

**POPULAR FICTION IN FRANCE AND ENGLAND, 1860-  
1875 : CONVENTION, IRONY AND AMBIVALENCE IN THE  
NOVELS OF PAUL FÉVAL AND WILKIE COLLINS**

**Elisabeth Picq**

**A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD  
at the  
University of St Andrews**



**2000**

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**Popular Fiction in France and  
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**Convention, irony and  
ambivalence in the novels of Paul  
Féval and Wilkie Collins**

Dissertation submitted for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
at the University of St Andrews

by

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Ist February 2000



## Abstract

This thesis is a comparative study of two popular nineteenth-century writers, Paul Féval and Wilkie Collins, and by extension, of their respective traditions, the Roman-Feuilleton and the Sensation novel. At the same time, the thesis seeks to provide new insight into the nature and function of popular fiction as a genre.

This study argues that, contrary to common assumptions, popular fiction is a complex and dialogic form. As a comparative project, this thesis underscores similarities and differences between the two writers.

Chapter I looks at the narrative structures of the novels. It demonstrates that the use of archetypal story-patterns and characters leaves room for both thoughtful and ironically playful narrative experiments, resulting in a surprising degree of self-reflexivity.

Chapter II emphasises the dialogic nature of the texts by examining the ways they evoke and rework different genres and registers. It argues that the mingling of tones and moods serves both to stimulate readers' pleasure and to convey criticism of contemporary society. Making use of Mikhail Bakhtin's theories on popular culture, this section highlights the carnivalesque nature of the texts.

Chapter III addresses in detail the formal influence of the theatre on the two sets of texts and investigates the use of theatrical metaphors in the novels as a way to explore the workings of society.

Chapter IV sets out to redress common assumptions about the conservatism of Féval's narratives and the radical nature of Collins' novels by highlighting the existence of two contrary discourses, one manichean and conservative, the other rebellious and immoral.

Chapter V makes use of René Girard's theory of the scapegoat. By showing how the two discourses articulate around a scapegoat figure, it draws a parallel between the mechanisms of popular fiction and social mechanisms. Finally, this section argues that both Féval and Collins were aware of the ideological charge of the form they were using and of its limitations.

### Declarations

i). I, Elisabeth Picq, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately 100,000 words in length, has been written by me, that is the record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

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## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisors, Mr. Phillip Mallett for his constant help and encouragement, and for his understanding in difficult times, and Dr Peter Read for his stimulating advice. I am very grateful to the School of Modern Languages and the School of English for providing me with financial support and teaching experience; to all the staff from the French and the English Departments, especially Madame Scott, for advice and support related to teaching matters; to all the secretaries from the English and the French Departments, especially Barbara McIntyre, for their assistance.

I am most grateful to Frédérique Stintzy and Michael Abécassis for their constant friendship, and to all those students from the French, English and History Departments who shared their experience of postgraduate studies with me.

My thanks are most due to my parents and M. and Mme. Racaut for moral and financial support; Luc Racaut for providing initial impetus for this thesis, regular proof reading, constant advice and support at key stages of the writing process, and Josh Hill for editing and precious assistance in the last stage of writing up.

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## Introduction

This thesis is concerned with the comparative study of Paul Féval and Wilkie Collins as representatives of two similar kinds of popular novels, the English Sensation novel and the French Roman-Feuilleton as they both stood in the 1860s.

This introduction is divided into five sections, corresponding to five different aims. The first aim is to map out the context of the issues addressed by the thesis, beginning with an overall view of the Roman-Feuilleton and the Sensation novel as literary and cultural phenomena, and following with an outline of their characteristic features. The two genres will be related to the rise of the popular press in France and England. Their method of publication and the nature of their readership will be examined, and their relationships with earlier literary forms briefly sketched.

The second aim of this introduction is to provide some elements of justification as to the comparative nature of this study and the choice of authors. This will be done by outlining some cross-Channel links and exchanges specific to the period studied and to the two chosen authors. As will be argued, the study of popular fiction in the 1860s benefits from a comparative approach due to the cross-fertilisation characterising French and English fiction of the time. Furthermore, certain similarities in the careers of both Collins and Féval are worth investigating. The two writers shared the same literary models, and both had a passion for the stage. They had a similar understanding of the literary frame in which they worked. Last but not least, comparing their relation to their respective cultures yields similar results.

The third aim of this introduction is to provide some notions of the critical contexts in which the popular novel in general, and Paul Féval, Wilkie Collins and their respective traditions in particular, have been studied. This section sets out to establish how popular fiction has been defined and what kind of critical issues it has raised. This will be done by reviewing specific definitions by leading commentators of the genres.

These broader questions will be revisited in the fourth section of the introduction, which provides a review of major critical work done on Paul Féval and Wilkie Collins. Discussions of the Roman-Feuilleton in general and Paul

Féval in particular generally consider issues of literary history, form and ideology together. The general tendency is to look at the Roman-Feuilleton as a social and cultural phenomenon with little literary value. In terms of literary history, most critics have followed Jean Tortel and looked at the Roman-Feuilleton in relation to Romanticism.<sup>1</sup> Questions of form are seen to revolve around the notions of archetypal characters and situations, the use of clichés and repetition. In terms of ideology, the debate concerns the problem of whether the Roman-Feuilleton is conservative, revolutionary or ambivalent. Jean Tortel and Daniel Couégnas view the genre as conservative, Yves Olivier-Martin as revolutionary, and Jean-Claude Vareille as ambivalent.<sup>2</sup> The debate on Féval, for example, revolves around whether the main feature of his novels is nostalgia for an aristocratic order or social critique. On the one hand, the Roman-Feuilleton's capacity to give a voice to the people, expose social inequities and keep alive yearnings for rebellion against the social status quo, has been emphasised. Attractive evil figures have also been seen as a source of subversive pleasure for readers. On the other hand, those who argue for the conservative nature of the Roman-Feuilleton have highlighted its lack of realistic solutions to real problems, its tendency to reduce social conflicts to moral ones and its clear-cut conclusions. For Jean-Claude Vareille, the Roman-Feuilleton is torn between those two poles.

The discussion of the Sensation novels and Wilkie Collins follows a similar pattern with more distinctive features. Early critics such as T. S. Eliot and modern critics such as Albert Hutter have looked at the genre in formal terms and related it to melodrama and the detective story.<sup>3</sup> Patrick Brantlinger and Winifred Hughes have considered the relationships between the Sensation novel and realism in the 1860s.<sup>4</sup> More recently, critics have looked at the cultural

<sup>1</sup> Jean Tortel, 'Esquisse d'un univers tragique, ou le drame de la toute puissance', *Cahiers du Sud*, XXXIV, 310 (Deuxième semestre 1951), pp.355-79.

<sup>2</sup> Jean Tortel, 'Un instrument d'aliénation des masses', in *Europe*, 'Le Roman-Feuilleton', 542 (Juin 1974), pp.160-61; Daniel Couégnas, *Introduction à la paralittérature* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1992); Yves Olivier-Martin, *Histoire du roman populaire* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1980); Jean-Claude Vareille, *Le Roman populaire français (1789-1914). Idéologies et pratiques. Le trompette de la Bérésina* (Limoges: PULIM/Nuit Blanche Editeur, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> T. S. Eliot, 'Wilkie Collins and Dickens', in Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), pp.460-70; Albert Hutter, 'Dreams, Transformations and Literature: The Implications of Detective Fiction', *Victorian Studies*, 9 (1975), pp.181-209.

<sup>4</sup> Patrick Brantlinger, 'What is "Sensational" about the "Sensation Novel"?', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 37 (1982), pp.1-28, reprinted in *Wilkie Collins*, edited

nature and function of the Sensation novel, and explored its ideology. The debate is between those who consider Collins a rebel, such as Patrick Brantlinger or Lyn Pykett, those who consider him a conservative, such as D. A. Miller, and those who view his novels as ambivalent, such as Lilian Nayder.<sup>5</sup> Collins' novels are either seen to expose and contest middle-class values and conventions, notably those related to women's nature and role, or to reinforce them. More recently, commentators like Lilian Nayder have claimed that both tendencies coexist within the Sensation novel in general and Collins' novels in particular.

Finally, the last section of the introduction maps out the particular goals of this thesis as a comparative study of two writers belonging to different cultures, and working within the frame of the popular novel, a form easily marginalised. A general outline of the aims and purposes of this thesis will be given, followed by a review of the specific points explored in the five chapters of this study.

i). Romans-Feuilletons and Sensation novels: cultural and literary phenomena

The Roman-Feuilleton and the Sensation novels were born of a revolution in the press, and closely linked to the rise of a new public looking for entertainment. Easily accessible due to serialisation in periodicals, they were mass-produced and mass-consumed. Both genres achieved immediate success among a wide variety of readers, cutting across class boundaries. Such popularity triggered the suspicion of elitist literary reviewers and conservative political commentators in both countries. Two aspects of the Roman-Feuilleton and the Sensation novel were particularly criticised: the formulaic nature of both content and treatment, and the tendency of both genres to expose aspects of contemporary society that had so far been ignored by fiction.

Both the Roman-Feuilleton and the Sensation novel dealt with social transgressions such as crime or adultery, and treated such themes in a melodramatic way. Both literary critics and readers of highbrow novels

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by Lyn Pykett (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), pp.30-54; Winifred Hughes, *The Maniac in the Cellar: Sensation Novels of the 1860s* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

<sup>5</sup> Brantlinger; 'What is "Sensational" about the "Sensation Novel"?'; Lyn Pykett, *The Sensation Novel: From The Woman in White to The Moonstone* (Plymouth: Northcote Publishers, 1994); D. A. Miller, 'From roman policier to roman-police: Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone*', in *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1988), pp.33-57; Lilian Nayder, *Wilkie Collins Revisited* (New York: Twayne, 1997).

considered the heightened emotions, extraordinary events and wild imagination of those two genres untrue to life and an offence to good taste. These novels were consequently dismissed as pure commodities, satisfying the yearnings for entertainment and escapism of an unsophisticated audience. Both genres, however, also borrowed from realist conventions and had something to say about social changes and modernity. The Roman-Feuilleton, especially at an early stage, exposed the indifference of the rich and the powerful to the plight of the poor. The Sensation novels, on the other hand, were essentially domestic and therefore focused on family and marriage. They often dramatised the injustice done to women and the consequences of female frustration, exposing the hidden side of middle-class domesticity. Both embodied a variety of fears and hopes of both middle and working classes, and explored tensions within society. While providing entertainment by stimulating imagination, therefore, the Roman-Feuilleton and the Sensation novel had a potential for social critique. Both were consequently considered not only untrue but also dangerous. In that respect, Margaret Oliphant's dismissal of Mrs Braddon's *East Lynne* as a 'dangerous and foolish work, as well as false, both to Art and Nature' echoed Alfred Nettement's earlier criticism of the Roman-Feuilleton as fiction that 'attaque le bon sens, le bon goût, la justice, la religion, la société.'<sup>6</sup>

The Roman-Feuilleton developed in the early 1840s along with the beginning of mass-publication. Well before English writers and publishers, the French had already experimented with low price and periodical publication. In 1836, Emile de Girardin and Armand Dutacq launched two daily newspapers: *La Presse* and *Le Siècle*. The yearly subscription cost only 40 francs, half as much as other periodicals, which made these newspapers accessible to an increasingly wide readership. This low cost was partly due to the publication of novels in serialised form. The first novel published as such was Balzac's *La Vieille fille* (1836). Balzac, however, never became used to the demands of serialisation, notably the short daily instalments and the use of cliff-hanging devices. The first novel to display most aspects of the popular novel was Eugène Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris* published by *Le Journal des Débats* in 1842. Specifically designed to be serialised in the *Journal*, *Les Mystères* quickly became a

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<sup>6</sup> Mrs Oliphant, unsigned review, 'Sensation Novels', *Blackwood's Magazine*, xci (May 1862), pp.565-74, reprinted in *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage*, edited by Norman Page (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), p.114; Alfred Nettement, *Etudes critiques sur le Roman-Feuilleton* (Paris: Lagny Frères, 1846), p.62.

phenomenon. Sue first conceived of his novel as an exotic portrait of the Parisian poor as the 'classes dangereuses'. A visit to a poor family transformed the course of his novel, which was to be strongly influenced by socialist and utopian movements of 1840s France. The main feature of *Les Mystères de Paris*, consequently, is its reforming purpose. The hero of *Les Mystères* is Rodolphe de Gerolstein, a noble duke in exile in Paris. While trying to evade his former wife and her brother who seek revenge on him, Rodolphe fights thugs and rescues the poor from misery and ill treatment. Sue's epic, extravagant novel turned into a myth. It established most archetypes of the Roman-Feuilleton for the next twenty years or so, such as outcast heroes, delayed revenge, miscarriages of justice, denunciation of social inequalities and exploration of the slums.

The next great success was Féval's *Mystères de Londres* (1844), published by *L'Epoque* to compete with Sue's novel. Better written and less demagogic, Féval's novel denounced British imperialism and social ruthlessness, and provided a fascinating picture of London's social strata, from slums to the aristocratic world. Like most of Féval's novels, *Les Mystères de Londres* has a convoluted plot, a mysterious hero and many picturesque secondary characters. The special qualities of the novel are its atmosphere, impregnated with an oppressive and diffuse sense of threat, and its obsession with the hidden secrets and mysteries lurking behind the scenes of respectable society. *Les Mystères* foretells Collins' novels, as has been pointed out in a recent critical edition of the novel:

Mais s'il évoque aussi bien qu'Eugène Sue la vie sans espoir des crève-la-faim, il ajoute à sa vision "sociale" une dimension de mystère qui ne laisse pas d'étonner le lecteur d'aujourd'hui. Comme Wilkie Collins un peu plus tard, il a compris que la société victorienne (disons, plutôt, la société puritaine des possédants de l'époque, toutes nations confondues) ne parvenait à régner sans partage que parce qu'elle réussissait à cacher au monde - et à se cacher à elle-même - les turpitudes qui l'agitaient tout au fond.<sup>7</sup>

As Dickens mentioned in one of his letters, Féval's novel was very successful in both France and England.<sup>8</sup> English audiences nonetheless resented Féval's uncompromising portrait of English society, and did not appreciate the pseudonym that Féval had chosen for himself, Sir Francis Trollop, to add some *couleur locale*.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Féval, *Les Mystères de Londres*, Note de l'éditeur (Paris: Phébus, 1998), p.12.

<sup>8</sup> *Letters of Charles Dickens*, edited by W. Dexter (London: Nonesuch Press, 1938), I, p.810.

These two novels heralded a first period in the Roman-Feuilleton. In that respect, Tortel's typology of the French popular novel is widely accepted by commentators on the genre. Nineteenth-century Roman-Feuilleton falls into two categories. The first period, covering the 1840s and 1850s, is that of the heroic Roman-Feuilleton, pervaded by social romanticism, extravagance and imagination, and dealing mainly with crime in an urban environment. Its main feature is the hero as outlaw, avenger and/or social *justicier*. This period includes most of Dumas' novels, including his masterpiece, *Le Comte de Monte-Cristo* (1844-46), which shares some of the earnestness and social criticism of Sue's novels. Most of Dumas' feuilletons, however, were characterised by humour and by their spirited, gallant heroes. Finally, Frédéric Soulié specialised in fantastic novels and shared Féval's taste for parody.

It is in these first Romans-Feuilletons that the main literary influences on the genre can be seen best. These are threefold. Firstly, the Roman-Feuilleton drew from the romance, adventure and heroism of the historical novel. Represented by Walter Scott and Fenimore Cooper, the historical novel had achieved similar success from 1815 to 1830. It was then integrated into the Roman-Feuilleton, notably by Alexandre Dumas. Secondly, the Roman-Feuilleton drew its inspiration from the gothic novel, which had never ceased to be popular since the Revolution. The Roman-Feuilleton, however, transposed the main features of the gothic novel, mystery and crime, into a contemporary background. Thirdly, most Romans-Feuilletons are also social novels, insofar as they explored the workings of contemporary society. In that respect, they were strongly influenced by the novels of Balzac.

The second period is what Tortel calls the *roman populaire bourgeois*, which developed in the 1880s and 1890s. These Romans-Feuilletons, exemplified by Xavier de Montepin's *La Porteuse de pain* (1880), drew from the same pool of archetypal motifs and characters, such as revenge, miscarriages of justice, social inequities and crime. They were, however, characterised by more realism and conservatism. The genre extols qualities such as social obedience, conformity and resignation to one's fate. Heroes are no longer powerful, and the established order, backed up by providence, always triumphs. Insofar as these novels established some connections between providence and the rightness of a

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<sup>8</sup> *Letters of Charles Dickens*, edited by W. Dexter (London: Nonesuch Press, 1938), I, p.810.

specific social order, they were akin to the domestic fiction of the 1850s in England, exemplified by writers such as Anthony Trollope or George Eliot.

Tortel's typology helpfully gives credit to Sue's novels for their utopian and reforming purpose, but it does not do justice to the novels of the 1860s. It is tempting to regard these latter novels, which include some of Féval's and most of Ponson du Terrail's, as heralding the *roman populaire bourgeois*, insofar as they were clearly less politicised due to the censorship exerted by the government of the Second Empire. They were nonetheless more diversified than the novels of the 1840s and 1850s. Emile Gaboriau's novels represented the judicial or detective novel *à la française*. His novels combined the scientific investigation of a crime with the probing of the bourgeois family's dirty secrets in the money-obsessed Second Empire. *Les Habits Noirs* and *Rocambole* belong to what the French called 'le roman de génie du crime', foretelling later series such as Fantômas and Arsène Lupin.<sup>9</sup> Ponson du Terrail's *Rocambole* is a triumph of imagination, but the style is loose and the content apolitical. With *Les Habits Noirs*, a precursor of the *roman noir*, Féval brought his obsession with crime and secret societies to perfection.

Like Ponson du Terrail, Féval was aware of writing in a particular tradition inherited from Sue and Dumas. He did not, however, make an unreflective and mechanical use of the conventions of the Roman-Feuilleton like du Terrail, but gave these a new and often ironic treatment. Although Féval was a conservative, his novels do not finally establish the rightness of society. Furthermore, they often betray a subversive attraction for rebellion and disorder. One of the aims of this thesis, therefore, is to establish the place of Féval in Tortel's typology, as a transitional writer who bridged the two periods of the Roman-Feuilleton.

In England, the Sensation novels developed in the 1860s, although serialisation had started in the 1840s. Several influences helped to disseminate cheap literature. Publishers like Henry Colburn launched cheap editions of novels, and Mudie's circulating libraries allowed people access to otherwise expensive fiction. It was Dickens, however, who spread the new practice of serialisation in *Household Words*, created in 1850 as a two-penny weekly journal. According to Ellis, Dickens 'initiated a revolution by lifting the new popular

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<sup>9</sup> This expression is used by Jean Raabe in 'Paul Féval et *Les Habits Noirs*', in *Manuel d'histoire littéraire de la France*, Tome V (1848-1917), Deuxième Partie, Chapitre II (Paris: Messidor/Éditions Sociales, 1977), pp.304-306 (305).

journalism from the gutters of Grub Street.'<sup>10</sup> Popular periodicals like *The London Journal*, aimed at an uncultured readership, already published novels in instalments. After a quarrel with his publishers, Dickens abandoned *Household Words* and started *All the Year Round* in 1859. It was in the latter periodical, for example, that Collins published *The Woman in White* in 1860, the novel which launched the Sensation novel phenomenon. Other journals and periodicals followed Dickens' example, such as Richard Bentley's *Bentley's Miscellanies*, later transformed into *Temple Bar*, *The Cornhill Magazine* or *Blackwood's*. Their main features were a novel published in instalments, along with various topical articles and short stories.

There was, however, a gap opening between Dickens' magazine and periodicals like the *Cornhill Magazine* or *Blackwood's*. It became evident that writers could follow two different paths, that of the domestic novel, mainly realistic and considered as highbrow, or that of the lowbrow novel, sensational and untrue to life. Serialisation, therefore, did not necessarily mean sensationalism, but was, as in France, a mode of publication that spread to most writers, popular and mainstream. William Thackeray, who edited the *Cornhill Magazine* from 1859 to 1863, came close to suggesting that Dickens wrote melodramatic lowbrow novels as opposed to his own, when he claimed that Dickens 'knows that my books are a protest against his - that if one set are true, the other must be false.'<sup>11</sup> However, this association between lowbrow Sensation novels and Dickens and his magazine on one hand, and domestic novels and mainstream writers on the other is rather artificial. Some of the writers who published in *Household Words*, such as Mrs Gaskell, had nothing to do with sensationalism, and Dickens himself, as will be shown, was not a sensationalist in the strict sense of the word. Furthermore, two novelists of the period associated with highbrow fiction had a try at the Sensation novel: Anthony Trollope with *The Eustace Diamonds* (1869) and Thomas Hardy with *Desperate Remedies* (1871).

Serialised fiction, however, came to be regarded as closely linked to the Sensation novels. It gave the genre a boost, insofar as this mode of publication was particularly adapted to the whole school because of its reliance on accidents

<sup>10</sup> S. M. Ellis, *Wilkie Collins, Le Fanu and Others* (London: Constable, 1951), p.205.

<sup>11</sup> William Thackeray, quoted by Walter C. Phillips in *Dickens, Reade, and Collins: Sensation Novelists. A Study in the Conditions and Theories of Novel Writing in Victorian England* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1919), p.22.

and suspense. Instalments in English periodicals were generally longer than the French ones, and published monthly or weekly rather than daily. They nonetheless had a similar influence on the narrative methods of the serialists, insofar as the English serial novels also relied on climaxes and curtain effects. This is particularly true of a writer such as Charles Reade, who was a keen reader of French popular fiction. Collins, on the other hand, was more interested in the whole design of his novels.

The Sensation novel lasted about ten years. The genre had many things in common with the previous literary craze, the Newgate novels of the 1830s and 1840s. The Newgate novels were also concerned with crime and punishment, yet they were written with an obvious moral and reformatory purpose - to show that retribution inevitably followed crime - and as a protest against the penal system. Furthermore, they had the loose, episodic plots of the picaresque novel. Sensationalists looked to Dickens as a model. Dickens had an imaginative perspective on life, and looked, in his own words, for 'the romantic side of life.'<sup>12</sup> His novels dealt with the mysteries of the city, such as crime and social misbehaviour, as can be found in novels such as *Oliver Twist* (1837-39) and *Great Expectations* (1860). Although Dickens was held responsible for the sensational turn that literature took in the 1860s, he differed from the Sensation novelists in many respects. He never used suspense and shocks for their own sake but gave predominance to the investigation of society and human emotions. On the other hand, his plots were less tightly woven than those of the sensationalists. More crucial, Dickens was always more cautious not to offend the feelings of his middle-class audience than Collins and other sensationalists.

Among Sensation novelists whose works have attracted critical interest is Charles Reade, whose techniques recall those of the French serialists. His novels accumulate shocks and revelations with emphatic energy, and he tends to deal with murder or bigamy in high society and the underworld as French writers do. Charles Reade's characteristic features are his carefully documented plots and his reforming purpose, which Collins imitated at the end of his career. A typical example is *Hard Cash* (1863), a fierce critique of the lunacy laws. Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1861-62) is a classic of the Sensation novel. As the narrative unrolls, a murderer and forger hiding behind the respectable outfit of a lady is unmasked. The story implicitly challenges

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<sup>12</sup> Charles Dickens, Preface to *Bleak House* (London: Penguin Books, 1994), p.vi.

Victorian morality and views social and sexual conventions ironically, insofar as Lady Audley is both Angel in the House and cold-blooded murderer. Mrs Braddon's narrative habit of keeping facts hidden from readers, however, means that the central character is quite poorly described. Mrs Henry Wood, on the other hand, used sensations as moral propaganda. *East Lynne* (1861), which dramatises the downfall of the adulterous Lady Isabel, is a lesson for would-be erring wives. Most of the novel, indeed, focuses on Lady Isabel's remorse and retribution. In spite of its melodramatic content, it is a poignant novel with a convincing heroine. Leading commentators on the genre, such as Lyn Pykett, view Collins as the best sensationalist:

Collins was the master of all of the main elements of the sensation genre: the construction and unravelling of an intricate, crossword puzzle plot, the atmospheric scene, the mysterious, prophetic dream, obsessive and disordered mental states, overtly respectable villains, and bold, assertive, and/or devious and scheming heroines and villainesses.<sup>13</sup>

Collins' talent, however, lies in his capacity to manipulate these conventional themes and techniques in order to explore and expose society's prejudices and conventions. His novels reveal more than those of any other sensationalist the ambiguous relationships of the genre with social and sexual conventions. This thesis will therefore investigate both the thematic content and ideological dimension of Collins' novels.

ii). Justification of the corpus: popular fiction of the 1860s and cross-Channel exchanges

The study of popular fiction of the 1860 benefits from a broad approach embracing at least two different cultures. The period spreading from 1840 to 1870 was a time of literary exchanges between France and England characterised in equal measure by attraction and repulsion.

Most French Romans-Feuilletons were translated and published in England, either in periodicals such as *The London Journal* or the *Family Herald*, or in collections of novels such as *The Mirror of French Romance* or *The Library of French Romance*.<sup>14</sup> They were popular for their vitality, their imaginative extravagance at a time when the literary market was dominated by the domestic novels. They were also much disparaged by critics and conceived as a negative

<sup>13</sup> Pykett, *The Sensation Novel*, p.14.

<sup>14</sup> Louis James, *Fiction for the Working Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), p.136.

influence. French popular novels were to have an important effect on the development of serialised novels and generally speaking, popular novels, in England. It is certainly true that Sue's and Féval's *Mystères* gave birth to a multitude of similar novels, including Reynolds' *Mysteries of London*. It is amusing, however, to note that the novels of both Féval and Sue had a foreign origin to begin with. Féval was initially told to rewrite an insipid English novel, while Sue's novel, according to Louis James, took its inspiration from Peirce Egan's *Life in London*.<sup>15</sup> In both cases, however, the final product has nothing to do with the original.

What was perceived as invasion in England was no less than theft according to some French writers, including Féval who was as much irritated by England as he was fascinated. In *La Ville vampire*, he includes a prologue lamenting the amount of material drawn by English writers from French novels. Ironically enough, *La Ville vampire* is introduced as a story written by Ann Radcliffe and told to Féval by an old cousin of hers. This type of exchange also took place in the theatre. As Collins complained many times, writing for the stage was not rewarding in England. Whereas most great French novelists also wrote for the stage, in England they deserted it. Because of low remuneration, it was much easier to translate loosely a French play. Charles Reade was famous for plagiarising French plays, for instance. In the 1860s, the Sensation novels were also deplored as the result of foreign influence, notably the 'exaggeration of the French school.'<sup>16</sup>

Influences, however, should not be reduced to appropriation or theft but should be taken in the larger sense of borrowing, reworking of conventions, and cross-fertilisation. Along with specific influences and exchanges, one must look at greater entities and the way they interact with each other. The French Roman-Feuilleton, issuing from both the Romantic and the Gothic movements, owes much to English literature itself. The French hero is indebted to the ambiguous Byronic hero and to the Radcliffean villain. As Olivier-Martin points out, Richardson's *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* anticipates features of the popular novel. with its lowlife heroine who is finally reintegrated in society, and its reliance on on pairs of opposites such as victim and persecutor or good

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p.140.

<sup>16</sup> D. O. Maddyn, unsigned review, *Athenaeum* (4 December 1852), 1322-23, reprinted in Page, *Wilkie Collins*, p.47.

and evil.<sup>17</sup> This study will explore the maze of similarities and differences between the Roman-Feuilleton and the Sensation novel, and also take note of large chronological sequences and broad cultural developments.

The two particular authors chosen here are worth studying individually because they reveal broad structural similarities in the way they understand and use the mechanisms of the popular novel. The choice of these particular authors can be justified in various respects. Firstly, this is not a study of trivial similarities or an investigation of a single aspect of their work. Collins was much influenced by Emile Gaboriau, the father of the French detective novel, and it would be interesting to compare their novels in the light of theories of the detective novel.<sup>18</sup> It would be an error, however, to reduce Collins to a writer of detective novels. Exploring the popular novel as a genre, looking for common archetypal features and cultural variations, is more rewarding. It is obvious, however, that Collins and Féval share things in common. Sue's novels, for instance, apart from being published twenty years before those of Collins', are too romantic to sustain a comparison with the Sensation novel. Féval provides a good compromise, due to a more careful style, an obsession with secrets akin to Collins', and certain ambivalence in content.

Féval and Collins are also representative of the new popular writers of the mid-nineteenth century, engaged in literary debates and cross-channel exchanges. There is no evidence that they met, although Féval certainly met Dickens, whom he refers to as 'notre ami' in a speech delivered at the *Société des gens de lettres* in 1865.<sup>19</sup> They both spoke, among other languages, French and English, both had spent time in France and England and met writers and artists. Collins enjoyed yearly trips to France, generally in the company of Dickens. They would go to Paris, spend some time in the popular theatres, in cafés and cabarets. Collins liked most aspects of France in comparison with Britain: 'Everything English [is] badly done, from politics to cookery'.<sup>20</sup> Féval, although he had some reservations about England, was certainly fascinated by it. The making of *Les Mystères de Londres* may have triggered this fascination. Féval

<sup>17</sup> Olivier-Martin, *Histoire du roman populaire*, p.15.

<sup>18</sup> I hope to pursue this comparison in a later study.

<sup>19</sup> Paul Féval, 'La Parole, la plume et le roman', reprinted in *Paul Féval, romancier populaire, colloque de Rennes 1987* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes et *Interférences*, 1992), pp.5-16 (7).

<sup>20</sup> Wilkie Collins, quoted by Catherine Peters in *The King of Inventors: A Life of Wilkie Collins* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991), p.37.

started working on the novel before he even went to London. After a dozen chapters, Anténor Joly, his editor, was extremely pleased with the results but nonetheless sent Féval to London to do some research, as planned. The latter was amazed to find the city exactly as he had described it in his novel. He had detectives at his orders who explored the slums for him, while the doors of the fashionable world were opened to him. While being critical of the state of society and the indifference of the powerful, Féval was very interested in the literary world. He attended a series of lectures given by English writers to their public and very much appreciated them. When he became president of the *Société des gens de lettres*, he tried to organise similar talks in France, without much success.

Both authors shared the same literary idols; Balzac, Dumas, Scott, Cooper. Born and brought up in atmospheric Brittany, there is evidence that Féval first thought of himself as a Breton Walter Scott, and he wrote a number of regional novels about Brittany. His fantastic novels show the influence of 'Monk' Lewis and Ann Radcliffe, although his masters were the French writers Charles Nodier and Frédéric Soulié. The influence of Byron can also be felt in novels such as *Les Mystères de Londres*. Balzac stood high on the list of both Féval and Collins. The story goes that Féval was dismissed from his job in a bank when he was caught reading a novel by Balzac, while Collins was one of the first to appreciate Balzac in England. Unlike contemporary critics, who deemed him unhealthy and rather amoral in his approach to life and fiction, Collins praised Balzac as 'the deepest and truest observer of human nature', as 'a writer who sternly insists on presenting the dreary aspects of human life, literally, exactly, nakedly, as he finds them.'<sup>21</sup> Both Féval and Collins shared the opinion that one can write about anything: 'L'art, la famille, la guerre, l'industrie, la richesse et la misère, le bonheur et le malheur: tout appartient au roman.'<sup>22</sup> There are no immoral novels, just bad ones.

There are many similarities in their lives and careers. Féval came from a family of impoverished lawyers; Collins from a family of artists who had been far from financially secure. Both studied law, left the bar after a few months and did other clerical jobs before getting involved with the literary world. Lawyers are recurrent figures in their novels, as are young men prevented from artistic

<sup>21</sup> Wilkie Collins, *My Miscellanies* (London: Sampson Low, 1863), p.205 and p.208.

<sup>22</sup> Paul Féval, *Rapport sur le progrès des lettres en France* (Paris: Imprimerie Impériale, 1868), p.63.

careers by conservative fathers or social pressures. Both wrote articles and short stories for periodicals. Collins wrote in Dickens' journal *Household Words*, in *Bentley's Miscellanies*, *The Leader* and many other periodicals. Féval published in *La Revue de Paris*, *Le Siècle* and *L'Epoque*. He also founded several journals, including the literary review *Jean-Diable* (1862-63). Both were fertile writers, and tried their hands at all genres. They wrote gothic, historical, fantastic and social novels. They were both fascinated with the theatre, wrote their own plays and adaptations of their own novels. Collins, however, did serious research, sometimes taking several years to write his novels, whereas Féval never had that much time, and is said to have written one in three days. Both paid a high price for the energy they spent on producing their novels and knew depression and exhaustion. While Collins became successful early, Féval met with many difficulties. His early life in Paris was fraught with miserable jobs and unhappy episodes; he knew disillusion and misery. The young man faced with the harsh realities of Parisian life is a recurrent theme in his novels.

Collins and Féval had similar personalities. Romantic and independent, they did not care much for other people's opinions. They were both ostracised at school for being different. With his recurrent trips on the continent, Collins had had a French education and acquired foreign taste. He was a liberal from an early age, while Féval was more of a conservative. In 1830, Féval overtly showed his legitimist allegiance and had to be removed from school to avoid the anger of his fellow students. He was then sent to a relation's manor in Brittany. The castle turned out to be a gathering place for Chouans and other conspirators, which stirred up Féval's taste for romance and mysteries. Although a royalist at heart, Féval founded two socialist journals in 1848, including *Le Bon sens du peuple et des honnêtes gens* and *L'Avenir national*. He also wrote *Les Ouvriers de Londres et de Paris* (1850) in collaboration with Pierre Zaccone. On the other hand, Collins, although a liberal, never challenged conventions openly.

Both were humorous, non-judgmental men, and opposed to conventional moralism. Nothing annoyed Féval more than didacticism and heavy moral lessons in a novel. A novel should not be a platform for one's political or social ideas. Collins' novels cleverly mingled entertainment and social insight. Their respective careers, however, took an unexpected turn at the end of their lives. Collins turned to the propaganda novel while Féval turned to religion and burned or rewrote any material that offended faith.

Part of Féval's pessimism and depression came from his unclear status as a writer. He was never very successful on the stage, and remained stuck in the minor genre of the popular novel, due, among other reasons, to a lack of confidence in himself. His failure to enter the *Académie Française* in 1873 vexed him. He was nonetheless a recognised author in his genre in the Second Empire. He was five times president of the *Société des gens de lettres*, was given the *Légion d'Honneur* in 1864, and regularly invited to the Empress' cultural afternoons. In those conditions it is easy to understand why he chose not to pursue the rebellious vein of his early novels. This situation has certain similarities with Collins, whose involvement with Dickens' middle-class journal *Household Words* implied toning down his most radical tendencies.

### iii). Popular fiction: definitions and main approaches

It might be helpful to offer some notions of the contexts in which popular novels have been looked at, before moving on to some specific definitions by leading commentators. These definitions can be loosely divided into three categories. Each corresponds to a specific moment in the evolution of critical theories.

To a large majority of critics, including most of the early commentators on popular fiction such as Q. D. Leavis, popular literature is purely escapist. It is to be defined by its entertaining function. For Leavis, popular fiction is easily readable and 'has achieved this end by sacrificing any pretension to literature... it sets itself to amuse and soothe. It is quite explicitly defiant of other standards and ambitions.'<sup>23</sup> According to that perspective, which is that of traditional scholarly criticism, there is an insuperable barrier between the popular novel and literature. This suggests that popular fiction is of limited critical interest, and can only be defined implicitly and negatively. For R. C. Terry, for example, popular fiction is 'short on ideas and enduring literary values.'<sup>24</sup> It is generally identified with mediocrity, loose style and lack of regard for what George Eliot called the 'sacredness of the writer's art':

The greatest benefit we owe to the artist, whether painter, poet, or novelist, is the extension of our sympathies... When Scott takes us into Luckie Muckleback's cottage ... more is done towards linking the higher classes with the lower, towards obliterating the vulgarity of exclusiveness,

<sup>23</sup> Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1932), p.32.

<sup>24</sup> R. C. Terry, *Victorian Popular Fiction, 1860-1880* (London: Macmillan, 1983), p.ix.

than by hundreds of sermons and philosophical dissertations. Art is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot.<sup>25</sup>

However, the separation between high and low literature is not so clear-cut. Whereas George Eliot praised Walter Scott for his moral usefulness in 1856, in 1871 *Tinsley's Magazine* disparaged him for his very lack of moral usefulness. Scott's novels 'lack[ed] an object worthy of such genius and power' and, the magazine was 'tempted to ask, Was there no great living truth to defend?'<sup>26</sup> Similarly, the notorious exclusion of Dickens from F. R. Leavis' *The Great Tradition* in 1949 and his rediscovery in the 1970s show how standards such as seriousness of purpose or literary style easily shift. The identification between popular novels and bad novels on the one hand, and serious literature and good novels on the other is clearly simplistic.

A second group of critics shares the assumption that what makes popular fiction popular is its capacity to entertain and relax, but offers some elements of explanation as to how it does so. Popular fiction entertains its readers by providing them with familiar forms, themes and treatments. These critics, therefore, were mainly interested in tracing the history of a particular type of popular novel, establishing its rules and looking at its moral implications.<sup>27</sup> Critics of the crime novel, have, for instance, distinguished between the thriller, the detective story or the suspense novel. Within each of these categories of the popular novel, the conformity to particular rules determines the value of a novel. This is the view taken by Howard Haycraft and Tzvetan Todorov, for instance.<sup>28</sup> Todorov's 'Typology of the Detective Novel' exemplifies and highlights the limited and descriptive nature of that approach to popular fiction:

As a rule, the literary masterpiece does not enter any genre save perhaps its own; but the masterpiece of popular literature is precisely the book which best fits its genre. Detective fiction has its norms; to 'develop' them

<sup>25</sup> George Eliot, quoted by Kenneth Graham, in *English Criticism of the Novel, 1865-1900* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), p.4.

<sup>26</sup> 'The Scott Centenary', ix (1871-2), pp.85-86, quoted by Graham, in *English Criticism of the Novel*, p.3.

<sup>27</sup> Howard Haycraft, *Murder for Pleasure: The Life and Times of the Detective Story* (London: Peter Davies, 1942); Dorothy Sayers, Introduction to *The Omnibus of Crime* (New York: Payson and Clarke, 1929); Régis Messac, *Le 'Detective novel' et l'influence de la pensée scientifique* (Paris: Plon, 1929).

<sup>28</sup> Haycraft, *Murder for Pleasure*; Tzvetan Todorov, 'The Typology of the Detective Novel', in *The Poetics of Prose* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977), pp.43-52.

is also to disappoint them: to 'improve upon' detective fiction is to write 'literature', not detective fiction ... If we had properly described the genres of popular literature, there would no longer be an occasion to speak of its masterpieces. They are one and the same thing; the best novel will be the one about which there is nothing to say.<sup>29</sup>

According to Todorov and similar critics, popular fiction is to be defined by its form, and by its conformity to a set of rules. More recently, Peter Brooks' *Reading for the Plot* (1984) heralded a less mechanical way to look at plot-structures and rekindled interest in popular narratives.<sup>30</sup> For Brooks, 'plots are not simply organising structures, they are also intentional structures, goal-oriented and forward-moving.'<sup>31</sup>

Perhaps a more rewarding way of looking at popular fiction is to focus on questions of ideology. This approach, which now dominates the debate on popular fiction, is socio-cultural rather than aesthetic. It devotes itself to the questions of who produces and consumes popular fiction and to what effect, and how it performs its ideological function. Early commentators such as Haycraft or or W. H. Auden have emphasised the cathartic power of the genre to reassure readers of the triumph of justice and innocence. For Haycraft, 'It is no chance but direct and causative parallelism' that the detective novel 'is intimately bound up with the whole body of civil and individual rights.'<sup>32</sup> For W. H. Auden, the detective novel performs the magic function of erasing readers' sense of guilt. Its significance is 'a fantasy of escape'.<sup>33</sup> On the one hand, French commentators such as Régis Messac maintained that the genre is pure entertainment, insofar as 'l'immense majorité des lecteurs ne songent ni à la moralité ni à l'immoralité. Ils songent à se distraire.'<sup>34</sup>

A common assumption among modern commentators is that although popular fiction is regarded as literature for the masses, it is not understood as the literature of the people. The early meaning of popular culture as the culture made by the people for themselves tends to be relegated to the past, as Raymond Williams points out:

<sup>29</sup> Todorov, 'The Typology of the Detective Novel', p.43.

<sup>30</sup> Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, p.12.

<sup>32</sup> Haycraft, *Murder for Pleasure*, p.28.

<sup>33</sup> W. H. Auden, 'The Guilty Vicarage', in *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1962), pp.147-58 (158).

<sup>34</sup> Messac, *Le 'Detective novel'*, p.12.

The shift in perspective is then quite evident. Popular was seen from the point of view of the people rather than from those seeking favour or power from them ... the culture actually made by the people for themselves is ... often displaced to the past as *folk culture*.<sup>35</sup>

The reasoning behind this attitude is the 'perception that most individuals ceased creating their own cultural forms with the coming of industrialisation and mass production.'<sup>36</sup> This view is corroborated by the fact that most authors of popular fiction in nineteenth-century France and England actually belonged to the middle-class. It is easy to understand why popular fiction is often considered as a presentation of prevailing ideologies, a means by which the governing classes play on people's fears and hopes to manipulate them and spread their own values. Critics such as Cawelti have granted the popular novel a capacity to offer some social insight.<sup>37</sup> Most recent studies, however, including those of Knight and Porter, reach the conclusion that popular fiction fulfils the complacent ideological function of maintaining the socio-cultural status quo.<sup>38</sup> For Stephen Knight, for instance, crime fictions, as popular novels and cultural productions, 'appear to deal with real problems but are in fact concerned and resolvable in terms of the ideology of the culture group dominant in society.'<sup>39</sup> This approach relates popular fiction to a specific cultural and social background. Again, this is a negative view of popular fiction as opposed to high art, where the individual author is assumed to be able to detach himself or herself from ideology, to express his or her own view of the world and thereby challenge accepted ideas or engage new grounds.

One could argue that the study of popular fiction demands a broad approach embracing different methods. A study based only on formal structures lays too much emphasis on conformity to the rules of the genre at the expense of variation and imagination, and overlooks the specific artistry of popular fiction. Besides, forms have meaning and purpose and cannot be separated from content. On the other hand, a cultural and historical perspective sheds light on any piece

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<sup>35</sup> Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana/Croom Helm, 1976), p.199.

<sup>36</sup> Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), p.7.

<sup>37</sup> John Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery and Romance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

<sup>38</sup> Knight, *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction*; Dennis Porter, *The Pursuit of Crime: Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981).

<sup>39</sup> Knight, *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction*, p.4

of work, mainstream or popular. However, the relationship between popular fiction and ideology is not a straightforward one, and I do not consider the popular novel as a transparent medium for ideological indoctrination. It can also be a space of protest and exploration. Part of this thesis seeks to investigate the relationship between ideology and popular fiction and highlight its carnivalesque appeal. Reading popular fiction can be an experience combining pleasure and critical perspective.

iv). Popular fiction in 1860s France and England: a survey of critical work on the Sensation novel and the Roman-Feuilleton

The Roman-Feuilleton is a genre that is generally regarded as more popular than the Sensation novel, insofar as external characteristics of the popular novel such as wide readership as well as internal features such as heroic figures and archetypal patterns of light and darkness are more marked in the Roman-Feuilleton. To state some obvious differences, the Roman-Feuilleton was published in daily instalments; the Sensation novel in weekly or monthly instalments. This difference put more pressure on French authors and forced them to write quickly. They were consequently unable to bring as much attention to style as their English counterparts. In terms of content, the Roman-Feuilleton aimed to provide a multitude of shocks and striking scenes, while the Sensation novel demonstrated a certain moderation due notably to the Victorian emphasis on morality in the novel.

These characteristics of the French Roman-Feuilleton have motivated its study as a whole. Academics took an interest in the Roman-Feuilleton from the 1950s, looking at the Roman-Feuilleton from a historical, thematic or sociological point of view. They neglected close textual analysis of individual writers because of their alleged poverty of style and personal vision. There are, consequently, fewer secondary sources on Féval than there are on Collins, although the former enjoyed regular re-editions and critical attention. There has been, however, a renewed interest in the Sensation novels from the 1970s onwards. Collins has received much attention as the most sophisticated of serialists, to the extent that he now almost belongs to the canon.

iv, a). Wilkie Collins and the Sensation novel

In the nineteenth century, the Sensation novel was seen as an inferior kind of literature due to its emphasis on plot rather than characters. It was also

regarded as a cultural disease linked to the pernicious influence of French fiction. As a contemporary reviewer put it, the Sensation novel was 'a plant of foreign growth. It comes to us from France, and it can only be imported in a mutilated condition.'<sup>40</sup> Collins was a recurrent target of contemporary critics, notably because of his portrait of female passion. Another reviewer denounced the heroine of *No Name* in the following terms:

Magdalen, the perverse heroine, whose heart-wrung and strong desire to right a cruel injustice caused by her and her sister's illegitimacy led her to crime, falsehood, imposture, to the verge of theft, even, is let off with a punishment gentle in proportion to the unscrupulous selfishness of her character.<sup>41</sup>

The critical interest raised by the Sensation novels was, however, ephemeral. Ten years after the publication of the first Sensation novel, Collins' *The Woman in White*, the genre no longer dominated the literary debate. It was not until the 1930s that Collins was rediscovered by critics and artists such as Dorothy Sayers, Walter de la Mare and T. S. Eliot. They nonetheless still considered him as an artist whose talents lay in the field of melodrama. For T. S. Eliot, for instance, *Armadale* 'has no merit beyond melodrama, and it has every merit that melodrama can give.'<sup>42</sup>

The reassessment of the Sensation novels was linked to the new currents of literary criticism. On the one hand, a group of academics focused on the form of the Sensation novels. The interest in plots and the conception of the novel as a game shared by critics such as Umberto Eco or Roland Barthes brought about an interest in popular fiction, and more particularly the detective story.<sup>43</sup> These critics emphasised the self-reflexivity of the genre. They argued that the detective novel implicitly highlights its own conventions and narrative structures by combining a set of formulaic components, such as mystery or clue. They also shifted emphasis from the text to the role of the reader as producer of

<sup>40</sup> Unsigned review, *Reader*, i (3 January 1863), pp.14-15, reprinted in Page, *Wilkie Collins*, p.134.

<sup>41</sup> H. F. Chorley, unsigned review, *Athenaeum* (3 January 1863), pp.10-11, reprinted in Page, *Wilkie Collins*, p.131.

<sup>42</sup> Dorothy Sayers, *Wilkie Collins: A Critical and Biographical Study*, edited by E. R. Gregory (Toledo, Ohio: The Friends of the University of Toledo, 1977); Walter de la Mare, 'The Early Novels of Wilkie Collins', in *The Eighteen-Sixties: Essays by the Fellows of the Royal Society of Literature*, edited by John Drinkwater (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932), pp.51-101; Eliot, 'Wilkie Collins and Dickens', p.468.

<sup>43</sup> Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1970); Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (London: Hutchinson, 1981).

meaning by establishing analogies between the process of detection and the reading and interpretative process. Mark H. Hennely views *The Woman in White* from such a perspective, while D. A. Hutter's study of *The Moonstone* underlines the similarities between the structure of the detective story and psychoanalysis as a problem-solving narrative:

Detective fiction involves the transformation of a fragmented and incomplete set of events into a more ordered and complete understanding [and] the restatement and restructuring in the present of a past event.<sup>44</sup>

Another approach has investigated the Sensation novel in relation to Victorian literary and critical debate, for instance through problems of realism and romance. Patrick Brantlinger and Winifred Hughes studied the relationships between the Sensation novels and the dominant novelistic mode of realism. For Hughes, the Sensation novelists made an unusual and remarkable use of romance and realism together in a 'frenzied attempt to penetrate the dense surface of the realist world, to release its hidden energies and exorcise its fears, to confront realities beyond the everyday.'<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, Brantlinger dismisses any subversive use of romance and realism and interprets the Sensation novels' mixture of literary modes as symptomatic of a mere crisis in literary realism.<sup>46</sup>

Another approach has sought to distance itself from questions of categorisation and form and to focus instead on the novels' subtexts and their capacity to reveal counter currents in Victorian culture and society. Cultural meanings and ideological functions of the Sensation novels now dominate the study of the genre. Collins has received most attention from critics. His female rebels, who so greatly shocked the Victorians, are now considered as his greatest achievement. One of the most influential essays here has been Knoepflmacher's on *The Woman in White*, which established Collins' new status as a rebel who exposed the 'asocial and amoral counterworld of Victorian fiction'.<sup>47</sup> Other critics showed how Collins' novels undermined middle-class values. For Nicholas Rance, the Sensation novels 'derived their effect from subverting a diversity of

<sup>44</sup> Hutter, 'Dreams, Transformations, and Literature', p.181; Mark M. Hennely, 'Reading Detection in *The Woman in White*', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 22 (1980), pp.449-67, reprinted in *Wilkie Collins*, edited by Lyn Pykett, pp.88-105.

<sup>45</sup> Hughes, *The Maniac in the Cellar*, p.67.

<sup>46</sup> Brantlinger, 'What is "Sensational" about the "Sensation Novel"?'.

<sup>47</sup> U. C. Knoepflmacher, 'The Counterworld of Victorian Fiction and *The Woman in White*', in *The World of Victorian Fiction*, edited by Jerome H. Buckley (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1975), pp.351-69 (352).

early and mid-Victorian ideologies, but particularly the ideology of self-help associated with the name of and formulated by Samuel Smiles'.<sup>48</sup> Many critics, including Lyn Pykett, have investigated how Collins' novels deal with 'questions of identity' and expose social and gender norms as social constructs.<sup>49</sup> *The Moonstone* in particular has generated many comments on Collins' critique of imperialism and many studies based on psychoanalysis.<sup>50</sup> Collins' novels have proved to be a topic particularly fitted to the new cultural history of the last twenty years.

Recent criticism of Collins has sought to qualify the idea of the Victorian rebel and social critic, by underlining his ideological ambivalence. D. A. Miller's article on *The Moonstone*, based on Foucault's ideas about modes of social control, maintains that the novel ultimately reinforces rather than challenges the social status quo. Furthermore,

*The Moonstone* ... is more fundamentally about the securities of perception and language than about the problems they pose. To use Mikhail Bakhtin's term, the novel is thoroughly *monological* - always speaking a master-voice that corrects, overrides, subordinates, or sublates all other voices it allows to speak.<sup>51</sup>

For Tamar Heller, Collins' novels are about 'containment of radical tendencies'; they are Gothic insofar as they dramatise a process whereby 'women's rebellion is ... submerged and hidden'.<sup>52</sup> Barickman's study emphasises Collins' 'indirect techniques' of criticism and the 'puzzling evasions' of the narrator.<sup>53</sup> Among recent criticism of Collins, however, only Lilian Nayder's *Wilkie Collins Revisited* fully acknowledges this ambivalence in Collins.<sup>54</sup>

This approach is the most accurate and fruitful way of looking at Collins' novels, and by extension, at the Sensation novel and popular fiction as a genre.

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<sup>48</sup> Nicholas Rance, *Wilkie Collins and Other Sensation Novelists: Walking the Moral Hospital* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991).

<sup>49</sup> Pykett, *The Sensation Novel*, p.14.

<sup>50</sup> John Reed, 'English Imperialism and the Unacknowledged crime of *The Moonstone*', *Clio*, 2 (1973), pp.281-90, and Rycroft, 'A Detective Story: Psychoanalytic Observations'.

<sup>51</sup> Miller, 'From *roman policier* to *roman-police*: Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone*', p.54.

<sup>52</sup> Tamar Heller, *Dead Secrets: Wilkie Collins and the Female Gothic* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), p.256 and p.251.

<sup>53</sup> Richard Barickman, Susan MacDonald, and Myra Stark, *Corrupt Relations: Dickens, Thackeray, Trollope, Collins and the Victorian Sexual System* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p.viii.

<sup>54</sup> Nayder, *Wilkie Collins Revisited*.

Collins' novels are characterised by contradictory discourses, subversive and reactionary, conservative and revolutionary. It will be argued that the existence of conflicting discourses in Collins' novels derives from the popular nature of his work. Collins' novels both express tensions, social problems, and resolve them in a way typical of a popular novel. Part of the claims made by this thesis is that popular fiction is likely to produce ambivalence. A potential for social criticism combined with a desire to reassure readers results in a certain ambiguity. The last two chapters of this thesis will explore this aspect of the popular novel.

#### iv, b). Paul Féval and the Roman-Feuilleton

Contemporary reactions to the French Roman-Feuilleton parallel the reception of the Sensation novels in England. The genre was criticised by conservative critics and by the Church for being immoral, encouraging distrust of the established order and exciting people's interest in things unhealthy. For Alfred Nettement, 'la littérature corrompue et corruptrice' owes much of its characteristic features to the pressure on writers to produce so much in so little time:

Qui ne sait qu'il faut plus de talent, de temps et de travail pour émouvoir et intéresser en respectant les lois de la morale, les règles du bon sens, les prescriptions du goût, qu'en ne tenant nul compte de ces lois, de ces règles et de ces prescriptions, en travaillant uniquement pour frapper l'imagination, en sacrifiant toutes les considérations du beau, du vrai, et du bien à l'effet que l'on veut produire. On frappe fort parce que le temps manque pour frapper juste.<sup>55</sup>

Most criticism was addressed to the first generation of popular writers, among them Sue, the first serialist to talk about social inequalities and expose the misery of the poor. The Riancey Law (July 1850) that taxed periodicals publishing serialised novels failed to destroy the genre. Public protest led to a more subtle auto-censorship under the Second Empire, resulting in less obviously revolutionary material such as Ponson du Terrail's *Rocamboles* and most of Féval's later production. The Roman-Feuilleton in France is now mainly studied as a cultural and social phenomenon. Although the vitality of the genre and its power to stimulate imagination are recognised as specific strengths, the Roman-Feuilleton tends to be considered in relation to 'serious' literature as a marginal and inferior production.

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<sup>55</sup> Nettement, *Etudes critiques sur le Roman-Feuilleton*, p.29 and p.11.

Paul Féval was one of the most successful French serialists, but often was the butt of criticism. Barbey d'Aurevilly considered him as a potentially great writer who wasted his talents on a secondary genre, unlike the Goncourts who lamented his tendency to stimulate sensations and nerves at the expense of thoughts.<sup>56</sup> Paul Morand, from the *Académie Française*, praised Féval's portrait of London in *Les Mystères de Londres*.<sup>57</sup> Contemporaries as well as modern readers tend to regard Féval as the man of one novel, *Le Bossu* (1857), an archetypal swashbuckling novel regularly popularised on stage and on screen. Modern critics, however, have changed their minds to a point. Daniel Couégnas, for instance, considers Féval as the most literary of all popular writers:

Féval, ce serait, avec sans doute autant d'habileté, de savoir dans l'art des rebondissements dramatiques, un sourire, une ironie, cette distance critique qui jamais n'excède les limites au-delà desquelles une ambiguïté bien littéraire risquerait de se dissiper au profit de la sécheresse du discours théorique.<sup>58</sup>

Modern criticism of the Roman-Feuilleton has raised similar concerns and issues as the Sensation novels among academic criticism. Jean Tortel was one of the first critics to take an interest in the Roman-Feuilleton in 1951.<sup>59</sup> Focusing on the links between form and ideology, he explored the novels of the 1830s and 1840s in relation to their cultural and intellectual backgrounds. According to Tortel, the Roman-Feuilleton is akin to an outgrowth of Romanticism. The function of the genre is to answer people's romantic yearnings for power and revolt through the figure of the ambivalent hero. According to this view, however, the Roman-Feuilleton is false. It serves the ideological purpose of maintaining the people in their proper place by feeding them stories about the plight of the rich. It is, therefore, a tool of social oppression.

The study of the genre really started in the late 1960s, prompted by the Cerisy colloquium which opened on a reflection on the term *paralittérature* led by Jean Tortel. As the name suggests, Tortel viewed popular fiction as an inferior kind of novelistic activity developing on the fringe of serious literature and characterised by a lack of concern for its own mechanism and signification:

<sup>56</sup> Barbey d'Aurevilly, *Les Oeuvres et les hommes*, Quatrième partie, 'Les Romanciers' (Paris: Amyot, 1865).

<sup>57</sup> Paul Morand, *Londres* (Paris: Plon, 1927).

<sup>58</sup> Daniel Couégnas, 'Le sourire de Paul Féval. Romanesque févalien et critères de la paralittérature', in *Paul Féval, romancier populaire*, pp.69-78 (78).

<sup>59</sup> Tortel, 'Esquisse d'un univers tragique'.

Dans le domaine de l'écriture, il n'y a jamais création de la paralittérature, mais toujours imitation, utilisation de procédés et de climats. C'est donc un mélange étonnant de liberté et de contraintes. Quoi qu'il en soit, ce qui est paralittérature ne participe en aucune façon à l'esprit de recherche et de contestation verbale qui constitue la littérature. Il contient à peu près tous les éléments qui constituent la littérature sauf l'inquiétude à l'égard de sa propre signification, sauf la remise en cause de son propre langage.<sup>60</sup>

Jean Tortel's definition of popular fiction was therefore based on the form of the genre. Other critics looked at the popular novel from a historical, thematic or sociological point of view. Yves Olivier-Martin's essay focused on the social significance of the genre in relation to its thematic content. Unlike Tortel, he investigated the Roman-Feuilleton as a vehicle for people's claims, addressing social issues such as children's work, prostitution, or miscarriages of justice.<sup>61</sup> Finally, Gérard Mendel shifted the debate from sociological function to psychological significance of the Roman-Feuilleton. He argued that the appeal of popular fiction relied on its capacity to feed people's imagination and fantasy through their identification with a powerful hero:

La raison d'être de la littérature populaire et la raison de son audience et de ses succès est d'alimenter directement de l'intérieur la fonction fantasmatique du sujet en lui procurant un aliment non élaboré, et par là, plus facilement métabolisable.<sup>62</sup>

A series of colloquiums and magazines periodically renewed the debate in the 1970s, such as a special issue of *Europe*, in June 1974. The issue of *Europe* questioned the association of the popular novel with notions of margin and mediocrity implied by the term *paralittérature*: 'D'ailleurs, où commence, où finit la littérature populaire? Quelles sont ses frontières avec une littérature qui ne serait pas populaire?'<sup>63</sup> Jacques Goimard looked into the formal structures of the genre, and highlighted the narrator's special role in providing a guide to his own fiction.<sup>64</sup> François Bussière looked into the Roman-Feuilleton's

<sup>60</sup> Jean Tortel, 'Qu'est-ce que la paralittérature?' and 'Le Roman populaire', in *Entretiens sur la paralittérature, actes du colloque de Cerisy du 1 au 10 Septembre 1967* (Paris: Plon, 1970), pp.14-34 and pp.55-74.

<sup>61</sup> Olivier-Martin, 'Sociologie du roman populaire', in *Entretiens sur la paralittérature*, pp.177-92.

<sup>62</sup> Gérard Mendel, 'Psychanalyse et paralittérature, ou de la paralittérature considérée comme la forme d'accès la plus directe du fantasme du langage', in *Entretiens sur la paralittérature*, pp.443-61 (452).

<sup>63</sup> *Europe*, p.3.

<sup>64</sup> Jean Goimard, 'Quelques structures formelles du roman populaire', in *Europe*, pp.19-30. See also Goimard's section on the popular novel in *Manuel d'histoire*

aesthetic of violence, and concluded that the genre raises and defuses strong fears about society:

[Le lecteur] retrouve en toutes les situations - quelque invraisemblables ou fantastiques qu'elles paraissent parfois - la réalité d'une société féroce, cette société des *Habits Noirs* où chacun peut être victime de ces 'crimes légaux' dénoncés par Balzac ... et être sujet à la misère.<sup>65</sup>

Marc Angenot's *Le Roman populaire*, published in 1975, provides a good panorama of all perspectives on the popular novel, insofar as he believes in a broad approach to the genre, including the use of socio-historical and semiotic tools.<sup>66</sup> Like Olivier-Martin, Marc Angenot regards the Roman-Feuilleton as 'un dépassement onirique de l'oppression sociale'.<sup>67</sup> He looks into the genre from a structuralist point of view and highlights the archetypal situations and characters of the genre as well as its manicheism. On the whole, nineteenth-century French popular fiction tends to be regarded as a social and cultural phenomenon with little literary value because of its formulaic nature. It is generally thought to be escapist. It might first shock and disturb, but ultimately brings consolation and resolution.

Two collaborative pieces of work on Féval were published in 1987. An exhibition held in Rennes looked at various aspects of Féval's career such as his regional novels, the diffusion of his novels in Spain and his religious publications.<sup>68</sup> Armel Diverrès and Marie-Thérèse Pouillias provided a good survey of Féval's novelistic production, which includes fantastic novels, historical novels, crime novels, swashbuckling novels, social novels, and an autobiographical novel.<sup>69</sup> Meanwhile, a colloquium on Féval was more academic in its approach and offered a wider range of material.<sup>70</sup> Daniel Compère studied how Féval reworked conventions of fantastic literature, while Daniel Couégnas reassessed Féval as the most literary of all popular writers and introduced him as

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*littéraire de la France*, which provides an illuminating discussion on the ideological function of the Roman-Feuilleton as well as a typology of the genre based on Greimas' theories. Tome V (1848-1917), Deuxième partie, Chapitre II (Paris: Messidor/Editions Sociales, 1977), pp.278-303.

<sup>65</sup> François Bussière, 'Le roman de la violence et son esthétique', in *Europe*, pp.31-50 (43).

<sup>66</sup> Marc Angenot, *Le Roman populaire, recherches en paralittérature* (Montréal: Presses de l'Université du Québec, 1975).

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, p.11.

<sup>68</sup> *Paul Féval, 1816-1887* (Rennes: Bibliothèque Municipale, 1987).

<sup>69</sup> Armel Diverrès; Marie-Thérèse Pouillias, 'Paul Féval et le roman', in *Paul Féval, 1816-1887*, pp.51-7.

<sup>70</sup> *Paul Féval, romancier populaire*.

someone aware of the conventions of popular fiction.<sup>71</sup> Jacques Dubois investigated *Les Habits Noirs* as a transitional detective novel, while Eric Neveu offered sharp criticism of the same novel as formulaic, superficial and conservative.<sup>72</sup> On the whole, Féval tends to be associated with conservatism and nostalgia on the one hand, extravagance and melodrama on the other.

Among recent work on the Roman-Feuilleton, Daniel Couégnas' highly elaborate *Introduction à la paralittérature* (1992) provides a good overall view of the Roman-Feuilleton.<sup>73</sup> The most refreshing body of work, however, is Jean-Claude Vareille's *L'Homme masqué, le justicier, le détective* (1989) and *Le Roman populaire français* (1994).<sup>74</sup> Vareille takes up some aspects of the popular novel such as its impulse towards repetition and clichés, but highlights the vitality and game-like aspect of the popular narrative. His use of Mikhaïl Bakhtin's ideas on popular culture and carnival enables him to rethink the concept of the 'popular'.

For Jean-Claude Vareille, however, the popular elements in the Roman-Feuilleton are eventually deprived of their popular dimension and serve instead a conservative purpose. There is no dialogism, only definite conclusions: 'un système binaire strict, refusant les figures de la feinte, de la duplicité ou de l'ambiguïté.'<sup>75</sup> This is where I disagree with Vareille's analysis. Carnival itself is ambivalent and ultimately serves to reinforce a given community. Besides, popular elements and dialogism are very strong in an author such as Féval. However, I agree with Vareille's analysis in *Le Roman populaire*, where he maintains that Romans-Feuilletons are not politically regressive but anthropologically so. They should not be thought of in terms of politically conservative (novels of the right) or revolutionary (novels of the left) but rather in terms of dreams and utopias insofar as they aim at the representation of an ideal society.

<sup>71</sup> Daniel Compère, 'Paul Féval et les vampires' in *Paul Féval, romancier populaire*, pp.59-67; Couégnas, 'Le sourire de Paul Féval'.

<sup>72</sup> Jacques Dubois, 'Les Habits Noirs et la formation du genre policier', in *Paul Féval, romancier populaire*, pp.81-91; Eric Neveu, 'Vraisemblables et idéologies dans *Les Habits Noirs*', in *Paul Féval, romancier populaire*, pp.183-202.

<sup>73</sup> Couégnas, *Introduction à la paralittérature*.

<sup>74</sup> Jean-Claude Vareille, *L'Homme masqué, le justicier, le détective* (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1989); *Le Roman populaire français*.

<sup>75</sup> Vareille, *L'Homme masqué, le justicier, le détective*, p.31

According to Jean-Claude Vareille, however, the popular novel is torn between the temptation of a closed and transparent world and the realisation that history is an ever-moving, shaping force. It is not, therefore, all consolation and illusion. Vareille nonetheless asserts that Féval's novels are on the side of closure and consolation. This might be true of a novel such as *Le Bossu*, but it certainly does not apply to *Les Habits Noirs*. Féval's work deserves some reassessment, and part of this thesis seeks to redress the simplified notion of Féval's novels as nostalgic and one-dimensional. Along with a conservative impulse, a subversive attraction for chaos and disorder runs through *Les Habits Noirs*. These characteristics of *Les Habits Noirs* recall Collins' novels. A comparative approach to both authors might help to highlight those common features as well as differences in treatment.

v). Thesis: aims and purposes

This thesis looks at a range of texts from the 1860s and early 1870s. Although an increasing number of Collins' later novels are now being re-edited, there is a consensus that his early novels, such as *The Woman in White* (1860), *No Name* (1862), *Armadale* (1866) and *The Moonstone* (1868), have more critical interest than his later novels. Between the 1870s and the 1880s, Collins put the defence of a specific social or political cause at the forefront, resulting in a series of propaganda novels. It will be argued, however, that *The Law and the Lady* (1875), a novel which has received relatively little critical attention, is a fascinating conclusion to the early part of Collins' career. As for Féval, five episodes of the *Habits Noirs* series, including *Les Habits Noirs* (1863), *Coeur d'Acier* (1866), *La Rue de Jérusalem* (1868), *Maman Léo* (1869), *L'Arme invisible* (1869) and *Les Compagnons du Trésor* (1872) will be examined. The *Habits Noirs* series illustrates Féval's main characteristics, including his obsession with mysteries and secret societies, his love of the fantastic and his ironic detachment from conventions. The evolution of the series also reflects that of his career as a whole.

This thesis is threefold. Firstly, it seeks to contribute to a wider view of cultural and literary exchanges between France and England in the 1860s by focusing on a comparison between French and English popular novels of the period. By extension, the thesis looks at the interplay between small and great literary areas, such as detective stories and thrillers, romantic and realist novels, and mainstream and popular fiction. Secondly, this thesis sets out to

investigate extensively two popular authors, contributing thus to the debate on both Wilkie Collins and Paul Féval. It seeks to outline the conventions and values that their novels bring into play and to highlight the way each set of texts functions in its particular cultural and social context. Thirdly, the thesis looks at popular fiction in a comparative way. It seeks to offer a broader look at popular fiction as a genre by relating two cultures and looking at broad structural and thematic similarities and cultural differences between the two chosen authors. It sets out to investigate how two sets of texts from different cultures operate in similar ways, highlighting what is specific to popular fiction as a genre. By looking at different versions of the form, a comparative study might help to outline the dual aspect of popular fiction, both in its universal conventions and archetypal patterns, and its cultural variants. It will be argued that in the period studied in both France and England there was something in popular fiction that transcended national and cultural differences.

Chapter I addresses the most obvious characteristics of the popular novel, its story and plot structure. The study of the narrative structures in Collins and Féval's novels is a first and essential step towards a typology of the popular novel insofar as it helps establish characteristic features and overall structures. The narrative points raised by the chosen texts highlight their nature as radical and stylised versions of the narrative as a genre, and as a place of playful narrative experiments and self-reflexivity. This chapter, therefore, outlines the formulaic and conventional aspects of the plots while at the same time highlighting the complexity of Féval and Collins' story-telling and the extent to which both were aware of the conventions and mechanisms involved in their own narratives.

Chapter II investigates the appropriation and reworking of other modes of writing involved in both the Sensation novel and the Roman-Feuilleton. It looks at the way various genres and registers are either synthesised or coexist within both genres and create dialogic and carnivalesque texts. This section focuses on the way both sets of texts blur the frontiers between romance and reality and mix facts and fantasy. Particular attention will be paid to the French influence on Collins, and to Féval's attitude towards Romanticism. It will be argued that both Féval and Collins borrowed from and reworked various literary conventions with a view to stimulating readers' pleasure and offer an indirect

comment on contemporary society. The formal and thematic dialogic nature of both sets of texts will then be emphasised by looking at them from a Bakhtinian perspective. An investigation of the relationships between the novels of Féval and Collins and carnival, which according to Bakhtin exemplifies the nature and spirit of popular culture, will highlight the dual nature of popular fiction as simultaneously harmless entertainment and vehicle for social protest and subversion. This section, therefore, sets out to relate those nineteenth-century texts to a broader and older meaning of the word popular.

Chapter III investigates the theatre as both a formal influence on the structure of the novels, and a theme within them. The involvement of Collins and Féval with the theatre is well known. It is also common to speak of the theatricality of their novels, yet there has been no close analysis to back up this argument. Furthermore, the theatre as a theme within the novels provides another insight into the reflexivity of the narratives of both writers. Images related to the semantic field of the theatre provide appropriate metaphors for a society, either Parisian or Victorian, characterised by duplicity. This section explores how the links made by the texts between specific categories of characters and acting become an indirect way to explore both the working of society and the relationships between fiction and reality.

Both the Sensation novels and the Romans-Feuilletons are related to the crime novel as a genre. They deal with transgressions such as murder, adultery, theft and domestic violence. They all feature evil characters and heroes who administer punishment. As such, both the Sensation novel and the Roman-Feuilleton raise issues about justice and moral values. Chapter IV is concerned with the moral content of the novels and seeks to redress the simplifying notion that Féval's narratives are suffused with manicheism, while Collins' substituted moral ambivalence for the manicheism of stage drama. It sets out to highlight the contradictory impulses, subversive discourse and conservative strains, that pull the narratives in opposite directions. This section is also concerned with questions of definitions and categories within the popular novel as a genre, and explores the notions of detective stories and thrillers as the two opposite poles of the crime novel.

Lastly, chapter V looks at the specific ways in which Collins and Féval deal with those contradictions, and how the two discourses articulate in each set of texts. It focuses on the scapegoat as both a theme and a deep structure of Collins'

and Féval's novels, which accounts for both its capacity for social impact and its tendency to defuse and displace problems. This section makes use of René Girard's analysis of scapegoating as a basic pattern of exclusion leading to the formation of a new social order.<sup>76</sup> For Girard, a society founds and periodically renews itself in a time of crisis by sacrificing a victim wrongly held responsible for the situation of crisis. Insofar as the victim is generally chosen simply because he differs from the norm, the death of the scapegoat reinforces common values and prejudices. In a given society, this initial sacrifice is then symbolically re-enacted and/or represented in written narratives. Scapegoating, therefore, brings about displacements and simplifications of issues. It invokes tensions and threats only to displace them onto a scapegoat figure and expel them by the ritual death of the latter. It will be argued that crime fiction, in its simplest expression, is ruled by the scapegoat mechanism insofar as it blindly reproduces the process of scapegoating. As will be shown, however, both Féval and Collins are aware of this aspect of crime fiction. In their own ways, each author is caught between reproducing the scapegoat process and rejecting it, making use of its capacity for protest and its propensity for defusing problems. This chapter, therefore, investigates the nature of popular fiction as a rite, and explores the complexity of both the ideological purpose and cultural function of the popular novel.

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<sup>76</sup> René Girard, *Le Bouc émissaire* (Paris: Grasset, 1982).

## Chapter I: Narrative structures

### Introduction

What most characterises a popular novel is the predominance of the story and plot-structure. The association with story-telling, however, gives popular fiction a bad name. Insofar as the events recounted are predominant, it is assumed that the way in which they are represented is not important. The narrative dimension of the text, such as the presence of the narrator and the way he or she shapes the primary material, is thought to be insignificant. Consequently, the popular novel is easily dismissed as formulaic and deprived of the critical dimension usually associated with the self-aware narrator of high literature. In *La Rue de Jérusalem*, Féval himself looks at the popular crime story in a rather self-deprecating way. The only credit that he grants to the popular novelist is an ability to sustain the interest of the reader:

Ainsi en est-il dans ces récits de l'histoire du crime, où l'écrivain n'a à dépenser ni beaucoup de talent, ni beaucoup d'imagination. Les faits sont là qui se posent d'eux-mêmes en jalons, les personnages existent; il ne s'agit que de ménager un peu l'intérêt contenu dans ces étranges procès-verbaux.<sup>1</sup>

Story-telling, however, is not necessarily an easy activity. On the one hand, popular stories demand conventional situations and archetypal characters. On the other hand, their special kind of artistry requires a balance between the conventional and the unexpected, the familiar and the new. For instance, they need to balance readers' need for dreams and escape, fulfilled by never ending stories, and that for clear-cut patterns and meaning exemplified by satisfying endings. Also, events must be carefully organised in a specific way to generate excitement or suspense.

This first chapter looks at the mechanisms involved in story-telling from a structural point of view. Insofar as popular fiction is mainly narrative, a narrative analysis of the texts seems the most obvious way to tackle them. This enterprise also underlines the critical interest of the texts as popular novels. Because of its emphasis on plot, the popular novel simplifies and focuses the main aspects of any narrative, and highlights narrative issues such as the treatment of time or characters as functions in the text. Various narrative

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Féval, *La Rue de Jérusalem* (Robert Laffont: Paris, 1987), p.776.

theories will be referred to in order to underline the mechanisms of Féval's and Collins' texts.

Narratology, however, tends to be descriptive more than explanatory or evaluative. Because it focuses on basic structures and recurrent features, it is given to generalisations. This first chapter, therefore, should be conceived of as an introduction, a necessary step towards the analysis of the popular novel. It aims to underline the broad structures and formal mechanisms of the genre. On the other hand, although narratology cannot do justice to the vitality and inventive variations on conventional structures and aspects, this section sets out to show the complexity of Féval's and Collins' story-telling. It also aims to underline the literary qualities of the texts, notably through an analysis of the narrator's nature and function. It will be argued that both are highly aware of the nature of their narratives.

## **Part 1. Narrative structures in Paul Féval's *Les Habits Noirs***

### **A. Nature and organisation of the narrative**

The first theory of narrative is to be found in Aristotle's *Poetics*. Aristotle emphasised two characteristics of narrative: unity and ordered structure. The concept of the wholeness of the action, or unity, is essential: 'A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle and an end'.<sup>2</sup> The action is self-contained insofar as it has temporal boundaries. In between those, the series of events must be connected in a coherent way. The plot, which is the way the action is organised, creates the unity of the action. A plot hinges on two essential stages leading to the transformation of the action, complication and resolution:

By complication I mean everything from the beginning up to and including the section which immediately precedes the change to good fortune or bad fortune; by resolution I mean everything from the beginning of the change of fortune to the end.<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, a narrative could be defined as the representation of a conflict, and characterised by a movement from an initial situation to a final situation.

Féval's novels can be considered as pure narrative. They are highly structured. Due to serialisation, beginnings had to be particularly exciting so that readers would want to buy the following instalments. The exposition of the

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<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics* (London: Penguin Classics, 1996), p.12.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p.29.

action is usually very short, and the complication takes place relatively early on in the narrative. Moreover, most of Féval's novels feature a problematic beginning. Problematic beginnings imply a situation rich in dramatic tension and characterised by a lack of balance. *La Rue de Jérusalem* provides a typical example. The first chapters introduce the hero Paul Labre who is on the point of committing suicide for two reasons. He has been involved in a conspiracy against General de Champmas and is hopelessly in love with Ysole, the General's daughter. At the same time, a plan contrived by the Habits Noirs is underway and threatens the General. Typically, the complication, namely the implementing of the Habits Noirs' plan, links the two series of actions. First, Coyatier, the Habits Noirs' killer, mistakes Paul's brother for the General. The murder of Jean Labre constitutes, strictly speaking, the first stage of the complication. Second, Coyatier's attempt to kidnap the General's other daughter fails. Coyatier has to abandon her in the river Seine, where Paul Labre later rescues her. The complication increases and focuses the dramatic tension.

