

Nothing Has Ended; Everything Begins
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[...]²

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 amongst 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.³

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 Luxemburg 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

¹ Translator's note: translated by NOT BORED! 8 October 2014.

² Translator's note: this excerpt begins on page 7 of the French original.

³ 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>.

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 town of workers.

Louis Scutenaire,⁴ 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.

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

I feel 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.⁵ Our slag heaps weren't made of

⁴ Interviewer's note: "I am neither a poet, a Surrealist nor Belgian," Louis Scutenaire was in the habit of declaring, and would add, "I am the first one" or, even better, "I dare to express myself thus." And in *Poisson d'Avril ou la vie sexuelle de Lili Pute*, San Antonio wrote, "'When you're dead, you feed on yourself,' as my dear Scutenaire would say, he who did more for Belgium than King Boudin and Eddy Mec combined. And this dead old Belgian genius said, 'Age wears away ugliness as well as beauty.' [...] He was a great sage with ferocious goodwill who reigned over Brussels, and the people of Brussels ignored him. The best Belgian history, I tell you, is the most terrifying thing; 'He was Scutenaire once, and the Belgians know nothing of him.' The French, too. [...] He said everything, but in short bursts, Scut. He knew about life, death, the front, the back, my cock, your cock, the bitter homeland, Surrealism, fries, cunts, morals, tears, and the way in which he must turn off the lights on the ground floor before illuminating the ones of the second floor so as to not make the meter move." (Jean Émile Louis Scutenaire, Ollignies, 1905 – Brussels, 1987).

⁵ Interviewer's note: the Borinage region owes its name to the Picard word *borin*, which means "a miner who extracts coal from the earth," and the Walloon word *boriner*, which means "to make holes." The contours of the industrial region of Hainaut reveal more of the social and political history that relates to its mining activity than the strictly topographical or administrative data that situates it approximately between the Mons Commune and the Franco-Belgian border of Valenciennes. Oil extraction began there in the Seventeenth Century. First constituted by family-owned businesses, the activity was industrialized in the Nineteenth. Between 1878 and 1880, during his stay among the miners, Vincent Van Gogh was profoundly affected by the miserable conditions in which the Borains lived. This experience durably impregnated his work. The first half of the Twentieth Century was a time of decline: mine-based production, struck hard by the "Great Crisis" of the 1930s, stopped cold. The miners' fight against the exploitation they suffered made Borinage into one of the principal cradles of political and social struggle in Belgium. The economic crisis of the period between the two World Wars engendered large

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,⁶ 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 low-lifes. 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 incited 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 Grevisse⁷ – are

workers’ strikes elsewhere in the region in 1932, which were immortalized in a classic of cinéma-vérité, *Misère au Borinage*, directed by Henri Storck and Joris Ivens. These upheavals constituted a prelude to the increasing contestation that reached its defining moment in Belgium at the time of the general strike of 1960-1961.

⁶ Interviewer’s note: *La meilleure séduction est de n’en employer aucune*. Charles-Joseph Lamoral, Prince de Ligne (Brussels, 1734 – Vienna, 1814).

⁷ Interviewer’s note: After the Second World War, André Gide was among those who recommended *Le Grevisse* – which was how this work (whose fame no longer exists) ended up being known – as the best grammar book of the time. Its author, Maurice Grevisse, was born in 1895 in Rulles, Belgium. When he was a young professor of French, he conceived the new

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 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.⁸

grammar book in the tradition of Vaugelas (1585-1650), otherwise known as “The Court Clerk of Usage,” who, in 1647, completed and published his *Remarques sur la langue française, utiles à ceux qui veulent bien parler et bien écrire*. The first edition of Maurice Grevisse’s *Bon usage* was published in 1936. The grammarian died in Brussels in July 1980, the day before the publication of its eleventh edition. Meanwhile, it was André Goosse, born in Liège in 1926, his son-in-law and collaborator, who took up the slack. He was a professor of French linguistics at the Catholic University of Louvain, a member of the Royal Academy of the French Language and Literature, and of the International Council for the French Language. The other famous Belgian grammarian of the French language, Joseph Hanse, was born in Floreffe in Walloon in 1902. He was one of the anxious men who proposed one use the turn of phrase that best suited the expression of the thought. It was in 1949, when he was a professor at the Catholic University of Louvain, that he published the first edition of the *Dictionnaire des difficultés du français moderne*, frequently reprinted thereafter. He died in November 1992. We must note that two or even three of the greatest defenders of “correct French” are from Belgium and not France.

