for a power broker [*une éminence grise*] with whom one had to deal. Some decisions made by Debord were, from all the evidence, due to her inspiration. Even if Debord was inclined to see women as objects of conquest that satisfied his taste for tactics, he dissimulated – as if it were a weakness or a dangerous concession – the role that unlimited love plays in each person’s life. Even if he didn’t deny the importance for him of Michèle Bernstein and then Alice Becker-Ho, this was always with a slight distance from the one to whom it was due and not with the confession that he owed much to their love. Yet I cannot say that they were advisors before being lovers to whom one pledged oneself totally. But to return to Michèle: she was everywhere! She had a great sense of hospitality – the dishes simmering, the table always well stocked . . . A driving force of hospitality, she never allowed herself to be reduced to the role of “hostess.” She participated in the discussions just as the guests did, but she added this feminine activity that we accepted, even although we were partisans of sexual equality. I don’t remember if we joined in, I might be wrong; I don’t believe so. We limited ourselves to keeping our feet under the table, on which the dishes followed each other like [the subjects of] the conversation. Michèle was the only woman present. She had a monopoly on seduction!

She was very seductive.

Yes! My first romantic desires for her have lasted, even if no adventure took place.

She radiated.

She was very attractive. She had and still has a very precise sense of language. I was totally steeped in provincialisms, Belgianisms. She had the art of correcting them elegantly. She was the guarantor of a high level of language. Perhaps we owe to her much of the precision of expression that became our custom. [...] [Like Michèle,] Viénet came from le Havre. He didn't share her elegance. Guy was a master of it. He'd practiced it in Lettrism and *Les Lèvres nues*. He'd earned that incisive side. But Michèle's acuity – in speech, at least – could blow you away.

Her sense of repartee . . .

. . . which sometimes slipped into Parisianism. She was capable of lightning flashes of clever expressions. Coming from a faraway province, almost at “the end of the empire,” I was seduced by Parisian French. Michèle willingly took the bait. She was certainly the one who most had an aesthetic appreciation of things . . . from a distance . . . Yes, something of a dandy.

And what was your perception of the public relationship between Michèle and Debord?

A bond more than romantic passion. Reciprocal admiration took the place of affection. I'm not trying to evoke coldness – that would be exaggerated – but a kind of coexistence, lived without drama, any apparent drama, in any case. I don't remember seeing them fight, which is a frequent occurrence with couples. I believe that they hid their adventures, in the emotional sense of the word, pretty well.

[...] *Did Debord also show emotional generosity?*

Absolutely. Debord had real human warmth, against which he tried to protect himself. He reproached me for being warm with people too quickly. Without condescension, he said precisely this: “Be suspicious. You too easily welcome people and then, when they disappoint or betray you, you bring out the machinegun.” It is true that, at the time, I could go from kindness to violent rejection very quickly. I learned much later to only associate with “people from my village,” as my friend Hubert Bérard¹¹⁶ says. One day, Debord said to me, “We must not be mistaken about people.” This perplexed me.

In a negative judgment, an error is fatal!

Without perceiving it fully at the time, I felt that this was reminiscent of an archaic and dominant law: the law of the social jungle. The one who comes to meet me might be an enemy! No doubt, but this very thought is also an enemy. I've always thought that “humanity” implies the end of predation.

¹¹⁶ *Translator's note:* an actor who has appeared in *Petits bateaux dans la tempête* (1978).

Whoever wanted to join the SI was subjected to an examination?

We would meet in a bar. Debord, more than I, had the ability to say, “This guy has intentions that he will not end up keeping. He doesn’t have the firmness his remarks suggest.”

As a whole, were his analyses about individuals and their attitudes accurate?

I especially remember a meeting with Jacques Ellul.¹¹⁷ He’d written to us, and his letter expressed opinions that were close to ours. At the end of the interview with him, we proposed that he join us. He retorted, “No, you don’t want me. I must admit to you that I’m a Protestant.” We left things there!

Jacques Ellul has produced excellent analyses, which are still pertinent today.

He was a curious person. He had been president of the Protestant Consistory of Bordeaux, if I remember correctly. He had the honesty and prudence to warn us.

No doubt he thought it would be good to save you the trouble [de vous devancer], which is elegant and courageous, at least.

He knew our positions on religion. But this didn’t stop us from being charmed by his remarks.

One has the feeling that you and Debord were two individuals equal in the SI, something that one can’t say about many other protagonists of the movement.

My encounter with Debord came at the very moment that things were evolving. I felt in accord with this phase of the SI’s history.

A little before your arrival, in 1961, an internal critique of the artists who were part of the movement was already underway. And then, in 1963, there was the quasi-exclusion of all the artists, with the notable exception of Asger Jorn.

Jorn distanced himself, but he always remained a member. I arrived at the moment that the terrain was shifting. On the one hand, there was the struggle against an artistic faction that saw in the SI an avant-garde movement that was just beginning to get organized. Debord was already quite critical of this at the time. On the other hand, it was also the time when there were large strikes in Belgium that I, like everyone else, participated in. For me, the social and political won out. More precisely – the social won out over the political. Artistic questions did not seem primary to me if they were not part of the surpassing of art. Likewise, I only envisioned politics

¹¹⁷ “The situationists are aware that the technical society is above all a global society, which implies a global revolution and that political movements that are, supposedly, revolutionary need to get involved in the current revolutionary urgency. In particular, Debord’s critiques of Communism, Socialism and anarchism are terribly pertinent.” Jacques Ellul, *Autopsie de la révolution*, 1969.

in the perspective of its surpassing. These two factors, combined, motivated our interest in this manner of approach. Debord told me about his attempts at experimental art. It was a period of long discussions and exchanges of ideas. I realized then that we had to decant this fermentation, to provide a larger framework right at the start and synthesize the whole. These were [in fact] the first notes for “Basic Banalities.”

Please explain the friendship and intellectual bond that was spontaneously established between you and Debord and that was immediate and very strong. What was mutually provided?

I had the feeling that we were stimulated by reciprocal emulation. We were never in competition. Each one of us, with his own “voice” clearly identified, engaged in a relationship that involved neither calculations nor tactics. We had exchanges. I developed my vision of the survival that was opposed to life. He developed the notion of spectacle . . . We spoke from within the SI, yet each of us did his work separately. I never let myself get trapped into a power relationship with Guy. No doubt this is why our harmony existed for so long. Even if, to me, the artistic polemics seemed a residue of surrealism, in the SI, they tended to become radicalized. Unlike surrealism, which enlisted in a generalized gossiping – we still didn’t know that, later, the SI [itself] would develop the same quirk. For us, the surpassing of art concerned everyday life itself. Life would become an artistic form, with all the dangers that this supposes. Thus, the politicization of the movement had the ability to ward off these dangers. This politicization was not perceived as the rallying to a politics, but as a *critique* of politics. The general strikes of 1960-61 in Belgium were an excellent illustration of this. They comforted us in our idea that traditional politics were obsolete.

When you arrived, Debord had – if I can say so – gotten entangled with the artists in the Spur group, principally in Germany.

Not yet. There were people like Constant, who was certainly a remarkable architect, but who began to draw a little too much on the word “situationist.” His work essentially consisted of defining bizarre constructed “situations” that he limited to transposing into architectural situations.¹¹⁸ The same procedure was evident in the works of the [other] artists. The problem got worse at the moment of my arrival. The proof is that one of my first texts published in issue #6 of the journal was a critique of urbanism.¹¹⁹ It originated in my discussions with Kotányi, who was very well informed about the subject. In this text, I denounced the tyranny of the architects, which was more harmful than the tyranny of the artists who wanted to be avant-garde and were only the avant-garde of the commodity. From the beginning, we refused to be associated with an avant-garde movement. For us, the avant-garde was a modernist relic that we had to rid ourselves of, at any price . . . Before I joined the SI, I’d participated in the production of a little pamphlet

¹¹⁸ *Translator’s note:* a reference to Constant’s “New Babylon” project, which occupied him for many years: <http://www.notbored.org/new-babylon.html>. Note that Vaneigem’s remark (“His work essentially consisted of”) is similar to a phrase in the note in *Internationale Situationniste* #5 (December 1960) that announced Constant departure from the SI: “Constant found himself in opposition to the SI because he has been primarily concerned, almost exclusively, with structural questions of certain assemblies of unitary urbanism.”

¹¹⁹ *Translator’s note:* titled “Commentaires contre l’urbanisme.”

called *Alternative*.¹²⁰ I've mentioned it already. Although quite maladroit, it nevertheless sketched out a vaguely social project centered on the idea of self-management. A critique of the unions went along with praise for the movement, whose spontaneity evoked the premises for a "commune" in our overly-lenient¹²¹ text. As imprecise as the idea of self-management was in *Alternative*, it didn't cease to be developed, through the critique of Socialisme ou Barbarie, for example. Now, we must be clear here. Debord did in fact know Cornelius Castoriadis and other members of that movement at the time.¹²² But, personally, I never knew him. [As for Debord,] he never took me to one of their meetings. He never wanted me to meet them.

From what Michèle Bernstein has told me, Debord's idea was to seduce [détourner] two or three of the most brilliant people in the Social-Barbarians, to bring them into the SI.

Even if it isn't a question of reducing Socialisme ou Barbarie to their critique of the bureaucracy, their contribution on that point was important. My discussions with Debord confirmed it. He'd adopted a sympathetic but critical distance from Socialisme ou Barbarie. He kept it until the distance was complete. Socialisme ou Barbarie retained an anti-bureaucratic radicality without managing to accomplish anything else. The ideas of workers' councils and self-management weren't directly approached by them. The group existed a bit like an anti-party, [based] on a perfectly coherent theory that didn't lead to a plan. As it happens, we had to revalorize the artist past of the SI because, in the name of poetry, the movement had avoided adopting a simple rejection of the bureaucracy, in which Socialisme ou Barbarie was bogged down. Such positions were accentuated in an ideological fashion by *Arguments*, against which we were immediately opposed.¹²³ Socialisme ou Barbarie at least conserved its radicality in its critique of the

¹²⁰ "We have embarked upon the organization of a power that is exercised over us, that gives us commands. Otherwise, neither workers' organizations nor struggles have any meaning." Extract from the journal *Alternative* #1, Brussels, July 1961. [*Translator*: on the front cover, which is reproduced below this extract, one can read the slogan "The power of the last workers guarantees democracy" and an indication that *Alternative* is a "publication of Pouvoir Ouvrier Belge," a Belgian group sympathetic to the French group Socialisme ou Barbarie.]

¹²¹ *Translator's note*: the French word used here, *complaisante*, can also mean overindulgent, smug or self-satisfied.

¹²² *Translator's note*: Cornelius Castoriadis (1922-1997) co-founded Socialisme ou Barbarie (the name of a group and its official publication) with Claude Lefort in 1949. Guy Debord first makes reference to S. ou B. in a letter to André Frankin dated 8 August 1958:

<http://www.notbored.org/debord-8August1958.html>. In 1960, Debord established contact with Daniel Blanchard, a member of S. ou B. and, in July of that year, co-wrote a short text with him titled "Préliminaires pour une définition de l'unité du programme révolutionnaire." Briefly a member of the S. ou B. group, Debord resigned from it on 5 May 1961:

<http://www.notbored.org/debord-5May1961.html>.

¹²³ "The Council has decided that any person who collaborates with the journal *Arguments* after 1 January 1961 cannot, under any circumstances, now or in the future, be admitted among the situationists. The announcement of this boycott draws its force from the importance that we know the SI secures at least in the culture of the years ahead. Interested parties can bet, on the contrary, on the dubious company it will attract." Resolution of the Central Committee of the SI, 6 November 1960, published in *Internationale situationniste* #5, December 1960. [*Translator's*

bureaucracy, with a grassroots struggle, an approach to the strikes.¹²⁴ Unlike the whole *Arguments* generation – people like Kostas Axelos, Edgar Morin, Georges Lapassade and *tutti quanti*¹²⁵ . . . The engagement of Lapassade [by *Arguments*] was, finally, a demarcation, even an extraction from Socialisme ou Barbarie but as a recuperation by the intellectuals. The SI had no reason to be opposed to Socialisme ou Barbarie. We agreed with their analysis of the bureaucratization of the workers' movement. They lacked what we had: poetry, that is to say, self-management, which was the poetry of the proletariat rediscovering its everyday life, rediscovering the veritable substance of class struggle: the self-management of everyday life . . . Lefebvre's *Critique of Everyday Life* played a crucial role in the awakening of the time. [As for Socialisme ou Barbarie:] It was the first time that someone described the USSR's system as "bureaucratic state capitalism." We'd already found this idea, but in a weaker [*floue*] expression, in Ante Ciliga's work.¹²⁶ Socialisme ou Barbarie theorized it more rigorously. The term "bureaucratic state capitalism" remains an absolutely clear term. Nothing in it needs changing: that's exactly what it is! Thus there was important input from Socialisme ou Barbarie that weakened at the moment that *Arguments* attempted to graft its ideology onto a concrete tree. We must also speak of the problems with the I.C.O. – *Informations Correspondances Ouvrières* – which was part of this movement. The I.C.O. developed a grassroots critique, an interesting approach, that nevertheless had some weaknesses. I'm thinking in particular of the critique of everything that could be recuperated bureaucratically by the movement. It was also the era in which we were discussing the Dutch councilists like Anton Pannekoek.

Pannekoek, Paul Mattick, Otto Rühle . . .

This mixture favored the critique of ideology. The SI was the first to denounce ideology as a system of thought separated from life.

[...] *Your critique of ideology refers to Georg Lukács' History and Class Consciousness, on the one hand, and, on the other, Joseph Gabel's La fausse conscience.*

Without forgetting the *Manuscripts of 1844*,¹²⁷ which contain Marx's first critique of ideology. But the Socialist and Stalinist publishers tried to ignore them. These texts had a considerable influence on our evolution.

note: Arguments collapsed in 1962.] "Henceforth, the proofs of our judgment will be seen: Arguments could do nothing but disappear!" Internationale situationniste #8, January 1963.

¹²⁴ *Translator's note:* elsewhere in *Rien n'est fini, tout commence*, there is a reproduction of the front cover of Socialisme ou Barbarie's publication, *Les Grèves Belges* (The Belgian Strikes), which lists the following as its contents: "The significance of the Belgian strikes"; "Testimony and reports about the unfolding of the strikes"; "The lessons of the Belgian strikes"; and "The 'Loi unique' and structural reforms." The 'Loi unique' (the 'Loi d'expansion économique, de progrès social et de redressement financier,') of 14 February 1961 was an austerity budget that both responded to and intensified the then-ongoing general strike.

¹²⁵ *Translator's note:* Italian for "all the rest."

¹²⁶ *Translator's note:* see Debord's letter to Branko Vucicovic dated 24 December 1966: <http://www.notbored.org/debord-24December1966.html>.

¹²⁷ *Translator's note:* first published in French by Éditions Sociales on 1 January 1961.

Your critique was systematic. It first inspired you to reject all ideologies. For you, the start of critical activity involved their destruction, all of them.

It was a radically new attitude in the history of thought!

With a real, practical significance.

The pertinence of our critique continues to be confirmed. It is enough to see what's become of the ideologies today.

[...] *The critique of ideas separated from life remains relevant today.*

[In the SI,] three forms of surpassing took place: the surpassing of art, the surpassing of philosophy, and the surpassing of politics. They [all] remain absolutely radical.

[...] *“The philosophers have only interpreted the world in diverse ways –*

– what is important is transforming it.” For me, this was one of the SI's driving forces, one of its most scandalous elements. It remains so today through this same phrase from Marx, which is well and truly a key.

[...] *At the time you were virtually the only ones to claim these texts – Lukács, Gabel, Marx – as theoretical predecessors. This alloy – combined with the poetic and artistic heritage of the SI when it was founded – gave you a bizarre and insolent profile. An explosive mixture.*

This was the most passionate period of the SI: endless discussions, lots of drinking, nonchalantly walking around.

Who else was involved?

Kotányi, René Viénet, Michèle Bernstein . . . Michèle had, no doubt, more than the rest of us – except perhaps for Viénet – a real joy for living. It is true that our playful approach, influenced by the thinking of Huizinga, author of *Homo Ludens*,¹²⁸ often approached abstraction. Michèle had a smooth side, the art of bringing levity to relationships that were sometimes [typically] “male,” rough, hard and crude. She had the ability to delicately thwart a certain peremptory tone, to lead things to their true level when we started to go off on Hegelian-Romantic flights. Michèle and Viénet excelled at thwarting the formation of nodules.

After speaking with [other] people who were there, I believe that Michèle Bernstein's irony, combined with René Viénet's humor, was something that sometimes annoyed Debord.

It irritated him.

¹²⁸ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 1936.

He made ironic comments about the “Havre clan.”

But that denunciation was obviously playful. He wasn't angry when he said it.

[...] *What memories do you have of Michèle's literary, bookish input? She was the one who introduced you to Herman Melville's “Bartleby.”*

She was also the one who introduced us to the music of Dietrich Buxtehude.¹²⁹ She gave us a disc. “Listen to this! Do you know it?” No – neither Debord nor I knew that superb music.

She adored Melville's “Bartleby,” Antoine Blondin, Roger Nimier,¹³⁰ Les Liaisons dangereuses.

I've read *Les Liaisons dangereuses*. Blondin and Nimier never affected me. No. Too Parisian. It's true that Michèle herself is somewhat similar to Nimier's “Blue Hussar” . . . She was always discreet. . . . I no longer remember when her novel¹³¹ was published. I read it, of course. She played a bit with her charisma. Everyone liked her. No one caused problems for her. But she loved to split hairs, to uncover problems.

. . . *without there ever being, it seems to me, the shadow of any contempt on her part.*

Never. We must also mention Viénet's contribution. To my knowledge, he was the first to go to China¹³² and soon after denounce Mao's regime in [private] letters that also related the gloomy everyday life of the people living there. At the time, everyone who prided themselves on their Leftism venerated that sinister¹³³ dictator. We must also recall that the SI was the first and only movement that was opposed to Castro, whom everyone else [on the Left] venerated – I no longer remember if Socialisme ou Barbarie adopted him or not – but we, right from the start, denounced him.

*Can we say that Viénet's letters contributed to what would become the pamphlet “Le Point d'explosion de l'idéologie en Chine”?*¹³⁴

Without adding to the theoretical development of the critique of Maoism, Viénet played the role of detonator. He provided us with testimony that allowed us to go much further than the analyses

¹²⁹ *Translator's note:* Danish-German organist and composer (1637-1707).

¹³⁰ *Translator's note:* Roger Nimier (1925-1962) was an author and the leader of the Hussars, a literary group that included Antoine Blondin. *The Blue Hussar* was published in French in 1950 and in an English translation in 1953.

¹³¹ *Translator's note:* *Tous les chevaux du roi*, first published in 1960 and reprinted in 2004 by Editions Allia.

¹³² *Translator's note:* 1964-1965.

¹³³ *Translator's note:* in French, *sinistre* can also mean absolute or dreary. All three meanings of the word would seem applicable to Mao.

¹³⁴ *Translator's note:* “The Explosion Point of Ideology in China” was written by Guy Debord and published as a pamphlet in August 1967. It was reprinted in *Internationale Situationniste* #11, October 1967.

of the relations of production and the bureaucracy undertaken by Socialisme ou Barbarie . . . His letters reported on the stifling puritanism of everyday life in China. His narratives were very funny, but the background was frightening. I especially remember a letter in which he complains about the difficulty of having even the least romantic relationship with the women. He suffered from it as from a disease. It was ironic: he went to see a doctor, who advised him to engage in sports and sublimate his sexuality through firm political thinking! Viénet's approach was more radical than any of the analyses of the relations of production or the ravages of the bureaucracy. The simultaneous critique and rejection of ideology was made concrete in his opposition to Castro – still seen by some as a hero of Cuban subversion – and Mao. We saw Castroism in seed form in Castro himself. Where Mao was concerned, it was much more obvious. But other than us, no one [on the Left in the 1960s] expressed any reservations.

All of the political tendencies were unreservedly in support of what people called the “Cuban Revolution” and the “Chinese Revolution.” Those who opposed them were considered to be reactionaries.

All of the Left was Castroist, and Mao was considered to be an example to follow. Our critiques were so scandalous that they received the most efficient reaction: silence. How could *we* be placed among the conservatives? Thus silence was the best weapon. We'd formulated a critique, not from the Left, but a radical critique that simultaneously attacked those who dipped their bills in the waters of Maoism and our usual enemies on the Right . . . But Viénet seems to have neglected the importance of his development (perhaps due to modesty or a lack of self-consciousness), just as Mustapha sometimes under-estimated the considerable contribution made by *De la misère en milieu étudiant*.¹³⁵

[...] *And yet, when we consider what remains today of the history of the SI, we can see that people don't speak a great deal about what René Viénet contributed.*

His great discretion, his modesty, have done him a disservice. We will never sufficiently emphasize the importance of his letters in the denunciation of Maoism. His letters from China were the objects of discussion for entire evenings. His arguments undeniably filtered in . . . But Debord wrote the text [on China].

[...] *It's the same thing with “Mode d'emploi du détournement,”¹³⁶ the founding and programmatic text of the movement: it's signed by Debord and Wolman. Wolman himself has reported, “we discussed all of the ideas and people with Debord and, generally, it was Debord who wrote it down afterwards.”*

Personally, I have always believed that Debord was the only author of that text.

[...] *but Wolman's testimony, corroborated by others, allows me to affirm that it is as I say.*

¹³⁵ *Translator's note: On the Poverty of Student Life, written by Mustapha Khayati, September-October 1966.*

¹³⁶ *Translator's note: “How to Make Use of Détournement,” Guy-Ernest Debord and Gil J Wolman, Les Lèvres nues #8, May 1956.*

There are many notes that Debord wrote by himself. We spoke and we would take notes that he later synthesized. From the start, he and I found ourselves in close agreement and we shared the same cultural and revolutionary lines. We hardly needed to explain things to each other at length. They agreed and interlocked on their own . . . There was an osmosis between our two, completely different personalities. We were virtually possessed by an analytic version of an adulterated [*frelaté*] world that had to be changed. The old project of workers' councils found [new] life and modernity in us.¹³⁷

When one pages through the first few issues of Internationale Situationniste, the idea appears to be in its infancy. One has the feeling that references to revolutionary movements, what one might call anti-authoritarian Marxism colored with anarchism, only appeared gradually. At the beginning, there was no assurance that it would appear later on. It was still embryonic.

This is why the Belgian strikes of 1960-1961 had a capital importance. Everything arrived and came into place at the moment when the surpassing of art (even surrealism) appeared important to us. The two elements easily came together. We had to do away with – not Dadaism – but the surrealist movement, which for us was a recuperation of Dadaism, and then move on to something more important. At the time, the artistic [part of the] movement began to daydream about the situationist label. This pretention was absolutely incompatible with our revolutionary project, which was being formulated more and more precisely. At the time, the idea of workers' councils, reading *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, and the critique of the bureaucracy began to bear fruit. Here as well, things were amusing. *Socialisme ou Barbarie* was a revolutionary project that had no attachment to either the old culture of the neo-surrealists or what was revolutionary in art. I believe that the profound difference of the SI was that – having assimilated the artistic movement – we perceived its radicality and yet felt the need to push further ahead. Thus, the SI, strong from the artistic roots that *Socialisme ou Barbarie* lacked, had the ability to become a focal point of radicality, which was something that neither the artistic movements on their own (no matter how modernist) nor the revolutionary revolutions (no matter how innovative) could claim to be. It was in the SI that the meeting of the two currents took place.

How [...] did the will to eradicate the artistic presence so as to reach a superior stage get put into place? I almost want to answer my own question: "By drinking a lot!"

It always began that way. I remember long aimless strolls that went from one bar to another. We drank vodka with pepper in it at a little bar on the rue des Rosiers, and then went off towards

¹³⁷ *Translator's note:* it seems worth pointing out that workers councils were an important part of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956; that an important statement issued by the Lettrist International in November 1956 ("The Alba Platform") refers to "the general revolutionary resurgence that has characterized 1956, visible in the upsurge of the masses in the USSR, Poland and Hungary"; that *Socialisme ou Barbarie* ran an important article about the Hungarian Revolution ("La Révolution prolétarienne contre la bureaucratie") in the December 1956 issue of its journal; and that, before joining the SI, Attila Kotányi had personally participated in the Hungarian Uprising. In sum: workers councils were *not* an "old" project in 1960-61.

other ports of call [*lieux d'ancrage*]. The interplay of encounters and affinities was intensified by a controlled alcoholism.

What you say nicely illustrates a text that Henri Lefebvre published in an issue of NRF that was titled “Vers un romantisme révolutionnaire.”¹³⁸ That is to say, it was still closely tied to a poetic approach: the reference to Wagner on the barricades and other such lines of descent . . .

I don't reject the term “revolutionary romanticism,” even if it is historically contestable. It was part of the spirit of the times. The idea fit well with the spontaneous poetry of the workers movement that had a festive side, burgeoning in the streets . . . During the Belgian strikes, people gathered around a fire, playing the accordion, eating *sandwiches*,¹³⁹ offering drinks to others. There was a very poetic side in all this . . .

[...] *If we take the example of Dada, the war of 1914-18 played an important role in its development.*

Spartakus, too.

But, in 1960, nothing like global conflict was on the horizon. In some way, the Belgian strikes seized hold of you. You saw filiations in them, and you integrated them into your thinking.

The events gave us the feeling of having gained access to the real – a field of resonances, we might say. Yes, we were on a field of artistic, cultural, working-class and revolutionary resonances – which comforted us in our actions. We'd reacted individually and collectively, like a drum of resonances. The events died out and found their coherence in the awareness we had of them. If something resurfaced in the SI, it was the revolutionary consciousness that we reawakened.

This social reality didn't exist in the absence of images, referential icons, mythical figures such as Spartakus, Durruti, the [Paris] Commune, and the Spanish collectives. You built a revolutionary imaginary.

Yes, but it must be made clear: if we'd fallen into nostalgia, we wouldn't have gotten beyond myth. We surpassed it, seized upon what it revealed: an application, a practical experiment that could be pursued. We never were sycophants of either the Paris Commune or Spartakus as historical events enclosed in the past. On the contrary, we put the accent on what was open and incomplete in the past and could be resolved in the present. Nostalgia quickly becomes “reactionary” . . . Perhaps this was the surpassing of revolutionary romanticism – a surpassing that conserved its slightly facile exuberance and set it down [*la jugulerait*] in a more concrete project in order to attain a truly revolutionary form. The two phases were linked. The historical circumstances that presided over the changes in the SI and personal reactions – I'm speaking of

¹³⁸ *Translator's note:* Henri Lefebvre, “Vers un romantisme révolutionnaire,” *NRF* #59, October 1957. In English here: <http://www.gavingrindon.net/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/Henri-Lefebvre-Revolutionary-Romanticism.pdf>.

¹³⁹ *Translator's note:* English in original.

the exclusions of the artists. The artistic mindset could no longer be integrated into a revolutionary perspective. Such was the case with the specialized politics of *Arguments*: a cleaning of volcanic rocks so as to rekindle the embers and get them to shine more beautifully.

After your first phase with Debord, how was the reorganization and new orientation [of the SI] accomplished? [...] I'm thinking of the exclusions of Jorgen Nash, Alberts, Armando, Oudejans, Pinot Gallizio, Constant –

– The exclusion of Constant took place before my arrival. The disagreement was settled between him and Debord. I participated in the exclusions of Nash, Wyckaert and Ovadia. Then, a little later, in the exclusions of the German artists, the members of the Spur group – Kunzelmann, Prem, Sturm, Zimmer, Eisch, Nele, Fischer, and Stadler – excluded in 1962.

In 1962, you became part of the editorial committee for issue #7, in which your name appeared next to those of Debord, Kotányi and Lausen [...]

