

Pedophile as Paragon? Or (Mis)Representing Motherhood in Tony Duvert's *Quand mourut Jonathan*

[...] the voices of the lovers of youth are disclaimed by all [...] We need to tell every story we can from our own point of view and get these stories told, in our own immediate context, before courtrooms and psychiatrists' couches force their idealizations onto our experience.

--Mark Pascal, *Varieties of Man/Boy Love*

If there were a Nuremberg for crimes during peacetime, nine mothers out of ten would be summoned to appear.

--Tony Duvert, 1979 *Libération* interview

That the polemical French novelist and diatribist Tony Duvert's death in his sixties of natural causes last summer went unnoticed is an understatement. By the time Duvert's desiccated body was finally discovered at his home by French authorities in August, the process of decomposition had been underway for at least a month. The writer's neighbors had noticed something amiss: not a smell but a sign of negligence, the overflowing mailbox outside his house, which had not been emptied for weeks (Simonin, "Duvert est mort").

This combination of neglect and excessiveness is surprisingly apt. Not only had Duvert been living in seclusion for some twenty years in the remote Vendôme village of Thoré-la-Rochette, but on the French literary scene he had long been forgotten. Indeed, he might as well have been dead. Censored in the 1960s, as Anne Simonin notes, and published only thanks to the transgressive editorial strategy of the Editions de Minuit, Duvert's works had seen the light of day and garnered considerable critical acclaim in the 1970s. But they had all but disappeared from the public eye in the decades thereafter. Despite having authored some dozen works of fiction, two lengthy essays, and having received France's prestigious Prix Médicis in 1973 for his novel *Paysage de fantaisie* (*Strange Landscape*), the aggressively homosexual writer, a self-proclaimed "pedhomophile" (*L'Enfant 21*, my translation) has long been excluded from histories of contemporary literature. This is partially due to the relatively modest sales of his works and no doubt also to the author's reclusiveness. Yet it owes more probably to the general marginalization of homosexual writing in France and most likely to Duvert's perceived outrageousness, his showcasing of the space of "conflicting anxieties and desires" that Victoria Best points out is the image of the child in contemporary culture ("Uses" 230). Because, as Jean-Claude Guillebaud observes, pedophilia is not only defended in Duvert's texts but is at their very heart (*Tyrannie 24*), because Duvert therefore plays with fire (Josselin), the author's literary profile has, as a result, more or less been erased: in the 1980s his corpus became "clandestine" (Simonin, "L'Écrivain" 423).

There have to date, for instance, been no full-fledged university-level studies of Duvert's œuvre, which his death last year conveniently defined, essentialized, and contained. The two extant studies of

Duvert's novel *Récidive* (*Repeat Offender*), which was first published in 1967 then rewritten and republished in a much shorter version nine years later¹, the study of the male hunter in Duvert's works², the English translation *Good Sex Illustrated* by Bruce Benderson last year of Duvert's 1974 indictment of sex education in France, *Le Bon sexe illustré*, his rageful pointing at the "strangulation of pleasure by capitalist shackles" ("Introduction" 8), and Simonin's own examination of Duvert's works through the lens of publishing history all promise to change this: to create the critical momentum necessary to bring to Duvert's prose the overdue—albeit posthumous—attention it warrants and thereby finally to salvage his literary legacy. To this short list we offer the following reading of maternal (mis)representation in *Quand mourut Jonathan* (*When Jonathan Died*), Duvert's 1978 novel that is considered a "masterpiece of tender understanding" by Edward Brongersma in his multidisciplinary study of male intergenerational sexual relations (*Loving Boys* 106) but also as Duvert's most "unsettling" novel by Joannic Arnoi on his literary blog ("Tony Duvert"), and as the "most controversial selection" in *The Penguin Book of International Gay Writing* by its editors (422).

