L'Encyclopedie des Nuisances
Abyss
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the one hand, then, is the will to maintain a society of dispossession at whatever cost, and the attendant conviction, reminiscent of Macbeth's, that once one is "in blood stepp'd in so far [. . .] returning were as tedious as go o'er." For our part, in face of the material changes that demonstrate day after day that there is nothing so bad that it cannot become worse, we want merely "to keep the door open to all other possibilities of change — first and foremost, of course, to the primordial hope that the minimum conditions for the survival of the species may be preserved. The changes we desire are, of course, the very ones that the dominant society seeks to obstruct by limiting history, irrevocably, to a broader reproduction of the past, and limiting the future to the management of the debris of the present" ("Discours preliminaire," *Encyclopedie des Nuisances,* No. 1).

Chernobyl also provided an opportunity to re-learn an old lesson, namely that social truths — and the existence of truth in society — can never be ensured by theoretical debate, never established by means of objective knowledge alone, but rather have to be fought for on the battleground of social existence itself: no specialized point of view — neither that of nuclear physics nor any other — can claim to be emancipated from the material bases of a perverted truth, unless it has allied itself with a social movement that effectively challenges those bases. In Poland, scientists linked to the underground opposition were thus able at the time of Chernobyl to get exact information to the people about this latest expression of Soviet friendship, borne by that same "East wind" that had hitherto been responsible, in accordance with leftist meteorology, for dispensing pollution of an exclusively ideological variety. In France, by contrast, such scientists as were prepared to break the law of *omerta* imposed by the pronuclearites were able to reach only the most restricted of audiences. What this shows is that there do exists specialists, in all sectors, who are ready and willing to become dissidents, but that practical forces capable of offering them a sphere of action — and an emancipatory use of their abilities — are still lacking. Sadly, such forces are likely to continue to be wanting for some time to come. The issue of dual power, however, cannot be put on the back burner until the moment of revolutionary transformation arrives: it is inherent in the very formulation of such a project, since any exact knowledge of the reality to be transformed is itself predicated on practical communicational abilities totally independent of the official media. Our task, in fact, is to help set up a network of this kind, as a way of federating all those partisans of the truth who are resolved to plan for the inevitable struggles ahead.

In conclusion, we feel confident in asserting that henceforth this world can contain only two kinds of seriousness: the seriousness of the extremists of domination, as obvious as the means at their disposal for perpetuating it any price — and ours, the proof of whose existence is supplied, paradoxically, by the scale upon which those same means are deployed. Between the two lies a gamut of unrealistic attitudes that are, in the last analysis, of negligible import. On

> A bottomless chasm, or at any rate one that cannot be plumbed, we call an abyss. What of the gulf into which this society of dispossession is plunging before our very eyes? That there may be no end to this descent, or that it may end only with the self-destruction of the human race — these are, of course, mere hypotheses, much like the famous "China syndrome" itself. The crushing presence of such a possibility, however, already sits in judgment over all human actions and governs the construction of the various "safety barriers" whereby a world at war with its own power hopes to avoid a terrifying end by surviving in an endless terror. The real question is therefore: How many Chernobyls will be needed before the truth of the old slogan "Revolution or death!" is recognized as the *last word* of the scientific thought of this century?

That the demand for life itself has now become a revolutionary programme is demonstrated, at least negatively, by the following fact: carried farther and farther into madness by the necessities of their dominance, those social forces that would once have been described as conservative are no longer concerned even with the conservation of the biological bases for the survival of the species. Quite the opposite, because they are in fact bent on the methodical destruction of those bases. The dimensions of the gulf that they are digging for us are forever being calculated and recalculated, right down to the likely speed of our descent into it, right down to the bottom line — which is, in the event, the lifespan of cesium or plutonium. For this society is mad in Chesterton's sense: it has lost everything except its reason — everything except that abstract rationality of the commodity that is its ultimate raison d'etre, and the one that has outlasted all the others. No doubt one could find other ruling classes in history which, having lost all historical perspective beyond that of their own survival, sank into a suicidal irresponsibility; but never in the past has a ruling class been able to press such vast means into service of such a total contempt for life.

When nihilism in power manifests itself into the ravages of those state-owned Dadaists who scatter their geometrical rubbish over

what remains of the city like so many territorial markers of bureaucratic abstraction, it suffices to note that all decadence is not equal even from a strictly aesthetic point of view. [Trans: an allusion to various modernist nonentities whose 'works of art' have recently been imposed on the historic center of Paris.] But when this nihilism threatens to assume cosmic proportions in the shape of a "Star Wars" programme, it must be conceded that, albeit without abandoning the mode of farce, it has every prospect of extending the range of the macabre. Alongside such a project the apocalyptic fantasies of a Sade seem like the product of a distinctly timorous imagination. According to some experts, however, this system of automated apocalypse cannot claim complete infallibility because it cannot be properly tested under "lifelike" conditions. Such, at any rate, is the chief objection of one pundit who, in view of his contribution to the computerization of the Vietnam War, must be ajudged a thoroughly qualified connoisseur of high-tech extermination: we are speaking of David Lorge Parnas, author of "Software Aspects of Strategic Defense Systems" (*Communications of the Association for Computing Machinery,* December 1985). French experts, meanwhile, estimate that in order to be able to rely *blindly* on a system of this kind, "We must be certain of having, in perfect working order, a logical base of more than ten million commands working in real time on a set of machines able overall to carry out a trillion operations per second; this raises the problem of the speed of political decision-making and the achievement of consensus" (*Le Monde,* 11 June 1986). But no doubt the promoters of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) will ignore such quibbles and rely instead on a procedure whose rigor was borne out by an official report on the in-flight explosion of the space shuttle *Challenger* on 28 January 1986: having been informed nearly nine years earlier about "bad design" in the part that proved to be at the root of the accident, the heads of NASA, along with the directors of the subcontracting firm involved, "first of all refused to address the problem, then refused to apply a proposed solution, and finally treated the problem as an acceptable risk" (*Le Monde,* 11 June 1986). Naturally, all risks are acceptable when things are so arranged that those who take them have no choice in the matter.

peril. For what remains of our famous "freedoms" — except perhaps the freedom, so beloved by the intellectuals, to spout nonsense with impunity — now that the charade of democracy has debouched into nuclear despotism? Custine, so often cited since the beginning of the Cold War and in support of an alleged "Russian bureaucratic tradition," may now be seen, much more accurately, as the prophet of a Stalinization of the world that has nothing to do with geography and everything to do with history. In short, the nuclear question *is* the social question in its most naked form — in the essential form down to which it has been stripped in the last years of a century that once believed itself capable of avoiding it altogether.

