Où donc avait-elle appris cette corruption, presque immatérielle à force d'être profonde et dissimulée?

(Her depravity was so deep and so dissembled as to be almost intangible: where could she have learned it?)

—Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*

SOPHIE LA ROSIÈRE

Trained as a sculptor, since 2009 Iris Häussler has been painting. But not just any painting. It's been out of date for a hundred years! After teaching herself how to paint for a retrograde purpose, Häussler has produced the complete oeuvre of the unknown French artist Sophie La Rosière, who died in 1948. Häussler has created an artistic persona (a heteronym) through which to channel this fictitious artist's secrets while, at the same time, fabricating a biography for her and an elaborate backstory of a hidden erotic liaison that intersects, nonetheless, with real people, historical events, and actual artistic movements.

The paintings, however, are merely a kernel within the larger shell of La Rosière's life circumstances, which includes the recreation of her studio together with its products and detritus. "Just as a writer does," Häussler states, "I invent characters with complex biographies and create detailed environments for them to inhabit. By equipping them with visually productive life habits I ensure that their surroundings acquire an inconspicuously artistic shape." The two mirror each other—the paintings and the studio—as the complementary products of an overall artistic conception that evolves into a work: that of Häussler's. Each reinforces the reality of the other while at the same time blurring their separation, each part contributing to a plausible whole. Häussler calls her project a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a total work of art—and it is more than all-consuming of the artist Häussler herself, being the life work of La Rosière, too. All-*too*-consuming would be more to the point: where the boundaries between artist and heteronym are blurred, where Häussler's studio slowly and imperceptibly becomes La Rosière's. Plausibility comes at a cost: the creation of one identity might mean the erasure of another, the unconscious slippage of one within the other.

The project does not stop here, burying La Rosière's secrets within the obscurity of her paintings. Literally: after some trauma yet fully to be explained, La Rosière covered her paintings with black encaustic, obliterating their images while preserving them. This is the condition in which they were discovered, masked as avant-garde monochromes from another era. Yet the reveal permitted by a forensic investigation, which is also part of the project, only intensifies the mystery: Why were these paintings abandoned? Why were they hidden by a layer of black encaustic? And, ultimately, what secrets do they conceal?

X-rays reveal accomplished oil paintings beneath the encaustic surfaces: erotic paintings of fecund female nudes. Being unveiled, however, does not reveal the paintings' mystery—only perhaps paradoxically covering it further, even though images are now visible through X-rays.[1] These X-rays unearthed a coherent artistic activity and set in process the discovery of what artist lay behind these paintings' abandonment.

Here is the story we know so far. Thinking that they had purchased two modern monochrome paintings by a 1950s or 1960s French artist while on a trip to Paris, a couple of Toronto collectors accidentally discover that the works actually are by an unknown painter who worked earlier in the century. In January 2016, they engage the C2RMF (Centre de recherche et de restauration des musées de France) to X-ray the encaustic panels. What the X-rays surprisingly revealed set off a line of inquiry in which the artist was discovered, through a serendipitous path Rui Mateus Amaral has related elsewhere in this book, to be Sophie La Rosière. But who was Sophie La Rosière and why is nothing known about her artistic career? Furthermore, and more strangely, why were the paintings disguised and hidden under an obscuring layer of encaustic, which nonetheless has protected them?

There are no definitive answers, but a few things have been learned about this artist that allow us to partially reconstruct her history. What we now know is that La Rosière never intended to have a public life as a painter and actually intended never to reveal the very fact that she painted. She never purchased canvas, instead painting on dismantled furniture or backs of doors that could be hidden away, and she made her own pigments. After some trauma—believed to be the end of her love affair with the artists' model Florence (surname unknown) in 1917—she obscured all history of their encounter, celebrated presumably in this outpouring of erotic images, but needing, nonetheless, to be suppressed and hidden from view. Submerged necessarily, as well, was any history of her artistic achievements.

Obviously, we go against La Rosière's wishes in recovering her activities and exposing her secrets, if that is what we do—because the two are not necessarily the same: uncovering the paintings to reveal her secret. Revealing the images does not reveal La Rosière's secret. The revealed images may only be the covering up of an originating secret differing from the trauma of her breakup with Florence. Secret upon secret. Secret within secret. There never is only one secret, one secret to be revealed. This is the secret of Sophie La Rosière. The first secret is that there is never only one secret.

Are we getting ahead of ourselves? What, after all, is a secret? Can there be a secret the subject doesn't know, even if she herself hides it? If so, La Rosière would be such a case, perhaps Häussler, too. Here we might ask of the banality of the secret. Because the expenditure on this secret, on behalf of this secret, is extravagant, far surpassing its 'originality' or worth, on both La Rosière's and Häussler's part—which is not to fault either of them. On the contrary, we cannot say what fascinates us more: La Rosière herself, or Häussler's fascination with her subject, becoming one with her in all this obsessive, wanton production.

How far would Häussler be in on the secret, Sophie's secret, which she herself, Häussler, put in place, secreted in the story and concealed beneath the encaustic of the paintings? Häussler's surface secret perhaps is only that she has assumed this heteronym of "Sophie La Rosière", then elaborated the fiction of her life while producing her oeuvre in some sort of way that, over time, art and life synced together. This syncing as well presumably leaves traces of occasional unconscious slippages between the two—niches in which other obsessional complexes reside and hide in the open. And who can say what came first here: the pictures or the story? Were the paintings begun on the basis of a vaguely articulated history? Or was a story found to fit the facts of painterly production, that is, rationalized after the fact on the basis of a semi-unconscious activity on the artist's part, here Häussler?

