Each word, idea or symbol is a double agent. Some, like the word “fatherland” or the policeman’s uniform, usually work for authority; but make no mistake, when ideologies clash or simply begin to wear out, the most mercenary sign can become a good anarchist.¹

—Raoul Vaneigem

There are no forbidden words; in language, as it will soon be everywhere else, everything is permitted. To forbid the use of a word is to relinquish a weapon that our opponents will use.²

—Mustapha Khayati

It would be imprecise to describe Raoul Vaneigem as committed to anarchism, since, for the former situationist, the suffix “-ism” signals the ossification of radical theory, its hardening into a generalized and generalizing ideology.³ Vaneigem’s commitment to total revolution, the end of hierarchy and the refusal of power, direct democracy and self-management,

nonetheless exhibits his clear affinity with anarchist thought and forms of organization. Born in Lessines, Belgium, Vaneigem is best known for his participation, throughout the 1960s, in the Situationist International (SI), a group founded in 1957 by Guy Debord and other artists and thinkers formerly connected to the Letterist International, the Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus, and the London Psychogeographical Society. Vaneigem’s most influential book, the *Traité de savoir-vivre à l’usage des jeunes générations* (1967), translated into English as *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, could be described as, among other things, a manifesto and compendium of hypotheses on how to construct a passionate life that would supersede the mediocrity of late capitalist consumer society. A number of sources inspire and inform the ideas and arguments expressed in these pages, ranging from the writings of Karl Marx, Charles Fourier, and Mikhail Bakunin to the aesthetic interventions of Dada, the Marquis de Sade, and the Comte de Lautréamont, from historical events like the Paris Commune and the Russian Revolution to everyday acts of creation, love, 

4 Histories of the Situationist International generally underemphasize Vaneigem’s role in the group despite his fundamental contributions to it. This may be because his ideas and style occasionally diverged significantly from Debord’s, the main protagonist of most accounts of the SI. This divergence and the debates it sparked led to Vaneigem’s resignation/expulsion from the group in 1970. One difference between Debord and Vaneigem is the latter’s significant proximity to the anarchist tradition. Debord accordingly titled his account of the SI and its division *The Real Split in the International*, an allusion to Marx and Engels’s “The Alleged Splits in the International,” which presaged the expulsion of the anarchists from the First International. See: Situationist International, *The Real Split in the International*, trans. John McHale (London: Pluto Press, 2003). Along with underplaying Vaneigem’s contributions, many histories of the SI reproduce this split and minimize or erase the anarchist tendencies within the group. Peter Wollen’s extensive overview of the group, its history, and its influences symptomatically commits this error in the following passage: “If we can see the SI as the summation of the historic avant-gardes, we can equally view it as the summation of Western Marxism—and in neither case does the conclusion of an era mean that it need no longer be understood or its lessons learned and valued.” Wollen privileges the influence of Marxism over anarchism instead of recognizing both political positions as equally relevant for the group. This skewed perspective of the SI is only possible because Wollen focuses on Debord and Asger Jorn while virtually ignoring Vaneigem. See: Peter Wollen, “Bitter Victory: The Art and Politics of the Situationist International,” *On the Passage of a Few People through a Brief Moment in Time: The Situationist International 1957–1972* (Boston: MIT Press, 1989), 27. Two fundamental studies of the SI, remarkable for their range and depth but unremarkable in their treatment of Vaneigem’s thought, include McKenzie Wark, *The Beach Beneath the Street: The Everyday Life and Glorious Times of the Situationist International* (London: Verso, 2011); and Vincent Kaufmann, *Guy Debord: Revolution in the Service of Poetry*, trans. Robert Bononno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006). Wark’s follow-up book is exceptional, especially regarding studies of the SI in English, because of its extended discussion of Vaneigem and his theoretical contributions before and after his split with Debord and the SI. See McKenzie Wark, *The Spectacle of Disintegration: Situationist Passages out of the 20th Century* (London: Verso, 2013), 49–84.
and play. A peculiar and unlikely interlocutor, given his consistent commitment to the (re)production of slavery and hierarchy, Friedrich Nietzsche also informs the ideas and terminology of The Revolution of Everyday Life. I argue, however, that Vaneigem converts Nietzsche’s words and ideas into good anarchists, that he repurposes the mercenary’s signs and symbols for an alternative project. This essay accordingly examines the translation of Nietzschean formulations into radical theory, the modification and reorganization of a preexisting vocabulary to construct a different language.5

Nietzsche’s appearance in Vaneigem’s seminal treatise is far from unprecedented. Numerous factions of the Left, particularly within the anarchist tradition, have championed Nietzsche and drawn extensively from his writings.6 Emma Goldman, for example, gave many lectures on Nietzsche and his work while traveling throughout the United States and argued that, in a certain sense, Nietzsche was an anarchist.7 In her autobiography, Goldman relates the following exchange at Justus Schwab’s saloon in New York City:

They began discussing Nietzsche. I took part, expressing my enthusiasm over the great poet-philosopher and dwelling on the impression of his works on me. [James] Huneker was surprised. “I did not know you were interested in anything outside of propaganda,” he remarked. “That is because you don’t know anything about anarchism,” I replied, “else you would understand that it embraces every phase of life and effort and that it undermines the old, outlived values.” [P.] Yelineck asserted that he was an anarchist because he

5 Consider Khayati on this point: “[N]othing is more obviously subject to dialectics than language, insofar as it is a living reality. Thus all criticism of the old world has been made through that world’s language and yet against it, hence automatically in a different language. All revolutionary theory must invent its own words, destroy the prevailing meaning of other words, and provide new positions in the ‘world of meanings’ that correspond to the new reality under preparation, a reality that must be released from the prevailing muddle.” Khayati, “Captive Words,” 173.


7 These lectures have unfortunately been lost. For a speculative reconstruction of their contents, see Leigh Starcross, “‘Nietzsche Was an Anarchist’: Reconstructing Emma Goldman’s Nietzsche Lectures,” I Am Not a Man, I Am Dynamite!: Friedrich Nietzsche and the Anarchist Tradition, 29–39.
was an artist; all creative people must be anarchists, he held, because they need scope and freedom for their expression. Huneker insisted that art has nothing to do with any ism. “Nietzsche himself is the proof of it,” he argued; “he is an aristocrat, his ideal is the superman because he has no sympathy with or faith in the common herd.” I pointed out that Nietzsche was not a social theorist but a poet, a rebel and innovator. His aristocracy was neither of birth nor of purse; it was of the spirit. In that respect Nietzsche was an anarchist, and all true anarchists were aristocrats, I said.8

Two important points from this striking passage are to be highlighted. First, Goldman maintains that anarchism’s subversion of antiquated norms and beliefs coincides with Nietzsche’s revaluation of values. Goldman also suggests that the affinity between Nietzsche and anarchism stems from their shared aristocratic spirit, their common will to live an exuberant life.

Goldman’s perspective nevertheless disavows the relationship between Nietzsche’s poetry and his social vision, between his aristocratic spirit and his steadfast opposition to all forms of egalitarianism.9 This is especially disturbing because some of Nietzsche’s most vitriolic critiques were directed at anarchists and anarchist ideals. Consider the following passage from Beyond Good and Evil, which Huneker may have been referring to at the New York saloon:

Witness the ever madder howling of the anarchist dogs who are baring their fangs more and more obviously and roam through the alleys of European culture. They seem opposites of the peacefully industrious democrats and ideologists . . . but in fact they are at one with the lot in their thorough and instinctive hostility to every other form of society except the autonomous herd, even to the point of repudiating the very concepts of “master” and “servant”—ni dieu ni maître.10

Nietzsche’s elitism and aristocratic individualism propels him to view both democratic movements and the anarchist call to end authority and

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9 For Waite, this disavowal is symptomatic of a much larger phenomenon: “Arguably the constitutive paradox of post/modern intellectual, artistic, and political life . . . is that Nietzsche seems to attack nothing more vehemently than democracy, feminism, popular culture, and the Left in general. Yet nowhere and at no other time has he enjoyed a warmer, more uncritical—hence more masochistic—welcome than today from precisely this same Left—warmer and more uncritically than ever even on the Center or the Right.” Waite, Nietzsche’s Corps/e, 75 (emphasis in original).
servitude, embodied in the popular slogan “no gods, no masters,” as committed to “making [man] mediocre and lowering his value.” Nietzsche proposes instead that “every enhancement of the type ‘man’ has so far been the work of an aristocratic society—and it will be so again and again—a society that believes in the long ladder of an order and of rank and differences in value between man and man, and that needs slavery in some sense or other.”

