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The dramatic story of Léon and Camille: literary geography essay set in the boulevards of Brussels

La dramatique histoire de Léon et Camille : essai de géographie littéraire le long des boulevards bruxellois

Het dramatische verhaal van Léon en Camille: een essay over de literaire geografie langs de Brusselse boulevards

Tatiana Debroux, Laurence Brogniez, Jean-Michel Decroly and Christophe Loir



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The dramatic story of Léon and Camille. Literary geography essay set in the boulevards of Brussels

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The spatial analysis of a literary text published in the mid 19th century allows a rediscovery of the panoramic literature genre and the wealth of information it provides about the urban context in which it was born. Through a literary geography essay based on the singular narrative of a condemned love, we wish to show the relevance of interdisciplinary thought on space and artistic productions, which are best understood when explored from different perspectives. The narrative studied here is built around the boulevards of Brussels and their social use: the analysis of places, temporality, characters' journeys and their cartographic translation reveals the socio-spatial structuring of the city as a whole. It also provides precious information concerning the use of space and its representations, which traditional historical sources are unable to do.

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Introduction

1. One lovely spring day in the mid 19th century, a student was walking in the boulevards surrounding Brussels when he met a young girl. His name was Léon, and he was from a good family. Her name was Camille, and she was a milliner.
2. When it was time to say goodbye, Léon and Camille decided to meet again at the same place, in front of the Jardin Botanique. From there, the boulevard was a place for them to walk and share their first secrets.
3. With the passing time and growing intimacy between them, Léon and Camille met in another part of the boulevards, between Porte de Namur and Porte de Hal. This less urbanised portion was hidden from the eyes of people who were out for a walk and offered a view of the countryside in Saint-Gilles. The couple enjoyed the bucolic setting, far from the busy city centre and favourable to the first impulses of the heart.
4. The days went by and the future suddenly filled with gloom for the young girl. As she was delivering a hat to Léon's home in the middle-class area of Saint-Josse, she overheard a conversation and learned that the young man did not love her: she was just a springtime love for him, to be replaced in the next season. On hearing these words, Camille was livid. She revealed her presence and then ran away.
5. The story was over for Léon. Finally free, he continued his indolent life, riding on horseback wearing elegant outfits, in the posh boulevards near Parc Royal.
6. After a word from Léon's mother, Camille's boss dismissed her. Broken, the young girl continued to wait for her love, following the same routes they had taken together. But he did not appear and her hopes began to dwindle as she lapsed into madness. Filled with sorrow and jobless, Camille wandered through the industrial area of the boulevards between Porte de Hal and Porte d'Anderlecht, near the small room she

rented. One evening, she saw a coffin and thought it was hers. She took fright and ran along the canal, gasping for breath. When she arrived at Allée Verte, a rider whom she thought was Léon brushed against her: frightened, she ran away once again and drowned in the canal.

7. The next day, as he was riding near Pont de Laeken, Léon saw a crowd. He crossed the bridge and joined the onlookers, and saw the lifeless body of the woman who had just been taken out of the water.

« Il venait de reconnaître dans la noyée une bouche qui lui avait souri, deux yeux dont le regard l'avaient caressé, deux joues qui n'avaient pas toujours été si pâles et qu'avec un mot d'amour il avait fait plus d'une fois rougir. Il devint aussi blême que ces joues de la morte et poussa un cri : Camille ! » [Hymans & Rousseau, 1853, p. 112]¹.

1. A panoramic narrative intended to describe the boulevards

8. Set in a broader narrative – that of *Le Diable à Bruxelles* [Aron, 2001], the story of Léon and Camille was published in 1853 by two young authors from Brussels, Louis Hymans and Jean-Baptiste Rousseau. It constituted the third chapter of the third volume of the work.
9. *Le Diable à Bruxelles* is not a typical novel: as a hybrid literary work between fictional and documentary narrative, it belongs to the genre referred to as panoramic literature, which was very popular in the mid 19th century – a precursor to realism, with the aim to reveal the hidden aspects of the city [Brogniez *et al.*, 2015]. Together with urban physiologies [Stiénon, 2012] and *Les Mystères* [Aron *et al.*, 2016], the genre of *Diables* was very successful in European cities which had been radically transformed by industrial development in the 19th century. The city, its prestigious buildings, modern means of transportation and the increase in social problems and multi-coloured populations, contributed to the definition of a literary genre in which urban reality was the main character.

