



Twin cities

Avant-gardism is in short supply these days, not least in the literary domain, where nothing is shocking any more and soporific storytelling has vanquished the taste for the back-to-front and inside-out. It was with pleasure, therefore, that we encountered *The Night / After the Night*, two slim volumes published as one by Book Works of East London. *The Night* is a translation of *La Nuit* by the Situationist author Michèle Bernstein, wife of Guy Debord, the movement's principal. First published in 1961, it is a Parisian perambulation, set in and around the Latin Quarter, with tints and highlights superimposed from the *nouveau roman*, *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, and the lives of the author and her husband. Here is the opening sentence:

At the corner of the Boulevard Saint-Germain and the Boulevard Saint-Michel lies a metro entrance, long since defunct, and bordered by the railings of a private garden.

The twin volume, *After the Night*, comes with photographs and transcriptions of email exchanges. It is set in London, in the present. The opening lines run as follows:

At the corner of Shepperton Road and Southgate Road lies the Rosemary Branch Theatre. Its scrawled chalkboard, black and white façade and pastel illustration of a hot air balloon look familiar.

In *The Night*, Carole and Gilles are the young couple based – so a new preface by the author tells us – on Bernstein and Debord. In *After the Night*, Francis and Savannah double for the Situationist first couple. The tense in both

is a never-never future: “Carole will be the first to jump out of the car and run into the garden”, says *The Night*. “Francis will board a brutally early flight from Heathrow to Marseilles”, predicts *After the Night*. The desire to leap back and forth between the original and its upstart English doppelgänger becomes compulsive. Francis is translating a French novel into English. “Michèle is happy with your translation”, Savannah tells him. The novel in question is *La Nuit*, and Michèle its author. The jacket of *After the Night* folds out to become a Google map for psychogeographers; the cover of *The Night* is modelled on the classic French “collection blanche”.

And so the game goes on, with in-jokes and fashionable references. “Did you see that piece in the *London Review of Books* or somewhere about cabbies’ shelters?”, Francis asks. Savannah sets him right. “It was in the *New York Times*.” The two-book “bundle” costs £15 from Book Works.

No one could be further removed from Bernstein/Debord than Barbara Pym, born 100 years ago this month. She was mildly successful in the 1950s, rejected and neglected in the 1960s, then revived and celebrated in the late 1970s. When Pym died in 1980, several manuscripts had been unearthed from the desk drawer to await publication. Four novels appeared posthumously over the next few years, including *A Few Green Leaves* and *An Unsuitable Attachment*.

Credit for Pym’s revival goes to Philip Larkin and David Cecil, and indirectly to the *TLS*. The issue of January 21, 1977, contained a feature, “Reputations revisited”, in which literary types nominated an “underrated” writer; and, if they wished, an overrated one, too. Larkin chose as underrated “the six novels of Barbara Pym published between 1950 and 1961 which give an unrivalled picture of a small section of middle-class post-war England. She has a unique ear for the small poignancies and comedies of everyday life”. (His overrated choice was D. H. Lawrence.) David Cecil regarded Pym’s novels as “the finest examples of high comedy to have appeared in England during the past seventy-five years”.

Pym lived just long enough to enjoy her change of fortune. Macmillan brought out *Quartet in Autumn* nine months after the survey, whereupon it was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. Another novel followed in 1978.

Underrated books in the same feature included *The Passionate Friends* by H. G. Wells, the choice of Vladimir Nabokov, and the Bible, nominated by Bob Dylan in his one and only contribution to the *TLS*. Among the authors charged with being overrated were André Gide (selected by Anthony Burgess), George Orwell (J. K. Galbraith) and Tolstoy (Rebecca West). Did we say that Dylan made only one contribution to the *TLS*? In fact, he also chose an overrated book: the Bible.

The above advertisement for porridge first appeared in 1899, and similar images have broadcast the advantages of the breakfast oats ever since. Nowadays, the mini-kilted piper is replaced by a muscle-bound shot-putter; floppy bow and plaid are discarded to reveal a manly semmet (get your Scots dictionary out). The image comes from *The Breakfast Book* by Andrew Dalby (Reaction, £19.95). In case all that brain and brawn should prove too tempting, Mr Dalby inserts



a cautionary follow-up from *Jane Eyre*:

On two long tables smoked basins of something hot, which, however, to my dismay, sent forth an odour far from inviting . . .

“Disgusting! The porridge is burnt again!”

I devoured a spoonful or two of my portion without thinking of its taste; but the first edge of hunger blunted, I perceived I had got in hand a nauseous mess; burnt porridge is almost as bad as rotten potatoes.

You could always try sugar instead of salt.

On June 21, Christie’s, New York, will offer for auction a letter from Edgar Allan Poe to James Russell Lowell, on the subject of Poe’s story “The Tell-Tale Heart”. The letter itself bears witness to a tale likely to be familiar to aspirant scribes. In November 1842, Lowell was in the process of setting up a new periodical, the *Pioneer*, and had asked Poe for a contribution of the suspenseful sort. Poe was also being sought by the *Boston Miscellany*, and in the newly discovered one-page letter admits to Lowell that he answered their invitation by sending “a brief tale, of the class you especially mention”. He had yet to hear back from them:

As my letter requested an immediate reply, and I have received none, I am at a loss what to think. The tale in question is entitled the “Tell-Tale Heart”. Might I beg of you the favor to call upon the editor of the “Miscellany” and ascertain his determination? If he decline the article, I should be glad to see it in your first number.

The *Miscellany*’s editor, Henry Tuckerman, took another month to reject “The Tell-Tale Heart”, asking the author to submit “more quiet articles” instead. The story went to Lowell and appeared in the first issue of the *Pioneer* in 1843. The letter, “4to, tipped at four corners to another sheet”, is estimated to sell for \$40,000–60,000. More details of the sale of Fine Printed Books and Manuscripts may be found on the Christie’s website.

J. C.

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