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Genre, style and culture in the translation into French of popular fiction

Abstract

This paper considers two authors, Ian Fleming and Dashiell Hammett, who contributed to the popular genres respectively of spy fiction and crime fiction. We examine the changing reception in France of the authors by analysing some examples of how their books were translated when they were published and at the present time. The discussion centres on a consideration, on the one hand of the books' literary qualities, given that they are what George Orwell called 'good-bad' books, and on the other of the wider socio-cultural context that seems to determine the reception of literature of this kind. To highlight the French situation we consider in tandem the sharply contrasting UK socio-cultural context.

Introduction

The category of 'good bad books' was defined by Orwell (1968: 19), in an entertaining essay on the subject, as 'the kind of book that has no literary pretensions but which remains readable when more serious productions have perished'. Genre fiction seems to be in the majority in this category. Orwell (*ibid.*) mentions as an outstanding example the Sherlock Holmes stories, 'which have kept their place when innumerable "problem novels", "human documents" and "terrible indictments" of this or that have fallen into deserved oblivion'. Orwell also cites *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a book that is hard to take seriously by strictly literary criteria. We might therefore add to the list didactic fiction, and risk the generalisation that the category excludes modern mainstream novels, the principal subject of which can be perhaps be defined as the complexity of human relationships, dramatised in settings that are not too far removed from the experience of most readers. This category has emerged fairly recently; since about 1800 in English literature, in contrast to the picaresque that was largely prevalent before then. We consider here Ian Fleming and Dashiell Hammett, who made notable contributions to the good-bad genre known respectively as 'spy fiction' and what is variously labelled crime, detective, noir, policier, etc.

Ian Fleming

For the sympathetic reader, Ian Fleming's James Bond novels and stories are situated towards the 'good' end of the good-bad category. Fleming's brother Peter, himself an accomplished travel writer and journalist, said much the same thing when he described the Bond books as 'tosh' – but tosh of the highest order, fashioned with great professional skill' (Hart-Davis 1974: 355). The books can be placed more or less squarely in the spy story sub-genre of crime fiction (although Bond, strictly, is a secret agent). The spy story, as Symons remarks in his comprehensive survey of the crime genre (1985: 214), 'owed its existence to awareness of the threat to national security implied in professionally organised spying', which is no doubt true so far as the social impulse is concerned. Symons's approach is fairly relentlessly sociological, a position we shall have occasion to nuance in what follows. Fleming (1908–1964), owing to his dates, his implacably anti-Soviet stance and his war-time experience in British Naval Intelligence, was well placed to sketch in six of his twelve James Bond novels an at least superficially plausible cold-war setting, presented from a pro-Western viewpoint. Equally, Fleming's privileged background enabled him to take the spy story in a new direction by setting it in a glamorous international context, replete with luxury brand-names and (for the 1950s and 1960s) exotic locations, most notably Jamaica where Fleming owned a house. This glamour (and his 'sadism'), while providing excitement for many if not most ordinary readers, brought out the puritan in many critics and condemned him at the time to good-bad status at very best.

Amis published in 1965 a diverting and at the same time critically well-informed study of the Bond novels. The study is significant in being one of the first, if not the first, to bring to bear the critical apparatus of the time on a body of popular fiction. Amis deplored the rigid distinction between serious and genre literature, and himself wrote several genre works, including the first post-Fleming Bond novel (*Colonel Sun*, 1968). He was mostly concerned in his 1965 study to rebut the charges of sadism, misogyny and snobbery commonly levelled against Fleming, and to explore what he called the 'Fleming effect', what Larkin (1983: 266) described as:

[...] an adroit blend of realism and extravagance, and both were necessary: the one helped us swallow the other. Because Sir Hugo Drax [the arch-villain of *Moonraker*] had red hair, one ear larger than the other through plastic surgery, and wore a plain gold Patek Philippe watch with a black leather strap, we accepted that his *Moonraker* rocket could blow London to bits.

Larkin went on to point out that the Bond films have now largely overlaid the books in the public imagination: the former 'dispensed with the realism and concentrated on the extravagance, becoming exercises in camped-up absurdity'. This eclipsing of book-Bond by film-Bond has perhaps reinforced the public impression of the books as above all products of popular culture, and of a rather low order at that.

