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THE PARIS MORGUE AS A SOCIAL INSTITUTION IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Whatever Edgar Allan Poe may have led us to believe, there is not and never was a *Rue Morgue* in Paris. Undeniably, as he knew, just the mention of the morgue is enough to evoke in most of us a chilling sensation of latent terror. In our mind's eye we probably see a sinister building located in some dark and deserted backstreet to which a draped horse-drawn carriage rumbles over the cobblestones to deliver its mysterious charge. But the reality in the nineteenth century, however lugubrious, was in fact less forbiding. The actual Paris morgue was a far more conspicuous social institution than that shrouded figment of our imagination might suggest.

The origins of the morgue can probably be traced to the fourteenth century when the practice began of dumping bodies at the dungeon of the Châtelet. Records of the corpses entered into the *basse geôle* were not kept until 1651, at a time when a primary function of the Châtelet was still the incarceration of criminals. The dictionary of the French Academy published in 1694 retained that definition: the morgue was a place of detention for all those who were, so far as society was concerned, gone and forgotten. Not until the end of the reign of Louis XIV, in 1713, did it become customary to display cadavres for identification; and the Academy's dictionary of 1718 reflected this new public service. An inscription mounted in the courtyard of the Châtelet accordingly announced the practice of exhibiting *dead bodies found in the streets and also found drowned.*[1]

As a result, the morgue became in the eighteenth century an important civic institution, a place where Parisians could stop to visit while on a stroll along the quais. It also earned some reputation as a bastion of royal injustice – although that symbolism was rather confused on July 15, 1789, when the remains of seven prison guards decapitated at the Bastille on the previous day were set out at the morgue for the edification of curious crowds. The association with monarchical abuse nevertheless remained such that the Châtelet dungeon was closed in 1792 and, by order of the Napoleonic Prefect of the Seine, the morgue was transfered in 1804 to another location.[2]

[1] Adolphe GUILLOT, Paris qui souffre. La basse Geôle du Grand Châtelet et les Morgues modernes, Paris 1887, pp. 14–30. This is still the standard work.

[2] Ibid., pp. 104–117. Also see Tirmin MAILLARD, Recherches historiques et critiques sur la Morgue, Paris 1860.

The site chosen for the new structure could not have been more central. A sort of Greek mausoleum was erected on the Quai du Marché Neuf at the corner of the Pont St. Michel. This had several advantages: since the morgue was beside one of the city's busiest thoroughfares, clearly visible to anyone passing, the principal function of facilitating the identification of the unknown dead was well served; it was also conveniently adjacent to the police headquarters and judicial chambers on the Ile de la Cité, and just a short walk from the medical faculty of the Sorbonne on the Left Bank; and finally, like the original morgue at the Châtelet, it was positioned just above a landing on the river front to which stone steps descended. Thus perched directly across from the Latin Quarter in the heart of the administrative district, easily accessible by street and water, the morgue was known to every Parisian and frequented by many of them. Invariably listed in the guidebooks of the nineteenth century, it was also an occasional attraction for tourists. No one crossing the bridge could altogether ignore the morgue, in any event, if only because of the penetrating stench of chemicals and the unusually dense population of large grey rats in the vicinity.[3]

The Marché Neuf soon achieved a certain political notoriety. Records show that 113 cadavres were delivered there during the July revolution of 1830; another 71 arrived in the wake of street rioting in 1832; 205 bodies were deposited after the June Days of 1848, far more than could be displayed or even stored; and 43 more were registered as a result of the Bonapartist coup in December 1851. Two decades later, following the relative calm of the Second Empire, several hundred corpses were accumulated in the final violent week of the Paris Commune. On each occasion thousands of citizens made their way to the morgue to perform the grim duty of searching out relatives and friends.[4]

For the rapidly growing population of Paris, especially in view of the city's rising number of suicides and homicides, the Napoleonic morgue was manifestly inadequate. The existing edifice, moreover, stood directly in the path of Baron Haussmann's project to widen the route from the Boulevard de Sébastopol across the Ile de la Cité to the Place St. Michel and beyond. As a consequence the blockhouse on the Quai du Marché Neuf was destroyed in 1864 and a larger building constructed on the point behind Notre Dame, facing across from the Ile St. Louis. This more modern structure retained the main advantages of its predecessor but was somewhat less unesthetic and insalubrious. Squat in form, partially hidden by a high iron grill, the new morgue flew a tricolor flag from the roof and boasted a dubiously appropriate

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[3] E. g., GALLIGAN's New Paris Guide, Paris 1855, pp. 82, 324; Adolphe JOANNE, Paris Illustré, Paris 1883, pp. 921–924; and Karl BAEDEKER, Paris and Environs, 14th ed., Leipzig 1900, p. 227.
[4] GUILLOT, Paris qui souffre, pp. 120–147.

inscription in front: *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité.* The intended public function remained the same, as a plaque clearly stated which invited the residents of Paris to enter with the explicit assurance that their cooperation would involve no financial liability whatsoever: *elle est toute gratuite.*[5]

