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Edited by Anna-Louise Milne

Excerpt

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I

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Introduction: The city as book

‘Among all cities’, wrote the German philosopher and critic Walter Benjamin in 1929, ‘there is none more closely connected with the book than Paris.’¹ In making this claim, Benjamin (1892–1940) was already announcing the specific significance of Paris that he explores in *The Arcades Project*, his vast and kaleidoscopic work on the city as *the* capital of the nineteenth century, which is undoubtedly one of the most significant contributions to thinking and writing about the multifaceted relations between cities and the literature they generate.² But foremost here within this particularly succinct observation is a striking conceptual claim, encapsulated in the singular term: ‘the book’. For Benjamin is not just saying that Paris has been and remains a key locus for the production of literary culture; he is also implying that Paris is the city that can be ‘held’ in one’s hand. He is evoking the city in terms of a world concentrated between two covers.

For Paul Valéry (1871–1945), writing also in the latter years of the 1920s when Paris was the locus of extraordinary social and demographic change, there is no other city in the world of such multiplicity – nowhere else where language ‘has such frequencies, such resonances, such lack of reserve’ – but also nowhere else of such ‘jealous’ and densely packed concentration of all the arts and sciences. ‘The French’, Valéry writes in his philosophical novel *Monsieur Teste* (1926), ‘have piled up all their ideas within the walls of one city.’³ Of course, like the book that seeks to exhaust human knowledge or history, the ideal of a city that contains everything within itself is just as apt to fissure and expand into other zones. Benjamin’s own writing strategies are evidence of this dynamic between encyclopaedic ambition and endless dispersal, and in this respect they are emblematic of the constant give and take between unity and proliferation that is archetypal of Paris. Stultifying or restorative, Paris is encountered as an all-consuming state released, almost like a genie, from unprepossessing fragments of experience. For Franz Kafka (1883–1924), writing in his diary in 1911, this took the form of finding Paris like a lump ‘in his throat’ at the sound of a popular song by Bruant.⁴ While for

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the Dominican-born Jean Rhys (1890–1979), who roamed between London, Paris and Vienna during the inter-war years, ‘when we get to Paris’ is a repeated anticipation of some state of rest for the female narrator of *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939), a state perhaps even of peace and oneness – ‘my beautiful life in front of me, opening out like a fan in my hand’ – clung to despite the fact that it has ‘no sense, no reason’.⁵

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the journey to Paris had become an almost obligatory rite of passage, especially if one wanted to write. Despised or adulated, Paris was the testing ground where one went ‘to exist’ as a writer: ‘Paris was where the twentieth century was ... [it] was the place that suited those of us that were to create the twentieth century art and literature, naturally enough’, wrote the great American modernist Gertrude Stein (1874–1946).⁶

It is no coincidence if these various evocations of ‘Paris’ as an ineffable but unmistakable force field all cluster around the decades 1910–1930. The long nineteenth century, marked by a succession of utopian visions of Paris as fount of freedom, where Humanity or the People would ‘rise up’, according to the great historical novelists Victor Hugo (1802–85) and George Sand (1804–76), had run into the more divisive currents of the twentieth century. This produced an extraordinary diversity of efforts to preserve something of this idealised unity, or to find it elsewhere, potentially in the backwaters, or in the ruins. Such would be the case on through the twentieth century and into the contemporary poetics of those working in and around the orbit of Jacques Réda (b. 1929), or in the fiction of Patrick Modiano (b. 1945), with whom this volume closes. Indeed, the literature of Paris through the twentieth century could be summarised as an unremitting quest for an elsewhere that would be one’s own ‘Paris’, the true Paris, a migration through the flea markets (discussed here by Jeremy Stubbs on Surrealism), to increasingly peripheral areas (Alec G. Hargreaves on ‘the banlieue’), or an exploration of what poetic or prosodic tension can reveal of the world (explored by Michael Sheringham). In contrast, the nineteenth century tended to give us a more robust and tangible city, of a measure with the men who built and dominated it.