The phrase popular culture evokes of course the opposition between 'high' and 'low' artistic artefacts. A thorough analysis of the differences between high and popular culture would be out of place here, but we can simply state a view that is commonly held by students of popular culture, namely that high and popular cultural practices are generally found in a parallel distribution rather than arranged hierarchically. An earlier view prized high culture while deploring its various opposites – folk culture, mass culture, popular culture – as uneducated, unchallenging, even debasing. The non-hierarchical view, which is of course axiomatic in the academic study of popular culture given the charge laid upon the scholar to describe and analyse but not to prescribe, is also gaining ground outside the academy, at least in societies where an egalitarian post-modern approach increasingly prevails, notably in the Anglo-American context (we discuss the French case below). Within the category of popular culture, it seems reasonable nonetheless to suggest that the complexity quite often found in some products of popular culture situates them on a different level from other, more straightforward or uniplex products. This is in opposition to a populist view that unquestioningly sees all products of popular culture as good, because popular. As Thody points out (1992: 43) in a discussion of the merits and demerits of Gide's *La symphonie pastorale*, 'the line dividing good from good-bad literature is a narrow one'. We might perhaps adopt a different metaphor, and suggest that distinction between good and good-bad literature is porous, so that accomplished and novelettish passages can be found in the same work; this is certainly true of Fleming's novels. Thody suggests further (p. 44) that: 'literary value 'as such', as an identifiable quality to be appreciated and admired, is an even more pointless and elusive will o' the wisp than the philosophers' stone'. It is undeniable that the appreciation of literary value, like any aesthetic value, though real, is entirely subjective. Problems arise when aesthetic judgements are based on socio-political criteria, as they so often are in Britain. These judgments, which will in principle see popular-cultural products as good, will nevertheless distinguish between artefacts which are popular in the sense of being well-liked, as are novels such as Fleming's, and also in the pristine French sense of 'populaire', to do with or promoting working-class culture.

Regarding the opposition between high and low culture, one can suggest that the two types have different aims. We referred above to the distinction between mainstream and genre fiction, and in this distinction mainstream or serious literature has higher pretensions, aims perhaps at 'transcendence' while popular fiction appeals to the more everyday aspects of human nature. Fleming himself was at pains to disclaim any literary pretension in his work; among his pronouncements quoted by Amis are: 'My books tremble on the brink of corn' and '[I am concerned in] the business of getting intelligent, uninhibited adolescents of all ages [...] to turn over the page'. As Amis remarks (1965: 141), such remarks were hardly likely to bolster Fleming's standing among critics. A larger issue refers to the UK cultural context, where, as Wheatcroft suggests (2005: 271): 'Both in academic discourse and in practical politics, class conflict has been superseded by 'culture wars'; and the other great truth of the age is that the right has won politically while the left has won culturally'. The obvious socio-historical explanation of the political victory of the right is to be found in the economic history of the past thirty or so years, which saw monetarism mobilised in response to the oil shocks of the 1970s. The doctrine has not been successfully challenged since, and it is a commonplace that politico-economic discourse in the UK and most other comparable countries is now located in the centre-right. That the left has 'won culturally' can perhaps be interpreted simply as the irreversibility of the broadly populist post-war socio-cultural developments which have proceeded independently of the rightward economic and

political restructuring of recent times. The ‘cultural victory of the left’, admittedly a vague phrase, seems to refer to a requirement imposed by critics upon writers (indeed all artists) to promote working-class values and attack the ‘establishment’. This entails that all art should be didactic or at least ‘committed’; the view ignores the independence of art from its subject-matter (as opposed to its manner of handling).

The issue is in any event not new, and certainly predates the period just referred to: in an essay on *Gulliver’s Travels*, Orwell (1968: 223) suggests that:

It is often argued, at least by people who admit the importance of subject-matter, that a book cannot be ‘good’ if it expresses a palpably false view of life. We are told that in our own age, any book that has literary merit will also be more or less ‘progressive’ in tendency. This ignores the fact that throughout history a similar struggle between progress and reaction has been raging, and that the best books of any one age have always been written from several viewpoints, some of them palpably more false than others.

