

## JACQUES HOUIS

Transgressive Autofictions:<sup>1</sup>  
Literary counterculture in 1960s Saint Germain-des-Prés

The '60s in French literature are primarily known today as the era of the Nouveau Roman and, at least in retrospect, Oulipo, as well as the era of a certain complicity between literature and theory, perhaps best represented by the journal *Tel Quel* and its founder Philippe Sollers. This literature was, of course, “experimental,” joining the other major art forms of the century in breaking down the representational conventions of realism, from linear temporality to reliable witness. But none of the writers involved are identified with the counterculture of the '60s, with what might be called the essential '60s zeitgeist. It may be that the formalist and minimalist tendencies of these movements, representing a species of modernism, simply did not align with the baroque, romantic, or lyrical sensibilities of the decade or its radical tendencies. In France, the authors or the works that *did* failed to coalesce into a school or movement, did not play the literary game, and staked a claim only

1. Serge Doubrovsky coined the term in 1977 with reference to his novel *Fils*. Autofiction combines two paradoxically contradictory styles: that of autobiography, and fiction. An author may decide to recount his/her life in the third person, to modify significant details or characters, using fiction in the service of a search for self. Scholar Arnaud Génon's definition (“Note sur l'autofiction et la question du sujet,” *La Revue des ressources*, 8 January 2007; available online at <http://www.autofiction.org/index.php?post/2008/10/13/Rubrique-a-venir3>) gives us a good idea of how this very French concept plays out in contemporary critical discourse: “Whereas Rousseau proclaimed the originality of his project and the unique nature of his self, the subject of autofiction is created in the Other's words and inscribed in the wake of his predecessors. In addition to being virtual the subject makes himself textual. He is made in the image of the genre that exposes him. He is monstrous and hybrid. He is never one. He expresses the plurality we encompass. He multiplies the strata, is unveiled by the writing and annihilated by the fragmented form it takes. More than a new literary genre, autofiction is in fact the means the subject has found to call himself into question, to refuse the idea of a univocal truth and lay claim to his fracture.” (Translation mine, as throughout this essay.)

to the status of transgressive outsiders vis-à-vis the literary establishment—hence their relative to near total obscurity. There were other factors as well: Certainly the strongly autobiographical tendency in our sample does not fit into the standard picture of the French literature of the '60s, although it does anticipate major trends of later decades. It will take some serious detective work and dogged scholarship to gain anything like a full picture of this French literary counterculture. However, if the small part of it I will be covering in this overview is at all representative of the whole, we may have to revise our idea of twentieth-century French literature, giving a bit more weight to these descendants of Rimbaud, Lautréamont, Artaud, and Genet.

#### FRANÇOISE D'EAUBONNE

The “scene” I have been alluding to emerges from a small group of friends<sup>2</sup> who frequented the storied cafés of Saint-Germain-des-Prés in the early '60s: **Nicolas Genka**, **Patrick MacAvoy**, **Jean Sénac**, and **Françoise d'Eaubonne**. Of these, only the last named would achieve a measure of international celebrity: In 1971 she co-founded the revolutionary Front Homosexuel d'Action Révolutionnaire (FHAR); in 1974 she coined the term “ecofeminism”<sup>3</sup> in her book *Le Féminisme ou la mort*; she was also the author of more than fifty other books in a career that spanned the years 1942–2003, producing biographies, memoirs, science fiction and historical novels, film novelizations, essays, and poetry. D'Eaubonne's subject matter often put her at the forefront of countercultural writing: works pertaining to gay liberation and ecofeminism; the persecution of witches seen as “sexocide”; the gospel

2. MacAvoy and Sénac, MacAvoy and Genka, d'Eaubonne and Genka were close friends. D'Eaubonne and MacAvoy were friendly during the period in the early '60s when the writers frequented the Café Flore and Les Deux Magots in Saint-Germain-des-Prés.

3. Ecofeminism, or ecological feminism, is a philosophy and movement born from the union of feminist and ecological thinking and the belief that the social mentality that leads to the domination and oppression of women is directly connected to the social mentality that leads to the abuse of the natural environment.

of Veronica; biographies of Antoinette Lix, Qui Jin, Pasteur Doucé; a book-length essay about the reinvention of love through literature and music, etc. Unfortunately, only two of her books were ever translated into English, and neither are now in print.

Of particular interest to us among her many books is *La plume et le baillon* (The Pen and the Gag; Paris: Esprit frappeur, 2000), which concerns three twentieth-century victims of censorship: Violette Leduc,<sup>4</sup> Nicolas Genka, and Jean Sénac, all of whom belonged to her circle. Although only Genka suffered from official censorship, strictly speaking, d'Eaubonne shows how neglect, editorial timidity, and unwarranted critical hostility constituted a form of censorship in Leduc's case, while marginalization and eventual assassination silenced Sénac. MacAvoy's obscurity was more self-inflicted and therefore did not warrant a place in the book. Recalling Rimbaud, he gave up writing in his twenties, after being published twice by Julliard: at eighteen and twenty-one, respectively. His third book, for which he received an advance, was never published after the editor in charge of the project was fired. Later, he burned his manuscripts and, under the name Nala, devoted the rest of his life to playing the sarod, a stringed instrument used in Indian classical music. He is the only living member of the circle of authors featured in this article.

