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WHY DOLORES HITCHENS ?

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Dolores Hitchens is probably a major novelist, appreciated by editors and published in various collections. Some of her novels have even been re-edited such as « The Abductor » (published in France as « La Loi Du Talion »), « The Watcher » (« Dans l'Intérêt Des Familles ») and « Sleep With Slander » (« La Victime Expiatoire »).

Following the Bulletin N°5, where I explained that the novel « La Maladie de Chooz » (Chooz's sickness) signed Michael Maltravers was in fact a Dard's pseudonym, I have received by mail a book « The Bank With The Bamboo Door » by Dolores Hitchens, translated into French as « Erreur D'Aiguillage » (Signaling Error) by Michael Maltravers .

I took this anonymous post mail without any accompanying letter as a mute question that I kept in a corner of my memory.

Later on, I learnt that it had been sent by a very attentive reader, Julien Dupré, who soon joined our association to sign in Bulletin N° 8, an article titled « Treatise of survival in modern environment » dedicated to Graham Greene.

Bulletin N°7 was dedicated to the most famous « Train Ride » published as « Londres Express » by the French editor Serie Noire. Considering the style, the vocabulary and the overall quality of the translation signed Marcel Duhamel I had expressed the hypothesis of a discrete cooperation with F. Dard but without facts, I did not pursue the idea.

In the same bulletin, I had also discussed M. Duhamel /F. Dard collaboration for adapting « No orchids for Miss Blandish » to the stage, (F.Dard using the pseudonym Eliane Charles as co-author for the premiere in 1950)

We should notice that after M. Duhamel's death, F. Dard used his name when the play, directed by Robert Hossein, was re-acted in may 1977 at the Théâtre de la Comédie in Geneva then in Paris at the Théâtre de la Porte Saint Martin. An extract of the program leaves us without doubt: it is after Marcel Duhamel's translation of « no orchids for Miss Blandish » that F. Dard wrote the play for the stage. Out goes M. Duhamel and F. Dard (aka Eliane Charles) got the full copyrights.

This was the striking confirmation of my hypothesis about F. Dard's theater (see Bulletins N° 1, 3 and 4) and his collaboration with M. Duhamel as soon as 1950.

With the Bulletin N° 7, I had to face Claude Mesplède's wrath . I quote him: « Thierry Cazon, chairman and only writer of the small print run Polarophiles Tranquilles, explains in each of his bulletin that it is not Peter but Paul who wrote the novel. His last find reveals that »Train Ride « by Peter Loughran has been in fact written by Graham Greene (bulletin N°7).

Does he justify it ? Not at all. He said that it is Graham Greene and we have to believe it. The same thing happened in Bulletin N° 6 where he revealed that « La Maladie De Chooz » (The Chooz's sickness), the excellent novel by Michael Maltravers - alias Roland Bouvard - had been written by San-Antonio. No piece of evidence to sustain this statement. One asserts without proving. It was however quite easy to consult the Serie Noire's notes for, if San-Antonio is the author, his name would have been mentioned and we cannot understand how another writer could have accepted to be a frontman

after having written and published several works. »

My answer was: it is easy to Claude Mesplede to produce the content of the notes which is beyond of my reach and, if need be, I let him bring the evidences in one of the next bulletins of Polarophiles.

Useless to say that I am still awaiting his participation and he preferred to hold forth in a mail sent to an adherent: »Yes, he does not have access to the notes but when one wants to demonstrate something, better to have ammunitions. I did have the possibility to consult La Série Noire's notes where one can find the names of the real author or if the pseudonym hides another identity. Everything can be verified and I feel sorry that the pieces of evidence have not been shown to the reader to support assumptions that cannot be verified given the fact that the witnesses are gone for ever. In few years time, we may be told that several books about the Gulf war by the screenwriter Frédéric Fajardie (1947/2008) and the novelist Gerard Delteil (1939-), were in fact, written by Nicolas Sarkozy during his long winter evenings. Supposition not ludicrous at all considering that his days are so busy that he needs some kind of relaxation at night. « End of quotation and end of debate.

