

Detection in the second degree in French urban mystery novels

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Detection in the second degree in French urban mystery novels

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Abstract

*This article uses the palimpsest as an interpretative lens through which to consider Fortuné du Boisgobey's *Mystères du Nouveau Paris* (1876) as a rewriting of Eugène Sue's *Mystères de Paris* ([1842–43] 1989). In particular, via an examination of Boisgobey's use of the hunting metaphor, I demonstrate the central role of the *mystères urbains/urban mysteries* in a hypertextual chain linking the adventure novel and the later roman policier/detective novel. Boisgobey veers between emphasizing the familiarity of the hunting cliché and wilfully subverting it, and this playful oscillation is echoed en abyme within the diegesis. The urban mystery novel, I suggest, emerges as an important precursor of the detective novel, in that this deliberate and sophisticated alternation between the predictable and the surprising echoes the ambiguity inherent to the palimpsest and integral to modern crime fiction.*

Keywords

cliché

detective

Eugène Sue

Fortuné du Boisgobey

palimpsest

urban mystery

Eugène Sue's serial novel *Les Mystères de Paris* ([1842–1843] 1989) was published to unprecedented popular acclaim in the *Journal des Débats* between 19 June 1842 and 15 October 1843. Sue's Parisian underworld, its convoluted web of stories and characters and its disquieting juxtaposition of crime, violence and heroism, disease, destitution and nobility, captured the public imagination and would remain central to the French popular cultural imaginary not only for the remainder of the nineteenth century but even, as we shall see, beyond it. The plethora of popular *mystères urbains*/urban mysteries¹ produced in the wake of Sue's success and calqued on his hypotext, to use Genettian terminology (1982), presents us with a fascinating, if disconcertingly large, corpus; in her *Lettres parisiennes* (1857), Delphine de Girardin remarked that '*Les Mystères de Paris*, on vous les offre partout, en pantomime et en pain d'épice'/'*Les Mystères de Paris* are offered on every corner and in every form, from pantomimes to gingerbread men' (Bory 1962: 273).² The methodological assumption underpinning my argument here will be that a particularly helpful interpretative framework via which we can gain some sort of purchase on this impressive phenomenon is that of the palimpsest trope.

The palimpsest, a metaphor applied to many areas of cultural studies, where ambiguous processes of erasure and superimposition, destruction and preservation, are a source of ongoing fascination, provides an especially apt model to describe the nineteenth-century city, the fundamental transformations it underwent as a result of the industrial revolution and the various economic, social and cultural consequences this brought with it. In particular, the arrival en masse of the rural population in Paris, creating an urban proletariat, made for a continually evolving, continually 'rewritten'

city, whose palimpsestuous composition made it increasingly difficult to ‘read’ or ‘decipher’. Such problems of ‘legibility’ were the source of much anxiety in conservative circles and would prove especially problematic for Baron Haussmann, when he implemented his huge programme of urban developments in Paris between 1853 and 1870 (2000; Prendergast 1992).

Sue’s text, and the numerous literary responses to it, can, much like the city he evokes,³ be understood through the interpretative lens of the palimpsest, and specifically through Gérard Genette’s notion of the palimpsest as a metaphor for hypertextuality, or any relation uniting a hypertext to an earlier hypotext via processes of transformation or imitation. The palimpsest is also a particularly fertile metaphor in the context of crime fiction. In her 2007 study *The Palimpsest*, Sarah Dillon refers to ‘the persistent fascination with palimpsests in the popular imagination’. In particular, she reveals how they ‘[embody] the mystery of the secret, the miracle of resurrection and the thrill of detective discovery’ (Dillon 2007: 12–13). For Dillon, detective reading and palimpsest reading are strikingly similar, in that detective fiction contains two texts, as identified by Tzvetan Todorov in his ‘Typologie du roman policier’ (1971): the *fable* (story), which criminal characters frequently attempt to erase or obscure, and the *subject* (plot), or superimposed version of events.⁴

I will attempt here to make a link between the urban mysteries and the later *roman policier*/detective novel, by contending that the palimpsest trope can be used to explain not only the structure of the detective novel in its established form, but also the *genesis* of the genre. I will argue that the use of the hunting metaphor in the mysteries, in some instances deliberately familiar while in others markedly less so, echoes the

ambiguity inherent to the palimpsest, and thus prefigures the palimpsestuous premise of the detective novel. The examples used to formulate and illustrate my arguments are taken from a novel by Fortuné du Boisgobey (1821–1891), a prolific French popular novelist and disciple of Émile Gaboriau. In Boisgobey's *Les Mystères du Nouveau Paris* (1876), Marcel Robinier, posing as John Caradoc de Colorado, born in Paris, returns to the crime-ridden capital, having spent many years working in California, in order to avenge his father's death. Boisgobey's novel provides a particularly rich case study for my exploration of the hunting metaphor as deployed in the mysteries.