Even d'Eaubonne herself was the object of relative neglect, despite her sizable output and numerous contributions. The scholar Hélène Jaccopard, author of *Lecteur et lecture dans l'autobiographie française contemporaine: Violette Leduc, Françoise d'Eaubonne, Serge Doubrovsky, Marguerite Yourcenar* (Geneva: Droz, 1993), stated that "The precocious, fertile, and engagé writer, Françoise d'Eaubonne, might as well not exist . . . in the eyes of literary criticism. I mean herein to acknowledge the fact that the critics have neglected this unique body of work, as well as to acknowledge receipt of one of Françoise d'Eaubonne most original texts, her autobiography. Throughout three volumes of memoirs, not only does a colorful self-portrait emerge, but

4. As Violette Leduc's work is widely available in English and relatively well known in the Anglophone world, she is not among the subjects of this article, although she is far from irrelevant to postwar French literary counterculture.

also a quest filled with insights about this difficult genre.”<sup>5</sup> The three volumes referred to eventually amounted to four, covering the 1920s to the year 2000 and totaling 1,135 pages, finally published as a single volume under the title *Mémoires irréductibles: De l'entre-deux-guerres à l'an 2000* (Paris: Editions Dagorno, 2001). Although these works could easily have been the portrait of an era, or a trove of gossip about the famous literary figures d'Eaubonne knew personally (which is how the books are represented by their publisher), the memoirs are in fact far more personal. As befits the writer that d'Eaubonne was, they detail the complexity of her efforts to be in the world. Throughout, she keeps asking rather than answering questions about what it means to be her—as though her activism had led her to be just as skeptical about her own assumptions as she was about those she found in the world in which she lived. As early as the first volume, written between 1963 and 1965, she is very frank about her sexuality. A subject that might otherwise invite prurience or simple narcissism here adds another dimension to d'Eaubonne's fascinating singularity: the co-founder of the Homosexual Front for Revolutionary Action, she was heterosexual, as she says, in spite of herself. A fiercely independent feminist, she was also acutely aware of, and disarmingly candid about, the dependency imposed by feelings of romantic love, feelings against which she nevertheless admits to being defenseless. The third volume of her memoirs, *L'Indicateur du Réseau*, subtitled “counter-memoirs,” is organized topographically and alphabetically rather than chronologically, like the train schedule to which the title refers. Entries are organized according to Place, Age, and Length of stay, which allows an achronological approach focusing more on place than narrative. All four of the memoirs revisit the same experiences from the new perspectives granted by age and circumstance. To the extent they try to answer the question “Who am I?” they provide the same definition as André Breton in *Nadja*: “[those] whom I ‘haunt’”; perhaps even expanding this definition to include one's “haunts.” Composed for the most part during the '60s or in their wake, the memoirs also reflect the supra-literary

5. “Françoise d'Eaubonne: accuser (la) reception,” *The French Review*, 67.3 (Feb. 1994), 486.

sensibilities of the time, as they were manifested in France. As Jaccomard puts it, “More so than a good many of her contemporaries, [d’Eaubonne] is in tune with French society and its ever-shifting political landscape.”

#### NICOLAS GENKA

The circumstances of Nicolas Genka’s childhood (born Eugène Nicolas, 1937–2009) are front and center in his works. His father, an engineer and a communist, married a German woman, also a communist, whom he met while he was an occupying soldier in the Ruhr after World War I. The family, which included Genka’s three sisters, lived with the father’s mother on a remote property in rural Brittany. They had thousands of books, but sometimes lacked the resources to light their lamps. While Genka’s father turned to alcohol, his autocratic grandmother (a war widow and retired boy’s school headmistress who dominated her son) forced her daughter-in-law, whom she hated on account of her nationality, to become a servant in the house. It was not until age seven that Nicolas realized one of the domestics browbeaten by his grandmother was his own mother. While Nicolas and two of his sisters attended school, his third sister Aline endured the same brutal treatment as her mother, perhaps because Aline had sought to protect her. Both were also beaten by the alcoholic father, who might as well have been carrying out his mother’s wishes. Eventually, Nicolas’s mother succumbed to madness. At the close of the Second World War, having lost three of her brothers, she was discovered on a train platform by Aline, toting a bag containing two onions and a crust of bread, bound for Germany and talking to herself incoherently. Enraged by this attempted escape, Aline stabbed her with a pitchfork, after which her husband locked her in the attic, where she remained with her infected wound until Nicolas informed the local authorities of her situation. After battling his abusive father and helping his sister Aline escape out the window using bedsheets, Nicolas found refuge in the home of his Russian uncle and adopted his last name. He later served as a medic in Algeria, moving to Paris when he returned to France, living off his army-discharge pay and doing odd jobs while he wrote.

His first novel, *L'Épi monstre*, was published in December 1961, when he was twenty-four, thanks to Christian Bourgois, then an editor at Julliard. It led Jean Cocteau to establish then and award it the Prix des Enfants Terribles Jean Cocteau. The book was an immediate success, selling ten thousand copies in a matter of weeks. The film director Pier Paolo Pasolini, as well as the authors Vladimir Nabokov and Yukio Mishima, contemplated translating it into Italian, English, and Japanese respectively,<sup>6</sup> but in July 1962, the Minister of the Interior banned any further sale, translation, export, or publicizing of the novel on account of its incestuous content. Soon thereafter, Genka's family homestead in Brittany was ransacked by "persons unknown." A new edition of the novel was tolerated in 1999,<sup>7</sup> though the ban was not officially lifted until 2005.

