

In Vidocq's footsteps

A comparative study of some explicit and implicit references
to the adventurer Vidocq in nineteenth-century literature.

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The publication of Eugène-François Vidocq's *Mémoires* on 4 October 1828 was something of an event. For some time all of Paris had been awaiting the publication of this book whose author was regularly the main topic of interest in newspapers, on account of his exceptional detective skills. The *Mémoires* of the ex-convict who rose to the rank of chief of police became a best-seller.¹ In 1829, the 10,000 copies of the *Histoire de Vidocq*, a reworked version of the *Mémoires*, sold out in the space of only a few days. Having already been copied and sold illegally in England and in Holland before its official release in France, the book ensured the author world-renown.

In a previous article, I studied the *Mémoires* and the *Histoire de Vidocq* and showed that Eugène-François Vidocq could be perfectly identified as part of a long tradition of adventurers in the 18th century and that his autobiographical work, in both form and content, demonstrated a close link between the genre of the adventure story and that of the picaresque.² In the present article, I shall leave aside his autobiographical works in order to focus on the figure's literary posterity. Whether in person or in the guise of some fictional character, the figure of Vidocq appears regularly in the literature of the 19th century. My aim is to examine how he was treated by some French and English authors of the time, establish the various processes involved in the making of a legend and explore the different stages in the development of the adventurer as a social type in the 19th century.

The year 1829 saw the publication of two texts, one in France, the other in England devoted to Vidocq. The first is a novel entitled *Mémoires d'un forçat ou Vidocq dévoilé*³, by

Louis-François Raban and Emile Marco de Saint Hilaire; the second a short play written by Douglas William Jerrold (1803-1857), a British journalist and humorist, called *Vidocq, The French Police Spy*.⁴ Just months after the release of the *Mémoires*, Vidocq is therefore elevated to the rank of a literary figure in his own right. The choice of titles by Raban and by Jerrold shows that his name was already familiar to all.

With their *Mémoires d'un forçat ou Vidocq dévoilé*, published only one month after the first volume of Vidocq's *Mémoires*, Raban and Saint Hilaire join the camp of Vidocq's sworn enemy, Louis L'Héritier, the 'teinturier' to whom the adventurer's bungling publisher had entrusted the task first of correcting the second and third volumes of the *Mémoires* then – without his client's prior consent – of writing a scandalous fourth volume. As if to follow the example of L'Héritier, Raban and Saint Hilaire made their novel a tissue of slanderous allegations against the chief of police.

As their title suggests, the *Mémoires d'un forçat* is supposed to have been written by one of Vidocq's former fellow inmates who is anxious to establish the truth about the adventurer. The text is presented as a systematic and thorough refutation of all the facts put forward in *Mémoires*. But the pretence of the so-called *Mémoires d'un forçat* is so transparent, the subjectivity of the authors so salient and the overstatement so patently obvious that the whole work quickly comes across as mere paranoid, vituperative mud-slinging. The tone of *Mémoires d'un forçat* is coloured by the author's opinion from the opening lines of the 'Avis au lecteur'. From the outset, Vidocq is accused of having tried to steal a copy of the text from the pseudo-convict, and – the ultimate dishonesty – of preparing a response to this scathing critique. As if that were not enough, the authors, with a logic that would have graced the Spanish Inquisition at its finest hour, then proceed to see this as the irrefutable proof of Vidocq's guilt: 'Vidocq innocent n'eût rien dit ; coupable, il cherche à se débattre sous le poids de la vérité qui l'écrase'. 'On dirait que toutes les actions de cet homme doivent être marquées au coin de la bassesse', comments our witness, as an introduction to what amounts to a vitriolic portrait of the adventurer. Thus Vidocq is accused of every crime, from causing the death of his wife to that of his own mother, not to mention the attempted murder of l'Aiglon, the son of Napoléon Bonaparte! But the picture of Vidocq which Raban and Saint Hilaire paint for us is not only that of a dangerous criminal or of a terrifying psychopath ; there is a distinct tendency – and this does much to point to their real motives in writing the book – to demonise the figure of Vidocq.

Throughout the text, Vidocq's human nature is slowly whittled away to reveal an animalistic, monstrous vision of the adventurer: 'il punissait ainsi sa mère d'avoir donné le

jour à un monstre⁵, ‘mais que parlé-je d’homme ? Vidocq mérite-t-il ce titre ? n’est-ce pas plutôt un tigre altéré de sang humain ?’⁶, ‘Je parlerai d’*un être* qui ne fut ni mon ami, ni mon ennemi[...]’⁷, ‘vingt fois les agents de la brigade arrachèrent cette infortunée des mains du cannibale auquel elle avait uni sa destinée’⁸, etc. In chapter 3, the narrator even turns Vidocq into a werewolf!