Having invented the term and practice, the Portuguese writer Fernando Pessoa is the closet example to the heteronymity Häussler pursues in visual art, wherein one creates an independent artistic persona with a differing aesthetic practice from one's own. She, too, works like a writer to invent a character who is an author, but the artistic persona in whose name the work is made is now a painter and not a writer, as in Pessoa's case—and, furthermore, a painter who is dead! Like Pessoa, Häussler must both invent a persona and fabricate a biography, a context in which the work theoretically is produced. Her fabrication is not imaginary, however, merely stated as out-of-frame biographical detail. Context must be realized, materialized, that is. Häussler must create more than a believable biography and consequent artworks that are formally consistent and that have an aesthetic coherence separate from her own artistic identity, but also an environment in which the work is produced—a studio, and moreover, a domicile that houses it, for instance—as well as a practice that is evidenced in more than the artworks, that is, stylistically, but in other artifacts as well, the whole artifactual, indeed artificial, setup.

As Häussler admits, not only does she invent characters, she creates—'recreates', one might say—their environments, their habitus: "By equipping them with visually productive life habits I ensure that their surroundings acquire an inconspicuously artistic shape." One could say differently that, submerged in their surroundings, the characters acquire inconspicuous habits, with their personalized psychopathologies of everyday life revealed in the smallest or unlikeliest of details. As a good German, Häussler would know that God, or the devil, is in the detail.

Closed in on themselves, the studio and paintings compose a hermeneutic circle. If only we knew where to enter in this symbolic circle to decipher the meaning. La Rosière's biography would seem to be one avenue but it only buoys the fiction, keeps it plausibly afloat. We won't really get anywhere with it. The paintings charge ahead in their own unacknowledged—that is to say, hidden—dynamic. They flash with intensity. And here I mean both La Rosière *and* Häussler as mediums of these images. Can we say that Häussler consciously paints what La Rosière consciously painted, even if Häussler's is a sober obsession and La Rosière's an intoxicated one? Or is it otherwise, as I believe, that Häussler unconsciously paints what La Rosière unconsciously painted, her hand guided by Sophie's, two operating in concert as a couple, Sophie's secrets ventriloquized, so to speak, posthumously through her partner. Sophie's secrets were merely muffled, stifled beneath the paintings' enveloping encaustic. The paintings were not destroyed; rather their forbidden content was annulled but not fully disavowed. There is something of Madame Bovary's wilful rebelliousness in this dissembling gesture.

Implicated within one another, neither paintings nor studio, strangely, discloses the other as an interpretative key to meaning. Implication only more tightly binds their mutual enclosure, their common encrypting, and perhaps, their common secret. It is as if the amber-like patina that suffuses the imagery of the painting and gives them their historical sheen was as opaque and dense as the paintings' enveloping encaustic. The romantically abandoned studio is not a rosy lens through which to view the discovered paintings. Rather

than exposing anything that transpires within, the studio, in fact, is the first of the paintings' encrypting. The studio was already a crypt, even before it definitively became one in 1918 when La Rosière abandoned it.

The studio was always a place for hiding away—the first symbol for the dissembling within, the outer vault of a profound deception. Fundamentally, the studio concealed Sophie and Florence's illicit relationship and prevented discovery *in flagrante delicto* of their lesbian affair so flagrantly depicted and flaunted in a daring series of paintings created there. The studio hid this very act of painting just as La Rosière gave no trace of an artistic practice, buying no canvas or pigments that could give herself away. Every level of the painting process was a hiding away, given as she was to painting on the backs of boards that could be stowed away, their doors closed and shuttered. Gestures were given and withdrawn at the same time, all on the same surface and support.

So concealed, nevertheless, the images are bursting, ripened artificially in this hothouse environment. Having no training, belonging to no school, is La Rosière an original naïve with no relation to the artistic movements of her time, locked away in her studio uncontaminated by outside influences? It seems unlikely. Her paintings correspond to those of her contemporaries, in particular the Nabis, though she was independent from them socially. Moreover, her 'sexological decadence' could only have ripened in the perverted atmosphere promulgated by fin-de-siècle literature, damning volumes of which have been found in her library.[2] "Où donc avait-elle appris cette corruption?" Precisely here.

Sharing with the Nabis painters, such as Maurice Denis, Édouard Vuillard, Pierre Bonnard, and Aristide Maillol, their intimist subject matter, La Rosière yet differs from them in one significant regard: the tendency of the Nabis to carry domesticity outdoors in paintings that evince the pleasures of family and the natural intimacy of mothers and children.[3] Sophie's pleasures were cloistered indoors, entwined with Florence's. Here an artificial red glow emanated unnaturally from "ce rouge soleil que l'on nomme l'amour".[4] In a choice between the quasi-innocence of Courbet's *Young Ladies on the Banks of the Seine (Summer),* 1856–57, and his not so innocent *The Sleepers*, 1862, La Rosière's paintings show us where her proclivities lay:

> À la pâle clarté des lampes languissantes,
> Sur de profonds coussins tout imprégnés d'odeur.

So Baudelaire wrote in one of his condemned poems about lesbianism, "Femmes damnées".[5] Sophie definitely was *fleur du mal*!

Where did she learn this corruption? Perhaps the dissemblance went deeper.

Has anyone pointed out how the studio repeats the convent in La Rosière's biography? When she was 16, Sophie's parents sent her to the Daughters of Charity convent in Aubervilliers, northeast of Paris, to protect her from the destructive influence of the older, wiser, more urbane and reckless Madeleine Smith, with whom they feared the scandalous disaster, so frightening to bourgeois families, of a lesbian relationship. Later in her life, at the end of Sophie and Florence's affair, the studio came to represent the stifling of the desire that originally flourished there. So too, earlier in her youth, the convent was an entombment of budding life and love. But as initially the studio was a protective seclusion, could not the convent, too, be a site where covert acts secretly transpired? Could Sophie be so easily admonished and her deviant behaviour corrected by such punitive placement without turning this secrecy to her advantage? It seems that the convent, as place of confinement, and the studio, as a place of liberation, cannot be so easily opposed. Rather, they are ambivalently opposed.

