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Anecdotes, *Faits Divers*, and the Literary

Dominique Jullien

Anecdotes, the dictionaries tell us, are narratives that concern a singular event. They are supposed to be memorable or at least interesting.¹ Although they are supposedly based on real life, they are not considered fit to be a serious basis for a philosophical discussion or scholarly elaboration, though they could open the way for one. In fact, one could apply to the anecdote what Roland Barthes says about the *fait divers*: it is “total,” “immanent” information.² Anecdotes do not formally make a point, they simply tell something—after them, nothing more needs to be said. Anecdotes have a kind of “so-what?” quality to them. But at the same time, anecdotes capture an essential truth about something; they are often supposed to be in some sense exemplary. For instance, Hegel’s anecdotal evidence about Italian women’s susceptibility to dying of love is meant to capture an essential truth about the Italian national character.³ The anecdote and the *fait divers*, while not identical (the *fait divers* belongs to a more specialized cultural context, that of the daily press with its hierarchy of bigger vs. smaller news items),⁴ obviously have significant overlap. One could propose that anecdotes are little stories about big people, while *faits divers* are stories about little people made big by publicity or the press. “Voici un assassinat: s’il est politique, c’est une information, s’il ne l’est pas, c’est un fait divers,” states Barthes (188). This essay will attempt to bring to light some points about anecdotes, *fait divers*, and their connections to the larger formal question of the literary, in relation both to narrative (“littérairement ce sont des fragments de roman,” Barthes observes about *faits divers* [189]) and to publication, since the etymological meaning of anecdote is “unpublished” (*American Heritage Dictionary*).

The first example is Félix Féneon’s *Nouvelles en trois lignes*, a genre of ultra-brief narrative he created for the daily newspaper *Le Matin*, where his three-liners appeared from May to November 1906. Terse, laconic, exuding a dark humor and a subversive wit, these minuscule *faits divers* tell stories of crimes, accidents, tragic loves and absurd deaths, abuse, strikes, and social ills—all in the fewest words possible. Here are a few samples:

Madame Fournier, M. Voisin, M. Septeuil se sont pendus: neurasthénie, cancer, chômage (Œuvres II: 991).

Derrière un cercueil, Mangin, de Verdun, cheminait. Il n'atteignit pas, ce jour-là, le cimetière. La mort le surprit en route (II: 1012).

Les femmes rouges d'Hennebont ont saccagé les vivres qu'apportaient aux ouvriers rentrés aux forges les femmes jaunes (II: 620).

Le feu, 126, boulevard Voltaire. Un caporal fut blessé. Deux lieutenants reçurent sur la tête, l'un une poutre, l'autre un pompier (II: 1026).

MM. Deshumeurs, de La Ferté-sous-Jouarre, et Fontaine, de Nancy, se sont tués, en tombant l'un d'un camion, l'autre d'une fenêtre (II: 697).

Comme son train stoppait, Mme Parlucy, de Nanterre, ouvrit, se pencha. Passa un express qui brisa la tête et la portière (II: 716).

"Je télégraphie à Ravachol!" criait Nini Colonne, Pantinoise. On l'arrêta pour folle, la mort du compagnon étant de notoriété (II: 988).

Renouer avec Artémise Rétro, des Lilas, était le vœu du tendre Jean Voul. Elle restait inexorable. Aussi la poignarda-t-il (II: 973).

Mlle Paulin, des Mureaux, 46 ans, a été saccagée, à 9 heures du soir, par un satyre (II: 1023).

Le cadavre du sexagénaire Dorlay se balançait à un arbre, à Arcueil, avec cette pancarte: "Trop vieux pour travailler" (II: 614).

Une Européenne de Tunisie a été enlevée, à Medjez, par deux Arabes paillards. Elle put fuir, encore intacte, mais déjà demi-nue (II: 661).

Trop pauvre pour l'élever, dit-il, Triquet, de Théligny (Sarthe), a étouffé son fils âgé d'un mois (II: 577).

Le Dunkerquois Scheid a tiré trois fois sur sa femme. Comme il la manquait toujours, il visa sa belle-mère: le coup porta (II: 566).