In the essay titled "Misogynie" ("Misogyny") which is part of the to-date untranslated but contentiously "antiheterocratic" 1980 text by Duvert, *L'Enfant au masculin* (*The Child in the Masculine*), in which he denounces the self-proclaimed right of heterosexuals to "reproduce" what he sees as their sexually repressive, repressed, puritanical, and dishonest selves (45), the author notes—or feigns—surprise that his books and the various opinions people believe contained within them are all too often deemed hostile to women. Those females he portrays are by and large mothers and thus all play both a social and familial role: "institutional beings," "administrative creations," of the same order as tax collectors, teachers, proprietors. Although certain readers believe Duvert may not shed the most favorable light on maternity, is it appropriate for them to label the author a misogynist, as a result? Given that his literary portrayals of fathers, children, and homosexuals are equally acerbic, he finds the label too strong. It is as misrepresentative of himself as he is deemed to be of his female characters:

It is true that my descriptions of mothers rarely portray maternity in a positive light. But I do not portray fathers, children, or homosexuals in any more flattering a manner: and for that I am not criticized. Only when I treat mothers the same way as my other characters do I get accused of purposely distorting the truth [...] Having said this, are my mothers really that outlandish? Are the real French mothers, the millions of average mothers any different or any better? Honestly, I am not sure (27, 29, my translation).

¹ See Brian Kennelly, "Rewriting, Rereading *Récidive*," *Dalhousie French Studies* 67 (2004): 135-42; and John Phillips, *Forbidden Fictions: Pornography and Censorship in Twentieth-Century French Literature* (London: Pluto, 1999).

² See Owen Heathcote, "Jobs for the Boys? Or: What's New About the Male Hunter in Duvert, Guibert and Jourdan," *Gay Signatures: Gay and Lesbian Theory, Fiction and Films in France, 1945-1995*, ed. Owen Heathcote, Alex Hughes and James S. Williams (Oxford: Berg, 1998) 173-91.

Reader reactions to Duvert's 1979 novel, *L'Ile atlantique* (*Atlantic Island*), for example, would tend to suggest otherwise: that to label the author a misogynist is misleading. Both sexes, the author claims, find the mothers he portrays therein realistic, if not recognizable:

A book like *Atlantic Island*, specifically, provoked an outpouring of awful confessions: as though it had inspired, emboldened readers of both sexes to denounce their own terrible mothers. And the worst mothers of the novel were those my readers found most like those of real life (29, my translation).

Is motherhood as portrayed by Duvert in *When Jonathan Died*, the novel published the year before *Atlantic Island*, any different? Are the mothers, the so-called “rare and fragile, persecuted, secret creatures” (34, my translation), also (mis)cast here as “skirted and slapping monsters,” as the “mother-torturers” (19, my translation), “cops,” “female Nazi guards,” “human by-product[s]” (“Tony Duvert,” my translation) Duvert demonizes in his later novel? Besides their social and familial roles, what part do mothers play in the novel and, more broadly, in Duvert's overarching activist rhetorical strategy, his textual call to arms against heterocracy—“a system,” he points out, “founded on the exclusion of almost all amorous pleasure and relying on a scaffolding of inequality, falsification and both the mental and corporal mutilation of men, women, and children” (*Journal* 78-9, my translation)—and its concomitant criminalization of pedophilia, its crushing of pedophiles, “subjected to the most violent repression and demonized” (*Le Bon sexe* 100, my translation) “under mountains of hatred and exaggerated mistruths” (*L'Enfant* 23, my translation)?

Of the five mothers featured in *When Jonathan Died*, that of eight-year-old Serge has the command performance. Because the part she plays is the biggest, most problematic and ironically the most intrusive, we will as a result focus most of our attention on her.³ Now while her travels might remove her physically from most of the action of the novel, she looms larger than life in the wings as the passive-aggressive “owner” of her son. From the start it is clear that she should be seen first and foremost in this “ready-made” maternal role (*L'Enfant* 27). The novel begins this way:

The little boy came into the kitchen, and he saw strange things on the floor.

But he said nothing. His mother was chatting to Jonathan. He, Serge, was going to explore this unknown house; he was unhappy at being neglected by the conversation.

A little later, his mother left without him. His eyes followed her. She went down a little track that led to the road; her car was down there. Jonathan shut the garden gate, pushed the child forward by the shoulders, and they went back into the kitchen (5).

