

Sublime, Necessarily Sublime, Christine V

Marguerite Duras

Translated by Andrew Slade

Translator's Introduction

In 1984, four year old Gregory Villemin was killed and his body was found in the Vologne river. In the quiet, even quaint, industrial villages of the Vosges Mountains of northeast France, the “Villemin affair,” as it was called, generated much spectacle and speculation. As happens with many murder cases that contain certain elements of intrigue and scandal, this one too produced a deluge of journalism in France and abroad. In addition to normal reportage, the case has occasioned at least two books of the true crime genre, Charles Penwarden’s *Little Gregory* (London: Fourth Estate, 1990) and Jean-Michel Lambert, *Le Petit juge* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1987). Additionally, a web search using the terms “affaire villemin” and “gregory villemin” on google produces numerous hits on sites devoted to following the case.¹ Perhaps no other article about this murder generates as much interest as Marguerite Duras’s, “*Sublime, forcément, sublime, Christine V.*,” which ran in *Libération* on 17 July 1985, roughly nine months after the body of Gregory Villemin was found.

The facts surrounding the case are both strange and familiar. The Villemin family was working class; Christine had married Jean-Marie Villemin in the mid 1970’s. Jean-Marie became a foreman in the factory. He and Christine enjoyed the ease that came with advancement—money, house, car, furniture. Yet, someone who called himself “The Crow,” like in the 1943 film of the same name, addressed letters to them in which they were ridiculed, criticized, threatened. The anonymous letter writer knew too much. He knew where they ate, what they ate; he knew their desires, their plans for the future.

After Gregory’s death, suspicion ran rampant in the family, in the village tucked in the Vosges. Bernard Laroche, Jean-Marie Villemin’s cousin, was implicated in the killing. But when the analyses of the letters came back and his handwriting did not match “The Crow’s” he was released. Yet, Jean-Marie and others still suspected him. In a rage for vengeance, Jean-Marie

killed his cousin on 29 March 1985, five months after Gregory's body was found in the river. Four months after this murder, Christine Villemin was arrested and charged with the murder of her son, but she was never brought to trial. By February of 1993, the charges against Christine Villemin had been dropped. The case remains riddled with innuendo, unsubstantiated conjecture, hyperbole. It is still unsolved, but was officially closed in 2001 when DNA tests on "The Crow's" letters proved inconclusive.

Sublime, Necessarily Sublime, Christine V.²

I will never see Christine V. It's too late. But, I saw the judge who is surely the one person closest to this woman. She will have spoken to him the most. He says, "it's awful for me to have to charge her, to have to go through to this moment." He says Christine is intelligent, canny, spirited. I asked what her face was like. He, too, speaks of a pretty face, as does Denis Robert, but of one with a slight absence in the gaze. This morning, Saturday, I see a picture of her in the car taking her to the prison, and I, too, find that absence, the slight inexpressiveness glazing her gaze.

I saw the house. Eric Favereau wasn't able to find the way. All at once, amid the twists and turns, it appeared in front of us—alone, on the summit of a barren hill. As soon as I see the house, I cry out that the crime did happen. This is what I believe. It's beyond reason. The wind whips the slight rain against the doors and shuttered windows as on the day of the crime. The house is new. It's for sale. It's a chalet typical of the Vosges with roof lines of unequal pitch. All around, empty hills, deserted roads, below, dark stands of somber pines. And between the trees, the river.

In the evening we talk about the crime. For two days we talk about it all the time. I try to understand why I cried out when I saw the house. I cannot figure it out. I return to Paris the next day and call Serge July³ and I tell him that I won't do the article. And then, at two in the morning, I begin to write it. I took it up again that morning after a call informed me that Christine V. was arrested.

Life Alone Like Before⁴

The child must have been killed inside the house, and then he must have been sunk. This is what I see. It's beyond reason. I regard this

crime without judging the judication that is being brought concerning it. Nothing. I see only her at the center of the world, surpassed by only time and God. By God I mean nothing. No one saw the child playing in front of the house. The farm woman, who is the closest neighbor, did not see the child that evening, even though she would see him every night when she brought her cows to the stable. Moreover, that pile of play sand doesn't exist. It's a pile of gravel mixed with cement and sand. It doesn't hold any shape, and no one can play with it. I see the shovel that had been stuck in the pile of gravel as a lie or error. There only for deception, for a journalist, photographer, or criminal. The father had wall paper of motocross races put on the walls of the child's room. He had also bought a small motorbike to go riding with him, to teach him to ride. The child loved motorbikes with big, fast, racing engines. He couldn't have cared less about other playthings.

