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Warren Motte

AUTHOR'S NOTE

ADDENDUM

I would like to offer an apology for the naivete I displayed in the introduction of this piece, as I projected when Donald Trump would clear the hurdle of twenty thousand lies. With the benefit of hindsight (I write this in March of 2021), it is clear that I grossly underestimated our former Chief Executive's mendacity as he sprinted to the finish line of his presidency. On January 24, 2021 the *Washington Post* reported that during his four years in office, Trump emitted 30,753 lies¹. He was in office for 1512 days. That provides a rate of 20.339285714285714 lies per day, far greater than the rate he was sustaining in June of 2020. As the *Washington Post* remarks, "What is especially striking is how the tsunami of untruths kept rising the longer he served as president and became increasingly unmoored from the truth". The hyperbole of the word *tsunami* will be easily forgiven, I think, by anyone who actually had to live through those awful days, laboring to distinguish between truth and untruth. Let us in any case recognize that Trump's record of lying is an impressive achievement, by any standard. But of course things came to an end for him, as all things must. *Sic transit gloria mundi*, as they might have said in Ancient Rome, at the end of another empire.

- ¹ As I write this, in mid-June of 2020, my fellow citizens and I are about to celebrate a significant milestone in our democracy's history. A couple of weeks ago, the *Washington Post* reported that according to Fact Checker's database, as of May 29, President Donald Trump had made 19,128 "false or misleading claims" in the 1,226 days since assuming office on January 20, 2017². A quick and reasonably simple calculation suggests that our chief of state has averaged 15.601957585644372 "false or misleading claims" (let us call them "damned lies" by virtue of the eminence of the individual who uttered them) per day, carried out to the fifteenth decimal point (which is all that my calculator will give me). If Mr. Trump continues to lie at his current heady pace³—and

why might we expect anything else?—it is legitimate to assume that he will tell his twenty thousandth lie on or before July 24, 2020. O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay! I don't know quite how we shall celebrate that event, but it would be regrettable to let it pass unremarked. For if nothing else, it suggests how fundamental lying has become to the national discourse of my country in recent years, to such a degree in fact that one feels a bit belated and uncool when one proposes merely to tell the truth. Obviously, that problem becomes thornier still if one wishes to say something truthful about the act of lying itself. However, it is well to remember that the paradox of the Cretan liar bedevils our brains only if we imagine that a Cretan pronounces it; in the contrary case it collapses, emptied of its sting.

- 2 Bearing those considerations in mind, and having for the moment put damned lies and statistics behind us (though we may have occasion to return to statistics, come to think of it), I would like to offer a few observations about lies in the work of Emmanuèle Bernheim. Not everyone will be familiar with Bernheim, who lived a relatively short life⁴, and left an oeuvre consisting of five novels and a memoir⁵. In Jérôme Garcin's *Dictionnaire des écrivains contemporains de langue française par eux-mêmes*, Bernheim proffered a characteristically understated account of her writerly career: "Elle écrit court"⁶. Indeed, each of her novels is in some sense an exercise in minimalism, each of them wagers insistently upon economy of expression, working out its small dramas in spaces that are noticeably confined. Among those novels, and granted my present purposes, *Sa femme* and *Stallone* interest me most particularly, for in both of them Emmanuèle Bernheim puts lies into play in crucial ways.
- 3 It is undoubtedly true – if only trivially so – that all novelists are liars, for untruth is after all their stock-in-trade. Their readers (that is to say, you and me) consume those untruths bulimically, and come back for more. Those readers are typically well aware that statements made in fiction do not have direct and immediate truth value in the phenomenal world. Antoine Roquentin will not be arrested for having failed to pay his taxes; one will search the cemetery in Yonville for Emma Bovary's grave in vain (assuming one can find Yonville); Molloy's chainless bicycle will never be seen climbing the Tourmalet during the Tour de France; the black Lancia of the French Embassy in Calcutta will never cut you off in traffic. Those readers furthermore put their real-world judgments in temporary abeyance, willingly suspending their disbelief, as Coleridge so famously put it, in order to heighten their readerly experience. Let us take all of that as read, because Emmanuèle Bernheim is engaged in something a bit different in *Sa femme* and *Stallone*, something a bit beyond the baseline purveyal of untruth common to all novelists. On the one hand, she enlists lying in the service of plot development in decisive manners; on the other hand, she uses lies to draw our attention to certain aspects of literature and its uses that she deems to be paramount.
- 4 Both novels put on stage young women who are (or who become) medical doctors, and both of those women are deeply committed to lying, if in rather different ways. "Claire" is the heroine of *Sa femme*. Her name is chock-full of cratylic value, signifying both in a straightforward manner and in manners more ironic. For clarity is one of the principal stylistic traits that distinguishes this novel: the simplicity of its plot and the refreshing transparency of its narrative technique are both striking. Both of those effects undoubtedly contributed to the success of the book, which was awarded the Prix Médicis in 1993. Yet the way that Claire indulges her taste for duplicity is anything but straightforward, and that effect provides a pleasing counterpoint to the apparent