Since Orwell’s time the view that books having literary merit will be progressive has, as was suggested above, overtaken ‘the importance of subject-matter’, and the view now applies to genre fiction too. We have seen that Fleming’s fiction is highly implausible, though deftly covered with a veneer of realism. In this sense a parallel with the spy novels of John le Carré is not very close, since the latter author’s work seems more ‘realistic’ (so far as the uninstructed reader can judge) in portraying the less spectacular and more sordid aspects of espionage. Like Fleming, le Carré had direct experience of intelligence work. As to the ‘view of life’ expressed, the example of le Carré’s work shows that spy novels can receive a warm critical reception if they affirm the cultural victory of the left just referred to, in the sense of presenting a ‘balanced’ picture that eschews any suggestion of the moral superiority of one’s own country. The contrast with Fleming’s unreflecting patriotism is obvious, as is the motivation behind the ‘snobbery with sadism’ label often affixed to his work. We shall see below that the French situation does not fit comfortably with the cultural left–right polarity sketched above.

Aesthetic judgments are subjective, as already stated, but an exchange like the following, from Fleming’s *You Only Live Twice*, between Bond and Tiger Tanaka, the head of the Japanese Secret Service, illustrates the porosity between high and popular culture. The context is that Bond is about to take on Tanaka in a game of rock-paper-scissors, and asks for a larger glass from which to drink his saké:

Bond: Is there such a thing as a lowly glass tumbler discarded in some corner behind the cabinets of Ming?

Tanaka: Bondo-san. Ming is Chinese. Your knowledge of porcelain is as meagre as your drinking habits are gross.

A simpler correlative construction compares like with like, at least in terms of the subject, although its attributes must of course vary: ‘algebra is as boring as it is difficult’. Tanaka’s utterance is more complex in basically adhering to the grandiose Latin quot . . . tot structure, such that it could be rephrased: ‘As your knowledge of porcelain is meagre, so your drinking habits are gross’. The latter formulation would have produced an even more high-flown effect, as in Burns’ ‘As fair art thou, my bonnie lass / So deep in love am I’. As it is we can suggest that the construction, presented in dialogue, represents a compromise between the learned nature of the construction and its use in speech.

Fleming’s second attribute as mentioned by Larkin, his ‘vividly bizarre imagination’, may be illustrated by a passage from *Diamonds are Forever*. In the following scene Bond, who is posing as a diamond smuggler so as to infiltrate a criminal ring, meets Michael ‘Shady’ Tree, the mob’s New York contact.

They crossed the frayed carpet to a glass-fronted door and the driver knocked and walked through without waiting for an answer. Bond followed him and shut the door.

A man with very bright red hair and a big peaceful moon-shaped face was sitting at a desk. There was a glass of milk in front of him. He stood up as they came in and Bond saw he was a hunchback. Bond didn't remember having seen a red-haired hunchback before. He could imagine that the combination would be useful for frightening the small fry who worked for the gang.

The hunchback moved slowly round the desk and over to where Bond was standing. He walked round Bond, making a show of examining him minutely from head to foot, and then he came and stood close in front of Bond and looked up into his face. Bond looked impassively back into a pair of china eyes that were so empty and motionless that they might have been hired from a taxidermist. Bond had the feeling that he was being subjected to some sort of test. Casually he looked back at the hunchback, noting the big ears with rather exaggerated lobes, the dry red lips of the big half-open mouth, the almost complete absence of a neck, and the short powerful arms in the expensive yellow silk shirt, cut to make room for the barrel-like chest and the sharp hump.

The first published French translation of this passage (Watkins 1957) is as follows:

Le chauffeur alla frapper à une porte de verre dépoli et entra sans attendre de réponse. Bond le suivit et tira la porte derrière lui.

Un homme aux cheveux d'un rouge agressif, au large visage lunaire et paisible, était assis à un bureau, un verre de lait devant lui. Il se leva à leur entrée. Bond s'aperçut que l'autre était bossu. C'était la première fois de sa vie qu'il voyait un rouquin bossu, mais la combinaison de ces deux éléments devait être fort utile pour effrayer le menu fretin qui travaillait pour le gang.

Le bossu fit lentement le tour du bureau et vint examiner attentivement Bond de la tête aux pieds, puis il se planta devant lui et le dévisagea. Bond demeura impassible devant ces yeux d'un bleu de porcelaine. Ils étaient fixes et vagues. On aurait dit des yeux de verre. Bond avait l'impression qu'on était en train de le jauger. A son tour, il examina discrètement le bossu et remarqua les grandes oreilles aux lobes trop larges, les lèvres sèches et rouges, la bouche entrouverte, l'absence de cou et les bras courts et puissants sous la chemise de soie jaune, taillée à la mesure du torse massif et de la bosse.

