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CHAPTER EIGHT
Reading and Writing the Primal Crime Scene:
Fred Vargas’s Dans les bois éternels
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One of the enduring myths of detective fiction surrounds the concept of the clue puzzle. The
gleasure of reading a detective story is generally held to lie in the web of clues that allow us to
pit our wits against a sleuth, whose great powers of deduction spring from his or her position
in the text as ambassador for authorial power. To use Roland Barthes’s terms,1 we engage in a
text that presents itself as eminently writerly. That is to say that the text offers itself to us as a
puzzle to be put together, which elevates the reader to the status of writer, or producer of the
text. The whodunit generally shatters its own myth, however, by celebrating the detective’s
revelation of the truth at the end of novel. This truth, regardless of whether or not the reader
happens to have arrived at the same conclusions, brings down an iron curtain across the divide
between reader and writer: authorial power lies in this revelation that things can only be as the
author (represented here by the detective) decrees. The ultimate writerly text is therefore
proven to be a celebration of the readerly. This poses a problem for those of us who claim to
take pleasure in reading detective fiction. Is our pleasure merely the product of an ego-
soothing prostration on the part of the reader before the detective or author of the detective
novel? We should prefer to see in the reading of detective fiction a more dynamic form of
pleasure. Just as in Chapter One we sought to reconfigure the flâneur’s role in a more engaged
detective activity, one that produces discourse as opposed to discovering truth, we shall here
reveal a more complex interrelationship between the readerly and the writerly at work in the
contemporary detective novel.

With a comparable aim in mind, Patrick ffrench has usefully interrogated the
“structural parallel between the activity of the psychoanalyst and that of the detective.”2 For,
as he notes, “if Freud proposes a theory of reading, this theory undermines the notion of
uncovering the hidden truth, of revealing the hidden crime”; in so doing, this theory
articulates a predilection for “syntax over content”, which is “ultimately let down by the
revelation of the crime or the criminal.”3 In such an analysis the revelation of the truth defeats
the pleasure of the text by seeking to disable any chance of opposition or jouissance. As we
hope to have shown earlier in this volume, the very nature of textuality works against the
hegemonic force of ‘content’, irrespective of the apparent constraints of genre. Indeed, these
deconstructive principles are not lost on ffrench, for whom reading and psychoanalysis both
involve transference. This is clearly evidenced in such modernist forms as the diary where
intimacy is challenged and shared (if not violated) by the inevitable and desired intervention
of the reader. Despite the best protests of authors of whodunits and their protagonists,
detective fiction has no immunity to the inevitable consequences of being read. It is in this
nexus of readerly truth and writerly analysis that a more productive configuration of pleasure
can be situated.

1 As developed, for example, in S/Z (Paris: Seuil, 1970) and Le Plaisir du texte (Paris: Seuil, 1973).
2 Patrick ffrench, “Open Letter to Detectives and Psychoanalysts: Analysis and Reading”, in Warren Chernaik,
222).
3 ffrench, p. 222.
In *Le Plaisir du texte* Barthes does not present us with a clear-cut dichotomy of readerly and writerly texts; instead, he sets up a tension—perhaps even a confusion—between these two terms. The omission of a term such as bliss from the title the essay is itself suggestive of this more problematic relationship. The pleasure of Barthes’s title seems in fact to encompass both the author’s work (the immutable part) and the writerly production of the reader (the quasi-infinite), and indeed the continuous movement between the two. In this way, pleasure (*plaisir*), in addition to opposing *jouissance* in the Lacanian dichotomy of integrity (of the ego) versus abandonment (and splitting of the ego), is at the same time a movement between *plaisir* and *jouissance*. Barthes’s binary model is therefore a dynamic one; it is an always already coming-alive or making-infinite process, in which the dead work is reanimated as living text and this text always depends for its life-force on its own otherness as dead work (that which the reader reads).4