Le serrurier Bonnaut, de Montreuil, causait devant sa porte, quand l'apache "Gueule d'empeigne" le frappa de deux coups de couteau (II: 594).

V. Kaiser, 14 ans, allait à Mt-St-Martin (M.-et-M.) voir son père. Le satyre du bois qu'elle traversait se dressa devant elle... (II: 1010).

Jugeant sa fille (19 ans) trop peu austère, l'horloger stéphanois Jallat l'a tuée. Il est vrai qu'il lui reste onze autres enfants (II: 763).

Le mendiant septuagénaire Verniot, de Clichy, est mort de faim. Sa paillasse recelait 2000 francs. Mais il ne faut pas généraliser (II: 986).

These briefest of stories turn the anecdotal into a news item. Crossing the line between the tragic and the absurd, they elevate these micro-events to the status of news, in effect publishing the unpublished—albeit in the back page of a daily newspaper—as lurid but ultimately insignificant *fait divers* to be immediately consumed and cast aside. They also display a corrosive irony: these dry, concise, unsentimental “narratives” (since *nouvelles* here means both news and stories) reveal to us the less glamorous side of the Belle Époque. Mallarmé was probably right to say that Fénéon’s real bombs were his writings. In addition to being a famous journalist and an acclaimed art critic, Fénéon was also an anarchist sympathizer. When, in April 1894, Fénéon was arrested on suspicion of having participated in the recent anarchist bomb attack on the restaurant Foyot, Mallarmé testified in his defense, claiming that “il n’y [a] pas, pour Fénéon, de meilleurs détonateurs que ses articles.” Coming from a believer in the power of *Le Livre*, however, this was not meant to express that Fénéon was an inoffensive writer disconnected from political violence, but on the contrary, it was meant to underline the explosive force of literature itself; for he added: “Je ne pense pas qu’on puisse se servir d’arme plus efficace que la littérature.”⁵ Whether or not Fénéon’s involvement in the anarchist movement resulted in active participation,⁶ it is clear that the *Nouvelles en trois lignes*, written twelve years after the notorious *Procès des Trente* and Fénéon’s acquittal for lack of evidence, partake of the same corrosive attack on society.

Formally, they also partake of the *haiku* esthetic—one must remember that *japonisme* was all the rage at that time, and that Fénéon, as an avant-garde art critic, did his part to promote the fashion⁷—the reader is struck by the poetic force of these miniature narratives that suggest so much while saying so little. The sketch, the *ébauche*, which allows for the spectator’s imagination, is at the root of Japanese art.⁸ This is one final important feature of these *nouvelles*: their reader, like the reader of *haiku*, is evidently expected to complete the picture by using his or her imagination. One last example:

Le soir, Blandine Guérin, de Vaucé (Sarthe), se dévêtit dans l’escalier et, nue comme un mur d’école, alla se noyer au puits (II: 1013).

We imagine this woman, young perhaps, certainly lonely, in her final poignant act of rebellion against life. The ironic set phrase—*nue comme un mur d’école*, instead of the more common *nue comme un ver*, or *nue comme la main*—tells us so much about the bleak, prosaic walls around her life. The uncanny reversal of the common allegory of truth (a naked woman coming out of a well, whereas here she is throwing herself into

it) tells us an all-too-awful truth—provided, that is, we complete the picture. Again Fénéon saw the same division of labor at work in painting: “Réservant au peintre la tâche sévère et contrôlable de commencer les tableaux, attribuons au spectateur le rôle avantageux, commode et gentiment comique de les achever par sa méditation ou son rêve” (*Ceuvres* I: 336).