³ Besides Barbara, the other mothers are: Barbara's mother (Serge's grandmother), Jonathan's elderly neighbor (whose son is dead), the mother at the café (who we will also discuss), and the mother of three boys (who Serge and Jonathan meet in a village).

The artist-painter Jonathan, whose “slight accent. An English, Dutch or German accent, you couldn’t tell” (5) makes his origins, his so-called motherland hard to determine, and the young Serge, who will be staying with him, are both named by the fourth sentence of the novel. Serge’s mother, a bohemian-artist-cum-hippie-cum-world-traveler-cum-loose-woman is identified by name some five pages later. The paragraph in which she is finally named sets a time limit for Serge’s stay at Jonathan’s; it furthermore takes us back in time and also qualifies her, rehearsing the nonchalance (“abandon” in French) and abandonment that typify her:

Barbara would leave the child with him for a week to go on a trip to the south, and she would pick him up again when she returned. Free of a husband, she used to leave Serge here and there, as she enjoyed the life of a single girl (8).

It is not surprising that “Barbara” is not her real name. For naming, as we soon learn, is not this mother’s forte. Serge has somehow escaped being saddled for life by his extravagant mother with a name as complex – indeed complex-forming – as “Sébastien-Casimir,” “Gervais-Arthur,” or “Guillaume-Romuald” (33). His cat, on the other hand, has not been so lucky. When the two males compare Serge’s domesticated feline back in his Parisian apartment to the wild mice that here roam free in Jonathan’s country cottage, it quickly becomes clear that for Georgette—Barbara’s real name and, notably, the feminized form of “George”—gendered labels only have currency when it suits her. Just as she sees nothing wrong with the life of a single girl, with kicking up her heels (“vivre en fille”) instead of playing stay-at-home-mom, “Barbara-Georgette” (235) thinks nothing of giving a female name to a male cat:

“(Ah we’ve got a cat it’s a boy and it’s called Julie, said Serge), and they’re soft to touch, really soft.”

“You’ve touched one? It was my mother, calling it Julie, the cat, have you really touched a mouse?”

“No, they’re too frightened. It was your mother who called the boy cat Julie?”

“It was her, really; so you haven’t touched one?” (6)

If she does not hesitate in her onomastic regendering, the aptly named Barbara just as readily mixes manipulation with fiction to convince Jonathan to care for her son while she continues to live up her “dissipated life” (“vie dissipée”) (34). To his credit, Jonathan suspects as much: “[He] wondered why she dared give the child into his care again. It seemed to be some kind of deal” (8). For some two months earlier, the artist-painter, despite being cash-strapped himself, has lent Barbara money. The letter written, if would first seem, to thank Jonathan, curiously contains an uncharacteristic and passing

mention of Barbara's son. It is as though she could not resist the gratuitous "barbarism" of cruelly tormenting Jonathan:

Barbara had thanked him with two pages of gossip, in which the only special thing had been a passage about Serge; her other letters had never mentioned the child.

Jonathan had been intrigued by this unexpected gift. *I hope you think of my lovely boy every now and again!!... He seems to have forgotten you completely!!!!... I talk to him about you—we were even going to see that exhibition of yours in December!... But no, the young man wasn't interested... You know at their age they forget very quickly which is best don't you think... But you can't imagine how lovely he is now!!!!*, Barbara had written, with her individual punctuation. She went on to say that Serge was at last behaving himself at school, that he loved her more and more, hid himself in her bed in the evening, a real little lover; he was getting to be a bit of a cry-baby, but so sweet. *And really I do prefer that to when he went round breaking everything!!... Children!...*

This wonderful news had driven Jonathan to despair.

As for the letter promising her son's visit, it also mentioned the financial difficulties in which the mother found herself. The ploy was so outrageous that Jonathan was afraid Barbara would in the end arrive alone (9).

Barbara's punctuational exaggeration, the grammatical abusiveness of her multiple and repeated exclamation marks and points of suspension aside, she pushes all common notions of politeness to extremes. Indeed, she appears to abuse the kindness of the seemingly benevolent Jonathan whose fear that she might arrive at his cottage without her son proves ultimately unfounded. Barbara cannot be relied upon either as a mother or a friend; the week that Serge, "whose possessor had loaned him, deposited him" (28), is to stay with Jonathan, and which has been intended to correspond with the "short" trip of his mother, soon stretches to months. This further stretches Jonathan's resources too.