It will no doubt be replied that a movement with a consciousness of this kind exists nowhere — and in France less than anywhere. It is true that in West Germany, for example, a government minister called the violent anti-nuclear demonstrations of May 1986 an attack upon the state, thus putting his finger on the true nature of the movement — on something, in fact, that is rarely acknowledged even by the movement's own participants. In France, by contrast, the pathetic relics of the ecology movement have sunk to the level of volunteering to run civil-defense exercises and lobbying for information about evacuation procedures to be broadcast via Minitel. Nevertheless, the development of an adequate response to the ultimatums of alienated history — whether these be delivered *a la* Chernobyl or in quite a different form — is already profoundly *real;* and this remains true even if at the surface of society the monopoly of appearances held by power's dream factories continues to derail the search for it. The call for truth in the life of society is liable to be dismissed as the product of a purely ethical or idealistic stance. In point of fact, however, the eminently practical nature of such a demand becomes more and more apparent as the toxic effects of bureaucratic secrecy spread into every last corner of life. As the gulf widens between the unrealistic monologues of power, on the one hand, and a realism deprived of legal expression, on the other, lies must be increasingly detrimental to those who rely on them. It is as though its long sojourn in oblivion had invested a re-emergent truth with fresh youthfulness and vigor, and hence with a fresh influence on the course of things.

has on occasion come in for criticism to the effect that it has no "central historical perspective," or even that it has nothing really original to contribute. Now, we have no quarrel with those who recognize that in this unhappy age all kinds of theoretical works are called for: such research is indeed absolutely necessary in order continually to hone the critique of all of alienation's concrete forms. Defining a "central perspective" of history, however, is one of those tasks that is accomplished by the *facts themselves,* and direct confrontation with these facts is the only way here of steering clear of pure speculation. Real history has continued to advance with its (unconscious) bad side foremost, and its results have continued, paradoxically as ever, to define the consciousness necessary to any social movement capable of acting effectively against the over-accoutred negation of life. The building of such a movement is a long-range project, but at least many of the obstacles that once lay in the path of endeavours of this kind have now been removed.

The critique of politics, for example, must now presumably be considered gratuitous, the extraordinary continuity maintained by the state in the sphere of nuclear policy having put to the last surviving intimations of difference between the programmes of the political parties. Furthermore, just as any consistent anti-nuclear movement must situate itself from the outset beyond parties, and seek to express a unity of particular and universal, so too it is bound to recognize in its own situation the basis for a critique of political economy made not by one but by all: in this way the simple question of the human use of material production, repressed by all "progressive" ideologies, returns as a question of *vital* urgency. Solved, too, *en passant,* is the old "national question," pollution notoriously being no respecter of frontiers. Much the same may be said of all the false dilemmas nourished by the (largely ideological) alternative between reform and revolution, for it is now plain that no change, not even the most limited, can be expected to occur so long as *all* those interests that control the social whole are not brought into question. The "revolutionary action" of the atom has even exploded what will turn out to have been the last mystification propagated by a submissive intelligentsia, namely the notion that there is something in our "democracies" worth defending against the totalitarian

It is just such an impeccably "realistic" approach on the part of our bureaucratic managers (who in this case happened to be American) — an approach democratically seconded by their scrupulously honest suppliers — that has allowed them in any number of spheres to carry out *in-vivo* experiments of a kind that they have not as yet conducted in the context of their research on catastrophes (in the context, as it were, of their catastrophic science). Admittedly, no matter how strong one's attachment to the truth, in the event of an all-out nuclear war waged by machines, the distinction between truth and error — between an "appropriate" strike and an accidental one — is liable to have a distinctly evanescent quality. And with whom exactly, thereafter, shall we be able to share the irony of history's "Nothing is true, so everything is allowed"?

In the light of such oppressive realities, it needs to be remembered how much scientific thought has in common with gardening in a graveyard: there may be a few flowers, but they are rooted in death and decay. We have told elsewhere (to remain for a moment in the vegetable kingdom) how the wise men could not see the vanished forest for the trees of their abstract hypotheses about that forest (see *Encyclopedie des Nuisances,* s.v. "Abetissement"). The devotion with which these sages prune their hypothetical trees clearly shows that they are ready to sacrifice all the real forests — and all real life — in order to perfect their knowledge of the deserts of abstraction. The religion of science, just like more traditional religions, has its own priests, martyrs, fanatics and visionaries (see *Encyclopedie des Nuisances,* s.v. "Abnegation"). Yet no matter how impartial this religion claims to be, nothing can prevent it from serving a social order that, though doubtless governed by more immediate interests, is working vigorously everywhere to create the very conditions — the very experimental *tabula rasa* — that it itself so urgently requires for its calculations and operations. However lofty science's ideals and ambitions, however worthy its scruples, it cannot but recognize its earthly realization in the profane practice of the forces of social domination: it thus treats every new folly as just one more route to Reason, as a test from which faith will emerge strengthened — for each new disaster serves to justify the intervention of the specialists who are alone able to interpret and understand it. The true reign

of Science will begin once human existence, that tiresome source of error, has at last been reduced to nothing; after all, catastrophes only underscore the fundamental unreliability of humanity and its whims . . .

We may fairly say of the present organization of society that, no matter what angle it is viewed from, it simply *cannot afford life.* For one thing, it is generally admitted that all the basic necessities of life, whether the life of trees or the life of human beings, are far beyond the means of our economic system. A lifestyle that in the past would have seemed simple, not to say ascetic, is an unheard-of-luxury today, in a world where simply to breathe fresh air and to enjoy peace and quiet is practically impossible anywhere. At the same time — and certainly more importantly — the technical means that this society has chosen to develop are those that enable it to dispense more and more thoroughly with living activity and individual initiative (and hence with those practical skills that once underpinned the proletarian project). It does without them so easily already, in fact, that it cannot see the need for them at all: the production of robots is naturally (or, rather, unnaturally) accompanied by the development of an environment suitable only for robots. The contaminated areas where robots best prove their usefulness bear witness, meanwhile, to *our* superfluity. One thinks of a remark made by an early atomic scientist: "Energy derived from nuclear fission is in the long run incompatible with the human race." Everything suggests, however, that the powers-that-be took the nuclear option *for this very reason,* as part of their war against life and history.

At Chernobyl, in the Ukraine, the ideology of progress has just reached its disintegration point. People more knowledgeable than us will no doubt pinpoint the technical causes of the disaster. So far as we are concerned, Chernobyl's fallout (in all senses of the word) tells us all we need to know about what happened, and enables us to put this event in its proper historical context without much difficulty. The fact that it occurred in a country where the ideology of progress is considerably more rampant (to put it mildly) than progress itself cannot obscure its universal significance: here for the whole world to see, lit up with terrible clarity, was all that remained of "enlightenment." All the glitter was gone and total darkness prevailed. Here,

to keep the harmfulness level at . . . zero. A similar approach was used earlier when the method of counting power-plant mishaps was revised in order to "reduce" their number. The practice of altering the map to conceal a pitiful state of affairs on the ground is of course widely and effectively applied; we have elsewhere drawn attention to the way in which our "planners of ignorance," confronted by an alarming resurgence of illiteracy, simply changed their marking system — scientifically, of course — so as to produce the desired percentage of passes come exam time (see *Encyclopedie des Nuisances,* s.v."Abecedaire"). Simply another instance, in short, where the bureaucracy, "being unable, naturally, to suppress nuisances, seeks to manipulate the perception of them" (see "Discourse preliminaire," *Encyclopedie des Nuisances,* No. 1).

The spread of scepticism cannot be prevented by this kind of subterfuge, however; one reason being that it is based on a very simple observation, and one which, unlike claims about numbers of picocuries, millirems and whatnot, is easy to verify: the observation that the owners of the means of contamination also monopolize the means of contamination's detection and control. If it is true that the soul of bureaucracy is secrecy, a secrecy "preserved within the bureaucracy itself by means of hierarchy, and vis-a-vis the outside world by virtue of bureaucracy's having the characteristics of a closed corporation," then the technical *content* appropriate to this *form* is certainly to be found in a nuclearized domination under whose sway it is not merely the "spiritual essence of society" which becomes bureaucracy's *private property,* but rather society's material existence as a whole. The chief result of this monopolization is that all attempts publicly to establish the truth about any aspect of reality become treason against the "mystery" of the bureaucracy. "The suppression of the bureaucracy is only possible if the general interest effectively becomes [. . .] the individual's interest, and this can only come about if the individual's interest effectively becomes the general interest" (Marx). The task of dismantling the nuclear walls behind which the oppressive forces are massed is the liberatory task that now subsumes all others, for here the individual's interest indeed effectively becomes the general interest. This *Encyclopedia*

continue to serve humanity" (*Liberation,* 2 June 1986). The peaceful atom, in short, must serve humanity even if humanity has to be wiped out in the process . . .

