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Parisian Visions: Haussmann, Marville and Meryon

The object of this paper is the Paris of the Second Empire. I will start with the historical contextualization of the process of urban renewal that goes under the name of Haussmannization and I will subsequently consider some idiosyncratic representations of the city figured forth by Haussmann's photographer Charles Marville and the introverted etcher Charles Meryon.

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The discussion of the manifold interventions elicited by the decay of Parisian urban fabric was about a century old when Georges Eugène Haussmann took the oath of office as Prefect of the Seine on June 29, 1853.[1] The understanding of the relationship between the material conditions of the city and the welfare of its inhabitants first emerged in the 18th century when, nurtured by the Enlightenment' faith in all rational improvements, intellectuals started to delineate an ideal city space which would befit the entire population. The real novelty of this mode of thinking, however, is not the spreading debate over urban ameliorations as such, but rather the encompassing scope of these hypothetical interventions which represent "important instances during the 18th century of people seeing the city whole rather than focusing on one part of it."[2] An organicist conception of the city gradually took shape which conceived of the city as a unified entity, an organic whole in which all parts are interrelated and whose modifications need to be addressed from an overarching vantage point. Thus, what comes into being is a new understanding of a unified urban *space*.

Also, the second half of the 18th century marks the dissolution of the baroque vision of urban intervention which reflected and satisfied the requirements of the absolutist powers of which the

[1] David H. Pinkney, "Napoleon III's Transformation of Paris: The Origins and Development of the Idea," *The Journal of Modern History* 27 (June 1955), p.131.
[2] Nicholas Papayanis, "Eighteenth-Century Roots of Modern Planning" in *Planning Paris Before Haussmann*, Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, p. 14.

Baroque was the official artistic expression. Indeed, if it is true that the late baroque town planning flourished in the sumptuous choreographic organization of the outer space, Sigfried Giedion also points out its peculiar limitation for "it limited its attention to connections between palatial residences and the spatial treatment of beautiful plazas."[3] Urban embellishments revolved exclusively around the movements and the residences of the royal court in the outmost neglect of the spatial conditions in which the rest of the population dwelled. Yet, during the 18th century the living conditions of the common people gradually gained visibility in both the intellectual and the political discourse.

This new visibility is epitomized by the twelve-volume *Tableau de Paris* (published from 1781 to 1788), the monumental enterprise of Louis-Sébastien Mercier, a late century versatile author who oscillated between the polygraphic recording of Parisian social life in *Tableau* and the utopian vision of the clean and rationally planned capital of a faraway future in *L'An deux mille quatre cent quarante: Rêve s'il en fût jamais* (1771) [Fig. 1]. [4]

Tableau de Paris is innovative in that it includes the chronicle – "pen-portraits"[5] - of minute aspects of Parisian street life and it portrays with encyclopedic zeal the animated daily life of *le monde de la rue*. Subverting a tradition of urban commentaries which focused on monuments, institutions and aristocratic lifestyle, this book encompasses the street and the market, a thus far neglected locale of lively social interaction. Popkin writes that "the book has all the characteristic of a modern metropolis. Like a great city, it sprawls, it is crowded with people of all sorts, and it forms a seemingly unorganized

[3] Furthermore, "after the departure of Louis XIV for Versailles, town planning was entirely neglected except in so far as it concerned the building of *places* and great avenues of communication, " from Sigfried Giedion, "City Planning in the Nineteenth Century" in *Space, Time and Architecture: The Growth of a New Tradition*, Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press (1980), p. 709-10.

[4] It is argued that under many aspects Mercier's visionary city seem to prefigure the Paris that Haussmann was to build the following century. For a discussion of *L'An deux mille quatre cent quarante* see Paul Hanson's review of Riikka Forsström, *Possible Worlds: The Idea of Happiness in the Utopian Vision of Louis-Sébastien Mercier* (2002) available on http://www3.uakron.edu/hfrance/reviews/hanson.html.

[5] Jeremy D. Popkin, "A City of Words: Louis-Sebastien Mercier's *Tableau de Paris*," editor's preface to *Panorama of Paris: Selections from Louis-Sebastien Mercier's* Tableau de Paris, trans. by H. Simpson, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999, p. 1.

chaos."[6] So ingrained was Mercier's understanding of city life as a constant flow that he insisted that the *Tableau* be published without illustrations that, in his eyes, were guilty of freezing a reality of ever-changing impressions.[7] The city emerging from his pages is an undisciplined and irrational concretion in which different social classes coexist side by side. With the gist of a minded reformer at the dawn of the Revolution, Mercier portrayed a city dominated by a shortsighted and corrupted elite, in which the lack of adequate infrastructures produced mephitic exhalations, traffic jams, and violent behaviors.[8] And indeed, at that same time, the street and, more broadly, the material conditions of the capital rose as a central theme in the debates over the infrastructural reforms necessary to realize the Enlightenment vision of a perfectly ordered society.

Fig. 1 Louis Sebastien Mercier

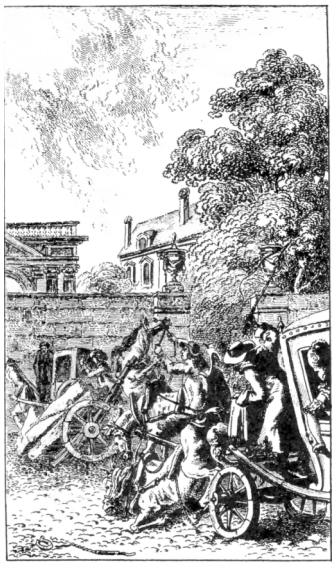

Fig. 2 Balthasar Anton Dunker, Carriage collision, (Illustration to Tableau de Paris), 1787

On the eve of the Revolution, the urban heart of Paris was an unsolvable tangle of tortuous streets and narrow alleys flanked by multistoried buildings that blocked the circulation of air and light. The streets were largely unpaved and almost completely devoid of sidewalks. The lack of pedestrian space

[6] *Ibid*., p.3.
[7] *Ibid*., p.19.
[8] Papayanis, *op.cit*., p.29-30.

together with the dim and sparse lighting of candle lamp (the first gas lamp were installed in 1817), made street walking a dangerous enterprise for pedestrians and horse carriages moved chaotically in the same constricted space in the absence of proper indications of directionality **[Fig. 2]**.[9]

Nor was the city clean. Channels of open sewers rambled in the center of the streets, irregularly maintained by the municipality and, sometimes, they were covered and forgotten until they overflowed with catastrophic consequences for the neighborhood.[10] Indeed, as Papayanis points out, at least one rationale for the diffusion of the Parisian arcades in the first decades of the following century, and one reason for their success, is that their covered passageways protected the bourgeoisie from the dirt and danger of the street.[11] The arcades fenced off a pampered space *at street level* where the upper and middle classes could comfortably descend to pursue commercial and social interaction. Accordingly, the *passages* fell out of favor with the betterment of the streets toward the mid-19th century.

