



# SIMENON ON THE NOBLE REFUGEE

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With his most recent film, [Maigret](#) (2022), French iconic actor, Gérard Depardieu, was hailed as having found a role cut for him. In fact, he missed out on a far better one. If he, and filmmaker Patrice Leconte, had been more astute, and better read, they would have realized the opportunity presented by the Ukrainian refugee crisis in France. They would have realized Simenon, not the Simenon of the Maigret stories, had written a novel about refugees: [Le clan des Ostendais](#) (The Ostenders). The central character, Omer, is a perfect fit for Depardieu: a larger-than-life, sea-faring boss, the brooding hulk of a fisherman thrown into the maelstrom of the collapse of Belgium and France, in May and June 1940.



Simenon, as is well known, led a quiet life during the Occupation of France, where he had settled in Vendée. He witnessed first-hand the “exodus” (*l’Exode* with a capital E, in French), the desperate rush of French civilians (as well as escapees from the Low Countries), fleeing by the millions the invading German armies, going as far south as they could. The Exode remains today the largest mass refugee movement in Europe in the 20th and 21st centuries. Eight million “evacuees,” to use the French bureaucratic euphemism, were displaced, and among them the fictional Omer, and his clan of Flemish-speaking Belgians.

## To Flee and to Exist

This refugee novel, for lack of adhering to the hallowed (French) dramatic rule of the three unities ( in one place, in one day, a single plot shall unfold; not very easy with a novel) is nonetheless a virtuoso exercise in narrative conciseness: the action is focused; the setting is the coastal region of La Rochelle; time is framed by two events: the first, in May 1940, is the theatrical arrival of five trawlers in the harbor of La Rochelle, a high-spirited scene worthy of Fellini's [E la nave va](#)—a different ship, for the beginning of a different war. The second event, just after the armistice of June 1940, is the almost mystical departure of the boats, at night, during a funereal wake.

Who is Omer, the *baes*, the boss? Words matter: until some plaques were updated to please politics, the French countryside was strewn with such memorials: “Here the Germans massacred....” Not “Nazis”—that was added later.

In Old Germanic, Omer is noble: "Odomar," or "master of resources." Omer is the skipper of a fleet of trawlers, who, having learned of the German invasion of Belgium off the coast of Iceland, heads out for Ostend to save what he can. On his five fishing boats, Omer loads the entire households of his crews, with all their belongings, from children's rompers to silver cutlery, from heavy Flemish wardrobes to ancestral trousseau sheets. Nothing is left behind. Omer, Master of Resources, reigns taciturn over the fugitives whom he steers to safety. They put in at La Rochelle, intent to do what sailors do: sailing further south, away from the war, and what fishermen do—to fish for "resources," under his command.

But, in La Rochelle, they get bogged down in French bureaucracy, caught up in the rout, debacle and defeat, and then the arrival of the victors. French and German officials let the Ostenders fish—and they offer their catch, by the caseload, to the thousands of refugees who have filled up the region. Parked in sheds and under trees, these refugees are starving and throw themselves on the manna, free-riding, pilfering, deploying the resourcefulness of French "*Système D*" (go get what you can). These haggard, scavenging fugitives follow the army's defeat, like rats follow the plague. At that moment Camus began to conceive his novel of the same name—which may not be about what the post-war existentialist bien-pensant legend says it is. Unlike the main character of *The Plague*, Omer is not powerless, quite the contrary. And he believes in God, to boot. Whom he serves. To have his clan exist.

Existentialism, one should never forget it, was born out of these dark years' struggle to survive, as a nation, as a State, as a way of life, as a culture, and as free and honorable human beings—out of a will to exist. A moral philosophy does not spring from abstract vagaries, but from living and dying. Sartre wrote *Being and Nothingness* under German oppression: how to be when nothing is. Hence how to be more than to endure. That is, to exist.

### **The Organic Morality of Refugees**

So, the Ostenders are accommodated in an economically depressed coastal hamlet, a far cry from the gay daily life of La Rochelle. The locals pity them heartily, because everyone knows, and is told, we should pity these "poor people," insulting them on account of their king's surrender, "a stab in the back," letting the Germans in. Come June 1940, the Rochelais and the villagers start to feel ashamed for having blamed the Ostenders for what the French army, routed in one fell swoop, inflicted in its turn on millions of refugees. The Ostenders do not say a word about it.

