

DOMINIQUE NOGUEZ

IN PRAISE OF FRANÇOIS-MARIE BANIER

I don't know François-Marie Banier. Not personally, I mean. I know him impersonally, indirectly, via the press: how could it not be so? He's had so many bad things said about him lately! His photo is exhibited at every opportunity, even on TV, like some negative amulet or a doll to stick pins in. It's a kind of permanent pillory. Farewell to personal image rights and privacy, farewell almost to human rights! I find this very troubling - even a little disgraceful. That's why I've decided to say some nice things about François-Marie Banier. It's not hard to do.

I don't know him, but I've seen him in the flesh at least three times. The last time was at Eric Rohmer's funeral in January 2010. I was sitting about two rows from the front in the church of Saint Etienne du Mont, behind Rohmer's family and close friends. I talked to Gabriel Matzneff and François Weyergans, and then we stopped talking because the service was starting. At that precise moment two tall, elegant men in black wearing sunglasses arrived and sat down at the front, level with Arielle Dombasle. They could have been Don Giovanni and Leporello in a production by Peter Sellars. I only recognized them on the way out, in the daylight in front of the church: it was Pascal Greggory and François-Marie Banier.

Two years earlier, in 2008, I'd seen Banier in the corridor on the first floor of the Gallimard publishing house, where Antoine Gallimard's office is: the Holy of Holies. He looked perfectly at ease there; he was wearing a pullover, if memory serves. He'd just published a novel that I later found in a pile of books I'd received and not had time to read: *Jimmy Dasolo*, an unsigned copy. I've now read it and it's a fine book, a cross between *Le Grand Meaulnes* and *The Great Gatsby*.

I saw Claire Chazal blush

But the first time I saw him must have been some time in the early seventies. People had just started to talk about this young, handsome man who was a protégé of Aragon. And one day I saw them, Aragon and Banier, crossing the Place Saint-Germain-des-Prés together. One of them - I forget who - was wearing a cape. So the rumours were true: Aragon had switched over, or switched back. Farewell Elsa, hello youth! People now say, based, it appears, on denials by the only surviving member of the duo, that there was nothing really physical about their relationship, that the young man was more into chatting than caressing, more into teasing than actual lovemaking, like Radiguet with Cocteau or Marc Allegre with Gide, but how can we ever know (indeed, how can we really know in the latter two cases)?

No matter, this magnificent liaison between the white-haired old apparatchik and his young faun would not last forever. Years later, I saw Aragon in a restaurant with another young man, a dark-skinned Lebanese who was interested in experimental cinema. And I heard no more of Banier, although for a long time, in an

antique shop window on the corner of the Rue Jacob and the Rue Bonaparte (since taken over Ladurée the macaroon-maker), I saw photos of mainly literary personalities (Beckett? Sagan? I don't remember), which were not bad at all and which were by Banier.

And then, three, maybe four years ago, I saw François-Marie Banier interviewed by Claire Chazal on cable TV. My first thought was that the attractive young man from the seventies had remained handsome, like some Dorian Gray who had only half failed to achieve his goal: the same attentive eyes, the same symmetrical face, the same half-serious, half-winsome smile; but his hair was less flamboyant, and most of all he had a lot of wrinkles— curiously, however, they didn't make him look old, they seemed somehow ornamental rather than making him look decrepit. Like the wrinkles Duras describes at the beginning of *L'Amant* as 'lacerating' the face without making it 'collapse', these were the kind of wrinkles that even preserve a form of beauty. As he talked to Chazal, however, it wasn't so much his face that was striking, it was his remarkable aplomb. In his slightly nasal voice, in complete control of what he was saying, with no slips, no hesitations, and not a word out of place, he moved inexorably on, pursuing a sometimes quite daunting sequence of ideas. It was a formidable trap: perhaps something like the way the Serpent spoke to Eve at the dawn of the world. Chazal was overcome. She was hardly able to ask questions; at one point she lost the ability entirely. He propositioned her, suggesting they meet after the show, shamelessly hitting on her in front of the cameras. She was speechless, but her skin spoke on her behalf: she started to blush. I saw Claire Chazal blush in front of Banier! Claire Chazal, with her long-standing experience of working in front of cameras. Was she seduced? I don't know. Worse than seduced, she was knocked for six.

I felt thrilled as I watched and listened: I was clearly witnessing a *tour de force*, something I was, of course, incapable of myself, something very few people are capable of. I found myself experiencing the kind of admiration I sometimes feel, either watching TV or in real life, when I see someone who really knows how to talk, or even better, *who knows how to make people listen*, which is not quite the same thing. Someone who must be like Jesus, Don Juan, Talleyrand, Jaurès, Landru, Guitry or Gurdjieff. Someone for whom speech isn't just sound and words, even well chosen ones, but a probing tentacle, a wreath of flowers, an irresistible gust of wind, a caress. Someone whose words are actions, who makes you see that what they are saying is *already* taking place.