⁸ Interviewer’s note: 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

It was in La Louvière, which is effectively in Hainaut. . . . A den of surrealists: Achille Chavée, Fernand Dumont, 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. . . .

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 reproached. There was also a working-class current represented by Aldred 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."⁹

for three years, and Fernand Dumont (1906-1945). Pol Bury, Marcel Lefrancq, Armand Simon and Louis Van de Spiegele rallied 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.

⁹ *Interviewer's note:* 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.

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 the downtown, working class, against uptown, bourgeois.

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 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.

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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.

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.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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. . . .

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 dessert, 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

¹⁰ *Interviewer's note:* in the elections of 1936, Belgium's principle three political tendencies – the Catholic Party, the Liberal Party and the Belgian Labor Party – respectively won 61, 23 and 70 seats in the House of Representatives. In 1939, the Belgian Labor Party won 64 seats, thus losing its *leadership* [English in original], while the Catholic Party became the primary force in the country and the Liberal Party made gains. In 1940, as a result of governmental games, the Belgian Labor Party – founded in 1885 by César de Paepe – was dissolved by Henri de Man, who had become its leader. A new party, the Belgian Socialist Party, was founded in 1945, while the *Vlaams Nationaal Verbond* – the fourth Belgian political force in 1939 and the successor to the *Frontpartij*, which historically was the first Flemish Community Party [*parti communautaire flamand*] – disbanded at the time of the Liberation because of its collaboration with the German occupiers. [Translator's note: Henri de Man's nephew, Paul de Man, achieved notoriety during his life as a leading exponent of the literary theory known in America as "deconstruction" and a certain infamy after his death in 1983 because it turned out that when he was a youth, during the Nazi Occupation of Belgian, he'd written for a collaborationist newspaper.]

¹¹ *Translator's note:* the *Union pour un mouvement populaire*, a center-right political party founded in 2002 by Jacques Chirac.

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 [...]¹²

*Did other people join you?*¹³

Dohmen’s friends were decimated. Alcohol only helped to elicit the resolutions of inadmissibility that were pertinent.

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 1961.¹⁴ 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 radicalism.

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. 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,¹⁵ 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. Kotanyi had been excluded. Lausen, too. Numerically, you didn’t weigh very much!

¹² *Translator’s note:* this is the end of the first excerpt. The second excerpt begins on page 205 of the French original.

¹³ *Translator’s note:* the beginning of the following footnote is not available in the current excerpt: “It was after the fact that Surrealism was made into a Belgian literary current, when it was nothing of the sort; likewise, Magritte had nothing in common with Belgian art. To be begun because this wasn’t art! The history of Surrealism was invented after the fact. In reality, it was a group of desperate people who didn’t know what to do, had no plan or project. Everything was improvised. In Paris it was, perhaps, more organized because at least they met in a bar. [...] But here, apart from Magritte, no one gave a fuck. Scutenaire never showed anything. Nougé didn’t publish anything. As for me, I am a bit of a phenomenon because I systematically applied myself to publication.” Marcel Mariën, interview with Olivier Smolders, October, 1991.

¹⁴ *Translator’s note:* they were in fact published in this journal in 1956.

¹⁵ *Translator’s note:* circa 1965.

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 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 advanced 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 radicalism. 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 off 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.¹⁶

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."

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 in 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 cake 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 radicalism, 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 radicalism 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

¹⁶ Translator's note: June 1963.

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 it¹⁷ 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.

