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Anne-Emmanuelle Demartini, *Violette Nozière, la fleur du mal: une histoire des années trente*. Paris: Champ Vallon Éditions, 2017. 391 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. €27.00 (pb). ISBN 9-79-1026706083.

Review by Steven Zdatny, University of Vermont.

A misfortune for her family, Violette Nozière's well-known attempt to poison her parents in August 1933--Dad died, Mom recovered--was also a gift that has not ceased to give. The details of the story were tailor-made for a press that thrived on scandal: an aspiring good-time girl and a range of sketchy figures who populated her demi-monde, the apparently doting parents, the vileness of the act, the brief search for the suspect, the speculations about the character and motives of the murderess. Indeed, the case created a mountain of historical documents. These included hundreds of stories from the daily papers and the crime-focused press, judicial documents stretching from the police investigation to the trial, to the later considerations of *réhabilitation*, along with dozens of unsolicited and often anonymous letters to the police and the court and the opinions of artists, psychiatrists, and assorted experts on the human condition. Claude Chabrol later made a film about it, with Isabelle Huppert in the starring role. Historians, too, have taken a crack at making sense of the tragedy--most recently Sarah Maza.[1] Apparently, as the cultural anthropologists might say, parricide is good to think with.

Anne-Emmanuelle Demartini, who is professor of contemporary history at the University of Paris-13, aims to use her new study of the Violette Nozière case to explore the place where "symbol meets social history" (p. 13); that is, to tell us something new and un-recognized about what she calls the "social imaginary." In this Demartini is responding to Alain Corbin's call to unpack "objets d'histoires denses." Her approach is very Corbin-like--as practiced, for example in *The Village of Cannibals* [2]--but her analysis is likewise peppered with citations to the pantheon of French social theory and cultural studies: Foucault (inevitably), Perrot, Kalifa, Bourdieu, Barthes, Merleau-Ponty, Lacan, and a host of others.

The book begins with the crime, committed on the night of 22-23 August 1933, on the rue de Madagascar, a small street in the working-class village of the 12th arrondissement in Paris. The *pompiers* arrived first, quickly followed by the police. They found the father Baptiste dead on his bed, with his wife Germaine close to dead nearby. The fact that the gas was turned on suggested it might have been a half-successful attempt at double-suicide. But it quickly became clear that they had been poisoned and that the prime suspect, their 18-year old daughter Violette, had gone on the lam. The search for Violette became the first chapter in what soon inflated from sordid crime to full-blown "affaire."

I found the book at its most absorbing when it was telling the bare-bones but compelling story of crime and punishment, and Demartini turns out to have a real talent for narrative. The autopsy that revealed the poison, the flight of the daughter, presumably with a missing wad of cash, meant that the case never amounted to much of a whodunnit; it was clear from the start that Violette had. The questions were why, and even more to the point, where had she gone? The police leapt into action, looking for witnesses and searching for the daughter. Agents of the court began to prepare a case. The newspapers

and crime journals, eager to cash in on such a tasty story, got involved in the chase and began speculating on the details of the matter. The author makes the obvious point that the affair quickly became the "fils de la culture de masse" (p. 35). But it did, and in the process turned up a group of secondary characters from the Latin Quarter and Pigalle--Negros and Corsicans and North Africans--who had been part of Violette's deliciously unedifying life. There was even the mystery of a "M. Émile," an older man who was supposed to have given the young woman quite a bit of money--although for what was not clear--who was never identified, if he had ever existed. After a week on the run, the law caught up to Violette. All in all, the first chapter does a bang-up job of examining the crime and setting up the pieces that would dominate subsequent events.

There is no surprise in the way the press latched on to the murder as a way to sell papers, or in the role it played in constructing the story for popular consumption, as a "mode priviligiée de construction des réalités criminelles" (p. 35). The excursions into theory and method that accompany this observation--seeking to teach us that the Violette of the "Scandal" is not the "Truth" about her---did not strike me as adding much in the way of insight, however. The editors who published the stories and the photographs knew exactly what they were doing. By comparison, academics seem late to the party…and a lot harder to understand.

Chapter two plunges deeper into the crime as an artifact of the social imaginary, as it follows the unfolding investigation. Demartini takes readers on a multi-disciplinary tour of "horror" and examines the history of poisoning and parricide. Of particular interest is the way that poisoning was gendered, the duplicity and cowardice of poison being associated with feminine practices of homicide. The image of Violette being booked provides the author with an occasion to "read" her iconic perp walk and to reflect on the way the media turned an event into an "event."

The key episode in this next phase of the affair was the long and apparently cynical confession the police got from Violette, who now claimed that her father had long subjected her to incestuous relations. This accusation against Baptiste, widely seen as a responsible, doting dad, produced a "concert of indignation" in a press that now considered Violette not just a parricide and a syphilitic tramp, but also a shameless liar. In fact, the police found some curious, and perhaps suggestive objects in the Nozières' apartment: a bit of pornography, an obscene postcard of a man with an erection, labeled "the Péniscope," and something best described as an "ejaculate sleeve"--all of which was dutifully reported in the papers. This naturally provoked a spell of hand-wringing about the proliferation of salacious detail and its impact on public morality, but the condemnations didn't stop it. Moreover, the "Péniscope" and the other materials did not amount to proof one way or the other about incest. A gripping moment in the unfolding drama came with the confrontation between Violette and her mother, the barely recovered Germaine Nozière, understandably miffed that her daughter had made her a widow and had tried to make her a corpse.