> Installed in place of the lost object, the incorporated object continues to recall the fact that something else was lost: the desires quelled by repression. Like a commemorative monument, the incorporated object betokens the place, the date, and the circumstances in which desires were banished from introjection: they stand like tombs in the life of the ego.
>
> —Maria Torok, "The Illness of Mourning and the Fantasy of the Exquisite Corpse"

I've never been satisfied with the explanation that La Rosière concealed her paintings as a result of her traumatic break with Florence, even if she also wished to defend herself, if it ever became public, from the notoriety and social opprobrium of such a lesbian affair. It seems too dramatic a gesture, even if justified by this secondary protective measure. Why not destroy the paintings altogether? Why this complicating act of protecting the paintings while obscuring them? After all, encaustic is the easiest of materials to remove, needing only the application of heat lower than that which melts oil pigments. In the end, La Rosière's dissembling destruction was one more disguise, one more deception in a long line of falsifications. I believe the prevailing explanation is not complicated enough to deal with what was implicated already in this gesture: what *previous* secret did the *exposed* paintings already obscure?

In other words, the story presently is not traumatic enough to account for the complex psychological motivations of La Rosière's final acts. There must be something else more deeply buried in Sophie's story or in her family's history to account for them. However, we cannot just add facts to the existing story to prove our point—facts that Häussler herself has not instituted and implicitly authenticated. It is not enough for new facts to be plausible. Today, with the internet we can prove almost any connection between people.[6] Only a fact supported by the work itself, that is, by the creative dynamics of the work, the paintings *and* their cover up, only such a fact, or revelation, that explains the deeper psychological dynamics, means anything at this point. So we have to ask instead, what exactly was forbidden that needed to be hidden?

It seems plausible that there were two crises—two secrets to hide away. The first turned the lock; the second threw away the key. As a typological precursor of the studio, the convent school already has given us a clue to secrets cached within secrets. Breaking with Florence would be a repeating and compounding of Sophie's earlier enforced isolation from Madeleine Smith. After her break with Florence, the studio could be seen in light of the convent as a place of the repression of desire, as much as it originally sheltered an efflorescence of sexual liberation. Crypt upon crypt.

While we are on the subject of the convent again, perhaps we need to revise the reason Sophie was sent there. Who sent her: the parents to get her away from Madeleine, or the mother to get her away from the father? It's not what you think. The father did not touch her. It's more complex. She who was hidden away, did she have something to hide? And did the family have something to hide, too?

In 1888, Sophie was summoned home from the convent to nurse her father who had been left stricken by a stroke. With her parents' deaths in 1904 and 1905, after being so long confined once again, now in the family domicile, did Sophie experience that increase in libido common in mourning: an impulse one feels as a crime against one's ideal object?[7] Increase in libido was entwined inseparably with her venturing out into the world to attend painting classes at La Grande Chaumière and her meeting Florence, entangled, that is, in the dual libidinal acts of painting and lesbianism. (Once again there is a striking parallel with Madeleine Smith: Madeleine's long

affair and planned marriage with her painting mentor Jean-Jacques Henner, 35 years her senior, ending with his death in 1905, then her subsequent marriage in 1907 to Pierre Champion, 16 years her junior.)

And yet in all this libidinal outpouring, what did Sophie feel guilty about? And what was her ideal object—her father, that is—guilty of?

Knowing that there must be two crises corresponding to two secrets, the second only silently reinforcing the first, originally I thought perhaps that Pierre Champion's successful campaign for mayor of Nogent-sur-Marne in 1919 might have brought Madeleine to implore Sophie to keep their old relationship secret, knowing too how unstable and unpredictable Sophie then was from her breakup with Florence. Who knows what contagion could spread to upset social propriety and make this man of property unelectable in a small, gossipy town? Here would be a betrayal of their early 'friendship' that compounded Florence's betrayal of Sophie, a second crisis coming closely on the first, although its secret preceded.

Then I realized that, though we are in the realm of speculation, a case such as this—with secrets encrypting other secrets—could only be accounted for by the fact that Sophie had an older sister... her secret sister! Sophie had an older sister, though there is no record of her; she has disappeared from sight. Sophie's secret would be that she had a sister, or, rather the secret would be her sister's, her sister's secret. The psychoanalysts Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok have shown, in intractable cases such as Sophie La Rosière, that the secret always belongs to another.

The secret, however, was not the sister's; it belonged to their father (Sophie's ideal object, the lost object, once he had died, of her melancholy). For the remarkable thing about crypts is that they "are constructed only when the shameful secret is the love object's doing and when that object also functions for the subject as an ego ideal. It is therefore the *object's* secret that needs to be kept, *his* shame covered up."[8] Sophie buried this secret in her first crypt that was made all the more secure long after through the trauma of Florence's departure, when Sophie suffered the "undisclosable grief that befalls an ego already partitioned on account of a previous objectal experience tainted with shame".[9] Hence began the display of an interminable process of mourning represented by the enshrouded paintings Sophie abandoned.[10]

I model my case precisely on that reopened by Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok of "The History of an Infantile Neurosis", Freud's analysis of the so-called Wolf Man.[11] Long story short: the Wolf Man's father seduced his sister; his sister practiced this seduction on the Wolf Man; the Wolf Man had to bury this pleasure with the denial: his father could not have done that! So he constructed a crypt for himself, containing this contradictory pleasure/prohibition, only to be opened posthumously by Torok and Abraham after Freud's failure to solve his most famous case.

