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**In the cauldron of the
negative**

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“I responded: ‘Kind lady, as I have based my actions on your tempting promises (like those others whom you see there, lost in error), every time that I encountered some artificial phantasm on such a frequented route, I was not able to separate myself from it without learning its hidden meaning; now that I have understood, thanks to ingenious machines, the degree of poverty to which you lead men whom you enchant with your sweet discourses and magnificent promises, the reason why I crossed the raging river and came to this forest is obvious: when I crossed it I could not contain my laughter, for I saw how insanely men allow themselves to be convinced (motivated principally by the avid desire to improve their stations in the world and to become great) not only to wander as if they were possessed through this place that so resembles a chaos, but to remain within it nourishing a perpetual hope, in the expectation of obtaining what no one has ever obtained despite long labors and great expense’.”

Giovanni Battista Nazari, *Della Tramutazione Metallica, Sogni Tre* (“Three Dreams concerning the Transmutation of Metals”)

INTRODUCTION

The researcher closed the book he had just finished reading. Absorbed in reading, he had not noticed the onset of night; the darkness would soon spread its long black fingers over him. He got up, took a few steps to stretch his legs, looked distractedly out the window, turned on the light and sat down again. Pensive, he once again took up the book and opened it to the first page, in order to re-read a passage that had intrigued him:

“Having, then, to take account of readers who are both attentive and diversely influential, I obviously cannot speak with complete freedom. Above all, I must take care not to instruct just anybody. The unhappiness of the times thus compels me, once again, to write in a new way. Some elements will be intentionally omitted; and the plan will have to remain rather unclear. Readers will encounter certain lures, like the very hallmark of the era. As long as other pages are interpolated here and there, the overall meaning may appear just as secret clauses have very often been added to whatever treaties may openly stipulate; just as some chemical agents only reveal their hidden properties when they are combined with others.”

This reminded him of something, and it seemed to him that this manner of writing was not so new. He got up again and scanned his bookshelves for a volume that he finally located. It was a relatively recent reprint of a text published in Paris in 1678: *The Summit of Perfection, or the Handbook of the Perfect Teachings of the Philosophers*, by Geber. He read:

“I declare, first of all, that in this *Summit* I have not been able to teach our science in a coherent way, but that I divulged it in fragments, here and there, in various chapters. And I have done so deliberately, because if I had arranged all of it in a coherent order, the wicked, who would utilize it for evil purposes, would learn it as easily as the good, which would be vile and unjust. Secondly, I declare that where it might seem that I could have spoken with the greatest clarity and in the most open way concerning our science, I spoke instead in a most obscure manner and concealed a great deal.”

The words were different but they reflected the same way of writing, called “the dispersion of knowledge” ever since Geber explained its principles. Geber’s book is so misleading that the name of the author was itself a false lead: “Geber” was the Latinized name of Jâbir ibn Hayyân, an Arab sage and alchemist who allegedly lived in the 8th century A.D.; he did not write even one line,

however, and was not actually responsible for the contents of most of the Arab texts that circulated under his name. The *Summa perfectionis magisterii* was a Latin text from the late 13th century whose author (perhaps a Franciscan monk by the name of Paul of Taranto) signed it with Jâbir's name in order to confer more authority on his doctrine. The work quickly became one of the classics of alchemy and until the end of the 19th century it was thought that Jâbir was really its author. Even the French translation, published anonymously in an anthology entitled *Bibliothèque des philosophes chimiques*, attributed the authorship of the text to someone who did not write it, the Englishman William Salmon, based on the initial "S" that is inscribed in the work, when in reality it stands for a doctor from Poitou named Nicolas Salomon. The history of alchemy is full of false attributions, decoys and fakes, and that is why the researcher was interested in it. That is why it was not difficult for him to discern the tutelary shadow of the pseudo-Geber behind the first few sentences of the *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* by Guy Debord.

This identification, however, merely led to new problems, since *The Summit of Perfection* is hardly ever read outside of a handful of erudite circles of a particular

kind, whose members are devotees of alchemy and the occult sciences. And Debord himself, in the book in question, clearly expressed his disdain for “the profitable daydreams of charlatans and sorcerers”, propagators of “false hopes”. He had never changed his views with regard to such matters since the times of the Situationist International, when he published articles that ridiculed the surrealists’ interest in séances or the popularity that the magazine *Planète* enjoyed at the time. There was a former situationist, Raoul Vaneigem, who paid a great deal of attention to alchemy; but when he resigned from the SI in 1970, Debord did not refrain from harshly denouncing his idealism and his tendency to self-contemplative mysticism. It would therefore be hard to imagine that Debord was an avid reader of the pseudo-Geber, and it would be more reasonable to assume that he stumbled across the text by accident.

In his autobiographical texts, however, Debord took pleasure in presenting himself as a reincarnation of the devil, even going so far as to describe the situationist adventure as the quest for an “evil Grail”. The researcher had attended a conference on this topic, whose title, *References to the Occult in Contemporary Social Critique*, had intrigued him: although he was somewhat suspicious at first—the conference was held at a Dominican Monastery by a rather unsavory association

of university professors—he left the event with the conviction that Debord’s relations with the diffuse mass of doctrines known as “occultism” were not as simple as they appeared at first sight; and at the same time, this made it less implausible that Debord might have read some of the most famous alchemical texts, beginning with *The Summit of Perfection*.

After closer inspection, the researcher also noted that alchemy had already appeared in the texts published by Vaneigem when he was still one of the leading members of the SI, above all in his *The Revolution of Everyday Life*,¹ which could hardly be proven to be in flagrant contradiction with the main theories of the situationists. This was quite odd. Just how did alchemy fit into the history of the SI? Was it a mere deviation that the critiques of 1970 had purged, or did it fulfill a more basic function in situationist theory? Perhaps the connection that he thought he had discovered between the *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* and *The Summit of Perfection* was only the tip of a very interesting iceberg. And even if his hypothesis regarding the use of the pseudo-Geber should prove to be incorrect—since the absence of any bibliographical citations renders certainty in this matter impossible—the question that had thus been raised seemed to merit

more in-depth investigation. But this task involved a lot more than just a little philological inquiry concerning a minor detail.

It was getting late, and the researcher told himself that he would see everything more clearly when he had more time to devote to the question. For the moment, other matters awaited his attention. He put on his coat and his hat, turned off the light and closed the door behind him.

- 1. The original French edition was entitled *Traité de savoir-vivre à l'usage des jeunes générations*; the most well known English translation was published under the title of *The Revolution of Everyday Life*. All subsequent references to this book in this translation will be made to the latter title for the convenience of the English-speaking readers [American Translator's note].

Part I: The Formula for Overthrowing the World

“Anyone who wants to possess the knowledge of living things must rely on demonstration beginning with material things and going back towards the principle of everything.”

Michael Psellus
Quaestionum Naturalium

1

The situationists attempted to formulate as coherently as possible a radical critique of the contemporary world, defined as a “spectacular-commodity” society dominated and unified by the economy. In a society of this type, all authentic life is rendered impossible by the falsification of human relations, which are experienced exclusively in accordance with the model of “separation”. This consists in the separation of social roles whose concrete expression is the division of labor; a division that is not limited to the sphere of traditional economic exchange but is extended to every form of specialization of activity (productive, artistic, intellectual, political...), none of

which can be said to escape the influence of the economy. A separated activity, then, is necessarily an alienating activity, one that makes the person who exercises it an instrument, a mere cog in a system of generalized commodity exchange. The separation of roles leads to the reification of individuals, who are reduced to the status of commodities, transformed into things by the same process that makes them believe that they are autonomous subjects. Separated from each other, they are also separated from themselves. Social classification, by defining the individual on the basis of his function, consummates his dissolution into the universal exchangeability of commodities, like a bar code, without which no value can be attributed to the product on the checkout line.

The ruling ideology makes separation appear to be the natural, and therefore legitimate, condition of human society: its acceptance as an unavoidable destiny engenders its endless reproduction. The different kinds of partial critique only result in a reinforcement of separation, because they do not attack the root itself of the distinction of social roles, but only this or that consequence of those roles. Only a unitary critique that reveals the concealed resources that make separation possible can clear the way for a global transformation of

society. The only revolution that is possible must be total; every attempt at partial subversion entails an acceptance of separation, an acceptance that allows it to remain intact. Revolutionary actions that do not have the goal of the complete liquidation of this society finally only lead to giving it the means to perpetuate itself by means of its modernization.

Having learned from history, the situationists established the principle that the revolution cannot aim at the goal of substituting the power of one group for another. In such a case, power changes hands but it is not abolished as such; that is why the Jacobins and the Bolsheviks did not carry out real revolutions. The only model of social organization that the situationists accepted was the system of workers councils, which they considered to be the only truly democratic system. The main weakness of this model lies in the fact that it has never been successfully established for any significant period of time because, due to the absence of specialization and hierarchy, it was a very fragile system when faced with repression or recuperation, and was more susceptible than any other system to internal decomposition. Its victory, making a place for itself in history, almost ineluctably gives way to its end. Debord himself

emphasized this fact in 1966 (“Contribution to a Councilist Program in Spain”, *I.S.*, no. 10):

“Councilist power ... cannot itself survive for very long without staking and winning its bet on the total transformation of all existing conditions and the immediate liberation of life.”

Now that capitalism has gradually transformed the entire world, except for a few aspects, into one vast “spectacular-commodity” society, the revolutionary perspective cannot be inscribed in a national framework. The nation, regardless of the basis upon which it claims to be founded (ethnic, religious, linguistic, or some other type) is only one of the forms of separation that the revolution must specifically aim to abolish, since it unites some people (the “citizens”) in order to separate them from all other people.

In view of the fact that the revolution is directed against a social system whose influence extends throughout the entire world and the fact that this social system must be abolished without allowing any part of it to survive, destroying this society is the same thing as destroying the world, or this world. Such an expression cannot but evoke the language of the millenarians, and the situationists themselves emphasized their kinship with the prophets of the apocalypse who preached, in the

most ancient times, rebellion against the powers that be, which were considered to be the concrete manifestations of the kingdom of Satan. In both cases the destruction of the world as it currently exists is the precondition for the advent of a better world; for the situationists, of course, the “prince of this world” is obviously not the devil, who is just as non-existent as God, but the economy.

It was from this conception of society as a totality—paradoxically unified by a principle of generalized separation—that the opposition between the (present) world of separation and the (future) world of a finally realized unity was derived. If the revolution does not pose this realization as its goal, it cannot be considered to be a complete reversal of perspective. Is such a reversal possible? Is it even *conceivable*? This is the question for which Vaneigem sought to provide a positive response in *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, and in order to do so he resorted to the metaphorical armory of alchemy.

2

The Revolution of Everyday Life, completed in 1965, was published in 1967, the same year as *The Society of the*

Spectacle. These two works were quite different with regard to both their style as well as their overall structure. Debord, as he was to say in his 1979 *Preface*, elaborated a “historical and strategic conception” of the society of the spectacle considered as a whole.

Vaneigem, for his part, situated himself on the terrain of tactics, addressing the question from a subjective point of view, enumerating the possibilities for the concrete transformation of everyday life that are offered to individuals. The later disavowal of Vaneigem by the SI tends to cause the differences, and even the opposition, between the two books to stand out in retrospect.

Nonetheless, the theses expounded in *The Revolution of Everyday Life* were precisely those of the SI at the time the book was published, and both texts were conceived to be read as the two complementary sides of a single unified theory.¹

The Revolution of Everyday Life was presented as a “contribution ... to the recreation of the international revolutionary movement”. It was based on the opposition between the perspective of power, which rules today’s world in all its aspects, and the perspective of its overthrow [*renversement*], which necessarily proceeds by way of a “reversal [*renversement*] of perspective”.² Thus, “the description of the negative

founds the positive project and the positive project confirms negativity”.

Today’s world is absolutely *negative*. In it, everything that characterizes authentic life is negated: the participation, communication and realization to which human beings aspire are impossible, since they are only accessible in a falsified form. Because these things constitute the real and permanent aspirations of individuals, everything converges to contribute to make them believe that they have the possibility to obtain them, if they work hard, just as children are promised candy if they behave. The simulacra of participation, communication and realization, presented as if they were the real things, allow individuals to forget that they are totally deprived of them, and that the only real activity that they are permitted is consumption. The illusion of life disguises the reality of survival, so that “the guarantee that we will not die of starvation is bought by accepting the risk of dying of boredom”. Commodity exchange not only conditions all the other forms of exchange; it alters them in their very essence. In the reign of the quantitative, the living is identified with the mechanical, the human with the commodity. Everything that is presented as qualitative—including the cultural “dose of soul”—is a veil covering the quantitative, the outer shell whose purpose is to make it acceptable.

The *positive* project of the revolution consists in abolishing everything that stands in the way of real participation, communication and realization. In other words, it means the abolition of separation. The revolution has no other content or program, of a political or any other kind. It is easy, however, to point out that this project is more ambitious than any other program. The situationists did not distinguish, unlike most other theoreticians of the revolution, between two stages in the revolution: a negative stage (destruction of the existing order) and a positive stage (construction of a new order). For the situationists, the abolition of this negation of life that defines the “spectacular-commodity” organization of the world is itself the positive moment, if we define the positive, following the logicians and Hegel, as the negation of the negation. Positive and negative have two opposed meanings depending on whether we situate ourselves upon the perspective of power or of its abolition: contemporary society considers everything that contributes to strengthening it to be positive, while everything that contributes to weakening it, the “negative in action”, is positive for the situationists.

The role of the revolutionary organization known as the SI did not consist in leading or planning the revolution, or

in elaborating utopias. The energy devoted to detailed predictions concerning the configuration of the world of the future is so much energy lost for the task of destroying the world of the present, and reality always assumes responsibility for ruining the best-laid plans. Besides, the situationists were busy excluding the actual utopians from their ranks, such as the science-fiction urbanist Constant. They did, however, preserve a very distinct sympathy for Charles Fourier, insofar as his utopianism, behind the combinational formalism that constitutes its most apparent feature, basically had no other real program than the free expression of the passions; moreover, the system of the passions described by Fourier, with its variability and its innumerable possible combinations, could be considered as a forbearer of the *game* from which the situationists derived their very name: the construction of situations (“Constructed situation: A moment of life concretely and deliberately constructed by the collective organization of a unitary ambience and a game of events.”, *I.S.*, no. 1). In order to supersede and abolish the stage of separation, it is necessary for this phenomenon not to be inherent to human society as such, since it would otherwise effectively possess that character of inevitability that would make it insuperable. The situationists therefore claim that separation has a

historical origin. For Vaneigem, separation arises from a “basic separation which precipitates and determines all the others: the social distinction between masters and slaves”. This origin, lost in the mists of time, dates to an era long before the period (which was quite recent) when the bourgeoisie came to power, but the bourgeoisie “laid bare the social and material character of separation”, so that “by the close of the eighteenth century the fabric was rending in all directions as the process of decomposition began to speed up”. Debord saw, for his part, in “the transition from pastoral nomadism to sedentary agriculture” the historical moment when labor replaced “lazy liberty without content”; from then on, “the social appropriation of time, the production of man by human labor, develops within a society divided into classes”.

The supersession of the world of survival and separation is conceivable because there is, in this same world, a vague aspiration for a completely different kind of life. For socialization has not yet completely stifled the will to live. The latter is all the more violently manifested the more it is repressed; thus, the suppression of the sexual urges only makes them more insistent: Puritanism creates Jack the Rippers the way cheese breeds worms. Within the individuals themselves a battle is waged

between the forces of submission and those of freedom, a battle that is nothing but “the struggle between subjectivity and what degrades it”. The dynamism of life, muzzled and distorted but not extinguished by the social organization that perpetuates domination, is constantly attempting to force its way to the light of day just as a sprouting weed cleaves the hardest pavement.

Separation is therefore not the natural condition of humanity, but a state that is maintained by coercion: the coercion exercised by institutions against individuals, who in turn strive to resist that coercion; and the coercion that individuals, alienated in every sense of the word, exercise against themselves.

The tactical weapon of the reversal of perspective is *détournement* [“diversion”], which Vaneigem defined as “a sort of anti-conditioning, not conditioning of a new type, but playful tactics”, or, in the terms used by Debord, “the language of contradiction”, which is the “fluid language of anti-ideology”. Propaganda—political, commercial, journalistic, cultural, recreational—is based on the distortion of individual desires and aspirations, which it channels and recuperates for the benefit of the existing social organization. Just as the revolution is the negation of the negation, *détournement* permits, among

other things, the reversal of the process of recuperation for the benefit of subversion.³

The tactic is playful, since play is an essential dimension of revolution. Since alienation prevails in the everyday life of individuals, it is in everyday life that the revolution must take shape, because otherwise the revolution is not a force of life, but of death. The antithesis of commodified reification is found in the gratuitousness of play, which proceeds without consideration of the profit requirements of the world of the economy. Whatever is gained in the game of life is just so much time wasted in a society in which time is only worth the money that it allows one to accumulate or spend; and labor time is a succession of instants that individuals lose forever.

Against the calculation of the indices of profitability and interest rates is opposed the qualitative, which is embodied in individual creativity. The later abuse of this term—popularized, among other sources, by Vaneigem's book—makes it necessary to specify that we are not talking here about that “creativity” as it is understood in the art market and the cultural entertainment industry, and much less that “creativity” that the specialists of advertising propaganda are always bragging about. Creativity as the situationists understood the term is not the exercise of any particular separate activity,

susceptible to fostering social recognition and earning money, but the “unmediated experience of subjectivity”, “the direct communication of the essential”: in short, the emergence of spontaneity.

3

Although at the risk of giving rise to certain misunderstandings—which indeed did not fail to arise—Vaneigem called the practical realization of spontaneity, its concrete result, “poetry”. Poetry, in the situationist sense of the term, is not a literary activity (there is no situationist poetry in the way that there is, for example, a surrealist poetry). Poetry is “the organizer of creative spontaneity to the extent that it reinforces spontaneity’s hold on reality”. In other words, the practical effect of the eruption of life—which is by definition spontaneity—in the world of survival, to the extent that this eruption helps make the existing order of the world tremble, this is poetry, which is thus at the same time “the fulfillment of radical theory”, the “revolutionary act par excellence” and the “act which engenders new realities”. True poetry is not written or read: it is revolution, in power and in action; that is, the destruction of the existing world.

Why, then, use this term, “poetry”? In order to emphasize the fact that the SI considered itself to be the

continuation, the consequence and the supersession of the different artistic and poetic vanguards of the 19th and 20th centuries, from Baudelaire to Lettrism, via Dada and the early surrealists. Debord himself says in his *Panegyric*:

“After all, it was modern poetry, for the last hundred years, that had led us there. We were a handful who thought that it was necessary to carry out its programme in reality, and in any case to do nothing else.”

If we consider the evolution that led to the SI, the choice of the word “poetry” is completely justified. The situationists took the declarations of Isidore Ducasse very seriously—“Poetry must be made by all, not by one”, “Poetry must have practical truth as its goal”—along with the ideas of the surrealists concerning the power of poetry, from which the surrealists were either unable or unwilling to draw all the conclusions. Vaneigem, in his *A Cavalier History of Surrealism* (written in 1969 under the pseudonym of Jules-François Dupuis,⁴ but not published until 1977), points out that surrealism had attempted to formulate, “so faithfully yet so maladroitly”, the essential problem: that “of the total human being's self-realization under the sign of freedom”. It devolved upon the situationists to realize the potentials, which had been

perceived but not realized by the surrealists, of this “radioactive radical nucleus”.