Nietzsche holds that hierarchical forms of social organization are necessary for the enhancement of man because he rejects the notion that “to benefit humanity as a whole” means “to benefit all human beings.” Rather, the idea is to allow “a choice type” to flourish, while everyone else must sacrifice “for [their] sake, must be reduced and lowered to incomplete human beings, to instruments.” A “higher state of being” is to be reached by a select few who, like the “sun-seeking vines of Java,” bathe in light while standing on the back of others. Although Nietzsche’s literary and aphoristic style, his use of rhetoric and vivid imagery, “the magic of his language,” likely encouraged Goldman to read the author of Beyond Good and Evil figuratively or allegorically, the above passages unambiguously propose concrete positions against those who would challenge a social order founded on hierarchy and slavery. Nietzsche’s aristocratic spirit, in other words, is linked to a project that strives for the production and reproduction of aristocratic forms of social organization; his poetic revaluation of values inhibits the subversion of antiquated social norms of rank and order.

Vaneigem, like Goldman, draws from Nietzsche’s thought, but he is more aware of the unity of Nietzsche’s spirit and social vision and therefore approaches Nietzsche strategically and with caution. Vaneigem does not ignore or relativize Nietzsche’s authoritarian social and political commitments but rather appropriates and manipulates Nietzschean formulations in order to invest them with a new, revolutionary content, thereby liberating them from their servitude as instruments of power. The situationists called this practice of resignification, of repurposing preexisting elements for the construction of a new ensemble, “détournement.” The prehistory of détournement includes a number of recombinatory concepts and practices, such as Kierkegaard’s recollections, Marx’s inversions of the genitive, Lautréamont’s creative plagiarisms, Dada’s technique of

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11 Ibid., 307
12 Ibid., 391.
14 Nietzsche, “Beyond Good and Evil,” 392 (emphasis in original).
15 Ibid. (emphasis in original).
16 Goldman, Living My Life, 172.
photomontage, the Letterist Isidore Isou’s distinction between the ampic
t and the chiseled, and Bertolt Brecht’s principle of Umfunktionierung.17
According to the situationists, détournement’s two fundamental laws
include “the loss of importance of each détourned autonomous element—
which may go so far as to completely lose its original sense—and at
the same time the organization of another meaningful ensemble that
confers on each element its new scope and effect.”18 In its basic structure,
détournement is the playful desecration of existing meaning followed by
the reorganization of the desecrated for the construction of new meaning.
This formal description of the procedure is nonetheless insufficient, since
détournement’s conversion process is also a subversive form of political
intervention. Détournement not only negates and constructs meaning
but also liberates resources formerly frozen in the grip of authority.19

Although these aspects unite all of its forms, the practice of
détournement is far from univocal. In the pre-situationist text “A
User’s Guide to Détournement” (1956), Debord and Gil Wolman distin-
guish between three forms of détournement: “minor détournements,”
“ultra-détournements,” and “deceptive détournements.”20 While minor
détournements appropriate forgotten or commonplace elements, like
press clippings or discarded photographs, and place them in a new context
from which they draw a heightened meaning, ultra-détournements modify
everyday social life, ascribing new significance to common gestures, words,
clothing, spaces, and situations. A minor détournement of press clippings
could produce an agitational collage whereas an ultra-détournement of
an everyday space might create “a fantastic fairground, a sunny pleasure
dome, where the most exhilarating adventures would allow themselves
to be directly experienced.”21

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17 Debord discusses how Marx and Kierkegaard use détournement in Guy Debord, The
Society of the Spectacle (New York: Zone Books, 1995), 145. Anselm Jappe highlights Isou’s
contribution to détournement in Jappe, Guy Debord (Berkeley: University of California
Press, 1999), 59, 60. Martin Jay offers a genealogy of détournement that includes the
other elements listed above in Martin Jay, Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in
18 “Détournement as Negation and Prelude,” Situationist International Anthology, ed. Ken
Knabb (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2002), 67.
19 Given his excellent contributions to the study of Debord and the Situationist
International, it is peculiar that Tom McDonough obscures this important aspect of
détournement in a recent formalistic presentation of détournement and recuperation.
See Tom McDonough, “Ideology and the Situationist Utopia,” Guy Debord and
the Situationist International: Texts and Documents, ed. Tom McDonough (Cambridge,
20 See Guy Debord, “A User’s Guide to Détournement,” Situationist International Anthology,
14–21.
21 This is how Vaneigem describes the détournement of the Palais de Justice in Brussels. See
Deceptive détournements, on the other hand, repurpose “an intrinsically significant element,” such as an iconic artwork or a statement made by a famous historical figure, “which derives a different scope from the new context.” This practice of détournement thus establishes a distance between an element’s initial meaning and its new, altered signification; however, if deception is total, if the original and its distance from the new signification is unrecognizable, then the détournement becomes unreadable, appearing as a faithful repetition or a wholly new creation rather than a subversive appropriation. As Debord and Wolman assert, “the main impact of a détournement is directly related to the conscious or semiconscious recollection of the original contexts of the elements.”

Included in the user’s guide is this particularly relevant example of deceptive détournement:

[D.W.] Griffith’s Birth of a Nation is one of the most important films in the history of cinema because of its wealth of innovations. On the other hand, it is a racist film and therefore absolutely does not merit being shown in its present form. But its total prohibition could be seen as regrettable. . . . It would be better to détourn it as a whole, without necessarily even altering the montage, by adding a soundtrack that made a powerful denunciation of the horrors of imperialist war and the activities of the Ku Klux Klan.

Neither cooperation nor purity, what Vaneigem describes as ineffectual refusal (reformism) and extreme refusal (nihilism), the practice of détournement presupposes that the elements already at hand need only be reorganized to release their revolutionary potential, “that a critique of the world of spectacle [can] only be articulated through the components of spectacle itself.” When confronted with the organizers of the spectacle, the situationists declare: “We are neither going to leave the present field of culture to them nor mix with them.” The third, situationist option is the individual and collective manipulation of that which manipulates the individual and the collective, the subversion and appropriation, in other words, of the entire field of culture.

There are some important variations of the practice of deceptive détournement. For example, the first thesis of Debord’s The Society of the

24 “Now, the SI,” Situationist International Anthology, 175.
Spectacle (1967), which states that “the whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles,” is a deceptive détournement of the opening sentence of Marx’s Capital.26 By explicitly theorizing détournement while practicing it, Debord’s text provides its own guide to any interpretation of its theses: “The device of détournement restores all their subversive qualities to past critical judgments that have congealed into respectable truths—or, in other words, that have been transformed into lies.”27 In contrast to the détournement of Birth of a Nation, which transforms the film’s racist content into anti-racist propaganda, Debord’s détournement of Marx is restorative, it reactualizes the once transgressive character of Marx’s words, encased in falsity as a result of their spectacular co-optation. The implications of deceptive détournement’s intervention thus depend, in part, on the former significance and context of the détourned element.

McKenzie Wark’s The Spectacle of Disintegration: Situationist Passages out of the 20th Century offers an illuminating examination of Vaneigem’s détournement of Charles Fourier that could be read, as he proposes, alongside Debord’s détournement of Marx (and Hegel).28 I would argue, however, that it would be a mistake to read Vaneigem’s détournement of Nietzsche in the same vein, for Vaneigem does not restore Nietzsche’s voice but rather makes his words and ideas recoil back at him, slashing vocal cords that vibrate on behalf of authority.29 “Repurposing (détournement) is the only revolutionary use of the spiritual and material values promoted by consumer society,” Vaneigem tells us in The Revolution of Everyday Life.30 He continues: “The main tactical and strategic issue is how to turn the weapons that commercial pressures oblige the enemy to distribute against that enemy itself. A user’s guide to repurposing should be available to all consumers who want to stop consuming.”31 As a defender of order and rank, indeed as someone who intended to use his writing to perpetuate hierarchical power and slavery, Nietzsche is a dangerous weapon.32 And

27 Ibid., 144, 145.
29 Greil Marcus defines détournement as “a politics of subversive quotation, of cutting the vocal cords of every empowered speaker, social symbols yanked through the looking glass, misappropriated words and pictures diverted into familiar scripts and blowing them up.” Greil Marcus, Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 179.
31 Ibid., 239.
32 Although far too rich and multilayered to summarize here, one of the main arguments of Waite’s Nietzsche’s Corps/e is that Nietzsche intended to “re/produce a viable
he admitted it: “I am not a human being, I am dynamite.” Rather than retreating from this weapon, which would amount to surrendering it without combat, Vaneigem appropriates and repurposes Nietzsche. The creative and playful spark of détournement lights the dynamite’s fuse. Nietzsche’s explosion is simultaneously a revelatory flash of truth—negation and prelude.