Endings are equally characteristic. The attraction of most narratives lies in their power to arouse a desire to know, a desire fulfilled by the end of the narrative.<sup>4</sup> Paradoxically, endings are both the purpose and the cessation of the narrative. This paradox is both enhanced and resolved by the commercial dimension of the Roman-Feuilleton. The resolution is delayed as long as possible. Multiple subplots, for instance, constantly create new interests and new causes for suspense. Endings in Féval's novels display, typically, both completion and lack of completion. On the one hand, endings must allow linkage, for the Habits Noirs never really die.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, endings provide a sense of closure. They usually feature a celebration scene where all characters are present, such as a ball, in *Les Habits Noirs* and *Coeur d'Acier*. In this last scene, the hero accomplishes his final mission as avenger, or finally manages to escape the villain. Most loose ends are tied up, hidden links between characters are exposed, and moral values are reaffirmed. This sense of closure is enhanced by the use of contrasts and parallels. The end is often a mirror image of the beginning, and

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<sup>4</sup> 'Reading a narrative is waiting for the end and the quality of that waiting is the quality of the narrative', Gerard Prince, *Narratology* (Berlin: Mouton Publishers, 1982), p.157.

<sup>5</sup> 'Linkage' is one of the closural strategies identified by Marianna Torgovnick in *Closure in the Novel* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981), p.14. It characterises the novels conceived as part of a larger series of works, the endings of which refer to future, yet unwritten novels.

the resolution that of the complication. In *Les Habits Noirs*, the complication is the theft of the Bancelle safe by Lecoq, which leads to André's arrest. The resolution's climax consists in André catching Lecoq red-handed in a new attempt to empty the same safe.

Paul Ricoeur's definition of a story, 'Toute histoire racontée n'a-t-elle pas finalement affaire à des revers de fortune, en mieux comme en pire?' could therefore be applied to all of Féval's novels.<sup>6</sup> Thematically, the *Habits Noirs* novels revolve around the issue of identity. The point of the narrative is the recovering of the hero's lost or stolen identity. The villain's function is to impede this quest. Typical complications are therefore based on despoilment of identity (stealing the hero's name), illegal solicitation of a legacy (stealing the hero's inheritance), or false accusations (giving the hero the false identity of a criminal). At the beginning of *Coeur d'Acier*, Roland's real identity is unknown to him and his social position precarious. His mother, however, is on the point of buying documents that can identify him as the son of a rich Duke. The complication consists in the theft of her money, followed by the theft of the documents by the Habits Noirs. The hero is then alienated from society. The general pattern of each episode of the *Habits Noirs* series is therefore as follows: a disruption (complication) results in the alienation of the hero and the chaotic state of society; then the hero's response (resolution) brings about the recovery of his identity and the return of order to society.

The temporal ellipsis that clearly separates most of Féval's narratives in two parts or epochs represents the point where the complication has led to the worst consequences for the heroes.<sup>7</sup> Order is upset, the world disrupted. In *Les Habits Noirs*, the ellipsis covers the period between 1826 and 1842. It marks the arrest of the hero André, the ruin of the innocent Bancelle family and the successful rise of the villain Lecoq. It is also a prelude to the resolution. After a period of hiding during which the hero prepares his return to society, there is a confrontation between hero and villain. Order is restored, poetic justice is done. The hero is rewarded, and the villain punished by death. Typical resolutions include recognition and exposure scenes, followed by punishment and/or expulsion of the villains. Everything works as if the narrative had a comforting moral value: crime is punished and virtue triumphs. The novels feature a

<sup>6</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Temps et récit* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1983), p.73.

<sup>7</sup> There is an ellipsis when the narrative 'jumps forwards' and leaves out a period of time from the story.

process of redefinition and purification based on expulsions, insofar as the new order is founded on ritual and symbolic sacrifices, notably that of the villains.

Actions in narratives are organised to form a coherent whole where each component is connected to the others in a specific way. Coherence can be provided by unity of character, time, and place. In Féval, unity is recurrently threatened by the proliferation of the action. A particularly fertile imagination as well as conditions of publication involving short daily instalments meant a profusion of episodes and as many sub-plots. Each story of *Les Habits Noirs* features at least two series of actions. First, a plan launched by the Habits Noirs to gain wealth and position for a member of the association goes hand in hand with the framing of an innocent victim as means of protection against the law. Second, there is an internal struggle for the leadership of the Habits Noirs. These are closely linked, as in *La Rue de Jérusalem*, where the rivalry between Nicolas and Lecoq, both members of the Habits Noirs, regulates the success of the association's plans. In later novels, including *Les Compagnons du Trésor*, rivalry for the leadership of the association becomes the main focus of the action. According to Féval himself, *La Rue de Jérusalem* is the only novel where the unity of action was not respected, since there are two affairs being launched:

J'ai essayé de ne rien inventer dans cette histoire .... Il eût été facile de lui donner l'unité dramatique, mais j'aurais renoncé à l'écrire, s'il m'avait fallu supprimer l'épisode du roi Habit-Noir et de sa Maintenon-à-barbe.<sup>8</sup>

The first plot involves the murder of General de Champmas and the second a theft from a rich peasant. The second plan is mentioned right at the beginning by one of the characters, but is at that stage turned down by the leader of the Habits Noirs. It is taken up again when the first plan fails.<sup>9</sup> Both plots require Nicolas to impersonate Louis XVII. Nicolas' failure to bring the first plan to completion threatens the success of the second, as characters involved in the first plot seek revenge or justice. The two plots are linked in many other ways, and it is more a case of interweaving than addition or alternation.

Other novels feature many sub-plots. The second part of *Les Habits Noirs* is characterised by a multitude of sub-plots, all related to the main plot. There is a love plot involving Edmée and Michel, a domestic plot involving the Schwartz couple, a friendship plot involving Similor and Echalot, a dramatic plot

<sup>8</sup> Féval, Envoi à Madame La R. de C..., in *La Rue de Jérusalem* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1987).

<sup>9</sup> Féval, *La Rue de Jérusalem*, Part I, Chapters X and XI, and Part II, Chapter V.

involving young artists Etienne and Maurice, etc. This should be related to the profusion of characters. Indeed, the presence of the hero is not sufficient to provide unity, as the focus tends to shift from the hero to secondary characters. In *L'Arme invisible*, one shifts from the story of Valentine and Maurice to that of Rémy d'Arx, and finally to that of Maman Léo and Echlot. The sequel to *L'Arme invisible* is called, significantly, *Maman Léo*. All these characters are linked in a particular way. For instance, numerous noble characters turn out to be related to the Bozzo, or the Fitz-Roy family. When Nita first appears in *Coeur d'Acier* as Roland's secret lover, she turns out to be related to the Fitz-Roys, and is, therefore, Roland's own cousin. She also happens to be a ward in care of Marguerite, Roland's enemy, since Joulou and Marguerite de Bréhu are also relatives of the Fitz-Roys. Similarly, most new characters from the second half of *Les Habits Noirs* (Michel, Maurice, Etienne and Edmée) turn out to be the sons and daughter of the protagonists from the first half of the story.

Finally, unity of place is equally artificial. This is particularly striking in *La Rue de Jérusalem*. The first part, which relates to the General, takes place in Paris. When the second plan is launched, the action moves to Normandy, home of the rich peasant whose fortune is coveted by the Habits Noirs. Not only do the General and Ysole de Champmas happen to have a house there, but it also turns out that Paul and Suavita have settled in the same village.

Logic also provides unity to the action. According to E. M. Forster, 'A plot is ... a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality.'<sup>10</sup> Most of Féval's novels begin by the enfolding of an intricate net of causal links. In *La Rue de Jérusalem*, the narrative recounts how a trap set by the Habits Noirs to kill General de Champmas fails and culminates in the accidental murder of Jean Labre. First, Paul Labre, who is feeling suicidal, leaves his lodgings and does not recognise his brother when they meet on the dark staircase. Second, Pistolet, who is investigating for Inspector Badoît, takes Paul's card off the door to write down what he sees as an important clue. Everything leads to Jean Labre knocking on the wrong door and being mistaken for the General. In *Les Habits Noirs*, the Habits Noirs' plan to steal from the Bancelles and have André charged with the crime works out. In both novels, the causal links that reflect the Habits Noirs' carefully thought-out plans or unexpected twists leading to unlikely results are nonetheless incomprehensible to the hero. The villain's actions,

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<sup>10</sup> E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (London: Edward Arnold, 1927), p.116.

which reflect intentionality, appear as mere events to André or Paul, a series of coincidences. The sense of absurdity and lack of proper design experienced by the hero is counterbalanced by his belief in fate, which restores a sense of design, however negative. From the point of view of the hero, the plot reflects a world-view structured by the opposite forces of fate and providence:

Hier encore, je ne distinguais pas nettement la Providence de la fatalité.  
Aujourd'hui, la fatalité me fait peur et je tends mes mains vers la  
Providence; car, séparés que nous sommes, Julie, par l'espace et par  
l'erreur, elle nous réunit tous deux sous son regard éternel.<sup>11</sup>

In the first episode of *Les Habits Noirs*, although it is clear that fate has much to do with the evil genius of the association, everything works as if there was a providence that eventually reunites Julie and André and punishes Lecoq. In later episodes, the existence of a benevolent and all-powerful providence, as we shall see in a later section, is less obvious. The world of *Les Habits Noirs* is a cruel one, where anyone can be a victim of crime.

Most of the time, however, the dramatic potential of the action prevails over the examination of its cause. The narrative tends to progress in an abrupt way, through coincidences and sudden discoveries. The development of the action sometimes depends on long-forgotten documents. In *Les Habits Noirs*, Julie learns of the existence of André, whom she thought dead, when she finds his diary, which had remained in possession of her second husband. Scenes of recognition are also the norm. In *La Rue de Jérusalem*, Général de Champmas and his long-lost daughter Suavita are suddenly reunited through the means of an anonymous letter. The following chapters abound in coincidences and revelations.<sup>12</sup> Insofar as the omniscient narrator tends to disclose most information to readers, it is logical that the investigating process should not prevail in the texts: readers have known all along whom Suavita was. When readers do not know, the narrator has a tendency to give away the solution of the mystery straightaway, as the following example from *Les Compagnons du Trésor* makes clear. Bozzo hires Vincent Carpentier to build a safe in a mysterious house outside Paris. On the way to the house, Vincent tries to guess where the house might be. The mystery is promptly explained since at his first attempt to trace his way back, Vincent realises that the house is actually Bozzo's own house, situated in Paris. For many critics this shortcut from mystery to

<sup>11</sup> Paul Féval, *Les Habits Noirs* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1987), p.69.

<sup>12</sup> Féval, *La Rue de Jérusalem*, Part II, Chapters XVIII to XXI.

solution is what characterises the Roman-Feuilleton as opposed to the detective novel: 'L'énigme et sa solution juxtaposée, c'est du feuilleton; la lente transformation de l'énigme en sa solution .... c'est du roman policier.'<sup>13</sup> It is also one of the main differences between Féval's and Collins' novels, insofar as Collins is always careful to delay the solution to sustain readers' curiosity and keep them guessing.

Therefore, the narrative either details causal series or highlights effects at the expense of causes. Coincidences and plot devices such as the resort to fate and providence are predominant. Marianna Torgovnick's comment on fiction seems particularly relevant as far as the Roman-Feuilleton is concerned: 'There is a tension in all human fiction between the desire to mime contingency and disorder, and the opposing need to create coherence and system.'<sup>14</sup> These conflicting desires are symbolised by the general structure of the Roman-Feuilleton, which we have seen dramatises the passage from a state of disorder to a state of order.

The predominance of the action means that not much space is left for characterisation. Little is known about characters, and any information provided tends to be functional. Short and definite portraits like that of Schwartz abound in *Les Habits Noirs*. 'L'aspect général de sa physionomie était une douceur grave, inquiétée par des yeux trop vifs et dont le regard semblait avide.'<sup>15</sup> In a single sentence, Féval highlights the strengths and weaknesses of the character: insecurity, greed and meekness. Although the character will evolve, the future behaviour of J.-B. Schwartz will be in keeping with these characteristics. Schwartz's characterisation is that of an individual, but also that of a type. Although not much is said about J.-B. Schwartz himself, much is said about the extended Schwartz 'tribe', of which he is a representative.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, secondary characters such as Echalot or Piquepuce are representative of a broader type, namely 'the Parisian'. Their characterisations are developed for picturesque and often comic purposes, to such an extent that they often outshine the more conventional heroes of the stories.

<sup>13</sup> Jean-Claude Vareille, *L'Homme masqué, le justicier, le détective* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1989), p.53.

<sup>14</sup> Torgovnick, *Closure in the Novel*, p.7.

<sup>15</sup> Féval, *Les Habits Noirs*, p.4.

<sup>16</sup> Chapter one of *Les Habits Noirs* is actually called 'Essai sur les Schwartz'.

Heroes tend to have the same physical and moral characteristics. Men are always handsome, and invariably kind. Short portraits conveying ideas of softness and virility combined are recurrent, as the portrait of Maurice makes clear:

Il avait le front haut sous ses cheveux blonds, coupés ras ... sa bouche était ferme, nette, singulièrement douce dans le sourire, mais sévère aussi à l'occasion, et en quelque sorte rembrunie par la courbe énergique de son menton.<sup>17</sup>

Similarly, portraits of heroines generally express both femininity and strength. Longer portraits have a narrative function, bringing up past secrets that will come out later in the narrative, as the following quotation shows:

André et Julie avaient dans leur passé d'étranges périls, évités, mais point de combats. André en était encore à éprouver sa force. A certaines heures, il avait conscience de l'énergie indomptable qui était en lui à l'état latent et qu'aucun danger suprême n'avait encore sollicitée.<sup>18</sup>

The same difference between main and secondary characters can be found regarding the villains. Lecoq's characterisation is rather thin, whereas Coyatier's or Marguerite's are more detailed, and therefore more appealing.<sup>19</sup>

Although there are passages of reflection in Féval's novel, the Roman-Feuilleton does not give supremacy to psychological analysis. Characters, therefore, are best classified according to what they do, as vehicles for the action. Villains disrupt order, and commit crimes. Heroes are victims and avengers; they restore order or save their lives. The distribution of characters tends to be characterised by manicheism. Characters fall into two broad categories: evil characters (villains) and good characters (heroes). In that respect, each episode is close to a tale, a quintessential popular formula that inspired Vladimir Propp's pioneering study of the folktale.<sup>20</sup> One aspect of Propp's study is the seven narrative functions of fictional characters, upon which A. G. Greimas or Claude Bremond have elaborated.<sup>21</sup>

Claude Bremond's categories are particularly helpful when applied to the strongly polarised universe of the Roman-Feuilleton. Bremond makes a

<sup>17</sup> Paul Féval, *L'Arme invisible* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1987), p.1072.

<sup>18</sup> Féval, *Les Habits Noirs*, p.22.

<sup>19</sup> For a closer look at characterisation, see chapter II, 'Heroes and villains'.

<sup>20</sup> Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale* (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1971).

<sup>21</sup> A. G. Greimas, *Sémantique structurale* (Paris: Larousse, 1966) ; Claude Bremond, *Logique du récit* (Paris: Larousse, 1973).

distinction between Agents (active characters) and Patients (passive characters). In Féval's novels, heroes tend to be Patients. They have to yield to the law of the villains. This is almost always the case at the beginning of each novel, when the hero finds himself a victim of the Habits Noirs. He might remain a Patient until quite late in the narrative, as in *Coeur d'Acier*, where the hero Roland hides from the world after his first encounter with the Habits Noirs. A sudden series of events then changes the course of his life: 'Depuis quelques jours, il semble qu'il y a autour de ma vie une sourde conspiration', says Roland, who will not be in control until the very end of the narrative.<sup>22</sup> In *Maman Léo*, heroes remain, to a certain extent, puppets: it is Bozzo who decides that Valentine and Maurice should be allowed to escape unhurt at the very end.

Villains are Agents. According to Bremond's categories, they are either Seducers or Intimidators. These categories are particularly useful, as corruption and contamination are key concepts in the world of the Habits Noirs. Marguerite is a Seducer who seduces weaker characters into giving in to her wishes. Bozzo is an Intimidator, who threatens with death unwilling collaborators such as Coyatier. Secondary characters are also active. They are Informers or Concealers, depending on whether they help the hero or not. One characteristic feature of Féval's novels is a blurred distinction between what Bremond calls Protectors or Frustrators (Helpers and Opponents according to Greimas).<sup>23</sup> Characters such as Echalot, Similor, or Pistolet tend to start by serving their own interest. They might help heroes or not, according to their cleverness or their knowledge of the situation. However, most end up choosing sides in the course of the story. The novels are characterised by a certain degree of confusion, as characters swap roles and do not always behave as they should. The world of *Les Habits Noirs* is a world in movement, where boundaries are blurred, and people play different roles.<sup>24</sup>

In what he called the *modèle actantiel*, Greimas has established how the links between characters revolve on various axes in the narrative.<sup>25</sup> These axes are Desire, Communication and Struggle. Desire characterises the search for an Object by a Subject. Applied to *Les Habits Noirs*, the *modèle actantiel* yields the following results. If the desiring Subject is the villain, the Object of desire is

<sup>22</sup> Paul Féval, *Coeur d'Acier* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1987) p.721.

<sup>23</sup> Greimas, *Sémantique structurale*.

<sup>24</sup> See chapter III on the theatre about characters as actors.

<sup>25</sup> Greimas, *Sémantique structurale*.

power and money. If the desiring Subject is the hero, the Object of desire is his own identity, and justice. There is likely to be a love Object too.

The axis of Communication is made by the Sender, a character whose function is to promise or give the Object, and the Receiver, who receives it. There are hardly any Senders in *Les Habits Noirs*. Personal interest and violence reign. The Subject takes what he wants and does not give anything for free. In that case, Sender and Receiver are the same person. The only contracts between Senders and Receivers to be found are of a 'diabolical' nature. Vincent and Joulou have signed a contract with Bozzo and Marguerite; they have sold their souls for money (Vincent) or love (Joulou). It seems that anyone can be bought, therefore corrupted. Insofar as no one seems to function as Sender to the hero, the latter works for himself. For instance, the Law, which should help him in his search for justice, is actually against him. This might account for the fact that the heroes' search for justice and retribution tends to shift to a search for revenge and power. Insofar as everyone tends to desire the same Object (power), and as acquiring the desired Object implies the destruction of Opponents, the axis of Struggle is a dominant one. All characters are in a *rapport de force*, until the escalation of violence leads to a final ritual murder.

Applying such tools of narrative analysis helps to put the main issues of the texts in perspective. The qualities that characterise the universe of *Les Habits Noirs* are self-interest, greed, violence on the one hand, and love and aspiration to nobility on the other. Lack of control is a fact, and contamination another. The novels dramatise a fight not only between good and evil, but also between the desire for justice and that for vengeance, the attraction of power or the need for peace, etc. This qualifies and complicates the idea of simplistic manicheism at work, as well as the idea of a happy and morally comforting ending.<sup>26</sup>

## **B. Temporal structures of the narrative**

There are two temporal levels in all narratives. One level is what Genette called 'story-time', meaning the order of the narrated events. The other level, or narrative-time, regards the order of the narrative, that is

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<sup>26</sup> See the chapter on 'Heroes and villains' for a discussion on manicheism versus moral ambiguity in *Les Habits Noirs*.

the order in which the events are recounted.<sup>27</sup> The Roman-Feuilleton highlights the various possibilities offered by those two temporal levels.

The universe of *Les Habits Noirs* has a strong temporal dimension in many ways. Temporal indications about the chronology of the events abound. For example, *Les Habits Noirs*, which starts on 14th June 1825, stops in September of the same year, resumes in September 1842, and ends one month after the death of Bozzo, in November 1842. The fictional universe has its own recurring dates, such as Bozzo's death, which happens in October 1842. This event is mentioned in passing or recounted at length in several episodes of *Les Habits Noirs*. Events can therefore be classified as happening before Bozzo's death, the golden period, or after his death, which signals the decadence of the Habits Noirs. The stories of *Les Habits Noirs* expand over a period of 41 years, from 1825 (*Les Habits Noirs*) to 1866 (*La Bande Cadet*). François Le Lionnais has noticed a few mistakes in the chronology, but on the whole, he is impressed by the complexity and the coherence of the chronology of *Les Habits Noirs*:

Essayez de représenter sur du papier les structures de ces intrigues enchevêtrées en figurant chaque personnage par un point se déplaçant à la fois dans l'espace et dans le temps. Vous obtiendrez des graphes... assez comparables avec ceux qui sont en usage dans les bureaux des compagnies de chemin de fer, et il vous sera aisé de vérifier, que tout en étant très serrés, ils n'impliquent jamais contradiction et ne pourraient jamais engendrer de déraillements ou de collisions.<sup>28</sup>

Facts and fiction are closely blended. There are numerous mentions of 'faits divers' that throw light on the story and illustrate some aspects of the first half of the century, such as corruption and love of money. Allusions to political events emphasise the notion of change that is central to the thematic of the story. Another underlying theme is the changes in the Parisian architecture, used as another mean to measure the passing of time.

The relationship between narrative-time and story-time varies according to the narrator's aim. The first part of *Les Habits Noirs* is fairly chronological, which means that narrative-time and story-time almost correspond. We witness the circumstances leading to a crime from the respective points of view of the

<sup>27</sup> The terminology used is Gérard Genette's in *Narrative Discourse* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980).

<sup>28</sup> François Le Lionnais, Preface to *Les Habits Noirs*, Volume II, p.viii. Le Lionnais points out that although Marguerite is killed by Joulou in 1843 (*Coeur d'Acier*) she is still alive in 1853 (*La Bande Cadet*).

criminal, his accomplice and their victim. A fast alternation of focus limits the occurrence of *anachronies*, that is 'the various types of discordances between the two orderings of story and narrative.'<sup>29</sup> A dense net of temporal markers highlights and links the development of three parallel series of action. The realisation of the crime is thus framed by the following sentences. 'C'était à peu près l'heure où notre J.-B. Schwartz rencontrait ce brillant M. Lecoq; ... cinquante paires de lunettes ... étaient braquées sur la montre d'André Maynotte' is the sentence that signals the beginning of Lecoq's scheme. 'A l'heure où J.-B. Schwartz et M. Lecoq se séparaient dans le chemin creux, la bonne ville de Caen commençait à s'éveiller' is the one that marks the accomplishment of the offence.<sup>30</sup> The chronological development of the events brings out the careful planning of the offence, as well as the inexorability of its outcome. André will inevitably be held responsible.

Afterwards, there is only one straightforward retrospection, or *analepsis*.<sup>31</sup> The action stops on 10th August after André's escape from prison and resumes on 25th December with a letter from André to Julie where he recounts what happened to him during this time. Therefore, this retrospection corresponds to a change of narrator, and has a strong narrative function. The letter will only reach its addressee some ten years later, and will be the means by which Julie discovers that her first husband had not died while trying to escape from prison as the newspapers had reported.

In *Coeur d'Acier*, retrospections are minor and purely strategic. They remind readers of important elements that they might have forgotten: 'On se souvient que Roland, avant de partir pour sa visite à l'étude Deban, avait écrit ces noms sous la dictée de sa mère, en guise de *memento*.'<sup>32</sup> These authorial mentions are typical of the French Roman-Feuilleton, insofar as narrators felt they had to make sure that readers would remember what had taken place in a previous instalment. Another instance of the narrator's tendency to provide a commentary or explanation of his story is the advance mention of the death of Roland's mother, coupled with a retrospection on Roland's behaviour: 'Nous avons soulevé cette question à laquelle il sera répondu, parce qu'elle explique la

<sup>29</sup> Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, pp.35-36.

<sup>30</sup> Féval, *Les Habits Noirs*, p.15 and p.31.

<sup>31</sup> An *analepsis* means 'any evocation after the fact of an event that took place earlier than the point in the story where we are at a given moment', Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, p.40.

<sup>32</sup> Féval, *Coeur d'Acier*, p.486.

conduite de Roland ... Roland, depuis quelques jours déjà, jouait la comédie.'<sup>33</sup> Other traditional *analepses* serve to introduce the antecedents of a new character in the story. Féval tends to overuse these, as in *La Rue de Jérusalem* where the action is punctuated by retrospections regarding Thérèse's past, Paul's past, etc.

On the other hand, in other novels such as *La Rue de Jérusalem* or *L'Arme invisible*, Féval's love of mystery prevails over his gift for recounting pure action. Retrospections abound and the chronology is seriously disrupted. This is always the case in the second part of the novels, when the action resumes after the ellipsis. The events that coincide with an ellipsis are essential, and are therefore covered by a series of retrospections. Sometimes, most of the narrative consists of a series of retrospections, the order of which is rather whimsical. The desire to create mystery also leads the narrator to multiple *anachronies*. Readers might be shown characters doing various things without being given reasons for their behaviour. Consequences of events are mentioned before their causes, as the following example from *Les Habits Noirs* makes clear. In the second part of the novel, a new character called Edmée visits Madame Schwartz, whom she resents for mysterious reasons. The purpose of her visit seems to be to check whether Julie has lost an earring. An authorial comment hints at part of the solution: 'Et par ce mot "rivaless", nous avons voulu éclairer brusquement le secret de cet entretien étrange. Edmée aimait: elle avait peur.'<sup>34</sup> However, the role of the earring will be explained much later in a retrospective scene.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, the reason for Madame Schwartz's absent-mindedness is given in several stages. First, readers realise that she knows about the existence of her first husband. Second, the exact circumstances of this essential discovery are further delayed. The structure is a zigzag between past and present, where no regular pattern can be found.

The reach of the *anachronies*, that is the time elapsed between the moment when the events recounted happened in the story and the moment they are recounted in the narrative, also varies. So does their extent, which is the space that the recounting of the events takes in the narrative. Chapters VII to IX from *Coeur d'Acier* are typical. They form a whole sequence in the action, that is a

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p.494.

<sup>34</sup> Féval, *Les Habits Noirs*, Part I, Chapter V, p.141.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., Part I, Chapter XV, 'Le bouton de diamant'.

self-contained series of events marking a stage in the action. The sequence recounts how Nita, Rose and Joulou visit Roland. It is interspersed with numerous retrospections. Their reach varies from a few moments, when Rose recalls the words that her friend Nita has just pronounced, to ten years. In the latter case, the narrator recounts what has happened to Roland since his illness, covering within the same sequence the events that took place during the ellipsis. The extent of these retrospections also varies from a single sentence to a whole page. Finally, these retrospections involve a whole series of characters, including Léon de Malevoy who does not actually appear in the sequence. The narrative is therefore fairly complex. It is characterised by a multitude of micro-scenes that are not necessarily chronologically or logically related to one another. However, the narrator rarely inverts the order of the narrative without saying so, resulting in an easier reading, but also a certain degree of heavy-handedness. The sequence is punctuated with sentences such as 'Deux semaines environ avant le jour où reprend notre histoire....'<sup>36</sup> The narrative is therefore characterised by a tension between order and disorder, control and chaos, which is carefully maintained by Féval.

Iterative retrospections are a distinctive feature of Féval's narrative. Following Genette's definition, an iterative narrative recounts a single event several times.<sup>37</sup> In *Coeur d'Acier*, Roland is rescued by a group of artists after his escape from the convent where he lay sick. The event is mentioned several times, either at length or in passing, by the main narrator, the rescuers, and Nita. The reiteration brings out the 'novelistic' and romantic nature of the episode, as Nita's version of the episode makes clear:

Ces Hurons sont des anges ... Ils ont recueilli autrefois par une terrible nuit d'hiver un héros de roman, beau comme les amours, qui gisait dans la rue, mourant de froid, de faim.<sup>38</sup>

The return of a primary scene that haunts the narrative is typical of Féval. The attempted murder of Roland is mentioned several times, by Joulou the perpetrator who feels remorse, by Marguerite who tells her own version to deceive Léon, by the crowd at the ball who think it is going to be made public:

Nul ne saurait expliquer comment ni pourquoi aujourd'hui, justement, la romanesque histoire de la nuit du mardi gras, oubliée depuis dix ans, et tout d'un coup ressuscitée, allait et venait dans les nobles salons de

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p.577

<sup>37</sup> Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, p.116.

<sup>38</sup> Féval, *Coeur d'Acier*, p.544.

l'hôtel de Clare, comme une nouvelle toute fraîche. Chacun la racontait, et cela donnait un certain à-propos à deux costumes de Buridan qui eussent été cruellement démodés sans cela.<sup>39</sup>

Jacques Dubois writes about the hollowness of the second part of *Les Habits Noirs*, in which, he says, everyone tries hard to revive the past, but nothing happens.<sup>40</sup> In that sense, as the narrative progresses, the story goes back to the past to give the solution to a mystery or expose a hidden past event. Marc Angenot's well-known expression, 'la structure progressive-régressive', can be applied to Féval.<sup>41</sup> However, the movement from present to past is, as we have seen, not direct and regular, but convoluted and jerky. If the narrative constantly refers to the past and relives the initial trauma undergone by the hero so that he can finally get on with his life, there are nonetheless other things going on in the narrative as well. In *Les Habits Noirs*, the love interest between André's son and Edmée as well as the theatrical setbacks of Maurice and Etienne are linked to the story of André and therefore contribute to the development of the main plot. It is therefore unfair to speak of the hollowness of the second half of *Les Habits Noirs*.

Iterative retrospections are well exploited by Féval, insofar as repeated mentions of the same event often mean a change of narrators, and a change of narrative format, from third-person narrative to dialogue or monologue, etc. In *Les Compagnons du Trésor*, the primary scene is the transmission of power within the Habits Noirs, of which Reynier was an unwitting witness. Vincent Carpentier later retells this sacrilegious scene. Vincent has lost his mind, a fact that becomes apparent when he gives a first-person account of the events. He has become so obsessed with the Habits Noirs' destruction that he actually believes he was there when the transmission of power took place.

Finally, a defining aspect of the narrative is its rhythm or speed. Narrative speed is 'the relationship between the duration of the narrated - the (approximate) time the events recounted go on or are thought to go on - and the

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p.701.

<sup>40</sup> Jacques Dubois, 'Les Habits Noirs ou la formation du genre policier', in Paul Féval, *romancier populaire, colloque de Rennes 1987* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes et Interférences, 1992), pp.81-91 (87). 'C'est un fait que la seconde partie ... laisse une singulière impression de vacuité'.

<sup>41</sup> Marc Angenot, *Le Roman populaire, recherches en paralittérature* (Montréal: Presses de l'Université du Québec, 1975), p.53.

length of the narrative.<sup>42</sup> Variations in speed create the rhythm of the narrative. On a scale from slow to fast, a narrator can choose from pauses, including considerations unrelated to the action or lengthy descriptions, scenes, summaries of events, and ellipsis, where the narrative jumps forwards and leaves out some events in the story.

There are few pauses in Féval's narratives. The narrator sometimes wanders away from his story, as we shall see in the next section on the narrator, but that is fairly rare. Lengthy descriptions are also avoided, unless they are essential to the understanding of the story:

Pour l'intelligence des événements étranges, et certes, inattendus qui vont clore cet épisode de l'histoire des Habits Noirs, nous avons besoin de faire connaître au lecteur, avec certains détails qui pourront sembler minutieux, la topographie exacte de l'hôtel de Clare.<sup>43</sup>

Otherwise, descriptions are not static, so that the action does not seem to stop. This is the case of the long description of the ball in *Coeur d'Acier*, where movement and noise prevail.<sup>44</sup> At the other end of the scale, there is one ellipsis in each novel. As we have seen, Féval prefers to recount a long period of action in a series of retrospective scenes rather than a swift summary.

Beginnings are usually very fast, *in medias res*, then there is a deceleration followed by a late acceleration. This pattern can be put down to the fact that, as Jacques Dubois puts it, 'Il y a concentration et déplacement des péripéties vers les deux extrémités du roman.'<sup>45</sup> For example, the action of *La Rue de Jérusalem* resumes very late in the second part, for various reasons. Pistolet's retrospective narrative recounts his exploits on the Continent, and slows down the development of the main plot, insofar as it has nothing to do with it. This is typical of Féval's attraction to picturesque secondary characters, about whom he tends to multiply digressions. The action is also slowed down by the proliferation of recapitulations about the fate of the characters. Finally, the impression of weight characteristic of the middle of Féval's novels can be put down to the iterative nature of the narrative. However, once the action has properly resumed, the action is very swift: the last chapters of most novels cover a period of a few hours only.

<sup>42</sup> Prince, *Narratology*, p.55.

<sup>43</sup> Féval, *Coeur d'Acier*, p.679.

<sup>44</sup> Féval, *Coeur d'Acier*, Chapter IV, p.700.

<sup>45</sup> Dubois, 'Les Habits Noirs ou la formation du genre policier', p.89.

### C. Nature and role of the narrator

*Les Habits Noirs*' main narrator is omniscient. He always knows more than the protagonists of his novel, and is therefore able to guide readers. At the beginning of *Les Habits Noirs*, the narrator gives extra information about the character of Schwartz so that readers can understand why the latter reluctantly accepts Lecoq's money: 'Il était honnête, pourtant; il ne vous eût pas trompé sur une facture faite; reste à savoir comment on fait la facture.'<sup>46</sup> The fact that the narrator is omniscient does not mean, however, that he always tells readers everything. For the purpose of creating suspense, or highlighting some aspects of the story, the narrator chooses to retain or disclose certain facts. In *Les Compagnons du Trésor*, the narrator first highlights the existence of a mysterious map with which Vincent Carpentier is engrossed. He then declares: 'Nous écrivons en toutes lettres les noms de ces rues pour ne point jouer à cache-cache avec le lecteur...'<sup>47</sup> However, on the next page, a rhetorical question underlines the narrator's refusal to be cooperative and his tendency to play hide-and-seek with readers instead. Having mentioned that Vincent uses a disguise, the narrator asks 'Mais à quoi pouvait lui servir ce déguisement?'<sup>48</sup> The narrator has switched to external focalisation. Things are seen from the outside, by a narrator who does not know or does not want to tell what he knows. Lastly, the narrator may also adopt a certain restricted point of view when it suits him. This is what Genette calls 'variable internal focalisation'.<sup>49</sup> The story focuses on different characters to obtain particular effects. The fact that the discovery of the theft of the Bancelle safe in *Les Habits Noirs* is seen from André's point of view conveys ideas of powerlessness and fatality. He does not understand what has happened, but he can see that he is to be held responsible for it. Free indirect speech also signals a switch to internal focalisation. When Féval writes 'Quel don Juan, décidément, que ce Lecoq!', it is from the point of view of Schwartz.<sup>50</sup> The latter is giving in to temptation, accepting Lecoq's money on the ground that the latter must have been involved in a love affair rather than a major offence. The internal focalisation highlights Schwartz's self-delusion and his moral weakness.

<sup>46</sup> Féval, *Les Habits Noirs*, p.7.

<sup>47</sup> Paul Féval, *Les Compagnons du Trésor* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1987), p.571.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p.572

<sup>49</sup> Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, p.189.

<sup>50</sup> Féval, *Les Habits Noirs*, p.31.

Féval's use of focalisation is not always consistent, notably as regards his treatment of the villains. Even when Lecoq and Bozzo have been identified and acknowledged as villains by the omniscient narrator, the latter sometimes adopts an external point of view on them. Bozzo's funeral, for instance, is referred to as 'Les funérailles d'un juste'.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, readers are told that Lecoq 'administrait avec une minutieuse probité' Madame d'Ornans' fortune, as if readers did not know the nature of Lecoq's interest in the Marquess' fortune.<sup>52</sup> On the other hand, this is in keeping with Féval's use of irony. The alteration or variation in point of view conveys the blindness of society to the true nature of its most important members. The inverse alteration, or *paralepsis*, is even more frequent. Paralepsis occurs when the narrator gives more information than he can logically give.<sup>53</sup> This is almost always the case when a character recalls a scene from his past, or recounts a past event. The chapter where Reynier tells Marguerite about his shipwreck on the coast of Sardinia is implausible, insofar as Reynier can never have seen and heard so much among the Habits Noirs, let alone remember it all.<sup>54</sup> The voice of the omniscient narrator shows through Reynier's narrative. The presence of a strong omniscient narrator is typical of Féval's novels. Although *Les Habits Noirs* is mostly a third person narrative, words such as 'je' and 'nous' are recurrent.

The narrator of *Les Habits Noirs* might be omniscient but he is certainly not objective. The narrator is a self-conscious narrator, aware of the fact that he is telling a story. Whether he discusses the origin or the circumstances of his writing, comments on story-telling techniques or judges his own characters, his narrative intrusions are significant. First, he clearly identifies himself as Féval, the author of the novels, as some intrusions make clear. 'Nous avons raconté fort au long l'histoire de son mariage [Marguerite's] dans une de nos dernières compositions', writes the narrator.<sup>55</sup> In *Les Compagnons du Trésor*, he mentions his friendship with Frédéric Soulié.<sup>56</sup> In *Maman Léo*, he reflects on the place where he wrote his first novel in Paris.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p.339.

<sup>52</sup> Paul Féval, *L'Arme invisible* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1987), p.1041.

<sup>53</sup> Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, p.195.

<sup>54</sup> Féval, *Les Compagnons du Trésor*, Chapters XIV to XVII.

<sup>55</sup> Féval, *La Rue de Jérusalem*, p.778.

<sup>56</sup> Féval, *Les Compagnons du Trésor*, p.731.

<sup>57</sup> Paul Féval, *Maman Léo* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1987), pp.100-01.

The existence of metanarrative comments highlighting the very structures of the action and the artifices of story-telling has already been mentioned. This is typical of the Roman-Feuilleton. The narrator guides readers, for example, by underlying distortions in the chronology of the novel. Essential moments of the plots, such as complication and resolution, are equally underlined. In *Coeur d'Acier*, the letter that the Habits Noirs send to Roland, which restarts the action, is highlighted in the following way: 'Elle n'était en réalité, cette lettre, que le premier symptôme du drame, envahissant tout à coup avec une violence folle le calme de son existence.'<sup>58</sup> The resolution is equally emphasised: 'Il est tard, dans notre histoire. Le dénouement, suspendu comme une invisible épée, menace déjà vaguement.'<sup>59</sup> The narrator's comments sometimes bring out the general structure of the novel, as in *La Rue de Jérusalem*, where the transition from one sub-plot to another, as well as their different natures, are pointed out: 'Nous laissons un instant de côté le drame noir pour une scène d'audacieuse comédie.'<sup>60</sup> Therefore, a whole series of metalinguistic authorial comments borrow vocabulary from literary criticism. Another type of intervention serves to help readers, by summarising the action or drawing attention to an important element in the plot:

Nous avons compris que Roland, cette nuit de la mi-carême où il avait dépensé tant d'intelligence et tant de force morale pour fuir ... échappait, à son insu, non pas au malheur, mais à quelque brillante et facile destinée.<sup>61</sup>

This type of intervention is characterised by concision, and swiftness of writing.

In the previous example, the 'nous' includes the reader or narratee, whose presence is always acknowledged by the text, creating complicity. The following comment serves, in a rather off-hand way, to justify the plausibility of a situation in front of potentially sceptical readers: 'Et si le lecteur, devant cet aveu, juge notre Ysole par trop crédule, nous le renverrons aux histoires authentiques d'imposture et d'amour.'<sup>62</sup> Many comments fulfil several functions, as the following quote shows:

<sup>58</sup> Féval, *Coeur d'Acier*, p.568.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p.700.

<sup>60</sup> Féval, *La Rue de Jérusalem*, p.939.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p.564.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p.789.

Nous rétrogradons de quelques heures pour pénétrer enfin dans cette mystérieuse maison à deux étages, dont nous n'avons pas encore franchi le seuil, mais qui a, sans nul doute, piqué la curiosité du lecteur.<sup>63</sup>

The effect is twofold. On the one hand, a certain degree of explicitness and redundancy characterises the text. By offering a kind of pedagogical guide to his novels, the narrator might ruin the pleasure that readers take in guessing and anticipating. By highlighting the artifice of story-telling, the narrator also risks destroying the pact between reader and author, what Coleridge called 'willing suspension of disbelief'. Both outcomes would defeat the purpose of a narrative. This is one interpretation, shared by critics such as Daniel Couégnas or Daniel Compère.<sup>64</sup> On the other hand, there is a joyful aspect to the text, as the narrator cannot help commenting on the action or on his characters, in a mixture of affection and irony. Commenting on the scene where the countess Corona is moved to tears by Rémy's melodramatic love for Valentine, the narrator writes 'Personne n'était là pour faire ressortir le côté comique de la situation.'<sup>65</sup> There is clear delight in using the resources of story-telling almost for their own sake, in a playful way.

This playfulness also characterises the use of secondary narrators and multiple narratives. *Les Habits Noirs* is mainly a third person narrative with an *heterodiegetic* narrator, Féval.<sup>66</sup> There are, however, many secondary narrators, and therefore, metanarratives, that is narratives within the narrative. These are written diaries and reports, or oral summaries and retranscriptions of scenes by a character, or any kind of recollection that a character has. At one point in the story, André, Paul, Valentine, Rémy, Echalot, Reynier are all *homodiegetic* narrators, that is protagonists and narrators.

Metanarratives introduce a variety of points of view, while fulfilling an explanatory function, by filling a hole in the narration. For instance, Féval chooses to narrate Paul's past in the form of a written confession, a suicide letter to his brother. As with André's narrative in *Les Habits Noirs*, we are given the

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p.776.

<sup>64</sup> Daniel Couégnas, *Introduction à la paralittérature* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1992); Daniel Compère, 'Paul Féval et les vampires', in *Paul Féval, romancier populaire*, pp.59-67.

<sup>65</sup> Féval, *L'Arme invisible*, p.1056.

<sup>66</sup> Gérard Genette distinguishes two types of narratives: 'one with the narrator absent from the story he tells, the other one with the narrator present as a character in the story he tells. I call the first type ... *heterodiegetic*; and the second type *homodiegetic*.' *Narrative Discourse*, pp.244-45.

opportunity to know those two characters from the inside. On the other hand, Bruneau's narrative about how the Maynottes' past is related to that of the Habits Noirs is strategic. Bruneau is André in disguise. By telling his own story to Maurice and Etienne, he hopes to secure their help without revealing his identity. Furthermore, the reception of André's narrative by two *homodiegetic* narratees mimes readers' reactions, interest and surprise. Féval favours metanarratives especially when reporting past events. For instance, Echalot's narrative exposes the circumstances that led to the separation of Irène and Reynier in *Les Compagnons du Trésor*. The choice of narrator is justified, insofar as Echalot regrets the role he has played and wishes to confess his error. His narrative has also a comic function, as Féval makes the most of the change of focalisation by keeping Echalot's language mannerisms. The effect is underlined by the following authorial comment: 'Je ne sais pas si la passion de Reynier attendrira le lecteur, dans la traduction libre d'Echalot, mais il était ému lui-même jusqu'aux sanglots.'<sup>67</sup>

Multiple narratives recounting the same events from different points of view are not always exploited to full capacity. Some are purely repetitive, and the change of narrator does not bring new elements. On the other hand, they are always symptomatic of Féval's pleasure in writing stories for the sake of writing stories. Such is the rewriting of the story of André Maynotte in *Les Habits Noirs*, transposed into a melodrama by Etienne and Maurice. This love of stories is illustrated within the fictional universe, as, for instance, villains are well aware of the power of stories. There is a fair amount of what we might call 'false narratives', in which villains provide a new interpretation of some events in order to deceive their enemies. This is Marguerite's speciality. In *Coeur d'Acier*, she lies about the attempted murder of Roland, which she had commissioned, and talks Léon de Malevoy into working for her. The fact that most enclosed narratives do not reach their intended narratee is quite symbolic of the universe of *Les Habits Noirs*. André's diary reaches Julie too late, Valentine's confession and Rémy's reports fall into the hand of the Habits Noirs. Communication is impeded; espionage is a major aspect of *Les Habits Noirs*, as is a certain kind of urban paranoia. The Habits Noirs are everywhere and they can see everything. There is no way out.

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<sup>67</sup> Féval, *Les Compagnons du Trésor*, p.699.

By displaying the abundance of narrative devices symptomatic of the French Roman-Feuilleton, Féval's narratives fulfilled the conventional expectations of his readers. The liveliness and exuberance of the texts are enhanced by the obvious pleasure taken by their narrator in playing with conventions of the genres. Unlike other *feuilletonistes* such as Sue, there is nonetheless an ironic dimension to Féval's playfulness that suggests distance from a genre that he perceived as secondary. By contrast, Collins is a more ambitious artist. While displaying the same pleasure in story-telling, he is also able to question and explore narrative conventions and conveniences.

**Part 2. Narrative structures in the novels of Wilkie Collins: *The Woman in White, No Name, Armadale, The Moonstone, The Law and the Lady***

**A. Structure of the action**

As demonstrated earlier, the narrativity of a text depends on the capacity of that text to constitute a self-contained whole and represent some sort of conflict. A narrative text is essentially dynamic, representing 'a mediation through time between two sets of opposites.'<sup>68</sup> The popular novel is, therefore, the purest form of novelistic text because of its high narrative charge.

Collins' novels, like Féval's, dramatise the resolution of a conflict, through a series of interconnected events. Collins' specificity, however, does not lie in a stylised representation of the three sequences of the narrative (prologue, complication and resolution) nor in emphasis on high impact complication and resolution.<sup>69</sup> He is more interested in the careful arrangement of all components of the action into a logical, coherent whole. The best of Collins' novels exemplify to perfection Aristotle's definition of the narrative as a complete 'whole'. In the narrative text,

the structures of the various sections of the events must be such that the transposition or removal of any one section dislocates and changes the whole. If the presence or absence of something has no discernible effect, it is not part of the whole.<sup>70</sup>

Dramatic concentration and unity are key aspects of Collins' novels. Beginnings, therefore, are usually *in medias res*, and determine the development of the whole novel.

<sup>68</sup> Prince, *Narratology*, p.147.

<sup>69</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics* (London: Penguin Classics, 1996).

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p.15.

One can encounter, however, two kinds of beginnings in Collins' novels. One type portrays an ideal order, which the complication will disrupt. This non-problematic beginning allows for some degrees of exposition, while creating a sharp and dramatic contrast with the result of the complication. In *No Name*, Collins builds up a picture of domestic bliss, and familiarises readers with the prospect of a comfortable life for the two Vanstone sisters. The complication, in two stages, destroys this idyllic picture. First, the death of the Vanstone couple exposes the fact that they have only been married for a few months. Second, Mr. Vanstone's will, which provides for his two daughters, was written before he was actually married to his wife, and is therefore not valid. The family turns out to be, legally speaking, no family at all, and the Vanstone sisters, 'Nobody's Children'.<sup>71</sup> The complication deprives them of their names, their fortune and their future.

The other type of beginning is the problematic beginning, which generates dramatic tension. The text is concerned not so much with exposition as with the preparation of the complication. As in Féval's novels, the complication happens early on in the narrative. Anticipations such as warnings or prophecies are symptomatic of Collins' novels. In *Armadale*, the first sequence introduces a dying character who has a dark secret to disclose, and a warning for his son: 'Never, to your dying day, let any living soul approach you who is associated, directly or indirectly, with the crime which your father has committed'.<sup>72</sup> The first stage of the complication is the meeting between the two Allan Armadales. The second is the arrival of Lydia Gwilt, the governess, on Allan's estate. The complication, therefore, fulfils the prophecy. Most of the time, tension is built up right from the beginning by vague doubts and strange omens. In *The Law and the Lady*, the first chapter, entitled 'The Bride's Mistake', recounts how newly-wed Valeria Woodville incorrectly signs the marriage register.<sup>73</sup> Her mistake is interpreted by her superstitious aunt as a bad omen regarding Valeria's married life, a feeling that the latter soon comes to share. Almost immediately, Valeria discovers a secret connected with her husband's past: he has married her under a false name.

Complications are more subdued than in Féval's novels, due notably to the domestic orientation of the Sensation novel. *The Moonstone* is the only novel

<sup>71</sup> Wilkie Collins, *No Name* (London: Penguin, 1994), p.113

<sup>72</sup> Wilkie Collins, *Armadale* (London: Penguin, 1995), p.48.

<sup>73</sup> Wilkie Collins, *The Law and the Lady* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p.7.

featuring a theft as a complication. In other novels, disclosure of secrets from the past, rather than theft or murder, functions as complication. Such disclosures are generally followed by more investigating and more disturbing discoveries. The complication, therefore, is usually duplicated and stretches over a long period in the narrative.

Endings are less abrupt too. They are not, as in the Roman-Feuilleton, *coups de théâtre* delayed until the very last moment. Instead, endings are generally carefully prepared, and developed in several stages. While Féval and most French serial writers emphasised shocks and surprises, Collins banked on suspense, and played with readers' expectations. Peter Brooks' definition of plotting applies particularly well to Collins' novels. For Brooks, plotting is:

the masterful management of suspense and mystery, artfully leading the reader through an elaborate dilatory space that is always full of signs to be read, but always menaced with misreading until the very end.<sup>74</sup>

To the public celebration and exposure of the truth symptomatic of Féval's novels correspond endings 'in diminuendo'. The Sensation novel is essentially domestic. The private destiny of the heroes, sealed by marriage, rather than the punishment of the villains and the public exposure of the truth, functions as effective closure. At the end of *The Woman in White*, Laura's identity and situation are restored in front of all inhabitants of Limmeridge House. However, as Walter points out, in order to spare Laura, Sir Percival's guilty past is not exposed publicly. In another famous Sensation novel, Mrs Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, the narrative goal is, ultimately, to hide Lady Audley's 'sins' in order to preserve the private sphere.

By ending his adventure novels on a neat, domestic note, Collins conformed to the literary conventions of his time, and not only to the rules of the popular novel. The attachment of the Victorians to the notion of poetic justice exemplified both aesthetic and moral closure. Loose ends should be tied up, virtue rewarded and everyone satisfied. Henry James dismissed this artificial conception of the novel with its 'distribution at the last of prizes, pensions, husbands, wives, babies, millions, appended paragraphs and cheerful remarks.'<sup>75</sup> Most modern critics agree that Collins' talent was hampered by the

<sup>74</sup> Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995), p.168.

<sup>75</sup> Henry James, 'The Art of Fiction', in *The Critical Muse: Selected Literary Criticism* (London: Penguin Classics, 1987), pp.186-208 (190).

literary conventions of his time. Sue Lonoff, for instance, criticises the ending of *No Name*, where 'Once again, a woman with Promethean potential is converted into a happy housewife.'<sup>76</sup> Although this regressive and conventional trend is most particularly felt at the end of *No Name*, it does not, as we shall see later, totally invalidate the radical elements developed in the course of the novel.

*The Moonstone* is Collins' only novel with a sense of linkage. Mr Murthwaite, a specialist in Indian culture and the last narrator of the story, concludes *The Moonstone* in the following terms:

So the years pass, and repeat each other; so the same events revolve in the cycles of time. What will be the next adventures of the Moonstone? Who can tell!<sup>77</sup>

However, we can hardly speak of anti-closure. Order is restored, the heroes properly rewarded; Franklin and Rachel get married and produce an heir to the Verinder estate.

As in the Roman-Feuilleton, contrasts and parallels with the beginning generally enhance closure. In *No Name*, the complication mirrors the resolution. Norah and Magdalen Vanstone's inheritance, which had been passed on to their cousin Noel, is restored to them following the marriage of Norah and George Bertram, who has become the heir to Noel. Therefore, most of Collins' novels have symmetrical structures. *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*, for instance, are divided into clear-cut periods. The middle of the story corresponds respectively with the return of Walter Hartright from America, and Franklin Blake from the Continent. Their return marks the early stage of the resolution. As Walter puts it, 'I had gone out to fly from my own future. I came back to face it, as a man should.'<sup>78</sup> His task is to restore Laura's identity: 'The story of the desperate attempt to which I now stood committed begins here.'<sup>79</sup> Similarly, Franklin comes back to find out the truth about the theft of the Moonstone, and to face his former lover Rachel Verinder, who, unaccountably, has borne him a grudge since the night of the theft. The general pattern of these novels is quite clear, and recalls that of the Roman-Feuilleton. The

<sup>76</sup> Sue Lonoff, *Wilkie Collins and his Victorian Readers: A Study in the Rhetoric of Authorship* (New York: A. M. S. Press, 1982), p.151.

<sup>77</sup> Wilkie Collins, *The Moonstone* (London: Penguin, 1986), p.526.

<sup>78</sup> Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), p.374.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 422.

irruption of a mysterious event perturbs and destroys an initially peaceful situation, and alienates the hero from his community. The hero's response, which always includes an investigation of the past, brings back order and reconciles him with society. The narrative goal, therefore, is a renewal of the community, symbolised by the private fate of the characters. In *The Woman in White*, the mercenary marriage between Percival and Laura breaks down, and is replaced by a purer union between Laura and Walter. This process of purification and redefinition demands a certain number of sacrifices, and consequently, contains a risk of scapegoating.

The structure of the popular novel is inseparable from its main themes, the loss and the recovering of identity. The reversals of fortune typical of the popular novel permit a simplified and heightened treatment of that quintessential novelistic subject matter, the relationships between self and others. In Collins' own words, *The Woman in White* is structured as follows: 'The destruction of [Laura Fairlie's] identity represents a first division of the story; the recovery of her identity marks a second division.'<sup>80</sup> *No Name* features the sudden dispossession of the Vanstone sisters, climaxing in the idea that 'Mr. Vanstone's daughters are Nobody's Children', and therefore, nobody themselves.<sup>81</sup> The novel dramatises how Magdalen slowly regains her lost inheritance, and in the process, a new identity. To get her money back, she reinvents herself as an actress, an adventuress, and a married woman. The two detective novels, *The Moonstone* and *The Law and the Lady*, focus on the search for the identity of a criminal, along with proofs of the innocence of the hero. Collins uses all motifs familiar to readers of popular novels, such as despoilment of identity and multiple identities.

Collins, however, does more than use these archetypes for the sake of entertainment or sensation. Such conventional popular motifs are used as indirect means to explore the formation of identity and the role of conventions in constructing notions of identity. Gender identity is a particular concern. A novel such as *No Name* is both an adventure novel and a *bildungsroman* with a heroine, whose conventional attempt to recover her lost inheritance hides a

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<sup>80</sup> Wilkie Collins on the composition of *The Woman in White*, *The World* (26 December 1877), pp.4-6, reprinted as 'Mr. Wilkie Collins in Gloucester Place', in Edmund Yates, *Celebrities at Home*, 3rd series (1879), pp.145-56, and in Appendix C. of *The Woman in White*, p.589.

<sup>81</sup> Collins, *No Name*, p.109.

more serious search for her identity as a woman. Within the simple structure of a detective novel, *The Law and the Lady* questions and explores the socially constructed notion of gender identity. The story is devoted to Valeria's search for the truth. Her quest is twofold; to restore the true identity of her husband as an innocent man, and to explore her own identity in the process. Insofar as he married her under a false name, is she a married woman, and what is her name? Furthermore, Eustace has condemned her attitude and forbidden her to investigate his past. Should she conform to the idea that a woman ought to obey her husband without question, or should she follow her own will? Valeria chooses the second alternative.

The narrative, therefore, has several values. On the one hand, it has an obvious moral value, namely to 'persuade readers of the fearful consequences of breaking the code.'<sup>82</sup> However, that process leaves room for an exploration of how social and moral codes are constructed, through characters who question and sometimes refuse those codes.<sup>83</sup>

Collins is always in control of his material. Characters, time, place and logic, everything contributes to strengthen the unity of the action, and nothing is ever out of place. Furthermore, the action is framed and controlled by the direction of the narrative: everything aims towards a carefully prepared end. Finally, the emphasis is on the logical progression of the action, from beginning to end. Collins' novels are like detective stories. They emphasise the gradual and logical explanation of a mysterious event, rather than the abrupt progression of a story based on a multitude of coincidences as in the Roman-Feuilleton, or in the novels of Collins' friend Charles Reade. For Collins, the beauty of the narrative is in its design.

Conditions of publication particular to the English serialised novel also influenced the structure of the novels. Instalments were longer, and less frequent. Collins shaped his plots to the demands of serialisation by avoiding proliferation of the action and notably, multiple sub-plots. Each story has one main story line, and the action hardly ever wanders from it. The central figure of *The Woman in White* is Anne Catherick, whose apparition triggers a chain of consequences in the life of heroes and protagonists. *No Name* is exclusively

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<sup>82</sup> Nicholas Rance, *Wilkie Collins and Other Sensation Novelists: Walking the Moral Hospital* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), p.134.

<sup>83</sup> See Chapter V on the scapegoat for further investigation of that aspect of the novels.

focused on Magdalen's fight to recover her lost inheritance. In both novels, there is a relatively small number of characters. As in Féval's novels, the point of the narrative seems to be the exposure of the hidden links between characters. In *The Woman in White*, characters all turn out to be related, in one way or another. Laura and Marian are cousins, the Foscos are Laura's uncle and aunt. The mysterious Anne Catherick turns out to be Laura's half sister. Mrs Catherick's lover was no other than Laura's father, Mr Fairlie, and not, as Walter speculated, Laura's husband, Sir Percival. Mrs Catherick merely helped Percival to commit forgery, hence the link between her daughter Anne and Percival, who shut her up so that she would not betray his guilty secret.

In novels such as *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*, the narrative choice provides a way to organise the action in a coherent way, according to different perspectives. The story is told by several narrators, each of whom observes the rule that characters should only appear in the story when they are closely connected with it. The existence of a narrator as editorialist, such as Franklin Blake in *The Moonstone*, who collects and lays out the multiple narratives, enhances the coherence of the text as a whole.

*No Name*, which is mostly a third person narrative, develops another way of providing unity. After the first section of the novel, which recounts the sudden misfortune of the Vanstone sisters, the main narrative focuses on the struggle between the two pairs of rivals, Magdalen and Captain Wragge on one hand, Lecount and Noel Vanstone on the other. Everything concerning Norah Vanstone and her governess Miss Garth is addressed in the form of letters, and gathered in sections entitled 'Between the scenes, Progress of the story through the post'. Sub-plots happen off-stage, so to speak, and are indirectly reported. Like most of Collins' novels, *No Name* has a structure akin to that of the stage drama, and can be divided in self-contained sections, all taking place in a different location.

Other novels such as *Armadale* and *The Moonstone* have more sub-plots and more characters. *Armadale* starts by developing the friendship between Allan and Ozias, and then adds a series of sub-plots, until all are intertwined. Sub-plots include Ozias' struggle with his past, Allan and Neelie's love affair, Bashwood's obsession with Lydia Gwilt, the adventuress whose guilty past and present plotting provide the link between all sub-plots and all characters. Lydia, however, ends up by threatening the unity of the whole book, as Collins

develops the technique used in *No Name*. Letters from Lydia to her accomplice, con artist Mrs Oldershaw, interrupt the main narrative, focused on the relationship between Ozias and Allan. Letters and main narrative first illuminate each other, insofar as Lydia's letters, for instance, make it clear that she is the mysterious woman who visited Allan's mother. The introduction of her diary into the narrative, however, changes the focus of the story and her status, from protagonist and villain to heroine.

Last but not least, unity relies on the intricate net of causal links that characterise Collins' novels. Most of Collins' novels are novels with a secret. Their narrators are almost never omniscient. It rests upon both characters and readers to clear up mysteries, working their way back from consequence to cause in detective novels, or forwards from cause to consequence in thrillers.<sup>84</sup> The beginning of *No Name*, which crosses the boundary between the two types of novels, unravels a series of interconnected events. Magdalen Vanstone has just confessed her love for Frank Clare to her father. The latter decides to consult Frank's father, a prospect which seems to depress him:

'The sooner I see him the better'.

He gave that answer in low altered tones; rose from his chair in a half-reluctant, half-resigned manner, which Magdalen observed with secret alarm.<sup>85</sup>

The secret of Mr Vanstone's unease lies in the knowledge that he ought to tell Mr Clare about his past. The secret, at this point in the narrative, is still hidden. It comes out after the unravelling of a 'fatal chain of events'.<sup>86</sup> Mr Clare is not put off by Mr. Vanstone's past, and agrees to the marriage. Furthermore, he draws Mr. Vanstone's attention to the invalidity of his present will, and advises his friend to make another one without further delay. Consequently, Mr Vanstone arranges for his lawyer to come and see him on the following Saturday, then realises that he already has some previous engagement for the same day. He decides to attend to that business immediately, by taking a train to town. On his way, he meets with a tragic accident and dies. Mr Vanstone's death then leads to the disclosure of his past life and the fact that his daughters are unprovided for.

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<sup>84</sup> Detective stories are concerned with past mysteries, thrillers with present adventures.

<sup>85</sup> Collins, *No Name*, p.72.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p.111.

The causal series is interpreted by an unusually obtrusive narrator as 'the law of revelation' according to which 'nothing in this world is hidden for ever.'<sup>87</sup> Such a law perceives the world as a place where, in virtue of the mechanics of cause and effect, everything will eventually be revealed. It leaves out, however, the role of human agency in digging out buried secrets, as well as notions of intentionality and design. The development of *The Woman in White* similarly relies on a chain of events. The characters, however, help the disclosure of the secret by acting as amateur detectives. The process is nonetheless pervaded with a number of coincidences and sudden revelations, bringing the focus on effects rather than causes. The whole novel is launched by a coincidence, the encounter between Walter Hartright and Anne Catherick on a London road. The meeting reveals that Anne is connected to the very place and people that Walter is going to. Throughout the novel, both Walter and Marian interpret coincidences and causal links as part of a grand design that transcends plausibility:

Judging by the ordinary rules of evidence, I had not the shadow of a reason, thus far, for connecting Sir Percival Glyde with the suspicious words of inquiry that had been spoken to me by the woman in white. And yet, I did connect him with them.<sup>88</sup>

Walter and Marian believe that life has form and meaning. In fact, they believe that they are part of a greater design:

I believe in my soul that the Hand of God was pointing their way back to them; and that the most innocent and the most afflicted of His creatures was chosen, in that dread moment, to see it.<sup>89</sup>

Not all characters in the novel, however, share this view. Besides, some aspects of the plot obviously contradict it. Mrs Catherick, for instance, far from being punished by the 'Hand of God', actually benefits from it.

These various uses of the providential plot suggest that Collins consistently explored what other popular novelists tended to use as simple narrative conveniences. One main aspect of *Armadale* questions man's need for design and pattern on one hand, and the world's apparent lack of order on the other. As in *The Woman in White*, a coincidence starts off the narrative. The hero, Ozias Midwinter, although he firmly believes in intentionality, is not quite sure how

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>88</sup> Collins, *The Woman in White.*, p.65.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p.396.

to interpret it. Why has he met with the very person his father warned him against: 'to perpetuate my father's crime by mortally injuring him? or to atone for my father's crime'?<sup>90</sup> 'Is there a fatality that follows men in the dark?'<sup>91</sup> The novel explores typical motifs such as Providence and Fatality, and questions notions such as freedom and determinism. Despite Ozias' last minute mastering of his destiny, and his proclamation that God provides design and meaning to the world, the novel is characterised by double discourse. The more Ozias tries to resist his superstitious feelings of fate, the more he paves the way for the villain Lydia to force destiny, and fulfil the prophecy of Ozias' father. As Winifred Hughes points out, 'Collins manages at once to confirm the operation of something that looks like fatality and yet to avoid endorsing any particular interpretation of it'.<sup>92</sup> Furthermore, Ozias' final liberation from his so-called destiny is counterbalanced by Lydia's relapse in her former life of crime. The novel simultaneously supports and denies the idea of a grand design.<sup>93</sup> Collins' novels, therefore, dramatise the passage from a state of disorder to a state of order, yet the very process is gradually undermined. After *The Woman in White*, the providential plot no longer reflects the ultimate world order of justice and morality.

In so far as social and psychological mimesis were the ultimate criteria of novelistic success for the Victorians, the emphasis on plot in the Sensation novel raised issues about characterisation. Reviewers found that the Sensation novels' characters were puppets subordinated to the plot, rather than multi-dimensional, real-life characters. This is not really true. Psychological analysis cannot be as developed as in mainstream fiction because such novels rely on the idea of a secret. Mystery and suspense are created and sustained by hidden elements in the personality or the motivation of some of the characters, such as Percival and Fosco in *The Woman in White*. However, characters are bound to be more developed than in any Roman-Feuilleton both because of the realistic dimension of the Sensation novel, and because of Collins' narrative technique. The first person narrative gives privileged access to characters' interiority. Besides, Collins had a greater talent for characterisation than any other sensationalists.

<sup>90</sup> Collins, *Armadale*, p.103.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p.105.

<sup>92</sup> Winifred Hughes, *The Maniac in the Cellar: Sensation Novels of the 1860s* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980), p.156.

<sup>93</sup> See Chapter II, 'Genres and registers', for a more extensive discussion on this point.

Like Féval, Collins also resorts to indirect means of characterisation. Portraits have a symbolic value, and constitute short cuts to the reality of the characters. This might take the form of an analogy between physical and moral, as in the case of Magdalen Vanstone. Collins emphasises the flexibility and vivacity, as well as the contradictions of her face:

Her complexion partook of the pure monotony of tint which characterized her hair ... The whole countenance - so remarkable in its strongly-opposed characteristics - was rendered additionally striking by its extraordinary mobility. The large, electric, light-grey eyes were hardly ever in repose; all varieties of expression followed each other over the plastic, ever-changing face, with a giddy rapidity which left sober analysis far behind in the race.<sup>94</sup>

This portrait announces her energy, her capacity to feel and suffer, and most of all, her potential to assume multiple identities, which the story will develop. This correspondence between body and mind is evident in most characters, from the frail, child-like blond Laura Fairlie to the dark and secretive Rachel Verinder.

The very name of Magdalen highlights the character's unconventional progress and her final penitence, although the narrator pretends not to see this: 'It was a strange name to have given her? Strange, indeed'.<sup>95</sup> This game of hide-and-seek with readers is symptomatic of Collins. In *The Law and the Lady*, the heroine has an explicitly significant name, so does the villain Miserimus Dexter. Valeria is a name suggestive of strength and determination, Miserimus Dexter alludes to the character's sad infirmity as well as his mental capacity to mystify people. Most critics have dwelt on the strongly explicit names of the characters of *The Woman in White*, but few have actually noticed that these names are not, so to speak, the real names of the characters, but pseudonyms used by Walter Hartright, the editor and first narrator of the story: 'for [Laura's] sake ... I tell this story under feigned names.'<sup>96</sup> The positive connotation attached to Walter's name, therefore, could be no more than the expression of a self-righteous and self-congratulatory mind. Similarly, the negative connotation attached to the villain's name, Fosco, could be questioned, all the more as Fosco is the centre of an amoral and relativistic counter-narrative.<sup>97</sup> In *The Moonstone*, most names turn out to be inappropriately bestowed. Franklin Blake, although rather vain

<sup>94</sup> Collins, *No Name*, p.8.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p.9.

<sup>96</sup> Collins, *The Woman in White*, p.503.

<sup>97</sup> Fosco means 'black' in Italian. See section IV on 'Heroes and villains' for a more extensive discussion on moral ambiguity versus manicheism.

and idle, is not 'black' as his name implies and did not steal the diamond, while Godfrey Ablewhite, the 'Christian Hero', is exposed as a vulgar thief.<sup>98</sup>

The world of Collins, however, is largely built on stage melodramas, and is therefore given to simplifications and classifications of characters into types. It is, to a certain extent, a polarised universe, where the good characters fight the bad ones. *The Woman in White* is the novel by Collins that is closest to the tale. It is not surprising to find, therefore, that *The Woman in White* should closely adhere to Greimas' *schéma actantiel*.<sup>99</sup> The male hero, Walter Hartright, is the Subject who pursues Laura Fairlie, the desired Object (the Princess in Propp's analysis). Marian functions as Sender. She first entrusts Walter with hers and Laura's safety, and, once the task is accomplished, she 'rewards' Walter with Laura. Indeed, Walter asks Marian for Laura's hand, and not Mr Fairlie, Laura's uncle who functions as Opponent to Walter's quest.<sup>100</sup> The Contract between Marian and Walter is therefore sanctioned by a Gift, Laura, symbolising Walter's value, and a Counter-Gift, the punishment of Laura's false husband Sir Percival and his accomplice Fosco. Marian first appears in the story as Subject, with the same mission as Walter: 'For Laura's sake! Laura's honour, Laura's happiness, Laura's life itself - might depend on my quick ear, and my faithful memory tonight.'<sup>101</sup> Her illness puts an end to her quest. She is not rewarded, instead she functions as Walter's second Gift, so to speak, since Marian, inseparable from Laura, will live with the married couple. Within the Opponents, Percival is an obvious Intimidator, Fosco a Seducer. Mrs Catherick is a Concealer, whose action is counterbalanced by Adjuvant and Informer Anne.<sup>102</sup> *The Moonstone* offers more or less the same pattern, with Franklin as a Subject, on a quest to prove his value to Rachel, his Desired Object. Both novels, therefore, refer to traditional romance, and draw on values such as generosity, selflessness and true love, as opposed to later novels, which are less transparent and to a certain extent, more cynical.

<sup>98</sup> Collins, *The Moonstone*, p.239.

<sup>99</sup> Greimas, *Sémantique structurale*.

<sup>100</sup> 'I owed it to Marian to consult her before I spoke to Laura, and to be guided afterwards by her advice', says Walter. Collins, *The Woman in White*, p.519.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p.291.

<sup>102</sup> See Bremond, *Logique du récit*. To Greimas' Adjuvant and Opponent correspond Bremond's Helper and Frustrator. These two categories are divided into sub-categories including Informer, Concealer, Seducer, Intimidator, etc.

Some novels are more likely to explore and blur those rigid categories. In *No Name*, the main Subject is Magdalen, whose Desired Object is her inheritance, a symbol of her now lost social status. Her Opponents are Noel Vanstone, the repository of her inheritance, and his housekeeper Mrs Lecount. Her main Adjuvant is Captain Wragge, the swindler. Everyone, however, has a hidden agenda. More or less everyone serves their own interest, and cheats on one another. Frustrators, Protectors, Concealers and Helpers, all characters shift from one role to the next. In *Armada*, Lydia Gwilt, a developed version of Magdalen, assumes all possible roles, which in turns forces other characters to shift categories. She turns Bashwood and Ozias from her Opponents into her Adjuvants, and therefore forces Ozias to act as Opponent towards his dear friend Allan. Endings, however, require clear repositioning. In *Armada*, Ozias returns to Allan.

The springs of the action are therefore twofold. On the surface, Collins' novels have traditional plots of courtship or fraud. When the Subject is a hero, the Object of his desire is a lover, justice and truth. When the Subject is a villain, it is money, or a social position, and the preservation of a guilty secret. Neither villains nor heroes want all encompassing power, or even fortunes. In that sense, the Sensation novel is less epic, less grandiose than the Roman-Feuilleton. It is more bourgeois and more realistic.

Below the surface, characters are on a different quest. The search for truth and justice is usually a search for identity. In *The Law and the Lady*, Valeria's search for the truth about Eustace's trial is also a means to assert her womanhood. In that context, her Opponent is not the villain Dexter but her husband Eustace, who does not want her to pursue the truth, because conventions demand that a woman should not 'disgrace' herself by prying into her husband's past and meddling with public life. Significantly, their relationship is a *rapport de force*, the winner of which is Valeria herself. Possession of the truth is possession of power. From *The Woman in White* to *The Law and the Lady* there is a complete reversal of pattern, with a strong woman in the role of Sender, and a weak man in that of Receiver. In *No Name*, Magdalen's real adversaries sometimes seem to be her own sister Norah, and their governess Miss Garth, who twice acts as Informer to Lecount. Norah and Miss Garth are not motivated by self-interest or greed, but by a sense of

propriety and a respect for social conventions. In that perspective, Magdalen's quest is one for freedom and self-fulfilment.

Self-interest, greed and violence are recurring aspects of the world of Collins; so are devotion, love and friendship. The real springs of the action, however, are not so much aspirations to evil or good as social pressure to conform, respect for conventions and propriety on one hand, and desire for self-fulfilment and freedom on the other. The novels dramatise a conflict between two sets of values.

Typical of Collins, therefore, is an increasingly strong heroine who tends to play all possible roles. Compared to the French Roman-Feuilleton, English serialists favoured female adventurers. Furthermore, heroes are essentially active in Collins' world. Laura Fairlie, who first appears as the female heroine of *The Woman in White*, corresponds to the canons of the traditional heroine. She is sweet and child-like, and is therefore deemed as a 'good' character. However, her very goodness, which covers notions such as passivity and dependence, incapacitates her and confines her to the background. Marian, bolder and ambiguously different, invests the foreground. This pairing is accentuated in *No Name*. Norah Vanstone is the conventional, therefore good woman. Like Laura, she nonetheless disappears from the story at an early stage: 'Norah's 'story' ... demonstrates that good women do not have a story, they inhabit a sub-plot.'<sup>103</sup> A heroine has to be unconventional. She has to be an outsider. The average reader and conservative critics alike regarded such 'heroines' as bad women. The narratives, however, explore notions such as goodness and evil in both their moral and social dimension. Type of character and traditional moral viewpoint, therefore, tend not to be equated. In that sense, Collins' novels blur essential categories such as heroes and villains.<sup>104</sup>

## B. Temporal structures of the narrative

The time frame is extremely important in Collins' novels, as in Victorian mainstream fiction, because of its realistic charge. Compared to the French, English audiences demanded more realism in all aspects of their novels. The fact that Féval's heroine Marguerite du Bréhu dies in 1843 and yet is still up and going in 1853 passed unnoticed, whereas Collins' initial mistake in the

<sup>103</sup> Lyn Pykett, *The Sensation Novel: from The Woman in White to The Moonstone* (Plymouth: Northcote Publishers, 1994), p.25.

<sup>104</sup> See Chapter IV, 'Heroes and villains'.

chronology of *The Woman in White*, a less marked inconsistency, was much discussed. However, as an unknown reviewer put it, it is true that 'The question of a date is the pivot upon which the novel turns. The whole of the third volume is devoted to the ascertaining of this date.'<sup>105</sup>

In terms of narrative-time and story-time, obvious techniques, such as retention of important elements and delayed explanations are symptomatic of the Sensation novels, bringing about a number of *anachronies*.<sup>106</sup> Collins' novels could be classified according to several strategies built on different time frames. *The Moonstone*, for instance, is a detective novel. For Todorov, '[The detective] novel contains not one but two stories: the story of the crime and the story of the investigation.'<sup>107</sup> *The Law and the Lady* offers a variation insofar as the story of the investigation is duplicated. The first investigation is the trial of Eustace, which came to no definite result; the second is Valeria's. As for *The Woman in White*, it is what Todorov calls a suspense novel:

[The suspense novel] keeps the mystery of the whodunit and also the two stories, that of the past and that of the present; but it refuses to reduce the second to a simple detection of the truth.<sup>108</sup>

These two types of novel are characterised by what Angenot called 'une structure progressive-régressive'.<sup>109</sup> As the narration progresses, the story regresses to the origin of the crime: narrative time and story time meet at the very end. The structure of such novels, therefore, is circular and self-contained. The end of *The Moonstone* dramatises the reconstitution of the theft of the diamond; the end of *The Law and the Lady* sees the investigators going back to the site of the crime, the house at Glenich. In Collins' novels, unlike Féval's, the movement from present to past is very regular. As one secret is cleared out, another comes up that has its origin further back in the past.

Todorov defines a third category of crime novel, the thriller: 'We are no longer told about a crime anterior to the moment of the narrative; the narrative coincides with the action [or story-time].'<sup>110</sup> This type of novel is concerned

<sup>105</sup> *The Times* (30 October 1860), reprinted in *The Woman in White*, Appendix A, 'A reviewer detects errors in the chronology of *The Woman in White*', p.585.

<sup>106</sup> *Anachronies* are 'various types of discordances between the two orderings of story and narrative', Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, pp.35-36.

<sup>107</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, 'The Typology of Detective Fiction', in *The Poetics of Prose* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977), pp.43-52 (44).

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, p.50.

<sup>109</sup> Angenot, *Le Roman populaire, recherches en paralittérature*, p.53.

<sup>110</sup> Todorov, 'The Typology of detective fiction', p.47.

with the present. This is the format of *Armada*. *No Name* starts like a mystery story, but shifts to the thriller when the secret of the Vanstones is revealed after only a few chapters. This type of novel, particularly favoured by Féval, features relatively few distortions in its chronology.