The success of Fred Vargas’s *rompols* is a function of these reading dynamics. Operating at this dual intersection of the readerly and writerly, on the one hand, and psychoanalysis and reading on the other, they showcase self-referentiality and perform pleasure. This is not always easy to follow in the course of the novels; indeed, the non-synthetic clashing of these binary terms is paralleled—and thus eclipsed—by the antagonistic investigative practices in which the detectives engage. On the surface Vargas’s novels appear to undermine the myth of the pleasurable detective story through their destruction (or deconstruction) of the readerly/writerly paradigm. They appear to announce themselves, via their wistful protagonist commissaire Jean-Baptiste Adamsberg, as blissful texts. For Adamsberg’s abilities as a detective lie precisely in his abandonment of control of his own subjectivity (Barthes’s orgasmic experience of the ceding of any exclusive ownership of the meaning-making process).

The conclusion to her prize-winning novel of 2001 *Pars vite et reviens tard* exposes this succinctly, when Adamsberg commits the first person singular of his identity to paper and entrusts it to unknown readers:

Quand la place fut plongée dans la nuit, Adamsberg, appuyé au platane, ouvrit son carnet et en déchira une page. Il réfléchit, puis il écrivit *Camille*. Il attendit un moment, et ajouta *Je*. Le début d’une phrase, songea-t-il. Ce n’est déjà pas si mal. Après dix minutes, comme la suite de la phrase ne venait pas, il posa un point après le *Je*, et plia le feuillet autour d’une pièce de cinq. Puis, d’un pas lent, il traversa la place et déposa son offrande dans l’urne bleue de Joss Le Guern.5

And yet, as was seen in Chapter One, Adamsberg’s role as flâneur-detective allows him to operate in the troubled waters between the two sides of the dichotomy. If he is able to make a gesture so ostensibly syntactical, it is, to use ffrench’s words, because of the content behind it; the concept of Truth is constantly challenged, but only because a truth is revealed. Adamsberg’s act of *jouissance* is therefore an enactment of pleasure (his very terms “that’s not so bad” are, after all, far from suggestive of convulsive bliss), a perfect cadence terminating alternating waves of syntax and content.

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4 The parallel that ffrench draws between psychoanalysis and the detective novel recalls this interplay of the readerly and writerly. He notes, for example, how “both propose complex models of reading complex textual surfaces—but in each this theory of reading is countered by a version of the truth, by a search for truth which remains monolithic and repressive of this complexity” (p. 222).

In *Pars vite et reviens tard* murder apparently espouses the trappings of the age-old terror of the Black Death. The mysterious harbinger of the plague is exacting revenge for a crime committed against him years before. The criminal is, therefore, inscribing his punishment of historical crime in the mythology of a far older tragedy. The discovery of the truth in this case involves the ability of the detective to read the text of the modern city in its multiplicity, exposing the ghosts of cities past in the streets of existential reality. Adamsberg’s ability is to map himself onto the trajectory of the murderer: where the criminal reads the past to write the story of his crime, the protagonist reads the past in order to read the criminal’s creative act of interpretation. The above quotation, then, is Adamsberg’s ultimate revelation: reading and writing, murder’s actualisation and its resolution, are parallel acts. The murder text is only a partial truth, like Adamsberg’s letter to Camille; it must be completed in the act of reading.

This concept, which is elevated to the level of signature motif by Vargas, is by no means exclusive to her novels. The following scene, taken from Norman Mailer’s novel of 1984 *Tough Guys Don’t Dance*, provides another example of a detective consciously assuming the role of writerly reader of the solution to a crime whose details are hitherto withheld from reader and characters alike; the protagonist, a writer, and the detective both suspect that a murder has taken place but neither are sure of this nor of the identity of the potential victim:

“You’re saying you can’t remember?”
“Not clearly.”
“So you could have knocked her off, and forgotten it?”
“Are you accusing me?”
“Let us say that I am working on the outline of the first scenario. In my way, I’m a writer too.”

