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**European Crime Fiction: the Novels of Fred Vargas and Andrea
Camilleri**

ABSTRACT

European Crime Fiction: The Novels of Fred Vargas and Andrea Camilleri

This dissertation considers the crime fiction of French writer, Fred Vargas and Italian writer, Andrea Camilleri. It places them in the context of the current growing popularity of crime fiction as a literary genre and their place in the literary history of their respective countries; in France, the *Roman Noir* and in Italy, the *Gailla*. It discusses in particular the key elements in their crime fiction which differentiates it from other contemporary European crime writers, particularly from Scandinavia.

The use of myth, legend and fairy tales, a unique feature in the novels of Fred Vargas is discussed in detail, as is the use of the natural environment as a metaphor in storytelling. Likewise, the role of place and local culture, crucially important in the novels of Andrea Camilleri which are based exclusively in Sicily in a fictionalised version of his home town, is also discussed in detail. In this context, the role of the local Mafia is referenced.

The development of character plays a key role in the work of both writers who create convincing alternative protagonists in Vargas's intuitive, 'cloud-shovelling' Jean- Batiste Adamsberg and Camilleri's gourmet Salvo Montalbano with his 'weather vane' temper. In this context, character development of their respective colleagues is discussed.

The use of the crime fiction genre as a metaphor for political comment and challenge is clearly identified in the novels of Camilleri, echoing the legendary Leonardo Sciascia. Vargas presents moral concerns around family and other relationships, through the messages implicit in the story telling tradition of fairy tales, myth and legend.

ENDS

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Introduction

In Dorothy L. Sayers's novel, *Gaudy Night*, one of the key characters, Harriett Vane, a crime writer and possibly an alter ego for Sayers herself, defends the writing of crime fiction to academic staff at the Oxford college she had attended as a student. Challenged to defend the writing of 'that kind of book', following her own release from a murder charge she says:

I know what you're thinking - that anybody with proper sensitive feeling would rather scrub floors for a living. But I should scrub floors very badly, and I write detective stories rather well. I don't see why proper feeling should prevent me from doing my proper job.¹

Today, crime fiction is recognised as a bona fide literary genre by both the reading public and academic institutions, and certainly a 'proper job' for writers from a range of backgrounds and nationalities with important things to say about their social, cultural and political environments. Its increasing popularity, not only through literature but through other media, confirms empathy, a resonance with contemporary audiences. Crime fiction in all its various forms has become a key chronicler of our times.

Crime fiction as a genre now has universal appeal. It appears on every best-seller list, is frequently adapted for stage, screen and television. Its crime busting protagonists – Sherlock Holmes, Poirot, Morse, Rebus, Wallander - are household names. It commands a wide audience. Ironically, this popularity has excluded the genre from serious academic study until recently. How can literature that is so universally popular be taken seriously? But, as Worthington points out:

Central to fictions of crime is the desire to discover that which is concealed, hear that which is unspoken, to decipher the codes. The very process of literary analysis is closely aligned to the work of the detective in fiction.²

¹ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Gaudy Night* (London: NEL/Hodder and Stoughton, 2003) p.35

² Heather Worthington, *Key Concepts in Crime Fiction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) p.ix

The literary 'detective' should be in sympathy with their fictional counterpart. There is also a moral imperative and as this dissertation will discuss, crime fiction is a useful literary model for social commentary. Crime fiction exposes wrongdoing and hypocrisy; it holds a mirror to a nation's morality. It represents in fictional terms the age old battle of good over evil; it highlights the exploitation of the weak by the powerful. Through its fictional plotlines and characters, it addresses contemporary and controversial issues. It becomes part of a nation's zeitgeist, part of its moral compass.

The great commercial success of Stieg Larsson's, *Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* the first novel in the *Millennium Trilogy* (2005) played into the current concerns with corporate corruption amid political impotence, family breakdown, misogyny, the sexual abuse of women and girls, and challenges to the freedom of the press. This heralded a renewed popularity for the so-called *Northern* or *Scandi-Noir* crime novels which emerged in the 1960's with Swedish husband and wife team, Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahloo, followed by another Swede, Henning Mankell. These authors were joined by other Scandinavian writers, notably Arnaldur Indridason (Iceland) and, more recently, Jo Nesbo (Norway). Apart from Larsson's protagonist, maverick journalist Mikael Blomkvist, and his enigmatic partner in crime busting, Lisbeth Salander, these novels follow the classic police procedural format with protagonists Martin Beck (Sjöwall and Wahloo), Kurt Wallander (Mankell), Erlundur Sveinsson (Indridason) and Harry Hole (Nesbo). Closer to home, Ian Rankin's Inspector Rebus in Edinburgh and Colin Dexter's Morse in Oxford reinforce the stereotypical character traits of the protagonists in these police procedural crime novels; difficulty with personal and professional relationships, together with an addictive personality, usually to alcohol, and a strong sense of justice and a commitment to seeing it done.

In the warmer climate of southern Europe, something rather different is happening to the genre. Against a background of post-war American influence, contemporary crime fiction

in France, or the *roman noir*, has developed from the lightweight status of little better than pulp fiction, to being regarded as a significant cultural narrative. Gorrara comments: ‘this ‘double’ vision of the *roman noir*, as both pulp fiction and contemporary urban narrative, has been highlighted by the cross cultural origins of the form.’³ Referencing Lacassin⁴, she suggests that there is a return to:

a pre-war tradition of French detective fiction that drew on *noir*-like elements of the baroque and the gothic [...] as blurring the boundaries between the real and fantasy, uncovering the magical qualities of everyday life. Dreams, premonitions, and superstitions play an important part in the narrative, and mysteries are resolved less by an act of logical deduction than through deciphering textual conundrums.⁵

The development of crime fiction in France and Italy reflect national character and culture, and particularly the post war political environment. This dissertation will focus on some key aspects of the current genre through an analysis of the novels of French and Italian crime writers, Fred Vargas and Andrea Camilleri respectively. It will identify how the role of place and cultural background, and the legacy of generational memory and myth and legend are used to tell truths about contemporary social and political issues. The role of place as an omnipresent ‘persona’, together with strong local characters creating cultural identity, play a key role in these novels and will also be analysed in the context of plot and characterisation.

³ Claire Gorrara, *The Roman Noir in Post-War French Culture*, (Oxford: OUP, 2003) p.1.

⁴ Francis Lacassin, *Mythologie du Roman Policier*, (Paris: UGE, 1974)

⁵ Claire Gorrara, *The Roman Noir in Post-War French Culture*, (Oxford: OUP, 2003) p.95.

Chapter One

Continental Crime Fiction: *Roman Noir* and *Gailla*

The fiction of French crime writer, Fred Vargas, the literary pseudonym of Frederique Audoin-Rouzeau, medieval historian and archaeologist, emulates Gorrata's assertion that crime fiction is returning to the pre-war tradition of the baroque and the gothic. In one instance, the reader is led, deep into a forest in northern France where a stag is found with its heart brutally removed. In another, in London, where several pairs of human feet, still in their shoes, are discovered outside the gates of Highgate Cemetery. Or high in the French Alps, where a wolf – allegedly a werewolf - is attacking human victims. Her novels have been described as 'popular myth and superstition', as displaying 'a love of the marvellous-ordinary', as 'the persistence of mythical thought in modern life'.⁶ She is reported as describing her fiction as contemporary fairy tales as: 'not about good and evil, order and disorder, they are novels about death. After a series of false trails, the hero will triumph. It's a cathartic process.'⁷ With an obligatory nod to Conan Doyle's creation, Sherlock Holmes, she acknowledges Agatha Christie as a model. 'I see links between her and the mythology I read when I was young, and I think she was conscious of it, too. Like her, I want to tell a story that identifies and deals with the dangers we face. It's no longer wild animals, but the fears are just as real, so I make a journey with the reader, confront the horror of humanity, and deliver them safely home.'⁸

Vargas's fictional police protagonist, Commissaire Jean-Batiste Adamsberg, subverts the stereotypical *flic*. Head of the Paris Serious Crime Squad, a 27 strong team of officers

⁶ Lorna Scott Fox, 'On the Trail of the Alleged Werewolf', *London Review of Books*, Vol.31, No7 (9 April 2009) pp. 28-30.

⁷ *Telerama* magazine, 6 February, 2008

⁸ Nicholas Wroe, 'Grave concerns', *The Guardian*, (Saturday, 16 February, 2008), <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/feb/16/featuresreviews.guardianreview14> [accessed 03.05.2013]

charged with getting results, he is, contra-suggestively, a ‘cloud shoveller’ or dreamer, who relies on intuition, a strong emotional intelligence and knowledge of folk law, myth and legend. The character of Adamsberg, the man, is elusive. Aspects of his personal history slowly emerge through the novels; his childhood in the Pyrenees, his two sons, his ‘lost and found’ brother, his childhood feud with Veyrenc, the New Recruit, his un-reconciled relationship with Camille, the mother of his baby son. Some of his team support their boss, the ‘cloud shovellers’, and some, the ‘positivists’, question his intuitive approach, in the resolution of complex murders. But what appears to be two diametrically opposed approaches or ‘camps’ to crime detection is, in a Vargas novel, fluid, reflecting the shifting of opinion of both the investigating team and other characters involved, as the plot unfolds.

Vargas is writing, following a resurgence of the genre in France, arguably initiated by the popularity of the idiosyncratic crime novels of Daniel Pennac, creator of Benjamin Malaussene and the Belleville series, principally *The Scapegoat* (1985) and *The Fairy Godmother* (1987). Platten comments: ‘His fiction is an idiosyncratic mix of unlikely plots, indestructible characters, and trenchant social critiques [...] Most of all, Pennac puts an inordinate value on the virtues of traditional story-telling.’⁹ This has clear echoes in the novels of Vargas. She references Bluebeard’s bloody chamber,¹⁰ and, with echoes of Pennac’s subversion, the ‘fairy godmother’ character of Clementine Courbet and her close friend, the computer supremo, Josette, described as ‘magical women’.¹¹ Gothic tropes in the form of the Dracula myth are also suggested in this novel through tell-tale, ‘signature’ punctures in the skin of the victims and the allusion to the living dead – the perpetrator being

⁹ David Platten, ‘Into the Woods: The Contemporary “Roman Noir” as Modern Fairy Tale’, *Yale French Studies*, No. 108, (2005) pp. 116-130, (p. quotation)

David Platten, *Into the Woods: The Contemporary “Roman Noir” as Modern Fairy Tale*, (Yale University Press: Yale French Studies No. 108 Crime Fictions, 2005) pp. 116-130. Accessed 27.05.2013.