Tous les anciens habitants d’Arras se rappellent encore l’histoire d’un loup-garou qui, pendant plusieurs nuits, jeta l’épouvante dans la ville, qu’il parcourait en poussant des hurlements effroyables et en traînant sur le pavé de lourdes chaînes ; mais personne ne sait mieux que moi quel était ce prétendu monstre : c’était Vidocq.⁹

Raban and Saint Hilaire thus illustrated to perfection the terror inspired by the adventurer as a social construct in the 19th century. The *Mémoires d’un forçat ou Vidocq dévoilé* arrived at the perfect moment to offset Vidocq’s plea in defence of the supposedly dangerous classes and to re-establish the legitimacy of the social order which had come under some scrutiny as a result of the adventurer’s statements. As Christophe Charle highlights in his *Histoire sociale du XIX^e siècle*, in the society of the time ‘les irréductibles qui vont à contre-courant prennent alors dans l’imaginaire social [...] les couleurs sombres d’un cancer à extirper [...]. La société démocratique, parce que démocratique, tolère moins qu’une autre ceux qui refusent ses règles. Incarnation de la raison et de la majorité, elle exclut sans pitié la déraison – celle du crime ou de la folie – et la minorité non conforme. Elle interprète comme pathologie biologique ce qui n’est souvent que l’inadaptation de ses institutions à des populations hétérogènes’.¹⁰ Vidocq, like all adventurers, is, in the eyes of Raban and Saint Hilaire, one of these diehard “pathogènes”: the narrator of *Mémoires d’un forçat* does not fail to spell this out in black and white: ‘le crâne de Vidocq serait une véritable bonne fortune pour les partisans du système de cranologie’, thus reminding us of the considerable efforts of some scientists of the time to rationalise and justify the social phobias of the bourgeoisie.¹¹

The impression of Vidocq offered by *Vidocq, The French Police Spy* is very different from that in *Mémoires d’un forçat*. When he wrote this short two-act play, first performed in London’s *Surrey Theatre* in 1829, Douglas William Jerrold was still relishing his first taste of success that same year with the staging of a “nautical” tragi-comedy entitled *Black-Ey’d Susan*. The character portrayed by Jerrold is relatively true to the image the adventurer paints of himself in his *Mémoires* - the play is openly touted as an adaptation of Vidocq’s autobiography, though more a montage of a couple of anecdotes taken from *Mémoires*.

Morover the author's decision seems to have been swayed more by their humorous content than by anything else. The scenes thus resemble short sketches, sometimes played to music and popular songs, in which Jerrold took pleasure in lampooning some stock characters of the social milieu described by Vidocq.

The plot of *Vidocq, The French Police Spy* is in reality rather thin and disjointed. The first two scenes take place in the prison camp in Brest and depict Vidocq's arrival and subsequent escape. Scenes three, four and five take place in Paris, more specifically in the large town residence of one Baroness de Stoth. Vidocq and Josas - a fellow inmate, who escaped with him, pose as officers of the Imperial Army Reserves stationed in the capital. Josas decides to swindle the Baroness by using the feelings she harbours for Vidocq and forces the latter into asking her hand in marriage. However, Vidocq's masquerade is discovered at the last minute and the adventurer is once again apprehended. Act II, which is made up of nine extremely short scenes, is also set in Paris. Vidocq is now a secret agent and is seen skilfully winning the trust of several criminals – including some former fellow inmates – in order to provide the police the means of apprehending them in flagrante delicto

Jerrold's Vidocq is devoid of all traces of the bloodthirsty criminal imagined by Raban and Saint Hilaire. In Act I Scene 1, Vierz, one of the prison wardens in Brest, makes the following remark about Vidocq: 'that's a surprising fellow [...], I believe he is painted blacker than he really is. – Bless you, at Paris they frighten the children with his name, whilst all the women are full of admiration of his daring exploits. Some say he has committed murder, high-way robberies, and all other iniquities – whilst in fact, we know that his whole crime is being accused of having assisted to forge a discharge for two prisoners at Rochefort'.¹² Vidocq is seen here as a scapegoat, a man persecuted for crimes he did not commit, but as a man of mystery whose courage and wits win the admiration of all. Much in the same vein as the Vidocq we see in the *Mémoires*, Jerrold's protagonist strikes us a relatively honest man who is forced to commit crimes by the crooks he is obliged to frequent. Thus Josas' plan to swindle the Baroness poses a real moral dilemma for Vidocq: being already married to his beloved Annette, he is reluctant to even pretend to wed the Baroness. In response to Josas' arguments, he retorts: 'Yes, but virtue – honour –'.¹³ Later, he complains: 'what a situation do I find myself in – is there no retreat? The Baroness here, good soul, has spoken pretty plainly – but, then, the villany, the deceit – no, no, I'm determined to confess all to Madam –'.¹⁴ But Vidocq's best intentions are hampered by Josas: 'No, you cannot, shall not attempt to do so; and though they may chain me to you, the next moment I will denounce you'.¹⁵ The same air of inevitability which seems to hang like a cloud over Vidocq in the