But Serge, "used to being abandoned as he was to being periodically abused" (42), predicts that his absent mother will not return on the day she has agreed. Jonathan might be preoccupied by Barbara's supposedly imminent return; however, nothing is further from Serge's mind. When Jonathan reminds Serge that he will soon return to Paris, the unrealistic attitude ("attitude irréelle"), the "naive refusal" ("refus naïf") of the boy disconcerts his older host:

She won't come [...] she's always late!... I bet she won't come [...] she won't come. I know. She's always changing her mind [...] Don't worry! I'm telling you she won't come! Everything's alright! If you ask me it's nothing at all, you'll see (38-40).

The letter announcing—although not justifying—the amorous trysts that have taken Barbara unexpectedly from the south of France to Sicily and Greece, then all the way to California after her invitation by another total stranger, who ostensibly believes in her artistic potential and healing

powers, confirms that Serge has been right all along. If the various excuses Barbara gives Jonathan for not being able to provide financially for her son and her temporary abandonment of him would seem abusive to many, in the eyes of the good-spirited boy, the prospect that he will be able to stay with Jonathan and thus be free from his mother—at least through the end of the summer, when French law will oblige him to return to school—is like hitting the jackpot: “[...] such freedom was beyond the boy’s imagination, like a figure in billions. He was abstracted and inactive the whole afternoon, and never for one moment did he leave Jonathan’s side” (42).

The scope of the freedom that these long, lazy summer months with Jonathan represent, where as Joannic Arnoi observes “there are neither roles to be followed nor a hierarchy to be respected” (My translation), is almost unfathomable to Serge. The time to be spent with Jonathan in his cottage, a place “[where] [i]t would be possible to hide away [...], to get older by a year or two, without changing” (44), “like one of those fine shells, in whose cavity, when held to the ear, you can hear the sound of the sea” (42) seems limitless, frozen. Yet the cruel reality of its limits soon hits home. Just as one might prefer not to imagine the monstrous mass that once inhabited the smooth sheens of the shell to which Jonathan’s cottage is compared, “the probably shapeless mollusc, utterly repulsive when out of its shell, which secreted this mother-of-pearl and polished the plunging corridor” (43), Serge is not prepared for the brutal scene between mother and son he and Jonathan witness the next time they venture outside it. Do the true monsters roam unchecked outside the idealized space, the “lost paradise” (Orezza, my translation) inhabited for this summer at least by Jonathan and Serge?

Seated at a café in the neighboring village with Serge, Jonathan hears sobs, “[h]igh-pitched, not very loud [and that] must have had their origin in a very tiny breast.” Serge points to a child of four or five years whose mother is reprimanding him for not drinking the lemonade she has ordered for him. From where he is seated, Serge has been able to witness what has happened. “She slapped him like that, across the face,” Serge explains to Jonathan, “and it bled” (45). The mother initially ignores the blood, which, like melting lard, is slowly streaking the delicate white cheek of her son. Whether the injury has been caused by the mother’s ring or by a broken nail matters less than calming the crying child so as not to attract further attention. She thus threatens him that if he keeps crying she will strike him again:

Contrary to plan, the slap to induce good behaviour had produced a striking and indecent spectacle which the woman was trying in vain to bring back under control. Words were not enough; at the edge of the table, her hand, with rigid fingers and cupped palm, was tapping rhythmically to draw the infant’s attention to the threat of another slap to correct the results of the first (45).

Only once the blood starts dripping onto her son's shirt collar does the mother attempt to wipe his cheek with a handkerchief. Her son attempts to writhe free, all the while sobbing louder, for the line between tenderness and abuse in what others might see as an overdue maternal gesture is for him too fine: "Perhaps [the young boy] took this for a further act of violence, beginning to cry more loudly and trying to free his head, which the woman held from behind as she was wiping" (45). However, this only exacerbates the situation, further enrages the child's mother, who angrily throws some coins on the café table before storming out with her poor boy in a final yet unequivocally violent show of force: "she pulled up the child from his seat, as far and as roughly as possible, plonked him firmly onto the ground, took his hand and marched him away" (45-6).

