



The Château-Rouge and the Père Lunette: Insights into the 'slumming' culture of late nineteenth-century France

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Richard Griffiths

Abstract

In the late nineteenth century, in the old medieval streets remaining behind the façades of the great new 'haussmannised' thoroughfares of central Paris, many low *bouges* still harboured criminals of all kinds, and served as refuges for the 'misérables' at the lower end of the social scale. Two of these *bouges*, the Château-Rouge and the Père Lunette, in the area between the place Maubert and the boulevard Saint Michel, are known to modern readers mainly through J.-K. Huysmans' description of them in *La Bièvre et Saint-Séverin* (1898). It turns out, however, that they were very well known at the time, and had been frequented and/or described over the years by many contemporary writers and artists such as Maurice Barrès, Rachilde, Oscar Méténier, Jean Lorrain, Albert Wolff, Rodolphe Darzens, Aristide Bruant, Marcel Schwob, Will Rothenstein, Robert Sherard and Oscar Wilde, as well as by journalists from France, Britain and the United States. Viewed through these writings, these places present us with a typical progression from authentic 'misère' to the status of inauthentic 'tourist attractions'. In the process, we gain some insight into the characteristics of late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Parisian 'slumming'.

Keywords

Maurice Barrès, *fin-de-siècle* low life, 'haussmannisation' of old Paris, J.-K. Huysmans, slumming, *tournée des grands-ducs*, Oscar Wilde

La mère Georgette, la laveuse, une des doyennes de la Maube, qui connut le Château-Rouge et le Père Lunette et le percement de la rue Lagrange, m'avait dit en 38... (Yonnet, 1954: 11)

This sentence in Jacques Yonnet's *Enchantements sur Paris* takes us from the late 1930s right back to the Paris of the period 1880–1900. Readers of J.-K. Huysmans will be familiar with the names of the two sinister *bouges*, the Château-Rouge in the rue Galande, and the Père Lunette in the rue des Anglais, which figured prominently in his book *La Bièvre et*

Corresponding author:

Richard Griffiths

Email: richardgriffiths473@btinternet.com

Saint-Séverin (1898). Yonnet, whose book vividly depicts the area between the place Maubert and the boulevard Saint-Michel during the Occupation 1940–4, may have known of these places through his reading of Huysmans, of course; but his mention of them seems to suggest that they were far more a part of collective local memory. Some historical and literary detective work has gradually revealed that they were in fact far better known than Huysmans appeared to have realised, and that a whole array of authors (including Maurice Barrès, Rachilde, Jean Lorrain, Oscar Méténier, Marcel Schwob, Rodolphe Darzens and Oscar Wilde) had frequented them, while from the early 1880s onwards an extensive literature, in books, pictures and newspapers, had been devoted to them.

All this shows us a number of things. First, that the middle-class fascination with low-life haunts, which had started at the time of Eugène Sue's *Mystères de Paris* (1842–3) (with its depiction of the *Lapin Blanc* in the rue des Fèves), in the wake of which writers such as Gérard de Nerval visited that and similar establishments like that of Paul Niquet, was still continuing (indeed, references to Sue abounded in this late nineteenth-century literature). Second, that the transformations taking place in Paris, with the new boulevards and wide roads cutting through the old street patterns, had created a nostalgic attraction for the remaining areas of narrow, miserable medieval streets such as that between the place Maubert and the church of Saint-Séverin. Third, that while there is no doubt that, to start with, these *bouges* were authentic, and often dangerous (being frequented by murderers, thieves and cut-throats), they gradually became attractive to middle-class dabblers in the 'frisson' of rubbing shoulders with *la pègre*, and eventually declined into tourist attractions. Indeed, by the end of the century they had become a part of the 'tournée des grands-ducs' – those tours of 'Paris by Night' so popular at that time.

The areas around the place Maubert and the rue Mouffetard, together with other central Parisian districts such as the Île de la Cité and the Palais-Royal, had been among the traditional areas of crime in Paris for centuries. By the late nineteenth century, as Dominique Kalifa has pointed out (2004), it had seemed for a while that the 'haussmannisation' of central Paris might have driven such crime out into the suburbs; but 'un étrange et paradoxal mouvement de recentrement accompagne et recouvre même souvent les décentrement évoqués'. In 1888 Gustave Aimard described the process:

Aussitôt que les grands boulevards, les larges rues, les squares et les magnifiques maisons nouvelles furent bâties, les gredins de toute espèce, avec cet instinct des fauves qui leur fait toujours retrouver leurs tanières, regagnèrent à pas de loup les bouges restés debout. (Aimard, 1888, quoted in Kalifa, 2004)

Prominent among the areas which Kalifa cites are the 'quartiers de la Maub' et de la Mouff', which he describes as being filled with 'lieux sinistres et dangereux, toujours dépeints comme des repaires d'escarpes et de chiffonniers' (Kalifa, 2004). The Château-Rouge and the Père Lunette were typical examples of this. These *bouges* were part of what Charles Rearick has described as the lowest category of Paris night-life: the 'squalid dance halls and cafés' which catered for the very poor and the destitute (Rearick, 1985: 96–7).

Umberto Eco graphically describes the aspect of the area around the place Maubert in the late nineteenth century, on the first page of his recent novel *The Prague Cemetery*:

A passerby on that grey morning in March 1897, crossing, at his own risk and peril, place Maubert or the Maub, as it was known in criminal circles ... would have found himself in one of the few spots

in Paris spared from Baron Haussmann's devastations, amidst a tangle of malodorous alleys ... From place Maubert, already scarred by boulevard Saint-Germain, a web of narrow lanes still branched off, such as rue Maître-Albert, rue Saint-Séverin, rue Galande, rue de la Bûcherie, rue Saint-Julien-le-Pauvre, as far as rue de la Huchette, littered with filthy hotels. (Eco, 2011: 1)

The Château-Rouge, at 57 rue Galande, also known as La Guillotine, was a *cabaret* and doss-house that existed in part of what had been in previous centuries a very grand house. Legend (much repeated by the authors we shall be reading) had it that the house had once belonged to Gabrielle d'Estrées, the mistress of Henri IV – though the legend was almost certainly untrue, and had originally been applied (equally spuriously) to a more famous Château-Rouge. This, known as the Bal du Château-Rouge, was a grand old house in extensive grounds on the rue de Clignancourt in northern Paris, which was converted in the 1840s into a very popular *bal public*, which closed in 1882 (and which some commentators – notably Garçon (1941) and Baldick (1958) – have unaccountably mixed up with our Château-Rouge). The house in the rue Galande had a very grand *porte cochère* onto the street, through which one entered a courtyard. The buildings off this were inhabited mainly by various artisans, but a large section was taken up by the *cabaret*, which occupied three large rooms on the ground floor and rooms above. It was frequented by thieves, prostitutes, pimps, ruffians and down-and-outs. For the down-and-outs it served as a place to sleep until they were all turned out into the street at 2 a.m. The clients tended to be very disorderly, but were kept in check by the proprietor, a certain Trollier (wrongly called by some, including Huysmans, Trolliet), a massive man who kept a variety of weapons, including coshes, lead piping and revolvers, behind the counter. The various rooms were as follows: the large first room was full of drinkers, and contained a zinc-covered bar, behind which Trollier presided. This led into a vast second room, whimsically entitled 'le salon', also filled with rowdy drinkers, many seated at tables. Off it, there was another smaller room, into which drunks were slung when incapable. There was also a very large room on the first floor, called the 'salle des morts', in which the poor homeless devils slept until they were turned out into the street at two in the morning.

The Père Lunette was a similar place in many respects, though it did not serve as a doss-house. It was a drinking-den in a narrow alley, the rue des Anglais. It too could be rowdy, and was full of the same kind of unsavoury clientele. There were two rooms only. In the first, there was a long bar, in front of which was always a vast and noisy crowd; behind this crowd were places to sit along the wall, reserved mainly for drunken old women. The second room, divided from this by a partition, was very narrow. It was called the 'Sénat', and was used mainly for entertainment in the form of bawdy songs. Its walls were covered with drawings and paintings, some obscene and others depicting celebrities of the day. This *cabaret* was called the Père Lunette because of its first owner, a certain Lefèvre, who wore a large pair of spectacles, often on top of his head. There was a sign outside in the form of a large pair of spectacles. By the 1880s the owner was a certain André Mary, whose physique and methods of keeping order appear to have matched those of Trollier. After his death in 1888, his wife took over the business for a short time, before eventually handing it over to her nephew.

These are the two *cabarets* in this area that were continually described in this period. We know that there were others, including the apparently notorious Crèmerie Alexandre described by Huysmans in 1898; but very little in the way of coverage was given to them, compared with the two others.

