Mothers and/as Monsters in Tony Duvert’s
Quand mourut Jonathan

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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

hat the polemical French novelist and diatribist Tony Duvert’s death in his sixties of natural causes went unnoticed is an understatement. By the time Duvert’s dessicated body was finally discovered at his home by French authorities in August 2008, 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 it would seem that he had long been forgotten. Published thanks to the transgressive editorial strategy of the Editions de Minuit, Duvert’s works had garnered considerable critical acclaim in the 1970s. Although these works had remained uncensored and in print in the decades thereafter, they had all but disappeared from the public eye. Despite having authored some dozen works of fiction, two lengthy essays, and having received France’s prestigious Prix Médicis in 1973 for his subversive novel Paysage de fantaisie, the self-proclaimed “pédophilophile” (L’Enfant) had suffered from indirect or insidious censorship (Phillips 13).

Why has Duvert been excluded from most histories of contemporary literature? Is it owing to the author’s reclusiveness during his lifetime and the limited sales of his works? To the forms of caricature and shock tactics he embraces in his texts? To the perceived outrageousness of the content of his works? Or does a combination of all of the above exclude Duvert’s texts from the “forêt de livres” whose contours are outlined in otherwise compendious works such as Bruno Vercier and Dominique Viart’s La Littérature au présent (2008)?

In his writing Duvert actively champions and showcases the sexual rights of children: the space of “conflicting anxieties and desires” that is the image of the child in contemporary culture (Best 230). Duvert not only defends pedophilia, “l’enjeu d’un prosélytisme acharné” as Jean-Claude Guillebaud observes, but he makes it a central theme in his œuvre (Tyrannie 24). During the nearly two decades marking the permissive “Emmanuelle era” in France (1967-1985), Duvert may not have raised too many eyebrows. For, as John Phillips points out, in the years following the publication of Emmanuelle Arsan’s erotic Emmanuelle (1967), sexual discourse was relatively free of legal or moral constraints. But with AIDS came a new puritanism. Abstinence and chastity replaced the unbridled sexual pleasure of the 1970s (Forbidden 10, 149). In the post-Emmanuelle era what Duvert touted in his texts was tantamount to playing with fire (Josselin). As a result, his literary profile suffered. Indeed, in the 1980s, which gave rise to AIDS writing and with it also the portrayal of more orthodox homosexual relationships, Duvert became increasingly marginalized. His work, “sent[ant] le soufre”
Despite Duvert's social and political mission and his avant-garde representation of homosexuality as a fluid, not fixed position in his formally experimental novels (Phillips 150, 162), there have to date been no full-fledged studies of his œuvre, now conveniently defined, essentialized, and contained for critics by the author's recent death. However, a spate of new publications promises to change this, to provide the overdue critical momentum necessary to salvage Duvert's literary legacy: two studies of the author's novel Récidive, which was first published in 1967 then rewritten and republished in a much shorter version nine years later 1; the study of the male hunter in Duvert's works 2; the English translation in 2008 of Duvert's indictment of sex education in France, Le Bon sexe illusoire (1974), which ragefully points at the "strangulation of pleasure by capitalist shackles" (Benderson, "Introduction" 8); and Simonin's own examination of Duvert's works through the lens of publishing history.

With a view to drawing further attention to Duvert's prose and the controversial position he takes on "homophilic" relationships, the present article will focus on Quand mourut Jonathan (1978), considered Duvert's "œuvre romanesque la plus dérangeante" by Joannic Arnio on his literary blog ("Tony Duvert") and the "most controversial selection" in The Penguin Book of International Gay Writing (422). (How) is the relationship in the work between the artist Jonathan and the young boy Serge both a substitute for and in competition with the relationship between Serge and his neglectful mother, Barbara? How does Duvert depict and simultaneously problematize the intergenerational relationships between the older man and the boy, as well as between the mother and her eight-year-old? And to what degree is Duvert's novel shaped but also distorted by the author's conflictual representation of "pedhomophilic" desire vis-à-vis the imperatives of motherhood?