This passage and its translation illustrate several related points. Firstly, the original has been subjected in translation to a certain amount of reorganisation and compression, and this is reflected in the length of the source and target texts – 237 and 204 words. One result is to speed up the French narrative, thereby reducing the cumulative tension of the original. This is perhaps best exemplified by the rendering of the second sentence of the third paragraph of the original, which in translation is compressed from 32 words to 19. The use of a slang term in French – rouquin for red-head – lessens the tension between the subject matter and the formal, or at least largely uncolloquial, style of writing. Where the original is presented mostly from Bond's point of view, which is crucial to the narrative, the translation either modulates it to a free indirect style – 'la combinaison de ces deux éléments devait être fort utile' – or expresses a passive using the admittedly common 'on' construction: 'Bond avait l'impression qu'on était en train de le jauger.' By suppressing 'some sort of', the translator attenuates slightly the noticeably contemptuous stance that Bond has towards the organisers of the ring he has been ordered to break. In general, the translation takes considerable liberties with the original, and this reflects a broader attitude that we discuss below. We can remark here briefly that Fleming's reception in French is now quite respectful; we discuss this shift in more detail in relation to Dashiell Hammett, since the explanation fits both cases.

Dashiell Hammett

Dashiell Hammett (1894–1961) is perhaps a borderline candidate for inclusion in the ‘good-bad’ category, despite having published quite a large quantity of pulp fiction which he himself in later life saw no reason to preserve. Some of his novels are works of art, in passages at least; this is hardly surprising, in view of the evident fact, already illustrated, that ambitious effects can often be found in the humbler types of fiction, and pedestrian passages in serious texts. Hammett is generally credited with the introduction, or at least the popularisation, of the ‘hard-boiled’ school of detective fiction, characterised by a cynical narrative viewpoint and violence that is sometimes capable of distressing the reader. His fiction marked a sharp departure from the ‘body-in-the-library’ type, designed largely to provide a puzzle capable of solution through deduction under an agreed set of rules. Hard-boiled fiction as practised by Hammett was more veridical, to the extent that fiction can be; the crimes described in the stories seem at all events to be more likely to occur than the typical country-house murder. He has always been well received in the UK, and aside from his literary merits we can suggest that this is in part because of his cynicism; as Symons points out (1985: 125), in *Red Harvest*, his first novel, ‘the police are crooked almost to a man’, as indeed they are in most of his fiction, if they are not inept. There can be little doubt that the US police were quite largely corrupt during Prohibition, the period when the novels were set, but for the purposes of the present argument it seems legitimate to assume that Symons’ very favourable judgment of Hammett’s work has a political as much as an aesthetic motive.

In the 1988 Cambridge Guide to English Literature, the article on Hammett states that he ‘wrote in an unadorned, realistic manner [...] that suited his material perfectly’. Statements of this kind are in the province of literary theory, and largely beyond our scope here, although it does seem intuitively obvious that the alliance of an unedifying subject-matter and a euphuistic style would result in incongruity. Symons (1985: 125) refers to Hammett’s ‘bareness of [...] style in which everything superficial in the way of description has been removed’, while acknowledging that he did not write ‘realistically in a documentary sense’. The term ‘realistic’ is of course a difficult one, as is illustrated by the following passage from *The Dain Curse* (1929), Hammett’s second novel. A minor character called Rhino Tingley is counting his money, witnessed by the narrator.

Rhino said: ‘Ain’t nobody’s business where I got my money. I got it. I got—’ he put his cigar on the edge of the table, picked up the money, wet a thumb as big as a heel on a tongue like a bath-mat, and counted his roll bill by bill down on the table. ‘Twenty—thirty—eighty—hundred—hundred and ten—two hundred and ten—three hundred and ten—three hundred and thirty-five—four hundred and thirty-five—five hundred and thirty-five—five hundred and eighty-five—six hundred and five—six hundred and ten—six hundred and twenty—seven hundred and twenty—eight hundred and twenty—eight hundred and thirty—eight hundred and forty—nine hundred and forty—nine hundred and sixty—nine hundred and seventy—nine hundred and seventy-five—nine hundred and ninety-five—ten hundred and fifteen—ten hundred and twenty—eleven hundred and twenty—eleven hundred and seventy. Anybody want to know what I got, that’s what I got—eleven hundred and seventy dollars. Anybody want to know where I got it, maybe I tell them, maybe I don’t. Just depend on how I feel about it.

