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## **Paroles gelées**

### **Title**

Haunting the Underworld in Nerval's Les Nuits d'octobre

### **Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9js288nn>

### **Journal**

Paroles gelées, 19(2)

### **ISSN**

1094-7264

### **Author**

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### **Publication Date**

2001

### **DOI**

10.5070/PG7192003116

Peer reviewed

## HAUNTING THE UNDERWORLD IN NERVAL'S *LES NUITS D'OCTOBRE*

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It is temporary homelessness and a chance encounter that plunge the narrator of Gerard de Nerval's *Les Nuits d'octobre* into an evening designed to resemble "la vie de bohème." However, it is rather the absence of this formerly lively bohemian nightlife that is most noticeable in the narrative. The date is 1852, and the only remains of such a life are stories of the past, because police presence has made the locations that were once considered unsavory safe for visits from the bourgeoisie. The novella shows the imitation of the fabled urban wanderings of bohemians becoming a leisure activity for the bourgeoisie. The frequent references to the past draw attention to the changes in the city over the past generation, while invoking the ghosts of romanticism and bohemia that live on as legend.

The narrator's temporary homelessness and resulting idleness are voluntary, and make possible his subsequent encounters, first with a friend whom he identifies only as a flâneur, and then with an article attributed to Charles Dickens that he comes across in a magazine. The article, called "The Key of the Street or London at Night," recounts the experience of a bourgeois narrator who decides to spend the evening slumming it, by staying out all night with only nine pence in his pocket. The narrator's reaction to the story is: "Qu'ils sont heureux les Anglais de pouvoir écrire et lire des chapitres d'observation dénués de tout alliage d'invention romanesque! A Paris, on nous demanderait que cela fût semé d'anecdotes et d'histoires

sentimentales,—se terminant soit par une mort, soit par un mariage. L'intelligence réaliste de nos voisins se contente du vrai absolu" (314). This reaction would seem to establish that for the narrator, realist representation and the "vrai absolu" at its source are to be found elsewhere, in this case, England, not amid the daily experiences of a bourgeois Parisian. He decides to spend an evening like the English realists he admires: he dares to explore the dark underbelly of Paris, with his friend the flâneur as guide, playing Virgil to the narrator's Dante.

Dickensian realism becomes the literary counterpart to the narrator's wanderings. The life that this genre represents—poverty, filth, lack of shelter—becomes the experience he seeks. The goal of his trip becomes to experience "les cercles inextricables de l'enfer parisien" (321) with the purpose of representing it realistically. But we will see that what the narrator chooses to represent—Paris at night, or "l'enfer parisien" as he calls it—and the way in which he does so betray very personal or subjective influences on his part. His interest in Dickens and realism is not so much a voyeuristic impulse to slum it with the down and out, but a desire, as a writer, to objectively reproduce the truth without any interference from emotion or sentimentality.

The narrator's tone—that he is embarking on an obscure voyage into the dangerous unknown—and choice of subject matter—the celebrated counter-cultural world of night-wanderers—might cause the reader to overlook the resemblance that this mysterious nightworld bears to ordinary daytime life. This novella contains many stereotypes associated with tourism and bohemian life in Paris at the time, particularly the notion that those who dare to leave the confines of their bourgeois existence will have access to metropolitan secrets otherwise not available. A good deal of time is spent itemizing late night dining choices, and enjoying an unusual eau-de-vie that is "inconnu aux grandes tables" (329). Before calling an end to his nocturnal ramblings, the narrator concludes that "[I]es hommes riches manquent trop du courage qui consiste à pénétrer dans de semblables lieux..."(335). This line echoes the popular belief associated with tourism and la vie de bohème in the nineteenth century: that

it takes an adventurous spirit to explore lesser known regions, and that escaping the ordinary is more rewarding.

The narrator envies the English their freedom of movement. He wishes Paris were more like London, where one is free to explore the night world without risking of the loss of one's respectability. He complains that the portiers regulate the comings and goings of the inhabitants of their buildings, making it inconvenient to come home after midnight.

The different motivations behind the narrator's desire that Paris should be "open" all night show the conflicted nature of his reasoning. On one hand, a European capital should provide the potential for constant entertainment and activity. He tells his friend that "[u]ne grande capitale ne devrait jamais dormir...et les étrangers, que de fois je les ai entendus rire en voyant que l'on couche les Parisiens si tôt" (320).

