

Alexandre Vattemare: A 19th-Century Story

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The extraordinary life of Nicolas-Marie-Alexandre Vattemare (1796-1864), known today by a handful of bibliographers as the founder of the American Collection at the Bibliothèque Administrative de la Ville de Paris and for his role in the creation of the Boston Public Library, deserves to be told, not only as a revealing page in the history of Franco-American relations, but as a window onto the rapidly changing cultural history of nineteenth-century France. His tireless efforts, from 1830 until his death, to create an official means of cultural exchange between North America and Europe have gone largely unrecorded, despite the claims of an obituary notice, written by his son, Hippolyte, in *La Patrie*, 25 Novembre 1864:

On peut dire vraiment que Mr. Vattemare a ‘divulgué’ les Etats-Unis. Avant ses fructueux voyages, on savait bien qu’il y avait, par delà l’Atlantique, un peuple remuant et marchant vers le progrès d’un pas délibéré, mais, quant à ce que ce peuple pouvait produire en fait de sciences et d’art, tout le monde l’ignorait ou à peu près. (*Monsieur Alexandre*, 30)¹

Although Vattemare’s is not a representative life, one can say that the times allowed his remarkable eccentricities to flourish in a way that would have been impossible during any other era in French history. The tragi-comic events of his peripatetic life are the material for a *Bildungsroman* worthy of Stendhal, Dickens, and, ultimately of Flaubert, reflecting in their protagonist’s achievements and failures the powerful social, economic and political changes that underlay opportunities for individual advancement after the French Revolution. Actor, publicist, entrepreneur, collector, philanthropist, and writer, Vattemare was, in many respects, a distorting mirror of the Enlightenment idealism which a progressivist middle class, bent on self-advancement, liked to see in itself. Its reflection in Vattemare was ultimately too much of a caricature, too ambitious, in short, too quixotic to be acceptable by the official representatives of the social order.

Born in Paris in 1796 during the tumultuous years of the Napoleonic wars, Vattemare, whose father was descended from minor Norman nobility, was first sent to a provincial seminary to prepare for the priesthood and then, after being dismissed for insubordination, to medical school at the Hôtel Saint Louis in Paris, where, despite his aptitude for science, he was again dismissed for insubordination. He finally found his vocation after two extended trips to the newly established American Republic – one

from 1839-1841 and the other from 1847-1850 – as a devoted crusader for the democratization of learning and the global exchange of culture, instrumental in the founding of the first free public library of Boston, the Smithsonian, a museum in Saint-Malo, and the collection of documents known as the ‘American library’ of the Bibliothèque Administrative de la Ville de Paris. Despite such tangible accomplishments, he died, according to the same obituary, “un homme abandonné à lui-même, sans caractère officiel, sans fortune” (*Monsieur Alexandre*, 30).

The ostensible cause for Vattemare’s youthful failure to conform to the rules of the educational institutions within which he found himself was also the passport to a life lived beyond the boundaries of class or nationality. Around the age of seven he discovered that he could make his voice speak as though it were issuing from outside of his body, at a great distance or up close, and that he had an uncanny ability to imitate all manner of sounds: human, animal, and mechanical. He could become a barking dog, a querulous old man, a silly young girl, a banging door or the whine of a saw. One can only speculate about the psychological origins of this gift that allowed him to change character at will, first tried out on his family and on the villagers of Lisieux, the town to which his father had retired during the revolutionary years to practice law. Later in life he would describe many of his most successful tricks, some of which can be seen as the expression of a repressed self creating farcical situations for its own release: cries of a drowning man being swept away by the current that brought crowds of Lisieux’s inhabitants with barges to drag the bottom of the river; cries of a voice in the chimney and cupboards and haystacks of neighbouring farms that the superstitious rustics believed to be the Devil or souls trapped in Purgatory; cries of a dead relative out of the embers of a fire that inspired the local curate to sprinkle the hearth with holy water.

Elizabeth Revai has suggested that this ‘gift’ was developed as a defence against an unhappy childhood (*Monsieur Alexandre*, 40), and there is circumstantial evidence to support this view. Despite their anti-revolutionary beliefs, each of Alexandre’s parents was married no less than three times. Like Hugo’s and a rash of other conservatives’, they had taken advantage of the decree, subsequently revoked by Napoleon, making divorce through mutual consent an option after 1792. He was the only child of his mother’s brief second marriage with Nicholas Vattemare, but there is some confusion over which household the boy lived in before he was sent to the seminary for two years as a way of getting him under control and preparing him for a religious life. According to his own account, many of his ventriloquized pranks were directed against his father:

He was in the habit of occasionally deceiving his father, by imitating the voice of a letter carrier, who usually called every post day: often, when the old gentleman expected correspondence of consequence from Paris, was he suddenly summoned by the well-known and welcome voice of the man of letters, and greatly was he chagrined, surprised, and enraged at the disappointment. (*Memoirs and Anecdotes*, 19)

His mother, described by one of her grandchildren as a “chouanne enragée” (*Monsieur Alexandre*, 19), also lived in Lisieux with her third spouse, Dr. Guitton, and would be taken in by Alexandre in 1830 after her husband died, leaving her impoverished. It may have been Guitton who suggested medical school, where, by all accounts, Vattemare was a brilliant student, becoming a surgeon’s assistant at sixteen (*Memoirs and Anecdotes*, 27). After making cadavers speak too many times from their storage place in the cellar or during surgical exercises, he was refused a diploma. Eventually, however, because of the dire lack of medical personnel, he was placed in charge of 300 wounded Prussian prisoners (some accounts say 400) who had been stricken with typhus. When Napoleon fell in 1814, the soldiers requested that their eighteen-year-old *aide du camp*, who by now spoke German and whom they found both entertaining and extremely solicitous of their well being, be put in charge of their repatriation to Berlin. Upon their safe arrival, following several attacks by outposts of French soldiers who were pacified through the diplomacy of Vattemare, the Prussian authorities recognized his service by awarding him the ‘Croix de fer’.

