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‘SAIN D’ESPRIT’: THE NOTARY AS ANALYST IN THE SHORT FICTION OF GUY DE MAUPASSANT

The novels and tales of Guy de Maupassant feature a recurrent set-piece scene of institutional power: the reading of wills by notaries.¹ André Vial has observed that ‘le thème de l’héritage [...] se manifeste si fréquemment dans *l’ensemble* de l’œuvre, qu’il semble trahir une obsession’ (349), but the exact meaning of that obsession is not immediately clear. The testamentary topos, which occurs in stories such as ‘Le Legs’, ‘Le Testament’, ‘La Confession’ and ‘L’Héritage’, and in the novels *Bel-Ami* and, to an extent, *Pierre et Jean*, represents in one sense a well-worn narrative device which enables the next stage of the plot; but my contention will be that it offers in addition a set of fascinating and rather overlooked moments of epistemological disruption. Put simply, the reading of wills serves in Maupassant’s fiction as the pretext for the exposure of unpleasant secrets (primarily adultery or illegitimacy). These secrets are often shown to be highly dangerous, and their discovery is at any rate capable of a radical reorganisation of the characters’ and reader’s knowledge. The last will and testament represents in Maupassant’s fiction an epistemological challenge to the negative knowledge and disavowals of social life.

In this article, I shall argue that, when taken together with the Catholic resurgence of the mid-1880s, the upsurge of occultism at the fin de siècle, and the growth of pre- (if not proto-) psychoanalytic work at the same time, Maupassant’s notaries appear symptomatic of a late nineteenth-century fascination with knowledge from ‘the beyond’: ‘beyond consciousness’, ‘beyond the grave’. Hence Maupassant’s

notaries are invariably involved with the reading of *wills* rather than, say, conveyancing or the drawing-up of marriage contracts: these narratives insist upon the apparent liminal position that notaries occupy between 'the world' and 'the dead'. They become mediums, if not ventriloquist's dummies who speak the words of those who have passed on, a metaphor which is reinforced (though Maupassant appears not to have realised this) by the fact that they are invariably called upon to read the evocatively named 'testament mystique', a will deposited by the testator with a notary, and of whose contents the notary is ignorant until the 'séance' begins (see *Code civil*, article 969, 976).² I shall argue that this legal situation recalls – not coincidentally and not in an entirely simple way – the psychoanalytic situation. These episodes prefigure both Freud's most optimistic rendering of the power of analysis (encapsulated in his famous dictum 'Wo Es war soll Ich werden'), and a more ambiguous version of the power of analytic knowledge which Lacan finds latent in Freud's work, and which he himself makes explicit.

An epistemological fantasy: 'Le Testament'

Our first example, 'Le Testament' (1882), exemplifies the most optimistic – which is, of course, always to say 'simplistic' – way of thinking about the disruptive power of wills. Mme de Courcils is one of Maupassant's stock-in-trade 'mal mariées' (Vial 347-8), a woman whose married life has been 'un martyre' thanks to the abuse of her husband and two elder sons. This poor soul has lived a life of silence: as her youngest son René, the tale's framed narrator, puts it, 'Ma mère ne disait rien : elle vivait dans cette maison toujours bruyante comme ces petites souris qui glissent sous les meubles' (1: 621).³ But Mme de Courcils has a secret: an adulterous affair, begun and ended many years ago, with one M. de Bourneval. The affair will remain concealed

until her early death, whereupon her family is assembled for the reading of her shocking will. In the will, Mme de Courcils confesses her adultery; reveals the identity of her lover, M. de Bourneval; explains that her youngest son René is the natural child of the adulterous affair; and leaves all her estate to M. de Bourneval, to revert to René at his majority. Sylvie Deboskre has read in this revelatory moment an instance of narration by 'la narratrice occulte', that is, by a woman who has claimed a brief discursive enfranchisement, arguing that: 'La découverte de lettres ou même d'un testament imprime un tournant à l'histoire et c'est par son écriture que, symboliquement, la femme fait tout basculer et qu'elle est responsable de la « chute » du récit' (56-7). While I agree with Deboskre's analysis of the subversive effects of the document, I believe these to be less the result of the sex of the author than of the epistemological peculiarities of the medium itself, and of the confrontation between disavowal and knowledge contained therein.⁴