Why do the café patrons and passers-by turn a blind eye on this brutal familial (brutally familial or familiar?) scene? What to make of their silent glances? Prudently preferring to hold their tongues and feign indifference, rather than to interfere ("s'éloign[er] [...] sans avoir dit un mot ni risqué une mine"), they recognize that the "dressage" of child-raising is not without unpleasantness: "they knew how difficult was the art of teaching manners to the little ones" (45). Similarly resigned to the rights that come with motherhood and to his own powerlessness, Jonathan is ashamed to try and justify to Serge why he for one has neither spoken out nor tried to intervene. The older artist-painter seems resigned to shamefully forgetting this "tiny [drama] which it would be ridiculous or dangerous to take to heart" (46) as quickly as possible, and to the inevitability of the mother getting the final, if not more painful word: "Nobody says anything, it was his mother. It doesn't help. She has a row with you, and she pays him back twice over when they get home" (46).

No matter how troubling it may seem to Serge, the older Jonathan is fully aware of the "excessiveness of female power" ("pouvoir féminin démesuré"). He knows that mothers hold a privileged and protected role in society. He has witnessed countless scenes just like this one, each confirming to him that maternal love is little more than "a love of an inspector" ("un amour d'inspectrice"), that the only form of education that a mother can provide is negative, one in which she "controls, sets norms, disciplines like a dog- or cat-trainer" ("[elle] distribue [...] ses contrôles et ses normes, sa discipline de ménagère, comme à un chien, un chat"), that mothers in effect are little more than "skirted robots" (*L'Enfant* 42). Though Serge may claim that if his own mother had hit him like that he would not have stood for it ("If my mother did that, I'd hit her back"), this is little more than hyperbolic bravado on his part. For when Jonathan first stayed with Barbara and her son in Paris, Serge would often hide in a closet and cry rather than stand up to her—this, after Barbara would strike out at him when he acted up and violently shake him in order ironically to be able to continue meditating, of all things:

when she had friends round to think quietly and meditate, with incense sticks, green tea, and a Zen book within hand's reach, she would shake Serge and hit him, reasoning with him in a measured voice:

'Listen now, young man, it's time to stop the play-acting, don't you think?'

Beside himself, the child would go and cry in a cupboard. Now Barbara and her friends could continue their exercises in serenity (20).

Indeed, under his mother's repressive reign, Serge's childhood seems little more than a nightmare of control and bribery (*L'Enfant* 29). Is it any wonder then that he so relishes the time he spends with Jonathan? That he yearns to free himself from her? At least insofar as circumstances appear in the unfolding narration of events, Serge is finally able to be himself, to do as he pleases, to "live" (*L'Enfant* 38). And as the person willing to host, feed, entertain, and nurture him, Jonathan at first appears a paragon of virtue. Jonathan has gone all out to make the eight-year-old as comfortable as possible, despite being short on savings and in spite of his habit of living austerely. "He didn't have a lot of the things he needed for the child. He had few sheets, just one pillow and one pillow-case, one dishcloth. He washed them all himself" (10). Jonathan has, for example, rented a refrigerator, added a mirror and whatever other furniture a young child might need to feel at home, stocked up on food, and thoroughly cleaned his living space both inside and out.

Yet despite the appearance of order, normalcy, and creature comforts, something is not quite right. In the same way that Jonathan is ashamed when he turns a blind eye to the abusive scenes he frequently witnesses in town between mothers and their children, he is embarrassed by his duplicity in purchasing games, toys, and periodicals for Serge. He first inquires at a pharmacy, for example, which items would be most age-appropriate then claims that they are for his son when he later purchases them at the next-door store:

At the toy shop, he said he had a son. When he left the shop, his lie caused him such shame and unhappiness that he almost left the package behind on a bench.

Finally, he thought to himself: 'If only he doesn't come.' (10-11)

Why, if Jonathan did not have anything to hide, would he feel it necessary to lie? Surely he could simply have responded that the items were for a boy and left it at that. Are the follow-up questions that might ensue so fearful? And what drives the interest he takes in this boy who is no relation to him?