Claude Mesplède who does not care to contradict himself likes to play with self satisfaction, derision and even with intimidation. He retained the lesson given by Maurice Garçon (1889-1961, member of the Académie Française) who made Pierre Louÿs' research (French novelist 1870-1925) look ludicrous about some mysterious plays signed Molière (Jean Baptiste Poquelin aka Molière 1622-1673). The Académie does not allow to touch its icons and Mr Mesplède support his dictionary's cards the best he can.

Meanwhile, my subconscious forced me to think about Dolores Hitchens . To deliver myself of this obsession, I read « Footsteps in the Night » which I found quite original, powerful, provoking and at the same time, seducing to the point that I selected its author as the subject of this column.

However, « The Bank with the Bamboo Door » (translated into French as « Erreur d'aiguillage » meaning Wrong Turning) had still to be perused and I started to read it with the fear to be disappointed. Finally, I had the satisfaction to have predicted that the Michael Maltravers's translation had the evident characteristics of a text written by F. Dard (whom I study now for more than 40 years) and whom I know the vocabulary.

First, we know Dard's talent to find a title to grab the public attention. The French title does not have any relationship with the original. It's a coinage by someone (and Dard was one) specialist of railways stories.

There is also expressions that hit the bull's eye and which are typical of Dard or San Antonio (a Dard's pseudonym) such as « Vieilles Biques » (word for word Old Goat meaning Old Bag), a «maritorne » (Spanish word used by Cervantes to designate a dirty maidservant) as well as slangy neologisms (which I am unable to translate).

These dialectal expressions cannot belong to a beginner in translation and author of only four spy novels..

There is only F. Dard who dares to create such a vocabulary and I concluded that M. Maltravers was one of his men of straw.

The translation activity of F. Dard for la « Serie Noire » has been proved and the translation of « Train Ride » (Londres Express) is most probably of his hand .

Before ending this first paper, I would like to let you know the two titles by Dolores Hitchens I prefer:

« Footsteps In The Night » translated into French by M.B. Endrèbe and « The Bank With The Bamboo Door » by F. Dard. I obviously read them in French and their attractiveness is certainly due to the quality of the translations

This paper has been elaborated with Alexandre Clément's suggestions, a new convert to Dolores Hitchens' deviant world. He also helped me to clarify my thinking. I want to thank him here.

Born Julia Clara Catharine Dolores Birk in 1908 at San Antonio, Texas, Dolores Hitchens' career goes from 1938 to 1973 (when she died in San Antonio) adopting equally the alterations of the American way of life and the detective stories transformations.

Hitchens appears on the scene at the time where the American police stories broke away from the influence of the English thrillers *à la* Agatha Christie (adapted in the USA by S.S. Van Dine, Ellery Queen and John Dickson Carr) and from the « Gothic » novel created in the UK by Ann Radcliffe and

developed by the « Had-I-But-Known » school. invented by Mary Rinehart (1876-1958).

A rich trend of female fiction writers will emerge early in the 40's to sweep the remnants of the pure enigma stories to tackle a large diversity of subjects.

Social and psychological realism, pictures of heavy familial atmosphere, precise description of the characters' attitude will be the work characteristics of Charlotte Armstrong (1905-1969), Margaret Millar (1915-1994), Dana Lyon, Ursula Curtiss (1923-1984), Jean Potts (1910-1999), Edna Sherry, Hilda Lawrence (1906-1976), Evelyn Piper (1908-1994) and Nancy Rutledge.

The set up becomes different and larger: the evil, committed within specified limits such as a frightening house or in a boat, allows easier its elimination and the restoration of the social order. Henceforth, it (the evil) runs in the streets, stretches like a curse from one hearth to another affecting the entire community.

Dolores Hitchens, following the example of her female colleagues, will specialize herself to put prominently the wickedness less and less exceptional, hence more and more banal and her heroes as well as the structure of her novels will be marked deeply.

However, the cleverness of some of her books' construction, her particular observation of the characters (always described within their environments surrounded with their familiar objects) make her an author more disturbing than usual. Her work, about 30 titles out of which 17 translated into French, do not help to classify her: although favoring the thrillers, in the 50's she also undertook to write black detective novels (polars noirs) with a recurrent Jim Sader as the private detective, police stories and even westerns.

