

FRENCH NOVELS *and the* VICTORIANS



JULIETTE ATKINSON

FRENCH NOVELS
and the
VICTORIANS

by
Juliette Atkinson

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Pour Frédéric

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Note on translations

All translations are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

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Introduction

In March 1844, Elizabeth Barrett wrote to her friend Mary Russell Mitford:

I meant to send you *Zizine* & I have sent instead *Moustache*, as representative of Paul de Kock. And now it has come into my mind, that there is a good deal of offensive matter in this *Moustache*, & that after you have read it, you will do well to throw it into the fire.¹

In Charlotte Yonge's novel *The Young Step-Mother* (serialized in 1857), Albinia Kendal tends to her husband's three difficult children. She is appalled to see her stepson Gilbert smuggle beneath his pillow a translation of *Les Trois Mousquetaires* (1844), 'one of the worst and most fascinating of Dumas' romances'. Gilbert, pleading to hear what happens to d'Artagnan before the book is snatched away, asks Albinia if she knows what it is about. She answers: 'Yes, I do. My brother got it by some mistake among some French books. He read some of the droll unobjectionable parts to my sister and me, but the rest was so bad, that he threw it into the fire.'² The same year, the *Saturday Review* shared its misgivings:

When the teaching contained in the light literature of France, during the last thirty or forty years, is looked at by itself—apart, that is, from the 'thrilling interest' of the plot—we feel amazed at the forbearance we displayed in not throwing the novels of a Sand or a Sue into the fire.³

A final incident. In 1860, twenty-three-year-old Algernon Charles Swinburne went to stay with the Trevelyans at Wallington Hall. One day, his biographer relates,

Sir Walter Trevelyan came into the drawing-room and found a French novel lying on the table. He asked how it got there, and was told that Algernon had

¹ Elizabeth Barrett to Mary Russell Mitford, [13] March 1844, in *The Brownings' Correspondence: An Online Edition*, Wedgestone Press (hereafter BCO). See Bibliography: Online resources.

² [Charlotte Yonge], 'The Young Step-Mother. Chapter VII', in *Monthly Packet of Evening Readings for Younger Members of the English Church*, 13.73 (January 1857), 21–36, at 33–5.

³ [Christopher Knight Watson], 'French Literature', *Saturday Review*, 4.92 (1 August 1857), 107–9, at 108. *Saturday Review* attributions of authorship, unless otherwise stated, are from Merle Mowbray Bevington's *The Saturday Review 1838–68: Representative Educated Opinion in Victorian England* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1941).

brought it as a gift. It was nothing worse, I believe, than a volume of the *Comédie Humaine*, but he was a rash man who in those days recommended a French book to an English lady. Even if she made no objection, her male relations were sure to take umbrage. Sir Walter Trevelyan threw the book on the fire with a very rough remark, and Swinburne marched with great dignity out of the house.⁴

Such stories might lead one to wonder whether any French novels escaped conflagration in Victorian England, but each one involves more than the mere censure of improper literature. Barrett—who memorably described French novels as ‘immortal improprieties’—jokingly presents book-burning as a theatrical act of cleansing that does not impede the enjoyment of cheeky novels.⁵ Paul de Kock’s indelicacies are sufficiently substantial for her to worry about shocking Mitford, but negligible enough to have slipped her mind; she has read the ‘offensive matter’ herself, and expects her friend to. The incineration of *Les Trois Mousquetaires* is equally problematic. Beyond the feeble excuse that Dumas’s novel had slipped into a batch of books by ‘mistake’ (and what are these unnamed French books?), Albinia’s brother would have had to read a good deal of the novel in order to identify the ‘unobjectionable parts’. The auto-da-fé again smacks of performance, a cautionary tale being acted out for two impressionable sisters. Like Yonge, the *Saturday Review* raises the possibility of separating the excitement of French plots from their moral dangers, and the ‘thrilling’ nature of the novels somewhat lessens the hardship involved in the reader’s ‘forbearance’. The critic implies that the novels the public (including himself) had been placidly consuming for almost half a century had lulled them into forgetting that they were dangerous. The wake-up call did not come from amongst their ranks but, as he goes on to explain, from the French critic Eugène Poitou, who in vividly painting the horrors of French novels had brought to the Victorian public’s attention the perils they had narrowly escaped. The critic compares the resulting discomfort to that of ‘a man who discovers that he has been feeding for years at his favourite restaurant, not on ordinary healthy viands, but on cats, rats, and toads, ugly and venomous’. What was more upsetting: to discover that one had been eating rat, or that one had enjoyed it? As for the fate meeting Swinburne’s gift of a Balzac novel (an anecdote that has been repeated in different forms), the husband’s outburst appears to have as much to do with control over his wife’s reading habits and a reaction to the connotations surrounding French

⁴ Edmund Gosse, *The Life of Algernon Charles Swinburne* (London: Macmillan, 1917), 71–2.