1880–5: The *habitués*

In the 1880s a number of literary figures began to show an interest in the low life of the Quartier Saint-Séverin. Probably the first article on this subject was Oscar Méténier's 'Tableau de Paris: Chez le Père Lunette', published in the journal *Panurge* on 4 February 1883. It takes the form of one of those prose-poems depicting scenes of modern Parisian life that had become so popular at this time, partly owing to the success of Huysmans' efforts in the genre, of which a number had been gathered into his recently appeared *Croquis parisiens* (1880). Méténier's piece is highly colourful. He starts with a depiction of the scene in the rue des Anglais:

La rue est étroite, sale, puante, noire; quand la nuit vient, son aspect horrible ferait reculer le passant le plus déterminé. Un peuple hailloneux et déguenillé grouille. Chiffonniers, escarpes, crochets, tout cela s'agite, crie, hurle, jure, siffle, glapit. La lueur blafarde des lanternes des hôtels borgnes, où l'on loge à la nuit, illumine par instants des faces blêmes et sinistres.

We now enter the Père Lunette, 'le rendez-vous de l'aristocratie du crime et de la misère'. The chaotic behaviour of the customers is described in vivid terms, and also, behind the counter, Père Lunette himself, 'les manches retroussés et les bras croisés, faisant saillir une formidable paire de biceps'. In the second *salle* are to be found 'des créatures sans nom', the female clientele of the establishment:

On trouve là le ban et l'arrière-ban de la prostitution. Toutes, vieilles ou jeunes, édentées ou flétries avant l'âge, réclament un verre de consolation à des étranges amants que leur fournit le hasard et, saoules, avachies, l'œil hébété, l'ordure à la bouche, elles les paient, en retour, de leurs caresses infectes et de leurs hideux embrassements.

The piece ends with a fanciful description of how the *patron* deals with a *bagarre*:

Alors, pareil au dieu marin qui d'un regard calme les flots et les poissons en courroux, le père Lunette s'avance. Un nerf de bœuf remplace le trident ... Avec impartialité, l'implacable judiciaire frappe à droite et à gauche; semblables à des fauves, que fascine l'œil clair et froid du dompteur, les combattants lâchent prise et courbent le dos. L'ordre renaît comme par enchantement. (Méténier, 1883)

Méténier's picture of the scene is exaggerated, even caricatural. He himself, however, had a good deal of personal experience of such places. The son of a senior policeman, he had started a police career in the *commissariat* of the Quartier Saint-Jacques. From the early 1880s onwards, however, he started writing for a number of avant-garde journals, and his first collection of short stories, *La Chair* (1885) had considerable success. He specialised in the depiction of the *bas-fonds* of society, and spent much time in cabarets and brothels. Around 1884, as well as the Père Lunette, he was also frequenting the back room of the Château-Rouge (Méténier, 1893). As he was to write in his memoirs:

J'ai fréquenté pour mon plaisir et mon instruction personnelle tous les lieux où l'on coudoie le peuple, depuis l'assommoir bien fréquenté ... jusqu'à l'arrière-salle enfumée et à double issue des mastroquets louches où les escarpes se partagent leur butin, à l'abri de tout regard indiscret. (Méténier, 1891: 83)

Another writer who frequented the Château-Rouge at about the same time was the young Maurice Barrès, recently arrived in the Quartier Latin from his native Lorraine. In an article published on 25 March 1885, he described the Château as 'un des endroits de Paris que je connais le mieux'. And he evoked his close relationship with the place and its *habitues*: 'Je l'affectionne et j'y suis aimé'. This article, 'Carême fantaisiste: chronique du mois', which appeared in the *Revue Contemporaine*, is a very strange piece. The 'chroniques du mois' were usually rather staid articles, which commented on the events of the month (books, journals, exhibitions, etc., sometimes with a dash of politics included). Barrès starts in this fashion, with a swift rundown of the changes in editors and contributors of the revues. He then comments on the new books of the month (with Bourget's *Cruelle Énigme* being singled out for praise), before going on to the Delacroix exhibition, and then to the new Mass composed by Gounod and conducted by him at Saint-Eustache that month. But suddenly the tone changes, as the writer evokes the great monument of Notre-Dame, where Father Monsabré (the celebrated preacher) is giving his accustomed Lenten sermons. And from there we move across the river to the 'rues immondes' which 'aussi bien demeureront immortelles', and 'une étrange émotion nous emplit devant'. Finally, 'nous tombons rue Galande, où s'ouvre le Château-Rouge, bouge d'ivrognes et de récidivistes'.

Barrès describes the Château at some length, evoking his love for the place, where he has felt so at home: 'La bourgeoisie ne l'envahit pas encore; moyennant quelque monnaie et des cigarettes, vous vous installez honorablement.' The description matches many others that were to come over the years: the first room 'une salle superbe, immense, très haute, avec son comptoir de zinc, des hommes, des femmes saoules autour d'un poêle, un faible éclairage et une forte puanteur'; the second room, full of tables of drinkers; and finally, 'la chambre des morts':

C'est là que par les pieds, brutalement, on jette les ivrognes qui tombent. L'aspect en est horrible, noir, plein de danger, et, parmi ces espèces de cadavres, des odeurs immondes de fange. (Barrès, 1885: 428)

Presiding over the place the *patron* 'porte une trique à la ceinture, il tend un revolver à la main gauche, et de la droite, aimablement, les consommations aux clients'.

Then, after a short description of the Père Lunette as well, Barrès comments on the social problem of these people devoted to 'le vol' and 'l'assassinat':

La police les connaît par leurs noms, par leurs crimes aussi. Mais qu'y faire? Les prisons trop petites, les agents fatigués, et la déportation, semble-t-il, ne saurait satisfaire tout le monde et les députés. (Barrès, 1885: 429)

This is the 'problème du mois'. Barrès, however, gives the last word to Father Monsabré, preaching just across the river, counselling Christian penitence. Notre-Dame, says Barrès, is neglected by the indifferent crowd, and nobody seems to listen to Monsabré. But they are wrong who think that 'ayant causé avec eux de Notre-Dame, je négligeai l'actualité' (Barrès, 1885: 431).

Despite this moralising message, there is no doubt that Barrès much enjoyed visiting the Château-Rouge, of which he had been a customer for some time. By early 1885, too, it is clear that he and Rachilde (the author of the novel *Monsieur Vénus*, with whom Barrès was at this time on very close terms) frequented it together. At the end of March, shortly after the writing

of this article, Barrès wrote to her arranging a rendez-vous there, in terms which showed that they were both familiar with it (Finn, 2010).

To be fair to Barrès, this place was indeed part of the ‘news of the month’ when he wrote his article in March 1885. As he pointed out, this was because ‘Gamahut le fréquentait assez assidûment’. The murderer Gamahut, whose exploits had caused a sensation, was on trial at the time, and would be executed in April; and Trollier, the landlord of the Château, had been giving evidence at that trial. The Gamahut case caused a spate of writing about the Château in 1885–9, of which Barrès’s article was the first example; and like many others, Barrès included an account of his own personal acquaintance with the events, as he witnessed the police catching Gamahut’s accomplices there, and searching in vain for Gamahut himself:

Tandis que les agents avec leur capture passaient auprès du comptoir, un homme sirotait une prune, la figure cachée par le coude. C’était Gamahut, que j’eus ainsi l’agrément de voir sans le connaître; et les agents mal renseignés ne songèrent point à l’arrêter. (Barrès, 1885: 429)

Adolphe-Tiburce Gamahut was a young man who had spent a lot of time in the Château-Rouge, where he was well known for his physical strength, and for the time he spent doing weight training in the back room there in preparation for wrestling (he was described in the papers as a ‘lutteur de foire’). What was *not* known (but came out when he was in the death cell) was that he had in his teens been a ‘frère postulant oblat’ at La Grande Trappe, under the name of ‘Frère Tiburce’ (Gamahut, 1885). But that had not lasted, and for several years he had descended further and further into ‘la misère’, and into the vice of the rue Galande. He eventually came under the influence of some of the most vicious habitués of the Château. In November 1894, four of them (Midy, Bayon, Soulier and Carrey) had decided to attack at her home Mme Ballerich, a police widow who lived on the boulevard de Grenelle, and who was believed to keep a lot of ready money in her home. They asked Gamahut to join them because of his known physical strength. When they attacked on 27 November, Mme Ballerich put up a more vigorous defence than had been expected, and it was Gamahut who struck the fatal blow that killed her.

