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Signature:

_____ _____

Julia E. House Date

Written in Blood: The Murder Narrative and the Crime of the Papin Sisters

By

Julia E. House
Doctor of Philosophy

French

_____

Candace Lang
Advisor

_____

Geoffrey Bennington
Committee Member

_____

Philippe Bonnefis
Committee Member

_____

Karla Oeler
Committee Member

Accepted:

_____

Lisa A. Tedesco, Ph.D.
Dean of the James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies

_____

Date

Written in Blood: The Murder Narrative and the Crime of the Papin Sisters

By

Julia E. House
B.A., University of Georgia, 1983
M.A., Middlebury College, 1991

Advisor: Candace Lang, Ph.D.

An abstract of
A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the
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Abstract

Written in Blood: The Murder Narrative and the Crime of the Papin Sisters
By Julia E. House

On February 2, 1933, Christine and Léa Papin, two maids in Le Mans, France, attacked and brutally murdered their employers, Madame and Mademoiselle Lancelin. The victims' faces were beaten and slashed beyond all recognition, their legs striated with a kitchen knife. Taken into custody following their crime, the suspects provided a detailed account of the chronology of the attack, omitting no detail save that of the motive behind the crime. Due to this one missing element, the murders have sparked a number of literary, cinematic and dramatic representations in the years following the crime, each trying to resolve questions around the disturbing murders. Through the lens of each writer, the crime has taken on a different shape, the sisters either psychotics, revolutionaries, lesbians or victims themselves. Yet even with the many treatments of the murders, the story remains obscure nearly a century later.

This thesis analyzes the structures employed in narrating the crime of the Papin sisters. The first chapter examines three traditional detective narratives by Edgar Allan Poe, Gaston Leroux and Guy de Maupassant, mapping out expectations that are set up and resolved in the text. The second chapter analyzes the Papin sisters' crime via their testimony and journalists' accounts of the trial. The third chapter relates specifically to the explanation provided by Jacques Lacan in his *Motifs du crime paranoïc* and the closely linked play of Jean Genet, *Les Bonnes*. The final chapter discusses three films based on the crime, Claude Chabrol's *La Cérémonie,* Jean-Pierre Denis' *Les Blessures assassines* and Nancy Meckler's *Sister My Sister*.

This murder case challenges the facile solutions to crime provided in fiction, as traditional narrative means prove futile in explaining the story. The gap between the reader's expectations and the availability of satisfactory resolution pushes the event to further analyses, culminating in a discarding of narrative completely as the story is taken up in visual forms of representation. What becomes apparent in this analysis is that the stringent logical form of narrative must be abandoned before the story of this murder can begin to be comprehended.

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Introduction

The Murder Narrative: Truth and Fiction

The crime genre is often considered as a literary form that falls well below high literature, in part due to its mass appeal and generic simplicity. While it is true that many of the narratives in this category are predictably conventional, the form is rich in potential and is equally regarded as a paradigm of all narrative: chaotic at the beginning, gradually taking shape as the suspense builds, and revealing answers in its dénouement. Indeed, the crime story is said to be the most basic form of linear narrative, a privileged example for narratologists, as each disparate element, no matter how disconnected or illogical, is eventually shown to be essential to the resolution of the crime.

The crime narrative emerged due to a convergence of cultural, literary and historical events that took place at the end of the 19th century. The rise in the reading population, an increase in the number of daily newspapers, and a voracious interest in the *fait divers* and crime stories created a rich market for the genre. Especially popular was the fictional murder story, a tale of violence and mystery in which archetypical killers and victims acted out the fears and desires of their readers. A series such as Emile Gaboriau's adventures of the detective Monsieur Lecoq or the later *Fantômas* of Marcel Allain and Pierre Souvestre[1] satisfied the public's desire to understand the chaos of crime as the stories repeatedly enacted generic scenes of robbery, brutality and murder. These series also provided the reader the opportunity to experience the criminal and his deeds in the safe, contained space of pure fiction.

[1] For examples of these early crime series, see *Monsieur Lecoq, L'Affaire LeRouge,* and *Le Dossier 113* by Emile Gaboriau, and *Fantômas, Tome I* by Marcel Allain and *Fantômas, Tome II* by Pierre Sylvestre and Marcel Allain.

Fictional accounts of murder often became entwined with the factual, as both types of story were offered to readers in newspapers without a clear distinction between the two. The rationality imposed by the fiction writer grew to be anticipated in non-fiction as well, with readers expecting similar solutions to be available in actual crimes as were seen in fiction. Many true murder cases allowed for such treatment, cases in which the killer was identified, the motive explained and the crime resolved and punished. In these crimes, the public was left with a sense of finality and resolution. Other murders were not so easily solved. Questions the reader expected to have answered – who? what? when? why? – often were left uncomfortably and awkwardly hanging, with journalists or police officials left to complete the story as best they could. These gaps between the fictional paradigm and factual reality create a kind of vacuum, drawing in the public to find out more and uncover possible explanations. As such, certain crimes are instilled with a sense of openness and irresolution. In these cases, the unknown is heightened and its pull becomes paramount. A murder committed in 1933 in LeMans, France, is one such crime.

On February 2, 1933, the mother and daughter of the Lancelin family were killed by their two maids, Christine and Léa Papin, in an unexpected and violent attack. The maids assaulted their employers in a remarkably brutal manner, ripping the eyes out of the two still-living women, beating them to death with a pitcher and a hammer, then slicing their faces and bodies with a kitchen knife to such a point that they were no longer recognizable. The women's bodies were found hours later by the husband and father, Monsieur René Lancelin. He arrived home to find the house seemingly empty, yet bolted from the inside. Unable to obtain entry, he called police, who helped him break into the

house, then accompanied him inside where the grisly discovery was made on the staircase landing. Initially the two maids were assumed to have been killed as well, and the party fully expected to find more carnage upstairs in their attic bedroom. Yet when police arrived on the upper level of the house, they found the women alive, huddled together in a single bed behind their locked door. In the time between the slaughter and the arrival of the master of the house, they had performed their domestic duties as usual, cleaning the blood off their bodies and changing into clean nightclothes. They also had rinsed the butcher knife used in the killing and placed it in the kitchen, along with the other cutlery in the drying rack. Once discovered in their bedroom, the sisters went calmly with authorities to be interrogated at the police station.

The event that took place in the Lancelin house that evening is not a mystery in the traditional sense of the word. Whereas investigators of most murder cases initially look for the killer, in this instance the identities of the murderers were known from the moment the crime was discovered. Neither Christine nor Léa denied her involvement in the killing—in fact, Christine was more than willing to narrate the chain of events directly surrounding the murders, giving police a detailed account of the chronology of the attack: " . . . je suis descendue précipitamment à la cuisine et suis allée chercher un marteau et un couteau de cuisine. Avec ces deux instruments, ma soeur et moi, nous nous sommes acharnées sur nos deux maîtresses. Nous avons frappé sur la tête à coups de marteau et nous avons tailladé le corps et les jambes avec le couteau" (Dupre 32). Though Christine was able to provide these details, she was unable to tell investigators the reason for the assault. Similarly, her younger sister Léa reported that she did not know why she had acted as she did. Instead of answering questions of motive, she offered

her own gruesome details about the incident: " . . . quand elles avaient été à terre, nous étions tellement furieuses que nous leur avons arraché les yeux en leur maintenant la tête sur le sol . . . (47).

As a result, the one element left open—the motive—has inspired those who want to explain the crime ever since. How could two apparently rational women kill with such violence? Did something provoke the sisters? Is there a logical and rational explanation for their crime? Writers have supplied copious narratives that examine these aspects of the murders, some focusing on sociocultural causes for the unexpected violence, others examining it from a psycho-sexual point of view. Some theorists have used it to support their own ideologies, some to bolster psychoanalytic analyses. The inability to resolve key mysteries around the event seems unexpected, as if the crime *should* be understandable. But on what are those expectations based?

In his essay "The Decline of the English Murder," a satiric look at the popularity of crime stories as leisure reading material, George Orwell sums up the perfect fictional murder as follows:

> The murderer should be a little man of the professional class—a dentist or a solicitor, say—living an intensely respectable life somewhere in the suburbs, and preferably in a semi-detached house, which will allow the neighbours to hear suspicious sounds through the wall. . . . He should go astray through cherishing a guilty passion for his secretary or the wife of a rival professional man, and should only bring himself to the point of murder after long and terrible wrestles with his conscience. Having decided on murder, he should plan it all with the utmost cunning, and only

> slip up over some tiny unforeseeable detail. The means chosen should, of course, be poison. In the last analysis he should commit murder because this seems to him less disgraceful, and less damaging to his career, than being detected in adultery. With this kind of background, a crime can have dramatic and even tragic qualities which make it memorable and excite pity for both victim and murderer. (381)

Evident in Orwell's description of the "ideal" murder is the predictable nature of the story as well as its moral implications. The reader's need for logic and for a clear and traceable path linking deed to criminal translates into a need for meaning, regardless of the often interchangeable details of the crime. Readers crave a logical explanation, for without resolution, there is no story. Thus, a crime narrative must make sense to the reader.

In *Poétiques de la prose*, Tzvetan Todorov speaks of the paramount importance of logic to transmit a sense of meaning to the reader of the detective story. Todorov indicates the determining nature of *vraisemblance* in crime fiction, which sets up the expectations of the reader. He delineates two separate and distinct "realities" for the reader, saying, "Ainsi s'esquissent deux logiques ou deux conceptions de la vie: la vie *littéraire* ou *livresque* et la *réalité* ou la *vie vivante*" (146). Though the reader ostensibly accepts that these two types of logic are governed by different forces—the *vraisemblable* of fiction and the reality of lived experience—the two are often at odds, particularly in the crime story. Yet, even in cases where the events of the story violate the rational logic of the reader, he will accept the solution if the governing narrative logic is sound. Referencing Nietzsche's *Underground Man*, Todorov adds:

> Les événements représentés ne s'organisent pas seulement de manière à réfuter la conception romantique de l'homme, mais en fonction d'une logique qui leur est propre. Cette logique, jamais formulée mais sans cesse représentée, explique toutes les actions, apparemment aberrantes, du narrateur et de ceux qui l'entourent . . . (146)

In other words, as long as the logic behind the solution is solid, its "believability" in the real world is unimportant. The beauty of the detective novel is that regardless of the disarray of the crime, the reader is confident that a logical strand of meaning will be teased out and that all lingering questions will be answered.

This is not the case with the crime of the Papin sisters. The killings committed by Christine and Léa seem to defy logic, and, as such, defy a logical narration. Where fiction writers are able to construct a logical path between killer and crime, this factual case stalls out, defying any explanation. The crime of the Papin sisters does not answer to the logical in its commission, nor can it be transmitted logically to the public in its representation. As we will see, attempts to narrate the event progress from the immediate version of the crime offered by the criminals themselves and journalists, to later attempts to explain the crime psychoanalytically or existentially, to dramatic and cinematic representations of Jean Genet and a number of film directors. In these visual representations we lose narrative completely, as the visual telling of the story takes on a more fluid, visceral quality. In this move from the logic of written narrative to the more experiential nature of the visual, key truths emerge about the relationship between audience and narrative, spectator and spectacle.

Murder as spectacle

Over the past 150 years, interest in murder has become a cultural phenomenon. Yet society's fascination with killing can be traced back much further. Why is there an audience for death? Did we create it? How closely related to an earlier fascination with the public execution of criminals, for example, is the desire to see, to know, and to look at the spectacle of murder? Society's interest in viewing death has taken on various forms throughout history, however it has always retained an element of theatricality; the idea of "death as drama" is evident as far back as Greek plays. The communal nature of Greek tragedy offered the spectator the experience of *katharsis*, generally defined as a mixture of pity and fear stemming from the viewer's identification with the tragic figure onstage and resulting in a purging of emotion[2] as a result of viewing the drama. In a tragedy such as Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, which has been called the original murder mystery, audience members shared the feeling of pity at the plight of Oedipus as he searches for the king's murderer, the spectators knowing before he does that he himself is that killer. His eventual realization of his own guilt, coupled with the death of the queen and Oedipus' reaction to these events lead to the collective *katharsis* of audience members. In the shared space of the theater, ritual connects actors and audience in a visual and corporeal experience.

The collective nature of these early dramas carries over into the later shared experience of public executions. In France, the spectacle of killing as punishment reached

[2] The function of tragedy "is not merely to provide an outlet for pity or fear, but to provide for them a distinctly aesthetic satisfaction, to purify and clarify them by passing them through the medium of art" (Butcher, 255). This clarification takes place through the process of *katharsis*.

its height during the era of public guillotining, roughly between the late 18th and the early 20th centuries. During this time, the scene of the execution[3] was set up much like a theatrical production would be, the guillotine placed on a large platform for better visibility, the lines spoken by the executioner like a rehearsed and repeated script, virtually the same each time. The prisoner entered the scene as would an actor, mounting steps to the scaffold as if to a stage. The entire event provided its audience with a visual pleasure similar to that of any dramatic production. The role of the spectators, as well, was like that of an audience in a theater, with landlords renting out the "best seats" in their buildings to those willing to pay. People began arriving several days before the event was to take place, bringing food and drink as if attending a festival:

> The rumbling of the crowd, interspersed with songs, jokes, and the occasional shout of protest against this or that member of the imperial family, grows louder as the hour of the execution approaches, and, inevitably, a 'heavy, rank breath of alcoholic fumes' begins to impregnate the night air. Street urchins clamber up into the surrounding trees, 'whistling and screeching like birds' . . . (Burton 112)

The theatrics of the spectacle owe a great deal to the simple presence of the audience. Speaking of the festive atmosphere of these events, or *les cérémonies du supplice*, Michel Foucault says that "le personnage principal, c'est le peuple, dont la présence réelle et immédiate est réquise pour leur accomplissement" (*Surveillir et punir* 61).

For a variety of reasons, the theatrical nature of death by guillotine declined over time, as authorities gradually reduced the opportunity for spectatorship. In the late 19th

[3] An older term for "scene of the crime" is, in fact, "le théâtre du crime," lending weight to the concept of crime as a spectatorial event.

century, the platform on which the machine stood was eliminated, so that the execution took place at ground level, greatly reducing the drama of the event. Eventually the entire process was removed from the public arena, vanishing behind prison walls, finalizing the transition. In a telling parallel, the lessening of visibility of death as punishment coincided with the rise in visibility of death as murder, in the form of the *fait divers*.

Murder as popular art form

The phenomenon of murder as entertainment is not only a descendant of the earlier spectacle of public executions, it also must be linked culturally and historically to a number of events at the end of the nineteenth century. By the mid-1800's, the newspaper was already widespread due to technological advances allowing for faster and more efficient printing. Combined with an increasingly literate population, the years between 1880 and 1914 witnessed a rise in the overall circulation of Parisian dailies of 250 percent (Schwartz 27-28). Although many papers in this rapidly-expanding industry covered political or important regional events, most of the dailies focused on the *fait divers*, a category of stories dealing with unexpected events befalling ordinary citizens. Among these stories were natural disasters, fires and drownings, but the most popular subject was crime, and the more violent and unexpected the crime, the more likely it was to sell a newspaper. Thus, much early journalism focuses on stories of death, especially homicide. There are many reasons for the popularity of these stories, not the least of which is the journalist's role of sorting out and explaining crime to the public. Newspaper

writers were able to bestow moral significance onto these events and reassure their readers of the forces at work in society to seek out and punish criminals. As Georges Auclair notes in *Le Mana quotidien*, a study of media treatment of crime at the turn of the century, newspapers generally assigned a succession of archetypes to the *fait divers* event—the innocent victim, the ruthless killer, the hero, the villain—and dealt less with " . . . la réalité statistique du crime que des fantasmes que la collectivité forme à son sujet . . . " (123). In other words, journalists reinforced existing societal conditions as perceived by the reader, placing elements in their expected roles with reassuring repeatability. As such, the crime story was propelled into the public sphere by its widespread coverage during the era.

Le Petit Journal, a newspaper begun in 1863, was known as the most popular newspaper in France at this time. Its circulation nearly equaled all other Paris papers combined, in large part due to its crime reports (Cragin 14). *Le Petit Journal* was known for its treatment of the *fait divers*, from stories of kidnapped children to agonizing accounts of entire families wiped out by fires. The demand for stories on violent death must be attributed not only to the need for citizens to know, but also to a continued craving for the spectacle itself. In his extremely enlightening discussion of the role of the newspaper in the growing cities of Europe, Mark Seltzer discusses the symbiotic relationship between crime and the emerging journalism of the time:

> It is possible here to speak of a media-dependent public sphere, if one understands this in terms of the collateral emergence of the public sphere (what Poe calls "the public mind") and mass print culture (the "public prints"). In systems-theoretical terms, we can describe this as the "double-

> contingency" of print and publicness. And this is what makes it possible for the mass spectacle of death to be both general and intense, "anonymized" and individualized, generic and singular, at once: both sensational media and a media *sensation.* (563)

We immediately see the implications of this commentary, as murder (or violent crime in general) becomes both created *for* the reading public and created *by* them, journalists feeding an existing need for the extremely private act of killing to be made public, and for the press to likewise create via their stories a market for them.

If we examine the pages of a typical edition of a paper such as *Gil Blas*, we are struck by the lack of boundaries between actual reporting on true crimes and the fictional narratives that were serialized in newspapers of the time. Journalists shared their space on the page with novelists, who published stories in weekly installments. These stories often contained similar plot lines to those of the journalists, creating a kind of crossover from one genre to the other, in which fiction became haunted by fact, and fact contaminated with fiction. By taunting readers with open-ended factual and fictional stories, publishers guaranteed continued readership, based in large part on these sensational stories. Yet they also obscured the line between real and representational texts, for although the reader ostensibly is aware of the distinction between the actual crimes and the fictional, the story lines and information provided in each were often indistinguishable. In setting up such a textual blurring of fact and fiction, publishers significantly influenced the readers of their papers, setting up certain expectations for readers of crime narratives. As such, the ability to explain, categorize and solve a crime in fiction bled into stories of actual murders, and what was possible in representation became anticipated in reality.

Truth and fiction

It is clear that the motivation behind the interest in murder is complicated. What is certain is that the need to resolve crime is a drive that perpetuates interest in the genre. Yet as early newspapers have proven, the handling of factual cases in the same manner that fictional ones are explained is problematic. The act of constructing a narrative around a real-life crime serves many purposes, and before moving into an examination of the relationship between truth and fiction within the crime committed by the Papin sisters, it is important to examine the broader connection between narrative and reality.

Traditionally, narrative is perceived as a vehicle for explaining the world, a form that purports to reflect a stability and linear causality existing naturally in the exterior world. Traditional plot lines consist of a series of logical relationships linking one event to the next, tracing a path through the text, eventually answering questions and providing a resolution that appears to be the natural result of the preceding series of events. Such a format suggests that disparate elements can be gathered, organized and incorporated into a grand scheme where all residual details are linked in a rational, reconstructable way. This classic narrative form depends on an omniscient narrator who sees all, a concept which implies that there is an "all" in the exterior world. Traditional narrative adheres to the unities of time and place, giving a clear, comprehensible view of an understandable world. Implicit in this fictional text is the understanding that its chronology and linearity reflect a parallel logic and structure that can be located in the exterior world. In other words, traditional narrative purports to be nothing more than a reflection of the laws at

work in the physical world. Although the conceptual framework offered by this narrative structure is generally held to be true, the relationship between reality and narrative is far more complex.

The details of lived experience do not necessarily fit into any existing narrative paradigm; correlations and causal elements found in fiction are not always applicable in reality. Events do not always have meanings, and often cannot be traced back to a specific cause. Any attempt to put an event into logical and sequential order is already manipulating the story so that it fits into such an ordering. As such, writing on actual events should be regarded as poised in a space between creating and reporting; the author of a text oscillates between transcribing an experience based in facts and supplying necessary details to fill in the inevitable gaps of available information. In writing about crime, a heightened sense of urgency haunts the task, since the desire to understand the event compels the completion of a narrative. However, there are certain crimes that writers are never able to definitively narrate, and for various reasons. These less easily contained crimes involve big blank areas, large gaps in the story either at the level of *who* (such as the crimes of Jack the Ripper in London in 1888,) *why* (the parricide committed by Lizzie Borden in Massachusetts in 1892) or murky questions stemming from a blurring of these two questions, as in the case of the Papin sisters in France in 1933.

The difficulty in establishing a distinct division between fact and fiction has been addressed by theorists in an attempt to define or otherwise delineate the role of the writer in factual accounts of history. In an attempt to resolve questions of authorship in the crime of the Papin sisters I would like to examine a number of theories regarding the play between truth and fiction in historical writing. These theories reflect the dilemma at the

basis of narrating the crime committed by Christine and Léa Papin, as each writer can be placed somewhere along the spectrum between fact and fiction, much like the authors of the stories on the murders. In this way we may better understand the flux between the two in crime writing, where the audience's need to know "what really happened" is fundamental.

Certain theories hold that the writer of a historical event chooses which elements to accept as actual truths of the narrative and which seem either irrelevant or untrue, incorporating the true into his narrative and discarding the false. This view paints history as subjective; since events do not coincide with the perceptions of their actors or their witnesses, it is the historian who makes the event out of the evidence he employs. As Paul Veyne suggests in *Comment on écrit l'histoire*, the historical writer[4] is much like the writer of fiction, deciding which plot best fits his narrative, then selecting what to pull from his documentation. Veyne refers to the actual events as a constantly changing collage:

> Les événements ne sont pas des choses, des objets consistants, des substances; ils sont un découpage que nous opérons librement dans la réalité, un agrégat de processus où agissent et pâtissent des substances en interaction, hommes et choses. Les événements n'ont pas d'unité naturelle; on ne peut, comme le bon cuisinier du *Phèdre,* les découper selon leurs articulations véritables, car ils n'en ont pas. (69)

For Michel de Certeau, writing history is the act of dividing time into present and past, a process through which the past is seen as dead. What is transcribed and recorded as history is "ce monde mort, definitivement autre" (7). In giving a voice to the dead,

[4] In this section I will use the term "history" to refer to all factual events.

written historic accounts emphasize the absence within them, “l’immensité inconnue qui séduit et menace le savoir ... le discours de la separation, c'est l’écriture” (9). Even though they are tossed aside, the unwritten and unnarrated elements still remain as shadows, haunting the account and casting uncertainty upon any work written on the past. Moreover, de Certeau states that modern history establishes certain divisions between other opposing terms: written and spoken, us and them, self and other. In each case the unspoken, unwritten “other” shadows the textual presence of the account, and the discarded information is never quite completely discarded.

For Hayden White, the compulsion to narrate is based in the reader’s desire for meaning, which in turn is based in a need to make sense of an event in a moral as well as a logical framework. In his view, the writer’s motivation to narrate is based in a desire to moralize, to find not only a resolution through the narrative but a moral significance as well. Here, meaning is derived after the fact of writing, in many ways assigned to the narrative by the author. White says that “narrativity, certainly in factual storytelling and probably in fictional storytelling as well, is intimately related to, if not a function of, the impulse to moralize reality, that is, to identify it with the social system that is the source of any morality that we can imagine" (18). The role of morality in narrative is especially useful in a discussion of representations of murder. As evidenced in the press treatment of crime, a writer both establishes resolution for the reader and reinforces her sense of right and wrong by sequencing and explaining events. Additionally, White argues that “the demand for closure in the historical story is a demand . . . for moral meaning, a demand that sequences of real events be assessed as to their significance as elements of a moral drama” (24). Traditional moral drama calls on the concepts of good and evil, of

right and wrong, ideas linked to the larger questions of crime and justice. In the crime of the Papin sisters, these opposing terms cannot be definitively mapped out. Uncertainty around such basic elements of the story as how the sisters should be read[5] heightens readers' desire for resolution and a moral explanation. Contributing to the difficulty in establishing a such reading is the need for a motive, which Christine and Léa are never able to provide. Because of the glaring lack in this one area, the narrative stalls out, leaving the story in many ways permanently incomplete. Each narrative on the crime attempts to categorize the sisters and their crime in a moral framework, yet none is able to do so cleanly. Without a determination of sanity, how can they be seen as guilty? Without motive, how can they been seen as evil?

Maria Tatar also notes the play between existing ideas of morality and the role of the crime narrative:

> The moral status of the victim shapes the ideological construction of the killer in a decisive fashion. We have seen how responses to the deeds of sexual murderers move along the spectrum from horrified contempt to undisguised empathy. When the victims are "innocent children," the serial killer is demonized and discursive strategies building on metaphors of disease and pollution are mobilized to target the murderer as a source of contamination and to advocate his elimination. When the victims are prostitutes—women marked with the signs of corrupt and corrupting sexuality—the killer is not infrequently judged to be a normal person

[5] *La Sarthe*'s lead story the morning after the crime carried the headline: "Deux anges? Non! Deux monstres..."

> provoked to an act of violence or his victims are seen as complicitous in their murders. (54)

As we will see in various representations of the murders committed by the Papin sisters, the killers' status of maids contrasted with that of their victims, who were their superiors, creating the basis for any given reading; whether social revolution or paranoid delusion, the crime ultimately rests on which moral interpretation the writer chooses to be true.

The detective narrative, and indeed, narrative in general, is based in lack. The reader is drawn by something missing at the heart of the narrative, wanting answers and resolution, yet at the same time tantalized by the possibility of not knowing. In the case of actual events, this possibility is real, since often in place of resolution there are more questions. Depending on the individual case, necessary elements to tell the story are variable, dependent on emerging information and changes in investigative methods and accepted beliefs about a particular crime. Furthermore, each murder case is different, and information that might be required in one—a murder weapon, for example—might be unnecessary in another. In the case of the Papin sisters, the lack of motive is the most obvious missing element, especially given the degree of violence and anger evidenced in the crime. This opening in the narrative leads writers and readers alike into questions of something less visible and tangible—the sisters' mental states at the time of the murders, their past lives and their relationship with their mother, their employers and each other—creating an unfinished work that begs to be completed.

As we will see, the difficulty in narrating this story begins at the level of the two participants, who are never able to articulate a reason for having slaughtered their

patronnes. As the role of narrating is taken up by other writers, it becomes evident that the missing motive is reflective of the subjects, who are clearly lacking in some essential way. With no motive and seemingly distant and disconnected criminals, the crime takes on the quality of an event with a lack at its center. Compelled to fill in the gap, writers, psychologists and theorists have written in various explanations, but no all-encompassing narrative has ever been written, one that satisfies once and for all the questions around the crime. The moral implications of narrative outlined by White reflect the reader's need for balance and stability. The outpouring of texts, films, plays and paintings that result from this crime reflects the inability to establish that balance.

Thus, an actual historical event problematizes the concept of seamless narrative, since in reality events only appear to have a concise linearity. The crime committed the night of February 2 provides an excellent opportunity to examine this phenomenon, since writers appear to struggle with any one narrative to explain the murders. The possibility of a cohesive narrative is thwarted when writers try to impose causality and linearity onto this event and find it impossible to do so. The latent expectation that actual events should possess the same stability as those in fiction leads readers to feel that there is an unfinished quality about this crime, that there is something missing in the narrative. If we go back to the original version of the crime, that is to say Christine and Léa's own words in their testimony, we can see the areas left undone where resolution is expected but not found.

Christopher Lane's article "The Delirium of Interpretation: Writing the Papin Affair" challenges the idea that the numerous representations of the murders ultimately lead to a sense of resolution. Lane states that rather than moving closer to any one

comprehensive explanation for the event, theories on the crime and its motive reflect the structure of delirium and psychosis suffered by the criminals themselves. In his opinion the absorption of the sisters into the various ideologies of each writer "mimics the delirium of this event by its production of meaningful irrationalities" (26). Lane sees the various texts on the case as evidence of an interpretative delirium running parallel to the delirium of the crime. I disagree with this notion, proposing instead that the abundance of texts on the crime ultimately leads to a different kind of telling, one based in elements outside the traditional narrative form. These narratives culminate in a kind of return to the spectacle, which for various reasons offers a more immediate experience of the event due to qualities unique to visual representation.

A murder sets into action a series of overlapping events so interdependent that they often cannot be placed chronologically: the official investigation combines with public speculation and journalistic coverage to such a degree that all seem to take place simultaneously. Further, each of these individual quests for information operates under a different set of rules and has a different desired outcome. Yet regardless of the initial motivation, narratives written about murder inevitably have one common element, the search for an explanation for something outside common human experience. I would like to examine the ways in which factual accounts follow fiction, fictional accounts are flawed, and the way the two are intertwined, making any solution problematic.

Chapter One

Reading Murder

In order to pinpoint reasons for which the story of the Papin sisters seems incomplete, it is helpful to look at the fictional crime story and the expectations it sets up and fulfils. The structure and inherent patterns of the traditional murder narrative intentionally upset the reader's sense of order by focusing on the chaotic aftermath of crime, then restore that order by means of a cohesive explanation. In these works, logic and rational thought overcome any sense of uncertainty. The murder narrative serves to resolve the open areas of a crime, which is written into the story as a way to maintain suspense and compel the reader forward. A novel by an early author such as Wilkie Collins, or a later popular traditional writer like Agatha Christie, maintains a sense of confusion up to a certain point, where the crime is resolved and all questions, no matter how impossible they seem, are satisfactorily answered. However, as we turn to an actual crime such as that of the Papin sisters, the answers desired by readers are elusive, compelling a deeper investigation by those wanting to resolve the murders. What seems to be missing in the story of the Papin killings is a definitive version of the event, a narrative that explains to the reader in a rational way the reasons behind the murders. Readers' expectations, based as they are in fictional resolutions, often are not satisfactorily met in reality. It is safe to say that fictional representations of crime-solving are deceptive, as writers often provice much-too-neat answers to questions about the nature of murder and those who kill.

However, even within the traditional murder narrative there are unexpected shades of uncertainty. As we will see in a sampling of stories from the late nineteenth

century, a text based in logic, rational thought, and detection carries with it the opposites of these terms as well: mystery, irrationality, and confusion. These elements invite a deeper examination, provoking questions on the nature of epistemology and the belief that we can know anything with certainty. In order to explore this phenomenon I will examine three prototypical crime narratives, each representative of a separate subgenre of murder literature: "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" by Edgar Allan Poe, *Le mystère de la chambre jaune* by Gaston Leroux and "La Petite Roque" by Guy de Maupassant. In each case, the resolution associated with unveiling the killer's identity is technically sound, yet it simultaneously throws into question the nature of the criminal, creating a sense of uncertainty about the stability of the solution. In these stories the author ultimately turns to a representation of the criminal as "other," a designation that in turn is used as a way to explain the transgression. In the first case, the killer is found to be not human at all, but an orangutan that escaped from its owner. The second text examines a crime that in truth was only dreamed by its victim, a hysterical woman frantic to keep her own past transgressions hidden. Finally, the Maupassant story questions the potential for violence within the ordinary individual who, as a result of his crime, becomes other to himself. In each case, the search for meaning becomes a search within the individual, one that raises questions about the way in which the criminal is viewed by society and how his crime is ultimately categorized. In this way we can begin to map out the story of Papin sisters' crime onto the expectations of the reader.

"The Murders in the Rue Morgue": Murderer as animal

Edgar Allan Poe's trilogy of stories centered on detective C. Auguste Dupin provides both a paradigm for the detective narrative and a way of gauging the expectations and limitations of the form. In the first story of the trilogy, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," amateur detective Dupin is able to solve a crime that has to that point baffled police. A mother and daughter have been brutally mauled and killed within a seemingly closed and locked apartment, the daughter strangled and shoved halfway up the chimney, the mother's throat cut and her body tossed into the courtyard below. The door to the apartment was bolted from the inside and all windows were closed and latched as well. The intrigue is further complicated by the fact that the witnesses to the crime saw nothing, yet heard what seems to be evidence of two men inside the dwelling at the time of the crime, one definitely French, the other foreign but whose nationality was indeterminable. Dupin examines the details of the case and arrives at the only logical explanation: the killer was an escaped orangutan being kept illegally in the city by a sailor. It had scaled the wall to the fifth floor apartment and jumped in an open window, killed the two women, then climbed back out again, swinging the window behind him, which latched automatically, only appearing later to have been locked all along.