Over the course of the summer that Serge stays with Jonathan, it becomes clear that much more is at stake, that Jonathan is more than the innocuous "nurse" (155) for Serge that some believe him to be.

While Jonathan and Serge may have seemed innocently to have slept together when Jonathan had first visited Barbara in Paris and “[i]n their own way [...] had loved each other very much” (8), it is only once Serge is free of his mother that the extent and true scope of this so-called “love” between himself and the man some twenty years his elder becomes evident. It is suggested early during Serge’s stay that Jonathan’s disingenuousness extends to his relationship with the boy. Serge comes in from the garden and asks his host where to find Jonathan’s “junk-drawer” (“foutoir”), whose etymological tie to the French noun and verb “foutre” (“sperm” and “to fuck,” respectively) and whose sexual connotation as “brothel” are also significant: “He quickly put his drawing out of sight [...] Jonathan, for his part, hadn’t dared show his drawing to Serge, for the drawing was obscene. It showed one of their secrets” (24, 27). If the drawing does indeed represent the secretive sexual component of their relationship as suggested, why—unless Jonathan is ashamed of the obsessiveness of it—should he find it necessary to hide it from the very person with whom he is sharing that secret relationship?

Now admittedly, Serge precociously initiates much of the sexual play with his older partner whose “relationship of pure passivity” (“relation de pure passivité”) Duvert notes in his 1979 interview with the newspaper *Libération*. In the bathtub, it is Serge who takes Jonathan’s penis first, “grabbing it, slapping and twisting it” before soaping up his host’s naked body “vigorously all over, thoroughly, leaving nothing out, as carefree and energetic as a housewife flanneling her kids” (34). The suggestiveness of what happened in the bedroom shortly thereafter—“[c]alm returned after what quenches boyish passion” (34)—gives way with time to slightly more elaborate descriptions; the thinly veiled “what” (“circonstance”) for the exchange of seminal fluid or “foutre” becomes a true “bout of filthiness” in which “they played at sex” (82). Caresses of Serge’s anus by Jonathan with his finger, for example, “a stroke of the index finger, or rather of its tip, which followed a fixed course [...] the divide of the buttocks, an inch or two above the hole [...] one side of the ring [...] the middle” (35), soon become obvious “coupling” (131), penetration of the boy by his elder and vice-versa, with Jonathan penetrated in turn by Serge’s “pretty little sex” (38). It is undeniable that there has been a sexual dimension to their relationship from the start and that the sometimes sexually tyrannical Serge plays his part in initiating the “thing”:

They had always fucked a bit. This is what had astonished Jonathan when in Paris he’d slept alongside the child—then hardly seven years old—who would turn his back on him and go to sleep with his bottom pressed into the hollow of the young man’s thighs, both of them curled up together. In the morning he would regain the position, and once, without saying a word, he slipped his hand behind him, took the sex that lay along the divide of his buttocks, and moved his hips so as to put it just at the hole. Jonathan didn’t dare move, and pretended to be still asleep. But that very evening, when they were in bed and had indulged in various caresses, they were again in the same position; and Jonathan, as the boy’s hole was still wet with saliva,

pushed in his sex. He had not imagined it so elastic. When he had gone in about the length of a finger, he heard Serge, his voice calm, murmur simply:

‘That hurts a bit.’

He withdrew straight away, and would not start again. The disproportion terrified him, although Serge, for his part, seemed quite unaware of it.

Later, the child repeated the gesture. Jonathan understood better than the pleasures of this little body. He didn’t penetrate, or hardly, but in this way masturbated the anus at length, until he flooded it, then wiped it dry, unless Serge demanded, as he did on some later occasions, with placid tyranny:

‘No, you must carry on when it’s wet.’

The thing was part of their routine, without occupying a privileged place. As for Serge, after various low and hesitant provocations, he had found means to amuse himself with the young man’s bottom, although for orgasms he relied on his hands.

