Frères Ennemis

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Conclusion

Stasis and Movement

Americans have often traveled to France in search of refuge from the pressures of life in the United States.

( Laurence Wylie in Stanley Hoffmann, *In Search of France*, 159)

Même les idiots ont cessé d’être heureux.

( Sudhir Hazareesingh, *Ce pays qui aime les idées*, 347)

*Frères ennemis* has focused on the ways in which selected French and American literary texts have constructed the image(s) of the two peoples over the last century and a half. I would like to begin this conclusion with a brief recapitulation of the principal ideas developed in the preceding chapters, and then proceed to consider some broader ramifications concerning what Jacques Chirac described as the “conflictive and excellent” rapport between the United States and France (Kuisel, *The French Way*, 91).

Borrowing significantly from Roland Barthes’s conception of myth, *Frères ennemis* deals in part with images which human beings had and have of each other and of their respective countries, images perceived as unstable concepts, created essentially by mixtures of historical circumstances and the needs of the moment. Henry James’s title, *The American*, illustrates this quite clearly. The main character is finally not Christopher Newman, but rather what he represents, the volatile myth he embodies, which is that of the American. The Bellegarde family undergo the same transformation. Initially, they are simply French people; in the course of
the novel they sometimes become the French. Yet, in accordance with
the most significant aspect of Barthes's theory, these images are not
stable. They can change in an instant, and the American and the French
can briefly become individuals again. Although the form of the national
images is volatile, the content is relatively stable, at least in its formulation
in James's novel. The American is wealthy, vigorous, yet culturally
undeveloped and naïve – the embodiment of the present and the future.
The French are intellectually sophisticated and cultured, but financially
strained, somewhat untrustworthy, and aware that their nation, for all
its achievements in the past, is losing ground to the American upstart.
This paradigm for the French and Americans' perceptions of each other
is established in The American, and recurs in various transformations in
American novels until the beginning of the twenty-first century. French
fiction embraced a version of this paradigmatic structure up until the
middle of the Cold War.

That subsequent American novelists would be tempted to accept, or at
least were influenced to some degree, by James's caricature of the French
is somewhat surprising but understandable. At the time he published
The American, James was one of the few citizens of his country with
an experience of Europe and a willingness to write about the continent.
Thus, his views had more influence than they probably deserved. What
he provided, both in The American and his other “European” novels, was
the initial filter through which other Americans could begin forming
their views of Europe. However, quite rapidly, a significant element in the
Jamesian paradigm would be reversed. The confrontation of the innocent
American and the arrogant French was transformed by Edith Wharton
and subsequent writers into supercilious Americans exploiting the more
open-minded French. The basis for the supposed American superiority was
wealth, even relative wealth (The Sun Also Rises), combined with a sense of
national entitlement, since the United States was considered by its citizens
to be the greatest, most powerful nation in the world.

Why the French would accept a vision of Americans that roughly
corresponds to James's portrait is somewhat more complicated. Part of
the explanation is due to the fact that de Tocqueville's influential study
of the young democracy describes Americans as ambitious, successful,
more pragmatic than philosophical, perhaps incapable of great cultural
achievements, and yet the harbingers of the world to come. In de
Tocqueville's version of Americans, which greatly influenced James, they
were a people to be admired, but also looked down upon to a degree, and feared. De Tocqueville played the same role for the French as James did for the Americans. Both functioned as passeurs who brought a different culture to the attention of their fellow citizens, without having particularly strong rivals to counterbalance other viewpoints. However, in addition to the role played by de Tocqueville, the French would witness the political and social involvements of the United States with more interest than the Americans would follow what was happening in France. Between the publication of James's novel and the beginning of the twenty-first century, the United States had established itself as a major world power, if not the major power. During the same period, French importance had declined. Thus the Americans, aided by their insular tendencies, could ignore what was happening in France, whereas the French, particularly the intelligentsia, became increasingly suspicious of American aims, and keenly aware of the contradictions within American society. What they experienced, filtered through speeches, newspapers, books, and eventually radio and television, were images of a mighty, politically conservative nation viscerally opposed to communism and other leftist movements. For many in France, the United States was a country attempting to dominate on the international scene while at the same time seemingly incapable of resolving its internal social and racial conflicts. Les Mandarins, the last French novel discussed which illustrates a version of the paradigm developed from Barthes's theory of myth, provides a perfect example of this Gallic sense of the States during the Cold War.

