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René Galand, Three fictional detectives: the *chevalier* Dupin, Father Brown, the *commissaire* Maigret

Some time ago, as I was looking for a book on the shelves of the Wellesley Clapp Library, my eyes fell on a thick volume, *The Father Brown Omnibus* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co, 1951). It contains G.K. Chesterton's fifty-one short stories about a Catholic priest, Father Brown, who happens to be also an excellent detective. I had never noticed it before, possibly because it was a recent acquisition, or because other readers had borrowed it. In general, I don't care much about English detective writers. I find the novels of Agatha Christie, Dorothy Sayers or P.D. James a bit mawkish in comparison with the works of the American specialists of the genre, Raymond Chandler, Chester Himes, and especially the masterpieces of Dashiell Hammett, *Red Harvest*, *The Glass Key*, and *The Maltese Falcon*. I do, however, find something of interest in Chesterton's stories, not so much for the stories themselves as for the method used by the good Father for discovering the culprit, and for the curious analogies as well as for the significant differences which it presents with the methods used by two other detectives famous in literature, the *chevalier* Dupin, a creation of Edgar Allan Poe, and the *commissaire* Maigret, the hero of seventy-five novels and twenty-eight short stories by Georges Simenon. The fundamental analogy is to be found in the principle of their method, the total identification of the detective and the criminal, and the difference appear in the modalities of its applications as well as in the different domains in which it is applied.

The *chevalier* C. Auguste Dupin is the protagonist of three stories by Edgar Allan Poe: «*The rders in the Rue Morgue* » (1841), «*The Mystery of Marie Rogêt* » (1848) and «*The Purloined Letter* »(1848). Poe introduces the *chevalier* to his readers in the first story. The narrator, as he reflects on the way in which a player can win a game of checkers, comes to the following conclusion: "... *the analyst throws himself into the spirit of his opponent, identifies himself therewith, and not infrequently sees thus, at a glance, the sole methods (sometimes indeed absurdly simple ones) by which he may seduce into error or hurry into miscalculation.*" Dupin, who shares an apartment with the narrator, has this ability to the supreme degree. He gives his friend a dazzling proof of this by following, link by link, the unfolding of the narrator's thoughts, of which the narrator was himself totally unaware. On occasion, Dupin is not unwilling to put his talents at the service of the police. He thus manages to catch the man who witnessed the double murder committed in a house of the Rue Morgue. From clues he has observed at the scene, Dupin has come to the conclusion that the perpetrator is an escaped orang-outang, and that his master is a sailor who has served on a Maltese ship. To lure the man into a trap, Dupin resorts to an ad in the papers. To compose this ad, Dupin throws himself into the spirit of the recalcitrant witness, foresees how the man must react to the ad, and composes the text in such a way that the man will reproduce within himself the reasoning predicted by Dupin: « *I am innocent ; I am poor ; my Ourang-outang is of great value – to one in my circumstances a fortune of itself – why should I lose it through idle apprehension of danger ? Here it is, within my grasp. It was found in the Bois de Boulogne – at a vast distance from the scene of that butchery. How can it ever be suspected that a brute beast should have done the deed? The police are at fault – they have failed to procure the slightest clue. Should they even trace the animal, it would be impossible to prove me cognizant of the murder, or to implicate me in guilt on account of that cognizance. Above all, I am known. The advertiser designates me as the possessor of the beast. I am not to what limit his knowledge may extend. Should I avoid claiming a property of so great value, which it is known that I possess, I will render the animal at least liable to suspicion. It is not my policy to attract attention either to myself or to the beast. I will answer the advertisement, get the Orant-outang,*

and keep it close until this matter blows over.” The trick works to perfection. In “*The mystery of Marie Roget*”, Dupin, using information provided by newspapers, manages to recreate within himself the reasoning of the victim and her killer. This mental reconstruction allows him to pursue his inquiries, which lead to the arrest and to the conviction of the murderer.

In these two stories, the part played by the identification of the detective and the criminal is somewhat secondary. It is, however, essential in the third story devoted to the *chevalier*, « *The Purloined Letter* ». Dupin explains to the narrator how, in his school, an eight year old boy won all the marbles in the game of “odd or even”. When his opponent was a dullard, the crafty boy answered « odd ». He might lose, but the second time around he always won, for he reasoned that if the dullard chose “even” the first time, the fellow’s trickery will go no further than changing to “odd”. If the opponent looks more astute, however, the crafty will conclude that the fellow will think that changing from “even” to “odd” is a bit too simplistic, and that he will repeat “even”. The crafty boy says “even” and wins again. He wins by reproducing within himself his opponent’s reasoning.

