

Reviews

Felice Piemontese. 2001. *Dottore In Niente*. Venice: Marsilio. 140 pp.

John Gatt-Rutter

Why has G. committed suicide? And why has the nameless narrator, perhaps standing in for the author, dragged himself from his own *Remotissima Provincia*, somewhere in Italy, all the way to the equally remote mountainous Auvergne province of France, where the said G. spent most of his time towards the end of his life, to look for an answer to this question, even though from the outset he, the narrator, has no expectation of finding any such answer? Is this a trope, a trick, a rhetorical device, the pretence that one really has nothing to say, a pretence that is advanced in order to get the reader thinking that perhaps one really does have something very special to say? Or is it perhaps a variant of the ineffability trope—the suggestion that what you are trying to get at is beyond the reach of language?

A life and a death certainly exceed or elude everything that can be said about them. Postmodernism has left none of us in any doubt about the impotence of words, of language, of any form of representation or expression or of signification, to capture any reality or any essence, to claim any authority. It has left us perhaps with the sense that the only thing that can be captured *is* representation, that representation *is* the only ascertainable reality, that is, representation in the broad sense I have been giving it. And we don't yet know whether we are now into post-postmodernism, or what that might be, or what it might yield.

These reflections become more and more pressing the further one gets into this book. Words. The narrative is largely composed of bits of reported speech, reminiscing snatches, snippets of musing aloud or witty remarks,

obsessively punctuated by an attribution of authorship—“queste sono parole di G.,” “così G.” or “così Geneviève” (“G.’s words,” “Geneviève’s words,” or whoever’s, Geneviève having been G.’s closest partner). Apart from G. himself and Geneviève, there is Wolf, and the narrator, and the innkeeper in the Auvergne, whose hospitality and excellent cuisine he enjoys: these are virtually the only sources of reminiscences about G. Anything not ascribed to one or other of G.’s circle also consists mainly of virtual quotations, strings of clichés advertised by the word *cosiddetto* (so-called), beginning from the book’s second line (“la mia cosiddetta inchiesta,” my so-called inquiry). Even something as apparently straightforward and matter-of-fact as life becomes “la cosiddetta vita” (91). This obsessive use of virtual quotation marks lends much to the book’s overall effect, which is that of rendering the whole of experience *sous rature*, under erasure.

The narrator, apart from contributing in his own person to this tessellated discourse, also provides what little movement the book cares to offer, above all the visit to the Auvergne, the undertaking of this cognitive quest into the speculative whys and wherefores of a man’s death and, circuitously, into the meaning of his life. Asking why G. took his own life is the ploy, or the cue, to get the reader to ask, “Who is or was G.? And how did he live?” Thus an inquest becomes in effect a biography of sorts, like an obituary. Those who have studied biography, or written it, over the past forty-odd years, have wrestled with the problem of the individual human subject. Can such a subject be posited as really existing in the first place? Can it be posited as being unique, self-determining, self-sustaining, continuous, and unified? If there is a unity, a presence, an essence, or a plenitude there, can the biographer capture it and represent it anyway?

Dottore in niente presumes no easy, definite or positive answers to these questions. What it pieces together does not amount to a resurrection, though a personality does emerge, if not quite a person. This elusive G., as evoked by the reminiscing and enquiring narrator, commanded a following of devotees by dint of the unnerving rigour of his libertarianism and his theorization of that libertarianism. He led an avant-garde movement, linked to a journal, that indissolubly welded together a left-Marxist development of social theory with a radical aesthetic for social living and for the re-making of our living space. For him, the personal was the political, and he allowed none of the pious conventions of a bourgeois morality to interfere with the conduct of his personal relationships. If any of his friends fell below the standards expected of them, they were summarily dropped. The same applied to his female partners as soon as they ceased to interest him, or themselves took an

excessive interest in him. Yet he maintained long-term privileged relationships with particular women. Drinking was his most sustained occupation, accompanied by thinking aloud in conversation with his friends, and another consisted of long nocturnal walks across Paris. He also produced films, projected in a cinema financed by an entrepreneur who had been converted to his cause, even though there was hardly ever anyone in the auditorium. These films might consist of half an hour of a completely white screen followed by half an hour of a completely black screen.

