

Carrico on Solomon (2014)

Solomon, Nathalie. *Voyages et fantasmes de voyages à l'époque romantique*. Toulouse: Presses universitaires du Mirail, 2014. Pp. 307. ISBN: 978-2-8107-0291-6

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In the conclusion of her work, Nathalie Solomon admits that a clear definition of the *récit de voyage* may still be far from reach. The fact that the question remains even after a detailed analysis of the diverse determinants of this genre proves, as Solomon explains, “l'excessive complexité des rapports que le genre entretient avec son objet” (295). She emphasizes the transformative impact nineteenth-century Romantic writers have had on the memories of the places they explored and documented, “narrativiser le monde” (296) as she calls it, yet throughout her work she focuses on the interaction between writers and place, forging a definition of the *récit de voyage* that carefully considers its ambiguity as genre and asks far-reaching questions concerning authorial voice, literary representation, and invention.

From the section titles—*Sur le genre, Composition, Rêver le pays, Voir le pays, Récits imaginaires*—we discover at first glance that Solomon is more concerned with general ideas about narrative, genre, and literature than with particularities about specific writers, though she does treat these as well, focusing primarily on Chateaubriand, Flaubert, Gautier, Lamartine, and Nerval, among others. Rather than dedicate a chapter to each writer or specific *récit*, she divides the book by problematic and theme, modes of questioning, if you will, delineating differences and intermittently marking similarities among the selected writers within each section. Although the frequent recapitulatory remarks between section, chapter, and sub-section can at times seem repetitive, it is here where she accentuates the essential concerns of her argument.

For Solomon, “le voyage littéraire est avant tout imaginaire” (19). She takes the conflict between the “real” and “imagined” seriously, questioning fundamental assumptions of the dichotomy rather than imposing its divisions: the *récit de voyage* is at the same time autobiographical and invented. Everything for Solomon is a question of genre as literary form. This is not to say that she imagines the writer simply as character or the story as purely fictive; rather, she examines the role and position of the author as both traveler *and* writer as well as indeterminable form of the story as an essential characteristic of the genre itself. While Solomon argues for the literary conception and poetic tone of the travel narrative, she recognizes differences between the *récit de voyage* and fictional works, suggesting that “il n’y a pas, dans la relation de voyage, de nécessité d’achèvement de l’ensemble ou des parties du récit, parce que le rythme et la construction de l’œuvre suivent l’ordre de la marche” (251). The *récit de voyage* is as flexible as the writer’s experience, but less so “dans l’ordre du reflet romantique de la conscience, que dans l’affirmation du rôle créateur du texte” (200).

The documented trip recounted as a story is as much about the experience of the writer as it is about the exoticism of the place visited, and discerning the point of convergence between the two is almost impossible. Solomon asserts that discovering if a detail of a trip actually occurred or if a writer’s account of a historical site or event is reliable is beside the point: “C’est davantage une question de tonalité” (143). In the first section, *Sur le genre*, Solomon investigates the definition of travel itself and points to the fact that some writers equally define their *voyages* as self-examinations as excursions elsewhere. She discusses inter-textual references as well as allusions to past *récits de voyage*, positioning nineteenth-century Romantics as particularly influential over their readership: “on attend son commentaire” (95). It is a referential yet authoritative position that “affirme les puissances de la littérature sur la réalité [... Le] récit de voyage du XIXe siècle lui apporte une dimension à la fois mythique et profondément personnelle” (95). Solomon examines the personal aspect of the narratives in the third and fourth sections, *Rêver le pays* and *Voir le pays*, examining the hallucinatory, sensory, and emotional reactions writers have with their surroundings and the ways in which these experiences can be portrayed. The second and last parts, *Composition* and *Récits imaginaires*, focus more on the structure of the *récit de voyage* and its encounter with other genres. Throughout the entire work, several words stand out as defining the *récit de voyage*: spontaneous, fragmented, ambiguous, poetic—that is, literary.

Above all, Solomon’s earnest interest in the subject, her comparative analysis of the selected works, and her positioning within current ecocritical research concerned with the convergence of geography and literary composition and representation make *Voyages et fantasmes de voyages à l'époque romantique* a worthwhile read and study.

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