guilelessness of Bernheim's storytelling, serving to put that narrative frankness very powerfully in question. Bernheim notifies us that Claire is a prevaricator early on in the novel. She had ended a love affair with a man named Michel a couple of years ago, we are told, but had remained friends with him, continuing to see him several times a week, and had even allowed him to keep a set of keys to her apartment. Yet when she changes her locks subsequent to the theft of her handbag, she imagines that she will tell Michel that she now has only one set of keys. In point of fact it never comes to that, however, because Michel knows her all too well: "Elle voulut parler mais renonça. Il ne l'écouterait pas. Il savait déjà qu'elle allait mentir" (SF 18).

- 5 That datum establishes an important standard for everything that follows. Lying and the recognition of lying as a legitimate discursive mode color *Sa femme* from beginning to end. Moreover, in Claire's case, the will to deceive others is so elemental that it overruns the borders of discourse, narrowly defined, and comes to permeate her very way of being in the world, and notably the way that she performs⁷ in social settings. A mirror scene early on in the novel puts that tendency of hers on display: "Elle entra dans une boulangerie et se vit dans la glace. Elle avait trente ans mais elle essayait de paraître davantage. Les jeunes médecins n'inspirent pas confiance" (SF 23). That moment is calculated to take us aback, because while we are well accustomed to people composing their appearance in an effort to seem younger than they are, it is rare that we catch them attempting to look older. Moreover, while the former gesture is so common that we typically fail to recognize the intention to deceive therein, the latter gesture, being so starkly counterintuitive, puts that intention clearly in evidence.
- 6 When the man Claire takes as her new lover confesses to her that he has a wife and two children, and that he will never leave them, she has no reason to imagine that he is telling her anything other than the truth. Indeed, once she has a moment to digest that information, she understands that it heightens the pleasure she will find in their affair. For Claire is intrigued by difficulty, by taboo, by the forbidden, and in that perspective, she foresees that her liaison with Thomas Kovacs will enable her to exercise her taste for deception. Crucially, and not by simple coincidence, it will also provide her with a rich field of speculation, hypothesis, and outright fabrication.
- 7 For it is precisely the illicit quality of their affair that fires Claire's imagination. Under the gaze of two construction workers in a café, Claire and Thomas refrain from kissing; when an elderly client of Claire's smiles at her and Thomas, they decide to stop meeting in public. Patently, instead of discouraging her, these constraints galvanize Claire and stoke her desire for Thomas—or perhaps for the potential that he represents. When she goes to dinner at her best friend's apartment, she makes a conscious decision not to tell Marie about Thomas. For one thing, the very act of keeping that fact to herself is powerfully appealing to Claire. For another, Marie is married, with a new baby: she projects the image of the sort of conventional, bourgeois love that Claire finds distinctly unappealing. During a subsequent visit to Marie, Claire resolves once again not to speak about Thomas. Moreover, she muses that Claire would probably disapprove of the affair: "Elle se rendit compte qu'elle n'avait jamais parlé de lui, à personne. Elle secoua la tête. Maintenant qu'elle vivait avec Bernard et qu'elle avait un enfant, Marie désapprouverait certainement une liaison avec un homme marié dont on ne pouvait rien attendre. Claire décida de ne rien lui raconter" (SF 81-82). She wonders how Thomas is handling things, and if he has spoken about her to his friends, a possibility that similarly arouses her: "Elle se demanda soudain si Thomas parlait d'elle.

‘J’ai une maîtresse.’ Elle faillit éclater de rire. Elle répéta plusieurs fois ‘maîtresse’ à mi-voix. Un couple assis en face d’elle la regardait, alors elle se tut. Mais pendant tout le reste du trajet, elle ne put s’empêcher de sourire” (SF 82).

