

For the People by the People?
Eugène Sue's
Les Mystères de Paris

*A Hypothesis in the
Sociology of Literature*

Christopher Prendergast



European Humanities Research Centre
University of Oxford

RESEARCH MONOGRAPHS IN FRENCH STUDIES 16

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PREFATORY NOTE



A specialist monograph is hardly the place for autobiographical ruminations, but a brief explanatory note in these terms regarding its background will help clarify its aspirations and scope. This short study is the delayed and residual outcome of a research project first activated some twenty-odd years ago, but which then lay dormant for nigh on two decades, partly owing to the interference of other interests and commitments, partly because the sheer scale of the original ambitions informing the project resulted in that all-too-familiar syndrome: deferral. These ambitions I have long since discarded, though not the hope that another, more determined scholar might one day pick up where I left off. The purpose of the present modest endeavour derives some of its point from this hope: it operates a reduction and distillation of a substantial, if radically incomplete, body of research with a view to sketching an ‘instrument de travail’ ideally destined for other hands. It engages with a problematic (emerging forms of popular literature) centred on a particular case (Eugène Sue’s *Les Mystères de Paris*) and underpinned by a specific hypothesis (what I call the Chevalier-hypothesis, the nature of which is described in the first chapter). It opens lines of inquiry, identifies blockages, entertains speculations and poses questions, with inevitably much left hanging in the air. It should not, however, be seen simply as a ‘case-study’, but as designed to illuminate a range of larger issues in the sociology of literature and the history of the book.



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CHAPTER 1



The Hypothesis

I

Eugène Sue's novel *Les Mystères de Paris* was published in serial form in the newspaper *Le Journal des débats* between June 1842 and October 1843, and reached what appears to have been an unprecedented readership. The relevant statistics (and *a fortiori* the inferences they permit) are inevitably sketchy, but what facts we do have are, by the standards of the time, impressive. Subscriptions to the *Journal des débats* (which maintained the pre-Girardin subscription rate of 80 francs) increased by many thousands in the early months of publication, while *Le Constitutionnel*, which bought his next novel, *Le Juif errant*, for the very large sum of 150,000 francs and published it during 1844–5, saw its readership leap from 3,600 to 25,000 in the space of one month and not long thereafter to around 40,000.¹ It has been further (and roughly) estimated that in book form *Les Mystères de Paris* had a run of over 60,000 copies between 1842 and 1844. Even as the novel appeared 'en feuilleton', Gosselin initiated a five-volume edition, rapidly followed by others (the 1844 edition is listed as the 'seventh', although this may have been something of a publisher's publicity wheeze). Also in 1843, Gosselin sought to rival the newspaper by issuing a version in separate instalments ('livraisons'),² eventually bound as a two-volume illustrated edition. Meanwhile, between 1842 and 1843 no fewer than three editions were published in Brussels, and in 1845 the Belgian publisher Paulin brought out a ten-volume edition at the staggeringly low price of 1 franc per volume. On certain assumptions regarding the number of readers per copy (whether as 'feuilleton', 'livraison' or volume), the

¹ Martyn Lyons, 'Les best-sellers', in Roger Chartier and Henri-Jean Martin (eds.), *Histoire de l'édition française. Le temps des éditeurs. Du romantisme à la Belle Epoque* (Paris, 1990), 425, 445.

² Cf. Anne-Marie Thiesse, 'Le roman populaire', in Chartier and Martin (eds.), *Histoire de l'édition française*, 513.

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actual readership has been estimated as five to ten times greater than the print-run or subscription figures.³

To the raw statistics must also be added the rich vein of anecdotal testimony. The stories here are almost endless, sustaining the legend that the whole of France waited with bated breath for the next day's instalment, with an irritable depression descending when for various reasons there were interruptions to the flow of publication:⁴ stories of queues forming in the early hours of the morning outside the offices of *Le Journal des débats* to get a copy of the next issue; of fights breaking out in the 'cabinets de lecture' over access to Sue's novel; of an impoverished worker saving up in order to subscribe to the 'livraisons'. As befits legend, the narratives also oscillate between the comic and the horrific. In the former register, there is the droll tale of Marshal Soult, head of the armed forces, who prided himself on despising literature and never reading books. The anti-literary Marshal became incurably addicted to *Les Mystères de Paris*, with the result that when Sue was arrested and gaoled by the National Guard for evading military service and refused to issue any more instalments while in prison, Soult ordered his immediate release. On the other hand, there is the macabre tale (one which, on reflection, carries a great deal of meaning in relation to the sorts of mythologies and mystifications that surrounded Sue) of the evening he returned home to his apartment to find that a young man had forced an entry and had hanged himself in the living-room, leaving a note to the effect that, driven to suicide by poverty, he had found at least some comfort and consolation in killing himself in the home of the individual who had become the great spokesman for the Poor.⁵

The statistical and anecdotal records thus point to a conclusion itself much touted at the time of the appearance of *Les Mystères de Paris*, namely, that it was a great 'popular' success in the sense of being one of the first works of fiction to be read by 'toute la France'⁶ (or, more accurately, across the whole social spectrum of literate France). But

³ For details, see Pierre Orecchioni, 'Eugène Sue. Mesure d'un succès', *Europe*, nos. 643–4 (1982), 161–5.