form of willing human slavery appropriate to post/modern conditions, and with it a small number of (male) geniuses equal only among themselves” by mobilizing an esoteric semiotics that would subrationally manipulate his readers (Waite, 232). Nietzsche’s corpus, according to Waite, advances certain philosophical claims that have no ontological or esoteric existence but are nonetheless politically useful and therefore circulated exoterically for public consumption. Potential communists attempt to politically appropriate Nietzsche’s exoteric claims for their own projects, but, like computer viruses, these claims sooner or later infect their hosts, transforming revolutionaries into Left-Nietzscheoids “who are supposed to believe that they are opposing tyranny when in fact they are supporting its undergirding conceptual and economic system” (ibid., 225, emphasis in original). Left-Nietzscheanism, in other words, is always already manipulated by Nietzsche’s esoteric messages, even as it attempts to creatively manipulate Nietzsche’s exoteric themes; Left-Nietzscheoids always already collaborate with Nietzsche’s socioeconomic project of order and rank, even when deconstructing Nietzsche’s texts. Although generally unflinching in his critique of the main currents of Left-Nietzscheanism, Waite is hesitant and ultimately inconclusive regarding his stance on the situationists. It is no surprise, given his critique of the leftist appropriation of Nietzsche, that Waite explicitly mentions “situationist activism” (ibid., 119) and détournement (ibid., 171) as strategies that are ultimately infected by Nietzsche’s esotericism. However, he does not offer a sustained critique of the situationists, instead admitting “a certain solidarity with what remains of international situationism” (ibid., 116) and drawing heavily on situationist ideas throughout the book, as evinced most obviously by the title: Nietzsche’s Corps/e: Aesthetics, Politics, Prophecy, or, the Spectacular Technoculture of Everyday Life. Indeed, Waite’s defense of his method and style of writing, of long endnotes, pastiche, and the use of dashes, implicitly evokes the practice of détournement: “If all these might appear in the abstract to be ‘Nietzschean’ strategies, now they are turned against Nietzsche’s corps/e. There are several important formal-technological as well as politico-ideological aspects of endnote-pastiche” (ibid., 77, emphasis in original). This ambivalent passage suggests that repurposing Nietzschean strategies can aid in combating Nietzsche and his corps while also doubly qualifying this statement with the phrase “in the abstract” and the scare quotes around “Nietzschean,” suggesting doubt about the truly Nietzschean quality of these strategies. This ambivalence is significant because the situationists may offer the strongest challenge to Waite’s argument regarding appropriation. When faced with Nietzsche, the Left has to ask itself the following question: Is it possible to wrest certain elements of Nietzsche’s corpus from his cold, dead hands, from his corpse, without becoming a part of his corps? For Waite, the answer is consistently no, whereas Vaneigem’s The Revolution of Everyday Life suggests that there is no other way to get beyond Nietzsche. If Nietzscheanism “is isomorphic with the Society of the Spectacle,” as Waite argues, then the best weapon against it is détournement (364). Cooptation is always a risk, but it is an even greater risk to relinquish a weapon that the organizers of the spectacle will use.

As we saw in the case of Marx, however, critical judgments can always suffer spectacular recuperation. “Power creates nothing; it coopts.”

Yet power cannot harness the creativity of détournement; the gold of détournement’s revolutionary alchemy turns to coal when it touches enemy hands. Once recuperated, further détournement is required, lest radical propositions of the past are to remain black stones of carbon. As Vaneigem asserts, “the watchword ‘Workers of the World Unite!’ may have helped construct the Stalinist state, yet one day it will underpin the classless society. No poetic sign is ever definitively commandeered by ideology.” Debord similarly posits that détournement is “the fluid language of anti-ideology. It occurs within a type of communication aware of its inability to enshrine any inherent and definitive certainty.”

Détournement and recuperation, in other words, are dialectically antagonistic practices mobilized in a continuous war of position and maneuver.

The practice of détournement may itself sound Nietzschean. While explaining the genealogical principle of the discontinuity between the origin of some thing or practice and its local usefulness in a specific situation, Nietzsche posits the following in *On the Genealogy of Morality*:

> Something extant, something that has somehow or other come into being, is again and again interpreted according to new views, monopolized in a new way, transformed and rearranged for a new use by a power superior to it; that all happening in the organic world is an over-powering, a becoming-lord-over; and that, in turn all overpowering and becoming-lord-over is a new interpreting, an arranging by means of which the previous “meaning” and “purpose” must of necessity become obscured or entirely extinguished.

Nietzsche’s notion of interpretation, as a practice that rearranges and transforms meaning for a new use or purpose, appears closely related to the situationist practice of détournement. But the aim of détournement

34 “All the King’s Men,” *Situationist International Anthology*, 150.
36 Ibid., 84.
37 Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 146.
38 A helpful discussion of the dialectical relationship between détournement and recuperation can be found in Karen Kurczynski, “Expression as Vandalism: Asger Jorn’s ‘Modifications,’” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 53–54 (Spring–Autumn, 2008), 293–313.
40 Gilles Deleuze’s interpretation of Nietzsche on interpretation, itself a creative manipulation of the philosopher’s thought, resonates with the practice of détournement insofar as it highlights interpretation’s (mis)appropriation of its object: “Interpretation reveals its complexity when we realize that a new force can only appear and appropriate
is not to seize power, to become-lord-over—this is the objective of recuperation. Dévouement, on the contrary, rattles the very structure of power in order to contribute to its ultimate supersession. Insofar as Nietzsche interprets the act of interpretation as an expression of the will to power, we could say that the practice of détournement is itself a détournement of Nietzsche’s interpretation, for détournement is interpretation as the refusal of power.41 Détournement enacts this refusal not only at the level of content, by transforming the political valence of a given element of the spectacle, but also at the level of form, by appropriating without formal citation, by expressly undermining any claim of authority or property.

Given its architectonic nature and its emphasis on historical periodization, it will be helpful to review the basic structure and historical arch of The Revolution of Everyday Life before considering further examples of the détournement of Nietzsche. The first part of the book, titled “Part One: Power’s Perspective,” is divided into three sections that theorize Power as a form of social organization whereby masters (e.g., feudal lords and bourgeois capitalists) mobilize certain constraints, mediations, and seductions in order to maintain and reproduce conditions of servitude. In the first section, Vaneigem explores Power’s mechanisms of constraint, which include humiliation, isolation, suffering, labor, and decompression (i.e., the weakening of antagonisms). Next, Vaneigem argues that, under Power’s perspective, mediations can become alienated and alienating and that aspects of everyday life augment this estrangement, such as the dictatorship of consumption, the prevalence of economies based on exchange, the use of technology as a mechanism of control, and the dominance of the quantitative over the qualitative. The third section exposes how Power’s seductions make wretchedness attractive. Examples include the seduction of causes that entail self-sacrifice, illusory forms of unity that obscure actual separation, appearances that hide the reality of our choices, roles that suffocate our identity with identification, and obsession with time experienced as constantly slipping away. The first part of the book concludes by exploring survival sickness, an affliction that plagues those

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41 Christopher Janaway points out that Nietzsche’s “revaluation of all values,” in the original German (Umwertung aller Werte), “carries a sense of values being reversed or turned on their head, not merely examined afresh, as may be connoted by the ‘critique’ or ‘calling into question’ of the Genealogy’s Preface.” This may sound very much like détournement, but it equally evokes spectacular recuperation. Without reference to the political implications of the practice, Nietzschean formulations easily, which is to say superficially, resonate with one of the SI’s central practices. See Christopher Janaway, Beyond Selflessness: Reading Nietzsche’s Genealogy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 13.
who wallow in the passionless mediocrity of everyday life, and two spurious responses to this malady, namely ressentiment and nihilism. “Part Two: Reversal of Perspective” closes the book by envisioning a revolutionary chain reaction that begins with individual creativity and the construction of nonhierarchical microsocieties and ends with a new form of consciousness, a new way of life, and a new mode of social organization that would entail not only economic emancipation but also freedom from all forms of hierarchy and domination, the unity and mutual enrichment of the individual and the collective, the flourishing of the passions of play, love, and creation through projects of participation, communication, and self-fulfillment—in short, the revolution of everyday life.

Vaneigem repeatedly returns to a periodization of historical development in order to show how humanity arrives at the preconditions for the possibility of this complete transformation of quotidian experience. His periodization begins with the state of nature from which tribal social bonds emerge, followed by three modes of social organization—aristocratic feudalism, bourgeois free market capitalism, and the cybernetic welfare state. For Vaneigem, the struggle against natural alienation (e.g., death, disease, suffering) drives humankind to construct hierarchical communities, founded on pacts, contracts, and exchange, in order to increase the probability of survival. This account of society’s genesis distances Vaneigem from Nietzsche insofar as the latter rejects the “humanitarian illusion” of the social contract and proposes instead that the birth of social organization stems from the collective decision of “some blond beasts of prey, a race of conquerors and lords,” to abandon their isolation in order to more effectively target the weak. Whether the origin of society is sparked by the struggle for survival or by the struggle for power, this divergence in perspective stems from opposing valuations of hierarchy. Whereas Nietzsche’s conception of higher and lower human types, of the strong and the weak, leads him to celebrate hierarchical social organization as life-affirming, Vaneigem historicizes hierarchical social forms so as to envision their eventual twilight.

