Review of Eugène Sue's *The Mysteries of Paris*

Max Stirner

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The "mysteries" have created a great sensation in the world, and a crowd of imitations have already appeared. Everyone wants to know about the hidden "lowest level" of society, and all look about, with curiosity, into its darkest and most dreadful corners. But with what eyes does one look into this? —With the eye of secure modesty, and with a virtuous shiver. "What an abyss of corruption, what horror, what a pit of depravity! Lord God, how can things so wicked be allowed in your world!" But soon Christian love is awakened, and it arms itself for helpful and pious action. "There must here be a salvation, and here action must be taken against the cunning of Satan! Oh, yes, there are many to save and many souls to win for the Kingdom of the Good [*dem Reiche des Guten*]."

Now thoughts are busy, and a thousand ways and means are planned to cast out the evil, and to put an end to the boundless depravity. Isolated prison cells, public housing for unemployed workers, education for fallen and penitent girls and countless other remedies are now not only proposed but actually undertaken. Charitable organizations will be gathered together and expanded in scope as never before, and there will be no lack of sacrifice and charity. Eugene Sue presents Rudolphe, the Grand Duke of Gerolstein, as the shining image of this impressive display of neighborly love.

What evil then would be cast away?—Immorality, sinful lust! The wells of evil should be dried up by needed reforms, and misled souls taken away from them and persuaded to seek a moral life. But who would want to take up this great work, and rob sin of its victims and servants? Who, if not those who love virtue and who understand that the true calling of man, are to follow the true moral way of life?

And so it is that virtuous people are to direct the immoral onto the right path, and the servants of the Kingdom of the Good are to seek the destruction of the Kingdom of Evil.

Are we not all of the understanding that there is nothing greater and more noble than to honor the Good? But yet, do not all of you have a fault, something that is disturbing and regretful, and which all-too-often turns you from the path of goodness and is "sinful"? Has the question ever occurred to you to ask if the Good might indeed be worth the cost, that to be on the path of goodness is the only thing for which a human being must do throughout their whole life? Do you just as little ask this question of yourselves than those who have fallen and have forgotten God question their own knowledge? (even if, on the other hand, they are—"sinners").

But you, who would save and convert sinners perhaps might be just as incorrigible and unredeemable as they are. Have you never doubted as to whether or not the Good might be—a mere fantasy? What if you were to admit that? Just as the Philosophers who love Wisdom, but never obtain it, would you also still believe that sinners can be made good and able "to do good"? Could you turn sinners away from desiring Evil? Might it then be possible even for you to turn from away desiring the Good? Do not ask yourselves what the Good is, but rather IF it is. If you really think it is, then ask yourselves first of all if it might only be your—imagination.

Perhaps your proofs of the Good might be more convincing if you would use some examples, such as: "Lying is bad, but honesty is good, impenitence is evil, but contrition and remorse are good, not being chaste is a sin, but chastity is a virtue, etc." On this, let us look into the "mysteries" and observe how the interplay between virtue and vice motivates this novel.

Now, I won't say anything about the details and the development of this novel, as I can suppose that you have read it. And even less will I speak of the so-called aesthetic value of this book. For if a Juggler were to perform some very difficult act, or a Magician would achieve the most astonishing of effects, even if it is said that such effects were an excellent display of the arts of the Juggler or Magician, yet no one would hold their arts in particular respect. So I also find no need to deal too closely with our author's skill in portraying social contrasts and characters—although his skill has hardly satisfied all connoisseurs of the fine arts. I do not think so highly of the talent displayed in this work that it would blind me to its total lack of any profound and compelling insights into the nature of society. Görres had also a beautiful talent, and died, as so many others, in a childish tottering about in the fixity of stupid thoughts.[(1)]

Now, although the Grand Duke of Gerolstein cannot be regarded as the hero of the novel, as the whole mechanism of the novel is not set in motion by him alone, he nevertheless does represent the elevated views and thoughts to which Sue himself aspires. The high ideal of morality is the viewpoint from which every thought and deed is measured. It is a literary work of fiction which is totally worked out from the standpoint of morality, and it presents the sort of men that would be created in the light of this viewpoint, and what would transpire under its dominion.