The purloined letter which gives Poe’s story its title is a most important document. It is addressed to the queen, and, if it was made public, it could compromise her honor. The perpetrator is known: he is none other than a minister, D--. He simply took the letter under the very eyes of the queen, but the queen was unable to do anything about it because the king was there. The queen entrusted the prefect of police with the task of recovering the letter. The prefect knows that the minister constantly keeps the letter within reach, since he holds the queen in his power only if he is able to produce the letter at any time. The letter must therefore be on him, or within his mansion. The prefect of police has therefore the minister’s residence searched from top to bottom. Nothing has escaped their attention : the cellar’s floor, the bricks with which the courtyards are paved, the inside of the partitions, the parquetry, the wood of the furniture, the upholstery and the cushions, the rungs of the chairs, the mirrors, the carpets, the bindings of the books..... The minister himself was attacked by robbers in the pay of the police and submitted to a thorough search: all in vain. In desperation, the prefect comes to Dupin, who suggests that he problem may be a little too simple, a little too obvious, and that the only advice he can give is to proceed to a new search. But before letting him go, Dupin asks the prefect of police for a detailed description of the purloined letter.

A month later, the prefect returns. The new searches have produced nothing. Dupin then asks him what would be the reward given to whoever would find the letter: fifty thousand francs, says the prefect. Dupin immediately gives him the letter in exchange for the check, and the prefect runs off. The *chevalier* then explains to the narrator how he recovered the document. The method used by the prefect of police was based on mathematical reasoning. This reasoning gives mathematical proof that it is impossible to hide the letter either in the minister’s residence, or on his person. If not a single square inch has escaped the search. It so happens that the minister is an expert mathematician. He therefore has no problem in reproducing within himself the reasoning made by the prefect. He even makes their work easy for the police by leaving his residence and allowing himself to be searched by robbers in the pay of the police. But the minister is not just a mathematician, he is also a poet.

One must not be mistaken here: for Poe, poetic reasoning is at least as complex as mathematical reasoning. In his celebrated essay on the composition of his poem « *The Raven* », Poe has demonstrated that the poem is the result of a series of operations (selection, treatment and organization of the theme, the motifs, the imagery, the rhythm, the rime, and the sonorities) intended to produce on the reader the effect calculated by the poet. Dupin is well acquainted with

the minister. He knows that the man is not only an excellent mathematician (he has written a learned treatise on differential calculus), but also a poet. If mathematical reasoning proves that it is impossible to hide the purloined letter, poetic reasoning provides a solution which is, as Dupin told the prefect of police, quite simple, quite obvious. This distinction between mathematical reasoning and poetic reasoning is somewhat similar to Pascal's celebrated distinction between *esprit de géométrie* and *esprit de finesse*.

Reproducing within himself the minister's reasoning, Dupin concludes that the minister did not even try to hide the purloined letter, a fact which he confirms during a visit he pays to the minister. Under the pretext that his eyesight is weak, Dupin has put on green glasses. The minister receives him in his office, and Dupin, his eyes hidden behind his glasses, makes a detailed observation of the premises. He immediately notices a card-board card-holder hanging by a blue ribbon from the fire-place mantelpiece. It contains a few calling cards and an old letter which is all crumpled, quite dirty, half torn. This letter bears a large black wax seal with the minister's coat of arms and the minister's address. The handwriting is quite small, that of a woman. The purloined letter bore the queen's address and a small red wax seal with the coat of arms of a ducal family. The handwriting was firm and determined, obviously that of a man. Dupin is immediately certain that, in spite of these obvious differences, it is the purloined letter. He makes a mental note of the appearance of the letter and takes his leave, forgetting on purpose his gold snuffbox. He returns the next day to claim the forgotten snuffbox. During his visit, a gunshot fired in the street attracts the minister's attention who goes to the window. Dupin takes advantage of this distraction to replace the purloined letter with an identical letter carefully prepared in advance. The gunshot was fired by a man in his pay who pretended to be drunk and half-witted.

