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Smoke and Mirrors: Secret Societies and Self-Reflexivity in the *Mystères urbains*

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This article reflects on the literary theoretical and literary historical significance of secret societies in the *mystères urbains*, a large corpus of popular novels produced in the latter half of the nineteenth century in response to the unprecedented success of Eugène Sue's *Mystères de Paris* (1842–43). In these novels, representations of secret societies challenge and transform our understanding of *l'envers* and, by extension, our approach to the (rewritten) text. Distorted reflections, by pointing to the shared preoccupations of readers of “popular” and “serious” literatures, hint at the arbitrary nature of groupings both within and outside the text. A protean system of initiates and outsiders echoes the engagements of both an exclusive “Happy Few” and an indiscriminate “masse idiote” with the text itself. The fusion of heterogeneous characters into fictional secret societies echoes the efforts made to demystify and defuse the threat of a new and alarmingly disparate reading public.

Between 1789 and 1871, France saw what Miranda Gill describes as a “bewildering succession of political regimes” (33), the inevitable response to which was an analogous glut of anti-establishment factions. The State opposition was frequently equated with plotting and secrecy, as has been the case throughout political history; as Georg Simmel puts it, “every group that is politically rejected, is called a secret society” (*Sociology* 376). This association is predicated on a fear of the unknown: if specific, identifiable political forces are threatening enough, then groups whose composition, motivations, organisation, and projects are a subject of mystery represent a kind of nightmarish apogee of political dissent. Unsurprisingly then, the French authorities saw sedition and conspiracy on every corner, and adapted legislation accordingly. Following the French Revolution, the *loi martiale* of October 1789 defined and legislated against illegal meetings, acknowledging their criminal potential. There were a series of nineteenth-century amendments to this law, for example under the July Monarchy,

and after the revolution of February 1848, the *interdiction de rassemblement* was made particularly stringent.¹ Nocturnal gatherings were considered especially pernicious and punished accordingly. As well as being a very real phenomenon in the nineteenth-century French capital, and the source of palpable political anxiety, secret societies were also a recurrent motif in the literature of the period, from Stendhal's *Vanina Vanini* (1829), recounting the love story between a young Italian aristocrat and a revolutionary *carbonaro*, to Balzac's *Histoire des Treize* (1833–39) and Féval's *Habits noirs* (from 1863). In this article I wish to reflect on the role of secret societies in the *mystères urbains*, a large corpus of popular novels produced in the latter half of the nineteenth century in response to the unprecedented success of Eugène Sue's *Mystères de Paris* (1842–43). It is my contention that this corpus is worth studying separately from the works already cited, because it exemplifies what I would term the self-reflexive agency of fictional secret societies; if descriptions of these groups invite us to consider the composition of reading communities, and the nature of readers' engagements with the text, then this invitation is at its most insistent in the *mystères*, where the size and prominence of the corpus and its tendency toward repetition lend weight to the parallels suggested between secret societies and the reading public. In exploring this thesis, I will refer to two texts in particular: *Les Invisibles de Paris* (1867) by Gustave Aimard, a prolific writer of adventure novels, and his lesser known co-writer Henri Crisafulli, follows the exploits of a group of masked avengers during Mardi Gras;² *Les Loups de Paris* (1876), by journalist and popular novelist Jules Lermina, published under the pseudonym William Cobb, recounts the adventures of the dastardly Loups and the altruistic Club des Morts, against a backdrop of royalist and revolutionary ructions and family dramas.³ These novels afford us a glimpse into something of a transitional and particularly fascinating phase in the *mystères urbains*; they distinguish themselves from the early *mystères*, produced under

the July Monarchy and Second Republic, by dint of an increasingly playful self-consciousness.

Scholarship on fictional secret societies to date has focused on two main themes: the socio-historical significance of nineteenth-century French fictional secret societies in particular, and namely their ubiquity as a reflection of the enmity and suspicion felt toward the Jesuits and their perceived plots for world domination,⁴ and in the following century, the narrative function of secret societies in detective fiction.⁵ My focus in this article, however, will be on the literary theoretical and literary historical import of these fictional groups. The secret society, I contend, emerges as a self-referential construct: representations of these groups challenge and transform our understanding of the urban underworld and, by implication, our approach to and understanding of text and palimpsest;⁶ distorted reflections within the diegesis point to the shared concerns of readers of “popular” and “serious” literatures;⁷ and the inconsistent treatment of initiates and outsiders reflects the often complex engagements of different groups of readers with literary modernity. My thesis here therefore complements the body of critical work produced as part of the Médias 19 project, coordinated by Marie-Ève Thérénty, of the RIRRA21 research team at the Université Paul Valéry Montpellier III. Specifically, this article identifies intra-diegetic reflections of the extra-diegetic phenomena elucidated by the Médias 19 research; the representations of secret societies considered here provide an intra-diegetic echo of the international (or transnational) reach of the *mystères* phenomenon, with the prevalence of plagiarism and piracy providing an additional link back to the diegetic content.⁸ I also point out the meta-diegetic resonance of the genre’s preoccupation with modernity, and modern identities in particular. If in these novels, as Thérénty writes, “derrière chaque ville se cache une interrogation inquiète sur la modernité,” then it is literary modernity in particular which we see illuminated by these fictional secret societies. Similarly, if the *mystères* exemplify an obsession with identity and

its representation—Thérenty and Kalifa refer to “la question centrale posée par les mystères: celle des identités dans la modernité”⁹ and to “l’engouement d’un lectorat en plein essor et affamé de représentations sociales”—then self-identity and self-representation are arguably just as much at stake.

