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POSTMORTEM ON S.A. STEEMAN' S WORK

Having devoted three bulletins entirely to the couple Graham Greene - James Hadley Chase, we plan to lead our readers to a more orthodox realm where no straw-men or pseudonyms are to be found hidden behind Stanislas-André Steeman (1908-1970), author of "L'Assassin Habite au 21" (the Murderer lives at the Number 21).

Besides, the Belgian novelist was so fussy about the form and style that except when he started out, he would never have admitted to collaborating or undertaking even the smallest task only to earn a living. Hence, the official critics should keep quiet...for once.

Why did we choose Steeman? Because at the time of the Anglo-Saxon crime novel hegemony (and in spite of recent discoveries in Nordic countries, in Italy and Spain), we must not forget what this genre owes to Belgium. This little country, periodically mocked by the French, introduced the "detective novel" - Simenon (1903-1989) who introduced a dominant tone to his novels contrary to the strict mechanical enigma discovery system of the time, and Steeman, who attempted to surpass all set limits.

However, French critics may well discover from time to time an author such as Simenon (who is regularly buried under the banalities of those very same critics!), but it's the likes of Steeman who fall unfairly into oblivion that we intend to try to put right. Imagine out of approximately 40 of the novels he wrote, only "L'Assassin Habite au 21" is regularly re-edited to-day. In addition to this, apart from the excellent and complete Steeman collection published by the editor "Le Masque" (The Mask), and unfortunately too soon out of print, it is fairly impossible to lay your hands on any other of his works.

"L'Assassin..." an ingenious plot in which Pierre Siniac (or Signac, 1928-2002) illustrates new ideas such as "Monsieur Cauchemar" (Mr Nightmare), is but the emerging part of an enormous iceberg waiting to be rediscovered.

An Unclassifiable and Free Author Stanislas-André Steeman's survival is due to Henri-Georges Clouzot's film adaptations of "L'Assassin habite au 21" and "Légitime Défense" (Self-Defense) which became "Quai des Orfèvres" (Paris Police Headquarters) for the screen. If these movies are two unquestionable successes, they owe little to the novels for the screenplays are inaccurate. The rest of his oeuvre (more than 40 books!) has been completely forgotten and with it, a large variety of inspiration and invention.

Steeman started his career at the end of the 20's with a novel combining both crime and

adventure, somewhat like Emile Gaboriau (1832-1873), Gaston Leroux (1868-1927) or Maurice Leblanc (1864-1941) with whom he did his basic training. Precocious, he was only fourteen when his first story was published in a newspaper. Influenced soon after by Agatha Christie's "whodunit murder mysteries" he managed however to rapidly free himself mainly after 1945, when he moved from the "Mask" editor to "Les Presses de la Cité".

Born shortly after the famous author of "Ten Little Niggers" (U.K title) or "Ten Little Indians" (U.S. title), renowned at the same time as Simenon, Steeman, the Belgium writer, was faced, after the second World War, with the "Hard-boiled" novels imported from America, at the cross-roads of the crime story world, and poised between adventure, mystery and tough nut novels. Yet although he demonstrated his perfect command in all areas, he never succumbed to any of them.

So, the question is, how did he succeed in remaining independent without being abandoned either by his public or his editor? By quite extraordinary means: he used the crime genre rather than serving it.

The man was an excellent imitator, with an amazing capacity of being able to switch from extreme Gothic fiction to the most unbridled action. He was also the master of an extremely personal and powerful world – not only did he have the ability of controlling the detective novel – he was also able to convert it to serve his own requirements.

This explains how the clever man was able to write novels both with an oppressive atmosphere as in "Le Démon de Sainte-Croix, 1932" (The Devil of Sainte-Croix), "Le Mannequin Assassiné, 1932" (The Murdered Dummy) or "La Maison des Veilles, 1938" (The House On Watch).

"Le Levrier Bleu, 1934" (The Blue Greyhound), an action story for the sake of action, which is a tribute to Edgar Wallace (American, 1875-1932), and, at the same time to dedicate himself to the purest of mystery stories such as "Six Hommes Morts, 1931" (Six Dead Men) or "L'Infaillible Silas Lord, 1937" (The Infallible Silas Lord).