The secrecy which Mme de Courcils has maintained concerning her extramarital love-affair, and which the testament comes to disrupt, is described in strikingly, yet perhaps only superficially, Freudian terms: 'comme elle était si craintive qu'elle n'osait jamais parler haut, tout cela fut refoulé, condensé, pressé en son coeur qui ne s'ouvrit jamais' (1: 621). To read this passage as 'Freudian' might well be to subscribe to an over-simple topological view of the unconscious as a private personal space, somehow locatable within the physical space of a person's body, a misleading perception which is pithily corrected by Slavoj Žižek's Lacanian insistence that 'the Truth is Out There' (1997, 3).⁵ Yet this rhetoric of interiority will, in fact, give way to a more convincingly psychoanalytic structure of exteriority: in 'Le Testament', the truth is indeed *out there*, externalised, contained in a *testament mystique* which the notary reads aloud. The externalised discourse of this will exaggerates the intrinsic ability of

such documents to make 'statements about past, present and future relationships' (Hallam and Hockey 164), radically reorganising rather than merely confirming existing familial coordinates. The most significant result of the truths revealed at the reading of the will is René's decision to repudiate his legal father, and to take the name of his biological father, de Bourneval.

The process that takes place in the notary's office may thus be figured as in a broad sense therapeutic or curative, identifying, naming and in some way resolving a 'disorder' – not merely illegitimacy or adultery (this would be a rather conservative interpretation), but more significantly a disturbing affective insufficiency and, most importantly of all, an overwhelming and pervasive dishonesty. The external mediation provided by the notary is crucial to this curative power of the will. Michelle Perrot observes that 'ces grandes lessives familiales' – that is, successional struggles – 'demeurent confidentielles', yet her offhand suggestion that they may remain so 'le notaire étant le seul témoin' threatens to ignore the considerable symbolic significance of the notary's presence (265). In these confrontations, he becomes the allegorical figure of the social, a source of impassive external observation; the 'confidentiality' promised by the notary is only ever the official discretion of the remote hall of records, and is synonymous with precisely the breaking-open and dissolution of the familial *entre nous*, that more topical mutism embodied in the silent Mme de Courcils. Maupassant's story makes this symbolic power abundantly clear: once assembled in his *étude*, the family appears to have been taken into some authoritative, neutral space, a kind of limbo where the dead woman can break the silence she was forced to keep during her lifetime, and finally make her discourse heard – through the mouth of the notary. The clarity of the notary's discourse penetrates the network of disavowals which René calls 'les hypocrisies mondaines' and 'notre moral imbécile' (1: 620, 621).

Such disavowals and imbecility might be associated with poor mental health which the analyst/notary aims to set right – hence the set phrase, required by article 901 of the Civil Code, with which the testator begins (and Mme de Courcils is no exception): *Je soussigné(e), sain(e) de corps et d'esprit...* The 'alienated' discourse contained in the will is thus established as a moment of sanity and enlightenment. The names of the characters reflect this (perhaps a little too neatly for good taste): as a final gesture of liberation, Mme de Courcils signs her maiden-name, 'Mathilde de Croixluce', a name suggesting both faith and light, while as a result of the 'enlightenment' her testament brings, her son is 'reborn' ('René') as the son of Bourneval.

In this story, hidden, repressed knowledge is spoken by the notary back to the subject – that is, the family – and, in a sense, this knowledge 'cures' the family of its pathology; to paraphrase Lacan, 'l'inconscient, c'est le discours du notaire'. Maupassant's story moreover provides an important anticipation of the precise epistemological position of the psychoanalytic *sujet supposé savoir*: the notary does not possess a secret kernel of wisdom which is denied to others – indeed, the *testament mystique* genre necessarily means that he knows nothing of what he is about to read – but instead performs the family's *own* disavowed knowledge. What matters is thus not what he knows, but the position of institutional authority he is seen to occupy, the discursive credit which he enjoys. It is his influence that renders ineffective such pathologising contestations as M. de Courcils's 'C'est là le testament d'une folle !' (1: 623). The knowledge provided by the notary as *sujet supposé savoir* seems incontestable.