Genka's second novel, *Jeanne la pudeur*, published in 1964, met much the same fate. Hailed as a masterpiece and awarded the Prix Fénéon, it too was promptly banned, only to reappear reissued by Flammarion in 1999. Although certainly violent and scatological, neither book, it should be noted, is remotely pornographic.

*L'Épi monstre* tells the story of Morfay and his two daughters, Mauda and Marceline, who live in a big house on a hill, overlooking the village of Querlas. Morfay (*Mort-Fait*, or "death-make," also rhymes with *forfait*—"felony" and would seem to allude to the Celtic goddess figure Morrígan by way of her descendant, *la fée Morgane*, or, as she is known in English, Morgan le Fay) is

6. *Libération*, May 24, 1999, available online at [http://www.liberation.fr/portrait/1999/05/24/nicolas-genka-61-ans-baillonne-dans-les-annees-60-pour-avoir-raconte-l-inceste-son-roman-l-epi-monst\\_273807](http://www.liberation.fr/portrait/1999/05/24/nicolas-genka-61-ans-baillonne-dans-les-annees-60-pour-avoir-raconte-l-inceste-son-roman-l-epi-monst_273807)

Actually, there is conflicting information about these celebrity endorsements. All sources indicate that the three writers were at least involved with Genka, and most report them as projected translators. Pasolini in particular promoted Genka, and the publicity for the eventual Italian translation of *L'Épi monstre* features language to the effect that Pasolini's dream has finally been realized. This is of particular interest because Françoise d'Eaubonne was convinced that François Malraux, the author and minister of culture under De Gaulle, so hated Pasolini that the director's promotion of Genka played an important role in the eventual ban.

7. Nicolas Genka, *L'Épi monstre* (Paris: Exils, 1999).

an alcoholic (like Genka's father) an ex-resistance fighter (like Genka's father), and an educated man living among illiterate alcoholic peasants he entertains with gutter wit in return for alcohol (like Genka's father). Mauda is clearly based on Aline, as she lives the life of a servant in the household. Marceline appears to be an amalgam<sup>8</sup> of Genka's other two sisters, Jeanne and Andrée. She is a free spirit who has left boarding school and come home after the death of her grandmother, remembered as *la dame aux gants noirs* (the lady who wears black gloves), a retired boy's school headmistress (like Genka's grandmother) who comes to her son's defense when he amuses himself to his wife's horror by roasting cats alive in the oven:

"Take a look at what your fellow Germans roast in the oven! . . . Not cats! . . . They would have sent you there yourself, you deranged Rosa Luxembourg! Kraut Louise Michel!" [. . .] And Morfay went on to dress cats in doll clothes. While he waited for his mother, consumed with rage, to trumpet a formidable couplet: 'I don't really know what my son thinks; but you gave him murderous instincts,' he stuck matchstick suppositories into them that he then lit. (62)

In the book, the girls' German mother bears the nickname La Trine. And the circumstances of her life and death resemble those of Genka's own mother, Marianne:

Mauda closes her eyes enlarged by the dark. "I didn't love her enough," she whispers to herself, "I didn't defend her enough. When she went crazy I put a hole in her thigh with a pitchfork: she wanted to go back to Germany naked under her 'cat skin,' with a suitcase in which they found just two old onions and a few crusts of bread, nothing else—I didn't want her to leave. Oh! I beat her too, he told me hitting her would put her in her right mind. But if it weren't for me she

8. Or even perhaps the female stand-in for Genka himself, who, if one account is to be believed, was raped by his father.

surely would have died sooner. When he locked her in the pantry, with spikes on the door, and she didn't say anything for days, I really thought we'd killed her."—She flashes on her mother's cadaverous eye sockets, the weightless body on the stretcher, the social workers bumping into Morfay, a rigid, harsh, unbearable Morfay: "Get rid of this rotting meat!" And the same Morfay three days later: "Ah! Those morons want to play rough with me! Get our mourning clothes ready."—The body of the person who had been La Trine was lying on a bed at the morgue. Her head was covered with a black veil, and this black square inside the white cube of the room gave Mauda a shock of the kind felt in the presence of a decapitated corpse. Her features could be distinguished through the veil—the half-closed eye, the open mouth, and when, most politely, the men who would nail the coffin shut removed the veil so that the corpse could be identified, Morfay hesitated, as if unsure. La Trine had become a horrible thing, a little skeleton badly dressed in bluish skin with dark circles that devoured her face. (97)

*L'Épi monstre* was banned under a 1949 law applying to publications for children, intended to protect minors. Although the book contains nothing that could be called pedophilia, incest is clearly an element present in the Morfay household. Through numerous allusions, it is made clear that Morfay and his older daughter Mauda have a sexual relationship, which seems to underpin the sadomasochism of their interactions. Mauda struggles to free herself from her father's domination but fails and ultimately kills herself. Her suicide concludes the last chapter of the first of the book's two parts. This entire chapter is characteristic of the Genka style, an apocalyptic, hallucinatory lyricism, which here seems to wed nuclear annihilation to the depredations of the patriarchal nuclear family:

Morfay will watch the windows turn green. "That's it, they've dynamited the planet. Mauda?"

