Violette Nozière:
The Wounds of Class in 1930s Paris

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Women are…without class, because the cut and fall of a skirt and good leather shoes can take you across the river and to the other side: the fairy tales tell you that goose girls may marry kings.

Carolyn Steedman, Landscape for a Good Woman

On October 12 1934 in Paris, a nineteen-year-old named Violette Nozière was sentenced to execution for poisoning her parents, one of whom, her father, died.¹ Although her life was eventually spared, most of the public seem to have approved of the trial’s conclusion because Violette was widely understood to be a “monster”. The teenager had sat at the dining room table with her mother and father on the evening of August 21 1933 encouraging them to drink up the “medications” she had brought home along with a forged note from the family doctor. As they lay unconscious, she had left the apartment, with purloined cash, for a hotel room and a long day of shopping and partying before returning home to open up a gas leak and “discover” the corpses.

Violette’s badness was spectacular, exemplary. She was the only child of modest folks, an engine driver and a housewife, who had saved and sacrificed their whole life to put aside a rather large sum, 165 000 francs, the presumed motive for Violette’s crime.
Germaine and Jean-Baptiste (known as Baptiste) Nozière pushed their daughter to continue her studies instead of sending her out to work like most girls of her social class; they gave her money and clothes and generally “spoiled” her in the estimation of the neighbors. In return, Violette cut classes, dropped out of one school after another, and racked up a long list of lovers. All of this was far from the worst of it, however. When Violette was apprehended in the wake of the crime she confessed immediately. She told the police that she had wanted to kill her father and merely incapacitate her mother to prevent her from intervening. The motive had nothing to do with money: her father, she said, had been forcing her to have sex with him once or twice a week since she was twelve years old. While parricide alone would have guaranteed the crime’s notoriety, Violette’s charge against her dead father ensured the Nozière affair front-page status for many weeks in 1933-34. As the press endlessly commented, Violette’s was a “double parricide”, the killing of her father and attempted murder of his memory.

Sex was the most explosive aspect of a case fertile in controversial issues. Violette went further than standard teenage promiscuity. Besides sleeping with a succession of schoolboys and students, she regularly crossed the river to the wealthy commercial right-bank districts around the Opéra and the northern boulevards to pick up well-heeled businessmen who “helped her out” financially after she had sex with them. The syphilis she had contracted was her badge of shame. She was certainly a “bad seed”, but it was her incest accusation (vehemently denied by her mother) which provoked, as one might expect, the most visceral reactions. Most of the press snarled with indignation, Baptiste’s railway colleagues closed ranks to defend his reputation, but numerous voices in print and on the street commented that something was obviously wrong in that
household. Several women wrote anonymous letters to the judge in the case begging him to believe Violette and spilling out their own stories of abuse in the process. It is easy to understand how the case played into anxieties about youthful corruption, female emancipation, and the venereal secrets that so often limned respectable family life.

All of this is far from unimportant, but I want to argue here that the Nozière case is even more revealing for what it says about class than about sex. The reactions of two upper-class female commentators on the case may serve here as a point of departure. The writer Colette, editorializing about the trial in the newspaper *L’Intransigeant* began her column: “C’est du petit monde” (“These are lowbrow people”), a phrase she returned to as a leitmotiv in her piece: “Lowbrow people, yes, unfortunately. What a difference with the feral wealth, the glamour of the underworld!…A lowbrow world which hews to lies, compromise, and reticence.” Janet Flanner, writing in the *New Yorker*, was even more prolific in her equally patrician contempt: “Though her doting parents had educated her over their heads and means in a Paris private school, in her brief career Violette Nozière had learned merely how to drink bad cocktails with penniless collegiates…and certainly never met any member of the government until, on trial for parricide, she made the acquaintance of her judge.” The death sentence “was followed by unusual silence in court, suddenly broken by Violette’s vulgarly shouting ‘Curse my father, curse my mother!’”. It surely took a female snob (or two) to articulate the scandal of a girl’s social style in the face of death falling so far short of her nicely cut clothes. So much, in Violette’s case, was about social cues and miscues.

The Nozière case offers a unique purview on interwar Paris in that it encompasses almost every district in the city, thus offering a microcosm of urban social history.
Violette grew up and lived in a “good” working-class district, the twelfth arrondissement at the eastern end of Paris, where men worked for the wine depots or the railways, women known locally as “carmens” rolled cigars in the tobacco factory, and families spent their Sundays in the Bois de Vincennes. She briefly attended an elite secondary school, the Lycée Fénelon, in the heart of the Latin Quarter; she dropped out quickly, but made friends with the middle-class male students who haunted the cafés around the Boulevard Saint-Michel, falling in love with one of them; on Paris’s Right Bank she offered herself to rich men in a barely-disguised form of prostitution and occasionally spent time in the jazz bars of Montmartre; she allegedly had a “protector”, an affluent industrialist whose family lived in an eastern suburb of the city; she was arrested under the Eiffel Tower, in the aristocratic west end of the city, when a young nobleman set up a date with her and tipped off the police.

In all of the sections of the city to which she traveled, Violette retailed different versions of a family romance. Most commonly she told friends and boyfriends that her father was an engineer and her mother held a high position in the venerable couture house of Paquin; she usually added that she had a rich aunt who lived in a hotel and was going to give her a car; in her mother’s native village she said she was studying to be a mathematics teacher; she told her aristocratic suitor that her name was Christiane d’Arfeuil, from a family who lived near the Arc de Triomphe. She hid her escapades by inventing for her parents’ sake a friendship with the (non-existent) sister of their upper-class doctor, Henri Deron, the same one whose prescription she faked at the end.

