

# **Confessions of a Mild-Mannered Enemy of the State**

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## Part 1 (1945–1969)

*“If the world reproaches me for talking too much about myself, I reproach the world for not even thinking about itself.”*

— Montaigne

### Childhood

I was born in 1945 in Louisiana, where my mother had gone to be with my father at an army camp. While he was overseas we lived on her parents’ farm in Minnesota. When he returned a couple years later, we moved to his home town in the Missouri Ozarks.

Moving at a somewhat slower pace than most of the country, Plainstown still maintained much of that small-town, early-twentieth-century, pre-television American life idealized by Norman Rockwell — the world of porch swings and lazy afternoons, Boy Scouts and vacant-lot baseball, square dances and church picnics, county fairs, summer camps, autumn leaves, white Christmases. That way of life has often been disparaged, but it did have some advantages over the plastic suburban lifestyle that was already beginning to replace it. Despite their naïveté in many regards, the inhabitants of the Show-Me State retained some vestiges of Mark Twainian skepticism and common sense. Even the poorest people often owned their own home or farm. Extended families provided a social cushion if anyone fell on hard times. Things were quiet and safe. A kid could grow up without much awareness of the problems in the outside world.

Yearly visits to the Minnesota farm maintained another link with earlier traditions. I still remember burrowing in the huge hayloft in the old barn; exploring the Victorian house, with its old-fashioned furniture and intriguing things like a clothes chute that ran from the second floor all the way down to the musty basement full of strange curios and contraptions left over from the previous century; or traipsing after my grandfather, a spry old guy still working vigorously in the fields in his late eighties.

My father was one of the last of the old-fashioned family doctors — the kind who used to deliver successive generations of babies and who charged \$5 for a house call, even if it was in the middle of the night — or sometimes nothing at all if the family was in difficult circumstances. Like his father before him, he combined full-time doctoring with part-time farming; he still does a little of the latter, though he retired from medical practice a couple years ago. My mother was trained as a physical therapist, but spent most of her time as a homemaker taking care of me and my two sisters.

My earliest and best friend, Sam Thomas, was two years older and lived just around the corner. We played all the typical games — baseball, basketball, football, badminton, ping pong, kick the can, marbles, cards, Monopoly, Scrabble; but what I remember enjoying most of all were the activities that we created for ourselves — elaborate constructions with Lincoln Logs or erector sets, deployment of little metal cowboys and Indians among forts and tunnels in a sandbox, building

our own club house and tree house, putting on shows and carnivals for the other kids in the neighborhood.

I also have fond memories of grade school. Although the educational system was not particularly “progressive,” it was very flexible and encouraging for me. Once I had demonstrated that the usual lessons were a breeze, the teachers allowed me, and to a lesser extent a few of my more intelligent classmates, to skip some of the routine tasks and pursue independently chosen projects — researching geography, history, astronomy or atomic physics in the encyclopedias, compiling lists and charts, conducting experiments, constructing science exhibits.

Outside class I read voraciously — science, history and *Pogo* comics being my main favorites — and learned some new games: tennis, pool, chess, and above all, bridge (a fascinating game — I still enjoy reading books on bridge strategy, though I’ve rarely played it since I left home). But here again, I remember with particular fondness the activities my friends and I devised for ourselves. Three of us created a little imaginary island world with extended families of characters cut out of foam, about whom we composed elaborate genealogies and stories. Another friend and I invented a game inspired by our fascination with the history of exploration. (Politically correct types will have a field day with this one.) He was England and I was France, each out to explore and colonize the rest of the world during the sixteenth century. We would close our eyes and point to a spot on a spinning globe, then throw three coins: the combination of heads and tails would determine how far we could travel from that spot (the distance depending on whether we traveled by sea, river or land) and how much territory we could claim. I think there were additional rules governing fortifications and battles in disputed territory. Everything was marked in different colors on a blank world map. On weekends we would often spend the night together and play all evening (until our parents made us go to bed) and much of the next day until the game came to an end through exhaustion or because the whole map was finally divided up between us.

I also had a lot of fun in Boy Scouts, as well as picking up some useful skills — lifesaving, first aid, crafts, nature lore, camping, canoeing (sublime combination of quietude and graceful motion, silently gliding along a winding stream past ancient weathered bluffs, looking down through the crystal clear water at the fish swimming and the crawdads and other critters scrambling on the gravel bottom). Despite its objectionable patriotic and semi-militaristic aspects, scouting put an exemplary stress on ecological principles and fostered what was for the time an unusual respect for the American Indian. My initiation into the “Order of the Arrow” included an entire day of total silence in the woods, modeled loosely on Indian initiatory practices and not all that different from some Zen practices I later went through.

Looking back, I realize how fortunate I was to have all these experiences. Thanks to caring parents and encouraging teachers, I was able to explore things for myself and learn the delights of independent, self-organized activity. I feel sorry for kids nowadays who get so hooked on television and video games that they never realize how much more fun it is to read or to create your own projects. I enjoyed some of the early TV programs, but we got our first set late enough that I had already had a chance to discover that books were a gateway to far richer and more interesting worlds.

## How I became an atheist

The only sore point in my early memories is religion. Like most people in Plainstown, I had a fairly conservative (though not fundamentalist) Protestant upbringing. As a young child I painlessly absorbed the Sunday school version of Christianity; but as I became older and began to understand what the Bible actually said, I became haunted by the possibility of going to hell. Even if I managed to escape this doom, I was horrified at the idea that anyone, no matter how sinful, might be consigned to torture for all eternity. It was hard to understand how a supposedly loving God could be infinitely more cruel than the most sadistic dictator; but it was difficult to question the Biblical dogma when everyone I knew, including presumably intelligent adults, seemed to accept it. Except for vague mentions of “atheistic Communists” on the other side of the world, I had never heard of anyone seriously professing any other perspective.

One day when I was thirteen, I was browsing through James Newman’s anthology *The World of Mathematics* and started reading an autobiographical piece by Bertrand Russell. A little ways into it, I came upon a passage where he mentioned how as a teenager he had become an agnostic upon realizing the fallaciousness of one of the classic arguments for the existence of God. I was stunned. Russell only mentioned this in passing, but the mere discovery that an intelligent person could disbelieve in religion was enough to set me thinking. A couple days later I was on the point of saying my usual bedtime prayers when I thought to myself, “What am I doing? I don’t believe this stuff anymore!”

Surrounded by virtually unanimous religious belief (at least as far as I could tell), I didn’t dare breathe a word about this for over a year. To all appearances I remained a polite, conventional, churchgoing boy, completing my Eagle Scout requirements and going through all the expected social motions. But all the while, I was quietly observing and reconsidering everything I had formerly taken for granted.

When I went to high school a year later, I met some older students who openly questioned religion. That was all it took to bring me out of the closet. The result was a mild scandal. That the boy whom fond teachers had for years praised as the smartest kid in town had suddenly come forth as an outspoken atheist was a shock to everyone. Students would point at me and whisper that I was doomed to hell; teachers hardly knew how to deal with my wise-ass comments; and my poor parents, at an utter loss to understand how such a thing could have happened, sent me to a psychoanalyst.

Once I had seen the absurdity of Christianity, I began to question other commonly accepted beliefs. It was obvious, for example, that “capitalistic Americanism” was also riddled with absurdities. But I had no interest in politics because the amoral, hedonistic philosophy I had adopted made me dismiss any concern with the general welfare unless it happened to bear on my own interests. I was on principle against any morality, although in practice I did scarcely anything more immoral than being obnoxiously sarcastic. I no longer hesitated to express my contempt for every aspect of conventional life, whether popular culture, social mores, or the content of my high school classes.

My real education was already coming from all the outside reading I was doing, and from discussions with a few friends who were reading some of the same books. Though I still enjoyed science and history, I had since junior high become increasingly interested in literature. Over the next two or three years I went through quite a few classic works — Homer, Greek mythology, *The Golden Ass*, *Arabian Nights*, Omar Khayyam, *The Decameron*, Chaucer, Rabelais, *Don Quixote*,

*Tom Jones*, *Tristram Shandy*, Poe, Melville, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Bernard Shaw, Aldous Huxley, Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet*, to mention some of my favorites. Given my limited experience of life, I missed many of the nuances of these works, but they at least gave me some idea of the variety of ways people had lived and thought out in the great world. I was of course particularly drawn to those writers who were most radically unconventional. Nietzsche was a special favorite – I delighted in scandalizing teachers and classmates with quotes from his scathing critiques of Christianity. But my supreme idol was James Joyce. I haven't been especially interested in Joyce in a long time, but when I first discovered him I was awed by all his stylistic innovations and multicultural references, and devoured all his works, even *Finnegans Wake*, as well as numerous books about him. I was also already becoming a bit of a francophile: I found Stendhal and Flaubert more interesting than the Victorian novelists, and was fascinated with Baudelaire and Rimbaud before I ever read much British or American poetry.

I learned about more recent literary rebels from J.R. Wunderle, an older student who had grown up in St. Louis and thus had a little more cosmopolitan savvy than my other friends. I had heard vague rumors about the Beats, but J.R. turned me on to the actual writings of Ginsberg and Kerouac, and even affected a certain bohemianism himself, to the very limited degree that this was possible for a high school student in a very square Midwestern town. A year later he and another guy went out to Venice West (near Los Angeles) and actually lived in the thick of the Beat scene for a while.

I doubt if I would have been ready to handle something like that myself. Except for a few family vacations, I had never been out of the Ozarks, nor held any job apart from a little neighborhood lawn mowing. But I sure did want to get out of Plainstown. The prospect of enduring it for two more years until I finished high school was extremely depressing, especially when I saw several of my older friends already going off to college.

A lucky solution turned up. A high school counselor, to whom I will be forever grateful, came across a catalog for Shimer College, a small experimental liberal arts college that accepted exceptional students before they had graduated from high school, and immediately thought of me. It seemed ideal. I would be able to get out of Plainstown and into an intellectually interesting scene without being abruptly thrown on my own; my teachers were no doubt relieved to get me out of their hair; and my parents rightly saw this as the best chance to resolve a situation they had no idea of how to deal with.

## **Shimer College and first independent adventures**

I entered Shimer in fall 1961, and I loved it. Located in a small town in northwestern Illinois, Shimer carried on the great books discussion program developed at the University of Chicago in the thirties by Robert Hutchins and Mortimer Adler. The total student body was around three hundred. Average class size was ten. There were no textbooks and virtually no lectures. Factual knowledge was not neglected, but the emphasis was on learning how to think, to question, to test and articulate ideas by participating in round-table discussions of seminal classic texts. The teacher's role was simply to facilitate the discussion with pertinent questions. Unorthodox viewpoints were welcome – but you had to defend them competently; unfounded opinion was not enough.

Shimer was not socially radical, nor was it particularly freeform in ways that some other experimental schools have been before and since. The administration was fairly conventional and the regulations were fairly conservative. The curriculum was Eurocentric and tended perhaps to overemphasize works of systematic philosophical discourse such as those Adler-Hutchins favorites, Aristotle and Aquinas. (Someone quipped that Hutchins's University of Chicago was "a Baptist university where Jewish professors teach Catholic philosophy to atheist students.")

But whatever the flaws of the Shimer system, it was a pretty coherent one. Three out of the four years were taken up with an intricately interrelated course sequence that everyone was required to take, covering humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, history and philosophy, leaving room for only a few electives. (With this basic grounding, most students had little trouble catching up on their eventual subject of specialization in grad school.) Moreover, in contrast to conservative advocates of classical curricula, Adler and Hutchins did not envision their program as destined only for an elite minority: they insisted that the basic issues dealt with in the great books could and should be grappled with by everyone as the foundation of a lifelong education. If they were rather naïve in accepting Western "democratic society" on its own terms, they at least challenged that society to live up to its own pretensions, pointing out that if it was to work it required a citizenry capable of participating in it knowledgeably and critically, and that what presently passes for education does not begin to accomplish this.

While these courses were pretty interesting, I actually learned a lot more from some of my fellow students. My roommate, Michael Beardsley, had a somewhat similar background — he came from a small town in Texas and like me had skipped the last two years of high school. But most of my new friends were Chicago Jews, with a radical, skeptical, humanistic, cosmopolitan culture that was refreshingly new to me. There were also some more apolitical characters, one of the most memorable being a plump, goateed chess prodigy and classical music connoisseur with the manner of an Oriental potentate, who successfully ran for student government with the single campaign promise that if he was elected, it would be gratifying for his ego! There were a few ordinary fraternity/sorority types, but they were definitely in the minority, and even they, like all the rest of us, took a perverse pride in the fact that in its one intercollegiate sport, basketball, Shimer held the national record for number of consecutive losses.

At Shimer, and during breaks in Chicago, my new friends introduced me to booze, jazz, folk and classical music, foreign films, ethnic cuisines, leftist politics, and a lively interracial scene. Although Plainstown was not flagrantly racist like the deep South, it was de facto segregated by neighborhoods, so I had scarcely so much as met a black person there. Shimer itself had only a few blacks, but at my friends' parties in Chicago I met lots of them. It was the heyday of the early civil rights movement and there was a warm, genuine, enthusiastic camaraderie, unlike the uneasy interracial suspicion that was to develop in radical circles a few years later. Though I was still apolitical on principle, I was beginning to discard my stilted amoralism; my new friends and surroundings were helping me to loosen up, to become more human and more humanistic.

Another big influence in this direction was the folk music revival, which was just getting under way. The simplicity and directness of folk music was a refreshing contrast to the inane pop music of the time. Joan Baez's first album was the most popular one on campus; but some of my friends had grown up on Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger and had already developed more puristic tastes, and they turned me on to earlier, earthier and even more exciting artists — above all the great Leadbelly. I was also inspired by the first folksinger I ever saw in person, Ramblin' Jack Elliott, a performer in the Guthrie tradition who traveled around the country in an old

pickup. I wanted nothing better than to play guitar like that. Moreover, such an aspiration was not totally unrealistic. Folk music lent itself to participation — you could easily sing along with it and almost as easily learn to play it, at least at a simple level. Many of my friends were already doing so. I started to learn guitar, and also eventually learned to fiddle some simple tunes.

That winter, after a few amorous relations that had never got beyond the heavy petting stage, I finally found a young woman who said yes. The blessed event took place in the Folklore Society office, which happened to have a convenient couch. (Finding a place for lovemaking was a perennial problem at Shimer until dorm regulations were liberalized several years later. In spring and fall we resorted to the campus golf course, which was never used for anything else, or to the nearby town cemetery; but during winter it was too cold, and all sorts of precarious alternatives were attempted.)

A few weeks later I also lost what you might call my spiritual virginity. This was just 1962 and, outside of a few marginal urban scenes, drugs were still practically unknown. Very few college students had even tried marijuana. As for psychedelics, scarcely anyone had so much as heard of them. They weren't even illegal yet. Mike Beardsley and I ordered a large box of peyote buttons from the Smith Cactus Ranch in Texas, which were duly delivered without the postal service or the school authorities taking the slightest notice. A few days later, without much idea of what we were in for, we ingested some of them.

For an hour or so we endured the peyote nausea, then, as that faded, we began feeling something strange and extremely unsettling happening. At first I thought I was going insane. Finally I managed to relax and settle into it. We spent most of the day in our room, lying down with our eyes closed, watching the shifting patterns evoked by different kinds of music — most unforgettably Prokofiev's first three piano concertos, which we savored for their unique combination of classical lucidity, romantic extravagance and zany trippiness. Everything was fresh, like returning to early childhood or waking up in the Garden of Eden; as if things were suddenly in 3-D color that we had previously seen only in flat black and white. But what really made the experience so overwhelming was not the sensory effects, but the way the whole sense of "self" was shaken. We were not just looking on from outside; we ourselves were part of this vibrant, pulsating world.

With visions of Rimbaud and Kerouac dancing in our heads, we neglected our classes and began dreaming of quitting school and heading out on our own to explore the great world. That spring we both did so. Mike and his girlfriend Nancy went to Berkeley, where she had some friends. I decided to check out Venice West since J.R.'s friend was still out there.

Venice was full of Beat poets, abstract expressionist painters, jazz musicians, sexual nonconformists, junkies, bums, hustlers, petty crooks — and lots of undercover cops. Very exciting, but also very paranoid; far from the relaxed openness and joyousness of the later hippie scene. Without the hippies' economic cushion of easy panhandling, it was also much more down and out. Never knowing where my next meal was coming from or where I might end up spending the night, I scraped by one way and another...

Eventually I was busted for petty theft. Since I was a minor and it was my first offense, I was only in for three days before being shipped back to the custody of my parents in Plainstown.

That, fortunately, has been my only experience of prison. Being confined is bad enough, but what makes it really nauseating is the mean, sick, inhuman ambience. As a white middle-class kid, I was of course just screwing around and was always free to return to more comfortable



circumstances; but I never forget those who haven't been so lucky. Thinking of people being locked in there for years makes me angrier than just about anything.

For the next few months I lived with my parents, working at a local bookstore and doing a lot of reading — Blake, Thoreau, Lautréamont, Breton, Céline, Hesse, D.T. Suzuki, Alan Watts, and above all Henry Miller, by then my favorite author. After decades of censorship his two *Tropic* books had just become available in America, and they hit me like a bombshell. Here, I thought, is a real person, talking about real life, beyond all the artifices of literature. I no longer take Miller seriously as a thinker, but I still love the humor and gusto of his autobiographical novels.

Another healthy and even more enduring influence was Gary Snyder. I already knew about him as “Japhy Ryder,” the hero of Kerouac’s *The Dharma Bums*. It’s a wonderful book, but certain aspects of Snyder were utterly beyond Kerouac’s comprehension. Snyder’s own writings were more lucid and his life was more inspiring. I had been intrigued by what I had read about Zen Buddhism, but here was someone who had actually studied Oriental languages and gone to Japan for years of rigorous Zen training. I couldn’t have been farther from that sort of self-discipline, but I started reading more books on Zen, with the idea that I’d like to explore it in practice if I got a chance.

In addition to Snyder’s poetry, I was also struck by his essay *Buddhist Anarchism* (later reprinted in *Earth House Hold* under the title “Buddhism and the Coming Revolution”). Despite my sympathy for civil rights and other dissident causes espoused by some of my Shimer friends, I had until then remained apolitical on principle, feeling (like Henry Miller) that all politics was superficial bullshit and that if any fundamental change was to come about it would have to be through some sort of “revolution of the heart.” Instinctively detesting what Rexroth calls the Social Lie, I could never get very excited about the goal of enabling people to have a “normal life” when present-day normal life was precisely what I had despised since I was 13. Snyder’s essay did not alter this view, but it showed me how a radical social perspective could be related to spiritual insight. I still didn’t pay much attention to political matters, but the way was opened for eventual social engagement when I later confronted issues that seemed meaningful to me.

By January 1963 I had accumulated enough bookstore earnings (supplemented by some winnings from a local poker game) to quit my job and begin venturing out of town again. To begin with, I hitched up to see J.R., now back in St. Louis, hanging out in a biker scene and working, of all things, as an attendant in a state mental hospital. J.R. himself, if not exactly insane, was always a pretty eccentric character. In later years he successively adopted so many intentionally outrageous personas, from W.C. Fieldsian con man to old-time frontiersman to cantankerous reactionary, that I’m not sure even he himself always distinguished the irony from the reality. He died a few years ago of cirrhosis of the liver at the age of 46.

