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### The Historian as Novelist

John Salmon  
*Bryn Mawr College*

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# BRYN MAWR COLLEGE

## Emeritus Gatherings

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### The Historian as Novelist

**John Salmon**

Delivered March 1, 2001

To start with, let me say that the title of the novel that is the subject of this talk is misleading. It reads: "The Muskets of Gascony: The Revolt of Bernard d'Audijos by Armand Daudeyos, translated by J. H. M. Salmon." This is false. When you write a historical novel things do seem to become falsified at times. I am the actual author, and Armand Daudeyos, the supposed descendant of the hero (Daudeyos is the Gascon form of d'Audijos) is a fiction. I adopted this device for several reasons. First, it adds an air of mystery to pretend that one has discovered the manuscript of a historical novel based on real events in the seventeenth century and written in the Romantic vogue of the nineteenth century. Second, it allows me to insert a "translator's preface" explaining how close the book is to what actually happened. And third, it protects me from the reproaches of my colleagues for betraying my profession. I have had to admit authorial responsibility because I soon found that many historians working in early modern French history knew full well that I had published a serious study of the Audijos revolt in an academic journal in 1984 and that this was reprinted in a volume of my collected essays entitled *Renaissance and Revolt* three years later. One might add that the game was given away in any case by both the London publisher and Borders book chain indicating on their websites that I was the author.

I intend to say something anecdotal about how the novel came to be written, something about the plot of the book itself, and something about the nineteenth-century mental constructs that went to its making.

When I started my serious investigation of the topic in the late 1970s, popular revolts in early modern France were the in-thing. If you were lucky enough to find an uprising that hadn't been worked on, supported by good departmental archives in an area with good cuisine, good wine and good scenery, life seemed good. I really enjoyed the research. On several occasions I spent time exploring the region, hiking and driving around, becoming used to things, getting the geography straight, admiring the scenery. The revolt occurred in southwest France and the Pyrenees. My first visit was quite adventurous. I had started my leave in Cambridge and had bought a second-hand car there. Its main selling point was that it had belonged to Peter Jones of the Monty Python crew. It lived up to its owner's reputation. When I crossed the Channel it insisted on driving on the wrong side of the road, and when I reached the Pyrenees the brakes began to fail. It was a perilous business driving down the side of a mountain in first gear, very, very slowly. Indeed there is an episode in the novel where the hero is escorting a couple of high born ladies, who traveled in a coach of sorts which had to be restrained by ropes on this same mountain track. Such is the fruit of experience!

Of course I had made some preliminary investigations in Paris before my trip to the south. Among my contacts was an anthropologist in the Musée de l'Homme who was interested in the genetics of some of the inbred communities in the Pyrenees. She put me in touch with the curé Larrouy whose village was in one of these areas. He was a marvelous man with a fund of stories about the strange ways of his parishioners, and a great guide to lesser-known byways in the mountains. I put him in the novel under an assumed name. Most of my work was in the local archives at Pau - a wonderful little town with its château where Henri IV was born. In the nineteenth century it was frequented by English tourists and sufferers from tuberculosis. Indeed there is a park there called "le Parc des Anglais." I was saved from having to go to Bordeaux, where many of the archives on the Audijos revolt are held, because a nineteenth-century antiquarian had assembled and published them. While working in Pau, then and on subsequent visits, I got to know a local historian who was exceedingly hospitable and helpful. His

subsequent visits, I got to know a local historian who was exceedingly hospitable and helpful. His Basque name, Tucoo-Chala, sounded like that of a Zulu chief. Behind his house was a high wire fence, which kept out the inmates of a mental institution. There were times when I felt that my host of thought of the outside world in similar terms. These are mere anecdotes, but the local color was important - far more important to writing the novel than it was to my more academic study.

