

compelled by an object that is so true, beautiful, and good that we forget about our petty efforts and genuinely look at the other. Christians assume such an object exists and has taken the compelling form of Jesus of Nazareth. But such an object no longer compels us because we assume that we no longer need redemption or that such a God can redeem us. For we assume that loving the world and the other can be done without pain and guilt. But it is just such an assumption that makes our world a dungeon of boredom and dullness when compared to the richness of the world we find redeemed on the cross of Christ. It may be that we will not be able to become a redeemed people, but at least we can try to write our moral theology more honestly. We can stop trying to justify by the Gospel the trivialities of our own existence. If we do that, we may find that even though we are not yet living Christian lives, we are at least on the road to the beginning of what such a life might look like.

## Does Simenon write a Metaphysical Novel?

by S. G. A. Luff

Georges Simenon writes detective stories, many featuring the amiable Inspecteur Maigret, almost too human to fit the traditional image of the sleuth. Simenon may be read more for atmosphere than for thrills, for Maigret's Paris, or the provincial towns of many non-Maigret stories; the weather mostly wintry with long evenings, the interest in trains, back streets, canals, bars, the small homes of small people in small worlds. And among these I find even more intriguing those with a Belgian scene, the Meuse, the industrial zone around Liège where young Simenon began as a reporter on the local press. Here are his native tow-paths and backyards, alleys and *impasses*, and a certain quality of *mud*, of earth and water and the two compounded.

Simenon does not normally set out to retail experiences that demand a transcendental world, least of all that purveyed by the Church. Where religious detail slips in it is seldom more than part of the narrative, handy description—as far as the author is concerned echoes from childhood, and usually no more than that for the characters too. Churchgoing is something children do and it is good for them; subsequently a minority elects to remain in this church sub-culture and becomes a characteristic feature of Sunday mornings.

Yet Simenon stands for something good. I have not combed his works to draw out loose hairs of self-sacrifice or the pursuit of values, but they are there. Monsieur Maigret is good with a comfortable home-loving Gallican middle-class goodness that stands while the world of crime revolves. This goodness has its temporal reward—the adequate recompense of an apartment managed by a faithful helpmate. Mme Maigret is a patient wife who cooks meals and keeps them warm and bears with her husband's professional irregularities. The Inspector can be understanding with the weak character, tolerant of the streetgirl's sins of the flesh, kind to colleagues and loyal to Mme Maigret—or if he sometimes isn't she will never know. There are a lot of Gospel beatitudes in these detective yarns, but all contained at a certain level. J. B. Priestley has commented on the contribution of Maigret's matrimonial relationship to the novels: 'Simenon has a very strong sense of evil, and in the Maigret stories this is counterbalanced by the essential goodness of Maigret and his wife.'

I am not of course concerned with a purely humanitarian 'essential goodness' of a Parisian couple. If there is any reality in the transcendental—if a man who has completed a destiny in the fog and lamplight of his *quartier* yet registers a beginning in a wider and ultimate sphere—then a good writer writing about men will be unable to evade it. When such a possibility informs his mind, even if it has not informed his conscious purpose, then in a novel where neither God, soul, nor anything patently ultimate is necessarily germane to the surface story, there might still emerge so dramatic a suggestion of values that a reader *who does believe in the transcendental* may want to call it a parable. In its unfolding he may notice such poise and counterpoise that it relates to poetry. Minor issues may attain such universal dimensions that it could be taken for an essay in the metaphysical. If I am reading about a silly degraded boy in a maze of suburban crime and nastiness, and suddenly find my emotions overwhelmed by the unusual tensions of crime and punishment, of love and purification, of interior victory swallowing up the sting of physical death, then I am entitled to wonder what my writer of popular detective fiction has suddenly achieved.

