Been There, Done That:
A Review of a New Translation of *Une saison avec Marianne: La dernière surréaliste*

Written by Alain Segura, *Une saison avec Marianne: La dernière surréaliste* was published in January 2022 by Éditions Plein Chant (Bassac, France). Relatively unknown in France, and completely unknown in the United States, Segura had previously published an essay about the members of the Situationist International titled "Or s'en vont, les chevaliers questant" in *À contretemps* #40 (May 2011). The year after *Une saison avec Marianne* was published, Éditions Plein Chant came out with another book by Segura, this one titled *Les rémores*. Neither one contains any biographical information about their author, and so we must rely on the information provided by the publisher of a new translation of *Une saison avec Marianne*: "Alain Segura was born in 1949, in Bellac, a town near Limoges, France, where his father, active as an anarchist militant in Spain, settled after the Civil War of 1936-1939. In his teens, he was a member of several small anarchist groups, including the Anarchist International."

The French edition of *Une saison avec Marianne* is dignified and restrained – much like Marianne herself, it would seem. Its covers are mostly white with sparse red and black type. The front cover contains a small, unassuming engraving (a vignette) that, according to the credits, takes after Théophile-Alexandre Steinlen; this same engraving is used within the main text as a kind of separator between its sections. The back cover includes the following text by its author (my translation):

> "I demand the deep, true concealment of Surrealism," André Breton wrote in 1930. Some 20 years later, when Marianne joined the Surrealist Group, she understood that order very well. She wouldn't sign any of her canvasses, but she would inscribe the following at the bottom of one of the most beautiful leaflets from May 68: "A Yugoslavian comrade who knows a lot."
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> "Why would I go to Tibet, if the Himalayas aren't here?" When you crossed the door into her studio, you indeed began the climb. Marianne would have had her place on Father Sogol's sailboat on its way toward Mount Analogue. Her words were for her friends. Her outbursts and fury, as well. She dispensed no teachings, but she listened to the painters, to the writers, to the sculptors, praising their patience, their attention. Most often, everything ended in a big burst of laughter. Leaving her studio, I thought I could feel the gust of wind that had swept my doubts away. To say that she meant a great deal to me would be a bit of clumsiness in which I can, nevertheless, engage because it is the truth.

And who is this Marianne? In the words of a text by Segura that only appears on the French publisher's website (my translation):

> Marianne Nikolic was born in Budapest on 10 July 1919. A recovered official document allows us to trace her family's origins. Budapest back then was a very cosmopolitan city. Her father was a diplomat; his [second] wife had a German maiden name. Of her mother, who very quickly disappeared, she kept the

image of a vivacious woman, who loved bathrooms and had a fiery temperament, which Marianne attributed to Gypsy origins. She loved to claim this and to say that she resembled her.

In her youth, Marianne traveled alone with her father. She kept radiant memories of those times, which were no doubt embellished by nostalgia. When she was 16 years old, a new wife appeared and soon after another child. This was the end of their life together [father and daughter], voyages by train and big hotels. Marianne then thought about leaving home, which she did without looking back, her pockets empty.

She studied the piano and lived in Belgrade with a musician friend whom she followed to Rome in 1941. Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany had invaded the Balkans. Returning to Belgrade, towards the end of 1943, Marianne hastened to join the Partisans' fight against them.

After the war, she joined a puppet theater group, in which she met a poet who would become her husband, Radovan Ivsic. Among many literary works, they translated Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* [from French into Croatian]. They came to Paris together at the beginning of the 1950s. Contacts made with the artistic avant-gardes in Yugoslavia led them to participate in the activities of the Surrealist group, which Marianne would continue to do until the death of André Breton.

I met Marianne in the fall of 67 thanks to anarchist friends. She'd been living apart from Radovan for several months. She lived alone in their apartment on the rue Galande.

I was very young then and cautiously stayed on the sidelines. Draped in a long black raincoat, her words were as sharp as a razor. It also wasn't good to meet her gaze directly. Those same anarchist friends, who were close to the situationists, introduced her to Guy Debord. At the time, Guy was often surrounded by sycophants. Not the case with Marianne, who posed unsettling questions: "What is this group that includes no women?" She struck hard, even at the entrenchments in which revolutionary, clear consciences (too often workerist) took shelter. "We have never been to subjected to such a critique," said an amazed Guy, who immediately came up with a nickname for her: *the Last Surrealist*.

It was in the fall of 1968 that I started to go to rue Galande. We were a few friends who shared reading sessions with her, often daily, in the evening, until just before the departure of the last train.