The child, yes, I cannot help believing, whomever the killer may be, he had to have been killed in the house. That's why the shutters had been closed. Only then was he taken to the river and sunk. No doubt he was killed here, gently, or rather, with sudden, incommensurable, mad love, for having to do it. No cry, no plea from the river, no one heard the child. When he was put there he was already dead.

The first person who spoke of the child's disappearance was his mother Christine V. She was the one who went to see the nurse to ask if she'd seen him, if he had gone back to her place. Once she was at the nurse's and asked these questions, unexpectedly, confusedly, I dare say, Christine V. immediately starts speaking about herself, of her existence. She says, "You can't imagine the life I've put up with for years." Is it the Crow's letters⁵ that she's talking about? In that case, it would seem that she would have said, "the life he and I put up with." Instead of being in an immediate, atrocious, anguish because her child disappeared, Christine V. speaks of the existence she had to endure. As if in inaugurating a misfortune in the offing, that child's disappearance closed the floodgates of a past misfortune. It's here, it seems to me, that the reason for the killing approaches us, that a decisive sort of causal relation will establish itself between Christine V.'s life and her child's death. But, perhaps it's simply too early for her to be worried about her child's disappearance. Perhaps. We will never know. We can say this: either she is worried for the child and, in this case, the missing child is an excuse for her to come and talk to the nurse about her life.

Perhaps she is not worried because the child often takes off. Who knows? It could have happened like this: he might have left with his father and they'd forget sometimes to let her know, and she wouldn't mind because she liked to be left alone that way, to find herself alone again as she was before this life. It's possible. And it may be in this state of being alone that the confirmation of her misfortune set itself in her irremediably more each evening. This is equally possible. And that she did not see the progression of her misfortune, certainly she might have no idea where she was going, one night that closed in on her, innocent Christine V. who had, perhaps, killed without knowing it, as I, I write without knowing, with eyes fixed at the window trying to see clearly in the growing dark of the evening, that day in October.

Or else she forgot. What might she have forgotten? This—that for her the child's disappearance will not have happened, that the child's disappearance will have happened only for the others, that she should have hidden that she knew while the others still did not know. That imprudence, that distraction. Instead of speaking only of the child and his vertiginous, brutal disappearance or of shutting up, Christine V. shares a deep, timeless, and secret confidence about her own existence. I believe we can say still more, indeed that Christine V. went to see the farm woman to say that, that sentence which would speak all at once the hell of the past and the future.

She forgot another thing. The nurse, Christine's friend, lives more than a kilometer from her place. That the child was able to return to his nurse's house, that he covered that distance on foot, appears to be the most improbable of hypotheses, yet that's where Christine V. goes looking for her child. Where she has the least chance of finding him. Will she thus have gone there to have gone there? In this case, confidence in the misfortune of her life would have been superfluous.

Nobody Knows What Life is Like in Those Houses

All of these circumstances, these errors, these imprudences, this priority that she puts on her own misfortune over the loss of her child. And another thing, like that always shortened gaze, leads me to believe that the child will not have been the most important thing in Christine V.'s life. Why not? It happens that women don't love their children, or their houses, that they are not the housewives one expects them to be. It happens that

they are not the wives of their husbands either. And it happens that in spite of putting up with it all—marriage, fucking, child, house, furniture—they still are not good mothers, are not any better at being faithful, and tend to slink away. This has not changed them in any way, for a single day.

Why wouldn't a pregnancy come at a bad time? Why mightn't the birth of a mother by the coming of a child be a miscarriage from the slapping around she gets from a man because of poorly cooked steaks, for example? Just as childhood may be lost from getting slapped for an F in math. When women have a child that they do not recognize as their own, maybe it's because they didn't want a child, that they didn't want to live. And in this case, no morality, no penalty will make them recognize that that child is theirs. They have to be left alone with their stories, without insulting them, hitting them. That all of these circumstances elaborated above may be found linked around Christine V. and that she let it all happen as if these things didn't concern her is possible. It's possible that Christine V. had lived a completely artificial existence that she couldn't care less about.

