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Hardboiled or overcooked? Translating the crime fiction of Léo Malet

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ABSTRACT

Few of Malet's more than forty crime novels have been translated. Much of the attraction of his work to a source readership lies in his playful use of language rather than in the twists and turns of plot: puns, running gags and jokes of various types abound. Translating this humour poses challenges of three main types: linguistic (ie semantic), cultural and genre-related. Moulding the text to target reader expectations (of the 'hardboiled' subgenre) results in significant omissions, as does the treatment of culturally-embedded allusions, an important element in Malet's writing. Following a brief introduction to Malet's work and a preliminary description of his style, drawing comparisons with stand-up comedy techniques, along with some consideration of French verbal humour in crime fiction, the present study takes examples from translations into English, Spanish, German and Italian and suggests that genre models can radically alter the types and frequency of humour-creating techniques typical of the author.

KEYWORDS

Léo Malet, crime fiction, humour, wordplay, hardboiled, stand-up comedy, German, English, Italian, Spanish.

The 'Frenchness' of Léo Malet (1909–1996)

Unlike his near-contemporaries Georges Simenon (1903–1989) or San Antonio (Frédéric Dard 1921–2000), Malet's work was not originally published in the massive print runs achieved by well-known pulp fiction collections like *Le Masque* or *Fleuve noir*. He is nevertheless admired by many current French crime fiction writers and aficionados, as much for his depictions of Paris, notably in the fifteen volumes of the *Nouveaux Mystères de Paris* (1955–1959), as for his unconventional private detective Nestor Burma, who spurns logic and deduction in favour of action and instinct, and for his creative use of language.

A handful of Malet's Burma books have been translated into Danish, Turkish, Swedish, Spanish, German and Italian, and five of the *Nouveaux Mystères de Paris* (along with four other novels)¹ have made it into English. I propose here to explore in some detail the dominant elements of Malet's style, before considering the specific challenges these pose to the translator. Key to this discussion will be the notion that the subgenre known as 'hardboiled' crime fiction imposes a number of target expectations that do not in fact correspond especially well to Malet's style, even though his work is frequently described in these terms. Finally, I shall compare English, Spanish, German and Italian versions of one of the early *Nouveaux Mystères* novels, *Brouillard au pont de Tolbiac*, with particular focus on the degree to which they maintain the features

identified as typical of Malet. This analysis is thus a study of what Maher (2011: 49) calls “moving the text into a new place in the hope that it will fit into the lives of its new audience,” as something that “involves considerable negotiation of audience expectations.” In other words, I will focus not so much on the challenges of translating individual words and expressions, although these are always relevant questions, as on ways in which genre expectations of hardboiled detective fiction might arguably frame any or all of these more text-based decisions, particularly in the process of translating into English.

What is ‘typically’ Malet?

Born in Montpellier in 1909, Malet died in Paris in 1996. He had left school very early, moving to Paris at the age of 16 to realise his dream of becoming a *gueulant*, a cabaret singer in Montmartre à la Aristide Bruant, or perhaps a 1920s Bob Dylan, a career in which he made no more than a faltering debut. It was a hard life, at times on the streets, sleeping under bridges, and included contact with the *foyer végétalien* (‘vegan hostel’) operated by a group of anarchists near the Pont de Tolbiac. Eventually he encountered the Surrealists, led by the charismatic André Breton and including Magritte, Dali and Eluard. Although these names are undoubtedly better-known internationally, Malet did take part in the 1938 Surrealist Exhibition, and published three volumes of surrealist poems, some with illustrations by Magritte. He began writing pulp fiction in the 1940s, and is best-known as the creator of the unorthodox private detective Nestor Burma.

His literary associations have led to serious claims that Malet’s later work is also poetic and surrealist. The central thesis of Emmanuel’s 2006 study identifies three Surrealist ‘traces’: the use of dream sequences, altered states, and elements of the fantastic. The writer himself recognised his debt, although in general terms: “Avant de connaître les surréalistes, je n’étais rien. Et tout ce que je suis maintenant, c’est à eux que je le dois” (Malet in Martin 1975: 9) [Before I got to know the Surrealists I was nothing. And everything I am now, I owe to them]². What this means for Malet’s work is that style is at least as important, and arguably more so, than plot. Rousselot comments: “On n’a sans doute pas assez marqué que l’œuvre ‘policière’ considérable de Malet, d’une part a renouvelé de fond en comble le genre, d’autre part n’a cessé de se nourrir d’un feu de poésie qui est sans doute la plus sûre vérité de notre ami” (1975: 13) [We probably haven’t stressed enough that Malet’s considerable ‘crime fiction’ work not only completely renewed the genre, but also is constantly fed by a poetic fire that is probably the biggest trademark of our friend]. Alfu writes that “Ceux-là mêmes qui peuvent critiquer la routine de ses intrigues, sont obligés de reconnaître le plaisir qu’ils prennent à la lecture de ses récits” (1998: 85) [Even people who may criticise the routine nature of his plots have to admit to the enjoyment they get from reading his stories.] Malet’s trademark is not complexity of plot, but the verve and

energy of his use of language: style indeed over substance. Or, as Caradec puts it:

... si je relis ses romans, ce n'est pas pour l'intrigue [...] mais pour son écriture, sa science du langage, de la langue populaire d'abord, c'est-à-dire la nôtre, et des jeux qu'autorisent les mots, contrepétries ou à-peu-près, qui rendent impossible la lecture en diagonale (2010: 397).
 [... when I reread his novels, I'm not doing it for the plot [...] but for the way he writes, his skill with language, with everyday language most of all, the language we all use, and for the way words can be played with, the spoonerisms or approximations, that make it impossible to skim-read.]

For Caradec this makes him no mere "auteur de romans policiers" [author of crime novels] but also a "poète de la ville" [a poet of the city], and even "un des plus grands écrivains de ce temps" (2010: 397–398) [one of the greatest writers of our time].

Malet acknowledged the influence of linguistically-innovative writers such as Louis-Ferdinand Céline, referring to the latter's *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (1932) [*Journey to the End of Night*], widely recognised as revolutionising literary French by incorporating strong elements of spoken style, as "un bouquin absolument extraordinaire" (Malet 1988: 228)[an absolutely extraordinary book]. In addition to this orality, I believe that Malet's work meets the criteria described by Gascoigne, writing about Perec, as "ludic fiction." This is defined as being more detached from reality than "mainstream narrative":

By virtue of this detachment, ludic writing is endowed with an enhanced capacity for humour, deriving from its apparently pointless complexity and feats of virtuosity, its self-indulgence in exploiting a single operation, and its frequently light-hearted take-it-or-leave-it spirit of experimentation. It eschews the illusion, rooted in much mainstream fiction, of offering a transparent window onto social and individual existence (2006: 19).

While Malet's crime fiction is not without its connections to a very concrete social reality — he sought to evoke Paris and its inhabitants in a relatively realistic, if idiosyncratic way — it is also clear that his characteristic use of humour places him at least partly in this category of ludic writers. Games and 'play' can be serious too, particularly within French culture. The complexity is only *apparently* 'pointless', and the 'spirit of experimentation' can be seen as a deeply-rooted tradition, going back many centuries. According to Baudin *et al.*, the influence of Rabelais is still evident: this 16th-century "lover of language" is noted for his tendency to "inundate his writings with a torrent of words" and French writers today reflect this practice on several levels:

The most refined intellectual shares with the less bright punster [...] a profound satisfaction in using a so beautiful, rich and expressive language. The best French spirit expresses a triumphant sentiment which is based not simply on successful play of words but on a true delight in language and its use (1988: 81).

Whether this plethoric style be Rabelaisian or Surrealist in origin, it is clear that “apparently pointless complexity” is an important and very French stylistic feature, although, as I will argue, it is also characteristic of stand-up comedy. In any case, what seems clear already is that readers of French crime fiction bring to their reading a set of “expectancy norms” (Chesterman 1997: 64) that are arguably different from those of readers of British or American crime fiction, something which adds to the difficulties the translator has to negotiate when conveying Malet in English (although some writers are altering this paradigm with much more use of humour, for example, Robert Crais’ Elvis Cole series).

Malet’s complexity in translation to English

The concept of the ‘torrent’, the multiple, is vital here. Puns are problematic enough, as the two following instances, both cited by Alfu (1998: 85), show: “Il était sale comme un peigne. Et, comme un peigne, il lui manquait des dents” (*Paletots sans manches*). The literal meaning is: He was as dirty as a comb. And, like a comb, he was missing some teeth. The humour is reliant on a simile that has no direct equivalent in English, thus initially invalidating the final punchline with its pun on the two meanings of teeth. A translator might, however, decide here that although not a stock simile, “dirty as a comb” is sufficiently evocative to work if simply transliterated.