Marianne made occasional trips to Yugoslavia on the behalf of an import-export company that specialized in fashion.

She started painting, when she lived on the rue Charlot, in order to justify the status of artist that she'd declared to the owner of a modest studio that was in poor condition but on which her heart was set.

When she arrived in Paris, she was also a typist at an office on the Champs-Élysées, where, under the amused but benevolent eyes of the secretaries, she typed with one finger.

At the beginning of the 1970s, she found work as a part-time proofreader, even though, to complete the work that she'd scrupulously been doing at home, she had to work late into the night.

She died at the Saint-Antoine Hospital on 14 August 1995.

Since then, I often see myself, in my mind's eye, taking the starry path that led to her studio.

The French edition of *Une saison avec Marianne* contains eight illustrations: a full-color reproduction of Marianne's painting *Don Juan* (oil on canvas, 1981); a full-color reproduction of *I Love Paris*, an oil painting from 2014 by Alexei Butirskiy that depicts one of the buildings in which Marianne lived; four high-quality black-and-white reproductions of photographs that appear in *Paris d'autrefois*, all of them depicting neighborhoods or buildings in which Marianne lived; and two high-quality black-and-white reproductions of photographs of Marianne in the company of Roger Legarec and Guy Debord, and Alice Becker-Ho, respectively, both taken in Vosges in August 1968. In both photos, the painter, unsmiling, is dressed all in black and wears her hair short.

The cover of the English translation published under the title *A Season with Marianne: The Last Surrealist* (Common Notions, December, 2024), by contrast, is nothing short of ugly. A pixilated blow-up of Marianne's face from the photo with Alice Becker-Ho (it is impossible to make out Marianne's features because she's holding her hand over her mouth, perhaps drawing on a cigarette) appears underneath wide vertical bands of heavy black type and even wider vertical bands of pixilated gradients of brownish red, reddish yellow and yellowish tan. Very post-modern, if you will, but certainly inappropriate for a woman like Marianne.

The back cover (heavy black type over those same colors, only brighter) proclaims:

> A memoir of the infamous "last Surrealist" amid the heady militancy of May '68.
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> Alain Segura was a teenage anarchist in Paris during the mid-to-late 1960s when he hung around with members of the Énrages and the Situationist International. He was particularly captivated by Yugoslavian militant, poet, and painter Marianne Ivsic, a member of André Breton's Surrealist group. It was Guy Debord who approvingly called her "the last Surrealist."
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> *A Season with Marianne* details the heady days of friendship, rebellion, and creative military surrounding May '68, against the backdrop of a colossal split between the Anarchist International and the Situationists in 1967, and the impossible demands of a revolution briefly glimpsed.
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> Alain Segura was born in 1949, in Bellac, a town near Limoges, France, where his father, active as an anarchist militant in Spain, settled after the Civil War of 1936-1939. In his teens, he was a member of several small anarchist groups, including the Anarchist International.

That's quite a lot of *huckster bullshit* for a mere 157 words. Marianne Ivsic was *not* "infamous" or even famous: in the words of the author himself, "Marianne received little attention during her lifetime" (p. 7), and – except for the writings of the author – has received virtually no attention at all since her passing. Guy Debord wasn't speaking "approvingly" when he incorrectly described Marianne as "the last Surrealist" (Annie le Brun joined the group years after Marianne did). Once again in the words of the author himself, "Guy Debord called her 'the last surrealist.' He wondered if that was a reason to rejoice or complain" (p. 40). (A more accurate translation of this crucial line is, "He wondered whether one should rejoice or be saddened by this.") And, of

course, the parting of the ways between the Anarchist International (AI) and the Situationist International (SI) *wasn't* a "colossal split": it was an almost completely inconsequential event, one in which the SI unilaterally broke off relations with the AI (an informal group that had only been formed a few weeks previously) – a decision that was and still is only worthy of a footnote. *None* of these unfounded, sensationalistic exaggerations are appropriate for a woman like Marianne, who, in the words of the author, "never ceased deliberately obscuring her trajectory, erasing every trace, and leaving next to nothing behind" (p. 6).

All of the illustrations in the French original are included in this English translation, but none of them are in color. Except for the pictures of Marianne with Debord and Becker-Ho, and the reproduction of the painting by Alexei Butirskiy, all of the images look washed out. This is especially distressing when it comes to Marianne's painting *Don Juan*, which is virtually indecipherable.

