



**Philippe Artières, *Un Séminariste assassin: L'affaire Bladier, 1905*
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At the end of the nineteenth and in the early years of the twentieth century, encouraging violent criminals to write their life stories became an accepted tool of forensic medicine. The autobiographical texts which emerged became vital building blocks in the psychological diagnosis of the subject. One of the leading international exponents of this method was the Lyon-based professor Alexandre Lacassagne, who developed a science of criminal anthropology guided by the principles of heredity and phrenology (the idea that mental functions could be precisely located in specific parts of the brain). Lacassagne was fascinated by abnormal behaviour and urged the inmates of Lyon prisons to write their autobiographies. He took a paternal interest in them, studied their tattoos, and used their life writing as a key to understanding the criminal personality. Philippe Artières has been working on Lacassagne's papers for over 25 years, and they formed the basis of his previous work *Le livre des vies coupables: autobiographies de criminels, 1896-1909* (The book of guilty lives) (Paris, 2000 and 2014). In this new book, he revisits one particularly disturbing case – the Bladier affair of 1905.¹

The essential facts of the crime can be briefly explained. Jean-Marie Bladier was 17 years old, a seminary student at St Flour in the French Massif Central. In 1905, towards the end of a summer holiday near the small town of Raulhac, Bladier stabbed a fellow-student, Jean Raulnay, aged 13, to death and decapitated him. Horrified by his own action, he immediately went to confess to a priest, who sent him away to give himself up to police. There was a strong sexual motive for the crime: for Bladier sexual arousal had often accompanied his fantasies of killing or

torturing others. The case was remarkable because of the youth of the perpetrator (legally he was still a minor), because of the extreme violence with which it was committed, and because Bladier would later be persuaded to write about it.

Artières discovered the Bladier file 25 years ago amongst the Lacassagne papers in the Lyon municipal library, but found the autobiography so horrifying and disturbing that he could not complete his transcription. Now, at last, he is able to do so. He approaches the topic paying homage to some impeccable mentors. He takes something from Michel Foucault’s interest in ‘anormaux’ – deviant lives – as well as from his interest in prisons and his analysis of medical knowledge as a ‘savoir-pouvoir’, an instrument of power. Like Foucault, Artières studies how extreme criminals construct themselves as historical subjects. An obvious precedent here is Foucault’s *Moi, Pierre Rivière, ayant égorgé ma mère, ma soeur et mon frère...: un cas de parricide au XIXe siècle* (Paris, 1973) (I, Pierre Rivière, having slaughtered my mother, my sister and my brother). Artières acknowledges another debt to the French anthropologist Daniel Fabre, well-known for his studies of rural France and for coining the phrase ‘ordinary writings’. Lastly, Philippe Lejeune, well-known to readers of this journal, suggested this case to Artières years ago as a possible research topic.

Artières’ aim is to bring obscure and forgotten lives out into the open. As he explains in a superbly written preface, the aim is not to commemorate past lives, but rather to dissect the anonymous bodies which have been thrown into the common grave of history. Historians must recognise all that cannot be known about them; the subjects they examine retain their opacity and never reveal all their secrets. In reconstructing their elusive portraits, we become ‘clumsy miniaturists of faceless individuals’ (10).

Artières’ strategy is to present a dossier made up of several layers, inviting the reader to peel them off, one by one, in order to get to the heart of the matter. First he cites the press reports on the crime, in which Bladier was denounced as a cretin, a sadist and a sex maniac. The anticlerical press blamed Catholic seminaries for raising such a monster; this was 1905, just before the law on the separation of Church and State in France, when pro- and anti-Catholic feelings were running high. The second layer consists of the first medical reports on Bladier which concluded that he was not responsible for his actions. Then the second opinion of the Lyon specialists reversed this conclusion and pronounced Bladier a ‘congenital bloodthirsty sadist’. This meant he was never sent to trial but was confined in a mental asylum. Lastly, the kernel of the work is a 28-page extract from Bladier’s own autobiographical text.