As an imitation of the American Roman Noir, he wrote "Madame La Mort, 1951" (Mrs Death) and "L'Autopsie d'un Viol, 1964" (Autopsy of a Rape). He managed to insert some kind of exoticism in his plot as in "La Nuit du 12 au 13, 1931" (The Night between the 12th and 13th) or to add fantasy as in "Feu Lady Anne, 1935" (The late Lady Anne).

However he was, above all, able to combine the various influences resulting in an inimitable amalgam which led him to the extreme limits of the police fiction: How, in effect can one classify such works such as "Haute Tension, 1953" (High Voltage), "Poker d'enfer, 1955" (Hell of a Gamble), "Le condamné meurt à Cinq Heures, 1959" (Condemned To Die at 5 O'Clock) and "Peut-être un Vendredi, 2001" (May be a Friday) which without using the police novel conventions, are indisputably black stories.

Steeman's originality (which certainly doesn't deserve its dusty image of being the heir of the mystery writers) was his refusal to apply the "genre" techniques, whatever they may have been.

In effect, conventions curb the inventiveness of the creator, establish certain writing routines and ruin his imagination. Authors as diverse as Agatha Christie, James Hadley Chase, not to mention Simenon and his Maigret's series, are perfect examples, producing book after book, following the same pattern to the satisfaction of a non-demanding public.

On the contrary, Steeman took all the risks in order to express the inner world he embraced: risking being rejected by his readers, falling out with his editors, and by putting himself on the fringe by writing unclassified texts (a trend that he had a tendency to accelerate at the end of his career).

Overall, his willpower to stay free gave us plots both structured and fantastic at the same time.

As a matter of fact, there is nothing more logical than a Steeman detective story. Nothing more exciting either:

Each situation can be reversed completely and very often, we have the feeling of attending a first-rate Magician's show (as is the case with the books published by "Le Masque"). For example, the denouement

of "Crimes A Vendre, 1946" (Crimes to be Sold): although the reader is led to believe that the plot is resolved, an additional murderer is revealed on the last page, along with the means of preventing him from carrying out a new crime Steeman plays with the spicy humor of the situation and the somewhat pathetic status of the characters as if they were actors of a large game of cards, but the game is serious and always very close to tragedy. In using the conventions of the genre, he succeeded in imposing a world both superficial and serious at the same time where everything is constantly reversed, where laughter and drama are interchangeable. This is his trademark - his ability to control an unbridled humor and the blackest anguish.

Mr Wens or Ambiguity in Power With his first publications, Steeman put his wicked genius to work. It is good to know that the young author used the crime novel by parodying it to emphasize its weakness. The humorous sketches "Le Mystère du Zoo d'Anvers" (The Mystery at Antwerp Zoo) and "The Diable Au Collège" (The Devil At Secondary School) were written with the journalist Sintair in 1928/29.

When he finally decided to express himself through the detective novel, he should have conformed to the recurrent investigator but he succeeded in getting round this obstacle by using the police superintendent Malaise then with Mister Wens, two rather ambiguous characters, not very moral and sometimes even rather disturbing. So, right from the start, Steeman managed to master the genre yet remain distant. He went beyond the limits of the mystery novel, he achieved a specific climate, alternately picturesque, sarcastic and finally disillusion of humanity. Mr Wens and the superintendent Malaise (an evocative name !) are entertainers in the same capacity as Maigret or Hercule Poirot. However they have more, they are womanizers, cynics, with their own personal approach to justice. They make the reader feel incapable of discerning them completely, they have additional and distinguishing characteristics.

The public got it right when it acclaimed Mr Wens the first time he appeared in "Six Hommes Morts" (Six Dead Men), which won the Grand Prix Du Roman d'Aventures in 1931 (best adventure novel prize). It was something special which differed from Hercule Poirot's unequivocal attitude, and we should have been surprised to have seen Mr Wens appear on the screens under the Occupation (France, during the WW II) for the ambiguity of this character echoed that of the period.

Throughout his career Steeman never gave up his recurrent protagonists, although he changed them regularly.