What about the translation, which was done by the team of Anna O'Meara and Sarah Lynne-Roberts, both of whom are Ph.D. candidates in Art History & Visual Studies at the University of Victoria? To begin their "Notes on the Translation," they write:

> When the translators first considered the following text, it was clear that style and contextual specificity were important to the author, Alain Segura, and his commitment to language and poeticism should inform our translation decisions.
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> We decided to consider methodologies used by the Situationist International, in particular those Guy Debord discusses in his collected letters, which reveal an intensive commitment to assisting translators in understanding his writing, clarifying meaning, and deep investment in etymology and double meanings. Words have histories and memories associated with them that are intangible and open. Following Debord's own methodology, the translators decided to engage Segura significantly in the process of choosing words and elaborating on the meaning of particular phrases. The translation of this text has the gift of the author's astute and poetic involvement.

I'm sorry, but "style and contextual specificity" are "important" to *every* author who is not a hack, not just Alain Segura, and the "methodology" of asking an author – if he or she is alive and contactable by normal means – to review, comment upon and, when necessary, correct the translation of something he or she has written is shared by *every* serious translator, not just those who have translated the writings of the SI or Guy Debord. Such was certainly the "methodology" I used when I translated *Une saison avec Marianne* into English more than two years ago. By claiming that they have somehow *done something special* by asking the author to review their work, the translators have actually undermined their own intellectual and creative autonomy and have thus made themselves look ridiculous. After all, they are, presumably, the ones who speak English as their first language and know how other, similar works have been translated into English in the past; they should not make it a policy to consistently defer to the author's opinion, the author should defer to theirs. After all, as Debord himself made clear, the job of a translator is to *improve* what has been written, not merely reproduce it, faults and all.

There are quite a large number of *contrasens* in *A Season with Marianne*. The translators have translated *tract* as "pamphlet" (p. 1), which is certainly incorrect when it comes to the single-page text that Marianne wrote and distributed during May 1968. The translators have

translated *les cafés dont l'enseigne fleurait l'insurrection populaire* (the cafes on whose signs working-class insurrection bloomed), as "cafes whose signs called with popular insurrection" (p. 15), which the copyeditor, even if he or she doesn't understand French, should have flagged as bad English. The translators have translated *misère* as "destitution," and not "poverty" or "misery" (pp. 18 and 27), as has been done ever since the time of Proudhon and Marx. They have translated *Elle me sembla sur le coup d'une bêtise insigne* as "This question seemed to me deadly out of place" (p. 20), which should also have been flagged by the copyeditor as bad English. (The same goes for "he [Debord] had a legendary intransigence, pulling as far from his enemies as closely toward his friends," a *sottise* that mars p. 22). They have rendered *exclusion* as "dismissal," which is far too weak a term, and *l'afflichage de leurs bandes dessinées* (the posting on walls of their comic strips) as "an exhibit of their comic strips" (p. 26), which is quite a different matter. They have simply refused to translate *autogestion* (p. 34), putting it in italics as if the word "self-management" didn't exist. They have translated *un Manouche* as "a Roma" (p. 43), when it is in fact a form of music ("gypsy jazz") that need not be played by a person who is Roma. They have missed the pun on VARIE OR (a sound-alike for WARRIOR) and have translated it as "varied gold" (p. 48), when it actually means "that which changes gold." They have translated *exemplaire* as "draft" (p. 57), when it actually means "specimen" or "example."

I feel sorry for the aforementioned copyeditor. No doubt overwhelmed by the sheer number of revisions and revised revisions that went back and forth between the translators and the author, and perhaps not given enough time to get to everything before the deadline, he or she missed correcting many phrases and sentences that just don't make any sense. Examples: "The diatribe did not leave the criticisms hanging but rather connected it to stronger trends before rekindling them" (p. 17); "the essence of their personalities merited our approach to them to the place where the drama was unfolding" (p. 20); "these quotations from George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* (1938) and Franz Borkenau's *The Spanish Cockpit* (1937) indicate memories of past rumblings from the street" (footnote, p. 31) (note well that, instead of insisting that the translators go back to the original English-language editions of these books by Orwell and Borkenau and *quote directly from them*, the copyeditor has allowed the team to translate the French translations that were consulted by the author *back into English*, thus providing a completely unnecessary translation of a translation); the translation of *Or s'en vont, les chevaliers questant* is given as "Off They Go, the Knights on Their Quest" in one place (p. 1) and "Come What May, the Knights Will Quest" somewhere else (p. 33); "I was writing several lines in my *Knights* wherein I spoke about him" (p. 70); "The meeting of the three friends who are searching them had been set long ago" (p. 75) – *trop, c'est trop*.