Before turning to the novel itself, we should note that the figure of the mother in Duvert's fictional universe is generally speaking a negative one. She is "Madame Non" (L'Enfant 41). Both archetype of evil and arch-enemy, she typically plays the role of demon within his overarching activist rhetorical strategy. In his textual call to arms against heterocracy—"un système de mœurs fondé sur l'exclusion de presque tout plaisir amoureux et sur l'instauration d'inégalités, de falsifications, de mutilations corporelles et mentales chez les hommes, les femmes, les enfants" (Journal 78-9)—the mother is "riche de dramaturgie et districe" ses contrôles et ses normes, sa discipline de ménagère, comme à un chien, un chat" (L'Enfant 27, 41). Indeed, as Duvert observes in an interview published in the newspaper Libération, if there were Nuremberg trials for crimes committed during times of peace, most mothers would be found guilty: "il faudrait y faire passer neuf mères sur dix."

Given this negative bias against mothers, it is hardly surprising that Duvert has been accused of misogyny, of distorting the image of the mother for his own purpose. Duvert responds to his critics in the contentiously "antiheterocratic" text, L'Enfant au masculin (1980), where he also denounces the self-proclaimed right of heterosexuals to "reproduce" what he sees as their sexually repressive, repressed, puritanical, and dishonest selves (45). Feigning astonishment that his works are considered misogynistic, Duvert notes that the women he portrays are typically all mothers playing both a social and familial role. They are "institutional beings," "administrative creations," of the same order as tax collectors, teachers, proprietors, "flies," and "kapos" (L'Enfant 42). They are

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1 See John Phillips, "Homotextuality: Tony Duvert's Récidive" in Forbidden Fictions: Pornography and Censorship in Twentieth-Century French Literature; and Brian Kennelly, "Rewriting, Rereading Récidive".

2 See Owen Heathcote, "Jobs for the Boys? Or: What's New About the Male Hunter in Duvert, Guibert and Jourdan".
“sous-produits humains” (Arnoi). And to those who accuse him therefore of misogyny in his portrayal of mother figures, Duvert responds that his literary portrayals of fathers, children, and homosexuals are all equally acerbic. He wonders whether labeling him a misogynist is misleading. Is it as misrepresentative of his intentions as his critics deem him to be of his female characters?

Mes portraits de mères, il est vrai, donnent rarement une haute idée de la maternité. Mais je ne flatte pas davantage les pères, les enfants, les homos: et cela personne ne me le reproche. C’est seulement quand je mets les mamans à la même sauce que mes autres personnages qu’on me traite d’affabulateur malveillant [...] Ceci posé, mes personnages de mères sont-ils si exceptionnels? Les mères françaises, les vraies, les millions de mères moyennes, sont-elles autres, et meilleures? Honnêtement, je n’en suis pas sûr (27, 29).

Take, for example, reader reactions to Duvert’s novel L’île atlantique (1979), which has been praised by François Nourissier for its “peinture sarcastique, impitoyable, désopilante des adultes” (8), and in which Duvert recounts the misadventures of a group of boys that end in murder. Both men and women, so Duvert claims, find the mothers he portrays in this work of fiction very realistic, if not recognizable:

Un livre comme L’île atlantique, en particulier, m’a valu une montagne de confidences épouvantables. Comme s’il inspirait aux lecuteurs, aux lectrices, la hardiesse d’avouer enfin leur mauvaise mère. Et ce sont les mègres du roman qu’on a trouvées les plus ressemblantes (29).

In light of this representational context, of Duvert’s belief that his portrayal of mothers as “mègres,” “tormentoires” (L’Enfant 19, 29) is based on truth, it is logical that the figure of the mother in Quand mourut Jonathan is also portrayed in negative light. Although the novel as a whole, considered a “masterpiece of tender understanding” by Edward Brongersma in his multidisciplinary study of male intergenerational sexual relations (Loving Boys 106), is traditional in its narrative poetics and can thus be differentiated from Duvert’s other works of fiction which are exaggeratedly ironic and hyperbolic or resemble what the prose of Jean Genet might have been had it been rewritten by Alain Robbe-Grillet (Thiher), the unflattering portrayal of Barbara in the work mirrors that of the mothers in L’île atlantique and Duvert’s other texts. Typical of the “créatures fragiles et rares, persécutées, secrètes” (34) despised and demonized elsewhere by Duvert, Serge’s mother is herself also cast here as a “robot à jupe” (L’Enfant 42). She is pitted both against her son and, by extension, against the man who is presumed to love him. While her frequent travels might remove her physically from most of the action of the novel, she looms larger than life in the wings as Serge’s passive-aggressive “owner.”