Prince Rudolpfe, in a momentary fit of fury, drew his sword against the sacred body of his Father. This he considered a sin, and because of it he felt compelled to choose a very heavy penitential duty. He decided that this duty should be "working for the power of Good." In time, following upon this, he was led to Paris where he visited the dark slums of poverty and criminality. There he would do whatever he could to help to relieve suffering, to soften hard hearts, and to bring fearful and just punishment upon criminals. With his princely means, he easily succeeded in alleviating some physical suffering, such as that endured by the impoverished Morel family. For this, they were indebted to him for their future happiness. But even more than his desire to eliminate physical dangers, and closer to his heart, was his desire to eliminate moral dangers. And it is this desire which brings him into contact with the heroine of the novel.

Fleur de Marie (*Marien-Blume*), or as we can simply call her, Marie, is in prison. Rudolph has no idea that she is the child of his first love. She is a lovely girl, who grew up in the custody and in the frightful hands of "*la Chouette*" [The Owl]—an evil woman. Pressured by poverty, pimps [*Kupplerinnen*], and other miserable circumstances, the growing girl finally decides upon the trade of a prostitute. But nevertheless, she remained untouched by the lustful pleasures of this way of life, she is stained without being stained. From the beginning, she was detached from either the desire for the trade of prostitution, or the fear of enslavement to it, and she

would have had the strength to resist it. But then she encounters Rudolphe, and with him, the very thing that vice cannot resist—the temptation to be virtuous. The poor child is tempted by virtue, which, if it would overcome her, will replace her vice. And so it is, that in the hope that he can bribe her, Rudolphe presses every promise and reward of virtue upon her easily excited imagination. However, although she has not completely "fallen" into the center of an intoxicating life of vice, she is still able to resist the sweet solicitations of the promoter of virtue, and so "falls." Yet there remains the temptation not to fall, to be virtuous. So, how then can Sue, the novelist of a liberal and virtuous civil society, find even more temptations to make her virtuous? Can she ever be raised up from being fallen if she refuses to take refuge in the comforting lap of the only morality able to make her divinely happy? And if one thinks that she should be delivered over into blessedness, then it must be delivered in full measure. It can only be that sort of morality leading to a blessedness in which both true piety and true virtue are inseparably linked. This is the case even among those Moralists who deny a personal God, for they still hold to the Good, the True, and the Virtuous—to their God and their Goddess.[(2)]

Still, I am not the opinion that Marie, even after her fall into virtue, would ever ascend into blessedness. As our novelist knows of nothing higher than this sort of blessedness, and insofar as anything higher is well beyond the limits of his thought, his creations could never ascend beyond his level—as even the best among them would simply be unable to rise higher than their creator. Marie, who was recruited by Rudolphe to serve the cause of morality, would thereafter, as the devoted and obedient servant of her author, only be committed to cause of morality. And so, whatever might be revealed in the later history of Maria, it could only happen to her in that she was the true servant of her creator, and as such would hold to the fate which her Divinity had imposed upon her.

In escaping the "claws of the owl," who was only able to despoil her body, Maria then fell under the power of a Priest, who despoiled her tender soul with the pious teaching that her life must now be that of a penitent—if future forgiveness was to be gained. This teaching determined her future. This worm of thought, placed in her heart by the Priest, gnawed steadily away, and finally corroded and destroying her God-given heart [*das gottergebene Herz*]. This inner corrosion ultimately forced her to totally renounce and withdraw from the world. The actual doctrines of morality are found in the pious teachings of this Priest and they finally silenced even Rudolphe's "sensible" objections.

