

Portrait of Guy Debord as a Young Libertine

Odile Passot

Quel besoin a-t-on de “faire un portrait” de moi? N’ai-je
pas fait moi-même, dans mes écrits, le meilleur portrait
que l’on pourra jamais en faire, si le portrait en question
pouvait avoir la plus petite nécessité?
Guy Debord, “*Cette mauvaise réputation...*”

The Man Behind the Mask

With the publication of his *Memoirs* in 1959, Guy Debord began, insistently, to paint his own portrait, which he retouched again and again in the years that followed. Debord gave much of his work an autobiographical dimension, intermingling in this way objectivity and subjectivity, theory and practice. Despite his desire for transparency, however, Debord composed his texts according to a secret code, which must be broken in order to understand what he really means. He cares little whether the common reader understands: “Having, then, to take account of readers who are both attentive and diversely influential,” he writes in *Commentary on the Society of the Spectacle*, “I obviously cannot speak in complete freedom. Above all, I must take care not to give too much information to just anybody” (1). Debord has, in fact, covered his tracks, so that only those who take the trouble to crack the code will understand his work. Despite the familiar faces in his films, his winks and private jokes, Debord gives little of himself away. He proceeds by allusions, while his real life remains hidden, obscure. In *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni*, he lingers on the great episodes of his life (the Lettrist epic, May ‘68, etc.), but it is not always possible to reconstitute the chain of events without the key to his particular codes.¹ Unless done by one who knew him personally, any portrait of Debord that goes beyond what he himself made public will be at best speculation, and at worst sleight-of-

hand. To understand the multiple self-portraits he left behind, we must turn to those who knew Debord, and recorded their own images of him.

During his lifetime, Debord was the subject of numerous accounts. Gérard Guégan depicted him in his 1975 novel *The Irregulars* as a character named Antoine Peyrot. Guégan had little love for Debord, and used Peyrot to settle the score between them.² Maurice Rajsfus dedicated the eighth chapter of his memoirs to a description of Saint-Germain-des-Prés between 1950 and 1954, just at the time of the Lettrist International. He met Debord there, and provides invaluable information not only on the revolutionary youth of the era, but on the screening of the first Lettrist films, including the famous showing of *Hurléments en faveur de Sade* on October 13, 1952 (Rajsfus 1992).

Since Debord's death, tongues have loosened, and accounts of Debord have become more frequent. Gérard Berréby conducted a series of interviews with Jean-Michel Mension, who took part in the Lettrists' escapades around 1953. The interviews give us a better understanding of the importance of the Lettrist movement in the development of Debord's ideas (Mension 1998). No doubt other accounts will appear in the near future.

To these various eyewitnesses must be added Debord's two wives, Michèle Bernstein and, later, Alice Becker-Ho. The latter has, for the moment, published only a short collection of poems, in which she mourns the suicide of her husband (Becker-Ho 1998). Bernstein, on the other hand, published two novels, *Tous les chevaux du roi* in 1960 and *La Nuit* in 1961, which are *romans à clef* of her life with Debord. I would like to study these two texts for the light they shed on Debord's life and intellectual sensibility. Of course, we must proceed cautiously, not only because they present themselves as works of fiction, but also because their author herself tends to minimize their importance. For several reasons, however, they deserve an attentive reading, which they have not yet received. Rather than taking the novels as works purely of the imagination, I consider them as "autofictions." This term, coined by Serge Doubrovsky, refers to a genre of literature in which the author presents aspects of his real life to the public in a distilled and reworked form. Autofiction is neither a diary nor pure fiction, but an intermediate genre, with rules of its own. Michèle Bernstein does not tell all, nor does she call her characters by their real names, but she plants clues that identify them. The adventures she recounts have verisimilitude, and their truth has in fact never been called into question. For this reason, Bernstein's two texts seem essential to any understanding of Debord and the Situationist movement.

Dangerous Liaisons: Laclos meets the SI

Bernstein's novels, *Tous les chevaux du roi* and *La Nuit* have generally been poorly received by critics. Gérard Guégan is hardly kind to the former:

In this novel by Michèle Bernstein, at the time Guy Debord's companion, the main characters—Gilles, Carole and Geneviève—labor never to grow old except "as a last resort." Closer to *Les Tricheurs* than to *A bout de souffle*, *Tous les chevaux du roi* published on August 30, 1960, has not convinced Ariane to read the Situationists. She couldn't get past page 65. [...] Gilles is a grotesque of Debord, and Geneviève a screen for Michèle Bernstein, currently a literary chronicler at *Libération*. But novels à clef are worth less than novels without locks. (*Un cavalier* 81-2).

Shigenobu Gonzalvez cites both texts in his bibliography of Debord, but pays them little attention. He writes,

The first novel by Debord's former wife depicts the everyday life and loves of a "modern" young couple, as they used to be called. One recognizes Bernstein and Debord in the guise of the protagonists. There is no direct reference to their Situationist activity, only a reference to a trip to Amsterdam to organize a scandal. (Gonzalvez 130-1)

Of the second novel, Gonzalvez says only that "Bernstein repeats exactly the plot of *Tous les chevaux du roi*, which she structures in the manner of the authors of the *nouveau roman*" (131).