The same cannot be said for Alfu’s second example, where corpses are described as being clothed “Dans des costards à 50.000 balles, sans compter celles qui avaient fait des trous dedans” (*Des kilomètres de linceuls*). Literally, this means: In outfits costing 50,000 francs, not counting the ones that had made holes in them. Here the pivotal humour mechanism is a homonymic pun on *balles*, both slang for money, and denotatively, bullets. English has no term that can cover both options, and the translator will clearly need to exercise ingenuity in compensating in place and probably also in kind for these features. They should not be dealt with in isolation, however, but must be seen as part of a bigger picture: even in this brief example, there is a layering of comic techniques. The use of an initial slang term, *costards* (‘outfits’, ‘get up’), prepares the reader for the following *balles* (‘money/bullets’) and the dangling preposition *dedans* in final position, a further signal of oral register, builds to a series of three ‘hits’ (comic triple)³. In other words, the comedic effect is developed through a combination of strategies: slang, punning, orality, and comic triple.

These uses of wordplay may or may not be a reflection of Malet’s exposure to Surrealism and of the influence of the automatic and/or restrictive writing techniques that would later form part of Oulipian practice. The puns are in themselves fairly predictable humour devices, likely to pose challenges to the translator in ways that have already been discussed by theorists (eg. Delabastita (ed.) 1997, Vreck 1999, Chiaro

(ed.) 2010). However, they serve as a preliminary demonstration of the importance of style, and of a particular 'Frenchness' in Malet's work. As the anonymous author of an article in *Itinéraires* puts it:

Nestor Burma est différent des détectives privés américains: il a des lettres, et du goût, il pratique l'argot mais aussi l'imparfait du subjonctif et la publicité. Ce personnage, inventé par Léo Malet dans les années 30, francise avec humour, le roman noir, et cela bien avant la naissance de la 'Série' du même nom (1993: 8).
[Nestor Burma is different from American private detectives: he knows his literature, he has taste, he uses slang but also the imperfect subjunctive and the language of advertising. This character, invented by Leo Malet in the 30s, Frenchifies the noir novel with humour, and well before the birth of the 'Series' of that name.]

Chiaro points out that verbally expressed humour (VEH) may include "both linguistic and cultural features" (2010: 5) adding to the translation challenges. I would add here the importance of both immediate context (within the 'chain' of the text itself, for example in the case of running gags), and the wider cultural allusions. What I would like to illustrate is the complexity *and frequency* of humour through language play within the Malet text, as part of a French tradition.

Making a joke of crime: what's in a title?

The first difficulty encountered by a translator of much French crime fiction may well be the title — although final decisions on this are often made in consultation with the publisher. French crime writers much more habitually use punning or word games in such titles. There are certainly some instances of English-language titles that play on words, whether it be Janet Evanovich's Stephanie Plum numerical series (*One for the Money, Two for the Dough, High Five* and so on), Sue Grafton's Kinsey Milhone alphabetical series where *A is for Alibi, K is for Killer* and *N is for Noose*, or Cynthia Baxter's veterinary series *Putting on the Dog; Lead a Horse to Murder; Right from the Gecko...* These cutesy titles belong on the whole (Grafton excepted) to what Knight (2010[2004]: 147–148) has called the "American cozies," 'quaint' or even 'twee' series that generally feature a deranged villain reassuringly stymied.

In contrast to this American practice, I maintain that there is a strong French tradition for punning titles found in series that are not at all 'cozy.' The *Le Poulpe* series published by Baleine abounds in examples: *Saigne sur mer* (Bleed-on-Sea, instead of Seyne-sur-mer) by Serge Quadruppani; *Nazis dans le métro* (Didier Daeninckx) in place of Queneau's famous *Zazie dans le métro*; *Un travelo nommé désir* (Noël Simsolo), a nod in the direction of Tennessee Williams' *Un tramway nommé désir*, replacing the streetcar with a tranny (transvestite). There are jokes in many of the San-Antonio series of 175 novels published between 1949 and 2001, such as *Ménage tes méninges* (1962), [mind your brain]; *Un éléphant ça trompe* (1968), punning on the elephant's trumpeting and the term for being

unfaithful; and *Vol au-dessus d'un lit de cocu* (1978), reworking the French title of Ken Kesey's novel *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* into a flight over a cuckold's bed.

San Antonio's *Baise-ball à la Baule* (1980) echoes yet another popular culture series, the OSS117 spy novels by Jean and later Josette Bruce, which also adopt a playful homophonic or rhyming mode with titles such as *Cache-cache au Cachemire* (c.1959), *Moche Coup à Moscou* (1964) *Gâchis à Karachi* (1952), *Tactique arctique* (c.1959) *Agonie en Patagonie* (1983) *Halte à Malte* (c.1959) and many more⁴. Not all of Malet's titles offer this kind of ludic wordplay, but there are *Micmac moche au Boul'Mich*, *Fièvre au Marais*, *Les Rats de Montsouris*, and *Pas de bavards à la Muette* and *Les Eaux troubles de Javel*, all of which play with Parisian place names⁵.