So, for a long time this sodomy had been mixed up with other pleasures; among them, it was nothing special, it went unnoticed. Only the child’s growing up, or the length of their intimacy, had gradually modified the nature of the penetrations—much deeper, but still almost static, on Jonathan’s part; more skilful, less facetious, longer and more solidly implanted, on Serge’s.

A development which continued through that summer (147-8).

But should it matter who initiates the sexual act? And that Jonathan is always the silent, if not nearly immobile partner of the seemingly more sexually charged Serge? Would such questions matter to a judge? Jonathan knows full well that in the eyes of society what he is doing with this prepubescent youngster will, if it is ever exposed, be deemed wrong, perverse, if not criminal and that his silence both in the bedroom and out of it is, ironically and relatively speaking, a measure of his prudence. This plunges him into despair. The mothers might seem monstrous to him by the way they (mis)treat their children. But if his repeated and ongoing sexual contact with Serge is discovered, he will be judged far more severely. How to explain to the child that what may seem perfectly natural to the two of them is in the eyes of society deeply troublesome, a “social horror,” to use the words of Kenneth Plummer, author of “Pedophiles: Constructing a Sociological Baseline,” certain to evince the most extreme moral outrage (244)? How to explain that the “innocence” in the adverb “innocently” is actually a perversion, distortion, misrepresentation of reality?

How to tell him that their amorous encounters [...] were not what he believed, not what he lived himself, not what he innocently and frivolously insisted upon, in the perfection of his personality as yet intact. How to tell him it was a crime, to be corroborated by commissioning doctors to spread apart his buttocks; and that their pleasures would bring Jonathan ten years in prison, and bring upon Serge a flood of psychotherapy, torture without instruments (155).

And what to make of Barbara, who it seems is too caught up in her “courses in movement,” her “primal scream seminars” (115), her “narcissistic mania” (114), and thus has not been aware of the true nature of the relationship her son has with the older artist-painter? Should she too be condemned as a bad mother for being so out of touch with reality? From the distorted perspective she exhibits for most of the novel, Jonathan’s “bad influence” (“influence néfaste”) has been due to his negative energy, to the “negative vibrations he put out without being able to control them” (21). Indeed, she has permitted Serge to spend more time with Jonathan while she has traveled with Simon, the husband with whom she has been reconciled. But this second visit of the boy with the artist-painter will be the last. Before seeing predation or perversion, she sees rivalry. Less a *paragon*, or “model or pattern of excellence, Jonathan—as actor in the “bout of filthiness” (82)—actually *paragons* Barbara.⁴ In the familial “theater” she reserves for her son, Jonathan is a match for, a rival to her. Whatever the situation, whatever the other roles she might play, Barbara sees her primary role as Serge’s mother: not as caregiver but as the person with the definitive, unparalleled, and unchallengeable right to control him:

she felt that she had over her child an absolute right, which she might enjoy according to her whims, and which authorised all the contradictions. Serge served her as a reserve human being when there was no one else left. He was a doll on whom she could experiment with those activities she would try again later on less lowly victims. A partner for rehearsal, for stage design and research. Whence the incoherence in her behaviour towards him: it depended on the play.

But it was clear that in all these theatres, Jonathan himself was the enemy and the danger. Barbara probably didn’t think particularly unfavourably of him; his problem, his clear qualification as unconditional enemy, was simply that Serge preferred him to her (154).

As her competitor for the “real little lover” Serge (“vrai petit amant”), as she herself has earlier described him (9), Jonathan must be kept at bay, neutralized. She thus intercepts all written communication between him and her boy. And when Barbara’s husband Simon suggests that Serge again be sent to spend six days with the artist-painter while Simon and his wife visit London, Barbara’s refusal, while rambling, is also categorical. The bond of this foreigner about whom her son appears to know far more than she does is far too strong for her liking. But although she never fully articulates what she senses, with the abbreviation “it” (“ça”) suggestive and its referent illegal, this is also the first time Barbara hints that Jonathan’s caretaking role might be a front. As self-imposed star in her own familial drama, Barbara knows enough to call it curtains. And so ironically to counteract what is also

⁴ “Archaic. to be a match for; rival” (*Webster’s*)

