

COLIN JONES

Paris

Biography of a City



PENGUIN BOOKS

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Praise for *Paris*

“Fascinating. Covers virtually all that one could wish to know about ‘the focal point of civilization’ (Victor Hugo’s description of the city). One wants to visit—or revisit—Paris armed with this new knowledge and enrichment. Those unable to do so soon can become armchair flaneurs, ambling through the city in their imaginations and appreciating all that Paris has to offer as they peruse its biography. An embarrassment of riches.”

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“A highly readable and illuminating canter through the history of a much-loved city.”—*The Economist*

“A remarkable account of the most celebrated city in the world that blends history, literary sensibility, and experience in an understated, affectionate, but not sentimental voice. Anyone who loves Paris will find connections and revelations here.”—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

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“This is a work that merits the French designation magistral: masterly and authoritative.”—*Financial Times*

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Colin Jones is professor of history at the University of Warwick. His books include *The Longman Companion to the French Revolution*, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of France*, *The Medical World of Early Modern France* (with Laurence Brockliss), *Madame de Pompadour: Images of a Mistress*, and the acclaimed *The Great Nation: France from Louis XV to Napoleon*.

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Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, U.S.A.

Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario,

Canada M4P 2Y3 (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)

Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd)

Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell,

Victoria 3124, Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)

Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi - 110 017, India

Penguin Group (NZ), cnr Airborne and Rosedale Roads, Albany,

Auckland 1310, New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

First published in the United States of America by Viking Penguin, a member of Penguin Group (USA) Inc. 2005

Published in Penguin Books 2006

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eISBN : 978-0-143-03671-5

1. Paris (France)—History. I. Title.

DC707.J66 2005

944'.361—dc22 2004053608

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For Jo

[Eugene de Rastignac] looked down [from the Père-Lachaise cemetery] on this humming hive in a way which seemed to draw a foretaste of its honey, and spoke these grandiloquent words: 'It's between you and me now!' (*À nous deux maintenant*)

Balzac, Le Père Goriot

Hausmann, faced with a city plan of Paris, takes up Rastignac's cry of *À nous deux maintenant!*

Benjamin, The Arcades Project

One can never say, like Rastignac, *Paris, à nous deux maintenant* , but always *Paris, à nous deux millions!*

Latour and Hermant, Paris ville invisible

From the heights of Père-Lachaise, Rastignac declared to the city, *À nous deux maintenant!* I say to Paris, *adorable!*

Barthes, Fragment d'un discours amoureux

Introduction An Impossible History of Paris?

‘One never sees Paris for the first time; one always sees it again . . .’ Edmondo De Amicis (1878)

Writing the Impossible History of Paris

In 1975 the avant-garde writer Georges Perec undertook to record what took place in a single Parisian square in a period of less than twenty-four hours, spread over three consecutive October days. In his *Tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien* (1975),¹ —‘Notes Towards an Exhaustive Account of a Parisian Site’—Perec explained that he chose the Place Saint-Sulpice in the Sixth arrondissement for his experiment. The site was moderately well equipped with the adornments of a modern city: a town-hall, a tax office, a police station, three cafés (one of which was also a tobacconist), a cinema, a famous and historic church, a publisher, a funeral parlour, a travel agent, a bus stop, a tailor, a hotel, a fountain, a newspaper kiosk, a shop selling religious objects, a parking lot, a beautician—‘and lots of other things’. His aim, however, was to leave all these out of his range of vision and to describe the rest—‘what happens when nothing happens except the passing of time, people, cars and clouds.’

The chronicle runs to nearly sixty pages. It is written in a terse, lapidary, informational style.

Three children being taken to school. Another apple-green *deux-chevaux* car.

The pigeons fly round the square again.

A 96 bus passes, stops at the bus-stop (Saint-Sulpice section); Geneviève Serreau gets off and takes the Rue des Canettes. I call out to her, knocking on the café window, and she comes to say hello.

A 70 bus passes.

The church bell stops.

A young girl eats half a cake.