In order to manage and regulate order and rank, feudal forms of social organization deploy what Vaneigem calls a “unitary myth” that connects lords and servants through a shared relationship to God. Vaneigem’s most succinct description of this mythical bond follows:

To the landowners the excluded made a real sacrifice of a significant part of their lives, accepting the owners’ authority and laboring for

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42 For Vaneigem on this transition from the state of nature to human societies, see, for example, Vaneigem, The Revolution of Everyday Life, 29, 30, 60, 61.
them. To the dominated group the masters for their part made a mystical sacrifice of their authority and their power as owners: they were ready to pay for the well-being of their people. God was the underwriter of the transaction and the guardian of the myth. He punished those who broke the contract, while those who kept to it he rewarded with power: mythical power for those who really sacrificed themselves, real power for those who did so mythically.44

The social pyramid, held together by the mortar of myth and sacrifice qua exchange, alleviates natural alienation; however, natural alienation is exchanged for a generalized state of social alienation. Although the feudal lords, unlike their servants, enjoy an aristocratic life of adventure and exuberance, they cannot escape alienation, for “the lord’s subjectivity is fulfilled only through the denial of the subjectivity of others; in this way it chains itself up, for by shackling others it shackles itself.”45 In good Hegelian fashion, Vaneigem construes the master-slave opposition dialectically, asserting that the master enslaves himself qua master and that only the slave can achieve self-mastery, that “it is only from the negative starting-point that thoroughgoing revolt can make the project of absolute mastery feasible. It is slaves, struggling to throw off their chains, who unleash the movement whereby history abolishes masters.”46 Although Nietzsche may have had recourse to dialectical thinking, his thought is generally understood as opposed to Hegelian and dialectical reason.47 As Gilles Deleuze asserts, Nietzsche conceives of dialectical reason “as the speculation of the pleb, as the way of thinking of the slave: the abstract thought of contradiction then prevails over the concrete feeling of positive difference, reaction over action, revenge and ressentiment take the place of aggression.”48 Accordingly, if Vaneigem wishes to release the affirmative from the death grip of Nietzsche’s master, he will have to show how the struggle to throw off the chains of slavery is an active process not reducible to an expression of ressentiment.

Vaneigem maintains that the bourgeois revolution, capitalist industrialization, and the death of God do not really signal the overthrow of feudalism and the unitary myth but rather its mechanization, secularization, and fragmentation. In the shift from aristocratic domination and the qualitative tripartite separation between lord, servant, and God

47 Waite offers a provocative reading of Nietzsche’s dialectic in Nietzsche’s Corps/e, 238, 239.
48 Deleuze, Nietzsche and Philosophy, 10.
to bourgeois exploitation and the dualistic distinction of quantitative equivalence between capitalist and worker, disalienation coincides with a new form of alienation, hierarchy is challenged yet preserved, and the disenchantment of myth produces fragmentary ideologies. More changes occur as bourgeois exploitation incorporates automation and cybernetic programming. The mandates of production gradually give way to the dictatorship of consumption, the free market economy mutates into the welfare state, and the distinction between master and slave, those with power and those without it, begins to blur. As a result, master-slaves, competing for the consumption of crumbs of power, populate consumer society.49 These historical processes coincide with what Vaneigem calls “the disintegration of the spectacle, the decomposition of all coherence, unity, myths, values, and even appearances.”50 What follows is the spectacle of disintegration, feeble replacements of previous values and myths that contribute to extending the life of commodity society.

Vaneigem postulates that the bourgeois era’s victory over the forces of nature, its unparalleled advancements in production and technology, remove, at least in potentia, the originary justification for social alienation (i.e., the struggle against scarcity, natural alienation). Hierarchical forms of social organization dig their own grave. The endless caricature of self-fulfillment, communication, and participation intensifies the thirst for the actual realization of these projects; the justification of exploitation and oppression in terms of the freedom to live a mediocre existence fosters the desire for a liberated, exuberant life. Vaneigem asserts that the proletariat in its new form, laborers who sell their labor power to consume, is driven by its passions, which the current system can only stifle, to close hierarchy’s casket and emerge from the master-slave dialectic as free individuals, as masters without slaves. This is what Vaneigem calls “the aristocratic supersession of aristocracy,” the overthrow of the last remnants of feudalism in order to make common an uncommon existence.51

Vaneigem characterizes the bourgeois era as an interregnum, “an intermediate stage between the life genuinely lived, if less than transparently, by the feudal masters and the life that will be constructed rationally and passionately by masters without slaves.”52 While he recognizes

49 Vaneigem recognizes that there are parts of the world that do not follow this general historical trajectory, thereby demarcating the limits of his periodization, but he also maintains, unapologetically, that the demands of affluent societies will be the global minimum program, that poorer countries will likewise strive for total revolution rather than accept mere ameliorations to their impoverished conditions. For Vaneigem’s discussion of this issue, see Vaneigem, The Revolution of Everyday Life, 20–22.
50 Ibid., 143.
51 Ibid., 186.
52 Ibid., 54.
this intermediate moment as instrumental in establishing the material preconditions for the elimination of natural and social alienation, his account of historical development is neither positivist nor progressivist. He asserts in an extremely Nietzschean-sounding passage that the bourgeois revolution is also a counterrevolution, that it sets the stage not only for the massive production of wealth but also for the disintegration of values, for their conversion into values contrary to life:

From the point of view of everyday life, the bourgeois revolution has not a few counterrevolutionary aspects. Rarely, on the market of human values, has the conception of existence suffered such a sharp devaluation. Proclaimed so defiantly to the whole universe, the bourgeoisie’s pledge to usher in the reign of liberty and well-being served merely to underscore the mediocrity of a life which the aristocracy had managed to fill with passion and adventure but which, once made accessible to all, resembled nothing so much as a palace split up into servants’ quarters. Thereafter hate would give way to contempt, love to attachment, the ridiculous to the stupid, passion to sentimentality, desire to envy, reason to calculation, and lust for life to desperation to survive.53

Just as Nietzsche critiques democratic (and anarchist) movements for devaluing man, attempting to convert great individuals into mediocre herd animals, Vaneigem asserts that the bourgeois revolution’s redistribution and democratization of power is also the redistribution and democratization of servitude. Formerly experienced, at least by some, as a passionate and adventurous life, existence is impoverished, reduced to the boredom of affluent survival. Channeling Nietzsche’s phobia of the mediocre and his attention to the value of values, Vaneigem succinctly asserts that the bourgeois revolution led to “the devaluation of aristocratic values, replaced not by superior values but by mediocrity.”54 The bourgeois interregnum is therefore “the perfect dwelling-place for Nietzsche’s ‘little man,’” the accuser of life who wallows in the shallow depths of the prosaic and trivial.55

If Nietzsche despises anything that would lower aristocratic individuals to a state of mediocrity, it is not because he is against mediocrity in all of its forms: “It would be completely unworthy of a more profound spirit to have any objection to mediocrity as such. Mediocrity is needed

53 Ibid.
54 Ibid., 74.
55 Ibid., 55. For Nietzsche’s discussion of the little man, see Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, ed. Adrian Del Caro and Robert Pippin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 176, 177.
before there can be exceptions: it is the condition for a high culture.”\textsuperscript{56} Nietzsche’s pyramidal vision of a healthy society requires as its foundation a mediocre base of inhuman humans, of individuals as slaves and instruments. It is no wonder that he is equally against democratic and anarchist movements in Europe. Vaneigem, on the other hand, insists that history shatters the false choice between the democratic generalization of mediocrity known as late capitalism, a putrid flower that blooms from seeds planted by the bourgeois revolution, and a Nietzschean aristocracy, in which a choice type may rule above everyone else but neither side can escape the mutual alienation of the master-slave dialectic. For Vaneigem, a radical alternative that would resolve the dialectic by abolishing mediocrity and hierarchy alike is a real historical possibility. Vaneigem’s analysis of the bourgeois era is thus a creative plagiarism of Nietzsche’s ideas and symbols that places them within a nonhierarchical perspective. Repetition with difference.