Rewriting *l’envers*; reconfiguring the palimpsest

The imaginary of the French *bas-fonds* has been analysed extensively by scholars, most notably by Dominique Kalifa in *Les Bas-fonds: histoire d’un imaginaire*. By way of introduction to his study, Kalifa notes the apt vagueness of the titular expression, and takes us on a tour of related terms and synonyms. Of these, I believe *l’envers*, as used by Sarah Mombert, to be the most appropriate for the purposes of this article. Evocations of an underside or underworld (arguably the best renderings of Mombert’s chosen term) crucially imply the existence of an equivalent, legitimate space, and the blurring of these two spaces, and of other antitheses, is central to my argument here.¹⁰

As Mombert remarks, the motif of *l’envers* is recurrent in the *roman-feuilleton*, *roman policier* and *roman noir* (21). Polarization is both physical and metaphorical, with the actual darkness of catacombs, sewers and secret passages used to frame and thus reinforce the nature of morally shady and deviant characters and activities.¹¹ Secret societies in the *mystères urbains* clearly feed into this polarization: Matthieu Letourneux’s mention of the catacombs haunted by M. de Belen of the Loups de Paris (“Paris, terre d’aventures”) is developed in Andrea Goulet’s detailed and perceptive analysis of Lermina’s novel.¹² This literal treatment of a metaphor which, as we shall see, would be handled in rather more abstract terms in the later *mystères*, seems to be a way of preparing the reader for the subtleties and abstractions to come. Such overt melodrama could also be said to prepare the reader for a rather more sophisticated use of the melodramatic mode by writers such as Balzac.¹³ Jean-Claude Vareille, building on Ginzburg’s insightful and wide-ranging essay,

“Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method,”¹⁴ remarks a similar concretization of the hunting metaphor in early French detective fiction.¹⁵ Just as the physical hunt would lose its material trappings to become an intellectual quest, so the notion of the criminal underworld would become more than a mere geographical space with symbolic physical characteristics. Clearly circumscribed underground worlds inhabited by secret societies of unambiguous melodramatic allegiance—“below” rather than “above,” “evil” rather than “good,” and darkness rather than light—prepare and prime the reader for the discovery of more complex mysteries, in which opposing moral forces are rather less clear-cut. In fact, the underworld trope is often both concretised and subverted within the same novel, and this is certainly the case with Aimard’s and Lermine’s mysteries, which could thus be said to exemplify a sort of second phase in the shift from clear-cut melodramatic distinctions toward the blurring of those distinctions. Secret societies are undeniably at home in these insalubrious underworlds, and yet members also have legitimate lives “above ground” and, as such, can be instrumental in pulling mystery and crime up to the surface level, to be played out in the city itself. To give an example, the first meeting of the Invisibles takes place at a Parisian ball, where the secret society members, though masked and under cover of night, are nonetheless placed in immediate proximity to “real” Parisian life. This shift in the locus of mystery is observed by Laverne:

Selon Roger Caillois, la ville forme dans un premier temps un décor façade qui cache le monde réel, le monde d’en dessous. Puis, un glissement s’opère: le Paris des apparences et le Paris des mystères, qui coexistaient sans se confondre, se mêlent. D’abord cantonné dans les domaines de la nuit et des quartiers périphériques, le Paris des mystères gagne peu à peu la pleine lumière et le cœur de la cité.¹⁶

If our interest is called back time and again to the surface of the city, this is also because *l’envers*, for all its melodramatic promise, in fact has very little to show us. The secret society

functions as a kind of red herring, affording the reader access to the melodrama of the initiatory process, but little else. The darkness and mystery of the secret societies does not hide any profound secret, but is itself the sum total of the secret:

Cette initiation est problématique dans la mesure où le basculement dans un monde de nuit et de mort (celui des catacombes et des bas-fonds), loin de préparer à la révélation d'un savoir ésotérique, constitue *la totalité* de ce savoir ésotérique: ce qu'il s'agit de découvrir, c'est que la ville véritable est faite de nuit, autrement dit, que l'espace intermédiaire nocturne [...] constitue en lui-même ce monde auquel il s'agit d'initier. [...]: ce qu'on découvre, c'est qu'il y a de l'obscurité. (Letourneux, "Paris, terre d'aventures" 155)

Mystery is never located and dissipated, but only displaced and reinvented. In this way, the secret societies act as duplicitous gatekeepers, with a kind of metaleptic agency, in that their trickery is designed to dupe readers of the *mystères*, as much as fellow-characters. Within the diegesis, darkness and mystery must be maintained to further the groups' criminal projects; beyond the diegesis, the societies are agents of a sort of self-preservatory crusade, encouraging a deliberately "superficial gaze,"¹⁷ which ensures that mystery is always, ultimately, preserved, and public interest therefore never completely exhausted.