To sum up, word games, rhymes, and intertextual references are all possible elements in titles of perfectly serious French crime fiction and thrillers, in ways that do not appear to have an obvious equivalent in English: for example, Ian Fleming's James Bond series contains catchy but not punning titles. To use such a title in English may even indicate a lightness that is not evoked in the French; in terms of translation, it may signal a 'coziness' that is thoroughly out of place. Issues such as these have to do with not only semantic equivalence, but also audience expectations of genre⁶. A cute or punning title may well mislead the reader: the label 'American-style' or comparisons with Hammett and Chandler may be equally confining.

Hardboiled or overcooked?

To what extent, then, has Malet's image as a writer of hardboiled fiction potentially influenced the translation of his fiction? Emmanuel is not alone in maintaining that Malet was influenced by "the American style of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, [launching] the French *roman noir* with Nestor Burma, who, for the first time, narrated a hardboiled crime story set in France" (2006: 31): this claim fails to take into account that neither author was readily available in French until after the founding of Duhamel's *Série noire* in 1945. While Malet acknowledged an interest in these writers, he was quick to insist that he read Chandler well after his own style had been established (Malet in Travelet 1980: 49). Hammett is an influence, certainly, but Malet cites more readily his admiration for Céline, Queneau and Vian (under his Sullivan nom-de-plume).

Clearly, Malet is interested in the play of language, and in using humour to draw readers in to the narrator's point of view. This is expressed in the first person, a strong feature of the American hardboiled (Porter 2012[2003]: 99), but claimed by Malet as a side-effect of a choice made in order to cover up any unintended grammatical errors resulting from his limited educational background, but creating "un style plus spontané, plus

direct” (Malet 1988: 167–168) [a more spontaneous and direct style]. We should also note here that Malet worked in a particularly oral vein, marked not only by the presence of spoken register in his texts, but by his method of composition itself. It was his habit to formulate the text aloud, pacing around his desk, before sitting down to type it. The result is an oral, highly rhythmic style that in many ways is close to stand-up, in terms of timing and frequency of punchlines as well as the building to a climax.

To illustrate this humour, and especially its frequency, I have analysed some two pages from *Les Rats de Montsouris*, the fifth in the *Nouveaux Mystères* series, first published in 1955⁷. My objective was to identify the salient features of Malet’s style, before considering how the English translation deals with them, and what resemblances, if any, exist between Malet’s work and the ‘hardboiled’ with which he has been associated.

What are the characteristics of Malet’s (comic) style?

The two pages cover Burma’s visit to a bar in a seedy part of Paris, a brief conversation, and his observations of the street on emerging. The text is marked by wordplay, changes of register and running gags, some of which are carried over from preceding pages or extend into the following ones. The most striking aspect of these pages is the frequency of comic features. These are varied in type, and include examples of irony, change of register, running gags (or *callbacks⁸), self-deprecation, over-elaboration, and cultural references: interestingly, there is only one pun amid this ‘torrent’ of features, where only a half-dozen lines of text appear to contain no attempt at humour. Bearing in mind that humour is relatively subjective (Reichl and Stein 2005: 5), by my count a sample of 325 words contained some 35 instances of VEH, a number that makes full and detailed discussion impossible.

Humour techniques in this sample (pp. 606-607) ranged from puns to register clashes (incongruities) to running gags and over-elaboration. Running gag plus pun (or connector): the use of the expression “je vidai incontinent”, meaning ‘I emptied [my glass] on the spot’, immediately, is followed six lines later by a reference to the need to visit the toilet, here referred to as the “où c’est?” (where is it?) which acts as a *closer near the end of the paragraph. The second meaning of the *connector ‘incontinent’ is thus activated, revealing the first mention to be a kind of *decoy. In addition, the contrast in register between the two key terms is striking, dropping from high in the first instance to familiar with a childish overtone in the second.

A second running gag operates through the cultural allusions to French history: streets are named after Vercingétorix, a leader of the Gauls from the Auvergne region, who was defeated by Caesar at Alésia (another street name), after earlier defeating him at Gergovie (also a street name). This referential network is activated by the name of one of the characters,

Ferrand, Clermont-Ferrand being the major city in the Auvergne. Since the success of this gag is dependent on the reader's knowledge of French geography and history, the translator is obliged to provide a minor gloss. Elsewhere, the reference is simply cut (see the example of the Triton, below).

