

A Bloodthirsty Bonaparte: Redefining Historical Figures through the Historical Novel and the Fantastic Tale in Paul Féval's *La vampire*

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From Alessandro Manzoni, we understand that the underlying goal of historical fiction is neither to be taught history, nor to create an entirely unique tale. The purpose of this hybrid genre is to go beyond providing “the bare bones of history,” and to offer “something richer, more complete. In a way, you want [the author of historical fiction] to put the flesh back on the skeleton that is history” (67-68). Manzoni’s metaphorical allusion to the bare bones of history demonstrates how the details of historical events and figures, like many of the real historical individuals, have decayed, leaving a rudimentary outline of events, or the skeletal structure for the present generations to use as a reference point. With that structure, the author of historical fictions fills in the missing gaps to create the illusion of a historically accurate depiction of the past, or, to continue the metaphor, he creates a resurrected body. While many French authors revered Sir Walter Scott’s own historical fiction (Paul Féval himself read it through translation), France began developing its own modern historical fiction, with many works centering on the French revolution of 1789. In his *The Historical Novel*, Georg Lukács claims “It was the French Revolution, the revolutionary wars and the rise and fall of Napoleon, which for the first time made history a *mass experience*, and moreover, on a European scale” (23). However, unlike Balzac’s *Les Chouans* or Hugo’s *Les misérables*, the reconstituted history for Féval’s *La vampire* (1865) is a far cry from the original events that have transpired, even though the narrative is built upon events that are easily recognizable to the general audience. Féval’s novels vary in genre, but they often include elements of history, religion, and fantasy (Galvan 25). In Féval’s novel, *La vampire*, historically based events and figures such as Napoleon Bonaparte, the monarchist Georges Cadoudal and Cadoudal’s attempted assassination plot against Bonaparte, contrast against the historically inaccurate and impossible figures and events, which are the multitalented protagonist Jean-Pierre Sévérin and a Hungarian vampire countess named Marcian Gregoryi. In addition to throwing into question the nature of history and historical accuracy, Féval creates a tale of the fantastic genre, which causes readers to consider reality itself. The presence of Marcian Gregoryi as a Parisian vampire within the historically based plot to overthrow Napoleon demonstrates how this text conforms to Tvetzan Todorov’s definition of fantastic narratives. For *La vampire*, the

readers must determine “si ce qu'ils perçoivent relève ou non de la ‘réalité’, telle qu'elle existe pour l'opinion commune” (Todorov 46). While it is common for studies of the fantastic to question sanity and reason, as evidenced in Jean Le Guennec's *Raison et déraison dans le récit fantastique au XIX^e siècle*, the need for such an approach is alleviated due to readers questioning the historical accuracy of the depicted historical events. For Féval's *La vampire*, the mixing of historical fiction and a fantastic tale, causes the novel to become a multilayered narrative that delivers political criticisms against Bonaparte and underscores the overall unreliability of historical events in historical fiction.