This could explain why she was not very successful in France although the moviemakers François Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard did appreciate her.

In spite of the variety of her production spread over 35 years, she always will sign with her husband names: first D.B. Olsen and then Hitchens when she marries Hubert, a railways policeman.

The D.B. Olsen production started in 1938, covers essentially suspense novels: the investigations are led by dimwitted emcees such as a couple of spinsters along with their cats (i.e. the Murdock sisters will appear in 12 novels) or the university professor named Pennyfeather. If these stories are stereotyped entertainments (the slapdash translations into French do not help to raise the grade), one observes that these dilettante snoops who would not spoil an Agatha Christie's novel, are less interested by the course of the enigma than its entourage and its codes.

The eccentricities *à la* Hercule Poirot of professor Pennyfeather mask his very human approach of the dramas where he is involved. « *Devious Design* » (in French: *La Mort Le Gnette*, Death is watching him) is the best example. First because the French translation falls to the conscientious Gilles-Maurice Dumoulin who best reconstitutes Hitchens' literary and thematic intentions, then because Pennyfeather goes beyond Agatha Christie's « sacred values » such as family, social order, all respected by her detective who cares about appearances. In order to understand the drama that shakes a rich Californian family, he will re-constitute its ways and habits the most objectively possible. He defines the governing hierarchies, isolate the dominants to sustain the dominated. Through the strength of his observations more than by the numerous adventures going on around him, he unmasks a plot where the virtuous elders (the powerful mother, the businessman above suspicion) do not have the best part. In short, from the enigma stories, the novelist evolved to the psychological dramas, which will become the source of her best work. From 1954 to 1960, signing Dolores Hitchens, she will refine the features of her microcosms to either a specific organization, or a family community or even a little town. It is at this time that, using her husband's professional experience, she chooses to portray in 5 novels the day-to-day events of the railways police. The intrigue, sometimes predictable, is very well documented (see the widely known « *Fool's Gold* », source of one of Godard's movies). She soon will abandon her amateur detectives to create the private investigator Sader who will appear in 2 black novels (romans noirs) published in 1955 and

1960,. The second one (praised by Bill Pronzini, born 1943), « Sleep With Slander » defies openly Ross MacDonald (pseudonym of Kenneth Millar, 1915-1983) on his own ground with its intrigue (Sader searches a missing child), its structure and its set up (California in the 60's) with the major difference that less keen on psychoanalysis than MacDonald, her world looks more real. Sader is more concerned with the people appearance than the people themselves and it is often by the way of objects and the set up that he succeeds, like Pennyfeather, to reconstruct the life of a person and the case he is trying to resolve.

The old architect as unpleasant as rich, the strange little bitch hidden in her villa , the ship builder, all reveal immediately their true nature, good or baleful, with the only description of the house where they live, of the objects that they use. The detective himself is subject to a similar portrait: « *in the internal office, Sader had a close look at the photographs of a car accident. Slightly bent on the desk, the photos spread in front of him, he looked smaller than in reality. He was a skinny man with red hair turning rusty after graying, with an intelligent look and a patient attitude. When the doorbell rang in the other room, he smashed his cigarette in the shell used as an ashtray and went to open the door. On his way, he looked at the clock: almost nine thirty. It was an October morning with a rainy sky*».

The physical and objective description is completed by an allusion to his job (the photos of the accident) and also by the shell-ashtray intimist detail which helps, better than any psychoanalysis, to make out the humanity of the character. Sader looks sympathetic: a bachelor somewhat neglected but romantic.

Instead of working with schemes and concepts including set up and characters, like Ross MacDonald, Dolores Hitchens keeps a simple approach: she sorts out the details that will surround the heroes and, by the same token, have the action to get ahead.