Not so suddenly. Simenon has written of the evolution of the novel in modern times, and himself undertook formally and deliberately to evolve. He contrasts the traditional story about 'man clothed' with contemporary novels concerned with 'man naked'. *La Neige était sale* dates from 1948, about midway in his career—the young Simenon was writing for the *Gazette de Liège* in 1919. André Gide read the proofs and wrote: '*Je tenais à vous dire que 'La Neige était sale' m'a épaté avec le surprenant rétablissement du caractère de votre affreux Frank, qui aurait pu être un héros.*' In his ensuing correspondence there are several references to the novel which, a year later, he still

describes enthusiastically as ‘*un des meilleurs livres . . . oh! disons le meilleur*’.<sup>1</sup>

Simenon’s ‘frightful Frank’ lives in an apartment block where Lotte, his mother, under cover of manicure, maintains a transitory ménage of prostitutes. Frank enjoys a sort of *droit de seigneur* part of the night, and when everyone else starts a working morning his bed has to be moved out of the way, with him in it. In the living room there is a contrivance called a *vasistas* (Fr., but the etymology is ‘*was ist das?*’) through which Frank, standing on the table, can observe the clientèle.

Frank uses his shoe leather mostly between home and a *boîte* called Timo’s. He makes two major excursions. The first, brief enough, is to a nearby alley where he knifes a fat German NCO nicknamed the Eunuch. We may as well call him German. Simenon avoids every form of identification except the descriptive. There is plainly an occupying power, but the occupied too have German names—Frank’s is Friedmaier. The result is either vagueness or a sort of exalted anonymity which lifts the value of events above the restrictions of time and circumstance. The road to Jericho could lead anywhere else. In spite of this suppression, I suspect that the story is set in the east Belgian industrial area of Liège.

The crime in the alley is observed. A middle-aged neighbour named Gerhardt Holst halts at the end of the alley. Holst, a widower with a daughter named Sissy, is a scholarly man come down in the world. He works on the trams. Frank relieves the Eunuch of his gun. Holst does nothing.

An occasional visitor to the Friedmaiers is the local inspector of police (not Maigret!), stolid, benign, who sits down but never removes his wet rubber boots. Lotte describes him as ‘perhaps her only true friend’, with the implication that he might be the boy’s father. Frank does not appreciate this paternity. It emerges in the dénouement that Gerhardt is the man he would have liked for a father, and we shall see that this could complicate, but in fact illumines, the quality of Frank’s ultimate relationship with Sissy.

A second excursion is to commit another murder. The motive again is interest, but not personal malice. Frank’s interest this time is the acquisition of a green card, ultimate warrant of privilege issued by the Occupation authorities; within Frank’s scope of vision at that time the supreme status symbol. He makes the green card his price, in addition to cash, for obliging a General who collects watches.

Frank was brought up in a village. Nearly every house there has a little wall shrine of the Madonna. Every day he used to visit an

<sup>1</sup>Quotations from and about Simenon are all from the special number of *Adam* (no. 328-330) 1969. *The Snow is Black* was published by Printer’s Hall, New York, in 1948, English rights subsequently acquired by Kegan Paul. A Penguin edition with the title *The Stain on the Snow* came out in 1964 and is currently (January 1972) reissued. A number of early Simenons will appear as part of the project.

elderly brother and sister, Monsieur and Mademoiselle Vilmos. They gave him sweets that they kept in a Robinson Crusoe tin. Monsieur Vilmos collected watches. Unexpectedly he has died, but a masked Frank bullies Mademoiselle his sister into revealing where the collection lies hidden. Frank's scarf slips and reveals his identity — 'Little Frank!' So he kills her. He gets the watches and, in due course, the green card.

Frank was paid with paper money as well as the green card. It transpires that the notes came from an Occupation HQ and had been marked. So Frank is arrested and imprisoned in a requisitioned school building.

Here he is confined, not in a cell, but in a small classroom all to himself, which he fancies might be one of the privileges of green card holders. It is a room with a view. He is regularly taken downstairs for interrogation by an anonymous seedy official sometimes flanked by two dull thugs. From this situation several significant factors emerge. Over this drawn-out period of isolation Frank does not examine his conscience, does not repent, shows no particular love for his mother when she visits him, nor for Minna, with whom he had slept, who comes with her. He does not hate, either. He shows no interest in other prisoners nor does he experience any vicarious anguish or personal fear when they are led out early to the firing squad in the school yard. Far from searching the depths of the spiritual man, Frank seems to be in danger of sinking below the human, even below an animal, level.

