ROMANCE STUDIES:
Readings in Excess and Betrayal, from Modernism to the Present

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

We may think that reading a text is an exercise in interpretation, in seeking out whatever hidden, even secret, meaning it might contain. But in practice, our experience with a book is usually marked more by how it makes us feel. We should attend to surfaces as much as to depths. Françoise Sagan's *Bonjour Tristesse* (1954) wears its affect on its sleeve, as it is an emotion (sadness) that gives the novel its title. In fact, this tale set in a context of superficiality and privileged languor, with characters who seem to have too much time on their hands and too few thoughts in their heads, revels in its rejection of meaningfulness. Even its plot concerns unintended consequences: things that are not meant to happen, but happen anyway. In place of interpretation, the search to look behind or beneath what is given, expecting everything to take the form of a sign, instead the novel affirms a love of appearances, an enjoyment found in contact with the vitality that surrounds us.

1. Translation and Feelings

The first challenge to meaning comes courtesy of the book's translator, and their decision to leave its title untranslated. This is not an entirely unprecedented decision (think of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* or Carmen Laforet's *Nada*), but it is unusual. Yet in the English edition—and also in the German, Dutch, Italian, Danish, Swedish, and Greek—-the title of Sagan's novel remains in the original French. And while "*Bonjour*" poses little problem even to those whose French is rudimentary, "*tristesse*" is more opaque (if not for the Spanish who, strangely, translate it anyway: *Buenos días, tristeza*). "Tristesse" is sadness, sorrow, or unhappiness. Did *you* know that? If not, or even if so, what is the effect of not providing an English equivalent? What does it tell us about translation, and its limits, when we come across a word (or phrase) left untranslated? Pause the video and have a think: why and when would a translator decide not to translate everything? While you do that, I'll have a glass of champagne, but I'll be right back.

There is a lot of drinking in *Bonjour Tristesse*. The narrator, Cécile, points out that "the bar is very well stocked" (15). It is not always clear what they are drinking—champagne is mentioned once, and Cécile gets drunk at a casino on whisky, in the company of "a half-tipsy South American" (37)—but it does not matter much. What matters is the blurring of boundaries that alcohol brings, which is equal parts liberating and dangerous. At times it is as though the whole book were narrated in the space of exception between pre-drinks languor and post-drinks regret. But this space will soon close, for Cécile and her father alike. We are told that as men age, "a time comes when they are no longer attractive or in good form. They can't drink any more, and they still hanker after women." Cécile is told "you don't think much about the future, do you?" (109). But a consciousness of imminent change, of the morning to come after the night before, haunts the entire narrative.

Leaving the title untranslated both raises the question of meaning ("What is *tristesse?*") and despatches it, by implying that it does not really matter. It is as though there were something decorative about the phrase: we do not need to understand it fully in order to appreciate the book as a whole; the fact that its meaning eludes us (if only a little) 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 or sorrow. Terms referring to emotion or affect often appear on lists of supposedly "untranslatable" words: the Portuguese "saudade," a form of melancholy longing or nostalgia; the Danish "hygge," a kind of convivial contentment; or the German "schadenfreude," a joy that comes from watching others fail. The untranslatability of these terms is pinned to the notion that the affects themselves are culturally specific. We are led to believe that the Portuguese are particularly prone to nostalgia, such that there is a Portuguese form of it that can neither be named nor felt by others; likewise that the Danes are by nature a cosy and convivial people; or that the Germans are especially prone to rejoicing in the misery of others. It is as though other languages do not need these words, because other people do not have these feelings. So it would not just be words that cannot be translated, but also affects.

Yet for the most part the characters in *Bonjour Tristesse* do not stand out for the depth of their feeling. There are five of them, vacationing on the Mediterranean coast in the South of France: the protagonist and narrator, Cécile, a seventeen-year-old girl, self-described as "thoughtless" if "healthy" (61), who is supposed to be studying to retake university exams; her father, Raymond, a forty-year-old widower who is "young for his age, full of vitality and happiness" (5) but also "incurably frivolous" (112); his "mistress of the moment," Elsa, much younger than him, "kindly, rather simple-minded" (6); his old friend, Anne, "proud, calm, reserved" (9), a "strong-willed woman" (26) the polar opposite of Elsa, whom she displaces, becoming Raymond's fiancée; and finally Cyril, Cécile's holiday romance, the mirror image of her father, who "called Cyril 'my boy,' and Cyril called him 'Sir.' But I sometimes wondered which of the two was the adult" (31). It is their shared carefree childish irresponsibility that Anne's arrival and her engagement to Raymond threatens to disrupt. Hence Cécile devises a plot to prise her father from his new lover, enlisting Elsa on the basis that "If they get married, our three lives will be ruined [. . .]. My father must be protected. He's nothing but a big baby" (66). Cyril, too, is drawn into the scheme, pretending to be Elsa's new boyfriend so as to stoke Raymond's desire, and Anne's jealousy and humiliation.