Much of Gamahut’s defence rested on his assertion that he had joined the gang only on the express assurance that there would be no violence; but, as was pointed out, the fact that he had been chosen to join the gang because of his physical strength ought surely to have forewarned him. And Trollier, the landlord of the Château-Rouge did not help him when, amid some ‘mouvement’ on the part of those present, he gave the following evidence:

Au moment où il allait commettre son crime, il faisait cette réflexion devant ma belle-sœur: ‘Les affaires ne marchent pas. Nous n’avons plus un centime. Il va falloir assassiner.’ (Cragin, 2006: 60)

One does, however, get the impression that Gamahut had been easily led by his rather more savvy companions. Trollier described Midy and Bayon as follows:

Midi [*sic*], l’Avocat, était un vrai bandit. Il arrivait souvent à mon cabaret la tête couverte de sang, et il fallait lui donner de l’eau pour se laver. Bayon volait dans la rue des porte-monnaie. (Cragin, 2006: 61)¹

‘Après l’affaire’, he said, ‘ils sont venus boire, et beaucoup, principalement de l’absinthe’. Bayon had, however, been recognised at the scene of the crime, as he was ‘très connu sur le boulevard de Grenelle’. It was known that he ‘fréquentait habituellement un établissement de

la rue Galande' (Cragin, 2006: 61). Within two hours of the crime, the police arrested Bayon and Soulier at the Château-Rouge. Trollier, in his evidence at the trial, declared that he had helped the police when they came (though he appears not, at that stage, to have denounced Gamahut – who had often helped him as a waiter or, at times, as an 'enforcer' – and who had been drinking, unrecognised, at the bar while his companions were arrested). The men began by giving false names, but soon confessed to the crime and incriminated their accomplices. Midy was arrested the next day and Gamahut (who had escaped to the country) a few days later, having been reported to the police by a man to whom he had boasted about the crime. At the end of the trial, Gamahut was condemned to death, Midy and Bayon to hard labour in perpetuity, and Soulier and Carrey to shorter sentences.

Despite the sordid nature of this crime, some of those who wrote about the Château-Rouge thereafter seemed to find some glamour in the person of Gamahut, and in the reflected glory enjoyed by Midy's mistress, Louise Hellouin, known as 'Tache-de-Vin' because of a mark that covered a great deal of her face. Oscar Méténier and Rodolphe Darzens, for example, both stress how well they had known Gamahut, dwelling on his physical strength (both of them being themselves keen on wrestling and body-building). Thus Méténier:

J'ai beaucoup connu Gamahut, qui était un garçon fort doux, infiniment moins coupable que ses complices. Il était d'une force herculéenne et faisait les poids au Château-Rouge. Il était parti pour voler et il n'a tué que dans un moment d'effolement, parce qu'il avait été surpris. Je l'ai vu mourir; il s'est montré très brave. (Méténier, 1891: 84)

As for Darzens, described in a recent catalogue as 'journaliste sportif ... lutteur masqué aux Folies-Bergère, revendeur de bicyclettes d'occasion, directeur de théâtre, coureur automobile, spadassin de lettres (on lui connaît une dizaine de duels), traducteur d'Ibsen et de Strindberg', etc. (Fayard, 1998), he described not only Gamahut's position in the Château-Rouge, but also an occasion when he himself had wrestled with him, in an equally insalubrious setting:

Ainsi furent arrêtés Midy, Soulier et Bayon, les complices de Gamahut, tous quatre assassins de Mme Ballerich. Pendant qu'on ligotait ses amis, debout, au comptoir, Gamahut buvait une verte; il n'était pas dénoncé encore et ne fut pas pris ce jour-là. D'ailleurs, il était de l'établissement. Lutteur adroit, d'une force peu commune malgré son extrême jeunesse, il faisait les poids dans la seconde salle, très entouré. Une fois, j'ai lutté avec lui, non pas au *Château-Rouge*, mais dans un caboulot qui existait alors rue de Bellefond, la turne au 'Capitaine' ... Le soir où nous avons travaillé ensemble, j'ai failli, en tombant sous lui, me faire briser le crâne contre un pied de table. C'était cependant un garçon doux, très aimé de tous; au Château-Rouge, il aidait souvent le père Trollier à servir ses clients ou parfois le faisait respecter d'eux. (Darzens, 1889: 228–32)

As for Tache-de-Vin, Méténier describes how she asked him to write a letter for her to her lover Midy, who had been deported to the penal colony in New Caledonia:

Dites donc, me dit une autre fois une grande femme dont une lie de vin coupait la figure en deux, vous savez, il va bien!

Qui donc?

Vous savez bien ... mon amant, le petit Midy, qui est à la Nouvelle ... Il se conduit parfaitement ... Je lui envoie des timbres ... Il n'a pas le droit de recevoir de l'argent ... Comment qu'il faudrait pour

aller le retrouver là-bas? A qui dois-je m'adresser? Au besoin, je paierais la moitié du voyage ... Vous seriez bien gentil de me faire la lettre!

Et j'écrivis la lettre, sur un coin de table graisseux. (Méténier, 1891: 84)

Another *habitué* of the Château-Rouge at about this time was the author Jean Lorrain. Like Méténier and Darzens, he was strongly interested in body-building and wrestling; in his case, this appears to have been a side-product of his publicly paraded homosexuality. Rachilde described him thus:

Jean Lorrain était grand, bâti en athlète; à trente ans, je l'ai vu coucher sur le sable un professionnel de la lutte et, plus tard, je l'ai vu pleurer pour des maux qui ne se pouvaient pas dire et, avec ses yeux extraordinaires, ses yeux gothiques, sa moustache rousse de gaulois et son rire étrange et désespéré, il ne me faisait pas peur parce qu'il avait, au-dessus de tout, le respect de la belle amitié. (Rachilde, 1930)

The sexually ambiguous Rachilde, together with Lorrain (whom she described as 'un bon Zig, accablé de tous les vices'), Méténier and a number of other friends including Barrès and Alfred Vallette (Rachilde's future husband), formed something of a 'gang' which frequented, among other night haunts, the 'bals populaires' including the Bal Bullier on the avenue de l'Observatoire. Rachilde often wore a masculine tail-coat on these occasions – which was more than could be said at times for Lorrain! Finn describes the 'entrée spectaculaire' which Lorrain, Rachilde and Méténier prepared, on one occasion, for the Bal des Quat-z-Arts:

Lorrain ... arrive chez elle portant un maillot d'un rose violent scandaleusement collant et un cache-sexe en peau de panthère. Il avance dans une voiture fermée, les menottes aux mains, entre deux agents. Sous les moustaches des policiers Rachilde reconnaît Oscar Méténier, ami et collaborateur littéraire de Lorrain (et fils du commissaire de police du quartier de l'Odéon), et le bon Alexandre Tanchard, poète et admirateur de Rachilde. (Finn, 2010: 19–20)

Up to mid-1885 the low life of the district around Saint-Séverin had been above all known to the reading public through people who were already *habitués* of the establishments concerned. The Gamahut affair, however, had drawn to it a far wider public, and a whole series of publications were to be devoted to it over the next few years, written by people who came to it from outside, some of them accompanying the police on their visits.

1885–90: Much wider publicity

During 1885, after what had happened, the newspapers naturally devoted a certain amount of space to the Château-Rouge. Fairly typical was *Le Petit Parisien* of 6 July 1885, which contained an article on police activity over the last few days, as they conducted 'une série de razzias dans les établissements, hôtels borgnes, cabarets et bouges diversement dénommés, connus pour être le refuge ordinaire des râteurs, des vagabonds et des repris de justice'. The main place visited was the Château-Rouge:

C'est dans le 'débit de vins' connu sous le nom de 'Château-Rouge' qu'a eu lieu le coup de filet principal. Le Château-Rouge, situé rue Galande, est célèbre. Il a sa légende. Légende récente, mais qui n'en est pas moins sanglante. C'est au 'Château-Rouge', on s'en souvient, que se rendit Gamahut le soir de l'assassinat de la veuve Ballerich, et c'est là qu'il fut arrêté. (*Petit Parisien*, 1885)

It was in 1885, too, that the journalist Albert Wolff devoted two whole chapters of his book *L'Écume de Paris* to the Château-Rouge and the Père Lunette respectively. Wolff had visited both of them with the police. The tone is far from that of the *habitués* we have seen so far; it is that of a traveller to a strange continent, as we see in Chapter 3, 'Le cabaret de la rue Galande' (Wolff, 1885: 29–37):

Une des plus curieuses excursions que j'aie jamais faites avec la police est celle qui m'a conduit dans un coin de Paris, sans doute inconnu de mes lecteurs, au cœur de la ville, à deux pas de la Seine, dans un quartier resté debout au milieu des transformations que la capitale a subies. C'est un souvenir du vieux Paris du temps d'Eugène Sue qui revit dans un des coins les plus misérables de la capitale ... Moi-même j'ai entrepris ce voyage d'exploration un samedi de quinzaine.