Yet this opposition – between the immaterial ‘essence’ of Paris and the forms and materials of its landscape – can also be understood as the two faces of a double process that has a longer reach. Accordingly, we could consider that any bid to ‘capture’ the city in a book, or to give the means to ‘know’ the city, works in tandem with what is perhaps an essentially narcissistic endeavour that perceives only itself, or its ‘book’, in the city. Hence the combination that we can see most paradigmatically in the way Victor Hugo conjured with visions of Paris from his exile in Guernsey during the Second Empire (1852–70). On the one hand, he sketched the city, in deft strokes of charcoal, reducing it to a mere

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outline under a nostalgic ‘cloud’ of his memories. On the other, he patiently reconstructed a journey on foot through specific streets and past particular houses in his great novel *Les Misérables* (1862) with an accuracy that suggests both extraordinary powers of spatial recall and a will to fill his novel with material traces of the city.⁷ In many respects, this combination of psycho-fantasy, often imbued with personal regret, and documentary detail runs throughout the nineteenth-century engagement with the city, and it will be a recurrent consideration here beginning with Tom Stammers’s exploration of the tension between the actual events of the Revolution and the way they came to be represented both by contemporaries and in their nineteenth-century afterlives.

Following Stammers on Paris and revolution, Honoré de Balzac (1799–1850) will be the subject of Owen Heathcote’s chapter focusing on the equally monumental ‘construction’ of Paris in the *Comédie humaine* (1829–46). Again we will be contending with a commitment to empirical exactitude in the ‘classification’ of the city that also conjures with another form of spectral projection. Less a lingering ‘cloud’ than a robust rival, Paris is most famously held out before us as fantasised totality by Balzac in the scene where his ambitious outsider Rastignac climbs the heights of the Père Lachaise cemetery at the end of the novel *Père Goriot* (1835) to address the city: ‘à nous deux, maintenant’ or ‘it’s between you and me now’. This resolutely combative posture where the city has to be ‘mastered’ by being understood, not only draws the reader in alongside the provincial upstart, establishing the mode for the ‘reading’ of Paris as one of gradual elucidation of the city’s secrets or inner workings; it also sets the terms that can, to some degree, be said to constitute ‘the literature of Paris’. Calling forth a form for conquest, a ‘vision’ of the city, Rastignac also announces a *corps-à-corps* – a posture that is both a struggle and a dance – whereby subject and city define one another, and the writing of Paris assumes a particular drive.

This posture is a key organising matrix for this *Companion to the Literature of Paris*, the objectives of which are twofold: to offer avenues into major works of literary representation of Paris, and to conceptualise both what it means to speak of the literature of a city and how that question relates to particular modes of literary production in Paris. The aim of thinking in terms of a ‘posture’ is to foreground the extraordinary disproportion and ambition involved in imagining oneself standing equally before the city’s multiplicity and depth. To assume this posture, that is, to rise to the challenge of Paris, is to recognise that writing in and/or about Paris is some sort of gauge of ‘existence’, and so there is necessarily a degree of bravura in this *corps-à-corps*, a bid to ‘exist’, as Stein put it. In these introductory pages we will observe how this posture evolves and changes shape. It can take a number of forms, but remains recognisable, rather like a shadow that the reader will then

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be able to see move, waxing and waning, through the following chapters and their engagement with the combination of symbolic construction and material exploration that constitutes ‘city literature’.

This posture should not be understood to be inevitably combative, however. French-American writer Julien Green (1900–98), for example, acknowledges this general intuition about what is at stake in writing in and about Paris, but imagines the process as a sustaining one. He opens his literary ‘promenade’ entitled *Paris* (1983) – which meanders from well-worn track to hidden facet, in a manner characteristic of late twentieth-century introspective ‘travel’ writing – with the recognition that this work is the culmination of many a dream. To speak of Paris is to speak ‘in the plural’, he says, but this plural is not conceived as a threat to the subject, but rather as an opportunity for the capaciousness of the writer to deploy itself. Yet, in this very expression – ‘Paris au pluriel’ – we also hear and see the wager or ‘pari’ of the upstart Rastignac. And, for all its acknowledgement of the unending, multiple nature of the task, Green’s *Paris* also operates an essentially syllogistic claim to – or on – the city. Looming over the effort of detailing the ‘reality’ of the city comes another ‘figure’, not the projected opponent facing the outsider, but the nourishing source beloved of the ‘native’ Parisian, and which guarantees an unreflective legitimacy: ‘Good or bad, what comes out of the hands of Paris is Paris, whether a letter, a chunk of bread, a pair of shoes or a poem.’⁸ What looks like a simple claim about provenance also appears to involve imagining, or troping, ‘Paris’.