This is where alchemy comes into the picture. In *The Second Manifesto of Surrealism*, André Breton devoted a long section to the “alchemy of the word”. This expression, utilized by Rimbaud in *A Season in Hell*, was first used at the end of the Middle Ages by certain alchemists who wrote under the name of Ramon Llull (the real Llull, who was hostile to alchemy, was not the author of any of the numerous alchemical treatises attributed to him) and ultimately served as a metaphorical designation, beginning in the 16th century, for rhetoric and later, by extension, for poetry. At the beginning, however, it had a very different meaning. The *alchimia verborum*, literally the “alchemy of words”, originated in the Arab theory known as the “balance of letters”, which has been associated with the name of Jâbir ibn Hayyân. The “balance”, that is, the equilibrium, is a theory of the universal measure, which seeks to make all the data of human knowledge the object of an exact science. The “balance of letters” is an intellectual construct of the letters of the alphabet (which cannot but evoke the Jewish Kabbalah) which consists above all in establishing a correspondence between these letters and the elemental qualities, the “natures”, whose combinations lie at the basis of all the bodies in the

physical world. The combinations of these “natures” can thus be translated into combinations of letters and, for that reason, quantified and measured, since each letter also corresponds, in this theory, to a number. The identification of letters, numbers and “natures” originated in the fact that, for the Greeks, one word was used to designate the elements of the physical world and the letters of the alphabet, since they considered the latter to be the constitutive “elements” of language, and in the fact that they used letters to designate numbers. Neither Rimbaud, nor Breton, nor even the authors of the pseudo-Llullian alchemical treatises possessed a clear understanding of this relation. For the latter, the “alchemy of the word” instead referred to the Divine Word, the “*Fiat*” thanks to which God, according to *Genesis*, created light and all the other things of the world. The connection between alchemy and poetry proceeded from the creative power thus attributed to the word (“poetry” comes from the Greek word, “*poiésis*”, which strictly designates the act of creation, of production, of making, and the “work”, poetic or any other kind, that results from this act of creation). Breton, for his part, declared: “alchemy of the word: this expression which we go around repeating more or less at random today demands to be taken literally.” This task was at first sight quite difficult. Because he did not know

exactly what the “alchemy of the word” could mean, but as he was convinced that it meant something—and in this respect he proceeded just as the generations of alchemists who preceded him had, limited to conjectures with respect to the meaning of all the deliberately obscure texts that constitute the alchemical corpus—Breton confessed:

“Everything happens in our epoch as if a small handful of men had just taken possession, by supernatural means, of a unique volume resulting from the collaboration of Rimbaud, Lautréamont, and a few others, and that a voice said to them, as the angel said to Flamel: ‘Come, behold this book; you will not understand a line in it, neither you nor many others, but you will one day see therein what no one could see’.”

(Here he is referring to the *Exposition of the Hieroglyphical Figures* supposedly written by Nicolas Flamel in the 14th century, but Flamel—who really existed—never wrote any alchemical works. This legend dates back to the Renaissance, and its falsehood was demonstrated in 1758 by Étienne-François Villain. But as in the previously-mentioned case of Ramon Llull, or of Basil Valentine—an alleged alchemist monk from the 15th century whose texts were actually written after the time of Paracelsus—Breton, a tributary of the history of

alchemy as he had found it in the works of the occultists Eliphas Lévi and Grillot de Givry, as well as other fake historians like Louis Figuier or Albert Poisson, accepted all the legends concocted by the alchemists themselves as authentic.)

A man like Breton could not allow himself to be deterred for very long by a “you will not understand a line”, even if it was delivered to him by an angel, so he proceeded immediately to revelation:

“I would appreciate you noting the remarkable analogy, insofar as their goals are concerned, between the surrealist efforts and those of the alchemists: the philosopher’s stone is nothing more or less than that which was to enable man’s imagination to take a stunning revenge on all things, which brings us once again, after centuries of the mind’s domestication and insane resignation, to the attempt to liberate once and for all the imagination by the *‘long, immense and reasoned derangement of the senses’*, and all the rest.... ‘Alchemy of the word’: one can equally regret that the word, ‘verbe, is taken here in a somewhat restrictive sense, and Rimbaud, moreover, seems to recognize that ‘outmoded poetics’ hold too important a role in this alchemy. The word is more, and, for the cabalists, it is

nothing less, for example, than that in the image of which the human soul is created; everyone knows that this concept goes all the way back to the first example of the cause of causes;⁵ that is why the word is as much present in what we fear as in what we write, or in what we love.”

For Breton, therefore, the function of alchemy was to restore the primacy of the imagination and abolish the reign of domestication and resignation. In this respect it does not really matter very much whether or not this corresponds to the real goal that was proposed by the alchemists; what matters is the fact that Breton provided the “alchemy of the word” with a meaning that went far beyond the “outmoded poetics”: it now involved, according to Rimbaud, “the transformation of life”. With this incentive, the situationists, who also took Rimbaud’s and Breton’s formulations “literally”, made poetry itself responsible for bearing the transmutative power that was once conferred by the philosopher’s stone, obtained through the “alchemy of the word”. Hence the definition of poetry as “the organizer of creative spontaneity to the extent that it reinforces spontaneity’s hold on reality”, the conclusion of the “stunning revenge” of the imagination that Breton had glimpsed.

4

Just as the alchemists issued exhortations not to confuse the “vulgar” substances mercury and sulfur with the mercury and sulfur “of the philosophers”, which were the mysterious substances concerning which they spoke, the situationists understood “poetry” to mean something very different from “vulgar” poetry. And in his attempt to explain the possibility of the birth of the revolutionary transformation in the world of separation, or, which amounts to the same thing, the realization of “practical truth” by way of poetry, Vaneigem compares the revolution with an alchemical transmutation.

The alchemists proposed to transform any metal into gold or silver. This seemed possible to them, and even indisputable, because they thought that all the metals were composed of a single substance that could assume forms of different degrees of maturity: the base or impure metals (lead, iron, copper, tin...) are those metals in which this substance is still unrefined and mixed with impurities; silver is the substance that is almost perfect, and gold represents its absolutely perfected state. For gold is not altered by either the passage of time or by the

action of fire. The process that nature conducted very slowly in the bowels of the earth, the alchemists strove to carry out in their laboratories, artificially accelerating the maturation process of the substances of metals. In order to do so, however, these metals had to be reduced to their *prima materia* [“primal matter”], which was the only way to make them susceptible to the action of the “elixir”—in the form of powder, liquid or solid (the philosopher’s stone)—by virtue of which the base metals could be conducted to their perfection, that is, transmuted into silver or gold. After the 13th century it was widely believed that the elixir was capable not only of perfecting metallic bodies but that it could also purify the human body of all its imperfections, curing all illnesses and prolonging one’s lifespan (hence, the “elixir of eternal youth”).

Thus, Vaneigem declares that, “the laboratory of individual creativity transmutes the basest metals of daily life into gold through a revolutionary alchemy”.

Subjectivity is the crucible within which this transmutation must take place. What must be transmuted is everyday life, which must be conducted from its current state of impurity (survival) to the perfect realization of its essence (life, properly speaking).

The *prima materia* that is susceptible to undergoing this

transmutation is individual creativity; the latter is the “absolute weapon” that everyone possesses but only rarely wields in everyday life, with the help of certain “privileged moments”. Vaneigem is explicitly evoking Paracelsus, for whom the *prima materia* was simultaneously “visible and invisible” to ordinary mortals: “the ignorant walk all over it with their feet every day” without noticing it. (This idea, by the way, was not invented by Paracelsus, but had already appeared in numerous alchemists who preceded him.)

For the alchemists, the *prima materia* was the selfsame substance that composed the chaos before the creation of the world by God in *Genesis*, who is identified with the demiurge of Plato’s *Timaeus*: it is something without any particular form, and for that reason susceptible to adopting any form. Likewise, for Vaneigem, individual creativity is “the source of all creation”; from it “everything, being or thing, is ordered in accordance with poetry’s grand freedom”. What the alchemists literally understood to apply to the matter of the physical world, Vaneigem seems, at least at first sight, not to endorse, except as a metaphor that graphically describes a process of psychological transformation. But insofar as this creativity is the manifestation of the life force that animates individuals, it could and must also be extended

as a power of creation in the literal sense: the ability to give life. The quintessence that was sought by the alchemists of the Renaissance was the same thing as the “world spirit”, a substance that could be found in a concentrated state in the sap of plants and in the sperm of animals, as well as in deposits of metal ore. This world spirit, which was not entirely made up of soul or entirely of body, was what disseminated life, and Vaneigem did not understand it in any other way.

The alchemists proceeded via the dissolution and coagulation of matter. In revolutionary alchemy, one must “dissolve slave consciousness, consciousness of impotence, by releasing creativity’s magnetic power ... as creative energy surges forth, genius serene in its self-assurance”. The individual’s discovery of his creative possibilities is the elixir that transforms alienated consciousness into revolutionary subjectivity. The reversal of perspective is this transformation that takes place in the consciousness of the individuals themselves is the place where one may find the “positive in negativity, the fruit which will burst out of the old world’s bud”.

5

In the situationist view, what induces this revolutionary transformation is the conscious action of individuals, rather than, as in vulgar Marxism, the mere modification of the economic base, since for the situationists it is a matter of abolishing the economy itself as a whole. The abolition of the state and of the economy must be carried out immediately; otherwise it will never happen, as is demonstrated by its postponement *ad calendas graecas* by Marxist counterrevolutionaries. If the revolution is not animated by the spirit of play (which is radically opposed to economic reification), it will only lead to another form of the organization of survival. This spirit must therefore be distilled drop by drop in the alembic of subjectivity in order to acquire its power. Vaneigem identifies what he calls a “third force”, called upon to play an essential role in the revolutionary process, similar to that of the quintessence of the alchemists, although this analogy is not explicitly elaborated in *The Revolution of Everyday Life*. This force “covers the whole extent of everyday life”, just as the quintessence, according to the alchemists of the

Renaissance, is everywhere, in a higher or lower concentration. The quintessence was the agent that would allow bodies to attain perfect health, overcoming their imperfections; in the same way, the third force is what “radicalizes contradictions and leads to their supersession, in the name of individual freedom and against all forms of constraint”. It is born in the form of an “irrepressible upsurge of individual desires”, “in all conflicts between opposing sides”. It is what “radicalizes insurrections, denounces false problems, threatens power in its very structure”. This force is the will to live. It is called the “third force” because it constitutes the middle term between the two antagonistic forces of the positive and the negative. It is this force which introduces the violence of the negative to destroy the apparent equilibrium of today’s world, this negativity that is transformed into positivity when it is considered from the perspective of the supersession of this world. The third force is also the means by which the conflict finds its resolution, not so much in the form of a synthesis that supersedes the two antagonistic forces by absorbing them (as in the Hegelian dialectic) as in the form of a process of maturation whose oppositional power is reinforced by revolutionary radicalization, which wants one of these forces to triumph over and destroy the other. For Hegel, supersession is a negation “which

supersedes in such a way as to preserve and maintain what is superseded, and consequently survives its own supersession,"⁶ whereas for the situationists, there is not much worth preserving or maintaining from today's world. (We shall see in the next chapter that in reality they preserved a lot more of it than they would have liked to admit.)

Vaneigem specifies that the will to live can appear as a "force of decompression" when it is crushed or recuperated by power, which constantly aspires to manipulate and control the conflicts that break out in society:

"Under the process of decompression, antagonists who seemed irreconcilable at first sight grow old together, become frozen in purely formal opposition, lose their substance, neutralize and moulder into each other."

While the revolutionary perspective accelerates the maturation of antagonisms by driving them towards a final conflict,⁷ the perspective of power organizes the degradation of these antagonisms by "hiding real contradictions", marshalling "unresolved antagonisms" in order to foster "the seeds of their future coexistence" for the purpose of "shackling man's most irreducible desire, the desire to be completely himself". Decompression is

the third force that in Hegel takes the form of the abstract negation of supersession,⁸ and which in the falsifications of the “glassblowers” (the false alchemists) stands opposed to real alchemy. For the alchemists, the quintessence, the active principle, is the life force when it is used correctly, but it can be converted into a force for death if one does not know how to use it: it is the same substance that was thought to compose the sperm of animals and the venom of serpents. As the ancient Greeks said long ago, the poison and the remedy comprise a unity; the antidote is extracted from the venom.

Every failure is derived from this error. The sterilization of the will to live by power is the reason why not even once in history “has an absolute confrontation been carried through”; “so far the last fight has only had false starts”. In the same way, no alchemical transmutation has ever succeeded (although some illuminati persist in believing otherwise). The alchemists who witnessed their attempts fail one after another were not discouraged by this; they did not perceive their disappointments as proofs of the vanity of their quest but as so many confirmations of the extreme difficulty of the “divine and sacred art”, whose secret, they believed, had been carefully concealed by previous alchemists in such a way

that it would be inaccessible to the uninitiated. With every failure of the revolution as well as of the Great Work, “everything must be resumed from scratch”.

- 1. As late as April 1970, Debord notified the other situationists of his intention to produce a film version of *The Revolution of Everyday Life*.
- 2. The French word *renversement*, in the English language editions of *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, is translated as “reversal” in the context of “the reversal of perspective” [Note of the American Translator.]
- 3. Predictably, however, once its initial shock wore off, *détournement*, too, ended up being absorbed by advertising; just like all other modes of expression, by the way.
- 4. This was the name of Lautréamont’s landlord.
- 5. An allusion to *The Gospel According to John*: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”
- 6. This is the definition, in *The Phenomenology of the Spirit*, of “*Aufhebung*”, a term whose translation by the word, “supersession” is more clear than the literal, but less explicit term, “suppression”.
- 7. Vaneigem uses the word “revolution” in an ambiguous way, in order to designate both the period

of confrontations prior to the final struggle (defined as the “long revolution”) as well as the final struggle itself.

- 8. In “abstract negation”, “the middle term collapses into a lifeless unity which is split into lifeless, merely immediate, unopposed extremes; and the two do not reciprocally give and receive back from each other consciously, but leave each other free only indifferently, like things” (Hegel, *The Phenomenology of the Spirit*).

Part II: The System of Doctor Tarr and Doctor Fether

“In the same way, by way of F, D is transformed into E, so that everything can return to B, which, in its circulation, must be turned into E, from which one must derive F. In our teachings, this corresponds to the place of Aqua Vitae and the malodorous spirit, because in this way F has the power to transform D and H by way of the preservation of their forms. They then possess in their activity everything that was potential in the work of nature, thanks to the best intermediaries, due to and by virtue of the extremities, since in F and D, F, G and H are active, having been distilled, purified and dissolved with force, thanks to the intelligence of the wisdom of nature. It is therefore necessary to extract and separate a part of D and a part of E; one will thus obtain F, which will imitate nature in the work of art in the best ways, with the help of C and D, which come from H and F, which descend from H to B. B produces F, which is transformed into G, following the course of nature in our teachings. And this G is the nearest approximation of the raw material, with which we produce our perfect remedy, which is the fermentation of the elixir.”

Pseudo-Ramon Llull, *Testament*

1

After having quietly fermented for several years, the *prima materia* began to froth in May 1968, disseminating the “radioactive radical nucleus” in all directions. The SI saw this explosion as a confirmation of its theory against all those who, arguing on the basis of their common sense, sought to prove the impossibility that such an almost spontaneous revolt could take place. The situationists participated in this revolt to the fullest extent of their abilities, attempting to radicalize the “occupations movement”. As they related almost immediately afterwards, however, in *Enragés and Situationists in the Occupations Movement*, the “collapse of an attempt at direct democracy at the Sorbonne” was already evident on May 17, and was only the prelude to the “main failure” of the movement.

Nonetheless, since at the time they preferred to opt for a more optimistic analysis, the situationists wanted to see the occupations movement as “the beginning of an era”. It must be pointed out, however, that the temperature of the crucible only diminished over the course of the months and years that followed, despite all their voluntaristic proclamations to the contrary. Faced with the decline of the movement, the SI went on to attempt

to put their own house in order, a stage characterized by a process of self-criticism that led, as was previously the case, to expulsions and resignations. This self-critique, however, was only partial, since it led the last members of the SI to employ it exclusively against Vaneigem, a critique which, if they had only conscientiously examined it, applied to them as well.

In a 1970 text that was included in *The Veritable Split in the International* (“Communiqué of the S.I. concerning Vaneigem”), Vaneigem is accused of not being anything but a “contemplative”. The radicality of the theses elaborated in *The Revolution of Everyday Life* served Vaneigem as a pretext “to spare himself all the fatigues, and all the historical risks, of the *realization*. The goal being total, it is only envisaged in a pure present: it is *already there* as a whole, as far as one believes one can make it believed, or else it remained purely inaccessible: one did not succeed in doing anything to define it or to approach it.”

The “general formulation of the most total revolutionary program” was degraded into a “mysticism” and “*bluff*” from the moment when its practical implementation evaporated before the discourse of the prayer, the litany of the quest for the absolute: “What has been declared

perfect, will thus one day have to be declared totally non-existent.”

As early as 1966, Debord had already criticized as a “pre-Hegelian manifestation of idealism” the attitude that consisted in attributing to the members of the SI “an immediate intuition of the totality” that would allow its adepts to “discourse superbly about everything” (“Report of Guy Debord to the 7th Conference of the S.I. in Paris”, extracts from which are reproduced in *The Veritable Split*). For this form of abstraction grants those who cultivate it the certainty of not being subject to refutation by concrete experience, since all practical realizations will fall far short of their sublime aspirations; and the constant invocation of “practice” does not affect this. The search for perfect positivity, purged of all conflict, is illusory because it lacks precisely the negative, which the test of events cannot help but introduce. And when this test, in its bitter reality, dissolves the fragile castles in the air, the pure gold is turned into base lead.^{[1](#)} It might seem strange that, even though they had expressed anticipations about the unreality that underlies such discourses for such a long time—even before the publication by Gallimard of *The Revolution of Everyday Life*—the situationists had to wait until 1970 to discover that Vaneigem was one of those pre-Hegelian

idealists already anathemized by Debord. Up until then, it would seem that they had become accommodated to him, since in 1969 Vaneigem had published a very idealist and hardly-dialectical profession of faith: his “Notice to the Civilized concerning Generalized Self-Management” (*I.S.*, no. 12), whose title implicitly refers to a text by Fourier.

In this text Vaneigem poses the two terms of a choice: on the one hand, “generalized self-management”, defined as a “new society of abundance”; on the other hand, “insurrectional chaos”, characterized by “social disintegration, pillage, terrorism and repression”. The former is just as beautiful and as harmonious as the latter is horrible. It is easy to see that such a neat cleavage between revolution-as-fairy-tale and revolution-as-nightmare is anti-dialectical, since it excludes in advance any manifestation of the negative within the absolute positivity of the new golden age. It is excluded because otherwise the revolution would have to be viewed as an incessant struggle with the contradictions that must inevitably arise in historical reality; and this would amount to admitting that the revolution can be tarnished with impurities. In a text of this kind, duly praised by the situationists—unless you think that the confusion of the post-68 period led them

to publish just anything in the 12th issue of their journal—utopia appears in its truth as a rejection of history, as the dream of a finally discovered unity, an eternal and magical reconciliation of opposites, in which sea water would suddenly lose its salty taste and become (in accordance with the prediction of Fourier) a delicious lemonade.

2

The surrealists had proclaimed in 1924: “We have to create a new declaration of the rights of man” (*La Révolution surréaliste*, no. 1).² In “Notice to the Civilized”, Vaneigem gave this program, which up until then had been quite vague, a more explicit content: “The new ‘rights of man’—everyone’s right to live as they please, to build their own house, to participate in all assemblies, to arm themselves, to live as nomads, to publish what they think (to each his or her own wall-newspaper), to love without restraints; the right to meet, the right to the material equipment necessary for the realization of desires, the right to creativity, the right to the conquest of nature, the end of commodity time, the end of history in itself, the realization of art and the imagination, etc.—await their antilegislaters.”

One cannot help but observe in this list, besides the “end of history in itself” —which Vaneigem opposed with the “pleasure of history for itself” (formulations that do not at all mitigate the “pre-Hegelian idealism” that the whole text expresses)—two “rights” that merit closer examination: “the right to the material equipment necessary for the realization of desires” and the “right to the conquest of nature”. The first is explained in more detail as follows:

“The councils will naturally distinguish between priority sectors (food, transportation, telecommunications, metallurgy, construction, clothing, electronics, printing, armament, health care, comfort, and in general whatever material equipment is necessary for the permanent transformation of historical conditions); reconversion sectors, whose workers consider that they can detourn them to revolutionary uses; and parasitical sectors, whose assemblies decide purely and simply to suppress them.... (administration, bureaucratic agencies, spectacle production, purely commercial industries)....”

This situationist revolutionary program sketched by Vaneigem makes almost no changes in the existing structure of production; it lacks neither telecommunications nor electronics (sectors which are moreover very closely linked), which he designates as

priority sectors. The administrative, bureaucratic, etc., superstructures are the only ones that he considers to be “parasitic”, and therefore slated for abolition. Vaneigem also says:

“Only the councils offer a definitive solution. What prevents looting? The organization of distribution and the end of the commodity system. What prevents sabotage of production? The appropriation of the machines by collective creativity. What prevents explosions of anger and violence? The end of the proletariat through the collective construction of everyday life. There is no other justification for our struggle than the immediate satisfaction of this project—than what satisfies us immediately.”