This last type of novel, characterised by simultaneous narration, can also be contrasted with the novel with a retrospective, or anterior narration.<sup>111</sup> Retrospective narration allows for more *anachronies*. Insofar as its narrator writes about the past, he can be in possession of certain elements, and even the whole truth. The narration sometimes brings up this knowledge. Walter starts the story of *The Woman in White*, with, he writes, 'the shadow of after events darkening the very paper I write on'.<sup>112</sup> In *The Moonstone*, Gabriel Betteredge is given to that kind of *prolepsis* or anticipation. While recounting how he advised his employer Mrs Verinder to keep the strange Rosanna Spearman at her service, he writes:

As the event proved, and as you will soon see, this was the worst advice I could have given. If I could only have looked a little way into the future, I would have taken Rosanna Spearman out of the house, then and there, with my own hand.<sup>113</sup>

Narrators do not always know as much as Gabriel or Walter. In *The Woman in White*, Walter's narration is explicitly retrospective. Its extent is basically the whole narrative. Marian's narrative, on the other hand, takes the form of her diary. Its reach is usually no more than a single day.<sup>114</sup> Sometimes, story-time and narrative-time even coincide and the narration becomes simultaneous, for example when she hears Laura coming back from her honeymoon:

Surely, I heard something? Was it a bustle of footsteps below stairs? Yes! I hear the horses' feet; I hear the rolling of wheels. Away with my journal and my pen and ink! The travellers have returned - my darling Laura is home again at last!<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> 'The chronological relation between a given narration and the events narrated through it may vary, with the former being sometimes anterior to, sometimes posterior to, and sometimes simultaneous with the latter'. Prince, *Narratology*, p.27.

<sup>112</sup> Collins, *The Woman in White*, p.17.

<sup>113</sup> Collins, *The Moonstone*, p.92.

<sup>114</sup> The reach of an *anachrony* is the time elapsed between the moment when the events recounted happened in the story and the moment they are recounted in the narrative. The extent is the space that the recounting of the events take in the narrative. These notions are defined by Genette in *Narrative Discourse*.

<sup>115</sup> Collins, *The Woman in White*, p.189.

Finally, to the simultaneous and the retrospective narration one needs to add the posterior narration, or the story based on anticipation. As Winifred Hughes puts it, this is 'the novel in which everything is hinted at before hand', as in *Armada*.<sup>116</sup> The novel, as we saw, starts with a warning from the first Allan Armadale to his son Ozias, to no avail. Everything the father warns his son against eventually happens, and the prophecy is fulfilled. Furthermore, the way it is fulfilled is anticipated by Allan's prophetic dream, which, in seven sequences, announces the development of the story. The two anticipations create a sense of foreboding.

Collins is always willing to experiment with time-levels, and all of his novels feature different kinds of narration. *Armada*, a thriller, combines a prophetic beginning, a secret from the past, and simultaneous narration. *The Moonstone*, a detective novel, combines retrospective narration with a kind of prophetic prologue. Most of Wilkie Collins' novels contain prophetic *prolepses*, such as Marian's and Anne's prophetic dreams in *The Woman in White*, which respectively foretell Walter's and Laura's future. They also feature retrospective narratives, such as Wragge's chronicles in *No Name*, or Lydia's letters and diary in *Armada*. They either fill in blanks in the narration, or allow a change of narrator. In *The Moonstone*, Mr Bruff's retrospective narrative throws light on Rachel's unexplained rejection of Godfrey Ablewhite.

Iterative events, usually linked with the return of a traumatic primal scene, are a common feature of both Sensation novel and Roman-Feuilleton. In the Roman-Feuilleton, however, the meaning and purpose of the primal scene and its reiteration are clear. The scene is usually a violent crime; the hero is framed as the murderer or he is the victim of the crime. The reiteration aims at restoring the truth, and providing retribution. In the Sensation novel, the primal scene is problematic; its reiteration aims at interpreting it. The primal scene of *The Woman in White*, and the central image of the novel, is the encounter between Anne Catherick and Walter Hartright. Afterwards, the name of the woman in white recurs endlessly in the narration, usually associated with that of Laura Fairlie:

Again the chance reference to the woman in white! Was there no possibility of speaking of Miss Fairlie and of me without raising the

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<sup>116</sup> Hughes, *The Maniac in the Cellar*, pp.138-39.

memory of Anne Catherick, and setting her between us like a fatality that it was hopeless to avoid?<sup>117</sup>

The link is strengthened when Walter realises the physical resemblance between Laura and Anne, in a moment of re-enactment of the primal scene. As D. A. Miller points out, the second section of the novel is less concerned with sensational scenes than with their interpretations:

Shocks decline 'dramatically'... as characters and readers alike come to get answers to the questions that sensation could never do more than merely pose ... - namely, 'what did it mean?'<sup>118</sup>

Anne Catherick symbolises both Percival's past secret, and Laura's dreadful future. The primal scene of *Armadale*, the murder of the first Allan Armadale by his namesake, similarly links past and future. The son of the murderer, Ozias, feels haunted and influenced by his past. He meets the son of the murdered man, and they eventually find themselves on the site of the murder. The purpose of the narrative, however, is to prevent the re-enactment of the past, and in the process, to explore notions of freedom and determinism.<sup>119</sup>

The narrative choice facilitates reiteration of the same events by different narrators. In *Armadale*, the murder is first recounted in a confession that the murderer makes to his son. The son later reports it to a number of people, among them Lydia and Brock, each of whom makes different uses of it. There are a number of self-reflexive allusions to Collins' story-telling techniques. In *The Law and the Lady*, for instance, Dexter retells the story of the crime in a variety of formats, including fairy-tale, drama and the autobiography.<sup>120</sup>

As far as the narrative speed is concerned, Sensation novels are slower than most Romans-Feuilletons, due to their realistic mode. Realism for the Victorians meant a profusion of details about everyday-life, in both setting and characters. There are, therefore, quite a lot of pauses. Due to narrative concentration, however, pauses are concerned not so much with narrator's considerations

<sup>117</sup> Collins, *The Woman in White*, p.62.

<sup>118</sup> D. A. Miller, 'Cages aux Folles: Sensation and Gender in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*', in *The Nineteenth-Century British Novel*, edited by Jeremy Hawthorn (London: Edward Arnold, 1986), pp.95-124 (107).

<sup>119</sup> It is interesting to notice that Féval's *Les Compagnons du Trésor*, which features more or less the same primal scene, does not explore such notions. The murder scene and its re-enactment are used for the sake of entertainment, and as narrative conveniences. Reynier, unlike Ozias, does not question the meaning of his experience.

<sup>120</sup> Collins, *The Law and the Lady*, Chapter XL, p.325.

unconnected with the action as with descriptions, which generally have a narrative and a symbolic value. The description of the Fairlies' house at Limmeridge in *The Woman in White* mainly fulfils purposes of realism and exposition, whereas Percival's house, Blackwater, with its gothic undertones, is in keeping with the atmosphere of suspicion and foreboding of the central section of the novel, the existence of an abandoned wing discreetly alluding to its potential use as a prison. This is where, in keeping with gothic conventions, Percival will conceal Marian and threaten his wife with imprisonment.

Like the Roman-Feuilleton, the Sensation novel's favourite mode of exposition is the scene. Scenes tend to detail everything in actions, thoughts, backgrounds, and are therefore rather long. However, dramatic content prevails over psychological and social consideration, which means that scenes are dynamic. The Sensation novels are adventure novels; actions prevail over static events.

On the other hand, Collins makes a consistent use of summaries, mainly to strengthen dramatic concentration. Lydia's past, for instance, is summarised by a protagonist, and not, as it would be in Féval's novels, in a series of retrospective scenes. Ellipses are regular. In *The Woman in White*, six months elapse after Laura's wedding, and the story resumes with Marian's diary. In *Armadale*, the first two months of Lydia's marriage with Ozias are left out. In the latter case, the ellipsis conveniently jumps over an undramatic period of inaction and happiness uncharacteristic of both the genre and Lydia's character. The action resumes when, dissatisfied with her marriage, Lydia returns to her life of scheming. Both ellipses are therefore followed by a change of narrator and a change of focus.

Finally, the use of letters to speed up the action is symptomatic of Collins. Letters are extremely focused, their narrator mentioning only what is important, and in a usually more concise way than a third-person narrator would.

### **C. Nature and role of the narrator**

The notion of the 'unreliable narrator', a direct consequence of the split narrative technique, is often associated with Collins, in opposition to the omniscient, trustworthy narrators of most of Victorian mainstream literature

and French popular fiction. There are, in fact, two kinds of Collins novels, with different narrators.

Collins' trademark is the split narrative. *The Woman in White*, which heralded the Sensation novel, is structured around a series of first-person narratives, and the use, therefore, of limited viewpoints. This can be considered as variable internal focalisation.<sup>121</sup> The narrative technique assimilates the novel to a court case, and each narrative to a legal testimony:

Thus, the story here presented will be told by more than one pen, as the story of an offence against the laws is told in Court by more than one witness...<sup>122</sup>

Some of the narrators are more important than others. There are *autodiegetic* narrators, namely heroes and heroines telling their own story, and *homodiegetic* narrators, simple protagonists bringing their own contributions to the story of the heroes. The distance, therefore, between narrator and narrative varies. Some narrators, for example, are emotionally closer to their narration, such as Marian or Walter. Furthermore, such narrative device allows for all sorts of voices to be heard, from men, women, rich and poor, powerful and powerless, bringing more depth to the social commentary. Collins is very good at creating idiosyncratic discourses, bringing to life a potentially artificial device. Betteredge's narrative builds up, in a consistent way, the picture of a simple, rather narrow-minded, yet well meaning house-keeper. However, the voice of the author sometimes comes through. In *The Woman in White*, several narrators, including Walter, use free indirect speech to mimic Mr. Fairlie's selfish mannerisms. This is out of place in the serious narrative of the family solicitor: 'Did I think he looked as if he wanted teasing? No. Then why tease him?'<sup>123</sup> Similarly, fanatical Miss Clack would not apologise for her style. She would welcome an opportunity to preach to the readers. It is Collins who writes 'I beg a thousand pardons. I have fallen insensibly into my Sunday-school style. Most inappropriate in such a record as this.'<sup>124</sup>

Multiple first-person narratives allow a variety of limited, sometimes distorted points of view, and therefore, of unreliable narrators. Each account is subjective, although we are not always made to question the validity of the

<sup>121</sup> Critical terms from Genette's *Narrative Structure*.

<sup>122</sup> Collins, *The Woman in White*, p.1.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., p.114.

<sup>124</sup> Collins, *The Moonstone*, p.238.

narrator's account and judgement. Readers first have to accept, as part of the willing suspension of disbelief, that each narrator remembers everything that took place, or that Marian consigned every single detail of her life to her diary.<sup>125</sup> In *The Woman in White*, the housekeeper is the only narrator who addresses that essential problem: 'I made no memorandum at the time, and I cannot therefore be sure to a day, of the date'.<sup>126</sup> Hints in the narration, more or less skilfully contrived, draw readers' attention to the partiality of some narrators. Asked to tell the story of the Moonstone, and starting with the history of the Verinder family, Gabriel describes Rachel's mother, his employee, as the best of the five Verinder daughters. Similarly, his good opinion of Godfrey Ablewhite is obviously based on personal motives, namely Godfrey's flattery. Valeria's narration, in *The Law and the Lady* is more subtly subjective, as her self-portrait makes clear:

She is not at all the sort of person who attracts attention in the street, seeing that she fails to exhibit the popular *yellow* hair and the popular *painted cheeks* (my emphasis).<sup>127</sup>

Her partiality towards Eustace is evident in the way she presents the Trial:

The fifth day of the trial opened with the speech for the defence. Ah, what a contrast to the infamies uttered by the Lord Advocate was the grand burst of eloquence by the Dean of Faculty, speaking on my husband's side!<sup>128</sup>

Her partiality leads her to further misjudge and distort the truth when she comes to the conclusion that Mrs Beauly, her husband's ex-lover, is the real culprit, a conviction partly based on jealousy. Most of Valeria's portraits and descriptions, therefore, have both a narrative and an expressive value.

Multiple narratives enhance the subjectivity of each narrator, especially when several narrators recount the same events or judge the same person. Rachel, self-willed, kind and feminine according to Gabriel's narrative, comes across as loud, careless and masculine in Miss Clack's. For Gabriel, Rachel's voice is 'clear...with a ring of the right metal in it.'<sup>129</sup> As for Miss Clack, 'it was loud, it

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<sup>125</sup> This is, nevertheless, not so hard to believe if one keeps in mind the Victorians' voluminous correspondence and journal writings.

<sup>126</sup> Collins, *The Woman in White*, p.327.

<sup>127</sup> Collins, *The Law and the Lady*, p.10.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., p.180.

<sup>129</sup> Collins, *The Moonstone*, p.87

was bold, it was wanting in every female charm.'<sup>130</sup> On the basis of such an example I would agree with Miller who describes the novel as monologic:

the 'unreliable' and 'contradictory' narrative of *The Moonstone* works only as a ruse... The different points of view, degrees of information, tendencies of suspicion are never allowed to tamper with more basic interpretative securities about character and language.<sup>131</sup>

For Miller, it is obvious where textual sympathy lies and which character represents the authorial ideal - in this case, Gabriel Betteredge. In *The Woman in White*, one can assume Madame Fosco's biography of her husband, yet another narrative that the text ironically alludes to, to be entirely false.<sup>132</sup>

There is, however, some truth in all conflicting representations of life. Miss Clack's narrative, with all its partiality and jealousy, highlights rather unpleasant aspects of Rachel, namely her careless attitude to her inferiors and her tendency to self-engrossment. On the other hand, no single narrator achieves a total vision of things. In those novels, the absence of an omniscient, reader-friendly narrator who would, as George Eliot does, provide a frame which enfolds the story, connects all aspects of the plots and draws conclusions, greatly puzzled the Victorians. For them, the absence of clear authorial statement along with the idea that the same facts could bear opposite interpretations contained a risk of relativism, and, notably, of moral ambiguity. If everything, as Captain Wragge puts it, 'entirely depends on the point of view', then there are no absolute values, and therefore, no moral absolutes.<sup>133</sup>

The task of making out the truth, in fact, rests with readers themselves. The novels exemplify the notions of the implied reader and the need for cooperative interpretation developed by Umberto Eco in *Lector in Fabula*.<sup>134</sup> Any fictional universe is interpreted by readers from what is left unsaid as well as what is explicitly stated. On a restricted scale, readers know more than each partial narrator. Laura's confusion when Gilmore asks her if the watercolours she has been looking at are her doing is inexplicable to Gilmore. It is meaningful to readers who know that Walter painted them. Laura has not, therefore, forgotten

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., p.276.

<sup>131</sup> D. A. Miller, 'From roman policier to roman-police: Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone*', in *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1988), pp.33-57 (52-3).

<sup>132</sup> Collins, *The Woman in White*, p.582.

<sup>133</sup> Collins, *No Name*, p.169.

<sup>134</sup> Umberto Eco, *Lector in Fabula* (Paris: Grasset, 1985).

Walter Hartright. On a larger scale, readers have to combine all narratives and all conflicting representations to make out the truth. The readers' work of interpretation is recurrently projected into the text. In *The Moonstone*, for example, Ezra Jennings tries to make sense of Dr. Candy's delirium by filling in gaps in the latter's incoherent discourse.

On the other hand, *No Name* and *Armadale* are mostly third person narratives with *heterodiegetic*, omniscient narrators. These, however, tend to keep important information hidden by adopting an external point of view, or to fall back on Collins' favourite device, variable internal focalisation, by shifting focus from one character to the other. The result is the same conflicting account of things. In *Armadale*, the main narration first develops the story of Ozias and Allan, and persuades readers to see them as the author's ideals and to identify with them. The introduction of Lydia's diary forces them to reassess their judgement. It emphasises her wit and depth of feeling, and puts both Ozias and Allan in a new, less heroic light.

There is, indeed, a different kind of dialogism that novels based on limited viewpoints bring out best. This type of dialogism is not so much born of the conflicting voices of various narrators, as of the gap between the voice of a main narrator and the events represented. In *The Law and the Lady*, for instance, Valeria's presentation of her story is completely at odds with the reality of it. Her constant self-castigation and apologising, her endless remarks about being only a woman hardly hide the fact that she is in fact bold, self-confident, and rather self-righteous.<sup>135</sup>

Collins is a master of narrative forms, using 'multiple narrators to maintain interest and to create a nearly epistemological form of suspense, a deep uncertainty of perspective.'<sup>136</sup> Furthermore, the voluntary breaking of these self-imposed rules creates stunning effects, such as the sudden interruption of Fosco's handwriting in Marian's diary. This feels like a betrayal of Marian's intimacy, and of the readers' intimacy with Marian. Ultimately, it is a betrayal of the pact between readers and author that is presupposed by any narrative, and

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<sup>135</sup> *The Law and the Lady* is a novel about ambivalence and lack of definite meanings, of which Valeria's narration is but one aspect. See the section on the scapegoat for a more extensive exploration of the novel.

<sup>136</sup> Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, p.169.

another example of Collins' experimental attitude towards the conventions of story-telling.<sup>137</sup>

Leading on from this, a widespread idea is that the narrator of Collins' novels is absent from his narration. This is not really true. Both *heterodiegetic* and *homodiegetic* narrators intrude on their narration. *Homodiegetic* narrators tend to be very aware of their task as narrators, and are therefore prone to comment on their narration, in a way similar to the French serialists. They underline the difficulty of story-telling, its artifices, and are also very conscious of writing for an audience. Valeria, Gabriel and Miss Clack all comment on their style. Gabriel informs readers of his difficulty in keeping the focus of his narration on the Moonstone, a mirror-image of Collins' obsession with dramatic concentration: 'How hard I try to get on with my statement without stopping by the way and how badly I succeed!'<sup>138</sup> Gabriel also underlines the orientation of the action and the structure of his narration: 'we shall be in the thick of the mystery soon, I promise you.'<sup>139</sup> At the end of his narration, he explicitly acknowledges the presence of narratees by simply writing 'Farewell'.<sup>140</sup> In *The Woman in White*, Gilmore's comments are more convincing. As a lawyer, he is in position to say: 'I warn all readers of these lines that Miss Fairlie's inheritance is a very serious part of Miss Fairlie's story.'<sup>141</sup> Another recurrent aspect of the narration that is underlined is the origin and the purpose of the narration, usually through a character who does an editorial task by commissioning and collecting the narratives.

As we have seen, *No Name* and *Armadale* are mainly third-person narratives with a *heterodiegetic* narrator. This narrator tends to be impersonal, he never uses 'I' or identifies himself as Wilkie Collins. He is not, however, totally distanced from his fiction. He does, to a certain extent, comment on the action. Collins is especially fond of fatalistic remarks to create a sense of foreboding, sometimes through *prolepsis*: 'The time he was waiting for, was a time close at hand.'<sup>142</sup> Another series of remarks underlines the logical

<sup>137</sup> Another striking breaking of the narrative rules is Franklin's discovery of his own 'culpability'. One of the rules of the detective story is that the narrator should not be the criminal.

<sup>138</sup> Collins, *The Moonstone*, p.53.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., p.53.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., p.233.

<sup>141</sup> Collins, *The Woman in White*, p.131.

<sup>142</sup> Collins, *Armadale*, p.239.

development of the action: 'So, with a trifling gesture of invitation on one side, with a trifling act of compliance on the other... they took the way which led to that secret's discovery.'<sup>143</sup> Some comments summarise and interpret the chain of events:

And so - by shaking Midwinter's trust in his own superstition, in the one case in which that superstition pointed to the truth - did Mother Oldershaw's cunning triumph over difficulties and dangers, which had never been contemplated by Mother Oldershaw herself.<sup>144</sup>

Chapter headings also provide a frame for the action, highlighting, for example, the structure of the plot. The seventh chapter of the third book of *Armadale* is entitled 'The plot thickens'. Compared with the protagonists' persistent yet logical questioning of events, such remarks, made by an narrator external to the action, are sometimes quite heavy-handed, as the following quotation from *No Name* makes clear: 'It was almost as unintelligible as that past mystery - that forgotten mystery now - of the journey to London.'<sup>145</sup>

More crucial, the narrator sometimes involves himself further in his world by judging the behaviour of his characters, assuming the traditional role of narrator as guardian of readers. For instance, a series of authorial remarks frames Magdalen's progress in *No Name*, and interprets her story as a struggle between the forces of evil and the forces of good. Magdalen's deal with Captain Wragge, for instance, is her first fault: 'she took the first fatal step downwards'.<sup>146</sup> Such a traditional melodramatic view is, however, counter-balanced by two things. First, the narrator seems to value Magdalen's energy and courage independently of moral considerations. 'A weaker nature would have accepted the warning. Magdalen's nature rose in revolt against it', writes Collins.<sup>147</sup> Similarly, Lydia's most morally reprehensible deed, her denial of her husband Midwinter, is perceived as 'dreadful courage'.<sup>148</sup> Furthermore, the development of the action contradicts the narrator's presentation. The end of *No Name* does not seem so much to punish a fallen and disgraced Magdalen as to actually reward her. The omniscient and obtrusive narrator contributes to the dialogic nature of the narrative.

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<sup>143</sup> Collins, *No Name*, p.35.

<sup>144</sup> Collins, *Armadale*, p.281.

<sup>145</sup> Collins, *No Name*, p.60.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., p.179.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., p.219.

<sup>148</sup> Collins, *Armadale*, p.626.

## Conclusion

The aim of narratology is to describe the mechanics of the narrative. Resorting to narrative devices has helped to establish certain facts regarding the novels of Féval and Collins, and by extension, the French Roman-Feuilleton and the English Sensation novel.

First, both are highly narrative. The repetitive and sometimes formulaic aspect of the plots has been underlined, stock situations and conventional characters pointed out. As opposed to 'high' literature, what characterises best the popular novel is an 'overdose' of narrative devices. Second, the narratives have an obvious moral value, dramatising the progression from disorder to order, the birth of a new purified community built on the expulsions of undesirable characters. This narrative goal is reached through specific means and in ways characteristic of each author's culture and personal artistry. Collins' plots are more polished and more structured than those of any serialist, either French or English. His prolific imagination was definitely counterbalanced by a taste for structure. On the other hand, Féval's novels are fanciful and romantic. Like most French serialists, he preferred epic sagas to the domestically oriented world of the Sensation novelists, and extravagance, fantasy and imagination to the tidy, logical world of the first detective novels, exemplified by Collins.

If plots are essential, the idea that the recounting of the action dominates over the discussion of the way in which they are represented does not apply to either Collins or Féval. Both were obviously aware of the conventions of storytelling, which they recurrently put in perspective in a self-reflexive way. Paradoxically, both authors arrive, with different methods, at similar results. What Féval does with an omniscient narrator, Collins does through a multiplicity of distorted perspectives and unreliable narrators. Both draw readers' attention to plotting and narrative devices. The texts, therefore, highlight their own structures and provide a guide on how to be read and understood. Although reflexivity sometimes results in redundancy and heavy-handedness, an obvious narrative pleasure characterises both Collins and Féval's novels.

Lastly, although Féval cultivates ironic detachment towards his fiction, he is nonetheless indebted to the archetypes of the genre. Collins, a more ambitious artist, carries textual playfulness to a higher experimental degree. Furthermore, he does not content himself with commenting on the nature of his novels, but

often explores and sometimes subverts conventional motifs and structures. Both sets of texts, therefore, are not only interesting as an exploration of narrative forms, but also as a way to define boundaries between high and low literature. Contrary to Jean Tortel's opinion, it is not so much the lack of awareness and concern for its mechanisms and significance that characterises the popular novel as its reluctance to explore its foundations and underlying assumptions. In that sense, Feval's complexity remains within the framework of the popular novel, while Collins' narratives blur the boundaries between popular fiction and serious literature.<sup>149</sup>

The next section on the genres and registers evoked by both the Roman-Feuilleton and the Sensation novel will not only constitute another 'formal' approach to the novels but also provide an opportunity to investigate the extent to which both authors were lucidly aware of exploiting literary conventions.

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<sup>149</sup> '[La littérature populaire] contient à peu près tous les éléments qui constituent la littérature sauf l'inquiétude à l'égard de sa propre signification, sauf la remise en cause de son propre langage', Jean Tortel, 'Qu'est-ce que la paralittérature?', in *Entretiens sur la paralittérature, actes du colloque de Cerisy du 1 au 10 septembre 1967* (Paris: Plon, 1970), pp.14-34 (18).

## Chapter II: Genres and registers

### Introduction

Some of the differences established in the previous chapter between the Roman-Feuilleton and the Sensation novel suggest dominant trends in both genres. Féval's extravagant narratives and larger-than-life heroes suggest that Romanticism is the dominant mode of the Roman-Feuilleton. On the other hand, Collins' closely-knit plots and the domestic orientation of his novels highlight the primacy of realist conventions in the Sensation novel.

Both the Roman-Feuilleton and the Sensation novel, however, can be defined by a mixture of literary genres and registers. Facts and fantasy, realism and imagination are notions that immediately spring to mind. This mingling of Romanticism and realism, as two modes typically considered mutually exclusive by contemporary critics, accounts for the mixed reception of both genres. According to contemporary critics, French and English, romance was about wonderful events, heroic deeds and/or tales of love in a far-away, unreal world. On the other hand, realist novels sought to illuminate human nature and society rather than entertain. The mixture of realism and Romanticism seemed to bring out their worst aspects. Sue's *Mystères de Paris*, for instance, recalled the studies in poverty and criminality of the 1830s and 1840s. Yet the novel was criticised for revelling in the dissection of the vices of society, an unfit topic for fiction. On the other hand, it was also dismissed for giving such problems a romantic and mythic treatment. Féval himself denounced this aspect of Sue's novel when he claimed that *Les Mystères de Paris* was 'un livre tout près d'être magnifique, qui a eu le grand tort de placer nos misères sociales dans le domaine de la féerie.'<sup>1</sup> Finally, the emotionally charged style of the Roman-Feuilleton often came under fire, as an illustration of excessive Romanticism.

In England, the Sensation novels raised similar issues. The mixture of romance and realism characterising the Sensation novels disturbed the conventions of novel writing. Domestic realism, which dominated Victorian fiction in the 1850s, was both a set of literary conventions and an ideological system. For most mid-Victorian writers, the moral usefulness of the novel, defined in terms of middle-class values, had primacy over its capacity to offer a

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Féval, quoted by Francis Lacassin in the preface to *Les Habits Noirs*, Volume I, (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1987), p.x.

realistic representation of life in all its complexity. There was a strong streak of idealism and romance in the mid-Victorian novel, encapsulated in the final resort to poetic justice. From this perspective, the Sensation novels distorted both realism and romance. They infused the realistic, familiar background of the mid-Victorian novel with the strange and extraordinary events of melodrama, and put realism to strange purpose by dissecting the hidden vices of the middle-class. They nonetheless lacked the great heroes and the elevating nature of romance.

It will be argued here that both Féval and Collins were aware of appropriating and reworking conventions from various genres. They did not do so simply to stimulate their readers' senses, but also to offer an indirect social comment. Both used a mixture of literary modes and genres to bring out otherwise hidden aspects of society. In their own ways, however, both genres were caught between two sets of values. On the one hand, they betrayed an impulse to answer readers' desires for dreams, excitement and idealism. On the other hand, their novels conveyed the pessimistic notion that romance could only be found in the dark and seamy side of society, whether linked to organised crime or to domestic secrets.

The dialogic nature of the novels, both in terms of form (realism, romance, and other literary modes) and content (social critique and escapist entertainment) will be emphasised by making use of Mikhaïl Bakhtin's analysis of popular culture.

## **Part 1. Genres and registers in Paul Féval's *Les Habits Noirs***

### **A. Realism and imagination: the *romanesque* voice**

A characteristic feature of the Roman-Feuilleton that was perceived as a flaw was its mingling of facts and fantasy. As early as 1846, Alfred Nettement dismissed Sue's *Le Juif errant*, because:

Le choc trop patent de la réalité et de la fiction fait disparaître la vraisemblance, cette vérité relative qui doit se trouver dans le roman même et dans la poésie.<sup>2</sup>

In the Roman-Feuilleton, mysterious events, extraordinary characters and improbable adventures went along with realistic details about human and social

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<sup>2</sup> Alfred Nettement, *Etudes critiques sur le Roman-Feuilleton* (Paris: Lagny Frères, 1846), p.70.

life. Somewhere between excess and measure, the French Roman-Feuilleton was definitely *romanesque*, a register that is not really translatable into English. The romanesque combines dreams and sentimentality with observation of facts to draw conclusions about life and, in the Roman-Feuilleton, contemporary society. Like the Sensation novels, the Romans-Feuilletons were modern romance. In fact, both genres partake of what Donald Fanger called 'romantic realism', a particular manifestation of the romanesque mode symptomatic of the first half of the nineteenth century, and exemplified by writers such as Balzac and Dickens.<sup>3</sup> Romantic realists viewed the world in terms of primary colours, energy and passion. They sought to render the striking nature of reality, notably through heightening their material and infusing it with their own personal myths.

*Les Habits Noirs*, mostly written in the 1860s, belonged to a period of realistic pressure on the Roman-Feuilleton, due to the influence of a realist trend in mainstream fiction, and to the evolution of the readership. As Jean Raabe puts it, according to a rule that applies to any kind of literature,

tout public nouvellement conquis à la lecture passe par une phase de goût du merveilleux avant d'accéder à une lecture plus critique, où l'exigence de vérité est rationalisée.<sup>4</sup>

More than twenty years after the publication of Sue's *Mystères de Paris*, readers and critics were becoming blasé. The Roman-Feuilleton was therefore renewing itself, and adapting to the taste of the public. On the one hand, the *roman judiciaire* or early detective novel, represented by writers such as Emile Gaboriau, Eugène Chavette or Fortuné de Boisgobey, substituted down-to-earth detectives for the romantic heroes of the early Romans-Feuilletons. On the other, the *roman populaire bourgeois*, exemplified by Jules Mary, Emile Richebourg or Xavier de Montepin, combined a representation of bourgeois and working-class milieux with social conservatism. Féval, however, never quite parted with imagination and romantic ideals. In that respect, *Les Habits Noirs* marked a return to the romantic, epic novels of the 1840s, with their mysterious figures, their powerful heroes and their extravagant fantasy.

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<sup>3</sup> Donald Fanger, *Dostoevsky and Romantic Realism: A Study of Dostoevsky in Relation to Balzac, Dickens and Gogol* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1967).

<sup>4</sup> Jean Goimard, 'Le Roman populaire', in *Manuel d'histoire littéraire de la France*, Tome V (1848-1917), Deuxième partie, Chapitre II (Paris: Messidor/Éditions Sociales, 1977), pp.278-303 (288).

Like most Romans-Feuilletons, however, *Les Habits Noirs* partook of the *roman de mœurs* or social novel. It aimed at representing French society in the first half of the nineteenth century, and therefore borrowed from realist conventions. To start with, the novels have a concrete, realistic background. The Habits Noirs' geographical empire starts in Paris. However,

Outre sa banlieue, c'est toute la France - notamment la Corse et la Normandie; sans compter l'Alsace, la Bretagne, la Provence et les Pyrénées - c'est même tout l'Occident - l'Italie, l'Espagne, la Grande-Bretagne et l'Irlande, l'Allemagne, L'Europe centrale, la Russie et jusqu'à l'Australie et au Nouveau Monde - qui furent témoins et victimes des savantes intrigues et des exploits condamnables des Habits Noirs. Paris n'en fut pas moins, pendant plusieurs décennies, le siège de leurs états-majors et l'épicentre de leurs forfaits.<sup>5</sup>

François Le Lionnais has listed the major spatial landmarks of *Les Habits Noirs*, from private mansions, such as Bozzo's *hôtel particulier*, rue Thérèse, in the second arrondissement, to gathering places such as the Epi-Scié tavern, Rue du Haut-Fossé, in the third arrondissement. Associations with specific locations also situate characters on the social scale. Paul's lodging, Rue de Jérusalem, by the Sûreté Générale, highlights his fall from society's elite.<sup>6</sup>

There is a strong temporal dimension to *Les Habits Noirs*. The legends of the Habits Noirs go back a century, but the novels mainly cover the period from 1825 to 1866. The topography of Paris changes from one story to the next, as do the political regimes. Féval stands out against the bulk of serial novelists insofar as descriptions, although mainly functional, are sometimes developed with a profusion of details, with realistic and symbolic purposes. They might, for instance, include a socio-political commentary. In *Coeur d'Acier*, Marguerite's flat, on the fifth floor of a house situated on the Boulevard Montparnasse, is described as follows:

C'était une de ces masures déguisées en élégantes demeures que le règne de Louis-Philippe sema dans Paris avec tant de profusion. Au-dehors, cela ressemble presque à quelque chose, mais la spéculation malsaine y économisa tellement la main-d'oeuvre et les matériaux que cela tombe déjà, et que, quand le marteau des démolitions y touche, cela chancelle sous un nuage poudreux qui ne laisse après soi qu'un monceau de plâtras inutile.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> François Le Lionnais, 'Le Paris des Habits Noirs', in *Les Habits Noirs*, Volume II (Robert Laffont: Paris, 1987), p.1091.

<sup>6</sup> Le Lionnais, 'Le Paris des Habits Noirs', and 'Petite Géographie des Habits Noirs à Paris', in Féval, *Les Habits Noirs*, Volume II, pp.1091-98.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Féval, *Coeur d'Acier* (Robert Laffont: Paris, 1987), p.426.

Realistic details about the capital help build a familiar picture, with recurring landmarks. Furthermore, familiar Paris is contrasted to Corsica, romanticised as an exotic world of heroism and vendetta.

Along with description of the material aspect of nineteenth-century Paris, Féval recreates the atmosphere of the time. The importance of the theatre will be investigated in the next section. The rise of business and the taste for money are other characteristic features. In that respect, Féval is akin to Balzac in highlighting passion for gold and pleasure as the two main springs of society. Before he actually started his literary career, Féval read for the bar, and later became a clerk in a bank. Many disappointments and difficulties then marked the beginning of his literary career. His involvement with the legal and financial worlds as well as his difficult début as a writer provided him with a wealth of experience from which to draw. In *Les Habits Noirs*, he broadened his observations to the whole of society, with success:

Sans atteindre la pénétration et la force d'un Stendhal, d'un Balzac ou d'un Zola, l'observation de la société par Paul Féval ne manque ni de justesse, ni de finesse, ni d'humour. L'ascension du banquier J.-B. Schwartz, celle, inspirée de Vidocq, du baron Lecocq de la Périère, celle de Marguerite de Bourgogne [sic] ... sous ces lions du boulevard Saint-Germain, la petite bourgeoisie commerçante, travailleuse, âpre au gain, crédule et bornée; puis, dans les bas-fonds, un grouillement de bohème, de minables et de voyous, tout cela fait assez bien revivre la société française sous le premier Empire, la Restauration, la monarchie de Juillet, et les débuts du second Empire.<sup>8</sup>

Paris stands out as a bright, busy place that attracts the ambitious and the talented. It is for Paris that J.-B Schwartz, the future banker of the Habits Noirs, sets out from his native Alsace in 1825. Similarly, Julie and André Maynotte, having put some money aside, decide to leave Caen for Paris to fulfil their ambitions. The capital is, however, a dangerous place, where guiding principles have disappeared:

si un barème quelconque faisait tout à coup le compte des gens qui, dans Paris, vont au hasard de la vie, sans principe ni soutien moral, prêts à tomber, selon les caprices de l'équilibre, du côté du mal ou du côté du bien, les pessimistes eux-mêmes auraient un quart d'heure d'étonnement effrayé.<sup>9</sup>

Like Balzac, Féval emphasises the careerist frustration and the restlessness of a generation born under Napoleon, who felt let down by the Orleanists and

<sup>8</sup> Le Lionnais, Preface to *Les Habits Noirs*, Volume II., p.ix.

<sup>9</sup> Féval, *Coeur d'Acier*, p.477.

stifled by the static, rigid society of the July Monarchy. The Second Empire's obsession with money and profit is also highlighted. Paris, a magnet for the ambitious, becomes a trap, where aspiring lawyers such as Joulou becomes murderers, artists such as Etienne and Maurice are finally deprived of their legitimate success by greedy theatrical agents, and a worthy young man like Leon de Malevov has a thankless occupation:

il n'y a aucun bâton de maréchal dans le portefeuille d'un notaire. Tel il naît, tel il meurt! notaire, notaire! Soldat est un mot immense qui comprend tous les grades, toutes les gloires. Notaire est un mot étroit qui n'a qu'une signification: notaire!<sup>10</sup>

Most characters are social types as well as individuals.

Féval excels in portraits of secondary characters. These are developed in the course of long digressions full of humorous and realistic details. Some characters particularly stand out, such as André Maynotte's lawyer, Cotentin de la Lourdeville, a prominent provincial full of himself, or the bunch of good for nothings gravitating around solicitor Deban's office, in *Coeur d'Acier*:

Il y avait là cinq jeunes hommes prêts à se jeter tête baissée dans l'aventure, quelle quelle (sic) fût. Aucun d'eux n'était précisément un coquin pour le moment, aucun d'eux n'avait droit au titre d'honnête homme. L'étude Deban, nous n'avons pas pris la peine de le cacher, était une détestable école.<sup>11</sup>

The familiar, realistic background, therefore, goes along with the realistic dimension of the characters. As a matter of fact, the narrator claims that his 'evil' characters are relatively true to life. Like Balzac and Sue, Féval took his inspiration from Vidocq's memoirs. Lecoq, and characters such as Cocotte and Piquepuce, half cops, half crooks, were obviously modelled on Vidocq and his accomplices. Féval also drew from a real court-case involving a secret association called Les Habits Noirs. This gang of criminals, whose members belonged to every layer of society, was put on trial in 1842. Its leader, supposedly an English aristocrat, escaped.<sup>12</sup> Féval denounced the romantic and larger-than-life dimension of rival fictional villains:

Le type colossal de Vautrin, autocrate de toutes les pègres, n'exista jamais que dans l'opulente imagination de Balzac. Nos coquins, Dieu merci! n'ont

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p.631.

<sup>11</sup> Féval, *Coeur d'Acier*, p.477.

<sup>12</sup> See Jacques Van Herp, 'Paul Féval, *Les Compagnons du Trésor*', *Désiré*, 30 (Décember 1970), pp.893-97. Van Herp gives much importance to this court case, from which, he writes, Sue, Dumas, Balzac and Féval drew some of their most famous criminal characters. Van Herp dates the court-case back to 1845, Féval to 1842.

pas l'esprit de famille: ils se trahissent mutuellement et, chaque fois que l'un d'eux a fait une brillante affaire, un chœur de voix envieuses s'élève des profondeurs souterraines pour crier son nom à la police.<sup>13</sup>

Fevalian heroes have less power. They also have more realistic, more practical ambitions than Balzac's Vautrin or Sue's Rodolphe. They act out of personal interest or revenge, and not to save the world or challenge society:

Au lieu de toutes ces poésies, nous ne possédons dans notre sac que la pauvre biographie d'un voleur, qui n'avait aucun plan de réorganisation sociale, qui ne se targuait d'aucune mission apostolique, et qui n'était même pas prédicateur! <sup>14</sup>

The realist project is, however, fraught with contradictions. Bozzo, for instance, turns out to be larger-than-life. Strange and wonderful events happen which clash with the realistic background. The narration blurs the frontiers between facts and fancy, heightening and altering reality.

The imaginative aspect of the Roman-Feuilleton owes much to French Romanticism, a movement that developed in the aftermath of the Revolution and lasted well into the 1850s. Romanticism was initially a reaction against all rules in literature and elsewhere, a celebration of freedom, individualism and feelings. Romanticism in France was a social phenomenon, and coincided with the rise of a new public. It is the same public, however broadened, which would fall for the Roman-Feuilleton and welcome its indifference to common sense and its celebration of imagination. As Jean Tortel puts it, 'l'existence du roman populaire ne doit être séparée de l'existence du romantisme.'<sup>15</sup>

Contemporary conservative critics such as Alfred Nettement initially made no difference between the Roman-Feuilleton and romantic drama, and dismissed both as *outré* and untrue to life. For modern critics, including Jean Tortel, both genres share an impulse towards melodrama. Romanticism, pushed to its extreme, becomes melodramatic. Both romantic drama and melodrama see life through highly coloured lenses. Both abound in hyperboles and extreme antitheses, both shared a repertoire including the following elements: lurid and violent events, mysterious parentage, abductions, hidden identities, wicked villains and pure innocent victims. Insofar as melodrama as a genre preceded romantic drama, Peter Brooks has suggested that:

<sup>13</sup> Féval, *Les Habits Noirs*, p.239.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p.198.

<sup>15</sup> Jean Tortel, 'Esquisse d'un univers tragique ou le drame de la toute puissance', in *Cahiers du Sud*, XXXIV, 310 (Deuxième semestre 1951), pp.355-61 (357).

It would only be a slight exaggeration to argue that in France melodrama quite literally lies at the source of Romantic aesthetics of dramatisation, in the theatre and in the novel. It appears, in any event, as their first approximation and as their radical form.<sup>16</sup>

The simplified and stylised Romanticism of the Roman-Feuilleton, therefore, borders on melodrama and attracted many criticisms.

The Roman-Feuilleton is romantic insofar as it represents and arouses strong emotions. Romantic writers wanted to stir people, to shock them with a clash of passions and emotions. Like Romantic drama, the Roman-Feuilleton went for wild passions and extreme emotions. A recurring mood is the lyrical, mainly concerned with love. When dealing with passions such as love, the French Roman-Feuilleton is characterised by either sentimentality or excess. In *Coeur d'Acier*,

Roland et Nita, tous deux, écoutaient le merveilleux langage de leurs âmes. Les yeux de la jeune fille languissaient; il y avait de superbes victoires dans la prunelle du jeune homme. Quand leurs mains se cherchèrent et s'unirent de nouveau, ce fut comme un hyménée, autour duquel toutes ces lumières envoyaient leur rayons, toutes ces fleurs leurs parfums, tandis qu'une voix céleste, tombant d'un monde meilleur, la voix de Carlo-Maria Weber, arrivait, balançant les suaves mouvements de cette valse, profonde comme la rêverie qui berce et qui bénit...<sup>17</sup>

In *L'Arme invisible*, Maurice and Rémy, both in love with Valentine, experience the same extremes of love and hate:

En ce moment un fougueux élan de haine passa au travers de son amour.

La beauté de Valentine prenait pour [Rémy] des rayonnements surhumains qui insultaient à son supplice, qui envenimaient son martyre.<sup>18</sup>

As for Maurice, 'il détestait jusqu'à la folie l'homme inconnu qui portait ce nom [Rémy d'Arx]; il eût donné une moitié de son sang pour voir cet homme en face de lui, l'épée à la main.'<sup>19</sup>

Characterisation betrays the same romantic attraction towards the exceptional and the extreme. Romanticism, in its rejection of all things established and mediocre, favoured the marginal and the abnormal. Criminals were a source of fascination:

<sup>16</sup> Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976), p.90.

<sup>17</sup> Féval, *Coeur d'Acier*, p.721

<sup>18</sup> Féval, *L'Arme invisible*, p.1151.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p.1089.

Romantic literature is, par excellence, the literature of crime. For the time, the murderer, by his antisocial behaviour, is proclaimed a hero, a model for youth, an ideal for the sensitive artist, the great-hearted lover and the high-minded criminal.<sup>20</sup>

The first great figures of criminal outsiders were to be found in romantic dramas: Hugo's *Hernani*, a *grand seigneur* turned gang leader, Dumas' Antony, an illegitimate child who murders his lover as a protest against society's rejection, Balzac's *Vautrin*, at war with society. Romanticism had a special interest in those cast aside by society, who sometimes hoisted themselves to social heights, only to fall again. These figures were magnified, their feelings amplified, their actions extraordinary. Romantic drama and the Roman-Feuilleton tend towards the epic, or rather heroic register: facts and characters have unusual strength and nobility.<sup>21</sup> For Féval, for instance, the true Roman-Feuilleton 'célèbre les hauts-faits d'êtres exceptionnels de la pègre ou du haut monde.'<sup>22</sup>

Despite his claims about the realistic dimension of his main villain as opposed to *Vautrin* or *Rodolphe*, Féval cannot help making a larger-than-life figure of *Bozzo*. The latter might not have great plans for society, but he definitely has extraordinary powers over his association:

Ce n'était pas là le roi *Vautrin* et ce n'était pas sa cour. L'*Habit-Noir*, le véritable, paraissant tout à coup parmi cette séquelle, eût mis sa cheville à la hauteur de leur fronts.<sup>23</sup>

*Bozzo's* characterisation, built on hints and omissions, generates romance and mystery. Everything concerning his past, for instance, is a legend. Supposedly hanged in 1806 in Naples by General Hugo, Victor Hugo's father, he 'survived' and travelled to Paris. He died there in 1842, having reached the respectable age of 103, in the first episode of *Les Habits Noirs*. There are contradictory rumours about Colonel *Bozzo*, whose appearance and origin remain mysterious to most people:

Il était jeune ce grand chef, on le disait: tout jeune, et d'autant plus terrible. On disait encore que c'était presque un vieillard, rompu à toutes les habiletés du crime... Palmer, c'était son nom, ou plutôt Cordova, peut-

<sup>20</sup> Laurence Senelick, *The Prestige of Evil: The Murderer as Romantic Hero from Sade to Lacenaire* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1987), p.xxix.

<sup>21</sup> In its strictest sense, the epic register includes the intervention of the marvellous. The heroic register does not.

<sup>22</sup> Paul Féval, quoted by Michel Nathan, in *Splendeurs et misères du roman populaire* (Paris: Littérature et Idéologies, 1990), p.14.

<sup>23</sup> Féval, *Les Habits Noirs*, p.240.

être Rosenthal. Bâtard de grande maison, selon toute apparence: les erreurs de Mme la duchesse ont produit de superbes voleurs.

Non pas cependant. C'était un fils du peuple, Gaulois de la tête aux pieds, vivante protestation de la misère: une figure riante et hardie, couronnée de cheveux blonds et bouclés.<sup>24</sup>

Secondary characters such as Echalot and Similor, who perpetually dream of the Habits Noirs, and occasionally get involved with them, spread rumours and keep the legend alive. The iterative aspect of the text therefore contributes to building a mythic picture of Bozzo.

For Jean Tortel, however, 'Le héros du roman populaire n'est jamais que le héros Romantique simplifié et hypertrophié.'<sup>25</sup> While Romantic literature often explored human dilemmas and conflicting impulses towards good and evil, the Roman-Feuilleton, in its simplest expression, featured larger-than-life characters who were clear-cut embodiments of goodness and evil. As will be shown in a later chapter, this is not really true of Féval's characters.<sup>26</sup>

Lastly, the Roman-Feuilleton and Romantic drama derived most of their ability to stimulate readers from their use of dramatic contrasts. As defined by Hugo in the *Préface de Cromwell* (1827), Romantic drama aimed at mingling genres and registers normally considered mutually exclusive, such as the tragic and the comic, in order to match the complexity of reality. The Romantic drama was therefore ruled by a law of contrasts, and like the Roman-Feuilleton, was a mixed genre in itself. Serial writers, including Féval, however, were thought to make a systematic and artificial recourse to the law of contrast. In 1881, Marius Topin criticised the

affectation systématique que met M. Féval à opposer trop souvent le rire aux larmes et à introduire des personnages comiques là où ils n'ont que faire ... on sent l'effort de l'auteur, qui se bat les flancs pour chercher des effets comiques, parce qu'il s'y croit obligé par la loi des contrastes.<sup>27</sup>

More recently, Jacques Dubois wrote that 'par leur présence et leur action, les figures drôlatiques contaminent le drame et lui ôtent une part de sa crédibilité.'<sup>28</sup> As a matter of fact, Féval's novels are most of the time twofold,

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p.241.

<sup>25</sup> Tortel, 'Esquisse d'un univers tragique', p.357.

<sup>26</sup> See the section on 'Heroes and villains'.

<sup>27</sup> Marius Topin, *Romanciers contemporains* (Paris: Didier, 1881), p.372.

<sup>28</sup> Jacques Dubois, 'Les Habits Noirs et la formation du genre policier', in *Paul Féval, romancier populaire, colloque de Rennes 1987* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes et *Interférences*, 1992), pp.81-91 (84).

featuring a tragic plot and a comic plot. The tragic plot focuses around the exceptionally noble hero, a victim of the Habits Noirs, who usually believes in the existence of greater powers than men, such as fate and providence. The comic plot revolves around secondary characters. In *La Rue de Jérusalem*, the tragic plot features Paul Labre, whose brother was assassinated by the Habits Noirs. Paul is desperately in love with Ysole, a woman manipulated by the Habits Noirs. The comic plot revolves around the character of La Goret, a grotesque peasant with a secret fortune. Pompous and resourceful Pistolet investigates, which adds to the comedy. The two plots are intertwined, allowing many weird and somewhat unsubtle contrasts. Chapter XII ends on the murder of Thérèse Soulas, Ysole's mother. The murder, which takes place on a stormy day, was commissioned by the Habits Noirs to frame Paul Labre. The following chapter switches to the character of La Goret, with a rather casual transition from the narrator: 'Nous laissons un instant de côté le drame noir pour une scène d'audacieuse comédie'.<sup>29</sup>

In *Maman Léo*, Valentine is the tragic heroine, who fights the Habits Noirs alone: 'j'ai pris, moi, pauvre fille, un fardeau qui écraserait les épaules d'un homme.'<sup>30</sup> Her lover Maurice is in an equally tragic situation, accused of a crime he has not committed: 'Maurice était sorti d'un rêve insensé pour entrer dans un cauchemar plus épouvantable et plus fou', writes the narrator.<sup>31</sup> To this tragic couple corresponds the comic couple Maman Léo and Echalot. Maman Léo is the opposite of Valentine, large, red, loud, alcoholic. According to Echalot, her unlikely wooer, the comparison between Maman Léo and Valentine benefits the former: 'Il y a des gens qui préfèrent mieux la rose épanouie à n'importe quel bouton', he says.<sup>32</sup> The tragic tends to the melodramatic, the comic to the grotesque, or bizarrely amusing. Most novels offer a contrast between heroic and common, trivial and poetic. In the first chapters of *La rue de Jérusalem*, the hero Paul Labre is 'l'inconnu, l'unique brin d'herbe par où nous puissions nous rattraper à la poésie' among the vulgar and common inhabitants of La Sûreté.<sup>33</sup>

Systematic contrasting and abrupt passing from tragic to comic account for the idea that the Roman-Feuilleton feeds on simplified Romanticism. In

<sup>29</sup> Féval, *La Rue de Jérusalem*, p.939.

<sup>30</sup> Féval, *Maman Léo*, p.114.

<sup>31</sup> Féval, *L'Arme invisible*, p.1094.

<sup>32</sup> Féval, *Maman Léo*, p.30.

<sup>33</sup> Féval, *La Rue de Jérusalem*, p.745.

Féval's novels, however, contrasts are not used only for their own sake, or simply to stimulate readers' senses. The mingling of genres and registers has specific purposes and effects.

#### **B. The mixed genre: an indirect comment on life and society**

While asserting the realistic dimension of his characters and rejecting the symbolism attached to characters such as Vautrin or Rodolphe, Féval sets out for a different kind of heightening, borrowing from the romantic and the fantastic modes. Like Gaston Leroux or Ponson du Terrail, Féval came to regret the death of his main villain. He found a solution by adding new episodes taking place both after and before Bozzo's death in 1842. Féval made the most of his initial mistake, and of the intricate chronology of the *Habits Noirs* series. If Bozzo's existence remains shrouded in mystery, his death is a matter of doubt. In *Les Compagnons du Trésor*, which takes place in 1835, Bozzo is killed for the third time, this time by his grandson Julian. Who, therefore, is the Bozzo of *L'Arme invisible*, which takes place in 1838? The ambiguity is preserved, and the text flirts with the fantastic. The fantastic text establishes absolute hesitation in protagonists and readers:

The narrator is no clearer than the protagonist about what is going on, nor about interpretation; the status of what is being seen and recorded as 'real' is constantly in question. This instability of narrative is at the centre of the fantastic as a mode.<sup>34</sup>

The fantastic is precisely this moment of hesitation. In that sense, such a definition can be applied to *Les Habits Noirs*, for this moment of hesitation is recurrent as regards the character of Bozzo.

As a matter of fact, there are two ways in which to apprehend the character of Colonel Bozzo. One is marvellous, involving some supernatural explanation. Bozzo has an unreal aspect. His longevity is extraordinary, as well as his powers, considering his frail appearance. There are some hints that Bozzo is not what he seems:

Il traversa la salle à manger d'un pas tardif et lourd, mais aussitôt qu'il fut dans l'escalier, il en gravit les marches avec l'agilité d'un vieux chat.

Ses pieds, tout à l'heure si pesants, ne produisirent aucune espèce de bruit en foulant le parquet du deuxième étage.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Methuen, 1981), p.34.

<sup>35</sup> Féval, *L'Arme invisible*, p.1098.

Besides, he has some strange habits:

Le colonel, au contraire, entendait sonner toutes les heures de la journée et de la nuit.

Il avait un côté fantastique, ce charmant et doux vieillard: il passait pour ne jamais se mettre au lit.<sup>36</sup>

Although he dies in *Les Compagnons du Trésor*, and is subsequently buried in the Père Lachaise, Bozzo is seen to creep out of his grave several times, a living dead man. The rational explanation could be that Bozzo really is dead, and is being impersonated by his grandson Julian, as the narrator sometimes hints. Such an explanation, however, belongs to the romanesque mode rather than to realism. Both nonetheless suggest the immortality of evil as a principle, exemplified in the Habits Noirs' excessive passion for gold and power.

In *Les Habits Noirs*, Féval is not really interested in things beyond reason and the marvellous as such. He is more interested in ironic variations on fantastic motifs, and transposition of fantastic elements to a modern setting, which allows his iconoclastic spirit to come out.<sup>37</sup> Bozzo is a 'criminel-vampire', who feeds on crime and then feeds innocent victims to the law for sacrificial death.<sup>38</sup> In *Les Habits Noirs*, Maurice and Etienne's drama, inspired by the story of André Maynotte, is called, significantly, *Le Vampire de Paris*.<sup>39</sup> Although this method partakes of romantic realism, which, in Fanger's words, consists in 'aggrandiz[ing] things by legendary association', Féval ironically inverts the symbolism used by Balzac or Dumas.<sup>40</sup> The characterisation of Dumas' hero Monte-Cristo has obvious Christian overtones. Vautrin himself, although a criminal figure, is elevated to the level of mythology by his superior intelligence, his almost magical capacity to read people and his recurring sacrifices. A tempter and an artist like Vautrin, Bozzo is nonetheless deprived of the former's grandeur. While Bozzo's association with vampirism brings out his

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p.1096.

<sup>37</sup> For Yves Olivier-Martin, Féval is the 'maître du fantastique parodique'. Similarly, in 'Paul Féval, auteur fantastique', *Désiré*, Jacques Van Herp examines how, by a process of ironic distance, Féval's novels 'degrade' fantastic myths. In *La Ville vampire*, for instance, there are two vampires, a traditional one who drinks the blood of its victims, and a modern one who takes the money of the victims. Similarly, Féval plays with conventions in *La Ville vampire*, by offering two endings, one fantastic and one realistic (*La Ville vampire*, in *Les Dramas de la mort*, Paris, Marabout, 1969).

<sup>38</sup> Yves Olivier-Martin, *Histoire du roman populaire* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1980) p.118.

<sup>39</sup> Féval, *Les Habits Noirs*, p.209.

<sup>40</sup> Fanger, *Dostoevsky and Romantic Realism*, p.63.

occult power and the hidden strangeness of the city, it also highlights the dark side of romance and the decadence of the city's inhabitants. As the legends suggest, Bozzo's greatness belongs to the past. He is now a vampire, thriving on the corruption and the greed of others. His passion and energies are all negative ones.

Féval's impulse to highlight the romance of contemporary society is counteracted by the pessimistic realisation that evil, in the form of organised crime, generates it. Féval shared Balzac's belief that society had become too static and uniform to offer the drama and passion that romance required. These things could only be found outside society, in the underworld and its hidden links with society itself, insofar as the underworld sustains society. Mystery and the fantastic, therefore, come from the existence of facts and truths hidden under the surface of things. The Paris of *Les Habits Noirs* is the gigantic web of a criminal association, a 'franc-maçonnerie [protected from the law by] je ne sais quel nuage magique.'<sup>41</sup> There are hidden links between extreme social classes, and complex associations between outward strangers. Respectable Parisian notables lead secret lives, symbolised by their multiple identities; crooks and good for nothings have access to high society. The recurrence of events such as carnivals and masked balls in Féval's novels symbolises and emphasises the nature of Paris as a place where appearance does not correspond to reality.

The mysterious and fantastic aspect of this hidden Paris is emphasised by an accumulation and heightening of fanciful details and by the narration itself. It seems that half of the city is won over to the Habits Noirs: 'La moitié de Paris en mange', says Similor.<sup>42</sup> The association uses cryptic passwords, such as '*Il fait jour*', or '*Coupez la branche!*' The principles on which the existence of the Habits Noirs depends, such as the sacrifice of an innocent victim as a protection against the law, are also romanesque. When André Maynotte suddenly realises that some powerful criminal has framed him, he is not heard:

[André's lawyer] prétend qu'on ferait un roman avec mon idée. Mais, ajoute-t-il, ce n'est pas un plaidoyer. Pour un plaidoyer, il faut des choses palpables, des faits: ça-et-ça! <sup>43</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Paul Féval, *Maman Léo* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1987), p.64.

<sup>42</sup> Féval, *Les Habits Noirs*, p.154.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.69-70.

The lawyer does not believe in the existence of the Habit Noir. That person would be a 'un feu follet, un démon ... un être invraisemblable et fantastique'.<sup>44</sup>

The personalities and the works of the Habits Noirs are highly imaginative. Nicolas foments extravagant plots involving the impersonation of Louis XVII, Marguerite and Lecoq are adventurers who cheat their way into high society. When he comes across the imaginative Habits Noirs, down-to-earth inspector Badoût does not believe his eyes:

Le côté eccentric et campagnard de l'histoire lui parut invraisemblable comme une féerie. Les Habits Noirs étaient des bandits malfaiteurs sérieux. A son sens, ils ne pouvaient user les immenses ressources de leur association à de pareilles folies.<sup>45</sup>

Such comments are symptomatic of Féval's ambiguous attitude towards his fictional world. While symbolic associations highlight the dangerous state of a society ruled by organised crime, the narration seems to defuse the danger by emphasising the extravagant fantasy of the criminal association and their lack of realism. Within the fictional world, however, it is precisely society's blindness and its reluctance to believe in such criminals that pave their way to success and power.

This representation of crime and society highlights the experience of writers born after the Revolution, strongly marked by repeated changes of regime and sudden restructuring of society. These upheavals left society vulnerable to impostors, resulting in strange and wonderful events. In Féval's own words, 'C'est le siècle des transformations, et nous n'avons certes point l'espoir d'émerveiller le lecteur avec cette chose si simple: une fille du Quartier latin devenue comtesse.'<sup>46</sup> After all, there was a number of impostors pretending to be Louis XVI's son. Lecoq de la Périère, formerly known as Toulonnais-l'Amitié, is reminiscent of the so-called Comte de St-Hélène who rose to social success before he was unmasked as an escaped convict. Reality is fantastic, and the bizarre is the norm, especially in the capital: 'A Paris d'ailleurs, les choses bizarres font fortune.'<sup>47</sup> *Les Habits Noirs*, therefore, abounds in mysterious episodes and bizarre characters. André Maynotte's revenge involves impersonating a legless character, Trois-Pattes. Rumours

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p.66.

<sup>45</sup> Féval, *La Rue de Jérusalem*, p.991.

<sup>46</sup> Féval, *Coeur d'Acier*, p.639.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p.132.

spread about the latter, as people understand neither his links with the financial aristocracy, nor his relation with the young and beautiful Countess Corona. 'Parlez-moi de ce mendiant,' asks Julie, 'Cela m'intéresse comme un conte de fée.'<sup>48</sup> In *La Rue de Jérusalem*, La Goret, the cruel and ugly peasant who hides a stolen fortune, draws the Parisian bandits to the *province*. To the average reader, the Roman-Feuilleton offered an explanation as to the workings of society and exposed the illegitimacy of the present social hierarchy.

It is not surprising, therefore, to find fairy-tale motifs in *Les Habits Noirs*. Indeed, the general pattern of the novels often comes from fairy-tale. In most episodes of *Les Habits Noirs*, such as *Coeur d'Acier*, a hero of unknown origin turns out to be noble. He might have to go through some ordeals to win a princess-like figure, as in *Les Habits Noirs*. Due to the pessimistic and ironic dimension of *Les Habits Noirs*, however, inverted fairy-tale motifs are even more frequent. In *Les Compagnons du Trésor*, Francesca appears as a fairy godmother to young Irène Carpentier, to whom she takes a liking. Francesca's feelings are genuine, as opposed to those of her grandfather Bozzo, who plays the benefactor:

Puisque tu t'intéresses à ces pauvres gens, chérie, je veux que tout change autour d'eux, comme si une bonne fée était entrée dans leur taudis par le tuyau de la cheminée.... J'aime les choses qui vont à la baguette. <sup>49</sup>

In fact, Bozzo is the hidden monster in the inverted fairy-tale. Vincent Carpentier, as he later realises, has signed a diabolical pact with Bozzo. For characters from the lower classes, deprived of power, and, more generally speaking, those ignorant of the secret workings of society, some events look like magic. Invited to Bozzo's private mansion: 'Maman Léo ouvrait de grands yeux. Les événements pour elle prenaient une allure féérique.'<sup>50</sup> In reality, events are the result of cold calculation by the powerful and the wicked. The recourse to fairy-tale motifs, therefore, highlights both the power of the evil characters and the ignorance and lack of control of the rest of society.

The *Habits Noirs* series stands out as a blend of facts and fancy, in more than one sense. The novels denounce evils, imaginary and real. The *Habits Noirs* can be understood as a metaphor for politico-financial scheming, or a symbol of the failure of institutions. The total control exerted by the *Habits Noirs*

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p.189.

<sup>49</sup> Féval, *Les Compagnons du Trésor* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1987), p.520.

<sup>50</sup> Féval, *Maman Léo*, p.116.

highlights the lack of legitimate structures in society and the powerlessness of the legal institutions. Hard work and honesty do not seem to pay, and instead, success, which is necessarily built on crime, has become virtue. Less politically engaged than Sue in *Les Mystères de Paris*, for instance, Féval is not really concerned with the plight of the poor. To his eyes, everybody can become a victim in the search for gold and pleasure that characterises modern society. For Féval, society is a battlefield. The individual is crushed by crime syndicates and their association with both the financial and the political worlds. To those real evils, however, the novels often bring romantic, imaginary solutions through the figure of the avenger, and signal the victory of dreams and imagination over dull and cruel reality.

Appropriation, reworking and mingling of conventions from realism, Romanticism and the fantastic serve to highlight certain aspects of society, such as the occult forces that undermine it from the inside. In the world of *Les Habits Noirs*, nothing is what it seems, nor as simple as it seems. Féval uses the romantic mingling of sublime and grotesque, as defined by Victor Hugo in the *Préface de Cromwell*, in a similar way, to convey the complexity of life.<sup>51</sup>

Hugo's Romantic drama was not simply about the mingling of comic and tragic, nor the use of contrast for its own sake. At the centre of Hugo's theory is the notion of the grotesque:

Le caractère du drame est le réel, le réel résulte de la combinaison toute naturelle de deux types, le sublime et le grotesque, qui se croisent dans le drame, comme ils se croisent dans la vie et dans la création.<sup>52</sup>

As Peter Brooks observes, Hugo's definition of the grotesque is rather ambiguous. Sometimes, Hugo considers the grotesque as the opposite of the sublime, covering notions such as the ugly or the bizarre. In that sense of the word, the grotesque is part of Féval's comic. Similor, for instance, is a comic character, a 'bouffon grotesque', ugly yet full of himself.<sup>53</sup> Sometimes, it seems that the grotesque is the result of the alliance of opposite notions, such as the sublime and the ugly. For Brooks, the grotesque is essentially a 'dynamic contrast': 'the grotesque is conceived as a principle of opposition in

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<sup>51</sup> Victor Hugo, *Préface de Cromwell* (Paris: Larousse, 1976).

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p.60.

<sup>53</sup> Féval, *Maman Léo*, p.148 .

conjunction with the sublime: it is conceivable only in terms of bipolar relationships.<sup>54</sup>

Féval has a grotesque vision of things, insofar as both notions of comic and tragic, most always identified with the sublime and the grotesque, are inextricably linked. Féval has a gift for spotting the comic aspect of everything, including the sublime, therefore producing grotesque. In the following example, the grotesque is in conjunction with the heroic figure of the Chevalier Mora, Irène's suitor in *Les Compagnons du Trésor*:

On avait tenu longtemps derrière le rideau le héros de l'épopée lui-même; puis il était apparu entouré de tous les prestiges: grandeur déchue, valeur chevaleresque, combat de la faiblesse isolée contre toute une armée de forces, mystère, fatalité, espoirs vastes comme le monde.

En (sic) ce même héros, car il y a dans tout lyrisme un revers comique, apportait, au lieu de papiers de famille, une preuve providentielle de son identité: sa ressemblance extraordinaire avec sa soeur la mère Marie-de-Grâce (my emphasis).<sup>55</sup>

Romantic excess in the expression of emotions equally produces tears and laughter. Francesca's comment on Rémy d'Arx's declaration of love for Valentine reflects the narrator's turn of mind:

c'est un grand amour... j'aurais voulu que vous pussiez l'entendre tout à l'heure, la passion s'épandait hors de son âme comme un flot d'éloquence et de poésie. Il était si beau que je pleurais, si ridicule que je riais comme une folle! ... ami, bien cher ami, pardonnez-moi, je me venge d'avoir été trop puissamment émue.<sup>56</sup>

Inversely, ugly, trivial characters can produce the sublime. 'On dit que le ridicule tue l'émotion; ce n'est pas toujours vrai, car il y avait dans le calme de ce pauvre diable une véritable grandeur', Féval writes about seemingly un-heroic Echalot.<sup>57</sup> There is greatness in the ugly, poetry in the trivial: 'La poésie est partout, l'élément populaire en regorge', writes Féval.<sup>58</sup> Echalot, therefore, is compared to a knight, and his love for Maman Léo is said to be of the chivalrous kind:

je ne vois rien, en dehors des comparaisons chevaleresques, qui puisse donner une idée du culte respectueux, mais ardent, payé par ce pauvre diable à cette grosse bonne femme ... Tout ce qui constitue la chevalerie était chez ce pharmacien de la Table ronde: la vaillance, le dévouement, la

<sup>54</sup> Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, p.92.

<sup>55</sup> Féval, *Les Compagnons du Trésor*, p.747.

<sup>56</sup> Féval, *L'Arme invisible*, p.1056.

<sup>57</sup> Féval, *Maman Léo*, p.153.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p.22.

vénération, et même cette petite pointe de sensualité naïve qui allait si bien aux preux compagnons de Charlemagne.<sup>59</sup>

Echalot's love for Maman Léo is later compared to Prince Albert's love for Queen Victoria, giving by extension royal quality to Maman Léo.<sup>60</sup> The latter was initially introduced in the story as a figure akin to 'la grande Catherine de Russie'.<sup>61</sup>

Such comparisons bring ambiguity to the discourse, as characters both benefit and suffer from them. Characters oscillate between the sublime and the ridiculous, and the narrator's tone between sincere and ironic. Some episodes featuring lower-class characters, such as the fight between Similor and Echalot, are recounted in the mock-heroic mode. Similor is persuaded that Echalot is hiding something from him, as the latter is in possession of a big sum of money. Echalot refuses to share the money with Similor, with good reason. The money belongs to Maman Léo, who intends to use it to fight the Habits Noirs. Maddened by the sight of bank notes, Similor turns against his friend. The fight abounds in literary references as the beginning makes clear:

[Echalot] sauta glamment dans l'espace libre, où il prit position d'un air à la fois mélancolique et résolu.

-Censément, dit-il, ça m'agace un tantinet de m'aligner avec l'ami de mon adolescence, mais si je renaudais tu aurais des doutes sur mon honneur.

Ce n'est certes pas en souvenir de l'aîné des quatre fils Aymon que ce verbe *renauder* est devenu classique dans le langage des sans-gêne...

Similor n'avait peut-être pas lu l'*Illiade*, et pourtant il répondit comme Ajax:

-A toi, à moi, racaille au tas! ça ne va pas peser lourd!<sup>62</sup>

Mythic comparisons enhance the grotesque aspect of the fight. Similor's weapon is a tin sword, an old theatre prop. Echalot finds an unlikely ally in an old lion, ironically called M. Daniel, that Similor had previously knocked out viciously. Féval is obviously on Echalot's side: 'C'était un véritable preux que ce mouton, fort et vaillant comme un taureau: un preux panaché d'ange.'<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, Echalot's fair play, however chivalrous, is totally out of place. Unscrupulous Similor is going to stab his friend when he is practically knocked

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., pp.25-26.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p.161.

<sup>61</sup> Féval, *L'Arme invisible*, p.1065.

<sup>62</sup> Féval, *Maman Léo.*, p.148.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p.154.

out by Maman Léo. The voice of reason, she denounces Echalot's romanesque turn of mind: 'J'aime bien qu'un homme ait bon coeur, mais les imbéciles ça me dégoûte.'<sup>64</sup>

In a study of Féval's novels from 1865, Barbey d'Aurevilly drew attention to Féval's sense of humour, which he saw as a two-edged sword. On the one hand, Féval's comic gift means that his novels tend to the superficial: 'Il amuse. Il est amusant. C'est un amuseur. Qu'il prenne garde.'<sup>65</sup> On the other hand, 'sa faculté première est l'ironie', an irony, which, we saw, is born of the alliance of grotesque and sublime, and conveys a complex view of life.<sup>66</sup> This double-vision of things is characteristic of a certain kind of popular novel, as Vareille has pointed out:

On discerne la distance qui sépare ce type de roman du roman "gai" ou "léger" à la Paul de Kock ou Pigault-Lebrun. Ces derniers connaissent certes le burlesque et le grotesque - mais ils "ignorent" le chevaleresque et la morale de l'honneur. Au contraire, dans le roman populaire "héroïque", versant chevaleresque d'une part, versant grotesque/burlesque de l'autre, sont complémentaires; ils ne valent que l'un par l'autre, exactement comme Don Quichotte ne se conçoit pas sans Sancho Pança, et inversement.<sup>67</sup>

Paradoxically, Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris*, which founded the heroic Roman-Feuilleton, seems totally without burlesque and irony. Alfred Nettement perceived this very early, when he wrote that Sue's novel was like 'Don Quichotte, mais sans le ton heroï-comique.'<sup>68</sup>

The popular novel operates through myths, combining archetypal and modern myths together. The same tendency to magnify and debunk simultaneously in an ironic way is to be found in Féval's reworking of certain myths of the popular novel.

For Jean Tortel, one of the first critic to write about the French popular novel, the Roman-Feuilleton expresses the need for a hero, corresponding to a yearning for power:

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p.155.

<sup>65</sup> Barbey d'Aurevilly, *Les Oeuvres et les hommes*, Quatrième partie, 'Les Romanciers' (Paris, Amyot: 1865), p.146.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p.155.

<sup>67</sup> Jean-Claude Vareille, *Le Roman populaire français (1789-1914). Idéologies et pratiques. Le Trompette de la Bérésina* (Limoges: PULIM/Nuit Blanche éditeur, 1994), p.60.

<sup>68</sup> Nettement, *Etudes critiques sur le Roman-Feuilleton*, p.241.

La structure du roman populaire est répétition pure, obsédée-obsédante, d'un thème unique: celui de l'accès à la domination, cette dernière figurée par l'emprise de celui que nous avons appelé le héros.<sup>69</sup>

The Romantic hero is born of a number of fictional and real-life figures. Napoleon, for instance, had a strong impact on nineteenth-century society and literature. For a whole generation, he embodied individual power, ideas of conquest and prestige. Most of the time, the popular hero, a Napoleonic figure, is of modest origin, and makes his way to social heights by his mere personality. The Napoleonic figure is ambiguous, neither tyrant, nor saviour, half-hero, half-villain. This ambiguity is what characterises the most elaborate Romans-Feuilletons.<sup>70</sup> In his quest for power, the hero is often helped by a secret society, as in *Les Mystères de Londres*, or thwarted by a secret society, as in *Les Habits Noirs*. Féval shared with Balzac an obsession with conspiracies, nourished by legends of the Carbonari, memories of the Chouannerie and facts about the philanthropic societies of the first half of the century. Secret societies have an ambiguous status. A counter-power, they can be perceived as a reaction against the rise of oppressive structures, such as the police or centralised power. Conversely, they can be a criminal and oppressive tool. In *Les Habits Noirs*, this ambiguity is a matter of appearance versus reality, as Bozzo, the leader of the Habits Noirs, passes as a philanthropist.

Both myths, of heroes and secret societies, are simultaneously erected and destroyed in *Les Habits Noirs*. Féval builds up the legend of the Habits Noirs, going back to the time of Fra Diavolo, and conjures up an image of glamour and terror. However, the days of glory of the Habits Noirs have long gone. Reality contrasts with the myth, and Bozzo is no longer the man he used to be. He is a frail old man, who sometimes appears rather senile: 'C'était Cartouche tombé en enfance.'<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, the great men of the association die one by one, and cliques of little calibre soon infiltrate the Habits Noirs:

Après la gloire, la fortune et la puissance, voici la décadence. En même temps que la frérie des Habits Noirs se transforme en *Club des Bonnets de soie noire*, le sens de la grandeur tombe en quenouille, et l'implacable

<sup>69</sup> Jean Tortel, 'Le Roman populaire', in *Entretiens sur la paralittérature* (Villeurbanne: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1985), pp.55-74 (74).

<sup>70</sup> In *Les Mystères de Paris*, Fergus' plan to liberate Ireland and destroy England's tyrannical power is based on Napoléon's plan of invasion of Britain. Fergus actually visits the fallen Emperor on the Island of St Helena. On the subject of ambiguity of the hero, see the section on 'Heroes and Villains'.

<sup>71</sup> Féval, *La Rue de Jérusalem*, p.796.

organisation fait eau de toutes parts et se laisse pénétrer par de vulgaires coquins. Saladin s'emparant du sceptre des Habits Noirs, n'est-ce pas Mme Verdurin devenue princesse de Guermantes?<sup>72</sup>

Another romantic myth characteristic of the popular novel is that of Faust. The myth of Faust goes back to a sixteenth-century legend concerning a magician who sold his soul to the devil in return for knowledge and power. The theme conveys a desire for boundless power and/or access to ultimate truths. Most Romantic Romans-Feuilletons feature a hero with a thirst for knowledge and power. André Maynotte's goal, for instance, is to find the truth about the Habits Noirs at all cost, to save himself and other victims of the association. This type of novel is sometimes called 'roman prométhéen', because of its hero, a saviour figure.<sup>73</sup> Apart from André Maynotte, Féval's heroes have less ambitious goals. They do not aim to save the world by eradicating evil, but to save themselves and their loved ones. However, the hero's obsessive search for truth and justice generally leads to disillusion.

The reworking of the myth is particularly interesting regarding the evil characters. There are, as mentioned in a previous section, a number of pacts made with the Habits Noirs to obtain ultimate knowledge of the secret of the association. Knowledge in this case is associated with gold, and power. Bozzo stands as a Mephistolean figure: 'il y a deux choses immortelles: le *bien* qui est Dieu, et moi qui suis le *mal*.'<sup>74</sup> No one manages to find out Bozzo's secret, and the price to pay is death. Significantly enough, the *scapulaire*, which is supposed to contain the secret of Bozzo's treasure, when violated, only turns out to contain the word 'nothing', engraved in about thirty different languages.

A third myth of the popular novel is that of the scapegoat.<sup>75</sup> The secret of Bozzo's longevity, revealed in *Les Compagnons du Trésor*, lies in the ritual sacrifice of the leader of the Habits Noirs by his own blood:

Cela ressemble à une légende mythologique: Saturne dévorant ses enfants.  
Dans l'Italie du Sud, patrie de Cacus, terre classique du banditisme, il est de croyance, depuis l'Apennin jusqu'à la mer et tout le long de la montagne

<sup>72</sup> François Le Lionnais, Preface to *Les Habits Noirs*, Volume II, p.ix. Saladin is Similor's son. Despite being raised by honest Echalog, Saladin has turned out a bandit.

<sup>73</sup> Marc Angenot, *Le Roman populaire, recherches en paralittérature* (Montréal: Presses de l'Université du Québec, 1975), p.44.

<sup>74</sup> Féval, *Maman Léo*, p.187.