¹⁰ Fred Vargas, *Wash This Blood Clean From My Hand* (London: Vintage, 2008) pp.60, 121

¹¹ Fred Vargas, *Wash This Blood Clean From My Hand* (London: Vintage, 2008) p.286

officially 'dead' at the time of the final murder.¹² Strong echoes of the 'living dead' myth is involved in the plot development of *An Uncertain Place* (2011), where her protagonist is forced to spend a very uncomfortable night in a vault with supposed vampires somewhere deep in the heart of Serbia. Comparing her novels to contemporary fairy tales, Vargas has commented: 'They are built on the same structure, around a vital danger, whether it be the Minotaur in the labyrinth, a dragon hidden in the forest or a serial killer lurking in the city.'¹³

During one investigation, Adamsberg states:

"A patient little white stone waiting in the dark forest [...] will take us straight to the crime scene, just like the stones in Tom Thumb."

"That's not quite right," pointed out Mordent who was a specialist in myths, legends and indeed horror stories. "The pebbles help Tom Thumb to find his way back *home*, not to the Ogre's house"

"Ok, Mordent. But what we want to find is the Ogre. So we're doing it the other way round."¹⁴

Vargas claims to write the basic outline of her novels in just twenty one days. She then spends up to eighteen months correcting what she calls 'the music of the book', linking what appear to be unrelated incidents and personal histories into a coherent whole. Vargas has commented: 'I think of the story like an orchestra with the violins and the brass at the front taking forward the action. But at the back are the basses [...] making a noise that comes from eternity.'¹⁵

This reference to the relationship between language, storytelling or fiction, particularly myth, and music echoes Levi-Strauss who likens the reading of myth to that of a musical score:

¹² Fred Vargas, *Wash This Blood Clean From my Hand* (London: Vintage, 2008), pp. 60, p. 286.

¹³ Lorna Scott Fox, 'On the Trail of the Werewolf', London review of Books, vol.31, No7 (9 April 2009) pp. 28-30

¹⁴ Fred Vargas, *This Night's Foul Work*, (London: Vintage 2009) p.73

¹⁵ Nicholas Wroe, 'Grave Concerns', <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/feb/16.featuresreviews.guar...> [accessed 03.05.2013] p.2

[...] we have to apprehend it [myth] as a totality and discover that the basic meaning of the myth is not conveyed by the sequence of events but [...] by bundles of events even although these events appear at different moments in the story. [...] we have to read the myth more or less as we would read an orchestral score, not stave after stave but understanding that we should apprehend the whole page [...] we have to understand that each page is a totality [to] extract the meaning out of the myth.¹⁶

Thus, the abandoned feet in north London, lead via Gothic horror in the land of the vampires, to an ancient family feud in Serbia (*An Uncertain Place*, 2011), the incomprehensible slaughter of a stag leads ultimately to a psychopathic pathologist who is seeking the elixir of life (*This Night's Foul Work*, 2009), the appearance of the 'Furious Army' of Lord Harlequin's ghost riders in a forest in northern France signifying a revengeful death, is used to mask murder (*The Ghost Riders of Ordebec*, 2013) or the serial killer who appears to go on killing after death in Dracula-like fashion, leaving his trademark trident wound like three metal fangs in his victims (*Wash This Blood Clean From My Hand*, 2008)

Concurrently, in Italy, a particular style of crime fiction or *giallo* has developed which reflects local identity and place. Andrea Camilleri's crime fiction, set in Sicily, is inextricably linked to the corrupting influence of the Mafia. He follows in the footsteps of the acknowledged master of the Sicilian *giallo*, Leonardo Sciascia, whose first novel, *The Day of the Owl* (1961) is a classic in this genre. In an interview with journalist Mark Lawson, Camilleri acknowledges the significant influence of Sciascia. He states: 'I call him the electrician Sciascia. What I mean is that, when I feel like my batteries are low, I take up a book by Leonardo, I open it, I read two pages and my batteries are recharged.'¹⁷ There is a very telling echo of Sciascia's *The Day of the Owl* in Camilleri's *The Snack Thief* (1996) where the potential witness to a murder, Clementina Vasile Cozzo, says: 'For decades the respectable people here did nothing but repeat that the Mafia was no concern of theirs but

¹⁶ Claude Levi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning* (London and New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978) p.40

¹⁷ Mark Lawson, *Andrea Camilleri: a life in writing*, *The Guardian* (Friday, 6 July 2012), accessed 10.05.2013

only involved the people involved it [...] the “see-nothing, know-nothing” attitude is the most mortal of sins.’¹⁸

The influence of Spanish writer, Manuel Vasquez Montalban is also acknowledged in the name of Camilleri’s protagonist, Salvo Montalbano. Direct reference to this is made by Camilleri in the novel *The Terracotta Dog* (2004): ‘the inspector had been reading a detective novel by a writer from Barcelona who greatly intrigued him and had the same surname as he, though hispanicized: Moltalban’.¹⁹ Camilleri concedes that a key aim of his crime fiction is as a vehicle for social commentary, an aim which he shares with Sciascia. Past comments: ‘The Montalbano novels share the same thematic interest [...] present in Leonardo Sciascia’s novels: concerns regarding the excesses, the inadequacies, and the abuses of both power in the abstract and of the justice system in particular.’²⁰

The development of Italian *giallo* during the twentieth century to the present day reinforces its political and cultural roots. Popularised in the 1920’s through publisher Mondadori’s *Libri Gialli* imprint, the famous yellow-covered paperbacks which gave the genre its name fell foul of Mussolini’s Fascist government and was outlawed as a subversive influence for allegedly portraying Italian society in a negative light. At that time and conversely, Marxist thinker, Antonio Gramsci, saw crime fiction as a force for good with potential to influence change towards a more egalitarian society, an opinion which, at that time, cost him a number of years in jail. Contemporary academic studies of *gialli* now echo his thinking, stressing its potential for social and cultural analysis. In a development that seems like life imitating art, has been the emergence of a new breed of crime writers drawn from the ranks of the police and the judiciary. Di Ciolla comments: ‘Senior police officers,

¹⁸ Andrea Camilleri, *The Snack Thief* (London: Picador, 2004), p.67

¹⁹ Andrea Camilleri, *The Terracotta Dog* (London: Picador, 2004) p.6

²⁰ Elena M.Past, *Methods of Murder: Beccarian Introspection and Lombrosian Vivisection in Italian Crime Fiction*, (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2012) p. xx

[...] judges [...] and lawyers, while fully engaged in their principal activities as custodians and upholders of the law, have also become the newest breed of Italian *genre* authors.’²¹ In a twist of poetic irony, the Italian Cesare Battisti, a former member of a far-left guerrilla group and accused with others of terrorist activities, sought sanctuary in France and began writing crime thrillers. Threats by the French government to extradite him to Italy to face trial were forcibly resisted by, among others, Fred Vargas.

In keeping with these developments, Camilleri, a media professional, uses the genre as political and social commentary. His urbane Sicilian protagonist, Salvo Montalbano, lives and works in the fictional Sicilian town of Vigate, based on Camilleri’s own home town of Porto Empedocle. He swims in the Mediterranean every morning, is a natural ‘foodie’, the novels could be read as a culinary guide to Sicilian cuisine, and is, characteristically, a *tragediatore*, play-acting in stereotypical Italian – even specifically Sicilian - style. Pezzotti comments: ‘ A *tragediatori* is, in Camilleri’s words, a person who organizes [sic] practical jokes and fakes stupidity, sadness, or outrage in order to escape embarrassing or difficult situations.’²² This skill allows him to manage the daily challenges of bureaucratic incompetence and endemic corruption against the historic back drop and continuing influence of the Mafia. Conversations with his superior officers, the Commissioners for whom he has little respect, offer many examples of Montalbano’s skill at manipulation. In one instance, talking to Commissioner Bonetti-Alderghi regarding some delicate negotiations with the old Mafia boss, Sinagra, Montalbano finds himself talking in clichés:

“ [...] But we need to be very cautious; one false step could send it all up in smoke. The stakes are extremely high.’ He felt disgusted by the words coming out of his

²¹ Nicoletta Di Ciolla, *Uncertain Justice: Crime and Retribution in Contemporary Italian Crime Fiction* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2010) p. 173

²² Barbara Pezzotti, *The Importance of Place in Contemporary Italian Fiction*, (Maryland and Plymouth: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2012) p.131

mouth. A clutch of clichés. But that was just the sort of language that worked at the moment. He wondered how much longer he could keep up the charade.²³

His temper, always short, is affected adversely by the weather, a trait of which his team of disparate – sometimes even comical - but essentially loyal colleagues are only too well aware.

To judge from the entrance the dawn was making, it promised to be a very iffy day – that is, blasts of angry sunlight one minute, fits of freezing rain the next, all of it seasoned with sudden gusts of wind – one of those days when someone who is sensitive to abrupt shifts in weather and suffers them in his blood and brain is likely to change opinion and direction continuously.²⁴

Here, Camilleri's description of the weather – angry sunlight, freezing fits, sudden gusts - perfectly captures the likely mood of his protagonist. On one occasion, he commits criminal damage in response to the destruction of an ancient olive tree to make way for building work.

The crime fiction of both Vargas and Camilleri is a far cry from both the murder mystery novels exemplified by Christie and Sayers, and the 'mean streets' of Chandler and Hammett's hard boiled American *noir*. In different ways, both novelists use the crime fiction genre as a mirror to reflect and comment on the complexities of life in the twenty first century, as a touchstone, a social commentary, on their respective cultural and social environments.

²³ Andrea Camilleri, *Excursion to Tindari* (London: Picador, 2006)p.142

²⁴ Andrea Camilleri, *The Terracotta Dog* (London: Picador, 2004) p.1

Chapter Two

Odd Couples and Disparate Teams

The main investigative protagonists in crime fiction have traditionally been teamed with a character - a close friend, relative or colleague - who acts as a foil, reflecting and sometimes challenging plot progression as directed by the main protagonist. Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes has his Dr Watson, Christie's Poirot his Captain Hastings. More recently, the police procedural model of crime fiction features pairings of junior ranking professional colleagues with seasoned senior officers, as in Colin Dexter's Inspector Morse and DS Lewis, Ian Rankin's DCI John Rebus and DS Siobhan Clarke and Reginald Hill's Dalziel and Pascoe. In similar vein, Vargas and Camilleri use strong characterisation of individual members of their respective teams, together with a broader community of players to enhance plot development and highlight both the frailties and strengths of the main protagonists. Vargas juxtaposes Adamsberg, her 'cloud shovelling' protagonist with a 'positivist' second in command, Commandant Adrien Danglard.