Although Vattemare, as a monarchist and a Catholic, was not averse to joining other French émigrés from the Revolution in Germany, he found himself caught between two countries in 1815 when Napoleon returned to power during the 100 Days. Told that he must choose between prison as an enemy alien and enlistment in the Prussian army, he opted for the status of *réfugié* and soon became acquainted with another family of refugees, the Thabuis de Guidon of Saint-Malo, who had fled France in 1809 for “complots de chouannerie” (*Monsieur Alexandre*, 41 (Revai)) and were reduced to selling homemade toys in the streets of Berlin to eek out a living. 1815, the year of Napoleon’s defeat, coincided with the death of Vattemare’s father and his adoption of the Thabuis de Guidon as his new family. To provide for the parents and their two children, he decided to turn his talent for mimicry and vocal illusionism to profit by taking his act on the road.

Thus began Vattemare’s illustrious twenty-year career (1815-1835) as “M. Alexandre, Ventriloque et Gentilhomme”, itinerant actor, playwright, self-styled aristocrat, and citizen of the world. In the wake of Napoleonic invasions and strong anti-French sentiment, he brought surprise, hilarity, and healing self-awareness to over 550 cities of Europe with satirical shows in which he single-handedly impersonated as many as ten separate characters in one play *Itinéraire*, 41). Well known caricaturists like W. West, M. Head or Madou, and Grandville, who were fascinated by Vattemare’s ability to change his appearance through facial distortions and costumes, have left a powerful visual record of his performances.² As one reporter from Boulogne wrote: “Habile à se grimer, personne n’est plus savant que lui dans l’art de la grimace.”³ With the Thabuis de Guidon family, who served as impresarios and administrators and whose daughter he married in 1818, Vattemare traveled, according to a Hungarian journalist, “tel un lord anglais” (*Monsieur Alexandre*, 64 (Revai)), looking more English or German than French. In Vienna he was described as “ce jeune protégé aux cheveux blonds, plus anglais ou allemand que français” (*Monsieur Alexandre*, 65 (Dargent)). He

was invited to all of the courts of Europe, giving private performances for the princes and monarchs of Weimar, Vienna, and Potsdam, the Tsar of Russia, Queen Victoria and the Dauphine of France. Nicholas I was particularly fond of him, doing away with imperial protocol when he came to the palace in Saint Petersburg and presenting him with valuable gifts.

To create advanced publicity for his act, Vattemare often played tricks on local villagers, causing the kind of consternation and outrage he had created as a child in Lisieux and filling his rented halls with crowds of curious spectators who had read about his antics in the local papers. These articles, collected in his "Press Book" between 1830 and 1839, are written in Vattemare's own self-promoting style and were probably sent to newspapers by him in advance of his performances.⁴ One might call him a kind of rogue doctor, bringing all levels of society together to witness his uncanny ability to unite diverse characters within his own person. Steven Connor's conception of ventriloquism as "the speech of the body against the speech of culture"⁵ strikes me as entirely appropriate to Vattemare, whose plays made fun of the institutions that had once marginalized him in France. Unlike mime, which is silent, ventriloquism is a counter-discourse where self-censorship is no longer operative. As traditional forms of pantomime, with its other-worldly Pierrots and Harlequins, began to fade, realism in the form of satire, farce and caricature directed at a middle class audience invaded the popular stage. Vattemare impersonated all of the stock characters of comedy: servant and master, wife and husband, daughter and lover, bourgeois, soldier, and priest, changing costumes and appearance with lightening speed from behind a screen while continuing the dialogue as though arriving on set from somewhere out of sight. He was scrupulous in details of costuming and décor, making sure they represented contemporary styles and would be recognizable by his different regional audiences.

The scripts Vattemare adapted or wrote, performed in French, German, or English, as the case may be, followed the conventional plots of Roman comedy or comedy of manners, making fun of the pretensions and superstitious ignorance of all classes; but one of his most popular plays, called "Les Rogueries de Nicolas,"⁶ directs the physical violence of farce at the body of the father in a transparently Oedipal way. The standard "blocking character" (Frye, 165) of the authoritarian head of household is represented by alderman Pillbury, a pharmacist and "invalid of his own making [...] suffering under a complication of Patent Medicines, two Doctors, an Apothecary, and his Wife." The obtuse bourgeois is being killed, intentionally it would seem, by his wife's kindness. "What a good wife she is [...] my torment always goes away when [she] is absent." Convinced that he needs to have an infected tooth extracted, Mr. Pillbury ends up having all of his teeth, one by one, painfully removed, by his tricky servant, Nicolas, clearly a stand-in for Vattemare himself, as Vattemare's *dramatis personae* makes clear: "Servant to the Alderman, with an appetency to accident, in breaking everything he lays his hand on, but invariably mending matters through an ingenuity sharpened with hunger, and assisted by opportunity." Vattemare used his own and his father's Christian name, "Nicolas", only as a stage persona, and, in this

case, creates a situation that allows the wily young servant literally to defang the *senex iratus*. The action, which ends with the father's unwilling consent to his daughter's marriage, moves, in typically comedic fashion, from one kind of society to another (Frye, 163), and is accompanied by a variety of other than human sounds: barking dogs, grunting pigs, cat and dog fights, and crowing cocks, all produced by the self-metamorphosing and ubiquitous voice of M. Alexandre.