Every day, Rudolph gave himself over to the sweet hope and longing for an intimate family life in the Court of Gerolstein, and to have the joy of a Father sharing the bliss of a life with Maria, his delightful young daughter. He, as only a princely Father could, would compensate the well-behaved and virtue-rich princess with new offerings of love to replace the early miseries she had endured. All the pleasures of a world that a great ducal court could offer her should now stand open to her. But what would be Maria's cost for the purchase these worldly pleasures? It could only be that no one should ever discover her former life, and henceforth, everyone must only recognize the goodness of her present life. If her former life were ever revealed, then no brilliance from the ducal crown would be able to protect the poor Princess from the poisonous looks and disdainful shrugs of the relentless admirers of moral purity. Rudolphe knows this quite well, and so he quietly keeps his own misgivings over Maria's earlier days to himself. What sensible human being would deal with this any other way? Everyone would—except an Ultra,[(3)] as it would not be moral!—just as a moralizing liberal would also say.

But how can Marie, the pure priestess of moral principle, now having entered into the moral world despite her misdeeds, still prove her salvation through a lie? Can she, through a deception, pretend to be purer than she really is? "Deception, always deception," she calls out in despair, "always fear and lies, always shaking before the gaze of him whom one loves and respects, as a criminal trembles before the relentless eyes of a Judge!" So, can it be accepted that Maria, a servant at the altar of morality, be permitted to lie?

Lying is a sin that no moral human can forgive. As much as he will, a person might ask forgiveness because his lie was necessary, but a necessary lie still remains a lie. But how can the truth serve, if even under temptation, it still leads to falsity? No morality can ever teach the justification of a lie, yet so many moral people actually do lie, that this surely proves that neither ethical principles nor the good itself is strong enough to direct actual life. This is the reason why humans are unconsciously led into actions which scorn these petty moral principles, into actions which might even encourage them to break away from the compulsion of these very principles themselves. But yet, one is not freed from an illusion until one overcomes it in theory.

Once won over to the cult of the good, Maria is too modest to argue any exception to its rules. So, she cannot lie. But how can she confess to this "relentless judge"? If the moral world does not know what she has done, then how could she be judged? The world of the "good" could not exist without having "goods," and among good things is Chastity, whose loss they can never forgive—in a woman. Yes, an enduring humility will allow for the healing of the painful wound, but time alone cannot wash off the mark of its scar. But that world, that world which believes in morality and its goods, can never forget the loss. Its goodness is valuable to it, and for those who lose even one good, even among those who would yet hang onto the illusions of this morality, however they might twist and turn, their sense of loss and criminality can never be fully forgotten. A woman who has given up her chastity, who has lived among the "castoffs of society," who has been "demeaned" will forever be looked upon with disdain. She is "stained," "fallen," "shameless"—she is "dishonored." The moral world will demand permanent shame as her punishment, a shame that they will awaken within the penitent woman.

Perhaps one might think that this is but an exaggerated and false shame and that if one were not overly-sensitive, it might, by a mature person, be easily cast aside. But then we must ask as to what this world, in its actual moral judgments, holds of higher worth—whether the human person—or his goodness. There is a profound connection between the rising concern with ethical behavior and the rise of the bourgeoisie: the Banker and the moralist judge a man from precisely the same viewpoint—not what he is in himself, but rather what he possesses. "Has he money?" And along with this question runs a parallel question: "Has he virtue?" Who possesses no money can have no connection to the Banker, it "makes him disgraceful," who does not "possess" the virtues of the honorable citizen must not approach that citizen. Both measure according to possessions, and the lack of property is, and will remain, a lack. Just as a horse, who might possess all of the virtues of the best horse, but possesses the blemish of a bad color, so also with a woman, who although otherwise pure has yet been once impure, and so will be forever condemned for that. Rightly so, as she does not possess one of the major goods which makes for the honor of a moral woman. If Marie is now chaste, this has not always been the case, and if she is now innocent, she was not previously so. Innocence is so tender a nature that it should never be allowed to be touched; once touched will forever vanish [*Die Unschuld ist so zarten Wesens dass sie niemals berührt worden sein darf; einmal verletzt ist sie immer verschwunden*].[(4)]

Innocence is one of those fixed ideas which turned Moral[5] into a lunatic, and Maria into a sick woman [*Betschwester*]. But so it must be. The fixed distance between the impure and the pure, the immoral and the moral, is simply expressed in the inward and hidden feeling in Maria. She is—"desecrated."

