



THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA  
Department of French, Hispanic & Italian Studies

# RMST 202

Romance Studies,  
Modernism to the Present

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*Bonjour Tristesse:*  
Françoise Sagan on  
Translation and  
Affect

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## *Bonjour Tristesse:* Françoise Sagan on Translation and Affect

with Jon Beasley-Murray

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We may think that reading a text is an exercise in interpretation, in seeking out whatever hidden meaning it might contain.

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But in practice, our experience with a book is marked more by how it makes us feel.

Françoise Sagan's *Bonjour Tristesse*  
wears its affect on its sleeve

Françoise Sagan's *Bonjour Tristesse*  
wears its affect on its sleeve

It revels in its rejection of meaningfulness.

In place of interpretation, the novel affirms a love of appearances, an enjoyment found in contact with the vitality that surrounds us.

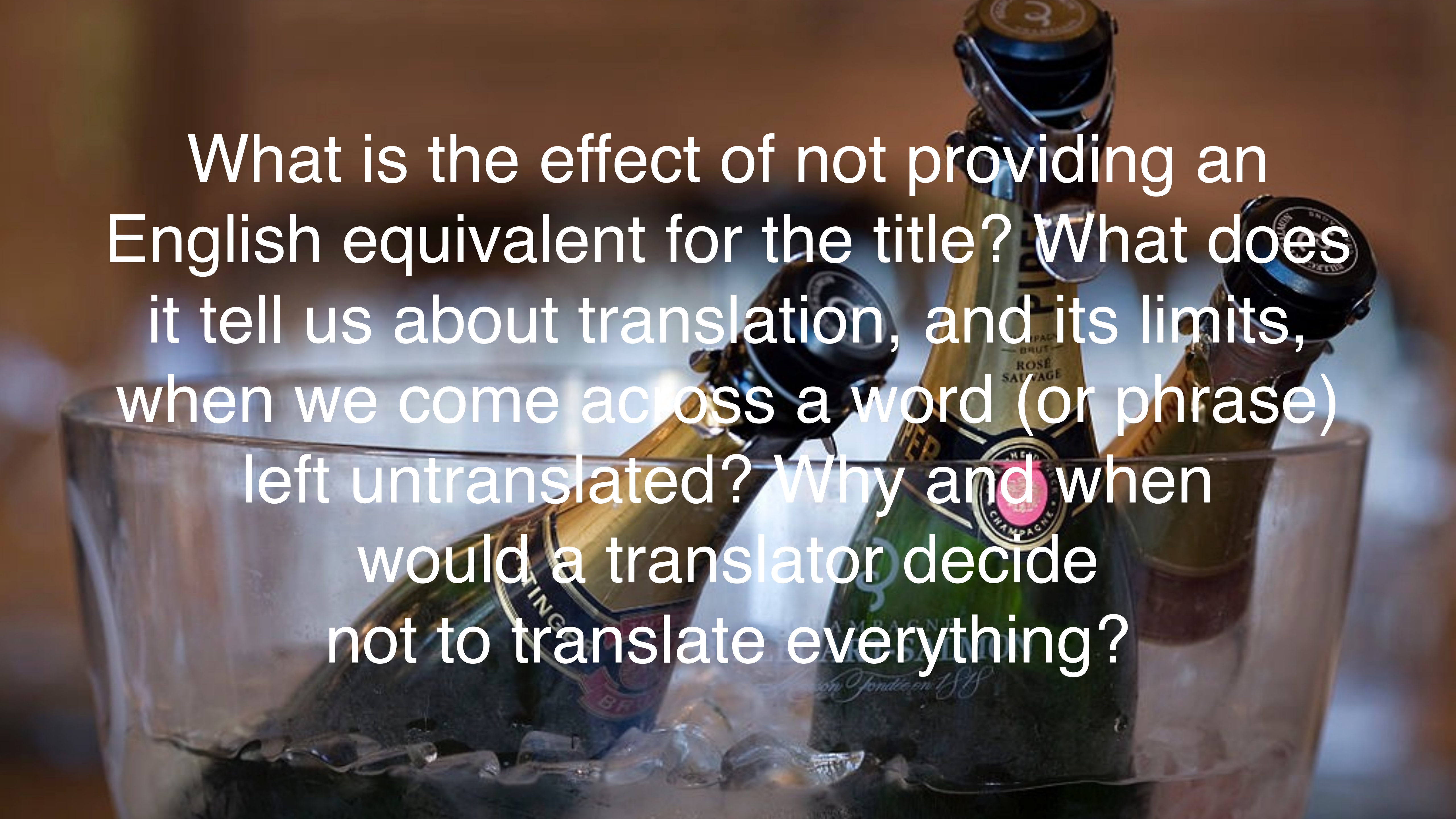




# TRANSLATION AND FEELINGS

The first challenge to meaning comes courtesy of the book's translator, and their decision to leave its title untranslated.

