

Hans Christian Andersen and the city of Parisⁱ

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Abstract

Hans Christian Andersen visited Paris 8 times, and if we compute these journeys, he spent in all about 10 months in the French capital. In this paper, I examine the importance these journeys have had on Andersen's literary production. I describe four different themes in which Andersen portrays the French capital: Paris on the Grand Tour, Paris as the city of theatre, Napoleon's Paris, and the Metropolitan Paris. There's no doubt that for Andersen, Paris was the city that had it all. In several of Andersen's works and letters, he refers to Paris as the "city of the cities." This expression is constantly used today when the Danes talk about Paris. In my article, I argue that the Danes might have inherited this expression from Andersen as he was the first one to name Paris "the city of cities" in a publication in Denmark.

Introduction

Hans Christian Andersen visited Paris 8 times, and if we compute these journeys, he spent in all about ten months in the French capital. He went to Paris for the first time in 1833, at the age of 28, and his last journey to Paris was in 1870, at the age of 65, so the journeys were spread over most of his lifetime. These journeys were a source of inspiration in his writing and in this paper, my focus is how the city of Paris is represented in his works.

The travels to Paris

The first journey to Paris in 1833 was a part of Andersen's Grand Tour of France and Italy; at that time, he was just an unknown young man with literary ambitions who was waiting for his breakthrough as a writer. For Andersen, this journey was considered important as inspiration; he visited all the sights such as Louvre and Versailles and wrote down all his impressions, so that he could use them later. His second travel to Paris in 1843 is, however, a more important one on the personal level because he associated with the French writers and artists, and he succeeded in becoming accepted by the French literary community. The question is how he managed to achieve recognition so easily by the French community?

Part of the honour is due to the French translator and man of letters, Xavier Marmier, whom Andersen met in Copenhagen in 1837 and to whom he told the story of his life. Marmier wrote an article about the Danish poet, which was published in *Revue de Paris* in October the same year together with a translation of the poem *The Dying Child* (Det døende barn). It happened to be only two years after Andersen had published his first collection of fairy tales, so it was truly very early for the French to be able to read an article about the Danish writer. On the journey to Paris in the spring of 1843, Andersen benefitted from his friendship with Xavier Marmier. They often went out together, and Marmier introduced him to the famous writers of that period. Among others, Andersen met Victor Hugo, Lamartine, Alfred de Vigny, and Balzac. One of the writers who became a really good friend, and whom he saw often, was Alexandre Dumas Senior. One acquaintance led to another, and through Alexandre Dumas, he met one of the most famous actresses of that time, Elisabeth Felix Rachel, whom Andersen admired and found very impressive.

Nevertheless, it was not only his contact with Marmier and other circumstances that made it possible for Andersen to become a part of the French community. In 1843, his ambition was to meet the French writers, and he made a personal effort to do so. Andersen chose *not* to stay in “the Danish tenement house,” in the hotel *Etoile du Nord*, which was situated on the west side (rive gauche) of Paris on Quai Saint Michel and was occupied by Danes from the “cellar to the ceiling,” as he wrote in a letter to Signe Læssøe on March 20th, 1843 (The Hans Christian Andersen Center, n.d.). His decision not to stay in the hotel with the Danes and instead choosing to stay in Hotel Valois, Rue Richelieu, on the east side, shows that he wished to withdraw himself from the Danes so he could be more open to French acquaintances. Furthermore, Andersen had a good knowledge of French literature, which made it easy for him to find a topic of conversation. For example, Andersen admired Alphonse de Lamartine who had written *Voyage en Orient*, which he referred to as “brilliant” in a letter to Henriette Hanck on June 27th, 1839 (The Hans Christian Andersen Center, n.d.). Andersen had read the works of Victor Hugo during his trip to Paris in 1833, and he had even read *Notre Dame de Paris* in French! He had a sufficient knowledge of the French language, he read French literature, and he was able to have a conversation in French up to a point.

