

2018

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Citation/Publisher Attribution

Carolyn Betensky, «Fantasmes de lecture dans *Les Mystères de Paris* d'Eugène Sue», *Médias 19* [En ligne], Publications, Catherine Nesci et Devin Fromm (dir.), American Mysterymania, mis à jour le : 10/01/2018, URL : <http://www.medias19.org/index.php?id=23815>.

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Reading Fantasies in Eugène Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris*

Ever since Jean-Louis Bory claimed in his 1962 biography of Sue and in his introduction to *Les Mystères de Paris* that the novel was a) the product of a joint effort between the author and his working-class correspondents and b) that this joint effort fed, if not led to, the Revolution of 1848, scholars have debated whether the novel could be considered a collaborative work and whether it could be credited with having produced the popular uprising.¹ Bory's characterizations of the novel's readership and political potency served as starting points for important subsequent scholarship by Louis Chevalier, Umberto Eco, and Peter Brooks. Upon closer examination of the evidence, more recent scholars such as Brynja Svane and Christopher Prendergast have challenged Bory's characterization of Sue's correspondents as preponderantly working-class, and Prendergast is especially unconvinced that we can establish any direct causal relationship between the novel and the events of 1848. Other scholars, in the meantime (Jean-Pierre Galvan, Judith Lyon-Caen, to a certain extent Claire Parfait, et al.), have argued for the centrality of this cross-class partnership to the novel's production, and Galvan and Dominique Jullien, among others, continue to insist on the link between *Les Mystères de Paris* and "l'esprit de 1848."²

¹ "It cannot be denied that [Eugène] Sue is certainly in part responsible for the revolution of February 1848. February 1848 was like an irresistible saturnalia celebrated by Sue's heroes, the laboring classes and the dangerous classes in the Paris of *Les Mystères*" (Bory, qtd. Eco 141).

² See Jean-Louis Bory, *Eugène Sue: le roi du roman populaire*; Louis Chevalier, *Classes laborieuses, classes dangereuses*; Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*; Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*; Brynja Svane, *Le Monde d'Eugène Sue*; Christopher Prendergast, *For the People by the People? Eugène Sue's Les Mystères de Paris: A Hypothesis in the Sociology of Literature*; Jean-Pierre Galvan, *Les Mystères de Paris: Eugène Sue et ses lecteurs*; Judith Lyon-Caen, "Un magistère social: Eugène Sue et le pouvoir de représenter" and *La Lecture et la vie: les usages du roman au temps de Balzac*; Claire

In this essay I return to Bory's claims regarding the identity of Sue's readers and co-authors (if such they be) and the political impact of their reading of the novel. But instead of asking who Sue's correspondents *really* were, whether they *really* had a considerable impact on the writing of the novel, or whether these putatively working-class collaborators helped to trigger or shape the events of 1848, I wish to consider the way these critical concerns themselves reflect and repeat a kind of cultural work the novel does. As Prendergast has demonstrated, the peculiar circumstances of the novel's production and reception make for a terrific case study in the history of the book and the sociology of reading – but they also make for a terrific case study of twentieth- and twenty-first-century cultural and political investments. Why do we need to establish whether Sue's correspondents were primarily working-class or bourgeois? Why does it matter whether these correspondents had a measurable influence over the novel he ended up writing? And finally, why are critics so eager to attribute authorship of the Revolution of 1848 to Sue and his correspondents?

It should go without saying that my interest in asking what is at stake in these questions does not imply that I think that determining their answers is in any way a fruitless or inappropriate scholarly pursuit. I do wish to suggest, however, that the centrality and repetition of these concerns in so much scholarship should invite our further reflection. In Sue's day, to single out the working-class component of Sue's readership and to suggest such readers had a hand in the production of the novel was to disparage Sue and to challenge his authority and his novel's value. In our own, the very opposite is true: to identify Sue's readers as hailing preponderantly from the working classes and assign them a significant role in authoring *Les*

Parfait, "The Nineteenth-Century Serial as a Collective Enterprise: Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Eugène Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris*"; Dominique Jullien, *Les Amoureux de Schéhérazade: Variations modernes sur les Mille et Une Nuits*.

Mystères de Paris is effectively to elevate such readers and to boost Sue's credibility and significance along with the novel's.³ What are we saying when we read a novel, however partially, through its readers? What kind of value is conferred upon readers when they are called authors -- and upon authors when they are fused with their readers? How did -- and how does -- social class signify within critical systems of literary classification and value, and how does reading itself function, in mostly unspoken fashion, as a locus of hope, dread, and desire?

