

Title: "The Mysteries of Moscow: In Which Boris Akunin Impersonates a French Writer and Reveals a Terrible Secret"

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Abstract:

Detective Ivan Frantsevich Brillling, Boris Akunin's villain in *Азazel* (1998), disparages the plot of the novel itself as "nonsense," premised upon "meaningless coincidences" like a novel by Eugène Sue. At the core of Sue's 1842 runaway success *Les mystères de Paris* lies an uncanny portrait of a great city, styled as a socially fluid and threatening space, one where the undercover German aristocrat Rodolphe and his two unlikely companions reveal, and sometimes resolve, the sufferings of a city no longer Romantic and not yet Decadent. Reviled by Marx and even Dumas, the novel was tentatively admired by Poe and Belinsky. Other writers, however, saw in it a source of inspiration and a resource for provocation. It anticipated the revolutions of 1842 and hangs suspended between Gogol's *Портрет* (1835) and Wilde's fin-de-siècle *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890).

Condemned as merely *frénétique*, feverish and delirious, and viewed as a failed reprise of the Romantic *frénétisme* of English Gothic and German *Sturm und Drang*, Sue's novel initiates a mode which Russian writers have embraced, developing the ideological potential of the portrait of a criminal and threatening city, which persists today. Gogol actively read *Les mystères*, and the modern mystery writer Akunin channels them via Dostoevsky.

This paper suggests that maybe always, but certainly for Gogol and Akunin, *frénétisme* is more than a flashy style, and that it does not apologize for that flash. It theorizes how the very egregiousness of the *frénétique* operates as a Decadent reprise of Romanticism making possible subversive interventions in moments of cultural strain and hegemonic consolidation. The Erast Petrovich Fandorin detective stories, especially *Любовница смерти* (2001) with its secret suicide society, and his wittily macabre portrait of global cities of the dead *Кладбищенские истории* (2005) embrace Sue's excessive style in ways that have always pleased readers in Russia, while appalling their leaders.