However, this Lacanian parallel could be seen as self-defeating, since as one of Lacan's most famous sayings has it, 'il n'y a pas de métalangage ; on ne saurait dire le vrai sur le vrai' (1966, 867). Mme de Courcils's testament embodies a revelatory 'voice

from beyond' which is totally efficacious, the very possibility of which Lacan denies in his rejection of metalanguages. Yet 'Le Testament' might thus be seen precisely as an epistemological fantasy, which indulges the idea of an enlightening intervention from beyond; and, as in many phantasmatic texts, the story exhibits certain tensions which might alert us to that indulgence. The first lies in the probable legal impossibility of Mme de Courcils's testamentary provisions. Though in her preamble she claims to reject the men before whom she has always trembled and 'leurs lois iniques' (1: 623), she must nevertheless operate within those laws in death, at least to an extent, and thus wills to Bourneval only 'la partie de ma fortune dont la loi me permet de disposer', that is, what the Civil Code calls *la quotité disponible*, in this case a third of her estate. She has done this, presumably, in an attempt to ensure that René (who will then inherit from Bourneval) receives as large a share in the inheritance as possible: otherwise, he would receive only a third of the amount devolving to each of his brothers, thanks to the Code's stringent provisions concerning the successional rights of even recognised illegitimate children.⁶ But Maupassant is deliberately sketchy on the details of this arrangement; Mme de Courcils's will states only that 'cette volonté est formulée en outre, d'une façon plus précise dans un acte notarié' (1: 623), grounding her revolutionary intervention in some other, elusive meta-text in a narrative deferral which implicitly confirms Lacan's claim that no such text exists. I would add somewhat fastidiously that this document will in any case have to be very cannily drafted indeed if it is to hold water legally speaking. It sounds remarkably like a *substitution*, a bequest made in favour of one person with the explicit or implicit condition that it be passed on to another; these were strictly and unambiguously forbidden by article 896 of the Code, on the assumption that they were only ever made in order to flout an unwelcome successional restriction (which is exactly the case here). Under these circumstances, the

will could very easily be contested and broken; yet as I have suggested, the story leaves the reader with the impression not only that it will not be contested, but also that it is *incontestable* – and that is the fantasy.

To understand the second, arguably more significant tension, we must consider the story's description of M. de Bourneval and his antecedents. If I am suggesting that 'Le Testament' presents a phantasmatic narrative of enlightenment, this is not merely my gloss; the notion of 'enlightenment' is endorsed by the text, since we are told of René's natural father:

Cet homme avait lu, et ne pensait nullement comme ceux de sa classe. Son arrière-grand mère avait été une amie de J.-J. Rousseau, et on eût dit qu'il avait hérité quelque chose de cette liaison d'une ancêtre. Il savait par coeur le *Contrat social*, la *Nouvelle Héloïse* et tous ces livres philosophants qui ont préparé de loin le futur bouleversement de nos antiques usages, de nos préjugés, de nos lois surannées, de notre morale imbécile. (1: 621)

According to this passage, 'Le Testament' tells the tale of a rare Enlightenment inheritance, from the eighteenth-century *philosophes* to M. de Bourneval, and thanks to Mme de Courcils's revelation, on to René; so it should come as no surprise if Mme de Courcils's will effects its own revolution ('bouleversement'). Reading, and especially the reading of socially daring texts, is assigned a liberating potential ('Cet homme avait lu') which is only magnified in the case of the eponymous testament – hence the story's title draws our attention to the *text*, and not to the rather secondary *inheritance* (which might just conceivably redeem the legal vulnerability of the will, since what matters is the knowledge rather than the financial provisions contained therein). The will becomes

a socially challenging document, another meta-text which might provide the answer to the confusions and disavowals of the mortal sphere (here called 'notre morale imbécile').

