

Street-signs: The City as Context and as Code in the Novels of Claire Etcherelli

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The associations of “city” are already highly charged for a reader before he picks up a book which has a city in it. Within the literary work this image becomes part of a coherent system of signs, and its meanings may be only tenuously involved with the empirical city itself.¹

Claire Etcherelli has so far written three novels: *Elise ou la vraie vie* (1967), *A propos de Clémence* (1971), and *Un Arbre voyageur* (1978). Paris and the closest of its suburbs serve largely or exclusively as backdrop to each. Urban topography as *toile de fond* is a familiar aspect of “realist” literature; no one, however, to my knowledge, has written of Etcherelli’s work as rooted firmly in the tradition of the Parisian novel. A corollary of the city as background is the city as character (usually as irrational, unpredictable character embodying this century’s ambiguous attitude to urban civilization), and this too is a feature of these novels. Finally, the thoroughfares of a city as metaphor for the lines along which the narrative develops—street plan paralleling coded paths that the reader must take through the text—constitute another aspect of urban space well represented in Etcherelli’s works. That symbiosis of actual and fictional cityscape—the meshing of what Burton Pike has called “the real city and the word-city”—allows Paris to be multiply coded as consciousness, life, exciting/threatening/alien. The present article seeks in some measure to explore these properties of the city as illustrated in these three novels.

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In an interview given a few weeks after the publication of *Elise*, Claire Etcherelli described her reading habits to Simone de Beauvoir. She had, she said, plundered her local libraries, but found their stock was limited to the classics. Some two weeks later Jean Gaugeard attended Denoël's celebration of the Prix Fémina that *Elise* had just been awarded, and recorded the following exchange:

—Vos plus grandes influences littéraires?

—Balzac.

—Et la littérature contemporaine?

—Je crois qu'il me reste encore à la découvrir.

—Your main literary influences?

—Balzac.

—And what about contemporary literature?

—I think that's something I've yet to explore. (9)

A debt to Balzac and to other equally illustrious predecessors is discernible on a variety of levels in Etcherelli's work. "La vraie vie" is what is missing from Rimbaud's Hell: "Quelle vie!" laments his mad virgin, "la vraie vie est absente" 'What a life! True/real life is missing' (135). Elise's description of Barbès and the Goutte d'Or district (235) cannot but bring to mind, if only by virtue of the qualifier *maudit* 'accursed,' that establishment Zola placed at the corner of "la rue des Poissonniers et du boulevard de Rochechouart." In *Clémence*, a friend of her father quotes to Gabrielle a few lines of *Les Contemplations*' "Paroles sur la Dune" (86), and as the novel closes, it is in a café on the rond-point Victor-Hugo that she begins work.

Such direct homage aside, the mere fact of setting her novels against so acclaimed a city means of course that Etcherelli can drop familiar names like so many pebbles, conscious that the ripples produced will spread far into that richest of urban mythologies. Elise Letellier, crossing the Seine as she returns to Paris to seek Arezki, cannot help thinking of the bodies that are doubtless drifting along in it (*Elise* 276). Over a hundred years earlier Flaubert had his nameless hero of *Novembre* look down at the water from the pont Neuf prey to identical sentiments (86). And a generation later, Verlaine brusquely apostrophizes the river under whose bridges "Bien des corps ont passé, morts, horribles, pourris / Dont les âmes avaient pour meurtrier Paris" 'Many dead bodies, horrible, rotting, had floated by, their souls destroyed by Paris' (67).

Tapping into this nineteenth-century storehouse of Parisian images, Etcherelli ensures that her text is enriched by the multiple connotations of area and street names. And as might be expected, it is in particular to her favorite chronicler of Parisian mores that she pays tribute in *Elise*, where one of the rare moments of joy her heroine is granted occurs in front of the Falguière statue in the square Guillaumin:

La joie m'envahissait. Nous avons beaucoup marché et nous nous trouvâmes sur une petite place, devant une énorme statue. Je m'arrêtai et la détaillai.

"C'est Balzac, dis-je joyeusement, je le reconnais. . . ."

Je vivais un moment de bonheur parfait. Il me semblait que si je quittais la place ce bonheur se diluerait.

Joy overwhelmed me. We had walked for a long time and were now standing in a little square in front of a huge statue. I stopped and had a good look at it.