Adamsberg has an:

unstructured mind [which] was like an unreadable map, a magma in which nothing clear emerged to be identified as an idea. Everything always seemed to be linked to everything else, in a network of little pathways where sounds, smells, flashes of light, memories, images, echoes and grains of dust mingled together.²⁵

On another occasion he is described as spending:

many an hour dreaming away, peacefully waiting for an idea to rise to the surface of his mind [...] he found it quite sufficient to daydream and then to sort out his catch, like a fisherman [...] Adamsberg's thoughts contained plenty of seaweed and sand, and he didn't always know how to avoid getting caught in the mess.²⁶

²⁵ Fred Vargas, *This Night's Foul Work*, (London: Vintage, 2009) pp. 91,92

²⁶ Fred Vargas, *Seeking Whom He May Devour*, (London: Vintage, 2008) p.92

Compare this to his second in command, Adrian Danglard described as:

a man of phenomenal erudition, controlling a complex network of infinite and encyclopaedic knowledge which, in Adamsberg's opinion, had ended up by taking over his entire being, replacing each of his organs one by one, so that you wondered how Danglard managed to move around like an ordinary mortal.²⁷

Discussing what he calls 'the odd couple', Platten describes Danglard as: 'a bibliophile who, in the tradition of the eighteenth-century *encyclopediste*, has an almost unflinching faith in the capacity of humankind to arrive at a complete understanding of the world through the application of science.'²⁸ However, Danglard, like Conan Doyle's Dr Watson, also a man of science, is an inveterate romantic who admires, and possibly loves in an honourable way, Camille, Adamsberg's estranged lover. He is also the doting single parent of five children, one of whom is the child of his absent wife's lover. Danglard acts as an effective rational foil to Adamsberg's more outlandish 'cloud shovelling', and remains professionally effective despite a dependency on daily quantities of white wine. It was: 'that watershed between reason and instinct, that Adamsberg and his deputy so diametrically differed, and had done for years.'²⁹

Conversely, Montalbano's second in command, Mimi Augello, also has a weakness – not wine but women; he is an inveterate womaniser, despite his recent marriage and the birth of his son. 'In matters of women, Mimi was easy to please and belonged to that line of male thinking according to which every neglected woman is

²⁷ Fred Vargas, *An Uncertain Place*, (London: Harvill Secker, 2011) p.20

²⁸ David Platten, *The Pleasures of Crime* (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2011) p.229

²⁹ Fred Vargas, *Wash this Blood Clean from My Hand* (London: Vintage 2008) p.3

lost to her mate.’³⁰ This trait, on one occasion, has the potential to destroy his career and his friendship with Montalbano:

Mimi had been disloyal to him; there could no longer be any doubt about this. [...] the disloyalty had begun the moment Mimi realised that Dolores wanted something from him, not as a lover but as a police officer. Although his vanity as a lady-killer must have taken quite a blow, he hadn’t been able or willing to break up with Dolores. [...] Not only had Mimi told him nothing about the predicament he was in; but, faced with a choice between him [Montalbano] and Dolores, he had chosen Dolores. [...] At last the inspector was able to say it. Mimi was a traitor.³¹

This situation is resolved in true Sicilian fashion – ‘I know but he doesn’t know I know’ - with Augello being totally unaware of being manipulated, both by his criminal lover and his boss. As a foil to Montalbano, the character of Mimi Augello is somewhat stereotypical and shallow. Camilleri counterbalances the more intelligent and intuitive investigative style of Montalbano with the more logical, structured approach of his subordinate, Fazio, a totally reliable and indefatigable details man and loyal supporter of his boss against all criticism. The recent airing on the BBC4 TV channel of the series, ‘The Young Montalbano’, the back story to the mature detective of Camilleri’s novels, features Fazio’s father who worked with the then, young, recently appointed, Inspector Mantalbano in his new role as commissare in Vigata. The arrival of Mimi Augello, and Montalbano’s initial meeting with Livia Burlendo who is to become his long term partner, is also featured in this series.

The character of the ‘Talian’ speaking telephone operator at Vigata’s police headquarters, Agatino Catarella – strikes an incongruous, albeit humorous note. Described as ‘frankly hopeless. Slow to think and slow to act’,³² Catarella has gained his position through influence. He is a caricature of American ‘slapstick’ movies –

³⁰ Andrea Camilleri, *Excursion to Tindari* (London: Picador, 2006) p.47

³¹ Andrea Camilleri, *The Potter’s Field* (London: Picador, 2012) pp.204-205

³² Andrea Camilleri, *The Terracotta Dog* (London: Picador, 2004) p.23

Charlie Chaplin, Abbott and Costello - possibly reflecting Camilleri's professional involvement in media. His one saving grace is his competence with computers. This, his loyalty and his willingness to be helpful, ensures respect from his colleagues, despite his lack of skill in other ways.

Camilleri introduces three women into Montalbano's life but unlike the female characters in a Vargas novel, Montalbano has no female colleagues. These women are classic stereotypes; the mother figure, his housekeeper, Adelina; his long term 'girlfriend', Livia Burlendo, fulfilling the role of wife, albeit, usually an absent one, and the beautiful and sexually liberated Scandinavian, Ingrid Sjostrom, the aspiring 'mistress' who, from time to time, becomes involved in the resolution of murder enquiries. Ingrid has become a loyal and close friend and her rather clichéd 'loveless marriage' and absent husband is a convenient plot device for her involvement in Montalbano's more unorthodox methods of investigation. Her skill behind the wheel of fast cars, together with her relaxed sexual mores, adds a touch of male fantasy to the novels in which she appears. The tension between Adelina and Livia is stereotypically that of mother and daughter-in-law. The possibility of marriage with Livia and the adoption of the orphan, Francois (*The Snack Thief*, 1996) offered the potential, as yet unfulfilled, for both plot and character development.

Other key characters include Galluzzo who generally has a non-speaking part in each unfolding drama, providing the essential backup 'muscle' when required to apprehend the criminal. More interestingly is the pathologist, Dr Pasquano, an experienced, mature professional who refuses to be rushed to judgement by the ever impatient Montalbano and who refuses to allow the small matter of murder to interrupt his games of bridge at his club. There is also a combative relationship with

the pathology laboratory manager, Jacomuzzi who is suspected of regularly leaking information to TeleVigata, the state controlled television channel.

Montalbano himself is not averse to using the media in the course of his investigations in order to flush out the guilty. He has a well-established relationship with Nicolo Zito, described as ‘an intelligent person and a good journalist’³³ who is a newsman for the Free Channel TV station. As an author, Camilleri uses his own professional background in television to make political points through the relationship of his principle character, Montalbano, with that medium. As a form of mass communication, Camilleri is aware of its power to influence opinion. He is writing at a time when Italy’s state-run television channels are controlled by the disgraced politician, Silvio Berlusconi. Unsurprisingly, the fictional state-run television channel in his novels, TeleVigata, is depicted as run by incompetent, certainly prejudiced, possibly corrupt journalists that act as a mouthpiece for its political masters. In an incident involving the discovery of the remains of two bodies in a hitherto hidden cave, TeleVigata announces the dramatic find as: ‘two people who had died for love’. Meanwhile, the questions posed by the real story behind the bodies in the cave was being told by the Free Channel with information from Montalbano:

Finally, he came to the news of the two bodies found in the cave, but he approached it from a peculiar perspective, indirectly challenging the angle that Prestia [journalist] and TeleVigata had taken on the story. Somebody, he said, once asserted that religion is the opium of the people; today, instead, one would have to say that the real opium is television. [...] why had certain people presented this case as a story of two lovers thwarted in their love? [...] The truth, claimed the newsman, is that they want to turn a probable crime into a certain suicide, a romantic suicide. [and] puff up a story like this to drug the people, to distract their attention from the serious problems and divert

³³ Andrea Camilleri, *Excursion to Tindari* (London: Picador, 2006) p.40

them with a Romeo and Juliet story, one scripted, however, by a soap-opera writer.³⁴

The underlying, authorial voice is clear, that state television, controlled by corrupt politicians was, at best, trivialising, at worst deliberately misinterpreting, important news stories, and so avoiding uncomfortable truths, particularly if those truths involved the Mafia. This incident also highlights the almost clandestine way in which Montalbano works; necessary tactics in order to sidestep suffocating bureaucracy and possible corruption.

The regional cuisine is a key signifier of Sicilian culture and in the character of Montalbano, Camilleri has created a gourmet who takes his food very seriously: ‘a representative of Sicilian identity in action.’³⁵ Adelina, his devoted housekeeper, leaves delicious regional dishes in the fridge for him on his return from work, or he eats out at his favourite restaurants, the Trattoria San Calogero, and after its closure, the Trattoria da Enzo. On Montalbano’s love of food, Camilleri comments:

I don’t think of him as greedy. [...] It’s the same in the books of Simenon where Maigret is a man who loves good food. I think it is a sort of unconscious revenge of vitality, an affirmation of being alive in the face of continuous death. Maybe, eating subconsciously expresses the pleasure of feeling alive. A life-force.³⁶

The concept of food as an un-corruptible life-force is very persuasive and in Camilleri’s novels, food is treated with respect, even reverence. To a discerning gastronome like Montalbano, the act of eating is a ritual requiring complete concentration. He refuses to carry on a conversation while eating and chides Mimi Augello on his apparently inadvertent use of Parmesan cheese. Montalbano is a willing prisoner working in Vigata and actively resisting any development in his professional or personal life which would involve relocation to mainland Italy. It is perhaps a comment on Camilleri’s familiarity with what is essentially

³⁴ Andrea Camilleri, *The Terracotta Dog* (London: Picador, 2004) p.151

³⁵ Pezzotti, Barbara, *The Importance of Place in Contemporary Italian Crime Fiction: A Bloody Journey* (Plymouth: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2012) p.126

³⁶ Mark Lawson, *Andrea Camilleri: a life in writing*, The Guardian (Friday, 6 July 2012), accessed 10.05.2013.

his home town that is reflected in his protagonist who is gloriously human, from his love of good food, his 'weather vane' temper, his 'on, off' relationship with partner, Livia and his elegant house overlooking the sea. He is highly literate, reading the Spanish writer, Montalban and Camilleri's literary hero, Leonardo Sciascia. His commitment to justice, his war against corruption and social injustice and his hatred of bureaucracy are without question.