Unfortunately, Andersen never published a travelogue about the trips to Paris. He could have written one as he did with the travelogues “In Spain” and “In Sweden,” but he has given a good description of the journeys to Paris in “The Fairy Tale of My Life.” Furthermore, he kept a diary every day when he was travelling, and he wrote a large number of letters from Paris; therefore, there is a lot of source material available from his journeys. Andersen was aware of the importance of

copious descriptions in his letters and diary, so he had material available later if he needed it in his writings. His letters were a sort of “first stage” of his later works. In Andersen’s writings we can see the inspiration from the city of Paris in his drama works, poetry, novels, and fairy tales. In this paper, my focus is on how the city of Paris is described in Andersen’s works, and I have divided it into four sections: Paris on the Grand Tour, Paris as the city of theatre, Napoleon’s Paris, and the Metropolitan Paris.

Paris on the Grand Tour

In Andersen’s novel *O.T.* published in 1836, the city of Paris occurs as a constant theme. At that time, only a few Danes had the possibility of travelling to Paris. We can observe this in chapter 8 in part 2 where the cousin Joachim comes back home from Paris and becomes the center of everybody’s attention. The main character, Otto, would like to make a good impression on the intellectual girl, Sophie, and it irritates him when Sophie, instead, shows an interest in Joachim. We can hear the ironic tone in Andersen when Joachim is described, “Cousin Joachim came and was interesting – very interesting, said all. He related of Paris, spoke also of Copenhagen, and drew comparisons.” (Andersen, 2009) The repetition of the word “interesting” creates a comic effect, and it also reveals Otto’s envy about Joachim being the centre of the ladies’ attention. “The lady of the house wished to hear of the flower-markets, and of the sweet little enclosed gardens in the Palaces. Sophie wished to hear of Victor Hugo. She received a description from him of his abode in the Palais Royale and of the whole Europe littéraire besides Otto was extremely interesting” (Andersen, 2009).

The intellectual student who *has not* been to Paris feels outdone by the intellectual student who has returned from Paris. When Andersen wrote this chapter, he was probably inspired by the comedy of Ludvig Holberg named “Jean de France.” Holberg wrote this satirical play in 1722 a few years after he returned from his Grand Tour of France and Italy. Andersen had been familiar with Holberg’s works since his childhood, and Holberg was one of the writers that he was very fond of and inspired by. The comedy “Jean de France” describes a young man Hans who, at the age of 20, has made a journey to Paris. When he comes home, he does not speak Danish any longer but only French. He is following the French fashion and has adopted French manners. The family thinks that he has changed, and he no longer feels comfortable in the domestic environment where they make fun of him, so at the end of the comedy, he has to leave home and return to France. In the novel *O.T.*, the young Joachim also returns from Paris, he has become fluent in French, and he can relate both cultural and political news from Paris. Just like Holberg’s main character, Joachim has changed

during his stay in Paris. Jean has changed so he has become “well-behaved and vivid.” (Holberg, 1722) Joachim is described as “eloquent,” “Joachim possesses eloquence” said the lady of the house. “That has developed itself abroad!” answered he.” (Andersen, 2009) Joachim does not feel comfortable at home any more; he cannot get used to the quiet and the silence, and he misses the “life-animating” Paris. That a young man’s character changes during a stay in Paris is a theme we find both in Holberg and Andersen. Holberg expresses it in the following way, “Frankrig kan dog skabe Mennesker om” (France can, indeed, change people). The main character, Otto, would like to go to Paris as well in order to change his character. When Otto inherits money from his dead father, he decides to travel to Paris with his friend Vilhelm. In Holberg’s play, the young man’s identity is transformed so radically that he must return to France, and he is almost expelled from society. Andersen, on the other hand, shows that the student Joachim is an example to follow; in this way, Andersen expresses the opinion, which was very common during the Golden Age in Denmark, that to travel abroad was natural and necessary for young men’s education. Paris becomes the city that can shape and educate the young intellectuals. At the same time, Paris is represented as the place to escape to during difficult periods and the place which can give you happy moments.