"It's Balzac," I said delightedly. "I recognize him. . . ."

This was for me a moment of perfect happiness. I felt that if I left the square, that happiness would lessen. (198)

From the outset, the notion of the-city-as-context is thus itself placed in the wider context of all other inherited literary images of Paris. And the naming of real places, streets for example, naturally also functions as an indicator of verisimilitude in realist works firmly rooted in their here and now. In these novels authenticity is of the essence: real life, as sought by every Etcherelli protagonist, is pursued in a *vraie ville* with *vraies rues*. It is not, however, the only such indicator; each of these works is also set in/at a precise, easily identifiable time. *Elise* is, except for its final two pages, all in flashback, the 'now' of the first page turning out to be 7pm on Saturday 21 June 1958; the 'now' of the last page, the next morning. If we know such details, it is because we are given regular signposts in the form of newspaper headlines. In *Clémence* and *Arbre* radio bulletins, posters, and graffiti are also introduced, and the juxtaposition of precise grid reference and authentic headlines can be strikingly effective in conveying not only the "where" but the "when" of the Paris of the 1960s:

DEUX ANARCHISTES CONDAMNÉS À MORT. LES JOURNALISTES N'ONT PAS ÉTÉ ADMIS AU PROCÈS PAR MANQUE DE PLACE.

Quinze août. Rayon de soleil sur Paris. Clémence revoit la rue de Strasbourg, les dimanches d'été. Sur le trottoir, les diagonales d'ombre. Anna se penchait à la fenêtre, annonçait: je vais sortir.

Alors Clémence quittait ses vêtements pour s'allonger dans le petit trapèze de soleil couché sur la couverture.

LES DEUX ANARCHISTES ONT ETE EXECUTES AU GARROT.
ILS AVAIENT TRENTE ANS.

LES DEUX ESPAGNOLS ETAIENT INNOCENTS AFFIRME
L'ORGANISME DES FEDERATIONS ANARCHISTES IBERIQUES.

Ce soir ils vont ensemble jusqu'à la rue de Rivoli, ils boivent un demi et rentrent à pied.

LA GREVE DES MINEURS ESPAGNOLS S'ETEND . . .

TWO ANARCHISTS CONDEMNED TO DEATH. NO ROOM FOR
JOURNALISTS AT TRIAL.

15th August. Sunlight on Paris. Clémence is reminded of the rue de Strasbourg on summer Sundays. Diagonal lines of shadow across the sidewalks. Anna leaning out the window and saying: I'm going out. And then Clémence getting undressed and lying down on the bed in the slant square patch of sunlight.

THE TWO ANARCHISTS GARROTTED. BOTH THIRTY YEARS
OLD. THE TWO SPANIARDS INNOCENT, CLAIMS IBERIAN ANAR-
CHIST FEDERATION.

Tonight they'll go to the rue de Rivoli together, have a drink and walk home.

SPANISH MINERS' STRIKE SPREADING . . . (199-200)

As is soon apparent, the importance of Paris as a political fulcrum is a key element in each Etcherelli work, and the city's streets thus become instrumental in framing the political context of the novel. The demonstration of May 28, 1958 in *Elise* follows the traditional Nation-République route. In *Clémence* the eponymous protagonist is caught up in a protest march that is heading for the Spanish embassy via identified roads; she is stuck on the avenue Montaigne, and then forced back into the rue du Boccador. And *Arbre*'s Milie picks her way around the 6th arrondissement in the first week of May 1968, caught up in the stream of young people hurriedly leaving the network of streets leading to the Seine, cut off at the rue Dauphiné, and finally sent back up to the pont Royal (263). Activists paint slogans, publish underground magazines, hold meetings in identifiable backstreets, thus mapping the capital as a hub of political activity.