Evocations of hunting were a recurrent feature of nineteenth-century French literature. Jean-Claude Vareille notes the presence in the detective novel in particular of:

la constellation de clichés⁵ qui tourne autour de la chasse, transformant le criminel en « gibier » et le détective en « limier », à qui son « flair » permet de remonter une « piste » ou de tendre des « pièges »/the constellation of clichés that revolves around hunting, transforming the criminal into 'game' and the detective into a 'bloodhound', whose 'sense of smell' enables him to follow a 'trail' or to set 'traps'. (1989: 107)

According to both Christopher Prendergast (1992) and Miranda Gill (2009), the use of this cliché in popular fiction is part of a broader discourse of savagery, in which comparison to animals and primitives is a means of emphasizing the difference between criminals and the urban poor, on the one hand, and the bourgeois reader on the other, thereby separating and controlling, and providing a reassuring sense of mastery. For

Prendergast, the motifs and terms associated with the cliché amount to ‘stratagems of separation, enclosure and surveillance’ (1992: 87): ‘The barbarian at the gate, or the reptile in primeval mud, these are the tropes with which the discourse closed off the lower depths, in a naturalizing and regressive reduction to the animal and the primitive’ (Prendergast 1992: 86–87). Gill agrees that the analogy, at least in its initial incarnations under the July Monarchy, was a means of defusing and demystifying danger, reflecting ‘a need to infantilize city-dwellers, transforming Paris into a fairy-tale world of talking animals. Though staring at humans was a cultural taboo regulated by the codes of propriety, staring at animals was not’ (2009: 133–34). Thus in Sue’s *Mystères de Paris* ([1842–1843] 1989), readers could follow the adventures of characters such as *la Louve* (she-wolf) and *la Chouette* (meaning ‘owl’, as well as ‘bag’ or ‘hag’) from a safe distance and with a clear conscience.⁶

But any such impressions of mastery had to be carefully controlled so as not to destroy the (lucrative) premise of mystery altogether. Matthieu Letourneux (2007) actually sees the use of the hunting metaphor as a means of exoticizing an otherwise familiar terrain. Although authors writing about contemporary Paris did not have recourse to geographical or temporal exoticism, the metaphor is a clear reference to the adventure novels of writers such as Fenimore Cooper, whose *Last of the Mohicans* was published in 1826, Mayne Reid, who published a number of adventure novels between 1850 and 1865, Gabriel Ferry, author of *Costal l’Indien* (1852) and, more famously, *Le Coureur des bois* (1853) and Gustave Aimard, who wrote *Les Trappeurs de l’Arkansas* (1858) (Vareille 1989: 107). The exoticism created by borrowing the hunting cliché from the adventure novel creates what Letourneux calls ‘la distance par la fiction’, or what we might term the

‘intertextual exotic’. Alexandre Dumas’s *Les Mohicans de Paris* (1854–1859), whose title is deliberately reminiscent of Cooper’s most famous work, is an obvious example. As Vareille points out, the hunting metaphor has no basis in the real-life jargon of detective work, but is strictly literary in origin. Thus although the reader may be intimately acquainted with nineteenth-century Paris and unfazed by unsavoury characters, who have been demystified via a simplistic animal typology, he finds himself confronted with a self-consciously fictional world and a series of intertextual references which he must recognize and navigate.⁷

In actual fact, whether the metaphor is being used to dispel or perpetuate mystery (as with a number of other mechanisms in the mysteries, drawing on an erotic dialectic of showing and concealing explored by Roland Barthes (1973), it almost certainly does both) is rather less important than the way in which the metaphor is reanimated in these texts, with inevitable implications for the identity of both the characters and the texts themselves. As Vareille points out, cliché is only pejorative ‘à l’intérieur d’un code esthétique de l’originalité qui vit la beauté comme écart, non-conformité à un canon’/‘in the context of an aesthetic code of originality which considers beauty as a departure from or non-conformity to a canon’ (1989: 106). Cliché, by definition, can only exist across a group of texts and as such, in popular literature, becomes a sort of *indicateur générique*/generic marker, where genre is a synonym for and guarantee of readability, a promise that a given text will conform to a reader’s expectations (Vareille 1989). Vareille also explains that cliché, rather than being used in a redundant, throwaway fashion, as part of a process of innocent, anodyne repetition, can be reactivated to become a productive, creative force:

pour employer la terminologie de Riffaterre, le cliché initial figé, soumis à une série de variations et de développements, va jouer le rôle de « générateur », de « matrice » et de « noyau » et par voie de conséquence devenir productif/to use the terminology of Riffaterre,⁸ the initial, fixed cliché, subjected to a series of variations and developments, will play the role of ‘generator’, ‘matrix’ and ‘core’,⁹ and consequently become productive. (1989: 112)¹⁰

