

# Preface In The Guise Of An Autobiography (Or Vice Versa)

Michèle Bernstein

April 2013

*La Nuit* would not exist if *Tous les chevaux du roi* hadn't come first. Here's why: in 1957 my husband and I were rather skint. In those days I was still a member of the lumpensecretariat, working for tuppence ha'penny at a humdrum publishing house. Guy Debord, naturally, wasn't working. The journal of the Situationist International sold five or six copies, and we sent the rest to people we found interesting...

So, to make ends meet, to earn our bread and butter, I decided to write a novel. Lots of fashionable novels came my way, and I read them without displeasure; I saw how I could write one that would immediately satisfy editors whilst deploying all the rules of the genre. The protagonists would be young, beautiful and tanned. They'd have a car, holiday on the Riviera (everything we weren't, everything we didn't have). On top of that they'd be nonchalant, insolent, free (everything we were). A piece of cake.

Hic Rhodus, hic salta: at that time the situationists, including myself, had an ironclad belief that the classic novel was past its sell-by-date. It had to be surpassed, overturned, exploded. Why not? Because in this case, no editor: no dough. The solution was simple: I would fabricate a 'fake' popular novel. Load it with sufficient clues and irony so the moderately observant reader would realise that they were dealing with some kind of joke, the steely gaze of a true literary libertine, a critique of the novel itself. The rather vulgar term for that being 'tongue-in-cheek'.

So: to kidnap a plot. *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, that book cherished by all good minds and so scandalous in its time, immediately came to mind. But it's no longer the eighteenth century, and scandal lies elsewhere. The protagonists no longer make mischief, but love. they no longer have the delicious certainty of being diabolical that Valmont and the Marquise de Merteuil had in *Les Liaisons*. No, they don't have a sense of sin, or transgression. No terrible punishment awaits them at the end of the tale. When a passing fling, perhaps even a love story, dissipates, of course there's a certain amount of bitterness, but what remains? Vague regrets, a hangover, and a yearning for new adventures.

Was it a *roman à clef*? That wasn't my intention. Now everyone thinks so, and I must bow to the idea that yes, it has become one. Life caught up with me at a turn in the road. The protagonist Gilles talks, walks, loves and drinks like Guy Debord did back then. He is occupied by 'reification'. The narrator, Geneviève, has the same outlook on life as I did, and hopefully still do. There are

several reasons for this: firstly, Guy and I were my two favourite people. Secondly, I don't have an unlimited imagination, I'm lazy, I took what was at hand. If there are novelists who can draw their characters from thin air, let them raise their hands. Lastly, how to resist the pleasure of a few 'private jokes' about a beloved husband?

I didn't think it would have any consequences. I didn't think I'd work forever (by forever, I mean the few decades of life remaining to the speaker. After that, *n'importe quoit*, whatever). I had no idea that because of his (public) work so many people would avidly devour the details of the (private) life of Debord, and mine, as a corollary.

Now to *La Nuit*, that other *roman à clef* despite itself. In it one encounters the same people as in *Tous les chevaux*, Gilles, Geneviève, Carole, Bertrand. They are still the same age. They still dance the same dance, meet up, like each other, leave each other; remain complicit. But the book is different.

My landscape had changed. I had an editor, a good one, and he was expecting another manuscript. I had almost free rein to do as I pleased without fear of rejection. But to put out another book, I would need another story. What? Me? A committed situationist, and an incidental novelist, pledging myself to the least revolutionary form of writing? (Remember, this was fifty-eight years ago). Since the first was an exercise in style, the second would be too. To prove it, the story mustn't be changed at all; and it would be a *nouveau roman*.

The *nouveau roman* was then at the cutting edge of received modernity. Assembled in a group photograph by a single publishing house, in a canny marketing exercise, a certain number of writers who had nothing much in common, but thereafter were thus labeled. The assertion isn't mine; several of them said as much later. I liked and still like some of them (the late Robert Pinget, our Beckett?). But the late Robbe-Grillet was the theoretician of the group and, as a theoretician, he sought to impose his law. One needed to be objective, complicated, omit no descriptive detail. A table? It was four legs, a tabletop, made of wood or plastic. Let's not forget the drawer. Come to think of it, what would he have retained of Proust's madeleine? The form, the weight, the golden shade. Perhaps he would have given the recipe. The trick was to elongate sentences, to scramble time and place, in short to increase the reader's work. So, let's go.