Paris as the city of theatres

Paris is referred to as the city where one may find cheerfulness and entertainment. One of the things that impressed Andersen most on his first journey to Paris in 1833 seemed to be the large numbers of theatres. In Copenhagen, the only theatre at that time was the Royal Theatre that had a monopoly. In Paris, the monopoly of theatres had been abolished in 1791, so anyone could start a theatre, and this resulted in many theatres side by side on the *grands boulevards* on the east side of Paris with names like Vaudeville, Variété, St. Martin, and Théâtre français. It must have been paradise for a theatre lover like Andersen to arrive in Paris where he could see a new play every evening. The setting of the stage looked also more interesting than in Denmark; the French decorations appeared much more detailed, and the stage was illuminated by gas light that was not yet used in Denmark. Furthermore, a lot of the plays were shown for the first time, so Andersen could see the plays, before they reached Copenhagen. Before Andersen left for Paris on his first journey in 1833, he made an agreement with the paper *Kjøbenhavnsposten* to send travel articles home with reports from Paris and especially to report about the new theatrical plays. Andersen could have become a good travel journalist like his friend Robert Watt, who later published *PariserFotografier* (1928), but Andersen did not have any ambitions towards continuing with journalism. He considered the travel articles secondary work that

stole his time from the real work, which consisted of writing novels, and, in this way, the journeys to Paris were an important source of inspiration. The novel *Only a fiddler* takes place in Paris in the third part in chapters 7 and 8, and here the city is represented as the place where the Danes can amuse themselves in the multifarious theatre life. “The countrymen separated. The one would be so fortunate as to hear Grisi – *la bella divina*, as he called her; the other was to go to M.Conte’s theatre, where children acted, that he might see the most charming child who would soon grow up and obtain his heart. Our two gentlemen wandered into the theatre of the Palais Royal to see the youthful *Dejazet* in a vaudeville, which could not be given among us.” (Andersen, 2004, p. 278) In Paris, there were different kinds of theatres, and the city is referred to as the place where talents have the best opportunity to develop. Andersen points to the Swedish-Italian Marie Taglioni who had a big success in the 1830s as the first ballerina of the opera. In the fairy tale called “Auntie” from 1860, we “meet” the lady whose whole life is the theatre; she almost considers it her second home. Here, the theatre is described as a way to get to know other cultures including the Parisian one:

The theatre is my schoolroom, she said, my fountain of knowledge; from it I have refreshed my Bible history; “Moses”, “Josés and his brethren,” these are operas! From the theatre, I have my general history, geography, and knowledge of mankind! From the French plays, I know the life of Paris, licentious, but highly interesting!

A theatre genre which was very popular in France was the vaudeville, which consisted of a comic-satirical play where a part of the dialogue was replaced by songs. In Denmark, it was Johan Ludvig Heiberg who introduced the Danish public to this genre. Andersen experimented with the vaudeville a couple of times, and in 1840 he wrote the vaudeville monologue *Mikkel’s love stories in Paris*. This vaudeville was performed once at the Royal Theatre of Copenhagen in marts 1840 and was subsequently only played twice in Andersen’s lifetime (1849 and 1870). Andersen was inspired by the vaudeville of Johan Ludvig Heiberg, *De Danske i Paris* (Heiberg, 1835) when he wrote the play; in the introduction to the play, it is mentioned that the main character Mikkel is the same Mikkel as the one in *The Danes in Paris*, and he also dedicates this role to the same actor, Ludvig Phister. When the vaudeville monologue was not received well by the public the only time it was performed on stage, Andersen felt it was because Phister was not “in the mood” that evening, as he wrote in a letter to Henriette Hanck on March 10th, 1840. (The Hans Christian Andersen Center, n.d.) The monologue is about a young fellow Mikkel who goes to Paris with the stage coach; in the coach, he meets pretty, French ladies whom he sees again at a comedy at the theatre. It is quite funny that Andersen chose to

call the play *Mikkel's love stories in Paris* because there were never any love stories between Mikkel and the French ladies, but there *might* have been love stories if not for the fact that Mikkel was already engaged to Christiane Andersdatter in Denmark.