In the rue Galande, he finds 'un des plus pittoresques cabarets qu'il soit possible de voir', the Château-Rouge, which 'est resté le cabaret populaire du temps des *Mystères de Paris*'. Wolff's description of the *cabaret* itself is similar to many others, except for its moralising tone. The place is an 'antre de l'ivrognerie', and he muses on the effects this Saturday-night 'orgie du bas peuple' will have in the succeeding weeks: 'deux semaines de privations et de misère, pendant lesquelles quelques-uns rouleront sur la pente ordinaire jusqu'à la police correctionnelle ou jusqu'au bagne'.

On this visit Wolff experiences on a number of occasions shivers of disgust and fear: 'La partie féminine qui fréquente le *Château-Rouge* donne le frisson'; 'dans son ensemble, cette population donne le frisson'. And, were it not for the protection of Trollier, and the distribution of some money, the frisson of fear could have been justified:

D'ailleurs, rien à craindre; nous sommes sous le sauvegarde de l'Hercule qui tient le cabaret et ses garçons aux bras d'acier. De plus, quelques pièces de vingt sous jetées négligemment dans les jupes des femmes, quelques litres que nous offrons aux hommes, nous donnent droit de cité dans le cabaret ... Bientôt la plus grande cordialité règne entre cette foule curieuse et les explorateurs de cette contrée inconnue aux Parisiens.

Chapter 4, 'Les rues crapuleuses' (Wolff, 1885: 38–43), takes our intrepid explorer to the Père Lunette, which, he claims, 'est le rendez-vous d'une clientèle à côté de laquelle le public de la rue Galande semble être le dessus de panier du faubourg Saint-Germain'. Here again, he is an 'interested' observer: 'A Londres, où j'ai visité tous les taudis de la misère ou du crime, je n'ai rien trouvé de plus intéressant que [ce] cabaret.' What appears to shock him most there is the state of the drunken women on the bench in the main room, 'ces rebuts de la prostitution parisienne':

C'est le rebut des femmes de Paris ... Leur voix éraillée siffle dans une gorge ravagée par la phthisie ... Déjà la mort les a marqués au front; l'œil est fiévreux, mais sans expression; les lèvres sont pendantes; la peau est jaune, les joues sont creuses; elles sont horribles à voir quand, d'une main tremblante, elles essayent de porter le verre à leurs lèvres, en se balançant sur leurs jambes sans ressort.

Wolff's description of the two *bouges* is almost exclusively horrific. This 'explorer' of low life appears to find there no attraction whatever of the kind experienced by the literary *habitués* we have so far seen.

Of the extensive literature which dealt with these establishments in the late 1880s, one book in particular stands out. This is Gustave Macé's *La Police parisienne: Un joli monde* (1887). Macé was the former head of the Sûreté Générale, who in his retirement had started writing a series of books about his life and career under the collective title *La Police parisienne*. The first of these, *Le Service de la Sûreté*, had appeared in 1885. It was a detailed – and dull – book about police procedures; where the low life of Paris was treated, it was mainly in terms of statistics. However, Macé appears thereafter to have realised that some of his former experiences had a considerable capacity to enthuse the public, and with *Un joli monde* (1887) he developed a new recipe, in which 'adventures' in the low life of the city were set in an imaginative, semi-fictional setting, which was nevertheless based on fact – what nowadays would be called 'faction'. This proved to be a great success, and the titles of the books he produced over the next few years show that he was repeating this successful recipe (*Crimes passionnels*, *Gibier de Saint-Lazare*, *Femmes criminelles*, etc.).

In *Un joli monde* he uses a well-tryed technique to describe the scenes he is visiting: that of an ignorant companion to whom everything needs to be explained. The head of the Sûreté (clearly based on Macé himself) is approached by a *préfet* and his nephew. The nephew, René, explains that 'mon oncle ... voudrait visiter les bas-fonds de la capitale; il a l'intention d'étudier par lui-même le Paris-vicieux'. The Macé figure undertakes to take them, undercover, on a journey of exploration, on which they will be secretly accompanied, for their own protection, by two of his agents, the slight 'Oiseau-Mouche' and the gigantic 'Porthos', both of them masters of disguise (on a scale that would put even Sherlock Holmes or Arsène Lupin to shame: the descriptions of their ruses and multiple changes of character show us the element of fantasy that is involved in Macé's stories). The guests are told that they do not have far to go: 'Nous trouverons dans le fouillis des ruelles qui avoisinent la place Maubert de quoi employer notre soirée' (Macé, 1887: 45–55).

In a chapter entitled 'Les cabarets' (Macé, 1887: 71–101), they start their adventure. The greater part of this chapter deals with the Château-Rouge and the Père Lunette. Macé vividly gives his opinion of such establishments:

Véritables réceptacles de débauche et de vice dans tout ce que le vice et la débauche ont de plus misérable, lieux de réunions habituelles de noctambules, rôdeurs de barrière, souteneurs de bas étage, déclassés cherchant l'oubli dans l'ivresse crapuleuse avec sa promiscuité malsaine.

As the group drink within the main room of the Château, he goes on to describe the nature of the clientele: 'Le Château-Rouge est le rendez-vous de la basse bohème populacière; c'est l'asile, le refuge spécial d'une centaine de paresseux, exerçant des professions interlopes, que la police correctionnelle ne peut pas toujours définir'. The *préfet* comments that they seem fairly peaceful, but Macé replies that this is a rare peaceful moment, and that normally 'les querelles sont fréquentes'.

In the Père Lunette, the first impression is that of a disgusting smell, 'un mélange d'alcool volatilisée, d'émanations de vin vomé, d'haleines empestées par l'ail et l'ivresse générale'. Macé's description of the drunken old women on the bench is as horrible as Wolff's:

On voit, sur un banc scellé contre le mur ... cinq ou six vieilles femmes en haillons, sales, dépoitraillées: les unes assises, branlant la tête avec la cadence automatique particulière aux ivrognes qui sommeillent: les autres, couchées pêle-mêle ivres-mortes; presque tous ronflant à l'unisson et se livrant de temps en temps à d'inconscientes et sonores incongruités.

They go into the second room, the ‘Sénat’, with its closely packed tables and its *consommateurs* ‘entassés comme des harengs dans un baril’. Here the noise is stupendous: ‘On crie, on hurle, on chante en même temps cinq ou six refrains différents, le tout avec accompagnement de bris de verres, de gestes, de bousculades et assaisonnement de quolibets obscènes’. There are frequent fights in this place, we are told, and while they are there a general *bagarre* breaks out.

Macé notes the paintings and drawings on the walls, which he finds ‘cyniques et ordurières’, singling out particularly one of a man defecating, and another of a prostitute bringing money to a pimp, though he comments that they are nevertheless ‘l’œuvre d’artistes d’un certain talent’. Finally, he describes the ‘chansonnier de l’établissement’, who sings a song in honour of the place (the same song is quoted in Rodolphe Darzens’s *Nuits de Paris*), which ends cynically with what Macé calls a ‘malpropre conception’:

Voici la reine des poivrots
 Buvant sans trêve ni repos,
 C’est Amélie.
 Jadis, cette affreuse guenon
 Était une femme, dit-on,
 Jeune et jolie.

À boire! À boire! Encore du vin
 Jusqu’à deux heures du matin,
 La soif la ronge.
 Et sous le téton aplati
 À la place du cœur parti,
 Bat ... une éponge.

Macé’s aims, in this book, are fairly contradictory. On the one hand, he wants to bring before the public Paris’s areas of ‘le vice et la débauche’, and, as a former police official, to deplore them. On the other, he wishes to titillate his public with an exciting picture of visitors braving the ‘dangers’ of these areas. For both reasons, he needs to stress the *reality* of those dangers.