Here we can see, as in other situationist texts (by Vaneigem, Debord and others) the acceptance as such of the Marxist idea that all that is necessary is to place the structures of production in other hands, transferring them from those of the capitalists to those of the proletarians, in order to qualitatively transform the nature of factory work. The “appropriation of the machines by collective creativity” will perform this transmutation. The idea that the system of needs established by industry must be reconsidered in its entirety as something intrinsically alienating, regardless

of whose hands operate it, did not occur to Vaneigem. In his view, what must be abolished are the “parasitic” superstructures, not the system of production as such. Here we touch upon the weak point of the theory of the spectacle, which in the last analysis is only a partial critique, although of course a very seductive one, of industrial society. That which constitutes its seductive quality is also the source of its weakness: this theory formally preserves the Hegelian-Marxist schema of “supersession” and is fully inscribed within the ideology of progress, converting by magical arts the negativity of the alienated world into the positivity of a liberated world as the workers councils seize the factories. The maintenance of the program of “the conquest of nature”—which must not be limited by anything, since it is a “right”—clearly illustrates that there is no break with the industrial system:³ the theory of the spectacle draws no conclusions from the fact that the “spectacle-commodity society” is also, indissociably, an industrial society.

In his famous text from 1966 on the Watts Riots (“The Decline and Fall of the Spectacular-Commodity Society”, *I.S.*, no. 10), Debord wrote:

“... the Los Angeles blacks take modern capitalist propaganda, its publicity of abundance, literally. They

want to possess now all the objects shown and abstractly accessible, because they want to use them. In this way they are challenging their exchange-value, the commodity reality which molds them and marshals them to its own ends, and which has preselected everything. Through theft and gift they rediscover a use that immediately refutes the oppressive rationality of the commodity, revealing its relations and even its production to be arbitrary and unnecessary. The looting of the Watts district was the most direct realization of the distorted principle: “To each according to their false needs”—needs determined and produced by the economic system which the very act of looting rejects. But once the vaunted abundance is taken at face value and directly seized, instead of being eternally pursued in the rat-race of alienated labor and increasing unmet social needs, real desires begin to be expressed in festive celebration, in playful self-assertion, in the potlatch of destruction. People who destroy commodities show their human superiority over commodities. [...] Looting is a natural response to the unnatural and inhuman society of commodity abundance. [...] now for the first time the problem is not to overcome scarcity, but to master material abundance according to new principles. Mastering abundance is not just changing the way it is

shared out, but totally reorienting it. This is the first step of a vast, all-embracing struggle.”

How can this critique of false needs and of the so-called “society of abundance” be made to accord with the words of Vaneigem concerning pillage and sabotage, which are said to lack any object in the “new society of abundance” because of “the organization of distribution and the end of the commodity system” and “the appropriation of the machines by collective creativity”? Because Debord only criticized the “society of abundance” from the perspective of the “abundance of commodities”, not as an industrial society. The products of this society are not condemned as “product[s] of human labor” of a particular type, but only as “commoditie[s] with the magical property of having to be paid for”. Debord’s text, although it does lay stress on the “*potlatch* of destruction”, does acknowledge the possibility that these industrial products might lend themselves to “a use that immediately refutes the oppressive rationality of the commodity” (“a mere refrigerator or rifle — a passive, inanimate object, subject to anyone who comes along to make use of it”) from the moment when they cease to be produced in a “spectacular-commodity” society, because they cannot be essentially distinguished, by their mode of production,

from any other “product of human labor”. It would thus be possible for a non-commodified industrial society to exist, and the industrial base is, at least in theory, ready to be appropriated “by collective creativity”. It is true that this implies “not just changing the way it is shared out, but totally reorienting it” but this merely involves, once and for all, “mastering abundance” in accordance with hypothetical “new principles”, and not turning our backs on abundance itself and the industrial mode of production that makes abundance accessible to only a tiny part of the world’s population. The rapid transition in Western Europe during the fifties from poverty to material abundance played a great role, of course, in the conviction, then shared by everyone, of the permanent nature of this abundance, considered in a way as an irreversible achievement of progress.[4](#)

In *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord claims that “capitalist abundance ... has failed”, and that the new “proletarian assault against class society” will be led by “lost children” following the banners of “a new ‘General Ludd’” who, this time, “urges them to destroy the machines of permitted consumption”. This does not mean, however, that for Debord “material abundance” is itself an illusion: it is “capitalist abundance” that has proven to be incapable of realizing its promises; the

possibility that these promises could be realized with a qualitatively different kind of “abundance” is not at all excluded. Hence the “new society of abundance” foreseen by Vaneigem, which will transform the world into one big luxurious paradise. The progressivism of the situationists prevented them from seeing that “abundance” cannot be indefinitely extended, and that it presupposes *in itself* (and not because of its inessential “commodity” form) the alienation of the few who benefit from everything, at the same time that they suffer from it, and the poverty and slavery of the majority.

This inability to perceive the nature of industrial society is accompanied, not at all surprisingly, by a similar blindness with regard to the question of automation. In “Basic Banalities” (*I.S.*, no. 8), Vaneigem declared: “With the extension of automation, the ‘workers,’ instead of supervising machines, could devote their attention to watching over the cybernetic specialists, whose sole task would be to increase a production that, through a reversal of perspective, will have ceased to be the priority sector, so as to serve the priority of life over survival.”

The program of “generalized self-management” that he would later propose would be strictly linked with this “extension of automation”, which was supposed to allow

for a considerable reduction in labor time. And in his *A Cavalier History of Surrealism*, he once again announces: “... a society in which the fantasy world of dreams would have at its disposal, for the purpose of its material actualization, the entire technical armamentarium which under present conditions serves only to destroy those prospects.”

These assertions, which make one laugh today, and which only hyper-alienated “cyborgs” or “Internet libertarians” wrapped up in fiber optic cables could possibly take seriously, stand in a direct line of descent from the oldest texts of the SI, beginning with Asger Jorn’s essay entitled, “The Situationists and Automation”, published in 1958 (*I.S.*, no. 1), from which we shall select a few extracts:

“Yet automation is now at the heart of the problem of the socialist domination of production and of the preponderance of leisure time over labor time. The issue of automation is bursting with positive and negative possibilities. [...] The various ‘avant-garde’ currents all show a defeatist attitude in the face of automation. At best, they underestimate the positive aspects of the future that is being so suddenly revealed by the early stages of automation. [...] Automation thus contains two

opposing perspectives: it deprives the individual of any possibility of adding anything personal to automated production, thus representing a fixation of progress, yet at the same time it saves human energies by massively liberating them from reproductive and uncreative activities. The value of automation thus depends on projects that supersede it and open the way for the expression of new human energies on a higher plane. [...] The idea of standardization is an attempt to reduce and simplify the greatest number of human needs to the greatest degree of equality. It's up to us whether standardization opens up more interesting realms of experience than it closes. Depending on the outcome, we may arrive at a total degradation of human life or at the possibility of perpetually discovering new desires. But these new desires will not appear by themselves within the oppressive context of our world. There must be a collective action to detect, express and fulfill them."

Jorn's text must be compared with another text, entitled "The Struggle for the Control of the New Technologies of Conditioning" (*I.S.*, no. 1), in which the situationists spoke of a "race between free artists and the police to experiment with and develop the use of the new techniques of conditioning". On the one side, the perspective of "the appearance of passionate and

liberating environments”; on the other, “the reinforcement—controllable scientifically, smoothly—of the environment of the old world of oppression and horror, whichever comes first”. Already, in these two texts one may discern their vacillations before the question of automation, which is still relevant today with the eternal media bombardment concerning neo-technology, presented simultaneously as a great step forward and as a factor of increasing alienation. Although these texts from the late 1950s are presented as reflections on a question that was still open, the power of attraction of the fundamentally progressive idea of “supersession”, and therefore the fear of adopting a position that might seem reactionary—identifying with “the forces of the past”—in fact led the situationists to take the side of modernity:

“The situationists place themselves at the service of *forgetting*. The only force capable of doing anything is the proletariat, theoretically without a past, which in Marx's words ‘is revolutionary or it is nothing.’ When will it be then—now or never? This question is of the utmost importance: the proletariat must realize art.”

There is much that could be said about this reference to a proletariat that is allegedly “without a past”, which is used as a master argument in favor of “*forgetting*”. In

any event, the choice made at the beginning (we must, however, point out that this choice was not made without certain misgivings) in favor of technological progress would be translated in the following period into increasingly more optimistic declarations regarding this question. Thus, in 1960, a “Situationist Manifesto” (*I.S.*, no. 4) presents “the automation of production” as one of “the organizational perspectives of life in a society which authentically ‘reorganizes production on the basis of the free and equal association of the producers’.” And in *The Society of the Spectacle*, when Debord addresses the question of automation, “the most advanced sector of modern industry as well as the model which perfectly sums up its practice”, Debord says that it consists of “the technical equipment which objectively eliminates labor” and that, as a result, “if the social labor (time) engaged by the society is not to diminish because of automation ... then new jobs have to be created”. Vaneigem’s texts quoted above, in which automation is presented as an emancipatory force, are therefore the results of a completely consistent process.

As everyone knows, however, the situationists never ceased to belabor the “cyberneticians” with their sarcastic remarks. We could view this as a kind of intellectual shortcut that serves to reinforce the idea of

the revolutionary transmutation of everything: cybernetics, like industry, art, etc., is bad insofar as it belongs to present-day society; once this society is abolished, cybernetics will become good, or at least it could become good. Once again the Fourierist transformation of seawater into lemonade....

In Edgar Allan Poe's short story entitled, "The System of Doctor Tarr and Doctor Fether", the inmates of a madhouse rebel against their warders, nurses and doctors, and replace them. If this special case is viewed, with a few small changes, through the lens of situationist analysis, the suppression of the representatives of the medical institution, whose very existence implies the idea of the madhouse (the insane only exist because there are doctors who define insanity), then the result would have to be the disappearance of the madhouse itself: once the perspective has been reversed, its nature is radically transformed and it ceases to be a madhouse. Poe's story reveals the fallacy of this kind of reasoning: a madhouse is still a madhouse even though the inmates believe they are no longer insane because they have transformed themselves into the real subjects of history. In the same way, industrial society will still be alienating, for *that is its nature*, even when, by some miracle (or alchemical transmutation), it should cease to be a

“spectacular-commodity” society. The situationists were perfectly well aware of the fact that the substitution of one class for another in power does not fundamentally alter the nature of the existing social relations (in Poe’s story, the madmen in power did not do anything but perform a grotesque parody of the doctors, and, furthermore, the narrator of the story did not immediately notice that the doctors were madmen), but they do not appear to have fully grasped the fact that the “appropriation” by the revolutionary proletariat of an apparatus of production that cannot be “redirected” in any way actually poses the same kind of problem.

The above-cited examples show that some of Vaneigem’s most unsound theses are based on ideas that were already present, at least in embryo, in the older texts of the SI, which helped make them acceptable, when they were formulated, to his situationist comrades. In fact, in the critique of Vaneigem’s “idealist” deviations, in 1970, the authors were careful to distinguish between the good Vaneigem—the one who wrote *The Revolution of Everyday Life* and the articles published in the journal—from the bad Vaneigem; but the theoretical defects for which he was condemned were common to both the good and the bad Vaneigem.

3

The unattainable character—utopian in the strict sense of the term—of the situationist program was not derived solely from Vaneigem's "idealist" tendency. It was also the result, as we have just seen, of a progressivism that incited a desire to "save" industrial society and at the same time abolish the civilization of the commodity, as well as of a structural defect of the situationist system of thought, which made it necessary for the situationists to resort to the alchemical metaphor of transmutation in order to account for the revolutionary "reversal of perspective".

This alchemical metaphor possesses a somewhat strange status in the situationist corpus. It performs a central role, although it is not given a great deal of emphasis (so that one might see it as nothing but a rhetorical flourish that does not have to be taken very seriously); something like the blind spot of the theory or, as Marx said, its "rotten side". It is nonetheless indispensable for the coherence of the system. But can we even speak of a "system" with regard to the situationist theses?

The SI, from the very beginning, addressed the problem of "situationism", which they defined in the following way (*I.S.*, no. 1):

“A meaningless term improperly derived from the above [“situationist”]. There is no such thing as situationism, which would mean a doctrine for interpreting existing conditions. The notion of situationism is obviously devised by antisituationists.”

The fear of seeing the situationist theses degraded into an ideology (as had taken place with Marxism, for example, or with surrealism) is the origin of this mistrust towards the very idea that there could be a situationist “doctrine”. However, to the extent that the situationists attempted to formulate a coherent and “unitary” critique of society, it is not illegitimate to try to isolate this coherence and this unity. Moreover, everyone knows that even a hallucination has a logical structure; so there might not be a “situationism” but there is of course a situationist system of thought, which was enriched and became more precise with the passage of time.

In order to demonstrate the coherence (or the incoherence) of a system of thought, the best and indeed the only way to do so is to address it *more geometrico*, according to the “method of geometry”, as exemplified by Euclid, Descartes or Spinoza. One of the advantages of this method is that it makes it much easier to perceive errors of reasoning, stripping the writing of all rhetorical adornments and penetrating to the essence. Its

disadvantage is that it compels one to reformulate the theses that one is examining, at the risk of distorting their meaning; but the advantage evoked above allows one to perceive with equal facility this type of distortion. And the spirit of geometry does not rule out, or at least it is to be hoped that it does not, a certain spirit of subtlety, which in this matter constitutes a precautionary measure.⁵ This treatment will be applied here to a particular question, but one that bears a decisive importance according to the situationists themselves: the theory of revolution. Such an examination might seem “anti-situationist”, insofar as it reveals what we could call *a logic of the impossible*.

(Author’s Note: In order to make the following presentation easier to read, the definitions and postulates have been arranged in a sequence of propositions. Propositions 5, 11, 13 and 21 are definitions; propositions 2 and 3 are postulates.)

PROPOSITION 1

A phenomenon called separation or alienation exists.

This proposition cannot be demonstrated by reason; it is not, however, properly speaking, a postulate, since the reality of alienation can be confirmed by individuals in their everyday experience.

PROPOSITION 2

Separation is not a phenomenon that is inherent to all human societies; it has a historical origin.

This proposition is neither demonstrable by reason nor is it verifiable by experience; it is therefore a postulate.

PROPOSITION 3

The cause of separation resides in a certain form of social organization.

This proposition seems to be derived from the one immediately preceding it, but it is actually a postulate.

PROPOSITION 4

If this social organization disappears, separation will not exist.

This proposition is derived from the previous one.

PROPOSITION 5

The state in which individuals find themselves when separation does not exist is called freedom.

Freedom thus defined does not need to be given a positive content.

PROPOSITION 6

The existence of separation exercises negative effects on the lives of individuals.

In effect, these individuals only have two choices in this matter:

A) *Accept alienation*; this behavior is paid for with the deprivation of freedom and a certain number of afflictions that are directly linked to this acceptance (occupational illnesses, madness, accelerated aging), not to mention the misery of the condition that results from it.

B) *Reject alienation*; this behavior is paid for with death or various punishments that tend to cause individuals to choose, either voluntarily or by necessity, choice A.

PROPOSITION 7

The suppression of separation exercises a positive effect on the lives of individuals.

This proposition remains unproven; it does, however, possess a certain degree of probability, to the extent that it is demonstrated (according to the previous proposition) that alienation exercises such negative effects that its suppression is desirable, regardless of the consequences of freedom.

PROPOSITION 8

The suppression of separation should be actively pursued.

This proposition derives from the two previous ones.

PROPOSITION 9

In order to abolish separation, the social organization that produces it must be abolished.

This proposition derives from propositions 3 and 4.

PROPOSITION 10

In order to abolish the social organization that produces separation, there must be a certain number of individuals who refuse to collaborate in its preservation.

The condition expressed in this proposition is necessary, but not sufficient; its practical implementation is incompatible with alternative B of proposition 6.

PROPOSITION 11

The violent refusal on the part of a certain number of individuals to collaborate in the preservation of the social organization that produces separation is called insurrection; the victory, even if it is only temporary, of these individuals, is called revolution; in other words, the suppression, even if it is only temporary, of that social organization.

The revolution thus defined does not need to be given a positive content.

PROPOSITION 12

The revolution is freedom.

This proposition derives from propositions 5, 9 and 11. It is only valid if the abolished social organization is not immediately replaced by another form of organization that produces separation (see the following proposition).

PROPOSITION 13

A revolution that does not bring freedom is a counterrevolution.

If the abolished social organization is replaced immediately by another form of social organization that produces separation, it is not a revolution but a counterrevolution.

PROPOSITION 14

Nothing indicates that such a revolution cannot endure.

This proposition is self-explanatory.

PROPOSITION 15

If freedom is impossible in the world of separation and if separation can only be abolished by way of revolution, it is impossible for anyone to be free before this revolution has taken place.

This proposition is self-explanatory.

PROPOSITION 16

The aspiration for freedom is the middle term that allows one to conceive the step from the state of separation to the state of freedom; what it does not by any means imply is that this step has to take place at any particular time.

This proposition is self-explanatory. The existence of the aspiration for freedom derives from propositions 5, 6 and 7.

PROPOSITION 17

If freedom is opposed to separation, freedom must consist in unity.

This proposition is self-explanatory. For if freedom were not to imply the realization of unity, separation could coexist with the revolution; which is impossible, since (according to proposition 11) the revolution is defined as the suppression of the social organization that produces separation. Since the preservation of separation is incompatible with freedom, the revolution is necessarily the realization of unity.

CORROLARY

If separation subsists despite the suppression of the social organization which is supposed to produce it, then

it can be deduced that either (according to proposition 13) we are not speaking of a revolution but of a counterrevolution, or else that the postulates (propositions 2 and 3) upon which the theory is based are false. In this latter case:

A) separation does not have a historical origin, but is inherent to human society as such (contrary to proposition 2); or,

B) separation has a historical origin, but it does not result from the social organization that is supposed to have produced it (contrary to proposition 3).

However, because we are dealing here with postulates, that is, propositions that can neither be proven nor refuted, it is impossible to definitively provide an answer to this question.

PROPOSITION 18

A war, in order to be waged, implies the existence of separation within each army.

This proposition cannot be demonstrated by reason, but is verified by experience. An insurrection can be spontaneous, that is, it does not imply any repressive organization; but a war has never been waged without any form of division of labor, hierarchy and coercion.

PROPOSITION 19

If the revolution is not carried out all at once, but takes place in a more or less extended stage of confrontations between two sides, it is no longer a revolution but a war, which implies the preservation or the reestablishment of separation.

This proposition derives from the preceding one.

PROPOSITION 20

If the revolution is the realization of unity, that is, of freedom, it requires a global qualitative change in order to proceed, without any transition or more or less extended stage of confrontations, from generalized separation to generalized freedom.

This proposition is self-explanatory.

PROPOSITION 21

A total and immediate qualitative change is a transmutation; alchemy is the art of deliberately provoked transmutations.

PROPOSITION 22

The revolution is like an alchemical transmutation.

This proposition derives from the two previous ones.

PROPOSITION 23

An alchemical transmutation is something whose realization is impossible.

This proposition is born out by experience.

PROPOSITION 24

The revolution is something whose realization is impossible.

This proposition derives from all the previous propositions.

Q.E.D.

- 1. The famous verse from the *Athalie* by Racine, “How has pure gold become base lead?”, is quoted in “The Communiqué of the S.I. concerning Vaneigem”.
- 2. This was Louis Aragon’s idea. It was recently disinterred (with lamentable results) by the last vestiges of the French Communist Party in an electoral campaign to address the question of the “new rights”.
- 3. Vaneigem aspires, paraphrasing Fourier, to “a unitary passional and industrial society”. In the same issue of the journal (no. 12), the article by Eduardo Rothe (“The Conquest of Space in the Time of Power”) goes even farther with regard to its demand for the right to conquer nature, speaking of the “entire universe pillaged for the workers councils”.