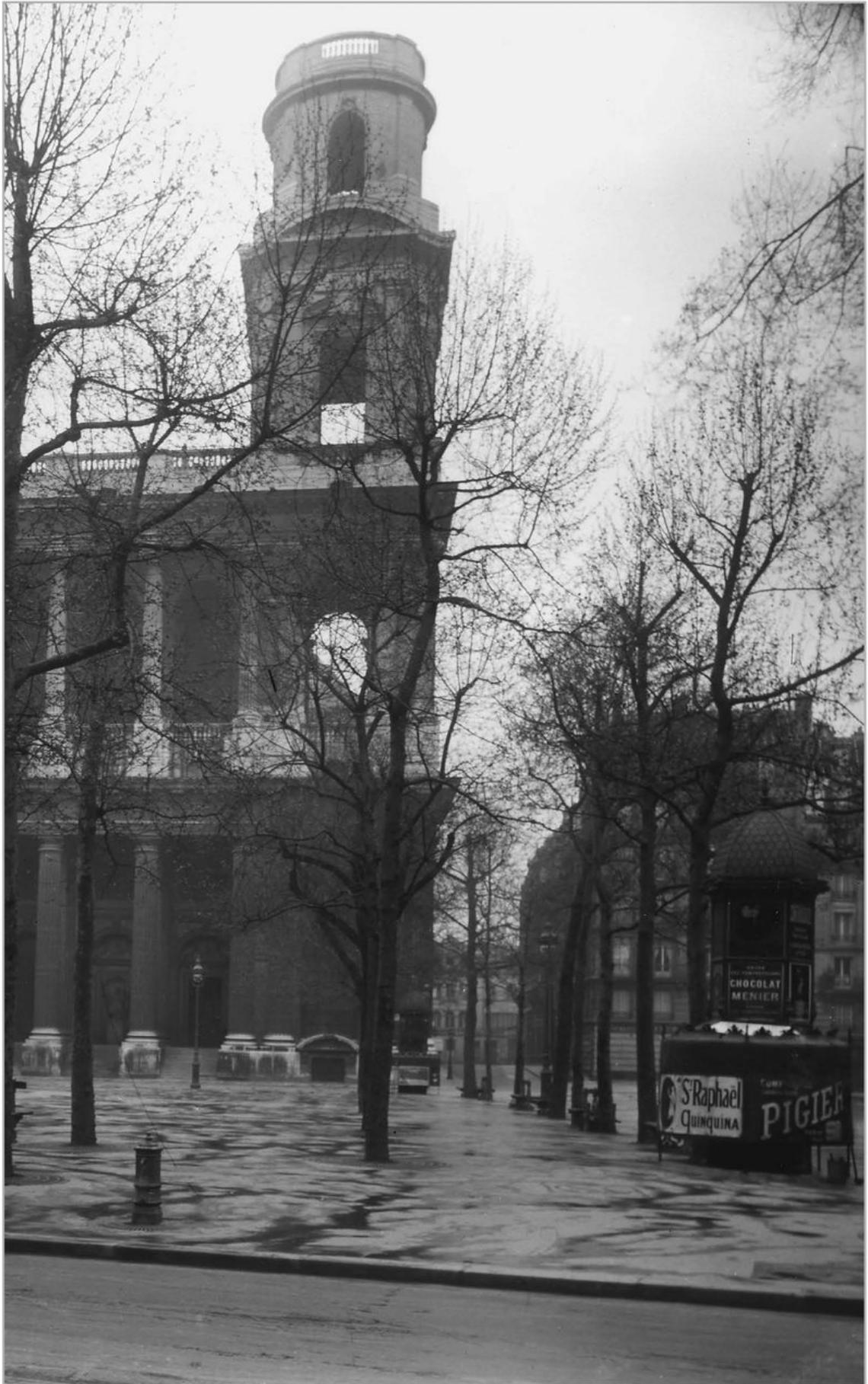
A man with a pipe and a black bag.

A 70 bus passes.

A 63 bus passes.

It is 2.05 P.M.