The next several chapters veer between cultural studies and historical context. In "La fille aux poisons," Demartini, focusing on the discourse *around* the murder, interpolates women's "special place" in the social imaginary of crime and the way that certain crimes were coded "female." The interwar period being the high tide of Freudianism, the press and the court spent a lot of time soliciting expert guidance on the "oedipal neurosis" of Violette's precocious sexuality and incest fantasies, which were presumably linked in her malfunctioning subconscious. The sum of this professional and amateur psychologizing had some effect in transforming Violette in the public mind from a *monstre* to a *malade.*

The author proceeds to peel the onion of the social imaginary in a fashion that not only recalls but explicitly references Foucault's notion of the archeology of knowledge. And once again, I was struck by the superfluous nature of so much of this theoretical and methodological reflection. That is, insights about gender coding and the "construction" of the young parricide hardly need to be teased out of the discourse; they were perfectly obvious to the reporters and photographers who were constructing the

crime and the criminal on front pages every day. Besides that, the impression left by those privileged voices that weighed in at the time is that "experts" invariably talk the most astounding rubbish.

On the contrary, in a marvelous section Demartini uses the archival treasures she finds both to examine the intimate live of the Nozière family and to illuminate the lived experience of the Parisian working class. Baptiste looked like an exemplary member of the successful industrial proletariat, a *cheminot* who had worked his way up from unskilled hand to *mécanicien*--still a *guele noir*, but a comparatively respected and well paid one, whose hard work and frugality had produced a very substantial nest egg for his family. Indeed, it was largely the prospect of this windfall that tempted Violette along the path to murder. Germaine was the perfect housewife. As parents concerned with social mobility, they tried to push their reluctant and not-especially-gifted daughter through the educational system.

The court finished its preliminary investigations and prepared to move to trial, while public debates about the case persisted, in particular over the subject of incest. The politically determined division of opinion on this question is a sober reminder to those who think that Donald Trump has brought the world an unprecedented degree of partisanship. *L'Humanité*, for example, disbelieved Violette because her accusation cast a negative light on the proletarian family. Right-wing publications like *Candide* and *Gringoire* displayed no such reverence for working-class virtue, even as they remained skeptical of the incest story. Somewhat curiously, the Surrealists made up the most egregious example of motivated conviction. They saw Violette as an almost Dreyfus-like casualty of a corrupt society. Guided by a perverse aesthetic and a *politique du pire*, where Murder equaled Revolution, Surrealist poets and Surrealist artists argued that the incest accusation *had* to be true and that Violette should be understood as the real victim of the drama. At any rate, from the Communists to the fascists, every faction wanted to use Violette as a club to beat the other factions: "It's the bourgeoisie!" "It's the Republic!" "It's the democratization of the educational system!" "It's a failure of good parenting!" And so on.

Partisanship aside, the public conversation around the affair had a what's-the-matter-with-kids-today? tone to it. This bled naturally into a discourse about the "crisis of gender" and the "mal de la jeunesse" besetting the country. As *Detective* magazine framed it, "Le procès de Violette Nozière, c'est celui d'une époque" (p. 291). Once again, a legion of experts threw themselves into the breach, seizing on the tragedy to support their narratives of decadence and revolution. It reminded me of the collective breast-beating that accompanied the stabbing death of Kitty Genovese in Queens, in 1964, while her neighbors supposedly watched but did nothing to help: the sins of the silent neighbors stood for the decline of American society. The facts were secondary.

The final substantive chapter steps back a bit from "reading" the text of the affair and offers a brilliantly clear and masterfully presented description of the sad calvary that Violette walked from trial to punishment to expiation. The court reached a firm set of conclusions about the young woman before them: she was not a sociopath. She suffered no oedipal problems. She was not a victim of incest striking back at her tormenter but a straightforward poisoner who had committed a "crime of interest"; that is, she had tried to kill her parents for their money. The defendant was by now a diminished figure who put up only a weak defense. And the trial itself had only one real moment of drama, when Germaine, dressed in mourning, testified as a civil party to the case. In contrast to the confrontation between mother and daughter shortly after the crime, this was a scene of reconciliation. The court found Violette guilty and sentenced her to be executed, although this is a bit deceptive. Everyone understood she would not be guillotined, since no woman in France had been for fifty years, and it was broadly accepted that civilized countries like France did not do that sort of thing. Instead, the parricide faced life at hard labor in a grim Alsatian penitentiary--at least until the Germans invaded and she was transferred to a prison in Brittany.

