

Exotic Bodies

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The Universal Exotic in *Paul et Virginie*

In this paper, I examine Bernadin de Saint-Pierre's novel *Paul et Virginie* (1788) to investigate and destabilize contemporary perspectives on exoticism. Tzvetan Todorov, in *Nous et les autres* (1989), defines exoticism as a form of relativism: whereas nationalism affirms the superiority of the nation's ("our") values, exoticism idealizes in the "other" the traits the nation lacks. Todorov remarks: "Mais la manière dont on se trouve amené, dans l'abstrait, à définir l'exotisme, indique qu'il s'agit ici moins d'une valorisation de l'autre que d'une critique de soi, et moins de la description que de la formulation d'un idéal"(355). The "other" is the idealized "self" in exotic clothing. Yet if Todorov links exoticism to the idealized self, proponents of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) point to how exoticism colludes with many discourses to represent the "other" as the particular – as perhaps beautiful, but inferior, backwards, even savage.

Bernadin's novel is unusual, in that he locates both the particular and the universal in the exotic. I argue that in *Paul et Virginie*, Bernadin de Saint-Pierre presents the exotic world of Ile de France (present-day Mauritius) as both a critique of France, and a robust alternative to French society; as both "other" – full of strange flora and fauna – and universal. I focus on the utopia of the two mothers and their children, to examine how Bernadin uses exotic characters as porte-paroles of the universal values of love, nature, humanity, and family. As we shall see, Bernadin's text questions both the idealized exoticism of Todorov, and the particularized orientalism of Said.

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Napoleon's Breasts

"Vous le voyez, docteur; beau bras, seins arrondis, peau blanche, douce, pas un poil, excepté pourtant.... Plus d'une belle dame ferait trophée de cette poitrine ; qu'en pensez-vous?" Much has been made of Napoleon's casual remarks about his effeminate post-exile body: indeed, entire books (*Napoleon, Bisexual Emperor* and *Napoleon's Glands*, to name only two) have been written on Napoleon's supposed feminization following his exile to Sainte-Hélène. Was Napoleon a breast man? According to Romi, author of *La Mythologie du sein*, Napoleon prized women for their elegant hands and feet but cared little about their breasts. In her *Journal anecdotique*, Madame Campan recalls the time when Napoleon interrupted Madame de Staël during a heated political argument to ask whether she had nursed her children. On another occasion, when Staël asked him to name the woman in history whom he most admired, he famously replied: "Celle qui a fait le plus d'enfants." In the emperor's world view, the breast seems to symbolize not sexual attraction, but rather maternal function, the quintessential female role in society abundantly illustrated in revolutionary iconography.

There is little doubt that Napoleon cared very much about controlling women's bodies and that he used various political and social means to accomplish that end. What does this mean in light of the rumors of his own feminization late in life? In *Mémoires de Sainte-Hélène*, Las Cases

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describes Napoleon as "fort gras, peu velu, [il] a la peau blanche et présente un certain embonpoint qui n'est pas de notre sexe, ce qu'il observe parfois gaiement." In this paper, we will explore Napoleon's gender-bending body and its influence on the construction of gender in nineteenth-century France.

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Foreign Bodies—Conflicting Discourse on Pregnancy during the First Empire

“‘Faites-nous des mères de famille,’ disait Napoléon à Mme Campan.”¹ The Emperor believed that women were responsible for and capable of increasing France’s population and initiated measures that would result in more healthy births among Frenchwomen. He professionalized midwifery, opened schools to train midwives, and created the infrastructure needed to provide better care for parturient women. His second marriage to Marie-Louise, based mainly on her status as a “walking womb,” was proof of his view of women as primarily baby machines. While the majority of physicians treated pregnancy as an illness and believed that pregnant women were more susceptible to disease, Napoleon took the view that for women who were as hardy as his mother, childbirth was a natural process, one that required little intervention. Napoleon’s promotion of midwifery angered the medical establishment, simultaneously setting off debate on the status of the female reproductive body. Medical narratives published at this time underscored the dangers of childbirth and the need for intervention by licensed physicians. Prominent midwives, on the other hand, asserted that their apprentice system of training and hands-on experience made them qualified to deliver all women. Thus pregnancy took on new importance as scientific discourse clashed with the practical knowledge of midwives. The ways in which these two perspectives intersect and their combined impact on knowledge about the reproductive body will be the focus of this paper.

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Sign / Language: The Exotic Body in Nerval

Critics rightly stress the importance of the symbolism of the veil in Gérard de Nerval’s *Voyage en Orient* (1851). The veil, with its inherent dialectic of presence and absence, of visible and invisible, serves as metaphor and emblem of the exotic in Nerval’s work, particularly of the exotic female body. Indeed, the seduction of the veil motivates the voyage itself and transforms the meaning of travel from the experience of displacement and superficial perception to that of immobility and deepening knowledge. As he writes at the beginning of the section entitled *Les Femmes du Caire*: “Pourquoi passer si vite? Arrêtons-nous, et cherchons à soulever un coin du voile austère de la déesse de Saïs.”

¹ Bachelet, Hippolyte. *Nouveau guide de la nourrice : Conseils aux mère de famille sur la meilleure manière de nourrir leurs enfants et de se nourrir elles-memes*. (Paris, M. G. Masson, 1877).

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The veil is not, however, the only marker of exotic difference. Linguistic and bodily differences combine to both heighten and frustrate the narrator's desires. Spoken language functions to create the exotic even within the known, as if inscribing itself on the always disquieting sign of femininity. For example, even the familiar German language becomes de-familiarized in the Viennese patois spoken by the women whom the narrator courts in an earlier section of the *Voyage*. Further, the female body itself is the bearer of troubling signs. The narrator chooses his slave Zeynab solely for the exoticism which her physical appearance represents, but once revealed, the "exotic" markings literally inscribed on her body confound the narrator's quest for transparency. The exotic female body thus serves as the figure of the impossibility of the epistemological voyage.