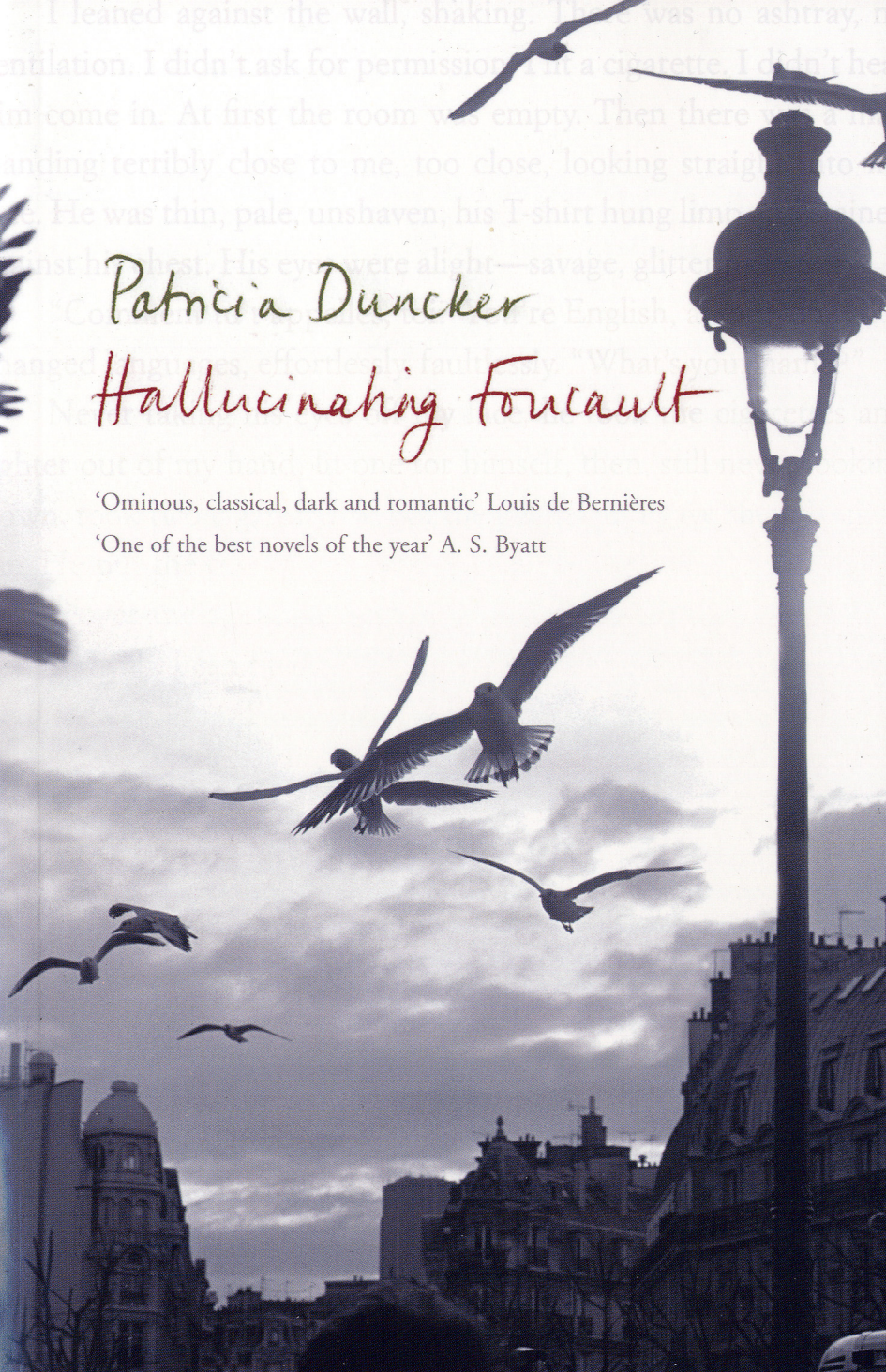
Patricia Duncker

Hallucinating Foucault

'Ominous, classical, dark and romantic' Louis de Bernières

'One of the best novels of the year' A. S. Byatt



Praise for *Hallucinating Foucault*

'Duncker manages her brainy material with a touch so deft it is almost skittish, inserts little hooks into the heart as well as the mind, and rounds the whole lot off with a thriller-like twist' *Independent on Sunday*