Food does not feature in the crime novels of Fred Vargas. Here protagonist, Adamsberg rarely eats anything significant, either to him or to the plot. Unlike Camilleri's Montalbano, we know little of Adamsberg's daily living arrangements. He, and the rest of his team are described by one of its members, Lieutenant Violette Renancourt, speaking to the new recruit, Veyrenc:

Adamsberg and his inaccessible wanderings, Danglard the walking encyclopaedia [...] Noel who's a loner and likes being as crude and narrow-minded as he can get away with. Lamarre is so shy he never looks you in the face. Kernorkian's afraid of the dark and germs. Voisenet's a heavyweight, who goes back to his zoology as soon as your back is turned. Justin's a perfectionist, meticulous to the point of paralysis. [...] Froissy is always unhappy about something or other [...] Estalere [...] is a worshipper [of Adamsberg]. Mercadet's a genius with figures. Mordent's inclined to take a tragic view and has hundreds of books on stories and legends.³⁷

Violette herself plays a key role in two of the novels, rescuing Adamsberg in a particularly bizarre manner from arrest on a false murder charge (*Wash This Blood Clean from My Hand*, 2008) and almost losing her life in pursuit of the murderer (*This Night's Foul Work*, 2009). She is described by Adamsberg as:

a rare bird. [...] this statuesque woman of thirty-five, 1.7m tall, and weighing 110 kilos who was as intelligent as she was strong, and capable [...] of channelling her energy in any direction [...] displaying a striking force of terrifying proportions [the squad's] all-purpose 4x4 war-machine.³⁸

³⁷ Fred Vargas, *Wash This Blood Clean From My Hands* (London: Vintage, 2009) p.88

³⁸ Fred Vargas, *Wash This Blood Clean From My Hands* (London: Vintage, 2009) p.10

Speaking to the pathologist, Ariane Legarde, he describes Retancourt as: ‘a divinity with sixteen arms and twelve heads. [...] she uses them as she pleases. Speed, mass, invisibility, serial analysis, transport, physical transformation depending on what’s called for.’³⁹ There are echoes of the magic realism of Angela Carter’s *Fevvers (Nights At The Circus)* in the character of Violette Retancourt. And certainly, the women in Vargas’s novels all behave outside the scope of mere mortals; the ‘godmother’ and world famous oceanographer, Clementine Courbet, mother of Camille, Adamsberg’s estranged lover and mother of his son, Clementine’s computer code cracking friend Josette who shares the same technical skills with Adamsberg’s anorexic colleague, Frossey. Vargas avoids the usual stereotypical female roles; her women characters have depth, talent and strong individuality and choose to live without permanent partners. Poole suggests that Vargas is aligning her characters in a deliberate approach to relationships. She comments:

Fred Vargas incorporates into these novels several other social issues – one parent families, racism, exclusion and war-crimes all feature – and in particular the evocation of a specific social climate, a central feature of which is the paucity of successful human relations when these are not based exclusively on friendship. [...] Friendship sustains, and saves lives. But *couples* [sic] break up so consistently that no happy nor even reasonably contented ‘pairs’ can be found in any of these seven novels’⁴⁰

Although outside the scope of Poole’s analysis, Vargas’s latest novel illustrates her observations in almost every particular. In *The Ghost Riders of Ordebec* (2013), Vargas features marital murder, a highly dysfunctional family involving sexual and physical abuse, and ultimately patricide, and the covert racism in a murder investigation of a mafia style killing.

Violence in childhood, not within families but within competing peer groups, forms the back story to the character of Veyrenc, the new recruit who joins the squad in *This*

³⁹ Fred Vargas, *This Night’s Foul work* (London: Vintage, 2009) p.126

⁴⁰ Sara Poole, ‘Rompols not of the Bailey: Fred Vargas and the polar as mini-*proto-mythe1*’, *French Cultural Studies*, 12:34 (2001), pp. 95-108 , (p.98).

Night's Foul Work (2009). He has a particular habit of speaking in Alexandrine verse, a habit attributed to reading the poetry of Jean Racine while growing up with his grandmother. He has a distinctive ginger streak in his hair, the result of a traumatic incident also involving Adamsberg, during their shared childhood growing up in the Pyrenees.

Vargas's plots have been described as outlandish and certainly the possible involvement of such ingredients as werewolves, the living dead and ghostly riders would seem to justify such a claim. But, as Geherin points out:

What makes her novels work is that her characters and their actions are plausible in the fictional universe she has created. She fashions a world where the rule of logic is stretched, then populates it with eccentric characters that come across as endearingly human. Her aim is not simply to produce comedy but to create a world with a fresh perspective. As a result, readers who enter that world are inclined to suspend their disbelief more readily than they might do when reading a starkly realistic police procedural.⁴¹

It is through her 'cloud shovelling' protagonist, Jean-Batiste Adamsberg, cleverly juxtaposed with his deputy, the 'positivist' Danglerd and their respective supporters that Vargas creates her credible alternative universe. 'And it was precisely that watershed between reason and instinct, that Adamsberg and his deputy so diametrically differed'.⁴² It would be easy to dismiss this division as analogous to society's dreamers and pragmatists, and perhaps, metaphorically speaking, there is some truth in this. But Vargas's characters are more subtle than that rather arbitrary division would suggest. It is the way in which she invests both her characters and her plots with an alternative approach to the business of crime detection.

⁴¹ David Geherin, *The Dragon Tattoo and Its Long Tail*, (North Carolina and London: McFarland & Co. Inc. 2012) p.110

⁴² Fred Vargas, *Wash This Blood Clean From my Hand* (London: Vintage, 2008) p.3

Chapter Three

A Sense of Place

The physical environment, the places in which crime fiction is sited is a key component of plot and characterisation; it takes on a persona, it becomes part of the plot. Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles* could not be sited anywhere but in the wild and unpredictable environment of Dartmoor. Likewise, Sherlock Holmes is synonymous with Baker Street in the heart of London, Agatha Christie's Jane Marple with St. Mary Mead, a village in the heart of the English countryside and John Rebus with Edinburgh, Scotland's capitol city, with its rival Glasgow offering a crime novelist many possibilities based on urban rivalries. Andrea Camilleri's novels featuring Salvo Montalbano are synonymous with Sicily now, literally, on the crime fiction map with websites promoting the island as a tourist destination and offering Montalbano literary tours where:

We'll follow the steps of **Salvo Montalbano** and the other members of Vigata's small police force [...] The tour starts in the city centre of **Montelusa** (Agrigento): here we find the *Commissioner's office* (Questura) and Piazza San Francesco, the place where the very idea of Vigata came to Camilleri's mind. We walk along Via Atenea to the Santo Spirito Library where Montalbano finds the book that helps him understand the mystery of the **Terracotta Dog**. Transfer to *Villaseta* (*The Snack Thief*) and continue to **Vigata**, passing by the *Pasture*. Stop at the *Tower of Charles V* (described in Camilleri's first book) and at the pier to admire the sight of Vigata from the sea. Later, we walk in Vigata city centre to Salita Granet and Caffè Vigata with references to various works of Andrea Camilleri that are set there (*The shape of water*, *The scent of the night*, *The terracotta dog*, *The excursion to Tindari*, *The voice of the violin*). [...] Continue to *Marinella* (Montalbano's house) and *Scala dei Turchi*, another place often described in the novels⁴³

The fictionalised Vigata is Porto Empedocle, Camilleri's birthplace, and Montelusa is the province of Agrigento; this authenticity of place, sited in real life, geographically and culturally, gives verisimilitude to the novels' narrative. Pezzotti comments: 'The Sicilian

⁴³ *The Inspector Montalbano Tour, From Montelusa to Vigata*, Sicily TravelNet, www.sicilytourguides.net/Montalbano_tour.htm (accessed 06.10.2013)

author does not set Montalbano's adventures in a sequence of nonplaces but in a town with its streets, cafes, and restaurants, its beaches and seafront, thus describing the life of a typical Sicilian provincial town.'⁴⁴

The use of an island setting in crime fiction is not new; it is the geographical equivalent to the 'locked- room' mystery novels popular in the 1930's. Islands have been used by Agatha Christie (*And Then There Were None*, 1939), PD James (*The Skull Beneath the Skin*, 1982) and more recently, Stieg Larsson (*The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, 2008). However, Camilleri does not invent a fictitious island, he reinvents a real one. His novels are sited in Sicily itself, in his home town of Porto Empedocle, renamed as the fictional Vigata. Situated at the foot of Italy, facing into the Mediterranean Sea and beyond to Northern Africa, Sicily is separated from mainland Italy and so geographically as well as culturally both autonomous and at a cultural crossroads to other Mediterranean civilisations:

At the time of the Muslim domination of Sicily [...] the Arabs built a district, on the outskirts of town, where they lived by themselves. When the Muslims later fled in defeat, the Montelusians moved into their homes and the name of the district was Sicilianized. [...] When they returned, this time as paupers, the Arabs moved back into that part of town, replacing the roof tiles with sheet metal and using partitions of heavy cardboard for walls.⁴⁵

It is against this backdrop of Sicilian history, and an awareness of Italy's disparate past, only relatively recently unified into one nation in the late nineteenth century, that Camilleri writes. The island's landscape, beloved by Montalbano, is described as:

Arid hills like giant tumuli, covered only by a yellow stubble of dry grass and abandoned by the hand of man after sudden failures owing to drought, extreme heat, or more simply to the weariness of a battle lost from the outset, were interrupted here

⁴⁴ Barbara Pezzotti, *The Importance of Place in Contemporary Italian Fiction: A Bloody Journey* (Plymouth: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2012) p.128

⁴⁵ Andrea Camilleri, *The Snack Thief* (London: Picador, 2004) p. 111

and there by a group of rocky peaks rising absurdly out of nothing or perhaps fallen from above, stalactites or stalagmites of the deep open-air cave that is Sicily.⁴⁶

Economic migrants seeking a better life in Europe but prone to exploitation by people traffickers could end up in the ironically named 'Pasture', a rendezvous for prostitutes of all kinds and their clients, organised under the usual commercial arrangements with the 'authorities', i.e the local Mafia, by a pimp called Gege Gullotta. Camilleri's sardonic description of the Pasture makes compelling social commentary:

Most of the meat [prostitutes] came from the former Eastern Bloc countries, now free at last of the communist yoke, which, as everyone knows, had denied all personal, human dignity; now, between the Pasture's bushes and sandy shore, come nightfall, that reconquered dignity shone again in all its magnificence.⁴⁷

Sicily is synonymous with the criminal activities of the Mafia and Camilleri, through the character of Montalbano, explores the influence of both place and that of the old Mafia who:

explained, informed and clarified. Not, of course, aloud or in print, no. But through signs. The old Mafia were experts in semiology, the science of signs used to communicate. Murdered with a thorny branch of prickly pear placed on the body? We did it because he pricked us one too many time [sic] with his thorns and troubles. Murdered with a stone in his mouth? We did it because he talked too much. Murdered with both hands cut off? We did it because we caught him with his hands in the biscuit tin. [...] And so merrily on in this fashion.⁴⁸

The murdered victim in this case had been dismembered, cut up into thirty pieces: 'Like Judas's thirty pieces of silver.'⁴⁹ This symbolic 'justice' indicated that the victim was a member of the Mafia who had betrayed the organisation. Commenting on the supposedly Mafia inspired murder of a prominent politician, the television journalist, Nicolo Zito, is quoted as: 'explaining how in Sicily, and in the province of Montelusa in particular, *mutatis*