Violette’s real life ranged all over the city, and her fantasy life spanned the upper reaches of the social world.
Certainly, issues of sex and class in this case can seldom be kept separate. If the sexual abuse did happen, as is likely, it would go a long way towards explaining Violette’s flight into both sexual promiscuity and social fantasy: she would have had to wish herself as far from possible from the two-room walk-up she shared with her parents. But I want here to focus on matters of class. Who were the Nozières, and what did they represent in the social world of 1930s Paris? How effectively could a young woman like Violette perform her way out of her class of origin? What can the case tell us about the drawing of boundaries between the upper classes and the upwardly mobile in the urban life of interwar France? What, in short, are the social connotations of a story, that of Violette and her parents, which had such resonance with contemporaries?

*Rue de Madagascar*

Violette’s parents came from different rural areas in the provinces. Germaine was born and raised in Neuvy-sur-Loire, a large agricultural village on the Loire river a few hours south of Paris. She had married very young, moved to Paris, divorced, and then met Baptiste Nozière. She was several months pregnant with Violette when she married him in 1914, aged 26. Baptiste had fled the remote hamlet of Prades in the Massif Central and the whims of his brutal father, a baker, by doing well enough in school to join and make his way up in the Paris-Lyon-Marseille (PLM) railway company. Paris had been a magnet for provincial immigrants for centuries: in 1929-31 around half of the inhabitants of the working-class district right next to Violette’s were born outside of the capital.5
Social and geographic mobility were enshrined in the very nature of Baptiste’s job as an engine driver for one of France’s six private railways companies. (They would be nationalized in 1937 as the SNCF). Railway workers were labor aristocracy, and being an engine driver was, short of management, the best that you could do in the company. Baptiste’s background was entirely typical of men who worked for the railways in the early twentieth century. Companies like the PLM typically recruited ambitious young men from small towns or the countryside, either youths from company families or the high-achieving sons of peasants. Once hired, young men most often moved away from home for their work: in 1911 less than half of all railways workers lived in their region of origin, an unusual statistic at the time. Studies of this group stress the uprooted and isolated nature of the railway workforce. The price you paid for a good job—in cases like Baptiste’s, willingly—was “communitarian isolation”: dedication to work and the company at the expense of other social connections. After Baptiste’s death, all of the people who vouched for his character were railway employees, some of whom lived in the same building as he.

Railway jobs were coveted because of their enviable wages and benefits. The companies offered excellent retirement and disability pensions, a rigidly ordered system of promotion, and a complex but strong wage structure which rewarded good work with a multiplicity of bonuses. Within the world of the cheminots, an engine driver was the apex of the pyramid, referred to by other workers not without a certain hostile irony as a seigneur or a gros monsieur. Drivers, and to a lesser extent their firemen acolytes, had direct and complete responsibility over the symbolic heart of the company, the locomotive. (Baptiste was so well regarded that he had once been entrusted with a train
carrying President Albert Lebrun—the same man who later commuted his daughter’s sentence from death to life in prison.) To be a railway worker was to be at least halfway out of the working classes. You might work with your hands and have grease on your clothes (drivers were admiringly called *gueules noires*, black mugs) but you were paid for task work, not piece work, and you did not have to sell your skills on the open market. Engine drivers especially had technical and supervisory responsibilities that likened their jobs to those of engineers. In 1933 someone like Baptiste was considered more of an *employé* or even a *fonctionnaire* than an *ouvrier*.9

The distinctiveness of an engine driver’s work status was reflected in his home life as well. Because their husbands put in long and irregular hours, and also because they could afford it, drivers’ wives did not work: there was even an expression, *faire la cheminote*, which referred to this custom. The role of the *cheminote* was to stay home, care for the family, and save money, but because of her anomalous non-working status the driver’s wife was often regarded with jealousy and considered a snob.10 That was certainly the case for Germaine Nozière, an aloof and erratic woman to begin with. Even in the wake of the tragedy acquaintances described her as standoffish; the Nozières’ neighbor Simone Mayeul, whom I interviewed in 2005, called Germaine a “bitch” (*garce*) who would sew dresses for her daughter and then parade the girl out on the landing for others to admire.11

Drivers’ wives shared their husbands’ modest backgrounds. They typically came from the rural or urban laboring classes and most had worked before marriage, usually as seamstresses, domestics, or laundresses.12 Germaine certainly fit that description. With a population of 1237 in 1926, Neuvy, located on the Loire and the main road from Paris to
Lyon was hardly an isolated locale: its inhabitants had sided with the Revolution and set up a Surveillance Committee in 1793, and hoisted a red flag in sympathy with the Paris Commune in 1871. But it was not a rich place either, its population made up mostly of mariners, vine growers and small farmers. Germaine’s father Alcime appeared on the census rolls as a cultivateur (farmer) in 1881 and 1896, but as a journalier (day laborer) in 1891 and a terrassier (road-worker) in 1906. Germaine was born in 1889, and by 1906 worked as a seamstress. The family cannot have saved up very much since in 1926 Germaine’s widowed seventy-seven-year-old mother Philomène was listed as a day laborer. For Germaine, the railroad that ran through Neuvy and the men who worked on it were also a way up and out.

Germaine and Baptiste chose deliberately to have a single child: the case was to reveal that they carefully practiced birth-control to avoid another pregnancy. In this too they were utterly typical of their class and time. Simone Mayeul next door was also an only child, despite, she told me, her father’s wish for a boy. Among railway families in the early years of the century, 30% had a single child, 24% had two, and only a quarter had three or more. For working-class and lower-middle-class families in interwar Paris, single children and small families were the widespread norm. Although in the popular imagination the war was blamed for France’s demographic decline, the truth is that French fertility rates dropped precipitously at an earlier date, 1890 to 1900, “with the suddenness of a command”. People in all social classes had fewer children, typically one or two, but lower-middle-class white-collar workers were twice as likely as factory workers to have a single child in order to maximize their investment in an education or a
dowry.\textsuperscript{18} One can easily imagine the pressure brought to bear upon that single offspring of an upwardly-mobile family.