The antagonist, countess Marcian Gregoryi, offers the first portrait of Napoleon while a second portrait is provided by the protagonist, Jean-Pierre Sévérin. Sévérin, the mysterious, unpretentious and wise figure of the text embodies nobility of character and honesty, thus drawing readers to align themselves with his principles and convictions. The only fault the author attributes to Sévérin is one he confesses to a young medical student: “Je suis du passé, tu es de l'avenir. Le passé croyait à ce qu'il ignorait ; vous croirez sans doute à ce que vous aurez appris ; je le souhaite, car il est bon de croire” (23-24). These are his only faults, should we accept them as such. He claims to be too old, too set in old traditions and old beliefs. Opposite Sévérin is the countess, who, aside from being a vampire, operates as the black widow within the text, continually seeking out a rich groom, stealing him away, receiving his inheritance and reappearing shortly after his death only to repeat the process. With the opposite roles that these two characters occupy, one as a predator and the other as a savior, it is curious that they are able to find common ground with their portrayal of Bonaparte. The countess describes Bonaparte as “un jeune homme de vingt-six ans, pâle, maigre, chétif, coiffant de cheveux plats un front puissant” (98). Sévérin later echoes the countess when recounting the first time he meets the future emperor: “Un jeune homme en habit bourgeois, d'aspect maladif et pâle, vint dans ma salle d'armes. . . . Ce jeune . . . avait une tournure militaire” (123). Both of these descriptions share the sickly physical appearance (“pâle,” “chétif,” and “maladif”). They likewise point to Napoleon's strength and military prowess, something that is indivisible from the Napoleonic myth. In his discussion of possible-worlds semantics of functionality, Lubomír Doležel states that “an ineradicable relationship exists between the historical Napoleon and all fictional Napoleons” (788). Claiming that fictional and nonfictional characters are devoid of attachment would be fallacious. The fictional characters both inform and are informed by their real counterpart. Therefore, physical traits and military background inform the characteristics of Féval's Napoleon. In return, this creation redefines the myth of Napoleon, allowing for the fictional to influence the real. These negative aspects of Napoleon are built on the all-encompassing myth of Napoleon, reinforcing it by reiterating what has previously been established (the military strength), and modifying it by portraying him as weak and sickly, as well as later transforming him into a standard of measurement, which others in the text will prove to surpass. Venita Datta offers that after the publication of *Le mémorial de Sainte-Hélène* in 1823, the image of Napoleon would “always [be] plural; indeed, the power of the Napoleonic legend was its very elasticity” (3). It is this pliability inherent in the Napoleonic legend that has made him so accessible to authors, such as Féval.

Féval uses the elasticity of the Napoleonic legend to transform Bonaparte into a stepping stone for others in the text, developing the grandeur of both the countess Marcian

Gregoryi and Sévérin in respect to their ability to outperform the future emperor. The author employs a narrative frame to introduce Bonaparte into the novel. Under the guise of another identity, the countess relates her encounter with Bonaparte. Shortly after her marriage, she abandons her husband for a more powerful man, who in a note she compares to Alexander the Great: "Il est un homme qui jamais n'a reculé, jamais cédé, jamais faibli : le vainqueur de toutes vos défaites, jeune comme Alexandre le Grand et destiné comme lui à mettre son talon sur le front du genre humain" (99). This description of Bonaparte permits Féval to transform him into the standard of measurement against which readers can evaluate other fictitious characters. After reading the note his wife has left, the count Gregoryi, hoping to regain both his honor and his wife, penetrates into the heart of the camp to challenge General Bonaparte. As the count prepares to strike a deadly blow, the countess takes the life of her own husband, and preserves the life of the compromised general. In this act, Bonaparte is deprived of his military strength, and explains to his soldiers: "Il paraît que la tente de votre général en chef n'est pas bien gardée" (100). In truth, the general's tent is well guarded, but not by his own soldiers. The young general who conquered European nations and the hearts of many French nationals is forced to rely on a foreign countess for his life. This countess, the most prominent literal vampire of the text, supports and sustains the future emperor, associating him with the evil she incarnates. A new hierarchy is created. The count, able to penetrate the defenses of the camp, is poised to take the life of the general. Therefore, he is greater than Napoleon. However, his wife, who also reaches the general's tent, succeeds in killing her husband, and through her success, she is greater than both the count and Bonaparte. From the countess's actions, Féval seems to subvert the image and myth of Napoleon, especially the depiction of his rise to power. This text suggests that Napoleon's labors do not testify of his own strength; rather, his success is due to a supernatural creature who sustains his efforts.