Given the somewhat anachronistic point of view of a twenty-first century reader, the text seems overly complex for a detective story. Its structure is convoluted and rambling, its focus unclear. The story opens with an epigraph[6] on knowledge and a lengthy discussion on game strategy in checkers and whist, and only mentions the actual

[6] "What song the Syrens sang, or what name Achilles assumed when he hid himself among women, although puzzling questions, are not beyond all conjecture" (141).

murder after much speculation on the availability and visibility of data. Such references are found throughout the narrative, creating an intertextual web in which the means by which knowledge is obtained and the methods used to solve a crime are as important as the ultimate solution to the crime. What is the point of the many pages on ratiocination and mathematics? Poe's motive in writing the Dupin trilogy is to examine the deductive qualities of man, presenting detective Dupin as the ideal "knower" and playing him off the bungling police investigators. By focusing on the detective's ability to eliminate misleading clues and concentrate only on the information he knows will lead him to the killer, Poe draws the reader into the maze of conflicting information and creates a sense of the need for order.

Dupin first learns of the crime in the Rue Morgue from a series of newspaper articles that include the testimonies of eyewitnesses to the crime who, though they saw nothing, were able to give police details about what they heard during the attacks on the women. The detective is able to distinguish important clues from their testimony, indices that were overlooked by police. In this instance, the witnesses wrongly interpret vital information about the killer and thus pass along key misinformation to police. Each of the witnesses describes hearing two distinct voices in the apartment during the altercation, and although they agree that one of the speakers was a Frenchman, none of them can identify the gender or the nationality of the other. The testimonies regarding the unknown individual are varied. The French *gendarme* reports: "The shrill voice was that of a foreigner. Could not be sure whether it was the voice of a man or of a woman. Could not make out what was said, but believed the language to be Spanish" (149). Another Frenchman is quoted as saying, "The shrill voice, this witness thinks, was that of an

Italian. Was certain it was not French. Could not be sure that it was a man's voice. It might have been a woman's. Was not acquainted with the Italian language. Could not distinguish the words, but was convinced by the intonation that the speaker was an Italian" (149). A Dutchman, examined through an interpreter, states, "Was sure that the shrill voice was that of a man—of a Frenchman. Could not distinguish the words uttered. They were loud and quick—unequal—spoken apparently in fear as well as in anger. The voice was harsh—not so much shrill as harsh. Could not call it a shrill voice" (150). Each witness' forced interpretation of the voice closes down the possibility of a definitive identification of that voice. The only commonality is that the voice spoke a language unknown to every witness who heard it, as such it can only be referred to as an "other" voice. As Dupin notes, " . . . each one spoke of it as that *of a foreigner*" (155). The eventual solution, of course, is that the voice belongs to an animal—the ultimate foreigner, the absolute opposite of man.

While Dupin realizes the significance of this voice and the importance of its otherness, the police are thrown off by the conflicting testimonies. The official attempt to reach a single narrative on the event becomes complicated, as at this point there is a dispersion of stories depending on the particular interpretation of the unknown voice. As is evident in the case of the Papin sisters, individual clues about the crime become (over)emphasized, forcing a given narrative in one direction. Relying on the sublimation of other possibilities, each reading builds on one element, often creating confusing and conflicting accounts. In the Poe story, given the fact that the voice of the second individual in the apartment cannot be at once French, Spanish, harsh and shrill, the detail

becomes what Lacan refers to as a phallic signifier[7] of the story, the part that "sticks out," an element that should be accepted *as is*—an unidentifiable voice—but instead is overdetermined, resulting in an *impossible* voice. The (mis)reading of the voice illustrates the extreme complexity of reconstructing an event and lends a sense of unreality to the crime, much as is seen in the many accounts of the Papin story.

The significance of this linguistic otherness in solving the crime of the Rue Morgue is twofold. First is the importance of the killer's inability to be understood. He has no language, he is outside the boundaries of linguistics: this is the first mark of his otherness. Rather than attempting to assign a nationality to the killer, investigators would have gotten further had they simply accepted him as *actual* other, or non-human[8]. Thus the marker of his otherness halts the police investigation. Secondly, in contrast to witnesses and police, who are baffled by the voice, Dupin accepts this linguistic boundary in its entirety: the voice is outside all interpretation and, as such, is key to the solution of the crime. Rather than making it impossible to solve, this detail is what makes it solvable. As the phallic signifier, it signals a critical point in the narrative. Dupin remarks after reading about the crimes: "By undue profundity we perplex and enfeeble thought; and it is possible to make even Venus herself vanish from the firmament by a scrutiny too sustained, too concentrated, or too direct" (153). The crime seems to have been committed by someone who fits no gender or nationality because it *was* committed by such an individual, an orangutan.

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[7] *Phallic signifier* is the place in the text where the reader's eye is drawn, a place that, by not exactly working, gives the reader a point of entry. Zizek says of the phallic signifier, "'Phallic' is precisely the detail that 'does not fit', that 'sticks out' from the idyllic surface scene and denatures it, renders it uncanny" (90).

[8] There is an implicit commentary on ethnocentricity here, as for these people, foreigners may be "actual" others.

But is the killer really animal? Important details emerge if we read closely the sailor's description of the orangutan's actions that led to his escape and the eventual death of the women:

> Returning home from some sailors' frolic on the night, or rather in the morning, of the murder, he found the beast occupying his own bedroom, into which it had broken from a closet adjoining, where it had been, as was thought, securely confined. Razor in hand, and fully lathered, it was sitting before a looking-glass, attempting the operation of shaving, in which it had no doubt previously watched its master through the keyhole of the closet. Terrified at the sight of so dangerous a weapon in the possession of an animal so ferocious, and so well able to use it, the man, for some moments, was at a loss what to do. He had been accustomed, however, to quiet the creature, even in its fiercest moods, by the use of a whip, and to this he now resorted. Upon sight of it, the Ourang-Outang sprang at once through the door of the chamber, down the stairs, and thence, through a window, unfortunately open, into the street. (166)

Also significant are his actions at the moment of the killings:

> As the sailor looked in, the gigantic animal had seized Madame L'Espanaye by the hair (which was loose, as she had been combing it), and was flourishing the razor about her face, in imitation of the motions of a barber. (167)

The animal mimics the master, and as a result of trying to be a man, he is first threatened with a whip, causing him to jump out the window, then frightened by the woman's screams, causing him to become violent and slash her throat. The boundaries are blurred

between man and beast, fear and violence, and self and other, leading to questions about the nature of these limits. While it is true that Poe throws the crime off of man and onto an "other" in the form of an animal, the animal was at the time *trying to be other than himself,* i.e. trying to be human. In mimicking the man's actions in the mirror, the animal's playacting is based on an imitation of man. Moreover, the act of shaving is itself another mirroring of man and animal. The man is trying to be less animal by shaving the whiskers off his face, gesturing again to the animal inherent in man and the idea of identity consisting of multiple incidences of role-playing. Does man become more human by casting off the animal in himself? Does the animal approach human-ness in pretending to shave himself? In other words, is the animal the source of violence, or is man? We can apply a similar question to the earlier example of linguistics: does the animal mimic man's speech, or is it man who misreads garbled barking as a language, thus laying human language over animal shrieks?

Returning for a moment to the Papin sisters, can a similar mimicking of their superiors be observed, a kind of playacting that accidentally leads to murder? Genet draws heavily on such an idea, suggesting a similar blurring of identities, and thus, an inability to define the guilty party. As in the Poe story, would such a reading imply that one group is more bestial than the other? Or is the crime in the act of mimicry itself, the attempt to transcend the social (or, in the case of the orangutan, the biological) hierarchy?

In the actions leading up to the murders in the Rue Morgue, numerous boundaries are crossed, each leading to a transgression more serious than the previous. First, the orangutan escapes from the sailor's closet, where he was thought to have been "securely confined." The escape leads to the next transgression, his attempt to play the role of

master. Upon being discovered seated before the mirror, the animal is upset, and crosses another boundary, escaping from the interior of the sailor's apartment to the exterior world, where he is not allowed to go. This transgression results in the chase through the streets, leading to the entry into the women's apartment, an apparently inaccessible place into which he is nonetheless able to enter. The final transgression is, of course, the murders, resulting from once again being where he should not be and attempting to mimic man.

In this series of actions, each transgression builds on the previous, creating layers of crimes that culminate in murder, each movement highlighting the existence of otherwise unexamined boundaries. In the crime of the Papin sisters, there is a tendency on the part of readers and writers to attempt to similarly trace a line backwards to an originary event, some earlier transgression that sparked the actions leading to the crime. The need to find a cause for the murders is reflected in the scrutiny of Christine and Léa's earlier lives, both at the Lancelin home and in their youth. In many instances the logic seen is the Poe story is forced onto the Papin story, as the women are regarded as criminals on many levels, each transgression building on the last. Their refusal to remain in the space provided them—their allotted space of society, gender and class—is most often pinpointed as the event that began their decline.

Dupin is able to solve the crime in the Rue Morgue because of his ability to recognize the significance of these and other boundaries. But beyond this awareness (or perhaps because of it,) not only does he recognize them, he is able to transcend them, as illustrated in his mind-reading abilities that are described early in the story. During a walk with the narrator one evening, Dupin makes an odd comment, one that seems to be

related to an internal train of thought going on in the narrator's mind at that moment. The narrator is astonished, believing Dupin has just read his mind. Yet as the detective explains, there was nothing supernatural about his actions: he had simply followed the logical thought processes he knew the narrator would follow upon the sight of "the fruiterer," arriving at the idea "(h)e is a very little fellow, that's true" (145) at the same time as the narrator.

This incident appears to highlight Dupin's observation skills and his ability to read, interpret and follow others' actions. I would argue, however, that the mind-reading passage is even more significant in that it highlights the barriers separating the two individuals, drawing the reader's attention to them as well as to the many other barriers and boundaries in the story. In this particular crime, Dupin arrives at the solution because he see the boundaries for what they are, fluid and transparent, rather than for what they appear to be, stable and impassable. In fact, the story is built on these many semantic axes[9]—interior and exterior, male and female, innocent and guilty, man and animal—and the killer's ability to cross them. Certainly, given Poe's solution, this last pair is crucial. Is he suggesting that all murderers are less than human? Or that each human carries within him remnants of the violence of the animal? And in this particular case, is the animal innocent or guilty? If guilty, by what rationale? If not, who is guilty of killing the two women? As in cases where the killer is determined to be insane, thus not responsible for his actions, this orangutan cannot be viewed as "guilty" of anything, since the rational, logical, sane, and *human* subject required for a trial to take place (and by

[9] Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (86).

extension, a crime to have been committed at all) does not exist[10]. Following this line of thought, if only rational beings can be held responsible for a crime, the orangutan cannot be guilty of this crime. In fact, we cannot view the murders as murder at all, since legally speaking, no crime at all was committed. Does that mean there is no guilty party in this case? And if Poe poses this question in such a fundamental text, should this be seen as the foundation of how we interpret all murders, even non-fictional ones?

It is important to keep in mind that the orangutan was in the city illegally, there only because of the actions of the sailor. As the animal's keeper, the man should be held responsible for the actions of the orangutan, yet after questioning the sailor and verifying that his own theory about the crime was correct, Dupin lets him go, with no hint of prosecution or punishment whatsoever. The sailor's role in the murders is significant, not only because he is the owner of the beast, but also due to his own involvement in the crime as a result of his actions just before the murders and at the moment of the crime. In the seconds just before the murders, the orangutan sees his master looking in the window and reacts: " . . . the face of its master, rigid with horror, was just discernable. The fury of the beast, who no doubt bore still in mind the dreaded whip, was instantly converted into fear" (167). If we regard the sailor as not only *voyeur*, but again as a direct cause of the crime, questions of responsibility become difficult to answer definitively.

Poe further plays with the reader at this point, noting the reaction of the animal to his deeds:

[10] In the case of an insanity plea, a *non-lieu* is pronounced, a ruling that states that a crime as such did not take place, the reasoning being that the subject who killed was not responsible for the crime as s/he was unable to make a conscious decision to kill. In these cases there is no criminal, there is only an absence in place of a killer.

> Conscious of having deserved punishment, it seemed desirous of concealing its bloody deeds, and skipped about the chamber in an agony of nervous agitation; throwing down and breaking the furniture as it moved, and dragging the bed from the bedstead. In conclusion, it seized first the corpse of the daughter, and thrust it up the chimney as it was found; then that of the old lady, which it immediately hurled through the window headlong. (167)

The orangutan is indeed aware of his transgression, as evidenced by his desire to conceal his crime, a trait borrowed as well from the man behind the beast.

As we saw earlier, each of the animal's movements involves his crossing a series of boundaries or escaping a series of confines (closet to bathroom to outside the apartment) then entering a series of interiors (window to apartment to women.) In this last act is reflected the presence of another semantic axis in the text: that of male and female. Entry into the space of the two women reflects a transgression on the level of moving across sexual boundaries. The two women live alone in the house, the door and windows locked from the inside: "The shutters of the front windows were seldom opened. Those in the rear were always closed, with the exception of the large back room, fourth story" (149). The time it took the killer to commit the deed is described as " . . . the time elapsing between the hearing of the voices in contention and the breaking open of the room door was variously stated by the witnesses. Some made it as short as three minutes—some as long as five. The door was opened with difficulty" (151). If read metaphorically, this is a crime of rape, a forced entry of a sexual nature. Furthermore, the killer is definitively presented as a male entity, as evidenced in a sampling of passages

describing the crime scene: “It was not possible to say how the injuries had been inflicted. A heavy club of wood, or a broad bar of iron—a chair—any large, heavy, and obtuse weapon would have produced such results, if wielded by the hands of a very powerful man” (152). “The throat of the old lady was not merely cut, but the head absolutely severed from the body . . . I wish you also to look at the brutal force of these deeds” (161). “ . . . (T)he gigantic animal had seized Madame L’Espanaye by the hair (which was loose, as she had been combing it) . . . ” (167). The act of murder committed on the daughter can be symbolically read as a rape, albeit a curious inversion of rape, in which the woman’s body is that which penetrates, and is found in the chimney “having been thus forced up the narrow aperture for a considerable distance” (148).

The words used to describe the crime scene are indeed sexually charged, indicating that the transgression at the heart of this early murder narrative is more than just taking a life. The crime should be equally read as sexual in nature, the female occupying the passive role of victim, the male associated with brutality and killing. This gendered reading of the crime leads to the obvious question: Is this story not only a way to explain man’s brutality but also a way to call attention to the sexual implications in all violent crimes? And if so, how do the Papin sisters—or any women who kill—fit into this pattern? Must we read their brutality as inherently masculine, lending more credence to the theories that emerged after their crime of lesbianism between the two sisters?

The continued emphasis on semantic axes throughout the story is significant. John Irwin sees the fluctuation between opposing terms as intentional on the part of the author:

> Poe’s decision to make the killer in his first detective story an animal capable of being mistaken under certain conditions for a man . . . suggests

> that the project that Poe evokes at the very start of 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' (the analysis of reflexive self-consciousness) is part of a larger task of differentiating the human, the task of distinguishing man from animal by defining the essentially 'human' (i.e., mental, self-conscious) element in man as opposed to the animal (bodily) element. (65-66)

The oscillation seen in this story between male and female, sameness and difference, familiar and foreign, can be seen as representing the essential human self-division that comes to light as a result of a murder.

The unexpected conclusion of this tale is likewise a commentary on the role of the criminal both in literature and in society. Given the repeated man-animal-man gesture, is the orangutan in this story not a literal orangutan at all, but instead a metaphor for crime? As Michel Foucault has noted[11], society's way of dealing with the other, whether he be other due to insanity or criminality, is a permanent separation from society, a permanent casting out. By attributing the murder to an orangutan, Poe explains the crime by throwing it off the human race completely, identifying violence not as the act of man but of animal. The crime of Christine and Léa Papin is similarly treated as a crime committed by an "other" as the sisters are indeed other in terms of gender, class, economic status, and sexual preference. But as we see in the case of the murders in the Rue Morgue, this other is often much closer to the rest of society than is realized.

[11] More on Foucault's view of the way in which society deals with the criminal can be found in *Surveillir et punir: naissance de la prison*.

Le Mystère de la chambre jaune: The dreamed crime

Where "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" problematizes the implied alterity of the criminal, Gaston Leroux's 1908 locked room mystery, *Le Mystère de la chambre jaune*, questions the nature of the act of murder itself. This story shifts the location of the crime from the physical world to the space of the imagined, raising questions about perception and reality in the criminal act. The mystery is centered on the attempted murder of Mathilde Stangerson, an event that takes place late one night in her apparently hermetically-sealed bedroom. Mathilde, along with her father, renowned scientist Professor Stangerson, and her fiancé, Robert Darzac, conduct research into her father's breakthrough theory of *La Dissociation de la Matière* in their isolated château in the French countryside. Many nights their experiments require that they stay up late working in the lab. On these occasions Mathilde sleeps in a special bedroom just outside the laboratory area. The walls are painted yellow, giving the room the name *la chambre jaune*. One night, Prof. Stangerson and his servant, Père Jacques, hear Mathilde cry out from her locked bedroom, followed by a the sound of a gunshot. The two men are forced to break down the door to get inside, where they find Mathilde unconscious on the floor, a revolver lying next to her. They search the room but find no trace of the attacker. Mathilde lies near death as a result of her injuries, but later makes a complete recovery. The investigation into the crime is pursued by two talented investigators, Frédéric Larsan, who works for the police department, and Joseph Rouletabille, a journalist. The link between the detective and the criminal hinted at in the Poe story is literalized here; Rouletabille eventually solves the crime and announces that the criminal is his rival,

Larsan, who is in reality the criminal Ballmeyer, a villain who had been posing as a detective, and who in the meantime has escaped.

With this revelation Rouletabille satisfies both the police force and the public, for whom the case is definitively closed. Yet for the reader, this explanation leaves something unresolved, similar to the Papin sisters' unsatisfactory explanation of their crime. If we examine the actual moment of the attack on Mathilde, it is apparent that the detective's explanation is faulty. Regardless of the identity of the assassin, no one could have penetrated the woman's locked room, as it was most certainly sealed at that time. Eventually Rouletabille answers this riddle as well. On the night in question there was no attacker, no attack, *no crime whatsoever*. The detective determines first of all that Mathilde knew her assailant but could not divulge his name for fear of revealing damaging secrets about her past. Secondly, an attack had in fact taken place, but not on the night in question. Mathilde had been assaulted and threatened prior to the incident in the sealed room, something she had kept hidden from the family. On the night of the apparent crime she re-lived the earlier attack in a dream, then woke up screaming and overturned the heavy table next to her bed, accidentally firing the revolver and knocking herself unconscious in the process. The dreamed attack was therefore the result of a very real threat, yet as the primary crime in the text it is revealed to have been a dream, in essence a non-event.

This earlier attack is eventually explained as well. Many years earlier, Mathilde had lived for a while with her father in America. There she fell in love with a man named Jean Roussel, but her father did not approve of him and would not allow the two to be married, so Mathilde ran away and married him in secret. A week after the marriage, her

husband was arrested, as he was in reality the infamous French criminal, Ballmeyer. Mathilde was shocked and betrayed, and also pregnant. She secretly gave birth to a child, left it to be raised by someone else, and eventually returned to France with her father. Years later, upon hearing of her engagement to Darzac, Ballmeyer located her at the chateau, attacked her and threatened to reveal to her family details of their past life together. Shortly thereafter, Mathilde had the dream that set into action the entire investigation.

Already in this convoluted plot we see a continuation of many of the lines traced out in the Poe story, as well as shades of the crime of the Papin sisters. The narrative is presented as if it were a straightforward detective story, yet it contains uncertainty and inconsistencies that problematize its reading. If the crime under investigation never took place, what is the status of the victim, who shares a hidden past with her attacker? How can the eventual solution be seen as resolvent, since it fails to provide any real ending? What kind of justice is served if the detective allow the criminal to go free? Many unresolved elements of the crime can be traced back to a basic play between presence and absence, and by extension, the visibility and invisibility of matter, calling to mind the research of the Stangerson scientists, *la dissociation de la matière*. Identities are easily hidden, as seen in Ballmeyer's plethora of disguises, and much like Dupin in the "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," Rouletabille is the only one who can see the truth. Furthermore, the temporal aspect of the story is complicated by the narrator's presentation of the events—revealing certain aspects early on in the narrative and withholding others until the end—as well as the delay between the actual attack and the investigation into the dreamed attack. There are spatial anomalies as well, since the fixed

nature of boundaries is uncertain: doors, walls and windows are not solid, what should be closed is in actuality permeable, and as a result, the senses (those of the characters as well as the implied senses of the reader) cannot be trusted. Because the supposedly fixed nature of the physical world is revealed instead to be fluid, placing the criminal act into a solid framework, with definitive answers and explanations, proves to be a tentative process. Basic questions of perception—how can one trust what one sees?—ultimately override the resolvent function of the text. Though the story eventually does provide answers for the reader, the text is far from a straightforward detective narrative, gesturing instead to the complexity of the event of murder itself. If this is the result of fictional crime narratives, how can we expect to find a sense of resolution in real murders?

A close examination of the space in which the crime occurs reveals many inconsistencies that prove to be unexpected in such a traditional crime story. Beginning at the level of the physical space of the chateau, the location of the crime reflects the eventual narrative of the attack, each deceptively solid, neither in reality able to contain the criminal. In his testimony to police, the old servant, Père Jacques, indicates the level of inaccessibility of Mathilde's room:

> La porte de la chambre fermée à clef "à l'intérieur", les volets de l'unique fenêtre fermés, eux aussi, "à l'intérieur", et, par-dessus les volets, les barreaux intacts, des barreaux à travers lesquels vous n'auriez pas passé le bras . . . Et mademoiselle qui appelait au secours! (9)

There was no entry into the room, yet someone entered. Upon breaking down the door, Professor Stangerson goes to help his daughter, while Larsan searches the room thoroughly, but finds no sign of the attacker whatsoever:

> Quant à nous, nous cherchions l'assassin, le misérable qui avait voulu tuer notre maîtresse, et je vous jure, monsieur, que, si nous l'avions trouvé, nous lui aurions fait un mauvais parti. Mais comment expliquer qu'il n'était pas là, qu'il s'était déjà enfui? . . . Cela dépasse toute imagination. Personne sous le lit, personne derrière les meubles, personne! . . . Par où cet homme était-il passé? Par où s'était-il évanoui? N'oubliez pas, monsieur, qu'il n'y a pas de cheminée dans la "Chambre Jaune". Il ne pouvait s'être échappé par la porte, qui est très étroite et sur le seuil de laquelle la concierge est entrée avec sa lampe, tandis que le concierge et moi nous cherchions l'assassin dans ce petit carré de chambre où il est impossible de se cacher et où, du reste, nous ne trouvions personne. La porte défoncée et rabattue sur le mur ne pouvait rien dissimuler, et nous nous en sommes assurés. Par la fenêtre restée fermée avec ses volets clos et ses barreaux auxquels on n'avait pas touché, aucune fuite n'avait été possible. Alors? Alors . . . je commençais à croire au diable. (11)

It is as if the attacker vanished "into thin air."

The permeability of seemingly fixed boundaries is evident in a later scene as well, one in which Rouletabille devises a scheme to catch the assassin. In this passage, the detective has set a trap that will lure the attacker to Mathilde's room in the upper level of the main house. Rouletabille has methodically placed four men who are key to the investigation at various points along two hallways in the upper level of the Stangerson home. These men have verified that there is no possible escape route from the upstairs hallways as all exits are manned and all windows and doors secured and locked. When

the assassin emerges from Mathilde's room, the four detectives chase him down the hallway to the point at which the two passages meet. Yet when they arrive at the crosspoint of the hallways, there is no one else there; the criminal appears once again to have vanished.

The permeability of walls and the fluidity of bodies in this scene seem to cast doubt upon the very stability of matter, reflecting the work of Prof. Stangerson in his laboratory. Yet another question is brought into play here as well. The killer was not captured as he was being chased along the hallways because (as is later revealed to the reader) at that moment, he was already among the four men involved in the chase in the form of police detective Larsan. He is not found, but not because he is absent. He seems to have escaped due to the fact that his disguise covers his identity so well that he is virtually undetectable. He is not invisible to the eye, but he is invisible *as criminal*. In this way Leroux forces the reader to question the reliability of vision and its relation to the physical world, where what appears to be true is not, and that upon which one relies for support is destabilized. What we find in this story is a questioning of the obvious, much as in Poe's tale, where the possibility of something impossible having occurred must be accepted before one can arrive at any explanation of what happened.

Running parallel to the closed-open space of the physical world is the figurative accessibility of the victim herself. Much of the symbolic significance of this story rests on the close association of Mathilde and the yellow room, both of which appear to be closed but are in reality permeable. Through her secret marriage to Larsan-Ballmeyer, Mathilde remained apparently "sealed"—virginal and unmarried—while in truth her body was open, both receiving the body of the man and giving birth to their child. Her

past transgressions as well are able to psychically enter the walled interior of her bedroom in the form of the dreamed attacker, just as the criminal, in the form of her lover, had previously entered her body.

In each case what occurs is logically impossible, yet it happens. The reason for this apparent contradiction is that a foundational lie that is perpetuated throughout the narrative forces a misreading of the crime and by extension, of the physical world itself. According to both Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, traumatic events cannot be recalled in the form in which they occurred, but are remembered in a number of ways. Since it is both the return of the traumatic event of her marriage to Ballmeyer as well as the repressed memory of the more recent attack, Mathilde's dream is the hysterical symptom of past trauma. As such, she cannot speak of either event. Whether intentional or not, her withholding of the truth behind her attack creates the false basis on which the investigation rests. Although her testimony must be trusted, it is equally possible that it is untrue, as is the case with any testimony[12].

Beyond these fundamental questions of the structure and nature of truth is a more complex set of uncertainties around the temporal elements of Leroux's tale. There is a kind of "dumping" of facts that occurs throughout the narrative. The narrator states at the beginning of the story that he has decided to recount what he knows of a crime and its ensuing police investigation seven years after the fact. At the time the event took place, the crime was solved by Rouletabille, yet the detective had never made his discoveries public. Moreover, necessary information is withheld from the reader until the end of the story, further upsetting the anticipated flow of time in the narrative. Although it is

[12] See Jacques Derrida's *Demeure*, a work written on Maurice Blanchot's *L'Instant de ma mort*, for more on the role of truth in testimony.

acceptable for the narrator to reveal final truths at the end of a story, in this case the reader is blinded to events that would have helped him understand important details much earlier in the narrative. In this way, Leroux places the reader at an unfair disadvantage, and in so doing breaks the first of S. S. Van Dine's "Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories" which states "The reader must have equal opportunity with the detective for solving the mystery. All clues must be plainly stated and described" (190). Instead, Leroux withholds crucial information until the last possible moment.

Moreover, as victim in the attack, Mathilde holds secrets that further upset the temporality of the story. Her hysteria creates a split in time, melding the past event onto the present moment, where she is unprepared to have her crime brought to light. The attack is thus blurred, neither in the past nor the present, yet at the same time, in both. The stated barrier of the locked room is ultimately a kind of screen upon which many narratives are played out: the real and the dreamed, the present and the past, the guilty and the innocent. At the core of each is the figure of Mathilde.

Of primary importance in any discussion of Mathilde is her gendered role in the story. The classic dichotomy of female victim/male aggressor is played out here on many levels. As a scientist Mathilde is not able (or not permitted) to do more than assist her father and her fiancé in their own work. The mere fact that she is given a bedroom in the workplace reinforces her child-like status: unable to work long hours, easily tired, requiring a place to rest in the midst of the activity. Mathilde is thus weakened, forced to remain in a subservient position that is physically reinforced by the very existence of the *chambre jaune* at all. Similarly, as Ballmeyer's former wife, Mathilde is his perpetual victim, powerless to disclose his threats against her since to do so would reveal her past

sexual and familial transgressions. The passive role she plays at home stands in marked contrast to her independent position in America, where she secretly wed her lover and bore his child. Almost as a self-punishment, Mathilde reinforces her position of helpless female, denying her own sexuality and adulthood by maintaining the pretext that she must be watched over and protected. Moreover, the sexual undertones of providing Mathilde with a bedroom in the laboratory are obvious, since this bed is surrounded by men and aligned metaphorically with the bed in which she lay with Ballmeyer. The walls of protection that enclose her bed in the form of locks and bolts reinforce both her sexual unavailability and her status of prisoner, sealed within a seemingly impenetrable chamber.

When we turn to the Papin murders, the gendered position of the women is particularly relevent as well, since their crime involves both woman-as-victim and woman-as-killer. In many ways it is precisely because the crime is a female on female murder that many writers read it as a class revolt; since gender could not be seen as motivating the crime, the only other logical explanation is that the separation of the Papin women from the Lancelins—in status, identity and physical placement in the home—was the source of the attack. The boundaries separating the two pairs of women thus acquire heightened importance, which may or may not have been experienced as such at the time of the murders.

In her article "The Yellow Spot: Ocular Pathology and Empirical Method in Gaston Leroux's *Le Mystère de la chambre jaune*," Andrea Goulet[13] touches on the

[13] Goulet's article examines the implications of optics in the story as part of the author's larger focus on the role of the visual in the detective narrative.

solidity of seemingly impenetrable boundaries in the story, specifically the availability of secret passages from interior to exterior and vice versa:

> Although guards have been posted at the property gate to keep out the curious, Rouletabille finds a way to get himself and his friend Sainclair both onto the grounds and into the chateau as invited guests. In fact, throughout the investigation, it becomes clear not only that the Yellow Room must have somehow allowed for intrusion, but that Stangerson's entire estate remains an unsettlingly porous enclosure. An American visitor, Arthur Rance, for example, is seen to come and go as he pleases, jumping over the park wall without alerting Stangerson's staff. Logically, the initial question posed by investigators is this: was the attacker an insider or an outsider? (29)

For the reader, this question can be rephrased as: Where do we ultimately place Mathilde's nightmare? As the present incarnation of a past attack, do we file the event inside the room or outside? The question of interior vs. exterior parallels that of present vs. past, setting up a duality that complicates any definitive reading of the crime. If we accept that Mathilde is responsible for the nighttime disturbance that set the investigation into motion, of what crime is she guilty? If she is guilty of nothing more than having a bad dream, are the father and servants responsible for turning the event into the sensation it became? Or does Leroux ultimately place the blame on Larsan-Ballmeyer, the ex-husband and current stalker of Mathilde, both for his earlier mistreatment of the woman and his current deception of the police and the citizens?

The importance of these questions is evident in Rouletabille's final proof of Larsan's guilt. He states that Larsan-Ballmeyer himself proves his culpability by the fact that he is not present for last part of the trial, at which time Rouletabille has promised to reveal the assassin's name. In his absence, Ballmeyer declares his own guilt. Rouletabille realizes that he (Rouletabille) could not have proven the case via factual evidence; only the criminal could do so, and only by fleeing. The notion that it is the absence of the criminal that proves his guilt is worth closer attention. Rouletabille's method involves a series of carefully controlled tests and observations, not unlike the minute examination of Dupin in the Rue Morgue murders. Similar as well to Dupin's decision to let the sailor go once the crime was explained, Rouletabille allows Larsan-Ballmeyer to escape and never reveals the actual details of the case to the police or to the public. The knowledge that the criminal could not possibly have escaped both the yellow room and the hallway experiment, and is thus an insider, combined with the final proof of his guilt stemming from the fact that he is absent, or exterior to the scene, raise questions about the efficacy of the method. After all, who would allow the criminal he has tracked over the course of the investigation to escape? The reporter has his reasons: "Oui, m'sieur le président, j'ai fait cela, répliqua Rouletabille avec orgueil. . . . Je ne suis pas de la 'justice', moi; je ne suis pas de la 'police', moi; je suis un humble journaliste, et mon métier n'est point de faire arrêter les gens!" (101).