It is here that the story turns from sordid tale of murder to a tragic but gratifying story of repentance and redemption. Violette dedicated herself to being an obedient prisoner and a model of honest remorse. The quality of mercy was restrained, given the horrific nature of her crime. Still, passions cooled and,

step by step, the system recognized and rewarded a woman who seemed genuinely reformed. In 1942, Pétain reduced her sentence to twelve years. At the Liberation, DeGaulle set her free to live with her mother, which she did for the rest of her life. Violette married in 1953, becoming the devoted wife of Pierre Coquelin and soon the responsible mother of five children. Alas, the Nozière bad luck that runs through this story remained with the family. Pierre was invalided, then injured again; he died in surgery in 1961, making Violette, like her mother, a widow at forty-five. Two years later Violette was diagnosed with breast cancer, which killed her in 1966. At the same time, after several failed attempts, Violette succeeded in obtaining her legal rehabilitation in August 1963, thirty years to the day after she had emptied a sachet of poison into her parents' drinks. As Demartini tells it, this exemplary story of sin and penitence leaves readers with a deep sense of tragedy, but also with a feeling that Violette Nozière must represent the greatest possible success for the French penitentiary system.

Demartini begins her summing up by reviewing the notion of the social imaginary, which "unveils" itself in exceptional historical moments like the Nozière Affair and follows with some brief comments on historical epistemology; that is, on what we can and cannot know about the past. She aims this question specifically at Violette's claims to have been the victim of incestuous sexual assault. In a moment of almost Ranke-ian empiricism, the author avers that it is perfectly legitimate for a historian to ask, "Was there or wasn't there [such an assault]?" Demartini's answer came as a complete surprise to me: the reality of incest, she writes, was "*très probable, sinon certain*" [my emphasis] (p. 369).

Wait a minute!?! I had just read the whole book, guided through the evidence more or less exclusively by the author, and I had long since concluded that Violette's incest accusation was a red herring, invented as a way to parry the cold facts of murder and theft. That was certainly what the police, the prosecution, and the court had gleaned from the evidence, and aside from Violette's allegation, I couldn't recall a single piece of proof for it. Ockham's razor: there was no physical evidence. There were no eyewitnesses, even though the assaults were supposed to have occurred in the not-very-private space of the open shed in the worker's garden that Baptiste owned. There was some speculation that Violette had spoken of it to her friends, but none of this came out in the preliminary investigation or at trial. By what combination of logic and evidence, then, does Demartini arrive at her dramatic reversal of accepted wisdom?

Eighty-five years on from that busy day on the rue de Madagascar, it is not surprising that no further material evidence has turned up. What has changed, at least for Demartini, are the insights brought to the old question by new work in social science and literary theory, particularly as concerns incest and child abuse, that allow her to reinterpret the old evidence. Thus, Violette's failure to say anything about the incest to anyone before her confession corresponds to "sexual abuse accommodation symptom," which teaches us that "the child adapts to the incestuous situation in order to survive" (p. 370). Likewise, the daughter's frequent sorties into Paris nightlife "are less signs of immorality than a tactic to escape incest [at home]" (p. 370).

I expect that readers will buy this conjecture or not based on something other than evidence and logic. More likely they will fall one way or the other consistent with whether they find Foucault, Corbin, Lacan, *et al*--and "social theory," in general--reliable guides to history and human behavior. Demartini is not coy about her own views; the book contains at least as much reflection on theory and method as it does raw narrative. Her project depends fundamentally on treating the past as a "text" to be deconstructed and assessing what the judges and the press and previous historians considered to be "evidence" as simply one more element of that text.

My own reaction is dubious because, when I read social theory, I generally see more smoke than fire. But there was one point in Demartini's argument, à propos of the incest question, that I found not just convincing but indisputable. She calls the process by which Violette was investigated, judged, and condemned "justice d'hommes," if not "justice de pères." Indeed, it is hard to deny the fact that, whatever the evidence before them, the judges were not a receptive audience for the assertion that,

however innocent he appeared to be--and he appeared to be a diligent worker, a good husband, and a loving father--Baptiste Nozière had been a serial child abuser. Neither can we ignore the essentialist discourse about gender that saturated both the judicial process and the press coverage of the crime and the criminal, as it no doubt saturated the social imaginary. These observations permit Demartini to close the circle of logic and evidence: "With respect to the possibilities that the historical moment offered to individuals, we can say that to kill her father was a more plausible path than to trust in the justice system: parricide was the only way the young woman found to make the incest stop" (p. 372).

A brief epilogue brings this poignant story to a poignant close when, discussing her research at an academic conference on the history of justice in Rouen in 2016, Demartini encounters a woman who rises to speak from the back of the amphitheater and announces, "Je suis la fille de Violette Nozière" (p. 375). The two spoke briefly afterward, and then the daughter disappeared. Demartini, much to her credit, I think, decided not to pursue her. Whatever curiosity she had was inhibited by a humane desire not to add more sadness to an already profoundly sad family history.

NOTES

[1] Sara Maza, *Violette Nozière: A Story of Murder in 1930s Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

[2] Alain Corbin, *Village of Cannibals: Rage and Murder in France, 1870* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1993).

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