Thus, to murder is to expose and create the criminal subject. Adamsberg’s love for his partner (whose sojourns in his life act as evanescent steps into an eternal river) is best defined by a single first-person pronoun: it is not simply the case that Camille and Adamsberg are one single subject; their relationship is predicated on an abandonment of subjectivity occasionally, and inexorably, made text. And the solving of the crime is equally a pleasurable act of abandonment: Vargas’s novels enshrine the death of the author inasmuch as her detective authors death, but his writing is always already an act of reading.

In Vargas’s 2006 offering, *Dans les bois éternels*, the authorship of murder is underlined early by the creation of a term to describe a dissociative state wherein a murderer

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7 The idea that a detective writes the crime as he goes along, until he achieves co-status as murderer, is not a new one. Raylene Ramsay, for example, discuses the ‘complementary’ (contradictory but not mutually exclusive) cell which the detective and the criminal cohabit” in her essay “Postmodernism and the Monstrous Criminal in Robbe-Grillet’s Investigative Cell” in Patricia Mirtiale And Susan Elizabeth Sweeney (eds), *Detecting Texts: The Metaphysical Detective Story from Poe to Postmodernism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), pp. 199-214 (p. 204). The difference that we wish to argue, however spurious it may appear, is that Vargas achieves this self-referential blurring of categories at the same time as anchoring herself firmly in the mainstream of detective fiction. She would, I suspect, sit rather awkwardly amongst the pasticheurs of Simon Kemp’s *Defective Inspectors* (see Chapter One), in which Alain Robbe-Grillet plays a lead role.


9 In novels such as Amélie Nothomb’s *Hygiène de l’assassin* (1992), for example, the verbs ‘to read’, ‘to write’ and ‘to love’ function as synonyms of murder, particularly in its most lethal conjugation, ‘to strangle’.
can carry out his or her acts as one persona whilst the other, everyday state of mind remains oblivious to him or her. For the originator of this term, Dr Ariane Lagarde, also turns out to be the perpetrator of the murders that Adamsberg is investigating. The murderer thus very much writes the crime: “C’est moi qui ai créé le mot : les tueurs dissociés”.10 And by revealing her story-telling role in the text, Lagarde confesses to the crime, enticing Adamsberg and the reader to read between the lines by laying her truth on the line. Truth will, however, be made relative, quite forcibly, in Vargas’s novel: the author-murderer’s version of events is diffused and decoded or simply made to stand out by the detective, who in so doing performs a writerly reading of the confessional text, which in turn forms his writing of the larger text encompassed by the volume held by Vargas’s reader.

Adamsberg has to shed an oblique light on the stark revelation of Lagarde’s truth for two reasons, each of which involves a reader: firstly, we readers desire that the truth be made novel; and secondly, Lagarde herself is not aware of her guilt half of the time (only her murder persona is aware of its actions). Her confession, therefore, represents a line of communication between the two aspects of Lagarde. Consequently, the binaries of objectivity and subjectivity, action and participation, murderer and detective, and, most importantly, reader and writer are activated; the blurring that is caused by this constant oscillation between the two sides of the dichotomies is posed, self-consciously, in Vargas’s works, as a metaphor for a critical reading praxis. We can say of Lagarde, therefore, that she reveals the key to the analysis of her own crime narrative, exposing her own devices and taking pleasure in her work as she abandons her authorial power to Adamsberg the writerly-reader-detective (who ultimately balances her role in the novel, building himself in her image just as the reader becomes, in the writerly text, like the writer). Ariane Lagarde has, to all intents and purposes, invented a blue-print for the prose-poetic criminal, which is embodied by the ombre that will haunt the novel just as the past dogs our steps in the modern city.11

For Lagarde the creativity of murder goes hand-in-hand with the critical process of writerly reading: a meaning is produced, thereby fixing, finalizing and temporarily killing creative potential for discourse; and at the same time, the solution to her crime is determined by a process dependent on the very instability and multiplicity of meaning. In Dans les bois éternels a pathology of disconnection is mapped onto criminal behaviour, a pathology parallel to that which will later be diagnosed in the mind of Adamsberg himself in Un lieu incertain. And as has been seen, this disconnection can be usefully compared to that offered by the flâneur, for whom Paris is simultaneously both a prosaic (existent) and poetic (ideal) space. It is the dialogue that occurs between these disconnected spaces, the way they threaten to but, ultimately, fail to become one, which scripts Adamsberg’s investigation and which shuttles him between the reality of his Parisian environment and the legendary trappings of the crime scene.12