Michèle Bernstein has hardly helped her readers to take the two texts seriously. In a 1983 interview with Greil Marcus, she practically dismisses them as jokes.³ Without taking her remarks quite at face value, Marcus, too, minimizes the novels' importance, noting that neither one was mentioned in any Situationist publication. Marcus recounts a legend according to which Bernstein's books were intended only to put money in the Situationist International's coffers at a moment when the movement lacked the funds to pay its printers:

"Michèle must write a novel," Debord said. "I cannot write a novel," she said. "I have no imagination." "Anyone can write art," Debord said. "But Situationists cannot practice a dead art," Bernstein said, "and the novel is dead if anything is." "There is always *détournement*," Debord said. (Marcus 422).

Convinced by this argument, the story goes, Bernstein went to work, attempting to manufacture a best-seller according to proven recipes and the public's expectations. Roger Vadim had just made a "scandalous" film adaptation of *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, with Gérard Philipe and Jeanne

Moreau; Bernstein in turn parodied Laclos's novel, in the hope of meeting a comparable success. Thus *Tous les chevaux du roi* was born. The novel sold well enough that the publisher commissioned a second; Bernstein responded immediately with *La Nuit*.⁴ So, at least, the legend goes. It has every semblance of truth, and is, moreover, so widespread in the Situationist milieu that no one has displayed the slightest desire to read the two works with any attention, let alone to study them seriously.

This first novel was firmly, although discreetly, under the influence of the SI, of which Bernstein was one of the chief members at the time. Its epigram admits this influence eloquently: "This mixture of blue scarves, ladies, cuirasses, violins in the room and trumpets in the courtyard, offered a spectacle seen more often in novels than elsewhere." This quote from Cardinal de Retz had previously appeared twice in Situationist publications, once in no. 2 of the *SI* review, and once in Debord's *Memoirs*, both of which appeared in 1958.⁵

The epigram of the novel's third part is also drawn from the stock of Situationist quotations. It is taken from the Preface to Racine's *Bérénice*: "It is by no means essential that there should be blood and corpses in a tragedy; it is enough that its action should be great and its actor heroic, that passions should be aroused, and that everything in it should breathe that majestic sadness in which all the pleasure of tragedy resides" (376). These lines appeared previously in *Potlach*, no. 26, "Eulogy for Diverted Prose," without attribution, as was the rule with *détournements* (233). Recall that Racine's tragedy is about the split between the lovers Titus and Bérénice, obliged to separate for reasons of state. Other signs place Bernstein's volume discreetly under the Situationist aegis, beginning with the dedication "for Guy." Our purpose here is not to catalogue these signs, however, but to show the direct relation between Bernstein's novel and the Situationist sensibility of the time. As I will demonstrate, although the Situationists denounced the spectacle, they were themselves avid spectators, especially of certain films, whose role in their personal mythology is reflected in Bernstein's novels.

All the King's Horses

Tous les chevaux du roi is divided classically into three parts, like Debord's *Memoirs*. It recounts episodes from the lives of Gilles and Geneviève, a couple of Parisian intellectuals who move in the avant-garde literary and intellectual circles of the era. The story takes place in the spring of 1957. It is told by Geneviève, spokeswoman for the author. At the opening of a show of recent

paintings by François-Joseph in a Latin Quarter gallery, the painter's wife invites Gilles and Geneviève to dinner. Over the course of the dinner, surrounded by artists (doubtless Surrealists) who "parade the ideas of thirty years ago" (12), Gilles and Geneviève meet Carole, the painter's stepdaughter. Carole, twenty years old, is herself a painter, with an androgynous charm neither Gilles nor Geneviève can resist: "Standing up, she seemed small and impossibly thin. Her short blond hair tousled, dressed like a model child in a white crewneck and blue sweater, she hardly looked her age" (13).

After the meal, Gilles and Geneviève take Carole home in a taxi. She lives in a maid's room in a bourgeois apartment, in the posh sixteenth *arrondissement*. Carole invites the couple up to her room, where she enchants them by singing traditional French songs, accompanying herself on the guitar. "Carole sang well, and classic songs: girls who are pretty at fifteen, when their boyfriends go to war. Girls who lose their rings by the riverside, weep at the passing seasons, will not give up their loves. Girls who go into the woods, girls one misses later, at sea, and the voyage will never end" (16-17).⁶ The arrival of Carole's friend Béatrice casts a pall on the little gathering. Gilles and Geneviève hurry home, eager to know Carole better: "We were happy and fiercely in love. In love with each other, in love with Carole, in love with something vague, and in truth it was the right moment for that" (19).

In the following days, the couple see Carole again. Gilles in particular takes her on long walks at night, and seduces her by making her see the city in a new light: "Gilles knows how to re-invent Paris" (38). These nighttime walks must be understood as real *dérives* between Les Halles, Maubert and the Place Monge. They are the occasion for the exchange of secrets and for chance encounters in cafés, which are the stops on this initiatory voyage. The *dérives* bring about a spiritual change in Carole—*dérive* being a *psychogeographical* experience, that is, an experience in which the psychological dimension is inseparable from the apprehension of space. When Gilles brings one of Carole's paintings home, the gift provokes a falling-out between Carole and Béatrice. Henceforth Carole acquires a separate existence; she gives her life its own particular meaning.