¹ 'On seeing the drowned woman, he recognised the mouth which had once smiled at him, the eyes whose gaze had caressed him, and the cheeks which had not always been so pale, having blushed more than once with his loving words. He became as pallid as the dead woman's cheeks and cried out, "Camille!"'.

10. Dedicated to places (cafés, theatres), particular spaces and buildings (Parc, 'Cité', 'West End', Sénat, Palais de Justice, Conservatoire) and socioprofessional groups (students, artists, high society), the different chapters of *Le Diable à Bruxelles* each have a special form, ranging from food reviews to social analysis and romance, and present the different facets of the rapidly changing city. The narrative is in the first person: the Devil – a character who interferes everywhere – tells the story. In the four volumes of the work, he tells of his travels, the things he has been told about places he does not go to, and what he finds behind the doors he opens.

11. The story of Camille and Léon is fully in line with Hymans and Rousseau's project with its scenery and its kinetics. However, it stands out from most of the other chapters due to the presence of a plot, in which sentimental education is followed by disillusionment. Other parts of the book are written like short plays (in particular the part dedicated to Parc Royal); the plot, however, plays a different and more limited role, in that it reveals the use of particular places. The particularity of the chapter on the boulevards containing the story of the lovers lies in a dynamic description of the space, based on a complete scenario and characters who act as revelations. Through the narrative of the wanderings of Camille and Léon on the boulevards, the authors present Brussels as a whole, by describing the social and spatial structures of the city. In this sense, their text echoes the advice given in the 19th century travel guides: 'There could be no better way to spend a few hours of free time than by walking around the city along the boulevards' [Baedeker, 1885, p.44].

2. The story step by step: mapping the narrative to reveal its structure and that of Brussels

12. Through the love story, the narrative reveals the socio-spatial contrasts associated with the different sections of the boulevards and the

parts of the city which they surround. Without the two characters, the description would in all likelihood have been modelled on what was mentioned in the travel guides about the boulevards of Brussels and the opposition between the high and low areas of the city; thanks to the couple and their adventures, the reader truly enters two different worlds which meet each other, avoid each other and come together again in a tragic ending.