The relocation of the morgue on the Quai de l'Archevêché by no means condemned it to obscurity. Under the Third Republic, to the contrary, it remained in every sense a popular institution, a place that catered to a public appetite for scandal and sensation. One contemporary writer observed that children playing in the garden of the Archbishopric would occasionally interrupt their games to investigate whether a new corpse had been placed on display; and he lamented that *the vulgar populace prefers the morgue to Notre Dame.*[6] The morgue also enjoyed something of a literary fad. In one novel of Alphonse Daudet, for example, a character attempts to become the registrar *(greffier)* of the morgue but fails for lack of connections and because of *a certain political dossier.*[7] Whole volumes of verse were dedicated to the wretched nameless creatures lying on their slabs in what was sometimes referred to as *the temple of suicide*; the literary quality may be judged from these typical stanzas published in 1890:

> Ils sont alignés sur leurs chars,
> Devant la foule qui se presse,
> Avec des poses de pochards
> Raidis par la dernière ivresse.
> Bohèmes de l'éternité,
> Fuyant la misère profonde,
> Sans leurs feuilles d'identité
> Ils partirent pour l'autre monde.[8]

Yet the nineteenth-century author who best portrayed the atmosphere of the morgue was Emile Zola. In »Thérèse Raquin«, an early novel (1867) which he painstakenly rewrote for the stage in the 1870's, he described the scene and then commented:

> La morgue est un spectacle à la portée de toutes les bourses, que se payent gratuitement les passants pauvres ou riches. La porte est ouverte, entre qui veut. Il y a des amateurs qui font un détour pour ne pas manquer une de ces représentations de la mort. Lorsque les dalles sont nues,

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[5] J. C. Gavinzel, Etude sur la Morgue au point de vue administratif et médical, Paris 1882, pp. 10–11. See David H. Pinkney, Napoleon III and the Rebuilding of Paris, Princeton 1958.

[6] Guillot, Paris qui souffre, pp. 14, 159–161.

[7] Alphonse Daudet, Jack, Paris n. d., Part I, chap. 2.

[8] Angelin Ruelle, Les Chansons de la Morgue, Paris 1890, pp. 7–9. The morgue was also satirized in the music hall of the Belle Epoque; see Pierre Clovis, Les Gaietés de la Morgue, Paris s. d.

> les gens sortent désappointés, volés, murmurant entre leurs dents. Lorsque les dalles sont bien garnies, lorsqu'il y a un bel étalage de chair humaine, les visiteurs se pressent, se donnent des émotions à bon marché, s'épouvantent, plaisantent, applaudissent ou sifflent, comme au théâtre, et se retirent satisfaits, en déclarant que la morgue est réussie, ce jour-là.[9]

Even when allowance is made for Zola's muckraking, his version is sufficiently corroborated by other evidence to be considered more than a fictional device. Rather than being veiled in intrigue and removed from sight in some desolate alleyway, we must conclude, the Paris morgue of the nineteenth century was one of the city's more prominent social institutions. So much for Edgar Allan Poe.

From the beginning of the century the morgue served both a legal and a medical function. Administratively attached to the Prefecture of Police and the Ministry of Justice, it provided indispensable facilities for purposes of criminology. Since it operated as a sort of lost-and-found department of the dead, and did so with increasing efficiency, the morgue was an essential agency for law enforcement and the detection of criminals. The connection with the faculty of medicine was more informal but scarcely less important. Medical specialists from the university often served as consultants in the performance of autopsies, and the morgue frequently provided cadavres for classes in anatomy. The modern designation for the morgue, the »Institut Médico-Légal«, preserves this dual role in the most literal sense.[10]

The physical plant of the building behind Notre Dame was constructed accordingly. After passing through a gate in the iron grill, the visitor stood in a small triangular courtyard. On the left was a door marked *Greffe* through which one passed to the office of the registrar: and on the right was another designated *Surveillants* which was the usual entrance into the exhibition hall. Inside, the main room resembled nothing so much as an aquarium. Stretching nearly the length of the hall was a large exhibition case with a paneled glass front, in appearance much like a huge sky-light. Behind the glass facade were two rows of black marble slabs, a dozen in all, illuminated and tilted to afford easier viewing of the subjects displayed. Above each headrest was a faucet to permit occasional sprinkling of the corpse with water and chemicals, the only means of preservation employed before the installation of a refrigerating system in the early 1880's.[11] Beside each slab, hooks and rods were available

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[9] Emile Zola, Thérèse Raquin, chap. 13.

[10] The present morgue at the Pont d'Austerlitz was placed in service in 1923 when the former structure on the Quai de l'Archevêché was demolished.

[11] Charles Tellier, Installation frigorifique de la Morgue, Paris 1881.

for hanging the deceased's articles of clothing. On a normal day viewers were free to move behind a low barrier in front of the case; but whenever larger crowds gathered they were obliged to procede in single file, entering by one door and exiting by another. The entire chamber seemed hollow and dank.[12]

A number of doors opened into other rooms. In the rear of the building was the reception hall which, like those in the two previous morgues, had direct access to the Seine. There was also one small laboratory for chemical analysis and, an innovation of the early 1870's, another for photography. A larger floorspace was occupied by the autopsy room, with its array of medical instruments, and by a separate conference room where administrative personnel and police officials could gather around a table. Finally, as indicated, the offices of the registrar and his assistant on the north side of the structure were used to receive persons making inquiries or declarations, to conduct the formalities of identification, and to store records. Beneath all of this was a vast cellar area where bodies could be temporarily kept except, as often happened, when it was inundated by the river. The regular staff of the morgue, including three medical examiners and several *garçons de service,* usually numbered about ten.[13]

This rapid tour of the building should suffice to illustrate the nature and variety of the services performed there. Paris was the first major city of Europe to develop such a complete facility, and it was widely copied elsewhere on the Continent before the end of the century. As one writer remarked with some pride, *the morgue is an eminently French institution.*[14] The Parisian police were consequently able to record and preserve reasonably uniform statistics on the French way of violent death. It is to these that we must now turn.