'Transgression, sexual ambiguity and madness, abiding themes in the eponymous French philosopher's work, provide the ingredients for Duncker's fervent depiction of amour fou and vicarious desire among the academic elite' *Sunday Times*

'A stirring meditation on the profound effect reading can have on the soul' *Esquire*

'It belongs to the tradition of quest stories and seeks a delineation of the relationship between writer and reader ... Duncker raises issues about Eliot's theory of the impersonality of the artist, about the nature of madness, and about the nature of love ... Her provocative writing is most welcome' *Financial Times*

'The story of a scholarly quest and a love affair, Patricia Duncker's first novel succeeds, like the narrator's nightmares, in creating an uneasy and uncomfortable environment in which questions are posed but seldom answered, and ambiguous desires are at the centre of relationships ... The reader's and the writer's voices are left to speak without interruption, and their hopeless situation is all the more affecting' *Times Literary Supplement*

'*Hallucinating Foucault* is cunning, post-modern and so forth, but one ends up believing in Duncker as a novelist for the simplest, old-fashioned reason that she has made us believe in her seething, wounded creation' *Independent*

Hallucinating Foucault

Patricia Duncker

BLOOMSBURY

For S.J.D.
my reader

Cambridge

THE DREAM UNFOLDS like this. I am facing a mass of hot, grey rocks, overhung by huge wedges of concrete, shaped like coffins. As I look to my left I see the glittering, undulating sea, the light catching each crest. The sea is empty. It is high summer, but there is no one there. There are no boats, no windsurfers, no parachute gliders, no swimmers, no families, no dogs. The coloured pennants in the little beach café are all aloft, full in the wind. The spray touches the barrels which support the planks of the café floor, boards pale as driftwood, smooth beneath my feet. But there is no one there. The tables are deserted. The bar is empty. The glasses are packed away. There is no one there. I feel the sun on my back. My eyes narrow to the glare.

And then I see that I am not alone. There are two of them, a man and a boy. They are squatting over the rock pools at the edge of the sea. Here where the waves rise with the tide the pools are left, full of tiny transparent crabs, green maidenhair, shellfish, old cans, fresh sand. They do not move. They are peering with terrible concentration into the pool. The boy's hand is still in the warm shallows. He is trying to catch something. The man's cigarette is motionless in his hand, the ash poised. He is concentrating hard, willing the child to succeed. They do not see me. I do not move. I feel the sun on

my back. I smell the sea, the white light bursts in glory about them.

Then—and this is the only movement I ever see—the child has found what he sought, he is drawing it out of the pool. I cannot see what he has found. I see nothing, only his hand rising, the fall of his curls as he turns to the man, smiling, triumphant. And I see in the man's warm glance, the complicity of lovers, the friendship of many years, the enterprise of a life shared, work undertaken together, meetings in restaurants, in public places, an intimacy achieved, the promise of a thousand things we can give to each other when there is love, honesty and confidence between us. I do not know whose memory I have entered. This is not written in any of the books.

I begin screaming. I am shaking, hysterical, distraught. In the dream I reach out towards them, to clamp that moment back into time, to halt the corruption of change, to lock them forever into the acknowledged joy of companionship and affection, across the gulf in their lives and in mine. That glance between them gleams, frozen forever on the hot, drenched rocks. I am awake, sweating, crying, consumed by the horror of what I am unable to prevent.

Sometimes I lose my grasp on what happened in the summer of 1993. I have only these evil, recurring dreams.