Personification of the city is, as Jane Augustine has argued, essentially a twentieth-century phenomenon. Writing on authors such as Dreiser and James, she notes that in contrast with nineteenth-century American works that depict man in control of his environment, the

twentieth century saw “a reinterpretation of the city” (73) at the hands of “certain American writers who are particularly sensitive social observers of the influence of urbanization upon the individual psyche” (73). Their nineteenth-century European counterparts were understandably quicker to explore the life of the city-dweller and to pinpoint the seamier aspects of city life, but while Paris or London might be *gouffres* or pits of hell, sentient beings they rarely were. Instances of personification of the city are rare in Etcherelli’s writing but all the more powerful for occurring at emotionally charged moments. Elise’s sketch of the confusion of the Algerian immigrant newly arrived in Paris has the city assaulting him with its bustle, trying to seduce him with the posters decorating its walls and its attractive bright lights—in short, playing both prostitute and policeman (224). Later, deliriously happy at the demonstration, she notes joyfully that Paris was there ‘heart and soul’ (268). And in *Arbre Anna*, nervous at the changes Milie wants to bring about in their lives by reintroducing the poet Fanch into the household, attributes to the Luxembourg area a negative human characteristic: “Ce quartier m’est hostile” ‘This district is hostile to me’ (63).

Images of Paris as reflecting a particular literary inheritance (and the possibilities of multiple significance this offers); urban topography to accentuate verisimilitude and as political entity; the city portrayed as a living being—such facets of the metropolis define the context of Etcherelli’s writing. “Her” Paris also exists as a specific area of the capital, and essentially comprises the working-class areas of the 11th (Popincourt), the 19th (La Villette, Belleville) and the northern suburbs. It is endlessly traversed by characters used to long strolls. Elise and Arezki spend their first outing together wandering around the 19th. Gabrielle Fardoux notes the itinerary of a walk with her lover Louis in *Clémence*: a slow walk from the bridge at Saint-Denis to the bridge at Saint-Ouen (91). Anna, who appears in all three novels—another nod in the direction of Balzac—is particularly sensitive to the atmosphere of La Villette’s canal de l’Ourcq, and talks of its potential for a certain poignant beauty (29). She is in good company. Prévert’s “Pater noster” juxtaposes it with the great wall of China.² Baudelaire apparently cited the banks of the canal as his favorite walk (quoted in Citron 359). Etcherelli’s Paris provides a rich and multilayered context for novels that are, in part at least, both of and about Paris.

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The city as code rather than context is the city exploited not for its value as backdrop or as climate but for its potential to contribute to and

shape the narrative. The city is given functions to carry out and roles to play. In the work of Etcherelli Paris is on one level coded as “society”; the positions a character abandons or attains geographically, in relation to it, are thus indicative of more than the fact that they have changed lodgings. Broadly speaking, Claire Etcherelli’s work is concerned with outsiders. Talking to Simone de Beauvoir when she was working on *Clémence*, she described her characters as people whose lives are hard, who cannot find their place in society (Gaugéard 28). She deals, therefore, in the marginalized. Her modest, struggling, coping heroines tend, naturally enough, to live on what are literally the fringes of the city. Thus the hotel in which we both meet and leave Elise is in the poor northern suburb of Saint-Denis. Clémence begins her working life in the self-same hotel, moving into the capital to live and work with Villaderda. When the relationship crumbles, Paris is once more out of bounds; as the novel closes, she has exchanged a suburb in the northeast for one in the southwest, and has begun living and working in a café in Issy-les-Moulineaux. Not surprisingly, the protagonist of *Arbre*, Milie, moves around, but long flashbacks trace her progress from the 11th to the 15th, and thence to the area in which she is living when Anna first meets her: on the borders of the northernmost *quartier* of the 19th, along the canal de l’Ourcq.

Such regions, one might be tempted to protest, are “as near to being Paris as makes no difference”; they are all, for example, on the métro. But Etcherelli’s outsiders are acutely aware of their position as such, and this is indicated by their vocabulary. Elise has a very clear notion of what constitutes the “borders” (169) and what is Paris itself. So does the old lady Clémence meet in the café, which by my reckoning is some thousand meters from the city limits: she is forever seeking a ride “à Paris” (229). And Milie’s canal de l’Ourcq district is presented as a kind of township leaning against the capital (*Arbre* 12). She and her friend Anna stress the fringe aspect of the district whenever they leave it with the ritual cry of “To Paris!” (29, 35). Milie will move her family to the outer eastern suburbs. But it is also from the Paris she has by this time left that the spirit of May 1968—what she refers to as “l’enfant de mai” ‘the child of May’—reaches out to her, and the end of the novel sees her moving her brood back from the northern limits of the Val d’Oise closer to Saint-Denis, feeling that she must return to the capital to work.

