

At Dawn: the Novels of Michèle Bernstein in Historical Perspective

Michèle Bernstein wrote two versions of the same story, that is to say, the story of Gilles and Geneviève, a husband and wife who have an “open relationship,” one that allows each one to have affairs and yet remain happily married. There’s an easy to read, short version (*Tous les chevaux du roi*, published in French by Buchet/Chastel in 1960), and a more challenging, longer version (*La Nuit*, published in French by the same publisher in 1961).

Short version

If it wasn’t for André Bertrand, who in October 1966 took the conversation about what Gilles does for a living (he studies reification by walking) and placed it into the mouths of two cowboys mounted on horses – thus creating what Greil Marcus has called “The Cowboy Philosopher” – *Tous les chevaux du roi* (“All the King’s Horses”) would not be worth reading today. It is, in a word, a trifle.

Though it does not include the conversation about reification, *La Nuit* (“Night”) is worth reading today – not because it tells us something about the Situationist International, which Bernstein and Debord helped to found in July 1957, but because it is an enjoyable read. It is well written, has an interesting narrative structure, and dwells on and evokes the streets and architecture of Paris in the 1950s. If *Night* tells us anything about its author, it is the fact that she didn’t imagine that, one day, Debord would have an affair with someone (Alice Becker-Ho) for whom he’d been willing to divorce her.

Long Version

Michèle Bernstein’s *All the King’s Horses* is a very short book, only 78 pages in total in its English version. Perhaps this is why Semiotext(e), when it published John Kelsey’s translation of it in 2008, sandwiched it in between an introduction by the translator and an afterword by someone named Odile Passot. Neither of these texts is primarily about Bernstein or her book, and so they obviously constitute what might be called “filler,” that is, if this word didn’t connote something soft and harmless. Since these texts

are in fact polemical and pernicious, they must be called (and denounced as) unwanted intrusions.

Kelsey's "Translator's Introduction" is about his own art gallery, Reena Spaulings Fine Art, which is located in the Lower East Side of Manhattan. (The book also includes a picture of his gallery and a reproduction of one of its flyers.) Despite its title, Kelsey's text says nothing about his work as a translator, the difficulties (or ease) of translating *All the King's Horses* into English, the book's publication history, the life of its author, or why a reproduction of a part of André Bertrand's *Le retour de la Colonne Durutti* ("The Return of the Durutti Column") appears at the book's very beginning.

There are some scraps of information on the book's back cover, but this information is incomplete and misleading: the Situationist International (SI) was founded by a group of people, not just by Bernstein "with Guy Debord"; the SI was much more than "the last artistic avant-garde of the century," especially as it matured; and *Libération*, for which Bernstein became a literary critic, was originally the newspaper of the Maoist group "Gauche prolétarienne," not a "left-wing magazine." The text on the back cover doesn't mention that Bernstein was also member of the Lettrist International, which existed between 1952 and 1957, that she resigned from the SI in 1967, or that she didn't take part in the insurrection that nearly overthrew the French State in May-June 1968. This text also doesn't say anything about "The Return of the Durutti Column."

Though the events depicted in *All the King's Horses* take place on or around 22 April 1957 – that is to say, three months *before* the SI was founded (the novel's sequel, *La Nuit*, will make clear that the events in question take place between 1953 and 1957) – Kelsey blithely states that *All the King's Horses* "retold a season among the free-living SI," that it is "a way of opening up another sort of distance toward what was being lived by Bernstein and the SI," that it is a "rewriting" of "the Situationist saga," and that it is "an ironic *détournement* of the SI itself." But Kelsey is wrong: Bernstein's novel is not about the SI as it existed between 1957 and 1960; it is about the moment(s) right before the SI was founded. To use the metaphor put forward by *La Nuit*, Bernstein's pair of novels are about the dawn of the SI: "Gilles explains the importance of the theme of the dawn, which even constituted a fixed form of poetry during this era [the Middle Ages]: this horror of the day is the horror of law; and the heartbreak of the dawn, that of separation." The very last lines of this novel are,

Gilles and Carole head right on the Petit-Pont, speeding up, a little before the break of day. And so they leave the Fifth Arrondissement. It is the night of the 22nd of April, 1957. It is about to end.