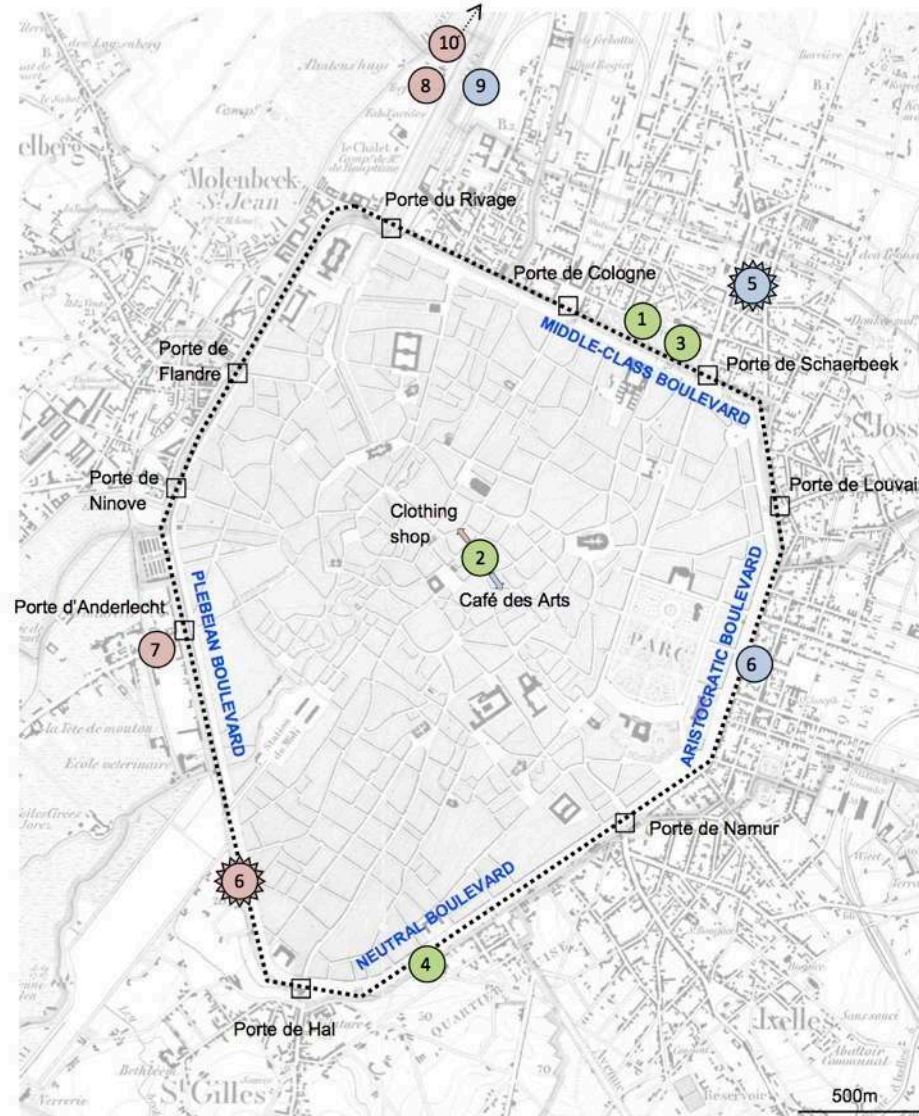
13. What may be perceived after a simple reading becomes clear when the different moments of the story are shown on a map; a close spatial analysis of the text combined with a mapping exercise reveals the fundamental importance of space in the narrative. By indicating the places and spaces described in the story of Léon and Camille, their order of appearance and the characters who go there, and then by transferring them to a map from the time of the story,² the minutely detailed spatial and temporal construction of the narrative is revealed – a Map of Tendre of Brussels and evidence of the sociospatial structure of the city (figure 1).

3. From Botanique to Allée Verte: variations on a spatial opposition

14. By telling the dramatic tale of characters from opposite social conditions, the authors reveal the fundamental split in the city of Brussels in the 19th century (lower/upper city, poor/wealthy city), but they describe it in places where encounters are permitted.

15. Although Léon and Camille lived in very different neighbourhoods, they met for the first time one afternoon in Boulevard du Jardin Botanique, which was a middle-class area where the social classes intermingled. This space therefore represented an opportunity for Léon to approach the young girl and for them to meet.

² In this case, we have used the *Carte topographique et hypsométrique de Bruxelles et ses environs*, made by Joseph Huvenne and published in Brussels by Philippe Vandermaelen (1858).



Unfolding of the plot

● Couple ● Léon ● Camille ☀ Residence

- 1 Léon and Camille's encounter on a bench.
- 2 Camille and Léon separate. She enters Petite rue des Bouchers and he goes to Café des Arts.
- 3 1st meeting, a stroll.
- 4 2nd and subsequent meetings. First kiss, Camille's waiting place.
- 5 Hat episode. Camille hears that he does not love her.
- 6 Léon wanders carefree in the beautiful boulevards. Camille languishes alone in her room, desperately hoping to see Léon again.
- 7 Coffin episode: Camille sees a coffin and thinks that it is his. Shattered, she runs along the canal to Allée Verte.
- 8 Surprised by a rider whom she thinks is Léon, Camille jumps into the water.
- 9 Léon sees a crowd while he is riding in Allée Verte. He discovers the lifeless body of Camille on the other bank.
- 10 Camille's funeral (Cimetière Laeken).