Between 1815 and 1820 Vattemare brought his one-man show to Prussia, Denmark, Poland, Russia, Belgium, Holland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, the British Isles, and, finally, back to France. But his greatest success seems to have been in England, where he settled down with his growing family for five years, from 1820-1825, playing to packed houses in Scotland and Ireland during the summer and in London during the winter, hailed by critics as the new "Kean" and as the second "Garrick" by the famous actor's own widow. As his wealth increased, Vattemare donated the proceeds from many of his performances to charity, most often to institutions for lost, ill, or abandoned children: orphanages in Germany and Russia, the Infirmary and Education of Poor Children in Leeds, the Deaf and Dumb Institution in Edinburgh, famine victims in Dublin, Cork, and Kilkenny (Monsieur Alexandre, 60, 68, 69 (Dargent)).

Amongst the many famous writers and artists of the period whom he knew, including Goethe, Lamartine, Pushkin, and Marceline Desbordes-Valmore, Walter Scott became a good friend, inviting Vattemare in 1824 to see his growing collection of antiquities at the medieval castle he was building in Scotland at Abbotsford. Scott, a child of the Borders who had been dispossessed of his inheritance at Dryburgh Abbey and whose "whole creative life" was spent, as Stephen Bann puts it, in a "massive effort of reconstruction" (*The Clothing of Clio*, 97; 110), must have felt a special affinity for the ironically self-fashioning Vattemare. He wrote a note for *Le Charivari* in 1939 that captures the actor's wit, virtuosity, and, most importantly, the subversiveness of his multi-dimensional identity:

Jadis, dans la vieille Angleterre, on regardait d'un mauvais oeil celui qui portait deux figures sous le même capuchon: que devait-on vous dire, à vous qui possédez un si grand nombre de visages? Hier soir, sous un seul capuchon, se sont montrées vingt têtes différentes. Voyons, habile imposteur, dites-nous la vérité. Etes-vous beau ou laid, vieux ou jeune, homme, femme ou enfant, chien ou souris? Réunissez-vous dans un seul tous les êtres vivans d'une maison? Que dis-je tous les êtres vivans! vous nous en offrez aussi tous les ustensiles: scie, rabot, tourne-vis. Mais avant tout, n'êtes-vous qu'un seul individu? Il me semble que vous devez être au moins Alexandre et Compagnie. Mais non: c'est une troupe, une réunion, un rassemblement; et moi, *shérif*, je dois remplir les devoirs de ma place. Oui, au lieu de chanter toutes vos merveilles, je devrais lire le *riot-act* et vous ordonner de vous disperser. (*Monsieur Alexandre*, 162)

Vattemare finally returned to France, in 1826, as a wealthy man, “a philanthropist and a gentleman”, as he liked to say. He bought a beautiful apartment on the rue de Clichy in Paris and a *maison de campagne* at Marly-le-Roi, only going on stage during the next four years two more times, in 1829 at the Gymnase and the Théâtre Madame, to raise money for a new, all consuming project which would occupy him, indeed become an *idée fixe*, for the rest of his life.

During his tours of Europe, as a follow-up to his publicity stunts, Vattemare liked to surprise his audience by including a few scenes based on local events or legends. Upon arrival in a town, he would research local customs and styles in libraries, museums, or *cabinets de curiosité* and soon began keeping records of these miscellaneous and unclassified collections, noting the large number of “*doubles*” or multiples in some collections and conspicuous gaps in others. Museums and libraries were often housed under the same roof, as Vattemare notes in his visit to Frankfurt in 1818: “Le musée dans le bâtiment de la bibliothèque” (*Itinéraire*, 103), thus bringing what was once the private, non-utilitarian activity of the gentleman traveller into the public domain. Because of the demands of his *métier*, Vattemare’s relationship to the ‘singular’ object evolved from personal curiosity and amazement to a desire to return the object to its place in a larger economy that would be of use to all citizens. He began an effort of classification, and his inventories eventually reached vast proportions: 18,000 *doubles* in the library of Iena, 30,000 in Vienna, 54,000 in Saint Petersburg, 200,000 in Munich, etc. (*Monsieur Alexandre*, 114). At the same time that he was exploring the *cabinets de curiosités* for props, he was beginning his own collection of engravings, prints, autographs, books, and objects given to him as gifts from the noble houses and courts of Europe.

