"For several years now, the crime industry hasn't been delivering the goods," popular novelist Paul Féval wrote in 1866. The vogue for literary realism and naturalism had passed, he observed, and theatre and operetta had abandoned bawdy humor and melodrama. The current rise in the popularity of crime literature, in contrast, was compelling. Féval calculated upwards of two million upstanding and intelligent French readers who, in the parlance of merchants, were simply dying of hunger for crime stories. Therefore, he admonished sensitive French writers to stop up their elegant inkwells and instead imbibe a little blood.

At current levels of production, Féval insisted, there was simply no way for bargain value crime to keep up with popular demand. To maintain France's national health in this decadent century, he mused, readers' consumption of murders needed to increase twice over, three times, or even a hundred fold. Success in that effort would involve a massive advertising campaign. Regrettably, he conceded, the following short announcement would have to suffice:

_Unforgettable, Colossal, Stunning Best Seller!

THE CRIME FACTORY
A DREADFUL NOVEL
By a Murderer

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1 Paul Féval, "Preface" to _La fabrique des crimes_ (Paris: Librairie Dentu, 1898), 1-4. The following summary, quotations, and formatting are from this edition. All translations are by the author, unless otherwise credited.
In one hundred feuilletons with seventy-three murders per installment, yielding an impressive total of 7,300 victims, Féval proclaimed that this was the veritable national novel all Europe had been waiting for. And we are only talking about monstrous criminal acts, he noted, not taking into account the novel's additionally vast number of thefts, rapes, cases of child smuggling, kidnapping, fraud, forgeries, goods sold at false weight, confidence scams, break-ins by scaling walls and picking locks, the corruption of minors, or crimes "guided by prudence." This book, Féval's insisted, would have it all. "This is a work without precedent, striking, staggering, incisive, convulsive, true, incredible, terrifying, monumental, entombed, audacious, furious and monstrous—in a word, AGAINST NATURE. After this, nothing more is possible, not even advanced putrefaction. We must . . . mount the scaffold!"

This humorous preface to La fabrique des crimes was, in fact, Féval's sustained parody of his own métier, that of the feuilletoniste who wrote popular novels in installments for daily newspapers or weekly magazines. After a decade of false starts as a journalist and novelist, Féval had finally made it into the feuilleton trade with Les Mystères de Londres, published in Le Courrier Français (1843–1844). Féval went on to write more than a dozen feuilleton novels over the following decade, including Le Fils du Diable and Le Bossu, and he gained a reputation as one of the "masters of the feuilleton novel," joining the company of such popular authors as Eugène Sue, Frédéric Soulié, and Alexandre Dumas. He was even acknowledged as one of the more literary feuilleton authors, which garnered him a favorable entry in Eugène de Mirecourt's series of short literary biographies, Les Contemporains.  

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In the 1860s, however, Féval was eclipsed by parvenu writer Pierre Alexis Ponson du Terrail, author of the wildly popular "Rocambole" series. Unlike Féval, there was absolutely nothing "literary" about Ponson's interminable Rocambole series, widely ridiculed by critics and parodied in the popular press for its totally unbelievable and completely over the top "rocambolesque" plots. Yet despite his lack of talent, Ponson had made a tremendous innovation in his feuilleton novel: the series protagonist, Rocambole, was not a virtuous and avenging hero, but an energetic, conniving, and murderous criminal. The series was a popular sensation, rendering Ponson the most widely read popular fiction author of the French Second Empire. When Ponson temporarily suspended the Rocambole series in 1860 to turn his attention to other projects, Féval jumped into the vacancy with *Les Habits Noirs*, a feuilleton epic about a criminal secret society of "Black Coats," spanning thousands of printed pages and produced over twelve years, 1863–1875. When Ponson returned to his series with *La Résurrection de Rocambole* in 1865, once again Féval was eclipsed by the more popular author.