As for *All the King's Horses*, it too is not about what has already arrived, but what is about to arrive: "Their arrival [which was] about to change everything." Both novels are attempts to remember the future, to look forward to a future that, in 1960, had already come to pass.

Odile Passot's "Afterword" was not written on the occasion of Kelsey's translation or its publication by Semiotext(e), and it doesn't primarily concern either Michèle Bernstein or her novel(s). Written in 1999, it is about Guy Debord and is titled "Portrait of Guy Debord as a Young Libertine." Because the people at Semiotext(e) who were in charge of this particular project were lazy or incompetent, they did not append a footnote to Passot's statement that – in the wake of Debord's death in 1994 and the 1998 publication of an interview with the former Lettrist Jean-Michel Mension – "No doubt other accounts [of Debord's life] will appear in the near future," even though many such accounts were published in the intervening years. Nor did these lazy or incompetent people edit Passot's essay, which includes a perfectly useless summary of the plot of *All the King's Horses* (a waste of two pages), as well as a plot-summary and long discussion of *La Nuit* (a questionable use of eleven pages).

Unlike Kelsey – who claims that, in *All the King's Horses*, "the names have all been changed, but it is clear that Bernstein, Debord, Asger Jorn and others are being rewritten as flimsy parodies of themselves," that "fiction is a means of putting oneself and one's problems at a distance," and that "we like these distancing effects, and the possibilities of disidentification [*sic*] that flourish as soon as we begin to operate under the sign of fiction" – Passot takes "Geneviève," "Gilles" and "Ole" as simple and straightforward portraits of Michèle Bernstein, Guy Debord and Asger Jorn. She writes,

Gilles is immediately recognizable as Debord. When Carole asks, 'What are you interested in, really?'¹ Gilles answers, 'Reification.' The girl then says, 'Serious work, at a huge desk cluttered with thick books and papers.' 'No,' Gilles replies, 'I walk. Mainly I walk.'

¹ Note well the discordance: in Kelsey's translation, this line is rendered as "What are you working on, exactly?"

In a footnote to this passage, which need not cause the reader to think of Debord and Debord only (Henri Lefebvre might also fit here), Passot says,

This dialogue appears again in André Bertrand's *détourné* comic strip, *Le retour de la colonne Durruti*,² which appeared in 1966. The panel in which this exchange appears has been published in a number of places, including [Greil] Marcus's work.

What Passot should have said was that "The Return of the Durutti Column" was published by a radical student at the University of Strasbourg (not a member of the SI) who wished to publicize the forthcoming publication of a pamphlet titled *On the Poverty of Student Life* (authored by a member of the SI, but financed by funds diverted from the coffers of the student union).

Passot insists that there is an obvious, flat and very close relationship (indeed: an identity) between "Geneviève," "Gilles" and "Ole" and Bernstein, Debord and Jorn. She writes,

Rather than taking the novels as works purely of the imagination, I consider them as 'autofictions.' This term, coined by Serge Doubrovsky, refers to a genre of literature in which the author presents aspects of his [*sic*] real life to the public in distilled and reworked form. Autofiction is neither a diary nor pure fiction, but an intermediate genre, with rules of its own. Michèle Bernstein does not tell all, nor does she call her characters by their real names, but she plants clues that identify them. [...] Our purpose here is [...] to show the *direct relation* between Bernstein's novel and the Situationist sensibility of the time (emphasis added).

Like Kelsey, Passot quotes the following passage, which is spoken by Gilles.

We're all characters in a novel, haven't you noticed? You and I speak in dry little sentences. There's even something unfinished about us. And that's how novels are. They don't give you

² Passot has silently corrected Bertrand's spelling mistake of the name of the famous Spanish anarchist.

everything. It's the rules of the game. And our lives are as predictable as a novel, too.

It is worth including the exchange that follows this statement.

“I don't find you unpredictable,” Carole answered him.

“Maybe I'm unpredictable for you,” said Gilles, “but hardly for the spectator on the outside. We're easy to read, my poor love.”

And how does the “spectator on the outside” “read” Gilles and Geneviève? In the words of a letter written by the character in the novel named Héléne,

They take advantage with their intelligent appearance, in the same way that richer people use money. But is there anything behind the gross contradictions of their lives? Nothing but an ocean of bad taste. I don't blame them for being drunks, which is obviously the case if you think about it. What I despise and regret is their incurable frivolity.