I took my first degree at Cambridge. I studied French and German. In my last year I specialised in modern French, linguistics and literature. I also took a paper in modern French history. I ought to tell you that because it explains why I got so involved in the whole affair. It was already my chief interest, my intellectual passion if you like. It doesn't explain why it all became so personal. Or maybe it does. You see,

when I decided to go on with my studies and to do a doctorate I was making a real commitment, not just to my writing, but to his. Writing a thesis is a lonely obsessive activity. You live inside your head, nowhere else. University libraries are like madhouses, full of people pursuing wraiths, hunches, obsessions. The person with whom you spend most of your time is the person you're writing about. Some people write about schools, groups of artists, historical trends or political tendencies. There were graduates doing that in my year, but usually one central figure emerges. In my case it was Paul Michel.

Everyone has heard of Paul Michel, with a little prompting. He wrote five novels and one collection of short stories between 1968 and 1983. His first novel, *La Fuite*, translated into English under the title *Escape* in 1970, was a set text on the modern French novel course when I was an undergraduate. He won the Prix Goncourt in 1976 with *La Maison d'Eté*, which all the critics say is his most perfect book. I wouldn't disagree. Technically, it is; and it's a book that deals with classic themes, the family, inheritance, the weight of the past. It reads like a book written by a man of seventy who has passed his life in peace and meditation. But Paul Michel wasn't like that. He was the wild boy of his generation. He made news. He was inside the Sorbonne in 1968, throwing Molotov cocktails at the CRS. He was arrested on suspicion of terrorism in 1970. And there was talk of intervention from the Elysée to have him released. Some people say he may have been a member of Action Directe. But I don't think he was. Although his public political statements were sufficiently extreme. Somehow he was never interviewed in studios or apartments as writers usually are, with their shelves of books and African statuettes behind them. I can't think of any images

of him taken indoors. He is always outside, in cafés, in the street, leaning against cars, riding pillion on a motorbike, gazing at a landscape of white rock, scrub bush and umbrella pines. He was more than good-looking. He was beautiful. And he was homosexual.

He was outspokenly homosexual, I suppose. Reading through all the interviews he ever gave I noticed that he insisted on his sexuality with an aggression which was characteristic of the period. But there was no other name ever associated with his. He never had a life-time partner as some gay writers do. He was always alone. He seemed to have no family, no past, no connections. It was as if he was the author of himself, a man without kin. Some critics pointed out, patronisingly, I always thought, that homosexuality was only one theme among many in his work and he could not be considered merely as a gay writer. But I did think it was central. I still do. His perspectives on the family, society, heterosexual love, war, politics, desire, were always those of an outsider, a man who has invested nothing and who therefore has nothing whatever to lose.

And I had one other clue around which to build my image of Paul Michel. In a late interview with an American review, the *New York Times Review of Books*, I think, when *Midi* was published in English, he was asked which other writer had influenced him most. And he answered without hesitation, Foucault. But he would make no further comment.

Of course, Paul Michel was a novelist and Foucault was a philosopher, but there were uncanny links between them. They were both preoccupied with marginal, muted voices. They were both captivated by the grotesque, the bizarre, the daemonic. Paul Michel took his concept of transgression

straight from Foucault. But stylistically they were poles apart. Foucault's huge, dense, Baroque narratives, alive with detail, were like paintings by Hieronymous Bosch. There was an image, a conventional subject, a shape present in the picture, but the texture became vivid with extraordinary, surreal, disturbing effects as eyes became radishes, carrots, as earthly delights became fantasies of torture with eggshells, bolts and ropes. Paul Michel wrote with the clarity and simplicity of a writer who lived in a world of precise weights and absolute colours, a world where each object deserved to be counted, desired and loved. He saw the world whole, but from an oblique angle. He rejected nothing. He was accused of being atheist, unscrupulous, a man without values. His more perceptive—and hostile—critics saw him as a writer who faced each event with the stoic indifference of an accepted destiny, whose political commitment was no more than an existential gesture, a man without morals or faith.