The experiment ‘concludes’:

Four children. A dog. A little ray of sunshine. The 96 bus. It is 2 o’clock.²

Perec’s efforts to chronicle a Parisian site ‘exhaustively’—covering the equivalent of less than a day in the life of the empty spaces of a single Parisian square—yielded a small book.

Let us now examine, through Perec’s prism, the task confronting historians who undertake to write the history of the whole city of Paris, rather than a fleeting moment in the life of a single urban square within it. History is normally defined as a discipline which records what happened in the past (and not only the passage of ‘time, people, cars and clouds’). And in the history of Paris a lot has indeed happened. Thus in writing its history we historians try to achieve rather more than Perec’s aim of chronicling, in a single location, ‘what happens when nothing happens’. Yet we find ourselves facing the following daunting ‘facts’ about our subject (which I set out in a Perecquian manner):³

number of squares: 670
number of streets and boulevards: 5,975
length of public highways: 5,959 kilometres
number of municipal buildings: 318
number of fountains: 536
number of public monuments: 40,000
number of shops: 62,546
number of buses: 4,364
number of bus routes: 275
number of bus-stops (*banlieue* excluded): 1,754
number of taxis: 14,900
number of traffic lights: 10,800
number of cafés: 2,050
number of hairdressers: 2,845
number of beauty parlours: 67
number of funeral parlours: 157
number of pigeons: 60,000
number of dogs: 200,000
number of public conveniences: 498
kilometrage of visitable underground tunnels: 300
number of individuals resident in the city of Paris: 2.1 million
number of private households: 1.1 million
length of history: more than 2,000 years (excluding the prehistoric era)
possible number of individuals who have ever lived in Paris or just passed through, each with their own histories: . . . countless

It is tempting to conclude from such somewhat hallucinatory statistics—of squares, streets, houses, buses, pigeons, dogs, people and so on—that writing the history of

Paris is an impossible quest, certainly in the Percec manner. But this is not the only moral to be drawn from the *Tentative d'épuisement*. Certainly, one can never write an exhaustive history of a city as ancient, diverse and complex as Paris—but then one knew that anyway. No history of anything will ever include more than it leaves out. An infinite number of histories of Paris is possible—and an almost infinite number has indeed already been produced. As Piganiol de la Force, author of an early visitors' guide, noted in 1765, 'one would be very wrong if, seeing the vast number of books devoted to the history of Paris . . . one imagined that there was nothing more to be said.'⁴ (My effort to identify the number of books in the French national library with *histoire* and *Paris* as keywords left the poor computer giving up exhausted.) But none of this infinite series can ever hope to tell the whole story—indeed the point of Percec's heroic micro-chronicling is to underscore the sublime impossibility of 'exhaustively' managing that task even when restricting the story to a single spot in the course of a single day.

The history of Paris may thus be too impossibly rich and diverse to be encompassed in a single narrative. Yet encompass it is what I will try to do in this book. In this Introduction I give a sense less of what I have included or excluded, than the criteria on the basis of which I have made choices. In so doing I have drawn inspiration from Georges Percec in seeking to write an 'impossible' history of Paris.

Memory and Myth

'Paris has been described so much', noted the Baron de Pöllnitz in 1732, 'and one has heard it talked about so much, that most people know what the city looks like without ever having seen it.'⁵ 'One never sees Paris for the first time,' concurred the Italian writer and Parisian tourist Edmondo De Amicis in the late nineteenth century, 'one always sees it again . . .'⁶ As these remarks suggest, engagement with Paris in the past has tended to come freighted with expectation. For De Amicis, this sprang from his wide reading of French literature, much of it set, as Balzac put it, in 'the city of a thousand novels'.⁷ This meant that De Amicis could not, for example, visit Notre-Dame cathedral or the city sewers without thinking of Victor Hugo, nor the Luxembourg gardens or the Latin Quarter without having a sense of *déjà vu* from Murger's *Vie de Bohème*; nor the Père Lachaise cemetery without reflecting on Balzac's *Comédie humaine*, nor the *quais* and bridges without calling to mind Baudelaire's poetry.