According to Geneviève, “we laughed a lot as we read this.”

No doubt Geneviève and Gilles would *howl with laughter* at what Passot deduces about Debord from this work of “autofiction.” Because Carole is described as boyish looking, because of the “importance of westerns and war movies in his personal mythology,” and because “Debord's emotional and intellectual universe is marked by a fascination for ‘real men,’” Gilles/Debord can be nothing other than a latent homosexual. “We,” Passot says, as if she were speaking for a team of psychoanalysts who had just concluded an intensive study with the patient himself, “recognize a relatively distinct, though latent homosexuality.” Indeed, Passot says, “Debord is obsessed by masculinity; he seeks to pass for a ‘tough guy,’ no matter what the cost, in order to distance himself from any doubt of his own virility.” Note Passot's use of the present tense: for her, Guy Debord is still alive.

The next step in this completely ridiculous personal attack on Debord is obvious: a completely ridiculous attack on the Situationist International, which, of course, can be easily, simply and completely identified with Debord. Once again, note the consistent use of the present tense.

The values of the Situationist movement are steeped in the culture of heroism. At the center of this culture stands the masculine figure as uncontested mediator of all exchanges. [...] We discover that the Situationist practice is in total opposition to the freedom promoted by a character such as Artzybashev's Sanin [...] The Situationist movement avoids any analysis of the psychological dimension of human behavior, whether their own or anyone else's. It would like to overlook the part played by the irrational in any action, preferring to conceive of men [*sic*] as rational beings, capable of controlling themselves, the better to control others.

As if the King-Vampire has died from these stakes being driven into his heart, Passot can then switch from the present into the past tense (and back again) as her essay comes to a close.

The Situationists, above all Debord, were fascinated by the image. If they denounce the spectacle, it is because they are its best spectators, as is evident from the importance of certain films, images, and cultural themes in the work of their chief theoretician. On the other hand, our investigation allows us to grasp the subjective, *untheorized* practices of those who participated in the Situationist adventure.

The funniest/saddest thing about this utter nonsense is its author's ignorance (or refusal to recognize the existence) of the final chapter of Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*, which, as it turns out, concerns mental illnesses such as schizophrenia. Is it not schizophrenic to write an essay that focuses on Guy Debord ("this in no way diminishes the value of Debord's analyses," Passot claims) only to destroy him?

Both Kelsey and Passot miss the obvious, which, I think, is signaled by the quote from Cardinal de Retz that precedes the first part of *All The King's Horses*: "This mixture of blue scarves, ladies, armor, violins in the room and trumpets in the square, offered a spectacle seen more often in novels than elsewhere." Instead of writing spectacular novels (and creating other works of art) that compensated for their impoverished everyday lives, Bernstein, Debord and the other situationists – precisely because their everyday lives were not impoverished, but were enriched to larger-than-life size by the nature and intensity of their involvement in the Situationist International –

created novels and other works of art that diminished and mocked their personae, their images and reputations in the spectacle, their status as “celebrities.”

Bernstein spells this out quite clearly in her “Preface in the Guise of an Autobiography (or Vice Versa),” which was written in April 2013 and precedes *The Night*³ (translated into English by Clodagh Kinsella and published by Book Works).

I would fabricate a ‘fake’ popular novel. Load it with sufficient clues and irony so the moderately observant reader would realize that they were dealing with some kind of joke, the steely gaze of a true literary libertine, a critique of the novel itself.

Note well: not a simple joke, something that should be dismissed as incurably frivolous, even if Bernstein herself (adopting the steely gaze of the poker player) has seemed to dismiss these novels as mere jokes, as essentially meaningless, but taken seriously as “a critique of the novel itself.”

What does Geneviève say after Gilles has claimed, “We’re very easy to read, my poor love”? She says, “On bad days, Gilles is more like a character in a folk song [than a character in an apparently cheesy novel]: ‘The devil made me stray from the one I love.’” Geneviève is alluding to the song sung by the horse-riding pair of troubadours in Marcel Carné’s film *Les visiteurs du soir* (their importance in Bernstein’s novels is what led André Bertrand to place the conversation about reification in the mouths of cowboys), but this allusion might not mean much for Americans who haven’t seen this film or don’t like folk songs. And so it might be replaced with a line from a famous rock ‘n’ roll song: *As heads is tails, just call me Lucifer*. To be properly understood, Bernstein’s novels must be turned upside down.