The hamlet is half in ruins, and its filth appalls the Ostenders. They are blond, hygienic and organized;

they wash every day. They are Nordic and do not speak French, but rather a language that sounds like "*Boche*," which intimidates the locals but enables them to get by with the occupiers once the region is under military rule. Omer rents an uninhabited, once bourgeois, dwelling for his family. He settles his lesser relatives to a house "across the yard," immediately cleaned and whitewashed, while his deckhands' families settle "at the back" in hovels turned into cottages made spic and span. Simenon—and this is his great art—plants a Vermeer painting in a scene from *Les Misérables*. An organic community is resurrected, and with it, its values.

The Ostenders create a natural yet civic microcosm, made of distinctions between the master of the trawlers, the skippers, the sailors, and their families. They observe etiquette. It is not a feudal order, but a vertical, kin and clan arrangement, based on a single, natural certainty—a fisherman fishes, the fishing boat provides work that determines duties and rights, and a hierarchy of labor. No one goes hungry, no one goes in rags, no one is unruly. Children attend classes. Every adult can speak their mind. Going astray results in quiet and firm ostracism. This is a natural, organic community.

The Ostenders' relationship with the locals follows the same ethos. They never complain. They never raise their voice. But their fortitude comes across as arrogance, and it pains the villagers so cruelly that, going hungry themselves, they leave large crates of flounder to rot on the doorstep of the town hall: how can one accept to be fed by refugees? The locals reject this miraculous, yet in their eyes, immoral fishing. None see the Christ-like allegory.

It is so, because Omer and his injured clan will not ask for help, even in grief. What they need, they purchase. They never demean themselves to seek some special treatment. Actually, their only French word is "*non*," thrown politely at bureaucrats when they try to pull a fast one on them. They are respectful of the law. They expect the locals to do the same. They are not idle, drinking white wine in port cafes, smoking cigarettes, or chatting in front of the fateful wireless claiming, "Paris, open city!"

The Ostenders offend popular common sense and the moralizing propaganda that proclaims, "Welcome them! We have to help them, no matter how, because it is the gesture that matters." They will not allow authorities to put a checkmark on a to-do list: "*Les Belges, c'est réglé*." They are, strictly speaking, demoralizing.

However, in the mine-infested waters Omer, loses a cherished boat, with her crew and his eldest son, and then more trawlers are hit and sunk, with his youngest son at the helm. The stopover in La Rochelle

has come at a high price. Omer's brood is decimated. A daughter-in-law goes mad with grief.

## Refugees' Fear

Of the sea they have no fear. The sea gives, the sea takes.

Nor do they live in the same fear as the thousands of refugees, corralled in cantonments, and quickly sliding back to a state of nature where *homo homini lupus* soon rules. The Ostenders live in a fear of their own—that of no longer being what they are. They fear to be denatured. They fear losing their organic civility.

This is the profound reason why they work, day and night; the women are cooking, mending, washing, mothering; and the men and boys, at every tide, when the weather is right and the anti-aircraft guns are not firing, go fishing as far away as the coasts of Morocco and the Balearics, passing destroyers and submarines, friends and foes, to whose captains Omer, strong in his rights, shows his "papers" of a fisherman from Ostend. Captain to captain, they understand each other. They salute him.

And then it happens. In the hazy coolness of a summer's dawn, having transported aboard their bare essentials, the Ostenders weigh anchor and silently prepare to sail away. The two surviving trawlers depart, in defiance of the Germans and the French. That night was also the night of the wake for their dead, sons and sailors. The small flotilla is crossing their chosen Acheron. But it is also the night they wake up, as free and honorable.

## The Noble Refugee

So, what is the lesson of *The Ostenders*?

Published in 1947 (in the same year as *The Plague*) by a Simenon whose conduct during the Second European General War was prudent, *The Ostenders* redeemed his cowardice. Indeed Simenon had taken refuge in a fantasy world of good detective work, while, at the same time, the French odious secret police, the *Carlingue*, was busy torturing Resistants, aided by the French Police nationale and the Gendarmerie that, somehow, escaped opprobrium, and worse, when accounts were settled in 1945.

Quite possibly Simenon tried to expiate his bystander's behaviour, when he carried on with his dystopian Maigret novels, as well as not disowning movies adapted from his works with the Germans' stamp of approval and material help.

But what is not ambiguous is the meaning of this allegory about refugees. Who are they? Are they fugitives, the destitute, the weak, the "expelled" like millions of Germans driven later from their ancestral lands now in Polish hands? The Ostenders are nothing of the sort. They came back to Ostend from Iceland instead of anchoring safely in North America. And from Ostend they left again, some twenty families, under heavy artillery fire. They anchored at La Rochelle, to get supplies, and with the intent to push on, probably crossing over to the Argentines. And it is not their fault if the local bureaucrats and their chorus of villagers wanted to entangle them in the mantra of "welcome to our refugees," and in the last instance to turn them into detainees at the mercy of the enemy.

