

The Budding Forest: Guy Debord's Reading Notes on Literature

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Abstract

THIS article examines the meaning of *literature* in the life and work of Guy Debord through an analysis of his reading notes. Specifically, the article considers those reading notes collected under the dossier "Poésie etc." held in the Guy Debord archive at the Bibliothèque nationale de France and published for the first time in 2019. The article proposes that we can best grasp the nature of the relationship between Debord and literature through the Situationist practice of *détournement*, that is, the transformation of existing cultural products to give them new meaning. Debord, in the construction of this collection, is, in this sense, giving new meaning to existing literary material through the creation of a body of cultural fragments that together express a poetic subjective identification based in the lived experience of a revolutionary project. This insight informs an analysis of Debord's reading notes contained within this collection that concern the manifestoes and journals of the Surrealists that help us to understand the centrality of the relationship between the Situationists and the legacy of Surrealism.

Introduction

LITERATURE certainly played a key role in everything that Guy Debord did, from his early days in the Letterist avant-garde to the end of his life, when he would be celebrated as a master of classical French prose. The impact of Situationist texts on the insurgent generation of May '68 should not be regarded solely as a result of the pertinence of the theoretical analyses they contained. It was also their poetical force that made these texts stand out from the usual platitudes found in militant texts. An understanding of the relationship that Debord established with literature is therefore crucial to any understanding of his work, including its revolutionary

project, as a whole. This article seeks to provide a new understanding of that relationship through a critical analysis of the author's reading notes held at the Bibliothèque nationale de France. These reading notes comprise a vast archive of record cards containing quotes and annotations that Debord created over the course of his life and which he organized under several thematic files or dossiers. The current work was originally published as a postface to the publication of a collection based on one of these dossiers, entitled "Poésie, etc."¹ I will then take that collection of notes as a starting point to discuss Guy Debord's understanding (and usage) of literature, in general, and poetry, in particular.

The first thing to be remarked upon is that, although Debord termed the dossier "Poésie" ["Poetry"], a quick glance through the collection reveals that we are far away from the traditional boundaries of that classification. Theatre classics feature (Molière, Shakespeare, Calderón de la Barca) and so too, to an even greater extent, do quotations from classic novels (Cervantes, certainly, but also Stendhal, Goethe, Proust, Melville). Of course, it also contains poetry: the epic poetry of Homer and Camões, the *dolce stil nuovo* of Dante and Cavalcanti, romanticism in the form of Hölderlin, the cursed poetry of Baudelaire and the modern poetry of Pessoa. It contains, in short, a significant sample of the whole canon of European literature (boosted further with the inclusion of Chinese poetry). It is perhaps possible to explain away the inclusion of such a diversity of genres of writing with the "etc." that Debord includes in the title. However, if that is indeed the case, why did he choose to use the word *poésie*, a literary genre, rather than the more general term *littérature*, that is to say, the art of writing? There is every reason to believe that this choice is not a meaningless one and that the word *poésie* had a particular significance for Debord.

It would be helpful, at the outset, to recall what the ultimate purpose of the dossier was for Debord. These cards, apart from being a record, were created to be potentially used. A fact that is demonstrated by the presence of the note "détournable" (i.e., could be the subject of a *détournement*) that is written next to certain quotations. If a *détournement* of the *détourneur* himself might be permitted, one might say that these record cards were the heavy artillery with which Debord planned to bring down the Chinese walls of modern thought.² These cards, that is to say, provide a stockpile of formulations for the composition of a complex language, based on the play of *détournements* and quotations, of the kind that

¹ This article was originally published in French (see Zacarias, "Féconde"). English translations of all French quotations have been provided in the footnotes—except very short quotations or terms, which appear translated in the main text—, drawing on published texts where available. All uncredited translations are Alastair Hemmens'.

² Guy Debord and Gil Wolman undertake a *détournement* of this phrase, which comes from Marx and Engel's *The Communist Manifesto*, in "Mode d'emploi du détournement". Debord would perform a *détournement* of the phrase again in thesis 165 of *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967): "Cette puissance de homogénéisation est la grosse artillerie qui a fait tomber toutes les murailles de Chine" (*Œuvres* 837) ["This power of homogenisation is the heavy artillery which brought down all Chinese walls" (Debord, *Society* [Anonymous] thesis 165)].

Debord practices in his works. This is the reason why, for example, a number of the cards included in the collection were originally found among the collection of preparatory works for the film *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* (1978) and for a project entitled "Apologie". *In girum*, a remarkable example of poetic cinema, draws its inspiration from a deep dialogue with the literary past, as constituted by those literary works with which Debord felt a great affinity. I will not focus on exploring this in detail as I have done so elsewhere (see Zacarias, "Enjeux"). Suffice it to say that, at the time of his last great cinematographic undertaking, Debord had the poetry of Apollinaire, Baudelaire, Dante, and many others, at the forefront of his mind. He recalled them, initially from memory, and then located them among his record cards. His use of poetry, however, even when it comprises the part of a project, can not be separated from his use of other forms of literature. The collection includes, for example, quotations from Robert Musil's novel *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* [*The Man Without Qualities*] (1930).

This brings us, once again, back to the issue of classification. Borges says that "los géneros literarios dependen, quizá, menos de los textos que del modo en que éstos son leídos" (4: 189).³ This is a useful formula for understanding the meaning of "poetry" in this dossier. Although the genres contained within the dossier are very different from one another, it remains the case that the way in which Debord, the reader, appropriates them is always the same. It is, moreover, a profoundly poetic approach. As I will argue in greater detail further down, the way in which Debord reads is already a kind of *détournement* in practice; and *détournement*, as an act of abstraction and cutting out, is also a form of poetry. His mode of reading is always an act of subjective appropriation. The main goal of these cards is to serve as an indirect representation of lived experience. Its purpose is, as Debord says in *Panegyrique* (1989), to show "de quoi auront été tissés en profondeur cette aventure, et moi-même" (Debord, *Œuvres* 1656).⁴ It is perhaps this fleeting point of encounter between writing and life that Debord calls poetry.