Napoleon's Paris

Another theme that we find in Andersen's works is Paris as a center of the history of France, and especially the story of Napoleon is at the center of his attention. In *Only a Fiddler* (chapter 8 of the third part), Andersen gives a description of the festivities during the days of July in 1833; they commemorated the July revolution three years earlier during which time the House of Bourbon had fallen and Louis Philippe was named king of the French. Andersen had been an eyewitness to the national festivities during his journey in 1833 when a new statue of Napoleon was placed on the Vendôme Column in the Place Vendôme. Andersen had rented a seat on a barrel in the square so he could watch the event from "the orchestra" and he had the honour of seeing King Louis Philippe. The scene is here described in *Only a Fiddler* (Andersen, 2004, p. 291):

The second day of the festival had come. The long Boulevard was the parade of the national guard; along the green alleys stood the well-dressed rows of people, and all the windows and balconies of the houses were filled, like the Boulevard, with people; wild boys hung on the branches of the trees; others balanced themselves on the stone balustrade of the fountain. Everywhere was the throng as great as in one of the most frequented passages. Louis Philippe, surrounded by his sons and generals, showed himself; he extended his hand, and kindly saluted his citizens. A 'Vive le Roi!' sounded, amid which was heard, 'A bas les forts!' The blue veil covered with the silver bees still lay over the statue of Napoleon upon the Vendôme column; windows and roofs were filled with people; the king and dignitaries of the kingdom stood with bared heads before the column; the signal was given, and the veil fell. 'Vive la Mèmoire de Napoleon!' was the cry of admiration.

Since his childhood, Andersen had heard the stories about Napoleon Bonaparte, and since then he had taken an interest in the French emperor. In *The Fairy Tale of my life*, Andersen wrote: "Napoleon was my childhood's, my heart's hero." Andersen had inherited the fascination with Napoleon from his father, Hans Andersen, who wished to go to France and fight with Napoleon's troops when he left Odense as a soldier in 1814, but, unfortunately, the father's regiment only reached Holstein, and the father died soon after his return to Odense. Therefore, it is a reference to Andersen's own childhood when he writes in the novel *O.T.* that it was Napoleon who had awakened Otto's interest in France.

In this matter Napoleon had awakened Otto's interest in France. [...] The Revolution and Napoleon had often fed his thoughts about and his discourse on this country. Otto had thus, without troubling himself the least about politics, grown up with a kind of interest for France. (Andersen, 2009)

During the July festivities in 1833, a big party was held in the town hall of Paris, and Andersen succeeded in getting an invitation to the party after having sent an application in French. A new decoration of the town hall had been implemented on the occasion of the July festivities, and Andersen noticed a historical painting that made a big impression on him; he mentions it in a letter to Henriette Wulff on July 30th, 1833:

In one of the halls, there was a lovely painting that represented the taking of the Hotel de Ville during the days of July. A boy with the flag in his hand is collapsing while bleeding; meanwhile, the enthusiastic crowd is moving on. (The Hans Christian Andersen Center, n.d.)

This image of the bleeding, dying boy who is fighting for the sake of the nation makes a big impression on Andersen. In Paris, there were a lot of commemorative monuments over the ones who had fallen during the July revolution, and at one of the monuments, Andersen listened to a story about a poor boy who was stabbed by a bayonet and dragged himself into the king's castle, the Tuileries, where he collapsed and died on the throne chair. Andersen remembers this story and the historical painting that he had seen in the town hall, and he uses these impressions seven years later when he writes *Picture book without pictures*. He places the story of the fifth night in Paris during the July Revolution, and he tells the story about the poor boy who dies as a hero on the throne of France,

A poor, ragged, half-grown boy fought bravely in the ranks of his older comrades. Mortally wounded with several bayonet thrusts, he collapsed. This happened in the throne room, and the bleeding body was laid on the throne of France; his blood streamed over the royal purple hangings that partly covered his wounds. That was a picture! [...] Perhaps at the boy's cradle it had been prophesied, "He shall die upon the Throne of France," and the mother's heart had dreamed of a second Napoleon.ⁱⁱ

I have tried to find the historical painting that Andersen saw at the dance at the town hall in Paris, and I think that it might be the painting *Fight in front of Hotel de Ville on 28 July 1830* by Jean-Victor Schnetz. Schnetz was a pupil of the painter David and one out of four painters that were commissioned

to make a number of historical paintings for the throne-hall in the town hall. This painting that shows a rebellion in front of the town hall during the July revolution, was a painting on commission for the July festivities in 1833, so both date and the subject of the scene correspond with the painting that Andersen saw. Of course, it can only be a guess as Andersen, unfortunately, did not mention the name of the painter.