- 4. See, for example, the text by Alexander Trocchi entitled, “Technique du coupe du monde” (*I.S.*, no. 8): “Clearly, there is in principle no problem of production in the modern world. The urgent problem of the future is that of distribution, which is presently (dis)ordered in terms of the economic system prevailing in this or that area. This problem on a global scale is an administrative one and will not finally be solved until existing political and economic rivalries are outgrown.”
- 5. The distinction between the “spirit of geometry” and the “spirit of subtlety” is taken from Blaise Pascal. See his *Pensées*, section 512 (Note of the Spanish Translator). [In W.F. Trotter’s English translation of the *Pensées*, the section explaining this important distinction, translated as “the difference between the mathematical and the intuitive mind”, is the very first section of the book (see: <http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl302/texts/pascal/pensees-a.html#SECTION%20I>) (Note of the American Translator).]

Part III: Concerning Defeat and the Various Ways It Was Dealt With

“After wasting a lot of time and money, you see these old men, burdened by their years, dressed in rags, starving, reeking of the odor of sulfur, covered with black soot from coal, paralyzed by their constant handling of mercury, rich only in the amount of snot dripping from their noses and furthermore so miserable that they would sell their soul for four pennies. They undergo themselves the metamorphosis that they sought to produce in metals, transformed from alchemists into melancholics, from doctors into beggars, from soap-makers into the haunters of taverns: the targets of the people’s jibes.... And often, compelled by poverty, they are reduced to the practice of detestable arts, counterfeiting and other frauds.”

Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa, *De incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum atque artium declamatio invectiva* (1527)
(“Declamation Attacking the Uncertainty and Vanity of the Sciences and the Arts”)

1

In his “Report to the 7th Conference of the SI in Paris”, in 1966, Debord claimed that “the theory of the SI is clear at least on one point: *one must make use of it.*” To what use it was put by Vaneigem and Debord himself over the course of the next few years is the topic that we shall now examine, in order to discover how they overcame, if indeed they did overcome, the contradictions and weaknesses evoked in the previous chapter. Before we do so, however, it will be necessary to reexamine the way the SI considered its past theory at the moment of its final crisis.

Two of the SI’s members who remained in the organization after the “orientation debate” of 1970 and the resulting wave of resignations and expulsions, Debord and Gianfranco Sanguinetti, harshly denounced (in the “Communiqué of the S.I. concerning Vaneigem”) “the myth of the admirable perfection of the SI”, in order to counteract the sterile admiration that this myth had aroused among the “stupid external spectators” who did nothing but passively consume the situationist publications. In 1972, in the text that announced the dissolution of the organization (“Theses on the Situationist International and Its Time”), published in *The*

Veritable Split, they call for “applying the critique that the SI had so correctly applied to the old world to the SI itself”. To imagine that the SI had produced a perfect theory¹ is an “idealist pretension” that “can only support itself through a dogmatism that is always already doomed to defeat, and dogmatism is always already the inaugural defeat of such thought”. Far from considering that the SI had constantly demonstrated the most extreme coherence, they insisted, paraphrasing Marx, on the fact that “the SI has always known how to scoff pitilessly at the hesitations, weaknesses, and failings of its first efforts, while showing at every moment the hypotheses, oppositions, and ruptures that have constituted its history”. The theory of the SI is not fixed in “a doctrine for interpreting existing conditions”, established once and for all, precisely because it is linked to a practice that is under constant development. Furthermore, this theory continued to undergo changes after 1968. The “Theses” of 1972 take ecological questions into account for the first time:

“Whether it is a question of the chemical pollution of the air we breathe or of the adulteration of foodstuffs, of the irreversible accumulation of radioactivity by the industrial use of nuclear energy, or of the deterioration of the water cycle from the subterranean springs to the

oceans, or of the urban leprosy that is continuing to spread out in place of what were once the town and the countryside, or of the ‘population explosion,’ of the increase in suicides and mental illnesses, or of the threshold approached by noise pollution....”

These facts are testimonies, each in its own field, to “the impossibility of going any further (which is more or less urgent and more or less mortal according to the individual case)” along the road of industrial development. The situationists thus included in their field of vision a category of considerations that they had previously disdained, compensating to some degree for their backwardness. For they began to show concern for these issues at a time when the publications devoted to the various forms of pollution and the problems they cause began to proliferate,² which revealed a mass of reflections formulated in the sixties outside of the vanguardist and revolutionary milieus.³ A very severe critique, which was certainly relevant, was directed against the “partial” nature of the knowledge accumulated by the scientists regarding these questions: “However, such a science, the servant of the mode of production and limitations of the thought that it has produced, cannot conceive of a true reversal of the course of things. It does not know how to think

strategically, which nobody asks it to do anyway; no more does it possess the practical means of intervening in it. It can only talk about its expiration, and about the best palliatives that would postpone this expiration if they were firmly applied. Thus, this science shows to the most ridiculous degree the uselessness of knowledge without means of use and the nullity of nondialectical thought in an era carried away by the movement of historical time. Thus, the old slogan 'Revolution or Death' is no longer the lyrical expression of consciousness in revolt; it is the last word of the scientific thought of our century."

In order for the knowledge of "general degradation" not to be translated into "*general powerlessness*", it will necessarily have to incorporate the (situationist) theory of the revolution, and thus discover a coherence and above all a practical use. This knowledge also confirms that theory, since "the last word of scientific thought" from now on is: "Revolution or Death."

But this is where the problems begin. For this information that the situationists will from now on have to take into account implies the idea of the irreversibility of the processes that are underway, explicitly emphasized with the example of the nuclear industry. It

is therefore necessary to put an end to this industry as soon as possible, along with most other industries, which, translated into situationist terms (imitating Marxist rhetoric), implies:

“The relations between production and the productive forces have finally reached a point of radical incompatibility, because the existing social system has bound its fate to the pursuit of a literally unbearable deterioration of all the conditions of life.... The brutal downfall of prehistoric production, which only the social revolution of which we are speaking can bring about, is the necessary and sufficient condition for the beginning of an era of great historical production; the indispensable and urgent renewal of the production of man by himself.”

The situationists of 1972 present the “brutal downfall of prehistoric production” as a simple update to their theory. For if the question is only framed from *adescriptive* point of view, the previous positions of the SI are indisputably confirmed:

“The universal development of the commodity has been completely verified as the realization of political economy, in other words, as ‘renunciation of life.’ At the moment when everything has entered the sphere of

economic goods, even spring-water and the air of towns, everything has become economic sickness.... This admirable coincidence appears with the new era: revolution is desired in a total form at the very moment when it can only be accomplished in a total form, and when the totality of the functioning of society becomes absurd and impossible outside that accomplishment.”

If, however, we view the matter from the *practical* point of view, that is, if we ask ourselves how they will arrange the revolution to “transform the world” within the new conditions that were just described, we can confirm that the latter actually contradict the previous theses of the SI. It will be recalled that these theses were largely based on an allegedly disalienated utilization of automation and the existing system of production, since these two conditions make it possible to foresee a substantial reduction of labor time in the future society. It was, so to speak, change within continuity: all that was necessary was to “reverse the perspective” and all the rest would follow later. For the theory of the spectacle granted a central role to the subjective perception of reality, and that is why the subjectivism of *The Revolution of Everyday Life* accorded quite well with the ideas of Debord (the notion of the “spectacle”, in the situationist sense of the term, only had any meaning in relation to

subjectivity: “Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation.”, etc.). From that point on, the situationists declared (“Notes To Serve towards the History of the SI from 1969 to 1971”): “... one cannot make revolutionary theory while neglecting the material foundations of the existing social relations. It is this critique of modern capitalism as it really is that separates the SI from all leftism and also from the lying lyrical sighs of the various Vaneigemists. We had to recommence the critique of political economy in understanding precisely and in combating ‘the society of the spectacle.’ And assuredly we had to continue this critique because this society, since 1967, has pursued its movement of decay in an accelerated manner.”

The new importance that was conceded to the “material foundations of the existing social relations” was confirmed by a sibylline passage from the “Theses on the Situationist International and Its Time”:

“The basic fact is not so much that all the material means exist for the construction of a free life in a classless society; rather, it is that the blind under-employment of these means by class society can neither interrupt itself nor go any further.”

The formula that “all the material means exist”, etc., corresponds to the situationist discourse of the period between 1958 and 1969 as it was expounded in the journal and in Vaneigem’s book, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*. This discourse no longer coincided with “the basic fact”, because it is simply incompatible with “the brutal downfall of prehistoric production” that is now announced (although in a relatively discreet way and, as we have seen, almost in a sibylline manner). But the situationists did not want to say this explicitly, or at least they never did so. They contented themselves at the time with saying that “the blind under-employment of these means by class society can neither interrupt itself nor go any further”. In other words, class society finds itself in a dead end; a situation that can only be resolved, the situationists say, by way of revolution. It was assumed, however, that this revolution was the “supersession” of the present situation; the question that then arises is: can a dead end [*impasse*] be “superseded” [*dépasse*]? Evidently not. You have to turn around and go in another direction. But in that case one no longer “supersedes” anything; one departs from the progressivist logic and then it is necessary to address different questions of a *practical* order which are precisely the questions that the situationists do not ask: how can that “brutal downfall of prehistoric production”

be reconciled with the material abundance that up until now had been taken for granted? To what extent is it compatible with the suppression of alienation, with the suppression of labor, etc., etc.? By defining the industrial mode of production as “the blind under-employment of these means”, it was suggested that they could be utilized more effectively if they were not wasted in the intensive production of useless objects, which squander the available natural resources without providing any benefits. But could they really be utilized with discernment? A “brutal downfall of prehistoric production” means exactly the death of the industrial system based on productivity. By turning their backs on this system, they make the entire apparatus of production and distribution tremble and necessarily replace abundance with scarcity, which returns the question of material survival to the highest plane. (This question, which abundance, the daughter of industry, allows us to ignore, was precisely the question that pre-industrial societies had to permanently face.) Thus, what must be reconsidered is the whole situationist theory. In order to avoid devoting themselves to such a revision, the situationists, in 1972, restricted themselves to formulating their last theses without drawing the requisite conclusions from them, and preferred to act as if these theses were themselves a *supersession* of the

theory of the SI, “which thus abolishes in such a way that it maintains and preserves what is abolished”.

In this way, the coherence of the theory was preserved, but only in words. (One example: this class society, which, by pursuing its current mode of functioning, “can neither interrupt itself nor go any further”, is confronted by a contradiction which by definition assumes that it will be resolved by the revolution, since the latter is the supersession of contradictions or, to express it in the Marxist-situationist style, “the real movement that surpasses existing conditions”. But this formal supersession is still a *petitio principii* insofar as it does not pose the question of *how* this state of affairs will be surpassed: unless one thinks, as Vaneigem does, that the democracy of the workers councils will solve all problems, and that it is therefore pointless to address them *before* the revolution. This way of avoiding the disturbing questions is a defect to which numerous pro- and post-situs would succumb.) In reality, the situationists, who had the merit of taking a step forward in the sense of a drastic revision of their theses—a revision that the leftists would never carry out, or that they would undertake much later and less consistently—but who had stopped at the threshold of this revision, found themselves precisely in the same situation as class society, a situation that they had so accurately

characterized: their theory “can neither interrupt itself nor go any further”. Then all that was left was to dissolve the SI, which is another way of leaving the problem unresolved, but this time, definitively.

The process of development through conflict that made the SI’s journal so stimulating—its ability to “[show] at every moment the hypotheses, oppositions, and ruptures that have constituted its history”—is interrupted, because the new stage in the evolution of situationist theory is no longer of the same order as the previous ones; this time it involves a change of course that was not carried out. In these conditions, even though it continues to claim that its theory is not perfect and that it must be criticized, the SI in fact considers its theory, from then on, as if it were something finished and immutable, even going so far as to say (at the end of the “Communiqué of the SI concerning Vaneigem”) that “the historians will only confirm the judgment of the SI”. With this sleight-of-hand, the situationists in fact favored dogmatism and “the narcotic certainties of ideology” that it professed to combat. The SI offered its readers an *intrinsically contradictory* theory—as before, as we proved in the previous chapter, but henceforth in a yet more flagrant form—presenting it, despite all the rhetorical denials that might be marshaled in its defense,

as the most admirable thing in the whole world.⁴ Like transubstantiation or the philosopher's stone, it is something incomprehensible, it seems impossible, yet you have to believe in it; since the power of the tone and the style employed is such that it exercises a role of "hidden persuasion" which makes a cold and objective reading impossible.⁵

It would be erroneous, however, to perceive this as a deliberate maneuver, a Machiavellian manipulation on the part of the situationists. It is just that they are obsessed with the question of organization, which they consider to be "fundamental ... in the very theory of revolution", and they devote their most serious attention to the critique of the "pro-situs" and the "Vaneigemists". There are blind spots in their theory, which they are thus unable to discern, just as they do not see that their new contributions to situationist theory do nothing but exacerbate that theory's contradictions. But maybe they sensed this in a confused way, which would explain their insistence on recalling that they had not sought to elaborate "a definitively coherent and worked-out system", and that with regard to their theory, "whoever helps the age in discovering what it can do is no more shielded from the blemishes of the present than he is innocent of the most deadly things that might occur".

They therefore anticipated in advance a critique that, in the final analysis, would not take place. And Debord, as we shall see below, would do nothing but replace one discourse with another without ever reconsidering the various contradictions that he had previously evoked.

2

After his resignation from the SI, Vaneigem first passed through a stage of escalated radicality, followed after 1979 by a second stage distinguished by renunciation of the very idea of revolution.

In 1972, in “Terrorism or Revolution” (Vaneigem’s Introduction to *Pour la révolution*, an anthology of texts by a 19th century revolutionary, Ernest Coeurderoy) and above all in “A Toast to Revolutionary Workers”, which was added as an afterword to the new edition of *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, he undertook, utilizing a profusion of detoured formulas from Marx, a critique of the “radical critique” represented by situationist theory. While the latter carried out “an analysis of the old world and through practice in which the analyst negates him or herself as separated consciousness”, “it must now either realise itself in the practical activity of the revolutionary masses or betray itself by becoming a barrier to that activity”; for “without the criticism of arms, the arms of

criticism are but weapons of suicide". The "subjective expression of the situationist project", which in 1968 "reached its highest point", "the most advanced practical thought of a proletarian sector with no access to the levers of the commodity process", then experienced its "lowest ebb" when it became only the object of an "intellectualised reading". Thus, "the main theses of the *Traité de savoir-vivre* must now find corroboration of a concrete sort in the actions of its anti-readers.... in the shape of total revolution", replacing the "theoretical what is to be done?" with "the revolutionary act". Vaneigem therefore accused the situationists of the post-1968 period of practical impotence, whereas the situationists, in the "Communiqué of the SI concerning Vaneigem", had characterized Vaneigem's position as a "permanent refusal to envision a real historical development". In their view, as they pointed out in 1972 in "On the Decomposition of Our Enemies" (included in *The Veritable Split*), the new texts by Vaneigem are only a kind of pseudo-revolutionary logorrhea in which "the most hollow formulae, and the long series of concepts without use, accumulate in a slap-dash manner, in what seems to be a bad *pastiche* of the Vaneigem of 1962".

For Vaneigem, the functioning of the SI, which should have represented—according to the terms of *The Revolution of Everyday Life*—a model of organization that mediates “between the increasingly disorganised old society and the new society yet to be built”, had proven incapable of finding a way “to harmonise inter-subjective agreements and differences”. Vaneigem henceforth rejected all “organizational model[s]” in favor of the spontaneous organization of the “insurgent workers” in wildcat strikes and revolts. The worker is now the only reader capable of drawing the practical conclusions of the theses of *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, whereas during the period when it was being written it was directed at any reader ready to “re-experience” the “life” that it contained; what the situationists were now reproaching Vaneigem himself for, on the other hand, was not having known how to do this. All-too-marked by the ideas of the SI and not having been written specifically for the “insurgent workers”, *The Revolution of Everyday Life* is not adapted to Vaneigem’s new orientation, which is why Vaneigem published in 1974, under the pseudonym of Ratgeb,⁶ a book entitled *From Wildcat Strike to Total Self-Management*. Published in a paperback edition (10/18)⁷ and presented as a practical manual, it ran no risk at all of being subjected to an “intellectualised reading”, all the more so insofar as it

adopted a clumsy pedagogical style that was addressed “exclusively to revolutionary workers”, since they are the only people who can “break the bonds of commodity domination”. The “revolutionary theory of total self-management” delineated by Vaneigem during the period when he was a member of the SI (to which he does not refer, because of the pretense that this book was not written by Vaneigem) is here reintegrated in “the movement it came from, the insurrectionary movement of the workers”. Despite his use of a pseudonym, the very title of the book already smacks so much of Vaneigem that we may ask ourselves if it found any readers who did not notice this.

Ratgeb sets forth, in much more detail than Vaneigem had provided in *The Revolution of Everyday Life* and in the “Notice to the Civilized”, “a model of what total self-management might be like, and of a society based on the satisfaction of individual desires and passions”. This model owes much, as always, to Fourier: social equilibrium results from the harmonization of the passions. Among the four sections that comprise “a total self-management assembly” there is also “a *harmonization* section, charged with coordinating passional offers and requests, harmonizing the plurality of desires, and facilitating the fulfillment of particular

caprices”. The author, a self-declared enemy of bureaucracy and of all “organizational models”, ultimately conceives, without even being aware of this, a typically bureaucratic organization, with that “harmonization section” that is simultaneously a research institute, a planning center and an office for the management of human resources. It will be recalled that, as far back as 1963, in “Basic Banalities”, Vaneigem imagined that one day the workers would “devote their attention to watching over the cybernetic specialists, whose sole task would be to increase ... production” in a society in which “the extension of automation” would be the rule. Ratgeb takes the utopianism of the Vaneigem of the situationist era to the point of caricature by radicalizing it even further. Ratgeb, however, defends himself from the accusation that he is a utopian. He thinks (just like Fourier) that his “contributions” can be “put into practice without delay”. The dreamed-of reconciliation of theory and practice—one of his articles for the journal is entitled: “Aiming for Practical Truth” (*I.S.*, no. 11)—once again comes to grief.[8](#)

Now we come to the second stage in Vaneigem’s literary career. As if to confirm the prediction of the SI concerning him (“What one has affirmed to be perfect, one must one day affirm to be totally nonexistent”),

Vaneigem, after having waited for several years for a revolution that never took place, undertook, beginning with *The Book of Pleasures* (1979), to subject his past “errors” to harsh criticism, replacing the word “revolution”, which he now only used reluctantly, with the word “emancipation”. From then on, the individual quest for salvation is what will allow for the attainment of the goal, always demanded, of “globally subverting society”. It is true that “daylight has not yet dawned on real life”; however, “behind all you shadowy figures, it is pushing through, under my very feet”. In this book, as in all those that would follow, Vaneigem explains that the “reversal of perspective” is no longer a hypothetical future event but is taking place “under my very feet”; it heralds “the end of the economic era and introduces universal self-management”, which is just around the corner. The ultra-radical who exhorted the “insurgent workers” to revolution has been transformed into a teacher of wisdom who preaches love with an artificial serenity, halfway between Lanza del Vasto and Paulo Coelho. Some examples taken at random:

“The key is within each of us. No instructions come with it.... It is entirely up to us to invent our own lives. We waste so much energy in living vicariously, it is really hard work, when it would be enough, if you love yourself, to

apply this energy to the achievement and development of the incomplete being, the child within.... At any one moment, my 'me' is to be found tightly tangled in the detritus of what oppresses me; heated debate erupts in the attempt to disentangle the twisted filaments and liberate utterly the sexual impulse as the breath that gives life perpetually. It ought never to be stifled.”

And also:

“With attractive ease as the most natural thing in the world, our common desire for autonomy will bring us together to stop paying, working, following orders, giving up what we want, growing old, feeling shame or familiarity with fear. We will act instead on the pulse of pleasure, and live in love and creativity.”

The revolutionary subjectivity of which he had been an ardent apostle is now in his view the main obstacle to the emancipation of life. His critique is directed, obviously, at his old comrades of the SI. It is all the more interesting insofar as it totally accords with what the SI had pronounced against him. He was accused of not having sufficiently taken the negative into account; and he accuses the “men of denial” for having been satisfied with an excessively critical attitude, as if they were the “district attorneys of the revolution, self-appointed

arbiters of radicality, hucksters of merit and demerit". Far from being the explorers of the world of the future, they are "armour-clad in neurosis" and the worst enemies of freedom: their hatred for this world is merely a projection of "the disgust they feel at themselves", since "they are attempting to change society and never cease to dissimulate, by exorcizing it, the old world that they bear within themselves".⁹ Here, the effort to understand the dialectical relation of the positive and the negative that was reflected in *The Revolution of Everyday Life* yields to a fixed separation of the two aspects (which had already been anticipated in "Notice to the Civilized"): on the one side, the idealism of a doctrine of the "alchemy of the I"; on the other, the nihilism of the worshippers of the negative.