To fully appreciate the presence and détournement of Nietzschean elements in Vaneigem’s account of the bourgeois era and its late instantiation as consumer society, it is important to recall, telegraphically, Nietzsche’s famous critique of the slave revolt in morality, which starts with the Jews’ devaluation of knightly-aristocratic values prior to the birth of Jesus of Nazareth and extends to the French Revolution’s struggle against the last of the European nobility.\textsuperscript{57} In the first essay of \textit{On the Genealogy of Morality}, Nietzsche introduces two human types—the strong and the noble, on the one hand, and the weak and the slavish, on the other. The former type, characterized as creative and active, deploys an “aristocratic manner of valuation” that affirms the self and all other manifestations of strength and creativity as good and then only retrospectively, as an afterthought, apprehends the weak, the incapable, and the subservient as bad. The weak, on the other hand, are filled with hatred and \textit{ressentiment}, with jealousy and negativity, and seek to blame their suffering on others. Their slave revolt in morality rejects “the aristocratic value equation (good = noble = powerful = beautiful = happy = blessed)” and creates instead an alternative set of values. As Nietzsche posits: “The slave revolt in morality begins when \textit{ressentiment} itself becomes creative and gives birth to values. . . . Whereas all noble morality grows out of a triumphant yes-saying to oneself, from the outset the slave morality says ‘no’ to an ‘outside,’ to a ‘different,’ to a ‘not-self’: and this ‘no’ is its creative


\textsuperscript{57} For Nietzsche on the French Revolution, see Nietzsche, \textit{On the Genealogy of Morality}, 32. For its role in the slave revolt, see Nietzsche, “Beyond Good and Evil,” 251, 392.
While the noble begins with self-glorification, the slavish method of valuation starts with contempt for an other, for those individuals who are unlike the weak. The weak type consequently interprets all manifestations of strength and power as evil and then conceives of its opposite, powerlessness, as good.

While Nietzsche recognizes with fascination the sublimity of the “ideal-creating, value-reshaping hate” of the slave revolt, especially since the creation of values is typically associated with the noble, *On the Genealogy of Morality* is dedicated precisely to the critique of the slave revolt’s values insofar as they are contrary to life and human flourishing and therefore constitute “a sign of distress, of impoverishment, of the degeneration of life.”

What motivates Nietzsche’s critique, in other words, is a very specific interpretation of life, a revaluation of existence. Nietzsche maintains, in an implicit polemic with Darwinism, that physiologists wrongly reduce existence to the struggle for survival: “A living thing seeks above all to discharge its strength—life itself is will to power; self-preservation is only one of the indirect and most frequent results.” Similarly, Nietzsche argues that “the wish to preserve oneself is the symptom of a condition of distress, of a limitation of the really fundamental instinct of life which aims at the expansion of power.”

To affirm life would therefore mean to affirm power’s expression and extension. Self-preservation may be a result of the will to power, but those who seek self-preservation over suppression and exploitation betray their own sickness, their weakened nature, and live impoverished lives.

Attuned to Nietzsche’s diagnosis of self-preservation as pathological, Vaneigem terms the experience of living a passionless and mediocre existence under consumer society’s rule “survival sickness.” “We must handle survival cautiously,” Vaneigem writes, “for it wears us down; live it as little as possible, for it belongs to death.” Yet there are always those who cannot see beyond their sickness and may even fight for its intensification, for more survival. Vaneigem calls such an individual, evoking simultaneously Nietzsche and Max Scheler, the “man of ressentiment,” the “perfect survivor, completely unconscious of the possible supersession.”

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60 Nietzsche, “Beyond Good and Evil,” 211 (emphasis in original).
63 Ibid., 140.
64 Ibid., 143, 152. Vaneigem explicitly refers to Scheler in his discussion of the man of ressentiment, but Nietzsche is so obviously in the background that it is unnecessary to
The man of *ressentiment* lives unhappily within Power’s perspective yet cannot see beyond it, unable to grasp the historical possibility of another form of existence.

Accordingly, the man of *ressentiment*, “eaten up by jealousy, spite and despair, tries to turn these feelings into weapons against a world perfectly designed to oppress him.”^65^ Like the perpetrators of the slave revolt, this individual slavishly and reactively discharges his hatred outward toward that which is powerful and strong. Consider the following passage:

> A reformist trapped between total rejection and absolute acceptance of Power. The man of *ressentiment* rejects hierarchy out of umbrage at not having a place therein, and this makes him, as a rebel, an ideal slave to the designs of his masters of the moment. Power has no firmer support than thwarted ambition, which is why it takes every effort to console losers in its rat race by tossing them the privileged as a target for their hate. Short of a reversal in perspective, therefore, hatred of Power is merely a form of obeisance to Power’s ascendancy.^66^

Power’s chains are like arbor knots; they are tied such that they tighten around the resentful reformist as he despairingly struggles against them. This figure is the perfect survivor because his ineffectual gestures of refusal ensure the survival of survival sickness by perpetuating the source of the disease, namely the hierarchical social organization that inhibits living an authentic life. Vaneigem’s manipulation of the Nietzschean motifs of survival and *ressentiment* thus exposes the limits of reformism. Insofar as his critique of reformism contributes to the articulation of an alternative that would constitute the total supersession of Power, the abolition of hierarchy as such, Vaneigem again creatively plagiarizes Nietzsche, placing his words in a new context so that they may serve a project contrary to his own.

If the man of *ressentiment* “becomes aware that survival is a losing proposition,” he develops into a nihilist.^67^ As is well known, Nietzsche characterizes European culture and its Judeo-Christian tradition as undergoing a crisis of nihilism, in which all values are devalued and life becomes meaningless. As a value-creating immoralist, Nietzsche’s perspective on this crisis is necessarily qualified. Consider the following passage from *The

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^65^ Ibid., 152.

^66^ Ibid. Although Vaneigem does not ascribe to perspectivism, his persistent recourse to the language of perspective in order to describe changes in consciousness *and* in forms of social organization is a simple détournement of Nietzsche. For Vaneigem’s most extended reflection on perspective, see ibid., 162–65.

^67^ Ibid., 156
Will to Power: “What does nihilism mean? That the highest values devalue themselves. The aim is lacking; ‘why?’ finds no answer.” Nietzsche expands upon this definition by describing nihilism as that which appears “because one has come to mistrust any ‘meaning’ in suffering, indeed in existence. One interpretation has collapsed; but because it was considered the interpretation it now seems as if there were no meaning at all in existence, as if everything were in vain.” Nihilism forms when the value system that imbued things with meaning suddenly looks hollow. Nietzsche maintains, nevertheless, that there are different responses to meaninglessness, that there are active and passive forms of nihilism. Active nihilism is “a violent force of destruction” that energetically participates in the devaluation of values whereas passive nihilism is “the weary nihilism that no longer attacks; its most famous form, Buddhism; . . . a sign of weakness.” While passive nihilism wallows in nothingness, active nihilism hastens destruction; it is a Dionysian “expression of an overflowing energy that is pregnant with future.” This is why Nietzsche describes nihilism as a “transitional stage” that clears the way for the creation of new, nobler values that affirm rather than deny life.

Likely alluding to how Nietzsche introduces the crisis of nihilism in The Will to Power, Vaneigem responds to an opening question on the subject with a scene of confusion and loss:

What is nihilism? Rozanov’s definition is perfect: “The show is over. The audience gets up to leave their seats. Time to collect their coats and go home. They turn round. No more coats and no more home.” As soon as a mythical system enters into contradiction with economic and social reality, a chasm opens between the way people live and the prevailing explanation of the world, which is suddenly inadequate, completely surpassed.

For Vaneigem, the unitary myth of the feudal aristocracy was the predominant interpretation or way of explaining the world, since it provided meaning to the suffering and sacrifice, both real and symbolic, of masters and slaves alike. As the unitary myth is fragmented by the bourgeois revolution, capitalist industrialization, and the death of God, traditional values begin to appear empty and artificial. In consumer society, the disintegration of the spectacle intensifies this crisis, releasing a sea of nihilism

69 Ibid., 35 (emphasis in original).
70 Ibid., 46, 47.
72 Nietzsche, The Will to Power, 14.
that drowns all values in meaninglessness. The nihilist is thus someone aware of this process of disintegration, conscious of the hollowness of existence-as-survival.