The 1950 French rendering shows a compression that is really rather cavalier:

- Ça regarde personne où je ramasse mon fric, dit Rhino. Je l’ai eu... J’ai...
- Il posa son cigare sur le bord de la table, rafla l’argent, humecta un pouce gros comme un poignet avec une langue aussi longue qu’un tapis de bain et compta son magot en empilant les billets un par un sur la table.
- Vingt, trente, quatre-vingts, cent, cent dix...
- Il arriva ainsi à onze cent soixante-dix, et reprit :

– Si quelqu'un veut savoir ce que j'ai, conclut-il, v'là c'que j'ai. Onze cent soixante-dix dollars. Si quelqu'un veut savoir comment j'les ai ramassés, p't'être j'y dis, p't'être j'y dis pas. Ça dépend comment j'suis luné.

The ruthless abbreviation of the 95-word list hardly needs pointing out. We can perhaps count this as writing 'realistically in a documentary sense', to the extent that the most 'realistic' narrative almost always suppresses detail of this kind, and is thus in fact highly conventional. We are brought up short when the convention is flouted, whether our reaction is irritation or admiration.

The 'bareness' referred to above is therefore unevenly distributed, but it remains true that the stories are often characterised by a terseness and lack of sentiment which sit well with the protagonist and anti-hero narrator of many of the stories and two of the novels, the 'Continental Op'. The first sentence of *Fly Paper*, one of the frequently collected stories, is representative: 'It was a wandering daughter job'. The plot is summarised in six words, and the narrator's attitude towards it of weariness and venality established. Examples could be multiplied, but of greater interest here is the serious, perhaps even over-earnest literary intent that informed Hammett's work, evidence of which is to be found even in the early hard-boiled stories. A single example may suffice, taken from *Red Harvest*. Part of the description of Dan Rolff, a minor character, runs as follows: 'His voice was a sick man's and an educated man's.' Stretches of affectation like this are out of tune with the generally demotic nature of the narrative.

The following passage, from *The Dain Curse*, is especially notable in presenting a display of learning, but in a derisive way that accords with the narrator's cynical and philistine approach. But the general point, that it is 'out of place' in a hard-boiled detective novel, still stands:

On my way back to the agency I dropped in on Fitzstephan for half an hour. He was writing, he told me, an article for the *Psychopathological Review* – that's probably wrong, but it was something on that order – condemning the hypothesis of an unconscious or sub-conscious mind as a snare and a delusion, a pitfall for the unwary and a set of false whiskers for the charlatan, a gap in psychology's roof that made it impossible, or nearly, for the sound scholar to smoke out such faddists as, for example, the psychoanalyst and the behaviourist, or words to that effect. He went on like that for ten minutes or more, finally coming back to the United States with: 'But how are you getting along with the problem of the elusive diamonds?'

This is 'literary' in the sense that strictly speaking it is redundant in a crime novel of the type that Hammett wrote, since it does nothing to advance the plot, although it may be designed to deflect attention from Fitzstephan as a suspect. It can hardly be described as portentous or overwritten, and the humour, best illustrated by the use of 'or nearly' and the long series of images beginning with 'a snare', is highly developed. Indeed, the passage is fairly complex, in that Hammett contrives to introduce a quite learned flourish and to mock it by presenting it from the narrator's debunking point of view. The 1950 French rendering is as follows:

Je repris le chemin de l'agence et m'arrêtai chez Fitzstephan pendant une demi-heure. Il était en train d'écrire, me dit-il, un article pour la *Revue Psychopathologique* ou quelque chose de ce genre. Il vaticinait sur son sujet pendant dix minutes, puis revint finalement sur terre en me disant :

– Et ce problème des diamants escamotés, au fait, ça avance ?

Here the sixty-odd words in the source text facetiously describing Fitzstephan's article are compressed into the verb 'vaticinait', literally 'prophesied', perhaps here suitably translated as 'pontificated'.