Vattemare’s taste for and fascination with collecting was undoubtedly stimulated during the five-year period he spent in London, where the rise of antiquarianism that had begun in the Eighteenth century was reflected in a growing commerce in curios, coins, prints and the establishment of privately funded museums. In 1812 William Bullock, traveller, collector, and naturalist, bought a house in Piccadilly that he named “The Egyptian Hall” for the display of over 15,000 curiosities, both aesthetic and scientific (Altick, 235). We know that Walter Scott attended an exhibition of his friend’s, Benjamin Robert Haydon’s, pictures there, and that in 1821 Giovanni Battista Belzoni, a character whose life was as remarkable as Vattemare’s in many respects, rented the Hall for a sensational display of artefacts and scaled down models of monuments he had brought back from Egypt. Belzoni’s success as a respected collector and man of science must have been an inspiration to Vattemare, since the Italian émigré from Padua had spent the early years of his life wandering “through England during the Napoleonic wars as a sideshow giant, strong man, and conjuror” (Altick, 243) before being sent, in 1815, on a mission to Egypt to sell Muhammad Ali Pasha a new kind of waterwheel. French Egyptologists, organized by Napoleon’s Minister of Culture, Vivant-Denon, as early as 1800, were exporting antiquities at a furious rate during this period; and independently of his mission, Belzoni became involved in extensive excavations, discovering the buried temple of Abu Simbel, six royal tombs in

the Valley of the Kings, and the lost city of Berenice. His dramatic exhibition, simulating with lighting and décor the original sites, brought 1,900 people to the Hall on the first day. Dickens later wrote of him: “The once starving mountebank became one of the most illustrious men in Europe! – an encouraging example to those who have not only stout heads to project, but stout hearts to execute” (Altick, 244).

It is impossible to imagine that Vattemare and his family, which now consisted of four children (a fifth child would be born later), did not attend the show. A few years later, in 1824, while they were still living in London, Belzoni returned to Piccadilly with objects brought from Mexico: carvings, hieroglyphic texts, models of tombs, life-size replicas of fruit, animals, minerals, etc. Like Vattemare, who used the popular press to promote his shows, Belzoni understood the importance of preparing his exhibitions with advance publicity by first bringing out narratives of his itineraries: *Narrative of the Operations and Recent Discoveries within the Pyramids, Temples, Tombs, and Excavations, in Egypt and Nubia*, 1821, or *Six Months' Residence and Travels in Mexico*, 1824 (Altick, 244, 246).⁷ Travel writing, entertainment, and self-promotion often went hand in hand. Like the person Vattemare would become, Belzoni was not only an energetic entrepreneur; he was also a visionary and an activist who wanted to break down the barriers between classes by changing the structure of social institutions. In 1830, the year Vattemare began to pursue his own dream of the universal dissemination of knowledge, Belzoni travelled to the U.S., where he bought “The Elms”, a 100,000 acre estate on the banks of the Ohio river, with the intention of founding a model community called Hygeia, meaning “City of Health” (Altick, 248). As we know from countless literary allusions and from the surge in emigration to the New World, the U.S. represented a place of renewal and dramatic social change for mid-century Europeans who did not belong to the upper classes. In France under the July Monarchy, Socialist utopians like Fourier or Enfantin and the Saint-Simonians were proposing ideal societies where mental and moral health was as important as good sanitary conditions.⁸

After the fall of the Bourbon monarchy in 1830, Vattemare left his family in France to return to Europe with the idea of raising money for the establishment of an Agency of European Exchange. His motto, “Recevoir de ceux qui ont, pour remettre à ceux qui n’ont pas”, was entirely in keeping with his view of himself as a gentleman philanthropist; but it also expresses the Christian and socialist ideal that underlay the evolution of Vattemare’s thinking from a private to a public concept of welfare. From 1830-1834 he drew on old friendships, his gift for persuasion, and natural charm to lobby heads of state and directors of institutions (universities, libraries, museums) to collaborate in a project that he presented to Guizot, the Prime Minister of France, in 1836 for sponsorship by the government of Louis-Philippe. In 1835 Vattemare had returned to France with agreements signed by the governments of Prussia, Bavaria, Austria, Holland, Belgium and Russia; but, although a law was passed in both “chambers” of the French legislature for the establishment of such an agency, it received no funding and was stalled by bureaucratic resistance at every turn.

Vattemare's Enlightenment dream of establishing publicly sanctioned and subsidized institutions for the universal dissemination of culture would consume his energies for the next twenty-five years of his life. It would not be fully realized, however, until after his death, with the establishment of free public libraries in every major city in the U.S. and Europe, with legislation passed by individual countries authorizing cultural exchange between nations, and, ultimately, with a global institution like UNESCO, founded nearly 100 years after his death. Article #8 of the founding charter of UNESCO bears striking resemblance to the wording of countless petitions and speeches by Vattemare explaining the rationale for his Agency of Cultural Exchange: "afin d'aider l'organisation des Nations Unies par l'éducation, la science et la culture à assurer la coordination internationale des échanges, les Etats contractants adressent à l'organisation des rapports annuels sur l'application de la présente convention" (*Monsieur Alexandre*, 11). Vattemare's petitions to the French government received polite answers, but were largely ignored. To raise money he created a subscription publication called *Album cosmopolite*, in which he published facsimiles of material from his private collection – engravings with critical commentaries and autographs of famous people – thus giving the public a chance to become part of an elite possessing the singular object of the traveller, collector, and gentleman at a relatively low cost.

