

## **Adventures in Reading (Nodier, Hugo and Balzac): Language, Landscapes and Escapades**

Chair: Catherine Witt, Reed College

This panel explores the works and creative processes of three major figures of early French romanticism known to have deeply influenced each other: Charles Nodier, Victor Hugo and Honoré de Balzac. Common to all three papers presented is a paradoxical conception of adventure (literally, what is to come) premised on a retrospective and reconstructive apprehension of history, language, and literary tradition.

The first paper, “Nodier’s Picturesque Linguistics,” attempts a synthesis of Charles Nodier’s philological works that closely attends to the author’s double preoccupation with the notion of a linguistic picturesque and the revalorization of popular and literary vernacular. The second paper, “Rien de plus original que tous ces édifices...” : Victor Hugo’s *France et Belgique*,” looks at the letters and albums that Hugo wrote during his travels through Belgium and France (1834-1838) alongside illustrations from Taylor and Nodier’s *Voyages Pittoresques*, examining them as documents of the imaginative processes (a dialectic of ruin and reconstruction) at work in *Le Rhin*. The final paper, “The Strange and Surprising Adventures of Reading Balzac,” discusses how Balzac’s novel *Louis Lambert* participates in a nineteenth-century tradition of re-reading the Robinson Crusoe legend, while, at the same time, it subsumes the motifs and moral values traditionally associated with eighteenth-century travel adventure under a new set of esthetic and philosophical concerns.

Taken together, these papers offer a rich and original overview of a crucial modus operandi distinctive to the romantic imagination: reading conceived not as source of study and imitation, but as a solitary and unpredictable travel through time, space, language, and literary tradition.

Catherine Witt  
Reed College

### Nodier’s Picturesque Linguistics

From the first edition of the *Dictionnaire des onomatopées* (1808) to *Notions élémentaires de linguistique* (1834), Nodier’s philological writings return to a similar proposition: to investigate and analyze the mimetic principles (onomatopoeia and mimologism) that motivate the generative processes of language. In his day Nodier’s detractors dismissed his work as that of a dilettante, pronouncing it an afterthought of the Enlightenment’s quest for the origin of language. For Sainte-Beuve, on the other hand, Nodier was simply inclined to listen to language in a more oracular fashion than the common lexicographer: “il n’avait pas seulement la science de la philologie, il en avait la muse.” Nowadays, with the exception of a seminal chapter in Genette’s *Mimologies: Voyages en Cratylie* (1976), Nodier’s contribution to the burgeoning field of philology in the nineteenth century has largely fallen in disregard. My paper aims to restore the significance of Nodier’s philological activity by revealing how its principles resonate with some of the crucial epistemological paradigms of early romanticism. With this in view, I examine three of its most salient biases: first, the rejection of erudition (linguistic jargon) in favor of a *naïve* apprehension of natural language; second, the formulation of a linguistic theory, which, while privileging spoken over written language, paradoxically rests on the notion of the picturesque; and third, the revalorization of both literary and popular vernacular, as evidenced by

## **Adventures in Reading (Nodier, Hugo and Balzac): Language, Landscapes and Escapades**

his defense of *patois* and his efforts to instate pre-classical writers like Clément Marot, Jacques Amyot, Henri Estienne and Rabelais in the French literary canon. With its focus on provincialism and its idealized representation of medieval and renaissance cultural legacies, Nodier's praise of the vernacular ("l'édification du plus vulgaire des monuments [de l'intelligence]") also holds a place in the inventory of great French monuments, which he, in collaboration with the Baron Taylor and Alphonse Cailleux, put forward in *Voyages pittoresques et romantiques dans l'ancienne France* (1820-1878).

Joanna Augustyn  
Haverford College

"Rien de plus original que tous ces édifices..." :  
Victor Hugo's *France et Belgique*

Victor Hugo's letters in *France et Belgique* are often considered a "rough draft" for the epic architectural reveries of *Le Rhin*. Taken together, the two works pose the problem of origin and interiority: besides the omnipresent Rubens, what types of images went into the construction of Hugo's celebrated imaginary museum? Did illustrations play a significant role in the drafting of the early travelogue? Between 1834 and 1838 Victor Hugo traveled throughout France and Belgium, inspired in great part by his friendship with Charles Nodier. The *Voyages pittoresques et romantiques dans l'ancienne France* of Charles Nodier, the Baron Taylor, and Alphonse de Cailleux, as well as specialized treatises dedicated to the architecture of Normandy and England nourished Hugo's growing enthusiasm for gothic architecture. Unlike the more mature *Le Rhin*, whose fictionalized letters were craftily strung in a bid for the peerage, the letters and travel albums from Belgium and France offer a unique image of the hugolian drafting process. With a look at images by Godefroy Engelmann and Taylor, among others, we will attempt to argue that the traveler represents the reader, in that his observations spring from the process of reading such carefully-illustrated documents as the *Voyages pittoresques*. As imaginary reconstructions of ancient and sometimes badly-restored monuments, the lithographs in these works reversed the ruin process. Later, Hugo's early research would lend itself to what Chantal Brière (*Hugo et le roman architectural*) has shown to be a process of architectural reconstruction in the novels. Yet already in the 1830's, the reconstructive imagination is at play, notably in the description of Belgium's medieval Flemish past. The travelogues transcribe, we will argue, Hugo's immediate reaction to the visual representation of architecture and point to the interdisciplinary origins of his poetics.

Joseph Acquisto  
University of Vermont

### The Strange and Surprising Adventures of Reading Balzac

The Robinson Crusoe legend has a long history in France. In its broadest outlines, this history chiefly involves a series of popular rewritings of the tale for children in the nineteenth century, often with a strong moral bent. In the twentieth century, by contrast, the legend emerges

**Adventures in Reading (Nodier, Hugo and Balzac):  
Language, Landscapes and Escapades**

as the basis for serious novels inviting reflection on a wide range of philosophic and esthetic questions. How can we account for this transition from popular to serious literary adaptations of the Crusoe myth? My paper examines the role Honoré de Balzac plays in this story. I argue that Balzac serves as an early figure of transition in the story of the Crusoe myth, and that his novel *Louis Lambert* participates in a Crusoe-esque tradition of the novel of solitary adventure. In *Louis Lambert*, Balzac makes subtle use of the Crusoe story, naming it explicitly only twice. Nevertheless, Balzac borrows and adapts certain structural patterns at work in Defoe's novel, eschewing the literal travel adventure in favor of a focus on philosophy. At the very moment when popular reworkings of *Robinson Crusoe* for children were at their height, Balzac paves the way for later novelists who will go on to de-emphasize the moralistic aspect of the story and inscribe the tale into a different set of esthetic and philosophical concerns. What can be gleaned by creative reworking of the text in ways that radically depart from the "prodigal son" narrative? How does *Robinson Crusoe* haunt *Louis Lambert's* deep structure? How do both stories come to replace actual adventure with reading *as* adventure? Balzac and those who follow him foreground a philosophical escapade, solitary by nature, thus redrawing the map of self and world, moving away from the protagonist as moral agent, and redefining the exotic along the way.