Lacassagne gave his subjects pens, ink and some school exercise books. Often they found writing unfamiliar and difficult; sometimes they could not remember very much of their past. Not so Bladier. He filled 11 notebooks, producing a text of 225 pages. Clearly, this kind of solicited autobiography was not spontaneous; Lacassagne would have several conversations with his prisoners, asking them to clarify aspects of their drafts. His suggestions about themes to address are evident in some of Bladier’s subheadings: mother, father, family, his dreams and so on. The autobiography, then, can be seen as a kind of dialogue between the murderer and his doctor, although Bladier certainly went far beyond Lacassagne’s prompts to produce a fluent, but repetitive account of his early life and homicidal impulses.

Bladier began as if he was writing a classic nineteenth-century autobiography, with a description of his parents, early childhood memories and schooling. But he quickly turned to an analysis of the chilling trajectory which led him to commit an atrocious murder. He wrote of his irresistible sexual urges, his frequent masturbation binges, and of his desire to enter the seminary as a way of controlling them. He tells of how he frequently confessed all his thoughts to priests, who never took him seriously, re-assuring him that he was exaggerating his *mauvaises pensées*. He wrote of his inner conflict as he tried to repress his desires, his disgust with life and his thoughts of suicide (although for him this, like murder, was an appalling sin). He related his fantasies of unspeakable torture and murder and the sexual pleasure he derived from the notion of inflicting pain. He explained his despairing vision of how, after his death, people would recoil in horror at his memory. The doctors found his self-analysis lucid and sincere. So much so that they incorporated chunks of it verbatim into their report: it was as if Lacassagne had delegated the analysis of the crime to the perpetrator himself.

In *Le livre des vies coupables*, Artières was able to illustrate a wider range of writing strategies adopted by prisoners facing the death sentence. Like Bladier, they borrowed a certain amount of medico-legal terminology from the doctors and judges who determined their fate, absorbing some scientific jargon to structure their self-examination, like the homosexual Double who called himself a ‘mental hermaphrodite’. A few wrote to resist and protest, maintaining their innocence and attacking the injustice of their conviction, but this was not the case for Bladier. They wrote to be recognised as individuals and to assert their own identity. Like Bladier, they wrote to take possession of themselves as unique, if flawed, subjects.

At the end of the book, Artières offers his own interpretations of and speculations about the affair, some of which sound convincing. He is surely on the right track when he stresses that it was significant that the murder occurred at the end of the

summer vacation, away from the seminary. The seminary, with its austere and highly regulated routine, was a refuge for Bladier. Its framework of moral discipline helped him to control his urges and partly neutralised his sexual drive. But at Raulhac, he was no longer restrained by any tight institutional controls.

Furthermore, the priests to whom he confessed at various moments had let him down; the autobiography tells us that they minimised his problems and his guilt. It is interesting that his first instinct after the murder was neither to flee nor to go to the police, but to seek out a priest. But the local *curé* had already gone to bed for the night and refused to receive him. Only then did Bladier hand himself over to the gendarmes. Religion had repeatedly failed to control his murderous tendencies or to correctly appreciate what was tormenting his conscience.

Did Bladier, as Artières suggests, find a new pleasure in the act of life-writing? He took to it easily and fluently, using accurate French with good spelling. Was this perhaps, a different kind of masturbatory act, which enabled him repeatedly to revisit his dreadful narrative and relive the sexual pleasure of killing? Artières speculates that writing was a substitute for actual masturbation, in which Bladier now claimed he no longer indulged. Unfortunately, the autobiography seems to have been the only thing he wrote, which suggests that he had no spontaneous desire to continue the practice of writing.

Artières’ skilful and sensitive presentation takes the study of life-writing into the unfamiliar territory of sadism and sexual perversity. He sees criminal autobiography as a sort of hagiography in reverse: these are the lives of the anti-saints, the ones who chose or were driven to choose the path of evil. Readers today are likely to find Bladier’s text, even in this truncated form, as unsettling as did contemporaries, and as did Artières himself on his first encounter with his vicious adolescent murderer.

Notes

¹ In preparing this review, I have also consulted the publisher’s blog, and a podcast interview with the author on SoundCloud. See:

<https://lejournale.cnrs.fr/articles/les-archives-mineures-sources-de-grandes-histoires> and https://soundcloud.com/luc-daireaux/chemins-dhistoire-un-jeune-seminariste-assassin-en-1905-avec-p-artieres-270920?fbclid=IwAR39Z186yOJagMK_cKApBD1RmI8Cp5rTa7ceTkbjEimgOqhXZSo1jOHnxoc