⁵ Elizabeth Barrett Browning to John Kenyon, 1 May [1848], BCO.

novels in general than with the book itself. It seems highly unlikely that this would have been the first encounter that Lady Paulina Trevelyan, friend of the Pre-Raphaelites and Brownings, would have had with French fiction. Gosse's account is, furthermore, laced with condescension regarding the moral preoccupations of his forebears: to him, Balzac is of course harmless and the husband's overreaction a specimen of antiquated Victorianism.

These responses—denouncing French novels for the benefit of others while consuming them oneself, engaging in theatrical gestures of vilification that already smacked of cliché, making distinctions between literary and moral values, and using contemporary attacks on French novels as a means of displaying one's greater sophistication—are all central to the place of French fiction in Victorian England. The *London Review* stated in 1862 that, 'By a French novel, we understand something more than a novel written in French'.⁶ It is the cultural impact and significance of the 'French novel' that this book sets out to explore.

A considerable uncertainty continues to hang around the status of French novels in Victorian England. There is, on the one hand, a substantial body of criticism arguing that the Victorians, too insular, ignored French novels entirely or that, too prudish, they relentlessly condemned them. In 2010, Gervais claimed that 'an awareness of continental fiction was uncommon amongst mid nineteenth-century English novelists. Most of them ploughed their own furrow, indifferent to what was going on abroad.' Those who cast a cautious eye across the Channel were unimpressed: for Eliot, Balzac was 'hateful', and Brontë 'found Balzac shocking'.⁷ Franco Moretti had already reached similar conclusions about the deplorable insularity of the Victorians in his *Atlas of the European Novel 1800–1900* (1998). Moretti's sampling of circulating library catalogues and translations led him to conclude that England became 'an island, repudiating its eighteenth-century familiarity with French books for Victorian autarky'. Alarming, he found 'a hostility to foreign forms, here, that recalls the xenophobia behind the French villains and the 'invasion literature' of fictional geography'. This in turn meant that 'many great themes and techniques of the age', such as adultery, were 'almost denied right of entry into Britain'.⁸ Sassoon, struck by Moretti's findings, echoed

⁶ 'Balzac', *London Review*, 5.115 (13 September 1862), 229–30, at 229.

⁷ David Gervais, 'From Balzac to Proust: English Novelists and Foreign Novelists', in Patrick Parrinder and Andrzej Gasiorek (eds), *The Oxford History of the Novel in English*, Vol. IV: *The Reinvention of the British and Irish Novel 1880–1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 72–86, at 72–3.

⁸ Franco Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel 1800–1900* (London: Verso, 1998), 156–8.

in 2006 that the 'Victorians remained provincial—the privilege of those who live in imperial countries'.⁹ An earlier study by Hooker, devoted to the *Fortunes of Victor Hugo in England* (1938), launches with the assertion that 'the English consistently and emphatically disapproved of Hugo and of all the "French" traits which he supposedly embodied. We have, then, an opportunity to study the psychology of English Francophobia, by tracing the reputation of a writer who was considered to have a particularly Gallic flavour'. Hugo was not the most 'repugnant': others such as Balzac were so bad that they 'could not be read in England; they were beyond the pale'.¹⁰ In fact, it would have been a highly unusual Victorian writer who was oblivious to French fictional trends, and writers such as Balzac not only could be read, but were.

A handful of book-length studies on the place of French literature in Victorian culture, many of them published in the 1960s, have argued that interest in contemporary French works began with Matthew Arnold (with Thackeray as a deeply conflicted predecessor), and really took off in the 1870s. The dates framing Starkie's study *The Influence of France on English Literature, 1851–1939* (1960) are based on the premise that 'the best-informed interest of English readers in French literature, between 1830 and 1850, lay in the realm of philosophical thought, in works such as those by Cousin, Michelet, and Comte'.¹¹ Marandon adds that 'jusqu'en 1850, l'intérêt pour le roman français est à son point le plus bas'.¹² Campos, in *The View of France* (1965), reminds readers of the (undoubtedly tremendous) influence of German culture for much of the nineteenth century, and suggests that it was mainly in the *fin de siècle* that 'the main currents of English literature changed their course in a diffuse quest for a new morality, and flowed for a time through France'.¹³

Other critics, on the other hand, have followed up Roberts's important hint of 1922 that 'the great names of Alexandre Dumas, Alfred de Vigny, Victor Hugo, Balzac, and to mention only two others, George Sand and

⁹ Donald Sassoon, *The Culture of the Europeans: From 1800 to the Present* (London: HarperCollins, 2006), 298.

