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TRANSLATING SIMENON

It has often amused me — especially since I have become one of his translators — to read certain declarations of Georges Simenon, stating that he aims to achieve a style which is universally comprehensible and easy to translate into any language.

In fact, in English this is far from being the case. It has become a commonplace of criticism to say that Simenon is rather difficult to translate into English, and that many of the existing translations are somewhat inadequate in conveying his style. For example, to quote the *Concise Encyclopaedia of Modern World Literature* (Hutchinson, 1963):

It is to be deplored that they (Simenon's novels) have very frequently been farmed out to drudge-translators whose command of English is far from equal to the precision and elegance of Simenon's French.

And the recent *Penguin Companion to the Arts in the Twentieth Century* (Viking/Penguin, 1985) states unequivocally:

The nuances of his style resist translation — and he has been scandalously badly served, in this respect, by his British publishers.

It was partly out of dissatisfaction with some of the translations that have appeared, especially recently, that I myself decided to offer my services to Simenon's British publishers.

But wherein lies the difficulty, with such an apparently easily translatable writer? Partly, I think, in the fact that, although Simenon passes for a «popular» novelist with a very straightforward style, his narrative procedures are, in fact, very complicated, with constant transitions between past and present time, between dialogue and narration, between interior monologue and

external description — all expressed in a very laconic style, which does not waste time smoothing over the transitions. This could make his books very hard to follow; that they are not is due, I think, to certain characteristics of the French language. If I may be permitted to generalise, French, with its relatively restricted vocabulary and tight sentence structure, lends itself particularly well to a concise, pared-down prose style, though in many French writers this is counteracted by a tendency to rhetoric. In this respect, Simenon, far from being the rough and colloquial writer he is taken to be, is in fact a rather pure French stylist, who takes certain characteristics of classical French prose to an extreme; one could say that his style is a classical French prose purged of rhetoric.

English, on the other hand, with its much wider vocabulary, looser sentence structure, and tendency to discursiveness, is not usually so laconic. (Again, this is a very broad generalisation: think of Hemingway!) When translated “straight”, Simenon often comes across as very jerky and staccato: this is a very noticeable characteristic of some of the weaker translations that have appeared. For my part, I often find myself having to fill out the sentences slightly and smooth over the transitions to get the desired effect. Often it is just a question of adding extra words, relatively unimportant words like “even”, “in fact”, “really”, “certainly”, “now”, etc., partly to convey the meaning more clearly, and partly to give the sentences a smoother rhythm, to help the prose flow better.

One of the reasons Simenon reads so smoothly in French compared with English, despite the abrupt transitions, is his very individual use of tenses, especially of the imperfect. The imperfect in French is commonly used to express either a continuous or a habitual action in the past; but Simenon extends this, often using the imperfect where another writer might use the simple past, or sometimes the past perfect. This much greater than average use of the imperfect allows Simenon to achieve a certain ambiguity regarding time, and to glide easily from one time sequence to another, thus creating a sense of fluidity and even vagueness, which is essential to what everybody thinks of as the Simenon “atmosphere”. This is extremely difficult to convey in English, which has no single equivalent to the imperfect tense. A simple phrase like “il allait au cinéma” could mean, according to the context, “he went to the cinema”, “he used to go to the cinema”, “he was in the habit of going to the cinema”, “he

would go to the cinema”, “he was going to the cinema” or “he had gone to the cinema”. The problem for the translator is that he has, of necessity, to choose only one of these options, so that he risks introducing too much clarity into what is intentionally vague in the original. Again, this can cause Simenon to read more jerkily in English, because the transitions are that much more obvious.

Finally, in this short summary, I should like to touch on another major hazard facing the British translator of Simenon, due not so much to Simenon himself this time as to the fact that the translations appear both in Britain and in the USA. The American publishers regard as the most important factor that the translation should be comprehensible to a contemporary American public, and this overrides the concept of fidelity to the original text. Of course, where it is a question of simply making the vocabulary more American — changing “cinema” to “movie theater”, for example — there can be little objection. But the US publishers also feel free to make changes and cuts whenever they find something unacceptable, especially in the case of a novel set in America.

I experienced something of this with my recent translation of *La Boule noire*, set in Connecticut in the 1950's. In Chapter 7, describing a motor journey, Simenon mentions roadside stands selling, among other things, whisky. This, of course, I translated perfectly literally, only to be assured by the editor that roadside stands in the USA never sell whisky; and so the word “whisky” was changed to “soft drinks”. There were many other factual changes made, which I suppose can be justified: I was told that Simenon makes many factual errors in describing the American scene. Other changes were less expected: for example, when Simenon says of three little Negro boys “Ils se ressemblaient tous les trois”. I was told that it was unacceptably racist, in the USA today, to say that three Negroes looked like each other, though it is quite clear that Simenon is saying that they looked like each other not because they were black but because they were brothers. Despite my objections, this was changed to “They looked at him gravely” — which has nothing to do with the original French.

I hope this very brief summary has given some indication of why translating Simenon into English is considerably more difficult than might be expected.

Howard CURTIS