I had very little contact with Uwe Lausen. I remember that he prodigiously irritated Michèle due to a number of his habits (feet on the table, the emission of various sounds). He was a little crazy. Did he write anything? I don't know. He displayed, shall we say, “a spontaneously insurrectionary nature.” He had a visceral hatred of cops . . . The exclusion of Nash took place at Goteborg when the proposition was made to illustrate an artistic work with the situationist label. The exclusion took place very clearly. I no longer remember if it took place at the conference or upon the return home, but everyone knew that the proposition was unacceptable.

First there was the exclusion of the “Nashists,” followed by the exclusion en bloc of the “Spurists.” This was a bit like a methodical program to turn the page.

The “Spurists” and . . . Jacqueline de Jong. I no longer remember the precise dates . . .¹⁴⁰ She formed a split with Nash and created *The Situationist Times*.¹⁴¹

[...] *What were the Spurists you knew like?*

Very likeable. I particularly liked Kunzelmann, a joyful companion, a good drinker . . . He wasn't a painter. He was the “thinker” of the group to some extent – the one who carried the mantle of theory. He played an important role in the orientation of the [Spurists'] texts. If his destiny was emblematic it is because – having left behind or been excluded from Spur – he was engaged in a form of rupture with art and in a political adhesion that led him to become very close to Baader's Red Army Faction. Heimrad Prem was more withdrawn . . . The stay in Goteborg was quite depressing [for him]. It's a place where alcohol is forbidden. He had to drink illegally. The personal contacts were rather cold, just like the discussions . . . Goteborg did not leave behind the memory of a festival.

¹⁴⁰ *Translator's note:* The Spurists were excluded on 11 February 1962 and the Nashists on 5 March 1962.

¹⁴¹ *Translator's note:* English in original.

It was the first conference in which you participated – August 1961. Present were J.V. Martin, Nash, Prem, Greta Stadler, Hardy Strid, Helmut Sturm, Hans Peter Zimmer, Debord . . .

Nothing to excite the memory! A gloomy atmosphere, at the very limits of dull [*sinistre*]. Nothing like the conference at Antwerp . . . Unlike the dreary [*sinistre*] town of Goteborg, Antwerp still kept a Brueghelian aspect, a street-party Flemish side. It had been marked by a long tradition of revolts, struggles, joyful and insolent radicality. At the time, I was giving courses at the Ecole Normale de Nivelles. I had to be there at 8:30 in the morning. I went back to Antwerp when my classes were over. I'd spend the night there, drinking and talking. One of my colleagues, Emile Ninin, a professor of gymnastics and an adorable man, set up a mattress in a corner of his room so that I could enjoy a little rest there . . . When my courses were finished, I could sleep for an hour. Ninin would wake me up, so that I could teach my next class. It was a delirious whirl! Finally, I'd meet up with my wife, Thérèse; we'd jump on the train for Antwerp and then it would all begin again. This lasted an entire week.

In any case, the photographs I've seen of the Antwerp conference in November 1962 attest quite well to this joyful and "playful" aspect [...]

I won't claim that, from Antwerp on, the joyful side of the SI was dominant, but what had been our alcoholic adventures were generally replaced by the seriousness of our critical speculations. I don't want to engage in caricature here. I don't want to say that everything changed at Antwerp, but I saw Debord playing a drum very, very happily.

There's a photo of it.

Yes, a photo that shows us in a moment of guileless relaxation. That was the lived authenticity we spoke about so often. I spent an evening calling out student songs of such healthy obscenity – which astonished Debord, who was stunned by my "culture." Festival was always important in the SI because the exuberant character of everyday life escaped and, upon austere reflection, was in sum the basis on which we planned the project of constructing a disalienated existence . . . At Goteborg, many things were rejected but austere. At Antwerp, everything was made concrete – rejection, yes, but in a joyful fashion. Paradoxically, something in the artistic project seemed dreary [*sinistre*] to us. Without going as far as questioning their honesty, we thought that these artists were following a direction that was no longer ours because it consisted, above all, in making their paintings, their art, become successful . . . For them, what was justification was, for us, incompatible with our revolutionary aspirations. Antwerp washed away the heavy moroseness of Goteborg and its lingering unease.

A change began and it never truly ended.

At Antwerp, there were many exclusions. A certain Tom Gutt, a byproduct of surrealism, commanded us to issue a tract against the fascist menace that, according to him, was weighing upon Belgium. The response was the tract, "Pas de dialogue avec les suspects, pas de dialogue

avec les cons.”¹⁴² Connections were also cut with the sub-surrealists who gravitated around Léo Dohmen in Antwerp – such as Gilbert Senecaut . . . Drinking certainly accentuated the expeditious character of the conference and the exclusions. Those who still flirted with Belgian surrealism and were attracted by the conference paid the price in the form of remarks such as, “Have I quite understood the stupidity than you have proclaimed?” and “What you say isn’t acceptable.” Alcoholism accelerated the fall of the guillotine blade.

Did other people join you [at the conference]?

Dohmen’s friends were decimated. Alcohol only helped to precipitate the pertinent resolutions of their inadmissibility.

Dohmen had been close to Mariën, who’d published the Surrealist journal Les Lèvres nues. It played an important role. It served as a springboard for Lettrists who’d published in it not a few texts – I would say programmatic texts – Lettrists who weren’t strangers to the theoretical foundations of the SI in ’57. “Théorie de la dérive” and “Mode d’emploi du détournement” were published in Les Lèvres nues before 1961.¹⁴³ Then came the break between Debord and Mariën. Personally, I have always found the Belgian surrealists to be much more radical than the French surrealists. Their leading thinker, Paul Nougé, largely dominated André Breton due to his radicality.

The texts by the so-called “Belgian” surrealists, those from La Louvière and Brussels, clearly distinguish themselves from the literary exercises of the Parisian surrealists. But the surrealist rain that falls in Antwerp no longer comes from the same waters. It’s mud. One needs to stay out of it.

Here there was a real change in the SI. At that moment,¹⁴⁴ you found yourself reduced. One of the two principle protagonists, Michèle Bernstein, began to quite gently distance herself. Mustapha had still not arrived. There was you, Debord, Martin and Strijbosch. Kotányi had been excluded. Lausen, too. Numerically, you didn’t weigh very much!

Martin, who was a painter, resolutely took the side of the situationists against Nash. He’d understood the stakes very well. He wasn’t a careerist at all. His only concession to the commodity was to practice a rudimentary form of exchange: he offered his paintings to the owners of bars who, in return, gave him drinks for free for years . . .

Were you close to him at the time?

He was someone whom I appreciated. . . . He was, strangely, more timid than one might have imagined. He had a fondness for certain drinks, but this was a personal secret, withheld. At the

¹⁴² *Translator’s note:* issued 27 February 1963 and then reprinted in *Internationale Situationniste* #9, August 1964. Translated as “No dialogue with people who are suspect, no dialogue with cunts”: <http://www.notbored.org/no-dialogue.html>.

¹⁴³ *Translator’s note:* they were in fact published in this journal in 1956.

¹⁴⁴ *Translator’s note:* circa 1965.

beginning, we saw the clownish side to him. When he went off alone to write his journal in Denmark, he impressed us.

He created Situationistisk Internationale, the Danish [version of] Internationale Situationniste.

His texts were of very good quality. He had real talent, an interesting way of seeing things. In his critique, he envisioned a form of art that wasn't situationist but that denounced the market system. He imagined a flotilla of golden boats that would torpedo the dominant world and advance little by little towards the conquest of the oceans. He developed a "pirate" version of things. His art was directly interlocked into everyday life.

In what town did he live?

In Randers, a little Danish town with no attractions and plenty of bars. He had problems with the administration, with the mayor. The cops went as far as setting fire to the warehouse where he lived and kept copies of his journals. I have several half-burnt journals. . . . Although he was married, he was a bit solitary. He never gave up his radicality. He was never excluded. . . . His alcoholism ended up killing him. There was something desperate about him that he exorcised with an exuberance sometimes borrowed from joyous companions. . . .

. . . an appealing figure.

Very appealing. No one has ever had something critical to say about Martin. He continued acting in relation to the SI as an individual, but we didn't see him very often. To meet him meant a celebration. He was one of those lovers of the revolution who have celebrated it so well by their drinking that they, having the impression that the revolution will come too late, have no other certitude than drinking more. The "RSG-6" exhibition won him the animosity of the Randers police, which sent someone to set fire to his place. . . . He only became more resolved.

Michèle Bernstein and he created the thermonuclear maps. Michèle's have disappeared. I don't know where Martin's are. Perhaps in Randers At the end of his life, he reconciled with the Social-Democratic mayor of the town. Under the aegis of support for artists, she gave him a place that was paid for and maintained by the Commune.

In other words, the municipality took care of him.

He had no money other than a small nest egg provided by the municipality. A cleaning lady came in to clean his apartment twice a week. . . .

It was at this time that Rudi Renson, traveling to Denmark, was refused entry at the border.¹⁴⁵

A tract protesting this was published. Rudi Renson later confided to me that he'd been unable to enter because he quite simply didn't have a passport. He confessed to me, "we made a big deal about this, pretending that I had been denied entry as a dangerous subversive."

¹⁴⁵ *Translator's note:* June 1963.

Did Renson speak of Martin?

Not too much. Rudi Renson was also a solitary kind of fellow, locked into disenchantment.

Melancholy and regret easily turn into rancor if you are cut off from. . . . Later on, he told me, “I have never recovered from my brief passage through the SI and the break from it. It demolished me. All the hopes that had been born were dead, I came to a very pessimistic view of the world and I have been unable to shake it.”

Can we say that there were chance events – of course mixed with well-founded reasons – that led a certain number of people to take part in the situationist movement and that the task was too big for them? That is to say, psychologically, there weren't “up to it,” they didn't have the depth to tackle an everyday war? An internecine war that “destroyed” many people, like Renson.

When you say “lacked the depth” or “weren't up to it,” I don't agree. I would say that there was a demand for radicality, certainly, but without the idea of “having to prove it.” Efficacy is the demand of predators!

But one had to be up to this demand for radicality that fascinated a certain number of people. One had to be able to live it! Not everybody could.

Rudi Renson arrived, if I remember, along with Jan Strijbosch, with whom he was very close. Rudi was from Antwerp, Jan was Dutch. They were immediately welcomed. Neither had focused on writing but, in discussions, they were very present. Their discourse was very radical. Rudi, like Jan, was a very amiable person, someone to whom one could confide, and his thought – with respect to situationist positions – was solid yet without constituting a new contribution. Rudi had a tormented side. At the time, we all did. I think that, through the group, he was seeking to escape an existential stagnation. This haunted all of us. It is too often forgotten: this group, which turned against each one of us, had, at the beginning, brought salutary help to its new members. It allowed us to disengage ourselves from the dark side, the nocturnal side, of an existence that was reduced to slavery, and what better support could there be than this creative enthusiasm? But when the enthusiasm dies, what is there to hang on to? Rudi was carried by the desire to participate in a movement that would liberate and emancipate everyday life. He wasn't excluded, but he felt excluded because he was separate from the project that we supported and that supported us. Perhaps there is in the suffering of disenchantment – felt and expressed discretely by Renson and Strijbosch – a premonitory sign of what took place generally after the ascendant creative phase of the SI.

Much later, during the decline of the SI, Debord deliberately surrounded himself with mediocre people whose baseness he had to see when they worshipped him. He excommunicated them with a wave of his hand when the mirror images that they reflected of his strange deference became intolerable to him. The problem was that a good number of them weren't mediocre. They were only apprentices, of which one could expect many. But by posing as disciples, they became mediocre through the morbid game of comparisons. After its dissolution, the SI only engendered aggressive idiots who wielded anathema with a rigor that their thought lacked.

Michèle and other protagonists have told me absolutely delicious stories about Jan.

He was a slightly angelic person. Very timid and sweet at the same time . . . He had an extraordinary trade: marionette's puppeteer . . . What he used to say was meaningful: he knew children well, and he shared their perception of reality. Through the interplay of marionettes and his scenarios, he managed to communicate his poetry. He had a great charm, a gentleness that I would describe as almost subversive. How can one be so sweet in such a brutal world? This was Jan's challenge: this determination, this opposition to a cruel world, which was completely cruel. He was spontaneous, without exhibitionism or outrageousness, endowed with a great modesty.

Finally, these are people about whom little is said but whose presence was beneficial. It was also the times that allowed one to meet people without demanding to see the curriculum vitae of their thinking. They were, above all, present and integrated into the group through their respective human characters. This is an important thing that has sometimes been greatly under-estimated. I believe that, at the beginning, the integration of people into the group took place this way, very spontaneously. These memberships were the consequence of a kind of sympathy, in the good sense of the word. When he was a member, Maurice Wyckaert said, "Yes, they made the decisions, but I was with them because I found them likeable [sympas]." Afterwards, they spent a lot of time together, with lots of reflection and discussions. It "worked."

Then, much later, people were co-opted because of their settled opinions. Like or dislike [of the person] still mattered, but there was an entrance exam.

And so, Debord found someone like Patrick Cheval very likeable, though he did nothing but drink enormously, who did not have, as one says, particular talents. Debord developed an almost paternal affection for him because he too drank a great deal. That said, Cheval wasn't stupid. His opinions were pertinent.

There was something completely new, something truly scandalous in the strong sense of the word in this handful of naïve unknowns [zozos inconnus] who had no diplomas, specializations or official titles, who spoke up in a very marginal fashion, in a journal of limited distribution, the Internationale situationniste, which was sold at little stores and of which no one spoke! At the time, it was an inaudible voice. During the ten years that the Situationist International lasted, no one directly spoke of it¹⁴⁶ and yet we can find traces of it everywhere.

It was juicy to see allusions to the SI here and there. Debord once said that, during an unexpected visit to the place of someone he didn't know, he saw copies of the journal. It was read, we knew this, but no one ever spoke of it openly. In my opinion, this was an opportunity for us. We could avoid falling into a kind of spectacular comfort, flattered by the knowledge that people were speaking of us, whether out of hatred or veneration.

¹⁴⁶ *Translator's note:* this is doubly incorrect. The SI was founded in 1957 and lasted until 1972 (that's 15 years, not 10), and it was certainly spoken and written about "directly" in the wake of the infamous Strasbourg scandal of 1966, the publication of two important situationist books in 1967, and, last but not least, May 1968.

Perhaps we can say that in secret you produced a certain number of original ideas, of which a part of the “elite” seized in order to integrate them into a system of general critique without citing you? The penetration of your ideas was inversely proportional to your recognition, because you were pillaged without ever being mentioned.¹⁴⁷ Do you continue to remain in the shadow of tiny minorities?

To be radical is to get at the roots of things and beings. Although this radicality was never mentioned in broad daylight, it mysteriously passed through recuperations and falsifications. Our reflections were officially ignored or deformed. Lies circulated about us. Nevertheless, something unassailable was also propagated. In a certain way, this explains the spontaneous adoption of our ideas. As at Sud-Aviation in Toulouse, for example – in the refusal of the commodity that was May 68. I’m not saying that the workers had read the journal, the *Traité de savoir-vivre à l’usage des jeunes générations*, or *La Société du Spectacle*, but one has the impression that our ideas sprouted there [among them] as from a deep source and that these ideas were understood. Why? Because we gave them a depth that circulated everywhere even if they were diffused despite us.

I would add – and this isn’t completely negligible – that you brought about a renewal in the formulation and, to my mind, it was this novelty in the discourse and the analysis that provoked such echoes. If we return to the silence that surrounded you, we can say that the members aware of the so-called intellectual elite knew that, if they created in the journal things that were completely novel, it would try to monopolize them and integrate them without citing them in their proper writings and discourses. It was this atmosphere that compelled you to pursue what I would call shadow work [un travail de l’ombre] through your discussions, your reflections, your analyses, your publications. At the same time, de facto, this prevented you from being on the radar screen and integrated by spectacular culture.

Although we sought out the shadows and silence in which the epoch judged it good to keep us, they protected us. We did nothing to be known,¹⁴⁸ and the “poetic” passion supported us sufficiently for us to avoid all that could become spectacular and in fact became so after May 68.

Finally, the recognition and celebrity are easily datable. They began with issue number 11¹⁴⁹ and reached their height with issue number 12, that is to say, after May 68. A simple principle

¹⁴⁷ After she’d read an article in *L’Observateur* in which, surprisingly, some of the theses of the SI resonated, but without the least allusion to the SI itself, Michèle Bernstein mentioned it to Guy Debord. This was his response in an unpublished letter dated April 1963: “The *Observateur*, yes, it amuses me. But this is nothing; we are ten years ahead. You will soon see the proofs of it.”

¹⁴⁸ *Translator’s note*: the SI staged a very public exhibition, *Destruction AF RSG-6*, at the Galerie EXI, in Odense, Denmark, in June 1963 and created the infamous Strasbourg scandal of 1966, among other highly successful things, “to be known.”

¹⁴⁹ *Translator’s note*: published October 1967, when the possibility of a large-scale social revolt in France was still thought to be impossible.

was at work: you are interested in critique, you're at the center of it, and every sycophant in the intellectual milieu grabs on to your scraps to overcome the deficiency of his thinking.

All the sycophants “went down in flames.” They were literarily massacred.

But the literary massacre was only known after the fact. At the time, your bulletin wasn't widely read. It existed in a limited environment. It was when the glory of the SI was reached, after its dissolution, that people could read the journal and old issues,¹⁵⁰ and that they discovered things that appeared outrageous [effarantes].¹⁵¹

Certainly the bulletin was not widely read but, when I met Raymond Queneau at Gallimard,¹⁵² he told me he'd read all of the back issues. He laughed. “I really liked your insulting letter. People no longer write like that.” We'd insulted him by calling him a sub-Dadaist when he published *Mille milliards de poèmes*.¹⁵³

Chapter IV: *Traité de savoir-vivre à l'usage des jeunes générations*

Please tell us about your meeting with Queneau!

The manuscript of *Traité de savoir-vivre à l'usage des jeunes generations* had been sent to a dozen publishers. They all sent it back accompanied by a letter that said “Sorry, not right for our collection” over the course of two detailed pages. This certainly amused me. I no longer remember who reproached my book for being too roughly drafted . . . an artificial distinction into

¹⁵⁰ *Translator's note:* this is presumably a reference to the reprinting of all 12 issues of *Internationale situationniste*, first by Van Gennep in Amsterdam and then by Champ Libre, in 1971 – at a time when, technically speaking, the SI was still in existence.

¹⁵¹ *Translator's note:* this is a very serious claim. It would seem to imply that, one way or the other, *the SI had lied*, not to its subscribers, who'd already read all of the old back issues, but to the people who'd never read the SI's texts or, rather, who were only reading them then, in 1971, for the first time and so had something to be outraged about. But what could that be – the exclusion of the Nashists in 1962? The exclusion of the English in 1967? No. In 1971, the very fact that May 68 took place was the real outrage.

¹⁵² *Translator's note:* circa 1967.

¹⁵³ “The theory of information immediately sets aside the principal power of poetic language, which is to fight against and surpass itself. Writing that touches upon the void, the perfect neutrality of content and form, can only be deployed as a mathematical experiment (as ‘potential literature,’ which is the period at the end of the long white page written by Queneau). Despite the superb hypotheses of an ‘informational poetics’ (Abraham Moles), [and] the touching insolence of their misunderstandings of Schwitters and Tzara, the technicians of language only ever understand the language of *technology*. They have no idea who or what judges all this.” (*Internationale Situationniste*, #7, April 1962). [*Translator's note:* Queneau was clearly familiar with the SI as early as 1962, and *not* after May 68 or 1971.]

two parts . . . I should have taken after André Gorz, whose book *Le Traître* was very successful at the time. I kept the rejection letters! The last one came from Gallimard, which said that after some hard reflecting, the answer was ‘No.’ It happened that, on a Wednesday or a Thursday, if I’m not mistaken, the *Figaro littéraire* ran the headline, “Behind the Provos, the Situationists.”¹⁵⁴ This was the first time that the word ‘Situationist’ appeared in the press. That evening, or the next day, I received a telegram from Queneau: “Come see me with the manuscript.” I got on a train. This must have been a Monday. The manuscript under my arm. Queneau welcomed me warmly. He told me that, of the eighteen members of the readers committee, sixteen were opposed to the publication of the book. He alone, along with Louis-René des Forêts, defended the *Traité*.

All the same, an active minority of some kind!

Yes! Among the opponents were Jean Dutard, Roger Caillois . . . the glories of the era. After the article in *Figaro*, Queneau went to see Gaston Gallimard. “What do we do now? Miss something again?” Gaston accepted.

It took Raymond Queneau’s insistence to get the Traité published?

I am grateful to Queneau and Louis-René des Forêts. Without them, the *Traité* would have ended up in the trash. It would never have come out. My friend Pierre Drachline from the Cherche-midi publishing house told me one day, “If you submitted the *Traité* today, no one would want it.”

The manuscript was accepted without any problems?

Two words bothered the secretary of Gaston Gallimard, Ms. Laigle. “*Bué*,” a Picardism that, going back to Littré,¹⁵⁵ I’d kept, and “creativity.” She told me: “the word ‘creativity’ doesn’t exist [in French].” To which I amiably replied, “Well, now it does.” I added a very awkward postscript that concerned self-management. Queneau suggested that I remove it because its programmatic tone, which later on would be Ratgeb’s,¹⁵⁶ weakened the coherence of the book. I accepted the suggestion without hesitation. The only pressure came from Livre de poche,¹⁵⁷ which proposed that the *Traité* would be included in its catalogue if I changed the title to *Manifeste situationniste*. I categorically refused. “In that case, Livre de poche will never touch it.” To which I inelegantly replied, “I don’t give a fuck.”¹⁵⁸ Perhaps that was the first attempt by the market to recuperate the movement. There was also a [similar] problem – decidedly a sign of

¹⁵⁴ *Translator’s note*: written by Jacques Dalny and published in the 4 August 1966 edition of *Le Figaro littéraire*, this article was titled “Pour les ‘provos’ la Révolution est un jeu. Derrière les jeunes gens en colère d’Asterdam, on trouve une Internationale occulte. Les ‘provos’ n’ont rien inventé.” It is reprinted in *Rien n’est fini*.

¹⁵⁵ *Translator’s note*: Émile Littré, *Dictionnaire de la langue française* (1863-1872).

¹⁵⁶ *Translator’s note*: Ratgeb was the pseudonym Vaneigem adopted to write *De la grève sauvage à l’autogestion généralisée* (Paris: Éditions 10/18, 1974).

¹⁵⁷ *Translator’s note*: a publisher of paperback editions.

¹⁵⁸ *Translator’s note*: the *Traité* was eventually reprinted as a paperback but without any changes to its title.

the times – with *La Société du Spectacle*, which was published, I believe, two months earlier by editions Buchet-Chastel. When the first print-run was finished, the book was reprinted and the publisher added a wraparound band to it. If I remember correctly, it said, “situationist theory.”¹⁵⁹ Debord, who wasn’t consulted, made a *casus belli* of it and broke the contract. The awareness on the part of the world of publishing of the possibilities for commercializing the word “situationist” reminds me of a little anecdote. In 1967, I wrote the text for two posters, one illustrated by [André] Bertrand, the other by [Gérard] Joannès. They were distributed and posted. I received a summons to appear at the Quai des Orfèvres, the cops of la Tour pointue. I was greeted by an extremely courteous, very cultivated gentleman: Commissioner Leclerc. “Well, I am not the only one to decide on this, but the prosecutor has found a dozen incitements in your poster: Incitement to commit murder, pillage –” He listed them all in a series. “You risk judicial prosecution. But if you tell me that it is art, that this is simply an instance of artistic freedom, like the surrealists or Dada . . . things can be arranged.” I responded with a smile, “No, it is not art; it is politics.” “Do you recognize the incitements?” “Yes, I recognize the incitements, but it is the State and you who incite violence . . . Moreover, I have never proposed to assassinate anyone. When someone cries, ‘Death to this or that head of State,’ it isn’t as if he has a pistol in his pocket and will kill him on a street corner.” “I understand, of course, but then . . . Yes, Dada; yes, the surrealists.” He displayed his knowledge of these matters. “OK, let’s return to the essential. You can still say that you were overtaken [*dépasse*] by inspiration.” I restated my refusal. He finished by saying, “Listen, I’m not going to threaten you. I will speak about the matter with the prosecutor; he’s the one who must decide, but we are not idiots, right? If you were prosecuted, your book would benefit from the publicity. I know authors – a little provocation never hurts, and perhaps we have more to lose than win.”

An intelligent man.

He held out his hand. I hesitated before saying, “No, I won’t shake the hand of a police officer.” “I understand,” he said with courtesy. Nothing further happened. Good intelligent cop that he was, he knew the point at which prosecution, a trial, or a provocation easily works in favor of spectacular recuperation.

How did your collaborations with Bertrand and Joannès come about?

I’d passed through the I.A., the Internationale anarchiste, to which my friends Hubert Bérard, Pierre Lepetit and Yves Raynaud belonged. The I.A. was born from a split from Maurice Joyeux’s Fédération anarchiste. They published a tract against Joyeux and, while they were at it, founded the Internationale anarchiste.¹⁶⁰

*Maurice Joyeux – the chauffeur of André Bergeron, the leader of Force Ouvrière.*¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁹ *Translator’s note:* “The situationist theory that exploded in May.”

¹⁶⁰ *Translator’s note:* cf. the letters by Guy Debord dated 7 May 1967 and 27 May 1967: <http://www.notbored.org/debord-7May1967.html> and <http://www.notbored.org/debord-27May1967.html>.

¹⁶¹ *Translator’s note:* The General Confederation of Labor/Workers’ Force, a large and powerful right-wing union founded in 1948.

They were truly joyful [*joyeux*] and they've remained so. In their entourage were Bertrand and Joannès, who were graphic artists. One day, they proposed that they should illustrate what I'd written [in the *Traité*]. I gave them the phrases and they produced posters with two completely different and very nice illustrations. They never broke with the I.A., and they never became *situs*.

With hindsight, how would you define the shared points and the divergences between La Société du Spectacle and the Traité.

The shared point lies in a critique of the old world that is based on a critique of everyday life. The perspective differed. For Debord, the gaze comes from the outside, from an observer who, in his laboratory, analyzes events and creates a spectrograph of them. I, on the other hand, began with my own emotions. I proceeded to a self-analysis in the course of which I tried to put myself in the clear . . .

[...] *The press spoke a great deal about these two books. I believe it was Pierre-Henri Simon who signed an article in Le Monde that analyzed [the Traité and] La Société du Spectacle. The concomitant critique of the two books was often obligatory.*

In general, all the reviews were critical! The one by Pierre-Henri Simon amused me. His "Old Catholic" side speaking of "the young people who have mostly passed the age of 30." This was still an era in which journalists could read. We see that Pierre-Henri Simon suffered while reading both books. He wasn't at all in agreement with what he read in them, but, all the same, he shelled out for a half-page in *Le Monde* . . . To adopt a musical metaphor, I believe that we can quickly distinguish the differences in tonality between the two texts – a minor key in Debord's case, a major one in mine. But this didn't prevent the two books from harmonizing. Each of us imagined his own fugue and together achieved harmony . . . When I sent Debord the complete – or the almost complete – manuscript, he sent me a telegram: "Bravo," which indicated a certain relief on his part . . . On my part, I hadn't read the manuscript of *La Société du Spectacle*. I thought it would be good to send him mine, because, with each of us writing separately, a doubt existed [in my mind]. What would be the concordance? Didn't we risk finding developments in the other's text that would displease one of us? Well, no. Though different, the two works joined together, combined to form a single subversive thought. Two singular interpretations ended up in a shared radicality that was violently hostile to the dominant world. In Debord's book, the positive side put the accent on workers' councils and self-management, while the *Traité* insisted on individual emancipation – which was opposed to individualism, the alienated individual, and [based] on the appeal that everyday life was the foundation for any [truly] subversive action. On those points, our agreement was total.