Might there be an objection intended to show that one is not guilty of what was done long ago, and so deserves greater leniency? First of all, although this objection might be generally disputed, still no one today is punished by the Church, certainly less so than during the lax morality of the *ancient regime*. Then, when the great mass of people had thick skins, there seemed little concern regarding the hard consequences following upon their religious doctrines [*Glaubensartikel*]. So then, must a serious thinking person with the fine sensitivity of Maria be ruined by the mundane views of the common man?

However, we must recognize, that she would, feeling the inner pressure of moral directives, do all that she could do, and so her withdrawal from the world was inevitable. She could not, without acting immorally, be allowed to deceive the world. It could not be allowed that she could ever admit of this deception, for if she did, rather than joy, she would only reap the scorn and ridicule of the world. Every joy, which the future might have offered her would have immediately been poisoned by the thorn of shame. Feeling this, she then remembered what he, whom she loved, had said of his Father, Prince Heinrich, "They wish me to die, to see me debased in his eyes!" She thought she must either hold something back from the world, or hold it in her own conscience, she could hope for nothing more—they had ruined her.

But why does she take refuge in God? Because neither the world nor she herself could remove her sins. Only God can forgive her. Men must act according to the Rules of the Good Book [*Gesetzbuch des Guten*] and so are but servants in the Kingdom of the Good. Here God alone is the absolute King, under whom the Good is subordinated, and when he wishes to pardon, it is not the Good which is addressed, but only his unlimited will. What is in this turn of Maria to the Lord? Nothing more than but she feels, as no justice can be found in the rule of morality, that she must have another rule and another judgment. She seeks absolution from God at the cost of a life of remorse. This remorse will be the work of the devout Priest, who is, of course, not allowed to tell her that "Who enslave themselves are slaves, and who release themselves are free." So, what she was able to do for herself, she seeks outside of herself; however, she would be neither moral nor pious were she to seek it elsewhere.

But how could this good maiden ever forgive herself for her unchastity and lies? If she did, then her forgiveness would go beyond morality, and all of the charming construction of E. Sue would collapse into a ridiculous nothingness—if the Good were no longer be taken to be the Highest. If this could be, then the human being would rise beyond virtue and vice, beyond morality and sin.

This whole struggle is based upon how a few bigoted people have a manic fixation upon the illusion of Good and Evil. As the world judges, we are allowed to do this and that, because it is good; but other things, such as lying, we are not permitted, because it is bad—and so thinks Rudolph, who intends to lead Marie to virtue.

The poet didn't impose his own virtues and morals upon Marie, but she imposed them upon herself, she became her own measure of virtue. It is as if one would measure a Lion not according to human properties, such as being magnanimous, but rather to take it according to its own animal nature; perhaps the dishonorable transformation of Maria from being a free and hopeful

person into a miserable and lost child was but the startling result of her coming to know and to devote herself to virtue in the time that she was yet a free and hopeful person. Her dedication was more than superficial, as the poor girl not only accepted and joyfully agreed to the unhappy link between virtue and remorse, but that she immediately become an oppressed slave in that moral world and submitted herself to its requirements. As she had been cast under the fated pressure of circumstance, the evil angel of conversion had seized upon this tender child. If she had but had the lucid and sensuous spirit of a Bajadere,[6] she would have been able to gather up her scornful passion and would have cast off the weight of a solidified world, and, rising up from her humiliating status—and rebel. But who has the courage and the spirit to avenge this loss of a girl's chastity [*Keuschheit*], to avenge this and every other loss in this whole guilty world?

But such as Sue know of no other happiness than that of honorable people, no other greatness than that of morality, and no other worth for man than being virtuous and devoted to God. And so, a human child, from whom might emerge a free human being, must be first enrolled in the service of virtue—and a yet unspoiled nature must be poisoned and spoiled with the hallucinations of "good people."