Within the actual city there are landmarks; within the “word-city” there are also signposts. It is a characteristic of Etcherelli’s style that precise topographical terminology frequently replaces more general referents of location and that features of Paris become features of the narrative. Thus, when describing a small rally she has attended, whose

purpose was to call for peace in Algeria, Elise refers to it as the “*Grange-aux-Belles*” meeting (159; my stress throughout this paragraph), although the street in which it was held is of no obvious significance. At the meeting’s end the group stops to chat “dans la nuit du quai de Jemmapes” ‘in that quai de Jemmapes night’ (142). When Clémence is constrained to stop working in the same office as her lover Villaderda, we are not told that she will no longer be helping run the business, but that she will be leaving the *rue Saint-Honoré* (105). The increasingly difficult situation of Villaderda, a Spanish refugee, is conveyed by a specific reference to the café he frequents: the walls of the Saint-Roch are oozing hostility (203). In *Arbre*, Milie remembers how her friend Mercier once carried her crying daughter home, but expresses this differently: the child is taken to the *rue St-Maur* (163, 270). And she notes the improvement in Anna’s health by recalling a particularly desperate moment in the past, again specified by means of location: “Un sacré rétablissement depuis *le soir du canal*” ‘Looking a hell of a lot better since that evening by the canal’ (230). Such instances—and there are many more examples—show the city *becoming* the moment, the event.

The city as a metaphor for “la vraie vie,” for what Etcherelli has termed “la prise de conscience” ‘coming to awareness,’³ is the city in the role that most allows it and its features to become inseparable from the narrative. Clémence links it inextricably to her lover: a bus ride she takes is qualified as bringing her closer to Paris and Villaderda (113-14). *Arbre*’s Milie installs her family in the distant suburbs, but the events of the spring of 1968 affect her profoundly, and she feels a visceral need to return to Paris. It is however most specifically in *Elise* that the topography of the city helps structure the narrative.

The phrase “la vraie vie” can be interpreted as having the sense of ‘Life as it should/could be lived,’ or again as ‘Life in the Real World’—the real world being by definition one that is yet to be encountered. Elise and her brother Lucien are initially sure that, whatever it is, it will not be found in their native Bordeaux. It is both offered and symbolized by Paris. Lucien leaves home first. Apprehensive but determined, Elise soon follows, convinced that ‘la vraie vie’ is about to begin.

If Paris on one hand functions as symbol of *la vraie vie*, the journeys that Elise makes, both to get there and to get around the city, can be seen as so many rites of passage her quest requires her to undertake. But Etcherelli ensures that her protagonist’s “awakening” is not achieved solely by her leaving her hometown and plunging into life on the assembly line. Solitude and fatigue alone can hardly be relied upon to hasten development of the self—personal commitment and the emotional upheaval it wreaks can. And so the FLN activist Arezki acts as catalyst.

Only with him can Elise attain that coming to consciousness that Etcherelli equates with *la vraie vie*. Only with him, therefore, can she come to know that which stands for it: the city of Paris itself. Arezki holds, and is, the key. This last might sound somewhat farfetched. Elise does after all arrive in Paris some two months before she meets Arezki; she begins work, travels to the factory, and so on. Life, in short, exists before him. But Paris, and therefore *la vraie vie*, I would submit, does not—as an examination of the places mentioned in the narrative soon reveals.

Elise and her brother, as mentioned earlier, take rooms in Saint-Denis. She is initially there on holiday, but we are never to learn what she has been doing in the few weeks she stays prior to taking up work—from which we can assume that nothing of interest occurred.

The factory in which she will join Lucien is in the southeasternmost *quartier* of the south-easternmost arrondissement, the 13th. The pair take the bus. The journey to work is often referred to in the text, and various locations along the route are mentioned, from which it becomes obvious that we are on the *petite ceinture*, the circle line bus, skirting Paris, sticking to the city limits. It is not with her brother, then, that Elise will penetrate into Paris/*la vraie vie*. But on Elise's ninth day at the factory Arezki, back from sick leave, makes his appearance. That evening, for the first time, Elise attends a meeting with her brother and Anna. It is on a street on the borders of the 10th and the 19th, and is as far into Paris as Elise ever gets with anyone other than Arezki (i.e. not very far). This is an occasion for her ignorance of the city (of life) to be stressed:

—C'est pour la paix en Algérie. Rue de la Grange-aux-Belles. Tu connais?