It is unlikely that Villiers de l’Isle-Adam ever read Henry James, but he most certainly would have read de Tocqueville, whose portrait of Americans addressed their supposed psychological naivety, their lack of talent for artistic creation, and potential for overconfidence. American psychological immaturity and intellectual arrogance are at the center of L’Ève future, a novel which both recognizes and fears the strength of the Yankee determination to succeed. By making Thomas Edison his central character, the French author was reflecting his admiration for American scientific genius at the same time as he was using Edison’s status to highlight what he took to be serious flaws in the American character. Edison's psychological and moral shallowness is best perceived in the nature of his invention. He did not create a woman; his android is a caricature of a woman, a replica of a female, but without the aspects of womanhood that men might find offensive. Hadaly is sweet, lovely, gentle, and completely submissive. She
Frères Ennemis

will never question male judgment; she exists to serve Lord Ewald’s every whim. In contrast to Edison, Ewald is British, a dandy, and a bit of a fop. Yet his nationality serves an important function in the novel. Unlike his American friend, he does not have the scientific brilliance or imagination to construct such a creature; Hadaly is a tribute to unbridled American ingenuity, unaffected by ethical considerations.

L’Ève future contains no French characters. Edith Wharton’s The Custom of the Country also has limited Gallic presence. It details the strength of American social ambition in France, an ambition that involves slowly but inexorably pushing the few French characters to the fictional and geographical periphery of the story. In what I have termed “urban colonialization,” Undine Spragg and her like-minded, albeit less gifted, friends demarcated as their own a significant part of the Paris created by Baron Haussmann, and turned it into an American protectorate where the French, if they were admitted at all, existed to serve the vanity and social ambitions of rich Americans. The French were marginalized in their own city, pushed to the edges of society, if not thrust completely out of the picture. To the extent that remnants of French culture had any function in this new, Americanized Paris, it was to serve as trophies (tapestries, paintings, fashionable real estate), symbols of the Yankee conquest of the Old World.

The Americans in The Custom of the Country fancied they were absorbing French culture by possession but they were in fact using the strong American dollar to amuse themselves in a foreign, yet Americanized setting. The characters in Ernest Hemingway’s The Sun Also Rises come mostly from different social backgrounds than the inhabitants of Wharton’s world, and have, for the most part, a much more violent European experience. Yet their activities are really only a logical extension of what Undine Spragg and her friends were doing, although on a different social level. Hemingway’s characters turn France and Spain into a vast playground whose sundry entertainments are made possible by a steady infusion of American money. Here again the Europeans (French or Spanish) have become figurants, bit players whose primary function is to make sure that la fête continue. Occasionally a supernumerary like Pedro Romero usurps a larger role for a time, but eventually fades into the background. What remains is a band of bored, rather childish expatriates living in a self-indulgent universe where one day resembles the next, and where the sun rises only to shine on a repetition of the day before.
Simone de Beauvoir’s *Les Mandarins* portrays Franco-American tensions on both the political and the personal level. The novel is divided into two deceptively distinct sections. This simple division does not do justice to *Les Mandarins*’ intellectual content. Although it is obvious that a large part of the first section focuses on the putative danger created by American might and presence on French soil, its real subject is the disarray of French intellectuals in the postwar era, and their ill-fated romance with the Soviet Union. These intellectuals, in opting to ignore the negative aspects of Stalin’s regime, sacrificed their credibility, and thereby undermining both their critique of the United States and their defense of the Soviet Union.