Charles Virmaître, in his book *Paris-Police* (1886), had castigated Macé, in his role as head of the Sûreté Générale, for his police methods, for his cultivation of the press, and for his love of publicity (Virmaître, 1886: 284–99). Now, in 1887, in *Paris-Escarpe: réponse à M. Macé*, he scoffed at Macé’s claims in *Un joli monde* about the Château:

Le cabaret de la rue Galande, que M. Macé décrit avec tant de fracas, n’est que de la petite bière auprès du *Lapin Blanc* d’Eugène Sue. Il est de même de trois ou quatre maisons borgnes qu’il nous fait visiter. Quant à ses types, ils n’ont rien de saillant. Ce ne sont même pas des scélérats convaincus; aucun d’eux ne donne la chair de poule. (Virmaître, 1887: 15)

The places Macé had been describing, he said, were ‘des cabarets inoffensifs’. And he suggested that much of what visitors saw was laid on especially for them:

La plupart des misérables qui composent la clientèle de ces assommoirs sont des abrutis qui posent pour la galerie et se font *rincer la dalle* par les *rupins* qui sont assez bêtes pour ajouter foi aux récits fantaisistes et viennent se repaître de ce hideux spectacle. (Virmaître, 1887: 19)

This is one of the first hints we get of the transformation that had been taking place in these places since they had been given publicity by the Gamahut affair. A pen-portrait of Oscar Méténier, in the *Petit Bottin des Lettres et des Arts* of 1886, had already given a hint of the way in which he was now ‘guiding’ visitors around. He was described thus:

Ami particulier des nos assassins les plus en vogue. Œil mobile et rotin en main, de minuit à deux heures, s’attable dans l’arrière-salle des mastroquets du quartier Galande, avec des diplomates, des momentanées, des dominicains, des bas bleus ou des industriels, qu’il pilote. (*Petit Bottin*, 1886: 97)

Méténier himself later evoked the change that had come over the Château-Rouge. He described himself sitting there in the past, some time before November 1884, at a time when ‘Gamahut y faisait encore des poids’:

À cette époque, le refuge du père Trollier n’était point encore catalogué parmi les curiosités parisiennes qu’il est de bon goût de visiter entre une heure et deux heures du matin. C’était un cercle très fermé, dont seuls quelques rares invités avaient le droit de franchir impunément le seuil. (Méténier, 1893)

The belief that these establishments were becoming above all a tourist attraction was by now widespread. In an article of 18 March 1888 in the *New York Times*, entitled ‘*Le Père Lunette*: One of the dens of criminals in Paris’, the writer, though still describing the Père Lunette as ‘one of the worst dens in Paris’, said that the recent notoriety of the Gamahut affair ‘had scared away the worst criminals’ from the area, and that this establishment had degenerated ‘into a mere show place of vice for the edification of “slumming” parties’, with it becoming fashionable ‘for men about town and *demi-mondaines* to repair at night “au Père Lunette” and to draw forth blood-curdling confidences from rascals who posed as retired burglars or released murderers’.

Nevertheless, the general public remained impressed by Macé’s account of the reality of it all. Nowhere is this clearer than in Auguste Vitu’s illustrated book *Paris: images et traditions* (1890). Most of this magnificent book (over 500 pages in-folio) is taken up with the historical monuments of Paris, and also with the new monuments created by the changes that had recently taken place in the late nineteenth century. When he comes to the fifth *arrondissement*, however, Vitu has clearly been impressed by the new fashion for the mean streets around the place Maubert. He picks out for special treatment the ‘établissement de grande renommée, qui se nomme le Château-Rouge, ou plus familièrement La Guillotine’. He states that there is no point in going into great detail, as Macé has dealt so brilliantly with the subject. He does, however, provide a drawing depicting ‘les clients du Château-Rouge’ sitting around the tables in the back room – and a particularly villainous lot they look! He also adds a new story about the place:

C’est au cabaret du Château-Rouge qu’en 1887 trois hommes ont proposé, accepté et réalisé le pari de jeter une femme à la Seine, uniquement pour s’amuser; la victime était une chiffonnière ivre, et l’enjeu était de deux sous, prix d’un petit verre d’eau-de-vie. (Vitu, 1890: 142–4)

Illustrations of the Château-Rouge were by now figuring elsewhere in the press. In its number of 14 December 1889, the magazine *L’Illustration*, for example, produced under the heading ‘Le Paris qui s’en va’, a couple of remarkable pictures of the Château-Rouge by the artist

P. de Haenen. One was a scene in the courtyard, depicting a crowd at the entrance to the *bouge*. The other was a horrific depiction of the ‘salle des morts’, looking like something from a medieval depiction of the Last Judgement. The commentary, ‘Nos Gravures’, contained a vivid verbal evocation of the atmosphere in the ‘salle des morts’ (*L’Illustration*, 1889: 520, 521, 524).

At this time, then, the Château-Rouge, like the Père Lunette, was widely known, and had become something of a showpiece for visiting ‘slummers’. This was the point, in the winter of 1890–1, when the author Joris-Karl Huysmans first became acquainted with it. Amazingly, he seems to have been unaware of its previous history.

1890–1: Huysmans and Wilde

The Château-Rouge and the Père Lunette are known to a modern audience mainly because of Huysmans’s depiction of them in *La Bièvre et Saint-Séverin*. This, however, was not published until 1898. Huysmans’ first experience of the *quartier* dates from the winter of 1890–1. The impressions he gained of it in that winter differed in certain important respects from the eventual depiction he was to give eight years later. He appears at this stage to have been blissfully unaware of the elements of ‘tourist attraction’ that so many others already saw as self-evident. While part of his intention, in the winter of 1890–1, was to gather material for an eventual study of the area (on the pattern of the study he had just published of *La Bièvre* (1890), the little river that ended up lost beneath the streets of the Maubert district), his correspondence gives a strong impression that he was above all searching for exciting experiences, vastly different from his prosaic life as a *fonctionnaire* in the Ministère de l’Intérieur. Like many visitors to the rue Galande, he appears to have been introduced to it by rather questionable ‘guides’, including two men who have been described as police informers (Garçon, 1941: 42; Descaves, 1942: 240–1). Huysmans ‘s’y donnait, sans grande risque, l’illusion de pénétrer un milieu dangereusement rempli d’escarpes’ (Garçon, 1941: 10). He savoured the company of some of the women there, two in particular. One, Louise Hellouin, ‘Tache-de-Vin’, the mistress of Midy, we have already seen in the company of Méténier. The other was a young thief and prostitute called Mémèche, aged about 17, whom Gustave Boucher described as ‘une petite diablesse ébouriffée qui se frottait avec affectation à Huysmans’ (Boucher, 1975: 5). Boucher also describes how, ‘moyennant une tournée de tord-boyaux’, they enjoyed a kind of temporary immunity in this place. A letter from Huysmans to Boucher on 2 January 1891 gives an impression of his enjoyment of these ‘illicit’ pleasures, as compared with the family duties of the *Jour de l’An*:

Cher ami, merci de votre petit mot. Le jour redoutable est enfin passé. J’en sors avec un parfait dégoût et les poches vides. J’ai vu des gens si bien dans ma famille que j’aspire après les purotins de la place Maub et considère la Tache de vin, Mémèche, comme d’exquises princesses aux cervelles vraiment nobles. (Huysmans, 1975: 4–5)

By this time Huysmans, a man of routine, was going to the Château-Rouge almost every Sunday, often after a visit with his friends to the working-class restaurant Chez Noblot in the rue de la Huchette, ‘avec comme commensaux les purotins, camelots et honnêtes apaches du quartier Maubert’ (Boucher, 1975: 5).

On 4 January 1891, before his usual Sunday evening outing to the *Château*, Huysmans visited Edmond de Goncourt's weekly Sunday 'at home' in his Grenier. He was full of his experiences in the rue Galande. Goncourt describes in his *Journal* the 'satisfaction un peu enfantine' with which Huysmans described to the assembled company 'sa connaissance intime avec les voleurs, les recéleurs du Château-Rouge et de ses rapports avec la maîtresse de Gamahut'. And Goncourt went on to muse about what he had heard:

C'est curieux, tout de même, cette maison de Gabrielle d'Estrées, devenue cet immonde garni et où la chambre même de la maîtresse de Henri IV serait devenue la *Chambre des Morts*: la chambre où l'on superpose plusieurs couches des ivrognes ivres-morts, les uns sur les autres, jusqu'à l'heure où on les balaye au ruisseau de la rue. Garni qui a pour patron un hercule, dans un tricot couleur sang de bœuf, ayant toujours à la portée de sa main deux nerfs de bœuf et une *semaine* de revolvers. (Goncourt, 1956: IV, 6–7)

The effect of Huysmans' story was, however, rather spoiled by the advent of another visitor to the Grenier soon after he had left. This was Jean Lorrain, whom Goncourt perspicaciously regarded as someone who had 'encore entré plus au fond de la société canaille de Paris'. Lorrain belittled 'les scélérats du Château-Rouge', saying that 'ce sont des cabotins, des criminels de parade, que font voir les agents de police aux étrangers menés par eux au Château-Rouge' (Goncourt, 1956: IV, 7).