Christine V. Maybe she's actually a vagabond, a suburban roughneck, with neither roof nor law to guide her,⁶ without marital obligations, sleeping with whomever, wherever, eating whatever, and that it had been from this misfortune that she truly wailed and laughed alike. The life one really leads in that house on the hill, or elsewhere, in identical houses, no one knows, not even the judge. Among those who know something about it are, first of all, children, and then there are women.

The Law of the Couple Set By Man

It might be possible that Christine V. lived with a man who was difficult to put up with.

That doesn't mean he had to have been mean. He must be an orderly, dutiful man. Being in principle instructive, I see his stern demeanor exercising itself without respite. I believe I see him approach his wife according to his own guise, and that he takes a certain, growing pleasure in this approach, a certain desire. When the law of the couple is made by man, it always includes an obligatory sexuality—obligated of the woman and set by the man. Look around you. When women are like this, inattentive, forgetful of their children, it's because they live under man's law, that they haven't any images, that they use all their power to see, to survive. There is

not a garden around the house; it stayed as it was the day the construction work was finished. These women don't plant gardens. They don't plant flowers each season. Sometimes, they sit in front of the house, exhausted by the blank sky, the harsh light. And the children come around them, play with their bodies, climb on top of them, undo them, muss their hair, hit them and laugh, while they remain impassive, letting it happen, and the children delight in having a mother to play with and to love.

No, the child didn't have to be the most important thing in Christine V's life. There must have been nothing more important than her in her life. In his life, yes, the child must have been the most important of all he had lived through, the most beautiful, the most unexpected, manna of God. It's terrible. He said she was a marvelous spouse, and he wished that all other men might have wives like her. This issues from the inertia that carries it, the most insidious, ravishing of all death drives. It is so close to blind submission, once men have known it, they can never shake it loose. The most cherished vow among men is to secure the profound difference between themselves and women.

Christine V. must have counted the time that passed, day after day, to figure out finally what to do with that life—how to get out from in front of that bare hill, how to stay with a man, who she had known for sixteen years, for example, and how to leave. How to leave the countryside before her, to put it out of reach. How, finally, to get elsewhere forever, even for a season, far from the awful, daily struggle of seeking a meaning to all this.

The Prison of Freedom

She is imprisoned in freedom. She has nothing to do with freedom. From time to time, she could think of striking back, breaking him down, of slapping him around in her own right, because of a poorly cooked steak, for example. But she could not have tried to hit the man who slapped her around, he would have laughed. They laugh at it. Nor can one refuse to live in the house, to leave them, that house, that place—to desert them. The idea that they will be able to find us again—it's terrifying. And then, leaving never suffices. The strife between a man and a woman is fixed to the place, rather than to him. It's hard to end a history, to let it go. There must be a reason to do it, some disaffection, another love. But to stay with the same story will end by being in it with a louse who would lord over all

her youth from the end of childhood to the day of the murder. At night she would dream of slapping him, that she would gouge out his eyes. He will know nothing about that. They never know. No man in the world can know what it's like for a woman to be taken by a man she doesn't desire. The woman penetrated without desire is in the murder. The cadaverous weight of virile pleasure over her body possesses the heft of the murder she doesn't have the power to commit—the weight of madness. Often these women try anonymous letters because many of them read Harlequin Romances. In letters, at least, they can hate, write the words, hurl insults. But usually these letters go unanswered. They change nothing. Letters are insufficient. They do not know how to write them. One may never know how certain women discover what to do. Even in the worst cases, the poles are limited. One must not break ancient prohibitions.