In the future, the nuclearites will not need to be forever preparing their next accident, for they have by now accumulated a vast inventory of as-of-yet undiscovered disasters. Instead, they will be able to focus all their efforts on the job of helping us catch up with our backlog of ignorance, while at the same time learning to live with their immense capacity to impose such backwardness upon us. The very forces of which we have lost control are thus revealed to us in their most baleful form, while their *mouthpieces* invite us to believe that they can measure and manage these forces with perfect ease. "Ah yes, bequerels — well, we have released some everywhere, more or less." The spokesmen who inform us of these things even assume a tone of scientific satisfaction as they do. All the same, the continued lying with statistics, which is designed to reassure us on the specialists' high degree of competence, and on the "model of safety" which that competence guarantees, is beginning to have an effect opposite to the one intended. Once it is known that a danger exists, figures giving no concrete notion of what exactly is to be feared encourage one to fear only the worst. Quantitative illusions thus eventually have a backlash effect that irreversibly shatters the "confidence" carefully built up on a foundation of ignorance of what is involved. If the nuclearites have suddenly evinced great concern about the ignorance of the populace, it is because they see that this ignorance is on the point of turning into suspicion. It no longer suffices to bury past and future under an avalanche of figures, because their increasingly transparent falsehoods and increasingly obvious impotence disclose a present that is itself a bottomless chasm, an unknowable "black hole" — something perhaps like that "great black hole you never come back out of" evoked in Ubu's beloved "Debraining Song." It has thus recently been discovered that the public is in need of "new aids to understanding" in this domain. Fortunately these new methods do not present too great an intellectual challenge. What is called for , seemingly, is the "normalization of the definition of thresholds" of harmfulness, and this is readily achieved by the simple process of adjusting the thresholds just as often as may be necessary

distilled, was the end-product of a mode of production, the practical form of a mortal truth: the truth that we have no choice but to suffer such an unnatural catastrophe without understanding it, just as its preconditions have been created in ignorance, and above all that we must accept our complete inability to learn any lesson whatsoever from it. After the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, Voltaire — the ever prudent Voltaire — came to doubt divine providence and its benefits: "We must face the fact that evil exists on earth," he concluded. After a disaster like Chernobyl, the new theodicy of technological progress appears to all in the shape of a dark fatality, a dispenser of insidious, ineluctable evils that can only be conjured away by the incantations of a priestly caste of experts (see *Encyclopedie des Nuisances,* s.v."Abracadabra"). The sometime difference between history and nature — namely, that we make the one and not the other — has been abolished by the reign of dispossession in the context of one and the same rout of humanity. Our pro-nuclear leaders dub this dispossession "consensus" — while *their* consensus of lies and prevarications passes for mastery. But the order that reigns over these ruins did not govern their production.

The Ukrainian disaster was followed by a veritable bacchanale of unreason wherein not a sober voice was to be heard. For more than a month, as the winds from Chernobyl continued to blow, power's experts, who in France regretted having upset us at first by saying nothing, now undertook to reassure us by saying anything at all. Flanked by their communications people, they put on a show that defied parody. It is hardly possible to caricature traits that one would be hard put to portray in their simple objectivity. All of a sudden, it seemed that the only thing that mattered was to *inform* us. How many curies, how many becquerels, were now thrust upon us in order to satisfy our hunger and thirst for knowledge! Not a day would pass without the authorities producing figures purporting to show that the (formerly nonexistent) radioactivity level had dropped considerably and was now "insignificant." They also worried about how difficult it probably was for us to calculate our chances of survival in so many different units of measurement, and suggested "standardizing the definition of the level at which radioactivity begins to present a threat to human beings" — in other words, pushing that

danger level high enough to spare us all those endless calculations. On 13 May [1986] one government minister forbade the sale of becquerel-heavy spinach, hastening to make it clear that his concern was more of a dietetic kind than anything else, because one would have had to "eat two tons of this spinach within a few weeks in order to reach the point beyond which medical consultation might need to be considered." How fortunate that we don't eat spinach by the ton — otherwise the point beyond which the nuclear power industry becomes a menace might need to be considered! One creative advisor, eager to "convince the French people that we had no wish to lie to them," suggested that the Prime Minister appear on television eating salad. Was this another way of saying that there would be nothing but becquerels — but that there would be plenty for everyone? Quite likely so, because the proposal was rejected: no doubt even the government realized that we needed no information about something so obvious. If we are not often reminded of truths so self-evident that they may be grasped without benefit of supporting facts and figures, and confirmed without using any special equipment, it may well be because (in Custine's words) "Humanity is quite willing to let itself be scorned and ridiculed, but it is quite unwilling to let it be said in explicit terms that it is being scorned and ridiculed. Violated in fact, it finds refuge in mere words" (*La Russie en 1839*). Most French people knew full well on this occasion that they were being scorned and ridiculed; indeed in their great majority they told the pollsters so in as many words. But they wanted to be "informed," to "find refuge in mere words," to use words to preserve what the facts had already obliterated. Once more political illusion came to the rescue; once more the individual was content to be, as Marx put it, "an imaginary member of a fictitious sovereignty." As for those leftist academics who saw this as a chance to bemoan "the old ideal of the responsible citizen abdicating in the face of the reality of the television viewer" (*Le Monde diplomatique,* June 1986), did it not occur to these nincompoops that the latter is merely a perfected version of the former?

The glut of "information" that besieges us creates a sort of white noise causing *everything* to be quickly forgotten (see *Encyclopedie des Nuisances,* s.v."Abasourdir"). In the case we are considering, for

Pellerin had authoritatively pronounced to be a "normal" becquerel level: "Let's kicks the daylights out of one of those experts for one hour exactly. If he complains, we'll explain to him that, since there are 8,760 hours in a year, if he spreads our beating out over that many hours, he will hardly feel a thing." (Quoted in *Liberation,* 8 July 1986.)