Here I quote a phrase that illustrates what you are saying about the Traité: "Those who speak of revolution and class struggle without explicitly referring to everyday life – without understanding what is subversive in love and positive in the refusal of constraints – such people have corpses in their mouths." It was taken up at the time like a banner by a part of the youth and almost summarizes what you say [in the rest of the book] . . .

You could read it on the walls . . . [As far as the two books,] the sides held. The *Traité* had something more “familiar” about it. Its point of departure was my own everyday experiences, and it supposes similarities with those of other people . . .

*You hit the mark. You succeeded in establishing a discourse that managed to bring a little order to the confusion.*¹⁶²

Many young people have told me that they became aware of the malaise of the world by reading the *Traité* . . . and I’d say that *La Société du Spectacle* also differentiated itself through a more closed, irrevocable¹⁶³ aspect . . .

. . . *a desire to make a system.*¹⁶⁴

You can get inside it and come out with tangible elements. The *Traité* has a much more chaotic side in which people find their own disarray. It doesn’t propose solutions, but paths for escape, for living preferences. It could also be read as an incitement to take one’s own life in one’s hands – in a constructive manner, in which my enemies have wanted to see a blissful optimism.

That is to say, each reader could get out of it what he needed – a fervent will to change his own living conditions, despite hell or high water [vents et marées], and to believe in it with an iron firmness. And to develop his history from there.

Which leaves itself open to a form of critique that sees spiritualism or voluntarism in it.

But there was voluntarism there.

Rather an obsessional delirium of the living . . . of the consciousness born from chaos.

[...] *Without denying the theoretical critique that grounds the text [of the *Traité*], there appear – beyond the demonstrations – much more poetic and literary phrases that, like inscriptions, can be taken out of context.*

¹⁶² *Translator’s note:* given Vaneigem’s insistence on the concordance between the two books, the only “confusion” here exists in the mind of the interviewer, who admits in a “question” that I have deleted: “I understood the *Traité*, but I didn’t understand *La Société du Spectacle* at all.”

¹⁶³ *Translator’s note:* the French word used here, *inamovible*, can also mean unsackable, fixed or stable.

¹⁶⁴ *Translator’s note:* to refute this utterly false and preposterous idea, allow me to simply quote two passages from *La Société du Spectacle* that the interviewer himself has included in the margins of this book: “Critical theory must be communicated in its own language. It is the language of contradiction, which must be dialectical in its form and in its content.” “In its very style, the exposition of dialectical theory is a scandal and an abomination according to the rules of the dominant language and the tastes that these rules have inculcated, because, in the positive use of existing concepts, it simultaneously includes the intelligence of their re-found fluidity, of their necessary destruction.”

The specificity of these formulations was that they could be used practically.

In Debord's case, there was a will to construct a syntax that was close to that of Feuerbach, Marx and Hegel, notably through the use of a language dressed up in inversions of the genitive – proper to Hegel – and also drawing in part on the Marxian détournement of Proudhon's Poverty of Philosophy into the Philosophy of Poverty,¹⁶⁵ which became a [situationist] trademark. Someone who wanted to sing in the key of the situationists was obligated to string together inverted genitives. The [old] story of being more royalist than the king himself.

The procedure produced a literature in which pretensions and nullity united theory and ridiculousness.

[...] *You had been completely in the shadows – unknowns from an ultra-minority. People were beginning to speak of you for the first time. How did you find the transition? Was it amusing for you?*

That the books were finally published was a relief. We'd become doubtful about it. In the case of *La Société du Spectacle*, editions Buchet-Chastel was more interested than the others . . . *La Société du Spectacle* was published first. It was difficult where the *Traité* was concerned . . . Did relief become arrogance? I can't deny it. We'd displayed a tranquil scorn towards all the reviews, favorable or unfavorable.

Your names were in La Quinzaine Littéraire and the rest of the press, almost everywhere . . .

We weren't flattered. As pretentious as this might sound, we believed that recognition was due us, that it was normal that people should be informed of our existence. The journalists who saluted that which they'd rejected outright for so long were only doing their jobs, their shitty jobs.

Claude Lefort¹⁶⁶ signed the article that appeared in La Quinzaine Littéraire.

A good article by someone who'd actually read what he was writing about. We were not made of ice. Our "superior attitude" was a way of not giving in to a blissful state!

Objectively, didn't your status change?

No doubt we were aware of it. It is also what we'd wanted, since we'd always spoken, in military terms, of creating a zone from which general resistance – the offensive against the empire of the commodity – could be launched. Until then, we'd been confined to the margins of an uncertain

¹⁶⁵ *Translator's note:* It is in fact the other way around! Proudhon wrote a book called *The Philosophy of Poverty* (1846) and Marx wrote a response to it called *The Poverty of Philosophy* (1847). And Marx's gesture wasn't simply a linguistic reversal: it quite obviously signified the poverty of philosophy that does not seek to transform the world.

¹⁶⁶ *Translator's note:* a co-founder of Socialisme ou Barbarie.

territory, more virtual than real. The fact that the two books were published at almost the same time certainly fit in with our military vision of things. We considered ourselves to be a “group in peril,” but also a “bridgehead,” an installation of forces hostile to the dominant world that would serve as a base for the conquest – or reconquest – of territory. I won’t deny the military character of our approach. At the time, I didn’t suspect that the military way of thinking might turn against us. This should’ve alerted us. We know that we later came to reproach some [situation] for not obeying the general instructions, for not being united and theoretically “pure” enough to confront the immensity of [the task of] “reconquest” . . . The “military” spirit provoked – by accentuating – a character blockage among the individuals [involved]. The subject was never raised. No one dared to say, “What can I do with the victory that we will inherit? I don’t know very well.”

[...] *Just as one is struck by the lack of women in the movement, there was another phenomenon: the flagrant absence of people of Jewish origins [...].*

There was Michèle! A woman *and* a Jew. Our guarantee, in a certain way.

[...] *There were also virtually no women or homosexuals,¹⁶⁷ not declared homosexuals, in any case. This is why I used the term “male” [“viril”] a little while ago.*

To use words such as “male” and “military” risks caricature. Nevertheless, if we keep in mind the fact that we always considered ourselves as a “bridgehead,” as a “group in peril,” as an advanced or forward team on enemy territory, we can’t underestimate the tactical and strategic aspects of our approach. It wasn’t by chance that we had a great fascination for Clausewitz, who has fallen into obscurity these days.

How did this interest in Clausewitz take shape?

Debord had me read Clausewitz,¹⁶⁸ whom I read before Sun Tzu, the Chinese who spoke about tactics and strategy . . . Both fascinated me . . . as did Uncle Toby who, in *Tristram Shandy*,¹⁶⁹ analyzed the art of fortification. They inspired Debord’s *Kriegspiel*. On the other hand, I don’t see any relationship between the few women, homosexuals and Jews in the SI. And even if all this were true, there was never a cult of virility in the group. The absence of homosexuals wasn’t the result of an explicit or implicit policy. The importance that I then attributed to tactics and strategy derived more from my will to have done with the Old World than to conquer territories. Military service was still obligatory back then. By the way, I recall that I was careful to teach myself military techniques by being trained as an officer, so as to be “armed” for the revolution. I even enlisted in the para-commandos. Fortunately I gave that up – otherwise I would have been shipped off to the Congo! I kept all my weapons manuals. Even if I see myself as an anti-

¹⁶⁷ *Translator’s note:* we might also note the complete and total absence in the SI of . . . blah blah blah, as if the SI were the United Nations of the revolutionary movement, or some sort of “Rainbow Coalition” in which each and every oppressed group had to be fairly represented.

¹⁶⁸ Guy Debord to Raoul Vaneigem, letter dated 2 January 1962: “I also think that if you finish Clausewitz now, it is the moment to do so – for you to read him and for me to re-read him. We will never be strategists with the nice friends we have [now].”

¹⁶⁹ Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (1759-1767).

militarist, I also see in the training of soldiers a technique to be détourned. One of Debord's fantasies – he never hid it – was to be a General. He had a taste for conquest and victory.

I don't know the biographies of all the members of the SI, but you seem to be one of the few to have attended officers' school.

According to the laws of normal conscription, I had to enlist as a “grunt” [*plouc*], but as a university student, I had the option to choose the officers' school. Such was my choice, paradoxical and naïve.

This instruction allowed you to rapidly reach a [high] rank.

You began as a corporal, then a sergeant, and finally a lieutenant.

You were a lieutenant?

Yes. I drew a malignant, Machiavellian joy from it. “If they only knew who they've embraced within their ranks!” I can handle weapons, throw grenades, [fire a] *bazooka*.¹⁷⁰

Do you have good memories of your military service?

It was difficult. To tolerate stupidity, brutal behavior . . . But let us say a secret motivation animated me: one day, I was going to exterminate those domestic servants of power!

“Justification” is a notion that, for example, appears in the internal politics of the SI. From the moment that there is “justification,” [all] things are acceptable.

Let me be clear that it wasn't the SI that initiated me into the “military spirit” . . . into pre-guerrilla techniques, let's say. But all the weapons that I handled are absolutely obsolete today. No one uses a Lee Enfield.¹⁷¹ At the time, I could take apart and put back together a machinegun – in the dark. There was a playful side to this, assuredly. And it is a game that can easily be played on the chessboard of death.

Without that playful aspect, this might be unlivable, no?

My fascination with weapons has endured. I have a Walther PPK, a .22 and a 3030. Games of life can quickly become games of death . . . with their bundles of exclusions . . . In games of life, you exclude people who prove unworthy, who “do not respect the rules.” But, at bottom, a game of life has no rules. From the moment that a living game must obey [the] rules, it becomes a game of “good” society in which – sooner or later – you end up cheating, betraying, hiding . . .

Great political treatises speak of this . . . Cardinal de Retz wrote in his Mémoires, “in a political party, one must beware one's own friends within it more than one's enemies outside.”

¹⁷⁰ *Translator's note:* English in original.

¹⁷¹ *Translator's note:* a bolt-action magazine-fed repeating rifle.

It was Debord's bedside reading. He also had Machiavelli there.

Obviously you mentioned your training as a military officer to Debord. How did he react?

He saw it as useful training. He regretted that I didn't know more about the handling of explosives.

You lived in the myth of revolution, of the guerrilla . . . The idea of taking up arms, becoming clandestine, overthrowing power.

In a dreadful and comforting [*désolant et consolante*] perspective: we were convinced that we would be gunned down before then! Military glory, in the name of emancipation, of course . . . which justified the idea of tactics and strategy . . . which has continued among the urban guerrillas in movements like the Shining Path,¹⁷² horrors of that type . . . The temptation to fight to the finish still exists in part today, in Greece, for example . . . the *Black Bloc*,¹⁷³ the struggle against fascism, etc.

[...] *You can now no doubt better understand all of the humor and irony that was involved when [in 2007] I published a book of interviews with [the ex-situ] Walter Korun, that is to say, Piet de Groof, under the title Le Général situationniste [...]*

When the book was published, I thought it was a hoax. I'd always supposed that he was fictitious.

To return to the notions of strategy and "bridgehead," weren't you playing at being little soldiers?

Yes, with the [same] naivety that was in play when I chose officers' training. Furthermore, I'd been sent to London [in December 1967] to exclude Donald Nicholson-Smith and his friends, who then composed the American section.¹⁷⁴ With deplorable consequences, notably in the obedience and discipline demanded of the SI's sections . . . The step seemed necessary to me at the time, but today the ridiculousness of the situation appears clear to me.

This "distancing" was really lacking at the time – that's the least one might say!

¹⁷² *Translator's note:* Maoists active in Peru.

¹⁷³ *Translator's note:* English in original. Note as well that "The idea of taking up arms, becoming clandestine, overthrowing power" – *none* of this has anything to do with the Black Bloc, which is not organization, but an anarchist tactic that is both defensive (freeing arrestees, protecting other protesters from the cops) and offensive (smashing store windows and throwing police barricades back at the police).

¹⁷⁴ *Translator's note:* Nicholson-Smith, T.J. Clark and Christopher Grey composed the *English* section of the SI.

This is why I insist on the role of Viénet. He made us sensitive to the ridiculousness of certain options. Nevertheless, the exclusion of Donald and his friends was accomplished with glacial seriousness. In the austerity that was nothing other than sectarianism, their concern for autonomy was lumped together with a lack of revolutionary radicality. We didn't use the phrase "rein in" [*mettre au pas*] – but what? How was this different from Jacobinism? But I supported it without hesitation. There is something frightening in finding oneself in a form of radicality without being aware that one is slipping into radicalism. I believe that we were preoccupied by the feeling that if we didn't watch out for it, the radical purity of things might corrupt us . . . The *doxa* itself.

[...] [*In December 1967,*] you were "soldier Vaneigem" mandated to –

– to go rectify what was about to get out of control.

[...] *How were you greeted?*

Very nicely. The break with Donald took place after many explanations and quarrels . . . But in every way, the thing was already settled [before I got there] . . . programmed.

You confronted them with an already settled matter.

In a concise way: "We regret to tell you that you no longer belong to . . ." No violence, no insults. It was done in English.

You returned to Paris with the sense of having done your duty, and I wouldn't say that you got a promotion, but in some way –

Neither a promotion nor any pleasure. Just duty, virtue. Why wasn't I more alert?

You'd written about enjoyment and pleasure . . .

. . . but there are things one doesn't fool around with.

You made a carapace, a solid [piece of] armor to accomplish all of the displeasing and reputedly necessary missions.

Once the mission was accomplished, we returned to more libertarian occupations. There was in all this a libertarian-authoritarian side, of course.

The term is quite comic, isn't it? Although not only . . .

At the time, I neglected to examine the internal contradictions and dangers of the "military spirit."¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁵ *Translator's note:* he might have availed himself of the SI's discussion of "Declaration on the Right to Insubordination in the Algerian War," which concerned a soldier's duty to refuse to

I believe that Debord collected small soldiers made out of lead.

Kriegspiel concretized his childhood dreams. To return to the “mandate” [of December 1967]: I acted with a clear conscience . . . Later on, I recalled a remark by Alfred Capus, a humorist from the 1920s: “I didn’t know the consciences of criminals, but I’ve known those of honest men, and they’re frightening!” . . . We navigated between orthodoxy and heresy.

*A member who deviated even a little from the official line passed from orthodoxy to heresy. He had to be excluded because he’d thrown himself down a detestable path.*¹⁷⁶

As a “group in peril,” the SI succumbed to what one calls “siege sickness.” A besieged town quickly comes to denounce supposedly undesirable or dangerous elements, to hunt down potential traitors.

The emotional plague needs infected people.

We saw it in Stalinism and in Münster before that.¹⁷⁷ Luther had troubled people by translating the Bible in German. He made it accessible to everyone [who couldn’t read Latin]. A current began within Protestantism, which Luther supported against his will. In the proliferation of texts, each reader took what he wanted. In Germany, the peasants seized upon certain remarks in the Bible to create an egalitarian doctrine and to contest the power of the princes. In this cauldron of new ideas, the Anabaptist movement – the bearer of a certain collectivism, a project of agrarian reform – was born. The peasants’ revolt that broke out in all of Germany was the consequence. The Anabaptists propagated a theory of agrarian collectivism. John of Leyden, a Dutchman, became the spokesman for a politics that advocated violence. “Since Luther has refused the tutelage of the Church, how can we not refuse the tutelage of the princes?” Luther, horrified, condemned the movement – then, in a famous declaration, called on the princes to crush the scoundrel. John of Leyden responded to oppressive violence with subversive violence. He seized control of the town of Münster in 1530.¹⁷⁸ He and his friends quickly acted like tyrants. Stalinists before there was a Stalin,¹⁷⁹ they eliminated their opponents and ended up killing each other.

obey unjust orders: “The Minute of Truth,” which was published in *Internationale Situationniste* #5 December 1960. <http://www.notbored.org/minute-of-truth.html>.

¹⁷⁶ *Translator’s note:* this is a caricature. I can think of none of the excluded members who even vaguely resembles it.

¹⁷⁷ *Translator’s note:* in the *Traité*, translated as *The Revolution of Everyday Life* by Donald Nicholson-Smith, Vaneigem wrote: “As for the God of the Anabaptists of Münster and of the revolutionary peasant of 1525, he is a primitive expression of the irrepressible thrust of the masses towards a society of whole men.” For a more in-depth analysis, see Vaneigem’s *The Resistance to Christianity*: <http://www.notbored.org/resistance-42.html>.

¹⁷⁸ *Translator’s note:* Vaneigem’s *The Resistance to Christianity* (and other sources as well) say this took place in February 1534.

¹⁷⁹ *Translator’s note:* this was the thesis of Norman Cohn’s *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Messianism in Medieval and Reformation Europe and Its Bearing on Modern Totalitarian Movements* (1957). Cf. <http://www.notbored.org/cohn.html>. The comparison

With the result that, when the armies of the princes and clergy besieged the town, it fell without any resistance. The last survivors were put to death in an atrocious fashion, bound and quartered or torn up with red-hot pincers.

A horror.

A horror that they themselves initiated within Münster. This siege fever certainly evokes the Jacobinism and Bolshevism that were to come.

*I won't hide from you the fact that, personally, I see the history of the SI from this angle, although there weren't any deaths in the physical sense of the term.*¹⁸⁰

This reminds me of something that Donald – whom I had excluded – told me one day, “Fortunately, we didn't have shoot-outs in the backyards of the bars!”

*In other words, it is fortunate that the situationists didn't assume official duties. Their “government” would have made life infernal . . . There would have been cops in the bedrooms!*¹⁸¹

The last straw for the supporters of the revolution of everyday life. Denunciation now seemed to go by itself.¹⁸² Today, what seems especially worthy of reflection is how individuals who were aware of the errors of the past and armed against them, started to get stuck in them. How they denounced the corruption of the old world and held their noses while they sank into their own corruption.

You reproduced what you criticized about the Stalinists, the surrealists and everyone else.

Fortunately, we didn't surpass [*outrépassé*] the stage of the derisory. Nevertheless, the schema was similar.

between the Stalinists and the radical Anabaptists of Münster seems far-fetched, precisely to the extent that the former had a foreign policy, while the latter (as Vaneigem himself makes clear) did not.

¹⁸⁰ *Translator's note:* then the analogy collapses and seems shrill. As Debord said in a letter to Asger Jorn dated 23 August 1962 – in a remark that is reproduced in the margins of this very book – “The practice of exclusion seems to me to be absolutely contrary to the utilization of people: instead, it obligates them to be free on their own – and to remain so – if one can't use them in a communal liberty.”

¹⁸¹ *Translator's note:* this is preposterous, if not calumnious as well. On the one hand, the situationists would never “assume official [governmental] duties,” and, if they were ever going to, May 1968 would have been their moment, but, of course, they didn't take advantage of it. On the other hand, if there *had been* or *will ever be* a situationist “government,” it would be nothing other than a self-managing federation of workers councils.

¹⁸² *Translator's note:* “now” being December 1967, it would seem. But this was already well-trodden ground by then. See Michèle Bernstein, “No Useless Indulgences,” *Internationale Situationniste* #1, June 1958.

In the most serious cases, profound psychological injuries were inflicted. Simply recall what Rudi Renson said, “I never got over it.”

There was something devastating about it. It’s not a question of sliding into self-critique, but trying to understand how such injuries were inflicted by people endowed with undeniable lucidity . . . Robespierre and revolutionary virtue, the “military spirit” and Clausewitz were part of the brevet that proposed to us the isolation to which we were condemned.

You were very few in number, ignored and ripped-off.

We were surrounded by total obscurity.

Which developed onto a persecution complex.

External, [and] internal . . . The struggle against obscurantism ended up introducing obscurity per se. Obsessed by resistance to the dominant world, we lost sight of the fact that the best way to destroy it consists in creating a new one. This tendency existed; we knew it; we had our references – the [Paris] Commune, workers councils, self-management . . . But we seized upon these references, less under the aspect of a new life than as historical movements¹⁸³ . . . a Hegelianism of some kind. This “height of consciousness” authorized us to exorcise the bad consciences that we nourished, secretly, slyly or unconsciously, about the obscurities that reigned in us and masked our own downward slides [*dérives*] . . . I must make clear – it is a classic phenomenon – that the lesser the ability, the greater the feeling of inferiority, the greater the radicality wanted to be more ferocious. A period of bureaucratization followed. All the joyful, booze-soaked meetings, the discussions going on until dawn, gave way to preoccupations of no interest, from questions concerning allocations to responses to be drafted – who would take care of this or that piece of mail?¹⁸⁴

*You’re telling me that any revolutionary association produces its own sclerosis and degeneration from within.*¹⁸⁵

We’d regressed¹⁸⁶ to an archaic mode of functioning that was so much more aberrant than what we tried to do away with. That’s the danger of wanting to destroy the old world with its own

¹⁸³ *Translator’s note:* contrast this with what Vaneigem had said earlier: “We never were sycophants of either the Paris Commune or Spartakus as historical events enclosed in the past. On the contrary, we put the accent on what was open and incomplete in the past and could be resolved in the present.”

¹⁸⁴ *Translator’s note:* in other words, all the secretarial duties that Guy Debord had been performing steadily since the beginning of the SI. Cf. his letter to the SI dated 28 July 1969: <http://www.notbored.org/debord-28July1969.html>.

¹⁸⁵ *Translator’s note:* The corollary of this opinion (it is far from established as a fact) would be that revolutionary organization is impossible and shouldn’t even be attempted.

¹⁸⁶ *Translator’s note:* when exactly? We appear to have gone no further in the chronology than December 1967.

weapons. Of course, these weapons – we tried to détourn them and send them back [*les retourner*] against the oppressor . . . A dangerous idea from which it was difficult to escape at the time. All revolutions have been made with weapons, including the establishment of the collectives in Aragon and Catalonia, which we admired very much . . . From whence [in part] came the notions of tactics and strategy. But even before I joined the SI, I believed that it would be necessary to take up arms at some point. Why leave the privilege of weapons to soldiers, to the cops, to our enemies?

*It seems to me that for both you and Guy Debord, with the publication of your respective books, the important thing was to mark [certain] points, to occupy space.*¹⁸⁷

The “bridgehead” from which everything would start . . . When May 68 exploded, the result exceeded our hopes. We’d foreseen it, wanted it and prepared for it. *De la misère*¹⁸⁸ played an enormous role as a trigger. At first, there were these students . . . It was Mustapha’s idea. His experiences in Strasbourg¹⁸⁹ had led him to formulate a critique of the student union – the UNEF. He had the idea of writing a pamphlet, *De la misère en milieu étudiant*. He drafted the text and proposed the title. Several clarifications and modifications were added.¹⁹⁰ For all that, it wasn’t a collective work. Mustapha’s text had simply been lightly modified. The pamphlet’s opening phrase was his: “We can affirm, without great risk of being mistaken, that the student in France is, after the cop and the priest, the most universally scorned creature.” The book was published with money diverted [*détourné*] from the student union. The pamphlet’s influence was considerable . . . It was distributed everywhere. It inspired the revolts in Nanterre, sowed trouble in the student milieus . . . The most scorned were the first ones to react and [thus] assured a widespread distribution [of it]. *De la misère* truly played the role of detonator.

¹⁸⁷ *Translator’s note:* the French here, *la place*, can mean also mean room, the square, rank, position or seat.

¹⁸⁸ *Translator’s note:* *De la misère en milieu étudiant considérée sous ses aspects économique, politique, psychologique, sexuel et notamment intellectuel et de quelques moyens pour y remédier*. Known in English as *On the Poverty of Student Life*.

¹⁸⁹ *Translator’s note:* cf. Debord’s letter about the exclusion of the “Garnautins,” dated 15 January 1967. <http://www.notbored.org/debord-15January1967.html>. (It would appear that, at the time, Vaneigem was one of the “situationists absent from Paris,” and so didn’t co-sign the letter.) Cf. also Debord’s letter to André Bertrand and Daniel Joubert dated 22 January 1967: <http://www.notbored.org/debord-22January1967.html>.

¹⁹⁰ *Translator’s note:* by Guy Debord. Cf. his letters to Khayati dated 9 September 1966, 29 September 1966, 13 October 1966 and 19 October 1966: <http://www.notbored.org/debord-9September1966.html>; <http://www.notbored.org/debord-29September1966.html>; <http://www.notbored.org/debord-13October1966.html>; and <http://www.notbored.org/debord-19October1966.html>. As for Vaneigem: elsewhere in *Rien n’est fini, tout commence*, there is an interview with Khayati, in which he says, “During the discussions in Paris concerning the different sections of *On the Poverty of Student Life* that I proposed to the group, I think that Raoul was able to be present only once or twice. I can’t recall any major contributions on his part.” <http://www.notbored.org/khayati-interview.pdf>.

Mustapha was a great reader of Marx, Lukács, and Hegel. He'd had professors of a certain renown in Strasbourg. He was also the one who wrote the booklet on Les Marxismes that was published by the Encyclopédie du monde actuel in January 1970.

His knowledge of Marxism was perfect. Thus he'd been welcomed [into the SI] with enthusiasm . . . It is true that when people speak about the SI's books, *Société* and the *Traité* are mentioned first. *De la misère en milieu étudiant*, despite its influence, is mentioned less often.

Anonymity fit the spirit of the era.

The text was what was important, not the author.

Your priority was to spread ideas, to awaken minds. This was incompatible for the search for glory and money.

We'd critiqued surrealism sufficiently well to know that the name is nothing and that what's important is what's expressed.

What was Mustapha like as a companion?

Very pleasant. He had a tiny fault: he was a bit stingy. We used to laugh about it. We'd remarked that he'd slip away at the moment that everyone had to pay for their drinks. Debord said, "We'll cure him." One day, on the rue des Rosiers, we drank some whisky and some slightly unusual booze, expensive spirits, [and] then [we said] to Mutspha, "It's your turn." He paid with a very large bill. After which he got better. His reticence never got completely healed – but, OK, nothing too important. Furthermore, this reproach only added to the problem. This aside, he was a good companion: joyful, pleasant, a drinker – beer rather than wine – without losing the rigor of his thought, his political judgment, which was equal to that of Debord. Mine, on the other hand, was deplorable.

What were his relations with Debord like?

Very friendly, but founded less on intimate trust than on an intellectual bond. This bond was what linked and stimulated us. Nevertheless, one day, the rigor of our thinking came to hide the shortcomings in human generosity, about which we made such a big case.

One day, Mustapha shared with me this intimate confidence: "A certain number of us, around Debord, had a problem to solve: a problem with the father." [...]

I think that's an exaggeration. Some had a paternal relationship with Debord. He appreciated this obedience but didn't support it. Mustapha was never obedient. He was ferociously independent.

How did Mustapha act during the meetings?

Very active, with the rigor of thought for which he was known. He had a political sense that I never had. It never interested me. He willingly devoted himself to it. The death of his mother

during a bombardment of Tunisia, his childhood with his uncle, constituted, on the other hand, memories that he didn't mention to everyone.

Can you speak about the disappearance of his mother?

He must have been 4 or 5 when English planes, coming back from some mission or other, thought it would be good to lighten their cargo by dropping the bombs that they hadn't used. They must have found it funny to dump them on the village – people fleeing in all directions. Mustapha's mother ran to escape the carnage, her child in her arms. She jumped into a ditch, covering him with her body – a bomb exploded. She was killed. Her blood covered him . . . You can imagine the trauma . . .

When it comes to forming the psychological structure of someone's whole life, I can't think of a more traumatic event.

I interpreted his story as a token of friendship. He never made a big deal about it. We didn't speak of it again. It was quite eloquent that we didn't. I might be wrong, but I don't believe that he ever told Debord. As I've already said, he discouraged confessions.

He didn't encourage confidences.