Despite the advance on a theoretical level toward an organic conception of the city, no comprehensive urbanistic plan was ever conceived, let alone implemented, in 18th century France and the increasing debates over the city's infrastructures often resulted in compartmentalized reform proposals rather than in a general plan. Nonetheless, the century of the Enlightenment awoke town planning to utilitarian considerations and thereby "moved away from the baroque objective of the city as a work of art" toward a conception of the city as "space of utility benefiting the largest number of people."[12]

Because funds were swallowed by military campaigns and the Parisian bourgeoisie opposed a strong resistance to the expropriations, Napoleon I's dream to build a capital of imperial distinction

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[9] Papayanis reports that while the first sidewalk was laid down on the Pont Neuf in 1601, the first sidewalk built on a street appeared only in 1781, on the rue de l'Odéon *Ibid*., 39.
[10] *Ibid*., 46.
[11] "They are very convenient for the pedestrians; they provide an agreable route, shelter from the rain, and comfort for an instant from the painful vigilance that one must constantly excercise to protect oneself from all the hindrances of the often-frequented streets," the words come from the anonymous writer of *Almanach des embellissement de Paris* (1808) quoted in *ibid*., p.56.
[12] *Ibid*., 54.

remained unfulfilled. A comprehensive urbanistic reform was abandoned in favor of smaller scale interventions that included the regularization of house numbering, the construction of the Arc de Triomphe and the Madeleine church and, most importantly, the extension of the rue de Rivoli that improved the circulation in the crucial roadway junction on the place de la Concorde.

The rue de Rivoli connected the place de la Concorde to the former Royal palaces of the Louvre and was conceived by Napoleon's architects Percier and Fontaine as a seemingly uninterrupted façade stretching out along the Tuileries gardens and providing the rich bourgeoisie with a view on the former royal gardens. The uniform façades of the palaces, bound together by the modular repetition of simple and elegant units and the perfect alignment of porticos and balconies, merged and, at the same time, concealed divergent purposes for those buildings which accommodated both residents and customers. A diversified social microcosm was distributed on the multiple levels behind the flawless fronts, with the middle-class business discreetly shadowed by the arcades, the upper-class lodgings spreading on the main floors, and the lower classes confined in the garrets.[13] The pillared arcades unfolding at ground level obscured the shop fronts in order to preserve the sober elegance of the promenade while, more practically, they also protected the costumers from the weather. And it is worth noticing that this instance of visual and architectural unification of disparate businesses seems to anticipate the self-contained world of the subsequent *passages* and the later department stores.

According to Giedion the rue de Rivoli built by Napoleon I still conformed to the late baroque tradition and it is only Haussmann's *percement de Paris* that "changed its whole character and made it over into one of those 'endless streets' born out of the 19th century."[14] And it is through the "cannonshot" apertures of the Haussmann's boulevards that we can now peer into the urban dimension of the Paris of the Second Empire.

[13] Giedion, *op. cit.*, p.714.
[14] *Ibid.*, p.715.

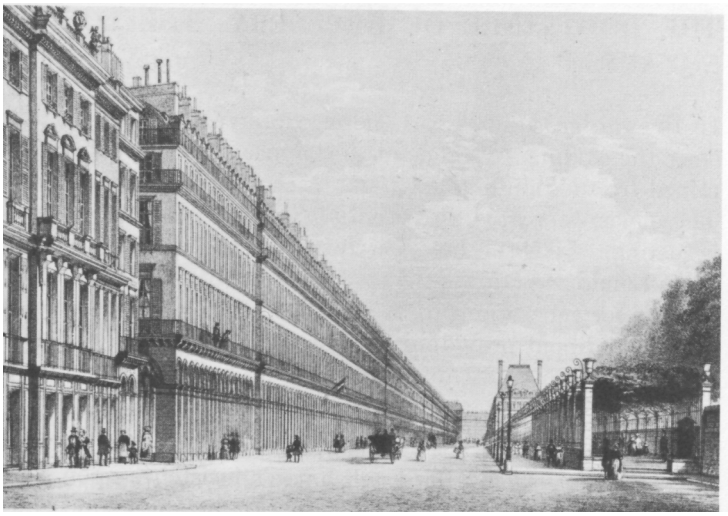

Fig. 3 Rue de Rivoli, View toward the Louvre, 1840

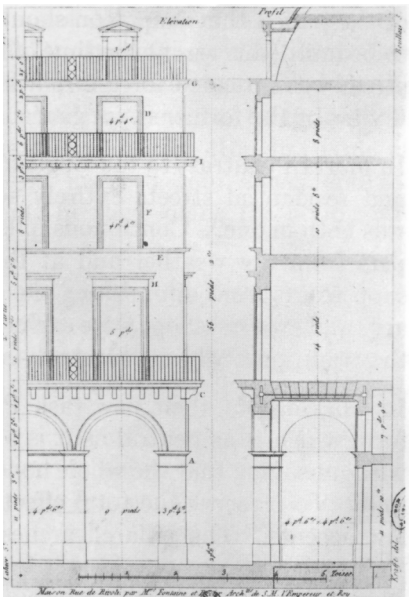

Fig. 4 Percier and Fontaine, Elevation of a House on the Rue de Rivoli, 1806

The reconstruction of Paris carried out by the Baron Haussmann in the seventeen years of his office issued from a plan largely devised by the emperor himself who, in 1853, presented the newly appointed prefect of the Seine with a map on which he had personally drawn the necessary interventions marking them with different colors (red, blue and green) according to their urgency.[15] Figure 5 illustrates the only surviving copy of Napoleon III's own project.

The radical reforms accomplished between 1853 and 1870 aimed at accommodating the increasing population and the needs of an expanding imperial metropolis which, on the wave of galloping industrialization, found that it could no longer retain its medieval urban core. The Haussmanization of Paris projected onto the city the functionalist and philo-imperialist vision of the prefect and developed into a multilayered urban refashioning whose complexity pushes it beyond the scope of this paper. Therefore, I would limit my considerations to some interventions in the urban

[15] *Ibid*., p.740.

fabric *at street level* in order to introduce the artistic and emotional response of Charles Meryon to a city that, in Baudelaire's lines, "changes more quickly than man's heart may change."[16]

Fig. 5 Map of Paris drawn by Napoleon III (copy), 1867

Haussmann set to work on a city that, according to Maxime du Camp "in the period following the Revolution of 1848 was about to become uninhabitable."[17] Hotbed of violent epidemics of cholera and of riots that had sometimes evolved in the revolutionary overthrown of the established powers, the eastern part of the city was regarded as sanitarily and politically infected and, as such, demanded a sweeping sanitation. Enlarged thoroughfares were therefore realized to ease the accelerated circulation of money, people, and troops. As we have seen, the boulevards, those large and far-reaching avenues, were not Haussmann's invention but it is during his 'boulevardization' that the pun between *boulevard* and *bouleversment* emerged and became a familiar tune among the Parisians.[18]