Then I made a second California trip, this time with Sam. I hadn’t seen him much since childhood days — we had gone to different schools, and he had remained a rather conventional, popular, outgoing guy while I was already in fervent intellectual revolt. But he got hip once he went to college; by the time I saw him again he had discovered jazz, grown a beard and started writing freeform poetry. During his semester break we picked up a driveaway car from a Missouri dealer, drove to Berkeley, then down to Los Angeles, where we looked up my Venice West buddies and delivered the car, and bussed back to Missouri, all in the space of ten days.

Next, I went down to Texas, where Mike and Nancy Beardsley had moved while she had their baby. This whole period still remains magical for me, though I can dimly recall only a few of our ventures — hopping on a moving freight train just to see what it felt like; trying the poisonous

witch drug, belladonna, and finding ourselves in a psychotic nightmare world... Even if some of our escapades were pretty foolish, we were exploring things for ourselves; there were as yet no media-propagated models to imitate. Isolated in Mid-America, occasionally encountering some kindred spirit with whom we would passionately share this or that discovery or aspiration or premonition, groping for the sort of perspective that took shape a few years later in the hip counterculture, we sensed that something new was in the air, but the only thing we knew for certain was that the world in which we found ourselves was fundamentally absurd. That world itself was still utterly oblivious to what was brewing. (Bear in mind that most of the things “the sixties” are known for didn’t really get under way, or at least come to public notice, until around 1965–66.)

That spring we all moved to Chicago and got an apartment together in Hyde Park. When I wasn’t working at odd jobs (first in a warehouse, then, rather more congenially, in a folk music store) I babysat their baby while they worked, and hung out with a few other old Shimer friends. I also discovered a small Zen center and got my first taste of formal meditation.

This experience, plus the fact that I was getting tired of the hassles of poverty, got me in the mood to get my life organized and move on to other things. As a first step, I decided to go back and finish up my Shimer degree, with the tentative idea (Snyder’s example in mind) of going on to Oriental studies in grad school, and then conceivably even going to Japan for Zen monastic training.

Back at Shimer I had two main extracurricular activities. One was making love with my beautiful girlfriend Aili. The other was folk music. Several friends and I played every chance we got, modeling our styles on the oldest and most “authentic” recordings — Appalachian ballads and fiddle tunes, old-timey string bands (Charlie Poole, Gid Tanner, Clarence Ashley, the Carolina Tar Heels), field hollers, jug bands, country blues (Blind Lemon Jefferson, Sleepy John Estes, Charley Patton, Son House, Robert Johnson).

The golden age was the 1920s, when locally popular musicians all over the country were more or less indiscriminately recorded by small commercial companies searching for potential hit material. There was an immense variety of styles — those in one region were often quite different from those in the neighboring state or even county. In the 1930s the Depression wiped out the regional rural markets just as recordings and radio were leading to increasing homogenization, with local performers being influenced by new nationwide stars like Jimmie Rodgers, the Carter Family and the first bluegrass and country-western groups (or analogously in black music, by more citified blues and jazz).

I enjoyed some of the Rodgers and Carter Family songs, but that’s about as modern as my tastes ever got. The slickness of bluegrass (to say nothing of the sappiness of country-western) left me cold; it had lost the haunting quality I loved in the old mountain ballads and tunes. For really vintage music, my friends and I turned to reissues of the 1920s recordings, to the field recordings made for the Library of Congress in the 1930s, and to live performances by the few surviving old-time greats who had been rediscovered and brought to play before entranced urban audiences. For purists like ourselves, the annual University of Chicago Folk Festival was the best in the country. I still remember the after-concert parties at my friends’ apartments — hundreds of people playing in every room and overflowing into the stairwells from midnight till dawn, then, after a few hours of sleep, excitedly returning to the campus for the next day’s concerts and workshops. Considering its far smaller size, Shimer didn’t do so badly either: during my two years as president of the Folklore Society, I managed to arrange concerts by Dock Boggs, Son

House, Sleepy John Estes and Big Joe Williams, as well as the granddaddy of modern old-timey groups, the New Lost City Ramblers, whose yearly appearances had become a Shimer tradition. J.R. and I also made a sort of field trip of our own, hitching from St. Louis to Memphis to record Gus Cannon and Will Shade, the last surviving members of the great jug bands of the twenties.

I think most real education is self-education, and I have a very low opinion of most educational institutions. But I do want to say that, far from interfering with my education as most schools would have, Shimer actually fostered it in many ways. One of my senior-year courses introduced me to two of my biggest influences. We were examining a number of different philosophies of life (Kierkegaard, Buber, Camus, etc.). For me, Buber's *I and Thou* stood out from all the other readings. Martin Buber was a real man of wisdom, one of the few Western religious thinkers I can stomach. During one of our discussions a classmate pulled out a copy of Kenneth Rexroth's *Bird in the Bush* and read some passages from his essay on Buber. I immediately borrowed it, devoured it, and was never quite the same again.

When I graduated from Shimer (1965) there was no question about where I would go next. Everything I had heard about the Bay Area sounded great, from the San Francisco poetry renaissance of the fifties to the recent Free Speech Movement at the University of California in Berkeley. Adding to the appeal, Sam (now with a wife and baby) had already moved there to do graduate study in poetry. One of his teachers had been none other than Gary Snyder, just back from several years of Zen study in Japan; and that fall he would be taking a class from — Kenneth Rexroth! After working that summer at a steel mill in East Chicago, I moved to Berkeley. I've lived here ever since.

## **Berkeley in the sixties**

It was a wonderful time to arrive. You could still feel the invigorating reverberations from the FSM; there were lively, ongoing conversations on campus, on street corners, in cafés, everywhere you went — and not just among hippies and radicals; ordinary liberals and even young conservatives were vividly aware that everything was being called into question and were drawn into debates about every aspect of life.

Over the next year, I took graduate classes at the small and now defunct American Academy of Asian Studies in San Francisco. Apart from that, I spent most of the time tripping around with Sam. Through him, I got in on the lively Bay Area poetry scene, meeting lots of other young poets and going to scads of readings by some of the most vital figures of the previous generation — Rexroth, Snyder, William Everson, Robert Duncan, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Allen Ginsberg, Philip Whalen, Lew Welch. Though I never wrote much poetry myself, I was immersed in it. Sam and I would read Whitman or Patchen or William Carlos Williams aloud, sometimes with jazz background, or improvise chain poems with each other while driving over the Bay Bridge to San Francisco, where I tagged along with him to Lew Welch's night-school poetry class and to the open-ended discussion "class" given by Rexroth at SF State.

Much as I liked Rexroth, I was at first more excited by Welch. He was a lot younger, more like a peer, sharing our zany sense of humor and youthful enthusiasms for psychedelics and the new rock music. What I remember most was his stress on finding the right word. Feeling that poets had a shamanic vocation to express the crucial realities in the most incisive way, he always denounced any "cheating" in a poem, any sloppy, sentimental, "inaccurate" phrasing.

Rexroth, though also sympathetic to our enthusiasms, was more detached and ironic about them. He pooh-poohed psychedelics, for example. At first I thought this was because he didn't know what he was talking about; but after reading some of his mystical poems I realized that he knew these experiences deeply, whether or not he had used any chemical means to arrive at them. Little by little I came to appreciate his subtle, low-key wisdom and magnanimity.

During my first couple years in Berkeley I took around a dozen psychedelic trips with Sam and other friends. Usually three or four of us would get together in some quiet place where we would not be disturbed, preferably with an experienced nonparticipant on hand who could take care of any necessary errands. Most often we simply listened to music, letting the opening of an Indian raga take us back to the timeless beginning of the universe, or feeling the notes of a Bach harpsichord partita pour through us like a shower of jewels. Sometimes we got into a humor zone in which a sense of universal sacredness was inseparable from a sense of the fundamental zaniness of everything — our cheeks would still be sore the next day from the multiple orgasms of laughter. Sometimes we went out into the woods: I remember two especially lovely psilocybin trips in a tiny cabin in a nearby canyon — in the afterglow I almost felt like founding a nature religion. I found psychedelics overwhelming enough without adding the noise and confusion of large crowds, but I made an exception for a rare Berkeley appearance of Bob Dylan. On another occasion, Sam and I took some acid and went to one of the first major marches against the Vietnam war (October 1965). We knew, of course, that this would hardly be an ideal environment for a calm trip, but we thought that it might be interesting to see how the two realms would go together. (Not that badly. Some of the straight politicians' speechmaking seemed rather jarring, but I enjoyed the general sense of engaged community.)

In fall of 1966 I quit school. There were too many more exciting things going on. The underground hip counterculture, which had just begun to surface a year or so before, was now spreading like wildfire. Haight-Ashbury was overflowing into the streets in virtually a nonstop party. Tens of thousands of young people were coming out to see what was happening, including dozens of my friends from Shimer, Chicago and Missouri.

My little cottage (two 10' × 10' rooms plus kitchen and bath for \$35 a month) served as a halfway house, sometimes accommodating as many as seven or eight people at once. Now that I'm so used to quietly living alone, it's hard to imagine how I put up with it. But we were all young, sharing many of the same enthusiasms, and when we weren't out at concerts, or cavorting around Telegraph Avenue or Haight-Ashbury or Chinatown or Golden Gate Park, or off camping somewhere, we happily hung around the house reading, rapping, jamming, listening to records and scarfing the delicious homemade bread we baked fresh every day, without minding too much that we hardly had room enough to put down our sleeping bags. And of course being turned on most of the time helped keep everything mellow.

My parents had supported me while I was in school, but after I dropped out I was back on my own. Like so many others during the sixties, I got by quite well on practically nothing, getting food stamps, sharing cheap rent among several people, selling underground papers, picking up very occasional odd jobs. Within a few minutes I could hitch a ride anywhere in Berkeley or across the bay to San Francisco, and often get turned on to boot. If necessary, I could easily panhandle the price of a meal or a concert ticket.

After half a year of this pleasant but somewhat precarious lifestyle, I got a job as a mail carrier, worked six months, then quit and lived on my savings for the next couple years. Just as that was about to run out, I discovered a weekly poker game, and the \$100 or so per month which this

netted me, supplemented by driving one day a week for a hippie taxi co-op, enabled me to get by for the next few years.

If the heart of the counterculture was psychedelics, its most visible, or rather audible, manifestation was of course the new rock music. When the increasingly sophisticated music of the Beatles and other groups converged with the increasingly sophisticated lyrics of Bob Dylan, who was bringing folk music beyond corny protest songs and rigid attachment to traditional forms, we finally had a popular music that we could relate to, which served as our own folk music. As Dylan, the Beatles and the Rolling Stones were becoming more openly psychedelic, the first *totally* psychedelic bands were taking shape in the Bay Area. Long before they made any records, we could see the Grateful Dead, Country Joe and the Fish, Big Brother and the Holding Company and dozens of other exciting groups almost any day we wanted at the Fillmore or the Avalon or free in the parks.

When they did get around to recording, none of their records came close to conveying what they were like live, as an integral part of a flourishing counterculture. Those early concerts, Trips Festivals, Acid Tests and Be-Ins, corny as such terms may now sound, included lots of improvisation and interaction, off stage as well as on. The music and light shows were clearly subordinate to the tripping within the “audience,” less a spectacle than an accompaniment to ecstatic celebration. If there were a few famous people on stage — Leary, Ginsberg, Kesey — they were not inaccessible stars; we knew they were as tripped out as the rest of us, fellow travelers on a journey whose destination none of us could predict, but which was *already* fantastic.

And those large public gatherings were only the tip of the iceberg. The most significant experiences were personal and interpersonal. There was considerably more intellectual substance to the counterculture than appeared to superficial observers. While there were indeed lots of stereotypically naïve and passive flower children (particularly among the second wave of teenagers, who adopted the trappings of an already existing hip lifestyle without ever having to have gone through any independent ventures), many hip people had broader experiences and more critical sense, and were engaged in a variety of creative and radical pursuits.

Some people may be surprised at the contrast between the scathing critiques I made of the counterculture in some of my previous writings and the more favorable picture presented here. It’s the context that has changed, not my views. In the early seventies, when everyone was still quite aware of the counterculture’s radical aspects, I felt it was necessary to challenge its complacency, to point out its limits and illusions. Now that the radical aspects have been practically forgotten, it seems equally important to recall just how wild and liberating it was. Alongside all the spectacular hype, millions of people were making drastic changes in their own lives, carrying out daring and outrageous experiments they could hardly have dreamed of a few years before.

I don’t deny that the counterculture contained a lot of passivity and foolishness. I only want to stress that we were aiming at — and to some extent already experiencing — a fundamental transformation of all aspects of life. We knew how profoundly psychedelics had altered our own outlook. In the early sixties, only a few thousand people had had the experience; five years later the number was over a million. Who was to say that this trend would not continue and finally undermine the whole system?

While it lasted it was remarkably trusting and good-natured. I’d think nothing of hitching with anyone, offering total strangers a joint, or inviting them over to crash at my place if they were new in town. This trust was almost never abused. True, Haight-Ashbury itself didn’t last very long. (The turning point was around 1967, when the “Summer of Love” publicity brought a huge

influx of less experienced teenagers who were more susceptible to exploitation by the parallel influx of ripoff artists and hard-drug dealers.) But elsewhere the counterculture continued to flourish and spread for several more years.

Personally, I was interested in “mind-expanding” experiences; mere mind-numbing escapist kicks had little appeal for me, and most of the people I hung out with felt the same way. Apart from an occasional beer, we scarcely even drank alcohol — we had a hard time imagining how anyone, unless extremely repressed, could prefer the crude and often obnoxious effects of booze to the benign aesthetic effects of grass. As for hard drugs, we scarcely ever heard of them — with the one notable exception of speed (amphetamine). In moderate doses, speed isn’t much different than drinking a lot of coffee, and most of us had occasionally used it to stay up all night to write a school paper or to drive across the country. But it doesn’t take much to become dangerous. It ended up killing Sam.

In 1966 he had begun taking a lot of speed, and by 1967 he was becoming increasingly manic and paranoid. This paranoia found expression in his discovery of the Hollow Earth cult, which holds that the inside of the earth is inhabited by some sort of mysterious beings and that (as in the rather similar flying saucer cults) the powers that be are keeping this information secret from the general public. At any mention, say, of the word “underground” Sam would give a sly, knowing nod; in fact, just about anything, whether a line in a poem or a phrase in an advertising jingle, could, with appropriate wordplay, be interpreted as a hint that the author was among those in the know about the Hollow Earth.

One of the most painful experiences of my life was seeing my best friend slowly become more and more insane without any of my attempts to reason with him having the slightest effect. One time he slipped out of the house naked in the middle of the night, and his wife and I ran around the neighborhood for hours before we found him. Another time he was found hitching down the highway so out of it that the Highway Patrol took him to the state mental hospital at Napa. Eventually his wife took him back to Missouri.

Over the next couple years his condition varied considerably. Sometimes his general exuberance and good humor made people think that perhaps his verbal ramblings were not really meant seriously, but were just playful poetic improvisations. At other times he slipped into severe depressions and was hospitalized. When I last saw him, he was calm but pretty wasted looking (probably on tranquilizers); he didn’t seem like the Sam I had known since earliest childhood. A couple weeks later I got a call informing me that he had hung himself. He had just turned 27.

Rexroth often remarked that an astonishingly high proportion of twentieth-century American poets have committed suicide. The presumption is that their creative efforts led them to become unbearably sensitive to the ugliness of the society, as well as laying them open to extremes of frustration and disillusionment in their personal life. The fact remains that the Rimbaudian notion of seeking visions through the “systematic derangement of all the senses” has often inspired behavior that is simply foolish and self-destructive. Whatever social or personal factors may have contributed to Sam’s insanity, the immediate cause was certainly all the speed he was taking.

Psychedelics may also have been a factor, but I doubt if they were a significant one. Despite a few widely publicized and usually exaggerated instances of people going insane during trips, millions of people took psychedelics during the sixties without suffering the slightest harm. To put things into perspective, the total number of deaths attributable to psychedelics during the entire *decade* was far smaller than those due to alcohol or tobacco on any single *day*. In some cases psychedelics may have brought latent mental problems into the open, but even this was

probably more often for the better than for the worse. I suspect that far more people were *saved* from going insane by psychedelics, insofar as the experience loosened them up, opened them up to wider perspectives, made them aware of other possibilities besides blind acceptance of the insane values of the conventional world.

I certainly feel that psychedelics were beneficial for me. I had one truly hellish trip (on DMT), but just about all the others were wonderful, among the most cherished experiences of my life. If I stopped taking them in 1967, it was because I came to realize that they are erratic and that the salutary effects don't last. They just give you a glimpse, a hint of what's there. This is why so many of us eventually went on to Oriental meditational practices, in order to explore such experiences more systematically and try to learn how to integrate them more enduringly into our everyday life.

The practice that continued to appeal to me was Zen Buddhism. I had already discovered the San Francisco Zen Center and occasionally went over there to do zazen or listen to talks by the genial little Zen master, Shunryu Suzuki. When a small branch center opened up in Berkeley in 1967, I started going a little more regularly. But I didn't keep it up — partly because I had some reservations about the traditional religious forms, but mostly because it required getting up at four o'clock in the morning, which was hard to fit in with the lifestyle I was leading at the time. I was into so many different, overlapping trips that it's difficult to narrate them chronologically.

One of the most enthusiastic ones was film. At some point in early 1968 the wonder of the whole medium suddenly hit me and I went through a period of total fascination with it. Over the next couple years I saw close to a thousand films — practically every one of any interest that showed in the Bay Area, including eight or ten a week at the Telegraph Repertory Cinema (I convinced them to let me in free in exchange for distributing their calendars, and would often return for second or third viewings of those I especially liked). Stan Brakhage's experimental films inspired me to play around with an 8mm camera; but mostly I was simply an ecstatic spectator. My favorites were the early European classics — Carl Dreyer, the German and Russian silents, the French films of the thirties (Pagnol, Vigo, Renoir, Carné) — along with a few postwar Japanese films. Apart from the early comics (Chaplin, Keaton, Fields, the Marx Brothers, Laurel and Hardy), who more than made up for their corniness with the sublime moments of poetic hilarity they sometimes achieved, I never cared for most American films. Hollywood has always vulgarized everything it touches, regardless of the quality of the actors and directors or the literary works on which its films are supposedly based; but until its influence came to dominate the whole planet, some of the foreign film industries allowed at least a few creative efforts to slip through.

Eventually, after having seen most of the classics, as well as a pretty wide sampling of modern styles, I got burned out. I've seen very few post-1970 films, and I'm almost invariably disappointed when I do. Practically all of them, including reputedly sophisticated masterpieces, are all too obviously designed for audiences of emotionally disturbed illiterates. About the only recent filmmaker I've found of slightly more than routine interest is Alain Tanner. No doubt there are a few other works of some merit out there, but you have to wade through too much garbage to find them. I'd rather read a good book any day.

## Kenneth Rexroth

The most interesting ones I was reading at the time were by Rexroth or by other authors he had turned me on to. I had liked him very much on first reading him and then meeting him; but it was only gradually, as I myself matured (somewhat) over the next few years, that I really came to appreciate him, to the point that he came to be my dominant influence, eclipsing earlier hero-mentors like Miller, Watts, Ginsberg, Welch, and finally even Buber and Snyder.