Gilles and Carole become lovers. They spend a good deal of time together; they quarrel and they make up. Without admitting that the affair hurts her, Geneviève distances herself from her husband. While visiting her friend Ole, she meets a very young man, Bertrand, whom, that very night, she takes as a lover. When summer comes, Gilles, Geneviève and Carole go south to Saint-Paul de Vence. Bertrand, although he's beginning to tire of

Geneviève, arranges to visit Hélène, a family friend who lives near Saint-Paul. At summer's end, Gilles and Carole travel to Holland, where Gilles is supposed to make "a scandal" (108). Geneviève returns to Paris with Bertrand and Hélène. She invites Hélène to her apartment, and begins an affair with her. Geneviève tells Bertrand about it the next day, effectively breaking things off with him. When Gilles returns from Holland, she tells him, too, about Hélène. The couple make up in the end, Gilles giving up Carole and Geneviève, Hélène. After their various affairs, Gilles and Geneviève find themselves together again, more strongly bound to each other than ever before.

This somewhat dry synopsis doesn't really do justice to Bernstein's light, ironic and charming novel. Gilles is immediately recognizable as Debord. When Carole asks, "What are you interested in, really?" Gilles answers, "Reification." The girl then says, "That's serious work, with thick books and lots of papers on a big table." "No," Gilles replies, "I walk around. Mostly I walk around" (29-30).⁷ The shadowy character of Ole is inspired by Asger Jorn (1914-1973), one of the founders of the SI, and, earlier, of the movement Cobra.⁸ A close friend of Debord and Bernstein, he financed the review *SI* and the films Debord was making at the time.⁹ Finally, we can see Bernstein herself in Geneviève, the narrator. Born in Paris in 1932, she was one of the founding members of the Lettrist International; her name appears in the review *Potlach* beginning with the third issue; she married Debord in 1954.

Even if the ideas dear to the SI at the time, like the *dérive*, *détournement*, and *séparation*, are treated lightly, Bernstein's novel nevertheless communicates the fundamental values of the movement, as they are presented in the first issues of the review *SI*. What's more, cultural references in the novel are numerous enough to give the characters some weight.¹⁰ In addition to the allusions to traditional French songs and to surrealism and other movements, we find the universe of the eighteenth-century libertine novel. Geneviève is a Marquise de Merteuil, less cynical than the original, steeped in the work of Sagan and Beauvoir; Gilles is a Valmont with less respect for the mores of his time, who falls in love with a Cécile slightly less naive than Laclos's model.

Cinematic Influences: A Tale of Two Gilles

The novel bears the clear imprint of Marcel Carné's 1942 film, *Les visiteurs du soir* (*The Devil's Envoys*). Based on a screenplay by Jacques Prévert and Pierre Laroche, the film takes place in 1485, and concerns two troubadours,

Gilles and the androgynous Dominique, who seek shelter in a castle and are invited to participate in prenuptial festivities. What their host does not know is that Gilles and Dominique have been sent by the devil, to spread despair. Through their diabolical art and enchanting songs, they spread trouble and dissent. They carry a sort of plague, a romantic passion that scoffs at authority, convention and social values and escapes the control of the devil himself. Dominique is sexual ambiguity incarnate, now a page and now a young woman; she is also a damned woman, a sort of Laclosian Madame de Merteuil, who uses people for her own dark ends. Her partner Gilles calls into question traditional notions of love. In the course of a hunting expedition, he leads Anne, the bride-to-be, into a forest labyrinth, a metaphor for the loss of all points of reference. In the heart of the forest he takes her for the first time, forcing her to discover "true" love. After which he rejects her, less from indifference than in order to make her despair, as he had promised Satan. These elements in *Les Visiteurs du Soir* are reference points for Debord and Bernstein, who alluded to the film a number of times.¹¹ Debord is given the name Gilles in Bernstein's two novels. Further, a song from the film, "The devil takes us far from our fair maids," returns in *Tous les chevaux du roi*. The novels' Gilles is both romantic troubadour and tempting devil. In Bernstein's universe, there is no transcendence, divine or diabolic; humans are subject to their own negativity, which they cultivate to de-stabilize their century's received truths. The film's Dominique and the novel's Geneviève also have a number of traits in common. Where the latter uses her sexual ambiguity to seduce Bertrand and Hélène, the former turns the heads of both the old Baron and his future son-in-law. Anne, the object of both troubadours' romantic assaults, possesses on the one hand the naiveté of a Cécile de Volanges, and on the other the passionate violence of the Présidente de Tourvel. In Prévert's scenario, she performs the same function as Carole in Bernstein's novels: she is part of a game whose real stakes she does not understand. Bernstein's novels don't simply allude to Carné's film; they model Gilles and Geneviève's behavior on the film, and, by implication, on the tradition of negativity in which the film is inscribed, even if the novels change the ending somewhat, with the "diabolic" couple making up, although at their victims' expense.

The numerous literary and cinematic references, once one recognizes their importance in the economy of the story, give Bernstein's novels weight and depth. Her characters sometimes become aware that their behavior has a novelistic or spectacular dimension: "We're characters from a book, haven't you noticed? We speak in dry little sentences. We even have something

unfinished about us. We can't keep track of everything. It's the rules of the game. And our lives are as predictable as the characters of a novel."

***La Nuit*: Laclos meets Robbe-Grillet**

La Nuit, published in 1961, re-uses the same characters, with the same names, and the same plot. Only the esthetic is different: this time it is inspired by the *nouveau roman* and is indebted to the two films Debord made at the time: *On the Passage of a Few Persons through a Rather Brief Period of Time*, and *Critique of Separation*. Further, the novel's epigraph, which places it under the aegis of Henri Lefebvre, clearly indicates theoretical preoccupations.