Vattemare's choice of reproductions for the *Album* is clearly eclectic, at the confluence of classical and romantic styles, aimed at a public representing the *juste milieu*. It includes landscapes, genre paintings, Biblical and historical scenes; but his preference, like that of Stendhal or Victor Cousin, is clearly for the realistic detail, local colour, and, above all, the expressive force of the image. The melodramatic critical commentaries that introduce each picture often focus on the head or the eyes of the subject and on their emotional effect on the spectator. Vattemare's purpose is clearly to reanimate the image into a dramatic *tableau vivant*. The style is lively, exploiting the kinds of sentimental clichés favoured by popular fiction:

« Dessin de genre, par Schulz, de Berlin »

Carl Schulz, de Berlin, est l'auteur du joli dessin que M. Lehnert a lithographié avec tant d'exactitude. Trois beaux lévriers ont été confiés à la garde d'un jeune enfant qui s'ennuie d'attendre. C'est peut-être par une de ces fraîches matinées d'automne, lorsque la bise du nord annonce déjà l'approche de l'hiver, que le pauvre petit a été posté là en plein champ. Il a l'air d'avoir froid : une expression de piteuse bouderie est empreinte sur son visage. Le groupe des trois chiens qui fait partie de cette scène est en parfaite harmonie avec l'attitude de l'enfant. Ce sujet, que l'artiste semble avoir traité d'après nature, est gracieux et bien étudié. (« Premier livraison »)

« Hermite consolant une jeune fille, par Louis Schnorr »

Une jeune fille en pèlerinage va visiter un vieux solitaire : l'expression de tristesse répandue sur sa figure laisse deviner les chagrins de son cœur. Le

bon ermite la console en lui montrant la croix rustique placée à l'entrée de sa cabane. Le style de cette composition est simple et romantique, les têtes sont dessinées avec soin, et le paysage s'harmonise bien avec la scène touchante qui se passe sur le premier plan. (« Huitième livraison »)

« Cerf mourant, par Landseer, de Londres »

...L'expression de souffrance empreinte dans la pose et l'attitude de ce sauvage habitant des forêts qui vient d'entraîner un de ses plus cruels ennemis, un de ses plus acharnés persécuteurs, dans un précipice où ils se brisent l'un et l'autre, est d'une énergique et effrayante vérité. Ne croirait-on pas entendre ce pauvre cerf pousser son dernier cri, son cri d'agonie ? (« Douzième livraison »)

It is not surprising that Vattemare considered the history painter, Paul Delaroche, the greatest artist of his time. Delaroche was famous for the way he captured a momentous event in an anecdotal scene borrowed from genre painting:

Personne plus que lui n'a su résoudre cette question restée sans réponse depuis la mort de David : Avons-nous un chef d'école ?[...] Il a en lui tout ce qu'il faut pour réussir : correct dans le dessin, suave dans le coloris, vrai dans la composition, toujours naturel, toujours impressionné de la couleur locale, selon les sujets qu'il traite et qu'il sait varier. M. Delaroche est le digne chef de l'école française, et c'est à lui qu'appartient désormais la mission de la diriger. (« Vingtième et dernier livraison »)

Like Scott, Vattemare used art to bring the past into the present and even into the future. For him the *Album* was a symbolic connection between his performances as a comedian and his vision of cultural exchange. The "Introduction" to the first *livraison*, signed by an unidentified "S.B" (most likely a cover for Vattemare himself), reads like an artistic manifesto presenting the artist as an agent for social and political communion. It is replete with the utopian hyperbole typical of the Victorian language of self-betterment:⁹

Ce projet, qu'il présente dans l'intérêt public, sous le patronage de noms recommandables, il en a depuis long-temps préparé la réussite ; c'est pour se ménager les relations qui devaient en assurer le succès qu'il s'est créé pour ainsi dire une double existence. Artiste inimitable, un et multiple à la fois, il s'est montré d'abord comme type de tous les caractères, de toutes les physionomies, de tous les sons de voix, et l'Europe entière a applaudi aux représentations du Protée théâtral...ici le roi figure à côté du tribun, le républicain avec le royaliste, l'artiste avec le docteur, l'évêque avec le soldat ; les distances se rapprochent ; les murs qui séparent les hommes s'écroulent, et les préventions disparaissent...Ainsi, cette publication

présentera dans un même cadre une foule de productions qui, par leur rapprochement, donneront pour ainsi dire l'art en spectacle lui-même, et qui, en lui montrant les richesses éparses sur tous les points de son vaste domaine, resserreront de plus en plus les nobles liens qui doivent unir entre eux les artistes de tous les pays. Paris, 31 mai, 1837

In 1839 Vattemare set up his own privately funded agency at 60 rue de Richelieu, and finally, tired of being ignored by the French government, decided, on the advice of Lafayette, to go to the newly formed Republic of the United States in search of support. The trip to North America offered him a fundamentally new opportunity for self-recreation. No longer a mountebank impersonating a gentleman, Vattemare presented himself to the elected leaders of the former colonies as a cultural ambassador. His fame as "M. Alexandre" had preceded his arrival, and he was welcomed by the American press with great fanfare. But, like Belzoni, Vattemare was anxious to put his bohemian persona behind him, agreeing to stage only one performance in New York at the Park Theatre, soon followed by a public meeting at Clinton Hall, where he introduced his idea of a system of global cultural exchange and formed an action committee for its realization.

Unlike France, the United States and Canada were eager to participate in such a project, and all of the thirteen former colonies that Vattemare visited in the next two years, from Maine to Florida, pledged money, books, maps, and objects representing the habitat, civil affairs, inventions and culture of their regions. The city of Philadelphia presented him with a copy of the Constitution, dedicated to "Alexandre Vattemere [sic] the friend of universal knowledge"; and John S. Meehan, Head Librarian of Congress, said "Votre nom ne sera prononcé qu'avec respect et reconnaissance par tous les corps littéraires, scientifiques, et législatifs du monde entier" (Tilliette, 3, 5).¹⁰ According to Revai, he was wildly received by the French populations of Montreal, Quebec, Louisiana, Richmond, Savannah, Indianapolis, and St. Louis and within one year had collected 150 volumes destined for the establishment of an "American library" in the city of Paris.