The much more compelling critique of American arrogance of power emerges in the section describing the love affair between Anne and Lewis. Anne represents France and Louis the United States. If the intellectuals in the first part of *Les Mandarins* confront the United States primarily in terms of the interpretation of ideas and political positions, Anne experiences *l’Américain* and *l’Amérique* in a deeply personal way. She is in the States, involved with one of its citizens, and exposed to various aspects of American culture. For most of their liaison, Lewis bends Anne to his will, and only painfully can she take some distance from him. She loved him at the beginning and, for justifiable reasons, became disillusioned with him by the end. For Anne, Americans possess many qualities, but the problem she discerns in them echoes what was emphasized in *L’Ève future*: the uneasy combination of vast power and a potentially dangerous psychological and emotional immaturity. In the final pages of *Les Mandarins*, Anne returns to a dreary Paris, disenchanted with Lewis but aware that for the foreseeable future he will remain a presence in her life in much the same way as American influence will linger in France.

Anti-American sentiment among France’s intellectual elite peaked during the Sartre era; by the 1970s, while the potential for annoyance and real anger remained and was occasionally acted upon, as evidenced by the reaction to Vietnam, the French had moved more toward absorbing American culture rather than rejecting it. The American cultural and commercial invasion of France, which developed apace with the *Trente Glorieuses* and beyond, had simply become part of French life; it affected French households (appliances), leisure time (movies and eventually television serials), cultural activities (pop music and fiction), and even eating habits (fast food).
In Jean Echenoz’s Cherokee, the American presence is felt throughout: in the music, the film references, and the characterization. The title refers to an American jazz composition, the prose echoes jazz rhythms, and scenes often seem structured as if they were parts of an American movie – which, to a degree, they are. The characters are American cinematic prototypes: the gangster, the shady lady, and two buffoonish detectives. Traditional French culture is relegated to the suburbs, where it is either stored for another occasion in warehouses or transformed into the names of streets in the banlieues. All this can sound rather grim, yet if it is treated comically in Cherokee, it is because French culture has proven more resilient than many French feared; it has certainly not been crushed by American influences. Rather, in Echenoz’s novel, French artistic culture has transformed the American models into something that is truly a hybrid of the two cultures. Historically, jazz, played by French musicians, was prominent in France well before World War II; France had been producing film noir before the Liberation, and if Ripert and Bock recall Laurel and Hardy, they may also remind a French audience of Dupond and Dupont. Finally, the film being made in the novel, presumably to be entitled Cherokee, is a Franco-American production and highlights the strengths and weaknesses of both traditions.

If Cherokee represented the mingling of two artistic traditions without doing serious damage to either, Paul Auster’s The Book of Illusions is an American novel strongly influenced by French literary and intellectual culture. Auster came to maturity during the heyday of “French Theory” and has spent considerable time in France. His exposure to French fiction is particularly clearly reflected in The Book of Illusions, whose structure gives priority to psychological drama over physical action. This leads to a text more comfortably in the French tradition and thus helps explain the author’s popularity and high reputation in the Hexagon, while it also suggests reasons for the lesser enthusiasm his work elicits in his own country. Another quality of Auster’s writing that can seem more acceptable to the French than to Americans is his frequent reliance on chance to move his story forward. While chance is a commonplace of daily life, it is potentially a difficult phenomenon to make plausible in a literary text, since it can readily appear artificial and contrived, a contemporary deus ex machina. This danger may be less of an obstacle to a literary French readership, which has been exposed to discussions of the concept by the Surrealists and the members of Oulipo, who have argued for and against
the role of chance in artistic creation. To some extent, the enthusiasm which Auster’s work has inspired among French critics also reflects the desire of the latter to reassert the vitality of intellectual and artistic life in the Hexagon by arguing that Auster’s artistic accomplishments demonstrate France’s continuing ability to assert a significant cultural influence even on the dominant Western power.