In competition with Maigret even though he appeared a few months before him in "Péril" (Danger), the police officer Malaise ceased to exist and was replaced by Mr Wens, a more interesting character, who in his physical features (bald and tall), personified the author himself. The success of this persona was such that when Steeman wished to adopt the hard-boiled crime drama and put on-stage a new recurrent character, the very physical Désiré Marco, he failed to outshine his competitor. However, Steeman is not Simenon who published many Maigrets in order to benefit from his character's success. When he felt Mr Wens' role was limited - to the extent that in his second novel, "La Nuit Du 12 au 13" (The Night Between The 12th And the 13th), he had already planned to kill him – he had to choose between the success of his character and his creative integrity. Like Conan Doyle (1859-1930), was he going to get rid of his Sherlock Holmes with the possibility of bringing him back to life under pressure of the readership ?

The Fregoli (Italian actor, 1867-1936) of the Crime stories (as nicknamed by Jean Cocteau, French 1889-1963) prepared a trick of his own: he continued to publish Mr Wens' adventure but he completely rearranged the persona and his attributions. Primarily a police inspector, the poor Wens became in turn, consultant for an out-of-date policemen in "Le Mannequin Assassiné" (the Murdered Dummy) and "Crimes A Vendre" (Crimes To Be Sold), a gambling man under a false identity in "Poker D' Enfer" (Hell Of A Gamble) and a hired killer in "Six Hommes à Tuer" (Six Men To Kill) which, ironically, is the reversed story of "Six Hommes Morts" (Six Dead Men). In this way, Steeman managed to avoid feeling as if he was the prisoner of an archetype of the mystery novel and was able to explore new paths.

While Simenon and Doyle's successes were their undoing in dragging their recurrent heroes around like a ten-ton weights, Steeman managed to impose his creativity by deconstructing Mr Wens' character in order to adapt it (sometimes even to become a caricature) to his own alterations of intrigue and ambiance.

Steeman's World : From A Smiling Misanthropy To Tragedy not only a diabolic schemer, Steeman also developed his works with inimitable atmospheres and themes but this achievement often brought with it evolution or, sometimes, tension.

The young Steeman of the 20's regarded the crime novel not like a report without concessions of a corrupted and vulgar community but rather as a fairy tale. He declared: "to write a good detective novel, one must have a quite developed childish mind. One must always consider it this way: the detective story is the fairy tale of the 20th century" and he never changed his opinion. It is a well known fact that all Steeman's books are pleasant to read.

Does it mean that he is a happy and artless person ? That the crime would be a pretext for a free play of the imagination ? In reality, he is an outstanding author because his humor, his lightness, his skill at reversing the situation apply to a vision disenchanted with manhood. His books make even the meanest sorts bearable, satirize the most depressing ridicules, knock down the most rancid prejudices. In this respect, the most striking example is "Le Mannequin Assassiné" (The Murdered Dummy) in which a most surrealist situation: a dummy thrown under the wheels of a train led to a series of consequences for both the stationmaster and the railroad engineer.

The engine driver's picking up of the "body" up and throwing it over his shoulder creates a comical gesture which is amplified with the irruption of the police officer Malaise and the absurd dialogue which follows.

One can smile at the police officer's exclamation recalling "the greatest crime of the world". But, as soon as Malaise starts investigating why the dummy "died", he discovers that the facetious deed is not gratuitous but symptomatic : in the heart of a provincial little town, somebody has a crime in mind. Even worse, the dummy could be the main object which helped to re-create an old murder. The investigator is left to discover what the crime was and who did it. According to Steeman, the "fairy tale" is not dissociated from the reality and reveals what a quiet setting and human respect attempt to keep out of sight.

Look how the "Steemanian" sensibility is at work ! Shopkeepers out of breath, crafty notables full of their own respectability, greedy usurers, viragoes who convert malicious gossip into works of art, scroungers, crooks, sadomasochists whose favorite activity is to torment well-bred ladies smiling to their faces while planning how to poison them . In the first part of Steeman's work, the "fairy tale" reveals the true nature of the characters while at the same time putting them into perspective so as to appear as if disguised, that they are caricatures. The author of "Haute Tension" (High Voltage) satirizes his imaginary creatures to the extreme yet the accumulation of the scathing remarks, the

perpetual reversal of the situations, the cynical but cheerful dialogues enable him to avoid any squalid atmosphere.