Vattemare no longer had to depend upon the private patronage of monarchs and princes. By 1843, he had brought 1,800 volumes, 500 coins, 250 engravings, and numerous mineralogical and natural history specimens to France. These included valuable items like signed copies of the Constitution, an original Audubon folio of the *Birds and Mammals of North America*, transcriptions of the Ojibwe language and Grebo tribal songs Monsieur Alexandre, 125 (Dargent)). Vattemare returned on a second trip to the U.S. in 1847 with some 50 cases of French archives and coins weighing 11,500 kilos, for which he paid \$8,000 insurance out of his own pocket; but these were mainly duplicates of bureaucratic documents or library discards of little worth. Nevertheless, in 1848 the U.S. Congress voted to give him an annual indemnity of \$5,940 to support his project, and by 1860, 300,000 volumes of material had been exchanged between the U.S., Canada, and France. An 1859 report on the material sent to the Hôtel de Ville in Paris lists the following items: « 6,000 volumes consacrés

aux publications officielles, aux débats des assembles et affaires politiques; 2,000 volumes consacrés aux sciences et aux arts ; 200 à la jurisprudence ; 1,000 à la littérature américaine ; 1,200 à la biographie ; 1,400 à l'histoire de la colonie et des villes de l'Union ; 1,000 aux revues ; 200 cartes, estampes, plans » (Tillette, 47).

Before returning to Paris in 1850 to help establish a space for the American Library at the Hôtel de Ville, Vattemare had advanced his dream of the democratisation of culture by donating material and participating in the planning of free public libraries in Baltimore, New York, Philadelphia, and Boston. Although the concept of a free public library was already being considered in New Hampshire and other New England states (*Monsieur Alexandre*, 137), it was thanks in part to Vattemare's vision and tireless lobbying that the lending libraries and reading rooms of the early nineteenth-century were eventually replaced by permanent collections available at no expense to the public and housed in great urban monuments like the Smithsonian or the Boston Public Library.¹¹ The family of Josiah Phillips Quincy, mayor of Boston, became close friends of Vattemare, taking him into their home and corresponding with him regularly after his return to France. A plaque commemorating his achievement can be seen today in the entrance hall of the Boston Public Library at Copley Square, placed there twenty years after Vattemare's death by Quincy's son.¹²

Vattemare reached the height of his success in France between 1850 and 1855, when he was held up by the government of Louis-Napoleon as the cultural ambassador to the U.S. and put in charge of the American contributions from the states of New York, Virginia, and South Carolina at the Exposition Universelle of 1855. But from 1855 until his death, there was a steady decline of interest and support for his Agency of Cultural Exchange. According to the *Grand dictionnaire universel du XIXe siècle* an appropriate reading space was never created at the Hôtel de Ville for Vattemare's collection, and many visiting Americans reported their disappointment on their return home:

La salle [...] consacrée [aux collections américaines] est une annexe de la *bibliothèque* municipale; mais rien ne la signale comme une *bibliothèque spéciale*. Elle est trop petite, dans tous les cas, pour ce qu'elle est destinée à contenir; et les plus importants ouvrages (la collection des documents du congrès, entre autres), sont *cachés* dans des placards à portes pleines pratiqués dans un corridor. Nous avons entendu beaucoup d'Américains, qu'avait attirés à l'Hôtel de Ville la renommée de *leur bibliothèque*, se plaindre avec amertume d'avoir été déçus dans leur légitime curiosité, et, bien plus, humiliés dans leur amour-propre national.¹³

In 1852 the U.S. Congress voted to revoke Vattemare's status as cultural representative and an embarrassingly small number of items were sent from the U.S. for the Exposition of 1855. Resources on both sides of the Atlantic dried up. France had become involved in the Crimean War, and the U.S. was absorbed by the events leading up to the Civil War. Devastation brought on by natural disasters and wars

claimed a large part of Vattemare's enormous collection. After his death, many cases of archives were sent to a poorly maintained warehouse in Passy in 1869; and the remaining 500-600 volumes containing some of the most valuable material, including the Audubon folio, were destroyed in the fire set by the Communards in 1871 (Tilliette, 48). A vast collection of material destined for a museum in Montreal was also destroyed by fire,¹⁴ and the museum Vattemare founded in Saint-Malo was reduced to rubble during the bombardments in 1944.