Some of the chapters in this volume take the very fact of provenance as their starting point: the literature of Paris means quite straightforwardly literature produced in Paris. For others, the question of producing Paris in literature is more overt, more explicitly part of the writerly endeavour. The aim of this *Companion* as a whole, spanning this apparent divide, is to enable the reader to grasp how these two different ways of conceiving of ‘the literature of Paris’ will tend to bleed into one another, challenge being an inextricable part of the context, and the context with all its variety being the reason why the challenge is always renewed.

The stakes of the wager or ‘pari’ made ‘on Paris’ perhaps reach their most colossal when Émile Zola (1840–1902) transposes Balzac’s Rastignac into his voracious speculator Saccard, who looks down on the city from the other hill to the north, the Butte Montmartre, in his novel *La Curée* [*The Kill*, 1872]. It is here that Zola depicts most dramatically the wholesale plundering of the city in the course of the Second Empire (1852–70) when Paris was enlarged to its current administrative limits. Massive building and remapping works were launched across huge swathes of the city in the process known as ‘haussmannisation’ after the prefect Baron Haussmann who oversaw the works on behalf of Napoleon III. Saccard instils fear in his wife as he describes the way the city will be dissected,

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slicing his hand through the air as he stares down at the city below with such conviction that she almost thinks her husband's hand 'had really made the cuts he spoke of, splitting up Paris from one end to the other, severing beams, crushing masonry, leaving behind it the long, hideous wounds of crumbling walls',⁹ in an image that holds together the imagery of the material processes of construction and the 'flesh' of an fantasised city-being. Brian Nelson's chapter on Zola and Haussmann explores this image further and considers how Zola responded to Haussmann's wholesale works with a 'wholesale' vision of Paris. In contrast, but also dealing with the impact of this key period in Parisian history, Maria Scott's discussion of Baudelaire (1821–67) draws out how the poet has to move and forage within the city to extract something meaningful from it when it is being so thoroughly transformed from ancient repository to modern metropolis. Baudelaire's position halfway through this volume marks a sort of middle point where the city is still conceived within the horizon of totality, and yet is already breaking into the rubble of multiple worlds.

Indeed, it had already ceased to be at all clear what sort of promise Rastignac's wager on Paris could hold when Gustave Flaubert (1821–80) borrowed Balzac's character as a model offered to Frédéric, the protagonist or anti-hero of his novel of a failed destiny, *L'Éducation sentimentale* [*Sentimental Education*, 1869]. Having recommended that he begin his rise to glorious distinction and influence in Paris by becoming the lover of the wife of a powerful businessman, Frédéric's confidante adds in a perfect piece of irony: 'But this is just the way the world goes [je ne te dis que des choses classiques]. Remember Rastignac, in the *Comédie humaine*. You can do it, I'm sure you can!'¹⁰ Frédéric makes the bet, fails to believe in it, then luxuriates modestly in his regrets when it is too late. His view on why he failed to live up to his promise is that he perhaps 'didn't steer a straight course' ('le défaut de la ligne droite', p. 458), an obscure statement that evokes both a lack of military discipline and an inaptitude for the increasingly straight lines that were the defining characteristic of 'haussmannisation', which was being carried out at the very time Flaubert was writing his novel.

Paris is presented at the outset of the novel as lying on the side of the 'straight line' (p. 20), but the city that Frédéric frequents has an alarming tendency to fade from view, only to re-emerge with great but unexpected clarity. Thus when he wanders the streets through the night, lost in his rapturous thoughts of a possible life with his beloved Madame Arnoux, the city disappears in a blur – and Frédéric with it – then reappears elsewhere, as if spitting Frédéric back out far from where he started: 'he walked on at random, carried away by his emotions. He felt the damp air, and realised that he had reached the embankment' (p. 56). Many critics have pointed out the elliptical, almost disjointed style cultivated by Flaubert, with its preponderance of commas and its use of

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the non sequitur. His sentences behave like Frédéric and his mistress Rosanette who not only escape to Fontainebleau while history is in the making (the June days of 1848), but choose to spend their time in the country travelling randomly along the back lanes, forever turning away from the straight line: ‘occasionally an abandoned road appeared straight in front of them, with drooping plants growing on it here and there. At the centre of every crossroads a signpost stretched out its four arms’ (p. 350).