The majority of the record cards stored within the dossier concern this labour of self narration (*écriture de soi*) that, as we shall see, predominates towards the end of Debord's life. An important exception to the rule, however, is a series of record cards that relate to the journal *La Révolution surréaliste* and André Breton's *Manifestes du surréalisme*. Apart from being inherently interesting for their subject matter, these cards help us to better understand the relationship that Debord established with the history of the avant-garde. After a brief analysis of this atypical collection of cards, I will turn once again to an analysis of the relationship between Debord and literature, the principle subject of the dossier, which is, of course, titled "Poésie, etc."

³ Transl.: "Literary genres depend less, perhaps, on the texts themselves than on how they are read."

⁴ Transl.: "to show fully of what stuff this adventure and I are made" (Debord, *Panegyric* 8).

Rereading Surrealism

THE dossier contains two collections of record cards that are very important for developing a better understanding of the relationship between Debord and Surrealism (see also Flahutez). The first collection, named simply “Lectures du Fond Doucet” [“Readings from the Doucet archives”] refer to reading notes based on the first five issues of *La Révolution surréaliste* that Debord consulted in the Jacques Doucet archives.⁵ The cards are organized by issue, Debord writing “commentaire général” [“general comments”] at the end of each issue. Debord also comments on the visual features of the issues. He is drawn, for example, to the photograph of “une femme au bas d’un escalier” [“a woman at the bottom of a set of stairs”] on the cover of the fourth issue. He notes also that this is the “dernière couverture rouge (ensuite, blanches)” [“last [issue] with a red cover (white thereafter)”].⁶ It is clear that the Surrealist journal, which, at the time, was innovative in the genre of illustrated avant-garde journals, serves as a model for the creation of *Internationale situationniste* (IS), the future organ of the Situationists, and not only in terms of its form. Direct echoes can sometimes be discerned between the passages that Debord takes notes on and Situationist texts. Reading the first issue of *La Révolution surréaliste*, for example, Debord writes: “Noter l’avertissement: Le surréalisme ne se présente pas comme l’exposition d’une doctrine.”⁷ The Situationists themselves, in the very first issue of their own journal, express a similar intention by refusing even to become an “ism”: “Il n’y a pas de situationnisme [. . .] ce qui signifierait une doctrine d’interprétation des faits existants” (Situationist International, “Définitions” 13).⁸

Debord makes note of several elements that are reflected in the values and practices that would later be at the heart of the SI. For example, in response to an article published in the fourth issue that recounts a lecture Aragon gave in Madrid, Debord writes: “Conférence d’Aragon – ton ultra-insolent, confiance délirante dans les bouleversements irrationnels entrepris par 40 hommes prêts à tout” (*Poésie* 335).⁹ Putting aside the reference to irrationality, might not this same comment describe the SI? What might one say then of this other passage lifted from the same lecture: “Ah ! banquiers, étudiants, ouvriers, fonctionnaires, domestiques, vous êtes les fellateurs de l’utile, les branleurs de la nécessité. Je ne travaillerai

⁵ Jacques Doucet (1853–1929) was a “haut-couturier”, art patron and collector, who was close to many Parisian artists throughout his life, including André Breton. After his death, part of his collections of artworks, publications, and manuscripts were donated to the University of Paris and served as a basis for the future library of the National Institute for Art History, as well as the accordingly named Jacques Doucet Literary Library.

⁶ Debord’s observation is not entirely correct as it was in fact the fifth issue that was the last to have a red (or, more accurately, orange) cover.

⁷ Transl.: “Note the announcement: Surrealism does not present itself as promoting a doctrine.”

⁸ Transl.: “There is no such thing as Situationism, which would mean a doctrine for interpreting existing conditions” (Situationist International, *Anthology* 51).

⁹ Transl.: “Aragon Lecture—ultra-insolent tone, crazy confidence in the irrational havoc wreaked by 40 men ready to risk it all.”

jamais, mes mains sont pures.”¹⁰ It is impossible to read Aragon’s words and not think of Debord’s famous graffito, “Ne travaillez jamais” [“Never work”] inscribed on a wall of the rue de Seine, Paris, in 1953.

Certainly, disdain for work is an enduring feature of modern poetry.¹¹ One need only think of Rimbaud: “Jamais nous ne travaillerons” [“Never will we work”] in “Qu’est-ce pour nous, mon cœur . . .” (1872). Debord found in poetry a confirmation of his negative view of work, which would later permit him to set himself apart from traditional Marxism.¹² Surrealism, which had declared a *guerre au travail* [war on work] played an important role in this respect. Apart from Aragon’s phrase, Debord is particularly drawn to Breton’s text “La dernière grève” [“The Last Strike”] (1925), which appeared in the second issue of the journal. From it, Debord records the following quotation: “ceux qui nous patronnent ne sont pas encore nés. Nous ne sommes guère des travailleurs ; c’est presque toujours nous embarrasser fort que de nous poser la question d’usage : ‘Travaillez-vous en ce moment ?’ (Peut-on dire qu’Hercule, que Christophe Colomb, que Newton travaillaient ?).”¹³ As Debord observes, the founder of Surrealism demonstrates in these words the “condition privilégiée de l’artiste qui n’est pas payé aux pièces” [“privileged condition of the artist who is not paid in coin”].