Germaine, Baptiste, and Violette lived at 9, Rue de Madagascar, an address the crime was to make notorious. The couple settled in the twelfth arrondissement certainly because of its proximity to Baptiste’s work at the Gare de Lyon; several other railway workers inhabited the modest building, which had six floors on either side of a courtyard and its own all-knowing concierge. The far eastern neighborhoods of Paris had an aura of working-class respectability about them. They lay on the axis stretching from the Marais and the old Faubourg Saint-Antoine where the descendants of the Bastille’s besiegers still came to their workshops wearing suits and called each other “monsieur”.\textsuperscript{19} Although the Nozières inhabited the less desirable sixth floor of the back building, they had achieved a degree of residential success: the flat had two small rooms plus a galley kitchen and, remarkably, its own indoor toilet. The investigation produced detailed descriptions of the apartment, as well as photos: the dining room at the front was almost filled up by a table, chairs, and sideboard in the then-popular faux-Renaissance style; the back room was the parents’ bedroom, and Violette slept on a folding cot behind a screen in the minute hallway; the kitchen had a sink and a gas burner. The apartment, tiny to begin with, seems smaller because of the busy floral paper and family photographs on the walls.\textsuperscript{20}

By the standards of early-1930s Paris, the Nozières were not at all badly off, given that the city was in the grips of a severe housing shortage.\textsuperscript{21} Aline Tourneux, the daughter of a concierge in the twelfth, grew up around the same time in a one-room lodge with her parents and sister, sharing a folding bed with the latter and washing in the
courtyard since there was no running water: “We lived on top of one another, but my
sister and I never saw anything that might have shocked us. I don’t know how my
parents managed it.”22 Another woman described her 1920s childhood in the nearby
eleventh arrondissement, in a thirty-three-square-meter apartment, also sharing a folding
cot with her sister. Both limited resources and the desire to conform kept things Spartan:
“In those days if you’d bought a refrigerator you would have been called a show-off. We
didn’t have a shower…it would have cost too darn much, and we would have looked
pretentious.”23 Even among the genteel, living conditions could be stifling. In the first
apartment Simone de Beauvoir remembered, she shared a bedroom with the family maid,
while her younger sister slept in a cot in the hallway: help came cheaper than space.
When she was about ten the Beauvoirs moved to another Montparnasse apartment. They
still had a maid but no bathroom or running water, the apartment was frigid all winter,
and Simone and Hélène shared a room so small you could barely get out of bed. There
was no living room, but Simone’s father had his own study. Simone found the lack of
privacy, of any space where she could read and think in peace, excruciating: until she was
almost out of her teens there was no question of her going out on her own. 24 Beauvoir
wrote bitterly in her memoirs about being unable to escape her mother’s prying,
expressing sentiments Violette would probably have recognized.

A wide swath of town-dwellers in the France of 1933 would have found the world
of the Nozières entirely familiar: the rural roots, the upward mobility, the small family
squeezed into tight quarters, the strenuous efforts to save up a nest-egg, the child in
whom one invested one’s hopes. Baptisté Nozière was an ambiguous social figure. He
had worked in greasy clothes and belonged to a Communist trade-union and therefore
could be posthumously cast as a working-class paragon. (Jean Renoir’s 1938 film of Zola’s *La Bête humaine*, starring a heroically virile Jean Gabin, suggests the extent of the contemporary political romanticization of engine-drivers.) The Communist newspaper *L’Humanité* pushed a narrative of the case whereby Violette was the “worker’s daughter” sexually used and corrupted by the “sons of the bourgeoisie”, but the Party’s efforts to cast her as an updated Tess of the D’Urbervilles never gained much traction.

His literal blue collar notwithstanding, contemporaries knew that Baptiste was not a proletarian but an avatar of the most significant social development in French urban life between the wars, the rapid extension of a lower middle-class of *employés*: office workers and lower bureaucrats and managers. Certainly the number of industrial workers grew, in France as elsewhere in the early twentieth century, by about 40% between 1906 and 1931; but the proportion of workers in the service sector grew even faster, by 55%. In Paris, jobs commerce and banking increased in those years by 52%, beauty and health services by 60%, workers in various administrations by 77%. The number of railway jobs reached an apex of half a million between the wars, one-third to half of them in the service sector. The Nozières’ story was not one of working-class oppression but of modest though overly-eager mobility within an expanding lower middle class. Therein lay ones of the keys both to Violette’s behavior and the case’s resonance.

*Violette’s Family Romance*

Girls of Violette’s social class usually did not get any or much secondary education, much less attend a Lycée. State-run Lycées for girls were created by the Camille Sée law of 1880, one of the Third Republic’s many moves to recruit more
categories of the population to its brand of Republican secularism. Until 1930, secondary education for both girls and boys was fee-paying and clearly aimed at the well-to-do. In 1939 only 140,000 boys and 64,000 girls attended Lycées, though many more from bien pensant upper-bourgeois families, like Simone de Beauvoir, went to private Catholic schools.  

Before World War II, French girls from the lower middle or working classes most typically finished primary school around age thirteen, earning a certificat d’études primaires, and if their families could afford to keep them out of the workforce completed two or three more years in an école primaire supérieure or a cours complémentaire. These classes clearly aimed at training girls for white-collar work: they included home-making and general instruction, but also involved options like a popular “commercial” track with shorthand and typing. France had a long and hardy tradition of female work, especially for married women, which low birthrates helped to solidify: in 1931 44% of married women worked, as did 61% of mostly younger single women. The fact that neither eighteen-year-old Violette nor her mother worked was anomalous, a fact noted with disapproval by their neighbors. One of them sent the judge an anonymous letter in September 1933, laying some of the blame on Madame Nozière: “You will agree that a mother, instead of letting her go without working and giving her delusions of grandeur by saying they had 150,000 francs, would have done better to set her on track for a job.” Another commented to a newspaper reporter: “You see, monsieur, that big girl did nothing with her ten fingers, and idleness brings bad counsel.”