Morfay will watch his daughter enlightened. "I see the plain in your eyes, and the heart of things, and farther. I see a dark point, it's the sign of the coming race. We're going to disappear. Engulfed. Disintegrated. We shall no longer see each other, my saint . . ." And Mauda will cradle his head in her heart: "You won't die, since I love you . . ."

The days will come wearing open cassocks, carrying crosses, tabernacles, all that insolent bric-a-brac; migrations of philosopher-manufacturers will come, carrying hidden veils and lawsuit material for nice pale rhetoricians, resolutely in love with Man and resolutely jerking themselves off with His destiny through their own and oneself; the maniacs of Christianity will come, the illuminated ladies whose periods are the stigmata and whose faith the thrusts of sex, the pederast missionary gentlemen, the little sluts will come, at their asses the servant princes, arms filled with the sunflowers of madness, the pyromaniacal old men will come, the poets floating on silk and opium, the lovers of the sow will come, the theoreticians of fortune, the surgeons of vanity: the laureates of the revolution.

[ . . . ] They will all traipse again through Mauda's Garden, they will all traipse again through Marceline's forest: "Halt childhood! Halt hope! We have seen Lot's daughter, she is going to rule the world!" [ . . . ]

Will Mauda, stricken with a saintly panic, see the fire at the end of her unconscious night? Will she finally wake up? Will she be stuck all of a sudden between her father and the crowd, will she understand the need to choose?

What if the gigantic trap of this love appeared to her suddenly amid the cries of a Morfay dispossessed, haggard, hands open? What if Mauda were to follow the crowd, wedding the world's revolution in a second marriage?

Oh! Madness then, the ultimate recourse, the Bomb! The assassination of masses, the Earth depopulated in three seconds, through the fault of a lost girl, through the rage of an old boy, through the misery of a love! Oh! The certainty of dying at the same instant,

even if you're on the other side of the planet, even if you beg, even if you remarry, even if you repudiate me aloud in your dazzling cathedral!

But nothing can happen to this bitch. Only this.

Morfay, one night, makes her wash his feet. (98–100)

The first part of the book ends with several pages of sadomasochistic degradation and Morfay's discovery of Mauda's corpse in the kitchen the next morning. The second part of the book relates Morfay's despondency, the efforts of his daughter Marceline to both help him and escape his clutches, her eventual failure (and the clearest allusion to an act of incest), her attempt to flee into the arms of a farm boy Morfay murders in a fit of jealous rage, and the death of both father and daughter, along with the total destruction of the Morfay property in a cataclysmic fire, described in terms befitting thermonuclear annihilation. Thus concludes a novel "improvised in ten days, like a piece of jazz, fed by immense anger."

While the sexual content of the novel might have been the pretext for banning Genka's work, it's far more likely the picture it painted of French family life and *la France profonde* could not be tolerated by the authorities. "This novel tells us that where there is family, there is a structure carrying crime, incest, rape, madness, and death. It is this usually repressed truth that led to the ban by the Ministry of the Interior," writes Jacques Henric in his preface to the first reissue citing Aristotle: "The family is the tragic milieu par excellence."<sup>9</sup> Françoise d'Eaubonne suggests an additional, symbolic dimension that might have played a subliminal role in the government's reaction. According to her, *L'Épi monstre* constructs "the symbol of the relationship between power, Morfay, and the two pillars of society: Mauda, the peasantry, and Marcelline, the intelligentsia."<sup>10</sup>

While *L'Épi monstre* remains attached to or grounded in conventional narrative, despite its recurrent flights of dark lyricism and use of temporal

9. *L'Épi monstre*, 20.

10. In *La plume*, 96.

shifts, Genka's second novel, *Jeanne la pudeur*, hardly ever sets foot on the ground. It is akin to a dream, and yet, once again, derives directly from Genka's experience. His sister Jeanne, the closest of his siblings growing up, a tomboy who introduced him to the work of André Gide, had simply disappeared. Rumor had it that she went to America. Years went by without news. Then, suddenly, when Genka was in Paris, after the publication and banning of *L'Épi monstre*, he received a call from the hospital in Brittany where his mother had died: "Your sister is hospitalized here in a terrible state. She has lost her mind."<sup>11</sup> Jeanne had been found wandering around her empty, ransacked former home "like a lost pet," toothless and wearing rags. She recognized her brother, but was unable to speak or communicate to anyone where she had been or how she had been living. *Jeanne la pudeur* imagines Jeanne as a prostitute returned to her native village from Pigalle in a state of utter destitution, raped by the locals under the leadership of the local priest. Soon her ex-lovers arrive to avenge her and to put her out of her misery: a mysterious man named Jean who moves in with and dominates the priest before raping and murdering a local boy; Michel, aka "Go Home," a black American GI, who murders Jeanne in what resembles a ritual sacrifice; and the memory of Yoshi, who died in Hiroshima, and with whom she is reunited in death. Or so it all seems, for this is a work of surreal and delirious imagination, as perhaps befit the real Jeanne, whose sufferings could only be imagined.