Yet a letter from Huysmans to Boucher a fortnight later, on 15 January, does at first sight seem to suggest that the Château-Rouge was as dangerous as Huysmans had asserted. In it Huysmans describes 'terrible' events there:

Girard a dû vous narrer les terribles épisodes du Château-Rouge; mon conducteur de Bray à moitié assommée, le garçon égorgé et mort, hier, à l'Hôtel-Dieu, le massacre de Triollet assommant à coups de canne plombée tous les chourineurs et en tuant un. Un vrai massacre! (Huysmans, 1975: 6)

Boucher (no doubt on the basis of information from Huysmans), describes the cause of all this in a note to this letter. According to him, there had been a plot to assassinate Huysmans, which had been foiled by his 'guide' de Bray. This was the cause of these 'tueries'. Huysmans decided not to set foot there again. 'J'ai eu la veine de ne pas être assassiné ... ça me suffit'. Three weeks later, Huysmans mentioned these events again, in another letter of 7 February:

Nouvelles de la place Maub. Les putois continuent à s'égorger, la police est descendue hier jeudi et a simplement ligoté et emmené quarante de nos amis. La terreur règne dans le quartier. (Huysmans, 1975: 7)

All is not as it appears, however. In the early 1940s Maître Maurice Garçon, who had access to the police records, looked up those for this period, presuming that such a 'massacre', including at least two deaths and such a number of arrests, would have left a substantial trace. Nothing of the kind! No traces of deaths, or of multiple arrests. Nothing in the newspapers, either, and they would surely have recorded such events. All he could find was a police report on a simple 'bagarre' that had taken place, of a kind well known even in our own day. A young man had been told by a waiter that, to stay in the place, he had to pay for a 'consommation'. He had gone, but returned with a couple of friends. In the resulting *bagarre*, the waiter received a slight knife-wound to the cheek (which a doctor later declared did not make

him incapable of working). Trollier, coming in after the group had left, hit a young man (presumably innocent) who had just arrived, and had him arrested by two policemen who were now on the scene. As for the events of three weeks later, all Garçon could find was the arrest of a man who had attacked his mistress in the Père Lunette.

Huysmans's story appears to have been invented either by him or by one of his companions. Maître Garçon gives a cynical explanation for Huysmans not revisiting the Château: 'Peut-être préféra-t-il ne pas conduire quelque ami vérifier sur place les détails d'un drame sorti tout entier de son cerveau' (Garçon, 1941: 21).

Strangely enough, it was later in this very same year of 1891 that Oscar Wilde, accompanied by the poet Stuart Merrill, and by Robert Sherard and Will Rothenstein, paid a visit to the Château-Rouge. The pattern is much the same in their case: introduction to the place as sightseers, accompanied by a belief, on the part of the visitors, that they are running serious dangers. It was undoubtedly Sherard – who in his many years in Paris spent much of his time exploring the 'low life' of the city (Sherard, 1906, 1911) – who initiated the visit, of which we have two accounts, Rothenstein's and Sherard's.

Rothenstein gives it a short mention in his *Men and Memories 1872–1900* (1931). He describes how Wilde, on a visit to Paris, accompanied the three others to 'a famous night-haunt of the Paris underworld, the Château-Rouge, a sort of doss-house with a dangerous and unsavoury reputation':

The sight of the sinister types lounging around the crowded rooms, or sleeping on benches, made me shudder. None of us liked it, while Sherard, to add to our discomfort, kept shouting that anyone who meddled with his friend Oscar Wilde would soon be sorry for himself. 'Sherard, you are defending us at the risk of our lives', said Wilde; I think we were all relieved to be out in the fresh air again. (Rothenstein, 1931: 93)

Sherard's account, in *Oscar Wilde: The Story of an Unhappy Friendship* (1902) is more detailed (and also, putting other words into the mouth of Wilde, gives a different impression of his own role). He states that they visited both the Père Lunette and the Château-Rouge, which he describes as 'the haunts of the lowest criminals and the poorest outcasts of the city ... which everybody who wishes to know the depths of darkness which exist in the City of Light goes to see'. Wilde was dressed very elegantly, with 'trinkets on his person', and, Sherard said, 'knowing the habits of the customers of these houses, I once or twice interposed myself between him and some particularly notorious character, whose intentions were only too apparent to me'. Wilde, speaking later about this, said, in this version: 'Robert was splendid, and defended me at the risk of his life'.

Sherard describes with particular vividness Wilde's experience of the 'salle des morts' at the Château-Rouge:

There is a large room upstairs ... where, by paying a halfpenny to the landlord, homeless vagabonds and beggars could sleep on the floor till closing-time at two o'clock in the morning. This room was known as the *Morgue*, or the *Salle des Morts*, and was the favourite spectacle of those seeking unhealthy emotions. We had spent some time in the pestilential taprooms downstairs, talking to thieves and the saddest daughters of joy, listening to the obscene songs of a frightful old, noseless hag, and watching a number of professional beggars in their display of the tricks by which they feigned infirmities. As a *bonne-bouche*, the *Salle des Morts* was proposed by the Herculean landlord. Wilde agreed, and we went upstairs, the landlord leading the way with a flickering dip.

The scene which greeted them was appalling, and Wilde's reaction was one of horror:

Stretched out in every posture of pain and discomfort, many in the stupor of drink, many displaying foul sores, maimed limbs, or the stigmata of disease, all in filthy and malodorous rags, the sleepers of the Room of the Dead, with their white faces, immobile and sightless, showed indeed like corpses. I can see my friend's face still, his head just rising above the floor, for his feet had refused to carry him to the top of the staircase into the pestilential room. Seen under the flicker of the bully's dip, there was upon its features the horror of one who looks on the Medusa: a twinge of pity about the lips perhaps, but in the main, horror – sheer horror. (Sherard, 1902: 95–7)

Wilde's attitude, after his return from this venture, was, like that of Huysmans, a desire to show off to his literary friends about the 'adventures' he had been having. Speaking to Marcel Schwob the next day, he said: 'J'étais hier soir avec les plus terribles créatures: bandits, voleurs, meurtriers – la compagnie que fréquentait Villon' (Champion, 1927: 99). Schwob appears to have himself visited the Château-Rouge at a later date. Goncourt describes him showing off about this on 18 February 1894, like Huysmans in 1891:

Schwob dîne ce soir ... Cet érudit n'est pas seulement un homme de bouquins, il a la curiosité des coins d'humanité excentriques, mystérieux, criminels. Il nous décrivait, ce soir, le repaire du Château-Rouge, nous contait une visite faite par lui à la salle des femmes. (Goncourt, 1956: IV, 521)

1891–8: Lorrain and Huysmans

In 1893 Jean Lorrain published a short story entitled 'Un soir qu'il neigeait'. This story, which appeared in the collection *Buveurs d'âmes* (1893), starts with Father Monsabré preaching a Lenten sermon in Notre Dame (shades of Barrès's article of 1885), but soon moves to the rue de la Huchette, 'cette rue chaude de la prostitution et du crime'. It then centres around the Château-Rouge in the rue Galande, and is, as always with Lorrain, a tale of vice and perversion. Huysmans (by now well on the road to conversion), writing to Lorrain about this collection of stories, said:

Vos abominables livres sont délicieux et le pervers mal éteint en moi ne peut pas ne point se délecter à ces savoureuses phrases ... Ça m'irrite un peu de resavouer ces souvenirs et je vais être obligé d'avaler les élixirs de lis, les fines menthes d'une sainte Angèle pour chasser l'obsédante horreur de ces vieux péchés. (Huysmans, 1965: 270)

It is at first sight surprising, given this reaction, that in early 1898 Huysmans decided to return to his abandoned study of the 'Quartier Saint-Séverin'. This was published in the *Écho de Paris* in nine fortnightly instalments from 6 April to 10 August of that year, after which it was published by Stock, in a volume containing also Huysmans' earlier essay *La Bièvre*.

The content of this book, however, differs greatly from Huysmans' first acquaintance with the *quartier* in 1889–90. The church of Saint-Séverin plays a major part in this study as it now stands. The low life of the area still has its role; but now (as in a short passage in the same author's conversion novel *En route* (1895)), it is related to the church at the centre of the *quartier*. The close links between the vice of the surrounding area and the church's role as a 'paratonnerre', as in the Middle Ages, are invoked, and a plea is made for this area to be spared the changes of modern life.

Amidst the descriptions of the low life of the area, there are lengthy descriptions of the restaurant he used to frequent, Chez Noblot (Huysmans, 1898: 65–73), and of the *bouges* of the rue Galande and the rue des Anglais (Huysmans, 1898: 142–70). In relation to the latter, it is clear that Huysmans had by now become far more aware of the ‘tourism’ aspect than he had been in 1890–1, and of the fact that much had already been written about them. He describes the Père Lunette as having been ‘tant de fois décrit’, and dismisses its *bagarres* and ‘dangers’ as amounting to nothing:

Ce ne sont là que des querelles sans portée, des amusettes de grand’mères et d’enfants, des liesses familiales. Il y a de tout, dans ce cabaret dont le plancher est un pavé de rue, de tout, sauf de vrais bandits. Ces femmes sont d’impénitentes gouapes, et ces gens qui déclament et qui chantent sont d’inaltérables pochards; ils se régalaient aux frais du passant et touchent encore d’autres profits, car ils cumulent le métier de souteneurs avec celui d’indicateurs de police, de casseroles. On ne détousse donc pas chez le Père Lunette les visiteurs; on se borne à les exploiter et à leur laisser en échange des puces ... C’est, en somme, l’endroit du quartier le moins dangereux et le plus bête.