<sup>75</sup> See Chapter V, 'The scapegoat mechanism'.

sicilienne, que Fra Diavolo, l'éternel maître des Camorre, tue ses enfants pour n'être pas tué par eux.<sup>76</sup>

The scene of transmission of power among the Habits Noirs is reminiscent of a myth from antiquity that Frazer described at the beginning of *The Golden Bough*, a book that introduced the figure of the scapegoat in ethnology. In antiquity, an Italian village was the site of a strange and recurring tragedy. There stood the sacred grove of Diana Nemorensis, the goddess of the wood. A man guarded the place day and night:

In his hand he carried a drawn sword, and he kept peering warily about him as if at every instant he expected to be set upon by an enemy. He was a priest and a murderer; and the man for whom he looked was sooner or later to murder him and hold the priesthood in his stead. For such was the rule of the sanctuary. A candidate for the priesthood could only succeed to office by slaying the priest, and having slain him, he retained office till he was himself slain by a stronger or a craftier.<sup>77</sup>

Frazer's anecdote illustrates the main thesis of *The Golden Bough*, that of regicide, a particular kind of scapegoating. Regicide characterises a system of divine royalty that renews itself by the ritual murder of its king. Starting from the legend of Diana of the Wood, Frazer studies all sorts of scapegoating, a process of purification and regeneration through expulsion or ritual murder. The idea of scapegoating is recurrent in the Roman-Feuilleton. The Habits Noirs similarly renew themselves through the sacrifice of their leaders. *Les Habits Noirs*, however, offers a perverted, inverted picture of the myth of Diana. Bozzo is a kind of evil priest guarding his treasure. The Habits Noirs' sacred sanctuary, the *Monastère de la Merci*, in Corsica, only hides gold, 'le dernier dieu ... qui ait un peu d'avenir désormais.'<sup>78</sup>

Finally, Féval's attitude to the popular novel's own conventions, turned into literary myths, is equally ironic. He both uses those conventions, building the romantic larger-than-life universe typical of the Roman-Feuilleton, and simultaneously makes fun of and denounces the romanesque material, including his own novels. Irène's attitude towards the Habits Noirs, for instance, reflects the naive approach of fans of the romanesque:

Irène avait tout admis, jusqu'à cette ligue mystérieuse, instituée en dehors de tout droit légal, dépourvue de tout contrôle public, où des gens de bien imitaient les errements réservés aux associations de malfaiteurs et

<sup>76</sup> Féval, *Les Compagnons du Trésor*, p.561.

<sup>77</sup> Sir James Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (London: Wordsworth, 1993), p.1.

<sup>78</sup> Féval, *Les Habits Noirs*, p.25.

ressuscitaient en plein XIX siècle l'audacieuse usurpation des francs tribunaux du Moyen Age.

Le bon sens d'Irène ne s'était point révolté à cette fantasmagorie du Bien combattant contre le Mal avec ses propres armes et dans ses propres ténèbres....

L'idée ne lui était même pas venue que cette concurrence privée, faite à l'administration d'Etat pouvait être difficile et peut-être impossible.<sup>79</sup>

Similarly, gullible Ysole falls for Nicolas, who plays the romantic hero. 'Il est des hommes auxquels rien ne résiste et qui prennent les coeurs avec une seule parole... avec un seul regard!', she says.<sup>80</sup> The narrator ironically comments on Ysole in the following way: 'elle était follement éprise de cet invraisemblable héros de roman qui lui promettait une couronne'.<sup>81</sup> As Jean-Claude Vareille puts it, 'Dumas, Féval, Ponson du Terrail fabriquent du romanesque épique à la chaîne..., mais conjointement ils dénoncent ce romanesque comme aliénant et abêtissant.'<sup>82</sup> In the first episode of *Les Habits Noirs*, there is a novel within the novel, the first being a parody of the second. It is an extravagant melodrama elaborated by Maurice and Etienne from the story of André Maynotte himself, a reflection of Féval's own project. For Jacques Dubois:

Ce n'est pas exactement d'un geste parodique qu'il s'agit ici - le drame continue à se jouer au premier degré et sollicite notre croyance - mais bien plutôt d'un raffinement dandyste qui frappe de gratuité moqueuse ou insolente ce qui, par ailleurs, a été laborieusement édifié.<sup>83</sup>

Féval has the same ambiguous attitude towards fiction in general, and the Roman-Feuilleton in particular. He sometimes debunks it as easy entertainment:

Ainsi en est-il dans ces récits de l'histoire du crime, où l'écrivain n'a à dépenser ni beaucoup de talent, ni beaucoup d'imagination.

Les faits sont là qui se posent d'eux-mêmes en jalons; les personnages existent; il ne s'agit que de ménager un peu l'intérêt contenu dans ces étranges procès-verbaux.<sup>84</sup>

At other times, he claims a realistic and useful dimension for his novels:

Bien des gens ont nié ces foudroyantes sympathies en les reléguant avec mépris dans le domaine du roman.

Grand bien leur fasse!

<sup>79</sup> Féval, *Les Compagnons du Trésor*, p.746.

<sup>80</sup> Féval, *La Rue de Jérusalem*, p.784.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. , p.788.

<sup>82</sup> Vareille, *Le Roman populaire français*, pp.128-29.

<sup>83</sup> Dubois, 'Les Habits Noirs et la formation du genre policier', p.86.

<sup>84</sup> Féval, *La Rue de Jérusalem*, p.776.

L'évidence est là qui raille les railleurs, et pour le dire en passant, je ne sache rien au monde qui soit si près des réalités de la vie que le roman bien conçu et bien étudié.<sup>85</sup>

Both the grotesque mode and the reworking of myths point at two conclusions. First, they convey an indirect comment on the genre itself. While following conventions and providing dreams and excitement, Féval takes his distance from the genre, resisting its impulse towards sentimentalism, its clear-cut separations between heroic and common and its many simplifications. Second, Féval's self-reflexive narration suggests both the complexity of life as opposed to fiction, and the darkness and decadence of contemporary society. The ambiguous attitude of the narrator towards his fictional world, as well as the double vision of life that Féval's novels express, correspond to what Mikhaïl Bakhtin defines as typical of popular culture.

### C. Dialogism and popularity of the Roman-Feuilleton

Jean-Claude Vareille was the first commentator on the French popular novel to apply Mikhaïl Bakhtin's theories on popular culture to the Roman-Feuilleton. It is in this perspective that I situate myself. The popular novel is popular in the sense that it draws from archetypes and mentalities from popular culture, or folklore. Furthermore, its ambivalence or unique potential for subversion is akin to that of carnival, which encapsulates the spirit and nature of popular culture, according to Bakhtin.

In *The World of Rabelais*, Bakhtin studied two major aspects of popular culture, namely dialogism and the carnival. Dialogism, or polyphony, characterises a certain kind of discourse made of conflicting variants, resulting in an endless confrontation of meanings. The second aspect that Bakhtin studied is the carnival, which encapsulates the spirit and the nature of popular culture. Carnival presents an alternative and contradictory view of life, comic and serious together: 'a double aspect of the world and of human life'.<sup>86</sup>

The general pattern and the main motifs of the popular novel are essentially carnivalesque. Carnival is a period of temporary freedom from established rules and social hierarchies:

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<sup>85</sup> Féval, *L'Arme invisible*, p.1087.

<sup>86</sup> Mikhaïl Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World* (Cambridge, Massachusetts,: The Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1968), p.6.

As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical ranks, privileges, norms, and prohibitions.<sup>87</sup>

Similarly, the Roman-Feuilleton, a mingling of various genres, a celebration of imagination and reality intertwined, represents relief from previous literary rules. Alfred Nettement called the Roman-Feuilleton, significantly, 'le désordre littéraire'.<sup>88</sup> It is, like carnival, the domain of utopia: everything is possible. This does not mean that the popular novel is totally deprived of rules. In fact, the Roman-Feuilleton, like carnival, offers a mixture of freedom and internal rules, 'the law of its own freedom'.<sup>89</sup> Like carnival, the Roman-Feuilleton follows some specific internal rules, some of which were reviewed in our previous chapter. The general pattern of the Roman-Feuilleton is that of a temporary reversal of order, a picture of the world upside down. Victorious criminals pass as respected citizens, and heroes are wronged. In *Les Habits Noirs*, the hero André finds himself in prison, mocked by his jailer:

Je parie un sou que nous sommes innocents comme l'enfant Jésus! ... Tous innocents! reprit-il, Ah! mais! le monde est à l'envers, c'est sûr! Je n'ai jamais gardé que des saints.<sup>90</sup>

Imprisoned, the only person who believes him innocent is a fellow prisoner. The world of *Les Habits Noirs* offers a general inversion of values. 'Ne laisse pas dormir un capital. Voilà le vrai crime', thinks Schwartz, for gold is worshipped as a god.<sup>91</sup>

As a stylisation of chaos, the carnival is characterised by an upsetting of all hierarchies. It is essentially an image of the world upside down, symbolised by rites of inversions:

We might find here a characteristic logic, the peculiar logic of the 'inside out'... of the 'turnabout', of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties.<sup>92</sup>

Carnival is therefore characterised by a polarised vision of life, and focuses on extremes. The Roman-Feuilleton is equally concerned with contrasts and analogies. Its characters are from social extremes, although in *Les Habits Noirs*,

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p.10.

<sup>88</sup> Nettement, *Etudes critiques sur le Roman-Feuilleton*, p.1.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p.7.

<sup>90</sup> Féval, *Les Habits Noirs*, p.63.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p.31.

<sup>92</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, p.11.

the people are in the forefront. Noble heroes and secondary popular characters are linked through doublings. As we mentioned earlier, Echalot and Maman Léo function as comic doubles to the heroic couple Maurice and Valentine.

Last but not least, the domination of women is another facet of the world upside down. *Maman Léo* features ridiculous inversions of sexual hierarchies. Léocaldie, who unwittingly killed her first husband in a show of strength, physically assaults frail Echalot, her new suitor. The latter is actually flattered by such treatment. The fact that Echalot, who turns out to be one of the main characters of the novel, is given enough room to express his sentimental and chivalrous views of life signals the temporary victory of dreams and imagination over common sense and prosaic reality, embodied by Maman Léo. Other novels offer reversals of traditional patterns and motifs of romance. To the traditional pattern of the woman as victim, kept prisoner in some strange place, and ultimately saved by a male character, *L'Arme invisible* recounts how the female heroine, Valentine, saves her lover Maurice from prison. In *Coeur d'Acier*, two characters, one female and one male, are unhappy in love. It is the male character, Léon de Malevoy, who retreats to a convent, while the female character, Léon's sister Rose, gets on with her life and marries elsewhere. In Féval's novels, women tend to be stronger than men, and more clear-sighted. Consequently, they either help the male characters, like Valentine, or destroy them, like Marguerite. Marguerite and Joulou, in *Coeur d'Acier*, are a good example of a female-dominated couple. Light-headed and dissipated, Joulou falls in love with Marguerite, and becomes her lover and her slave. A variation on the sadistic woman, Marguerite hates male domination, yet she despises Joujou for his weakness, and tortures him constantly. She uses his name and title as a stepping-stone to power, then plans to poison him when he becomes a hindrance.

*Les Habits Noirs* abound in specific carnival motifs. *Coeur d'Acier* is placed under the sign of the carnival. It is 1842, fashion demands fancy-dress balls to celebrate the success of Dumas' *La Tour de Nesle*. The novel ends, like most episodes of the Habits Noirs series, with a masked ball. It is during these balls that justice is applied, and the villain undone. Serious business takes place against a festive background, a symbol of the contrasted aspect of life. This may be traced back to a folklore tradition according to which the people had the

right to supplement the legal system.<sup>93</sup> The end of *Coeur d'Acier* and *Les Habits Noirs* displays a mixture of festive and penal, which, according to specialists, is typical of carnivalesque manifestations:

Le bal était à son beau moment ... la fête était un brillant succès ... quelques-uns disaient qu'il se passait ici, au son des violons de Tolbecque, une grave et mystérieuse aventure. Devinez quoi. Je vous le donne en mille. Une instruction criminelle!<sup>94</sup>

*Coeur d'Acier* features a scene akin to a Charivari, another popular festive custom.<sup>95</sup> Charivaris were noisy, mocking rites of inversion organised by lords of misrule and 'usually occasioned by some anomalous social situations or infractions of community rules.'<sup>96</sup> They were marked with a carnivalesque double-aspect of gratuitous merriment and punitive purpose. Jaffret, an accomplice of the Habits Noirs, is in possession of stolen legal documents that belong to Roland de Clare. Friends of Roland, disguised as birds, invest Jaffret's house at night. The substitution of beasts for humans, which blurs human and animal realms, is a traditional means of symbolising the inversion of social order.<sup>97</sup> Generally speaking, disguises and masks abound in the Roman-Feuilleton. In *Coeur d'Acier*, the grotesque gang parades around Jaffret, while punishing him by drinking his wine and eating his pets after slaughtering them. Significantly, Jaffret has hurt himself by getting caught in the trap he set for his own enemies.

Finally, the recurring sub-plot involving the impersonation of Louis XVII is an obvious variation on the ultimate carnivalesque rite of inversion, the crowning and decrowning of fools. This is fully developed in *La Rue de Jérusalem*, where Nicolas plays the son of Louis XVI to rob a rich peasant, Mathurine Goret, of her fortune. La Goret, a hideous old woman, has agreed to marry the false king, in order to become queen. The idea of the plot and its development are essentially carnivalesque:

Au Château-Neuf, il y avait grande parade, gala général et présentation de Mathurine Goret, reine de France et de Navarre, à la noblesse des environs.

<sup>93</sup> Martin Ingram, "Ridings, rough music and the 'Reform of Popular Culture' in Early Modern England", *Past and Present*, 105 (1984), pp.79-113.

<sup>94</sup> Féval, *Coeur d'Acier*, p.723.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., Deuxième partie, Chapter XX, 'Le cauchemard du bon Jaffret', p.669.

<sup>96</sup> Ingram, 'Ridings, rough music...', p.81.

<sup>97</sup> Keith Moxey, *Peasants, Warriors and Wives: Popular Imagery in the Reformation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

Le vrai peut quelquefois n'être pas vraisemblable. Paris et la province ont des folies d'un genre très différent: Paris ne croirait pas aux splendeurs grotesques qui marquèrent cette cérémonie.

La reine Goret surtout y dépassa tellement les limites du comique possible que la chevalière Le Camus de La Prunelaye quitta la table avant le dessert.

Entre la poire et le fromage, le beau Nicolas, usant des privilèges de sa race, eut la générosité de guérir plusieurs personnes affligées d'écrouelles.<sup>98</sup>

Such developments in the plot exemplify Féval's taste for the absurdly entertaining. At the same time, they provide an indirect comment on human folly and the precariousness of social structures. Social boundaries are easily violated, peasants and impostors pose as rulers. The narrative, therefore, is dialogic, characterised by irony, self-parody and seriousness.

Carnavalesque manifestations, therefore, traditional vehicles for ritual merriment, have a more serious side. For Bakhtin, carnival and popular culture are essentially ambivalent insofar as they constitute an opposition to the dominant voice of culture. Carnival's laughter is 'gay, triumphant and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives.'<sup>99</sup> Because it inverts the order of things and blurs boundaries between all sorts of categories, it could be dangerous in periods of crisis, when boundaries are already threatened and perceived as necessary for the well being of society. Besides, at a deeper level, the crossing of boundaries supposes an awareness of the precariousness and artificiality of boundaries and hierarchies. A stylisation of disorder, carnival has a potential for riot and violence. On the other hand, culture depends on what it excludes. The carnival is a sort of safety valve and performs a cathartic release of tension. This is symbolised by the figure of the scapegoat. Carnivals usually end with the ritual burning of an effigy, or the chasing of a character symbolically burdened with the sins and guilt of the community. In that sense, carnivalesque manifestation would actually reinforce norms while strengthening the community.<sup>100</sup> Similarly, the popular novel has a cathartic nature, and strong affinities with the scapegoat. Like carnivals, most popular novels end with the death of a criminal who embodies all that is evil in the community. They are akin to a ritual in which

<sup>98</sup> Féval, *La Rue de Jérusalem*, p.971.

<sup>99</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, pp.11-12.

<sup>100</sup> Stuart Clark, 'Inversion, misrule and the meaning of witchcraft', *Past and Present*, 87 (1980), pp.98-127.

chaos is introduced and made to die so that the community might be reborn. As a process of naming evil, the popular novel contains an unavoidable risk of scapegoating.

To draw a parallel between popular fiction and carnival can provide insights into why there have been many conflicting, even opposite interpretations of the genre. As mentioned in the introduction, there are several schools of commentators of the popular novel. Some, such as Yves Olivier-Martin, give it a revolutionary nature. Others, such as Jean Tortel, see it as a conservative tool of exploitation of the people. In fact, the most sophisticated Romans-Feuilletons are all that. They are fundamentally ambivalent. Later sections will consequently be devoted to problems of ideology in *Les Habits Noirs*.

**Part 2. Genres and registers in the novels of Wilkie Collins: *The Woman in White*, *No Name*, *Armadale*, *The Moonstone*, *The Law and the Lady***

While the dominant mode of the French Roman-Feuilleton was Romanticism, the Sensation novel's background and concerns were essentially realistic. They did, however, feature the extraordinary incidents and extreme passions usually associated with the realm of romance and were therefore considered false and untrue to life. The outcry caused by the genre in the 1860s can be ascribed not so much to its mingling of realist and romantic conventions but to the way it departed from the dominant mode of the novel, domestic realism. Domestic realism itself featured a specific balance between realism and romance, which the Sensation novels upset. They seemed to value the factual aspect of domestic realism more than its concern with middle-class morality and the exaggerations of romance more than its redeeming qualities.

**A. The Sensation novels: subverting domestic realism**

It could be argued that by the 1850s, domestic realism had become the norm for the mainstream English novel. The domestic novel, a tradition going back to Jane Austen and represented in the 1850s by authors such as Mrs Gaskell and Anthony Trollope, dominated literary life. Domestic fiction looked at family life and the social interactions of the members of a small community. Realism in the domestic novel had to do with everyday life of ordinary people. This concern for verisimilitude verged on detailism. The

Sensation novels kept this emphasis on the domestic world, as well as the familiar, photographic quality of the background.

The sensationalists' concern for verisimilitude and a familiar, minutely detailed background, nonetheless contrasted sharply with the far-fetched plots and extraordinary accidents in their novels. The Sensation novels' fondness for the extraordinary, however, was paradoxically based on a taste for the factual. They featured extraordinary stories based on truths, and detailed, scientific records of incredible deeds: they were, in Charles Reade's own words, 'matter-of-fact romance'.<sup>101</sup> In that respect, they put domestic realism's concern with truth and detailism to strange purpose, exposing realism as a set of conventions rather than the only valid way to represent reality.

Although absurd and fantastic, the accidents of the Sensation novels were characterised by possibility. Charles Reade and Wilkie Collins, in particular, researched their material and took care to remain within the limits of the possible. They often took their inspiration from daily news, and drew from real crime stories, keeping general truth as well as specific details. *The Moonstone*, for instance, was based on a contemporary affair, the Road Murder case of 1861. The incriminating nightgown, which turns out to be Franklin's, was at the centre of the Constance Kent case. *The Law and the Lady* took its inspiration from the Scottish case of Madeleine Smith (1857). Furthermore, criminals' behaviour faithfully reflected those of real-life villains. As Virginia Morris points out, Collins:

strove for verisimilitude in [his female criminals] even in his most sensational novels. His women killers most often use poison rather than knives and guns, just as real women did in real life. Collins also emphasised premeditation - a necessary component of a poisoning murder but a relatively unusual theme in Victorian fiction.<sup>102</sup>

When he gave primacy to imagination rather than daily news, Collins did scientific research, in a need for accuracy and authenticity. When Collins was writing *Armadale*, he commissioned the construction of a fumigating apparatus, to make sure his plot would be technically possible. As John Sutherland points out, in reality Lydia would have needed a huge amount of carbonic acid to fill a whole room and suffocate a human being.<sup>103</sup> No doubt Collins would have

<sup>101</sup> Reade, Preface to *Hard Cash*. (Boston and New York: Brainard, 1910).

<sup>102</sup> Virginia B. Morris, *Double Jeopardy: Women who Kill in Victorian Fiction* (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1990), p.107.

<sup>103</sup> See Appendix to *Armadale*, p.710.

modified his plot instantly if he had known that, being so determined to write nothing but what would enhance the reality and probability of his stories. A mixture of extravagant accidents and a concern for scientific accuracy and realistic details, 'the chosen territory of the sensation novelists lies somewhere between the possible and the improbable, ideally at their point of intersection.'<sup>104</sup> Although strangeness was a necessary part of the Victorian novel, insofar as a good story had to provide some excitement to its readers, it was kept in check by a demand for verisimilitude. As Margaret Oliphant put it, 'fiction is bound by harder laws than fact is, and must consider *vraisemblance* as well as absolute truth'.<sup>105</sup> The Sensation novels, on the other hand, put the strangeness of life to the foreground. Not only was that strangeness generally linked with crude or evil deeds, but also the scientific treatment given to such material did not ultimately explain its existence in a rational way.

The Sensation novel's departure from domestic realism's belief in the intelligibility of the world also affected characterisation. Domestic realism laid emphasis on familiar, comprehensible characters. As Winifred Hughes points out:

For the Victorians, unlike their twentieth-century successors, 'truth' and 'human nature' are constants; not only do they have an objective evidence that can be observed and imitated by the artist, they obey certain innate laws, predictable and immutable.<sup>106</sup>

The mission of the novel was to copy these laws of nature in order to illuminate human truths, mostly through the study of characters. On the contrary, the Sensation novels, revolving around hidden crimes and past secrets, clearly gave primacy to accident. Collins was well aware of this particular line of criticism, and always denied sacrificing characters to plot, as the Preface to the 1861 edition of *The Woman in White* makes clear:

I have always held the old-fashioned opinion that the primary object of a work of fiction should be to tell a story; and I have never believed that the novelist who properly performed this first condition of his art, was in danger, on that account, of neglecting the delineation of character - for this plain reason, that the effect produced by any narrative of events is

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<sup>104</sup> Winifred Hughes, *The Maniac in the Cellar: Sensation Novels of the 1860s* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980), p.16.

<sup>105</sup> Mrs Oliphant, 'Charles Reade's Novels', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, cvi (1869), p.510, quoted in Graham, *English Criticism of the Novel*, p.45.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p.51.

essentially dependent, not on the events themselves, but on the human interest which is directly connected with them.<sup>107</sup>

Furthermore, sensational characters were perceived as exaggerated and caricatured. Like Dickens' characters, they were made of mannerisms and idiosyncrasies. The delineation of Collins' insane or simple-minded characters relies, indeed, on external features, such as Anne Catherick's white garments or Dexter's strange fits. Major characters do not always escape that particular line of criticism. One critic of the genre analysed the character of Fosco in the following way:

Subtract from him his eccentricities, his Italianisms, and his corpulency - what is left? Simply this, that he is a very undecipherable villain. The author has put him together, just as he puts together his mysterious plots. The only difference is that Mr. Wilkie Collins gives us the key to the plot, and cannot, or does not, give us any key to the villain. So far he is right. Circumstances are an enigma which it is the task of the storyteller artfully to solve. Human nature is an enigma which the truest painter will leave unsolved and unattempted.<sup>108</sup>

The unknown reviewer concludes nonetheless that Collins' novels did not contain 'any imaginative creation, any delineation of character worth preserving or portrait of human nature'.<sup>109</sup> Such a view betrays the real objection to Collins' characterisation, which does not bear so much on its use of idiosyncrasies but on the underlying assumption that human character cannot always be accounted for. Fosco's behaviour and motivations, one must say, remain unaccountable. The fact that Laura's death brings him a rather small sum of money does not really fit with the energy and imagination that he invests in planning her death. It is easy to understand why critics concerned with moral and comforting truths disapproved of such characterisation, insofar as it suggested that evil could not always be put down to a specific cause, explained and dismissed. This is, however, not the case of other villains or keepers of secrets, such as Godfrey Ablewhite or Rosanna Spearman in *The Moonstone*. Once the enigma is resolved, their behaviour appears in a new light, and brings us to question our previous assumptions.

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<sup>107</sup> Preface to the 1861 Edition of *The Woman in White*, reprinted in the 1973 edition, p. xxxviii.

<sup>108</sup> Unsigned review, *Saturday Review*, x (25 August 1860), pp.249-50, reprinted in Norman Page, *Wilkie Collins, The Critical Heritage* (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), p.85.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

The absence of a traditional omniscient narrator acting as a go-between to interpret the action for the readers enhances the mysterious and sometimes incoherent behaviour of some of the characters. Even characters to whose interiority readers are given access through the use of diaries and other first-person narratives suggest the same conclusion. Lydia Gwilt's diary, for instance, does not always provide clues to her behaviour, a fact highlighted by the text itself: 'Why am I not always on my guard and never inconsistent with myself, like a wicked character in a novel? Why? why? why?'<sup>110</sup> Lydia's insight enhances authenticity and adds to the complexity of her character, while stressing the irrational component in human beings.

Characters, whether villains, victims, or investigators of a dangerous secret, tend not to feel in control. Realist fiction assumed that human nature and society were intelligible. Traditional heroes of romance were great men who were in charge of their destiny and made history. With its emphasis on coincidences and incomprehensible supernatural agents and its detailism, the Sensation novels partook of both romance and realism, but suggested that man's power and freedom were considerably limited.

One reason for the lack of heroism in Collins' novels might be found in the relative failure of reason in the face of the growing irrationality of modern life. *The Moonstone*, for instance, is generally heralded as one of the first detective novels, insofar as it lacks supernatural mysteriousness, and emphasises the logical resolution of a single mystery. A detective novel should be 'un récit consacré avant tout à la découverte méthodologique et graduelle, par des moyens rationnels, des circonstances exactes d'un événement mystérieux.'<sup>111</sup> In Collins' novels, however, most mysterious events are exposed in various ways and by various agencies, including human logic but also 'divine revelation, feminine intuition, Mumbo-Jumbo, Jiggery-Pokery, coincidence or act of God', none of which belong to the detective novel.<sup>112</sup> There is just enough ambiguity in the texts not to label the novels as detective novels or supernatural thrillers. Reason and logic tend to be opposed to other

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<sup>110</sup> Wilkie Collins, *Armadale* (London: Penguin Classics, 1995), p.559.

<sup>111</sup> Régis Messac, *Le 'Detective novel' et l'influence de la pensée scientifique* (Paris: Champion, 1929), p.5

<sup>112</sup> Julian Symons, *Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), p.10.

forms of knowledge, and are part of a larger conflict opposing the visible world to the unseen. One is never quite sure which is the chosen territory of Collins.

This ambiguity can be linked to the fantastic mode. The fantastic mode begins with the irruption of the inadmissible in a familiar, comprehensible world. According to theorists such as Tzvetan Todorov or Rosemary Jackson, the fantastic is the mode of hesitation: these inadmissible events can neither be accounted for, nor dismissed.<sup>113</sup> When they are given a rational cause, these mysterious events are strange or uncanny. When they turn out to have a supernatural cause, they are marvellous. The character of Anne Catherick exemplifies the fantastic mode in Collins. Her ghost-like appearance through a hole in the gate on a London road is strange; to Walter it is fantastic, insofar as it is beyond his comprehension: 'I found myself doubting the reality of my own adventure.'<sup>114</sup> When he realises her resemblance with Laura Fairlie, he is seized with a superstitious feeling of foreboding, which grows as coincidences pile up. As it turns out, everything can be explained rationally. Anne Catherick resembles Laura because she is, in fact, her half-sister. What seemed fantastic is simply strange. Characters, however, tend to interpret everything as fate. The resemblance has served the villains' plans, yet for Walter and Marian, the half-sisters ultimately suffer because of a supernatural rule according to which 'the sins of the fathers shall be visited on the children.'<sup>115</sup> Coincidences point at the same conclusions, and are perceived as part of a grand design. Anne Catherick stands as a symbol of the whole novel, strange and marvellous at the same time, therefore fantastic.

Ambiguity as to the rationality of life, encapsulated by the fate of Ozias and Allan, is amplified in *Armadale*. Allan's prophetic dream confirms Ozias' superstitious fears about his fulfilling his father's prophecy: Ozias fears that he will eventually be the cause of Allan's death. The novel, however, offers two interpretations of the dream. Whereas Ozias views the dream as prophetic, an echo of his father's curse, Allan puts forward a rational explanation. His dream has simply been triggered by recent events of his life, and has nothing to do with the future or Ozias. The dream is nevertheless fulfilled with spooky

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<sup>113</sup> See Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), and Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*.

<sup>114</sup> Collins, *The Woman in White*, p.21.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, p.514.

exactitude, a fact that seems to confirm Ozias' interpretation. Lydia's own plans, however, play an important part in the realisation of the dream. It is in her interest that Allan shall die; therefore she uses her knowledge of the dream to make it come true. Whether the characters' actions are the result of free will or determinism one simply cannot say.

The novels' use of the providential plot leads to the same conclusion. While traditional romance and domestic fiction conveyed an optimistic belief in providence, the Sensation novel's use of the providential plot is ambiguous. While putting the role of providence in the foreground, it expressed doubt as to the reality of it. Although the heroes of *The Woman in White* constantly refer to the notion of providential design, sub-plots and secondary characters provide an alternative interpretation to the so-called providential plot. Everything works as if the same event could be interpreted differently according to the individual point of view. Providence, therefore, is emptied of its content. Furthermore, Walter Hartright's feeling in the face of providence is one of alienation rather than power and optimism. He feels like a mere pawn in a game played by greater men and greater forces than him, and is eventually denied his revenge on his enemies. In other novels, providence is questioned and eventually mocked. *The Moonstone*, for instance, is more concerned with simple causal links than any idea of a transcendent worldview. Furthermore, it actually mocks notions such as design and Providence, through the character of Betteredge and his recurrent pseudo-revelations from his Bible, *Robinson Crusoe*:

Please to remember, I opened the book by accident, at that bit, only the day before I rashly undertook the business now in hand; and, allow me to ask - if *that* isn't prophecy, what is?<sup>116</sup>

The Sensation novels, therefore, sometimes came close to conveying an absurdist perspective on human conduct and human destiny.

Finally, the most characteristic aspect of the Victorian novel was its role as a vehicle for representation of contemporary society. Far from being a full account of life, mid-Victorian realism, however, was a partial and ideologically orientated one:

It should be stressed immediately that the 'everyday experience' was seen as that of the middle-class: 'realism' here meant writing about the middle-class, or at least from a middle-class point of view ... such highly

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<sup>116</sup> Collins, *The Moonstone*, p.40.

and selective 'realism' was by the 1850s considered normative for the three-volume novel.<sup>117</sup>

In *Facts and Fiction*, the sociologist Joan Rockwell showed how society uses fiction as a tool of social formation and cohesion.<sup>118</sup> Novels reflect and propagate the beliefs and values that form the collective identity of a group. English novels of the 1850s, represented by writers such as Anthony Trollope and Mrs Gaskell, were vehicles for middle-class values, and provided a representation of the world as the middle-class would like it to be.

Consequently, one main feature of mid-Victorian realism is its self-conscious moralism. Trollope's novels encapsulate the mid-Victorian notions of realism as moralism: 'I have ever thought of myself as a preacher of sermons, and my pulpit as one which I could make both salutary and agreeable to my audience.'<sup>119</sup> Novels should offer behavioural models for the young. Mid-Victorian novels built up an image of reality purged of distasteful or dangerous aspects of contemporary life. One of the main aspects of Victorian society that should remain veiled was the cultural construction of femininity; there were things that young women should be protected from, including anything to do with sexuality. Instead, along with concepts such as respectability, industry or sobriety, mid-Victorian novels propagated the image of the self-sacrificing woman as a virtuous repository of the bourgeois society, the Angel in the House of Coventry Patmore's poem. This mixture of blindness and self-righteousness led to some dullness in the novels, and, according to some harsher critics, some shallowness. For Franco Moretti, the English novel is 'one long fairy-tale with a happy ending, far more elementary and limited than its continental counterparts.'<sup>120</sup> This emphasis on morality, however, transcended the limits of realism, infusing the novel with the idealism and the comforting qualities of romance. The tendency of the Victorian novel to rely on poetic justice illustrates the desire to present a better, fairer world. Endings should reassure readers that virtue would be rewarded and evil punished.

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<sup>117</sup> Andrew Blake, *Reading Victorian Fiction: The Cultural Context and Ideological Content of the Nineteenth-Century Novel* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), p.73.

<sup>118</sup> Joan Rockwell, *Facts and Fiction* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974).

<sup>119</sup> Anthony Trollope, quoted by Graham, *English Criticism of the Novel*, p.72.

<sup>120</sup> Franco Moretti, quoted by Ian Duncan, *Modern Romance and the Transformations of the Novel: The Gothic, Scott and Dickens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p.5.

On the one hand, the Sensation novels illustrated typical middle-class concerns such as marriage or inheritance. Their endings tended to reaffirm bourgeois norms and values by punishing characters who violated them and rewarding those who endorsed them. On the other hand, the progress of most novels exposed the venality and hypocrisy of Victorian society, as Collins wrote in the preface to *No Name*:

Estimated by the Clap-trap morality of the present day, this may be a very daring book. Judged by the Christian morality which is of all time, it is only a book that is daring enough to speak the truth.<sup>121</sup>

Established truths and values were threatened from within: that subversion made the Sensation novels particularly dangerous. *No Name*, which features an unmarried couple living in sin, yet showing no sign of guilt, was perceived as an attack on marriage and the family. As with most of Collins' novels, the story conveys indirect attacks on the traditional Victorian marriage, yet ends on a return to such an institution.

Unsurprisingly, the main objection to the Sensation novels was a moral one. They not only focused on the extreme of human experience, but they also highlighted the seamy side of life, feeding on crude realism. Their main feature was crime, their main themes violence, hatred, seduction and betrayal. Collins defended the validity of his subject matters on Victorian realism's own grounds:

Nobody who admits that the business of fiction is to exhibit human life, can deny that scenes of misery and crime must be of necessity, while human nature remains what it is, form part of that exhibition. Nobody can assert that such scenes are unproductive of useful results, when they are turned to a plainly and purely moral purpose.<sup>122</sup>

In spite of their often artificial happy endings, however, Collins' novels were subversive. By inviting readers to explore norms and values, they often suggested that middle-class moral values were not ultimate truths but social constructs.

Crime was also symptomatic of the genre that preceded and, to some extent, resembled the Sensation novels: the Newgate novels. The Newgate novels, nevertheless, dealt with the gallows and the prisons. They confined crime to the

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<sup>121</sup> Wilkie Collins, Preface to an early edition of *No Name*, quoted by an anonymous reviewer in *Spectator*, xxxix,(9 June 1866), pp.638-40, reprinted in Page, *Wilkie Collins*., p.149.

<sup>122</sup> Collins, letter of dedication to Charles Ward, *Basil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) p.xxxviii.

lower class, and in so doing, kept it far from the safe world of the middle-class, just as the historical romance of Walter Scott had kept violence relegated to the past. The Sensation novels introduced crime in a middle-class, contemporary background, reaching out beyond the tranquil surface of Victorian life to expose its shameful sides. In that regard, they differed from the average French Roman-Feuilleton, which investigated the extremes of society, nobility and the lower class. The Sensation novel either featured an outsider who cheats her way into the middle-class, crossing social boundaries and bringing chaos along, or placed the source of chaos in the middle-class itself. Collins' Lydia Gwilt or Mrs Braddon's Lady Audley both masquerade as respectable women, while plotting crimes. Those two novels differ from *No Name*, where the troublemaker really is a lady, Magdalen Vanstone.

Collins' novels were particularly subversive insofar as they tended to deconstruct Victorian ideology. They suggested that what the Victorians liked to think of as natural and permanent, such as sexual codes, were in fact conditioned and artificial. One main aspect of Collins' novels is the representation of the social construction of femininity. For nineteenth-century critics, Collins' representation of women was simply false, and the 'unrealistic' quality of the Sensation novels further enhanced by a high occurrence of heroines and female criminals. Twentieth-century critics recognised this particular feature of the genre as one of its greatest achievements, insofar as it offered alternatives to the dominant representations of women. Although the Angel in the House was likely to be a character of the Sensation novel, such as Laura Fairlie in *The Woman in White* or Norah Vanstone in *No Name*, she was never its heroine, nor had she the approbation of her creator. Other female characters often eclipsed her, such as the villainess or various characters that blurred boundaries between heroines and villains. All these female characters seemed unreal to the Victorians. According to the Victorian ideal of the angelic and submissive woman, women and action, let alone women and crime were antithetical. The Sensation novels' representation of women clashed with the role that society assigned to them:

When women are thus put forward to lead the action of a plot, they must be urged into a false position. To get vigorous action they are described as rushing into crime, and doing masculine deeds ... It is not wrong to make a sensation; but if the novelist depends for his sensation upon the action of

a woman, the chances are that he will attain his end by unnatural means.<sup>123</sup>

The Sensation novels made a display of female passion, and as Lydia puts it in *Armadale*, 'We all know that a lady has no passions.'<sup>124</sup> Female sexuality in particular is a recurrent aspect of Collins' novels. Like other sensationalists, Collins did not make his heroines the embodiment of chastity and sanctity. Margaret Vanstone was bad enough; Lydia Gwilt, a mature and sexually aware woman, was 'fouler than the refuse of the streets'.<sup>125</sup>

Lastly, reviewers resented the fact that Collins proposed neither cure nor punishment for such evil. After the publication of *No Name*, many reviewers complained that Magdalen was not properly punished, and instead 'let off with a punishment gentle in proportion to the unscrupulous selfishness of her character.'<sup>126</sup> When Collins' novels were not perceived as dangerous, they were dismissed as pessimistic and charged with destroying people's faith in virtue. They also lacked human sympathy. One reviewer deplored the grim fate of Rosanna Spearman in *The Moonstone*, suggesting an alternative ending full of sentimentality:

We wish some means could have been found to save Rosanna Spearman. The cloud that hangs over her horrible death might have been lifted by a true artist, and she might have been allowed to live and recover her right mind, under the tender influence of her friend, 'Limping Lucy.'<sup>127</sup>

Collins' universe, however, was miles away from the sweetness and sentimentality of the domestic novel.

Collins' *The Woman in White* launched the sensation vogue in the midst of a period characterised by sanity and morality in the novel. The novel, which had long been considered as the lowest form of literature, had at last gained respectability. The Sensation novels, which departed from the conventions of domestic realism, posed a threat to the newly won status of Victorian fiction, while exerting a pernicious influence on society. Such pollution was decidedly foreign, and the blame was ascribed to French literature.

<sup>123</sup> E. S. Dallas, *The Gay Science* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1866), p.298.

<sup>124</sup> Collins, *Armadale*, p.552.

<sup>125</sup> Unsigned Review, *Spectator*, xxxix (9 June 1866), pp.638-40, reprinted in Page, *Wilkie Collins*, p.150.

<sup>126</sup> H. F. Chorley, unsigned review, *Athenaeum* (3 January 1863), pp.10-11, reprinted in Page, *Wilkie Collins*, p.131.

<sup>127</sup> Geraldine Jewsbury, unsigned review, *Athenaeum* (25 July 1868), p.106, reprinted in Page, *Wilkie Collins*, p.171.

## B. Influence of French fiction on Collins

The daring side of the Sensation novelists relaunched a debate on the bad influence of French writers on English fiction. In the eighteenth century, French fiction was already considered as frivolous and morally dubious. Throughout the nineteenth century, the English had an ambivalent attitude towards French fiction, characterised by both attraction and repulsion.

In the first decades of the nineteenth century, the most popular French writers were Victor Hugo and Alexandre Dumas, followed by the *feuilletonistes*, including Eugène Sue and Paul Féval. The vivacity and gallantry of Dumas' historical romance appealed to the English audience. The fantasy and the original extravagance of the romantic serialist writers were much appreciated too. However, both novels and plays had a tendency to dwell on human vices. In the early 1830s, romantic plays suddenly bloomed with debauched heroes, prostitutes, and scenes of orgies and crimes. In her 1835 memoirs on Paris and the Parisians, Frances Trollope violently attacked Hugo, 'this champion of vice - this chronicler of sin, shame, and misery'.<sup>128</sup> She viewed Dumas' *La Tour de Nesle* as 'a national disgrace'.<sup>129</sup> In the 1840s, the *feuilletonistes* chose to lay the emphasis on the vices of the city, probing slums and *hôtels particuliers* with macabre curiosity. Thackeray commented on the unflattering representation of French society in *Fraser's Magazine*:

Did all married people ... break a certain commandment? They all do in [French] novels. [Is] French society composed of murderers, of forgers, of children without parents, of men subsequently running daily risks of marrying grandmothers by mistake? of disguised princes, who live in the friendship of amiable cut-throats and spotless prostitutes..? All these characters are quite common in French novels.<sup>130</sup>

Apart maybe from Sue, the *feuilletonistes* seemed to put excitements and sensuality before moral purpose. It is this very cynicism and lack of seriousness of purpose which repelled English critics, for they feared that it would contaminate both English readers and writers:

The French novelists seem to set about such pictures [of vice] in a kind of jocular, half-credulous vein, which they communicate to their readers, and which inspires a feeling of half-reality, very consoling in horrors, and leaving full enjoyment of the comic in the gayer scenes. No Englishman

<sup>128</sup> Frances Trollope, *Paris and the Parisians in 1835*, 2 vols (London: Bentley, 1835), I, p. 154.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, II, p. 37.

<sup>130</sup> Thackeray, *Fraser's Magazine*, xxviii (1843), p.349, quoted by Louis James, *Fiction for the Working Man* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), pp.142-43.

could at all attempt that light *charlatanerie* of the French, and for us to rival it by taking such stories more *au sérieux* is equally hopeless.<sup>131</sup>

Realist fiction was no less criticised. First welcome as English audiences nourished a desire for less extravagance in the novel, writers such as Sand, Balzac, Flaubert and Zola were at the centre of many disputes regarding the status of the novel. They were charged with distorting realism, highlighting the dark side of society with a total lack of idealism and sympathy for humanity. Flaubert was seen as morbid and pessimistic, while Balzac's energy and strong plots did not make up for the cynicism of his thoughts. He was viewed as a genius, but had gone too far in his representation of society. Furthermore, his search for a good plot demanded the sacrifice of his characters. In his novels, 'the figures [were] forced into unreal posture by the need for effect.'<sup>132</sup> Finally, French realists were seen as licentious, even erotic: *Madame Bovary* was particularly scandalous. French fiction, therefore, destroyed people's innocence and their faith in virtue. These were the very things that English critics found repulsive in the Sensation novels.

Like other sensationalists, Collins had been compared to French novelists, but only to discredit and disparage him, French fiction being a convenient synonym for sensations and immorality:

we doubt very much whether the sensation school, of whom Mr. Collins is by far the ablest representative, will ever become genuinely popular in England. It is a plant of foreign growth. It comes to us from France, and it can only be imported in a mutilated condition. ... one may generally say that, with us, novels turn upon the vicissitudes of legitimate love and decorous affection; while in France they are based upon the working of those loves and passions which are not in accordance with our rules of respectability. Now, unlawful passions are inevitably replete with a variety of sensational situations...<sup>133</sup>

Collins, however, was more understanding than his contemporaries towards French literature, and also more receptive to French critics. After his first novel *Antonina* (1850), English critics had warned Collins against 'the exaggeration of the French school'.<sup>134</sup> His next novel, however, was more

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<sup>131</sup> 'Lucrecia', review (12 December 1846), 5, quoted by James, *Fiction for the Working Man*, p.143.

<sup>132</sup> Graham, *English Criticism of the Novel*, p.99.

<sup>133</sup> Unsigned review, *Reader*, i (3 January 1863), pp.14-15, reprinted in Page, *Wilkie Collins*, pp.134-36.

<sup>134</sup> D. O. Maddyn, unsigned review, *Athenaeum* (4 December 1852), 1322-23, reprinted in Page, *Wilkie Collins*, p.47.

French than ever. *Basil* (1852) is a sensational story of passion, betrayal and crime, and frankly addresses the question of male and female sexuality. Critics were outraged. Collins' next novel, *Hide and Seek* (1854), was much toned down, and very Dickensian in style and content. In 1855, Emile Forgues' long article on Collins, which appeared in the *Revue des deux mondes*, once more changed the direction of Collins' fiction.<sup>135</sup> Unlike English critics, Forgues preferred the dark *Basil* to the sentimental *Hide and Seek*, and encouraged Collins to develop his strong points, strength and honesty in the representation of society. Collins was flattered, and following Forgues' advice, he never wrote another novel like *Hide and Seek*.

In the course of his career, Collins was constantly criticised for the impropriety and immorality of his novels. Dickens himself associated this aspect of Collins' fiction to French literature, when he said that his friend's novels expounded 'a code of morals taken from French modern novels, which I instantly and with becoming gravity smash.'<sup>136</sup> This 'code of morals' characteristic of realist French fiction is best exemplified by Balzac's novels. In that regard, George Eliot's comment on *La Comédie humaine* is particularly significant. She liked the novels, but deplored the fact that they lacked 'a consistent set of moral values'.<sup>137</sup> Balzac's novels showed no respect for either social conventions or morals laws. In fact, French novels did not expound a belief in absolute moral standards, nor did they equate them with bourgeois values:

For the French, middle-class morality was not a compound of absolute standards to which the relative success or failure of any individuals within society might be referred. The dominant tradition was insurrection and the imminence of the revolutionary republic.<sup>138</sup>

Balzac, although not sympathetic to the 'revolutionary republic', was definitely not writing from a middle-class point of view. His realism, like Stendhal's, was very different from Victorian domestic realism. Balzac thought of himself as a social historian, and aimed at a total representation of life in all its puzzling contradictions:

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<sup>135</sup> Emile Forgues, 'William Wilkie Collins', *Revue des deux mondes*, xii (15 Novembre 1855), pp.815-48, reprinted in Page, *Wilkie Collins*, pp.62-66.

<sup>136</sup> Charles Dickens, quoted by Kenneth Robinson, *Wilkie Collins: A Biography*, second edition (London: Davis-Poynter, 1974), p.77.

<sup>137</sup> George Eliot, quoted by Nicholas Rance, *Wilkie Collins and Other Sensation Novelists: Walking the Moral Hospital* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), p.32.

<sup>138</sup> Rance, *Wilkie Collins and Other Sensation Novelists*, p.34.

saisir la nouvelle réalité dans ses rapports typiques ... trouver dans le chaos de la vie contemporaine ses essors cachés (sic) ... représenter la réalité telle qu'elle est mais d'une manière critique, en la jugeant et la condamnant .... *représenter la réalité sans l'approuver, et protester contre elle sans la fuir.*<sup>139</sup>

His novels showed the growing criminality of nineteenth-century France, its dullness and lack of belief in humanity. Furthermore, Balzac's novels did not focus on man in a domestic environment, but rather on the social nature of man. They showed how men are shaped and twisted by social, economic or political realities. This idea was subversive to the mid-Victorians, because if men were shaped by circumstances, moral values and other aspects of reality were similarly derived from social and economic considerations. The outlook was moral relativism.

Collins admired Balzac very much. In an 1859 review of a biography of Balzac, Collins wrote that *Le Père Goriot* 'unveil[ed] the hidden corruption of Parisian life in the interest of that highest morality belonging to no one nation and no one sect.'<sup>140</sup> Collins, therefore, questioned the Victorian association between morality and middle-class values. Although he was not totally free from the prejudices of his compatriots, as a man who lived a secret life he had personal reasons not to share their middle-class values. An important aspect of Collins' mission, like Balzac's, was to expose the vices of contemporary society. The plot of *The Woman in White*, for instance, echoes that of *Le Colonel Chabert* in two ways. First, both are based upon substitution of identity. Second, both show how virtue and innocence cannot survive in the corrupted state of society, be it Victorian society or that of the Restoration.<sup>141</sup> Like Balzac, Collins believed in the role of society in shaping men and values, and therefore in the relativity of most things. Fosco, a character possibly modelled on Balzac's Vautrin, functions as a spokesperson:

I am a citizen of the world, and I have met, in my time, with so many different sorts of virtue, that I am puzzled, in my old age, to say which is the right sort and which is the wrong. Here, in England, there is one

<sup>139</sup> Jan O. Fischer, *Epoque romantique et réalisme. Problèmes méthodologiques* (Praha: Université Charles IV, 1977), p.25. The author probably means 'ressorts cachés'.

<sup>140</sup> Wilkie Collins, 'Portrait of an Author, painted by his publisher', *Household Words* (June 1859), reprinted in *My Miscellanies* (London: Sampson Low, 1863).

<sup>141</sup> In *The Woman in White* Laura Fairlie's tormentors are punished, and she is rewarded with Walter's true love, whereas the more pessimistic Balzac offers no such providential outcome for Colonel Chabert.

virtue. And there, in China, there is another virtue. And John Englishman says my virtue is the genuine virtue. And John Chinaman says my virtue is the genuine virtue. And I say Yes to one, or No to the other, and am just as much bewildered about it in the case of John with the top-boots as I am in the case of John with the pigtail.<sup>142</sup>

Furthermore, the absence of an omniscient narrator, exemplified in English fiction by Trollope or Eliot, gave weight to the case for moral relativism. This was dangerously close to French theories of impersonality in fiction. As a narrator, Balzac avoids direct interventions to judge and interpret the conduct of his characters. The critical dimension of his realism is embedded in the narration itself, in the way the story develops.

It was, therefore, customary to associate any work of fiction featuring improper sensations with French fiction, and the sensationalists did not escape such labelling. In Collins' case, however, the link was particularly appropriate, for he had a particularly French approach to fiction.

### **C. Gothicising the domestic: exposing the dark side of Victorian society**

The Sensation novels explored the validity of domestic realism as an appropriate way to represent contemporary society by appropriating and mingling conventions of realism, romance or the French novel. While romance for the Victorians was associated with an unreal, fanciful world of fantastic happening, the Sensation novels were determined to find it in the everyday world, in the domestic sphere as well as in the city. They were, therefore, instances of romantic realism insofar as they viewed mundane reality through a highly coloured lens, and mingled the realistic with the symbolic. Like the Romans-Feuilletons, however, they found energy and passion in crime only, in the hidden side of Victorian society. Romantic motifs, therefore, tend to be of the dark kind, which accounts for the importance of the Gothic in the genre.

The Sensation novelists, notably Collins and Reade, claimed Dickens as their literary model. In the Preface to *Bleak House*, Dickens declared that he had 'purposely dwelt on the romantic side of life'.<sup>143</sup> For Dickens, romance could be found in modern life, however repellent and gloomy reality looked. That vision of reality made him a major example of romantic realism. According to Donald

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<sup>142</sup> Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), p.211.

<sup>143</sup> Charles Dickens, preface to *Bleak House* (London: Penguin Books, 1994), p.vi.

Fanger, 'realism ... tinged romantically with the sense of strangeness and wonder ... is Dickens' own contribution to fiction and to the varieties of romantic realism.'<sup>144</sup>

For Collins, 'Not one man in ten thousand living in the midst of reality has discovered that he is also living in the midst of romance.'<sup>145</sup> His novels systematically draw on the bizarre nature of modern life, the romantic mysteriousness of everyday life. As Henry James puts it, 'To Mr Collins belongs the credit of having introduced into fiction those most mysterious of mysteries, the mysteries which are at our own doors.'<sup>146</sup> In Collins' novels, trivial things such as an encounter with a stranger, or a business errand, become the starting point of an incredible story. His vivid imagination transforms familiar characters and places into strange things. In *The Woman in White*, Hampstead Heath becomes the realm of romance. As a strange woman turns up behind Walter Hartright, the latter suddenly wonders about the reality of the scene: 'Was I Walter Hartright? Was this the well-known, uneventful road, where holiday people strolled on Sundays?'<sup>147</sup> Seen under the distorting eye of the sensationalists, reality becomes a dream, and realism becomes fantastic realism.

Collins emphasised the mysterious and extraordinary nature of modern life by borrowing patterns and motifs from all sort of romance, old and modern. Both *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone* borrow from the chivalric tale and the fairy-tale. Both Walter Hartright and Franklin Blake are on a quest to prove their value and win the love of a woman. Walter, like many adventure heroes of lowly origin, has to win back Laura. She is a princess figure, lovely but unobtainable, imprisoned in an unhappy marriage and a country-house that looks like a castle. To win her, Walter has to fight his enemies, a wicked Baronet and his fiendish friend Fosco. Fosco is an adept of chemistry, a modern equivalent to black magic. There is a happy ending, the villains are punished and the pure rewarded. If this is the stuff fairy-tales are made of, it is nevertheless a facet of Victorian daily life. For Sue Lonoff, '*The Woman in White* is a fable for the time, a fairy-tale that offers a marvellous solution to a

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<sup>144</sup> Fanger, *Dostoevsky and Romantic Realism*, p.72.

<sup>145</sup> Wilkie Collins, *Heart and Science* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1883), p.32.

<sup>146</sup> Henry James, unsigned review, 'Miss Braddon', *Nation* (9 November 1865), pp.593-5, reprinted in Page, *Wilkie Collins*, p.122.

<sup>147</sup> Collins, *The Woman in White*, p.18.

genuine Victorian predicament.'<sup>148</sup> Laura's fate, indeed, is that of any woman married off by her father, much against her will. If *The Woman in White* evokes a medieval world of superstitions, *The Moonstone*, 'wild, and yet domestic', opposed tranquil England to India, the land of magic and hocus-pocus.<sup>149</sup>

*No Name*, which is free of supernatural elements, features a character that would not be out of place in a fantasy novel. As Kimberley Reynolds and Nicola Humble point out, Mrs Wragge, a giant, idiotic, yet gentle woman 'is the likely model for Carroll's White Queen: both are large, amiable and pathetic and both are entirely incapable of remaining tidy.'<sup>150</sup> Mrs Wragge is permanently puzzled by her husband's demands, and unable to perform the tasks that society ascribes to women. A comic and rather caricatured character, Mrs Wragge nonetheless illustrates the fact that the conventional role assigned to women did not take into account individual personalities or abilities. Collins' novels abound in grotesque, bizarre characters like Mrs Wragge. Another larger-than-life and consequently unrealistic character is the legless Dexter in *The Law and the Lady*, whom Collins conceived as a modern Centaur, half-man, half-machine. For Sue Lonoff, Dexter is 'a goblin, a troll...but definitely human', an illustration of the shock and disgust caused by Darwin's discovery of the animal heritage of the human race.<sup>151</sup> Significantly, Dexter is often compared to a monkey.

Fairy-tale elements and patterns of romance, therefore, are used to comment on society. In that respect, *The Woman in White* can be considered as a study in marriage and divorce. In a similar way, *No Name* looks at the law and its relationship with the family, and *Armadale* exposes the underworld of London. All novels point at the same conclusion: the cruelty and injustice of Victorian patriarchal society towards women and the weak. The Sensation novels, therefore, leaned towards the dark side of romance. The heroic or tender emotions usually associated with light romance were magnified and distorted,

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<sup>148</sup> Sue Lonoff, *Wilkie Collins and his Victorian Readers: A Study in the Rhetoric of Authorship* (New York: A. M. S. Press, 1982), p.92.

<sup>149</sup> Charles Dickens, letter to W. H. Wills (30 June 1867), reprinted in Page, *Wilkie Collins*, p.169.

<sup>150</sup> Kimberly Reynolds; Nicola Humble, *Victorian Heroines: Representations of Femininity in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Art* (New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), p.129.

<sup>151</sup> Lonoff, *Wilkie Collins and his Victorian Readers*, p.164.

and became sensations: horror, terror, fears. They did, however, tend to replace supernatural frights by earthly terrors, suggesting that evil was to be found in society and the human mind.

The presence of Gothic images and patterns in the novels, therefore, is not surprising. The Gothic novel, which flourished in the late eighteenth century, dealt with cruel passions such as crime and lust, and supernatural terrors in medieval settings like haunted castles or ruined monasteries. Its mode and atmosphere were gloomy and obsessive. The genre hoped to arouse feelings of horror and pity at the plight of its main character, usually a young girl tormented by a tyrant. The medieval background and the supernatural thrills typical of the early Gothic novels, however, are not essential. Any work concentrating on the bizarre, the macabre or aberrant psychological states may be called gothic.<sup>152</sup>

The Gothic novel aimed to expose another realm under the visible world, an unseen and mysterious world. In *The Moonstone*, Franklin Blake declares that 'the butcher, the baker, and the tax-gatherer, are not the only credible realities in existence to my mind', and indeed, the banal world of the Verinders is soon disturbed by foreign superstitions and old curses.<sup>153</sup> Collins' novels are pervaded with supernatural and occult elements. Like the Gothic novels, they abound in prophetic dreams, strange forebodings and superstitions. They blur the boundaries between the natural world and the supernatural world. As Ann Radcliffe did, Collins created stunning effects with superstitious thrills and mysteries that have an earthly rather than supernatural source. There are a number of ghosts and apparitions in Collins' novels, yet all are alive. The most obvious example is the ghostly Anne Catherick in *The Woman in White*. Locked in an asylum by a powerful man and a cruel mother, simple-minded, ill and poor, Anne Catherick's fate is more frightening than a mere ghost. In *No Name*, a novel that has nothing to do with the Gothic, there are two episodes featuring 'ghosts'. One of them recounts how Mrs Wragge mistakes Magdalen, disguised as Miss Garth, for a ghost. The Gothic imagery here similarly enhances Magdalen's loss of identity. Magdalen embodies the ultimate fears of the Victorians, social downgrading, dispossession, illegitimacy. As Nicolas Rance puts it, 'If ghosts in

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<sup>152</sup> Martin Gray, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Longman York Press, 1988), p.94.

<sup>153</sup> Collins, *The Moonstone*, p.72.

Gothic fiction signified a past as liable to erupt into an enlightened present, Collins substituted the present for the past as a source of dread.<sup>154</sup>

Another substitution regarding the source of fear is that of the familiar for the alien. Fear does not proceed from some vague supernatural threat but from society's patriarchal structures. In that sense, although the Sensation novels evoke various Gothic novelists, the main influence is the female Gothic:

As developed by such figures as Ann Radcliffe, who popularised the genre in the 1790s, the female Gothic maps a plot of domestic victimisation. In the Radcliffean Gothic, the castles in which the heroines are imprisoned are nightmarish images of the home, and the coercive villains versions of male authority figures.<sup>155</sup>

Radcliffe's novels marked, according to Alice Killen, 'l'apothéose de la jeune fille'.<sup>156</sup> Her novels revolve around a young and unhappy heroine kept prisoner and persecuted by some evil figure, and ultimately rescued by a youthful hero. Like the Radcliffean novel, the Sensation novel revolves around the exploration of the heroine's fears and dramatises female nervousness. For Tamar Heller, for whom Collins' novels are the product of a male author influenced by female forms of gothic, *The Woman in White* is 'at once an extraordinary feminist, as well as Radcliffean, work.'<sup>157</sup> It is in fact an up-to-date rewriting of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. Particularly significant to the Gothic novel is the image of female imprisonment, and its link with madness: Laura and Marian try to resist male violence in *The Woman in White*; Laura ends up in an asylum, her sanity denied, while Marian's illness puts her in the power of the male villains. Peripheral to the novel but strangely recurrent are the imprisoned women of *Armadale*. The grotesque Mrs Milroy, an invalid woman embittered by her illness and the loss of her youth, is a secret 'household misery'.<sup>158</sup> During a surreal episode of the novel, Ozias and Allan are trapped on a wreck off the islet of the Calf. When they cry out for help, they

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<sup>154</sup> Rance, *Wilkie Collins and Other Sensation Novelists*, p.53.

<sup>155</sup> Tamar Heller, *Dead Secrets: Wilkie Collins and the Female Gothic* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), p.2.

<sup>156</sup> Alice M. Killen, *Le Roman terrifiant ou Roman noir de Walpole à Ann Radcliffe et son influence sur la littérature française jusqu'en 1840* (Paris: Champion, 1924), p.32.

<sup>157</sup> Heller, *Dead Secrets*, p.112.

<sup>158</sup> Collins, *Armadale*, p.197.

are answered by the cry of a madman, mingled with that of a terrified woman.<sup>159</sup>

Through the fate of its main characters, *Armadale* conveys the Gothic notion of domesticity as nightmare, and marriage as imprisonment. In *The Law and the Lady*, Valeria is left with the task of finding out about her husband's first marriage in order to save her own. Eustace, a bluebeard figure, was tried for the murder of his first wife, but has kept this fact hidden from his wife. On the contrary, in *Armadale*, it is Ozias' knowledge of Lydia's first marriage that will ultimately save him. In her previous marriage, as in all her relationships, Lydia Gwilt has been wrongly used by men. Her past triggers a reaction symbolised by a reversal of the Gothic pattern. The story of Ozias Armadale is more about male victimisation at the hands of women, climaxing with the image of Ozias locked in the room of Doctor Downward's Sanatorium, at the mercy of his wife Lydia. Female revenge, however, is impeded at the very last moment: Lydia frees Ozias, and takes his place in the deadly room. For Heller:

Collins ... uses the Gothic not only to tell a story about female victimisation, but also to encode a plot of feminine subversion that resembles a narrative pattern feminist critics have identified in nineteenth-century writings.<sup>160</sup>

Female subversion, however, is ultimately crushed, either through death, or through the conversion of strong women into obedient housewives. Both solutions nonetheless deconstruct the Gothic image of female imprisonment to expose it as the ultimate condition of women in nineteenth-century society.

Collins' novels are also Gothic in their emphasis on the macabre, on aberrant mental and physical states. That aspect of his fiction has long repelled critics. Collins' portraits of insanity and disease, however, are often strong points in his novels, schematic yet impressive studies in alienation. Anne Catherick is associated with death throughout the novel, from her first ghost-like appearance on the London road to her final destination, the grave. One of her obsessions concerns the dead Mrs Fairlie, with whom she constantly wishes

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<sup>159</sup> Nuel Davies reports how Collins saw a madman being pursued by a farmer and his wife while he was visiting the Isle of Man in preparation for *Armadale*. Collins was shocked to discover that the Manx authorities had made no provision for the lunatics of the island. Their families had to take care of them. This incident is modified in *Armadale* so that the focus is not on the madman but on the injured woman. See note 2, Chapter IV, *Armadale*, p.688.

<sup>160</sup> Heller, *Dead Secret*, p.3.

to be reunited. Anne recurrently appears in graveyards, kneeling by Mrs Fairlie's grave. Her progress in the story maps out her mental and physical degeneration, a process made all the more pervasive as it is duplicated through the fate of her look-alike Laura Fairlie. Both characters are, however, harmless and gentle. On the other hand, a character like Dexter is disturbing. He partakes of the unhappy, gloomy villain of Radcliffe's novels, and of the lustful tyrant of Walpole's novel. Everything, however, is magnified and distorted by the unsteady state of his mind and the horrible infirmity of his body. Alternatively quiet and hysteric, straightforward and insidious, witty and imbecile, Dexter gives a picture of the working of the mind, in its splendour and its decadence.

Collins' attraction towards the macabre can be ascribed to his long history of health-problems. Born with a strangely shaped head, he was also plagued by recurrent illness and depression. The rheumatic gout that affected most of his life was checked by the use of laudanum, yet the long-term use of opium took his toll on him, giving him terrible hallucinations.

Finally, the Gothic mode in the Sensation novels has some affinities with the notion of the Romantic grotesque. Collins was influenced by some aspects of Romanticism, notably Hugo's conception of the grotesque. Like Collins, Hugo seemed to put the extreme before the normal, the ugly before the beautiful. Collins' grotesque is particularly Hugolian in its frightening and tragic aspect. For Bakhtin, the Romantic grotesque is particularly dark:

The world of Romantic grotesque is to a certain extent a terrifying world, alien to man. ... Our world becomes an alien world. Something frightening is revealed in that which was habitual and secure ... The images of Romantic grotesque usually express fear of the world and seek to inspire their readers with fear ... In Romantic grotesque ... madness acquires a sombre aspect of individual isolation.<sup>161</sup>

The darkness of Collins' universe comes out when compared to Féval's grotesque creations. Characters such as Echalot and Maman Léo are symbols of life's richness and of regeneration. They are optimistic creations in the face of adversity and perversity. The Févalian grotesque, therefore, transcends the romantic grotesque and recalls the older form of the popular grotesque. On the other hand, Mrs Milroy or Dexter, who equally symbolise life's complexity, have tragic rather than cheerful overtones. They evoke death rather than life. Féval's grotesque highlights the sublime; Collins' grotesque the terrible.

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<sup>161</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, p.39.

Like the French Roman-Feuilleton, the Sensation novel is built on romantic principles, including the ultimate generator of grotesque, the law of contrast. In the Preface to *No Name*, Collins asserts his belief in the mixture of comic and tragic that characterises human life:

Round the central figure in the narrative, other characters will be found grouped, in sharp contrast - contrasts, for the most part, in which I have endeavoured to make the element of humour mainly predominant. I have sought to impart this relief to the more serious passages in the book, not only because I believed myself to be justified in doing so by the laws of Art - but because experience has taught me ... that there is no such moral phenomenon as unmixed tragedy to be found in the world around us. Look where we may, the dark threads and the light cross each other perpetually in the texture of human life.<sup>162</sup>

Humour in Collins' novels, however, differs from that of Féval. There is no such thing as a self-mocking narrator who simultaneously magnifies and debunks its grotesque creations. In the Romantic grotesque, 'laughter .... ceased to be a joyful and triumphant hilarity. Its positive regenerating power was reduced to a minimum'.<sup>163</sup> Collins' humour, indeed, verges on the cruel or the insane. *No Name's* Mrs Wragge, a Dickensian grotesque, is a rather sad creation. In *The Moonstone*, Miss Clack's narrative, however hilarious, is nonetheless threatening insofar as it proceeds from a fanatical view of the world. Finally, Dexter's antics in *The Law and the Lady* provoke uneasy laughter. Despite its happy endings, and its middlebrow quality, Collins' universe is much darker than that of the Roman-Feuilleton.

#### **D. Dialogism and carnivalisation: the 'popularity' of the Sensation novel**

The novels evoke a multitude of texts and genres, and offer an endless confrontation of meanings: they are essentially dialogic. Their dialogism is twofold; it is both formal and essential. To their variety of styles and registers correspond the ambiguities of their meaning. They clearly offered an alternative to the dominant genre of the 1850s, the domestic novels, which associated monologic form to monologic content. This alternative view, however, was essentially ambivalent. The links between Collins' universe, with its counter-values and subversive attitudes, and conventional mid-Victorian literature are obvious. Culture depends on what it excludes, and counter-culture relies by definition on what it parodies or criticises.

<sup>162</sup> Collins, Preface to *No Name*, p.xxi.

<sup>163</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, p.38.

Collins' attitude towards norms and conventions is significantly ambiguous, and tensions characterise the progress of the stories. In *The Law and the Lady*, for instance, Collins pushes Victorian values to their extremities, demonstrating their inner contradictions. Valeria's quest is motivated by devotion to her husband; she believes in his innocence and ultimately saves him. In that regard, her behaviour conforms to the rules of the Victorian ideal of the sacrificing woman. Valeria is nonetheless constantly criticised by the other characters for losing her feminine sweetness and propriety in the course of her investigation, and, in fact, acting like a man. In *The Woman in White*, Laura's fate symbolises the closeness between feminine dependence and passivity and mental disease. The Sensation novels voice tensions and fears about the social system, yet ultimately reassured their readers with romantic solutions. There is a dual perspective on events and characters as regards, for instance, the injustice done to women and female rebellion. The novels convey the conviction that women will never be forced into the role of Angel in the House. They celebrate the triumph of female rebellion. On the other hand, as a male writer from a patriarchal society, Collins tends to punish female transgressors, or to come round to the idea that women's happiness relies on domesticity. Seen from another perspective, it could be said that most novels end on a utopian vision whereby opposite impulses are reconciled. In *No Name*, Magdalen gets back everything she had lost: her inheritance and her name, a husband and society's regard. On the other hand, the Sensation novels are obviously cathartic. Built on a stylisation of chaos and order, they release tensions and dramatise fears about society, while entertaining their readers with a good story. Like carnival according to Bakhtin, they function as safety valves.

The Sensation novels feature fewer traditional motifs such as crownings of fools or parades than in the Roman-Feuilleton. They only evoke carnival in attenuated forms such as masks, disguises and an attraction for theatrical performances. However, other popular motifs and attitudes present in carnivalesque manifestations abound. Popular culture, for instance, is irrational. It makes no distinction between the natural world and the supernatural: no more do the Sensation novels. Popular culture is characterised by orality and dramatisation, and dominated by an impulse towards repetition; the Sensation novels are dramas with set episodes, such as confrontation and exposure scenes. The most characteristic carnivalesque feature of the Sensation

novels is, of course, the ambiguous discourse about official culture and values encapsulated by the image of the world upside down. One obvious facet of the inversion, which is conveyed by many contrasts and analogies, is the ambiguous domination of women over men. The Wragge couple is Collins' version of the popular actors of a charivari, that carnivalesque manifestation which also sought to punish social anomalies such as female infidelity and physical abuse of husbands. Such manifestations would punish the wife, but also mock the husband. Mrs Wragge, a giant, could very well dominate her rather small husband. Their union is indeed grotesque. She is, however, the victim of Captain Wragge's cruelty and selfishness, symbolising the real inversion, that of the husband's exploitation of the wife that he is supposed to protect. In that sense, the Wragge couple can be thought of as the grotesque double of, say, the Vanstones, for injustice exists among the rich and the poor. Collins shows awareness that social institutions and social values are, therefore, artificial and precarious.

Finally, the Sensation novels display a typically ambiguous attraction towards criminal heroes. Another facet of the world upside down image is the domination of the criminal figure over the virtuous hero. Ballads and broadsheets of old times were never as popular as when they recounted the exploits or the execution of famous criminals. A picture of vice framed with calls to virtue and moral is probably the most popular subject matter in the world. The popular mind, therefore, celebrates both the greatness of rebellion and the necessity of discipline and social morals.<sup>164</sup> The Sensation novels, suffused with this spirit, ultimately revolve around notions such as good and evil or punishment and reward. They are about justice for the people by the people. *The Woman in White*, structured as a court-case, recounts how two impoverished characters take the law into their own hands to palliate the weakness of society's institutions. Such an attitude allows characters to put themselves above the law, in the position of outsiders, to denounce the wicked and the failings of the law itself. Villains are usually powerful men of wealth, and the law protects them. Power and wealth, however, are temporary and fallible.

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<sup>164</sup> See Victor E. Neuburg, *Popular Literature: A History and Guide* (London: The Woburn Press, 1977).

The Sensation novel, therefore, is carnivalesque in spirit and structure. As D. A. Miller puts it, 'There is nothing boring about the Sensation novel.'<sup>165</sup> They have a unique entertainment value, and constitute a carnivalesque feast of creative imagination. They also have a political flavour, pointing out abuse through the figure of the transgressor. Their cyclic structure from order to disorder, and back to order, serves as a means to evoke and punish deviance, to classify what is socially acceptable or not, by means of contrasts and allegories. In *No Name*, the contrast between Magdalen Vanstone and her sister Norah, or perversity versus innocence, provides a way to explore extremes of behaviour. The risk of scapegoating is permanent, all the more as the novels convey an acute sense of the fragility and artificiality of social structures and hierarchies.

There are, therefore, powerful links between the Sensation novel, that product of modern life, and ancestral popular culture. The rebellious impulse inherent in all popular manifestations dominates, all the more threatening as mid-Victorian obsession with conventions and respectability hardly hid insecurities and social uncertainties.

### Conclusion

The Roman-Feuilleton and the Sensation novels were characterised by a mingling of genres and, notably, a specific balance between realism and Romanticism. They both partook of what Donald Fanger called 'romantic realism', a literary mode characterised by the need to simultaneously give a realistic account of contemporary society, and a romantic desire to expose its excitement and heroism. Although they belonged to different cultures, both authors lived in an increasingly materialistic society where religious values were being questioned. Both the Roman-Feuilleton and the Sensation novel answered people's need for greatness and something sacred. Both genres did so by means of heightening characters and situations. In that respect, as will be seen, both flirted with melodrama, a genre that relies on simplification and exaggerations. The impulse towards romance meant that both the Roman-Feuilleton and the Sensation novel borrowed motifs and patterns from fairy-tales or myths. Both genres were grounded in reality, yet they were concerned with what lay beyond the surface of things and with strange and unaccountable

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<sup>165</sup> D. A. Miller, 'Cages Aux Folles: Sensation and Gender in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*', in *The Nineteenth-Century British Novel*, edited by Jeremy Hawthorn (London: Edward Arnold, 1986), p.95.

events. It is not surprising, therefore, that a keen insistence on gothic and fantastic elements particularly characterised them. Both conveyed the belief in the chaotic and sometimes irrational aspect of contemporary life and society. Their desire to show the romance and the heroism of life, and in so doing to provide escapist entertainment to their readers, was counterbalanced by the realisation that the romance of modern life was of the dark kind. In that respect, they offered indirect critical comment on society.

The mingling of genres is particularly striking in the novels of Collins and its effect all the more effective as realist conventions were barely accepted when the Sensation novels questioned them again. The Sensation novels were a new genre that both invoked and subverted the dominant literary mode of the time, domestic realism. They also undermined the dominant representation of society by exposing its hidden aspects, most of which related to the plight of women in a patriarchal society, and to the socially constructed nature of conventions and values.

The Roman-Feuilleton, on the other hand, featured a balance that leaned towards romance and stylised Romanticism rather than realism, which made them less obviously prone to a subversive representation of reality. Furthermore, Féval wrote the *Habits Noirs* series twenty years after the first truly popular serial novel, Sue's *Mystères de Paris*. He addressed himself to an audience that had become blasé. Féval's answer was to offer ironic variations on worn out motifs and patterns of the genre, resulting for example in degraded myths. This makes of *Les Habits Noirs* a self-reflexive text and one that provides a pessimistic vision of contemporary society in a way similar to the Sensation novel. Féval, however, did not believe in didacticism in fiction. Furthermore, as a royalist and a favourite of the Second Empire leaders, he was not interested in exposing the plight of the poor or in offering revolutionary solutions. *Les Habits Noirs* offers instead an allegory of social ills and an indirect comment on certain aspects of society such as the illegitimacy of its present hierarchy, the weakness of its legal institutions or its obsession with money making.

In their own ways, the sensational nature of both sets of texts does not reside so much in their mingling or stylisation of genres, but from the reality they depicted, a reality closer to the truth than their readers would have liked. Collins' novels, indeed, encapsulated the spirit of the 1860s, a period of loss of faith in old values, dissatisfaction with the present and doubts about the future.

They dealt with concerns of the time in a highly coloured form and an ambiguous way, providing alternative values and models, before finally upholding conventions. Féval's novels, although less anchored in reality and less socially engaged, reflected the Second Empire's lack of idealism and loss of faith in men's moral improvement. However, they did not put forward specific social solutions, but took refuge instead in the individual values of the heroes.

Both genres, therefore, had a unique entertainment value relying on shocks, surprises and humour. On the other hand, they moved towards social critique, simultaneously undermining social conventions and hierarchies and expressing a belief in the necessity of their existence. Their twofold nature as both escapist and serious, or cathartic and subversive is truly popular in the sense that Bakhtin gave to this word. They are dialogic and carnivalesque texts that express the diversity of life. Far from being a kind of industrial and production line literature, artificially fabricated in the first half of the nineteenth century, both genres have been shown to belong to a long tradition that goes back to popular culture and folklore. Finally, the use of Bakhtin has underlined the greater popularity of Féval's narratives. Whereas traditional popular motifs such as rites of inversion and other images of the world upside down abound in *Les Habits Noirs*, they exist only in attenuated forms in Collins' narratives. This can be ascribed to the focus on domestic realism in the latter texts.

The following section will be devoted to the main genre invoked by both the Roman-Feuilleton and the Sensation novel, the theatre, with particular reference to melodrama. An investigation of the way the theatre functions as a formal influence and a theme within both genres will also provide more insight into the way those popular texts simultaneously entertain and offer social criticism.

### Chapter III: Theatre and the novel.

#### Introduction

The interest of both *feuilletonistes* and sensationalists in life's dramatic events and their methods of heightening and stylising both characters and situations make their novels akin to stage drama. The theatre exerted a formal influence on the Roman-Feuilleton and the Sensation novel, providing them with familiar themes and treatments. Two kinds of reasons account for such situation: the immense popularity of stage melodrama in both France and England at the time, and the intense interest in the stage shared by both Féval and Collins.

The 1820s and 1830s were one of the great heydays of Parisian theatre, and saw the triumph of melodrama followed by that of Romantic drama. Féval, like most nineteenth-century French writers, was fascinated by the theatre. He was aware that his readership's taste had been formed by the stage, and shared with his readers a common tissue of theatrical references. He himself wrote eighteen plays, including six adapted from his own novels. Some, such as *Le Bossu*, which he adapted in collaboration with Anicet Bourgeois and Victorien Sardou, were great successes; most were not. Féval's relative failure on the stage made him bitter and led him to reject the stage altogether in his later life.

