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TRANSLATING SIMENON

The experience of translating half a dozen Simenon novels taught me two central lessons about the craft in general. Although, looking back, both seem self evident they surprised me at the time.

The first is that by definition there can be no "correct" translation. Nationalities are inherently different. French people cannot be "translated" into the "same" English characters. Nor is the language they speak not the "same" as the English language only using different words. For one thing there are fewer words in French, and they are used with more logical precision than the English use their richer vocabulary. The two do not just talk different languages. They talk differently.

The requirement on a translator, therefore, is not a purely scientific one. In his quest for accuracy and fidelity he can follow the directions indicated by the dictionary and the rules of grammar. But very soon he runs over the edge of the map into uncharted territory.

To take a telling example (though, because he uses remarkably little slang, one that is not very typical of Simenon): how do you translate expletives like "Merde!?" The literal translation happens to be rather more shocking in English than it is in French. The equivalent English person might not say it in the same circumstances. So do you make the character behave as a Frenchman or as an Englishman? Do you translate the word, or the character? Would a Simenon character say "Damn"? Possibly: but who are you, a mere translator, to depart from the academically literal translation? What are the rules of this game of make believe you have entered into with the English-language reader and the English-language Simenon characters? It is at this point that judgments based on intuition take over — and why

translating is a craft, not a science nor an art form, but an amalgam. What are the rules of this craft? I can only reply that if you need to ask the question you will never know the answer.

The second thing I learned from spending months of my life in the company of Maigret and an assortment of those irresistibly human psychopaths with which M. Simenon has peopled the small towns of France, was that translating his work was as much a test of my English as of my French. Understanding the exact nuance of the original was difficult enough: finding the English equivalent that rang true could be very much more so.

To M. Simenon in particular I give thanks for the classical purity of his prose. Apart from being an aesthetic pleasure to read, I found it a great deal easier to translate than more prolix or even plain bad writers I have tackled. I have mentioned the problem posed by slang. Watching film thrillers (which I greatly enjoy) is often ruined by the unnatural and often comic language of sub-titles struggling to render an English equivalent of another nation's gangster language; no doubt the converse is true. I once attempted a translation of a thriller about the Paris underworld by Auguste le Breton (who inspired the film *Rififi*). I found the task literally impossible; and the result embarrassing. Never again!

One Simenon character with whom I experienced difficulty was, curiously, an Englishman: Inspector Pyke in *Mon Ami Maigret*. The setting is London during a heatwave. In the original the Inspector from Scotland Yard comes over as an Englishman seen through the puzzled eyes of a Frenchman. Because the language of the translation is itself English, this essential filter is removed. In the process the character loses some of his point, and in consequence seems less convincing. Somehow there is a loss of innocence.

By contrast I immensely enjoyed my attempts to convey in English a typically Simenon atmosphere captured within a telling detail, which like a tiny clove of garlic in a stew, lends its flavour to the whole dish, and often to the palate for days afterwards. I refer of course to the touches every Simenon fan will recognise with pleasure — the desperate face in the crowd that catches Maigret's attention in Chapter One, the physical sensations ranging from the "relents du lit" to the rocking motion of a train travelling across a provincial French landscape, or the final petty humiliation heaped on the little man silently building up the courage to murder his dominating wife.

The translator's enjoyment has, of course, its own perils. When all is said and done the characters are not *his*; they belong to the author. The translator is like a Nanny given temporary custody of someone else's children — and trouble famously starts when Nanny becomes too maternal. It is no business of the translator to invent; he is in the business of dressing characters in the disguise of a foreign language. He has to make Maigret sound at home in English and not awkward, yet without surrendering his Maigret character. In return the reader, for whose benefit all this has been done, fills his side of the bargain by suspending disbelief when Maigret speaks English while remaining à Frenchman.

In summary, though he may be torn at times by conflicting loyalties the translator's ultimate duty is to the author's original characters. After the afternoon walk Nanny has to bring the children home.

By way of postscript, I have one grievance to air. If what is written about M. Simenon is true, it used to take me at least twice as long to translate his novels, however imperfectly, as he took to write them in the first place. Of course I am not sure to whom I can legitimately address my complaint. There has, however, been a compensation: I have over the years received praise regularly, and from quite unexpected quarters, for «my» latest Simenon. A lady in Arizona even wrote to ask me if I was going to «write» some more. That was about ten years ago. I am still unsure how to reply.

Nigel RYAN

