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Guy de Maupassant, *The Necklace and Other Stories: Maupassant for modern times*. Translated by Sandra Smith. New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2015. xi + 322 pp. \$29.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-87140-368-1.

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Maupassant published just over 300 short stories. Sandra Smith, who has previously translated Camus's *L'Étranger* and eleven works by Irène Némirovsky, presents this cross-section of thirty as "Maupassant for modern times," arguing that "the majority of the existing translations ... are extremely dated" (indeed; and often anonymous and frequently abbreviated) and have rendered him currently underappreciated (p. vii). Some recent versions are both complete and accurate—for instance David Coward's chronological choice, with which this volume shares twelve stories—but this selection is welcome.[1]

Intended for the general reader, it avoids any attempt to characterize how the selections "contribute ... to ... what a modern short story is" (p. ix), or indeed to define the "short story genre" (p. vii). Nor does Smith mention its inferior status in nineteenth-century literature and its origins in journalism, which dictated length and immediate intelligibility (Maupassant increasingly sought to establish his reputation as a novelist), or its tendency to position itself, in both theme and technique, in opposition to the contemporary novel. Some useful contextual information is provided in an outline of Maupassant's life (reproduced from Robert Lethbridge) and in brief introductions to the selection's three thematic sections (dates of publication are not given): tales of French life, of war, of the supernatural. These would have benefitted from drawing on Marlo Johnston's recent biography that has clarified what can be known in two key areas.[2] As regards the Franco-Prussian war, Smith contends that "his own experience ... forms the basis for most of Maupassant's tales about the conflict" (p. 111). Maupassant's whereabouts during most of the war remains uncertain; although his depiction of the French withdrawal and the behaviour of the inhabitants of Rouen at the start of *Boule de suif* draws on what he witnessed in the *Intendance* (Supply Corps), few of the other tales, with their violence (executions, murders, skirmishes), can be said to derive directly from personal experiences. Secondly, Smith repeats the speculation that Maupassant's interest in the *fantastique* "coincided with his discovery that he had contracted syphilis" (p. 229). This discovery dates from 1877; his first notable story, *Boule de suif*, appeared in 1880; the link between syphilis and the symptoms identified from the 1820s as general paresis (mindlessness, paralysis, death) was not definitively established until after his death.[3] The effects of the illness on his writing were largely limited to eye problems and disabling migraines, and are certainly irrelevant to his novel exploitation of the *fantastique*. The manuscript of *Le Horla* points to a carefully constructed and corrected work of fiction.[4]

Maupassant, writing for the press and driven, at least initially, by the need to produce rapidly and plentifully, draws on what he knew at first hand in the "Tales of French life" (office life in Paris, life in the Norman countryside); here, as Smith notes, family, money, status, and love are key issues. The supernatural tales comprehend "themes of terror, death, the occult, madness, and suicide, subjects common in the literature of the nineteenth century" (p. 229). All are forms of the unknown, frequently

linked to death, darkness, isolation; Maupassant explores the threat posed by the inexplicable and its effect on the imagination. As Smith states, the tales evoking incidents in the Franco-Prussian war are more than just a “document of the political events and social mores of the times” (p. 112): the majority highlight a more general vision, “the bleak absurdity of war as seen from the ground level” (p. 111). War is pointless and destructive in *La Folle* (*The Madwoman*), and *Deux amis* (*Two Friends*). Those who suffer are individuals on both sides, helpless against the institutions (state, army) that are responsible. Hunger, self-preservation and cold are more important factors than patriotism; male heroic posturing is undercut by principled or quick-witted women (*Les Prisonniers* [*The Prisoners*], *Boule de suif*). But it could be pointed out that the stories are also firmly linked to the context of their publication, and draw on 1870 to counteract the revanchist nationalism of the 1880s; and that Maupassant simultaneously provides fantasies of revenge instigated by unlikely heroes (a prostitute in *Mademoiselle Fifi*, a stout bourgeois in *Un duel*, a penny-pinching farmer in *Le Père Milon*), against humiliations inflicted by arrogant and wantonly destructive Prussians.