Mother as Manipulator?

From the start it is clear that Barbara should be seen first and foremost in this “ready-made” maternal role, “son rôle tout constitué” (L’Enfant 27). The novel begins this way:

Le petit garçon entrait dans la cuisine, et il apercevait des choses insolites sur le carrelage.
Mais il ne dit rien. Sa mère bavardait avec Jonathan. Et lui, Serge, il explorait cette maison inconnue: car il était mécontent que la conversation le néglige.
Jonathan, whose “accent léger […] allemand, ou anglais, ou néerlandais, on ne savait pas” (11-12) makes his origins hard to determine, and the young Serge, who will be staying with him, are both named by the fourth sentence of the novel. But Serge’s mother, a bohemian-artist-cum-hippie-cum-world-traveler-cum-loose-woman is only identified by name five pages later in a paragraph in which she imposes a time limit for Serge’s stay at Jonathan’s. This paragraph furthermore takes us back in time, qualifies her, rehearses the nonchalance (“abandon”) and abandonment that typify her: Barbara abandonnerait le garçonnet une semaine, ferait un petit voyage au sud et le reprendrait à son retour. Libre de mari, elle se soulagerait aussi de Serge ici et là, car elle aimait vivre en fille (13).

It comes as no surprise that Barbara is not her real name. For naming, as we soon discover, is not this mother’s forte. Serge has somehow escaped being saddled for life by his extravagant mother with a name as complex and complex-forming as “Sébastien-Casimir,” “Gervais-Arthur,” or “Guillaume-Romuald” (33). His cat, on the other hand, has not been as lucky. When he and Jonathan discuss the wild mice that run free inside Jonathan’s country cottage and evoke with fondness Serge’s domesticated feline back in his Parisian apartment, it quickly becomes clear that for Georgette – Barbara’s true 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:

(Serge dit ah on a un chat c’est un garçon il s’appelle Julie), et c’est doux, tout doux!
- Oh t’en as touché? C’est ma mère quand on l’a appelé Julie le chat, non mais t’en as touché des souris?
- Non elles ont trop peur. C’est ta mère qui l’a appelé Julie le garçon chat?
- Oui forcément, alors t’en as pas touché (12-13).

If she does not hesitate in her onamastic 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 her “vie dissipée” (34). And Jonathan suspects as much, that he is being used by her: “[II] se demanda pourquoi elle osait lui confier son nouveau petit. Cela ressemblait à un marché” (16). For some two months earlier, the artist, despite being cash-strapped himself, has lent Barbara money. The letter written, it would first seem, to thank Jonathan curiously contains an uncharacteristic and passing mention of Barbara’s son. It is as though “Barbara” could not resist the gratuitous “barbarism” of cruel torment:

J’espère que tu te rappelles de temps en temps mon adorable fils !!... Lui a l’air de l’avoir vraiment oublié!!!!!!!... Je lui parle de toi – on voudrait même aller à ta fameuse expo en décembre... Non ça n’intéresse pas monsieur... Remarque que à son âge on oublie vite c’est peut-être mieux tu trouves pas... Mais tu ne sais même pas qu’il est tellement adorable maintenant!!!! (16)

Barbara’s exaggeration of punctuation, 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 empty-handed, without her son proves ultimately unfounded. Barbara cannot be relied upon either as a mother or a friend; the week that Serge, “prêté, ou plutôt déposé” (42), 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, "accoutumé aux abandons comme aux abus périodiques" (60), predicts that his absent mother will not return on the day she has agreed. Jonathan might be preoccupied by Barbara's presumably imminent return; however, nothing is further from Serge's mind. When Jonathan reminds Serge that he will soon return to Paris, the "attitude irréelle," the "refus naïf" of the boy disconcert his older host:

Elle viendra pas [...] elle est toujours en retard!... Je te parie qu'elle vient pas [...] Elle va pas venir! Moi je sais. Elle change tout le temps d'idée [...] T'inquiète pas! Elle viendra pas je te dis! On est tranquilles! Moi si tu me crois pas ça fait rien, tu vas bien voir (56-7).