The Woman of the Bare Hills

For all this, the woman of the so-called bare hills, will have found a way to undo the total edifice of her life all in a minute. So it's said. It's not certain. One can imagine the thing in her way, according to her logic. In her act, one cannot. It's strictly impossible. If it's Christine V. who has taken this way in this period of her life, it's because all the ways she had thought up for getting out of there, including the death of her child, must have been equivalent. In this case the death of the child would have been the only way that would have remained for her, for it would have been the most certain. I dare to suggest that if Christine V. is conscious of the injustice done to her during the crossing of the long tunnel that had been her life, she is totally foreign to the culpability that one seeks from her. She doesn't know what that word, guilty, means. Victim of unjust treatment, yes, she had been, but guilty, no, she was not guilty. From the moment of this crime, in the precise way in which she was to have committed it, no one could have stopped it. She was not guilty. Christine V. never waled except at the cemetery. Had she cried, I believe it would have been this: "May all the world die around me, this new child, my husband, me, but guilty as the courts say, I shall never be." She had said that for the dead man she could be imprisoned, but not for the child. A man and a child are not comparable. It's an absurdity to call the crime by the same name in both cases. To put this crime in the marketplace of crimes is impossible. She knows this, Christine V., the mother.

Not Even To Die, They, The Women

When that October evening comes, it seems to me that madness has already passed through the hills. That it's already too late. That she had already hardened her body, her breasts, her gaze, that she had frozen her heart, that it's already too late. Even in the tempo of that day, she no longer comes to kill him. She no longer looks at anyone, except the outside, that wind that returns with autumn, that bareness of the hills, that nightmare, that cold, those shorter and shorter days like the time that remains until the end. During such evenings these women no longer happen to read. Sometimes, in the degree of lucidity that the silence and disappearance of life attain in their homes, they are no longer obliged even to speak with men. Nothing anymore between them but the children. In the pits of this silence, the children wait. But when they speak, the children, their mothers shut them up. How can they not see it, the men? They have nothing more to do than this, this of which we speak, not even to die, the women.

That other crime remains. That dejected man must have known something. The insistent way he looked into one's eyes saying that he was innocent always made me think that he knew something that he could not reveal without implicating someone else. And when someone aimed the gun at him and he said: "You know very well it wasn't me who did it," I heard: "You know very well who did it." It's said that it's her, Christine V., who would have incited the killing. It's her who would have persuaded the assassin that it could not but be this man. Why him? To be done with it. The child had undeniably been killed by a human being. It is necessary then, that there was an assassin. The killing of the child by his mother, I do not know its name, I do not know what to call this crime, but that of this innocent man, I know what to call that one. It was done for her. The man was killed.

She had thus been designated the official assassin of the child. Everything goes along as if it were not up to the court to distribute the roles in this affair, including that of the assassin.

Without doubt, it's the first time that the man with whom she lived would have believed what she proposed, she, the mother of his child.

That time, Christine V. would have been able to be overwhelmed. The assassin had been found, captured, and the one who killed the child went to prison.

A Certain Period of Peace

Once the three murders were complete, it's probable that Christine V. had known a certain period of peace. The house will be for sale. The leather living room furniture which would have cost large sums will also be for sale. No one was ever invited to go into that house, to sit in those expensive chairs.

Why have those things? To be able to show them to the jealous? To pretend to believe in the ordinary happiness of life? Yes. To pretend. For practical reasons that are equally ordinary. For here, everything was ordinary. Everything. Practically. Like everywhere. Christine says that after the death of the child she re-experienced the desire for love, for that man. Probably the abominable pain that she created for him caused the past, the difficulty, to vanish. She had abolished time. She made equality in misery. Prison rendered the décor unapproachable. This too, is loving. No one has the right to it.

This Crime, It's a Desert

At 26 years old they were already married ten years. They no longer had anything in common, not even the child. They had only earned money, the house, the cars, the living room. Now, they share a dead child.

The form is this: nine months have passed since the crime. The anticipation continues without interruption. This crime is a crime that does not leave us. It's unfathomable, very vast, very. Often, we lose sight of it there where we believe to find it, and it disappears when we approach it. Very close to the crime the monstrosity of innocence remains. In this crime, we have encountered the final delivery of evil, of that innocence before God.

This crime has made all of the inhabitants of the countryside think. All of its inhabitants have come to understand this crime, criminals and spectators alike.

Nothing else was happening, it's at a dead end. Where is the indictment? What are we waiting for?, they asked. For the police report. It came. The results of the handwriting analyses came. The indictment was even expected. And then it took place. It's Christine V. who was indicted. For infanticide. She was imprisoned.