On the other hand is every good bourgeois citizen's concern with his own safety. He goes on to say, "[s]i j'étais préfet de police, au lieu de faire fermer les boutiques, les théâtres, les cafés et les restaurants, à minuit, je payerais une prime à ceux qui resteraient ouverts jusqu'au matin. Car enfin je ne crois pas que la police ait jamais favorisé les voleurs: mais il semble, d'après ces dispositions, qu'elle leur livre la ville sans défense..." (320). The narrator proposes a city that doesn't sleep both for his own pleasure and so criminals don't have the opportunity to catch the city off guard. Of course if he had his wish as préfet de police, there would be no difference between the city at night and in broad daylight.

The instinct of the narrator, as a bourgeois tourist "adventurous" enough to enter into the nightworld, is to gaze upon the repressed and discarded elements of his own world (mental or exterior) before it has the opportunity to shock or haunt, unexpectedly. Likewise, the law is present in this text to keep the marginal in line, before any transgression occurs. The text is laden with *sourcières*, or low-life places the police allow to stay open so they will know where to find the criminals. Despite the controlled experience, the narrator's realist experiment is not invulnerable to the sentimentality that he seems to be using the cloak of realism to escape.

One of the lingering presences in this text is indeed the ghost of Parisian nightlife past, or the way things used to be before they were so rigidly controlled by police. There is a difference between the perceived danger of nocturnal wandering, the reputations of the places the narrator and the flâneur visit, and what actually happens. The flâneur tells the narrator: “si nous ne craignons pas les *tirelaines*, nous pouvons encore jouir des agréments de la soirée,” indicating that there is some danger involved in what he has planned for the night, and that courage is required to take part in his wanderings. They pass by the Café des Aveugles, and the narrator explains the gimmick of the blind orchestra that gave the café its name: “c’est que vers la fondation, qui remonte à l’époque révolutionnaire, il se passait là des choses qui eussent révolté la pudeur d’un orchestre. Aujourd’hui, tout est calme et décent. Et même la galerie sombre du caveau est placée sous l’œil vigilant d’un sergent de ville” (321). As with most of the formerly wild nightspots visited by the narrator and his friend, the visit renders a very tame and dull experience. The constant police presence makes a joke of the flâneur’s suggestion of danger. These nocturnal wanderings offer nothing but a safe experience for the narrator.

The narrator, like the subject in “The Key of the Street” temporarily gives up his bourgeois privileges to share the terrain of the city’s disinherited. However, what we see is that the underworld of the city is as safe for tourism as the commercial daytime world. The controlling measures of bourgeois society have followed its curiosity into the city’s nether regions, to make it safe for a visit.

The narrator’s ambivalence about seeking the unknown is apparent throughout. He wants his friend to show him the last Dantean circle of l’enfer parisien, but he does not want to sacrifice his comfort. When all the tables are full at an after-hours eatery, the narrator wants to leave rather than eat at the counter. Again, at another restaurant, he remarks, “[l]a grande salle est un peu tumultueuse...mais il y a des salles particulières et des cabinets” (333), as though he is describing the restaurant for a tourist guide. The narrator also insists that what he has seen is disturbing enough that “si je n’étais pas sûr d’accomplir une

des missions douloureuses de l'écrivain, je m'arrêteraici" (328). His friend assures him that he has still only reached purgatory, and has yet to see hell. The text shows the narrator torn between wanting to see the depths of hell, and not wanting to sacrifice his comfort. We see his desire for knowledge of the world beyond the familiar, and his fear of it. He is anxious about advancing further into hell, but apparently he couldn't get there anyway by this approach: the underworld as he represents it himself is too controlled to provide anything unfamiliar that may shock.

To take part in the nightlife of mid-nineteenth-century Paris is to seek the fabled nightlife of the previous generations. The promise of the past is contained in the names of the places that continue to host night wanderers, who are tourists this time around. Tourism, of course, seeks a safe and fun ride for everyone, so the marginal must flee their own haunts, or abide by the rules. We see when the narrator visits the quarries of Montmartre that there are fewer and fewer places in which to displace the dispossessed: "Il n'existe plus aujourd'hui que deux carrières habitables du côté de Clignancourt...c'est ainsi que la couleur se perd!—Un voleur sait toujours où coucher: on n'arrêtait en général que d'honnêtes vagabonds...ou des ivrognes..." (316). He laments the loss of local color, while he seems to be in favor of police presence. He always presents the sergents de ville as friendly, fatherly figures, which is probably not how they are seen by those they arrest.

The nightlife he encounters resembles the bourgeois world. His travels produce a version of the same in a different setting. The underworld has become so sanitized that based upon the narrator's representation of it, we do not see any point of access to any less controlled, foreign or unsavory elements of society.