Like Nietzsche, Vaneigem conceives of nihilism as “a sort of chrysalis stage of consciousness,” a transitory moment straddling the reactive and the affirmative, and he likewise distinguishes between active and passive forms of nihilism. For Vaneigem, passive nihilists defend decayed values despite the apprehension of the general decay of all values; they do not believe in anything but they act as if they really believed. Vaneigem cryptically evokes Blaise Pascal in this context, suggesting that passive nihilists make an empty wager by repeating the ritual of belief even in utter disbelief. As with the man of *ressentiment*, Vaneigem repurposes Nietzsche’s notion of passive nihilism to diagnose a political stance in relation to Power. If the disposition of the man of *ressentiment* is reformist, Vaneigem’s passive nihilist cynically submits to the status quo. As Nietzsche would say, the passive nihilist is too weary to attack. Active nihilists, on the other hand, counter the ineffectual refusal of *ressentiment* and the submission and subservience of passive nihilism with extreme refusal. For Vaneigem, “Active nihilism combines consciousness of disintegration with a desire to expose its causes by speeding up the process. The disorder thus fomented is merely a reflection of the chaos ruling the world. Active nihilism is prerevolutionary; passive nihilism is counterrevolutionary.” The extreme refusal of active nihilism ultimately swims with the current of meaninglessness by replicating what has already become a general condition, a basic banality. This form of nihilism is nevertheless prerevolutionary because it has surpassed the *ressentiment* of reformism without capitulating to Power.

Before distinguishing between active and passive nihilism, between its prerevolutionary and counterrevolutionary manifestations, Vaneigem lists “the fruit of free experimentation in the field of destroyed values.

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74 Ibid.
75 Ibid., 155–57.
76 Vaneigem’s characterization of passive nihilism resonates with Slavoj Žižek’s theorization of cynicism as a form of ideology. In dialogue with Peter Sloterdijk, Žižek argues that it is no longer helpful to conceive of ideology as false consciousness, as a veil that hides the true meaning of one’s actions. Instead, cynical ideology entails preserving the illusion even as it is revealed, acting as if the illusion were true while completely aware of its status as illusion. In other words, ironic distance, insofar as it fails to change how one thinks and acts, ultimately reproduces the current social reality. See Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1999), 28–30. Žižek also suggests that Pascal’s wager is at bottom cynical: Ibid., 83, 84. For Sloterdijk’s discussion of cynical reason, see: Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).
Sade’s passionate rationalism, Kierkegaard’s sarcasm, Nietzsche’s haverning irony, the violence of Maldoror, Mallarmé’s icy dispassion, Jarry’s Umor, Dada’s negativism.” The list is diverse and the descriptions are ambivalent; it is not clear where Vaneigem locates these outgrowths of nihilism on the political spectrum. What unites them, however is that they all lack something essential, namely a “sense of historical reality.” The nihilist’s consciousness of disintegration, in other words, is divorced from a consciousness of the historical possibility that shines through the cracks of this disintegration, from a “consciousness of the possibility of supersession.” Vaneigem contrasts the nihilists to the “greatest makers of history,” figures like Marx and Lenin who are conscious of the movement of history yet lack what the nihilists embody—“a sharp awareness of history’s immense destructive power in the bourgeois era.” While the extreme refusal of the nihilists limits their ability to actively and constructively redirect the course of history, the makers of history fail to grasp the historic forces of annihilation that accompany total revolution.

As his account of the bourgeois interregnum suggests, Vaneigem seeks to manipulate nihilism in the service of supersession. The revolution of everyday life requires it: “An alliance between nihilism and the forces of supersession means that supersession will be total. Herein without doubt lies the only wealth to be found in the affluent society.” Rather than mimicking the destructive power of the bourgeois era, nihilism’s violent flame of refusal, repurposed, can reduce Power to ashes. The elements for this historic transformation are already at hand in the sparse wealth of affluent society, but they have to be reorganized, détourned. As Vaneigem explains: “Although [the nihilists] now suffer the despair of nonsupersession, a coherent theory may be expected, by demonstrating the mistakenness of their viewpoint, to place all the potential energy of their accumulated rancor at the service of their will to live. . . . Nihilists, as Sade would have said, one more effort if you would be revolutionaries.” In a moment of subtle reflexivity, Vaneigem performs what he prescribes by diagnosing the limits of nihilism through the détournement of Sade’s words. A détourned Sade, in other words, is made to articulate the path through which he would arrive at his own self-negation qua nihilist.

This is precisely what Vaneigem does with Nietzsche throughout The Revolution of Everyday Life, détourning his ideological formulations to construct a radical theory that demonstrates the mistakenness of the
philosopher’s perspective by underscoring historical reality and the possibility of supersession. Détournement is accordingly the effort that converts the words of the nihilist into his own undoing, that harnesses and redirects nihilism’s violent force of destruction, now pregnant with the future.

Vaneigem finds Nietzsche’s theorization of the will to power to be the most mistaken notion within his conceptual apparatus. Nietzsche equates life, or sometimes the will to life, with the will to power; he argues in *Beyond Good and Evil* that “life itself is essentially appropriation, injury, overpowering of what is alien and weaker; suppression, hardness, imposition of one’s own forms, incorporation and at least, at its mildest, exploitation . . . life is will to power.”83 Exploitation, he continues, “belongs to the essence of what lives, as a basic organic function; it is a consequence of the will to power, which is after all the will to life.”84 Vaneigem, on the other hand, contends that the passions of creation, love, and play are the fundamental elements of life. These passions correspond to three projects, the will to self-fulfillment, the will to communication, and the will to participation, which form the unitary triad of the will to life. The will to power is not absent from Vaneigem’s view of life but rather is conceptualized as the latter’s perversion: “The will to power is the project of fulfillment travestied, cut off from communication and participation. It is the passion for creation—and for self-creation—entangled in the hierarchical system, condemned to drive the mill of repression and appearances. Status and humiliation, authority and submission—such is the quick march of the will to power.”85 Nietzsche is misguided, Vaneigem asserts, when he reduces life to the will to power. The exploitation Nietzsche sees everywhere is simply the historically determinate distortion of individual creativity. It belittles life to equate it with such mediocrity and ennui.

In a chapter titled “The Organization of Appearances,” Vaneigem lifts a passage from the preface of *Ecce Homo* that implicitly responds to Nietzsche’s faulty revaluation of life:

According to Nietzsche, the “ideal world” is a construct based on a lie: “Reality has been deprived of its value, its meaning, its veracity to the same degree as an ideal world has been fabricated . . . the lie of the ideal has hitherto been the curse of reality; through it mankind itself has become mendacious and false down to its deepest instincts—to the point of worshipping the inverse values to those which alone could guarantee its prosperity and a future,

83 Nietzsche, “Beyond Good and Evil,” 393 (emphasis in original).
84 Ibid. (emphasis in original).
the exalted *right* to a future.” What can the lie of the ideal be if not the truth of the masters? When theft needs legal justification, when authority waves the banner of the general interest in order to pursue private ends with impunity, is it any wonder that the lie captures minds, so distorting people by shaping them to its “laws” that their very deformity comes to resemble a natural human attitude?86

While Nietzsche’s perspectivism undermines the distinction between truth and falsity, the thing-in-itself and appearances, he nonetheless mobilizes these categories to critique the naysayers of life who invent an ideal world in opposition to the world as it exists. Vaneigem détourns Nietzsche by asserting that the lie of the ideal world is the fragmentary ideology of the master, what the latter peddle as truth. The naturalized utopia of the masters is familiar, stale: this is as good as it gets, there’s no better system than capitalism, it’s for the benefit of everyone that someone polices everyone else. These variations of the master’s truth constitute the organized appearances that obscure the reality of exploitation and the possibility of supersession, justifying a form of social organization that can no longer be justified. Vaneigem turns Nietzsche’s words into a denunciation of the master’s ideal, a denunciation of the mystification of hierarchy and oppression. Yet this is exactly what Nietzsche achieves with his call to say yes to life defined as the will to power; his affirmations of exploitation and becoming-lord-over function the same way. Wasn’t Nietzsche’s truth that “caste-order, *order of rank*, is just a formula for the supreme law of life itself”?87 Vaneigem’s détournement of Nietzsche thus shows Nietzsche to be a fabricator of ideals, an organizer of appearances. Nietzsche’s words are made to speak otherly, exposing the truth of their flawed utterer.