The letter announcing -- but 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 seem abusive to Jonathan, in the eyes of the free-spirited boy, the prospect that he will be able to stay with Jonathan and thus be liberated 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: "Une pareille liberté passait l'imagination du garçon, comme un chiffre en milliards. Il fut distrait, peu actif, tout ce jour-là, et ne quitta pas Jonathan un instant" (61).

Mothers as Monsters?
The scope of the freedom that these long, lazy summer months with Jonathan represent, "où il n'y a plus de rôles ni surtout de hiérarchie" (Arnoi), is almost unfathomable to Serge. The time to be spent with Jonathan in his cottage, a place "[où] on pouvait [...] s'enfermer, vieillir d'un an, sans changer" (63), "comme ces beaux coquillages simples dont la cavité, près de l'oreille, produit l'appel de la mer" (61) seems limitless, frozen. Yet the cruel reality of its limits quickly hits home. Serge is not prepared for the brutal scene between mother and son he and Jonathan soon witness the next time they venture outside it. Do the true monsters roam unchecked outside this idealized space, this "paradis perdu" (Orezza) that is inhabited, for this summer at least, by Jonathan and Serge?

Seated at a café in the neighboring village with Serge, Jonathan hears sobs, "[a]jus, peu élevés, qu'une très petite poitrine devrait émettre." Serge points to a child of four or five years whose mother is reprimanding him for not drinking the lemonade she has ordered him. From where he is seated, Serge has been able to witness what has happened. "Elle l'a giflé comme ça, à travers," Serge explains to Jonathan, "et ça a saigné." The mother initially ignores the blood. Like melting lard, it is slowly streaking the delicate white cheek of her crying son. Whether the injury has been caused by the mother's ring or by a broken nail matters less than calming the child so as not to attract further attention. She thus threatens him that if he keeps crying she will strike him again:

La gifte pour se tenir bien avait, contre son intention, provoqué un spectacle indécent et bruyant que la femme essayait en vain de ramener à l'ordre. Les mots ne suffisaient pas: sa main, au bord de la table, doigts raids, paume creusée, avait de courtes saccades rythmiques, pour attirer discrètement l'attention du bambin sur la menace d'une nouvelle gifte qui remédierait aux effets de la première (64).

Only once the blood starts dripping onto her son's shirt collar does the mother attempt to wipe his cheek with a hankercchief. Her son attempts to writhe free, all the while sobbing louder. The line between tenderness and abuse is too fine for the son: "Le garçonnet [...]
prit peut-être ce geste pour une autre violence: il se mit à pleurer plus fort et essaya de libérer sa tête, que la femme maintenait par derrière en l’essuyant.” However, this only exacerbates the situation, further enrages the child’s mother. She angrily throws some coins on the café table then storms out with her poor boy in a final yet unequivocally violent show of force: “elle arracha l’enfant de son siège aussi brusquement et aussi haut qu’elle put, le plaqua un bon coup de pieds au sol, lui empoigna une patte et l’entraîna” (65).

Why do the café patrons and passers-by turn a blind eye on this brutal scene? What to make of their silent glances? Prudently preferring to hold their tongues and reign in their indiscipline rather than interfere (“s’écloigner”) (65), they recognize that the “dressage” of child-raising is not without unpleasantness: “ils savaient que l’art d’enseigner les convenances aux tout-petits est plein d’embûches” (65). 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. He seems resigned shamefully to forget this “drame minuscule” as quickly as possible, and to the inevitability of the mother getting the final, if not the more painful word: “Personne ne dit rien, c’est sa mère. Ça ne sert à rien. Elle t’engueule toi, et lui en flanque le double à la maison […] On se bouche les oreilles, on attend que ce soit fini” (66).