The marginalized of the past thus become harmless anecdotes, while the marginalized of the present are invisible, no longer welcome in the city. The ghost of the past is sought in the presence of the police and other controlling elements of the present. This suggests that the touristic impulse eliminates any difference or otherness, which was the original goal of our narrator's quest. Or was it?

We see the normalization of the underworld as the bourgeois shadow the marginal. The narrator's experiment in realism shows an underworld already anesthetized, to the point that the narrator might have chosen his own bourgeois world to represent, to the same effect. But he didn't: he chose to leave home, perhaps only for the sake of movement, and escape. We begin to suspect that the real danger is not in the seedy underworld, but at home.

The opening paragraph of the text indicates that the foreign or the strange really exists at home, not anywhere that the narrator might travel: "Avec le temps, la passion des grands voyages s'éteint, à moins qu'on n'ait voyagé assez longtemps pour devenir étranger à sa patrie. Le cercle se rétrécit de plus en plus, se rapprochant peu à peu du foyer. —Ne pouvant m'éloigner beaucoup cet automne, j'avais formé le projet d'un simple voyage à Meaux. Il faut dire que j'ai déjà vu Pontoise." The narrator speaks as one who has traveled, and he tells us that home is what has become foreign and strange from this point of view. His remarks also suggest that he has increasingly fewer destinations to which to escape as refuge, and that those that remain keep getting closer to home. His remark that he's already seen Pontoise might be read as an indication to his readers that he is running out of places to escape to before he is left only with the strangeness at home. The fact that he avoids leaving for Meaux, but then cuts short his diversionary excursion into the Parisian underworld, suggests that these places are already too close to home. He is not comfortable staying at home (that is, not moving), or chronicling the Parisian underworld, or going to Meaux.

The narrator's search for realism takes him away from his daily life, and instead he searches for the real in a place that has nothing to do with his own life. The underworld represented in this text is a controlled projection of what the real might be, in a place where the narrator can find the safe comforts of the bourgeois world, without the details of his own, private past that are truly capable of haunting. The experience of a sterilized past that is not even his own makes it impossible for his own real to touch him. In order for haunting to occur, there must be a

conflict that threatens to bring the repressed to the surface, and the narrator places himself in a position where all threat is absent. The only social reality exposed by the narrator's journey into the underworld is that it is safe for the bourgeois subject to travel anywhere.

His interest in realism might be seen as a means of maintaining the objectivity he seeks in his relationship to his own surroundings. To attempt to objectively represent what is not only an exterior world, but somebody else's exterior world, serves his purpose of avoiding the foreign-ness that he has said exists closer to home. Realism allows him to be detached from his subjects, and to re-direct his focus away from the strange, or foreign, at home. As opposed to the threat-less underworld, where perhaps the pursuit of realism was used to keep his own past safely under control, he cannot as easily objectify the events of his dreams, which will preoccupy him during his travels outside of Paris.

The narrator's pose as objective realist is interrupted at several points in the text, before he gives up on it entirely and shifts the focus to his dreams as subject matter. During his night in Paris, he hears exchanges between young men and older women: each encounter has the effect of making him want to leave this nocturnal world he is visiting. The first time, a woman ("la femme-Rubens") tells a young man, "ce n'est pas toi qui est capable de corriger une femme!" and the narrator's reaction is: "Je n'en voulus pas entendre davantage" (328). Later, after hearing another exchange between an old chiffonière and a young philosophe, the narrator says, "[l]a tête commençait à me tourner au milieu de ce public étrange" (335), at which point he finally leaves "l'enfer parisien" and makes it to the train station on time. If this "public étrange" is foreign in the same way that he is to his home (étranger à sa patrie), they must represent something that was once familiar to him, from which he has become estranged.

It is at the moment in the text, of the purest, most absolute realist reproduction, that we get an idea of what the narrator might be fleeing in his home. He reproduces, word for word, a poster from a café in Meaux advertising a freak show, and even



goes so far as to add a footnote that the reader can see the poster for himself: "Tout dans ces récits étant véritables, l'auteur a déposé l'affiche aux bureaux de *L'Illustration*, où elle est visible"(337). The show featured, "une très jolie femme ayant pour chevelure une belle toison de mérinos" (336), as the advertisement says. However, aside from this exact reproduction of the poster, the only means available to the narrator to explain the events of that evening are his dreams. The objective reporting skills he had been nurturing during his night in Paris abandon him completely, and he is left to wonder what actually happened, since he trusts neither the poster nor his dream entirely.