These questions relating to the reception of the novel and the potential its reading unleashes in its readers imply a longing for a particular kind of author, as well as a particular kind of reader. As Foucault makes clear in "What is An Author?," the entity we call "the author" is a convenient repository of a cluster of desires; "the author" is a construct, a projection, an object of collective fantasy. As scholars scour the traces of Sue's correspondence for clues as to the influence his readers had on him and he on them, what emerges is indeed a projection of collective desire. Whereas for Foucault the author-function is primarily a principle of classification that helps us organize and confer value upon certain texts and knowledge and not others, here the author-function represents a different cluster of desires. The author-function operating here is rather a principle of investment in an omniscient executive, a subject who can get things done. Like his protagonist Rodolphe, this author-function version of Sue can bring fantasies to fruition, moving from idea to enactment, fusing so successfully with his readers that he can read them, incorporate them, and direct their behavior.⁴ Naturally, this longing for a particular kind of author implies a longing for a particular kind of reader, as well -- a reader who is understood to read in a regular, predictable, less nuanced, but more action-oriented fashion

³ Although she is making a different point here, Jullien notes the confluence of right and left in their appraisal of the revolutionary potential of the novel: "En somme, si la droite condamne le roman-feuilleton parce qu'il fomente la révolution, la gauche le condamne parce qu'il empêche la révolution" (40).

⁴ See Jullien and Grossir for their discussions of the way Sue fuses with his protagonist in the popular imagination.

than the actual reader, for the actual reader is unbound by any promises her emotional response to the novel might logically seem to elicit.⁵

It is no coincidence that *Les Mystères de Paris* itself stages the “for the people, by the people” scenario regarding the potential powers of storytelling. Indeed, the novel poses the same sorts of questions as those who seek to establish the identity of the readers of *Les Mystères de Paris* and the consequences of their reading. Throughout the novel, Sue demonstrates tremendous interest in the ways different classes of people metabolize and are transformed by their experience of narrative. He tends to be most clearly fascinated by the power of stories to bring their audiences to heel; this is most patently the case in the Pique-Vinaigre story-telling scene in la Force prison, but it’s also at the crux of Rodolphe’s plan to rehabilitate Clémence d’Harcourt. The transformative power of narrative interests Sue beyond these cases of explicit discipline, restraint, and reorientation, however. For if what Sue has to offer his readers, ideologically speaking, in *Les Mystères de Paris* is a cluster of wish-fulfillment fantasies, these fantasies are not just in the domain of philanthropy and social control, as Marx and Engels would have it, nor primarily, as Eco claims, at the level of narrative closure and delivery of expectations.⁶ What Sue offers his readers are also, importantly, fantasies regarding the power of literature, and specifically of *reading*, to create social change, fantasies regarding the value of his readers’ expertise as readers, and fantasies regarding the possibility of configuring or at least conjuring a working-class readerly subjectivity that will reflect kindly on the internal life of an

⁵ While Foucault’s essay explicitly theorizes the author-function, it also has profound implications for notions of readership. If we understand the author-function as a principle of categorization that posits an entity at the origin of what we value, it should not be difficult to conceive of “the reader” as a similarly entity upon whom culturally and historically specific fantasies are projected.

⁶ See Marx and Engels, *The Holy Family*; Eco 138.

idealized bourgeois subject.⁷ Ultimately, I want to suggest that one of the defining ideological successes of *Les Mystères de Paris* is the way it manages to model and then package itself and its own reception as monumental. In partnership with other nineteenth-century novels that we could anachronistically call “engaged,” it had no small role in shaping our perhaps wishful notions of what socially engaged narratives and the act of reading them can do.⁸

Before I go any further, a word about what I mean by “reading” in this essay.

Undergirding my understanding of the cultural work reading does in *Les Mystères de Paris* is an important theoretical source that may be unfamiliar to scholars of French literature. In *Dear Reader: the Conscripted Audience in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction*, Garrett Stewart argues that Victorian novels feature both explicit and figurative scenes of reading within their pages that model and guide their responses, culminating in a specifically literary ideological event. For Stewart, the reader is a subject whose being and participation are both appealed to and compelled in the experience of reading. As opposed to the “implied reader” theorized by Booth and Iser or the “ideal reader” posited by Riffaterre, the conscribed reader is written into the novel she reads: “the reader is not only narrated to but also narrated” within the text (7):

In the event of a reading, fictional structure commandeers a response that it may also structure in replica as a described event. The rhetoric of narration passes thereby to the narration of rhetorical efficacy itself. Whether through direct address or structural parallel, at such times you as reader are not simply inscribed by prose fiction. Instead, as

⁷ For an excellent discussion of the institutional crisis the prospect of democratized reading posed to literary critics, see Lise Dumasy’s introduction to her *La querelle du roman-feuilleton: Littérature, presse et politique, un débat précurseur (1836-1848)* (5-21), as well as Lyon-Caen’s *La Lecture et la Vie*.