If there is one thing that Vaneigem did not abandon it is the reference to his favorite themes, already fully displayed in *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, which are "the will to live" and alchemy. *The Book of Pleasures* specifies what Vaneigem means by life, a notion that was characterized up until this time, according to his own testimony, by a certain imprecision. This is a force or an energy without goal or purpose, defined as that which "escapes the economy and will destroy it with gratuitousness". Against it, the economy

stands as a power of death: “the market” is “a dead civilization”, a state of “inversion in which death battens on life”, in which “death is what the dominant world thinks about”. As opposed to “a society which reduces life to a production of dead things” in a process that inexorably tends towards self-destruction, Vaneigem posits “a society based upon the individual will to live”, animated by the constructive energy of life. That is why “life becomes strange and new” when it is manifested within a “moribund society”, “upon the threshold of the unlivable, filled with compensatory nostalgia for a past that never was but inseparable from a history based upon the degradation of the will to live”.

The “alchemy of life”, the central theme of the *Adresse aux vivants sur la mort qui les gouverne et l'opportunité de s'en défaire*, published in 1990,^{[10](#)} emerges directly from this conception of life. Since life is the opposite of the economy, the “alchemy of life”, which produces (not in an uncertain future, but here and now) the philosopher’s stone that is capable of transmuting market society, is nothing but “the grace of love and of being friendly [that] dispenses with all this waiting for favors from anyone or anything”, which brings about “the fundamental agreement between life and nature.” This is the secret of the Great Work.

“By an enchantment that has come into its prime in our time, an alchemical relationship has elaborated itself, timidly, between these two beings, taken over by the radically new state of being they enter together, a relationship where the transmutation of a primal nature implies the simultaneous transformation of the operator of that transmutation.”

The realization of this alchemy proceeds via “the child’s second birth”: it involves an attempt “to rediscover ... not a wounded childhood”, as in psychoanalysis, but “a blooming childhood”, “wealth of being ... the morning of desire”. This is therefore a revelation: “the creation of the living is revolutionary”. Long and picturesque explanations ensue in which he addresses the development of the fetus in “the maternal athanor” (the “athanor” is the furnace of the alchemists) and the “alchemical quest”, which is “a quest in search of happiness”. The “alchemy of the ‘I’” is the “conscious creation of individual destiny”, that is, “the stubborn urge to desire endlessly”.¹¹ There is no reason to go any more deeply into the details of this discourse, which rehashes many of Vaneigem’s old formulations by adapting them to a kind of New Age philosophy. It will suffice to point out that, by means of an effect of magical transfiguration that not even Fourier would have

dreamed of, “the transmutation of the ‘I’ contains the transmutation of the world, [because] each individual is the whole of the world, with its disasters, prosperity, massacres, births, wars and peaceful havens, seasons, climate, intemperateness, cyclones, earthquakes, and humid, dry, cold, sultry, and temperate zones.”

As in the *Emerald Tablet* attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, “that which is below is like that which is above and that which is above is like that which is below”. The harmony of microcosms and macrocosms (“to feel yourself to be in agreement with everything living”) in “the body on its quest for psychosomatic plenitude” is the only authentic medicine, which allows one “to learn how to hijack and divert the effects of death”. In short, “the ubiquity of the living is reborn in the new symbiosis in which the individual finds the unity of human nature and terrestrial nature on enjoyment”. The Age of Aquarius is not far off, and we float in a daydream; the full title of the book is *Address to the Living concerning the Death that Rules Them and the Opportunity to Free Themselves from It*.

Even in *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, one of the effects of revolution must be the abolition of death, or at least its considerable postponement, by means of an unprecedented reinforcement of the will to live.^{[12](#)} Thus,

however disturbing they might be, the later works of Vaneigem are nothing but further developments of what his situationist writings already contained. This explains why we have spent so much time here with the avatars of “Vaneigemism”.[13](#)

The Vaneigemist conception of the “will to live” is largely inspired by the ideas of Schopenhauer, who had conceptualized the “will to live” in *The World as Will and Idea* (sometimes translated as *The World as Will and as Representation*) (1818). The series of passages that follow, at the same time that they allow us to understand just what Schopenhauer means by the “will to live”, will also clearly show the similarity between his works and Vaneigem’s (some of his sentences sound like pure Vaneigem):

“... the answer to the riddle is given to the subject of knowledge who appears as an individual, and the answer is will. This and this alone gives him the key to his own existence, reveals to him the significance, shows him the inner mechanism of his being, of his action, of his movements....

“... every kind of active and operating force in nature is essentially identical with will

“In us also the same will is in many ways only blindly active: in all the functions of our body which are not guided by knowledge, in all its vital and vegetative processes, digestion, circulation, secretion, growth, reproduction. Not only the actions of the body, but the whole body itself is, as we have shown above, phenomenon of the will, objectified will, concrete will. All that goes on in it must therefore proceed through will, although here this will is not guided by knowledge.... The will, considered purely in itself, is devoid of knowledge, and is only a blind, irresistible urge, as we see it appear in inorganic and vegetable nature and in their laws, and also in the vegetative part of our own life.... the will is the thing-in-itself, the inner content, the essence of the world....

“Thus our knowledge, bound always to individuality and having its limitation in this very fact, necessarily means that everyone can be only one thing, whereas he can know everything else....

“... the satisfaction of the sexual impulse goes beyond the affirmation of one's own existence that fills so short a time; it affirms life for an indefinite time beyond the death of the individual.... procreation is only the expression, the symptom, of his decided affirmation of

the will-to-live.... the will-to-live, the kernel and essence of that world....

“Nature, always true and consistent, here even naïve, exhibits to us quite openly the inner significance of the act of procreation. Our own consciousness, the intensity of the impulse, teaches us that in this act is expressed the most decided affirmation of the will-to-live, pure and without further addition.... procreation is only the expression, the symptom, of his decided affirmation of the will-to-live.... The genitals are the life-preserving principle assuring to time endless life.... The pleasure that accompanies procreation is a higher power of the agreeableness of the feeling of life.... The act of procreation is further related to the world as the solution is to the riddle. Thus the world is wide in space and old in time, and has an inexhaustible multiplicity of forms. Yet all this is only the phenomenon of the will-to-live; and the concentration, the focus of this will is the act of generation. Hence in this act the inner nature of the world most distinctly expresses itself.... Therefore that act, as the most distinct expression of the will, is the kernel, the compendium, the quintessence of the world; it is the solution to the riddle. Accordingly, it is understood by the ‘tree of knowledge’; for, after acquaintance with it, everyone begins to see life in its

true light.... No less in keeping with this quality is the fact that it is the great 'Unspeakable,' the public secret which must never be distinctly mentioned anywhere, but is always and everywhere understood to be the main thing as a matter of course, and is therefore always present in the minds of all. For this reason, even the slightest allusion to it is instantly understood. The principal role played in the world by this act and by what is connected with it, because everywhere love-intrigues are pursued on the one hand, and assumed on the other, is quite in keeping with the importance of this *punctum saliens* of the world-egg...."

As you can see, Freud invented nothing. The transition from the "will to live" to the "alchemy of life" is easily explained in the light of these texts, and Schopenhauer himself used alchemical metaphors ("quintessence", "the world-egg" ...); but for Vaneigem they are not metaphors: it is assumed that the alchemy is *really* as he describes it. Vaneigem distorted Schopenhauer's ideas with respect to their original meaning, because Schopenhauer is a total pessimist and Vaneigem's ecstatic reveries concerning "the happy childhood" and the "wealth of being" would have made him burst into laughter. For Schopenhauer, the "will to live" is the worst evil, and the only way to escape this misfortune is to flee from desires

by leading an ascetic life. Animated by a diametrically opposed intention, in *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, Vaneigem reworked Schopenhauer's ideas about boredom, which he used to characterize the subjective perception of "survival":

"The basis of all willing, however, is need, lack, and hence pain, and by its very nature and origin it is therefore destined to pain.... Hence its life swings like a pendulum to and fro between pain and boredom, and these two are in fact its ultimate constituents. This has been expressed very quaintly by saying that, after man had placed all pains and torments in hell, there was nothing left for heaven but boredom."

(Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*)

One last observation to conclude our examination of Vaneigem. In 1995, he was kind enough to write the Afterword for a book written by Alain Mamou-Mani that was published by Albin Michel, whose title—*Au delà du profit: comment réconcilier Woodstock et Wall Street* ("Beyond Profit: How to Reconcile Woodstock and Wall Street")—tells you all you need to know about its contents. In this book we find the whole future program of the "alter-globalization" movement, and even a precocious debut of the most famous of its slogans:

“‘Another world’ is possible if civil society, consumers associations and stockholders play the role of pressure groups by using democracy and the market.... All the individuals who live on this Earth are structured as one vast planetary brain, a world civil society, a network of citizens, a global consciousness.... This new consciousness will unite the values of the East with those of the West, the masculine and the feminine values, the values of the economy and efficiency, with the values of ecology, of respect for oneself and for one’s neighbor. Worldwide television, like ‘world music’, based on cultural fusion, reduces the ‘mental distance’ between continents, peoples and civilizations: it contributes to the emergence of this planetary consciousness, of common challenges.”

Vaneigem appears in this work as the guru of capitalism with a human face:

“Like Raoul Vaneigem, we see [14](#) that ‘the message of business provides sufficient clarity for elucidating the destiny that you desire for yourselves. We must give priority, therefore, to environmental remediation, to the marketing of quality goods, to the coordination of the regional and the international, to the critical processing of information, to the suppression of work and to the promotion of creativity, to the reconversion of parasitic

industries, to the development of so-called natural or alternative energy, to the emergence of a gay science, to a non-state controlled collective of producers and consumers, to individual autonomy, to the defense of the rights of life, to the construction of a human environment, to the introduction of new energy technologies in the third world, to the peaceful reconversion of military technologies, to the gradual replacement of penal sanctions by a policy of atonement for the harm caused.... Isn't this a beautiful program, and well-designed to awaken even more enthusiasm than the enthusiasm that was aroused for a few months during the economic upheavals of 1789 and 1917?'"

In his Afterword, entitled "Brief Observations on the Ethical Stage", Vaneigem declares that the ethical stage,¹⁵ "a legitimate weapon of neo-capitalism", is the prelude to the reconciliation "of consciousness and the body":

"Are there no reasons to be satisfied with a transformation in which the economy that is extinguished in the systematic looting of the planet discovers a new youth in the profitable reconstruction of a devastated natural environment and an everyday life ruined by survival? Besides the fanatics of a profit that feeds on death, who would regret the fact that ethanol

distilleries and solar collectors replace the nuclear power plants, that fauna and the flora escape programmed massacre, that the free range chickens should call for a boycott of the chickens that are raised in gigantic factories?.... The struggle that capitalism has been waging since 1968 against its archaic—and still dominant—forms is nothing but, in the convergence of its contraries, a revolution: one that is engendering a new era and that nothing can stop. If critique only wants to perceive in neo-capitalism the old system with a new look, it is condemned to the blather and the tacit apology for the old world. Furthermore, it does nothing but perpetuate the separation of consciousness and the body—the fundamental space of the territory that must be liberated—if it contents itself with approving the humanist ethic, which is the legitimate weapon of neo-capitalism against the barbarism of an economic system whose death throes make the death throes of the earth profitable.”

We hear the same old song in *A Warning to Students of All Ages*, published in the same year:

“On the other hand, if the same steps taken obey the solicitations of a Neocapitalism searching out in ecological investments a weapon against the property speculation of an ownership without imagination, all

that'll be lacking will be a change of consciousness for a guaranteed salary and a reduced-time workday for the path of free creation and the leisure to find and to be oneself, at last, to be opened for everyone.”

Thus, twenty-five years after leaving the SI, Vaneigem comes to explain to us that, once all modesty is cast aside, a real “revolution” finally did take place after 1968, but that it did not come from where it was expected; it is “neocapitalism”, at war “against its archaic forms”, which is responsible for bringing about this prodigy. This time the hour of emancipation has really arrived. There is no longer any need to appeal to the “insurgent workers”: capitalism is spontaneously oriented towards a collective “change of consciousness” that will allow for the establishment of “a guaranteed salary and a reduced-time workday” that will make possible the advent of the long awaited realm of the qualitative.

(The Curtain Falls.)

3

After the dissolution of the SI, Debord, too, gradually renounced, although in a very different way than Vaneigem, the situationist perspective of the revolution.

While Vaneigem increasingly expressed his taste for positivity, Debord did exactly the opposite, presenting himself as the incarnation of the negative.

In 1978, in his film *In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni*, Debord speaks ironically of those who expect the advent of “a permanent paradise”, “a total revolution”, “a happy, eternally present unity”. Similarly, in 1979, in his “Preface to the Fourth Italian Edition of *The Society of the Spectacle*”, he recalls that life cannot be conceived, “for the sole reason that it would be pleasant for us”, as “a trouble-free and evil-free idyll”: it is not possible to abolish with the touch of a magic wand the dimension of conflict, which is the very substance of history dialectically conceived. The “Communiqué of the SI concerning Vaneigem”, discussed above, quoted Hegel, who said that “contradiction is the source of all movement, of all life”, since it “is only to the extent that a thing includes within itself a contradiction that it shows itself to be active and alive”. In order to distinguish himself even more clearly from Vaneigem, Debord points out that he had set forth in *The Society of the Spectacle* “a conception which is ... historical and strategic”, and that the book “gives no kind of assurances about the victory of the revolution or the duration of its operations or the rough

roads it will have to travel, and still less about its capacity—sometimes rashly boasted of—to bring perfect happiness to everyone.”

With this declaration, which confirms the change of course initiated in the “Theses on the Situationist International and Its Time”, the situationist theory of the revolution (with all of its “Vaneigemist” baggage) is definitively abandoned. It is true that Debord was still proclaiming that “the days of this society are numbered” and that “its inhabitants are divided into two sides, one of which wants this society to disappear”, but there will be blood, sweat and tears.

Paradoxically, although he distances himself from the illusions of the SI of the sixties, he nonetheless renders, so to speak, one last homage to them, in a passage that is undoubtedly the most utopian of his entire oeuvre:

“... the revolution that wants to create and maintain a classless society ... can begin easily enough wherever autonomous proletarian assemblies ... abolish the separation of individual, the commodity economy and the State. But it will only triumph by imposing itself universally, without leaving a patch of territory to any form of alienated society that still exists. There we will see again an Athens or a Florence that reaches to all the

corners of the world, a city from which no one will be rejected....”

In *The Society of the Spectacle*, the paragraph devoted to the Renaissance had already demonstrated Debord’s fascination with the Italian cities of the 15th century: “The new possession of historical life, the Renaissance, which finds its past and its legitimacy¹⁶ in Antiquity, carries with it a joyous rupture with eternity. Its irreversible time is that of the infinite accumulation of knowledge, and the historical consciousness which grows out of the experience of democratic communities and of the forces which ruin them will take up, with Machiavelli, the analysis of desanctified power, saying the unspeakable about the State. In the exuberant life of the Italian cities, in the art of the festival, life is experienced as enjoyment of the passage of time. But this enjoyment of passage is itself a passing enjoyment.”

Besides the elegance of a well-constructed formula, we can ask ourselves just what “an Athens or a Florence that reaches to all the corners of the world”, in which separation has been abolished, would look like. It is actually nothing but the generalization over the whole planet of direct democracy, which would necessarily assume the form of a federation of cities, since direct

democracy can only function (as Jean-Jacques Rousseau understood) in small-scale communities; this democracy, which was first assayed in the Greek city-states and later in the Italian cities, will be fully realized by the democracy of the workers councils.¹⁷ Debord later added, in his 1979 “Preface to the Fourth Italian Edition of *The Society of the Spectacle*”, that the revolution, after “having brought down all its enemies”, would “surrender itself joyously to the true divisions and never-ending confrontations of historical life”. In this brief evocation of the ideal city, Debord emphasizes conflict, in complete opposition to the Fourierist harmony praised by Vaneigem (a variation on the theme of the “invisible hand” that is supposed to miraculously reconcile individual desires with the good of the collectivity). Employing the same comparison with Athens and Florence at the conclusion of his *Truthful Report on the Last Chances to Save Capitalism in Italy*, first published under the name of “Censor”, Sanguinetti—who had terminated the adventure of the SI together with Debord—still insisted, in 1975, on the conflictive dimension of the adopted “model”:

“... the most cultivated of our adversaries find the rough outline of their model in Pericles’ Athens or pre-Medici Florence—models that they must confess are quite

insufficient, but nevertheless worthy of their real project, because they display to the most caricatural degree the incessant violence and disorder that are its very essence.”

The Debord of 1979 is in complete agreement with the Sanguinetti of 1975, who nonetheless at the time seemed to be prone to an exaggerated and ironic form of expression. The revolution will not abolish “violence and disorder”; it will not be the end of history but its real beginning, since it will make humanity exit (as Marx said) prehistory. The revolution, however, is still conceived, in the situationist manner, as “a total revolution” (although in 1979 Debord no longer uses this expression) that must be “universally” imposed or else not exist, since it is based on the abolition of separation. But this is precisely what makes it *totally* unrealizable. And that is why Debord no longer considers it to be imminent but relegates it to an indefinite future; for example, in *In Girum* he does not rule out the possibility that we might someday “manage to abolish classes and the state”. If we look carefully, we can find some formulations in Debord with which Vaneigem would not disagree. In *In Girum*, for example, he declares that the situationist program “promised nothing more than an autonomy without rules or restrictions”. There is also a fleeting

allusion to “a harmonious society that was capable of controlling all its forces”. But outside of these few excursions into positivity, Debord was preferentially devoted to highlighting the negative dimension of his past and present activity. In *In Girum*, he summarizes the situationist project in the following terms:

“[We were devoted] quite simply to totally destroying this hostile world — in order to rebuild it, if possible, on other bases.’

The destruction of “this hostile world” is still an indisputable goal, insofar as its reconstruction “on other bases” is presented, with notable casualness, as something vague and uncertain. The situationist theory, considered in its broadest outlines (see above, Part I, Section 2), identified destruction and reconstruction as two aspects of a single process, and not as two distinct phases. But the SI was marked, in its historical development, first of all by diverse propositions concerning “unitary urbanism” and the “realization of art”, and later by Vaneigem’s program of “generalized self-management”. The positive part of the situationist enterprise became for Debord accessory, imprecise, almost insignificant. Because he did not want to recapitulate it, he considered it to be non-existent, and thus practiced a kind of repression, in order to only

subsist in the negative part, the only valid one in his view.

Without openly saying so, Debord admitted that the situationist project could not lead to any effective action that did not involve destruction, which he now presented as the only practical contribution of the SI to the revolutionary movement, the only one, at least, that was crowned with success. This new, almost nihilist,¹⁸ perspective, was retroactively transformed into the truth of the SI. Debord described the situationists as knights who went in search of an “evil Grail”, which is obviously the revolution:

“We did not seek the formula to overthrow the world in books, but in wandering. It was a derive on great days, in which nothing was like the day before, and never stopped. We found surprises, considerable obstacles, great betrayals, enchanting dangers, nothing was lacking in this quest for the other evil Grail that no one had wanted.”