The familiarity of the hunting cliché is used particularly effectively to prepare the reader for what will become, in the detective novel, an intellectual search. The urban setting is crucial, in that it provides a kind of hermeneutic training ground, a space in which that search can be concretized and rehearsed by the detective-bloodhound, whose mission is given the reassuringly familiar trappings of a physical hunt.¹¹ As Vareille puts it:

Conformément à l'étymologie, l'*enquête* est d'emblée *quête*, poursuite. Il n'y a pas d'*abord* un raisonnement ou une déduction, *puis* une poursuite. Non : enquête et poursuite sont confondues, ce qui montre bien la dette de ces auteurs envers [...] le roman d'aventures [...] Il ne s'agit pas seulement de raisonner ou de faire des fiches [...]; il faut *agir, bouger, courir, poursuivre*. Ou, plutôt, raisonner est déjà agir, se déplacer, comme dans ces temps primitifs où l'intelligence ne se séparait pas d'un parcours/According to etymology, *investigation* ['enquête'] is also *quest*, poursuit ['quête']. There is not *first* reasoning or deduction and *then* pursuit. No: investigation and pursuit are combined, and this demonstrates the

debt of these authors to [...] the adventure novel [...] It is not just a question of reasoning or writing records [...] it is imperative to *act, move, run, pursue*. Or, rather, to reason is already to act, to move around, as in primitive times where intelligence was understood as a physical trajectory. (1989: 128–29, original emphasis)

Vareille (1989: 128) notes this exteriorization of reflection in Gaboriau (a contemporary and mentor of Boisgobey) and in Doyle, Leroux and Leblanc (writing in the first two decades of the twentieth century), but clearly the same thing is happening here in the work of this less well-known writer and at an earlier date. In *Les Mystères de Paris*, physical and intellectual pursuits are diametrically opposed:

Rodolphe [déclara] qu'il ne se sentait aucune vocation pour l'étude, qu'il avait avant tout besoin d'exercer ses bras et ses jambes, de respirer l'air des champs, de courir les bois et les montagnes, un bon fusil et un bon cheval lui semblant d'ailleurs préférables aux plus beaux livres de la terre/[Rodolphe [declared] that he felt no vocation for study, that he needed above all to exercise his arms and legs, to breathe the air of the fields, to run in the woods and the mountains, a good gun and a good horse seeming, to him, preferable to the most beautiful books on earth. (Sue [1842–1843] 1989: 246)

But in Boisgobey's text, a link is made between the two. Marcel and Dominique's initial mistrust of official French police, typified by the excessively formal and pedantic

Chambras ('Un agent... autant vaut dire un espion, murmura le chasseur d'ours avec une grimace de dégoût'/'A policeman... you may as well say a spy, muttered the bear hunter with a grimace of disgust' (Boisgobey 1876: 82) soon gives way to a fascination in Chambras's techniques and an appreciation of common ground (indeed, in its literal sense). Chambras announces:

d'ici à très-peu de jours, je vais me mettre en chasse [...] [p]artout où se tient le gibier que je vais poursuivre, partout où vont les coquins, dans les cabarets, dans les bals, dans les garnis, aux carrières d'Amérique/[in just a few days, I'm going to start hunting [...] everywhere that the game I'll be pursuing is to be found, everywhere that rascals go, from taverns, balls and rented rooms, to the quarries of America. (Boisgobey 1876: 261)

And he appeals to Marcel's taste for adventure in order to secure his help: 'je vous promets que vous verrez des choses curieuses. Peut-être bien y aura-t-il quelques risques à courir'/'I promise you that you will see strange things. There will perhaps even be a few risks to be taken' (Boisgobey 1876: 261). Marcel becomes Chambras's unofficial apprentice and, much like the reader, is initiated into the activity of detection via this literalization of the hunting cliché. As Vareille explains, the detective novel of the early twentieth century would abandon this spatial dimension in favour of pure reasoning and logic.¹² But it is clearly in the urban mysteries that the physical enactment of intellectual activity prepares the ground for this leap into abstraction.