What is the function of Rouletabille in the story and in the case? In the capacity of reporter, he represents a different kind of investigator, one who illuminates truth in a way police detectives do not. The concept of the news as something vital and *new* adds an almost oppositional element to the investigation. Whereas a police detective would tend

to work with the facts of a case, constructing a logical chain back to the originary event, a newspaperman is expected to simply report the facts, leaving deduction and interpretation up to the reading public. Rouletabille's method blends both functions. He does not arrest the criminal; he simply reports his identity[14]. The lengthy summation he provides at the inquest at the end of the book displays a journalistic flair ("Puisque l'assassin ne peut être en dehors du cercle, *il est dedans!"*) as well as a detective's uncanny ability to know all ("Écoutez ce que je vais vous dire, fit-il à voix basse . . . et que cela vous donne confiance! Vous, vous ne savez que le nom de l'assassin; Mlle Stangerson, elle, *connaît seulement la moitié de l'assassin; mais moi, je connais ses deux moitiés; je connais l'assassin tout entier, moi!"*) (124).

The reasons for Rouletabille refusing to announce his findings to the public are directly related to the details around the crime that involve the honor of Mlle Stangerson. In this regard he is at once detective—uncovering clues and resolving questions about the crime—and concealer—protecting the heroine and keeping the true nature of the crime hidden. Furthermore, the detective does not work for the police but for the newspaper, and as such he technically has no power over the investigation. Thus we find the character of Rouletabille interwoven into the mystery and its narration as both outsider and participant. Much like Mathilde, who is both culprit and victim, and Larsan-Ballmeyer, who is criminal and policeman, Rouletabille represents the duality of crime and the impossibility of arriving at definitive answers in the murder investigation.

[14] The reasons for the many secrets around the identity of the criminal Ballmeyer will be revealed in the sequel to this book, *Le Parfum de la dame en noir*.

“La Petite Roque”: Killer as divided subject

As is made clear in the Poe and Leroux stories, the detective narrative is far from clear-cut, and its solution is not always easily available. Where we expect to be left with a clear sense of resolution, we find ourselves instead in a murky, complex and unsettling realm where not only are the criminal and his crime ambiguous, the existence of the crime itself becomes questionable. If these fictional examples contain such questions, how is it that we as readers expect a true crime such as that of the Papin sisters to fit into a clear and logical narrative? “La Petite Roque” of Guy de Maupassant describes a crime similar to the Papin’s in that the events surrounding the murder are known and the guilty identified, but where even within the clearly delineated event, questions remain about the concepts of identity, sexuality, legality, guilt, speech and power.

“La Petite Roque” is the story of the murder of a young girl, Louise Roque, who is found dead in the forest outside the town of Carvelin. Mederic, the village postman, finds her naked body under a tree, her face covered by a handkerchief. The mayor of the town, Renardet, heads up the investigtion to find the killer, providing all necessary manpower in the search. Following a police investigation, the killer is determined to be someone from outside the village, perhaps a transient, but the criminal is never identified or found. The reader soon learns his identity, however; it is Renardet himself. The mayor is shocked at his own guilt and becomes haunted by his crime, both literally and figuratively. He begins to see Louise Roque’s ghost in the form of the dead body he glimpsed before fleeing the scene. Eventually, overwhelmed by his unexpected violence against the girl, he writes a letter of confession, then commits suicide.

Similar to “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” as a result of the murder the criminal Renardet is placed outside the boundaries of civilized man, considered an “other.” Since his culpability remains a secret to everyone but himself, his otherness comes from within. Each time the mayor experiences a hallucination of the girl’s dead body he is reminded of his crime. Thus, it is not so much the guilt that drives him to his eventual suicide, it is the unbearable knowledge that he has crossed a line and is no longer who he thought himself to be. Where he believed he was on the side of the law, as mayor, he now seems to be on the side of transgression—the criminal. Where he thought himself to be fair and rational, he is violent and irrational. The other cannot be incorporated into the self he knows.

Much like Leroux in *Le Mystère de la chambre jaune*, Maupassant sets up a series of binary oppositions in the story that examine both the nature of the dualities as well as the fluidity of the barriers that separate them. These boundaries, both textual and symbolic, reinforce the otherness experienced by the criminal. The story opens with a description of the postman making his way across an open field to deliver mail to Renardet, who lives cloistered within the forest. Mederic clearly represents the outside world and civic law as he moves from the open, exterior space of the field to the enclosure of the forest: “Sa blouse bleue serrée à la taille par une ceinture de cuir noir passait d'un train rapide et régulier sur la haie verte des saules; et sa canne, un fort bâton de houx, marchait à son côté du même mouvement que ses jambes” (618). In contrast to his controlled movement, the forest appears as a wild, natural setting: “Le long de l'eau, de grands arbustes avaient poussé, chauffés par le soleil ; mais sous la futaie, on ne trouvait rien que de la mousse, de la mousse épaisse, douce et molle, qui répandait dans

l'air stagnant une odeur légère de moisi et de branches mortes" (619). The enclosed forest—still, organic and mysterious—stands in clear contrast to the exposed world of Mederic and the village.

Between these two spaces runs the Brindille, " . . . l'étroite rivière qui moussait, grognait, bouillonnait et filait dans son lit d'herbes, sous une voûte de saules . . . Par places, c'étaient des cascades d'un pied, souvent invisibles, qui faisaient sous les feuilles, sous les lianes, sous un toit de verdure, un gros bruit colère et doux" (618). The river serves as a transitional space, offering qualities of the world both outside the forest and within its interior. The water is contained, predictable, and stable in its riverbed, yet at the same time it froths, murmurs and boils—an unpredictable and emotional being. Infused with elements of exteriority and interiority, controlled and primordial, the river can be seen as both a point of transition and of contagion, where elements from each side blend into one another.

In a similar position between field and forest lies the dead body of Louise Roque: " . . . à dix pas devant lui, gisait, étendu sur le dos, un corps d'enfant, tout nu, sur la mousse. C'était une petite fille d'une douzaine d'années. Elle avait les bras ouverts, les jambes écartées, la face couverte d'un mouchoir. Un peu de sang maculait ses cuisses" (619). The body of the victim lies at the midpoint of two oppositions, and, as seen in the river, possesses qualities of both spaces. Louise is both a human being of the civilized world and a decaying object of the forest. She is visible—in full view of the spectators—and hidden, as her identity is yet unknown due to the handkerchief covering her face. The body can also be seen as a point of contagion between knowledge and ignorance. Until

the handkerchief is lifted, the identity of the victim remains hidden; the moment between anonymity and identity is thus prolonged.

The victim lies at the threshold of a number of oppositional spaces in the narrative. Physically located at the point of entry into the forest, Louise Roque is also a figure to be crossed in passing through the transitional spaces found throughout the story. The physical layout of the narrative presents the first level of division, as the text is clearly separated into two parts. These two parts are conceptually divided by the body of the victim as well, as the crime divides the story into a kind of before and after for the reader. Part I is the external investigation to find the killer while Part II is the search within the killer for an explanation for his crime. In this respect, the body occupies the space between exterior and interior, both in the actual location of the dead girl beneath the tree and in her conceptual positioning between the external quest for the killer of the first part and the internal search within the killer of the second. Further, the girl's body occupies the space between purity and sensuality in its position in the river at the moment of the crime, where the girl's innocence provokes Renardet's lust. Her body occupies as well the space between reality and fantasy in Part II of the tale: is there really a ghost, or is the haunting a result of a guilty conscience? It stands at a point between speech and silence, as her death is the result of the rapist trying to make her "be quiet." At each point of tension between opposing binaries, at each threshold that must be crossed, the body of Louise Roque will be found. In his book, *Maupassant, juste avant Freud*, Pierre Bayard comments on transitional spaces in Maupassant's crime stories, saying that each acting out of a desire corresponds to the crossing of a threshold (180). The threshold in question is actually a multitude of thresholds, all referring back to the dead body.

At the moment he became a killer, Renardet crossed into the space of opposition, becoming something other than who he had thought himself to be, a law-abiding representative of the law:

> Tuer quelqu'un en duel, ou à la guerre, ou dans une querelle, ou par accident, ou par vengeance, ou même par forfanterie, lui eût semblé une chose amusante et crâne, et n'eût pas laissé plus de traces en son esprit que le coup de fusil tiré sur un lièvre; mais il avait ressenti une émotion profonde du meurtre de cette enfant. Il l'avait commis d'abord dans l'affolement d'une ivresse irrésistible, dans une espèce de tempête sensuelle emportant sa raison. Et il avait gardé au coeur, gardé dans sa chair, gardé sur ses lèvres, gardé jusque dans ses doigts d'assassin une sorte d'amour bestial, en même temps qu'une horreur épouvantée pour cette fillette surprise par lui et tuée lâchement. (641)

Where the mayor had thought himself to be brave, he is *lâche*. He thought he was reasonable, yet he is overcome by lust. He is not the embodiment of the law, he is criminal. The crime itself serves as a cutting of time and space, dividing the day and subsequently the lives of the two people involved, into before and after. Louise Roque is the constant reminder of who he was before the crime, and who he is now. Her body becomes the place where he sees his own division, his own contagion. “Si la rencontre avec l’Autre met à nouveau l’accent sur la division interne, celle-ci prend ici une forme plus précise: elle sépare le sujet et ce qu’il a été. Ainsi *je* est-il éloigné de soi par une histoire passée, enfouie dans la mémoire et soigneusement oubliée” (Bayard 59). The

other's dead body reinforces the other within Renardet. The meaning of "I" is blurred as a result of the crime, and the mayor no longer recognizes himself.

Having crossed a threshold much like that faced by the Papin sisters, who became other at the moment of the murders, Renardet is forced into self-reflection. The murder forces the killer to examine himself, attempting to answer questions that, although not posed by external authorities, take on a similar form to the questions asked of Christine and Léa when they are taken into custody. What came over me? Why did I commit this crime? The murderer is other to society and to himself, something that is reinforced by the questions posed by police, forcing an examination of an event that even the killer does not fully understand.

Reinforcing the otherness the mayor senses within himself is the external change evident in the village of Carvelin. The event separated the flow of time into before and after for the entire community. Whereas the forest once gave pleasure to families on Sunday afternoons, where " . . . ils s'asseyaient sur la mousse au pied des grands arbres énormes, ou bien s'en allaient le long de l'eau en guettant les truites qui filaient sous les herbes . . . ," following the murder, the spot in the forest is changed: "Il était resté aux âmes des habitants une inquiétude, une vague peur, une sensation d'effroi mystérieux . . . La futaie, d'ailleurs, était devenue un endroit redouté, évité, qu'on croyait hanté" (631-32). For the villagers, the physical location of the crime, sullied by the image of the dead girl, is avoided: "Maintenant personne n'allait plus sous la voûte épaisse et haute, comme si on se fût attendu à y trouver toujours quelque cadavre couché" (632).

The description of the rape and murder of the girl are told through the eyes of the criminal in a flashback, itself evidence of a break in time. We are told that at the moment

of his chance encounter[15] with Louise Roque, that hot, oppressive summer morning, Renardet had been living as a widower for six months. His wife's death had disconnected him from his source of sexual release, and he found himself in a state of unease, desiring a woman but repressing his need. Louise Roque appears, bathing in the river:

> Une fillette, toute nue, toute blanche à travers l'onde transparente, battait l'eau des deux mains, en dansant un peu dedans, et tournant sur elle-même avec des gestes gentils. Ce n'était plus une enfant, ce n'était pas encore une femme ; elle était grasse et formée tout en gardant un air de gamine précoce, poussée vite, presque mure. (638)

Possessing qualities of innocence and carnality, standing between hot and cold, between girl and woman, Louise has a powerful effect on Renardet. He rapes her, then trying to stifle her cries, strangles her as well. The sexual basis for this crime, then, is as in the other two stories. The linking of sexual violence to murder, which will be hinted at in the crime of the Papins, is more prevalent than is realized.

Following the murder, Renardet is haunted by the image of the dead girl. He initially sees her outside his manor house as he looks through the window: "Là-bas, sous les arbres, le corps de la fillette luisait comme du phosphore, éclairant l'ombre autour de lui! . . . Une force irrésistible le soulevait et le poussait à sa vitre, comme pour appeler le fantôme et il le voyait aussitôt, couché d'abord au lieu du crime, couché les bras ouverts, les jambes ouvertes, tel que le corps avait été trouvé" (643). The dead body serves several functions. It is a marker of the space before and after. It is a potent physical reminder to

[15] On the subject of chance encounters, Pierre Bayard indicates that in the work of Maupassant, the unexpected meeting always possesses something of the unreal: "...comme si l'être croisé relevait simultanément de plusieurs catégories. Ce faisant, [ces rencontres] conduisent celui qui les vit aux frontières de la dépersonnalisation... " (37).

Renardet of his guilt. It is also the link between "I" and "other" and the blurring between the two.

The killer's vision of the girl takes place through a window; the reflective quality of the glass acts as a mirror when Renardet looks out from his lighted room into darkness. Gazing at the girl, he would see in the window his own reflection as well. The two figures held in the glass would overlap at a certain moment, something that is evident in a gesture made by Renardet: "Comme il ne distinguait pas encore, Renardet enferma ses yeux entre ses mains ; et brusquement cette lueur devint une clarté, et il aperçut la petite Roque nue et sanglante sur la mousse" (644). Only when he blocks out the interior light, along with his own face, is he able to "see clearly" and make out the form of the bleeding girl below. In the split second where he must eliminate his own image in the window in order to see the girl's image below, the two exist as one visual entity.

We can best comprehend this bond between criminal and victim by returning again to the scene in which the crime takes place and examining the place of language at this moment. The narrator describes the action of Renardet following the rape of the girl as that of one who has been dreaming: "Il se réveilla de son crime, comme on se réveille d'un cauchemar. L'enfant commençait à pleurer" (639). Bayard discusses this scene by calling attention to the fact that the crime of rape—the first offense committed by Renardet—is one "où le sujet n'est plus représenté par les mots" (185). The significance of this blank in the text goes deeper than just an absence of language at the moment of the traumatic event. The moment of the first crime is a blank in the story; the narrator and reader, as well as the criminal, are absent from the event. Nevertheless, the narrator is able to relate the second crime—the murder itself—in detail. Following the logic

established above, the presence of narration indicates the presence of Renardet at the girl's killing. The question that arises is that of the criminal's identity, since Renardet himself stepped into the place of the other at the moment he attacked the girl. These gaps in language around the crime reinforce the gap within the killer and reveal the complexity of the origin of the criminal event. The slippage between self and other, presence and absence, and innocence and guilt lead to the phantom now appearing before the mayor.

Equally significant is the voice of the girl that is silenced in the murder. Philip Hadlock speaks about the struggle for power between male and female characters in Maupassant's œuvre: "In his short stories, Maupassant often thematizes conventional notions of the male's primacy in patriarchal society and narrative as well as the female's subjugation to patriarchal order; yet the author constantly and repeatedly confronts these 'givens' of gender paradigms with the logical impasses inscribed in their mythic origins" (79). In this story, the givens of dominance and submission have not only been confronted, they have been switched, and the powerless have been given agency. The girl's cries following the rape evoke the following exchange:

> - Tais-toi, tais-toi donc. Je te donnerai de l'argent. Mais elle n'écoutait pas; elle sanglotait.
>
> Il reprit :
>
> - Mais tais-toi donc. Tais-toi donc. Tais-toi donc. Elle hurla en se tordant pour s'échapper. (639)

Louise's speech consists of nothing more than sobs, yet Renardet insists that she be quiet. His urgent "Be quiet!" is repeated no fewer than five times in this scene. The surface binary terms of speech and silence are laid over another pair of oppositions in this scene,

that of power and impotence. Renardet, a physically imposing presence, also holds symbolic and real power as mayor of Carvelin. Yet the voice of a sobbing female child poses the ultimate threat to him. Because hers is the one voice that could identify him and his crime he must silence it. The possibility of her speech is too great a risk; the command *tais-toi* slides into a permanent silencing: " . . . il ferma ses mains de colosse sur la petite gorge gonflée de cris, et il l'eut étranglée en quelques instants, tant il serrait furieusement, sans qu'il songeât à la tuer, mais seulement pour la faire taire" (639).

But is she silenced? Louise Roque returns in the form of a raped and broken body, seemingly powerless yet ultimately possessing an agency which outweighs that of the mayor. Just as the innocent Louise in the river haunted the lust of Renardet on the riverbank, and the vision of the phantom Louise haunted Renardet through the window, the dead body eventually drives Renardet, the mayor turned rapist and killer, to his death. In this story Maupassant questions the absolute nature of binary oppositions, allowing the reader to see the play between each pair of opposing terms. Where the contagion found in the threshold spaces examined here—between exterior and interior, lust and innocence, civic and natural—initially brings about the death of Louise Roque, in the end it culminates in endowing the girl's body with power, and bringing about the death of the killer.

"La Petite Roque" is not a traditional search for a killer, but an examination of the questions around guilt and an interior search for meaning where no meaning is decisively found. As we saw in the other narratives examined in this chapter, incongruities in the fictional murder narrative form the basis for expectations of what will be found in the true crime story. In the story of the murder committed by the Papin

sisters, the reader's desire to understand the crime translates into a desire to have it logically narrated, to have unknown elements teased out and explained. However, as is made clear by these three typical murder narratives, even the most solid solution is still haunted by questions of subjectivity, boundaries, identity and sanity, questions that cannot always be neatly answered.

Chapter Two

Testimony of the Papin Sisters

The crime committed by Christine and Léa Papin is much more problematic than one would expect, given the fact that the killers were immediately known and apprehended. Written attempts to narrate the crime have been unsuccessful, resulting in a series of books that fall into two broad categories. First are works that do not so much explain what happened and why, but instead pull together the facts, going no further to try to explain a motive behind the crime, such as Frances Dupré's comprehensive account of the extant primary sources about the event. The second category includes writings that propose a theoretical motive and offer evidence to support it, as in the psychoanalytic interpretations offered by Jacques Lacan or the class revolt readings of Simone de Beauvoir and the Surrealists. Yet neither of these means is able to definitively answer the questions surrounding the crime; in fact they prolong the interest and fascination about the murder instead of closing it precisely because of their inability to satisfy the reader's curiosity. The narrative logic usually deployed in fiction and in factual stories stalls out as writers attempt to impose it onto the Papin's crime. Reasons for this can be directly located in the initial versions of the event, told by the killers themselves. As those closest to the crime, they hold the most information. However as we will see, even at its source, the crime deflects narration and logic, sending its narrators into a circuitous pattern where the ending point of one account becomes the beginning of the next.

The murders committed by Christine and Léa Papin have remained in the public eye in the years since the crime for many reasons: the large gap between the violence of

the murders and the complete lack of explanation of the killers, the suggestions of incest and homosexual desire between the two sisters, evidence of social oppression and cruelty on the part of the mistress of the house, and the sense of blurred and confused identities between the killers. The multitude of narratives about the murders committed by the Papins begs the question: What are readers seeking, and writers trying to provide, in the many narratives about the event? To what degree does the women's gender problematize the construction of a logical narrative? Is it possible to understand what lies behind murder, or do some events come from a place in the human psyche where reason can no longer be deployed to explain the event?

As we saw in the previous chapter, unexpected inconsistencies are present in any murder narrative, even those in which the crime is solved, often overshadowing any sense of resolution. This phenomenon is clear in the crime committed by Christine and Léa. In this chapter, in order to show the reasons for the difficulty in writing this narrative, I will examine the testimony of the killers in order to locate gaps and blind spots in the story. By pinpointing areas of inconsistency and vagueness, I will identify the various points of entry for later writers who in their own texts attempt to complete the narrative left "unfinished" by the sisters. In so doing I will examine the process of determining truth, not from a legal, judicial standpoint, but from that of a public spectator of crime.

Christine and Léa Papin: First version of the crime

Early narratives of the murders are based on information taken from the inquiry that took place in the hours after the crime. Upon discovering Christine and Léa in their *chambre de bonne*, police immediately arrested them and took them into custody for questioning. At that time in France, the investigation of particularly serious or complex cases was performed by a series of individuals. Police examiner Commissaire Dupuy is the first investigator, and takes the following testimony from Christine:

> Ce soir, à une heure que je ne peux pas indiquer, mais il ne faisait pas encore noir, nos patronnes ont quitté la maison, nous laissant seules ma sœur et moi dans l'immeuble. Avant de partir, elles n'ont eu aucune discussion avec moi, ni avec ma sœur et ne nous ont donné aucun ordre pour accomplir un travail quelconque. Elles n'avaient d'ailleurs pas à nous en donner puisque notre travail est taxé depuis longtemps et nous l'exécutons régulièrement. . . . Mes maîtresses sont rentrées vers 5 h et demie environ. Il faisait noir et les volets de la rue avaient été fermés par ma sœur. Pendant leur absence le fer à repasser s'était démoli, comme hier d'ailleurs, et avait été réparé puisque j'étais allée le chercher chez Boucheri. (Dupré 32)

Already evident is a kind of self-imposed linearity to Christine's words, signaling her effort to place events in chronological sequence that may not have been evident at the time they occurred. Reading her own actions in this (re)telling, Christine becomes both character and writer of the account, and seems unsure about what she is being asked for.

"Quand M^{me} est rentrée, je lui rendis compte que le fer était de nouveau démoli et que je n'avais pas pu repasser. Quand je lui ai dit cela, elle a voulu se jeter sur moi, nous étions à ce moment-là, ma sœur et moi et mes deux maîtresses, sur le palier du 1er étage" (32). The establishment of cause and effect relationships that are necessary for a logical narrative is a product of the speaker, one who in this case is unsure herself about what event caused another to take place. Christine's testimony demonstrates her confusion about something as basic as which victim is which:

> Voyant que M^{me} Lancelin allait se jeter sur moi, je lui ai sauté à la figure et je lui ai arraché les yeux avec mes doigts. Quand je dis que j'ai sauté sur M^{me} Lancelin, je me trompe, c'est sur M^{lle} Lancelin Geneviève que j'ai sauté et c'est à cette dernière que j'ai arraché les yeux. Pendant ce temps, ma sœur Léa a sauté sur M^{me} Lancelin et lui a arraché également les yeux. Quand nous avons eu fait cela, elles se sont allongées ou accroupies sur place ; ensuite, je suis descendue précipatamment à la cuisine et suis allée chercher un marteau et un couteau de cuisine. (32)

The idea that Christine could stumble at such a central point in the description of her attack—whose eyes she ripped out—is hard to comprehend. Both she and Léa display a propensity for mixing up the identity of their victims. In this first account we can clearly see confusion in the line, "Quand je dis que j'ai sauté sur M^{me} Lancelin, je me trompe, c'est sur M^{lle} Lancelin Geneviève que j'ai sauté et c'est à cette dernière que j'ai arraché les yeux." At a later stage in the questioning, Christine astonishingly repeats this mistake, saying:

> Je ne sais pas si c'est moi qui ai arraché les yeux à M^{me} Lancelin, je crois plutôt que c'est à M^{lle}. J'ai saisi l'une des deux, derrière laquelle je me trouvais, en tournant sur le palier ma sœur et moi . . . M^{me} et M^{lle} Lancelin n'ont crié que quand on leur a arraché les yeux. Ça a été un cri de douleur très fort, mais sans appel au secours. J'étais en furie, et ne me suis calmée qu'après les avoir frappées avec les objets saisis, avoir vu leur état et tout le sang répandu. (45)

As she continues her testimony, similar vagueness is evident at the level of self: "Je n'ai aucun regret, autrement dit, je ne peux pas vous dire si j'en ai ou si je n'en ai pas" (32). Here we see an apparent ambiguity regarding her own feelings about the crime, pointing to a lack in the speaker herself and an uncertainty about her own complicity in the murders.

Léa Papin is questioned after her sister. As the younger of the two, Léa has been portrayed as a follower, dependent on her sister for direction and assistance throughout her life and certainly in their work at the Lancelins. Her testimony to investigators does appear to be based on her sisters' account; the initial statement is similarly matter-of-fact to that of Christine, as if she is describing any day in the Lancelin household:

> Mes patronnes . . . sont parties de la maison vers 3 h et demie pour aller en ville; elles nous ont laissées seules à la maison avec ma sœur. Cette dernière a repassé et moi j'ai fait le nettoyage. Aujourd'hui, avant leur départ, nos patronnes ne nous ont fait aucun reproche, il n'y a pas eu de discussion entre nous. Elles sont revenues vers 6 h – 6 h et demie. (33)

It is worth noting the somewhat odd wording in this phrase: "elles *nous* ont laissées…avec ma sœur." Though commonly used in the French, this phrase takes on added significance when we consider the relationship between the two women. The literal English translation—they left *us* alone *with my sister*—conveys a blending of identities similar to that seen in Christine's testimony. Léa's account takes on additional weight due to the fact that after this initial statement she refuses to speak any further. At this point, she symbolically disappears from the investigation, and relies on the testimony of her older sister to tell her story as well. Upon hearing Christine's version of the crime, which is read aloud to her by officials, Léa replies:

> Tout ce que vous a dit ma sœur est exact, les crimes se sont passés exactement comme elle vous les a narrés. Mon rôle dans cette affaire est absolument celui qu'elle vous a indiqué. J'ai frappé autant qu'elle, comme elle; j'affirme que nous n'avions pas prémédité de tuer nos patronnes. L'idée nous en est venue instantanément quand nous avons entendu que Mme Lancelin nous faisait des reproches. Pas plus que ma sœur, je n'ai le moindre regret de l'acte criminel que nous avons commis. Comme ma sœur, j'aime mieux avoir eu la peau de mes patronnes plutôt que ce soit elles qui aient eu la mienne. (33)

The genesis of numerous texts on this crime can be seen in this statement. Léa's comment, "Tout ce que vous a dit ma sœur est exact, les crimes se sont passés exactement comme elle vous les a narrés," is the basis for her portrayal as nothing more than a shadow of Christine, the two sisters so intertwined as to be a single entity. The repetition of *ma sœur*: "pas plus que *ma sœur* . . . comme *ma sœur*," and even the

preponderance of the use of the personal pronoun *elle* when *je* is only used twice, belie any indication that there is a separate individual, Léa, giving this testimony. And again, when asked a slightly different question, "Avant que vous ne frappiez vos patronnes, votre sœur et vous-même avez-vous été frappées par elles?" she replies that they were never hit, but that the Lancelin women made a gesture as if about to strike. She then says "Je vous le répète, j'aime mieux avoir eu la peau de mes patronnes plutôt que ce soit elles qui aient eu la mienne et, je vous le répète encore, je n'ai aucun regret" (33). Léa presents her testimony as if reading dialogue in a play, with words that don't belong to her but to another author.

Second version of the crime

During the second interrogation, which also occurred on the night of crime, Mssrs Hébert and Riégert (the *juges d'instruction*[16]) were in charge of the questions. The sisters' testimony, particularly that which describes the chronology of events, is significantly different in this version. Christine says that when the Lancelin women returned to the house that night, she asked Madame Lancelin, "Madame est rentrée?" and that upon hearing that the power was out, Madame said "Encore?" then took Christine's arm as if to hurt her. "Me prenant par les bras, elle m'entraîne jusque vers le milieu du palier, me serrant par les bras, je ne pouvais me dégager. C'est alors que nous nous sommes battues

[16] The best translation of the term is *examining judge*, though this individual is not a judge in the American sense of the word. He or she operates independently from the prosecution. The goal of the *juge d'instruction* is *not* the prosecution of a certain person, but determining the truth of the event.

comme des chiffonnières" (34). Madame fell, grabbing Christine's hair as she did and holding on so tightly that she pulled out a handful.

At this point in the questioning, the examining judges isolate a detail of Christine's testimony and focus on it, saying, "Dans le monde de Mme Lancelin, on ne se bat pas, comme vous avez l'air de l'insinuer, comme des chiffonniers," (34) the implication being, of course, that it *is* like the Papins to fight like this. Here, the judges manage both to question Christine's remark and to imply that she is naturally less than her employers, highlighting without outwardly stating the subservient nature of the sisters position in relation to their employers. The role played by language in attributing meaning is evident in the power of this one word, *chiffonniers*, to redefine the attack as that of a member of the lower class on her superior. The judges write their own version of events, in which they at once clear the Lancelins of any violence, name the Papins as instigators, and remind them (and us) of their place in society. In a reading later taken up by Jean Genet in his play *Les Bonnes*, the maids, as such, are already guilty, due to the fact of their having been identified as maids.

As the questioning continues, further mirroring is evident in Christine's testimony as she describes her attack on Mademoiselle Lancelin in nearly the exact terms she used in her description of the attack on Madame: "Mlle Lancelin est montée de suite, elle s'est jetée sur moi, elle me tenait par les bras, je ne pouvais me dégager. Ma sœur Léa m'a aidée à me dégager" (35). Her words mirror those she used in giving the earlier account of Madame's attack: "Me prenant par les bras . . . me serrant par les bras je ne pouvais me dégager. . . . Puis ma sœur est venue à mon secours, elle a essayé de me dégager" (34). This uncanny correlation on Christine's part, between the attack of Madame and

that of Mademoiselle, when considered alongside the existing blurring of Christine and Léa's identities, reveals the many levels of confusion of self and other in the mind of the speaker.

Christine begins to exhibit another peculiar tendency, that of embellishing her answers with details that seem extraneous in light of the interrogation. "Je ne l'ai pas frappée tout de suite ; une blessure devait provenir de ce qu'elle est tombée, la tête sur le pied de l'armoire" (34). This comment is unrelated to the actual function of her testimony. It is possible that she is consciously attempting to portray herself as less violent by pointing out that she is not responsible for *all* the injuries to the women. But equally possible is that she honestly believes that these details are significant in answering the officials. Either way, her inclusion of random details is evidence of her own uncertainty as to which elements of the event are relevant and which are irrelevant.

Christine continues, saying that as she was defending herself against Madame Lancelin, Léa came downstairs to help. What appear to be insignificant details repeatedly emerge, confirming her propensity to stick by her story, often regardless of details that might be provided to discount it. At one point, police insist the chairs on the landing were in a certain position, and Christine insists they were in another. "Quand vous avez été chercher la chaise dans l'escalier, où l'avez-vous replacée?" "Là où vous l'avez retrouvée . . . " "Mais quand nous l'avons trouvée le soir, elle était dans la chambre sur la rue; la porte de cette chambre était ouverte . . . " "Elle était cependant bien là où je l'ai mise entre les deux portes, ma sœur va vous le dire" (35). Again, language takes on power, revealing the battle between the police narrative (the chairs were in the front bedroom) and that of Christine (the chairs were between the two doors.) Each speaker insists on the

truth of his or her version of events, revealing the somewhat arbitrary nature of the "final" narrative. Each writer works towards establishing a finished product. The motivation, available information, desired outcome and points of reference of each writer determine his particular outcome. The questioning seen here can be viewed as a snapshot of that process, revealing the many possibilities in the narration of a single event, and the role of language and intention in determining the outcome of that process.