The "femme mérinos" represents the marginal and exotic other in every way: she is foreign, from Venice, though she grows the hair of a Spanish sheep. She is racially other, as the narrator suggests she's part African. She is advertised as being part animal part human. We don't know precisely what about her is threatening, only that she is, due to the change in the text that occurs after she appears. The insertion of the poster describing her marks a rupture in objective, realist representation. Something about this woman allows sentimentality to enter the narrative, and penetrate what has been a subject-effacing realist narrative. The narrator's desire for her surfaces in a dream; she triggers a change from realism to a narration that more closely resembles surrealism. Unlike the tourist-friendly underworld he has just come from, something about the figure of the femme merinos haunts him, whether it's the "mère" of mérinos, or another reminder of his past she may represent. *Les Nuits d'octobre* is frequently referenced as a precursor to *Aurélia*, Nerval's final and most autobiographical text. *Aurélia* focuses almost entirely on dreams, where the narrator's mother and an early abandoned love haunt him. *Aurélia* might be seen as the counterpart, or continuation, of *Les Nuits d'octobre*, in that the haunting presence is primary, in the foreground, not marginalized into a freak show as in *Les Nuits d'octobre*. The guise of realism has been abandoned, and threats that surface in dreams are explored.

On his way to Meaux, the narrator recognizes that he had not really seen hell during his night in Paris: “Je m’appliquais ce vers [Voilà, voilà, celui qui revient de l’enfer] en roulant le matin sur les rails du chemin de Strasbourg, —et je me flattais...car je n’avais pas encore pénétré jusqu’aux plus profondes *souricières*; je n’avais guère, au fond, rencontré que d’honnêtes travailleurs...Là n’est pas encore le dernier abîme” (336). He was trying too hard to follow a model—of Dante, or of Dickens—to encounter hell, but he did not, since it was not his own. He may have had some instinct that the socially repressed is related to repression at home, but what he presented as a brave impulse to encounter this world is in fact only a postponement of any personal encounter.

In contrast, the last line of *Aurélia* is “[t]outefois, je me sens heureux des convictions que j’ai acquises, et je compare cette série d’épreuves que j’ai traversées à ce qui, pour les anciens, représentait l’idée d’une descente aux enfers” (750). His contact with hell was not a literal descent as the ancients represented it, and as he tried to reproduce in *Les Nuits d’octobre*, but an individual and subjective experience directly linked to haunting, or the resurfacing of the personal regret, not the carefully-monitored socially repressed.

Despite all the images of haunting in *Les Nuits*, any real ghosts are conspicuously absent upon close examination. The narrator takes to the underworld, traditionally the home of ghosts, but the result is a deferral of any haunting at the place where threat looms: at home. The images that generally accompany haunting are plentiful in this text: descent into hell, a nocturnal world featuring a different cast of characters from those in the daytime world, and an excursion into the unknown. What is missing is any conflict that might cause haunting. The underworld is in fact not the unknown, but a safe replica of the bourgeois world.



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# La joie de re-vivre:

Spectrality and Haunting in French  
Literary and Cultural Production



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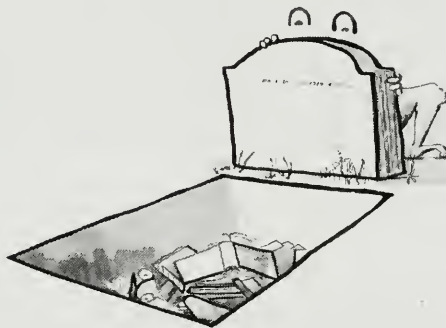
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Cultural Production

Selected Proceedings from  
The UCLA French Department Graduate Students'  
Sixth Annual Interdisciplinary Conference  
April 27–28, 2001

*Ce serait le moment de philosopher et de  
rechercher si, par hasard, se trouvait ici  
l'endroit où de telles paroles dégèlent.*

Rabelais,  
*Le Quart Livre*

***Paroles Gelées***  
Special Issue  
UCLA French Studies  
Volume 19.2 2001



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*Paroles Gelées* was established in 1983 by its founding editor, Kathryn Bailey. The journal is managed and edited by the French Graduate Students' Association and published annually under the auspices of the Department of French and Francophone Studies at UCLA.

Information regarding the submission of articles and subscriptions is available from the journal office:

*Paroles Gelées*  
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212 Royce Hall, Box 951550  
Los Angeles, CA 90095-1550  
(310) 825-1145  
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Subscription price (per issue):

\$12 for individuals  
\$14 for institutions  
\$16 for international orders

Back issues available. For a listing, see our home page at  
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Cover illustration by Christine Thuau

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ISSN 1094-7294

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