At once mystical and radical, earthy and urbane, Rexroth had a breadth of vision I've never seen in anyone else before or since. Oriental philosophy, Amerindian songs, Chinese opera, medieval theology, avant-garde art, classical languages, underground slang, tantric yoga, utopian communities, natural history, jazz, science, architecture, mountaineering — he seemed to know lots of interesting things about just about everything and how it all fit together. Following up his hints for further reading (above all in those incredibly pithy little *Classics Revisited* essays) was a liberal education in itself. Besides giving me illuminating new takes on Homer, Lao Tze, Blake, Baudelaire, Lawrence and Miller, he turned me on to a variety of other gems I might otherwise never have discovered — the modest, meditative journal of the antislavery Quaker John Woolman; the immodest but engrossing autobiography of Restif de la Bretonne (a sort of ultra-sentimental eighteenth-century Henry Miller); the subtle magnanimity of Ford Madox Ford's *Parade's End*; the hard-boiled down-and-out narrative of B. Traven's *The Death Ship*; the delightful Finnish folk-epic, *The Kalevala* (get the literal Magoun translation); Finley Peter Dunne's "Mr. Dooley" (a turn-of-the-century Chicago Irish bartender whose monologues are as worldly-wise as Mark Twain, and to my taste even funnier)...

I reread two of his essays so often I practically knew them by heart. "The Hasidism of Martin Buber," by presenting a mysticism whose ultimate expression is in dialogue and communion, challenged those countercultural tendencies that saw mysticism primarily in terms of individual experience while tending to play down the social and ethical aspects of life. "The Chinese Classic Novel" introduced me to Rexroth's notion of magnanimity, which I consider the central theme of his work. The notion goes back to Aristotle's ideal of the "great-souled" man (the literal sense of the term), but Rexroth enriches it by linking it with the traditional Chinese ideal of the "human-hearted" sage. His contrasting of magnanimity with various forms of self-indulgence was a revelation to me. It deflated a whole range of self-consciously "profound," wearing-their-soul-on-their-sleeve writers who were fashionable at the time — Kierkegaard, Dostoyevsky, Nietzsche, Proust, Joyce, Pound, the surrealists, the existentialists, the Beats... The list could go on and on: once you grasp Rexroth's perspective it's hard to find any modern writer whose self-indulgence doesn't stick out like a sore thumb.

As always in Rexroth, what might seem to be a mere aesthetic discussion is actually a way of talking about basic approaches to life. That magnanimity/self-indulgence distinction became one of my main touchstones from then on. An autobiographer can hardly claim not to be self-indulgent; but if you think I'm self-indulgent now, imagine what I would have been without Rexroth's tempering influence!



## **How I evaded the draft**

After dropping out of school and losing my student deferment, I avoided the draft for the next couple years on the basis of a letter from the psychoanalyst my parents had sent me to, which stated that I would not make good army material due to my extreme “resentment of authority.” By the late sixties, however, the army was getting desperate for more bodies to send to Vietnam and that sort of excuse no longer cut it. When I was called in to the Oakland induction center, the examining psychologist scarcely glanced at the letter, then to my horror checked me off as fit for military service.

I had no intention of going into the army, but I didn’t relish the idea of going to jail or going through all the conscientious-objector hassles. Probably I would have gone to Canada if necessary; but I was really annoyed at the idea of having to drop everything and leave the Bay Area. I vowed not to leave the building before I had settled the matter once and for all.

I considered hurling a chair through a window, but concluded that that might be a little too extreme (I didn’t want to end up in a straitjacket). Instead, I decided to concentrate on the psychologist who had passed me. Gearing up for the most crucial acting role of my life, I went back and barged into his office, where he was interviewing another guy, and started screaming at him: “You dumb jerk you think you understand me listen when I get in the army just wait till I get a gun in my hand you think I won’t shoot the first fucking officer who gives me an order ha ha and when I do I’d like to see your face when your bosses ask you why you passed me ha ha ...” (all this was accentuated with infantile grimaces and twitches and shrieks, so I looked and sounded like a kid having a tantrum). Then I slammed the door and sat down outside his office.

When he came out I silently followed him down the hall, determined to stick with him no matter what. He went into another room and soon emerged with an officer, who came over to me and said, “What’s the idea of threatening Dr. So-and-So?” I went off on another tirade. The officer told me to come into his office. After a few more minutes of my ranting, he said that he was rejecting me for the army. But he couldn’t just let it go at that, he had to save face: “Now, that’s probably just what you want to hear. But let me tell you this. I’ve seen a lot of guys in this business. Some of them were conscientious objectors. I didn’t agree with them, but I could respect them. But you! Judging from your disgusting violent behavior we haven’t come very far since the cave men! You’re not good enough for the army!”

Resisting the impulse to grin, I just sat there glowering at him and gripping the edge of the desk as if I might go into a spasm at any moment, while he filled out and signed the form. I took it without a word, stomped out the door, delivered the form to the appropriate desk, walked out of the building, rounded the corner ... and went skipping down the street!

## **How I became an anarchist**

Although I had showed up at a few civil rights and antiwar demonstrations during my first couple years in Berkeley, it wasn’t until late 1967 that the intensification of the Vietnam war led me to become seriously involved in New Left politics. My first step was joining the newly formed Peace and Freedom Party, which tentatively proposed a Martin Luther King-Benjamin Spock presidential ticket for the following year. Most of the PFP’s hundred thousand California members were probably no more politically knowledgeable than I, but had simply registered in

it in order to make sure that some antiwar choice was on the ballot. But though the PFP was primarily an electoral party, it did make some effort to get people to participate beyond merely voting. I went to several neighborhood meetings and attended all three days of its March 1968 convention.

There was a lot of good will and enthusiasm among the delegates, but it was also my first experience of witnessing political maneuvers from close up. Totally open and eclectic, the PFP naturally attracted most of the leftist organizations, each jockeying to promote their own lines and candidates. Some of the politicians seemed rather obnoxious, but in general I admired those who had taken part in civil rights struggles or the FSM, and was quite willing to defer to their more experienced and presumably more knowledgeable views. While I might claim to have been an early and fairly independent participant in the counterculture, in the political movement I was nothing but a belated run-of-the-mill follower.

As I became more “active” in the PFP (though never more than in banal subordinate capacities: attending rallies, stuffing envelopes, handing out leaflets) I was progressively “radicalized” by the more experienced politicians, especially the Black Panthers. Looking back, it’s embarrassing to realize how easily I was duped by such crude manipulation, in which a handful of individuals appointed themselves the sole authentic representatives of “the black community,” then claimed the right to veto power, and in practice to virtual domination, over the PFP and any other groups with which they condescended to form “coalitions.” But they were obviously courageous, and unlike the black separatist tendencies they were at least willing to work with whites; so most of us naïvely swallowed the old con: “They’re black, and are being jailed, beaten and killed; since we are none of the above, we have no right to criticize them.” Practically no one, not even supposedly antiauthoritarian groups like the Diggers, the Motherfuckers and the Yippies, raised any serious objections to this racist double standard, which among other things amounted to relegating all other blacks to the choice of supporting their self-appointed “supreme servants” or being intimidated into silence.

Meanwhile the healthy participatory-democracy tendencies of the early New Left were being smothered by browbeating, spectacularization and ideological delirium. Calls for terrorism and “picking up the gun” were echoed in much of the underground press. Activists who who disdained “theoretical nitpicking” were caught unprepared when SDS was taken over by asinine sects debating which combination of Stalinist regimes to support (China, Cuba, Vietnam, Albania, North Korea). The vast majority of us were certainly not Stalinists (to speak for myself, even as a child, reading about the crushing of the 1956 Hungarian revolution, I had enough sense to know that Stalinism was total bullshit); but in our ignorance of political history it was easy to identify with martyred heroes like Che Guevara or the Vietcong as long as they were exotic enough that we didn’t really know much about them. Fixating on the spectacle of Third World struggles, we had little awareness of the real issues at play in modern society. One of the most militant Berkeley confrontations did indeed begin as a “demonstration of solidarity” with the May 1968 revolt in France, but we had no conception of what the latter was really about — we were under the vague impression that it was some sort of “student protest against de Gaulle” along the narrow lines we were familiar with.

It is common nowadays to blame the collapse of the movement on the FBI’s COINTELPRO operation, which included planting disinformation designed to sow suspicion between various radical groups, use of provocateurs to discredit them, and frameups of certain individuals. The fact remains that the authoritarian structure of the Panthers and other hierarchical groups lent

itself to this sort of operation. For the most part all the provocateurs had to do was encourage already delirious ideological tendencies or inflame already existing power rivalries.

For me the last straw was the Panthers' "United Front Against Fascism" conference (July 1969). I dutifully attended all three days. But the conference's militaristic orchestration; the frenzied adulation of hero-martyrs; the Pavlovian chanting of mean-spirited slogans; the ranting about "correct lines" and "correct leadership"; the cynical lies and maneuvers of temporarily allied bureaucratic groups; the violent threats against rival groups who had not accepted the current Panther line; the "fraternal" telegram from the North Korean Politburo; the framed picture of Stalin on the Panthers' office wall — all this finally made me sick, and led me to look for a perspective that was more in line with my own feelings.

I thought I knew where to look. One of my Shimer friends who had moved out here was an anarchist, and his occasional wry comments on the movement's bureaucratic tendencies had helped save me from getting too carried away. I went over to his place and borrowed a whole sackful of anarchist literature — classic writings by Bakunin, Kropotkin, Malatesta, Emma Goldman, Alexander Berkman, pamphlets on Kronstadt, the Spanish revolution, Hungary 1956, France 1968, current journals such as *Solidarity* (London), *Anarchy* (London), *Anarchos* (New York), *Black and Red* (Michigan).

It was a revelation. I had intuitively sympathized with what little I knew about anarchism, but like most people I had assumed that it was not really practicable, that without some government everything would fall apart into chaos. The anarchist texts demolished this misconception, revealing the creative potentials of popular self-organization and showing how societies could function — and in certain situations or in certain respects already had functioned — quite well without authoritarian structures. From this perspective it became easy to see that hierarchical forms of opposition tend to reproduce the dominant hierarchy (the Bolshevik Party's rapid de-volution into Stalinism being the most obvious example) and that reliance on any leaders, even supposedly radical ones, tends to reinforce people's passivity instead of encouraging their creativity and autonomy.

"Anarchism" turned out to encompass a wide variety of tactics and tendencies — individualist, syndicalist, collectivist, pacifist, terrorist, reformist, revolutionary. About the only thing on which most anarchists were in agreement was in opposing the state and encouraging popular initiative and control. But this was at least a good beginning. Here was a perspective I could wholeheartedly espouse, that made sense of the current failings of the movement and gave some idea of the right direction to move in. For me it tied in perfectly with the Rexroth-Buber goal of genuine interpersonal community as opposed to impersonal collectivities. Some of Rexroth's recent articles had pointed out the Kropotkin-ecology connection. Rexroth and Snyder had also referred to a "Great Subculture" encompassing various nonauthoritarian currents throughout history, and had expressed the hope that with the current counterculture these tendencies might be on the point of finally becoming fulfilled in a liberated global community. Anarchism seemed to be the political component of such a movement.

Ron Rothbart (a close Shimer friend who had recently moved to Berkeley) soon became an equally enthusiastic convert. We began looking at the movement more critically, and started taking some modest initiatives on our own — talking up anarchism among our friends, ordering anarchist literature for local distribution, carrying black flags at demonstrations. We soon discovered some other local anarchists, with whom we took part in a discussion group, planned to reprint certain anarchist texts, and considered the possibility of opening an anarchist bookstore

in Berkeley. My first ever “public” writing was a mimeo leaflet (a few dozen copies circulated among friends and acquaintances) in which I tried to convey the anarchist relevance of Rexroth and Snyder.

## Part 2 (1969–1977)

### How I became a situationist

In our reading of recent anarchist literature Ron and I came upon several mentions of the Situationist International (SI), a small but notorious group that had played a key role in catalyzing the May 1968 revolt in France. I vaguely remembered having seen some situationist texts a year or so before, but at the time I had put them back on the shelf after a brief glance had given me the impression that this was just one more variant of the European ideological systems (Marxism, surrealism, existentialism, etc.) that seemed so old hat after psychedelics. In December 1969 we again came across some situationist pamphlets in a local bookstore, and this time of course we did read them.

We were immediately struck by how different they were from the simplistic propagandistic style of most anarchist writings. The situationist style seemed rather strange and tortuous, but it was extremely provocative, clearly aimed more at undermining people's habits and illusions than at merely converting them to some vague and more or less passive "libertarian perspective." At first we were bewildered, but as we reread and discussed the texts we gradually began to see how it all fit together. The situationists seemed to be the missing link between different aspects of revolt. Striving for a more radical social revolution than was dreamt of by most leftists, they simultaneously attacked the absurdities of modern culture and the boredom of everyday life (picking up where the dadaists and surrealists had left off). Total iconoclasts, they rejected all ideologies – including Marxism, anarchism, and even "situationism" – and simply adopted or adapted whatever insights they found pertinent. While carrying on the traditional anarchist opposition to the state, they had developed a more comprehensive analysis of modern society, a more rigorously antihierarchical organizational practice, and a more consistent attack on the system's conditioning of people into passive followers and spectators. (Their name came from their original aim of creating open-ended, participatory "situations" as opposed to fixed works of art.) Last but not least, they emphatically rejected the "politics of guilt," the whole idea of basing revolution on self-sacrifice, self-flagellation and martyr worship.

A couple months later Ron and I came across some situationist-style leaflets by a local group with the intriguing name Council for the Eruption of the Marvelous. We wrote to them proposing a meeting. They accepted, and the next day we met two of them. They answered our questions briefly but lucidly, made sharp criticisms of most of our vague projects, and dismissed our anarchism as just another ideology which would inhibit us from doing anything significant. Quick to express their contempt for just about everything that passed as radical, they clearly knew what they were talking about and meant exactly what they said. Yet it was obvious that despite their seriousness they were having a lot of fun. Their own agitational practice, consisting primarily of critical interventions in various situations, seemed to combine careful calculation with a delightful sense of mischievousness. Having made it quite clear that they did not intend to waste their time with any additional efforts to convince us, they left.

We were stunned, but also aroused. Even if we were not sure we agreed with them on some points, their autonomy was a practical challenge. If they could put out leaflets expressing their own views, why couldn't we?

We went back to Ron's place, turned on, and each wrote one. Mine was a collage of anarchist and situationist slogans followed by a list of recommended books; his was a satire of the way revolution was being turned into a trite spectacle. We mimeoed 1500 copies of each and handed them out on Telegraph Avenue near the University. Abstract though this action was, just creating something and getting it out there was an exciting breakthrough.

Over the next couple months we carried out several other leaflet experiments. I wrote one on the theme that people should never relinquish their power to leaders, which I distributed at the apropos film *Viva Zapata*, and put together a comic on the mindless, ritualistic nature of militant street fighting in Berkeley. Ron wrote a review of Buber's *Paths in Utopia* and a critique of an inept classroom disruption carried out by some of our anarchist acquaintances. These interventions were all pretty rudimentary, but by noting the various reactions they provoked we gradually got a better feel for confronting issues publicly. There was a progression toward greater incisiveness and criticality.

During this same period we attempted to find some viable compromise between our hangloose countercultural milieu and the rigorous extremism of the situationists (at least as we somewhat confusedly understood it). We had numerous discussions with friends aimed at inciting them to some sort of radical experimentation, but though some of them were vaguely intrigued by our "new trip," virtually none of them responded with any initiative. If nothing else, these confrontations at least served as good self-clarifications. We were becoming so involved in our new ventures that we had little interest in continuing relations on the old terms.

As for the anarchists we had been hanging around with, just as they had made no demands on us, they expected us to make none on them. When we offered a few mild critiques (far milder than the CEM had made of us) they reacted defensively. We began to see that despite its pertinent insights, anarchism functioned as just one more ideology, complete with its own set of fetishized ideas and heroes. After months of discussions and study groups, the grouping had not proved capable even of carrying out any of the reprinting projects, much less of starting a bookstore. We concluded that if we wanted anything done we'd better do it ourselves; and that autonomous interventions were more likely to strike a chord than distributing a few more copies of anarchist classics.

We rarely saw the CEM, but were occasionally informed of some of their delightfully scandalous interventions, whose combination of the situationist tactic of *détournement* with a dash of surrealist and William Burroughs influence was theorized in their pamphlet *On Wielding the Subversive Scalpel*: lampooning the spectacular role of sacrificial militants with a leaflet showing the Chicago Eight being crucified; going from door to door in a plastic suburb, dressed in suit and tie, delivering a tract exhorting the recipients to drop everything and get a life; disrupting a local Godard appearance with rotten tomatoes and bilingual leaflets; handing out packets of trading cards featuring stereotypical roles (housewife, sparechange artist, hip merchant, etc.) and "Great Moments in the Void" (traffic jam, supermarket shopping, watching TV).

We also met two emissaries of another situationist-influenced group from Massachusetts, the Council for Conscious Existence. The CCE was less humorous and surrealist than the CEM, but equally intense, intransigent and iconoclastic. Their example reinforced the CEM challenge to call in question everything out of our past, including all our previous idols.

One of my few remaining heroes was Gary Snyder. I could agree that most of the movement and counterculture leaders were hierarchical manipulators or spectacular confusionists, but Snyder still seemed to me almost totally admirable. In any case I had the common misconception that in order to have the right to criticize someone I should myself be better, and I scarcely thought I could compare myself with Snyder.

Then one day I learned that he was coming to Berkeley to give a reading of his poetry. Previously this would have been one of the high points of my year. Now I was uncertain. Did I still think such an event was a good thing? Or was it “spectacular” — did it contribute toward people’s passivity, complacency, star worship? After a little thought I decided that the most appropriate way to come to terms with this question would be to compose a leaflet to distribute at the event — thereby at the same time challenging others involved. The time limit was also a good challenge: the reading was in three days.

In making notes I started out with rather moderate criticism. But the more I considered the whole situation, the more radically I began to question it. Up till this time I had accepted Snyder as a spectacular package — his life and writings were “inspirational” to me, but only in a vague, general sort of way. Now I realized that if he had said something I thought was useful, the point was to use it. If he said something I felt was mistaken, I should point it out. It seemed particularly appropriate if I could turn some of his most valid remarks against other aspects of his practice that fell short.

Each little step opened the way for more. It went against the grain to “ruin” my prized picture of Snyder and his friends by cutting it out and pasting it on the leaflet; but once I had “detoured” it by adding the comic balloons, my fetishism disappeared. Now it was just an image, interesting only because I could use it to undermine other people’s fetishism. I laughed at myself as I broke through my own psychological resistances, just as I laughed to think how this or that aspect of the leaflet would meet with uneasy puzzlement on the part of the people who received it. If what I came up with seemed bizarre or awkward, so what? I was creating my own genre, and there were no rules but the desire to get to the root of the situation and expose it in the most challenging way possible.

I finished the leaflet [Do We Need Snyder for Poet-Priest?] just before the reading and had a hundred copies printed. As I approached the auditorium, nervously clutching them under my arm, I became hesitant. Wasn’t this too extreme? How did I dare attack Gary Snyder this way? He himself was more or less an anarchist; he wasn’t trying to recruit anyone to anything; he wasn’t even charging any money. Had I gone off the deep end? I decided to sit down and listen to the beginning and see what it felt like.

There was an audience of several hundred people. Snyder started off by saying that before he got under way with the poetry he’d like to “say a few words about the revolution.” He made a few remarks on that topic which were a bit vague, but not bad. When he finished, the audience *applauded*.

That did it. Nothing could have made the spectacular nature of the whole occasion more clear. The applause was the glaring sign that his words would not be taken up practically, but would merely serve as one more tidbit for passive titillation. (People would probably go home after the reading and tell their friends, “He not only read a lot of great poems, but he even said some far out stuff about revolution!”) I was outraged at the situation. The most insulting aspects of my leaflet were only too appropriate. I took them out, threw them into the crowd and ran away. I had no further interest in anything Snyder might say, and I did not wish the incisiveness of my

act to be diluted by a debate with the audience as to what alternatives I had to propose. That was their problem.