Collins shared with Féval a life-long obsession with the stage. A keen participant in amateur dramatics, in 1851 he joined the Devonshire House circle, Dickens' theatrical company. His first role was the part of Dickens' servant in Bulwer-Lytton's *Not So Bad As We Seem*. This initiated a friendship and a professional collaboration between Collins and Dickens. The English stage, however, did not satisfy the former. Theatre in England was far from being the prestigious genre that it was in France. The stage was deserted by good writers, and dominated by popular but poor adaptations of French plays. Along with Charles Reade, another sensationalist, Collins was one of the few Victorians to write stage adaptations of his novels.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> That was partly to protect his plays from other people's adaptations, as there were no copyright laws. Collins shared Féval's advocacy of international copyright laws.

Two early successes fuelled Collins' theatrical ambitions. In 1855, Dickens' company performed Collins' melodrama, *The Lighthouse*. The next year, *The Frozen Deep*, written in collaboration with Dickens, was a great success. However, Collins' third attempt at stage drama, *The Red Vial*, was a disaster.<sup>2</sup> Collins was mortified by his failure and soon turned to the French stage. Dickens and he had been in the habit of indulging their passion for the stage by regularly visiting the Parisian theatres, favouring the popular stage. Collins had been led to believe that dramatists in France earned 70-80, 000 francs a year.<sup>3</sup> He had always hoped that his friend Régnier, of the Comédie Française, would launch him on the French stage. To fulfil his dream, Collins would have gladly sacrificed his novelist career, all the more as he primarily thought of himself as a dramatist:

If I had been a Frenchman - with such a public to write for, such rewards to win, and such actors to interpret me, as the French stage presents, all the stories I have written, from "Antonina" to "The Woman in White" would have been told in the dramatic form... if I know anything of my faculty it is a *dramatic* one.<sup>4</sup>

The adaptation of *Armada* on the French stage in 1866 did not make him rich; but the subsequent French adaptations of *The Woman in White* and *The New Magdalen*, both organised by Régnier in 1871 and 1873, brought him fame and fortune. More generally, Collins' hard work paid off in the 1870s. His novels were all adapted for the stage and professionally played. This brought him fame in England, France and America.

The influence of the theatre as a genre on both the Roman-Feuilleton and the Sensation novel is not restricted to formal aspects such as their dramatic and scenic quality. The theatre is also part of the thematic content of the novels in two different ways. Specific characters are associated with the stage. They are mostly women in Collins' novels, and young men in those of Féval. In both sets of texts, villains, both male and female, are also linked to the stage. On the one hand, such self-reflexive use of the theatre as a theme becomes, especially

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<sup>2</sup> Catherine Peters recounts that the audience laughed at the dramatic climax of the play. Henry Morley analyses the failure of *The Red Vial*, ascribing it to a lack of comic sub-plot that would have provided some relief for the audience and satisfied their love of the absurd. *The King of Inventors: A Life of Wilkie Collins* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991), p.183.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p.67.

<sup>4</sup> Wilkie Collins, quoted by Catherine Peters, *The King of Inventors*, p.239.

in the novels of Collins, a way to explore the workings of a society characterised by pretence and duplicity. On the other hand, and particularly in the novels of Féval, it becomes a means to comment on the relationships between fiction and reality.

## Part 1. The theatre in Paul Féval's *Les Habits Noirs*

### A. A question of form: the theatricality of *Les Habits Noirs*

In the third book of *The Republic*, Plato made a distinction between two modes of representation. Facts and words can be reported in a narrative, through the use of indirect speech, that is, the mediation of a narrator. This is what Plato called diegesis. Facts and words can also be reported through dialogue, or direct speech. This is mimesis, or imitation. This distinction served as a basis for a classification of genres, according to Plato. The first is pure narration. The second, pure mimesis, corresponds to the theatre.<sup>5</sup>

What characterises Féval's novels, and indeed the bulk of French Romans-Feuilletons, is the use of mimesis or dialogue. The theatricality of Féval's novels can mainly be ascribed to the use of dialogue and monologue. As we mentioned in a previous section on narrative structures, Féval's novels share some formal features with tragedy. Characters' comments on events seem almost more important than the events themselves. A chorus of characters commenting on a past event is a recurrent scene in *Les Habits Noirs*. The analysis of the beginning of *Maman Léo* may serve to isolate the specific use of dialogue in Féval's novels.

*Maman Léo* is the sequel to *L'Arme invisible*. One month has elapsed since the events recounted in the earlier novel took place. The novel ended with the dramatic suicide of Rémy d'Arx, who was in love with Valentine de Villanove. Rémy d'Arx first discovered that Valentine loved another man, Maurice, who had been wrongly charged with a murder committed by the Habits Noirs. Furthermore, Valentine de Villanove, in a typical plot twist, turned out to be Rémy's long lost sister. The Habits Noirs exploited the situation by claiming that Rémy did not commit suicide but was murdered by Maurice. *Maman Léo*, a

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<sup>5</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, III (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Loeb Classical Library, 1937), 392c to 395. Plato distinguishes a third mode of representation, which combines narration and mimesis, and corresponds to the epic genre.

mother figure for the young lovers, had helped them fight the Habits Noirs. Now Maurice is back in prison, Valentine is ill, and Maman Léo has heard nothing of them. This summary of past events could have been given by the main narrator of *Maman Léo*, Féval himself, in a few lines. Instead, a couple of chapters are devoted to the recapitulation of past events by a handful of characters. Maman Léo asks to be reminded of the facts, because, she says, she has been so worn down by the sad outcome of things that she has withdrawn from everything for a month.<sup>6</sup> This pretext is not altogether convincing, but the narrative choice results in greater vivacity, a characteristic feature of Féval's novels.

Facts and words are not reported through the mediation of a narrator, which means that the distance between readers and the characters and their discourse is considerably reduced. Therefore, the use of direct speech enhances the dramatic illusion. Furthermore, the use of dialogue helps to create livelier characterisation insofar as all characters have their own particular style, and react to the situation in their own particular way. This scene takes place in Maman Léo's Grand Théâtre Universel et National, which is, in fact, a circus. The scene introduces new characters, including Gondrequin, also called 'Militaire', because of his passion for all things military. His love of the military shows through his language: 'C'est l'instant, c'est le moment, dit-il tout bas, fixe! et tenez-vous ferme dans les rangs, maman.'<sup>7</sup> Similar, a character familiar to readers, displays his usual vanity in picturesque imagery and bombastic style:

Si aussi bien on m'avait demandé la chose, au lieu de s'adresser au fabricant de croûtes et teinturier en guenilles, on aurait vu comment je sais charmer une assemblée par l'élocution de ma parole!<sup>8</sup>

The orality of the text should be pointed out. Exclamations, question marks, calls to his audience punctuate Baroque's speech:

"La fille de chambre se fit un peu prier, puis elle donna l'adresse du logement garni de la rue d'Anjou.

" Est-ce un guet-apens, oui ou non? Du reste, la servante a été en prison.

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Féval, *Maman Léo* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1987), pp.16-17.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p.16.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p.18

“Ce qui se passa dans le logement garni, dame! je n’y étais pas pour le voir, mais la justice fut avertie.<sup>9</sup>

This scene is a microcosm of Paris, where, as Baruque mentions, people talk about things: ‘C’est sûr que Paris est bavard, et qu’il y a des propos qui vont et qui viennent.’<sup>10</sup> Baruque’s comment also emphasises a typical feature of the French Roman-Feuilleton. As Jean-Claude Vareille points out, since events, opinions and feelings tend to be represented by direct speech, characters must have a gift for speech:

Il en résulte que les personnages du roman populaire sont d’incorrigibles bavards: ils parlent tout le temps, même durant les actions les plus violentes, pendant qu’ils courent, pendant qu’ils tuent, pendant qu’ils meurent bien entendu.<sup>11</sup>

Even when they are on their own, characters are always talking, resulting in a high occurrence of monologues.

In the light of Peter Brooks’ analysis of the melodramatic imagination, this fixation on speech is to be put down to a ‘desire to express all ... a fundamental characteristic of the melodramatic mode.’<sup>12</sup> Characters of melodramas have a constant need to speak out, they use words as a magic tool to articulate relationships, identities and truths. In the world of *Les Habits Noirs*, concerned with secret plans and hidden truths, words are essential. It is through talking that the truth can be exposed. Maman Léo’s desire to arouse herself from silence is the first step towards the unveiling of the truth.

Finally, even when dialogue is not the main mode of representation, it nonetheless tends to invade the narration. In *La Rue de Jérusalem*, Paul’s letter to his brother is characterised by the retranscription of everything he said to Lecoq, and everything that he was told by Lecoq. Signs of direct speech such as ‘I asked him’ or ‘he said’ abound.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., pp.20-21.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p.14.

<sup>11</sup> Jean-Claude Vareille, *Le Roman populaire français (1789-1914). Idéologies et pratiques. Le trompette de la Bérésina* (Limoges: PULIM/Nuit Blanche Editeur, 1994), p.230

<sup>12</sup> Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976), p.4. For a broader discussion of the influence of the melodrama on Féval and the French Roman-Feuilleton, see the previous section on Genres and registers.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Féval, *La Rue de Jérusalem* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1987), p.844.

As was mentioned in the chapter on narrative structures, Féval's favourite mode of exposition is the scene. Scenes are essentially theatrical in two ways. First, as in the theatre, every single component of a scene is meaningful. Theatre is a total spectacle: the text gives information, so do the gestures of the actors, their costumes, the set, the lights, etc. Second, scenes tend to constitute dramatic moments of confrontation, of unexpected revelation, *coups de théâtre* where characters under the influence of strong emotions emphatically express themselves. Scenes are a heightened and intense representation of life. According to Peter Brooks:

The scene represents a victory over repression, a climactic moment at which the characters are able to confront one another with full expressivity, to fix in large gestures the meaning of their relations and existence.<sup>14</sup>

The same expressivity is to be found in Févalian scenes. *Les Habits Noirs* is clearly ruled by this impulse towards dramatisation and theatricality. A closer look at a scene from *La Rue de Jérusalem* may serve to illustrate that aspect of the texts. Coyatier, the Habits Noirs' killer, is asked to abduct a young girl, called Suavita. If something goes wrong, he has been told, he must kill her. The setting of the crime is simple, but striking. Once into Suavita's apartment, Coyatier settles in the lounge. He searches about the place, finds some food, sets the table, and starts eating. Next to the lounge is the bedroom, brightly lit, where Suavita sleeps. Since he killed his wife in a fit of jealousy, Coyatier has been obsessed with women, whom he hates. The mere sight of a woman enrages him and provokes a fit of violence. Suavita, therefore, must die. The scene is built on the dramatic contrast between the fearful killer and his innocent victim. However, Coyatier cannot fully accept what he has become, and his anguish at the thought of committing a new murder is another aspect of the scene. The signs of fear abound. Everything, gestures, movements, words, goes towards highlighting the horror of the situation. Coyatier tries to eat, but he cannot swallow. He drinks, but the wine tastes bitter. He puts his head in his arms, he pulls his hair, both conventional and theatrical gestures of despair. He cannot speak, but stammers. He thinks aloud, he suddenly gets up to look out of the window, where, typically, there is an ominous full moon. At one moment, he

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<sup>14</sup> Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, p.4.

finally decides to go into the bedroom, but finds himself in front of a mirror, where his reflection, distorted by the light of the fire, frightens him:

La lampe de la cheminée éclairait ses traits en plein.

Il recula comme si quelqu'un l'eût pris aux cheveux par-derrière.

Jamais il ne s'était vu pâle. - Et il était pâle comme un mort.<sup>15</sup>

Other signs of fear abound, such as sweating and shaking. Such an accumulation of information, most of which is symbolic, refers us to melodrama, which Peter Brooks defines as 'a drama of the sign':

We should at present recognise that the drama of the sign is played out across a whole scale, or staff, or code - or perhaps more accurately, a set of different registers of the sign, which can reinforce and also relay one another. Melodrama tends towards total theatre.<sup>16</sup>

Mentions of Coyatier's repulsive physical appearance, especially his hands, the weapon of the crime, contrast with allusions to Suavita's innocence and fragility. Words are chosen for their ability to evoke emotions and for their visual quality: 'Ses mains se rapprochaient toujours. Elles tranchèrent bientôt, rugueuses et brunes, sur le cou blanc de Suavita.'<sup>17</sup> The climax of the scene is delayed as it takes Coyatier several attempts to bring himself to kill the little girl. Finally, still half-asleep, Suavita mistakes Coyatier for her father and calls him 'papa':

Puis, ses sens s'éveillant, elle eut doute; ses narines délicates perçurent avec dégoût ces horribles effluves qu'épandent à profusion le sordide séjour des prisons et des bouges, la misère, le vice, le crime.

Elle ouvrit les yeux tout à fait.

Elle vit cette tête énorme, crépue, hideuse, qui pendait sur elle comme un impur cauchemar.

Une épouvante indicible la saisit.

Elle poussa un cri rauque, et retomba sur son lit, évanouie.<sup>18</sup>

Everything is theatrical about this scene. It is intense, frightening and pathetic. It involves strong emotions and passions, such as violence and hate. It aims at arousing strong emotions in readers, such as fear, pity, and horror. It is both a scene of dramatic confrontation and a scene of unexpected discovery,

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<sup>15</sup> Féval, *La Rue de Jérusalem*, p.820.

<sup>16</sup> Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, p.46.

<sup>17</sup> Féval, *La Rue de Jérusalem*, p.821.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p.822.

followed by a reversal of situation. Moved by Suavita's early mistake, Coyatier decides not to kill her, but to protect her instead.

Scenes of confrontation are the most theatrical of all. The climactic end of a novel is likely to be a scene of confrontation, which offers the greatest dramatic value. All will be said, hidden links between characters will be exposed, innocence will be exposed, and villainy unmasked. The truth is encompassed by a verbal act of nomination, accompanied by symbolic gestures. In *Coeur d'Acier*, the plot revolves around the improper solicitation of a legacy. The villain, Marguerite, seeks to impose an impostor for the title of Duke of Clare. Her evil plan involves the impersonation of Nita de Clare, one of her enemies. While impersonating Nita, Marguerite is literally and figuratively unmasked by Rose de Malevoy: 'Celle-ci vous assassinait l'un par l'autre! dit une voix éclatante. Roland, mon frère! Celle-ci n'est pas Nita de Clare!'<sup>19</sup> At the same time, the identity of the real Duke of Clare is proclaimed: 'Sur mon honneur et ma conscience, prononça lentement l'autre domino noir, en désignant Roland, ce jeune homme est le fils de Thérèse (sic), duchesse de Clare!'<sup>20</sup>

At the end of *Les Habits Noirs*, after a confrontation between the villain Lecoq and the hero André, there is a short but violent struggle between them, which takes place in a dark room. What is going on is not clear, until the narration focuses on the outcome of the struggle, in a kind of tableau, where the symbolic position of the two characters is fixed and given for all to see:

André Maynotte était debout, tenant à la main le couteau qu'il avait arraché aux doigts crispés de Lecoq. Celui-ci ... gisait sur le parquet comme une masse inerte. Ce n'était plus ce *faiseur* fanfaron, moqueur, effronté, rondement cynique ... Le masque avait glissé sur le visage de l'Ajax des Habits Noirs. Le masque tombé laissait voir l'épilepsie enragée d'un scélérat vaincu.<sup>21</sup>

This device of using a tableau at the end of a significant scene is highly theatrical. Indeed, most melodramas from the 1830s featured tableaux as a kind of visual recapitulation. In *Les Compagnons du Trésor*, this device of a tableau is explored in several ways. The primal scene of the novel is the ritual murder of the leader of the Habits Noirs by his successor, who must either be his son or his father. This scene happens twice, each time with different protagonists. One is

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<sup>19</sup> Paul Féval, *Coeur d'Acier* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1987), p.738.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Paul Féval, *Les Habits Noirs* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1987), p.388.

anterior to the story, the other takes place at the end of the novel. This scene, a symbol of the Habits Noirs' self-regeneration, is highly dramatic. It involves two symbolic objects, the weapon of the crime, and the key to the treasure that the defeated ruler has to pass on to the victorious successor. It has a sacred quality enhanced by the ritual words pronounced by the criminal. This scene, which makes a perfect tableau, is actually fixed and visualised in a more literal way since it exists as a picture, painted by, according to Féval, a mysterious painter called Le Brigand.<sup>22</sup>

A previous section on the narrative structures in Féval's novels showed how the Roman-Feuilleton highlighted its own structures, and how Féval as a narrator provided a commentary on his text. It is not surprising, therefore, that the theatricality of the texts should be enhanced in the same way. Chapter headings often refer to the theatre as a genre, and announce their scenic nature. In *La Rue de Jérusalem*, the last chapters are respectively called 'Dernier tableau, scène première', and 'Dernière scène du dernier tableau'.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, the theatricality of the scenes is underlined within the action. In *Coeur d'Acier*, Marguerite's sudden appearance among the Habits Noirs is very theatrical.

-C'est convenu, fut-il acclamé. Part à neuf!

Une voix sonore et nette s'éleva derrière la chaise du maître clerc.

-Part à dix! prononça-t-elle d'un accent impérieux et profond.

Ce fut comme un choc ... Chacun tressaillit et chacun tourna un regard épouvanté vers la porte du cabinet qui était grande ouverte... Le lieu était bon pour une apparition théâtrale.<sup>24</sup>

The chapter ends with the following sentence, as Marguerite is accepted into the association: 'La pièce tournait; les rôles changeaient.'<sup>25</sup> This last sentence, and indeed this whole scene, convey the idea that the theatre is not only used as a literary mode, but also as a metaphor of what is going on in the world of *Les Habits Noirs*. Marguerite, like other characters, is an actress.

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<sup>22</sup> This picture is mentioned by Reynier who was a witness to the first ritual murder, saw the picture in the Habits Noirs' monastery in Corsica, and possesses a copy of it. Paul Féval, *Les Compagnons du Trésor* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1987), chapter XII, p.541.

<sup>23</sup> Féval, *La Rue de Jérusalem*, p.1007 and p.1012.

<sup>24</sup> Féval, *Coeur d'Acier*, pp.471-72.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p.475.

The love and knowledge of the theatre is reflected within the fictional universe, as characters constantly refer to plays and acting. In *L'Arme invisible*, a scene of confrontation between Rémy d'Arx and Maurice provokes the following reaction in a witness: 'Je viens de voir une scène qui ferait de l'effet à l'Ambigu. Je n'ai pas compris tout à fait, mais il y a une dame dans l'histoire et ça promet d'être raide.'<sup>26</sup> Similarly, André witnesses a scene in which Baron Schwartz spies on his wife, who is veiled and carrying a small casket, only to realise that the veiled woman is not his wife but Countess Francesca. André later tells Lecoq that 'Il y a eu là-bas, sous vos fenêtres, une scène à la Beaumarchais.'<sup>27</sup> Such comments are not only self-reflexive, highlighting Féval's awareness of his debt to the stage, but they also partake of his project to show the exoticism and excitement of Parisian life. Life in Paris is akin to a spectacle.

#### **B. Theatre as a recurring motif within the texts**

The theatre is one of the main themes of *Les Habits Noirs*. To start with, it is an important aspect of the life of the characters. It seems that everybody goes to the theatre, and everybody talks about it. Insofar as most episodes of *Les Habits Noirs* take place in the 1830s and the 1840s, this passion for the theatre is a reflection of reality.

Theatre in nineteenth-century France was the most prestigious of all literary genres, and the most popular of entertainments. People took their theatre-going seriously. It was a social rite for the rich, but also for the less fortunate, as the great number of Parisian theatres catered for all tastes and all fortunes.

The rise of the popular theatre can be traced back to 1814, the year when the freedom of the theatre was reinstated. Seven years earlier, Napoleon had reduced the number of theatres to eight, four traditional theatres and four new ones, the latter assigned for vaudevilles and melodramas.<sup>28</sup> In the late 1820s, there was a definite shift from traditional theatres to secondary theatres. Classical theatres included the Théâtre-Français, the Opéra, the Opéra-Comique,

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<sup>26</sup> Paul Féval, *L'Arme invisible* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1987), p.1144.

<sup>27</sup> Féval, *Les Habits Noirs*, p.292.

<sup>28</sup> Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, p.85.

the Opéra Bouffes, the Comédie Française and the Odéon. Among the new theatres featured the Gaîté, the Ambigu-Comique, the Folies-Dramatiques, the Funambules and the Porte-Saint-Martin, all specialising in a repertoire aimed at a lower-class audience. Under the Restoration, however, these theatres had become respectable places frequented by every one. Most were situated along the boulevard du Temple, also known as the *boulevard du Crime*, in reference to the blood shed on its stages. Under the July Monarchy, the boulevard du Temple was a busy, bright area with cafes and shops. Most of those popular theatres, however, were to be demolished in the 1860s as part of Haussman's transformation of Paris.

References to these places abound in the *Habits Noirs* series. In *Coeur d'Acier*, Roland follows Marguerite as she is on her way to the Odéon, where a ball is being given. The whole novel is actually marked by the theatre. It takes place in 1842, the year of the première of Dumas' *La Tour de Nesle*. The choice is no coincidence as Marguerite Sadoulas, *Coeur d'Acier*'s main villain, is in several ways similar to *La Tour de Nesle*'s strong and perverted female character, Marguerite de Valois. A ball is given to celebrate the event, and Marguerite is dressed up as the queen. In *Maman Léo*, Léo's circus is pompously called Le Grand Théâtre Universel et National. One of the activities of the Grand Théâtre is the representation of tableaux taken from famous plays:

Une, deux, demi-tour à droite, ra fla, voilà le massacre de la Saint-Barthélemy, avec Charles IX, dont les veines de son sang lui sortent en vers rongeurs tout autour du corps pour prix de son crime ... voici la chèvre savante de M. Victor Hugo, dans *Notre-Dame de Paris*, accompagnée de Quasimodo et des tours de l'église, d'après nature, auprès desquelles travaille la Esméralda, restée pure malgré son commerce ... voici l'éruption du Vésuve à la lumière de la lune...<sup>29</sup>

Echalot and Similor, the resourceful Parisian pair, are often found on the boulevard du Temple, where they while away their time by hanging around the theatre queues, bright and noisy poles of attraction. They might also go there to make some money trying to get hold of *contremarques* (readmittance tickets):

[Echalot et Similor] avaient fait un tour au boulevard du Temple, le long des chers théâtres, pour calmer le chagrin de leur déconvenue. Le Cirque colossal, la sensible Gaîté, les Folies-Dramatiques, le Gymnase de la

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<sup>29</sup> Féval, *Maman Léo*, pp.10-11. The 'éruption du mont Vésuve' evokes Pixérécourt's melodrama *Le Belvédère*, which featured, on stage, an eruption of mount Etna, followed by a sunset.

moyenne épicerie, Madame Saqui, les Funambules et le Petit-Lazari, avaient successivement ouvert leur battants pour l'entracte sans leur apporter la moindre contremarque.<sup>30</sup>

Féval was obviously aware of writing for an audience who knew the theatre well, and whose tastes had been formed by the theatre.

In the world of *Les Habits Noirs*, some characters have a particular link with the theatre. These are characters like Pistolet, a true working class Parisian: 'Le gamin de Paris cherche volontiers des termes de comparaison au théâtre. Le théâtre est sa passion et son éducation.'<sup>31</sup> This is certainly true of the generation born after the Revolution, which aspired towards instruction and entertainment, and which found in the popular theatre and the popular novel an outcome for their insatiable thirst for knowledge and amusement. Although melodrama appealed to all social classes, the working class had a particular relationship with the popular theatres. Hemmings recounts the respectful concentration of the public during theatrical performances: 'as soon as the curtain is raised, absolute silence is restored as if by magic; if anyone were to break it, he would be instantly expelled.'<sup>32</sup> He quotes Eugène Mirecourt, who described how the working class would submit entirely to the dramatic illusion:

The lowest orders would give themselves up body and soul to the fascination of the drama; they follow the plot anxiously as it unfolds. You see them, with necks out-stretched and mouths gaping; not a word do they miss, not a syllable; they shudder at every turn of events and weep at the conclusion. They take everything for real with a frightening naiveté.<sup>33</sup>

Characters like Pistolet display the same naiveté, and see life under the distorting frame of the theatre. In *La Rue de Jérusalem*, Pistolet sees Paul Labre as a theatrical hero:

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<sup>30</sup> Féval, *Les Habits Noirs*, p.244. As Hemmings points out, 'In the 1830s almost every theatre was showing what were called *spectacles coupés*, which were a series of short plays, separated by intervals'. A member of the audience who left the theatre at the interval and intended to return was given a *contremarque* or readmittance voucher, which he had to hand back to be readmitted into the theatre. A spectator wishing to leave the theatre would be sure to find people willing to buy his *contremarque*, either for their own use, or for the purpose of reselling it at a small profit. *The Theatre Industry in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p.59.

<sup>31</sup> Féval, *La Rue de Jérusalem*, p.958.

<sup>32</sup> Hemmings, *The Theatre Industry*, p.119.

<sup>33</sup> Eugène de Mirecourt, quoted in F. W. J. Hemmings, *The Theatre Industry*, p.124.

Paul était pour lui le Gauthier d'Aulnay de *La Tour de Nesle*, le Ravenswood de *La Fiancée de Lammermoor*, le Müller d'*Angèle*, le Gennaro de *Lucrece Borgia*. Pistolet ne l'apercevait jamais sans se dire: Je donnerais dix sous pour lui mettre un costume à M. Mélingue. <sup>34</sup>

In this imaginary play, Pistolet himself has a role to play, and he knows when to step in: 'C'est le moment de faire son entrée dramatique et opportune, pensait-il. En avant deux!'<sup>35</sup> Other working class characters linked with the theatre are Echalot and Similor. As Similor is about to tell Echalot about a new plan to earn some money, no doubt involving some dramatic plotting, Similor suddenly has a 'dramatic' vision:

Amédée se souleva sur le coude. Un rayon de lune éclairait son maigre visage, autour duquel ses cheveux plats tombaient comme des serpents.

-Tu ressembles au traître! murmura Echalot épouvanté. <sup>36</sup>

This association of young male characters, especially working-class, with the theatre is recurrent in Féval's novels. It conveys the vanity of youth. In *Les Drame de la jeunesse*, a novel partly autobiographical, Féval's young hero Fernand admits his love of pose and his egotism: 'il jouait un rôle de comédien, ramenant tout à son thème.'<sup>37</sup>

References to the theatre, however, are not innocent. They constitute an opportunity for Féval to pass a somewhat paradoxical judgement on the theatre, and especially melodrama, the most popular genre in the 1820s. 'Si vous le trouvez [Pistolet] lamentablement éduqué, prenez-vous en au théâtre!', exclaims the narrator.<sup>38</sup> Melodrama is le 'fléau de Paris'.<sup>39</sup> Féval's condemnation of melodrama has both moral and aesthetic undertones. Melodrama delights in portraying violence and vice, crime and blood are essential features:

Dans nos romans, dans nos drames, dans nos opéras-comiques, dès qu'un voleur paraît, il est intéressant. L'auteur sait où est le succès. Il ne s'inquiète guère de corriger les moeurs, le principal est de plaire.

Le voleur plaît; l'assassin ne déplaît pas.

<sup>34</sup> Féval, *La Rue de Jérusalem*, p.958.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p.968.

<sup>36</sup> Féval, *Les Habits Noirs*, pp.246-47.

<sup>37</sup> Paul Féval, quoted by Charles Buet in *Paul Féval, souvenirs d'un ami* (Paris: Letouzet et Ané, 1888), p.41.

<sup>38</sup> Féval, *La Rue de Jérusalem*, p. 958.

<sup>39</sup> Féval, *Les Habits Noirs*, p.202.

On leur donne du *brio*, de l'esprit, de la générosité, des bottes molles, des habits brodés, de la poésie, toutes les séductions, et des chapeaux à larges bords, ornés d'une plume.<sup>40</sup>

Melodrama spreads the idea that crime is the only way to social success, it is 'le monde des malsaines invraisemblances'.<sup>41</sup> When Similor and Echalot overhear something about 'killing a woman' in a conversation between Etienne and Maurice, they assume that it must be the perfect plan to earn money, and immediately offer their services.<sup>42</sup> Significantly, Maurice and Etienne were only talking about their theatrical projects. Through the sub-plots of Etienne and Maurice, Féval also denounces the idea that writing for the stage is the way to become famous overnight, a widespread idea at the time. Hemmings mentions rumours about:

the extraordinary fortunes to be made by writing for the theatre [which resulted in] raising the expectations of countless young hopefuls and impoverished pensioners seized by the desire to stake a claim in this new gold-rush.<sup>43</sup>

Féval makes fun of Etienne's and Maurice's ambitions in a parody of Hugolian style: "Je suis un nain et j'ai des envies de géants", laments Maurice.<sup>44</sup> As they are still young, their dreams are still amusing: 'dans la grande ville, ces pauvres comédies de la jeunesse abondent', writes Féval.<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, Similor and Echalot's illusions are rather tragic: 'Le bouffon grotesque des bas-fonds parisiens tournait au tragique.'<sup>46</sup> Besides, when Maurice and Etienne eventually write and have their play performed, a greedy theatrical producer takes all benefits and fame from them.

Constant references to the theatre have two other consequences. They serve to authenticate the fiction, and by contrast, create the illusion of reality. If the world of the theatre is one of implausibility, then the world of the novels is real:

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<sup>40</sup> Féval, *La Rue de Jérusalem*, p.827.

<sup>41</sup> Féval, *Les Habits Noirs*, p.245.

<sup>42</sup> Féval, *Les Habits Noirs*, p.333.

<sup>43</sup> Hemmings, *The Theatre Industry*, p.241.

<sup>44</sup> Féval, *Les Habits Noirs*, p.207.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p.211.

<sup>46</sup> Féval, *Maman Léo*, p.148.

Le drame qui se joue dans cette maison, au château, à l'hôtel, dans la rue, va plus vite que la plume, et il sera dénoué depuis longtemps quand vous le présenterez au théâtre.<sup>47</sup>

In fact, life indeed is more theatrical than theatre itself . When Lecoq reveals to Baron Schwartz that his wife has a first husband who is still alive, he says that such a (melo)dramatic situation is actually quite common:

Eh bien! quoi! on ne peut donc pas s'expliquer, au lieu de filer les scènes interminables d'un mélodrame! Cette pièce-là, vous le savez, se joue chaque jour une douzaine de fois à Paris où la bigamie mène en cour d'assises. <sup>48</sup>

While highlighting the dramatic quality of modern life in Paris, such mirror-effects between theatre and life blur the boundaries between fiction and reality.

Finally, Féval comes across as an ambiguous narrator, as he himself owes much to melodrama. Firstly, *Les Habits Noirs* feature as much blood and crime as the typical melodramatic stage, and some attractive and successful villains.<sup>49</sup> Second, Féval is no stranger to melodramatic tricks and twists. In *La Rue de Jérusalem*, the identity of Suavita is suddenly revealed through the means of her medallion, a typical melodramatic device. The narrator simultaneously apologises and justifies himself for resorting to such a trick:

La peur nous tient que le lecteur ne prenne ce petit médaillon pour un meuble de mélodrame, d'autant qu'il contenait une mèche des cheveux de feu Mme la comtesse de Champmas.

Sans mépriser le génie des écrivains habiles qui se servent de pareils bijoux pour amener d'importantes péripéties, nous croyons n'avoir jamais abusé de "la croix de ma mère".

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<sup>47</sup> Féval, *Les Habits Noirs*, p.235 .

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p.302.

<sup>49</sup> See the section about 'Heroes and villains' for a discussion on moral ambiguity in Féval's novels. It is amusing to note in Féval's *Le Capitaine Fantôme* a description of a 'brigand' which corresponds exactly to the one that Féval criticises in *Les Habits Noirs*: 'Son costume était presque aussi bariolé que celui de Noir-Comin lui-même, dans un autre genre, et je ne suppose pas qu'on en trouvât un aussi beau à Paris, fût-ce dans le magasin de l'Opéra-Comique ... C'était un justaucorps de velours marron, sanglé sur une triple veste de velours, autour de laquelle s'enroulait une riche ceinture de soie écarlate. Les culottes ou caleçons étaient de la même couleur que le justaucorps, et par-dessus se lançaient de grandes guêtres en cuir de Hanovre ... N'était-ce pas un joli brigand, et peut-on s'étonner qu'en passant il eût fait battre plus de coeurs sous les corsages débraillés des filles de Pharaon?' *Le Capitaine Fantôme* (Paris: Edmond Dentu, 1884), Part II, pp.75-6.

Le lecteur peut compter sur nous.<sup>50</sup>

Similarly, Lecoq criticises Nicolas' tendency to elaborate convoluted plots akin to melodramas: 'C'était cet idiot de Nicolas qui vous avait mis en tête la manie des grands plans, combinés comme des mélodrames à compartiments.'<sup>51</sup> Nicolas, however, is not ultimately responsible for such plots; the culprit is Féval himself .

In fact, the theatre is an accurate reference for the world of *Les Habits Noirs*. Both strive towards a heightened representation of life. Dramatisation is about transforming banal reality into something exciting and mysterious. In *Les Habits Noirs*, Maurice and Etienne's project, which is to rewrite the story of André Maynotte for the stage, reflects Féval's own project: 'Je vois un drame bizarre, curieux, mystérieux, émouvant, [qui continuerait] pendant cinquante actes, si je veux!... Et toutes les énigmes de la terre, entends-tu?'<sup>52</sup> In *Coeur d'Acier*, the impulse towards complexity, mystery and excitement is underlined by the narrator, as he comments on the epilogue of his novel:

Joie des questions insolubles, plaisir des imbroglios dramatiques,  
voluptés inhérentes à ces problèmes, posés selon l'art, qui sont offerts et  
résolus deux cents fois de suite sur nos théâtres populaires!<sup>53</sup>

Similarly, the narrator acknowledges and comments on the theatrical exaggeration and extravagance of some aspects of the novels. Maman Léo takes an interest in Valentine and Maurice's love story 'comme si c'était une pièce de la Gaieté'.<sup>54</sup> Similarly, Lecoq's comment on Valentine's report on her life and her suspicion of the Habits Noirs highlights conventional dramatic twists and turns:

Entrée en scène du colonel Bozzo-Corona et de Mme la marquise d'Ornans,  
grande péripétie dramatique et romanesque de l'héritière d'une noble  
famille, enlevée autrefois par des bohémiens ou quelque chose  
d'approchant et retrouvée miraculeusement, grâce aux soins de la  
Providence. La petite semble en vérité garder quelques doutes sur

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<sup>50</sup> Féval, *La Rue de Jérusalem*, p.977.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 1009. By 'mélodrame à compartiments', Féval alludes to the romantic dramas of the 1830s, structured around a multitude of small scenes, as opposed to the melodramas of the 1820s, most of which featured three acts in the classical way.

<sup>52</sup> Féval, *Les Habits Noirs* p.215.

<sup>53</sup> Féval, *Coeur d'Acier*, p.703

<sup>54</sup> Féval, *L'Arme invisible*, p.1035.

l'authenticité de cette reconnaissance où manquent les actes de l'état civil et même la simple croix de sa mère.<sup>55</sup>

Féval's playful and somewhat contradictory treatment of the conventions shared by popular theatre and the Roman-Feuilleton is another aspect of his ambiguous relationship with his literary medium. On the one hand, he gives free reign to imagination and extravagance; on the other, he takes his distance from a minor genre by revealing its conventions and making fun of them.

Another reason for Féval's mixture of fascination and repulsion for the stage might be found in his thwarted theatrical ambitions. Like most young writers, he was fascinated by the prestige of the theatre, and tried his luck as a playwright. Féval wrote in 1863:

Ma vie est devenue impossible, depuis que je fais du théâtre, attendu que j'ai voulu réaliser ce rêve de faire du théâtre sans abandonner le roman...Cela n'aboutit pas encore beaucoup, cela n'aboutira peut-être jamais, mais nul ne pourra dire que je n'ai pas pioché comme un esclave.<sup>56</sup>

Apart from the immensely popular performances of three of his novels, *Le Fils du diable*, *Les Mystères de Londres* and *Le Bossu*, Féval was never successful. In 1875, in a letter to the widow of Amédée Achard, Féval's tone of voice had changed totally:

Vous vous êtes étonnée de l'horrible répugnance que j'ai à m'occuper du théâtre. Le théâtre est l'enfer: un enfer pauvre et cauteleux, repoussant, hideux.<sup>57</sup>

Finally, the theatrical metaphor is used to provide comments on Parisian society, characterised by drama and excitement but also duplicity and lies.

To use Peter Brooks' expression, Féval, like Balzac, wanted to write a 'two-tiered drama, where what is represented on the public social stage is only a configuration of what lies behind, in the domain of true power and significance.'<sup>58</sup> Féval recounts what is happening on stage (in society) and what is being plotted backstage by those who actually rule society. Like Vautrin

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p.1158.

<sup>56</sup> Letter from Paul Féval to Vitu, quoted by Jean-Pierre Galvan, in 'Paul Féval d'après sa correspondance: Le métier de romancier' in *Paul Féval, romancier populaire, colloque de Rennes 1987* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes et Interférences, 1992), pp.93-110 (104-5).

<sup>57</sup> Quoted by Jean-Pierre Galvan, 'Paul Féval d'après sa correspondance', p.106.

<sup>58</sup> Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, p.121.

in *La Comédie humaine*, Bozzo and his accomplices make history. Pistolet is once given the opportunity to attend what is happening backstage when he overhears a meeting of the Habits Noirs:

Il était admis inopinément à visiter les ficelles d'un théâtre bien autrement important que Bobino; il avait envahi les coulisses mêmes de cette scène fantastiquement machinée et dont les trucs inconnus avaient tant de fois occupé son imagination.<sup>59</sup>

Colonel Bozzo, the leader of the Habits Noirs, can write the perfect scripts: 'nous connaissons exactement le scénario de la dernière tragédie imaginée par le colonel', says doctor Samuel, a member of the Habits Noirs who covets Bozzo's position as leader.<sup>60</sup> However, Bozzo can also improvise and change the end of the script if something goes wrong, which is what happens at the end of *Maman Léo*. Bozzo had planned to kill Valentine and Maurice during their wedding, but his plans are thwarted when Doctor Samuel sets the other Habits Noirs against him. Bozzo then decides to change the resolution of his tragedy:

Dis donc, l'Amitié, fit-il tout à coup, as-tu lu les tragédies de M. Ducis? ... M. Ducis était un poète du temps de l'Empire qui rabobinait des auteurs anglais et qui prenait la peine de faire trois ou quatre dénouements pour chacune de ses tragédies. Je ne suis pas de l'Académie, mais je fais un peu comme M. Ducis: mon premier dénouement n'allait pas mal, c'était le mariage et rien avec .... Mais j'ai eu vent de vos petites menées, et mon dénouement a tourné.<sup>61</sup>

The difference between Vautrin and Bozzo is that the latter is both playwright and actor. While Vautrin has to hide and lives out his dramatic ambitions by proxy through his association with young men like Lucien de Rubempré, Bozzo passes as a respectable member of society. Féval denounces society's blindness and hypocrisy, as its most revered members are the best actors. This is the case of all members of the Habits Noirs. Marguerite, for instance, is a born actress. At the height of her social triumph, she is, Féval writes, tired of pretending:

La comtesse elle-même, qui était une femme de grand ton, de grand esprit, avait parfois d'étranges moments, et ressemblait alors à une excellente comédienne que son rôle fatigue.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Féval, *La Rue de Jérusalem*, p.959.

<sup>60</sup> Féval, *Maman Léo*, p.176.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p.185.

<sup>62</sup> Féval, *Coeur d'Acier*, p.554.

This fatigue, however, is only temporary. The last section of the novel unfolds Marguerite's plan to win herself the title of Duchess, a play complete with change of scenes and costumes:

Nous l'avons vu quitter le bal où elle avait mis en scène, dans toute la rigueur du terme, le prologue de son effrontée comédie.

Dans ce prologue, elle avait dit son dernier mot; le reste du premier tableau pouvait et devait se jouer sans elle. Il faut les entractes pour reprendre haleine, souffler et changer de costumes.<sup>63</sup>

Although Marguerite fails, her death is more of a theatrical climax than a defeat. Her plan involves impersonating Nita de Clare, which she does brilliantly, until her husband finds her out and shoots her, a violent final scene of which she is the heroine. Bozzo is more lucky, as he manages to die like a saint: his reputation as a benefactor of society survives his death.

In this drama of realities hidden under the surface of everyday life, fiction and reality have become blurred. 'Tu voudrais bien me demander où commence la vérité, où finit la comédie?' asks Bozzo to Francesca.<sup>64</sup> Even among the Habits Noirs, dissimulation, lies, plots go on, as Bozzo's remark makes clear:

Mes enfants, il ne faut pas se fâcher; j'ai toujours remarqué qu'il est bon de jouer la comédie même entre soi; cela entretient. On ne saurait mettre trop de soin aux petites choses. Les affaires sont les affaires. Du temps que j'avais le malheur de porter un déguisement, je couchais avec mon faux nez.<sup>65</sup>

Significantly, heroes also have to act in order to defeat the Habits Noirs. The most active and the most successful heroes are gifted actors. André Maynotte manages to sustain two disguises as Trois-Pattes and Monsieur Bruneau; Valentine pretends that she has lost her mind.

The most active characters, however, are the secondary characters. Their love of the stage means that they are always eager to seize the opportunity to have a role, and to act. Their fates illustrate the double nature of the theatre as both prestigious and dangerous. Characters such as Pistolet or Similor are willing to take an active part in the Habits Noirs' direction of society. Marguerite, however, is the only one clever enough to become one of the active leaders of the association. Joulou and Schwartz, who start off as secondary

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p.708.

<sup>64</sup> Féval, *Maman Léo*, p.172.

<sup>65</sup> Féval, *La Rue de Jérusalem*, p.790.

characters of indeterminate moral status, end up as Habits Noirs themselves. They nonetheless remain puppets. Ysole's involvement with the Habits Noirs has roots in similar feelings of vanity and yearnings for power. Promised a crown by Nicolas, disguised as Louis XVII, she momentarily satisfies her ambition:

Ysole ... était follement éprise de cet invraisemblable héros de roman qui lui promettait une couronne - et elle avait un rôle.

Un rôle pour les filles d'Eve, c'est le bonheur.

Ysole était heureuse, émue, ivre d'espoir et d'orgueil.<sup>66</sup>

Her desire for excitement and drama, however, leads her astray. She steps out of her proper place, but instead of becoming a queen, she ends up as Nicolas' then Lecoq's mistress. Her virtue and reputation lost, she has to exile herself. The metaphor of the theatre, therefore, is twofold. The world of the theatre, which is about power and performance, is exciting and alluring. The other side of the coin is the danger of the theatrical world. It is a world where one can easily lose oneself, as Ysole's story demonstrates.

## **Part 2. The theatre in the novels of Wilkie Collins: *The Woman in White, No Name, Armadale, The Moonstone, The Law and the Lady***

### **A. The Sensation novels of Wilkie Collins and the stage: formal affinities**

Collins' narrative choices enhanced and strengthened the affinities between the Sensation novel and the stage. As mentioned in the section on narrative structures, Collins is a narrator who often hides behind his characters. Readers view the action directly, without the mediation of an all-seeing narrator, as they would on stage. This device reduces the distance between readers and action or characters, creating immediacy, as well as authenticity. Even in *No Name*, a novel with a third person narrator, Collins refuses to introduce his characters in the way a traditional narrator would:

Who were the sleepers hidden in the upper regions? Let the house reveal its own secrets; and, one by one, as they descend the stairs from their beds, let the sleepers disclose themselves.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Féval, *La Rue de Jérusalem*, p.788.

<sup>67</sup> Wilkie Collins, *No Name* (London: Penguin Classics, 1994), p.3.

Characters, therefore, tend to 'disclose themselves' through action and speech, rather than psychological analysis.

Due to the absence of a proper narrator, the notion of point of view is apparently irrelevant to the theatre. Taken in a larger sense, however, it becomes the main characteristic of a play, since each character represents a different point of view. In Collins' novels, such a feature corresponds to what we identified as a split narrative, based on variable internal points of view. This technique, particular to Collins, strongly recalls conventions of the stage, such as double enunciation and dramatic irony. On stage, characters' speeches have two narratees: the other characters, and the audience. Their words, therefore, might not have the same value, and might not be interpreted in the same way by the different narratees, all the more as the audience generally knows more than each character. The dramatic irony characteristic of the stage, and highlighted by Collins' narrative methods is particularly convincing in *The Moonstone*. During a scene between Rachel and Godfrey, witnessed and recounted by Miss Clack, Godfrey declares his love for Rachel, and tries to persuade her to marry him. At this point in the story, Godfrey, a popular speaker for various Ladies' Committees, is known to be heavily involved in charity work. Miss Clack, a caricature of the evangelical spinster, worships Godfrey, 'the Christian Hero', and dislikes the beautiful and self-willed Rachel Verinder.<sup>68</sup> Having just scattered religious tracts all over Rachel's house, Miss Clack is in the library when she overhears the entrance of Godfrey, who utters the following words: 'I'll do it to-day!'<sup>69</sup> Miss Clack's curiosity is further roused by the sudden entrance of Rachel, and her pride wounded by the latter's off-hand remark: 'Clack in the library! ... You are quite right, Godfrey. We had much better stop here.'<sup>70</sup> Hidden behind the curtain, Miss Clack listens to their conversation. The impact of Godfrey's words on her is directly at odds with that on readers:

You know what I was, Rachel. Let me tell you what I am. I have lost every interest in life, but my interest in you. ... Would you believe it? My charitable business is an unendurable nuisance to me; and when I see a Ladies' Committee now, I wish myself at the uttermost ends of the earth!<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Wilkie Collins, *The Moonstone* (London: Penguin Classics, 1986), p.239.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p.275.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p.276.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p.278.

Miss Clack is indignant; readers are delighted. The end of the scene further exploits dramatic irony, and humour lies mostly in the situation. Miss Clack has a narrow escape indeed:

[Rachel] rose, and, in rising, looked for the first time towards the little room in which my martyrdom was going on.

'Who has drawn those curtains?' she exclaimed .... At the moment when she laid her hand on them - at the moment when the discovery of me appeared to be quite inevitable - the voice of the fresh-coloured young footman, on the stairs, suddenly suspended any further proceedings on her side or on mine. It was unmistakably the voice of a man in great alarm.

'Miss Rachel!' he called out, 'where are you, Miss Rachel?'

She sprang back from the curtains, and ran to the door.<sup>72</sup>

Overheard conversations, a typical theatrical device, feature among Collins' favourite and most successful scenes.

The sensationalists thought of the representation of both action and characters in theatrical terms. Collins considered novel and play to be closely connected:

The Novel and the Play are twin-sisters in the family of Fiction...the one is a drama narrated, as the other is a drama acted; and ... all the strong and deep emotions which the Play-writer is privileged to excite, the Novel-writer is privileged to excite too.<sup>73</sup>

It is in scenes that characters best reveal themselves, along with, in Collins' novels, written narratives such as diaries or letters. The scene is indeed the Sensation novel's favourite form of exposition, and its most memorable feature. Furthermore, the novels carefully frame those scenes, mimicking the raising and lowering of the curtain, the entrances and exits of the characters. There are, broadly speaking, two kinds of scenes in Collins' novels. One is the 'Sensation' scene, the trademark of the genre; the other is the 'duel' scene, which is often a scene of comedy.

The Sensation novels were named after the sensation dramas, by critics who assimilated Collins and other serialists such as Miss Braddon and Mrs Wood to stage melodramas. As Michael Booth pointed out:

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p.283.

<sup>73</sup> Wilkie Collins, Letter of Dedication to Charles Ward, *Basil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p.xxxvii.

Boucicaut [Dionysius Lardner Boursiquot], seemed to have invented the term 'sensation drama' and applied it to his *Colleen Bawn* (1860), whose sensation scene is the rescue of Eily O'Connor from drowning in a lake cave, where blue gauze simulated water and Eily and her saviour could actually be seen beneath the surface.<sup>74</sup>

The Sensation scenes were thrilling, dramatic sequences demanding the full exploitation of the resources of the Victorian theatre: elaborate lighting, complex carpentry and loud sound effects. They were, therefore, particularly adapted to the larger, better-equipped theatres. Other famous Sensation scenes from the 1860s include an exploding steamboat in *The Octoroon*, a house burned down in *The Poor of New York* and a boat race in *Formosa*.

Sensation scenes responded to a growing taste for spectacle. At the beginning of the century, a new public emerged, with simple but definite tastes:

The rowdy, illiterate new audience crowded into the theatres, requiring their interest to be roused by vigorous action, their emotions moved by pathos, and their troubles soothed by a happy ending. These demands had to be met as best as they could. Forced to reject much of the Georgian repertory, the new theatre found itself without a drama and had too often to substitute spectacle.<sup>75</sup>

The Victorian theatre, therefore, witnessed the triumph of spectacle. During the 1860s, the theatre and the novel became more closely connected.

Collins' novels feature some spectacular action scenes that would have appealed to ambitious stage directors. Nicholas Rance reports how Edwards Fitzgerald, a great admirer of *The Woman in White*, said: 'I wish Sir Percival Glyde's death were a little less of the minor Theatre sort'.<sup>76</sup> Sir Percival's end, burnt to death in the old Parish Church of Whelmingham, is a typical Sensation scene from a Gothic melodrama.<sup>77</sup> *Armadale*, the most complex and possibly melodramatic of all five novels, also features a nautical murder scene, in which

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<sup>74</sup> Michael Booth, Introduction to *Hiss the Villain: Six English and American Melodramas* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1964), p.32.

<sup>75</sup> George Rowell, *The Victorian Theatre, 1792-1914: A Survey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p.31.

<sup>76</sup> Edward Fitzgerald, quoted by Nicholas Rance, *Wilkie Collins and Other Sensation Novelists: Walking the Moral Hospital* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), p.98.

<sup>77</sup> Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), Hartright's second narrative, Chapter IX, p.465.

a character is locked into his cabin while the ship, caught in the midst of a tempest, is sinking.

Collins' speciality, however, is not so much the crude Sensation scene as the 'delicately powerful' atmospheric scene, as Mrs Oliphant pointed out in an admiring article on *The Woman in White*.<sup>78</sup> For example, the most memorable scene of *The Woman in White* is the encounter between Walter Hartright and Anne Catherick on the London road. As in the theatre, visual and verbal elements are combined to create maximum effect. It is a sultry night, there is a full moon, and Walter is walking towards London across the heath. He then takes a by-road leading to a crossroads, from which London can be seen in the distance. This is when the woman in white appears, in a theatrical pose, pointing at the cloud over London:

There, in the middle of the broad, bright high-road - there, as if it had that moment sprung out of the earth or dropped from the heaven - stood the figure of a solitary Woman, dressed from head to foot in white garments; her face bent in grave inquiry on mine, her hand pointing to the dark cloud over London, as I faced her.<sup>79</sup>

Posturing and gesturing are characteristic devices of melodrama, 'a figuration of the primal language onto the stage, where it causes immediate, primal spiritual meaning.'<sup>80</sup> Novelists who resort to melodramatic gesturing, as Peter Brooks points out, are 'more concerned with decipherment and translation of gesture than with its pure figure.'<sup>81</sup> Anne's gesture, striking yet unaccountable to Walter, is heavily charged with unspecified yet important meaning. The action of the whole novel, launched by this initial scene, relies on what Anne Catherick's gesture means, on what she has to say. During the scene, all sorts of indications are given about characters' movements and tones of voice, especially the mysterious woman. She speaks earnestly, she shrinks back from Walter when she feels suspicion on his part; she sighs, she nervously shifts her bag from one hand to the other and looks about. All her gestures suggest some secret misery.

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<sup>78</sup> Mrs Oliphant, unsigned review, 'Sensation Novels', *Blackwood's Magazine*, xci (May 1862), pp.566-74, reprinted in *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage*, edited by Norman Page (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), p.118.

<sup>79</sup> Collins, *The Woman in White*, p.15.

<sup>80</sup> Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, p.72.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p.77.

The representation of the encounter between Walter and Anne Catherick is characterised by *chiaroscuro*: on the one hand, the mysterious light of the moon shining on the heath and on the woman's clothes; on the other, the darkness of the sky and the big city. The mystery of the scene is enhanced by the sudden appearance of the woman from a gap in the hedge, and her slow disappearance in the cab that takes her to London: 'The sound of the wheels grew fainter in the distance - the cab melted into the black shadows on the road - the woman in white was gone.'<sup>82</sup> The scene ends on a *coup de théâtre*, as Walter learns that the woman has just escaped from a private Asylum. Later in the novel, Fosco underlines the picturesque nature of a similar scene. In the dead of the night, lit only by candles, bed-ridden Marian is removed from her chamber at Blackwater and transported to the deserted wing of the house by Fosco and Percival:

The scene was picturesque, mysterious, dramatic, in the highest degree .... Where is the modern Rembrandt who could depict our midnight procession? Alas for the Arts! alas for this most pictorial of subjects! the modern Rembrandt is nowhere to be found.<sup>83</sup>

This type of scene exploits the strange side of reality, its hidden excitement and mystery. As in Féval's novels, scenes set at night and charged with a gothic dimension suggest the hidden danger of life. Collins' scenes, however, are generally more evocative. The fact that he had started his career as a painter perhaps accounts for his talent at creating picturesque scenes.

The picturesque quality of those scenes is also reminiscent of the dramatic *tableaux* of stage melodrama. Collins' novels are pervaded with sensational visions and prophetic dreams, which are generally represented as highly dramatic *tableaux*. Anne Catherick's letter, a recounting of her dream about Laura's fate, is the description of a fantastic animated *tableau* where the postures of each character are highly symbolic:

After a time, there walked towards us, down the aisle of the church, a man and a woman, coming to be married. You were the woman. You looked so pretty and innocent in your beautiful white silk dress, and your long white lace veil, that my heart felt for you and the tears came into my eyes... instead of falling from my eyes ... they turned into two rays of light which slanted nearer and nearer to the man standing at the altar with you ... I looked along them; and I saw down into his inmost heart. It was black as

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p.21.

<sup>83</sup> Collins, *The Woman in White*, p.565.

night ... and then the rays of light shifted ... and there, behind him, stood a fiend, laughing. And the rays of light shifted once more, and pointed over your shoulder; and there, behind you, stood an angel weeping.<sup>84</sup>

Other strong *tableaux* include Marian's dream in the same novel, which foretells the fate of Walter Hartright in America. The dream takes the form of four melodramatic visions of disasters that leave Walter unharmed, and his resolution unshaken. In the dream, Walter's resolution to come back and save Laura is conveyed in inflated rhetoric:

Darker and Darker ... farther and farther yet. Death takes the good, the beautiful, and the young - and spares *me*. The Pestilence that wastes, the Arrow that strikes, the Sea that drowns, the Grave that closes over Love and Hope, are steps of my journey, and take me nearer and nearer to the End.<sup>85</sup>

In *Armada*, Allan's dream about his future is a sort of pantomime in eight sequences. These visions function as microcosms of the novels, by foretelling the future, and by telling a story by means of *tableaux*.

Another type of scene is deprived of melodramatic excesses and metaphoric references to darkness and light. *No Name*, for example, is less obviously Gothic than *The Woman in White*. Its setting is definitely domestic, and its characters neither frightening nor mysterious. The story focuses on Magdalen Vanstone's fight to recover her lost inheritance, and her rivalry with Noel Vanstone and his housekeeper Mrs Lecount. The most striking scenes of the novel, therefore, are scenes of confrontation between the rivals, shows of skills like chess tournaments. The scene at Vauxhall Walk where, disguised as Miss Garth, Magdalen confronts Lecount and Noel is exemplary. Mrs Lecount keeps her self-control, provoking Magdalen with her refined, insolent pity. The latter fights to control her temper, and eventually betrays herself in front of Noel Vanstone, who guesses nothing nonetheless. This is a highly theatrical moment, where Collins' taste for entertaining fiction prevails over more serious concerns:

'No ears but his have heard me', [Magdalen] thought, with a sense of unutterable relief. 'I have escaped Mrs Lecount'.

She had done nothing of the kind. Mrs Lecount had never left the room.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p.67-68.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p.249.

<sup>86</sup> Collins, *No Name*, p.237.

The clever housekeeper has witnessed Magdalen's loss of self-control, and found her out under her disguise. She has also silently cut off a piece of Magdalen's dress, in order to be able to identify her. Such unexpected twists and minor *coups de théâtre* provided by spying and overheard conversations are recurrent. In *Armadale*, Allan and Neelie have been discussing their wedding projects. Saddened by their dim prospects, Neelie leaves crying:

As she hurried homeward, the leaves parted behind her, and Miss Gwilt stepped softly into the open space. She stood there in triumph, tall, beautiful, and resolute. Her lovely colour brightened while she watched Neelie's retreating figure hastening lightly away from her over the grass.

'Cry, you little fool!' she said, with her quiet clear tones, and her steady smile of contempt. 'Cry as you have never cried yet! You have seen the last of your sweetheart.'<sup>87</sup>

Such scenes, akin to a comedy of manners, explore the gap between what people say in their social life and what they really mean. But, everything is charged with excessive meaning. Despite the theatricality and absurdity of the situation, something deadly serious is going on. Although Magdalen and Mrs Lecount are restrained by their respective disguises and by social conventions, they perfectly understand each other's threats. Similarly, Lydia means murder. Like Balzac and Féval, it is 'melodramas of manners' that Collins writes.<sup>88</sup>

Finally, the texts are characterised by their self-reflexivity. As in Féval's novels, characters refer to plays and acting, providing self-reflexive comments on the novels. Some references underline complicated aspects of the plot, bizarre situations and mysterious characters. Drama and the Sensation novel seek the mysterious and the exciting side of society, and present a vision of life filtered through a magnifying and distorting lens. In *The Law and the Lady*, the enigmatic Mrs Beauly longs for 'freaks and fancies', and forbidden excitements.<sup>89</sup> She decides to go to a masked ball frequented by 'ladies of doubtful virtue' and 'gentlemen on the outlying limits of society'.<sup>90</sup> As told by her friend Lady Clarinda:

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<sup>87</sup> Wilkie Collins, *Armadale* (London: Penguin Classics, 1995), p.461.

<sup>88</sup> Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, p.131.

<sup>89</sup> Collins, *The Law and the Lady*, p.265.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

Helena, in one of her wildest moments, hit on a way of going to the ball without discovery, which was really as ingenious as a plot in a French play.<sup>91</sup>

Mrs Beauly has in fact sent her maid home, dressed as herself, while she slipped off to the ball. In *No Name*, Noel's hopelessness in the face of Magdalen's scheming and Mrs Lecount's revenge is conveyed by his remark that 'It's like a scene in a novel - it is like nothing in like real life.'<sup>92</sup> This last example contrasts with Fosco's boasting about his highly ingenious and controlled plan:

I started in the fly, leaving the false Lady Glyde dead in the house, to receive the true Lady Glyde, on her arrival by the railway, at three o'clock. Hidden under the seat of the carriage, I carried with me all the clothes Anne Catherick had worn on coming into my house - they were destined to assist the resurrection of the woman who was dead, in the person of the woman who was living. What a situation! I suggest it to the rising romance writers in England. I offer it, as totally new, to the worn-out dramatists in France!<sup>93</sup>

Noel is a mere puppet, a pawn in other people's games; Fosco organises the game, puts on a performance and actively takes part in it. *The Woman in White* is

a two-tiered drama, where life and acts on the surface of things are explainable only in terms of what is going on behind, in terms of those who know and control "the most dramatic existence".<sup>94</sup>

Fosco, therefore, shares Collins' talent for inventing incredible plots and stories; so does Dexter, who retells the story of the crime in the form of a drama: 'This is a drama; and I excel in dramatic narrative. You shall judge for yourself.'<sup>95</sup>

The theatre, therefore, is particularly associated with certain characters. As in Féval's novels, the villains come across as gifted actors and playwrights. On the other hand, women seem to have a particular link with the stage, as their tendency to dissimulate and their love of excitement suggest.

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p.267.

<sup>92</sup> Collins, *No Name*, p.448.

<sup>93</sup> Collins, *The Woman in White*, p.568.

<sup>94</sup> Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, p.120.

<sup>95</sup> Collins, *The Law and the Lady*, pp.252-53.

## B. Exploring the theatrical metaphor

References to the theatre within the novels reflect, as in Féval's novels, its status within society. As in France, nineteenth-century English theatre was dominated by melodrama. It had not, however, the prestige of the French stage, and compared to France, most respectable people shunned the stage. Melodrama catered for and was mostly frequented by the lower-classes.

In England, according to George Rowell, the Romantics did not share the French romantics' interest for the stage:

When the work of the romantic poets took dramatic form, it was often a 'closet drama', written only for the theatre of the mind, much of it, like *Manfred* or *Prometheus Unbound*, defying stage representation. This scorn of the stage is reflected, not only in the form of the plays, but in the choice of forbidden themes, as with incest in *The Cenci*, and in unwieldy lengths.<sup>96</sup>

In terms of actual plays performed, what the Romantics did bring to the theatre was insignificant. The revival of the stage, therefore, can be ascribed to melodramas. Melodramas were first played at Covent Garden and Drury Lane, and then flourished in the minor theatres which catered for the growing demand for entertainment created by the growth in population. Drury Lane and Covent Garden specialised in gothic melodrama; Astley's, The Royal Theatre, and Sadler's Wells in spectacle melodrama. Melodrama was immensely successful, and when it invaded the larger theatres, it attracted its usual working-class audiences with it. The middle and the upper class, therefore, deserted the stage altogether.

As Collins complained, the state of the stage in England was far from being satisfactory, and its artistic quality rather poor. Dramatists were badly paid; it was much cheaper to pay an author to adapt a French play than to write something original. In the first half of the nineteenth-century, almost half of the plays performed on the London stage were adaptations or translations from the French.<sup>97</sup> In the 1860s, however, interest had shifted from foreign adaptations to home-made melodramas, and from gothic and nautical melodrama to domestic and spectacle melodramas. Boucicaut became the leading Victorian dramatist. Furthermore, the connections between novel and drama were

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<sup>96</sup> Rowell, *The Victorian Theatre*, p.32.

<sup>97</sup> Peters, *The King of Inventors*, p.83.

tightened during this period. The works of writers such as Dickens, Cooper, Scott, Ainsworth, and the sensationalists Miss Braddon and Mrs Wood were all adapted for the stage. These novelists provided the same stuff that domestic melodramas were made of: the suffering of the poor, the villainy of the powerful, the danger of the city, the ravages of drinking, and above all, the rise of crime.

Respectable society, however, still avoided the theatre, seeking entertainment in the circulating libraries. Novels were often read aloud, in the private theatre of home. When it did go to the theatre, respectable society preferred the Opera, at least until the 1870s. Within Collins' fictional world, characters reflect these facts. Collins' heroes and heroines are from the middle-class, sometimes from the landed gentry. No lower-class character, however, has a major role in Collins' novels, although most feature modest people such as servants. In the novels, there are regular references to the Opera. *No Name* starts the morning after a performance at the Opera. In *The Woman in White*, Fosco, a great amateur of music, goes to see *Lucrezia Borgia*, during which performance he is identified as a member of the Brotherhood, the Italian secret society. In *Armadale*, it is during a performance of *Norma* that Lydia recognises her former lover Manuel among the singers. Also, in both *The Woman in White* and *Armadale*, the Opera provides an ideal background for an untimely revelation, as characters find themselves in the public eye, and cannot hide.

The one novel concerned with the stage, *No Name*, highlights its poor reputation. Magdalen Vanstone, once her inheritance is lost, takes to the stage to earn a living, a disastrous move in the eyes of her relatives. This bold move destroys her social status as a respectable woman more than the loss of her inheritance. On the other hand, *No Name* also features private theatricals, which were a fashionable entertainment at the time.

It is during a private performance of *The Rivals*, by Sheridan, that Magdalen discovers her natural talent for acting.<sup>98</sup> The episode of the play is a piece of comedy, reminiscent of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*. Apart from Magdalen's performance, the acting is bad, and yet pretension runs high. Selfishness is heightened, and pride easily hurt. Miss Marble, who has

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<sup>98</sup> Collins himself staged this very play when he lived at Blandford Square. See Peters, *The King of Inventors*, p.83.

organised the play for her birthday, is mortified to be outstaged by Magdalen. A stout lady who played the young and sentimental Julia leaves the play after overhearing her fellow actors' sarcastic comments. It is also during the rehearsals that Magdalen falls in love with weak Frank Clare, and flirts with him, as Mary tries to entrap Edmund in *Mansfield Park*. Both pairs are equally incompatible, but in *No Name* it is the woman who suffers. Magdalen's remark to Frank is prophetic: 'It's *my* heart you're to break - and of course I shall teach you how to do it.'<sup>99</sup>

If Magdalen's pleasure and pride are great on this private occasion, her reaction is totally different when she takes to the stage professionally, and finds herself in the public eye.

As in Féval's novels, the characters most likely to be associated with the stage are the villains. Acting is assimilated to hiding and lying. Those characters pretend to be something they are not, assuming different personalities and sometimes different names. In *Armadale*, both Mother Oldershaw and Doctor Downward reinvent themselves with ease when they meet with difficulties. Mother Oldershaw assumes the personality of a devout. She even thinks it fit to act in front of her previous accomplice Lydia, greeting her with her theatrical: 'Oh Lydia! Lydia! why are you not at Church?'<sup>100</sup> Doctor Downward becomes Doctor Le Doux, owner of a Sanatorium. Oddly enough, Lydia Gwilt keeps her name, despite being well known for having been put on trial. She feels safe playing the respectable governess, although she has to add to her disguise, by inventing a past inspired by the 'commonplace rubbish of the circulating libraries'.<sup>101</sup> When she is found out as an impostor by Mrs Milroy, Lydia chooses a new role, that of an innocent martyr. Ozias falls for her, providing her with two more parts to act; his respectable wife, and his respectable widow. Lydia is in her element when plotting. When she realises that her marriage to Ozias is over, and returns to her scheming, she feels that although '[she] is running headlong into a frightful risk - [she] never was in better spirits in [her] life.'<sup>102</sup> This is what differentiates her from Magdalen Vanstone, whose status, heroine or villain, remains unclear. As a rogue,

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<sup>99</sup> Collins, *No Name*, p.47.

<sup>100</sup> Collins, *Armadale*, p.582.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p.491.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p.463.

impersonating Miss Garth, she feels 'a horror of the vile disguise that concealed [her].'<sup>103</sup> Her self-castigating is contrasted with Captain Wragge's cool, organised system of roguery, with his list of ready-made characters to assume, his 'Skins To Jump Into'.<sup>104</sup> Lydia brings the same professionalism to her scheming, and is able to appreciate what she is doing: 'The public ought really to enjoy it in the form of a farce at one of the theatres.'<sup>105</sup> Her diary features a number of theatrical references. Most of them are highly symbolic, as in the following example where Lydia alludes to a famous murderess:

'To bed! To bed!' as Lady Macbeth says. I wonder by-the-by what Lady Macbeth would have done in my position? She would have killed somebody when her difficulties first began. Probably Armadale.<sup>106</sup>

Godfrey Ablewhite, the villain of *The Moonstone*, has never been discovered for what he is. He has chosen the role of an orator at charitable occasions, to hide the shabby side of his life. His acting talent is unwittingly underlined by Miss Clack in a scene previously analysed. Godfrey is proposing to Rachel Verinder, whom he does not love, because he hopes to pay off his debts with her inheritance. At this point in the story, this information has not been disclosed, yet as Miss Clack reports the scene, which she witnesses from behind a curtain, it becomes apparent that Godfrey is faking his feelings:

Can words describe how I sickened when I noticed exactly the same pathetic expression on his face, which had charmed me when he was pleading for destitute millions of his fellow-creatures on the platform at Exeter Hall!... Exeter Hall again! Nothing wanting to complete the parallel but the audience, the cheers, and the glass of water.<sup>107</sup>

Miss Clack's interpretation cleverly casts doubts on the nature of Godfrey's feelings for Rachel, and on his involvement in charitable work. Godfrey belongs to that category of villains who are self-conscious actors, and play their part with theatrical bravado. That category is best represented by Fosco, whose nature as self-conscious performer is best encapsulated by his confession scene, 'a minor dramatic masterpiece'.<sup>108</sup> It is a climactic moment in *The Woman in White*, one of those scenes where 'both [hero] and villain announce

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<sup>103</sup> Collins, *No Name*, p.221.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p.263.

<sup>105</sup> Collins, *Armadale*, p.213.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p.442.

<sup>107</sup> Collins, *The Moonstone*, pp. 277-78.

<sup>108</sup> Peter Harvey Sucksmith, Introduction to *The Woman in White*, p.xii.

their moral identity, present their name and the qualification attached to it, in the form of a revelation':

You have not got my lamented friend to deal with, now - you are face to face with FOSCO! If the lives of twenty Mr. Hartridges were the stepping-stones to my safety, over all those stones I would go, sustained by my sublime indifference, self-balanced by my impenetrable calm. Respect me, if you love your own life!<sup>109</sup>

Yet this essential moment seems not to feature 'the recognition and triumph of the sign of virtue', insofar as Fosco's improvisation turns the situation to his advantage, making of his confession of villainy a monument to his own glory.<sup>110</sup> Written down in wild theatrical gestures, the confession is then read by Fosco himself, 'with loud theatrical emphasis and profuse theatrical gesticulation.'<sup>111</sup>

It seems that, by opposition, the good characters are those devoid of acting talents, because they do not resort to dissimulation and do not scheme. However, the good characters' inability to act reveals, by contrast, the theatricality of a codified society based on pretence and duplicity. Allan, for example, comes across as a simple, artless sort of person. This quality soon alienates him from his neighbourhood. On his arrival at Thorpe-Ambrose, Allan avoids the reception organised by local notables. After a few more social blunders, he is ostracised by polite society. Having realised this, Allan tries to act more like a country gentleman and fulfil people's expectations by getting married. However, he is also untalented in the game of love; his direct, unsubtle approach means that he is equally unsuccessful with Neelie. Neelie is an actress in her own way. Playing the game of love, she intends to make Allan fall in love with her. She is nonetheless determined to play the game by its rules. In that sense, Lydia's scheming to marry Allan is only a heightened version of what men and women normally do. The parallel suggests that the highly socialised and highly theatrical process of courting and marrying, which for Collins amounts to 'a social persecution against the individual', hardly hides a crude competition for money and power.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, p.39, and Collins, *The Woman in White*, p.547.

<sup>110</sup> Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, p.49.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid. p.553.

<sup>112</sup> Wilkie Collins quoted by Catherine Peters in *The King of Inventors*, p.184.

Allan's social artlessness, which verges on stupidity, comes from a naive lack of perception of the gap between what people say in their social relationships and what they really mean. Allan takes people at face value, and cannot see through them. This places him at the mercy of the experienced Lydia Gwilt, who is clearly aware of the theatricality of social conventions. Lydia is willing to follow the rules, in order to subvert them. A dash of wickedness, or at least some acting skills, and a little dissimulation are useful to one who wants to survive in the urban jungle. In *The Law and the Lady*, Valeria makes progress in her investigation, obtaining vital information from womanising major Fitz-David by using makeup to impersonate a more feminine version of herself. In Collins' novels, therefore, characters see the theatrical aspect of life, whereas in Féval's novels, they merely see life through the distorting frame of the theatre.

Women are particularly associated with the stage. Insofar as the main feature of the Sensation novel is the 'villainess', both categories of villains and women overlap. For Lyn Pykett, however, 'the Sensation novels seem to define femininity as duplicity and genteel femininity as performance or masquerade'.<sup>113</sup> The fact that most of Collins' women, whether they are villains or heroines, engage in some degree of dissimulation or duplicity, suggests as much. The truth is that impersonating respectable gentlewomen appears to be very easy. Both Lydia Gwilt and Magdalen Vanstone demonstrate the ease with which it can be done. Once she has cheated her way into the role of a respectable married woman, Magdalen obtains a legitimate name and place in society. She has 'made the general sense of propriety [her] accomplice', and 'even the law, which is the friend of all ... respectable people, has recognised [her] existence, and has become [her] friend too!'<sup>114</sup> The most respectable role of all, that of a married lady, is easily assumed. What society takes for granted and assumes is natural and unique, is in fact artificial and conditioned. It can be imitated, with some training and a proper costume. A lady, as Magdalen has learnt, is nothing but 'a woman who wears a silk gown, and has a sense of her own importance.'<sup>115</sup> Magdalen's discovery is echoed throughout the novel by other characters, such as Mrs Wragge, for whom 'a trifle of money left you that

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<sup>113</sup> Pykett, *The Sensation Novel*, p.24.

<sup>114</sup> Collins, *No Name*, p.484.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, p.503.

you didn't expect ... make[s] a lady of you.'<sup>116</sup> Therefore, a shadow is cast upon all women, who might, under a facade of respectability, gentleness and submission, hide self-interest and dangerous passions.

There are, however, some 'good' women in Collins' novels, such as Norah Vanstone or Laura Fairlie, who are truly genteel and never outstep the limits of respectable behaviour. Their artlessness, nonetheless, makes them easy victims: Laura's innocent trust of her future husband seals her fate. At best, these women are boring characters: Norah passively accepts the loss of her inheritance, and, were it not for her sister Magdalen, there would be no story to tell. Characters such as Norah or Laura illustrate Collins' desire to show how women are trapped in conventional roles, and to expose these as artificial, unnatural, and potentially dangerous codes of behaviour. Women have to conform to the norm, by impersonating an absurdly ideal version of themselves. Consequently, acting as impersonation takes on a different and more positive meaning: 'The theme of acting is ... very closely related to the theme of willing or choosing, as opposed to submitting and accepting.'<sup>117</sup> While Magdalen freely assumes the identity of the governess as a step forward in her search for her inheritance, her sister Norah, who accepted her fate passively, is forced to become a governess. Magdalen and Lydia take on fluid identities as they impersonate various characters. All of Collins' women, even when they are not impersonators, share the same characteristics: unpredictability, impulsiveness, and changeability. This suggests that women are not to be limited by narrow definitions or to be constrained to what is socially acceptable feminine behaviour. Collins' narratives paint women who are flawed, realistic and complex. In that sense, his female characters were alternative representations of women, simultaneously exciting and subversive.

Women's impersonation, therefore, becomes an indirect way to explore how women's identity is formed in a traditional patriarchal society. Magdalen, left with 'no name' at the death of her father, has no identity apart from that given by her father. In the course of her varied impersonations and recreations of herself, she can never be anything but what a man makes her.

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., p.165.

<sup>117</sup> Richard Barickman, Susan MacDonald and Myra Stark, *Corrupt Relations: Dickens, Thackeray, Trollope, Collins and the Victorian Sexual System* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), pp.125-26.

As Noel's wife, she has merely become 'Somebody's Wife'.<sup>118</sup> As Louisa, the parlour-maid, she is given another identity by her master: 'What's your name, my good girl? Louisa, is it? I shall call you Lucy, if you don't mind.'<sup>119</sup> There is the hint of a comparison between sexual and social oppression. This symbolic dispossession of Magdalen's identity by a man is echoed by the fate of Mrs Wragge, rebaptised Julia Bygrave by her husband for the purpose of cheating Noel Vanstone:

'What is your name?'

'Matilda', answered Mrs Wragge, in a state of the densest bewilderment.

'Nothing of the sort!' cried the captain, fiercely. 'How dare you tell me your name's Matilda? Your name is Julia ... Who are you? You're Mrs Bygrave - Christian name, Julia .... Say it all over to me instantly, like the Catechism! What is your name?'<sup>120</sup>

The many occurrences of such motifs impose the idea that indeed, the atypical plight of the disinherited Magdalen Vanstone ...becomes the means of implying that most Victorian women have no firm identity, no name, as they remain under paternal authority or pass from a father's authority to a husband (exchanging, of course, one man's name for another).<sup>121</sup>

Collins, however, is oddly ambivalent about the representation of women, and the value of acting. On the one hand, impersonation is construed as a form of asserting one's freedom to live one's life as one's pleases, as well as a proof of vital energy. On the other hand, it appears to be a perverse tendency of the female mind, and a dangerous activity. Anne Catherick in *The Woman in White* first exemplifies this dangerous tendency. Anne Catherick is an 'unconscious' actress. She is a very theatrical character; everything about her is exaggerated. Her 'madness' enhances her mannerisms and her incoherence, so do her sudden fits of hysteria and her rambling obsession with Percival's secret. As it turns out, Anne 'acted' the role of the woman with a secret. As her mother reported:

She knew that there was a Secret - she knew who was connected with it - she knew who would suffer by its being known - and, beyond that, whatever airs of importance she may have given herself, whatever crazy

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<sup>118</sup> Collins, *No Name*, p.484.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., p. 512.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., pp.268-69.