The quest for the Grail, which constitutes the theme of several medieval romances—known as “Arthurian” romances because their plots are situated in the legendary epoch of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table—that were written in the 12th century, such as *Perceval le Gallois* [published in English

translation as: *Perceval, the Story of the Grail*—American Translator’s Note], by Chrétien de Troyes. Perceval attempted to cross a “Desert Land” whose king was known as the “Fisher King”, but was thwarted. The Desert Land would never be fertile until the King was cured thanks to the Grail—a sort of cup which later authors identified with the chalice that contained the blood of Christ collected by Joseph of Arimathea—and the “Bleeding Lance”, also identified later with the lance that a Roman soldier had thrust into the side of Christ at Calvary. While staying as a guest at the castle of the Fisher King, Perceval sees a strange procession pass by in which these two objects are featured. Amazed by this marvelous apparition, he misses his chance to seize the objects so he can cure the Fisher King. He subsequently discovers his error, and devotes the rest of his life to trying to locate the Grail Castle; but the opportune moment has passed and will no longer return. Later, in various sequels to the romance of Chrétien de Troyes, various Knights of the Round Table (Lancelot, Gawain, Bors, Galahad, etc.) depart in search of the Grail, meeting with various adventures. The constant motif in all these adventures is the fact that this Grail is surrounded by a veil of mystery, and those who seek it do not really know what they expect to find; they even see it without recognizing it. They go to meet adventure, at random,

without any plan to guide them, so that their wanderings possess all the features of a situationist “*derive*”. Some of them see the Grail, others do not, but none of them can possess it; the cup is content to appear and disappear without anyone knowing how or why. Modern students of the occult will identify it with the Cauldron of Abundance of the Celts or the philosopher’s stone. It is obvious that Debord is quite familiar with this literature. Various allusions to the Desert Land crop up in *In Girum*. The modern world appears in this film as a “vale of desolation”, a “wasteland where new sufferings are disguised with the name of former pleasures” (an obvious reference to the illness of the Fisher King). But Debord inverts the meaning of the legend: the Grail, a divine object possessing the power to cure, becomes “evil”, and Debord explicitly transforms it into a diabolic object.

“Did we eventually find the object of our quest? There is reason to believe that we obtained at least a fleeting glimpse of it; because it is undeniable that from that point on we found ourselves capable of understanding false life in the light of true life, and possessed with a very strange power of seduction: for no one since then has ever come near us without wishing to follow us. We

had rediscovered the secret of dividing what was united.”

Just as the serpent tempted Adam and Eve with the fruit of the tree of life, that is, knowledge, the Grail allowed one to be “capable of understanding false life in the light of true life”; it conferred a “power of seduction” that evokes one of the main characteristics of Satan, the tempter, the seducer par excellence; and transmits the “secret of dividing”, which brings us to the devil, the “Prince of Division”. Such an interpretation might seem forced if we were not to see it fully confirmed in another passage of *In Girum*:

“We brought fuel to the fire. In this manner we enlisted irrevocably in the Devil’s party—the ‘historical evil’ that leads existing conditions to their destruction, the ‘bad side’ that makes history by undermining all established satisfaction.... If you don’t fall in line with the deceptive clarity of this upside-down world, you are seen, at least by those who believe in that world, as a controversial legend, an invisible and malevolent ghost, a perverse Prince of Darkness.... We thus became emissaries of the Prince of Division —‘he who has been wronged’—and undertook to drive to despair those who identified with humanity.”[19](#)

The identification of the devil with the “negative” of Hegel and Marx is obvious here, in accordance with Goethe’s definition of Mephistopheles in *Faust* (“the spirit of perpetual negation”). We need only compare the above passage with the following extract from the “Theses on the Situationist International and Its Time”, where certain identical formulas are employed, taken from Marx:

“The SI has only succeeded by expressing ‘the real movement that surpasses existing conditions’ and by knowing how to express it. In other words, it has known how to make its own unknown theory understood from the subjectively negative aspect of the process, from its ‘bad’ aspect. This aspect of social practice, although initially unaware of it, creates this theory. The SI itself belonged to this ‘bad aspect.’”

The definition of the devil as “he who has been wronged” is taken from Baudelaire’s *The Flowers of Evil* (“The Litany of Satan”):

“O Prince of Exile, you who have been wronged
And who vanquished always rise up again more strong,
O Satan, take pity on my long misery!”

Thus, the formula that Debord would employ, some years later, in *Panegyric*, acquires its full meaning (“After

all, it was modern poetry, for the last hundred years, that had led us there”): the poetic modernity invoked by the Lettrists and later by the situationists was born with Baudelaire, who published *The Flowers of Evil* in 1857, exactly one hundred years before the founding of the SI. The diabolical Grail is also a theme that was already featured in surrealism.²⁰ In 1950, Michel Carrouges, in a chapter of his book, *André Breton et les données fondamentales du surréalisme* [“André Breton and the Basic Concepts of Surrealism”], entitled “The Appeal to the Powers of Darkness”, evoked “that mad quest for a new castle of the Grail—a black Grail—wherever it may be”, which animated the surrealists. Furthermore, Vaneigem himself, during the period when he was a member of the SI, had described the surrealists as “those latter-day knights wandering between the devil of total freedom and the death of culture” (*A Cavalier History of Surrealism*).²¹ Thus, in this sense as well, Debord elaborated and reformulated the themes and proposals of the old artistic vanguards.

The expression, “the formula to overthrow [*renverser*] the world” evokes the “reversal [*renversement*] of perspective” advocated in *The Revolution of Everyday Life* (a work that Debord, as we saw above, was always careful to distinguish from “Vaneigemism”, which is the

transformation of Vaneigem's situationist ideas into an ideology). And when Debord says that "we had rediscovered the secret of dividing what was united", he is referring not only to the "Prince of Division" but also to alchemy, a Vaneigemist theme where it appears, but reversing the meaning that Vaneigem gave it. Vaneigem insisted on the positive dimension of this art, on the vital principle that acted in the alchemical process; Debord, for his part, emphasized its destructive, "bad" side. The phase of dissolution clearly interested him more than that of coagulation. By way of his constant practice of exclusions and breaks, Debord, in the final analysis, was doing nothing but practicing a kind of alchemy, one of the traditional definitions of which was "the art of separating the pure from the impure". (In view of the facts discussed above, it is not impossible that the similarity between the beginning of the *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* and the passage from *The Summit of Perfection* by the pseudo-Geber mentioned at the beginning of this book was deliberate.)

Whether we are speaking of the Grail or the philosopher's stone, the gold concerning which we are interested here is nothing but that of dreams, and the quest is destined never to be consummated. In the era of the SI, however, this theory is presented as the most rational theory that can be conceived, and even as the

only possible rational perspective (even if it seemed extravagant to vulgar thinkers) as opposed to the suicidal madness of “this upside-down world”. Debord would repeat this in *In Girum*, and would not cease to do so thereafter: “there is no greater madness than the present organization of life”. In the *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* of 1988, however, he no longer considered that the situationist revolutionary perspective had been as rational as the SI had claimed it to be, but he instead emphasized—as always, as was his custom, with veiled expressions—the intrinsic contradictions with which it was replete:

“It is generally believed that those who have displayed the greatest incapacity in matters of logic are precisely those who proclaim themselves revolutionaries.... Protesters have not been any more irrational than submissive people. It is simply that in the former one sees a more intense manifestation of the general irrationality.... They have given themselves diverse obligations to dominate logic, even strategy, which is precisely the entire field of the deployment of the dialectical logic of conflicts; but, like everyone else, they are greatly deprived of the basic ability to orient themselves by the old, imperfect tools of formal logic. No

one worries about them; and hardly anyone thinks about the others.”

“Those who proclaim themselves revolutionaries”, among whom we obviously have to include the situationists, were neither more rational nor more irrational than “submissive people”; they were exactly like them, at least in that respect. The goals that they set themselves, and the method they followed to attain those goals, were condemned to failure, so it is normal that they never achieved those goals. But Debord had already demonstrated ten years before that the situationists were just like knights errant: the revolution was merely a pretext, what they were really more or less consciously seeking was their own *derive* (“the true taste of the passage of time”). From this point of view, it cannot be said that they failed, or that they succeeded; they were what they were, and that is all. Thus, as Debord says in *In Girum*, “there has been neither success nor failure for Guy Debord”. Theory, as the strategic formulation of consciously pursued goals, only has in the final accounting a secondary importance: while Debord magnified the existential “adventure” of the Lettrists, he abandoned situationist theory in the name of historical inevitability (“theories are only made to die in the war of time”). In his *Panegyric* (1989), Debord insists at length

on the vanity of human actions, even quoting Ecclesiastes (“another, earlier contemner of the world, who said that he had been a king in Jerusalem”): since there is never “anything new under the sun”, all revolutionary whims are condemned in advance to failure.

Debord therefore ended up making a total break with situationist theory. In 1972, he and Sanguinetti claimed:

“The theory, the style, and the example of the SI have today been adopted by thousands of revolutionaries in the principal advanced countries.... What are known as ‘situationist ideas’ are merely the first ideas of the period of the reappearance of the modern revolutionary movement.... Youth, as a passing stage, is not what is threatening the social order; it is, rather, the modern revolutionary critique in acts and theory that is increasing every year and taking off from a historical point of departure that we are now living through. It begins momentarily among youth, but it will never grow old. The phenomenon is in no way cyclical; it is cumulative.”

This revolutionary critique that “will never grow old” becomes in *In Girum a caput mortuum*, and in the *Comments* not even the slightest trace of it remains:

“[Those who practice surveillance are] surveilling, infiltrating and influencing *an absent party*: that which is supposed to want the subversion of the social order. But where can it be seen at work? Because conditions certainly have never been so seriously revolutionary, but it is only governments that think so. Negation has been so thoroughly deprived of its thought that it was dispersed long ago.”

What happened to those “thousands of revolutionaries”, and that “revolutionary critique ... that is increasing every year” on the basis of situationist theory and practice, which consecrates the forceful return of the negative on the world stage? They had to disappear under the effect of an enchantment, since sixteen years later, “negation has been so thoroughly deprived of its thought that it was dispersed a long time ago”. In 1979, however, Debord thought he could still affirm that the “inhabitants [of this society] are divided into two sides, one of which wants this society to disappear”. But in 1988 this party that “is supposed to want the subversion of the social order” had become “an absent party”. Thus, what the SI had considered to be “the beginning of an era” was actually nothing but a flash in the pan, perhaps even an illusion; for nothing, after all, disappears so easily as something that had never existed in the first place. All

that remained was the memory of a handful of knights errant, modern Don Quijotes who sallied forth to the assault on a “hostile world” with—in the guise of ammunition—the dreams aroused by “modern poetry”, and wearing simple barbers’ basins on their heads. In any event, this is how it was depicted by Debord, who abandoned a situationist perspective that was unsustainable over the long- as well as the short-term; and, with more mediocre intellectual and literary resources, so did his comrade Vaneigem.[22](#)

In one last about-face, Debord even came to suggest (in a note dating from 1989 that was published as an appendix to the new edition of the journal *Internationale Situationniste* in 1997) that the only “truly vital conclusions” of situationist theory were contained in “the most mysterious” “of all the documents to come out of the SI”, the *Hamburg Theses* (1961), which exhibited the strange feature of never really having existed: “It in fact involved the conclusions, intentionally kept secret, of a theoretical and strategic discussion concerning the whole of the SI’s conduct.... Deliberately, with the intention of letting no trace that might give rise to an observation or exterior analysis filter outside the SI, nothing was ever put into writing concerning this discussion or what it concluded. It was then agreed that

the simplest summary of these rich and complex conclusions could be reduced to a single phrase: '*Now, the SI must realize its philosophy.*'²³ This phrase itself was not written down. Thus, the conclusion was so well hidden that it has remained secret until now."

What at first sight might seem to be a mystification, was nonetheless taken very seriously by Debord, and he saw this as one of the most decisive "formal innovation[s]" of the SI:

"... to only consider the experimental originality, that is to say the absence of any publication of the *Theses*, the later socio-historical application of this formal innovation is also entirely remarkable: afterwards, of course, it underwent a complete reversal. Indeed, a little over twenty years after, the process could be seen to meet with an unusual success for the higher authorities of numerous States. We now know that a number of truly vital conclusions, whose authors are reluctant to enter them into computer networks, tape or telex records, and who are even distrustful of word processors and photocopiers; after having been most often written in the form of manuscript notes, are simply committed to memory, the draft immediately destroyed."

We shall for the present disregard the excessive influence attributed to these *Hamburg Theses* in order to

simply point out that, contrary to Debord's claims, the procedure he describes is not at all novel. Thus, at the beginning of the modern era, one of the most famous literary scams of European history, the *Treatise of the Three Impostors*, an anti-religious work that presented Moses, Jesus and Mohammed as vulgar con artists who manipulated the masses, was cited, described and even condemned on many occasions before anyone even decided to finally write it. Similarly, when around 1610 a manifesto entitled *Fama fraternitatis des löblichen Ordens des Rosencreutzes* (written by Johannes Valentinus Andreae) was anonymously distributed, at first in manuscript form, and later as a printed book, in order to reveal to the world the machinations of a mysterious "Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross", the vehicle of a no less enigmatic project of universal reform, all of Europe went in search of the members of this secret society, which only existed in the imagination of its author. Only when, much later, real brotherhoods of Rosicrucians were actually formed, did the fiction become a reality. And the claim that the most "vital" conclusions of a theory are precisely the ones that, because they must remain absolutely secret, cannot be revealed to the uninitiated, has for many centuries been one of the central themes of the literature of alchemy, which leads us back to that "dispersion of knowledge"

advocated by the pseudo-Geber in *The Summit of Perfection*, and to Debord's analogous caveat situated at the beginning of *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*.

The late—and even posthumous—insistence on the importance of the *Hamburg Theses* would tend to place the entire situationist enterprise in the category of the “parodic-serious”, to borrow an expression coined by Wolman and Debord (“A User's Guide to *Détournement*”, *Les Lèvres nues*, no. 8, 1956), and is particularly similar to that pataphysics which the situationists (*I.S.*, no. 6, 1961) saw as “a religion in the making”. Furthermore, it cannot but remind us of the mystery of the magician depicted on the Marseilles tarot card, which Debord chose for the cover of his 1994 book (if you can call it a book) entitled, *Des contrats*. Such a retrospective jape tempts us to apply to all this business, as an epitaph, the judgment that Giovanni Battista Nazari issued in 1572 against the charlatans who practiced “sophistical alchemy”:

“Raging fits, vain illusions,
drunken dreams, false and lamentable thoughts,
deceitful inventions far removed from duty:
such are the false hopes of the alchemists.”

- 1. This is what Vaneigem seemed to think, as the “Communiqué of the SI” directed at him points out: “At the 7th Conference of the S.I., in 1966, we had to argue for two hours against a strange proposition from Vaneigem: he held for certain that our ‘coherence’ would always indicate *in no matter what debate on a practical action to be undertaken*, and after a thorough discussion, the sole right path, univocally recognizable in advance.” Similarly, Vaneigem claimed in his “Notice to the Civilized” that “only the councils offer a definitive solution” for all problems.
- 2. For example, this is what one may read in the first pages of the book by Maurice Pasquelot, *La Terre Chauve: Aliments Pollues* (1971): “Before man can enter the 21st century, it is possible that nature will have taken revenge for the devastation that man has inflicted upon it. The seas, the oceans and the rivers are decomposing, the sky is turning black and the air is unbreathable; the land, or at least what remains of it, is polluted. The ‘environment’ will not be able to support life.... Now, nothing we eat is natural. Our foods are not only contaminated by external factors but their manufacture creates chemical compounds that cause cancer, madness, leukemia and death.”

- 3. There are many books on the history of ecology, to which the interested reader is referred for more details.
- 4. The reader thus finds himself between a rock and a hard place: he is admonished to admire a discourse at the same time that he is prohibited from admiring it.
- 5. Debord and Sanguinetti were still feverishly employing “the tone of incisive pride” characteristic of “situationist expression” in the same text in which they declare that this tone has “stopped being convenient”.
- 6. Jörg Ratgeb, already mentioned by Vaneigem in “Terrorism or Revolution”, was a 16th century German painter who sided with Thomas Müntzer and the peasant rebels, for whom he served as a “military advisor”; he was “drawn and quartered in Pforzheim in 1526” (Vaneigem, *La Résistance au christianisme*, 1993). See Maurice Piazola, *Peintres et vilains: les artistes de la Renaissance et la grande guerre des paysans de 1525* (1962); and *Thomas Munzer ou la guerre des paysans* (1958), republished in 1997 with an introduction by Vaneigem.
- 7. Vaneigem had first solicited Champ Libre to publish the book, which refused to do so (see the text at the end of Chapter 5 of the *Correspondance* of Champ Libre, Vol. I, 1978).

- 8.Concerning Ratgeb, see also the chapter devoted to him in Jaime Semprun's *Précis de récupération* (1976).
- 9.The Spanish translation of most of these passages from *The Book of Pleasures* that appear in this paragraph are so different from the English translation I consulted that I have in some cases translated directly from the Spanish rather than utilized the existing English translation, where the latter seemed suspect; the passages in question in the English translation I consulted (which may be viewed online at <http://libcom.org/library/book-of-pleasures>) are as follows: "Freedom has no worse enemy than these cure-all panaceas which claim to transform society. For these veils of exorcist ritual simply serve to smuggle the old world back in. Lawyers for the revolution or sniffers of radical chic, whatever pedigrees these grocers have, they are our adversaries, armour-clad in neurosis, and will bear the full brunt of the violence of those who live without restraint. I know well the wise men who denigrate survival, having in many ways been one of them. Under the cassock of that high-brow criticism moves the secular arm of far more pernicious inquisitions. But they merely project the disgust they feel at themselves towards others." [Note of the American Translator.]

- [10](#).The decomposition of his thought is accompanied by the decomposition of his writing style: this *Adresse* is faulty even in its very title, which is a clumsy recuperation of the *Appel aux vivants* (1979) by the Stalino-Islamist Roger Garaudy.
- [11](#).Vaneigem would later publish a book entitled *Nous que désirons sans fin*("We Who Endlessly Desire", 1996).
- [12](#).In his most recent book (*Le Chevalier, la Dame, le Diable et la mort*), Vaneigem points out that he is not really saying that "the human being, by acceding to real life in a harmonious society, will not age and will not die", but that this must be understood in a metaphorical sense.
- [13](#).He nonetheless has his admirers: two eulogistic works devoted to him, by Pol Charles and Grégory Lambrette, were published in 2002; and Philippe Sollers himself is now singing the praises of Vaneigem.
- [14](#).The quotation is taken from Vaneigem's *Lettre de Staline à ses enfants enfin réconciliés de l'Est et de l'Ouest* (1992).
- [15](#).A concept taken from Kierkegaard, who distinguishes, in *Stages on Life's Way*, the esthetic stage, the ethical stage and the religious stage, the highest of which is the latter.

- [16.](#) A few pages earlier, Debord recalled that the Greek city had constituted the first outline, although imperfect (since it was based on the separation between different cities and, within each city, the separation between masters and slaves), of a “historical time [become] conscious, but not yet conscious of itself”, as opposed to the “despotic State”.
- [17.](#) Similarly, in his *In Girum*, the veiled allusion to Athens and Florence (today we would be “astonished ... to see the sudden reappearance of a Donatello or a Thucydides”) seems to suggest that a certain kind of individual genius is only possible in a social organization of the type of the democratic city. This is an absurd thesis, refuted by innumerable examples as well as by the idea, implicit in all of Debord’s works, that he is himself a genius of this type; but he considers himself the exception—the negative—that proves the rule.
- [18.](#) “This civilization is on fire; the whole thing is capsizing and sinking. What splendid torpedoing! And what has become of me amid this appalling collapse—this shipwreck which I believe was necessary, and which it could even be said that I have worked for, since it is certainly true that I have avoided working at anything else?”
- [19.](#) This last formulation was inspired by the screenplay written by Jacques Prévert for the Marcel Carné

film, *The Night Visitors* (1942), which opens with these words: “Thus, on this beautiful day in May of 1485, His Majesty the Devil sent to the earth two of his creatures for the purpose of making humans lose all hope”.

- [20](#). We also find it in a disciple of the occultist Aleister Crowley, Kenneth Grant (*Aleister Crowley and the Hidden God*, 1973), but in a context of sexual magic that has nothing to do with our topic: the “diabolical Grail” designates the anus, as opposed to the unqualified “Grail”, which according to Crowley is the feminine sex.
- [21](#). The image also crops up in *Le Chevalier, la Dame, le Diable et la mort*: “What was accomplished by the knight’s wandering ... and the devil who led him astray and enlightened him, since Lucifer showed him the black light of his own dissolution....?”.
- [22](#). Of the numerous books devoted to the ideas of Debord, the best is undoubtedly the one by Anselm Jappe, published in Italy in 1993 and published in an English-language edition in 1999. Most of the other books about Debord—especially those by Jean-Marie Apostolidès, Christophe Boursellier, Antoine Coppola, Shigenobu Gonzalvez, Cécile Guilbert, Vincent Kaufmann and Frédéric Schiffer—are no good.
- [23](#). See above: “The proletariat must realize art.”