—Comment veux-tu que je connaisse?

Il me proposa de l'accompagner.

—It's for peace in Algeria. In the rue de la Grange-aux-Belles. D'you know it?

—How do you expect me to know it?

He suggested that I accompany him. (138)

Soon, however, and despite misgivings, Elise will agree to go for a drink with Arezki. (On this, as on most future "dates," they travel separately on the same bus, having agreed beforehand on the stop at which they will alight.) This first outing, naturally enough, sees them "sticking to the boundary," to the city limits: they chat awkwardly, have a cup of tea at the porte des Lilas, and Arezki shakes Elise's hand and puts her on the bus at Pantin.

The second secret rendezvous covers much the same area and much the same ground. The third meeting similarly takes the form of a walk around the Porte des Lilas, but for the fourth, Arezki asks Elise to wait at the Stalingrad métro station. Stalingrad, as Elise stresses, is no longer on the borders—it is Paris itself (169). They stop in a café, mention the war briefly—and Arezki touches Elise's hand. Twice. And they talk about Paris, its geometrical structure. In fact Arezki is explaining a lot more to Elise. His brusque goodnight kiss at the underground station pleases her to the extent that she jumps out of the carriage he has just put her in and runs to the exit to try and catch up with him. She can't see him, and what she does see—a police swoop—shocks and scares her.

Elise chooses the spot for their fifth rendezvous: porte de Montreuil—she's sticking to the outer areas. That evening, in a café, Elise is very aware of the looks their being a mixed-race couple attracts (179). She is also aware of her own latent racism; never before has Arezki's skin looked so dark. Hearing hostile remarks aimed in their direction, she is close to panic and glad when they continue their walk to the end of the rue d'Avron (towards the city center). She is still, of course, learning; she has also been frightened by the aggression they encountered in the café, and resents Arezki for being the cause of it. Her reply to his query concerning where she would like to meet him on the following Monday thus has to be "Mais je ne connais pas Paris" 'But I don't know Paris' (181).

A desire not to seem always available initially causes Elise to refuse Arezki's sixth invitation. But witnessing the other women's attitude towards one of their number who is known to be seeing an Algerian serves to make clear to her the importance she attaches to her outings: "le contact de sa main quand il me quitte, et cette marche dans la nuit, je ne peux pas y renoncer" 'the touch of his hand when he leaves me, and that walk in the dark; I can't give these things up' (194). This time, then, Arezki takes her to the Ternes district, like Avron and Stalingrad another "inner border" area between the outer ring of arrondissements and the next one in. Elise is enchanted and, leaving the main thoroughfare, they penetrate into the next circle of arrondissements. Again aware of sidelong glances in the café they enter, Elise tries in vain to find comfort in the romantic image of Paris as refuge for the hunted and exiled:

Les voisins nous considéraient en silence pendant quelques secondes et il était facile de déchiffrer leurs pensées. J'essayai de me dire: "Quoi, c'est Paris, c'est la ville des proscrits, des fuyards du monde entier! On est en 1957. Est-ce que je vais perdre contenance pour quelques regards?"

For a few moments our neighbors stared silently at us, and it was easy to see what they were thinking. I tried saying to myself: "Look, this is Paris. Fugitives and refugees from the whole world seek sanctuary here. This is 1957. Am I going to be intimidated by a few sideways looks?" (196)

This sortie into the 8th is, however, one of the happiest moments they spend together (it is at this point that the scene before the statue of Balzac occurs). Elise seeks a way to convey her happiness. Significantly enough, she does so by expressing her affection for the town with which she has up to now repeatedly denied any intimacy: she tells Arezki that she loves Paris. Arezki responds by wishing she had instead declared that she loved him. Of course, she has, though not in so many words.

From this point onwards Elise and Arezki's outings are no longer itemized in such detail, but merge into one another as the relationship grows closer. The list of these outings, which of course serves to accentuate that growth, constitutes one of the rare examples of the use of the perfect tense in the novel: the tense that, as Charles Camproux has it, governs "l'action répétée dans l'indéfini" 'action repeated in an indefinite time period.' It also links those actions firmly to the present, as if to stress that such moments have indeed been lived and cannot, therefore, ever be taken away:

Nous avons traversé des ponts.
 Nous nous sommes perdus dans les rues du quartier de Saint-Paul.
 Nous avons remonté les boulevards autour de l'axe Saint-Augustin.
 Partis de Vaugirard, nous nous sommes retrouvés à la porte d'Auteuil.
 La rue de Rivoli, nous l'avons parcourue dans les deux sens.
 Et le boulevard Voltaire, et le boulevard du Temple, et les ruelles
 derrière le Palais-Royal. Et la Trinité, et la rue Lafayette.