The second group of reading cards is titled “Analyse des MANIFESTES d’A[ndré] Breton (Sagittaire 1955)” [“Analysis of A. Breton’s MANIFESTOES (Sagittaire 1955)”]. As the title suggests, this is not simply a reading but rather an attempt to analyse the collected edition of the Surrealist manifestoes released by the publisher Sagittaire in 1955. This is a rather long collection composed of 11 cards that, apart from quotations, also contain a good number of comments by Debord. He has particularly good things to say about the “Préface à la réédition du *Premier Manifeste*” [“Preface to the new edition of the *First Manifesto*”] written in 1929 that is placed at the start of the 1955 collection, calling it “un des plus élevés d’A[ndré] B[reton]” [“one of Breton’s most elevated”]. He remains critical, nevertheless, remarking that “la dernière phrase laisse clairement paraître le côté hasardeux, incontrôlé de cette ‘grâce transfigurante’, et les longs intervalles d’ennui finalement inexplicables.”¹⁴

¹⁰ Transl.: “Ah! Bankers, students, workers, officials, servants, you are the adulterators of utility, the shirkers of necessity. I will never work; my hands are pure.”

¹¹ And consequently, the critique of work finds a particular place in modern French thought, with different nuances, as Alastair Hemmens has brilliantly demonstrated in his extensive study on the matter, which comprises surrealists and situationists, alongside many others (see *Critique*).

¹² Although, in his critique of the society of abundance, Guy Debord makes use of Marxist theory, he does so without falling into its essentialization of work. I have discussed this matter concerning the specific relationship of Debord and Herbert Marcuse elsewhere (see “Éros”). For a more general perspective on the SI’s critique of work and its relation to traditional Marxism, besides Hemmens’ above mentioned work, one can also refer to “Abolition” by the same author.

¹³ Transl.: “our patrons have not yet been born. We are hardly workers. We are almost certain to be embarrassed when asked the customary question, ‘Are you working at the moment?’ (Did Heracles, Christopher Columbus or Newton work?).”

¹⁴ Transl.: “the last sentence leaves open the uncontrolled, random, side of this ‘transfiguring grace’ and long periods of ultimately unexplained boredom.”

Debord was already familiar with Surrealist writing when he undertook this reading of the Surrealist manifestoes. He had already formed an opinion of André Breton's thinking and the trajectory of the Surrealist group. Hence, while summarizing the ideas of the first manifesto, Debord writes,

Le règne de la logique est fâcheux parce que, déjà, il a capitulé à propos des fins. L'expérience elle-même s'est vue assigner des limites. Les chimères sont fâcheusement bannies par un système lui-même insuffisant. Heureusement Freud est venu. On peut attendre un triomphe de l'imagination. [...] "Si les profondeurs de notre esprit recèlent d'étranges forces capables [...]" etc.¹⁵

Debord also puts forward criticisms of the following texts and even texts of Breton that are not found in the collection: "En fait, ces forces sont surestimées par A[ndré] B[reton] avant d'être remplacées par l'occultisme (premiers signes dans le *Second Manifeste*, 1930) victorieux dès la guerre 39-45 (*Prolégomènes*, *Arcane 17*)."¹⁶

Debord therefore has prior knowledge of the *Manifestes*. The record cards in question are perhaps the result of a targeted rereading that served as the basis for one of his own texts.¹⁷ Debord demonstrates, moreover, that he has internalized a more general narrative about Surrealism; one which refers back perhaps to his reading of other works, such as Maurice Nadeau's *Histoire du surréalisme* (1945), or even what he gleaned from the opinions of Isidore Isou and the Letterists. In a reading that is clearly teleological, Debord attempts to identify, in the first manifesto, the origins of the "chute" ["fall"] of Surrealism into "occultisme"; a fall that he believes is imminent in the second manifesto, and confirmed in the aftermath of the Second World War. His reading therefore ends with an observation on the regressive nature of the final texts. On the subject of *Prolégomènes* (1942), for example, Debord criticizes, right from the beginning of his notes, its "défiance envers tout système. Défiance inintelligente, et réactionnaire." ["rejection of every system. A stupid and reactionary rejection"]. He returns to the same theme later on: "Insuffisance de tous les systèmes, principalement du marxisme (remplacé par un cheminement d'A[ndré] B[reton] vers un idéalisme diffus)" ["Insufficiency of all systems, principally of Marxism (replaced with A[ndré] B[reton]'s movement towards a vague idealism)"]. Debord finally concludes his analysis of the text with sarcasm: "Grande idée du manifeste (à part la défiance anti-marxiste) : l'homme n'est pas le

¹⁵ Transl.: "The reign of logic is vexatious because he has already capitulated with regard to its ends. Experience finds itself assigned limits. Illusions are vexatiously banished by a system that is insufficient to itself. Happily, Freud came along. We can expect a triumph of the imagination. [...] 'If the deepest parts of our mind contain strange powerful forces [...]' etc."

¹⁶ Transl.: "In fact, A[ndré] B[reton] overestimated these forces before replacing them with occultism (the first signs of this are in the second manifesto, 1930), which won out after the war of 39-45 (*Prolegomena*, *Arcane 17*)."

¹⁷ Certainly, given the date of the book's publication, a reading undertaken after 1955. It may have been used for the writing of the "Rapport sur la construction des situations" (1957), in which Debord elaborates a short history of the avant-garde, or for the preparation of the first issue of *Internationale situationniste* in 1958, which opens with a critique of Surrealism.

centre de la création, il pourrait y avoir des 'grands transparents', mythe nouveau d'un idéalisme mythique stupéfiant."¹⁸

It should be noted, in all fairness, that Debord is being particularly severe and does not take into account the historical context in which the works in the collection were produced. *Prolegomènes*, in particular, was written in 1942 and should be understood in the context of the disillusionment that the war produced. As Breton writes: "Il suffit d'une brusque convulsion de ce globe, comme nous en connaissons une aujourd'hui, pour que soit inévitablement remise en question [...] la suffisance des modes électifs de connaissance."¹⁹

It is the inadequacy of the existing systems of thought faced with the horrors of war that drives Breton to seek out an alternative system, what he terms "système à moi" ["my own system"]; a gesture that is not only philosophical in nature, but also political because he asserts his position of independence against the dogmatism of political parties:

Les partis : ce qui est, ce qui n'est pas *dans la ligne*. Mais si ma propre ligne, fort sinueuse, j'en conviens, du moins la mienne, passe par Héraclite, Abélard, Eckhart, Retz, Rousseau, Swift, Sade, Lewis, Arnim, Lautréamont, Engels, Jarry et quelques autres? Je m'en suis fait un système de coordonnées à mon usage, système qui résiste à mon expérience personnelle et, donc, me paraît inclure quelques-unes des chances de demain.²⁰ (Breton, *Manifestes* 153)

Isn't this desire to create a personal system that avoids dogmatism a sinuous theoretical way forward that takes many very different paths and that is not limited to any particular discipline not the same road that Debord takes? It is, moreover, notable that nearly all of the authors that the Surrealist mentions here are the same ones found in this very dossier of the Situationist.