In Mustapha's case, it was more than a confidential matter; it was something that revealed his very body, his real affects. It was important that he spoke about his body. Because, like Viénet, he had an earthy side, [only] he was more cerebral, a little stiff sometimes, at least at first. But he wasn't an intellectual. To me, an intellectual is someone whose ideas are separated from [his] life. Mustapha was sensitive and attentive to what took place in the [human] body and the social body. He'd read enough Groddeck¹⁹¹ to suspect a relationship between his nephritic colic and his difficulty in giving birth to the book on Islam that everyone pressed him to write . . . But he alone could work on himself, it's true . . . No one else can do that work for you. Mustapha, furthermore, never showed the least readiness to painfully pour it all out, in the manner of, let's say, Rousseau.

To return to his political sense, Mustapha, as he told you, was raised by his uncle, who was a union militant in Tunisia. As a child, he was taken to all the meetings, without anyone paying too much attention to him. He was always very animated. In that way, he'd acquired a certain sense for rhetoric and political strategy.

He was also someone who wasn't mistaken about people. He was very lucid in his approach – I'm speaking here of the political dimensions of [interpersonal] relations. He played an important role in the polemics that we had to confront. He's the one who accustomed us to a certain acidic tone. He was already in such a mode with the artists. Unlike him, I'm not capable of demolishing a politician from "within."

¹⁹¹ *Translator's note:* Georg Groddeck (1866-1934), a physician and pioneer of psychosomatic diagnosis.

We can't say that you have a politician's temperament.

Not at all. Furthermore, I maintain an outrageous indifference to everyone who resorts to politics. That is, no doubt, my way of condemning it. Furthermore, Mustapha was someone of extreme discretion. He didn't have the sense of power but the sense of presence. He never sought to advance himself. This excessive modesty worked against him.

Such discretion that, in his family circle, he was nicknamed "The Minister of the Interior." [...]

That nickname fits the manner in which he accumulated information. He had a fabulous memory – something I don't possess at all. He had a memorial side. I also remember that he wore dark glasses.

He wore glasses, very thick ones, always slightly colored, to correct his nearsightedness. As a result, it was difficult to catch his eye.

But he was never hiding something.

[...] *In his case, fantasy was almost completely absent.*

Yes, but he knew how to balance his seriousness with a little humor. He always succeeded in placing an ironic distance between things and himself . . . too much distance, perhaps, because – with respect to *De la misère* – he was, no doubt, too isolated from what he really was, that is to say, at the heart of things. He had, and still has, a tendency to underestimate himself, to remain effaced, despite a real presence that everyone recognized in him. He was never at risk during the exclusions.

At that moment,¹⁹² the trio you formed – Khayati, Debord and you – had produced important books, though Khayati remained anonymous.¹⁹³

The three works, relayed by the press, came to reinforce the military idea of “bridgehead.”

They also escaped you. They were translated into a large number of languages. Everyone grabbed them up, especially De la misère, which – thanks to or because of the anti-copyright¹⁹⁴ provisions¹⁹⁵ that you made part of the agenda of the era – had widespread distribution.

Extracts were copied and circulated everywhere . . . [Our works] departed in all senses of the word.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹² *Translator's note:* late 1967.

¹⁹³ *Translator's note:* ten years after its original publication, *On the Poverty* was reissued by Editions Champ Libre – something to which Khayati was opposed. See his letter to Champ Libre dated 12 October 1967: <http://www.notbored.org/khayati-12October1976.html>.

¹⁹⁴ *Translator's note:* English in original.

¹⁹⁵ “All the texts published in the *Internationale situationniste* can be freely reproduced, translated or adapted, even without indication of origin.”

Which inevitably had repercussions on the group and the individuals who composed it.

The group had then clearly won out over the individuals. Personal actions hadn't yet fallen under the form of particular added-values: there was no Khayati added-value or a Vaneigem added-value . . . There was no ego limitlessly flattered . . . Events brought us together. Until then, each member had worked in his [respective] corner, separately.

These three publications came to weld together the organization that you'd called the Situationist International with hilarious seriousness.

A pleasantry and a pleasing reality.

You'd done pretty well with bluffs, hadn't you?

I would say instead that, like a kind of gamble [*coup de poker*], reality followed suit. Our ideas flew everywhere. The recognition became international, so was the victory, but – as we would see – this also announced the decline of the SI.¹⁹⁷ Faced with the signs of official recognition, the solidarity of the group was at first reinforced – a new authority was instaurated . . . The “Enragés” of Nanterre, inspired by situationist ideas, had denounced one [Daniel] Cohn-Bendit, who played at being the orator and organizer of the student revolt. The idea of consolidating our “bridgehead” went along with a desire to prevent the enemy from penetrating it. The enemy was recuperation, which had already accomplished its work . . . Poor Cohn-Bendit . . . there's this ridiculous photo in which he appears alone, bound for exile,¹⁹⁸ alone on the avenue des Champs-Élysées . . . with three thousand people behind him! This spectacle defined the person.

Chapter V: May 1968

The SI had been great in its anonymity, in its subterranean work, in unanimous silence, pillaged by intellectuals. You were still only a little experimental laboratory of three threadbare guys [pelés] who got together to discuss and specify a mad scheme. As utopian as it appeared, this project suddenly gained considerable importance. Thousands of people became aware of it.

¹⁹⁶ *Translator's note:* the French here, *partir*, can mean leave, go, start off, disappear or pass away.

¹⁹⁷ *Translator's note:* circa late 1967, early 1968.

¹⁹⁸ *Translator's note:* a German national, he was deported from France on 22 May 1968.

In May 68, a certain number of the principles that we'd advocated suddenly got propagated by echoes – not “behind the scenes” but at the front of the stage: the refusal of work – this had never been emphasized to that point. The refusal of sacrifice, appearances, and spectacle. The importance of women – which would lead to feminism – and children; the denunciation of the “repression/release” cycle and the manipulation of emotions; the critique of ideologies and patronage [*clientélisme*] . . . these positions, which today begin to appear as “self-evident,” were far from being obvious at the time.

Some of society's padlocks have been broken open.

We brought critical consciousness to its highest level.

The problem being that one risks becoming a group like any other. Even if the group produced and expressed a certain radicality, it got caught up in political confrontation.

We should have remained outside, with the idea of the “bridgehead,” [but] this wasn't the case On the contrary. The paradox is that the group became closed when it opened itself up.¹⁹⁹ The number of members increased. A change took place in us and in the group, which became a cheap hotel [*auberge espagnole*]. Everyone arrived with his litany of thoughts to share.

People joined because they shared a similar sensibility. Ideas were thrown about, willy-nilly . . . but there really wasn't a guiding line . . .

We hoped that the creative phase would go on, always a little painfully, but passionately, with fumbling around and errors.

In this boiling cauldron, how did you feel about what was happening? How were the events of May 68 unleashed?

Our feelings were quite strange. We'd foreseen that an upheaval was coming, without saying exactly when. Our predictions were thus confirmed. But we also found ourselves in the position of a General who observes a tactic judged to be unstoppable produce different results than hoped for. We were aware that the reflections propagated by the journal and concretized by the three books joined together to form a pole of attraction. This awareness was very clear. It was quite right that we'd always thought – with formidable modesty! – that our radicality gave its impulse to May 68. Of course, we must make some qualifications. Historical conditions fused together. There was a conjunction between individuals becoming aware and a historical evolution that oriented things in the direction that we'd foreseen. Let's recall, nevertheless, the magnitude of ambient skepticism, which even touched some of us Until the very last minute, the idea prevailed that we were evolving in a complete utopia, that what we'd imagined couldn't happen for the good reason – and it's true – that, for the first time, people had apartments, they paid for cars and television sets, according to temperament. They were experiencing popular access to consumption – which was new What thrilled us was that official discourse and ordinary

¹⁹⁹ *Translator's note:* after May 1968, when the members of the Enragés and the CMDO were invited to join the SI.

public opinion were smashed by our certainty that this nonsense was going to collapse. Everyone shouted it: the situation hadn't been as prosperous for decades. The image of the traditional spectacle was reproduced everywhere. This was the era in which Walter Lewino wrote his novella, *L'Eclat et la blancheur*,²⁰⁰ in which he took up an ad for detergent that showed a family living like what one saw on TV: the mother, the father, the children – a beautiful little world, perfectly happy because they had a TV, [things] to eat – in sum, a consumable happiness. That was the dominant idea. The fact that a fissure had opened in the [formerly] uncontested spectacular image – this gigantic stage apparatus that wasn't ever questioned, not even by a counter-spectacle – confirmed the radicality alive elsewhere. We'd placed our fingers on a radioactive kernel. Thus we no doubt felt satisfaction, which I have difficulty accounting for.

[...] *What is striking is the fact that, after the moment that people began to speak of you, there followed in the majority of European countries troubles and protests that were directly or indirectly tied to your critique. You could then rightfully say, "There's our International! It's giving birth to the Human Being International that we have dreamed of!"*

It was obvious . . . There was the conjoined flowering of two phenomena: thinking that had been crowned with silence and was sufficient in itself,²⁰¹ and a historical movement tied to the crisis of consumerism, to an awakening. Quite suddenly, something was unleashed and propagated itself effectively through slogans. The fulminate had done its work and what had been prepared had the surprising effect of an explosion. There was another phenomenon, which I call the "resonance effect." An incredible number of people suddenly said, "What you've expressed is what I have always thought!"

Your thought dissolved and was propagated everywhere.

Yes! It corroborated a confused feeling, a malaise, something not right somewhere. Our words suddenly stuck to reality. They were adequate to this malaise, and through them people began to give coherence to their disarray.

We could speak here of brilliant success.

I spoke of "flowering" [*éclosion*] so as to not use the word "success," which is dangerously tied to competition, predation and opportunism. The "success" led to an increase in the number of situationists. People like Riesel and Christian Sébastiani had painted slogans such as "Under the paving stones, the beach," and "Run, comrade: the old world is behind you." Their creative input inspired us to co-opt them. This was also the beginning of the danger that we've already

²⁰⁰ Based on an idea by Michèle Bernstein, it was published in 1967 and won the Cazes Prize the next year.

²⁰¹ *Translator's note:* contrast this notion of the SI's self-sufficiency with what Vaneigem says about his *Fragments pour une Poétique*, written in 1961. "Reading them is like reading a musical score whose meaning and value come from its performance. One must bring to these texts lives that only audio-visual technology can kindle in the hearts of the masses; one must bring them into collective action, which, by transfiguring them, will assign to social praxis its veritable measure, which is that of man-become-world." <http://www.notbored.org/fragments.pdf>.

discussed.²⁰² But it's true that there was a propagation of ideas. Nevertheless, I prefer to say "resonance" rather than "propagation," which only takes place through words . . . Perhaps we can speak of both. At first, the resonance effect that took place and many recognized themselves in the phrases that were circulating, which flew like the words spoken by Rabelais:²⁰³ they pass into the sky and then land. If we think about Mexico, about the place des Trois Cultures, where on 2 October 1968 we unfortunately saw – in the Tlatelolco massacre,²⁰⁴ a mirror effect of May 68 that ended very badly, one can say that the phenomenon was considerable. Same thing in Czechoslovakia, the Prague Spring . . . A little bit everywhere.

This notoriety also marked the beginning of problems within the group.

In terms of strategy, we can see it in the history of the fall: after Clausewitz's curved-line offensive comes decline and collapse.

*In other words, the situationist movement, as an avant-garde, didn't know that it should scupper itself, dissolve itself. It tried to perpetuate what it had reaped to develop itself.*²⁰⁵

With hindsight . . . yes. In the enthusiasm, the frenzy of the moment, it was difficult to envision dissolution, to declare, "We gave the impetus, we laid the foundations, for a global change. Henceforth, things will follow their course."²⁰⁶

When we read Debord's letters to Mustapha Khayati – and, in a certain period there were almost a hundred of them – they are letters of recommendations, of organization. Nothing is left to chance. Why not? I will agree to defend spontaneity, but that spontaneity was of an extremely methodical and rigorous nature.

We didn't want an ideology of spontaneity. We'd seen what this leads to among the authoritarian cretins of the "Mao-Spontex"²⁰⁷ type.

²⁰² *Translator's note:* it is precisely the "beginning" of this danger that has proved hard to pin down. Here it is just after May 1968; elsewhere it has been late 1967 and early 1968.

²⁰³ "And he saw the very spicy words / the bloody words / which the pilot / sometimes tells us / to put back in the place / from which they were uttered / but it was a cut throat." François Rabelais.

²⁰⁴ *Translator's note:* cf. Paco Ignacio Taibo's book *68*: <http://www.notbored.org/taibo.html>.

²⁰⁵ *Translator's note:* an odd thing to say, given that, just three or four years after May 68, the SI knew enough to dissolve.

²⁰⁶ *Translator's note:* this is a fairly good summary of some of the ideas that were soon after expressed by Debord and Sanguinetti in "Theses on the Situationist International and Its Time," *The Real Split in the International*, first published April 1972, translated by John McHale (Pluto Press, 2003): "From now on, situationists are everywhere, and so is their task."

²⁰⁷ *Translator's note:* "Spontex" is not only an abbreviation of (those who are) spontaneous, but also a derisive allusion to a French petrochemical company that makes sponges.

[...] *The SI gave the impression of wanting to perpetuate itself at the very heart of the action. We must say that you'd never [before] directly confronted reality, nor found yourself on the field of battle.*

Nor confronted problems with “bureaucratic” organization.

You were active in the Strasbourg affair,²⁰⁸ then in May 68, with the Committee for the Maintenance of the Occupations. You were active on the ground, and this for the first time.

Here we can distinguish three phenomena. We'd been an assembly – I wouldn't say an intellectual one, but one of reflection – and we became a practical organization. What to do? The global idea remained self-management – a vast project! We found ourselves confronted what we'd always refused: a form of militancy. By “militancy” I mean an activist's comportment, in which one puts one's body on the line: distribute tracts, occupy the Sorbonne, fight with the cops. At the Sorbonne, during the first demonstrations, we were overwhelmed by militants, by specialists who knew all the tricks of manipulation: the Trotskyites, the Maoists, the Mao-Spontex, etc.

The cream of Leftism.

With Cohn-Bendit their more or less avowed *leader*.²⁰⁹ It isn't useless to note that the first clashes “on the ground” in Nanterre at the time of the March 22d Movement were between Riesel and the [other] Enragés, and Cohn-Bendit, who wanted to affirm his power as a *leader*.²¹⁰ In the struggle against the Dean of the Faculty, we could see how Cohn-Bendit worked to construct his network of militants and get himself recognized as little boss.

Did militancy appear in your “ranks,” too?

I object to the use of the word “militancy” because we were fiercely hostile to any form of [self-] sacrifice. The fact of being on the ground at the Sorbonne didn't really obligate us to act. On the other hand, at the Institut Pédagogique National,²¹¹ there were songs, the tracts that Yves Raynaud printed up, and clashes with the cops at la Bourse.

If we look at the letters from that period, the exchanges were extremely sustained and, at the same time, highly technical.

They became more and more technical.

[...] *You critiqued militancy in the name of the authenticity of the desire for life, but you found yourselves plunged into an action that required a minimum of know-how and organization.*

²⁰⁸ *Translator's note:* as previously noted, Vaneigem was not personally involved in the Strasbourg affair.

²⁰⁹ *Translator's note:* English in original.

²¹⁰ *Translator's note:* English in original.

²¹¹ *Translator's note:* the building occupied by the Enragés and situationists.

We found ourselves in an awkward situation with people who were accustomed to debate. I believe that none of us spoke out publicly, except perhaps Debord at the Sorbonne – I no longer remember. In any case: me? Never.

*So what was May 68 like for you? Later on, there were interrogations of the “revolutionary tribune” type: “Who did that? Who proved unworthy? Who deserted?”*²¹²

I was part of the first conferences at the Sorbonne. They were dominated by the Maoists and Trotskyists. We found ourselves unable to act. None of us was an orator . . . Anyway, I’d promised Marie-Paule, with whom I was living at the time, to go down to Spain with her. So I went. By the time I reached Barcelona, the movement [back in France] had spread throughout the entire country – the paralysis of transportation started then. I rented a *car*²¹³ that took me to Paris, where I joined my friends, who’d left the Sorbonne and occupied the Institut Pédagogique National [the IPN]. Apart from some jokes, no one complained to me because of my eclipse . . . I left – certainly that wasn’t well advised – but I returned and we went to work. Texts were drafted. Yves Raynaud and the graphic artists printed tracts and posters. There were a number of us occupying the IPN. Buildings were squatted; people were siphoning gas from the cars. I only did that once, to go to Nantes with Hubert Bérard. We were greeted rather coldly there. They believed that the “central committee” had mandated us.

As Leftists will do. At the time, Leftism was the “organizational” peak of the workers’ combat.

It wasn’t workers who met us in Nantes, but those whom we would later call “pro-situs” who created problems for us. In Nantes, there was a little group with a slightly charismatic *leader*.²¹⁴ Yvon Chotard.²¹⁵

²¹² *Translator’s note:* a caricature of something that didn’t happen. At worst, it seems, there was this: “The first factory had been occupied the previous day and, at that time, the most imbecilic member of the most backward groupuscule didn’t doubt that a very serious social crisis had begun. Nevertheless, Vaneigem, who was much better informed, as soon as he affixed his signature to our circular, boarded a train that very afternoon to return to the location of his Mediterranean vacation, which had long ago been scheduled. Several days later, learning abroad, from the *mass media*, of what had continued as foreseen in France, he naturally found it his duty to return, traversing with great difficulty the country, which was on strike, and rejoined us a week after his ridiculous blunder, that is, when the decisive days, during which we could do the most for the movement, had already passed. Therefore, we know well that Vaneigem truly loves revolution, and that it isn’t courage that he lacks. We thus can only understand this as the limiting-case of the separation between a rigorous routine of an unshakably orderly everyday life and a real but greatly disarmed passion for revolution.” Guy Debord, “Communiqué Concerning Vaneigem,” 9 December 1970: <http://www.notbored.org/debord-9December1970.html>.

²¹³ *Translator’s note:* English in original.

²¹⁴ *Translator’s note:* English in original.

²¹⁵ *Translator’s note:* see Debord’s letter to Yves Chotard dated 17 December 1967: <http://www.notbored.org/debord-17December1967.html>.

Who maintained a kind of stranglehold over the local events.

We went there in solidarity. We were thought to be spies. So we went back to Paris and the IPN in Hubert's little car. We were full of enthusiasm; we stopped at several restaurants and bars along the way. Nothing like the exhilaration of the militants – like those occupying the Odéon,²¹⁶ for example.

“Life goes by / Life flees / The days march to the step of boredom (...) / Time is bought at the supermarket.”²¹⁷

That was written at the IPN in an ambiance of joyful effervescence.

[...] *Who wrote “La Makhnovstchina”?*

Etienne Roda-Gil! Not the songwriter Julien Clerc.

Was he close to you?

We had good relations with him. He had a very colorful, joyful side – at least apparently so, because he also had a pathetic side. And then there was a discussion at Pierre Lepetit's place, if I remember right, in the course of which Roda-Gil was accused of lying and mythomania due to various anecdotes from here and there . . . We immediately cut off all contact with him. In his case, the question of exclusion didn't come up because he wasn't officially part of the group. I don't think that he'd really understood what had happened to him! In such a context, we professed to be a movement with a sense of humor that took the form of expressions as lapidary as “We can't accept lies,” applied with Robespierre-like revolutionary ethics . . . His song is still sung today . . . We remained at the INP, receiving visitors, such as Jean Malaquais.²¹⁸ Enthusiastic visitors: “We've waited so long for this moment!” Cordiality reigned. Playfulness allowed us to avoid the traps of militancy.

Who was at the Institut regularly?

Debord, Bernstein,²¹⁹ Mustapha, Riesel, Jacques le Glou, Yves Raynaud, Hubert Bérard . . . Fortuitous encounters, such as with the daughter of Madeleine Bourdouxhe, author of *La Femme de Gilles*, whom we called “Marie the Belgian” in homage to the Bonnot Gang.²²⁰

Sébastiani?

²¹⁶ *Translator's note:* occupied by members of the Living Theater, among other groups.

²¹⁷ *Translator's note:* the lyrics of “La vie s'écoule, la vie s'enfuit,” one of the songs that appear on *Pour en finir avec le travail* (1974), which was put together by Jacques Le Glou. It is in this very song that one finds the phrase “Nothing has ended but everything begins.”

²¹⁸ *Translator's note:* a French novelist (1908-1998) of Communist sympathies.

²¹⁹ *Translator's note:* Michèle Bernstein does not appear to have been a member of the CMDO.

²²⁰ *Translator's note:* the gang included a woman named Marie Vuillemin.

Sébastien, Alain Chevalier, I believe – I’d forgotten him. André Bertrand and Joannès, the designers of my comic strips . . . Yves Raynaud was very effective. He had contacts with printers who delivered free copies of the posters that we created. We slept there, amused ourselves. It was very drunken. The best antidote to militancy is playfulness.

[...] *Those posters were reprinted in René Viénet’s book, Enragés et situationnistes dans le mouvement des occupations, published in the autumn of 1968.*

There were also the fake “letters from the management.”²²¹ They were posted all over town!

How did you feed yourselves?

Some grocers offered us food and drink. To nourish ourselves in the narrow sense of the term, we bought trifles, *sandwiches*.²²² It was quite summary. I experimented with sacramental wafers stolen from a sacristy and honey. It was disgusting. But drinks were never lacking!

And all this took place amidst good feelings after your return from Spain?

Until the Grenelle Accords,²²³ when everything was reversed. We’d left the Institut to avoid possible reprisals.

You were convinced you’d be arrested and imprisoned.

It was a risk. I’d the feeling that repression was approaching . . . During the occupation of the IPN, we went to the corner bars. The bartenders welcomed us with pleasure. Often we didn’t pay. When we left the IPN, the doors of the bars were closed. A very “Evening of the Commune” ambiance. They sneered at us, “When fun time is over, is that the end of the good life? The end of the orgies? Who’s going to pay?” So we beat a light retreat. This was with Hubert Bérard, Yves Raynaud, Patrick Cheval, Jacques Le Glou and several others . . . We returned home, going to all the leftist bars, having a drink in each one of them. The further we proceeded, the more we were ill at ease, unfortunately. I said to myself, “These are the same ones who celebrated us yesterday, while today – as at the fall of the [Paris] Commune – they denounce us and line us up against the wall.”

Frightening!

In the tempo of this final turn, we felt that the wind had changed. The benevolence of the day before became aggressive, as if – having been completely expended – it was necessary for someone to pay for it.

²²¹ *Translator’s note:* cf. footnote #2 to this statement from Viénet:

<http://www.notbored.org/ReneVienet.pdf>.

²²² *Translator’s note:* English in original.

²²³ *Translator’s note:* concluded on 27 May 1968. On 30 May, de Gaulle dissolved the National Assembly and called for elections to be held one month later.

The humiliation of seeing the adventure end . . . by fizzling out.

Leaving the Institut together, with the idea of not staying around, exposed to the repression that soon came down, the decision was quickly made to meet in Brussels, on the avenue Stuart Merrill, in my apartment. I took the train. René Viénet went first class, which he thought was safer. Guy refused, thinking it was madness to take the train because we risked getting arrested. He made a detour through Luxembourg, a true game of traces.

On a train?

On foot, by bus . . . Like an exile fleeing the border police. He even crossed the French-Belgian border on foot . . . He looked glum when he arrived and was greeted with taunts.

So there was you, Viénet, Debord . . .

Patrick Cheval, Alain Chevalier, Mustapha, Riesel, François de Beaulieu – maybe some others? I put up I don't know how many people [at my place] and Clairette Schock housed a good number of people, too. Finally, they were spread out everywhere.

On the Avenue Stuart Merrill, you decided to write what would become Enragés et situationnistes dans le mouvement des occupations. Debord, you, Mustapha, Viénet and Riesel. And there were others who only participated in the discussions.

Everything was done collectively.

You each wrote a chapter.

Then it was read, reviewed, corrected – all very quickly.

Of all the [SI's] publications, it's the book that people recall the least.

No doubt, but it's the most precise account of the “occupations movement” – a phrase I like very much. The book isn't a masterpiece, but that wasn't our goal. It is a memoir, a report, a clarification of what was done or not and remained to be done. All things considered, it didn't go beyond the level of a memoir about the French Revolution. But that's kind of what the book wants to be. It's the only text that “situates” itself above the excremental logorrhea that spewed forth concerning May 68 – and that wasn't too difficult to do. It is also the only testimony about the actions of the situationists during the occupations. No one [else] ever used the phrase “occupations movement.” Even today it irks people. They prefer to speak of the “events” of May 68. When one speaks of the recuperation of the *leaders*²²⁴ of 1968 who are today rotting away within the system, it has nothing to do with what we lived! The book attributed to Viénet remains an indispensable work for anyone who wants to go beyond lies. A historical line is traced out in it, easily verifiable, which was totally hidden and remains so today. It was Viénet, I believe, who

²²⁴ *Translator's note:* English in original.

made contact with Pierre Nora at éditions Gallimard, which published it.²²⁵ It included illustrations, which one cannot find anywhere else.

[...] [*During May 68,*] *people got around on foot, which established a way of life that lasted for a while, [one that was] extremely surprising and unusual.*

Something idyllic reigned for a short spring. You could see people experiencing a joy that was founded on the assurance that nothing would ever be the same. Thus, everything returned as before, and worse . . .

The idea that the Big Night was going to take place the next day was in your blood. This feeling flourished and died away for many people.

I had the feeling of living through what the people of the Paris Commune had experienced: the joy, the hope that everything would change, suddenly crumbling, falling into a bitter despair, very rapidly, like a change of mood in a capricious person. The hostility was palpable. We could easily imagine being lined up against a wall and shot. To them, we were the ones responsible for the reversal and the disenchantment. We had given them hope and we'd stolen it away from them. Paranoia – already present in Debord's case – grew afterwards.

Did you have weapons?

No. One day, at the barricades at la Bourse, Alain Chevalier took the gun from a [member of the] CRS.²²⁶ There were no bullets in it. Grimaud²²⁷ had forbade the CRS from loading their guns. The munitions remained in their *cars*.²²⁸

The Prefect of Paris played a not insignificant role in this, whether we like it or not. He prevented the spilling of blood.

He saved our lives . . . Without him, with Pasqua – the Service d'action civique,²²⁹ the SAC and its killers – they would have liquidated us, like at the place des Trois Cultures, that's for sure! We had the weapon in hand. Alain Chevalier, Debord and I broke it against a manhole cover. The gesture recalled to me my father, who proudly displayed the pacifist symbol of a broken gun.

²²⁵ *Translator's note:* perhaps this is why Viénet received the author's credit for the book.

²²⁶ *Translator's note:* the Compagnies Républicaines de Sécurité, the "Republican Security Companies," a national police force that specializes in "riot control" and brutality.

²²⁷ *Translator's note:* Maurice Grimaud, Prefect of Police.

²²⁸ *Translator's note:* English in original.

²²⁹ *Translator's note:* a Gaullist militia founded in 1960 and composed of Mafiosi, right-wing thugs, anti-Communist zealots, CIA agents, etc. According to one source (Wikipedia), "During May 1968, SAC members, disguised as ambulance crew, took demonstrators to their headquarters, rue de Solférino, where they were beaten up."

During the riots, a weapon comes into your hands and you throw it down the sewer! All the same, weren't you very naïve to not know that a revolution also requires weapons?