Let it be reiterated that the morgue was designed to perform a specific social function: the identification of the unknown deceased. The corpses received were therefore untypical of the dead, and any statistical analysis must first of all concede that distortion. Keeping the qualification in view, we may usefully concentrate here on a period of three decades in mid-century, prior to 1880, for which a reliable contemporary summary was first compiled.[15] In political terms these measurements stretch from the founding of the Sec-

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[12] GRAVIZEL. Etude sur la Morgue, pp. 11–17.

[13] Ibid. Also see the informative pamphlet by Dr. BROUARDEL, Organisation du service autopique à la Morgue, Paris 1879.

[14] GRAVIZEL, Etude sur la Morgue, p. 46. Also see Ernest CHERBULIEZ, »La Morgue de Paris,« in: Revue des Deux Mondes, vol. 103 (1891), pp. 344–381.

[15] Edmond-Antoine FOLEY, Etude sur la statistique de la Morgue 1851–1879, Paris 1880. The raw materials for this and other statistical accounts of the morgue are contained in the DA series at the Archives de la Préfecture de Police (APP), Paris. My computations differ slightly but unimportantly from those of Foley.

ond Empire to Marshal MacMahon's resignation from the presidency of the Third Republic; and for the history of the morgue itself, they divide about equally a time before and after ther relocation of 1864. We are able to deal, then, with a manageable sample of somewhat more than 16,000 registrations. (See Table I)

Table I: Corpses Received at the Paris Morgue, 1851–1878

Year	Men	Women	Infants	Fetuses	Remains	Total
1851	254	38	26	46	7	371
1852	282	63	26	48	6	425
1853	254	51	40	41	9	395
1854	239	54	42	33	9	377
1855	285	58	42	44	4	433
1856	311	50	47	55	11	474
1857	278	55	58	61	5	457
1858	269	49	57	63	9	447
1859	346	58	69	51	6	530
1860	321	59	61	43	9	493
1861	333	60	71	42	15	521
1862	378	66	59	66	10	579
1863	367	76	88	58	11	600
1864	363	67	94	74	10	608
1865	420	69	106	58	6	659
1866	486	86	83	63	15	733
1867	513	65	89	56	21	744
1868	551	81	83	63	8	786
1869	496	88	74	72	10	740
1870	527	114	74	73	10	798
1871	484	107	67	39	14	711
1872	489	96	75	77	5	742
1873	400	107	95	70	7	679
1874	319	85	85	67	9	565
1875	358	87	70	69	11	595
1876	341	110	74	78	11	614
1877	360	119	71	63	16	629
1878	447	123	69	63	16	718
Totals	10471	2141	1895	1636	280	16423

These figures reveal that before 1870 the number of male corpses delivered to the morgue was more than five times as many as the females; whereas after that date the ratio was slightly less than four to one. A reason for the difference, as we shall see, was the less rapid increase in the rate of male suicides – that is, unidentified suicides – in the decade following the Franco-Prussian war. One can only guess at the psychological explanation for this phenomenon, but it seems reasonable enough to assume that the sudden and

heavy loss of men in combat was basic. The fact remains, with this one exception, that registrations at the morgue tended to mount steadily throughout the time in question, as a detailed tabulation for the entire century would make even clearer. For instance, in 1835 there were 283 bodies admitted; in 1845: 334; in 1855: 433; in 1865: 659; in 1875: 595; in 1885: 858.[16] If account is taken of the expanding population of the city of Paris and the Department of the Seine, the proportionate increment was not great. But from the standpoint of the capacity of the morgue, it is easy to understand how the older facilities became inadequate and why (Haussmann aside) relocation in the more spacious quarters behind Notre Dame was imperative.

Table II: Reception of the Adult Corpses at the Paris Morgue by Mouth, 1851–1859

Year	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	June	July	Aug.	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.
1851	31	28	24	21	33	29	34	22	27	17	13	13
1852	36	18	28	29	38	20	50	36	25	22	27	16
1853	24	17	21	33	38	36	29	22	22	25	23	15
1854	20	17	24	18	27	44	42	38	16	19	8	20
1855	24	13	28	44	34	28	38	32	35	25	24	18
1856	30	30	29	33	31	40	39	26	35	24	20	24
1857	28	30	25	35	40	31	35	24	16	25	22	22
1858	35	18	27	35	25	24	29	23	19	17	17	29
1859	29	28	43	35	44	37	56	40	17	27	26	22
*TOTAL	257	199	249	283	310	289	352	263	212	201	180	179

*Plus 20 non-classified

The level of activity at the morgue was in part seasonal (See table II). Obviosly the peak occurred during the late spring and summer. July was the most crowded month at the morgue, December the least. Since the pattern of the 1850's remained generally constant for the succeeding two decades as well, there is sufficient reason to discard the stereotyped association of personal acts of desperation with misty winter nights and flickering gas lanterns.