- 8 The recognition that speaking can have just as much appeal as silence is perhaps what determines Claire to renege on her resolution to say nothing to Marie about her affair with Thomas. Yet when Claire does finally speak, Marie’s reaction proves deeply disappointing. For she suggests that Thomas will leave his wife and children in order to devote himself entirely (and conventionally) to Claire, a perspective that leaves Claire cold and makes her regret her decision to speak: “Marie disait n’importe quoi. Thomas ne quitterait pas sa femme, ni ses enfants. C’était impossible. Elle changea de sujet de conversation. Pourquoi avait-elle parlé de Thomas à Marie ?” (SF 82-82). The problem here, obviously enough, is one of audience and interpretation. Marie is a bad reader, insofar as the inferences she draws from the story Claire tells are, in Claire’s view, utterly contrary to the story’s meaning. Because when Claire tells that same story to herself—and she does so constantly, in versions that vary only minimally—she interprets it in very different ways. Notably, she refuses any suggestion that her affair with Thomas will result in a traditional, bourgeois partnership. And when that notion occurs to her, she immediately puts it from her mind. For she is quick to realize that if her relationship with Thomas becomes normalized in a conventional sense, the quality of the story of that relationship will inevitably suffer⁸.
- 9 That, I think, is the crux of the matter for Claire. Her liaison with Thomas fires her imagination and stimulates her creativity in ways that Claire finds deeply satisfying. It allows her to exercise her narrative powers in a manner both focused and directed, as she envisions hypothetical situations, contingencies, and subplots for the story of her affair. Her imagination is patently very fertile indeed, because she produces those chunks of narrative in great number and considerable detail. She imagines for instance that Thomas has not wished to make love to her upon their first encounter because he was afraid that his wife would smell Claire’s perfume on his body. She imagines Thomas at home, with his wife and children. Seeing that he does not wear a wedding band on his hand, she infers that he is afraid to lose it on the construction site where he spends his days. She thinks about his wife, making him something to eat. She frets that he may have had an accident on the construction site. She muses that he may spend the Christmas vacation in the mountains, with his wife and children: “Mais quand partirait-il ? Et quand reviendrait-il? Elle l’ignorait. Il ne lui en avait encore rien dit. Et elle ne lui posait jamais de questions” (SF 59). Visiting a toy store in order to find a present for her nephew, she sees a mother accompanied by a boy and a girl, and concludes that they must be Thomas’s wife and children. She imagines him kissing his wife. Seeing Thomas in a new jacket, she infers that it was a present from his wife. When he leaves her after one of their meetings, she imagines that he may have had a car accident, and she sees herself at his funeral. In short, working from the relatively bare data of her actual affair with Thomas, Claire constructs an elaborate romance, a tale where fiction outweighs fact in staggering proportion, and where the virtual is far more pleasing than the actual.
- 10 In order to buttress the story that she tells herself, Claire begins to collect souvenirs of her meetings with Thomas, beginning with some sugar cubes and a swizzle stick in the shape of a golf club, mementos of trysts in cafés and a bar, respectively. When Thomas

leaves her apartment after making love with her for the first time, Claire adds another element to her collection:

La pièce lui parut soudain très silencieuse. Il n’y avait rien à ranger. Pas de verre car Thomas n’avait rien bu, pas de serviette humide à faire sécher car il ne s’était pas lavé. Aucune trace de Thomas. Seul le couvre-lit était un peu froissé. Claire vit alors, à côté du lit, une pochette de papier doré, déchirée. Elle la ramassa et sourit. Dans la salle de bains, elle appuya son pied sur la pédale de la poubelle. Le couvercle se souleva. Au fond de la poubelle presque vide gisait une petite chose ronde et luisante. Claire s’agenouilla et la prit dans sa main. C’était le préservatif qu’avait utilisé Thomas.

Elle le remit dans sa pochette déchirée. Et elle le rangea dans le tiroir de son bureau, avec les sucres et la canne de golf. (SF 33)

- 11 Let us remember that this is a love story from the 1990s, and that Claire is a doctor. Of course she will practice safe sex. Yet the use of a condom seems to violate the norms of erotic narrative—unless one fetishizes that object, which is precisely what Claire will do. For the importance of the condoms is not that they protect Claire from a sexually transmitted disease, but rather that they testify *materially* to the reality of her affair with Thomas. Thus, when several months into their liaison Thomas asks her if he may dispense with the condoms, Claire refuses: “Sans les préservatifs, que lui resterait-il des moments passés avec Thomas ? [...] Thomas continuerait à mettre des préservatifs, et elle continuerait à garder leurs enveloppes” (SF 88).

- 12 Claire guards her collection jealously, and keeps it hidden, most importantly from Thomas, because she realizes that he would not understand the logic of her gesture. Moreover, keeping that secret clearly satisfies her taste for deception. Alone, she pores over her collection, counting the elements that constitute it:

Elle ouvrit le premier tiroir de son bureau. Les sucres, la canne de golf et la cassette du répondeur s’y trouvaient toujours. Ils reposaient sur un tapis de petits carrés dorés. Les pochettes des préservatifs, toutes vides, sauf la première.