In order to identify with the minister so completely that he could reason exactly like him, Dupin's mind had to be uncommonly supple. How could he achieve such a perfect mimicry? Poe provides an explanation by using the case of the crafty boy mentioned previously. Dupin had asked the boy how he achieved this perfect "*identification of the reasoner's intellect with that of his opponent*"). The boy told him his secret: "*When I wish to find out how wise, or how stupid, or how good, or how wicked is any one, I fashion the expression of my face as accurately as possible in accordance with the expression of his, and then wait to see what thoughts or sentiments arise in my mind or heart, as if to match or correspond with the expression.*" Although the identification accomplished by the boy includes feelings as well as thoughts, all the examples given by Poe pertain only to the realm of the intellect, of reasoning, be this reasoning mathematical or poetical. It is clear, however, that Poe sees a close correlation between what pertains to the senses and what pertains to the intellect, and that for him it is the poetical mind which is best equipped to perceive this correlation. Further on, he states that: "*the material world abounds with strict analogies to the immaterial*", and he associates these analogies with metaphors, and metaphors have some truth value. The universe as he sees it forebodes Baudelaire's universe of correspondences. This vision of the universe is structured by what present day thinkers would call "*la pensée sauvage*". Here again one should underline that the examples of identification mentioned by Poe are limited to the realm of the intellect, of reasoning.

It is in the story titled "*The Secret of Father Brown*" that Chesterton, through the mouth of the good Father, expounds his own method in rather dramatic terms: "-- "*You see, it was I who killed all those people [...] You see, I had murdered them all myself,*" explained Father Brown patiently. "*So, of course, I knew how it was done.*" [...] "*I had planned out each*

of the crimes very carefully”, went on Father Brown. “I had thought out exactly how a thing like that could be done, and in what style and state of mind a man could really do it. And when I was quite sure that I felt exactly like the murderer myself, of course I knew who he was.” Father Brown, like the Chevalier Dupin, recreates within himself the mental process of the murderer. But it should be noted that this identification is not limited to the realm of reasoning. He must not only think, he must also feel. It is the entire psychical life of the assassin that he reproduces within himself” :--« *I try to get inside the murderer.... Indeed it's much more than that, don't you see. I am inside a man. I am always inside a man, moving his arms and legs, but I wait till I know I am inside a murderer, thinking his thoughts, wrestling with his passions; till I have bent myself into the posture of his hunched and peering hatred, till I see the world with his bloodshot and squinting eyes, looking between the blinkers of his half-witted concentration, looking up the short and sharp perspective of a straight road to a pool of blood. Till I am really a murderer.*” It is clear that Father Brown, like Dupin, believes there is a close relationship between the physical appearance and the mental realm. But for Chesterton, to imitate the expression and the attitude of the criminal does not only enable the imitator to think like him, but also to feel everything that he feels. How can Father Brown, the kindest of all men, identify so totally with the worst of criminals? Wherefrom does he receive the power to put himself within an assassin's skin? Chesterton, a Catholic convert, give this rational explanation : Father Brown is a priest, and he has heard thousands of confessions. He has thus had occasion to see the innumerable faces of evil. But Chesterton prefers this theological explanation : Father Brown is a human being, and, like all descendants of Adam and Eve, his soul bears the stain of original sin. He is therefore exposed to all the temptations which Satan send to every human being, even to the holiest one. This is why Jesus had to tell Saint Peter: « *Vade retro, Satanas* ». His chosen disciple, when he refused to accept Christ's coming death, a sacrifice necessary for the accomplishment of Christ's mission on earth, was doing the Devil's work.

Simenon has made of Maigret the protagonist of seventy-five novels and twenty-eight short stories. The *commissaire's* method, like Dupin's and Father Brown's., is based on the identification of the detective with the author of the crime, but this identification, in the case of Maigret, is not the result of a conscious and voluntary decision. It occurs unbeknownst to him, His co-workers says that he goes into a trance. He literally becomes someone else, His face takes a new expression, his limbs makes gestures he never made before, to such an extent that his wife believes it is a stranger who is lying next to her in her bed. It must be understood, however, that this process of identification has been prepared by a lengthy and careful inquiry, and that Maigret has considered every piece of information gathered by his detectives about all the individuals who have had anything to do with the victim. But this was not enough. An essential step, in Maigret's application of his method, is a total immersion in the victim's social surroundings. Maigret absorbs this atmosphere like a sponge. His special gift for identifying with any one else enables him to feel at home in any milieu, a shop in Flanders or an exclusive apartment building in the XVIth arrondissement, an artisan's workshop or a strip-tease club, a village in Vendée or a fishing port in Brittany, a suburban garage or a provincial castle, etc... His unconscious mind collects fleeting impressions, apparently insignificant details which will later form a meaningful configuration. It is not an individual whom Maigret discovers, but an entity which is part of a vaster ensemble, a single cell within an infinitely more complex organism.