The change could be said to echo a concomitant shift in interpretative criticism. Criminals in the early *mystères*, who in line with the traditional conception of *l'envers* keep obligingly to their underworld niche,¹⁸ function as a diegetic echo of the text as conceived by the Structuralists: a layered palimpsest, with an objective meaning embalmed within it. The organised infiltration of Parisian life "above ground" by secret societies in the later *mystères* echoes the post-Structuralist view of text and palimpsest as polysemic surface phenomena; unlocking mystery and accessing meaning is a question of unravelling surface intricacies, rather than peeling back layers. If we subscribe to Barthes's understanding of the text as

tissu,¹⁹ then what is at stake is the very texture of the cloth, rather than what we assume to be hidden beneath it.²⁰ Recent scholarship on the surface/depth distinction vindicates the shift to the surface observed in the *mystères*. Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus advocate “surface reading” (in a variety of forms), as opposed to the “symptomatic reading” popularised by Fredric Jameson, and by Freud and Marx before him and, invoking Margaret Cohen, note the particular aptness of the former approach in the popular literary context. Just as in the *mystères* the reader must look, increasingly, to the surface of the city, so the scholar should pay attention to the text’s “discursive contexts” rather than seek to plumb its “hidden depths” (7).

In summary, secret societies in the *mystères*, by mingling, at times almost imperceptibly, with real urban life, help to construct a more complex notion of *l’envers*. The revelatory rhetoric synonymous with the Structuralist drive for interpretation and fascination with profundity is, ultimately, specious. Our preoccupation remains the intricacy of the surface (of city and text alike), rather than what may be hidden beneath it, and this echoes both a self-conscious, self-preservatory impulse and a broader interpretative shift, which encourages us to approach works of popular fiction in ways conducive to our study and enjoyment of them.

Distorted reflections: parody and *illusio*

The proximity of the underworld to the real world, when not physical, is ideological, as in the numerous instances when the secret societies provide distorted reflections of the very power structures to which they supposedly stand in opposition. In one particularly striking scene, Muflier and Goniglu of the Loups de Paris stand trial, accused of betraying the group. The machinations of the Assises Rouges prove remarkably similar to those of the official justice system: “Ceci avait tout l’air d’une cour d’assises. [...] Derrière eux entrent douze hommes qui se rangent sur un banc un peu plus élevé que leurs sièges. [...] Douze

hommes! cela ressemblait furieusement à des jurés” (Lermina 2: 221–22). And yet the reflection is decidedly ironic, given that the positions of power in this court can only be held by prisoners condemned to death, sentenced *in absentia*, or by escaped convicts: “Par une odieuse contrefaçon des lois régulières, ce tribunal était constitué selon les règles de la procédure normale. Un président assisté de deux juges dirigeait les débats. Ces sièges ne pouvaient être occupés [...] que par des condamnés à mort, contumaces ou évadés.”²¹ The similarity of the entire set-up to the system it purports to subvert is nonetheless striking:

Le greffier commença sa lecture: c’était un document rédigé dans la forme judiciaire et dans lequel—détail des plus curieux—étaient visés les articles du Code d’instruction criminelle. [...] [L]es agissements [de la procédure régulière] étaient suivis pas à pas, et eût-on fermé les yeux pour écouter qu’on se fût transporté dans une de ces audiences solennelles où la société se défend contre le crime. (2: 224)

This illustrates Simmel’s assertion that “the secret society makes itself into a sort of counter-image of the official world, to which it places itself in contrast. Here we find the ubiquitous sociological norm: that structures which resist larger, encompassing structures through opposition and separation, nevertheless themselves repeat the forms of these structures” (*Sociology* 360). The idea of the secret society as a negative reproduction of the society which exists “above ground” is indicative of the ironic, parodic propensity of these texts.²² Simmel’s point is reiterated by Bourdieu, who explains the “adhésion collective au jeu” upon which hinges his “*illusio* du champ artistique”:

Bien qu’ils soient totalement opposés dans leur principe, les deux modes de production culturelle, l’art “pur” et l’art “commercial,” sont liés par leur opposition même qui agit à la fois dans l’objectivité, sous la forme d’un espace de positions antagonistes, et dans les esprits, sous la forme de schèmes de perception et

d'appréciation qui organisent toute la perception de l'espace des producteurs et des produits.²³

In this way, the secret societies could again be said to direct our attention beyond the diegesis, to the functioning of the text itself: just as the secret society provides a reflection (albeit a warped one) of the very institutions it purports to subvert, so “popular” and “serious” modes of literary production at this time were less antagonistic in practice than they were in principle, with many writers obliged to keep a foot in both camps. I return to this ironic conflict of priorities, which was characteristic of the fin-de-siècle *crise du roman*, and to its diegetic echoes in the *mystères urbains*, in the subsequent section of this article.

