

Carrico on Le Huenen (2015)

Le Huenen, Roland. *Le Récit de voyage au prisme de la littérature*. PU de Paris–Sorbonne, 2015, pp. 392, ISBN 979-1-0231-0509-4

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The defining characteristic of the *récit de voyage* is its malleability in form and purpose. It is neither limited to a specific time period nor to an ideological perspective. And yet, Roland Le Huenen proposes in his comprehensive work, *Le Récit de voyage au prisme de la littérature*, that the *genre viatique* as a whole observes two rules: the stories must first represent actual trips, and second, relate observations and descriptions of the place(s) visited (124). It is not his goal, however, to prove whether or not each *récit de voyage* that he examines follows this prescription; rather, Le Huenen traces the progression of travel writing from its quantifiable origin in the sixteenth century to its turning point in the Romantic period, and finally, to its reappearance in 1955. That year marks the publication of Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques*, which, Le Huenen argues, evokes the same emphasis on the subjective as François René de Chateaubriand's foundational and authoritative text on the genre itself, *Itinéraire de Paris à Jérusalem* (1811).

Focusing primarily on the nineteenth century and returning repeatedly to *Itinéraire* as a reference point, Le Huenen's work can be read in various ways: continuously, as an examination of the travel narrative in its various forms and contents; by divisions, each one focusing on a particular problematic in the transformation of the genre or the grouping of its players (*Archéologie du Voyage, L'Entrée en littérature, Voyageuses, Périples et Promenades, Diplomates voyageurs, Dans les marges du voyage*); or by individual chapter highlighting one or two *voyageurs-écrivains*. Even though all but one of the chapters have been previously published or presented—two-thirds of them appearing in 2005 or later—as a unit, *Le Récit de voyage au prisme de la littérature* offers an erudite, confident, and unified voice, drawing inspiration from the cited texts and situating them with regard to historical context and theoretical moment.

Le Huenen is a raconteur: he weaves stories about the travelers as individuals on a quest and as representatives of a hierarchized order of exploration and literary expression. They are, to use his designations, *découvreurs* (Columbus, Cartier), *observateurs* (Robert Challe), *voyageurs-historiens* (Herodotus, Volney), *écrivains* (Chateaubriand), *autobiographes/artistes* (Sand), *parias* (Tristan), *touristes* (Gautier), *sensualistes* (Flaubert), *promeneurs/poètes* (Hugo), *aventuriers intellectuels* (William Shaler), and *voyageurs romantiques* (Chateaubriand, Lévi-Strauss), among others. Le Huenen also includes those not generally considered as travel writers, addressing Honoré de Balzac, who, while critiquing the “double opposition *privé/public et réel/fictif*” (326) of the *récit de voyage* nevertheless played with the genre in his works; Laurence Sterne, whose *Voyage sentimental* broke with traditional conceptions of the travel narrative (338); and George Sand, who wove together religious, political, and social critique into her travel novel *La Daniella* (343).

Through his storytelling and critical point of view, Le Huenen entices readers to question the literary devices and discursive registers of the *genre viatique*: signifiers and referents, history/knowledge/memory, objectivity and subjectivity, sight (*vue, vision, and regard*), truth and experience, self and other, and, ultimately, the interconnectedness of travel description and literary production.

First originating with a didactic purpose to teach about the “other,” and the referential object (place and people), the *récit de voyage* started to undergo a change as early as 1690–91 when Robert Challe published his *Journal d'un voyage fait aux Indes orientales*. Here, the focus began to shift from “une économie textuelle descriptive fondée sur l'objet à une économie textuelle narrative focalisée sur le sujet” (49) that would later see its realization with Chateaubriand's *Itinéraire*. With Chateaubriand came, as Le Huenen explains, “l'effacement du référent physique et le surgissement concomitant d'un signifié où vient se refléter le savoir livresque du narrateur” (99). By shifting attention from the physical and outward object towards the self and internal contemplation, readers too were able to enter the reflective realm: “En se détournant de l'objet physique, référentiel, le geste descriptif invite le lecteur à la reconnaissance, à se ressouvenir du florilège des textes qui constituent sa mémoire et son identité culturelle” (99). What was so groundbreaking in Chateaubriand's text was not only the internal turn towards the self as object and the influence this had on the reader, but the entry of travel writing into the domain of literature, concerned with its own inter-textual network and ability to turn discourse on itself (99).

Roland Le Huenen's work testifies to the polymorphic particularity of the *récit de voyage* in its own re-assembled and composite form, holding at its center perspective and literary form. What we glean from this salient work is that travel writing shifted alongside historical context and literary production, but remained didactic at its core, whether to teach about others or

about the self. The *récit de voyage* continues to be an important genre across domains (social, political, literary) as writers' referents simultaneously narrow and widen, and as scholars and other readers continue to observe, compare, and seek, acknowledging that a relation to place and space is pivotal to personal and social experiences.

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