[16] Charles Baudelaire, "The Swan" in *The Flowers of Evil*, trans. J. McGowan, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 173.
[17] Quoted by Benjamin, in *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Howard Eiland and K. McLaughlin, Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press, 2004, p. 122.
[18] "I am finally satisfied with the etymology [of boulevard]: it is merely a variant of the word *bouleversement*," Jacques Fourier quoted in Benjamin, *op.cit*., p. 140. Haussmann himself admits "I myself am charged with the double sense of

Shelley Rice observes that the boulevard materialized an "urbanism of regularization" for the sake of which "short, narrow, winding, and picturesque old streets were replaced by straight roads leading off into the distance farther than the eye could see and lending an air of regularity to everything."[19] The invasiveness of these straight and leveled "cannonshot" streets that penetrated into the most ancient and urbanistically virgin parts of the city was largely resented by the population who often voiced its own estrangement from the city - its sense of loss - as an inconsolable mourning for the disappearance of a long-familiar space. The rue de Rivoli was a symbol of this novel unwelcoming space described by a contemporary in 1867 as "a new street, long, wide, cold, frequented by men as well dressed, affected, and cold as the street itself… *The street existed only in Paris and the street is dying*" [emphasis mine.][20]

But the boulevards should not be understood solely in functionalist terms as means to improve the circulation across and around the city center and as preemptive anti-riot strategies. They were not simply the *tools* employed to achieve pragmatic aims since they also reflect a specific aesthetic program. They created what Rice calls the new "Parisian views" and impressed on the cityscape Haussmann's *culte de l'axe*.[21] Haussmann thought that the boulevards would solve the strident aesthetic contradiction that had vexed Voltaire more than a century earlier: the entrapment of the grand monuments of the glorious national past into a chaotic and squalid mesh of medieval alleys.[22] Therefore, Haussmann devised a network of roads that, while strategically linking recent and ancient monuments, would also visually rescue them from the quagmire of the old city. The axial perspective of the grand boulevards was to articulate the new vistas of the modern metropolis. **[Fig. 6]**

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having unduly disturbed the Population of Paris by *bouleversant*, by 'boulevardizing', almost all the quartiers of the city," *ibid*., p. 127.

[19] Shelley Price, *Parisian Views*, Cambridge (MA): The MIT Press, 2000, p.42.

[20] Charles Yriarte, quoted in *ibid*., p.42.

[21] The expression *culte de l'axe* is borrowed from Giedion, *op.cit*., p. 770.

[22] Papayanis, *op.cit.,* p.19.

fig 2.[11]
A. Braun, *Rue de Rivoli,* 1855 or after (Metropolitan Museum of Art, David Hunter McAlpin Fund, 1947, New York)

Fig. 6 Adolphe Braun, Rude de Rivoli, 1855

Yet, the aesthetic result of this enterprise swayed from the original intentions. Rice points out that in building three mile long boulevards, like the rue de Rivoli, Haussmann abandoned human scale for he created "vistas" or connections that could be grasped only on a map, that is at a conceptual level, but that could not be readily perceived by the senses *at street level*.[23] Of course, maps visualize not single objects but the relations between fixed points, therefore the sites that Haussmann strove to highlight in the urban fabric by way of spectacular and rectilinear access, ended up vanishing in the

[23] Rice, *op.cit*., p. 44. The abandonment of human scale also explains the frequent accusations of megalomania directed at the Baron that emerge from section in the Arcades Project entitled "Haussmannization, Barricate Fighting," op.cit., pp.120-49.

interminable preamble of the boulevard. It was not only the street that was dying, but the very supremacy of the monuments was being shattered by the centrality of the road network. Thus, the *culte de l'axe* seems to have ultimately overcome Haussmann's scenographic taste for a monumental closure of the boulevards: to the embodied *promeneur* the boulevards have no closure, rather they are "astonishing architectural intrusions that begin just about anywhere and end up nowhere."[24] Thereby, the gravitational point of the Renaissance linear perspective, the vanishing point, unexpectedly found its place in the kaleidoscopic landscape of the modern metropolis.

Despite his self-appointment as *artist démolisseur* and his recurrent impeachment for "scorn of historical experience"[25] Haussmann, and more broadly the administration of the Second Empire, heralded a historical sensibility that acknowledged the importance of the past. In 1851, the very year of the *coup d'état* by which the Prince President Napoleon III recast himself into the role of Emperor, the *Commission des Monuments Historiques* commissioned a group of five photographers the first photographic survey of French historical monuments in need of urgent restoration. The objective of the *Mission Héliographique*, named after the recently founded photographic society Société Héliographique, was eminently conservative:

> The numerous negatives produced under its auspices were designed to preserve France's ancient architectural heritage – a heritage that was being threatened not only by industrialization but also by restoration […] These photographs might have been produced by a modern mechanical medium on the cusp of the creation of the modern urban environment, but their primary function was to "preserve" the old structures and record the changes that had already occurred in the country's architectural patrimony.[26]

This same conservative spirit led, about a decade later, the agency *Service des Travaux Historiques* to employ the photographer Charles Marville for the documentation of the old streets of

[24] Quote from *Histoire de Paris*, Dubech and d'Espezel, 1926, as reported in *Arcades*, *op.cit.*, p. 131.
[25] *Ibid*. 132.
[26] Here, Rice emphasizes the "disjunction between the radicalism of means and the nostalgia of vision," that is between the prompt governmental adoption of the newly born technology and the photographic reproduction of the architectural heritage within familiar patterns of perception. Rice, *op.cit*., pp. 52.3.

Paris slated to be torn down in the process of "boulevardization."[27] Maria Morris Hambourg sees a "bizarre if not downright contradictory state of affairs" in the administration's effort to preserve the past while destroying its material traces.[28] Two apparently opposed tensions are at play in these major documentary enterprises: the progressivistic urge to destroy in order to renovate and the will to preserve, and indeed immortalize, through documentation. What seems to emerge during the Second Empire is a new historical sensibility hinged upon the concept of the archive, the systematic accumulation of data that constitutes the core memory of modernity.[29] The consideration that the government bestowed to the orderly collection of historical records transpires from a letter written by the Emperor himself to Haussmann where, in reference to the monumental publication of a multi-volume collection of documents and books titled *Histoire générale de Paris*, Napoleon III emphatically declares that "*cette collection de monographies, de plans, et de documentations authentiques, destinée à s'accroître sans cesse, permettra de suivre a travers les siècles la transformation de la Ville*."[30]

Marville operated within this cataloguing climate with systematic dedication. He took hundreds of pictures following a rigorous pattern of "two pictures - [taken] from two different vantage points – of each street scheduled to disappear and he then continued to photograph the site in each of the successive stages of its construction." **[Fig. 7, 8]** Hence, he revolved circularly around the gravitational axes of destruction, reeling back to the same sites to find a always different urban landscape.