The brief form of Fénéon’s three-liner thus combines both the pictorial suggestiveness found in Japanese ink drawings or calligraphy—the viewer must flesh out the picture mentally, “completing them by his meditation or his dream”—and the narrative essence that turns these dramatic nuggets into potential short stories. “Le fait divers est-il autre chose,” writes Alfred Jarry ironically, “sinon qu’un roman, du moins qu’une nouvelle due à la brillante imagination des reporters? Si les reporters devaient attendre que le fait divers existât, leur journal paraîtrait le surlendemain” (2: 513). Jarry, beyond his trademark tongue-in-cheek humor (he is in effect blurring the line between journalism and novel-writing by praising the journalists’ imagination), points out an essential connection between *fait divers* and story. A close friend of Fénéon’s and a fellow contributor to the brilliant *Revue blanche*, Jarry relished the ambiguity that allowed these minuscule narratives to cross the divide between fact (he called *fait divers* “la menue monnaie de l’information”) and fiction.⁹ In the three-line drama lies a serial novel just waiting to be spun out over weeks, months, or years of daily installments. In Félix Fénéon’s three-line novellas, something like the opposite of the never-ending *roman-feuilleton* is happening, as if the writer had ironically undertaken to rewind the yarn back into its tightest possible ball.

The second example that can help shed light on the subject of anecdotes is Alexandre Privat d’Anglemont, author of two books of anecdotes on Paris, *Paris anecdote* (1854) and *Paris inconnu* (1861). The second book was published posthumously; he died at a relatively young age from consumption, brought on by his habit of wandering the streets at night.¹⁰ Like his 18th-century predecessor, Sébastien Mercier, Privat wrote “des livres avec ses jambes”;¹¹ and like his more famous contemporary and fellow *flâneur* Baudelaire, Privat d’Anglemont spent his nights wandering through the poor neighborhoods in search of picturesque, proto-surrealist anecdotes. The Paris Privat describes is entirely nocturnal and its economy (“les industries inconnues,” as the introductory chapter of *Paris anecdote* is titled [13]) is entirely fantastic. His characters are the most marginal of all. They are not simply distinct from the wealthier Parisians (in keeping with the polarized view of the

city common to this kind of text);¹² they eke out their “existences problématiques” (14) on the margins not just of society but of reality as well. His books are filled with tales of quaint encounters, and describe the bizarre trades of old Paris. The reader is introduced to a killer of cats, who sells the skins as sable and the flesh as rabbit (113), a painter of turkey feet, expert at giving them the glossy look of freshly killed fowl (50), a breeder of maggots for the many fishermen of Paris (23), a retailer of used bread crusts to feed rabbits (52), a guardian angel who escorts drunks back home safely (66), a maker of artificial rooster crests (116), a renter of leeches to patients who cannot afford to buy them (121), and—strangest of all—even a lyric poet who makes a living with his poetry (139). The list goes on.

Milord l’Arsouille, a.k.a Lord Henry Seymour (1801-1859), the eccentric English millionaire who held court in the Paris slums, haunts the final pages of the book (228-240). Although Privat never met him in person, but only heard of him, he is the benign ghost who provides the author with a kind of aristocratic patronage. Milord l’Arsouille, often emulated (but never surpassed) by young and wealthy Parisians, became a legend for the poor people, a real-life replica of Eugène Sue’s Rodolphe de Gerolstein, the hero of his fantastically popular serial novel *Les Mystères de Paris* (1843).

Maintenant, milord l’Arsouille n’est pas encore mort dans le souvenir du peuple, seulement il est passé à l’état légendaire. C’est pour la nouvelle génération un prince Rodolphe, une sorte de redresseur de torts, doué d’une force herculéenne, qui, dans son jeune temps, parcourait les cabarets en protégeant les faibles ou châtiant les méchants” (Privat, 239).

Like Prince Rudolph, Milord l’Arsouille is a protector of the weak and punisher of the evil, and outrageous anecdotes proliferate around him (239-240).

With an acutely nostalgic eye, Privat d’Anglemon, well aware that this old-fashioned Paris was rapidly vanishing—not so rapidly, though, we might say, since Aragon’s *Paysan de Paris*, some sixty years later, would still sing to the same tune¹³—Privat felt compelled to document it before it was all gone, just as photographer Eugène Atget would want to document the old Paris of the *petits métiers*.¹⁴ The anecdotes and the photographs appear to be almost mutually equivalent. Together they perpetuate a picturesque, archaic, romanticized image of the city. We could say that the city actually changes more rapidly than literary fashions:

Le vieux Paris n'est plus (la forme d'une ville
 Change plus vite, hélas! Que le cœur d'un mortel)
 [...]
 Paris change! Mais rien dans ma mélancolie
 N'a bougé!

