

Foreword

Léo Malet's Post-War Paris

"There are many ways to take a walk through Paris," Georges Perec wrote in *Perec/rinations*, his whimsical *visite guidée* of Paris in twenty-one crossword puzzles, "one can have fixed goals for oneself or go off on one's own; one can want to systematically explore each neighborhood, with a guide in hand, or get on the first bus that passes by and take it to the end of its line."¹ Although Léo Malet never got to the "end of the line" of his epic series of novels, *Les Nouveaux mystères de Paris*, in which he set out to write one mystery for each of the twenty-one *arrondissements* of Paris, he did quite well for himself, managing to get through an astonishing fifteen of them.² One can only imagine what atmospheric delights would have been in store for readers had Nestor Burma, his tough gumshoe alter-ego, been able to also explore the rest of the *arrondissements* such as the seventh, the eighteenth, or the twentieth . . . perhaps he left that job for another generation of writers such as Daniel Pennac, who so lovingly sets his mysteries in the Belleville section of Paris, or Alain Demouzon who infuses the Parisian *banlieues* with the existential weight of his detective hero, Melchior.³ As François Rivière recounts, the idea of making a new type of *Mystères de Paris*, by updating Eugène Sue to

¹ Georges Perec, *Perec/rinations* (Paris: Zulma, 1997) 8 (my translation).

² Because of the many printings of his novels by different publishers, all references to Léo Malet's text in this book will come from the five-volume *Oeuvres complètes*, edited by Francis Lacassin, (Paris: Laffont, 1985-89). Volumes 1 and 2, *Les enquêtes de Nestor Burma et les nouveaux mystères de Paris*, are heavily cited in the format: (*Enquêtes*, volume: pages).

³ Malet, in fact, wrote the preface to one of Alain Demouzon's earlier novels, *Château-des-rentiers* (Paris: Flammarion, 1982).

suit modern Paris and 1950's sensibilities⁴ came to Malet in a perfectly surrealist moment, by chance, and fittingly, during a walk with his ten-year old son near the Bir-Hakeim bridge with its elevated metro stop: "Il se perd dans la contemplation du métro aérien et se dit qu'il y a vraiment quelque chose à faire avec un si prestigieux décor, si négligé depuis les auteurs de *Fantômas* et Louis Feuillade.' L'idée lui vint spontanément . . ."⁵

Indeed, if the *Nouveaux mystères* are so captivating, and go far beyond the regular *roman policier* genre in their scope, it is because Malet was successful not only in capturing a slice of the Parisian quotidian of his era, but also appreciating its poetic value. In this way, Michelle Emanuel's groundbreaking study, *From Surrealism to Less-Exquisite Cadavers*, is particularly insightful in its treatment of Malet as a pioneer within the French *roman noir* literary genre, of course, while making sure to focus on his surrealist roots as well. If Malet has been able to fascinate the French public for so long, it is because, as Emanuel rightfully points out, his work "reveals multiple literary and cultural influences as [he] forges a link among popular culture and concurrent genres in twentieth-century French literature." Through his unflappable protagonist Nestor Burma, Malet was, above all, a modern *flâneur*, as he not only sought out exciting crime stories, but also, snippets of the quotidian that are usually within the jurisdiction of poets and urban studies specialists rather than crime fiction novelists. As such, when Burma takes a spontaneous break from pursuing a suspect he has been following, he pauses to admire the (still to this date) beautiful outdoor Passy metro station – a station that many every day users of the metro might not even appreciate for its beauty and elegance (especially if they happen to be late for work!). In truth, Malet's tastes are refreshingly simple, and his appreciation of every day Paris, not very dissimilar from his surrealist predecessors such as André Breton or even, in his early poetry, Raymond Queneau:

Une des plus agréables du réseau – à mon goût, mais j'ai des goûts simples moi – presque champêtre, avec ses portillons qui semblent donner de

⁵François Rivière, "Léo Malet: Un noir jeu de l'oie," *Magazine Littéraire* 332 (1995): 61-63.

l'intérieur des wagons. C'est à cet endroit que la ligne Etoile-Nation, direction Nation, sort de terre pour devenir aérienne jusqu'à Pasteur dans le quinzième. La station Passy est séparée de la verdure que l'on aperçoit en passant, de la largeur d'un escalier, aussi bien à droite qu'à gauche. Ces escaliers sont bordés de terrain en pente, boisés, couverts de buissons. (*Enquêtes*, 2: 126)

