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GERONIMO AS TRANSLATOR

To read crime fiction from a foreign culture is a paradoxical experience. On the one hand the act of reading is sucked in by the genre's specific vortex. The reader wants to know what comes next. On the other hand it will elicit a spontaneous theory of literature-as-a-mirror-of-culture in the reader's mind. In his reading depth replaces speed and the novel becomes a historical (ethnological, sociological, etc...) document. In an advanced foreign language and culture class both strategies, speed and depth, are didactically useful... and have their pitfalls. In the *speed* strategy, acquiring the language or that specific brand of language is no more a formalistic exercise but a necessary tool to follow a pleasurable story. But the story may be only coarsely understood and the language may be considered too "transparent" by a hurried reader. In the *depth* strategy, which the pedagogical frame itself tends to push to prominence, language is examined closely. Also, realistic novels are obviously a good reservoir of cultural information from which to tap. But why would such a long detour along the path of the thriller be necessary in order to penetrate this foreign culture? No doubt it's dealt with more directly in other readily available sources. Can the reader really learn anything more than what lies in conventional documentation? I would rather suggest that he learns it *differently* through the novels.

The *roman policier* is itself a school of suspicion. The detective is suspicious by trade, his scepticism is technical. Technical scepticism meets the sceptical ethos of popular novels. It is precisely this oscillation of the genre which permits the novel to teach *something else* and *differently*, just as long as the reader accepts the cognitive approach of a "bottom-up" understanding of the book (i.e. from a particular story to general assumptions on culture) instead of starting "top-to-bottom", with a pre-existing encyclopoedic knowledge about a foreign society. Hence, I will first examine a short series where this oscillation is particularly evident, Jean Amila's "Géronimo/vs/ Foderch" stories : *La Nef des dingues* (1972), *Contest-flic* (1972), *Terminus Léna* (1973)¹. Only then will we come to understand the series' context as that of a crisis not only of French society and some of its Great Narratives², but also of the thriller genre itself, in its forms and its cultural industry, and within French psyche.

UNSETTLED GENRE AND OXYMORONIC HERO

Where to fit the Amila series ? Three tales of espionage or three cop novels? Actually, the series throws the two universes of police and *Spionspiel* against each other in an irreconcilable conflict. Géronimo does not accept the *Spionspiel* maxim "he who wants the end also wants the means". "Géronimo" is the designation of officer Magne's singularity: the onomastic equivalent of his bandanna and his long hair, which were then totally uncommon in his line of work. A case of "appearances can be deceiving"? Thanks to his disguise, could Géronimo be aiming to baffle the hooligans? Actually, the reader rapidly understands that it's not the case at all. Géronimo is really, authentically, albeit inconsistently both cop and hippie, a contradiction with which the narration deals at the level of Géronimo's psychology

and the tolerance of the institution to which he belongs.

The narrative sits on a fence between two genres and between the two State apparatuses which inform them. The character is stuck between two worlds the reader discovers to be incompatible. A figure is being drawn which could well embody the series' fundamental principle: *the contradictory in-between*. The cop+hippie oxymoron is not equivalent to the espionage/cop novel in-between. On the contrary, Geronimo's heretical relation with his home State apparatus worsens the contradiction between police and intelligence service. The hero's motto could be "*Geronimo perhaps, but no hooligan*" (in *argot*, the word *apache* used to stand for that concept). Or, "Cop perhaps, but no spy".

Amila's stories are certainly as political as most French neo-*polar* of post 1968 flavour, to which Amila served as a founding father figure. But they prove more complex with their subtle and improbable narrative solutions - the oxymoronic hero, the indecisive genre, and the discomfort linked to *in-between-ness*. The student-reader must become aware of the fact that simple questions (What genre? Who is the hero?) have immediately ambiguous, indecisive or complex answers.

