



LÉO MALET

From Anarchism to Arabophobia

by Stephen Schwartz

The crime novelist Léo Malet represents a fascinating phenomenon in French literature. Coming from a proletarian family — his parents and younger brother died of tuberculosis — he had little formal education. As a youth, he sold anarchist newspapers such as *Le Libertaire*, and at 16 migrated from his native Montpellier to Paris, where he performed as a cabaret singer. He was employed in more typical marginal jobs. He became a friend of the poet Jacques Prévert and began participating in the Surrealist movement in the 1930s. He was also active as a Trotskyist, like most of the Surrealists of the time. He claimed he wrote many of his later books — the topic of this article — on a typewriter ‘left to him’ by Rudolf Klement, a German political exile and the first secretary of the Fourth International, murdered by the Soviet secret police in Paris in 1938. During the second world war, Malet was imprisoned first by the French for revolutionary activities, and then by the Germans, but was freed and returned to Paris.



The most prominent of the many paradoxes in Malet’s life came when he began publishing detective novels, a genre the Surrealists despised. The detective story, however, has sustained a diverse range of attitudes and talents. It includes the banal and reactionary — a Conan Doyle novel about Sherlock Holmes, *The Valley of Fear*, is a lurid attack on the Mollie Maguires, an Irish labour group in the U.S., and promotes the anti-worker campaigns



of the Pinkerton detective agency. But the boundaries of crime fiction extend to the works of Raymond Chandler, the unchallengeable poet of a corrupt Los Angeles, as witnessed by Chandler’s invention, private investigator Philip Marlowe. Let it be noted that Chandler has had many more imitators, over the past century, than Conan Doyle. The Spanish author Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, creator of a private detective named Pepe Carvalho, also produced a novel, *El pianista*, in 1985, that discussed the Spanish anarchists and the anti-Stalinist Partit Obrer d’Unificació Marxista (P.O.U.M.), for which George Orwell fought during the Spanish

Léo Malet Revolution.

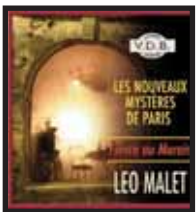
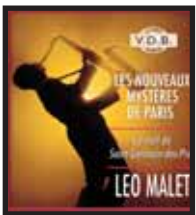
1909-1996

Malet never completed his planned great cycle of detective stories, *Les Nouveaux Mystères de Paris* (‘The New Mysteries of Paris’), which were to include a novel set in each of the 20 *arrondissements* of Paris. He managed 15 but then gave up.

Malet has been credited with introducing the stripped-down, pessimistic, ‘hard-boiled’ style of Chandler and Chandler’s inferior contemporary Dashiell Hammett — a Stalinist who had worked as a Pinkerton strike-breaker — to French readers. The medium for this novelty was a sequence of short novels in which the protagonist was an ex-anarchist and private detective, Nestor ‘Dynamite’ Burma. In the 1940s, Malet produced a first group of Burma tales, and in the mid-1950s began a second, *Les nouveaux mystères de Paris* (*The New Mysteries of Paris*), each of which was set in a different *arrondissement* or municipal district. All the Burma novels shared with the 19th century magazine series, *Les mystères de Paris* by Eugène Sue, a sympathy for and profound knowledge of the impoverished classes in the French capital, as well as an inundation of the text by the distinctive Parisian slang, or *argot*.

In other ways, however, the mysteries of Malet differed dramatically from those of Sue. Firstly, the *argot* itself had changed over time. Second, Nestor Burma first appeared in 1943, under the Nazi occupation, with publication of *120, rue de la Gare* (issued by Pan Books in 1991, in an English translation by Peter Hudson, now out of print.) In the Burma novels, the oppressive ‘darkness’ of life begins in the night of fascism.

The adventures of ‘Dynamite’ Burma feature a group of recurrent secondary characters. The detective operates the ‘Fiat Lux’ Detective Agency, the Latin name of which means ‘let there be light,’ which may refer to the characteristic gloom of the *roman*