Such investigation is prose poetic inasmuch as it fits the following description offered by Nikki Santilli: “the ideal prose poem is not hermetic, despite its appearance, because it relies on the dialogue between itself and its context (the exiled reference)”13 Furthermore, a comment made by the night watchman at the graveyard where the first victim of the novel has been posthumously violated reinforces our desire to persist with this prose-poetic analysis:

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11 See Chapter One.
“La poésie, ça sert surtout à compliquer les choses, non ? Mais peut-être qu’en les compliquant, on les comprend mieux. Et en les comprenant, on les simplifie. Au bout du compte.”

For Vargas the exiled other is, in the public domain, the stuff of legend and, in the private sphere, distant memories, contorted and coloured—that is to say, made text—by the passing of time and psychological exigencies. The other is, in other words, already there. The construction of such a prose poetic space as Baudelaire’s weaves legend into and out of reality: the construct of old Paris is born of the modern city and is one with it. Where Santilli sees “privileged space” that “transcends the causality of plot” in the disconnection of the prose poem’s out-takes of city life, we should prefer to take our lead from the Surrealists who, whilst cherishing the undoubted privileges of Paris’s statuary and train stations, find their marvellous in the mundane, that is to say, everywhere and anywhere. The street within which the action takes place has neither beginning nor end; it is simply there. Thus, whilst Baudelaire can be said to unframe Paris, to remove it from any overarching system of meaning by virtue of which it might be made transparently readerly (and thus coincide with the Paris of popular connotation), it can also be said that the street is there as a logical and necessary frame, which, inasmuch as it is public and private, real and essential to the myth, is, as Santilli herself notes, “foregrounded because it is the area common to both sides of the dialectic.”

At the beginning of the new millennium the detective novel is called on once again to sustain the idea of a connection to the past. Hence its prose poetic form. For the alienating tendency of the modern city, which gained a new and menacing impetus in the mid-nineteenth century with Haussmann’s urbanization, reached new heights (again) in the twentieth century. If, as Sara Poole comments, “Fred Vargas conceives of the polar as a modern vehicle of mythologies”, it is precisely because this is the role that it has always played. After all, it was Baudelaire who translated Edgar Allan Poe into French and poeticized the trauma, thereby combining the traditions of French detective fiction and modernity. This may well explain why the protagonists of the polar are described “acting always on instinct”—they are inescapably tainted by the Baudelairean Ur-text. We should argue further that this instinct and the fetishistic worldview that accompanies it are a reaction to the loss of childhood innocence. This loss is most keenly felt in Dans les bois éternels, all of whose plots are about the recuperation and extension of youth.

In this light we can read the modernization of the city as a metaphor for the development of the adult human condition. Unaware of its mortality a child inhabits an idyllic state of newness. All that it sees, it sees for the first time. As a result, everything is presented to it in the absence of meaning-conferring representations; indeed, everything with which the child is presented becomes the canvas on which all its future representations will be made (once it has moved out of this pre-mortal phase). It is the adult’s recollection of these childhood experiences that later provides the rose-tinted gloss, which in turn becomes known as memory. For the adult’s worldview has the additional feature of belatedness; and memory, which for Ross Chambers is the new critical dimension in the flânerie of Baudelaire’s prose