Mémoires haunts Jerrold's eponymous hero; he says with resignation 'Well, I am marked out for a villain, and so to fulfill my destiny'.¹⁶

It is as if, in the course of the first act of *Vidocq, the French Police Spy*, the author is trying to demystify the character, portray his human side: for Jerrold, Vidocq is not the all-powerful impalpable and free individual that the terrified French bourgeoisie imagined him to be. As is reinforced by the testimony of Annette at the beginning of Act II, Vidocq is not truly at ease in his adventurer persona, all he wants to do is settle down: 'Should Vidocq again be discovered! should he again be prevented from following an honest and honourable occupation –'.¹⁷ Jerrold's approach, his tendency to demystify Vidocq, his light, humorous way of dealing with the character, apart from the fact that it is the antithesis of the one created by Raban and Saint Hilaire, also reflects the disparities between the French and the English in the way they perceive the adventurer as a social construct. The reasons for these differences are, of course, to be found in the histories of these two countries. Great Britain never underwent social or political upheaval to the extent that France did during and after the Revolution, and which turned France into what amounted to a breeding-ground for adventurers and crooks of every sort¹⁸, nor did it experience the popular revolts and the bloody uprisings spawned by the political instability which was rife in 19th century France and consequently was never gripped by the abject terror towards any social group capable of transgressing its absolute rule.

In the context of Jerrold's play, the adventurer not having been seen as a real threat to society, his escapades take on a comical, ludic twist. The hero of *Vidocq, The French Police Spy* is one of the more or less fortunate participants in the vast game that is society. When he loses, Jerrold's Vidocq takes it well, retaining his cheek and humour. Once, upon entering the prison in Brest disguised as a country bumpkin, he introduces himself as Louis Cartouche to the guards!¹⁹ When the chief warden Thierry asks him to compare the conditions of captivity in Brest to those in Toulon, he ironically replies: 'Oh, yes, much better; here we have sumptuous fare indeed – here only two hours are needed to find all the beans in the soup, whilst in Toulon the search would take eight days'!²⁰ When he is on the run dressed in an officer's uniform, despite the fact that he is being ruthlessly hunted down, he cannot resist using his disguise to put on a show to fool a group of naïve citizens. In every circumstance, Jerrold's character is given to engaging in some form of mockery. In the adventurer's eyes, society life seems to resemble a light play or a game - Vidocq once exclaims at the conclusion of one of his crooked plots: 'Now, then, [...] what game are we to play next?'. This propensity for hilarity to some extent imposes the role of clown on Vidocq and makes him

quite different from the horrible protagonist of *Mémoires d'un forçat*. The role of Jerrold's character is to entertain society just as a court jester would entertain the king, either at the expense of others or at his own expense. As a secret agent, he enjoys, like the clown, a certain element of freedom or *carte blanche*, but suffers the same constraint in role and function.

In 1833, it was Balzac's turn to draw from the character of Vidocq when he created the character of Vautrin. Even though he only appears in three volumes of *La comédie humaine* (*Le père Goriot* (1833), *Les Illusions perdues* (1839) and *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes* (1839-1847)), Vautrin was deemed by the writer to be the "backbone" of his work. What evidence do we have to suggest this close link between Vidocq and Vautrin? First there is the character's name: according to Michel Le Bris²¹, the name "Vautrin" (meaning "boar" in the local dialect of Ardennes) happened to be Vidocq's nickname when he was a boy because of his imposing build, not to mention his tendency to get into fights. This very physical force is also typical of Balzac's character whom the author describes as a "Hercules" and who is described in *Le père Goriot* as 'un de ces gens dont le peuple dit : voilà un fameux gaillard ! [L]es épaules larges, le buste bien développé, les muscles apparents, les mains épaisses [et] carrées' (VIII, p.39).²² Like Vidocq, Vautrin is also an escaped convict from Toulon prison camp and he too forged a release order in an attempt to help another inmate to escape. In *Le père Goriot*, it then transpires 'qu'à l'aide de ses immenses ressources, cet homme a su se créer une police à lui [et] des relations fort étendues qu'il enveloppe d'un mystère impénétrable' (*ibid.*), which draws a further parallel between the two. Finally, in *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes* (XXIII), after several years of wandering, he joins the ranks of the police and ever-reminescent of Vidocq, becomes 'chef de la Sûreté'. There can be no doubt therefore that Vautrin is Vidocq's double, indeed, Balzac was well-acquainted with the author of *Mémoires*. He had met him on several occasions, notably at the house of Monsieur de Berny, advisor to the 'Cour d'appel' in Paris, Vidocq's close friend and the man with whose wife the novelist was having an affair. According to Leon Gozlan, Vidocq was even invited to dine at Balzac's house in the summer of 1844.²³ From this moment it is interesting to observe the image Balzac projects of Vidocq through the character of Vautrin, and the way in which the adventurer acted on the creative imagination of the author of *La Comédie humaine*. The first thing which strikes the readers about Vautrin/Vidocq when they see him for the first time at Vauquer's boarding house, depicted, as he is, as a generous, good-humoured, middle-aged former merchant, is the silent but worrying power which he evinces and which seems to belie his apparent good nature.