Further reference to violence is made through the "coup du père François", a double act in which the victim is strangled from behind while being robbed by an accomplice. "La marine en bois" (the navy in the time of wooden ships), another colourful expression, adds to the language play around the use of navy terms ("aperçu" [aye, aye] and thus develops the character of Burma, the narrator. Like the "candélabres électriques" [electric candelabra] instead of street lamps, or the discussion of the noise of passing car tires compared to amorous sentiments dying almost before they are formed, these vivid images fall readily under the label of over-elaboration (the apparently pointless complexity already discussed).

Equally striking, particularly if read aloud, are the rhythmic changes in the passage. Several examples of twinned statements, such as "Propice à la méditation. Ou au coup du père François" [Suited to mediation. Or the Father François technique], or "Un bonhomme aux jambes en cerceau s'engagea dans la rue, puis rebroussa chemin" [a fellow with bowlegs entered the street, then turned around and backtracked], or the sentence that follows, all use a similar 1:2 pattern, like that of *set-up and *punchline, thereby adding to the overall comedic effect. We might add to this the incongruous juxtaposition of images evoked by the undervest-clad *gros triton mou* [the big flabby Triton] weighing *cent kilos bon poids* [easily a hundred kilos] alongside the Cinzano thermometer, decorated with an elegant lady sporting an upswept coiffure and elbow-length gloves.

As even this brief analysis shows, Malet's text is rich with layers of meaning, both cultural and linguistic, either explicit or implicit. How then does the translator proceed? Peter Hudson's English translation for Pan in 1991, *The Rats of Montsouris*, while respecting characterisation, description and action overall, also reduces the original considerably.

Malet: Le gros *triton mou* soupira, tira un flacon trapu de la glacière, le décapsula *d'un preste mouvement* du poignet, *rafla* un godet parmi ceux qui séchaient, et déposa *le toutime* devant moi (606, emphasis added).

Literally: The great flabby Triton sighed, pulled a squat bottle from the icebox, removed the top with a deft flick of the wrist, grabbed a glass among those that were drying, and set the whole shebang down in front of me.

Hudson: He sighed, took a squat bottle from the ice-box, removed the top with a deft flick of the wrist, grabbed one of the glasses set out to dry, and banged it and the bottle down in front of me (11).

Where the original contains an incongruous classical reference and moves several times between upper and lower registers (*le gros triton mou, un preste mouvement, rafla, le toutime*), the translation arguably smoothes away this alternation in all but the case of the “deft flick”. The bartender has previously been described as “a flabby-looking heavyweight in a vest” (10) (*un costaud mou en maillot de corps*, 606), but this second description, as a Triton, has been cut, replaced by a simple ‘He.’ A second sample again illustrates this smoothing:

Malet: Ensuite, toujours morose, il retourna à sa plonge, en poussant un soupir destiné à tenir compagnie au précédent. Manifestement, ses cent kilos bon poids s’accommodaient mal des 28 degrés indiqués au thermomètre Cinzano (606).

Literally: Next, still glum, he went back to his washing-up, heaving a sigh destined to keep the previous one company. Obviously his one hundred kilos (minimum) were not dealing well with the 28 degrees showing on the Cinzano thermometer.

Hudson: Then he sighed again and went back to his washing up, morose as ever. His hundred kilos were feeling the 28 degrees shown on the Cinzano thermometer (11).

The most noticeable loss here is in the over-elaborate description of the sigh: awkward as they may be to translate, such flourishes are a frequent feature of Malet’s writing and if these are trimmed away on a regular basis the obvious result is a paring down of the ‘plethora’ effect.

The English translation visibly reduces and simplifies in places, aiding readability but arguably losing uniquely Maletian features. The ‘torrent’ of humour in the original presumably goes beyond the usual parameters of the hardboiled. Here we might briefly consider the question of ‘overcookedness’: for an anglophone readership expecting the hardboiled, what is the effect of such a plethora of comic strategies? Is it legitimate to limit the number of ‘hits’ in a text for this reason? Perhaps in fact the very thing that fascinates so many French readers of Malet — the importance of style over substance, the fact that it is not possible to skim read his work — is an obstacle to a new anglophone reader, in that the material aspect of the text (its language) keeps getting in the way of the plot.

How have other translators handled this?