Some novels are but a pretext to build a gallery of portraits: "La Maison des Veilles" (The House On Watch), "L'Assassin Habite au 21" (The murderer lives at the Number 21) and "Crimes A Vendre" (Crimes To Be Sold), stories where the author had a field day with his misanthropy. However, during the war, his tone did change: the "fairy tale" became somewhat awkward, his humor blacker and the series of masks à la Ensor (Belgian painter, 1860-1949) disappeared to be replaced by a limited number of characters somewhat psychologically sharper. "Légitime Défense" (Self-Defense) gives the pitch of this new orientation : the book is limited to the mental itinerary of a man jealous of his wife...up to the crime. The burlesque side being progressively replaced by an insidious tragic turn exacerbated by the hearings held in camera, as if Steeman, who was at this time depressive, became unable to avert the sordid side of the world. The "Mannequin Assassiné" (The Murdered Dummy) is no longer entertaining although it leads to the discovery of what is hidden inside human beings: the reader is thrown directly into the persona's neurosis.

The most direct metaphoric decline is found in "Le Condamné Meurt à Cinq Heures" (Condamned to Die at 5 O'Clock) where the Steemanian engineering owes everything to the tragedy for, to parody Bergson (French philosopher, 1859-1941), the calamity as the laugh has its own system.

Steeman began with the reputation of a man of integrity, the famous attorney Lejanvier, and, the particularity of Simenon, which was to introduce an alteration to observing the progression clinically. While Simenon used to base everything on the capacity of the character's reaction to the consequences, Steeman, more pitiless, would show at the same time, the inevitable spiral his hero gets caught up and the psychological effects. We feel the need to shout "stop acting like an idiot" to the poor Lejanvier who, of course, does not listen but to keep up appearances, gets rid of a blackmailer subtly and realizes after all, that it was a Pyrrhic victory: he became untrustworthy of his ideal although he would stop at nothing to save it.

"Le Condamné Meurt à Cinq Heures" (Condamned to die at 5 O'Clock) points out that a twist of fate was at work, that the fairy tale, the magic trick had been transformed into just one of those things. It is no longer a question of Steeman pulling the puppet's strings but to seriously observe how somebody, so full of himself ends up betraying his own values although he tries to save them (tragic situation par excellence).

Without totally losing his sense of humor, his last novels give a new but very pessimistic orientation to his work. It is this peculiar tragic and misanthropic vision of men, detectable even in his most cheerful novels, which makes him inimitable.

Conclusion

A precocious author, Steeman was lucky enough to be able to draw the attention of the literary commentators and was praised throughout his career. But we might ask ourselves if this is not a misunderstanding. All the critics understood how Steeman, due to the extraordinary cleverness of his intrigues, the charm of the situations and the mastery of his style, was able to renew the police genre but his capabilities are generally seen as those of a schemer. Some maintain that "Mr Steeman is an expert as far as intrigues and inventions are concerned". Others declare to be flabbergasted by his clever challenges.. But he is more than clever, he is exceptional - he created a unique world. Undeniably, he used all the knacks and astuteness of the detective genre, he belonged alternatively of the school of thrillers and then of hard-boiled crime fiction but only for what these frameworks could bring to his own vision of the world. Never did he lock himself in the same mold nor did he write the same scenario twice, yet his world remained consistent.

We should not fool ourselves: we may smile and laugh quite a bit when reading his books but although highly recreational, his stories conceal a desperate vision of manhood and a continuous condemnation of human stupidity and perversity.

In fact, many of Steeman's heroes are dualistic, at the same time accomplice and victim of their own destiny. It suffices to examine Mr Wens' role to appreciate this point. This ambivalence could well have become oppressive if his writing had not been at the same time witty.

It is essential that we rediscover Steeman considering that although the detective genre is inclined to fade rapidly, his work is not out of fashion and has stood the test of time. He is definitely more than a simple provider of intrigues for the film-director H.G. Clouzot.