The idea that cultural expectation can get in the way of experiencing Paris 'for the first time' is far from a late nineteenth-century perception. 'A man can die without ever having seen Paris,' confirmed Konstantin Pausovsky. 'And yet he will have been there, he will have seen it in his dreams and in his imagination.'⁸ Medieval travellers had expectations too as they approached the city for the 'first' time: many anticipated Jerusalem or Babylon (and some, Sodom and Gomorrah combined). Twentieth- and twenty-first-century visitors have if anything had even more cultural baggage loaded on them by an infinite array of influences including Impressionist painters, surrealist

poets, existentialist philosophers, crime fiction writers, classic film-makers, urban photographers, tourist postcards—and other histories of Paris.

The notion, highlighted by De Amicis, that experience of the city is refracted by cultural expectation doubtless applies to other major cities and historic sites. If for Paris it seems to have always been the case, and perhaps more so than for other locations, this is partly because the city has long enjoyed a mythical status. Historians have accustomed us to the idea that Paris was mythologized as the city of modernity in the nineteenth century. The city that Napoleon III and Baron Haussmann thoroughly redesigned in the 1850s and 1860s supplied for several generations the template of modernity which other cities strove to achieve—and which we still inhabit when physically present in the city.⁹ But Parisian history was mythologized long before Haussmann was even born. For example, one narrative, developed from the eighth century, had it that Paris was the result of a Trojan diaspora following the fall of the city to the Greeks. From the High Middle Ages onwards at very least, Paris has always been mythically modern. The medieval topos of the city as ‘wisdom’s special workshop’, the post-Renaissance conception of Paris as a new Rome, and the Enlightenment and Revolutionary notion of Paris as the leading edge of civilization comprise three examples which pre-date the nineteenth-century myth of Haussmannized ‘modern’ Paris. Part of the myth of Paris is that it has engendered so many myths about itself.

If Paris has always been modern, it has always been historic too. Perec’s chronicle of ‘the passing of time, people, cars and clouds’ excludes what most individuals familiar with Paris will know about the Place Saint-Sulpice probably in advance of physically encountering it, namely that towering over the square is one of the city’s most interesting and historic churches. The church is a striking example, in fact, of what an influential group of historians under the leadership of Pierre Nora has in recent years designated as ‘a site of memory’—a *lieu de mémoire*.¹⁰ By this term, Nora indicates an institution or location (not necessarily a building) on which the historical consciousness of the French people has focused and which over time has received incremental incrustations of collective memory. It is noticeable that a great many of the *lieux de mémoire* to which Nora and his colleagues have devoted their erudition are Parisian buildings, events or institutions: the Panthéon, the funeral of Victor Hugo, the 1931 Colonial Exposition, the Mur des Fédérés, the Louvre, Parisian statues, the Académie française, the Collège de France, the Palais-Bourbon, Notre-Dame cathedral, the Sacré-Coeur, the Eiffel tower, and so on. It is tempting to conclude that Paris is itself one gigantic ‘site of memory’, not simply for Parisians, moreover, nor even just for French people. The case is all the more compelling when one widens the perspective to consider the city’s incomparable museums and galleries which have acted since the nineteenth century as a major repository of western artistic culture.

If cultural memory, then, lies stored and encoded in the city’s built environment, it is pertinent to remember that that environment is inhabited. After all, it would seem rather churlish to exclude Parisians from their own history. The notion that a city is both a site and a community is as old as the Greeks. It follows from this dual recognition that the city’s history lies in the interaction between individuals and time, and between ecology and community. In this we can remain true to Perec’s project,

taking a physical site, and including as our quarry the individuals ('people') as well as the objects, both natural ('clouds') and manufactured ('cars') whose passage makes up a history. Perec's little study is helpful too in another way: it shows how the micro-events which take place in the square run in counterpoint to the square's influence on what happens within it. The passage of the 96 bus, for example, is part of the history of the square, but the location is also an event in the history of the 96 bus. Similarly, the individuals who appear as free agents following their own personal agendas as they pass through the square are, seen from another angle, products of the square as a site of neighbourhood sociability or traffic flow. The history of Paris is a narrative of a place which came to be called Paris, and those who lived in it, or merely, like passengers on Perec's 96 bus, just passed through.