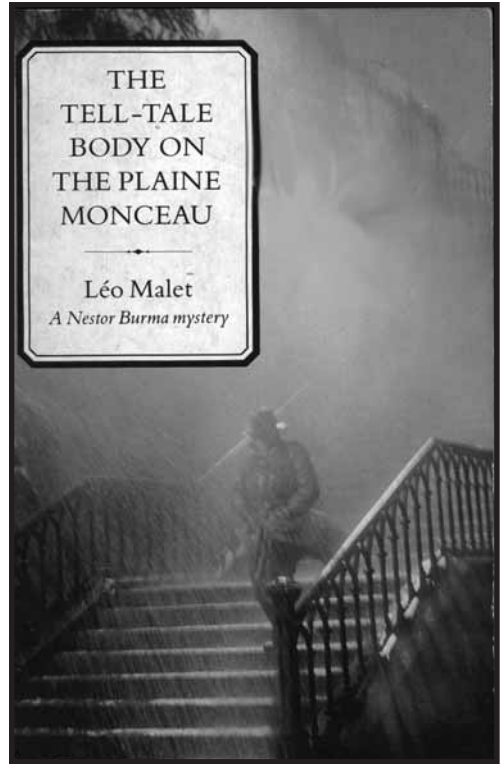


noir. The cast includes a female secretary, Hélène, who serves as a faithful co-investigator, and Marc Covet, reporter for a daily newspaper, *Le Crépuscule* (The Dusk) — another satirical title when compared with those of the former dailies *Le Matin* (The Morning) and *Paris-Soir* (Paris Evening), but also, perhaps, a clever comment on the *noir* style. Burma usually contends with Florimond Faroux, a top police functionary, but also a sympathetic friend.

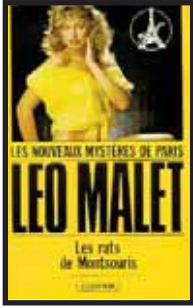
Appreciating Malet in English is challenging, because of the reduction of the ‘hard-boiled’ idiom to laconic observation without much description of the environment, which is either taken for granted or sinks into anonymity. To really appreciate Chandler, I believe one must know something about the Los Angeles of his time, and to comprehend Malet, the reader should preferably be Parisian.

The anarchist sympathies both of Malet and of ‘Dynamite’ Burma are well-represented in the 1956 volume *Brouillard au pont du Tolbiac*, a ‘new mystery of Paris’ set in the city’s southern 13th arrondissement. As *Fog on the Tolbiac Bridge*, it was published in English, in a translation by Barbara Bray in 1993, also by Pan Books and also out of print.

Fog on the Tolbiac Bridge begins with Burma receiving a note that addresses him as ‘Dear Comrade,’ and which is signed ‘Yours fraternally, Abel Benoit’. The communication summons him to a bed in the hospital of Salpêtrière, located in ‘the 13th’. While riding the metro to the clinic, Burma encounters an attractive Gypsy woman, who recognizes him. Strangely, she is aware of his mission to visit Benoit, but tells Burma there is no reason to go any further, because Benoit is dead, and she had mailed the letter to the detective. She then reveals that she had followed Burma out of his office onto the metro, and gives her name as ‘Belita [Isabelita] Morales.’ When he enters the hospital, Burma is informed that Benoit has died the same morning. A



Pan, 1993



police inspector named Fabre, who reports to Florimond Faroux (and who at this point in the sequence of stories has become a police superintendent), introduces himself by addressing Burma as ‘comrade’. Burma asks if Fabre is a Communist, and Fabre replies that he is aware of Burma’s anarchist past. Fabre states that between communism and anarchism he sees little choice, and Burma responds by declaring, ‘It’s a long time since I threw any bombs’. Burma then cites the notorious remark of the French politician Georges Clemenceau, that ‘Anyone who isn’t an anarchist when he’s sixteen is a fool’. Fabre completes the aphorism, ‘But didn’t he also say that anyone who’s still an anarchist when he’s forty is just as bad?’

Fabre then discloses that he had been waiting at the hospital for Burma to appear, and while Burma seems not to recognise the name of Abel Benoit, Fabre states that the latter had collected newspaper clippings on the detective’s cases, in addition to sending him the note that began the story, and that Benoit had also been an anarchist. Benoit had been fatally stabbed by a band of assailants and, refusing to go to the regular police, wanted Burma to track them down for revenge. Fabre reveals that the victim’s real name is ‘Albert Lenantais,’ and Burma immediately recalls him as an anarchist associate, a quarter century in the past, ‘a shoemaker by trade, so everyone called him the Cobbler’.

Lenantais would have been easily identifiable, according to Burma, by a tattoo on his chest reading ‘Neither God nor Master,’ the most famous slogan of the anarchists. Burma recalls him as a counterfeiter, who served a prison sentence for that offence, symbolized by a second tattoo, of a French coin, on the dead man’s arm. Faroux arrives and the text then diverts to a memoir of anarchist life in Paris in 1927. But Burma’s recollections are vague and inconsequential; they merely remind him that he has aged.