No matter how troubling this maternal outburst may seem to Serge, the older Jonathan is fully aware of the “pouvoir féminin démesuré” (L’Enfant 42). He knows that mothers hold a privileged and protected role in society. He has witnessed countless scenes like this one. Each has confirmed to him that maternal love is little more than “un amour d’inspectrice”; that the only form of education a mother can provide is negative; that mothers are in effect little more than “monstr[e]s] à jupes et à gifles” (L’Enfant 29).

Though Serge may claim that if his own mother had hit him like that he would not have stood for it (“Moi ma mère si elle me fait comme ça moi je l’aurais fait dans la gueule”), this amounts to little more than hyperbolic bravado. 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 continue meditating, of all things:

quand elle recevait des amis pour contempler et méditer, avec des bâtonnets d’encens, du thé vert et un livre de zazen à portée de main, elle secouait et giflait Serge en le raisonnant d’une voix mesurée:
- Écoute mon vieux, il fallait un peu arrêter ta comédie, tu crois pas non?
L’enfant hors de lui s’en allait pleurer dans un placard. Ainsi Barbara et ses amis pouvaient reprendre leurs exercices de sérénité (31).

Indeed, under his mother’s repressive reign, Serge’s childhood seems little more than a nightmare of control, “chantage à [ses] besoins les plus élémentaires” (L’Enfant 29). Is it any wonder then that he so relishes the time he spends with Jonathan? That he yearns to free himself permanently of 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 to town to make the eight-year-old as comfortable as possible, despite being short on savings and in spite of his habit of living austerely. “Il lui manquerait beaucoup de choses pour accueillir l’enfant. Il avait peu de draps, un seul oreiller avec une seule taie, un seul torchon. Il lavait cela lui-même” (17-18). 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.
Pedophile as Paragon?

Yet despite the appearance of order, normalcy, and comfort, something is amiss. In the same way that Jonathan is ashamed when he turns a blind eye to the passably abusive scenes he frequently witnesses in town between mothers and their children, he is embarrassed by his duplicity when he purchases games, toys, and periodicals for Serge. He first inquires at a pharmacy, for example, which items would be most age-appropriate. Then he claims that they are for his son when he purchases them later at the store next-door:

Chez le marchand de jouets, il dit qu’il avait un fils. Sorti de la boutique, son mensonge lui laissa tant de honte et de douleur qu’il fallait abandonner le paquet sur un banc.

- Pourvu qu’il ne vienne pas, pensa-t-il à la fin (18).

Why, if he does not have anything to hide, would Jonathan feel it necessary to lie? Surely he could simply respond that the items are for a boy and leave it at that. Are the follow-up questions that might ensue so frightening? And what drives the interest he takes in this child 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. Jonathan is not the innocuous “nurse” (155) for Serge that Barbara and her husband Simon first believe him to be. While Jonathan and Serge seemed innocently to sleep together when Jonathan first visited Barbara in Paris and “s’Etaient, à leur façon beaucoup aimes” (15), it is only once Serge is free of his mother that the extent and true scope of this so-called affection 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 the “foutoir,” whose etymological tie to the French noun and verb “foutre” and whose sexual connotation as “brothel” are also significant: “Il dissimula rapidement son dessin […] Jonathan, lui, n’avait pas osé montrer son dessin à Serge: car ce dessin était obscène. Il représentait l’un de leurs secrets” (41). If the drawing does indeed represent the secretive sexual component of their relationship as suggested, why should he find it necessary to hide it from the very person with whom he is sharing that secret relationship? Is Jonathan ashamed of the obsessiveness of it?