But this of course is not the case. Even the fact that the prison is a school building has significance. Frank enters into a way of detachment, nor is he the only character in Simenon's 'pure' novels (the adjective is his own) to do so. His condition, moreover, is not without hope. Frank's 'room with a view' looks across to an apartment block, at one of the windows of which a woman regularly appears. She washes baby clothes. One supposes there is a husband, but he never shows. It is a wall, with a mother and child, like the walls of his village. The sentiment with which Frank longs for her is never named. When he is taken into town for interrogation and beaten up he resolves to catch a glimpse of her, if he can, before he leaves the car. *Stabat mater!*

Frank did not break down at the interrogation, nor subsequently. He could have given names of accomplices, contacts. He realized that his masters knew already as much as he knew, and what they had tried to ferret out of him so far, and might torture out of him henceforth, would be what they thought he knew. Occupation officers had frequented his mother's brothel, some of them must sometimes have been indiscreet. The 'vasistas' had been observed. Frank must have a thing or two to tell. But even if he told them he could hardly be returned to currency.

Frank's submission to the formative process provided by the *lycée* is confirmed, all the way to its sole pattern of graduation in the school yard, at first light.

One day Gerhardt Holst comes with Sissy. Before describing the supreme and ultimate thing that happens during their visit I must explain a *sin* that Frank had committed concerning Sissy. Her took her out, to a café and to the cinema. He managed to conclude that she was a virgin but also—as far as I can judge, because of the way she accepted his fumbling caresses—that she was 'like other girls'. Judge for yourself the malice of that offence in Frank's category of shortcomings. He did not sleep with her. Why should he? He had 'other girls'. Let Sissy find her own level. Let her find it in his mother's establishment. Frank made an assignment for Sissy, but, with Shakespearean panache, substituted for himself one of his clumsy buddies, Kromer. As it happened, Sissy had the wits to switch the light on. She struggled, and as she escaped called out Frank's name. That cry effects in Frank the beginning of a transformation, the watershed of his life. She left behind her bag with the key to her father's flat. Frank pursued her into the night, unsuccessfully. He stood in the snow, on waste land, holding up the bag and calling: 'The key . . . the key . . .' He had not seen her since, but from that night to this encounter the sequel is direct.

Now Holst and Sissy are there in the school office. Frank is not alone with them. The anonymous grey man is at his desk, flanked by his thugs. It had already occurred to Frank to think of them as priest and acolytes at an altar, but not in any context of love. Perhaps he could accept their blows as some sacrament of atonement.

Sissy hardly speaks. Her first word, in isolation, is 'Frank!'—*just as he had expected*. The giving of a name; that too is sacramental. He was *afraid* she would say she forgave him, but she didn't; Sissy said: 'I have come to tell you that I love you.' She does not say a word more, but Simenon writes with what would anywhere else be extravagance: '*It is not possible that two human beings could ever have looked at one another so intensely.*'

No words of forgiveness are spoken, because for Frank this is not the reconciling Sacrament of Penance, but a Sacrament of Initiation. It is not a renewal, metanoia, penance, but a beginning. It does not pardon, but cleanses by involving in love. It is also a sign of sonship by adoption. That is why in its ministry Gerhardt is as necessary as Sissy. God is not mentioned, but there is a minister to act for him. That bureaucratic old priest with his desk-altar and his blood-letting altar-boys are by-passed. Gerhardt Holst ministers with time-honoured sacramental sign. He lays his hand on Frank's shoulder 'just as Frank had always thought a father would' and his voice 'reminds you of the ceremonies of Holy Week' (the primitive time for Christian initiation).

Gerhardt Holst tells a story. He had had a son. The boy studied medicine. He stole to pay his way. When he was caught he jumped from a window. Frank said nothing, but wanted to. He wanted to say: 'Father. . . .'

'There were no rings; there weren't even any prayers, *but Holst's words stood for them.*'

Sissy and Frank did not even touch hands.