Napoleon's military success is similarly questioned when Sévérin tells of his encounter with the future emperor. Napoleon comes to Sévérin's *salle d'armes* looking for an exercise that will tire him out: "Êtes-vous homme à me rompre les os, à me courbaturer les muscles en vingt minutes de temps chaque jour ?" (124). Sévérin describes the training in these terms: "Je ne le fatiguai pas, je le moulus si bel et si bien qu'il demanda grâce et tomba tout haletant sur ma banquette" (125). Sévérin, like the count and countess, is placed above the general in a hierarchy of strength and power. By placing Sévérin as a more powerful figure than Napoleon, the myth of Napoleon as a powerful and dominant figure is undermined. After all, Sévérin embodies the lower strata of the French population, and he is one of the two who causes General Bonaparte to ask for mercy. Through these two passages within the text, Féval removes Napoleon from the mythic pedestal of history, only to replace him with the characters of his own creation. Beyond the apparent lack of military prowess, which is contrary to much of what is known about the real Napoleon, Féval has inserted a political criticism of the emperor. Responding to the then young Napoleon's affinity to republican principles, Sévérin states: "Sire, je suis un républicain, moi aussi, je l'étais avant vous, je le serai après vous" (125). It is not difficult to see how Féval hints at this fictional Napoleon's naïve commitment to republican ideals when the central protagonist's convictions sound almost as if they come from Victor Hugo himself. This is another means in which Féval denounces this fictional Napoleon as a committed leader, and in fact makes him less appealing to his readership.

It is important to note that while Féval's depiction of Napoleon is not entirely faithful to the historic Napoleon, it is nevertheless a product of the myth of Napoleon under creation during the nineteenth century. As Féval modifies the representations of Bonaparte, he likewise causes the perceptions that readers have of the historical Napoleon to change as well. After all, perception of history is not fixed. Manipulation of French history, and more precisely of the image of Napoleon Bonaparte, is made clear in Sudhir Hazareesingh's "Napoleonic Memory in Nineteenth-Century France: The Making of a Liberal Legend," in which the author demonstrates how biographers focusing on Napoleon Bonaparte shift their writings from treating his reprehensible rise to power to the more laudable aspects of his leadership. Hazareesingh argues that Napoleon's primary nineteenth-century historians, Emmanuel de Las Cases and Constant, are partially responsible for shaping the perception of Napoleon that has been cultivated over time: "Las Cases also gave a decisive ideological twist to Napoleon's legacy, presenting him as the heir of the Revolution and the 'prince of liberal ideas' " (757). Historical fictions, like the more credible studies of Las Cases and Constant, also help shape the images of those they treat, but they do so without the pretensions of being disinterested in their subject matter. Hazareesingh describes how Bonaparte's image progressed throughout his career. In his words, some authors following Napoleon's death (including Constant and Las Cases)

concentrated instead on 'humanizing' the Emperor by focusing on his magnetic personality and character, and on the periods of imperial political weakness and vulnerability—the Hundred Days and the early years of exile at Saint-Helena. Above all, these visions and representations drew away from the history of the Consulate and First Empire, specifically avoiding any intellectual engagement with the cornerstone of Napoleon's system of rule, namely his conception of power. (764)

He likewise points to Victor Hugo's remark during the *retour des cendres* as being "a ceremonial which was marked by the 'concealment' of Napoleon" (764). Féval's treatment of the former emperor coincides with that of Constant, Las Cases, and Hugo, in as much as Féval remains a self-proclaimed *chouan*, a French monarchist, uncommitted to condoning Napoleon's rule. The Bonaparte that Féval creates is imperfect and human, to the point that he appears weak when compared to others within the text. The historical Napoleon is distanced from the action of the text. He is only revealed to the reader through the testimonial stories told by the fictitious characters, or as his signature affixed to a letter. It is through Sévérin's description of their first meeting and the narrative frame provided by the countess that Napoleon is truly given a place in this novel. Féval revisiting Napoleon's rise to emperor and depicting his shortcomings with respect to the two figures of his novel posits an alternate reality, another history for readers to consider, which blurs the lines that divide reality from fantasy, and history from fiction. The historical foundation also lies in his choice of Georges Cadoudal as an enemy to Napoleon. Historically Cadoudal led several attempts to overthrow the French government in order to restore a monarchy, and scholars such as Pierre Dominique agree that in an effort to reconcile with a group of French royalists, Napoleon offered Cadoudal a position within the government (56). Cadoudal refused this position, and we learn that the conspiracy of 1804, the historical background for *La vampire*, proved to be Cadoudal's last.