So when Féval lampooned "the crime factory" of the feuilleton publishing industry for achieving popularity with astronomical body counts and numbers of crimes, he wrote from an insider's perspective. It was his ironic acknowledgement that the larger commercial forces of "industrial literature," the very means that had made his own career successful, were more responsive to the demands of popular readership than to literary prowess. In the marketplace, mass consumption determined cultural value. Popular literature in general and crime writing in particular were roundly condemned in the institutions of French official culture—the *Revue de Deux Mondes*, the Académie

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3 In nineteenth-century France, the adjective "industrielle" was employed more frequently than "commercial" in relation to print mass culture, reflecting the new emphasis upon the production aspect of industrial capitalism as a politically and socially equalizing force. See Lise Dumasy, *La querelle du roman-feuilleton: Littérature, presse et politique, un débat précurseur (1836–1848)* (Grenoble: ELLUG Université Stendahl, 1999), 12.
française, the Abbé Belthléem's *Romans à lire et romans à proscrire*—and most of these popular authors and series were later denied inclusion in the canon of French national literature. Nonetheless, this unofficial realm of commercial mass culture constitutes an important cultural reservoir of collective French popular beliefs and the era's unrealized social, moral, and political aspirations. Neither the mimetic representation of social reality nor the expression of a primitive or folk *mentalité*, crime stories emerged from a dynamic process of cultural production and reception through which a collective social imagination (*l'imaginaire social*) was popularly fashioned.

The fortunes and misfortunes of feuilleton writer Paul Féval help to illuminate how and why this was so. Féval was born in Brittany on 27 September 1817, the third son of Jean-Nicolas Féval, the Royal Court advisor of Rennes, and Jeanne-Joséphine Le Baron de Létang, the daughter of the city's Court of Appeals prosecutor. After the death of his father in 1827, Paul Féval received a scholarship to study at the Collège Royal de Rennes. During the July Revolution of 1830, Féval's mother moved her children to a secluded family manor in Morbihan, a department along the Atlantic coast of far western Brittany. The chateau served as a rendezvous for latter-day Chouans, who dreamed of their own rural insurgency against the Revolution. As the locals worked late into the night hand manufacturing their own lead shot bullets, the teenaged Paul delighted in their tales of Chouan exploits, counter-revolutionary conspiracies, and ferocious massacres.

Returning to Rennes shortly thereafter, Féval received his *baccalauréat* at age sixteen and, following in his father's footsteps, entered law school and earned his license at age

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twenty. His only venture into the courtroom as a defense attorney, though, proved disastrous. His client, a chicken thief, kept changing his story over the course of the trial, resulting in his conviction and Féval’s public humiliation. After five years of performing office work for the court, Féval moved to Paris toward the end of 1838 where, through some family connections, he began an apprenticeship as a banker. Fortuitously, he also immersed himself in reading novels and, inspired by Honoré de Balzac, began to dream of becoming a writer. Quitting his bank job with "ten Louis in his pocket," he rented a sixth-floor attic apartment and began to experience the hunger and penury of his newly adopted career. After several fitful starts at fiction writing, Féval managed to eke out a living as a copyeditor, writing entries for *Recueils encyclopédiques* and the *Dictionnaire de conversation*, as a playwright of "third-class vaudevilles," and as an occasional journalist for Legitimist newspapers.


"That's it! Let's get to work!"

"On what?" Féval said.

"On our Mysteries, my friend, our Mysteries! Look, it's the same thing . . . We just switch English names for the French ones, beer for

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6 Ibid., 25.
wine, and we're in Great Britain! The first installment appears tomorrow."

From 20 December 1832 to 12 December 1844, Les Mystères de Londres appeared in the Courrier Français under the name of Sir Francis Trollopp, to lend the feuilleton an air of English authenticity. The plot turned on the exploits of the Marquis Rio Santo, the alias of the condemned Irish revolutionary Fergus O'Breane, an avenger opposed to the "crushing and odious economic system" of British capitalism. The feuilleton was a success for Joly, leading to a series of installment novel contracts for Féval, including Les Aventures d'un émigré in La Quotidienne (1844), Les Amours de Paris in Le Courrier Français (1845), La Quittance de minuit in Le Journal des Débats (1846), and Le Fils du Diable in L'Époque (1846). His literary success placed him in the ranks of Alexandre Dumas and Frédéric Soulié, and soon Féval was widely regarded as one of the era's more promising authors. He continued to write at a feverish pitch during the Revolution of 1848—a highly disconcerting event for the conservative Féval, who fell into a debilitating depression in 1854. During his recovery, Féval met his future wife, Françoise-Joséphine Euphrasie Pénoyée, the daughter of his attending physician.