Perec's experiment also reminds us that the individuals whose presence in the square he records do not seem to compose a homogeneous community. Rather, they form a random collection of individuals with—as far as we can judge on the fleeting evidence we are allowed to glean—very different lives, aims, intentions and destinies. For Perec, there is no average Saint-Sulpicois. It is a good point. It calls us, in writing a history of Paris, not to presuppose the existence of an average Parisian, nor to construct a narrative which—just as bad—imagines that a Parisian community thinks, acts or reacts in unison. That would be very far from the truth.

No Typical Parisians

Power and social status have never been simply distributed among a city's inhabitants. A dominant elite group may lay claim to embody the community in some way or to have special urban entitlements—in Lutetia, this would be through Roman citizenship, in nineteenth-century Paris through a bourgeois lifestyle and possession. Yet it would be an incurious historian who wrote without taking into account the indigenous population and slaves of the Roman era, or without the proletarians, for example, in the period of bourgeois dominance. Indeed, these groups, who formed a large part of the population of the city, contributed powerfully to its history. By the same token, the 'average Parisian' has thus always been both lord and serf, bourgeois and worker, capitalist and proletarian, man and woman.

The 'average Parisian' is a myth in another way too. He or she was almost certainly born outside the city, or was the child of outsiders. The true native born-and-bred Parisian—*le vrai titi parisien*—is a minority phenomenon in Parisian history. Until the late nineteenth century, in Paris as in most major cities, deaths exceeded live births, meaning that population growth was staked on the city's attractiveness for immigrants. At any one time, something between a half and three-quarters of 'Parisians' were thus non-Parisian. Although for more than a century the birth-death ratio has altered, other factors—Paris's cultural attractions, its importance in education and career development, its role as employer—now contrive to produce the same effect of what we might call 'average outsiderdom'.

What is true of the generality is also true of the exceptional individual. Major

historical figures who have had an influence on Paris's history, have as often as not been non-Parisians by birth. Julius Caesar was a Roman. The city's patron saint, Geneviève, was most likely of Germanic stock (as of course was Clovis). Philip Augustus was born in Gonesse, Francis I in Cognac, Henry IV in Pau, Louis XIV in Saint-Germain-en-Laye, and Louis XV and XVI in Versailles. Robespierre and Danton were both provincials. Napoleon came from a Mediterranean island which had been Genoan until 1768 (a year before he was born). Baron Haussmann was born in Paris but brought up in Alsace and spoke with a German accent. Eiffel was a Burgundian and Toulouse-Lautrec an Albigeois. Georges Clemenceau was from the Vendée and François Mitterrand from the Charente. Victor Hugo hailed from Besançon, while Georges Simenon, the creator of Inspector Maigret, was a Belgian. Édith Piaf at least was Parisian by birth. So is Jacques Chirac, for what it is worth. They are a small minority.

If outsiders have always played a crucial part in Parisian history, Parisians have themselves often remarked on how their fellow citizens act like outsiders in their own history. In his novel *Zazie dans le métro* (1959: subsequently made into a film by Louis Malle), for example, Raymond Queneau tells the story of a little girl's adventures on a weekend trip to Paris as a cross between *Alice in Wonderland* and Dante's *Inferno* (with some nods towards James Joyce's *Ulysses*). Like Alice, Zazie finds it difficult to get her bearings. She is not helped by the fact that the Parisians she meets have no clear sense of the most obvious features of the cityscape that they inhabit. They can just about recognize the Eiffel tower, but are forever mistaking the dome of the Panthéon for the Invalides, or the Sacré-Coeur, or the Gare de Lyon, or even maybe the barracks out at Reuilly, and they mix up the Sainte-Chapelle with the commercial lawcourts.¹¹ The savant Queneau, a close observer of Parisian ways, here highlights a feature of Parisian history which any historian of the city will recognize. Most Parisians in the past—but then this is probably a fairly universal trait among city-dwellers—had a shaky sense of the shape of their city and the trajectory of its past. It is as though they simply forgot or never learnt the meaning of the sites of memory in their midst. Parisians in the past were less Cartesian than Pierre Nora and his school would have us believe.

