

Michael Sheringham
All Souls College, University of Oxford



Summary: *In terms of the cultural imagination a Paris/London axis has generally been understood to run northwards, residing for example in Balzac's influence on Dickens and James, or in the massive presence of Baudelaire in Anglo-Saxon high modernism. What happens if we reverse the flow and look at the way in which images of London may have contributed to visions of Paris? The article focuses initially on how Poe's story, 'The Man of the Crowd', and Thomas De Quincey's Confessions of an English Opium eater - both set in London and translated by Baudelaire - can be seen to have shaped Baudelaire's hyperbolic vision of Paris as a 'fourmillante cité', full of ghosts and psychic upheavals. Then Gerard de Nerval's essay-novella Les Nuits d'octobre comes into the picture, via its relationship to 'The Key of the Street', a sketch which Nerval erroneously attributed to Dickens. The sketch was in fact written for Dickens's magazine Household Words by his disciple George Sala, and the phrase (which does come from Dickens) was then used by G.K. Chesterton who claimed in his biography that Dickens possessed 'The Key of the street'. Sala's text, and its repercussions in Nerval's writing, illustrates the extent to which Paris and London have, for more than two centuries, provided mirrors or echo-chambers for each other. More recently, in Iain Sinclair, for example, London is viewed in a perspective that reflects this ongoing two-way process.*

Keywords: Paris, London, Baudelaire, Nerval, Dickens, representation, mirror, reportage

Résumé : *Dans l'imaginaire culturel les rapports entre Paris et Londres sont conçus d'habitude selon un axe allant du sud au nord : on cite volontiers l'influence de Balzac sur Dickens et James, ou la présence massive de Baudelaire dans le modernisme anglo-saxon. Que se passe-t-il si nous renversons la vapeur pour envisager l'apport des images de Londres dans la manière de voir Paris ? Cet article montre d'abord que la nouvelle de Poe, « L'homme de la foule » et Un mangeur d'opium de Thomas de Quincey - traduits par Baudelaire, et dont le cadre se situe à Londres - ont pu modeler la vision baudelairienne d'un Paris plein de fantômes et de turbulences psychiques. Ensuite, l'essai-nouvelle de Gérard de Nerval, Les nuits d'octobre, est pris en compte à travers son rapport au feuilleton, intitulé « La clé de la rue », que Nerval attribuait à tort à Dickens. En fait, le feuilleton fut écrit pour le magazine de Dickens, Household Words, par son disciple George Sala. Et l'expression (qui vient en effet de Dickens) a servi ensuite à G.K. Chesterton pour qualifier l'art de Dickens dans sa biographie*

du romancier. Le texte de Sala et son retentissement dans l'écriture de Nerval, font preuve du fait qu'au long de deux siècles Paris et Londres ont servi, l'une pour l'autre, de miroir ou de chambre d'échos. De nos jours, l'œuvre d'un Iain Sinclair témoigne du fait que ce double échange continue d'être fructueux.

Mots-clés : Paris, Londres, Baudelaire, Nerval, Dickens, représentation, miroir, reportage

The notion of London as Paris's twin goes back at least as far as Louis-Sébastien Mercier's *Parallèle de Paris et de Londres* (1780), which preceded the twelve volumes of his *Tableau de Paris* that appeared between 1783 and 1788. However, at the level of cultural consciousness, the London-Paris axis has generally been understood to run northwards, and to reside for example in Balzac's influence on Dickens and James, or in the massive presence of Baudelaire in Anglo-Saxon high modernism. The citation of Baudelaire's 'fourmillante cité' (I: 87)¹ in *The Waste Land* planted the French poet's phantasmagoric sense of *modernité* at the heart of T.S. Eliot's vision of London as 'Unreal city'. But what about traffic in the other direction?

I want to suggest how one might reverse the usual flow, and look at how images of London may have contributed to the view of Paris that fuelled a compelling vision of the modern city which, by a ricochet effect, then bounced back on to the ways in which London came to be seen - as in Eliot, or more recently, Iain Sinclair - via Parisian frameworks. Of course this essentially means redressing a balance, for in reality we are dealing with endless interactions between ways of imagining London and Paris, with each capital consistently serving, albeit in different ways, as its other, its secret sharer.