Figure 1. The moments of the story on a map. Source: T. Debroux's mapping of the narrative using the *Carte topographique et hypsométrique de Bruxelles et ses environs*, made by Joseph Huvenne and published in *Brussels* by Philippe Vandermaelen (1858).

« Si vous descendez de la porte de Louvain jusqu'à la porte de Cologne³, vous trouvez le monde bourgeois. Quelquefois il a des voitures attelées [...] ; plus communément il marche à pied. C'est vers six heures du soir, lorsque les cavaliers aristocratiques ont disparu du boulevard du Régent, que les cavaliers bourgeois apparaissent sur le boulevard du Jardin Botanique. [...] les cavaliers eux-mêmes sont parfois des pastiches passables des originaux qu'ils copient. [...] dans cette apparente confusion des rangs et des naissances, on peut démêler les intrus ; leur attitude annonce leur position sociale » [Hymans & Rousseau, 1853, pp. 95-97]⁴.

16. The two young people leave the bench where they met each other and go down to the city centre together, where they go their separate ways: one goes to a place of pleasure (a café), and the other to a place of work (a clothing shop).

17. The later encounters took place in Boulevard de Waterloo, which was still barely urbanised around 1850: the boulevard was described as being neutral, « le plus solitaire, le plus tranquille ». « Vers sept à huit heures du soir, le boulevard est surtout hanté par les familles [...] de l'émigration anglaise [...]. Mais lorsque neuf heures sonnent, l'Angleterre rangée se retire de cette avenue, où lui succèdent quelques ouvriers belges accompagnés de leurs maîtresses » [Hymans & Rousseau, 1853, p. 81]⁵.

18. Outside his circles, Léon was able to walk arm in arm with Camille and kiss her as he pleased, without the fear of being stigmatised by his

peers. For the young girl, the rural character of this boulevard made it an idyllic setting for her first love.

19. The abrupt end to the love story was marked by a clear spatial break. From the moment when Camille fled from Saint-Josse, the two characters moved in radically different spaces. Similarly, the rhythm of their movements was no longer the same: Léon strolls around on horseback, while Camille takes off towards her tragic destiny, precipitating the end of the narrative.

20. The jobless Camille had stopped waiting for her lover and was thus confined to the poor area of the city, where she walked for hours; Léon « ne mettait jamais les pieds de sa monture sur le boulevard qui s'allonge de l'Allée Verte à la porte de Hal, boulevard plébéien entièrement abandonné au petit peuple et aux militaires sans galons » [Hymans & Rousseau, 1853, pp. 97-98]⁶.

21. He rediscovered the pleasures of horseback riding and light-hearted gallantries:

« On sait que le boulevard où se promène presque exclusivement le monde élégant est celui qui s'étend depuis la porte de Namur jusqu'à la porte de Louvain. C'est là que rivalisent d'orgueil et de beauté les plus frais équipages et les meilleurs chevaux, les jeunes gens les plus riches, les femmes les mieux nées » [Hymans & Rousseau, 1853, p. 95]⁷.

³ Today, this would be the area around Place Madou to Place Rogier.

⁴ 'If one goes from Porte de Louvain down to Porte de Cologne, one may see people from middle-class society. Sometimes they use horse-drawn carriages [...]; more commonly they ride on horseback. Around six o'clock in the evening, when the aristocratic riders have left Boulevard du Régent, the middle-class riders appear on Boulevard du Jardin Botanique. [...] The riders themselves are sometimes acceptable pastiches of those whom they copy. [...] In this apparent confusion of ranks and births, one may pick out the intruders; their attitude reveals their social status'.

⁵ 'the most solitary, the quietest'. 'Around seven or eight o'clock in the evening, the boulevard is above all frequented by English families [...]. But at nine o'clock, the orderly English families leave the avenue and are replaced by Belgian workers and their mistresses'.