Elle commença à les compter.

Trente-cinq, trente-six, trente-sept, trente-huit. Elle se sentait mieux.

Cinquante-neuf, soixante, soixante-et-une. La sonnerie de la porte l’interrompit. C’était peut-être Thomas. Elle remit les pochettes dorées, en vrac, dans le tiroir et le referma. (SF 63-64)

- 13 Those statistics reassure her, for they serve to guarantee the tale of her affair with Thomas that she is telling herself. In search of other reassuring statistics, Claire turns to her appointment diary:

Elle contemplait son carnet de rendez-vous. Chaque moment passé avec Thomas y figurait. Un grand T et une double flèche verticale indiquait l’heure de son arrivée et celle de son départ.

Claire prit une feuille de papier et un crayon. Une heure et quinze minutes par jour, cinq jours par semaine, pendant près de trois mois. Elle calcula.

Soixante-quinze heures.

Ce carnet contenait les soixante-quinze heures passées avec Thomas. Comment pourrait-elle se résoudre à le ranger auprès de ceux des années précédentes ? (SF 74)

- 14 In both cases, that counting activity is a way of framing⁹ Claire’s collection and the experience that it represents; it enables her to organize and bring coherence to an otherwise disparate series of events. I have argued that Claire’s particular way of bringing meaning to experience is through storytelling – and in that she is perhaps not so very different from many of us. But her impulse to translate experience into

narrative is undoubtedly more insistent than that which most of us evince; and furthermore the manner in which Emmanuèle Bernheim underscores that behavior in her novel leads one to suspect that something else is going on here.

- 15 When information is lacking, Claire's propensity to engage in inference shifts into overdrive. Frustrated in her attempts to locate Thomas's name in the Parisian phonebook, she infers that he must live in the suburbs, and she attempts to imagine his house there. That inferential activity is a powerful generator of fiction, and Claire finds the production of fiction profoundly gratifying. Once, after Thomas leaves her apartment, she imagines that he has had a deadly car accident. She envisions herself attending his funeral, and taking a rose from one of the funeral bouquets: "Ce serait la dernière chose qu'elle rangerait dans le tiroir de son bureau. Après, elle n'y ajouterait jamais plus rien" (SF 87). The fecundity of her imagination is striking, as is the manner in which she focuses it with a view toward elaborating an ideal story—far more perfect, in fact, than the one which emerges from the actual details of her affair with Thomas. In a word, Claire is behaving much like a novelist, and as Emmanuèle Bernheim weaves the competing levels of irony in her text, she invites us to consider Claire's example as a sardonic commentary on her own project. I do not mean to suggest that this metaliterary dimension of *Sa femme* suffices to distinguish and particularize it, but I do think that it is useful to recognize the exceedingly droll manner in which Bernheim turns that topos to her purposes.
- 16 That drollery becomes still more piquant when the truth finally explodes in this novel, shattering the fiction that Claire has so carefully cultivated. Very considerably abashed, Thomas makes a confession to her: "Je ne suis pas marié, je n'ai pas d'enfants" (SF 90). One might imagine that the tears that Claire shed upon receiving that confession were tears of joy; but I feel that another emotion may provoke them. For the truth that Thomas utters is unwelcome: Claire clearly prefers the lie, which stimulated her creative impulse and enabled her storytelling. Indeed, even after learning that he is not married, she continues to attempt to smell his wife's perfume on his body, because she is unwilling to give up the story that she has so lovingly told herself. In that perspective, truth has a normalizing effect that does violence to Claire's story. Their first dinner together as a "legitimate" couple is disappointing to her; the idea that they might buy a washing machine together or move to a house in the suburbs evokes the specter of just that sort of conventional, bourgeois relationship that Claire finds so insipid and unsatisfying. She resigns herself to her new life with Thomas: "À présent, elle dînait tous les soirs avec Thomas et bientôt ils vivraient ensemble. Elle deviendrait sa femme. Et ils auraient des enfants" (SF 114).
- 17 Yet people who are devoted to stories – be they doctors or novelists or even readers like you and me – will always find new stories to tell themselves, new fictions upon which to hang their desires and their hopes. Claire's new patient, Monsieur Corey, is a splendidly insignificant man who is suffering from an eminently curable bout of hepatitis. When he leaves a book of matches behind after his consultation with Claire, that simple object assumes the status of totem, and Claire cathects her abundant creative energy squarely upon it. It is the first element in a new collection, which will eventually frame a new story, one which likewise might be entitled *Sa femme* – though this particular fiction, suspended at the end of Bernheim's novel in a liminal, hypothetical mode, might well turn out a bit differently.

