

Lettres Françaises
2 June 1971

A Stranger Called Banier By Aragon

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At the beginning of this year, when Edmonde Charles-Roux brought François-Marie Banier to dinner at my home, I did not recognise the young knight, who took some time to reveal who he was, apologising for the shyness that had prevented him from taking us up on our offer. The time has come when, for more or less everybody, François-Marie is becoming better known, and the conversation we had with him focused on two books of his, last year's *Les Résidences secondaires* and the recent *Le Passé composé*, which have been variously received and have sparked not inconsiderable jealousy, so that one wishes, or at least I wish, to respond to the envious and clumsy individuals who endeavour to fence this newcomer in with a circle of legends and preconceived ideas, without having physically met this extraordinary character who belongs to that rare and troubling breed that bears the mark of the future upon its brow.

It is not that no justice is done to this erstwhile stranger, but – already – perhaps perceiving the singular nature of who he is and what he writes, people feel the need to *classify* him, doubtless in order to render him less dangerous (a danger that is hard to comprehend) and to immediately place him in an already well known category of literary successes, and I would like to share with you here how irritated I am by a certain way people have of receiving the author of *Le Passé composé* as someone who will soon find his niche, while writers twenty years his senior are still trying to decide which side of their mouths they should be smiling from in order to ensure the success of their books. Nevertheless – even if here and there they fall into the trap of contagious cliché – one must be grateful to André Billy for *Les Résidences* and Kléber Haedens for *Le Passé*, for encouraging the stranger called Banier as he took his first steps. Even if my pleasure in reading the books has been quite different from theirs. And even if one must beware of judging books by their appearance and their air of youthfulness (which one can all too easily criticize someone for when it is something one lost a long time ago), the essential thing is doubtless to avoid classifying a writer who is young today alongside another who was young once. The thing is to read him, or to encourage others to do so. And I would do that in reverse, starting with the second book and continuing with the first. Or more exactly beginning with *Le Passé* and continuing with *Les Résidences*, first rejecting the pitying look of those benevolent apostles who are always ready to kill your second child in honour of the first. Which means I must clearly state my position here, which is that I have a preference for *Le Passé composé*. Although some find the second book *a little on the short side*, a criticism that goes hand in hand with that of reminding us of someone else's work.

It is the done thing, because the author is twenty-three years old, to compare him to others, and to come up with a portrait of him designed to show that we have not been taken in. Having known Radiguet well when he started out, I regret to have to tell these critics that Banier only resembles him inasmuch as he is his exactly opposite antithesis. He is the craziest, most generous, funniest person one could hope to meet; he has a fiery, chaotic gift for conversation; and he tells stories like no other. If he writes as he speaks, he will one day become the cruellest and keenest chronicler of his age. Radiguet was a brooding, bitter young man who learned his writing style like an earnest schoolboy and looked for masters, from Mme de Sévigné to Mme de La Fayette. One day we will see that if François-Marie resembles anyone, it will be Benjamin Constant and Stendhal.

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And there are, in the Paris literary world, many people, or (perhaps I am exaggerating) some people, who prefer Banier’s first book *Les Résidences secondaires* to *Le Passé composé* (as I wrote this down in rough, my hand, indiscreet as always, at first escaped me, mistakenly writing *Résidences composées*, which betrays how *profoundly* certain I am of being in the presence of a real novelist, and not, as is so often the case with beginners, someone who, having nothing to say, tells us his life story before he has started living it). These *Résidences* that so enchanted André Billy, who is less a novelist than a writer (remember... Apollinaire : *Where are Carco Billy Dalize – Whose names make me feel quite melancholy – Like footsteps in a church...*), we may have liked these *Résidences* for what they have on the surface, this modern life of *weekends* that has not yet been described and which one enjoys because of its setting more than its characters, a crowd in which one assuredly loses oneself with a degree of pleasure, and by ‘loses oneself’ I mean loses one’s critical sense, one’s sense of depth, if I am not overusing this term which expresses *the other dimension* of things written line by line, and perhaps one enjoys the setting and the protagonists more than one sees their human heart. Because I would not want praise for *Le Passé* to make people think that I am neglecting its singular predecessor, its own ‘past’. Remembering the subtitle to *Les Résidences secondaires* (which is all too seldom noticed, in my view), namely *La vie distraite* (‘a life of distraction’) I would like to see in it a singular connection between these two ‘first’ novels by François-Marie Banier. The crowd in *La Vie distraite* is in Thierry Dorival’s ‘composed past’: and people have all too often ignored what seems to me to be the main thing in this book, the main thing? or perhaps I should say the essential thing? anyway the thing that has the most repercussions, a true image of youth one finds in the friendship between Thierry Dorival and André Mortimer, described with a delicacy of style and tone for which I am at pains to find an equivalent anywhere save in the works of the great 19th century writers... I hesitate to say who I mean: let’s say Turgenev! But in fact, I am not talking about the *Résidences* here: I want to focus on the *Passé composé*.

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François wanted to lose himself with Cécile among the gypsies. Olivier liked fairs. It's true, fairs are beautiful things. The big wheel, the ghost train, the bumper cars, the candy floss, the water-drinking dwarves, the giant goldfish, the strongmen, the rides and the music.

Suddenly, François said to Cécile:

– I can just see Olivier here. I can imagine what he would look like, how he would walk around. I can hear his voice.

Cécile, how I love you. Cécile, why are you laughing?