Their hypothesis: "a precocious traumatic scene, removed, sent to a crypt, encrypted".[12] The Wolf Man buried both his father and his sister together in this crypt. "The ultimate aim of incorporation", Abraham and Torok write, "is to recover, in secret and through magic, an object, that, for one reason or another, evaded its own function: mediating the introjection of desires. Refusing both the object's and reality's verdict, incorporation is an eminently illegal act; it must hide from view along with the desire of introjection it masks; it must hide even from the ego…. Installed in place of the lost object, the incorporated object continues to recall the fact that something else was lost: the desires quelled by repression."[13] The desires quelled by repression do not dwell in the Unconscious to come back periodically as a return of the repressed. Rather, "the prohibited object is settled in the ego in order to compensate for the lost pleasure and the failed introjection".[14] "The crypt works in the heart of the Ego as a special kind of Unconscious", Abraham and Torok say: "A false Unconscious: the crypt in the Ego—a false 'return of the repressed', the action in the Ego of hidden thoughts from the crypt."[15]

Again, long story short: the father seduced Sophie's sister; she demonstrated this seduction (differently from the Wolf Man's case obviously) on Sophie; Sophie buried this pleasure in her denial: her father could not have done that! It was not necessary that an incestuous sexual relationship continue between Sophie and her sister. Once was sufficient. But that moment of pleasure had to be interred together with the denial, the two silently reinforcing each other, hidden together in a crypt—lingering there unknowable and unspeakable. Florence's departure was only the final act of an originating crisis brought about by the father and having to be denied and repressed by Sophie as if it never existed.

Sophie was prohibited from her pleasure because, like the Wolf Man, she was prohibited from naming her father's crime. Her sister therefore became the locus of a contradictory desire/prohibition: "Such an incorporation of the sister is thus understood as the only possible means of combining within her two incompatible roles: that of Ego Ideal and that of Love Object."[16] (One could say analogously: the paintings and their covering up.) In this scenario, Sophie's liaison with Madeleine is unnecessary in order to initiate her lesbianism. And Florence's departure, she who always had to be hidden away, only awakened an old crisis, an originating crisis. This *first* crisis demanded that the crypt be reinforced, its secret made secure precisely by obscuring the paintings. Covering the paintings only further deepened the denial of that earlier familial crisis, and only superficially disguised Sophie's affair with Florence. Covered, the paintings were now an outer tomb mimicking a preceding inner one. Sophie couldn't destroy her paintings, ever. Beneath their veiling, they must always maintain a secret life mimicking the retrieval of an original pleasure that they already were. Sophie still needed access to these images, veiled though the paintings now were, enshrouded in encaustic, because she still needed access to the secret pleasure they unconsciously fulfilled when *originally* painted. That was their 'magical' effect. Their painting was this pleasure. Destroying the paintings would destroy that pleasure, not simply hide her liaison with Florence.

Uncovered, the paintings already held a secret, reserved within their images, depicted right on their surface, that preceded Florence. Entombing was not the obsessive act, painting was. Each painting, each sketch, recovered something of the prohibited desire associated with her sister, dissembled in and seemingly motivated by an image of the present: that of Florence modelling for Sophie. And especially those fixated on genitalia, even those hidden in the symbol of a flower: each time they were depicted, their "hallucinatory fulfillment exults in orgasm".[17] No wonder Sophie exulted this image of female sexuality and obsessively dwelt on it.

Even before they were covered over, the paintings already were a line of fracture, cracks along the crypt's seams that reinforced its solidity and impenetrability at the same time. They, too, were a fractured symbol, whose other half, an unconscious co-symbol, resided deep within the crypt. Only an image passing as something else, as an image of Sophie's liaison with Florence, could pass over and appear outside—but only as the outer safe of an inner safe. Thus, the originating secret was still safely hidden though somewhat exposed. Elsewhere Abraham has written about such diverting display: "But thanks to this subterfuge, the text of the drama being written behind his inner safe will play itself out in front, on the outer safe, so to speak."[18] Sophie's paintings were an outer safe on which was written the drama cached within her inner safe. Fully exposed, their surfaces hide another story, another secret than that of her illicit romp with buxom Florence.

You may wonder about, indeed protest, such reckless interpretation that is not given by any facts but rests in pure speculation. In telling this story and revealing its secrets, sometimes I feel like Freud when he wrote of the Wolf Man that "certain details seemed to me so extraordinary and incredible that I feel some hesitation in asking others to believe in them".[19] Let me apologize as well to readers for my wild excursion, but to me the story

of a secret sister is the only logical explication for the Sophie's excessive response to Florence's departure. Only it offers a satisfactory explanation for the central puzzling fact of her case: the repressive conservation of her paintings. Sometimes one must be unreasonable in support of the plausible. Sophie's story is not straightforward, and a simple explanation will never get at its mysteries.

IRIS HÄUSSLER

> Repetition is truly that which disguises itself in constituting itself, that which constitutes itself only by disguising itself. It is not underneath the masks, but is formed from one mask to another, as though from one distinctive point to another, from one privileged instant to another, with and within the variations. The masks do not hide anything except other masks.
>
> —Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*

Häussler's own act could only constitute itself, as Deleuze says, on the basis of disguising itself, in her repetition of Sophie's secret, in her repetitive making and masking of Sophie's paintings. Both the paintings and, let it be said, the *masking* of these paintings—in which she is complicit. Häussler decided, just as much as Sophie, to obscure these paintings, to make them into a mystery.

But she decided as well to make the paintings themselves, even before being obscured, a mystery, a mystery explained, however, by a backstory, whereas the paintings themselves were obscured *in themselves* by an act that does not reveal itself, or reveal its backstory, that is—in spite of what the accepted story maintains. This is a distinction that does not pertain to the story concocted about Sophie La Rosière but resides in the paintings themselves, or, rather, in their covering and concealing. Paintings and encaustic contain each other without external illustrative need, encrypted, indeed, in their mutual embrace.