As Smith observes, all three sections serve “as both a historical document and an embodiment of universal, timeless emotions” (p. ix). Although the tripartite division is both traditional (and the basis for numerous French anthologies) and sensible, different ostensible subjects cover the constant underlying preoccupations. Maupassant’s world is random, unpredictable, and unfair. Characters are offered one day of freedom, only for chance to trap them in a lifetime of slavery (*La Parure* [*The Necklace*], *À Cheval* [*On Horseback*]) or push them to madness or suicide; life can hinge on an obsession or a fleeting impulse. Apparent escape leads only to definitive entrapment: *Deux amis* (*Two Friends*) escape besieged Paris to the countryside to fish; they are captured and shot as spies. Even in a tale with an optimistic end, such as *La Question du latin* (*The Question of Latin*), a life is turned around by a pointless prank (engineering a dinner between his tutor and a young laundress) by the narrator. Maupassant’s pessimistic and unflinching vision of the world and of society gives coherence to his work: a limited view of life, but one which suits stories which frequently depend on the unmasking of illusions to destroy a reassuring vision of the world and on schematic characters. This vision is often more important than the ostensible theme: the invasion in *Boule de suif* is an instance of those other “cataclysmic events”—earthquakes, floods—that “destroy any belief in eternal justice, any confidence we are taught to have in protection from Heaven and human rationality” (p. 188). The word “affolement,” combining panic and madness (rather lamely translated here as “a kind of fear”) to describe the reaction it provokes, indicates the close connection with the “supernatural” tales; the story is moreover a depiction of French life: its portrayal of representatives of a local establishment motivated by hunger, self-preservation and cowardice targets hypocrisy and “the honest members of society [“les honnêtes gens”: “respectable” might be closer] who were Religious and had Principles” (p. 194). Maupassant’s capitals underline his scorn.

Maupassant’s style is not complex, but he wrote for a nineteenth-century public, and Sandra Smith’s introduction outlines her solutions to specific problems Maupassant poses to translators. Titles and names are left in French, with notes pointing out some of Maupassant’s frequent sly puns in their use. Some more discreet jokes escape comment: towards the close of *Une partie de campagne* (*A Day in the Country*), when the rower Henri is told by Henriette’s mother that her daughter (whom he seduced on the outing) has married the young apprentice, and that “c’est lui qui prend la suite,” the mother’s unwitting double entendre is missed by translating it, albeit accurately, as “he’ll be joining the business” (p. 98) (Maupassant is also pointing to Henri’s initial possession of the young woman: “He’s taking over”). Recent commentators have gone further in unearthing Maupassant’s more risqué suggestions, for instance that (in this story) the excursion to Bezons not only obviously echoes “baisons,” but Henriette and Henri make love to the song of “un rossignol,” “a nightingale,” but also a colloquialism at the time for “penis.”[6] In *La Question du latin*, the pun in M. Piquedent’s name is noted (p. 100, n. 1: “Toothache”), but when the young laundress calls him, when tipsy, “Piquenez”, this is glossed as “hurts your nose” (p. 106, n. 2), overlooking a more obvious echo: “se piquer le nez” / “to get plastered.” Maupassant’s suggestion of regional Norman language and familiar language through spelling, syntax

and vocabulary is sensibly and relatively discreetly rendered through a generic colloquial without any regional inflection, and Smith deals effectively with the accented French of German soldiers in the war tales. Mme Oreille insults her husband in *Le Parapluie* as: “canaille”; Smith has an aggressive “you bastard” (p. 55), Coward “You stupid clown” (p. 161). Overall Coward tends to be bolder, especially with Norman farmers: in *Le baptême* “Dis donc, curé, si t’en veux un, t’as qu’à le dire” becomes in Smith: “Hey, Father. ... If you want one, all you have to do is say the word” (p. 72), speakable but not markedly colloquial; Coward’s: “Oy, padre! If you wants a kiddie, you only has to arsk!” (p. 137), is effective, but tends to the caricatural.

Two areas of late nineteenth-century France raise problems for a reader of “modern times.” Money and status are crucial in Maupassant’s world, as Smith observes (p. 3); their manifestations would often benefit from more careful translation or annotation. A “louis” is not “worth about 20 francs” (p. 11, n. 1) but the coin of exactly that value; the “100 sous” that Davranche in *Mon oncle Jules (My Uncle Jules)* gives the old mendicant is glossed accurately as “5 francs” (p. 15, n. 1), without explaining the extraordinary generosity implied by this amount. Nor is there any comment on the staggering 5,000 fr. the narrator of *Le Horla* seeks to borrow overnight from his cousin Mme Sablé (p. 300), at a time when an *employé de ministère* earned 1,800-2,400 fr. per year.[7] M. Loisel, such an employee in *La Parure*, had set aside 400 fr. for a gun, which his wife spends on her dress for the ball. In that story, which turns on yearning for social ascent and definitive fall, the aspirational Mme Loisel comes from “une famille d’employés”; translating this as “a working-class family” (p. 5; Coward: “very minor civil servants” [p. 168]) misses the point that her marriage to a ministry clerk is probably to someone of the same status (she fails to escape her origins); at the end, after losing the necklace borrowed for her one “escape” to the Minister’s ball and having destroyed her and her husband’s lives in paying for a replacement, she dresses “comme une femme du peuple”: Smith’s “like a working-class woman” (p. 12) gives no indication of how far she has now come down even from her origins. When in the conclusion she accosts the convent friend from whom she had borrowed the ill-fated (and of course fake) necklace, Mme Forestier takes her for “une bourgeoise”: this is again rendered as “this working-class woman” (p. 13; Coward “a common woman in the street” [p. 176]). As regards status in different areas, the prostitute Boule de suif is (euphemistically) “une de ces femmes qu’on dit galantes,” but scarcely as up-market as a “courtesan” (p. 195); the verger’s comment in the same story, “C’est les grands qui font la guerre,” accuses “the rich and powerful,” rather than Smith’s narrower “It’s the noblemen who make war” (p. 208).