Flaubert himself seems to have identified the absence of clear direction in this particular novel as the explanation for its relative failure. In a letter to Edma Roger de Genettes in October 1879, he wrote: ‘Why has this book not had the success I expected? ... It is too true ... it lacks the *falseness of perspective* ... Every great work of art must have a point, a summit, must form a pyramid ... But life is not like that ... I don’t think anyone has shown such probity as myself.’¹¹ In the pursuit of ‘life’, Flaubert has then eschewed the perspective that enabled the more panoramic and ostensibly ‘complete’ vision of Paris that Rastignac and Saccard sought. This eschewing of ‘perspective’, or the avoidance of monumental Paris with all the over-determination such a notion implies, is another way of imagining the *corps-à-corps* that interests us here. Less of a struggle and perhaps more of a dance with eyes averted, it flickers through the chapters that recount the gradual fissuring of the city into zones of particular sensibilities and conditions: Nicole G. Albert on lesbian life and sexual marginality during the Belle Époque; Nicholas Hewitt on the two ‘sides’ of Montmartre and their importance for the universe of Louis-Ferdinand Céline (1894–1961); Geoff Gilbert on expatriate writing in the first half of the twentieth century, and more particularly Jean Rhys’s work and the sort of perspective it has on the 1937 International Exhibition. These chapters all engage with the difficulty of ‘mapping’ Paris when the perspective adopted is that of ‘life’, to borrow Flaubert’s phrase, exploring the relation between literary experiment and modes of adaptation to social and economic pressures in the city. They also bear witness to the increasingly cosmopolitan make-up of the city, with aspects of the growing Anglo-American expatriate community filtering into Albert’s account of sexual marginality in Paris, while ‘another’ expatriatism crosses into Hewitt’s focus on the shadier haunts of Montmartre, where low rents and lowlife habits offered a way into the city for African American musicians, performers and poets. These two chapters thus complement Gilbert’s study of ‘expatriate Paris’, revealing the fact that even for the relatively small facet of literary Paris that is Anglo-American modernism, no one map will suffice to capture the different trajectories.

We have already seen the difficulty with mapping the city in *L’Éducation sentimentale*, and in one memorable scene, as Frédéric reaches a metaphorical crossroads with three out of the four women with whom he will become

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romantically involved, he urges his postilion to ride on, only to find himself in a traffic snarl at the bottom of the Champs-Élysées: ‘And the berline made off in the direction of the Champs-Élysées in the midst of the other carriages – barouches, britzkas, wurts, tandems, tilburies, dog-carts, covered waggonettes with leather curtains full of singing workmen out on the spree, and demi-fortunes being carefully driven by fathers of families’ (p. 224). The narrative development of the story stalls; there is no clear perspective forward, and instead we are invited to make what we can of this unlikely pile-up of city traffic and careful fathers. The text generates a cacophony of rival possibilities, a fizz of such signifying potential as to call to mind again Valéry’s vision of Paris in *Monsieur Teste*. The latter depicts the city as a great hotbed of egotistical agitation burning with reactions between rival electrons all buzzing with the idea that ‘there’s only me . . . there’s only me, me, me’, crossed by the interference of a high-pitched whine: ‘yes, but what about so-and-so’. This fusion makes Paris, Valéry claims, the ultimate ‘stock exchange . . . the Occidental bazaar for the exchange of phantasms [des échanges des fantasmes]’ (p. 58).

So should we deem this inexhaustible jumble of words and things to be ‘life’, as Flaubert would have it, or a phantasmic hothouse? In other words, does the absence of perspective down amongst the traffic bring us closer to ‘Paris’, or prevent us from seeing it? The overcrowdedness forces Jean Paulhan (1884–1968) for one into the metro, in a troping of the city as its underground that we could also trace back to Hugo’s *Les Misérables*. But rather than the explanation for the city,¹² Paulhan finds in the metro an equally strange ‘fauna’ or accumulation of names and manners. This fauna does offer some sort of reprieve, however, from the signifying overload of the surface – a strange reprieve, he says, that once more refigures our *corps-à-corps* by adding another layer to the dynamic. Paulhan likens the pleasure of relative simplification procured by the ‘stable, reposeful air’ of the metro to the experience of finding ‘another mask that resembles [him]self’.¹³ This is faintly reminiscent of Balzac’s description of the Parisian population in the Preface to the *Fille aux yeux d’or* [*The Girl with the Golden Eyes*], where the city is described as a ‘sea of faces, twisted, contorted, exuding through every pore of the skin the toxic lusts conceived in the brain. Or rather, not so much faces as masks’.¹⁴ However, Paulhan neutralises the negative charge implied in Balzac’s pageant of hypocrisy and self-interest. Instead of the mask adding the injury of illegibility to the struggle for dominance, Paulhan imagines it as a means of recognition and connection in the city. Writing in 1945, in the wake of the Occupation and having been highly active in Resistance networks, he is attuned to something like a hiatus in communication in the city – a ‘blackout’ – across which it is still possible to know something of one another. His perspective is neither from above, nor from below, but rather across