Perhaps this quasi-amnesiac tendency derives from the outsider status of 'average' Parisians. It may also link to the often intense parochialism of many city-dwellers. Until relatively recently, some Left- and Right-Bank-dwellers prided themselves on never having crossed the Seine. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century observers noted the tendency of inhabitants of Belleville—and even denizens of the Faubourg Saint-Antoine—to talk of 'going to Paris', a not overly complex manoeuvre which involved crossing the Place de la Bastille and walking in a general westerly direction. The villagey feel of many Parisian neighbourhoods has also contributed to the triumph of a parish pump mentality, which is no doubt much to the fore in Perec's Place Saint-Sulpice. The tendency of many immigrants to hold on to the identity of their homelands also may count in all this. Scratch a Parisian, one invariably finds a proud Auvergnat, Breton or Tunisian.

Parisians' sense of Paris time has often been as squiffy as their sense of Paris place, if we are to believe chroniclers, antiquarians and historians of the city. Until well into

the eighteenth century, for example, it was generally believed that the Roman Baths in the Latin Quarter and the Châtelet prison on the Île de la Cité were constructed by Julius Caesar. These estimates err by about 200 and 900 years respectively. When Parisian builders used stone from the Philip Augustus wall to build new ramparts in the fourteenth century, they claimed that the walls had been built to resist Saracens (who had never in fact been even close to the city). This phenomenon is modern as well as ancient. In his book *Paris insolite* (1952), Jean-Paul Clébert expressed his astonishment at the fact that ‘after the enormous quantity of books—good books—devoted to Paris ancient and modern, the inhabitant of Paris is ignorant about his city, disdains it, or else limits his (always identical) thoughts and comments to the poetry of the *quais* of the Seine.’¹² Parisian history, then, may certainly be about memory. But it is also, as Zazie might remind us, about forgetting.

Power, Resistance and Affection

The first account we have of the city of Paris based on first-hand experience is that of the Emperor Julian, who resided in the township of Lutetia (the Roman name for Paris) in 358 AD and then in 360-61 AD. His account starts out ‘*Cara Lutetia . . .*’ (‘Beloved (or ‘Sweet’) Lutetia . . .’), and it goes on to praise the site’s pleasant features (including its climate and its excellent wines).¹³ Rome and London have attracted paeans of praise over the centuries, but also acres of disappointment and disillusionment. New York only seemed to amount to very much in the twentieth century. One may, if one chooses, see Naples and die, but one does not even have to see Paris with one’s eyes, for, as De Amicis has already explained, one has already seen it in one’s imagination—and probably started to love it.

Affection seems more integral to Paris’s historical identity than is the case for any other, even world-historic city. Julian’s is only the first of a very long list of quotations in which those who have got to know the city express their warm feelings for it. Even where judgements are mixed (and all cities have tended to suffer at the hands of the Arcadian tendency), the balance swings towards affection rather than distaste. Most followed Holy Roman Emperor Charles V who on his visit in 1540 declared ‘Paris is a world’—and thought that this world could contain good as well as evil.¹⁴ Rabelais thought it ‘a bad city to die in’ but a good one to live in. Montaigne ‘love[d] it tenderly warts and all’; Voltaire thought it ‘half gold, half filth’, and Goethe, ‘the world’s head’. Balzac recognized that many thought the city ‘a monstrous marvel, an astonishing assemblage of movements, machines and ideas’, while George Sand commented admiringly on its unmatched ‘air, appearance and sounds’. Victor Hugo saluted it as ‘the focal point of civilization’, and the English visitor Matthew Arnold thought ‘the free, gay and pleasant life’ of Paris the homeland of *l’homme moyen sensuel*.¹⁵

For his part, the poet Charles Baudelaire regretted that the city could not be fixed in aspic. ‘Old Paris is no more. The form of a city changes more swiftly, alas! than the human heart’.¹⁶ With these words, he coined the motto for Parisian nostalgia, but he hardly invented the phenomenon itself. The history of Parisian nostalgia is as long as