
Pierre Verdaguer. *La séduction policière: signes de croissance d'un genre réputé mineur: Pierre Magnan, Daniel Pennac et quelques autres.* Birmingham, AL: Summa Publications, 1999. 315p.

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Pierre Verdaguer's study examines a "modest" (3) selection of French detective novels from the late 1970s onward that all share the following features: the investigation as motor of the plot, a thematic focus on France's recent past and on the universality of human weaknesses, and finally a high stylistic quality or "literariness," a characteristic not usually ascribed to a genre generally considered to be trivial or popular. As he announces he intends to from the outset, Verdaguer leaves aside theoretical considerations in order to proceed to a series of close readings of the targeted primary texts; this approach, however, while tenable in the most cogent parts of the book, simultaneously conceals some of the study's weaker points.

Comprised of three chapters each analyzing two to three authors and followed by a short conclusion, *La séduction policière* begins with an introduction that touches on crucial and complex questions regarding the nature of the detective novel and its position within the literary field. The eponymous seduction is revealed here as being twofold: while crime fiction enjoys an ever-growing readership that bespeaks its undeniable seductive power, it similarly attracts an ever-growing number of writers—established authors and neophytes alike—into the realm of the *paraliterary*, some of whom, by succumbing to the temptation of the detective genre, arguably risk their reputations. But aside from making these self-evident observations, Verdaguer fails to deliver any truly new insights into the seduction phenomenon, a situation that leaves the reader wondering at the unfortunate and somewhat misleading choice of title. The seduction phenomenon remains indeed only briefly addressed through references to Roger Caillois, Tzvetan Todorov, and Jacques Dubois and their theories about what makes detective fiction attractive: namely, its inherently playful aspect.

The most engaging part of Verdaguer's study is by far the first one, devoted as it is to two successful and prolific authors of detective novels: Pierre Magnan and Daniel Pennac. However distinct they may be in the fictive realms they create and the underlying ideologies they respectively espouse—thus readily lending themselves to a comparative analysis—Magnan and Pennac do show similarities, especially in regard to their understanding of literature. Both authors overtly draw from the oral tradition through their use of protagonists closer to the poet and storyteller than to the detective, protagonists for whom the investigation is seen as part of a creative

process. Verdaguer notes as well their common use of ironic distancing: through this practice, both Magnan and Pennac intentionally parody the stereotypes and idiosyncrasies of detective fiction on the one hand while on the other redefining and elevating the genre by their use of numerous cultural and literary references. The chief difference between them involves the notion of modernity: while Magnan chooses to set his novels at the margins of contemporary society—in the unchanging and homogenous, if not downright Gallo-centric, surroundings of provincial southern France—Pennac opts for the urban and multicultural setting of the Parisian suburb of Belleville. Their interests and referential frameworks, however, intersect again in their mutual fascination and obsession with their country's recent past as the backdrop for the fight between good and evil. Particularly compelling here are Verdaguer's remarks on the authors' treatment of history (with their special emphasis on the two world wars) as something that allows a shift from the judicial and the rational to the inexplicable and poetical: "La descente dans l'Histoire, autrement dit dans l'en-deçà de la modernité, préside au glissement dans une poésie de l'inexplicable. L'Histoire n'est plus alors que la justification d'un désir de régression dans les zones mythiques de l'incompréhensible" (101).

The book's second part, titled "Triade féminine," intends to analyze three female authors of detective fiction: Fred Vargas, Estelle Monbrun, and Anne de Leseleuc. Unfortunately, the title proves again to be deceptive as this chapter does not break new ground in the complex issue of the attraction of crime fiction for women, whether as writers or as readers; nor does it have anything new to say about the specific practices of female detective novelists. By way of comparison with the British tradition, Verdaguer arrives at a few conclusions that could well apply to French detective novels in general, regardless of the writer's gender: male detectives are often depicted as outsiders and poets whose talent for observation of mankind derives from a humanist tradition; and, in accordance with the French republican mentality, the hero tends to belong to the police force, whereas the British hero, in the role of the dilettante detective, typically comes from an upper-class, elitist society. Since the *feminine* aspect of these three authors' writing is more or less evaded, the question arises whether it wouldn't have been wiser and more logical to treat the works of Anne de Leseleuc, a writer who specializes in historical detective novels that take place in antiquity, together with those of Christian Jacq on ancient Egypt. The latter writer appears instead in the last part of the book alongside Didier Daeninckx, whose fictional world is set in a contemporary society marked by pessimism, darkness, and the obliteration of the horrors of France's national past. It seems that a closer comparison of Leseleuc and Jacq's writings would have indeed proven conclusive as they both revert to what Verdaguer terms a "specular technique"

(222). This strategy consists in using a remote historical setting characterized by decadence and the constant threat of corruption as a device by which to subtly mirror and morally judge contemporary France, thereby revealing the true object of the authors' socio-historical criticism. In their technique, Leseleuc and Jacq come to confirm Verdaguer's main thesis, which the brief conclusion finally highlights clearly: that the fundamental obsession with the wounds of France's unresolved past constitutes the motivating force behind all the detective novels examined here, and ultimately helps explain their seductive power. This is a fascinating thesis that would have greatly benefited from a more tightly wrought structure and rigorous focus. Ultimately, however, Verdaguer's book succeeds in acquainting the reader with some of the most popular authors of contemporary France and the far from trivial questions their crime fiction raises. ✱