The year 1804 is one of particular importance to French history, in particular its history surrounding the French revolution. It is during this year that Napoleon, profiting from his roles in the French military, transitions from the Consulate to an empire, and he places himself as its emperor. Jacques-Louis David's *Le sacre de Napoléon*, painted in 1807, is a well-known painting, commissioned by Napoleon, and it gives a visual representation of the ceremony wherein Bonaparte officially becomes the emperor. Féval's vampire evokes this image in her own actions in the text and thereby Féval aligns the fictional vampire with the historic Bonaparte. The conquering nature of the vampire, which is reminiscent of Bonaparte's rise to emperor, is given in several different accounts within the novel. In Féval's novel, the vampire does not suck blood, as suggested for a vampire named Faust in *La vampire's* preface: "[Faust] était hâve ; sans son costume de hussard vous ne l'auriez point reconnu ; les ossements de son crâne n'avaient plus de cheveux, et ses yeux si beaux, manquaient à leurs orbites vides" (12). The bald head, resembling a skull, illustrates this creature's proximity to death. Likewise, the lack of hair for the Faust vampire prefigures the necessity for a fresh head of hair that the female vampire in Féval's tale will require to sustain her youthful beauty. When the countess explains to René de Kervoz, the nephew of Georges Cadoudal and the fiancé to Sévérin's stepdaughter, the vampire's need for fresh hair, the enterprising nature of the vampire is revealed.

Le don d'Addhéma, ainsi se nommait la Bulgare, était de renaître belle et jeune comme l'Amour chaque fois qu'elle pouvait appliquer sur la hideuse nudité de son crâne une chevelure vivante : j'entends une chevelure arrachée à la tête d'un vivant.

Et voilà pourquoi sa tombe était pleine de crânes de jeunes femmes et de jeunes filles. Semblable aux sauvages de l'Amérique du Nord qui scalpent leurs ennemis vaincus et emportent leurs chevelures comme des trophées, Addhéma choisissait aux environs de sa sépulture les fronts les plus beaux et les plus heureux pour leur arracher cette proie qui lui rendait quelques jours de jeunesse. (93)

The countess continues to explain that due to the need for victims "bientôt jeunes filles et jeunes femmes devinrent rare" (93). The vampire's overindulgence forces her to seek another home and expand her hunting ground. Féval implies that this blood-thirsty expansion is representative of Napoleon's efforts to enlarge France's empire. The countess explains "Ceux qui creusent leur sillon à travers la foule laissent derrière eux du sang et de la haine. Pour montrer [sic] très haut, il faut mettre le pied sur beaucoup de têtes. Depuis le parvis de Saint-Roch jusqu'à Aboukir, le général Bonaparte a franchi bien des degrés. Chaque marche de l'escalier qu'il a gravi est faite de chair humaine..." (Féval 90). She later adds:

Je vois partout cette terrible chose qui a nom le vampirisme : ce don de vivre aux dépens du sang d'autrui. Et avec quoi sont faites toutes ces gloires, sinon avec du sang ?

Avec du sang, dit-on, les hermétiques créaient de l'or ; il leur en fallait des tonnes. La gloire, plus précieuse que l'or, en veut des torrents.

Et sur ce rouge océan un homme surnage, vampire sublime, qui a multiplié sa vie par cent mille morts. (103)

For both the vampire and Bonaparte, the acquisition of money, territory, and glory come at the price of others' lives. Whereas the vampire takes one life at a time, the emperor will cause the death of many with each ensuing battle.

Féval points out that for the vampire to be rejuvenated, hair must be taken from a newly claimed victim. The effect lasts according to the natural life that her victim has remaining, granting the vampire one day of restored youth for every year that her victim had remaining of life. Manifest in this exchange is the alteration of life. As the hair is transferred from one scalp to the other, the life attached to it is altered from being natural to becoming both supernatural and unnatural as it is applied to the head of this Parisian vampire. Through Jean-Pierre Sévérin, the readers are shown a glimpse of the horrid process. While in a boat searching for his stepdaughter, Sévérin sees a corpse floating against the current at a speed faster than his own. In the distance, he sees the corpse arrive next to a young woman kneeling at the river.