It was certainly true that his political life and his writing life seemed to be divided by a crevasse. He was personally involved in the radical left, but his writing addressed classical traditions, with what could be described as an olympian elitism. The elegance of his prose was stamped with the highhandedness of indifference. His life was engaged with the times, his writing was that of an aristocrat who has owned land for centuries, who knows that his peasants are loyal and that nothing will ever change. It was a mysterious contradiction. It was not true of Foucault; and if I had to choose between them as my comrade on the barricades I would have chosen Foucault. He was the idealist; Paul Michel was the cynic.

But writing and politics have very little to do with each other anyway in the English tradition. Or at least they haven't

done since the demise of Winstanley and John Milton. I didn't want to become mired in agonised liberalism. I read all of E. M. Forster in my last year at school. He had a dreadful effect upon me. I think that's why I became so involved with the French.

I was going out with a Germanist when I began my research on Paul Michel. She was an intense-looking woman, a bit older than I was. I first saw her going into the Rare Books Room of the University Library. She had a mass of curly brown hair and wore tiny, round, thin-rimmed glasses. She was bony and quick in her movements, skinny as a boy, oddly dated in her manners, like a mid-nineteenth-century heroine. I thought she looked fascinating. So I transported myself and all my books to the Rare Books Room.

She smoked. And that was how I got to know her. Very few of the graduates smoked, and there was a sort of prison yard next to the tea room in which the smokers walked round and round, consuming our poisons. I waited until she had finished her tea and set off round the yard. Then I followed her at a safe distance. When she had her cigarette well alight and was marching purposefully towards the magnolia I caught up with her and asked for a light. I know it's a pick-up line that must have been used by Neanderthal man, but women writing theses never usually notice that you're trying to pick them up. Ask them to tell you about their work and they'll usually do just that. For hours, without let or hindrance. So I didn't ask her what she was doing. I asked her how long she'd been doing it. Two years, she said. And she didn't volunteer any further information. I asked her where she lived. Maid's Causeway, she said. And in so final a tone I didn't feel I could go on and ask for the number. So I thanked her for the light and pushed off, feeling as crestfallen as if she'd bitten me.

Next day she walked straight up to me in the tea room and came out with an accusation that certainly didn't sound like a pick-up line.

'Why do you sit in the Rare Books Room if you're working on Paul Michel? You don't have to order any rare books.'

I kept my wits about me.

'How do you know that I'm working on Paul Michel?'

'I went through your books while you were having a piss.'

I was flabbergasted. She admitted to spying on me. And she was still standing there, with her curly hair in her eyes, waiting for an answer. I was so frightened of her that I told the truth.

'I work there so that I can look at you.'

'I thought so,' she cried vindictively.

'Am I so obvious?' We weren't even going out with each other and yet we were having our first row.

'Telling me. Have-you-got-a-light?' She mimicked my voice contemptuously. 'You've been using your own cigarette lighter for the past five months.'

'So you've been watching me?' I retaliated, trying to get a foothold in the conversation.

'Natch,' she said, sitting down and lighting up, 'only five of us in modern languages are smokers and you're one of them.'

I thought she was going to put her tongue out at me. She looked like a triumphant schoolgirl who'd just won all the marbles.

'Why didn't you ask me what I do?'

She was on the offensive again. 'You don't know, do you? You think all academic women are blue-stockinged bimbos.'

'Hang on,' I interrupted defensively. The situation had got completely out of hand. 'Why are you quarrelling with me?'

'I'm not.' She smiled, for the first time, a wonderful boyish grin. 'I'm asking you out.'

'You can't smoke that in here,' snapped the woman from the cash desk, who had come up behind her. 'Go outside at once.'

I wolfed my cake and followed her out into the yard. I couldn't believe my luck.

