

***The Life and Travels of Xavier Marmier (1808–1892).***

***Bringing World Literature to France, by Wendy S. Mercer,***

**A British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship Monograph,**

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**Loïc Guyon**

Wendy S. Mercer's biography of Xavier Marmier is in many respects a remarkable piece of work. Remarkable indeed for the quality and extent of the research undertaken in order to produce what is and will certainly remain the most comprehensive account of Marmier's life and publications. Remarkable also for the clarity and straightforwardness of Mercer's style and presentation which make her book very enjoyable to read despite the profusion of material and information covered. But what makes Mercer's book remarkable in the first place is its subject: the incredibly rich and interesting life of Xavier Marmier. This name may not be known to many nowadays, except perhaps by some specialists of nineteenth-century comparative literature, but Marmier, who became a member of the Académie française in 1870, was very famous and influential in his time. And the fact that his death in 1892 made the front page of all the major newspapers and reviews in France is not surprising given the extraordinary career and achievements of this tireless autodidact. It was at the age of 24 that

the young Marmier took the life-changing decision of leaving his native Franche-Comté and the Bibliothèque Municipale of Besançon, where Charles Weiss had secured for him a modest position of assistant librarian, to try his luck as a poet in Paris. Introduced by Weiss to Charles Nodier and the little romantic cénacle, Marmier quickly succeeded in being recognised as a talented and promising young poet. But unlike many ambitious young men of his generation, Marmier does not seem to have ever envisaged settling in Paris. In fact he was not to settle anywhere for a very long time since foreign lands were what really appealed to his inner self, his imagination and insatiable curiosity towards other cultures. In 1832 he undertook a two-year journey to Germany which was to become the first of an amazingly long list of travels. He left for Germany without being able to speak a word of German, but in the space of two years not only did he manage to learn the language, but also familiarise French people, through a vast number of articles and translations, with some of the most influential representatives of the German artistic and intellectual elite such as Uhland, Holtei, Schwab, Chamisso, Dannecker and Tieck. From his first trip to Germany, and from the many other journeys he made across the Rhine in the following years, Marmier produced an impressive amount of publications on German society and cultural life. His most celebrated contribution to the promotion of German literature in France remains his works on Goethe, but he also studied and translated such prominent authors as Hoffmann and Schiller, to name just a few. After Germany Marmier set off to Iceland in 1836 as part of the scientific and rescue expedition organised by the Commission du Nord. Having learnt Danish and Icelandic, he conducted a vast survey of the history, literature and mythology of the island and offered through his *Lettres d'Islande* a vivid account of Icelandic society. Through his works he became the first person to introduce Icelandic culture and literature to France. His association with the Commission du Nord then led him between 1837 and 1838 to visit Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland and Lapland. The subsequent series of publications he produced

during and after this new journey marked him, as Mercer states, ‘as the most influential Franco-Scandinavian intermediary of the era’. From Scandinavia Marmier went on, over a period of 17 years, to visit Russia, Poland, Holland, Switzerland, Austria, Italy, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Moldavia, Turkey, Palestine, Syria, Egypt, Algeria, the USA, Canada, Argentina, Uruguay and several of the Balkan states, learning on the way – in addition to the already acquired German, English, Danish and Icelandic languages – Sami, Dutch, Spanish, Russian, Serbo-Croat and Italian! During this period of almost constant peregrinations, he produced an impressive amount of travel accounts in various shapes or forms, including detailed surveys of the topography, administration, culture, life and customs of the visited countries. Everywhere he went Marmier came into contact with some of the most important local figures from all spheres of society, notably the literary and the political, but also the scientific, the artistic and the world of learning, making him a truly privileged witness and therefore one of the best informed observers of the regions he visited. After 1856 Marmier, inspired by all his travels, started a successful career of novelist which would open for him the doors of the Académie française: a true consecration for this translator, journalist, lecturer, linguist, ethnologist, literary critic and historian who began his career as a poet and whose first travels were therefore in the land of imagination. His love of literature and the pleasure he had in meeting fellow writers and poets all around the world is perhaps what characterises best Marmier’s attraction towards otherness. A complete bibliography of Marmier’s writings can be found at the beginning of the volume and Mercer offers the reader many very useful critical insights on the nature and value of their content. As stated on the book’s jacket, *The Life and Travels of Xavier Marmier* really is ‘an essential reading for everyone interested in nineteenth-century French literature and intellectual life, literary criticism, travel writing and the history of the regions Marmier visited’.