This short exchange illustrates the larger task of sifting through possibilities in order to establish a narrative of a true event. In terminology borrowed from structural linguistics, we can say that just as any linguistic sign virtually contains within it all other possible signs that might have been used at that moment, each narrative contains the other possible versions of the event. Though it is not clear in this instance why the position of the chairs on the landing was significant, the simple fact that each position is considered by each speaker to be the "true" placement of the chairs reveals the uncertain and somewhat random process of establishing a definitive narrative. Much as historian Michel de Certeau[17] said about historical writing, there are many possibilities for any one event, and in the course writing a narrative, those versions that were discarded still remain, hidden within that narrative, haunting it. As such, the concept of there being one true account of an event is problematized.

It is apparent that by this stage in the inquiry, investigators have already determined their own narrative of the event, and are looking for Christine to verify details that will confirm their theories as true[18]. However, her testimony indicates that she is

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[17] See Michel de Certeau, *L'écriture de l'histoire*.

[18] Dupré suggests that the entire trial was rushed and served primarily to find the sisters guilty as quickly as possible. "Nombre d'observateurs … ont noté la précipitation (je ne dis pas la hâte) à conclure tout à la fois du juge, de l'accusation et des jurés. 'Non décidément, on ne devrait pas rendre ainsi la justice dans la

unable to distinguish either the significant and necessary elements of her story or to comprehend what information the investigation was hoping to find. Her responses indicate a basic lack of understanding about her actions, significantly contributing to a sense of uncertainty regarding her sanity. Léa exhibits a similar tendency to insist that something happened as she recalls, even when presented with police testimony and crime scene photographs to the contrary:

> Léa: Elle (Madame) est tombée sur le côté, la tête du côté de l'armoire et les pieds du côté de la porte. C'est dans cette position que je l'ai frappée avec le pot d'étain
>
> Police: Mais la position indiquée par vous n'est pas celle véritable des victimes; la tête était au contraire du côté de la porte et les jambes du côté de l'armoire. Au reste, les photographies prises au moment du meurtre attestent que vous ne dites pas la vérité!
>
> (Léa prend en main la photographie et, après l'avoir examinée, dit:) C'est cependant bien comme je le dis que les corps étaient placés. (37)

Another example illustrates the physical impossibility of Léa's stated position during the attack on one of the victims:

> Dr Chartier: Où avez-vous porté votre premier coup?
>
> Léa: Derrière la tête.
>
> Dr. C: La teniez-vous d'une façon quelconque quand vous l'avez frappée?
>
> Léa: Oui je lui tenais la tête par une main et de l'autre je la tenais par un des bras.

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fièvre des après-dîners et des digestions difficiles', écrira le chroniqueur de *l'Œuvre* au lendemain du verdict" (81).

M. le procureur de la République[19]: Mais vous aviez donc trois bras pour la circonstance?

Léa: Non, mais j'ai accompli mon forfait comme je vous l'ai indiqué. (38)

In these lines, not only is the speaker's confusion evident, but the sisters' absolute refusal to change their account of what happened is puzzling. In the first instance, Léa goes as far as to deny visual evidence that would seem to prove the position of the bodies. Her audacity in denying the truthfulness of the photograph showing the actual position of the bodies forces us to question the existence of a true account of any event. Can either of the two sides be truer than the other? What makes one true and the other false? Is it possible that someone who had access to the crime scene after the sisters were led away changed the chairs' positions, or moved the bodies slightly? Or should all these discrepancies simply be read as lapses of memory, or evidence of mental instability?

Christine's revelation

On July 12, Christine calls an official to the prison, where she is being held in a straightjacket, having tried to rip out her own eyes the previous night. The separation from her sister appears to have brought on periods of sheer panic. According to her cellmates, she had suffered a nervous fit earlier in the day, during which time she grabbed the bars of the cell window and shouted "Pardon! Pardon! Je ne recommencerai plus! C'est moi qui ai attaqué Madame Lancelin" (168). One cellmate stated that she had

[19] This expression is retained because no exact English equivalent can be found for the functions he performs. The *Procurer de la République* is a deputy attorney general who is attached to every court of first resort (Kelly 107).

observed Christine fly into similar rages at least three times in the month she had been there, running around the room looking for her sister and calling for her husband and child. This time, she prostrated herself on the floor and made the sign of the cross on the ground, furniture and walls with her tongue:

> Elle a voulu se crever les yeux en ma présence et, comme je la maintenais, elle m'a saisi la main droite et l'a placée dans sa bouche entre ses dents. J'ai été obligée de lui tordre le nez pour lui faire lâcher prise et je lui ai moi-même envoyé deux gifles. Elle bondissait à droit et à gauche, de sorte que les surveillantes ont été obligées de lui passer la camisole de force. (168)

Rather than ripping out the eyes of the victims, as she did during the killings, Christine tries to rip out her own eyes, revealing another level of self/other confusion.

When the official arrives, Christine tells him that she wants to give another statement, having realized that the assault on the Lancelin women was a result of a nervous fit she had suffered the night of the crime. Having just experienced another, similar attack, she had remembered more details about the murders. Christine states:

> Je ne vous avais pas dit toute la vérité. Quand j'ai attaqué Mme Lancelin, celle-ci ne m'avait pas provoquée. Je lui ai demandé quand je l'ai trouvée sur le palier si elle voulait réparer mon fer électrique. Je ne sais pas ce qu'elle m'a répondu; mais j'ai été prise d'une crise nerveuse et je me suis précipitée sur elle sans qu'elle s'y attende. Il est possible que j'ai pris le pichet et l'ai abattue sur la tête de Mme Lancelin qui me faisait face et

> celle-ci est tombée à genoux. . . . Je ne me rappelle pas bien d'ailleurs comment tout s'est passé. (54)

Léa is questioned after Christine. In an extraordinary coincidence, she repeats Christine's words, though the two women are being held separately and are questioned in different areas of the prison. When informed that her sister had changed her account of the events, Léa states:

> Je ne vous ai pas dit toute la vérité, lorsque vous m'avez entendue la dernière fois. Quand nos patronnes sont rentrées, ma sœur est descendue la première comme je vous l'ai dit et je ne suis descendue qu'après elle lorsque j'ai entendu un cri. Mme Lancelin était déjà tombée sur le palier du premier étage et ma sœur était aux prises avec Mlle Lancelin, au débouché même de l'escalier qui conduit au rez-de-chaussée. . . . Ayant vu Mme Lancelin qui s'efforçait de se relever, je me suis précipitée sur elle et je lui ai cogné la tête sur le parquet pour l'étourdir. Elle ne m'a presque pas résisté. Puis ma sœur m'a crié d'arracher les yeux de Mme Lancelin et je l'ai vue en train de les arracher elle-même à Mlle Lancelin. J'ai suivi l'exemple de ma sœur qui paraissait furieuse et qui poussait des cris, et respirait bruyamment. (54-55)

She further states that having done this, Christine said to her, "Je vais les massacrer, je vais chercher un couteau et un marteau" (55).

Christine's state of mind immediately preceding these declarations appears significant to her; as she says it is what served to trigger her memory of the night of the murders and is perhaps relevant to the attacks themselves, since she had suffered a fit that

night as well. Her testimony also brings to light new details of the night of the crime, specifically in that it marks her as the instigator and Léa as the follower. Furthermore, this slightly altered version of the crime sheds some light on the question of motive, albeit in an oblique way. In place of the concrete and logical motivation that interrogators had been hoping to find, Christine's statement indicates that absolutely nothing caused the attack. She admits that Madame did not provoke her; in fact, she states that she does not even know what Madame said to her. In other words, the reason for this brutal slaughter is a complete blank; the motive is *no motive*, which is unimaginable in such a brutal killing as this one.

Finally, we obtain insight into Christine's emotional state at the time of the murders in a critical part of her sister's statement, where Christine is said to have uttered the words, "je vais les massacrer." Oddly enough, in the many books written on the murder, this phrase has seldom been analyzed. It seems significant for several reasons, both in the legal arena and in psychological terms. Legally the comment is noteworthy in the way it relates to the degree of the crime for which they will eventually be tried, since it indicates a conscious desire to inflict harm, even though the victims are already dead. The violence evident in the words "I am going to butcher them" moves beyond any logical reason for the attack and into the pathological. Furthermore, no psychiatrist was called in to discuss these attacks with her, or to examine her in light of her revelations, though they seem quite significant to the question of the degree of her guilt. We would expect this statement to be significant in determining Christine's sanity, yet it was not.

The lack of correlation between the brutality of the act and the coolness of the killers during questioning constantly tugs at readers. In retrospect it is seems logical that

the degree of violence in the two women, especially Christine, would be attributed to an inherent mental illness, yet state-appointed alienists who examined them before their trial found no reason to pursue the question of sanity any further. On June 1, 1933, the three psychiatrists who had examined Christine and Léa presented their report. This group, consisting of forensic doctors Schutzenberger, Baruk and Truelle, met with the sisters only once, at which time they examined them physically and asked them a series of questions. Their findings, later disputed by another psychologist who was called in to testify for the defense[20], indicated that the sisters were sane at the time of their crime, and that no allowance should be made for mental or physical disease. Summarizing their report, the prosecutor at their trial stated:

> Au point de vue héréditaire, au point de vue physique, au point de vue pathologique, nous n'avons trouvé chez ces deux femmes, nous ont-ils dit, aucune tare susceptible de diminuer dans une proportion quelconque leur responsabilité pénale. Elles ne sont ni folles, ni hystériques, ni épileptiques, ce sont des normales, médicalement parlant, et nous les considérons comme pleinement et entièrement responsables du crime qu'elles ont commis. (97)

In France, as in most Western countries, the insanity defense is a slippery legal maneuver at best. Over the past century, individuals in the legal field have tried to arrive at a mutually acceptable understanding of what criteria should be used to determine the mental state of a defendant. Yet the complexity of the human mind does not so easily fit into a set of pre-established categories. At the time of the Papin trial, the criteria were all

[20] Dr. Benjamin Logre: "Le docteur Logre, médecin de la Préfecture de Police et aliéniste distingué, a été appelé par la défense (Dupré 90)

but nonexistent: sanity or insanity was established on a case-by-case basis, with no standardized litmus test available for making such determinations[21]. Especially noteworthy is the fact that at the time of the crimes, the Napoleonic *Code pénal de 1810* was still in effect. Based as it was in the earlier era, its parameters were hardly current, and did not give any direction or specific information to those responsible for determining sanity. Article 64 of the penal code states "Il n'y a ni crime ni délit, lorsque le prévenu était en état de démence au temps de l'action ou lorsqu'il a été contraint par une force à laquelle il n'a pas pu résister." Had they been determined insane at the time of the murders, Christine and Léa would have been considered free of responsibility. As such, the crime would not have been punishable by law. Yet based on their perfunctory examination of the women, psychiatrists found them to be sane.

Furthermore, "une force à laquelle il n'a pas pu résister" is not meant to refer to any interior force, nor any compulsion which could be considered evidence of psychiatric malady; given the era in which it was written, the code clearly refers to an exterior force, such as a third party forcing the defendant's hand via threats. Only the word *démence* points to the fact that this code refers to cases where the defendant is mentally ill. The broad range of meanings associated with this term is the basis for the difficulty in its application, and the resulting difficulties in diagnosing an individual as having been *en état de démence* at the time of a crime. Furthermore, latter part of this phrase, *au temps de l'action,* is significant in that it refers to a time in the past at which none of the judges or

[21] In his article, "Le Problème du style et la conception psychiatrique des formes paranoïque de l'expérience," which appeared in the first issue of the surrealist journal, *Minotaure*, Jacques Lacan refers to the Penal Code's Article 64: "…l'intérêt pour les malades mentaux est né historiquement de besoins d'origine juridique … Dès lors la question majeure qui s'est posée pratiquement à la science des psychiatres, a été celle, artificielle, d'un tout-ou-rien de la déchéance mentale (art. 64 du Code pénal)" (*De la Psychose paranoïaque* 68).

psychiatrists were present. How can any determination of sanity be made at all, given the outdated wording of the code and the lack of parameters within which to work?

Putting aside for a moment any questions of the mental state of the Papin sisters, I would like instead to focus on the repercussions of article 64 of the *code pénal*, as its wording reflects the basic epistemological dilemma at the heart of this crime. The article states that there is no crime in cases where the accused is proven to be in an altered state at the time of the event. Clearly the implication is not that the event did not take place, but that as punishable by law a *crime* did not take place. Yet the wording seems to question the very definition of murder, as if to say that in such cases no murder has been committed. *Non-lieu*[22] is the legal term for such a ruling, the direct translation of which gives it an unusual connotation. There is nowhere to assign a murder as having occurred, as well as no "place" to logically *put* the crime. Though the court acknowledges in such cases that *an event* has taken place, when a *non-lieu* is issued, the appellation "crime" and all its associations—trial, guilt, punishment—are for all legal purposes non-existent. A *non-lieu* can be pronounced in any case in which there is not enough evidence or if the law is not clear enough to convict.

Although the issuance of a *non-lieu* would have been logical and appropriate in the case of the Papin sisters, the question of the their mental state was pushed to the periphery by the doctors' pre-trial diagnosis of sanity. While Christine and Léa's competence should have been one of the major factors in the trial, it was effectively determined that for all legal purposes the women were responsible for their actions. Quoting an unnamed journalist of the time, Dupré writes, "Il aurait fallu . . . un jury entièrement composé de médecins. C'est reconnaître que tout un chacun se doit d'aliéner

[22] The closest English equivalent of this term is "no grounds for a trial."

son jugement à celui de la science. Or, c'est précisément ce qu'ont fait les jurés" (84). In other words, seeing themselves as unqualified to make a judgment of sanity, members of the jury completely relied on the psychiatrists' opinions, and ruled accordingly. In a case such as this one, where the suspects are thought (at least by the public) to be mentally unstable, were they to be declared insane, who would be held responsible for the deaths of the Lancelin women? Perhaps this is the judges' reasoning for hearing only from those doctors who pronounced the sisters sane. The Lancelin women are dead, someone is responsible, yet if a non-lieu were issued, by law there would be no guilty party. The nature of the case and the brutality and ferocity of the women's attack make this alternative impossible.

Journalists' accounts of the crime

As we return to the challenge of putting this crime into narrative form, we begin to see more clearly where difficulties originate. Having confirmed the difficulty of finding definitive answers to such basic questions as "was there a crime?" and "who committed the murders?" I will now consider early texts on the event, beginning with the journalists who covered the trial. As in most violent crimes, newspaper coverage ran concurrent to the sisters' arrest, interrogation and trial. In these accounts the writer literally serves as the voice of the public, studying, describing and analyzing Christine and Léa, and picking up on details not available in official police documents, especially visual clues in the form of the women's appearance and mannerisms. In nearly every case, uncertainty about

the women's mental state overrides any other element of the report. The morning after the crime, the local paper, *La Sarthe du soir*, ran the following description of the first interrogation:

> Les magistrats . . . ont recueilli les propos des deux sœurs qui éludaient les questions trop précises auxquelles elles ne voulaient pas répondre, par des phrases incohérentes, parlant par exemple 'd'atomes', ou disant que dans certaines circonstances, 'les femmes étaient visitées par l'esprit' . . . Toutes frêles dans leurs peignoirs d'étoffe bigarrée qu'une grande ceinture serre à la taille, notre photographe a pu, à leur passage, les fixer avec son objectif. Nous les avons retrouvées toujours aussi renfrognées, l'œil toujours aussi mauvais, mais le regard perdu dans le vague, leurs longues nattes encadrant leurs figures aussi pâlottes; leurs mains nerveusement croisées à la taille, pour serrer plus fort, peut-être, un secret qu'elles ne semblent pas disposées à trahir. (Dupré 41)

The description of the sisters' demeanor, expression and dress brings to light elements that would otherwise be lost for the contemporary reader of the crime. The writer notes the odd behavior of the sisters and their disconnected responses to the judges' questions. He further describes the apparent discomfort of the two, which is perfectly understandable, given the circumstances. However, certain qualities he points out are particularly noteworthy given the inconsistencies and gaps we have already observed. Christine and Léa seem at once confused and guarded, clutching their own bodies either in fear or "to better hide their secrets."

The writer continues, describing Christine as having said, “Nous n’avons que faire d’avocat: nous savons bien que nous serons guillotinées,” (42) about which he offers the commentary: “Etrange propos qui pourrait à lui seul servir de conclusion à ces quelques notes si notre devoir d’informateur ne nous obligeait à rappeler le fait suivant qui démontre combien ces êtres bizarres semblaient atteints par la manie de la persécution” (42). Why are journalists able to recognize the intricacies of the question of sanity when doctors trained in such determinations are unable to assign any possibility of mental deficiency to the killers? Clearly, the actions and words of Christine and Léa place them in a category beyond the realm of rational thinkers.

A later column in *La Sarthe* continues to enlighten the reader with details of Christine and Léa’s demeanor at this time:

> Christine, l’ainée, est toujours très surexcitée. Quant à sa sœur, Léa, elle paraissait affaiblie: la sueur lui perlait sur le visage, ses lèvres étaient exsangues, et, un moment, on craignit qu’elle ne perdît connaissance, tant elle paraissait à bout de forces. . . . Elles s’abstiennent de se nourrir depuis leur arrivée; elles refusent même de se coucher, et restent assises sur leur lit . . . Au début de l’après-midi de mardi, Christine Papin . . . a été extraite de la prison et introduite dans le cabinet de M. Hébert, juge d’instruction. Extrêmement pâle et tremblante de tous ses membres, le regard fixé sur le sol, elle répondit sans trop de difficulté aux questions du juge. (51-52)

Once again, the journalist reads the women’s appearance, assigning a sense of lack to Christine and Léa’s physical presence: nervous, on the verge of collapse, yet also obstinately refusing to eat or sleep, “assises sur leur lit” all night. How do we interpret

this image? The duality of the women passively staring at the ground and answering questions as if in a trance on the one hand, and staying up all night and refusing food on the other, certainly begs for some kind of interpretation. Yet none is given.

The *La Sarthe* journalist sums up the day's questioning with the following observation: "Fait curieux, qui mérite d'être signalé puisqu'il est souvent reproduit, Christine et Léa Papin, qui ne peuvent communiquer entre elles, ont souvent les mêmes réponses aux questions qui leur sont posées" (52). This statement provides yet another example of the ability of the journalist to identify areas of uncertainty that serve as the seeds for later narratives. How can the two communicate if they are physically separated? What is the unseen connection between the two women? Yet once again, the writer does nothing more than gesture towards the mystery, as he is unable to interpret the meaning behind the observation. Another journalist gives this vibrant physical description of the sisters:

> Voici Christine et Léa Papin entre les respectables carrures de trois solides gendarmes. On pouvait craindre, de la part des filles, des excentricités, des manifestations bruyantes. Quelle erreur! Elles sont là, toutes deux comme des petites filles en classe alors que passe l'inspecteur. Christine a revêtu un manteau clair dont l'ouverture laisse voir un corsage bleu haut monté. Tout le temps des débats, elle baissera les yeux, mais sans manifester jamais la moindre émotion. Etrange fille. Elle ne semble sortir de sa torpeur que lorsqu'un détail un peu spécial est donné. Alors, sans que ses paupières se lèvent pour trahir le regard, elle a une sorte de rictus bien difficile à définir. S'amuse-t-elle ou souffre-t-elle à ces rappels du passé?

> Bien fort qui pourrait le dire. Oh! il y a loin de cette fille frêle, toute ramassée dans son manteau, à la mégère surexcitée que nous vîmes le soir du crime, au commissariat central, criant les doigts levés comme pour rééditer l'horrible geste: —Oui, je leur ai arraché les yeux. Ah, mais!... Pour ceux qui ont vécu, quelques heures après, l'horrible tragédie, cette audience fut loin d'être sensationnelle. (85)

As the writer suggests, part of the attraction of this spectacle is the contrast between the *apparent* harmlessness of the two women and the horror of the act that they committed. Securely surrounded by "les carrures de trois solides gendarmes," a barrier between the sisters and the public, they do not appear as dangerous killers who might at any moment break away from the guards. On the contrary, they are "comme des petites filles en classe alors que passe l'inspecteur," girls, not women, in a position of submission before the eyes of the school inspector. The writer has difficulty categorizing the women: eyes lowered slightly, suggesting sleepwalking, Christine appears as if hidden behind a mask. Do her lowered eyes indicate shame at her crime, or does she mock the townspeople in her pleasure at what she did?

The journalist also notes a contrast between this and the previous appearance of the women the night of the crime, when they were (as he hints) glowering and seething with pleasure at their crime. His difficulty in reading the sisters' appearance is aligned with the difficulty in placing the women and their crime in any logical category. Murderers should look like murderers. Evil should ooze evilness. Yet before the public stand two frail and confused women whom we are unable to definitively place anywhere. In these descriptions and analyses, the role of writing and language in assigning meaning

again becomes evident. These journalists rely on the sisters' appearance to tell the story of the crime. Much as the information provided by a novelist, these descriptions are presented for the reader's interpretation, as a way to convey information about a character.

Another important question is that of exterior influences on the writer. How did this journalist see them that first night? Was his impression overridden by the crime, over-influenced by what had just happened? Is the temporal distance now between that night and the cold light of the day of the investigation a similar influence, allowing the journalist to see, not necessarily more clearly, but simply in a different way the appearance of the Papins? In other words, to what degree is the reading of the killers' appearance skewed by external influences, such as the immediacy of the violence and the contrasting rational legality of the trial?

"L'anormal, l'inexplicable, l'inexpliqué"

Finally I would like to examine an article by Jean and Jérome Tharaud, journalists for *Paris-Soir,* who also wrote the last article discussed. In a case that freakishly illustrates life paralleling art, or vice-versa, these two brothers wrote their articles jointly, using the pronoun *je* as if they were one individual. The newspaper even referred to them as "notre envoyé spécial, Jérôme et Jean Tharaud." The Tharaud brothers are mirror opposites of the Papin sisters; perhaps as such, their own awareness of blendings and fusions afforded them a unique perspective of the sisters. As it is contemporary to the moment of the trial

and detailed in its information and insight, this article is so important that I will cite it in its entirety.

> La porte s'ouvre. Les voici! Aucune photographie ne pourra donner l'idée du mystère qui entre avec ces deux filles. Léa, le plus jeune, tout en noir, les mains dans les poches de son manteau; Christine en manteau beige , le col relevé. Elles s'assoient. Léa, les mains toujours dans ses poches, les yeux ouverts, mais ouverts sur quoi, on ne sait pas; Christine, elle, fait un geste pour arranger sous elle son manteau, en fille soigneuse qui sait qu'on doit faire ce geste. Elle croise les mains devant elle et demeure immobile dans une rigidité qu'on dirait cadavérique. Elle a les yeux fermés et depuis une heure de l'après-midi, où commence l'audience, jusqu'à trois heures du matin où elle vient de finir, pas une fois elle ne les ouvrira, pas même pour répondre aux questions qu'on lui pose. Léa a le teint mat, olivâtre, des yeux noirs assez beaux mais qui n'expriment rien, ni étonnement, ni effroi, ni inquiétude. Une indifférence absolue, qui ne s'animera pas une minute et que j'ai tort d'appeler indifférence; je devrais dire plutôt *absence.* Christine, elle, paraît endormie, mais on sent bien qu'elle ne dort pas. Dès qu'on l'appelle, elle se dresse aussitôt, exactement comme à la chapelle du couvent où elle a été élevée elle se dressait à la messe. Elle ressemble à un médium à qui on va poser des questions. Toutes deux ont des fronts bien dessinés de personnes intelligentes, bien qu'elles ne le soient ni l'une ni l'autre. . . . C'est un long monologue du président qui retrace leur vie devant elles, s'attardant de temps à autre pour demander:

"C'est bien ainsi, n'est-ce pas?" Christine, les yeux cousus, répond par un signe de tête imperceptible qui montre seul qu'elle n'est pas dans un état cataleptique, puis elle se rassied, toujours avec le même geste soigneux, et, de nouveau, croise les mains et retombe dans sa rigidité. Léa, elle, répond un éternel oui, un oui qu'on n'entend pas. . . . Quelles étranges créatures! Et quelle étrange impression elles m'ont donnée! Toute la journée, je les écoute, ces horribles détails d'un forfait comme il n'y en a pas d'autre exemple, paraît-il, dans les annales de la criminologie. Toute la journée, j'entendrai, ce n'est pas moins horrible, les paroles sorties de ces bouches fermées au moment où elles parlaient pendant le crime ou après: et cependant, chose singulière, et dont j'étais stupéfait, pas un instant, en regardant ces filles, je n'ai ressenti une horreur correspondant à l'horreur de leur action. Pourquoi donc? C'est, je pense, que le mystère qui est dans ces misérables filles, et qui reste aussi impénétrable après qu'avant le procès, l'emportait en moi sur le dégoût que j'aurais dû éprouver. J'ai suivi toute cette longue audience avec un désir passionné de découvrir une raison à l'acte sauvage des accusées qui, jusqu'à la minute, à la seconde où leur crime a commencé, avaient mené une existence que tout le monde déclare exemplaire. Mais de raison, personne n'en a apporté ici. L'accusation a soutenu qu'on se trouvait en face d'une crise de colère qui a dégénéré en fureur. Cette explication semble parfaitement satisfaire MM. Schutzenberger, Baruk et Truelle, les trois psychiatres commis à l'étude mentale des meurtrières. Comme, d'autre part, la colère n'est pas

> classée parmi les maladies, et qu'elle n'est qu'une passion qu'on peut et qu'on doit surmonter, et comme, d'autre part, Christine et Léa ne présentent aucune maladie organique, ils concluent, sans hésiter, à leur entière responsabilité. Oui, mais d'où est venue cette colère qui aboutit à cette boucherie pour un motif de rien: l'histoire du fer à repasser? et même qui est sans aucun motif, si j'admets la dernière version que Christine a donnée du crime et qui, de l'avis général, est la plus vraisemblable. Une pareille explosion de fureur, si elle est sans motif, relève de la pathologie. Or, au cours de toute l'audience, nul motif n'est apparu; on a parlé de l'humeur renfermée, de l'irritabilité de Christine. Mais entre un état irritable et le massacre qu'elle a fait, s'interpose l'image tragique, impénétrable, qui a pris devant moi sur la muraille la forme des deux sœurs et qui s'appelle: la folie. Je n'aurais rien su du procès, que rien qu'en les voyant (et je les verrai longtemps en esprit) aussi saisissantes l'une que l'autre dans leurs attitudes différentes, j'aurais eu immédiatement l'impression de me trouver devant l'anormal, l'inexplicable, l'inexpliqué. (86-87)

This long passage illustrates the sudden fame of the Papin sisters, foreshadowing in many ways the more recent phenomenon of the killer as celebrity. Certainly there is a sense of excitement as they enter. With one brutal act, the sisters have gone from anonymity to a very visible position. The accompanying frenzy is unavoidable, yet what does it tell us about the public's desire to know more? At what point does this desire move from curiosity to fascination? Tharaud goes as far as to describe what the women

are wearing: Léa is in black, with her hands in her pockets, while Christine is in a beige coat with the collar pulled up. Accompanied by the comment "a photo cannot possibly capture their mystery," this article is painfully close to the often-written phrase, "a photo cannot possibly capture their beauty."

The theatrical nature of the sisters' entrance also brings to mind actual theater. As if foreshadowing Jean Genet's play, *Les Bonnes,* Tharaud describes the door opening as a curtain rising in a play. "There they are!" captures the first excited moments of the drama, inspiring in his readers curiosity about what will happen next. Tharaud further describes the movement of each character, her oddities and mannerisms, conveying the sense of mystery he feels at seeing the two women. Yet he can do nothing more than gesture, "Quelles étranges créatures!" The impression that the women's words and actions are a performance is well founded; the actual identity of each is uncertain, and the sense that they are playing roles grows more pronounced with each article written on them.

Furthermore, Tharaud highlights the shocking contrast between the brutal crime and the women's calm appearance. Christine arranges her clothes "en fille soigneuse," as if despite her situation, she still remembers her manners. Tharaud notes that not only does her appearance not fit the expected "look" of a killer, who is expected to have a strong and vengeful *presence*, she is barely there at all. In fact, with her eyes closed and her body still, Christine transmits just the opposite, a rigid and impenetrable cadaver. Léa's eyes, though open, are similarly blank, showing "rien, ni étonnement, ni effroi, ni inquiétude." In fact, what Tharaud first reads as indifference he re-assigns as *absence*. The reader cannot help but be intrigued by this striking observation. How could these two

women be so calm and passive, given their brutal actions during the murders? Tharaud is disturbed as well at his own reaction to the women. Knowing the nature of their crime, aware of the singularity of the violence and brutality of the murders, he wonders that "pas un instant, en regardant ces filles, je n'ai ressenti une horreur correspondant à l'horreur de leur action." Rather than shock, he feels curiosity.

What visual details specifically inform this reading? As Tharaud says, part of it is their apparent calm, the demure and ladylike demeanor they present to the onlooker. But, he also admits, it is a feeling he gets from looking at them, something mysterious, which both confuses him and draws him in to learn more from them, as one would do with a medium or a mystic. They hold some kind of answer that he (and the reader) does not know. Why do killers hold this knowledge, and what is its nature? Does the fact that they took two lives give them some kind of insight? Or does their violence tap into something we are not able to access? Is their allure due to the fact that they acted out their fantasies, the same desires we all possess but keep buried behind our civilized exterior?

Christine's closed eyes are an aspect of her appearance that cannot be ignored. The implication of blindness, which seems to follow this case, can be read in the bizarre fact that she sees nothing "from 1:00 pm to 3:00 am," or the entire duration of the trial. On a literal level Christine's closed eyes can be read as her way of blocking out the world, the demeanor of a hysteric, whose refusal to see those involved in her case translates into a denial (or ignorance) of her own involvement. But taken symbolically, as I believe Tharaud intended it to be read, Christine's blindness transforms her into one who does not see, a modern-day Oedipus[23], who indeed will later attempt to rip out her

[23] What is astonishing in this case is the propensity of writers to allegorize the sisters, to transform them from women into furies and Bacchantes. The need for a symbolic reading of the crime is patent.

own eyes in prison. Do the closed eyes ("pas une fois elle ne les ouvrira") indicate her guilt, as did Oedipus' blinding? If she is aware of her guilt, does she prefer being blind to knowing the truth? As Tiresius says, "How terrible to see the truth when the truth is only pain to him who sees" (*Oedipus Rex*, line 360).

Motive, sanity and guilt

Perhaps the most significant gap in the narrative of this crime stems from ongoing questions and speculation about the motive behind the attack. Though motive is ancillary in this case, since the killers are in custody and have admitted to the crime, it seems to be the only thing lacking in the narrative, and in turn, the driving force propelling the continued police questioning. During the extensive investigation, officials sometimes directly posed the question of motive to Christine and Léa, other times implied various reasons for the murders. Journalists, too, questioned the reasons behind the crime and attributed it to various causes. Yet the sisters are unable to either provide a motive of their own or to agree with the motives provided. The vague reasons Christine provides for the violence of the attack— "I was simply annoyed," "I don't remember," and "I had been angry all morning"—leave the question open and invite interpretation.

The most prevalent reason given for the crime by both police and journalists is that of a class struggle, or even a revolution in miniature. Later embraced by the Surrealists and other writers[24], this motive has as its basis the sisters' childhood and the

[24] See Simone de Beauvoir, *La Force de l'age* (150-152) and Jean-Paul Sartre, "Erostrate" in *Le Mur* (94-95).

oppressive atmosphere during their years in the Lancelin home. Even though the treatment of Christine and Léa in the home was not abusive—in fact, it has been speculated that their situation was among one of the better arrangements of the era as they had days off and were allowed to have their own space in the house—nonetheless their position in the home was one of submission:

> . . . ma sœur m'avait dit que M^{me} Lancelin l'avait pincée pour lui faire ramasser quelque chose par terre et j'avais entendu moi-même, étant dans la salle à manger, ma sœur heurter le plancher de la chambre. Elle m'a dit ensuite que M^{me} Lancelin en la pinçant, l'avait forcée à se mettre à genoux pour ramasser quelque chose. . . . Je croyais qu'elle avait oublié, ce n'est pas pour cela que nous avons fait ce que nous avons fait. (44, 45)

Madame Lancelin was by many accounts a particularly demanding mistress. According to Christine, "Quand le ménage était terminé, elle passait l'inspection partout et le moindre grain de poussière attirait des observations et le rappel de faits précédents du même genre. Elle trouvait aussi que les carnets de boucherie et d'épicerie montaient trop." But these events are disputed as having been reason for the attack: "Mais ce n'est pas ces procédés à mon égard et à l'égard de ma sœur qui nous ont peu à peu irritées contre Mme Lancelin" (42-43).