'So you'd already noticed me?' I demanded, incredulous.

'Yup,' she said peaceably, 'have a cig. And you can use your own lighter this time.'

'Look,' she went on, 'I live in a two-room flat, so you can't move in. But I'd like to go to bed with you. So why don't you come round tonight?'

I dropped my cigarette in a puddle. She grinned some more.

'Chicken,' she hissed, her eyes glittering behind the thick lenses and silver rims. And that was how the affair between us began.

She was a very good linguist. She spoke fluent French. In her year out between public school and Cambridge she had worked as a student language teacher in a lycée outside Aix-en-Provence. She mastered schoolchildren by day and the thugs in a bar at night. She had read every single one of Paul Michel's books and had opinions, different opinions from everybody else, about each one of them. I didn't know if it was because she didn't want to tread on my toes, but it was quite hard to extract her views in detail. It was clear, however, that she had fairly ferocious ideas of her own. She also had decided ideas about what should happen between us in bed. I

thought that this was absolutely wonderful as I didn't have very much to do. She was writing her thesis on Schiller. I didn't think that Schiller stood a chance.

At the beginning of an affair lovers usually spend a lot of time in bed. Even when they do manage to get up they're exhausted; worn out with achievements, victories. But this wasn't true of the Germanist. At eight o'clock she was up, with her glasses in place, busy making coffee in my kitchen or in hers. I would hear the ferocious sound of the whirling Moulinex, smell the terrible, inevitable fumes of that strong, black, anti-aphrodisiac and know that the working day had begun. She made toast, scoured the sink, packed her bag and set off on her bicycle. Whatever the weather. By nine-thirty she had her head down in the Rare Books Room. As I say, Schiller didn't stand a chance. I used to turn up at eleven, a little giddy, still reeling with sex. She would raise her head, magnificent and censorious as a schoolmistress, and consent to twenty minutes break for coffee and a cigarette.

I loved her flat. She lived in two rooms, with a kitchen which looked out down the garden and was painted yellow and blue. Her cups were yellow and her plates were blue. She always had fresh flowers on the table. She bleached the surfaces and the sink. Her movements, when she was cooking, were intense and exact. So was her writing. When I finally managed to get up I would find brief notes left on the table.

Coffee on stove. Fresh bread in bin. Use old loaf first.

I kept every single one of these cryptic messages, as if I would one day find the key to decode them.

She used to leave messages for herself above the bathroom

mirror. On that first morning when I struggled to the loo feeling like a battered piano, I saw, typed out in large block letters, emphatic, aggressive, Posa's demand for freedom to King Philip II.

SO GEBEN SIE GEDANKENFREIHEIT
(*Give us freedom of thought*)

And, like Posa, the Germanist meant it. She wanted freedom in every respect—theologically, politically, sexually. I used to write down the bathroom mirror messages, which were always in German, look up any words I didn't know and ponder their elliptical meanings.

Her other room was a startling, decadent mass of reds; a scarlet bedspread threaded with gold, an old Turkish carpet which was her father's gift, a turbulent web of ochre, brown and gold. The lampshades, adorned with hanging tassels of red lace, had escaped from a Regency brothel. She had a huge, empty birdcage, shaped like a bell jar. On her desk was a mass of paper, overrun with her precise and tiny handwriting. It seemed to me that she had enough material for a dozen theses already. I peered at her notes. I could understand nothing. Otherwise, every single surface was coated in books. She spent all her money on books and all her time reading them. They were all marked with criticisms, responses in the margins, sometimes interleafed with whole pages of commentary. She prowled across centuries of writing, leaving her mark wherever she went.