14 Dans les bois éternels, p. 126.
15 Santilli, p. 186.
17 Poole, p. 96.
18 There is something childlike about Baudelaire’s overvaluation of insignificant objects in his prose poetry. Significance comes with the ability to represent things, which accompanies the realization of mortality. A child, therefore, operates according to the same poetics of neutrality as Baudelaire because all objects have equal value in its eyes.
poetry. This time gap becomes a reading praxis, a means of interpreting and reconstructing, rather than simply recalling, the past.\textsuperscript{19} The adult is thus conscious of the divorce between presentation (the way the world is negotiated in the present) and representation (the way the world is idealized and made objective with the benefit of critical distance). A frame has been added; and like that of Baudelaire’s prose poems, it is not visible from the inside. Yet despite the fact that we cannot see the borders of our lives, occupied as we are with living them in the unfurling of the present, we adults realize that there was a time before us and that there will be a time after we are gone. This permeable border, which allows the separation of the existential and the abstract, the real and the legendary, also adds the layer of representation to everything that we encounter. This is the duality of the (adult) human condition, and it is implicit in Santilli’s description of the blank frame that separates us from and attaches us to the exiled reference:

\begin{quote}
The blank frame is therefore independent of the work and a part of it in the same way that the prose poem is related to the Absent Work that it prefaces in an infinitely tessellated system. The frame is a precondition to presentation but being itself a contradictory preface, it blurs the very edges it surrounds.\textsuperscript{20}
\end{quote}

Adamsberg has all the qualities of Chambers’s new flâneur, displaying “pensiveness, the stubborn melancholia that is a marker […] of historical alienation, and hence of the necessity to read the new, changed world […] rather than merely reproduce its visual aspect”.\textsuperscript{21} Yet, Adamsberg is not always the first in a Vargas novel to understand this need for a ‘loiterly’ investigation of the murder-text; for in his haste to prevent further murders he often tries to force the Truth to emerge.

In \textit{Dans les bois éternels} the murder-text is represented, in a \textit{mise en abyme}, by the ancient text of the \textit{De reliquis}. A comment made in the course of a discussion of this text is denied by Adamsberg; nonetheless, his modus operandi belies his denial of the prose poetics in which he is both voyeur and participant:

\begin{quote}
— Il ne faut pas chercher ce genre de logique. C’est à la fois une recette et une sorte de poème.
— Non, dit Adamsberg. Ce n’est pas parce que le langage nous paraît compliqué qu’il est poétique. Ce n’est jamais qu’un vieux bouquin de recettes, et rien d’autre.\textsuperscript{22}
\end{quote}

Indeed, the key to the \textit{De reliquis} lies ultimately in the stated purpose of its most famous recipe: to provide eternal life. When at the end of the novel Adamsberg visits the killer in order to return a small amount of the elixir for which she had killed, he simply compounds what he has already done in his completion of the text, that is to say co-writing the text. By participating in the construction of the writerly murder-text, in collaboration with the killer, Adamsberg guarantees not only a satisfactory closure for the reader but also, and paradoxically, polysemy. The act of allowing Ariane Lagarde the victory of (reading into her text) eternal life, is thus parallel to his dissolution of his own subjectivity at the conclusion \textit{Pars vite et reviens tard}.\textsuperscript{23}

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\textsuperscript{19} Ross Chambers, \textit{Loiterature} (Lincoln; London: University of Nebraska Press, 1999).
\textsuperscript{20} Santilli, p. 200.
\textsuperscript{21} Chambers, p. 219.
\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Dans les bois éternels}, p. 262.
\textsuperscript{23} Adamsberg’s compassionate treatment of the murderer whom he has arrested has become something of a trademark of Vargas’s series. It is as though allowing him or her (partial) victory maintains the integrity of the
\end{flushright}
The mediating detective is, of course, well supported; his team, famously polarized between his supporters and detractors, provides an ideal space between whose extremities he can oscillate. Without his data collectors and sparring partners, notably the intellectual Danglard, Adamsberg would remain locked in something of a Catch 22. The events must take place in order for him to (de/re)construct them. (Part of his mediation must be between a fixed reality of the text and a performativity; or, rather, his investigation is a reflexive indication of the reliance of syntax on content within the text.) In their simplest terms, then, Vargas’s novels contain within them an element of the classic whodunit: their formulaic plotlines typically present a quest on the part of the criminal to avenge crimes committed against him or her long ago. The detective must then solve two parallel and interlinked crimes, one that is present and developing and another that is fixed. In terms of textual analysis Adamsberg reads one work, or readerly text, whilst assisting the production of a writerly text. The result is an oscillation between the readerly and the writerly: the former crime is reread to the point that the detective act may be considered a partial rewrite of the original work, whilst the ongoing text is both interpreted and actively created from bare bones whose secrets are less unearthed than dreamt up by Adamsberg.