People sometimes ask if situationists “do” anything or if they “just write.” I had had this same misconception — I had felt that I wasn’t sure what to do, but that meanwhile it might be helpful to write the leaflet in order to clarify matters. It was only afterwards that I realized I *had* done something. If a critique really stirs even a few people to stop and think, to see through some illusion, to reconsider some practice, perhaps even provokes them to new ventures of their own, this is already a very worthwhile and practical effect — how many “actions” do as much? I saw that the insistence on being “constructive” was just a shuck that intimidated people from confronting their own condition; and that a critique (as opposed to a self-righteous moral condemnation) need not imply one’s own superiority. If we had to be better than others before criticizing them, the “best” people would never be criticized at all (and hierarchs tend to define the issues in such a way that they remain on top). It didn’t matter how talented or wise or well-intentioned Snyder was. If the purpose of poetry is to “change life,” I felt there was more poetry in my act than in any poem he might read that evening.

I will be the first to admit that this particular intervention was inept and probably had no notable effect on anyone but myself. Though the leaflet was clear enough in attacking passive consumership of culture, the social perspective on which this attack was based was only vaguely implied. (The “Ode on the Absence of Real Poetry” that I put out a few months later was more explicit on this score, but also more stodgy.)

The action was also a flop as a disruption. I had searched in vain for some balcony-type place from which I could drop the leaflets over the whole audience, so as to create a “critical mass” situation in which everyone would be intrigued into reading them at the same time. I could have achieved the same result a little less dramatically by barging through all sections of the audience. Nowadays I would think nothing of doing that, but back then I was new at the game and didn’t have the nerve. As a result of my more timid distribution, only a fraction of the people got the leaflets, and (as I was later told by some friends who were there) after a few seconds’ pause the reading continued, with most of the rest of the audience probably assuming that it was merely some run-of-the-mill leaflet about Black Studies or the Vietnam war.

But whatever effect my action had on the audience, it was very illuminating for me. As I ran from the auditorium I felt like a child again, as excited as a grade school kid playing a prank. My real breakthrough in grasping the situationist perspective dates from that moment. I had already learned a lot from reading situationist texts; and from the example of the CEM (who after sharply criticizing my previous confusions had wisely *left me on my own* to work out what I was going to do next); and from my experiments over the previous months. But pulling the rug out from under my own passivity and star-worship had the most liberating effect of all. The fact that I had picked what was for me just about the hardest conceivable target made the experience the biggest turning point of my life.

The CEM members were aware of my admiration for Snyder. When I later showed them the leaflet, one of them said, “Hmm. I see you’ve been subverting yourself as well as others!” We all grinned.



## 1044

In June the CEM broke up. The group had contained divergent tendencies, some of the members were not as autonomous or committed as others, and some of their ideological contradictions could never in any case have lasted very long before exploding. After the breakup two of the ex-members, Isaac Cronin and Dan Hammer, went to Paris and New York to meet members of the SI.

Meanwhile Ron and I formed our own two-person group (later referred to as “1044” after our P.O. box number). He moved in with me in July and for the next few months we lived communally, in accordance with the mistaken impression we had derived from the CCE and CEM that this was *de rigueur* for a situationist-type organization. Actually, although the SI was very strict about internal group democracy and avoidance of hierarchy, SI membership did not imply any such economic pooling or any sacrifice of privacy or independence in other personal affairs. We soon found that our puristic misconception was not very workable, though the experience of living and working together more closely than usual was interesting in some ways.

Our mystification about coherent organization was linked with a rather apocalyptic notion of coherent practice. Our little *In This Theater* text, with its evocation of Vaneigem’s “unitary triad” of participation, communication and realization (see *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, chapter 23), hints at our state of mind at the time. We knew that the separations in our lives could not be definitively overcome short of a revolution, but we felt we could make a significant breakthrough by attacking the separations in a unitary manner. The Snyder disruption had been such a revelation to me that I, in particular, tended to overemphasize such experience as the “one thing needful,” imagining that if others could only make a similar qualitative leap they too would discover the whole new world of possibilities of the “reversal of perspective.” In my eagerness to incite people into such ventures I often became too pedagoguish, a bad habit that has persisted to this day. I still think that people need to take autonomous initiatives if they are ever going to break out of their conditioning, but as a practical matter being preachy and pushy seldom leads them to do so. As I noted above, one of the merits of the CEM was that they did not hang over our shoulders with wise advice, but simply made a few incisive critiques and then left us on our own. After a number of mostly fruitless efforts to arouse our friends, Ron and I learned to do likewise.

At our first encounter with the CEM delegates they had brought along a cassette recorder and taped our entire conversation. This was partly so that the other members of their group could listen to it later, but also because they found it useful to constantly review their own practice. Ron and I tried recording some of our own talks with friends, noting where we had talked too much, become stilted, responded inadequately, etc. The general idea was to become more conscious of whatever we were doing, to recognize and break up undesirable habits by altering habitual forms. Other methods we used included doing “circle talks” (three or more people sit in a circle and each person talks *only in turn*); putting more things in writing (challenging ourselves to better organize our ideas); and detouring comics (taking comics from which we had whited out the original words and filling in the balloons with new ones — composing a new story on a given theme, or copying in randomly selected passages from situationist or other writings). In our most extensive venture of this sort we set aside one entire day for an intensively and arbitrarily scheduled series of activities (successive brief periods of reading, letter writing, brainstorming, drawing, cooking, eating, automatic writing, dancing, house cleaning, translating, play acting, leaflet composing, comic altering, gardening, meditation, exercise, rest, discussion, jamming), then spent the next

week writing up a ten-page account of the experience, which we printed in a private edition of a dozen copies to give to a few friends.

Lest this add to the many misconceptions of “what situationists do,” I should stress that this was only a one-time experiment and that the various other activities mentioned here were not necessarily typical of the *situ milieu* in general.<sup>1</sup> While SI-influenced groups tended to be fairly experimental in both everyday life and political agitation, the types of experimentation varied considerably. Some of our ventures reflected our American countercultural background more than would have been typical of our European counterparts. We were, of course, quite aware of the limits of such experiments. But liberating even a little space for even a brief period of time gives you a taste for more. You develop the knack of playing with different possibilities instead of assuming that the status quo is inevitable, and you get a more concrete sense of the social and psychological obstacles that stand in your way. The advantage of private experiments is that within their limits you can try anything without any risk but the salutary one of embarrassing your ego. The same principles apply, but obviously with more need for caution, in public activity.

Our public ventures included several experiments with *détournement*, the situationist tactic of diverting cultural fragments to new subversive uses. One of my creations was a comic balloon printed on stickum paper, designed to be pasted over ad posters so that the usual stereotypically beautiful woman model would be making a critique of the manipulative function of her image: “Hello, men! I’m a picture of a woman that doesn’t exist. But my body corresponds to a stereotype you have been conditioned to desire. Since your wife or girlfriend is unlikely to look as I do, you are naturally frustrated. The people who put me up here have got you just where they want you — by the balls. With your ‘manhood’ challenged, you’re putty in their hands...” (If I may say so myself, I think this way of turning spectacular manipulation against itself is more illuminating than the usual merely reactive complaints such as “This ad exploits women” — as if such ads didn’t also exploit and manipulate men.) I also took advantage of the openness of an open poetry reading to read a lengthy critique of the limits of merely literary poetry, *Ode on the Absence of Real Poetry Here This Afternoon*, to the puzzlement and disgruntlement of the other poets present, who by the rules of the game had to sit there and listen politely to my “poem” without interrupting.

Ron wrote a pamphlet analyzing a recent Chicano riot in Los Angeles [*Riot and Representation*], and on a lark signed it “by Herbert Marcuse.” This resulted in the pamphlet’s getting a wider readership, both at first, when people assumed that Marcuse was really the author, then after Marcuse had been forced to publicly disavow it, when even more people became intrigued by all the speculations as to who could have perpetrated such a strange prank. To add to the fun we wrote a series of pseudonymous letters to the editors of various local papers denouncing, and thereby further publicizing, the pamphlet. (This tactic of putting out falsely attributed texts, which we later termed “counterfeitism,” subsequently became rather sloppily used by other groups in ways that often produced more confusion than clarity. We ourselves soon abandoned it, and that fall Isaac and I collaborated on a critique of those aspects of the *Subversive Scalpel*

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<sup>1</sup> Although the term *situationist* originally referred specifically to members of the SI, it later also came to be used in a broader sense to designate others in the “*situ milieu*” carrying on more or less similar activities. Here and in my other writings the context should usually make clear in which sense I am using the term. (Past tense usually refers to the SI; present tense — as in much of “The Society of Situationism” and “The Realization and Suppression of Religion” — usually indicates the broad sense.)

pamphlet that gave the impression that détournement meant throwing random confusion into the spectacle.)

Taking our cue from the situationists, we also began to fill in the enormous gaps in our knowledge of previous radical efforts, exploring the history of past revolts and checking out seminal figures like Hegel (a hard nut to crack, but even a little familiarization helped us get a better feel for dialectical processes); Charles Fourier (whose delightful though somewhat loony utopia is based on encouraging the interplay, rather than the repression, of the variety of human passions); Wilhelm Reich (his early social-psychological analyses, not his later “orgone” theories); and some of the more radical Marxist thinkers: Rosa Luxemburg, Anton Pannekoek, Karl Korsch, early Lukács.

And Marx himself. Like most anarchists, we knew virtually nothing about him except for a few platitudes about his supposed authoritarianism. When we discovered that many of the situationists’ most pertinent insights, and even some of their most striking phrases, were derived from Marx, we started reexamining him more carefully. We soon realized that it was simply ignorant to uncritically lump Marx with Bolshevism, much less with Stalinism; and that, while there were undoubtedly significant flaws in Marx’s perspective, his insights on so many aspects of capitalist society are so penetrating that trying to develop a coherent social analysis while ignoring him is about as silly as it would be to try to develop a coherent theory of biology while ignoring Darwin.<sup>2</sup>

Above all, of course, we read everything of the SI that we could get our hands on. Unfortunately, most of the situationist texts were available only in French. Apart from half a dozen pamphlets and a few leaflets, the only things in English were a few rough manuscript translations done by people who in some cases knew scarcely more French than we did. I still remember the excitement, but also the frustration, upon first obtaining a copy of Vaneigem’s *Treatise on Living* (a.k.a. *The Revolution of Everyday Life*), which we struggled to read in a dim photocopy of a photocopy of a photocopy of a poor manuscript translation. When I realized how much I was missing, I started brushing up my rudimentary and long-forgotten college French. I had always imagined it would be great to get proficient enough to read my favorite French writers in the original, but such a goal was too vague to inspire me to do the necessary study. The situationists provided the incentive. Just about everyone else I knew who became seriously interested in them eventually picked up at least enough French to piece out the most important texts. When we later met comrades from other countries, French was as likely as English to be our common language.

## Contradiction

That summer Ron and I met Michael Lucas, who had moved to the Bay Area after having collaborated and become dissatisfied with Murray Bookchin’s *Anarchos* group in New York. In October Sydney Lewis (one of the CCE emissaries we had met the preceding spring) arrived in town, having left the CCE in disillusionment with some of its more extravagant ideological rigidities. Soon afterward Dan and Isaac returned from Paris and New York. Comparing the positive

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<sup>2</sup> I should mention one other important influence whom we discovered independently of the SI: Josef Weber. He was the leading spirit of *Contemporary Issues*, a little-known but remarkably high quality radical journal that was published in London from 1948–1970. We picked up a lot of basic knowledge of recent history from the sober, well-researched articles in the *CI* back issues and a lot of provocative ideas from the brilliant, if sometimes rather eccentric, pieces by Weber.

and negative conclusions from our diverse experiences, we found a significant convergence of views.

Two tentative group projects developed: a study group devoted to Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* (the other main situationist book, which had just been translated by Black and Red) and a critique of the American radical movement and counterculture. The study group didn't last very long — we soon found that we got a better grasp of Debord's theses by the experience of using them (in graffiti, in leaflets and in our movement drafts) than by merely discussing them in the abstract. The preliminary stages of the movement critique meanwhile confirmed an increasing degree of accord among the six of us, while eliminating three or four other people who had attended the study group but had not followed up with any autonomous initiatives. In December Dan, Isaac, Michael, Ron and I formed the group Contradiction. Besides our movement critique, we envisaged publishing an SI-type journal and carrying out various other critical agitations.

Sydney would almost certainly have been the sixth member of the new group if he had not returned to the East Coast just before its formation; but once out of town he drifted into somewhat different perspectives, and we eventually discontinued the relation. Meanwhile we had discovered a new comrade in Berkeley. I was strolling around on campus one day and happened to overhear two people talking, one of whom was making an intelligent critique of bureaucratic leftism. After listening a moment I interrupted to say that he was absolutely right, but that he was wasting his time since the person he was talking to was obviously incapable of seeing his points. He gave me a surprised look, stopped and thought for a moment, realized I was right, took his leave of the other person, and we went off to talk. At first I let him do most of the talking, merely nodding and asking a few questions. Though he had never read a word of the situationists, he had independently arrived at virtually all their positions. Then I pulled some pamphlets out of my bag and read him a few passages that expressed the same things he had been saying. You could have pushed him over with a feather! He began working with us on our movement critique and eventually became the sixth member of Contradiction. I always think of this encounter with John Adams as a striking confirmation of the situationists' claim that they were not propagating an ideology, but simply expressing the realities that were already present.

The first Contradiction publication was my poster Bureaucratic Comix, inspired by the recent revolt in Poland. Now that we've become used to the idea of the collapse of Stalinism it may be necessary to recall how much people used to take its permanence for granted, and just how uncomprehending the New Left was when it came to the issues raised by such a rebellion. While a few leftist groups tried to distinguish between "revisionist" East European regimes and "revolutionary" Third World ones, most of the underground papers, unable to figure out how to fit such an event into their Guevarist fantasy world, did not even *mention* the uprising. Thus the poster's *détournement* of various movement heroes, which may seem only mildly amusing to present-day readers, had a far more traumatic effect on their habitual admirers (as some of them later admitted to me).

While we had been experimenting with methods inspired by the SI, the SI itself had been going through crises which were eventually to lead to its dissolution.

In March 1971 I went to New York to meet Jon Horelick and Tony Verlaan, the two remaining members of the American section of the SI, and learned that they had recently split from the Europeans. They presented me with a fat stack of correspondence and internal documents, mostly in French, which I began to struggle through in a generally unsuccessful effort to figure out what it was all about. Then I flew to Paris.

The first people I looked up were Roger Grégoire and Linda Lanphear, ex-participants in Black and Red. We had read with interest the B&R publications (especially Grégoire and Perlman's excellent booklet on their activities during May 1968), which combined some situationist features with a more traditional anarcho-Marxist orientation; but our interest had faded as the group began to settle into an ultraleftist eclecticism. Roger and Linda's recent open-letter critique, "To the Readers of Black and Red," demonstrated that they, like us, were moving in the direction of a more rigorous, situationist-style practice. We hit it off fine and I ended up staying at their apartment for most of my trip.

I wasn't able to see the remaining members of the SI, but I did meet a number of other people in the Parisian situ milieu, including Vaneigem and a couple other ex-SI members. The discussions were a mixture of genuinely interesting exchange of information and ideas with the exaggerated hopes and illusions that sprung up in the heady aftermath of May 1968.

Of course just being in Paris was exciting – taking in all the new sights and sounds and smells, losing myself in the labyrinthine street layout, wandering for hours through cobblestone alleys among centuries-old buildings and obscure little shops; stopping at outdoor cafés and watching all the passersby, catching tantalizing fragments of the strange language I was just beginning to be able to understand; shopping in the little open-air markets that used to be on practically every street corner; savoring those tasty multi-course French meals and excellent wines and liqueurs that we would linger over during hours of lively conversation...

After a month and a half in Paris, plus brief visits to London and Amsterdam, I flew back to New York and stayed a couple weeks with Tony Verlaan. He and Jon Horelick had just had a falling out, and Jon more or less disappeared until two years later, when he came out with his journal *Diversion*. Tony and Arnaud Chastel had meanwhile formed Create Situations, and were in the middle of translating some SI articles, which I helped with. Then I returned to Berkeley.

Over the next few months we had quite a few visitors: Tony and Arnaud (after a couple weeks of tumultuous interaction we broke with them); Point-Blank (a group of teenagers from Santa Cruz, with whom we also eventually broke after working with them for some time); Roger and Linda; one or two contacts from England; and a young Spanish couple, Javier and Tita. Tita and I hit it off right away, although our verbal communication was at first limited to pidgin French. When Javier returned to Europe a few weeks later, she stayed with me.

During all this time we were continuing to work on the movement critique [Critique of the New Left Movement and On the Poverty of Hip Life] and other articles for our projected journal. Unfortunately, except for a few incidental leaflets none of this work was destined to materialize. There were lots of good ideas in our drafts, but also many insufficiencies, and we proved incapable of bringing the project to completion. Partly this was because we undertook too much, partly it was due to poor organization, leading to duplication of effort. One person might put in a lot of work on a certain topic, then find that his draft had to be drastically reorganized to fit in with changes in other articles; which themselves had been altered by the next meeting, necessitating yet further changes. Meetings became a headache.

(In retrospect, we might have done better to delegate one or two people to draft the movement piece as a whole, drawing on individual contributions but without worrying about sticking to them in detail. It might also have been a good idea to issue short preliminary versions of some of the chapters, produced and signed by different members, both to get something out there for feedback and to develop more individual autonomy.)

Meanwhile the various fragments of the movement were self-destructing from the very contradictions we had been analyzing. There was less and less to attack that was not already widely discredited. By early 1972 about all that might have remained for us was to make a more lucid postmortem. Even that would have been worth doing (you have to understand what went wrong if you're ever going to do better); but by this time we were so sick of the whole project that we no longer had the necessary enthusiasm, and had already started drifting into other pursuits. Michael and I had gotten into classical music and were spending a lot of our time listening to records and going to concerts and operas. Dan and Isaac were spending most of their time in San Jose working with Jimmy Carr (Dan's ex-Black Panther brother-in-law) on his prison memoirs.<sup>3</sup> Our abandonment of the movement critique in April 1972 marked the effective end of the group, though we didn't formally dissolve it till September.

A general exodus followed. John and Michael both moved out of town. Dan, Isaac and his girlfriend Jeanne went to Europe, where Tita had returned shortly before. I still saw Ron occasionally, but scarcely anyone else. Relations with many of my older friends had cooled since our 1970 confrontations, and some of the ones I was still close to had recently moved back to the Midwest as the counterculture began to wind down. About the only bright spot during the whole year was a reunion with a former girlfriend, who flew out from New England for a brief visit; unfortunately there were too many obstacles to continuing the relation.

Lonely, depressed and frustrated by the *coitus interruptus* of Contradiction, I didn't have the spirit for anything but reading, listening to classical music, and trying to maintain my survival with poker.

The private game I had been playing in had disbanded, and I had shifted to playing lowball at the casinos in nearby Emeryville. This was a tougher proposition: not only was the competition keener, but you also had to pay an hourly fee to the house. I plugged away practically full time for several months, to the point where I was becoming addicted. Clustered around a brightly lit green felt table, insulated from the outside world, you become jaded. The thought of going back to some humdrum job seems intolerable when you remember the night you walked home with several hundred dollars after a few hours' play. (You tend to forget all the losses, or attribute them to temporary back luck.) I had hoped that with experience I might gradually improve and win enough to move to the higher stakes games, but my records showed that my net winnings were barely holding steady at around 75 cents an hour. In November I finally gave it up.