When we had been together for a month or so I took the risk of hunting for the shelf where she kept her copies of all the novels of Paul Michel. Sure enough, there they were, all together, in chronological order, amassed in a privileged

position beside her desk. Each book was filled with as much of her writing as his. She had answered him, in full. There were white paper markers, pages of notes, dates marked on the inside cover, which I realised were the months in which she had read them. Unlike many other commentators on his work she preferred the later texts. She had read *La Fuite* as an undergraduate, as I had, but she had read *Midi* twice and *L'Evadé* three times. I was puzzled and pleased. I found a sheaf of her writing inside the text of Paul Michel's last novel. These referred me to particular pages, incidents, passages. There was one paragraph that she had almost defaced with her meticulous, savage handwriting. At the bottom of the page she had written in her emphatic tiny block letters, BEWARE OF FOUCAULT, as if the philosopher was a particularly savage dog. I had the same edition, so I wrote down the page number. Just beneath I noticed that she had also marked a reference to a passage in one of Foucault's interviews. I wrote that down too and decided to decipher this particular cryptic message which she had written to herself. She knew perfectly well that I was writing about Paul Michel and Foucault. Never once had she expressed an opinion on this particular relationship. Now I knew she had one, her silence seemed odd, even sinister. But she must have had her reasons for saying nothing. I was prying into her secrets. I guiltily replaced the book on the shelf.

I stood in the middle of her room, mystified. Then I scoured her entire flat for Foucault, but could not find any of his books. He had clearly been banned.

She seemed to be present in her rooms even when she was not there; the smell of her cigarettes, the cumulative effect of the incense she burned, the can of oil she kept on the window

sill for her bike chain, the muddy gloves she used for gardening. I liked to sit there, trying to piece her together, as if she were a puzzle to be solved. For she didn't quite add up. On the one hand she operated with quite terrifying directness. Never before had I been told to take my trousers off while the woman watched. But on the other hand there were sides to her that were fragile, cryptic, hidden. If I touched her when she had not expected me to do so she shrank back, shaking. There were times when she was writing and I would see her covering the page briskly, then she would pause, staring into space, frozen, unmoving, for over twenty minutes, the pen perched like a bird against her cheek. I did not dare to disturb her or ask where she had been. She was like a military zone, some of it mined.

One day I came down to her flat to find her because she wasn't in the library and there she was, writing in bed, her face wet with tears. I took her in my arms and kissed her. She let me do that once, then pushed me away. I looked down at her writing and saw that it was a letter addressed to '*Mein Geliebter* . . .'—she had written pages and pages in German. I nearly had a brain haemorrhage with jealousy.

'What the fuck are you doing?' I shouted.

'Writing a love letter to Schiller.'

'A what?'

'You heard.'

'Are you serious?'

'Absolutely. It helps me to get a grip on him. To think clearly. If you're not in love with the subject of your thesis it'll all be very dry stuff, you know. Aren't you in love with Paul Michel?'

'No. Or at least I don't think so.'

'Can't see why not. He's very good-looking. And he likes boys.'

'I'm in love with you,' I said.

'Don't be such an idiot,' she snapped, leaping out of bed and scattering her passion for Schiller all over her Turkish rug. I tried not to treat Schiller as a serious rival, but he was. She spent more time with him than she did with me.

I come from a fairly ordinary middle-class family. My dad's a physicist and my mother's a GP. They met at college. I've got one sister who's six years younger than me. We were brought up like two only children really. I liked her and we used to play together, but we had our own friends, our own lives. The Germanist, however, came from not one broken home, but two. For a while I couldn't quite get my mind round her family circumstances. She had two fathers and her mother had apparently disappeared.

'I know it sounds weird,' she said, 'having two dads. But I always have had. They don't live far apart. One's in West End Lane, the other one's up the hill in Well Walk. I don't know if they had joint custody or what. I've always halved my holidays between them. My first father, if you see what I mean, the one who gave me the rug, works in the Bank of England. I don't know what he does. I have to wait for security to let him out at lunchtime and they won't let me in at all. I did ask him once, you know, what he spends his days doing, and he said, negotiating with other banks, but so gloomily I don't think he likes it much. Or it could have been a bad day on the Stock Exchange. Mother ran off with my second father when I was two and took me with her. I liked my second father a lot. He made me a huge kite with a dragon on it. He's a painter, sells masses now, and teaches studio in an art college. It was Wimbledon, now it's Harrow, or is it Middlesex? Anyway,

he does vast frescoes with his students, gigantic, all along barren walls in inner city slums. Mother didn't stay long with him either. She pushed off within a year and left me behind this time.'

