

L'amie de madame Maigret

G.Simenon

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Simenon wrote an incredible number of Maigret novels, no doubt to a certain specific format, all of them in particular of similar length, and as far as I know, all of them independent of each other, and hence you can dip in anywhere without any loss. Just imagine if they would be chronologically ordered, what a pain to read them in succession, to be able to get the right one in line, when you are ready for it, because few people would be willing at the onset to get them all risking not to like them. For the student of French they have a certain attraction, I can testify to a limited vocabulary and simple grammatical constructions, and the idea is that after having devoured a certain number of them you have acquired a certain fluency of reading to serve you in good stead for more ambitious projects.

Why detective stories? They seem to be the most popular ways for people to get distracted or even to extract enjoyment out of their reading. How could this be the case? What does those novels actually provide? The obvious answer is the mystery of an unsolved problem which is gradually being clarified and solved. This is an attractive idea, and indeed much of popular writing on science would benefit from having a similar approach, rather than throwing at the readers various facts, supposedly scientifically excavated and systematically produced, provides mysteries and various traces and clues which can be interpreted in various ways. That would relieve the tedium as well as making things more tentative and hence exciting firing the imagination of the reader. However, few detective stories are so well crafted as to provide a gradual revelation, giving relevant clues for the reader to ponder; what they do is to give the illusion of so doing, and that is even better from the view of the reader who is only out to get distracted and entertained, as it saves him or her from any serious mental exertion. Now when we are talking about illusions, and of course that is the point of all fiction, what may hold the interest of the reader is instead the mood of the story as well as the depiction of the setting, and here Paris, as in the case of Maigret, gives an edge to many alternative settings. The workings of a police department may be one of the best known professional activities among the general public. How difficult is it not to depict the working day of say a mathematician and composer? Here work is entirely cerebral and introspective, while in police work there is an inevitable external, and hence visible, aspect as many people interact, not only among themselves but also encountering figures, predominantly from the nether world. Depending on focus, the detective novel can thus furnish a basis for social commentary. Not that much of that aspect can be gleaned from the Maigret novels, which instead contend themselves with evoking that special 'Paris noir' feeling.

It would be pointless to give a summary of the plot, and in fact a cardinal sin in the context of detective novels is to give away the end, after all the suspense created by the still elusive end is the major source of enjoyment in the genre. Thus the detective novel is consumed rather than savored, typically when read it is ripe for being discarded, and thus

oblivion. It has added nothing save for the enjoyment for the moment. George Orwell noted when he was responsible for a lending library that some habitues when presented with a detective story, were able to glance at the first few pages and pronounce that this one they had had. The view of reading, as the typical detective story engenders, is a rather depressing one, the activity of reading, rather than edify and instruct, seems merely one of killing time. And what kills time, inevitably kills other things as well.

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