With the death of Eugène Sue in 1857, Féval seemed poised to become France's most popular author—but then disaster of an altogether different nature struck. That year, Les Drames de Paris, a feuilleton by upstart writer Pierre Alexis Ponson du Terrail, appeared in the newspaper La Patrie, and it became an instant sensation. Within the year, one of the more obscure figures in Ponson's sprawling feuilleton, named Rocambole, emerged as the series' most dynamic character. The thing was, Rocambole was a lying, thieving murderer, rather than the kind of avenging hero in the mold of Sue's Rodolphe from Les

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7 Ibid., 37-38.
8 “FÉVAL, Paul (Henry Coretin)," in Mesplède, ed., Dictionnaire des littératures policières.
Mystères de Paris. Ponson's rambling series included three separate novels—L'Héritage mystérieux, Le Club des Valets de Cœur, and Les Exploits de Rocambole—over as many years. By 1860, Ponson had emerged as the most popular feuilleton writer of the Second Empire, thanks largely to the accidental invention of his criminal anti-hero, Rocambole.9

What galled Féval about all of this was that, unlike himself, Ponson was a hack writer with no literary talent whatsoever. When Les Drames de Paris ran aground in the fourth title in the series, Les Chevaliers du clair de lune, which reduced Rocambole to a behind-the-scenes criminal schemer, Ponson abandoned the series to work on other projects. Sensing the opportunity to cash in on the current enthusiasm for crime fiction, Féval jumped into the fray in 1862 with Jean Diable, a crime novel about an international arch-criminal and murderer named John Devil, who was pursued by Scotland Yard detective Gregory Temple. The following year Féval launched Les Habits Noirs, a criminal saga that he hoped would rival—even surpass—Ponson's Rocambole.

In 1863, Féval's crime feuilleton premiered in Le Constitutionnel, the "newspaper of business, politics and literature" and a publishing venue for both eminent and popular writers, including Alfred de Musset, George Sand, Balzac, Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve, Sue, and Dumas. Les Habits Noirs tells the story of the misfortunes and vengeance of André Maynotte, a metalworker framed by the secret society of "Black Coats" for a crime he did not commit. The story opens in 1825 with a young Alsatian named Jean-Baptiste Schwartz, who was down on his luck and traveling on foot to Caen. He is approached on the way by a stranger named Monsieur Lecoq, who persuades him to drive a coach from the city of Caen and

then to abandon it at a predetermined location. Unbeknownst to Schwartz, Lecoq is scheming to steal four hundred thousand francs from a business safe by means of a brassard ciselé, a ruby-studded metal armband fashioned by Maynotte to protect the wearer from the safe's metal trap mechanism. Once the money and protective armband are discovered missing, Maynotte realizes that he will be considered the prime suspect in the crime. André flees Caen, and he sends his wife Julie on to Paris in a coach that coincidentally is occupied by Jean-Baptiste Schwartz, who has been handsomely rewarded by Lecoq for his services. Trusting in Providence, André turns himself in to the police, believing his innocence will triumph in court.