«A so charming but haunted hearth « is a quasi daily kaleidoscopic observation in « *The Bank With The Bamboo Door* » that leads, detail after detail, Dolores Hitchens to attempt a new literary experience. Without discontinuing her railways police procedurals, nor the more classical police stories (i.e. « *The Abductor* » published in 1963) she makes the bet to portray an entire little town with « *The Watcher* » . The project is certainly not new : the mystery novelist Hillary Waugh (born 1920) aims at the same venture with his investigator Fred Fellows. However, Hitchens innovates in suppressing the main character who could monopolize the action which will be led by several individuals as in the play « *Our Town* » (1938) by Thornton Wilder (1897-1975) or, more recently, in Robert Altman's movies.

This narrative choir where everybody is on the same level to participate to the action is brought to perfection with «*Footsteps In The Night* »(1961) and « *The Bank With The Bamboo Door* »(1965).

But the scheme aims less to the technical innovation than to illustrate in more details her themes that she will enrich book after book such as the denunciation of the false harmony of the appearances or the exposition of the predatory relations between each other. The little towns according to Hitchens encourage these bonds to the extent that everybody knows everybody, where the curtains lift up at the appropriate time, allow to caught some secrets to take advantage on the holder.

In the name of what ? Officially, for personal reasons but in reality, for the pleasure to feel stronger towards the weaker one: at least, we, seem to say the predators, are normal which means « we go unpunished ».

It is in the names of these personal reasons that in « *Footsteps In The Night* » the old M. Arthur is kept on the leash by his daughter in law (« *we do not want you to disturb people*

and make us ridiculous »); that the terrible Mae Holden keeps her husband frightened; that when a little girl is found out strangled in a brand new condominium, the neighborhood immediately suspect the more fragile creature of the place, the withdrawn and solitary Kim Dronk, the lame teenager.

But it is also because they want to elude decency that the matured spinsters and respectable spouses

let themselves go to commit something wrong adding an extra guilt . These weak persons are too old to

pretend belonging to a community ashamed of them, too young to defend themselves against an

accusation , too sensible to curb their impulses or simply carrying an old guilt that they cannot get rid of (Forrest Holden once was attracted by a little girl. His wife never forgave him).

For Hitchens, they are no victims and the tormentors are no evil emissaries. They are just ordinary

middle American people one can find by the dozen. Once more, she has an objective view, showing a successive series of significant details. It looks like she want to say: here is the American way of life,

the worst hidden behind a façade. The dialogues themselves smell poison and sadism under the platitude of the concerns . « *I have decided that you will be better off in the back-room* said Mae Holden to her husband. You will not be disturbed by the noisy games of the children. Besides, you can count on me to keep them apart. Her look stopped heavily on her husband's stoop who came to a halt without turning around .

Then she added: of course, Arthur's kids are pretty small, they are still almost babies.» Effectively, useless to have a moral considering that Hitchens shows only the appearances which are so well corrupted by what they want to hide that the reader is forced to shiver..

Vertigo of the usual as long as we know how to decipher it.

In this residential and air-conditioned area underlying a terrible climate, Hitchens will introduce a violent element which will materialize the dominant / dominated relationships: a killer of teenagers in « *The Watcher* », the murder of a little girl in « *Footsteps In The Night* », a bank robbery in « *The Bank With the Bamboo Door* » . But her view is not really pessimistic. Some of her characters are saved by individuals who are not part of the plot. In numerous novels, Hitchens utilizes the lonely old alcoholic uncle who will get nephews and nieces out of troubles (see in : « *The Watcher* », « *The Man Who Cried All The Way Home* » and « *The Baxter Letters* ») . As if the solidarity could only be expressed between people being at both ends of life, the great age helping the youth in discounting the adults' inability corrupted by the conventions.

As one can see, the strength of Dolores Hitchens is not, contrary to most police novels, in the enigma, here generally secondary, sometimes inexistent.

All the interest of her work is based on the desire to be only a realistic and objective way of looking, upon a group of men and women and restore their activities without a moralizing comment.

.It is only when she gives up this ambition for the profit of a conventional fiction that her work loses its pertinence and becomes unequal in quality.

However, what she reveals on the American Life of her time (much of it has been now adapted to the French society): its materialism and voyeurism, its need to find scapegoats to compensate its mediocrity make shudder.

It is a world of expiatory victims and ordinary butchers with, sometimes, for the youngest, the hopes to close the door on an asphyxiating and dishonest community.