Vattemare's legacy was not only lost because of physical disasters, however. It was undermined and eventually eclipsed by respected librarians themselves, some of whom became directors of the institutions he had helped to found. This new generation of specialists in the systematic classification and organization of knowledge would be responsible for the production of the official documents that we accept as history.¹⁵ Vattemare's histrionic personality, entrepreneurial ambition, and missionary zeal (one might even say mania) for collecting irritated more than one of the people who were in a position to control the histories of their institutions and the afterlife of Vattemare's collection. Georges Ticknor (1791-1871), as a distinguished professor of French and Spanish at Harvard College and elected trustee of the Athenaeum from 1823-1832, had produced a plan for the unification of all Boston libraries under one roof well before Vattemare arrived in the city. As Whitehill condescendingly puts it in his centennial history of the Boston Public Library:

Two more different characters could hardly be imagined than the scholarly Ticknor, commodiously installed in the dignified red brick house that still survives [...] at the corner of Park and Beacon Streets in the shadow of the State House, and the volatile little French ventriloquist, touring Europe and collecting in an "Album Cosmopolite" tributes to his theatrical prowess from the Emperors of Austria and Russia, Queen Victoria, Beethoven, Victor Hugo, Landseer, and ten thousand others. [...] Had he but lived a few decades later, Vattemare's promotional instincts would have met their proper outlet in a chamber of commerce or an advertising agency, for there were few limits to the expansiveness of his imagination or his ready adaptation to any opening that presented itself. (Whitehill, 3-4)¹⁶

According to Robert C. Winthrop, Ticknor and others, like himself, who were involved in plans for the library, considered the histrionic Frenchman to be a charlatan:

Our friend Mr. Ticknor was not a little unwilling to have Vattemare's name connected with the Library, regarding him as a Charlatan, as, indeed, we all did. I cannot forget how Mr. T. winced when I read to him my allusion to Vattemare on the 23rd page of the Cornerstone Proceedings, and how earnestly he said "I would not say a word about him." (Whitehill, 10)

Whitehill acknowledges, nevertheless, that “it was Vattemare’s activity, resulting in a second gift of books from Paris to Boston, that provided the next step”, in 1847, for the founding of the Boston Public Library (Whitehill, 11).

Vattemare was excluded even more emphatically by the direction of the Smithsonian, although his story reveals interesting parallels with that of its founder, Lord Smithson. Bastard son of Sir Hugh Smithson, Duke and Count of Northumberland, Baron of Warkworth and Lovaine,¹⁷ James Lewis Macie was given birth by Elizabeth Keate, widow of James Macie, in France. Educated at Oxford, Macie adopted the name of his father when he was admitted to the Royal Academy in 1802 for his learned contributions to the natural sciences. Smithson, who, like Vattemare, lived most of his life abroad in Berlin, Paris, Rome and Florence, willed the fortune he had inherited from his mother to his nephew, Henry James Hungerford, with a clause stating that if Hungerford died without heirs, the inheritance should go to the government of the United States “to found at Washington, under the name of Smithsonian Institution, an establishment for the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men”. Clotilde Frigiolini believes that Smithson’s reasons for choosing the U.S. as his beneficiary spring from the circumstances of his birth and from his admiration for a form of government that places talent over bloodlines. She quotes Smithson:

The best blood of England flows in my vein, but this avails me not. My name shall live in the memory of men when the titles of the Northumberlands and the Percys are extinct and forgotten. (*Monsieur Alexandre*, 148-9)

Plans for the creation of the Institution began in 1836, with the death of Hunterford; and, during his first trip to the U.S., an enthusiastic Vattemare contributed several cases of books, coins, and objects for the permanent collection. Yet when Joseph Henry, President of the National Academy of Sciences, became First Secretary of the Smithsonian in 1847, he made certain to distance himself from Vattemare’s Agency by setting up the museum’s own system of cultural exchange, handsomely funded by Smithson’s more than \$500,000 legacy.

On the other side of the Atlantic Vattemare ran into hostility from someone who would become one of the most distinguished names in library science: Sir Anthony Panizzi (1797-1879). He had come to England as a refugee from the Austrian part of Italy and joined the staff of the British Museum in 1831, where he found a rich but disorganized collection with limited access for researchers. Besides designing the great Round reading room, Panizzi devised a new cataloguing code called the 91 Rules, which would be widely used by other libraries, and guidelines for the acquisition, storage, preservation, and discard of stock.¹⁸ Most importantly for our story, after he became Director of the British Museum, Panizzi persuaded the British government to provide funds for the acquisition of older material and foreign publications. According to Elizabeth Revai, he became the “sworn enemy” of Vattemare, denigrating his system of exchange between France and the U.S. at every opportunity: “Il n’est pas vrai non plus, comme on a voulu le faire croire [...] que dans

la Bibliothèque de l'Hôtel de Ville de Paris il y a des compartiments réservés aux lecteurs et que les livres qui s'y trouvent ont été offerts par les Etats-Unis; rien de tout cela n'est vrai".¹⁹

In France one might say that Vattemare's legacy was saved to some extent by the official forces that had marginalized him when they sent so much of the "American Collection" to Passy. The editor of the *Journal des économistes*, Adalbert Froust de Fontpertuis, would call attention to the importance of this material a year after the disastrous fire of 1871:

Permettez-moi, au nom des travailleurs sérieux, dont je crois faire partie, d'appeler votre attention sur le dépôt de livres américains, connu sous le nom de *collection Wattemare* [sic], qui fut détaché de la bibliothèque de l'Hôtel de Ville, quelques mois avant le 4 septembre [...] Je ne puis m'empêcher de croire qu'on n'a point obéi à une bonne inspiration, quoique par le fait des monstrueuses folies de la Commune elle se soit trouvée fort heureuse, en reléguant cette collection dans un arrondissement aussi excentrique [...] les documents législatifs ou administratifs qui composent la collection me paraîtraient surtout utiles pour dissiper l'ignorance trop réelle des jeunes gens français... (Tilliette, 37)