Faroux tells Burma that Lenantais, a rag-picker, had been stabbed by ‘North Africans’ and taken to the hospital by the Gypsy woman, Belita Morales. Faroux hints at his own disgust that the neighbourhood in which Lenantais was assaulted had become ‘full of Arabs,’ and describes the living quarters of the deceased as sheltering a large collection of anarchist propaganda from 1937 or 1938. The Spanish Revolution, it seems, had ended the activism of Lenantais. Faroux informs Burma that the police are interested in any case in which the detective is mentioned, but Burma insists



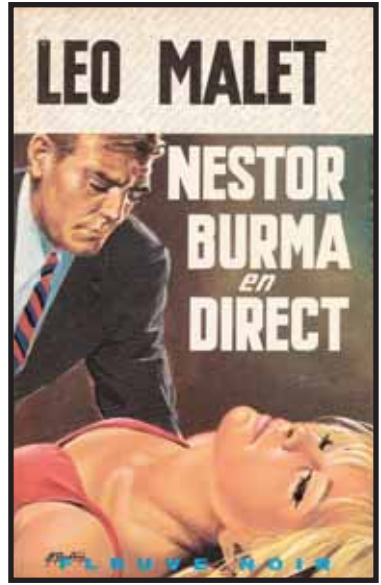


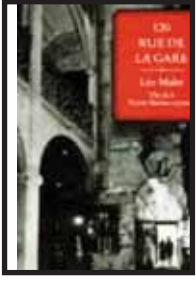
that his acquaintance with Lenantais was superficial. To learn more about the dead militant, Burma turns to the journalist Covet.

Michelle Emanuel, author of a rather dry, post-modern academic study, *From Surrealism to Less-Exquisite Cadavers: Léo Malet and the Evolution of the French Roman Noir*¹ has pointed out that prejudices against North African Arabs and Gypsies — both treated harshly in *Fog on the Tolbiac Bridge* — as well as African and Antillean Blacks, and even Japanese, are repeatedly expressed by Nestor Burma. He is, according to Emanuel, a ‘likeable xenophobe.’ Beyond his evocation of the ‘noir’ attitude of disillusion with established life, she writes, Burma ‘represents the darker side of French culture’, i.e. its chauvinism. He is not, however, anti-Jewish, and Emanuel rather crudely contrasts him with the notorious Jew-baiting author Louis-Ferdinand Céline, noting primly that ‘Malet, although a racist, was neither a collaborator [with the Germans] or an overt anti-Semite.’ But in the analysis of Emanuel, Arabs, and especially Maghrebis from Morocco and Algeria, ‘because of their revolutionary involvements... are cast on the opposite team from Burma, often as gun-runners and cigarette smugglers. Hardly sympathetic to their cause, Burma sees them as a threat to Parisian stability.’

Emanuel notes that in interviews, Malet had claimed that ‘racism exists in every citizen,’ including in his own fictional character.’ When interviewed by the leftist daily *Libération*, in 1985, Malet burst out, ‘Now listen while I tell you something: Arabs bore the shit out of me and I don’t like them at all! And I consider them to be cunts!’

Further on in *Fog on the Tolbiac Bridge*, Burma sleeps with the Gypsy woman Belita, but then has a confrontation with a male Gypsy, Salvador. The latter is armed with a flick-knife but Burma threatens him with a pistol and then strikes him on the head and hand with it. Some Arab spectators appear but do not get involved. Burma comments, ‘I was getting rather fed up with all this racism.’ That is, the French ex-anarchist turned detective perceives racism on the part of the Arabs and Gypsies rather than in himself. In the resolution of the story, North Africans are innocent of the murder





of Lenantais, so that the splenetic comments of Malet/Burma are gratuitous.