I understood how, thirty years earlier, Aragon and many others had been wrapped up, overwhelmed, and swept away by the power of these words.

And of course— let us focus for a while on his unique expertise, a process as inexorable and mysterious as the transformation of a chrysalis into a butterfly or that of a fly caught in a spider's banqueting web—, there was not only sugar and sweetness in his words. There was some bullying and jostling too: the whole human gamut. Put another way, he pushed his words to *every* limit, be it pleasant or unpleasant, and this is a very rare thing in society.

A sad billionaire's daughter

This is why—I'm getting ahead of myself here — when the Bettencourt scandal was raging we heard all sorts of bitter, chewed-over things from all kinds of people. That he'd bullied such and such a protectress, fortunately verbally rather than physically, and that this man who could, apparently, dash off a madrigal or proffer a bouquet of roses like no other, sometimes used barrack-room vocabulary. He asked

Lili Brick, Maiakovski's former partner whom he met at Aragon's place: 'So, did Vladimir have a big one?'¹; and he came close to shocking Pierre Bergé one evening by looking at a restaurant waiter and asking in a loud voice 'Do you think he gives good blowjobs?'² When I heard all this, and when I found out that he would, on occasion, urinate in Mme Bettencourt's hydrangeas, it neither surprised nor shocked me. You can't embody the scandal that is a *natural* individual, i.e. someone who has scratched his own social skin until it bleeds, without scandalising others.

So that's the man who resurfaced in the venomous media limelight in December 2007. At the root of the scandal was a sad billionaire's daughter who, not satisfied with pocketing 95 % of her mother's fortune, took umbrage when the latter dared to use the freedom that was hers of right and decided to give the remaining 5 % to whomsoever she pleased. And it so happened that 'whomsoever she pleased' was François-Marie Banier. Banier and Liliane Bettencourt had been acquainted since the late 60s; they met for the first time as guests of the Lazareffs. Banier immediately found her 'sublime' and called her 'a second Ava Gardner'³. In 1987, he photographed her for the excellent (it published Bernard Frank) and very snobbish magazine *L'Egoïste*. That was when they started to become very close, and this is an important point: at the outset, it should be noted, there was no seduction, no cheeky pick-up line, no insidious manoeuvring. Instead there was a commission from the magazine's chief editor Nicole Wisniak, and a professional relationship between a photographer and his model. Yes, but then what? Then we have the whole Banier scandal. Did he attack her? Burgle her house? Rape her? Kill her? No, he did none of these things. What he did was much worse: something that scandalises right-thinking people in these dark times more than anything else: he made her fond of him (And apparently, it was reciprocal: as he elegantly said in an interview with *L'Express*, 'Our relationship is one of sensibility - our ages disappear when we talk').

Julien Sorel, Lucien de Rubempré, Frédéric Moreau

He knows what money is and what it does. He has probably always thought about it: this comes out in his novels (for example in *La Tête la première*, the narrator says 'Soon I will have no more money and instead of looking at the sky and the people I'll have to sort myself out. And the awful thing is, I will do so very successfully'⁴. And a character who resembles him in *Le Passe composé*, written forty years ago, says 'One day, he'll have a big park of his own. The people in the street don't know this. They don't know that one day this boy walking along with a record in his hand will have a big house with a big park. They don't know he'll be rich. People will say, "See him? That's François de Chevigny. That's a gentleman with money."⁵)

This is not a problem for me as a socialist: no more of a problem than the great social climbers in French novels, even if they never really get what they want: Julien Sorel, Lucien de Rubempré, Frédéric Moreau. It's all right to be rich, as long as you pay your taxes. It's reminiscent of Alain (the philosopher) writing in praise of

¹ See Patrice Lestrohan, *Le Dernier Aragon*, Paris, Riveneuve, 2010, p 60

² Pierre Berge *Les jours s'en vont je demeure* Gallimard 2003, p 89

³ François-Marie Banier interviewed by Christophe Barbier and Jean Marie Pontaut, *L'Express*, 13 July 2010

⁴ François-Marie Banier, *La Tête la première*, Grasset 1972/ «Folio» Gallimard, 1995

⁵ François-Marie Banier, *Le Passe composé*, Grasset, 1971

ambitious people who *make the effort*, who obtain a great deal through work or thanks to their talent. It's possible to be left-wing and still like people.