GREAT NARRATIVES AND LITTLE NAMES

Amila series may be considered popular literature (i. e. not over-written). Its writing draws the reader's attention to the stuff fiction is made of, pre-existing stories and words. *La Nef des dingues* reveals how characters, no matter how harmless they may seem, can become dangerous because of the way they all more or less incarnate a Great Narrative: inebriating themselves with a Great Narrative. The Great Narrative of the defense-of-superior-State-interests authorizes the ordinary ignominies of Foderch's gang. It opposes and yet complements another Great Narrative: Albert Camus' experience of estrangement. The reader can appreciate this flavour of revolt after a Camus-inspired punk, Dorf, uses a steel-toed sock to kill an old man. The Great Narrative of the Apocalypse is represented by the naïve fleeing businessman Meyer's peculiar idiom, whose narrative is absolutely appropriate to describe the murder of a delinquent teenager. Even Geronimo models himself after a Great Narrative: Duty.

But Geronimo sees the monologism of Great Narratives (Truth for Dorf, Vengeful God for Meyer...) and their inability to be transformed quite less clearly than Amila. Most importantly, he doesn't realize that there is no possible translation from one to the other. Total incredulity with regard to the Great Narratives is instead to be found in Pipou the psychopath, as well as in Mad, Geronimo's girlfriend, a positive but also sceptic type. Pipou's captious libido knows how to manipulate Great Narratives and Mad's scepticism immediately sees their fictitious nature.

But alas, one does not get rid of words so easily, as is shown in a new peculiar development of the figure of contradictory *in-between-ness*. Indeed, the characters in this novel live *in-between names*. Every character engaged in this lethal story, besides a birth name, is endowed with a nickname: Nono and Sosso, Bob and Pipou, Dorf and Bri, Mad and Doudou... "Saint-Ange" protects Foderch's agent's anonymity (Foderch, or *faux-cul*, *argot* for hypocrite, being a generic name for spies in Amila's series.) This "angel" which has become the signifier's guardian (*ange* in French) in Solange's Christian name, gives Pipou a hard-on. This orgy of names applies to the hero of course, Édouard Magne, a.k.a. Geronimo, a.k.a. Doudou...

The signature itself, Amila, is gripped by this vertigo of the inadequate word: his first name *Jean* became *John* in the *Série Noire*³.. Isn't Amila a foreign name? American perhaps, by virtue of the *Série noire*? but also perhaps latino, like that Geronimo, a post-modern and weary copy of the proud warrior who opposed the American State. The name Geronimo precisely reflects, by its dual American and outsider origin, Spanish and Apache, the cosmopolitan syncretism of the "John/Jean Amila" signature. *Amila* is more importantly a pseudonym, placed in stead of *Meckert*, the name of the author's father who was unjustly executed by firing squad. What's in a name? For Amila, his signature assumes the infamy of the father's death and his own cultural de-territorialisation. It finally entrusts him with the mission of denouncing the State's perversity.

THE FICTION AND ITS MASTER

The continuation of the series uses this contradiction of Great Narratives and misappropriated names again, and proposes in *Contest-flic* and *Terminus Léna* two different twinings of the same two narrative threads: the appeal to truth and the mastery of fiction. *Contest-flic* sees the return of the "angel". This sign seems accessory at a first glance. But it curiously floats, like a jazz melody, on the harmonic and rhythmical structure of the narrative, echo of older "angels". Transparent language, the simplistic pitfall of the *speed* strategy, is out of place here. Such a text's depth is designed to draw attention to the fragility imposed upon Geronimo by the figure of *in-between-ness*. *Anges*, here, in the distance (Cannes' bay of Angels), there with fat *Angèle* (Angela) who serves the coffee... Actually, *mon ange* "my Angel" as hypocoristic, as affectionate nickname, puts the reader, if not Geronimo, on the path of the interpretative lesson of that text's multi-layering. The nickname is a clue to his modest place in the pecking order: that of a child, or amorous and antiphrastic nickname of the big boy, as Hilda says:

Mon Doudou, tu es un ange vachement sexué. (p. 156).

[Doudou honey, you are one hell of a sexy angel.]

The institutional tolerance for the cop-hippie contradiction mentioned earlier is incarnated by Geronimo's chief, "papa Verdier". Geronimo himself can be fooled, and he lets himself be gently tricked by the status of chief and the name "papa Verdier" itself. It is more properly a maternal brand of protection he is given here: the protection of Little Magne by Papa Verdier. Geronimo's place in that dyad is as ambiguous as his angel's place in the dyad with his lover Hilda, and as ambiguous as his hero's status.