It was even more anomalous that the Nozières moved their daughter from a local school where she earned faltering grades to the Lycée Fénelon, and how they got her into
that illustrious institution remains a mystery. Fénelon, which opened in 1883 in the heart of the Latin Quarter was the oldest girls’ Lycée in France, and arguably the most prestigious, since it initially had a monopoly on training its most brilliant students for the only female école normale supérieure. In 1913 the school had 850 students, a handful of whom (about 70) were high-achieving girls on scholarships, the daughters of employés. The bulk of the student body was drawn from the social elites, with fathers who were teachers or professors, professionals, industrialists, and even politicians. According to a 1913 graduate, the students believed they were receiving the best of educations: “Was Fénelon a great Lycée? We certainly thought we were superior to the others, and I think this might have had some truth to it, since all of our [women] teachers had the agrégation.” Violette belonged at Fénelon neither socially nor academically, and she responded by cutting classes and dropping out in less than three months. But the experience was clearly pivotal to her self-fashioning, since the Latin Quarter and its well-heeled student population remained the center of her social life.

The path a girl like Violette, with ambitious parents of lower standing, should have taken, can be illustrated by her friend Madeleine Debize, another eighteen-year-old with whom she went out drinking and dancing on the evening after the murder. Although Madeleine assured the authorities that her links to Violette were tenuous and accidental (none of Violette’s “friends” were to display any commendable loyalty), the police naturally questioned her and her parents carefully. Madeleine, apparently an only child, lived with her parents on Rue Claude Decaen, a few blocks away from Violette. The girls had been friends in elementary school, had lost track of one another, then reconnected earlier in the summer of 1933. Madeleine’s father was a décorateur, an
indoor painter and carpenter, and her forty-eight-year-old mother was one of the new legions of office workers. Madeleine seems to have completed some post-elementary commercial and language courses, after which her parents sent her to Germany for several months to perfect her linguistic skills. In August 1933 she was working as a trilingual secretary for an impresario in Montmartre. As her mother explained nervously, on the night of the crime she was engaged in her regularly scheduled conversation session with a student from Germany.\(^\text{32}\)

Madeleine’s was the typical trajectory for girls from that sort of family in the twelfth arrondissement: office skills, language training, and secretarial work by the end of one’s teens which would usually continue after marriage. The job of \textit{sténodactylographe}, soon shortened to \textit{dactylo}, appeared in the 1880s with the rise of the typewriter; there were about fifty typist-secretaries in Paris in 1886, three thousand or so by 1900, and between the wars the job became massively feminized. By that time the \textit{dactylo} had come to represent a well-defined urban type, descended from the nineteenth-century \textit{midinette}: the sexy, stylish, working Parisienne.\(^\text{33}\)

Madeleine and Violette had one thing in common: their trajectories took them, for better or worse, far from their neighborhood of origin. Madeleine’s job in the eighteenth had her commuting daily to the other end of Paris, and Violette’s range was, as we have seen, pretty much city-wide. (Paris’s metro network made all of this moving around quite easy). Violette certainly, and Madeleine probably, had contacts with a wide range of people, and this was apparently more characteristic of women than of men of their background. A study of the witnesses in all marriage contracts for 1936 in working-class Belleville in the northern districts of the city shows that witnesses for brides, especially
those who worked in white-collar jobs, were socially diverse and included members of
the bourgeois professions; witnesses for grooms came from a much narrower range, and
were usually close colleagues in the trade. The study’s author Antoine Prost concludes:
“One gets the sense that women crossed class boundaries more easily than men.”34 By
way of contrast, here is what Aline Tourneux’s brother Albert said rather proudly about
his youth in the twelfth: “I was born Rue Crozatier. I went two hundred meters to
school, and four hundred to wed since I married a girl from Avenue Crozatier. After
military service we went to live on Boulevard Diderot, that was about one kilometer
away. In the neighborhood, everyone knew me.”35

Women who worked had some money to spend on clothes, and thanks to the
abundant availability of ready-to-wear items in department stores, they could obtain
outfits that allowed them to “pass” socially, while men remained sartorially closer to their
working-class identities.36 Violette did not earn money, but she wheedled it out of her
parents and lovers, and appears to have spent most of it on clothes. Indeed, shopping
seems to have been something of an addiction, a palliative to her anguish. On the day
after the murder, after making a date with Madeleine for later, she immediately went to
the Galeries Lafayette and another store near it, where she treated herself to a black
evening dress, stylish black gloves, a short grey jacket and a beret.37 On the day after
the corpses were discovered, even as the police was keeping close track of her, she
bought a full set of elegant mourning clothes, including a fashionable belted coat and
beret, the sort of outfit that was being advertised all over the daily papers.38 Earlier in the
month she had put down two hundred francs on a six-thousand-franc silver fox stole.39
It is not irrelevant that Violette purchased her clothes at the Galeries Lafayette, since that store’s very location was symbolic of its Janus-like social function. The great department store abutted to the south the city’s sources of money and expensive pleasures around the Bourse and the Opéra, while to its north lay some of the poorest working-class districts of the city. Popular newspapers with very large circulations such as *Le Petit Parisien* and *Le Journal* carried the store’s advertisements almost daily, yet the Galeries Lafayette also attracted a rich clientele. A 1929 guide for wealthy Anglo-Americans advised readers that where department store clothes were concerned “the Galeries Lafayette and Printemps are apt to have the smartest, the balance shifting from one year to the other.”