Nicolas Genka was a tragic figure, a gay man in a time of sanctioned homophobia and a likely sexual-abuse victim whose obvious love for the women in his family (when he spoke the word "sister," he would trace an upper case S in the air with his index finger) had been ravaged by forces beyond his control. Each of his sisters, as well as his mother, had been a victim he had been unable to rescue, and each of his attempts to use writing as a means of coming to terms with the rage he felt as a consequence of these experiences was foiled by the state. And his rage itself only made matters worse. According to Françoise d'Eaubonne, "[Genka] lived in a state of permanent provocation. His verbal aggressions, of a scatological nature, ridiculed people with such

11. *La Plume*, 84.

mastery that he terrified his entourage.<sup>12</sup> In 1964, when his sister Renée was involved in a divorce, her husband exploited the autobiographical elements in *L'Épi monstre* to win custody of their daughter by claiming that she was the product of an incestuous relationship between brother and sister. (In which, somehow, Genka's homosexuality was thought to be a contributing factor!) While his sister cried on the witness stand, and her husband's attorney exclaimed, "She shared the same little room in Paris with her brother!" Genka stood up in court and bellowed sarcastically "A love nest!" His antics helped Renée lose custody of her daughter, although all those close to Genka knew the accusation was an absurdity. In a 1999 interview on the occasion of the reissue of *L'Épi monstre*, Nicolas Genka said, "I was twenty-four. I was completely ignorant of legal procedures. Renée ended up swallowing a tube of Nembutal. They pumped her stomach so they could bring her back to court where they judged her in my name."<sup>13</sup> He survived by editing, rewriting screenplays, etc. But he died an alcoholic in 2009. He only published one other book in 1968, which went unnoticed.

#### JEAN SÉNAC

"Jean Sénac is little known today in either the United States or in France, yet his is one of the most powerful and original voices to have emerged from the bloody war of independence and the turbulent postcolonial period in his native Algeria. His name does not appear even within the most authoritative studies of gay literary history or in surveys of Francophone literature. And yet, this openly-gay Algerian of European descent, who is widely believed to have been the victim of a government assassination in 1973, was one of the most remarkable French-language authors of his generation and represents the struggle of intellectuals trying to bring a reconciliation between European and Islamic cultures in order to create a truly multi-ethnic, multi-religious,

12. *Libération*, May 24, 1999.

13. *Libération*, May 24 1999.

sexually liberated society.”<sup>14</sup> So writes Katia Sainson, one of very few scholars working to preserve the legacy of this major poet. With David Bergman she translated and edited *The Selected Poems of Jean Sénac* (Rhinebeck, NY: Sheep Meadow Press, 2010), a bilingual edition that is in fact the only volume of his poetry currently in print.

Sénac was born in Algeria in 1926. His mother, Jeanne Comma, was Spanish. He never knew who his father was. He took the name of his French stepfather. Although he wrote in French and never learned Arabic, he early on devoted himself to the cause of Algerian independence and was associated with the FLN. This earned him the enmity of Albert Camus, another *Pied-Noir* who, along with René Char, had been a friend and an early champion of his poetry. When Camus called him “the cut-throat,” alluding to the FLN’s killing method of choice,<sup>15</sup> and referred to his poem “Salute to Black Writers and Artists” as “unacceptable, indecent and shameful,”<sup>16</sup> their long friendship came to an end. Sénac spent the war years in France, returning to Algeria as soon as independence was declared. There he joined the Ministry of Culture in the Ben Bella government, hosting two popular and influential radio shows (with a listenership that rivaled those for soccer matches and soap operas) that introduced a young North African audience to poetry from around the world. When Ben Bella was overthrown by the more Islamist Boumedienne regime, Sénac was forced out of his post and became increasingly isolated. Although he was threatened and denied citizenship (despite the fact that his patriotic and revolutionary poems had become standard schoolroom fare), Sénac refused to leave Algeria. By the early ’70s he was living in a hovel in Algiers. It was there that he died of multiple stab wounds in 1973.

Sénac’s poetry is abundant and wide-ranging. After Char’s early influence, Sénac developed a style that evolved through many different periods,

14. From an unpublished translation proposal by Sainson.

15. As related in Sainson’s introduction to *The Selected Poems of Jean Sénac*, with regard to Sénac’s poem posthumously published poem entitled, appropriately, “To Albert Camus Who Called Me a Cut-Throat.”

16. Quoted in Sainson’s “Jacob’s Wound: Jean Sénac, Albert Camus, and the question of Algerian Nationalism.” *French Review* 86.3 (May 2010), 1202–15.

from militant revolutionary to intensely personal and erotic poems of the body (which Sénac called *corpòemes*). His poetry reflects both the '60s countercultural desire to combine love, sex, and revolution, and what might be called the legacy of nineteenth-century French poetry: Baudelaire's conflation of aesthetics and existential necessity (poetry as a way of life) along with the twin ambitions of Rimbaud and Lautréamont, to "change life" and "change the world." Surrealism turned this legacy into a veritable program and neither the counterculture nor Sénac escaped this influence. Sénac however eschews what might be called the abstract and impersonal utopian tendencies of surrealism. Where Rimbaud, Mallarmé, and the Surrealists sought something like the dissolution of the self in the poem (Mallarmé's "elocutionary disappearance of the poet") Sénac is busy struggling to construct a gay French Algerian revolutionary bastard self. And he is inclusive, engaging in a dialogue with other poets—Whitman and Lorca, not surprisingly, as well as many others.