⁴ Charles Simond recorded: 'je peux dire sans exagération que les jours où le feuilleton manquait, il y avait comme une dépression intellectuelle dans Paris', *La Vie parisienne à travers le XIX^e siècle* (Paris, 1900), cit. Jean-Louis Bory, *Eugène Sue, le roi du roman populaire* (Paris, 1962), 272.

⁵ Bory, *Eugène Sue, le roi du roman populaire*, 273, 284.

⁶ Georges Jarbinet, 'Les Mystères de Paris' d'Eugène Sue (Paris, 1932), 179.

whether this claim is properly instantiated by the kind of evidence cited above remains necessarily moot. Even on its own terms, the statistical record is incomplete, and critically so in relation to certain questions concerning the dissemination and reception of Sue's novel. But in addition, the terms themselves are not only factually deficient but also methodologically problematic; as Roger Chartier has tirelessly pointed out, in his critique of the *Annales* school, statistical social history has the unfortunate consequence of 'reifying' the processes it studies into purely quantifiable objects. Amongst other things, it repeats and consolidates the distinction of 'high' and 'low' culture, whereby the latter disappears into the anonymity of the 'external, collective and quantitative approach', while to the former is reserved 'the intellectuality of the highest forms of thought, which requires internal analysis to individualize the irreducible originality of their ideas'.⁷ As we shall see, differentiation of 'voice' and 'agency' will be important to assessing the terms of the reception of *Les Mystères de Paris*.

To some extent, the anecdotal sources can serve as a counterweight to the abstraction of purely statistical evidence: drawn from the repertoire of everyday life, these examples capture something of the quality of a 'lived' set of responses. As more recent forms of historical inquiry have stressed, this kind of evidence is by no means negligible. On the other hand, the anecdotal corpus, though often impressively vivid, is by its nature fragmentary and, in some cases, rhetorically inflated: we may have no particular reason to doubt Mme Denoix's report of fights breaking out in the local bookstore over the latest instalment, but we must remember that the report is embedded in what is essentially a fan letter (she also converted the successive instalments of *Les Mystères de Paris* into a running poem of interminable proportions, which she sent to Sue as a grimly tedious echo of his own method of publication).⁸ Moreover, even if true, in what respects the anecdotes can be accorded representative value, telling us something about a more general configuration of readership and response, is not something that can be simply taken for granted. In short, neither statistics nor anecdotes can in themselves yield satisfactory answers to two fundamental questions: the precise nature of Sue's reading public; the place of *Les Mystères de Paris* in the formation of a modern popular literature.

⁷ Roger Chartier, *Cultural History* (Oxford, 1988), 37.

⁸ For details of the letters to Sue, see Ch. 3 below.

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The two questions are clearly related. The difficulty of the first is partly an empirical matter (of which more later), but it is also tied to how, historically and conceptually, we handle the second: how the publication of *Les Mystères de Paris* is tied into the play of forces that produced a new configuration of popular culture in the first half of the nineteenth century.

In this context, ‘popular’ is a difficult term, one that has to be run analytically across a grid of historical meanings that include the political, the social and the cultural.⁹ Stretched and strained in this way, ‘populaire’ in nineteenth-century French discourse proves as slippery as the talismanic term from which it derives, ‘le Peuple’. As it travels through the nineteenth century, the latter famously gathers about itself a complex semantic history, paradoxically emptying itself of determinate content the more its meanings proliferate, to end as an essentially self-validating discursive category available to all manner of appropriation. As a political term issuing from the speech and writing of the Revolution, it is rapidly assimilated to the unifying fictions of ‘nation’ and thus to a notion of a common culture transcending division and difference.¹⁰ This definition would of course underpin the view of *Les Mystères de Paris* as a novel destined for, and read by, ‘toute la France’. On the other hand, by the 1840s, and climactically