The United States that Dominique Falkner explores in Ça n’existe pas l’Amérique is not really a world power. In fact, it is not even l’Amérique as the term is commonly understood. It is a relatively small section of the country running approximately from Chicago to Missoula, Montana. Falkner’s approach, in contrast to Baudrillard’s, is to emphasize particular experiences over broad judgments. Falkner’s slice of the States consists of places which either expose or hide histories of violence, idealism, or greed, areas inhabited by people who are bizarre, intelligent, eccentric, bitter, or some unequal mixture of these attributes. In Ça n’existe pas l’Amérique the author does not explain, he describes. The anecdote is given pride of place over analysis, while history is used simply to provide a context for a particular incident, which the reader will evaluate. Little effort is expended on defining the American character or the nature of American society.

The very modesty of Falkner’s approach sets him apart from most French commentators who continue to favor a broad perspective on l’Amérique and its denizens. Baudrillard published Amérique in 1986, but his approach is far from outdated. In 2006, Bernard-Henri Lévy, at the request of The Atlantic Monthly, made a trip throughout the United States as a sort of twenty-first-century de Tocqueville. Where de Tocqueville’s geographic scope was limited, Lévy covered over twenty thousand kilometers ranging from the East to the West coast. Despite the twenty years separating Amérique from American Vertigo, their methods, if not writing styles, are quite similar. Both indulge in sweeping generalization, and express admiration for Americans, while suggesting that they are not quite on an intellectual par with their European counterparts. Early in Amérique, Baudrillard appears to lament American indifference to the splendor of continental thinking, whereas Lévy expresses his dislike for neoconservative ideas as exemplified by Bill Kristol, who has not read European luminaries such as “Strauss, Arendt, Julien Benda” (283). What distinguishes Falkner’s approach from that of commentators such as Baudrillard and Lévy is that he remains with specifics, always leaving the conclusions, grand or modest, to the reader.
Aside from an obvious curiosity about l’Amérique, the narrator of Ça n’existe pas l’Amérique appears to arrive in Chicago with no particular assumptions about the country. This is not the case with Isabel Walker, the heroine of Diane Johnson’s Le Divorce. When she lands in Paris, Izzy has many idées fixes which, to her credit, she manages to shed over the course of the story. Le Divorce is a contemporary rewrite of The American; it is a sly novel which develops more than reiterates the major situations and assumptions in James’s work. With Johnson, the French become a much more complex people presented with their good qualities and faults, and in no sense moral inferiors to the Americans, which was the case in The American. What does linger from the earlier novel is a sense of mutual mistrust between Americans and French. The expatriates seem to be largely contemporary versions of James’s expatriate couple, the Tristrams; they are Americans who for the most part band together and carefully monitor their encounters with the “foreigners” who are the French. On the other hand, Isabel develops a much greater interest in the French people and their culture than ever Christopher Newman did. In fact, the most striking innovation in Le Divorce is not the gender switch, the hero becoming the heroine, but Isabel’s indecision concerning whether she should stay in France or return to the States. In all the novels read in this study, Isabel is the only American who expresses an interest in better understanding contemporary French culture and society. It is not coincidental that she is also the only American who makes a serious, sustained effort to learn French. That said, it should not be forgotten that the paradigm Johnson follows in this novel is essentially one featuring rather simplistic dichotomies over one hundred and fifty years old. A possible retort is that such a choice is only natural in a rewriting of Henry James, but one might also wonder why someone with Johnson’s extensive knowledge of life in Paris would not chose to develop James’s simplifications more thoroughly, rather than merely reframe some of his more questionable assumptions. Of course, a possible rejoinder to this objection would be to say that from Johnson’s informed perspective, French and American attitudes toward each other have not changed that much since James’s day.

In terms of Franco-American relations, the most significant historical phenomenon during the period from the second half of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twenty-first was the rapid rise of American influence and the slow decline of French prestige. This shift has constituted the background for all the works I have discussed. The United States’
expanding power in international affairs infused its citizens with a certain confidence and even arrogance concerning their national and personal superiority. For the French it was a shock and humiliation to see their reputation decline in the face of a country with little history and minimal cultural achievements. The American books discussed here do not fundamentally challenge this change; it is perceived simply as a historical reality, which energizes Americans in often questionable ways, and expresses itself, in the direst French manifestations, in the nightmare of a brazen people usurping the rights and privileges of their betters. However, in the American novels there are several patterns which underscore the potential dangers inherent in this sense of national pre-eminence.