It would be here that we should unlock Häussler's secret. Shouldn't our cryptonymic analysis, our decrypting of Sophie's story, extend, after all, to Häussler, too, in that both perhaps are cryptophores? What's *her* story? I have a theory, but that's a secret even Häussler doesn't know. And probably the liberties I took with La Rosière would be out of place here with Häussler. So I will resist delving into what Häussler buried along with La Rosière, whatever the correspondence. Nonetheless, there must be a corresponding secret—a secret of Häussler's that corresponds or resonates somehow with that of La Rosière. But it is La Rosière who has the lead here, who interrogates Häussler as much as Häussler interrogates her in order for the latter to constitute La Rosière's reality as an artist. La Rosière shares her secret with Häussler and communicates it to her through the ventriloquism of a phantom effect. This secret is maintained and sustained in an "intrapsychic tomb" that is this project itself.[20] "What comes back to haunt", Abraham writes, "are the tombs of others".[21] Will we ever know this secret?

To commit herself to Sophie in such a way, to give of her life to her for so many years to the degree of embodying Sophie's practice within her own, as her own, to gift her an entire oeuvre: almost 300 paintings and drawings Häussler toiled over after teaching herself how to paint![22] Many a day and night these last years, Iris has lain down beside Sophie and woken up with her. She has kept herself a recluse for Sophie. It would be strange if Häussler did not identify with what she projects into, or onto, Sophie, on both a conscious and unconscious level. Over-identifying with her, Häussler can't resist putting something of herself into Sophie's paintings—maybe only as a game for herself, a secret for Häussler alone to enjoy… or, as a co-conspirator perhaps, to lay down a false trail to lead us away from Sophie's real secret.

SLR-162

SLR-161

SLR-166

SLR-167

SLR-215

For example, Sophie was a lover of flowers: collecting, pressing, and preserving them, using them to make her pigments, and, of course, painting them—irises, for instance. For an exuberant, luscious example, look at SLR-162. Did Iris intuit the iris as Sophie's favourite flower? Or has she insinuated herself into Sophie's work through this flower, hiding herself by eliding her name behind their image? The iris stem in SLR-162 bursts open and reaches towards the light. A darker variant is found in SLR-161, closer to earth or flesh in its rose madder tones. Here the bloom no longer masks the flower's sexual function, having disappeared altogether, leaving a vivid symbol rather of female sexuality. Then in SLR-167, the artist offers us an image of the flower painted on a board around a keyhole, with the keyhole substituting for the iris's ovule or ovary. The symbolism here is almost too obvious, figuratively, but perhaps literally, too. Is this the literal keyhole into the project, the key to its meaning?[23] Is Häussler telling us to pay special attention to the wanton sexuality focused on the genitals, Sophie's obsessional aim, the core of her interest and the symbol of her sexual liaison with Florence.[24] Or is Iris offering us a clue to herself in this small panel, hidden among so many others, of *her* identification with Sophie in and through this organ? Aha, we would go, and be mistaken. Rather than a key to unlock this mystery, it is a decoy to lead us away from its secret.[25]

Häussler is complicit with Sophie, protective of her and of her secret. After all, she has allowed this stranger to settle in the core of her ego, becoming a substitute ego for Sophie. The ego has a role, as Abraham and Torok state, in the protection of the secret the crypt conceals: "Nothing at all must filter to the outside world. The ego is given the task of a cemetery guard.... When the ego lets in some curious or injured parties, or detectives, it carefully provides them with false leads and fake graves."[26]

Iris won't give up Sophie's secret so easily.

FLORENCE

What did Florence know of this secret, and did it inform her decision to leave? It's unlikely since Sophie herself could not know her own secret. Indeed, what actually do we know of Florence herself in this story? She seems only a secondary personage, merely serving a function: the reason for the paintings ultimately being concealed—but also the reason for them being painted in the first place. This is reason enough for us to enquire. But this is Sophie's story; she is the artist behind the paintings, the mystique behind the mystery. Sophie was the active one: it was her house, her studio, her fortune they lived off. It is her paintings that remain. Florence was merely passive—as suiting an artists' model. Her only act, it seems, was in leaving.

Yet, we only have to look carefully within Sophie's house and studio at the traces of what was left behind. Here we find another story that is fully exposed, not covered up, that tells otherwise of the breakup between Sophie and Florence. We must look to the paintings themselves—all of them. A second hand has been discovered within the cache of paintings uncovered in Sophie's studio/residence. Not as refined as Sophie's, rather amateurish, it is hardly developed at all and for this reason cannot be attributed to Sophie, to whose work, moreover, these paintings share no stylistic similarity. Furthermore, they betray a lack of awareness of the history of art and iconographic traditions, even of the particular idiom of French painting that Sophie's participate in. Most of them are naïve sketches really. And hardly that: more like the neurotic scribbles of someone pretending to paint, like a child copying their parent.

But this is not the case. These 'scribbles' mean something. The breakup between Sophie and Florence was already prefigured, inscribed violently in these few paintings that have been attributed to Florence. Or, at least, comparing Florence's to Sophie's paintings, one sees that the couple's

separation was inevitable. It's all in the paintings. Already there was an antagonism, an irreconcilable difference, rendered aesthetically. Perhaps what could not be said between them came out in Florence's paintings.

Florence was always potentially a disturbance. She brought the outside inside, first as a liberation, then as a threat. Initially, she gave Sophie greater access to the art world—and the women who inhabited it. But while working as a nurse at the military hospital the Smith sisters established on their estate, she was a daily reminder of the war Sophie wished to shut out. Florence brought in the disturbing pulse of this relentless soul-destroying war that upset the erotic balance of the household. This pulse could not be contained and soon infected Florence's paintings. In fact, this is all they were: a relentless pulse. Her paintings were not obsessive scratches or repetitive neurotic patterns. They subtly registered the shock waves that shook the very bodies of front-line soldiers. They were nothing but this relentless mechanical pulse. Sometimes pulses rippled across the flat surface with the febrile nervousness of Van Gogh's wheat fields (SLR-236, 238); sometimes their contours shaped themselves into the primitive image of a naked body (SLR-215).