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[27] In the essay "Charles Marville's Old Paris" Maria Morris Hambourg counters the reductive reputation of Marville as an antiquarian photographer based on the pictures of the old Parisian streets by elucidating the wider range of his subject matters which included "demolitions, constructions, installations of statues and trees, the levelling and landscaping of parks etc.," in *Charles Marville, photographs of Paris at the time of the Second Empire on loan from the Musée Carnavalet*, ex. cat., ed. Jacqueline Chambord, New York: French Institute/Alliance Française, 1981

[28] Maria Morris Hambourg, *op.cit.*, p.10.

[29] For the specific implications between photography and the new epistemic paradigm of the archive see Allan Sekula "The Body and the Archive," in *The contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, ed. R. Bolton, Cambridge (MA): The MIT Press, 1999, pp. 343-381 and Rosalind Krauss, "Photography's Discursive Spaces" in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge (MA): The MIT Press, 1986, pp. 131-150.

[30] Quoted by Hambourg, *op.cit*., p. 9. "At the same time as curiosities and streets are demolished, they are rebuilt, preserved in images, embalmed in articles, by writers, painters, lithographers and photographers. Scarcely has a house or a alley disappeared that it begins to be well-known," Fernand Desnoyer (1863), quoted in Roger Collins, *Charles Meryon: A life*, Devizes: Garton & Co., 1999, p. 122.

Very little is known of the life of Charles Marville for his personal documents and the terms and dates of his involvement with this documentary project were lost in the fire of the Hôtel de Ville during the Commune of 1871. His first artistic productions were illustrations, paintings and engravings, but around 1851 he took on the new technology of reproduction using the calotype technique and since 1856 he photographed mostly on collodion negatives that required a shorter exposure time and a faster printing process.[31] The commission for the *Travaux Historiques* brought Marville to move along with and ahead of Haussmann's plan, the shutter of his camera blinking countless times at the tortuous medieval alleys.

The photographs of old Paris present a recurrent structural composition. From the ordinary vantage point of a stroller, Marville frames the short cobblestone streets slightly off-center thereby emphasizing their irregular winding course. From this viewpoint the streets bend and twist in such a way that the buildings in the background appear to stand out as cumbersome obstructions shutting the beholder's eye in the narrow and almost claustrophobic space of the alley. Indeed, the eye is initially propelled by the open, unobstructed ground that dominates the foreground of the picture plane, yet as it penetrates deep into the photograph its movement is increasingly constrained by the narrowing buildings until it finds itself wedged in a visual dead end. The facings sides of the old streets appear to hem in onto the virtual passerby leaving him no room for freedom. **[Fig. 9, 10, 11]**

Since Marville's obstructed and claustrophobic perspective strikes the viewer as willfully antipodal to the vertiginous arrowing abyss opened up by the Baron's boulevards, it has been argued that these formal devices were deliberately conceived to illustrate and dramatize the irrational spatial environment that compelled and justified Haussmann's regulatory intervention..[32] In fact, the

[31] The biographical and technical information on Marville are derived from the essay "Charles Marville: Photographer of Paris between 1851 and 1879" by Marie de Thezy, published in *Charles Marville, photographs of Paris at the time of the Second Empire on loan from the Musée Carnavalet*, *op. cit*, pp. 65-67.

[32] "Part of Marville's assignment was to photograph in such a way that Haussmann's future accomplishments could be appreciated. Thus he inevitably chose vantage points emphasizing the twisting, narrowness, the ill repair, and the claustrophobia of the medieval streets," Rice, *op.cit*., 86-88.

Fig. 7 and 8 Marville, Two different Views of the Impasse de Rohan.

Fig. 9 Marville, Rue Tirechape

Fig. 10 Marville, Rue Verdelet

Fig. 11 Marville, Impasse des Bourdonnais

photograph *Rue Daubenton* (c.1865) contains a rather explicit hint to the photographer's constant awareness of the impending destruction. In the immediate foreground, on the upper-left side stands a signboard almost entirely obscured by the shadow of the opposite building. Only the first line of the sign is brightly sunlit and it spells out in large font "MATERIAUX DEMOLITION." Thus, upon her entrance into the meandering and suffocating space of the old city, the viewer is forewarned of its looming fate. **[Fig. 12]**

Fig. 12 Marville, Rue Daubenton, 1865

Marville chose to a long exposure time of 3 to 12 seconds despite the fact that faster processes were already available at the time.[33] Thus, he willingly foreclosed the possibility to fix on the photographic plate the hustle and bustle of street life in central Paris which constitutes a leitmotif in the urban chronicles and accounts of the time. For instance, Maxime du Camp had written at length of the "people choked in the narrow, dirty, convoluted old streets where they remain packed in because there was no other way."[34] And yet, the liveliness of the street does not stand the test of the long exposure

[33] Rice, *op.cit*., p.86.
[34] Maxime du Camp, quoted in Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire*, London: Verso, 1997, p. 86.

time; occasionally, it can only leave a blurry trace as it is seen in the rear end of *Rue Daubenton*. As Rice points out "this photographer's images record a time zone different from the one inhabited by the passersby."[35] Then, the "documentary" value of Marville's images should be reassessed for he did not set up his camera in the attempt to mirror the life unfolding before his eyes. Instead, he intentionally manipulated it in order to image a ghostly, petrified city that in reality did not exist.

The same formal construct with a centered or quasi-centered shadowy street wedged in the middle-ground by the narrowing side buildings that cover-up the sky is reiterated with minor variations and creates an "overwhelming impression of sameness."[36] The recurrent vertical format of the photographs precludes the horizontal reading of the pictures channeling the eye along the cobblestone streets, whose axiality is often reinforced by the gutters, toward the depth of the photograph barred by the buildings. The serial quality of these images is such that their meaning develops by accretion, juxtaposition and ultimately superimposition. Seen one after the other, their topographical specificity gradually fades away to be replaced by a phantasmagoria of the city, a stony labyrinth[37] of mirrors reflecting the same image, in which the wandering man "submits to the monotonous, fascinating, constantly unrolling band of the asphalt."[38]

The old city is showed deserted, bereft of life and almost devoid of human presence as if the expropriation preceding the demolition had already taken place. In *Rue Daubenton*, as in the other photographs that illustrate this analysis, the only people registered by the camera are those standing on thresholds, leaning out of windows or against walls. They are incorporated, petrified, almost visually fossilized, into the stony texture of age-old buildings and through this physical contiguity it runs the fatal contagion of stillness and obsolescence that accentuates the hopeless deadness of the historical

[35] Rice, *op.cit*., p. 88.
[36] Rice, *op.cit*., p.101.
[37] Baudelaire, "the stony labyrinth of the metropolis," in *Arcade*, p. 434. Benjamin, "the city is the realization of that ancient dream of humanity, the labyrinth," *ibid*., p. 429.
[38] Benjamin, *ibid*., p. 519.

heart of the capital, and its inhabitants. **[Fig. 12, 13]** In the street photographs predating the reconstruction, Marville figured forth a dead and deadly city in tune with the Baron's interest to build a historical record that would uphold his urban improvements.