In sharp contrast to this straightforward suggestion — which sets an excellent example for any future programme of action for "non-specialists" — it has fallen to the Stalinists (as well it should) to out-Herod Herod in this sphere: in their eager anticipation of a perfected nuclear totalitarianism, the vision of which for them no doubt represents a kind of glorious home-coming, the Communists unintentionally expose the truth behind all the Big Lie's conjuring tricks with numbers. Thus, *L'Humanite,* attempting to succuor "Professor Pellerin and the other experts who stand alone against the onslaughts of the anti-nuclear faction and all those who would like to go back to the days of the Cold War," summed up the stance of their materialism-of-disintegration towards Chernobyl's contribution to ambient radiation as follows: "One hundred times nothing, or four hundred times nothing, is still nothing." Any and all rational argument having been transcended, what is also manifestly being *set at naught* here, because nobody has the means to invest it with value, is reality itself; all that remains is the majestic progress of abstraction, and there is no countervailing force to challenge it. What better measure could we have than this *zero,* which annihilates all contradictions, for the future of a society that so resolutely turns its face towards nothingness. We shall leave it to others to decide whether post-Chernobyl Stalinism may also expect that the plant mutations so rigorously promoted in the Ukraine will realize Lysenko's genetic dreams — and that the results of a science gone mad will thus furnish an *a posteriori* justification for that earlier application to science of an ideology gone mad. For our part, we are sufficiently persuaded by the inevitable spread of the effects of State-generated dementia by the words of one Soviet television announcer, who asserted that "it is impossible to prevent the progress of knowledge," adding — as though wishing to carry the ideological inversion of reality into the realm of out-and-out caricature — that the "peaceful atom must

disposed in this regard, but the most insouciant credulousness must have pause in face of the sheer stodginess of the mental fare our bureaucrats have to offer. In any case, figures are not something one *believes in:* one either knows them to be true, or not. What this means in this instance is that we must resign ourselves to the impossibility of any verification. (Interestingly, no sooner are we tempted to conclude from such statistical data that they indicate a more dangerous state of affairs then our informants hasten to tell us that they are false or "insignificant.") In the unilateral discourse of the proprietors of technology, figures are a crude replacement for any recourse to rationality, a recourse that has in fact become impossible as a result of the detachment of this discourse from all historical reality. The mind-numbing piling up of statistics is also supposed to persuade the impotent spectator that what he or she cannot understand is understood perfectly by others — who are as at home amidst these numbers as fishes are in the sea (a sea warmed, perhaps, by the radioactive effluent of a nuclear power station?). Thus the "precision" of quantification is supposed to come to the rescue of a bureaucratic language that is otherwise notoriously ill-equipped to sustain any appearance of logic. A tic-like feature of all the pseudo-reasonings of spectacular power is the use of expressions such as "moreover" and "furthermore" as devices for implying logical relationship, where none exists, between an element A and another, B, whose only real connection with B is the fact that it has been chosen from an infinite number of possibilities to be thus brought into conjunction with it. When it comes to the quantative description of the public nuisance known as radiation, however, the basic verbal tic is the use of the phrase "which is equivalent to." The trick here, though less subtle, is reminiscent of the deception involved in the paradox of Achilles and the tortoise: the overall cumulative process is ignored in favor of the particular instant under consideration, and a mean is then extrapolated from this isolated segment of reality. In this way, dangerous trends are as effectively abolished as the forward movement of Achilles. A remarkably pertinent response to such sophistry, both in form and in substance, was the following observation published in the Corsican autonomist paper *Arriti* on 20 June 1986, at a time when Corsica was ingesting what Death's Head

example, the only truly informative item, the only piece of news worth thinking about, was naturally bound to disappear from our awareness along with the vast mass of nonsense in which it was buried. The item in question was the fact that the people who have opened up the abyss so clearly revealed at Chernobyl are actively pushing us towards its brink. But what chance is there of finding people courageous enough to confront this truth head-on in a country so degenerate that it mounts a sort of state funeral for a media-mad clown like Coluche? It would nonetheless be fatuous and puerile to explain the general passivity by blaming some kind of "conspiracy" for suddenly depriving honest citizens of their powers of discrimination, for the pro-nuclearites make no secret of the fact that they have made an irreversible decision to follow nobody's judgment but their own. For once, moreover, their self-assurance is convincing, for for it reposes on the one power they exercise fully, the power to constrain us — a power, certainly, that they use more effectively than any control they exert over the diverse ventures (and adventures) of their technology. Assembled in Tokyo a few days after the Chernobyl disaster, for example, a group of Western heads of state declared that "Nuclear power is and always will be, if suitably managed, a more and more widely used source of energy" (*Le Monde diplomatique,* art. cit.). At the beginning of June 1986, in Geneva, Hans Blix (director of the International Atomic Energy Agency), upped the ante even further by declaring his complete confidence in the results of the pro-nuclearite blitzkrieg: "To my mind, atomic energy has reached the point of no return; it is simply a reality with which we have to live" (*Le Figaro,* 3 June 1986). This despotic fatalism of dispossession does not even bother with the calming reassurances generally given out by the media hacks, such as the totally spurious claim that certain essential differences in Western reactors or in their confinement systems make an accident like Chernobyl impossible in the West.

One member of the US Nuclear Regulatory Commission by the name of James Asseltine, who came into public view once before, during the "incident" at Three Mile Island, has recently rather earnestly declared that, unless other security measures are taken, "we may expect to see a reactor-core meltdown within the next twenty years with the emission of as much radioactivity as at Chernobyl, if not

more." Asseltine adds that US reactors "were not designed for major meltdowns" (AFP, 23 May 1986, quoted by the World Information Service on Energy (WISE) bulletin, 31 May 1986). So much for "suitably managed" nuclear energy. It is plain that no extra "safety measures" could change anything in such a "design" — in fact, they would probably only introduce extra risk factors. The fact that "state-of-the-art" technology — supposedly standing guard as we sleep — offers a degree precisely equivalent to that enjoyed by the *Challenger* astronauts — the same degree of safety as that guaranteed by any piece of industrial junk produced under the prevailing conditions of irresponsibility, corruption, deliberate trickery and waste: the conditions, in a word, of exploitation. One has only to think of those "sophisticated" electronic components, allegedly meeting military standards, which Texas Instruments was obliged to recall at great expense from missile-guidance systems because of manufacturing defects that had survived the most Draconian tests. The same parts, of course — or their clones — are responsible for the "automated" functioning of nuclear-power plants.

So what we did learn, despite everything from Chernobyl, was that the managers of this redoubtable energy have eliminated the danger of a "major" accident from their engineering with exactly the same rigor as that with which they have eliminated that possibility from the picture they paint when estimating "costs and benefits" or trying to demonstrate the "competitiveness of the nuclear option." At least no one can accuse the scientific method underpinning the various enterprises of death and desolation to which this society is so attached of inconsistency: just as our scientists know everything about a tree *in vitro,* but nothing about its disappearance *in vivo,* all the safety reports on French nuclear reactors carefully avoid any mention, not only of accidents, but also of the real conditions that must necessary lead to such accidents. Consider, for instance, the fact that the development of cracks in the boilers and pipes of French reactors, which got a certain amount of play in 1979, had already occurred during experimental simulations. As a Framatome engineer remarked with a degree of common sense truly unheard-of among his ilk: "Are we really supposed to believe that this development of cracks is characteristic of the sample components in tests but not

state, which has gone further along the path of nuclear insanity than any other — though it has not yet achieved the "energy independence" that it seeks — has certainly achieved complete independence from society (and, in the process, rendered society for *its* part more dependent). This creation of dependence on the state, planned in an authoritarian manner on the bases of unreality and the Big Lie, calls for a concentration of the means of conditioning comparable to the concentration required by the planning process itself. In other words, it is the same hierarchical networks, of which the electorate has not only no control but also no knowledge, that both impose the vital decisions and generate the propaganda that is then obediently disseminated by the media. For example, the moderately critical members of a scientists' Group for Information on Nuclear Energy (GSIEN) have shown that one investigator, Arvonny — who was so resourceful when facts needed to be denied (see *Encyclopedie des Nuisances,* s.v. "Abetissement") — was quite content to fill the need for "fresh data" by simply quoting the communiques issued by the EDF [the French state electricity authority] itself for the edification of readers themselves apparently conceived of as "models of safety." Arvonny did not pretend to have done any original research — he did not even bother to examine the blatant internal contradictions of other EDF documents. We have elsewhere examined the similar way in which the periodical appearance in the press of articles hailing the marvels of agribusiness is entirely a function of the propaganda-mongering of the French National Institute of Agronomic Research (see *Encyclopedie des Nuisances,* s.v. Abat-faim).