To consider whether genre-based decisions might also vary between languages or translators, this section takes brief examples from another book in the *Nouveaux Mystères* series, *Brouillard au pont de Tolbiac*, that has been translated into English, German, Spanish and Italian. I note that my knowledge of both Italian and Spanish is too limited for more than brief comments, and I leave further reflection to others (for example, on whether Malet’s frequent play between upper and lower registers could be more fully duplicated). Nothing is easier than to criticise a translation. The following analysis is offered only in an attempt to describe the various

translators' strategies and their effects. Here we will compare versions of the book's opening paragraph:

Ma bagnole étant à la révision, je pris le métro.

J'aurais pu essayer de fréter un taxi, mais le Père Noël, c'était pour dans un mois et demi. Il crachinait salement et dès qu'il flotte un tant soit peu, les bahuts se raréfient. Ils doivent rétrécir à l'humidité. Je ne vois pas d'autre explication. Et quand il ne pleut plus, ils ne vont jamais dans la direction désirée par le client. Pour ce dernier phénomène, je n'ai pas d'explication, mais les chauffeurs, eux, en fournissent d'excellentes.

Je pris donc le métro (837).

A relatively literal translation would read: My jalopy being at the mechanic's, I took the Metro. / I could have tried to charter a taxi, but Father Christmas, that was a month and a half. It was drizzling dirtily and as soon as there's a bit of a wet, cabs become rare. They must shrink in the damp. I don't see any other explanation. And when it isn't raining any more, they're never going in the direction desired by the customer. For this last phenomenon, I have no explanation, but the drivers do, they supply excellent ones. / So I took the Metro. The salient features of the opening sequence, again with multiple comic effects, are differences in register, irony, the set up/punchline 1:2 structure, and the callback repetition. The juxtaposition of the familiar/slang term *bagnole* ('jalopy') with the relatively sophisticated present participle construction and the historic past *je pris* ('I took') strike the reader immediately. Although Céline had used the *passé composé* instead of the *passé simple* as early as 1932 in *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, and Camus followed suit with *L'Étranger* (1943), the majority of crime writers and translators of the genre into French maintained the use of the preterite despite its degree of orality. San Antonio would largely break the mould in the 1960s.

A further clash of registers, between the somewhat technical *fréter* ('to charter') and the conversational construction *c'était pour dans* (literally: 'it was for in') reinforces this. The expansion which follows — a nice example of 'apparently pointless complexity' — contains an ironic complaint about and pseudo-explanation of the non-availability of taxis (and cash), alongside another register difference (*bahuts* / *se raréfient* ['cabs' / 'become rarefied']). The 1:2 pattern is strongly evident in every sentence in the next paragraph: in essence, it is made up of *one-liners and add-on *tags. Doubling back to the opening sentence, the last sentence offers a further example of typical stand-up structure, in that it imitates the apparently casual, very oral story-telling style which proceeds by a series of digressions.

In Barbara Bray's English translation, this becomes:

My car was being serviced, so I took the Métro.

No doubt a taxi would be along in due course, but so would Christmas, and I didn't feel like waiting six weeks. Besides, it was drizzling, and there wasn't a cab to be seen. They shrink to nothing in the wet – that's the only possible explanation.

Even when it stops raining they never want to go in the direction you're aiming at.
Don't ask me why. The cabbies will tell you soon enough.
So I took the Métro (11).

Bray's version, while replicating this doubling back, and respecting overall the lively and very oral tone of the original, again pares away some of the elaborateness, and loses most of the register changes. This is a much more plain-speaking Burma, closer to the terseness expected of a hardboiled detective.

German (*Die Brücke im Nebel*, Hans-Joachim Hartstein)

Mein Wagen war bei der Inspektion. Also nahm ich die Metro. Hätte mir auch ein Taxi leisten können, aber bis Weihnachten waren es noch eineinhalb Monate. Außerdem nieselte es hundsgemein. Und dann lösen sich die Taxis bekanntlich in Luft auf. Laufen einfach ein, sobald sie von den ersten Tropfen naß werden. Anders kann ich mir's nicht erklären. Und wenn der Scheißregen endlich aufhört, fahren sie nie in die angegebene Richtung. Für dieses Phänomen hab ich keine Erklärung. Aber die Taxichauffeure liefern immer ganz hervorragende.

Ich nahm also die Metro (7).