It is here that one should take note of the original French publication of *Brouillard au pont du Tolbiac* in 1956, when the Algerian Revolution was two years old, and the subject of relations between the French and their then-subjects in North Africa was hardly a neutral one. If Malet had wandered far from his anarchist roots in becoming a detective novelist, he journeyed much further away from the Surrealists and the Trotskyists, as well as the anarchists, on the question of North African liberation. All three groups had a long history of supporting North African resistance to French imperialism. The Surrealists in France and the Spanish anarchists were both well-known for their solidarity in the 1920s with Muhammad Ibn ‘Abd El-Krim El-Khattabi, leader of the Rif Berbers in their armed struggle against the French and Spanish in Morocco. From the 1930s to the 1950s the Surrealists, anarchists, and one faction of the French Trotskyists (the Lambertistes) also supported the Algerian pan-Arabist Messali Hadj. In the 1950s the ‘Messalistes’ were known as the Mouvement National Algérien (MNA). The British historian Ian Birchall, who has written on the ex-anarchist, anti-Stalinist writer Victor Serge, has reviewed an important French volume on this topic, *Les camarades des frères, trotskistes et libertaires dans la guerre d’Algérie* by Sylvain Pattieu.²

According to the Pattieu account, French anarchists, who were more numerous than the Trotskyists, took the lead in supporting the Algerian revolutionaries at the beginning of the 1954-1962 conflict with France. Pierre Morain, a French anarchist, was imprisoned for publishing articles against the war. Later, the Trotskyist rivals of the Lambertistes, known as Frankistes — the competing leaders were Pierre Bousset, alias Lambert, and Pierre Frank — supported the Front de la Libération Nationale (FLN), the more powerful competitors of the MNA. The FLN, supported by the Egyptian nationalist dictator Gamal Abd Al-Nasr, murdered many MNA adherents in Algeria and France alike — an injustice for which the FLN, after years of political power in Algeria, has apologised. But the Frankist Trotskyists were active in transferring money collected by FLN cadres in France to the organization on the southern shore of the Mediterranean.

Perhaps most importantly, the Surrealist André Breton, whom Malet had once idolised, was a major protagonist in the



1960 publication of the Declaration of the 121, a statement defending the right of desertion from the French army as an alternative to combat in the Algerian war. The majority of the 121 were members of the surviving Surrealist movement, with some anarchists and syndicalists, associates of Jean-Paul Sartre, and other prominent cultural figures. The Declaration of the 121 was banned by the French authorities.³



It may be that the evolution of Léo Malet and his detective, Nestor Burma, from anarchism to Arabophobia merely reflected age, or changes in French society from the 1930s to the 1960s. One may also discern in the attitudes of Malet and Burma a variant of the proletarian racism that infected the socialist and anarchist movements in France and elsewhere through the last quarter of the 19th century and the period leading to the first world war. In addition, hostility to Arabs in France by an ex-anarchist anticipates the Islamophobia that has become widespread in Western liberal circles. It seems, nevertheless, more appropriate to perceive in this trajectory a vindication of the Surrealist dislike of detective fiction in general. Once Malet, the former revolutionary, created a sympathetic literary character that, whatever his background, stood on the side of the law, there was no going back. Had he survived, Rudolf Klement, with or without his typewriter, would probably have found himself on the other side of Malet's last barricades.

1) Published by Rodopi, Amsterdam-New York, 2006. '*Le cadavre exquis*' ('The Exquisite Corpse') was a game of conjoined words or images invented by the Surrealists.

2) On leftist support for 'Abd El-Krim and Messali Hadj, see my monograph, *Islam and Communism in the 20th Century: An Historical Survey*, originally published in German as 'Kommunismus und Islam im 20. Jahrhundert: Ein Historischer Überblick,' in *Jahrbuch für Historische Kommunismus-Forschung 2009*, Aufbau, Berlin, and available as a free, downloadable .pdf in English at http://www.islamicpluralism.eu/PDFs/Islam_and_Communism.pdf and at <http://www.islamicpluralism.org/documents/islam-communism.pdf>. Also see the review in *Revolutionary History* (UK), v. 8, no. 4, 2004, by Ian Birchall, of Sylvain Pattieu, *Les camarades des frères, trotskistes et libertaires dans la guerre d'Algérie*, Ed. Syllepse, Paris, 2002.

3) The Declaration of the 121 is accessible in English at <http://www.marxists.org/history/france/algerian-war/1960/manifesto-121.htm>.



Léo Malet's typewriter (left to him by Rudolf Klement)

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- * *Le cinquième procédé* (1948)
- * *Coliques de plomb* (1948)
- * *Gros plan du macchabée* (1949)
- * *Les paletots sans manches* (1949)
- * *Direction cimetière* (1951)
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 - * *Les rats de Montsouris* (1955)
- * *M'as-tu vu en cadavre?* (1956)
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- * *Micmac moche au Boul' Mich'* (1957)
- * *Du rébecca rue des Rosiers* (1958)
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- * *La femme sans enfant* (1981)
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