What is the effect of not providing an English equivalent for the title? What does it tell us about translation, and its limits, when we come across a word (or phrase) left untranslated? Why and when would a translator decide not to translate everything?

A photograph of three champagne bottles chilling in a bucket of ice. The bottles are of different colors: one is dark green, one is gold, and one is dark red. They are all tilted and have their cork caps removed. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light blue and white. The text is overlaid in white, bold, sans-serif font.

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Leaving the title untranslated both raises the question of meaning and despatches it, by implying that it does not really matter.

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The fact that its meaning eludes us hints that meaning may not be what is at stake for this novel.

It may also suggest that there is something untranslatable about “tristesse,” as though it were a particularly French sadness.

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It is as though other languages do not need these words, because other people do not have these feelings.



Yet for the most part the characters in *Bonjour Tristesse* do not stand out for the depth of their feeling.

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“If they get married, our three lives will be ruined [. . .]. My father must be protected. He’s nothing but a big baby.” (66)

“Something rises in me that  
I call to by name, with closed eyes.  
Bonjour, tristesse!” (130)



# **AFFECT ON THE SURFACE**

*Bonjour Tristesse* appears to offer a critique of superficiality. But this reading destroys much of the book's charm, which comes from its focus on immediate sensation, its depiction of characters who live for now, with little thought for the future.

A moralizing tone is out of place in the book, which is driven by the hope that responsibilities can be postponed to another day, if not forever.

“I had never been locked up, and at first I was in a panic. I rushed over to the window, but there was no escape that way. Then I threw myself against the door so violently that I bruised my shoulder. [. . .] This was my first contact with cruelty. I felt it grow in me, as my thoughts gave it substance.” (88)

Anne tries to impose a contract of duties and obligations in place of the contact and sensation to which Cécile is attuned.



The novel is not unserious, but it takes surfaces seriously. While Sagan's book has little truck with emotion, if by that is meant some kind of profound feeling, it is all about affect: the ways in which bodies interact and we are moved by the touch of surface on surface, by our exposure to the outside.

“You take a red-headed girl to the seashore, expose her to the hot sun which she can't stand, and when her skin has all peeled, you abandon her. It's too easy!” (39)

“The mirror reflected a sad sight. I leaned against it and peered at those dilated eyes and dry lips, the face of a stranger. Was that my face? [. . .] I occupied myself by detesting my reflection, hating that wolf-like face, hollow and worn by debauchery.” (41-42)

“Suddenly I saw myself smile.  
What a great debauch!” (42).

“Suddenly I saw myself smile.  
What a great debauch!” (42).

She refuses to regret the plasticity  
of surfaces, the ways in which  
they register experience and are  
marked by personal history.

Appearances are the driving force  
for the novel's plot.

“He always caught me before we reached the house and would spring on me with a shout of victory, rolling me on the pine needles, pinning my arms down and kissing me. I can still remember the taste of those breath-taking kisses, and hear Cyril’s heart beating against mine in rhythm with the soft thud of the surf on the beach.” (47)

“You should realize that such diversions usually end up in the hospital.”



“You should realize that such diversions usually end up in the hospital.”

“I saw her face assume its beautiful mask of disdain, that expression of weariness and superiority which became her so well.” (48)

“I never missed my mark, for when we saw Cyril and Elsa openly showing signs of their imaginary relationship, my father and I both grew pale with the intensity of our feelings.

The sight of Cyril bending over Elsa made my heart ache.” (117)

*Bonjour Tristesse* can be read as being about growing up, assuming responsibility, and accepting a tragic view of the world.

Yet the poem from which its title is taken is about the power of love: “love of the bodies that are lovable” (*Collected Poems* 70).

“It is always in a contact with the generative force of life that one is able to extract the power to love humanity.”


*(Bonjour Tristesse 51 ; Bergson 46)*

Sagan's novel resists the imposition  
of meaning and emotion,  
to affirm instead vitality and affect.



# MUSIC

Pianochocolate,  
“Romance”



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# PRODUCTION

[jon.beasley-murray@ubc.ca](mailto:jon.beasley-murray@ubc.ca)

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