Again, this seems phantasmatic, or at least nostalgic, and arises perhaps from a kind of nostalgia that Gérard Delaisement sees as characteristic of Maupassant's work: 'Ce que Maupassant souhaitait découvrir, à l'image des rapports amoureux du XVIII^e siècle, la spontanéité, l'élégance pour une qualité d'individu plus authentique parce que plus profonde, n'existe plus' (104). There is at the very least a tension in this fantasy, as well, which lies in the fragility, indeed the sheer improbability of the lineage evoked: an inheritance from a fairly distant relative, the great-grandmother, is only evoked as a weak subjective possibility ('on eût dit qu'il avait hérité'). Yet we might argue, *contra* Delaisement, that this weakness is so significant that it represents less a tension in the fantasy, and more a deliberately ironic attitude towards phantasmatic evocations of the glory of the preceding century. René's nebulous reference to '*Le Contrat social* [...] et tous ces livres philosophants' perhaps suggests his own lack of familiarity with such texts (quite apart from the sneer one might think implicit in the adjective 'philosophants'). Moreover, while the knowledge of the *philosophes* has been transmitted principally through adulterous affairs (those of the great-grandmother and of Mme de Courcils), René also remains vague about just what trends of late eighteenth-century culture are being suggested. He makes self-consciously worthy references to texts advocating social reorganisation or warning against the dangers of adultery (*La Nouvelle Héloïse*), but there is also a clear strand of *libertinage* here, even a Sadean 'philosophie dans le boudoir'. And while one ought not to be prudish about such things, the other extreme must equally be avoided: it seems possible that both René's progressive rhetoric and Delaisement's reference to 'une qualité d'individu plus

authentique parce que plus profonde' make untenable ethical and social claims for what is at bottom a lineage of aristocratic adultery and 'free love'. Maupassant's ironic point is perhaps that a certain hypocrisy lies at the heart of René's own denunciation of his hypocritical contemporaries; after all, the legacy he has received from this bygone age of putative honesty and enlightenment consists in nothing more precise than an aesthetic appreciation of adultery, of which he is seemingly a little embarrassed, and which he consequently attempts to prettify as some sort of social progress narrative.

The notary's hypocrisy

In this way, even Maupassant's apparently optimistic rendering of the notarial or testamentary intervention betrays an awareness that a simple moment of absolute enlightenment is not possible. Yet while my extended reading of 'Le Testament' revealed only that the notary's therapeutic 'analysis' was less effective than it initially appeared since a certain amount of hypocrisy subsisted afterwards, other stories suggest that it may be the very role of the notary's to authorise and even orchestrate such hypocrisy. 'La Confession' (1884) tells the tale of a controversial and unexpected testament, and represents an antidote to the 'fantasy' of 'Le Testament', in that it begins to reveal how the notary's apparently unmarked, 'ventriloquised' discourse may in fact conceal a complicity with the 'hypocrisies mondaines' it initially seemed to disrupt. M. Badon-Leremincé, pillar of his community and model of virtue, has died, and the tale opens following his grandiose funeral. At stake in the story is the discrepancy between popular illusion and the truth of the dead man's past, and this is made clear in the very opening sentence: 'Tout Véziers-le-Réthel avait assisté au convoi et enterrement de M. Badon-Leremincé, et les derniers mots du discours du délégué de la préfecture demeuraient dans toutes les mémoires: "C'est un honnête homme de moins!"'

(2: 371). Yet all is not what it seems. Badon has left a will to be opened by his children after his burial, enclosing a separate text within which the dead man reveals a terrible secret: the murder by exposure, many years ago, of an illegitimate child born to his then mistress, whose very existence threatened to destroy his social and professional future.