If a novelist can present his heroine as one who can lead her life in the center of a confused mass of the dirtiest vices, paying for it with the bloom of her body, but not as *Chouette* or the Schoolmaster,[7] who would convert her young friends into the servants of vice, then why cannot an Atheist, who, although pressured by religion remains perfectly free, be thought of as one who might lift her above the influence of virtue? But no, the maudlin writer, dreaming of a "true and proper bourgeoisie society," rather than having this girl assertive in the face of vice, renders her into a weak and sentimental creature whose feeble resistance against a craving for the "Good" will welcome, both in body and soul, the slavery of virtue.

There is no one to be found in this whole novel who could be termed "self-creative." There is none, who, by his own omnipotent and creative power, creates himself. There is no one who can act without restraint against their own instincts, nor against the pressure of beliefs (belief in virtue, morality, and so on—as well as vice).

The first type of Sue's characters are those who blindly follow the direction of their heart, their disposition, and their natural inclination such as Rigolette.[8] She is as she is—a contented nature, a happy mediocrity, and she will always remain so. Her nature is undeveloped, just as her canaries. They also can experience their fate, and suffer, but they can never become anything other than what they are. The other side of Rigolette is the child, Lahme.[9] He is a malicious child who now enjoys seeing misery, and who will, as he ages, only get worse—until his life ends on the scaffold. He will find an unknown grave, just as Rigolette, who will find a respectable grave. It makes no essential difference what sort of a life style dominates the individual, with Ferrand,[10] it is greed, with the prisoner German,[11] an impotent gabbling, and so on.

The second type of undeveloped and servile humans, are those who are not so much governed by their natural instinct, than from a belief, a fixed idea. Eugene Sue, himself a servant among servants, knows nothing better than how to apply pathological exactitude upon those driven by virtue. Above them, the faithful believer in virtue, stands the Duke, who belongs to the "Order of the Benefactors of Suffering Mankind," a decoration not on, but in, his breast. Rudolphe, this "Brother of Mercy," is committed, with mildness and strength, to the improvement of mankind, to give himself over to the "betterment," both physically and morally, of those who suffer in a cesspool of sin, and to reward those who are stained and hopeless, and, by a careful search to

find those who corrupt souls and—punish them. He then moves to Paris, and sick from his lunacy, leaves it after he has led his daughter into the divine house of virtue [*das Gotteshaus der Tugend*] and has robbed her of the last possibility to become an individual human being.

As virtue finally robs this child of both understanding and life, the Brother of Mercy, finally sees that he has, in his priestly duty, not sacrificed his unhappy daughter to moral idols, but rather for the "Justice of the inscrutable God." His attack upon his father has been avenged by the loss of his daughter. This fighter for virtue and religion is so insanely driven to apply his own principles that he cannot recognize the consequences of this treatment upon his daughter, and so can only admire the "stern judgment of God." Marie is a complete and perfect challenge to morality and religion. Her father must confess that "his unhappy child resists, with such relentless logic, all that is required for a tender heart and honor, that she cannot be converted" - - and he "gives up lecturing her, as all reason is impotent against her unconquerable conviction, which comes from a dignified and elevated feeling." Yes, he also understands, that he, in Marie's name, would also treat the matter with "courage and decorum"—so now then, what does he see in this uncompromised and completed morality of his daughter? Nothing but a "chastisement" of God, who gives him the goodness of his child as a "a punishment"! Truly, the cowardice of our liberal age, the "*juste-millieu*," could have been presented no more hideously nor more scornfully than what, instinctively, this spineless member of the age does here. The good Prince, after his penitential experience, had "learned nothing and forgot nothing."[(12)] As a man without development or self-creativity, he merely experiences hard destiny, for which the service of virtue prepares its disciples: he had only theological experiences, not human. Does it ever happen that he would seek to question the Lord, which he serves? Does it ever occur to him to seek out the kernel within the ideas he labors for—of "morality," "religiosity," "righteousness," and so on? He places himself within rigid limits, his understanding fixed in place, and from this place any further movement, any release from his Lord is, for this judgmental Duke, impossible. So intent upon proving himself to be a moral man, and yet so completely incompetent in judging men, he is a faithful image of his own creator—a miserable priest of virtue.