- 18 It is tempting to see in *Stallone* a wry sequel to *Sa femme*, but I think it makes more sense to view it as a return to a set of questions that Emmanuèle Bernheim finds richly invigorating: the power of the imagination, the strategic uses of lying, the potential of fiction to palliate the banality of ordinary life, and so forth¹⁰. Once again, the protagonist is a young woman doctor. Once again, there is a man in her life, and their relations are fraught with closely guarded secrets, outright lies, and a few statistics. They are still more fraught by the figure of Stallone, who plays a finely-calculated subversive role in this novel from first page to last. And indeed prior to the first page, for what reader of contemporary French literature would fail to be astonished when coming upon the name “Stallone” emblazoned in red, all-caps Didot font, on the cover of a book published in Gallimard’s *collection blanche*? One assumes that it must be another Stallone, almost any Stallone at all, but surely not Sylvester Stallone. Yet that assumption is unceremoniously dashed when the first scene of the novel finds the heroine, Lise, at the movies, engrossed in the fable of *Rocky III*: “Les premières notes de la chanson battent dans ses tempes, dans sa gorge, sa poitrine, elles résonnent dans tout son corps. Stallone nage, Stallone cogne dans un sac de sable. Stallone court. Et il lui semble qu’elle nage, cogne, court avec lui. Elle a chaud, elle transpire. Allez, encore un effort . . . Elle n’en peut plus, sa bouche est sèche, elle a soif” (St 12) (ellipsis in original). As if that were not enough, the soundtrack of the movie becomes the soundtrack of the novel, the fevered pulsing of the tune that made *Survivor*’s fortune and saved the band from the last circle of obscurity, “Eye of the Tiger”.
- 19 Stallone and *Survivor*: the recipe is a potent one, and Bernheim exploits it with considerable relish, vexing popular culture against elite culture quite deliberately in order to raise questions about one and the other. Lise is the ideal consumer of popular culture. Having abandoned her medical studies in frustration some years back, the example of persistence that Stallone puts on display in *Rocky III* inspires her to such a degree that she returns to her studies and eventually qualifies as a general practitioner. Moreover, she is canny enough to recognize that it was not Rocky who inspired her, but rather Stallone himself. The irremediable case of bovarysme that she contracts casts Stallone as its central figure, striding broadly across the novel’s stage, while *Survivor* plays “Eye of the Tiger” over and over again in frenzied cadence, from the orchestra pit. In order to stoke her determination to succeed in life, and also to support her hero, Lise makes a resolution: “Désormais, elle irait voir tous les films de Stallone. Tous. Elle n’en raterait aucun. Elle en faisait aujourd’hui le serment. Et elle n’attendrait pas qu’ils passent à la télévision. Non. Elle irait les voir en salle, elle paierait sa place. Elle lui devait bien cela. Car c’était grâce à lui que sa vie allait changer” (St 23-24).
- 20 The novel chronicles the way that Lise keeps her promise, registering Stallone’s films one after the other: *First Blood* (1982), *Staying Alive* (1983), *Rambo II* (1985), *Rocky IV* (1985), *Cobra* (1986), *Over The Top* (1987), *Rambo III* (1988), *Lock Up* (1989), *Tango & Cash* (1989), *Rocky V* (1990), *Oscar* (1991), *Stop! Or My Mom Will Shoot* (1992), *Cliffhanger* (1993), *Demolition Man* (1993), *The Specialist* (1994), *Judge Dredd* (1995), *Assassins* (1995), *Daylight* (1996), *Cop Land* (1997). That catalogue serves the same purpose as Claire’s collection in *Sa femme*: it is the material, statistical evidence of Lise’s obsession and the certification of her fealty to the fantasy that she has elaborated. It is also a clock or a calendar of sorts, recording the passage of time and Lise’s behavior therein. Yet even that resolution is not enough for Lise. Distressed to find that the movie theater was almost empty when she goes to see *Oscar*, Lise wonders if Stallone’s career is on the wane and

frets that he may end up in penury. She thus come to a second resolution, and goes to her bank to open a new account: “Dorénavant, elle verserait sur ce compte dix pour cent de tout ce qu’elle gagnait. Cet argent serait pour Stallone, si par malheur il se trouvait un jour dans le besoin” (St 43). Reasoning further that she might die before Stallone, she drafts a letter declaring her intentions and entrusts it to her cousin Nicolas, to be opened only in the case of her death.