Indoctrination of this kind, so poorly disguised as information, always bears the clear marks of its origin. Uncontrollable statistics and unverifiable figures are solemnly trotted out, for all the world as though the whole of society consisted of docile civil servants; and incomprehensible acronyms — designating obscure but presumably powerful institutions — are pompously produced one after the other, like the litanies of a self-satisfied cleric who can be sure of awed respect from his audience. Marx observed that bureaucrats were the Jesuits of the State. Those [bureaucrats] of today are true to the tradition of their predecessors (*perinde ac cadaver*), but they have lost all their means of persuasion. Not that the current age is ill-

Catastrophe, meanwhile, has the paradoxical function — albeit logical enough in what is after all an old-fashioned protection racket — of serving as a guarantee of seriousness: if the credibility of the nuclear zealots should ever falter, the spectre of disaster will always be there to back up their arguments — so long, at any rate, as humanity does not make up its mind to reconquer the territory of real life and — as an indispensable part of that project — to *evacuate the evacuators.* In the meantime, as pure spectacle of catastrophe, each Chernobyl can meet other basic needs of bureaucratic capitalism, and advantageously open up new markets in the tooling of dispossession. Thus, along with sets of desirable objects designed to fully outfit each happy consumer with a pseudo-personality, complete with supposedly human qualities, we are now also offered trendy products for unhappy consumers — a panoply of state-of-the-art gizmos for detecting, and protecting ourselves from, those very real properties of today's world that constitute its own noxious "personality." Along similar lines, the French supermarket chain Mammouth — boldly introducing a style of sales promotion well adapted to the new conditions — equipped all of its Alsatian outlets with devices for measuring radioactivity (becquerel scales, so to speak). In the words of Mammouth's advertising copy, "While France debates, Mammouth acts. Be absolutely sure your fruit and vegetables are safe" (*Le Monde,* 17 May 1986.)

By thus aspiring to resell to us, at retail, that survival on which the bureaucrats have the ultimate monopoly, such shopkeepers behave as profiteers always do in times of crisis, and by their cynicism merely underwrite the status quo. The status quo, in the event, is expressed in the war-like proclamations of the pro-nuclear terrorists, whose programme corresponds exactly to Custine's evocation of "the discipline of the military camp substituted for the order of the city, and a state of siege substituted for the normal state of society." To muster support for such a programme, its promoters are obliged to make clumsy appeals to brute necessity, and to pose as the handmaidens of scientific objectivity. In reality, of course, these clamorous perverters of life speak only for a power that is utterly indifferent to any human necessity, and that every day dispenses only those objectives truths that accord with the lies of the moment. The French

of those same components once they are in an operational setting?" One kind of guarantee against such cracks, of course, is simply to dub them "undercoating faults." Short of such sheerly magical thinking, there is a form of logic peculiar to the proponents of nuclear power according to which, should a serious accident *per impossible* occur, it would gravely compromise, after the fact, the accuracy of the instruments designed to record it and account for it; what point would be served, therefore — runs this argument — by contemplating the possibility of events so inaccessible in any case to scientific measurement? We are nonetheless supposed to be much edified to learn that "EDF [the French state electricity authority] technicians undergo training in a mock-up control room where they learn how to respond instantly to the most unimaginable accidents"? It is certainly reassuring to know that the unimaginable has been taken into account! Unfortunately, the imaginable is given short shrift: thus we learn that in this "practice alert" a computer program "simulates the Three Mile Island accident in order to teach the technicians in the control room how to respond to the most bizarre of situations: (*Paris Match,* 4 October 1985). One does not have to be a genius to tell that there is one "bizarre situation" that will always be left out of such simulations: the *next* one . . .

All the historical wisdom of this discreetly flawed technocratic despotism is contained in the celebrated Bonapartist dictum, "Let us hope it lasts . . ." But as long as it does last, and as long as specialists of this stripe continue to exploit and thrall an ignorant world, they may as well inscribe their banner, as they watch humanity sinking ingloriously into disaster, with the words attributed to Napoleon at the crossing of the Berezina: "Look at those toads," he is supposed to have said as he contemplated the seething mass of his soldiers drowning in the river. Despotism's one and only idea is contempt for mankind, the idea of mankind dehumanized. This idea is superior to many another inasmuch as it at least corresponds to a real fact. In the language of the technonuclear variety of despotism, it has the following form: "Standard man: a theoretical representation of the average adult human body (chemical makeup, weight and size of organs) established by the ICRP as a yardstick in the assessment of maximum acceptable concentrations of substances in the body" (*Dictionaire des*

sciences et techniques nucleaires, Commissariat a l'energie atomique, 1975). For the nuclear-bunker experts, then, a human being is merely a degree of tolerance to a "concentration" of a substance. And — although the ICRP is referring here to a concentration of radioactivity, it is worth pointing out that this approach applies equally well to the concentration of power — a tendency that has been proceeding apace throughout the history of this century, with the "maximum admissible level" subject to continual adjustment (upwards, needless to say).

Perhaps the foregoing remarks lack some of the trenchancy that our readers, including our opponents, have come to expect from us. Perhaps we have failed fully to convey the violence of the revulsion that these appalling exercises evoke in us. In point of fact, the trenchancy really called for here — the required cutting edge, so to speak — would be one capable of ruthlessly abbreviating the noxious reign of a "Death's Head Pellerin" [translator: Director of the French government's central department for protection against ionized radiation (SCPRI), and a leading member of the pro-nuclear lobby who is notorious for his lies and prevarications]. Nor do we despair of seeing the day when this madman and his acolytes are as universally detested as a farmer general on the eve of the French Revolution. Meanwhile, since the activity of *writing* is still needed to help bring that day closer, what better source could we have than the pro-nuclearites' own words to describe what their Leviathan's poison breath is silently bringing forth? Their contempt for humanity is expressed just as masterfully in their discourse as it is in the facts themselves, so we may as well offer them the same tribute here as the one they enjoy in society at large; at least here we have some prospect of offsetting their eloquence by injecting a small dose of reality.

Consider the following account, offered by a mildly apologetic journalist, of a conference in Geneva, in early June 1986 (attended by some "two thousand proponents of nuclear power from twenty-eight countries"):

> "The participants here are first and foremost 'brothers in the faith of science and technology.' Indeed, their unshakeable faith

> another reason," as Tazieff points out, "for anticipating a devastating earthquake in the near future." To avert all these potential disasters, the "Bhopal Group" has chosen to work under the banner: "In time of peace, prepare for war." — *Liberation,* 31 May-1 June 1986.

So it goes for Isere — and for all of us. We are assured that our mandated powers (which of course we never mandated) are being used to prevent imminent disasters by preparing us for them (rather, one supposes, as those same powers were earlier and secretly used to create the very threat that we now need protection from). Much is made of the judiciousness of the preventive measures taken — on the model, no doubt, of the "good judgment" shown in the erection of nuclear power plants over seismic faults. A system that can justify its existence by evoking the need for protection from catastrophes of its own making has stolen a page from George Orwell's recipe for social control, which was based on the fear of war with an enemy *without.* In a society at war with its own deviated possibilities, a permanent mobilization is called for against what appears as on omnipresent enemy *within,* an inscrutable force whose agents, like so many pyralene transformers, are liable at any moment to unleash an offensive and release their indestructible toxins. According to the promoters of the "Bhopal Group," "the lessons drawn from one high-risk department, as it is transformed into a model of safety, may then be applied on a national scale" (ibid). It is not hard to see that the only purpose of such a model, as "safe" as it might be, is to habituate people to the idea of performing on command all the large and small actions demanded by a regime of militarized *survival.* The only real utility of all the nuclear evacuation plans and drills is as a means of gauging and hence of reinforcing people's docility; the one real aim is to manipulate that docility and press it into the service of an ever greater concentration of power.