⁸ Lyon-Caen charts the novel’s trajectory in the 1840s from its former position out from under the purview of academic critics and onto the political main stage. It was during the July Monarchy that novels, particularly romans-feuilleton, claimed political relevancy for themselves (*Lecture* 71). Yet Lyon-Caen sees the notion that novels were powerful in and of themselves as having waned by the end of the nineteenth century. I am contending that this notion did not wane entirely. It seems rather to have morphed into one that suits our current needs – and perhaps more than ever, our current academic needs.

member of an audience, your private reading – along with that of every other reader – is actually convoked and restaged, put in service to the text. Either as an identifying notation or as a narrative event, this reading in of your reading – or of you reading – is what I mean by the notion of a conscripted response. (8)

Readers participate in the process of their own formation as reading subjects, not only by willingly reading, but also by suspending their awareness of their participation. An element of misrecognition is built into the building-in of the reader within the novel.

In Stewart's analysis of "classic" nineteenth-century British novels – which shared many of their salient features with French novels of the same period – the conscription of readers takes place through apostrophe ("Dear Reader") as well as through analogy, or parable. Although the novel is full of direct invocations of the reader – including many apostrophic instances that flatter and thank the reader in advance for performing the important function of reading the novel itself -- my reading of *Les Mystères de Paris* here relies most heavily on Stewart's parabolic mode of conscription. He offers a broad and somewhat counterintuitive list of topoi that subtly but persistently figure the reader's own reading within the text:

the oral recitation of biographical story (Dickens); the global trope of life as an inwardly audited silent tale (Charlotte Brontë); the world stage as itself an epitomizing volume of human effort, foible, and defeat (Thackeray, Meredith, Schreiner, Hardy); the posthumous intensity of expressive impulsive released from all textual encumbrance (Eliot); or, increasingly toward the end of the Victorian century, all manner of vicarious, voyeuristic, mesmeric, and vampiric phenomena in which psychic usurpation, somatic

doubling, or perversely gendered otherness doubles for the aesthetic distance – and transacted gap – between reader and read (18-19).

I have quoted this list of meta-reading scenes Stewart works with in order to suggest the potential range and diverse shapes of such implicit but reiterated parables. I wish to make a case for the presence of similar formations in Sue's novel. In *Les Mystères de Paris*, such self-reflexive but misrecognized scenes of reading tend more to be scenes of "reading" than reading – although the act of reading does make significant appearances throughout the text. The conscripted reader of *Les Mystères de Paris* encounters parables for different kinds of reading and readers, all of which reiterate and reinforce the value of reading itself. Through these parables, the reader comes to understand her own reading activity as being as valuable within the world outside the novel as it is shown to be within it. Its value naturalized and self-evident, reading ultimately becomes, in and of itself, something to do in response to problems in the world.

* * * *

Even the skeptical Christopher Prendergast concedes that the readership of *Les Mystères de Paris* was huge, and perhaps unprecedented. While casting doubt on the anecdotal and archival evidence regarding the class composition of the novel's readership, he acknowledges that what we do know about the circulation of the novel from publication records suggests *Les Mystères de Paris* had many, many readers. The *Journal des Débats* boosted its subscription base by thousands of readers thanks to *Les Mystères de Paris*, and over 60,000 copies of the novel came out concurrently and subsequently, in France and Belgium, in different book formats and editions. Prendergast cites Pierre Orecchioni's estimates from these and other statistics that the novel likely had five to ten times more readers in France than the subscription or print runs

alone would indicate, totaling somewhere between 400,000 and 800,000 (Prendergast 66). Yet the legendary reputation of *Les Mystères de Paris* as a novel “for the people by the people,” as Bory and then later Chevalier understood it, is based less on such statistics than on numerous contemporaneous anecdotes attesting to the range of readers it had and on a cache of correspondence between Sue and his readers. It is largely on the evidence of the dossier of this correspondence, recently published in a collection edited by Galvan, that scholars have made their arguments regarding the class affiliations of Sue’s readership.