Some will scoff: Banier? What work? What talent? The answer is: And what about the daughter (the plaintiff)? What work? What talent? As Beaumarchais' Figaro imagines saying to Count Almaviva, 'What have you done to deserve such a fortune? You went to the trouble of being born, nothing more. Otherwise, you are a rather ordinary man: while I, zounds! Lost in the dark crowd, I had to use more skill and planning just to survive than have been put into governing all of Spain for the last hundred years.'⁶

Our two favourite Marguerites

So what is Banier's 'Spain'? It can be whatever you please, depending on the impression you have of him: generally, if you're really honest, without knowing the facts. A gigolo? A *cicisbeo*? A conversationalist? A writer? A photographer? Let's start with the gigolo – it's the one people find the most annoying. I say that if one is able to do such a job, all well and good – as long as it's done of one's own free will and not in servitude. It's not always pleasant, and it can be tiring, like any job. It's actually a fine job – perhaps the finest of all (except President of the Republic or Abbé Pierre). You give your body, but you keep your head. You can think about something else while you work (a novel you finished when you were a child, or the things you need to take to the dry cleaners). If I'd been as good-looking as Banier, I'd have been happy to donate my body to Art and Letters as others give theirs to science: to Aragon, Sagan, Dali, Sarraute, or even to Liliane Bettencourt, apparently a woman of figures rather than letters. (On the subject of Banier's looks, a female artist friend he knew well around 1968 told me that despite his adorable face his body wasn't so attractive: her gestures told me that she meant his shoulders were too narrow and his legs not slender enough. This opinion naturally struck me as very subjective).

Having said all this, it is no doubt accurate to cast François-Marie as a *cicisbeo* (i.e. a lady's escort a gigolo who doesn't have sex, which is a possible definition of friendship, and even, in some cases, love). Old lady writers — for example our two favourite Marguerites, Yourcenar and Duras — loved having this kind of 'final companion', despite the suffering it might entail. And despite the suffering, rich old ladies are fond of them too. Except that they can afford the very best: in other words, Banier. Yes, the very best: the extent of his cultural knowledge, his taste in art and interior decoration, his consummate ease in society circles (night clubs, society parties, travel), the confident way he approaches top people, his sense of anecdote, his gift of the gab, his stinging retorts, his exquisite attentions, even his bitchiness and brusquerie clearly made him a first-rate *amuseur* and a conversationalist worthy of Valéry and de Chazot rolled into one. He was the delicious, slightly unpredictable companion all bored rich people would love to have around. In addition, he could be a dandy and a prankster: he is our Alcibiades. Having all this to hand — an adviser, a jester, a confidant, a beau and an artist — in a single person is inestimable. It's easy to see why he doesn't come cheap. But after all, he's no more expensive than a footballer, a trader or a TV anchorman.

'Taking advantage' and the double standard

⁶ Beaumarchais *Le Mariage de Figaro*, Act V, Scene 3, Figaro's monologue

Goaded by the media, people hated two things most of all. The first was the amount of money involved. By adding together the paintings and the knick-knacks and the life insurance policies with l'Oreal, they came up with the (probably significantly rounded) figure of one billion euros, which quickly became legendary. France, a country where equality counts for so much but exists so little, is also the land of envy. So people started to envy Banier his famous billion. But they forgot one thing: Banier is a novelist and photographer — highly skilled, not only as a portraitist — and most of this money took the form of artistic patronage (people said it was a lot for one man, and that state patronage distributes largesse more evenly; true enough, but as long as large fortunes have not been drastically diminished by taxes, which would only be right, this kind of munificence will remain perfectly above board).

The second point is that, helped by the satirical TV puppets *Les Guignols de l'Info*, the good people of France have been made to swallow Bettencourt's daughter's obsession with *abus de faiblesse* (the idea that Banier took advantage of her mother's failing mental health). This is a classic trope: they tried to do the same with Aragon. One is struck by the double standard when people talk about this so-called 'advantage-taking': when Bettencourt gives money to her daughter or to Mr Woerth, she is in full possession of her faculties; when she gives to Banier, suddenly she is non compos mentis. After 6 December 2010, when the scandal was over, the fable continued: 'Though depicted for months as being senile, Liliane Bettencourt in fact orchestrated the reconciliation from beginning to end', revealed Laurent Valdiguie in *Le Journal du Dimanche*⁷. 'At the same time, she even made a generous contribution to her daughter's finances.'"

So everything returned to normal: the girl got the loot and the novelist-photographer lost most of his presents but gained a magnificent subject for a novel – or better still, for his Memoirs.

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⁷ Laurent Valdiguie, 'Affaires Bettencourt: les dessous d'un arrangement', *Le Journal du Dimanche*, 12 December 2010

(Translation by Martyn Back)