

# Volutions

Guy Hocquenghem

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“An attitude that’s no longer revolutionary in the sense of a reversal or overturning... but volutionary in the sense of *Wille*, in the sense of willing what could be.”<sup>1, TN1</sup>  
– J. F. Lyotard “*Un capitalisme énergumène*,” *Critique*, November 1972

From now on we’ll do without the *Re*. The forests have been clearcut.<sup>TN2</sup> Recapitulate, resent, reflect, repeat—May has been baptized by some a “general repetition.” There is no *Re*-volution; we want nothing more to do with the prefix that moors the flight of our desires, restricting their corrosive powers. Especially when this prefix brings with it the malady of the past: the tradition of the workers’ movements and their stupid notions of change. Such notions just take on new forms and Civilization begins anew—the very Civilization we’d like to forget. Changing words while holding onto prefixes is how “Revolution” becomes reactionary.

That is to say we will no longer recapitulate or revolutionize. The upheaval we desire cannot be brought about by a new coat of red paint, a return to origins, or a new faith in the proletariat. In short, to create a revolution, to turn the world upside down according to the actual, hypocritical intentions of the proletariat, would just be giving the wheel another spin while leaving intact its center: Man, his wife, and his children.

## Without Law or Self

The revolutionary camp is only revolutionary “in relation,” in relation to the bourgeois world against which it seeks vengeance. Its existence is just the belief in the supposed guilt of our bourgeois exploiters. This faith becomes all the more fantastic as capital spreads a new cynicism among a growing segment of the population captivated by its media. What point is there in invoking justice, in wrapping oneself in the flag of the rights of the oppressed, when the system answers: the real culprits are the victims, not the assassins? When, in the United States, men guilty of genocide such as Lt. Calley are treated as misunderstood heroes?<sup>TN3</sup> When leftist campaigns are hampered less by incomprehension than by the open hostility of the “people”?... There is not—there never was—such a thing as bourgeois guilt to bank on. The revolutionary camp buys into a game of morality in which Capital always cheats and wins.

To be revolutionary or not to be, to have or to have not. Transcendence for the leftists: the irrevocable judging of revolutionary normality. Sacred words—the word “revolution” more so than any other... But it’s no longer a matter of choosing between bourgeois vice and its opposite, revolutionary virtue. What the leftists hide from us with their mythological “revolutionary subject,” the “proletariat,” and their sacrosanct “strategy” is the manifold of paths unexplored, uncompleted, or too soon abandoned.

By totalizing these paths under the all-encompassing term “cultural revolution,” we might gain the respect of the Leninists or the bourgeois, depending on the case, but we lose the precious dispersion that shatters fictitious unities.<sup>2</sup> We lose out because such a lumping is the beginning of the game of representation, in which one speaks in the name and the place of a supposed totality of outcomes of an unfinished exploration. And, above all, we lose irreparably when we

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<sup>1</sup> “In the sense of,” or, rather, through a slippage of meaning, a false etymology, because between “volution” (reversal) and “volition” (will) there is no relation of origin, only of wordplay.

<sup>2</sup> In *Counter-Revolution and Revolt*, Marcuse uses the term “cultural revolution” to encompass all contestation in the United States. Respectable enough now to be a term of reflection for the great philosopher, it permits an “integration of the universal.” Thus, for example, the sexual revolution is only a true revolution in so far as it is a “revolution

accept, under revolutionary blackmail, an agreement based on the lowest common denominator, revolutionary politics as the phallic crown of all our local struggles.<sup>3</sup> A universal currency that renders all strategies interchangeable, a solid terrain of entente between ideological imperialisms that cements the revolutionary camp just as gold cements the bourgeois camp. It becomes the measure by which we compute and compare the forces of each side.

No more measuring the sum of our disruptions against the universal and abstract yardstick of “Revolution,” which only indicates to the bourgeois the level of danger, quantifying it, localizing it, and enclosing it. We should be moving in all directions, shaking off civilized power the way you shake off someone who is following you. Burrowing, everywhere possible, mining underneath the edifice, always surprising the enemy from behind, never being trapped where they are waiting for us. We should put into practice the truth that there is no revolutionary subject—*there is no subject at all*. There are only historical drives that ruffle this or that part of our social skin, that vibrate this or that organ of our social body. In detaching ourselves from our identities, we are left to our uninterrupted passions.

That is to say, against the despotic Subject of History, we should invoke our multiple *selves*, taking them to be irreducible. This self that has been used to frighten and shame us, when finally exposed, is shown to have concealed the real forces, untamed and unsuspected. Exposing what lies behind the domination of the subject diffuses the trap of subjectification. By focusing on ourselves, rather than hiding, trembling, and vainly protesting against the unhappiness of the world, we have observed, when we take a closer look, the decomposition of our image, the wrinkling, cracking, and explosive dispersion of the self to the four corners of the universe.