If, as the critic Arnaud Génon has said,<sup>17</sup> the essence of autofiction consists of the subject "laying claim to [its] fracture" then Sénac's "novel" *Ébauche du père: pour en finir avec l'enfance* (Sketch of the Father: To Be Done with Childhood) is a classic representative of the genre. Written between 1959 and 1962, it was meant to be the first volume of an autobiographical project that would cover Sénac's life. When Sénac returned to Algeria, his "life book" never advanced beyond this first installment. Dedicated to his mother, to his adopted son Jacques Miel, and to Patrick MacAvoy (who would dedicate his first novel to Sénac), *Ébauche du père* was published posthumously in 1989 by Gallimard. Besides reminiscences of childhood, it features most prominently the author's attempt to come to terms, by way of a suitable fractured structure, with the unknown father who is thought to have raped his mother:

And now, what does it matter if he really forced her or if she consented! [. . .] What was his name? I don't know. I don't want to

17. In "Note sur l'autofiction . . ."

know. (Maybe Ruis Y Gongora.) I don't want to know [. . .] I am talking about it in this novel because my hand is pushing me. Is it a novel to tell one's life with a lot of imagination that reshapes things according to their true core? It is a novel, because I invent a bunch of truths whereas I only experienced approaches, passages, flashes. I crystallize, I petrify what were just glimpses, questions, whims. (23)

Sénac raises questions of culture and identity that speak directly to our historical moment, with his concerns having moved from the periphery toward the center of Western societies. (The same can be said of all the writers I am addressing: d'Eaubonne's promotion of ecology, gay rights, and women's rights; Genka's indictment of sexual abuse and patriarchy; MacAvoy's adolescent rage or disappointment with the conditions of modern existence.) He is the ultimate outsider: an openly gay European in an Islamic country that rejected him even as he embraced it; a man rejected by the country of his nationality because he fought against it; a traitor to a cause (colonialism) now almost universally despised; a man lacking even the basic knowledge of his own paternity. And yet a deep vein of optimism runs through Sénac's poetry, and the approach he took to his memoir-novel seems to have been motivated in part by a desire to maintain the integrity of his poetry: "For me it is the only way to not soil my poem. To shield it from my vacillating attachments and my duplicity. And it is why I go forth, sinuous and talkative, in order to reach the only thing that matters. The Father, the Country, the Flesh I have been given." Sénac the poet seems to have understood that his very singularity was the mark of his humanity, and that by embracing it he was on the right side of history.

#### PATRICK MACAVOY

Patrick MacAvoy won the second Prix des Enfants Terribles Jean Cocteau for *Les hauts fourneaux* (The Blast Furnaces) published in Paris in 1963 by

Julliard and dedicated to Jean Sénac. François Ruy-Vidal,<sup>18</sup> in the chapter of an unpublished memoir covering the years 1964–1965, has this to say about Patrick MacAvoy:

*Les hauts fourneaux* was published by René Julliard when [MacAvoy] was only eighteen. And yet it has nothing in common with *Bonjour tristesse* [which Julliard had likewise published when its author, Françoise Sagan, was eighteen]. Neither did the two authors have anything in common. Save that it was possible to think, as Julliard would often have it, that the pages of these *hauts fourneaux*, written so quickly under the black suns of cruelty and madness, were only the baby steps of a unique and irreplaceable writer and the first contribution to a body of work that would turn out to be exceptional.

Julliard published MacAvoy's second book, *La ballade*, in 1966. In 1983, a collection of MacAvoy's poems written between 1960 and 1970, *Les Fenêtres Rouges*, was published by Éditions Saint-Germain-Des-Près. The first and apparently only edition was limited to eighty copies, decorated with an original lithograph by Edouard MacAvoy, the writer's father—an important portrait painter, the president of the Salon d'Automne, and friend to many other writers and artists. The nature of the relationship between father and son during this period is perhaps best expressed by a passage from Edouard's memoir, *Le plus clair de mon temps 1926–1987* (Paris: Éditions Ramsay, 1988): “Thus do I witness the experiment my son Patrick is attempting, refusing any support, any love, any contact, living according to a rhythm of which I cannot approve and norms I find inexplicable. I hope that he is in the right, and not

18. François Ruy-Vidal, along with Harlan Quist, published a number of modernist children's books with such authors as Eugène Ionesco and Marguerite Duras. His blog (and, in greater detail, his memoir in progress) contains much discussion of his friends at the Café Flore in the early '60s, and the four writers featured in this article in particular. It is Ruy-Vidal who places them at the same table and also talks about them in the context of his work as an editor at Grasset. His blog and my own acquaintance with Patrick MacAvoy in 1968–1969 were the starting points of this article.

myself . . .” These lines were written in 1969 in the context of a discussion of the events of May 1968; today, Patrick MacAvoy himself doesn’t approve of the young man he was at the time.<sup>19</sup>