I was a partisan of urban guerrilla warfare until the process of self-destruction that it puts in place became obvious. We could sense in it the noxious effects among the Mao-Spontex and the Leftism from which came the Red Brigades and other combat cells. Our preoccupation was the occupation of the factories, to get the movement to spread . . . For us, that was what was important. It would have been an imbecilic provocation to brandish that gun, which was nothing. Tear gas grenades were launched against us. A little woman in her 60s, Spanish, arrived with scarves. "Piss in them, comrades, and then put them on your faces, they will protect you." Such solidarity was idyllic . . . We'd wanted to make contact with the workers of an occupied factory. They kept behind the metal gates. Between us and them stood the security services of the CGT,²³⁰ which used clubs and *bludgeons*²³¹ to strike us when we tried to approach. It is impossible to communicate with workers who are imprisoned by their own union. Soon afterwards came the Grenelle Accords. It was the Communist Party that broke the occupations of the factories. Its role was decisive, much more so than De Gaulle's.²³²

The CGT being the Communist Party's the drive belt – a classic arrangement.

The victory of the Communist Party liquidated the occupations quickly. From then on, the C.P. collapsed.

[...] *The majority of the young people who participated in May 68, the self-proclaimed leaders,*²³³ [...] *found themselves, not due to any "betrayal," in management positions in the emerging new society. The social structures in which they'd grown up didn't permit them to attain to the positions that they coveted by virtue of their elite training. Thus they had to break certain cogwheels of society to "carve out" positions for themselves in the press, advertising or elsewhere.*

They became what they already were: people like [Serge] July, the CEO of Citroën,²³⁴ ex-Trotskyists – all patent 68ers.

I insist: this wasn't betrayal.

Not at all! They only pursued their own objectives . . . Protest served their ambitions to be little leaders . . . It's a question of distinguishing two things. People such as Cohn-Bendit, July, and

²³⁰ *Translator's note:* the Confédération générale du travail, at that time close to the French Communist Party.

²³¹ *Translator's note:* the French word used here, *gourdins*, can also mean erect penises.

²³² *Translator's note:* in Italy, this insight would be applied in the form of the "Historic Compromise" of the bourgeois State with the Italian Communist Party.

²³³ *Translator's note:* English in original.

²³⁴ *Translator's note:* Serge July is in fact the CEO of *Libération*, not Citroën.

Alain Geismar,²³⁵ who were denounced as recuperators, only remained what they were: *leaders*.²³⁶ They became so in a society that they had, indeed, changed. Thus we can't speak of betrayal, nor of a renunciation of an ideal on their parts. Alongside this, there was the radicality that situationist thought had developed. And it has never been recuperated. It has only begun to develop. It has had echoes. There are more and more of them. I'm thinking of the freedom to love – not simple libertinage – but a much vaster demand; the importance accorded to the equality of women; the creativity of children; the refusal of work . . . [In the last few decades,] the authority of the *pater familias* has fallen. We'd also foreseen the collapse of the army – then quite formidable, but today it has been converted into the defense forces of the market in humanitarianism: weapons and a bowl of rice . . . The slogans of those times have become the terms of the dominant ideology. They are the very negation of the foundations that we'd laid down: radicality. Radicality is not recuperable by any ideology, but, on the other hand, it can nourish any ideology. Everything that you've mentioned²³⁷ proves it. Feminism has become a power as tyrannical as the patriarchy that it combats.²³⁸

[...] *In a certain way, your critical discourse has become the discourse of power. I'm not saying you are responsible for this, yet this articulation between contestation and recuperation is very interesting to me.*

It isn't a question of responsibility. I believe that what was always clear about us was our radicality. Our agreement with Lefebvre about the importance of everyday life reappears in today's debates. To take a fashionable example, let's mention the question of the hijab for Muslim women. Now, *that's* an ideology! The important thing is the status of women. The quarrel: must we accept the hijab or must we be obligated to raise it. Who gives a fuck? On the other hand, women are subjected to the masculine domination of an archaic patriarchy under the traditional regimes of the Arab world, but also in the Mediterranean world – that's the real problem. It is a question of putting everything to work so that the rights of women are not only those of men, but – and here's the real battle – that the primary demand concerns the emancipation of the human being, male and female.

There is, on one side, an authentic critical discourse and, on the other, ideology, recuperation that turns the best into the worst. My question is simple. Was the worm already in the fruit of the May 68 insurrection?

All ideologies falsify the real. For me, ideology is thought separated from life. The spectacle is but the result of thought become autonomous. I still insist on the necessity of working at the base, which is everyday life, the radicality that is the root of being . . . Doesn't revolutionary combat exactly consist in consistently tracing things to their roots so as to prevent recuperation,

²³⁵ *Translator's note:* during the occupations movement, Geismar had been the General Secretary of SNESup (Syndicat national de l'enseignement supérieur), a teachers' union. After May 1968, he became a leader of Gauche prolétarienne, a Maoist organization.

²³⁶ *Translator's note:* English in original.

²³⁷ *Translator's note:* in twaddle that I have deleted, the interviewer had mentioned the rights of children, legalized homosexual marriage, feminism, and medically assisted procreation.

²³⁸ *Translator's note:* a cringe-inducing remark.

derailment [*dévolement*] and falsification? Call it what you like – it is the phenomenon that is important. The massacres in which the revolutionary experiences of the past ended – brutally interrupted, either by the Versaillais²³⁹ or the Communists – doesn't mean that these movements aren't worthy of being ceaselessly begun again. Not repeated, but reinvented, recreated.

I agree, but in such movements there's always been a radical fringe that doesn't lay down its weapons, that goes much further, that wants to continue the project and that perishes in blood [...]

Kronstadt.

Kronstadt, Mahkno . . . [...] Despite recuperation, a radical fringe has always carried on.

Like an eternal return. It begins again, always in historically different circumstances, but always with the same resolution, which is as irrepressible as a vital impetus [*élan vital*]. Here we come back to the opposition between “life” and “survival.” In May 68, survival was still quite comfortable. Today, it is threatened.

We've seen that, within the SI, radicality passed through a subtle handling of the game, [a sense of] humor, as well as procedures that came to constitute a safeguard to the extent that they protected you against ideological downward spirals [dérives]. How did this happen? Did you lower your guard? It's true that you could deploy a sense of humor that was terribly redoubtable.

Between ourselves? No. Towards those on the outside? Yes, certainly. All relationships with us were redoubtable. There was a requirement of thought to be protected.

You didn't tolerate the least weakness?

This wasn't an effect of despotism. The requirement came from each person. That was precisely the richness of the group. We didn't enter into competition. We emulated each other. Each pushed the others to go further, to improve his language, thinking, precision and rigor. Then inflexibility won out. I believe that the playful side – in the sense of a joy for living – was an important point. Michèle had a sparkling way of looking at things – humor and the spirit of play – Debord less so . . . When I say that Michèle possessed the art of placing plates on the table without anyone realizing it, that's also a way of saying that she had the art of leading the discussion to concrete considerations that, in her absence, risked evaporating into grand declarations.

When things became a little too vague.

When we held forth like Saint-Just.

²³⁹ *Translator's note:* in the case of the Paris Commune.

People have relayed this remark by Debord: “Bernstein is a good consultant.” What do you think of that?

That was his way of celebrating her presence among us. She’d kept her importance by distancing herself little by little. There was never a break or confrontation, at least not apparently. In their everyday lives, perhaps that was something else . . . But she had the art of distancing herself little by little at the moment that . . . She’d perceived before we did that we were heading down a dead-end street . . . Her ability to distance herself allowed her to keep her ability to fascinate. This distancing, which Bertolt Brecht had popularized, was taught to us by her. Because we were very “serious” [*“au premier degré”*], all the same.

. . . rough.

With a good awareness of what we provided, of what we were, in the final analysis.

Pure and hard, but sure.

Michèle loved the expression: “You will not mistake yourself for half an orange.” She led things to the concrete. Not enough! Because the separation between theory and life did not cease increasing.

[...] *Did you know the causes of her distance? Were there official reasons given, that you knew of? [...]*

There was no official explanation, with the peremptory reason being the separation of the couple. We’d felt that their separation was amicable. I no longer remember when Michèle met Lewino²⁴⁰ . . . I’ve always believed, based on Debord’s own belief, that it was a passing fancy, Lewino being very likeable but not very serious. The last time I saw Michèle, she corrected me. Her relationship with Lewino had been a real love story, a great passion . . . We didn’t think that Michèle and Debord’s separation resulted from a theoretical divergence. Each one became distant from the other, little by little.

According to what she told me, the decision to leave had truly been made in 1967, well after the separation from Debord. It happened at the beginning of the Six Day War between Egypt and Israel. She began to have enough of the political tendency that appeared almost everywhere, including in the SI, to systematically condemn the State of Israel and defend the Arab countries.

²⁴⁰ “And it seems to me that we neglect too much the important roles played in the situationist adventure by Michèle Bernstein and Raoul Vaneigem: the first for her taste for derision, her total refusal of conventions and her irrepressible penchant for playfulness; the second for his great passion for unofficial cultures and his cast-iron morality that is wedded to a strong penchant for good cheer and young women [...] I continue to see them both, always fascinated by the aggressive intelligence of Bernstein and the great culture and calm modesty of Vaneigem.” Walter Lewino, *Pardon, pardon mon père*, 2001. [*Translator’s note: Lewino (1924-2013) was a French journalist.*]

It was then that she truly turned her back on the movement and no longer considered herself to be a member of the SI.

Both attempted, rather awkwardly, to imitate Valmont and Merteuil.²⁴¹ In love, at least where Debord was concerned, tactics won out over passion. He'd made his own the exaltation – which one finds among the surrealists (Breton's least questionable behavior with respect to Nadja) – of mad love, which was most often restricted to discourse instead of applied to lived reality. He was closer to Don Juan than Casanova. Valmont was his role model and he didn't cease looking for a Merteuil to serve his designs. If I'm not mistaken, Michèle followed her own inclinations. She satisfied her desires with complete independence. Debord was more irritated by her independence than by her romantic passions. A victory in love, as mediocre as it might be, erotically speaking, was always a defeat from which only cynicism and resentment could profit. Have we forgotten the stinging contempt that Choderlos de Laclos had for the “boatswains of love”? Although they incline towards libertinage, my sympathies for Casanova and my facility in letting myself seduce [women] have always protected me against Don Juanism. We never discussed the subject with Debord. Although he nourished hopes with respect to a young woman for whom I also felt a great passion, he didn't hold against me – in the spirit of de Retz or de Bernis – what he must have felt was a defeat. By amicably teasing me, he showed himself to be a “good sport” [*beau joueur*].

Did Michèle Bernstein's departure mark the beginning of what we might call the “situationist ideology”?

We never had the least ambition where this was concerned. We'd irrevocably condemned “situationism.” We'd always spat upon such an obvious ideology. Nevertheless, the firmness of the refusal wasn't enough, if you more or less unconsciously allow what you reject to take hold of you.

That's what happened in the SI in 1968. While we'd been a small, closed circle until then, we found ourselves confronted with an influx of [new] members. We found ourselves with 30 people who, likeable though they were, encumbered the process. Decision-making became bureaucratic. A form of hierarchy came into being, despite ourselves.²⁴² . . . No one wanted to be aware of this side.²⁴³ In any group, a relative cowardice comes into existence and corresponds to the moment when the individual [as such] abdicates in the name of the group.²⁴⁴ That was the

²⁴¹ *Translator's note:* in Choderlos de Laclos' *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, the Vicomte de Valmont and the Marquise de Merteuil are ex-lovers and rivals who seduce others and brag about it later.

²⁴² *Translator's note:* presumably the “bureaus” here were the various national sections, and the “hierarchy” was the preeminence of the French.

²⁴³ *Translator's note:* but see the SI's “orientation debate,” which took place between April 1968 and February 1971. <http://www.notbored.org/orientation-debate.html>.

²⁴⁴ *Translator's note:* but this was the case with the SI from the very start. The following notice appeared in the first and second issues of *Internationale situationniste* (and is reprinted elsewhere in *Rien n'est fini, tout commence*): “This bulletin is collectively produced. The articles

thing that we abhorred the most, because we'd fought for freedom and individual creativity.²⁴⁵ It didn't prevent us from succumbing to it within our own movement. And we took on the role of founding fathers.

But that's what you were!

That's what we were, what we didn't want to become, and what we tolerated because of the obedience shown by the new generation of situationists. An obedience that we obviously didn't demand. But whatever – the newcomers saw in obedience a “purgatory” from which they could only leave by proving their creativity.

It wasn't obvious.

Only a few managed to do it.

So as not to say “none”!

Beyond René Riesel and Christian Sébastiani, who else?²⁴⁶

When we look at the different products, the itineraries – by consulting the archives – we see that, at the time, there were many discussions, letters with copies sent to the others, multiple signatories . . . We in fact see this become tiresome and very bureaucratic. But also a certain kind of “one-upmanship.”

An atmosphere of complete paranoia hovered [over us]. Here's an anecdote that will perfectly illustrate this ambiance. One day, in my apartment in Brussels, I discovered a situationist from Strasbourg²⁴⁷ in the process of rummaging around, opening my mail. “What are you doing?” To which he responded, “I'm looking at your letters. We practice transparency, right? No one has anything to hide.” That was in 1967. And what was isolated behavior then got worse after 1968 . . . I see no reason to cloud the issue. In the first period of the SI, we displayed arrogance. But it was an arrogance on a par with our objectives.²⁴⁸ We were far from exemplary modesty. We had an extraordinarily lucid awareness. This made us – I recognize it now – a bit megalomaniacal.

that were drafted and are signed by individuals must also be considered as of interest to the entirety of our comrades and as particular points of their collective research.”

²⁴⁵ *Translator's note:* the whole point of Vaneigem's analysis of Lautréamont's two-step development, not to mention Vaneigem's own decision to stop being an isolated individual and join the SI, was the ineffectiveness of “individual creativity” and the necessity of engaging in collective, social creativity.

²⁴⁶ *Translator's note:* François de Beaulieu and Gianfranco Sanguinetti also contributed several letters to the SI's “orientation debate.”

²⁴⁷ *Translator's note:* perhaps one of the “Garnautins.”

²⁴⁸ *Translator's note:* the French word used here, *prétentions*, can also mean ambitions, hopes or requirements.

For me, from the moment that megalomania comes into the picture, it doesn't pose any problems.

Except when it is no longer warranted [*soutenu*]. And so situationist disciples arrived with the conviction to join a group – a conviction that they made use of in their romantic conquests and their contempt [for people outside the SI]. The original arrogance of the SI wasn't marred by any contempt, except when it came to people whom we didn't like and even then contempt wasn't dominant: contempt was more associated with power than with our critique of it . . . To state “Lapassade is a cunt”²⁴⁹ was a critique of Lapassade and the ideologues who were [also] necessarily impostors and falsifiers . . . The surrealists had already had recourse to this style. It revealed an artistic side. I say this without any contempt or condescension. The problem [only] continues when arrogance becomes the essential production of individuals who believe that they can use it to exonerate themselves from having created nothing.

It seems to me that in what you say there are the seeds of what would later constitute the “pro-situ” movement [...]

The “pro-situ” downward slide [*dérive*] was accentuated from the moment that cooptation [of new members] worked through a reversible sympathy that – more or less quickly – became antipathy . . . This was a drama for a number of them. The cause of it? A lack of vigilance, complacency, too. Perhaps a form of self-satisfaction. We acted as if what was given to us was what we were due . . . But despite what we wanted, the “situationist” label was already there for people who wanted to play a role and exercise power.

Were you in the process of tolerating what had previously merited exclusion?

We witnessed the emergence of ideology within a movement that had always fought against it!

An “anti-authoritarian” movement that demanded equality in tasks and rights ended up favoring the emergence of a hierarchy at its heart.

A separation between everyday life and ideas.

While the critique of separation was your “battlehorse.”

It would be too easy to impute the recuperation to social Machiavellianism. The SI was recuperated²⁵⁰ because ideology had already rushed in and because we allowed it to grow . . . At the risk of repeating myself, I believe that the lack of vigilance was disastrous. The newcomers inherited a *doxa*; they attached themselves to it like leeches; they eruditely recited it to their

²⁴⁹ *Translator's note:* cf. *Internationale situationniste* #9, August 1964: “M. Georges Lapassade est un con.”

²⁵⁰ *Translator's note:* compare this with “there was the radicality that situationist thought had developed. And it has never been recuperated. It has only begun to develop.”

peers; and, at the smallest fault, they brought out their pistols. If there was deficiency on the part of the “old members,” it was not dissolving the movement!²⁵¹

Don't worry! I don't want to set up a revolutionary tribunal! I'm happy just to emphasize the existence of the problem.

An error isn't a fault. An error can be corrected. Culpability comes from religious masochism. If I speak here of a sliding, it is not to denounce our lack of awareness and the complacent smugness nourished by the victory of May 68, it is to prevent the phenomenon from being reproduced in today's movements.

This sliding started the moment that success struck the SI.

It was a lure for indolent and uncertain thinkers.

To be a “situ,” you easily “situated” yourself above Leftist cretinism.

The social recuperation that we'd vituperated was going strong . . . We just didn't want to see the on-coming decline. After May 68, the only pertinent step was self-dissolution!

What fooled you was the fact that, at that very moment, your ideas were beginning to germinate in people's minds.

They spread and, at the same time, they became diluted, weaker. The paradox is that when our ideas were debased, truncated and corrupted – under spectacular recuperation, this went from dubious Leftist radicalism to the popularity of a marketable situationism – the radical kernel of our thinking remained intact and pursued its work of undermining and creating. How could I not be happy when I read such inscriptions as these on the walls of Athens, Thessalonica, and Chania: “Self-management of everyday life”; “Fascism is the party of death; we are the party of life”; and “The State is nothing; we are everything”? . . . But I'd like to return to the reproach that we lacked vigilance and to respond to it with an anecdote. Someone said to Madame de Coislin,²⁵² who was on her deathbed, that she would never die if she remained attentive. “I know,” she said, “but I must have a moment of distraction.”²⁵³ And then she died.

As either the conclusion of a life or a deathbed testimony, it was very successful as an exit.

The arrival of the new situationists engendered a laxity mixed with a laughable and ferocious suspiciousness. A voyeurism of transparency. Gossip was rife. “So and so said this and that.” Of

²⁵¹ *Translator's note:* since I have already noted that the SI did indeed dissolve itself between September 1971 and April 1972, I will point to the fact that Vaneigem could have resigned the group at any time, but waited more than two years after May 1968 to do so. If things were terrible, why stick around?

²⁵² *Translator's note:* Marie-Anne de Coislin (1732-1817).

²⁵³ “I know, she said, but I fear being distracted.” François-René de Chateaubriand, *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*, 1850.

course, it is easier to speak with hindsight than it was to realize it at the time. The idea of the “group in peril” became stifling under an increasingly artificial *cloak*²⁵⁴ of subversion.

Weren't there symptoms of this siege sickness at the time of the exclusion of Théo Frey and those who were categorized as the “Garnaultins”²⁵⁵ in January 1967? Before 1968, in any case.

Yes, we might wonder if those exclusions didn't already reveal a pathological suspicion. There wasn't any claim of a flagrant lack of theory or betrayal, properly speaking, only a certain will for autonomy,²⁵⁶ among the people from Strasbourg otherwise known as the “Garnaultins” [*sic*]. The same will was demonstrated by the Americans whom I was charged with sanctioning by excluding Donald Nicholson-Smith.

The Americans – that is to say, Timothy Clarke, Christopher Gray and Nicholson²⁵⁷ – were excluded in December 1967.

I can't date the first manifestations of the phenomenon. In any case, we were harvesting the perverse effects of the first exclusions.²⁵⁸ As I've said, they were justified. We had to react against Kotányi's mysticism, the artists in quest of a label, traditional politics, Castroism, Maoism, the decadent Left. These reactions didn't affect the coherence of the group. We were unanimously against Trotskyism, Leftism, etc. Starting in 1967-68, the principle of exclusion took an ambiguous turn. For the first time, a [kind of] lawsuit was brought [*un procès a été intenté*] against actual people. Debord had suddenly begun to hate peaceful Théo Frey, who wasn't very active but whose radicality could not be doubted. The episode had a Stalinist stench to it. For the first time, the excluded people were presented as traitors and baptized with a name that was intended to denounce them as dishonorable. Stalinism has never stopped proceeding in this way. Perhaps it was at this moment that the coherence of the movement tipped over into ideology.²⁵⁹ There was indeed a malaise but we stood together against the “danger of a split.”

²⁵⁴ *Translator's note:* the French word used here, *chape*, can also mean a priest's cope, a screed or a tire tread.

²⁵⁵ *Translator's note:* though one of the situationists from Strasbourg was named Jean Garnault, the name they were given was the “Garnautins.” Here they are consistently referred to as the “Garnaultins.”

²⁵⁶ *Translator's note:* the letter announcing the exclusion of the “Garnautins” (15 January 1967) refers to “base calumnies [...] flung against Mustapha Khayati.” Note well that Vaneigem was not one of the signers of this letter, which included such other “pathologically suspicious” situationists as Mustapha Khayati, Michèle Bernstein, Donald Nicholson-Smith and René Viénet. But he did sign a document about the “Garnautins” that was distributed only a few days later: <http://www.notbored.org/three-provocateurs.html>.

²⁵⁷ *Translator's note:* these were the members of the *British* section of the SI, not the American one.

²⁵⁸ *Translator's note:* Vaneigem will go on to mention the first exclusions after he joined the SI, but these, of course, were not the very first exclusions, of which there were several between 1958 and 1961.

²⁵⁹ *Translator's note:* and yet Vaneigem did not resign or even speak out against this “Stalinist ideology.”

Yes, perhaps it was then that the character armor of the people [in the SI] settled in and the group became a sect. We were participants in a lottery held by a zoological garden at which each person won a tiger. What to do about it? No one rebelled against it . . . That was the critical moment when rigor, which is necessary for all thinking, became inflexibility. Everything happened as if the sectarian character had won out over the light of awareness.

I will advance the hypothesis that rigor became inflexibility when it began to fail and mask a more profound weakness.

In February 1963, two or three months after the Antwerp Conference, when the tract denouncing Lefebvre, “Aux poubelles de l’Histoire,” was published – he’d failed to cite the theses on the [Paris] Commune that preceded his – and ended in a break, there had already been something unclear. We’d had amicable relations with Lefebvre until then. Everyone recognized his contribution to the critique of everyday life. During a friendly discussion over a meal, he’d declared, “I have to write something very quickly about the Commune. Do you have a draft that might allow me to work without losing too much time?” We agreed and wrote a series of theses on the subject and gave it to him.²⁶⁰ When his book was published,²⁶¹ it appeared that our theses had been diluted, watered down, reduced, sometimes even a little truncated. Beneath this affair – and here we could already have been more suspicious of ourselves – there was another cause for the manifest animosity. Lefebvre lived with a young woman, Nicole, who one day announced that she was pregnant.²⁶² Debord or Denise Cheype, perhaps, I no longer remember, exclaimed, “But you can’t keep it! You will have an abortion, right?” Lefebvre took this badly. “Why are you getting mixed up in this? It’s my life, and I want to have the child.” The coldness wasn’t unconnected with a future theoretical disagreement. But it was only later that I made the connection – I’d had a child without it posing a problem – with the theoretical denunciation of Lefebvre.

A tract that denounced the infamy titled “Aux poubelles de l’Histoire” was printed. On one side, it displayed Lefebvre’s theses, and then on the other side the ones that you’d offered.

We couldn’t accuse him of plagiarism since we ourselves had given the text to him! What we’d denounced was his manner of diluting radicality in order to make it something reformist and socially acceptable, to use Pascal’s reproach of the Jesuits. “Aux poubelles de l’Histoire” was an outrage, an expression of Leninist style!²⁶³

²⁶⁰ *Translator’s note:* dated 18 March 1962, these notes were signed by Guy Debord, Raoul Vaneigem and Attila Kotányi.

²⁶¹ *Translator’s note:* Lefebvre’s “La signification de la Commune” in fact appeared in *Arguments*, #27-28, 3rd and 4th quarters, 1962. As the reader will remember, the SI had called for a boycott of *Arguments* back in 1960.

²⁶² *Translator’s note:* cf. Michèle Bernstein’s note to Vaneigem dated 3 August 2014 and published elsewhere in *Rien n’est fini, tout commence*: <http://www.notbored.org/lefebvre-cheype.pdf>.

²⁶³ *Translator’s note:* and yet Vaneigem did not resign or even speak out against this “Leninist style.”

Raoul, I have the feeling that it became necessary to throw any individual who had contributed in a positive manner to the development of the movement into the trashcan of history in order to appear totally autonomous and owe nothing to anyone. That is to say, to get rid of its own fathers, in some way. Because the violence directed against Henri Lefebvre was no doubt exaggerated. Others merited it, but weren't subjected to it.

If we look to history for traces of this deviation – the passage from rigor to inflexibility, from vigilance to suspicion – that's one of them . . . [But] a real loss of impetus was clear after 1968, even if the exclusion of the “Garnaultins” took place in 1967. At that moment, the books had been written; the “essential” notions had been established.²⁶⁴ Debord had finished *La Société du Spectacle* at roughly the same time that I completed the *Traité*: in 1965-66. We often forget that we'd have to wait more than a year for both to appear.

[...] *In [most] avant-garde movements, explosions take place very quickly. The degeneration of the SI began around 1966 and ended in the dissolution of 1972 – a total of six years.*

The occupations movement of 1968 offered us a reprieve and allowed us to rebound. The self-satisfaction of the members who had lit the fuse of 1968 didn't prevent sparks of creativity (posters, songs, agitation) . . .

[...] *I have the impression that the bond between the members of the movement, their mutual enrichment and their theoretical production, had reached its culminating point. This would all decline, along with a creativity that only continued through inertia.*

Yes, radicality continued through inertia. In our determination to continue, there was contentment close to megalomania. Debord published his theories at the cost of an almost Stoic asceticism. As for me, the *Traité* having been completed, despite the anguish of it being published or not, I had a feeling of accomplishment. Khayati had good reason to congratulate himself on the impact of his pamphlet. The megalomaniacal downward spiral [*dérive*] is a very formidable feature of human nature.

²⁶⁴ *Translator's note*: though this book includes an excellent text about the SI's creation and installation of a replica of a long-absent statue of Charles Fourier in March 1969 (<http://www.notbored.org/fourier.pdf>), neither Vaneigem nor Berréby mention the event itself. Furthermore, neither one mentions (let alone discusses) the SI's other accomplishments in 1969 and 1970, which include the publication of *Internazionale situazionista*, the first issue of the journal of the Italian section (July 1969); the publication of *Internationale situationniste* #12 by the French section (September 1969); and the publication of three important tracts by the Italian section: “Address to the Italian Proletariat On the Current Possibilities for Social Revolution” (November 1969); “Is the Reichstag Burning?” (December 1969); and “The Workers of Italy and the Revolt In Reggio Calabria” (October 1970). Contrary to what Vaneigem and Berréby will claim, these texts did in fact add a new notion to the “essential” ones of 1967: the critique of the spectacle of terrorism as it was practiced in Italy after 1969. Cf. also Guy Debord, “Preface to the Fourth Italian Edition of *The Society of the Spectacle*” (1979) and *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (1988).

At the beginning of the SI, Robert Estivals, someone close to the situationists who published the journal Grammes, had accused Debord of megalomania,²⁶⁵ a criticism that was often made. Can you speak to us of this character trait, such as you see it today, with hindsight?

I no longer remember who charged the SI with “intellectual terrorism.”²⁶⁶ We didn’t need to prove our intelligence or the usage we could make of it. Our analyses of the world, as object and subject, attained a level of consciousness that revealed a challenge: to radically change the existence of millions of human beings. This millenarian aspiration – we nourished the project of concretizing it. Our error was to draw glory from that absolute will, which is self-sufficient. It was ridiculous and pathetic to reduce it to a victory, to “a success.”

In fact, one has rarely seen so many young people so convinced of their genius, who repeated over and over again that they were the most beautiful, the greatest, and the strongest; and that they were surrounded by wimps, that no one else was at their level . . . So much childish jockeying!