Jonathan's paragonic role, she finally exerts her maternal privilege to protect Serge in a tirade that mixes the pathological with the paranormal, the intensely private with the theatrical:

Oh no! [...] That's enough of Jonathan!... It's not healthy, you've got to admit it!... Since he's come back from there, he's never been the same, he's quite impossible [...] I don't want him to carry on seeing Jonathan. I don't want any more of it [...] I don't want to hear about it again. There's something not right about it. It[s] probably not their fault. I'm not saying that, well... But there's something wrong. I can feel it. I can feel it. And I'm not wrong about that sort of thing. No! Something, I'd rather not tell you what I think. But I can feel it. No, there's something wrong. No. It's over, as far as Jonathan is concerned, and that's it. I tell you we'll have trouble for years to come if we let it go any further. Fine! Nothing! I'm not saying anything! But it's over. It's all over, and that's all there is to say about it. Serge has become too attached, don't you see. And I don't know to who[m]. I don't know who it is! Yes, that's what worries me... It's my right... I produced this child, I don't know whether you've noticed. I can feel it. It's serious [...] I can feel it. It just can't go on, this business. No. That's enough. The end. Full stop (165, 168-9).

But in what appears to be the first positive maternal intervention by Barbara on behalf of her son, in this defiant act of protection, Barbara ironically and tragically loses him forever. With his sights set on visiting Jonathan again, Serge takes the metro to the outskirts of Paris where hitchhikers try their luck getting a lift:

He knew where the hitch-hikers went, the exit from Paris which led to the road for Jonathan's. His own road now. It couldn't take very long, surely. Not with all the cars. It had to work. There were plenty of people (170).

Once outside in the pouring rain, however, Serge quickly becomes disoriented. Yet he has reached a point of no return: “[He] told himself he wouldn't leave. Nor would he go home” (173). As the hundreds of cars speed by, their headlights like stars in the heavens beckoning to him, Serge sees his chance:

Now, watch the cars, until there was one going very fast and all by itself. And watch the headlights and throw himself against them, very fast too, there where the light shone brightest. Rigid and motionless, his sight a little blurred, Serge allowed several cars go by, before he saw the one he was waiting for (174).

And so, with this “unimaginable” suicide (“Tony Duvert”), not quite accomplished, premeditated but not quite enacted, the novel draws attention one final time to the very inevitability that has driven it: that the erotic variety it celebrates is always already dangerous, unhealthy, and depraved (Rubin 280). If, as Duvert notes in *L'Enfant au masculin (The Child in the Masculine)*, “the adult lover is the only man in the world who treats the child as an equal and therefore gives him freedom” (38, my translation), in truth and because of social norms, this freedom can only be ephemeral, Serge will always be a “marionnette”: the relationship between Jonathan and Serge, their “ideologized coupling”

(“Tony Duvert”) has been doomed from the start and will never be permitted by modern society to survive. But the final, foreboding scene of the novel also rehearses one last time the misrepresentation at its heart and framed by, as if dramatized, in everything its title is not. Just as Jonathan, the adult lover of Serge, neither dies *in* the novel nor is the paragon he appears, just as Serge’s mother proves herself ultimately not as unaware as she might first seem, this suicide is really a killing, manslaughter. Instead of murdering his mother as Serge has suggested he might to Jonathan—“I could kill her. Only that...” (155)—, Serge indirectly causes the death of the person dearest to him, the one who has made his life worth living by freeing him. For after Serge dies, Jonathan will not be able to survive. Having long contemplated ending his own life, his relationship with Serge amounts ultimately to an extended dress-rehearsal for the inevitable: “Jonathan’s death, that too would have been a murder: for suicide doesn’t exist. One is always killed by someone” (155).

When Jonathan *died*, indeed how Jonathan died, and why Jonathan died. If ever they were, they are no longer matters of fact but prompts for interrogative rereadings of Duvert, his literary and literal tackling of our civilization’s most “sacred” taboos: childhood and maternity (Josselin). Whether Jonathan, this dead man walking, might therefore be resurrected, recuperated, or vanish into the “black hole” into which any measured speech about consent, pleasure and desire in intergenerational relationships seems to vanish (Davies 370) remains to be seen.

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