Changes to the layout alter the visual and oral rhythms of the original, but arguably better approximate German paragraphing practices. The choice of *Wagen* ('automobile') rather than the more neutral *Auto* ('car') goes some way towards replicating the differences in register in the original. A compensatory ellipsis (of the subject pronoun in *Hätte mir...*, and later *Laufen einfach ein*) adds to the orality of the text, but the preference for *Weihnachten* ('Christmas') over *Weihnachtsmann* ('Father Christmas') subtracts connotations of childhood expectation that are ironic in the original. *Hundsgemein* mistakenly(?) amplifies the ironically understated *crachiner* ('drizzle') that allows Malet to exaggerate the taxi-drivers' sensitivity and lead in to Burma's musings on possible reasons for their unavailability. The use of *bekanntlich* creates a sense of shared knowledge with the reader and simultaneously reinforces the fluid, chatty tone, but potentially works against the original's thesis, that the reasons for the scarcity of taxis are a mystery, although it can of course also be read as ironic. The addition of the vulgarism *Scheißregen* adds an emphasis not present in the original, where the contrast between light rain and extreme absence of taxis is an important comic intensifier. The callback in the final line respects the original, even though the visual and rhythmic pattern of the whole has been disturbed by earlier changes.

Spanish (*Niebla en el puente de Tolbiac*, Luisa Feliu)

Me estaban haciendo la revisión del coche en el taller, de modo que tomé el metro.

Hubiese podido parar un taxi, pero todavía faltaba un mes y medio para el aguinaldo. Caía un sucio sirimiri y en cuanto empieza a llover los taxis escasean. Deben encoger con la humedad. No se me ocurre otra explicación. Y cuando deja de llover, no van en la dirección que al cliente le gustaría. Para este último fenómeno carezco de explicaciones pero, en cambio, los taxistas las tienen excelentes.

De modo que tomé el metro (7).

This version scrupulously respects the callback structure, and the affective dimensions of *Père Noël*, although *aguinaldo* ('Christmas bonus') is arguably a more adult concept. *Parar* ('to stop') neutralises the humour of *fréter* ('to charter'), and the light rain of *crachiner* is intensified, here by the addition of *sucio* ('dirty'), which fits with Malet's *salement* ('dirtily') and replicates the oppositional humour of the original.

A somewhat misleading intensification, *pioveva di brutto* ('it was raining very hard'), is found in the Italian version:

Italian (*Nebbia sul ponte di Tolbiac*, Federica Angelici)

Visto que avevo la macchina a riparare, presi il metrò.

Avrei potuto tentare di acchiappare un taxi, ma eravamo a un mese e mezzo da Babbo Natale. Pioveva di brutto e si sa che, appena cadono anche solo due gocce, i taxi si fanno subito più rari. Dev'essere que si restringono con l'umidità. Non trovo altra spiegazione. E quando non piove più, non vanno mai nella direzione desiderata dal cliente. Per quest'ultimo fenomeno, non ho spiegazioni, ma i conducenti, loro, ne offrono di eccellenti.

Presi quindi il metrò (7).

Here again, the opening and the closing callback correspond neatly, and the translation follows the original quite closely. *Acchiappare* ('to grab') offers some colour in place of *fréter*, and *Babbo Natale* echoes *Père Noël*. The qualification *di brutto* ('nastily', 'very hard') misreads the quality of both the rainfall and the joke, but the rhythm of the last sentence in that paragraph neatly imitates Malet's text.

As might be expected, the translations vary in their attempts to reproduce the original work: for the most part, however, the translators have kept the rhythms and tone of Malet's text. It is arguably the English version that strays the furthest, reducing both the elaborate parenthetical information of these opening lines and the register contrasts, and introducing a change of tone in giving Burma's monologue and addressee ('you').

Genre factors in translation

Without more in-depth information, it is of course impossible to know what factors determine translators' final choices. However it is worth reflecting on the possible role of genre expectations in this respect. An anglophone translator, more influenced by the idea of the hardboiled detective as a wise-cracking, plain-speaking character given to "laconic wit" and creating a "sophisticated verbal exercise in the anti-picturesque" under the influence of Hemingway's "pared-down language" (Porter 2012[2003]: 99) is arguably unlikely to exploit the full texture and richness of Malet's elaborate and 'torrential' original. An anglophone reader expecting typically hardboiled story-telling in these terms may feel anything not 'pared down' is an intrusion into the reading process. Chandler's more frequent flourishes are a better basis for comparison,

where the interest “is often less in the pleasurable fear associated with suspense or the unravelling of mystery than in discovering through his imagery what a face has in common with a collapsed lung or a mouth with a wilted lettuce” (Porter 2012[2003]: 105). For sheer verbal fireworks, however, Malet stands apart.

This is ostensibly what French fans and critics mean when they point to the uniquely French verve of Léo Malet’s books. Alfu comments:

que l’on apprécie ou non le ‘détective de choc’, il faut bien reconnaître qu’il a su nous préserver d’une invasion trop expéditive de nos amis américains. Grâce à lui, une autre voie s’est ouverte, franchouillarde, ironiseront certains, française suffit-il de dire. Et qui allait ouvrir les portes d’une école fort riche, influencée mais non dévorée par le *hardboiled* (Alfu 1998: 91–92).