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.¹⁸ 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 radicalism was never been 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.

¹⁷ *Translator's note:* this seems doubly incorrect. The SI was founded in 1957 and lasted until 1971 (that's fourteen years, not ten), and was certainly spoken and written about in the wake of the Strasbourg scandal of 1966, if not before then.

¹⁸ *Interviewer's note:* 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 ‘Observer,’ yes, it amuses me. But this is nothing; we are ten years ahead. You will soon see the proofs of it.” [*Translator's note:* there is no indication why such an apparently important letter was not published in the “complete” collection of letters published under the title *Guy Debord Correspondance*.]

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,¹⁹ 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 11²⁰ and reached their height with issue number 12, that is to say, after May 68. A simple principle 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,²¹ and that they discovered things that appeared outrageous [effarantes].²²

Certainly the bulletin was not widely read but, when I met Raymond Queneau at Gallimard,²³ 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*.²⁴

¹⁹ *Translator’s note:* if the reader recalls what he or she has read within this very book (!), he or she will know that the SI staged a very public exhibition, *Destruktion AF RSG-6*, at the Galerie EXI, in Odense, Denmark, in June 1963. Many other examples can be easily provided of concrete, public actions – designed to win the group infamy – that the SI planned and carried out over the course of 1960s.

²⁰ *Translator’s note:* published October 1967, when the possibility of a large-scale social revolt in France was still thought to be impossible.

²¹ *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.

²² *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?

It seems far more likely that if, in 1971, someone was finally getting a chance to read *Internationale Situationniste*, and that someone “discovered things that appeared outrageous,” those “things” could only be (1) widespread revolt was possible, even imminent, in France and (2), when it came, the SI would trigger it but not lead it. In 1971, wasn’t the very fact that May 68 took place the ultimate outrage?

²³ *Translator’s note:* circa 1967.

²⁴ *Interviewer’s note:* “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

Please tell us about your meeting with Queneau!

The manuscript of *Traité de savoir-vivre à l'usage des jeunes générations* 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 two parts. . . . I should have taken after André Gorz,²⁵ 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.” 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!

(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 that language of *technology*. They have no idea who or what judges all this.” (*Internationale Situationniste*, #7, April 1962). [Translator’s note: Queneau was familiar with the SI as early as 1962, and *not* after May 68 or 1971.]

²⁵ Interviewer’s note: “(...) one day he *might* not: because the effort might be too great, because he could no longer give his words, thoughts, voice and inflections to what, under the pain of failure, had to remain the thinking of another, quite exactly *another(’s) thought*: inflexible, impersonal, irrefutable like destiny or like the thinking without [a thinking] subject that no one thinks and that everyone attributes to others – in other words, ‘public opinion.’ Because that was what journalism in France was at the time: it had to give the *appearance* of interiority, an appearance of personal unity (attested to by the signature and careful style), to a narrative whose primary quality had to be *the absence of an author*. Of course, there were apparent exceptions: the big reporters had the right to say ‘I’ and describe what they had presumably seen and thought, giving their own impressions – but this privilege was suspended on the condition that they didn’t think too much. They should watch as a camera watches; they should be *outside*, not *inside*, that is to say, external observers and not part, judge and agent of history in the making.” André Gorz, *Je n’existe pas. Notes sur le journalisme*, 1960. [Translator’s note: this seems to have been a perfectly unnecessary footnote. It was not taken from the book mentioned by Vaneigem, nor is it relevant to the contents of Vaneigem’s own *Traité*. And yet its last sentence seems uncannily applicable to the interviewer, who never joined the SI, nor any other revolutionary group, for that matter, but has devoted his life to publishing books about it, if not to Vaneigem himself, who – at least in Guy Debord’s view – became a passive observer *within the SI* after he’d finished writing his book, which was in 1965. Cf. Debord’s letter dated 9 December 1970: <http://www.notbored.org/debord-9December1970.html>.]

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.”²⁶

²⁶ *Translator’s note:* end of excerpt.