So the reader learns enough about G. and his movement, and picks up sufficient casual but precise geographical and historical references, to locate both him and it and partially identify him and it as one of the currents most radically negating bourgeois society and life and aesthetics that arose during the cold war, circulated round Western Europe and centered mostly around Paris's Left Bank and Latin Quarter, peaking amid the *événements* of that blissful dawn of May 1968. What could be a fictitious biography could also have a factual basis. On the second page, we are informed of the name of the isolated, wild and mountainous location of G.'s last habitation: "The village is called Bellevue-la-Montagne, the homestead is at Champot, a ward some kilometres away . . ." This naming and precise locating, which recurs with sporadic nonchalance throughout the text, is a reality effect, a referential talisman, which is as typical of realistic fictions as it is of reports that present themselves as factual.¹

Here, *Dottore in niente* plays a peculiar trick. For whereas the narrative does not positively identify G. as a historical person, making him come across as something more like a fictional construct, the blurb matter-of-factly informs us that

[t]he deceased writer is the Frenchman Guy Debord, nihilist "king of the *enragés*", whom many today consider one of the most significant and important intellectual figures of the second half of the twentieth century. . . .²

and that he had been first to define our society as the "Society of the spectacle" and had been turned into a myth by the very media which he so abhorred.³

The claim that "many today consider [Debord] one of the most significant and important intellectual figures of the second half of the twentieth century" may seem a bit far-fetched. There are some in the media world who are keenly aware of Debord's *La Société du spectacle*,⁴ which was first published in 1967, and of the journal of his group, *L'Internationale*

Situationniste, which appeared from 1957 to 1969.⁵ In France, certainly, the Situationist experience and challenge is established as part of the history of the third quarter of the last century, and in other countries, including the English-speaking world, it is resurfacing, without ever having been totally submerged, as a continuing, though somewhat phantom-like, presence within and against the debates and the cultural thrust of postmodernism. A landmark in this process was Sadie Plant's 1992 volume, *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age*, which traces and discusses the afterlife of the thinking of Debord and his group within the cultural debates.⁶ This was followed in 2000 by the first full-blown biography of Debord in English, Andrew Hussey's *The Game of War: The Life and Death of Guy Debord*, a close-up of the man in the context of the historical circumstances which he helped to shape.

G. in Piemontese's book, as did Guy Debord in his own life, comes across more than a little as a charismatic and even messianic figure, rejecting our industrial world, with its circular logic of production for the sake of consumption and consumption for the sake of production, in the name of some implied more humane values, an implicit utopia, a metaphysically or mystically derived alternative religion with its devotees and its own creed and its esoteric rituals, sanctuaries (all-night bars and *bistrots*), and alternative lifestyle—all of which were to spread across the western world in such guises as flower power and hippie- and yippiedom, vulgarly designated in English as either radical chic or the loony left.

A link between all this and the revival of a form of primitive Christianity can be seen in a partial anticipation of "situationism" in postwar Florence (which, along with Tuscany as a whole, was later to become one of Debord's favourite haunts). In Florence, an ultra-left Catholic priest called Ferdinando Tartaglia had a considerable following, especially among university students, for his message of a lifestyle revolution against the drudgery of the factory-system, "il mondo banausico," as he called it. (One of the famous watchwords of the Situationists, around 1968, was to be "Ne travaillez jamais"—"Don't work, ever.") Tartaglia, for his pains in preaching his *Progetto di Religione* with its vision of a new "pure" reality and in leading a "Movimento di Religione" directed *against* Christianity and especially against Catholicism as a false religion, was suspended from the Church during 1945–1946 and then definitively excommunicated.