Bernstein mixes episodes told in the present, past and future in a jumbled series of paragraphs, like clips of film arranged without regard for chronology. Without knowledge of the previous novel, the plot is nearly impossible to follow. The passages written in the present describe only a single episode, Gilles and Carole's seemingly endless walk through Paris on the night of April 22, 1957. Their stops in cafes and the buildings they look at are described in great detail, like a slow-motion sequence in a film. The night is important in that Gilles and Carole, who have only known each other for a few days, discover the intensity of their attraction to one another. They seal a silent pact, which will lead them to become lovers that very morning, in Carole's room. Although there is no narrator, the author "sees" Gilles and Carole's walk, and attributes to it an importance it did not have in the first novel. Their itinerary is presented as an initiation, a voyage into the labyrinth of the quarter, and ends with an exit, or rather with a return to civilization. In Bernstein's novel, as in Debord's *In girum imus nocte*, night is opposed to day, and the Latin Quarter to the rest of the city, as negative to positive.¹² Over the course of this initiation, the relationship between Gilles and Carole is transformed: they have plunged together into the heart of the labyrinth, into the sleeping city, which the author presents as a sort of mysterious forest. They have, in effect, chosen a dangerous and unknown path:

- "I'd like to be in a labyrinth with you," Carole says.
- "We already are," says Gilles. (92)

The episodes told in the past deal with the events leading up to the night of April 22. They are concerned principally with the places where significant events took place: François-Joseph's gallery, his apartment, and

Carole's room. Here, again, the author includes numerous details only alluded to in the earlier novel. Among other things, we learn that Carole and her stepfather François-Joseph aren't as simple as they seemed. During their dinner, the artist, who has drunk a good deal, teases his stepdaughter insistently. "There was a sort of complicity between them in misunderstanding Carole knew for what deep reasons (no one is *that* young, nor that innocent), François-Joseph took such an interest in her, and, although by her spite she showed that she didn't want any part of it, still she encouraged it a little, admitted that it was there" (40).

The episode of songs in Carole's room is likewise presented in a new light. Carole is described as "a woman-child" (52); she sings at Gilles's request, to please him, thus reversing the relation between Anne and Gilles in *Les Visiteurs du Soir* (where it is the latter who sings for the former's pleasure). Carole's repertoire includes Maurice Thiriet-style laments, taken from Carné's film (56-7). It is not simply the girl's musical talent that fascinates, but her sexual ambiguity, which moves Gilles and Geneviève to the point that they feel themselves immersed in the atmosphere of the film, in the festival Baron Hugues gave for his daughter's wedding. Thus one of their cult films bursts into their life, thanks to this girl, still practically a stranger: "Her charm was not in her song, but in the way Carole identified with her songs [...] and her way of seeming a little girl—or a page—or more exactly, a girl with a boy's allure, singing, leaning back, and accompanying herself on the guitar" (71-2). As Carole identifies with her songs, Gilles and Geneviève identify with the intrigue (reworked in their imagination) of *Les Visiteurs du soir*.

When Carole's friend Béatrice appears, it is noted that "She was the same size as Carole, her hair of the same color, and done the same way, almost like a boy's" (66).¹³ It's not until the middle of the novel that we discover that Carole and Béatrice are involved with each other romantically, ever since boarding school, a fact that their parents overlook, either because they don't see it or because it serves their purposes too well. Carole hints again and again at her lesbianism in Gilles's presence, but he never asks her "to explain herself clearly." Her affair with Gilles is an occasion for her to move from a homosexual to a heterosexual relationship, as she breaks with Béatrice once and for all.

If one reads the novel in a Situationist perspective, that night becomes a trip into the labyrinth; the streets of Paris have the magical properties of the forest in the Middle Ages; Gilles and Carole are two knights, or rather a knight and his page, who are initiated into the mysteries of life. As they

leave the maze, Carole discovers that she has taken on the Situationists' way of seeing the world, beginning with the practice of the *dérive*, which consists not only in breaking up the utilitarian understanding of the world that underlies urban practice, but also in an openness to new encounters and unexpected events.¹⁴ After this initiation, one imagines that Carole will master the complexity of the Situationist worldview. She will know how to distinguish between the Situationist movement and the pseudo-avant-garde personified by her stepfather. Gilles's love initiates her; it allows her to change her ideas, her values, her way of acting in the world.

The title, *La Nuit*, refers in part to the practices of the troubadours, whom Gilles mentions to Carole in the course of their wandering. He "confirms to her the importance of the theme of dawn in their work [...], their horror of the day was a horror of the law, and the break of day, the break of separation." (81). Originally, when Gilles and Geneviève had visited Carole's room, *they* had been *Les Visiteurs du Soir*. But during Gilles's night wanderings with Carole, the plot of the film obsessively continues to work as an unconscious. This, at least, is what Geneviève imagines: that Carole has taken her place, that Carole now plays Dominique to Gilles: "Sad, lost children, Gilles and Dominique ride slowly down the rue Cardinal-Lemoine. They are mounted on white horses, guitars strapped to their backs. A grand new castle awaits them, and it is the devil who sends them on their way" (49).