At the heart of the matter is the phrase I have borrowed for my title: 'the key of the street'. I first encountered it in Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* where it occurs in one of several quotations from the opening of the third chapter of G.K. Chesterton's 1906 biography of Dickens. To have 'the key of the street' was a piece of urban slang meaning to be shut out; it was a euphemism for being homeless, down and out. Having admired the phrase, and noted its presence in Dickens's *Pickwick Papers*, Chesterton, in the passage cited by Benjamin, adapts it to evoke a facet of Dickens's genius. Dickens, wrote Chesterton, 'had, in the most sacred and serious sense of the term, the key of the street ... his stars were the lamps of the street; his hero was the man in the street'². Benjamin follows this with two further quotations from the same passage, where Chesterton evokes Dickens's sad childhood in the blacking factory:

Whenever he had done drudging, he had no other resource but drifting, and he drifted over half London. He was a dreamy child, thinking mostly of his own dreary prospects He did not go in for 'observation', a priggish habit; he did not look at Charing Cross to improve his mind or count the lamp-posts in Holborn to practise his arithmetic. But unconsciously he made all these places the scenes of the monstrous drama in his miserable little soul. He walked in darkness under the lamps of Holborn, and was

crucified at Charing Cross. ... Dickens did not stamp these places on his mind; he stamped his mind on these places.³

Chesterton goes on to see this apprenticeship in city wandering, as ‘the whole secret of Dickens’s “eerie realism”’, a kind of realism ‘which does not exist in reality; and ‘can only be gained by walking dreamily in a place; it cannot be gained by walking observantly’ (Chesterton, 1906). As an example he quotes a passage where Dickens recalled a coffee house in St Martin’s Lane:

In the door there was an oval glass plate with ‘COFFEE ROOM’ painted on it, addressed towards the street. If I ever find myself in a very different kind of coffee-room now, but where there is an inscription on glass, and read it backwards on the wrong side, MOOR EEEFOC (as I often used to do then in a dismal reverie), a shock goes through my blood. That wild word, “Moor Eeffoc” is the motto of all effective realism.⁴

Benjamin cites this extraordinary passage in the context of what he calls ‘the allegorical element’ in Baudelaire⁵, and one could of course look at how profoundly Baudelairean Chesterton’s Dickens is. But the point here is how Dickens and London feed into Benjamin’s vision of Paris, how Paris, Benjamin’s ‘Capital of the nineteenth century’, is haunted by imaginings of London, and how this helps us to reflect on how London may have haunted Baudelaire.

Much has been written about Baudelaire’s Paris, but what about Baudelaire’s London? True, unlike Mallarmé, Rimbaud, Verlaine and Apollinaire, Baudelaire seems never to have visited London, but two of the major constituents of his vision of ‘les villes énormes’ (I: 276), Edgar Allan Poe’s story ‘The Man of the Crowd’ (Poe, 1967:179-88), and Thomas De Quincey’s *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (De Quincey, 1950), are centred on London rather than Paris; while, in the visual realm, the anonymous M.G. of ‘Le Peintre de la vie moderne’ (II: 683-31) is, if anything, more associated with London than with Paris, as was indeed the case of the essay’s model, Constantin Guys, and of part of its inspiration, the figure of the dandy, Anglo-Saxon in tenor, with Beau Brummel as its effigy.

Poe’s tale was first published in 1840 and Baudelaire translated it in the early 1850s under the title ‘L’Homme des foules’ (Poe, 1972:37-48). It is a truism to say that the story influenced Baudelaire’s prose poem ‘Les Foules’ (I:), as well as his account of the ‘painter of modern life’ whose passion is to ‘espouse’ the crowd, which is his ‘domain’, as air is that of the bird (II:). Yet Poe, who had lived in Stoke Newington as a child, very deliberately set the ‘The Man of the Crowd’ in London. The story’s narrator, having spied a strange-looking old man going past the window of the coffee-house where he had been people-watching for hours, leaps up and then follows him, all night and all through the next day. To the follower’s endless astonishment the old man makes his way, sometimes erratically, sometimes decisively, from centre to periphery, from North to South, yet always within the boundaries of the seemingly endless metropolis, only to end up after twenty-four hours at his point of departure, apparently ready to set off again. It is crucial to the story that it sometimes takes the man an hour or more to negotiate a single street, ‘so vast a difference

is there', writes Poe's narrator, 'between a London populace and that of the most frequented American city' (Poe, 1967:185). For Poe, as for Baudelaire, London is a hyperbolic city, where features that are perceived to be central to the urban are writ large. When translated back to Paris these features will not make it identical with London, but provide some of the terms in which its uniqueness can be apprehended. London provides a code to decipher Paris.