⁴⁶ Andrea Camilleri, *The Terracotta Dog* (London: Picador, 2004) p.81

⁴⁷ Andrea Camilleri, *The Shape of Water* (London: Picador, 1994) p.7

⁴⁸ Andrea Camilleri, *The Potter's Field*, (London: Picador, 2012) p.111 & p.112

⁴⁹ Andrea Camilleri, *the Potter's Field*, (London: Picador, 2011) p.110

mutandis – or *zara zabara* to say it in Sicilian – things never budged.’ Referencing Lampedusa’s *The Leopard*: ‘He quoted [...] the prince of Salina’s famous statement about changing everything in order to change nothing.’⁵⁰

Camilleri is regarded as both a national and a regional writer. As Pezzotti points out, his novels reflect: ‘Sicilian history, culture and everyday life while [...] recording transformations due to a network of influences between Sicily and the mainland. Camilleri’s Sicily [...] is a powerful image of the island as a site of “double identity”’.⁵¹ This double identity of an island state detached from mainland Italy with its own distinct character and culture is being challenged by increasingly sophisticated modes of communication making Sicily more homogeneous with the rest of Italy. Likewise, modern technology is influencing the ways in which organised crime, including the Mafia, operates. However, according to a recent media report which discusses one recent case of theft, retrieval of property, and action taken against those responsible, the journalist concludes that: ‘The Cosa Nostra [local Mafia] is still the only way of life for many ordinary Sicilians despite repeated efforts by the authorities.’⁵²

Unlike Camilleri, Fred Vargas sites her crime fiction in a number of disparate locations, both in France and abroad, including Canada, Serbia and the UK. Her day job as a medieval historian and archaeologist plays into the plots, offering a universal linkage through geophysical features; a disturbance of the earth around a grave, misplaced pebbles or little white stones, a living lake over a dead lake and ‘a strange creature left over from a bygone era.’⁵³ Her work on the epidemiology of the bubonic plague inspired her novel, *Have Mercy on Us All*, (2009). The character of the medieval historian, Marc Vandoosler, one of *The*

⁵⁰ Andrea Camilleri, *The Shape of Water* (London: Picador. 2003) p.107

⁵¹ Barbara Pezzotti, *The Importance of Place in Contemporary Italian Crime Fiction: A Bloody Journey* (Plymouth: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2012) p.137

⁵² James Bone, *From Our Correspondent*, The Times (Monday,18 November, 2013) p.39

⁵³ Fred Vargas, *Wash This Blood Clean From My Hand* (London: Vintage, 2008) p.132

Three Evangelists, (2006) kicks a pebble along a Parisian street; another Evangelist, Mathias Delamarre, ‘the fair-haired giant’ who is ‘hostile to anything that had occurred since 10,000BC or so’⁵⁴, is an archaeologist and called upon by Adamsberg to resolve criminal activity involving disturbances at a Parisian cemetery. In this instance, Adamsberg’s ‘New Recruit’, Veyrenc, responds to the situation in his idiosyncratic, poetical syntax:

‘O Earth, when I query, why distain to reply? / And of this night’s foul work all knowledge now deny? / Has the key been withheld, or are my ears too weak / To hear of thy suff’ring, a sin too great to speak? [...] [Adamsberg] returned to the graveside, with Danglard and Justin at his sides. ‘If there’s a sound to be heard, and we’re not hearing it, it means we’re deaf. The earth isn’t dumb, but we’re not skilled enough. We need a specialist, an interpreter, someone who can hear the sound of the earth. ‘What do you call one of those?’ asked Justin anxiously. ‘An archaeologist’, said Adamsberg [...] ‘Or a shit-stirrer if you prefer.’⁵⁵

Although Adamsberg is commenting specifically on the case in hand, a disturbed grave, his sentiments could be interpreted as a more universal comment reflecting Ghia hypothesis of the earth’s self-regulating properties, which, according to this philosophy, is under threat from global warming. As an archaeologist, Vargas is likely to have some sympathy with this view. In one instance, the development of the population of Bearn, Adamsberg’s home town in the Pyrenees, is attributed to a “Stream of lava [which] came down the mountainside and when it hardened, it turned into us.”⁵⁶ Platten comments: ‘As a trained archaeologist, she accepts the omnipresence of the material world and sees human history as compacted in the seams beneath the earth’s crust.[...] For the archaeologist, the earth releases knowledge.’⁵⁷ The natural phenomena of pink lakes which occur in various parts of the world, including Canada, is used as a metaphor for the living dead, a

⁵⁴ Fred Vargas, *The Three Evangelists* (London: Vintage, 2006) p.15

⁵⁵ Fred Vargas, *This Night’s Foul Work* (London: Vintage, 2009) pp. 112, 113

⁵⁶ Fred Vargas, *This Night’s Foul Work* (London: Vintage, 2009) p. 45

⁵⁷ David Platten, *The Pleasures of Crime: Reading Modern French Crime Fiction* (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2011)

characteristic attributed to the perpetrator of a spate of murders which Adamsberg believes could only have been committed by a dead man:

From fifteen metres down [...] the mud on the lake bed which enclosed its 10,600 years of history [...] was perpetually stagnant, airless and dead, a fossil. Worst of all, a salt water fish still lived down there, from the era when the sea had covered it.⁵⁸

The earth, properly interpreted, gives up its secrets, in other words, tells stories. This idea is not new: Australia's Aboriginal art uses the land and other natural features as a canvas for a narrative art. Likewise, prehistoric cave paintings most famously at Lascaux in the Dordogne region of France depicts the daily life of cave dwellers. Vargas's empathy with her environment and her use of myth, legend and folklore as an alternative explanation to the more mechanistic approaches in contemporary crime fiction, a hallmark of her novels, is also echoed by the divisions in her protagonist, Adamsberg's team, between the 'cloud shovellers' and the 'positivists'.

From Parisian cemeteries in *This Night's Foul Work* (2009) the action of the novel shifts to the Normandy village of Haroncourt where Adamsberg and his team encounter local characters, Anglebert, Robert, Oswald and someone called 'the punctuator' who, literally, punctuates conversation with clichés like, 'Stands to reason' and 'It takes all sorts':

He [Adamsberg] had been told that Normans never ask a direct question, a myth, as he had thought, but in front of him he had a clear example [...] If you ask too many questions you reveal yourself, and if you reveal yourself, you're less of a man.'⁵⁹

Normandy is again the location of Vargas's latest novel, set in the small Norman town of Ordebec, which is experiencing ghostly visitations from the legendary Furious Army of Lord Hellaquin, whose visitations, galloping along the Chemin de Bonneval, a local bridle path, predict the death of individuals supposedly guilty of unspecified crimes. On

⁵⁸ Fred Vargas, *Wash This Blood Clean from My Hands* (London: Vintage, 2008) p.131

⁵⁹ Fred Vargas, *Wash This Blood Clean from My Hands* (London: Vintage, 2008) p.46

encountering local resident, Valentine Vendemot, who has travelled to Paris to consult him, Adamsberg comments:

Ah, Normandy [...] that could explain her reluctance to talk. He had met several Normans in his time, taciturn people who had taken days to loosen up. As if saying a few words were the equivalent of giving away gold sovereigns, without feeling it was deserved.⁶⁰

Vargas has commented: 'I like to use these people from the villages. Theirs are the voices that never move and never change [...] I know the Normans very well because my mother's family is from there. But for me they represent all village people, and by extension some sense of elemental humanity.'⁶¹ There are distinct echoes of Agatha Christie's Miss Marple and her village of St. Mary Mead deep in the English countryside. In her analysis of a murder, Miss Marple is always reminded of a local incident at St. Mary Mead which, no matter how obtusely, has some relevance to the case in hand.

Graveyards, together with tombs also feature in *An Uncertain Place* (2011) where the action shifts from Paris and London, and countries bordering the River Danube, notably Romania with its links, via Transylvania, to the Dracula legend, and Serbia where the sectarian hatred exposed in recent international conflict, is echoed, small scale between ancient families. In London for an international police conference, Adamsberg, Danglard and Estalere become involved in an investigation triggered by the gruesome find of pairs of feet, still in their shoes, outside the gates of Highgate Cemetery which, according to Danglard's encyclopaedic knowledge is: 'One of the most baroque cemeteries in the Western world [...]

⁶⁰ Fred Vargas, *The Ghost Riders of Ordebec* (London: Harville Secker, 2013) p.12

⁶¹ Nicholas Wroe, 'Grave Concerns', *The Guardian*, (Saturday, 16 February, 2008), <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/feb/16.featuresreviews.guardianreview14> [accessed 03.05.2013] p.2

an artistic and macabre fantasy [...] full of Gothic tombs, burial vaults, Egyptian sculptures, excommunicated people and murderers [...] a place where madness lurks.’⁶²

Vargas uses Danglard rather like a one man Greek chorus, informing the reader of the background to current action. He later goes on to expand on the history of Highgate Cemetery: ‘We’re talking about historical Highgate, 160,800 bodies, 51,800 tombs [...] the nocturnal hunts in the 1970’s and even about Lizzie Siddal.’⁶³ Here, Vargas is referencing further Gothic markers. The nocturnal hunts in the 1970’s refer to the growth of an urban myth based on the vampire legend which was perpetrated by occultists and taken up by the media, resulting in a mass vampire hunt on Friday, 13 March 1970.⁶⁴ Elizabeth Siddal who is buried in Highgate Cemetery, was the model, lover and later, wife of the nineteenth century Pre-Raphaelite painter, Dante Gabriel Rossetti. On her death, Rossetti, in grief, buried his poems with her, a decision he later regretted. According to legend, on exhuming the grave to recover them, it is reported that Elizabeth was unchanged and that her celebrated auburn hair had grown while in the grave. Elizabeth had become a vampire, one of the living dead. On their journey back to Paris from London, Adamsberg, Danglard and Estalere discuss the story of Lizzie Siddal. Dangard is, of course, well informed on the subject. Referencing Bram Stoker and his novel, *Dracula* (1897), he said:

He made one of his heroines, Lucy, go wandering there, and he made the place famous [...] it was Stoker who persuaded Rossetti to look once more on his dead wife [...] the miraculous conservation of Lizzie Siddal caused a big scandal in England and beyond. People immediately started connecting it with the Master – the Highgate Vampire – and saying he had taken possession of the cemetery.⁶⁵

Later in the novel, Adamsberg is destined to spend the night, involuntarily entombed in the company of potential vampires, deep in the heart of southern Europe, in the village of

⁶² Fred Vargas, *An Uncertain Place* (London: Harville Secker, 2011) p. 21

⁶³ Fred Vargas, *An Uncertain Place* (London: Harville Secker, 2011) p.2

⁶⁴ For further details, see Bill Ellis, ‘The Highgate Cemetery Vampire Hunt: the Anglo-American Connection in Satanic Cult Lore’, *Folklore* 104 (1993) pp.13-39.