That was a good step, but I wasn't sure what to do next. Inspired by reading Montaigne, I tried writing some self-exploratory essays. This might not have been a bad idea in other circumstances (writing the present text has included a lot of this type of self-exploration via confronting diverse topics), but at the time nothing came of it because practically any topic I started to write about sooner or later led to some connection with the Contradiction experience, and I had gotten so depressed about the latter that I could hardly bear to think about it. Yet I felt equally uncomfortable about evading the issue.

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<sup>3</sup> After Jimmy's 1972 assassination (which may have been caused by a COINTELPRO setup) they completed and published the book under the title *Bad: The Autobiography of James Carr* (1975; reissued by AK Press).

## A fresh start

In December Dan, Isaac, Jeanne and Tita all returned from Europe. As I recounted in my Case Study, their return helped spur me back to life. I began experimenting once again, reassessed my relations (which led to some traumatic breaks), and after having repressed the whole Contradiction experience for months, finally got the idea of confronting it in a pamphlet. As with my earlier Snyder leaflet, I saw this as a way to bring things together: for my own sake I wanted to figure out what went wrong, but I wanted at the same time to force others to face these issues, both those who were directly concerned and those who might be involved in similar ventures in the future.

Later on I'll say a little about the situationist practice of breaks. For the moment I will only mention that I now regret the first letter quoted in the "Case Study," which was to Ron's girlfriend C — . The faults I criticized her for were not really anything more than the sort of white lies and mild social hypocrisies of which practically everyone is guilty. It would probably have sufficed, and been much easier on everybody concerned, to have simply politely distanced myself from her, as people usually do in such cases and as I myself would undoubtedly do now. But at the time I was desperate to break out of the rut I had fallen into.

The letter certainly did accomplish this, for both good and bad. On one hand, it helped clear the way for the personal revival I described; on the other, it ended my relation not only with C — but also with Ron, and ultimately with John and Michael as well. I was deeply saddened by this, but I had known the risk I was taking. Ironically, I ran into C — a few years later and we "renormalized" our relation to a limited but amicable level; whereas the estrangement with Ron lasted twenty years, ending only recently when (as a result of reconsidering the incident in the process of writing this autobiography) it finally occurred to me to write him a letter of apology.

(We've both lost touch with Michael Lucas — last heard of living in Germany — and John Adams. Does anyone know where they are?)

The second critical letter quoted in the "Case Study" (which I feel was more justified; for one thing, it wasn't even a break letter, merely a sharp challenge) was directed to one of Dan, Isaac and Jeanne's friends, thus putting some of my other close relations at risk. But after some initial uncertainty, they soon came around to agreeing with it. The appearance of Remarks on Contradiction and the surprising changes I was making in my life began to inspire them to similar ventures, bringing us closer together than ever.

The next two or three months saw a flurry of self-analyses, neo-Reichian exercises, recording of dreams, reassessments of our pasts, and other challenges to ingrained character traits and petrified relations. This was all to the good; but after a while, beginning to feel that we were getting too narrowly internal and psychoanalytical, I wrote them a letter stressing the social context of our experiments and the need to continually supersede our situation so as to avoid falling into yet another rut.

To my great delight they answered my challenge by shifting the dialogue to another level. Three days later they turned up with a draft of a large poster:

### **WE'RE TIRED OF PLAYING WITH OURSELVES**

Truly Voluptuous Spirits,

... We are three people much like yourselves ... We had some common perspectives toward daily life, concerning what we did and didn't want from society as it is now

organized. We worked as little as possible, ... read all the best books (*Capital*, *The Maltese Falcon*, etc.), listened to the best music, ate at the best cheap restaurants, got drunk, went for hikes and trips to the beach and Paris...

We were anti-spectators of the spectacle of decomposition. We read the *Chronicle* just like you do, which is to say “critically,” which is to say that the very chic cynicism which appeared to add spice to our lives actually helped drain the life out of us. We had plenty of clever remarks about the lacks and excesses of the bourgeois world, but despite the fact that we were reproached by others for being too bold we were actually too timid...

The sky didn't open up one day. But since we weren't quite dead yet, enough was soon too much. We received a terrific kick in the ass from Jean-Pierre Voyer's *Use of Reich* and from our friend Ken Knabb's use of Voyer in *Remarks on Contradiction and Its Failure*. The work of Voyer was the first since Debord that concretely shed light on our alienation. We realized that we were to a great extent accomplices in the ruling spectacle, and that character is the form of this complicity. We began the strategically crucial task of character assassination — after some tentatives which either over-psychologized the attack on character (Isaac and Jeanne) or defended against this attack by criticizing psychology (Dan) — including in that attack those traits of our own and of each other which we had previously accepted as “part of the package,” which we'd patronizingly accepted as immutable, which we'd timidly considered “too personal” to criticize except when they became unavoidably excessive. This negative task begun, positivity was released from the chains of repression...

Our attack on this rot has made external restraints — especially our inability to meet you — all the more unbearable. The enrichment of our relations with each other has underscored the poverty of our relations with the rest of the city...

We expect this address to help us break some of the barriers to meeting you... But whether or not you even see this, we're coming after you.

For days without chains and nights without armor,  
Dan Hammer, Jeanne Smith, Isaac Cronin

Since the comic poster announcing my Voyer translation was going to be ready at the same time, we decided to distribute the two posters together. Over the next few days we pasted up several hundred copies around the Bay Area.

Fresh and audacious though their poster was, the responses revealed that it was not as clear as it might have been. The dozens of letters they received certainly showed that a sympathetic chord had been struck, but most of the responders had the impression that this was simply a matter of overcoming individual isolation by meeting more people, with little grasp of the implied connection to social critique.

Nevertheless, the two posters led us to meet a much larger variety of people than usual — not only those who wrote to us, but many others we ran into on the street or in cafés who were intrigued by our lively and mischievous manner and by the fact that we were obviously having so much fun. My new “Special Investigator” business card added to the mixture of amusement and intrigue when people got around to the inevitable “Just what is it that you do?”

That fall we all returned to Europe, though not all at the same times and places. I was in Paris for three months, staying at Roger and Linda's again and spending most of my time among their





- SPECTACLE BUSTING
- BUREAUCRAT ROUTING
- CAPITAL CRIME

## Bureau of Public Secrets

*"Making petrified conditions dance  
by singing them their own tune"*

**KEN KNABB**  
SPECIAL INVESTIGATOR

**P.O. Box 1044, BERKELEY**  
**(DON'T CALL US -**  
**DO IT YOURSELF)**

circle of friends, which now included Jean-Pierre Voyer. I had been inspired by the amusingly audacious style of Voyer's early activity (the name "Bureau of Public Secrets" was partly suggested by his notion of *publicité*). In person I found him to be intellectually provocative, but he had a tendency to get carried away with his theoretical insights, harping on them to the point that they became ideological. I was also disappointed to learn that he was not following up some of the embryonic ideas that had most interested me in his Reich text. I realized that if I wanted to see these ideas developed, I would have to do it myself — which I later did to a certain extent in *Double-Reflection* and the "Case Study."

During my first weeks in Paris there was a lot of excited discussion centering around Voyer's ideas and our recent Bay Area ventures. I soon came to feel that this talk was leading nowhere and that there remained a lot of rigidities and repressions in our relations, and wrote a letter to Voyer and the others criticizing both the scene in general and each of the particular individuals involved. This stirred up a flurry of self-questioning for a few days, but ultimately things reverted to how they were before. From this point on my relations with all of them cooled.

Part of my impatience with them was due to the contrast with Daniel Denevert, whom I met around this same time. He had discovered a copy of *Remarks on Contradiction* at a Paris store and decided to translate it; then he happened to hear through the grapevine that I was in town and hunted me up. It turned out that he, in turn, was the author of an earlier pamphlet that I had greatly appreciated (*Pour l'intelligence de quelques aspects du moment*). This independent accord made for an exciting encounter. I spent most of the rest of my stay seeing him and the other members of his recently formed group, the Centre de Recherche sur la Question Sociale (CRQS): his wife Françoise Denevert (pseudonym: Jeanne Charles), Nadine Bloch and Joël Cornuault.

## The “Notice” group

When I returned to California in December I was already working on *Double-Reflection*. Dan and Isaac were each working on small newsletters. Tita had just published a Spanish version of Voyer’s Reich article and was going on to translate Vaneigem’s “Basic Banalities.” Robert Cooperstein (a friend we had met the year before) was working on a comic-illustrated pamphlet about children. In March 1974 we got an exciting and unexpected vindication of our perspectives when Chris Shutes and Gina Rosenberg came out with *Disinterest Compounded Daily*, a detailed critique of Point-Blank from the inside (Chris was an ex-member and Gina a sometime collaborator) that had been inspired in part by our recent publications.

Over the next several months there were quite a few collaborations among us and the CRQS. Once I had completed *Double-Reflection* (which Joël immediately started translating into French), I joined Dan and Robert in translating Daniel’s recent pamphlet, *Théorie de la misère, misère de la théorie*, along with a couple other CRQS texts; the chapter on “behindism” in *Double-Reflection* inspired Chris to follow up with a whole pamphlet on the subject; he and Isaac wrote a critique of Jon Horelick’s journal *Diversion*, then began working on their own journal, *Implications*; Isaac and Gina translated Debord’s article on *dérives*; Isaac and Dan composed a leaflet on a baseball riot in Cleveland, which they distributed at a local Oakland A’s game...

Not surprisingly we began to be considered as a de facto organization. People would write to us as a group or assume that a letter from one of us represented the views of the others. We thought it might be interesting to try to work out a joint public statement in order to see just what degree of accord we did have. Eventually we came up with a text along the lines of the CRQS’s Declaration, but specifying that though we shared certain perspectives, we were each acting only in our own name. This Notice Concerning the Reigning Society and Those Who Contest It was issued in November 1974, along with a second poster advertising our publications.

Despite the “Notice’s” statement to the contrary, putting out the two posters paradoxically tended to reinforce the idea (among us as well as others) that we formed a unified tendency, whose activity was objectified as a collection of mutually approved texts. There was indeed a considerable accord among us, but it was probably a mistake to stress this commonality at the expense of neglecting the diversity of our views and interests. We were more careful about preserving individual responsibility than *Contradiction* had been, but on the other hand *Contradiction* had had a substantial common project that gave more reason for adopting an explicit organization. Formulating a collective statement can be a fruitful way to work out where you stand, but it also involves some risks; speaking in the name of a collectivity makes it easier to get carried away in extravagant rhetoric that you might be less likely to use if speaking only for yourself. The “arrogance” of the “Notice” was, of course, an intentional effort to challenge others — far from being “elitist,” it obviously undermined whatever tendencies we might have had to accommodate passive followers. Nevertheless, this kind of style does tend to become habitual and encourage a pompous attitude. We would probably have done better to have kept things looser, more autonomous and more modest.

Anyway, over the next three years we were all pretty close, socially as well as politically. We even worked together — Jeanne, Dan and I at *Rolling Stone* magazine in San Francisco, most of the others as a house-painting team.

While I was at *Rolling Stone* I vaguely considered perpetrating some sort of détournement, such as replacing one of the pages with an alternative text critiquing the magazine and its readership;

but this turned out to be technically unfeasible. More innocuously, just for the in-joke amusement of my fellow workers, one deadline night while I was waiting for copy to come in I typeset a takeoff on the *RS* table of contents, modeled on Dan's wonderful "Great Moments in the Void" trading cards:

*The Rolling Stone Interview: Jeanne Jambu*

Many of our readers may be more familiar with artist Jeanne Jambu under her former name, Jeanne Smith. (See mastheads, *RS* Nos. 174–186.) Senior Editor Ben Fong-Torres seeks Ms. Jambu's reasons for the change, probing behind her enigmatic "I didn't like the name 'Smith.'" Throughout the interview Jambu comes through as a woman who knows what she wants: witness her bringing her own (European) coffee to the Production Department this issue. But Jambu retains a sense of proportion: she modestly noted that fellow artist Roger Carpenter had actually introduced the practice with his frequent and popular "French Roast" contributions.

*Personalities*

With this issue *Rolling Stone* introduces a dynamic new staff member, Dan ("Danny") Hammer. Hammer's has been a varied career, with work ranging from the book to the trading card fields, but he has made the shift to *Rolling Stone* with ease. His main trip here is typesetting, but, as he noted in a recent conversation, "I also sometimes do a little opaquing when they need me."

*The Missing Tapes: Four Views by Samuel Beckett, Norman Mailer, Henry Miller and Alexander Solzhenitsyn*

Shortly after dinner, Art Assistant Suzy Rice had trouble locating some typeset corrections. Senior Typesetter Ken Knabb said he had put them in the proofreading room, but Rice, finding that they were no longer there, grew frantic. Later it turned out that the missing tapes had already been picked up by Art Director Tony Lane.

We asked four prominent writers what *they* thought about the incident. The responses were lively and varied. Perhaps Alexander Solzhenitsyn's was the most penetrating comment: "I guess things like that are bound to happen every now and then."

I quit my job in summer 1975 and got back to work on notes I had put on hold the year before. The first and only issue of my journal, *Bureau of Public Secrets*, was completed the following January. As soon as it was printed and mailed out I went to Paris.

## **The breaking of a fellowship**

Apart from brief side trips to London and Bordeaux, I stayed with the Deneverts for the next three months. For the most part we got on very well. (Here as elsewhere I'm skipping many encounters, collaborations and general good times, and focusing on a few turning points.) But despite our closeness in most regards, a divergence began to become evident on the question of breaks. While I was there they broke with several people on what seemed to me rather subtle grounds. This divergence became more problematic when such breaks involved people with whom I had substantial relations. Joël Cornuault had been excluded from the CRQS a few months

before, and Nadine Bloch was in a rather uncertain position between him and the Deneverts. The fact that I was seeing her frequently while the Deneverts were not made for an uneasy and sometimes delicate situation. At one time there might seem to be a rapprochement in the making; then it would be broken off because of some seemingly trivial matter. Though I could by now understand French pretty well, some of the nuances were still over my head — one side might explain to me that such and such a phrase in a letter contained a snide irony, only to have the other deny this...

Soon after I returned to Berkeley I got a letter from Daniel announcing a “chain break” with Nadine — i.e. that he was not only breaking with Nadine, but would also break with anyone else who maintained any relation with her. I was not really any more enlightened about the whole business than I had been before (he justified this ultimatum by the *tone* of a recent letter from her), but after much agonizing I finally decided to rely on the trust and respect I had for his judgment. Such reliance might have been appropriate regarding some third party I didn’t know, but in the present case I should have refused to go along with his demand. Though this would have ended my relation with him, it might have brought the whole issue of breaks to a head earlier and in a cleaner way than later developed. Once I had capitulated in this way, it became that much more difficult for me to take a clear stand on related issues that came up a few months later.

Upsetting as this affair was, its impact on me was diminished by the fact that, for the moment, it concerned only my relations in France. Things seemed to be going well enough in Berkeley. I had started making notes for *The Realization and Suppression of Religion* in Paris, and now plunged into the project full time. I also began taking night-school courses in Spanish and Japanese. A guy in Spain was preparing a small anthology of BPS and CRQS texts and I wanted to learn enough Spanish to be able to check his translations (he eventually abandoned the project, however). I had also been corresponding with Tommy Haruki, a Japanese anarchist who was manifesting a lot of interest in the situationists, and I had begun to think about visiting Japan. Besides the political motivation, I still retained a certain interest in Zen and Japanese culture. I was doing a little zazen every morning and having a lot of fun going to a karate class with Robert and Tita. Relations with them and my other “Notice” friends still seemed pretty good.

But not for long. Within a few months there was a traumatic breakup — ironically, just as I was completing the religion pamphlet, which was in part concerned with questioning aspects of the situ scene that tended to give rise to this sort of hostility and delirium.

In January 1977 Chris wrote a letter to the Deneverts questioning the manner of their breaks with Joël and Nadine. They responded with a scathing letter to all the “Notice” signers en bloc, not only taking issue with several of Chris’s points, but considering his letter as exemplifying various incoherences that all of us had been manifesting or tolerating. After much discussion of these issues, the rest of us decided to break with Chris — not so much because of the points objected to by the Deneverts (on some of those we were in at least partial agreement with Chris) as because of our reconsideration of some recurring tendencies in his activity over the previous years.

The Deneverts concluded that we were using him as a scapegoat and broke with us in April. A few weeks later Gina came around to a similar position, and demanded that each of us “(1) denounce thoroughly and publicly the break with Chris and the break letter to him; (2) ... thereby announce the project of future public disclosure(s) giving, as one moment of his return to revolutionary practice, ... a written form to the practical truth he has grasped in his struggle to be seizing his point-of-view in the aftermath of the Notice days (which have ended); (3) sever rela-

tions with any one of the Notice signers who has not seen fit to carry out these two criteria.” Over the next month Chris, Isaac, Robert and Tita declared their acceptance of these three demands. Dan and I refused them.

I now think the break with Chris was inappropriate, especially considering the situation in which it took place. The Deneverts had challenged us to clarify our individual and collective activity. We should first of all have confronted these matters to the point where each of us knew where we stood, instead of getting carried away exaggerating the significance of Chris’s faults, which in retrospect do not seem to me to have been all that serious. At the time, however, I did not feel that the break was so totally unjustified as to call for a “thorough denunciation”; and in any case I had no intention of “announcing” a public accounting of the affair before I felt I had anything definite to say about it.

It turned out that, except for Isaac, none of those who rallied to Gina’s position ever fulfilled her second demand either. And Isaac’s bilious piece (“The American Situationists: 1972–77”) contained so many distortions and self-contradictions that he himself soon became dissatisfied with it and stopped circulating it, though he never bothered to publicly repudiate it.

I started drafting a critique of Isaac’s text, which among other things projected onto me various pretensions and illusions that I had in fact vehemently opposed whenever they had been manifested (most often by Isaac and Chris); but I eventually concluded that it was such a gross distortion of reality that it would take an equally extensive text to adequately deal with it. There seemed little point in getting embroiled in such a dismal project when I would have had nothing to offer but denunciations of his misrepresentations or reiterations of points I had already made in other publications.

Daniel circulated a more serious and cogent analysis of his position on the affair (“Sur les fonds d’un divorce”). There were a few aspects of his account that I might have debated, but his main point was simply that he and Françoise had a more rigorous position on breaks and relations than we did, and this was true enough. Without wishing to play down the significance of our other differences, I believe that some of them merely reflected our geographical separation. Thus my unsuccessful effort to get Debord’s films circulated in America, where situationist theory was still almost unknown and they might have had a significant impact, was viewed by Daniel as contradicting his efforts (notably expressed in his December 1976 text, *Suggestions relatives au légitime éloge de l’I.S.*) to criticize the development of a “Debordist” orthodoxy in the quite different conditions of France.

Why didn’t I respond to the mess by getting it out in public, like I did in *Remarks on Contradiction*? First of all, my frustration with the fizzling out of *Contradiction* had been due to the fact that so much promising effort had gone unfulfilled. In the present case we had already communicated the main things we had to say in numerous publications. Secondly, while I had had several points to make regarding the reasons for *Contradiction*’s failure, I had not arrived at any clear conclusions about the reasons for the current debacle. About the only thing I had derived from the whole miserable affair was a personal determination never again to yield to pressure regarding breaks.

Probably I would nevertheless have done better to issue *some* public statement rather than letting the affair linger on in unanswered rumors. But at this distance in time, when all the persons involved have long abandoned their old positions, there would be little point in going any more into the details in contention, which in my view were as unedifying as they were convoluted.