A woman dressed in a Galeries Lafayette outfit could be an engine-driver’s daughter or an heiress from Chicago.

Violette, a tall and slender young woman dressed in her generically fashionable clothes, lied constantly and insistently about her parents’ social status. Pages upon pages in the police record and many dozens of articles in the daily press report that she told everyone she met outside of her neighborhood that her father was an engineer, her mother worked for the House of Paquin, sometimes that she herself worked there, and other recurrent fibs concerning her family’s exceptional wealth and status. It does not take much of a Freudian to surmise what was going on here, and indeed the patriarchal judge Lanoire, probably no fan of weird foreign theories, made the point directly to Violette that her crime was not about sex or even money, but about class: “You lived in a milieu somewhat above your condition, and you wanted to remain there…You could not go back down to the mediocrity of your real status, of which your parents’ presence was a constant reminder. Through them, your lies could be uncovered. Without them you
could continue to play the role in which your imagination took pleasure.” Violette Nozière killed her parents symbolically, discursively, before she gave them real poison. She acted back upon them the crime of social mobility they had performed on her. If it was not justice, poetic or otherwise, it was at the very least fearful symmetry.

Just as people who create aliases for themselves cling to elements of their real names, Violette could not abandon her parents’ actual identities even as she lied about them. Her invented family was very much her own, albeit several notches higher on the social scale. Her father was an engineer, she said, but she usually specified that he was an engineer for the railways. And because her mother had been a seamstress, and had made dresses for Violette, a touch of the wand made Germaine into a leading figure in one of Paris’s most prestigious couture houses. Only when she had committed her crime did Violette invent an identity that erased her parents entirely: she was now Christiane d’Arfeuil living on the wealthy Rue de Bassano, she told the young noblemen she met, her father deceased, her mother away. But still, she could not entirely let go: one of the men she talked to on the Champ de Mars reported that she had given her full name as Violette Germaine Christiane d’Arfeuil.42

Railway engineers were upper management, usually trained in the technical and scientific branches of the *grandes écoles* –Polytechnique, the École des Mines, the Ponts et Chaussées-- which still make up the apex of the French socio-educational system and churn out the nation’s most revered upper class.43 This was the population that really belonged in the Latin Quarter, as opposed to interlopers like Violette. A nostalgic former student of the Ponts et Chaussées remembered, from his studies in the 1920s and 30s, his professors injecting aesthetic norms into their discussions of bridges and factories: “Even
in teaching the most precise and erudite technical matters, they were guided by those high spiritual standards characteristic of French genius.”

Violette’s fantasy placed her father in a social world that could be illustrated by the family of Simone de Beauvoir’s adored friend Elizabeth Mabille (Zaza), whose father was indeed a railway engineer trained at the best school of all, Polytechnique. The Mabilles were haut-bourgeois fervent Catholics, with none of the eccentricities and money problems of the Beauvoirs. Zaza’s family had nine children, her mother was active in Catholic charities, the girls entered arranged marriages once dowries were settled and trousseaus prepared, and daughters were reminded to spend more time on their “social duties” and less on their studies.

Violette was so disarmingly ignorant of the real world of the upper classes that she did not realize that somebody in Monsieur Mabille’s league would never be married to a woman who worked in fashion, even in the exalted role of a première (top saleswoman) for the House of Paquin. If nothing else the high fashion world, then as now, was shaped and peopled by transgressive outsiders – Jews, gays, provincial orphans like Coco Chanel—and Paquin, for all of its respectability, was no exception. A 1931 English-language guide proclaimed that “Paquin is perhaps the most widely known name of French couture, and the house is probably the most representative of French dressmaking”. But “Paquin frères” was originally a clothing store in provincial Normandy owned by one Isaac Jacob, who passed it on to his son Isidore, born in 1862. Isidore moved the business to Paris where it thrived, thanks in large part to the fashion and business sense of Isidore’s remarkable wife Jeanne Becker, a dress designer. By the 1890s Paquin was dressing the entire female cast of Proust’s Remembrance, from the
oldest aristocratic families to stars of the theatre to the glamorous courtesans known as *grandes horizontales*, and the business had a branch in London. Isidore “Paquin” was even awarded the Legion of Honor in 1900, over the loud protests of anti-Semites.  

By the late 1920s, however, Isidore was dead, Jeanne had retired, and Paquin was beginning to acquire the reputation of a rather stodgy couturier—a place where mothers rather than daughters shopped, where wealthy women still went to get a good coat while buying their more exciting outfits from Rochas, Patou, and especially Chanel: “Paquin at number 3 [Rue de la Paix] has conceded little to the demands of time”, a guidebook commented, “…For without an artistic heir to a unique figure like Madame Paquin, an organization runs the risk of commercialization”. Out in the twelfth arrondissement, however, who knew or cared about the difference between Paquin, Worth and Chanel? Violette knew enough, however, to be aware of the glamour inherent to the position of *première vendeuse*, also known as a *vendeuse mondaine* or “society saleswoman”, a product of Jeanne Paquin’s excellent business sense. *Premières* acted as fashion advisors to the highest level of clients, foreign aristocracy and royalty. In terms of social contact, there was no higher you could go in the world of clothing. The *premières* at Paquin divided up the western world like conquerors: Isidore’s cousin Jane Bloch, for instance, had an empire which included the queens of Belgium and Portugal, as well as the courts of Spain and Russia. Violette drew on her mother’s skill with the needle to place Germaine in the most dazzling cosmopolitan context she could imagine. Her fantasy might have been an act of love.