The first involves the insistent use of English. *The American* made clear that while Christopher Newman was very interested in acquiring a French wife and artifacts of French culture, his desire to learn the French language was limited. In this respect, *The American* establishes a behavioral pattern that would be reiterated in the ensuing novels: where the French are obliged to speak English if they wish to have any meaningful communication with Americans, the Yankees feel no such need. The world of the present and the future is either on the way to becoming American or has already done so. Consciously or not, the Americans and the French know that. In *The Custom of the Country*, the Americans in Paris appear to have a limited grasp of the native language, but their smattering of French is simply a necessary annoyance for them, a tool which allows them to communicate with the help. In *The Sun Also Rises*, Jake and Lady Brett seem to know French, but they are the exceptions and, in any case, apart from an occasional gesture on Jake's part, prolonged conversation with the locals is avoided; one can argue whether these characters reflect, in any but an ironic sense, a Lost Generation, but what they certainly have not lost is a sense of the privileged life bestowed upon them by the almighty dollar. Along with that comes the assumption that if the natives wish to communicate with them, they must do so in the American idiom. Concerning the need to master American English, *Les Mandarins* offers the most ironic example. In a novel whose first part reflects a period of strong French anti-Americanism, a desire to limit the American presence on French soil, the second section underscores on a personal and implicitly political level the need to know English, if for no other reason than to be able to better understand the American lover and the country he represents. Nobody in *Cherokee* speaks English, but to the extent that cultural artifacts are a language of sorts, the American
vernacular suffuses the novel in the forms of movies and their characters, as well as the omnipresence of jazz played by American musicians.

The depiction of the expatriate communities in the American novels also constitutes an implicit caution concerning American dominance. This assumed pre-eminence expresses itself in the behavior of expatriates as a sense of superiority to the French and a preference to remain together as Americans rather than mingle with “the foreigners” or treat them as equals. In *The American*, this was not always the case. Mrs. Tristram was an intelligent and sensitive woman with some French friends who appeared to find in France an alternate, albeit isolated universe, where she could surround herself with like-minded Americans and immerse herself in an idealized version of French culture.

Mr. Tristram, however, was another matter, and the character type destined to have a greater influence in subsequent American literature. He was loud, vulgar, and indifferent to the cultural opportunities available in Paris. In these respects, he was perhaps the prototype of the caricature known as “the typical American tourist.” The expatriates encountered in most of the novels are, with the possible exception of those in *The Sun Also Rises*, not particularly loud and vulgar, but like Mr. Tristram they prefer to keep their distance from the French. This desire is reflected in the places they live and their tendency to band together in a way that either excludes the French or makes them a people of secondary importance. While one might argue that this preferred isolation suggests a degree of cultural intimidation in the face of the French achievements which surround them, I would suggest that it is a projection of an American arrogance of power, which pays lip service to the accomplishments of other cultures but maintains that the American model, for all its flaws, remains the finest. To live abroad allows for a nostalgia with regard to the putative excellences of the United States without having to be involved in the nation’s specific problems. It also permits indulgence in the beauties of another country without having to relinquish one’s sense of national excellence, or overly concern oneself with the host country’s political and social issues. Finally, using a place like Paris as a background for personal activities can be viewed as adding a degree of culture and sensitivity to one’s self-image; it becomes a means of suggesting a certain superiority over less fortuned compatriots.