When it comes to footnotes, the translators and/or the copyeditor do not provide enough of them, hardly any, in fact. They actually seem reluctant to provide them. Many translators are, even the good ones: they fear offending the author, who might take footnotes as an indication that his or her allusions and references are obscure; they fear accusations that they are "spoon-feeding" the reader, who, presumably, is as well-educated as they are or, if not, will be perfectly capable of doing such tedious but rewarding research on their own. But these fears overlook the simple fact that a translator who provides footnotes is performing a public service. By doing it all at once and for everyone, he or she is minimizing the amount of labor that the collective of individual readers must expend and removes the need for each individual reader to perform the very same task that the other readers are performing. And, of course, once appended, footnotes can be verified, questioned, challenged and, if needed, corrected by any reader who cares to do so.

In the absence of explanatory footnotes, there are many historical, social and literary references and allusions in *A Season with Marianne* that will certainly be missed by the "average" American reader, especially those who are not familiar with contemporary French history and culture, in general, or with modern French anarchism and the Situationist International, in particular. A press release from Commons Notions describes Segura's book as "gossipy," which it surely is. But what's the point of writing a "gossipy" book if no one knows whom you are gossiping about? Is it not frustrating to read a book that seems to proffer "insider" knowledge but actually withholds the most salient details?

This brings our attention back to Alain Segura, who is in fact the true protagonist of his book, not Marianne Ivsic. In "Musketeer," the second-to-last chapter of *A Season with Marianne* – it should have been the very last chapter, because, unlike the chapter that follows it, it concerns the present and those who are still alive, not the past and those who are dead – he writes (pp. 70-71):

> He was a long-time friend, but we were hardly close. We first met in the mid-1960s. René Viénet was a member of the prestigious Situationist International. This qualifier would have made him smile. But my comrades and I, we were so amazed by the Situationist back then. […]
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> During the pandemic, René arranged to meet me in a beloved bookshop […] I had before me one of those remarkable men who one never forgets having had the good fortune of meeting. Our handshake that day held a certain weight. It recalled those fragmented memories of poetry and history; all things blended together. It confirmed the image I held of him, of a Musketeer. His features bore a notable distinction.
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> My memories [recalled in *Or s'en vont, les chevaliers questant*] had touched him. He was having a hard time, recollecting now, and I had helped him recall them. I had an even stronger impulse to guide him; when he had to leave to run an errand, I proposed that I accompany him. His powerful stature now had something of a frailty to it. It seemed to me that he would find the journey easier with me.
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> Those paces down the street, in the busy throng, remain special to me. It seemed an exquisite moment which, to this day, leaves me in total awe. We were two survivors of a sunken galleon; we walked in a cloud of gold dust, glimmering in silence, almost shoulder to shoulder as the path narrowed. Like those times when we sat in a café, around a table.

So ends "Musketeer." Once separated by a vast distance, René Viénet and Alain Segura are now very close. Instead of simply receiving guidance and help from the former Situationist, the once-and-forever Situationist admirer is now in a position to give guidance and help *to him*. They are almost equals, "almost" walking "shoulder to shoulder." They are both "survivors" of the "sunken galleon" that was the "prestigious" Situationist International.

I'm not buying it. Upon the SI's rejection of the little group of which he was a part, and the dissolution of that group, did Segura try to form another one? Did he found a new journal? Did he write any new essays? No, he didn't. Between the early 1970s and the early 2010s, he was, it seems, politically inactive. Lord knows what he did during that long period of time, but it certainly wasn't trying to raise the "sunken galleon" from its watery grave or even put up buoys

that marked its last known location. It is clear that Segura was never really interested in political action or revolution; he was always interested in the social life, "the scene," that surrounded the people who were engaged in political action, who tried to make a revolution. All he really wanted to do was hang out with and gaze in amazement at the modern-day equivalents of the Four Musketeers and the Knights of the Round Table. Sure, he provided me with a copy of the scorching-hot leaflet that Marianne and Pierre Petit wrote and distributed during May '68, which I posted to my website, but he didn't want his name associated with it: he was afraid people might think he shared their radical views and put him into some kind of danger.