Florence registered the unprecedented shocks of her time in such a way that could not be cloistered or hidden away behind private, domestic pleasures. Her paintings were sensitive recording devices so aligned to the new graphic recording systems of the scientific experiments in physiology of her time. Her entire body registered this pulse she then directly transferred to her paintings. This was a matter of the whole body and not just the genitalia; it was the shock of the actual, not the representation of a symbol. Note that the sexual organs aren't even articulated in Florence's paintings (see SLR-215).[27]

As a studio model, this working girl already knew the naked body in a different way from Sophie: how it was exposed to view in the clinical light of the studio; how it was mechanically posed and manoeuvred. Moreover, while modelling in the experimental milieu of advanced artist studios, Florence could overhear the audacious speculations on the new 'physiological aesthetics' in the back-and-forth sally of studio talk so different from the genteel talking down ladies were exposed to in the painting salons open to them. Hers, however, was no theoretical application; it was a necessity.

Sophie's paintings were in the bucolic past, Florence's in the dynamic present. Florence might have been a muse for Sophie; she also turned out to be a sensitive medium of her time.[28] In the Parisian art world, perhaps Florence could still dilly-dally sexually with other women, fellow models or demi-mondaine frequenters who passed through. But now as a war nurse amongst all those damaged young men with lost limbs, missing faces, and shaken uncontrollably by the tremors of shell shock, it was more Bosch than bucolic. Every night how could she return to be welcomed by some symbolic 'dish' served up by Sophie, who stayed home painting, based on her genitals? Stark reality freed her. The choice was clear. As much as she loved Sophie, she must be of the world. The shock of separation shook her back to the world. Its after-effects were felt by Sophie in such a way that they could not be muffled or smoothed away.

It's remarkable that Sophie didn't cover Florence's paintings, just her own. She didn't cover them up, yet she had to flee them. Florence's paintings couldn't be covered, blanketed, smoothed over, muted under a heavy wrap that stilled, stayed, or stifled their disturbance. Smothering them with encaustic would only muffle the pulse, not stifle it completely. Florence's paintings would continue to haunt Sophie if she remained amongst them.

Sophie abandoned two disturbances when she fled her studio in 1918—both her own paintings and those of Florence. Yet perhaps Sophie fled Florence's paintings more than her own. Mantling her own paintings, veiling them with encaustic, enabled Sophie to relive them intimately still, even though abandoned, in this "preservative repression".[29] Isn't the encaustic layer one more metaphor for what she figured in her paintings,

SLR-238

representing her desire to conjoin two naked bodies in close embrace?[30] Encaustic may seem to entomb an image but at the same time it envelops and embraces it. Like plaster, it potentially creates a relief of its original in order to keep its image alive. Relieved of its original object, plaster still keeps a trace, to be recreated in casts endlessly, but smothering encaustic relives it intimately in a softer caress. In this light, these encaustic paintings seem no different from the numerous plaster casts of women's vulvas Sophie entreated from visitors, however we might think of them as trophies of Sophie's wanton sexuality or mere expressions of her curiosity (see SLR-274 to 288). Both plaster vulvas and veiled paintings keep the memory of her covert desires alive.

Even if she had tried, Sophie would not have been able to entomb Florence's paintings. They would have resisted. After all, Florence's paintings represent something else, being essentially of a different nature. It is not so much the couple's paintings that oppose each other: the one erotic and quasi-spiritualized; the other mechanical and quasi-materialist.[31] Rather, their contrary entombing and pulsating answer to different regimes of logic. Sophie's entombed paintings adhere to the theological logic of the negative whereby wax maintains an imprint of memory in a meeting of "sensible surfaces".[32] Florence's paintings depend on the positive logic of relay whereby ghostly sensations are transmitted. Such transmission renders a surface vibratory in order to imprint a pulse, not reproduce a surface. They flash hidden affects rather than bury obscured secrets.

CONCLUSION

Other scholars must now step forward to continue the investigation of Sophie La Rosière and make their contributions based on the facts compiled here—and whatever else is sure to be uncovered in the future. This publication represents the efforts of the first responders, the initial excavators who fell upon this story, La Rosière's studio, and its paintings. This small team has cobbled together a chronology of the artist's life; it has inventoried the paintings and prepared a catalogue raisonné; it has separated the hands of La Rosière and her lover and model, Florence, herself an artist; and it has speculated, wildly at times, on the core problems—not the issue of La Rosière as a feminist precursor in art with her emphasis, obsession one could say, on the embodied iconography of female sexuality (Judy Chicago *avant la lettre*), but rather the psychological dynamics of what always, perhaps, will remain the central question of the repressive conservation of her paintings. The problematic covering of her paintings will always remain the symbol of any exercise in interpreting of her works. In fact, this repressive conservation offers itself as an exemplary case, a prime symbol, in any future general discussion of hermeneutics and theories of interpretation.

Considering, thus, the covering of her paintings, one layer obliterating another, can one even say that there is an interpretative *level* to our discussion here that stands critically outside the work and separate from it, that is not itself invaginated in its story—that doesn't insinuate itself in all levels of the project, including its *ongoing* storytelling? It is impossible to write about this project without the verbs changing tense, mixing past and present in the process; without the text, as well, participating in the telling, not just recording and observing; without advocating for Sophie as well as for Iris, as if both were real and sometimes one and the same; and without adding to its secrets. In this project, fictions, heteronyms, and secrets are implicated one in the other, mixing freely and establishing their own inverted temporalities that confuse identities. Each successively deepens readings of the work. The fiction is a framework. It sets up the parameters within which the project is pursued. The heteronym is a means to maintain the practice that is ongoing. The secret sustains the story—a fiction behind the fiction—and delays recognition, denies us immediate access to a motivating drive that obsessively produces the work. A fiction is a type of secret, a heteronym, too. They are 'secrets' we agree to maintain, as protocols we abide by. Only the actual secret escapes determination, all protocols, ultimately escaping our grasp too.