Vaneigem also pauses his détournement of Nietzsche to critique explicitly the latter’s adoration of the will to power and order and rank:

All the same, beneath its protective wrapping, the will to power does harbor traces of an authentic will to life. Think of the *virtù* of the condottiere, the exuberance of the giants of the Renaissance. But today the condottieri are no more. At best we have captains of industry, gangsters, arms dealers and art dealers—mercenaries all. For an adventurer, Tintin; for an explorer, Albert Schweitzer. Yet it is with such people that Zarathustra dreams of peopling the heights of Sils-Maria—in these runts that he claims to discern the lineaments of a future race! Truth to tell, Nietzsche was the last master, crucified

86 Ibid., 106. For the original passage, see Nietzsche, “Ecce Homo,” 71.
by his own illusions. . . . As prone to disgust as he was, Nietzsche had no difficulty breathing in Christianity’s ignoble stench by the lungful. By affecting not to understand that Christianity, for all its stated contempt for the will to power, was in reality its best shield, its most faithful henchman, stoutly opposed to the emergence of masters without slaves, Nietzsche gave his blessing to the permanence of a hierarchical world where the will to life dooms itself to be nothing more than the will to power.88

As its travestied form, the will to power during aristocratic feudalism contained remnants of the will to life, but its instantiations during the bourgeois era are mere shadows of these remnants, pale appearances of creativity and fulfillment that could not possibly portend Zarathustra’s Übermensch. If ressentiment perpetuates rather than supersedes Power, Christianity ultimately protects the will to power even as it rebuffs it. By sanctifying hierarchy, Nietzsche acts like a good Christian, shielding weak and feeble distortions of the will to life.89

If historical conditions within bourgeois capitalism set the stage for the supersession of hierarchy, how might these conditions affect the historical realization of Nietzsche’s social vision? Vaneigem suggests that humankind has already witnessed one historical manifestation of Nietzsche’s vision, stating unequivocally that

Nazism is Nietzschean logic called to order by history. The question was: what is the fate of the last masters in a society whence all true masters have vanished? And the answer: they become superslaves. Even the superman as conceived by Nietzsche, as weak as this figure may be, is obviously far superior to the flunkeys who ran the Third Reich. Fascism knows only one superman: the State. The State as superman is the strength of the weak.90

Nazism is the historical exemplification of the will to power during the bourgeois interregnum, and it shows itself to be “a will to passive

88 Vaneigem, The Revolution of Everyday Life, 214. This passage could be read as a détournement of Nietzsche insofar as it seems to evoke Nietzsche’s screed against Wagner: “Richard Wagner, seemingly the all-conquering, actually a decaying, despairing decadent, suddenly sank down helpless and shattered before the Christian cross.” Friedrich Nietzsche, “Nietzsche contra Wagner: From the Files of a Psychologist,” The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings, 276.
89 Nietzsche was of course aware of religion’s usefulness, of its status as “one more means for overcoming resistances, for the ability to rule,” but Vaneigem’s point is that Nietzsche’s own position regarding hierarchy is Christian. Nietzsche became Christianity’s accomplice and, in his own words, “preserved too much of what ought to perish.” See Nietzsche, “Beyond Good and Evil,” 262, 264, 265 (emphasis in original).
90 Ibid., 214.
obedience” to the State. Nevertheless, like Debord and Wolman with Birth of a Nation, Vaneigem does not leave Nietzsche, that stick of dynamite, to the Nazis. Instead, he appropriates and repurposes Nietzsche’s ideas for the unified tripartite will to life. The stakes are high:

Woe betide those who abandon their violence and their radical demands along the way. As Nietzsche noted, murdered truths become poisonous. If we do not reverse perspective, Power’s perspective will succeed in turning us against ourselves once and for all. German Fascism was spawned in the blood of Spartakus. Our everyday renunciations—no matter how trivial—lend fuel to our foe, who seeks nothing short of our complete destruction.

While Zarathustra urges the wisest to speak of the will to power and its expression in the annihilation and creation of values, lest these truths become poisonous, Vaneigem paraphrases Nietzsche’s Thus Spoke Zarathustra to warn against abdicating to Power, lest more Nietzschean poison spill, destroying the possibility of practically realizing radical demands in everyday life.

Vaneigem gleans the most light from the explosive détournement of Nietzschean formulations during his discussion of the proletariat and the future society of masters without slaves. As discussed above, Vaneigem frames the proletariat’s overthrow of Power as a moment in the Hegelian master-slave dialectic. Since the master is dependent on his slaves qua master and therefore cannot escape the positive pole of alienation, Vaneigem draws the Hegelian conclusion that “it is only from the negative starting-point that thoroughgoing revolt can make the project of absolute mastery feasible. It is slaves, struggling to throw off their chains, who unleash the movement whereby history ab abolishes masters.”

Given Nietzsche’s subtle appropriation and critique of the master-slave dialectic, most visible in his analysis of the slave revolt in morality, it may seem as though Vaneigem’s proletariat, struggling to throw off its chains, is simply another outgrowth of ressentiment, another instance of the weak reactively lashing out against that which is different.

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91 Ibid., 149.
92 Ibid., 165.
93 “Only where life is, is there also will; but not will to life, instead—thus I teach you—will to power! . . . And whoever must be a creator in good and evil—truly, he must first be an annihilator and break values. Thus the highest evil belongs to the highest goodness, but this is the creative one. Let us speak of this, you wisest ones, even if it is bad to do so. Keeping silent is worse; all truths that are kept silent become poisonous.” Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, 90
The quality of the proletariat's struggle, however, permits it to avoid entangling itself in its own chains:

In contrast to the bourgeoisie, the proletariat is not defined in terms of its class opponent, but heralds the end of class distinctions and of hierarchy per se. . . . Whereas the bourgeoisie was content to forge arms against the feudal system—arms that one day will be turned against the bourgeoisie itself—the proletariat carries within itself the possibility of its own supersession. The proletariat is poetry, momentarily alienated by the ruling class or by technocratic organization, but ever apt to burst out of its bondage. As the sole depository of the will to life—for it alone has experienced in its full force the intolerable pressure of mere survival—the proletariat is destined to demolish the walls of constraint in the whirlwind of its pleasure and the spontaneous violence of its creative energy. All the joy and laughter that this will release the proletariat already possesses, for its strength and passion are drawn from within. What it is preparing to build will, in addition, destroy whatever stands in its way, like a fresh tape-recording automatically erasing the previous one. The power of things will be abolished by a proletariat in the act of abolishing itself, by virtue of a luxurious, nonchalant afterthought, by virtue of the sort of grace displayed by someone calmly manifesting their superiority. From the new proletariat will emerge, not the robotic humanists dreamt of by the onanists of the supposedly revolutionary Left, but masters without slaves.95

In this passage, Vaneigem releases the affirmation of life from the death grip of Nietzsche's masters. The endeavor is reminiscent of Marx’s insurrectionary inversion of the genitive insofar as it accomplishes “the reversal of established relationships between concepts,” revealing the master to be reactive and the slave to be life-affirming.96 Although the establishment of a classless society will require significant confrontation and violence, the proletariat’s revolution of everyday life is not a resentful revolt against its class opponent but rather a Dionysian affirmation of the will to life, an exuberant, even aristocratic, expression and satisfaction of its passions, a revolution in the service of poetry. Rather than “Death to the Exploiters,” the proletariat’s slogan is “Life First!”97 The proletariat sheds its status as

95 Ibid., 187.
96 Debord, The Society of the Spectacle, 144 (emphasis in original).
97 Ibid., 254. Georges Bataille expresses a similar, although politically more ambivalent, idea when he asserts that “the positive practice of freedom, not the negative struggle against a particular opposition . . . has lifted me above a mutilated existence.” George Bataille, On Nietzsche, trans. Bruce Boone (St. Paul: Paragon House, 1994), xxvii. Although beyond the scope of this essay, it is worth nothing that there are
slaves and in so doing also abolishes masters. The result is not a society of slavish herd animals, as Nietzsche would have it, but rather the emergence of a new kind of mastery that does not entail the enslavement of others and consequently self-enslavement. Vaneigem names the aristocratic figure that supersedes all hierarchical forms of social organization the master without slaves.

Prior to the revolution of everyday life, the aristocratic masters of old live on in their decrepit contemporary form as bourgeois master-slaves, little men peddling shards of fragmentary power for consumption (“Would you like to work for us?” “Can I interest you in a brand new car?”). The proletariat’s aristocratic struggle accordingly represents “the aristocratic supersession of the aristocracy,” the total abolition of all vestiges of feudalism left over after the failure of history’s partial revolutions, bourgeois or otherwise.\(^98\) Vaneigem identifies three passions as predominantly active in this endeavor to revolutionize everyday life. As reformulations of the passions of creation, love, and play, Vaneigem lists the passion for absolute power, the passion for smashing constraints, and the passion for rectifying an unhappy past. As with the basic passions of the will to life, these passions correspond to three projects—the supersession of patriarchal social organization, the supersession of hierarchical power, and the supersession of authoritarian caprice.\(^99\)

Vaneigem predictably mobilizes Nietzsche to shine light on the passion for absolute power: “The passion for absolute power, a passion for placing objects directly in the service of human beings without the mediation of human beings themselves; and the consequent destruction of those who cleave to the order of things, slaves who possess crumbs of power. ‘Because we cannot stand the sight of them, we shall abolish slaves,’ says Nietzsche.”\(^100\) Absolute power entails the abolition of one form of power (power over others) and the liberation of another form of power (power to create without human mediation, without slaves). Establishing the conditions necessary for the expression of absolute power “opens up a unique opportunity for the will to reign over the world with no restrictions save those imposed by a finally reinvented nature and by

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\(^99\) Ibid., 186–92.