Apart from his bear-like physique and certain aspects of his manner, such as the way he would sometimes hurl a jet of spit and which in the narrator's words 'annonçait un sang-froid imperturbable qui ne devait pas le faire reculer devant aucun crime' (p.40), it is mainly his gaze which conveyed his strength: 'comme un juge sévère, son œil allait au fond de toutes les questions, de toutes les consciences, de tous les sentiments' (*ibid.*). Everywhere he goes, he levels 'ces regards par lesquels [il] semblait s'initier aux secrets les plus cachés du cœur' (p.103) and which leave one 'sanglé comme d'un coup de fouet'(p.118). We should note that in *Mémoires d'un forçat*, Raban and Saint Hilaire attributed a similarly distinctive stare to Vidocq, which they described as his trademark: 'Eugène-François Vidocq [...] porte effrontément ses regards sur tous ceux qu'il rencontre, comme s'il avait le signalement du genre humain'(p.344). Like Raban and Saint Hilaire's Vidocq, but perhaps more justifiably, Vautrin seems to be able to see through society and point directly to its weaknesses; the world order is reversed, the outlaw becomes judge and jury and society the culprit. For Balzac then, living on the margins of society is less a handicap than a means of gaining critical perspective, perhaps even superiority. Vautrin levels at a palsied society this 'regard froidement fascinateur que certains hommes éminemment magnétiques ont le don de lancer, et qui, dit-on, calme les fous furieux dans les maisons d'aliénés' (p.206). The excessive power given to him by Balzac provides him with a certain air of transcendence: his gaze becomes intuitive ('divinateur' (p.120)), Balzac imagines him as a sphinx and then, of course, as a demon.

We see in Balzac then the same tendency to demonise the adventurer as in the work of Raban and Saint Hilaire. Like the devil, Vautrin has talents for corruption and temptation which the young Rastignac tries to resist; like the devil, the convict bears a beastly colour and look, like these 'bouquets de poils touffus et d'un roux ardent' which cover his hands, and the 'crin fauve' bedecking his chest and his 'cheveux rouge brique et courts qui [...] donnaient [à sa tête et à sa face] un épouvantable caractère de force mêlée de ruse'(p.214) ; and like the devil Vidocq's Balzacian double has a look which smacks of 'celui de l'archange déchu qui veut toujours la guerre' (p.216). 'Vous seriez une belle proie pour le diable' remarks Vautrin ironically (p.177) when addressing the unfortunate Rastignac who, while listening to him, 'avait vu passer au-dessus de sa tête ce démon qu'il est si facile de prendre pour un ange, ce Satan aux ailes diaprées [...], le dieu de cette vanité crépitante dont le clinquant nous semble être un symbole de puissance' (p.138). Nevertheless, this process of demonisation is never as fully worked out as it is in the work of Raban and Saint Hilaire, whose intention was to instigate and justify the moral condemnation of the adventurer as a rebellious individual. By

associating Vautrin with Satan, Balzac allows the adventurer's revolt to rise above its mere anecdotal, microcosmic context to assume mythical, ontological dimensions. He is not just a rebel, he is the embodiment of original rebellion, of humanity's unquenchable thirst for freedom. Vautrin exclaims to Rastignac: 'Quand j'ai résolu quelque chose, le bon Dieu seul est assez fort pour me barrer la route' (p.197). He is no mere criminal, but the very incarnation of crime and the prison universe 'dans ses mœurs et son langage, avec ses brusques transitions du plaisant à l'horrible, son épouvantable grandeur, sa familiarité, sa bassesse', 'le type de toute une nation dégénérée, d'un peuple sauvage et logique, brutal et souple'. He is not just a man, but the totality of human existence, 'un poème infernal où se peign[ent] tous les sentiments humains' (p.216)!