— Baudelaire, "Le Cygne," *Les Fleurs du mal* (107-8)

There is a straight genetic line, I would suggest, that leads from Privat d'Anglemont to Baudelaire, Alexandre Dumas, then on to Eugène Atget and the Surrealists, and beyond, all the way to the historian of Paris, Louis Chevalier, who followed up on his classic *Classes laborieuses et classes dangereuses à Paris au XIXe siècle* with personal, anecdotal books on the seedier aspects of his Paris: *Montmartre du plaisir et du crime* (1980) and especially *Histoires de la nuit parisienne* (1982), which presents itself as a "livre d'histoires et non d'histoire" (9). The Paris Louis Chevalier conjures up in this book, with all its picturesque inhabitants, disappeared, he claims, in the sixties—again the nostalgic topos. In this book, Paris comes directly and essentially unchanged from the novels of Balzac, Hugo, and Sue, and from the poetry of Baudelaire, who all get pride of place in Chevalier's literary introduction (18-19). It is strongly reminiscent of the photographic views of Paris by Brassai, who also strolled around, alone or in the company of writers, in search of subjects from the city's underworld, and in whose *Paris de nuit* both squalor and poetry mingle. Strangely anachronistic, the marginal types that the author meets during his nightly rambles—prostitutes, pimps, taxi drivers, bums, wrestlers, acrobats, concièrges, small-time grifters—lead up to the enigmatic closing anecdote about the young man who, partly as a result of his encounter with Chevalier, became "possessed" by Lacenaire, the famous romantic murderer, further glamorized by Jacques Prévert and Marcel Carné in their classic film *Les Enfants du Paradis* (1945). At the heart of Chevalier's anecdote lies an unsolved police mystery: one morning the young man is found lying in his blood. There is a note pinned to his chest reading "Signé Lacenaire." The culprit is never found. The young man's obsessive impersonation of Lacenaire provides a powerful symbol of the enduring spirit of the city, the ghost of the old Paris haunting the modern one (Chevalier, "Signé Lacenaire," *Histoires* 304-16).

Louis Chevalier was also the author of the first groundbreaking study in what was to become a key field of contemporary historiography: the history of *fait divers*. His posthumous book, *Splendeurs et misères du fait divers*, is given a Balzacian title that reminds us that, for Chevalier, all of Balzac's novels are but overgrown *faits divers*. The final section of the book, entitled "Transfiguration romantique," points out the vital link between *fait divers*

and Balzac's novels, which exploit the anecdote's narrative potential (141-43). The historian's treatment of the anecdotal is also what allows Chevalier to cross disciplinary boundaries: "c'est ici, sur ce point [i.e., the anecdotal] que l'entreprise d'histoire telle que je la conçois, et l'entreprise romanesque se rejoignent" (143). By linking so intimately the anecdotal and Balzacian realism, Chevalier is able to subsume both aspects of the anecdote—the banal and the lurid—into one narrative source.

Are anecdotes and *fait divers* necessarily violent? *Fait divers*, according to Chevalier, acknowledge the banal, the everyday, but on the other hand, they can also reveal the darker, unsuspected, fascinating side of our society. The Surrealist anecdote, it seems, requires blood—after all, Breton himself advocated random shooting as the simplest form of Surrealism: "L'acte surréaliste le plus simple consiste, revolver au poing, à descendre dans la rue et à tirer au hasard, tant qu'on peut dans la foule" (78). In our day and age, endowed with so many unpublished Surrealist poets, this simple form of Surrealism seems to have grown to epidemic proportions. Breton's formidably stupid statement exacerbates the decadence of the "esprit *Revue blanche*," which, a decade or two earlier, already flirted with anarchism as a kind of elegant trend.¹⁵ André Gide's hero Lafcadio, who commits a casual murder simply as a way to prove the existence of *actes gratuits*, is a case in point (Gide 193-5). More generally, Breton's aestheticization of violence perpetuates and modernizes (updating the weaponry in particular) the Romantic love affair between the outcast poet and the margins of lawful society.¹⁶