The “Happy Few” and “la masse idiote”

The rhetoric of initiation constructed around the societies, via, for example, the codification of costume and language, could also be said to apply to the *mystères* themselves, and their readership, as much as to the fictional groups. Costume is frequently used to reinforce the group dynamic. In *Les Assises Rouges*, the second volume of *Les Loups de Paris*, the Loups stage their own court of assizes trial, in distinctive garb: “Ils sont vêtus de longues robes noires, le visage noirci [...] ils portent au cou un ruban rouge, collé contre la chair, qui donne l'illusion de la trace laissée par un coup de hache, à supposer qu'après une exécution la tête ait été rapprochée du tronc.” As well as the red cravate, the jurors also wear “une sorte d'épaulette taillée dans une tête de loup” (Lermina 2: 222). Such symbols create cohesion within the group, and are also used as a means of identification, as in the first meeting of the Invisibles, where the society members recognize their leader via the sign of the Maltese cross formed by diamonds on his chest (79). And yet such marks of group identity certainly have their limitations. The semiotic systems of these secret societies are actually rather ambiguous and often a source of confusion rather than an aid to identification. To use Aimard's text as an example, ironically, it is the very anonymity and invisibility of the

secret society's members that defines and identifies them: "nous sommes les *Invisibles*, non seulement pour les hommes qui vivent en dehors de notre association, mais aussi pour nous-mêmes. [...] si vos masques tombent, vous seriez certes bien étonnés."²⁴ Mask-wearing is a prime example of this. The physical mask is a typical feature of a secret society's uniform, and yet its function is decidedly ambiguous. The mask indicates belonging to the group and yet also hides the identity of the individual wearing it. Indeed, the mask is used repeatedly in the *mystères* as a metaphor for hidden thoughts and feelings.²⁵ It is significant that our first encounter with Aimard's Invisibles takes place during a masked ball, where the secret society members are impossible to distinguish from the revellers. It is the familiarity of the mask, and the physical proximity of the mysterious secret society members to the oblivious partygoers, which unsettles the reader.²⁶

Codified language is marked by a similar ambiguity. In some respects it binds the groups, who communicate via slang and exchange secret passwords. At the same time, much like the clothing, ceremonies, and symbols already evoked, it can be just as much a source of mystery and confusion. According to Christopher Prendergast, "[t]he proper name is a verbal locus of social identity, an index of belonging to a known social world" (166), but because, as we have seen, the society members operate in a number of different "social worlds," their numerous *noms de guerre* become the source of tremendous confusion and incidences of mistaken identity.²⁷ In *Les Loups de Paris*, the head of the eponymous criminal gang is known variously as leader Biscarre (or Bisco), Jew Blasias, businessman Mancal, and bookseller Germandret. In *Les Invisibles de Paris*, the main character goes under the names of Passe-Partout,²⁸ le comte de Warrens, le capitaine Noël (159) and M. Riffard (171–72), according to his different activities. As such, these characters could be read as a nod to the large number of authors of popular fiction who resorted to pseudonyms in order to differentiate between their different writing activities, Lermina/Cobb being just one

example.²⁹ Another example of codified language actually creating or perpetuating mystery rather than providing a key to it is the use by the Invisibles of *la lune* as a codeword, which helps society members to recognize each other, but is otherwise entirely phatic. It is no accident that the moon is a recurrent motif in this novel, as it encapsulates the tension between day and night, knowledge and ignorance, showing and concealing. As Philippe Hamon explains, the moon sheds light, but is only a reflection of the sun's rays. It is a token gesture toward explanation and clarification, but remains inextricably linked to night, shadow, and mystery.³⁰

The partial, selective nature of the initiation of secret society members and readers alike is crucial. As Mombert explains, the narrator is a sort of “false friend” (30), who enables our initiation into the secret world, and its secret signs—“[e]n nous faisant suivre pas à pas le parcours initiatique du personnage, jalonné de révélations successives des mystères du groupe, le récit rend lisible le code occulte et nous dévoile les secrets de l’association” (31)—and yet also takes care to ensure that this is always on his own terms, that the initiation is never complete, and that any revelation of mystery is only partial: “si l’on accepte d’entrer dans le jeu de dévoilement que propose le narrateur, on accepte aussi que le narrateur, qui nous initie aux secrets de ses personnages, nous impose le silence, fasse taire, au moins pendant la durée du récit, notre esprit critique” (31).