This may, however, be a good place to make some remarks about the whole vexed issue of situationist-type breaks.

First of all, just to keep things in perspective, it's important to remember that in breaking with people the situationists were doing nothing more than choosing their own company — deciding whom they wished to associate with and making clear, in cases where there might otherwise have been some confusion, whom they did not wish to be associated with. There's nothing elitist about such a practice; those who want to recruit devoted followers employ tact, not insults. The situationists strove to provoke others to carry out their own autonomous activities. If the “victims” of their breaks proved incapable of doing so, they only confirmed the appropriateness of the break.

Different types of projects call for different criteria. Beginning by criticizing the avant-garde cultural milieu in which they found themselves in the 1950s and moving toward a more general critique of the global system, the situationists' project was at once extremely ambitious and quite specific to their own situation. It would have been absurd for them to accept collaboration with those who did not even grasp what this project was, or who clung to practices that were inconsistent with it. If, say, the SI wanted to carry out a boycott of some cultural institution, this boycott would obviously lose its punch if some SI members continued to maintain relations with the institution in question. An early SI article pointed out the danger of losing one's radical coherence by blurring into the ambiguity of the cultural milieu:

Within such a community people have neither the need nor the objective possibility for any sort of collective discipline. Everyone always politely agrees about the same things and nothing ever changes... The “terrorism” of the SI's exclusions can in no way be compared to the same practices in political movements by power-wielding bureaucracies. It is, on the contrary, the extreme ambiguity of the situation of artists, who are constantly tempted to integrate themselves into the modest sphere of social power reserved for them, that makes some discipline necessary in order to clearly define an incorruptible platform. Otherwise there would be a rapid and irremediable osmosis between this platform and the dominant cultural milieu because of the number of people going back and forth. (*SI Anthology*, p. 60 [Revised Edition p. 79] [The Adventure]. For other articles relating to breaks, see pp. 47–48, 177–179, 216–219 in the same book [Revised Edition pp. 58–59, 230–233, 277–281] [No Useless Leniency, The Ideology of Dialogue, and Aiming for Practical Truth].)

One need only recall how many radical cultural and political movements have lost their original audacity, and eventually their very identity, by becoming habituated to little deals and compromises, settling into comfortable niches in academia, hobnobbing with the rich and famous, becoming dependent on government or foundation grants, pandering to audiences, catering to reviewers and interviewers, and otherwise accommodating themselves to the status quo. It is safe to say that if the SI had not had a rigorous policy of breaks and exclusions, it would have ended up as one more amorphous and innocuous avant-garde group of the sort that come and go every year and are remembered only in the footnotes of cultural histories.

This is a practical question, not a moral one. It's not just that it would have seemed hypocritical for the situationists to have written *On the Poverty of Student Life* if they had been academics; if they had been academics they would not have been *capable* of writing it. The lucidity of the SI

texts was directly linked to the authors' intransigence. You don't get on the cutting edge without cutting yourself free from the routines and compromises around you.

But what was perhaps appropriate for the SI is not necessarily essential for others in other circumstances. When the situationists were isolated and practically unknown, they did well to make sure that their unique perspective was not compromised. Now that that perspective has spread among thousands of people around the world and could not possibly be repressed (though it can, of course, still be coopted in various ways), there would seem to be less justification for the old SI-style bluster. A radical group may still decide to dissociate itself from certain individuals or institutions, but it has less reason to act as if everything hinges on its own purity, much less to imply that its own particular standards should be adopted by everyone else.

The situationist practice of public polarization has had the merit of fostering radical autonomy; but (in part, I believe, because of some of the factors I discussed in my religion pamphlet) this practice ultimately developed its own irrational autonomous momentum. Increasingly trivial personal antagonisms came to be treated as serious political differences. However justified some of the breaks may have been, the whole situ scene ended up looking pretty silly when virtually every individual had disdainfully split from virtually all the others. Many participants finally got so traumatized that they ended up repressing the whole experience.

I never went that far. I never renounced my radical and (apart from a few nuances) still basically situationist perspective, and have no plans to. But I was certainly disheartened by our 1977 breakup. For years I mulled it over, trying to come to terms with what had happened. As long as it hung over me it was difficult to be as audacious as I had sometimes been before. I continued to make notes on various topics, but except for two or three relatively short and specific projects I was unable to bring them to completion. Besides objective difficulties in the topics themselves (including the relative ebbing of radical activity in the late seventies) there would inevitably be ramifications that would relate back to the old trauma.

Anyway, in the immediate aftermath of the breakup, finding myself suddenly estranged from several of my closest friends and unsure of what to do next, I figured this was as good a time as any to go to Japan. That summer I took an intensive three-month Japanese course at the University, and in September I flew to Tokyo.

## Part 3 (1977–1997)

### Japan and Hong Kong

I was in Japan for two months, based in Fujinomiya, a quiet country town at the foot of Mt. Fuji where Tommy Haruki and his family lived, enough off the beaten track that some of the neighborhood children had never seen a foreigner.

After a week or two I returned to Tokyo to meet some young anarchists who were translating my “Society of Situationism.” It was interesting to try to come up with Japanese equivalents for what I had written; but due to the absence of situationist activity in Japan they naturally had no conception of many of the nuances of ideologization that my text is largely concerned with, so I doubt if the translation ever met with much understanding.

I met a number of other anarchists in Tokyo, but for the most part I did not find the scene of much interest. Just to see if I could stir things up a bit, I wrote a sharply critical open letter to one of the groups [Open Letter to the Tokyo “Libertaire” Group], which Haruki translated and circulated to anarchist addresses throughout Japan. The group reprinted it along with a couple responses on the “If you can’t say anything nice, don’t say anything” theme.

In November I made a three-week trip to Hong Kong to meet the “70s,” an anarchist group that was disseminating information on dissident tendencies in China at a time when such information was very hard to come by and many people still had illusions about Mao and the “Cultural Revolution.” I later put out a critical appreciation of the group and its publications [A Radical Group in Hong Kong]. To my surprise and disappointment, this text did not receive any public response from the 70s, though it apparently stirred up some internal debate. “Although some overseas comrades have criticised your ‘A Radical Group in Hong Kong’ as supercilious there are a number of us here (people including myself who have not met you) who *do very much* agree with you in your criticisms of the 70’s to the finest details,” wrote one correspondent, who unfortunately ended up rallying to the stale dogmatism of the International Communist Current, which hardly represents any improvement. The 70s group itself dissolved in the early 1980s.

Back in Japan, I visited some other anarchists in Kyoto and Osaka; helped Haruki reprint a Japanese translation of *On the Poverty of Student Life* that we had discovered; savored a few final dictionary-aided conversations, accompanied with cups of hot saké (particularly pleasant as the December cold began to penetrate the uninsulated houses); and returned to Berkeley.

I had mixed feelings about Japan. I disliked the conformism, the work ethic, and the persistence of traditional hierarchies and gender divisions. (There are even different grammatical forms depending on whether you’re a man or a woman, or are speaking to a superior or an inferior — I found it hard to take that sort of thing seriously.) But I liked some aspects of the culture very much — the traditional architecture and decor; the polite, modest comportment; the delicious cuisine; the almost fanatical neatness. (The practice of taking off your shoes before entering someone’s home seemed so sensible and comfortable that I’ve adopted it ever since in my own home.) And the language, though difficult, is fascinating to work with. Back in Berkeley I continued to study



it, with the idea that I might go back and live there for a while. But I never ended up doing so, primarily because I didn't hear of any interesting new radical developments there or any new contacts I wanted to meet. After a year I discontinued the study, and have since forgotten almost everything I knew. But it was fun while it lasted.

Apart from Japanese study, most of 1978 was taken up with proofreading work. For the last two decades I've gotten by on various freelance proofreading and editing jobs — not very exciting, but it allows me flexible hours and a lot of free time. Having fairly simple tastes and no family to support, I've been able to live my entire adult life in modest comfort on an income below the official poverty level. Of my only two apparent extravagances, my publications have almost paid for themselves (if you don't count my "labor" on them, which has mostly been fun) and even my occasional foreign trips have been relatively cheap because I generally only go to places where there are friends or contacts I can stay with.

That fall I started closely following the revolt in Iran, reading daily press accounts as well as exploring a lot of background history. In March 1979 I issued a poster, *The Opening in Iran*, several hundred copies of which were distributed to radical Iranian student groups in America. It was my hope that a few copies, or at least some of the ideas, might find their way to Iran, but I don't know if this ever happened. Some of the individual Iranians I met were vaguely sympathetic, but most were too caught up in the momentum of events and too attached to Islam or to one or another variety of Leninism to comprehend any truly radical perspective. A few even threatened to beat me up for disparaging Khomeini.

My text has been criticized for underestimating the preponderance of the religious element in the uprising. I assumed that both the strength of the Khomeinist movement and its reactionary nature were obvious. In any case, though Khomeini's eventual victory seemed likely, I did not believe it was a foregone conclusion — as it was, it took him several months to really consolidate his power. Leaving aside the admittedly overenthusiastic opening sentence, which was added on a last-minute impulse, my text was simply an attempt to cut through the prevalent confusions and distinguish the various forces and factors in play; it presented possibilities, not probabilities or predictions. For whatever it may be worth, someone later wrote to me: "I was in Iran shortly after the revolution. I hitchhiked from the Pakistan border to the Turkish border. I can tell of dozens of examples where ordinary people had taken power. Your analysis of the situation in Iran and its possibilities is *the only* bit of information I have seen that even remotely resembles the truth." I know nothing about the reliability of this person, but every statement in my text was based on documented sources, most of them no more radical than *Le Monde* or the *Christian Science Monitor*.

The *Monitor*, incidentally, is the only mainstream news publication I read with any regularity: I've subscribed to it ever since I discovered it while researching my Iran piece. It is, of course, far from radical, but I find it less obnoxious than other American papers, and within its moderate, more or less liberal-humanistic limits (the paper's religious perspective rarely obtrudes) it gives more international news and wastes less space on the latest moronic sensations.

In fall 1979 I went to Europe for four months. Several weeks were taken up in side trips to meet contacts in Mannheim, Nantes, Bordeaux, Barcelona, Athens and Thessaloniki. The rest of the time I stayed in Paris, hosted by Nadine and Joël, with whom I was back on excellent terms (they had visited me in California the year before). I also saw the Deneverts a few times. After the 1977 break they too had gone through a traumatic period that had eventually led them to question the sort of hostility and delirium that had frequently accompanied breaks in the situ milieu, and

had initiated some degree of reconciliation with some of the people they had previously broken with. This did not mean that they were resigned to settling back into the usual superficial social relations. A year later they sent out a set of “Lettres sur l’amitié” in which they discussed their recent experiences on the terrain of political and personal relationships and declared a “friendship strike” of indefinite duration. That was the last I ever heard of them. The next time I tried to get in touch with them they had moved and left no address. (Does anyone know where they are?) [I have since found them.]

While I was in Paris I drafted a leaflet, apropos of nothing in particular (I envisioned handing it out at random in the Métro, etc.). What with one thing or another I never got around to printing it up. Here it is for the first time, seventeen years later:

### **PARIS SPLEEN**

In Paris more than anywhere else, especially since the situationists, everything has been said but few have taken advantage of it. Because theory is in itself commonplace it can only be of value to people who are not. Radical texts have become as routine as the work and consumption they denounce. Yes, we know it’s necessary to abolish the state and wage labor, to liberate our everyday lives, etc. But we become blasé. It becomes difficult to think for ourselves. Revolution is contained by overexposure.

Only exceptionally are our struggles open and clear. Usually we are entangled, implicated in what we want to fight. It’s easy, and comforting, to blame the capitalists or the bureaucrats or the police; but it’s only thanks to the passive complicity of the “masses” that those small minorities have any power. It’s not so much the “fault” of the unions or the mass media for falsifying workers’ struggles — after all, that’s their function — as of the workers who fail to themselves assure the communication of their own experiences and perspectives.

Bad enough that the system exploits us and hurts us and keeps us in ignorance. Worse is that it *warps* us, turns us into mean, petty, spiteful, cowardly creatures. Were we confronted with a single gross temptation to self-betrayal we might well refuse it. But little by little a thousand compromises wear away our resistance. We become incapable of any experimentation, for fear of disturbing the defenses we have built up to repress our shame. Even when we arrive at considering a critical action, we hesitate; we find so many objections — we are afraid of seeming foolish, afraid of being mistaken, afraid that our idea won’t work, or that if it does it won’t amount to anything.

Hypocrite reader, your blasé expression doesn’t hide the fact that you know very well what I’m talking about. You go from ideology to ideology, each containing just enough truth to keep you hanging on but fragmentary enough to keep you from confronting the totality concretely. Successively disillusioned, you end up believing in nothing but the illusory nature of everything. Cynical spectator, like everyone else you pride yourself on being “different.” You console yourself by despising the naïve, the provincial, the yokel, the person who still believes in God or in his job — whose caricatured submission is presented as a foil precisely to make you forget your own submission. You are even telling yourself right now that this applies to most people

but not to you; while the person next to you thinks that it applies to you but not to him.

You vaguely imagine that somehow your life may get better. Do you really have any reason to believe that? Are you going to continue as you have until you die? Have you nothing to say? Have you no audacity, no imagination?

Dialogue must concern itself with the suppression of the conditions that suppress dialogue!

Let's resolve the anachronistic "social question" so we can tackle more interesting problems!

Pettiness is always counterrevolutionary!

## **The *SI Anthology***

Back in Berkeley I started working on my *Situationist International Anthology*. For years I had been frustrated by the lack of SI translations. Most of those that had appeared were inaccurate, and the few relatively good ones were usually out of print. It was difficult for people to get a sense of the overall situationist perspective and how it had developed by reading just a few scattered articles, and the only general collection, Christopher Gray's *Leaving the Twentieth Century*, was inadequate in several respects. I had already considered doing some translations myself, but my 1975 proposal (in the "Blind Men and the Elephant" poster) had failed to interest any publishers, and the thought of self-publishing a large collection seemed too overwhelming. Delay was also caused by two projected commercial editions of Vaneigem's *Treatise* that proved abortive: those of us who might have gone ahead to translate and publish situationist texts ourselves were misled by these publishers' firm assurance that their editions would soon be out — which, if true, would probably have led to other situationist books being issued by major publishers.

Eventually, after yet other rumors of new translations proved unfounded, I concluded that if I wanted a competent collection I would have to do it myself. Though not totally fluent in French, I did by this time have a pretty thorough understanding of the texts and I was able to enlist Joël and Nadine's help in clarifying any obscurities that remained.

As soon as I had worked out a fairly specific idea of the contents of the *Anthology* I sent out a prospectus to some thirty publishers, but ran into the usual presumption that situationist writings were too difficult or obscure. In retrospect this was probably fortunate. Had I succeeded, I might have had to worry about the publisher arguing about my choice of texts, insisting on a preface by some radical celebrity, adding blurbs by reviewers who didn't know what they were talking about, delaying publication, letting the book go out of print, etc. By self-publishing I was able to control the whole project. Among other things this meant that I could maintain the SI's original noncopyright policy and that I was able to keep the price down and send large quantities of free copies to prisoners and to indigent comrades in East Europe and the Third World.

The project took up most of the next two years. This was just before the advent of cheap desktop publishing; with present-day equipment I could have saved hundreds of hours and thousands of dollars on typesetting, indexing, pasteup, etc. But believing that these texts are the most important body of social critique in this century, I was quite happy to do whatever was necessary to present them as accurately as possible.

I don't believe there are any significant errors in my translation, though I might have been able to render some of the passages a bit more clearly and idiomatically (as I did in the new version of the Watts article I recently issued). A few people have questioned my decision to anglicize *dérive* and *détournement*, but I have yet to see any alternatives that are not more confusing. (On the other hand, I now feel that the one other French term I anglicized, *récupération*, can be most clearly translated by "cooption," despite the slightly different connotations of the two words.)

As happens with any anthology, some readers disagreed with the choice of articles. Michel Prigent, who seems never to have forgiven me for having pointed out that his own translations of situationist texts (published under the names Piranha and Chronos) are clumsily overliteral, accused me of shaping the selection to accord with my own "ideological perspectives"; but aside from apparently implying that I should have included one or two texts that he himself had already translated, the only alternative he suggested was a complete English edition of the French journals. I hope someone will eventually publish such an edition, but this would have tripled the time and expense of what was already a pretty overwhelming project.

A few other critics claimed that I "concealed" the earlier, more cultural phase of the SI. The *Anthology* is admittedly weighted somewhat toward the situationists' later, more "political" period (without which no one but a few specialists in obscure avant-garde movements would have ever heard of them), but the main features of the earlier phase could hardly escape anyone who reads the first dozen articles of the book. I probably would have included more selections from *Potlatch* and other pre-SI material if it had been available at the time; but if I didn't go into the subsequent history of the "Nashists" and other artistic tendencies this is because I think they are of little interest and have little to do with the situationists' most original and vital contributions. Since the book's appearance these critics have had fifteen years to publish the vital texts I supposedly concealed; so far what they have come up with has not been overwhelming.

Other readers wished there were more annotations explaining obscure references. Actually the supposed obscurity of situationist texts is greatly exaggerated. They usually assume little more than a minimal acquaintance with a few basic works and major historical events that anyone with a serious desire to understand and change the world should certainly find out about for themselves if they don't already know about them. The context usually makes the sense pretty clear even if you are not familiar, say, with some particular European ideologue being denounced, just as you can learn a lot from Marx and Engels without knowing anything about the particular philosophers and economists they criticized.

Others wished I had included some of the original SI illustrations. I like them as much as anyone. But many of the best ones (particularly the detoured comics) were already so widely reprinted and imitated that they were tending to distract from the writings and reinforce the popular misconception that situationist publications consisted of zappy collages designed to blow people's minds. I felt that it wouldn't hurt the image addicts to pay attention to the simple unadorned texts for a change.

There were also, of course, many more comments about the texts themselves. In the last few years books and articles on the SI have become even more numerous than in the immediate aftermath of May 1968, and the SI has become more intriguingly notorious than ever.

A little of the aura has even rubbed off on me. Since the original SI members have generally remained unavailable, I have sometimes been considered the next best thing, and have been asked to do booksignings, to grant interviews, to give talks, to be videotaped, to contribute to various publications, to provide information for graduate theses, to take part in radical conferences and

academic symposiums, to be a “visiting artist” at an art institute, and even to furnish background material for a television program. I have refused all these requests.

This isn’t a matter of rigid principle. Someday, if I’m ever in the mood and am given sufficiently free conditions, I may decide to detourn one of these situations, as Debord once did when he gave a talk at a conference on “everyday life” (see *SI Anthology*, pp. 68–75 [new ed. 90–99]) [Perspectives for Conscious Changes in Everyday Life] which among other things criticized the inherent limits and biases of such conferences. But on the whole I think people are fooling themselves if they believe that the radical effect of this sort of publicity outweighs all the trivializing and neutralizing effects (including the subtle temptations to accentuate one’s own trendy or sensational qualities while refraining from offending anyone, in order to ensure that one will be invited again). In any case, although I’m somewhat less rigorous in these matters than was the SI, when I am asked to present or represent “the situationist perspective” I feel I convey that perspective most incisively by refusing the kinds of things the situationists themselves consistently refused.