Self-Narration

DEBORD and Breton also share the practice of self-reflective writing that constantly reappears in their work. Debord, however, would do it quite differently. He is in frequent dialogue with the literary past, borrowing quotations,

¹⁸ Transl.: "The manifesto's great idea (apart from an anti-Marxist distrust): man is not the centre of the universe, there might be 'great transparent ones', a new myth of astounding mythic idealism."

¹⁹ Transl.: "All that is needed [...] is a sudden convulsion of this globe, such as the one we are going through today, for there to be called into question [...] the adequacy of the optional modes of knowledge" (Breton, *Manifestoes* 287).

²⁰ Transl.: "Parties: what is, what is not in the party line. But what if my own line, that admittedly twists and turns, passes Heraclitus, Abelard, Eckhardt, Retz, Rousseau, Swift, Sade, Lewis, Arnim, Lautréamont, Engels, Jarry and a few others? From them I have constructed a system of coordinates for my own use, a system that stands up to the test of my own personal experience and therefore appears to me to include some of tomorrow's chances" (Breton, *Manifestoes* 285).

speaking of the self through the words of others. The greater part of the quotations recorded on the cards refer to this labour of self-narration. This is why there are so many quotations written in the first and second person. Where the third person does appear, it is usually through the eyes of a narrator who is describing the life of a fictional or historical character. In the case of Chateaubriand, for example, we do not come across quotations of poetry, but rather quotations taken from the *Vie de Rancé* (1844), an account of the life of Abbé Rancé and his times. Chateaubriand, in this text, does not limit himself to speaking only of the eighteenth century; he also digresses into other periods of history, including providing a portrait of the Cardinal de Retz, a figure on whom Debord always placed a great deal of importance. Debord may therefore have read the text in preparation for another project that he was undertaking, a work on the Fronde, a subject that is covered by many of the record cards (see *Le Bras* 57–75). The central tone of the *Vie de Rancé*, however, is a nostalgic recounting of the past and distancing from the present. As the last work that Chateaubriand ever wrote, haunted by his approaching death, it is a reflection on old age; the author is speaking of his own life through his description of the life of the abbot. This text, which is a kind of implicit description of the self, echoes, in both theme and form, the final works of Debord himself. It is obvious how Debord might have used these quotations to construct an account of his own life, to describe his values, his character, the adventures of the SI, May '68, etc. The following quotation, for example, could have served to evoke that part of his life devoted to Letterist *dérives*: “Un jour, avec trois gentilshommes de son âge, il résolut d’entreprendre un voyage à l’imitation des chevaliers de la Table ronde.”²¹ Similarly, the declaration that “Paris était distribué en quartiers qui portaient des noms merveilleux”²² could have echoed Ivan Chtcheglov’s “Formulaire pour un urbanisme nouveau” [“Formulary for a New Urbanism”] (1953).

Obviously, not all of the quotations held within the dossier serve this sole purpose. Other themes that were important to Debord, such as the relationship between art and modern life, or the submission of art to commodity logic, can also be observed. Indeed, different quotations on the subject of beauty seem to resonate with one another: “La beauté n’est jamais, ce me semble, qu’une promesse de bonheur”, writes Stendhal;²³ “l’art n’est qu’un produit de remplacement en une époque où la vie manque de beauté”, adds Mondrian;²⁴ and, finally, Pessoa concludes, “A beleza é o nome de qualquer coisa que não existe. Que eu dou às coisas em troca do agrado que me dão.”²⁵

²¹ Transl.: “One day, with three other gentlemen of his own age, he decided to go on a journey like those of the knights of the Round Table.”

²² Transl.: “Paris was divided into neighbourhoods with marvellous names.”

²³ Transl.: “For Beauty—this I believe—is nothing but a promise of happiness” (Stendhal 41).

²⁴ Cited from a newspaper article (Debord, *Poésie* 316). Transl.: “art is no more than a replacement product in an epoch where beauty is missing from life.”

²⁵ Cited by Debord in Portuguese (*Poésie* 316). Transl.: “Beauty is the name of something that does not exist / And that I give to things in exchange for the pleasure that they give me.”

That being said, the principle that motivates the transcription of the vast majority of the quotations remains self-narration. Many of the quotations serve to reinforce an idea of the “character” of the author, his self-image, in particular, of his personal integrity and his indifference to the values of dominant society. In the preparatory notes for what would have been the third volume of *Panegyrique*, we find that the opening chapter was to be called “Du Caractère” [“On Character”] (Le Bras 211). On the basis of this dossier, Debord would not have lacked for material. He could have begun, using Stendhal once again, by explaining to us that “la force de caractère [. . .] provient de l’admiration de ce qu’on a osé faire pendant les accès de passion; on prend confiance en soi.”²⁶ He could have then gone on to boast, like Dom Juan, “Non, non, je ne suis point changé, et mes sentiments sont toujours les mêmes.”²⁷

Sometimes reading the record cards gives the impression of an incomplete conversation. You can play at trying to work out what motivated Debord in his reading. Debord himself, however, often states his intentions explicitly. From Mallarmé, for example, he notes a “phrase, bien jolie comme épigraphe à toute l’IS” [“very pretty sentence for an epigraph for the SI as a whole”]: “À quoi bon trafiquer ce qui, peut-être, ne se doit vendre, surtout quand on ne se vend pas?”²⁸ Or an extract from Cervantes that serves the same purpose: “Et quand vous l’aurez vue, répliqua don Quichotte, quelle obligation vous aurai-je de reconnaître une vérité qui parle d’elle-même ? L’important, c’est que vous le croyez sans la voir, que vous en juriez, et que vous les souteniez les armes à la main contre qui que ce soit.”²⁹ Debord adds on the side the following note: “épigraphe APO / 68?”