Here's what was enough to make it appear now to have been not enough, and which lacks terribly an element that is poorly defined, but irreplaceable, without equivalence—to know a person, a human being, and to say that he had seen, that he knows. There is no one in this crime, it's a desert like the bare hill. We enter now, like always, in these gigantic criminal investigations, the excessively clear area of the conclusions. If the police deserted the countryside, would not other people have been *removed* like that man, that brother? We sense that one part of the village, “the strong room,” knows the truth, and curiously, in the countryside the crime had been expected to liquidate definitively the anger, started perhaps in the last century, among the families.

And If It Were There, the Fourth Murder?

That other child remains. For everyone, she remains unknown to the investigation. For all the spectators on the path of justice, it's the most densely shadowed zone of the crime. Once again: why did she tell that first luminous, faultless, story of this crime? That the gendarmes had forced her, no, that's not true. It was not the gendarmes who forced that clarity upon her, that simplicity, like a child's sketch. Her fright when she lost her mind has remained in everyone's memory. She never returned to school since the crime. She hardly ever leaves, plays with her goat, they say. And if it was there, her, the fourth murder.

And once again we know nothing. Less than nothing. If we ask the people: “And if all of a sudden the murderer were discovered in the outskirts of the village...?” they will tell us no, that it's not possible, that everything had been accounted for. It will remain, then, to interrogate all of them, until the last one.

All of the sudden, the atmosphere is different. Justice appears insufficient, distant, even useless. It becomes superfluous from the moment it's rendered. Why render it? It hides. More than the secret, it hides. It hides the horizon of the crime, and let us say it, its spirit. The movement of knowledge undoes legality. It's against the separation of this criminal from the other women. What would make Christine V. a criminal is a secret that all women share. I speak of the crime committed against the child, however it's accomplished, but also of the crime perpetrated on her, the mother. And that regards me. She is still alone in solitude, there where women are still at the bottom of the earth, of the dark, in order that they remain

what they were before, isolated in the materiality of matter. Christine V. is sublime. Necessarily sublime.

Endnotes

¹ On this site, we can follow the chronology of the events of the affair as well as contemporary developments in the case: http://www.cfpj.com/adn_justice/03parfait/03affairesgregory.html. On another website, <http://perso.club-internet.fr/ecordier/index.html>, we find the astrological charts of the key adult players in the crime, Christine Villemin, Jean-Marie Villemin, and Bernard Laroche, Jean-Marie's cousin. Additionally, the Library at Kent State University in its Borowitz Collection, has a file on the Villemin case: Borowitz Crime Subject Files, 1940 and ongoing, box 2a. The contents are listed as follows: 1. Citations for articles on this case; 2. Correspondence; 3. *Le Figaro Magazine* [Entire magazines and individual articles], April 5, 1985-February 27, 1988 4. Magazine articles, September 18, 1986-January 8, 1987 5. Magazine articles, [no date] 6. Newspaper articles, July 16, 1987-December 13, 1987 7. Newspaper articles, February 8, 1988-September 3, 1989 8.;Newspaper articles, October 21, 1989-November 9, 1989 9. Newspaper articles, March 8, 1990-February 18, 1993 10. *Paris-Match* [Entire magazines and individual articles], April 19, 1985-December 30, 1993.

² *Libération* (17 July 1985): 4-6.

³ The editor of *Libération*.

⁴ The subheadings were added by the editors of *Libération*.

⁵ Duras's French refers to the letters of "*le corbeau*." This is French slang for a priest, but literally means, raven. The reference is to the film of 1943, *Le Corbeau* (directed by Henri-Georges Clouzot) in which a series of anonymous letters torment a small town until the residents begin suspecting and then turning on one another. No one is able, in the course of the film, to discover the Crow's identity. The Villemin family received anonymous letters in which the writer claimed responsibility for Gregory's death.

⁶ Duras's phrase is, "*sans foi, ni loi*." This is a common, idiomatic expression which can have a number of significations in French depending on the context in which it is used. Here, what is important is that Christine V. may have acted from a position that is beyond the reach of any belief or law. Christine V., in Duras's text, may have experienced herself as being fundamentally excluded, different, from the world that surrounded her. Another French phrase, "*ni toit ni loi*," accounts for my translation. This is not Duras's phrase, yet the earlier references in her article to the roof-lines of the typical houses in the Vosges, and of Christine V.'s relation to that house, justifies the choice of "roof nor law."

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