The atmosphere of play and of religious mysticism among Tartaglia's followers seems strangely analogous to that among Debord's associates and is

described by Giulio Cattaneo in King Lear's words to Cordelia when both have become Edmond's prisoners:

... so we'll live,
 And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
 At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues
 Talk of court news, and we'll talk with them too—
 Who loses and who wins, who's in, who's out,
 And take upon's the mystery of things
 As if we were God's spies . . .⁷

And, in fact, in *Dottore in niente*, a follower of G.'s, here called Wolf, admits something of the sort: "Many of the things we used to do, these are Wolf's words, were banal, really, even if we tried to make them strange and mysterious." But he adds, "[W]e wanted to rediscover the city, to reinvent it."⁸

This last refers to situationist "psychogeography" and the project of humanizing and appropriating the cityscape which modern development was rendering increasingly alien.

But we also published (Wolf's words) a project for "rational enhancements" to the city of Paris, which, among other things, involved keeping the Metro stations open at night (to be "illuminated by faint, intermittent lighting"); the planned arrangement of fire-escapes and the provision of gangways where necessary so as to turn the roofs of the city into convenient promenades; the abolition of cemeteries, including the complete destruction of the corpses (though it was not specified how); shutting down the museums and the transfer of the artworks into cafés and other crowded places; free access to the gaols; doing away with all information about departure times in railway stations, and other things of the same sort. Possibly we were in part copying the so-called historical avant-gardes, says Wolf, but I think we did so intelligently.⁹

The pranks, scandals, provocations of Debord and his circle also targeted established religion, most shockingly and famously when they disrupted an Easter service in Notre Dame cathedral with a demonstration to the cry of "God is dead." This incident is one of the recurrent points of reference in *Dottore in niente*. Any new religion making universal claims must

demolish its own immediate predecessor, and the Situationists enjoyed ridiculing André Breton and the outworn Surrealist faith as much as it enjoyed flouting and mocking the Churches.

So here in Piemontese's book we have biography without narrative, an anti-narrative biography that nevertheless pieces together much that was important in an extraordinary life and much that was historically important in its own time and that remains, perhaps more than ever, challenging to our present time. The nineteenth-century Murger's *Vie de Bohème* and the life centred around the Café Momus are taken to their limits, radically politicized, expanded to a European and global scale, and rigorously theorized. Debord's concept of the "Society of the Spectacle" explicitly invokes a cue from a century earlier in Feuerbach's introduction to the second edition of *The Essence of Christianity*, which laments the fact that in modern Western society, the image, the copy, has taken over from the reality. That this is still—indeed, more than ever—seen by many as a mortal danger is evident from the contributions by Giulio Ferroni, James Hillman and Roberto Zecchi to Roberto Pazzi's volume on *L'immaginario contemporaneo*.¹⁰

Piemontese's text circles in on a number of themes, one of them being the suspicions which a whispering campaign by the French media attached to Debord, or G., as he is consistently identified here, of complicity in, or responsibility for, the death of Gérard Lebovici, referred to in *Dottore in niente* as Liebermann. Debord/G. at first contemptuously ignored these innuendoes, and at length no less contemptuously repudiated them in his *Considérations*.¹¹ Lebovici/Liebermann was a cinema tycoon who became a friend and generous patron of Debord's, financing his cinematic production and the exhibiting of his films and publishing his books. The *Considérations* themselves were published under the Lebovici imprint.

No doubt, any sort of biography of Debord, even a biography as unconventional as this one, is obliged to tackle a theme that loomed so large in the latter part of Debord's life. But Piemontese's concern, or that of his intratextual narrator, doesn't seem to be so much that of clearing his subject's name or vindicating his ethics. After all, Debord's vocation was to be a bad boy. He has displayed a taste for low life and for professional criminals and lamented that he was not as proficient in this field as François Villon, one of his idols. What is more pertinent to the narrator's quest is to establish that Debord's suicide was not in any way motivated by the fallout from the media campaign to incriminate him.