Possible uses for quotations even arise therefore during the course of a reading. This note shows that, while reading the book, Debord recognized that he could use the passage in his “Apologie” project as an epigraph to the events of May ’68. It is worth noting here that the designation “APO” or “Pour APO” does not ultimately refer to a single work, but rather indicates, in a more general fashion, a planned project about his life that Debord had been considering since the mid-1970s. The project would eventually take the form of several different works, most notably *In Girum* and *Panegyrique*, in which quotations that, in the record cards, are indicated with the note “APO” would be used. When encountering this note, therefore, it is

²⁶ Transl.: “[strength of character] has its roots in *admiration*—admiration for the feats a man has dared to perform in the sudden tempests of his own passion. The result is self-confidence” (Stendhal 149). Translator’s note: The original French is more self-reflexive than this already existing translation and suggests that it is admiration for what one has done oneself in a fit of passion that builds strength of character. It should also be noted that the quote has been recorded in the *Poésie* volume incorrectly with the word *administration* given, rather than *admiration*.

²⁷ Transl.: “No, no, I am not altered, and my feelings are always the same” (Molière, [Van Laun] 160).

²⁸ Transl.: “Why engage in commerce with that which should be traded, especially if one does not own oneself?” Translator’s Note: This quotation is taken from Mallarmé’s *Variations sur un sujet* (1895), for which there is no extant translation into English.

²⁹ Transl.: “‘If I were to show her to you,’ replied Don Quixote, ‘what merit would you have in confessing a truth so manifest? The essential point is that without seeing her you must believe, confess, affirm, swear, and defend it’” (Cervantes 1: 140–41).

necessary to think more broadly about all of the works Debord composed on the subject of his own life. The reading notes demonstrate the way in which this work of self-representation could have effectively continued forever. If, for example, the extract from *Don Quixote* cited above serves as a representation of the Situationists in the heart of the turmoil of May '68, the same could be said from the following recorded passage from Schiller's *Wallensteins Tod* (1799): "Notre vie fut une marche sans repos, et, pareils au vent qui gronde dans les airs, nous avons, sans patrie, sans loyer, traversé, comme fait l'ouragan, le monde agité par la guerre."³⁰

Upon this "monde agité par la guerre", Debord and the SI often took their struggle straight into polemics and, in so doing, employed the art of the insult. Consequently, the quotations that Debord notes down can, to this end, be used to help him defend himself from attack, such as passages lifted from Pascal's *Lettres provinciales* (1656–57) on the subject of calumny. Others might serve to cast an unflattering image of old adversaries, such as the following passage lifted from Molière's *Les femmes savantes* (1672) that Debord plans to use against Jean-Paul Sartre:

Je vis dans le fatras des écrits qu'il nous donne,
Ce qu'étaie en tous lieux sa pédante personne.
La constante hauteur de sa présomption,
Cette intrépidité de bonne opinion,
Cet indolent état de confiance extrême,
Qui le rend en tout temps si content de soi-même,
Qui fait qu'à son mérite incessamment il rit,
Qu'il se sait si bon gré de tout ce qu'il écrit[.]³¹

The majority of the quotations recorded on the record cards refer therefore to this attempt of the author to represent his life and his times, which defined his final works. Although they are a form of self-representation, these works are not part of the fashion for autobiographies, which arise rather out of the phenomenon of the "spécialisation de vécu apparent" ["specialists of *apparent life*" (Debord, *Society* [Knabb] thesis 60)] pointed out by Debord earlier in *The Society of the Spectacle*.³² At the same time, they do not squarely fit within the confessional model of autobiography that Rousseau initiated. Rather than a direct expression of intimacy, these works are constructed through the mediation of literary material that is exterior to the subject who is writing. Analysis of these record cards

³⁰ Transl.: "Yea, our whole life was but one restless march / And homeless, as the stirring wind, we travelled / O'er the war-wasted earth" (Schiller 43).

³¹ Transl.: "I saw in the trash which he writes all that his pedantic person everywhere shows forth; the persistent haughtiness of his presumption, the intrepidity of the good opinion he has of his person, the calm overweening confidence which at all times makes him so satisfied with himself, and with the writings of which he boasts" (Molière, *Dramatic Works* [Wall] 357).

³² Former situationist Donald Nicholson-Smith translates the passage as "diversification in the semblance of life" (*Society* thesis 60). The passage originally refers to stardom, but I believe it could designate a social phenomenon that unfolds subsequently in the generalization of "apparent life" under several forms (including, nowadays, that of the social media).

reveals a patient work of self-narration in which the speaking subject forms itself incrementally through the juxtaposition of quotations.

