

Smith, Eliza Jane. Literary Slumming: Slang and Class in Nineteenth-Century France

Hope Christiansen

Numéro 122, 2022

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1101631ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1101631ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Department of French, Dalhousie University

ISSN

0711-8813 (imprimé)

2562-8704 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Christiansen, H. (2022). Compte rendu de [Smith, Eliza Jane. Literary Slumming: Slang and Class in Nineteenth-Century France]. *Dalhousie French Studies*, (122), 131–132. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1101631ar>

Son petit portrait de Hugo, avec qui, conservateur dans l'âme, il ne pouvait rien avoir politiquement en commun, met très rapidement en lumière à la fois les grands mérites et les limites de l'homme – même si Du Camp estime à tort qu'on se souviendra de Hugo tout d'abord en tant que poète. Renan est liquidé en quatre mots : c'est « le Paganini du néant » (517). Bien d'autres petits camées du même ordre s'apprécient avec plaisir et profit.

Thomas Loué a fort bien fait d'exhumer ces exemples brillants de la « sociologie instinctive et toute personnelle » (22) de Du Camp, les faisant précéder d'une étude utile et les ornant d'abondantes notes. Ce volume fera le bonheur de bien des dix-neuviémistes. Et il ne manquera pas d'amuser ceux qui n'appartiennent pas à cette confrérie, ne fût-ce que par des anecdotes désopilantes comme celle qu'il narre au sujet d'un dénommé D'Audiffret-Pasquier, sur laquelle il convient de boucler ce compte rendu, qui pourrait encore se prolonger longtemps si on cédait à la tentation d'en citer d'autres :

« Il écrivit académie dans sa lettre de candidature, on s'en est souvenu lors de l'élection de Pierre Loti qui passe pour n'être pas irréprochable en ses mœurs : on fit le quatrain suivant :

Le moment est venu de rire
Voici Loti de l'Institut
D'Audiffret va pouvoir écrire
Académie avec un q. » (60-61)

Vittorio Frigerio

Dalhousie University

Smith, Eliza Jane. *Literary Slumming: Slang and Class in Nineteenth-Century France*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2021. 280 p.

In this fascinating study, Smith argues that subversive, slang-speaking characters in nineteenth-century literature reveal a sociolinguistic trend she calls literary slumming, which at once “speaks to a collective social progress” and “marks a significant shift in the relationship between dominant and oppressed cultures” (5). Chapter 1 focuses on the use of slang as the primary signifier of criminal identity in Eugène François Vidocq's *Mémoires* (1828), Eugène Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris* (1842–43), and Honoré de Balzac's *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes* (1838–1847), the first successful works to showcase the lower classes and to deal directly with criminal life (18). The presence of slang in these works (underscored by italics, parentheses, footnotes, and glossaries) reveals the public's desire to identify and classify those who threatened the social order as well as the writers' investment in creating a literary demand for criminal culture (53). In chapter 2, Smith demonstrates that criminal characters' bodily performance and stylization (disguise, cross-dressing, gesture, dance, song) in those same works should be considered the corporeal equivalent of spoken slang (18), citing, among many other examples, that of the obscene dance, featured in both Vidocq and Sue, called *le chahut*, “an embodied index of immorality” (78).

Chapter 3 offers insights into the ways the newspaper industry put criminals in the limelight and iconized slang within the social imaginary (19), in large part through the creation of the *roman feuilleton*, situated at the intersection of journalism and literature. Phenomena such as lower subscription prices, “paper-passing,” *cabinets de lecture*, and a higher literacy rate due to changes in public education meant a greater democratization of readers. Chapter 4 delves into the intriguing case of Victor Hugo, who, in *Les Misérables* (1862), departs from Vidocq, Sue, and Balzac by asserting that criminality arises from poverty and social injustice, that slang has poetic value, and that the working-class speaker is a Christ-like figure “worthy of upper-class assistance rather than contempt” (20). The

disconnect between style and content in *Les Misérables* is deeper than that in the work of the other writers under scrutiny here, says Smith, because Hugo refused both to publish his novel serially and to describe the topic “in any way unworthy of the highest literary aesthetics” (155).

In chapter 5, Smith explores slang’s codification and enregisterment in five slang dictionaries (by Vidocq, Lorédan Larchey, Alfred Delvau, Lucien Rigaud, and Jules Lermina and Henri Lévêque), showing that the marketing of slang shifted from a criminal code “to a fashionable, urban language with creative possibilities” (22). The final chapter deals with the relationships among slang, the body, and women’s agency in Edmond and Jules de Goncourt’s *Germinie Lacerteux* (1865) and Émile Zola’s *Nana* (1880). Smith argues persuasively for considering fictional prostitutes “pioneering emblems of female liberation”; even if Germinie and Nana are unable to free themselves from a “masculinist economy,” they succeed in “displacing the male gaze through their transgressive speech and bodily practices” (201).

It is regrettable that such engaging material, combined with Smith’s solid research, convincing conclusions, and obvious command of sociolinguistics, is not supported by strong writing. The book is rife with wordiness and repetition; in a span of ten pages, for example, Smith offers three nearly identical definitions of literary slumming (7, 11, 17). Two consecutive paragraphs open with essentially the same sentence: “In *Splendors*, the linguistic scapegoating of other languages onto criminal slang occurs with other Romance languages, as well as with the Baron de Nucingen’s Jewish-Polish patois”; “In addition to slang’s conflation with other Romance languages, Balzac further conflates it with the Baron de Nucingen’s foreign Jewish-Polish dialect” (49); and elsewhere, only a few lines separate “For Lermina and Lévêque, . . . the body communicates key social information and constitutes an act of individuality” from “dictionary writers such as Lermina and Lévêque placed a new value on individuality,” then from “writers increasingly valorize the experience of individuality from all class backgrounds” (186–87). Repetition manifests itself as well within individual phrases (“consequences that ensued as a result” [34]) and in sentences that are circular in structure: “Proclamations of these flâneuresque (sic) experiences marked these reference works as containing a high degree of authenticity . . . thus ensuring a higher degree of credibility with regard to a dictionary’s lexicon” (22); “Albeit a product of upper-class privilege, the expansion of social identity . . . ultimately contributes to the slow breakdown of class lines and the reimagining of more complex and nuanced social identities” (46). Misplaced modifiers abound, to wit: “Like the hardened criminal men and women who possessed the same gruesome physical appearances, . . . French writers post-1850 begin to conflate” (217); “A site of perceived physical and moral filth, the prostitute’s physical permeation of the upper classes occurred” (237). Finally, many sentences are simply overly long and convoluted (e.g. the final sentence of the first full paragraph on p. 258). On a smaller scale, there are person-number errors (18, 167, 215, 259...); comma problems (“literary critic, Pascale Gaitet explores” [4]; “In fact, Germinie’s ventures into the streets of Paris, transform her into the author of her own narrative” [229]; “a sociolinguistic phenomenon that I term, *literary slumming*” [31]), and a missing apostrophe in the book’s final, impactful sentence (239). Smith refers repeatedly to her study of slang in nineteenth-century French *literature*, when her corpus clearly has a narrower scope and includes important non-literary sources. In short, *Literary Slumming* could have been a first-rate book had it only been better vetted for style and adherence to the rules of grammar and usage.

Hope Christiansen

University of Arkansas
