

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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The Mysteries of Paris / Les Mysteres de Paris (1842-1843) Eugene Sue

Backgrounds to Modern French Romanticism

In listening to the voices of French Romantics since the Renaissance, we have crossed many Romantic Passages---we heard the sweet music of Louise de Labe, Pierre de Ronsard, Marguarite de Navarre, women or high strung admirers of women, in whom the ancient finesse of the feminine brings out the well-tuned subtleties of feminine rhyme, meter, and notation. When it comes to the place of the mother of the muses, rhapsody and cultural memories we need only reflect on the Greek adage which holds the memory is the mother of the Muses, the launch pad, in other words, of the diverse modes in which the creative imagination may choose to express itself. We revert to the embedded wisdom of that thinking of 'Muses of History, Music, Visual Beauty, Drama,' all of them voices of female in its unique modes. It is such categorical Muses that we speak, in addressing the mysteries of Paris, the dark depths of an ancient settlement, which brings to order, within its banks, the first thrill of proto European settlement. The mother, as source of all, steams to solemn presence in a modern epic like Eugene Sue's *Mysteries of Paris*.

The Romantic movement in French literature and culture grew palpably from the sense of the place, the heart of throbbing city like Paris, into which Sue introduces us in a sequence of panels, or chapters, tracking a coherent set of characters drawn from the dark demi world of Paris. Sue's effort is part of the Gallic effort to claim its full depth of self-awareness.

The Style of Entry

Sue adopts the dignified portraiture of Victorian novelists, taking care to portray, and give himself ample opportunity to share the details. 'It was a cold and rainy night, towards to end of October, 1818, that a tall and powerful man, with an old broad trimmed straw hat on his head and clad in a blue cotton carter's frock, which hung loosely over trousers of the same material, crossed the Pont au Change, darted with a hasty step into the Cite, that labyrinth of obscure winding and narrow streets which extends from the Palais de justice to Notre Dame.

The author cloaks the man's movements in the obscurities of the medieval city, in the narrow, winding cobblestone streets we know, for example, from Balzac's *Eugeniene Grandet* or many a Conan Doyle novel. All is mystery here as was the medieval city itself, which was only beginning to assume its centuries old regional characteristics, law courts, incarcerational facilities, tradesmen's guilds, training grounds for sport. The romance with which we cloak this scenography today may be a byproduct of film history and contemporary romantic fiction, but they are nonetheless working images of ourselves struggling to make a polity our earlier selves.

What kind of mystery cannot unravel itself from this spectral man in the dark street?

Within the warrens of small domiciles, into which we can imagine our 'tall man' making his way, 'this quarter serves as the lurking place of a multitude of lairs—*tapis francs*—in the slang of theft and murder, a drinking shop of the lowest order—its bosses called *ogres and ogresses* respectively—recalling the dark of Gorky's *The Lower Depths*. One could say that with each step forward the tall man of introduction steps more deeply into the city. Before long he is entering a forest of interior and crisscrossing ladders leading into the multiple lairs. The visitor deepens into the center.

In the center. He seems clearly to know where he is, our man. The man in the carter's frock gown, stopping before one of the creatures standing abjectly around the wall, seizes her by the arm and says, 'Ha! Good evening, La Gouauleuse!' The girl recedes saying in a faint and fearful tone: 'Good evening Chourineur. Don't hurt me.'

The name the guy had, as a liberated convict, had been so given—*chouineur*, 'one who strikes with the knife, the stabber or slaughterer,' was the name the guy had acquired in the galleys-- Banter ensues, the ugly type, many innuendos abound, sex and slashing and blood. (Liberated convicts, back from the galleys, were apt to make their ways back to these subterranean cesspools after a session in the ocean galleys. In the present instance, after a scuffle on the tapis franc's slimy floor, La Gouauleuse slips away into a dark and muddy corner. As she is about to escape, but with her wrist caught firmly in the Chouineur's grasp, a yet stronger arm intervenes himself—Le Bras Fort—with a far stronger grasp than Chouineur's. The slaughterer's grasp has been left helpless.

'A returned convict is,' in this world's phraseology, 'called an 'ogre,' or a woman in the same degraded state, is called an 'ogress,'; women generally keep such cribs...frequented by the refuse of the Parisian population,; freed felons, thieves and assassins are their familiar customers. No wonder it is that the Parisian police head first for these lairs when they are on the scent of a 'hot cqtch.' One can think out from this demi monde into other texts of modern literature and culture—the fictions of Dashiell Hammet—the underground crime thriller films of Kurosawa, the splendidly crafted television sequence *Homicide Hunters* narrated by Lt. Kendra after a career of over a hundred homicide arrests with the Colorado Springs Police Department.

It was Sue's plan to create a sequence of fiction shaped vignettes in which a recurrent cast of characters made parts of a continuous narrative.

Edmond Sue and Les Freres Goncourts

Virtually simultaneous with the work of Eugene Sue, the Goncourt brothers began their own literary journey into the modern life of France. It became their growing intention, from the beginning of their writing career—these two brothers created in tandem every day of their lives—to leave as definitive as possible a life record, on their times and culture, and to do so with as clear as possible a determination to touch all registers of social being—to leave comprehensive material records—this was the period in which similar records of historical French buildings were being kept, under the watchful eye of such as Prosper Merimee; and in which masters of the history of French architecture were instituting national restoration projects throughout the country. This was also the period in which throughout France the temptation of Monarchy or Royalty was strongly felt in society. National self-awareness and historical preservation were fully in style.

The turn to an interest in the structure and nature of society—was destined to reflect itself throughout the arts and culture. We can concern ourselves with the preservation of culture as we find it in the long sequence of fictions devoted to that issue by the Goncourt brothers. Like many of their fiction writing contemporaries—Zola or Flaubert,—the Goncourts treasured as a lifetime duty not to let time slip out of their hands and careers. There will be no need here to rethink the monumental effort of Marcel Proust, to track down and restrain the flight of time.

The Goncourts, Proust, Sue, and Greenland

Throughout the French nineteenth century there were rumblings of digging into the fundamental structures of human society. This societal rumbling assumes primitive form in the work of Sue, who explores the *bas fond* of society's structure. The Goncourt brothers penetrate the mysteries of society where it expresses itself in terms of significant social products, from national monuments to paper clips and dust mops.

It might be said that the greatest expressions of nineteenth century Romanticism in France were inspired by the daring social reform moments that grew out of Socialism, and that were to grow into the movement of Communism, which was destined to build into that Communism destined to fire the fuse of conflict and revision through much of the twentieth century. If the increasing exploration of the earth can feasibly be compared with the underworld pursuits private to the demi world of crime, we will be in a position to identify a contemporary closure of the human theme. This final allusion,, which testifies to little but the author's amateurism, makes simple reference to current scientific—and geopolitical--reality, which appears to place priceless caches of rare minerals underground in northern Greenland. What lies

apparently hidden in nature may once more prove unexpectedly present. Yet it may be as difficult of access as any other fragment of the Golden Fleece.