Fig. 13 Marville, Place Gozlin, Carrefour Boci, c. 1865.

The shadows of the old streets of Paris cast their spell on another artist even prior to the conception of the radical process of urban renewal. In 1850, three years before Haussmann took his office, the etcher Charles Meryon started to work on a collection of etchings, *Eaux-fortes sur Paris*, gathering unglamorous views of the medieval town in which the major historical monuments, if present, hardly arise from the tight mesh of the ancient urban fabric. Collins argues that "the artist's initial choice may not have been driven by any antiquarian urge to record a city before it was devastated, but from personal affinities with the streets and the buildings."[39] The title page of the *Eaux-fortes sur Paris* was "intended to be a symbol of the foundations of Paris" and it represents a stone slab,

[39] Collins, *op.cit*., p. 123.

almost a tombstone to the city, that incorporates fossils and moss imprints from the quarries of Montmartre.[40] **[Fig. 14]**

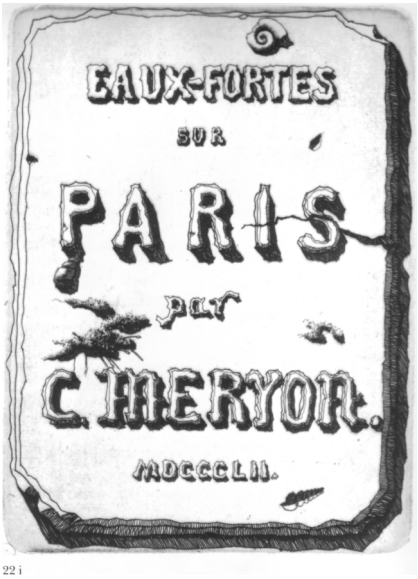

Fig. 14 Meryon, Eaux-fortes sur Paris, 1852

Although he had been practicing drawing since his adolescence, Meryon embarked onto an artistic career as an etcher relatively late, at the age of 25, upon his return to France from a four-year mission in the Pacific Ocean as a naval officer. This voyage deeply marked the artist who in 1849, three years after his return, wrote to a friend "the sailor who has spent years on the vast, proud Ocean; who has seen... he will find everything very petty when he returns from his distant travels to some inland town, however great it may be."[41] And yet, as we shall see, Meryon will find the Ocean in the old inland capital.

Two etchings, *Tourelle, Rue de Tixeranderie* (1852) and *Tourelle, Rue de l'Ecole de Medicine* (1861) can be appreciated in relation to Marville's street photographs.[Fig. 15, 16] Here, the vertical format is appropriate to Meryon's interest in the architecture of the old city. In *Rue de Tixeranderie*, the three-storied buildings occupy about four-fifth of the picture plane and they appear magnified by the slightly lowered point of view and by their preponderance in relation to the diminutive human figures.

[40] Richard S. Schneiderman, *The Catalogue Raisonné of the Prints of Charles Meryon*, Devizes: Garton & Co., 1990, p.40.
[41] Quoted in Collins, *op.cit*., p.87.

Fig. 15 Meryon, Tourelle, Rue de la Tixeranderie, 1852

The ascending reading of the image is prompted by the raised arm of the dark, manikin-like figure leaning against the fence, and it is reinforced by the elongated pointed cone of the roof of the corner tower. The *tourelle*, demolished in 1851, stretches vertically in the shade at the center of the picture and it seems almost to spring from the climbing plant enshrouding its base. As in Marville's photographs, the subject of this etching is undeniably the street, as indicated even in the title. Yet, whereas Marville quite literally spotlights the pavement of the street wherein each cobblestone shines separately in the sharp focus of the camera, Meryon focuses on the "street's curtains" more than on the street itself, meticulously transcribing the architectural details of the heterogeneous buildings that cram close to the picture's surface smothering its depth. Although numerous slices of street life find their place in Meryon's etchings, because of their lack of detail and their diminutive size the human figures appear subordinate to the stony, age-old face of the street. The originality of Meryon's focus on the decaying architecture of old Paris is well explained by Philippe Burty, a contemporary critic and collector of Meryon's etchings:

> *L'architecture, jusqu'alors abandonnée à l'épure de l'architecte ou la gouache du décorateur, est devenue sous sa pointe ce que le paysage est pour certaines grands maîtres, un poème ; et la ville, la rue, l'édifice, qui ne jouaient jusqu'alors que le rôle banal du cadre ou de la toile de fond, se sont animé de la vie latente de l'être collectif.*[42]

Almost ten years separate this etching from *Rue de l'école de Medicine* **[Fig. 16]** , a timespan marked by at least two crucial events: the Haussmanization of the city and Meryon's first serious episode of nervous exhaustion that had led to his hospitalization from the May 1858 to September 1859 in the *Maison Impérial de Santé de Charenton*, at the edge of the Bois de Vincennes. The diagnosis upon his arrival records that he suffered "deep melancholy, ideas of persecution which he considers to be deserved, depressive ideas; he considers himself guilty toward Society."[43]

[42] Philippe Burty, "L'oeuvre de Charles Meryon," *Gazette des beaux-arts*, (June 1863), p. 523.
[43] Collins, *op.cit*., 187.

Fig. 16 Meryon, Tourelle, Rue de L'ecole de Medicine, 1861

About this etching, Meryon stated that "although small, is in my opinion (and I have strong reasons to think so), my masterpiece."[44] The scene is carefully constructed and dense with allegorical significance. Rue de l'Ecole de Medicine 22 was a notorious address at the time: it was believed to be the house in which Marat had been assassinated. As in *Rue de Tixeranderie*, the scene is composed vertically and features two different buildings, one of which is cornered by a Renaissance turret, framing the narrow cleft between them. Yet, the strong chiaroscuro contrast is superseded by the shadows of the close-knit hatching which cover up the entire plate except for the sky and the puddle of light on the ground, vertically aligned with the allegorical scene in the sky, onto which the horse is about to step. At street level, "*le chant incessant de la vie sociale*" goes on, its protagonists unaware of what is going on above their heads.[45] Only the two roofers, many stories above the street level, acknowledge the extraordinary airborne scene that represents the dramatic encounter between Justice and Truth. The personification of Truth holds an open book whose words "FIAT LUX" dazzle the personification of Justice who lets drop her sword over the swarming street intersection. Framed in the semicircle at the top of the plate, under the monogram of Meryon, a naked female cherub raises her arms to her head while loosing her wings as an Icarus trying to flee from the urban labyrinth.[46] This image and the accompanying caption reveal the true extent of Meryon's modernity and of his engagement with old Paris for, as Benjamin noted, beyond "the faithfulness with which the city of Paris is reproduced" there lays a personal "interpenetration of classical antiquity and modernism, of superimposition and allegory."[47] The terms of this modernity are reasserted by Jonathan Crary:

> Meryon is important not for the formal or iconographic content of this work, but as an index of a damaged sensorium responding to the early shocks of modernization. Meryon's disturbing images of the mineral inertness of a

[44] "those who will examine it with interest and attention should understand, find the true and whole meaning, a meaning to which I attach, I repeat, the greatest importance," Schneiderman, *op.cit*., 136.
[45] Philippe Burty, *op.cit.*, p. 523.
[46] The inscription at the bottom of treads "Holy, inviolable Truth, Divine Torch of the Soul, when Chaos is on Earth, you descend from the heavens to enlighten men and regulate the decrees of strict Justice," translation of Collins, *op.cit*. p. 218.
[47] Walter Benjamin, "Modernism" in *Charles* Baudelaire, *op.cit.*, pp. 87-88.

> medieval Paris take on the value of "afterimages" of an annihilated set of spaces at the onset of Second Empire urban renewal.[48]

Yet, Meryon's "damaged sensorium" cannot be reduced to the shock of Haussmann's interventions for the dark size of the city is nowhere made more explicit than in one of his most famous etching, *Le stryge*, which dates from 1853. **[Fig. 17]** The stone gargoyle, named after a predatory night bird, is crouched on the tower of Notre-Dame and stares attentively in the far distance surrounded by birds of prey that anticipate its vulturous flight. The inscription warns the viewer that it is "The insatiable vampire, eternal lust/forever coveting its food in the great city." Meryon insisted that "this monster which I have represented does exist, and it is in no way a figment of my imagination. I thought I saw in it the personification of Luxuria."[49]

Fig. 17 Meryon, Le Stryge, 1853

Fig. 18 Dürer, Melancholia, 1514

[48] Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge (MA): The MIT Press, 1992, p. 20.
[49] Schneiderman, *op.cit*., p.56. Because of an error of versification Meryon couplet changed the couplet in the 4th and 5th state in the following way "Vice, like a vampire, gloats with greedy eyes/O'er the vast city where his *quarry* lies," Collins, *op.cit*., 132.

Both the gargoyle and the Tour de Saint Jacques - whose height is proportionally exaggerated - are "modern" vestiges of the Gothic past: the gargoyle was a 19th century addition while the tower, a remnant of a late Gothic church, had been recently and spectacularly restored.[50] The carefully constructed juxtaposition of a close-up of the "personification" of the evil in the foreground with the aerial view of the city stretching in the background is allegorical in Benjamin's sense:

> The deadness of the figures and the abstractions of the concepts are therefore a precondition for the allegorical metamorphosis of the pantheon into a world of magical creature-concepts.[51]

That is, Meryon displays a sensibility akin to that of Baudelaire, the 19th century allegorist *par excellence* and an admirer of the etcher, who in the same years was turning Paris into the subject of *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857) and in the "The Swan" famously wrote:

> *Paris change! mais rien dans ma mélancolie*
> *n'a bougé! palais neufs, échafaudages, blocs,*
> *Vieux faubourgs, tout pour moi devient allégorie,*
> *Et mes chers souvenirs sont plus lourds que des rocs.*

Indeed, Dürer's "Melancholia" seems to be revived the stillness, the meditative posture and the alienation from the surrounding world of the petrified gargoyle. **[18]** As the enigmatic utensils lying on the ground become Melancholia's useless objects of contemplation so the urban hunting ground of the monstrous predator, the Stryge appears, almost unseizable.

And yet, the dark, rayless interstice that often fractures Meryon's street architecture and from which the Tour de Saint Jacques appears to rise, epitomizes the dark abyss, the moral black hole at the heart of the city and makes it clear that the city has already been seized, indeed penetrated, by evil. In a street etching, *Rue de Chantres* (1862) we are offered a closer insight into such a shady crevice to find again a (neo)gothic landmark looking on the unaware city dwellers: it is the needle-pointed spire added by Viollet Le Duc during the restoration of Notre-Dame surrounded by sinister circling birds. Crouched

[50] Collins, *op.cit*. 133.
[51] Quoted in Susan Burck-Moss, *Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Projects*, Cambridge (MA): The MIT Press, 1989, p.165.

on the uncontested symbol of medieval Paris which so often galvanized Meryon's imagination, *Le Stryge* becomes the synecdoche of the modern city and conveys the mood with which the artist engaged with the urban space "translating a personal, pessimistic reading of urban realities into a sequence of ominous, introspective views."[52]

The majority of the figurative plates that compose the *Eaux-Fortes sur Paris* illustrate vistas of the Île de la Cité that this sailor-turned-etcher felt compelled to circumnavigate. One is struck by the absolute predominance of waterscapes[53] and reminded that the city was not made only of stone but, as Hugo wrote, "Paris is between two layers, a layer of water and a layer of air."[54] And, as another contemporary observer noted, the relationship between these two layers is osmotic "the Seine seems to exhale the air of Paris all the way to its mouth."[55]

I believe that "water" is the understated subject of Meryon's portfolio as it is wittingly hinted from the title, *Eaux-Fort sur Paris*, with a pun that if not explicitly intended would probably be appreciated by the artist who, reportedly, thought that his name was related to the sea.[56] In *Le Petit Pont, L'Arche du Pont Notre-Dame, La Tour de l'Horloge, La Pompe Notre-Dame, Le Pont-Neuf, Le Pont au Change, La Morgue* and *L'abside de Notre Dame*, the Seine flows as a slimy foundation under "the mineral inertness of Medieval Paris." **[Fig. 19, 20, 21, 22]** In these etchings the artist discloses the watery soul of the capital that he also emblazoned in the plate of the "Symbolical Arms of Paris" and

[52] Collins, *op.cit*., p.124.
[53] This calculation is based on list of plates provided by Asher Ethan Miller, "Autobiography and Apes in Meryon's 'Eaux-Fortes sur Paris,'" *Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 141 (Januart 1999), pp.4-11.
[54] Victor Hugo, in *Arcades*, *op. cit.*, p. 797.
[55] Engels, *ibid.*, p. 797.
[56] "Dans une lettre en date de 1867 il se nomme « peintre graveur, ancien marine », et il était d'ailleurs d'avis que son nom de famille avait trait à la mer," Lars-Ingemar Lundström, "Charles Meryon (1821-67), Peintre-Graveur Schizophrène", *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica* XL, supp. 180, p.162.

through them he embarks in those "dreams of boating" which "seemed to have transformed the Parisians into mariners."[57]