The book's textual operation rather proffers the thesis that Debord and

his movement had outlived themselves, and had come to nothing. They had *not* discovered the “North-West passage” that it was hoped would lead our “Society of the Spectacle” back to some kind of authenticity, not because they had failed, but because such a North-West passage did not exist.¹² Debord, in other words, so the enquiring narrator surmises, was bowing to a historical inevitability, and was bowing out of history. The narrator also repeatedly mentions Debord’s resignation to the loss of youth—he was after all sixty-two when he took his life—and, more incidentally, his serious illness (105). It seems there is, after all, a rationale to Debord’s coolly planned and coolly executed exit: it has all the characteristics of a euthanasia. The narrator sums up, first in G’s words: “all hope of being able to change the world had gone forever,” and then, on his behalf: “So, he took his own life, because it seemed to him that to strive simply to survive was in contradiction with all that he had wanted from his existence.”¹³

Guy Debord and Situationism hover in this book like intimate phantoms from the heady days of May 1968 and thereabouts and yet at the same time like a subterranean presence in this once postmodern and now post-September-the-eleventh age of ours. In groping for the reasons behind Debord’s suicide in 1994, Felice Piemontese’s narrator-investigator makes us reflect on where we are now, on whether we have rethought our living space or the status of the artwork as a super-commodity or the imperative to produce and consume. The enquiry into a life and a death imperceptibly becomes an enquiry into our civilization.

Notes

1. G. Genette, *Fiction et diction* (Paris: Seuil, 1991), is one of the best-known discussions repudiating the possibility of distinguishing between factual and fictional narratives on formal grounds.

2. Felice Piemontese, *Dottore in niente*, Venice: Marsilio, 2001, inside front cover: “Lo scrittore scomparso è il francese Guy Debord, il nichilista ‘re degli arrabbiati’, che molti considerano oggi una delle figure intellettuali più significative e importanti del Novecento.”

3. *Ibid.*: “. . . uno scrittore famoso per i suoi libri e, più ancora, per la radicalità del suo rifiuto di quella che per primo definì la Società dello spettacolo. Intorno a lui, il sistema dei media—da lui aborrito—ha costruito nel corso degli anni un vero e proprio mito.”

4. Guy Debord, *La Société du spectacle* (Paris: Buchet-Chastel, 1967, and Paris: Editions Champ Libre, 1971). English translations: *The Society of the Spectacle*, Detroit: Black & Red, 1977; and by Donald Nicholson-Smith, unpublished, 1990.

5. *Internationale Situationniste 1958–1969*, complete facsimile edition, Paris: Editions Champ Libre, 1975.

6. Sadie Plant, *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).

7. On Tartaglia, see Giulio Cattaneo *Letteratura e ribellione* (Milan: Rizzoli 1973, pp. 25, 34–35).

8. “Molte delle cose che facevamo, sono parole di Wolf, erano in fondo banali, anche se cercavamo renderle strane e misteriose . . . volevamo riscoprire la città, reinventarla . . .” (86).

9. “Ma pubblicammo anche, sono parole di Wolf, un progetto per “abbellimenti razionali” della città di Parigi che prevedeva tra l’altro l’apertura notturna delle stazioni del metrò (che avrebbero dovuto essere “illuminate da deboli luci intermittenti”); la sistemazione delle scale di soccorso e la creazione di passerelle, dove necessario, per trasformare i tetti della città in comode passeggiate; la soppressione dei cimiteri, con la distruzione totale dei cadaveri (non era precisato come); la chiusura dei musei, con il trasferimento delle opere d’arte nei caffè e in altri luoghi molto frequentati; il libero accesso alle prigioni; la soppressione, nelle stazioni ferroviarie, di tutte le indicazioni riguardanti gli orari di partenza, e altre cose dello stesso genere” (85).

10. Roberto Pazzi, ed., *L’immaginario contemporaneo. Atti del Convegno letterario internazionale–Ferrara, 21–23 maggio 1999*. Biblioteca dell’ “Archivum Romanicum” (Florence: Leo S. Olschki Editore, 2000).

11. G. Debord, *Considérations sur l’assassinat de Gérard Lebovici*, Paris: Editions Gérard Lebovici, 1985.

12. “. . . il famoso passaggio a nord-ovest non lo ha poi trovato, pensai, ma non lo ha trovato solo perché non esiste” (107).

13. “. . . era perduta per sempre ogni speranza di poter cambiare la vita. Allora si uccise, perché gli sembrò che sforzarsi semplicemente di sopravvivere contraddicesse tutto ciò che la sua esistenza aveva voluto essere” (140).