Cognition plays a part in the stuff of the narrative as well as words. Thus, *Commissaire Dommergue* chooses a scenario, a fiction, to frame an hypothesis for his case. Geronimo, presuming less but using the same cognitive tool, finds himself between two hypotheses for which it would be necessary to construct fictions and stipulations: spy at work? or sleazy crime? Where lies the truth? But here the novel transforms itself into a radical formulation of the question: "What is truth?". For Geronimo, truth is not a simulation, nor is it a fiction. Rather, it is an equation. In his cop style version of Aristotelism, it is the right adjustment of the proposition to the facts, the adequate propositional explanation of the facts. In other words, the explanation must encapsulate the facts. The equation is summed up by the culprit's name: it is Gastaldi - both drug dealer and Foderch's "sleeper" - who is responsible

for the Hauselman family's murder.

But Géronimo is made painfully aware that knowing how to investigate, how to collect information is not enough. Even unmasking a culprit is not enough. One must first know how to put it all into words. Furthermore, a communication channel is not enough. One still has to find a friendly ear. Finally, it is not enough to have convinced an addressee; one must also address someone who can act. Truth, for a police officer, is Foderch's guilt. But Géronimo will eventually find out that, at the *Spionspiel* level, truth is only a narrative which, measured in comparison to all the possible narratives, is rather less convincing than fiction. And the interpretation which wins over the others, the espionage interpretation, both invents and expounds a conceptual oxymoron: truth-fiction! The Great Narrative of the *roman policier* truth cannot be distinguished in the midst of the noise and confusion rising from the other Great narratives' general canto. Too rigid, too straightforward, ill-transformable, ill-adaptable, truth bends not, but perhaps breaks.

No doubt Amila would not resolve this dead lock. In the following novel, it is rather Mad and her common sense which come back to play the role of *messenger of truth*. But the stakes are displaced, the question not being "What is truth?" anymore, but "Who masters fiction?". *Terminus Léna* rapidly gives away its inter-textual key, through ostensible parody: the actor Charles-Évariste Stern plays in a film adapted from Balzac, *Une ténébreuse Affaire*. Later, the director explains the difference between the world of police and that of espionage. The reader can thus easily translate. It's like the antagonism between the counter-espionage service and the PJ (police judiciaire: civil police department). The redundant recourse to *Une ténébreuse Affaire* can no longer pass unnoticed, even to an inattentive reader. Slipping from the Great Narrative to the Great Novel, Géronimo's saga has passed from the confrontation between Great Narratives to the more skewed game of parody and paradox.

Terminus Léna goes a step further in the series. It still inherits the oxymoronic hero, the indecisive genre, the discomfort linked to *in-between-ness*, the stuff post-modernity is made of (dangerous Great Narratives, inadequate words, truth as a poor brand of fiction) but it also represents the interpretative perception of the reader himself. This novel about blurred perception is framed by two edges, two interpreters, two women, two kinds of reading: Mad the hippie and Laurence the actress. Mad's reading firmly maintains a rational hypothesis: that everything is dependent on the *Spionspiel*. Mad can thus show the misinformation process: she exhibits and explains its process of infinite refraction. The film being made - a fiction - evokes a false conspiracy at the time of the Napoleonic Empire. It has been set up by real schemers, whose set is full of false actors who are actually real spies... (do you follow?) . On the other hand, Laurence, who is mentally unbalanced, confuses everything and, understanding neither *Spionspiel* nor the actors' paradox, no longer knows who is who, or who she is. Thus, she can only over-interpret and misinterpret what happens to her (still following?).

THE THRILLER AND ITS FRENCH CONTEXT

All this should not discourage an Anglophone student from continuing to learn "something else in another way". How can we make this Amila series a pedagogical door opening onto French culture? First, the teacher will provide some help with the reading of the Amila series, underline some crucial formal, psychological or

philosophical components of the narratives (as this paper has attempted to do). In the bottom-up approach, the teacher's role is that of helper. Then the teacher will move on to the top-to-bottom phase, and replace the Amila series in the dual context of the French thriller's story and the social crisis which came to a head in 1968. His role will then be that of information provider.