[whether you admire the ‘détective de choc’ [Burma] or not, you must admit that he saved us from an overly rapid American invasion. Thanks to him another pathway opened up, stereotypically French, some might complain, but simply French is enough. A pathway that would open the gates to a very rich school, influenced but not devoured by the *hardboiled*.]

A particular French twist, then, on the American *hardboiled* school, in which the seriousness of the investigation and the values at stake appear to be secondary to the ways in which they are expressed. In this sense, however, Malet (through Burma) is “jamais plus sérieux que lorsqu’il a l’air de plaisanter” (Bouvier 1982: 114–115) [never more serious than when he seems to be joking]: there is always within these texts an element of social criticism. While I have suggested another apparently American genre model, stand-up comedy, as an alternative way to read, respond to and translate Malet’s crime fiction, it is worth pondering the fact that stand-up developed through vaudeville, said to have originated in Vaux de Ville or Vaux de Vire in Normandy (Tafoya 2009: 110), where a tradition of satirical song existed. Perhaps the *gueulants* in the radical Montmartre cabarets of Malet’s youth, vaudevillians in their own way, also modelled the elaborate banter that is the basis for Burma’s narratives.

While much has been said in favour of readability and respecting genre norms within the target culture, particularly from a commercial point of view and perhaps particularly in the case of popular fiction, I would argue that translators still need to hear the unique voice of each writer and to transmit that voice as best they can. Malet’s peculiarly French contribution to the crime genre is perhaps yet to be fully revealed, in its English translations at least.

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Appendix: Glossary of stand-up comedy terms (Tafoya 2009)

- callback: a joke that references a joke told previously in the show or routine.
- closer: the final joke of a comedy performance, one that should get a big laugh.
- connector: the centrepiece of a joke. A word, idea or image that suggests one thing in the set-up line and is revealed to mean something else in the punchline.
- decoy assumption: the misdirecting assumption in a joke's setup that creates the first story and is shattered by the reinterpretation.
- one-liner: a joke that consists of only one or two short sentences.
- sequence: a series of jokes in which one joke depends upon or builds upon [the preceding one].
- setup: the first and unfunny part of the joke that contains a decoy assumption and a connector.
- tag: an additional punchline that does not require a new setup.
- timing: the use of rhythm and tempo to enhance a joke or emphasise a punchline.

Bibliography

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¹ These are: *The Rats of Montsouris*, 1991; *Sunrise Behind the Louvre*, 1991; *Mayhem in the Marais*, 1991; *The Tell-Tale Body on the Plaine Monceau*, 1993; *Fog on the Tolbiac Bridge*, 1993; and *Dynamite versus Q.E.D.*, 1991; *120 rue de la Gare*, 1991; *Mission to Marseilles*, 1991; *Death of a Marseilles Man*, 1995; all translated by Peter Hudson or Barbara Bray, series editor Barbara Bray, and published by Pan (London).

² Translations from Malet's published works are those of the translators listed in the Bibliography. Translations from other texts are my own.

³ See, for example, McKim and Skene (2011: 66–67) for a brief comment on the 'rule of three' in comedy. This is arguably a phenomenon that crosses linguistic and cultural boundaries, since examples of the tricolon can be found in classic Greek poetry, folktales, modern speeches and nineteenth-century French prose (*rythme ternaire*).

⁴ There are over 240 novels in the OSS117 series written by Bruce and his family. The titles listed here are all variants on [trouble] in [place] with an emphasis on rhyme: for this reason I have not attempted to translate them.

⁵ The base meaning of these titles is as follows: Seedy Goings-on on the Boul'mich (Boulevard St Michel); Fever in the Marais (both an area of Paris and the word for swamp); The Rats of Montsouris (again an area of Paris, but 'souris' also means mouse); and No Chatterboxes in La Murette (a Parisian placename that also means The Silent Woman); it was in Javel, on the banks of the Seine, that Claude Louis Berthollet invented bleach ('eau de Javel') in 1777.

⁶ I acknowledge here that for the sake of concision I am simplifying the issue and that meaning is arguably determined by context as well as morphology or etymology.

⁷ Nadia Dhoukar, editor of the complete series (Laffont 2006), arranges them in order of Burma's biography as revealed in the books: she lists this novel as 6th on these grounds.

⁸ Terminology used for stand-up comedy is indicated with an asterisk. Definitions are given in the Glossary below (Appendix).