Anyone familiar with Emile Durkheim's classic study of suicide will not find such an observation surprising.[17] Indeed, nearly all of Durkheim's major hypotheses were clearly prefigured in earlier studies of the Paris morgue. As nearly one-third of the registrations at the morgue before 1880 were entered as suicide victims, this was a subject particularly susceptible to statistical analysis, which is now of interest both for its conclusions and its distortions.

[16] Guillot, Paris qui souffre, pp. 178–179.
[17] Emile Durkheim, Suicide. A Study in Sociology, trans. by John A. Spaulding and George Simpson, Glencoe (Ill.) 1951.

One fact appears indisputable: that the frequency of suicide rose considerably between 1850 and 1880 (See Table III). It is impossible to overlook a correlation between the incidence of suicide and the public fortunes of the French nation. If the count remained rather low during the relatively stable decade of the 1850's, it began to increase perceptibly in the uneasy final years of the Second Empire. The war then resulted in a temporary hiatus, after which the unsettled political and economic conditions of the 1870's evidently produced strains which took their toll. The distribution by decades is revealing.

Table III: Number of Suicides Registered at the Paris Morgue, 1851–1878

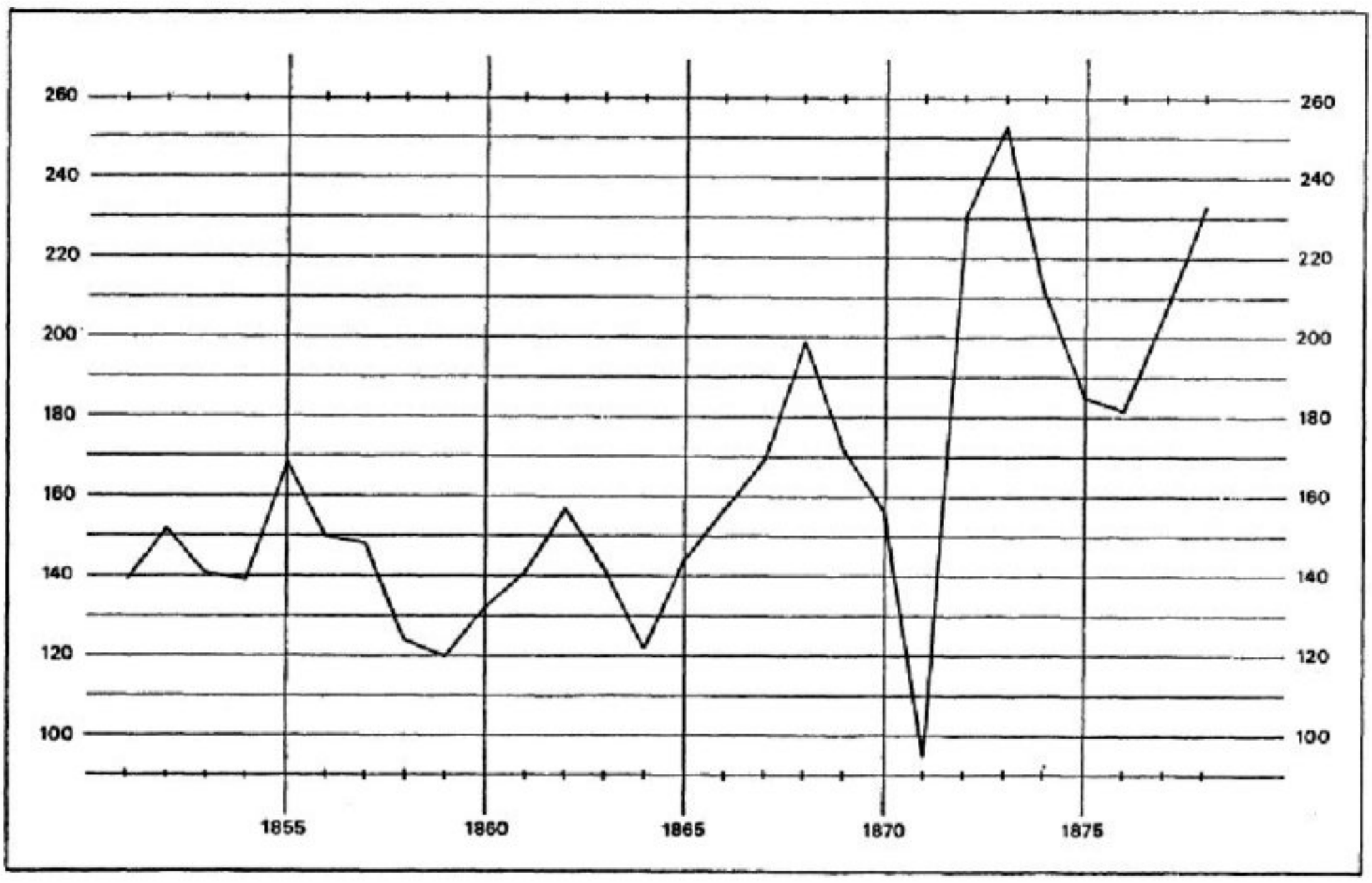

Table IV: Rate of Suicides Registered by Decades at the Paris Morgue, 1851–1878

Years	Men	Annual Rate	Women	Annual Rate
1851–1859	1024	113	257	28
1860–1869	1300	130	228	22
1870–1878	1387	154	364	40