The image of expatriates in *Le Divorce* is a not particularly subtle variation on this general orientation. The clannishness, the condescension
regarding the folks back home, the assumption that Paris somehow bestows a degree of sophistication on the its expatriate inhabitants if not necessarily on the Parisians – all these remain, but what is added to this mix is an outdated anti-Americanism, which clashes with the more common American nostalgia for the home country. Ames Everett was noted for “the special rancor he bore America, for he never failed to badmouth it” (35). This is a man who, according to Isabel, is famous in the States, “even revered ... in his coterie” (35), yet he dislikes his native country intensely. Perhaps Ames's hatred has personal origins, but the novel says nothing on this. It is therefore possible that this angry American intellectual is indulging in an anti-Americanism once fashionable in France but which by the 1990s has become much less pronounced. If the clannishness of expatriates indicates that they never really desert the United States, Ames's behavior suggests that, in attempting to emulate trendy French attitudes, they succeed only in demonstrating that they are as much removed from the world of contemporary France as they are from that of the States. The expatriates in *Le Divorce* live in an elaborate cocoon where Mr. Tristram, after some adjustments for the passage of time and progress, would doubtless feel at home.

It would appear that Christopher Newman is the rare American to arrive in Paris with a relatively open mind. Others ventured overseas with a variety of *idées fixes*, ranging from Undine Spragg's initial desire to be dazzled by Europeans, a sentiment which rapidly changed into a rather cynical sense of how the cultural products of the Old World could be manipulated to enhance her reputation in the New World, to Isabel Walker's combination of indifference and slight *méfiance* when first setting foot in Paris. Yet, however different the American characters’ thinking about France, with the exception of Izzy, they all share one fundamental assumption that is illustrated in the opening pages of *The American* when Christopher strolls into the Louvre. France, Paris, and, by extension, Europe, are the past, a world of slightly obsolete cultural monuments which are a major part of the place's charm and thus have a deep, genuine appeal to American visitors. While Laurence Wylie was correct when he noted that “Americans have often traveled to France in search of a refuge from the pressures of life in the United States” (159), such a statement is probably applicable to most tourists from most countries. However, for Americans in the novels discussed, this “refuge” takes the particular form of concentrating on France's past glories and turning one's back on France's
Frères Ennemis

contemporary situation in order to create a uniquely American refuge on European soil. With the exception of Le Divorce, little interest is shown in ordinary French people or daily French life.

The distrust of the French which the Bellegardes created in Christopher Newman persists, certainly in literature, to the present. As we moved from Henry James to Diane Johnson, France for Americans evolved or devolved from being a mysterious place with excellent mementos of the past, to becoming an American colony, then a playground, and ultimately in Le Divorce, a theme park. The ending of Le Divorce offers a suggestion that the rigid American attitude toward France, its people, culture, and contemporary situation is beginning to change, but for the moment that is more of a hope than a reality.

By contrast, the French attitude toward Americans, after an initial inclination to view Americans along the lines de Tocqueville and by extension James, suggested, and then in a more politically negative fashion, has shown signs of becoming much more nuanced and open to development since the post-World War II era. As discussed in the chapters devoted to Cherokee and Ça n’existe pas l’Amérique, the American reputation in France was improving due to a combination of the prosperity spurred by the Trente Glorieuses, French recognition of its own racism, a perceived weakening of American power, 9/11, and the Obama presidency. One might add that French willingness to venture on vacations outside of the Hexagon and visit l’Amérique resulted in a calling into question of some of the crasser French attitudes toward the States. Given all these reasons for a possible change in Gallic attitudes, the French remain, despite their own failures in this area, appalled by American racism, as well as by the easy access to arms, and the United States’ inability to untangle the mess created in the Middle East in large part by American international policies.

All the above explanations for France’s readjustment of its attitudes toward the American nation have to do with perception of the States, a viewpoint that most likely will be radically altered by the Trump presidency. However, aside from how Trump’s policies will affect Franco-American relations, literary and otherwise, French authors’ more positive, or at least more open-minded, recent attitudes toward l’Amérique have also to do with the frustration common today in France among people of all social backgrounds. Broadly stated, it is an impatience and anger with recent governments’ mismanagement of the nation. Particularly since the financial crisis of 2008, France has been largely stagnant. The
Conclusion

economy failed to grow significantly, the nation could not meet its financial obligations to the European Union, unemployment was only beginning to drop but not significantly, efforts at social change were often challenged by a mouvement social (which at times seemed to be the only movement in the country), and the nation's international prestige, at least until the election of Emmanuel Macron, was continuing to recede. In recent years, the mood in France, accentuated by terrorist attacks, has become more somber, and the well-known Gallic moroseness, traditionally the badge of French intellectuals, has been spreading to the general population, prompting Sudhir Hazareesingh to quote an unnamed French literary historian's claim that "Même les idiots ont cessé d'être heureux" (347).