21 I have characterized Lise’s condition as bovarysme, yet it might be argued that things are more complicated than that. Because Emma Bovary was simply afflicted with a tendency toward readerly literalism and credulity. Though Lise inhabits the fictional worlds of Stallone’s films with demonstrable relish, and takes the moral lessons she finds therein very seriously indeed, she is nevertheless capable of distinguishing the boundaries of those worlds. Things become a bit more complex, however, when she fixates upon Stallone as a real person. In one of his recent novels, Christian Garcin remarks: “Écrire des fariboles au sujet de personnes existant réellement, ce n’est pas dire la vérité mais des mensonges, et les écrivains qui usent ainsi de mensonges devraient être interdits de publication”¹¹. We may imagine that Garcin is speaking ironically, yet his comment may help us see Lise’s situation in clearer focus. For as she imagines Stallone’s future penury, and takes steps to palliate it, she is clearly losing her grip on the distinction between truth and untruth, the real and the imaginary, lived experience and fiction.

22 Clearly, Lise is not like most other people. Emmanuèle Bernheim takes care to underscore her difference, pointing out the fact that the people with whom Lise is notionally close fail to understand her. When she declares her intention to return to her medical studies, for instance, her father sneers at the idea, never imagining that she will carry it out; her boyfriend belittles her initiative, and she leaves him; the doctor for whom she worked as a receptionist likewise doubts her resolve; the men at the gym where she works out mock her when she decides to take up the sport of boxing. In that perspective, her boyfriend’s reaction is emblematic: “Il connaissait Lise, elle n’aurait jamais la patience d’aller jusqu’au bout, il le savait” (St 22). Like everyone else, he misreads her, failing to register the fundamental truth of her resolve. And perhaps even Lise finds it difficult to recognize the new person she has become. Coming home one evening after a long day at the hospital, she showers and goes to the mirror to brush her teeth:

Elle allait se laver les dents, lorsque la buée de la glace du lavabo se dissipa.

Et elle se vit.

Non. Ce n’était pas elle.

Du plat de la main, elle frotta le miroir. Ce visage sans éclat, cette coiffure informe, ça ne pouvait pas être elle.

Depuis quand ne s’était-elle pas vraiment regardée? (St 26)

23 Mirrors always confront people with their fundamental duplicity, to a great or lesser degree¹². The person whom I espy therein is not me; it is someone pretending to be me. Or, more accurately and more chillingly, it is *me* pretending to be me. For though I recognize that when I raise my right hand, the person in the mirror raises his left hand, though I concede that the representation of the thing is never the thing itself, nonetheless I act as if those considerations were not true. If the person in the mirror has a piece of spinach lodged between incisor and canine, I trust that I do, too, and I act upon that trust. In practice, my trust is often rewarded. But the analogy that I imagine should never be confused with identity, and that is where Lise goes astray. Not so much

perhaps in the way that she imagines herself, as in the way that she imagines Stallone, because he serves her as a kind of mirror as well, reflecting an image of herself in which truth is significantly (and strategically) warped.

- 24 The only person who accepts Lise unconditionally is a man named Jean – and the fact that he sells and installs mirrors for a living is surely not a coincidence. Lise will marry him, and in due course they will settle into a pleasant domestic life and produce two sons. But the confidence that Lise invests in Jean is not entire, and early on in their relationship she resorts to prevarication in order to hide from him the depth of her attachment to Stallone. When *Lock Up* appears in 1989, Lise goes to see it, telling Jean that she had a meeting with her thesis advisor. Bernheim is careful to highlight that moment, calling our attention to Lise’s lie: “C’était la première fois qu’elle mentait à Jean” (St 36). Lise lies to Jean yet again when *Tango & Cash* comes out later that year, and by the time that *Oscar* appears, Bernheim makes it clear that Lise’s prevarication has become habitual: “Comme d’habitude, elle s’inventerait des visites à domicile” (St 39). Lise’s lying is intriguing, and pleasingly complex. For one thing, it is to all appearances completely gratuitous: she has no need to lie to Jean, granted his indulgence with regard to her. Patently, she lies for another purpose. It is a matter of Lise’s own purpose, certainly, but it is also a matter of Emmanuèle Bernheim’s purpose, I believe; and the interplay of those two purposes significantly illuminates both one and the other.
- 25 Just like in *Sa femme*, the lies in *Stallone* serve to fuel the protagonist’s creative energy—and once again those energies are deployed in the service of storytelling. And once more Emmanuèle Bernheim invites us to think about storytelling as such, ironically comparing Lise’s activity, so patently absurd on the face of it, to her own. Lise guards the tale of her attachment to Stallone jealously, telling it to herself over and over, caressing it. She muses that she owes everything to Stallone: her career, her husband, her family. Every month when she receives her bank statement, she is pleased to see that the account she opened for Stallone has increased in value. Her life plays out in chapters designated by the regular appearance of Stallone’s films, one after the other. When *Cliffhanger* appears, shortly after the birth of her second son, Lise frets that, between the demands of her medical practice and those of her motherhood, she will not be able to go to the movie theater to see it. Yet she goes to see it nonetheless, baby in her arms. When he begins to cry (he is undoubtedly less deeply afflicted by stallonism than his mother), Lise leaves the theater, consoling herself that she had paid for her ticket, and thus kept the promise she had made to Stallone. Lise binds that promise up in narrative, and she constantly calculates what she has invested in it, whether the currency of that investment be time, money, or psychic energy. She keeps it to herself as long as she is able, because plainly she is the ideal narratee for the story that she tells, by a long chalk, as subsequent events in the novel will demonstrate beyond any possibility of doubt.
- 26 For the truth will out, in this novel as in most others. Yet that outing will not be a conventional one, and nor will it bring any real resolution. When Jean finally asks Lise why she has opened a new bank account, Lise sits him down and tells him her story: “Elle lui parla de *Rocky III*, de sa décision de reprendre ses études, et de sa vie qui en avait été changée. Elle lui expliqua sa dette envers Stallone, le serment d’aller voir tous ses films — treize jusqu’à présent — et l’ouverture de ce compte, pour lui, si un jour il en avait besoin” (St 48). In other terms, Lise tells him the same story that Emmanuèle