\(^100\) Ibid., 188 (emphasis in original).
the resistance of things to being transformed.”101 Vaneigem mentions a number of failed attempts to satisfy this passion, from noble serial killers (e.g., Heliogabalus, Gilles de Rais, Elizabeth Báthory) to lords massacring their servants in Sade’s 120 Days of Sodom.102 Although they unsuccessfully attempt to escape alienation through the intensification of alienation, to arrive at total humanity through total inhumanity, these figures fascinate Vaneigem insofar as they express in distorted form a genuine passion for uninhibited creative expression.

Vaneigem repurposes a fragment from Nietzsche’s unpublished notes to locate the philosopher within this tradition of masters attempting to liberate themselves from their slaves.103 A similar sentiment is expressed during the exchange between the Wanderer and the Shadow in Human, All Too Human: “For the sight of one unfree would embitter for me all my joy; I would find even the best things repulsive if someone had to share them with me—I want no slaves around me.”104 No matter how much disgust and loathing the sight of slaves provokes in Nietzsche, he cannot envision a world without them, going so far as to postulate in Beyond Good and Evil that every advancement of humanity has been and will be the result of “a society that believes in the long ladder of an order of rank and differences in value between man and man, and that needs slavery in some sense or other.”105 Due to the placement of Nietzsche’s passage, Vaneigem nonetheless makes the evangelist priest of hierarchy utter, despite his blindness to historical possibility, a call for the abolition of slaves, for a world composed solely of masters, free to revel in the absolute power of creation.106

101 Ibid., 181. It is important to note that Vaneigem is not against mediation as such but rather against its alienated form. For this distinction, see the chapter “Mediated Abstraction and Abstracted Mediation,” in ibid., 77–87.
102 Ibid., 180, 182.
104 Friedrich Nietzsche, Human, All Too Human, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 394. Many thanks to Tanya Rawal-Jindia for pointing me to this passage.
106 Goldman likewise evokes Nietzsche in order to imagine a world of masters without slaves; however, while Vaneigem subverts Nietzsche by making him speak otherly, Goldman whitewashes one of Nietzsche’s most abhorrent ideas in order to protect a “giant mind”: “It does not occur to the shallow interpreters of that giant mind that this vision of the Übemensch also called for a state of society which will not give birth to a race of weaklings or slaves.” Emma Goldman, Anarchism and Other Essays (New York: Dover Publications, 1969), 44.
Because Vaneigem conceives of the proletariat’s passions as playing a major role in the overthrow of the existing social order, his starting point for the revolution of everyday life is not communitarianism but rather individual subjectivity. As long as society is structured hierarchically, the individual can only be opposed to other individuals and the collective in a relationship of mutual impoverishment of the passions and their satisfaction: “Individual survival-lines collide and cut one another off. Each imposes its limits on the freedom of others; projects cancel one another out in the name of their autonomy. Such is the basis of the geometry of fragmentary power.”107 Vaneigem accordingly suggests that establishing a federation of nonhierarchical and self-managed microsocieties, “protected areas where the intensity of conditioning tends towards zero,” would reate the conditions of possibility for a new geometrical perspective to emerge, “which is neither a reflection nor an inversion of the earlier one. Rather, it is an ensemble of harmonized individual perspectives which never clash but which successfully construct a coherent and collective world. All these angles, though different, open in the same direction, as individual will and collective will gradually become one.”108 The alternative geometry of federated microsocieties prefigures the social organization needed to sustain a world of masters without slaves, of “free individuals, irreducible to one another.”109

This alternative geometry has profound implications for Vaneigem’s notion of revolutionary equality, which he arrives at by repurposing Nietzsche’s aristocratic individualism and anti-egalitarianism:

The viewpoint of altruism—or of solidarity, which is what the Left calls it—turns the meaning of equality on its head. Equality becomes nothing but the common distress of social isolates humiliated, fucked over, beaten down, betrayed—and contented: the distress of monads aspiring to join together not in reality but in a mystical unity. Anything will do: Nation, the workers’ movement—no matter what, so long as it purveys that drunk-Saturday-night feeling of “we are all brothers and sisters”. Equality in the great family of man reeks of incense, of religious mystification. You would need a

107 Ibid., 76.
108 Ibid., 164, 175. Félix Guattari and Antonio Negri define communism in similar terms, no doubt as a result of their own creative interpretation and manipulation of Nietzsche: “[C]ommunism is the establishment of a communal life style in which individuality is recognized and truly liberated, not merely opposed to the collective. That’s the most important lesson: that the construction of healthy communities begins and ends with unique personalities, that the collective potential is realized only when the singular is free.” Félix Guattari and Toni Negri, Communists Like Us, trans. Michael Ryan (New York: Semiotext(e), 1990), 16, 17.
stuffed-up nose not to be sickened by it. For myself, I recognize no equality except that which my will to life according to my desires recognizes in the will to life of others. Revolutionary equality will be inseparably individual and collective.\textsuperscript{110}

Although opening with an allusion to Hegel’s idealist inversion of the dialectic, this passage contains subtle references to Nietzsche throughout, including an overt reference to Nietzsche’s delicate sense of smell—“Bad air! Bad air!”\textsuperscript{111} Nietzsche cannot stand to sniff “[t]he poisonous doctrine ‘equal rights for everyone’”—Christianity disseminated this the most thoroughly”—because its abstract universalism erases difference, including distinctions of rank and order.\textsuperscript{112} Nietzsche proposes, alternatively, “equality for the equal, inequality for the unequal” and advises those who wish to help others to only help their friends (i.e., equals) and to “make them bolder, more persevering, simpler, gayer . . . to share not suffering but joy.”\textsuperscript{113} Clearly drawing from Nietzsche, Vaneigem critiques the perspective of altruism/solidarity insofar as the individual connects with others based on their suffering, thereby sharing it with them, and that this connection is ultimately sustained by the abstractly universalist and religious sentiment that all men are created equal. Yet Vaneigem repurposes these Nietzschean formulations by subtracting a commitment to difference from its Nietzschean use as a justification of hierarchy. The point is not to oppose difference to equality, the individual to the collective, but to recognize their inextricable linkedness. This allows Vaneigem to place equality back on its feet, to envision a revolutionary equality in which irreducible individuals are bound together not by suffering but by the joy of their shared will to life.

For Vaneigem, “savoir-vivre means knowing how not to give an inch in the struggle against renunciation. Let nobody underestimate Power’s ability to force-feed its slaves with words to the point where they become slaves to those words themselves.”\textsuperscript{114} If Nietzsche is not a man but dynamite then it is important to remember that the word dynamite comes from the Greek dynamis meaning power. To end the forced consumption of dynamite packed with words that serve authority, to struggle against the renunciation of individual and collective freedom, Vaneigem’s \textit{The Revolution of Everyday Life} repurposes Nietzsche’s ideas and vocabulary for

\begin{footnotes}
\item[110] Ibid., 34.
\item[112] Nietzsche, “The Anti-Christ,” 40.
\item[114] Vaneigem, \textit{The Revolution of Everyday Life}, 85.
\end{footnotes}
the creation of a radical theory.\textsuperscript{115} The untimeliness of this endeavor, when much of today’s Left eagerly consumes dynamite as though it were an addiction, underscores the book’s significance and revolutionary potential. Indeed, \textit{The Revolution of Everyday Life} is also a kind of user’s guide to the future repurposing of Nietzsche. It therefore calls to be read by anti-readers that will concretely realize its propositions, starting with the construction of an anarchist language from the détournement of mercenary signs, a language that would communicate the everyday passion for a world of masters without slaves.\textsuperscript{116}

\textsuperscript{115} Since virtually every page of \textit{The Revolution of Everyday Life} is composed of détourned Nietzschean elements, this essay cannot possibly address all of them. Further examination could investigate how Vaneigem repurposes Nietzsche’s ideas about roles, gifts, sacrifice, and suffering, as well as the philosopher’s discussion of the relationship between art and life, during which he states that “we want to be the poets of our life—first of all in the smallest, most everyday matters.” Nietzsche, \textit{The Gay Science}, 240.

\textsuperscript{116} I would like to thank Barry Maxwell and Raymond Craib for their generous invitation to present a shorter version of this text at Cornell University’s Institute for Comparative Modernities 2012 Annual Conference “Global Anarchisms: No Gods, No Masters, No Peripheries.” I am also very grateful to Michael Arnall, Lital Levy, Alexander Nehamas, Bécquer Seguín, and the participants of Princeton University’s 2013–2014 Comparative Literature Dissertation Colloquium for their extensive and helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article.