The ongoing interest in knowing who read *Les Mystères de Paris* and what this reading *did* found its earliest expression as the novel was still in serial publication. If we follow Judith Lyon-Caen in her contention that anxieties concerning the subversive potential of the *roman feuilleton* in France long preceded the ones Sue evoked, *Les Mystères de Paris* could be said to have triggered already-existing worries about working-class readers. Anecdotes attesting to the popularity of *Les Mystères de Paris* were legion, and many sources made a special point of citing its working-class readers, often with anxiety or disdain but sometimes with bemusement or approval. Observers such as Barbey d’Aurevilly claimed that one could find coachmen and laborers who were reading it “avec ivresse et dans l’ivresse et pour des raisons qui n’ont rien de littéraire”, for instance (Bory 270). Théophile Gautier wrote that even those who couldn’t read had access to the novel and were acquainted with its characters: “Les gens qui ne savent pas lire se sont fait réciter *Les Mystères de Paris* par quelque portier érudit et de bonne volonté; les êtres les plus étrangers à toute espèce de littérature connaissent la Goualeuse, le Chourineur, la Chouette, Tortillard et le Maître d’Ecole.” (He went on famously to add that the dying postponed their last breaths in order to know the outcome of the novel’s various threads, and that Death itself was forced to oblige Sue’s publication schedule (Bory 272-273).) The period’s most

important literary critic, Sainte-Beuve, wrote similarly in 1843 that when Sue didn't publish an installment on schedule and missed a day, women of the upper classes and their chambermaids alike would all get worked up together about it until he let his readers know that he was feeling under the weather (Galvan 9). It was Sainte-Beuve, incidentally, who was one of the earliest observers to attest to the existence of a voluminous correspondence between Sue and his readers.

Lyon-Caen has argued that the reception of *Les Mystères de Paris* is best understood in the context of a historically specific French culture of the novel. Citing such critics as Alfred Nettement, who had written in 1841 that the roman-feuilleton was, from its inception in the 1830s, deeply antisocial, she writes: "Si le roman vise une consommation de masse et emprunte des voies de circulation inédites, sa nocivité change de nature: il ne corrompt plus seulement les individus, mais menace aussi l'ordre social tout entière. C'est au nom d'un tel raisonnement que le roman-feuilleton devient, au cours des années 1840, une affaire d'ordre public" (Lyon-Caen, *Lecture* 66). Even before the events of 1848, one Baron de Chapuys-Montlaville, the representative of Saône-et-Loire, had brought his concerns about the *roman feuilleton* into the Chamber of Deputies and mounted a campaign against it.⁹ His opposition to the serial novel was based on its encouragement of bad literary taste and its tendency to promote immorality, etc., but he worried most about the deleterious *social* effects of the novel: specifically, the way it

⁹ While *Les Mystères de Paris* came under attack unsurprisingly from conservatives of various stripes, it didn't take long for the novel to be blasted from the left or by the working-class press, either. Unlike the less widely read workers' newspapers *La Ruche Populaire* and *Le Populaire*, which were unctuous in their praise for Sue, the newspaper *L'Atelier* was critical of the novel on the grounds that it did not reflect the systemic nature of poverty and thus offered "insignificant palliatives" for social ills instead of any real analysis of them or substantive plans for addressing them (Prendergast 113). Marx and Engels also famously scoffed at the novel's reformist pretensions in *The Holy Family* (1845). Perhaps the most memorable aspect of their takedown concerned Rodolphe's suggestion to Clémence d'Harville that she engage in philanthropy for the sake of amusement: "The mystery of the *philanthropy* he has hatched is betrayed by the Paris fop who invites his partner to supper after the dance in the following words: 'Ah, Madame, it is not enough to have danced for the benefit of these poor Poles.... Let us be philanthropic to the end.... Let us have supper now for the benefit of *the poor!*'" (Marx and Engels 257)

“declassed” its working-class readers. “On se persuade trop dans les campagnes et dans les ateliers que l’égalité consiste à porter le même habit que son voisin, et à lui être semblable par la fortune. Ce n’est pas la richesse qui fait et donne le rang dans ce pays; c’est l’intelligence, la probité et le travail” (qtd. Lyon-Caen 83). Connecting their reading with the declassed behavior he expected would ensue, Chapuys-Montlaille sees a direct correspondence between a working-class consumption of the *roman feuilleton* and utter despondency -- or worse:

Il leur faut de la lumière, de l’éclat, de la puissance, des plaisirs, de l’or, et c’est pour cela qu’ils accumulent effort sur effort pour sortir de la condition de leur père et s’élever vers les sommités; et comme chez la plupart les forces manquent à de tels dessins, ils retombent épuisés, ou bien ils se jettent dans les partis extrêmes et cherchent à ébranler les bases d’une société qui n’a pas été assez généreuse pour leur donner à chacun des portefeuilles et des millions (qtd. Lyon-Caen 84).

Significantly, the idea that their reading of *Les Mystères de Paris* would mobilize its readers to commit destructive acts against property did not have its origins in any sort of celebration among revolutionaries or aficionados of popular literature, but rather, in a something more akin to a conservative panic.¹⁰ For if it’s true that everyone was reading the novel, it was specifically its working-class readers who frightened such observers, and specifically the prospect Chapuys-Montlaille raises that such readers were ripe for radicalization.

