



British Writers and Paris: 1830-1875

Elisabeth Jay

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"A wicked and detestable place, though wonderfully attractive." Charles Dickens's conflicted feelings about Paris typify the fascination and repulsion with which a host of mid-nineteenth-century British writers viewed their nearest foreign capital. Various perceived as the showcase for sophisticated, cosmopolitan talent, the home of revolution, a stronghold of Roman Catholicism, and a shrine to irreligious hedonism, Paris was also a city where writers were respected and journalism flourished. This historically-grounded account of the ways in which Paris touched the careers and work of both major and minor Victorian writers considers their actual experiences of an urban environment, distinctively different from anything Britain offered, as well as the extent to which this became absorbed and expressed within the Victorian imaginary.

Casting a wide literary net, the first part of this book explores these writers' reaction to the swiftly changing politics and topography of Paris, before considering the nature of their social interactions with the Parisians, through networks provided by institutions such as the British Embassy and the salons. The second part of the book examines the significance of Paris for mid-nineteenth-century Anglophone journalists, paying particular attention to the ways in which the young Thackeray's exposure to Parisian print culture shaped him as both writer and artist. The final part focuses on fictional representations of Paris, revealing the frequency with which they relied upon previous literary sources, and how the surprisingly narrow palette of subgenres, structures, and characters they employed contributed to the characteristic, and sometimes contradictory, prejudices of a swiftly-growing British readership.

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