At one point in their travels, Gilles tells Carole, "There's something medieval about you. Your haircut, at least. Your sweater, like a coat of mail" "Like in the movies?" the girl replies (48-49). Nothing more is necessary for Carole to slip into the "obsessive myth" Gilles and Geneviève have wrought. Given her skill with the guitar, she takes on the role of Dominique—or rather Gilles generously assigns it to her.¹⁵

A little farther on, Carole speaks her mind:

- "I remember [...] the couple riding in *Les Visiteurs du Soir*, in the beginning, outside the castle, where their arrival will change everything. [...] They arrived together. I think we're just the same. I could dress up as a boy, and pass myself off as your younger brother."
- "Yes," Gilles says, "but no one sent us."
- "That's not the point," Carole says. "We're still coming from far away, aren't we? And we could make a lot of trouble."
- "Surely," says Gilles. (98-99)

Here Carole becomes dangerous for Geneviève. She doesn't accept the role she's been given, the role of Cécile Volanges, of Anne, Baron Hugues' daughter. Carole wants Geneviève's place, a desire she justifies on the

grounds that she looks somewhat like Gilles's wife, and can play an instrument.

In the course of their walk, Gilles seduces Carole, certainly; at the same time he treats her with a nonchalance that suggests that, for the moment, she is nothing for him but a small animal, or at best a doll: "It's Carole he kisses [...] and caresses, carelessly, so that she won't protest, or even respond, like a statuette or a toy, no part of which is erotic, as its erotic properties have been diffused harmoniously through the whole" (68). In other words, Gilles reduces her to a "girl-object." On occasion, the author herself calls Carole a "beast" (95), an "animal" (135), that is, at once inferior, familiar, and domesticated. At their first meeting, didn't Carole show that "she likes to obey, to be given orders" (164)?

When he goes walking with her, Gilles likes to hold Carole by the neck: "He always rests one hand on her, at that moment on the nape of her neck, a gesture that gives Carole an air of complete obedience, as if she were an animal on a leash. She is just small enough for Gilles to find the gesture comfortable" (57-58).¹⁶ When Gilles and Carole meet in a restaurant, at the start of their affair, Geneviève tries to reassure herself, evoking the fundamental confidence that ties her to her husband, and the necessity of not attaching too much importance to the girl.¹⁷ Even as she minimizes the place occupied by Carole, who after all is not the first "other woman" in Gilles's life, Geneviève reminds her husband that he will have to break things off with Carole shortly, if he doesn't want to compromise the pact on which their marriage is founded (97-98). Geneviève is perfectly aware that she's manipulating her husband, trying to get him to put an end to an affair that injures her. But, too intent on her own ends, she bungles it. Gilles breaks up with Carole, only to resume his affair the first time she calls.

An "Open Marriage" and its Limits

In *La Nuit*, Geneviève appears as both more hurt by her husband's infidelity and more cynical about her means of bringing him back. The novel can be read as the description of a betrayed woman who attempts to recover her husband but is hampered by her own political and social beliefs. Geneviève cannot use bourgeois means; she must invent an original solution in order not to lower herself in the esteem of the man she loves.

Gilles and Geneviève are non-conformist in their ideas, their way of living, and their way of loving: "...Carole understands that Geneviève sleeps with other men, and not without telling Gilles about it" (47). Gilles seems to

be a man of great intelligence and vast culture, charming, original, and seductive. He demonstrates a gentleness (sometimes tinged with mockery) in response to every challenge. He breaks friendships off for no apparent reason, at least none known to the friends concerned. His relation to Geneviève is founded not so much on mutual attraction as on a shared conception of life. In *La Nuit*, the author emphasizes more than once the willfulness, even the control that the couple exert at once on their own lives, and on the fate of those who come near them, like Bertrand, Carole, or Hélène. It is, however, easy to discern the bad faith of certain passages in the novel, in particular those in which Geneviève explains her own feelings. She deceives herself as to the extent of her non-conformity. Even as she gives her husband free rein in his ideas as in his loves, she never ceases to scrutinize his every movement, the changes in his mood, the development of his feelings for Carole. She literally “hallucinates” the night of April 22, of such great importance for her, in that she risks losing the man she loves. She takes Bertrand as a lover to avoid being reduced to the bourgeois role of the cheated-on wife, incapable of holding onto her husband.

Even for those open to multiple experiences, some limits are not to be crossed. Even if one grants one’s partner sexual freedom, freedom of affection—with all that it implies—constitutes a threat. This is a stumbling block for any sexual revolution, in 1960 as today. We can note another problem, which has to do with the gendered division of labor in everyday life. Gilles and Geneviève behave traditionally, in that he allows himself to be waited upon, while she takes on the greater part of the household work.¹⁸ This reservation aside, Geneviève is indeed a non-conformist wife, free from the prejudices of her time: she welcomes Carole, attracted as she is to the girl; she even participates, mentally, in Carole’s affair with Gilles, which she can experience only at a remove.

But once she feels genuinely threatened, Geneviève must find a way to defeat her rival. In so doing, she must take into account the tacit, liberal, even libertine conventions between herself and her husband. These conventions imply not only sexual freedom for both partners, but also a solidarity between them, built of mutual trust and shared values.¹⁹ But there is this new, unexpected element, Gilles’s excessive love for Carole, which threatens to destabilize the “permanent” couple, Gilles and Geneviève. Carole’s demands for love, her tricks and her lies have brought on the unforeseen, the uncontrollable. Gilles finds himself overcome by this girl, who is not satisfied with the secondary role assigned her by the script. He

breaks with her, finally, on the day when she dares to ask him to account for himself—that is, when she behaves like a jealous and possessive mistress.