¹⁰ It’s worth noting that Chapuys-Montlaille was nominally a reformist, or as Lyon-Caen puts it, a representative of “la gauche dynastique” (Lyon-Caen, *Lecture* 81). He was called out for what today would be called his classism by a contemporary journalist, Louis Desnoyers, who wrote in *Le Siècle* in 1847: “Comme on le voit, M. de Chapuys-Montlaille est foncièrement hostile au déclassement des individus. C’est une anomalie de plus dans les doctrines de l’honorable démocrate. Il ne veut pas que les enfants s’efforcent de s’élever au-dessus de leur condition native; il ne faut pas même qu’ils aspirent jamais à professer en Sorbonne” (Dumasy 130).

I want to pause here to stress the fact that the fantasy of a mobilized working-class reading did not crystallize in the aftermath of the Revolution of 1848: as we can see, on the contrary, the fantasy of a mobilized working-class reading preceded any putative mobilization. In other words, the fantasy that one could anticipate and control the vagaries of readership was in place well before the novel or the Revolution came along. The fact that this combination fantasy of/dread for a mobilized working-class readership made itself visible prior to the fantasied/dreaded event gives us the opportunity to see how the ascription of this kind of political authorship to Sue met a preexisting cultural demand for an Author who could understand, represent, interpret, control, and incite the masses, and a mass readership who could be reached and directed through a cultural, as opposed to a purely repressive, mechanism. Given this fantasy of a potent working-class reading – and its supporting fantasy of a literature that could somehow engineer such mobilization – how could Sue *not* be blamed for the Revolution of 1848 with the eclipse of the Second Republic?¹¹ And given the continuing allure of such a fantasy about the powers of literature, how could Sue not be *credited*, in our day, with partial authorship of the same revolution?

When notions of reading and extratextual agency run together in a self-evident fashion as if each implies the other, analysts of *Les Mystères de Paris* will agree, even when they disagree. Nineteenth-century critics of Sue and his twentieth-century admirers are on the same page: both camps concur on the power and purview of authors and readers. This is why I contend that, while the novel is certainly rife with paternalistic and reactionary policies, its explicitly bourgeois self-interested aspects are low-hanging fruit for ideological analysis. Sue's

¹¹ According to Bory, Charles Menche de Loisne directly charged Sue, who was at that time serving as elected socialist representative in the Assemblée, with having instigated the insurrection with his authorship of *Les Mystères de Paris* (Bory 349-50).

representations of and allegories for reading are more central to the novel's ideological pull than his more clearly "ideological" philosophies of punishment and philanthropy.

In the following section of this essay, I focus on two figurations of reading in the text. I begin with an analysis of la Force prison episode before considering the subtle role of reading in scenes featuring Prince Rodolphe of Gérolstein, hiding in closets, as the reader's avatar. Analyzing reading as it is given pride of place across the novel allows us to appreciate the ways it mediates and naturalizes divisions of social class at the same time as it challenges them.

The lengthy chapters of *Les Mystères de Paris* that take place in La Force prison are among the novel's most suspenseful. François Germain, a young clerk in the office of the sadistic solicitor Jacques Ferrand, has landed in prison thanks to Ferrand's determination to charge him with a theft he hasn't committed. Despite the urging of Rigolette, the woman who becomes his fiancée, and a concerned prison guard, Germain cannot seem to bring himself to behave collegially with the other inmates. The guard has communicated his fears to Rigolette that Germain's aloof behavior will be perceived as contempt on the part of his fellow prisoners, and that this will cause them to single him out for rough treatment – which is exactly what happens, even though, ironically, the rough treatment arrives on the very day he's resolved to be friendlier. It's been discovered among the prisoners that Germain had earlier revealed a plot to rob a bank, which gets him labeled a "mouchard," and this has spurred a murderous gang of them, led by the fiend they call le Squelette, to want to make an example of him. Le Squelette is already facing the guillotine (his other sobriquet is "Déjà Mort"), so he's volunteered to do the honors of strangling Germain with his own two bony hands.

The murder plot revolves around the ability of the conspirators to exploit the story-telling talents of Pique-Vinaigre, who has promised to regale his audience with the tale of Gringalet and Coupe-en-Deux. The idea is that the guard will leave the prisoners alone and go off to eat his dinner when he sees how entranced they all are by the story. Of course, le Squelette and company don't reckon on Pique-Vinaigre's story being so good that the guard himself doesn't want to stop listening to it, and thus their plot is almost foiled. Almost: le Squelette does manage to get his fingers around Germain's neck, and he would have succeeded in killing him were it not for the intervention of le Chourineur, an already rehabilitated criminal who has planted himself in La Force for the express purpose of saving the young man.