This stark picture seems particularly depressing when compared to the more positive image of the United States where the economy is steadily growing, unemployment diminishing, and the median income (slowly) improving. In contrast with France, and despite its own real social problems, l'Amérique projects a sense of vitality, which, until Macron, seemed absent in the Hexagon. French literature appears to be involved in an effort to tap into this vitality through novels replete with action, interesting characters, and often bizarre yet compelling stories. These works evoke a fascinating, albeit frequently more violent, world where at the very least, things, good and bad, are happening. French novelists' openness to the United States, and willingness to abandon stereotypical images of les Américains, is positive in the sense that it opens up a new area of inspiration, but it also reflects a deep sense of frustration on the part of French artists with the direction in which their own country has been moving or failing to move.

The French view of the United States and its inhabitants has undergone a significant transformation. This is evident not simply in the novels discussed here, but also in the sheer quantity of fiction being produced in France that takes one or several aspects of l'Amérique as its subject. From the perspective of the issues discussed in Frères ennemis, this current situation is not without a certain irony. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, the Americans, represented by Christopher Newman, were the open-minded group, curious about France and interested in learning about the country and its people. In the early part of the twenty-first century, the opposite appears to be the case. Americans, as portrayed in their nation's fiction, are content with the image of France as a haven for cultural glories of the past, as a place to visit in order to take one's mind off important, which is to say American, issues. The French, once disdainful of the American
interlopers, now approach the States a little like Christopher Newman first entered the Louvre, relatively non-judgmental and curious, although much better informed. For contemporary French writers, l'Amérique is, for the moment at least, a source of literary inspiration as they observe with a keener interest what transpires in that powerful, contradiction-laden country which, for good or for ill, embodies the present.

Notes

1 It is difficult not to appreciate the irony of descriptions of the French being pushed to the outlying areas of Paris in an early twentieth-century novel, since their contemporary equivalent is the expanding Parisian banlieues populated by immigrants who are often, but not entirely, Muslim. The French in The Custom of the Country were the embodiment of the past whereas today, “La banlieue constitue donc le cœur de cette nouvelle France de l’après-guerre” (Stovall, 51).

2 According to Tony Judt, “By the late 1940s, information about life under Stalin and his system was readily available to anyone” (Past Imperfect, 101).

3 At times French intellectuals’ adulation of the Soviet Union and its leader produced rather amazing rhetorical flights into fantasy. Jean-Richard Bloch, anxious to stress the rapport between the Soviet dictator and the French intellectual tradition, assured his audience that “Il n’y a personne de plus ‘cartesien’ que Staline” (Hazareesingh, 63). While Jean-Paul Sartre contented himself with the simple assertion that “La liberté de critique est totale en URSS” (Hazareesingh, 131).

4 Despite the oft-decried dangers of consuming fast food, and the much-vaunted French contempt for such products, the French were, and probably still are, quite taken with McDonald’s, “because it was fast, convenient, affordable and child-friendly, unlike traditional restaurants, and because the French were ‘fascinated with America.’ This fascination made France the most profitable [McDonald’s] market in Europe – second only to that of the United States” (Kuisel, The French Way, 187).