The proffering of semiotic titbits, of what appear to be linguistic and sartorial keys, gives the reader the impression of being party to various secrets, and yet these keys typically prove deceptive, or emerge as a means of withholding rather than gaining access to secret information. This was clearly a means of creating suspense within a given novel, which equated to a longer and thus more profitable text, and of creating an appetite for further *mystères*, as already discussed. But the complexity of the initiatory experience also underlines

the problematic relationship of the “serious writer” to his readership at this time, and principally his alienation, as Prendergast puts it, from an “ignorant and vulgar” public:

Far from reaching out to the society around him, the artist now tends to recoil in disgust, to emphasize his isolation, to address himself to an elite or an imagined posterity or to withdraw totally into a highly esoteric conception of his art. Thus Stendhal significantly dedicates *La Chartreuse de Parme* to the “Happy Few” [...] Sainte-Beuve reacts to those who claim to write “pour le peuple” by affirming that “il faut viser à satisfaire ses égaux (pares) ou ses supérieurs, et non pas écrire pour ceux qui ont moins de goût et d’esprit que nous; en un mot, il faut viser en haut et non en bas.” Vigny [...] finds himself compelled to distinguish between “l’élite” and “la masse idiote”; the contemporary reading public “cherche dans les arts l’amusant et jamais le beau. De là le succès de la médiocrité.”³¹

The meaning of the text was not offered indiscriminately, but had to be earned by a reader able to distinguish himself from this “masse idiote” and thereby prove his worth.³² While Sue and authors of the other *mystères urbains* were not, of course, the “serious writers” to which Prendergast refers, the initiation of characters and readers into the secret societies of the *mystères*, alternately encouraged and frustrated, could be seen to echo, indeed perhaps even parody, the efforts of authors of more serious literature to distinguish their work from an increasingly homogenised literary offering. In this way, the *mystères* are exemplary of literary modernity as defined by Alain Vaillant, according to whom the expansion and democratisation of media and the concomitant uniformisation and standardisation of discourse (in the form of printed text) provoked, to quote Patrick Thériault, a reactionary, anti-democratic “surcodage herméneutique et [...] surinvestissement stylistique” on the part of “serious writers.”³³ The confusions and inconsistencies of initiations in the *mystères*, either left incomplete or else compromised, also confirm the ironic conflict of priorities faced by

these writers, who were opposed in principle to the new terms of literary communication, but were nonetheless, almost without exception, dependent on the burgeoning press, both financially and in terms of their reputation.³⁴

If secret societies, by problematizing the initiation process, at times draw parallels with literature aimed at a privileged, elite readership, then in other instances they seem to function, conversely, as a metaphor for the “masse idiote.” The very fact that the societies are groups, rather than individuals, suggests this alternative role. The idea of an anonymous, collective other is a threatening prospect, culturally as well as socially:

[M]ass, along with related words, is a very problematical term. As Raymond Williams has put it, “masses are other people,”³⁵ our image of a collective other, to which we ourselves do not belong or rather do not see ourselves as belonging. [...] “Masses” is frequently a semantic correlative of “mob,” and just as the latter carries overtones of a threat to social order, so the former is often made to speak of a threat to culture and sensibility. (Prendergast 22)

The composition of the popular reading public was as much a source of mystery as their number. Pedro Salinas refers to “ce public qui, pour soumis qu’il soit aux statistiques et aux compatibilités, n’en reste pas moins essentiellement mystérieux et insaisissable.”³⁶ The Invisibles describe themselves in the very same terms in Aimard’s novel:

— Cher monsieur, répéta l’ex-chef de la police de sûreté, vous êtes membre de la Société des Invisibles.

— Honoraire ou titulaire?

— Un des chefs peut-être de ces Protées insaisissables...

— Insaisissables... repartit ironiquement Riffard. Les insaisissables... c’est aussi ronflant que les Invisibles! (498)

According to Prendergast, the mysteriousness and anonymity of the reading public were a direct result of the “basically economic” and, as such, “essentially impersonal” relationship between writer and reader (20). “Popular readers” were, in fact, an extremely heterogeneous mix. In fact, the term was used so freely as to be virtually meaningless. As T.J. Clark writes:

[T]he adjective “popular,” applied to persons, manners or entertainment in the later nineteenth century, came to mean many, too indefinite things. The word’s elusiveness derived from its being used for ideological purposes, to suggest kinds of identity and contact between the classes—ways they belonged together and had interests in common—which did not exist in their everyday life or social practice, but seemed to in the spectacle. There was a sense in which the “nouvelles couches sociales” were nothing in our period, or very little, without the space allocated to them in “popular culture”—which is not to say that they lacked a determinate economic position, only that it was not yet clear, to them or anyone, what it was. (205)

The secret societies in the *mystères* are characterized by a very similar eclecticism. To take Lermina’s text as an example, the Loups are portrayed as a motley, *sui generis* assortment of characters. We are reminded of “Georg Simmel’s notion of the ‘club of club-haters’ and Arthur Conan Doyle’s Diogenes Club, a refuge for ‘the most unsociable and unclubable men in town,’”³⁷ as well as what Gill refers to as the “monstrously heterogeneous category” of Parisian bohemia (181). The Morts, despite their very different ideology, are an equally unlikely mix, whose ranks include the erudite Armand de Bernaye, Englishman Sir Lionel Storigan, and one-armed twins Droite and Gauche. All have been saved from the jaws of death or suicide and share a vague, benevolent, altruistic vision, but otherwise have little in common except their black velvet masks.