The opposite belief was fanatically held and incarnate in Mother Martial. Criminals have, and must also have, their fanatics, who believe in crime, and would bring it honor. Mother Martial is one of these—a Heroine of Vice. She lives and dies for crime, her ideal. But just as the believers in virtue, so also the believers in vice, who, in being possessed by a fixed idea, are also deprived of their own development and self-creation. As miserable as she is under the idea of vice, she yet cannot rise above it. And so, for her it is also the case: "Here I stand, I can do no other."[(13)] Ossified and gray in her belief, she is the Critic,[(14)] offering a singular salvation for those who suffer under the illusion that they can yet reach unreachable holiness, she yet is impotent, just as any other believer. Indeed, as is the case with lunatics, every reason she gives to free them from their lunacy serves only to strengthen it. There is no other experience for her except that fated for her. Her madness, winding about her, fully possesses her, and she can have only immoral and unholy experiences—just as her counterpart can only have moral and holy experiences.

Rudolphe's spirit has become a fixed attitude of belief in virtue. Vice is represented in the fixed attitude of Mother Martial. She levels a fearfully harsh judgment against her "misguided" son who wants to know nothing of crime. As a woman of principle, she fully impregnates the household with criminal standards, just as other family leaders fill their own homes with standards of goodness; she exercises demanding rules which have stifled the fatherly feeling of her

son Brutus. And so, are the commands of virtue essentially other than the commands of vice, are the fixed principles of one more bearable than the other? In his earlier novel, Atar Gull,[15] Eugene Sue might well have learned something: that the feeling of revenge and the feeling of rectitude are one and the same, for good and evil collapse into a unity.[16] But for Sue, the black Moor is the Devil simply because he is black, and the white Parisian, as pure white, is virtuous only at the cost of accepting God. However, the good author can be so little improved upon as his fictional characters, for if they do convert, they become even more pitiable and slavish than they were.

As we can see, the central figures and some of the others are but repressed and slavish characters, so dominated by their own beliefs and habits that they are robbed of their self-creativity and self-reliance. This being the case, there is really no need to deal with the other slaves.

It is clear that the author employed only biased characters, those whose fate was prepared for them by their wishes or doctrines, by their uncultured nature, or their unnatural culture. Such is his world, but Sue has only proven that he can fashion complacent people within his world, but not that he is able to lift them out of its restraints—and so free them.

It is no miracle that the mysteries have received so much approval. Indeed the moral world has seized upon this winning production of Philistinism as the true image of its own humanitarianism. It echoes fully the same lust to reform, as well as the same complaint that has broken out among the Turks—that there is hardly more left to reform. The good will of a Mahmud II.[17] is not needed for our age, for our present day liberals now honor and hold the greatest expectations for today's Turkish liberalism[18]—and who, be they high or low, would not be a liberal! "Our time is sick!" one friend, with sad eyes, will speak to another, and then both immediately embark upon n botanical expedition seeking out the sweet herbs which alone can cure the sickness of the age.

Friend, your time is not sick, it is over. So, don't bother to look about for a cure, but rather ease your few final hours by allowing them to hurry by, and then—as the time can never be recovered—allow your age to die.

"Everywhere there are needs and sufferings!" This thought encourages anyone, even those in doubt, to open up the Mysteries and so observe the full wretchedness of suffering. But just try, just once, to "reform" Turkey. You hope to reform it, and it will become yours—to tear apart. Turkey, just as an old man, lacks nothing. Of course, an old man lacks the strength of a youth, but if he did not, then he would not be an old man. The good will of such as Mahmud II and our Liberals would attempt to cure this "lack" in the old man, and so rejuvenate him, to make his tottering body once again strong and straight. But our time is neither sick nor able to be cured, but rather it is old, and its final hours have already sounded. But despite this, a thousand Sues spring up to offer their charlatan cures.

Now, should we not conclude with a word of praise for the splendid gifts of aristocratic benefactors, and the philanthropic suggestions of the novelist? Indeed they do rush about, and, by taking as long as it takes, and by offering rewards and punishments, "guide" the people into making Virtue their Master! Countless proposals for the improvement of the Church were made before the Reformation, and are now made for the improvement of the State: improvements, where there is nothing more to be improved.

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