Paris the metropolis

Paris

Susende, vekslende, trættende, broget
er det omkring mig, - jeg er i Paris!

Ret som en karnevalsdag er hver dag her,
et trasvesteret, nyt paradys.

Kalkede grave med roser bemalte,
menneskesjæle i svajende siv
danser omkring mig, leende, lokkende
vidner: "Minuttet, det er dit liv!"

Figenbladet er borte og hverdags
menneskeligt, hvad i mennesket bor.

Babylon tænker jeg på: Paradisets
kundskabens træ nu i Babylon gror

(Andersen, 2005, p. 630)

“Whistling, alternating, tiring, varied, is everything around me – I’m in Paris.” This is how Andersen describes Paris in this poem during his journey in 1863, but it could have been any other journey to Paris, because every time he arrived there, he was overwhelmed by the big city which was constantly moving and changing. When Andersen came to Paris for the first time, he was impressed to see a big city with so much life and traffic in the streets. There were more than 600,000 inhabitants in Paris in the 1830s whereas Copenhagen was quite a small city with about 100,000 inhabitants, so there were six times as many people in Paris. In *Only a Fiddler* (chapter seven) the city is described as a big metropolis filled with life and people. Andersen stayed at Hotel Vivienne at Rue Vivienne, and in that part of the city, one could see several of the Parisian ‘passages’ like Gallerie Vivienne down the street; the passage was an architectural invention that the Danes did not know yet. In *Only a Fiddler*, he explains to the Danish readers what a Parisian passage is,

We now enter a passage that is called a street, provided with a glass roof. Here are shops of two stories high on each side, and little passages branch off like side streets from the greater one. In the cold and rain, you find a shelter here, and when it's evening, hundreds of gas-lamps change the night into day, and you may find in the handsome shops everything that you need, and which is always able to gladden the heart of a man. (Andersen, 2009)

Another novelty that Andersen mentions in the novel, is the Parisian 'omnibuses' in which the passengers could get around the city in no time. The omnibus was like a big stagecoach where the passengers could sit either inside or on top as there was an external staircase in the back. Andersen was fascinated by all the scientific inventions of the time, and he *had* to go to Paris in 1867 when the city hosted the International Exposition (Exposition Universelle). Countries from all over the world exhibited novelties within art, industry, and agriculture, and 10 million tourists visited Paris during the exhibition. Denmark was also represented; there was a small group of Danish painters such as Carl Bloch, Lorenz Frølich, and Elisabeth Jerichau Baumann who exhibited in the Nordic Pavilion. A Danish journalist had written in an article that Charles Dickens was the only writer who was capable of describing the exposition. Probably, the statement is due to the fact that a couple of years earlier, Dickens wrote the novel *A tale of two cities* that took place in Paris and London during the French Revolution. Andersen took this statement as a challenge and decided to write a story about the International Exposition. He wanted to write a modern fairy tale that should take place in Paris in the reader's contemporary time. It took Andersen a very long time to write the fairy tale *The Dryad*; he got the idea for the story when he visited Paris in April the year before (1866) when he saw a tree on the square outside his hotel, which was pulled up by the roots, and he finished it two and a half years later in December 1868. He spent a lot of time on this fairy tale because he knew that it would get a lot of attention as there were plans to publish it in England, Germany, France, and America. A dryad comes from the Greek mythology and is a sort of a tree nymph (the spirit of the tree). The dryad is longing to get out and experience the city, she tears herself away from the tree and through her we hear about the exposition:

A splendid flower of art and industry, they said, has sprung up on the barren soil of the Field of Mars; a gigantic sunflower, from whose leaves one may learn geography and statistics, get the knowledge of a guild-master, be elevated in art and poetry, and learn the size and greatness of different countries.

In 'The Dryad,' Andersen pays homage to all the technological inventions of the time that one can find in a big city like the trains and the steamships:

They come here from early morning until late in the evening. Steamer after steamer full of people glides down the Seine. The number of carriages is constantly increasing, the crowds of people both on foot and on horseback are growing, omnibuses and tramcars are stuffed, covered, and filled with people; all these currents move towards one goal, The Paris Exhibition! [...] It's like the kingdom of Babel, the language of Babel, a Wonder of the World. It was such indeed so the reports about it said; who did not hear them? The Dryad knew everything that had been said here about the "new wonder" in the city of cities.