Sexual Ambiguity and Stratagems

Beyond this official motive, the lovers' separation is doubtless the result of Geneviève's stratagems, which we must now consider from another perspective. We have already noted that Carole's sexual ambiguity accounts for a good deal of her effect on Geneviève and Gilles. We do not know whether it is her boyishness or her immaturity that pleases Gilles. Her revelation of her homosexual experiences with Béatrice, far from shocking him, only intrigues him more, as it gives her an aura of non-conformism. Who knows whether it doesn't please some deeper level of his being as well? Gilles seems fascinated by feminine homosexuality, as a dialogue between husband and wife in *Tous les chevaux du roi* tends to confirm. Geneviève admits to her husband that she is becoming attached to Hélène: "If you look at her, she's much prettier than Carole" (*Chevaux*, 142). To which Gilles replies, "I like the idea of you and Hélène, I like it better than the idea of you and Bertrand" (142). Geneviève, who knows her man well, admits in turn, "I knew it. I did it for you" (142).²⁰

When he first meets Carole, Gilles is attracted because she's young, she's intelligent, she sings songs he likes, and she paints. Above all, she embodies the myth of the androgyne, which seduces him with its mix of archaism and modernity.²¹ On a deeper level, Carole reveals to Gilles an unknown dimension of his own personality, that is, the homosexual desire that he cannot otherwise admit. If in her turn, Carole's affair with Gilles realizes her fantasies of transgressing the oedipal taboo, by displacing them from her step-father to Gilles, so Gilles realizes his own: by seducing a girl with a boy's attractiveness, he gives himself over to a "homosexual" love without taking it on directly—that is, at once innocently and in bad faith. The lovers, Gilles and Carole, understand each other less on a superficial level than on the level of the unconscious, in that they each realize, by means of the other, a part of the fantasies that structure their deep personality. They are, reciprocally, the image of what they desire, and do not know they desire.²²

Geneviève must enter into this dialectic of the image and destroy its charms. By keeping Bertrand on as a lover, first of all, she places herself on equal terms with Gilles. Where Gilles has a young lover who paints and formulates ideas that seem a little dated to the couple, Geneviève takes a young lover with an interest in poetry. Once again, the young man's style

seems completely outmoded to the two Situationists (*Nuit*, 100-104). Where Geneviève tolerates Carole's presence, Gilles puts up with that of Bertrand. Gilles, however, upsets the system by paying too much attention to Carole.

We have already noted, however, that Geneviève finds Carole attractive. The girl allows Geneviève to cosset her, and confides in her. At a certain point in the story, relations between the women are so friendly that they end up, at least implicitly, distancing themselves from Gilles: "To the point that Gilles will vanish, little by little, from their relations; he will no longer be the obligatory term (or mediator), and indeed, between the two women, agreement will no longer need to pass through his intermediary" (98). Such a state of affairs presents a thinly disguised threat for Gilles, in that the two women now communicate without his mediation, without the help of masculinity. In other words, Gilles risks losing his manly privilege as a mediator between women. If Carole and Geneviève themselves became a couple, giving and receiving pleasure without Gilles, it would mean Gilles's "symbolic castration," or, at the very least, his expulsion from the drama. As we have seen elsewhere, Debord is obsessed by masculinity; he seeks to pass for a "tough guy," no matter what the cost, in order to distance himself from any doubt of his own virility.

On her return from summer vacation, Geneviève at last finds an adequate stratagem. Ridding herself of Bertrand, she becomes Hélène's lover. In doing so, she realizes Gilles's secret fantasy, that is, to have the woman he loves love another woman. Geneviève, who resembles Carole in some ways, takes the place of her young rival when she in turn realizes the *image* that is at the heart of Gilles's relation to his mistress. Geneviève will offer him the same image, relegating Carole to a secondary role in the drama of their obsessions. Geneviève will become Dominique anew; she will take back her old place by Gilles's side, which a stranger tried to usurp.

Aware of the different stakes in their battle, Geneviève and her husband meet upon his return from Holland. They each have their cards to play. Gilles can replace Geneviève with Carole; Geneviève can destroy Gilles in a still more fundamental way, by depriving him of his masculinity, and thus reducing him to nothing. "Then it's war!" Valmont declares to Madame de Merteuil in *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. Gilles and Geneviève, faced with a similar situation, seem to declare "Then it's peace!" They make up in a sort of "potlatch," where each strives to be as "generous" (in the Corneillian sense of the term) as the other. Gilles gives up what's precious to him, his love for Carole; Geneviève in return ends her affair with Hélène, who, like Carole, finds herself sacrificed on the altar of the couple's reconciliation. Over the

course of her negotiations with her husband, Geneviève “will allow into the drama the conditions of an exchange, of a potlatch of complicity, namely, that Gilles will not be able to act less forcefully than she will, and that his leaving Carole unconditionally will be the first proof of his detachment, of his freedom. And she will make him understand that, unless this reciprocity is observed, it will mean the end of their old complicity. All this will be veiled in irony, in caution, but it will be clear enough all the same” (173-174). By acting thus, Gilles will prove that he behaves “like a man,” that he can break off an affair without regard for the consequences to his mistress.

Thus Geneviève shows herself to be a master strategist. Even as she maintains the appearance of a woman subjected to her husband’s desires, she shows him, in no uncertain terms, what he risks if he goes too far. If he has affairs with young girls, fine, but he may not become emotionally involved in a lasting relationship, which would shatter the traditional concept of the couple. In the game of “gift-counter-gift,” Gilles is the loser. Of the two, he has more to lose.