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difference in the city, opening up a sort of latitude that enables connections despite apparent discontinuities, which will be the impetus for a new generation of exploration in and through the literature of Paris, discussed in our final chapter.

So if Rastignac's posture emerges within a novelistic project built on the idea of encoding the city within a rigorously meaningful system, with every drape of a coat and or detail of a shop front offering information to the reader/ethnographer, the interest in foregrounding it here, in these introductory remarks, lies as much in the variations it helps us discern. Balzac's immense *œuvre* undoubtedly represents some sort of turning point in the literature of Paris, the moment of an ambition that is most easily expressed in terms of the birth of the modern, post-revolutionary city. This *Companion* is organised to reflect that intuitive understanding, with – as mentioned earlier – Chapters 2–7 still working within the frame of a totalisable, structurally determined city, and 8–13 concerned more with what escapes the frame or the structure. Yet the particular Parisian expressions of the tussle between the city as readable display and as many-headed monster must also be grasped within a longer discursive evolution. In 1648 the philosopher René Descartes (1596–1650) had already expressed a sentiment close to that of Valéry's *Monsieur Teste*, describing the negative effect of the 'air of Paris' which disposes him 'to conceive of chimeras, instead of philosophical ideas. I meet so many people there who are mistaken in their opinions and their calculations that it seems to be a universal sickness.'¹⁵ Hence the importance for this *Companion* of crossing a chronological presentation, beginning in the early seventeenth century, with the spatial proposition that I have chosen to figure in bodily terms, as a posture. For the city as 'sickness', pumped up on what Descartes calls chimerical ideas, stands very close to the agitation of Valéry's 'electric' Parisians, and what they share is the city's propensity to sponsor particular abstractions.

In addition to an unfolding through time of the city and its literature, this volume thus calls on a series of spatial parameters, some of which are recognisably *quartiers* or districts, others of which are more precisely described as a particular 'habitus' or way of occupying space. But the significance of these discrete spaces lies not just in the fact that they are all 'parts' of the city, but also in that they have been depicted and fantasised as *the* city in a metonymic transfer. This transfer sometimes strives to blanket out all rival claims to Paris, and sometimes functions in a more paranoid mode, imagining the 'true' city – and by extension oneself – to be in danger of being blanketed out, subsumed in the inexorable march of history.

Each of the chapters in this collection thus offers different avenues of reflection into the interplay between the physical and social environment

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and the sorts of ideas of the city that they foster. It begins with the noble *hôtels particuliers* of the Marais, sometimes extensive domains reserved for the most exclusive society, and ends in the overcrowded housing estates of contemporary suburban areas and the undistinguished roads and features of the outer arrondissements of Paris. But if each chapter foregrounds a particular space or community, it does so in order to explore the way that these urban identities conceived of their relation to the greater ‘metropolitan’ space, that multipolar market in which goods, ideas and people intersect and interact.