In mystery narratives, as Prendergast explains, “[w]hat is crucial is not difference but similarity, not division—and it is here that the deep meaning of the mystery plot is located—

but connection” (64). If identifying similarities and making connections between secret society members allows us to gain some purchase on the text, then, in much the same way, identifying (if not delineating in any detail) a group of “popular readers” gave an appealing sense of mastery to a bourgeois literary establishment confronted with a readership whose composition and evolution were the source of great disquiet.

The identification of “popular readers,” the links between whom, much like those between secret society members, are somewhat tenuous, was useful in that it fed back into the aforementioned rhetoric of initiation. Identifying such a group, however heterogeneous its members might be, meant that those who did so could position themselves outside that group, by cultivating “a difference from [those below them] which hinged on [their] skill—[their] privileged place—as consumer of [images of their lives]” (205). Prendergast agrees that:

When [...] we speak of the nineteenth-century “reading public,” we are speaking rather of an image of that public, an image that comes down to us via the statements and views of a relatively small group of highly articulate individuals, who furthermore generally see themselves not as included in, but as standing apart from that public. (20)

Just as a simplistic definition of the “reading public,” and popular readers in particular, was a reassuring but artificial construct for a literary establishment faced with unprecedented change, secret societies in the *mystères urbains* were a convenient narrative device promising similarity, connection, and order in the face of difference, division, and mystery.

Conclusions

The socio-political subtext and narratological limitations of fictional secret societies have been well documented, but the literary theoretical and literary historical resonance of these groups, particularly in the *mystères urbains*, is not to be underestimated. Secret societies in these novels spearhead a shift of diegetic focus, from the underground to the

surface, which reflects the revised figuration of the palimpsest; the urban underworld, just like the palimpsest, no longer constitutes a buried secret to be unearthed, but must instead be disentangled from “normal” life at the surface level. Distorted reflections of legitimate structures point to the shared concerns of extra-diegetic groups otherwise diametrically opposed, and perhaps most significantly readers of “popular” and “serious” literatures. Initiations into the societies, encouraged and frustrated by turns, reflect the complex engagements of these groups of readers with the text itself; indeed, the exaggerated diversity of the fictional groups serves to expose the erroneous assumption that a coherent group of popular readers even exists. The jocular dismissal of the fictional secret society as a cheap narrative trick, which became popular in the twentieth century, is certainly reductive, as the resonance of these groups clearly extends beyond the diegesis; the fusion of characters into groups echoes the efforts made to demystify and defuse the threat of a new and alarmingly disparate reading public.

Languages and Cultures

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¹ As noted in Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*:

1851: “A decree of December 8 authorized the deportation, without hearing... of any person presently or formerly belonging to a secret society. This was understood as referring to any society at all, whether a society for mutual aid or a literary society, that met—even in broad daylight—without the express permission of the prefect of police.” A. Malet and P. Grillet, *XIX^e Siècle* (Paris, 1919), p. 264. (608)

² See also Letourneux, “Imaginaires sériels et circulation internationale. Le cas des mystères urbains (France, Grande-Bretagne).”

³ See also Goulet 68–71.

⁴ The subject was tackled by “serious” writers such as Michelet and Quinet, as Umberto Eco observes in his essay “Fictional protocols,” but it was perhaps Sue’s *Juif Errant* (1844–45), featuring the nefarious Rodin, a personification of Jesuit conspiracy, which drew on and perpetuated what Michel Leroy terms “le mythe jésuite”

in the most emphatic and lurid terms. Elsewhere, the Jesuits were targeted by implication; if every politically rejected group was considered a secret society, then every secret society, by affiliation or influence, was held to be Jesuit in origin. In this way, the international conspiracy took on an intertextual dimension:

[L]es images et les métaphores qui soulignent la ressemblance, voire l'identité, entre la Société de Jésus et les sociétés secrètes, réelles ou mythiques, vivantes ou disparues, n'établissent pas seulement des analogies, pour opérer un transfert d'exécration; elles suggèrent des connexions ou des filiations. Le mythe, forme de délire d'interprétation, reçoit sa consistance des liaisons artificielles qu'il imagine, ou feint d'imaginer, entre des éléments distincts. De la Charbonnerie à la franc-maçonnerie, des Templiers aux Assassins, sans oublier les Juifs, il tisse des fils d'un formidable complot, à la dimension du monde et de l'histoire. (Leroy 236–37)