In the Château-Rouge, said Huysmans, ‘Il y a, comme chez le père Lunette, toute une part du décor apte à allécher le public’. The *pièce de résistance* was the ‘chambre de morts’ on the first floor, which the waiter took people to see, and then asked for money, not for the poor people within, but for the *patron* and himself. Huysmans describes the two-o’clock turning-out time:

On grimpe et l’odeur fade du bas s’aggrave des senteurs échappés. ... Trolliet lève brusquement le gaz et hurle: ‘Debout!’ – L’on est sur un champ de bataille; l’on dirait de ces gens pressés par terre, les uns contre les autres, des cadavres; ils ont un sommeil de mort, des râles d’agonie; réveillés en sursaut, ils ressemblent à des blessés évanouis qui reprennent connaissance; ils regardent, hagards, on ne sait quoi, puis, éblouis par la grande lumière, ils baissent les yeux et leur premier geste, quand ils se mettent sur leur séant, est de glisser les doigts sous leurs guenilles pour se gratter. – ‘Allons, dépêchons!’ Et Trolliet salive de côté et rien ne peut rendre l’effroyable mépris de ces crachats.

All this is described in a detached manner. Huysmans is the ‘observant visitor’, rather than the ‘habitué’ of seven years before. Indeed, when he does evoke his former acquaintances, it is in a very different tone from formerly. He describes women like Mémèche and Tache-de-Vin as ‘effrayant[es]’, as ‘monstres’. What had become of them in the years since he last saw them? Mémèche, suffering from delirium tremens, had fallen from a fourth-floor window and killed herself; Tache-de-Vin, involved in another murder, had been sentenced to five years.

Huysmans had a pressing reason for writing this book at this time: the threat under which these streets were suffering, as demolition loomed. Huysmans finishes his book by stressing how destruction will not do anything to get rid of crime and vice; it is only the church and its prayers that can, as in the Middle Ages, do something to create an equilibrium within the society around it. ‘Le remède est là et non dans la destruction du quartier qu’on nous annonce.’ He ends the book with a dismal prediction:

En effet la haine des ingénieurs pour tout ce qui est encore marqué d’une étampe d’art est inlassable et ils ne s’arrêteront que lorsqu’ils auront complètement aboli les derniers vestiges du Paris d’antan. Après cette mélancolique et charmante Bièvre qu’ils ont fini par tuer et par inhumer dans un égout, ça va être le tour de Saint-Séverin; c’est dans l’ordre. (Huysmans, 1898: 224)

The demolitions

The rue Galande and its environs had been threatened with destruction for some years, and this had renewed interest in the *bouges* of the area. As London's *Macmillan's Magazine* put it in February 1897, in an article entitled 'Vanishing Paris':

Wherever the Vandal has refrained, there you find colour, character, romance: While the Place Maubert, stripped of its rag-pickers and its splendid squalor, has been converted into a perfect monument of modern architecture, there is a corner, but a stone's throw distant, that reveals the spirit of ancient Paris.

There followed a vivid description of the Château-Rouge and the Père Lunette.

By 1899 it had become clear that the Château-Rouge was seriously under threat, as it was right in the path of the future rue Dante. Not everyone deplored this, of course. In *La Presse* of 28 February, in an article entitled 'Paris qui s'en va: Un bouge célèbre', the anonymous author speaks of the 'physionomie minable des habitants, canaille plate et sans envergure', and of how 'le snobisme' has transformed such places into 'lieux de pèlerinage'. Once he knew the place had been vacated, he had visited it; all that was left was a disgusting smell. Finally, he lauded the decision to demolish:

Certains, d'un souci archéologique ou travaillés par une esthétique particulière, vont peut-être gémir sur l'évanouissement de ces vagues architectures, et la fuite des types étranges et crapuleux qui les complétaient ... Le pittoresque de Paris ne perdra absolument rien à la disparition de la plupart de ces vieux et stupides quartiers aux ruelles tortueuses et puantes. Et je ne trouve rien de mieux pour l'assainissement moral de la grande ville que ces trouées qui culbutent ces foyers infectieux, pour amener à leur place l'air et la santé! (*La Presse*, 1899)

Efforts were made to preserve anything of value. The *Pall Mall Gazette*, in an article in June 1899 entitled 'Château Rouge doomed', described how the curators of the Musée Carnavalet visited the old house to see whether it 'contained any relics worth preserving', though 'an illegible inscription or two was all, however, that was found'. Meanwhile, the famous photographer Eugène Atget preserved the aspect of the façade of the Château, the large *porte cochère* on the rue Galande, in one of his most brilliant photographs – also, in another, a view of the rue Galande itself, with the entrance to the Château-Rouge in the background, at a curve in the street. Within weeks he was taking two even more striking photographs of the space where that part of the street had been, entitled 'Percement de la rue Dante à travers la rue Galande'.

The famous *chansonnier* Aristide Bruant, poet of the people (whose appearance Toulouse-Lautrec had immortalised on his posters) had been an infrequent visitor to the Château, where, we are told, he was received with wild outbursts of admiration (*Macmillan's Magazine*, 1897). It was he who was to sum up, in his song 'À la Place Maubert', the sadness and bewilderment of those who saw the old Paris disappearing:

Je m'demande à quoi qu'on songe,
En prolongeant la rue Monge,
À quoi ça nous sert
Des squares, des statues,

Quand on démolit nos rues,
 À la place Maubert!
 À la place Maubert! ...

Pour trois ronds chez l'père Lunette,
 Où qu'chantait la même Toinette,
 On s'payait l'concert.
 Pour dix ronds au Château Rouge,
 On sorguait avec sa gouge,
 À la place Maubert!
 À la place Maubert!

Aussi bon Dieu! J'vous l'demande,
 Quand y aura plus d'rue Galande,
 Plus d'hôtel Colbert
 Où s'que vous voulez qu'y's aillent,
 Les burotins qui rouscaillent,
 À la place Maubert!
 À la place Maubert!

The worst premonitions were not justified, however. Most of the rue Galande still survives, as do the rue des Anglais, the rue de la Huchette and most of the other mean streets in the area. What became, however, of the surviving *bouge* of the pair, the Père Lunette? It was destined to become even more of a tourist attraction, as part of the *tournée des grands-ducs*.

La tournée des grands-ducs

Nowadays, 'faire la tournée des grands-ducs' has become an idiomatic phrase, meaning 'to go out on the town', or 'to go out on a spree'. When the term was invented in the late nineteenth century, however, it had a more precise meaning. Legend had it that the Grand Dukes of Russia, uncles of the Tsar, when on visits to Paris, liked to be conducted on visits to the *bas-fonds* of the city. On this basis, there grew up a minor industry arranging such tours for the Parisian upper and middle classes, and for foreign tourists. The most successful entrepreneur in this area was, as one might expect, a former head of the Sûreté, Marie-François Goron, who had been a favourite of the press, but had had to leave the service because of an expenses scandal. Like Macé, he had used his retirement to write a series of vivid memoirs. He also set up a system of accompanied tours of the lowest dives in Paris, which became known as the 'tournée des grands-ducs'. What Reader describes as 'the voyeuristic appeal of the Parisian underworld' (2011: 85), which was later to result in the cult of the *apaches* of the Bastille area and of the suburbs, had thus already in the 1890s been turned into big business. The attraction of this kind of tour has been described as follows:

Les bourgeois aiment s'encanailler dans les cabarets mal famés et éprouver des émotions fortes en côtoyant les 'arsouilles' pas toujours authentiques ... On va voir les brigands dans leurs repères comme on va en famille au musée Grévin et au Zoo. On aime se faire peur en visitant les microcosmes du mal. (*Le Fait divers*, 1982: 33)

The *Guide des plaisirs de Paris* for 1905 describes the nature of the jaunts of the *tournée des grands-ducs* (and incidentally shows how Goron's connections with the *préfecture* enabled him to employ policemen to reassure the clients):

Cette promenade est connue des Parisiens sous le nom de 'La Tournée des grands-ducs' ... On peut, en s'adressant à la Préfecture de police, se faire accompagner par un agent de la Sûreté en bourgeois ... Une expédition nocturne fera descendre l'étranger dans les vrais enfers parisiens ... Il y a un autre Paris dont la vie ne commence que le soir: un Paris étrange, parfois horrible, quelquefois dangereux, mais combien intéressant, qui offre à l'observateur des scènes et des tableaux de mœurs qui valent ceux des *Mystères de Paris* ... On explorera des coins, des cabarets et des bouges recelant la plus basse prostitution et toute la lie de la populace. (*Guide des plaisirs*, 1905: 122–3)

In this 1905 *Guide*, the *tournée des grands-ducs* concentrated above all on the area round Les Halles, and on the rue Galande/rue des Anglais/rue de la Huchette area on the Left Bank. Among the other 'tournée' also listed in this *Guide* is a rather more sedate 'tournée de Montmartre', which was not a 'tournée des bas-fonds' on the model of the 'grands-ducs', but merely a trip around the famous places of entertainment in that area. Nicholas Hewitt has noted that such Montmartrean tourism was a prominent feature of the time. Its attraction, however, was clearly different from that of the 'grands-ducs', contributing as it did to 'the establishment of the Butte de Montmartre as a centre of bohemia and the artistic avant-garde' (Hewitt, 1996: 34).