In the vanguard of this campaign, the pro-nuclear forces, whose task it is to translate the refusal of history into exact technical realities, believe that they have found the ultimate weapon for ensuring submission in the permanent blackmail of their "safety imperatives."

Clearly perceptible here is the elation that fills these would-be monopolistic controllers of survival when they glimpse a time coming when they will at last be able to exercise complete power, when their "protection" will be unquestioningly accepted as indispensible. Their encomiums to those other "heroes of safety" doing battle on the Eastern front are suitably epic, august and virile in tone, but one senses that the authors are chafing at the bit for a chance to show off their own prowess.

Indeed, the arms destined for use in the campaigns to come are already being polished up, to the accompaniment of much stamping of anticontamination boots, as we prepare, having sown the wind of risk, to reap the whirlwind of disaster.

> Isere has just been designated a high-risk department by Alain Carrignon and Haroun Tazieff. Yesterday afternoon, the reception rooms of Grenoble police headquarters witnessed the inauguration of the "Bhopal Group," cornerstone of the policy of the new Minister for the Environment (who is also President of the Isere General Council and Mayor of Grenoble). On the face of it, no more appropriate choice could have been made. The population of this department, just under a million, will by the end of the year be playing host to almost 10 percent of France's nuclear power industry, yet in no other metropolitan area but that of Grenoble can one find 400,000 people overshadowed by such a vast quantity of water: one thousand million cubic meters are contained by the dams closest to the city. Meanwhile, three of France's fifteen most dangerous chemical plants are also to be found on the outskirts of Grenoble. Nor can nature be left out of the picture: to get out of the city, which is only 200 meters above sea level. one must pass through a gorge with walls 3,000 meters high, whole sections of which periodically collapse. Last but not least, a seismic fault runs beneath the most densely populated section of Isere; it extends in an arc from Swizterland to Provence, and produces two major shocks per century on average, although it is now almost a hundred years since any serious seismic activity has occurred — "yet

and determination is at times expressed from the podium with a naive candor which is not always in the best of taste. Hans Blix, for example [. . .] declared unhesitatingly that 'Chernobyl has not caused any more deaths than a notorious football match in Heysel about a year ago.' Blix then proceeded to berate the press for publishing 'provocative headlines' about Chernobyl, and made the claim that the production of a quantity of energy equal to that generated at Chernobyl using a coal-fired power station would give rise to just as many accidental deaths and injuries, whether on-site in the mines or in the form of pollution-related cancers. As he spoke, venerable conferences were somewhat shamefacedly passing around an issue of the *Village Voice* [translator: that of 13 May 1986] containing a coolheaded but terrifying account of the most serious pre-Chernobyl nuclear accident, that at Three Mile Island (TMI), near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, on 28 march 1979. There are two reasons for the considerable impact that this issue of the *Village Voice* has had here. In the first place, it is very frightening. One article recounts how — although the TMI accident, unlike that of Chernobyl, claimed no immediate victims — plants in the vicinity affected by radioactivity have degenerated and mutated over time, while the incidence of adult and childhood cancer has increased amongst people living along the path taken by the escaping radioactivity to a level 700 percent higher than normal. Secondly, it is significant that these 'revelations,' confirmed only after several earlier scientific studies had produced ambiguous results, are the outcome of a collaboration between the local population as a whole, which is by definition ignorant of nuclear matters, and a number of highly qualified scientists who are not afraid to speak in ordinary language. This is what is new — and not a few of the participants here have been shaken up by it. The chief proponent of such an adjustment is the German Klaus Barthelt, a producer of nuclear electricity with Kraftwerk Union. According to Barthelt, 'The credibility of nuclear experts is on the wane, and our task today is to find new ways of making ourselves understood.'" (*La Croix,* 5 June 1986.)

The problem address by these fanatics has thus absolutely nothing to do with the placing of restraints, however limited, on the appalling capriciousness of their deadly machinery. On this point, at least, they are unshakeable. No, the only thing that disturbs whatever they have for minds is the fact that their hapless victims have the temerity to rebel against their state of ignorance and demand access to precise knowledge of what is being inflicted upon them. Such persistence is liable to compromise the chief advantage enjoyed by nuclear energy as compared with other power sources such as coal. Despite oil's efforts to hold its own, at Maracaibo or elsewhere, radioactivity remains unarguably superior to the side-effects of all other technologies in that its main results become tangible only long after the egregious sets of circumstances that make the front pages of the newspapers. In this sense, too, radiation is marvelously adapted to the needs of the spectacle: we talk about it, forget it, then we suffer its effects, and die from it, in silence. Thus what needs to be concealed — the essential reality of the phenomenon — is conveniently relegated to a hypothetical future time, there to dissolve into statistical abstraction in company with the dangers of smoking and the death toll on the roads. This is what makes it possible to compare the Chernobyl catastrophe to a football riot.

Occasionally, however, what we learn about the past can make this future a little less hypothetical and bring it distinctly closer to our present. Thus official statements seeking to minimize the deadly largesse of the winds from Chernobyl made much, all of a sudden, of the nuclear tests of the early Sixties, and we now learned just how much those had contributed to the development of such notions as "maximum admissible concentration" and "acceptable risk." Going back even further in time, an AFP dispatch recently brought us some "fresh news" from 1949: "A veil of secrecy has been drawn aside at Spokane (Washington State) concerning an incident that took place at the Hanford nuclear power plant on the West Coast of the United States. It has been revealed that, on that occasion, 5,500 curies of iodine 131 were released into the atmosphere during experiments conducted in connection with the manufacture of plutonium for atomic bombs. At the time, contamination affected both [the states of] Washington and Oregon, though no medical investigation was

easier. Nuclearization has in any case merely afforded an avenue of expression to the inherent self-destructiveness of a world carried along by the irresistible impetus of its accumulated power, and that power has thus been turned back in all its explosive violence against the very bases of its own existence, as though to deprive any prospective tendency toward revolutionary transcendence of all the purchase it would also inevitably need on those same foundations. The highly technical tenor of their discourse notwithstanding, the midwives of nuclear power's despotism — the midwives, that is, of a historical monster — are really saying nothing different from what Agrippina said when she learned from a soothsayer that Nero would becomes Emperor, but that he would also kill his mother: "Let him kill me — but let him reign!"