The observations set out above are not new; Robyns (1990) has a detailed account of the quite systematic practice prevalent in French publishing houses during the relevant period of gutting translated detective fiction (and spy fiction, as in Fleming's case) of much 'extraneous' matter of the

type exemplified above; that is, passages which, irrespective of their literary interest, do little or nothing to further the plot. This appears then to be a very concrete example of the French cultural elitism which prevailed until quite recently. Before examining evidence of Hammett's more recent seeming rehabilitation in France, we examine how the French cultural context has evolved recently.

The French cultural context

As previously suggested, the appreciation of literary merit, like any aesthetic value, though real, is entirely subjective. Complications arise when aesthetic judgements are based on socio-political criteria, as they so often are in Britain, where a kind of puritan populism is detectable. We have already referred to Wheatcroft's suggestion that in the UK 'the right has won politically while the left has won culturally'. What is especially notable in France is an attitude of social or cultural conservatism in several French commentators whose stance is on the political left. The French situation shows the obvious fact that the political terms 'left' and 'right' are in large measure nation-specific. Almost the entire landscape in France tilts 'left', if by this is meant, in a democratic context, 'characteristic of greater state intervention', in all matters: political, economic, social, cultural. Along with this statism goes an aspiration for cultural uplift. Perhaps the most striking example of a French intellectual who is not notably right-wing but who has attacked cultural democracy is Alain Finkielkraut; the title of his book, *La Défaite de la Pensée* (1987), speaks for itself. He is very vocal in his opposition to cultural levelling of the kind that, for example, refuses to distinguish between the quality of Mozart and rap music (his examples). The prominent left-wing writer Régis Debray (1992: 18) has an analogous approach, as shown by the following quotation:

La République, c'est la Liberté plus la Raison. L'Etat de droit, plus la Justice. La Tolérance, plus la volonté. La Démocratie, dirons-nous, c'est ce qui reste d'une République quand on éteint les Lumières.¹

This line of thought shows clearly the element of the republican tradition that lays stress on the republic as a rational enterprise, informed by the Enlightenment ('les Lumières', in the untranslatable pun), and on duties as well as rights, including the citizen's duty of participation in the polity. This in turn depends on education. While other national contexts do not lack discussion of 'dumbing down', notably of institutions like the BBC, which in the Reithian tradition has or has had an educational and even morally improving role, the idea of upward rather than downward levelling, with the aim of full and responsible participation by the citizen in the democratic process, seems more central to the French republican concept.

For the purposes of this discussion, it is significant that French socio-cultural élites, including of course publishers and their editors, certainly shared and no doubt to some extent still share the *élitisme républicain* or 'elitism for all' which either disprizes popular culture, or in a seeming paradox seeks to assimilate it to high culture. The paradox is superficial, because in a state where a tradition of official promotion of the arts is firmly entrenched, that promotion will be shaped by the differing views of influential personalities. This tradition is beyond dispute; Looseley (1995: 2), citing the French historian Jean-Pierre Rioux (1991: 10), points out that:

France has always distinguished itself from other developed nations by 'l'effort séculaire que l'Etat et ses fonctionnaires ont consacré à la transmission, au partage et à l'enrichissement d'une 'culture' largement entendue et dont ils ont estimé qu'elle relevait sans conteste du domaine de l'administration générale'.²

¹ The Republic is liberty plus reason, the rule of law plus justice, tolerance plus will. We may say that democracy is what remains of a republic when the lights have been switched off.

² The constant effort that the State and its servants have devoted to the transmission, sharing and enrichment of a 'culture' understood in a wide sense, and which they have deemed to fall incontestably within the remit of general government.

This is no doubt allied to the sense prevalent in France of the uniqueness of her national culture, expressed in the phrase ‘exception culturelle’, in marked contrast to other ‘developed’ nations, for instance the UK, where arts funding is capable of polarising the political left and right. Looseley’s book traces the influence exercised by the French Culture Minister Jack Lang during the 1981–1993 Socialist administration. Lang’s promotion of popular culture aroused the fury of high-culture intellectuals like Alain Finkielkraut, in part perhaps because some popular genres like pop music are not native to France. The earlier condescending attitude to Hammett’s fiction, as shown by the summary translations accorded to it, may stem partly from the same cause, as well as from the elitism discussed above that sixty years ago saw detective fiction as devoid of literary merit.