Anyone is free to reprint, adapt or comment on the *SI Anthology* or any of my other publications. I can’t take seriously those who never do so while seeking some personal encounter or scoop designed to give spectators the impression they have gotten some inside dope about texts they often haven’t even bothered to read, much less put into practice. It seems to me that maintaining this distance puts things on the clearest basis. Shortly after the publication of the *Anthology*, for example, a certain professional writer wanted to interview me to obtain information for an article he had been asked to write on the situationists for the weekly *East Bay Express*. I refused to have anything to do with him, and the projected article never appeared. Around the same time I also refused to meet Greil Marcus when he was preparing a review of the *Anthology* for the *Village Voice*, but to his credit he did not let this stop him from writing a lengthy and very laudatory article. There was, after all, plenty of information in the SI texts themselves, and because he read them carefully he was able to get most of his facts right. Though limited in some regards,<sup>1</sup> his article was an honest expression of his take on the situationists, done out of his own enthusiastic interest, not because someone assigned him to do it or because I sucked up to him. Everything is so much clearer this way.

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<sup>1</sup> To put it briefly, in both his *Village Voice* article and his subsequent book, *Lipstick Traces*, Marcus relates to the situationists *aesthetically*, as a fascinated *spectator*. For all his awe of their extremist ideas, he shows little interest in the carefully calculated tactics and organizational forms through which they tried to *implement* those ideas instead of merely impulsively “expressing” them like his other heroes, the dadaists and the punks. His personal, impressionistic approach is more illuminating than the fatuous accounts of most academic and cultural critics, but he shares the latter’s main blind spot: preferring the situationists’ early, more intriguingly exotic phase, while seeing their later revolutionary perspective as an embarrassing anachronism. Such critics invariably assure us that, whatever revolutions may have happened in the past, it’s all over now and will never happen again. After ridiculing the SI’s advocacy of workers councils (which was far less simplistic than he implies), Marcus blasély concludes: “If the situationist idea of general contestation was realized in May 1968, the idea also realized its limits. The theory of the exemplary act ... may have gone as far as such a theory or such an act can go” — ignoring how close the May movement came to going much farther (see the passages cited on pages 53 and 57 of the present book [in the sections “What could have happened in May 1968” and “The ultimate showdown” of *The Joy of Revolution*, chapter 3]) and never mentioning subsequent movements such as Portugal 1974 or Poland 1980 (which in some respects did go farther) or any of the individual currents attempting to actually use and develop the situationists’ achievements. I myself am oddly pigeonholed as a “student” of the SI, as if there was nothing left for any of us latecomers but to produce learned dissertations or wistful elegies on the heroic ventures of bygone times.

By the early 1980s I had reestablished friendly relations with most of the other “Notice” signers. They had gone their various ways and, except for Chris and Isaac, who had each put out two or three pamphlets in the interim, none of them had carried on any notable radical activity since our 1977 breakup. In 1982 Isaac and his wife Terrel Seltzer also put out *Call It Sleep*, a 45-minute videotape roughly in the style of Debord’s films. Not long afterwards Isaac renounced his previous radical perspective, justifying his subsequent devotion to primarily financial pursuits with what seems to be a sort of neo-laissez-faire ideology in a bizarre book he co-authored with Paul Béland, *Money: Myths and Realities* (1986).

I’ve made some criticisms of Isaac because he expressed viewpoints from which I felt obliged to dissociate myself. But I would like to acknowledge my debt to him and to many other former comrades. We went through a lot of exciting times together. All the polemics have tended to overemphasize the problems of the situ milieu. For me, at any rate, the ventures recounted here so tersely contained many valued relationships, lots of good times, and an immense amount of laughs; even the fiascos were often amusing. I hope my old friends haven’t entirely forgotten them.

Once the *SI Anthology* was published I felt less obliged to devote so much time and energy to explaining the situationist perspective, correcting misconceptions, etc. The most significant questions were dealt with quite lucidly by the situationists themselves in the texts that were now available. Over the next few years, apart from carrying on more or less routine correspondence and distribution and making occasional notes, I began to explore other things.

## Rock climbing

My first new venture turned out to be rock climbing, one of the last things I would ever have imagined myself getting into. Like almost everyone, I was very afraid of heights; but during recent outings I had begun to find myself more and more intrigued by the idea of climbing, feeling a sort of primal, primate allure whenever I saw cliffs or rock formations. Eventually I suppressed my terror and signed up for a beginning rock climbing class. We spent a couple hours learning the basic principles, then went to some outcrops in the Berkeley Hills and actually climbed. A few weeks later I took a more advanced class in Yosemite and did my first really high climbs on the granite cliffs, hundreds of feet straight up.

For the next two years rock climbing was my passion. When possible I went on trips in Yosemite and elsewhere in the Sierras; but most of the time I climbed right in town, biking several times a week up to Indian Rock for bouldering (practicing difficult moves near the ground). With the right kind of shoes (made with high-friction rubber soles and worn supertight so your foot becomes one firm, scrunched-up unit like a mountain goat’s hoof) it’s amazing what meager indentations in the rock can accommodate your toe or finger — a pea-sized bump will do if you orient your body just right, gauging the right balance of opposing forces, moving carefully but with relaxed confidence (if you tremble you’re more likely to slip).

If you pay attention and use the ropes properly, rock climbing isn’t as dangerous as it might seem. Still, there’s obviously some risk. At first I loved it so much that I felt the risk was acceptable; but after a couple years I decided to quit while I was ahead. In Aldous Huxley’s utopian novel *Island* it’s part of the education of every adolescent to have at least one psychedelic trip and one

rock climbing trip (though not at the same time!). Considering their risks I would hesitate to recommend either one unreservedly, but both experiences have certainly meant a lot to me.

I still occasionally do a little bouldering and hiking (most often over the hills, through the woods and along the beach at nearby Point Reyes), but my main exercise in recent years has been basketball and tennis. Playing basketball with the black teenagers in my neighborhood was an interesting cultural as well as physical challenge: I felt like I had accomplished something when I finally became accepted as more or less one of the guys. More recently I've shifted to tennis. It's also virtually the only thing I ever watch on television: I lug my set out of storage three or four times a year for Wimbledon and other major tournaments.

In fall 1984 I made another trip to France, staying most of the time in Paris with my friend Christian Camus. We had originally met in a situ context during my previous trip, but by this time his focus had shifted to experimenting with ways to enliven his own immediate milieu. That's fine with me: if I have to choose, I prefer intellectually alive people who do interesting things with their life over those who do nothing but regurgitate political platitudes and gripe all the time. Full of playful irony, provocative banter and jokes in several languages, and possessing a keen insight into people's games and scripts (in Eric Berne's sense), Christian keeps me on my toes when I start becoming too stodgy and pedantic.

There were two side trips: to the Dordogne region in southwest France where Joël and Nadine were now living, and to Germany to revisit my Mannheim friends and briefly meet another group in West Berlin.

## Rexroth again

Back in Berkeley I began work on two Rexroth projects. During the early seventies my interest in Rexroth had waned. In the light of the situationist perspectives his political analysis seemed insufficient, his notion of subversion through art and poetry seemed dubious, and some of his activities, such as writing newspaper columns or dabbling in Catholicism, seemed unacceptably compromising.

In less direct ways, however, his influence persisted. Recalling his skeptical magnanimity helped me keep things in perspective during some of the more traumatic situ affairs. In my 1977 religion pamphlet I was already trying to figure out to what extent these two major influences of my life could be reconciled; since that time, my enthusiasm for him had fully revived. Besides rereading all his books, I hunted up and photocopied as many of his uncollected articles as I could locate in the old magazine files at the University library, including all of the 800+ columns he wrote for the San Francisco *Examiner*.

On a lark, I sent out a proposal to edit an anthology of the columns. There was enough tentative interest on the part of a few publishers that I spent several months going through the columns in order to prepare a representative sampling. Ultimately only one small publisher made an offer, and it was so unsatisfactory that I rejected it and decided to put the project on the shelf. I would have been happy to put in a lot of time editing the columns for a modest royalty, but I didn't feel like publishing them myself.

It had meanwhile occurred to me that it was more to the point to express my own perspective on Rexroth, to try to convey just what it was that I thought was so great about him as well as to

clarify the points where I disagreed with him. Besides hopefully turning people on to him, this would be a good way for me to work out my own views on all sorts of topics.

This project turned out to occupy me on and off over the next five years. I could, of course, have written most of what I had to say in a much shorter period; but since I had no deadline I took my time and indulged myself, reading his works over and over, gleaning favorite quotes, accumulating masses of notes, and following out all sorts of tangents. It might occur to me, say, that it would be interesting to compare Rexroth with other freewheeling writers such as H. L. Mencken, Edmund Wilson, George Orwell or Paul Goodman; this would be a good excuse to reread several of their books, even if I ended up making little if any use of them in my text.

## Zen practice

In 1985 I also began a regular Zen practice. Over the years I had occasionally done a little zazen at home, but I had scarcely taken part in any formal group practice since the sixties. As I mentioned earlier, in addition to laziness and involvement in other things, I had reservations about some of the traditional forms. Although Zen is less dogmatic and more intellectually sophisticated than most religions, traditional Zen practice is quite strict and formal. I could recognize the need for certain forms to facilitate concentration and self-discipline, but I was dubious about others that seemed to be mere vestiges of Oriental social hierarchy. I was quite aware of the deplorable role religion has played in reinforcing acquiescence in the established order, and of people's remarkable capacity for self-deception.<sup>2</sup>

Rexroth used to say, "Religion is not something you believe, it's something you do." I don't know if this can justly be said of the major Western religions, which very emphatically insist on belief in certain dogmas, but it's at least partially true of some of the Eastern ones. The Eastern religions probably contain as much bullshit as the Western ones (the more superstitious or obnoxious aspects are usually discreetly omitted in Western popularizations), but they do tend

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<sup>2</sup> Before going on, I should stress that my Zen practice has nothing to do with any supernatural beliefs. To my understanding, Zen does not invalidate science or reason, it simply tries to break the habit of excessive, compulsive intellectualizing. Without *some* logical discrimination people could not survive for a day — or even understand what I'm saying well enough to disagree with it.

Though science is often accused of arrogance, it is virtually the only field of human endeavor that takes into account its own fallibility, that consistently tests itself and corrects its own errors through rigorously objective methods designed to counteract people's natural tendencies toward fallacious reasoning, unconscious biases and selective memory (remembering the hits and forgetting all the misses). To really test the claims of astrology, for example, requires checking a statistically large sampling of people to see if, say, a disproportionate number of scientists are born under signs supposed to indicate rationalistic tendencies. Such tests have been carried out many times and in no case has there turned out to be any such correlation. Similar investigations of many other supposed paranormal phenomena have been described in books by James Randi, Martin Gardner and others and in numerous articles in the *Skeptical Inquirer* (journal of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal). Over and over such claims have been shown to be based on rumors that turn out to be false, misinterpretations of otherwise explainable events, insufficiently rigorous conditions of experimentation, or hoaxes and charlatanism.

There may turn out to be kernels of truth in a few of these areas, but considering how susceptible people are to fooling themselves (and to clinging to their beliefs rather than admitting that they've been made fools of) I intend to reserve judgment until I see some good evidence. For years Randi and others have made a standing offer of \$100,000 to anyone who can demonstrate any paranormal power whatsoever under scientifically controlled conditions (including observation by professional magicians like Randi, who are capable of recognizing the sorts of tricks often used by charlatans). Hundreds of self-proclaimed psychics, dowrsers, astrologers, etc., have tried to do so. So far not a single one has succeeded.



to be more tolerant and ecumenical. Their myths are often explicitly presented as mere spiritual metaphors and there is relatively little insistence on beliefs. Zen in particular is more a practice than a belief system. Verbal teachings are considered meaningless unless you test and assimilate them for yourself. The most vital teachings are by living example. Despite an element of guru-disciple hierarchy (which has been considerably attenuated as Zen has been adapted in the West), the emphasis is not on worship of superior beings but on the practice of meditation and mindfulness in one's own day-to-day activity.

In my Rexroth book I implied where I personally draw the line: "It is one thing to practice some type of meditation or take part in some ritual or festival that everyone understands is simply an arbitrary form to focus one's life or celebrate communion; it is another to seem to lend credibility to repugnant institutions and to sick dogmas that are still widely believed." I suppose this is mainly a matter of taste. I have friends who have fewer qualms than I, and others who wouldn't be caught dead taking part in any formal religious practice whatsoever. Personally I like most of the Zen rituals, the silence, the bells, the incense, the neat Japanese-style decor, the ultraconsiderate etiquette. And practicing with a group offers many advantages in the way of instruction, camaraderie and mutual encouragement.

Anyway, I was in a mood to suspend my relatively mild objections and try out a more regular practice. The Berkeley center I had gone to in the sixties had quietly carried on the Soto Zen practice brought to America by Shunryu Suzuki.<sup>3</sup> The teacher, Mel Weitsman, one of Suzuki's students whom I had known in the sixties, was both solid and low-key, and the members, a varied and generally congenial assortment of laypeople trying to integrate Zen practice into their everyday lives, seemed to have kept their sense of humor and to have avoided any excessive cultishness. And I didn't even have to get up early: they now had afternoon as well as morning sittings.

I started going for a forty-minute period of zazen every weekday afternoon.

In zazen (sitting meditation) we sit cross-legged on a firm cushion, facing a blank wall. The belly is pushed slightly forward so that the spine is erect and the body is stably balanced on buttocks and knees. Mouth closed. Eyes lowered but open. Shoulders relaxed. Hands in lap, left on right, thumb tips lightly touching. If sitting cross-legged is too difficult other postures, such as sitting over one's heels or even sitting on a chair, are okay as long as the back is straight; but the cross-legged lotus position (both feet resting on opposite thighs) or some easier variation thereof (one foot on opposite thigh or calf) provides optimum groundedness.

In Soto-style zazen we generally concentrate on maintaining our posture (constantly correcting the tendencies to slump or to tense up) and following our breath — breathing from the abdomen and silently counting exhalations: "O-n-n-n-e ..., t-w-o-o-o ..." If you get to ten you just start all over again. The numbers simply provide an arbitrary nonemotive focus to help maintain concentration. The point is to get as close as you can to "doing nothing" while remaining totally alert.

It's not as easy as you might think. Most of us have developed a strong habitual resistance to being in the present. What usually happens is that by the time you've got to "three" or "four,"

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<sup>3</sup> Not to be confused with D.T. Suzuki, whose numerous works deal with the more dramatically "goal-oriented" Rinzai school of Zen. Shunryu Suzuki left only one modest little book, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, but it's a gem. There is now a Shunryu Suzuki website created by David Chadwick, author of the excellent Suzuki biography, *Crooked Cucumber*, and of the delightful and often hilarious account of his own experiences, *Thank You and OK!: An American Zen Failure in Japan*. [Note added 1999.]

you've become caught up in memories, daydreams, desires, worries, fears, regrets. This repetitive cacophony is going on in our minds most of the time, but in zazen you become more acutely aware of it.

It may come as quite a shock to realize how petty and compulsive your usual thoughts and feelings are. It did to me, anyway. I could see how Christian believers going through similar experiences saw them as a confirmation of humanity's inherent sinfulness, leaving them no way out but faith in some supernatural redemption. Buddhism addresses these matters more calmly, tolerantly, objectively, without getting so caught up in futile breastbeating. Trying to repress the "monkey mind" only stirs up more emotional entanglement. But if you just sit still, without any value judgments, and keep coming back to your breath, the disturbances, deprived of reinforcement, will tend to settle out, become less emotive, less subject to compulsive habits and associations. It's not a matter of eliminating thoughts or emotions, but of ceasing to *cling* to them – ceasing to cling even to your sense of progress in not clinging. The moment you start thinking: "Ah! Now I'm finally getting somewhere! Won't so-and-so be impressed!" you've drifted away from present awareness. Just calmly note the fact, and start again: "O-n-n-n-e ..., t-w-o-o-o ..."

After a couple months of daily sitting I started taking part in the monthly *sesshins*: one or more days of intensive Zen practice, primarily zazen, but with other activities carried out with a similar effort to focus mindfully on just what you are doing. A *sesshin* typically runs from 5:00 in the morning to 9:00 in the evening. Zazen is in 40-minute periods, alternating with 10-minute periods of *kinhin* (ultraslow walking meditation to stretch the legs). Beginning and end of periods are signaled by bells or wooden clappers. No talking except for minimal necessary communication during work. The procedure of serving and eating, which also takes place in the *zendo* (meditation hall), is elaborately ritualistic. Servers bring a dish, you bow to each other, they serve you, you make a palm-up gesture to indicate "enough," you bow to each other again, then they proceed to the next person...

I particularly liked the longer *sesshins* (five or seven days). The first day of a *sesshin* you may still be preoccupied with your other affairs, but after three or four days you can hardly help settling into the *sesshin* rhythm. They say there are two kinds of Zen experience. One is sudden and unmistakable, like getting a bucket of water dumped on your head. The other is more gradual and subtle, like walking through a mist and then noticing that your clothes have imperceptibly become soaking wet. That's sort of what you feel like in the later stages of a *sesshin*. It all starts coming together.

It can also be pretty grueling, with fatigue, stiff shoulders, aching back, sore knees. Though it becomes easier as the body gets used to the cross-legged position, most people continue to experience some knee pain during *sesshins*. The point isn't to see how much pain you can stand (if it's really too much, you can always shift to some easier position), but to learn to deal with whatever comes with equanimity; to stop yearning for the past or the future and settle right in the moment. After a while you discover that suffering is caused less by pain itself than by cringing apprehension of future pain. The first day of a *sesshin* can be horrifying if you're sitting there thinking that you have seven more days of this to endure. But if you take it just one breath at a time, it's not so bad.

(This is where one of the greatest advantages of practicing with a group comes in. When you're sitting alone it's too easy to rationalize stopping when you feel a little discomfort; but when several participants have committed themselves to a *sesshin* and are all sitting there together, each person's effort encourages everyone else.)

As soon as you begin to get accustomed to the zazen, other responsibilities are thrust upon you which require equal mindfulness. If you're a server your mind mustn't wander or you might spill soup on someone. If you head up a dishwashing team consisting of people who aren't familiar with the procedures, you need to make sure dishes are put away in the right places, yet you don't want to disturb people's efforts to concentrate by yacking away about every detail. Each situation presents new challenges to find the right balance between efficiency and presence, calculation and spontaneity, effort and ease.

Hopefully some of these habits gradually become integrated into your everyday life. I don't want to give the impression that zazen is a cure-all, but I do think that some sort of regular meditation helps one to develop a little more patience and sense of perspective; to recognize certain problems as unimportant or illusory, and to deal more calmly and objectively with those that still seem significant.

After a year and a half of intensive day-to-day involvement with the center I got a bit burned out, and reverted to doing my daily zazen at home. I continued, however, to take part in the longer sesshins. I also started going to sesshins at some of the other centers in northern California, including one that Gary Snyder and others (including an old friend of Sam's and mine from the sixties) had recently built on their land in the Sierra Nevada foothills. As might be expected, they have a strong back-to-nature orientation: some of their sesshins are combined with seven-day backpacking trips — an arduous but powerful combination!

In early 1988 I started thinking about taking part in an intensive three-month "practice period" at the Tassajara monastery. For years I had vaguely imagined that going to a Zen monastery would be one of the ultimate things to do; now I began to think I might actually do it. In the spring I went to Tassajara for a week just to see what it felt like, and liked it very much indeed. Back in the Bay Area I took part in a few more sesshins, arranged my affairs, and in late September packed up and drove back down.

The first Zen monastery in the Western hemisphere (founded in 1967 by Shunryu Suzuki), Tassajara is located in the coastal mountains about a hundred miles south of the Bay Area. It used to be a hot springs resort, and still functions as such in the summer; but during the rest of the year it's closed to the public.