As recounted by the novel’s narrator, Serge precociously initiates much of the sexual play with his older partner. In the bathtub, it is Serge who takes Jonathan’s penis first, “qu’il finissait par saisir, gifler, tordre” before soaping his host’s naked body “partout, à fond, jusqu’au plus indiscrét, avec le sans-gêne et l’énergie d’une ménagère qui torche ses moutards” (50). The suggestiveness of what happened in the bedroom shortly thereafter, “le calme revenait après la circonstance qui assouvit les garçons” (51), gives way with time to slightly more elaborate descriptions with the difference in age between Jonathan and Serge that has been masked in the heavily charged use of the noun “garçons” increasingly apparent in the “disproportion” of their sexes. The thinly veiled “circumstance” becomes a true “théâtre de […] cochonneries” in which “ils se cherchaient le cul” (114). Carcasses of Serge’s anus by Jonathan with his finger, for example, “un effleurement de l’index, ou plutôt de sa pulpe, qui suivait une course précise […] la raie des fesses, quatre ou cinq centimètres au-dessus du trou […] un bord de l’anneau […] son milieu” (51), soon become obvious “accouplements” (181), penetration of the boy by his elder and vice-versa, with Jonathan penetrated in turn by Serge’s “beau petit membre” (55). 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 their intimate coupling:

[...] la chose fit partie de leurs attouchements habituels, sans être privilégiée parmi eux [...] depuis longtemps, la sodomie était mélangée à leurs autres plaisirs; elle n'y était rien de spécial; elle y passait inaperçue. Seule la croissance de l'enfant, ou la durée de leur intimité, avait modifié peu à peu la nature des pénétrations—beaucoup plus profondes, mais toujours presque immobiles, de la part de Jonathan; plus adroites, moins farceuses, plus longues et plus solidement logées, de la part de Serge.

Evolution qui se poursuivit, cet été-là (205).

Whether or not we can trust the narrator, whose point of view seems confused with that of Jonathan, 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? Is this the “religion de pure passivité” that Duvert claims it to be in an interview with the newspaper Libération after the publication of his novel? As an adult and not a mere boy, Jonathan knows full well that to view Serge as emotionally and psychologically mature enough to sustain a sexual relationship with him on an equal footing (Phillips 163) is highly questionable. Jonathan is aware that in the eyes of society what he is doing with this prepubescent youngster will, if ever exposed, be deemed perverse, monstrous, criminal. His silence both in and out of the bedroom is, ironically and relatively speaking, a measure of his prudence. His exclusion from society what he considers acts of love and tenderness, “(objet) de la plus violente répression, de la vindicté la plus acharnée” (Le Bon sexe 100), plunges him into despair. The mothers might seem monstrous to him by the way they mistreat their children. But if Jonathan’s repeated and ongoing sexual contact with Serge is discovered, Jonathan will, as he recognizes, 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, rooted in an imbalance of power, a “social horror” certain to evince the most extreme moral outrage (Plunemer 244)? That their “innocence” is actually a perversion, distortion, misrepresentation of reality?

Comment lui dire que leurs jeux amoureux [...] n’étaient pas ce qu’il croyait, ce qu’il vivait et exigeait frivolement, innocemment, dans la perfection intacte de sa personnalité? Comment lui dire que c’était un crime, que l’on constaterait en commettant des médecins pour lui écarter les fesses; et que leurs plaisirs vaudraient à Jonathan dix ans de prison, et à lui, Serge, des avalanches de psychothérapie, de torture à main nue? (216)

And is Barbara, who herself is too caught up in her “cours d’expression corporelle,” her “séminaires de cri primal” (159), her “folie narcissique” (157) and is thus not aware of the true nature of the relationship between her son and the older artist, also at fault? Is she a bad mother for being so out of touch with reality? From the distorted perspective she exhibits for most of the novel, Jonathan’s “influence néfastes” has been due to his negative energy, to the “ondes négatives qu’il répandait sans pouvoir les contrôler” (32-3). 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 to Jonathan’s house 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 “théâtre de [...] cochonneries” – actually paragons Barbara. In

3 In its archaic verb form, paragon means: “to be a match for, rival” (Webster’s).
the familial “theater” she reserves for her son, Jonathan is a match for, a rival to her. Whatever the situation and 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:

elle se sentait, sur son enfant, un droit définitif, dont elle usait selon ses fantasies, et qui autorisait toutes les contradictions. Serge lui servait d’humanité de réserve quand elle n’avait rien d’autre. Il était une poupée sur qui on essaie les gestes qu’on accomplit plus tard sur des proies moins infimes. Partenaire de répétition, de mise en scène, d’études. D’où l’incohérence du comportement de Barbara envers l’enfant: cela ne dépendait que de la pièce à jouer.