Once again, the voice that shatters this collective delusion is that of the lawyer, M. Poirel de La Voulte, who reads the confession aloud 'de sa voix terne, faite pour détailler les contrats'. We recognise in this description the unmarked, objective quality of the notary's hieratic or analytic discourse. Yet after the reading of Badon-Leremincé's disturbing testament, the notary makes a shocking deviation from his priestly position:

M. Poirel de La Voulte releva ses lunettes d'un mouvement qui lui était familier quand il avait achevé la lecture d'un contrat ; et les trois héritiers du mort se regardèrent, sans dire un mot, pâles, immobiles.

Au bout d'une minute, le notaire reprit :

« Il faut détruire cela. » (2: 377)

The suggested destruction of the testament – a very physical disavowal – comes from none other than the notary himself. We might note that the adjusting of the notary's spectacles before and after the reading of the will – he only begins to read 'ayant ajusté ses lunettes sur ses yeux' (2: 371) – represents almost a stepping into and, crucially, out of, his official, neutral capacity: he first ensures his own visual acuity, before deliberately returning to the natural short-sightedness which affects *le tout Véziers*. In the end, the terrible testament is burned by Poirel and the dead man's children, the financial provisions having first been carefully set aside; the secret remains concealed,

the illusion – that Badon is ‘un honnête homme’ – intact. The pessimistic case seems clear. While still a hieratic mediator between the quick and the dead, the notary now appears as something of a casuist, the hypocritical enabler of the vices of the upper crust. Unlike the psychoanalyst, Poirel is not concerned to ‘cure’ the confusions which beset his patient (the town), but prefers instead to confine the dangerous knowledge to the fireplace, at once the symbolic focal point and the functional blind spot of bourgeois disavowal.

But another, less pessimistic reading is possible. Let us consider the opening paragraph once again. The *entire* town attended the funeral; the delegate's words echo in *everybody's* memory: the narrator is emphatic in showing just how implicated this community is in the good memory of the deceased advocate. His reputation is never called into question, and he is held up as an example of good behaviour to be followed by the town's inhabitants: ‘il n'avait jamais dit un mot qui ne contînt un exemple [...], jamais tendu la main sans avoir l'air de donner une bénédiction’ (2: 371). What, we should ask, would the effect upon Véziers be, if for the first time, posthumously, Badon-Leremincé should be heard to utter words that were far from ‘exemplary’? The document he leaves behind is in these circumstances exceptionally dangerous in social terms. Thus when M. Poirel de La Voulte burns the terrible confession, we might argue that he is not simply preserving the integrity of a representative of the ruling class: he is rather defending the fragile self-image of ‘tout Véziers-le-Réthel’.

He is, moreover, acting in a sense within the ‘spirit’ of the Civil Code. We have already seen how Article 901 insists that ‘pour faire une donation entre vifs ou un testament, il faut être sain d'esprit’. In 1863, conservative journalist J.-B.-V. Coquille observed that the last will and testament is the only legal undertaking subject to such a stipulation, placed here by ‘the legislator’, Coquille claims, because ‘il voulait que le

testament pût toujours être cassé, sous un prétexte ou sous un autre' (427).⁷ Might we not see here the Code's implicit awareness of the strange character of testamentary discourse? Article 901 offers some protection against the potentially subversive knowledge that the liminality of the will makes it able to communicate. Over and against the overwhelming power of Mme de Courcils's 'enlightenment' testament, the Code allows Poirel de La Voulte to destroy – *casser* – the dangerous knowledge that threatens the social coherence of Véziers-le-Réthel, of 'all of Véziers-le-Réthel'.

