

## *Introduction*



Paris, early 1970s: On the Left Bank, in the Mouffetard neighborhood, an alternative preschool had opened up. It was founded on the assumption that education should be free of charge, seek the full development of children, and involve the participation of parents. I took my son there every day. Over the months, the project fell apart: The adults hung around on the second floor making love or smoking joints, leaving the kids to themselves. The big kids tormented the little ones until they sobbed, and none of them had their noses or their bottoms wiped. Play equipment and pharmaceuticals regularly disappeared. The few fathers and mothers who actually performed their assigned tasks at the school started withdrawing their children and putting them back in schools run by “the bourgeois capitalist state.” The alternative preschool had become a shambles and, after a few final quarrels, closed its doors.

Shortly afterward, I went to Christiana, a free commune in Copenhagen, Denmark: At a dinner in this sentimental kolkhoz, attended by a few dozen strapping fellows who looked like Christ and their female companions, all with long blond hair, adorable little boys and girls danced on the table, shouted, fought, trampled on the food, and threw cheese, mashed potatoes, and ham at each other amid their impassive parents, who were too busy puffing on their pot

pipes or snuggling with one another to offer the slightest reproof. When the chaos had become unbearable, the adults left the table, leaving the battlefield to the kids, who were disappointed not to have been reprimanded. A good wallop would have seemed completely out of place.

The 1960s and 1970s left those who lived through them with the memory of an immense generosity combined with candor and a profound silliness. We thought our potential was unlimited: no prohibition, no illness stood in our way. Economic prosperity, the collapse of already worm-eaten taboos, the feeling of being a predestined generation in an abominable century—all these led to a multitude of projects. We nourished the dream of an absolute break with the past; from one day to the next the world would turn into an inconceivable Eden, and the very meanings of words would change. We were going to put centuries of distance between ourselves and our ancestors, and there was no question of following in their footsteps. Sexual liberation became the most common way of getting in contact with the extraordinary: every morning we reinvented our lives, we traveled from bed to bed even more easily than we traveled over the surface of the globe, willing partners awaited us everywhere, even in the most distant lands. Our freedom, intoxicated with itself, no longer knew any bounds, the world loved us and we loved it back. The age invited us to give free rein to our appetites, and happiness consisted in multiplying our passions, finding ways to satisfy them immediately. Everyone wanted to be a pioneer, to deny himself or herself nothing, to pursue fantasies to the very end. In these years of innocence, there was an unparalleled creativity and an incredible fecundity in the areas of art, music, and literature.

What put an end to this euphoria? The emergence of AIDS, the cruelty of capitalism, the return of a moral order? It was simply that time went on. We knew only one season in life: eternal youth. Life played a terrible trick on us: we got old. The movement, having accomplished its role in history, ran out of steam. It was less a revolution than the culmination of a process that had begun much earlier. The taboos that had been uprooted didn't come back on us like weeds. Some achievements of this period remain unchallenged: the change in the condition of women, contraception, divorce, the decriminalization of abortion, the second sex's massive entry into the world of work. Above all, the sixties and seventies gave birth to a conceptual oddity: "free love." The expression had long meant promiscuity, the circulation of bodies, easy lays. Now we have to understand it at a higher level as the oxymoron par excellence, the improbable union of belonging and independence, a new system that affects us all, whatever our milieu, our opinions, our inclinations. How can love, which attaches, be compatible with freedom, which separates?

The field of love is divided between two great discourses that pass through multiple channels: the discourse of lament and the discourse of subversion. For the former, the truth of love was lost somewhere between the troubadours and the Romantics; for the latter, it is still to come, when humanity, having rid itself of its bourgeois trappings, has broken its last chains. This gives rise to two contradictory projects: restoring and overthrowing. Erasing the accursed parenthesis of the sixties, rehabilitating the traditional family, repealing the rights accorded women, or, inversely, doing away with the couple and jealousy, throwing them in

the ashcan of History. Thus we are called upon to be archaic or modern, caged or free. As if love were a disease and we had to drop everything else to cure ourselves of it, as if we had to excuse ourselves for loving the way we do.

It has to be admitted that in this domain the effort to wipe the slate clean has failed: neither marriage, the family, nor the demand for fidelity has disappeared. But the ambition to return to the *status quo ante* has also failed. Even the most retrograde have been affected by the upheaval. People are astonished by, and often regret, what is new in our morals; inversely, I am astonished by how much our morals have remained the same, despite so many changes. For a generation that wanted to reform the human heart, it has been a strange experience to rediscover certain inviolable codes. Today, the ideas of revolution and restoration are disappearing in favor of a complex, sedimented conception of a time that is neither a return to the past nor the advent of a new era. Less a transcendence than a displacement.

This book was written for those who reject the choice between revolution and restoration, who refuse to abandon the old drama of the passions but do not disavow the changes that have occurred. Unlike the conservatives, they celebrate the rights achieved, but unlike the progressives, they do not feel guilty about their old-fashioned tastes. To tell the truth, at the height of the lyrical years the old world that we claimed to be escaping had already caught up with us. We were thwarted libertines, romantic philanderers, sentimental hedonists, caught between two masters: constancy and inconstancy.

Our freedom in love was won in battle at a price that remains to be determined. (Someday the “black book” of the

1960s will have to be written.) Freedom does not release us from responsibilities but instead increases them. It does not lighten our burden but weighs us down further. It resolves problems less than it multiplies paradoxes. If this world sometimes seems brutal, that is because it is “emancipated” and each individual’s autonomy collides with that of others and is injured by them: never have people had to bear on their shoulders so many constraints. This burden explains in part why contemporary romances are so hard.

A paradoxical result: we now ask everything from love; we ask too much of it; we ask that it ravish, ravage, and redeem us. It is assigned such a grandiose ambition in no culture other than ours. Christianity’s invention of the God of love has made the virtue of love the cardinal value of life. Countless forms of messianism derived from Christianity, notably communism, have in turn raised love to the pinnacle, with varying outcomes, thereby proving that sentiment, once it is demanded by a state or an institution, is as dangerous as an explosive. By liberating itself, it reveals itself for what it is, in its flashes of brilliance and in its pettiness: noble and base at the same time.