Mais il était clair que, dans tous ces théâtres, Jonathan était, lui, l’ennemi, le danger. Barbara ne pensait probablement rien de très défavorable envers lui: son défaut, sa qualité évidente d’ennemi absolu, c’était simplement que Serge le préférait à elle (213-4).

As her competitor for the “vrai petit amant” Serge, as Barbara herself has earlier described him in a letter (16), Jonathan must be kept at bay, neutralized. She thus intercepts all written communication between Jonathan and her boy. And when Simon suggests that Serge again be sent to spend six days with the artist while Simon and his wife visit London, Barbara’s rambling refusal is categoric. The bond with this foreigner about whom her son appears to know far more than she does is far too strong. Although she never fully articulates what she senses, with the abbreviation “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-declared star in her own familial drama, Barbara knows enough to call it curtains. And so ironically to counteract what is also 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:


When Jonathan died?

But in what appears to be the first positive maternal intervention by Barbara on behalf of her son, in this defiant if not overdue act of protection, Barbara ironically and tragically
loses Serge 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 south:


Once outside in the pouring rain, however, Serge quickly becomes disoriented. Yet he has reached a point of no return: “Il se dit qu’il ne partirait pas. Il ne rentrerait pas chez lui non plus” (239). As the hundreds of cars speed by, their headlights like stars in the heavens beckoning to him, Serge sees his chance to flee:

Maintenant, surveiller les voitures, jusqu’à ce qu’il en arrive une toute seule et qui roule très vite. Et regarder les phares et se jeter contre eux, très vite aussi, là où ça brille le plus. Serge, raide et immobile, la vue un peu brouillée, laissa passer plusieurs voitures avant d’apercevoir celle qu’il attendait (241).

And so, with this suicide not quite accomplished, premeditated but not quite enacted, “un suicide […] qui n’est pas pensable, qui n’est pas imaginable” (Duvert, “Tony Duvert”), 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), to be crushed under “montagnes de crétinisme et de haine” (L’Enfant 23). If, as Duvert notes, “L’amant adulte est le seul homme au monde qui traite l’enfant en égal et lui rende sa liberté (L’Enfant 38), 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” (Duvert, “Tony Duvert”) has been doomed from the start and can never be permitted by modern society to survive. But the final, foreboding scene of the novel also rehearses one last time the fundamental misrepresentation at its heart. 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 seem, this suicide is really a killing, manslaughter. Instead of murdering his mother as Serge has suggested he might to Jonathan (“Moi je peux la tuer. Y a qu’à la tuer”), Serge indirectly causes the death of the person dearest to him, the one who has made his life worth living by freeing him. How can Jonathan survive without his beloved Serge?

By the end of the novel it becomes clear that what one might have thought the work would be about — when Jonathan died — is mere window dressing. Jonathan may have long contemplated ending his own life, but his relationship with Serge amounts ultimately to an extended dress-rehearsal for the inevitable: “La mort de Jonathan, elle aussi, aurait été un assassinat: car le suicide n’existe pas. On est toujours tué par quelqu’un” (215).

When Jonathan died? How Jonathan died? And why Jonathan died? These are ultimately overdue prompts for interrogative rereadings of Duvert, for closer attention to 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. In the meantime, however, we should neither lose sight of his problematic relationship within social reality (Phillips 172) nor of the ethical questions he — and Duvert through him — raise. Without the perspective of literary characters such as Jonathan, without the loud, if not discordant voice of his late creator, the ongoing, perhaps unresolvable debates over pedophilia in society and in the texts
defining and tracing its moral contours remain incomplete. As such, they may themselves be misrepresentations as well.

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WORKS CITED