To most—if not all—contemporary commentators, the dysfunction at the heart of the Nozière case was social rather than sexual. The newspapers offered a drumbeat of
commentary calling Violette a liar, a “mythomaniac” (the latter a new and popular
diagnosis). Refuting the accusation that she killed her parents for their savings, Violette
told the police after her arrest that she had no need for money since she had a “protector,”
a sixty-ish man she knew only as “Monsieur Émile” whose appearance, clothing, and car
she described exactly. Waiters in various establishments remembered seeing her with a
man of that description, but the authorities never located the gentleman in question.

In the end the young girl was hoist on her own petard: if she had lied
systematically about her social identity, why believe what she said about her father?
Wasn’t the incest charge, like the social fantasies, the wishful thinking of a girl afflicted
with an “Oedipus complex”? The Nozières, so went the first and official version, were
“people like us” who had somehow spawned a bad seed. Paris Soir, for instanc,
described the Nozière parents in glowing terms: “The couple really embodied the very
type of those who are usually referred to as brave gens [good folk].” (Braves gens
implied moral decency but also social mediocrity: it was not what anybody would ever
say about the Mabilles or the Beauvoirs.)

But the newspapers also routinely labeled Violette “spoiled”, which implied some
degree of responsibility on the part of her officially saintly parents: “L’Enfant gâtée”,
“The Spoiled Child”, screamed the front cover and headlines of the first issue devoted to
the case by France’s most popular crime magazine, Détective. Violette’s parents were
implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, blamed for giving their daughter aspirations well
above their status; Janet Flanner’s comment cited earlier about her parents educating her
“over their heads and means” undoubtedly reflected what the journalist heard from her
Paris acquaintances. Neighbors complained about the mother’s aloofness, and indeed
Germaine told the police: “I did not socialize with anyone in the building because my husband was against it.” It was clearly this attitude that had come home to roost in a daughter of whom a neighbor said: “Ever since her parents had to take her out of the Lycée Fénelon because she cut classes to go run around the Latin Quarter with men, she wasn’t the same girl: she was haughty, and acted like some fancy lady.” In the end, Violette’s lawyer René de Vésinne-Larue tried to shift the blame onto Violette’s parents, arguing in his closing speech that since her parents tried to over-educate her and give her contempt for her social station, they should at least share the blame for the disaster.

Both the Nozière parents and Violette had broken the rules of social mobility, although in different ways. Violette’s parents reached too far up too fast, distancing themselves and their daughter from the normative patterns of social mobility for their class. Violette, who did not possess the requisite academic abilities and whose promiscuity may well have been the effect of abuse, tried to use sex to achieve the same thing, while projecting her parents’ ambitions back onto her fantasy of them. These criss-crossing trajectories proved deadly. Dysfunction may be unique to any given family, but it can also be historicized since unhappy families are miserable in historically different ways. While the Nozière household may have bred its own very specific pathologies, Violette’s crime was resonant with contemporaries, I would argue, in part because of the recognizably class-bound nature of the way the family lived.

*Barriers and Levels*

Only critics on the left made the point that life in this model household was structurally bound to be hell. The most famous expression of this point of view is the
poem Paul Éluard published in a volume the Surrealists dedicated to Violette: “Violette
dreamt of undoing/ And undid/ The hideous vipers’ knot of family ties.”55 A pair of
Communist sympathizers who published a pamphlet on the case in 1933, pointing the
finger at Violette’s parents and her exploitative lovers, made the same point more
prosaically: the Nozières were “proletarian bourgeois”, living in isolation: “A horrible
family life for these three beings who could neither leave each other nor live
together…three enemy beings lived alone, without friends.”56

Indeed, the family’s isolation, as revealed by the police investigation, was
striking. They had no relatives in Paris save one distant cousin they never saw, and
apparently no friends or social life. There is no mention in the voluminous record of their
family life that they ever invited an outsider into their home. Baptiste participated in the
enforced sociability of the job, albeit with limits: testifying to his irreproachable
character, colleagues frequently commented that he never took a drink or visited a
prostitute, which suggests, among other things, that he kept a distance from co-workers.57
Germaine, as we saw, stayed aloof from others in the building and the neighborhood.
Violette had to leave home, in every sense, to create a social life. The family did
maintain links with their provinces of origin, but these were limited in part by the force of
circumstance. Neuvy was closer, and the family spent summer vacations there, but
Baptiste’s father lived further away and in any case the two had recently become
estranged. To some degree, no doubt, this isolation reflected Baptiste and Germaine’s
particular temperaments: she was by all accounts moody and standoffish, and while he
was well-liked, he evidently much preferred working in his garden plot near the city
limits to frequenting cafés or restaurants. Both, in any case, were ferociously (and successfully) determined to save up their money.

Social isolation was not at all untypical of *cheminot* families, most of them, like the Nozières, uprooted from their province of origin. Their professional environment was highly structured and their jobs kept them on the road—or rather, on the rail—while their wives were confined to the home. In practical terms, it was often hard for railway families to develop social ties beyond—and even within—their job. But the experience of isolation probably characterized many more segments of the working and lower-middle classes than just railway workers. In Paris, with over half of that population born outside the city, strong salary differentials, the ebbing of union activity, and the shift of many into white collar work, isolation was apparently widespread. Gérard Noiriel, a leading authority on the lives of twentieth-century French workers writes: “Two central themes characterize the daily lives of workers in the twenties: uprooting and social partitioning [cloisonnement].” The Nozière family’s isolation caused comment only from upper-middle-class critics like Éluard.