⁹ Nathalie Zemon Davis has distinguished two basic meanings for the term ‘popular culture’ (the ‘anthropological’ and the ‘literary-sociological’), associating each respectively with two 19th-century names, Jules Michelet (in particular Michelet’s *Le Peuple*) and Charles Nisard (author of *Histoire des livres populaires*): on the one hand, ‘the concept refers to the values, beliefs, customs, rituals and associations of peasants or of artisans and working people of the city. Here culture is characterized, as anthropologists might, by its relation to the lives and purposes of a specified social group’; on the other hand, ‘popular culture seems to designate certain kinds of literature, art, religious practice or festivity which either are widely dispersed in a society or are intended for a broad public. Here popular culture is characterized by its differences from learned or high culture’: ‘The Historian and Popular Culture’, in Jacques Beauroy, Marc Bertrand and Edward Gargan (eds.), *The Wolf and the Lamb: Popular Culture in France from the Old Regime to the Twentieth Century* (Stanford French and Italian Studies; Saratoga, 1977), 9–10.

¹⁰ In 1868 the Marquis de Chasseloup-Laubat, then President of the Société Franklin (an organization directly concerned with popular reading), posed the rhetorical question: ‘In our country, where all class distinction has disappeared, where all are reunited and mixed as a single class which is called the *Nation*, who can say where the application of the word *popular* begins or ends?’, cit. (and trans.) Robert J. Bezucha, ‘The Moralization of Society: The Enemies of Popular Culture in the Nineteenth Century’, in Beauroy et al. (eds.), *The Wolf and the Lamb*, 179.

in 1848, ‘peuple’ and ‘populaire’ also become, in certain contexts, more specialized terms of social description and self-description, more closely associated with ‘les couches populaires’, especially the semi-industrialized urban working class.¹¹ The term ‘peuple’ (including some of Sue’s uses of it) readily invokes and attracts, as cognates, the terms ‘ouvrier’, ‘travailleur’ and even, at this relatively early stage, ‘proléttaire’.¹²

The association of ‘peuple’ with the labouring classes nevertheless remains unstable and fragile, especially where pressing political interests are at stake. Thus, elsewhere (for example Thiers’s notorious distinction between ‘peuple’ and ‘multitude’,¹³ or Hugo’s opportunistic discrimination of ‘peuple’ and ‘populace’),¹⁴ the term will be deployed rhetorically against the working class, or at least to impose differentiations designed to separate out and circumscribe certain sectors of the working class (typically in the troublesome area where ‘classes laborieuses’ and ‘classes dangereuses’ are perceived as threateningly confused with each other). Alternatively (this too we will often find in Sue’s own writings), the term is invested with a studied and disingenuous ambiguity, such that it at once designates the ‘workers’ or the ‘poor’, but also connotes ‘more’ (for example the petty-bourgeoisie), thus reinvoking the older notions of nation and

¹¹ The worker newspaper *L’Artisan* proposed this identification as early as 1830 : ‘Selon nous, le peuple n’est autre chose que la classe ouvrière’. It can also be traced back to Babeuf at the end of the 18th century (‘ce véritable peuple, le peuple laborieux, le peuple ouvrier’). By 1848 the definition has become commonplace, as in Tocqueville’s *Souvenirs* (‘le peuple proprement dit’ equals ‘les classes qui travaillent de leurs mains’), cit. Maurice Tournier, ‘Le mot “Peuple” en 1848: désignant social ou instrument politique?’, *Romantisme* 9 (1975), 14, 19.

¹² Sue’s use of the term ‘proléttaire’ appears as early as 1832 in the Preface to *La Salamandre* (defined as a form of ‘leprosy’ infecting the social body): see Marcelin Pleynet, ‘Souscription de la forme. A propos d’une analyse des *Mystères de Paris* par Marx dans *La Sainte Famille*’, *La Nouvelle Critique*, special issue, Colloque de Cluny (1968), 102. The term becomes more insistent, and more politically self-conscious, after 1848. The subtitle of *Les Mystères du Peuple* is *Histoire d’une famille de prolétaires à travers les âges*. In 1851 he wrote a piece of reportage, *Réalités sociales—Etudes sur le prolétariat dans les campagnes—Jean-Louis le journalier*, a text offering itself as a study of ‘la condition sociale du proléttaire des champs’: see Jean-Pierre Leduc-Adine, ‘A propos de Jean-Louis le journalier’, *Europe*, nos. 643–4 (1982), 138.

¹³ Cit. Louis Chevalier, *Classes laborieuses et classes dangereuses à Paris pendant la première moitié du XIX^e siècle* (Paris, 1984), 459.

¹⁴ Victor Hugo, ‘Discours de réception à l’Académie française’, in *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Jean Massin, 18 vols. (Paris, 1967–70), vi. 161.