So, they set off to remain themselves, leaving their dead in the shell-strewn sands and in Heaven, and to remain honorable. For them, all but honor was lost. And the honor of a fisherman is to be a "toiler of the sea," as in Victor Hugo's famous novel. The people, now fleeing back to Paris, channeled by German troops, in the delusional peace of the armistice, were willing to live lives without honor. In June 1940, the Resistance and the Free French were yet to come. The first to join De Gaulle were a clan of hundred Briton fishermen from the Isle of Sein.

The Ostenders' only respect, as they regroup, mourn their dead, pray for the living, and prepare to depart is reserved to their rustic counterparts, those peasants in wooden clogs pushing their exhausted cattle ahead of them, back to their far away farms soon to be plundered by the Germans, then plowed and razed by Anglo-American bombings.

The Ostenders did not conform to any coded expectations that would reassure the villagers, and neighboring Rochelais, of their moral rectitude. The Ostenders turned the tables—they showed how not to be a refugee. They set themselves apart. Indeed, as they set sail, the armistice Demarcation line comes into effect, a divide that would soon turn this region into a no-go military zone, in addition to the main split between the harshly occupied North and the vassal "free" South basking, for another two short years, in the meridional sunshine sung by Charles Trenet.

The Ostenders had swallowed bitter tears in the winds and frosts of Newfoundland, humiliated by their king's surrender. They are now restoring their honor, not of a vainglorious military kind but of a deeply

civic and organic communal virtue.

## Redeeming Honor

The wake—in both senses, funereal and nautical—of the trawlers powering up in a yellow mist toward England drew the Ostenders' very own demarcation line, between being and existing. So doing, they were also drawing another demarcation line, between the rhetoric of good feelings about "refugees," contrived to ennoble those who give refuge and find moral reward in it, and the nobility of the fugitives or the expelled who act to restore for themselves honor and self-respect.

The final sentences of *Le clan des Ostendais* sum up the metaphysical meaning of the escape. "We are there, aren't we?" replies Omer to his wife and matriarch Maria's interrogation, half-question, half-puzzlement: "England?" Omer says this, if one pays attention to his words beyond the idiomatic turn of phrase: that "there," that place, "is it not" or "is it?" Is this landing a stage in a journey of self-respect and the organic preservation of who we are? Omer adds: "Lord, I've done what you would have me do"—that is, my natural community has held, and will hold, here or there, so long as we remain ourselves. Honor is our place.

This gives an entire new meaning to the cliché of cosmopolites and soccer players (not that we expect these morons to know about it), *ubi bene, ibi patria*: where my honor exists (honor being the "*bene*," the true *summum bonum*), there is my homeland. England is merely a stage emerging from a yellow mist. It is a harbor; it is no more than that. For when one's autochthony has been lost, when the ancestral ground has caved in, when the natural ruler has surrendered, then existing in honor replaces it all.

*Le clan des Ostendais* carries a powerful lesson about virtue among refugees, and the inner life of organic fortitude whose roots are deep, autochthonous, if one cares about them.

Recently, in a village of the French Pyrenees, the local mayor welcomed a motley group of refugees from the Ukraine. One woman was reported as saying she would go back when the moment is right, hardly expressing any gratitude. How this moment will come, she has no idea. There is no honor and no virtue in her reply. The pained mayor turned then to a family and explained that integration may not be easy: "France is a very old country." The father, surrounded by his wife and two teenagers, a boy and a girl, replied: "We are learning French, we want to belong to our new motherland." It is unlikely the rural

mayor or the Ukrainian father knew that French kings, otherwise proud of their Frankish names, were the first European dynasts, in the 11th century, to adopt the outlandish "Philippe" as a royal name, which endured till the last monarch. It is owed to Anne of Kiev, queen-regent of the Franks, mother of Philippe the First. Honor is indeed organic, or it is not, among refugees. It may, or may not, rekindle roots a thousand years later. Whether those who welcome refugees in France today have a sense of organic honor, and a will to exist, is another matter.

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A much different version of this text appeared first, in French, at [\*Les Influences\*](#).

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[\*Featured\*](#): *Three Fishermen Pulling a Boat*, by Peder Severin Krøyer; painted in 1885.

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