⁶⁵ Fred Vargas, *An Uncertain Place* (London: Harvill Secker, 2011) pp. 41, 42

Kiseljevo, on the borders of Romania and Serbia: ‘with its multi-coloured walls and close-packed roofs, and its white church tower, nestling in the hills with the Danube sparkling lower down’.⁶⁶ So, another village, and this time with serendipitous links with Danglard and peopled by characters with a past and a story to tell like Slavko, the local ‘ancient’, and Danica, the landlady of the local inn.

Adamsberg’s own childhood growing up in the Pyrenean village of Caldherz is also referenced. Entering the local inn: ‘Conversation stopped as they went inside and suspicious faces turned towards them, reminding Adamsberg of the Norman drinkers at Haroncourt or the Bearnais in the bistro at Caldherz.’⁶⁷ Maybe Miss Marple’s St. Mary Mead is not so far removed from Vargas’s southern European rural villages. In acknowledging the influence of Christie, she has said:

I see links between her and the mythology I read when I was young, and I think she was conscious of it, too. Like her, I want to tell a story that identifies and deals with the dangers we face, It’s no longer wild animals, but the fears are just as real, so I make a journey with the reader, confront the horror of humanity, and deliver them safely home.⁶⁸

In a sense, Camilleri’s small town Vigata, enclosed in an island setting, and Vargas’s rural south European villages are broadly analogous: they share the same characteristics of enclosed communities, a long, usually proud history, an established and respected social structure, a suspicion of strangers; gossip, an active ‘grapevine’. Jealousies and hypocrisies abound and there are many guilty secrets; in all, a mirror of humanity.

⁶⁶ Fred Vargas, *An Uncertain Place* (London: Harville Secker, 2011) p. 249

⁶⁷ Fred Vargas, *An Uncertain Place* (London: Harville Secker, 2011) p. 249

⁶⁸ Nicholas Wroe, ‘Grave Concerns’, *The Guardian*, (Saturday, 16 February, 2008)

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/feb/16.featuresreviews.guar...> [accessed 03.05.2013] pgs.4 & 5

Chapter Four

Myth, Legend, Fairy tales

The importance of storytelling through myths, legends and fairy tales in the dissemination of social and cultural values is well established. The ‘once upon a time’ of fairy stories, even the grimmest of Grimm’s, endure the test of time and changing taste. These tales carry strong messages about moral and religious codes of behaviour, honour, courage, anticipated dangers, the triumphing of good over evil, legitimate goals, the ‘happy ever after’ scenario. From the oral tradition of Beowulf to today’s soap operas - the post-modern fairy tales - storytelling is a powerful means of communicating effective messages to a given audience. Politicians talk of being ‘on message’, election campaigns are all about ‘getting the narrative right’. Conveying messaging through storytelling is as old as time. It is therefore unsurprising that novelists, particularly writers of crime fiction which is all about understanding, detecting and responding to challenges to normative behaviour, murder being the biggest challenge, should use the mediums of myth, legend and folklore to tell their tales.

Vargas’s crime fiction which utilises gothic tales, fairy tales, legends and myths all come with their own special environments. Dark forests are a necessary component of many fairy tales from *Hansel and Gretel* to *Little Red Riding Hood*. Graveyards are the scene of many gothic tales and one of Dracula’s favourite haunts. Deserted mansions in lonely locations are reminiscent of Bluebeard’s castle with its grisly contents behind the locked door. Vargas has stressed the importance of myth and storytelling in her novels, and, as a Sicilian, Camilleri is inherently a storyteller as Pezzotti points out: ‘Related to Sicilian theatricality is another distinctive anthropological trait, the habit of communicating through stories, parables, and proverbs and the ability to detect a hidden message in apparently casual

conversations.’⁶⁹ This being Sicily, the Mafia has influenced the ways in which messages are communicated, particularly by the use of metaphor and signs:

The old Mafia were experts in semiology, the science of signs used to communicate. [...] Murdered with his shoes on his chest? We did it because he wanted to run away. Murdered with both eyes gouged out? We did it because he refused to see the obvious. Murdered with all his teeth pulled out? We did it because he ate too much.⁷⁰

Similar signs emerge during the course of his enquiries into the case of the two bodies found in a hidden cave (*The Terracotta Dog*, 2004), Montalbano discusses the meaning or ritualistic signs and symbols with an old priest, Alcide Maraventano, Discussing the meaning of a stone left in the mouth of a murdered man, Montalbano responds that:

the dead man talked too much, said things he wasn't supposed to say, or was an informer.' The priest replies: 'Exactly. You, therefore, understood the explanation because you possessed the code of that language, which in this case was a metaphorical language. But if you'd been ignorant of the code, what would you have understood? Nothing.'⁷¹

In another instance, where the control of property is at issue:

a lawyer named Sidoti and the Marchese Lauricella, did not dare, though both short of cash, to divide up and sell the land, for fear of gravely offending Don Balduccio, [Mafia boss] who had indeed summoned them and, through metaphors, proverbs and anecdotes, had given them to understand that the presence of outsiders would be an unbearable nuisance to him.⁷²

The religious basis of some legends and the multicultural nature of Sicily's current population are used by Camilleri in his plot to explain the discovery of the bodies of two naked young people, clasped in each other's arms, found in a cave many years after their deaths. The old Christian legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus is invoked, and the Muslim story in the Koran, 'the eighteenth sura, the one about the cave'⁷³. Referring to

⁶⁹ Barbara Pezzotti, *The Importance of Place in Contemporary Italian Crime Fiction: A Bloody Journey* (Plymouth: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2012) p. 132

⁷⁰ Andrea Camilleri, *The Potter's Field* (London: Picador, 2012) pgs. 111 & 112

⁷¹ Andrea Camilleri, *The Terracotta Dog* (London: Picador, 2004)p. 199

⁷² Andrea Camilleri, *Excursion to Tindari* (London: Picador, 2006) p. 112

⁷³ Andrea Camilleri, *The Terracotta Dog* (London: Picador, 2004) p. 269

artefacts left in the cave, Montalbano discovers that: ‘The dog’s name is Kytmyr [...] but he’s also called Quotmour. Among the Persians, you know, that dog, the one in the cave, became the guardian of written communication.’⁷⁴

Endemic Catholicism in the form of the legends of the saints, when invoked in Camilleri’s novels, is to emphasise a positive feeling, usually associated with food. On one occasion, having enjoyed a meal of stuffed bass in saffron sauce, he asks his fellow diner, Pintacuda: ‘Do you think this kind of miracle could ever happen again?’ Pintacuda responds: ‘It’ll happen again, don’t worry, just like the miracle of the blood of San Gennaro. [...] I’ve been coming here for years, and never, I repeat, never has Tanino’s cooking let me down.’⁷⁵ In the *Notes* at the end of the novel compiled by the translator, Stephen Santarelli, the legend is explained:

San Gennaro (St Januarius) is the patron saint of Naples [...] his celebrity lies in the alleged miracle of the ‘liquefaction’ of his blood, which is kept in a small glass vial in the eponymous cathedral of that city. The miracle is believed to occur some eighteen times a year, but the main event is on 19 September, the saint’s feast day [...] Failure to liquefy is believed to be a dire portent.⁷⁶

A ritual invoking the remembrance of the dead is brought to mind

The memory of another feast day, All Saints Day, what is now Sicilian Halloween on the 2 November is invoked: ‘Every time he [Montalbano] was about to open the oven or fridge’ anticipating the delicious dishes prepared by his housekeeper, Adelina. On All Saints Day, the young Montalbano:

⁷⁴ Andrea Camilleri, *The Terracotta Dog* (London: Picador, 2004) p.271

⁷⁵ Andrea Camilleri, *The Snack Thief* (London: Picador, 2005) p.273

⁷⁶ Andrea Camilleri, *The Snack Thief* (London: Picador, 2005)p. 298

would look for the wicker basket in which the dead had left their gifts during the night [...] The only ones who did not forget their dead was the Mafiosi; but the presents they sent in remembrance were certainly not little tin trains or marzipan fruits.⁷⁷

Although mythologised by films such as *The Godfather*, the influence of the Mafia or Cosa Nostra as the Sicilian Mafia is known, is still ever-present, an endemic part of the cultural landscape.

Unlike Camilleri and many of her contemporaries in France, Vargas does not overtly reference political issues through her crime fiction, despite her support for one time far left Italian guerrilla, Cesare Battisti. now, ironically, a thriller writer, Instead, she distances her fiction from reality by the use of myths, legends and fairy tales, used as metaphors which challenge the reader to make sense of the world through this alternative prism, while also allowing her to comment on the universal theme of the human condition. Geherin comments:

Her decision to exclude contemporary issues is part of an overall strategy that de-emphasizes [sic] realism by avoiding too much in the way of specific details. While her books are often set in actual neighborhoods [sic] in Paris, the Paris she describes is not quite like the one a visitor might encounter.⁷⁸

Also unlike Camilleri's protagonist, there is no Adamsberg literary tour. Instead, the 'tour' is inside the reader's head, around their psyche and childhood memories. The wolf, or is it a werewolf, in *Seeking Whom He May Devour* (2008) evokes memories of *Little Red Riding Hood*, a story also featured in the magic realism novels of Angela Carter, notably in the short story, *The Company of Wolves* (*The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*, 1979). The search for an elixir of life, a universal theme, is the motivation to murder in *This Night's Foul Work* (2009). The Dracula myth, key to plot development in *An Uncertain Place* (2011) has echoes in an earlier novel, *Wash This Blood Clean From My Hand* (2008) in which the perpetrator

⁷⁷ Andrea Camilleri, *The Terracotta Dog* (London: Picador, 2004) p.44

⁷⁸ David Geherin, *The Dragon Tattoo and Its Long Tale* (North Carolina & London: McFarland & Company, 2012) p.112

initially appears to be ‘the living dead’. A ghostly army of necromancers predicting death, based on medieval legend, is featured in *The Ghost Riders of Ordebec* (2013).