Fig. 19 Meryon, Petit Pont, 1850

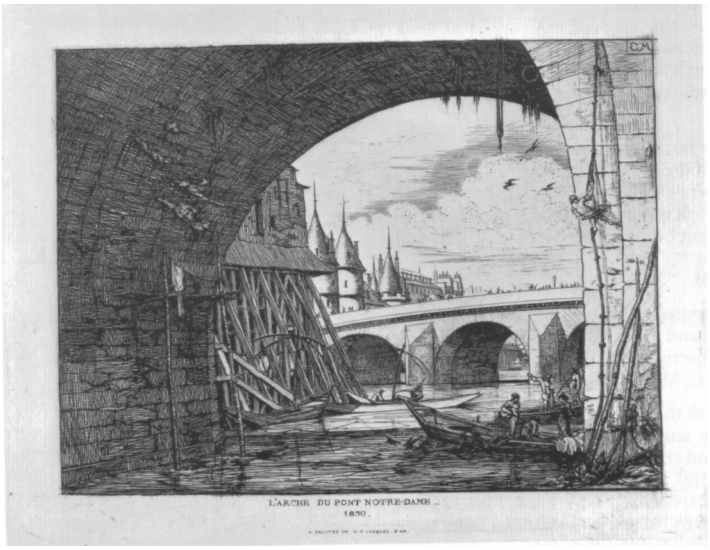

Fig. 20 Meryon, L'arche du pont de Notre-Dame, 1853

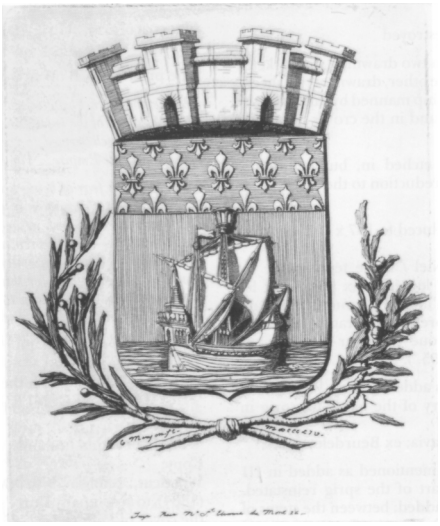

Fig. 21 Meryon, Armes symbolique de la ville de Paris, 1854

[57] "Baudelaire's 'Le Beau Navire' created quite a stir… It was the cue for a whole series of sailor songs which seemed to have transformed the Parisians into mariners and inspired them with dreams of boating," Gourdon de Genouillac, quoted in *Arcades*, *op.cit.*, p. 426.

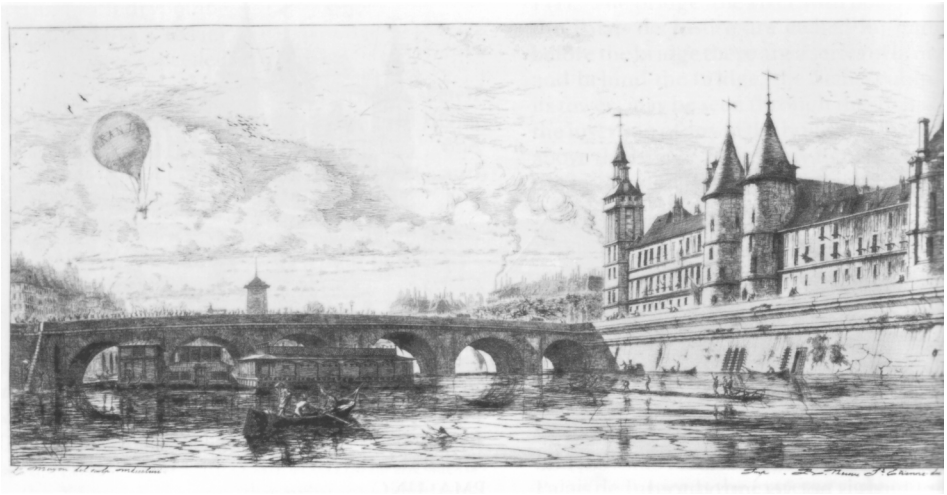

Fig. 22 Meryon, Le pont au change, 1854

Fig. 23 L'abside de Notre-Dame, 1854

Glimpses of the ancient cathedral glimmer intermittently in Meryon's etchings and although the verses accompanying *L'abside de Notre-Dame* **[Fig. 23]** reveals straightforwardly the artist's pessimistic attitude ("Our great and pious kings built it/ as a testimony to their Master of their profound repentance./ Although very massive, alas, it is said to be still to small/ to hold even the elite of our least

sinners"), I believe that the image resonates with more meaningful correspondences if looked at through the verses of Alphonse Esquiros's poem "Notre-Dame" (1837):

> And here is the old cathedral looming out
> With its rough front and raling bell;
> Like a large vessel supporting humanity,
> Spreading its two masts, advancing its hull
> It seems to be ready, grazing the sea-gravel
> To leave for eternity!

Victor Hugo was in a privileged position to understand the intimate *correspondence* between Paris and the Ocean in the artist's imagination for, when he first received Meryon's prints, he was spending his exile in Jersey - another island – whence he wrote:

> These etchings are magnificent things. This fine imagination must not be punished by the great struggle which it wages with the Infinite, *sometimes contemplating the Ocean, sometimes contemplating Paris*. Strengthen it by all possible encouragement. The breath of Immensity blows through the work of M Meryon and makes his etchings more than pictures, visions.[58] [emphasis mine]