Given that there is a historical link between hunting and early manifestations of human intelligence, the metaphor seems especially apt:

Les civilisations préhistoriques étant ou fondées sur la chasse, ou pastorales et nomades, et l'odorat (le « flair ») y jouant un rôle infiniment plus grand que dans nos cultures actuelles, il semble que l'image du déplacement spatial soit lié dès l'origine aux premières manifestations de l'intelligence humaine/Prehistoric civilizations being either founded on hunting, or else pastoral and nomadic, and sense of smell playing a role in these civilizations infinitely greater than in today's cultures, it would seem that the image of spatial displacement has been linked from the outset to the first manifestations of human intelligence. (Vareille 1989: 129)

In much the same way that hunting characterized the origins of human intelligence, so the hunting metaphor, used very specifically in the urban mysteries, points to the origins of the detective novel.

There are other familiar deployments of the cliché, such as the repeated references to the main characters' North American origins or experiences. In Boisgobey's novel, we are informed from the outset of the restlessness of Marcel's Canadian companion Dominique, who is repeatedly referred to as 'un sauvage'/'a savage', ill at ease in Parisian society. He spends his time shooting in the garden of his hotel and sleeps with three revolvers under his pillow. Believing the city to be the very antithesis of the

lifestyle he has left behind in Canada, Dominique is impatient to hear why his friend has come to Paris, so that they can leave as soon as possible:

Tu m'as promis de m'expliquer ce que nous sommes venus faire à Paris. Je tiens à le savoir le plus tôt possible, parce que, vois-tu, s'il s'agissait de rester pour mon plaisir dans cette grande ville où on ne voit que des pavés et des maisons...

– Tu retournerais vite au Canada, n'est-ce pas, Dominique ?

– Ma foi ! oui. Que veux-tu ! c'est plus fort que moi. J'ai la nostalgie des grands bois, et il me prend parfois des envies folles de chasser le bison ou bien l'ours gris/You promised to explain to me what we're doing in Paris. I want to know as soon as possible, because, you see, if I were staying in this big city, which seems to be nothing but cobblestones and houses, for pleasure alone...

– You'd be straight back to Canada, wouldn't you, Dominique?

– Well, yes! What can I say? I can't control it. I miss the great woods, and sometimes I find myself overcome with mad desires to hunt bison or grizzly bear.

(Boisgobey 1876: 17–18)

The irony of Dominique's unease and the marked proximity between the bison- and bear-hunting he remembers so wistfully and the hunting to be done in the urban jungle will soon become clear. Dominique's promise of help 'tu peux compter sur moi. Les ours gris attendront'/'you can count on me. The grizzly bears will wait' (Boisgobey 1876: 18) is similarly ironic. Rather than postponing his hunting activity, he will simply be transposing it to a new terrain: *le Nouveau Paris*/New Paris instead of *le Nouveau*

Monde/the New World. Explicit comparisons are made between the two settings: ‘Par une nuit obscure, à deux heures du matin, ce coin perdu de la grande ville était aussi désert qu’une gorge des Montagnes Rocheuses’/‘On a dark night, at two o’clock in the morning, this isolated corner of the city was as deserted as a gorge in the Rocky Mountains’ (Boisgobey 1876: 170). The similarity is underlined by the fact that the vagueness of Marcel’s recollections of Parisian topography does not hinder him in the slightest: ‘Le Californien, qui n’avait pas mis les pieds dans ce quartier depuis plus de vingt ans, ne savait pas du tout où il était et ne s’en inquiétait guère’/‘The Californian, who had not set foot in the neighbourhood for over twenty years, had no idea where he was and this worried him little’ (Boisgobey 1876: 163).¹³

Animal and hunting imagery is also used from the earliest stages of the novel to evoke characters and clashes between them. When Marcel intervenes to save Cécile from the unwanted attentions of l’Épouardeur, we are told that the latter ‘avait l’air d’un ours s’apprêtant à étouffer le chasseur qui l’a blessé’/‘looked like a bear preparing to smother the hunter who has wounded him’ (Boisgobey 1876: 36). After watching a public execution, Marcel remarks that the criminal ‘s’est laissé tuer avec la résignation d’un tigre pris au piège’/‘let himself be killed with the resignation of a tiger caught in a trap’ (Boisgobey 1876: 95). When Dominique is attacked, Marcel is able to use his hunting prowess in an urban context for the first time: ‘M. de Colorado se baissa pour ne pas être vu et attendit, dans la position d’un chasseur à l’affût’/‘bobbed down so as not to be seen and remained there, in the position of a hunter lying in wait’ (Boisgobey 1876: 171). The criminal retreats, obligingly, like a wounded animal: ‘le drôle se releva prestement et

s'enfuit comme un lièvre cinglé par le plomb d'un chasseur'/'the rascal rose swiftly and fled like a hare stung by the shot of a hunter' (Boisgobey 1876: 172).