## Civilization: Nervous Collapse

At the core of its anxieties, however, the expiring civilization has found a new fear to poison us with: the arsenic of Crisis. For those minds already inoculated against fascism, war, consumerism, and other fears perhaps stronger, only this millenarian delusion continues to stem the old world’s bleeding credibility. It’s a convenient ruse to deter the desire to do away with the ancient codes that encircle, smother, and defuse possible eruptions.

A great farce: strange tremors shake an already splintered ground. Mephitic vapors percolate upward, announcing the mysterious, gasping birth of unknown monsters. Wars before the Red Cross in the memories of the old. The end of capitalist growth and the return to a prehistoric ecology in the minds of the youth. The Crisis intensifies the histrionics, it’s the last grandiloquent discourse capable of creating cohesion through terror in a social body already in decomposition, breathing a semblance of life into the reign of Capital.

Forget controlling history. After the failure of the revolution, and the defeat of the dream born after May of creating a new social reality out of our desires, comes the great black hole “out of which there is no return,”<sup>TN4</sup> the infernal machine of a Crisis about which no one can do anything, not even the militant promoters of “human responsibility.” Say goodbye to the progress of an

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of the entire human being, converging with a political morality.” The cultural revolution is reaffirmed as a total revolution against all attempts at economic and political reduction, but we then find ourselves with yet a new totality: “human Being.”

<sup>3</sup> Regarding art, Artaud made the following observation, which is valid also for revolutionary politics: “To make art is to deprive a gesture of its reverberation in the organism,” to hold still the vibrations in order to isolate the origin. [This line is from Artaud’s “No More Masterpieces,” included in *The Theater and its Double*. – T.N.]

enlightened and scientific humanity. Goodbye also to its reciprocal double, the Revolution, the end of the end of social progress, the highest realization of humanity.<sup>4</sup> Say hello to the monsters of the historical unconscious, the burning stakes seeking work on skid row, burning stakes and mysticisms, comets and regressions.

The wheel of history had been spinning in a frenzy, at the risk of breaking loose and setting the world's axis off kilter. From now on it will turn backwards toward a new Middle Ages. Dialectical temporality has come to an end: who today would dare to suggest that the Crisis will bring about Revolution? There's no longer any point in acting, struggling, writing, cries the tragic voice. What will remain when the hell of Crisis is unleashed? It will be impossible to express desire when we are nothing but rats seeking a quiet corner in a ship being tossed around by a hurricane. It's the repetition of terror, not of the orgasm.

The most fantastic geopolitical manipulation of all is taking root today: a crisis of social energy capable of sapping our hearts and bodies, tapping the new energies unmasked by the recent eruption of deconstructive desires. A crushing blow, a compression, a diminution of productive forces, but also of the forces of desire. A new battle waged in our brains and on a planetary scale, in which the stakes are no longer only the pumping of black gold, but also the diversion and (why not?) the exhaustion of desire.

The multinational soft machine<sup>TN5</sup> aims to dehumanize the flood of desire, to overtake it and erode its vitality through a brutal devaluation of hopes. A terrifying marking process begins anew. It's the Law of a great transcendent power, all the more terrifying and grandiose because the supposedly joyful hell of consumption that was supposed to quell revolutionary desires has only stoked them instead of satiating them and putting them to sleep. For refusing to be satiated, you will be clubbed by this mysterious repression coming from nowhere, the Crisis. The promised thrill of the great unknown reveals itself to be nothing more than a premonition of the great putting-to-bed. It's bedtime for your little desires. Here comes the great cadaver.

We already knew that we didn't know what to expect—that's what, in part, motivated us. Now the unknown wears the mask of Crisis. And there you have it, the enemy is exorcised! Tragic transcendence and historical fatalism—ancient, repugnant fossils—have replaced what was attractive about the future. Crisis: it's the new Mr. Thiers<sup>TN6</sup> against the commune of our desires, the firing-squad execution of the hopes of after-May by the Versailles<sup>TN7</sup> of harsh necessity. Man once again becomes a wolf to man—he never really ceased to be a wolf beneath the hypocritical façades<sup>TN8</sup> of indefinite progress: you knew this well, and you already denounced it, so what are you complaining about?