Childish, certainly, but to reproach us for such behavior, one would need to have the means of this insolence! Because it was with this eternally optimistic conviction that we shook the world and broke the barriers erected against us. The wall of silence is, today, the wall of the spectacle, but radicality’s attempts to undermine [it] have lost nothing of their obstinacy . . . of *our* obstinacy.

People would take up a peripheral idea that belonged to an ensemble of ideas and treat it, here or there, as if it were a central problem, that is to say, as a specificity. You can see this when Paul Virilio²⁶⁷ writes about speed: he makes it the central point of his critique of the modern world, while it is only one of the elements of its critique. On the other hand, I have the impression that, quite often, there was someone who annoyed you. Thus you had to get rid of them. Once this decision had been made, the [official] reason for it hardly mattered.

That meant that the person in question was left in suspense until the moment a theoretical error worthy of exclusion was discovered. This was, in fact, a tendency that evolved slowly, and humor played an essential role as a safeguard. And then all this was accentuated in an absurd fashion after 68 . . . I wish to briefly return to what you said about Virilio. It is delicious to see that hundred of books have been based on a small fragment of situationist thought and yet are presented as if they contain an original idea or thesis. Such books aren’t always without interest, but what’s cruelly lacking in them is a global perspective.

²⁶⁵ *Translator’s note:* as the reader will see, Estivals made no such accusation.

<http://www.notbored.org/RobertEstivals.pdf>.

²⁶⁶ *Translator’s note:* in *Enragés et situationnistes dans le mouvement des occupations*, it is reported that the *Journal de Dimanche* used the phrase “technique of intellectual terrorism” to describe the SI on 19 May 1968.

²⁶⁷ *Translator’s note:* a very interesting contemporary theorist who is, nevertheless, hostile to the situationists. Cf. <http://www.notbored.org/art-and-fear.html>.

I have the feeling that situationism, which was so thoroughly denounced by the situationists themselves, was – before being instituted by their enemies to empty their thinking of its substance – precisely produced by the situationists, approximately at the moment of the publication of “Poubelles de l’Histoire.” It was [further] developed afterwards.

If we search for the origins of this degeneration, it is true that the outrages of exclusions, of breaks not justified by a pure and simple betrayal of the theory, were no doubt primary elements in it. The exclusions and breaks, which were more or less accepted, ended up nourishing a kind of coherence in our reactions, in our approbations – something like a collective inflexibility. If there is a substantive critique to be formulated here, it would be that we did not account for it sooner. Because we were delirious, this cowardice appeared after the rather disorderly arrival of the “pro-situs.” We’d accepted [into the SI] almost anyone on the basis of affinity.

[...] *It seems as if being more situationist that all the [other] situationists was the most widely shared quality.*

What we’d begun, which followed from the necessity of defending ourselves against a hostile world, became throwing people to the wolves.

You propagated the feeling of the possibility of the existence of a man who was strong, pure, absolute, infallible – something that could turn into authoritarianism, if I may so say.²⁶⁸ Whoever expresses himself must be at the height of his ideal discourse. You systematically seek out the flaws in revolutionary comportment, and there mustn’t be any contradiction between theory and practice, which would be very commendable, but doesn’t take into account the contradictions inherent in any individual.

I am tempted to cite Debord’s terrible²⁶⁹ aphorism, “I am not someone who corrects himself.”²⁷⁰ And I’d like to add two remarks: at first, I’d like to return to the separation of language and the evocation of the total and infallible man; then on the separation from what one really is . . . We knew well that contradictions existed between our everyday comportment, as coherent as it was or wanted to be, and our remarks. We refused the incoherence of a comportment that disavowed the radicality of language. Furthermore, by privileging radical discourse, we took too lightly our own behavioral habits, as if changing them was futile . . . Thus there followed two forms of scorn: towards our own dysfunctioning and towards other people. That’s where we can speak of “intellectual terrorism”: contempt for others; the “others” being those who weren’t radical. But you can found nothing on the contempt for others. How could we defend individual and universal emancipation with such dispositions? This incoherence only increased. It wasn’t at all by chance that the “pro-situs” only applied their talents to imitating the scornful tone of the SI without contributing a single new idea. We can understand why the young situationist generation was in such disarray. They hurtled towards ruin with the idea of patching it up. There only

²⁶⁸ *Translator’s note:* it seems the interviewer has mistaken Vaneigem’s “total man” (a social being *par excellence*) for Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* (a hyper-individual).

²⁶⁹ *Translator’s note:* in French, *terrible* can mean dreadful, enormous, terrifying, or terrific.

²⁷⁰ *Translator’s note:* cf. the “Foreword to the third French edition of *The Society of the Spectacle*” (1992): <http://www.notbored.org/debord-1992.html>.

remained a sordid pettiness. Those who expressed their disappointment were the first to be excluded. Lack of revolutionary virtue, lack of theoretical rigor. How to survive in such conditions?

Thus came the passage of the situationist movement from uncontested radicality to radicalism – the trough at which so many protagonists have indulged themselves.

A shop-window radicalism, socially acceptable.

We were [players] in the spectacle of radicality.

Paradoxically, a spectacular pseudo-revolutionary pantomime appeared within the SI itself.

It took off at the moment that the SI no longer existed and didn't want to recognize this fact.

Which explains its longevity.

The longevity of its agony . . . Because this was an agony so slow that that it refused to acknowledge itself. Everyone suffered from the growing debility and everyone sought his salvation in megalomania.

[...] People fell back into the schemas of exclusion and purity. The notion of purity is suspect, at the least.

It is fake and harmful. The revolutionary virtue of Robespierre contains ethical purification, ethnic purification and Puritanism in germ form.

*People's heads were cut off . . . You cut off a few.*²⁷¹

Debord had reproductions of Epinal prints. After the exclusion of the “Garnaultins,” he used his scissors to make a collage of cut-out images that suggested the debacle of his enemies – their elimination. The fall of the Girondins²⁷² as told to children.

You were performing in a kind of comedy, a quite childish revolutionary psychodrama.

Our childishness became our alibi. We didn't need a psychodramatic spectacle to exclude the artists and the politicians.

The movement had been joyful and intoxicated, but it also took itself seriously, right?

Humor gave our seriousness nuances – humor and a certain hedonism. I have no sympathy for hedonism. It is the ideology of pleasure. I must agree, on the other hand, that we were very

²⁷¹ *Translator's note:* this isn't a figure of speech – it is a caricature.

²⁷² *Translator's note:* a moderate group active in the French Revolution that was eventually smashed at the start of the Reign of Terror (1793).

hedonistic, indeed. A hedonism of drinking, eating and fucking that appeared to protect us against Robespierre-like virtue, but in fact served as an alibi for traditional behaviors of exchange and predation, which pertain to survival, not human life. That mode of life, which we criticized, is the same one that was subsequently celebrated by Michel Onfray.²⁷³ Thus, the comfort of a survival whose fundamental lack of satisfaction we'd denounced served to caution us to refuse asceticism and paradoxically authorized us to exalt theoretical purification. The ferocious critique of power, patriarchy, the diverse forms of authority, didn't prevent us from falling into the ruts [*les travers*] that we'd denounced. The separation between discourse and lived experience was obvious. Our behavior towards women wasn't without machismo. Power is only one of the forms of separation of each person from himself. And yet Guy directed the film *Critique du séparation*.

Was the cause the members of the SI or the form of the organization?

Whatever our individual histories, we found ourselves in an elitist organization . . . We rejected the old formula – “the iron lance of the proletariat” – but we claimed the lucidity of a unique vision.

You were in some way the supreme contemplators of society.

The absolute contemplators of a society whose omnipresent flaws we denounced. The problem was not seeing them in ourselves . . . Our critical awareness assumed the role of good conscience. Its intransigence, its purity, masked the misguided ways of lived experience. It became a false good conscience. Strong from radical thinking, we dispensed with the only fundamental radicality, the one that makes a man into a human being. *That* was radicalism: we were involved in the worst ideology even as we fought against it.

Wasn't the denunciation of “situationism” a way of giving yourselves a good conscience by economizing on the critical work [that needed to be done] on yourselves?

On ourselves, yes, because we denounced it in others. Thus we ourselves were implicated in a situationism that didn't recognize its name. A bit like the perennial techniques that project upon the outside the bad conscience that gnawed on us from the inside . . . a kind of sustained lack of awareness. It was an exorcism. To denounce the corruption on the outside in order to stage the spectacle of its incorruptibility [on the inside].

[...] *I'd like to mention the tract “España en el corazón.”*²⁷⁴ *It would be hard to find a better example of a virile, bourgeois, traditional, macho mythology. In it, one found the image of a*

²⁷³ *Translator's note:* a contemporary French philosopher who advocates hedonism and anarchism, and is quite interested in the situationists. Cf. <http://banquetonfray.over-blog.com/article-michel-onfray-conferences-sur-france-culture-l-ete-2013-22-119721472.html>.

²⁷⁴ *Translator's note:* reproduced elsewhere in *Rien n'est fini, tout commence*, this tract consisted of reproductions of two détourned photos and the following text, which appeared in both Spanish and French. “These photos, circulated clandestinely in Spain, by virtue of the success they encountered, attest to the point at which the love of liberty and liberty in love continue to

luscious and sensual woman [...] These were the same kind of photos that truckers would display in the cabins of their trucks.

The détournement conferred on them another meaning.

But the détournement didn't disturb the imbecilic cult of virility!

That was a failed détournement. We'd always said that the principle of détournement resided in the excellence of the détourned phrase, in its radicality with respect to the basic phrase . . . If the détournement doesn't surpass the initial remark, it comes to a sudden stop, it aborts . . . The little phrase in it about emancipation²⁷⁵ fell into an awkward position due to macho complacency.

I believe that you were its author.

Alas, yes . . . The tract perfectly illustrates what was said earlier: radical discourse stuck to the willful ignorance of an archaic and vulgar form of behavior. It was a kind of détournement, with each one more mediocre than the last one – precisely pro-situ creations – that systematically failed their subversive intention [*leurs propos*]. Here as well the old antimony between practice and theory that we sought out missed its objective, because it served as an alibi for a slightly disastrous and backwards practice. It was as if the rather devastating opening that we had on the world served as cover and permitted the closure of each individual on himself and on the group. Here we come to the idea of the group affected by “siege sickness.” We were obsessed with the distribution of those détourned photos in Spain. A noble project that excused everything.²⁷⁶ The idea of the butt as the bearer of good news had something evangelical about it!

Could we speak of paranoia here?

At a certain moment, paranoia took on delirious proportions for Debord, ending in *Cette mauvaise réputation*,²⁷⁷ things of that sort . . . To listen to him, everyone resented him, everyone

characterize the revolutionary spirit everywhere that their prohibition and falsification characterize oppressive regimes. Denouncing the holy union of clerical hypocrisy and Francoist dictatorship, such propaganda recalls to the leaders of the next insurrections that – and a sense of humor doesn't exclude this opportunity – only total change that includes the totality of everyday life can exist. We can't suppress a few details of the oppression; we can only suppress the oppression as a whole. It isn't a question of changing masters or employers, as the specialized managers and politicians of the Socialist, Communist, Christian Progressive and parties believe. We must change the use of life; we must become the masters of it. The revolutionary masses, fighting *spontaneously*, are at the point of liquidating Francoism in order to impose their power *directly*. The situationists recognize themselves perfectly in this form of propaganda, in this future. – Published by the Situationist International (Western Europe) July 1964.”

²⁷⁵ *Translator's note: la emancipación de los trabajadores será la obra de ellos mismos* (“the emancipation of the workers will be the work of the workers themselves”).

²⁷⁶ *Translator's note: even soft-core pornography!*

²⁷⁷ *Translator's note: in English here: <http://www.notbored.org/this-bad-reputation.html>.*

betrayed him . . . But it's not a question of putting Debord's paranoia on trial, because we'd also cultivated the same ground: "Everyone resents us, thus we are exceptional."

*We must also speak here of the admirers whom, in the milieu of rock 'n' roll, one calls "groupies."*²⁷⁸

There were sympathizers, not "situ whores" in the way that one speaks of soldiers' whores [*filles à soldats*]. Libertinage wasn't unpleasant for us.

You personally profited from it.

It is piquant and pathetic to find out that the height of thinking authorized us to practice the ordinary baseness of bourgeois pleasure-seekers. No surprise that, from then on, once the individuals went their separate ways [after a meeting], the group became an abstract entity to which you had to indenture yourself or else be accused of committing treason.

The group had such a perception of its strength and role that it dissipated its energies surveilling and suspecting its own members, on the lookout for the slightest backsliding, the least deviance. With political trials,²⁷⁹ denunciations, exclusions . . . We can see this in a very long letter from Debord to someone named Loiseau.²⁸⁰ In it there's the question of one's "ability to go to bed and have an orgasm"²⁸¹ – an ability that was, of course, revolutionary. That was infernal, in the literal sense of the word.²⁸² If the people in power practiced such principles, we would in fact have the police in our bedrooms . . .

All in the name of transparency . . . The same inclinations can be found among the Jacobins . . . The quarrels between Danton and Robespierre, the systematic massacre of friends . . . No one tried to analyze what had been afoot behind the settling of accounts. These people had been friends: the Girondins, the Jacobins, Saint-Just, Marat. And it turned into a movement of sycophants. In which one denounced the other in order to save his own skin . . . Thus there exists an existential history of individual relationships . . . For example, one of the arguments made against Danton was that he was a pleasure-seeker. Officially he was a banker, a man of finance. This isn't what got him sent to the scaffold, but the fact that he was a pleasure-seeker, someone who only thought of himself and not of the Republic! Which is to say, the Common Good placed under the tutelage of a group of pure, incorruptible people . . . In the final analysis, we never left Jacobinism behind!

²⁷⁸ *Translator's note:* English in original.

²⁷⁹ *Translator's note:* a caricature.

²⁸⁰ *Translator's note:* Jean-Marc Loiseau. Cf. letter from Debord dated 2 October 1971. <http://www.notbored.org/debord-2October1971.html>.

²⁸¹ *Translator's note:* I have checked my translation, and I have checked the French original, and neither this phrase nor anything remotely like it appear in this letter.

²⁸² *Translator's note:* given that this hyperbole is based upon a demonstrably false attribution, all I can say is *Honi soit qui mal y pense*.

Chapter VI: After the Situationist International

This was, finally, never really critiqued by the SI, which had, on the contrary, reproduced it. You admired Saint-Just, even Robespierre and Marat. And at a certain time – through one or through the others? – the group produced its own ideology, that is to say, “situationism,” in an almost pathological fashion.

The group couldn't have produced its own ideology if it hadn't already been present in the individuals involved. But the group's radicality had precisely consisted in preventing the separation between thought and lived experience, between the critique of survival and the will to live humanely. I left the SI with an unshakeable conviction: “Never again in a group, never again in a community. I will pursue my work alone.” I focus on individual autonomy, on the creativity of each person. It is reassuring that [today] the protest and insurrectionary movements have refused *leaders*,²⁸³ bosses, tribunes, politics, hierarchical organizations.

What memories do you have of the conference in Venice?

The preceding conferences had all made innovations. That one took place in a dead town with dead people. Gianfranco Sanguinetti lodged us on the Island of Giudecca,²⁸⁴ in an old monastery, a nice place that our presence made drab [*sinistre*]. The wine flowed abundantly but joylessly. The boredom of worn-out adventures. I have good memories of Brussels, Parisian drinking bouts, the conference at Antwerp . . . We could have spared ourselves Venice. There was a general animosity, fleshed out with unhealthy gossiping. Because Debord arrived a day late to the conference, we were scolded by the American section: “Bravo! You ceaselessly give us lessons about punctuality and yet you yourselves . . .” Debord retorted by arguing that such radicality would have been more useful elsewhere.

It was a conference of one-upmanship?

The reconstruction of the ruins.

You refused to admit the bankruptcy and sclerosis of the SI after 68 and it was the incarnation of the SI that had the most peremptory discourse.

Mustapha was the first to distance himself. He preferred to occupy himself with the problems of the Middle East . . . The gloominess was general. An end-of-party ambiance. During a stroll in Venice, Debord confided his weariness to me. “Will you agree to continue with me? We'll get rid of everyone else and . . .” I don't know if I showed enthusiasm, but I sincerely acquiesced. I believed that the contribution of the SI had been considerable and that it was a receptacle of ideas to be taken further. All the same, we had the councilist project. My sincerity remained at

²⁸³ *Translator's note:* English in original.

²⁸⁴ *Translator's note:* cf. “La Casa Frolla,” included elsewhere in *Rien n'est fini, tout commence* and translated here: <http://www.notbored.org/LaCasaFrollo.pdf>.

the emotional level of a friendly remark. It was too late. The gold had changed into lead. My withdrawal²⁸⁵ was considered to be a betrayal. It was in the order of things – an order so rigorous that it floundered in deliquescence. When I distanced myself, the survivors – clinging to the wreck – decreed: it wasn't a resignation but an exclusion.

This was the debacle and the disarray. Many found themselves orphaned . . . The aftermath of the Venice Conference was marked by the publication of La Véritable Scission dans l'Internationale.²⁸⁶ In it the self-dissolution of the SI was decreed.

It succumbed, we are told, under the blows of traitors who meditated upon its destruction.²⁸⁷ *La Véritable Scission* is a text more oppressive for its authors than for those whom it anathematizes. It is true, however, that I was too casual when it came to denouncing the downward spiral [*dérive*] of separation. After 68, the meetings were something out of Courteline.²⁸⁸ We shared the many letters that these meetings gave rise to. We no longer discussed self-management, but “who is responding to whom?” . . . We returned to the question of organization very quickly. The Arthurian myth of a Round Table around which all the participants are equal – and some were more equal than others!²⁸⁹ – had been a federating idea. What a pleasure, what a comfort, to know that anything could be said and heard . . . Everything took place as if repressed life reemerged in the form of its worst discharges, in the belligerence of frustrated desire.

You continued to speak of “theory” when it was in fact a question of “ideology.”

The separation between “theory” and “practice,” which Marx addressed in the *Manuscript of 1844*, served as a veil to hide – in a temperamental way – the groans of desire tormented under the guise of liberating them from all obstacles. A little like dictatorship over the proletariat exercised in the name of its emancipation. The crème tart of theory and practice in the 1960s was the most nauseating dish of all the farcical pastries of political philosophy. Each had his little spoon in it and the doctrinaire tone literally prevented anyone looking at the bottom of that dish. And what was there? Frustrations, violent emotions more suited to hatred than to amorous adventures. More propitious for the alienated individual and his individualism than autonomy and solidarity – which were, all the same, what the SI had been building, something more promising and thrilling . . . After having valued the individual as a being who aspired to his autonomy in a society that demanded the same freedom, we ended up producing an individual subjected to condemnation by the group if he expressed himself in a different fashion. His opinion was weighed on the false scale of theory and practice . . . The very notion of emancipation was false. At the beginning, it was understood socially; it was carried along by the

²⁸⁵ *Translator's note:* cf. his letter of resignation: <http://www.notbored.org/resignation.html>.

²⁸⁶ *Translator's note:* first published April 1972, this book, co-signed by Guy Debord and Gianfranco Sanguinetti in the name of the SI, contains both Vaneigem's letter of resignation and a “communiqué” concerning him dated 9 December 1970: <http://www.notbored.org/debord-9December1970.html>. Cf. *The Real Split in the International*, translated by John McHale (Pluto Books, 2003).

²⁸⁷ *Translator's note:* I can find nothing in this text that supports Vaneigem's claim.

²⁸⁸ *Translator's note:* Georges Courteline (1858-1929), a French satirist.

²⁸⁹ *Translator's note:* a famous line from George Orwell, *Animal Farm* (1945).

project of a classless society. When we affirmed that the individual was the existential foundation of class struggle, it was a question of the individual in search of emancipation. The ambiguity long consisted in knowing whether or not the emancipation of the individual passes through the emancipation of society or – to offer a caricature – if a classless society produces free, autonomous individuals. That was the first error. The second was to valorize the individual as the bearer of a principle of emancipation – autonomy – that was socially translated by self-management. That individual – we’d never made the effort to place him in his living conditions, whether they were familial or social or . . . Those of an individual thrown off balance by those conditions and who saves himself – almost in the sense of “salvation,” common or religious salvation – thanks to the clarity of his will for general emancipation. He carries it upon his shoulders . . . shoulders burdened by constraints that we didn’t examine . . . because the project was in fact at the level of transcendence . . . Except for Viénet, we had the impression we were changing the world, changing its foundations. Such a conviction illuminated us . . . Because we can speak of illumination here. It clarified the whole world and excused us from clarifying our outdated behaviors.

[...] When the critique of the “pro-situ” was enunciated in La Véritable Scission, this current had, several years previously, already contaminated the SI and its members.

That’s the “scapegoat technique”: you project your own sins on a poor beast that you banish with strong kicks and blows. I also recall that we were preoccupied with the obsession to keep going.

You inscribed yourselves in a moment of history, thus you couldn’t – despite the fervent desire that emerged from your discourse – be in the next era, too [...]

Yet that was how we envisioned things . . . To once again get together to debate our ideas and refine our arguments, to which each person contributed, was an authentic passion for us. We lived in a colloquium, in Erasmus’ sense of the word. To respond to your question, “How could we all allow ourselves to be so blind?” I believe that one of the reasons resided in the passion to create – each one for himself and together. The group never constrained it. It was the good side of the adventure. No one intervened to ask, “What are you doing? It’s not interesting!” Each person did his work on his own with the feeling of collaborating in the collective richness.

You were openly on the lookout for new ideas that would maintain and develop your passions.

It was very important, yes. To speak exclusively of the negative side of the group risks leading us to an unbalanced vision that makes us turn up our noses at what had been gestating during the first period of the SI. The solidarity of friends who supported and approved of the work undertaken in “Basic Banalities” – what a powerful stimulant!

The point on which you finally broke your backs remained that of organization.

The time came when the SI became something other than what we had created: a permanent creation.

Following up on the notion of a colloquium, we might advance the idea that Debord played a determinant role in the flowering of the thinking of the other situationists and in the art of drawing out the best, intellectually, from each of the protagonists – a part that these people, on their own, did not know how to harbor [recéler].

It was one of his principal qualities. And when a bad mood or aggravation occurred, Viénet was there to say, “C’mon, let it go: it isn’t very important,” recalling to us the passionate side of being together. The drinks and Michèle Bernstein’s cooking were added to the boiling cauldron of discussions. Did this idyllic side help hide what was gnawing away at us? It’s right to say that Viénet revealed the dysfunction, but also swept it away.

Viénet’s humor removed the [symptoms of the] malaise without extirpating the tumor.

We continued as if it were nothing. With the conviction of being “good together” in commensality, meals, drinking and ideas.

[...] *People say that alcohol played a role in the development of a form of paranoia in Debord.*

From then on, why wouldn’t alcohol, absorbed in frightening quantities, be harmful during a period in which creative activity also “absorbed” us?

No doubt at first, because this creative activity was quasi-permanent, to the point of winning out over the rest . . . On the other hand, being young, you could drink [...]

At the risk of abusing a turn of phrase [*une formule-pirouette*], I would say that we were especially carried away by the youth of a world . . . At such moments, a unity existed between the pleasure of things, thinking and discourse . . . Alcoholism played a role of the highest order in the SI and it was also what made it quite ambiguous. With the caveat that we were never drunks or real alcoholics. Alcoholism never interrupted the thread of our subversive thinking.

Debord was an alcoholic and he died from it!

[J. V.] Martin, too. One of my old students, whom I knew to be a “great drinker,” one day explained to me the difference between an alcoholic and a drunk. In a traffic accident, he’d run over someone, and decided to join Alcoholics Anonymous. He came to my place. I picked out a nice bottle. He told me, “I no longer drink.” I confessed, “I still do.” “You are not an alcoholic. I’ll explain. If I now have a glass of wine with you, in 10 minutes I’d be saying, ‘Excuse me, I must run down to the corner store.’ I’d run to have two [quick] beers at a bar next door. Then I’d return and say, ‘OK, I’ve made my little run to the store.’ *That’s* an alcoholic. He can’t do without a drink. Can you go two days without one?” “Yes, of course, after a period of excess, I drink only water.” “You aren’t an alcoholic. An alcoholic is drunk after two glasses.” My father always warned me about alcoholism; the half-wit [*taré*] who babbles, who drinks with his boss and betrays his class – a summary and effective ethic. None of us was ever babbling drunk or unable to control himself. On the other hand, I later saw such excesses at Martin’s place. It was frightful. It reminded me of the image of what *I* might have become if I hadn’t periodically moderated my excesses. The consumption of alcohol has a liberating aspect. It allows a kind of

mental opening. In certain periods, after drinking several Lagavulins,²⁹⁰ I've been able to write very effectively. There is a generosity in alcohol. We can, quite rightfully, make fun of the propensity of the drinker to celebrate the universal brotherhood in which everyone is beautiful and good and then quickly become bitter when he finds out that such isn't the case. But the positive effects [*pulsion*] of alcohol merits being taken into consideration. In general, people say that alcohol gives a boost to creativity and generosity – but then the opposite occurs. You return to your characterological enclosure [*fermeture caractériel*]. In reality, it is easy to avoid that relapse: when a drink is had in joy, in an atmosphere of friendship and solidarity, its effects are creative. We wrote many pages while drinking a lot. We never experienced any mental or physical “hangovers,” which levels and renders [everything] bad.

It isn't for everyone.

Some have the propensity to wander in obscurity than to seek the light through alcoholic vapors. Whatever it is, a creative movement surely increases the beneficial effects of drinking. In contrary dispositions . . . it is better to abstain. In the SI, there was, perhaps – in a sometimes slightly caricatural fashion – an increase in the level of alcoholism that predisposed us to remarkable flights, and then a fall, a descent, after 68, in a hangover that really spoiled the mood.

Some who didn't drink were intoxicated by your presence.

Did they imagine that this gesture would improve their lives? In the same way that people believe that a little amphetamine makes you a genius. But if there is no genius, amphetamines, drugs or alcohol only reveal stupidity.

[...] *Today, drugs have become a vector that neutralizes populations. They have become completely democratized [...] They have lost their festive character. Instead, they work towards placing the masses in a moronic state.*

Neuroleptics²⁹¹ are actively part of this moronic state since all pharmacopeia involves drugs. We can measure the difference in impact of such products by comparing people such as René Daumal, Henri Michaux, and Antonin Artaud.²⁹² They got a poetic vision from drugs. But how can someone imagine that they would become Michaux or Artaud if they took mescaline or peyote?

It isn't the suicide that makes the poet.

Many suicides have nothing poetic about them, obviously.

²⁹⁰ A classic whisky from the western islands of Scotland.

²⁹¹ *Translator's note:* anti-psychotic tranquillizers.

²⁹² *Translator's note:* René Daumal (1908-1944) was a French surrealist poet; Henri Michaux (1899-1984) was a Belgian writer; and Antonin Artaud (1896-1948) was a French dramatist. All three experimented with various psychoactive substances: generally speaking, to the benefit of their art and the detriment of their health.

[...] *We must distinguish those members of the SI who were in a posture and those whose behavior responded to the demands of lived experience.*

We must specify that some who had fallen into a posture, into role-playing, had, at the beginning, subscribed to an authentic approach . . . Do I exaggerate the idyllic side, the passionate aspect? Well, that's how *I* experienced it.

Such a side exists for me, too.

It existed but, paradoxically, it wasn't foreign to our blindness . . . I *believed* – and that's a word I generally avoid – in the persistence of our enthusiasm.

[...] *The publication, in a concomitant fashion, of La Société du Spectacle, the Traité de savoir-vivre and De la misère – each with different destinies – was a culminating point. Afterwards, everything subsided, right?*

The events that we unleashed had to be left to follow their own course, which is what is happening today. The impetus was enough. We had to know it – even “militarily,” as I mentioned a little while ago, it was the descending curve of the offensive that Clausewitz spoke about. The duration of the SI's survival no doubt was too long. It petrified its myth, its lie.