La jeune fille s'inclina en avant et tendit le bras. Un autre bras, celui du corps, s'allongea aussi vers la jeune fille. . . .

J'entrevis, à travers un brouillard, quelque chose d'inouï et d'impossible.

Ce ne fut pas la jeune fille qui attira le corps à elle, ce fut le corps qui attira à lui la jeune fille.

Tous deux, le corps et la jeune fille, restèrent un instant hors de l'eau, car le corps s'était arrêté et dressé.

Une main morte se plongea dans l'abondante chevelure de la jeune fille, tandis que l'autre main décrivait autour de son front et de ses tempes un cercle rapide.

Puis le corps monta sur la berge, vivant, agile, jeune, tandis que la pauvre enfant prenait sa place dans l'eau tourmentée. (153)

After searching for the girl he believes to be Angèle and the latest victim of the vampire, Sévérin encounters a woman in the streets with hair just like his stepdaughter's. "Je l'arrêtai. Quand elle se retourna, je reconnus la comtesse Marcian Gregoryi, éblouissante de beauté et de jeunesse, mais coiffée de cheveux blonds" (153). The image of the vampire taking the hair from a corpse and raising it up to her own head calls to mind David's *Le sacre de Napoléon*. Just as the vampire is granted an unnaturally prolonged life and restored to beauty through placing a new head of hair upon her scalp, Napoleon renews the strength and glory of France, and even the empire that has been dormant since Charlemagne, by placing the crown upon his own head. In this context, the restoration of the empire is not as innocent as it otherwise may seem. For, as many have noted, Napoleon's division from the church is seen in the act of him placing the crown upon his own head, allowing him to circumvent papal authority. This rejection of the church by the emperor adds to the already developing association between Napoleon and the vampire, since a pious vampire would be an absurd notion in nineteenth-century France. This criticism of Napoleon's creation of an empire extends to its later restoration by Napoleon Bonaparte's nephew, Napoleon III. After all, for Féval, this new empire under the rule of Bonaparte III is simply another crown taken up that will, like for the vampire in his text, temporarily restore an unnatural life. That Féval wrote this novel during the Second Empire, and thus during the reign of Napoleon III, suggests that Napoleon Bonaparte's weakness in comparison to Sévérin and the countess is not pure coincidence, but instead constitutes a poignant attack against the regime. Even further, that Féval sets *La vampire* at the time when Napoleon is to become emperor draws a parallel to Napoleon III's own conception of power, which was largely opposed by the legitimists that supported the reinstatement of the Bourbon royalty. In an effort to align various political parties under his

government, Napoleon III “decided to support moderate members of it [the legitimist party] in order to avoid openly hostile ultras” (Zeldin 36). However, this did not calm the resistance against his cause entirely. While some, out of protest, abstained from participation in Bonaparte III’s government, others, such as the editor of the legitimist newspaper in Finistère, vowed to “do all [they] could to overthrow Louis Napoleon and that [they] hoped to succeed” (Zeldin 43-44). When *La vampire* was published in 1865, Bonaparte III had already been in power for well over a decade. Nevertheless, it is Féval’s pride in the monarchy and in chouanerie that motivates his negative portrayal of the historical Napoleon Bonaparte and to depict the heroic Breton hero, Georges Cadoudal, who fought for the restoration of a monarchy.

Just as the countess Gregoryi and Sévérin are opposing figures within the text, Napoleon is considered the opposite of Georges Cadoudal. Féval’s portrayal of Napoleon in *La vampire* is accompanied by the favorable revision of Bonaparte’s historical and textual rival, the monarchist Georges Cadoudal. The Cadoudal of the text lived in Paris, successfully evading the police even though gossip of his presence was abundant. Cadoudal accomplished this by taking on the name of Morinière and claiming to be from Normandy. His ability to avoid authorities represents his ability to avoid Bonaparte himself, since each of these agents acts by the power of the First Consul. However, when the cover of his alias fails him, he is caught in an ambush and attempts to flee from the police. Sévérin finds him and wishes to fight at his side. Cadoudal refuses help, explaining:

[J]e vous remercie de ce que vous avez voulu faire pour moi. . . . Je ne suis pas Normand, je suis Breton... Je ne suis pas Morinière le maquignon ; je suis Georges Cadoudal, officier général de l’armée catholique et royale... Je ne suis pas un assassin, je suis un champion arrivant tout seul et tête haute contre l’homme qui a des millions de défenseurs... Écartez-vous de moi : votre chemin n’est pas le mien. (217)

Even amidst the numerous references to the supernatural within *La vampire*, Féval creates a historically realistic portrayal of a celebrated Cadoudal. His death, although scarcely revealed, does not take away from his martyrdom. As the novel approaches its conclusion, Féval’s heroic depiction of Cadoudal eclipses the general preoccupation with Bonaparte and momentarily abandons the subject of a supernatural vampire to place Cadoudal at the center of the narrative.

Cadoudal’s death, although ambiguous, gives a false impression of the historical account. This is another instance where “it is precisely this tension between fact and fiction, the ‘empirical’ and ‘aesthetic’ planes, that creates the peculiar dynamics of the historical novel (and other genres of ‘documentary literature’) endowing it with a unique and important dimension” (Ungurianu 380). Féval’s election to omit Cadoudal’s subsequent trial is an obvious shift from the “empirical” to the “aesthetic,” as described by Ungurianu. His commanding presence, sending off not only the timid coach driver, but also Sévérin who was eager to help, is further evidence of Féval choosing to create a heroic and independent Cadoudal. This heroic image risks being sacrificed should Féval not display this fight as Cadoudal’s final actions in the text. Alluding to the trial would paint him as a criminal, whereas falling to a mob shows him to be the victim. In the text the reader only learns that

Il n'était pas mort. Les agents n'osaient l'approcher. Ce fut le même garçon boucher qui lui jeta au cou la première corde.

Cinq minutes après, au moment où la charrette qui avait arrêté le cabriolet de Georges Cadoudal l'emmenait, garrotté, à la Conciergerie, un homme parut au milieu des agents qui formaient le noyau de la foule immense rassemblée au carrefour de Buci. (217-18)

As the *garçon boucher* throws the cord around Cadoudal's neck, readers are given a hint concerning Cadoudal's later death, execution by hanging. However, this is the last time that readers encounter Cadoudal and his death is otherwise untreated. Readers are left to turn to other sources, such as Dominique, to learn of his death: "La fin de Cadoudal est, en effet, d'une beauté sublime. Ce trait surtout qu'il veut être guillotiné avant ses compagnons. Ce n'était point pourtant la coutume : le chef était guillotiné le dernier. Mais Georges se disait que certains de ses compagnons pouvaient croire qu'après leur mort lui serait peut-être gracié" (60). Féval's decision not to focus on Cadoudal's death or trial enables him to preserve the image of a passionate rebel who fought insurmountable odds to challenge Bonaparte. While Cadoudal, as an attempted assassin, murderer, or traitor, could easily be degraded, and while Bonaparte at the time is already enjoying renewed popularity at the hands of historians, Féval reverses their historical roles to create a weak and unimpressive future emperor and a heroic rebel.

In *La vampire*, Féval describes a fictional history where Napoleon Bonaparte is not only feeble, but he owes his success and survival to a predatory vampire. Bonaparte is depicted as weak when compared to other figures (fictional and historically based) in the text. Within in the novel, this vampire also serves as a parallel Féval uses to vilify Bonaparte, and by association, Bonaparte III's Second Empire. In view of his own pro-monarchist beliefs, Féval depicts Georges Cadoudal as the true hero-martyr of the novel, presenting him to be stronger and more courageous than those same fictional figures which made Bonaparte appear weak. The images of Cadoudal and Bonaparte are evidence of Féval's revisionist presentation of historical figures, and assist in better understanding the nature of the historical fiction genre. Returning to Manzoni's metaphor, building upon the bones of history, authors of historical fiction are at liberty to not only recreate historical events, but to modify them and create a new history. Just as the vampire of *La vampire* dresses her head with a new scalp and restores her unnatural life, the author, too, applies his fiction to history and creates it anew.

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