<sup>121</sup> Barickman, ed., *Corrupt Relations*, p.113.

boasting she may have indulged in with strangers, she never to her dying day knew more.<sup>122</sup>

Although Anne Catherick genuinely believes she can help Laura Fairlie, her self-delusion ultimately causes her death. Walter's encounter with the woman in white recalls Collins' real-life encounter with Caroline Graves.<sup>123</sup> The parallel does not stop here; Caroline Graves suffered from a nervous disorder, and presented symptoms of hysteria. As Catherine Peters reports, she deliberately assumed personas, and sometimes fell victim to her own plotting.<sup>124</sup> According to nineteenth-century medicine, hysteria was a condition that could easily affect all women.<sup>125</sup> Hysteria, a form of hypersensitivity, is what causes Magdalen's career of impersonations. Anne's nervous disease and her death are but a heightened version of what triggers most female characters' behaviours, and what ultimately befalls those who consciously impersonate people. They become trapped in their performance, suffer self-fragmentation and put their social status and their mental health at risk. Magdalen goes through alternating periods of self-debasement and self-confidence, depression and exaltation, before finally breaking down altogether.

At the end of *No Name*, Magdalen recovers from a long period of illness to marry her saviour Captain Kirke. The ending, therefore, contradicts the whole course of the novel, and denies her past as an actress. She gains passively what she has striven for, and her final name is, unsurprisingly, conferred by a man. On the other hand, her progress could also be construed as an illustration of the taming process involved in getting Magdalen to conform to the only role left to women, that of an obedient and respectful wife. Normality is finally reached, but not without having shown its danger and absurdity.

Finally, two male characters have a particular link with the theatre, Dexter in *The Law and the Lady*, and Ozias in *Armadale*. Both these characters, however, share some characteristics with their female counterparts. They are, to start with, rather feminine themselves. Ozias, we are told, has a 'sensitive

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<sup>122</sup> Collins, *The Woman in White*, p.499.

<sup>123</sup> See J. G. Millais, *The Life and Letters of Sir John Everett Millais, President of the Royal Academy*, I (London: Methuen, 1899), pp.278-81.

<sup>124</sup> Peters, *The King of Inventors*, p.220.

<sup>125</sup> Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980*, especially Chapter 6, 'Feminism and Hysteria: The Daughter's disease' (London: Virago, 1987), pp.145-64.

feminine organization'.<sup>126</sup> Contrasted with masculine, athletic, down-to-earth Allan, Ozias is skinny, artistic and imaginative. Tortured by a superstitious fear that he will eventually re-enact his father's crime and cause Allan's death, Ozias hides his feelings and keeps his self-control for most of the novel, until he breaks down in an absurd yet striking scene. Ozias, who has been acting all day in an unusual exaggerated way, 'a coarse masquerade of boldness', is seized with uncontrollable hysteria when Major Milroy's elaborate clock goes wrong and its automatons crash into each other.<sup>127</sup> Overacting becomes a symbol of tensions in the psychic self, externalised by irrational behaviour. Admittedly, 'he has broken loose from his own restraints', demonstrating the dangers of both overactive imagination and repression.<sup>128</sup>

In *The Law and the Lady*, Collins develops his exploration of the unconscious, repression and neurosis, through the character of psychically damaged Dexter. Like Ozias, Dexter has a guilty secret: he is responsible for the death of his friend's wife Mrs Macallan. Dexter shares abrupt changes of mood and a morbid imagination with Ozias:

I have an immense imagination. It runs riot at times. It makes an actor of me. I play the parts of all the heroes that ever lived. I can't help it, I am obliged to do it. If I restrained my imagination, when the fit is on me, I should go mad. I let myself loose. It lasts for hours. It leaves me, with my energies worn out, with my sensibilities frightfully acute.<sup>129</sup>

Dexter's sensibility and imagination make him an artist. His 'madness' is creative: he acts, paints, and tells stories. Most of all, he makes an art of his life, in an extraordinary self-conscious theatrical display of his misdirected energy, his infirmity and his talents. He excels at mystifying people, who do not know what to make of him, and think him mad. Valeria is able to see through him:

It seems to me that he openly expresses - I admit in a very reckless and boisterous way - thoughts and feelings which most of us are ashamed of as weaknesses, and which we keep to ourselves accordingly. I confess I have often fancied myself transformed into some other person, and have felt a certain pleasure in seeing myself in my new character... Mr Dexter lets out the secret, just as the children do.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Collins, *Armadale*, p.220.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, p.221.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>129</sup> Collins, *The Law and the Lady*, p.218.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.221-222.

Dexter's acting out of his fantasy, therefore, is nothing but a heightened version of what people would do, if they were not restrained by conventions. Furthermore, Valeria is able to see Dexter's dramatisation and exaggerated emotions as both symptoms of hidden truths within himself, and clues to the disclosing of these truths. Dexter's contradictory impulses to hide and reveal the truth about Mrs Macallan's death are gnawing at his sanity. Significantly, the truth will indirectly come out, hidden in Dexter's incoherent, dream-like storytelling.

### Conclusion

The formal influence of the theatre on both sets of texts and the high occurrence of theatrical references reflect the popular appeal of stage melodrama in France and England as well as the passion that Paul Féval and Wilkie Collins shared for the stage. Both obviously conceived of their novels in terms of drama, as is evident from the importance of dialogue or the predominance of dramatic scenes of revelation and confrontation. Paradoxically, both writers experienced difficulties in their theatrical careers. It is not well known why Paul Féval's success on the stage was limited. Charles Monselet commented on the former's failure in the following terms:

Il y a même lieu de supposer, que, doué comme il était d'une si puissante organisation, il aurait pu fournir une très brillante carrière théâtrale si les circonstances et les directeurs l'avaient voulu et lui avaient fait le chemin plus facile. Mais quoi! On me croira difficilement; dans la force de l'âge et du talent, à la tête d'une renommée éclatante et légitimement acquise, Paul Féval, à chaque fois qu'il prétendait aborder la scène, se heurtait à des obstacles qui paraissaient ordinairement réservés aux débutants.<sup>131</sup>

Taking into account the commercial pressure put on any French *feuilletoniste*, Féval's relative failure might be ascribed to a lack of time devoted to his theatrical ambitions. The extravagance of his novels might also have made their theatrical adaptation difficult. As for Collins, his theatrical successes generally entailed toning down his novels for theatrical adaptations and purging them of all their subversive elements.

The most striking feature of both sets of novels, however, is the way they use the theatre as a metaphor for contemporary society. On the one hand, this is

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<sup>131</sup> Galvan, 'Paul Féval d'après sa correspondance', p.105.

another aspect of their desire to highlight the dramatic and exciting aspect of modern life. On the other hand, the theatrical metaphor conveys the idea of a codified society based on pretence. All the novels contrast villains as powerful artists, playwright and actors, and the rest of society as blind puppets, unaware of the theatricality and artificiality of social life.

Féval's novels offer a conventional denunciation of the hypocrisy and cruelty of society, and a negative view of acting as manipulation, greed and vanity. This goes along with a certain objection to the aesthetics of the theatre, conceived as easy and immoral. Féval's attitude towards the theatre is nonetheless ambiguous. His portraits of characters supposedly perverted by the theatre are infused with humorous sympathy, and his portraits of villains subversively glamorise them. Such treatment of both theatrical conventions and theatrical metaphor betrays Féval's playful approach towards his work, characterised by a constant game between fiction and reality, truth and lies. Last but not least, his ironic distance from conventions highlights his mixed feelings toward the popular novel.

Whereas Féval simply uses the theatrical metaphor to underline the vanity and ambitions of human beings in general and the villains' ability to make use of society's codes and roles in particular, Collins explores the nature of these very roles and codes and provides sharp social criticism. Acting becomes not only a deceitful way to success, but also a positive conquest of one's freedom from strict conceptions about what people in general and women in particular are expected to do. In so doing, he exposes the socially constructed nature of femininity. Criticism does not only apply to criminal figures, but also to respectable society and middle-class structures and laws, leading to subversion. The subversive nature of his plots nonetheless tends to be counteracted by a systematic punishment, generally in the form of nervous breakdown, of characters prone to acting.

The next two sections, therefore, will be devoted to the existence of such contrary discourses in both the Roman-Feuilleton and the Sensation novel. This will include a discussion of the ambiguous relationship of both genres with the ideology of melodrama, providing further insights into the affinities between the popular novel and the stage.

## Chapter IV. Heroes and villains: manicheism and moral ambiguity

### Introduction

In this chapter, the Roman-Feuilleton and the Sensation novel are considered from the perspective of the crime novel, and particular attention is paid to their moral content. An examination of the detective novel and the thriller as the two poles of the crime novel will serve to highlight the differences between representation and treatment of moral issues in the narratives of Collins and Féval.

As crime novels, both the Sensation novel and the Roman-Feuilleton dealt with crime and punishment, and, as such, implicitly and explicitly raised issues about justice and moral values. Popular novels, however, are primarily concerned with providing entertainment to their readers. At their simplest, crime novels rely on a dualistic moral configuration where conventional types of characters are assigned clear-cut moral positions. Endings are likely to signify the victory of justice and virtue over evil.

The Roman-Feuilleton, for instance, is rarely credited with ambiguity. For most critics, the genre dramatises with melodramatic panache and exaggeration the conflict between a good hero and a morally weak villain. It builds up the picture of a transparent universe from which evil is eventually expelled. This interpretation, however, overlooks the nature of the hero. As a Romantic figure, the French hero is endowed with ambivalent power. Marginalised after a miscarriage of justice or a personal ordeal, he is liable to temptation, and prone to interpret justice as revenge. André Maynotte, the hero of the first episode of *Les Habits Noirs*, illustrates such ambivalence. As the series evolves, however, more room is given to a different type of hero. The Févalian hero gradually becomes disillusioned, and the outcome of his struggle against the forces of evil becomes unsure. Féval is not so much interested in showing the final victory of goodness over evil as in building the pessimistic picture of a society where virtue does not always pay. Furthermore, the narrative reveals a subversive attraction to anarchy and chaos, one aspect of which is the villains' tendency to invest the foreground. The *Habits Noirs* series is unmistakably run through by a melodramatic impulse towards idealism and clarity. It nonetheless prefigures the dark side of the crime novel, the thriller, where notions such as justice and culpability are relative and the outcome of the moral conflict is not clear.

On the contrary, the Sensation novel is now praised for its ambivalent treatment of moral issues. For Winifred Hughes, for instance, 'the sensation novelists revised the traditional moral certainty [of popular melodrama] with moral ambiguity.'<sup>1</sup> It is true that Collins shared Féval's attraction with evil figures or ambiguous characters such as Magdalen Vanstone, whose moral status, villain or heroine, remains unclear throughout *No Name*. Contrary to Féval, however, the final impulse of his narratives is generally to set things right. Either providence helps reveal the rightness of society and the victory of the moral characters as in stage melodrama, or a detective figure finally provides clarity by identifying and separating the good from the bad. Insofar as his narratives validate definite conclusions and clarity, Collins' crime novels are on the side of the detective novel, the lighter pole of the crime novel.

In both genres, therefore, two contrary discourses oppose each other and pull the narratives in two different directions.

## **Part 1. Manicheism and ambiguity in the novels of Paul Féval**

### **A. Manicheism in *Les Habits Noirs*: the melodramatic impulse**

Lack of time and pressure to conform to readers' desire for escapist literature meant that French *feuilletonistes* did not dwell heavily on complex moral issues. Moreover, most Roman-Feuilleton are run through by an impulse towards order and consolation, which is to be ascribed mainly to the influence of melodrama.

Melodrama is built on the existence of moral absolutes. It is concerned with extremes, and subjects the universe to moral polarisation. The genre, therefore, tends to abstractions and simplifications:

In treatment of material, melodrama concentrates on externals; its stays on the surface and never explores the depths. This approach produces two of the form's most notable features: character stereotypes and rigid moral distinction.<sup>2</sup>

Melodramatic heroes and villains are rarely interesting as individuals, because they are mere incarnations of opposite principles. Their confrontation enacts the universal conflict between the principles of good and evil, or virtue and vice. Those notions are never questioned nor explored: they are absolute and universal principles. Readers, therefore, always know

<sup>1</sup> Winifred Hughes, *The Maniac in the Cellar: Sensation Novels of the 1860s* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p.ix.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Booth, Introduction to *Hiss the Villain: Six English and American Melodramas* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1964), p.10.

where they stand. Moreover, the outcome of the universal conflict is always the victory of virtue. Melodrama believes in a benevolent order which might temporarily be destroyed, but which will ultimately triumph. Although melodrama revels in natural catastrophes and human perversities, Peter Brooks emphasises the process whereby virtue slowly conquers evil: melodrama 'is about virtue made visible and acknowledged, the drama of a recognition.'<sup>3</sup> Evil is punished, virtue rewarded. Behind chaos, there is sense and certainty, insofar as society is ultimately sustained by the benevolent hand of God. Melodrama is therefore straightforwardly moral, as well as optimistic.

The influence of melodrama's code of ethics on the Roman-Feuilleton is undeniable. Archetypal figures such as heroes and villains are recurrent. The figure of the ambiguous yet honourable hero is the mark of the Roman-Feuilleton. In his endeavour to clear his name and acquire social recognition, the hero is often led to perform illegal deeds. But whatever his position towards the law, he remains a defender of the weak and a noble fighter of evil. The nobility of the hero covers both social and moral senses of the world. In *Les Habits Noirs*, the hero invariably has an aspiration towards nobility, which is at the same time a desire to remain pure and to surpass himself. Generosity, courage and honesty are recurrent qualities of the hero, along with a heart of gold: most Févalian heroes are devoted to a mother, a fiancée or a wife. Once that is recognised, he wins or regains a place among the powerful, along with a title.<sup>4</sup> Once he has proved his innocence, André Maynotte, a former petty bourgeois, finds himself rich and linked to the aristocracy through his former wife Julie, now a baroness. In *La Rue de Jérusalem*, Paul Labre erases the traces of his sorrowful past, denounces his persecutors and simultaneously gains the title of baron. The mission of the hero, therefore, is to make social appearance match moral reality, and re-establish some clear boundaries between right and wrong, good and evil.

In his endeavour to clear his name, however, the hero is often led to perform illegal deeds. Féval resorts to specific devices in order to lessen the ambiguous aspect of his heroes, including techniques of doubling and displacement. When André infiltrates the Habits Noirs and becomes Lecoq's associate, he jeopardises his status as hero insofar as he must be drawn into

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976), p.27.

<sup>4</sup> That social recognition does not prevent him from going into exile, either abroad or in the provinces, away from the corrupting influence of Paris.

their world of crime. These illegal deeds and the moral issues that they raise are overlooked. They are further obscured by the fact that André assumes the personality of the cripple Trois-Pattes. Readers' attention is distracted from the shady actions of the hero and focuses instead on the mysterious legends that the grotesque Trois-Pattes generates. Moreover, the existence of a second assumed personality symbolises André's purer self. He is also Monsieur Bruneau, an honest bourgeois who secretly protects Michel, his own son. Another trick is to have secondary characters perform the dubious tasks of the hero. In *La Rue de Jérusalem*, Paul has withdrawn into his country house, absorbed with the two sisters Ysole and Suavita, while the task of finding out the truth about the assassination of his brother falls to Pistolet. In *Maman Léo*, it is not Valentine, the noble heroine, who gets rid of the villains, but Echalot and his wife Léocaldie. Everything works as if the dirty work was done by the people, and not by the 'noble' hero.

As regards the necessary involvement of the hero in the punishment of the villains, Féval develops certain strategies in order to minimise the participation of the heroes so that it looks like justice rather than revenge. Villains tend to be destroyed by their own passions. Even if André is determined to avenge himself, he does not have to strike Lecoq when the confrontation takes place; conveniently enough, 'ce fut Dieu qui frappa.'<sup>5</sup> This death is exemplary for it is thrice justified; it is wanted by human justice, by André and by God. The fact that Lecoq's death echoes the earlier condemnation of André suggests that evil will destroy itself, and retribution be done, by God if not by human justice. The self-destruction of the villains is less heavily handled in later novels. In *Coeur d'Acier*, the villain Joulou is aware of his own degradation, and expresses the desire to do something good before he dies. He will have a chance to do so by saving the heroic couple, whose lives are threatened by the evil Marguerite. In order to do so, Joulou shoots her, then commits suicide, for Marguerite, though a villain, was his beloved wife. A great device of Féval is the idea of 'couper la branche', which is an alternative justice within the Habits Noirs themselves. For instance, in *La Rue de Jérusalem*, Nicolas, who has jeopardised the future of the association, is killed by his accomplices. He was responsible for the downfall of Ysole, who had asked the hero Paul to kill him. Nicolas' premature death prevents Ysole or Paul from having to commit a murder themselves. As in *Les Habits Noirs*, the use of parallel and doubling enhances the symbolic value of the punishment. Nicolas is lured into a room, his throat is cut and he is walled

<sup>5</sup> Paul Féval, *Les Habits Noirs* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1987), p.395.

in the safe that once concealed the body of Paul's brother, for whose death he was responsible too.

While the ambiguous aspect of the hero tends to be overlooked, the main villains are generally pure evil. There is no ambiguity about Bozzo, the head of the Habits Noirs. The length of his career contrasts sharply with his lack of motives for doing evil. He seems to have a boundless desire for power and money yet has 'aucune des passions que l'or assouvit'.<sup>6</sup> Bozzo is very much like a melodramatic incarnation of evil. The gratuitous aesthetic pleasure that he takes in designing machiavelian plans has a surreal quality. In that respect, he prefigures another evil figure from the later Roman-Feuilleton, Fantômas. Lecoq, on the other hand, is rather deprived of fantasy. For him crime is an alternative career. Yet, like Bozzo and Marguerite, he has no conscience, no remorse, and never questions his actions. As far as the main villains are concerned, ambiguity is only temporary or external, so to speak, and is not linked with moral ambiguity. As Marc Angenot puts it, 'le conflit ontologique [entre l'attirance entre le bien et le mal] n'est plus que la contradiction accidentelle entre l'apparence et la réalité.'<sup>7</sup> As Valentine puts it in *Maman Léo*, 'le Diable et ces gens là, vois-tu, c'est la même chose.'<sup>8</sup>

As for Marguerite, she first appears as a complex character, a victim of sexual oppression and economic deprivation who sets out to take control of her own life. Féval describes her as an unconventional business woman, and contemplates her from a feminist point of view:

Personne ne comprend celles qui mettent le pied hors du sentier battu.  
Folles ou perverses! On leur donne le choix entre ces deux injures. Ce  
qui peut exister dans leur pensée, nul ne prend souci de le  
chercher...<sup>9</sup>

In the first half of *Les Habits Noirs*, her behaviour is analysed and she comes across as an individual with sufficient depths. She comes from the bottom of society. She has been used by men, has learnt some lessons and now she wants to use them to climb to the top. However, the more space she takes in the story, the less dimension she has. Féval forgets the feminist discourse, which threw light on the origin of her criminal career and made her into a variation of Laclos' Madame de Merteuil, and turns her into a pure incarnation of evil. What is on her mind is no longer explored, and self-interest appears to be her sole motive. Furthermore, Marguerite starts her

<sup>6</sup> Paul Féval, *La Rue de Jérusalem* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1987), p.804.

<sup>7</sup> Marc Angenot, *Le Roman populaire, recherches en paralittérature* (Montréal: Presse de l'Université du Québec, 1975), p.50.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Féval, *Maman Léo* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1987), p.113.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Féval, *Coeur d'Acier* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1987), p.440.

career by having a man killed, which, in Féval's universe, puts her on the side of darkness straight away. Her wholeness as a villain can be seen in relation to the character of the hero, Roland. 'Tu serais un obstacle sur mon chemin, car je t'aimerais', she says before asking her lover Joulou to stab him.<sup>10</sup> Féval chooses not to explore the possibilities of a conflict between love and ambition, or even between the temptation to do evil or good. Marguerite experiences no inner conflict, unlike a complex character like Collins' Lydia Gwilt, who chooses love first, then sacrifices it when it comes in the way of her personal fulfilment.

Therefore, the world of *Les Habits Noirs* seems one where the opposite forces of evil and good face each other and clash endlessly. Characters have a polarised vision of their universe. The lesson that André learns from his misfortune, for instance, is the polarised structure of his world:

Hier encore, je ne distinguais pas nettement la Providence de la fatalité. Aujourd'hui, la fatalité me fait peur et je tends mes mains vers la Providence; car, séparés que nous sommes, Julie, par l'espace et par l'erreur, elle nous réunit tous deux sous son regard éternel.<sup>11</sup>

The fight between heroes and villains tends, therefore, to become a symbol of the eternal fight between evil and goodness. Chapter XLI of *Maman Léo* is called 'Le "bien" et le "mal"', announcing Bozzo's dream at the end of the chapter:

Figure-toi, dit-il, que j'ai eu un drôle de rêve hier. Je me voyais dans cent ans d'ici et je disais à quelqu'un dont le père n'est pas encore né, mais qui avait déjà la barbe grise: il y a deux choses immortelles: le *bien* qui est Dieu, et moi qui suis le *mal*.<sup>12</sup>

In most episodes, the ending marks a victory over the forces of evil, however temporary and unsteady. Apart from Bozzo, the main villains are punished at some point. Lecoq dies in *Les Habits Noirs*, Nicolas in *La Rue de Jérusalem*, Marguerite in *Coeur d'Acier*. Among secondary villains who are not mere incarnations of villainy, many seem to pay for their crimes, especially if they have committed murder. In that respect, *Les Habits Noirs* remains characterised by the polarised and simplified moral universe of the crime novel.

Finally, the evolution of the series deserves more investigation. While the first hero of the *Habits Noirs* series was reminiscent of Sue's Rodolphe and Dumas' Edmond Dantès, later heroes are less powerful and less

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p.441 .

<sup>11</sup> Féval, *Les Habits Noirs*, p.69.

<sup>12</sup> Féval, *Maman Léo*, p.187.

ambiguous. They do not seek to bring back order to the whole of society, but simply to claim personal justice or revenge. Sometimes, this project collapses and the hero merely tries to escape unscathed from the confrontation with the villain. Heroes finally become pure innocent victims. The evolution of the series goes towards clearing out ambiguities linked to the nature and the actions of the hero.

In *Les Habits Noirs* (1863), André becomes a member of the criminal association in order to avenge himself and establish his innocence. In *L'Arme invisible* (1869), Valentine is drawn towards the shady methods of the Habits Noirs and eventually considers resorting to murder. Both novels suggest a parallel between heroes and villains that complicates the simple black and white frame on which most novels are based. Later novels, however, reject such parallels. Vengeance will not do, neither will compromise. *Les Compagnons du Trésor* (1872) denounces the vicious circle of violence. Count Julian, Bozzo's son, has become the leader of the association. In accordance with the rules of the Habits Noirs, he has killed his father and is now confronted with his own son Reynier, the young hero who had been so far ignorant of the identity of his father. Julian tries to seduce Reynier, offering him the control of the association and its treasure if he kills him as the tradition demands. Reynier refuses power and fortune with the help of his lover Irène.

The *Habits Noirs* series, therefore, evolves towards a less compromised but also a weaker hero. Many later Févalian heroes, as opposed to André or Valentine, seem rather passive. André feels the need to answer the call of adventure and fulfil his heroic destiny:

Sa vie, jusqu'alors, n'avait pas manqué d'aventures, car il venait de loin et il avait fallu tout un roman sombre et mystérieux pour mettre dans ses bras d'artisan la fille déshéritée d'une noble race; mais ce roman s'était noué en quelque sorte au gré de la destinée. André et Julie avaient dans leur passé d'étranges périls, évités, mais point de combats. André en était encore à éprouver sa force. A de certaines heures il avait conscience de l'énergie indomptable qui était en lui à l'état latent... C'était un de ces instants. André rêvait de luttes futures et s'étonnait du mystérieux besoin qu'il avait de bondir dans l'arène.<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand, Roland, the hero of *Coeur d'Acier* (1866) spends most of his time hiding under a disguise, because 'le rôle de héros d'une cause

<sup>13</sup> Féval, *Les Habits Noirs*, p.22.

célèbre lui faisait peur et horreur.<sup>14</sup> He prefers to forget the crime he has been accused of instead of avenging himself or proving his innocence:

Bien des gens positifs pourront blâmer cette puérole épouvante. Roland était tout le contraire d'un homme positif. Son regard ne se portait jamais qu'avec une répugnance malade vers cette nuit du mardi gras qui avait fait de sa vie deux tronçons dont l'un ne pouvait plus se renouer à l'autre ... Dans cet état de lassitude morale, dépourvue de tout espoir et même de tout désir, où il végétait déjà depuis des années, que lui fallait-il? Un refuge.<sup>15</sup>

Eight years later, a new love interest and a strange letter sent to him rouse his curiosity and rekindle his failing energies. Another scheme of the Habits Noirs to further victimise him eventually prompts his reaction. But even then, the hero relies on a crowd of secondary characters to fulfil his ordeal. In *La Rue de Jérusalem* (1868), Paul similarly evades his responsibilities. He first tries to find out who killed his brother, then delegates this mission to Pistolet, the young Parisian. Paul's weakness is actually denounced by other characters within the story, such as General de Champmas: 'Cela s'appelle fuir, monsieur le baron, interrompt brusquement le général, et fuir est d'un lâche!'<sup>16</sup> The general stresses the consequence of such an attitude, and underlines the hero's dilemma. Paul has not quite fulfilled his role yet:

Vous êtes allé chercher la vérité au fin fond de l'enfer, votre âme est digne et bonne ... mais laisser vivre un assassin, c'est se rendre complice des meurtres qu'il peut commettre dans l'avenir.<sup>17</sup>

The end of the story finds an alternative solution to the dilemma. The Count forgives Paul's weakness and gives him his daughter Suavita. The culprit is killed by the Habits Noirs themselves. Although such a solution allows the hero to preserve his moral purity, it also brings some ambiguity to the notion of justice. Nicolas does not die because he deserves to pay for his crimes, but because he puts the whole association in jeopardy. Justice, therefore, remains relative.

Féval's feverish and worried nature comes out in his later novels, as does his growing desire for ideals, which was to lead to his conversion to Catholicism in the late 1870s. Heroes become more disillusioned, and violence becomes definitely out of the question. This eclipse of the hero, which brings more realism in the novels insofar as crime syndicates are rarely defeated by a single man, also corresponds with the increasing importance of secondary

<sup>14</sup> Féval, *Coeur d'Acier*, p.513.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp.565-66.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p.1014.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p.1013.

comic characters such as Echalot and Pistolet. For Féval, humour was a way out of his dark thoughts.

Paradoxically, the idealist assumption that the hero should not compromise himself jeopardises his role as the active centre of the story. The passive hero as pure victim becomes a foil to more flamboyant villains, which create an alternative centre of attraction. Their cleverness is underlined and often glamorised. They dominate the narration insofar as they are in control of events. Finally, Féval's attitude toward his evil characters betrays a subversive attraction towards the energy and strength of the forces of darkness.

Bozzo is the main figure of *Les Habits Noirs*. Féval may have taken his inspiration from 'le Vieux de la Montagne', the Muslim leader who founded the Assassin order in the Middle-Ages.<sup>18</sup> Bozzo's character is built up through rumours and legends spread by fictional characters and narrator alike, many of which are contradictory. Féval never gives the final word as to who Bozzo really is, resulting in the continuous creation of a mysterious, larger-than-life character. With his old age and his eventful past, Bozzo seems invincible and almost immortal. He is said to be more than a hundred, has escaped death by hanging several times, and has behind him a long career of crimes, which originated in Italy. He is now:

Ce conquérant, dont la ténébreuse puissance tenait en échec la police de la Restauration, ce souverain, ce papa de la religion des bagnes, ce demi-dieu, fort par lui-même et par l'association énorme dont il résumait en lui les forces.<sup>19</sup>

While Bozzo has a mythic aura and combines the Romantic outlaw with the professional criminal, Lecoq is a man of his time. His name suggests kinship with Vidocq, a parallel enhanced by many half-veiled references in the text. In *La Rue de Jérusalem*, Badoût suggests that Lecoq, who also calls himself Toulonnais-l'Amitié, and Vidocq are in fact the same man:

-Tant qu'on s'adressera à M. Vidocq pour prendre Toulonnais-l'Amitié... commença Badoût vivement.

Mais il n'acheva point sa phrase et dit:

-Je prends du café.<sup>20</sup>

Lecoq comes across as a clever, but cold and vulgar criminal. Féval does not seem to have much affection for him. He makes sure readers appreciate his smartness yet cannot hide some contempt for that type of criminal. Lecoq's

<sup>18</sup> Francis Lacassin, introduction to *Les Habits Noirs*, Volume I, p.xvi.

<sup>19</sup> Féval, *Les Habits Noirs*, p.109.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p.761.

death provides Féval with an opportunity to vent his feelings towards his character: 'il avait nom Monsieur Lecoq comme devant; moins que cela, il avait nom Toulonnais-l'Amitié; ce n'était qu'un vulgaire coquin, puisqu'il n'avait pas réussi.'<sup>21</sup> This comment highlights the ambiguity of the narrator regarding the main villains. They are clearly evil, and will eventually be punished. However, they are to be admired as long as they succeed, for they are survivors.

This double discourse is particularly apparent in the character of Marguerite. Immoral and cruel, she is to be condemned, but also admired and respected for her energy. In *Coeur d'Acier*, she outshines the rest of the characters, in particular the weak hero Roland. The scene where Marguerite wins her place as a member of the Habits Noirs is characteristic of the attraction of the villain. The Habits Noirs have gathered for a meeting, when Marguerite intrudes on them to claim her share of profit. Readers are obviously meant to be on her side, and she comes across as a heroine, confronting the evil Habits Noirs, whom she outwits.<sup>22</sup> Even in the scene where she gets Joulou to murder Roland, Féval handles his character with indulgence. Marguerite conquers her scruples, calls up destiny to back up her deed: 'Les musulmans ont raison ... C'était écrit, tout est écrit.'<sup>23</sup> Everything works as if Féval wanted to show that she faces her criminal destiny with courage and stoicism. On the other hand, it is obvious that Marguerite is dangerous, totally amoral and has no heart. Her characterisation oscillates between a criminal *femme fatale* and a larger-than-life figure of pure evil. A popular character with Féval's readership, she was first meant to be a secondary character. In view of her popularity, he turned her into a main villain. Many villains, therefore, are to be admired for their energy and skills, regardless of the moral content of their action. They are survivors. In that sense, they are heroes in the technical sense of the word.

Féval's fascination with the forces of darkness remained constant. His villains embody a period between the Restoration and the Second Empire when people were seeking wealth and power without much consideration for others or ethics. Féval, however, tends to turn them into mere representations of evil. Such enlargement prevents them from being painfully realistic or socially subversive. When they die, they create

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 388.

<sup>22</sup> Féval, *Coeur d'Acier*, Première Partie, Chapter IX, L'Autre Fenêtre.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p.450.

catharsis rather than unease. They nonetheless suggest a kind of evil that can never be fully localised, or fully defeated, and which is best represented by the crime syndicates and mysterious conspiracies that abound in Féval's novels. Villains partake of both sides of the Roman-Feuilleton. While flamboyant villains as incarnations of evil are typical of the abstract and simplified world of melodrama, they also reveal a subversive attraction towards the forces of chaos.

### **B. Ambiguity in *Les Habits Noirs*: an early prototype of the thriller**

One facet of *Les Habits Noirs* recalls the simplified world of melodrama. Moral values are not really explored. The code of ethics expounded by the series is based on Christian and bourgeois morals, with particular emphasis on human life and property. It is bad to kill or steal; it is good to work and to behave according to one's social rank. Social conflicts tend to be reduced to moral conflicts, and moral conflicts are generally externalised, resulting in a sort of cosmic war between the forces of evil and that of goodness. Some aspects of the narrative, however, resist the desire for transparency and order on the ground that reality is not that simple. While having faith in the moral worth of the individual, Féval is aware of human frailties and particularly suspicious of the nature and effect of society. The optimism of melodrama is denied, and the black and white moral frame that sustains the series becomes increasingly blurred, making of *Les Habits Noirs* an early prototype of the thriller.

According to Todorov's typology of the crime novel, one could situate *Les Habits Noirs* series somewhere between the thriller and the story of the detective-as-suspect.<sup>24</sup> The story of the detective-as-suspect is centred on a wrongly accused hero, whose mission is to find the real culprit and prove his innocence:

We might say that, in this case, the character is at the same time the detective, the culprit (in the eyes of the police), and the victim (potential victim of the real murderer).<sup>25</sup>

This pattern fits all episodes of *Les Habits Noirs*, which are built around organised miscarriages of justice, a principle known as 'payer la loi' in the fictional universe. In each episode of *Les Habits Noirs*, a crime is committed by the association and a plan prepared so that the hero is blamed for it. In

<sup>24</sup> The story of the detective-as-suspect is itself a variant of the suspense novel.

<sup>25</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, 'The Typology of Detective Fiction', in *The Poetics of Prose* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977), pp.43-52 (51).

terms of temporal structures, however, the series is much closer to the thriller. For Todorov, the thriller is:

no longer [the story of ] a crime anterior to the moment of the narrative: the narrative coincides with the action .... There is no story to be guessed; and there is no mystery, in the sense that it was presented in the whodunit.<sup>26</sup>

In *Les Habits Noirs*, for instance, the initial crime of which the hero is later accused is never a mystery. Whereas the narrators of detective and suspense stories have a restricted viewpoint on the action, the omniscient narrator of *Les Habits Noirs* recounts the initial crime, so that the identity of the real culprit is always clear. The focus of the *Habits Noirs* stories, therefore, is not so much on who committed the crime, but on how the hero will find it out, and how he will avenge himself.<sup>27</sup>

If Todorov focused his comparison of detective story and thriller on the formal aspects of the two genres, modern critics hold the view that the most significant difference between the two genres resides in their treatment of moral issues. While the detective novel is based on a clear-cut distinction between good and bad characters, the thriller 'still refers to black and white patterns but in a blurred and confused way'.<sup>28</sup> While the detective is confident in his righteousness and trusts his power to find out the truth, the hero of the thriller tends to be less sure about the outcome and the validity of his task. The thriller presents a world where strict separations have broken down; one of its main features is the doubt as whether each character is good or bad. The hero himself partakes of both worlds, that of the law and that of the underworld in which he is forced to live. Whereas the detective novel conveys the idea of an enclosed and relatively transparent community where order is brought back by the expulsion of a misfit, the thriller portrays a society torn by inner fights and made opaque by moral contamination. Notions such as justice and culpability have become ambiguous and relative.

It is easy to see why this pattern appealed to the French serial novelists more than that of the detective novel. Picturesque and ambiguous characters, action, violence and love stories were already present in earlier ancestors of the Roman-Feuilleton, such as melodrama and Romantic drama.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p.47.

<sup>27</sup> This device recalls the novels of R. A. Freeman, where readers are generally witnesses to the initial crime.

<sup>28</sup> Heta Pyrhonen, *Murder from an Academic Angle: An Introduction to the Study of the Detective Narrative* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1994), p.60.

The Gothic novel, another influence on the French Roman-Feuilleton, also shared many features with the thriller. The English Gothic novel, from Mrs Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and Matthew Gregory Lewis' *The Monk* (1796) to Charles Robert Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), was extremely popular in France in the 1820s. They shared with the thriller a mixture of sordid love and violence, a sense of danger and fear, and the ambiguous confrontation between villain and hero. One variant of the Gothic novels is worth examining. William Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (1794) is the story of a gentleman named Falkland who kills the man who has publicly humiliated him, and lets someone else be condemned for it. Falkland lives a secluded life of remorse when his servant Caleb, who sees himself as a student of human nature, suspects something from the strange behaviour of his master. Caleb spies on Falkland and tortures him with constant insinuations, until he finally admits his crime. From that point in the story, the situation is reversed. Falkland cannot bear to have his secret disclosed, and has Caleb accused of a crime to get rid of him. The pursuer becomes pursued, and vice-versa. *Caleb Williams* had many features of the detective story, but its particular importance is that it denied all the assertions that sustain the detective story: 'in the detective story the rule of the law is justified and an absolute good, in Godwin's book it is seen as wholly evil'.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, neither Caleb nor Falkland are totally guilty or innocent. Whereas the curiosity and perspicacity required of the modern detective are obvious qualities, Caleb Williams, as a detective figure, is singularly tainted with a perversity associated with encroachment on private life. Both characters function as doubles, and have a relationship that borders on fascination and repulsion at the same time. Finally, feverish scenes of chase and escape symptomatic of the thriller abound in *Caleb Williams*.

What is specific to the thriller, however, is its urban nature and its portrait of professional rather than private crime. These two features characterise the modern American thriller or hard-boiled novel, which bloomed after the second-world war and recreated the madness of life in the city.<sup>30</sup> It is worth noticing, however, that Sue's *Mystères de Paris* and Féval's *Les Habits Noirs* presented those very features long before Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Latimer and other modern writers of thrillers. In a way,

<sup>29</sup> Julian Symons, *Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), p.27.

<sup>30</sup> The first thriller was William Riley Burnett's *Asphalt Jungle* (1899), which described the struggle for survival in a town riddled with unscrupulous criminals.

one could say that one of the American thriller's precursors was the French Roman-Feuilleton. In fact, both genres had a common ancestor in an earlier literary form, the American adventure novel, exemplified by Cooper's *Last of the Mohicans* (1826).

While the Gothic novel informed the Roman-Feuilleton and the Sensation novel alike, the influence of the American novel is prevalent on the French Roman-Feuilleton. The patterns of influence and borrowing between French and American popular novels, however, was established back in the 1820s, way before the first modern thriller or the first American serial novels. It was triggered by the publication of Cooper's *Last of the Mohicans*. Cooper's novel recounts the wars between the French and the English for the North of America, which also involved their respective Indian allies. The plot of the novel is very simple. The two daughters of an English general on the brink of defeat try to reach their father, helped by a young sergeant, two Indians and an adventurer. There is plenty of action and violence, mingled with heroism and melodrama.<sup>31</sup> This special mixture appealed to the French public, so did the moral confusion created by the inner struggles of the various Indian tribes, and the moral dilemma of the white men confronted by a different culture and a different set of moral values.<sup>32</sup> Cooper's treatment of moral issues was superficial and, despite the novelty of the background, his characters remained conventional heroes and villains. The French were nonetheless fascinated by the dangers of the New World, the resourceful yet cruel savages, and the heroic soldiers defending a lost cause.

Cooper's novel heralded the first American serial novels, the Dime novels. Published in the 1860s, they told old tales of the West. Typical heroes were Kit Carson or Buffalo Bill. In 1886, the *New York Weekly* published the adventures of the first American detective, Nick Carter, a man of action operating in a large city. The last frontiers had moved from the Wild West to the big cities, and the adventure novel to the thriller. This displacement to an 'urban' jungle, however, had already taken place on the other side of the Atlantic. In France, in both mainstream and popular literature, the image of the savage in the forest was used as a metaphor to express fears about urban

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<sup>31</sup> The fate of both sisters is especially melodramatic: the elder is pursued by a lustful and cruel Indian while the innocent younger is secretly loved by the young hero.

<sup>32</sup> The adventurer Hawkeye advises the young Heyward to be cautious, and to 'Remember, that, to outwit the knaves it is lawful to practise things which may not be the gift of a white skin'. James Fenimore Cooper, *The Last of the Mohicans* (New York and London: Putnam, 1912), p.275.

life and the criminal underworld in the 1840s. For Régis Messac, Balzac's *La Comédie humaine* is a Parisian transposition of Cooper's novel.<sup>33</sup> In fact, Cooper's influence on Balzac can be traced as far back as *Les Chouans* (1829), which already presented many similarities with *The Last of the Mohicans*, such as its plot. In 1799, the adventurer Marie de Verneuil arrives in Brittany accompanied by Corentin, an agent of the Revolution. Her mission is to seduce the leader of the local Royalist movement and hand him over to the Republicans. In this strange and unfriendly environment, natives have their own ways and traditional rules do not hold. While remaining essentially Romantic, the confrontation between heroes and villains becomes suffused with ambiguity. As Marie falls in love with Le Gars, the interplay between the ideological convictions and the feelings of the characters complicates the moral configuration. The Chouan rebel Le Gars, however, is perhaps presented with more sympathy than the cold Corentin.<sup>34</sup>

It is, however, Sue who first thought of Paris as a jungle, a place ridden with criminals as clever as Cooper's savages:

Nous allons essayer de mettre sous les yeux du lecteur quelques épisodes de la vie d'autres barbares, aussi en dehors de la civilisation que les sauvages peuplades si bien décrites par Cooper. Seulement les barbares dont nous parlons sont au milieu de nous; nous pouvons les coudoyer en nous aventurant dans les repaires où ils vivent, où ils se concertent pour préparer le vol, le meurtre, pour se partager enfin les dépouilles de leurs victimes.<sup>35</sup>

Another master of the Roman-Feuilleton, Alexandre Dumas, equally transposed Cooper's representation of the New World to the French capital in *Les Mohicans de Paris* (1855). Finally, Féval himself exploited his predecessors' fame. In 1856, he wrote his own tale of the West, *Les Couteaux d'or*, which dealt with two men's rivalry. *Les Habits Noirs*, written twenty-years after Sue's *Mystères de Paris*, benefited from Cooper, Sue and Balzac's influence. The image of the savages of Paris can be found throughout the series:

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<sup>33</sup> Régis Messac, *Le 'Detective novel' et l'influence de la pensée scientifique* (Paris: Champion, 1929), p.424.

<sup>34</sup> In Balzac's later novel *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes* (1838-47), the criminal is more a social scourge than a Romantic figure. Vautrin, however, is sometimes more sympathetic than the policeman Corentin, and still has something of a Romantic rebel.

<sup>35</sup> Eugène Sue, quoted by Jean Goimard in *Manuel d'histoire littéraire de la France*, Tome V (1848-1917), Deuxième partie, Chapitre II (Paris: Messidor/Éditions Sociales, 1977), p.280.

Et [Pistolet] se mit à ramper dans l'herbe avec une telle adresse que les Indiens de Cooper lui auraient certainement fait compliment.<sup>36</sup>

In *Les Habits Noirs*, a policeman boasts about having 'le coup d'oeil américain', an obvious allusion to the senses of the Indians following a track.<sup>37</sup>

Between Sue's heyday and the 1860s, however, the economic and social situation had changed. Society's corruption has become an accepted fact and evil was no longer linked to a specific class. *Les Habits Noirs* series is therefore less focused on the underworld which frightened the men of the 1840s. It shares Balzac's notion of crime diffused throughout society. In the 1860s, crime had also become industrial; the most current crime was fraud.<sup>38</sup> Bozzo's career, from Romantic outlaw to professional criminal and manipulator of a corrupt society, reflects those social changes. *Les Habits Noirs* is a reflection of the reality of its time, seen through a distorting and magnifying glass. The series recounts the epic exploits of a sprawling criminal society torn by inner fights for ultimate power. Féval's modernity resides in this vision of organised crime that heralds the Mafia. The *Habits Noirs* have an Italian origin and an international dimension, and a family structure corrupted by lust for power. As Francis Lacassin puts it, *Les Habits Noirs* is:

Le roman d'une réalité sociale dominée par la violence au service de l'intérêt, le miroir d'une civilisation dans laquelle le crime paie. Alors que le roman anglo-saxon va se perdre dans les méandres des indices, déduction et fausses pistes disposés pour des esthètes de la logique, Féval en fait une épopée des bas-fonds. Un jeu tragique où le criminel mène la partie, où le policier n'est plus qu'un rouage anonyme de la vengeance sociale. Fantômas, Arsène Lupin, Al Capone et le roman dit "de série noire", se dessinent dès 1863 ... acte de naissance du roman policier, cette aventure des villes née de l'écroulement de la civilisation rurale.<sup>39</sup>

The presence of the hero in Féval's novels, however, puts him closer to an author like Edgard Wallace than to Raymond Chandler, for instance. Wallace's novels feature the urban background as moral wasteland of the typical thriller, but their heroes have a Romantic nature that recalls the heroes of the Roman-Feuilleton. Their conception of justice is expeditive and

<sup>36</sup> Féval, *La Rue de Jérusalem*, p.956.

<sup>37</sup> Féval, *Les Habits Noirs*, p.95.

<sup>38</sup> Gérard Mendel, *Meurtres exquis: histoire sociale du roman populaire* (Montreuil: P. E. C., 1986), p.32.

<sup>39</sup> Francis Lacassin, Introduction to *Les Habits Noirs*, Volume I, op. cit., p.xvii. Born in 1945, the *série noire* imported American hard-boiled novels in France before publishing French thrillers.

violent, yet they are men of honour akin to Romantic knights. The novels of both Féval and Wallace also share an absurd fantasy foreign to the cold and realistic thriller.<sup>40</sup>

The world of *Les Habits Noirs*, however, is a chaotic one. The nature and scale of the Habits Noirs as a criminal organisation suggests the extent of the hold of crime and corruption on society. As Lecoq puts it:

On nous appelle des coquins, je connais assez mon Paris pour savoir que les dix-neuf vingtièmes de ceux qui s'intitulent honnêtes gens sont exactement dans la même position que nous.<sup>41</sup>

Within the fictional society, the criminal figures, especially those belonging to the higher sphere of society, are rich and respected. Bozzo passes as a philanthrop, Marguerite and Lecoq obtain titles. In *L'Arme Invisible*, Lecoq uses his connections with the police, the government and the king to recover several reports on the illegal activities of the Habits Noirs, suggesting that law and power are corrupted. The Habits Noirs infiltrate the whole of society, from the base to the top, so that eventually everyone seems to belong to them: 'Dire qu'on ne peut pas faire un pas dans Paris sans marcher dessus quelqu'un qui en mange!', declares Similor.<sup>42</sup> This makes it hard to determine who is honest and who is not. The indeterminacy of the moral status of the characters is what Eric Neveu calls 'le constat d'anomie'.<sup>43</sup> This doubt as to the status of the characters is typical of the thriller.

As opposed to the main characters, many secondary characters are neither totally corrupt nor totally innocent. Some are amoral and seek their own interest, such as Echalot and Similor in the first episode of *Les Habits Noirs*:

-Tope là! Nous jurons fidélité...

-Jusqu'à la mort, Amédée... A quoi?

-A la chose de tirer notre épingle du jeu pour nous, et pour pousser le petit dans sa carrière!<sup>44</sup>

Others have been pushed to crime by fate and passion for a woman, such as Joulou, the fallen aristocrat, or Coyatier: 'C'était un rude scélérat habitué au

<sup>40</sup> In that respect, Féval is a direct precursor of French writers of thrillers, such as Auguste Le Breton and Léo Malet, and especially San Antonio who displays the same inventive approach to language and the same grotesque vision of life.

<sup>41</sup> Féval, *Maman Léo*, p.85.

<sup>42</sup> Féval, *Les Habits Noirs*, p.119.

<sup>43</sup> Eric Neveu, 'Vraisemblables et idéologies dans *Les Habits Noirs*', in Paul Féval, *romancier populaire, colloque de Rennes 1987* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes et *Interférences*, 1992), pp.183-202 (193).

<sup>44</sup> Féval, *Les Habits Noirs*, p.154.

sang...mais ce n'était pas un scélérat de naissance.'<sup>45</sup> Vincent Carpentier's ruin is triggered by his ambition, while it is Ysole's naiveté that causes her fall. It is fair to say that, unlike many other *feuilletonistes*, Féval created 'une infinité de types humains, nettement différenciés et inclassables selon les catégories traditionnelles du bien et du mal.'<sup>46</sup>

The moral message of the narrative is equally ambivalent. For conservative and Christian critics such as Marius Topin, Féval's work is moral, because it emphasises the failure of those who hope to benefit from crime.<sup>47</sup> This is true of characters such as Similor or Piquepuce, who remain petty thieves tossed about by the great leaders of the association. Moreover, if one focuses on the individual fate of some criminals such as Joulou du Bréhut or Marguerite, then the narrative might convey the idea that criminals will eventually pay for their crimes. On the other hand, *Les Habits Noirs* nonetheless portrays the rise of men and women whose careers are based on crime, including Schwartz and Bozzo. In the course of their careers, they cause the death of innocent people and never have to answer for their crimes. It would be just as true to say, along with Yves Olivier-Martin, that *Les Habits Noirs* tells pessimistic stories, '[des] histoires cyniques où le mal et le péché triomphent longtemps et sans vergogne.'<sup>48</sup> Justice as it is portrayed is definitely relative. Besides, even when criminals are punished, society is never totally purified. Insofar as villains are embodiments of society's corruption, individual deaths cannot restore order. Furthermore, the serial nature of the novels underlines the continuity of evil. The format of the novels suggests that chaos rather than order is the dominant aspect of life. Within the fictional world, the villains seem to be forever triumphant. Even when hurt, the Habits Noirs grow back, symbolically if not literally.

In fact, there is no straightforward moralistic presentation of crime. Féval was not interested in delivering clear moral messages in any of his novels. In 1865, he was elected president of the *Société des gens de lettres* and launched a series of conferences where writers would talk to their public as they did in England at the time. In his inaugural speech, he asserted his dislike of the moral novel:

J'ai dit dans les faits, car je ne professe pas une tendresse particulière pour le roman prétendu moral, sermoneur et pédagogique, inventé par nos charmantes voisines les institutrices de Londres, les *governesses* chaussées de bleu, le roman au biberon, qui dépense huit cents pages

<sup>45</sup> Féval, *La Rue de Jérusalem*, p.817.

<sup>46</sup> Raabe, in *Manuel d'histoire littéraire de la France*, p.306.

<sup>47</sup> Marius Topin, *Romanciers contemporains* (Paris: Didier, 1881), p.364.

<sup>48</sup> François Le Lionnais, introduction to *Les Habits Noirs*, Volume II, p.x.

écrites avec des confitures à prouver que l'esclavage est un malheur, l'ivrognerie un vilain défaut et l'assassinat une mauvaise habitude.<sup>49</sup>

Crime in *Les Habits Noirs* is a statistic, something that might be found out or not, and might be punished or not. Heroes are not always victorious and culprits have a tendency to escape punishment. Some stories have an open ending; one might realise that the story is not quite over. *L'Arme invisible* is altogether pessimistic, and the end of its sequel, *Maman Léo*, open to interpretations. Maurice and Valentine think that they have destroyed their adversaries, when they have actually been manipulated and cheated by the Habits Noirs. There are hints in other stories that the couple might have been killed later, outside the story, so to speak. The same rumour is to be found about André and Julie.

The world of *Les Habits Noirs* and that of the Roman-Feuilleton in general is a tragic world. It portrays a cruel society, where people have to fear both the violence of crime and the inequities of the law. The Habits Noirs use people who are weak, ambitious or coarse, like Ysole, Vincent Carpentier or La Goret. Madness and temporary aberration is a leitmotiv of the series, a metaphor of the actual giving in to one's worse tendencies. Coyatier, Similor or Vincent Carpentier all have fits of destructive madness. Féval shared with Balzac the notion that, providing the proper circumstances were gathered, everyone could commit a crime, including the hero.

In that sense, another great influence on Féval's novels is the eighteenth-century libertine novel, such as Laclos' *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1782) and l'Abbé Prévost's *Manon Lescaut* (1728-31). Both expound a pessimistic vision of society along with a deep understanding of human frailty. Moreover, the libertine novels exerted a kind of perverse fascination due to their anti-heroes. These were morally weak characters who were at the same time victims of the scandalous customs of society and eager participants in its corruption. In *Les Habits Noirs*, heroes are very rarely eager participants in the world of crime. They are nonetheless often part of it.

The hero, inhabiting both spheres of justice and crime, embodies another facet of the blurred world of the thriller. In Féval's *Les Habits Noirs*, as in the earlier Roman-Feuilleton, the hero is generally convicted of a crime, which, in the eyes of justice, makes him as much an outlaw as the real culprit. In order to carry out his revenge, the hero takes the law into his own

<sup>49</sup> Paul Féval, 'La Parole, la plume et le roman', reprinted in Paul Féval, *romancier populaire*, pp.5-16 (16).

hands, which is equivalent to the criminal law, the survival of the fittest. Furthermore, he might infiltrate the milieu and use its own rules to his own advantage. As in modern thrillers, there is an interaction between hero and criminal that transcends strict notions of right and wrong, and suggests a kind of psychic link between the two.

In the first episode of *Les Habits Noirs*, the lives of the hero André and that of the criminal Lecoq are closely intertwined. Their rivalry predates the beginning of the novel, and is recounted in a flashback. André's wife Julie is related to the noble family of Bozzo, and Lecoq was one of the men who wanted to prevent her marriage with a commoner, André. A few years later, when André is suddenly accused of a theft, the married couple suspects their old enemy of having something to do with it. Lecoq's plan is twofold: have his revenge on André and take Julie back to her noble but corrupt family. The plan works and Julie remarries the banker of the Habits Noirs, who is closely watched by Lecoq. While this happens, André sets out to find out the truth, eventually finds Lecoq, and the hunter becomes the prey. To André's 'Depuis vingt ans [Lecoq] plane sur notre vie comme un mauvais destin' corresponds Lecoq's 'Voilà dix-sept ans [que André] me suit, comme un sauvage suit la piste d'un ennemi.'<sup>50</sup> Under the disguise of the cripple Trois-Pattes, André infiltrates the association and becomes Lecoq's closest associate.

In *L'Arme invisible*, the heroine Valentine has a similar relationship with Bozzo, the head of the Habits Noirs. They are engaged in a kind of game of wit, a chess tournament. She fears him, he respects her, and even wishes she would become an Habit Noir: 'Une pareille enfant, dressée par moi dans le temps où j'avais encore du sang plein les veines, aurait fait un fameux sujet, sais-tu, l'Amitié?'<sup>51</sup> Both ultimately design the same plan to get rid of each other. Valentine decides to bribe the association's hitman, Coyatier, in order to kill the Habits Noirs on her wedding day. Bozzo himself has planned the death of the heroes and that of the rebellious Habits Noirs at the same wedding. The narrative tension comes from the problem of who has more information about what is going on, and who is going to outwit the other. The difference between the two books is that while Valentine uses a go-between, Coyatier, André is himself the link between the world of the heroes and that of the villains, which enhances his ambivalence.

Furthermore, most French popular novels of the early type seem rather ambiguous about the real issues at stake. Is the fight between heroes and

<sup>50</sup> Féval, *Les Habits Noirs*, p.394 and p.382.

<sup>51</sup> Féval, *L'Arme invisible*, p.1157.

villains a matter of justice, or is it a matter of power? For Jean Tortel, one of the first critics to investigate the genre, the popular novel is the expression of an obsession with power. This is most obvious in novels dominated by the figure of the evil genius. However, Tortel particularly focuses on the hero's role in the search for ultimate power:

La structure du roman populaire est répétition pure, obsédée, obsédante d'un thème unique: celui de l'accès à la domination, cette dernière figurée par l'emprise de celui que nous avons appelé le héros.<sup>52</sup>

The hero is fallible. An outlaw by fate or necessity, he becomes a rebel and a righter of wrongs, and dispenses his own justice. He is, however, prone to exert his power for the sake of it, and to misuse this very power.

This is very much the case in the first story of *Les Habits Noirs*, which explores the different possibilities open to the hero by dramatising the conflict between legitimate and unlawful violence. André Maynotte is first determined to apply his own justice, on the ground that the law has let him down:

Deux condamnations, l'une à vingt ans de travaux forcés, l'autre à mort lui donnaient un horrible droit. A ces profondeurs, il y a des lois faites pour combattre la loi.<sup>53</sup>

Words such as 'horrible' and 'profondeur' underline the hero's dilemma: should he rely on human justice (the law), should he put himself above the law and follow his own justice ('an eye for an eye'), or should he obey divine justice and forgive? André's religious feelings prevail and he chooses forgiveness. However, when he is arrested under a false pretext for the second time, André falls back on his wish to avenge himself personally. The second part of the story shows how, after a period of investigation and secret preparation, André finally confronts Lecoq. While preparing his revenge, André compromises with corruption, regardless of the means he uses to reach his goal, by becoming Lecoq's associate. The death of Lecoq ultimately emphasises the hero's ambiguity. On the one hand, André requires the presence of the law and declares that he will leave Lecoq in the hand of the justice: 'Je n'ai pas confiance en votre justice, mais je ne tuerai pas.'<sup>54</sup>

Nevertheless, his next statement contradicts the previous one:

Je n'ai pas le désir de me venger, mais la volonté de punir: volonté froide, éprouvée, inébranlable. Dieu seul, désormais, pourrait mettre

<sup>52</sup> Jean Tortel, 'Le Roman populaire', in *Entretiens sur la paralittérature, actes du colloque de Cerisy du 1 au 10 septembre 1967* (Paris: Plon, 1970), pp.55-74 (74).

<sup>53</sup> Féval, *Les Habits Noirs*, p.348.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p.386.

un obstacle entre ma main et le coupable. Quelles que soient les apparences, je suis juge. Ici est mon tribunal.<sup>55</sup>

André's position of force compromises his legitimate motivation. The substitution of the law of the strongest to the civil law further jeopardises the moral high ground of the hero:

Je vous ai dit: cet homme a le sentiment de son impuissance. Il est vaincu trois fois: par ma loi qui est celle du plus fort, par votre loi à vous et par la sienne propre: la loi des Habits Noirs.<sup>56</sup>

As a matter of fact, through his friendship with Francesca Corona, it appears that André has laid his hands on the scapular, the Habits Noirs' treasure, which makes him the new leader of the association. He seems to have given in to the temptation of power and money: 'Je suis le Maître de la Merci!'<sup>57</sup>

The temptation of the hero is not always linked with power. Rémy and Maurice are real heroes crushed by fatality. In both cases, it is the love of a woman, a much nobler cause, which brings about the temptation of evil. Rémy is in love with Valentine, who loves Maurice. 'Cet homme est innocent, mais il est l'obstacle qui me sépare de vous, il mourra. Dites que c'est un crime lâche et froidement conçu', admits Rémy.<sup>58</sup> Maurice feels the same hatred: 'Il est riche, il est beau, je le hais.'<sup>59</sup> However, he does not have the means to harm his rival. Later on, Maurice is trapped by the Habits Noirs and sent to prison, and Rémy is appointed his lawyer. He finds it hard to be impartial, a dilemma Gaboriau was later to explore in more detail in *L'Affaire Lerouge*. Léon de Malavoy is equally tortured by temptation:

'J'ai songé à un crime, c'est vrai... J'ai songé, en une nuit de fièvre, à appauvrir la princesse d'Eppstein, pour rendre possible ce qui n'était pas mon espoir, mais ce qui était mon rêve'.<sup>60</sup>

This ambivalence of the hero comes from his Romantic nature, but also from the archetypal models on which he is built. The hero of the Roman-Feuilleton tends to be like the heroes of the legends, who are above traditional notions of right and wrong. The hero embodies the source of everything that exists, of primordial chaos. His progress also conveys the idea that nothing is created without chaos. In *Les Compagnons du Trésor*, the revelation that the *jeune premier* Reynier is the villain's son is not only a melodramatic trick but also suggests that evil and goodness have a common

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p.389.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, p.393.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Féval, *L'Arme invisible*, p.1148.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p.1091.

<sup>60</sup> Féval, *Coeur d'Acier*, p.636.

origin. The law of the Habits Noirs according to which the leader is killed and replaced by his son evokes the cyclic time of myth, the end of the world and its rebirth. For Jean Tortel, the hero must have a 'passage à travers le mal' to have access to power.<sup>61</sup> In the Roman-Feuilleton, the hero has to pass some ordeal that links him to criminal outlaws, and brings about a period of hiding. This metaphorical death, a necessary step forwards in his development, evokes the mythological hero's voyage to the underworld.

The mythic nature of the confrontation between hero and villain provides another perspective on their psychic interdependence, insofar as the hero needs the confrontation with the villain to fulfil his heroic nature. In other words, the hero presupposes the villain, and vice-versa. The aim of the heroes of legends is to regenerate society, like the heroes of the early Roman-Feuilleton. In both myths and Roman-Feuilleton:

Un héros s'aventure hors du monde de la vie habituelle et pénètre dans un monde de merveilles surnaturelles; il y affronte des forces fabuleuses et remporte une victoire décisive; le héros revient de cette aventure mystérieuse doté du pouvoir de dispenser des bienfaits à l'homme, son prochain.<sup>62</sup>

However, because of their capacity to do good and evil, both have in themselves the potential to love power for itself, and to become villains or tyrants themselves. In the Roman-Feuilleton, the qualities of the Romantic hero, honour, courage and self-sufficiency have a potential to turn into pride and glorification of strength, to rebellion and hubris. The strategy adopted by most heroes in order to avoid such a pitfall is to leave. In Dumas' novel, for instance, Monte-Cristo, 'ayant dominé la société ... s'en retire, surmontant ses haines.'<sup>63</sup> He is 'un homme, qui, pareil à Satan, s'est cru un instant l'égal de Dieu et qui a reconnu, avec toute l'humilité d'un chrétien, qu'aux mains de Dieu seul sont la suprême puissance et la sagesse infinie.'<sup>64</sup> Similarly, Sue's Rodolphe goes back to Gerolstein, leaving society to its fate. More often than not, a few have been saved, many have not, and society is likely to return to an original state of chaos.

In most novels, however, the ambiguous nature of the hero remains on a mythical level. In *Les Habits Noirs*, the nature and extent of André's

<sup>61</sup> 'Le passage à travers le mal est la condition requise pour parvenir à la domination', Jean Tortel, 'Esquisse d'un univers tragique ou le drame de la toute puissance', *Cahiers du Sud*, 310 (Deuxième Semestre 1951), pp.367-79 (378).

<sup>62</sup> Joseph Campbell, *Les Héros sont éternels* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1978), p.36. This quote is in italics in the original text.

<sup>63</sup> Gilbert Signaux, Preface to *Le Comte de Monte-Cristo* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), p.x.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

involvement with Lecoq is unclear, and the ethical problems that the situation should raise are overlooked. In most novels, a recurrent and highly dramatic scene dramatises the temptation of the hero, without going deeper into notions of right and wrong and problems of moral choice. Furthermore, even if André Maynotte appears disillusioned at the end of his long quest, he nonetheless recovers his wife, and his punitive thoughts seem validated by the 'hand of God'.<sup>65</sup> The ambiguous hero remains a hero, and attachment to notions of hero and villain goes along with traditional motifs of reward and punishment. The regressive side of the Roman-Feuilleton comes clear at the very end of *Les Habits Noirs*. The tensions generated by the picture of an unfair and cruel world are defused at the very last moment, and an impulse towards consolation and resolution of conflicts is given free range.

It can be said that two opposite discourses coexist in *Les Habits Noirs*, one aiming at transparency and closure, the other acknowledging the uncertainty and moving nature of life. While efforts are made to draw strict lines between right and wrong, and heroes and villains, justice often remains relative.

**Part 2. Manicheism and moral ambiguity in the novels of Wilkie Collins: *The Woman in White*, *No Name*, *Armada*, *The Moonstone* and *The Law and the Lady*.**

As a *feuilletoniste*, Féval was neither interested in delivering a clear moral message nor in exploring complex issues in ethics. Collins, as a Victorian writer, was more conscious of the moral dimension of the novel. He nonetheless developed an exploration of moral and social norms which involved interweaving conventional structures borrowed from melodrama and the detective novel with subversive counter-structures, inducing a sense of duplicity. These included hidden parallels between heroes and villains and seemingly insignificant episodes that subtly undermined the goodness of the traditional hero. He was not, therefore, the radical critic that commentators such as Patrick Brantlinger take him to be. Collins' novels reveal, in a way similar to the Roman-Feuilleton, the existence of opposite currents. A subversive attraction towards alternative values encapsulated by rebellious characters coexists with attachment to conventional notions of right and wrong and reappraisal of the status quo.

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<sup>65</sup> Féval, *Les Habits Noirs*, p.396, 'Ce fut Dieu qui frappa'.

### A. The simplifying structures

Collins' novels resort to conventions and structures belonging to literary genres such as melodrama, the detective novel and the suspense novel. Each of these corresponds to a specific way of investing the moral configuration provided by the confrontation of heroes and villains. They are all simplifying structures insofar as they avoid moral ambiguities.

One type of melodrama is characterised by a triangular relationship between hero, heroine and villain. This configuration is a variant of the conflict between hero and villain, where the hero has split into a heroic couple. This archetypal melodrama dramatises the struggle of the heroine to retain her virtue, understood as a symbol of what is good and right. Similarly, the villain's desire to possess the heroine hides a primal desire to destroy moral order. The villain, in fact, does not really need a motive. He merely represents the principle of evil. Such is the model for Collins' first great success, *The Woman in White*. In that particular novel, Winifred Hughes' assumption that Collins replaced the moral dualism of melodrama with moral ambivalence is not so true.<sup>66</sup>

Collins was devoted to popular melodrama.<sup>67</sup> Furthermore, as a Victorian, he had special affinities with melodrama. Victorian moralism, in particular, is akin to melodrama, in erecting its values as absolutes and establishing clear-cut distinctions between people who lived by them and people who did not. The Victorians thought of their situation in terms of polarities and extreme situations, and expected their popular novels to portray reality as such. As Kenneth Graham puts it, 'the slightest confusion in the distribution of good and evil labels - such as the faintly attractive villain or modestly backsliding hero - [was] often received with exaggerated dismay.'<sup>68</sup> Victorian fictional characters had to be clearly distinguishable, as indeed, melodramatic characters.

'This is the story of what a Woman's patience can endure, and of what a Man's resolution can achieve.'<sup>69</sup> The first sentence of *The Woman in White*, with its capital letters and its vagueness, highlights the polarisation of the fictional universe and its fondness for abstractions. Patience is given the features of Laura Fairlie. She is the embodiment of goodness, of what is 'fair',

<sup>66</sup> Hughes, *The Maniac in the Cellar*.

<sup>67</sup> See the previous section on the theatre for more details.

<sup>68</sup> Kenneth Graham, *English Criticism of the Novel, 1865-1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), p.83.

<sup>69</sup> Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), p.1

as her name suggests. Laura is constantly associated with the semantic field of whiteness and light. On the contrary, Percival and Fosco, their persecutors, are connected with notions of blackness and shadow. Melodramatic images evoking villainy unleashed on the pure woman in white abound throughout the novel, such as 'the darkness of the future', or 'the shadows of after-events'.<sup>70</sup> Symbolism and manicheism are equally present in Anne Catherick's fantastic dream about the dangers that the future holds for Laura. In the dream, Laura dressed in white is followed by an angel, while two men surround her. One, Percival, has a heart 'dark as night', and the other is 'a fiend'.<sup>71</sup> Those strong terms suggest that Percival and Fosco represent evil. Percival recalls the lesser villain of melodramas, as well as a type of villain, the English bully. Nevertheless, Percival has motives that do not justify, but at least explain his behaviour. His wickedness also remains within certain boundaries. Fosco, on the other hand, has no such limits. His confession to Walter explains nothing. In fact, it rather adds to the mystery of the man. The fact that Laura's death would have brought him money only enhances the discrepancy between such a trivial motive and the greatness of his villainy. Fosco plans the crime with much pleasure. He has neither scruples nor remorse. For Laura he is 'the vilest creature breathing'.<sup>72</sup> Marian sees him as 'a magician ... a man who could tame anything'.<sup>73</sup> Like Bozzo, Fosco is at the centre of a double perspective. While symbolising the corruption of his time, he has the raw energy of a truly melodramatic villain, a representation of evil for evil's sake, never quite conquered or explained. Consequently, Laura's involvement with Percival and Fosco is crucial, for it represents the universal fight between the forces of good and evil. These are the very words used by Walter, when he sets out to meet Anne Catherick in the churchyard:

the whole future of Laura Fairlie's life might be determined, for good or for evil, by my winning or losing the confidence of the forlorn creature who stood trembling by her mother's grave.<sup>74</sup>

Laura Fairlie is a perfect melodramatic heroine, the embodiment of virtue and perfection. Her situation is typically melodramatic. Bound by her father's desire to have her marry Percival, and her own promise to do so, she never puts her vow in question, even when she falls in love with someone else. Brooks insists on the irreducible nature of such vows in melodrama:

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p.66 and p.17.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p.68.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p.269.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p.195.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 83.

These melodramatic vows and pacts are always absolute; there is never a thought of violating them ... We are not encouraged to investigate the psychology of the vow or the logic of the deadline but, rather, to submit to their dramaturgy, their functioning as mechanism.<sup>75</sup>

Laura's personal sense of honour and her obedience to the patriarchal system demand self-renunciation. She even tells Percival about her love for another man, not to induce her freedom, but out of loyalty. Laura behaves with the unbelievable heroism of melodramatic heroines:

heroism constantly tended to surpass itself, to reach a point of self-mastery and self-renunciation which is truly *exemplary* ... nobility of thought ... that allows a moral triumph over the pettiness of ambition, calculation, worldly victories.<sup>76</sup>

The more Percival wrongs her, the more she is determined to forgive him.

Walter Hartright is a fairly conventional hero figure. The law of contrast that informs melodrama and *The Woman in White* positions Walter on the side of good, merely because Percival is a villain. If Percival is the bad husband, Walter must be the good lover. Walter accepts Laura's marriage, and heroically renounces her. When he comes back to save her, he does it in a spirit of fair-play towards all. He leaves Laura time to recover her health and sanity, and only launches his plan to win back her place in society when they are married. The more Percival resorts to treachery, the more scruples Walter has. He openly confronts Fosco, and refuses to resort to disguise when he follows the traces of Percival on the way to Old Wellingham. However unexciting, Walter, with his proper manners and behaviours, remains a traditional good hero.

On the one hand, the hero must not compromise himself. On the other hand, the situation must be solved and the villains punished. Such contradiction is overcome either through the intervention of providence, or through tricks that alleviate the responsibility of the hero as regards, among other things, the death of the villain. In that sense, the basic moral configuration of melodrama is not disturbed. Readers are reassured that virtue and justice pay, they are not threatened by perplexing moral dilemmas and subversive moral ambiguities. Melodramatic endings, therefore, convey a belief in a benevolent moral order that is always triumphant. In *The Woman in White*, Walter and Marian believe in 'The hand of God', in great design and ultimate retributions.<sup>77</sup> Like in the first episode of *Les Habits*

<sup>75</sup> Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, p.31.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p.26.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p.396.

*Noirs*, justice in *The Woman in White* is a matter of divine intervention, which conveniently coincides with human justice and limits the participation of the heroes in the retribution of the villains. Poetic justice also takes the form of self-generated punishments. Tortured by remorse or fear of being found out, the criminal betrays himself and brings about his own downfall. The burden of secrecy first causes Percival's figurative madness. Yet he does not repent. The narrative has, therefore, something more frightening in store for him. Percival returns to the church where he forged documents, and in an attempt to erase the proofs of his guilt, he unwittingly sets the place on fire. His death is highly symbolic, insofar as fire purifies. Furthermore, Percival dies on the scene of his crime. The circumstances of the death are also convenient because Walter, who had traced Percival to the church, does not have to dirty his hands. On the contrary, his heroic and generous nature is confirmed when he attempts to save Percival.

Fosco is killed by the Brotherhood, the secret society he belonged to and eventually betrayed. His death takes place abroad, outside Walter's sphere of influence. Fosco's death is deserved twice over, for what he did to the heroes and to his own secret society. Conveniently, the responsibility of Fosco's death is displaced from Walter to Pesca (another Brotherhood member who recognised Fosco as the dissident member and planned his death) to whoever ultimately murdered Fosco. In both cases, the deaths are guiltless. The final message is that crime does not pay. Melodrama, therefore, is a reassuring and superficial moral genre. Complex issues in justice or moral choice are simply not addressed. The punishment being legitimate, readers feel good about it, all the more as the pure hero takes no part in it. *The Woman in White* evokes and validates those melodramatic conventions. Supported by a black and white frame, the novel is suffused with manicheism.

Some aspects of the novel, however, clash with its melodramatic nature. Laura Fairlie, for example, is hardly the proud and strong character of melodrama. Laura's virtue might be made public and rewarded, but she is nearly destroyed by her ordeals. There are some suggestions that virtue might be dangerous, if not idiotic. Conventions are strained so far that they become absurd. At a deeper level, Laura's fate suggests that society's pressure on women to be pure and obedient is absurd and dangerous. Women cannot live like melodramatic heroines in the venal, unstable 1850s. Within the fictional universe, Laura is ultimately saved because providence is there to take care of her. And yet some secondary characters, including the

ambiguous Mrs Catherick, put forward the assumption that providence might be in the eyes of the beholder. Percival's death, for instance, actually benefits Mrs Catherick, when, as his accomplice, she should answer for her deeds. *The Woman in White* sometimes flashes images of an absurd and chaotic world where people have little control over things, and which is miles away from the safe world of melodrama.

Moreover, *The Woman in White* features a character who does not really belong to the world of melodrama. That character is Marian, Laura's impoverished half-sister who, along with Walter, eventually restores Laura to society. Marian initially shares Laura's vision of life, and approves of her decision to forget Walter. Unlike Laura, Marian comes to believe that absolute ideals, innocence and obedience will not be effective against Percival and Fosco. She does not shy away from highly illegal actions, such as bribery. Marian's thoughts and deeds put notions of right and wrong under scrutiny, and add complexity to the novel. Yet for all her depth, Marian is never given the full status of heroine. A prisoner of conventions, Collins gives priority to the idealised and simplified Laura Fairlie. Although Marian attracted more interest from readers, Laura remained, technically speaking, the heroine of the novel, the object of Walter's love and the heir to the Limmeridge estate and fortune. The progress of the novel, therefore, validates the conventional conception of the Angel in the House, as exemplified by Laura Fairlie. Collins' first great novel, however, already features a kind of underlying critique of its own design. This self-reflexivity will be enhanced in later novels.

The detective novel provided Collins with another narrative of crime and punishment strongly charged with moral value. Collins' *The Moonstone* (1868) is usually considered as the first detective novel. It is in fact the first English detective novel. Elements of detection and criminality can be found in some of Dickens' novels anterior to *The Moonstone*, such as *Oliver Twist* (1837-38), *Barnaby Rudge* (1841) and *Bleak House* (1852-53). Dickens, however, never put the investigation of a crime before the study of human heart and society. Collins' predecessors were mainly American and French: Edgar Allan Poe and Emile Gaboriau.

As Régis Messac pointed out, Collins was one of the few English writers who had read Poe:

Collins était probablement celui qui eût été le mieux doué pour reprendre et continuer l'oeuvre de Poe. Il fait appel à l'intelligence

plus qu'à toute autre faculté, et son principal effort portait sur l'agencement méthodique des diverses parties de ses livres.<sup>78</sup>

Although Messac underlines the scientific aspect of Poe's stories, notably in the process of detection depicted, it should be noticed that Collins also drew from Poe's love of the irrational and the sensational. It is this very mixture which Collins was to find and appreciate in Emile Gaboriau's novels too. Gaboriau's first detective novel, *L'Affaire Lerouge*, was published in 1863, without much success. It became hugely successful when it was republished in 1865. In 1867, Gaboriau published *Le Dossier 113* and *Le Crime d'Orcival*. These and many other Gaboriau novels were translated into English, and paved the way for the success of *The Moonstone*. Gaboriau's mixture of detection and melodrama, or 'florid sensationalism' as Howard Haycraft put it, as well as his sometimes loose and conventional style mean that he is often dismissed as a writer of melodrama.<sup>79</sup> He was, in fact, quite representative of French popular fiction of the time, mixing conventions of the Roman-Feuilleton with a more modern trend towards investigation and rational deductions. While Edgar Allan Poe's *Murder in the Rue Morgue* (1841) featured an amateur detective, Gaboriau's *L'Affaire Lerouge* provided detective fiction with the first professional detective, Monsieur Lecoq.<sup>80</sup> The first French detective novels nonetheless put the emphasis on drama and adventure rather than logic and reason. They were likely to include disguises, coincidences, and absurd fantasy. Such a characteristic should be partly ascribed to the influence of Vidocq's *Memoirs* (1829), a *romanesque* and extravagant four-volume account of his exploits as a policeman and a crook. Féval himself wrote a detective novel as early as 1860, *Jean Diable*. Its detective figure, typically, is mad, and soon eclipsed by yet another secret society. In that sense, Collins is closer to Gaboriau than to the classical British detective story, best represented by the figure of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

The detective story is a modern variant of melodrama. Nevertheless, if melodrama devotes most of its space to the persecution of the heroes by an evil figure, the detective novel shifts the focal point to the detective and the investigation of a crime, substituting logic and intellectual reasoning for emotions and excess. The change of focus from villain to detective also heightens the moral dimension of the genre. The first commentators on detective fiction, in fact, were mainly concerned with this aspect of the

<sup>78</sup> Messac, *Le 'Detective novel'*, p.500.