'No, I've no idea where she went, or who with. Nor has anyone. I've never seen her since. She must have done well though. She sent me eighteen thousand pounds when I was eighteen. A thousand for each year.'

'What? You're making that up.'

'No joke. I own the flat in Maid's Causeway outright. It was £27,000. The Bank of England made up the rest. Why do you think I never bitch about rent? I've had it since my second year at King's. But Mother's obviously not interested in me particularly, nor my dads. They never hear from her.'

'Haven't they remarried?'

'She wasn't married to either of them. Martin, that's the painter, had a girlfriend who lived with us for a couple of years, now he's got one who doesn't. And the Bank of England is homosexual. He has lots of boys. They're usually great. They all love cooking. So does Dad. We eat like lords.'

I sat with my mouth open.

'Your dad's gay?'

'Yup. Like Paul Michel.'

'Is that why you've read all his books so carefully?'

'I read everything carefully,' she snapped witheringly.

She said nothing for a while. Then she said, 'My dad's read some of Paul Michel. He reads French. It's interesting having nothing but fathers. Different if you're a man. Paul Michel was always searching for his Oedipal ogre.'

'Who's that?'

'Foucault.'

And that was the first time she'd mentioned his name. I couldn't ask any pointed questions without revealing that I'd been digging about in her shelves. Besides, she got up to go back to the Rare Books Room, thereby indicating that the conversation was decisively over.

That night she went to a film at the German Society which I'd already seen, so I stayed home and looked up the offending passage in *L'Evadé*. This is what Paul Michel had written.

> The cats are asleep at the end of my bed and all around me, the thundery silence of L'Escarène, caught at last in the rising flood of warm air, carrying the sand from the south. The Alps are folded above in the flickering light. And on the desk in the room beneath lies the writing which insists that the only escape is through the absolute destruction of everything you have ever known, loved, cared for, believed in, even the shell of yourself must be discarded with contempt; for freedom costs not less than everything, including your generosity, self-respect, integrity, tenderness—is that really what I wanted to say? It is what I have said. Worse still, I have pointed out the sheer creative joy of this ferocious destructiveness and the liberating wonder of violence. And these are dangerous messages for which I am no longer responsible.

It was an important message, disturbing if taken out of context, but there were other things in *L'Evadé* which contradicted this savage despair. It took me over an hour in the library to find the interview with Foucault because it dated from 1978, but was published posthumously in *L'Express*, 13th July 1984, and consisted of Foucault denouncing his own work, *Les Mots et les choses*.

A NOTE ON THE AUTHOR

Patricia Duncker is the author of the novels *Hallucinating Foucault* (winner of the Dillons First Fiction Award and the McKitterick Prize in 1996), *The Deadly Space Between*, *James Miranda Barry* and *Miss Webster and Chérif*. She has also written two books of short stories, *Monsieur Shoushana's Lemon Trees* and *Seven Tales of Sex and Death*, and a collection of essays on writing and contemporary literature, *Writing on the Wall*. Patricia Duncker is currently a Professor of Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

FICTION

Monsieur Shoushana's Lemon Trees
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Miss Webster and Chérif

CRITICISM

Sisters and Strangers
Writing on the Wall: Selected Essays

EDITED

In and Out of Time
Cancer through the Eyes of Ten Women (with Vicky Wilson)
The Woman Who Loved Cucumbers (with Janet Thomas)
Mirror Mirror (with Janet Thomas)

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