¹⁰ Kenneth Ward Hooker, *The Fortunes of Victor Hugo in England* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1938), vii–viii.

¹¹ Enid Starkie, *From Gautier to Eliot: The Influence of France on English Literature, 1851–1939* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1960), 20.

¹² 'Until 1850, interest in the French novel was at its lowest ebb'; Sylvaine Marandon, *L'Image de la France dans l'Angleterre Victorienne 1848–1900* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1967), 640.

¹³ Christophe Campos, *The View of France: From Arnold to Bloomsbury* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), 9. See also Ceri Crossley and Ian Small (eds), *Studies in Anglo-French Cultural Relations: Imagining France* (London: Macmillan, 1988), especially John Conlon, 'The Reception of French Literature in England, 1885–1914', 34–46.

Eugène Sue, belong almost as much to English literature as to French'.¹⁴ Terry Hale recently concurred that 'every level of British cultural life in the nineteenth century was affected in some degree by French literature and theatre'.¹⁵ As Rignall summarizes, French fiction was met with a 'combination of recoil and admiration': the 'impropriety of French fiction was a critical commonplace', but 'of course there were readers who were far from offended, and there was a persistent counter-current of critical opinion which defended French fiction for its truthfulness and honesty in comparison with its English counterpart'.¹⁶ Cohen, responding in part to Moretti, similarly stresses that 'despite such chauvinism, British critics and readers at the same time mastered foreign languages and savoured the unwholesome literature they decried [...] It was the most nationalistic of eras; and yet, it was the era when international influences were formative: what we may call the poetic development of the British novel between 1820 and 1880 hinges on this paradox'.¹⁷

The existence of these two competing discourses can partly be accounted for by the eagerness of late-Victorian and Edwardian critics to assert their modernity in opposition to what they saw as an earlier philistinism. Writing during the Great War, Gosse pondered Anglo-French relations and regretted that the political entente established by Guizot and Aberdeen in the late 1830s had produced no literary equivalent. Indeed, he insisted:

Vainement chercherait-on, dans toute la critique anglaise du temps, ne fût-ce qu'une mention des grands noms de Balzac et de Victor Hugo, de George Sand et de Lamartine, qui se trouvaient alors, comme on sait, parvenus au plus haut point de leur activité créatrice [...] Pour tout ce qui relevait du monde de l'imagination, l'indifférence était complète dans la critique anglaise, et la France a traversé longuement les phases successives de sa révolution romantique sans que jamais cette critique de chez nous eût même fait mine de s'en apercevoir.¹⁸

¹⁴W. Roberts, 'Dumas and Sue in English', *Nineteenth Century and After*, 92 (November 1922), 760–6, at 760.

¹⁵Terry Hale, 'The Imaginary Quay from Waterloo Bridge to London Bridge: Translation, Adaptation and Genre', in Myriam Salama-Carr (ed.), *On Translating French Literature and Film* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), 219–38, at 234.

¹⁶John Rignall, '"One great confederation?": Europe in the Victorian Novel', in Francis O'Gorman (ed.), *A Concise Companion to the Victorian Novel* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 232–52, at 244–5. See also Ignacio Ramos Gay, 'Curious about France': *Visions Littéraires Victoriennes* (Berne: Peter Lang, 2014).

¹⁷Margaret Cohen, 'International Influences', in John Kucich and Jenny Bourne Taylor (eds), *The Oxford History of the Novel in English*, Vol. III: *The Nineteenth-century Novel 1820–1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 409–26, at 409.