<sup>79</sup> 'Florid sensationalism' according to Howard Haycraft, *Murder for Pleasure: The Life and Times of the Detective Story* (London: Peter Davies, 1942), p.103.

<sup>80</sup> See, for example, Messac, *Le 'Detective novel'*.

genre. In *Murder for Pleasure*, Howard Haycraft discussed the 'curious fact that all the detective stories worth the name have been produced by those ... nations that have longest enjoyed the privileges of democracy'.<sup>81</sup> One of the assumptions of the genre is that all crimes will out, and justice be done. By setting distinctions between right and wrong and fighting crime, the detective novel aims at the preservation of moral order. For Julian Symons, 'the detective story, as developed through Collins and Gaboriau to Doyle and the twentieth century writers, was certainly on the side of law and order'.<sup>82</sup> The classical English detective novel, where the elimination of the criminal brings about the re-establishment of a disrupted order, generally emphasises harmony and morality. The couple 'detective and criminal' is, therefore, invested with the same simple moral values as the couple 'hero and villain'. The detective novel only differs from melodrama insofar as it puts emphasis on tidiness and rationality. It tackles a single crime rather than forces greater than men, and relies on scientific deduction rather than providential coincidence.

First, the detective is not personally involved in the events that he investigates. Second, the criminal and his crime are always less interesting than the mystery posed by the unsolved crime: 'Le vrai sujet des premiers romans policiers n'est donc pas le meurtre mais l'énigme. Le problème est analytique plutôt que social ou juridique'.<sup>83</sup> Justice takes on a particular sense:

Grace à la médecine légale, entendue dans son sens très général de sciences des indices, le détective peut se délivrer de tout ce qui, en lui, risque d'être trop humain: préjugés, passions, etc.... D'où une transformation profonde de l'idée de justice.<sup>84</sup>

In that sense, the detective novel is not about goodness and evil, right or wrong, but about the scientific resolution of a puzzle by a detective. The detective novel is a game. No questions are raised about the conduct of the detective, since, by definition, he is the herald of a just law. The presence of the criminal entails no psychological probing. Action and emotions recede before reason and logic.<sup>85</sup> This is the model for *The Moonstone*. If *The*

<sup>81</sup> Haycraft, *Murder for Pleasure*, p. 28, and Chapter XV: 'Dictators, Democrats and Detectives'.

<sup>82</sup> Symons, *Bloody Murder*, p.17.

<sup>83</sup> Ernest Mandel, *Meurtres exquis: histoire sociale du roman policier* (Montreuil/P. E. C., 1986), p.32.

<sup>84</sup> Thomas Narcejac, *Une machine à lire: le roman policier, une littérature problème* (Paris: Denoel/Gonthier, 1975), p.30.

<sup>85</sup> Poe's short stories are symptomatic of the scientific coldness of the detective novel. The main aspect of *Murder in the Rue Morgue* is Dupin's clever deduction as to the identity of the murderer. The absurdity and savagery of the murder itself

*Moonstone* evokes the conventions of the genre, however, it also highlights their limitations, notably when they touch upon ethics.

The first part of *The Moonstone* is not about right and wrong. The criminal, one of Collins' least interesting characters, is a hypocrite who steals a diamond to pay off his debts. His crime is a personal weakness, not a social issue. Godfrey Ablewhite has no depth, no philosophy of life, or scruples once the theft is done. He dies before he has a chance to explain himself, and does not have to confront Franklin Blake or Sergeant Cuff. The main preoccupation of the fictional characters is to find out how the diamond was stolen from Rachel Verinder's bedroom, a symbolic version of the sealed room mystery.<sup>86</sup> Sergeant Cuff is not concerned with ethics, but with reading signs, recognising codified relationships and fitting them into a familiar pattern to make a puzzle:

'Can you guess yet', inquired Mr Franklin, 'who has stolen the Diamond?'

'Nobody has stolen the Diamond', answered Sergeant Cuff.

We both started at that extraordinary view of the case, and both earnestly begged him to tell us what he meant.

'Wait a little', said the Sergeant. 'The pieces of the puzzle are not all put together yet.'<sup>87</sup>

Behaviours and social interactions are clues corresponding to patterns of crime and guilt. Cuff sees no individuals, but a social configuration in harmony with his world of itemised relationships. Rachel is like any other young woman:

For the last twenty years ... I have been largely employed in cases of family scandal, acting in the capacity of confidential man. The one result of my domestic practice which has any bearing on the matter now in hand, is a result which I may state in two words. It is well within my experience, that young ladies of rank and position do occasionally have private debts which they dare not acknowledge to their nearest relatives and friends.<sup>88</sup>

Similarly, Rosanna, an ex-convict, must be guilty: 'When I saw Rosanna, I altered my mind. I suspected her at once of being privy to the suppression of

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raise no moral issues, no questions of moral choice as the criminal conveniently turns out to be an animal. In *The Mystery of Marie Roget*, the narrative focuses on how the crime was committed and where the criminal can be found, but does not dwell on why it was committed nor on how it will be punished.

<sup>86</sup> The novel suggests a parallel between the diamond and femininity as secret and sacred. Its theft from Rachel's bedroom by her lover Franklin is therefore akin to rape.

<sup>87</sup> Wilkie Collins, *The Moonstone* (London: Penguin, 1986), p.143.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p.205.

the diamond.<sup>89</sup> The novel abounds in significant signs waiting to be properly read in order to proclaim the truth. Those signs include Rosanna's footprints on the sand, the box she buried in the sand, the smear on Rachel's door and Franklin's stained night gown. Objects rather than humans occupy the foreground of the story. Significantly, the crime of *The Moonstone* is a theft, a crime involving less intense emotions than murder.

Cuff, however, proves to be wrong. Human individuality and free-will get in the way, insofar as no one behaves as they would in Cuff's ideal world, the world of the detective story.<sup>90</sup> Rachel is no ordinary young lady, and Rosanna's behaviour is not to be ascribed to her past as a thief. As D. A. Miller points out, *The Moonstone* 'moves from a story of police action to a story of human relationships in less "specialised" contexts', and, one might add, in a less simple world.<sup>91</sup> *The Moonstone* demonstrates the limitations of the design on which it is built and resumes with another. There are in fact, two different codes at work in *The Moonstone*. The residents of the Verinder Estate defend a community and aristocratic code, by remaining loyal to their mistresses, their servants and their class. Betteredge protects his fellow servant Rosanna just as Rachel protects her lover Franklin. None of them helps Sergeant Cuff, who is looked upon as an outsider. The novel proposes a reversal of the pattern of the detective novel, where the detective is supposed to bring back order. In *The Moonstone*, Cuff seems to bring nothing but disruption. The search for the truth according to Cuff implies hurting people's feelings, from Mrs Verinder to the servants, including Rosanna who eventually commits suicide. On the other hand, Rachel's attitude is depicted with sympathy and never questioned. Rachel is indeed, a rather melodramatic character, bound by a self-imposed vow of silence as to the supposed guilt of Franklin. The conflict depicted by the novel is not so much that of detective against culprit as that of detective against community. Furthermore, the fact that Cuff jumps to the wrong conclusion and that Rachel is ultimately rewarded for her strength of mind points to the conclusion that the detective's code might not be the best one. Cuff's incapacity to find the truth turns the detective novel into a suspense novel:

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p.209.

<sup>90</sup> Cuff's assumptions about the world remind readers of the methods of Agatha Christie's female detective Miss Marple. For Miss Marple, there are only limited types of people and of human behaviour.

<sup>91</sup> D. A. Miller, 'From *roman policier* to *roman-police*: Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone*', in *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley; London: University of California Press, 1988), pp.33-57 (p51).

Cuff leaves the stage, Franklin resumes the investigation and discovers himself as the culprit.

Critics tend to hold *The Moonstone* as 'the first and greatest of English detective novels' and the greatest of Collins' novels because of its perfect puzzle structure.<sup>92</sup> *The Moonstone*, in fact, offers an inner critique of the detective story. It also demonstrates the failure of the rational basis of the genre. After all, the mystery of the moonstone is solved by a drug addict through means that have nothing to do with logic and reason. The novel also borrows from the French detective novels insofar as it mixes detection with sensationalism, and favours romance, picturesque characters and *coups de théâtre*. However, Cuff comes back at the end of the novel with a piece of paper on which is written the name of the real culprit.<sup>93</sup> The novel ends on a note typical of the game-like aspect of the detective novel, and reverts to the conventional morality of the genre. The ending suggests that the police always find the culprit (even, as in the novel, after his death), and that innocents are ultimately rewarded. The devices used to preserve the hero's integrity in *The Woman in White* are also used in *The Moonstone*. Neither the community, nor the police get involved in the punishment of the culprit. The Indians who were looking for the stolen diamond occasion the death of Godfrey Ablewhite, one of the most horrid in the world of Collins. Everything works as if he was punished for having stolen the diamond from the Indians and not from Rachel, so neither she, nor Franklin, nor even the police have to exert any punitive action. Violence is portrayed as totally alien to English society, and relegated to the criminal exoticism of India.

In 'The Typology of Detective Fiction', Todorov distinguished three main forms of 'detective fiction': the proper detective novel or whodunit, the thriller and the suspense novel. Whereas the detective novel gives primacy to the resolution of an enigma in the past, the suspense novel focuses on both past and future:

The reader is interested not only by what happened but also by what will happen next; he wonders as much about the future as about the past. The two types of interest are thus united here - there is the curiosity to learn how past events are to be explained; and there is also the suspense: what will happen to the main characters? These

<sup>92</sup> T. S. Eliot, 'Wilkie Collins and Dickens', in *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), pp.460-70 (464).

<sup>93</sup> Cuff is, in fact, rather like Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot. Poirot is always slightly detached from the events and the milieu that he investigates. He suspects everyone, but only reveals the truth in the very last chapter.

characters enjoyed an immunity [in the detective story]: here they constantly risk their lives.<sup>94</sup>

Todorov divides the suspense novel into two sub-categories. The one relevant to our analysis is the 'story of the suspect-as-detective':

In this case, a crime is committed in the first pages and all the evidence in the hands of the police points to a certain person (who is the main character). In order to prove his innocence, this person must himself find the real culprit, even if he risks his life in doing so.<sup>95</sup>

Unlike melodrama and the detective novel, the suspense novel revolves around the character of the wrongly suspected hero. An amateur detective and a suspected criminal, the hero is not backed up by the law. His actions may be illegal and entail moral dilemmas. Hunted by the law and possibly by the real criminal, the hero might experience fear and doubts. For the French critic and writer of crime fiction Thomas Narcejac, this focus on an insecure hero makes the crime novel more human and easier to relate to: 'Ainsi le suspense possède-t-il d'emblée ce qui manque au roman-problème [the detective novel]: la dimension psychologique.'<sup>96</sup> The suspense novel is therefore closer to the literary novel than the purely analytical detective novel or the simplistic melodramatic novel. It has a potential for infusing the basic configuration of crime fiction with moral ambivalence and complexity.

In reality, the suspense novel, like melodrama and the detective novel, does not address the real problems. In his 1948 essay 'The Guilty Vicarage', W. H. Auden maintained that the 'dialectic of innocence and guilt' is the main feature of the detective story, which he traced back to Greek Tragedy.<sup>97</sup> According to Auden, the detective novel shares the notion of reversal of fate with tragedy. The detective novel features a reversal from the apparent guilt of the suspect to his innocence, coupled with a reversal from the apparent innocence of the culprit to his guilt. This pattern, in fact, best fits the suspense novel, with its hero as false suspect. The image of innocence versus guilt is nonetheless just another facet of the simplistic moral configuration of melodrama or detective fiction. The blurring of boundaries between good and evil that the suspense novel hints at is often reduced to a simple opposition between appearance and reality. The suspense novel shares with the detective novel the fact that the suspect-as-detective is never guilty.

<sup>94</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, 'The Typology of Detective Fiction', in *The Poetics of Prose* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977), pp.43-52 (51).

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p.51.

<sup>96</sup> Narcejac, *Une machine à lire*, p.195.

<sup>97</sup> W. H. Auden, 'The Guilty Vicarage', in *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1962), pp.147-58 (147).

Signs have simply been misread. This is the model for the second part of *The Moonstone*, and to a certain extent, that of *The Law and the Lady*.

The second section of *The Moonstone* presents Franklin as suspect and detective, although his guilt is not suggested by the police but by his own findings. *The Law and the Lady* provides another variant of the suspense story, in the sense that Valeria investigates on her husband's behalf. Eustace Macallan was put on trial for the supposed murder of his first wife; the verdict of the case was 'not proven'. Unlike the professional detective Cuff, both Valeria and Franklin jeopardise if not their lives, at least their reputations. Yet significantly, they are never in real danger. Similarly, doubts as to the guilt of the suspected characters are always superficial.

In *The Moonstone*, the initial problem of distinguishing between right and wrong, good and evil, turns out to be caused by a simple confusion between appearance and reality. At first sight, Godfrey is a philanthropist, a character oozing charm and goodwill. His name, Ablewhite, misleads readers and fictional characters alike by pointing ironically at the side of goodness. Godfrey, in fact, is too good to be true. Once revealed as an impostor, there is nothing to redeem him. He has debts deriving from supporting a lover, which he habitually pays off with charities' money. On the other hand, all appearances are against Franklin, a careless youth with a suggestive name (Blake for black). As it turns out, Franklin was seen taking *The Moonstone*. And yet he did not steal it.

The truth is indeed embedded in the text. On the one hand, Godfrey's guilt is suggested before it is exposed for everyone to see.<sup>98</sup> Rumours of his debts and his relation with the banker Luker, at whose office the diamond is pawned, clearly point at Godfrey. And yet Collins avoids developing that aspect of the story and focuses on an alternative way of finding the truth. Instead of investigating how the diamond got to Luker's office, which would lead to Godfrey, the narrative focuses on how the diamond left the house, through the agency of Franklin Blake. On the other hand, Franklin, being the one who commissions and edits the story, cannot be the villain. His attitude is therefore clear and honest. He directed the search for the Moonstone after its theft because he wanted it back, and not, as Rachel thought, out of hypocrisy. The impulse towards maintaining the hero's

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<sup>98</sup> In that regard, Collins elaborated what was to become one of the essential rules of the detective novel, the rule of fair-play towards readers. All the elements leading to the discovery of the culprit should be present in the text so that the issue of the investigation is not a let down.

spotlessness is pushed to extremes. Franklin did take the diamond from Rachel's bedroom, but he did so under the influence of a drug that had been administered to him without his knowledge. All other suspected characters are cleared in the same way. Rosanna, for the very reason that she is a former thief, is not guilty. She just looked so. Rachel Verinder, whose silence and irritability were misconstrued as guilt, was simply appalled at what she thought was Franklin's cold-blooded betrayal.

There is even less ambiguity in the basic moral configuration of *The Law and the Lady*. The question of Eustace's culpability is not even a problem. Readers, identifying with Valeria, are simply meant to feel that he did not poison his first wife. For her, Eustace is a 'poor darling', an 'innocent martyr'.<sup>99</sup> His innocence is enhanced by his humble and submissive attitude to the verdict, and as it turns out later, his rather implausible ignorance of the true nature of his good friend Dexter. The focus shifts from Eustace to other possible suspects as Collins has him leave for Spain, leaving Valeria alone to find the real culprit. After an initial mistake as to the identity of the latter, Valeria suspects Dexter, who eagerly supported her illusions. The good friend who tried to protect Eustace's privacy was in love with his wife. Dexter's madness was a clue to decipher the guilty secret that tortured him. He harassed Eustace's wife, convinced her that her husband hated her, all of which ultimately led her to commit suicide.

So far, we have shown that Collins' novels evoke and borrow from a multiplicity of patterns corresponding to different sorts of crime novels, while suggesting or providing a sort of self-reflexive critique of these very patterns. The duality at the root of crime fiction brings about a narrative that depicts a clear conflict between right and wrong, or good and evil. Collins embroiders on this basic moral configuration, and invests it with new significances. The existence of counter-structures undermines the very foundations of the crime novel, inducing a sense of duplicity.

## **B. The complex counter-structures**

Two main aspects of these counter-structures consist in undermining the goodness of the hero on one hand, and putting in question the notion of evil on the other.

Modern critics, notably those working in the field of feminism, have established a parallel between the villain of *The Woman in White*, Percival,

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<sup>99</sup> Wilkie Collins, *The Law and the Lady* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p.101.

and its hero, Walter Hartright, which challenges the purity of the latter.<sup>100</sup> According to these critics, the text suggests that like Percival, Walter ultimately seeks to control Laura, confining her to the close space of home and moulding her to his own desires. This conclusion, however valid, can only be reached in the light of modern theories about women's carceral nature in nineteenth-century society and literature.<sup>101</sup> Although the women question is obviously a main aspect of Collins' novels, nothing tells us for sure that in this particular instance, he was aware of the deeper implications of his plot. *The Woman in White* is more a reflection of the prevalent ideology than a reflection on it. The novel puts the blame on bad husbands and domineering fathers, denouncing the abuses of the patriarchal system, but not clearly the basis of the system itself. Even Marian, through whom are voiced most of the criticisms regarding the social values and roles imposed on women, validates Walter's behaviour towards Laura. At the end of the novel, it is agreed that Marian will live with Walter and Laura at Limmeridge House. Walter offers a shelter rather than a prison to both women. In other words, Walter remains a traditional good hero, and the representative of benign, good patriarchy. In that sense, social problems are reduced to moral ones, and public issues to private ones.<sup>102</sup>

In *The Moonstone*, Cuff first disappears from the stage after a series of blunders and unwitting damage. Indeed, he is soon outshone by Franklin Blake the *jeune premier*, whose nature is in fact more ambiguous than that of Walter Hartright. Franklin's dark side, however, remains peripheral to the story. During the investigation, his behaviour towards the main protagonists remains honourable, yet significant details suggest a parallel between him and the villain of the story, Godfrey Ablewhite. A secondary episode recounts how Rachel first hears of Franklin's financial problems. She overhears a conversation between Franklin and an agent sent by a family to whom he owes money, in which Franklin proves to be selfish and careless. This episode is significant insofar as it brings about a quarrel between Rachel and Franklin. Rachel will not forget that unpleasant side of Franklin. It will, indeed, confirm her belief that Franklin has stolen the diamond from her.

<sup>100</sup> Lyn Pyckett, *The Sensation Novel: from The Woman in White to The Moonstone* (Plymouth: Northcote Publishers, 1994), p.19.

<sup>101</sup> See Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of their own: British Women Novelists from Charlotte Brontë to Doris Lessing* (London: Virago, 1982), and Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979).

<sup>102</sup> See the next section on the Scapegoat for a more extensive discussion of that displacement at work in the novels of Collins and the popular novel as a genre.

Franklin's financial position and his careless attitude towards money recall Godfrey, who is actually embezzling money from his charity work, and who will, at one point, contemplate marrying Rachel for money. As Gabriel points out, Franklin is also engrossed in himself:

He was so eloquent in drawing the picture of his own neglected merits, and so pathetic in lamenting over it when it was done, that I felt quite at my wits' end how to console him.<sup>103</sup>

Franklin's egotism and exaggerated feelings echo Godfrey's theatrical talents. Finally, Franklin's relationship with Rosanna, the deformed servant who is hopelessly in love with him, suggests a parallel with Godfrey's treatment of women. Drusilla Clack, the fanatical spinster, sees Godfrey as a 'Hero'.<sup>104</sup> Rosanna looks upon Franklin as a 'prince'.<sup>105</sup> Yet Godfrey does not care about Drusilla or about her fellow-worshippers, and Franklin's insensitive attitude towards Rosanna contributes to her suicide.

In *The Moonstone*, the duplicity of the heroes spreads to other characters. Rosanna herself is not quite innocent. Although she has taken no active part in the disappearance of the diamond, she has nonetheless retained precious information in the investigation. Believing Franklin to be guilty, she actively protects him. Rosanna's behaviour in the affair is complex, as are her motivations. She is torn between love and hate, the desire to protect Franklin and to blackmail him, for the knowledge of his theft means that he has at the same time degraded himself and got closer to her. Moreover, Rosanna's position regarding her past as a convict is rather ambiguous. She repents of her past crimes yet professes a deep sense of emptiness. In fact, it seems that she regrets her exciting past. As for Rachel, innocent as she might be, she nonetheless turns out to have thought about stealing her own diamond, whereupon Sergeant Cuff's theories about young women's private debts prove to be not so irrelevant to the case. When Rachel eventually confronts Franklin, she says that had she known he was in need of money, '[she] would have pledged the Diamond [her]self, if [she] could have got the money in no other way!'<sup>106</sup> Moreover, although she is presented as a woman of deep feelings, Rachel recurrently treats her impoverished cousin Drusilla Clack with indifference and even cruelty.

Ambiguities as to which side, right or wrong, characters belong to, as well as issues about moral responsibility nonetheless remain unaddressed,

<sup>103</sup> Collins, *The Moonstone*, p.214.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., p.239.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., p.362.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p.400.

adding to the narrative tension. Things are suggested, and not really explored, a defining characteristic of the popular novel. Rachel and Franklin are always viewed with sympathy, and their attitude ultimately presented as proper. At the end of the novel, they are proved worthy of receiving each other as husband and wife. The ending of the novel confirms the simple moral configuration of the crime novel. At a deeper, unacknowledged level, however, the simplistic opposition between appearance and reality has dissolved into a generalised confusion.

Moral confusion spreads in *The Law and the Lady*. The two novels explore different kinds of dialogism. In *The Moonstone*, the confrontation of the multiple narratives highlights similarities and contradictions in characters' behaviours. In *The Law and the Lady*, ambiguities are brought forth by the discrepancies between Valeria's presentation of the story and what really happens. Valeria's dark side is not, as with Franklin, a mere matter of peripheral concern. It is closely linked with her investigation. First of all, Valeria is an obviously biased amateur detective. The rapidity with which she comes to a first conclusion after reading about the trial of her husband raises readers' suspicion. She has hardly completed her first reading of it when she declares:

My husband being innocent, somebody else, on my own showing, must be guilty. Who, among the persons inhabiting the house at the time, had poisoned Mrs Eustace Macallan? My suspicion, in answering that question, pointed straight to a woman. And the name of that woman was - Mrs Beaully!

Yes! To that startling conclusion I had arrived. It was, to my mind, the inevitable result of reading the evidence.<sup>107</sup>

The fact that Mrs Beaully is the woman whom Eustace truly loved but could not marry points at the truth: Valeria's conclusion is the obvious product of her jealousy. As it turns out, Mrs Beaully is an unconventional yet honest woman. If Valeria's misguided zeal leaves Mrs Beaully unharmed, it kills her second suspect, Miserimus Dexter, whose mind gives way under Valeria's persistent questioning. This unfortunate end does not come as a surprise, for Valeria's methods are ambiguous from the start. For a newly married heroine who has just been deserted by her husband, Valeria is unusually bold. She uses her sexuality to get information from people. When she finds herself on her own, Valeria re-invents herself as a rake and paints herself to get an interview with women-loving Major Fitz-David:

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<sup>107</sup> Collins, *The Law and the Lady*, p.184-85.

I noticed - yes! and enjoyed - the glances of admiration which chance foot-passengers on the pavement cast at me. I said to myself, 'This looks well for my prospect of making a friend of the Major'.<sup>108</sup>

After she has twisted the old Major round her little finger, Valeria proceeds to provoke and seduce Dexter: 'I laid my hand, as if by accident, on the wheelchair to keep him near me'.<sup>109</sup> In all her dealings with Dexter she is devious, manipulative, and rather cruel. She laughs at him and speculates on how to extract information from him when she knows that too much questioning will kill him. Her relentless questions lead to his descent into imbecility and death, which, in turn, brings about the death of his faithful servant Ariel. And yet Valeria's attitude is patronising and righteous to the end. She pities Dexter and ultimately pays so that Ariel can remain with her dying master. Her narrative is a mixture of bold doings and protests of her own unworthiness.

Insofar as Dexter did not poison Mrs Macallan, his death is unjustified, a fact which should call into question Valeria's status as a heroine. Her attitude recalls that of Collins' bad women, such as Lydia Gwilt or the ambiguous Magdalen Vanstone. Nevertheless, Lydia and Magdalen's 'sexy tactics' are condemned, whereas Valeria is never openly presented as guilty. While Magdalen is aware that her dealings with old Noel Vanstone are immoral, Valeria never sees anything improper in her behaviour. Besides, the way the story is arranged makes it clear which side Collins is on. Valeria's investigation is justified insofar as there has been a deficiency in the law, a deficiency for which she is making up. Moreover, Valeria is acting for the sake of her husband. Everything works as if finding out the truth and getting rid of Dexter in the process was a success. On a superficial level, as a mad cripple, Dexter was an embarrassment to society. The existence of Dexter's illness also attenuates Valeria's responsibility. She renders his death useful, if premature, by extracting the truth from him. The female detective turns out to be an ambivalent and manipulative woman, while retaining a facade of innocence and devotion.

As far as villains are concerned, Collins' universe provides some melodramatic and some insignificant criminals: Fosco and Godfrey respectively fall in those two categories. The novels, however, also feature some fairly complex criminal figures who encapsulate the different facets of crime, including Sir Percival, Lydia Gwilt and Miserimus Dexter. The negative

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., p.58.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., p.216.

pole of the crime novel gains importance, resulting in a certain measure of moral ambivalence.

In *The Woman in White*, the deeper implications of Percival's crimes are lost under the melodramatic pattern of the novel. Fosco's melodramatic bravado outshines Percival's meanness, and hides the social dimension of the latter's crimes. The real nature of Percival's crimes is further hidden by his immediate concerns, which spring from financial hardship. Harassing the helpless Laura for money and treating her with the utmost cruelty, Percival seems wickedness incarnate. His earlier wrongs, however, are of a different nature. Paradoxically, Percival's first crime, forgery, reminds us of his victim Anne Catherick. Percival's mother contracted an unhappy first marriage, and was not able to remarry Percival's father. Like Anne Catherick, Percival was born out of wedlock, an illegitimate child. He eventually forged the marriage certificate of his parents in order to secure his inheritance and his social status. While Percival took charge of his own destiny, Anne Catherick was left defenceless, the target of unscrupulous people. Percival's crime is neither an impulse towards evil nor a temporary aberration. It ultimately springs from the lack of law protecting illegitimate children, and going back in time, to the unjust laws on women. In that sense, Mrs Catherick's particular interpretation of Percival's crime, that he 'made a honest woman of his mother', is quite valid.<sup>110</sup>

However, the legal implications of the crime are emphasised at the expense of its causes. The link between Anne Catherick's suffering and Percival's crime is minimised. Whereas the failure of the law to protect illegitimate children is lamented as regards Anne, it does not seem to attenuate Percival's responsibility. Moreover, the main protagonists reduce the whole question of illegitimacy and crime to a mere melodramatic pattern. Percival's family situation, his forgery and the infidelity of Anne's father are bundled up together and assimilated with sin, whereby 'The sins of the father shall be visited on the children.'<sup>111</sup> Anne and Laura's ordeal becomes a sort of punishment or atonement for the previous generation's crimes. What is confined to the subtext of *The Woman in White* will become the main concern of *No Name*, a novel built around the figure of the illegitimate child forced to unlawful deeds. *No Name* explores the social nature of crime, and presents the offender with sympathy. In that sense, Magdalen Vanstone is more of a heroine than a villain.

<sup>110</sup> Collins, *The Woman in White*, p.492.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p.514.

In *Armada*, the social nature of crime invests the foreground. Like most of Collins' novels, *Armada* is built on multiple narratives. The novel's specificity is the importance given to the narrative of the villain, Lydia Gwilt. Seen through the eyes of various characters, Lydia initially appears as a cold and vicious woman. The introduction of her diary in the main narrative brings about a change of perspective and a new value judgement. Lydia's diary allows readers' sympathy to shift from the heroic couple Allan and Ozias to her, and ultimately transforms her into a heroine. As it turns out, Lydia is a manipulative woman but not one devoid of feeling. Far from being a representation of evil, she is an individual whose past, motives and feelings are shown in an understanding, if not sympathetic light.

Like Percival, Lydia has a dual nature as victim and victimiser. Deserted by her parents, Lydia was brought up by Mother Oldershaw, a con artist who used her. A social outcast, Lydia later became a forger and a gambler herself, simultaneously exploiting society and protecting herself from her fellow swindlers. For Virginia Morris, Collins was the first Victorian writer to show that female criminality springs from sexual oppression and not depravity.<sup>112</sup> Sexual oppression makes indeed a large part of Lydia's life. All her relationships with men lead to her being abused. Trapped into marriage, she becomes a victim of domestic violence. She eventually takes her revenge by poisoning her husband. In her past, Lydia did not do evil for evil's sake, but in despair. Her present attitude towards Ozias adds to the complexity of her character. Despite her weariness of the male sex, she loves him and thinks she has found true companionship. Marriage is like a redemption to her: 'I have trampled my own wickedness under foot. I am innocent; I am happy again.'<sup>113</sup> The failure of her marriage and her subsequent return to crime are partly, therefore, to be ascribed to Ozias' incapacity to love her. After a few months of passion, he becomes estranged from her and resumes his obsession with Allan. Lydia's plans are twofold: to replace the thwarted emotional security with financial security, and take her revenge on Ozias and Allan by denying the former and cheating the latter of his money. The return of Lydia's perfidious lover Manuel, which coincides with her decision to have Allan killed, is significant. Her plan to kill Allan is a vicarious revenge on Ozias' emotional hold on her and on Manuel's blackmail.

<sup>112</sup> Virginia Morris, *Double Jeopardy: Women who Kill in Victorian Fiction* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1990), p.105.

<sup>113</sup> Wilkie Collins, *Armada* (London: Penguin Classics, 1995), p.514.

At this point in the novel, Lydia's hopes and projects are about to collapse. Her past comes back to haunt her, symbolised by Manuel and also by her old admirer Bashwood, who has just launched an investigation of her past life. Lydia is allowed no second chance: 'I have been driven from one place to another, like a hunted animal.'<sup>114</sup> From that point in the novel, her status as a victim is confirmed, all the more as she is an unusually unsuccessful criminal. Lydia's decisions are not easy, and her diary is filled with agonising moral dilemmas. Her scruples and energy give depth to her character, and by extension, emphasise the inaccuracies of the traditional good characters, Ozias, Allan, and Neelie. This causes readers to care more about her fate than that of the heroes. Lydia is not, however, allowed to get away with her life of crimes. The failure of her last crime, combined with her increasing remorse, leads to her suicide. When she has acted her part of the murderess, she then acts the persecutor and punishes herself. In the world of the novel, therefore, her death is considered good and necessary. The end of the novel nonetheless chooses to highlight Lydia's bravery, and ultimately transforms her into a heroic victim.

In *The Law and the Lady*, readers do not have so great an insight into the past life of the villain, Miserimus Dexter. Furthermore, Dexter's dual nature as a victim and a victimiser is not so much linked to the deficiencies of society as to a personal ordeal. The text suggests his ambiguous status through symbolic details and scenes without pointing directly at flaws in the social fabric. Like Lydia, Dexter is an outsider, yet his reprehensible actions spring from a sense of alienation and lack of fulfilment due to his infirmity and mental instability. Two parallel scenes in the novel highlight his dual nature as a victim and a victimiser. In one scene, he ties his servant Ariel to a chair before beating her for no particular reasons. This scene is witnessed by a horrified Valeria. In the following scene, he begs Valeria to tie him down to the chair in order to beat him. These two scenes are symbolic of Dexter's relationship with people in general. Other characters look upon his infirmity and eccentricity as repelling and dangerous. Isolated and victimised, Dexter's only companion is his servant Ariel. Physically and emotionally damaged, Ariel is like a distorted reflection of her master. Being the cleverer of the two, Dexter dominates Ariel and mistreats her the way people mistreat him. Dexter's secret is in line with his ambiguous nature. He was in love with Mrs Macallan; she was disgusted by his appearance and scared by his strange behaviour. Knowing the feelings of Mr Macallan

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid., p.509.

towards his wife, Dexter told her that her husband did not love her, hoping that she would turn to him. Unfortunately, in so doing he prompted the suicide of the woman he loved. Dexter is no more guilty than Eustace, who did not love his wife, and indeed wished her dead. In that sense, Dexter suffers more from Mrs Macallan's death than her own husband does. Dexter and the neglected woman, Mrs Macallan, belong to that category of characters dear to Collins, the ugly, the mad and the ill, the victims of society's prejudice. They are, however, less subversive characters than Lydia Gwilt, for they do not raise so many social issues.

To clear Eustace's name, Dexter has nonetheless to be turned into a monster. *The Law and the Lady* seems to suggest that the desire to read the world in terms of polarisations and simplifications, an attitude which characterises melodrama, the suspense novel and the detective novel, is reductive and dangerous, while enacting this very process at the same time. On a simple level, Dexter is found guilty so that Eustace can be found innocent. He pays for having Eustace's secret dream come true. The dualistic configuration hero versus villain is established. At a deeper level, it does not work like this. The hidden parallel between good and bad characters, already present in *The Moonstone*, casts a shadow on the character of Eustace, whose innocence is supposedly demonstrated by Valeria's investigation, while coming close to making a scapegoat of Dexter.<sup>115</sup>

Lastly, the duality of the crime novel can be contemplated from an angle that upsets the balance in the confrontation between hero and villain and challenges conventional views on morality. By making a hero of the villain, the author indulges in the subversive pleasure of recounting the adventures of a downright villain without any moral consideration. To a certain extent, this is what happens in *The Woman in White*.

In *The Woman in White*, Fosco has his roots in the melodramatic figure of the foreign villain, mixed with the continental influence of Balzac's Vautrin. Fosco's views on society's hypocrisy and corruption recall Vautrin's theses as exposed in *Le Père Goriot*:

I say what other people only think; and when all the rest of the world is in a conspiracy to accept the mask for the true face, mine is the rash hand that tears off the plump pasteboard, and shows the bare bones beneath.<sup>116</sup>

<sup>115</sup> See the next section for the figure of the murderer in crime fiction as a scapegoat.

<sup>116</sup> Collins, *The Woman in White*, p.213.

Voilà la vie telle qu'elle est. Ça n'est pas plus beau que la cuisine, ça pue tout autant, et il faut se salir les mains si on veut fricoter; sachez seulement vous bien débarbouiller: là est toute la morale de notre époque.<sup>117</sup>

Like Vautrin, Fosco belongs to a secret society that places itself above the law. Fosco does not link crime with the Christian notion of sin: 'the wise man's crime is the crime that is *not* found out.'<sup>118</sup> Crime is more a philosophy of life, a superior man's way to live. It is, above all, linked to a specific social configuration. In the 1850s, virtue is scorned and evidently useless, while crime is interesting and pays. Fosco echoes Vautrin for whom virtue is stupid and can only lead to misery: 'Certes, là est la vertu dans toute la fleur de sa bêtise, mais là est la misère.'<sup>119</sup> Fosco lives by his principles, and is above petty considerations such as revenge and money muddles. He is always in control and perfectly polished. Percival serves as a foil to him, as does Walter.

Marian, who as the investigator is the character with whom readers are more likely to identify, also functions as a vehicle for Collins' intentions. She is fascinated by Fosco's physical and moral features, and so are readers. Collins uses lavish details to enhance the portrait of this exceptional man, including his fatness, his embroidered waistcoats and his love of birds and cakes. There are dark mysteries about Fosco which further draw readers towards him, such as the taming of his wife, his political relationships abroad or his knowledge of chemistry and medicine.

The attraction and vitality of *The Woman in White* mainly derive from the character of Fosco. He is the one who shapes the narrative, insofar as most of the action springs from his fertile mind. Other characters feel like puppets in a chaotic world; Fosco is the puppeteer of their world. It is, however, this very flamboyance that prevents him from being a true object of admiration. Collins exaggerated Fosco's character to the point of utter selfishness and megalomania. As a result, Fosco comes across as totally unpleasant at the end of the novel. He remains, however, the most striking character of Collins' novels and indeed, the first of a new prototype of villains, the fat foreign evil genius.<sup>120</sup>

<sup>117</sup>Honoré de Balzac, *Le Père Goriot* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1995), p. 167.

<sup>118</sup> Collins, *The Woman in White*, p.209.

<sup>119</sup> Balzac, *Le Père Goriot*, p.167.

<sup>120</sup> Fosco prefigures, among other villains, the character of Blofeld in the Bond series.

As we have seen, Lydia Gwilt differs from Fosco insofar as her status of villain is questioned by her past as an oppressed woman. She remains, however, a criminal and a recidivist. Furthermore, her attraction derives from the same basis as Fosco's. A *femme fatale*, her beautiful red hair attracts yet foretells mischief. She is daring, outspoken, resourceful, sharp, and witty. Collins is particularly keen on showing her energy and mental superiority over most characters independently of moral or social considerations. 'Here I am, running headlong into a frightful risk - and I never was in better spirits all my life', she says when she decides on a plan to rob Allan of his money.<sup>121</sup> Chapter VII, ironically entitled 'The Martyrdom of Miss Gwilt', hilariously recounts how Lydia deals with three impromptu encounters on the road to Thorpe-Ambrose, adapting her tactics to the personality of each of her opponent, and turning the situation to her advantage.<sup>122</sup> Lydia puts things into perspective and sees through people. She deems Neelie and Allan, who had so far assumed the role of heroic couple, as foolish and conventional, and immediately esteems Ozias, whom everyone else had treated as a hysterical outcast. As the story develops, readers have to do justice to the validity of her opinions and the accuracy of her judgement. Unlike Fosco's, Lydia's death is a noble one. She takes responsibility, acts as her own judge and condemns herself. Lydia's death leaves a hole in the narrative, and takes out the vital force from the other characters, including Ozias and Bashwood, both of whom, significantly, were in love with her. The marriage of the nice but insignificant Allan and Neelie signifies a return to weak conventional morality.

Finally, although Dexter cannot be called a hero due to the narrative choice of *The Law and the Lady*, he certainly dominates most parts of the story. There are very few characters in *The Law and the Lady*, and even fewer striking ones. On the other hand, Collins provides readers with an imaginative and polished portrait of Dexter that highlights the former's fascination for darkness, ambiguity, and the hidden recesses of a diseased mind. In that sense, Valeria's reflection on Dexter's work of art, showing 'signs of a powerful imagination, and even a poetical feeling for the supernatural', also functions as a reflection on Collins inventing the character of Dexter.<sup>123</sup>

<sup>121</sup> Collins, *Armadale*, p.463.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter VII, p.376.

<sup>123</sup> Collins, *The Law and the Lady*, p.230.

The real fascination of crime novels comes from the mystery of crime, a transgression of both social and moral laws, and from the criminal who dares to transgress such laws. Collins plays on this dark impulse in readers by highlighting the criminal figure, a position that sometimes borders on admiration of the criminal, and glorification of crime.

*No Name* is the novel which sums up best all the conflicting currents in Collins' writing. Its main character, Magdalen Vanstone, embodies the moral ambivalence of the thriller. She can be considered either as heroine or villainess; indeed she is both victim, victimiser and *justicier*. The development of the story explores both the social nature of crime as well as its subversive, raw energy. Collins' resistance to closure and clear-cut notions of good and evil, present if unacknowledged in all novels, comes to the foreground in *No Name*. He finally gets rid of the confrontation of the good hero and the morally weak villain, and writes a proper thriller instead.

The thriller, as previously mentioned, focuses on the duel between a hero and a villain, but these basic concepts no longer cover clear-cut notions of right and wrong. *No Name* initially flirts with melodrama, yet the familiar pattern of goodness against evil takes on a different value. On the death of their parents, the Vanstone sisters discover their illegitimacy and lose their inheritance to their cousin Michael Vanstone. The latter refuses to help them. Faced with such a disastrous future, the two sisters react differently. Norah accepts her fate passively, Magdalen rebels against the decision of the law. Seen through the eyes of their governess Miss Garth, the decision of the sisters becomes a test whereby their true nature is revealed:

Searching, as in a glass darkly, into the two natures, she felt her way, doubt by doubt, from one possible truth to the other... Was the promise of the future shining with prophetic light through the surface-shadow of Norah's reserve; and darkening with prophetic gloom, under the surface-glitter of Magdalen's bright spirits? If the life of the elder sister was destined henceforth to be the ripening ground of the undeveloped Good that was in her - was the life of the younger doomed to be the battle-field of mortal conflict with the roused forces of Evil in herself?<sup>124</sup>

This moral configuration, however, changes very soon, as the story shifts from the sisters to the character of Magdalen Vanstone. The narrative suggests that the conflict between good and evil takes place not through the confrontation of the two sisters, but in Magdalen's own mind. With its ambiguous heroine, *No Name* evokes the pattern of Romantic drama rather than that of melodrama. Magdalen's development is not that of an ideal

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<sup>124</sup> Wilkie Collins, *No Name* (London: Penguin Classics, 1994), p.116.

heroine, insofar as she goes against the conventional morality that was previously defined as goodness.

As the story develops, it appears that conventions of evil and goodness, right and wrong, are even less relevant to the story. In her search for her lost inheritance, Magdalen is helped by Captain Wragge, a sympathetic crook. Both are engaged in a duel with the old Noel Vanstone, the depository of the inheritance, and his clever housekeeper Mrs Lecount. Everyone pursues their own interest. Each character is neither good nor bad, but an adversary in a game of wits. Ambiguity is preserved until the end. Michael Vanstone's death seems a high price to pay and comes across as an injustice rather than a punishment. Magdalen's fate renders it impossible to tell whether she is ultimately rewarded as a heroine or punished as a villain. On the one hand, she goes through a symbolic illness, and does not, strictly speaking, recover her inheritance. The money goes to her sister Norah. On the other hand, she does gain access to the money through her sister. Furthermore, she is allowed a happy marriage and reinsertion into society, enjoying a newly found respectability. Insofar as Magdalen's revolt springs from society's injustice and oppression, the text suggests that it has a positive aspect worthy of our admiration, while acknowledging her weaknesses at the same time. *No Name* is a novel that raises issues of morality, justice, the law and human choice without necessarily providing answers, let alone simplistic ones.

*No Name* borrows from both old and new patterns. It mingles the picaresque adventures of a female rogue with the seriousness of a *bildungsroman*, and evokes the blurred world of the thriller, replacing the exploration of professional crime with that of domestic crime, in accordance with the conventions of the Victorian novel. *No Name* and its main character Magdalen Vanstone, however, were too ambiguous for their Victorian audience.<sup>125</sup> In subsequent novels, Collins will return to more traditional designs and indirect means of expressing ambiguity.

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<sup>125</sup> 'No Name possesses a simpler and more intense interest than *The Woman in White*, but it is a horrible and unnatural interest; the book enchains you, but you detest it while it enchains. The incidents at Aldborough, where Miss Magdalen, under the instructions of Captain Wragge, is striving to entrap Mr Noel Vanstone into marriage, and where Mrs Lecount is working to foil the conspirators, are cleverly told, but the repulsiveness of the matter disturbs the pleasure of the reader.' Alexander Smith, unsigned review, *North British Review*, xxxviii (February 1863), pp.183-85, reprinted in Page, *Wilkie Collins*, p.142.

## Conclusion

Most novels from the two sets of texts are characterised by conflicting impulses between simplifications of moral issues, best exemplified by manicheism, and representations and even explorations of moral complexities. They are also torn between conventional notions such as justice triumphant and a more subversive picture of chaos. This double discourse comes from the nature of the popular crime novel. On the one hand, the existence of the genre itself suggests a subversive attraction to chaos, darkness, and the irrational. Moreover, crime novels have a potential for social criticism and exploration of psychological issues. On the other hand, most crime stories either approach the problem of crime through the entertaining adventures of a hero confronted with an evil figure, or the intellectually stimulating story of a detective seeking the solution to a mysterious crime. They seek to explain and rationalise the notion of crime, thus defusing the threat and making sense of disorder.

The existence of two opposite poles in the crime novel highlights the tensions inherent to the genre. Simplifications are accentuated in the detective novel, which offers a consoling fable in the face of the uncertainties of reality. Detective fiction often is a vehicle for the idea that men can explain and make sense of the chaos of life. At its simplest, it is manichean insofar as it assumes that everyone can easily be labelled as right or wrong, guilty or innocent. Its ending upholds conventional notions of justice. By contrast, the thriller slightly blurs the black and white pattern. It relies on the assumptions that the law is fallible and men prone to temptation. The hero is not powerful enough to be able to read and purify an opaque society. He is likely to become entangled in crime or he might have to leave a corrupt society in order to remain pure. In any case, circumstances are likely to cause him to elaborate his own set of moral values. Justice and culpability, therefore, become relative.

The novels of Féval and Collins respectively heralded the thriller and the detective story. *Les Habits Noirs* gives emphasis to the role of the city as a catalyst of men's weaknesses and darkest tendencies. Contrary to many Romans-Feuilletons which are supported by, to quote Jean-Claude Vareille, 'un système binaire strict, refusant les figures de la feinte, de la duplicité et de l'ambiguïté', Féval's novels abound in vivid characters who transcend traditional notions of good and bad, and are simply human.<sup>126</sup> The hero, once

<sup>126</sup> Jean-Claude Vareille, *L'Homme masqué, le justicier, le détective* (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1989), p.31.

the embodiment of a fantasy justice, loses some of his power. He might achieve a victory over the forces of evil, but never the ultimate victory. Féval's moral is pessimistic, insofar as men remain what they are, prone to compromise. Chaos rather than order seems the dominant aspect of human life.

The conditions of publication of the French Roman-Feuilleton nonetheless put pressure on the novelists to write fast and please a readership who looked for entertainment rather than seriousness and complexity. Furthermore, although Féval once said that a novel worth the name should always deal with real-life problems, he did not have Sue's love of moralising, and took pleasure in writing stories without an obvious moral message to deliver.<sup>127</sup> His exploration of moral issues, therefore, remained on a symbolic or mythic level, and notions such as good and evil are neither defined nor explored. Moreover, his subversive attraction for disorder and chaos is counter-balanced by nostalgia for a stable and transparent world, and his pessimism tempered by idealism.

On the contrary, Collins' novels all seem to follow the pattern of the virtuous hero exposing a morally weak villain. The melodramatic novels, such as *The Woman in White*, are likely to enhance the manicheism inherent to that structure. Those based on the format of the detective novel, such as *The Moonstone*, are not really concerned with moral issues, while the suspense novel's potential to explore ethical subtleties tends to be sabotaged. As a Victorian writer, Collins could not portray criminals with sympathy or enthusiasm without being suspected of admiring or justifying crime, which is why all the novels but one end on the punishment of the criminal figure. Most novels expound a final optimistic belief in virtue and society's rightness. In the course of their development, however, they offer sharp observation of psychological and social issues related to crime and other transgressions. Particular attention is paid to the discrepancy between social and moral notions of right and wrong.

Both authors were, to a different extent, aware of the tensions, the limitations and the potential of the literary format in which they worked. Whereas Féval's novels reflect the ambiguities of the crime novel, it can be said that those of Collins actually explore them. He experimented with different kinds of crime novels and different perspectives on crime,

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<sup>127</sup> 'le roman ..... qui ne résout point dans les faits un problème de la vie n'est qu'un inutile et méprisable bavardage', Paul Féval, 'La Parole, la plume et le roman', p.12.

religious, moral or aesthetic. Each of his novels provides an implicit or explicit critique of its own design, establishing a series of counter-structures that invests the basic configuration of the crime novel with complexity and moral ambiguity.

Finally, our next section will offer a closer look at the way the conservative and subversive discourses articulate, through a study of the scapegoat figure in the novel.

## Chapter V: The scapegoat mechanism

### Introduction

The previous chapter has brought to light the existence of two contrary discourses in the two sets of novels. A subversive, carnivalesque attraction towards chaos co-exists with an escapist nostalgia for a transparent world with ultimate and clear-cut meanings. This section will explore how the two discourses articulate, and how Féval and Collins deal with specific contradictions in their narratives by underlying the scapegoating process that structures the texts.

The concept of the scapegoat sends us back to an earlier section on narrative structures in the novels, which established a parallel between the popular novel and carnival. The section made use of Mikhaïl Bakhtin's analysis of carnival as the embodiment of popular culture's nature and spirit. In pre-industrial communities, carnival was regularly staged, a vehicle for ritual merriment. At the same time, carnival was a rite of renewal and maintenance of society, in which exclusion played the main part. A stylisation of chaos, carnival ended on a return to order by means of the ritual sacrifice of a scapegoat, a figure burdened with all the evil of the previous year and the excess of the carnival itself. The process allowed social fears and anxieties to be staged, and tensions to be released. It had, therefore, a potential for subversion and violence. Popular novels, especially those concerned with crime, tend to have a carnivalesque structure. They dramatise the loss and return of social order through the ritual death of a criminal figure. Consequently, they also display the ambivalence of carnival. While providing entertainment, popular novels simultaneously undermine and reappraise the values and structures that sustain social order.

Another way to look at the themes of scapegoating and exclusion and to further investigate the carnivalesque nature of popular fiction is to make use of René Girard's theory of the scapegoat mechanism.<sup>1</sup> According to Girard, scapegoating is not simply an ancient and symbolic ritual, but a timeless generative principle at work in society and culture. It is an unconscious social mechanism that founds and periodically renews a society in times of crisis by means of exclusion of a scapegoat figure. Society periodically re-enacts this founding murder in ritual sacrifices, and represents it in written narratives such as myths in order to rekindle and

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<sup>1</sup> René Girard, *Le Bouc émissaire* (Paris: Grasset, 1982).

maintain social cohesion. The ritual death of a scapegoat figure during carnival time, therefore, displaces an actual event onto a symbolic level. A sporadic and conscious staging of sacrifice, carnival and other representations of scapegoating should not obscure the fact that violence and expulsion are key elements in an actual and continuous social mechanism that is rarely acknowledged as such.

Girard underscores the fact that scapegoats, contrary to the common use of the word, are not chosen at random, but for specific reasons that have to do with community values and norms. The scapegoat is likely to be chosen because he is perceived as different, and because such difference questions and threatens the validity of a given norm. The death of the scapegoat, while bringing catharsis to the community, ultimately reinforces the very prejudices and values that were previously threatened.

It will be argued here that the Sensation novel and the Roman-Feuilleton, as popular crime novels, dramatise a scapegoating process. Both sets of texts portray some kind of community crisis and its resolution by means of the expulsion of an evil figure. In a divided society, a criminal is identified, held responsible for the chaotic state of society and then sacrificed. In the light of Girard's theory of the scapegoat, these texts can be considered as ritual narrative re-enactments of an initial murder. As such, they serve to maintain society's social order. Social tensions and threats are once more evoked, before being reduced and displaced onto a scapegoat figure whose expulsion or death will expel those very tensions.

The scapegoat figure is, therefore, at the heart of the conflicting discourses of such popular texts. It allows the conservative and subversive trends to co-exist, and accounts for the simultaneous expression of social discontent and criticism, and the reappraisal of the status quo. The popular novel, at least when it is concerned with crime, is therefore likely to produce ambivalence. Its ambiguity is inscribed in its very structure.

This section will first explain the basic mechanism of scapegoating as explored by René Girard, before moving to a general consideration of the process in popular fiction. Finally, specific aspects of scapegoating in the novels of Paul Féval and Wilkie Collins will be discussed. The discussion of the novels will follow a chronological order with a view to highlighting the evolution of both writers towards awareness of the structuring mechanism at work in their narratives. The section will explore whether the two sets of texts either enact the scapegoating process with its simplifications and

displacements, or offer a self-reflexive critique of it. In other words, is the ambivalence simply generated by the texts themselves, or is it enhanced and explored by the authors? This will lead to an exploration of the sorts of values and norms brought into play by the Sensation novel and the Roman-Feuilleton, and to the effect that popular fiction has on readers. The section will, therefore, provide further insights into the complexity of both the ideological purpose and the cultural function of the popular novel.

## Part 1. René Girard and the scapegoat theory

### A. The surrogate victim theory

René Girard is best known for his theory on social interactions, which revolves around the scapegoat figure. Initially trained as an historian, he later turned to literature and interdisciplinary research, to include psychology and theology. The theory of the scapegoat is developed and expounded in three major books: *La Violence et le sacré* (1972), *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde* (1978), and *Le Bouc émissaire* (1982).<sup>2</sup> The origin of the theory, however, is to be found in Girard's earlier work on literature, notably *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* (1961), in which he developed the concept of mimetic desire.<sup>3</sup> In this, Girard exposed the romantic notion of spontaneous desire as an illusion by studying the work of Cervantes, Stendhal, Flaubert, Proust and Dostoevsky. For Girard, desire is mimetic, or mediated. It consists in an unconscious imitation of a mediator or model, insofar as the desiring subject only desires what the mediator himself possesses or desires. Such a situation carries the potential for jealousy, rivalry and violent conflict.

Girard then studied primitive religions, myths and Greek tragedies in the light of such concepts. He came to the conclusion that mimetic desire, or mimesis, usually culminated in actual violence against a victim. The sacrifice of the victim puts an end to the original violent conflict, bringing out a newly found order. Sacrifice, therefore, is at the origin of culture. According to Girard, any kind of order in a given society is obtained and maintained through scapegoating, that is, through a basic pattern of exclusion. The victim, who is initially held responsible for the state of crisis, ultimately brings back harmony and order to society. This paradox is reflected in the ambiguous way in which the victim is generally perceived by his

<sup>2</sup> René Girard, *La Violence et le sacré* (Paris: Grasset, 1972); *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde* (Paris: Grasset et Fasquelle, 1978); *Le Bouc émissaire*.

<sup>3</sup> René Girard, *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* (Paris: Grasset, 1961).

persecutors, as both dangerous and sacred. Sacrifice is therefore also at the origin of religion which, in archaic communities, is hardly distinguishable from culture. Insofar as Girard supposes an actual death at the origin of all representations of scapegoating, the whole process is not simply a myth or ritual. It is an unconscious principle at work in society, and a universal feature and tendency of the human mind.

Girard is particularly interested in two stages of social order: the crisis of violence, and the scapegoating or surrogate victim mechanism that puts an end to the initial crisis and restores unity among the community. This leads him to look in particular at spontaneous cases of collective persecutions in history. He is also interested in ritual forms of scapegoating, such as carnival, and in textual representations of scapegoating. In a given culture, many texts provide representations of scapegoating that commemorate the origin of social order. In *Le Bouc émissaire*, Girard studies myths as archetypal narratives of persecution and distorted representations of scapegoating.<sup>4</sup>

The culmination of the scapegoat theory, and the most controversial aspect in Girard's work, however, is his interpretation of the Bible as the first narrative to unveil and denounce the scapegoat mechanism, and to advocate a non-exclusionary and non-violent human community.<sup>5</sup> This aspect of Girard's work has no particular relevance to this thesis, and will not be explored. However, the distinction between texts that are blind to their own mechanism and generate distortions, and texts aware and critical of their own structure, is particularly helpful in exploring boundaries between popular fiction and high literature, especially from a cultural and ideological point of view.

## **B. Cultural and ideological implications of the scapegoat theory**

Scapegoating is about misrepresentations and displacements. When a community reaches a state of violent chaos that leaves normal institutions helpless, and fails to identify the real causes of the crisis, a collective murder paradoxically brings back stability. People experience the crisis as a loss of the social, of rules, hierarchies and differences that secure social order and cohesion. Unable to locate or act on the causes of chaos, the community directs its hostility towards a victim who is wrongly viewed as responsible for the whole crisis. The choice of the victim is apparently arbitrary. However,

<sup>4</sup> See Girard, *Le Bouc émissaire*, Chapter III, 'Qu'est-ce qu'un mythe?', pp.37-69.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapters IX to XV, pp.151-311.

Girard has shown that the choice is ruled by certain criteria, motivated by the community's beliefs about the victim's differences. Those differences are what Girard calls stereotypes of persecution, or *signes victimaires*.<sup>6</sup> In a given society, therefore, minorities are by definition likely to become scapegoats. Anyone whose physical appearance, way of life or social status is different from the average might be a victim:

Il y a, par exemple, une anormalité sociale; c'est la moyenne ici qui définit la norme. Plus l'on s'éloigne du statut commun, dans un sens ou dans l'autre, plus les risques de persécution grandissent. On le voit sans peine pour ceux qui sont situés au bas de l'échelle.<sup>7</sup>

In the eyes of the persecutors, the victim's difference represents deviance from the norm, and is perceived as abnormal. Deviance, of course, is ultimately defined by society's restrictive notions of what is normal and acceptable. Difference is precisely perceived as a threat because it reveals the artificiality and relativity of the norm: 'La différence hors système terrifie parce qu'elle suggère la vérité du système, sa relativité, sa fragilité, sa mortalité.'<sup>8</sup> The scapegoat represents otherness, deviance, and is considered as evil because it implicitly challenges common values and prejudices. Girard also calls the signs of the scapegoat 'cultural signs'.<sup>9</sup> This denomination underlines the fact that scapegoating can tell us about a specific culture.

The illusions and displacements that lead to sacrifice are maintained by the outcome of the process. The community's persecution of its victim ends in the death or sacrifice of the latter. Already united in their hatred of the victim, the community feels purified. Most mythical representations of the scapegoat mechanism, for instance, show:

un véritable retour de l'ordre compromis dans la crise, plus souvent encore d'un ordre tout neuf, dans l'union religieuse de la communauté vivifiée par l'épreuve qu'elle vient de subir.<sup>10</sup>

Insofar as the death of the scapegoat is followed by a return to order, the illusion that he really was responsible for the crisis is confirmed. For Girard, the process can only work if it is unconscious, that is, if its misrepresentations are present. The scapegoat's death can only bring purification and order if the persecutors believe in his culpability, and do not realise that he is chosen for specific reasons that have nothing to do with

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., Chapter II, 'Les stéréotypes de la persécution', pp.21-36.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p.30.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p.34.

<sup>9</sup> Girard, *Des choses cachées*, p.189.

<sup>10</sup> Girard, *Le Bouc émissaire*, p.66.

the disorderly state of their society. The sacrifice must appear justified, and be clearly distinguishable from an illegitimate act of violence such as revenge. Catharsis, however, is short-lived, since not only might the community be responsible for the initial crisis of violence but it is also responsible for the collective murder.<sup>11</sup>

Insofar as scapegoating aims at the return of social cohesion and implies a triumph of common beliefs and dominant values, it is a conservative process. Its outcome is to eliminate deviance and difference in order to reinforce the norm. At a deep level, therefore, culture depends on what it excludes. Scapegoating illustrates a system of differences whereby culture is founded and maintained. If scapegoating ends on the reappraisal and reinforcement of a given social order, it allows nonetheless for a phase of exploration and criticism of community values. It carries, therefore, a potential for subversion, and is very likely to produce ambivalence.

### C. Scapegoating and popular formulas

Girard makes a useful distinction between texts that enact the scapegoat mechanism with its misrepresentations, and texts that expose the displacements of the process:

Avant d'invoquer à propos d'un texte le bouc émissaire, il faut donc se demander s'il s'agit du bouc émissaire du texte (le principe structurant du texte) ou s'il s'agit du bouc émissaire dans le texte (le thème bien visible). Dans le premier cas seulement il faut définir le texte comme persécuteur, entièrement soumis à la représentation persécutrice. Ce texte est gouverné par l'effet du bouc émissaire qu'il ne dit pas. Dans le second cas au contraire, le texte dit l'effet de bouc émissaire qui ne le gouverne pas. Non seulement ce texte n'est plus persécuteur mais il révèle la vérité d'une persécution.<sup>12</sup>

In the latter texts, the scapegoat process is acknowledged and rejected. It fails to perform its function. The former texts, on the other hand, are ruled by the scapegoat mechanism. They are given to simplifications and distortions. Instead of dramatising the collective murder of an innocent, they might for example portray the scapegoat as guilty and/or develop tricks to avoid laying responsibility of the victim's death on the community. They will therefore hide the violent origin of society. Scapegoaters will not consider themselves as such, nor will they consider the victim as a scapegoat. Scapegoating, therefore, will be present in such texts only as a hidden mechanism. In *Le Bouc émissaire*, Girard underscored the evolution in

<sup>11</sup> The community might not always be responsible for the crisis: it can be caused by epidemics, for instance.

<sup>12</sup> Girard, *Le Bouc émissaire*, pp.176-77.

representations of scapegoating, from early myths to folk and fairy tales. These narratives gradually hide the original ambivalence of the scapegoat as both dangerous and sacred, as well as the violence of the community. In folk and fairy tales, for examples, the ambiguous scapegoat has split into a good hero and a monstrous character.<sup>13</sup>

It is obvious that many popular genres, including melodrama and crime fiction, belong to the first category of texts. They tend to enact the scapegoat mechanism with its displacements and simplifications. Melodrama, for instance, often features a monstrous character who is made an embodiment of evil: a scapegoat. Evil is seen as external to the narrative community and/or the hero. An abstract social setting is symptomatic of melodrama at its simplest. Its monstrous scapegoat, therefore, is deprived of specific cultural signs and reduced to a basic representation of evil as a vital principle. Appropriately, the melodramatic villain has supernatural powers and/or links with the supernatural. He might also be foreign.<sup>14</sup> Melodrama also provides a providential solution to the problem of evil, insofar as the sacrifice of the evil figure is generally enacted or can be ascribed to 'the Hand of God'. The final order therefore, appears to be divinely founded, and violence, if not hidden, is nonetheless justified.

In detective novels, the signs of the scapegoats remain by definition hidden for the main part of the narrative since its whole point is to determine the identity of the criminal. Once found, however, the villain comes across as the odd one out, the polluting element in the 'great good place'. Crime is proved to be the product of a diseased or morally weak mind, and not linked to a structural fault in society. On the other hand, the main character, with whom readers identify, comes across as having no responsibility in the chaotic situation of the fictional world, nor in the ritual sacrifice of the villain. Since the detective is a representative of a good state and an equitable justice, locating the source of chaos is his job and does not entail guilt. Besides, detective novels rarely dwell on the arrest and punishment of the criminal.

The surrogate victim process is further justified by the existence of another type of scapegoating in both melodrama and the crime novel. In melodrama, the hero is persecuted by an evil figure; in the detective novel, it

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p.121.

<sup>14</sup> Other signs are likely to be extreme, such as ugliness, deformity, etc. As in myths and fairy tales, the villain's monstrous appearance reflects his monstrous mind: 'la mythologie ... va de préférence aux extrêmes et c'est ce qui caractérise ... la polarisation persécutrice'. Girard, *Le Bouc émissaire*, p.51.

is likely that suspicion will first be directed at the wrong person.<sup>15</sup> These characters appear as innocent victims, or scapegoats in the common sense of the word. The representation and denunciation of what is considered as bad scapegoating nonetheless ultimately serves to justify the sacrifice of the villain and that of less obvious undesirable elements demanded by the resolution of the plot.

In both cases, the scapegoating process provides simple catharsis due to moral polarisation or character splitting. The sacrifice of the villain, an evil figure, seems appropriate and just, all the more as the hero takes no part in it. In that respect, W. H. Auden is right in saying that detective fiction is not so much about 'readers' vicarious murderous desires, but about the illusion of being dissociated from the murderer.<sup>16</sup> The final inclination of the detective novel is to separate the good from the bad, that is, the community, represented by the detective hero, from the criminal. The death or expulsion of the evil figure, therefore, generates pure, clear-cut emotions and complete consolation.<sup>17</sup> This is nonetheless an illusion, insofar as it derives from moral polarisation and simplifications of issues that have nothing to do with real life.

Auden is one of many commentators who have linked the detective novel to the religious notion of guilt. According to such an interpretation, the significance of the genre lies in the way the ritual murder of the criminal figure allows a projection of guilt away from the reader. This seems too reductive; Girard's theory might help to emphasise the specific social dimension of feelings such as guilt and fear.

To consider popular fiction in the light of Girard's theory of the scapegoat, therefore, raises the following questions. Are popular texts such as detective fiction and melodrama blind to fundamental truths about human instincts, such as men's tendency to seek scapegoats instead of facing unpleasant truths about themselves and their world? Are they also blind to the social mechanism that they reflect, the construction of order through violence and exclusion? Do all detective novels and melodramas have the complacent ideological functions generally ascribed to them, to propagate dominant beliefs and values in order to strengthen social cohesion?

<sup>15</sup> That character is the hero in the suspense novel.

<sup>16</sup> W. H. Auden, 'The Guilty Vicarage', in *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1962), pp.147-58 (158).

<sup>17</sup> As opposed to, for example, the death of the tragic figure, a divided character whose downfall is partly brought on by his own shortcomings (the tragic flaw), and has rich and complex implications.

Insofar as they are structured by the scapegoat mechanism, these genres rely on patterns of light and darkness, good and evil. They are therefore conservative in the sense that strict patterns allow no shades and have unambiguous conclusions. They seem to be based on the assumption that there are no other classifications of people other than good or evil. Those who threaten the status quo are therefore labelled as evil and ultimately sacrificed. Melodrama tends to stick to a simple dualistic pattern because it aims at basic and universal notions. Detective fiction, as an offspring of realist fiction, is more likely to add cultural variants to the basic pattern of melodrama. Notions of good and evil, right and wrong will have more depth, and will be specifically and socially defined. However, these will still draw ultimately on common beliefs and dominant values. Closure will not question these but strengthen them. In their simplest expression, detective novels and any other popular novel enacting a symbolic drama of light and darkness do not challenge readers' beliefs. They fulfil people's expectations and are therefore likely to feed on their prejudices. Detective fiction tends to reinforce common ideas about what is acceptable or not, and to provide a vehicle for the idea that whoever challenges common values will be punished.

There is, however, no reason to believe that writers cannot at least be partly aware of and detach themselves from the ideological charge of the form they use. They might for ideological reasons feed on people's need for stability and patterns and therefore entertain their prejudices; they might do the same for purely commercial reasons. In his study of narrative structures in the James Bond novels, for instance, Umberto Eco is inclined to think that Ian Fleming makes an opportunistic use of clichés and public opinion:

Fleming cherche des oppositions élémentaires; afin de donner un visage aux forces premières et universelles, il recourt à des clichés. Pour identifier ces clichés, il se réfère à l'opinion publique. En période de tensions internationales, ce sera le méchant communiste ou le criminel nazi impuni ... Fleming les emploie tous les deux avec la plus grande indifférence.

Un homme qui opère un tel choix n'est ni un fasciste ni un raciste: c'est seulement un cynique, un ingénieur en romans de grande consommation.<sup>18</sup>

Popular formulas and self-awareness are not necessarily incompatible, and the use of clichés and common values is not inevitably linked with reactionary ideology.

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<sup>18</sup> Umberto Eco, *De Superman au surhomme* (Paris: Grasset, 1978), p.190.

Moreover, if one considers the pattern of the genre in its totality rather than focusing on its ultimate impulse towards closure and clear positioning, one can see that, like carnival, it allows for a phase where the concerns, tensions and fears of a community are voiced before being projected on a scapegoat figure. Representations of scapegoating are dramatisations of violent crises, where common rules and boundaries have been broken. This stylisation of chaos allows for the exploration of social and moral codes, and potential social criticism. In fact, the investigation of a murder in a detective story may serve as a tool to investigate the values of a society, before closure brings back the lost order and strengthens its codes. The victim or suspected criminal can be exposed for what he really is, a scapegoat, revealing in the process the prejudices of the readers. As Heta Pyrhonen puts it,

The use of red herrings and likely suspects, drawing on prejudices deep in our personal experience or cultural encyclopaedia, is a common way of exposing ideological assumptions. For example, often a foreigner is made a suspect only to be exonerated, thus disclosing the readers's hitherto unreflective prejudice.<sup>19</sup>

The same motif can of course serve to propagate prejudices without overtly supporting them, or merely reflect them.

Popular fiction, therefore, is concerned with real-life problems and does raise cultural issues. However, it usually solves them in a way which both comforts people and defends the status quo, by means of a scapegoat who takes on all the troubles of society. The scapegoat narrative, like carnival, is ambivalent. It feeds readers' desire for protest and their opposite desires for stability and order. On the one hand, writers can favour the early stage of the narrative, which voices tensions in society, and be as conventional or subversive as they like. They can also favour its later stage, which aims at closure, simplification of issues and displacements. They can also balance both stages, such as Féval and Collins. In that respect, both writers provide a dual perspective on most fictional events and characters. Moreover, writers can either stick to the most basic narrative, or add as many cultural variants as they want.

Similarly, readers can take what they want. Everything that can be said about readers of popular fiction is conjectural insofar as we cannot know how they read and what use they make of their readings. There is no reason to believe, however, that readers automatically have a passive attitude, nor that reading for pleasure necessarily means reading without some critical

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<sup>19</sup> Heta Pyrhonen, *Murder from an Academic Angle: An Introduction to the Study of the Detective Narrative* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1994) p.105.

perspective.<sup>20</sup> Depending on how critical readers are, and on which stage of the novel they particularly focus on or relate to, their reception of a work can be totally different. Insofar as Collins' novels are concerned, this is particularly clear. For instance, nineteenth-century critics who particularly valued closure were generally dissatisfied with Collins' lack of clear positioning at the end of *No Name*.<sup>21</sup> Magdalen is punished and her sins condemned insofar as her illness strips her of her rebellious impulses. Yet she is also rewarded with a moneyed man and eventually recovers her inheritance. Modern critics, for whom openness and self-reflexivity are more important, value *No Name* for its deconstruction of society while blaming the regressive impulse of its ending.<sup>22</sup> Both interpretations are valid, in that the text is ambivalent enough to sustain such opposite conclusions. *No Name* is an exemplary instance of a popular text, which, as Bakhtin demonstrated, is ambivalent, both regressive and progressive.<sup>23</sup>

Many commentators on popular fiction tend to focus on its final impulse at consolation, fantasy resolutions and illusory closure, and to highlight how such endings generally serve contemporary ideology. In fact, the field of popular culture is certainly not uniform, and can go from rather sanitised, harmless popular novels, to subversive criticism or overt protests against everything established and official. Tensions and threats must be invoked, before they are dispelled or contained. Such a conception of popular fiction as complex and multi-dimensional overlaps with other modern interpretations of the genre, including those of Marxist critics. For Gramsci, for instance, ideology is a permanently contested matter. In order to disseminate itself, it has to make concessions to dissident values, and integrate elements from opposition.<sup>24</sup> Popular fiction, therefore, even if it is likely to uphold conventions and dominant values, necessarily makes room for alternative values and rebellious impulses.

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<sup>20</sup> Janice Radway's study of Harlequin romance, *Reading the Romance* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1984) points at the same conclusions. Radway shows how readers both find escape in such novels and relate them to their everyday life. They also find subversive elements in the tamest of novels.

<sup>21</sup> See Chapter IV, Heroes and villains.

<sup>22</sup> See Winifred Hughes, *The Maniac in the Cellar: Sensation Novels of the 1860s* (Princeton New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980), p.149.

<sup>23</sup> See Chapter II, Genres and registers.

<sup>24</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971).

## Part 2. The scapegoat figure in Paul Féval's *Les Habits Noirs*

### A. The two sides of the Roman-Feuilleton

Among the many commentators on the Roman-Feuilleton, Jean-Claude Vareille is one of the very few who underlines the presence of scapegoating elements in the genre. As Vareille points out, closure and order in the Roman-Feuilleton are only reached through the violent expulsion of undesirable elements. His insight into the deep structure of the genre enables him to denounce a widely spread interpretation of the Roman-Feuilleton as harmless and watery. He points out the violence and sacrifices that sustain the 'ideal', transparent world to which the Roman-Feuilleton aspires:

Au demeurant, gardons nous bien d'édulcorer le roman populaire. Les sociétés closes ne sont pas nécessairement tendres. Elles sont féroces au contraire, parce que, ne pouvant subsister qu'en se débarrassant de l'*impur*, de celui que les anthropologues ou ethnologues appellent le *pharmakos*, le bouc émissaire, la victime expiatoire - qu'en chassant sans pitié celui qui conjointement menace l'ordre et le fonde, puisque, par définition, on ne peut se définir et se protéger que "par rapport à", "contre". En fait, selon nous, un pacte de ce genre se retrouve à travers tous les romans de Mérouvel, Richebourg, Decourcelle et consorts.<sup>25</sup>

Vareille highlights the basic structure of the Roman-Feuilleton, but is not interested in examining how scapegoating works, or in the question of whether serialists were aware of the ideological implications of such structuring mechanism. The consensus among critics of the genre, however, is that most French serialists wrote for commercial reasons only:

Ils ne travaillent ni pour la postérité ni pour exprimer ce qu'ils ont de plus intime ni ce que personne n'a jamais dit. Ils honorent leur contrat. Tant de lignes, tant d'argent.<sup>26</sup>

This made them demagogues who exploited people's prejudices and passions to sell their books. According to these common views, the Roman-Feuilleton merely reflects the scapegoat mechanism with all its simplifications and displacements. It emphasises the sacrifice of an evil figure by a morally strong hero. Such a process both brings a solution to all fictional problems and purifies the community of readers of negative energies generated by social tensions and fears. Its ultimate effect is to strengthen the status quo.

<sup>25</sup> Jean-Claude Vareille, *Le Roman populaire français (1789-1814). Idéologies et pratiques. Le Trompette de la Bérésina* (Limoges: PULIM/Nuit Blanche Editeur, 1994), p.8-9.

<sup>26</sup> Michel Nathan, *Splendeurs et misères du roman populaire* (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1991), p.1.

Many interpretations of the Roman-Feuilleton corroborate this view, among them that of the humorist Joseph Méry:

Si j'étais le Roi Louis-Philippe, je ferais des rentes à Alexandre Dumas, Eugène Sue et Frédéric Soulié pour qu'ils continuent toujours 'Les Mousquetaires', 'Les Mystères de Paris' et 'Les Mémoires du diable'. Il n'y aurait plus jamais de Révolutions, la France ne lirait plus que les feuilletons des romans'.<sup>27</sup>

Such interpretations ground themselves on the strong need for closure of the Roman-Feuilleton, construed as the picture of a world made ultimately transparent through the action of the superhero. Complex political and social issues are transformed into simple moral ones and reduced to the confrontation of hero and villain as respective embodiments of good and evil. Justice has more to do with sentiments and personal triumph than social or political reform. For Jean Tortel, the effect of the genre is to suppress people's need for change or revolution. Because most popular novels, at least in the early phase of the genre, dealt with the working classes, whereas serialists themselves mainly came from the ruling classes, Tortel interprets the Roman-Feuilleton as a tool for social control, 'un instrument d'aliénation des masses' used by bourgeois society.<sup>28</sup>

Yet the carnivalesque aspect of the Roman-Feuilleton, its ability to portray a world upside down, is equally extreme. In that matter, it can also be interpreted as an opposition to the dominant voice of culture. Like the Sensation novel, one of the many inversions that it performs was between the open and the hidden. The Roman-Feuilleton brought into the open what the leading classes had previously hidden to themselves and to the whole world: their exploitation of the weak, their own corruption and selfishness. In that sense it is true to say that the early Roman-Feuilleton was akin to 'un cahier de revendications des classes laborieuses'.<sup>29</sup> In *Les Mystères de Paris*, for instance, Sue gave popular archetypes a social and political dimension by choosing his villains mainly among the ruling classes, whereas most of his virtuous characters happened to be poor. The accusation of opportunism should also be qualified. The fact that Dumas was paid 1, 50 francs per line by *Le Constitutionnel* certainly accounts for his massive output. On the other hand, one must do credit to Sue's earnestness in fancying himself as the

<sup>27</sup> Joseph Méry, quoted by Pierre Noriey, in 'Le Roman-Feuilleton', *Le Crapouillot* (March 1934), p.37.

<sup>28</sup> Jean Tortel, 'Un instrument d'aliénation des masses', in *Europe*, 542, 'Le Roman-Feuilleton' (June 1974), p.161.