Aside from formal initiatives like those described above, pursued in the dirigiste transition, we can point out more generally that popular culture tends strongly to be assimilated to high culture, just as middle-class language very often adopts, at least in the contemporary period, working-class linguistic forms. For instance, the operettas of Gilbert and Sullivan, despised by many in their day, would now be generally agreed to be highbrow or at least middlebrow culture. While the French Impressionist School was widely regarded at its inception as a bad joke at best, Impressionist paintings now undoubtedly form part of the canon of high culture, to the point of attracting derision from contemporary cultural iconoclasts. Collovald and Neveu (2004: 19), in their study of the contemporary reception of detective fiction (including non-French authors in the genre), have a discussion of those whom they call the ‘cultural entrepreneurs’ responsible for rehabilitating certain authors. Unsurprisingly, these are publishers, publishers’ editors and academics, but also enthusiasts less formally connected with the cultural industry.

The situation is of course complex, and whatever the precise mechanisms responsible for the changing fortunes of some authors, it seems indisputable that Hammett’s rehabilitation, or perhaps absorption into respectable culture, is from the French viewpoint well under way, if not complete. This is illustrated by the publication of a 2009 omnibus edition of his five novels translated into French, accompanied by a good deal of biographical and critical information. The translations are moreover highly respectful of the originals. It would be tedious to reproduce the 2009 French translation of the scene in *The Dain Curse* where Rhino Tingley counts his money; suffice it to say that the long list is reproduced in full in the recent rendering. The contemporary translation of the mock-literary intrusion into the same novel, quoted and discussed earlier, is however worth quoting:

En retournant à l’agence, je fis halte une demi-heure chez Fitzstephan. Il rédigeait, me dit-il, un article pour la Revue de psychopathologie (ce titre est probablement erroné, mais c’était quelque chose comme ça) qui condamnait l’hypothèse d’une dimension inconsciente ou subconsciente de l’esprit, jouant le rôle de leurre et de tromperie, de piège pour l’imprudent et de postiche pour le charlatan, une faille dans la structure de la psychologie qui rend impossible, ou quasiment, pour le spécialiste sain d’esprit de chasser de leurs trous en les enfumant les représentants de professions à la mode tels les psychanalystes et les psychologues comportementalistes, ou je ne sais quelle théorie à l’avenant. Il poursuivit sur sa lancée pendant dix minutes au moins et revint enfin dans le monde réel en disant : « Mais où en est-tu, avec ton problème de diamants envolés ? »

In marked contrast to the 1950 translation, the more recent version is longer than the original – 142 words against 130. The fidelity to the original entails more words, inevitably given that French uses post-modifying constructions where English has the advantage of more compact expression, such that ‘faddists’ in the original gives ‘représentants de professions à la mode’, while the phrasal verb ‘smoke out’ has the unavoidable circumlocution ‘chasser [de leurs trous] en les enfumant’. The French tendency to abstraction is illustrated in the rendering of ‘a gap in psychology’s roof’ by ‘une faille dans la structure de la psychologie’. The point is worth making because of the high expansion rate usually seen in translation from English to French. The compression in the earlier translation of *The Dain Curse* is therefore radical, and involves considerable cutting throughout.

We referred above to an ‘attitude of social or cultural conservatism’ noticeable in France. This phrase, like ‘the cultural victory of the left’, is rather vague but implies an ability to distinguish between politico-sociological and aesthetic judgments. This ability is noticeable in Orwell’s writings; he was a man of the left but had strong artistic preferences that were independent of his politics. As we have argued, this approach seems more widespread in France. The aesthetic judgments visited in France upon Fleming and Hammett, at least by ‘cultural entrepreneurs’, have mutated in the last fifty or so years, judging by his treatment by French translators. The shift to cultural populism is no doubt common to most comparable nations, but the top-down role played by the French state gives the country a curious uniqueness that does line up quite closely with its self-perception.

Concluding remarks

The highly pervasive influence at all levels of culture upon language, and hence upon translation, can hardly be overstated; we have examined here a wider cultural context in which this influence is exerted. Cultural shift as shown through translation, as of course through other practices, seems broadly to be proceeding in the same direction across more or less comparable countries, but the subtle inflections that differentiate each case merit further investigation.

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