Integrated Spectacle

CERVANTES being a particular favourite of Debord, Don Quixote is one of the characters who appear most frequently in his work of self-narration. Debord channels himself several times through the unfortunate knight and his reading notes contain several passages that would later be the subject of *détournement* in his works. In *In girum*, for example, there is this fine homage to the friends of his youth, "J'ai bu leur vin. Je leur suis fidèle."³³ Its sincerity is underlined as a borrowing of words from Sancho Panza when speaking of his master: "seguirle tengo: somos de un mismo lugar; he comido su pan; quiérole bien; es agradecido; diome sus pollinos, y, sobre todo, yo soy fiel."³⁴

But Cervantes' novel also serves other ends. Among these cards, one recognizes a passage cited in the seventh thesis of Debord's *Commentaires sur La Société du Spectacle*: "Et comme nous disions d'ordinaire en Espagne, sous un méchant manteau il y a souvent un bon buveur."³⁵ Debord uses this passage in the *Commentaires* at a point where he engages in a ferocious critique of the social role of the expert. According to him, "l'expert qui sert le mieux, c'est, bien sûr, l'expert qui ment. Ceux qui ont besoin de l'expert, ce sont, pour des motifs différents, le falsificateur et l'ignorant. Là où l'individu n'y reconnaît plus rien par lui-même, il sera formellement rassuré par l'expert" (*Œuvres* 1602-03).³⁶ He evokes the transformation of food production by the chemical industry, giving viticulture as an example: "Une époque qui trouve rentable de falsifier chimiquement nombre de vins célèbres, ne pourra les vendre que si elle a formé des experts en vins qui entraîneront les caves à aimer leurs nouveaux parfums, plus reconnaissables" (*Œuvres* 1603).³⁷

Those who let themselves be taken in by the form see in the *Commentaires* a critique of society that is less refined than that found in *La Société du spectacle*.

³³ Transl.: "I drank their wine. I was loyal to them."

³⁴ Debord notes this passage in the original Spanish, using a 1979 edition of *Don Quijote*. Transl.: "I can't help it, I must follow him; we're from the same village, I have eaten his bread, I'm fond of him, I'm grateful, he gave his ass-colts, and above all I'm faithful" (Cervantes 3: 368).

³⁵ In the collection "Poésies, etc.", Debord notes the passage down in the original Spanish: "En fin, en fin, hablando a su modo, debajo de mala capa, suele haber buen bebedor." Malcolm Imrie, in his English translation of the *Commentaires*, provides the following translation: "under a poor cloak you commonly find a good drinker" (Debord, *Comments* thesis 7). The original passage from Cervantes comes from the dialogue between the Duchess and Sancho Panza, in which the Duchess decides to answer him in his own language, that is to say, with a proverb.

³⁶ Transl.: "The most useful expert, of course, is the one who can lie. With their different motives, those who need experts are falsifiers and fools. Whenever individuals lose the capacity to see things for themselves, the expert is there to offer an absolute reassurance" (Debord, *Comments* thesis 7).

³⁷ Transl.: "A period which, for example, finds it profitable to fake by chemical means various famous wines, can only sell them if it has created wine experts able to con connoisseurs into admiring their new, more distinctive, flavours" (Debord, *Comments* thesis 7).

The moral tenor of the discourse is a stylistic choice that separates the text from the Hegelian tone of the earlier work. This does not, however, necessarily imply a renouncement of the earlier dialectical position. If there is a loss of dialectic, it is rather to be found in the world that Debord is discussing. *La Société du spectacle* is, above all else, a critique of the growing separation between representation and lived experience. The *Commentaires*, on the other hand, deal with a society where the objective world itself has been altered according to the logic of spectacular abstraction. One can no longer, as before, condemn the falsity of the spectacle on the basis of the incompatibility between representation and the world. This world, which has been modified at great speed in its material qualities, can no longer be understood through experience, whence the necessity of the expert. Beneath the moral tone of the critique, there is always an understanding of a dialectical process: the progress of reason transforming itself into a loss of freedom.

It is also in the context of the critique of the “spectacle intégré” [“integrated spectacle”]—the final phase of spectacular society—that we must understand the author’s return to classical style and his thoughts on the loss of the French language. It is a mistake to see in this a reactionary inclination on the part of the old Situationist. On the contrary, Debord is responding to a phenomenon that was amply discussed at the time in order to make the connection with spectacular alienation. As he writes in one unpublished note: “On reconnaît assez largement aujourd’hui que la langue française se perd ; on ne reconnaîtra pas volontiers, sauf dans des cercles très fermés, que j’en ai fait la théorie il y a vingt ans” (Le Bras 156).³⁸ Debord recognizes therefore a dual process: on the one hand, the modification of language that inevitably follows the material modification of the world; on the other hand, the impoverishment of language that results from the ubiquity of the spectacle. As he goes on to write in his notes, the spectacle has thus “imposé universellement, en plus du langage du faux, le faux langage” [“universally imposed, in addition to a language of the false, a false language”] (Le Bras 155). He adds that “la voix qui parle le plus puissamment à chaque heure de la vie sociale des contemporains [...] est aussi normalement la voix qui crée instantanément l’usage – qui lance le sens et le choix toujours plus étroit et sélectif des mots, et leur prononciation, etc.” (Le Bras 155).³⁹

The critique that Debord develops here is similar in many respects to that of the Frankfurt School in that it stresses the collapse of rational progress.⁴⁰ The Frankfurt School theorists already observed, with the onset of the Second World War, that all thought and language was being reduced to its instrumental dimension. As Horkheimer writes, “Language has been reduced to just another tool in the gigantic apparatus of production in modern society” (27–28). Debord sees

³⁸ Transl.: “Today it is largely admitted that the French language is being lost. It is not admitted willingly, except within very closed circles, that I theorized this twenty years ago.”

³⁹ Transl.: “the voice that speaks the most forcefully every hour of the social life of his contemporaries [...] is also normally the voice that instantly shapes how it will be used [usage]—which sets out the evermore restricted and selective meaning and choice of words, their pronunciation, etc.”