Baudelaire's references to Poe's story underline the complexity that the prism of London helped bring to the extraordinary vision of urban experience which Baudelaire forged in his 'Tableaux Parisiens' (I: 82-104) and in the prose poetry of *Le Spleen de Paris* (I: 273-34). In his first essay on Poe he focuses on the inscrutable man of the crowd, '[qui] se plonge sans cesse au sein de la foule; [...] nage avec délices dans l'océan humain' (II: 277). In 'Peintre de la vie moderne' the focus shifts to the narrator, 'qui contemple la foule avec jouissance' (II: 690), and then can't resist setting off in pursuit of the man of the crowd, 'un inconnu dont la physionomie entrevue l'a, en un clin d'œil, fasciné' (II: 690). The fact that Poe makes his narrator a convalescent, whose mood is 'of the keenest appetency' (Poe, 1967:179), is used to develop a portrait of the artist as someone, 'spirituellement à l'état de convalescent' (II: 690), a condition Baudelaire links to the freshness of childhood vision.

Heightened vision - associated with childhood, with 'appetency' enhanced by extreme physical and mental states, induced by hunger and then by drugs, and applied in the context of the great city - is also at the heart of Baudelaire's essay on De Quincey, 'Un Mangeur d'opium', part of his work called *Les Paradis artificiels - Artificial Paradises* (I: 442-517). Baudelaire paraphrases and cites at length, in his own translation, the famous episode of the runaway schoolboy, De Quincey, wandering the streets of London with the young prostitute, Ann, and then experiencing the depths of despair when he is unable to find her again, except as a figure haunting his opium-induced dreams, after missing their assignation in Great Titchfield Street. Extrapolating, and adding an explicit reference to the school of Greek philosophers, Baudelaire writes: 'Dans les rues de Londres ... l'étudiant émancipé était donc une espèce de *péripaticien*, un philosophe de la rue, méditant sans cesse à travers le tourbillon de la grande ville' (I: 456)⁶. And Baudelaire often embroiders on De Quincey's evocations of the vast metropolis, referring for example to 'leurs monotones pérégrinations dans l'interminable Oxford street, à travers le fourmillement d'une grande ville regorgeante d'activité' (I: 456). Referring to 'le Sahara des grandes villes' (I: 458) Baudelaire links city and desert, as environments that fortify the sensibility of their denizens. And further on he associates the city with the sea, a metaphor he uses in his own poems, translating the passage about Great Titchfield Street, 'qui était comme leur port habituel de repos dans la grande Méditerranée d'Oxford Street' (I: 460; De Quincey, 1950:282).

Having evoked 'le tumulte et les lumières de Picadilly' (I:) Baudelaire translates the poignant passage where De Quincey speculates that he and Ann must have searched for one another 'through the mighty labyrinth of London; perhaps even within a few feet of each other - a barrier no wider, in a London street, often amounting in the end to a separation for eternity!' (De Quincey, 1950:289)

(Baudelaire probably remembered this passage in his sublime city sonnet ‘A une passante’, I: 92-3.) He was also struck by De Quincey’s descriptions of taking opium and then visiting the poorest areas of the city on Saturday nights to experience a ‘jouissance’ which Baudelaire calls ‘le dilettantisme dans la charité’ (I: 468). In terms that will be directly echoed in ‘Les Foules’ (I : 291-2), Baudelaire writes that, having suffered so much in his youth, ‘l’ancien écolier [...] veut se plonger au sein de cette foule de déshérités, et comme le nageur embrasse la mer et entre ainsi en contact plus direct avec la nature, aspire à prendre, pour ainsi dire, un bain de multitude’ (I: 468). He also quotes at length the passage that haunted the Situationist writer, Guy Debord, where De Quincey talks of using the stars to steer himself back from these forays by trying to find ‘his north-west passage’. Recalling losing his way ‘dans des labyrinthes de rues, dans des énigmes de culs-de sac, dans des problèmes de rues sans issue’ (I: 470; De Quincey, 1950:305), De Quincey claims to have stumbled on previously unexplored *terrae incognitae*, unregistered on extant maps of London. As in his earlier reference to the Peripatetic school of philosophy we see here how Baudelaire tends to make London a city of the mind as much as a city of bricks and mortar. This tendency will be at the heart of the ‘London’ that then informs his vision of Paris, and that of other writers.