⁵ Twentieth-century critics would be unanimous in their derision of the role played by secret societies in detective fiction. G.K. Chesterton, in his 1926 preface to *The Wrong Letter*, praised author Walter S. Masterman for avoiding a number of antiquated devices deemed unworthy of the genre, one of which was the convenient introduction of secret societies into otherwise well-crafted narratives:

The things [Masterman] does not do are the things being done everywhere today to the destruction of true detective fiction and the loss of this legitimate and delightful form of art. He does not introduce into the story a vast but invisible secret society with branches in every part of the world, with ruffians who can be brought in to do anything or underground cellars that can be used to hide anybody. (quoted by Huntington Wright 68)

In his well-known article entitled “Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories” (published in the *American Magazine*, September 1928), Huntington Wright (writing as S.S. Van Dine) seconded Chesterton’s view in no uncertain terms, stating:

Secret societies, camorras, mafias, *et al.*, have no place in a detective story. A fascinating and truly beautiful murder is irremediably spoiled by any such wholesale culpability. To be sure, the murderer in a detective novel should be given a sporting chance; but it is going too far to grant him a secret society to fall back on. No high-class, self-respecting murderer would want such odds. (191)

⁶ I return here to my use of the palimpsest as a particularly apposite lens through which to consider rewritings of Sue’s novel; the figurative concept of the palimpsest has been used to evoke both urban accretions and rewritten texts (*Rewriting Les Mystères de Paris*).

⁷ I draw on a distinction made by Prendergast between “serious” writers and “popular” novelists “such as Sue, Dumas, Soulié,” the latter group defined by their “complete capitulation to the pressures of the market” (24).

⁸ Thérenty evokes, for example, “des contrefaçons promptement fabriquées en Europe du Nord (par exemple en Belgique chez Hauman, Lebègue et Sacré fils).” See also Levi 638.

⁹ The point is one made repeatedly in the Médias 19 publications on the *mystères*. See, for example, Thérenty’s reference, invoking Judith Lyon-Caen, to the organisation of the *mystères* “autour d’un questionnement inquiet sur les identités modernes.”

¹⁰ Kalifa himself explains how the *bas-fonds* function as “repoussoir” (foil) and “miroir inversé d’un monde de la norme dont il consolide en retour les contours” (“L’imaginaire des bas-fonds” 45).

¹¹ Lavergne notes several examples of this polarization, in Lermina’s *Chasseurs de femmes* (1881) (186), as well as in Boisgobey and Leblanc (187).

¹² Goulet’s analysis (68–71) is part of a whole chapter on catacomb fictions (39–79).

¹³ Brooks explains how “Realist” novelists such as Balzac and Henry James, while not producing melodrama per se, drew effectively on the rhetoric and excess of the melodramatic mode. Balzac, for example, “sees in the moral polarization of existence [both] a fundamental law and an aesthetic principle” (112), so that the melodramatic conflict in the Balzacian canon becomes one between the difficulties of surface “representation” and the intricacies and idiosyncrasies of latent “signification.”

¹⁴ See especially 12–14 and 22–23. Ginzburg also explores hunting as a narratological metaphor (13).

¹⁵ See also Wigelsworth, “Detection in the second degree in French urban mystery novels.”

¹⁶ Lavergne 191–92. Lavergne’s reference is to Caillois 188–91. On Paris as a city of surface contrasts, see also Wigelsworth, *Rewriting Les Mystères de Paris* 45; on the prevalence of such “surface blurring” in American-set *mystères*, see Wigelsworth, *Rewriting Les Mystères de Paris* 66. Note that for Thérenty the blurring articulates a correlation between the two Parisian realms which is implicit from the outset: “la description des bas-fonds sociaux n’est là que pour dénoncer la société dans son ensemble qui malgré les apparences dépérit des mêmes crimes que les enfers sociaux.”

¹⁷ In the words of Daniel Couégnas:

[I]l y a [...] le plus souvent une espèce de *superficialité* du regard que le roman paralittéraire jette sur les êtres et les choses. Le recours aux clichés ne facilite pas l’analyse *en profondeur* du réel, même si, d’une manière faussement paradoxale, toute une rhétorique et une thématique du *dévoilement*, de l’*élucidation*, de la *révélation au public*, contribuent largement au succès d’une certaine paralittérature

fondée sur les ‘mystères’ (...*de Paris*), les ‘secrets,’ les ‘énigmes,’ des situations ‘étranges,’ ‘curieuses’ ou ‘ténébreuses’... (102)

¹⁸ For example, Sue’s one-eyed La Chouette, hideously self-mutilated Maître d’école, and limping Tortillard, whose conspicuous physical deformities preclude their involvement in legitimate Parisian life; in much the same way, Rodolphe can only enter the Parisian underworld in disguise.

¹⁹ See Barthes “L’Effet de réel,” *Le Plaisir du texte* and “Texte (théorie du).”