[...] *You'd exploded your own image, without being too aware of it. The progressive slide towards institutionalization worsened the malaise, and ideology came to camouflage it.*

The ideology here was constructed on what had been the most enthralling by becoming its negation . . . The passionate, creative side disappeared in favor of anti-creation. We fell into repetition and, as everyone knows, “repetition” and “bureaucracy” go together perfectly. The unity became artificial; the organization took priority and power over the individuals in it.

The fraternity of the beginning turned into bitterness, if not hatred. You were no longer supported.

There reigned a permanent animosity, as in a couple in decline. We were carried away by a spirit of the Enlightenment, in close connection with Diderot, Rousseau, d'Alembert, Cloots, La Mettrie, d'Holbach, the Voltaire of the *Dictionnaire philosophique*. Then Hegel, Marx and Nietzsche . . . Was this an excess of presumption, the stench of pride? After May 68, we felt that we'd been dispossessed of what we'd given birth to . . . It was strange: we'd wanted the best (it was what was due us) and yet we remained stunned, stupefied and paralyzed by it . . . In sum, we withdrew before the enormity of what we'd obtained . . . We found ourselves disarmed. We'd used the arms of critique and they made us who we were. We rapidly fell into discontent, imposture . . . which developed until the end.

This is a case for psychoanalysis.

I have always been hostile to psychoanalysis, no doubt because I've observed its effects on people who are close to me. I have never had the need for it . . . Freud was never popular among

the members of the SI. We were more interested in Reich, Ferenczi and Groddeck. Reich brought psychoanalysis out of its Freudian cocoon. He built bridges towards the social. *Listen, little man!*²⁹³ seduced us.

Notably when Reich enunciates the concept of the shell [carapace].

I have always had recourse to the notion of character armor . . . It would have been quite useful to discover it in our own behavior. *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*²⁹⁴ is a brilliant book. He studied the repression of emotions that suddenly decompresses through a vast, self-destructive suicidal movement. Here as well, we drew from Reich what corresponded to the preoccupations of our era, and yet we neglected what applied to each and every person: “Pay attention: the compression of emotions can have formidable effects.” Our relationship with psychoanalysis was, finally, a comfortable one: Reich’s works served us as a tool in the critique of the world, but we didn’t think about subjecting ourselves to that analysis. Success had in fact, perhaps, blinded us. And yet, until then, I had been quite lucid. This seems to me to be a revealing anecdote. After signing the publication contract for the *Traité* with Gallimard, I left the offices of that prestigious publishing house “as on a little cloud.” My toast would have been, “To us both, Paris.” A bout of gullibility. I took the train to return to Brussels and then the tram home. I got out to put my feet down upon a slab of ice and I fell flat on my back without too much difficulty . . . but enough for me to say to myself, “OK, I understand. This is where glory leads. Try not to forget it!” Thus I was warned, not about myself, but about my glorious presumptuous self. I succumbed to it anew in 68 . . . If the movement had decided to dissolve – all at once – after 68, we would have remained at the stage of intact radicality (I think that our radicality is still intact) without saddling itself with radicalism and falling into the absurd society-gossiping [*mondanité*] of situationism.

[...] *The pro-situs were denounced in order to better hide the downward spiral [dérive] of the situationists even before the pro-situs joined the movement.*

That’s radicalism. No one denigrated the “founding fathers” in the only suitable way: by surpassing them, by going further than they did.

[...] *Debord had suggested to you that, together, you would begin a third [period in the history of the] SI. You accepted, but eventually you didn’t do it. He then felt betrayed.*

Emotionally speaking, I would have attempted the adventure. But what adventure? To perpetuate a dead movement.²⁹⁵ The role had supplanted the living. Nothing more, no more ideas came out of the SI. Nothing but dead thoughts came from its cadaver.

²⁹³ *Translator’s note:* Wilhelm Reich, *Rede an den Kleinen Mann*, 1945.

²⁹⁴ *Translator’s note:* *Die Massenpsychologie des Faschismus*, 1933.

²⁹⁵ *Translator’s note:* except in Italy, the country in which the SI was founded. Cf. “Is the Reichstag Burning?” etc.

Like the SI's letters,²⁹⁶ which are among the most boring I've ever read: exchanges without either a head or a tail, in which each one is lost in one-upmanship, masculine [virile] competition – the most vulgar competition.

The word is harsh, but true. The hardest thing to accept is, no doubt, the tolerance that we all had to have for a cadaver that we tried to artificially galvanize. It was flagrant despair.

[...] *You would arrive late or you'd abstain from coming [to meetings of the SI]. You'd be mocked in humorous ways. "Whose bed have you come from?" You'd shrug your shoulders and didn't say anything much.*

I continued [in the SI] through inertia. With perhaps a very vague hopefulness.

[...] *In this difficulty to break off, to move on to something else, was there something emotional, deep-seated, a fear of the unknown?*

Deep-seated? No. The passionate [aspect] was no longer there, that's for sure. But the remnants of a bond, of friendship . . . the remnants of the solidarity that had been in the SI and whose ghost still haunts me. A friendship that could, from time to time, continue through meals at Guy's place, where gossip was rife. "Have you heard that so-and-so has left us? It was unacceptable." We knew who the next one to be excluded was going to be. I no longer remember who was surprised by our love of the film *Viva Villa!*²⁹⁷ After he left, Debord²⁹⁸ said, "You heard that asshole: he doesn't like *Viva Villa!*" Two weeks later, he fell under the blow of a lack of radicality and was excluded.

At that stage, the discussions were little more than the chronicles of the deeds and gestures of each other with, in the background, a kind of moral judgment that at first seduced you but ended up being disgusting.

What I'd taken for coherence between practice and thinking was only a pretext for trials and accusations.²⁹⁹ I'd been seduced by the permanent denunciation of the thought/action dichotomy in individuals, and it took on the aspects of a tribunal that settled accounts in the name of revolutionary virtue. Which caused a lot of psychological damage, decline, even suicide.

²⁹⁶ *Translator's note:* the SI's "orientation debate" was, in part, conducted through the exchange of letters, with each member receiving carbon copies of those letters not specifically addressed to him: <http://www.notbored.org/orientation-debate.html>.

²⁹⁷ Co-directed by Jack Conway and Howard Hawks and released in 1934, *Viva Villa!* tells the story of the young Pancho Villa. It was adapted from the book *A Recovery of the Real Pancho* by Edgcomb Pinchon [and] O. B. Stade.

²⁹⁸ "When the revolution and cinephilia allowed, Guy Debord very much liked [to see] the film 'Viva Villa!' But what particularly thrilled him and, due to their pure madness and cruelty, made him laugh were the film's final lines. After having killed, plundered, massacred and worse, Villa breathes out, 'Forgive me Johnny . . . What did I do wrong?'" – Michèle Bernstein.

²⁹⁹ *Translator's note:* let the reader judge for him or herself: Raoul Vaneigem, "Notes of synthesis for the meeting of 19 May 1970": <http://www.notbored.org/orientation19.html>.

*Everyone played the prosecutors in a revolutionary operetta – a role that was even more severe because it wasn't based on anything.*³⁰⁰

The less revolution there was, the greater the importance of the prosecutor! . . . We were, no doubt, shut into an empty cohesion, a group formalism, with everything ridiculous and odious that goes along with it, because we were in the mode of tribunal and judgment. The formalism increased the passivity, the inertia that had seized us – the others and I – until the lamentable end that was the Venice Conference.

Do you believe that all this came from a bankruptcy that you'd refused to accept?

Debord never wanted to accept that assessment. We survived it until the moment that the collapse became too obvious. He preferred to place the responsibility for it on deserters and traitors . . . There was no longer any grasp on external reality. We compensated with an internal assumption of power. We could have foreseen it six or seven months before the Venice Conference,³⁰¹ where everyone knew it – it was over. We were, incidentally, consoled by several exclusions, several meaningless admissions to the group, trifles.

We might make a comparison here – since we've spoken of revolutionary virtue – with the French Revolution. Similar practices were adopted at the moment when power retook the reins and the revolutionaries sought to survive by caricaturing each other –

– and killing each other . . . We can see the same phenomenon among the *Zengakuren*, with whom we established relations.³⁰² Some of them came to make contact with us. Later on, at the end of a similar evolution, they ended up killing each other off. The last members of the group massacred everyone else.³⁰³

[...] *The lack of an opening causes a power struggle among the remaining members. We can see this in the institutionalization of the SI in the dominant way of thinking and the media [...].*

³⁰⁰ *Translator's note:* let the reader judge for him or herself: Guy Debord, "Remarks on the SI today," 27 July 1970: <http://www.notbored.org/orientation23.html>.

³⁰¹ *Translator's note:* that would be March 1969, the month that the SI installed a replica of a statue of Charles Fourier that had been missing since the Nazis removed it. <http://www.notbored.org/fourier.pdf>.

³⁰² In 1963, members of the Situationist International met two delegates from the *Zengakuren*: T. Kurokawa and Toru Tagaki. Later on, in *On the Poverty [of Student Life]*, the *Zengakuren* were singled out for praise.

³⁰³ *Translator's note:* it is probable that Vaneigem is referring to the Japan Revolutionary Communist League, National Committee, which was referred to as the *Ligue Revolutionaire Communiste du Japon* in *Internationale Situationniste* no. 8, p. 12. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Revolutionary_Communist_League,_National_Committee.

From the moment that our critique of the dominant world was no longer creative, the world recuperated it to its profit. Situationism became something for society gossip columns [*fait partie des mondanités*].

This has been the misfortune of avant-gardes that didn't scupper themselves in time and, consequently, degenerated.

In reality, none of the artistic avant-gardes willingly scuppered themselves. Dada tried to survive; surrealism supplanted it, only to decline in its turn . . . I must emphasize a particularity of the SI, which is that it wasn't an avant-garde, but was recuperated as one. The radicality of situationist ideas doesn't stop manifesting itself in the changing of morals and behaviors everywhere that collectivities rise up against the devastating totalitarianism of financial capitalism. The piquant thing is that the vivaciousness of this radicality also nourished its spectacular recuperation. So that [the various] fashions, which are rapidly condemned to obsolescence, are able to find in that radicality a permanent reservoir in which the old hides of their "modernity" can be refreshed. As for similarities between the SI and surrealism, I would say that we completely disengaged from the artistic side, although we'd excluded the artists. Until the decline, even in the memories of our actions, an artistic consensus endured. Due to inertia, people reproduced the old attitudes, the old comportments against which they'd arisen. Recuperation by the mechanisms of the dominant world was part of this inertia. After the breaks, our isolation was quite severe. Yet it was also a relief – the type one feels upon leaving behind a period. Like someone who breaks away from a sect or a church. When we see the depths of melodrama into which the deserters and excluded fell, gave themselves up for self-critiques, ridiculous attitudes, we must wonder why they remained for so long.

We can speak of a doctored form of assassination³⁰⁴ when it comes to those who ended in degeneration or death. You yourself, I believe, weren't demolished but were nevertheless greatly affected by the end of the party. For a long time, you remained alone. Perhaps you went through a profound crisis. On paper, in any case, you didn't produce anything for –

– for nearly seven or eight years.³⁰⁵

While by nature you were someone who reflected, wrote, took notes, discussed, met with people . . .

Worse than absolute silence, there was a very bad little text, signed Ratgeb, that I published³⁰⁶ and that was the result of what we were just discussing. I only got back on my feet in 1978, when I wrote *Le Livre des Plaisirs*, published in 1979.

³⁰⁴ *Translator's note:* "on peut parler d'une forme maquillée d'assassinat." I suppose this means that the situs liked to *pretend* to kill each other? If so, it's another caricature.

³⁰⁵ *Translator's note:* during this same period (1970-1978), several other ex-situs were very active. René Viénet produced four films, Guy Debord produced three films, and Gianfranco Sanguinetti wrote two books.

³⁰⁶ *Translator's note:* Ratgeb, *De la grève sauvage à l'autogestion généralisée* (Paris: Éditions 10/18, 1974). Jerg Ratgeb (1480–1526) was a fairly obscure German painter.

As for Debord, beyond the preface to the fourth Italian edition of La Société du Spectacle, the first text that he wrote [after the dissolution of the SI] was that of the film In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni, which dates from 1978. This great silence³⁰⁷ confirms the existence of a profound crisis for Debord as well as for you. [...]

In Debord's case, the artistic side was always a constant, even in the search for a surpassing of it. He got back on top in the last part of his life, with the solitude of an artist. Beautiful because it was useless! Through his suicide, Debord provided the tragic note that closed the course of his existence by crowning it with a halo – the prestige that he'd taken precautions to cultivate. He was obsessed by the need to adopt a pose that consecrated his glory under the eyes of history. He who with unquestionable pertinence had dissected the cadaver of the old world ended up donning the bullfighter's outfit for an inaccessible revolution in order to elevate himself to the Lord's right side, to sit on the throne of the deified spectacle. His solitary grandeur had no need of the pettiness of megalomania. His vocation as an artist was exacerbated to the extent that his analyses of the spectacle were demonstrating their obviousness everywhere. It ended up enveloping him in the blanket of *qualis artifex pereo*.³⁰⁸ What always saves him from mummification is his contribution to the revolution of everyday life, which, today, breaks the chains of the past in a silence comparable to the one that, so long ago, surrounded the SI and wanted to suffocate it.

[...] There's something we shouldn't neglect, which is the destiny of all those other people who didn't belong to the SI, didn't even approach it, and who, knowing the movement and its publications, were subjected to the repercussions.

In the name of the SI, this caused a total dispersion. Only a fringe of situationism – like the commitment of the journal and group called the *Encyclopédie des nuisances*,³⁰⁹ to cite only one example – retained the ritual of exclusion in one-upmanship of radicalism that was intended to compensate for the absence of new ideas.

[...] When we read the correspondence between Debord and Jaime Semprun,³¹⁰ there are several quite revealing letters. The intellectual execution of adversaries, the advanced political,

³⁰⁷ *Translator's note:* Debord was only "silent" between 1970 and 1978 if one fails to remember the existence of the texts he wrote for the film version of *La Société du Spectacle* (1973) and the film *Réfutation de tous les jugements, tant élogieux qu'hostiles, qui ont été jusqu'ici portés sur le film « La Société du spectacle »* (1975).

³⁰⁸ Nero's last words before killing himself on 9 June 68 CE. They mean: "What artist dies with me." In other words, "what great artist the world loses with my death."

³⁰⁹ *Translator's note:* founded in 1984 by Jaime Semprun, Christian Sébastiani and others in response to the murder of Gérard Lebovici, Debord's friend, publisher and film producer, the *Encyclopédie des nuisances* (the Encyclopedia of Harmful Effects) was an explicitly post-situationist project from the start. Debord himself would publish three articles in the group's journal between 1985 and 1987.

³¹⁰ *Translator's note:* cf. *Editions Champ Libre, Correspondance, Volume 1* (1978): <http://www.notbored.org/champ-libre.html>.

*theoretical and philosophical arguments that propped up base acts that, with the ordinary sadism of an executioner, were intended to injure people.*³¹¹ *They demanded irreproachable comportment. By remaining on the same side, you tipped over to the other one.*

The renown of the SI can be summarized in a few words: the people who excluded each other.

*We can see the same damage during the Lettrist period, notably the exclusion [...] of Gil J Wolman*³¹² [...]

I know Wolman's name, but I confess I've never read anything by or about him. I didn't know Wolman, [Alexander] Trocchi or [Ivan] Chtcheglov. Debord spoke of Chtcheglov with a lot of emotion. A great friendship united them. He suffered seeing his friend decline into madness. He must have had the same type of feelings for Trocchi. He spoke of him as someone eminently intelligent and yet at the same time self-destructive, but without ever managing to critique that self-destructiveness, of course.

Trocchi was a confirmed drug addict [...]

Neither Debord nor I ever touched [illicit] drugs, except for a *joint*³¹³ from time to time. Debord was much more troubled by Trocchi's self-destructive side, which he shared with him.

Debord didn't go beyond alcohol.

Drugs do something degrading. We once had the opportunity to experiment with LSD. Michaux, Artaud and Daumal all tacitly invited us to do it. But a friend of Donald's, in England, who'd taken some, ended up with psychiatric problems. This cooled our enthusiasm. We never touched it. Alcohol, in any case, even when consumed excessively, wouldn't alter our mental faculties. We were never delirious or offered up somber stupidities under its effects. The loss of a certain level of awareness, which we attributed to drugs, was unacceptable to us.

*In the letters from Debord to Wolman – still unpublished – something is quite clear: I've never seen Debord be so solicitous of someone.*³¹⁴

³¹¹ *Translator's note:* perhaps this infernal caricature was meant as an allusion to Jaime Semprun's book *Précis de récupération, illustré de nombreux exemples tirés de l'histoire récente*, Champ Libre, 1976. If not, I'm stumped.

³¹² *Translator's note:* Gil Joseph Wolman (1929-1995) was a French filmmaker, poet and artist. With Debord, he'd co-founded the Lettrist International in 1952 and was excluded from it on 13 January 1957.

³¹³ *Translator's note:* English in original.

³¹⁴ "I am satisfied with having participated in the Chaplin affair (although pushed back into the shadows) and having made *Hurlements*, in respect of which I know everything that I owe you." Guy Debord to Gil J Wolman, undated, around April 1957. "This possibility aside, whatever your style of life at the time, and no matter how long it has been so, you will always have a place in this bond, should you want it." Debord to Wolman, undated.

When I arrived in the SI, my cultural education had gaps in it. I knew about Lettrism, but not Wolman or Ivan Chtcheglov, whom Debord spoke about at great length. I never had the opportunity to meet him.

In Debord's last film, directed by Brigitte Cornand, Guy Debord, son arts et son temps, produced and broadcast by Canal +, he pays tribute to some of the most important people in his life. He includes Chtcheglov and Wolman.

I haven't seen it. The past leaves me indifferent and, if I am returning to it with you now, I do it to warn self-managing collectives about the errors that any community should watch out for.

It is even more striking that you haven't had the desire to read the volumes of letters [by Guy Debord] that have been published.

It no longer interests me. I remain attached to the theoretical value of the thinking, [but] the rest . . . Anecdotes and letters are part of the archives. I have no interest in them. Only the idea of thinking that constantly evolves interests me. *La Société du Spectacle* isn't a bible, but a text that merits being renewed, analyzed, constantly revised. Debord himself showed this necessity, since he wrote the *Commentaires [sur la société du spectacle]*.³¹⁵

A book of visionary lucidity.

Living thought. I am not interested in dead thought – the thoughts of the dead . . . This allows me to live without nostalgia. It is anti-nostalgia! I have no desire to encumber myself with disagreements . . . I believe that what is accomplished by creation at any given moment must continue through creation. I personally make myself its custodian without giving the word “*dépositaire*”³¹⁶ a sense of appropriation. *That's* what interests me. In the same way that Montaigne, Diderot, Hölderlin, Nietzsche and Bakunin are inscribed in my heritage . . . I choose those who surround me. Historians need documents – not me.

[...] *Didn't Debord relate everything accomplished by the movement to his own intellectual development, that of an artist who constructs his oeuvre in an individual manner?*

I would like to pick up on the notion of “revolutionary beauty.” I wonder if, beyond the ethics of the movement, there wasn't also an aesthetic – an aesthetic that subjugated all of us. I relate that aesthetic to the artistic attitude that you speak of. We'd excluded the artists because we'd situated ourselves in an art of living that surpassed art. This didn't prevent us from falling into aesthetics. To caricature it, our art of living became an art for art's sake without us realizing it. We'd evolved in all these different dimensions – self-destruction, the glory of the revolutionary project, tragedy and comedy – and we linked tragedy and comedy in the first period [of the SI], which had actually been very joyful and in which no one nourished too many dark thoughts. We

³¹⁵ *Translator's note:* published in French by Editions Gérard Lebovici in 1988 and translated into English as *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* here:

<http://www.notbored.org/commentaires.html>.

³¹⁶ *Translator's note:* the word can mean custodian, depository, agent or reseller.

were heading towards a radiant future, even if this future had to fall under the guillotine blade of the dominant society. Perhaps we underestimated the aesthetic dimension. You brought it up by mentioning Debord's artistic side, which we all shared to some degree. Not having had an artistic past, I completely adhered to the surpassing of art by an art of living. But this art of living itself became an aesthetic, with its ambiguities, because it can also mean living like a *bon vivant* – which isn't at all an art of living, as one quickly understands by experimenting with it. Hedonism has a disastrous³¹⁷ background.

There are people with limited ideas who survive quite well. They are hedonists who know how to share a good bottle, to be very good company . . .

. . . and who are content with it. But the comfort of survival is a slow agony. From the moment that the project was completed in order to better collapse upon itself, aestheticism triumphed. The beauty of the gesture is a [form of] gullibility. I really like the title of Shigenobu Gonzalves' book: *Guy Debord, ou la beauté du négatif*.³¹⁸ It sounds right! Why did we allow what was only a cadaver to continue, claiming that we were galvanizing it with electrical shocks? Perhaps because a certain aesthetic haze floated to the top. One of the dimensions that contains elements of a response to the question that you have posed and perhaps future generations will pose: Why didn't you dissolve the SI by letting the movement develop in its alternations between recuperation and emergent radicality?

[...] *Apart from Debord's individual development, the text of In girum is very beautiful: it casts a retrospective glance on an experiment, the proletariat become the Beatrice³¹⁹ of the moment, the primary question of the era. In it we are confronted with the assessment that the revolutionary project has failed.*

Debord then went on to write the *Commentaires sur la société du spectacle*.

Which is even more striking than La Société du Spectacle itself.

He'd renewed "his" battle. He shows that the [first] book has lost none of its pertinence: he demonstrates this, especially when he speaks about Noriega.³²⁰

[...] *His strictly personal point of view was both fascinating and monstrous.*

He obeyed a principle of self-destruction that has even been active post mortem. When Michèle said, quite sarcastically, that he'd won a posthumous Legion of Honour medal, it was cruel.

³¹⁷ *Translator's note:* the French word used here, *sinistre*, can also mean ominous, sinister, dreary, or dire.

³¹⁸ *Translator's note:* published in 1998 by Mille et une Nuits.

³¹⁹ *Translator's note:* cf. Dante, *The Divine Comedy*.

³²⁰ *Translator's note:* cf. Chapter XIX: <http://www.notbored.org/commentaires.html>.

Perhaps that's what he wanted: to influence the era and society post mortem, and to have the [various] institutions, starting with the BNF, recognize in him the status of a classic writer. To be "pantheonizable."

But we can't limit his ambitions to that. In our drinking bouts in Brussels, he was not like that . . . I continue to think that he'd profoundly wanted – but until when? – the end of the old world, the liquidation of this shitty society. His reflections on workers' councils in the manner of Anton Pannekoek are important. When he critiqued ecology, he returned to the importance of self-management. Ecology?! OK, but what does it mean apart from self-management? I have the feeling that he always kept the idea of a new society as a secret aspiration against which he protected himself with a rage that he found exonerated him in a convenient way by believing he could overwhelm me with his aversion – he was mistaken because his aversion never overwhelmed me, no more than his propensity for power weighed on me – which allowed us to coexist for almost 10 years!

His Beatrice evolved as a function of his times, of the individuals with whom he was successively associated and his own development as both the point of departure and arrival.

If we adopt the image of Beatrice and Dante, what is piquant is that we began with the last part of *The Divine Comedy*, that is to say, with the illumination of the love of God and Beatrice, before descending into the circles of hell. I think we mustn't lose from sight the existence of the diverse dimensions in which we evolved.

We can believe that Debord participated in a post mortem revisionism. But everyone, starting with you, hasn't had the desire to adopt such an approach. You have pursued your own life and your books.

I don't give a fuck about judgments! As Viénet would say, you've got to "let the merinos piss!"

[...] Looking at the letters [...] from the last years of his life [...] one can say summarily – or at least I think so – that he was a man who aged badly.

It's worse than a simple question of aging, but an aesthetic choice in which self-destruction goes beyond suicide because those letters, with all their pettiness, do him a disservice – him and his image.

If I follow your reasoning, he would have wanted to destroy himself in the photograph of history.

I don't know.

Well, he did it, in any case [...] His desolation can be measured in the light of the actions of others. There remains a large field of ruins.

He made sure he organized his own field of ruins.

[...] *People came who, not managing to fit into the décor, necessarily became shaky, precarious. We saw some inflate themselves and go flat in contact with Debord. A few human injuries!*

We can also discern here his aesthetic positions, which mock “human injuries” [“*dégats humains*”]. Ethics is aware of them in an essentially hypocritical fashion; it is only good intentions, good resolutions, without any effect. Aesthetics constitutes a veritable cleaver: failure participates in beauty; the important thing is to end nobly.

Debord said it, and you, too, in these interviews: “Among the situationists, the question was never posed in terms of failure or success.” This means that there was an aesthetic aspect that dominated the others.

No one could legitimately recognize our failure or our success. The evaluation of other people was foreign to us; we scorned it. What our enemies called the SI’s “intellectual terrorism” was, at the beginning, only our awareness of bringing the old world to its end and laying the foundations for a new world. It was true, and it was something to boast about. But when a creator boasts of his work, it isn’t without risks. Our project was revolution. For Debord, revolution, to which he sincerely aspired, remained a work [of art]. The defense of that work became the defense of his role as an artist. Contemptuous of any avant-garde, he erected an absolute one. He didn’t shrink from the power of his oeuvre; he made use of it. Yet this work spared him from the risk to which he willingly exposed himself, which was becoming another mummy in the pantheon of philosophical glories.

[...] *There was a battle being fought and it had to last.*

Many people are fighting in Greece and among the Zapatistas – a real fight that we take to heart. There was a radicality that still exists in the world and among thousands of people. Every person’s battle is, in this sense, more important than the ethics of humanism or the aesthetics that claims to go beyond, only to finally end up in the sanctification of inhumane conduct.

Yet we speak here of a project that had founded its program on the human(e) and the surpassing of its conditions in the world of alienation.

That’s what it remains.

In a certain way, your separation from the SI revealed the downward spiral [dérive] of the initial project [...].

It was already present in my letter [of resignation], but it was more amply developed in *La Véritable Scission dans l’Internationale*, which is a trial by rules. What I find piquant is seeing these elements come out *after* the break, without ever having been expressed at the time. After the split, the little book by Debord and Sanguinetti appeared: it contains violent reproaches of me. This impression of a judgment or trial that concerned facts that didn’t loan themselves to judgments, trials or even discussion is shocking. They could have asked me to explain myself at the time. What had only produced gibes later became a hanging matter.

When you became aware of the trial that was made of you in the communiqué, it was surprising, wasn't it?

You had to expect it at the time of a break. I'd seen it before, as with Théo Frey, who was reproached for asceticism because he didn't drink – he was one of the rare ones! Everything became a reason for reproaches.

[...] *In sum [in 1969-70], you still had one foot inside and one foot outside.*

The hope for a new beginning at that time had been illusory. As we were very plugged into Pannekoek and the soviets, it was that kind of illusion that I wanted to prolong in the very bad book published under the name of Ratgeb: *De la grève sauvage à l'autogestion généralisée*.

Why the pseudonym?

The book was written in total despair. It is interesting as a document because it contains the will to go on all alone – which was, in a certain way, the case with Ratgeb himself. He'd been a German painter in the 16th century, but he is especially celebrated for his revolutionary commitment. He was one of the *leaders*³²¹ of the most radical peasants' movement – the *Bundschuh*, from the revolt of the Rustaids.³²² Today he is considered to be one of the precursors of the “damned of the earth.” He was born on the side of the rich, but he chose to become active in the revolutionary struggle of the peasants: it cost him his life. He'd been advised by some German prince who, at the time of Ratgeb's capture, had him [bound and] quartered at Pforzheim. He'd completed the frescoes at the abbey of Maulbronn, which I went to see. There's a book about him. He was a good painter. There were great artists in the movement, such as Tilman Riemenschneider, renowned for the beauty of the hands he painted. One must read the very beautiful book by the “Stalinist” Maurice Pianzola: *Peintres et vilains*.³²³

Might we see in this book by Ratgeb the sketch for the works to come about the Movement of the Free Spirit, to which Ratgeb might have been linked?