The values of the Situationist movement are steeped in the culture of heroism. At the center of this culture stands the masculine figure as uncontested mediator of all exchanges. When she disrupts this position, Geneviève threatens not only a man, but an entire system that is unaware of the imaginary presuppositions on which it is founded. Gilles is unprepared to confront this dimension of his own praxis; he chooses to give up his lover, rather than to see the superiority of the “phallus” thrown into question.

Conclusion

I may be reproached for this descent into the private life of the Situationists. My perspective is neither academic, nor usual among contemporary analysts of their saga. It is obvious that I have not taken into account the movement’s revolutionary contribution to art or to everyday life. Why linger over novels whose own author finds them insignificant? According to the Situationists themselves, authors such as Charles Fourier or Mikhail Artzybashev have played an important part in their definition of love. However, if we rely on Bernstein’s two novels, we discover that the Situationist practice is in total opposition to the freedom promoted by a character such as Artzybashev’s Sanin (*Sanin*, 1907). Far from letting themselves be overwhelmed by passion, Gilles and Geneviève try to control it in order to maintain their power on the other characters. Even if they do not acknowledge their true intellectual affiliation, their world is closer to

that of the aristocratic libertines of the eighteenth century than to the Surrealists.

The Situationist movement avoids any analysis of the psychological dimension of human behavior, whether their own or anyone else's. It would like to overlook the part played by the irrational in any action, preferring to conceive of men as rational beings, capable of controlling themselves, the better to control others. We have nevertheless found our investigation of the few documents available on the subject to be fruitful. On the one hand, this study shows us the degree to which the Situationists, above all Debord, were fascinated by the image. If they denounce the spectacle, it is because they are its best *spectators*, as is evident from the importance of certain films, images, and cultural themes in the work of their chief theoretician. On the other hand, our investigation allows us to grasp the subjective, *untheorized* practices of those who participated in the Situationist adventure. This in no way diminishes the value of Debord's analysis, but it does give us a sense of their scope, and of their limits.

Université Stendhal, Grenoble III
translated by Paul Lafarge

NOTES

I would like to thank Olga Vasile for her invaluable contribution in editing my text, and Lisa Destoop for her perceptive comments, revealing an exemplary knowledge of Situationist history. Additional thanks go to my excellent translator, Paul Lafarge.

1. Debord offered some of these keys with the publication of a critical edition of this text in 1990.
2. In his memoir, *Un cavalier à la mer*, Gérard Guégan goes on the offensive again, this time without the help of fiction; he evokes Debord numerous times in the book, mostly for the purpose of maligning him.
3. "'They were jokes,' she said in 1983" (Marcus 423).
4. Marcus agrees with Bernard Pingaud, who in the preface to *La Nuit* had remarked: "The novelist had meanwhile changed her model, from Sagan to Robbe-Grillet" (12).
5. In the first text, it appears right under Bernstein's photo (36); in the second, it can be found in the thirteenth plate of the third part. It figures there not as a citation from de Retz's *Memoirs* (which Debord had doubtless not read at the time), but as an excerpt from a recent book by Pierre-George Lorris on the Cardinal de Retz and the *Fronde*. (Lorris 1956).
6. Among the pieces she sings on that evening, we can note a 17th or 18th century song, "Aux marches du palais," from which Bernstein's novel takes its title. The words to this song may be found in Segher 153-4.
7. This dialogue appears again in André Bertrand's *détourné* comic strip, *Le retour de la colonne Durruti*, which appeared in 1966. The panel in which this exchange appears has been published in a number of places, including Marcus's work (Marcus 425).

8. A man of many talents—he was a painter, an engraver, a ceramicist, a tapestry designer, essayist, theoretician of art and a philosopher—Jorn had an international reputation by the end of the 1950s. The list of his publications between 1957 and 1961 is impressive (Cf. Atkins, G. and Erik Schmidt 1964). Bernstein paints a more detailed portrait of Jorn in *La Nuit*, where she presents him as a relaxed host, ironic and bohemian.
9. *On the Passage of a Few Persons Through a rather brief period of time*, 1959; *Critique of separation*, 1961.
10. “Guy had a tremendous amount of culture and ideas that were extraordinary enough at the time, or even for the years that followed. Bernstein was completely different; she had an exceptional classical education, and knew lots of things. For me and for others, at the time, she was a walking dictionary; she had a very cultivated background” (Mension 113).
11. Debord includes several scenes from *Les Visiteurs du Soir* in his last film, *In girum* (1978). Cf. *Oeuvres cinématographiques*. 253, 255, 277.
12. In his last film, Debord speaks of the Latin Quarter as a sort of den of thieves where, in the early 1950s, young people who struck terror into the hearts of right-thinking folk used to meet. “In this place which was the brief capital of disturbances, even though it might have been true that the select company included a certain number of thieves, and occasionally murderers, the existence of all was mainly characterized by a prodigious inactivity; and it was this that was resented as the most threatening of so many of the crimes and offences discovered there by the authorities.” (*In girum* 36-37).
13. Later, Bernstein remarks again, “Twin and dear sisters, childish and authoritarian, in their room as on stage, and more beautiful because they looked so much alike, a resemblance, it’s true, achieved through artifice, but none the less touching for all that. Carole came off as the more perfect toy, more elegant, funnier, and finer in her details” (176).
14. Debord’s fascination with the chivalry of the late Middle Ages, which he got from the work of Huizinga, can be found also on Alice Becker-Ho’s recent collection of poetry, *D’azur au triangle vidé de sable*.
15. We have seen earlier that, in the economy of the story, Carole plays the part of Anne in Prévert’s screenplay; Dominique’s role belongs only to Geneviève.
16. We find a similar image in the film *Critique of separation*. Cf. Bracken 107.
17. “It is unclear why Geneviève will find it opportune (or rather, she will know all too well that it is not opportune, and will do it with all the more pleasure and feigned clumsiness, faced with her husband’s willfully absent attitude) to think of the little space, or rather the little time Carole will be allowed in Gilles’s life, precisely on account of this complicity, of this confidence, the importance of which Gilles will not be able to deny at this moment in his story, which she will destroy in advance—the importance of his adventures, of his pleasures” (97).
18. Cf. 32, 74, and 144-45 of the novel.
19. Geneviève evokes for a moment “the rigid frame of conventions that they have fixed for themselves once and for all, certainly a long time ago—or perhaps, if she thinks about it, not once and for all after all” (77).
20. In *In girum imus nocte*, Debord includes images of his second wife, Alice, in the arms of his mistress, Celeste. Cf. *Oeuvres cinématographiques*, 273, and photo No. 20 of the dossier that accompanies the film. Alice Becker-Ho herself confirms that she shared lovers with her husband in her poem, “The New Favorite”. Cf. Becker-Ho 13.
21. Cf. Libis 1980.
22. Debord’s emotional and intellectual universe is marked by a fascination for “real men,” whether thugs like Ghislain de Marbaix, bandits like Villon or Lacenaire, or simple soldiers. Note the importance of westerns and war movies in his personal mythology, in which we may also recognize a relatively distinct, though latent, homosexuality. We