Regardless of her statement to the contrary, Christine's testimony does hint at a master-servant duality and the idea that the attack stemmed from something of which perhaps she was unaware. For example, her statement that "(j)'aime mieux avoir eu la peau de mes patronnes plutôt que ce soient elles qui aient eu la mienne et celle de ma sœur," though followed by the retraction, "(j)e n'ai pas prémédité mon crime, je n'avais

pas de haine envers elle, mais je n'admets pas le geste qu'elle eut ce soir, Mme Lancelin, à mon égard" (32-33) is heavy with meaning. As if the roles had reversed at the moment of the crime, Christine speaks of not tolerating Madame's actions towards her, as if the crime represented for her a refusal of the passive role of servant and entry into the dominant role of mistress. Speaking of the choice she had to make ("us or them") she indicates the inevitable nature of the murders, as well as a kind of self-defense rationale, without actually naming either as such.

A second possible motive taken up by writers on the crime is that of a confused self-other dynamic within the sisters, particularly as it concerns their relationship with their own mother. When questioned about their childhood, Christine begins her statement "Ma mère, qui ne m'a pas élevée, est âgée de 50 à 60 ans, je ne sais au juste, . . . elle est divorcée depuis 20 ans d'avec mon père qui est cultivateur à Marigné; elle m'a confiée à une sœur de mon père, Isabelle Papin, à Marigné, qui m'a élevée jusqu'à 7 ans, âge où ma mère m'a repris et me confia au Bon-Pasteur rue de la Blanchisserie" (42-43). Admittedly the girls' childhood was hard; they were shuffled among relatives, sent to the Bon-Pasteur, then placed into domestic work, spending virtually none of their young lives with their family. In this passage, it is noteworthy that although Christine begins by discussing her early childhood, her testimony quickly shifts to the moment of the crime, indicating a confusion of the two moments in time. She continues, either refusing to look back any further than the moment of the attack, or unknowingly gesturing to the link between the two periods of time. Speaking now of Madame Lancelin, she says:

> Elle était depuis 2 secondes sur le palier du 1er étage, quand je suis descendue, elle rentrait de ville avec M^{lle} Lancelin quand nous sommes

> descendues, j'avais une bougie placée dans un petit pot sur une assiette, afin que les taches ne tombent pas dans l'escalier, je lui dis: "Madame, le plomb est encore une fois fondu en repassant, comme hier." M^{me} Lancelin me dit: "Encore détraqué!" et comme je m'approchais d'elle, elle lança ses deux bras dans ma direction et me heurta la poitrine et le bras gauche et saisit celui-ci. Je lui dis: "Qu'est-ce qu'il vous prend?" et j'ai boxé avec elle. (43)

As if anticipating the officials' next question, Christine says, "Je vous assure que nous n'avons pas prémédité ce coup-là, s'il avait été prémédité, il n'aurai certainement pas été si bien fait. C'est-à-dire que, si j'avais réfléchi, je ne l'aurais certainement pas exécuté" (44).

Overlying the blurring of mother, self and mistress is the ongoing confusion about whose eyes she ripped out, indicating the fluid nature of the identity of all participants in the event. Of further significance is the scattered nature of Christine's testimony, which leads to a third motive broached by writers, one to which we have alluded throughout this analysis. Many see the tendency to jump from one topic to another, the confusing of the victims' identities, and the compulsion to add unnecessary details to her testimony as potential evidence of insanity. As such, the link between sanity and motive must be addressed: if the intention to kill stems from a place where right and wrong no longer apply, there is in essence no motive whatsoever. The mental state of each sister was in question from the start, but it is Christine who is most often seen as significantly unstable. Evidence of a mental break can be seen here in her propensity to focus on marginal elements of the crime:

> C'est moi qui avais à la main l'assiette sur laquelle était le pot contenant la bougie. J'ai lâché l'assiette quand Mme Lancelin s'est élancée sur moi, l'assiette a été cassée, mais le pot ne l'a pas été. J'avais acheté le matin pour ma sœur à la boulangerie les deux pains de Gêne et les deux brioches que vous avez trouvés sur le guéridon du palier. C'est ma sœur qui les avait dans la poche de son tablier et qui a dû les y déposer. (44)

Christine's persistent references as well to being *en colère* and *en furie* are telling, even though she continues to refute any hint from the examiners of the possibility that her lingering anger is a direct cause of the attack. Again and again she seems puzzled that anger could be connected to the attack, even though she consistently points to it in her testimony.

Note the similarly disjointed nature of Léa's statement as she jumps from a description of the night of the crime to the comment about the amount of money they had saved:

> Ma mère aurait bien voulu que je parte de chez M. et M^{me} Lancelin ainsi que ma sœur, mais nous n'avions pas voulu car nous ne nous y trouvions pas trop mal. M^{me} Lancelin nous faisait parfois des observations quand on le méritait. Mais ce soir-là, M^{me} Lancelin s'est jetée sur ma sœur et M^{lle} Lancelin sur moi-même et, après avoir échangé des coups de poing avec celle-ci pour la faire finir, j'ai été obligée de lui arracher les yeux et elle est tombée comme sa mère. Nous sommes allées, ma sœur et moi, chercher le couteau et le marteau à la cuisine et, quand nous sommes remontées, comme ces dames remuaient encore, nous les avons frappées

> avec le couteau et le marteau toutes les deux. Nous n'avons pas mis tout notre argent à la Caisse d'Epargne, car nous avons amassée 2000 francs qui sont dans un portefeuille placé dans une valise dans notre chambre. Nous n'avions pas l'intention de fuir pour échapper au châtiment car nous n'avions rien prémédité. (45)

The sisters often refuse to respond directly to a question, something which recurs with growing frequency when questioned about motive. Following the investigator's declaration: "Vous avez sans doute prémédité votre crime avec votre soeur. Vous aviez des ressentiments contre Mme Lancelin de vous faire une observation injustifiée alors que vous croyiez ne pas avoir d'observations à recevoir. Du reste vous n'avez pas beaucoup travaillé ce jour-là, puisque l'électricité était détraquée," Léa responds: "Mais j'étais dans ma chambre, j'avais du linge à préparer et j'ai travaillé de 3 h ½ à 6 h. Je n'ai descendu que lorsque j'ai entendu crier ma soeur" (46). She either ignores or does not hear the first part of his question, replying only to the portion asking about her workday.

How is sanity related to motive? As motivation for any action is seen as the rational processing behind the event, it implies conscious decision-making, rational thought, and the ability to reason and to logically plan a course of action. None of this is reflected in the Papins' testimony. In the statements where motive is specifically addressed, either by the investigator or by the women themselves, Christine and Léa draw an absolute blank. Though they acknowledge that they killed the women, where do we as readers of the crime place their motivation?

What is significant for our study is that certain areas of the crime remain fuzzy, due to Christine's (or less often, Léa's) account of them. The lack of clarity about which

victim was attacked first, for example, contributes to heightened curiosity about that very spot in the story. What does it mean that Christine can't tell us if she ripped out Madame's or Mademoiselle's eyes? These entries into the mystery of the crime invite interpretation, and beyond the journalists' accounts, what we find are more and more far-reaching interpretations. With a crime as violent and surprising as this one, the need to interpret is strong. Like Tharaud, who experienced "un désir passionné de découvrir une raison à l'acte sauvage des accusées qui, jusqu'à la minute, à la seconde où leur crime a commencé, avaient mené une existence que tout le monde déclare exemplaire," (87) we all want a reason. But now, as then, "personne n'en a apporté ici."

Chapter Three

Representations of the Crime by Jacques Lacan and Jean Genet

The February 4 edition of local Le Mans' paper *La Sarthe du soir* describes the extreme chaos of the crime scene, which in many ways serves as the visual complement to the chaotic attempts to effectively narrate the event:

> Sur le palier du premier étage, deux cadavres étaient étendus, presque parallèlement. C'étaient eux de Mme Lancelin et de sa fille. La mère avait la tête tournée vers la rue, la fille du côté opposé. La tête et le visage de Mme Lancelin étaient absolument écrasés. Les traits étaient méconnaissables. Mlle Lancelin, couchée sur le ventre, avait le visage tourné vers le sol. Au premier examen, il était difficile de savoir à quelles blessures elles avaient succombé. Mais la partie postérieure du corps était horriblement déchiquetée. Deux coups de couteau avaient ouvert profondément le bas des reins et les jambes étaient sillonnées de profondes blessures. . . . Les deux coupables n'étaient pas loin. Nous avons dit que de la rue on voyait une faible lumière dans la chambre des bonnes, Christine et Léa Papin. . . . Christine et Léa Papin étaient là, couchées dans le même lit. Le marteau qui avait servi au double crime traînait à terre. M. Dupuy entra avec ses hommes. Les deux filles sursautèrent, puis elles avouèrent avec des accents hachés et frémissants qu'elles avaient tué, et l'ainée déjà prête à la défense, déclara que c'était pour se défendre. . . . (Dupré 16-17)

The fragmented bodies and unrecognizable faces of the victims suggest an intentional disfiguring that could only result from a violent and bestial killer. The register of the newspaper account appears unusually tame, given the crime scene. However, the excess of the crime is evident even in this account: *absolument écrasés*, *méconnaissables*, *horriblement déchiquetée*, *profondes blessures*. In contrast to their crime, the descriptive terms used to describe the setting where the two killers are found are unusually neutral: *pas loin*, *une faible lumière*, *dans le même lit*. The contradiction between the scene they created on the landing and the scene in which they are discovered cannot be reconciled. The suggestions of the investigators—hatred towards the family, premeditated revenge, retribution for some unknown slight—are dismissed by the killers, who by all accounts were thought to be model servants, incapable of such a crime.

Rather than looking to Christine and Léa to explain the reason for the murders, the explanation must be located within their inability to articulate their motive. In effect, the story lies in their silence, yet at the same time somewhere *beyond* their silence. In this chapter I will examine two seminal representations of the crime that, although divergent in format and separated by a span of 25 years, manage to explore questions surrounding the sisters' silence. The first is a contemporary essay by Jacques Lacan in which he clinically examines Christine and Léa's case, joining psychoanalytic diagnosis to speculative theory, since he never met the sisters. Drawing from his earlier study of a woman known as Aimée, Lacan attributes the sisters' crime to their being in a state of dual paranoia, resulting from an underlying mental illness and a sense of powerlessness and an inability to speak of what was taking place in their psyches. The second work I will examine is Jean Genet's influential 1947 play, *Les Bonnes*, which similarly examines

the fusions and mirrorings shared among the participants in this crime by focusing on the role of blurred identity between the two women and their victims. In many ways this play provides a visual representation of Lacan's theories as Genet clearly draws on similar questions of identity and subjectivity as are seen in Lacan's work. In representing the crime and the killers, these two pieces do not reveal an explanation or provide a narrative account of the murders, but instead open up to investigation the silence of Christine and Léa, providing the audience with an entry into the otherwise unavailable world of the sisters' psyche.

Jacques Lacan's analysis

In a fundamental text on the crime written just months after the murders took place, psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan attempts to explain the blank area left by the lack of motive as an interweaving of language, psychosis and unconscious desire. In his essay, "Motifs du crime paranoïaque: Le Crime des sœurs Papin," Lacan transfers the event from a legal arena to the psychoanalytic, shifting the focus from the logical to the illogical, exploring the inherent mystery noted by the Tharaud brothers who described the sisters and their crime as being "l'anormal, l'inexplicable, l'inexpliqué" (Dupré 87). Lacan had already dealt with a similar case in his doctoral dissertation of 1932, "De la Psychose paranoiaque dans ses rapports avec la personnalité," in which he analyzed an attack with no apparent motive committed by a women he calls Aimée on a popular French actress outside a Parisian theater. Aimée, in reality Marguerite Pantaine, tried to kill actress

Huguette Duflos[25] in an attack that left the actress injured but alive, and became Lacan's patient during her subsequent institutionalization at Sainte-Anne psychiatric hospital. Lacan aligns the Papins' murderous disruption with the "psychic doubling" of Aimée, identifying both attacks as a way for the women to give form to an underlying state of delirium and paranoia of which they themselves were unaware. As such, the murders are a symptom of Christine and Léa's illness, and as in the case of Aimée, their confused self-other dynamic is evident in their psychosis and paranoia.

Lacan's essay on the Papin sisters is significant for many reasons, primarily because it provides an immediate interpretation of the sisters' mental state at the time of the murders. Though he never examined, or even in fact met the Papin sisters, he analyzes and expands on the theories offered by Dr. Benjamin Logre[26], one of the only doctors at their trial to diagnose Christine and Léa as mentally incompetent. Dr. Logre testified that the aggression of the attack, the evidence of the sisters' delirium, and the apparent chronic nature of their illness were all indicators that theirs was a classic example of paranoia. Lacan plans to take the diagnostic process one step further, via "une observation plus conforme au comportement du malade" (*Motifs* 25). By observing the physical actions of the women, both at the time of the crime and afterwards at their trial and in jail, Lacan says he will make a more thorough determination of their mental state, an ambitious goal considering he has no access to the women whatsoever, and will base his diagnosis on existing texts and personal recollections. His "observation," then, is

[25] Coincidentally, Duflos had played the role of Mathilde Stangerson in an early cinematic version of *Le Mystère de la chambre jaune* in 1930. See Appignanesi, pages 258 – 269.
[26] Like Lacan, Logre never met or examined the sisters.

filtered through material which has been culled by others[27] as well through his own theories. Lacan's investigation is fruitful as it provides an extensive analysis of Christine and Léa's unusual relationship as well as providing a possible motive (though he never refers to it as such) for the killings.

Lacan outlines several determining factors in the case. First is the question of motive, or more generally the factors that led the sisters to kill their mistresses. As we have seen, Christine and Léa were unable to provide any reason whatsoever for their crime. Lacan views this lack as an indication of the unconscious basis of the attack, a motivation stemming from the sisters' aggression and what he calls a "camouflage of motives." Precisely because of the irrationality at the heart of the crime, any theories of motive must be found outside the traditional definition of the term. Lacan's use of the word "camouflage" suggests that any causal elements behind the crime will be cloaked, that his own ability to determine a cause will similarly have to navigate an area between conscious act and unconscious desire. In psychoanalytic terms, the sisters acted in a state of delirium:

> La pulsion agressive, qui se résout dans le meurtre, apparaît ainsi comme l'affection qui sert de base à la psychose. On peut la dire inconsciente, ce qui signifie que le contenu intentionnel qui la traduit dans la conscience ne peut se manifester sans un compromis avec les exigences sociales

[27] Note a similar observation (in reference to Aimée) by Cox-Cameron: "He returns to Aimée's story in chapter three where a fuller picture will emerge. This time the focus is on Aimée's childhood, but that this focus is not at all psychoanalytic is evident from the fact that almost all Lacan's information is gleaned from her sister, her brother and later, her husband, rather than from Aimée's own speech. Lacan is well aware of the unreliability of such accounts, which Freud had specifically excluded from psychoanalytic case-histories in 1918, and in fact cites Freud to explain the difficulties encountered in pursuing this method: 'Nous pourrions dire que, sur l'enfance d'un sujet, les enregistreurs familiaux semblent subir les mêmes mécanismes de censure et de substitution que l'analyse freudienne nous a appris à connaître dans le psychisme du sujet lui-même' (*Ibid*.: 219)" (13). She refers to Lacan, *De la psychose paranoïaque dans ses rapports avec la personnalité, suivi de Premiers écrits sur la paranoïa.* Paris: Seuil, 1975.

> intégrées par le sujet, c'est-à-dire sans un camouflage de motifs qui est précisément tout le délire. (26)

This is not to say simply that the women had a hidden desire to kill, but instead that the violent act stemmed from an unconscious need that was translated into irrational actions. In other words, the murder was a "normal" reaction to something that was not based in reality, a desire hidden within other conflicting desires.

Further complicating the possibility of defining a distinct motive for the crime is the punitive dimension of the women's illness, as outlined in this passage:

> Mais cette pulsion est empreinte en elle-même de relativité sociale: elle a toujours l'intentionnalité d'un crime, presque constamment celle d'une vengeance, souvent le sens d'une punition, c'est-à-dire d'une sanction issue des idéaux sociaux, parfois enfin elle s'identifie à l'acte achevé de la moralité, elle a la portée d'une expiation (auto-punition.) (26)

The vocabulary Lacan uses—intent, revenge, punishment—reflects forms of justice inflicted by a society on an individual. Yet in this case, the punishment is inflicted by the individual on another person, a stand-in for herself. What is intended to be a self-inflicted attack, *une expiation,* turns into the murder of someone else, a punishment of the Lancelin women for the actions of the Papin women. This self-punishment casts out the offender by marking her as criminal, yet in this case it is initiated by the criminals themselves. Since the murder is a form of self-punishment while also being an intentional act of revenge, it is crime and punishment all in one act. Twisting cause and effect such that the effect comes before the cause reflects the duality at the core of the crime. If the murders are self-punishment for Christine and Léa, the transgression for which they

punish themselves in killing the Lancelins cannot be located at the moment of the crime, but must have taken place at a previous moment in time.

As in later Lacanian theory, the reversal (effect before cause) and duality (parallel guilt, parallel killers and victims) indicates a confused self-other dynamic. As such, it is clear that any attempt to assign a linear cause and effect explanation for this crime will prove to be futile. Lacan locates the only possible explanation for the crime in the pathology of Christine and Léa's relationship, the external evidence of which he sees in the symbiotic nature of their attachment to each other. Whatever ignited the frenzy is buried within the relationship between the sisters; therefore, the only way to attempt to explain it is to examine the status of that relationship. Layering exposition and myth, Lacan himself camouflages his own explanation:

> Le "mal d'être deux" dont souffrent ces malades ne les libère qu'à peine du mal de Narcisse. Passion mortelle et qui finit par se donner la mort. Aimée frappe l'être brillant qu'elle hait justement parce qu'elle représente l'idéal qu'elle a de soi. Ce besoin d'auto-punition, cet énorme sentiment de culpabilité se lit aussi dans les actes des Papin . . . (28)

The original Narcissus myth, here filtered as well through Freud's concept of narcissism, encapsulates the complexity of Christine and Léa's intertwined "self." In the Greek myth, the reflective quality of mirrored surfaces is deceptive for Narcissus, who is unable to recognize his own image in the water into which he gazes. The mirror freezes him into an object: beautiful, yet unattainable and lifeless. As he looks at the desirable image in the water he realizes that it is himself—*Iste ego sum*—and as such, inaccessible and unpossessable. This realization leads to his death, as he cannot accept the fact that he

cannot possess the one he loves, as it is himself. The Papin sisters' suffering is thus compared to that of Narcissus in that their love for each other is a kind of self-love, equally unattainable. The myth further solidifies the idea of self-killing noted by Lacan. His alignment of the sisters with Narcissus reveals a self-love in which the self is other and the other is self, a collapsing of the subject to the point where the two become one.

Yet how do we proceed from this distortion to the physical act of the murders? Why were the two sisters suddenly focused outward, on the other two women? There are many theories as to what ignited the fury of Christine and Léa that night. One of the most significant for us is the speculation that the *patronnes* walked in on the sisters as they were engaged in sexual play, a theory which could account for the suddenness and violence of the killing. Were the relationship between the Papins more than a figurative self-love and literally incestuous, it could explain why they turned on the women and killed them. Lacan does not in so many words state this as the spark which led to the "orgie sanglante," (25) yet he does move beyond calling their bond an *attachement singulier* to identifying it as sharing characteristics of a homosexual relationship based in a dual adoration and hatred of each other:

> Homosexualité, perversion sado-masochiste, telles sont les troubles instinctifs dont seuls les psychanalystes avaient su dans ces cas déceler l'existence et dont nous avons tenté de montrer dans notre travail la signification génétique. Il faut avouer que les sœurs paraissent apporter à ces corrélations une confirmation qu'on pourrait dire grossière : le sadisme est évident dans les manœuvres exécutées sur les victimes, et quelle signification ne prennent pas, à la lumière de ces données, l'affection

> exclusive des deux sœurs, le mystère de leur vie, les étrangetés de leur cohabitation, leur rapprochement peureux dans un même lit après le crime? (27)

If this is the case, the punishment inflicted on the Lancelins is directed at the Papins, payment for their transgressive self-love and incestuous attachment to each other. Lisa Appignanesi comes to a similar conclusion, drawing from the earlier case of Aimée to explain the link between the murders and the sisters' relationship:

> Aimée, with her ambivalent hatred of her sister, had struck on a displaced version of her ego ideal which she both loved and hated. The Papin sisters, with their Siamese twinning, didn't turn against each other but acted as one in two parts. By turning against their mother/daughter mistresses, castrating them, pulling out their eyes, they enacted their own murderous punishment for the sins of their homosexual desires." (271)

There is ample evidence for such a relationship. The sisters' bond is patent in Léa's testimony that there is no division between the two sisters: "Pas plus que ma sœur, je n'ai le moindre regret de l'acte criminel que nous avons commis. Comme ma sœur, j'aime mieux avoir eu la peau de mes patronnes plutôt que ce soit elles qui aient eu la mienne" (Dupré 33). It is further observed in the delirium experienced by Christine when, separated from Léa in prison, she exclaims: "Je crois bien que dans une autre vie je devais être le mari de ma sœur" (264). Clearly, the relationship between the two was powerful, intense and unfathomably intertwined.

What was the cause of such an attachment? Lacan discusses one of the stages in the development of the psyche as an infantile hostility between sisters that is gradually

brought under control by *la réduction forcée* of society. He says (referencing Freud) that sometimes an abnormality turns this hostility into desire, which is similarly overcome due to societal restrictions[28]. The Papins did not move beyond the desire phase as they were unable to proceed into a healthy ability to love another person. The link to his analysis of Aimée is evident in this observation, as he refers to her case as illustrative of a similar attempt to locate and destroy the loved and hated other, which is the self:

> Si au cours de son délire Aimée transfère sur plusieurs têtes successives les accusations de sa haine amoureuse, c'est par un effort de se libérer de sa fixation première, mais cet effort est avorté: Chacune des persécutrices n'est vraiment rien d'autre qu'une nouvelle image, toujours toute prisonnière du narcissisme, de cette sœur dont notre malade a fait son idéal." (*Motifs* 28)

This, according to Lacan, is an underlying basis of homosexuality, the causes of which "peuvent être d'origines très différentes, les unes organiques, . . . les autres psychologiques: la psychanalyse a révélé parmi celles-ci l'importance de l'inceste infantile" (28). As such, the roots of the sisters' desire for one another was the culmination of a number of factors in their childhood.

As young girls the sisters were shuffled among relatives and placed in a convent during most of their childhood. Though there is no testimony about their youth, several references to earlier events signal that their relationship was unnaturally close, and that the latent violence had been present for some time. Taken from a portion of their questioning several months after the crime, the following passage offers a glimpse of

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[28] One is reminded here of Freud's description of the incest taboo in *Totem and Taboo*. Lacan does not cite his reference, however.

minor altercations between Christine and previous employers prior to her employment in the Lancelin home:

> Après avoir été élevée de 7 à 15 ans au Bon-Pasteur du Mans, à qui votre mère vous avait confiée, et où vous avez laissé un bon souvenir, vous êtes entrée en service et vous avez fait différentes places avant d'entrer chez les époux Lancelin: soit seule, soit en compagnie de votre sœur. Tous vos patrons en général ont été satisfaits de vous; dans les renseignements fournis par quelques-uns, apparaît cependant une certaine restriction en ce qui concerne le caractère. C'est ainsi qu'une dame Ménagé du Mans qui vous a employées, vous et votre sœur, du 7 mars 1925 au 21 avril suivant et qui était par ailleurs fort satisfaite de vos services, vous ayant fait l'observation que vous étiez restée trop longtemps au marché, un vendredi, vous entendit répondre sèchement; sous l'influence d'une colère mal contenue, comme votre patronne s'éloignait, vous vous êtes mise à parler fort dans votre cuisine et à remuer avec fracas les ronds de votre fourneau; quelques jours après, votre mère, prévenue, venait vous chercher. (Dupré 57-58)

Christine's response is non-committal: "Je me rappelle cet incident chez une dame Ménagé" (58). Further into the questioning, more information is revealed: "C'est ainsi encore que la même année, étant avec votre sœur Léa domestique chez une dame de Dieuleveut, sur une observation de votre patronne, vous avez tenu un propos qui fut qualifié de désobligeant et qui entraîna votre renvoi." This declaration is followed by a similarly empty response from Christine, "C'est exact" (58). Whether she is aware of the

questions' implications or even the existence of any potential link between the earlier events and the crime is unclear.

As a previous employer seems to have realized, the couple Christine-Léa was a significant force, and something to be avoided, if possible:

> M^{me} de Dieuleveut, quand votre mère vint vous chercher, lui conseilla de ne pas placer avec vous votre sœur qui lui avait fait bonne impression. Dès 1924, une dame Tonteix, chez qui vous n'avez été que 15 jours, avait remarqué que vous aviez le caractère difficile et que vous aviez l'air hautain et rétif. Mais ce caractère difficile, qui s'était manifesté bien avant que vous ne soyez chez M. Lancelin et avant la brouille de 1929 avec votre mère, ne peut expliquer ce double crime qui vous est reproché, commis dans des circonstances inimaginables d'horreur, que je vous rappellerai un peu plus loin. (58)

The symbiotic and potentially dangerous bond between the two was evident to earlier employers, with Christine seen as the dominant force. Their own duality is transferred to the victims at the time of the crime, making the two Lancelin women, in essence, one single condensed target in which the identity of each individual is unimportant. As Christine's police testimony makes evident, in retrospect she could not recall which woman she attacked first, or whose eyes she tore out. Given the sisters' intertwined relationship, the fact that the "other" is similarly doubled is not surprising. Thus, the murders were a way of attacking an external, idealized other, "cette sœur dont notre malade a fait son idéal" (Lacan *Motifs* 28). The mistresses were a reflection of their own joined selves, each individual identity similarly blurred.

Lacan speaks in the early portion of the essay of the "comportement du malade" (27). Yet this case does not concern *le malade* but *les malades*, immediately compromising any discussion of an individual psychological diagnosis. Can two individuals react as one, sharing an attack of delirium? Can we say with any certainty that the crime resulted from two acts of self-punishment, occurring simultaneously? Lacan addresses this critical question:

> Ce qui est certain, c'est que les formes de la psychose sont chez les deux sœurs sinon identiques, du moins étroitement corrélatives. On a entendu au cours des débats l'affirmation étonnante qu'il était impossible que deux êtres fussent frappés ensemble de la même folie, ou plutôt la révélassent simultanément. C'est une affirmation completètement fausse (27).

Lacan refers here to the doctors and prosecutors at the trial who confirmed the nonexistence of the affliction later referred to as *folie à deux*. Their casual denial of the existence of dual insanity necessitates a discussion of this condition, which at the time of the trial had not yet been clearly defined by the psychiatric profession. Most often afflicting family members, *folie à deux* is the onset of delusional thoughts or acts that affects two people simultaneously. They act on these thoughts as one entity, each in turn leading or following the other in an attack that usually involves inflicting violence on a third party. This affliction occurs most often between sisters, second only to the occurrence rate between mothers and children:

> Usually, one partner is dominant (the inducer) and has a psychotic illness (most often, schizophrenia). The delusions and hallucinations become

> shared by the passive partner (recipient), who may or may not have a coincidental schizophrenic or delusional disorder. Cognitive impairment, poverty, and shared traumatic life experiences may be vulnerability factors, but the outstanding risk factors are isolation and pathological intimacy." (Campbell 256)

This definition, taken from a 2004 manual, reflects details and specifics that were obviously not available in 1933. Nonetheless, the applicability of this diagnosis to the case of the Papin sisters is evident. The manual also outlines a sub-category called *folie simultanée* where "both persons have a psychotic illness occurring simultaneously" (256). Lacan's comment that the opinion of the psychiatrists responsible for the Papin sisters' judgment was "une affirmation completètement fausse" indicates his conviction that the crime was based in the sisters' shared delusions and paranoia.

Further illustrating the bond between the sisters is the role of language in their lives. Lacan notes that prior to the crime, Christine and Léa had worked for years in the Lancelin home in a virtual linguistic seclusion. According to testimony, the family refused to speak directly to the two sisters. "En dehors du service, les maîtres étaient un peu distants avec nous. M. Lancelin ne me parlait jamais et M^{lle} Lancelin non plus. Seule Madame me parlait, pour me faire des observations et quelquefois des reproches plus ou moins justifiés" (Dupré 43). This isolation not only forced the two sisters into a world in which their only speech was to each other, their sole connection to the family was Madame. Lacan marks the presence of language as a sign of entry into the symbolic order, and as such, any interruption of language would represent a fracture in that order,

resulting in isolation of the individual[29] and complications in her ability to successfully operate within that order. As he notes, in the Lancelin household " . . . d'un groupe à l'autre 'on ne se parlait pas'" (Lacan *Motifs* 25). Furthermore, language is a measure by which the stability of the subject can be established. Lacan points out the sisters' lack of spoken communication with the Lancelins as just one example of the many ways in which they were separated from the rest of the world, a separation that contributed to their heightened dependence on each other. On days off, for example, they seldom left the house, and if they did it was always together: "Il y a aussi l'attachement singulier qui les unissait, leur immunité à tout autre intérêt, les jours de congé qu'elles passent ensemble et dans leur chambre" (25). Physically isolated and ignored by the family, the two shared a world unto themselves in a symbiotic relationship where it was difficult to discern where one individual left off and the other began. "Vraies âmes siamoises, elles forment un monde à jamais clos; à lire leurs dépositions après le crime, dit le Dr Logre, 'on croit lire double'" (28).

But in this crime Lacan sees language playing an even more significant role. He states that the attack on the Lancelin women is not only result of a breakdown in language within the household, it is a kind of language unto itself, a physical translation of something the sisters could never have expressed in words. However, though the crime speaks that which the criminals cannot, the women themselves remain unaware of what the actions symbolize. Elisabeth Roudinesco elaborates: "The crime . . . was a violent acting out of a *non-dit*: something unspoken, of whose meaning the chief actors in the drama were unaware" (63-64). The murders are thus the transformation of a *non-dit*—that which is left unsaid—into an act of violence. The conceptual status of "nothingness"

[29] Once again, in this case *individual* refers to the couple, Christine and Léa.

or something "unsaid" reinforces the mirroring of the crime, where absence becomes a violent presence: "Au soir fatidique, les sœurs mêlent à l'image de leurs maîtresses le mirage de leur mal. C'est leur détresse qu'elles détestent dans le couple qu'elles entraînent dans un atroce quadrille" (Lacan *Motifs* 28).