As previously suggested, these figures show that the rate for males was much higher than for females, although the increase of the latter was more marked after 1870. Just as Durkheim later confirmed in his comparative study, moreover, celibates of both sexes were more inclined to suicide than the married. The conclusion seemed inescapable that the greater the social integration, the less likelihood of suicide.[18]

[18] Compare Foley, Etude sur la statistique, pp. 12–15, 70–71, with the similar but far more so-

Yet, in considering the means of committing suicide, a serious deficiency in these statistics becomes apparent. According to the registrar of the morgue, drowning was the method most often utilized by both sexes and in all age categories during the nineteenth century. Strangulation by hanging was a distant second. But this assumption was challenged by the morgue's most famous and knowledgeable medical examiner of the time, Dr. Brouardel, and subsequent investigations bore him out. The exaggeration of drowning, one can safely speculate, was due to the particular location and function of the morgue. Unidentified corpses fished from the Seine were routinely brought there for autopsy and registration; those found in their own room or residence, having chosen another means of self-destruction, were more likely to be identified on the spot and to be buried at once by family or friends.[19]

Nor do the records of the morgue shed much light on the motives for suicide. The categories established by the registrar were imprecise and by no means mutually exclusive: mental derangement, disgust with life, loose living *(inconduite)*, misery, business failure, domestic problems, drunkenness, disappointed love, incurable disease, etc.[20] Unable to consult with the victim, the registrar was usually reduced to guesswork based on the testimony of visitors, if any, who came to his office in order to file a formal statement of identification. Durkheim's despair with the futility of this procedure of classification led directly to his rejection of a psychological approach to the problem of suicide and his attempt to formulate a sociological alternative.[21]

That possibility was already suggested by the effort of the morgue to establish the profession of registered suicides. Since these statistics were so fragmentary there is little point in citing them here, but we may at least retain the order of frequency. The professions most often listed for men were: *journaliers, militaires, cordonniers, employés, tailleurs, serruriers, maçons,* and *menuisiers.* Among the women they were: *domestiques, couturières, journalières, blanchisseuses, marchandes.*[22] After consulting this list the inference appears justified that most suicide victims were laboring and lower class persons engaged in services which brought them into daily contact with managers, bosses, and social betters. They more often tended to be occupied in artisanal trades and menial duties than in the newer industrial sectors of the

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phisticated analysis of DURKHEIM, Suicide, pp. 171–202. Most studies in this century have, with some modifications, continued in the same path; e. g., Maurice HALBWACHS, Les causes du suicide, Paris 1930, and Jack P. GIBBS and Walter T. MARTIN, Status Integration and Suicide. A Sociological Study, Eugene (Oregon) 1964. But see the critique of the Durkheimian tradition in Jack D. DOUGLAS, The Social Meanings of Suicide, Princeton 1967.

[19] CHERBULIEZ, »La Morgue de Paris«, loc. cit., pp. 348–351.

[20] FOLEY, Etude sur la statistique, pp. 16–19. The author admits that *it is here that the interpretation of the facts is least secure.*

[21] DURKHEIM, Suicide, pp. 145–151.

[22] FOLEY, Etude sur la statistique, p. 15.

economy; and, if so, they must have led a periodically insecure existence in the uneven process of industrialization. For the reasons indicated, such conclusions based on the records of the morgue cannot escape the realm of conjecture. Yet the generalization stands, as it was stated by a member of the faculty of medicine as early as 1880, *that one must accord a real influence to the milieu in which the individual lives, and that . . . one must take account of changes which their profession might have induced in the way of feeling, thinking, and wanting of the individuals who have put an end to their days.*[23]

Thus the Paris morgue not only performed a crucial social function. Its organization and procedures, by their nature, inevitably posed fundamental questions about that function. The subsequent attempt to answer them more fully provided a practical impetus for French sociology and, through Durkheim, contributed importantly to the theoretical development of the social sciences.[24]

The nineteenth century was a splendid one for sensational crimes; and none was more intriguing to the French press and public than an unsolved murder. Whenever the identity of a victim was in doubt, of course, the corpse was brought to the morgue which thereby became headquarters for the ensuing criminal investigation. Unfortunately, the records of the morgue in regard to homicide are statistically meaningless, and it is consequently only by resorting to the method of case-study that one can grasp how the morgue actually functioned as an instrument of criminology.[25] The case we shall reconstruct for this purpose has the particular advantage of demonstrating the importance of the morgue at a time when the detection of crime was evolving through the application of more advanced »scientific« techniques.

The year was 1876. At five o'clock on the evening of November 8 two packages were delivered to the morgue. A few hours before they had been pulled from the Seine at Clichy where one of them was first noticed by some girls at play on the river bank. They contained the upper and lower halves of the corpse of a woman, now designated at the Prefecture of Police and in the press as *la femme coupée en morceaux.*[26] By the next day Dr. Bergeron, chief medical examiner of the morgue, had completed the autopsy. He reported the following:

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[23] Ibid., p. 17.