For Poe, as has been seen, the constitutive element of a personality is the intellect. One could almost say without any exaggeration that he has appropriated Descartes' axiom: “*Cogito, ergo sum*” [I think, therefore I am.], the “I” being pure reason. The most eminent psychoanalysts,

however, have underlined the dominant role of the unconscious both in Poe's life and in his writings. This is the case especially of the extensive study, published in 1933 with a preface by Freud, which Princess Marie Bonaparte has devoted to Poe, and of Jacques Lacan's famous seminar about « *La Lettre volée* » [The Purloined Letter], a text published in his *Écrits* (Le Seuil, 1966). How can one resolve this paradoxical contradiction? It seems to me that Descartes' axiom, for Poe, means: « Qui pense est, qui ne pense pas, n'est pas. » This reminds me of a couple of *New Yorker* cartoons. The first one shows a character seated at a table in a café. The waiter asks him: « *Will the gentleman have a cocktail before ordering?* ». The gentleman, to whom the cartoonist has given the features of Descartes as he appears in the celebrated portrait by Frans Hals, answers: « *I think not* ». The next drawing shows the waiter with an expression of total surprise on his face as he looks at an empty chair. It would seem that, for Poe, a man who does not think, who is deprived of clear and distinct reasoning, has no claim to existence. This does not mean that Poe believes that there are no such persons, but he denies the existence of that which, in a man, is not clear and distinct consciousness, that is, to the unconscious. In *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, Dupin, the incarnation or pure reason, is the complete opposite of the orang-outang, this animal being a symbol of the unconscious, of the monstrous and murderous *id*. It is equally significant that Dupin places himself at the service of the law, which makes of him a perfect representative of the *superego*. In such stories as *The Cask of Amontillado* and *The Tell-Tale Heart*, the narrator, the character who is "I", relates without any qualm all the misdeeds which he has committed. The deathly struggle between *id* and *superego* is symbolically represented in another story, *William Wilson*. The narrator, an incarnation of the *id*, has committed every possible crime and constantly rejected the exhortations of his double, who fulfills the role of the *superego*, whom he finally gets rid of by killing him. For Poe, denying the right to exist to the unconscious seems to be an attempt to free himself from the monsters teeming in the depths of his unconscious. Poe thus raises the question of man's freedom, and therefore of his responsibility: to what extent can a man in whom the unconscious, the *id*, remains the sole master be judged guilty?

For Chesterton, the concept of identity includes his entire psyche. But this concept must be considered from the viewpoint of Catholicism: there is, in every human being, a demonic presence. It is because Father Brown is thoroughly acquainted with this presence that he can understand the most evil criminal. But here again the question must be asked: to what extent is a man possessed by the Devil responsible of his actions. Chesterton could well make his own this conclusion of a prose poem by Baudelaire which Mauriac, another Catholic writer, used as an epigraph for his novel *Thérèse Desqueyroux*: « *Seigneur, ayez pitié des fous et des folles ! O Créateur ! peut-il exister des monstres aux yeux de celui-là seul qui sait pourquoi ils existent, comment ils se sont faits, et comment ils auraient pu ne pas se faire* » [Lord, have pity on mad men and women ! O Creator ! can there be monsters in the eyes of the One who alone knows why they exist, how they came to make themselves, and how they could have not made themselves what they are]. Conversely, to what extent can the criminal who repents of his crimes, like the bandit Flambeau, who, in Chesterton's stories, places himself in the service of the good, attribute to himself alone the merit of his good deeds? Was it not the blood shed by Christ on the cross, or even just a prayer said for him by Father Brown, which enabled him to be touched by divine grace?