Part IV: The Labyrinth of Greater and Lesser Mysteries

“Everything I had seen up until that moment was nothing compared to what they promised that I would see. However, it was not hard for me to take consolation when I reflected on this Celestial Empire, in which the All-Powerful appears seated on His Throne surrounded by Glory and Cherubims, Seraphims, Thrones and Rulers. There we shall see what the eye has never seen and we shall hear what the ear has never heard, since that is where we must experience an eternal happiness that God Himself has promised all those who strive to become worthy of it, since we have all been created to participate in this Glory.”

Pseudo-Bernard of Treves (François Alary), *The Green Dream*

The Great Work is, together with the squaring of the circle, the example par excellence of the vain quest for the impossible. Why, then, did the situationists refer to alchemy, which at first glance would appear to be the worst model a revolutionary theory could adopt, regardless of how little it is concerned with efficacy? This question requires two complementary answers.

1

The first reason—and the most obvious one—for the choice of alchemy as the pivot of a revolutionary theory is linked to the interpretation given by psychoanalysis and surrealism to the Hermetic art. If alchemy, as a practical activity, led to the results—or more correctly, the absence of results—with which we are familiar, in the 20th century, by virtue of having become a privileged expression of “depth psychology”, it recovered the credit that it had lost in times past on the material terrain of the transmutations of bodies. This interpretation is based on the way the esoterics and occultists of the 19th century viewed alchemy. Beginning in the late 1700s, since no one could seriously believe in material transmutation, the neo-alchemists tended to fall back on a psychological or “spiritual” conception of transmutation (whose origins lay in certain tendencies

already present in alchemy in the 16th century);¹ the operations that pertained to matter were translated to the level of the soul of the adept. The practitioners continued to manipulate substances in the laboratory but their real goal was of a different kind. The alchemical texts effectively could be easily used for this kind of interpretation, given the polyvalent character of their language and the wide variety of possible readings (operative, moral, religious...) to which they could be subjected. The practical failure of alchemy might have then been perceived as something secondary and superficial compared to its real objective: the transmutation of the old, imperfect man into a new man, like gleaming gold. The author of *The Revolution of Everyday Life* was absolutely convinced of this. And not long ago he once again reaffirmed this belief (in *Le Chevalier, la Dame, le Diable et la mort*), by defining alchemy as “the process of evolution that is leading us from the animal to the human that lies within us”. The surrealists, as Vaneigem explains in *A Cavalier History of Surrealism*, also saw alchemy as an “exploration of human limits and potentialities” whose objective was “a cosmic unity divested of all anthropocentrism where the forces of the mineral, vegetable and human worlds all had their parts to play”. But surrealist alchemy erred, Vaneigem continues,

because it strayed into a “mystical vision”, an “absolute objective idealism” ruled by the principle enunciated by René Guenon and “approved by Breton” according to which “historical facts have no value save as symbols of spiritual realities”. In such a case, “the experimental approach to the human was replaced by a purification of the ego by virtue of the alchemical Great Work” and “concrete problems of subjectivity became problems of being”. This “ontological shift”, modeled on the initiatory program of the so-called traditional sciences (in the Guenonian sense of the word), prevented, according to this interpretation, the surrealists from noticing the fact that alchemy, as “the experimental approach to the human”, could lead to the revolution of everyday life of the kind formulated later by the situationists. Vaneigem’s alchemy is intended to be a *supersession* of that of the surrealists: like the latter, it is about man himself and not material substances (metals, etc.), but it does not aspire to transmute the human spirit by “purification” in the name of a transcendence that the situationists did not acknowledge; its purpose was instead to transmute everyday life in its most “concrete” aspects, considered as the only really existing human universe, and therefore the only real framework within which it was possible to test “human limits and potentialities”. (Later, as we have seen, Vaneigem’s alchemy would rediscover the “cosmic

unity” of the micro- and macro-cosmos, but this was not yet the case in his situationist period.)

The reduction of alchemy to psychology or to a “spiritual” dimension paved the way for a rehabilitation of the alchemical thematic in the context of surrealism. For André Breton, alchemy represented the revenge of the imagination against the domestication of the spirit by rational thought. This point of view must be understood in the context of the surrealists’ interest in the unconscious and Freud’s doctrine. In an article entitled *Freud de l’Alchimiste à l’Hygiéniste* [“Freud: From Alchemist to Hygienist”], published in 1924 in the journal, *Le Disque vert*, and republished in the book, *Mon corps et moi*, René Crevel subjects psychoanalysis to an alchemical reading: according to him, the psychoanalytic cure is an alchemical operation because it allows for “the rediscovery of pure and simple instinct” by ridding the individual of the neuroses that keep him separated from himself and prevent him from acting in a spontaneous way. By purifying the material of metals, alchemy leads them to perfection; in the same way, psychoanalysis restores to the individual the key of his own original essence. Just as it does for Vaneigem, transmutation for Crevel consists in the liberation of the individual from the social conditioning that imprisons him and prevents him

from acting and expressing himself freely; unlike Crevel, however, the situationists thought that psychoanalysis had by no means succeeded in achieving this liberation. For them it is, to the contrary, a tool for the maintenance of the social order, since all the help it brings to the individual consists in making him accept the necessity of conditioning, internalized as a fundamental law. Indeed, Freud affirmed that the abandonment of the “pleasure principle” in favor of the “reality principle” constitutes the basis of all social life; that is why he thought happiness was impossible, except as “a transitory experience” (*Civilization and Its Discontents*). Influenced by Henri Lefebvre, the situationists postulated, in complete opposition to Freud and Schopenhauer, that the exceptional “moments” of life can become, thanks to the conscious construction of “situations”, the substance of a new life, one from which frustration and boredom have been expelled. This is what they called “authentic” life, as opposed to the simple “survival” that psychoanalysis and all the other forms of psychosocial conditioning assumed as a function to legitimate. The situationist perspective differs from that of Crevel—and from that of the surrealists more generally—in that creative spontaneity is not conflated by the situationists with unconscious automatism, but rather with the conscious domain of the abilities of the individual. To see

all good in the unconscious and all evil in reason, as the surrealists did, amounts to prohibiting any reconciliation of these two domains. For the situationists, the opposition between the conscious will and the unconscious passions is an effect of “separation”; once the latter is abolished, the conscious goals of individuals must logically (if one admits that postulate) no longer be opposed to their unconscious drives. To celebrate the unconscious to the detriment of reason is therefore to serve the maintenance of separation, preventing the individual from recognizing himself as a whole. Only the revolution will permit the individual to concretely resolve the internal conflict that afflicts him, which can only be abolished by abolishing the cause that produces it. The revolution is this elixir that transforms the dross of the neuroses into the pure gold of subjectivity.

In *Le Chevalier, la Dame, le Diable et la mort*, Vaneigem willingly admits that he has “embraced a somewhat shallow understanding of alchemy”, one that is, however, more than sufficient for the purpose of “delimiting ... the various stages of a process in accordance with which he sought to live each day”:

“I accept the three stages, distinguished by Hermetic tradition. These are, viz., the black Work: putrefaction,

dissolution, dereliction, desperation; the white Work: treatment of the negative, resurrection; the red Work, or rubifaction: philosopher's stone, the powder of projection or of sympathy, youth or the abolition of age....

“I continue to return to everyday alchemy, which consists in subjecting the negative accumulated in unwholesome strata to the heat of this athanor that constitutes the body, in order to proceed from the black Work to the red Work and then to the philosopher's stone.”

One of the leading authorities on the “Hermetic tradition” to which Vaneigem refers is the esoterist Eugène Canseliet (who was a friend of Vaneigem),² along with Fulcanelli and René Alleau. Vaneigem had also read the dissident psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung, whose psychological interpretation of the alchemical texts and imaginary is very much appreciated by the esoterists. In his *Dictionnaire de citations pour servir au divertissement et à l'intelligence du temps* (1998), he quotes a passage taken from *Psychology and Alchemy*, in which Jung clearly sets forth his perspective:

“... while working on his chemical experiments the operator had certain psychic experiences which appeared to him as the particular behaviour of the

chemical process.... He experienced his projection as a property of matter; but what he was in reality experiencing was his own unconscious.”

According to this interpretation, when the alchemists spoke of metals or worked with them, they only really saw them with their own unconscious, which they “projected” onto matter.³ Such a psychologizing of alchemy, based on the frequently aberrant analyses that Jung made of texts and images removed from their historical context and which sometimes actually had nothing to do with alchemy,⁴ in our time constitutes for many people the truth of the “alchemical tradition”. If the modern esoterists have given it a warm welcome, this is because it presents many points in common with their own view of alchemy.

The Jungian theory of “archetypes” that structure the collective unconscious allegedly proves what in reality it assumes; that is, the existence of precisely a collective unconscious that is always the same in every era and which can easily be discovered, under the thin shell of cultural, historical and geographical variations, by resorting to analogy as the general principle of interpretation. In other words, history has no importance at all; it is nothing but the inessential unfolding of a time which does not really modify the basic characteristics of

the human “soul”. Jung’s disciples did not refrain from compiling vast catalogs of symbols from all eras and countries, or, in the apparently more scientific form of the structuralist model, charting the “anthropological structures of the imaginary”. The relationship between this kind of focus and that of the esoterists—which is moreover completely deliberate, and is even proclaimed by Jung and his emulators, with Gilbert Durand at their head—is due to the fact that the esoterist interpretations of alchemy are always based on the idea that alchemy has no history: according to them, it is a “traditional” art that had arisen fully formed from the head of Hermes Trismegistus, and that it has been preserved as such, since time immemorial, by way of a secret transmission, following the form of the chain of initiates (for the esoterists, furthermore, alchemy is joined with astrology, the Kabbalah and magic as just one part of the vast whole of the “secret” or “occult” sciences, which comprise a totality and which must be studied together).

This ahistorical view of alchemy did not emerge out of thin air. It was adapted from the image that the alchemists sought to confer upon their own doctrine: already in the very earliest days of alchemy, in the Hellenized regions of Egypt, in the 3rd and 4th centuries of the Christian era, alchemical texts were attributed

with a false antiquity and were signed with prestigious names (Democritus, for example) or even purely fictitious names. The same thing was true of the magical texts, as well as many other types of writings; in an era when individual originality aroused mistrust this was a way of guaranteeing the validity of the doctrines that were being promoted. This fabrication of apocrypha was not necessarily due to “frauds” in the sense that we understand that term today: at that time it seemed natural to confer merit on a doctrine that was taken to be true, and which furthermore was not claimed to have been a recent invention, with the authority that its attribution to a prestigious author would confer. Hence the profusion, especially among the Arabs, of alchemical treatises attributed not only to Jâbir, but also to Plato, Aristotle, Hermes Trismegistus.... In one of the most famous texts of medieval alchemy, the *Turba Philosophorum* (“The Assembly of the Philosophers”), an Arabic compilation whose complete text has only been preserved in Latin, the Greek philosophers—Thales, Pythagoras, Parmenides, etc.—meeting in an assembly, deliver speeches one after another in order to explain their conception of alchemy.

The elimination of real history from this art in favor of a legendary history, based on the fiction of an immutable

doctrine that goes back to the depths of antiquity, was so successful that it is today very difficult to date some of the texts. When it is possible, the esoterists ignore it and continue to believe, despite the evidence, in the authenticity of the writings of Llull, Flamel or Basil Valentine.... They are still persuaded, against all the evidence, that the *Emerald Tablet* of Hermes Trismegistus is the oldest of all alchemical texts, and that it contains in a deliberately cryptic form the totality of the doctrine to which subsequent authors only added commentaries. This supposedly ancient Greek text, however, is in reality an Arab text dating from the 9th century, and it was only recently proven that when it was composed it was not even an alchemical text, but a text of talismanic magic, interpreted alchemically *a posteriori*. Alchemy was never a complete doctrine; like all the arts, sciences and traditions, it evolved at the whim of different eras, places and milieus.

We could ask ourselves if it was advisable on the part of Vaneigem to take a “tradition” that is essentially presented as a negation or rejection of history as a model for that historical transformation known as the revolution. The alchemical tradition appeared to him, like the millenarian tradition or the “resistance against Christianity” to which he devoted a book, as the

testimony of the subterranean persistence of the will to live, necessarily assuming (or distorting) the philosophical or religious means of expression of the culture of its time, but basically opposed to “separation”; in short, a primitive form of social revolt. Such a representation is historically false: to the contrary, numerous alchemical texts justify secrecy by the need to preserve the existing social order, which would be ruined if gold were to lose its value by becoming easy to produce; there would then be no rich or poor, no one would want to work, authority would collapse.... The practice of alchemy was sometimes prohibited in one place or another, in the Middle Ages or the Renaissance, by the civil or ecclesiastical authorities, not because they considered it dangerous in itself (the alchemists were neither sorcerers nor revolutionaries), but because most of those who passed themselves off as alchemists and offered their services to princes were actually counterfeiters. It was only after the time of Paracelsus and, later, the Rosicrucians (and before that, marginally, certain Franciscan groups), that alchemy was inscribed in a program of political and religious reform that was really subversive. In both cases, however, alchemy did not constitute anything but a secondary element of the “universal reform” that was advocated.

2

There is a second element of the answer, somewhat less evident than the previous one, to the question why alchemy was chosen as the model for a revolutionary transformation of society. The alchemists elaborated over the course of the centuries and in various forms a theory of qualitative change that constituted, indirectly, one of the sources of the Hegelian dialectic, and which also nourished the sources of the “Marxist” theory of the revolution. Since every theory creates its precursors, we can retrospectively read the alchemical literature as an attempt (expressed metaphorically or allegorically) to dialectically conceive the transformations of matter by way of the relations between the world considered as an organic totality, and the elements of which it is composed. In any case, it is not hard to discover in Hegel or in Marx analogies with what we could call the “primitive” dialectic that is present in the alchemical texts (not to speak of the recurring comparisons Marx made between capitalism and alchemy).[5](#)

Alchemy functions in situationist theory, as Vaneigem explains it, as a metaphor for the revolutionary *transformation*, in conjunction with the dialectical model. The notion of “supersession” is

combined in this theory with that of transmutation, which is an alchemical term. The synthesis of these two ideas can in a way be traced back to the origins of the Hegelian dialectic. For the source of the latter is not to be found only in the conceptions of the dialectic elaborated by the philosophers since Plato,⁶ but also in the mystical writings of Jakob Böhme, who was very much influenced by Paracelsus. Hegel took from Böhme the idea of the “convergence of opposites”, which goes back, before Böhme, to a very old theological (exemplified especially by Nicholas of Cusa) and alchemical tradition. For the alchemists, the philosopher’s stone miraculously reunited the opposed qualities that were assumed not to exist in a body at the same time; according to the principles of Aristotelian logic and physics, a body, for example, is cold or hot, or it is dry or wet, but cannot simultaneously possess these two qualities “in actuality”. This convergence of opposites is translated in the alchemical texts by expressions that associate contradictory properties, which are called oxymorons in rhetoric: “the stone that is not a stone”, “the water that does not make your hands wet”, “virgin’s milk”,⁷ etc. This kind of formula made it possible for the imagination to grasp something that could not be rationally described. Thus, a non-existent thing seems to find a principle of realization in the mere fact that it is possible to explain it

with words. In this sense, the rhetoric and imaginary of alchemy played a role that Plato had assigned to myth (in the *Timaeus*): when with regard to any particular issue “we are not able to give notions which are altogether and in every respect exact and consistent with one another”, it is necessary to resort, if we do not want to remain silent, to a “tale which is probable”.

The convergence of opposites is for Hegel the essential characteristic of the dialectic. In the *The Philosophical Propaedeutic*, he explains:

“Reason is *negative* or *dialectical*, when it indicates the passage from a determination of being (on the plane of consciousness) to the opposed determination. Usually, the dialectic is presented as the attribution to a single subject of two opposed predicates. In its purest form, it consists in showing how a determination that pertains to a predicate is, *in itself*, also *its own opposite*; and therefore how it abolishes itself in itself.”

We can therefore say that the philosopher’s stone is the imaginary expression of a dialectical reality, or the dialectical formulation of an imaginary reality. On the other hand, the Great Work—for which the philosopher’s stone is simultaneously the instrument and the goal

(insofar as, once it has been obtained, all the rest must follow from it with great ease)—is a *process*: it involves the creation of a qualitative change in time, which is the same goal that is addressed by the dialectic of Hegel as well as that of Marx. Even though the Great Work is impossible to concretely realize, it is entirely possible to conceive it theoretically; that is why, towards the end of the 18th century, the theoretical possibility of the transmutation of metals was still being debated. The *coup de grâce* was only delivered by the new chemistry of Lavoisier, which led to the collapse of what was left of the conceptual apparatus that made the problem conceivable.

The theory of transmutation was based essentially on two ideas: that of the *prima materia* and the Aristotelian concepts of potentiality and actuality. The alchemical concept of the *prima materia* had emerged from the fusion of two old cosmogonic myths: the creation of the cosmos from chaos by the demiurge in Plato's *Timaeus*, and the creation of the world by God according to the account in *Genesis*. For the alchemists of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, this account was not a mere myth: its authenticity was not subject to any doubt; it told about the way the world had *really* begun (the similarity of the Platonic myth and the Biblical account provided a

supplementary testimony in favor of the latter). In the “little world” of the laboratory, the alchemist tried to find the *prima materia* of the metals, called “chaos” by analogy, reversing the process followed by God in his creation of the world from that *prima materia* that was the original chaos. Since the world had arisen from chaos, the latter must *potentially* contain, that is, in its latent, “hidden” state, the qualities that the divine creation had worked on *in actuality*, that is, in a manifest way.

From there the alchemists, like the majority of the philosophers of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, proceeded to a series of analogies that allegedly clarified the process of creation: plant and animal reproduction (the seed contains in embryo, latently, the future being); fermentation (the transmutation of grains, of milk and of grapes into bread, cheese and wine), in turn identified with pregnancy; digesting (the transmutation of food into flesh and blood); and transubstantiation (the miraculous transmutation of the sacred host into the flesh of Christ). The transmutation of base metals into silver or gold was not, after all, either more implausible or less mysterious than those processes we have just enumerated, all of which are clearly authentic or assumed to be authentic and, except for transubstantiation, all of them are completely natural.

That is why the author of one of the most famous pseudo-Paracelsian texts, the *Philosophia ad Athenienses*, could write, in order to explain the content of the *prima materia*:

“The *prima materia* of all things is the ‘great mystery’ Just as babies are born from the mother, it is from the ‘great mystery’ that all things are born, with or without sense, and also all other things, without exception. The ‘great mystery’ is the only mother of all mortal things....” Here we are confronted by an explanation by analogy (which is not really an explanation, properly speaking) which is perfectly circular. For the “great uncreated mystery” that is the original chaos, analogous to a womb fertilized by the divine light during the course of the act of creation, then serves to clarify and explain the different “particular mysteries” that are the productions of new substances (cheese, worms....) from other substances (milk, rotten meat...), which are “like the grandchildren” of the original “great mystery”. Thus, the “great mystery” is the model of all reproduction and, reciprocally, the “particular mysteries” help us to understand how the primeval “great mystery” could have taken place. In reasoning by analogy, the different orders of reality refer to each other and serve to mutually

confirm each other. Similarly, in his work entitled *Paragranum* (1530), Paracelsus affirmed:

“Nature is so subtle and so meticulous ... that one can only win its favors through a great art. It yields nothing in a finished state; it is up to man to complete it: this process of completion is called alchemy. The alchemist is the baker who bakes the bread, the vintner who ferments the wine, the weaver who weaves the fabric. Thus, an alchemist is the one who allows everything that nature causes to arise for the use of man to reach the point that nature has ordained for it.... In order for its medicine to take effect,8 nature itself will show the way by which you must conduct your efforts. Just as the summer causes the pears and the grapes to ripen, its medicine must be administered slowly.... The medication that you prescribe is prepared by the stomach, that is, the alchemist.”

By defining the baker, the vintner, the weaver and, finally, all men (who have stomachs) as alchemists, it becomes much easier to consider alchemy as something plausible; the “mystery” of its operations is no different in any respect than the one that is presented every day by these transmutations, whose familiarity leads us to overlook their profoundly incomprehensible nature, which is what artisans do when they transform a *prima*

materia into a qualitatively distinct product, and which is also carried out, without us being aware of it, by our internal alchemist: the stomach.