Bernheim has just told us, and the way that he reacts to that narrative is thus all the more significant. Mistaking truth for fiction, Jean explodes in helpless hilarity, praising Lise for her dry humor and congratulating her on her narrative creativity: “Il ignorait qu’elle savait inventer des histoires. Stallone. Quelle idée” (St 48). Jean’s failure to understand places him squarely on the side of the other people in Lise’s orbit, and Lise herself is quick to seize that fact. But our readerly position is somewhat different, of course. We appreciate that truth has a special status in a fictional world—as do lies for that matter. When Jean interprets Lise’s story as fiction, he qualifies as a poor reader in the fictional world, because he lacks imagination, suppleness of spirit, and the capacity to make a leap from himself to another. Bernheim offers him as a counterexample, and attempts to coax us toward a more agile, creative reading.

- 27 Yet meaning in *Stallone* is not without its vexations, granted the multiple (and competing) ironies that Bernheim elaborates in her novel, and the shifting play of truth and lie that animates it from first page to last. As a final gesture, Bernheim limns a brief parable of fiction and its fate, devolving precisely upon the credibility of Lise’s story. After her death, her cousin Nicolas, to whom she had entrusted her testamentary letter, brings that letter to Jean. Upon opening and reading it, Jean collapses in a paroxysm of both hilarity and grief, amazed anew by the lengths to which his wife went with the joke that they shared, and mourning the exceptionally creative partner he has lost:

Et, comme s’il se fût agi d’un mouchoir, ses grandes mains froissèrent, triturèrent, malaxèrent la lettre de Lise.

Nicolas prit Jean par les épaules et l’entraîna dehors.

Il respira à fond. L’air froid lui fit du bien. Il se détendit et ses doigts s’ouvrirent, laissant échapper une petite boulette de papier qui tomba sur le trottoir.

Et roula, roula, roula. (St 53)

- 28 It’s a curious way to end a novel. What becomes of Lise’s vow and the devotion that accounts for it? What does that suggest for the conceit that fuels Bernheim’s novel? Within the fictional world, it could be argued that the only person who loses anything is Stallone himself. But we readers who inhabit the world of phenomena may see things a bit differently. As we try to make our way in that world, we are constantly called upon to distinguish between fact and fiction, truth and lie, in circumstances that are often uncertain. Sometimes we hunger for the truth, at other times we seek refuge in fiction. Both of those discursive registers have their uses and their misuses. We call upon them strategically, we parse them to the best of our ability, we recognize that meaning may shift as the context of utterance shifts. In that process, our ability to distinguish one from the other is constantly called into question, and it is in just such a perspective that Bernheim’s fable resonates most abundantly.

ENDNOTES

1. See <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/01/24/trumps-false-or-misleading-claims-total-30573-over-four-years/>.