A second area of uncertainty concerns religion, more in the forefront of everyday life at the time and consequently in need of explanation today. The “sel symbolique” of *Le Baptême (The Baptism)* that may have caused the child’s distress is not “salty water” (p. 72) but the few grains of salt were put on the tongue in the old Roman ritual as a sign of wisdom. In *Boule de suif*, the “bonnes sœurs” are simply “nuns” rather than “good nuns” (p. 194), and the travellers wrapped up like “curés obèses avec leurs soutanes” suggest “fat priests in their cassocks” rather than “long cloaks” (p. 190). But the annotation, though meagre, is generally accurate. One major slip: Jean Renoir (b. 1894), who made the film of *Une partie de campagne*, was not a “friend of Maupassant” (d. 1893) (p. 87, n. 1). And it may be “extremely rare” in late nineteenth-century France for a Jewish woman to be a prostitute (p. 121, n.7), but it is frequent in that period’s fiction, from Balzac onwards, and indeed down to Proust; in *La Maison Tellier* the establishment includes Raphaële who “jouait le rôle indispensable de la *belle Juive*.”[10]

Finally there are occasions where ambiguities in Maupassant’s text are resolved implausibly, given the context either of France at the time or of the story. The layout of Mont-Saint-Michel, for example, means that “ayant gravi la rue étroite et rapide” is not “having crossed the short, narrow street” (p. 293) but “climbed” (Coward: “climbing the steep, narrow street” [p. 279]). In *Une partie de campagne*, M. Dufour orders “deux litres et une bouteille de bordeaux” for the party of five: probably not “two quarts of beer and a bottle of Bordeaux” (p 90) but two liters of *vin ordinaire* and the bottle, given the effect on the family (even the grandmother is drunk) and the fact that three pages later, when “the wine was going to their heads” (p. 93, the young man “kept pouring himself one glass of wine after the other”).

Cornudet, who has been a loquacious republican for twenty years, is still “bon garçon”—a “good sort,” perhaps, but no longer “a rather likable young man” (p. 195). He throws himself into defending “la ville,” but in the context of *Boule de suif* this is clearly Rouen, not “Paris” (p. 195)—he is now off to do the same in Le Havre; and the “préfecture” of the town at the time would have been the offices of the Préfet, not the “police station” (p. 215). In one case translation spoils the end of a story: the doctor in *En voyage* concludes his anecdote by commenting: “Les hommes sont des drôles de toqués”; the five words in Smith: “Men are very strange *when they are madly in love*” (p. 35, my italics), renders pointless what is implicit in the woman’s reaction: “They were... they were...”, whereas Coward’s less explicit “Folk can be very peculiar indeed” (p. 110) leads into it naturally.

Overall, however, Smith’s translation succeeds in its aim of making available a wide-ranging and representative selection of Maupassant’s stories in a fluent and (with a few minor slips) accurate translation that does justice to both their “poetic elements” (p. viii) and their concision, free from the archaic and fusty without falling into excessive modernization.

NOTES

[1] Guy de Maupassant, *A Day in the Country and Other Stories*, translated by David Coward (Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics, 1990).

[2] Marlo Johnston, *Guy de Maupassant* (Paris: Fayard, 2012).

[3] On the issue see Appendix B of Johnston, *Maupassant*, pp. 1119-1126.

[4] Guy de Maupassant, *Le Horla*. Présentation, transcription et notes par Yvan Leclerc (Paris: CNRS, 1993) (with facsimile of the MS).

[5] It is problematic only in that half of Maupassant’s tales evoke “French life,” at most twenty-four the supernatural, and fewer than twenty the war; Smith’s choice unaccountably includes the lamest version of one, the uncharacteristic *Le Mariage du lieutenant Laré* (published in a periodical for the young in 1878: Johnston, *Maupassant*, p. 233).

[6] Éléonore Reverzy, “Flaubert dans Maupassant. Usages de la métaphore,” in Antonia Fonyi, Pierre Glaudes and Alain Pagès ed., *Relire Maupassant: “La Maison Tellier”, “Contes du jour et de la nuit”* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2011), pp. 29-44 (p. 38); see also Johnston, *Maupassant*, p. 1157, n. 86, for Maupassant’s admission of readiness to play such tricks.

[7] Guy de Maupassant, *Contes et nouvelles*, ed. Louis Forestier (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), I, 1303, n. 3; see also the figures given in Maupassant’s *chronique* “Les Employés” (*Le Gaulois*, 4 January 1882; *Chroniques*, ed. Hubert Juin (Paris: U.G.E., 1980), I, 375-380: Maupassant says that one could earn up to a maximum of 4,000 fr. a year by 50 or 55.

[9] *Contes et nouvelles*, II, 1640.

[10] *Contes et nouvelles*, I, 259.

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