⁴⁰ This aspect has also been noted by Marcolini.

the deepening of this process in the age of the integrated spectacle. The triumph of the spectacle is the consequence of that fact that, for most individuals, “le langage du spectacle, c’est le seul qui lui est familier ; celui dans lequel on lui a appris à parler” (Debord, *Œuvres* 1611).⁴¹ This abolishes even the possibility of critique as, knowing no other language, individuals cannot set themselves into opposition against the spectacle: “La disparition si rapide du vocabulaire préexistant n’est qu’un moment de cette opération” (Debord, *Œuvres* 1611).⁴²

This is the meaning of Debord’s return to classical language. Faced with the one-dimensionality of the present, it is necessary to go searching in the past for a language other than that of the spectacle. Debord is therefore converted into an archaeologist of language; a practical archaeologist since it is a matter of playing with the debris and ruins of the literary past in order to construct new texts. It is notable that the cards in this file only concern authors that lived before the spectacular age.⁴³ This is equally true of the translations that Debord chooses, such as those of the works of Homer and Cervantes, all of which date from the nineteenth century.⁴⁴ Debord, moreover, judges the translation of *Don Quixote* to be “très infidèle” [“highly inaccurate”]. But, even as a poor translation, it remains, nevertheless, useful as the central goal is to make use of language that is different to that of the present. Debord, who was always attentive to the inseparability of the form and content of thought, wishes to gift us an instrument with which we can develop a critique that is outside of spectacular homogeneity.

Poetry Expanded

FINALLY, let us return to the question originally posed at the beginning of this article, the decision to title this dossier “Poésie”, in order to better understand the relationship between Debord and literature. Based on everything that we have seen, from the variety of literary genres and themes covered in these record cards, it is obvious that the idea of “poetry” being advanced cannot be limited to a formal or stylistic concept. In order to understand how the word is being used in this particular instance, we need to recall an illustrious predecessor, Isidore Ducasse (alias Comte de Lautréamont), whose 1870 work *Poésies* contained no poems. *Poésies* was a touchstone for Debord and he considered it to be an “exposé programmatique” (*Œuvres* 1675) [“programmatic exposition” (*Panegyric* 43)]. In *Poésies*, Lautréamont plays with the language of classical maxims, appropriating them, reversing them, in a moral sense. It was in this book that Debord first

⁴¹ Transl.: “the language of the spectacle [...] is the only one he is familiar with; the one in which he learned to speak” (Debord, *Comments* thesis 11).

⁴² Transl.: “The swift disappearance of our former vocabulary is merely one moment in this process” (Debord, *Comments* thesis 11).

⁴³ With the exception of Tonino Benaquista, whose novel *Les Morsures de l’aube* (1992) is the only contemporary work included in the dossier.

⁴⁴ In the case of the *Odyssey* and the *Illiad* this could have also been a matter of personal taste as the translator, Pierre Giguet, was also an author of *militaria*.

discovered a formula that he would so often repeat: “Le plagiat est nécessaire, le progrès l’implique.”⁴⁵ It was under the tutelage of Lautréamont that Debord would develop the practice that would define his writing right up until the end of his life: *détournement*.

Certainly, *détournement* is equally indebted to the historical avant-garde, thanks to its practice of collage. Debord was himself actually a remarkable collagist, as is demonstrated by his psychogeographic maps and the two books he created between 1957 and 1958 in collaboration with the painter Asger Jorn: *Fin de Copenhague* (1957) and *Mémoires* (1958). But what is the relationship between collage and poetry? Let us recall a well-known example, Tristan Tzara’s method for making a Dadaist poem. According to Tzara, all one needs to do is to cut out phrases from a newspaper and rearrange them on a page by pulling them randomly out of a bag. The use of chance as a creative method is what most often interests critics. However, the simplest aspect is what should be noted first: the formal transformation of journalistic prose, which, once cut out and rearranged, becomes verse. We consistently see the same procedure of transforming prose into verse in the work of Debord. His *Mémoires* comprises a number of such cut-out poems. In reading these pages, passing from one cut-out phrase to another, is the experience not similar to that of reading the verses of a poem? It seems even more plausible if we consider the relationship between modern poetry and the space of the page, from “Coup de dés” (1897) by Mallarmé, another poet present in the dossier, to the *Calligrammes* (1918) of Apollinaire, a poet that Debord often invokes.

Moreover, these reading notes demonstrate that the process of cutting-out (*découpage*) is already at work in the very act of reading. *Détournement* is not just a form of writing, it is also a form of reading. The boundary between reading and writing tends to disappear in Debord’s reading notes. Reading stops where it becomes writing, when the formulas that he considers “détournable” appear for future use. This means, in short, that the movement from prose to verse already occurs in the act of reading. First, through copying down the quotes, then through the act of underlining, which cuts the text up a second time. Therefore, while very few poems appear in this dossier entitled “Poésie, etc.”, it could be said, without too great an exaggeration, that, through a reading that is “détournante”, everything within it becomes poetry.

As one goes through the record cards, reading the quotations that are underlined in it, one can easily imagine that one is reading a work in the same style of *Mémoires*. The formulations are ready to be strewn across the page. Yet, the poetical movement does not disappear in Debord’s prose texts, such as *Panégyrique* (vol. 1). Rather, the cut-out formulas are still there, *détourné* and cited. They are what give the text its rhythm. What is poetry, after all, if not rhythm? Debord, it should not be forgotten, incorporated Letterism and he created tape recordings (see *Enregistrements*). The issue of sound in language, a subject proper to poetry, was not something foreign to him. It appears once again, later on, in his films, where he reads out, in his own voice, the textual commentary.

⁴⁵ Transl.: “Plagiarism is necessary. Progress implies it” (Lautréamont 327).

