

## Regionalism and Exoticism in 19th-century French literature

Chair: James Smith Allen, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale

Like the historical novel, literary regionalism and exoticism are conservational (not conservative), insofar as they seek to preserve nostalgic memories in the present (as we preserve memories of wild nature in the zoo), without-like the French Restoration-imposing those memories on the socio-political structures of the present. However, as opposed to the historical novel, in the form introduced to France by the example of Sir Walter Scott, who primarily expresses nostalgia for cultures that vanished in the past, and that can survive only in texts, regionalism and exoticism seek to foster the survival of earlier cultures in the present, “here” in France (regionalism) or “elsewhere” outside France.

Each of these two tendencies encounters conceptual aporias both in theory and in practice. Exoticism is often condemned, typically by the Left, as representing, at best, an exploitive “consumption” of the Other, who rarely is allowed to speak, and at worst, as a preliminary “mapping” of the Others’ territory, in preparation for a colonizing invasion. Regionalism, seen as the persistence of cultural enclaves, is typically opposed by the Right, as constituting a willful, ignorant obstacle to national unity and progress (compare the relatively enlightened Emperor Hadrian’s launching of the Jewish war and the Destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D. because the Jews stubbornly refused to assimilate; under the current American imperium, entire nations and groups of nations are reduced, conceptually, to the status of regions resisting the ideal of global democracy), although the Left often defends regionalism as a treasured preserve of diversity. The less a region is politically organized and active, the more likely it is to escape Rightist oppression, and to be used instead, but the Right, as an exemplar of lost but potentially recuperable virtues.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century in France, the leveling effects of globalization already make themselves felt, and literature reflects this trend on both the national (“Le Tour de la France par deux enfants”) and international (“Autour du monde en vingt-quatre jours”) level. Regionalist and exotic nostalgias persist to this day, but they increasingly tend to expose the underlying uniformity of injustice and destruction inflicted on the “natives” by the “first world” (Butor’s “Mobile,” for example, detects virulent racism throughout the varied, picturesque regional quilt of American life).

Laurence M. Porter  
Michigan State University

### Exotic Consciousness and Consciousness of the Exotic in Chateaubriand

Identity politics plays an indispensable but incomplete role in analyzing literary encounters with foreign cultures. To acknowledge our social responsibility, we insist on the calculated, exploitive plans of the military or commercial colonizer; but in order to function well as narrative transactions, both fictions and autobiographies dealing with the exotic also require some naïveté in the protagonists. The foreign lands that stories display must be unfamiliar to preserve reportability; and they must remain mysterious to create suspense. Framing our argument with a meta-critique of Derrida’s critique of Lévi-Strauss, we explore how Chateaubriand’s North American narratives provide an ideal range of illustrations of complex virtual encounters with the cultural Other. Atala shows fictional Native Americans from their viewpoint, in a setting unfamiliar to Europeans. René too is set in North America, where the fictional European protagonist encounters the Indian chief Chactas and the French Priest Souël.

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And sections of the *Mémoires d'Outre-Tombe* relate the historical Chateaubriand's supposed adventures in the New World, concluding with a conversion experience: he must abandon his Lost Eden to help recuperate his own French society. In these narratives, which fictional devices enable the encounter of the Self and the Other? How do the characters and narrator interpret the Other and his or her culture—accurately or erroneously, adaptively or maladaptively? For comparative cultural studies, the conclusion resembles Heisenberg's uncertainty principle. We can observe only because what we can see has always already been contaminated; even were that not so, "primitives" prove to be conscious agents who can plan and lie. They organize their world as we do ours, around the principle of territoriality. Our emphasis on naïve viewpoints does not exculpate industrialized societies; instead, it reveals a permanent ground of presumed superiority that underlies our intermittent adventures in consumption and exploitation abroad. (296 words)