The “Ratgeb” book wasn't written with the idea of the Free Spirit in mind. We can glimpse in it what I later called hostile and impotent revolt: “Kill them all and the revolution will recognize its own.”³²⁴ There's something of Nechayev³²⁵ here – odious, at least. It indicates the rut into which you fall when there's no longer a flourishing historical movement and you feel an obscure and confused despair, a fierce desire to continue despite it all. Thus there was a desire for autonomy, with all the errors, all the fumbling, and sometimes even backsliding that one risks. Many aberrations are in the text, especially the praise of urban guerrilla warfare, which I shortly

³²¹ *Translator's note:* English in original.

³²² *Translator's note:* cf. Chapter 42 of *The Resistance to Christianity*: <http://www.notbored.org/resistance-42.html>.

³²³ *Translator's note:* published in 1962. In 1997, Vaneigem wrote a preface for Pianzola's *Thomas Munzer ou La guerre des paysans* (Editions Ludd).

³²⁴ *Translator's note:* a parody of “Kill them all and let God recognize his own.”

³²⁵ *Translator's note:* Sergey Nechayev (1847-1882), a Russian revolutionary and nihilist.

thereafter condemned. Why did I fall into this quirk? No doubt because the conviction that there was nothing more to do brought me, took me back, to the spirit of such anarchists as Coeurderoy,³²⁶ Vaillant and Ravachol: there is nothing to do but destroy. “Revolution by the Cossacks.”³²⁷

[...] *Thus you left the SI in conditions that were somewhat turbulent, a kind of depression overtook you, not only due to the separation from the situationist movement, but also a generalized depression.*

It was a depression of History.

[...] *With the reflux of the revolutionary movement, a regression took place. Individuals and groups enlisted in the ideology of armed struggle [...]*

In the guerrilla warfare of the Red Army Faction or the Italian Red Brigades, for example, there was only the destruction of the system without an opening towards any other.³²⁸ Such as I envision it, armed struggle must open upon another society, not a militarized collectivity.

What strikes me about the [Ratgeb] book is its triumphalist side.

Megalomania is sometimes the consequence of a feeling of powerlessness.

[...] *What is the most striking thing to me about the book is the total absence of hindsight or doubt concerning the possibility of dissolving discourse into action.*

There's a distant origin to all this. I want to return to Defuisseaux's *Catéchisme du peuple*, whose importance to my childhood we've previously discussed. It was a text that had enormous importance in the 1880s. My father had a copy. It was present in all the workers' milieus. It isn't known in France, but it was very popular with the miners and metallurgists in Belgium. It was built upon a system of questions and answers that played upon the string of naivety. In some way,³²⁹ I reproduced this procedure. It begins with the intention to return to the basics. Thus there's the risk of naivety and spiritualism, but “to return to the basics” is also an existential demand.

[...] *What's the most striking thing to me, finally, is the very peremptory tone, full of affirmations, a little gratuitous, a little disconnected from what's being said.*

³²⁶ *Translator's note:* cf. Vaneigem, “Terrorism or Revolution,” a preface to a 1972 collection of texts by Coeurderoy: <http://www.notbored.org/coeurderoy.html>.

³²⁷ *Translator's note:* the subtitle of Coeurderoy's book *Hurrah!!!*

³²⁸ *Translator's note:* see Guy Debord, letter to Gianfranco Sanguinetti dated 21 April 1978 (<http://www.notbored.org/cavalcanti.html>) and Gianfranco Sanguinetti, *On Terrorism and the State*, for different interpretations of the Red Brigades: <http://www.notbored.org/on-terrorism.html>.

³²⁹ *Translator's note:* Chapter 1 of “Ratgeb” poses 25 pointed questions.

Doubt needs affirmation. It was a book through which I exorcised myself. I'd already had these tendencies, notably to violence, assumed under the cover of class struggle. I'd spent my youth in the Jeunes Gardes socialistes, dreaming of setting fire to the villas of the bourgeois. We smashed their windows when we were at summer camp. Childishness, certainly, but with something more: a violence channeled into class struggle. Today, this kind of violence has become blind and people quite simply knock out their neighbors . . . From the moment that class struggle disappears under the steamroller of leveling consumerism, we enter into a kind of war against all, which is what we see today. When you say that class struggle channeled that violence, there is, on one side, the reformist tendency, and, on the other, the violent class struggle that aligns itself with a form of radicality. But we must recall that class struggle also postulates the end of class struggle, the de-proletarianization of the proletariat, which doesn't fight for itself but for its emancipation.

Class struggle channels violence and thus exercises a socially regulatory function.

They aren't mutually exclusive. In class struggle, there is a place for the awareness of its surpassing, that is to say, the struggle for the advent of classless society. The expression "classless society," which has disappeared today, was constantly used in the SI.

One of the SI's first tracts, which, I believe, dates from 1959, was titled "Classless society has found its artists."

Today, this idea has something dated about it because it is now a matter of the generalized exploitation of people – to such a point that no one can find himself in it and anyone can be anyone else's enemy.

[...] *I see a very dark future in the analysis of such phenomena; a collapse of civilization.*

And thus the birth of another one! . . . Beyond all that barbarity, there's the aspiration to be human that, sooner or later, causes a jolt. Except for the agrarian revolution in the Neolithic Age, which engendered the cataclysmic agro-business civilization, there's only been one revolution, a single very significant upheaval, the shock waves of which continue to be felt today: the French Revolution, even if it was submerged; even if the humanist ideals of Diderot, Rousseau, d'Holbach and Meslier were smashed to pieces after the Thermidorian reaction and the victory of bourgeoisie, something irreversible took place: the end of religion, even if its influence has lasted for more than a century; the end of monarchical power, even if it was replaced by totalitarian republics. Something unsuspected that travels underground in a "life response" [*réaction de vie*] that always runs the risk of appearing in broad daylight. Today we certainly live in a totalitarian empire of barbarity, but the "life responses" don't stop being reborn. My friends and my enemies like to taunt me for what they call my optimism. What optimism? In one of the many "self-managed social centers" in Athens, where I participated in some discussions, someone said to me, "I'd like to say that you're right, but look around you: nothing changes; money governs everything; the powers of repression are enormous. What can we do? Nothing." I responded simply, "If you truly believe that, what are you doing here, in this 'self-managed

collective,' where you practice *la gratuité*,³³⁰ where you invent a life that has nothing in common with the financial powers, with the States that are their servants [*leur botte*] or with the political parties and the unions?" He acquiesced by laughing. It is a great victory by the repressive forces when they make us doubt our creative powers to the point that it makes us denigrate them.

Why would this make you fear that there's nothing more [to be done]? It seems that we've had the greatest difficulty admitting that nothing more will exist. I can easily see that, in a given situation, there's nothing more [to be done].

I don't believe in the end of *the* world. I believe in the end of *this* world, in the end of market civilization.

By a "return to barbarity" – since we disagree on this point – I mean a reign by hordes, a war of all against all.

That's a risk, a passing risk . . . During a "war of all against all," something new might appear.

[...] Many of the objects that are produced by contemporary technology, which alienates us completely, are, paradoxically, demanded by those who consume them as a form of liberation. There's a lack of real reflection on technology and the law.

That's the spectacle: the image of ourselves that the dominant society shows us. It maintains its own image by diffusing the image of alienation as the only possible reality. Debord showed this clearly. But the spectacle doesn't show what it is incapable of seeing or what it doesn't want to see – that there is an underside to it.

Contrary to you, I will say that it sees it and also controls it.

The refusal to obey and the decision to continue to fight also explain the success of the book in which there's nothing but the title: *Indignez-vous!* by Stéphane Hessel.³³¹ How was this shallow text, from which one learns nothing, able to sell millions of copies, simply because of its title, which is a bad one? To express indignation – then what? People are indignant when they protest against the government; they chant slogans; and then they go back home, watch television and, the next day, go back to work. Thus this insignificant title is taken up by millions of people³³² for

³³⁰ *Translator's note:* a virtually untranslatable phrase for "that which is free." Cf. Vaneigem's interview with Siné Mensuel: <http://www.notbored.org/sine-mensuel.html>.

³³¹ *Translator's note:* written by a former concentration-camp prisoner (then 93 years old) and published in 2010, this booklet was in fact 35-pages long. It has been translated into English as *Time for Outrage!*

³³² *Translator's note:* it is said that *Los Indignados* took their name from the Spanish translation of this book.

whom it suddenly means, “Do something!” They tell themselves, “I must do something. But what? I don’t know, but I must do *something*.”³³³

A simple, vague desire.

But “something” is awoken. Millions of copies sold! People are spontaneously sensitive to solicitations of this type. Since the project of “class struggle” has disappeared, people construct their own projects. A vague project that risks being delirious but is, nevertheless, based on personal and historical experience. Self-management isn’t a vague, utopian or aberrant project. It ceaselessly reappears. The collectives of the Spanish Revolution put it into practice, including a form of generalized self-management in Aragon and Catalonia, where the use of money disappeared and people met up with each other and created new conditions. I love the Zapatistas’ remark: “We are snails;³³⁴ we advance slowly, but surely,” which is tied to a resolution: “We will not go back.” In their communities, progress is slow but there’s no stagnation. Without such a resolution, we will be blind; we will experience total lethargy. In revolution, awareness emerges. Lethargy is obscurantism. In the dominant obscurantism and passivity, the incitement to become indignant or make things move – although limited – has a meaning. If the revolt of the Indignant collapses, it won’t be extinguished. In Spain, it has created neighborhood committees, resistance against deportation, and small temporary actions that do not lack interest . . . Such things are a beginning. The attempt always demanded to be transformed . . . It is true that such sporadic phenomena adhere more to the project of survival [than that of emancipation]. But this can give us ideas. In Greece, villages have created seed collectives. Exchange takes place without a monetary transaction. They renew local seeds. There are collective vegetable gardens, especially in the villages.

With regard to what you just said, we might consider Ratgeb’s book to be very dated and representative of a [certain] time.

I don’t want to defend or justify that book: it is a document of the era. It is representative of my position after my break with the SI. It corresponds to a regression of the movement of history.³³⁵

You quickly grasped the error in the book and, in your preface to an anthology of texts by Coeurderoy, you distanced yourself from urban guerrilla warfare.

Shortly after writing the Ratgeb book, when I wrote “Terrorisme ou révolution,” which was my preface to an anthology of texts by Coeurderoy, I proceeded to a clear critique of terrorism.³³⁶ I

³³³ *Translator’s note:* in the case of the Spanish protests of 2011-2012, the “indignant” movement was nation-wide and involved the occupation of public places and buildings, rioting and fighting with the cops.

³³⁴ *Translator’s note:* the word used by the Zapatistas themselves is *Caracoles*.

³³⁵ *Translator’s note:* except in Greece, Portugal and Spain, where this period (1974-1975) saw the collapse of three different fascist regimes.

³³⁶ *Translator’s note:* the chronology here or, rather, Vaneigem’s memory of it, is irreparably tangled. The “Ratgeb” book contains references to events that took place in 1973 and was published in 1974, and “Terrorism and Revolution” was signed on 5 January 1972 by its author

took up a position against the terrorism of the Red Army Faction and the Red Brigades, which was then in vogue.³³⁷ In any case, in the SI there was never a penchant for terrorism – on the contrary. We’d always been opposed to any form of direct action, including the *a posteriori* critique of the anarchist movement, which doesn’t diminish the merits of Ravachol and Bonnot.³³⁸ By writing it, I understood the point at which resentment engenders lucid violence amidst the suffocation of this era . . . It’s also a question of a psychologically explicable phenomenon. It was a moment of history in which all the visible enemies [of capitalism] disappeared. A confusion, an enormous feeling of weakness, then descended; I tried to remedy it by a will to persevere via the opposite effect: triumphalism. This triumphalism is present in all insurrectionary movements. For example, among the Maoists, we can find the conviction that they will be victorious. In the slogan, “We will conquer,” there are two elements: a laughable illusion and a fundamental will: “We will not be stopped.” To address the possible influence of “Ratgeb” on the Red Army Faction or the Italians: I believe that the book was in fact translated into Italian or, in any case, it circulated in an alternate version in the country. I was then surrounded by people who approved of the Red Army Faction, and they were numerous. Although they weren’t terrorists, they had this need: things had to change and the method wasn’t important.

*Were you fascinated by armed struggle?*³³⁹

A fascination for people who acted in accordance with an aberrant conduct, but who continued to fight? Yes!

Given the context of depression, what were your friends’ reactions to the publication of “Ratgeb”?

It was badly received. The guys had reservations. I’d expected this, thus it didn’t affect me overmuch. For me, it was a question of marking the occasion. A challenge: “even if I am not part of the SI, I won’t stop.” The idea had been that each one would continue on his own momentum .

and published later that same year. But here Vaneigem states that he wrote “Terrorism” *after* “Ratgeb,” a statement he repeats several times.

³³⁷ *Translator’s note:* as if “terrorism” is something one simply opposes or endorses, like a political referendum; as if there’s nothing ambiguous in either the definition or the practice of “terrorism”; as if the “terrorism” apparently perpetrated by the Red Brigades wasn’t in fact perpetrated by the Italian secret services, thus making the apparently simple referendum rather complicated. Or so it would seem: cf. the line of critique begun in 1969 by the Italian SI in “Is the Reichstag Burning?” and continued in the 1970s works of Guy Debord and Gianfranco Sanguinetti.

³³⁸ *Translator’s note:* Ravachol (aka François Claudius Koenigstein) was a French anarchist and bomber (1859-1892). Jules Bonnot was a French anarchist and bank robber (1876-1912).

³³⁹ *Translator’s note:* the distinction between “terrorism” and armed struggle is crucial. Note well Debord’s comments concerning “the insolence to treat – and reduce to a ridiculous schemata – the historical and strategic question of armed struggle in general and the particular case of *all terrorism* as it has existed in many diverse forms throughout history.” Letter to Jaap Kloosterman dated 23 February 1981: <http://www.notbored.org/kloosterman.html>.

. . I didn't write it as a response to the past. On the other hand, from the moment that we were no longer together, this was – for me – a way of saying that I refused to evolve in the way that the majority of the former members of the SI did. I felt an urgency to bounce back.³⁴⁰ I surely had to make use of it.

Did you see in it a means of individual survival, in order not to be completely sunk?

Absolutely! Writing that book helped me get back on my feet . . . Not so much an anchoring but a sliding towards something else. As if I had to obey the same contained rage that Coeurderoy and Lautréamont had to have known proportionally. In Lautréamont, the political or social perspective isn't overtly present, but implicit. Maldoror's aim consists in saying, "We must stop and crush everything, and then begin again." Lautréamont is renewed in the *Poésies* with naivety, grandeur and spiritualism . . . Independently of the great writer that he was, his work is seductive due to the reversal of perspective. It leads Maldoror to his end: to destruction, to death. The annihilation of Maldoror only takes place in an annihilated world. Starting from there, something new, a new perspective on life, can begin, by feeling its way.

How did the evolution from "Ratgeb" to the preface for Coeurderoy take place?

When I became aware of the aberrant aspect of the "Ratgeb" book, I wanted to react to and distance myself from what I'd defended. In my twenties, I'd discovered at a secondhand bookstore the Stock editions of *Jours d'exils* in three volumes and *Hurrah!!! ou la révolution par les Cosaques*.³⁴¹ I'd known about Coeurderoy. I'd always been fascinated by this extraordinary person, who was devoted to a solitude that made him crazy and eventually killed him. Since I lived nearby Tonnerre, I visited the library that was then located in the Coeurderoy family's house. I learned from the librarian what had become of the Coeurderoy archives. His mother, a zealot,³⁴² burned all of her son's manuscripts right there in the courtyard. I collected a group of texts that éditions Champ Libre published. I was in contact with Gérard Guégan. He'd welcomed me, despite the recent breaks. He ended up rejected.³⁴³ One finds in Coeurderoy's oeuvre, in *Hurrah!!!*, the old millenarian idea that an apocalypse will take place and create an absolute renewal. To begin what again? There will be time to find out.

[...] *There's an extremely violent and legitimate phrase in Hurrah!!! [...] "I appeal, finally, to Hatred! The men of my time have inspired me through their hypocrisy, which they give me in return for my frankness." To my eyes, that's the ambivalent side of the revolutionary movement.*

It's an ambivalence from which we aren't detached, into which we fall back to the extent that the project of a new society hasn't been put into place. This project exists. In the intentions of the

³⁴⁰ *Translator's note:* this suggests that "Ratgeb" might have been written after the appearance of *The Real Split in the International* – that is to say, April 1972.

³⁴¹ *Translator's note:* two books by Ernest Coeurderoy, both published in 1854.

³⁴² *Translator's note:* the French word used here, *bigote*, can also mean a bigot or a sanctimonious person.

³⁴³ *Translator's note:* see the letter from Gérard Lebovici to Guégan dated 18 November 1974: <http://www.notbored.org/lebovici-18November1974.html>.

Breton village that you mentioned,³⁴⁴ a small seed is planted. This old background³⁴⁵ reappears in the villages of free Catalonia. It ceaselessly reappears. And, in a certain way, that's reassuring. Most often we put the emphasis on impasses and failures. People say we've never surpassed the Paris Commune, and that the soviets turned out badly under Lenin. But something always returns.

In any case, it has ceaselessly reappeared for centuries without having the time or the means to succeed.

But this doesn't mean that it won't ever succeed. History changes. Isn't it extraordinary that, as Thomas Bernhard has pointed out, the seizure of a public building was enough to trigger the French Revolution?³⁴⁶ It is always astonishing to see how a harmless trickle can turn into a flood. But to return to Coeurderoy: I find his example very interesting because, at a given moment, it is hatred, the rejection of this abject world, that wins out over the rest. As with Nechayev, the refusal becomes an end in itself, a source of satisfaction. But it is here that *Jours d'exil* starts the surpassing of *Hurrah!!!*

[...] *In all the people you mention, the notion of apocalypse often occurs [...]*

In Greek, *apocalypsos* means "revelation." In the notion of "apocalypse," we lose the sense of "revelation" and keep that of "general catastrophe." Thus we can say that *Maldoror* assumes an apocalyptic aspect, while the revelation in Lautréamont's work would be the *Poésies*. We see the same schema in Joachim de Flor: there will be three ages; we are in the third, the one of the destruction of the world and the new beginning, which is called "the Age of the Saints and Universal Salvation" under the aegis of God.³⁴⁷

[...] *Once the notion of the human is gone, will we be in a world of cyborgs,³⁴⁸ monsters and so forth? The land filled with the radioactive wastes that we bury in it and on which we don't know how long life will last.*

This is a way of saying that there's no end to the apocalypse.

That's the new element of the epoch in which we live.

³⁴⁴ *Translator's note:* in twaddle that I've taken the liberty of deleting, the interviewer had mentioned an article in *Le Monde* he'd read about a group of communities in Brittany that, at the time, were *studying the idea* of becoming independent from the country's electric utility company. This is why Vaneigem refers to their "intentions."

³⁴⁵ *Translator's note:* the French word used here, *fond*, can also mean core, content or ground.

³⁴⁶ *Translator's note:* Nicolas Thomas Bernhard (1931-1989) was an important Austrian author, poet and playwright who, it would appear, never wrote about the French Revolution: http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Bernhard.

³⁴⁷ *Translator's note:* cf. Raoul Vaneigem, *Le mouvement du Libre-Esprit* (Editions Ramsey: 1986), translated by Randall Cherry and Ian Patterson as *The Movement of the Free Spirit* (Zone Books: 1994), pp. 64-69.

³⁴⁸ *Translator's note:* English in original.

Indeed, we've never before seen such destruction at the planetary level. Until now, the "apocalypse" has been at the local one.

That's the only change.

We are on the razor's edge, because there's either one or the other. We are only shown the dominant side, and we don't see the other one. But there is good reason to bet that the question that each person must ask himself will arise: when will we be able to pursue the revolutionary intention to the point that it doesn't fall into its opposite effect? It's a question of awareness [*conscience*], but it is also a problem that I wouldn't venture to try to solve . . . One day, I was invited by a friend to attend one of her classes in Geneva. She'd assigned her students – young people 17 or 18 years old – to read my *Traité*. After many oratory precautions, one of them said to me, "I've always been astonished by your admiration for Gilles de Rais and Sade." I responded to him, "You're right. I myself am shocked by the references I made at that time" – aesthetic references to Gilles de Rais, an abominable person, and to Sade – the Sade of the *Cent vingt journées*, because I distinguish between the Sade of that book and the Sade of "*Français, encore un effort*," which comes from a courageous man, one of the rare ones to object to the death penalty in '93.³⁴⁹ Yes . . . those were my stupidities of the time, obeying a very questionable [form of] provocation in which aesthetics won out over ethics. Here as well, in my critique of ethics, I was running the risk of falling into the opposite excess.

Here we touch upon an interesting articulation.

I confirmed to that student that he was perfectly correct and that I no longer advanced that type of position. I obviously didn't censure the *Traité*, but it was the sign that, in that profoundly modern book, there were not a few archaisms. An even more perilous archaism would have been the intellectual pretention to react to the world. By "intellectual" I mean the separation of ideas from lived experience. The student's astonishment at my old convictions lasted a moment longer. I insisted: "Yes, I'll make a critique of it. My options were the options of the times; they are no longer those of the world today." I explained that I'd also maintained sympathy for Bonnot and his violence against a closed world, completely closed off by an odious bourgeoisie, but, today, I won't defend someone who kills a boss and refers to Bonnot. The truth of one epoch can become dangerous or noxious in other conditions.

[...] *Today, the techniques [of manipulation] can sometimes be turned against the power that created them and make new forms of contestation appear. This is especially the case in the utilization of images [...]*

Everyone fears the image. These days, demonstrators take photographs and videotapes of police violence and post them to the Internet.

³⁴⁹ *Translator's note:* Sade's *The 120 Days of Sodom* was written in 1785 and published posthumously; his essay "Frenchmen, one more effort if you would be Republicans" was included in *Philosophy in the Bedroom* (1795).

[...] *Today, we can see forms of violent, working-class demonstrations that are fundamentally based on the prioritized consumption of new commodities, with police repression to maintain order [...]*

There's total confusion. "Confusion" and "spectacle" are interesting phenomena [*données*]. When the spectacle conserves its unity, or when "for" and "against" are balanced, it's an acceptable notion. But in the examples you mention, no one knows where he is. People fear that their image is bad or doesn't exist . . . I quite like the image of a raised fist holding a phone that can take pictures because it is a weapon, a weapon that doesn't kill. I have the impression – we must have confidence in people's creativity – that we are heading towards the development of resistance that uses non-lethal weapons.

[...] *Recuperating an event in the form of a video recording that is uploaded to YouTube³⁵⁰ represents an operation that situates itself beyond the spectacle. Everything happens as if this broadcast is more important than what actually happened!*

Yes, but there's consequences. For example, take the war photograph of the little [Vietnamese] girl and napalm, which was repugnant because it made a spectacle of a horrendous misery, of a killing, by being a shocking photo . . . It seems to want to say to us, "*This is war; this is what we Americans are doing in Vietnam.*" The ambiguity of the image still lingers. It inclines towards one or the other meaning according to whether it is recuperated and doesn't leave the spectacle, or if the spectacle's backstage area ends up winning out over the spectacle itself. It is true that what happened in Tunisia,³⁵¹ where we were in direct contact with the rioters, allowed them, too, to move around and . . . protect themselves a bit against the cops' violence, which was quite terrible, nevertheless.

[...] *In the wars between the States, we have seen a phenomenon in which hackers³⁵² sabotage the websites of other countries [...]*

These small groups have also penetrated the computer systems of the military and the banks. These kinds of networks [of hackers] can also destroy banks from the inside. It is a veritable war that is taking place today, with the part of the resistance that we used to call "proletarian" now manifesting itself in a different form. But it still has concrete effects –

– *that are, perhaps, even more formidable.*

Yes, because it is able to destroy the very brains of a business.

To me, what has fundamentally changed is that, in the 1960s, a working-class [populaire] grouping, a mass demonstration, could still force the Parliament to rescind an "unpopular" ["impopulaire"] measure. Today, all that is completely gone. It is even unthinkable.

³⁵⁰ *Translator's note:* English in original.

³⁵¹ *Translator's note:* circa December 2010-January 2011.

³⁵² *Translator's note:* English in original.

It's now a part of *folklore*.³⁵³ Today the government doesn't even take into account a demonstration that brings together a million people. It sits on it with an exemplary cynicism.

[...] *To confirm or deny what is said today or what was said with confidence the day before, one can now say one thing and its opposite [at the same time] by relying upon a battery of experts. This is very dangerous.*

It is automatically recuperated as a “conspiracy” and rapidly turned into a fossil [*sclérosé*]. Thus there's an incitement to passivity and resignation. We live in voluntary servitude. It has existed for millennia. Today, it's taken on planetary proportions . . . It is obvious that we are witnessing, not the end of *the* world, but the end of *this* world, the disappearance of a civilization that has led the evolution of mankind into an impasse, to its programmed destruction. The instauration of an agro-business economy several millennia ago has led to the extraordinary development of the techniques by which mankind and the earth are exploited to make profits. But this progress has worked at the expense of human progress. The result has been a continuous tide of mud and blood whose sole particularity, in our epoch, is that it affects the whole planet. Yet, despite the implacable strictness of which history offers a cruel catalogue, it rises above the voices that summon humanity to become human. Those voices have been stifled because a new barbarity has been instituted in their name. The devastation of life and natural resources that the financial mafias and the despotism of the money they make on exploitation are appalling and spread like a pandemic. We see an absolute system impose its *ukases*³⁵⁴ on the States; impoverish their populations; cheat the public welfare; pollute foodstuffs; sterilize the earth and everyday life; push despair and boredom to the point of sparking off the war of all against all. So much so that it appears more and more clearly that, after [the disappearance of] class struggle, [which was] exhausted by consumerism, there will be a confrontation between the party of life and the party of death and chaos that encourages the financial powers because it allows them complete freedom to tax the living and – this is the height of imbecilic cynicism – to draw their profits until the inevitable monetary *krach*³⁵⁵ admitted by the economists. The States are the servants of the system that destroys everything by destroying itself. Their last reason to exist is to exert their repressive function. The stakes are clear. Either we adopt suicidal logic and resign ourselves to dying in the bankers' gas chambers, where they themselves will end up being devoured, or . . . So, by becoming aware that we can only expect help to come from ourselves, we lay down the foundations for a society in which the art of living eradicates the system of profits and exploitation, whose collapse is taking place before our eyes. To get the schools, hospitals, transportation systems, housing and socially useful enterprises (metallurgy, renewable energy, textiles, natural foods, etc.) to function; to restore the public good, the *res publica*,³⁵⁶ that have been jeopardized by the henchmen of stock market speculation – we have no need of ideologies. In Greece, Spain and Portugal, where dilapidation has lifted the veil of illusions that remains in place in France, “self-managing social centers” have appeared. In them, *la gratuité* presides over the restoration of the rights to education, health and good-quality food. These are only fumbling

³⁵³ *Translator's note*: English in original.

³⁵⁴ *Translator's note*: proclamations in Imperial Russia that had the force of law.

³⁵⁵ *Translator's note*: German for “an economic crash.”

³⁵⁶ *Translator's note*: Latin for “public affairs.”

experiments, but it is through them that the self-management of everyday life, which carries the seeds of a truly human society, stands out. This isn't a doctrine that is being preached. For those who aren't resolved to agonize in the growing poverty of being and having, it is the only practical way to give life a chance.

According to you.

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