Segura himself says that, back in 1966 or 1967, when he first read *On the Poverty of Student Life*, he "didn't understand it" (p. 16). He was a student at the time and he "didn't understand" *On the Poverty of Student Life*. OK. "A little later, in November 1967," Segura writes, "Guy published his book, *The Society of the Spectacle*" (p. 27). Did he understand it? Did he like it? No. "Guy's effort was excessive and endearing. *The Society of the Spectacle* seemed to promise to remove the veil, even though I was never convinced by this book's moralizing tone and weighty declarations" (p. 27). This is the first time I've ever heard someone accuse Debord's book of having a "moralizing tone," which one presumes is a bad thing. To whom or about whom does it "moralize"? The workers. According to Segura, writing in an unpublished text about Debord's 119th thesis,

> Of course it is understood that, for the instauration of the power of the Workers' Council, one needs workers. And so the word "workers," in the texts of the SI, takes on a curious flavor. Who is one speaking of? The workers themselves would be quite surprised if one spoke to them of Councils. For here they are invited to a party that they, no doubt, would be uninterested in – they who have begun to forget about the existence of their reformist labor unions.
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> Failing to be qualitative, they are required to take truly dangerous leaps, such as the condition that *the workers become dialecticians and inscribe their thought in their practice* (Thesis 123).
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> One must have a certain self-assurance to mobilize them in this way and to engage them in a dialectical exercise that will quickly render them operational. But why? We must not be mistaken: there must be a troop, some theoretical cannon fodder. They are the sacrificed, the chosen ones of global theory.

"The workers themselves would be quite surprised if one spoke to them of Councils," which is "a party that they, no doubt, would be uninterested in" – except, of course, for those tens of thousands of workers who participated in Workers Councils during the Russian Revolution of 1905, the movement led by Makhno circa 1918-1921, the German Revolution of 1918-1919, the Irish Revolution of 1919-1923, the Spanish Revolution of 1936, the Hungarian revolution of 1956, etc. etc. It is only on the basis of this ignorance of revolutionary history that Segura – the son of a Spanish anarchist, yes, but someone who "was totally unaware of my father's membership to the anarcho-syndicalist union" (the CNT) and who was "even more surprised that he'd remained active" (p. 29) – is able to claim that "self-assured" (that is to say: reckless) people like Debord believe that "there must be a troop, some theoretical cannon fodder," that the workers, whether they like it or not, must be led to take "truly dangerous leaps" and be "sacrificed" for the good of the revolution. But that is not at all what Debord believed or says anywhere in *The Society of the Spectacle*, a book that Segura clearly prefers to *look at* and use as

a prompt for his own "poetic" speculations, rather than read and understand: "However, I wasn't left indifferent as I considered the title in black letters and the dazzling white cover," he writes. "I sensed a concern with holding the words, even just retaining their shadow, as though the world, now captured, must remain imprisoned in ink, never to escape from the page" (pp. 27-28).

It is quite clear that Segura was not and still isn't a Situationist, and that he wasn't much of an anarchist either. "I never agreed, [not] for a single moment," he says, "with the May '68 crowd" (p. 39). *Try to wrap your head around that*, especially those of you who believe the book's back cover when it says that Segura is concerned with "the heady militancy of May '68," the "heady days of friendship, rebellion, and creative militancy surrounding May '68." Alain Segura *never "agreed with" any of it*, never agreed with "the May '68 crowd," he says, as if it were a small Parisian social scene and not a country-wide movement in which tens of millions of people – many of whom knew nothing about the Énrages or the situationists – went out on an unprecedented general wildcat strike that lasted several weeks and threatened to topple the French government. "The movement of occupations," Segura says, "asked society to stop and to server ties with the world" (p. 39). No, you're wrong: the Occupations Movement didn't ask anything of "society" (which is somehow different from "the world"?). It simply *took what it wanted* and tried to *reestablish* "ties with the world," which is what Segura's good friend René Viénet tried to do when he sent out wickedly funny telegrams to the leaders of the so-called Communist world and laughed at them, warning them that their time was going to come, and soon. "But beneath their charts of demands," Segura writes of the "May '68 crowd," who of course demanded nothing but the impossible, "the barriers had not given way. They had only multiplied" (p. 39). And that is why Debord and the other situationists and true anarchists who were a part of the Occupations Movement formed the Conseil pour le Maintien des Occupations: they didn't throw up their hands and quit; they kept fighting.

Look here: for all his faults, Segura is a very fine writer, a poet even, and, when his text is translated well, it sings. He provides especially vivid and memorable descriptions of the streets and architecture of Paris. His portrait of his relationship with Marianne is subtle and nuanced, and, if entrusted to the right filmmaker, would make an excellent movie. And so I say, if you want to read what he's written, and judge its merits for yourself, don't buy the edition published by Common Notions and read my translation instead. You can find it here, for free: https://www.notbored.org/A-Season-with-Marianne.pdf.

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