Of course, this does not happen. Not only is a mountain of evidence amassed against André, he is represented by a worthless defense lawyer who, he gradually realizes, will assure his conviction. Every day from prison he writes to Julie, who is living in Paris under an alias, to lament his miserable circumstances and reassure her of his love. One evening, though, a neighboring prisoner bursts through his prison cell wall. The visitor tells André that someone called L'Habit Noir had previously occupied this cell. This mysterious person was the leader of a band of criminals called the Habits Noirs who recognize one another with a secret greeting, "Fera-t-il jour demain? (Will there be daylight tomorrow?)." During his incarceration, the Habit Noir had rigged the window bars of the cell to serve as an escape route from the prison. Fashioning a makeshift rope from clothes, André successfully descends the wall, though his companion falls in the attempt and breaks his neck. André takes his companion's clothes and identity, and flees to England. When Julie stops responding to his letters, he surreptitiously returns to Paris just in time to witness the marriage of Giovanna Maria Reni (Julie) to the recently ennobled Baron Jean-Baptiste Schwartz. Heartbroken, André departs for London, consoling himself that at least he is a free man, only to find himself arrested for theft and sentenced to hang—the victim of the nefarious machinations of the Habits Noirs.
Jumping ahead to 1842, the remainder of the novel revolves around intrigues by the Habits Noirs. Readers learn about the background of this secret society, an international band of criminals across Europe that numbers in the hundreds of thousands. The chief Habit Noir is Colonel Bozzo-Corona, called the Père-à-tous (Father of All), a frail centenarian who is the last of the Corsican godfathers. The Habit Noir's chief associate and heir apparent is Monsieur Lecoq, known to the criminal underworld as Toulonnais-l'Amité (The Toulon Swindler). A host of secondary characters are introduced as well, notably the conniving and miserable hunchback Trois-Pattes (Three-Feet), and two pairs of irrepressible partners, Similor and Échalot (Goldy and Bum), and Cocotte and Piquepuce (Pungent and Fleabite). Supplementing the activities of the secret criminal society, a multitude of intrigues—including concealed identities and unrequited romances—surround the family of the Baron and Countess Schwartz.

At the finale of Féval's sprawling novel, with Colonel Bozzo on his deathbed, Monsieur Lecoq schemes to betray the Habits Noirs and to recover the missing four hundred thousand francs, once again secured within an enormous safe and requiring the brassard ciselé to open it, for himself alone. Following the death of the colonel, who is publicly venerated at his funeral as a great philanthropist, Lecoq commands Trois-Pattes to organize the Habits Noirs to carry out a grand theft under the cover of a great ball being hosted by the Baron Schwartz. Lecoq has orchestrated a deception, however, as he and Trois-Pattes instead sneak off to the safe room on their own. Once Lecoq has opened the massive safe, however, he finds it filled with counterfeit bank notes, and Trois-Pattes reveals himself as . . . André Maynotte! Not only is André alive, he produces the sacred Scapular of the Master of Mercy entrusted to him by Colonel Bozzo, which means that André, not Lecoq, has inherited the vast fortune of the Habit Noir.

A mortal struggle between Lecoq and Maynotte ensues, just as the Baron and Countess Schwartz (Julie) appear in the doorway. Lecoq fires a two-shot revolver, the Baron is killed,
and André is wounded. In a supreme effort, André heaves his nemesis toward the safe and pulls its trigger mechanism. Lecoq's head is crushed in the safe's massive door, his mangled body collapses in a bloody heap, and André faints to the floor. Julie, rushes to cradle André, overjoyed to find a still faint pulse in her true love. She declares her eternal love for André, but the bullet has found its path and severed his artery. Guests dancing at the Schwartz ball have remained happily oblivious to these proceedings, but rumors begin to circulate, "Monsieur Schwartz is dead! The Black Coats! . . ."¹⁰

Les Habits Noirs was a resounding popular success for Féval and Le Constitutionnel, and Hachette issued the novel in a single volume that same year. Yet all of this turned out to be a pyrrhic victory for Féval. Two years later, Ponson released a new Rocambole adventure, La Résurrection de Rocambole in Le Petit Journal, one of the new mass-circulation newspapers sold by the issue rather than by subscription. In this rebirth, Ponson transformed his criminal anti-hero into an equally rocambolesque avenger hero. The revitalized Rocambole feuilleton garnered Le Petit Journal fifty thousand new readers; the following year La Petite Presse benefited even more by acquiring one hundred thousand new readers through the serialization of Ponson's Le Dernier mot de Rocambole.¹¹ Féval responded to this challenge by redoubling his efforts in the continuation of the Les Habits Noirs saga, adding six novels to the series over the next decade in various newspapers: Cœur d'acier (1866) and La rue de Jérusalem (1868) in Le Constitutionnel; L'Avaleur de sabers (1867) in L'Époque, L'Arme invisible ou Le Secret des Habits Noirs, suivi de Maman Léo (1869) and Les Compagnons du trésor (1870–1872) in Le National; and La Bande Cadet (1874–1875) in L'Évenement.¹²

¹⁰ Féval, Les Habits Noirs, 1:396.
¹² Recently, four novels in the series have been translated into English by Brian Stableford under the title "The Black Coats" (Encino, CA: Black Coat Press). They are The Parisian Jungle (Les Habits Noirs, 2008), Salem Street
Yet though the series was a great success for Féval, Ponson remained the more popular author for the rest of the Second Empire.