Vargas’s skill lies in the way her two texts are made to run parallel. The meta-text must be read in order for the work of the killer to be brought to its conclusion. And the subjectivity of the solution is reiterated throughout:

— Ce n’est malgré tout qu’une vaste spéculation, dit Voisenet avec une secousse de tout son corps, comme s’il se réveillait après la fin d’un film, cessant brusquement de croire à une fiction qui l’aurait emporté. Comme tout le reste.
— Rien d’autre, dit Adamsberg.
Un battement d’ailes, entre ciel et terre, pensa Danglard, inquiet.24

As ever, this speculation creates a bond with the murderer, whose acts are themselves interpretations of legendary text. Both detective and murderer mediate between reality and myth.

In *Dans les bois éternels* Adamsberg will also operate across two parallel stories, which themselves serve to mediate between present and past. Only once Lagarde is behind bars, can he conclude the story that binds his childhood to that of his colleague Veyrenc.25 In order for closure to be brought to the attack that he suffered as a young boy, the latter’s memory of events must either be proven true or false: if true, then he must exact revenge on Adamsberg; if false, then both can walk away. The parallel with the murders, which is so stark as to make Veyrenc the key suspect for much of the novel, lies again in the insufficiency of truth. Tellingly, it is Adamsberg’s memory that is found to correspond to the facts of the past—tellingly because he himself denies its status as objective truth. Instead, he offers his solution as a reading of a text that, for the two men, has become legend. It is as a reading—and nothing more—that he offers his version of events.

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24 *Dans les bois éternels*, p. 265.
25 That the resolution of the crime (the murderer’s past) should hinge on the recovery of the detective’s past is of no surprise to ffrench, for whom the natural evolution of detective fiction is towards postmodernism: “Psychoanalysis seems to have become a hidden or acknowledged sub-text for the detective, who is now not so much in search of the truth of the crime he or she is investigating, as in search of the truth or trauma of a past, often his or her own past.” ffrench, p. 225.
According to this reading, when Veyrenc saw Adamsberg standing against a tree, watching him being attacked, he was looking at a boy bound to the tree, unable to move. The young Jean-Baptiste Adamsberg was trying to free his bonds with his pocket knife: “Et j’essayais, comme dans les films, de trancher mes liens. Mais nous ne sommes jamais dans un film, Veyrenc. Dans un film, Ariane aurait avoué. Dans la réalité, son mur résiste.”26 Had this been a film, then the hero would have, if not Truth, then at least the alibi of the film’s viewers on his side; in fiction meaning cannot be so readily be fixed. In the existential drama of Vargas’s noir text Adamsberg will need to support his truth with hard evidence. But, of course, it is not the evidence that proves the truth of the story; it is the plausibility of the story that decrees whether or not the evidence will be found (syntax preceding content in this case, and not vice versa). Veyrenc’s acceptance and the discovery of the proof ultimately coincide, not because the knife is needed to make the story true, but because it is a symbol of his desire to find closure in Adamsberg’s reading of events. By couching his story in hypothetical terms, Adamsberg thus allows Veyrenc to read the tale for himself, knowing that meaning must here be co-authored, which means Veyrenc arriving at his own (part of the) conclusion. So when Adamsberg sets up the hypothetical terms of his story, he does not point to the condition of the knife having been left untouched for so many years, but to that of his story being true: “Mais si l’histoire est vraie, il y a une chance pour que le couteau n’ait pas bougé et se soit enfoncé dans la terre.”27