Consider the fact that EDF's propagandists, truly "electrified" by Chernobyl, were able *in triumphant ones* to cite the report of a so-called Institute for Nuclear Protection and Safety (IPSN) which describes the measures "taken in order to reduce the effects of the accident":

> According to the IPSN, 'the contaminated land is being covered with a neutralizing film to prevent the radioactive dust from making its way into the soil. Two or three hectares are said to be treated in this way daily.' In the vicinity of the plant, the earth has been frozen by injecting it with liquid nitrogen, so as to obviate any possible contamination of underground water reserves through the filtering down of radioactive water.' The nearby river, meanwhile, 'has had its banks reinforced and raised to prevent its pollution by rainwater running off the contaminated land around the plant.' As for the roofs of buildings, the IPSN believes that they 'will be treated by a special (liquid-gas) method to stop rain from washing radioactivity off them.' All in all, in the estimation of the IPSN's experts, 'it seems probable that the Soviets have succeeded in avoiding any major and rapid pollution of water sources via the subsoil.' And they conclude: 'At all events, one cannot but be very impressed by the scope of the safeguards that have apparently been set up.'" — Supplement to *La Vie Electrique,* May 1986.

on "scientific" grounds presents no serious problem at all. In his own age, [Jonathan] Swift was able with confidence to advance the hypothesis that a man would have rather few spectators were he to offer to demonstrate, for threepence, how he could thrust a red-hot sword into a powder keg without its catching fire. Here we have a convenient gauge of the great strides made by unreason in less than three centuries, for today the French electricity authority (EDF) can draw crowds of spectators — and convinced spectators at that — with its miracle-working patter. Perhaps, if Swift's time had not been so simple-minded, superstitious and resistant to change, his contemporaries would have immediately seen the sense in what has elsewhere been called "tuyere-style thinking" (see *La nuclearisation du monde,* Paris: Editions Gerard Lebovici, 1986). For example: (a) It is unscientific to talk of things one knows nothing about, and furthermore nobody who ever happened to be within thirty meters of an exploding powderkeg has ever said anything about it. (b) Playing on the word "powder" serves to evoke the age-old fear of battle, whereas in this case no cannons are present. (c) For any individual who keeps at least 1200 meters away, the auditory impact of this explosion will not differ significantly from that of a medium-sized fireworks display. (d) AIDS is a bigger killer. And people still drink and smoke, don't they? (e) The modern spectator handles neither gunpowder nor swords; his world is one of plastic and ballot boxes. The socially responsible thing to do, when it comes to matters of which the ordinary citizen is completely ignorant, is to leave all decisions to those properly qualified (and paid) to make them. (f) You have to learn to live with gunpowder. (g) Practical human error must not be allowed to detract from the superhuman beauty of the *principle.* (h) The envious may carp, but there's no denying threepence is a damned hard price to beat.

Nuclear madness represents the "maximum acceptable level" of class power; as such, it is a pathological development that may at first have seemed reasonable and tolerable enough to those who found nothing particularly shocking about the "normal state" of that power. Eventually, however — here as elsewhere — even the nature of "normality" itself has been forgotten, making the acceptance of the malady's mutations (and their scientific investigation) that much

ever undertaken. The Three Mile Island (Pennsylvania) accident in 1979 resulted in the release of only 15 to 30 curies of radioactivity" (*Le Monde,* 18 March 1986).

Comparisons serving to relativize what we are now obliged to put up with by means of appeals to what has successfully been imposed on us in the past are thus no longer confined to the horrors of pre-nuclear capitalism; we are now asked to contemplate for the first time — and be appropriately enlightened by — the ghastly results achieved by the nuclear-power industry from its lively beginnings on. The *Village Voice* article that so rattled the nuclear experts in Geneva does provide us, fortunately, with a little perspective on the real dimensions of Three Mile Island's modest contribution to the contamination of our atmosphere:

> Seven years after the accident, the Bechtel Group subsidiary that has the $1.2 million contract (plus cost overruns) for the "cleanup" of the damaged TMI Unit 2 reactor has only managed to remove 36,000 pounds of highly radioactive material. Since the remaining 308,00 pounds that could melt down at any minute, thereby contaminating the entire Eastern seaboard, it is kept in the reactor chamber under twenty feet of chemically-treated coolant water. Over 600 workers involved in the cleanup have suffered contamination, even though they are attired in protective clothing and are not allowed to approach the material [. . .] In 1984, TMI's owners pleaded guilty or no contest in federal district court to seven criminal charges of falsification of data on leaks of radioactive material. The company has also admitted the falsity of its assurances that there was no meltdown during the accident. In fact, partial meltdown occurred and there is strong evidence that transuranic elements, including plutonium, escaped into the atmosphere. The company also admitted that the temperature during the partial meltdown reached 5,100 degrees Fahrenheit. At the time of the accident, a National Regulatory Commission commissioner stated that if temperatures had approached 2,100 degrees, it would have been mandatory to evacuate Harrisburg. (Anya Mayo, "You Wore A Tulip," *The Village Voice,* 13 May 1986, p. 29.)

In time, no doubt, we shall get to know practically everything about our accumulating radioactive past. We may be sure, however — since we depend for our our information on the very forces that produced that past — that we shall never learn anything that is not in some sense *saleable,* whether from the point of view of the state bureaucracy, or from that of business interests, or both. Decontamination follows the self-same route as contamination, and here that route is the madcap pursuit of profit. "Living with nuclear energy" is merely shorthand — in accordance with the abstract logic of the commodity — for maximizing the profitability of that energy, including even the fallout from it. Thus what was initially characterized as belonging to a qualitative realm of the catastrophic — as "unmeasurable" and "incalculable" — nevertheless falls under the sway of market forces just like anything else, and ends up with its own market niche and proper market value. Even if we live in a world where all solidity and permanence is liable to evaporate into the atmosphere, there to disperse like a radioactive cloud, this does not mean that the resulting noxious fumes are not suspectible of financial appraisal and subject to contract law. The rebirth of the abstract form of the commodity from its own ashes, its seeming ability to thus snatch victory from the jaws of defeat, has in fact nothing Phoenix-like about it, nor does what takes flight in this dusk have anything in common with the owl of Minerva. A closer analogy would be with the living dead of science fiction, for it is as though plain old commercial greed has died, only to return in mutant form under the effects of all the "transuranic elements" volatized in the air. For surely all these numbers, all this talking of costs and benefits and searching for bureaucratic norms — these waters of pure self-interest icy enough to cool the melted-down heart of a heartless world and turn a profit on it — are a macabre travesty of economic calculation.

A mockery, too, are all the techniques and interests that depend — or, rather, are believed to depend — on realities that have in actuality already vanished into the abyss that a materialized historical unconscious — the Mind of a mindless world — is opening up as easily as radioactivity passes through meters of solid concrete. Never has it been more apt to compare our society to one of those cartoon

occurred in American nuclear plants. — *VDS,* 15–21, March 1986

Note that the destruction of nerve cells is still provisionally considered a "contra-indication." On the other hand, one assumes that the more in-depth research that will become possible as nuclear accidents proliferate will bring out all the benefits to be derived from WR2721. This will doubtless be greatly reassuring, in the first place, to "safety personnel," who, as is well known, tend to be rather nervous, and hence prone to "human error." It will also be of much comfort to the public at large, who, at the moment, must rely on less radical chemistries to cope with their anxiety (see *Encyclopedie des Nuisances,* s.v."Ablation"). They will at least be forearmed against the "malaises experienced by certain population groups in Eastern Europe, living thousands of kilometres from Chernobyl," who, in the expert opinion of Professor Tubiana — a piece of shit who deserves to be more notorious than he is — "display all the characteristic signs of psychosomatic disorder" (*VSD* art. cit). In the meantime, all citizens would do well, one imagines, to take their inspiration from the model calm displayed by certain cesium-laden sheep in the English West Country.

> Leaving Fischer Farm, we drove the length of Valley Road down to historic Goldsboro. The TMI sirens go off frequently, and when there's a problem out on the island, people in Goldsboro can hear the personnel shouting back and forth on loudspeakers. With much of the population either moving away or dying, Goldsboro feels like [a] cluster of hovels [. . .] at the mercy of inscrutable powers (Mayo, *Village Voice,* art. cit. p. 30).