The relative obscurity surrounding Nicolas Genka, despite an aura of *succès de scandale* and obvious literary merit (and ambition?) is a relatively straightforward matter, given his work’s truly taboo subject matter and its innovative, outsider quality. Patrick MacAvoy, however, seems to have courted obscurity more actively, in part no doubt in reaction to his father’s celebrity. His precociousness prompted both the Cocteau award and an article by his editor Jacques Brenner, entitled “Adolescent Genius,”<sup>20</sup> which compares MacAvoy to both Rimbaud and Lautréamont. Indeed, on the basis of literary virtuosity alone, it is nearly impossible to conceive of how a sixteen-year-old<sup>21</sup> could have produced such a text. Only the extremely dark themes and fervid emotional tenor of the prose provide clues to the writer’s age. As Brenner put it in his essay:

Adolescent genius is often a genius for revolt, especially when it manifests itself before [one’s] twentieth year. It is a total revolt: one directed against the human condition in general. [. . .] Young poets tend to celebrate the dark aspects of life: boredom, pain, sadness, and death. ‘It is to want at all costs to consider only the puerile dark side of things,’ Lautréamont said, as he retrospectively passed judgment on his *Chants de Maldoror*.

The comparison to Rimbaud is even more striking, however. Both MacAvoy

19. Related to me during telephone interviews, and during a visit to Patrick MacAvoy in the Aveyron.

20. In *Journal de la Vie Littéraire 1962–1964* (Paris: Julliard, 1965), 136–137. Elsewhere in this same volume is an article entitled “La Nouvelle Fable,” in which Brenner situates Patrick MacAvoy in a “movement lacking only a theoretician,” that is “a reaction against every form of realism, in particular the existentialist school and *l’école du regard*” (a term for the Nouveau Roman).

21. Jean Sénac submitted the manuscript of *Les hauts fourneaux* to René Julliard when Patrick MacAvoy was sixteen.

and the poet wrote with striking urgency and precociousness, then abandoned writing at about the same age. Both left France: Rimbaud for Africa, MacAvoy for India. In addition, MacAvoy's work bears clear signs of influence by the Rimbaud of *Une saison en enfer*. Most of all, MacAvoy seems to have followed to the letter the prescription set forth by Rimbaud in his "Lettre du Voyant":

You have to make the soul monstrous: in imitation of the Comprachicos, right! Imagine a man implanting and cultivating warts on his face. [. . . the poet himself] seeks out every form of love, of suffering, of madness. He exhausts every poison, to keep only their quintessence . . ."<sup>22</sup>

As might be expected, Antonin Artaud, Samuel Beckett, and Jean Genet also stand out as influences. These antecedents, and the surreal dimension of MacAvoy's writing, point to a rejection of realism, setting him apart from many of the other experimental French prose writers of his time, whose works often feature a kind of minimalist objectivism.

*Les hauts fourneaux*, which nonetheless describes itself as a novel, is made up of three tales. The first, "Blockhaus Définitif" (Terminal Blockhouse), is itself split into two parts. The first is forty-eight pages long, and is an extended interior monologue by a middle aged man named "Patrick MacAvoy," who is writing, or attempting to write, in order to remember, to be able to tell, eventually, the story of "what happened." Part two, at twenty-two pages, is (probably) the story the narrator of part one was attempting to remember: in the post-nuclear-holocaust French provinces, the narrator and his wife, Denyse Rolland (the name of the author Patrick MacAvoy's real wife at the time) are the only ones who have not fled. The narrator experiences the deterioration and disintegration of his wife. As insects eventually devour her and her limbs fall off, he shows his love by embracing her putrefaction in any number of memorable ways. Prose style aside, part one is reminiscent of some of Beckett's novels and bears an uncanny resemblance to Paul Auster's relatively recent *Travels in the Scriptorium*. Part two has echoes of Edgar Allan Poe.

22. Rimbaud: *Œuvres complètes*. Paris: Gallimard, 1972, 251.

The second tale of *Les hauts fourneaux* is titled “Le Fil de Nerf Barbelé” (The Barbed Wire Nerve) and is forty-three pages long: a mostly third-person narrative, with dialogue, relating from different points of view the short and violent life of an Algerian immigrant day laborer in Paris. The tale cuts back and forth between the story of Ahmed in Paris and its eventual conclusion: Ahmed, dead in the street (after committing random murders), surrounded by a knot of Parisians waiting for someone to pick up the body.

The third tale, “L’Epine” (The Thorn), at sixty pages, is a gothic horror story in the form of a journal kept by a fifty-year-old man, chronicling his descent into madness after welcoming into his home a once prominent attorney who killed his own daughter and gouged out her eyes, but has since been deemed cured after a stay in a mental institution: it’s like nothing so much as Maupassant on LSD. Again and always, literary pyrotechnics propel these stories into uncharted territory. The writing is layered, dense, and dazzling, but without recourse to much in the way of allusion or symbolism. Instead, rather than a representation of everyday reality enriched by the symbolic or seen from a new perspective—or both—precedence is given to the creation of a more purely textual reality:

The other day the luminous globe that lights the room began to swell. It was full of water in which not entirely coagulated clots of an unknown, other liquid were swimming, their yellowish color tending toward ochre. But no, they were yellow. I no longer have any doubt. Yesterday, just as I finished writing this first page, I came across, or at least my eyes came across, a photograph that, as it aged, had taken on exactly this same shade of yellow. Since it had yellowed under my own light, it’s quite possible that it is the lamp itself that contains this fluid and imprints its color on every object within its reach. And what if I myself were discolored in this way, I wondered? That is probably just what’s happening, for I am now yellow, the same shade as that somewhat ochre, dirty yellow. In spots my skin is lighter, and my most private parts reach lemon yellow, a violent and laughable yellow . . . I am in the depths of a malady as foolish and cruel as impotence. (12–13)

Published when MacAvoy was twenty-one years old, his second book, *La ballade*, is the sixty-page, first-person narrative—a monologue, mostly—of a hospitalized prostitute. It was written while MacAvoy was convalescing in a veteran’s hospital outside Paris, and then in the south of France, after an operation to remove one of his lungs. The title is best translated as “The Stroll” or “The Ramble.” In her imagination, MacAvoy’s narrator embarks on a lyrical search for her lover (pimp? Death itself?). Both the lover and the search are of monumental proportions, and *La ballade* features writing in which the author’s command of the language seems total, with the text taking on the appearance of an irrefutable stylistic proof of concept:

In this village that he frightened by putting on the airs of a fakir, old women and children pointed him out. In this other one he sowed the rye, irrigated the scrub, picked the vegetables, and harvested the grapes. Farther on, I hear him talked about as an untouchable, impenetrable mikado, who is supposed to have reserved a room in a luxury hotel for one night. He had the moon as a monocle and no luggage. Farther still, distrustful peasants tried to kill him with pitchforks; in a stream he laid traps, bathed, dried off on the bank, and seeing him so beautiful, the washerwomen stopped rinsing their laundry and, chirping, stood up, leaning again as though they did not want to see, caryatids suddenly surrounded by a farandole of crazed fauns, bent over by the weight of the erect poem.

I know every location he chose to rest, every pond where he dipped his face. He avoided such and such a group of farms access to which was barred by mastiffs, he snuck in at night like a fox into hen houses to break the necks of badly guarded chickens, but my suffering pursues an uncatchable trade wind, a Tamerlane, the only visible aspect of which are the roofs torn away, the damage after his passage.

I let myself fall on a bale of hay that has kept the shape of his body, a shape that for a moment I thought was on top of me. And it burned me. I hit the road again! “Anne, Anne, he is in the little wood,” said the oak, “he is in that farm shed, in front of you . . .”

I fight wild hogs for potato peels, I too thread my way through henhouses, my stomach clenched from hunger, and I call you from the hilltops, from the steeples. The road is long. It leads to my grail under fiery skies, vehement dreams of nettles or hyacinths, to the rhythm of my step, which is a loving, regular, almost joyful rhythm. My love, the shepherd returning home for the winter Angelus, the kid in clogs playing in a puddle, the suspicious patrolman, the women chatting in front of the church, the horse thief, all have watched you leap over walls or run through the brush; the flowers too remember you and try to imitate your odor. (52–53)

A documentary from 1970 tells us that Patrick MacAvoy was a serious candidate that year for the Prix Goncourt, France's most important literary prize.<sup>23</sup> The film contains a short interview in which MacAvoy dismisses the prize as "commercial" and "petit bourgeois," and says that if he won it would mean he had written "a very bad book" In any case, he would refuse it, since he would refuse "rewards and punishments alike." His intransigent, militant stance was certainly a factor in why the literary world seems to have forgotten him despite the magnitude of his achievement in *La ballade*—and, in turn, perhaps the degree to which *La ballade* has been marginalized contributed to MacAvoy's decision to give up writing. More likely, this slim volume simply exhausted or fulfilled his literary project. That he has devoted himself in the intervening years to Indian classical music is no fluke: there, MacAvoy says he finds "the ideal balance between structure and improvisation." It is clear that his writing already sought that balance, and to a great extent found it.<sup>24</sup>

23. *Le Prix Goncourt pourquoi pour qui?* available online at <http://www.ina.fr/art-et-culture/litterature/video/CPF10005685/le-prix-goncourt-pourquoi-pour-qui.fr.html>

24. Speaking personally, I reconnected with Patrick MacAvoy after a forty-two year hiatus. We had been friends in Paris in 1968–69, and he had dropped completely out of sight after that. I eventually found him in 2012 thanks to the Internet and blind luck, combined with my need to inquire about the translation rights to *La ballade* and some of his poems. During our phone conversations and a later visit, it seemed as though

According to an October 2011 article in the newspaper *Sud Ouest*, about the sale of several Edouard MacAvoy paintings, his son, now known as Nala, had this to say: “My father’s work languishes in purgatory.” The same could be said of his own work, and to a lesser extent of the works of Nicolas Genka, Jean Sénac, and Françoise d’Eaubonne, all of whom deserve a wider audience, both in French and in translation.

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no time had passed since we last met. Patrick remains perhaps the most compelling person I have ever known, a man who combines *joie de vivre* with the honesty of those who live without illusions. His physical ailments now interfere with the demands of the sarod. Thus he is considering a return to writing because he says he cannot live without creative activity.

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