Sissy's was not the love that makes a husband out of an erratic youth. Frank never was a husband. He never slept with a woman he loved. Never with Sissy. Simenon comments: 'If he had had that, perhaps he might have had nothing. It isn't the duration of things that counts, but that they should be.'

What love is it? What does Simenon think it is? It is allied with Frank's adoption by Sissy's father. Nothing could be less carnal and it is made explicit that it must be so. It could not be perfect any other way than the way it was, and, for this story, perfect it had to be. Is it love simply, love unconditioned? In the Christian economy, it mirrors the pure charity of God for man.

What was the significance of Frank's substituting Kromer in the bedroom? As a sin, was it worse than seducing Sissy himself? At the moment of discovery, before she fled, she had called out *Frank*. Sissy wanted him, for himself. In the moments that followed, when he did not respond to her call, and she ran out into the night, there is this sentence, printed alone as a paragraph:

*Quelque chose casse en lui.*

Had he not been so gross as to substitute Kromer, there would have been no loving cry in the night, then, nor now, in this supreme moment that makes him son and lover.

In the morning Frank confessed—to the anonymous old gentleman. He confessed that he stole the watches and killed Mlle Vilmos, that he had killed the Eunuch and taken his revolver, that he had done other things more shameful, including 'the biggest crime in the world'. With almost unbecoming subtlety he says: 'I am not an *exalté*—I am *une crapule*.' While he said it, his voice was 'like Holst's'—the sacramental, Holy Week, adopting voice of the father, recognized now in the accents of the son.

Frank was beaten several times after that. The last time he was stripped naked. They shot him one morning in the school yard, when the snow began to fall.

A number of Simenon novels have been published in threes (*Collections Trio*, Presses de la Cité, Paris). One includes *La Neige était sale*, accompanied by *Au Bout du Rouleau* and *Le Destin des Malou*. They have in common a quest for realization involving a father relationship. It was fair to bracket *La Neige était sale* with the other, especially as no attention is drawn explicitly to the common

feature. It might, however, be taken to imply that the Holst relationship is the major factor in the *destin* of Frank—as opposed to the relationship with Sissy. Perhaps the two relationships should not be considered separately. In the other two novels the spiritual overtones are far less evident.

One might discuss the title. Some titles are riddles, to which the clever or initiate might guess the answer. If your subject is 'man clothed' you may well call your book *Barnaby Rudge* or *Little Dorrit*. When it is 'man naked', 'man pitted against himself, as in Dostoevsky' (a quote from Simenon) he must carry a name that, like some Scriptural names, expresses his struggle, his mission, or his achievement. There have been two English titles to *La Neige était sale*—*The Snow is Black* and, the current one, *The Stain on the Snow*. I find neither convincing. To me Frank is the snow. His ultimate love demands the chastity of ice. But you have only to read the book to see how much dirt there was about.

## Joseph Berington—'Prophet of Ecumenism'?

by J. Derek Holmes

The Reverend Joseph Berington (1743-1827) has never had a particularly good press even from sympathetic Catholic historians. This is almost certainly due to the fact that he was a leading supporter of the cisalpine, if not gallican, Catholic Committee and was one of those Catholics who believed that an Oath of Supremacy, properly understood, was not incompatible with Catholic principles. As a result of his attitude and activities, he was at one stage censured by the bishops and deprived of his faculties. Berington himself felt that English Catholics had suspected him since he taught philosophy at Douay where he was regarded as being too modern and bold in his philosophical opinions, and that this explained the later questioning of his orthodoxy.<sup>1</sup> Joseph Gillow simply claims that Berington's 'love of novelty and of the affected liberality of the day created great prejudice against his writings, which, however, was considerably removed before his death'.

Yet according to a 'Memoir' published in the *Catholic Miscellany*,<sup>2</sup> Berington made 'the first open and bold attack . . . on the immense mass of Protestant prejudice that had been accumulating against Catholics for more than two centuries', while the *Reflections addressed*

<sup>1</sup>*Catholic Miscellany*, Vol. IX (1828), pp. 371-2.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 225, 298.