[24] DURKHEIM, The Rules of Sociological Method, transl. by Sarah A. Solovay and John H. Mueller, Glencoe (Ill.) 1965. Also see John MADGE, The Origins of Scientific Sociology, Glencoe (Ill.) 1962, pp. 12–51.

[25] This is not to overlook the attempts to generate a general theory of homicide to parallel the work on suicide; e. g., Andrew F. HENRY and James f. SHORT, Jr., Suicide and Homicide, Glencoe (Ill.) 1954.

[26] Daily report of the Prefect of Police to the Minister of the Interior, 8 Nov. 1876, APP Paris, BA/87. Le Soir, 10 Nov. 1876.

1) that death had occurred no more than forty-eight hours before discovery of the body;
2) that the corpse had been submerged on the night of November 7;
3) that there was no trace of strangulation, infanticide, or abortion;
4) that the stomach and intestines had been *carefully* removed, suggesting the hypothesis of poisoning;
5) that the crime had been performed by *a vigorous and skillful hand*;
6) that the victim belonged to *a lower class.*[27]

These details appeared forthwith in the popular press and, after a visit to the morgue, an investigative reporter for »Le Soir« was able to embellish them. The woman's head had been carefully wrapped and, inexplicably, her hair had been cut off and was missing along with the intestines. She was about thirty years of age with sharp features, an oval face, and high cheekbones; she was a heavy-set woman, a provincial type, who had probably been employed in Paris as a laborer or servant.[28] The »Petit Journal« expanded further: she measured about 1 meter 55 (five feet and one inch), her eyes and mouth were open, and the face showed contortions of agony; *one would think that the head was still alive.*[29]

Flourishing in the first years of the Third Republic as never before, the newspaper press was filled with detailed accounts of the hideous sight at the morgue. Police agents were meanwhile fanning out in the city with photographs of the victim in an effort to locate someone who could aid in the identification – one of the first instances on record in which photography was successfully employed in this manner.[30] The result was to attract to the morgue crowds such as had seldom been seen there before. Long lines formed which stretched across the bridge to the Ile St. Louis and then along the Quai d'Orléans. In his daily report to the Minister of the Interior, the Prefect of Police estimated the number of visitors on November 12 at not fewer than 30,000 and on the day following at 40,000.[31] The press continued to savor every detail: the fainting women, the erroneous identifications, the false leads. Interest was sustained by a report that the face of the victim was beginning to decompose and that an expert from the faculty of medicine, Jules Talrich, had been called to the morgue to make a wax mask. On November 17 the corpse was removed for burial and was replaced by the mask, mounted on a mannequin and placed on a marble slab in the glass case of the exhibition

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[27] Report of the Chief of Security to the Prefect of Police, 9 Nov. 1876, APP Paris, Assassinats 9366.
[28] The reporter's name was Paul Pry. Le Soir, 10 Nov. 1876.
[29] Le Petit Journal, 11–12 Nov. 1876.
[30] A regular service of photography was not installed by the Prefecture of Police until July 1874. Gulliot, Paris qui souffre, pp. 204–205.
[31] Prefect to Min. of the Int., 12–13 Nov. 1876, APP Paris, BA/87. Le XIXe Siècle, 14 Nov. 1876.

hall. The Prefect was not alone in observing that *the resemblance is striking*; and the crowds continued to flock to the morgue.[32]

The first break in the case came late in November. Convinced that they recognized the woman in the police photographs, a group of men who regularly gathered at a Montmartre café made their way together to the morgue to view the mask on display.[33] A brief inspection sufficed. They promptly informed the registrar that the victim had been the mistress of one Sebastien-Joseph Billoir, resident at 51 Rue des Trois Frères in the 18th arrondissement of Paris. Within a few hours Billoir was brought in for interrogation. He readily admitted that he had until recently been living with a young widow named Jeanne Marie Le Manach, a trunk of whose clothing was found in his room. True, she was missing – she had left, he said, after a serious argument between them earlier in the month – but he disclaimed any knowledge of her whereabouts.[34] Despite some criticism in the press, the police continued to hold Billoir even without conclusive evidence of his guilt. At least the identity of the victim was no longer in question once her brother-in-law was brought from a village in Normandy to the Paris morgue where he corroborated the deposition of Billoir's erstwhile cronies from the café.[35]

There the matter stood for more than a fortnight, with Billoir in detention at the Mazas prison near the Pont d'Austerlitz and the police still lacking definitive proof to implicate him as the murderer. Something was missing, but what? That question was posed by the main criminal investigator, Chief of Security Jacob, who had been wearing a path between the morgue and the Prefecture. During a review of the autopsy report and other available evidence one evening, the all too obvious answer came to him: hair and intestines. A scene ensued which might have served the author of the most graphic of naturalistic novels. Between midnight and dawn of December 16 a detachment of policemen, armed with lanterns and shovels, dug up the communal cesspool in the Rue des Trois Frères.[36] The search was successful, and the new evidence was brought to the chemical laboratory at the morgue where Dr. Bergeron confirmed that the hair and intestines were indeed those

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32 Prefect to Min. of the Int., 20 Nov. 1876, APP Paris, BA/87. A wax mask had been successfully used thirty years before to solve a famous murder case known as *l'enfant de la Villette*. Le Soir, 21 Nov. 1876. Talrich's model aroused such interest that he soon opened a wax museum in the Rue Rougemont where one could observe *the admirable structure of the human body, the details of certain diseases, the wounds caused by firearms and their scars, an amputation, etc.* A display of the male sexual organ was restricted from visitors under twenty years of age. La Patrie, 23 Nov. 1876.