Comparing criminals to animals was a characteristic feature of the *roman frénétique* (the French branch of gothic fiction preoccupied with horror, at its peak in the 1820s and 1830s). Vareille explains how such comparisons were a means of classifying and thereby demystifying a variety of criminal natures: 'Par son inadaptation à la vie sociale, le criminel est *ours*. [...] Par sa cruauté et son instinct sanguinaire, il est *tigre*'/'In terms of his social ineptitude, the criminal is a *bear*. [...] In terms of his cruelty and murderous instinct, he is a *tiger*' (1989: 124, original emphasis). Sue, in his description of the Fosse-aux-Lions prison, proposes a similar taxonomy:

Sur les traits rusés de celui-là, on retrouvait la perfide subtilité du renard; chez celui-ci, la rapacité sanguinaire de l'oiseau de proie; chez cet autre, la férocité du tigre ; ailleurs enfin, l'animale stupidité de la brute/In the cunning features of [one prisoner], could be found the subtle treachery of a fox; in another, the bloodthirsty rapacity of a bird of prey; in yet another, the ferocity of a tiger; and elsewhere, the animal stupidity of a beast. (Sue [1842–1843] 1989: 1011)

But while these are some of the more predictable ways in which Boisgobey draws on the hunting cliché, which we might liken to the palimpsestuous process of preservation, he also appears to question the legitimacy of the metaphor and push its boundaries on a number of occasions. Marcel, just like the reader, is subject to a kind of hermeneutic titillation (Barthes 1973), alternately seduced and perplexed by the trappings of the hunt.

We see him torn between the hunting reflexes exemplified by Chambras, the official police agent he shadows, and his own, more personal reactions. For example, following Dominique's dramatic fall when he jumps through a window in pursuit of a thief, the priorities of Marcel and Chambras are clearly at odds. While Marcel can think only of rushing to the railway station to see if Dominique has survived the fall, Chambras wants to concentrate on trapping a second criminal who is still in the house and unaware of their presence:

– Mais alors, si c'est M. Le Planchais qui a sauté après le *caroubleur*, le valet de chambre doit être encore dans la maison.

– Eh! que m'importe? courons à la gare! peut-être Dominique n'est-il que blessé.

– Silence! on vient, dit tout bas M. Chambras en lui saisissant le bras d'une main et en lui montrant de l'autre le corridor faiblement éclairé par le reflet d'une lumière.

Celui qui la portait descendait lentement l'escalier.

– C'est mon libéré de Poissy qui vient voir comment l'affaire s'est terminée, murmura le sous-chef de la *sûreté*. Le temps de l'*emballer*, et je suis à vous./– But if it was Mr. Le Planchais [Dominique] who jumped after the burglar, the valet must still be in the house.

– Eh? What do I care? Let's get to the station! Maybe Dominique is just injured.

– Silence! Someone’s coming, whispered Mr. Chambras, seizing his arm with one hand and with the other showing him the dim light coming from the corridor.

The person carrying it was coming slowly down the stairs.

– It’s my ex-Poissy convict, come to see how things turned out, murmured the police deputy. Just let me catch him, and then I’m all yours. (Boisgobey 1876: 319, original emphasis)

The next day, Marcel’s hunting skills are present but a source of frustration rather than satisfaction. We are told:

Il put constater dans sa chambre les traces de la tentative de *Pain-de-Blanc* et reconnaître que toutes les suppositions de l’agent de police s’étaient vérifiées. Mais ce fut là une bien triste satisfaction, car la sagacité de M. Chambras ne lui rendait pas son vieux camarade qu’il aimait comme un frère/He could see in his room the traces of Pain-de-Blanc’s criminal efforts and could recognize that all the assumptions of the police officer were correct. But this was a sad satisfaction, because the sagacity of Mr. Chambras did not restore to him the old friend whom he loved like a brother. (Boisgobey 1876: 340–41)

He uses his observation skills to keep his fears at bay, rather than to provide answers to the mystery, and formulates a series of questions:

Pour tromper son inquiétude, il voulut examiner minutieusement le théâtre de l'accident, et il vit avec une certaine satisfaction que la muraille était moins élevée qu'il ne l'avait cru en la regardant de bas en haut. Cependant, il lui sembla presque possible que Dominique eût exécuté ce terrible saut sans se briser les membres. Mais que le voleur eût eu la même chance, cela passait l'imagination. Et, d'ailleurs, qu'étaient-ils devenus tous les deux? Le problème restait à résoudre/To allay his concern, he wanted to scrutinize the scene of the accident, and he saw with some satisfaction that the wall was lower than he had thought when looking up at it from below. It seemed almost possible that Dominique had pulled off this terrible jump without breaking his limbs. But that the thief had had the same luck was highly implausible. And besides, what had become of them both? The problem remained to be solved. (Boisgobey 1876: 341)

Unwilling to pursue the questions himself, he chooses to wait passively for Chambras's verdict. Marcel's reluctance, within the diegesis, to participate in scenarios which rely heavily on the familiar hunting cliché thus acts as a reflection *en abyme* of a more general reappropriation and repositioning of the cliché.

Elsewhere, Boisgobey seems to turn the cliché on its head altogether, just like the palimpsest which, in superimposing something entirely new, obscures the underlying hypotext. The episode in which Marcel saves Clothilde Pouliguen, a friend's wife, from a disastrous adulterous liaison with the caddish Belamer, shows him covering tracks rather than following them. Familiar imagery is used, but its application reversed, with Marcel saving innocents from traps rather than laying traps to snare wrongdoers. He tells

Clothilde: ‘je viens vous sauver [...] du piège où vous alliez [*sic*] tomber, du piège tendu par un misérable qui ne mérite pas que vous vous perdiez pour lui’/‘I have come to save you [...] from the trap into which you were going to fall, the trap set by a scoundrel for whom it is not worth losing your way’ (Boisgobey 1876: 150). He finds her waiting in her carriage for Belamer, who unbeknownst to Clothilde, has announced to his *cercle* (gentlemen’s club) friends that he has no intention of seeing through their planned elopement. Marcel informs Madame Pouliguen that Belamer is not to be trusted and sets about helping her to remove any incriminating evidence, such as the letter she has left for her mother, explaining the elopement and asking for her forgiveness: ‘Il faut qu’il ne reste aucune trace d’une folie qui aurait pu vous coûter cher. Ne perdons pas un instant’/‘Not a single trace must be left of this madness, which could have cost you dear. We don’t have a moment to lose’ (Boisgobey 1876: 162). When Madame Pouliguen is reluctant to let Marcel see her home, he promises he can be just as adept at ignoring clues as he is at noting them:

[Vous craindriez] [q]ue je ne remarque la porte et que je ne retienne le numéro ?
Rassurez-vous, madame, je n’en ai nulle envie et je fermerai les yeux, s’il le faut, pour ne rien voir, car je ne veux pas me souvenir de ce qui s’est passé cette nuit/[Might you be worried] that I see the door and remember the number? Rest assured, madame, I have absolutely no desire to do so and will close my eyes, if necessary, so as to see nothing, because I do not want to remember what has happened tonight. (Boisgobey 1876: 164)

The cliché is thus brought back to life and recalled to our attention by its self-conscious, parodic application. For the reader, the familiar cliché should offer a key to the text, but instead Boisgobey seems, in Vareille's words, to '[faire] ressortir *l'étrangeté* sous la *familiarité* apparente'/'bring out the *strangeness* behind the apparent *familiarity*' (1989: 117, original emphasis). The way in which Marcel struggles to reconcile hunting reflexes and rather more emotional reactions shows how the cliché is used as part of the diegesis to hone and refine the detective character. The prototype of the detective figure emerging across a variety of texts at this time is here internalized and dramatized within one character.

The application of the metaphor is also extremely flexible. For example, when the drunken Épouardeur accosts Cécile as he falls out of a café, we are told: 'Elle s'affaissa comme une perdrix saisie par un vautour'/'She crumpled like a partridge seized by a vulture' (Boisgobey 1876: 34). Similarly, during the episode where Dominique is attacked:

Tout à coup, après avoir fait un long détour en se traînant par terre comme un tigre qui rampe sur le ventre pour arriver à portée de saisir sa proie, l'autre se dressa derrière le promeneur occupé à causer avec son complice/Suddenly, after a long detour dragging himself along the ground like a tiger crawling on its stomach to get close enough to seize its prey, the other man stood up behind the walker busy chatting with his accomplice. (Boisgobey 1876: 172)

This recalls a very similar description in *Les Mystères de Paris*, when La Chouette prepares to murder Sarah Mac-Gregor, and we are told:

Avec l'astuce du chat-tigre, qui rampe et s'avance traîtreusement vers sa proie, la vieille profita de la préoccupation de la comtesse pour faire insensiblement le tour du bureau qui la séparait de sa victime/With the shrewdness of the tiger cat, crawling and advancing treacherously towards its prey, the old woman took advantage of the Countess's preoccupation to gradually make her way around the desk that separated her from her victim. (Sue [1842–43] 1989: 873)

The versatility of the cliché is what stands out here, and the way in which terms such as 'proie' are used to describe victims being sized up, as well as criminals being trailed, is both striking and significant. The ambiguity of the hunting metaphor is perhaps best summed up by a conversation between Fleur-de-Marie and la Louve in *Les Mystères de Paris* ([1842–1843] 1989). La Louve dreams of leaving prison and living in the forest with Martial, where they will make a living from poaching, but wonders whether this will constitute a salutary pastoral idyll or a return to criminality:

- Excepté le braconnage, il n'a commis, n'est-ce pas, aucune autre action coupable?
- Non, il est braconnier sur la rivière comme il était dans les bois, et il a raison. Tiens, est-ce que les poissons ne sont pas comme le gibier, à qui peut les prendre?

Où donc est la marque de leur propriétaire?/– Except poaching, he has committed, has he not, no other criminal acts?

– No, he’s a poacher on the river as he was in the woods, and he’s right. Are fish not like game? Who may take them? Where is the mark of their owner? (Sue [1842–1843] 1989: 637)

Fleur-de-Marie suggests he work as a *garde-chasse*/gamekeeper. Thus, wherever we are to place them on the criminal spectrum (reformed and industrious workers or unscrupulous repeat offenders), Martial and la Louve will be described using the same semantic field.

Gill describes this phenomenon in terms of ‘semantic reversibility’ (2009: 208) and notes Carroll Smith-Rosenberg’s argument that ‘during moments of intense confrontation, politically opposing groups adopt identical metaphors and images’ ([1985] 1986: 246). A number of related but slightly different applications of the hunting metaphor at this time are also notable. Sue draws parallels between hunting and amorous pursuit, for example when Rodolphe sympathizes with Madame d’Harville over her arranged marriage: ‘Rien ne m’a toujours paru plus barbare et plus sauvage que cette coutume d’emporter brutalement une jeune femme comme une proie’/‘Nothing has ever seemed more barbarous and savage to me than the custom of brutally carrying off a young woman, as if she were prey’ (Sue [1842–1843] 1989: 408). Gill also notes the metaphor in evocations of prostitution and of the hostile, predatory social gaze.¹⁴

Readers of the urban mysteries, then, would have to sift through all these connotations and associations to make sense of Boisgobey’s text. Ironically, it is because

of its very familiarity that the cliché becomes difficult to read. Its frequent and varied applications result in a problematic polysemy. This is undoubtedly part of a commercially astute but otherwise gratuitous (albeit amusing), Barthesian game of showing and concealing. The cliché appears to be offering the reader a familiar key with which to interpret the text, but due to its polysemy is in fact rather less transparent than it seems, and raises as many questions as it answers. The fluidity of the metaphor means that identity can at no point be taken for granted. The reader, who realizes that identical imagery is being applied to opposing groups, is called into action and compelled to make judgements as to the identity of characters and, by extension, the identity of the text.

To conclude, in *Les Mystères du Nouveau Paris* (1876), Boisgobey's use of the hunting metaphor is, by turns, both predictable and surprising. At times, the novel is clearly grafted onto a pre-existing corpus of adventure novels, and the familiarity of the hunting cliché emphasized. This familiarity is used to 'train' the reader and to spell out in explicit, physical terms the hermeneutic skills which will later need to be intellectualized, when they are called upon in abstract, rather than concrete, scenarios. But we also see this familiarity offset against a series of unexpected applications. Boisgobey wilfully subverts and thereby rewrites the metaphor, for example by giving it a problematic polysemy which undermines its traditional association with reassuring notions of legibility, control and mastery. This playful alternation is given a fictional echo. The emergence of the detective figure is crystallized, *mise en abyme*, in the character of Marcel, whose oscillation between the role of hunter, using tracks and traces as an aid to detection, and hunt saboteur, deliberately obscuring those tracks, echoes the ambiguity inherent to the palimpsest. The ambiguous impulses of showing and concealing, of reiterating the

already written and, conversely, overwriting it, were thus clearly intrinsic to the detective genre from its inception, at the level of individual metaphors as well as larger structural devices. Boisgobey's text thus has a central role in the hypertextual chain, as both a *hypertext*, transforming the hunting imagery used by Cooper, Reid, Ferry and Aimard, and at the same time a *hypotext*, which will be transformed in turn by the detective novel, whose palimpsestuous premise it anticipates.