But anecdotes can also pull us in the other direction, in the direction of the banal, everyday occurrence. A petty quarrel in a crowded bus, followed by an idle discussion about a missing coat button—such is the anecdote that provides the basis for Raymond Queneau's *Exercices de style*, a book consisting of 99 retellings of the same unremarkable story in different styles. The first exercise, entitled "Notations," provides the bare facts: "Dans l'S, à une heure d'affluence. Un type dans les vingt-six ans, chapeau mou avec cordon remplaçant le ruban (...) Le type en question s'irrite contre un voisin. Il lui reproche de le bousculer chaque fois qu'il passe quelqu'un (...) Deux heures plus tard, je le rencontre Cour de Rome, devant la gare Saint-Lazare. Il est avec un camarade qui lui dit: 'Tu devrais faire mettre un bouton supplémentaire à ton pardessus'..." (7). "The point about the original story having no point, is one of the points of the book," states Queneau's English translator (15).

Even more steeped in the quotidian, and thus even more minuscule, is Georges Perec's 1978 radio broadcast entitled *Tentative de description de choses vues au carrefour Mabillon*. During six consecutive hours of a particular day (19 May 1978) Perec sat watching the same intersection and recording everything that went on. The project reflected his passion for lists—so many buses, so many women in raincoats, so many passing commercials, so many red cars and so many blue cars—and for what he termed *l'infra-ordinaire* (the opposite of the extraordinary).¹⁷ The most dramatic *fait divers* in the entire series is probably the woman who slips and falls while crossing the street...

From the surrealist anecdote to the hyperrealist anecdote, these are opposite attempts to capture the raw, unpublished poetry of the city. Alexandre Dumas's hero Salvator says it best at the beginning of *Les Mohicans de Paris*. When advising a young poet who is at a loss for subjects, he tells him to simply wander the streets: "Les romans, poète, c'est la société qui les fait; cherchez dans votre tête, fouillez votre imagination, creusez votre cerveau, vous n'y trouverez, en trois mois, en six mois, en un an, rien de pareil à ce que le hasard, la fatalité, la Providence (...) noue et dénoue dans une nuit, dans une ville comme Paris!" (I: 62). Like his exotic predecessor, the caliph Haroun Al-Rashid, the hero of so many *Thousand and One Nights* tales, who liked to spend his sleepless nights going incognito around Bagdad in search of adventures, this modern prince in disguise lets the city lead him to the next encounter, the next *fait divers*, the next story, the next installment of the novel. "Au revoir, seigneur commissionnaire! Comme on dit dans les *Mille et Une Nuits*; car (...) décidément, vous êtes un prince déguisé," exclaims Dumas's young medical student Ludovic (I: 872). Slumming in the wretched neighborhoods of pre-Haussmannian Paris, dressed as a street porter, yet revered as a prince by the paupers over whom he exercises his benign authority, Salvator is able to both grasp the complex social webs of the city and to turn its myriad occurrences into fiction. The poet merely takes in the cornucopia of anecdotes offered by the city, fulfilling the anecdote's narrative potential, no longer an author in the usual sense of the word, but rather a publisher.