Lacan's eventual diagnosis, which he describes as *très précaire*, is that at the time of the murders, the sisters had moved beyond a state of paranoia into "des paraphrénies, que le génie de Kraepelin isola comme des formes immédiatement contiguës" (27). Paraphrenia is a term indicating a sub-category of paranoia in which the patient is able to carry on an apparently normal life, hiding her fantastic and paranoid thoughts from the rest of the world. "Kraepelin (1919) characterized paraphrenia as an insidious development of an ever-worsening paranoia (including grandiose delusions in many patients in the later stages of the disorder), with minimal disturbance of affect and will and preservation of the personality, but without progression to insanity (deterioration)" (Campbell 478). Thus we can view the delirium exhibited in the crime as a sudden eruption into the exterior world of the fantasy life the sisters had kept hidden from society. In the world outside their room, life was lived as theater, their apparent normalcy cloaking an internal delusional state.

The Papin sisters' influence on Lacan's later work

The effect of Lacan's early analysis of the Papin sisters on his developing theories is significant, as there is considerable overlap in the two areas. The influence of the sisters

is evident in his later psychoanalytic work, which incorporates questions of self and other, the real and the imaginary and the relation of language to the symbolic order. Three years after his analysis of the Papin sisters' intermingled identity, he formally presents the mirror stage at the Fourteenth International Psychoanalytical Congress at Marienbad in 1936, then further enunciates the theory in Zurich in 1949. His description of that stage of development is very similar to his analysis of the sisters:

> Ce développement est vécu comme une dialectique temporelle qui décisivement projette en histoire la formation de l'individu: le *stade du miroir* est un drame dont la poussée interne se précipite de l'insuffisance à l'anticipation - et qui pour le sujet, pris au leurre de l'identification spatiale, machine les fantasmes qui se succèdent d'une image morcelée du corps à une forme que nous appellerons orthopédique de sa totalité, - et à l'armure enfin assumée d'une identité aliénante, qui va marquer de sa structure rigide tout son développement mental. Ainsi la rupture du cercle de *l'Innenwelt* à l'*Umwelt* engendre-t-elle la quadrature inépuisable des récolements du *moi*. (Lacan *Ecrits* 97-98)

The threat of fragmentation is precisely the spark that set off the attack on the Lancelin women. If we accept the fact that Christine and Léa were psychically joined to the point of being one person, the desire to remain whole is complicated by a sense of rivalry, if not in the form of the actual other, the sister, then in the perceived threat of the physical other, the mistress(es.) The blurred tension between the two sisters, the "Siamese souls" who represent the Narcissus myth acted out in real life, is at the heart of the mirror stage.

The later Lacanian triad of the imaginary, the symbolic and the real can be located in Lacan's work on the Papin sisters as well. This theory situates the subject within the world via a positioning of three orders as follows: the imaginary is the internalized image of the ideal, whole self that results from the mirror stage and the image of a complete self reflected in the mirror. Lacan's imaginary should not be confused with an "unreal"; rather it is the idealized self, existing only in the mind of the subject. The symbolic is aligned with the acquisition of language, and involves the subject's entry into an order where symbols and signs convey information and can be manipulated by the individual to create and convey meaning. The symbolic order functions as a way for the subject to access and communicate with the exterior world. Finally, the real is the chaos that cannot be articulated, that which resists representation, which is pre-mirror, pre-imaginary, pre-symbolic. Aligned with Freud's *das Ding*[30], the real is thus that which remains outside of the symbolic realm of language and articulation.

In a brief passage in *Looking Awry,* Slavoj Zizek offers an interpretation of the real and the imaginary that is helpful in understanding these orders and that will allow us to use them in relation to the crime of the Papin sisters. In his analysis, he employs the visual example of a series of monochromatic squares painted by artist Mark Rothko at the end of his life[31]. The series of black, brown and gray paintings consist of a play between the large mass of color in the foreground of the canvas and the much smaller line of lighter color in the background. In Zizek's estimation, Rothko, knowing that his death was imminent, painted the square larger and larger in each work, until the barrier between the mass of color and the background was nothing more than a sliver. Eventually, when

[30] See Lacan, *Le séminaire, Livre VII*. Paris: Seuil, 1986.
[31] In his analysis, Zizek identifies the square of color as Lacan's real and the background as what he refers to as "reality" but which is in effect Lacan's imaginary.

there was no more room to expand, yet before the square took over the canvas entirely, Rothko killed himself: "He preferred death to being swallowed by the Thing…that grey and formless mist, pulsing slowly as if with inchoate life . . . " (Zizek 19). In other words, the thin line separating the square from the background represents the barrier between the real and the imaginary, where the square is the real and the background of the canvas is the imaginary. If we apply this to the Papin sisters, we can read their crime as a similar collapse of reality into the real, the erasure of the barrier separating the two. "Far from being a sign of 'madness,' the barrier separating the real from reality is therefore the very condition of a minimum of 'normalcy': 'madness' (psychosis) sets in when this barrier is torn down, when the real overflows reality . . . or when it is itself included in reality" (20). As Zizek explains, the precarious balance seen in the Rothko paintings illustrates that which occurs in cases of paranoia: "The paranoid construction is . . . an attempt to heal ourselves, to pull ourselves out of the real 'illness,' the 'end of the world,' the breakdown of the symbolic universe, by means of this substitute formation" (19).

We can thus trace a line from the analysis of the Papins to the formalization of the symbolic via the role of language in their lives. Since the symbolic order is associated with language, entry into the symbolic involves establishing signifiers to "stand in" for the represented thing. As such, the symbolic order is the rational, the written and spoken linguistic system of man. In the case of the Papin sisters, the lack of speech between the maids and the Lancelin family represents a fractured order, in which the only words spoken were between the sisters and Madame. Furthermore, Lacan defines paranoia as a result of the imaginary overtaking the real, creating a symbolic order in which the subject is powerless to effect change in the system. In the relationship between the Lancelins and

the Papins, such an economy exists, marking it as a key influence to the development of this theory.

In much of Lacan's interpretation of the Papin sisters' crime, he illuminates certain elements of the killers' inner lives that had been previously hidden. Similarly, events from their past are shown to be causal elements in the crime. In his opinion, the crime should be regarded as a kind of translation into actions of previously unexamined frustrations and fears. In this theory, the two women become actors in a theatre of their own, perhaps the most "real" actions they ever committed. In his representation of the crime, Jean Genet transforms the murder into actual theatre, altering key elements as he transforms the factual story into fiction, and in so doing, presents a story otherwise unrepresentable.

Jean Genet, *Les Bonnes*

One of the most challenging interpretations of the sisters' story is Jean Genet's 1947 play, *Les Bonnes.* Genet draws on Lacan's study of the sisters' symbiotic relationship and incorporates it into a work in which there is a continuous rewriting and rereading of self by the two protagonists. He reduces the original murder quartet by one, placing housemaids and sisters Claire and Solange against their *patronne*, Madame, who is alternately a figure the maids strive to imitate and one whom they detest and plan to poison. These sisters engage in their own theater as they take on the role of one another and of their mistress, indulging in an elaborate ritual that serves as foreplay to the crime

they are forever on the verge of committing but never carry out. In this self-perpetuating drama, each sister repeatedly enacts her fantasy of inhabiting the other's body, adopting her name, wearing her clothing and acting out her desires. As such, the performance reveals the thin fabric that separates maid from Madame, sister from sister.

Theater and literature

Before moving to a discussion of this particular play it is important to examine the key differences between theatrical productions and literature. The word *theater* has its origin in several Greek words: *theatros*, which means "revealing," *theoria*[32], "a spectacle," or the adjective form "speculative" and finally the noun *théatron*, which is a place for seeing, a watching place. If we consider the theater as having evolved from these terms, and as such a conglomeration of all these significations, the multifaceted and complex nature of the art becomes clear. The theater is at once a place where one sees, an entity that reveals, a time for speculation, and sacred ground. Any text translated into drama is thus elevated to the status of a sensory experience capable of effecting change on its audience.

For the purpose of this study I will discuss three areas of theater on which Genet specifically relies in his play, *Les Bonnes*. These unique qualities of drama create a radically different experience for the audience from that of reading a text. Each contributes to the singular ability of theater to address questions of identity, interpretation

[32] Greek for *contemplation,* or "the perception of beauty regarded as a moral faculty" (Oxford English Dictionary 1495). The word is derived from the same root as the English word, *theory*.

and ritual that are at the core of the Papin story. First is the interpretive role of the actor and the fluctuations of identity inherent in his work. When assuming the identity of a character onstage, an actor must maintain a balance between self and other, entering the character with a part of his psyche while still remaining himself with the rest. He takes on the words, gestures and personality of another, yet never loses his "real" self, which is always available on some level, monitoring the feedback of the spectators, keeping check on the role he plays and gauging the success with which he plays it. The actor is "the word transformed into living flesh," (Esslin 34) a definition that borrows from the religious aspect of performance. Actors choose their gestures, tones of voice and facial expressions depending on the given moment, yet must remain within the confines of the text and the playwright's direction as well as the director's vision. In the introduction of a 1954 edition of *Les Bonnes*, Genet compares drama to poetry, proposing that the actor sublimate himself completely to the role, becoming the vessel through which playwright and audience communicate "des thèmes majeurs et de profonds symboles" (13) written by the playwright. The fragile barrier between actor and character endows each performance with a duality unique to theater.

The temporality of drama marked by the duality of time experienced at a play forms the second distinctive quality of theater. As opposed to the time spent reading a novel, which is determined by the reader, time in the theater is dependent on several factors, and is in many ways outside of time. According to Genet:

> Dès le debut de l'événement théâtral, le temps qui va s'écouler n'appartient à aucun calendrier répertorié . . . Même si le temps, que l'on dit historique . . . ne disparaît pas complètement de la conscience des

> spectateurs, un autre temps, que chaque spectateur vit pleinement, s'écoule alors, et n'ayant ni commencement ni fin, il fait sauter les conventions historiques nécessitées par la vie sociale, du coup qu'il faut sauter aussi les conventions sociales et ce n'est pas au profit de n'importe quel désordre mais à celui d'une libération—l'événement dramatique étant suspendu, hors du temps historiquement compté, sur son propre temps dramatique—, c'est au profit d'une libération vertigineuse. (10)

Furthermore, drama is an eternal present:

> Each time *Hamlet* is acted, Hamlet is present and goes through the sequence of the events that happened to him as if they were happening now for the first time. The same is true in ritual. Ritual abolishes time by putting its congregation in touch with events and concepts which are eternal and therefore infinitely repeatable. (Esslin 28)

Thus, time in theater is both the lived time of the performance and the infinitely repeatable time of the action within, making each play dually fixed and fluid.

Related to this is the third distinctive mark of theater: the ritual of drama, and by extension, the presence of an audience. Whereas a reader consumes a work of literature alone, he attends a play among other spectators, making it a communal experience. As such, theater involves more than just the consumption of a text; spectators actively partake of the drama, receiving information and sensory input from the actors and sending it back in the form of their own physical responses. Audience members move the actors along, pushing and advancing the action onstage "par des signes faibles, mais très clairement perceptibles en *feedback* . . . " (Ubersfeld 33). Audience reaction is never

static and must be regarded as an integral part of the drama. The theater is a place for illusion, but that illusion is never complete. The spectator enters into the drama while also being aware that what he observes is artifice. The division within the spectator that allows him to accept without accepting is similar to that of actor who takes on a role yet remains himself. Ritual and drama thus parallel each other, as they are equally focused on the efficacy of their symbolic component: "One can therefore look at ritual as a dramatic, a theatrical event—and one can look at drama as ritual. The dramatic side of ritual manifests itself in the fact that all ritual has a mimetic aspect; it contains an action of a highly symbolic, metaphorical nature …" (Esslin 27).

In the same introduction of the 1954 edition of *Les Bonnes*, Genet specifically addresses theater's link to religious rite: "Sous les apparences les plus familières—une croûte de pain—on y dévore un dieu. Théâtralement, je ne sais rien de plus efficace que l'élévation de l'hôte" (15). This passage is centered on the act of communion, the shared experience of God's body and blood. Celebration of the Eucharist is the ultimate mystical experience in which all participants merge into one: a complete, enraptured unity. Included in this unity is the congregation, as well, or in the case of theater, the audience. Genet envisions a theater where actions and gestures become metaphor, operating as the host in the Eucharist. "On ne peut que rêver d'un art qui serait un enchevêment profond de symboles actifs, capables de parler au public un langage où rien ne serait dit mais tout pressenti" (11-12). Were theater to achieve the symbolic and ritualistic aspect of religious ceremony, in which the bread and wine both represent the body and blood of Christ and actually are his body and blood, it would be the powerful transforming medium Genet desires it to be, needing no language or translation, only symbols.

Therefore, ritual is at the basis of all drama. In *Les Bonnes* the ritual is evident in the form of the ceremony the sisters perform each night. At the heart of this ritual is the maids' playacting, where each is free to act out the fantasy of being Madame. In this ceremony they also play at murdering her, but it is all under the guise of illusion. Yet on this particular night Solange has decided to carry through with the ceremony, to end the acting and actually kill Madame by poisoning her tea. The play opens during this ritual, and the spectator is immediately faced with the *mise en abyme* of the scene taking place on stage. For the first several minutes of the play, audience members are unaware that they are watching the two characters themselves play parts: the "Claire" and "Madame" of the opening scene are actually Solange and Claire enacting their own drama. In this scene Claire plays the role of Madame, and Solange, the role of Claire. The difficulty of staying in character becomes evident, as the actress Solange begins to emerge from behind the role of Claire:

SOLANGE. Oui madame, ma belle madame. Vous croyez que tout vous sera permis jusqu'au bout? Vous croyez pouvoir dérober la beauté du ciel et m'en priver? Choisir vos parfums, vos poudres, vos rouges à ongles, la soie, le velours, la dentelle et m'en priver? Et me prendre le laitier? Avouez! Avouez le laitier! Sa jeunesse, sa fraîcheur vous troublent, n'est-ce pas? Avouez le laitier. Car Solange vous emmerde!

CLAIRE. Claire! Claire!

SOLANGE. Hein?

CLAIRE. Claire, Solange, Claire. (29)

The slippage in Solange's performance reveals the otherness at the center of the character (that is to say, the entity created by an actress playing Solange playing Claire) onstage. While the *mise en abyme* gives a certain reflective quality to the play as a whole, the mirroring of the Solange-Claire character becomes so instable that it collapses into itself. Solange alternately refers to herself as Solange (her "real" name) and as Claire (her character's name and in "reality" her sister's name.) The line "Claire, Solange, Claire" reverses and repeats the names, reflecting the manner in which the roles played by each merge with and bleed into the other. The hatred directed at Madame becomes hatred for her sister as well, which is equally a self-hatred. The identities of she who hates and she who is hated are blurred to the point that they are indistinguishable. As Jean-Paul Sartre says, " . . . chacune, en l'autre, ne voit que soi-même à distance de soi, chacune témoigne à l'autre de l'impossibilité d'*être* soi-même . . . " (*Saint Genet* 682).

In Genet's presentation of sisters Claire and Solange, he relies (whether consciously or not) on Lacan's multifaceted interplay between self and other. Lacan defines the subject's knowledge and conception of himself, stemming from the mirror stage, as inherently other. In the mirror stage, a child first recognizes himself via the image he sees in the mirror. This illusion presents a wholeness previously unknown to the child, as before seeing his image he had only experienced himself in bits and pieces, what he could take in via his gaze. In the mirror he sees himself as complete. Furthermore, the illusory completeness is reinforced by the mother, who points to the image and says "Yes, that's you." This double reinforcement— his own gaze and the affirmation of the mother—creates his conception of self. The reliance on the other, both the other in the mirror and the other in the form of the maternal affirmation, forms the subject. Yet Lacan

reminds us that this complete body exists only in fantasy, in the mirror, and as such is an ideal that can never be completely realized. This is what Lacan refers to as *méconnaissance*, a misrecognition, which is the basis of self (*Ecrits* 97-98). Hence our concept of self relies on our misidentification with this image of the other.

Moving further into the self-other dynamic, Genet reduces the intended victims of the murder plot in *Les Bonnes* from what it was in the Papin case—a mother and daughter —to a single individual, Madame. He also adds a character, the permanently-absent Monsieur. If we want to consider this play as based in a Lacanian reading of the crime, this is a killing of the self, an *auto-punition*, in which there can be no extra victim. In the actual crime of 1933, we see a duality in the two women killers pitted against two women victims. It is logical that the crime be two on two, given the idea that the crime is a kind of mirroring of a self-killing. But if we incorporate Lacan's theory that the sisters act in unison because they are, in fact, one subject, any concept of parallelism is unbalanced if the murder claims two victims. For this reality we need only one person, Madame, to balance the duality Claire-Solange, mirrored as it is on the couple Christine-Léa.

Another important difference between the actual crime and the play is that in the case of the Papin sisters, Madame and Mademoiselle are killed. In *Les Bonnes* the sisters are unable to carry out their plan to kill Madame, since once they physically attempt to carry out the crime, Madame refuses to take the cup of tea they offer her, an unforeseen occurrence which brings to light the contingent nature of reality. This eventual failure leads to the denouement of the play and the death of Claire who, playing the role again of Madame, swallows the cup of cold poisoned tea. Madame is killed, but at the cost of the actual life of Claire, who dies in her stead. The mirroring seen in Lacan's analysis of the

crime is literalized in the play, as the interchangeable nature of the participants in the drama (both that of the play and that of the Papin sisters) extends to the point where one character actually dies in the act of self-punishment.

The repeated actions in drama are inexhaustible. In the space between the ceremony repeatedly performed by Claire and Solange and the actual murder, which never takes place, time stops, creating an eternal present that is the basis for theater itself. If we incorporate this idea into Genet's "alternate ending" as it were, we see that though the play results in the failure of the actual murder, and the substitution of Claire for Madame, the ritual nonetheless survives in the form of the next production. In other words Genet manages to create the very conditions necessary for the maids to live in the form of the imagined killing, regardless of the actual ending of the play. We as audience are forced to reflect on permanence, time and ritual as persistent factors not only in drama but in the real world.

The suspension of time is specifically addressed in Genet's production notes to the play. Entitled *Comment jouer Les Bonnes,* this document not only provides the anticipated stage direction, but also gives supplementary information about the author's own conception of his work. Genet begins with a one-word sentence: "Furtif" (*Les Bonnes* 7). He goes on to say that each of the actresses' gestures should be "suspendu, ou cassé" and the voices should be equally "suspendues et cassées" (7). These three adjectives—furtive, suspended, broken—could equally be used to describe Christine and Léa. Rather than serving as concrete instructions to his actors, these words reflect the unknown at the heart of the story. Genet instructs his actors to align themselves on stage with the hidden, interior states of the sisters. The silent gesture, the fluidity of movement

and its sudden stoppage, become the focus of the actors. As such, motion reinforces dialogue, action supplements language, the kinetic mirrors the linguistic, all in a kind of mirroring of the sisters. Lucien Goldmann speaks of the sisters' ritual and its value derived precisely from its existence in the imaginary space of the ritual: "A world, therefore, where everything is positive and negative at once and where the one authentic value is the imaginary realization of love-hate in the ritual which the maids resume each evening (and which they now act out, for spectators, on the stage)" (98).

In his instructions, Genet specifically addresses the question of boundaries. By stating that "(c)haque geste suspendra les actrices," (*Les Bonnes* 7) he indicates that the feeling of suspension should carry over into both the temporal and spatial dimensions, temporarily interrupting and blocking the flow of the play. This gesture reinforces the symbolic containment of the maids, the static, invisible limits that block off their lives in the home of Madame. Imposing such limitations to the story of Solange and Claire creates a fictional arena where specific questions of boundaries in the story of Christine and Léa can be explored. In bracketing the drama in such a way, Genet fixes the story in time and space, giving the complexities of the characters a definite beginning and ending, providing audience members a stable reference point to analyze. Furthermore, the eternal quality of the struggle between maid and Madame is fixed in time, clearly marking it as universal. Goldmann points out this universality, saying, "The world pivots on the relationship between the ruled and the rulers: the maids and Madame . . . It is a dialectical relationship, one of hatred and fascination" (96, 97).

If we return to the play's first scene, we see of one of the key boundaries to be examined, that between maid and mistress, symbolized in the gloves worn by Claire-

Solange. Her first words, “Et ces gants! Ces éternels gants!” (*Les Bonnes* 15) refer to these rubber gloves, the shackles that bind her to her maid identity. Yet in the theater enacted by the sisters, that is to say, in their play within a play, this boundary is crossed. The rubber gloves are cast off within the first few minutes of the play, a metaphor for the sisters’ liberation from the ugly, heavy, utilitarian ties that hold them. As such, the props seem to be part of the machinery that represses and controls the maids, symbols of their oppression. The gloves that had held them in this place are now tossed aside and the sisters are able to take on any identity they desire. In a passage of *L’Ecrivain scénique* in which he discusses props and clothing in *Les Bonnes*, Michel Vaïs suggests another way of reading the rubber gloves. He indicates that the clothing in this early scene is “animated,” literally brought to life by the sisters, as puppets would be animated by the puppeteers. Suggesting that the maids are in full control in this scene, Vaïs reads the glove manipulation as a conscious decision on the part of the maids, and that by removing them they are taking the first step leading to Madame’s murder. In this reading, the gloves symbolically serve as protection from the women’s “un-maidness,” (147) a barrier shielding them from the world, and *vice versa*. Only when the gloves are removed are the actual women beneath able to act out their desires. In this way the lines between maid and Madame, and as well between maid and killer, are easily transgressed, and it is the maid who is in full control.

As noted, the physical presence of the spectator transforms his experience of the story into a participatory one—she is given the ability to take part in the action simply by being a witness to it. In the active sense, to witness means to bear witness, to speak of what one has seen. This definition is used in both a religious and a judicial setting; a

witness is one who testifies[33]. A related but slightly different definition of the word is to see, to view: one witnesses the action of a play. Both of these meanings are relevant to *Les Bonnes*, as the audience member who sees the play also bears witness to the drama of Claire and Solange. Historical theater especially capitalizes on the concept of witnessing. Freddie Rokem speaks about the *katharsis* of historical plays, wherein the actors present themselves as witnesses of a traumatic event:

> Theatre about historical events generally focuses on a character with knowledge (sometimes even too much knowledge), where the victimized survivor is given the position of the witness. This witness is able to tell the spectators something about the experiences *previously hidden behind the 'veils'* of his or her past and now, through the performance, revealed to the spectators. The cathartic processes activated by the theatre performing history are more like *a 'ritual' of resurrection*, a revival of past suffering, where the victim is given the power to speak about the past again. (205, my italics)

Although *Les Bonnes* is not historical *per se*, it is clearly based on the drama of the Papin sisters. In what ways are Claire and Solange-Christine and Léa victimized survivors? What is their testimony, and how is the audience to read it? Rohan's veils are complicated in *Les Bonnes*, where events are unveiled, re-veiled, and unveiled again. Yet the idea of testimony is relevant for Claire and Solange, whose private theater reveals much of their hidden lives and desires, forming the basis of a veiled testimony of the Papin sisters. In these scenes each line has hidden meaning. Yet gradually it becomes

[33] Jacques Derrida links the terms *witness* and *testify* to their shared etymological root, the Latin *testis,* also the root of *testes*, which brings in the problem of gauging the truth of a witness, as no one has witnessed the witness witnessing. See Derrida, *Poétique et politique du témoignage*.

apparent that their discussion of clothing, the milkman, and Monsieur cloaks another conversation between the *actual* Claire and Solange. In this way they reveal by veiling their own disgust with each other and with their lives as maids:

> CLAIRE. … Solange, tu veux parler, n'est-ce pas, des malheurs de Monsieur. Sotte. Ce n'est pas l'instant de le rappeler, mais de cette indication je vais tirer un parti magnifique. Tu souris? Tu en doutes?
>
> SOLANGE. Ce n'est pas le moment d'exhumer…
>
> CLAIRE. Mon infamie? Mon infamie! D'exhumer! Quel mot!
>
> SOLANGE. Madame!
>
> CLAIRE. Je vois où tu veux en venir. J'écoute bourdonner déjà tes accusations, depuis le début tu m'injuries, tu cherches l'instant de me cracher à la face!
>
> SOLANGE. Madame, Madame, nous n'en sommes pas encore là. … (19-20)

Not only is the hidden conversation not hidden at all, Claire continually falls out of character, invoking Solange's repeated "Madame, Madame" to remind her of her role. Furthermore, the line "nous n'en sommes pas encore là" is an indication that the drama is scripted rather than purely improvised. In this example Claire has moved ahead to a later scene, and must again be reminded by her sister to "stick to the script."

Who is the audience for Claire and Solange's private drama? Their actions are clearly theater, as seen in the adaptation of roles, wardrobe and dialogue. But what is drama without an audience? For whom do they perform their ceremony? In the play

enacted by Claire and Solange they are at once writers, directors, actors, and logically their own audience as well, as they are the only individuals present during the ceremony. They are alone in the house each time the play is performed; therefore the audience must be Claire and Solange themselves. But each does not perform for the other; rather the performance as a whole is enacted for the two of them as audience. In other words, Claire-Solange and Solange-Madame perform for Claire and Solange, who are both actors and spectators, self-aware and aware of their play as a whole entity. The self-conscious theater involves a split within the characters, which allows them to be present as audience member and as actor, witnessing themselves play themselves. The play they enact is clearly a means of gaining power over Madame, a way of giving themselves power, as members of the faithful, the congregation. The drama is thus performed as a ceremony leading up to Madame's murder, but perhaps more importantly an opportunity to step outside the mirror and watch oneself play the other. Yet their power stops once the illusion within the play ends. They are able to control Madame, but in the end they cannot bring about her death.

Jean Genet on theater

Genet was critical of modern theater and its role in society. In a letter to Jean-Jacques Pauvert, which served as an introduction to the 1954 edition of *Les Bonnes*, he discusses his opinion of Western theater and his desire to instill in it the significance it once had. When compared to that of the east, occidental theater no longer serves the central role

that it should. “Son point de départ, sa raison d’être, c’est l’exhibitionisme” (12). The actor in this theater, rather than despairing, is complacent. “L’acteur occidental ne cherche pas à devinir un signe chargé de signes, simplement il veut s’identifier à un personnage de drame ou de comédie” (12). Furthermore, Genet calls *Les Bonnes* a failure, since what he had envisioned, a play that would unite author and spectator such that the characters onstage would be pure metaphor of what they were supposed to represent, failed to come to pass. The theatre he envisions is impossible to carry out, because there are no actors who can perform the roles he writes. “Je le sais, des marionnettes feraient mieux qu’eux l’affaire. Déjà l’on songe à elles” (14).

Clearly Genet considers the role of theater to be in line with that of ritual and religious ceremony. As such, *Les Bonnes* goes a long way to explain the fascination that the case of the Papin sisters has exercised on the public by reinforcing the ritual aspect of the murders. The spectator’s identification with the characters links him to the killers much as the experience of *katharsis* in Greek tragedy. Just as Oedipus, whose own guilt mirrors that of each spectator, is ultimately a reflection of the collective Greek society, Claire and Solange are a reflection of us. Genet’s play points to the idea that the public’s fascination with the Papin sisters stems from the fact that, in some way, we identify with the sisters.

Chapter Four

Visual and Cinematic Representations

Moving from dramatic representations of this crime to its cinematic narratives is a delicate shift. Cinema is less like theater than might be thought, though it offers its audience a similar visual experience. Film is more neatly aligned with the montage, as cinema is based in the technical manipulation of still images and the viewer's unconscious retention of those images as they pass before her eyes. Both the nature of the montage and the quality of the experience of viewing a film in a darkened theater make cinema the ideal medium by which to view murder stories. In many ways, murder in the cinema offers access to physical, visual and psychological states unavailable in any other medium. The spectator is able to intimately approach the event but with no risk of being touched by actual blood or harmed by the killer. Cinema removes any danger associated with death, but leaves the gore and spectacle, allowing the viewer a safe, secure entry to a murder.

Cinema encapsulates the role of vision in representing murder and its after effects on several levels. First is the reliance on a visual medium on the part of the filmmaker. Elements of public spectacle and voyeurism are reflected in the compulsion to show murders onscreen. As well, the audience member's desire to know translated into the desire to see, drawing on elements of spectatorship linked to the forbidden and the gruesome, as was seen in public executions. Certain films specifically speak to the link between voyeurism and knowledge, especially knowledge related to crimes such as murder. Michael Powell's 1960 film, *Peeping Tom,* for instance, draws on the need for

the visual in the actual moment of killing. The protagonist craves images of women watching themselves being killed, the result of his own experience of trauma as a child. His own father filmed him in moments of fear or extreme sadness. As an adult, he takes the place of the father behind the camera, filming the faces of the women he murders, not only killing them with a weapon fashioned out of his movie camera, but also adding the twist of placing a mirror on the outside edge of the camera lens, so that the victim's face reflects the horror of seeing her own death and the expression of fear on her own face as she dies. The tropes of reflection and mirroring are literalized in this film.

Other films incorporate crime and the desire to see as a way to bring to light the relationship between viewer and viewed. In *Rear Window* of Alfred Hitchcock and *Blow Up* of Michelangelo Antonioni, the play between event and the gaze is complicated. In the first, a man believes to have witnessed a murder in the apartment across from his own. His vision is sometimes mediated by the closed shades and darkness on the side of the crime (in the opposite apartment,) sometimes enhanced by his own camera and its close-up lens (in his own apartment.) He remains fixed in place, however, unable to move due to a broken leg, an affliction that led him to the activity of gazing in the first place. As the scene across from him is silent, the possible crime and its investigation by the protagonist and his more mobile assistants unfold entirely in the visual register.

Similarly, the film *Blow Up* is the story of a possible crime that a photographer inadvertently captures as he is taking pictures in a public park at night. He spots an peculiar object in the corner of the photographs as he is developing them, which compels him to enlarge the photos repeatedly, effectively entering deeper and deeper into the visual product. The object captured in his shot, enlarged and thus blurred, appears to be a

dead body partially hidden in some bushes in the park. The photographer is intrigued, and rushes back to the scene to look for the actual body. He finds nothing, and is uncertain as to the existence of a crime at all, since what he thinks is a dead body in the photograph is not actually there in reality. In this film, the camera opens up reality by focusing in on the body, yet at the same time it complicates the visual by blurring the same scene, making any reading uncertain. As such, the increase in the visual field offered by the camera might be illusory, as the viewer of the photograph as well as the spectator of the film itself are unsure about the truth of the scene.

Thus, the apparent enhancement provided to a scene of murder by the camera must be regarded as potentially misleading. Much like the photograph of the crime scene of the Papin sisters' murder, where what was seen was immediately challenged by the killers, the visual representation is not without inherent complications. Does a visual portrayal actually provide anything more substantial in resolving a crime? Is anything gained by the characters of the films discussed by their use of a camera? Similarly, in the films that represent the crime of the Papins, is more information gleaned from this visual portrayal, and if not, why does cinema represent the culmination of the telling of this event, perhaps offering the spectator more than even a theatrical presentation?

Cinema and theater

In the chapter "Théâtre et cinéma II" of *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?,* André Bazin suggests that one central difference between theater and film is the way in which the spectator

views herself in relation to the actors, and thus, to the event portrayed before her. In this example, as in many others, cinema reflects its basis in photography: “Le photographe procède, par l’intermédiaire de l’objectif, à une véritable prise d’empreinte lumineuse: à un moulage. Comme tel, il emporte avec lui plus que la ressemblance, une sorte d’identité . . . ” (151). The photograph is made via a “tracing” of the object or person shown within, a process much closer to an actual physical presence than a mere image. Film, as a continuation of this process, provides the viewer with a simulacrum that borders on a physical reality, an opportunity to enter into the drama. As opposed to the relationship between actor and spectator found in the shared space of theater, cinema presents a distinctly closed world where the spectator joins the illusion taking place before her, losing herself completely in the filmed drama. Bazin further states that the audience member at a play must maintain a level of conscious control in order to maintain a willing suspension of disbelief, that the flesh and blood realness of the actors onstage is a constant reminder that the drama itself is *not* real. In cinema, on the other hand, the actor *is* the character; the abstraction from real to illusion is already complete, thus the spectator does not need to actively intervene to make it so. As such, she experiences a willing and effortless psychological identification with the hero (153-54).