Vargas injects verisimilitude into her plots by the inclusion of authentic or quasi-authentic references. Commenting on the natives of Normandy, Adamsberg thinks: ‘the ‘Norman heads [...] looked like his friend Bertin, a descendent of the god Thor, wielder of thunderbolts, who kept a café on a square in Paris’⁷⁹ The comic juxtaposition of a mythical god and a Parisian café owner is typical of Vargas’s subversive humour which offsets the potential threat of violence and bloody death which her novels may contain. Again, the authentic St. Jerome, patron saint of libraries whose stolen bones, a religious relic, was the subject of investigation by Adamsberg and his team, is juxtaposed against a supposed edition of the 1663 *De Sanctis reliquis* containing the cryptic cipher to the elixir of life for which murder has been committed. In this, reference is made to ‘the heart of the eternal branches’⁸⁰ which takes the reader straight back to the first puzzling incident in which Adamsberg encounters the killing and removal of the heart of a stag in a Normandy forest. Another element, ‘the quick of virgins on the dexter side’ links back to two murders and the desecration of graves in a Parisian graveyard. These references to medieval history, either real or fabricated, are the soft storytelling metaphors leading towards the harder truths of twenty first century crime. When the perpetrator is finally apprehended, thanks to the sharp intelligence of Lieutenant Retancourt, Adamsberg’s Amazonian colleague, and Snowball, her loyal cat which, almost supernaturally, tracks 38 kilometres in search of her mistress, Vargas is masterful in her

⁷⁹ Fred Vargas, *This Night’s Foul Work* (London: Vintage, 2009) p.43

⁸⁰ Fred Vargas, *This Night’s Foul Work* (London: Vintage, 2009) p.214

contemporary understanding and depiction of the psychopathic, ‘dissociator’ mind, exposed during the murderer’s interview with Adamsberg.⁸¹

Vargas uses the mythical concept of ‘the undead’ - those who have had an earthly life and still ‘live’ in some supernatural state after death - ghosts, ancestral spirits, Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, all find their way into Vargas’s fiction. In *Wash This Blood Clean From My Hand* (2008), the mythological figure of Neptune, Roman god of the sea, is referenced via his symbolic three pronged trident depicted in a poster which Adamsberg sees and which triggers an instinctive reaction, the stirring of an old memory. He consults Danglard who tells him:

In the picture [...] we see him [Neptune] surrounded by his court and his demons. Here are Neptune’s benign actions, and here is his power to punish mortals, represented by his trident and the evil serpent who drags men under the sea⁸²

This ‘power to punish mortals’ is epitomised in the character of Judge Fulgence, now officially dead, was an austere and unforgiving judge who perpetrated an alleged miscarriage of justice against Adamsberg’s long lost brother, Raphael. Adamsberg is convinced that Judge Fulgence is responsible for a number of unsolved murders, including the one of which his brother was accused. A recent murder case bearing all the hallmarks of the judge’s previous alleged victims, a three pronged, Dracula like trident puncture which the poster of Neptune had triggered in Adamsberg’s mind. This reopened the possibility that the judge was still alive and well and killing again. This proved to be the case when, following the exhumation of the grave, his ‘body’ turned out to be: ‘shining white sand. Harder than cement, as

⁸¹ Fred Vargas, *This Night’s Foul Work* (London: Vintage, 2009) pp. 380 - 391

⁸² Fred Vargas, *Wash This Blood Clean From My Hand* (London: Vintage, 2008) p.19

sharp as glass, fluid and mobile, like Fulgence himself.⁸³ The exposure of this fraudulent burial questions the existence, and in what shape or form, of the murderer. This being Vargas, the reader is encouraged to question the text; is Adamsberg and his team dealing with a flesh and blood man, a ghost, or a vampire?

The literary references to blood, and the recurrence of blood, together with the murderer's weapon of choice, are echoed in the title of the novel:

What hands are here? Ha! They pluck out mine eyes. / Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood / Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather / The Multitudinous seas incarnadine / Making the green one red.⁸⁴

The idea that oceans might turn red with the blood of murdered victims resonates with the pink lake, a natural phenomenon also featured in this novel, with its prehistoric fish, long since thought extinct, like Judge Fulgence, lurking in its depths:

Adamsberg [...] copied as precisely as possible the artist's impression of the damned fish which seemed to swim between heaven and hell. He had intended to spend a long time in the forest, but Pink Lake made him go back. Everywhere he found himself facing the long-dead judge, everywhere he found himself touching the threatening waters of Neptune and the traces of his accursed trident.⁸⁵

The judge's murder weapon, the 'accursed trident', becomes a recurrent motif throughout the novel. Its three prongs, reminiscent of Dracula's deadly bloodsucking habit of leaving puncture marks in the necks of his victims, is echoed by the murderer using his contrived 'trident'. Mixing modern psychology with gothic legend, Vargas introduces matricide. In conversation with the mayor of the judge's birthplace, Adamsberg learns of the matricide: 'to impale his own mother like that [...] when someone takes a garden fork to do

⁸³ Fred Vargas, *Wash This Blood Clean From My Hand* (London: Vintage, 2008) p.302

⁸⁴ William Shakespeare, *The Arden Shakespeare Complete Works* (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2001) p.781

⁸⁵ Fred Vargas, *Wash This Blood Clean From My Hand* (London: Vintage, 2008) p.132

it, I call it impaling [...] to take a garden fork and stick it in your mother's guts.'⁸⁶ Again, echoes of the Dracula myth with the use of 'impale'. The murderer's father symbolically lost his thumb and little finger in an industrial accident and afterwards worked as a gardener: 'Adamsberg looked in fascination at the wrinkled old hand [of the mayor]. Three fingers. The father's mutilated hand, like a [garden] fork or a trident, Three fingers. Three claws.'⁸⁷

The symbolic nature of the Chinese game, Mah Jong with its Hand of Honours, echoing the damaged hand of the Judge's father, its dragons and winds motifs linking them to the names of victims, provide the final clues to an unravelling of unsolved murders. It is also worth noting that the novel was published in France under the title, *Sous les vents de Neptune*, roughly translated as *All the Winds of Neptune*.

Comparing her books to contemporary fairy tales, Vargas has commented: 'They are built on the same structure, around a vital danger, whether it be the Minotaur in the labyrinth, a dragon hidden in the forest or a serial killer lurking in the city.'⁸⁸ The murderer, Judge Fulgence, is a psychopathic serial killer. However, his backstory exposes his psychological state of mind in the context of a family history which, to some extent, explains his actions. As in other instances, Vargas reveals through her plot and characterisation, a deep mistrust of the family as a benign social environment. Another example occurs in her latest novel, *The Ghost Riders of Ordebec* (2013) Here, Vargas features another dysfunctional, possibly criminal Vendermot family which is pivotal to the plot. Daughter Lina is physically voluptuous, turning the heads of the men around her; Hippolyte, who talks backwards, has a deformed hand, symbolically like Judge Fulgence's father, but his is the result of his murdered father's brutality. He is also gifted with 'an impressive head' and keen intelligence. Antonin, the youngest, thinks he is made of clay and so, easily breakable, and Martin, who is described as

⁸⁶ Fred Vargas, *Wash This Blood Clean From My Hand* (London: Vintage, 2008) p.315

⁸⁷ Fred Vargas, *Wash This Blood Clean From My Hand* (London: Vintage, 2008) p.317

⁸⁸ Lorna Scott Fox, 'On the Trail of the Alleged Werewolf', *London Review of Books*, vol.31 No7 (9 April 2009)pp. 28-30

‘tall, skinny and brown, like a branch of dried wood.’⁸⁹ As in *Wash This Blood Clean From My Hand* (2008) there is the murder of a parent. In that instance, it was matricide; in this latest novel, it is patricide. Both instances are the result of physical or emotional abuse; the judge resented the way his mother derided and undermined his father for his lack of social status, the father in the Vendermot family was sexually abusing his daughter and physically abusing his wife.

It is the abused wife from Ordebec who approaches Adamsberg in his Paris headquarters concerning a vision which her daughter, Lina, claims to have witnessed which, in some way, puts her in danger. This furious army of ghost riders which Lina has seen riding along the Chemin de Bonneval, introduces a legend from the Middle Ages in *The Ghost Riders of Ordebec* (2013). In another example of verisimilitude, Vargas mixes the authentic historical fact with fiction by referencing the medieval poet and chronicler, Helinand de Froidmond. According to Adamsberg’s deputy, Danglard, already established as a reliable source of encyclopaedic knowledge, the story told by Helinand de Froidmond’s uncle, Hellebaud, recounted:

a great tumult in the woods, like the whinnying of many horses, the clash of arms and the shouts of men on the attack. [...] The forest is full of dead souls and demons. [...] I heard them talking and shouting: [...] we shall capture the Archbishop of Reims. [...] I could hear voices and the sound of armour and horses neighing, but I could neither see the shades nor understand the voices. [...] the Archbishop did not survive fourteen days after we heard those voices. People said he had been taken by spirits.⁹⁰

These vengeful ghost riders, ‘this ancient cavalcade [...] is damaged. The horses and their riders have no flesh and many of their limbs are missing. It’s an army of the dead, an army of ghostly riders, wild-eyed and screaming, unable to get to heaven.’⁹¹ Its apparent reappearance in Ordebec, threatens the lives of citizens guilty of unspecified crimes, like a

⁸⁹ Fred Vargas, *The Ghost Riders of Ordebec* (London: Harvill Secker, 2013) p. 168

⁹⁰ Fred Vargas, *The Ghost Riders of Ordebec* (London: Harvill Secker, 2013) pp. 35,36

⁹¹ Fred Vargas, *The Ghost Riders of Ordebec* (London: Harvill Secker, 2013) pp. 36,37

medieval style lynch mob. The ghostly riders, known locally in Ordebec as Hellequin's Horde, has a reputation for continuing to mete out rough justice. The incidence of anyone seeing the Horde, like Lina Vendomort, with its proposed victims, is treated as a presentiment of what will happen:

The fact that the Riders singled out unpunished villains interested him [Adamsberg]. He suddenly realised that the other people whose names Lina had revealed would not be going about their lives very cheerfully in Ordebec. Everyone else would be watching them, asking themselves questions, wondering what crime these marked men had committed.⁹²

As in previous novels, Vargas uses the setting of the enclosed village community where rumour, innuendo, gossip and age-old prejudices abound and where legends like Hellequin's Horde still has credence. Local police chief, Capitaine Emeri, who, as the plot unfolds, has some interest in perpetuating the legend. He comments to Adamsberg:

“It isn't just a vision, it's a legend that's been current in Ordebec for a thousand years. You can bet that three-quarters of the people here are terrified of this parade of dead horsemen. They'd all be panic-stricken if their name was announced by Hellequin.”⁹³

The legendry name Hellebaud lives on in the novel as both the name of the magical doctor who will bring a key witness to crime, Leone, out of her coma; also the pigeon rescued from cruel humans and nursed back to health by Adamsberg's newly found adult son, Armel, nicknamed Zerk by his father. A clumsy metaphor, perhaps, for the healing of relations between father and the, possibly damaged, son he never knew he had.