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'It's a dying profession, swinging people', says the man to François. François takes the phrase with him. 'It's a dying profession'. François meets Cécile at the bottom, but what if it is Oli-

vier? Olivier in Cécile's place. Olivier swinging here, Olivier allowing himself to be swung to and fro by this man he doesn't know, by this man whose profession is dying ... François imagines. But has he not been thinking about Olivier since he's known her? Cécile or Olivier? The man pushes François harder, François goes higher, faster. Cécile or Olivier? Cécile, Olivier. François feels giddy. He asks the man to push him even harder. Cécile cries: 'Careful! You'll go all the way round'. Cécile or Olivier?

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I don't know if anyone who has not yet read the book in its entirety will understand or misunderstand me. Too bad. For me, these three pages have an incomparable flavour. That of a liqueur that is no longer made, and which I seem to remember having hardly tasted in my childhood, in the summertime, somewhere in a landscape of mountains and trees, with my mother saying: 'Just a drop, no more, at your age!' Well, we remain children forever. These days the doctor forbids me everything, spirits, wine, coffee, tea... without saying whether he would let me have just a drop.

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Or Rimbaud:

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It hasn't. And yet these verses are like swings to me... There are few to be seen in today's literature: *it's a dying profession...* Like turmoil.

And at that point the door opens, and the stranger called Banier comes in, touches everything, a book, some scissors, a photo of Elsa, and then says he's impatient that I should write something, and starts laughing, and reeling off a story, how for example Régine talks about her relationship with André Malraux, and I lose my concentration, so how do you expect me to carry on with this article ?³

Aragon.

(Translation by Martyn Back)

³ I should however say a word about something that is commonly written about *Le Passé composé*: several critics have found the end of the book indecisive, insufficiently apt, indeed too weak for them to take the bait. This is entirely subjective. In any case, I don't agree. Because the ringing gong of madness, the kind of madness that is shut away in institutions, proves that we must not believe a word of Olivier's biography, of Cécile's invention, vainly, with the cunning of the mad, supported by the diary she says her brother kept as a child, and letters, a letter of farewell that Cécile says she tore up and which no one else has seen or read, everything that might support her claim and confirm to François (half of the author, from which the sky of the last name is missing) Cécile's invention, the lie that inhabits her. I feel, on the contrary, that the end of the book is very apt indeed. Only François Nourissier seems to feel the same way. Bravo to him. – A.

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Lettres Françaises
2 June 1971

A Stranger Called Banier By Aragon

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It is not that no justice is done to this erstwhile stranger, but – already – perhaps perceiving the singular nature of who he is and what he writes, people feel the need to *classify* him, doubtless in order to render him less dangerous (a danger that is hard to comprehend) and to immediately place him in an already well known category of literary successes, and I would like to share with you here how irritated I am by a certain way people have of receiving the author of *Le Passé composé* as someone who will soon find his niche, while writers twenty years his senior are still trying to decide which side of their mouths they should be smiling from in order to ensure the success of their books. Nevertheless – even if here and there they fall into the trap of contagious cliché – one must be grateful to André Billy for *Les Résidences* and Kléber Haedens for *Le Passé*, for encouraging the stranger called Banier as he took his first steps. Even if my pleasure in reading the books has been quite different from theirs. And even if one must beware of judging books by their appearance and their air of youthfulness (which one can all too easily criticize someone for when it is something one lost a long time ago), the essential thing is doubtless to avoid classifying a writer who is young today alongside another who was young once. The thing is to read him, or to encourage others to do so. And I would do that in reverse, starting with the second book and continuing with the first. Or more exactly beginning with *Le Passé* and continuing with *Les Résidences*, first rejecting the pitying look of those benevolent apostles who are always ready to kill your second child in honour of the first. Which means I must clearly state my position here, which is that I have a preference for *Le Passé composé*. Although some find the second book *a little on the short side*, a criticism that goes hand in hand with that of reminding us of someone else's work.

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Cécile, how I love you. Cécile, why are you laughing?

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Or Rimbaud:

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People will say that's got nothing to do with it.

It hasn't. And yet these verses are like swings to me... There are few to be seen in today's literature: *it's a dying profession...* Like turmoil.

And at that point the door opens, and the stranger called Banier comes in, touches everything, a book, some scissors, a photo of Elsa, and then says he's impatient that I should write something, and starts laughing, and reeling off a story, how for example Régine talks about her relationship with André Malraux, and I lose my concentration, so how do you expect me to carry on with this article ?³

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Lettres Françaises
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Cécile, how I love you. Cécile, why are you laughing?

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Or Rimbaud:

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The mirrors have kept your shadow, Aloïda...

² Henry

Or Rimbaud:

What might I drink from this young Oise

Voiceless abalones, flowerless lawns, cloudy skies...

People will say that's got nothing to do with it.

It hasn't. And yet these verses are like swings to me... There are few to be seen in today's literature: *it's a dying profession...* Like turmoil.

And at that point the door opens, and the stranger called Banier comes in, touches everything, a book, some scissors, a photo of Elsa, and then says he's impatient that I should write something, and starts laughing, and reeling off a story, how for example Régine talks about her relationship with André Malraux, and I lose my concentration, so how do you expect me to carry on with this article ?³

Aragon.

(Translation by Martyn Back)

³ I should however say a word about something that is commonly written about *Le Passé composé*: several critics have found the end of the book indecisive, insufficiently apt, indeed too weak for them to take the bait. This is entirely subjective. In any case, I don't agree. Because the ringing gong of madness, the kind of madness that is shut away in institutions, proves that we must not believe a word of Olivier's biography, of Cécile's invention, vainly, with the cunning of the mad, supported by the diary she says her brother kept as a child, and letters, a letter of farewell that Cécile says she tore up and which no one else has seen or read, everything that might support her claim and confirm to François (half of the author, from which the sky of the last name is missing) Cécile's invention, the lie that inhabits her. I feel, on the contrary, that the end of the book is very apt indeed. Only François Nourissier seems to feel the same way. Bravo to him. – A.