The Book Works edition of *The Night* does not come with a statement from the translator, though one would seem to be called for by the difficulty of this novel’s language: “The trick was to elongate sentences, to scramble time and place, in short to increase the reader’s work,” Bernstein says in her preface. “To scramble the time frame, one cuts the linear tale into short segments. Little slips of paper to

³ Note the addition of the word “the” to the title.

throw into a hat and shuffle. One advantage being that it also pays homage to Dada.”

But the book’s editor(s), someone or something called Everyone Agrees, have made unwanted intrusions into it: at the beginning of the book, an image appears that shows the route that Gilles and Carole took on the night of 22 April 1957 superimposed upon a Google map; and, at the book’s end, there is an image that appears with the caption, “The route of the London walk, April 22, 2013. The adventure continues in *After the Night*, also published by Book Works.” A note from the publisher explains, “*The Night* by Michèle Bernstein, has been published with *After the Night*, a détournement of *La Nuit* set in present-day London, by Everyone Agrees.” A stupid title, one that perhaps betrays a desire to remain in the darkness: after the night comes *the dawn*.

Of course, maps play no role whatsoever in either *All the King’s Horses* or *The Night*. As I have already mentioned, these novels are about leaving the night behind and entering into the dawn of a new day. (One only makes a map of places one wishes to return to, not leave behind once and for all.) That is why the novels’ dominant metaphor, if it is indeed a metaphor, is the labyrinth. “I’d like to be in a labyrinth with you,” Carole says to Gilles, who responds, “But we are.” Unlike maps, which are used to avoid getting lost, labyrinths are places in which getting lost is the whole point.

Perhaps inevitably, the best parts of *The Night* are those in which the reader can’t help but get lost; those impenetrable passages into which the reader cannot “get.” I count two of them. (Perhaps one for Gilles and one for Carole? Maybe there are two because they are a couple.)

In the wilderness of the Rue Daubenton, where one encounters no saloon, Gilles follows his route, towards what memories, towards what exchanges, like the cowboy who found his love, after so many years, unbeknownst to everyone else. ‘Are you an unknown woman?’⁴ He asked her. They didn’t understand. And then what words? Since the fire is out. No saloon, certainly, but Carole, who walks at his side, firm and resolute. It’s Carole

⁴ This is definitely a mistake by the translator. In the movie titled *Johnny Guitar*, which is the reference here, the question is, “Are you a strange woman?”

now, we're wandering in the night. It's Carole now exactly as it was, or almost exactly, for others, one other. The devil is taking us far from our lovely friends. Nothing to drink, sadly, but this night near her. But all the fearful games of time. *Et votre teint sentait encore son enfance.*⁵ Here again, we're making our way in the night. Nothing to drink, obviously, it's regrettable, but Carole is here, everything is still possible. In the midst of youth, in the midst of the Rue Daubenton: look, here it ends.

The Rue des Fossés-Saint-Bernard, we're not going on the Crusade, Gilles and Carole together always. The Rue des Fossés-Saint-Bernard where all secrets are shared. All is permitted, all is gathered in the Rue des Fossés-Saint-Bernard (Bernard, Bernard, this green youth won't always last).⁶ In the Rue des Fossés-Saint-Bernard, where dawn no longer threatens (like a false friend amidst our ventures).

The overlapping – indeed, the overlapping of the overlapping – is striking. In both passages, there is a single street, in or on which a pair of images and a line of poetry from the past are superimposed upon the Paris of the present. In the first passage, the cowboy in *Johnny Guitar* and the troubadours in *Les visiteurs du soir*; and, in the second, the Crusades and the heresy that “nothing is true, everything is permitted.” The mood is elegiac but hopeful; it is time to move on; the night is ending and dawn is beginning to break. “Shall we go?” Gilles asks at the very end of *All the King's Horses*. “I think we're late.”

NOT BORED!

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⁵ “And your complexion was still young.” A line of poetry by Pierre de Ronsard (1524-1585).

⁶ A line by the orator and theologian Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet (1627-1704).