We crossed bridges.
 We got lost in the backstreets of Saint-Paul.
 We went up the boulevards around the Saint-Augustin area.
 Leaving from Vaugirard, we found ourselves at the porte d'Auteuil.
 We went up and then down the rue de Rivoli.
 And the boulevard Voltaire, and the boulevard du Temple, and the
 little streets behind the Palais-Royal. And the Trinité, and the rue
 Lafayette. (200)

With the last few areas mentioned, the pair have obviously made it into the heart of Paris. Their growing affection and attraction for each other is depicted by means of glowing descriptions of the city (202). As Elise discovers desire and her own sexual identity, the city, whose erotic appeal for the Maghrebian immigrant has already been stressed, is (repeatedly) penetrated. And thus it is Arezki, the leading figure in both her real and her ideal lives, who forces Elise to leave the sidelines and move towards that coming to awareness, a process mirrored throughout by her abandoning of the city limits and guided exploration of the city. When simultaneously he disappears and Lucien dies, progress is no longer possible. Elise and Henri bury Lucien near the Mantes convalescent home and drive back, Henri respectfully breaking the silence only once to say: "Voici Paris. Je vous conduis directement chez vous, n'est-ce pas? *Nous allons prendre les boulevards extérieurs, ce sera plus rapide*" 'Here's Paris. I'll drive you straight home, o.k? *We'll take the circular, it'll be quicker*' (274; my stress). Elise once again is on the outer edge, skirting the city as she did on first arriving there.⁴

This final journey around Paris, taking the route of the *petite ceinture*, sees Elise move from an initial optimism, a belief that Arezki can and will be found, through pessimism, to total despair—and each mood shift is linked to the areas they drive through, the monuments they pass, the bridge they cross. Thus the Cité universitaire, the student residences, as symbol of learning, inspires hope in an Elise who has retained a naïvety in certain respects—"La vie d'un homme, elle a du poids ici" 'A man's life counts for something here' (275)—but the pont National, from which she has often admired the fairy lights of the city, crosses a Seine from which more than one of history's disappeared have been pulled. The boulevard Poniatowski and the bourgeois aspirations of its working-class inhabitants (276) is no more reassuring: "la vie d'un Arabe est de quel prix ici?" 'What price an Arab's life here?' (276). Finally they enter the tunnel under the porte de la Villette, and Elise finally allows herself to admit despair: "Je pressens que je ne verrai plus jamais Arezki" 'I have the feeling that I will never see Arezki again' (277).

Two weeks later Elise will leave Paris and return to Bordeaux. "La vraie vie" will have lasted nine months (279). Grieving, once again a provincial outsider, she is now nevertheless a survivor. In this novel in particular, the acquiring of awareness, that *prise de conscience*, is indistinguishable from an acquiring of Paris. The cityscape is not only a backdrop but becomes a psychological, mythical entity. Elise has found and benefited from "la vraie vie." Put another way, she has got the measure of Paris. She has become streetwise.

Notes

1. Burton Pike (ix).

2. "La terre / Qui est quelquefois si jolie / Avec ses mystères de New York / Et puis ses mystères de Paris / Qui valent bien celui de la Trinité / Avec son petit canal de l'Ourcq / Sa grande muraille de Chine. . . ." "The earth / Which is sometimes so lovely / With its mysteries of New York / And its mysteries of Paris / Which equal that of the Holy Trinity / With its little canal de l'Ourcq / Its great wall of China. . . ." (58).

3. In *Femmes d'Aujourd'hui*, quoted by John Roach in the Methuen edition of *Elise* (39).

4. Margaret Attack has stressed the 'thematically and structurally important' (62) representation of the city in *Elise*, and commented on this passage in particular. She does, however, have *Elise* and Henri 'cross Paris' (63); in fact, as Henri indicates, they circle it.

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