Furthermore, cinematic technology gives the filmmaker the ability to visually reveal areas that are unavailable to the audience in a theatrical production, bringing the viewer into the event. The close up, for example, draws the viewer into the intimate space of the actors, often allowing her to see through their eyes. The way a film is edited visually links diegetic elements such that certain thematic components are highlighted. The soundtrack as well offers a sensual experience unavailable in other forms of

representation, as the sounds of murder—the knife entering the flesh of the victim, the groans and cries of pain, the slushy sound of an enucleation—are easily added to a film, making present for the spectator the gruesome, visceral reality of the experience.

Moreover, the spectator does not occupy the shared space of the action; the screen is delineated, separated, realistic but ultimately not *real.* As Bazin notes, "Le cinéma étant par essence une dramaturgie de la nature, il ne peut y avoir cinéma sans construction d'un espace ouvert, se substitutant à l'univers au lieu de s'y inclure" (164). The spectacle provided by film is experienced as a space much like the exterior world, one into which the viewer can enter, yet in which he is protected by the screen of illusion. Unlike being a spectator at a "live" scene of an actual death, he views an abstracted death, entering the drama as a ghost, identifying with the characters, but ultimately able to leave the cinema. As such, cinema has the unique capacity to give its audience pure simulacrum: the illusion of entering the crime itself.

To further comprehend this idea and its relation to the murders committed by Christine and Léa, we must look at the implications of this protected space. If the spectator is able to enter into the drama onscreen, to what degree does this movement align him with the characters? "Il est faux de dire que l'écran soit absolument impuissant à nous mettre 'en presence' de l'acteur. Il le fait à la manière d'un miroir . . . mais d'un miroir au reflet différé . . . " (152). This description of the function of cinematic reality is important for several reasons. First is the fulfillment of the desire to confront, on a purely speculative level, the killers. Cinema puts the viewer face to face with Christine and Léa, in their presence and in their world. No other medium allows such an intimate relationship between audience and killer. Secondly, Bazin's description of this action as

taking place “in the same way as a mirror” clearly references Narcissus, bringing the viewer back to his own culpability and its relation to the killers. In a mirror, the self is reflected in the gaze. Yet in cinema, the spectator views a character, not the self. Where is the overlap of self-before-mirror and self-before-character? Each entity in the equation possesses the unique qualities of real and illusion, but in blurring the distinction between self and image, the spectator becomes linked to the onscreen character in the way he is bound to his own image reflected in a mirror.

Finally, the temporal repercussions of the refraction are significant in two areas. First, the actress herself is absent in time and space; the mirrored reflection of image is the only version of the actress that is present. Moreover, in her onscreen presence, she is not herself but a character. This doubling reflects the fundamental duality of acting that was seen in the theater. Secondly, her presence is made real to the spectator due to the complex biological process by which the human eye views the montage. The delay between the moment the eye sees each still frame in the film is what makes film possible. In fact, the process of viewing links the spectator to the character in a very physical way: film is based in montage, and the process of viewing a montage involves the spectator’s body as an essential part of the process. In viewing a film, the retina retains each image for several seconds, causing a delayed refraction. This gives the eye the ability to read the montage as movement rather than static images. The physical process of viewing thus creates a psychological bond between viewer and viewed, subject and object.

Since film is based in the montage and its reliance on unconscious associations, and the montage is based in the still image, it is important to examine the use of still photographs of the Papin sisters before moving on to the filmed versions of the crime.

The "before and after" photographs

In early journalistic coverage of the murders committed by Christine and Léa, reliance on the visible is already evident. In fact, there are few photographs that have been as central to the iconography of a crime as are those that surround the Papin sisters. Perhaps the images of Jack the Ripper's last victim, Mary Kelly, or those of the crime scene of Elizabeth Short, the so-called Black Dahlia, in 1940s Los Angeles come close. Yet these are images of the crime scenes, and as such depict the victims of murder, not the perpetrators. The use of the photographs of the Papin sisters is different as it reflects the desire to gaze upon the horror of murder in the form of the killers, not the victims. Though crime scene photographs exist of the bloody aftermath of the Papin murders, showing the sliced bodies and faces made unrecognizable by the attack, in this case it is the killers' faces that attract viewers. The images in question are two sets of photographs, one taken around 1927 (Fig. 1,) and the other taken at the prison following the sisters' arrest (Fig. 2.) How the early image came to be in the journalists' possession is unknown, but it has been surmised that one of the first reporters who came into the sisters' room removed the photograph from its frame and took it with him[34]. Regardless of the source, the images became the focus of many articles in which journalists used the pictures as a way to assign meaning to the crime, noting a transformation in the faces seen in the two sets of photographs. For these writers the deed was written onto the women, and legible in their faces.

[34] See interview with Paulette Houdyer for comments about this discovery in the documentary film by Claude Ventura, *En Quête des Sœurs Papin*.

Fig. 1. Léa (on left) and Christine Papin before their crime.

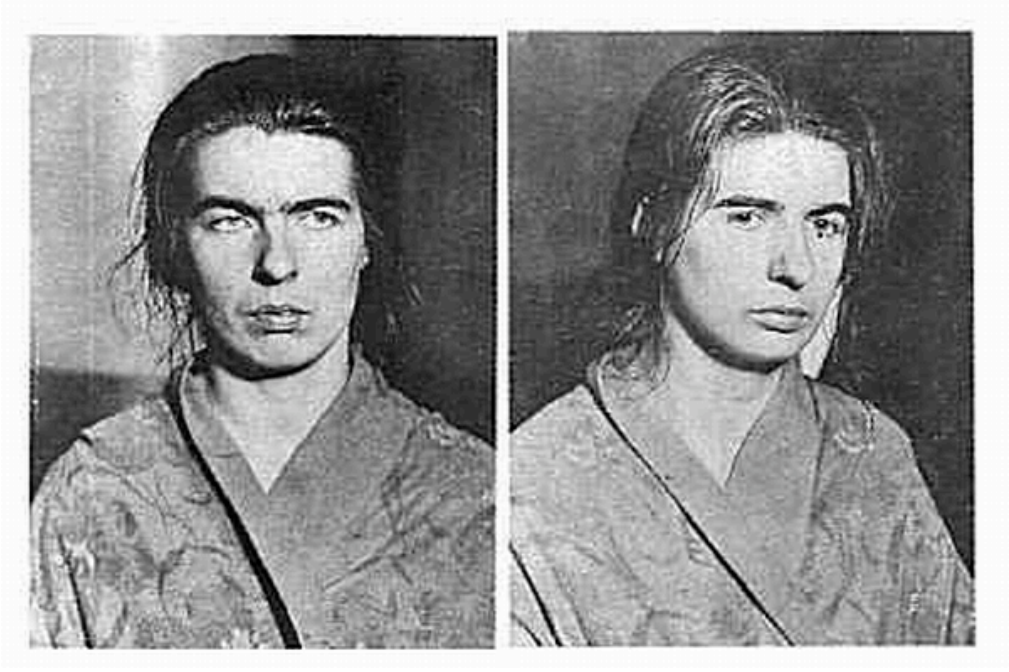

Fig. 2. Christine and Léa after committing the murders. Here Christine is on the left, Léa on the right.

If we analyze each photograph individually, we find that they easily fit into an existing narrative. The “before” image shows two well-groomed and poised women, no

doubt ideal domestic servants, appearing incapable of violence. Similarly, the "after" photographs depict the same women, however in these images they are disheveled and defiant; what before seemed to be a blank stare now appearing to be the harsh stare of a killer. In the images taken after the murders, each woman visually bears the mark of her crime. Yet in newspaper articles on the women, seldom is there an actual analysis of each photograph. Instead the images are read in tandem, physically positioned side by side on the page and discussed together as a set. In this reading, the temporal distance between the two photographs becomes critical, lending itself to an entirely different story. In order to comprehend the lapse of time between 1927 and 1933, the event that took place in that time frame must be understood, yet in order to do this, we must somehow make sense of the transformation of the two women caused by the event. Thus reading takes place at the level of the visual image before us, but only as a way to explain the unseen "image" in the space between the two photos. The circularity of cause and effect complicates the reading: is the second set of images the "real" Christine and Léa, and the first a reflection of the clever roles they played before the crime? Or did the horror of what they did transform them into something monstrous? Is the image in the after photograph what lies beneath the mask of all maids, in a way a terrifying glimpse of Lacan's real[35]? Or are the women actually changed by the crime, their blank horrific stares reflecting the event that permanently altered their psyches? In other words, were they always evil, or did the commission of the crime transform them into the malevolent creatures in the after photos?

[35] See Lacan's reference to Harpo Marx in *Seminaire VII*: "N'y a-t-il rien qui puisse poser une question plus présente, plus pressante, plus prenante, plus chavirante, plus nauséeuse, plus faite pour jeter dans l'abîme et le néant ce qui se passe devant lui, que la figure, marquée de ce sourire dont on ne sait si c'est celui de la plus extrême perversité ou de la niaiserie la plus compléte, d'Harpo Marx?" (69).

As has been seen in other murder narratives, tying to comprehend a crime entails putting disparate elements into a logical order. However, in the analyses of the photographs, the desire to read meaning into the faces of Christine and Léa goes beyond imposing order on a chaotic event. Writing about the transformation from maid to killer incorporates a degree of morality in the reading, becoming a way to condemn the women as well as to classify them. This is clearly reflected in the register of the vocabulary used in descriptions accompanying the photographs in newspapers: *anges*, *monstres*, *brébis enragés*. Underlying the inflammatory language are the polarities of good and evil, docility and violence, human and monster, reflecting the sensational jargon of the press but also showing the difficulty in accepting that there might be another explanation lying somewhere between each set of extremes. The idea that absolutely anyone could erupt in a murderous attack is untenable. Christine and Léa *must* be abnormal; otherwise the story becomes terrifyingly banal and repeatable. Precisely because of their otherness, they can be regarded as atavistic and, more importantly, culpable. In this way the visual reinforces the desired narrative of the police and of society. We know the women are evil, because we can see it ourselves in the photograph.

The Surrealists and the Papins

Surrealist writers of the era pushed the potential of the photographic montage, formalizing it as a process by which to gain access to a "réalité suprême" (Breton 52) created by the conjunction of disparate images. One of the tenets of surrealism is to

embrace the active use of the imagination and to rely on dreams and the unconscious in order to find meaning in both texts and in visual images. In the first *Manifeste du surréalisme,* André Breton comments on the limits imposed by logical thought, rejecting the rational in favor of meaning derived by unconscious associations. Instead of trying to control and rationalize the exterior world, one should rely on disconnected images and associations that are created by the reception of unexpected thoughts. Quoting Baudelaire's description of images that come to him while taking opium, Breton proposes that one abandon oneself to these images and thoughts that "s'offrent à lui, spontanément, despotiquement. Il ne peut les congédier; car la volonté n'a plus de force et ne gouverne plus les facultés" (50).

Breton and Paul Eluard drew upon the potential inherent in the montage when they published the photographs of Christine and Léa in the December 1933 issue of "Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution." In this journal, the editors subvert the reading of the images by incorporating them into a montage, inviting the reader to allow the unconscious associations created by the visual data to direct his thoughts. The layout includes the photographs on a page in conjunction with an article discussing the revolutionary nature of the work of painter René Magritte, and an illustration entitled *Vierge retroussée,* which shows a winking nun pulling up her habit to reveal high heels and bare thighs. By placing these items together, Breton and Eluard encourage a reading of the montage in which all disparate elements are included, regardless of their context. In this way, the reader is likely to make an association between the sisters and the blasphemous nun, adding a sexual, revolutionary element to the reading. Furthermore, on the following page is an essay on the Papins' crime by Eluard and Benjamin Péret:

> Six ans, elles endurèrent avec la plus parfaite soumission observations, exigences, injures. La crainte, la fatigue, l'humiliation, enfantaient lentement en elles la haine, cet alcool très doux qui console en secret car il promet à la violence de lui adjoindre, tôt ou tard, la force physique. Le jour venu, Léa et Christine Papin rendirent sa monnaie au mal, une monnaie de fer rouge." (27-28)

Though open to the interpretation of each reader, clearly for the surrealists this montage transforms the sisters into rebels and elevates them to the status of mythical heroines. As Christopher Lane observes: "Magritte's illustration therefore depicts a surrealist fantasy that the Papin sisters were engaged in a rebellion against bourgeois piety, for it sexualizes the act of murder by making their transgression against the community of Le Mans 'saucy'" (45).

Breton's use of the photographs, as opposed to both written narratives and dramatic interpretations of the crime, muddies the concept of representation as a single cohesive version of the event, since the montage plays on existing associations in the mind of the viewer. The way the photographs are placed on the page, the accompanying text and the associated drawings have significant influence on the reading of the women and the crime. In this way the montage is a medium of its own, able to incorporate a variety of elements that, when viewed together, create a reading unique to each individual. In particular, the incorporation of components unrelated to the act committed by the sisters takes the crime out of any fixed locale, and the process of incorporating the unconscious of the viewer creates a bond between spectator and image that carries over into the cinema in its linking of viewed and viewed, self and other.

Cinematic representations

In cinematic representations of the crime, the centrality of these elements of the montage to the relationship between spectator and story become evident. Cinema is based in the montage and is entirely illusory: light and shadow are projected onto a screen, but there is a marked absence of physical actors, sets, costumes and dialogue. Film is complete illusion, pure image, lacking physicality; there is nothing actually there. The spectator is presented with images that invoke unconscious associations that virtually create his experience of viewing. How does this medium affect the reception of the Papin story? Cinematic presentations of the event continue to focus on questions of motive and sanity, areas of the story where uncertainty continues to drive public interest in the crime. How does the cinema provide resolution where other mediums do not? Or, rephrasing this same question, what does a visual representation give the viewer that can only be provided via the cinema? Similar to the experience of reading a text, the act of viewing a film give the viewer control over the story, as a film exists can be consumed again and again. Both mediums are finite and can be read, re-read, viewed and re-viewed as many times as the individual desires. Unlike the text, however, film incorporates unconscious associations seen in the montage, and presents the viewer with the pleasure of the violence, the fluidity of the experience of pure visual gratification.

Each filmed version of the Papin affair highlights certain areas of the generally-accepted story, picking up and often extending themes present in textual treatments of the crime (the role of language, the duality in the sisters' relationship, elements of social

oppression) as well as opening up entirely new areas that cannot be explored in written narrative (visual linking of past and present, a sense of containment and oppression). Also significant is the fact that each of the three films to be examined here—*La Cérémonie* of Claude Chabrol, *Sister My Sister* of Nancy Meckler, and *Les Blessures assissines* of Jean-Pierre Denis—finds difficulty in the same aspects of the crime. Each film addresses with particular attention three areas of the crime: the role of language in both fixing the subject in a role and in negating her existence completely, the importance and the sexual nature of dualities in the film, especially as they relate to the concept of a *folie à deux*, and the sisters' interdependency and its role in the scene of murder itself. These specific areas appear to be particularly problematic for the directors, posing specific difficulties in each film. These potential representational limits are approached by the filmmakers via certain cinematic techniques in order to allow the spectator the closest approach to the murders that is possible.

Claude Chabrol, *La Cérémonie*

The film *La Cérémonie* is not literally based on the Papin case, yet director Claude Chabrol draws on many themes seen in the crime, specifically that of motive, and gives his crime a randomness that speaks to the possibility of the crime resulting from no motive whatsoever. The title refers to a seminal scene in Genet's play, *Les Bonnes*, in which Solange and Claire speak of the murder of their mistress (which ultimately never transpires) as *la cérémonie*. In Chabrol's film, this idea is reversed: there is no

preliminary ceremony; instead best friends Sophie and Jeanne complete the work interrupted in *Les Bonnes* and then some, as they kill all four members of the family for whom Sophie works as a maid. As in previous representations of the Papin sisters' crime, language plays an important role in creating tension between the family and the maid. Elements of social inequality take on a more vital importance in Chabrol's story, which is set in modern-day France, where class divisions are still evident. The relationship between the two killers is also aligned with that of the Papin sisters: each woman has no one but the other—no family, no friends, no lovers. They are united further in the sense that each is, on several levels, an outsider. Sophie is hired as a maid, and relegated to the upper levels of the family's home. Jeanne works in the local post office and is shunned by others in the village due to her irresponsible treatment of their mail and her increasingly unpleasant demeanor. Thus the two are joined in their alterity. As such, their crime is in many ways a *folie à deux* seen from the inside, as the audience is privy to their "secret" dialogues and actions as they grow closer to each other and further from societal decorum and laws. The spectator witnesses the event of murder as something that is layered, resulting from a complex set of circumstances that cannot be completely unraveled or understood.

Nancy Meckler, *Sister My Sister*

Sister My Sister, a 1994 British film based on the play *My Sister in this House* by Wendy Wasserman, is much more clearly based on the Papin sisters' story. From the opening

credits, this film establishes as its focus the relationship and the dualities between Christine and Léa as well as those between them and their two employers. These credits, filmed in black and white, consist of a montage sequence of Christine and Léa as children. In each segment of the montage, the elder Christine is seen caring for, feeding, dressing and comforting her younger sister. The innocence of this childhood relationship is thus a formative scene for the viewer, one that is carried throughout the entire film, creating a similar sense of innocence and purity in the love between the two as adults. It is clear that this film is less a tale of class struggle than a story of the nature of the bond between the two women and the connection between their relationship and the crime they commit. The visual transition from the end of the black and white sequence—a scene in which the mother carries Léa away—to the next scene—a flash-forward in which the camera pans down a set of stairs to the crime scene—visually joins mother, mistress, loss of sister and hatred that may be the basis of the murders. As the camera tracks backwards, from the top of the wooden stairs leading from the *chambres de bonne* to the landing below, the viewer gradually sees items appear in her line of vision: scattered flowers, blood-covered packages, broken glass and a sliced and bloody stockinged leg. The camera finally comes to rest on a close up of the lace curtains of the window, setting up a sense of enclosure and claustrophobia that marks this film. The accompanying soundtrack—a woman's voice singing a child's song about her sister—aurally links the bloodbath on the landing to the younger sisters of the opening credits.

Meckler incorporates the basic facts of the crime of the Papin sisters in such a way that the story becomes universal. The name of the employer family is altered: they are not the Lancelins but the Danzards. The town, as well, is never indicated, thus the

crime is not fixed in any location. A further change is the marked absence of the husband and father of the patron family. As in most of the representations we have seen, this male presence is written out of the story, refocusing the crime as a specifically gendered murder: all action, causes and effects are feminine. Moreover, on a technical level, the entire production team is made up of women, giving this film a unique perspective in its focus on the murders as a crime of women.

Jean-Pierre Denis, *Les Blessures assassines*

Les Blessures assassines is a more conventional portrayal of the Papin sisters' crime, and is focused almost exclusively on Christine. In fact, given that she is present in every scene of the film save two, she is clearly marked as the key perpetrator of the crime and the focus of interest for the audience. Jean-Pierre Denis traces the sisters' crime to their shared history, beginning the story in the sisters' childhood and focusing on their entire lives rather than just the years spent in the employ of the Lancelins. *Les Blessures assassines* contains far fewer scenes in the employer's household than either of the other two films, concentrating instead on the world outside and in the home of their mother. Reading the murders as a result of Christine's traumatic past, Denis examines the lacks in her life in order to reach an explanation for the later crime. In this film, she is presented as being invisible for the families for whom she works, irrelevant, a lack. As the actress who plays Christine, Sylvie Testud, observes in an interview: "Nous avons une identité par rapport à une autre chose: une position, une personne. La place assignée à Christine

était trop étroite." This film portrays Christine as completely at the mercy of those around her, controlled by her employers, her mother, even her love for Léa. Denis speaks of her as having spent "toute sa vie au service des autres," the importance of which is visually transmitted via the director's use of alternating scenes in which Christine is seen juggling her responsibilities to others and her own fears and desires. Trapped between her mother, her employer and her sister, she is clearly in a space that is "trop étroite."

Despite the differences in approach and focus of each director, the films on the crime of the Papin sisters reflect the same key elements that have already been outlined in the other representations of the murders: the role of language, the nature of the relationship between the two killers, and the uncertain origin of the attack on the victims.

Language and naming

The true nature of Christine and Léa's temperament was, in retrospect, evident to the son of one of the former employers of the Papins, who is interviewed in a scene from the film *En Quête des sœurs Papin*[36]. He neatly and apparently unintentionally encapsulates the role of language in their lives when he categorizes[37] the sisters, along with the rest of their class: "A l'époque . . . les domestiques . . . il y avait les bonnes coucheuses, les

[36] Claude Ventura's 2000 documentary was made in conjunction with *Les Blessures assassines.* It chronicles the director's examination of primary documents, interviews with police officials and authors who remember the event, and his search for a woman claiming to be Léa Papin. The son of the former employer is only identified as "B de Dieuleveult".

[37] His observation, made many years after the crime, mirrors that of the police investigator at the sisters' interrogation who used the term *chiffonières* in referencing and categorizing Christine and Léa.

bonnes voleuses, les bonnes buveuses. Elles appartenaient presque automatiquement . . . à la catégorie des bonnes insolentes."

Language is central to the formation of the subject and a fundamental element in the Papin sisters' story. Filmmakers have exploited this aspect of the story through a visual portrayal of the central role of language in the lives of Christine and Léa. In *La Cérémonie*, Chabrol gestures to the role of language as that which creates a space for Sophie while at the same time marking her as symbolically absent. Daughter of the family, Melinda, first attacks her parents' use of the word *bonne* during a family discussion following the hiring of Sophie by her mother: "'La bonne,' c'est humiliant. Vous pouvez dire 'ma gouvernante' . . . " Her father plays around with the word, testing it on his lips: "C'est un terme assez gratifiant . . . 'bonne à tout faire' . . . bonne . . . à tout faire, qui peut s'en vanter!" Though Melinda's desire to re-create Sophie's position by naming it differently is an attempt to defend Sophie's dignity as an individual, her solution is to impose another name, one that, in fact, is nothing more than a synonym for "maid."

Further objectification of Sophie is evident in this same scene in a remark made by her brother, Gilles: "Elle n'est pas trop moche . . . ?" to which the father chuckles and replies: "Ah! Il aime les belles choses!" This exchange demonstrates the capacity of language to reinforce the existing societal power structure. Each individual discusses the maid as if she is an object, *une belle chose*. Yet even so, Sophie passes barely noticed by Madame, who says in response to her son's question, "Ecoutez . . . je n'en sais rien. J'ai pas remarqué. En tout cas, elle n'est pas monstrueuse, sinon je m'en serai aperçu!" A later scene further reinforces the position of *la bonne* as object and possession. Madame

hosts a dinner party for which Sophie has prepared the food. As the guests compliment the *petites quiches* Madame replies: "C'est notre Sophie qui les a faites." *Notre Sophie* gestures to the maid not only as a possession, but as nothing *but* a possession. Recalling the remark of Genet's *bonnes*, "Madame nous aime comme ses fauteuils," Sophie is barely noticed, yet admirably useful.

Further complicating Sophie's position with regard to language is the fact that she is illiterate. While the fact of her illiteracy indicates her class, as the inability to read is generally perceived to be a stigma of the lower classes, it further translates into a limited participation in the world of signs, as she is isolated from complete entry into the communicative system of those around her. In a Lacanian sense, language is what defines entry of the subject into the symbolic order. Lacking this fundamental ability, she is not only excluded from that order, she is forced to play the role of one who *has* entered into the realm of language, the image of which becomes a motif in the film. In repeated scenes, Sophie pretends to read notes, grocery lists, instructions from the family; each time she puts on her "reading glasses," squints at the words and pretends to read the text, mimicking what she has observed in others. This separation from the literate world makes her an actor in her own life, a linguistic outsider in relation to those around her as well as an "other" to herself.

Thus language both defines and objectifies the maid, often to the point that the individual to whom *bonne* refers is blotted out completely. A short scene in *Les Blessures assassines* illustrates this erasure of the individual referred to as *la bonne*. It begins in the home of a family for whom Christine works prior to being hired by the Lancelins. She is seen from behind, working in the kitchen. A bell rings off-screen, and she hurries from

the kitchen. She enters the dining room and is seen framed in a medium long shot, visually fading into the background as she is dressed in a white apron and standing between tall white double doors. The camera then cuts to a medium long shot of the entire room, where we see Madame and Monsieur seated at the circular table and Christine standing in the doorway in the center of the frame. Monsieur speaks, "Approchez . . . on ne va pas vous manger." Christine is washed out by the whiteness of the walls against her apron and appears ghostlike as she moves towards the dining room table. Monsieur walks into the frame, facing away from the camera, and appears to inspect Christine, looking her over and leaning behind her to examine the back of her head. He speaks, though not to Christine but to his wife, saying, "J'aurais juré qu'elle était blonde!" He shakes his head and moves out of the frame. Christine remains standing in the center of the shot for a second, looking blankly in front of her, then Monsieur's voice is heard, saying "Vous pouvez vous disposer, Zépherine," as he waves his hand to dismiss her, a hand barely visible in the lower corner of the screen. She turns and leaves the room. The scene cuts to a shot of the exterior of the door as she exits, the camera tracking backwards as she exits. Monsieur's words are again heard off-screen: "C'est charmant . . . *Zépherine*." Though he fully knows her name to be Christine, he prefers the sound of "Zépherine." Similarly, the true color of her hair is a mystery to him, since he has never actually seen her. Her entire existence is fleeting and temporary, a nameless figure passing in and out of the dining room. The person known as Christine does not exist for the family.

This scene can be coupled with the one before and the one after it and analyzed as a sequence consisting of one continuous movement by the character. The preceding scene

shows Christine walking through town as she returns home from a rare Sunday spent alone with Léa. At the end of the scene, she stands framed in a medium close up, looking directly at the camera, as a voice-over describes the day she has just spent with Léa "sans ma mère." She turns away from the camera and moves away in a semicircle, walking from left to right. In the opening of the dining room scene, Christine is seen bent over the stove, framed in the same way as the previous scene, a medium shot with her body slightly to the left of center of the screen. As the bell rings from the other room, she moves from left to right across the screen, dries her hands on a towel, then moves in the opposite direction, disappearing off-screen, then apparently walking directly into the dining room in the next shot. As she enters, she is seen again in a medium shot. Her movement into the room is from right to left, then as she leaves, following the encounter with Monsieur, it is in the reverse direction, from left to right. In the next shot, filmed from outside the room, she appears as if in the same continuous movement, making a semicircle as she exits the room and moves off-screen to the left. The next scene is an exterior tracking shot in which the camera follows Christine as she moves from left to right down the street, as if she has gone directly from the dining room to the street in one single movement. In this final scene the camera follows a disheveled Christine on her way to see her other sister, Emilia, who is a novice in the convent. The camera moves in for a medium close up of her face as she speaks, "Seigneur, moi aussi, tu m'appelleras?" The result of this series of shots is that the audience experiences Christine's journey through the scenes as one single and fluid movement. The three scenes in tandem visually reinforce the spectator's experience of her life as the repeated motion seen here: moving

from her sister to the patron's home to sister to God. The sequence further present Christine as being in a perpetual state of namelessness, repeated and reinforced daily.

An early scene in *Sister My Sister* similarly emphasizes the role of speech and silence, but in this instance, it is via the soundtrack itself. In a scene in which Léa has just arrived at Madame Danzard's house, the sisters await Madame's decision as to whether or not she will be hired to work in the house with Christine. The scene begins in complete silence, except for the ticking clock. The camera focuses on a low-angle shot of Christine standing in her maid's apron, her face serious, lips pursed, eyes downcast. It then cuts to a similar low-angle shot of Léa, who also stands looking at Madame. In this shot of Léa, Christine's image is reflected in the mirror over the mantle, and as such she is reinforced as a dominant figure in Léa's world. The camera then moves to a level medium shot of Madame who is seated in an armchair reading a letter, a shot framed by the out-of-focus bodies of Christine and Léa in the foreground, seen from behind. The camera slowly pans in on Madame's face, the soundtrack still silent but for the ticking clock. The next shot is a medium long shot of all four characters, though Isabelle is barely visible, standing behind a floor lamp behind her mother, similarly diminished by the presence of the other female in the couple. The silence is broken by Madame's voice saying, "Very good," ending a scene that seems quite long, due to the extended use of silence, though in reality it only lasts 30 seconds. The silence, as the absence, reinforces the sense of the void inhabited by Christine and Léa, whose lives together are clearly seen to be precarious and dependent solely on the decisions of others.

The role of silence is further seen in the literal space of the words, or the presence and absence of speaking. Throughout the film, the sisters grow closer to each other,

drawing together not so much against the family but as a way to maximize their time together. Madame and Isabelle speak to each other of their increasing quietness, with comments such as, "Quiet, she never speaks . . . neither of them do," and "Have you noticed, they don't speak anymore." This concern with silence is reflected in the sisters' conversations with each other as well. Paralleling the conversation between Madame and Isabelle, Christine and Léa remark to each other, "Madame never speaks to us anymore." The echo of each pair's words reflects the meaning within the sentences, reinforcing the uneasiness in the house created by the lack of speech. It further marks the two pairs as two separate forces, silently readying themselves. This growing concern with silence is further coupled with the growing silence itself, all of which lead to the complete breakdown of language in the form of the crime.

Folie à deux **and dualities**

Christine and Léa's intertwined relationship is evident on a narrative level as well as via the cinematic techniques utilized by the directors of these films. In *La Cérémonie*, much of the two women's relationship appears to be a result of their shared criminal history. In the scene where the viewer learns that each has been suspected of murder in the past, their bond is seen in the physical space of the scene as well as in the implications stemming from the fact that both have killed. The sequence takes place in Jeanne's tiny apartment, a clear contrast to the spacious home of the family where Sophie works and where most of the film up to this point has taken place. Opening as the two women

prepare lunch in Jeanne's kitchen, the camera frames them in a medium shot which also includes a kitchen table, two chairs, a stove, a sink, a small window and a china cabinet. The viewer feels the physical tightness of the space, as if there are too many objects in the frame, which translates into a sense of claustrophobia that is not only physical but psychic; the lives of the two women are experienced as equally limited and claustrophobic. As they are eating, Sophie unexpectedly says to Jeanne, "J'en ai appris sur toi?" to which Jeanne replies, "Des choses bien, j'espère." "Il paraît que tu as tué ta fille…" Jeanne gets up from the table and moves around the kitchen, yet still framed in the same medium-close shot. She denies this murder, saying cryptically, "En plus, ils n'avaient pas de preuve!" The camera tracks backwards as she moves forward, going to a small cabinet and pulling something out. She returns with it to the table. "Moi aussi, j'en sais sur toi" she tells Sophie, holding a newspaper out in front of her. "C'est bien toi là sur la photo?" There is no response. "Mais oui . . . " She reads: "L'incendie était criminelle, mais la criminelle est en liberté . . . " Jacques Bonhomme was killed in a fire at his home. His daughter, Sophie Bonhomme, had gone shopping just minutes before and "a été rapidement mise hors de cause . . . " Jeanne looks at Sophie: "Tu t'appelles bien Sophie Bonhomme?" The camera moves in on Sophie's face, first expressionless, then brightening: "Oui." She smiles as she says this, and the camera pans left, stopping on Jeanne's face, which bears the same smile. The bond between the two is not a literal blood relation, yet they are ultimately bound by the blood of murder.

The interdependency of Christine and Léa is mirrored by that of Madame and Isabelle in the film, *Sister My Sister*. Isabelle's dependence on her mother is marked by her childlike appearance, frumpy clothing, page-boy haircut and scowling expression.