Though the heyday of the 'tournée des grands-ducs' was in the first decade of the new century, as early as 1892 a reporter from the *New York Times*, describing a visit to the Château-Rouge, and commenting on what he perceived as the dangers there, had spoken of the fact that the *habitués* turned out to be 'all like lambs with the Inspector, who handles them beautifully' (*New York Times*, 1892). We also know, from an unlikely source, not only that the 'tournée' was flourishing as early as 1895, but also that the Château-Rouge and the Père Lunette were major points on its itinerary. The source in question is Maurice Donnay's play of middle-class society, *Amants* (1895). In Act 1, we find a Goron-like figure, Schlinder the *préfet de police*. One of the other characters describes his role thus: 'Si vous avez besoin de faire prendre des renseignements sur une cuisinière, ou d'avoir un coupe-file, ou de faire la tournée des grands-ducs, vous pouvez vous adresser à lui en toute confiance.' Later, the society ladies corner Schlinder about this:

CLAUDINE: Nous voudrions aller dans les endroits où l'on trouve des assassins ...
 MADAME GRÉGEOIS: M. Ravier nous a nommé tout à l'heure un tas de lieux mal famés ... Le Père-Lunettes, le Château-Rouge, le bal des Gravilliers, le caveau Saint-Hubert ...
 RAVIER: La tournée des grands-ducs.
 SCHLINDER: Mesdames, rien n'est plus facile.
 CLAUDINE: Dites donc ... je ne serai pas très rassurée ... il n'y a pas de danger? ...
 SCHLINDER: Mais non, madame ... pas plus que chez vous.
 CLAUDINE: Vous êtes trop bon.
 SCHLINDER: Non, c'est vrai, vous comprenez bien que tous ces endroits-là sont connus, classés ... Maintenant on les exploite ... et la boutique de Père-Lunettes est devenue un cabaret artistique. (Donnay, 1895: 10, 18–20)

After the demise of the Château-Rouge, the Père Lunette continued as a major part of the 'tournée'. On his visit to Paris in 1903, the German artist Franz Marc noted in his diary on 18

July that he had been taken on the 'tournée des grands-ducs', visiting the Père Lunette and ending up at the famous restaurant Chez Baratte in Les Halles, getting home about four in the morning (Marc, 1903). And in July 1905 the indefatigable Jean Lorrain wrote an article in the journal *Je sais tout*, in which he described the Père Lunette as 'la plus célèbre des haltes de la Tournée des Grands-Ducs'. The clientèle, he said, 'habituée aux visiteurs de la haute, y fait toujours un chaleureux accueil aux clients' (Lorrain, 1905).

In 1906 the artist Paul Schaan produced a remarkable painting entitled 'Le cabaret du père Lunette, rue des Anglais', in which the bright red façade of the building shows how it stood out from the drab frontages surrounding it in the narrow street. (This painting is now in the Musée Carnavalet).

The *cabaret* closed in 1908, but by the inter-war period it had again become a major feature of 'Paris by Night', now called the Bar des Anglais. It was now a night haunt on the modern model, with low lights, apache dancing, a crowded floor, and (still) a low-life atmosphere to impress visitors. An etching by Gustave Assire (with the title 'Bal-musette, rue des Anglais'), in his series *Images secrètes de Paris*, published in 1928, gives something of the atmosphere which now reigned in the place. More recently, in 1999, some of the original wall-paintings were rediscovered and have been preserved, and since 2007 the place has become a *monument historique classé*.

Conclusion

This *quartier* has had further considerable literary treatment over the years. In the inter-war period, for example, the American writer Elliot Paul lived in the rue de la Huchette for some years, and later devoted a book to it entitled *Narrow Street* (1942) (the American edition was called *The Last Time I Saw Paris* (1942)). While giving a fascinating picture of life in the street in that period, Paul nevertheless fell too easily into the trap of depicting, for his American and British readership, the inhabitants and their way of life as having been essentially 'quaint' and 'foreign'. Yonnet's 1954 book *Enchantements sur Paris* is a completely different matter. Its story-line moves from past to present, interweaving many mysterious elements in the life of this area over the ages, and also in the time that he was writing. One is caught up compellingly in a world which, while it appears to mingle fantasy with reality, succeeds in capturing something of the true atmosphere of this area, and also of the area around the rue Mouffetard. In 2010 Umberto Eco placed part of his vast intertextual fantasy of the 1890s, *The Prague Cemetery*, in the place Maubert district. Even the Château-Rouge has a brief mention (Eco, 2011: 349), as do a whole series of other details culled from the writings of Huysmans, including not just, on the small scale, a description based almost word-for-word on that of Huysmans of the restaurant *Chez Noblot* in the rue de la Huchette (Eco, 2011: 157–8), but also, ranging more widely, an extravagant treatment of the 'Satanism' of the Abbé Boullan, based loosely on Huysmans's *Là-bas*.

Despite all the 'improvements' of the late nineteenth century, many of the old streets have remained in between the wider thoroughfares. Yonnet's *Enchantements sur Paris* gives us a vivid evocation of what it was like to live in the streets around 'la Maub' and 'la Mouffe' in the 1940s – and the picture was still one of deprivation, petty crime and yet companionship and community. The *ambiance* of those streets remained as he described even in the late 1950s, when the present writer lived for a while in a nondescript hotel in the rue de la Huchette. Admittedly, the world of middle-class entertainment was encroaching in the form

of jazz clubs in the old cellars (such as those of the former cabaret Les Trois Mailletz in the rue Galande, and those of the Caveau de la Huchette); in the form of the discothèque Storyville; and in the form of the Théâtre de la Huchette, which was just beginning its long run of the plays of Eugène Ionesco; but there were as yet none of the overwhelming tourist attractions – restaurants, bars, kebab shops, trinket-sellers, etc. – which now dominate the area and fill it with their noisy bustle. The streets still contained the same peeling façades, the same occultist booksellers, the same seedy bars, the same atmosphere of decay; and in the miserable little street the rue Xavier Privas (formerly rue Zacharie), there was still the little bar filled with the dirtiest, most smelly *clochards* of the area, which made walking down that street seem such a danger. Yonnet has brilliantly described this little street, ‘cette cachottière maussade’ (Yonnet, 1954: 33 and *passim*).

This whole area has now become a pedestrian precinct and an ‘in your face’ tourist trap. The tourists, of course, fail to see the inauthenticity of what they are buying. Yet isn’t this the same old story that we have been seeing from the 1880s onwards? The romanticism of *la misère* is never romantic for *les misérables* themselves. It is attractive only to those who come from outside. And once they start coming, it is only a question of degree before full-blooded commercialism takes over.

One must beware, however, of wallowing in nostalgia. Just as linguists accept the fact that languages are continually changing, and that one cannot insist on ‘norms’, so we have to accept that the social life of a city never stands still. The story of the Château-Rouge and the Père Lunette is a microcosm of the ever-changing, always vital, life of the great city. These two *bouges* were originally a genuine part of the life of the poor and the outcasts of the city. Then they began to be visited by writers and artists who gained a sense of excitement by ‘belonging’ to the places, and feeling themselves to be a part of a strange and unusual community. After the notoriety brought to the Château-Rouge by the Gamahut affair, however, a wider public became interested, and writers of a different hue examined, as though under a microscope, the ‘specimens’ they found in these places. This in turn led to a more general public desire to ‘experience’ this low life; and of course that led to the commercial exploitation of this desire. Who is to say where, on this slippery slope, authenticity ends and inauthenticity begins?

Note

- 1 The official account of the Gamahut trial no longer exists, the relevant archives of the Préfecture de Police having been pulped in 1920. There is, however, a contemporary four-page pamphlet which gives a verbatim account of part of the trial, entitled ‘Arrestation, jugement et condamnation à mort de cinq assassins’. This has been reprinted in Cragin (2006: 60–2).

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Richard Griffiths is Emeritus Professor of French at King's College London. He previously held Fellowships at Selwyn College Cambridge and Brasenose College Oxford, and the Chair of French at Cardiff University. He has published widely on French literature and history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. His book *Marshal Petain* was republished in 2011 by Faber and Faber in their 'Faber Finds' series.