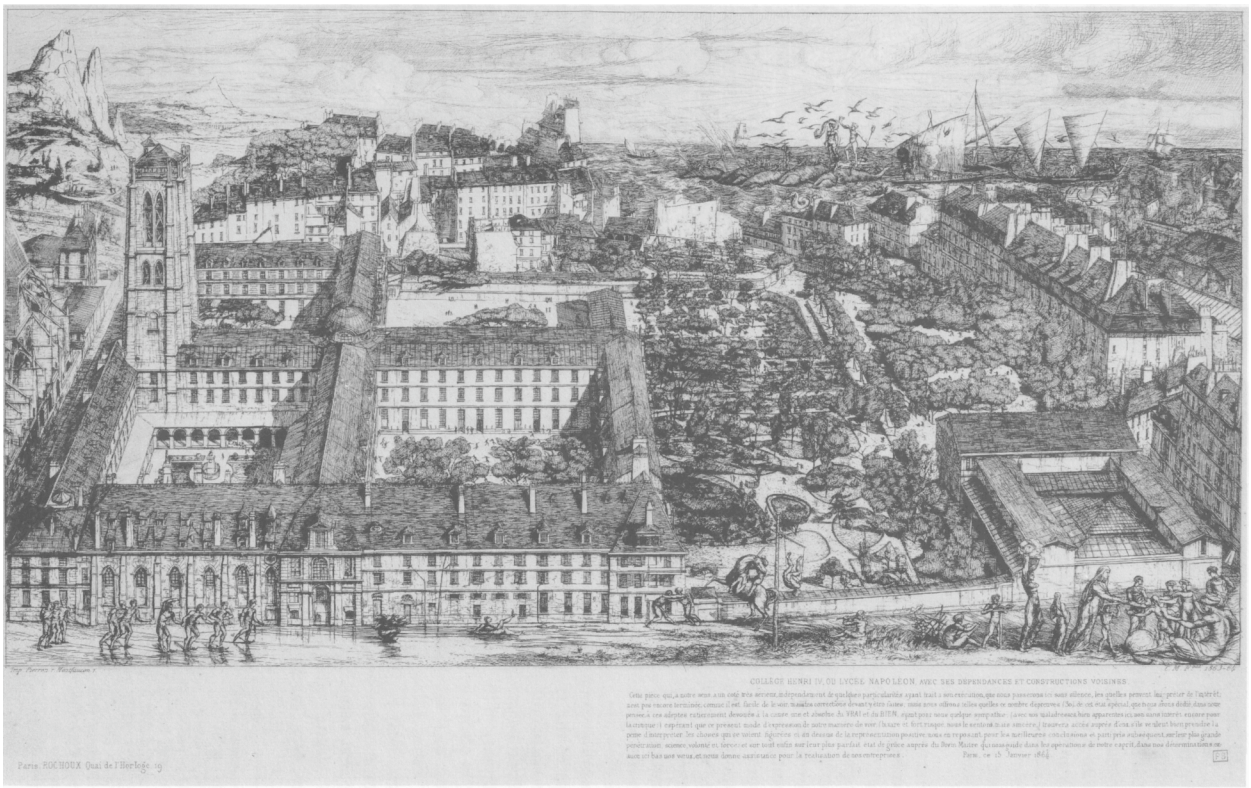

Fig. 24, Meryon, Le Lycée Napoléon, 1863-64

[58] Victor Hugo, quoted in Collins, op.cit., p. 203.

Indeed, the ocean across which Meryon had moved for four years in his youth never abandoned his imagination. In a later aerial view of the city seen from the Pantheon, *Le Lycée Napoléon* (1863-4), the Oceanian seascape rife with exotic birds and boats penetrates the earliest states as a visual consolidation of the artist's past and present experience. Meaningfully, "*exactement à l'endroit où se trouvait l'atelier de Meryon, Paris finit et Océan commence*."[59] In the later states, this mnemonic condensation, the merging of the self and of the city will be enacted in a more "realistic" townscape in which Meryon inscribes his initials and those of his lover:

> Exercising my rights as author of this plate, I have indicated by my initials, first, a house (rue St. Etienne du Mont, 26) where I lived for a long time and where I made the series of etchings entitled 'Eaux Fortes sur Paris'; and second with the initials 'L.N.' another nearby, where there lived a young woman whom I knew (or rather saw), and with whom I…[60]

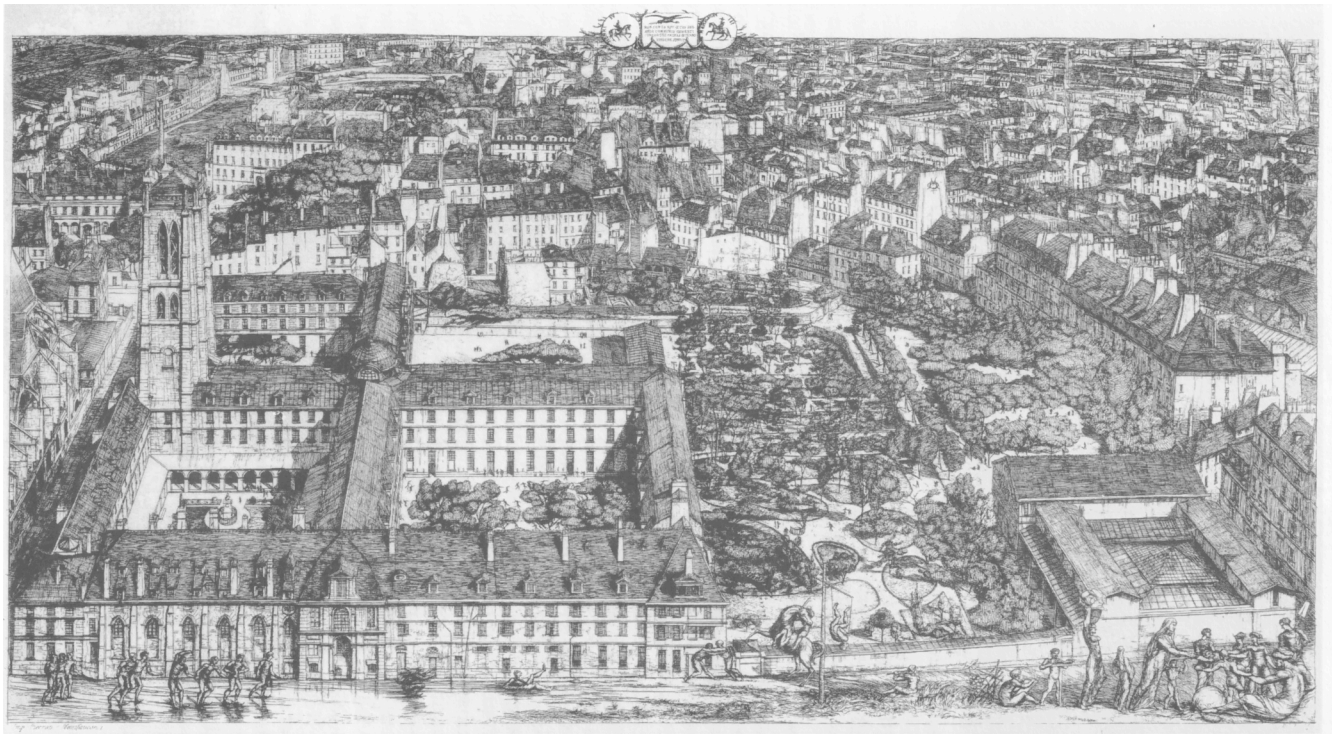

Fig. 25 Meryon, Le Lycée Napoléon (late state), 1863-64.

[59] Lundström, *op.cit.*, p.162
[60] Schneiderman, *op.cit*., p. 179.

Indeed, Meryon exercises his rights as an author on Paris itself: with a persuasive disregard for topographical accuracy he appropriated the townscape and steeped it in his own memories thereby turning it into a "resonant expression of nostalgia."[61] Whereas Marville shaped his "documentary" photographs of Paris in order to cater to the government's agenda, Meryon's Paris emerges as a visionary town embedded with personal resonances.

[61] Collins, *op.cit*., p.222.

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