Although much of the American collection would either be dispersed to provincial libraries or continue to mold in a storage space on Boulevard Morland between 1872 and 1879, 245 titles representing 504 volumes have survived and can be consulted in the foreign collection of the Bibliothèque Administrative de la Ville de Paris by researchers interested in the history of urban development in the United States and Canada. Moreover, John Bigelow, who was Chargé d'Affaires d'Amérique in Paris and a friend of Vattemare, had the foresight to buy for 2,000 francs some of the material that the nearly destitute family auctioned off when Vattemare died. In 1897 Bigelow made a gift to the New York Public library of correspondence relevant to the Agency beginning in 1834, including 400 folios of copies of letters sent between 1854 and 1864 to the U.S., Russia, Portugal, the Ottoman Empire, Switzerland, and Holland (*Monsieur Alexandre*, 144-5 (Frigiolini)). Thanks to the recent efforts of his descendants, archives with Vattemare's stamp from the original collection have surfaced in museums of natural science and provincial libraries in France. Much of this material, along with documents long buried in the archives of the Smithsonian, the New York Public Library, and the Boston Public Library, is being assembled for an exhibition planned for 2006, first at the Hôtel de Ville in Paris and then at the Boston Public Library. The many faces of Alexandre Vattemare will capture the protean spirit of an age that believed in the power of the exceptional individual to remake himself and, in the process, to reshape the world for the betterment of mankind. His very combination of acting, writing, and the promotion of mechanisms for the free exchange of knowledge brought Enlightenment ideals and spirit to an age rapidly giving

way to the anonymous control of vast corporate and governmental entities. Today his existence may seem to us more fictional than real.

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1837. *Album cosmopolite ou Choix des Collections de M. Alexandre Vattemare.* (BAVP)

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¹ Much of what we know about Alexandre Vattemare has been transmitted through oral reminiscences and transcriptions of his own autobiographical accounts by his descendants : *Memoirs and Anecdotes of Monsieur Alexandre, the Celebrated Dramatic Ventriloquist*, London, 1822; *Itinéraire dans plusieurs pays de l'Europe, 1814-1825*; *La Revue de Presse (1830-1839) d'Alexandre Vattemare*; *Album cosmopolite ou Choix des Collections de M. Alexandre Vattemare, 1837* These have been assembled by the Association des Amis d'Alexandre Vattemare. Manuscripts and typescripts can be consulted at the BAVP.

² An original colored lithograph by Grandville is in the BAVP. Others have been reproduced in *La Revue de Presse* and *Monsieur Alexandre*.

³ J.L. Dargent's book, *Alexandre Vattemare: artiste, promoteur des échanges internationaux de publications*, Tunis, Bruxelles, 1973-1976, is excerpted and quoted in *Monsieur Alexandre*.

⁴ See *La Revue de presse*

⁵ *A Cultural History of Ventriloquism*, cited in *Memoirs and Anecdotes*, p.51.

⁶ The manuscript of this play can be found in the Bibliothèque historique de la ville de Paris, 14705. It was originally published in London, in English in 1822.

⁷ Vattemare kept a detailed descriptive narrative of his early travels in his *Itinéraire*.

⁸ See Tony Bennett. *The Birth of the Museum: History Theory, Politics*. London & New York: Routledge, 1995, p.18. In 1876 Benjamin Ward Richardson had a plan for a model city called Hygeia that would

be “well furnished with baths [...], playgrounds, gymnasia, libraries, board schools, fine art schools, lecture halls, and places of instructive amusement.” *Hygeia, A City of Health*. London: Spottiswoode, 1876, p. 39 (facsimile edition published by Garland Publishing, New York, 1985), cited by Bennett.

⁹ Flaubert will parody this kind of inflated rhetoric in the journalism of Homais or the fulsome oratory of the minor official who presides over the *Comices agricoles* in *Madame Bovary*.

¹⁰ This is the most complete, carefully documented, and critically balanced account of Vattemare’s contribution to the foreign collection of the BAVP we have to date.

¹¹ Book prices had increased eight to ninefold between 1820 and 1840, so many people from the reading public patronized commercial lending libraries or private reading societies; but, as Reinhard Wittmann notes, there was “considerable variation in the size and composition of their stocks.” In *A History of Reading in the West*, edited by Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier, translated by Lydia G. Cochrane. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999, pp. 303 and 310.

¹² President of Harvard College and, like his father, mayor of Boston.

¹³ article “Bibliothèque”, tome 3, p. 696, cited by Tilliette, p.43.

¹⁴ See Elizabeth Revai’s thorough-going account of Vattemare’s activities in Canada.

¹⁵ For David Murray the distinguishing features of the modern museum were “the principles of specialization and classification.” *Museums: Their History and Their Use*. Glasgow: James MacLehose and Sons, 1904, cited by Bennett, p.2.

¹⁶ Walter Muir Whitehill. *Boston Public Library: A Centennial History*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956, pp. 3-4.

¹⁷ Clotilde Frigiolini, “L’Oeuvre passionnée du mime et ventriloque français Alexandre Vattemare (1796-1864) dans le domaine des échanges internationaux, ses rapports avec les Etats italiens et la ‘Smithsonian Institution’ de Washington », *Revue française d’histoire du livre*, 1979, cited in *Monsieur Alexandre*, p. 148.

¹⁸ Article “Panizzi, Sir Anthony” in *International Encyclopedia of Information and Library Science*, ed. by John Feather and Paul Sturges. London & N.Y.: Routledge, 1997, p.356.

¹⁹ pp. 128-134, Cited by Tilliette, p.32.