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Notes

1. Anecdote: "the narrative of a detached incident, or of a single event, told as being in itself striking or interesting" (*Oxford English Dictionary*, second edition). "ANEC-DOTE (gr, *anekdota*, choses inédites). Bref récit d'un fait curieux, amusant ou peu connu" (*Petit Larousse illustré*).
2. "Le fait divers (...) est une information totale, ou plus exactement, immanente" (Barthes 189).
3. Hegel notes that Italian women and maidens "not infrequently (...) have died instantaneously from grief over an unhappy love affair" (X: 66/48). See John McCumber, "To Be is to Be an Anecdote: Hegel and the Therapeutic Absolute" in this issue.
4. The *fait divers* harks back to the beginning of the modern French press with Emile de Girardin's *La Presse*, which, in 1836, instituted the tremendously successful *roman-feuilleton*, and in 1843 featured a regular section entitled "Nouvelles et faits divers." See Dominique Kalifa, *Crime et culture au XIXe siècle* (135). Théophile Gautier used the word as early as 1838, and it became a household word during the Second Empire; see D. Kalifa, *L'Encre et le sang: récits de crimes et société à la Belle Epoque* (19-20).
5. Interview in the daily newspaper *le Soir*, 27 April 1894 (qtd. in Joan U. Halperin, *Félix Fénéon and the Language of Art Criticism* 9). A few years later, Camille Mauclair would rephrase the idea in more dramatic words, quoting Mallarmé as saying: "Je ne sais qu'une bombe, c'est le livre." Mauclair, *L'Art en silence* 1901 (qtd. in Leslie Hill, "Blanchot and Mallarmé" 908).
6. In Halperin's biography, *Félix Fénéon: Aesthete and Anarchist in Fin-de-Siècle Paris*, Fénéon's active participation in the attacks is treated as fact. See particularly Part Four, "Iris-in on Anarchism, 1891-1894" (241-295). On Fénéon's deathbed confession about the bomb at the Hotel Foyot, see 276 and note 15.
7. Particularly through his promotion of Neo-Impressionist painters such as Seurat and Signac. See John Rewald, *Post-Impressionism: From Van Gogh to Gauguin* on Fénéon's friendship with and defense of Seurat (87-88), and on Fénéon's anarchist sympathies (140-141). On Fénéon's praise of Japanese art's "ultimes simplifications" and its connection to the *nouvelles en trois lignes*, see Jan Hokenson, *Japan, France, and East-West Aesthetics: French literature, 1867-2000* (192-196).
8. See Halperin, *Félix Fénéon and the Language of Art Criticism* (90). Marilyn Johnson also points out the analogy between Fénéon's three-liners and *haiku* in her review of Luc Sante's translation of Fénéon's *Novels in Three Lines*, "Haiku Journalism" (21).
9. On the convergence between *fait divers* and serial novels, see Kalifa, *Crime et culture* (132).
10. See Alfred Delvau's biographical note in Privat, *Paris inconnu* (12).
11. Delvau in Privat, *Paris inconnu* (9).
12. On the manichean contrast between representations of affluent and seedy Paris prevalent in the world of the *roman-feuilleton*, see Kalifa, *L'Encre et le sang* (117).
13. The collection of nostalgic anecdotes on the vanishing aspects of old Paris was, among other things, a thriving literary business. On the "principe de nostalgie" at work in this particular genre, see Kalifa, *Crime et culture* (38-39). Aragon is heir to a

long and solid tradition when he celebrates the *passages* threatened by “le grand instinct américain, importé dans la capitale par un préfet du second Empire (...) c’est aujourd’hui seulement que la pioche les menace, qu’ils sont effectivement devenus les sanctuaires d’un culte de l’éphémère” (21).

14 See Andrea Loselle, “André Breton’s and Eugène Atget’s Valentines” in this issue.

15 “On était anarchiste parce que cela avait de l’allure, du romanesque,” recalled Camille Mauclair in *Servitude et grandeur littéraires* (qtd. in Kalifa, *L’Encre et le sang* 187). Breton himself acknowledged the anarchist seeds in Surrealism; see Jerrold Seigel, *Bohemian Paris: Culture, Politics, and the Boundaries of Bourgeois Life, 1830-1930* (370).

16 On the Romantic glamorization of crime and criminals, in particular the comparison of real life *fait divers* with serial novels and melodramas, see Kalifa, *L’Encre et le sang* (67).

17 Georges Perec, *Entretiens, Poésie ininterrompue, Tentative de description de choses vues au carrefour Mabillon le 19 mai 1978* (1997). This recording of 4 CDs is comparable in its goal to two published projects, Perec’s *Tentative d’épuisement d’un lieu parisien* (1975) and *L’Infra-ordinaire* (1989).