Historical shifts in the production and consumption of popular literature under the Second Empire are critical in understanding Ponson's popular success over Féval. In literary history and criticism, Féval is widely acknowledged as the superior author. With roots in the storytelling traditions of Brittany, Féval infused an insolent, ironic, and satirical sensibility into his novels. Viewed in terms of historical continuity, Féval's use of criminal sobriquets among the characters in Les Habits Noirs was a contemporary reworking of Bibliothèque bleue stories about rogues, thieves, and gypsies that had been popular in France for more than three centuries. In this light, the leader of the Habits Noirs can be viewed as a corollary to the traditional Grand Coësre or "Beggar King," who ruled over an argotique entourage of inquisitors and archbishops, as well as a much larger society of swindlers, beggars, and vagabonds. Féval also occasionally peppered his text with criminal argot, most famously in the secret phrase shared among the Habits Noirs, "Fera-t-il jour demain? (Will there be daylight tomorrow?)," which actually means, "Will a crime be committed tomorrow?"

The reply to that question, "De minuit à midi et de midi à minuit, si c'est la volonté du Père (From midnight to noon and noon to midnight, if Father so wishes)," provides a bridge from that traditional mode of crime storytelling to a more modern

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(La rue de Jérusalem, 2005), The Invisible Arm (L'Arme invisible, 2006), and The Companions of the Treasure (Les Compagnons du trésor, 2008).


14 See Roger Chartier, Figures de la gueuserie, collection "Bibliothèque bleue" (Paris: Montalba, 1982).

15 The argot phrase is typically used in the present tense: "Il fait jour (It's daylight)" means "to commit a crime." Jean-Marc Lofficier and Randy Lofficier, Shadowmen: Heroes and Villains of French Pulp Fiction (Encino: Black Coat Press, 2003), 122-23.
popular sensibility. For Colonel Bozzo is not a stalwart and imperious figure, but an old and decrepit mastermind who silently orchestrates a vast and international network of criminal conspirators, more akin to the fantastic Masonic conspiracies of power popular in Féval's time than to the inverted feudal traditions parodied in the *Bibliothèque bleue*. Similarly, the Colonel's lieutenant, M. Lecoq, is a modern character type, made in the image of Vidocq, the condemned criminal turned detective hero. Like the real-life Vidocq, Féval's Lecoq runs a crooked private detective agency to illicitly profit from his bourgeois clientele. In addition, the name Lecoq invokes and parodies one of the foundational symbols of the French nation, *le coq* or the Gallic cock.\(^\text{16}\)

It is this quality of traditional storytelling combined with an ironic contemporary sensibility, an ear for popular idioms, and a disdain for modern society that made Féval the superior author. In an early thesis on *paralittérature*, Andrée Blavier noted particular literary characteristics in Féval's writing that set his work apart from the vast body of popular novels produced as feuilletons: parodying the popular crime genre as a method of social satire; employing a variety of techniques to produce ironic humor (i.e., *clin-d'œil*, hyperbole, *ad infinitum*, exclamations, false naiveté, typographic inflection through the use of italics and capitalization); showing restraint in the application of dark humor during horrific scenes; and using authorial commentary as a mode of narrative digression.\(^\text{17}\) More recently, literary critic Charles Grivel has asserted that an "infernal logic (diabolisme)" organizes Féval's writing, providing it with an intrinsically ironic character.\(^\text{18}\) Whether or not Féval's contemporaries recognized these exact characteristics in his writing, they certainly affirmed his literary achievement by twice electing him President of the


\(^\text{17}\) Andrée Blavier, "*Le Jeu romanesque dans les Habits Noirs* de Paul Féval" (PhD. diss., University of Liège, 1969).