33 The men were *habitués* of the café Charles in the Boulevard Ornano. It is possible that they were alerted by a drawing of the head, based on photographs taken at the morgue, which appeared in Le Journal Illustré, 26 Nov. 1876. La Patrie 27 Nov. 1876.

34 Le XIXe Siècle, 28 Nov. 1876. A transcript of the interrogation is extant in APP Paris, 79366.

35 Le XIXe Siècle, 6 Dec. 1876.

36 Le Soir, 17 Dec. 1876. Le XIXe Siècle, 17 Dec. 1876.

of the deceased woman. All of which was kept from Billoir himself but revealed to the public by the Parisian press, which now placed the assassin's identity beyond doubt and lavished praise on the police and the staff of the morgue.[37]

The final step of the investigation was conducted by a contingent of five men: Jacob, Dr. Bergeron, a police commissioner, an investigating judge, and an architect carefully examined Billoir's flat and there discovered on the bedroom floor spots of blood which had been scrubbed with potassium, presumably to thwart detection. In a cupboard they also found laurel and thyme, some leaves of which had been tangled in the hair retrieved from the cesspool. The killer had evidently stored the hair temporarily in the cupboard while he performed his grisly task and then, after binding the two packages, had dropped it with the other remains into the cesspool. The case was solved.[38]

Confronted with these incriminating details, Billoir nevertheless persisted in his claim of innocence. Public interest meanwhile shifted from the victim to the accused, and what began with *la femme coupée en morceaux* henceforth became *l'Affaire Billoir*. During the Christmas holidays the public was treated to more speculations and descriptions of the prisoner. Billoir was a drifter from the provinces. Born in a tiny village near Cambrai in 1819, as a boy he had joined an older brother in Paris and then enlisted in the army, cutting all ties with his birthplace after the death of his mother. Retired from military service before the war of 1870, he had found only sporadic employment to support his habit of heavy drinking until he met the young widow who became his mistress. A large and unattractive girl, Jeanne Marie Le Manach had the compensating virtues of a steady income and a small inheritance. With her Billoir had passed nearly two years, during which time they together frequented the cafés of Montmartre. Billoir was portrayed in the press as having broad shoulders and the ravaged face of an alcoholic, with a large nose and a heavy moustache falling over thick lips.[39] If ever appearances could convict a man, Billoir was an eminently qualified suspect. Besides, the evidence gathered at the morgue spoke for itself.

After weeks of interrogation Billoir finally confessed. His mistress had returned drunk to their apartment one evening early in November, he said, and had inadvertently broken a glass of sentimental value to him. As she stooped to pick up the pieces, he had kicked her in the abdomen, and she lay inert on the floor. Believing she was dead, he had placed her on the bed and waited through the night. The next day he decided to dispose of the body. Taking a razor and a pair of scissors, he cut through to the spinal column which he then broke with the aid of a hammer and chisel. After binding the packages

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[37] Le XIXe Siècle, 19 Dec. 1976.

[38] Le Soir, 19 Dec. 1876. Le XIXe Siècle, 20–21 Dec. 1876.

[39] Le Petit Journal, 22 Dec. 1876. Le XIXe Siècle, 22–24 Dec. 1876.

and disposing of the rest, at dusk he took one bundle and made his way down the hill to the river where he threw it in. He returned to spend the night with the other package still in his apartment. The following evening he descended to the Seine with his second load. Just as he was about to leave he was alarmed by an approaching rowboat and ran back to his room, exhausted from exertion and fright. He had killed Jeanne Marie Le Manach, but it was an unpremeditated murder, a crime of passion.[40]

This story was no sooner publicized than it was challenged in the press. When the body was first discovered there had been no evidence of a bruise on the abdomen. Billoir's dating of the death, on November 3 he claimed, accorded neither with the autopsy at the morgue nor with witnesses who testified they had heard or seen the woman thereafter. Surely a more substantial weapon, perhaps a sword or bayonet, had been used. After all, the wax mask had permanently recorded the terror in the face of the victim. The trial of *this sinister personality*, as »Le Soir« called Billoir, would bring to bear the weight of scientific proof, the evidence from the morgue.[41]

And so it did. The court proceedings in the Palais de Justice lasted only two days. The gallery was filled when the prosecution brought its procession of fifty-four witnesses before judge and jury. Jeanne Marie Le Manach, *heavy of body and spirit*, had supported her lover for months until her resources were depleted. Wishing to be rid of her, the accusation was, Billoir had first scouted out an appropriate spot on the river front – where two witnesses claimed to have seen him – then cruelly murdered and severed the victim before casting her bundled corpse into the Seine. The weapon, although unfound, must have been at least a large butcher knife; presumably the victim had been slashed while still alive, since she had died of hemorrhaging and her body was exsanguinated when delivered to the morgue. In short, the prosecution contended, this was a case of premeditated murder.[42]

The accused was firm and remarkably articulate in his own defense. He denied that he had killed his mistress in cold blood or had wielded a heavy weapon: *I respect science but* (a gasp in the audience) . . . *I used a razor.* To the prosecutor's assertion that he must have carried both bundles at once to the river, he simply replied: *Impossible.* And he insisted that Dr. Bergeron's autopsy was in error as to the time of death. He had never been to the river before the crime, he said, and had he wished to find a suitable location in Clichy, he would never have chosen such a shallow place near the entrance of a canal where the corpse was discovered. This latter contention touched

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[40] A transcript of the confession was sent from Chief of Security Jacob to Judge Bresselle, 3 Jan. 1877, APP Paris, 79366.