<sup>29</sup> Yves Olivier-Martin, 'Sociologie du roman populaire', in *Entretiens sur la paralittérature, actes du colloque de Cerisy du 1er au 10 Septembre 1967* (Paris: Plon, 1970), p.179.

people's spokesman. A dandy and a bourgeois, Sue first shared with his peers the vision of the working class as the 'classes dangereuses'. A visit to a working-class family and the awareness of the potential social dimension of *Les Mystères de Paris* changed the course of the novel, making it a vehicle for Sue's ideas on social reforms and democracy.<sup>30</sup> The early Roman-Feuilleton, therefore, helped the diffusion of social and political ideas, and contributed to undermine people's faith in the established order. It is therefore frequently cited among the causes leading to the 1848 revolution.<sup>31</sup>

Bourgeois society certainly felt threatened by the Roman-Feuilleton's potential for disruption, for the Riancey Law (1850) introduced a special tax on newspapers publishing serial novels, and nearly killed the genre. Popular protest led to another law in 1851, which cancelled the previous one but forced newspapers to exert a kind of self-censorship. Such laws, as well as the defeat of the 1848 revolution, brought about some changes in the Roman-Feuilleton. It took some of the edge off its social criticism and brought more uniformity to the general production. The greatest success of the 1850s was Ponson du Terrail's *Rocambole*, which took up archetypal situations and characters from his predecessors but left out most of their political content. The pattern of *Rocambole* is a basic fight between the forces of evil and good. Those notions are defined in a simple and conventional way. In the first volume of the series, which is a prologue to the adventures of *Rocambole*, the hero Armand de Kergaz strongly recalls Sue's Rodolphe. He has, however, no real project, no social ideals, and his opponent, who happens to be his half-brother, is motivated by a love of evil for evil's sake. Ponson's gleeful excess and raw energy has led critics to consider *Rocambole* as, according to their conception of the popular novel, the best Roman-Feuilleton of the time, or a parody of the genre. An apolitical novel, it fulfilled its function of safety valve, and had no subversive flavour. *Les Mystères de Paris* and *Rocambole* represent two poles of popular fiction: one politically engaged and one entertaining, or one temporarily weakening and one ultimately strengthening of social cohesion.

In any case, the Roman-Feuilleton had a double-edged ideological impact the origin of which is to be found in the scapegoat mechanism as a deep structuring device:

<sup>30</sup> See Jean-Louis Bory, *Eugène Sue, Dandy mais socialiste* (Paris: Hachette, 1973).

<sup>31</sup> Jean Raabe, 'Le Roman populaire', in *Manuel d'histoire littéraire de la France*, Tome V (1848-1917), Deuxième partie, Chapitre II (Paris: Messidor/Éditions Sociales, 1977), pp.278-303.

Le roman populaire est une arme redoutable. Engagé, il est une machine à fabriquer des présupposés. Apolitique, il se contente de les perpétuer. On comprend les réactions de ceux qui sentent le danger d'une telle littérature, la machine à désigner des boucs émissaires et à imposer les idées reçues.<sup>32</sup>

The Roman-Feuilleton, however, is not always unaware of its deep structure, or blind to its implications. The genre, especially in its early, romantic period, took advantage of the potential for social critique that representations of scapegoating usually carry. Furthermore, it acknowledged some of the illusions and simplifications of the process itself, notably its reliance on violence.

### B. Paul Féval's *Les Habits Noirs*

Féval's *Les Habits Noirs* (1863-75) marked a return to the romantic and epic Roman-Feuilleton à la Sue. The first episode of the series displays a utopian impulse towards transparency and order. The series, however, evolves towards more lucidity as to the cost of order and cohesion, and to the conviction that violence can only lead to more violence.

The *Habits Noirs* series is pervaded with images and symbols of scapegoating as a means to achieve some kind of order. As mentioned in a previous section on Genres and Registers in the Roman-Feuilleton, one of the myths used by Féval in *Les Habits Noirs* is that of the scapegoat.<sup>33</sup> The myth is reworked and inverted, suggesting the chaotic state of a society where power and money rather than religion have become the dominant values. There are many other references and images of scapegoating in *Les Habits Noirs*, particularly in relation to the villain figures. As an association, the Habits Noirs seem to perpetuate themselves through ritual sacrifices. On the one hand, this suggests a conservative belief in the idea of social order based on differences and hierarchies, and maintained by violence. On the other, scapegoating in relation to the Habits Noirs also highlights the endless need for violence, and therefore, the inadequacy of a process that can only perform its function for a short time.

A form of regicide as well as recurrent sacrifices of members feature among the rules of the association. Both are strongly ritualised, and involve precise formulas and procedures. The ritual death of the leader of the Habits Noirs at the hands of his son is a form of renewal of energy that has allowed the association to live on for more than a hundred years. The rule according

<sup>32</sup> Nathan, *Splendeurs et misères du roman populaire*, p.26.

<sup>33</sup> See Chapter II, Genres and registers.

to which a member threatening the association is sacrificed, otherwise known as 'couper la branche', secures the survival and impunity of the Habits Noirs. In both cases, scapegoating obviously has nothing to do with justice. It is about group control and strengthening of power on one hand, and the power of the majority over the minority on the other. In *La Rue de Jérusalem*, Nicolas' death at the hands of his fellow Habits Noirs is a parody of justice, since he is no more or no less guilty than the rest. Coyatier provides a third aspect of scapegoating. As the association's hitman, Coyatier is feared by everyone. In reality, Coyatier is no more dangerous than the rest, but as the visible face of violence, he serves as a repository for fears and hatred. For Erik Neveu, this organisation is significant of Féval's conservative vision of social order, based on hierarchies, rituals, norms and what he calls 'familialisme':

Sa description des 'Veste Nere' ne pose pas un modèle, elle invite à méditer sur les causes d'une stabilité, fût-elle criminelle. La force du mal vient de son ordre, illustré par une hiérarchie, des rituels, des normes.<sup>34</sup>

If their ritual sacrifices contribute to lengthen the life span of the Habits Noirs, they also ultimately determine their self-destruction. As a means of group control, violence fails to regulate the competition for money and power. Instead, the Habits Noirs find themselves in a whirlpool of violence that generates instability and ultimately leads to their self-destruction. This is no denunciation of scapegoating as such, but rather a suggestion that illegitimate violence can never produce long-term stability in a given society. On the other hand, this illegitimate use of scapegoating, a parody of order and justice, highlights the lack of legitimate rules and norms in society, and of a legitimate violence administered by a strong and equal law. While taking a carnivalesque pleasure in the vision of a world taken over by a criminal association, Féval implicitly expresses a conservative desire for tighter social control and a stronger elite. The Habits Noirs' fate nonetheless puts in the foreground the primitive nature and the destructive potential of scapegoating, as well as the injustice of an exclusionary society.

Another instance of bad scapegoating is provided by the persecution of the hero. A rule of the Habits Noirs, known as 'payer la loi', consists in providing the law with a false culprit for each crime committed by the association. This, however, can only be done with the unwitting complicity of

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<sup>34</sup> Erik Neveu, 'Vraisemblable(s) et idéologie in *Les Habits Noirs*', in *Paul Féval, romancier populaire, colloque de Rennes 1987* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes et *interférences*, 1992), pp.183-202 (194).

a society where justice contents itself with scapegoats. Sacrifice, therefore, is not only a rule of the criminal association, but also an unwritten rule of society. The facility with which villains get away with their crimes points at the way society at large works, through sacrifices of the weak. Success is built on violence and exclusion. The *Habits Noirs*, therefore, clearly are a metaphor of society, which exacerbates men's tendency to violent exclusion and sacrifice. This explicit denunciation of scapegoating with its illusions and displacements, however, contrasts with the implicit structuring mechanism of the novels, which seeks to enact a legitimate form of scapegoating. Closure is to be brought not through reform of society, but through the expulsion of scapegoats. As a *feuilletoniste*, Féval is torn between the vision of a transparent world based on legitimate violence and expulsion, and the conviction that such a pattern is short-lived because it is fundamentally wrong. There is no such thing as legitimate violence, and no clear-cut boundaries between good and evil.

The emphasis on violence and exclusion in the Roman-Feuilleton can be traced back to the impact of the Revolution on literature and society. At the beginning of the nineteenth century in France, people had long been acquainted with violence and looked for strong emotions in popular entertainment. The concepts of sacrifice and of the cycle of violence were also familiar to a people who had witnessed regicide, disruption and the reversal of social order on a regular basis since 1789. The disillusion felt by many Frenchmen and women after the Revolution and the crises of 1830 and 1848 had something to do with the notion that human societies seemed condemned to endless cycles of violence.

These notions are reflected in the serial nature of the Roman-Feuilleton and in its double-discourse about violence. The genre conveys a desire to find a legitimate and ultimate violence that would put an end to previous pointless violence within society. It also aims at locating the origin of violence in society, once and for all. Such aims could only lead to illusions: at its simplest, the Roman-Feuilleton is clearly suffused with manicheism and ruled by the scapegoat mechanism. The hero is a knight who pursues and punishes an evil figure whose death brings social stability. On the other hand, the Roman-Feuilleton displays some awareness of the inadequacy of the whole mechanism. The most elaborate Romans-Feuilletons emphasise the role of the ambivalent hero in the sacrifice of the villain, making revenge and violence the centres of the narrative. Instead of hiding violence, they emphasise its presence in society and its role in the mechanism that brings back order. In

*Les Habits Noirs*, for instance, the hero gradually comes to reject violence. Furthermore, the series acknowledges, and to a certain extent, resists some of the simplifications of the scapegoating process, such as its moral polarisation. The evolution of the *Habits Noirs* highlights Féval's specific approach, characterised by social pessimism, to the inherent contradictions of most Romans-Feuilletons.

In spite of some early awareness of the inadequacies of scapegoating, *Les Habits Noirs*, the first episode of the series, is ruled by the scapegoat mechanism. The novel ends on the defeat of the villain, Lecoq, which puts an end to the injustice and cruelties provoked by his initial wrongdoing. It revolves around the violent expulsion of a character portrayed as evil, whose violent death seems justified. The hero, André Maynotte, has to live on the fringe of society like Edmond Dantès, following a miscarriage of justice. He then plans his revenge on his persecutors. However, whereas Edmond Dantès revels in his revenge and Rodolphe takes violence for granted, André questions his actions in the light of both human and divine justice. The novel dramatises the conflict between legitimate and illegitimate violence, and suggests that involvement and compromise are part of the hunt for the monstrous scapegoat.

As we saw, Féval's characterisation of André and his treatment of moral issues are nonetheless rather basic. The moral problems raised by André's involvement with Lecoq are never addressed. The conclusion of the novel also validates his choices and clears ambiguities regarding his behaviour. André refuses violence, and relies on human justice to deal with Lecoq, but also claims that he is entitled to do justice himself. Féval solves the problem in a conventional way by resorting to the intervention of providence, which exonerates André from violence. By contrast, the epilogue, structured like a chorus, recounts public opinion according to which André did kill Lecoq. In both cases, closure depends on violent expulsion. The death of Lecoq, however, brings back transparency and social harmony. Notions of good and evil find just retribution and are not questioned. Even André's affirmation that he now leads the *Habits Noirs* does not jeopardise his status of hero.

The death of Baron Schwartz does not raise any moral problem either. A more realistic character than André, Schwartz is neither totally corrupt nor totally innocent. Morally weak and tempted by gold, he unwittingly takes part in a crime of the *Habits Noirs*. His fortune is then built on the money gained on this occasion, and consolidated by usury. His faults are too great to be left unpunished, and he dies a rather useful death, since he saves the life

of André's wife Julie. His death is therefore unproblematic, and adds to the sense of closure through legitimate exclusion. In that sense, the world of *Les Habits Noirs* and that of the Roman-Feuilleton in general is quite a cruel one. Even when they are not fundamentally evil, characters who commit mistakes, such as Vincent Carpentier in *Les Compagnons du Trésor* or Rémy d'Arx in *L'Arme invisible*, are sacrificed to the resolution of the plot.

The pattern of *Coeur d'Acier* is similar to that of *Les Habits Noirs*. The evil figures die and the innocence of the heroes is proclaimed. As a criminal figure, Marguerite is more complex than Lecoq. In the previous section, it was shown how Féval first portrays her as a victim of social and sexual oppression who sets out to use the system that exploited her, before transforming her into a mere incarnation of evil.<sup>35</sup> Her morally weak husband Joulou du Bréhut, a tool of the Habits Noirs, is similar to Schwartz. *Coeur d'Acier* nonetheless differs from *Les Habits Noirs* insofar as its hero is more passive, and less ambivalent. Whereas André had already been involved with the Habits Noirs, Roland is just a man who finds himself in the wrong place at the wrong time. He is a pure victim who also rejects the confrontation with the forces of evil. The hero is disillusioned and refuses to compromise. Féval solves the dilemma in a rather conventional way, through the self-destruction of the villains. A remorseful Joulou commits suicide after shooting Marguerite. Violence is therefore disconnected from the hero. The death of the couple is justified, and represents a fantasy resolution to the problem of evil. As in *Les Habits Noirs*, representatives of the law are present to recognise their mistakes and to validate the resolution.

Subsequent novels are more pessimistic. *La Rue de Jérusalem* takes up the dilemma of the hero regarding the use of violence and his involvement with the forces of darkness. The hero Paul remains passive and refuses to investigate the murder of his brother, preferring ignorance to pain and innocence to compromise. The passivity of the hero, however, brings forth the lack of a legitimate source of order. God seems absent from the world and human justice is completely out of its depths. For Count de Champmas, Paul's inaction makes him an accomplice of the Habits Noirs. Féval solves the problem by resorting to a less scrupulous secondary character, Pistolet. Pistolet, however, is not strong enough to solve the crisis. The end of the novel, therefore, is rather pessimistic. Although the main villain is killed, his death serves to preserve the impunity of the Habits Noirs rather than moral retribution insofar as he is sacrificed according to the association's

<sup>35</sup> see Chapter IV, Heroes and villains.

rule of 'payer la loi'. The other Habits Noirs are still alive and their alternative scheme is successful. The hero's domestic bliss does not make up for the fact that society remains opaque and fluid.

On the other hand, secondary characters representing minor deviance are also sacrificed to the resolution of the plot, with some measure of ambiguity on Féval's part. The characters of Thérèse and her daughter Ysole serve to highlight some interconnected social and sexual tensions, and, ultimately, to reinforce social and sexual prejudices. Thérèse is a country woman who is seduced and abandoned by a noble man, Count de Champmas. Their illegitimate daughter Ysole is brought up with the Count's legitimate daughter Suavita. Although Féval's sympathy lies with Thérèse rather than the Count, the former is nonetheless sacrificed to the resolution of the plot. Everything works as if Thérèse was punished for her early sexual licence. Her daughter is taken away from her, then behaves in such a way that she loses her social rank and her reputation. Thérèse's relationship with the Count remains characterised by indeterminacy and exploitation, insofar as she becomes his domestic when she settles in the Champmas household. As for the naive and ambitious Ysole, she is seduced by the Habit Noir Nicolas, and later becomes Lecoq's accomplice and mistress. While exposing the cruel fate of a seduced woman and her illegitimate daughter, the narrative also reinforces prejudices insofar as Ysole is revealed as dangerous and sexually promiscuous. Her ambitions were illegitimate, and her place in the Champmas household akin to usurpation. Her attitude is equally ambivalent. On the one hand, she considers herself as a lost woman and believes that her sins spring from her illegitimate status. She nonetheless refuses to take all the blame for her actions and denounces the responsibility of her father in both her fate and that of her mother:

Monsieur, vous ne me chasserez point; il n'est pas besoin: je vais m'exiler moi-même. Monsieur, souvenez-vous que sans vous j'aurais connu ma mère.<sup>36</sup>

At the end of the novel, Thérèse is dead and Ysole has locked herself in a convent. The Count finds his long-lost legitimate daughter Suavita, who marries the hero Paul d'Arcis. The end of the novel validates conventional notions of marriage and family.

In *L'Arme invisible*, the use of violence by the hero is definitely construed as negative. The Christian ideal of not answering violence with violence is, strangely enough, voiced by the Habits Noirs' hitman, Coyatier.

<sup>36</sup> Paul Féval, *La Rue de Jérusalem* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1987), p.987.

The heroine, Valentine, speaks of purifying blood; Coyatier objects that there is no way to eradicate blood: 'Mais où les laver, mes mains, jeunesse, mes mains qui ont du sang? Dans le sang?',<sup>37</sup> As God or Providence is still silent, nothing puts an end to the wrongdoings of the Habits Noirs. At the end of the novel, the heroic couple find themselves in prison. Rémy d'Arx, who has been misled by the Habits Noirs as to the identity of the woman he loves (she is his sister), commits suicide. *Maman Léo*, the sequel to *L'Arme invisible*, is equally pessimistic. Heroes are cheated by the Habits Noirs into believing in the destruction of the main members of the association. They resolve to flee abroad. There is, however, a suggestion that they will not live long. *L'Arme invisible*, therefore, signals the transition from the early Roman-Feuilleton with its powerful hero to the novel of the evil genius. It becomes clear that there can only be a temporary victory over the forces of evil. Society lacks the means to win such a fight, and the hero's involvement can only make him a mirror image of the villain. Significantly, secondary characters that are neither good nor evil but simply human, such as Pistolet, start to invest the foreground. These tend to be comic characters: their function is partly to defuse the tension created by the main story line.

In *Les Compagnons du Trésor*, the heroic *jeune premier*, Reynier, is absent from most of the narrative. His lover Irène has no control over what is being schemed against her and the ones she loves. The novel is mostly concerned with the internal struggle for power within the association on one hand, and the downfall of Irène's father Vincent Carpentier on the other. Vincent Carpentier, an impoverished but ambitious architect, is hired by Bozzo to build a safe for the Habits Noirs treasure. It is not long before Vincent guesses the nature of his employer's business. He cannot, however, take his mind off the treasure, and sets out to locate and steal Bozzo's gold. The novel, therefore, maps out the corruption and fall into madness of a fundamentally good human being, and on the incapacity of virtue to set things right. The last minute resolution is not entirely happy. Reynier makes his comeback and is forced to kill Count Julian, Bozzo's successor, who also turns out to be Reynier's father. Such family ties suggest a common origin to good and evil, and convey the idea that moral polarisation is artificial. Every one seems on the brink of perdition in *Les Compagnons du Trésor*. Even Reynier has to be helped by Irène to turn down the treasure and the leadership of the Habits Noirs, which, according to the rule of the association, now belong to him. The self-destruction of the rest of the association will not

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<sup>37</sup> Paul Féval, *Maman Léo* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1987), p.136.

prevent the reorganisation of the criminal society. In Féval's next novel, the *Habits Noirs* reappears as *La Bande Cadet*. Finally, the epitaph on Bozzo's grave symbolises the permanence of lies and false values:

*Ci-gît*

*Le colonel Bozzo-Corona,*

*bienfaiteur des pauvres.*<sup>38</sup>

The evolution of the novels increasingly puts in the foreground a Christian refusal of violence and compromise along with aspiration towards higher values. Heroes refuse to commit the ritual murder of the villain. Due to the chaotic state of society and the lack of legitimate power, however, the criminal figures seem to thrive even more and closure is further threatened. On the other hand, Féval sometimes resorts to some kind of poetic justice such as providence or self-destruction of the villains. Such tensions suggest both awareness of the demands of the genre (closure and resolution) and some resistance to the simplifications that such conventions require, notably moral polarisation. Tensions result in a double perspective on characters. The scapegoat mechanism is only partially enacted, and never quite fulfils its functions.

Although heroes are prone to temptation, they are still fundamentally good characters. Their goodness is never really questioned. Moral notions, indeed, are quite simple and never really explored. They are quite conservative too. Goodness is equated with religion, marriage and family, patience, hard work and generosity. Evil, by extension, is associated with disrespect for such values: the ritual parricide within the Bozzo family illustrates the lack of regard for family ties, for instance. Otherwise, evil consists mainly in actions such as murder or theft of property, excessive love of money, and more generally, excessive passions. If such notions are quite clear, there is a suggestion that everyone has some measure of both. Evil cannot always be pinpointed, and identified with one specific character. In that respect, the *Habits Noirs* are a metaphor of the corruption of the whole of society, rather than a mere incarnation of evil. This is complicated by the fact that, in Féval's novels, the threat to society is not associated with a particular class. In that respect, villains have diverse cultural signs. The threat to society comes as much from its financial and aristocratic elites (Schwartz or Joulou du Bréhut) as from its underworld (Coyatier), or from the very people who are supposed to protect it. Lecoq, modelled on Vidocq, straddles the world of the police and that of crime. Not all of these, as we saw,

<sup>38</sup> Paul Féval, *Les Compagnons du Trésor* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1987), p.840.

are totally evil or guilty. Similarly, everybody can be a victim of the law or the Habits Noirs: heroes come from the nobility (Rémy d'Arx or Paul d'Arcis), the bourgeois world (André Maynotte) or the people (Pistolet). The villains, as scapegoat figures, do not really highlight the artificiality of common norms and values as Collins' characters do, but rather suggest that there are no real norms or values anymore. Society is reduced to a state of jungle. The deaths of the villains, therefore, can never quite bring consolation and catharsis.

If the origin of evil is hard to pinpoint, solutions are hard to come by too. Féval's vision of men and society is rather pessimistic, and his work mostly deprived of ideological illusions. Political comments are hard to find in *Les Habits Noirs*, simply because Féval, unlike Sue, believed that they had no place in a novel. It does not follow from this that his novels are apolitical. For Féval, facts must speak for themselves: 'Ce sont les faits qui doivent avoir de l'éloquence, non pas le conteur.'<sup>39</sup> A monarchist and a *légitimiste*, Féval portrays society as a moral wasteland, where the laws, hierarchies and boundaries that used to secure social order have been wiped out by the Revolution. What is left is a social jungle, where people compete for riches and success with total cynicism, and where unlike Sue's world, everyone suffers from the loss of social rules. The social and cultural problems raised by the *Habits Noirs* mainly revolve around loss of property and social status, as substitution of identity, illegal solicitation of legacy, kidnapping of children and other motifs leading to sudden reversals of fortune demonstrate. On the one hand, these are conventional themes of the Roman-Feuilleton that reflected the social concerns of the bourgeoisie. On the other hand, those specific fears rouse more primitive and general fears regarding loss of identity, social or personal. Although the notion of goodness that Féval's heroes embody partakes of a conservative and aristocratic world-view, his heroes come from all ranks in society. Féval was not reactionary. He knew that the past could not be brought back and he had a pessimistic vision of the decadence of the aristocracy, as characters such as Joulou du Bréhut and Marquise d'Ornans demonstrate. No real solutions are offered. In the early novels, social justice takes the form of a mythic revenge on the forces of evil enacted by a powerful hero. In the later novels, isolation from a corrupt society seems the best option.

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<sup>39</sup> Paul Féval, quoted by Francis Lacassin, in the Preface to *Les Habits Noirs*, Volume I (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1987), p.x.

The number of references to scapegoating in *Les Habits Noirs* suggests that Féval is clearly aware of such mechanisms. The unjustly persecuted hero is indeed a common feature of many Romans-Feuilletons, and partly reflects the immense impact that miscarriages of justice such as the *Courrier de Lyon* affair had on people. Féval uses this conventional motif to offer an indirect comment on social order and chaos. Sacrifices of the weak and of those who do not conform to the values of the time (competition, greed, and violence) are recurrent, and social success is shown to have its origin in violence and exclusion. Such bad scapegoating is conventionally contrasted to the use of legitimate violence by a morally strong hero, generating a new social order. Féval, however, cannot quite reconcile his growing refusal of violence with the need for narrative closure and social order. The series evolves, therefore, from a basic pattern of scapegoating, with heroes and villains embodying conventional notions of right and wrong, to a Christian refusal of violence along with a pessimistic notion of the impossibility of locating and expelling evil. The first episodes fulfil their function as safety valve and entertainment. They create catharsis by an imaginative and colourful stylisation of chaos and of its defeat, through the symbolic sacrifice of an evil figure. On the other hand, there is a suggestion that such a pattern is too simple, for evil is diffused into the entire society. Guilt and justice can only be relative, and the resolution of the plot does not always defuse the dramatic tension. Furthermore, the notion of legitimate violence itself is questionable, and heroes evolve towards less active involvement with the forces of evil. They often leave the corruption of the city, go to the country or find shelter in domestic bliss. As in the modern *série noire*, what remains are more realistic characters, neither good nor evil, but most of them liable to temptation and corruption.

**Part III. The scapegoat mechanism in the novels of Wilkie Collins: *The Woman in White, No Name, Armadale, The Moonstone, The Law and the Lady***

**A. Domestic fiction and the Sensation novels: two kinds of popular fiction**

In France, the advent and success of the Roman-Feuilleton accentuated the differences between popular fiction and high literature. Popular fiction was particularly characterised by dramatisation of chaos and establishment of social order through expulsion. Treatment of such themes generally included melodramatic aggrandising and simplification, and moral polarisation. Instead of offering a detailed analysis of society and putting

forward realistic answers, the Roman-Feuilleton addressed social issues through the dramatic adventures of a heroic figure, and offered mythic solutions that invariably involved the death of a scapegoat figure.

The polarisation between high and low fiction in England at the same time was not that clear cut. Domestic fiction of the 1850s and 1860s gave particular emphasis to popular features such as sentiment, fairy-tale and clear-cut, definite conclusions. Their dominant mode was restraint and their message strengthened conformity. They can be considered, therefore, as hygienic, almost 'official' popular novels. Most Victorian fiction, however, was, like French popular fiction, highly narrative, and emphasised elements of mystery. On the other hand, like French high literature, it used realistic techniques to probe the nature of the social fabric as well as the workings of the mind. Its ideology also partook of both popular and serious literature. Victorian fiction sought to give a representation of society as it really was, while being keen on attenuating certain aspects of reality to offer moral guidance and uplifting messages. The Victorians demanded unambiguous positioning in their novels. Endings generally solved problems in terms and in favour of middle-class values. The emphasis on formal and thematic closure made it particularly akin to popular fiction. The bulk of the production, therefore, can be said to be semi-popular, and considered as vehicles for diffusion of common values and maintenance of the status quo. Characters who embody common values are praised and rewarded; those representatives of dissident values are excluded and punished. The moral polarisation characteristic of the victimising process can easily be detected.

In that sense, Michiel Heyns' *Expulsion in the Nineteenth-Century novel: The Scapegoat in English Realist Fiction* is quite interesting. Michiel Heyns applies Girard's theories of the scapegoat to realist fiction, but uses the scapegoat in a more general sense, as a symbol for the exclusion of elements impending narrative resolution rather than as a figure and a structuring principle. It is significant, however, that among the writers considered by Heyns, to include Jane Austen, George Eliot and Charles Dickens, only later writers such as Joseph Conrad and Henry James manage to avoid the punitive movement of the scapegoating process.<sup>40</sup>

The Sensation novelists exaggerated many traits of the Victorian novels, substituting sensations for sentiments, illicit passion for marital love, and murder for minor transgression. The technique of character splitting was

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<sup>40</sup>Michiel Heyns, *Expulsion in the Nineteenth-Century Novel: The Scapegoat in English Realist Fiction* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

also brought to perfection, leading to heroic and villainous figures such as Laura Fairlie or Count Fosco in *The Woman in White*. By giving primacy to action and dramatic concentration, the Sensation novelists brought the scapegoating mechanism to the foreground. Paradoxically, they also acknowledged some of the injustice and illusions of the process. Valuing excess rather than measure, and taking pleasure in the carnivalesque depiction of the dark side of society, the Sensation novel, as opposed to domestic fiction, was rightly perceived as a subversive kind of popular fiction.

The Sensation novels were subversive insofar as they used conventional patterns and undermined them at the same time. They dramatised the birth of disorder in a given society, and the return of order through the expulsion of bad characters. They were, like the Romans-Feuilletons, structured by the surrogate victim mechanism. Instead of justifying the process, however, they sympathised with the excluded and revealed their real nature not as embodiments of evil but as victims. Collins' novels, in particular, insisted on the social nature of crime. Furthermore, his heroes and heroines were not totally free of resentment or violent tendencies. Endings, however, generally meant clear repositioning and the sacrifice of characters embodying dissident values. Such final inclinations can partly be ascribed to both commercial imperatives and ideological reasons. Writing for a middle-class readership, Collins ultimately had to uphold their values. He nonetheless exploited the potential for social criticism that such structuring devices carried. The representation of villains as embodiments of alternative values, for instance, left room for an exploration and a criticism of common norms and values.

The conflicting impulses towards social criticism and upholding of conventional values, as in the Roman-Feuilleton, revolve around the figure of the scapegoat. Lilian Nayder has rightly pointed out that aspect of Collins fiction, when she said that 'the inversion [from exploration and criticism of common norms to reappraisal of those very norms] is accomplished through the scapegoating of certain characters.'<sup>41</sup> She nonetheless fails to recognise that this structure is typical of the popular novel as a whole. It is clear from the evolution of his novels, however, that Collins became more and more aware of sacrifice and exclusion as a tendency of the mind and a law of society, as well as a convention of the novel. His fiction underscores both the

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<sup>41</sup> Lilian Nayder, *Wilkie Collins Revisited* (New York: Twayne, 1997), p.29.

distortions and arbitrariness of the scapegoat mechanism while ultimately enacting it.

### **B. The scapegoat mechanism in the novels of Wilkie Collins**

*The Woman in White*, like all of Collins' novels, enacts the scapegoat mechanism. A crisis arises which turns the world of Walter Hartright upside down. The genteel Laura Fairlie is ill-treated by her own husband, and her cousin Marian Halcombe is forced to behave in an unconventional, if not improper way. Fosco and Percival, a traitor and an impostor, both pose as respectable men. The fictional community is then ultimately purified by their deaths. There is, however, some awareness of the injustice of the process insofar as Percival's crimes can ultimately be ascribed to his social condition rather than individual wickedness. As an illegitimate child for whom society did not provide, he took his destiny in his own hands. His subsequent misbehaviour, therefore, highlights the shortcomings of the community. Percival is condemned for the crimes he committed against the heroes, but also for his refusal to keep to the place society had assigned to illegitimate children, which are viewed as deviant. Percival is nonetheless sacrificed to the resolution of the plot. The only character who voices an alternative view of him is Mrs Catherick, for whom Percival, by his forgery, 'made an honest woman of his mother'.<sup>42</sup> As a figure embodying sexual licence and immorality, however, Mrs Catherick's opinion in the novel does not carry much weight. Furthermore, readers' attention is diverted from the relative injustice of Percival's fate by the more wholly deserved death of Fosco. These 'legitimate' sacrifices also hide a less public one. The exclusion demanded by narrative and social cohesion is reflected in Laura's fate, insofar as her final triumph is nearly obtained at the expense of her life. Laura represents a normative view of women so extreme that the norm becomes absurd. The sacrifices that the victory of the norm demands become obvious. To become an 'Angel in the House', Laura has to be purified of all her energy, self-confidence and other unfeminine qualities, however few she had at the beginning. Laura is one of the first instances of Collins' most recurrent scapegoat figures: women.

In *No Name*, Collins takes up the figure of the villain as a scapegoat and reveals its true nature as a victim of society's shortcomings, while pushing further his examination of social attitudes and prejudices. As a scapegoat figure, Magdalen combines the cultural signs of Percival and Laura:

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<sup>42</sup> Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), p.492.

illegitimacy and femininity. Unlike Percival, however, Magdalen has committed no crime. The state of crisis is provoked by the death of her parents and aggravated by Michael Vanstone's decision to keep his nieces' inheritance. As Magdalen challenges that decision, she is castigated and persecuted, a victim of society's inability or unwillingness to deal with illegitimate children. The exclusion of the Vanstone sisters from good society also highlights anxieties linked to the nature of the Victorian family. Unmarried, the Vanstones were not a family in the legal sense of the word, yet they lived happily and respected by their neighbours. The existence of such a family suggests that Victorian family laws are arbitrary. Magdalen is further persecuted for not behaving as society demands and not conforming to its norms. Unlike the conventional Nora, she does not passively accept her fate, but sets out to set things right herself. Her attitude challenges conventional visions of women as passive and obedient. Her quest for her lost inheritance further serves to expose society's contradictions and double-discourse regarding women and marriage. When she sets out to marry Noel Vanstone to recover her inheritance, her mercenary views beget more resentment from society. Yet, as Magdalen puts it, 'Thousands of women marry for money... Why shouldn't I?'<sup>43</sup>

Magdalen's progress and society's reaction to her 'deviancy' allow Collins to explore the construction and propagation of social and sexual values, through the eyes of someone who contests them. The novel suggests that most values and codes are social constructs rather than laws of nature, and are therefore artificial. The narrative also questions conventional notions of right and wrong. Magdalen's ambiguous status brings about a lack of closure and clear positioning. Collins does not quite validate society's persecution of Magdalen by expelling her from the community, nor does he accept her differences and fully approve of her. She remains neither heroine nor villain, and is neither killed nor punished but suffers a mere illness that takes some of her rebellion away. She is then reinserted into society with her inheritance and a new husband. *No Name*, therefore, is reluctant to distinguish between sheep and goats, heroes and villains, and comes close to exposing the link between closure and sacrifice, and the whole scapegoat mechanism.

The reception of the novel led Collins to change his tactic in *Armadale*. Contemporary critics chose to ignore the injustice of their patriarchal society and the damage done to women. They did not view Magdalen as a

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<sup>43</sup> Wilkie Collins, *No Name* (London: Penguin Classics, 1994), p.400.

victim or a scapegoat but as a villain, and lamented the lack of clear punishment and expulsion. *Armadale* also deals with sexual and social codes. Unlike Magdalen, however, Lydia's initial role in the story is clearly that of villain. Nevertheless, Collins falls back on a sympathetic portrayal of the deviant woman as a victim of society's hypocrisy and prejudice. He refuses common misrepresentations of female criminals and shows instead that criminality springs from sexual and social oppression. This was enough for critics to denounce Collins' sympathy for a female criminal, or more exactly for portraying Lydia as a victim of society rather than mere evil. Lydia, however, is ultimately punished, and cast off from the narrative community, leaving only the upholders of conventional values, such as Neelie and Allan: the scapegoat mechanism is once more formally enacted.

In *The Moonstone*, Collins took even less risks by elaborating on the conventions of the detective novel, in which form and content are even more closely intertwined than in the chaotic Sensation novel.<sup>44</sup> The detective novel achieves perfect closure, insofar as all conflicting elements of the narrative (the possible solutions or the possible interpretation of a mystery) are ultimately expelled, apart from one, construed as the ultimate truth:

To the modern critic schooled, say, in Foucault, such a radical simplification of the data in the interests of apparent intelligibility is a form of mind control; as D. A. Miller puts it, 'in relation to an organisation so complex that it often tempts its subjects to misunderstand it as chaos, the detective story realises the possibility of an easily comprehensible version of order'. The hidden structural principle, then, which ostensibly serves as a suspense-inducing strategy may surreptitiously function as a strategy of containment.<sup>45</sup>

In terms of content, the cause of chaos is located and identified with one figure who generally is an embodiment of evil, and who is consequently sacrificed. At its most basic level, the ultimate meaning of the detective story resides in its conclusion, the disclosure of the truth. Detective fiction at its simplest, therefore, calls for no second reading. In *The Moonstone*, although the criminal figure is not evil, he is uninteresting and simple enough to be the repository of the community's trouble. The identification of Godfrey as the thief definitely clears Rachel and Franklin, and puts an end to the mystery of the theft. The stronger the impulse towards closure on the surface, however, the more misrecognitions and displacements there are at a

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<sup>44</sup> Although the detective novel was still in its early stage at the time, the French writer Emile Gaboriau had by 1866 already published *L'Affaire Lerouge*. Collins, a great admirer of Gaboriau, had certainly read these by the time he wrote *The Moonstone*.

<sup>45</sup> Heyns, *Expulsion in the Nineteenth-Century Novel*, p.19.

subtextual level. First, Collins suggests that the heroic couple is not totally innocent. Indeed, the whole community has some responsibility in the disappearance of the diamond. Attention is distracted, however, from the morally dubious heroic couple and the guilty community to the villain, Godfrey Ablewhite.<sup>46</sup>

Second, Godfrey's death hides the death of secondary scapegoats such as Rosanna Spearman and Ezra Jennings, who represent other undesirable elements in the community. There is some evidence that Rosanna and Ezra are used to expose cultural and ideological assumptions. Rosanna, a poor and deformed servant who is also a former thief, is in love with the *jeune premier* Franklin Blake. Her strange and secretive attitude raises people's suspicions and Rosanna is suspected of having something to do with the theft of the diamond. According to Betteredge's daughter, 'It's quite monstrous that she should forget herself and her station in that way.'<sup>47</sup> For Betteredge, the girl is 'mad'.<sup>48</sup> 'Hadn't you better say she's mad enough to be an ugly girl and only a servant?', replies Sergeant Cuff.<sup>49</sup> This dialogue points at the truth behind the persecution of Rosanna. She has broken the conventions, boundaries and hierarchies that secure social order in the Verinder estate and therefore represents a threat. As a woman and a servant, she breaks the rules according to which she should have no passionate sexual desires, let alone let them be known. Moreover, these desires are directed at her superior. However, Cuff himself is not free from prejudices either. Knowing Rosanna's guilty past, he declares that 'When [he] saw Rosanna, [he] altered [his] mind. [He] suspected her at once of being privy to the suppression of the Diamond.'<sup>50</sup> Once a thief, always a thief. Collins ultimately validates those assumptions, or at least recognises the threat against community values, for Rosanna is sacrificed to the resolution of the plot. Furthermore, the community is exonerated from guilt, insofar as she takes her own life. The same pattern can be observed in case of Ezra Jennings, who is also made a scapegoat by the community, on account of his strange appearance:

It was impossible to dispute Betteredge's assertion that the appearance of Ezra Jennings, speaking from the popular point of view, was against him. His gipsy complexion, his fleshless cheeks, his gaunt facial bones, his dreamy eyes, his extraordinary parti-coloured hair, the puzzling contradiction between his face and figure which made him

<sup>46</sup> See Chapter IV, Heroes and villains, for a more detailed discussion on characterisation.

<sup>47</sup> Wilkie Collins, *The Moonstone* (London: Penguin Classics, 1986), p.185.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p.151.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p.209.

look old and young both together - were all more or less calculated to produce an unfavourable impression of him on a stranger's mind.<sup>51</sup>

These physical and extreme victimary signs convey a prejudiced view of things. The dark and sickly man is associated with wickedness, as opposed to the blond and fit man, such as the Englishman Godfrey. Significantly, Ezra happens to be born in the colonies. This makes of him an outsider. It is enough to misrepresent him as a cause of threat. This threat is transposed into an accusation by the community:

I have mentioned an accusation which has rested on me for years. There are circumstances in connexion with it that tell against me. I cannot bring myself to acknowledge what the accusation is. And I am incapable, perfectly incapable, of proving my innocence.<sup>52</sup>

Collins, indeed, denounces this prejudiced view of Ezra, as it is his very differences that help to solve the mystery of the Moonstone. It is the sickly, feminine, and irrational man who finds out what happened through the use of opium and intuition. Ezra is expelled from the narrative community by means of a very timely death. Rosanna's death had at least roused the anger and desire for vengeance of her equally marginalised friend, Limping Lucy: 'the day is not far off when the poor will rise against the rich.'<sup>53</sup> However unsubstantiated, this message implicitly challenges closure. Upon the whole, *The Moonstone* reflects the scapegoat mechanism without being totally ruled by it. Collins does not fully detach himself from conventions and ideological assumptions. The contradictions and ambiguities of *The Moonstone*, however, are what make the novel particularly interesting.

In *The Moonstone*, the subversive resistance to closure and the denunciation of scapegoating are kept in the background. In *The Law and the Lady* they come to the foreground. Even if closure is finally enacted, its cost is clearly exposed. The novel is a simplified version of detective fiction that enables Collins to bring out the basic frame of the genre and the scapegoat mechanism in all its simplicity. The initial crisis is caused by the outcome of Eustace's murder trial, the 'non proven' verdict. Neither Eustace nor Valeria can be satisfied with the indeterminacy of the judgement; instead they look for definite meaning and closure. Valeria's prejudices and her partiality for her husband make her convinced of his innocence: all there is left to do is to identify the person at the origin of chaos, the real culprit. That person is Dexter, out of whom Valeria exhorts a confession, which eventually

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p.417.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p.428.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p.227.

leads to his premature descent into imbecility and death. Dexter dies having confessed his role in the death of Eustace's former wife. His confession satisfies Valeria and vindicates Eustace's innocence.

As more details about the past events come out, however, readers realise that Dexter is not guilty of murder, and that Eustace also has some responsibility in the death of his wife. Within the fictional world, Valeria does not quite share common opinion about Dexter. Even before he is revealed as the culprit, Dexter is cast off by the community on account of his strange behaviour and his infirmity. People believe him mad, and find him monstrous. Valeria first asserts her belief that Dexter is not mad. She points out that people resent and fear him because he acts out what people generally try to hide:

I must still venture to doubt whether this strange man is really mad ... It seems to me that he openly expresses - I admit in a very reckless and boisterous way - thoughts and feelings which most of us are ashamed of as weaknesses, and which we keep to ourselves accordingly.<sup>54</sup>

Dexter is made to be the embodiment of imagination without restraint, irrationality and madness. Such collective representations of Dexter as a madman highlight the fact that retention and concealment of intimate feelings represent appropriate behaviour according to the conventions of the community. Being unable to restrain oneself, on the other hand, is considered not only improper but also dangerous. Dexter's victimisation, however, underscores the potential for irrationality, conflict and violence that lurks in everyone. Valeria's mixture of compassion, repulsion and guilt towards the character clearly goes in the same direction:

I know that compassion for him was utterly inconsistent with the motive which had taken me to his house - utterly inconsistent with the doubt, still present to my mind whether Mr Playmore had really wronged him in believing that his was the guilt which had compassed the first Mrs Eustace's death. I felt this: I knew him to be cruel; I believed him to be false. And yet, I pitied him! Is there a common fund of wickedness in us all? Is the suppression or the development of that wickedness a mere question of training and temptation? And is there something in our deeper sympathies which mutely acknowledges this, when we feel for the wicked, when we crowd to a criminal trial; when we shake hands at parting ... with the vilest monster that ever swung on a gallows? It is not for me to decide.<sup>55</sup>

Valeria has come to realise that Dexter's victimisation involves displacement of her own feelings of guilt and her own potential for 'wickedness' onto a

<sup>54</sup> Wilkie Collins, *The Law and the Lady* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p.221.

<sup>55</sup> Collins, *The Law and the Lady*, pp.329-30.

surrogate character. In spite of her insight into the human mind, however, Valeria prefers ignorance and simplification of issues.

When the whole story comes out, Valeria experiences yet more doubts, which she similarly avoids confronting:

And so it ended! Not as I thought it would end; not perhaps as you thought it would end. What do we know of our own lives? What do we know of the fulfilment of our dearest wishes? God knows - and that is best.<sup>56</sup>

Mrs Macallan's diary exposes the complexity of the case, and throws a shadow on Eustace's past conduct towards his wife. He did not love her, and wanted her to die. Dexter loved her, and unwittingly provoked her death. Valeria, however, chooses to simplify the data, and concludes that the diary is a 'triumphant vindication of my husband's innocence'.<sup>57</sup> If this is true, then why is she adamant to prevent him from seeing the diary for his own peace of mind? The truth is that Dexter is made a villain so that Eustace can be cleared: Dexter is a scapegoat. Valeria chooses to ignore this fact to protect her husband from the knowledge of his responsibility in his former wife's death, and also because she will not face her own responsibility in Dexter's death.

*The Law and the Lady* enacts the scapegoat narrative, but in the process it clearly exposes the cost of closure and order: sacrifices, simplification and self-illusion. The novel denounces the desire to see the world in terms of polarisation and clear-cut notions, both characterising popular fiction and the detective novel. In this light, Valeria's flippant 'it's not for me to say' might be read as a self-reflexive comment on the inadequacies of the archetypal detective novel and the average Sensation novel to address complex issues except in an indirect way. It is also a pessimistic statement about how men are condemned to blindness and violence. The novel, which ends, as Valeria puts it, 'not perhaps as you thought it would end', both achieves and contests closure by playing with generic conventions.

In the light of the scapegoat mechanism, *The Law and the Lady* illustrates what Girard calls the collaboration between persecutors and persecuted.<sup>58</sup> On a symbolical level, this boils down to the interrelations between social/narrative order and what they exclude. Narrative closure, and within the fictional universe, social cohesion, are achieved with the vindication of Eustace's innocence, which is founded on and therefore

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p.413.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p.395.

<sup>58</sup> Girard, *Le Bouc émissaire*, p.97.

depends on Dexter's victimisation. The relationship between Dexter and Eustace throws light on other couples of opposites, such as Marian and Laura in *The Woman in White*, or Lydia and Neelie in *Armadale*. In these novels, the victory of the characters who are the repositories of the dominant values depends on the exclusion of those who implicitly or explicitly contest these values. This explains the element of sacrifice concerning Marian at the end of *The Woman in White*: a potentially subversive character, she fades into the background and is reduced to the life of a spinster, while the conventional Laura achieves public recognition. Similarly, the cost of Allan and Neelie's conventional happiness is Lydia's death. Endings take on a bitter taste as awareness that sacrifice and injustice are necessary components of what is achieved becomes apparent.

As a Victorian popular writer, Collins' work is run across by an impulse towards fairy-tale. Happy endings resolving all problems raised in the course of the novel, preferably on middle-class terms, are *de rigueur*. Fairy-tales, however, have a violent component, insofar as the harmony of their world relies on the expulsion of a monster. Collins' fiction reflects the sacrificial mechanism inherent in most popular work, for commercial and ideological reasons. On the other hand, he takes advantage of the ability to voice tensions and fears inherent in popular fiction, and examined with constancy the formation of social, moral and sexual codes. Furthermore, resistance to closure and awareness of the cost of closure can be traced back to his early work. Most of his novels offer a double discourse. They enact the scapegoat mechanism and fulfil people's desire for pattern and closure, but also highlight its necessary simplification of issues, its blindness and injustice. Collins' vision of society is quite pessimistic, insofar as order and cohesion seem to be possible only in terms of exclusion, symbolic and real. This self-awareness about the medium he uses, popular fiction, makes his novels border on high literature.

### **Conclusion**

The Roman-Feuilleton and the Sensation novel, and, by extension, most popular novels, are narratives centred on scapegoat events. They dramatise a state of disorder in a given community. The final sacrifice of a victim results in a new order born of relief from conflict and violence. In their representation of scapegoating, both genres feature a variety of displacements and distortions such as justification or hiding of the violence involved in the process. Both the Roman-Feuilleton and the Sensation novel feature disguised forms of the victim, such as the wrongly suspected hero and

the figure of the criminal as embodiment of evil. Heroes, on the other hand, are also self-righteous figures. Both, therefore, feature what Girard calls the 'polarisation persécutrice', a polarised perception of the world that enables the scapegoaters to view themselves as good men and to turn their scapegoat into a figure of evil, a necessary step towards a regeneration of their society.<sup>59</sup> As ritual representations of scapegoating, both the Roman-Feuilleton and the Sensation novel are not only concerned with social order but are also vehicles for the propagation of common values and the reappraisal of the status quo. They do so by voicing social tensions and conflicts before displacing these onto a scapegoat figure and expelling them through the ritual sacrifice of the latter.

The novels of Collins and Féval, however, suggest that both authors are aware of scapegoating as a tendency of the human mind and a means of social order. Both denounce the injustice and displacements of a process that leads to a social order based on exclusion and violence. Collins is more obviously aware of the force and implication of the scapegoat process. He shows that his villains are perceived as deviant because they openly question or implicitly challenge established norms and values. He uses such basic patterns to explore major areas of social tension in Victorian society, notably the construction and definition of femininity as well as the nature of the family. Most of his scapegoat figures are women or illegitimate sons or daughters. The final inclination of his novels, however, is to reaffirm conventional values by sacrificing these very characters and the dissident values that they represent, suggesting after all that there is nothing wrong with society as it is. The artificiality of some endings nonetheless suggests that Collins is aware of the structuring principle at work in his novel. The dual perspective allows his novels to be both entertaining and serious, and offer consolation and catharsis along with social insight and critique.

Féval, on the other hand, is less interested in the exploration of particular social disease. The French serialists, unlike their English counterparts, were less pressurised into producing realistic representations of society and delivering moral lessons. As a popular serialist, Féval benefited from the society of the Second Empire. As a *légitimiste*, however, he did not approve of a society that he perceived as fundamentally wrong, and did not seek to uphold the social status quo. The *Habits Noirs* series, although it was not openly supportive of the established order, nonetheless contained nothing so strong as to advocate social rebellion. Féval's criminal figures are

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p.50.

scapegoats insofar as they represent but one aspect of the corrupt nature of a society whose members all took part in the violence of the Revolution. They are also subversively attractive because they rebel against the rigid nature of society, and turn the corruption and materialism of their time to their own advantage. Whereas Collins seeks to explore common norms and values in order to reform and redefine them, however, Féval generally contents himself with showing the complete reversal of values at work in society. Most of his criminal figures remain figures of evil, whose death is justified and necessary to bring back order to the fictional universe. The novels, however, offer increased resistance to such simplifications. They highlight the potential for violence and social domination of the hero, who often seems to be a double of the villain. Furthermore, as the whole of society is shown to be corrupt and involved in the chaotic state of society, chaos prevails despite ritual sacrifices and closure is never totally enacted. While the individual fate of the heroes and the villains entertains and offers catharsis, social pessimism and the conviction that society is condemned to violence nonetheless characterise the novels.

### Conclusion

I have attempted in the preceding chapters to provide new insights into the works of two popular writers of the 1860s, Paul Féval and Wilkie Collins, and by extension into their respective literary contexts, the French Roman-Feuilleton and the English Sensation novel. By adopting a comparative approach I have sought not only to highlight similarities and differences between both writers and genres, but also to probe the nature of popular fiction as a genre, and its relationship with high literature. It is now appropriate to review the main findings of this thesis and illustrate the usefulness of its methodology.

There has been hitherto no full-length comparative study of the Roman-Feuilleton and the Sensation novel. Back in the 1860s, however, comparisons between the two genres were recurrent. Insofar as the French had had an earlier experience of serial publications in cheap magazines, most comparisons bore on the influence of French fiction on English popular novels. English critics tended to conflate French influence with contagion and corruption. From D. O. Maddyn's early warning against the 'exaggeration of the French school and "its accumulated horrors"', Collins' fiction was seen to be particularly tainted by French influence.<sup>1</sup>

I have shown that these early comparisons mainly highlighted the state of English literary criticism, as well as differences in the way the French and the English conceived of their novels. The mid-Victorians considered the novel as a realistic representation of everyday life and a vehicle for moral messages. By contrast, French writers of the period made a bolder use of realism, probing some aspects of life that Victorian writers preferred to leave unexplored. French serialists also tended to infuse their description of contemporary life with extravagant events. Consequently, although French novels were very popular on this side of the Channel, they were generally considered as both untrue to life and pernicious. Margaret Oliphant summed up the opinion of a nation when

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<sup>1</sup> D. O. Maddyn, unsigned review, *Athenaeum* (4 December 1852), pp.1322-3, reprinted in Norman Page, *Wilkie Collins: The Critical Heritage* (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), p. 47-48 (47).

she said that French novels, popular or mainstream, were 'not so safe for general reading as English'.<sup>2</sup>

While identifying large chronological sequences and patterns of connections, this thesis has not sought to study the specific influence of the Roman-Feuilleton on the Sensation novel. As I have shown, there is no doubt that popular French novels of the period influenced the development of English popular fiction. The number of translations of French novels into English boosted their popularity on this side of the Channel, and presented a model easily available to novelists aiming for a large readership. Cliff-hanging techniques, fast flowing narratives, violent stimulation of the senses and the imagination, and realistic depictions of vice can be ascribed to the influence of the French Roman-Feuilleton. Collins himself was quick to disparage many aspects of his culture, and tended to appreciate things French. He enjoyed reading French novels, and paid particular attention to the reception of his own novels in France. Like French writers, he believed that no subject was unfit for a novel.

I have argued, however, that the 1860s was a time of literary experiments, characterised by cross-fertilisation and a blurring of boundaries between popular and mainstream literature. If popular writers, including Alexandre Dumas, Eugène Sue and Paul Féval, indeed influenced the development of English popular fiction, so did writers such as Honoré de Balzac and Victor Hugo. This is particularly evident in the novels of Collins. The emphasis on the hidden secrets of respectable society reminds one of Sue and Féval; the logical investigation of a crime recalls the narratives of Emile Gaboriau. Collins' bold treatment of female sexuality and his belief in the relativity of values and norms, however, are reminiscent of mainstream writers such as Balzac and Flaubert. However, many characteristics of the Sensation novel have their roots in literary genres that are more specifically English. These include the Newgate novel, with its acute interest in crime, and the Gothic novel, with its imaginative power. The influence of Charles Dickens cannot be overlooked either. A detailed comparison between the Sensation novel and the Roman-Feuilleton, therefore, has helped establish the main differences between the two genres. The Roman-Feuilleton is essentially romantic and epic. It generally deals with the

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<sup>2</sup> Margaret Oliphant, 'Two Cities, Two Books', *Blackwood's Magazine*, 116 (July 1874), pp.72-91.

underworld and the aristocracy. Its central figure is an ambiguous male hero, who often provides a link between the two social extremes. By contrast, the Sensation novel is domestic and more realistic. Its main character tends to be a female adventurer. In that sense, Collins' novels are strongly Victorian, notably as regards their subject-matter and their emphasis on middle-class domesticity.

Besides, Féval and Collins both achieved originality. Neither had the disjointed style of Sue; neither sought to represent life as a mere series of startling contrasts. Collins was the more self-conscious stylist of the two. His desire to entertain went along with careful preparation and a seriousness of purpose unknown to most French serialists. Compared with other sensationalists, such as Reade, he had an exceptional skill for plot-construction. He also had a unique capacity to explore motifs and patterns that others used as mere narrative conveniences. In terms of social critique, he certainly was the most radical of all sensationalists, and the least prone to moral preaching. Féval, by contrast, was a less ambitious writer. Yet he was well aware of being the heir to a tradition that was running out of steam. His playful attitude towards his fiction and the ironic distance he took from the conventions of the genre gave his novels the literary dimension lacking in most French Romans-Feuilletons. His plots, extravagant yet coherent, departed from the episodic structures of the early Romans-Feuilletons. In terms of ideology, social pessimism prevailed over social manicheism and idealist illusions.

These two writers had a unique ability to handle the specific demands of their particular traditions. As a sensationalist drawn to the detective genre, Collins had an exceptional talent for balancing the intellectual pleasure of detection and the stimulation of the senses by means of superstitious thrills and emotional shocks. His development of sub-plot never distracts readers from the main story-line. It builds up suspense rather than destroys it. Féval, as a *feuilletoniste* and a precursor of the *roman noir*, fulfilled the needs of his readers for heroic, mysterious figures, and their growing interest in the *génie du crime* figure. As with the majority of Roman-Feuilleton, mysteries prevail over the investigation of a single crime. Féval, however, handles the multiplication of plots and characters with exceptional liveliness. Secondary characters symptomatic of the modern thriller, such as the hitman, the *femme fatale* or the petty thief, are particularly striking. Finally, both sets of texts bring into play a particular vision of the world and reflect the personal

concerns of their creators. Collins' obsession with diseased states of body and mind informs his novels, as well as his fascination with strong women. Féval's fascination with secret societies and organised crime sustains most of his novels. While Collins' novels are defined by a desire to reform society, the dominant aspect of Féval's narratives originates in his mocking imagination.

The rejection of the Sensation novel as 'a plant of foreign growth', however, did not simply reflect the actual influence of the French novel on English popular fiction or the prejudices of English criticism.<sup>3</sup> I have shown that the genre questioned the conventions of novel writing at a time when the novel, once dismissed as entertainment for the idle and the frivolous, had just become acceptable. The Sensation novel was not 'symptomatic of a mere crisis in literary realism', as Patrick Brantlinger argued.<sup>4</sup> It was both an attempt to infuse the Victorian novel with fantasy, excitement and life, and an effort to convey the dark intricacies of modern life. Collins was particularly criticised because he was the most daring of the Sensationalists. His novels simultaneously used and subverted domestic realism by exposing its artificiality and limitations. They reached under the even surface of ordinary life to explore, for instance, the frustration and hidden desires of women. Collins' narratives, therefore, represented an ideological threat to the middle-class.

The outcry caused by the genre nonetheless subsided quite rapidly. In the 1870s, the Sensation novels had disappeared from the literary scene. In France, the Roman-Feuilleton had become decidedly bourgeois. It no longer exposed human vice and social injustice, and no longer shocked.

In the first half of the twentieth-century, both genres attracted sporadic interest. There was still no comprehensive or comparative study because, as was discussed in the introduction, popular fiction had from an early stage been considered as an inferior kind of literature. It was still associated with bad style and a lack of artistic, political and social ideals. Consequently, close textual analysis and other tools of traditional scholarly criticism seemed irrelevant. An alternative approach was the study of genre fiction, concerned with questions of form, structure and sub-generic branching. Early studies of detective fiction

<sup>3</sup> Unsigned review, *Reader*, I (3 January 1863), pp.14-25; reprinted in Page, *Wilkie Collins*, pp.134-36 (134).

<sup>4</sup> Patrick Brantlinger, 'What is "Sensational" about the "Sensation Novel"?', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 37 (1982), pp.1-28, reprinted in *Wilkie Collins*, edited by Lyn Pykett (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), pp.30-54.

generally contrasted the English detective novel, which is thought to have started with Collins, with French instances of the genre. I have shown that the comparison generally benefited the former. In Howard Haycraft's study, the comparison between English and French popular fiction served to highlight the 'marked inferiority of the Continental detective story - even that of France -'.<sup>5</sup>

This assumption is still widespread, as Heta Pyrhonen pointed out recently:

Even though almost all Western countries have, by now, their own detective literature, its Anglo-American versions have always been and continue to be the most significant.<sup>6</sup>

Such a view relies on the assumption that the rational aspect of detection is the integral motif of detective fiction. Consequently, everything which has to do with action and emotions should be kept in check by the genre. This was clearly not the case with French serialists, who valued adventure and drama more than logic and reason. Although Gaboriau's *L'Affaire Lerouge* predates Collins' *The Moonstone* by two years, and is the first novel to feature a professional detective, the latter novel is generally considered as the first detective novel proper. Haycraft, for instance, lamented the fact that Gaboriau's novels upset the balance between detection and drama, resulting in 'cheap sensationalism.'<sup>7</sup> As for Féval, both Haycraft and Julian Symons dismiss him as a writer of 'criminal romance', a term that denotes a fantasy world of fantastic events.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, we have seen that the comparison between the two traditions generally served to contrast the invigorating moral value of the English detective novel and the immorality of the French novels. Symons underscored the link between English detective fiction and the idea of legal justice, and pointed out that 'the detective story, as developed through Collins ... was certainly on the side of law and order.'<sup>9</sup> French writers, on the other hand, preferred ambiguous adventurers to detective figures. As Symons argued, 'Féval did not think of making a policeman his hero.'<sup>10</sup> More often than not,

<sup>5</sup> Howard Haycraft, *Murder for Pleasure: The Life and Time of the Detective Story* (London: Peter Davies, 1942), p.103.

<sup>6</sup>Heta Pyrhonen, *Murder From an Academic Angle: An Introduction to the Study of the Detective Narrative* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1994). In this quote, 'detective literature' is used as a generic term for the crime novel and not as a synonym of the classic British whodunit.

<sup>7</sup> Haycraft, *Murder for Pleasure*, p.36

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p.31; Julian Symons, *Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel. A History* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), p.54.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p.17.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p.54.

policemen and professional detectives are mocked, and presented as incompetent or corrupt. The notion of regular, legal justice is foreign to the Roman-Feuilleton.

I have attempted in the preceding chapters to redress these common assumptions about detective fiction and the works of Féval and Collins. I have shown that detective fiction's interest in moral issues is superficial. It tends to reduce the mysteries of life and the human implications of death to the rational investigation of a single crime. It is a mere intellectual game. Furthermore, its ultimate impulse is to assert the understandable nature and the fundamental rightness of the world. Crime is likely to be the product of an individual weakness. The genre remains sustained by moral manicheism.

I have also argued that the detective novel proper, and what Haycraft and Symons called 'criminal romance', are not two different types of novel but represent two poles of the crime novel. While detective fiction tries to keep in check what are the actual springs of the genre, namely violence, crime, and other dark facets of human life, criminal romance puts them in the foreground. Féval's novels, therefore, should not be considered as immature forms of detective novels, but as early prototypes of a sub-genre that is historically and ideologically closer to us: the thriller. The thriller emphasises the opacity and the chaotic nature of the world. It focuses on the dealings of the criminal and the suffering of the victims. The hero does not represent an equitable law. A marginal figure, he has to resist the criminal's attempt to either kill or corrupt him. The thriller is likely to end with their confrontation. While the final moment often highlights the punishment of the culprit, the genre also underscores the lack of solution to the endemic corruption of society as a whole.

However, I have also demonstrated that Collins was well aware of the limitations of detective fiction. I have shown how his narratives both evoke and subvert the conventions of the genre. They explored the limits of human logic by upsetting the conventional balance between rationality and irrationality. The use of red herrings also allows Collins to endow the simple moral configuration of the detective novel with ambiguity. He plays with readers' moral judgements and undermines the conventional equation between moral worth and character-type. On the other hand, Féval does not take advantage of all the possibilities of the thriller. His description of society as a moral wasteland is contradicted by the existence of strong emblematic figures. His tendency to

magnify criminal figures obscures the social nature of crime. As a result, the blurred boundaries between goodness and evil symptomatic of the thriller tend to be reduced to a matter of appearance versus reality.

Féval's complexity, therefore, remains within the boundaries of the popular novel. Archetypal figures and patterns prevail over the realistic description of a chaotic world. His exploration and denunciation of society's workings are conventional and the depiction of characters' moral dilemmas lacks depth. *Les Habits Noirs* is an allegory of social ills and a bitter-sweet meditation on the evolution of nineteenth-century French society. On the other hand, Collins uses the most rigid and the most conservative form of the crime novel. He nonetheless explores and plays with the rules of the genre and eventually undermines its basis. In spite of their final inclination towards transparency and order, Collins' novels probe the foundations of society and explore Victorian psychology. In his attempt to explore and question rather than sketch and suggest, Collins is working against the boundaries of popular fiction.

These observations can be applied to Féval's and Collins' respective traditions. Due to Evangelical and Utilitarian influences, the Sensation novel was a more subdued genre than the Roman-Feuilleton. It lacked the extravagant fantasy and rough edge of its French counterpart. Both its aesthetics and content were less extreme. In spite of their emphasis on action and dream, the Sensation novels relied on realistic conventions to build their fictional universe and characters. This realistic undertone implied a certain effort to explain and understand the complexities of life. On the other hand, they generally restricted themselves to domestic feuds, and were reluctant to address acute social problems such as prostitution. When they did, they ultimately sought to reassure readers. They appealed to sentiment rather than reform, and ultimately defended the social status-quo. Sensation novels shared many common points with the genre that they set out to criticise, the domestic novels of the 1850s. The gap between popular fiction and serious literature in England, therefore, was not as clear-cut as it was in France in the middle of the nineteenth century. In France, mainstream literature was realistic. Even if writers like Balzac or Stendhal made use of Romanticism and symbolism, they still aimed to explore all aspects of life in an objective and critical way. The Roman-Feuilleton, on the other hand, approached social problems from a romantic angle. It offered a mythic solution

to real-life problems with the figure of the *justicier*. Its primary goal, however, was to entertain by recounting the exciting adventures of a larger-than-life figure. It generally ignored traditional psychological analysis, and took a greater interest in the psychology of exceptional states.

Far from being an obstacle to this study, the discrepancy between the two genres and the two writers has provided a unique opportunity to explore the boundaries between popular fiction and mainstream literature. By contrasting the two authors, I have attempted to highlight the potentialities and limitations of popular narratives and their creators. I have sought to differentiate between what is generated by the nature and structure of popular fiction, and what is produced by individual authors. In so doing, I hope to have redressed some of the common assumptions about popular fiction and these two writers in particular. In terms of ideology, the consensus about popular fiction is that, unlike high literature, it conventionally presents and validates prevalent ideologies, serving a conservative purpose. At worst, it is thought to be totally escapist. I have shown that popular narratives are not deprived of social or political meaning by nature. In fact, they are likely to produce ambivalence. In crime fiction, the exploration of a crime and its repercussions on a given society provides an opportunity to evoke a state of social chaos. Insofar as crime is a transgression of social and moral laws, room can be given for an exploration and critique of the structures, rules and values of a particular society. On the other hand, the final impulse of the crime novel is to reassure readers that common values are right, invalidating or at least qualifying its social critique. The popular crime novel is built on two contrary discourses.

Making use of René Girard's theory of the scapegoat, I have argued that the way these opposite trends articulate is akin to a scapegoating process. At its simplest, popular narratives such as fairy tales end on the sacrifice of a monstrous figure. In more elaborate narratives, the scapegoat is a character rejected or condemned by a fictional community. Popular novelists can encourage readers to admire, sympathise with, or even accept the scapegoat and the values that he or she represents. The scapegoat, however, is invariably sacrificed to the resolution of the plot, and more normative views of society reinstalled. Borrowing from Mikhaïl Bakhtin's analysis of the popular tradition, I have shown how these nineteenth-century texts relate to a more ancient notion of the popular, a notion normally associated with folklore. They function

in a way similar to popular manifestations such as carnival. Fuelled with subversive energy and images, they nonetheless go towards the preservation of the established order. They provide both an expression of social discontent and entertainment. This dialogic aspect of the texts is evident in the way they borrow from and rework various genres and registers. The use of gothic or fantastic conventions serves to stimulate readers' senses and imagination, heightening their pleasure. At the same time, they highlight strange and frightening aspects of contemporary society.

The fictions of both Collins and Féval display similar varied facets. They are structured by the same scapegoating mechanism, and feature similar kinds of contrary impulses. In that sense, Collins did not make popular fiction yield unknown possibilities. He is not simply the radical that U. C. Knoepfelmacher or Nicholas Rance take him to be, or merely conservative as D. A. Miller has argued, but both at the same time.<sup>11</sup> His ambivalence comes from the genre that he worked in, whose political and social basis he was able to exploit. As a talented writer, Collins also made use of his insight into various issues, from the latest development in psychology to the cultural and political problems raised by the growing independence of women. Similarly, that the ends of his novels often contradict their development should be ascribed not only to a specific rule of popular fiction, but also to Collins' own limitations. The double-discourse about women, for instance, reflects personal, unresolved tensions regarding powerful female figures, and his reluctance to commit himself to involvement with a conventional, self-righteous middle-class elite.

Féval was equally aware of the nature and impact of the popular novel. Too much emphasis has been put on the conservative aspect of his narratives. While lacking Collins' complex analysis and sometimes radical critique, Féval's novels also have their subversive moments. Furthermore, the reassuring impulse towards closure and transparency that is so strong in Collins' narratives subsided as the *Habits Noirs* series developed. There is very little sense that the world of the *Habits Noirs* is fundamentally right and sustained by a benevolent

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<sup>11</sup> U. C. Knoepfelmacher, 'The Counterworld of Victorian Fiction and *The Woman in White*', in *The World of Victorian Fiction*, edited by J. H. Buckley (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1975), pp.33-57; Nicholas Rance, *Wilkie Collins and Other Sensation Novelists: Walking the Moral Hospital* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991); D. A. Miller, 'From roman policier to roman-police: Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone*', reprinted in *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1988), pp.351-69.

providence. Scepticism creeps in, and there is a suggestion that crime, unlike virtue, does pay. These characteristics come from the commercial pressure put on French serialists and from Féval's artistic ambitions. His reluctance to preach and his royalist tendencies account for the lack of substance of his social comment. While his narratives lament the lack of a legitimate social elite, the only solution seems to reside in individuals: they should be more worthy of their rank, and more aware of their duties. As in Collins' narratives, there is a strong tendency to reduce social and political issues to individual moral conflicts. This is symptomatic of the popular novel. Furthermore, the subversive or disquieting elements in Féval's narratives are kept in check by the sometimes absurd fantasy of his novels. However, pessimism and scepticism lead to resistance to closure, and endings rarely bring back absolute order. In that sense, Féval's novels certainly do not belong to what Tortel called *le roman populaire bourgeois*.<sup>12</sup>

The history of the novels in question and their relationship with literary criticism raise further questions about the nature of popular fiction and the validity of this study. On the one hand, their extreme but short-lived popularity suggests that the appeal of a popular work, unlike that of high literature, resides in its special links with a particular culture at a particular time. This thesis has argued that there is much to gain by replacing popular works in their specific cultural, political and historical contexts. For modern readers, for instance, the sexual conventions described in Collins' novels and the final submission of most of his female heroines to the patriarchal system are now obsolete. In the 1860s, however, they reflected the ideals of female purity and submissiveness. Collins' treatment of the female question also exemplified anxieties regarding the changing role of women, which grew after the Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857. Similarly, the lack of social rules and the permanent sense of threat to the individual symptomatic of Féval's fictional world might be dismissed by modern readers as melodramatic or paranoiac. However, for a generation that had experienced recurrent changes of political regimes as well as a spectacular series of miscarriages of justice, such instability struck a sensitive chord.

On the other hand, the novels of both Collins and Féval have enjoyed regular re-publications, as well as popular film and TV adaptations. They clearly

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<sup>12</sup> Jean Tortel, 'Esquisse d'un univers tragique, ou le drame de la toute puissance', *Cahiers du Sud*, XXXIV, 310 (Deuxième semestre 1951), pp.355-79.

have a capacity to attract and entertain, a power that transcends temporal and cultural boundaries. This attraction has much to do with a timeless need for higher values. Popular narratives offer a fantasy of justice revolving around the figure of the hero. They also satisfy a timeless fascination with the forces of evil. In that sense, the popular novelist, as Henri Pollès puts it, is 'le maître à penser, le philosophe du peuple. Il doit répondre à ses interrogations essentielles.'<sup>13</sup> These interrogations concern the ability of virtue and love to survive ordeals, or the existence and strength of providence in the face of evil. Popular fiction has a unique capacity to fulfil man's opposite needs, such as rebellion and justice, risk and security, or order and chaos, without creating confusion. The genre provides a fuller, more exciting world, but also one that is more simple than reality.

The best popular works, therefore, feature the characteristics of the particular and those of the general. They combine universal, archetypal patterns with temporally and culturally-bound materials. The comparison between Collins and Féval has helped to differentiate between the common archetypal material and what is specific to their particular socio-cultural context. Characters such as Lydia Gwilt or Lecoq, for instance, are both striking representations of evil as a principle. The narratives never quite manage to explain and defuse their actions. They illustrate the meaningless and arbitrary forces that destroy good individuals, and the never-ending presence of evil. On the other hand, they are convincing illustrations of a cultural idea of evil. Lydia is a *femme fatale*, she represents the danger of female emancipation and female sexuality. Lecoq exemplifies the threat of impostors and the lack of a responsible elite. He also embodies the drive towards materialism and Mammonism that reached a peak during the Second Empire. In that sense, while the ideological interpretation of popular narratives is perfectly appropriate, the anthropological approach suggested by Jean-Claude Vareille is equally valid.<sup>14</sup> These popular narratives represent a utopian or regressive space where contrary impulses coexist without conflict, and opposite desires are simultaneously fulfilled. Finally, the predominance of archetypal patterns over cultural variants characterises popular narratives at their most simple.

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<sup>13</sup> Henri Pollès, 'Paul Féval, romancier breton et romancier populaire', in *Paul Féval, 1816-1887* (Rennes: Bibliothèque municipale de Rennes, 1987), pp.35-40 (38).

<sup>14</sup> Jean-Claude Vareille, *Le Roman populaire français (1789-1914). Idéologies et pratiques. Le trompette de la Bérésina* (Limoges: PULIM/Nuit Blanche Editeur, 1994).

Unsurprisingly, the cultural material is richer and more elaborate in the fiction of Collins than in that of Féval.

Furthermore, this thesis has shown how popular narratives, especially those concerned with crime and mystery, have something to say about the human mind and universal social mechanisms. Their structuring principle, akin to a scapegoating mechanism, and their emphasis on closure reflect the tendency of the mind to seek clear-cut meanings and patterns. I suggested an analogy between the functioning of these narratives and the human tendency to think in terms of contrast and establish dualistic classification. Built on the generic principles of doubling and character-splitting, they work by simplification and displacement. They ultimately rely on the projection of guilt, hidden unpleasant tendencies and other human failings onto a surrogate figure. Leading on from this, popular crime novels also offer some insight into the way societies are formed and maintained through scapegoating, construed as a system of differences and exclusion. Insofar as they represent and reproduce a scapegoating pattern, they ultimately function as vehicles for the propagation of common values. They are akin to rites of social control.

I have shown, however, that they are not necessarily unaware of their own structure and its implications. There is enough evidence in the narratives to say that both Féval and Collins were aware of the scapegoating mechanism as an unwritten rule of society and a psychological mechanism. Their fiction evolves from an unconscious mirroring of the scapegoat mechanism to an awareness of its contradictions and inadequacies. Féval's narratives highlight the violence of the process and the precarity of its outcome. They mainly do so by means of symbolic images and scenes. Collins' narratives underline the injustice and the arbitrariness of the mechanism. In *The Law and the Lady*, the link between closure and sacrifice comes close to being exposed and denounced. The punitive movement of the narrative, however, is stronger than ever. Popular fiction can express and explore tensions about social patterns and psychological tendencies. It can neither explore human failings deeply, nor directly condemn them. It cannot advocate radical changes in the structure of society either.

Finally, the popularity of both writers cannot be explained without reference to the way they both mastered the particular artistry of the popular novel. The investigation of both sets of texts has exposed a complex narrative organisation and a number of imaginative variants that complicate the idea of

simple, rigid structures normally associated with popular fiction. Moreover, both writers have been shown not only to be extremely aware of the creative process, but also to address readers as if they were highly literate, resulting in an extraordinary degree of self-reflexivity. That they draw attention to their own narrative conventions is an unconscious kind of self-reflexivity. It can be ascribed to the way popular narratives and particularly detective fiction combine a series of well-known rules and sequences. By contrast, a conscious form of self-reflexivity also emerges from these texts. As regards Féval, self-reflexivity ranges from simple guiding comments addressed to the reader, to playful metalinguistic comments about the content, form, and function of the genre. The simple, emotionally charged style typical of the popular novel coexists with an ironic discourse. As there is no reason to believe that readers are naive and ignorant of the rules, this can be interpreted as an intellectual game between Féval and his readers. While heightening their common pleasure, Féval also ironically distances himself from a minor genre, by, for instance, making fun of his fictional world.

Collins' fiction makes more demands on readers, insofar as it not only reflects on popular motifs such as Fate and Providence, but also explores them. The use of multiple narrators, for instance, underscores the artificiality of narrative organisation and interpretation, and ultimately raises questions about the limits of knowledge. The greater complexity of Collins' narratives is also evident in the way he deals with his debts to the theatre. Both writers comment profusely on the theatricality of their novels and characters. In both cases, this leads to a reflection on the theatricality of society. Féval conventionally links acting skills with vanity, manipulation and lies to denounce illicit desires for riches and power. Collins, by contrast, suggests that acting is implicit in all forms of social life, and explores the artificiality of social roles, notably those assigned to women.

Popular fiction, therefore, should be considered as a particular tradition with its own specific artistic standards. Its appeal resides in the way it serves a variety of psychological, cultural and ideological functions. Although I have emphasised the way popular narratives reflect the human tendency to scapegoat as a thought process and a social mechanism, such claims remain unsubstantiated due to the lack of concrete data regarding readers' receptions of

the novels.<sup>15</sup> What is clear from the in-text evidence, however, is that popular narratives are not necessarily blind to what they generate. On the contrary, they can bring latent tendencies and their implications in the open. As far as their ideological content is concerned, if they ultimately uphold normative views, in the process they provide alternative values, resulting in a sort of ideological compromise. Finally, if they do have a tendency to simplify issues, notably to reduce social and political problems to moral and personal conflicts, there is no reason to believe that readers cannot extrapolate from the private sphere to the public.

This study has sought to focus both on the investigation of the nature of the popular novel and the exploration of Paul Féval and Wilkie Collins from a comparative angle. Further perspectives for research include a more detailed study of the French influence on Wilkie Collins, notably that of Balzac and Emile Gaboriau, and a closer look at the theatrical careers of both Féval and Collins. Furthermore, while Collins' novels published after *The Law and the Lady* (1875) are being re-edited, Féval's name remains associated with two novels, *Le Bossu* and *Les Mystères de Londres*. His abundant output as a novelist deserves to be re-discovered and critically re-assessed.

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<sup>15</sup> Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), is the first study of popular fiction which is based on readers' own use of the novels rather than scholarly interpretation. This method, of course, cannot be applied to nineteenth-century texts.

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