My hypothesis that Baudelaire’s Paris was in part assembled from material he found in texts about London chimes with a remark Benjamin makes when he juxtaposes Baudelaire’s praise for Meryon’s engravings of Paris with his criticism of Auguste Barbier’s politically inspired poems about London:

If one compares Baudelaire’s discussion of Meryon with Barbier’s ‘London’ one asks oneself whether the gloomy image of ‘la noire majesté de la plus inquiétante des capitales’- the image, that is, of Paris - was not materially determined by the texts of Barbier and of Poe. London was certainly ahead of Paris in industrial development.’ (Benjamin, 1999:452)

London provided Baudelaire with a set of figures and tropes to do with immensity, infinity, extremities of wealth and poverty, and with the violent and grotesque elements he found in the British caricaturists, including Rowlandson and Cruickshank, on which he wrote discerning essays. London is both an endless sea of faces and an existential desert where madness and solitude are commonplace. Drawing on a literature inspired by a city nearly ten times the size of Paris, Baudelaire imports from the phantasmatic London of Poe and De Quincey the sense of a cityscape that is also a mindscape, a counterpart to the ‘undulations of reverie and the ‘summersaults of consciousness’ as he put it in a text on his prose poems (I: 275-6). All these elements feed into the visions of the labyrinthine, conflicted Paris that we find in his poems and prose poems, essays and journals. Yet at the same time London provides a kind of hyperbolic *Abgrund*, a groundswell against which other, more specifically Parisian, figures are brought into play (especially, perhaps, Baudelaire’s vision of Paris as an endless interior, and his version of the *flâneur* as an armchair philosopher rather than an existential hero, savouring, but without risk, the multiple attractions of the city).

After Poe and De Quincey, let us now consider a third London text with Parisian repercussions. In 1852 the magazine *L'illustration* published Gérard de Nerval's 'Les Nuits d'Octobre', an autobiographical account of nocturnal ramblings in Paris and its environs. The opening explains how, converting to short rather than long journeys, the narrator had decided to savour the tranquillity of Meaux, one of Paris's nearby 'modestes planètes' (N: 77)⁷. Having missed the train, he repairs to a café and comes across an article by Dickens called 'La Clef de la rue' in the *Revue britannique*. This prompts reflection on the lucky British, able to read pages of observation unadulterated by fiction, since, unlike the Parisians, 'l'intelligence réaliste de nos voisins se contente du vrai absolu' (N: 78). Thereafter, Nerval's wonderful account of a Parisian ramble - via Montmartre and Pantin to Les Halles, followed next day by the postponed trip to Meaux, Crépy en Valois (where he spends a night in gaol), and finally Creil where he arrives too late for the otter hunt he was supposed to attend - features a humorous ongoing debate about the pros and cons of 'realism'. Instead of making things up *ex nihilo*, or using experience as a springboard for 'invention romanesque', the realist is expected, firstly, to write about what he has experienced first-hand, and secondly to stick veraciously to what has been seen or done. Nerval refers to this approach, inspired by Dickens, as 'Daguerrotyper la réalité' (N: 102), and he blames his attempts to stick to it for landing him in gaol: 'le métier de réaliste est trop dur à faire' (N: 109), he exclaims at one point.

If Karlheinz Stierle finds the 'Nuits d'octobre' un-Dickensian, it seems to be because he associates Dickens with either journalistic reportage or fictionalised sentimentality. Stierle claims that, unlike Nerval's text, its ostensible model, 'la Clef de la rue', features the 'regard de pure constatation du réaliste à la Dickens' (Stierle, 2001:396), where the perceiving 'I' is no more than an abstract medium for uncovering the repressed side of the city, which is supposedly clear and legible when you seek it out and describe it. Not only is this far from accurate as an account of 'La Clef de la rue', it also turns out that this text was not written by Dickens but by George A. Sala, a collaborator to Dickens's magazine, *Household Words*, which often published material anonymously. Dickens's letters reveal that he was hugely impressed by the essay sent in 1851 by Sala, then a twenty-three year old writer, who would subsequently contribute over a hundred pieces to *Household Words*, mainly evocations of sorties in London, and go on to become a prominent Victorian man of letters⁸.

Sala's piece launched his career as a writer of London sketches and he placed it at the beginning of his 1859 work, *Gaslight and Daylight*, featuring other items such as 'Down Whitechapel, far Away', 'City Spectres', and 'Music in paving Stones'. 'The Key of the Street' is a vivid first-person account of a night spent wandering around London. Sala claims that on the basis of his first-hand experience, 'from the macadamized page [he will] read forth the lore of midnight London Life' (Sala, 1859:2). With only ninepence in his pocket, he starts at around midnight by watching an alehouse close its shutters, then observes a well-heeled crowd swarm out of Covent Garden, encounters three young men 'out on the spree', and so on. As the proportion of 'disreputable figures' increases, he impulsively signs up at a place off Drury Lane offering 'Lodgings for single men at fourpence

per night' but is repulsed by the numerous bugs. Progressively, he feels himself changing into a 'night skulker': 'I no longer walk, I prowl' (Sala, 1859:8). With a band of fellow 'night prowlers', he rushes to a fire in a Soho pickle-shop, noticing that those who help the fire brigade receive free beer. In the early morning he finds himself among the cabbages of Covent Garden market and eventually decides to spend his last pennies on a good breakfast, whereupon he falls asleep and dreams of bugs, cabbages, and fires.