A similar process of expedient legal concealment occurs in 'L'Héritage' (1884), one of Maupassant's longest stories (adapted from 'Un Million', a shorter and altogether less aesthetically successful tale of 1882). Lesable, a hapless office worker, marries Coralie, the daughter of a colleague, Cachelin. Cachelin's sister, Tante Charlotte, who reputedly has 'un million' (2: 8), is expected to die fairly soon, and this prospective inheritance is Lesable's primary motivation in concluding the marriage. When Charlotte finally passes away, the family attend the *étude* of M^e Belhomme, notary; Cachelin enquires of him with exquisite disingenuousness 'si [Tante Charlotte] n'a pas formulé quelque volonté relative à son inhumation ou si vous n'avez pas quelque communication à nous faire' (2: 29). The reading of the dead woman's *testament mystique* follows. She has willed her estate to the children of Lesable and Coralie; the parents have a life-interest, but only if an heir is conceived within three years. If not, the estate will be made over to charity.

Lesable will of course prove to be impotent: the couple cannot procure a child; the time gradually elapses. Yet while Charlotte's will initially serves to reveal Lesable's humiliating secret, its ultimate effect will turn out to be quite the opposite. In the final year, Lesable's dashing work colleague Maze is invited to the family home (at Coralie's request), and becomes an *habitué*. In no time at all, Coralie falls pregnant,

despite Lesable's decision to abandon all efforts to produce a child. So Tante Charlotte's will has had the rather unforeseen effect of introducing an adulterous child into the family, but this apparently disruptive influence is not what it seems. What follows is one of Maupassant's most effective narratives of disavowal. While Lesable is initially perturbed by his cuckolding, he nevertheless attempts to blind himself to the undeniable:

Lesable, mal à l'aise, l'esprit troublé, hanté d'idées confuses, contradictoires, plein d'appétits de luxe, de colère sourde, de honte inavouable, de lâcheté jalouse, faisait comme ces dormeurs qui ferment les yeux au matin pour ne pas voir le rayon de lumière glissant entre les rideaux. (2: 58)

The process is by no means instantaneous, but is eventually successful. As the couple leave the doctor's office (where a certificate of pregnancy has been produced, allowing them to claim their fortune), Lesable's disavowal reaches its hilarious apogee. Walking beside his adulterous wife, who is carrying his colleague's child, 'il semblait fier de promener ce ventre en bosse qui attestait sa virilité' (2: 62).

There is more to this than Lesable's self-delusion; or rather, if there is a delusion here, it is one which is directly authorised by the civil law, for according to article 312 of the Civil Code, 'l'enfant conçu pendant le mariage, a pour père le mari'. In this article, the Napoleonic legislators mirror at a governmental level the work of Poirel de La Voulte, implicitly recognising the impracticality of objective truth in all things, and the necessity of a purely conventional social truth where this more useful.⁸ This legal preference is recognised in another of Maupassant's stories, 'Divorce' (1888), in which a husband consults a notary following the discovery that his wife has

two illegitimate children. Clearly, the man expects priestly, objective advice: instead he receives only the pragmatic recommendation: 'Reconnaître vos enfants, monsieur' (2: 1025). Now, the law *discourages* revelation in instances where that revelation might lead to disruption or unpleasantness, determining instead that the state's more compelling interest is in stable marriages. Most importantly, the law seems to all intents and purposes able to create *ex nihilo* an entirely new state of facts: in the eyes of the law, for instance, Lesable *is* the father of his wife's child – and these are, in a sense, the only eyes that matter. And in case we were about to conclude precipitously that this article is an institutionalised example of 'modern' or 'nineteenth-century' (or whatever) hypocrisy, we must think again: it merely rehearses an ancient tag of Roman law, 'pater is est quem justæ nuptiæ demonstrant' (Locré 4: 6).

In a sense, this insistence upon the compromises of the law is an extension of the work of Balzac, who was also concerned to reveal the limitations of the law, its subjective, relative or even delusional aspects. In these stories, Maupassant undertakes a certain demythologization of the Civil Code, and is in this respect an early precursor of the important work of legal historian Xavier Martin. Martin attempts to understand the Code within the dynamic intellectual context of the Enlightenment, while simultaneously stripping it of the aura of luminous clarity which still attaches to documents of this period. In particular, he emphasizes precisely those moments where the Code knowingly enshrines illusion, most notably concerning the question of property. The drafters of the Code were, Martin insists, well aware that property was a kind of 'artifice social', and disserted lengthily and eloquently on the fact that 'l'être humain seul a l'heur de se croire, par illusion pure, et chère illusion, un propriétaire' (38). Yet the social usefulness of this illusion, Martin suggests, made it indispensable, and these judicial – and judicious – *philosophes* were thus willing to compromise on

their otherwise rationalistic principles. Maupassant's narratives, and especially those which attend to article 312, pay similar attention to the limit-points of the Code's rationalism.