The Crisis can also be the supreme remedy for boredom—Viansson-Pontier's theme.<sup>TN9</sup> A fresh and joyous Crisis to mobilize the new soldiers of the old trenches. The new con game. A false mirror in which the desire for change mistakes itself. The ultimate manipulation in which the desire for *jouissance*<sup>TN10</sup> is transformed into the desire for repression and apocalypse. A new malaise settles into civilization,<sup>TN11</sup> instead of a liberation of flows. It's the final seduction: the multinational octopus offers you a new spectacle, a melodrama in which the road finally runs aground. The face of the death drive haunts the ball of civilization. Through the looking glass of

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<sup>4</sup> The old Right dovetails with the progressive Left in fearing the collapse of our social world: Louis Pauwels (Paris-Match, 5 January 1974) applauds Roland Leroy when he denounces "Big Capital... which completely repudiates rationalism and optimism... while developing ideologies of the end of the world" (*La Nouvelle Critique*). [As Hocquenghem implies, a right-wing writer in a mainstream magazine praising a leftist in a PCF journal. – T.N.]

the end of history, what we see now before us is not the magic field of Alice's talking flowers, but the bitter path of return to humanity's darker periods.<sup>5</sup>

And then there are the fetishists of the Crisis, the *jouisseurs* who anticipate the great catastrophe. Now that the old morality has collapsed, these cynics, made up and sequined, drinking champagne amid the ruins, march on in. Ah, the decadents, bittersweet salon queens [*travestis*] à la David Bowie, snobs of the latest fashion—the one that sucks the feet of the great collapse. Confusing decoding with decadence, these apostles of a *fin de siècle* style and a millenarian ideology transform the call of the transversal into a petty quarrel of salon intellectuals. They take anxious pleasure in believing themselves to be in the privileged place of the crisis of civilization. But to make apologies for the decay is only another means of remaining attached to the civilized world and its fantasies. They assume the role of the unworthy sons, the profligate inheritors at the furious potlatch of collapsing values: an enervating and narcissistic pretension to be the last survivors rather than the first mutants.

Enough of these despairing individuals, fixated on their own condition. Former militants, now devoted to their joyless highs, they have seen everything and lived nothing. In their own eyes, they were born too late in a world too old, like the wretched children born belatedly to an aging couple. Drawn to fascism and fashion, these young Cocteauss of the new 1929 aim to shock, but their provocations are predictable and filled with remorse. Claiming to make pleasure out of necessity, they contemplate the fascisms of the future with complacency. They are bad copies of a Maurice Sachs or those women shaved by the Liberation, swimming in a caviar that tastes of ashes.<sup>TN12</sup> A fitting image for those who “no longer believe in anything,” as if it were a matter of belief to begin with. They are on this side of, not beyond, Good and Evil. The characteristics of an unhappy consciousness that soothes itself by dancing at the rim of the volcano. Such is the libidinal fascination for fascism as it presents itself today.

But what is to be gained from burning one's bridges in a final celebration of *ressentiment*? We must move in another direction, beyond the moldy ideologies with their superficial glint. We must cut away, not give in to, such civilized neuroses and anxieties. The vapors of the contemporary nervous collapse only affect the feeble-minded. We need not celebrate the fact that we were born in an epoch devoted to putrefaction. On the contrary, we should speak, act, and cut through the lethargic reality of everyday life in the 20th century. So let's drop the bitter and plodding attitudes that give our actions the odor of disillusioned youth. To put on makeup, dance, and make love does not require our sinking into the quagmire of the tribulations of the last days.

## After May

The question of how to move beyond the choice between the old revolutionary morality on the one hand and the affectation of the new pleasure-seekers on the other is the one I have set for myself in this book. The pieces in the collection *L'après-mai des faunes* are so many attempts to recover, from the dictatorship of revolutionary transcendence, the breakthroughs of a life beyond the Law. The prism of one path among so many others strewn about by the explosion of May. There's no question of returning back along these paths, like a dog who retraces his steps

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<sup>5</sup> An echo, in the form of a denial, that gives one a sense of the tone of the current campaign: regarding the Crisis, Olivier Guichard has written, “We are witnessing the rebirth of a constipated moralism analogous to the one that saw the 1940 invasion as fit punishment for our collective sins. Today, it is poverty that comes to punish the *jouisseurs*.”

by sniffing out his own piss. Nor is it a question of retracing dialectically the various stages of consciousness leading toward a global truth, as one would unroll a majestic red carpet down a great flight of stairs. The sketches that follow proceed as lurches, deletions, and fresh starts. There is no one way, and there's no question of taking the path already made rancid by the kind of cynical snickering in which desire is dissolved.

Yes, with the multiplicity (of which only parts are presented here), we aim to bring about the death of the god Revolution, to end all recourse to a unitary Will whose power consists of silencing all sorts of petty desires, the great battering ram Will that is supposed to crush the largely mythical center-Capital, always believed to be more fluid than its adversary (the revolution is always a delayed war). It is, on the contrary, the thousands of petty desires, partial drives, and minuscule obsessions that will remake a world out of *jouissance*.