Yet what Ponson realized better than Féval was that, in the shifting commercial trends of the popular literature, authorial skill was rapidly taking a back seat to the preferences of a popular contemporary readership. With the advent of the daily newspaper at a sou (a five-centime piece, roughly a penny), new novels serialized in fifteen-centime installments, and "popular library" series of books that sold for less than one franc per volume, the masses could now afford to buy contemporary literature. What Ponson may have understood better than his more talented colleague was that "la suite au prochain numéro (to be continued in the next issue)," was the dynamic that fed the relations between newspaper sales, a writer's income, and readers' pleasure. Or perhaps Ponson was simply the first to fully capitalize upon that mechanism as the motor of his own writing technique—a slapdash, cultural pastiche that promiscuously borrowed and copied from all genres of fiction and from sensationalist newspaper faits divers. The kind of social imagination produced by Ponson's rocambolesque fiction was neither mimesis nor irony, but a confabulation collectively fashioned by the commercial consumption of a popular readership. As Walter Benjamin would later articulate in his famous essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," the literary aura provided by individual authorship had been superseded by the cult value of serialized mass culture.

It is hard to say whether Féval came to a similar realization or whether an apoplectic response to such conditions contributed to his second major psychological collapse and subsequent "conversion" to ultra-Catholicism in 1875. It is equally possible that the recent round of revolutionary activity in the Paris Commune and the establishment of the French Third Republic,

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19 The Société des gens de lettres was established in 1837 by a group of French authors to protect their commercial rights and combat plagiarism in the popular press and in other roman-feuilletons. "Société des genres de lettres (SGDL)," in Compère, Dictionnaire du roman populaire francophone.
as well his personal financial ruin by having invested heavily in speculative enterprises in the Ottoman Empire, simply exacerbated his lifelong conservative political and moral convictions. Féval abandoned the *Habits Noirs* cycle and spent the final decade of his life writing confessional autobiographies (*Étapes d'une conversion*, four volumes, 1877–1881, and *Coup de grâce*, 1881) and proselytizing works, such as *Jésuites!* (1878). He also re-edited his earlier works of fiction to make them less morally reprehensible. Despite the continuing support by cultural luminaries such as Barbey d'Aurevilly, Alphonse Daudet, and Victorien Sardou, Féval never attained the level of official or popular literary recognition he craved.²⁰ Féval actually suffered apoplexy following the death of his wife in April 1884, and he remained paralyzed until the end of his own life in 1887. It fell to his third son, Paul Féval fils, to take up his father's métier as a popular novelist.

Féval's true literary successor, however, was his former secretary, Émile Gaboriau, author of the Père Tabaret and Monsieur Lecoq detective novels.²¹ Not only did Gaboriau learn his craft as an apprentice under Féval, he transformed the Vidocq-style character of Lecoq from a private detective criminal into a respectable Sûreté detective, one who abides by the law and pursues his suspect through methodical investigation rather than by subterfuge. Gaboriau also represents a shift in the roman populaire away from the crime and adventure novel and toward the roman judiciaire or "police procedural." For this reason, in the French canon of the detective novel, Gaboriau occupies a prominent position between Edgar Allen Poe and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

Still, while *Les Habits Noirs* did not bring Féval as much personal success as he had hoped, the series had a profound influence upon the subsequent development of the French roman policier. In addition to the new kind of police detective

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represented by Gaboriau's Monsieur Lecoq, a fascination with criminal anti-heroes and avenger vigilantes continued to grow in popularity among French readers into the early twentieth century, reaching fruition in "Les Terribles" of Maurice Leblanc's Arsène Lupin, Gaston Leroux's Rouletabille and Chéri-Bibi, and Pierre Souvestre and Marcel Allain's Fantômas. The fortunes of Féval's crime factory would continue to nourish the collective social imagination of French readers for decades to come.

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22 This characterization of these characters as "Les Terribles" is taken from Antoinette Peské and Pierre Marty, Les Terribles (Paris: Frédéric Chambriand, 1951).