In their time, the Nozières would have been identified as members of the newly-tagged *classes moyennes*. The sociologist Edmond Goblot wrote in 1925: “I call *classes moyennes* the wealthier portion of the working and peasant classes, as well as the impoverished portion of the bourgeoisie.” This was an identifiable segment of society, that between the popular classes and the bourgeoisie, and those who wrote about it always stressed the importance of work, and especially of striving and saving, in this middle-class experience and mentality: “This classe moyenne is currently a large milieu in what it encompasses”, wrote one author in 1924, “a crossroads where destinies whose
points of departure are essentially varied come to meet”. He went on to emphasize the importance of education to this group, and the preeminent value of saving money: “Each generation leaves more than it has received”\textsuperscript{61}. Fifteen years later, another commentator similarly chimed in: “The man of the middle classes sees in work and daily saving the means of living, of marrying off his daughters, of placing his sons, of ensuring his future in old age….For the middle classes, coins are flat so you can stack them; for the capitalist, they are cylindrical so you can roll them.”\textsuperscript{62} The middle classes of the 1920s and 30s were hell-bent on one thing: the family patrimoine, the financial cushion saved one franc at a time that would protect you and your descendants from financial catastrophe, and might eventually lift you up into the ranks of the genuine, upper-class bourgeoisie.\textsuperscript{63}

The irony is that those strategies aimed at lifting a family out of the classes moyennes and into the culturally as well as economically dominant bourgeoisie functioned precisely in ways to keep that family at bay from genuine bourgeois culture. Two of France’s great sociologists of class, writing between the wars, put their finger on exactly why that was. Goblot, whose famous 1925 treatise is entitled 

La Barrière et le niveau (Barriers and Levels), anticipated Bourdieu in arguing that the finer and more significant distinctions of class in France had more to do with codes of culture than with income. Goblot’s title signaled his thesis. Classes, he wrote, were a matter of both steep escarpments and flat plateaux—vertical “barriers” and horizontal “levels”: they depended both on the sharp climb to get up into the class above yours, but also on the relative equality within members of a class that was defined by a density of networks.\textsuperscript{64}
Money was a prerequisite for entering the bourgeoisie, he wrote. You needed a certain monetary level to fulfill two prerequisites to mobility, keeping your wife out of the workforce, and your children in school until they were adults and even beyond: “To live like a bourgeois entails above all, giving your children a bourgeois education.” Such an education was expensive, and Goblot noted the link between social mobility and depopulation: “Limitation of the number of children is endemic at the juncture between [middle and upper] classes, above it because one fears a downfall, and below it because one pursues advancement.”

In a family on the way up, like the Nozières, where the father worked very hard, the mother stayed home, the child was pushed to (ideally) excel at a lengthy education, and the money for a patrimoine was saved religiously, little time or energy and few resources would be invested into a social life beyond the nuclear family. But the stringent process of getting over the barrière was exactly what kept you out of the niveau. Maurice Halbwachs, Durkheim’s most influential interwar disciple, devoted several studies to the psychology of social class in his day. Halbwachs argued that the essence of what it meant to be a true bourgeois in those years resided in the cultivation of a social sphere outside of one’s profession and immediate family. Like Goblot, Halbwachs rejected any primarily economic definition of class; in his view one’s class position was determined both by the mechanics of one’s profession and by one’s access to those forms of collective life that matter to a society: “That which characterizes a class, and explains the hierarchy of classes”, he wrote in 1937, “is essentially the degree to which those who belong to them are invited to participate in collective life in the forms most appreciated by that society.”
In his 1930s works on the psychology of social classes, Halbwachs explained that while the world-view of peasants and workers was determined by contact with raw, inanimate matter, that of middle-class employés was shaped by “the technical”—the application of rules and techniques to human beings that is required by professional life.\textsuperscript{69} The bourgeois upper class partook of that professional ethos, he admitted, but the essence of the social elite was a defining involvement in something beyond the professional, the immersion in the non-technical aspects of human life that it had inherited from the nobility. Halbwachs defined the almost bygone French nobility as a group utterly absorbed by its own customs and traditions, and in which the observation of its own members—their foibles, their uniqueness—was paramount, embodied in the whirl of social life known as \textit{le monde}.\textsuperscript{70} The modern bourgeoisie partook of professional life of course, but also, and more importantly, of the social life of \textit{le monde}. The latter, which was “closed to anything technical in human occupations”, trumped and defined the former, so that a bourgeois, in zig-zagging between these two environments, “is more influenced by \textit{le monde} when he returns to his occupations than by his occupations and functions when he returns to \textit{le monde}”. In the end, the men of this class “can only succeed in the occupations they carry out if they have the attributes and the worldly understanding they can only get from a milieu beyond their profession”.\textsuperscript{71}

The man or woman of the \textit{classes moyennes} existed, in other words, only “vertically”, in the blinkered environment created by dedication to professional technique and the steep ascent of the social escarpment; the bourgeois, on the other hand, existed in a horizontal world defined by relations with networks of friends, acquaintances and extended family. All of the more visible differences in clothing, speech, and manners
devolved from these class-specific forms of social organization. The crux of what it meant to be bourgeois is captured in Simone de Beauvoir’s acid description of her father’s norms for women which did include a sharp appreciation of class-bound forms of female intelligence. He had no esteem for “bluestockings”, she wrote, and “believed that a woman’s place was at home or in the salons”; he loved that most French of creatures, the *femme d’esprit*, and both of her parents professed admiration for “remarkably intelligent girls” who “shone in the salons”. Such norms were worlds away from the lives of the Nozières, which millions of French people, Parisians especially, recognized as their own. Violette’s act had struck at the very heart of the experience of painstaking upward mobility, the isolation and pressure involved in the quest for an education and a *patrimoine*.