Underpinning the strong legendry theme of the novel is a recurring lighter note from folklore, the story of Hansel and Gretel, introduced at the very beginning of the novel. The suspicious death of an old woman, a trail of breadcrumbs and two rats named Toni and Marie, clearly musical,* introduces the reader to Adamsberg and his intuitive methods of crime detection:

⁹² Fred Vargas, *The Ghost Riders of Ordebec* (London: Harvill Secker, 2013) p.39

⁹³ Fred Vargas, *The Ghost Riders of Ordebec* (London: Harville Secker, 2013) p.68

A trail of breadcrumbs led from the kitchen into the bedroom, as far as the spotless sheets where the old woman lay dead, her mouth open. Commissaire Adamsberg looked down at the crumbs in silence, pacing two and fro, wondering what kind of Tom Thumb – or what ogre in this case – might have dropped them there.⁹⁴

Hansel and Gretel's trail of breadcrumbs, used as an aid to helping them find their way home from the forest, was ineffective; the breadcrumbs were eaten by birds. Tom Thumb is a reference to a version of this story by seventeenth century French writer, Charles Perrault. (This story has also been referenced in a previous Vargas novel, *This Night's Foul Work* (2009) and quoted in this dissertation as footnote 14.)

The theme of a trail, this time of the paper wrappings from sugar lumps, is echoed later in the novel involving Leo / Leone who first presents herself to Adamsberg as an old woman of the woods who: 'walked quite briskly through the trees, using her sticks, She looked rather like a grasshopper jumping over roots'⁹⁵ and later, with strong undertones of a witch's persona, is described as: 'Lankly old Leone who looked like a broomstick in clothes'⁹⁶. She is revealed, in true fairy tale fashion, as the aristocratic Leone Marie de Valleray, Comtesse d'Ordebec. Her dog Fleg and his fondness for sugar lumps will eventually lead Adamsberg to the murderer.

In the context of fairy tale and legend, the main plot of *The Ghost Riders of Ordebec* (2013) could be seen as a medieval tale of good triumphing over evil, with Adamsberg cast as the gallant knight sent to save ladies in distress, in this case, Lina Vendermot and Leone who, following a vicious attack by the murderer, goes into a coma and can only be saved from death by a magical doctor, crucially called Hellebaud, echoing the legend, and the efforts of Adamsberg to apprehend the murderer which he does but only after a near death experience.

⁹⁴ Fred Vargas, *The Ghost Riders of Ordebec* (London: Harville Secker, 2013) p.1

⁹⁵ Fred Vargas, *The Ghost Riders of Ordebec* (London: Harvill Secker, 2013) p.56

⁹⁶ Fred Vargas, *The Ghost Riders of Ordebec* (London: Harvill Secker, 2013) p.61

*Vargas making a jokey reference to the two lovers in *West Side Story*, perhaps.

Almost like a note to Vargas herself, and with echoes of the ‘cloud shoveller’ persona attributed to Adamsberg, the magical doctor Hellebaud, while treating Adamsberg for his ‘so-called bubble of electricity’ comments:

We’d only have to sever a few ties linking you to the earth for you to drift up to the clouds, without even having an ideal. Like a balloon. Watch out, Adamsberg, I’ve already warned you about that. Yes, real life is despicable and mediocre, a pile of shit in fact, we can agree about that. But we’re obliged to wade through it, *mon ami* [sic] Obliged.⁹⁷

In what is the most gothic of her novels, *An Uncertain Place* (2011), Vargas invokes the world of vampires and the Dracula myth. From Highgate Cemetery and Pre-Raphaelite model Lizzie Siddal buried there and already discussed in this dissertation (see footnote 65), the action follows the history of the shoe clad feet left outside the cemetery: ‘From the ancient shoes with their cracked leather and trailing laces, projected decomposed ankles, showing dark flesh and white shinbones which had been cleanly chopped off.’⁹⁸

Adamsberg travels to the Serbian village of Kiseljevo and here uncovers a decades long old family feud involving the Blagojevic / Plogojowitz and the Paole families. The Plogojowitz family was held responsible for unexplained deaths in the village since the death of Peter Plogojowitz in 1725. Adamsberg has another near death experience trapped in the tomb of the supposedly undead Plogojowitz family members, particularly that of: ‘Vesna, a corpse almost three hundred years old but looking lifelike alongside whom Adamsberg had spent the night’⁹⁹ Once recovered, Adamsberg discussed the history of the family feud with Aranjel, a village elder, and established the link between Highgate Cemetery and Kiseljevo. Aranjel comments:

⁹⁷ Fred Vargas, *The Ghost Riders of Ordebec* (London: Harvill Secker, 2013) p.223

⁹⁸ Fred Vargas, *An Uncertain Place* (London: Harvill Secker, 2011) p.23

⁹⁹ Fred Vargas, *An Uncertain Place* (London: Harvill Secker, 2011) p.342

Much worse than a connection, young man. Long before they made the cemetery, people say that the body of a Turk was taken to the top of the hill, in his coffin, and that his was the only grave there for a long time. [...] he wasn't a Turk at all, but a Serb, and he's supposed to be the master vampire, Plogojowitz himself. Fleeing his native land to go and reign in London.¹⁰⁰

The novel has travelled a long way from its initial setting in London at a police conference, to Serbia via Paris and a bloody murder which is ultimately linked to the bigger, gothic picture. Following the resolution of murder, Adamsberg, briefing his team:

described in detail the enmity between the Plogojowitz and Paole families. So [...] as Retancourt said, there was some all-out war going on between two clans of vampires, each trying to annihilate the other, after the original clash three hundred years before.¹⁰¹

Retancourt, being one of Adamsberg's positivists, brings some levity to the situation: 'And since, ahem, vampires did not exist, what were they supposed to do about it and where was the investigation heading?' Some readers may sympathise with this sentiment. The plot involves complex connections between gothic history, contemporary murder and the initial dramatic meeting between Adamsberg and his adult son, Armel / Zerk, the existence of which he was unaware. Elements of plot development and the introduction of characters can feel arbitrary and Vargas's unique blend of weaving legend, myth and folklore into her fiction, does, from time to time, trip over into a more formalised police procedural format. She accommodates this by creating from the outset, two approaches to the crime fiction she writes, personified by the division in Adamsberg's team between the positivists and the cloud shovellers.

¹⁰⁰ Fred Vargas, *An Uncertain Place* (London: Harvill Secker, 2011) p.275

¹⁰¹ Fred Vargas, *An Uncertain Place* (London: Harvill Secker, 2011) p.343

Conclusion

This dissertation set out to examine contemporary crime fiction from southern Europe, specifically France and Italy, focusing on the novels of Fred Vargas and Andrea Camilleri respectively. Compared with other European countries, the genre in France and Italy appeared to offer an alternative to the traditional police procedural format which is a key feature of the genre in northern Europe, particularly Scandinavia.

In France, Fred Vargas is invoking myth, legend and fairy stories to tell age-old truths about human nature which crime exposes, what Gorrara has called the 'double' vision of the *roman noir*, as both 'pulp' or populist fiction and contemporary urban narrative. In Italy, Andrea Camilleri follows in the footsteps of Leonardo Sciascia in highlighting the excesses, inadequacies, and abuses of both power in the abstract and of the justice system in particular.

As this dissertation has discussed, Vargas's strength as a writer of crime fiction is her ability to incorporate within this popular fictional format, a story telling tradition which resonates with readers. Her professional background in medieval archaeology is reflected in references to place and the natural environment, and her knowledge of ancient myth, legend and folklore, and the ways in which such mythology resonates with village life is used effectively to authenticate both characterisation and plot.

Camilleri's use of place in general, and Sicily in particular, is a key feature of his crime fiction. His complete familiarity with that place, transposed in his novels to Vigata alias his home town of Porto Empedocle, and its people lifts his fiction above the conventional police procedural format. His knowledge of the island's history and in particular the key role played by the Mafia or Cosa Nostra together with a keen awareness of the contemporary political environment authenticates his fiction. From his knowledge of the place and the people comes the humour; when necessary, Montalbano plays the typical Italian

tragediatori, while Catarella acts the buffoon. Like Vargas, Camilleri brings other professional skills from his 'day job' as a professional communicator in various media, to inform his fiction. Both authors have created convincing, empathetic and, above all, alternative protagonists in the form of Vargas's Jean Batiste Adamsberg and Camilleri's Montalbano, together with their respective teams of loyal and uniquely individual colleagues. This strong characterisation by both authors offsets any weakness in plot development.

Following in the footsteps of his literary hero, Leonardo Sciascia, Camilleri is motivated by a strong moral imperative to expose corruption and injustice, particularly in Italy's judicial system. Conversely, Vargas is not overtly political. However, her novels, like the fairy stories, legends and myths she references, have things to say about moral values and the way we live. Relationships, particularly within families are a key target. Also, responsible parenthood; Adamsberg babysits his young son, despite being estranged from the child's mother, Camille; single parent Danglard cares for his five children, including one by his absent wife's lover. The strength of women is highlighted, particularly through the characters of Adamsberg's colleague, Violette Retancourt, and Camille's mother, Clementine Courbet. Through her male protagonist, Adamsberg the 'cloud shoveller', Vargas champions what are thought of as female characteristics; intuition, empathy, mutual support, communication. Through Danglard, she has created his male antithesis, possessing an encyclopaedic knowledge, an efficient memory and intellectual rigour but with a limited imagination and a difficulty in forming personal relationships, particularly with women.

This dissertation set out to look at what differentiated the crime fiction of southern Europe, particularly in France and Italy, compared to its more northerly neighbours in Sweden, Norway and Iceland. What emerges is a greater emphasis on place, culture, and history and a more relaxed approach to petty crime. For instance, the son of Montalbano's

housekeeper, Adelina, is a petty thief who Montalbano has convicted, but his relationship with both the mother and her son remain warm. Adelina continues to make him delicious meals and the son, when not in jail, is a useful police informant. Likewise, Adamsberg arranges for a jailed criminal, the ‘magical’ Doctor Hellebaud, to be released to treat a coma patient, a key eye witness to murder.

The use of crime fiction as a metaphor for political comment and challenge has also emerged strongly through Camilleri’s fiction, echoing the history of Italian *gialla*. In France, Fred Vargas does not conform to this general trend personified by fellow crime writer, Daniel Pennac. Her approach may be regarded as whimsical compared to the satirical cut and thrust of her fellow writers. However, as this dissertation has identified, her fiction is imbued with moral imperatives dressed up as stories, fairy tales, myth and legend.

Either as political comment or moral tales, crime fiction writers, Fred Vargas and Andrea Camilleri have succeeded in engaging a large international audience of loyal readers, proof, if any were needed, that ‘popular’ fiction can also be ‘heavyweight’ in communicating current social and political concerns. To echo the sentiment expressed by Dorothy L. Sayers in *Gaudy Night* (2003) which began this dissertation, crime fiction, ‘that kind of book’ can be ‘a proper job’.

ENDS

Dissertation

European Crime Fiction: the Novels of Fred Vargas and Andrea Camilleri

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