see above all an attraction for everything that Debord didn't dare or couldn't do himself. For more on Ghislain de Marbaix, a thug and pimp who was assassinated doubtless by a contract killer, see his anonymous memoirs, dictated to Randal Lemoine in 1967: *Monsieur Gontran*. The book, although it makes no direct reference to Debord, covers the same period as Bernstein's novels. Debord pays homage to Marbaix again and again in his films and in his last writings: "There had been that 'noble man' among my friends who was the complete equal of Régnier de Montigny, as well as many other rebels destined for bad ends" (*Panegyric* 26).

WORKS CITED

- Artsybashev, Mikhail, *Sanin*. New York: Illustrated Editions Co., 1932.
- Atkins, Guy and Erik Schmidt. *A Bibliography of Asger Jorn's Writings to 1963*. Copenhagen: Permildt and Rosengreen, 1964.
- Becker-Ho, Alice. *D'Azur au triangle vidé de sable*. Cognac: Le temps qu'il fait, 1998.
- Bernstein, Michèle. *Tous les chevaux du roi*. Paris: Buchet-Chastel, 1960.
- . *La nuit*. Paris: Buchet-Chastel, 1961.
- Bracken, Len. *Guy Debord—Revolutionary*. Venice, Ca: Feral House, 1997.
- Carné, Marcel and Jacques Prévert. *Les Visiteurs du Soir*. (film). 1942.
- Debord, Guy. «10 ans d'art expérimental: Jorn et son rôle dans l'invention théorique», in *Museum Journal*, vol.IV, no. 4, Otterlo: October 1958.
- . *Mémoires*. 1959. Paris: Les Belles lettres, 1993.
- . *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*. London: Verso, 1990.
- . *Oeuvres cinématographiques complètes*, (1978). Paris: Gallimard, 1994.
- . *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni*. Edition commentée. Paris: Gérard Lebovici, 1990.
- . *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni. A film*. Trans. Lucy Forsyth. London: Pelagian Press, 1991.
- . *Panegyric*. Trans. James Brook. London: Verso, 1991.
- . "Cette mauvaise réputation...". Paris: Gallimard, 1993.
- Gonzalvez, Shigenobu. *Guy Debord ou la beauté du négatif*. Paris: Mille et une nuits, 1998.
- Guégan, Gérard. *Les Irréguliers*. Paris: J.-C. Lattès, 1975.
- . *Un cavalier à la mer*. Paris: François Bourin, 1992.
- Huizinga, Johan. *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*. Chicago: UCP, 1996.
- Laclos, Pierre Choderlos de. *Les Liaisons dangereuses*. 1782. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995.
- Lemoine, Randal. *Monsieur Gontran*. Paris: Julliard, 1968.
- Libis, Jean *Le mythe de l'androgynie*. Paris: Berg International, 1980.
- Lorris, Pierre-Georges. *Un agitateur au XVIIe siècle. Le cardinal de Retz*. Paris: Albin Michel, 1956.
- Mension, Jean-Michel. *La tribu*. Paris: Allia, 1998.
- Mercier, Luc, ed. *Archives situationnistes*, vol.1. Paris: Contre-Moule/Parallèles éditeurs, 1997.
- Marcus, Greil. *Lipstick Traces. A Secret History of the 20th Century*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1989.
- Internationale Situationniste*, no. 2, 1958, 2nd ed. Paris: Fayard, 1997.
- Racine, Jean. *Complete Plays*. New York: Random House, 1967.
- Rajsfus, Maurice. *Une enfance laïque et républicaine*. Levallois-Perret: Editions Manya, 1992.
- Potlatch*, rééd. Folio, Paris, Gallimard, 1996.
- Seghers, Pierre ed. *Le livre d'or de la poésie française*. Paris: Marabout Université, s.d. 1962.