[41] Le Soir, 5, 9 Jan.; 14 March 1877. Le XIXe Siècle, 6 Jan. 1877.

[42] The official transcript of the trial was published in the Gazette des Tribunaux, 15–16 March 1877.

an evident weakness in the prosecution's case. The only two witnesses were brothers-in-law, one of whom confessed that he had been too far removed for positive identification. The other had already reported to the police in November, before Billoir was found, that the suspicious person was a large man with broad shoulders, a detail duly reported as a fact by the newspapers before the trial. But when Billoir was asked to stand in the courtroom, the impartial »Gazette des Tribuneaux« noted that the accused was *of medium size, rather short than tall.* The witness thereupon conceded that the question was *delicate,* yet he reaffirmed his affidavit of four months before by stating: *I thought I recognized Billoir.*[43]

Thereupon the trial ended and the jury retired. Within twenty-five minutes the unanimous verdict was announced: guilty of premeditated murder. The judge immediately pronounced a sentence of death at the guillotine. Outside, where a large crowd had waited for hours in the Place Dauphine, the news was acclaimed. Billoir was sent off to the prison of La Roquette, behind the Bastille, where he spent a month playing cards with his guards, still hopeful that an appeal would permit his sentence to be commuted to life imprisonment. But on the evening of April 26 President MacMahon closed Billoir's dossier without granting a pardon.[44] At four o'clock the next morning he was executed in the public square before the prison in a brief ceremony witnessed by republican guards, squads of policemen, and a gathering of 400 spectators. Billoir's body was buried at the cemetery of Ivry, to which the remains of Jeanne Marie Le Manach had earlier been carried by another route from the Paris morgue.[45]

In our own day it would scarcely occur to anyone, native Parisian or tourist, to visit the morgue without urgent reason. Very few are even aware of its present location. Nor are those who now pause at the Memorial to the Martyrs of the Deportation, behind the cathedral of Notre Dame, likely to recall that the same site was once the Paris morgue. Our entire society's attitude toward death, one is led to conclude, has significantly altered in the course of the twentieth century; and perhaps the surfeit of two world wars is explanation enough for the change.[46]

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[43] »J'ai cru reconnaître Billoir.« Ibid.

[44] The date is not inconsequential: MacMahon's refusal came just two weeks before the onset of the crucial *seize mai* crisis of 1877. Since the President was already in serious political difficulty, he was perhaps reluctant to create a public stir by allowing Billoir's reprieve.

[45] Le Droit, 27 April 1877. Le Soir, 27 April 1877. Le Petit Journal, 28 April 1877.

[46] In a different context, namely the advance of French medical practice, a shift in attitudes toward death about the First World War has also been posited by Philippe Ariès, Histoire des populations françaises et de leurs attitudes devant la vie depuis le XVIIIe siècle, Paris 1948, pp. 522–546. But this view is somewhat modified in his recent volume of essays: »In our day, in approximately a third of a century, we have witnessed a brutal revolution in traditional ideas and feelings . . . It even seems that this revolution began in the United States and spread . . . to industrialized Europe; and we can see it today, before our very eyes, reaching France and leaving

In the nineteenth century, however, public display of the dead was still commonplace. It was a venerable tradition perpetuated after 1789 by the spectacles of the guillotine during the Terror, the emotional parade of improvised hearses thorugh the streets of Paris in the June Days of 1848, and the gruesome show of communards executed at Père Lachaise in 1871. The Paris morgue was a monument to that tradition and an institutionalization of it. Moreover, in every great city anonymous death was a fact of daily life, not just an aberration of political violence. The remarkable demographic growth of Paris in the nineteenth century could not fail to exacerbate that social need to which the morgue was a rational response.

More than a temple of suicide, the Paris morgue became the shrine of positivism. We have treated the earliest attempts to derive a statistical analysis of death in the city and we have traced the line of questioning which led to the development of Durkheimian sociology. As a practical matter as well, the social function of the morgue was inseparable from the growing prestige of nineteenth-century science. *L'Affaire Billoir* deserves to be recorded not as an exceptional melodrama of passionate crime but as a characteristic illustration of the positivist spirit in the public domain. Whether or not justice was actually served in an individual case, the verdict was a victory for the new scientific techniques which the morgue incorporated: medical autopsy, chemical analysis, photographic equipment, wax masks, and the rest. Vaunted by the press, admired by the populace, respected by the courts, positivism swept aside every objection. Until the century ended this probably explained, better than anything else, the real significance of the Paris morgue as a social institution.

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oil smudges wherever the wave passes.« ARIÈS, Western Attitudes toward Death from the Middle Ages to the Present, Baltimore 1973, pp. 85–86. See the critique of his methodology by Robert DARNTON, »Death's Checkered Past, »New York Review of Books, vol. XXI, No. 10 (13 June 1974), pp. 11–14.