These "inscrutable powers," at whose mercy we all find ourselves, can of course only be our own material strength, sequestrated by the unreason of the State and turned against life to buttress an order that nobody wants, but to which everybody must resign themselves. The absurdity of this order is by now so much taken for granted that it is an easy matter to pile on yet more absurdity, no matter what the cost may be; and justifying such proceedings in advance

history. And what have those who wanted to preserve something of the old culture and the old politics managed to save? They felt that guaranteed survival was a sufficient demand, but even that they have failed to obtain. All that remain to them are the promises of society's protection agencies — empty promises if ever there were.

Such a world tends to neutralize irony; it renders even black humor ineffective, so outrageous is its own absurdity, so dispossessed is it to answer each of its own horrors with a cure that is worse than the disease. Dean Swift himself, were he to come back to life, would be hard put to match the atrocity of the news items that fill the media day after day. Consider this, for example:

> The government in Washington has offered to furnish the Soviets with an anti-radiation pill to be tested on a range of more or less contaminated subjects. This pill, whose existence is still classified as a top secret, is the outcome of research begun in the United States in 1981 on behalf of the Pentagon, which wants to find a chemical shield against radioactivity for use in the event of nuclear war. Experiments carried out at the Walter Reed Army Institute in Washington led to the production, in 1985, of a prototype product named WR2721, which could be administered via intramuscular injection. WR2721 was reportedly capable of increasing resistance to the effects of radiation by a factor of 3 or 4. There was one serious contra-indication, however: the destruction of nerve cells. The Pentagon then invested further colossal sums in an attempt to improve the product. In view of the probable difficulty of injecting oneself in the midst of battle, or during nuclear explosions, the Pentagon was especially eager to find a substance that could be administered in some other form, as a capsule, tablet or pill. Since early 1986, in fact, Walter Reed's specialists have been testing a version of WR2721 in pill form, designed for the use of the military and of anyone working in a nuclear plant. The drug is particularly appropriate for the safety personnel at nuclear plants, who are the most at risk of exposure in case of accident. To date, the American scientists have had to restrict their testing to animals, however, because no sufficiently serious accidents have as yet

characters who is carried out over a void by the impetus of some wild chase, but only falls when he looks down and becomes aware of his plight. Society likewise plunges onward, completely ignoring the fact that its mechanical existence is underpinned in its every aspect by the sheer force of illusion. This simple fact was starkly apparent at the May Day parade in Paris, on a day when, as fate would have it, Death's Heath Pellerin and his agency for the protection of scum that serve the French state once again ought to have us swallow the absurd claim that the radioactive cloud from Chernobyl had stopped in its tracks on arrival at the frontier of our proud and fiercely independent country. (Was it perchance daunted by its own insignificance in the face of France's immense homegrown potential for nuclear pollution?) Anybody with half a brain knew that the nuclear contamination was at that very moment "imperceptively yet perceptively" blanketing the country. Even supposing that this fact could somehow be concealed for a few more moments by those in charge of the management of appearances, there was simply no way its *reality* could be prevented from exposing what was indeed unblushingly perceptible that day in the street as an unreal, grotesquely irrelevant and utterly doomed absurdity. The sudden warmth of a spring day offered this nonsense a perfect setting in which to strut about and puff itself up to gigantic proportions. After all, this was the Feast of Work, wasn't it? That it was. And history, one might say, had no qualms about "celebrating" it, what with the uncontrollable products of work's alienation — none the less dangerous for being disseminated in the upper atmosphere — floating above these relics of the trade-union movement. One wing of these leftover had taken the vulgarity of its self-parody so far as to substitute a boat trip on the Seine for the inevitable street parade of yore, while the more conservative section remained loyal to the tried and true vulgarity of Stalinism. Meanwhile, thanks to a nice twist of the dialectic, it was leisure rather than work that was being fittingly hailed by the grimy pall that overlay these doings; one could not help but wonder how much of this pea soup was due to "normal" car-borne pollution, how much to the heat — and how much to more exotic "transuranic" factors. At all events, in this city that had once been Paris — not that Paris's famous elegance means much to us, but this was nevertheless

a place where both rich and poor, each after their own fashion, had once been able to pursue their tastes and enjoy themselves — in this city, then, there now reigned an unbuttoned, seaside-like mood, blending natives and tourists in a socially promoted exhibitionism where bodies and clothes, people and commodities all bespoke nothing but a cruel absence of pleasure — an absence, moreover, which itself bore a price tag. But to linger on such abominations would necessitate a complaisance in the sordid and the heartsickening worthy of the repellant Celine.

Had a literary allusion been called for, one might have been forgiven, in that subtly doom-laden atmosphere, for thinking rather of Edgar Allan Poe's "Masque of the Red Death." This society's festivities had nothing of princely refinement about them, it is true, nor did Death appear amidst the revelers under such openly horrifying hues as in the Poe story, yet the uninvited participation of Chernobyl in the day's jollifications undoubtedly foreshadowed even more terrible catastrophes to come. "And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all." But it was above all more pressing memories that came to mind as one contemplated this festival of unhappy consciousness. The memory of Libertad, for example, on an earlier May Day, denouncing the illusions of the "unionized working class" and calling for a strike against "useless gestures" — a call so interestingly similar to Mallarme's, as he invited the poet, "on strike against society," to "reject all corrupt means that may present themselves to him." The memory, too, of everything that the old revolutionary workers' movement did in its efforts to deflect the economic course of things and put whatever had been won under the reign of alienation into the service of a free life. And most of all the memory — closer to us in time — of those critical theses and slogans that, as the production of commodities diverged from human needs and crossed the threshold beyond which dispossession approaches its finished material form, took the refusal of work as a basis for the clear formulation of the necessity for conscious domination of this irrational development — the necessity, in other words, for revolution:

> Material liberation is a precondition of the liberation of human history, and it can only be judged by that yardstick. Any conception of a minimum level of development to be reached in one place or another must depend, precisely, upon the nature of the liberatory project chosen, and hence upon who has done the choosing — the autonomous masses or the specialists in power. Those who accept the definition of some particular group of managers as to what is *indispensible* may perhaps be freed from want in respect to the things those managers opt to produce, but they will certainly never be freed from those managers themselves. The most modern and unanticipated forms of hierarchy can only be costly remakes of the old world of passivity, impotence and slavery, no matter how great the material force that society possesses in the abstract; such forms can only represent the opposite of mankind's sovereignty over its environment and its history [. . .] The alternative before us does not consist merely in a choice between real life and a realm of survival that has nothing to lose but its modernized chains: it also appears *within* the realm of survival itself, in the shape of the ever worsening problems that the masters of mere survival are unable to solve. (*Internationale situationniste,* No. 8, January 1963.)

A quarter century ago formulations such as these were denounced, in the name of realism and moderation, as extremist and irresponsible. With the benefit of hindsight, however, we see that that same realism and moderation has led us to extremes far more terrifying in their irresponsibility than all the revolutionary excesses imputed *in advance* to the promoters of a critique that made no concessions. What has been liberated in the intervening years, except for the arbitrary authority of the specialists in power? Certainly nothing constrains their ravings about what they consider indispensible, ie, our perpetual submission to their whims; and they have undoubtedly freed us from any shortage of their chief products — namely impotence, historical paralysis and death. The material force that society possesses in the abstract henceforth takes the concrete form of an "inscrutable power" that enslaves society and reveals itself to all as the opposite of mankind's sovereignty over its environment and its