It is with a surprising (and therefore probably ironic) indulgence that the writer allows Vautrin to take the floor, thereby endorsing a virtual panegyric to sedition: 'il n'y a que deux partis à prendre : ou une stupide obéissance ou la révolte', the character writes (p.124). Revolt appears as a positive step against an unjust society which chooses 'd'envoyer les pauvres diables qui valent mieux [qu'elle] avec T.F. sur l'épaule, afin de prouver aux riches qu'ils peuvent dormir tranquillement' and whose slogan could be summarised as: 'aboie contre les voleurs, plaide pour les riches, fais guillotiner les gens de cœur' (p.125). When society begins to resemble 'l'enfer du bon Dieu', it is not surprising that men who are doomed to live there take on the appearance of the mythical revolutionary. Revolution is no longer synonymous with anarchy and immorality, but is justified by its cause, Vautrin strives towards a goal, aspires to an ultimate objective; he is an idealist who marries action with thought: 'je suis un grand poète. Mes poésies, je ne les écris pas : elles consistent en actions et en sentiments', he proudly confides (p.129). His philosophy is clear and sound: 'je suis comme don Quichotte, j'aime à prendre la défense du faible contre le fort' (p.131) and his revolt does not exclude goodness or a certain code of honour.

The picture of Vidocq presented to us by Balzac through the character of Vautrin is then ultimately that of a superior individual: 'il se rencontre par chaque million de ce haut bétail dix lurons qui se mettent au-dessus de tout, même des lois', we read in *Le père Goriot*, and Vautrin/Vidocq is among them (p.128). This explains why the adventurer will never flinch - 'quand il le faut absolument' - from resorting to crime and violence to attain his goal and to realise his ideal of a more just society. In this he is exactly like Rodolphe in *Les Mystères de Paris* who said: 'à votre violence qui tue, j'oppose une violence qui sauve'.²⁴ But in order to hammer home the power and superiority of the character, Balzac was still duty-bound to purify Vautrin of certain imperfections and weaknesses. In contrast to Vidocq, who

is often seen in his *Mémoires* to be at the mercy of chance, pursued by some inevitable fate, Vautrin is the typically Balzacian embodiment of the power of human spirit; he wants to be master of his own destiny: 'il faut être imbécile pour s'en remettre au hasard' (p.123) and 'l'homme supérieur épouse les événements et les circonstances pour les conduire'(p.132).

Not only at the mercy of chance, Vidocq was frequently at the mercy of women. This could be one of the reasons why the author of *La comédie humaine* made Vautrin's character homosexual. In *Le père Goriot*, the boarder in Vauquer's boarding house is constantly warning Rastignac of the fairer sex with their hypocrisy and their wiles. Gondureau confides in Miss Michonneau - who thought she could trick the ex-convict using her womanly charms - Vautrin 'n'aime pas les femmes' (p.185). As far as he is concerned, 'il n'existe qu'un seul sentiment réel, une amitié d'homme à homme' (p.179). And it is precisely this term 'amitié' which fits the platonic conception of homosexuality envisaged by Balzac: after all, why preserve the adventurer from the passion of women if it is only to have him subjected to that of men? Vautrin seems to have experienced this danger in his youth when he let himself to be indicted in place of the man he loved. By strength of will the character overcomes his homosexuality, turning it into an asexual feeling of paternal love. Of course, and Balzac does not fail to highlight it, such paternal love also involves its risks of its own too (the example of Goriot is particularly enlightening) and remains one of Vautrin's few – if not the only – weaknesses. Nevertheless it is a necessary weakness, not only because it affords the character an element of humanity, but also because it triggers his final conversion and thus his transcendence. In *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes*, it is following the suicide of Lucien de Rubempré, whom he loved like a son, that Vautrin decides to come out of the shadows in order to engage in combat, not from the outside but within the structure of society's institutions as head of police.

While Balzac was completing *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes* in France, cross-channel interest in Vidocq was rekindled by a highly-publicised visit to the British capital. When Vidocq arrived in London in April 1845, he was greeted by a warm welcome from the English public on the back of the success of his *Mémoires* and of Jerrold's play, which is still attracting capacity audiences in theatres around London almost two decades after its first performance. The Vidocq Exhibition, organised by the adventurer himself, proved very popular. Apart from the public display of several personal objects and mementos charting his extraordinary travels, Vidocq also performs on stage. In 1860, in a long article devoted to

Vidocq published in *All The Year Round*, Charles Dickens' new periodical, the novelist Wilkie Collins described the astonishing performance of the ex-convict:

The performance, which was repeated several times in the course of the same day, was this: He addressed the audience, in French, in a short speech which was translated by an interpreter. He gave, after his own fashion, a summary of his adventurous life. He put on his galley-slave's dress and the irons with which he had been laden, including the double chain he had worn at Brest, as well as in the different prisons of Douai, Lille, and Paris. He related the stratagems to which he had recourse, to take the most formidable criminals; and each time he put on the costume and made up his face as he had been obliged to do under the actual circumstances.²⁵

This article which had appeared in a revised English edition of Vidocq's *Mémoires* the year before in 1859 would not have any more than documentary interest were it not for the fact that its author, Wilkie Collins, was, at that moment, in the process of writing his famous novel *The Woman In White*. Indeed it is in *The Woman In White*, a thriller published in instalments in *All The Year Round* (at the same time as the article in which Collins shows such a keen interest in Vidocq), that a mysterious character and possibly a new incarnation of Vidocq answering to the name of Count Fosco appears.

