

Editorial

WRITING about thrillers, detective stories, espionage intrigues, or plain adventure tales poses the critic with many problems. First of all he or she has to get over an intellectual guilty conscience probably installed along the long trek of school or university syllabuses and examinations. This difficulty is often, of course, not so much evidence of an intellectual guilty conscience as of intellectual snobbery. The question of when the best-seller becomes literature is perhaps at the root of the matter. Success in the eyes of the buying public can put off some critics for evermore. Then there is the question of how far brilliant technique (for the writers of what we might bring together as *romans policiers* often display this in a most impressive fashion) can offset what are often, the critic feels, themes and stories unworthy of this sheer writing ability. And a very proper question arises when the whole *œuvre* of a writer of *romans policiers* is considered: is there development? Or is there just a fiddling on old strings, a ready-made plot to be unclothed by a fresh display of blondes, with the cynical old intelligence officer sitting back to wait and see what will eventuate from his counter-machinations as his clever young Major drives a disguised taxi beneath the bright city lights. Not that there is not a subtle pleasure for the *aficionado* in observing the slight variations the skilful writer allows himself. For he must economize a little if he is to live by production of an annual chase, puzzle, or intrigue.

Unless, that is, he is an Ambler, or, above all, a Simenon. For Simenon's range for ever increases. His power of characterization, in Maigret obviously, is excellent, but in the Maigret range the other characters develop, show themselves and are filed away in our memories: some have mere walking-on parts but are as perfect in their detail as are the more important personages. Yet Simenon regards the Maigret stories as bread and butter compared to his other novels. The feature which all his writing exhibits brilliantly is an understanding of and capacity to convey the sense of place. This can rest upon the selection of detail, the old tiles

behind the bar counter, say, in a dockside restaurant in Delfzyl, or some clinical description of the oozy humidity of Florida; but it also goes deeper, for an almost animal-like awareness of atmosphere is invested in us as we read his words and share his apprehension of the nature of a place and then of the people who add to it that strange mysterious moving dimension which is human life, daddylonglegs rippling faintly and momentarily upon the placid waters of time's lake.

Simenon is a phenomenon of our time, perhaps, and now we can judge others by his particular achievement. Nicholas Freeling in his recent writings has developed beyond the not very severe limitations of Inspector Van der Valk. His use of detail, his careful creation of atmosphere, and his increasing human sympathy are reaching beyond mere best-seller techniques. This development in his work can be seen in his use of Porquerolles, that somewhat manyana-ish island off the Cote d'Azur, as background for the story of Raymond, the drifter with a dream, who so inevitably manages to muck up his quest for Valparaiso, his plans for getting there single handed in the *Olivia*. Here the manipulation of time by the author is skilled: the tempo alters insensibly: the lap of the waves stills the action, then later brings it to a rapid stormy climax of disaster. The author becomes unobtrusive, unselfconscious, and we accept his story, know his human beings as something more than stock characters of the *roman policier*. The critic has to allow for change, for deepening of perception, for ability to use rather than be used by the minutiae, the conventions and clichés which are easy, which work, and yet must be kept subordinate to the human values and quirks they might in the hands of hack writers obscure and denigrate. There are luckily many writers in this strange extensive genre who not only give pleasure to the insomniac or jetborn executive but add, paradoxically, often in their preoccupation with death, to our awareness of the richness of human life.

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