Madame Danzard paints Isabelle's fingernails and chats with her about household affairs and thwarted vacation plans, in short the daughter takes on much of the role of the absent father, whom Meckler and Kesselman have written out of the story completely. Meckler consistently uses crosscutting between scenes of the two maids and the two Danzards in order to highlight the dual relationships. In a key scene paralleling the two sets of women, Christine and Léa are shown making love in their *chambre de bonne* upstairs, while Madame and Isabelle play a heated game of cards in the parlor. The latter pair is framed in a medium shot as they sit at a game table. Madame's voice is the dominant element of the scene as she reprimands Isabelle for having made a clumsy move and chatters about the game, apparently taking pleasure in the distraction she is causing her daughter, whose face, seen in a medium close up, shows her frustration as she tries to play her hand. The scene cuts to the women upstairs and a close up of stocking-clad legs, a pair of hands slowly pulling down the stockings and caressing the leg. There is another cut back to the Danzards, now in a medium shot, seated cross from each other at the table. "I've got the ace of spades . . . and the two!! And the three!!" shouts Isabelle. This is followed by a crosscut to a medium shot of Léa kissing Christine's leg, her hair falling down behind the outstretched leg as she moves her lips up her sister's calf. Light comes in from the window behind the pair, giving the scene an otherworldly quality. The excitement of Madame and Isabelle's game matches that of Christine and Léa's approaching orgasm, the frenzy of each activity, highlighted by the rapid crosscuts between the two, blurs the distinction between the two and creates a sexually-charged release as each pair reaches a climax. As the sisters sigh and moan in pleasure upstairs, Madame wins the game downstairs, standing up and screaming with joy, the soundtrack

of which is transferred to the visual image of Christine and Léa lying in each others arms. These repeated crosscuts reinforce the duality of the two scenes and, as a result, the similarities in each pair of women.

Meckler isolates a specific event as the catalyst that sets off the murders, a scene which further shows the degree of Christine and Léa's bond, and the significance of their duality as poised against that of Madame and Isabelle. The sequence begins in a wide angle long shot of the entry hallway of the Danzard home. Isabelle is on the left, Madame on the right. The front door opens at the far end of the hall and Christine and Léa enter. Their heads are bowed, their faces barely visible under their hats. Without speaking or looking up, they move towards the stairs. The camera pans their movement as they approach the stairs and ascend them, moving as two silent, anonymous figures in black coats, their dual pairs of white gloves standing out in contrast. In a sound bridge, Madame whispers to Isabelle, "Did you see them, coming back from church, their white gloves . . . " The camera moves in on the two in a medium shot as Madame continues, "Those hats , , , they don't even look like maids anymore." The symbolic physical placement of the sisters on the staircase, in motion, and Madame and Isabelle at ground level, standing still, foreshadows the later scene of killing.

Sister My Sister presents an event in the sisters' lives that further joins them by literally binding them in blood. In a key scene of Christine and Léa alone in their room, Christine tells Léa the story of an accident that occurred when they were children. Their two faces are framed a medium close up: "It was a long narrow street . . . at the top of the hill a horse and carriage was galloping down, right towards you. I ran into the street, I pulled you across I pushed you down in the gutter with me. What a noise the horse when

the horse galloped by." The camera pans slowly from left to right, moving across the two women, blurring them at to the point that they visually appear as one, then continuing past them, reestablishing them as two individual figures. "And when we stood up we were both bleeding. It was the same wound. It started on my arm and went down across your wrist. Look . . . we have it still." The camera moves in even closer on their faces, cheek to cheek, as they look down at their arms. They join their wrists together, and the camera moves in for a close up of the scar, a jagged line that is only whole when the two arms are placed side by side. "We're bound for life . . . bound in blood." Their bodies are marked with their unity; the scar is their visible link.

Murder scene

One key difference of cinema as opposed to other mediums is its ability to graphically portray the murders as they are said to have taken place. In the play, *Les Bonnes*, for example, Genet follows the rules of classic drama, relegating the violence to offstage, giving the audience only the dialogue around the event. In the texts on the crime, the violence often is described in detail, but the visceral, emotional element is lacking. The turn to a cinematic portrayal of the event allows the viewer to see the murders as a kind of language, as noted by Lacan, a *non-dit*, a kind of speech that can only occur without speaking, conveying that which cannot be spoken. The presentation of the murders can be further seen as a cinematic illustration of the concept of the *phrase affect* of Jean-François Lyotard, a phrase which does not lend itself to articulation. As such, the act—

physical and illogical—speaks where the logic of language fails. Represented onscreen in the scenes of murder are the visual re-creations of this affect phrase, the Papin sisters' speech that cannot be articulated. In its unique ability to show and to make present to the audience the real-ness of this event and its significance as speech, cinema captures an essential reality unavailable in other forms of representation.

The scene of the murders varies significantly in each of these three films. *La Cérémonie* presents the crime as the somewhat unexpected result of a series of actions that once begun, must be followed through to the end and the death of the family. In this film, a game between Jeanne and Sophie is played out against the soundtrack of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, which the family is watching together in the salon, unaware that anyone else is in the house. The two have arrived late at night to pick up Sophie's belongings following her having been fired. Instead of packing her things, they go to the kitchen and make a pot of hot chocolate, then go upstairs to the parents' bedroom where, upon seeing the unmade bed, Jeanne remarks, "Ah, ils ont baisé! C'est pas possible!" She jumps on the bed and holds the pot of chocolate to her crotch, pouring it on the sheets as if urinating. The two go into Madame's closet and begin pulling out her clothes and ripping them to pieces on the floor. The continued crosscuts to the family downstairs increase the tension as the drama in *Don Giovanni* builds, and the musical score serves as soundtrack for both the actual drama and the opera. Finally, having ransacked the bedroom, Sophie and Jeanne move out of the room and onto an upper landing where, unseen, they look down on the family. The camera pans down in an extreme high-angle POV shot. Jeanne pretends to spit on them and the camera cuts to the group below, seen only by the tops of their heads, visually highlighting the family's vulnerability and the women's hatred for

them. “Qu’est-ce qu’on fait maintenant?” “Je ne sais pas.” “Si on leur faisait peur . . . ” At this point in the sequence, the action becomes more serious. The two women cut the phone line and get rifles. They load them and pretend to shoot each other as well as objects in the kitchen, as would children playing a game. The scene cuts to the family who has finished watching the first scene of their opera. Madame asks her husband to go investigate a noise she heard in the kitchen. As Georges enters the room, the two laugh and point their rifles at him “Qu’est-ce que c’est que ce bordele?” He turns to Jeanne and grabs the shaft of the rifle she holds: “On vous a dit de ne pas mettre les pieds ici . . . ” Jeanne laughs at him and pulls away. The camera pans to Sophie, pausing for a moment in a close up of her face. She raises her rifle and, with no change of expression, shoots him. There is no surprise on the face of either woman. They move in and look down at his body, then Sophie shoots him again. The visual shock of seeing the bleeding dead body jump as it is shot again gives the audience a taste of the physical presence of the act of killing. The spectator is a part of the killing, and is thus provided with a close-up view of the process. Sophie’s comment, “Allez, on y va,” is not only directed at Jeanne, it is meant for the audience as well.

The second part of the sequence takes place against the background sound of *Don Giovanni* as the don serenades Elvira’s maid. Both the aural beauty of the song and the visual calm of the family seated on the sofa belie the violence of what has just taken place in the kitchen and what is bound to occur in the living room. As Madame sends Gilles out of the room to see what has happened to his father, the camera follows his movement, tracking forward until he reaches the door, then backward as he opens the door to reveal the two women standing there pointing the rifles at him. He backs into the

room as they move towards him. Madame asks, "Où est mon mari?" to which one of the women replies, "Votre mari est mort, Madame." The words are followed by the sound of gunshots as they kill the son, mother and daughter, the camera panning in on the killers' once again expressionless faces. They shoot again several times into the dead bodies. In a long shot incorporating the barely visible bodies in the foreground of the shot and the killers standing behind them, we see Jeanne reach out and stroke Sophie's hair. Echoing the words similar to those that Christine Papin is rumored to have uttered after killing the Lancelins[38], Jeanne says, "On a bien fait."

In *Sister My Sister* the murder sequence begins with a close-up shot of a droplet of water slowly falling from the tap in the kitchen of the home. The droplet is shown in extreme close up, its heaviness and roundness highlighted by the play of light coming in from the window, the spectator's desire that it fall creating a tension within the scene. This image is a motif throughout the scene, visually and aurally, as each time it is shown, the dropping water marks the passage of time, echoing the ticking clock from earlier scenes. The droplet of water suggests the interminability of the scene and the slow, plodding, repetitive nature of their work: Léa is upstairs ironing, and Christine is in the kitchen washing glasses. All at once, the slow and unwavering pattern is broken. Christine breaks a portion of the glass she is washing, cutting her finger with it. At the same time Léa is heard screaming from upstairs, "The iron . . . I was in the middle of the satin blouse . . . "

The scene cuts to Léa, framed in a low angle as she stands on the stairs, speaking to Christine who has run to the hallway below. In a reverse POV we see Christine mounting the stairs. "How can Madame be angry? It's not your fault." Christine goes into

[38] *Voila du propre*, or "nice job," is a term that is often used as an antiphrasis.

the bedroom. The camera cuts to Léa, showing the absolute terror on her face. The clock ticks; the tap drips. “Is it all right?” she asks Christine. “Is it? Is it?” The length of the scene is heightened, emphasized by the silence of Christine’s pauses against the sound of the dripping tap. “It’s alright.” “What will happen now, Christine, what will happen now?” These words hang in the air as there is a cut to an elliptical scene of an extreme close up of the drop of water coming out of the kitchen tap. Color in the scene is so minimal that is appears to be filmed in black and white. A second drop falls, reinforcing the feeling on the part of the spectator that time has stalled out, or perhaps that time has just begun, depending on the reading of the murders. Either way, the monotony of their lives is broken. The camera cuts back to the women upstairs. Léa asks “How much money do we have saved?” “Not enough.” “We’ll go away some day, won’t we?” Léa collapses, sobbing, her tears mirroring the drops of tap water. The camera moves to a an extremely low angle long shot of the two women holding each other on the bed in the afternoon light coming in from the window.

The next scene shows the darkened kitchen. Madame and Isabelle enter, Madame angrily remarking that the house is dark and there is no one there to answer the door or take the packages. The sisters awaken, hearing the movement below. Christine gets out of bed and makes her way down the stairs, grasping hold of the banister and making her way slowly, stepping only with her right foot, reflecting a movement she made in an earlier flashback to when she was a child, and would be afraid to come downstairs and face the sisters at the convent. As the Danzard women mount the stairs from below, Christine appears in the doorway in her nightgown, her hair loose, her face drawn. The lighting in the scene portrays each woman differently, with Christine lit straight on,

appearing pale and fragile, and Madame's face lit from below, showing her as evil, menacing. Upon finding Christine on the landing, Madame says, "How dare you expect me to come home to a dark house!" Accusing the sisters of burning Isabelle's blouse and blowing the fuse, she spits, "You'll never work again, not after what I've seen here tonight." The language in this scene is layered over tropes seen throughout the Papin crime, reflecting entrapment, drawing on sexual overtones, and strongly making use of visual references. Christine says, "Madame has seen nothing!" to which Madame replies, "Nothing! Nothing! That hair . . . that face . . . You smell of it my dear!" "Oh Madame, please stop." "Not another word out of your mouth! Breaking my iron and my house in darkness." "Madame has no right . . . " "No right! No right! It's *you* who have no right, Christine." At this point Christine is joined by Léa, also with her hair down and in a nightgown. The camera moves in on Madame's face in a close up. "Just look at that sister of yours. You'll never work with her again. God forgive me for what I have harbored here." The scene cuts from the sneering face of Madame to the two sisters, who stand holding each other, shaking, breathing heavily like trapped animals. "You dirt! Scum! (Spits at them) Scum sisters!" The word "sisters" hisses in the air, and is echoed by Christine. "Sister! Not my sister! Not my sister!" she screams as she and Léa move towards Madame and Isabelle. The reversal of power symbolized in the earlier camera angles is literalized as the sisters attack the Danzards. With a scream Christine rushes directly at the camera, hands drawn up in claws. The attack is blurred, both literally, as the action takes place quickly with the camera not directly focused on anyone, and symbolically, as the viewer cannot see who rips out whose eyes. The diegetic sound blends with the music on the soundtrack in a series of minor chords and echoing

percussion. The viewer sees blood pooling and dripping, hears the sounds of chopping and grunts and heavy breathing, in sum he is witness to a scene that is visceral, violent, and panicked at both the visual and the aural level. The sounds grow in intensity until all that is heard is the grunting and breathing, reach what sounds like a sexual climax, then stop. The final scene is an overhead shot of the crime scene that parallels exactly the crime scene photograph of the actual Papin murder scene.

In a reversal of the opening scene of the film, the camera pans up the stairs, past the strewn flowers, the packages, the keys, the eyes. The soundtrack consists of a voice over of the actual crime scene description. As the speaker reads, low notes of a cello begin to play, growing louder as the description progresses:

> The bodies of Madame and Mademoiselle Danzard were found in the hallway. On the floor were fragments of bone and teeth. A diamond earring, hairpins, a handbag, a set of keys, a package of meat. The walls and doors were covered with splashes of blood, reaching a height of two meters. Madame Danzard's body lay face up, Mademoiselle Danzard's body, face down, the coat pulled up, the skirt pulled up, the undergarments pulled down, revealing deep wounds on the buttocks and multiple slashes on the calves. On the last step of the staircase, a single eye was found, intact, complete with the optic nerve. The eye had been torn out without the aid of an instrument.

The gruesome description that makes up the final moments of this film thus draws the audience back into the Papin sisters' crime in reality, as it incorporates the official account of the murder scene. The overlay of factual data—the report, the photographic

crime scene recreation—and fiction—what the attack looked like, what words were spoken—creates a scene where neither truth nor fiction dominates. The spectator experiences the fury and slashing and blood as if she were at the actual scene and in the presence of Christine and Léa. The amount of physical violence in this scene outweighs the perceived and imagined scene of killing. We see the eyes as they are being pulled out and the blood running down the walls. The gaze of the spectator misses no detail as the film camera is able to penetrate into the event as far as necessary to expose the act of murder.

The scenes of the murder in *Les Blessures assassines* consist of a similar construction as in *Sister My Sister*. In the beginning of the sequence, the two women are framed in a medium close up as Madame gives instructions to Christine before going out for the evening. Christine stands on the left, holding a large knife and chopping celery, Madame is on the right, in profile. The two women resemble each other in this scene, as both are wearing grey and faded blue, the same height, even their hair is noticeably similar, slightly wavy and reddish brown in color. The knife in Christine's hand endows her with power, as a butcher knife (perhaps that very one?) is the instrument used by the Papins to slice the bodies and disfigure the faces of the Lancelins. The next scene shows Léa blowing the fuse with the iron and burning the blouse she is ironing. The upper floors thus in symbolic and actual (per the sisters' testimony) darkness, the drama of murder has begun. The sisters decide that since no more work can be accomplished that night, they climb into bed, eat dinner and begin to make love, but are interrupted by the sound of a door slamming downstairs. Christine goes into the hallway to find that the Lancelin women have returned home early and are making their way up the stairs. She stands

framed in the doorway, whispering to Léa: “Elles montent l’escalier. Elles sont sur la pointe des pieds.” In the next shot, which shows Christine standing on the landing of the stairs in semi-darkness, waiting for the women to come up, Denis employs a low-angle medium close up similar to that used by Meckler in *Sister My Sister*. The camera cuts to Madame and Geneviève below on the landing, seen in a high-angle shot. The camera pans across them as they move up the stairs, not yet aware that they are being watched. Madame gasps upon seeing Christine, who is framed in a low-angle shot as she moves down the stairs. “Que Madame m’excuse, je ne l’avais pas entendue rentrer.” The camera begins a series of shot-reverse shots, moving from just behind Mademoiselle and over her left shoulder to just above Christine and over her right shoulder, effectively drawing the viewer into the confrontation. Christine is framed in a medium shot and appears to tower over the other two women who stand below her, their faces framed in a medium close-up high angle shot. As Madame accuses Christine of ignoring her work and neglecting to close up the house before retiring, Geneviève whispers to her mother, “Elle a les pieds nus.” The camera moves in closer on their faces, capturing the eyes of each as they look at Christine’s feet, observing more than just bare feet. The visual references in this scene highlight the role of the gaze indicated in the sisters’ testimony, and foreshadows the fact that they will rip out the eyes of the victims.

The role of the eye and the gaze has further significance as noted by Sylvie Testud, the actress playing Christine. In an interview about the film, she refers to something noted by a previous employer, the fact that Christine refused to lower her eyes when speaking to her: “On ne lève pas le regard à l’époque. Assassines, homosexuelles, incestueuses . . . elles ont transgressé . . . tout.” The eye is the site of knowledge and of

judgment, and for the sisters, the site of transgression as well. In their insolence they gazed where they were not allowed to gaze, the first step in their criminality. As such, the eye is essentially linked to the murders, as it reflects the other transgressions of homosexuality and incest, leading eventually to the death of the employers. The gaze is the basis for much of their story, and is highlighted as such in the language of the confrontation leading up to the killings.

The sequence of the film that shows the physical attack is shot in close up. It begins as Madame states, "Vous me répugnez. J'ai eu trop longtemps la vue courte," and tries to push past Christine to go upstairs and confront Léa. The shot is filmed over Madame's shoulder as Christine grabs her by the arms and pushes her. The camera moves in behind both women in a high angle shot as they stumble down the stairs. There are no sounds except those made by the women as they struggle. Mademoiselle is in the foreground, Madame and Christine on the right, her hands around Madame's neck. This scene is crosscut to a scene of Léa, alone upstairs, listening. The camera frames her in a medium long shot as she moves quickly around the room, cleaning up a broken dinner plate and making the bed against the backdrop of the cries and grunts from below. Via a crosscut to the fight below, the spectator sees the other three women framed in a medium close up, the camera panning rapidly as they tear at each other. Christine grabs the pitcher off the sideboard and hits Madame with it, knocking her to the ground. The camera pauses in a medium close up of Christine during a moment of stillness. She faces the camera, looking down and off to the left. In this last moment that the two victims are still alive, the viewer sees the pause between the two sets of photographs, the moment where the attack could stop or continue. In viewing this pause, the spectator is made aware of

the self-perpetuating nature of the murders, as it is clear that once Christine begins the attack, she cannot possibly turn back; once the line is crossed from innocence to guilt, there is no backwards movement. At the sound of Geneviève screaming "Maman!" the scene cuts again to Léa upstairs, who turns to the crucifix on the wall and crosses herself, saying, "Dieu, je vous supplie d'arreter ça." Léa is seen in a close up, the camera panning from right to left as she walks slowly to the door of their room and into the dark hall beyond. The soundtrack consists solely of grunts, moans and cries that grow in intensity, often sounding less like death cries and more like the sounds of sexual activity, not only blurring the distinction between the two actions taking place in this scene, but recalling earlier lovemaking scenes between the two sisters. The scene cuts back to the landing, where Christine is seen hitting Madame again with the pitcher, then knocking her to the ground, then attacking Mademoiselle in the same way. A medium shot of Christine shows her standing, looking first left, then right. The camera cuts to Mademoiselle's face in close up, her body shuddering, her eyes on Christine as she beats her mother. The scene again crosscuts to Léa upstairs, standing in the darkened hallway, her hands over her ears. The scene is visually ambiguous, as she appears to be standing against a brick wall, as if foreshadowing the walls of her prison cell, where she covered her ears to block Christine's cries for her. The camera follows her down the hallway, tracking backwards, focusing on her face. The next scene shows Christine still astride Madame, hitting her with the pitcher. She pauses for a moment, and out of view of the spectator her hand reaches down to Madame's body. The camera remains on her face, but the soundtrack tells the viewer what is taking place. Knowing the story, the viewer is aware that at this moment Christine is pulling out the eyes, yet the fact that he only *hears* the action is

particularly chilling for the spectator. The camera moves in for a close up of her face as she winces, her tongue out, concentrating on her actions. There is a cut to a medium shot of her in profile on top of Madame, digging her fingers into the eye socket. In a close up she is seen pausing and turning her head to the camera, evidently looking at the figure of Mademoiselle on the other side of the room, yet in actuality staring directly at the viewer with a gaze steeped in hatred. The spectator is pulled into the scene, feeling the fear of Christine's eyes upon him.

The scene cuts to Léa, who walks slowly down the stairs. The two scenes join together as the camera moves behind Léa and shows her in the foreground, coming down the stairs, and Christine in the background, straddling Geneviève and pulling out her eyes. The camera moves in on her face in close up: "Mais . . . Christine . . . " Léa approaches her sister, who turns and begins to hit her. "C'est moi! C'est moi! C'est moi! C'est moi! C'est moi!" cries Léa. The camera moves in again for a close up of her face as she looks around at the bodies, looks up at Christine, then falls against her and onto the floor. In a medium long shot, she is seen supine on the floor with the other two women, and Christine is seen bending over her. She pulls Léa up to a seating position, reviving her. At this point Léa appears joined to Christine in the blood that now covers them both, as well as via the words she speaks. "Je dirai que je t'ai aidée…J'irai avec toi." The two faces are seen in close up, yet oddly framed, the bottom portion of Léa and the upper portion of Christine being out of the frame, they appear both fragmented and complete. "Tu diras que je t'ai aidée," Léa says as she moves out of the frame, leaving Christine there alone. The scene cuts to the kitchen counter and Léa grabbing a knife, then a hammer. Christine joins her. "Comme toi" is repeated, as the camera moves in on a close

up of the two, tracking backwards as they go back up the stairs. Christine takes the hammer and the dizzying backwards track continues following them as they move forward. Their bodies are joined in the frame, resembling each other in their identical nightgowns and their bloody faces and hair, both carrying weapons back to the crime scene. The final shot of the sequence consists of a slow pan over the dead bodies of the women. The viewer sees details not shown in other films: the blood-soaked carpet, the calves carved like baguettes, the battered skulls. Yet the enduring image left with the viewer is the overwhelming presence of red: the bright red of the blood, the darker maroon of the carpet, and the dark, almost black red of the blood-matted hair.

Why cinema?

The fundamental role of vision and the significance of the gaze in representations of murder separate cinema from other art forms. Similar to theater, cinema capitalizes on the voyeuristic desire inherent in the spectator. Unlike theater, which is based in ceremonial aspects of ritual, film is coldly technical; rather than a shared experience of communion, it is an individual experience of watching. The viewer within the movie theater is isolated; though others may sit in the audience with him, sitting in a darkened space watching a film is a solitary experience. Laura Mulvey insists that this isolating effect of cinema spectatorship is decisive in the reception of films, saying:

> It is in the nature of cinema that the narrative unfurls with total indifference to the audience representing an hermetically sealed world.

> The darkness of the cinema helps to isolate the spectators from one another while the brilliance of the screen and the play of light and dark upon it contribute to this sense of isolation. The conditions of screening alongside the narrative and other conventions therefore can be understood to place the spectator in the illusory position of looking in on an abstract world. (840)

The positioning of the viewer is thus voyeuristic, watching unseen in the darkness, identifying with the characters, psychologically entering their world, yet at the same time removed, in a different time and space. In a footnote of "Théâtre et cinéma II" from *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma*, André Bazin localizes this unique position of the viewer: "Celui qui regarde de la trou de la serrure n'est pas au théâtre: Cocteau a justement démontré dans *Le Sang d'un poète* qu'il était déjà au cinéma" (156).

In the texts and dramatic representations of the crime, the audience has seen no blood, instead experiencing the murders as the result of madness, or social revolution, or a form of speech without words. They have grasped the essence of what took place that night, but not seen the gore, the blood and the spectacle of death. Cinema is thus a return to the visual pleasure experienced by the spectators at the guillotine, but with key differences. Rather than being present at an actual scene of death, they are witness to a re-creation. Rather than a repeated scene of execution, the film is a unique creation of murder. The viewer is protected by his removal in space and time from the blood, yet pulled in via the illusion to become a part of the killing. As a result of the physical experience of the sight and sounds created by murder, not only is the spectator a witness to the crime, not only does she identify with the killers, she is able to know the

experience of witnessing the murders because she sees it, in every sense and implication of the verb.

In essence, the search for truth about the crime translates into a *desire to see.* If we examine Sophocles' play, *Oedipus Rex*, the transgression committed by Oedipus is to desire too much knowledge. He wants to see the truth, resulting in his gaining knowledge he would have been better off without, yet which he was destined to discover. As seen in the story of the Papin sisters, the focus on the eyes is manifest, as Oedipus is guided by the blind Tiresius, who advises him to end his search. Upon learning that he is the one he seeks, Oedipus gouges out his own eyes, in self-punishment but also so that he will see no more truths. Thus seeing and knowing are conjoined with shame and guilt, forcing a reexamination of the position of the self in the experience of seeing.

Conclusion
Vision and Knowledge

The crime committed by Christine and Léa Papin transgresses a number of cultural and societal laws, homosexuality, incest and violence against bourgeois women by working-class women being the main three. The murders sparked a number of textual, cinematic and dramatic representations, as seen in the work of Jacques Lacan, Jean Genet and Jean-Pierre Denis. Read through the lens of each writer, the crime takes on a different shape, the sisters seen at once (and not at all) to be psychotics, revolutionaries, lesbians and victims themselves. Yet the sense of the unknown that surrounds this crime remains, even nearly a century later.

Through a sampling of typical traditional detective novels, we have seen how this actual murder case challenges the easy solutions to crimes provided in fiction. The gap between expectations and the availability of answers pushes readers and writers to further analyze these murders, culminating in an abandoning of narrative completely as the crime is taken up by visual representations. Because it defies the narrative logic that would normally be employed to recount a murder, the crime of the Papin sisters not only calls for another kind of telling, it becomes increasingly fascinating, since any sense of resolution remains out of reach. While it is unclear exactly why this is the case, the stringent logical form of narrative must be abandoned before the story can be transmitted.

Both the abundance of possible narratives and the reliance on the visual recall the work of the *nouveau romanciers*. In his theoretical text, *Pour un nouveau roman*, Alain Robbe-Grillet argues that the traditional novel, with its dependence on an omniscient narrator and adherence to the unities of time and place, creates an illusion of order that is

inconsistent with the discontinuous and ephemeral nature of modern experience. The problems encountered by those who have written on the Papin crime reflect this same shortcoming. For Robbe-Grillet, the task of the *nouveau roman* is to dispense with any technique that imposes a particular interpretation on events or organizes events in such a way as to endow them with specific meaning. The novelist achieves this by not purporting to reflect any kind of linearity in the exterior world, but instead by drawing attention to the competing and conflicting narratives within a potential story. In this way the finished work calls up all possible narratives under the umbrella of one novel, emphasizing the arbitrary nature of what is seen as a finished product. In such works, there is no truth, only multiple possibilities. The narrator holds no definitive knowledge; he merely repeats what he sees, which changes with each telling.

Furthermore, the *nouveau roman* relies on vision as the primary source of information about the event and access to any possible truth. In *Le Voyeur,* for example, the reader encounters a crime narrative that reflects the insufficiencies of any attempt to contain (or even establish the existence of) a murder in a single narrative. Beginning with the title, a question emerges about the ability of the text to clarify or enlighten the reader, since the reader cannot say with certainty which character is the voyeur. It could be the protagonist Mathias, who intrudes on the lives of the people of the island and whose eye is responsible for what is "seen" throughout the story. It could be Julien, a character who may or may not have observed the crime without the killer's knowledge. Or *le voyeur* might refer to the reader, whose eye takes in the scenes and attempts to make of the narrative anything resembling a traditional story with beginning, middle and end. Any of

these choices is possible; the meaning of the text fluctuates with each reader's decision at any given point in the text.

In many ways, the *nouveau roman* takes it cues from the cinema. As each relies on visual data as the primary source of information, the two forms share a reliance on the audience's interpretation of events transpiring in the novel or on screen. Yet cinema clearly extends further into the visual register through its ability to represent that which the text can only suggest. As Siegfried Kracauer proposes, cinema presents a certain reality while shielding its audience from the actual reality, serving much the same function as the shield of Perseus, which protects him from Medusa by allowing him to see her reflection rather than her actual body. Because of the shield, Perseus is able to obtain the knowledge he needs (305-05). Besides offering images of the gruesome moment of killing, cinema presents such repressed issues as incest, homosexuality and social injustice. As seen in the films on the Papin sisters, these images are confronted by the viewer in the protected space of the theater. Christine and Léa's crimes are animated via the illusion of film. Again, the visual portrayal of the issues is a kind of telling, examples of ideas made visible under the shield of cinema, as the spectator does not see the reality of the transgressions, only their cinematic equivalent. In this way, film is an opening up of vision, allowing the viewer access all the while protecting him from the reality of the event.

The spectacle of murder is thus an opportunity for the audience to view an unknown and violent event to which most of us will never be privy otherwise. While the relationship between the *nouveau roman* and the crime narrative has been explored, further areas of study remain to be pursued relating to the visual arts and their

representations of the crime of murder. Walter Benjamin likened Eugène Atget's photographs of deserted streets of Paris to crime scenes.[39] Why do we associate such images with intimations of an untold crime story? Similarly, how does a painting transmit this same desire to know, while also providing visual information of its own?

In order to expand on the role of vision in making sense of the crime of murder, it would be interesting to do further research into paintings and photographs of scenes of murder, victims and killers in order to understand how various media represent this crime. Since the act of seeing in many ways links the viewer to the object viewed, further research is needed to explore the effect of certain paintings and art installations on the viewer. One such piece of art is Marcel Duchamp's assemblage, *Étant donnés: 1° la chute d'eau, 2° le gaz d'éclairage...* The piece, worked on by the artist between the years of 1946 and 1966, consists of a heavy wooden door, much like an entry to a medieval building, hidden from the exhibition space itself. In order to see the work at all, one must find it, going behind one of the museum walls in the gallery. The next step in viewing is to find the "peephole" notch in the door, which is not immediately evident. The spectator must then walk up to it, bend over, and look through. The scene behind the door consists of the body of a naked woman, her legs splayed open, her sex in direct line of the viewer's eye at the hole. She appears to be dead, murdered, perhaps, and is lying on a pile of straw, her face out of view, her left hand holding a lamp. The complexities offered by this work serve to make it a kind of metaphor for the link between the desire to see and the forbidden scene in the form of murder and the female body. Not only is the spectator

[39] "It is no accident that Atget's photographs have been likened to those of a crime scene. But isn't every square inch of our cities a crime scene? Every passer-by a culprit? Isn't it the task of the photographer—descendant of the augurs and the haruspices—to reveal guilt and to point out the guilty in his pictures?" (527).

a part of the installation, a subject in relation to the object of the dead body she sees through the peephole, she is also visible as object by others in the space, her eye at the crack in the door, a voyeur. In this way the installation is much like a three-dimensional version of the *nouveau roman*, silent except for the story created in the mind of the viewer.

What is certain in the examination of murder and its pull to be explained is that the thrill of the unknown is a perpetual state, one which may be tempered by certain information, but whose potential cannot be exhausted. Much like the analyses of the murders committed by Christine and Léa Papin, an examination of our compulsion to look at death is in many ways an entry for us to discover what separates us from those who kill. The treatment of the Papin sisters' case suggests that something in the public's fascination with murder necessitates a different kind of inquiry and exposition, that more possibilities exist to explain this attraction than are provided in the traditional crime narrative, and that any resolution that seems to be complete nonetheless only provides a portion of the story. In this thesis, I have sought to pursue such an inquiry through my examination of the variety of interpretations of this particular true crime. My own work is just a beginning, one which offers many more paths to examine the impetus behind society's ongoing curiosity about crime.

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