For Simenon, the concept of identity goes beyond the limits of the individual. Man is only a cell constantly modified by its relationships with other cells of a collective organism on various levels (family, social category, work, money, sex, religious or political affiliation, etc). At the

time when Simenon created and launched the character of Maigret, *i.e.*, the late twenties and the thirties, the theories of Émile Durckheim were generally accepted in France. It may be difficult nowadays to understand how deeply entire generations of students and intellectuals were deeply influenced by him. I'll mention just two examples. At the time, in the French *lycées*, the final year students had two options for the *baccalauréat* examinations: mathematics and philosophy. The *baccalauréat de mathématiques* was required to prepare for the competitive entrance exams to a number of the *grandes écoles* from whose ranks the future elites and leaders of the country are recruited: *École Polytechnique*, *École Navale*, *École Spéciale Militaire de Saint-Cyr*, *École de l'Air*, *École des Mines*, *Agro*, *Chimie de Nancy*, *Sup. Élec.*, *École Normale Sup. – Sciences*, *École Centrale*, *École des Hautes Études Commerciales*, as well as for matriculating in science courses in universities. The *baccalauréat de philosophie* was required for such *grandes écoles* as the *École Normale Supérieure – Lettres*, the *École des Chartes*, and for matriculating in universities in literature and languages, history, philosophy, or in specialties which did not require advanced preparation in mathematics and sciences, law and medicine, for instance. In the *lycées*, philosophy courses were divided into four categories: Logic, Ethics, Psychology, and Sociology, and it was Durckheim who had established sociology as a scholarly discipline in France. I was a student at *the lycée* of Brest, where the French Naval Academy, the *École Navale*, was located. Its cadets were considered as the aristocrats of the town, especially by the young women, and many students dreamed of joining their ranks. I did too, but I was a bit near-sighted, and therefore ineligible for sea duty. The next choice was the French Military Academy, the *École Spéciale Militaire de Saint-Cyr*, which allowed its students to wear corrective lenses, and whose uniforms were also very much admired by young ladies. It so happened that candidates to the highly competitive entrance exams got extra points if, in addition to the *baccalauréat de mathématiques*, they also had the *baccalauréat de philosophie*, and they got more extra points for each university course which they had passed. Since one single point could make all the difference between being accepted and rejected, it was well worth the additional studying. I therefore prepared for the *baccalauréat de philosophie* and also took university courses in English literature and philology. In the philosophy courses which I took, I can bear witness that the professor often made mention of Durckkheim. Here is an even more convincing proof of Durckheim's influence on the French intelligentsia. Most French *grandes écoles* have their own traditional folklore, customs and songs. At the *École Polytechnique*, students sing *L'Artilleur de Metz*, at the *École Navale*, old sea chanties like *Le 31 du mois d'août*, *Le Corsaire le Grand Coureur* and *Les matelots de la Belle Eugénie*, at the *École Spéciale Militaire*, *Les petits casos*, *La Galette*, *Les Fines* and *Le Pékin de Bahut*. At the *École Normale Supérieure – Lettres*, where the French intellectual élites receive their training, the students had two hymns: the *Hymne à Varah* (in Latin; the tune is an aria from *Aida*) and the *Hymne au Totem*. The tune is that of a well known song, the *Trafadja de la moukhère*. The first lines are: « *Vénérons le Totem, le Gtand Manitou, / Que le Maître Durckheim, / Planta parmi nous...* » [Let us venerate the Totem, / The Great Manitou / Which the Master Durckheim / Planted among us...]. Simenon never studied for the *baccalauréat de philosophie*, nor was he ever accepted at the *École Normale Supérieure*, but Durckheim's theories about the close relationship between an individual's behavior and his integration within his social environment were well known among literary circles, and the character of Maigret appears as a perfect illustration of these theories. Maigret only has to immerse himself for a few weeks in a Paris neighborhood, in a small provincial town, or in a country village to feel that he is becoming someone else. At times, this change affects not only his personality, but even his body. It can be so pronounced that his wife notices it, and that she

wonders who is this stranger in her bed. If this is what can happen to Maigret, it is no wonder that an individual who has spent all of his life in a single social environment has been totally conditioned by this environment. This is why Maigret can show so much understanding, or even so much leniency, for those whom he has arrested, and why the latter are dimly aware of this understanding, and a bear him no grudge. One may then well ask: to what extent can an individual who has been so thoroughly conditioned by his social environment be deemed responsible for his actions?

For each of the authors mentioned here, a police inquest is based on the same principle, and it leads to a similar question: how can a criminal dominated by a power over which he has no control be 100% guilty? This power, for each of these writers, is different in its nature: psychological for Poe, theological, for Chesterton, sociological for Simenon. But whatever its nature of, the conclusion must remain the same: if the individual is not responsible, how can he be judged to be guilty, by himself, by God, or by those appointed representatives of society, the police and the courts?

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