In a short article Deborah Wynne has already highlighted some similarities between the character of Collins and Vidocq, as the novelist described him in *Vidocq, The Woman in White*.²⁶ Wynne sees four major points common to the two men. First, their profession: Fosco, like Vidocq, is a spy: '[he] is employed as a spy [...] and he uses disguise'. Second is their talent for disguise: 'both men possess extraordinary powers of physical transformation [...]. Fosco contrives his fatness and alters his face to escape detection'. Wynne also cites the fact that 'both men, in spite of their physical bulk, have a taste for 'feminine' clothes'. Both men, she continues, share a lack of scruples about their respective professions. Like Vidocq, Fosco sings the praises of a particular ethic towards crime: 'Collins' villain also holds similar ideas about crime and its detection. Fosco's well-known maxim, that for an educated, intelligent person crime *does* pay, is a theory which Vidocq had put into practice'. Are the comparisons drawn by Wynne relevant and if so, are there other similarities to be found between the two characters?

As far as spying is concerned, we know that Vidocq was operating for three years between 1809 and 1811 as a secret agent to the police and that he carried out some very confidential reconnaissance missions for the highest authorities in the French state. Collins tells us that Fosco's 'vocation in life was the vocation of a spy'.²⁷ But what about disguises and the ability to blend in with one's background? While we are well aware of Vidocq's skill

and expertise in this field, nothing in Collins' novel allows us to say with certainty that Count Fosco ever made use of such tactics. The only suggestion is when the hero, Mr Hartright, bemusedly postulates: 'the shaven face [of the Count], which I had pointed out at the Opera, might have been covered by a beard in Pesca's time – his dark brown hair might be a wig [...]. The accident of time might have helped him as well – his immense corpulence might have come with his later years' (p.599). At no other point in the book is there any doubt cast over Fosco's actual obesity, and at no point, contrary to Wynne's view, is it suggested that the character's appearance is the result of a particular faculty for physical transformation or the result of a clever disguise. As for Count Fosco's at times effeminate manner, it seems in no way comparable to Vidocq's alleged propensity to make himself up as a woman in order to trick his adversaries. Wynne's comparison therefore seems somewhat tenuous. However, her view of how close morally the two characters are is significantly more accurate: Fosco and Vidocq are very similar in the way they shroud their espionage with a certain respectability. Like Fosco, who only refers to his undercover work with the Austrians as 'diplomacy' and 'delicate political missions' (p.618 and *passim*), Vidocq liked to claim that his role as a secret agent was entirely respectable:

Mon rôle, en matière de police politique, s'est borné à l'exécution de quelques mandats du procureur du roi et des ministres, mais ces mandats eussent été exécutés sans moi, et ils présentaient d'ailleurs toutes les conditions de la légalité. Et puis aucune puissance humaine, aucun appât de récompense, ne m'aurait déterminé à agir conformément à des principes et à des sentiments qui ne sont pas les miens.²⁸

In addition, as Wynne emphasises, both figures have the same sociological approach to crime. A comparison of one of the rare comments on the subject made by Count Fosco with some of Vidocq's thoughts in his *Mémoires* is highly instructive:

Which gets on best, do you think, of two poor starving dressmakers – the woman who resists temptation and is honest or the woman who falls under temptation and steals? [...] [T]hat second woman is relieved, as the breaker of a commandment, when she would have been left to starve, as the keeper of it (*The Woman In White*, p.258).

[L]a misère doit enfanter des crimes ; et la misère, dans un état social mal combiné, n'est pas un fléau dont on puisse se préserver toujours, même quand on est laborieux (*Mémoires*, p.806).

There are other elements too which can justify a close comparison. Apart from some social considerations, the two men share some philosophical and metaphysical views; they have, for example, the tortured feeling of being at the mercy of an inscrutable fate. So while Vidocq bitterly laments 'qu'une fatale propension à laquelle [il] obéissai[t] malgré [lui], et