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Notes

¹ Although this discussion centres on the French mysteries, it should be noted that this was by no means a uniquely French phenomenon. G. W. M. Reynolds' *The Mysteries of London* (1844–1846) is perhaps the most well-known English-language urban mystery. For an insightful analysis of American and Australian, as well as English and French, urban mysteries, see Knight (2012).

² All translations are my own.

³ The notion of city as text, popularized in the nineteenth century, is perhaps most famously posited by Hugo in *Notre-Dame de Paris* ([1831] 2009).

⁴ The palimpsest also picks up crime fiction's frequent rewriting of historical events and scandals.

⁵ Vareille uses the term 'cliché', but is emphatic in his rejection of its pejorative connotations (see also 1989: 3–4). The reader should note that my own references to 'cliché', like those of Vareille, are not intended to imply any sort of value judgement. For a seminal discussion of cliché, see Amossy and Rosen (1982).

⁶ Of la Louve, we are told: 'quelque chose de violent, de farouche, de bestial, dans l'expression de la physionomie de cette femme [...] expliquait son surnom [something violent, wild, bestial, in the woman's physiognomy [...] explained her nickname]' (Sue [1842–1843] 1989: 618), while the older woman is described as:

une vieille borgnesse qu'on appelait la Chouette... parce qu'elle avait un nez crochu, un œil vert tout rond, et qu'elle ressemblait à une chouette qui aurait un œil crevé/an old woman blind in one eye called la Chouette... because she had a hooked nose, a round green eye and looked like a one-eyed owl. (Sue [1842–1843] 1989: 47)

⁷ Curiously, however, the cliché is not really found in Poe, as Vareille notes:

on ne le trouve guère chez le père de la nouvelle policière, Poe, et dans ses textes canoniques « Double assassinat rue Morgue » (1841), « Le Mystère de Marie Roget » (1843) et « La Lettre volée » (1845), l'auteur préférant développer les champs lexicaux de l'induction, de la déduction ou du raisonnement algébrique. (1989: 110)

⁸ Vareille refers to Riffaterre's 1979 *La production du texte* and his 1983 *Sémiotique de la poésie* (both Paris: Seuil).

⁹ Another fitting translation of Riffaterre's 'matrice' and 'noyau', drawing on apt reproductive imagery, would be 'womb' and 'nucleus'.

¹⁰ Christine Marcandier-Colard (1998: 254–55) very makes similar remarks about the *fécondité/fecundity* of cliché (with reference to Michel Crouzet's 'Théophile Gautier et la paradoxe du cliché' (1995: 7-27)).

¹¹ On hunting as a metaphor for hermeneutics, see Ginzburg (1990: 102–04).

¹² Modern-day criminal reconstructions, which resort to the same kind of hermeneutic ‘spoon-feeding’, by restoring unsolved crimes to their original, physical terms, could thus be seen as a kind of nostalgic regression to primitive, material modes of reasoning.

¹³ Note that, while the American origins or connections of Boisgobey’s characters undoubtedly feed into the hunting metaphor central to his novel, they also point to a more general *fin-de-siècle* trend towards ‘américanization’, which affected both city and text. In ‘L’âme américaine’ (*Variétés littéraires*, [1900] 1904), Brunetière would bemoan the fact that ‘[n]os nouveaux boulevards sont des boulevards américains [our new boulevards are American boulevards]’ (see also Hamon 2001: 159). Of Flaubert, Simon Jeune notes that ‘le mot « américain » dans sa correspondance signifie à la fois « utilitaire, laid et barbare » [the word ‘American’ in his correspondence denotes at once ‘utilitarian, ugly and barbarous’]’ (1963: 11). In *À Rebours* (1884), Huysmans criticized the Americanization of French society. Poet Jules Laforgue also bemoaned ‘l’image américaine’/‘the American image’: a levelling off, banalization and vulgarization of the arts. See also Catherine Dousteysier-Khoze (2012) and Philippe Hamon (2001: 27–28, 300, 303, 305–06). Characters in the French mysteries with American connections could therefore be said to have a metatextual resonance as well as a diegetic significance.

¹⁴ Gill refers in particular to Vallès (2009: 150) and also notes another example of semantic reversibility: ‘The pursuit of women for hire was often metaphorically associated with hunting, but it was also claimed that men were in fact the prey [...]’ (Gill 2009: 111). Gill’s reference to hunting as a metaphor for the social gaze is to Gustave Louÿs’s *Physiologie de l’Opinion* ([1855] 1867) (2009: 53).