⁶ 'never rode his horse in the boulevard between Allée Verte and Porte de Hal, which was a plebian boulevard completely given up to the common people and low-ranking soldiers'.

⁷ 'The boulevard where elegant society may be seen almost all of the time is the one between Porte de Namur and Porte de Louvain. This is where the freshest crews, the best horses, the wealthiest young people, and the best bred women vie with each other to be proudest and most beautiful'.

22. This social opposition between the characters, their conditions and their spaces, cristallised at the end of the narrative along the canal and Allée Verte. The right bank of the canal to the north of the boulevards, where trees had been planted and the first Belgian railway had been built, was very popular among high society at the time.

« [Léon] suivait les voitures aristocratiques, qui longeaient le côté de l'eau ; l'autre côté appartient à la plèbe ; ainsi que les boulevards, l'Allée Verte est divisée en zones sociales bien tranchées » [Hymans & Rousseau, 1853, p. 107]⁸.

23. Camille fell into the water on the other bank. In order to find out why a crowd had gathered, Léon had to cross a bridge over the canal. Symbolically, he nearly fell off his horse and had to dismount when he recognised the young girl. In a few final lines, the authors bring together the threads in the plot in a precise location and illustrate once again what separates the characters, socially and spatially.

24. The readers follow the story through the boulevards and reach Allée Verte where the narrative ends.

Conclusion: the narrative, the map and the territory

25. Recent developments in literary geography – which arose from the spatial turn of the social sciences and the arts, and geographers' interest in literary texts as sources and objects of research – have shown the diversity of questions raised by the spatial analysis of fictional narratives [Moretti, 2000; Madoeuf *et al.*, 2012]. With respect to the structuring of plots (literary analysis) as well as that of the territories described and their mapping (socio-spatial analysis), the analysis of texts and their comparison with each other and with other sources is more than a purely formal exercise. Thus, the literary analysis is enriched by a new dimension, namely that of spatiality, whereas through its characters, the narrative provides interesting keys to understanding the spatial structuring and the social use of the depicted space. Finally, through the filter of the era and the subjectivity of the writers, a geography of the represen-

tations of cities emerges from the mapping of urban narratives [Debroux, 2015].

26. The short narrative chosen for this essay lends itself ideally to demonstration: written in a particular urbanistic and cultural context (growth of Brussels and marked socio-spatial dualisation, first social surveys, walks in the city, development of panoramic literature), the story of Léon and Camille teaches the contemporary reader about the social configuration of the city and the use of the boulevards in the mid 19th century, which more traditional archival documents are often unable to do (as regards the temporality of walks in the boulevards or the types of people who used them – e.g. English families).

27. Cartography allows a summary of these different elements; in this case it even allows us to understand the architecture of the narrative and its progress in the form of a loop along the boulevards, also proving to be a powerful tool for literary analysis and interdisciplinary dialogue.

28. While the reproduction of this type of exercise for current narratives raises the question of necessary historical hindsight or of its relevance with respect to a comprehensible immediate reality, works of fiction allow us to come closer to the representations associated with the spaces we live in. They constitute another way to understand urban contemporary phenomena and to capture perceptible dimensions which may be missed in urban analysis.

29. Beyond texts and maps, many artistic media may lend themselves to the exercise (films, contemporary art, dance, etc. – Chilaud *et al.*, 2013; Cosgrove, 2006; McCormack, 2008) through new media and spatial analysis practices (GIS, geolocalisation, animated cartography – Caquard, 2013; Hawkins, 2013). Situated at the crossroads of artistic and scientific disciplines, these encounters enrich the analysis of works and provide additional knowledge in order to study the territory of the city.

⁸ '[Léon] followed the aristocratic carriages which went along the water; the other side belonged to the plebs; like the boulevards, Allée Verte is divided into well-defined social areas'.

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