¹⁸'We would seek in vain, in all the English criticism of the period, for but one reference to the great names of Balzac and of Victor Hugo, of George Sand and of Lamartine, who had then, as we know, reached the pinnacle of their creative powers [...] English criticism displayed

In his desire to identify the *fin de siècle* as the moment when French novels gained a secure footing in England, Gosse willfully ignores the hundreds of articles and reviews devoted to the subject between 1830 and 1870, which would have produced generations of astonishingly well-informed readers. Blame for this skewed perspective can also be placed at the foot of many Victorian critics themselves, who denounced French novels in the most hysterical terms and clung to the notion that such works would never be tolerated in England. The loudest voices were not, however, necessarily the most representative. One of the greatest challenges facing an investigation into the Victorian reception of French fiction is that public rhetoric often failed to match private habits. Scholars of British Romanticism have been more active in dismantling similar misconceptions about the earlier nineteenth century. Mortensen tackles 'the glaring paradox that Romantics borrowed [...] paraphernalia from those un-British writers whom they most vigorously disowned', and Wright has explored how, 'while Gothic novelists in Britain were acutely aware of their country's troubled relationship with its French neighbor, they all nonetheless dared to look across the Channel for inspiration, be it through the realms of translation, adaptation or unacknowledged plagiarism'.¹⁹ Possibly because views regarding Victorian patriotism and priggishness are more entrenched, or perhaps because research into *fin-de-siècle* cosmopolitanism has overshadowed earlier decades, Victorian studies have yet to fully investigate the paradox sketched by Cohen of the simultaneous public recrimination and private consumption of French novels.

The socio-historical background of nineteenth-century Anglo-French relations is marked by a similar tension between attraction and distrust. It would be hard to overestimate the long-term impact of the French Revolution on British perceptions of the French. As Mortensen summarizes, Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) in particular 'cemented a xenophobic image of the French national character, as cold, abstract and theory-ridden, but simultaneously and paradoxically as overexcited,

a complete indifference to everything that related to the world of the imagination, and France went through the successive phases of her Romantic revolution without any indication from our critics that they had noticed it at all'; Edmund Gosse, 'France et Angleterre: L'avenir de leurs relations intellectuelles', *Revue des deux mondes*, 35 (1 October 1916), 526–41, at 533–4.

¹⁹Peter Mortensen, *British Romanticism and Continental Influences: Writing in an Age of Europhobia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 13; Angela Wright, *Britain, France and the Gothic, 1746–1820: The Import of Terror* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 10.

enthusiastic and prone to bursts of violence'.²⁰ At the mere *souçon* of a popular uprising, nervous observers feared that homegrown radicals would emulate them. They had plenty of opportunities for concern: nineteenth-century Paris was characteristically eventful. King Charles X, less progressive than his predecessor Louis XVIII, issued a set of ordinances in July 1830 that tightened censorship, curbed the powers of the growing middle classes, and dissolved the Chamber of Deputies, setting off three days of rioting (the 'Trois Glorieuses'). Charles was followed by Louis-Philippe, styled the 'Citizen King', an initially more popular monarch whose reign was beset by growing social inequality. The 1848 revolution was sparked by clumsy attempts to prevent political gatherings, and Louis-Philippe fled to England. For three years, France was once more a republic, and the exiled Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte (the nephew of Napoleon I) was elected president. When his four-year term was coming to an end, his popularity remained so high that a nervous National Assembly cancelled universal male suffrage, following which, on 2 December 1851, Louis-Napoleon's troops moved to the centre of Paris, the Assembly was dissolved, and opponents arrested. The riots that broke out in response to this show of force were quashed, and insurrectionists were either deported or (like Victor Hugo) went into exile. In December 1852, Louis-Napoleon was proclaimed Emperor, a role he maintained until France's defeat in the 1870 Franco-Prussian War. For many, French novels of the period reflected the political chaos of the times both morally and formally. In 1831, George Sand privately commented: 'La littérature est dans le même chaos que la politique. Il y a une préoccupation, une incertitude dont tout se ressent. On veut du neuf, et, pour en faire, on fait du hideux.'²¹ Numerous Victorian critics agreed with Sand's assessments, but saw her as part of the problem.

Following the 1830 revolution, Louis-Philippe's reign in many ways brought England and France closer together. The king had forged close relations with the British aristocracy while in exile after the French Revolution and described himself, the *Quarterly Review* reported, as 'attached to England not only by gratitude, but by taste and inclination'.²² Diplomatic relations were warm: Anglomania flourished in Paris, and the ambassador

²⁰ Mortensen, *British Romanticism and Continental Influences*, 20.

²¹ 'Literature is in the same state of chaos as politics. There is a preoccupation, an uncertainty, that is felt everywhere. There is a demand for novelty, and, to supply it, the hideous is fabricated'; George Sand to Jules Boucoiran, 7 March 1831, in Georges Lubin (ed.), *George Sand: Correspondance* (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1964-91), I, 825.

²² Louis-Philippe, quoted in [John Wilson Croker], 'Personal History of Louis Philippe', *Quarterly Review*, 52.104 (November 1834), 519-72, at 556.