ENDNOTES

1 Subsequently, the paintings have been fully exposed with the removal of the obscuring encaustic. Both paintings and X-rays can be viewed in the catalogue raisonné devoted to Sophie La Rosière's work.

2 The term is Emily Apter's. See Apter, "Introduction, Selections Octave Mirbeau", *The Decadent Reader*, Asti Hustvedt ed, New York: Zone Books, 1998.

3 X-rays reveal a third layer below the encaustic and oil painting, which differs in style from the final painting itself: its graphic patterning and cloisonné partitioning seem much closer to Art Nouveau.

4 Baudelaire, Charles, "Femmes damnées", *Baudelaire: Selected Poems*, Joanna Richardson trans, London: Penguin Books, 1975, p 224.

5 Baudelaire, "Femmes damnées", p 220.

6 Melding fact and fiction, it is easy to make connections. For instance, for a while, during the course of this project, I wondered whether it was possible to link La Rosière, or Florence, to one of the famous Paris salons run by ex-pat lesbian-Americans such as Gertrude Stein. I thought maybe Stein's salon on Rue de Fleurus was a bit too 'masculinist' and Sophie, or Florence, might be more comfortable at the Rue Jacob salon of the fabulously wealthy and flamboyant Natalie Barney. Perhaps a meeting might have taken place there during the First World War when Barney held anti-war meetings in her Temple of Friendship, a faux-Greek temple in her garden. And perhaps now it was Florence, rather than Sophie, who ventured out discreetly to avoid a doubly dubious association when Barney hosted the Women's Congress for Peace. Here was a first possible connection.

But then I realized maybe it was not Natalie but her mother, Alice Pike, through whom a liaison was established. Alice was an artist. She first travelled to Paris in 1887 to be near her daughters, who were schooled at Les Ruches, run by the influential feminist educator Marie Souvestre. Alice herself studied with the famous academician and high-society portraitist Carolus-Duran, who together with Jean-Jacques Henner operated "the studio for ladies" where Madeleine Smith, we know, attended. Here was a second possible connection. When Alice returned to Paris in 1896, she continued to study with Carolus-Duran as well as opening her own salon on Avenue Victor Hugo at which a new generation of symbolist painters were frequent guests, including Edmond Aman-Jean (1858–1936), known equally through Georges Seurat's very beautiful profile portrait of him in conté crayon. Aman-Jean was born at the juncture of the Seine and Marne rivers, downstream from Nogent-sur-Marne. He, too, became a teacher. Would this be a third connection? All these possible connections were established in about ten minutes through the internet.

7 On this phenomena, see Maria Torok, "The Illness of Mourning and the Fantasy of the Exquisite Corpse", *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis, Volume I*, Nicholas T Rand trans, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994, pp 107–124.

8 Abraham, Nicholas and Maria Torok, "Mourning *or* Melancholia: Introjection *versus* Incorporation", *The Shell and the Kernel,* p 131. Other points to consider: "The crypt also includes the actual or supposed traumas that made introjection impossible", p 130; "Inclusion does not occur unless the subject is convinced of the object's total innocence", p 136; "the primary aim of the fantasy life born of incorporation is to repair—in the realm of the imaginary, of course—the injury that really occurred and really affected the ideal object", p 134.

9 Abraham and Torok, "Mourning *or* Melancholia", p 131.

10 "It should be remarked that as long as the crypt holds, there is no melancholia. It erupts when the walls are shaken, often as a result of the loss of some secondary love-object who had buttressed them. Faced with the danger of seeing the crypt crumble, the whole of the ego becomes one with the crypt, showing the concealed object of love in its own guise. Threatened with the imminent loss of its internal support—the kernel of its being—the ego will fuse with the included object, imagining that the object is bereft of its partner. Consequently, the ego begins the public display of an interminable process of mourning... without ever revealing, of course, the unspeakable secret." Abraham and Torok, "Mourning *or* Melancholia", p 136. Covering the paintings was a form of mourning with the encaustic masking itself as a black mourning veil.

11 Abraham and Torok, *The Wolf Man's Magic Word*, Nicholas Rand trans, Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1986.

12 Abraham and Torok, *The Wolf Man's Magic Word*, p lxii.

13 Torok, Maria, "The Illness of Mourning and the Fantasy of the Exquisite Corpse", *The Shell and the Kernel*, p 114.

14 Torok, "The Illness of Mourning and the Fantasy of the Exquisite Corpse", p 113.

15 Abraham and Torok, *The Wolf Man's Magic Word*, pp 80, lxii. See also: "The crypt marks a definite place in the topography. It is neither the dynamic unconscious nor the ego of introjections. Rather, it is an enclave between the two, a kind of artificial unconscious, lodged in the very midst of the ego. Such a tomb has the effect of sealing up the semipermeable walls of the dynamic unconscious." Abraham and Torok, "The Topography of Reality: Sketching a Metapsychology of Secrets," *The Shell and the Kernel*, p 159.

16 Abraham and Torok, *The Wolf Man's Magic Word*, p 4.

17 Torok, "The Illness of Mourning and the Fantasy of the Exquisite Corpse", p 117.

18 Abraham, Nicolas, *The Case of Jonah*, quoted in Jacques Derrida, "Foreword: Fors: The Anglish Words of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok", Barbara Johnson trans, *The Wolf Man's Magic Word*, p xi.