But the daughter's stratagems have tragic consequences when Anne, the only one of the group who takes things at all seriously, or perhaps the most melodramatic of the bunch, dies in a car crash, a probable suicide. Hence at the novel's end, looking back months later on the summer's events, Cécile can say that sometimes, late at night, "Something rises in me that I call to by name, with closed eyes. *Bonjour, tristesse!*" (130). It is as though it is not simply sorrow but feeling itself, feeling that comes from the depths and still cannot find its English equivalent, that the narrator belatedly welcomes.

2. *Affect on the Surface*

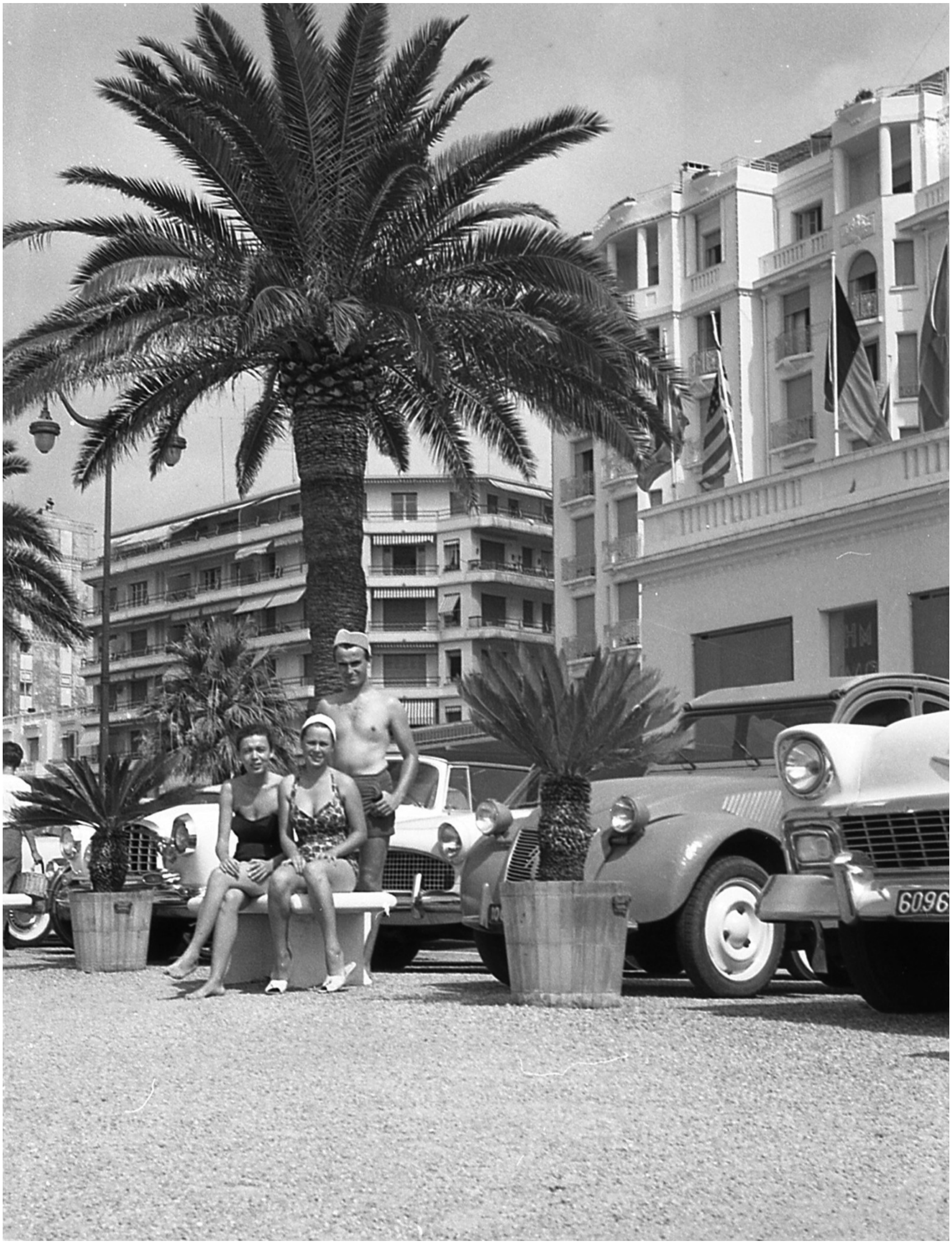
Bonjour Tristesse appears to offer a critique of superficiality, of the capricious and careless way in which Cécile and Raymond deal with other people, motivated by idle whim and the desire to postpone meaningfulness at almost all cost. But this reading destroys much of the book's charm, which comes from its focus on immediate sensation, its depiction of characters who live for now, with little thought for the future. Asked how she did in her exams, Cécile "cheerfully" says: "Flunked! [. . .] Completely flunked!" Anne may be right to respond: "You must pass in October, you absolutely *must!*" (25). But such a moralizing tone is out of place in the book, which is driven by the hope that such responsibilities can be postponed to another day, if not forever.