Regardless of what the Surrealists wanted to believe, Violette did not strike out at the heart of the “bourgeois family”; her rejection of family life went no deeper than that of most angry teenagers. A very conventional woman, she yearned to marry and have children, which several twists of fate later she did. In this paper I have offered an explanation of why her crime resonated so deeply with her contemporaries. On the face of it, the case caused controversy because of its sexual aspects, with debates erupting in print and evidently within countless private homes about who or what was responsible for the young girl’s promiscuity, whether or not her boyfriend could be called a pimp, and whether she might have been telling the truth about her father. But some of the case’s deeper resonance, I am suggesting, came from its location within a fraught and precarious experience of social mobility that many thousands would have recognized as their own.
The case also affords an unusually intimate view of the tensions running through one family in the Paris of 1933, and hence challenges us to ponder the ways in which class and political identities, especially those of women and children, are bred in the hothouse of family pathologies. The model for such and inquiry remains Carolyn Steedman’s *Landscape for a Good Woman*, a historian’s account of growing up with a working-class single mother whose sense of social dislocation translated into defiant political conservatism. Conventional accounts of class-consciousness, Steedman insists, cannot account for the ways in which frustrated desire, envy, and investment in the material world can shape the consciousness of those without real access to the public world, women and children especially. Steedman’s mother grew up in the 1920s, like Violette, longing for clothes, glamour, and money: “When the world didn’t deliver the goods, she held the world to blame. In this way, the story she told was a form of political analysis, that allows a political interpretation to be made of her life.” But Steedman’s story is also that of her own coming of age seeing the world through fairy tales like Andersen’s “The Snow Queen” and through her mother’s anger, envy, and yearning for material goods, for the many yards of fabric it took to make a New Look skirt. Steedman and her sister learned “how the goods of that world of privilege might be appropriated...above all with clothes, the only boundary between you and a cold world.” This is class subjectivity at the margins, and none of the conventional accounts located at the center can really help us to understand it.

How can we begin to describe in social terms the consciousness of a girl like Violette, whose father was most likely grotesquely transgressing his role, and whose parents refused to spend money on the only things that could define her? There are few
well developed theories, no collective histories, to answer such questions. They can only, for now, be addressed one family, one woman, one child at a time.

1 Despite its immense contemporary resonance, very little has been written, including by scholars, on the Nozière case. An excellent narrative of the affair was published in 1975, Jean-Marie Fitère, *Violette Nozière* (Geneva: Presses de la Cité, 1975). Fitère obviously saw the police record, but his book does not include references. It served as the basis for a movie that Claude Chabrol made about the affair in 1978. Véronique Chalmet, *Violette Nozière: La fille aux poisons* (Paris: Flammarion, 2004), is a semi-fictionalized biography. There is one excellent scholarly article specifically about the case, mostly in relation to its literary and political appropriation by the Surrealists, Anne-Emmanuelle Demartini and Agnès Fontvieille, « Le Crime du sexe : la justice, l’opinion publique et les Surréalistes, regards croisés sur Violette Nozière » in Christine Bal et al., eds, *Femmes et justice pénale, 19e-20e siècles* (Rennes : Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2002), pp.244-252. The case is mentioned or briefly discussed in works on Surrealism or on famous crimes of twentieth-century France, but has received nowhere near the attention that has been devoted to the exactly contemporary crime of Christine and Léa Papin.

2 These letters are in Archives de la Ville de Paris (AVP) D2U8 380.


9 Ibid., and pp. 213-219.

10 Ibid., chapter 5, esp. p.219.

11 Interview with Simone Mayeul, March 24 2005.


15 Archives départementales de la Nièvre, 6M 193/2, 193/3, 193/4, 193/6, 193/7, 193/8, 193/9.

16 Mayeul interview, 3/24/05.

20 AVP D2U8 379, August 23 1933.
28 AVP D2U8 380, September 21 1933.
29 *Paris Soir*, August 26 1933.
31 Ibid., p. 25.
32 AVP D2U8 379, August 26 1933; 2U8 380 October 13 and December 18 1933.
37 AVP D2U8 379, August 26 1933 (Madeleine Debiez) and September 2 1933 (Zoe Pillot).
38 *Le Petit Parisien*, August 26 1933.
39 Ibid., September 11 1933.
41 AVP D2U8 380, December 16 1933.
42 *Le Petit Parisien*, August 29 1933.
50 *Paris Soir*, August 26 1933.
51 *Détective*, August 31 1933.
52 AVP D2U8 379, September 25 1933.
53 *Paris Soir*, August 26 1933.
57 AVP D2U8 379, need to find the specific references.
63 Ibid., p. 39
64 Goblot, *La Barrière et le niveau*, p. 9.
65 Ibid., pp. 23-24.
66 Ibid., p. 24.
67 Maurice Halbwachs, *Les Classes sociales* (Paris: Tournier et Constans, 1937); and *Esquisse d’une psychologie des classes sociales* (1938) (Paris: Marcel Rivière, 1964). The latter is a reworking of the former, which consists of Halbwachs’s Sorbonne lectures.
68 Halbwachs, *Les Classes sociales*, p.43.
69 Ibid., pp. 56-76.
70 Ibid., p.106
71 Ibid., pp. 106, 110.
73 Violette’s sentence was commuted to life in prison. She became an exemplary, very pious prisoner, and her sentence was reduced in 1942. She was released from prison in 1945 and married a man from the prison staff, a cook by training. They had four children and ran a restaurant (!), but her husband died in a car crash in the early 1960s. For reasons that remain unclear because access to the sources is impossible, but thanks to tireless campaigning by her lawyer, the judgment against her was reversed in 1963. That same year, however, she was diagnosed with malignant cancer and she died at age 50 in 1966, surrounded by her children and cared for by her mother.
75 Ibid., p. 6.
76 Ibid., p. 38.
77 See the perceptive analysis of Steedman’s work and its implications by Laura Lee Downs, “If ‘Woman’ is Just an Empty Category, Then Why Am I Afraid to Walk Alone at Night? Identity Politics Meets the Postmodern Subject”, in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 35 (April 1993): 414-437, especially p.434.