The texts of Paracelsus, taken as a whole, are dizzying and almost impossible to translate without simplifying. The repetitive, confused and apparently contradictory nature of his writings is due to the fact that he attempted to convey the meaning of complex realities and processes that are impossible to rationally explain, and which can only be expressed by way of analogies and metaphors that are necessarily only approximations. And this is the nature of that “primitive” dialectic that we shall encounter, with various nuances, in most of the alchemical texts. We can see that the poetic and image-filled language of these texts does not possess a merely ornamental function, nor does it serve exclusively (although this is indeed one of its aspects) to transmit in a cryptic form, inaccessible to the vulgar, information pertaining to chemistry in the modern sense of the term: the processes of qualitative transformation, the paradoxical properties of the philosopher’s stone or of the *prima material* surpass the descriptive potential of ordinary language.

Unlike the dialectic of Hegel or Marx, the alchemical “proto-dialectic” is not inscribed in a linear temporality, in which one proceeds by means of successive “suppressions” and “supersessions”. The processes described by the alchemists are not cumulative: each attempt to carry out the Great Work, with the inevitable failure that it entails, begins a self-enclosed cycle, one that reproduces the cycle of the history of the world, inaugurated with the creation and destined to be completed with the resurrection of the flesh; time only flows within the Great Work, where one must respect the time required for fermentation, cooking, ripening, etc. (which is furthermore almost never clearly indicated). From this point of view, it can be said that alchemy does not have a history. Although he stubbornly aspires to understand what his predecessors did, each alchemist is alone with himself when he works, without having any other guide than the enigmatic descriptions of the mysterious transformations (natural or artificial) of matter. That is why the alchemical model, which is certainly suggestive for the imagination, annihilates the revolutionary perspective from the moment we examine the discourse it utilizes from the point of view of its logical coherence.

Alchemy nonetheless preserves with the Hegelian-Marxist dialectic a formal similarity that merits further scrutiny. The different alchemical theories have in common the idea that the metals are formed in the same way, which enables one to speculate concerning their final return to the unity they exhibited prior to the historical accident that constituted the separation of the *prima materia* into various “species” (iron, copper, lead, etc.). In the same way, the dialectical triad (thesis, antithesis, synthesis) always presupposes an initial unity or affirmation, ineluctably shattered by the negative stage of separation before the return to a positive unity at a higher level, which has, so to speak, reabsorbed within itself the multifarious and the negative; this unity constitutes in turn the starting point for a new cycle, distinguished by the appearance of separation and the negative, etc. Although the alchemical cycle differs from the dialectical cycle due to its non-cumulative nature (the end of the cycle does not inaugurate the beginning of another, later cycle), the postulate of initial unity is shared by both forms of thought and governs the general conception of the process. Likewise, for the situationists, the idea that “separation” is not inherent, in one form or another, to every human society, and that there once existed, as Engels had already believed, a primitive communism, or at least, according to the formula of

Debord, an initial state of “lazy liberty without content”, permits the conception of the supersession of the state of separation by way of the return to a freedom of a higher order. If the effective realization of this revolutionary supersession is not guaranteed, its possibility, on the other hand, seems to be certain by virtue of the metaphysical assumption according to which all historical processes are subject to a dialectical “law”. But there is nothing to indicate that separation, once a certain qualitative threshold of the irreversibility of the material (ecological) modifications of the world and of the ensuing transformations of the human species has been reached—a threshold that theory does not allow itself to anticipate, but which is only revealed empirically once it is attained—can still give way to a positive supersession. This is the intuition that the situationists had in 1972, in *The Veritable Split*, an intuition that was necessarily fatal for the theory that they had previously elaborated.

- 1. Contrary to what many people believe, it seems that “spiritual” alchemy did not emerge until quite late in the history of alchemy. The “spiritualist” interpretations of the “visions” of Zosimus of Panopolis (late 3rd century-early 4th century A.D.) by Carl Gustav Jung are erroneous, and those of the Arabic alchemical

texts by Henry Corbin, who saw them above all as mystical exercises, must be taken with a pinch of salt, since they quite likely reflect the esoteric assumptions of the author. The Medieval Latin alchemical texts, in any event, have nothing “spiritual” about them, and the same is true of most of the alchemical texts of the Renaissance. It was, more than any other factor, the Paracelsian and, later, the Rosicrucian authors, who would elaborate a “spiritual” conception of alchemy.

- 2. “Eugène Canseliet, whose amiability was equal to his vast erudition, confirmed that the makers of gold lived in material poverty. He assured me, between laughs, that the alchemist could obtain, at the end of an operation that demanded considerable patience, attention and time, enough pure gold to manufacture a small nugget, which he could have purchased for one-tenth the money that it cost to make” (*Le Chevalier, la Dame, le Diable et la mort*).
- 3. Just like “sublimation”, “projection” is an alchemical term (the “powder of projection”) that acquires a psychological meaning for psychoanalysts. They were immediately stunned to find it in alchemical texts, and they have never ceased to see it, taking cause for effect, as the proof that alchemy was nothing but a kind of primitive psychoanalysis.

- 4.The basic principle—and the fundamental methodological error—of the Jungian interpretation is that any text or image of a “mystical” or “alchemical” kind can and must be interpreted exactly in the same way as the relation of a dream provided by a patient lying on the couch of the psychoanalyst. Interpreting some features in the light of others, it was easy for Jung to recognize in the former the “archetypes” that he thought he could discover in the latter, and vice versa, thus constructing a theory which by virtue of its circularity is rendered unscientific.
- 5.An Italian author, Luciano Parinetto, devoted an entire book, entitled *Faust et Marx* (1989), to “alchemical metaphors” in their relation with the “critique of political economy”. Some pertinent observations in this book are buried under an avalanche of more or less untenable analogies. See also, by the same author, *Alchimia e utopia* (1990).
- 6.In Plato, the dialectic consists in subdividing a problem into pairs of contraries for the purpose of precisely determining the essence of a thing (Pierre de la Ramée would rediscover and generalize this “dichotomous” method in the 16th century). Plato also distinguished between an “ascending” dialectic, which rose from the sensory to the Idea, and a “descending” dialectic, which started from the Idea in order to arrive

at sensory objects. It is possible to see in the two methods of distillation distinguished by the medieval alchemists (ascendant and descendant) an application of the Platonic dialectic to the analysis of the constitution of physical bodies: the volatile substances, designated with the name of “soul”, rise from the “earth” (where the fixed substances remain, called “bodies”) to the “heaven” of the alembic, while condensation causes the “spirits”, in the form of a liquid, to descend within the container made for that purpose. “Ascendant” distillation and “descendant” distillation were practiced in apparatuses called *ascensum* and *descensum*, respectively.

- 7. These expressions initially served to describe the paradoxical properties of mercury (which made it hard to classify according to the customary logical and physical categories), identified with the *prima materia* of the metals, and therefore with the philosopher’s stone. In the 16th century, the debunkers of alchemy in turn used this rhetorical device, defining alchemy as an “art without art”.
- 8. Paracelsus was only interested in medical alchemy and rejected the alchemy of metals.

Part V: Necessary Illusions

“The art of alchemy was a very ingenious investigation of the natural philosophers, and of no minor importance: for by means of this art, many wonderful inventions have been obtained, which have been crucial for the improvement of the world and of considerable benefit to craftsmen. For it was from this art that the art of glassblowing arose, which is in truth the most beautiful of all the world’s arts, and indispensable for the comforts of life and for all peoples. From this most ingenious art there also arose the art of painted enamels, the sublimates, cinnabar, arsenic, purple, and many other beautiful inventions held in the highest esteem, not to mention the numerous types of medicinal oils and liquids; so that not only is it a benefit, but a great ornament for medicine and surgery. Later the method of producing brass was discovered, from which all kinds of objects were made that were almost the equal of gold. They also discovered by means of this art the method by which objects may be plated with the purest gold and an infinite number of other beautiful, useful and pleasant things.”

Leonardo Fioravanti, *Dello specchio di scientia universale* (“On the Mirror of Universal Knowledge”)

By favoring the manipulation of the most various substances thanks to an important *ad hoc* equipment (alembics, athanors, etc.), the quest for the Great Work allowed the alchemists to “invent” numerous products that were useful for humanity. This notion, that was a cliché of the positivist thought of the late 19th century, was already a commonplace in the Renaissance. It was the object of a consensus, whether or not one believed in the possibility of transmutation. Thus, the text quoted immediately above, extracted from a work published in 1564, was written by a doctor of the “empirical” school, who in addition to boasting of having obtained the philosopher’s stone, marketed a supposedly sovereign remedy for the plague. Even Leonardo da Vinci had claimed, at the end of the previous century, that “the works of the old alchemists deserve infinite praise, due to the usefulness of the things that they discovered for the use of men”. This did not, however, prevent him from being convinced that the project of artificially creating, “not the least noble of nature’s products, but the most excellent, that is, pure gold,” was doomed to failure; for he believed that man is incapable of equaling nature, “neither by chance nor by deliberate experiments”.

The authors who perceived alchemy as an “ingenious investigation of the natural philosophers” rather than as a “divine and sacred art” usually attributed to the alchemists certain discoveries for which they were not responsible, among others that of glassblowing, which had already existed in the Roman world (this attribution can be explained by the presence, in various medieval texts, of digressions devoted to glass, which is considered as the example of a successful transmutation—the artificial transmutation of opaque and hard sand into a fragile and transparent, and therefore qualitatively distinct, substance—which might point out the way to the transmutation of metals). The question is not to know who was right and who was wrong but to show that the legitimization of alchemy as an experimental art, regardless of whether or not one supported its theoretical formulations or its practical goals, constituted a means for overcoming the simple opposition between “success” and “failure” in order to enter a domain susceptible to more nuanced considerations.

Furthermore, the very name of “alchemy”¹ referred to a theoretical-practical set of assumptions that was quite diverse, one that included metallurgy, natural philosophy, medicine, pharmacology, magic and counterfeiting, and was all the more difficult to define

with precision as the alchemists defined themselves as “philosophers” after having long been considered as “mechanicals”, that is, simple artisans without the least degree of social or intellectual prestige. Examined from the perspective of its historical development and the multiplicity of its fields of application, alchemy is much more complex than the more or less inspired *a posteriori* reconstructions of esoterism, psychoanalysis or surrealism would lead us to believe.²

If the alchemists, by vainly attempting something that was impossible, finally ended up discovering other things that were as real as they were useful, we can discern in their efforts a concrete manifestation of what Hegel called the “ruse of reason”; just as, expecting to arrive in Asia, Christopher Columbus discovered an unknown continent in his path. But the “ruse of reason” can only be seen in action retrospectively, and its vagaries are unpredictable. Thus, the medieval alchemists were incapable of imagining that their investigations concerning matter would one day serve to elaborate a theory of “archetypes” of the human soul, or to translate into metaphors an ideal revolution. And who would have thought in the decade of the 1870s that an unknown named Ducasse would exercise on posterity a much greater influence than so many glorious names of the

time, whose posthumous survival seemed obvious but who no longer mean anything to anyone?

What now appears to be the main weakness of the situationist texts—especially those of Vaneigem—was hardly discernable thirty years ago; moreover, it was precisely this weakness that in its time seemed to be one of its greatest strengths: the ability (of an exclusively rhetorical order) to enable one to see and almost to grasp in one's hands certain ineffable goals and to dazzle by way of a magical solution of contradictions in an unprecedented “supersession” of the objective conditions. This power of seduction was translated in 1968 by the surge of slogans taken directly from *The Revolution of Everyday Life*. Such enthusiasm, which is so hard to share today, was not due only to the qualities inherent in Vaneigem's text, but also to the fact that it was inscribed in a moment of history in which the “young generations” at which the book was explicitly directed were animated by a passionate desire to “change life”; *The Revolution of Everyday Life* had the precise objective of transforming this vague aspiration into a conscious revolutionary will. Nothing seemed to be impossible in the eyes of those young people, all the more so since they thought that the problem that had obsessed all previous societies, that of material survival,

was finally on the verge of being solved thanks to progress in technology and industrial organization. While it is true that there were still workers in the factories and exploited persons all over the world, sooner or later machines would replace men in order to perform the most distasteful tasks and “liberate” individual and collective time. Thus, this vanguard of the future world known as the “young generation” could devote its main efforts to exploring the possibilities of human life that had been repressed up until that time, experimenting with all the possible forms of “liberation”: personal, sexual, psychological (it was assumed that drugs would open up the “doors of perception”) or artistic (rock n’ roll and its derivatives, made possible by electricity, represented a true aural “revolution” and symbolized a way of life that recapitulated all the other “liberations”). Far from refuting this spirit of the time, *The Revolution of Everyday Life* endorsed it by radicalizing it.

In such a context, the program of “total revolution” formulated by Vaneigem did not seem to be so impossible, and the social upheavals then underway appeared to confirm its relevance at the time. The illusions cherished by the situationists—the greatest of which was that of the final advent of an era of abundance that would be the material basis for the

future society—were all the less likely to be perceived as such the more they were accompanied by the demolition, which was for a long time the monopoly of the SI, of diverse contemporary illusions, among which the Chinese “cultural revolution” was one of the most famous. The situationists were convinced that they possessed the central point around which everything revolved, and this correspondence of partial analyses, often very good and well-documented, with the totality of a global critique, conferred a particular power upon their writings and radically distinguished them from the diversely ingenuous fantasies that flourished at the time.

It is fair to point out that if the situationists had demonstrated more consistency and lucidity in every domain, including the question of material abundance and automation, they would have forfeited a large part of their power of attraction, while the perspective of “supersession”, which was not a mere defensive attitude but implicitly contained the promise of a better future, would have lacked the power of seduction. Mere lucidity has never caused a sensation; that is why no one ever pays any attention to logical Cassandras. As Theodore Kaczynski was capable of perceiving in *Industrial Society and Its Future*, “an ideology, in order to gain enthusiastic support, must have a positive ideal as well as a negative

one; it must be FOR something as well as AGAINST something". Thus, the innumerable reports, articles and books published since the end of the fifties that announced—not only as something possible or probable but as something that was absolutely *certain*—the coming ecological catastrophe and the suicide of industrial society did not lead to any kind of generalized accession to consciousness, nor to any shock with a real effect. They engendered, to the contrary, a diffuse anxiety, more or less serious; and in reality, it was not these discourses or their arguments that by themselves produced this result, but their subsequent confirmation by reality. This anxiety leads to impotence and passivity, due to the very nature of the proposed remedy: if the road that humanity has followed with industrialization is truly catastrophic, then deindustrialization, for its part, will restore the question of material survival to its previous status as the most important question, especially in all those regions of the world and for all those social classes for whom abundance had been transformed into a reality precisely by virtue of industrial society. Faced with this perspective, those who find themselves in those regions and belong to those classes will always prefer to preserve, even if only for one more day, their advantages, rather than willingly renounce them. And when the catastrophe finally affects them

personally, they are scandalized by the fact that no measures were taken (by whom?) to prevent it. Thus, the deaf ears turned towards lucid predictions and rational analyses are not at all surprising. This is not—at least not always or necessarily—a sign of stupidity, but derives rather from what Giacomo Leopardi called “necessary illusions”. No one, he wrote in his *Zibaldone*, can renounce these illusions: “life and the total absence of illusion, and therefore of hope, are mutually contradictory”. Although the illusion of progress upon which industrial society has been nourished is slowly killing us, it still preserves at least a small part of its power of seduction or consolation (in this respect it is similar to religion), in the face of the depressing absence of promises apparently entailed by the very idea of deindustrialization. Again according to Leopardi, “the greatest misfortune is exacerbated and ends up being a veritable hell when we are deprived of that shadow of illusion that nature always tends to grant us”. We may therefore have good reason to fear that the catastrophes that are taking place will not lead to any salutary higher level of awareness:

“Illusions, even when they are undermined and unmasked by reason, nonetheless still exist in the world, and form the essential part of our life. And it is not

enough to understand them into order to rid ourselves of them, even if we understand their vanity. Once lost, however, a strong rootstock always remains and, as we go on living in this way, they sprout despite the experience and understanding that we have acquired.... The same thing happens to all those philosophers who write about and examine the miserable truths of our nature and who, however free of illusions they may be, never cease to create others with their works and take advantage of the illusory benefits of life.”

When the objective conditions worsen, the attraction of illusion is not diminished; quite the contrary. We have thus seen most of the myths of the sixties, almost in the same form, emerge in today’s “cyberculture”, a vast swindle that has no other function than to add the charms of contestation to the elixir of youth of an allegedly “dematerialized” capitalism. It is not just a coincidence that the adepts of this culture should profess a kind of worship for Timothy Leary, the apostle of LSD, nor that one of the pioneers of “cyberspace”, John Perry Barlow, was also a member of the Grateful Dead, the famous psychedelic rock band from San Francisco. For all those people, mostly young people, who support the values of “cyberculture”, we are living in marvelous times.³ We might find some of them in the “alter-

globalization” movement, which proclaims that, “another world is possible”. They, too, are immersed in an ideology, the most nebulous ideology possible, of course, but one that precisely for that reason allows them to be optimistic. Against the inextinguishable power of the desire for illusion, we may affirm with Leopardi that, “to fight against illusions in general is the most obvious sign of a very imperfect and insufficient knowledge, and of an obvious illusion”.

If illusions are not only inevitable, but also necessary, and survive every attack, even their “assassination”, then a goal that is based on mere reason, such as the objective (which is furthermore quite vague) of deindustrialization, has little chance of attracting the support of a numerically significant part of our society. And a “re-enchantment of the world” that would grant this program a new seductive power, by way of the creation of new myths, will run up against the difficulty that was already encountered by the surrealists in their day, to which Vaneigem called attention in *A Cavalier History of Surrealism*: one cannot artificially force the birth, in an era when hardly the least vestige of pre-industrial societies remains, of “the great myth of the unitary society of old, where the individual trajectory of even the humblest of men was

inextricably bound up with the cosmic in a mass of fictional realities and real fictions, an atmosphere in which every event was a sign and every word or gesture magically sparked off mysterious currents of mental electricity.”

But we must not concede too much weight to illusion and its power of seduction. Thus, the revolutionary illusions of the period after May '68 collapsed under their own weight after a few years, because they could not find any kind of basis in reality (regardless of what the miserable “radicals” may think, who are still fingering the beads of their revolutionary rosary). Maybe illusion is necessary, but it is not necessarily effective. If an anti-industrial consciousness should nonetheless take shape, it will not assume—of this at least we may be sure—the form of the situationist revolutionary theory. There is therefore no need to desire its rehabilitation, and we can allow the alchemists to rest in peace in their tombs.

It is by no means certain, however, that the absence of illusions will be totally deprived of its power of seduction, even if only because such an absence of illusions is itself, according to Leopardi, an illusion. So all hope is not lost. And as Baudelaire, with whom this history commenced and with whom it is therefore fitting that it also come to

a close, said: “The curtain has risen, and I am still waiting.”

Translated in February 2014 from the Spanish translation.

Source: Jean-Marc Mandosio, *En el caldero de lo negativo*, tr. Javier Rodríguez Hidalgo, Pepitas de Calabaza, La Rioja, 2006.

Original French-language edition published by Éditions de l’Encyclopédie des Nuisances in 2003 under the title, *Dans le chaudron du négatif*.

- 1. This word is merely the Arabized form, with the addition of the prefix, *al-*, of the Greek word of Egyptian origin, *chemeia*. Chemistry [*chimie*] in the modern sense of the word began to really be separated from alchemy [*alchimie*] during the 18th century.
- 2. Not to mention the attempts at a “radical” analysis of alchemy. For example, on the Internet web page of *Nemesis* one can read, in a text entitled “The Rise and Fall of Alchemy” (1997), published under the name of Urbain Bizot, that alchemy, “a popular heretical hope”, whose origins go back to “the iron age”, was “a strange unconscious synthesis of the most obsolete archaisms, which had arisen from the collective mysticism of the misty beginnings of time, and the individualist adaptation to rising bourgeois society, or even its anticipation”, and that it above all aspired to

obtain “the Peace of the subject” The author could very well have been inspired by meditating, before writing this piece, on the warning that John Dee included at the beginning of his *Monas Hieroglyphica* (1564): “He who does not understand, should either remain silent or learn.”

- [3](#). See *Après l’effondrement: notes sur l’utopie néotechnologique*, pp. 139-141.