Yet if Maupassant undertakes a certain interrogation of the Code's mythology of enlightenment, he does so, as I have already suggested, not so much to denounce as to explore with fascination the workings and limitations of social knowledge, and in that exploration, I think, there lies a sophisticated anticipation of psychoanalytic epistemology. Revelation, denunciation, exposure – Maupassant implies that these things may often be dangerous, or indeed impossible, within a given community, without that community's being corrupt as a result. And this is the subject of one of Lacan's most famous and infuriating koans: 'Si je dis que le roi est nu [...] ce n'est justement que pour autant qu'il l'est sous un certain nombre d'habits' (1986, 23). Lacan's meaning here, as I understand it, is that for as much as 'the emperor's new clothes' (that is, say, the trappings of civilisation which might cover an instinctual primitivism) are 'imaginary' (that is, based on misrecognition), this emphatically does not mean that the emperor is naked: the imaginary 'garments' of civilisation are *there*, and cannot conceivably be removed since, if they were, nothing would be left – least of all 'enlightenment'. Now this goes rather beyond the simple perspectivism of 'Le Roman' (1888), where Maupassant argues that it is an 'enfantillage de croire à la réalité, puisque nous portons chacun la nôtre dans notre pensée', adding that 'chacun de nous se fait donc simplement une illusion du monde' (1987, 709). These personal illusions presumably create a multitude of 'phenomenal' realities, yet the fiction seems on the contrary to insist upon the possibility of a single unified illusion shared by a community: the collective memory of 'tout Véziers-le-Réthel' for instance. Significantly, those who dare not share the relevant illusion are often figured as

painfully alone and powerless: the helpless client in 'Divorce' is one example of such isolation.⁹

So rather than an infinity or flawed and relative perspectives, we begin to see a structure more akin to Lacan's observation that '*la vérité surgit de la méprise*' (1975, 287), whereby the undeniable truth and consistency of the intersubjective world is created precisely by the sharing of a number of basic illusions (for Lacan, principally the fundamental illusion of the unified subject) which facilitate meaningful social life. Put differently, and remaining with our allegorical reading of 'La Confession', Badon-Leremincé's dark secret (the infanticide) is not any more 'true' or 'real' than his role as an 'honnête homme'; indeed, in so far as the former is unknown and the latter socially widely accepted, it is the latter which comes closest to the truth of his nature. The understanding of revelation as a revolutionary practice is thus, according to Lacan, facile at best, in that the end-point it presupposes, when the final veil is pulled aside, is properly inconceivable (since it would be coterminous with the end of society as we know it). Žižek takes Lacan's interpretation of the fairytale even further, in order to give an evocation of the 'consequences' of revelation which is, for the reason just established, necessarily hypothetical and allegorical:

The child from Andersen's tale who with disarming innocence states the obvious is usually taken as an exemplar of the word which delivers us from stuffy hypocrisy and forces us to confront the actual state of things. What one prefers to pass over in silence are the catastrophic consequences of such a liberating gesture for its environs, for the intersubjective network in which it takes place [...]. After the deed, when it is already too late, we suddenly notice that we got more than we bargained for – that the very community of which we were a member has disintegrated' (1991, 11-12).

Or as Terence Cave puts it, in different terms: 'Anagnorisis conjoins the recovery of knowledge with a disquieting sense, when the trap is sprung, that the commonly accepted coordinates of knowledge have gone awry' (2). Indeed, the reference to anagnorisis of the sort experienced by Œdipus reminds us that the epistemology I am ascribing to Maupassant (and Lacan) is already present to an extent in antiquity. This perhaps tells us something more about Maupassant's 'modernity': it is partly a willingness precisely to look backwards, beyond Baudelairean 'spleen' and fin de siècle pessimism to a more complex model of social knowledge which the 'delusional' provisions of the Civil Code can be seen to reintegrate.