James Smith Allen  
Southern Illinois University Carbondale

### The Regional Exotic in Emile Guillaumin's *La Vie d'un simple* (1904)

When Emile Guillaumin published his first, fully developed, and most successful novel in 1904, largely in response to Eugène Le Roy's *Jacquou le Croquant* (1897), which Guillaumin considered a betrayal of the true peasant-writer's experience and craft, he very nearly won the Prix Goncourt, missing the prize by just two votes. His (very nearly) unvarnished account of rural life and its rigors proved exotic enough for the jury, including its champion Octave Mirbeau, to overlook the work's literary infelicities. In subsequent editions in 1922 and again in 1943, the author embellished the book's figurative language without losing the profound otherness evident in the peasant's first-person narrative. None of Guillaumin's other works developed such a curious appeal to a non-rural audience so far removed from the brutal conditions in the French countryside.

This paper explores Guillaumin's autobiographical account of peasant life for what its original audience might have seen as exotic in the author's recourse to regional language and anti-pastoral descriptions that he subsequently revised to fulfill more familiar literary conventions. My analysis also considers the way Guillaumin reverses the gaze on the novel's protagonists who deliberately mystify their life to outsiders, like the ethnologists and the Parisian relatives, visiting Old Tiennon's farm. The voyeuristic reader from the city is subjected to similar treatment in the narrative that upends stereotypical expectations of peasant motivation and behavior evident in Guillaumin's revisions and in his other more fully varnished productions, such as *Tableaux champêtres* (1901) and *Près du soi* (1905). By revealing the entirely rational and common-sense features of rural laborers, however inscrutable to outside observers, Guillaumin redefines the exotic as just another variation on the modernization of France for much of the nineteenth century. Guillaumin makes possible yet another "discovery of France," as recently framed by Graham Robb's geographical history, to correct the relative simplicities of Eugen Weber's *Peasants into Frenchmen* (1976).

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Kathryn Grossman  
Pennsylvania State University

Paris, Bretagne, la Grande-Bretagne: Hugolian Exotica in *Quatrevingt-Treize*

Inspired by both Chateaubriand and Walter Scott, Hugo transports his reader to other times and other places from the very outset of his career. He follows Chateaubriand to the French colonies, in this case the Greater Antilles in 1793, in his first novel, *Bug-Jargal* (1820 and 1826), then produces several historical novels in the mode of Scott: *Han d'Islande* (1823), set in seventeenth-century Norway, and *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831), which takes place in late-medieval Paris. Though most of *Les Misérables* (1862) centers on nineteenth-century Paris, critics have demonstrated its extensive eighteenth-century prehistory; moreover, Hugo stages a number of crucial scenes in the text in the provincial towns of Digne and Montreuil-sur-mer. The last three novels likewise envision some form of *ailleurs*, given the exotic background of the Channel Islands for *Les Travailleurs de la mer* (1866), of Restoration England for *L'Homme qui rit* (1869), and of eighteenth-century Brittany for the opening and closing books of *Quatrevingt-Treize* (1874).

While the historical dimensions of these narratives have been amply discussed by such critics as Claudie Bernard, Sandy Petrey, and Miriam Roman, little scholarly attention has been devoted to the role in Hugo of the French provinces and fringes *per se*. Viewed most broadly, the margins of France stretch in his work as far as Saint-Domingue, but my current interest is in the locales that lie between the center — that is, Paris — and the *other* Other, Great Britain. In this paper I argue that, as with the lengthy preface to *Les Travailleurs de la mer* on the Channel Islands, the discourse in *Quatrevingt-Treize* pertaining to Brittany points in multiple directions. Viewed microscopically, the region presents a formidable natural, cultural, and political barrier to outside forces. Viewed telescopically, however, it links warring forces in a joint venture that transcends immediate events. In this way, the tension between the urban hub and the exotic periphery in Hugo's last novel not only replays that between England and France. It also gestures beyond the real, the historical, and the natural toward the timeless and the ideal.