Whatever its literary merits (its whimsicality can certainly seem dated), the realism of Sala's text is far from narrowly objective, and the dialogue with 'The Key of the Street' threaded through Nerval's masterpiece is more complex than Stierlhe suggests. Nerval's text includes a section in praise of 'les nuits de Londres', where the lack of intimidating concierges means that one can stay out late and go from theatre to music hall, from clown show to boxing match, from oyster bar to gin place: 'c'est une série de paradis ou une série d'enfers, selon les moyens qu'on possède' (N: 83-4). Sala's text may be lacking in Nerval's magical realism or pre-surrealism but it presents the London night as a place of discoveries and initiations. Moreover, even if Nerval's avowed aim was 'une imitation satirique de Dickens', his brilliant metatextual ruminations on the nature of realism in fact pay respectful homage to key aspects of his model - who is in fact Sala, not Dickens. Realism is hard not just because it gets you into trouble but because it involves a multi-faceted take on reality, where objective and subjective elements are endlessly in play. Like Sala, Nerval recounts dreams inspired by his experiences: after a performance by a woman with a sheep's fleece instead of hair, he dreams of singing gnomes who burble about the 'terrible combat' between 'self and non-self', and later, in gaol, he dreams of a court where he is condemned to death for being all at once 'Fantaisiste ! réaliste!! essayiste !!!' (N: 117), the incriminating evidence consisting of some English and American magazines bearing the names Poe, Dickens and Ainsworth (N: 116). If Sala lacks Nerval's ability to derive the marvellous from the real, the mix of subjective and objective in his writings points in that direction. Like Baudelaire, but in a different register, and with different generic implications, Nerval derives from London writing a sense of a multi-channelled and unstable relation between city, text and subject.

The nineteenth-century Paris, whose London underpinnings I have been unearthing, has recently resurfaced as a major presence in ways of writing about London. In many works by Iain Sinclair, including his recent anthology, *London City of Disappearances* (Sinclair, 2006), Peter Ackroyd's *London: a Biography* (Ackroyd, 2000), and Patrick Keiller's films *London* and *Robinson in Space*, we find a London haunted, via Benjamin, the Surrealists, the Situationists, by the shades of Nerval and Baudelaire, Rimbaud and Verlaine, Husysmans and Apollinaire, as well as by the texts of De Quincey, Dickens, Poe - and perhaps George Sala - that inspired them.

Bibliography

- Ackroyd, P. (2000) *London: a Biography*. London: Faber.
- Baudelaire, C. (1980) *Œuvres complètes*. Paris: Gallimard: Pléiade: 2 vols.
- Benjamin, W. (1999), *The Arcades Project*. Harvard University Press.
- Chesterton, G. K. (1906) *Dickens*. London.
- De Quincey, T. (1950) *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*. London: Cresset Press.
- Nerval, Gérard de (1990) 'Les Nuits d'Octobre', *Aurélia* [and other autobiographical writings]. Paris: Gallimard.
- Maxwell, R. (1992) *The Mysteries of Paris and London*. Charlottesville, London: University Press of Virginia.
- Poe, E. A. (1967) *Selected Writings*, ed. Galloway, D. London: Penguin Books.
- Poe, E. A. (1972) *Histoires extraordinaires*, trans Baudelaire, C. Paris: Livre de Poche.
- Sala, G. A. (1859) *Gaslight and Daylight*. London.
- Sinclair, I. (2006) *London City of Disappearances*. London: Hamish Hamilton.
- Stierle, K. (2001) *La Capitale des Signes: Paris et son discours*. Paris: Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme.

Notes

- ¹ Baudelaire (1980). All Baudelaire citations (except his translations of Poe) will be given in the text, citing this edition, in the form, volume: page.
- ² Benjamin (1999:438), quoting Chesterton (1906).
- ³ Benjamin (1999:438), quoting Chesterton (1906).
- ⁴ Benjamin (1999:233), quoting Chesterton (1906).
- ⁵ Benjamin (1999:233), quoting Chesterton (1906).
- ⁶ The equivalent passage of De Quincey is in *Confessions* (1950:284).
- ⁷ Nerval (1990). Page references are to this edition and will be incorporated in the text, preceded by the abbreviation *N*.
- ⁸ On Sala see Maxwell (1992:262-5).