Conclusion

So like Andersen's tale as interpreted by Lacan and Žižek, Maupassant's fiction provides an allegorical exploration of what the ramifications of 'revelation' might be. The 'ghosts' who challenge the characters' social worlds through the medium of the will are in this sense doubly metaphorical: 'ghosts' only in a figurative sense (since their haunting is circumscribed by the law – both the civil law and the law of literary realism), they equally represent a revelatory voice which is only ever hypothetical. Thus when the notary burns the odd document as necessary, he implicitly rejects as imaginary the 'transcendental' wisdom of the will. There is nothing we can learn from 'the beyond' which might enrich us, since as Lacan will go on to point out quite categorically: 'Il n'y a pas d'au-delà, pas d'au-delà substantiel' (1973, 209). We are on the contrary embedded epistemically, ethically and emotionally in our own moment and community. In this way, the allegorical notary represents not only the developments of civil society which limit our freedom to a sphere they define, while simultaneously guaranteeing our freedom within that sphere; but also more generally, the limits of

knowledge which apply in every community in order for that community to exist. Maupassant shows, as Lacan will, that a certain hypocrisy – what Ross Chambers has called a failure to ‘reconnaître ce qu’on connaît’ (146) – is as much a social imperative as a social vice, protection as much as oppression. The institution of the law, like that of psychoanalysis, stands at a threshold, arbitrating between the demands of the truth and those of social coherence.

Yet this kind of half-knowledge, of knowing and not knowing, is also enacted by the texts as fiction: metaphor and allegory ensure that only canny eyes – which are of course paranoid eyes – will detect the truly daring ideas beneath. So while one might make the grandiose claim that the knowledge of Maupassant's testaments represents at once a liberating truth, and a threat to our very coherence as subjects and as communities, exposing however briefly those necessary disavowals which structure social existence, there is nevertheless always the possibility that Maupassant will reply in the words of Lacan: ‘Si vous croyez avoir compris, vous avez sûrement tort’. Or perhaps more characteristically, that our interpretation will be greeted with that equally enigmatic mantra of *la sagesse normande*: ‘peut-être que oui, et peut-être que non’.

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NOTES

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² Article 976 of the Code refers to this type of will as 'testament mystique ou secret'.

³ All undated references to Maupassant refer to the *Contes et nouvelles*.

⁴ Moreover, since Mme de Courcils's will works primarily to reinstate a certain patrilinearity (between Bourneval and René, who adopts his natural father's name after the reading of the will), I think it is problematic to read 'Le Testament' as an uncomplicated revelation of what Deboskre calls 'la vérité féminine' (56).

⁵ Note that Pierre Bayard regards an obsession with interiority as a Freudian vice, over and against Maupassant's more sophisticated emphasis on exteriority (95-6). While I suspect this misrepresents Freud somewhat, the perception of psychoanalysis as persistently 'interiorising' may perhaps be more charitably attributed to Bayard's decision to exclude from his analysis all post-Freudian psychoanalytic work (and notably that of Lacan).

⁶ See articles 756, 757 of the *Code civil*.

⁷ Coquille, an irrepressible paternalist pundit, makes this observation in the context of a denunciation of the Civil Code's apparent contempt for paternal authority.

⁸ There were limits, of course: the same article also provides for the repudiation of the child where the husband can prove that 'pendant le temps qui a couru depuis le trois-

centième jusqu'au cent-quatre-vingtième jour avant la naissance de cet enfant, il était [...] dans l'impossibilité de cohabiter avec sa femme'.

⁹ The most significant example of this epistemological loneliness is Pierre Roland in *Pierre et Jean* (1888). I am confining myself to the short stories in this article, however.