And so, Veyrenc digs, unaided by Adamsberg who believes that it is important for his colleague to complete the writing of the tale of their shared past. Authorship, in this case a commitment to a writerly reading of the present designed to justify actions of the past, is the only way to dispel Veyrenc’s doubts. Symbolically, once the knife is found, Adamsberg offers it to Veyrenc, for whom it will act as a token of closure. There are obvious similarities here to the fetish object, which is used in order to reconcile a realization made in the present with a vision of the past. The major difference between this example of denial and the classic Freudian example of fetishism lies in the fact that, in this case, a small boy sees something which he takes to be truth and which will affect the way he henceforth negotiates the present; Freud’s boy, on the other hand, experiences a traumatic spectacle that forces him to adopt a fetishistic worldview, thereby allowing him to temper his knowledge of the truth with a parallel rewriting of the past. Both boys see the truth, but Veyrenc, rather than neurotically repressing it, develops a psychosis such that he sees the opposite of what apparently happened. And whereas the fetishist rewrites the past to accommodate the present, Veyrenc is obliged, as an adult, to rewrite the present in order for the new mythology of the past to establish itself. And we use the word mythology to describe Adamsberg’s account of the past, for it is a truth forged in the telling: the only proof that the past was actually as Adamsberg describes is the fetish object. In this case then, the fetish acts not as a symbol of an irrefutable, readerly truth but of a negotiated, writerly one. Vargas’s use of the fetish symbol in Dans les bois éternels is adjusted to accommodate her self-referentially writerly text; neurosis and psychosis are built on a deviation (repression and transformational denial, respectively) from the readerly position. Vargas’s truth is always mediated, a discourse to be produced in the mythical space between the present and the past.

Whilst any form of psychological denial can be shown to have similarities to and departures from Freud’s fetish scenario—particularly in this fictional situation—the scene, in which Adamsberg takes Veyrenc and himself back to the place (and time) of their childhood trauma, also resembles the case of the Wolf Man, whose dream of being observed by intensely silent wolves is interpreted by Freud as a repressed memory of watching intense

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26 Dans les bois éternels, p. 433.
27 Dans les bois éternels, p. 433.
motion. Veyrenc’s apparently psychotic response to the attack sustained at the hands of young boys results in a similar reversal. (Of course, the key epistemological difference to be borne in mind is that Freud substitutes for the dream account one that will stand for the Truth; Adamsberg will replace a memory shaped by denial—a mythology—with a story whose meaning, and hence truth, will be claimed by the reader/analysand and not the author/analyst.) The scene unfolds as follows:

— Le cinquième gars, sous l’arbre, le voyez-vous ?
— Oui.
— Qui est-ce ?
— Vous.
[…] — Comment suis-je ?
— Debout. Vous regardez la scène sans intervenir. Vous croisez les mains dans le dos.28

Framed against the tree, Adamsberg is in the position of the wolves in the dream: inactive and looking on. Our inverted reading instantly suggests that Veyrenc is looking (which, of course, we know since this is the account of an event witnessed and not a scene dreamt) at a scene of great activity. In the case of the Wolf Man, the event at the origin of the trauma is the primal scene. Veyrenc’s memory is symbolic, and it runs parallel to the other (main) plotline of the novel:

— Pourquoi ?
— Vous cachez une arme, ou un bâton, ou je ne sais quoi.29

At this point the primal scene appears to take on a masturbatory edge: Veyrenc is not repressing the frenetic motion of his parents’ union but that of a solitary boy fumbling with his penknife. Notwithstanding the potential of this onanistic reading, we should like to follow the way Veyrenc’s account veers towards the essay on fetishism: seeing his mother’s lack causes Freud’s boy’s to realize that he has always understood his mother to be phallic, and it is this belief that the fetish helps him to maintain. Here, Veyrenc’s trauma causes him to see inactivity and to believe that Adamsberg possesses a (symbolic) phallus. His desire for revenge can be said to have been motivated not simply by a desire to dispossess Adamsberg of the phallus but by a need to believe him to be phallic, a need itself inspired by his humiliation and (symbolic) castration. The phallic Adamsberg is next replaced in the account, which is co-authored by the analyst-detective, by a woman, who, like the mother in the fetish scenario, turns out not to be phallic:

— Vous avez vu Ariane, avant-hier, à son arrivée dans mon bureau. Elle avait les mains dans le dos. Tenait-elle une arme ?
— Cela n’a rien à voir. Elle était menottée.30
(Vargas, 2006: 432)

In this way, Vargas reminds us readers that the whole case has from the outset been both complicated and solved (we may recall the night watchman’s remark about the relative

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28 Dans les bois éternels, p. 431-32.
29 Dans les bois éternels, p. 432.
30 Dans les bois éternels, p. 432.
problems and virtues of poetry reading) by false beliefs about phallic women, both real and legendary.

— Et c’est une excellente raison pour avoir les mains dans le dos. J’étais attaché, Veyrenc […] J’avais les mains ligotées à l’arbre.

(Vargas, 2006: 432)

Adamsberg dispels the myth of his own possession of the phallus (even his masturbation must be read as *coitus interruptus* as he drops the knife). He therefore forces Veyrenc to share his vision of how the story went or ought to go.31

This version of events is authenticated, or accepted as truth, when Veyrenc unearths the pocket knife. Symbolically (and curiously), the knife here represents not castration (which took place during the childhood attack) but its opposite, and, when handled by Veyrenc, it empowers him to face the world anew;32 and as a fetish, it also enables him to reconcile his present and his past. The production of this fetish object is, then, both different and similar in value to the establishment of the fetish in Freud’s account: on the one hand, Vargas’s fetish object is produced long after the event and in order to symbolize acceptance of the truth and rejection of the long-held and erroneous belief in the phallic other, whereas Freud’s fetish is instantaneously established in order to allow the truth of the non-phallic other to be screened by a parallel belief in its opposite; on the other hand, both fetishes symbolize the truth, one with the screen removed, the other with it erected. And whilst Freud’s fetish allows the subject to negotiate the existential present via the construction of a mythologized past, the discovery of the knife, although altering a psychotic reconfiguration of the past and appearing to replace it with the truth, still serves in *Dans les bois éternels* as a symbol of a history written and represented rather than lived and recollected.

The tangled web that is the resolution of the novel functions as a demonstration of ffrench’s suggestion that “the detective genre […] and psychoanalysis too, show themselves up to be also characterised by a dynamic between their own textuality and their will for mastery over the ‘perplexed surface’ of experience and textuality”.33 And yet, the ‘infantile quality’, which, for ffrench, is the marker of detective and analyst alike, as they strive to control their narrative, is displayed quite openly in *Dans les bois éternels*. There is, therefore, a way in which the narrator is taking the place of ffrench as reader, not simply showing but writing in, in real (narrative) time, “a trauma not hidden behind but only too evident on the surface of the text.”34 And in this intertwining of text and truth, of syntax and content, there is pleasure. For Vargas frustrates ffrench’s ‘superior reader’, giving *plaisir* to the emotionally committed turner of the page in the very moment that the text achieves the climax of its own abandonment.

31 This is a risky business. According to Pierre Bayard it is impossible for two people’s ‘inner books’, the books that they write internally from a common book, to coincide; indeed, only in a situation like that presented by the film *Groundhog Day* could such a feat be achieved. Pierre Bayard, *Comment parler des livres que l’on n’a pas lus?* (Paris: Minuit, 2007).
32 My thanks go to Larry Duffy and Joe Hardwick from the University of Queensland for pointing out the difficulty of defining the precise symbolism of the knife here. The truth of Veyrenc’s reading is in fact castrated by the discovery of the knife, but Adamsberg’s refusal to join the dig forces Veyrenc to produce the evidence of the inadequacy of his own truth. Adamsberg’s role as bearer of the knife is now associated with a second powerful act of non-castration.
33 ffrench, p. 230.
34 ffrench, p. 230.