²⁰ On the illusory depth of text and palimpsest, see Wigelsworth, *Rewriting Les Mystères de Paris* 44, Dillon 3 and 29, and McDonagh 211.

²¹ *Lermina* 2: 223. See Prendergast’s discussion of the secret society as a “grotesque parody” of the family model, with particular reference to Balzac’s *Histoire des Treize* (“the anonymous ‘fraternity’ of the Thirteen, with its codes of loyalty and dependence in a context of mutual crime and violence”), *La Fille aux yeux d’or*, and *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes*. He refers to “[t]he actual or incipient breakdown of the integrated and hierarchical family unit” and its replacement, in melodrama, by “new contracts, new ‘families,’ bizarre and disconcerting leagues and associations” (180).

²² For a detailed discussion of this propensity, see Wigelsworth, *Rewriting Les Mystères de Paris* 183–208. As Hamon puts it, “l’imaginaire (du) négatif [...] est très souvent, au XIX^e siècle, ironique dans ses postures d’écriture. En effet l’ironie n’est-elle pas la figure d’énonciation qui consiste à dire *l’inverse* de ce qu’on veut faire entendre?” (296–97).

²³ Bourdieu, *Les Règles de l’art*, 278 and 279. See also Bourdieu, *Raisons pratiques* 152–53.

²⁴ Aimard 80. Although this is certainly another source of the teasing we have come to expect from the *mystères*, this kind of irony and confusion, seemingly at odds with a sense of group identity, would appear to have been a historical reality, and not just a fictional device, as Benjamin notes: “The Comité Invisible <Invisible Committee> [was the] name of a [real] secret society in Lyons” (611).

²⁵ See, for example, the marquis d’Harville’s reference to the “mask” worn by his unfaithful wife: “Oui, je veux aller chez elle et observer le masque doux et perfide sous lequel cette infâme rêve sans doute l’adultère de tout à l’heure” (Sue 288). The marquise herself acknowledges “ce masque menteur” (Sue 594). On the centrality of performance to urban life in nineteenth-century Paris, see Wigelsworth, *Rewriting Les Mystères de Paris* 162–79.

²⁶ This curious mix of the familiar and the foreign is what Freud termed *Das Unheimliche* (the uncanny in English; *l’inquiétant étrangeté* in French).

²⁷ On the subject of agnition in popular novels, see Eco, *De Superman au Surhomme* 27–34.

²⁸ The name clearly underlines my previous point; secret societies are not confined to a geographical underworld, but infiltrate and operate in all walks of urban life.

²⁹ On author name in general, see Genette 41–58; on pseudonymity in particular, see 50–58.

³⁰ See Hamon 268–69. See also Wigelsworth, “Illustration et dissimulation dans *Les Mystères de Paris*.”

³¹ Prendergast 24–25. Prendergast cites Stendhal 395, Sainte-Beuve 499, and Vigny 62 and 60. Stendhal’s appeal to the “Happy Few” recalls, in turn, the famous St Crispin’s Day speech from Shakespeare’s *Henry V* (4.3.18–67).

³² The distinction between “initiates” and the wider public would, indeed, continue into the twentieth century. See Donoghue’s discussion of John Crowe Ransom’s “Freud and Literature” (*Saturday Review of Literature*, 4 Oct. 1924): “while a work of literature becomes a public property as soon as it is uttered, it becomes such a thing differently in the hands of ‘the many’ and ‘the few’” (43). Donoghue recognizes the same distinction, “between the carnal and the spiritual sense of a text” (and linked to the surface/depth distinction), made in the first chapter of Frank Kermode’s *The Genesis of Secrecy*:

The distinction is an old one, except for its diction: it is well established as distinguishing between the manifest sense of a text and a latent sense available only to the elect. The manifest sense of a story is what everyone makes of it, more or less; the latent sense is what someone on the inside makes of it. Or it might denote a distinction between an ordinary, straightforward gloss and an act of divination: the gloss would arise from a supposition that the story is nothing more than what it appears to be, the act of divination would arise from the supposition that the story is in some way oracular, yielding its sense not now but later or never. The agent of divination is the insider; the other is the outsider. The insider lives within the circle, the fellowship, the institution, where the score is known; the outsider is content with rougher satisfactions. (44–45)

³³ Thériault 4. While Thériault’s focus is poetry, he elucidates a number of points which can be meaningfully invoked in relation to prose.

³⁴ I am indebted to Patrick Thériault for the interest he showed in an earlier version of this article, and for a number of reading recommendations, including his own 2014 article, which owes much, in turn, to Vaillant’s *Histoire littéraire* 251–69 and 313–33, and *Crise de la littérature* 147–71 and 361–83.

³⁵ Prendergast’s reference is to Williams 289.

³⁶ Salinas 370, quoted by Prendergast 19.

³⁷ Gill 74–75. Gill’s references are to Simmel, *On Individuality and Social Forms* 307 and Doyle 436.

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