There is no doubt that for Andersen, Paris was a city that had it all; it was the center of the history of France, the theatres, and the modernity. The 'city of the cities' (byernes by) is an expression that is repeated often in Andersen's description of Paris. In the *Dryad*, I have counted three times where Paris is called the city of cities, for example: "Rejoicingly she said, "I shall go to the city of cities. Life will begin for me – floating like the clouds, whither no one knows."

Was Andersen the first writer who started naming Paris the city of cities or from where did he adapt this expression? In a letter to Henriette Wulff on July 22nd, 1847, he refers to Victor Hugo for this expression, but he isn't quite sure "Victor Hugo or who it is that names Paris the city of cities" (The Hans Christian Andersen Center, n.d.). I have tried to find a quotation of Victor Hugo where he refers to Paris as "the city of cities", but I haven't succeeded in finding it. However, Andersen was right that it might have been Hugo who invented the expression, because Hugo often pays homage to Paris in his works.

When Danes say today that they are travelling to the 'city of cities,' everybody knows that they are talking about the capital of France. It is an expression constantly used, in tourist contexts, about Paris. For the Danes, the expression indicates that it is the city that has it all. This expression does not resonate in a similar fashion in French or English or another Nordic language. Andersen already used the expression "byernes by" on his first journey when he wrote this in a letter to the Collin family on July 28th, 1833: "leaving soon, maybe forever, the lovely, multicoloured Paris. It's really the city of the cities! I wish all People could come here, just for a Month." (The Hans Christian Andersen Center, n.d.)

In Andersen's letters, I have found four passages where he uses the expression the city of cities about Paris (two letters from 1833, one from 1839 and one from 1850). Yet, he wondered if it

was really Paris that was the city over all cities; there are, in fact, three other letters where he pays homage to London as the city of cities, and one letter where he mentions Rome as the city of the cities. Apparently, however, Andersen often spoke about Paris as the city of the cities because in a letter from February 14th, 1843, Henriette Wulff writes to Andersen, we find: “With this letter, I hope again to be one of the first of your dear, old Danish friends, dear Andersen, who wishes you welcome in the foreign town, and this time it’s even in ‘the city of cities’ as you yourself call it.”

I have been in contact with the Danish Language Council (Dansk Sprognævn) to find out when the expression “byernes by” was used for the first time in the Danish language, and they have informed me that the earliest date of this expression in their database actually appears in Andersen’s novel, *O.T.*, and that here it is used about Paris: “We will set up next week!” said William “and then it shall be – (...) Away over the Moors, up the Rhine to the land of champagne to the city of cities, the life-animating Paris.” (Andersen, 2009)

Concluding comments

Andersen had a very good knowledge of French literature, French history, French theatre and of the French cultural life in general. He had achieved this knowledge partly by reading, partly by his contacts with the French writers and partly by the many visits to Paris where he could see the transformations of the French capital during the years. In the diaries and letters, we can see that Andersen was a curious and very attentive observer of the vivid life in Paris, there was plenty of source material to be inspired by if he had had the ambition to write a whole novel taking place in Paris as he did in his early years with “The Improvisator of life in Italy” after his travels to Rome in 1833. Unfortunately, Andersen never wrote a whole novel taking place in Paris or a travelogue about the travels to Paris, but in this paper, I have showed how Paris appears as a theme in all the different literary genres and that the detailed descriptions are based on his own travel experiences. Paris is represented as a historical place, a cultural place with all the theatres, and also a modern city with novelties that were unknown for Danes at that time. I think that the expression “the city of cities” aptly represents Andersen’s way of portraying the French capital in his literary work, as the city which had everything that a man could dream of. It might be too far to say that Andersen invented the expression “byernes by” in Danish, but he has probably had an active part in spreading the expression as his novel *O.T.* and *The Dryad* were read by thousands of people.

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ⁱ This article has not been peer reviewed.

ⁱⁱ A translation of *Billedbog uden billeder* by Jean Hersholt, www.andersen.sdu.dk