Yet, it is somehow fitting that Malet's project remain unfinished, as the Paris evoked by Malet, and then so atmospherically interpreted by Tardi in his *bande dessinée* adaptations of Nestor Burma's adventures, has changed radically since the fifties. Writing at the dawn of France's remarkable thirty years of prosperity known as *les trente glorieuses*, Malet sensed and almost melancholically depicted a Paris at the crossroads of intense modernization *cum* gentrification on the one hand, and a city desperately trying to hang on to its old neighborhoods, folkloric streets, and traditional values on the other. Although Malet was not quite as graphic in his wistfulness *vis-à-vis* the vanishing parts of Paris (often "embodied" by a disappearing cadaver in Burma's cases) as Jacques Tati who in his 1957 film *Mon Oncle* so humorously described a hyper-modernized flip-side to the quaint *vieux Paris* so adored by Monsieur Hulot, Burma's Parisian peregrinations are nonetheless historical testaments to a Paris that no longer exists. In his most famous novel, for example, *Brouillard au Pont de Tolbiac*, the thirteenth *arrondissement* which, today, is so distinctive because of its dynamic Chinatown, was rather bourgeois and traditional in Malet's time. Similarly the *Marais* so colorfully if not controversially described in terms of its Jewishness in *Du Rebecca*, *rue des Rosiers* or *Fièvre au Marais* has now yielded to fashionable shops and trendy restaurants or cafés.

Perhaps Malet's sudden flashes into a fleeting Paris are what ultimately distinguish him from some of his distinguished colleagues in French crime fiction such as Georges Simenon or Maurice Leblanc. As Emanuel points out so clearly, while Malet "subverts the rules of the canon as well as those of detective fiction itself, allowing literary variation within the existing genre," and his *détective de choc* hero is hard-boiled inside and out, it is his appreciation and interaction with a changing Paris that adds a rather bittersweet quality to the Burma narratives. As Burma laments when noticing a construction site within the once "pristine" 16th *arrondissement*:

Bientôt dans ce secteur jadis renommé pour ses coquettes residences privées, il ne se dressera que des gratte-ciel, et les espaces verts dont s'est longtemps enorgueilli cet arrondissement, il faudra les chercher dans les académies de billard. Même les terrains vagues seront bouloités. (*Enquêtes*, 2:121)

"Old Paris" will soon give way to a "New Paris," a Paris where even *la pègre* does not abide by the codes it once followed in earlier, more respectful times. Although Malet did not quite imagine a Paris taken over by The Gap and Starbucks, he was prescient in putting his finger on that aspect of urban life that cannot help disappearing if a city wants to remain vibrant and "up to date." As Akbar Abbas has written regarding the constantly disappearing sections of Hong Kong which never ceases to reinvent itself through a process he labels the phenomenon of the "déjà disparu," Malet's Burma inadvertently stumbles on a "visual that is both ineluctable and elusive at the same time."⁶ This is why Burma is ultimately and, in opposition to his more *mondain* detective predecessors, a type of Everyman, a man of the people, a man who can understand the thrill of the urban crowds, a quick *coup de rouge* at his favorite café or the majestic beauty of an empty Parisian street at dawn. This is Burma's Paris that Tardi so dreamily portrays in his drawings. As Burma lovingly muses through the caption of one of Tardi's images in *120 rue de la Gare* when standing in front of a *vitrine* (the Passage de l'Argue in Lyons) that resembles the old Parisian "arcades" (*passages*) Walter Benjamin immortalized in his classic essays on the *flâneur* in Paris: "Eh ben dis donc!...le voilà, mon petit rade. Ça n'a pas bougé d'un poil...ils n'ont même pas repeint la façade!"⁷ Paris may well have had to adapt itself to the contemporary, globalized world at times, *Burma's* Paris never changes as he is able, in capturing certain ephemeral pleasures of the quotidian, to keep those images alive for future readers of all classes and walks of life.

Lastly, if Malet can follow in the footsteps of such colleagues as Philippe Marlowe, Sam Spade and Hercule Poirot, as many critics have pointed out, it is not only for his incredible investigative skills and toughness in tackling criminals and unsavory cases. He is indeed

⁶ Akbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) 42.

⁷ Léo Malet and Jacques Tardi, *120 rue de la gare* (Paris: Casterman, 1996) 36.