souvent à [s]on insu, [l]e rapprochai[t] constamment des personnes ou des objets qui devaient le plus s'opposer à ce [qu'il] maîtrisât [s]a destinée'(p.669), Count Fosco wonders and exclaims: 'What are we (I ask) but puppets in a show-box ? Oh, omnipotent Destiny, pull our strings gently! Dance us mercifully off our miserable little stage!'(p.619). Here, the metaphor of the puppet can be compared to that of the 'volant pris entre deux raquettes' used by Vautrin in *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes* to express, if not his inability, then at least the adventurer's difficulty in remaining master of his own destiny. Count Fosco and Balzac's Vidocq-double have another characteristic in common: the power of their gaze. Like Vautrin, Collins' character exerts an almost hypnotic power over those around him. Even Mrs Halcombe, the most perspicacious and phlegmatic figure in the novel, succumbs to this strange power: 'I think the influence I am now trying to find is in his eyes. They are the most unfathomable grey eyes I ever saw, and they have at times a cold, clear, beautiful, irresistible glitter in them which forces me to look at him, and yet causes me sensations, when I do look, which I would rather not feel' (p.241). Like Vautrin, Count Fosco seems to have the capacity, simply by looking, to penetrate the recesses of the intimate private thoughts of the other characters: 'His eyes' Mrs Halcombe relates later, 'seemed to reach my inmost soul through the thickening obscurity of the twilight'(p.310). Fosco, like Vautrin, but also as we have seen, like the Vidocq of Raban and Saint Hilaire, assumes the appearance of an individual who is possessed of superior knowledge. Vidocq's different literary incarnations have only served to strengthen the image the adventurer projected of himself in his *Mémoires*, where he was given to presenting himself as the generous purveyor of some valuable, empirical knowledge, the dissemination of which was in his view critical for the redemption of society as a whole. By perpetuating Vidocq's image through the character of Fosco, Collins turned him into an almost omniscient being:

This same man [...] can talk, when anything happens to rouse him, with a daring independence of thought, a knowledge of books in every language, and an experience of society in half the capitals of Europe, which would make him the prominent personage of any assembly in the civilised world. [He] is one of the first experimental chemists living, and has discovered, among other wonderful inventions, a mean of petrifying the body after death. (p.243)

Despite the hyperbole in this description, some of the skills attributed to Count Fosco are grounded in reality. Vidocq was indeed familiar with several languages, had a keen interest in chemistry and its effects on the human anatomy (he was notably a past master in the art of changing his physiognomy with the use of certain products) and was also responsible for the

invention of a number of tools and techniques which lay at the heart of the first successes in forensic criminology. There can be no doubt, in the light of all these facts, that Collins had recourse to the French detective when creating his adventurer. Even though no mention is ever made of any prison history - which would have confirmed the foundation upon which the character of Count Fosco was constructed – it is nevertheless the image of a convict which first occurs to Mrs. Halcombe when she is confronted by the spectacle of the count playing with pet mice: ‘They are pretty, innocent-looking little creatures, but the sight of them creeping about a man’s body [...] suggests hideous ideas of men dying in prison with the crawling creatures of the dungeon preying on them undisturbed’ (p.253).

Raban and Saint Hilaire, Jerrold, Balzac and Collins all drew their inspiration from the character of Vidocq. Each one of them looked at this extraordinary man through different eyes: Raban and Saint Hilaire took upon themselves all the phobias held by the ruling classes of the time for marginal individuals and turned Vidocq into what amounted to a monster. Jerrold, for his part, chose to focus on the humorous, comical side of the famous convict’s exploits; Balzac, through Vautrin, made him the champion for social criticism; Collins, in representing the Gallic adventurer in the guise of Count Fosco, to some extent gave us one of the first ever examples of a gentleman-thief.

But beyond the differences, it is possible to pinpoint some significant areas of common ground between *Les mémoires d’un forçat*, Balzac’s works concerning Vautrin and Collins’ novel. The first relates to the physical appearance of the character; to borrow the phrase used by Raban and Saint Hilaire, the adventurer always has ‘des formes colossales’. Then we have the incredible keenness of the figure’s gaze which seems to read into the very soul of everyone and from which he seems to draw a certain hypnotic power. These two characteristics are representative of the power vested in outlaw figures by 19th century literature; they were symbols of the romantic individual’s revolt against artistic and social conventions. The power of the adventurer is thus proportional to the violence and the excesses of his struggle against a society which is intolerant of his marginality. This power is not only physical but psychological and intellectual too: marginality becomes in this instance synonymous with spiritual independence, critical objectivity, perceptiveness, meditative retreat and lastly omniscience. If such a figure seems able to penetrate the deepest thoughts of everyone he meets and to anticipate their movements, it is because he has acquired a greater knowledge of society from his incessant struggle against it.

This article has taken only a handful of representations of Vidocq in the literature of the nineteenth century; the French adventurer inspired many other authors including Hugo, Dickens, Ponson du Terrail and Poe. But it will provide some idea of the influence François Vidocq had on his contemporaries, of the way in which they perceived the social construct of which he was an example and of the contribution he made to the rise in popularity of a range of stock characters including the bandit-cum-sleuth, the modern day Robin Hood and the gentleman-thief.

