

# Letter from Raoul Vaneigem to Guy Debord

## 24 January 1961<sup>1</sup>

Dear Mr. Debord,

A short while ago I received a letter from Mr. Lefebvre in which he assures me of the interest that you might take in meeting me in Paris. Due to the strikes, that letter unfortunately reached me after my return from Paris, leaving me the regret of having missed an interview that I hold dear. Perhaps this is only a matter of time, because the admirable insurrectionary momentum of these strikes has broken under the weight of Social-Democratic opportunism, Stalinist inertia and the incompetence of the unions. In a work that I will make available to you in several days, I have tried to bring into action the inaccessible totality in which it cannot effectively exercise itself in the dialectic of the individual, the group and history. During recent events, sociologists, economists, and badly prepared (or too few) agitators have seen their efforts stop short, take on an unexpected form or break against the reefs of the union bureaucracy. Located between the authentically alive revolutionary forces and the rusted levers that the political flunkies hold, the Leftist intellectual limits himself to his role as witness and his testimony will even excludes the struggle, if he isn't careful. Poor consolation for knowing it. Between thought and action, the terrain is swampy. The putrid odor of alcohol, whorehouses and the Holy Sacrament.

It is easy to encounter on les Champs-Élysées the desire to demonstrate with the workers, to organize strike pickets . . . One remains divided, dispersed, torn apart like a long-cuckolded actor who, every evening, plays the role of Adonis, the happy lover, the seducer, on the stage. We live aesthetically or, even better, aesthetic conventions “live us,” they love us in the manner of an incubus. We are builders who are mocked by our piles of bricks. When will we seize the reel with both hands, in the praxis of a good technician? In this sense, the situationist movement interests me greatly (thanks for the package; I have much appreciated

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<sup>1</sup> Published in Raoul Vaneigem and Gérard Berréby, *Rien n'est fini, tout commence* (Editions Allia, 2014). Translated by NOT BORED! 31 October 2014. Cf. Debord's response, dated 31 January 1961:

<http://www.notbored.org/debord-31January1961.html>.

your “Preliminaries”<sup>2</sup> but I regret – we must discuss it – that I do not like the tone or the resolutions in Situationism #5,<sup>3</sup> which, to my mind, give too much emphasis to the “internal bulletin” aspect and not enough to violent action against ideology and bourgeois art). I have decided to publish “Fragments pour une poétique”<sup>4</sup> (I must find a publisher!) because it seems to me that the right time has come, at a favorable conjuncture, in the perspective of new struggles – our epoch is something like Russia in 1905. It is a borderless but determined text, the value of which lies in its own experimentation. In it I consider poetry not as a method of diversion, or as a construction in alienation, but as the expression and completion of an action, the “*han!*” of boat haulers who simultaneously model and perfect their efforts at the moment of completing them. It is no longer enough to provoke the breath of revolt, in the manner of Bloch, Essenine, Mayakowsky, Brecht, Eluard, Pichette – poetry must be that very breath, not in the heart of the solitary reader but in the living usage a mass of people make of it. The bourgeoisie has appropriated most of the beautiful phrases of revolt for itself; it turns them into grammar, a schoolboy’s lunch. For the bourgeoisie, true poetry is luxury that it alone can claim; all of it is grist for its cultural capitalization. Moreover, stealing poetic wealth from the people, it obligates them to consume in return the masturbatory rhythm of its buglers, an advertising poetry (from “Dear Abby” to margarine), admirably *elaborated* in the laboratories of brainwashing. But the techniques spoken about by Chakhotin<sup>5</sup> – isn’t it up to us to take them away from the top cops, the clergy, and the technocrats of “psychological action” in order to place these techniques at the service of intelligence, lucidity, class consciousness and disalienation? To deliberately refuse the scientific methods of agitation – isn’t that to consent to live a life of drunkenness, the life of a Franciscan, an assassin or poet *made in Cocteau*?<sup>6</sup> Because it is also the impossible and stupid dialogue with myself that pushes me to want to publish, the intolerable feeling of not being one, thought and action narrowly curled together, [the feeling of] not being the active cog in the mechanism of the world that justifies itself by justifying the world. It is not a text that I intend to give to the public, but a mechanism, a musical score [*partition*] lacking executors, something that lives beyond itself, shadows clinging to their future embodiments, a life on the point of appearing and without which I

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel Blanchard (aka Pierre Canjuers) and Guy Debord, “Préliminaires pour une définition de l’unité du programme révolutionnaire” (Paris, 1960).

<sup>3</sup> He means *Internationale Situationniste* #5, published December 1960.

<sup>4</sup> Also published in Raoul Vaneigem and Gérard Berréby, *Rien est fini, tout commence*.

<sup>5</sup> Sergei Chakhoti (1883-1973), an anti-Nazi theorist of propaganda.

<sup>6</sup> Phrase in Italics: English in original.

would disappear. For the moment, it is enough for me to know that my inquietude and my distress join those of thousands of other people, that I can't liberate myself without them and that it remains possible to liberate them. In the hope of meeting you some day soon – and in complete friendship,

Raoul Vaneigem

8 Place du Chat Botté, Brussels, 18