Besides Mel, who led the practice period, there were 26 participants (14 men and 12 women) plus two staff people who took care of technical maintenance work and shopping trips to town. During the next three months none of us left Tassajara and no one else came there except a couple visiting Japanese monks and two or three Zen Center people briefly down from San Francisco.

Eleven of us were there for our first practice period and had to go through a five-day initiation: a superintensive sesshin with even less physical and mental relief from zazen (no kinhin, no lectures, no work). Except for a half-hour break after each meal and bathroom breaks as needed, we had to remain seated on our cushions from 4:20 a.m. to 9:00 p.m.

Even more than in a sesshin, everything levels out. Time slows. Attention is reduced to the simplest things. Nothing to do but stew in your own juices (literally as well as figuratively: it's sweltering) and learn to calmly ignore the relentless little mucous flies that delight in crawling around your eyes, ears and nostrils. (The only solution is to accept them: "Okay, you little rascals, do what you must! I'm not moving.") Just sit, perfectly still, breath after breath... The bell rings. Slowly get up, keeping eyes lowered. Come together for a ritual. Then back to your cushion for a meal. Then a break. Slowly exit the zendo, striving to maintain complete concentration despite the sudden splendor of the natural world outside. Have a cup of tea. Massage your aching legs.

A few precious minutes are left for sitting by the creek and letting the sound of the water pour through your head. Then back to the zendo. Settle into the right posture. Become perfectly still. Just this breath, breath after breath...

After it was over, we reverted to a somewhat less intense schedule. Every morning at 4:00 we were awakened by someone running down the main path jangling a loud bell. Just time to wash my face, do a few yoga stretches, put on my meditation robe and go to the zendo. The morning was like a sesshin: mostly zazen, with breakfast and lunch served ritual-style in the zendo. In the afternoon we worked for three hours. I was part of the miscellaneous contingent and did all sorts of different jobs — carpentry, hauling, gardening, dishwashing, cleaning, taking care of the library. After work came the most luxurious part of the day: a leisurely hot bath followed by an hour of free time. Then back on with our robes and to the zendo for dinner. Then a study period, then more zazen. To bed at 9:30. There was never any trouble getting to sleep: the next thing I heard was that jangling wakeup bell...

Every fifth day we got to sleep till the indulgently late hour of 5:00, and after one period of zazen and breakfast we had free time until evening. This was generally spent doing laundry, packing a sack lunch and taking a hike, or sitting around reading, writing letters or quietly socializing. In the evening we had a class on Dogen's "Genjo Koan": "To study the Buddha way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be actualized by the myriad things. When actualized by the myriad things, your body and mind as well as the bodies and minds of others drop away. No trace of realization remains, and this no-trace is continued endlessly..."

Within a few weeks the weather turned frigid. Shaded by the surrounding mountains, Tassajara becomes cold and damp in fall and winter, at least until midday, and there was no heating or insulation. At least the cold helped us wake up. Though the routine was Spartan in some ways, it was refreshing to get down to basics and live in a community in which everyone was quietly working together. For me a sesshin or a practice period is a hint of how life could be. Upon meeting anyone on a path we both stopped, bowed to each other, then continued on our way without saying a word. Wonderful!

## **Reading, writing, translating and music**

Back in Berkeley, I resumed what has been my ongoing Zen practice ever since (brief daily zazen at home plus long sesshins a few times a year) and got back to work on my Rexroth book [The Relevance of Rexroth]. I had accumulated hundreds of pages of notes, but eventually I decided to leave most of them out and pare the text down to a brief and relatively accessible presentation of a few main themes. It was finally completed in 1990. Sales have been pretty modest, but (one of the advantages of self-publishing) I've also been able to give copies to hundreds of friends and acquaintances, sometimes even to total strangers. I'll continue to do so with the numerous copies I still have on hand, but I've also included it in this collection [the book *Public Secrets*] because it goes into a lot of matters that are important to me but that aren't dealt with in my other writings.

In January 1991 the Gulf war brought hundreds of thousands of people into the streets for the first time in years. I immediately started writing *The War and the Spectacle*. Most of the points in that text were already being widely discussed or intuited, but I felt that the situationist concept of the spectacle would help tie them together. With a little help from some friends I distributed

15,000 copies over the next few months. Besides mailing them to individuals, groups and radical bookstores around the world, I saturated the local antiwar milieu, handing them out at marches, rallies, demonstrations, films, concert benefits, radical theater performances in the parks, forums on “the war and the media,” and appearances of Ramsey Clark and Thich Nhat Hanh. It was the most well received text I’ve ever done. Nearly everyone who got it read it, no one complained that they couldn’t understand it, many people later told me that they had photocopied it and sent it to friends or entered it onto computer networks, and it was widely reprinted and translated.

One of the few critics of the piece expressed surprise that I took over two months to write such a short article. I envy people who can work faster, but for me that’s about par for the course. I do write a lot — noting anything that has any conceivable connection with whatever topic I’m working on, sometimes virtually free-associating — but I’m not usually satisfied till I’ve drastically condensed the material, going over every detail numerous times, eliminating redundancies and exaggerations, experimenting with different rearrangements, considering potential objections and misconceptions. I feel that one carefully considered text will have a sharper and ultimately more far-reaching impact than a dozen slipshod ones.

Since I only tackle subjects that I’m really interested in, the process is usually pretty engrossing. Sometimes I get into the ecstatic “negative rush” state described in *Double-Reflection* — so many ideas flood through my mind I hardly have time to write them all down; out walking, I may have to stop every few minutes to jot down some idea; I may even get up in the middle of the night to scribble notes to myself. Sometimes I get so involved that if I faced imminent death my first concern would be: Just let me finish this piece, then I’ll go happily!

At other times I get burned out and depressed; everything I’ve written seems boring and trite. I may work all day on some passage, lie awake thinking about it that night, then throw the whole thing out in disgust the next morning. As I get closer to publication I agonize over possible consequences. A poorly expressed point might lead to a lot of time wasted in misunderstandings; a well-expressed one might trigger a turning point in someone’s life.

We all have a natural tendency to repress things that contradict our own views. The best way I know to mitigate this tendency is the one Darwin used: “I had, during many years, followed a golden rule, namely, that whenever a published fact, a new observation or thought, came across me which was opposed to my general results, to make a memorandum of it without fail and at once; for I had found by experience that such facts and thoughts were far more apt to escape from the memory than favorable ones.” I try to follow this rule, playing devil’s advocate on every issue, carefully considering any critiques of myself and immediately noting anything that occurs to me in the way of possible objections to my ideas — answering them if I can, modifying or abandoning my position if I can’t. Even the most delirious attacks usually contain some valid points, or at least reveal misconceptions that I need to clarify.

It’s necessary to strike a psychological balance. Too much worry about possible objections makes you afraid to do anything. Orthodox situationists scorn my mysticism, New Ageists feel I’m too rationalistic, old leftists denounce me for downplaying class struggle, arbiters of political correctness imply that I should express more contrition for being a white American male, academics fault my lack of scholarly objectivity, hangloose types find me too meticulous, some complain that my writing is too difficult, others accuse me of oversimplifying... If I took all these objections too seriously, I’d become a catatonic! Eventually you just have to go for it.

As far as possible I try to make each project a new venture, choosing a topic I haven’t explored or a method I haven’t tried before. This makes it more interesting for me at least, and hopefully

for the reader as well. I also try to avoid taking on too many things at once. It's easy to get burned out if you constantly absorb all the bad news of the world or try to contribute to every good cause. I generally concentrate on one or two projects that interest me so deeply that I'm willing to devote to them whatever time and expense is necessary, while ignoring most other things that I have no real intention of doing anything about.

Back to France in fall 1991, once again staying with Christian (in a household with his girlfriend and his brother). There were three side trips: to Grenoble to visit Jean-François Labrugère, a friend who has translated several of my texts with an exemplary meticulousness; to Warsaw to meet some young anarchists who were just discovering the situationists; and to Barcelona, where I joined some of my German friends. On the way back to Paris I stopped in the Dordogne region to see Joël and Nadine. I had turned them on to Rexroth years before, and they had eventually become as enthusiastic Rexrothians as I and had recently completed a translation of the first of his books to appear in French, *Les Classiques revisités*.

I spent a lot of my time in Paris exploring my biggest musical enthusiasm of the last few years, vintage French popular songs — scouring the flea markets and used record stores for old albums, taping my friends' collections, and trying to decipher the more obscure, slangy lyrics. It's a rich, fascinating world, from nineteenth-century cabaret singers like Aristide Bruant (the guy with red scarf and black cape pictured on the well-known Toulouse-Lautrec poster, which was commissioned to advertise the café where Bruant performed his own songs), through the tragic-sordid *chansons réalistes* (Fréhel, Damia, early Piaf) and upbeat music hall artists (especially the delightfully zany Charles Trenet) of the 1930s, to the post-World War II renaissance of great poet-singers: Georges Brassens (the greatest, ranging from worldly-wise elegies to outrageous satirical humor), Anne Sylvestre (a lovely lyricist, somewhat reminiscent of early Leonard Cohen or Joni Mitchell), Léo Ferré, Jean-Roger Caussimon, Jacques Brel, Guy Béart, Félix Leclerc; along with many excellent interpreters of earlier material, of whom my favorite is Germaine Montero.

It's hard to find such music here in the States, but my friends and I occasionally get a little taste when the Baguette Quartette performs at the local Freight and Salvage folk music club, which has hosted so many wonderful musicians over the last three decades. Although I've gone through a number of musical enthusiasms over the years, from the elemental sounds of Japanese taiko drum ensembles to the hard-boiled rebetika songs of the Greek urban underworld, I've always retained a special fondness for old-time American folk music, probably because it's the only kind I can also play. I still enjoy doing so with small gatherings of friends (including a few who date from my old Shimer and Chicago days) and I rarely miss the monthly East Bay Fiddlin' and Pickin' Potlucks, where a hundred or so people bring food and play music all afternoon at some suitably large house. Interspersed with eating and socializing, people cluster into their own preferred genres — bluegrass, say, in the back yard, Irish music in the den, group singing upstairs, 1930s swing around the piano (if there happens to be one), old-time fiddle tunes on the front porch, blues, or perhaps cajun or klezmer, in the driveway or overflowing onto the sidewalk. I'm usually to be found with one of the old-time bunches, singing and playing fiddle or guitar — nothing fancy, but enough to have a good time. Everybody participates at their own level: less-skilled players like myself tend to follow the more versatile ones as best we can, but any of us are always free to initiate one of the numbers we know. The EBFPP has been smoothly functioning for nearly twenty years now on a purely self-organized and volunteer basis. I sometimes think of it, and of countless similar circles and networks that are going on all the time without ever seeking or

receiving notice in the spectacle, as modest foreshadowings of how things would function in a sane society. Not that it's any big deal. That's the point.

I still agree with the situationists that the arts are limited forms of creativity, and that it's more interesting to try to bring our creativity into the project of transforming our lives, and ultimately our whole society. When I'm engaged in that great game I find I have less inclination for artistic activities. But there's a time for everything. The situationist critique of "the spectacle" (i.e. of the spectacle *system*) is a critique of an excessive social tendency; it does not mean that it's a sin to be a spectator, any more than the Marxian critique of the commodity system implies that people should do without goods.

I've always found it amusing that radicals feel they have to justify their cultural consumption by pretending to find some radical message in it. Personally, I would far rather read a lively human being with a twinkle in his eye, like Rexroth, Mencken, Henry Miller or Ford Madox Ford, than some inane politically correct priggery. For that matter, I'd rather read Homer or Basho or Montaigne or Gibbon than virtually any modern writer. I can still appreciate certain great works of the past, recognizing that their limitations were understandable in the context of their time; but it's hard to take seriously post-1968 visionaries who haven't even noticed the new possibilities of life. When it comes to contemporary authors, I scarcely read anything but frankly escapist works that have no pretensions of profundity or radicality. Some of my favorites are Rex Stout's detective stories (not so much for the plots as for the amusing world of the Nero Wolfe household and Archie Goodwin's lively narration); Jack Vance's fantasy and science fiction (for his remarkable variety of bizarre societies and his drolly sardonic and ironic dialogues); and the nonfiction science essays of Isaac Asimov, who has the rare knack of making just about anything he writes about both informative and entertaining, whether he's explaining the latest discoveries in astronomy or particle physics or speculating about what sex would be like in a zero-gravity space station.

In 1992 I set out to translate my Rexroth book into French. Even if it was never published, I wanted at least to have an adequate version on hand to give to friends and contacts. It was also a good opportunity to refine my still rather limited French skills. I prepared a first draft on my dandy new computer, then over the next year mailed successive drafts to Jean-François Labrugère, who made numerous corrections and suggestions for more idiomatic style. We circulated a provisional version in 1993; a revised version will be published in early 1997.

During the same period I also began working with Joël Cornuault on a series of translations of Rexroth's own works, beginning with a bilingual edition of thirty of his poems (*L'automne en Californie*, 1994) and most recently including a selection from his journalism (*Le San Francisco de Kenneth Rexroth*, 1997).

It's been a pleasure to collaborate with these two translators because both of them have the patience to carefully verify the precise nuance of each phrase, even though this can be pretty time-consuming when done by correspondence.

## **How this book came to be**

1993 brought a lot of things together for me, ultimately leading to the book you have in your hands [*Public Secrets*]. Early in the year I finally got around to reading all of Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (*Remembrance of Things Past*). Immersing myself in that immense, sometimes

tedious but usually fascinating work got me in the mood to explore my own past. Primarily for my own interest (though with the idea that I might eventually show the text to a few close friends), I started writing down whatever I could remember from my early days. One thing reminded me of another, and before I knew it there were over a hundred pages.

It turned out to be a good way to come to terms with a number of past problems and mistakes. Recalling some of the good old times also inspired me to reestablish contact with several old friends, including Mike Beardsley, whom I hadn't seen in over twenty years. I managed to hunt him up, we had some long phone conversations, and in June I flew to Chicago to see him. He had ended up in the rather stressful occupation of inner-city school teacher, gone through several tempestuous marriages and divorces, and let himself get way overweight; but he still had a lot of his old wild, independent spirit. It was great to see him again. To add to the nostalgia, we drove out to the old Shimer campus for a reunion that happened to be taking place at the same time and saw several other old friends for the first time since the sixties.

Two months later I got the news of Mike's sudden death. In an effort to deal with my sorrow I free-associated a long elegy celebrating our old friendship. Then I reworked it into a short statement which I circulated to a few mutual friends and relatives:

**MICHAEL BEARDSLEY  
(1945–1993)**

Mike died August 29 of heart failure while in the hospital being treated for pneumonia.

We were best friends for just two years, 1961–1963, but they were vital, intensely exciting ones for both of us — meeting as roommates at Shimer College when we were just 16, then heading out on our own for bohemian explorations in California, Texas (where he and his first wife Nancy had their baby) and Chicago. Just a few years later a counterculture embodying some of our aspirations would surface and spread among millions of people; but in the early sixties it was still just brewing underground here and there; we and our fellow questers were still relatively isolated, clumsily groping our own way for new visions, new lifestyles. In some ways this isolation made things more difficult for us, but it also gave a special savor to the adventures and even the misadventures the two of us shared — discovering Zen and peyote, Rimbaud and the Beats, Henry Miller and Hermann Hesse, Leadbelly and Ravi Shankar; living from day to day, constantly experimenting, sometimes to the point of foolhardiness; hitching through vast, oblivious Mid-America, maybe getting stranded overnight but not really minding all that much, just strolling on down the empty highway humming Coltrane and imagining the great world out there waiting to be explored...

We eventually went our separate ways, with only very sporadic communication over the next thirty years. Then a nostalgic mood luckily inspired me to hunt him up again, and I flew back to Chicago to see him just a couple months ago. Despite all the water under the bridge there were lively moments of our old camaraderie. I looked forward to a renewed friendship in the years to come. Then suddenly he was gone.

As I cried over his death I realized I was really crying mainly for myself, because a precious part of my own life was now gone. I know that others who were close to



him feel this same kind of personal loss. It's sad to think of all the things we shared with him, or might yet have shared with him. Yet ultimately I don't think there was very much of life that he missed out on. Mike had a very tumultuous life, there were a lot of passions and pains, but he lived it with wonder and intensity. One time he barged into my room while I was asleep and exclaimed: "Ken! Wake up! The world is magic!" "Wha — ? Oh, yeah I know, Mike, but I didn't get to bed till pretty late last night ..." "But Ken, I want you to really see that the world is magic. Right here! Just look!" There was no arguing with him — I had to get up and see. And he was right, of course.

So long, old buddy.

It was Mike's death more than anything else that made me decide to publish this autobiography. I had looked forward to showing it to him and having him remind me of things I'd forgotten. Now it's too late. I'm not personally expecting to kick off any time soon, but this sort of shock does remind you that you don't live forever and that if you want to do something you'd do well to get on with it.

Bringing together so many loose ends in my life in turn encouraged me to get some of my old notes in shape. Since the late seventies I had been accumulating observations on different types of radical tactics and situations, but without ever managing to get them coherently organized. Now the two projects began to complement each other. The casual format of the autobiography lent itself to brief remarks on miscellaneous topics that would not have merited whole articles (answers to questions I am often asked, clarifications of various misconceptions, attempts to convey what I have found interesting about this or that), in some cases serving to illustrate or elaborate on topics presented more objectively in *The Joy of Revolution*. Material could be shifted from one text to the other as appropriate.

I had also been thinking about reissuing my previous publications in some sort of collected form. Apart from a few extravagant pronouncements and slips into kneejerk situ rhetoric, I still stand by most of what I said in them, though they will no doubt seem obscure to people who don't engage in the sort of ventures they deal with.

For a while I thought in terms of several separate publications: reserving the autobiography for close friends while issuing the other writings as pamphlets or small books; or perhaps reworking parts of the autobiography as a commentary to the reissued texts; or putting out a journal that would include "The Joy of Revolution" plus miscellaneous material. Eventually it occurred to me that a lot of things would be simplified if I just put it all together in one big book. Incongruous as such a collection might seem, it would have the advantage of revealing both the interrelations (which might not otherwise be evident to readers) and the contradictions (which might not otherwise be faced by myself).

Knowing that it would be read by a rather diverse range of people, most, but not all, of whom would be familiar with the situationists, presented a number of interesting challenges, both in relating different aspects to each other and in finding the right balance between too little and too much explanation. The rather mixed result (part political chronicle, part self-analysis, part simple nostalgia) will probably not fully satisfy anyone — some will wonder why I go into certain matters at all, others will wish I had gone into juicier detail.

Once I envisioned publishing the autobiography, I trimmed out a lot of the personal details in the original draft, either because they might embarrass those involved or because they would be

of little interest to most readers. With a few exceptions I have not referred to people by name unless they have already committed themselves to some sort of public activity.

The whole thing is admittedly very self-indulgent. Although I've mentioned a few painful episodes that were too crucial to omit, for the most part I've made it easy on myself and dealt only with things I enjoyed recalling and felt might be of interest to my friends and perhaps a few other people. If some readers consider me an egomaniac for presuming to write about my relatively unspectacular life, I hope that others will be encouraged to reexamine their own experiences.

\* \* \*

*"I round and finish little, if anything;  
and could not, consistently with my scheme.  
The reader will always have his or her part to do,  
just as much as I have had mine. I seek less to state  
or display any theme or thought, and more to bring  
you, reader, into the atmosphere of the theme or  
thought — there to pursue your own flight."*

(Whitman, "A Backward Glance O'er Travel'd Roads")

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Ken Knabb  
Confessions of a Mild-Mannered Enemy of the State  
1997

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