Loïc P. Guyon
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¹ Source : Jean Savant, *Vidocq après 1827* (Paris : Les Bibliophiles de l'Originale, 1967).

² See my article : 'Eugène-François Vidocq, un aventurier picaresque au XIX^e siècle' in *Actes du colloque Abenteurer als Helden der Literatur/L'aventurier comme héros de la littérature* (Suttgart : Metzler-Verlag, avril 2002). 'In Vidocq's footsteps' is based on a paper, given in French at the 16th congress of the International Comparative Literature Association held in Pretoria in August 2000 and entitled 'L'ombre de Vidocq, une étude comparée de quelques références explicites et implicites à l'aventurier Vidocq dans la littérature du XIX^e siècle'.

³ Louis-François Raban et Emile Marco de Saint Hilaire, *Mémoires d'un forçat ou Vidocq dévoilé*, 4 vols (Paris : H.Langlois fils, 1828-1829).

⁴ Douglas William Jerrold, *Vidocq, the French police spy* (London : Duncombe, 1829).

⁵ *Op. cit.*, 'Avis au lecteur'.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 'chapitre I'.

⁷ *Ibid.*, my italics.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 'chapitre 14', p.310.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.50.

¹⁰ Christophe Charle, *Histoire sociale du XIX^e siècle* (Paris : Editions du Seuil, « Points Histoire », 1991), p.328.

¹¹ 'Chapitre 14', p.344. Considered as «charlatanerie» by Napoléon, phrenology progressively imposes its views under the Restoration to gain the status of real science under the July monarchy. The first 'société savante' dedicated to phrenology was created on 14 January 1831. To learn more on this subject, see Marc Renneville's remarkable work, *Le langage des crânes, une histoire de la phrénologie* (Paris : Institut d'édition Sanofi-Synthélabo, «Les empêcheurs de penser en rond», 2000).

¹² *Op. cit.*, p.3.

¹³ *Ibid.*, I, 4, p.13.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, I, 5, p.14.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.15.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.17.

¹⁸ René Rémond, in the second volume of his *Introduction à l'histoire de notre temps* (Paris : Editions du Seuil, 1974), underlines 'qu'il y a, dans la société [française] du XIX^e siècle, toutes sortes d'éléments instables qui sont facteurs de désordre. Ce sont , tout d'abord, hérités de l'Ancien Régime, les errants, les vagabonds, cheminots, en bref, le quatrième état, qui n'a pas de travail, ne s'est pas intégré dans la société'(p.66). 'Les classes populaires inspirent, au XIX^e siècle, une terreur dont nous n'avons plus idée'(p.65).

¹⁹ Louis Dominique Cartouche was a famous outlaw, chief of a gang of robbers, who defied the French authorities for years before being arrested and executed (beaten to death) on the Place de Grève in 1721.

²⁰ *Op. cit.*, p.4.

²¹ *Assassins, hors-la-loi, brigands de grands chemins : mémoires et histoires de Lacenaire, Robert Macaire, Vidocq et Mandrin*, ed. by Michel Le Bris (Brussels : Editions Complexe, 1996), p.16. Page references of Vidocq's *Mémoires* will be included in the article after quotations.

²² All references to Balzac's novels included in this article are quoted from *La comédie humaine*, préf. par Rolland Chollet, 24 vols (Lausanne : Editions Rencontre, 1969).

²³ L.Gozlan, *Balzac chez lui* (Paris : M.Lévy frères, 1862). Jean Savant gives the year 1847 for this meeting.

²⁴ Eugène Sue, *Les mystères de Paris* (Paris : Editions Robert Laffont, «Bouquins», 1989), part II, chapter 7, p.204. Vautrin appears here as an incarnation of the romantic ideology which, as Christine Marcandier-Colard puts it in *Crimes de sang et scènes capitales* (Paris : PUF, 1998), 'accorde aux hommes et aux femmes supérieurs un droit absolu et poétique au meurtre, couronnement de leur puissance et de leur beauté'(p.10).

²⁵ Wilkie Collins, 'Vidocq, French Detective', in *All The Year Round*, (14 July 1860), pp.331-336, (21 July 1860), pp.335-360.

²⁶ D. Wynne, 'Vidocq, The Spy: A Possible Source For Count Fosco In Wilkie Collins's "The Woman In White"', in *Notes And Queries* (September 1997).

²⁷ Wilkie Collins, *The Woman In White* (Harmondsworth, England : Penguin Books, 1974), p.584. Page references will be included in the article after quotations.

²⁸ Vidocq, *Mémoires*, in *Assassins, hors-la-loi, brigands de grands chemins : mémoires et histoires de Lacenaire, Robert Macaire, Vidocq et Mandrin*, ed. by Michel Le Bris (Brussels : Editions Complexe, 1996), p.811. Page references of Vidocq's *Mémoires* will be included in the article after quotations.