The story of Gringalet and Coupe-en-Deux itself -- Pique-Vinaigre's story, that is -- is a naïve, violent, comic-book-like tale that features a puny orphan boy who's exploited horribly by a drunken trafficker in children and animals. Gringalet is warmhearted and tries to save helpless creatures like insects whenever he can. When he's about to be killed by Coupe-en-Deux, he's rescued by a fly. Eventually, Coupe-en-Deux's cruelty ends up backfiring on him, and Coupe-en-Deux is killed by the evil monkey he'd instructed to kill Gringalet. All of the other children and the whole town, too, end up celebrating the boy and the no-longer evil monkey in a parade that celebrates the end of Coupe-en-Deux's reign of terror.

Pique-Vinaigre is in on the prisoners' plan to hurt Germain, though he doesn't know that they actually intend to murder the young man, and the novel shows him actively counterplotting by drawing his tale out as long as he can to keep the guard on hand. As Dominique Jullien has written, this scene belongs to the tradition of Scheherazade, and it's certainly true that the storyteller deploys his fiction like the heroine-narrator of the *Thousand and One Nights* to stave off

the violence as long as possible. Narrative works here as a weapon of the clever, but vulnerable; in Pique-Vinaigre's case, the pen may not be mightier than the sword, in the end, but the pen will give the sword a run for its money. The will of those who are more numerous and physically more powerful, this will that presumes to put the narrative to its own ends, will have to resort to pure, brute force.

Although Pique-Vinaigre's story does not keep the guard away from his soup long enough to prevent Germain from getting attacked, Sue takes great pains to show the effects of the morality tale on its listeners, the most vocal of whom is le Chourineur. As the tale proceeds, le Chourineur offers feedback on the characters and plot. Early on in his narrative, when Pique-Vinaigre introduces a good-guy character, the town leader who stands up to the villainous Coupe-en-Deux, le Chourineur is quick to share his approbation: "Farceur de doyen! J'aime le doyen, moi!" And the guard agrees, saying, "Et moi aussi" (971). A little further on, when Pique-Vinaigre dwells on the weakness and deprivations of the hapless Gringalet and really milks it for his audience, le Chourineur pipes up again: "Pauvre moutard, il me semble le voir! [...] il y en a d'enfants comme ça... sur le pavé de Paris, des petits crève-de-faim" (972). This time, Germain chimes in after the guard expresses his intention to stay a bit longer, saying, "Vraiment, c'est très intéressant" (973). This commentary on Pique-Vinaigre's narrative that takes place in the text's diegetic real time continues, with different characters offering their readings of its significance, its direction, its verisimilitude. As the prisoners weigh the merits of the narrative, along with the petit-bourgeois Germain and the honest working-class guard, they slow it down, draw it out, and give Pique-Vinaigre ideas for the tale suggested by their own experience.

One could be forgiven for thinking that this prison episode sounds much like Bory's influential representation of the way this novel was written and read, with Pique-Vinaigre standing in for Eugène Sue, and the prisoners as analogues for Sue's working-class co-authors. And indeed, Claudine Grossir has written of this episode that it is a

véritable mise en abyme de l'écriture et de la lecture du roman. Le texte fournit alors son propre mode d'emploi, indiquant la fonction de la fiction et de la littérature dans le processus d'appréhension de la réalité et son pouvoir de transformation du monde: les forçats, émus par le sort de Gringalet, auquel ils identifient inconsciemment François Germain, refusent de devenir les bourreaux du jeune homme. (Grossir 6)

I agree with Grossir that the episode does function recursively, but what it reproduces in miniature is less the actual writing and reading of the novel than a potent fantasy of what reading and writing can do, and this potent fantasy, as we shall see, goes far beyond narrative's potential to manipulate, discipline, and repel physical force.

I want to return to the prefatory remarks Sue makes right before the episode itself begins, for this is where he explicitly sets out his fascination with the way narrative gets metabolized. He reveals his interest in reading as a mechanism of social power – and when I say reading, I mean it figuratively here, for the “readers” in la Force are taking in Pique-Vinaigre's narrative by ear -- when he writes of the reception of the Gringalet et Coupe-en-Deux story. Before he even has Pique-Vinaigre begin, however, he muses on the nature of reader response among not only the incarcerated but also the masses, generally:

Avant d'entamer le récit de Pique-Vinaigre, nous rappellerons au lecteur que, par un contraste bizarre, la majorité des détenus, malgré leur cynique perversité, affectionnent presque toujours les récits naïfs, nous ne voudrions pas dire puérils, où l'on voit, selon les lois d'une inexorable fatalité, l'opprimé vengé de son tyran, après des épreuves et des traverses sans nombre. Loin de nous la pensée d'établir d'ailleurs le moindre parallèle entre des êtres corrompus et la masse honnête et pauvre; mais ne sait-on pas avec quels applaudissements frénétiques le populaire des théâtres du boulevard accueille la délivrance de la victime, et de quelles malédictions passionnées il poursuit le méchant ou le traître? (969)

What makes for a peculiar contrast with respect to the criminals – the fact that they're cynical and perverse but favor morality tales – leads Sue directly into an appreciation of what is for him the unsurprising sensibility of the honest poor, who also favor such tales. The disingenuousness of “loin de nous la pensée d'établir d'ailleurs le moindre parallèle entre des êtres corrompus et la masse honnête et pauvre” aside, it's the honest poor who compel Sue's notice. He continues:

On raille ordinairement ces incultes témoignages de sympathie pour ce qui est bon, faible, et persécuté...d'aversion pour ce qui est puissant, injuste et cruel. On a tort, ce nous semble. Rien de plus consolant en soi que ces ressentiments de la foule. N'est-il pas évident que ces instincts salutaires pourraient devenir des principes arrêtés chez les infortunés que l'ignorance et la pauvreté exposent incessamment à la subversive obsession du mal? (969)

“Rien de plus consolant en soi”: a healthy, moralizing, readerly sensibility among the working classes is, in and of itself, a source of consolation. Consolation for what, we might ask, or for

whom? I'll get back to these questions in a moment. Sue goes on to offer his admiration for the masses for the morally dependable character of their reading: "Comment ne pas tout espérer d'un peuple dont le bon sens moral se manifeste si invariablement? D'un peuple qui, malgré les prestiges de l'art, ne permettrait jamais qu'une oeuvre dramatique fût dénouée par le triomphe du scélérat et par le supplice du juste?" (969)

This idea of a moral sensibility to be mobilized by a variety of narrative reception that you can rely on would seem to be challenged by the fact that the very people Sue has characterized as cynical and perverse share it with those in whom he places all his hopes – but it's precisely the idea of a mobilized and mobilizable reading that offers consolation to the readers of *Les Mystères de Paris*. It's reading itself that brings consolation – not so much, in this instance, to those who read the tale of Gringalet and Coupe-en-Deux within the tale, but to those who *read* those who read, which is to say, the readers of the frame narrative of the *Les Mystères de Paris*.

Yet if those who read those who read the tale of Gringalet and Coupe-en-Deux are consoled by this working-class reading -- which is essentially a disciplinary fantasy that features reading as a check on any hostile feelings that might lead working-class readers into committing acts of violence against the dominant classes -- there is still another layer of consolation ahead that derives not from discipline but from the centrality of reading itself. For before he concludes his excursus on narrative reception and returns to la Force to give Pique-Vinaigre the chance to begin his tale of Gringalet and Coupe-en-Deux, Sue loops back to consider the good moral sense lurking within the hearts of his hardened criminals, but he does so in a move that gestures toward humanity much more broadly:

En un mot, puisque les gens endurcis dans le crime sympathisent encore quelquefois au récit et à l'expression des sentiments élevés, ne doit-on pas penser que tous les hommes ont plus ou moins en eux l'amour du beau, du bien, du juste, mais que la misère, mais que l'abrutissement, en faussant, en étouffant ces divins instincts, sont les causes premières de la dépravation humaine? (970)

While this may sound much like a garden-variety Rousseauian pronouncement about the natural goodness of humankind, it is more than that. Sue is making a claim for the power of narrative not only to trigger but also to reveal these qualities of goodness, beauty, and justice. The reading readers do is an index on their souls. Reading this reading – not just the reading criminal readers do, not just the reading honest, poor readers do, but also, potentially and crucially, the reading better-off readers do – allows those who are read to be seen at their best, to be seen for what they could be or could have been, or for what they somehow, deep down, really are, in spite of their circumstances.

What I've been saying here is that *Les Mystères de Paris* offers two different but mutually sustaining fantasies regarding what reading can do: it can trigger or restrain or discipline the reader, on the one hand, and it can allow the reader to be read, on the other. If the first fantasy makes its most pronounced appearance in the mise-en-abyme of the Pique-Vinaigre episode, the second fantasy insinuates itself most prominently throughout the narrative in the readings Rodolphe does of the honest, suffering poor whom he tracks down and spies on and tests, and in the reception of those readings among those he reads. This is the fantasy, in other words, of Rodolphe's reading being read and valued by the poor he has read. (I should add that I'm saying "Rodolphe" here, but his aristocratic affiliates, as well as those working-class characters whom he deputizes to work with him, provide the same kind of platform to support

the fantasy.) Rodolphe's reading does not discipline him: it reveals him to be the godly super-reader who takes note of every singularity. This reading is thus strategically quite different in nature from the reading the prisoners do at la Force. Yet like the first fantasy of what reading can do, this one, too, is supported by a recursive structure that gets reinforced as the reader of *Les Mystères de Paris* reads Rodolphe's readings of the poor and absorbs the rewarding reception his readings achieve among his poor readers.