5 Baudrillard is not always the clearest of writers, frequently deploying irony and counter-intuitive statements. Lévy favors a rather breathless prose that dramatizes, rather than explains his thought, and relies heavily on exaggeration. After mentioning that he really knows less about de Tocqueville than Americans who are “Moyennement cultivés et habitués,” he announces that they have a tendency “à voir dans De la démocratie en Amérique, non seulement un manuel ou un bréviaire mais une sorte de miroir où, comme
Conclusion
dans les westerns, comme dans *Naissance d'une nation* de Griffith, comme à Rushmore, ils contemplant l'image anticipée de leurs virtus, de leurs vices ...” (11). The centrality in American life that Lévy accords to de Tocqueville's book will come as a surprise to many Americans, and will certainly provide French readers with a rather distorted view of de Tocqueville's renown in the States.

6 With regard to general statements, Braudrillard's were for the most part at least discussable, whereas Lévy's pronouncements often strain credulity, even if the subject is finally not of the greatest importance. To take but one example, he claims that Americans, unlike Europeans, for the most part do not like cities (51). The basis for this opinion is never clear, nor is its pertinence to his general argument.

7 In the chapter devoted to *The American*, I note that it is normal in an English-language novel that all dialogue appears in English, just as in a French work conversations with foreigners would be, beside the occasional word or expression, in French. The difference in the fiction discussed in this study is that the Americans' incapacity to express themselves in French and the need for their French interlocutors to address them in English are highlighted. On this point, the recent spate of French novels set in the United States has everyone speaking in French. To cite an example which emphasizes the use of French in an American-based novel, Antoine Bello's *Ada* (2016) is instructive. Ada is the name of an extremely sophisticated computer program that is attempting to improve its English. To do so, the program begins using a variety of ostensibly English clichés, all of which are taken from French.

8 Initially Anne's English was weak, and Lewis's French awful, but it was of course the French woman who had to make the effort to develop fluency in English. There was never a question that Louis would undertake the task of learning French.

9 Donald Trump's election to the American presidency will certainly affect French views of the United States, and probably mute the enthusiasm the country is currently enjoying in the contemporary French novel. His flamboyant personality, his ease with racist and sexist comments, his apparent indifference to the truth, along with his hypersensitivity to perceived slights, and seeming willingness to say the first thing that pops into his head, might provide a goldmine of inspiration to French artists. If so, it must be mined carefully. Caricature would appear to be the most obvious approach to writing about Trump, but it may not be as easy as it appears, since the finest caricaturist of the forty-fifth president of the United States is himself. A harder, but potentially more rewarding perspective for novelists would be fiction dealing with Trump's supporters, extreme right-wing Christians and secularists, as well as the legion of working-class whites who lost their jobs to technology and more effective or cleaner fuel supplies. In addition to being displaced by
Frères Ennemis

modernity, these people perceive themselves, with some justification, as being scorned by the liberal intelligentsia (“these deplorable people”) whose efforts to appeal to racial and sexual minorities at least have given the impression they no longer were interested in poor white people. A third possible theme for artists interested in writing about Trump’s Amérique is the fear engendered by the president’s violent and ill-considered rhetoric in reaction to possible threats to the American nation (“Fire and Fury”). Such language might prove to be little more than bluster and saber-rattling, but given the man’s unpredictability and power, one can never be sure. This fear affects every country on the planet and is perhaps one of the few issues where the American Congress might eventually manage a bipartisan reaction, since a war created by a mistake, a lapse in judgment, remains a war.

10 Once again the election of a new president has the potential to alter the literary landscape. If Macron’s pragmatic approach succeeds in effecting even slight change to labor laws, at breaking the impasse between the syndicats and the patronat, restructuring healthcare, and perhaps affecting a meaningful educational reform, France will become a different country, arguably one more inspiring to its artists than Trump’s America.

11 To list some of the most recent examples of this phenomenon: Jean Frémon’s Calme-toi, Lison (P.O.L.), a fictionalized account of the artist Louise Bourgeois; Benjamin Hoffmann’s American Pandemonium (Gallimard), a parody of an American disaster novel/movie; Antoine Bello’s Ada (Gallimard) a depiction of computer programming run amok in Southern California; and Simon Liberati’s California Girls (Grasset), the story of the havoc created by the Manson gang. All these novels were published in 2016.