19 As quoted in Derrida, "Foreword: Fors", p 118.

20 "To have a fantasy of incorporation is to have no other choice but to perpetuate a clandestine pleasure by transforming it, after it has been lost, into an *intrapsychic secret*." Abraham and Torok, "Mourning *or* Melancholia", p 131. How far does the "endocryptic identification" pass between Iris and Sophie? Is Häussler a cryptophore as well? Moreover, in Häussler's case is the heteronym a type of incorporation?

21 Abraham, "Notes on the Phantom: A Complement to Freud's Metapsychology", *The Shell and the Kernel*, p 172. "The phantom's periodic and compulsive return lies beyond the scope of symptom-formation in the sense of a return of the repressed; it works like a ventriloquist, like a stranger within the subject's own mental topography. The imaginings issuing from the presence of a stranger have nothing to do with fantasy strictly speaking. They neither preserve a topographical status quo nor announce a shift in it. Instead by their gratuitousness in relation to the subject, they create the impression of surrealistic flights of fancy or of *oulipo*-like verbal feats." p 173.

22 Häussler's dedication is equivalent to what Octavio Paz wrote about Pessoa: "inventor of other poets and destroyer of himself". Paz, "Introduction: Unknown to Himself", *Fernando Pessoa: A Centenary Pessoa*, Eugénio Lisboa and LC Taylor eds, Manchester: Carcanet Press Ltd, 2006, p 4.

23 The keyhole flower conjunction is also found in SLR-166 and SLR-203. Sometimes the appearance of a keyhole may only be a result of the accident of painting on dismantled furniture, but not apparently in SLR-167.

24 Courbet's *Young Ladies on the Banks of the Seine (Summer)*, 1856–57, and *The Sleepers*, 1862, gave La Rosière license for her Sapphic subject matter, but it is really

the elder painter's *Origin of the World*, 1866, in its isolated close-up view of female genitalia, that expresses her obsession.

25 Häussler was a vehicle to produce Sophie's paintings, but Iris conveyed no secrets, contrary to her mythological Greek namesake, the messenger of the gods.

26 Abraham and Torok, "The Topography of Reality: Sketching a Metapsychology of Secrets", p 159.

27 A couple of paintings in Florence's style, though, give us pause: SLR-192, 194. Both seem uncharacteristically to emphasize the genitals. We speculate that here Florence painted in her usual wet-in-wet method over a pre-existent image by Sophie in order to abstract and deny the underlying paintings' emphasis of the sexual organ.

28 In these two sets of paintings, different worlds confronted each other, one surpassing the other. Just as Sophie's painting surpassed the lingering academicism of Madeleine Smith, so Florence surpassed Sophie in its response to the moment, in its own small way reflecting the world historical effects of the First World War shattering the falsifying bourgeois ideals of the Belle Époque.

29 "To use less metaphorical language we shall call the tomb and its lock *preservative repression*, setting it off from the *constitutive repression* that is particularly apparent in hysteria and generally called dynamic repression. The essential difference between the two types of repression is that in hysteria, the desire, born of prohibition, seeks a way out through detours and finds it through symbolic fulfillment; whereas for the cryptophore, an already fulfilled desire lies buried—equally incapable of rising or of disintegrating." Abraham and Torok, "The Topography of Reality: Sketching a Metapsychology of Secrets", p 159.

30 In this respect, the encaustic covered SLR-263 would seem to be especially important, but also the enigmatically wrapped SLR-235 La Rosière kept with her until her death, which in X-ray we can see as two sleeping figures. Again, the fascination with Courbet's *The Sleepers* is apparent here. For other conjoined or doubled figures, see SLR-008, 111, 112, 117–121, 153, 183, 214, 235, 256. That the X-ray of SLR 264 reveals three naked recumbent figures offers new paths of investigation, though it may have been merely a fantasy on Sophie's part—or unless it is the fantasy of Sophie imagining herself and Florence, dreaming the two together beside the sleeping figure of herself on the left. While paintings usually are painted upright, encaustic would be applied on the horizontal, making the associations with tombs obvious but beds as well.

31 Was Florence answering to Sophie's depiction of her through the stripped down materiality of her own paintings? She rejected figural articulation and any iconographic association in her own work. Even when there is a figural reference in Florence paintings, such as in SLR-215, the body is treated topographically rather than organically in the strictly iterative repetition of its striations. Contrast this mechanical rendition to the organic development of Sophie's nudes that align drawing and volume to an iconography of fertility, with their references of bodily organs to pomegranates, artichokes and flowers in general—attributes, moreover, of Aphrodite (see SLR-214 [with reference back to the more naturalistic SLR-262] and the X-ray of 264). Instead of Florence's mechanically iterated bodies, Sophie's grow organically, generative and reproductive, as if they were seeded on a micro level, a case often revealed only through X-rays. Note as well Sophie's habit in her late paintings of rendering the two bodies each in a distinct fashion, one 'seeded', the other 'petalled', one presumably Sophie, the other Florence (see SLR-235 as well as the X-rays of 263 and 264). Florence's mechanical striations are a 'no' to being so characterized by the natural world.

32 "Traditionally, the arts of copying had been enshrouded with an aura of magic or theological mystery. The logic of the negative—wax to seal, cast to form, stone to print—carried with it the enigma of parentage, of the transmission of physical and, usually, optical resemblance to another object, upon which the imprint remained stored as memory.... Copying therefore referred not to a merely material process but to a meeting of sensible surfaces, a matrix where internal properties and external regimes coincided. Hence, whether in its secular or theological formulations, copying or mechanical inscription signified an ontological relay, or in André Bazin's characterization of the photographic image, as a 'transference of reality from the thing to its reproduction'." Brain, Robert Michael, *The Pulse of Modernism: Physiological Aesthetics in Fin-de-Siècle Europe*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015, pp 9–10.