2. See <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/politics/trump-claims-database/>.
3. The *Washington Post* also reported, on April 14, 2020, the following: “As of April 3, Trump’s 1,170th day in office, our database shows that he has made 18,000 false or misleading claims. That’s an average of more than 15 claims a day, though since our last update 75 days ago, he’s been averaging just over 23 claims a day. That’s slightly higher than the 22 a day he recorded in 2019”. See <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/04/14/president-trump-made-18000-false-or-misleading-claims-1170-days/>. See also David Markowitz’s report in *Forbes*: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidmarkowitz/2020/05/05/trump-is-lying-more-than-ever-just-look-at-the-data/#4c703afb1e17>.
4. Born in 1955, she died in 2017, at the age of 61.
5. Her novels, in order, are: *Le cran d’arrêt* (Gallimard, 1985), *Un couple* (Gallimard, 1987), *Sa femme* (Gallimard, 1993, henceforth *SF*), *Vendredi soir* (Gallimard, 1998), and *Stallone* (Gallimard, 2002, henceforth *St*). Her memoir, in which Bernheim recounts the end of her father’s life, is entitled *Tout s’est bien passé* (Gallimard, 2013). In addition, Bernheim worked as a scriptwriter for film and television.
6. Quoted by Josyane Savigneau in the obituary notice that appeared in *Le Monde*: https://www.lemonde.fr/disparitions/article/2017/05/11/la-romanciere-et-scenariste-emmanuele-bernheim-est-morte_5126185_3382.html. See also Savigneau’s assessment in “La Femme de l’autre”, *Le Monde des livres*, n° 15128, 1993, p. 25: “Trois cents pages en huit ans, c’est bien peu pour asseoir une réputation, surtout si cela n’est accompagné d’aucun scandale, d’aucun zeste de sida ou autres propos racoleurs”.
7. I am thinking of Erving Goffman’s notion of performance here. See *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, New York, Doubleday Anchor, 1959, p. 17-76, and more especially p. 22: “I have been using the term ‘performance’ to refer to all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers”.
8. See François Nourissier, “La femme secrète”, *Figaro Magazine*, n° 678, 1993, p. 113: “C’est ici que le bref roman d’Emmanuèle Bernheim devient très dérangeant. Pour les lecteurs, bien sûr, mais sans doute aussi pour les lectrices, car avec une discrétion, une économie et une perversité exemplaires, il pulvérise quelques idées reçues et admises sur les relations, aujourd’hui, entre les hommes et les femmes”.
9. Once again I rely on Erving Goffman, who suggests that this kind of framing activity is one of our principal ways of transforming something that is fundamentally meaningless into something meaningful. See *Frame Analysis*, Boston, Northeastern UP, 1986 [1974], especially p. 21-39.
10. Morgane Cadieu has read the novel in a rather different way, identifying in it a deeply embedded autobiographical dimension. See “Stallone meurt: L’auteur et ses fins de vie dans les romans d’Emmanuèle Bernheim”, *Fabula-LhT*, n° 22, “La Mort de l’auteur”, 2019, URL : <http://www.fabula.org/lht/22/cadieu>.
11. *Le bon, la brute et le renard*, Arles, Actes Sud, 2020, p. 319.
12. I have argued that point at some length in a book entitled *Mirror Gazing*, Champaign, Dalkey Archive Press, 2014.

ABSTRACTS

Il est sans doute vrai que tous les romanciers mentent, car le mensonge est après tout leur marchandise première. Leurs lecteurs (c'est-à-dire, vous et moi) consomment ces mensonges de manière boulimique, et en redemandent. La plupart du temps, ces lecteurs sont conscients que les déclarations qu'ils trouvent dans un roman n'ont aucune valeur de vérité directe et immédiate dans le monde réel. Antoine Roquentin n'ira pas en prison faute d'avoir payé ses

impôts ; on cherchera en vain la tombe d'Emma Bovary dans le cimetière de Yonville (trouver Yonville sur la carte est déjà toute une affaire) ; on ne verra jamais le vélo sans chaîne de Molloy monter le Tourmalet pendant le Tour de France ; la Lancia noire de l'Ambassade de France à Calcutta ne vous fera jamais une queue de poisson sur l'autoroute. Pendant le temps de leur lecture, ces lecteurs laissent de côté leur façon de juger la vérité des choses, pratiquant une suspension consentie d'incrédulité, pour parler comme Coleridge, afin d'intensifier leur expérience lectorale. Tout ceci étant, Emmanuèle Bernheim fait quelque chose de différent dans *Sa femme et Stallone*, quelque chose un peu au-delà du commerce de contrevérité habituel des romanciers. D'une part, elle met le mensonge au service de l'intrigue de manière décisive ; d'autre part, elle se sert des mensonges afin d'attirer notre attention sur certains aspects de la littérature et ses usages qu'elle estime primordiaux.

INDEX

Mots-clés: mensonge, vérité, bovarysme, collection, statistiques

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