

## Geographies and Geopolitics of Empire

Chair: Peter Starr, University of Southern California

Anne Berthelot  
University of Connecticut

### Brocéliande, entre Empire et exotisme

Le Romantisme a (re)découvert avec délices une époque obscure à souhait, dont on pouvait faire le cadre de toutes les nouvelles valeurs trop longtemps bannies par l'Esprit des Lumières : la passion, l'horreur, la religion, le patriotisme trouvent à s'enraciner dans un Moyen Age de fantaisie, largement élaboré à partir des romans de Sir Walter Scott – et, il faut l'avouer, bien éloigné de ce que la critique académique, une ou deux générations après, prendra comme objet d'étude. De Nodier à Hugo, le matériau « moyenâgeux » fait recette, mais curieusement, la « matière de Bretagne » reste un peu à la traîne jusqu'à ce que, dans la deuxième moitié du siècle, plusieurs écrivains s'attachent à la figure de Merlin « l'Enchanteur ». Hersart de la Villemarqué, Edgar Quinet, Jean Lorrain, chacun à leur façon, vont faire de Brocéliande, en Bretagne continentale (la Petite-Bretagne des romans médiévaux !), le lieu d'un exotisme paradoxal d'où est censé jaillir un renouveau de l'esprit national. Si Lorrain s'inscrit dans la tradition Tennysonienne en s'intéressant davantage aux amours de l'enchanteur avec *Viviane*, si Quinet fait de lui son *alter ego* dans la perspective d'une réflexion politique, Hersart s'aventure avec son *Myrdhinn ou l'enchanteur Merlin* dans un nouvel espace colonial au cœur même de la France, un espace d'une richesse et d'une originalité exceptionnelles, capable de faire pièces aux séductions étrangères de l'Orient. Merlin, à la fois proche et lointain, devient le héros à la fois exotique et familier dont la France a besoin pour définir ses ambitions impérialistes.

Göran Blix  
Princeton University

### Grandeur and Decadence: The Geo-Politics of the Balzacian Type

In his mock-epic tale of the rise and fall of a mediocre perfume seller, *Histoire de la grandeur et de la décadence de César Birotteau* (1837), Balzac maliciously borrowed his pompous title from Montesquieu's celebrated account of the success and downfall of the Roman Empire. His attempt to ennoble his bourgeois type, and to endow modern life with an epic dimension, was no doubt deeply ironic, but despite this irony Balzac was clearly also committed to discovering what Baudelaire would call the "heroism of modern life." This paradoxical new heroism—that of the average, the norm, the type, rather than of the exception—stood in stark contrast not only with the exemplary figures of antiquity and the ancient regime, but also with more recent memories of French imperial glory, and would therefore seem inseparable from a satirical and nostalgic perspective on modern France. However, the balzacian type, as I aim to show, far from just embodying a post-heroic disillusion, displaces the impossible celebration of military greatness into an aesthetic form of imperialism by which the writer strives to gain figurative mastery over the world. The totalizing ambition of the *Comédie humaine*, with its drive to invest, occupy, and condense every aspect modern reality, and to produce the epic of everyday life that Rome and Carthage never did, can be seen in this light as Balzac's unspoken *agon* with Napoleon. The type constitutes the centerpiece of this strategy of total representation, and in a

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sense redeems the defunct empire with the modern artist's powerful scheme of social classification: the dream of extensive geographical mastery becomes a protocol here for an intensive form of aesthetic control. The anachronistic code of heroism (Balzac significantly left the *Scènes de la vie militaire* unfinished) that has seeped out of the world thus becomes entirely absorbed in the modern writer's grandiose effort to map reality. This paper seeks to reinterpret the balzacian type, chiefly through a reading of *César Bitotteau*, as the symptom of a new form of militant authorship in post-Napoleonic France.

Michael Tilby  
Selwyn College, Cambridge

### Empire, Class, Place: Towards an Understanding of Balzac's Political Geography

In this paper I shall attempt to lay the foundations for a study of the ways in which Balzac's representation of Paris embodies an overall socio-political significance that goes unacknowledged by the narrative discourse, which assigns to each building, street and *quartier* its own distinct identity. I shall examine the way in which Balzac implicitly invokes the geographical model proposed by the Napoleonic vision of Europe only to respond instinctively to the incompatibility of this model with a changing socio-political reality. My analysis will focus principally on the way the city is imagined in terms of a new bourgeois order, the distinctiveness of which resides in its atopic nature. In contrast to the Imperial idea of a city ordered in terms of an identifiable central power, Balzac's Paris is uniformly amorphous, as the reflection of a class that is both everywhere and nowhere.