No, we do not believe that the new poverty renders our desires obsolete, except when it infantilizes them as the pitiful remains of a decadent surplus. We have nothing to learn from the discourse of consumption, and very little from the discourse of Crisis, except perhaps new possibilities for transversal invention. We will not be kept prisoners by this restraint that follows a feigned opening up. The premium price is irrelevant to the creation a new world of *jouissance* and luxury without resentment. There is no need to believe in an affluent society in order to stimulate the forces of imagination.

We view the after-May as a multifaceted transformation of life. The “after-May of the fauns” is a frolicking in all realms of the possible, not a fidelity to fixed ideas. It's an after with no rear-view mirror; it doesn't look back to those wise, legendary events of May. Nor is it possessed by childish nightmares of a Crisis. It's like a summer afternoon.

This book does exemplify a certain manner of writing that aims to convince, a utilitarian and less than joyful usage of writing that continues to obey the law of the revolutionary signifier. There is an editorial “we” implicit in these texts, since nothing in here could have been written, discussed, and reworked without the existence of militant groups, leftist papers, and the people with whom I lived. And this “we” proclaims certitudes in an imperious tone, with the manifest intent of mobilizing others. But as this “we” speaks, piling naivety upon naivety, it shatters into multiple positions. There are perhaps two ways of reading the following pages. One might search for an order of causes and effects, a logic behind the convictions—that is, the fictitious unity of a self. Or, one might regard them as pages torn from a diary, guided by intuitions, images, and sensations as chaotic as the fiery storms that they might inspire.

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#### Retranslator's Notes:

1. This passage from Lyotard's essay on Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* was excluded from the translation published as “Energumen Capitalism,” in Semiotext(e)'s *Anti-Oedipus* issue.
2. “*Nous ne ferons plus en Ré, les lauriers sont coupés.*” Hocquenghem is referencing the opening line of a poem by Théodore de Banville: “*Nous n'irons plus au bois, les lauriers sont coupés*”: “We will to the woods no more, the laurels have been cut.”

3. William Calley, found guilty for the 1968 My Lai Massacre, a mass murder of hundreds of unarmed civilians during the Vietnam War. Though sentenced to life, he served his time in house arrest until he was paroled in 1974.
4. Quote from “*La chanson du décervelage*” (“The Song of the Debraining”) in Alfred Jarry’s 1896 play *Ubu Cocu*.
5. Reference to Burroughs’ experimental 1961 novel *The Soft Machine*, which deals in part with the invasion of the body by control mechanisms.
6. Marie Joseph Louis Adolphe Thiers (1797–1877), politician and historian of the French Revolution, famous for repression of the Paris Commune. He was referred to by Marx as a “monstrous gnome.”
7. The palace of Versailles is the most common symbol of absolute monarchy in France.
8. Reference to a 1792 speech by Robespierre, leader of the French Revolution, denouncing false allies of the cause.
9. Reference to Pierre Viansson-Ponté, French journalist and author of a well-known 1968 article, “*Quand la France s’ennuie*” (“When France gets bored”).
10. *Jouissance*: infamously untranslatable term first popularized by Lacan. Its semantic field encompasses “enjoyment” in the everyday sense as well as the narrow legal sense of enjoying rights or property; it also means orgasm. In contrast to pleasure as a biological function of the organism, *jouissance* denotes an excessive, ecstatic pleasure that ruptures the stability of the subject. Elsewhere in the essay the related form *jouisseur*, denoting a participant in *jouissance*, is used. In this passage Hocquenghem is referring to the desire for social upheaval as a dangerous *jouissance* that can easily tip over into its repressive opposite.
11. Reference to Freud’s *Civilization and its Discontents*, known in French under the title *La malaise dans la civilisation*. The phrase implied in the previous paragraph, “man is a wolf to man,” *homo homini lupus* in Latin, is also a reference to Freud’s pessimism in that book.
12. Sachs, like Cocteau, mentioned a few sentences earlier: a gay writer of the WWII era about whom morally ambiguous stories circulated. In Sach’s case, this concerned collaboration with the Gestapo. The women referenced were accused of collaboration during the Nazi occupation and subsequently humiliated by having their heads shaved.



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Retranslated by Critila. “Volutions” was first published in Hocquenghem’s *L’après-mai des faunes*. (The book’s title echoes Mallarmé’s poem “*L’Après-Midi d’un faune*,” changing the common word *après-midi*, “afternoon,” to the neologism *après-mai*, “after-May.” The poem’s gay faun has become a crowd of fauns.) Published in January 1974, the piece reflects critically on the legacy of the events of May 1968, and the abandonment of so-called revolutionary thought soon after. Hocquenghem calls on his readers no longer to react to the bourgeois class and its values, but to find ways for turning (away) through “volutions” of action from the apathy of leftism. We have added some endnotes to show to what degree Hocquenghem’s nascent queer sensibility was fed by reading literature and revolutionary history. As for his taste in literature, need we underline how many of the authors referenced here were queer, drug addicts, or insane?

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