One of many examples of the second kind of fantasy, the fantasy of one's reading being read and revealing one's humanity, occurs when we are first introduced to the Morels, a family suffering from extreme poverty, illness, lack of heat and clothing, and a host of other problems. The patriarch, Jérôme Morel, is a gem-cutter who works on diamonds and other precious stones in the same room in which his family languishes. As he and his wife, Madeleine, commiserate over their fate, Madeleine lashes out at the rich for their hard hearts. Morel defends them, saying that the rich are no more callous than anyone else – they just don't know what poverty is. “Ça naît heureux, ça vit heureux, ça meurt heureux: à propos de quoi veux-tu que ça pense à nous? Et puis, je te dis... ils ne savent pas.” (403) A moment later, after acknowledging the kindness of their neighbor Rigolette and its relation to the fact that she is poor herself, he adds, “[C]omme je dis toujours: Si les riches savaient!” (404) What he does not know himself is that the rich, represented by Rodolphe, do know and do care (in the text, I mean, of course), and are taking in his story as he speaks. Rodolphe is peeping in on this horrible drama and will eventually reveal himself as the desired rich, omniscient reader. I say “eventually” because it feels like an eternity before he does so – he waits for a grandmother to be threatened with a whip, for a child to die, for Morel to be cornered by bailiffs who want to haul him off to prison, and for Morel's daughter Louise to come home and be charged with infanticide before he leaves his hiding place.

Nevertheless, he does emerge, just at the moment when the gem-cutter has cried out that God is not just, to disagree with him: “Si, Dieu est juste... il a toujours pitié des honnêtes gens qui souffrent” (420). And when Morel throws himself at Rodolphe’s feet, in a gesture of gratitude and submission that characterizes many of the recipients of his largesse, and says, “Ah, monsieur, vous nous sauvez la vie! À qui devons-nous ce secours inespéré?” Rodolphe answers him, “À Dieu; vous le voyez, il a toujours pitié des honnêtes gens” (422).

This kind of scene abounds in the novel. Rodolphe is not always to be found literally hiding and spying through key-holes to bear witness to the sufferings of others, but throughout the text, he adopts various forms of disguise and subterfuge in order to obtain access to narratives whose authors do not expect him, or anyone, to read them. And throughout the text, the praise for Rodolphe is over the top. Fleur-de-Marie is extravagant in her appreciation of his all-knowing benevolence, as is le Chourineur; especially in the case of le Chourineur, Rodolphe is praised for having discerned something in him, “du coeur et de l’honneur,” that le Chourineur had never known about himself, let alone had anyone else read in him before, and Rodolphe’s acuity as a reader of le Chourineur’s character changes him forever. The point I want to make here is that Rodolphe’s reading of the suffering poor is repeatedly read and lauded by the poor themselves. And it is the reader of *Les Mystères de Paris* – if not *exclusively* the bourgeois subscriber base of *Le Journal des Débats*, then *primarily* the bourgeois subscriber base of *Le Journal des Débats* -- who gets to read this extravagant, rewarding reading of Rodolphe’s reading, over and over again.

This, I want to argue, is where we find the ideological jackpot of *Les Mystères de Paris*. Embedded in the fantasy of a working-class reading of the bourgeois reader’s reading lies a fantasy of a bourgeois reading that matters, a bourgeois reading that makes a difference in its

mere act of accomplishment, a bourgeois reading that comes in for notice and endorsement and gratitude on the part of the potentially threatening populace. If the working-class reader offers consolation or cause for hope to the bourgeois readers Sue explicitly addresses with his text, it is because this spectral reader can appreciate, in fantasy, the caring that bourgeois readers demonstrate, à la Rodolphe, by reading.

I am not claiming that working-class readers did not read *Les Mystères de Paris*, nor that they gave no encouragement or material to Sue. However, it's time we acknowledged that the idea that the novel was read and coauthored by working-class readers is -- at least also if not instead -- a wish-fulfillment fantasy both modeled and marketed within the pages of the novel itself. It is a fantasy that predated the existence of *Les Mystères de Paris*, as we've seen, but one that seems to have survived it, too.

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