When I come to Mourenx by road, I always climb a small hill which overlooks the brand-new housing estate, where the water tower is being built. As an intellectual of the Left and a philosopher (or ex-philosopher), I am not afraid of looking ridiculous; it is obvious that any gentleman who sits on a hilltop to meditate on the destiny of the housing estate below is perfectly ridiculous – or almost. And here are the things I have told myself so many times during my hilltop meditation:

‘It is impossible for you not to be reminded here of what Marx wrote when he was still a young man: “Big industry . . . took from the division of labour the last semblance of its natural character. It destroyed natural growth in general, . . . and resolved all natural relationships into money relationships. In place of naturally grown towns it created the modern, large industrial cities which have sprung up overnight.” So think back to the medieval towns, swarming with activities and natural life. Nothing was disjointed, and everything opened out on to everything else: work and passing-through places, house and street, countryside and buildings, exchange and production, private life and public life. There, as Marx said, the life of the people and the life of the state coincided: It was democracy, it was lack of freedom – vitality and poverty, splendour and derision. You have seen something like it in the medinas of Islam. There is still a trace of it in the village where you live.

‘Above all, think of the polycentric cities of Greece. The agora, the temple and the stadium regulated not only the way the inhabitants moved about, but also their interests and their passions, in an organic way. The way the city was structured coincided almost entirely with its way of life. Passions and rhythms, cycles in time and space – all was in harmony. There, the feeling of personal dignity and freedom was a part of social living. Civil society – in other words, the overall system of social relations which constituted men as individuals – was in harmony with the state, in so far as there was a state. The state coincided with the city and civil society to form a whole, and private life was subservient to it.
Now petry and the Others were in the midst of the camera.

'Before, elsewhere, everyday life existed. It was alive. The slimy creature secreted its beautiful shell. Everyday life was apparent only through its metamorphoses: art, culture, monuments, or quite simply discourse, a naïve rhetoric, symbols. Yet it existed, with its dual dimension of platitude and profundity. You used to think that an autocritique of everyday life through its own transpositions was possible: a critique of the slimy animal by its delicate shell and vice versa – a critique of the everyday by festivals, or of trivial instants by moments, and vice versa – a critique of life by art and of art by life, of the real by its double and its reverse image: dreams, imagination, fiction. Then times changed. Technology began penetrating everyday life; there were new problems. And now, what can you see? Everyday life like a massive weight, reduced to its essence, to its trivial functions, and at
the same time almost disintegrated, nothing but fragmented gestures and repeated actions. There it is at your feet, almost entirely alienated and reified, and maybe willingly so, but perhaps also trying to take control again. And you say (as Marx did, but how bitter and uncertain the ‘must’ is!) we must strip human life of everything natural and define it as pure power over nature, so that finally men will come together and reunite to discover their own nature and join forces with external nature once more. Here in Mourenx this stripping process has been accomplished. So what now? What is to be done with this human sand, in which individuals and their gestures are stuck together in implacable, abstract blocks and dumped on the edge of the moors which have not changed at all, not far from ancestral villages, like a brand-new knife blade piercing the ancient soil? Our task now is to construct everyday life, to produce it, consciously to create it. There it is, in all its crushing boredom, a single, monolithic platitude. Yet it is not there any more, it has been reduced to a thin, opaque human material deprived of its games and spontaneous pleasures. . . . Will you try to find the crack for freedom to slip through, silently filling up the empty spaces, sliding through the interstices? Good old freedom, you know it well. It needs a “world”, neither a completely empty one nor a completely full one. But what about that “world” down there? It looks empty, yet it looks full, “as full as an egg and as empty as an abyss . . . ”.