To scramble the time frame, one cuts the linear tale in short segments. Little slips of paper to throw into a hat and shuffle. One advantage being that it also pays homage to Dada.

To approximate the habits of others, believe me, there's absolutely no need to engage in a tiresome study of semantics, linguistics, structuralism and statistics. It's enough to familiarise oneself with the works of the afore-mentioned others, reading and re-reading them for several days without distraction, and there you have it, or almost. Sometimes one's own voice reasserts itself on the sly and shows through like a riverbed in shallow waters. Re-reading myself again today I see little besides my contribution, which amuses me; far less the joke about the *nouveau roman* that *La Nuit* wanted to be. More's the better.

Within this enlarged frame the characters have more perspective. Their feelings show through in all their wavering. Their personalities, passions, frivolity, confidence and anxieties have a new depth. If I understood them better the second time around, it's because I loved them more; over time, one grows attached.

Critically for me, two very situationist practices appear: 'détournement' and 'dérive'. Like the unknowns we were back then, they have since developed a certain notoriety, a definite notoriety. Back in the day, they were shibboleths for our little band, and all the more precious because of it.

Détournement: using someone else's words and mixing them, modified or not, with one's own discourse, in such a way that they are reborn in the context. Some of them couldn't age: Ronsard's line about the charms of youth which comes and goes like a refrain; Bossuet's melancholy warning about 'this green youth which won't always last', about the 'the passing of time, and we who pass with it...'. A beautiful quotation, it has stayed with me since sixth-form. Films, obviously. Although not too embedded in history like Ronsard and Bossuet, they haven't aged too badly: *Johnny Guitar*, a Western love story; even more so Carné's *Les Visiteurs du soir*, which any clued-up cinephile knows practically by heart (hold on a minute, had it come to mind, if you really get down to the bones of it, the subject matter of *Les Visiteurs* is strangely similar to that of *Les Liaisons*). Gilles and Carole ferociously identify with Carné's radiant, deadly couple, dispatched by the Devil at the height of the Middle Ages... *Lost, lonely children* (the song in the film), *riding white horses*, they approach a *large château which is still brand new*... Let's not get carried away by the poetry: *there is a strong odour of Chinese cooking in the street*. One détournement that still makes me laugh: the young poet wants to publish an anthology called *Drink Quenches*. an unsubtle allusion to Guy Debord himself and to Pavese's worthy *Work Tires (Lavorare stanca)*. And then, and then... At the end of the last chapter I see, such arrogance, a wink to Joyce.

The dérive wasn't a hobby, we wanted to make it a way of life. Letting our steps guide us through the city (the dérive is urban) without following a set path or pursuing any particular goal. Letting oneself be drawn by the forces emanating from houses, paving stones, and windows. Planning nothing in advance. During their night of wandering, Gilles and Carole cover almost every street in the fifth and sixth arrondissements of Paris (the best ones) and several other neighbouring, affiliated streets. Like a sacred ceremony subordinated to the will of chance.

It has often been said, and it's incontestable, that Paris changed a lot in fifty years, largely growing uglier. It's not the first time. In the nineteenth century Baudelaire was already writing that *the old Paris is no more, the form of a city changes faster, alas, than the human heart*... Bruant sang *One wonders what they're on, destroying the rue Monge*... It would seem that everyone has decided that after the Paris of their own youth, it's Armageddon. Ha ha, if the human heart doesn't change, humans, themselves, change. Who can be sure that those who go with a fresh heart through the streets that I don't recognise can't find their own magic. There's the optimistic note.

*La Nuit* is about the Paris of 1957, the one I see when I close my eyes (a nostalgic note). There's no need to cry, it's still there. We can piece together the image from the scattered pieces of the jigsaw. And if *La Nuit* is a love story, it's not for him or for her, or for someone else, or for me. It's a love story, a story of lost love. For the streets.

The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



Michèle Bernstein  
Preface In The Guise Of An Autobiography (Or Vice Versa)  
April 2013

The Night by Michèle Bernstein 2013 Book Works. English translation by Clodagh Kinsella.  
Edited by Everyone Agrees.

**[theanarchistlibrary.org](http://theanarchistlibrary.org)**