The city with which we begin, on the eve of Louis XIII’s reign, still contained significant areas of pasture land, despite accommodating in other districts extremely high levels of population density. This contrast is explained by the high number of churches, monasteries and palaces still within the city walls, which were often surrounded by large gardens and cultivated land. In the Marais, discussed by Joan DeJean in Chapter 2, where the *hôtels* characteristic of early seventeenth-century architecture were largely concentrated, the area covered by the home of one family was often over 1,000 square metres and opened out onto a generous private courtyard and sometimes a garden; a century later, when the major pole of aristocratic life had shifted to the Left Bank and the Faubourg Saint-Germain, previously dominated by the vast Abbey Saint-Germain and its very extensive grounds, a single *hôtel* might cover as much as 4,000 square metres. Meanwhile, in other sectors of the city, the streets were extremely narrow – no more than 4 metres across – and the buildings already high, with three to four storeys common in the areas around the central market. Another factor in this overcrowding in parts of the pre-revolutionary city was an already tenacious fear of ‘rampant’ urbanisation. In 1627 Louis XIII renewed the city limits already decreed by Henri II in 1549, ordering a series of posts to be erected to mark the boundaries beyond which building was forbidden. These posts were apparently never installed, and the history of Paris continued to be marked by the construction, then destruction of a series of walls and administrative frontiers that performed, at the level of urban politics, the same Rastignac-like bid to define Paris by ‘closing’ it off. Just as in the figurative battles to dominate the city, this ‘wager’ was, of course, repeatedly overwhelmed by the unstoppable flow of goods and people. The maps in Figures 1.1 and 1.2 give the reader a visual representation of this process.

The walls did not only ring the city. At a more local level, the structure of the *hôtel particulier* made sections of Paris into clusters of juxtaposed private worlds. The buildings were not conceived and organised according to the function of the street, but rather to that of the private courtyard, which was purposely invisible to those obliged to walk at street level. Often a narrow passage was the only way out onto the street. This was the case, for example,

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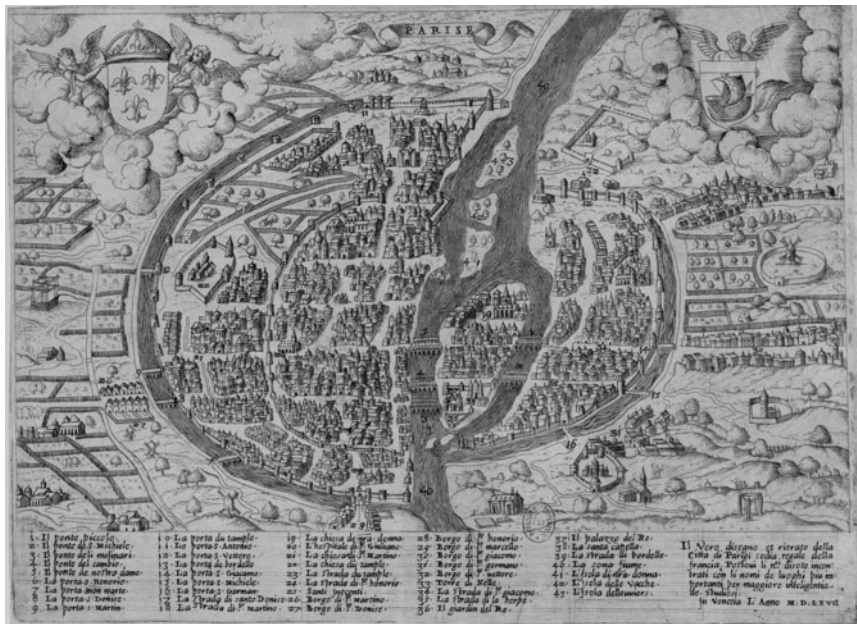


Figure 1.1 Plan de Paris, anon., 1567. Note the large areas of undeveloped land both within the walls and outside. The number 16 refers to the Porte Saint-Germain and the abbey within its walls can be seen just next to it.

with the Hôtel de Béthune-Sully, built on the rue Saint-Antoine and today a national monument. It had only one narrow alleyway onto the main thoroughfare and otherwise opened through a very discreet passage onto the Place Royal, as the Place des Vosges was then called. For Balzac, two hundred years later, the *hotel particulier* remained the only haven for ‘sacred privacy’ in Paris: ‘Unless fortunate enough to live in one’s own hotel, overlooking courtyard and garden, all lives are interlocked. At every floor of a building, one household looks over into another household. Each and everyone stares into the most intimate corners of their neighbours’ home. Paris is a city that exhibits itself as good as naked at every hour.’¹⁶ Yet, despite the premium placed on seclusion, the public space of the square was already, in the seventeenth century, the setting for all sorts of activities and encounters through which people imagined they could raise the barriers that confined them within rigidly separate social horizons, as DeJean documents here, drawing on a vibrant range of popular plays, personal letters and vast novelistic projects. Moreover, these encounters in public space increasingly took the form of an urban consciousness, what DeJean calls ‘the original myth of a Parisian neighbourhood’, marked not just by its sense of difference from