the “détective de choc” but also a *détective célibataire*. Long and lonely are his adventures, when he is not having an attractive woman fall into his arms or his bed. There is no room in Malet’s life for deep attachments to bourgeois institutions such as marriage or enough sentimentality to be vulnerable to what Philippe Marlowe, referring to romantic sadness, describes as a sensation of “cold as the ashes of love” in *Farewell, My Lovely*.⁸ In this way, he is reminiscent of the typical hero of a Jean-Pierre Melville film. Although Melville’s heroes are often on the other side of the law, that is almost an irrelevant bit of information as what binds the ideal Melvillean detective or the Melvillean gangster is not the official law of the Palais de Justice, but rather an honor code of the streets which, like the old neighborhoods Burma explores, is also a relic of a more genteel time. As Bob le Flambeur says to his friend the Police Commissioner in the 1956 film *Bob le flambeur, la pègre* itself can no longer be considered “civilized” in its breaking of the law as the unwritten codes of behavior that both criminal and detective once followed have given way to pure “chacun pour soi” expediency: “Le milieu n’est plus ce qu’il était. C’est Pourriture et Compagnie maintenant.”⁹ Yet, despite the changing times, Burma, like Bob le Flambeur, enjoys the freedom of time and space that comes with being a bachelor. Although Paris during the *trente glorieuses* was in full economic expansion, there was an excitement in the air and a certain speed with which France was recovering from the war (such as the extraordinary amount of governments that came and went during the Fourth Republic alone. From 1944-1958, there were 25 Heads of Governments, the shortest one lasting only 4 days). It is an excitement that Burma seems to encapsulate in his carefree structuring of his days. If Melville’s Bob “est un homme libre. Il a choisi de vivre à Montmartre parce que pour lui Montmartre est encore le seul endroit où l’on puisse vivre. C’est le dernier refuge. Il y vit pendant la nuit jusqu’à l’aube, entre loup et chien, puisque le soir, c’est entre chien et loup,”¹⁰ Burma, too, makes the city his playground at all hours of the day and night. As is the case

⁸ Raymond Chandler, *Farewell, My Lovely* (New York: Vintage Crime/Random House, 2001) 255.

⁹ *Bob le Flambeur*, dir. Jean-Pierre Melville, Organisation Générale Cinématographique/La Cyme/Play Art, 1956.

¹⁰ Rui Nogueira, *Le cinéma selon Jean-Pierre Melville* (Paris: Editions de l’Etoile/Cahiers du Cinéma, 1996) 72.

of many fictional detectives, Burma's bachelorhood contributes to his "hunter"-like aura that allows him to keep questing from one adventure to another without ever needing to be satiated to the point of settling down in domestic bliss. As Jean Borie has written regarding the restlessness inherent in the bachelor condition, "le célibataire qui peut donner si facilement l'impression d'être quelqu'un de fini, reste un être de quête,"¹¹ It is therefore particularly *à propos* that Malet and Burma never finish the ultimate mission of completing the *Nouveaux Mystères* as finishing them all may have endowed Burma with a false note of satisfaction which his perpetual search for urban adventure would somehow never permit anyway.

In similar fashion, Michelle Emanuel does not content herself with simply placing a *point final* to her study of Léo Malet as she might well have been entitled to as one of the only critics to devote a full-length study to Malet's life and work. Indeed she is to be commended for providing such a complex and deep study of the controversial Malet as she is not afraid to tackle his nationalism or the bitterness that characterized the later part of his life. As critics of the much more controversial Céline have encountered, the many facets of Malet – the man and the novelist – can be as maddening as they are rewarding. By providing an in-depth analysis of Malet's surrealist roots, Emanuel perspicaciously puts her finger on what makes him a truly serious writer who, surprisingly until now, has been all too often neglected by "mainstream" literary criticism. Indeed, by contextualizing Malet's work within the framework of his surrealist and anarchist past, she engagingly underlines the originality and unique position Burma plays within the detective fiction genre in France. Since he is playfully *à cheval* between the hard-boiled American model and the rather intellectual esthete that dominates the French model, he is equally fascinating for where he fits in terms of his predecessors such as the brilliant memoirs of the 19th-century Vidocq (the master criminal turned police chief upon whom Balzac's Vautrin is based), Alexandre Dumas's *Les Mohicans de Paris*, and of course Eugène Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris* as he is for the ways in which he diverges from them. Part Eugène Sue, part Raymond Chandler, Malet concocted, in Burma, a particularly intriguing

¹¹ Jean Borie, *Le célibataire français* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 2002) 37.

fictional hero. Along parallel lines, Emanuel's last chapter, by keeping the book open to potential heirs to Burma such as Jean Amila, Jean-Patrick Manchette and Didier Daeninckx confirms Burma's role as an avant-garde literary hero as well.

"Au final," writes Christophe Evans of the *Service Etudes et Recherche* of the BPI (the Centre Pompidou's Bibliothèque Publique d'Information),

curieux miroir, on s'apercevra que les lecteurs de polars [...] ne sont pas si éloignés du sociologue qui cherche à mieux les connaître et les comprendre: même sensibilité à l'importance des enquêtes, même goût pour les efforts d'objectivation et la collecte minutieuse de témoignages. En un mot, même goût pour le réel, aussi difficile soit-il à saisir et à décrire.¹²

It is to Emanuel's credit that the reader of *From Surrealism to Less-Exquisite Cadavers* will be able to experience not only the "réel" within the *roman policier* genre, but especially the *sur-réel* for as Evans confirms, "Lire des romans policiers: un jeu décidément très sérieux."

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¹² Christophe Evans, "Pourquoi lit-on des romans policiers? Une enquête sur les lecteurs," *Bulletin BPI*, 12 (2005): 6.