Notwithstanding the crucial part played by its political component, the 1968 crisis had a primarily socio-cultural base, consisting in an attempt to adjust quickly to the modernity, for which the United States (powerful and successful) served as model. The ideological influence, the commercial strength of the American media, translations being cheaper than French originals, etc...: although obvious, these reasons would not be sufficient to explain why the thriller rooted itself so deeply in the French paraliterary genres system. At first known as *roman noir* the thriller has been baptized *polar* - the slang equivalent of *roman policier* - starting in the sixties. The language itself reveals how much the genre had become an intrinsic part of the culture. Actually, the history of adventure and mystery genres revolving around the *roman policier* reveals a great deal about the history of French culture, especially in the way it metabolized American cultural inputs. Between 1945 and 1968, to be successful in France, an American genre had to pick up on an established and reshapable French tradition, accept an ambiguous sociosymbolic value, and become a cultural code through which French authors and their readership could express something culturally relevant and functional for them.


The Géronimo series would come to mark a new dense and accelerated cycle in the history of the French *polar*. As early as 1965 there had been a certain re-organisation and distribution of the readership within the collections - the climb of SF, the rapid increase of the number of television sets, etc... All this on the background of an irresistible "schooling of society"⁴. Let us remember that, traditionally, the taste for paraliterature was inversely proportional to the degree of formal education. In the '70's the *Série noire* had gained an ambiguous position of distinction in the field of the *roman policier* that would make it a haven for the political themes which sprung from the students' riots of May 1968 and their protest against the State. From the early '70's on, A.D.G. and Raf Vallet on the right, Jean-Patrick Manchette and Jean Vautrin on the left would set the tone. Born in 1910, completely anchored in the *Série noire* since his beginnings, Amila played the role of ancestor for the *néo-polar*. But Amila's position with respect to ideology was more complex than the *néo-polar*'s. Géronimo was influenced by the small and marginal characters who were the protagonists of his novels of the '50's and '60's, but also from the detective's professional ethics typical of the American thriller transposed to the French Civil Service. His sceptical asceticism, acquired during the course of the three novels, managed also to reframe the Great Narratives without preaching illegality. He did so with the idea of game-play.


The reader must accompany Géronimo in his groping search and go beyond the simple predisposition to doubt. In the process the student-reader learns indeed something else on French culture, and learns it differently. Within the act of reading itself, he must pass from a language-conscious type of reading (from the fleeting character of names to parody) and a reflective style of reading (fictional representation of a problematic moment in French culture, with its critique of the State) to the discovery of the game. Amila shows his reader the catastrophic nature of the Great Narratives, the perversity of the State, the fragility of the Name-of-


the-father. He does so without using Nietzsche or Wittgenstein, and many years before the philosophical theoretization of post-modernism by Jean-François Lyotard. With his literature Amila faced the death of God, and with his courage he faced the right-wingers who literally tried to crack his head. The series makes his reader experience the wealth and the discomfort of *in-between-ness*, of the translator's position - the literary representation of the intercultural process within which the student is himself an agent.

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¹  Since in such a brief paper these novels can't be adequately summed up, references will remain allusive. Even though the paper gives readers a sketchy idea, nothing would compare with the actual reading of those three good thrillers.

²  The concept of Great Narrative is drawn from Jean-François Lyotard (1983), a post-modern philosopher. It indicates his scepticism towards XIXth-century's global philosophies of History (Hegelianism, Marxism, Liberalism, etc.) and refers to any modern mythical discourse which, through its apparent rationality, both reveals and conceals reality to anybody who experiences it.

³  Later, the return to *Jean* had actually created a new possibility of indecision on the author's sex (most of the *Série Noire*'s books were translated from American authors and as an American first name *Jean* is indeed a feminine one; but was that last fact known to French readers?).

⁴  "scolarisation de la société" (P. Ory, 1989).