We are, in many respects, faced with an expanded concept of poetry, which perhaps explains the “etc.” in the title of the dossier. The fact that Debord chooses the term *poésie* rather than *littérature* is already significant. The former seems to carry with it a more emotional charge, which is something that suits the intentions of an author who already explored the potential of art for changing life. Many passages in his writing alert the reader to the fact that, for Debord, the word refers to that which, going beyond the text, can touch lived experience. In his youth, Debord wrote to his school friend Hervé Falcou: “J’ai jeté les bases d’un manifeste qui définit une nouvelle poésie – en dehors du surréalisme ou du lettrisme. Nous porterons plus loin la libération éthique de Breton, et je dépasse Isou en préconisant le SILENCE, l’action directe etc.” (*Marquis* 104).⁴⁶ Not only do these words anticipate his first film, *Hurléments en faveur de Sade* (1952), they also reveal what the young Debord thinks of as poetry: an ethical stand and, therefore, a form of action. “L’évolution formelle de la poésie s’achève avec le lettrisme [et] l’arrangement arbitraire des lettres” (*Marquis* 118),⁴⁷ Debord affirms in a second letter where he argues for a “néo-poème” [“neo-poem”], the description of which might make one think of May ’68: “Le scandale, la provocation, les inscriptions sur les murs, sont le cortège du néo-poème, détaché de toute justification esthétique, qui peut se réduire à un titre” (*Marquis* 118).⁴⁸ Debord would later distance himself from this position. As we read in “Mode d’emploi du détournement” (1956): “Il s’agit [...] de passer au-delà de toute idée de scandale” (*Œuvres* 221).⁴⁹ Debord instead proposes a constructive art that aims to intervene in everyday life. It is the concept of the “situation construite” [“constructed situation”] that motivates the creation of a new avant-garde. The constructed situation will condemn spectators to disappear as they are replaced by “viveurs” [“livers”] in a frank rupture with “le principe même du spectacle: la non-intervention” (*Œuvres* 325) [“the very principle of spectacle: non-intervention” (Situationist International, *Anthology* 40)]. Just after this celebrated passage from “Rapport sur la construction des situations”, we once again read the following: “Il faut multiplier, disons, les objets et les sujets poétiques, malheureusement si rares actuellement que les plus minimes prennent une importance affective exagérée ; et organiser les jeux de ces sujets poétiques parmi ces objets poétiques. Voilà tout notre programme, qui est essentiellement transitoire” (*Œuvres* 326).⁵⁰ The “realization of poetry” could have been one of the

⁴⁶ Transl.: “I’ve jotted down the basis for a manifesto that will define a new poetry—beyond Surrealism and Letterism. We will take Breton’s ethical freedom further, and I go beyond Isou in recommending SILENCE, direct action etc.”

⁴⁷ Transl.: “Letterism [and] the arbitrary arrangement of letters is the formal culmination of poetry.”

⁴⁸ Transl.: “Scandal, provocation, graffiti are the cortege of the *neo-poem*, free from all aesthetic justification that might reduce it to a title.”

⁴⁹ Transl.: “It is, of course, necessary to go beyond any idea of mere scandal” (Situationist International, *Anthology* 15).

⁵⁰ Transl.: “We have to multiply poetic subjects and objects—which are now unfortunately so rare that the slightest ones take on an exaggerated emotional importance—and we have to organise games for these poetic subjects to play with these poetic objects. This is our entire programme, which is essentially transitory” (Situationist International, *Anthology* 41).

“directives” that Debord painted in 1963, if he had not preferred the more general idea of the “dépassement” [“overcoming”] of art.⁵¹

We can finally understand this expanded notion of poetry as literature crossing its borders. Poetry is literature that touches—or could touch—life. It’s not therefore necessarily a question of poetry in the formal sense, nor of literature properly speaking. We could ask ourselves, what are some readings used in the making of *La Société du spectacle*, such as Lewis Mumford’s *The City in History* (1961), doing in this dossier?⁵² Their presence is justified perhaps by the fact that Debord’s interest in the city and urban space was always tied to psychogeography and the *dérive*. The *dérive*, moreover, was a poetic practice, at least if we are to judge by this *détournement* Debord undertakes of René Char: “La psychogéographie est le voyage réalisé du désir demeuré désir.”⁵³

Poetry is ultimately understood as an impulse, a projection beyond the text, of the affective values of literature. This could explain the direction of a life, even of a whole generation. As Debord writes of the residents of Saint-Germain-des-Près, the “quartier de perdition” [“neighbourhood of perdition”] where he spent his youth, “Après tout, c’était la poésie moderne, depuis cent ans, qui nous avait menés là. Nous étions quelques-uns à penser qu’il fallait exécuter son programme dans la réalité ; et en tout cas ne rien faire d’autre.”⁵⁴ This generation has passed, and the poetical aspirations that animated their revolt can seem distant to us, after a century of spectacular counterrevolution. Is this a reason to despair? Perhaps not. As Homer tells us, “Men come and go as leaves year by year upon the trees. Those of autumn the wind sheds upon the ground, but when spring returns the forest buds forth with fresh ones. Even so is it with the generations of mankind, the new spring up as the old are passing away” (bk. 6, lines 144–49). Debord’s reading notes can serve then as road maps through the budding forest of poetry—at least until the next spring.

⁵¹ In 1963, Guy Debord prepared five paintings for a Situationist exhibition in Denmark, which consisted of five “directives”, or guidelines, for the situationist revolutionary project. They read as follows: “Dépassement de l’art” [“Overcome art”]; “réalisation de la philosophie” [“Realize Philosophy”]; “Tous contre le spectacle” [“Everyone against the Spectacle”]; “Abolition du travail aliéné” [“Abolish alienated labour”]; “Non à tous les spécialistes du pouvoir, les conseils ouvriers partout” [“No to all specialized power, workers councils everywhere”] (see *Œuvres* 654).

⁵² Such cards are identified with the inscription “Pour SduS”, meaning they were used in the making of the Society of the Spectacle. Let us recall that Mumford is quoted in theses 172 and 174 of that book.

⁵³ Transl: “Psychogeography is the finished journey of the desire that remained a desire” (passage from a letter to Ivan Chitchevlov, reproduced in Debord, *Marquis* 154–55). The original sentence is from René Char’s *Fureur et Mystère*, reading as follows: “Le poème est l’amour réalisé du désir demeuré désir.” We find the sentence equally in Debord’s notes on Breton’s *Manifestes*, which shows that it was one of Debord’s favourite quotations.

⁵⁴ Transl.: “After all, it was modern poetry, for the last hundred years, that had led us there. We were a handful who thought it necessary to carry out its programme in reality, and certainly to do nothing else” (Debord, *Panegyric* 22).

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