So when Anne literally locks Cécile up in her room, to ensure she catches up on her "vacation tasks" (88), the reader sympathizes with the young girl, not with the older woman who is acting out of a sense of duty that she seeks to impose on others, believing that "in marrying [Raymond] she felt she must also take charge" of his daughter (87). The constriction, forcing Cécile to remain inside, imposing on her a sense of interiority, registers as a brutal injustice: "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). Though Anne herself is no less superficial than Cécile—her "constant disapproval," we are told, is unaccompanied by any "feeling which went more than skin-deep" (87)—*she tries to impose a contract of duties and obligations in place of the contact and sensation to which Cécile is attuned*.

Another way to put this is that the novel is not unserious, but it takes surfaces seriously, like an Impressionist painting, fascinated by the ways in which light glances off objects and makes an impact in the moment. While Sagan's book has little truck with emotion, if by that is meant some kind of profound feeling that comes from deep within, it is all about affect: the myriad ways in which bodies interact and we are moved by the touch of surface on surface, by our exposure to the outside.

The key difference between Anne and Elsa, rivals for Raymond's affection, has to do with the way they react to the sun: Elsa's skin "reddened and peeled, causing her intense agony" (7); Anne's skin, by contrast, is "almost without a blemish," thanks to "a lifetime of care and attention," a self-disciplining of the body (24). It is as though Elsa's discomfort were written on her flesh, leading directly to Raymond's decision to leave her. Cécile upbraids her father: "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). Elsa is affected in a way that Anne is not. In turn, Raymond's betrayal is a reaction to shredded epidermis.

Cécile judges by appearance, assessing her image in a mirror the morning after a night on the town. At first she is shocked and upset, seeing herself as other as she peers at her "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." But then, in a twist, she decides to accept, even celebrate, that other in herself: "suddenly I saw myself smile. What a great debauch!" (41, 42). She refuses to regret the plasticity of surfaces, the ways in which they register experience and are marked by personal history.



Boulevard de la Croisette, Cannes, 1959

Appearances, indeed, are the driving force for the novel's plot. Cécile's anger with Anne comes not only from the older woman's insistence that she should study, but also from her intervention in her relationship with her boyfriend, Cyril. Cécile describes her encounters with him in all their tactile sensuality: "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). But one evening Anne spies the two of them and, thinking they are having sex, insists that they should not meet again: "You should realize that such diversions usually end up in the hospital," she says, in a coded reference to abortion. It is telling that it should be Anne who utter one of the few lines in the book that does demand interpretation. In response, Cécile protests that her future stepmother has over-interpreted the clinch, credited it with more meaning that it has (in fact, it has little), but Anne, her face a "beautiful mask of disdain, [with] that expression of weariness and superiority which became her so well" (48), refuses to listen. Soon afterwards, Cécile decides upon the plot to take her revenge and rescue her father from his fiancée's clutches, through a ruse that depends upon manipulating appearances and provoking interpretations that conjure up misplaced significance.

Cécile enlists Elsa and Cyril in a charade of play-acting, as they pretend to be lovers to excite Raymond's remorse and Anne's jealousy. This simulation of feeling is so convincing that even its "stage manager" is carried away: "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). Eventually Anne is driven off, though at almost that exact moment Cécile starts to feel sorry for what she has done. In the immediate aftermath, before they get the phone call that announces the theatrical deception's tragic dénouement, she and her father write "letters full of fine sentiments" dedicated "to the impossible task of getting Anne back" (125). But these "letters of excuse" are insubstantial and false. When they finally hear the news of the car crash, by which Anne disguises suicide as accident, Raymond pours them both a glass as "the only remedy at hand" (127). Words, after all, are insufficient.

In short, *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, Surrealist Paul Éluard's "À Peine Défigurée," is about the power of love: in Samuel Beckett's translation, "love of the bodies that are lovable" (*Collected Poems* 70). This is a much more affirmative and less disillusioned take on things. And the text that Cécile is supposed to be studying is by Henri Bergson, whose philosophy revolves around the concept of an "*élan vital*" or "life force," as in the line quoted in the novel (taken from Bergson's *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*): "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). Indeed, for all Cécile's inability to sit down and study his philosophy, Sagan's novel ends up being a thoroughly Bergsonian text: it resists the imposition of meaning and emotion, to affirm instead vitality and affect. But you do not need a book to tell you that!

works cited

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Image:
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Boulevard_de_la_Croisette,_jobbra_a_a_Hotel_Martinez._Fortepan_57970.jpg

Song: "Bonjour Tristesse" (Juliette Greco)