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Abstract

Moving Cataclysm: Journeys of Quest, Landscapes of Loss in Late French Medieval Romance
and 19th-Century Travel Narratives

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This dissertation examines the relationship between human movement, social processes, and changing landscapes in 12th-13th-century French romance (*roman de quête*) and early to mid-19th-century French travel narratives and *romans d'ailleurs*. The intentional journey, which we can apply to secular as well as to spiritual goals of both medieval heroes and Romantic journeyers, connotes a place of juncture in an individual life that seeks resolution through movement, through return to origins, and through alignment with ongoing human processes and the processes of history. How narratives of traversal of natural and lived spaces assign meaning to both traveler and place and how humans construct themselves and attempt to re-order their universes by intentional journeying comprise the focal concerns of this study. The term *cataclysm* refers to any sudden, violent change, whether local, global, or in one's perception of the universe. Late medieval quest, initially a prescribed practice designed to re-educate the

wayward knight for service to society, emerges as a complex response to natural and social degradation, associated with incompatible, yet co-existing, moral discourses, forces of progress, and progressively mechanized human identity. As Ken Hiltner puts it, environmental consciousness occurs when one becomes “thematically aware” of one’s environment “at the moment of its withdrawal” (*What Else is Pastoral* 38). 19th-century travelers, for whom pilgrimage into unknown and “exotic” territories often accompanies social or political exile, attempt to mediate between the multiple dimensions of *being* and being French in relationship to post-Revolutionary France. Whether from the vantage point of Chrétien de Troyes, 13th-century prose adaptations of the Arthurian legend, or early-to-mid-19th-century reflections of Chateaubriand, Lamartine, Nerval, texts from each period grapple with codified and re-imagined scenarios of encounter between individuals, unknown wildernesses, and the lost local: their authors articulate perceived threats, document uncertainty, and seek resolution through projects of self-renewal. Whether as pilgrims, exiles, or *flâneurs*, the landscapes within which these travelers wander loom with an aura of impending eclipse that, nevertheless, never entirely loses hope of *régénérescence*. As they progress through space, these journeyers move around and about cataclysm that, presumably, through transformation, they can move, distance, reverse, or avert.