As to the plot of the novel, I followed events from the archival record as they unfolded in the 1660s and early 16070s, using a modicum of imagination to interweave the unrecorded career of Audijos and his friends and enemies. The uprising was in response to the extension of the salt tax or gabelle. Parts of the area, especially Béarn, where there was a salt fountain, were exempt from the tax, and the product was smuggled northwest along the river system. These convoys were often interdicted by the guards of the bureau administering the tax in adjoining districts, and there were frequent affrays between them and the smugglers. A salt tax may seem a rather odd thing to be the cause of a rebellion, but salt was enormously important in the preservation of food, and besides, the salt bureau seemed to challenge the traditional privileges of areas that possessed semi-independent representative and judicial institutions. When Louis XIV began to exercise his own authority in 1661, and appointed Jean-Baptiste Colbert as his finance minister, these institutions were threatened by the absolute power of the new regime. The war with Spain had ended and several French regiments, including the one in which Audijos served, were disbanded. Offices and musketeers joined either the guards or the escorts of the salt convoys. As the tax pressure increased, resistance spread to the towns, and Audijos assumed the leadership of the movement. He and his guerilla bands kept several regiments of the king's dragoons at bay, and received aid and sympathy from all ranks in Gascon society. In response the authorities charged with repressing the revolt established a network of informers, and employed torture and terror against the rebels. The primitive peoples of the mountain valleys joined the revolt, and at one point hundreds of them laid siege to the town of Lourdes in a snow storm, clad in the skins of wild beasts, and howling round the city walls as if they themselves were wolves. When I first read of these colorful adventures in the archives and local memoirs, I could not help thinking what wonderful material this was for a historical novel, but I waited until I retired before I began to write it.

The novel involves far too many characters. That is because they were real people described in the reports of the local commissioner in his correspondence with Colbert, and I wanted to make the book as veridical as possible. Romance, in the popular sense, could not be excluded, but there were few women mentioned in the despatches of the *intendant*. I invented two - one a Basque witch name Carla Baroja - much of the action takes place in the Basque lands, including the town of Bayonne, where massive witchhunts had occurred in earlier generations. The other is the villainous of the book, the infamous Châtelaine de Sèvres, who plays a major role in the intelligence network of the *intendant*, and uses her charms to identify and betray the leaders of the revolt. Audijos himself has a brief affair with her before he discovers her machinations. The third important female character was a real person, Jeanne-Marie Dubourdieu, Audijos's childhood sweetheart.

Inventing fictional characters, and endowing real people with characteristics unmentioned in the record, suggest the issue I mentioned earlier - the betrayal of one's profession. Most academic historians are a little shamefaced about liking historical novels. There seems to be an eternal conflict between historian and novelist, fact and fiction, imagination and reality. But, you know, historians have to use their imagination. If you want to assess the motives people had for their actions in the past, you have to use imagination to try to grasp the mentality of those about whom you are writing.

The Romantic period in the nineteenth century marked a truce, if not an alliance, between novelist and historian, although there were some, such as Balzac, who did not share this attitude. "Historians," he said, "are privileged liars who lend their pens to support popular superstitions." For the most part historians at this time admired, and at times were inspired by, the better historical novels of the age. Some of the historical novelists, for their part, thought they were writing serious history, and even believed they were doing it rather better than the historians. This was either because they thought they had found certain moral truths in history, or because they had developed a grand schema about underlying forces that made history meaningful and explained the present in terms of the past. My own

underlying forces that made history meaningful and explained the present in terms of the past. My own ideas about this go back to the time when I taught the course I enjoyed teaching at Bryn Mawr more than any other - on historians and novelists among the French Romantics.

Perhaps I should say a word or two about how this alliance came about. First, there was Sir Walter Scott and his Waverly novels, which enjoyed a tremendous vogue in France, and were translated soon after they appeared. Scott relegated real historical personages to the background and invented his main characters, who often symbolized historical processes and ethnic rivalry. In *Ivanhoe*, for example, the characters stood for the long contest between Norman and Anglo-Saxon. The first major work by the leader of the new Romantic history, Augustin Thierry, *The Conquest of England*, was derived from Scott, and continued the theme into the English civil wars of the seventeenth century. His own schematization of French history into twelve hundred year of oppression of the Gauls by the Franks had a similar inspiration. When Victor Hugo reviewed Scott's *Quentin Durward* as a young man, he used the occasion to set out his own views about history, later to influence the novel that everyone knows, *Notre-Dame de Paris*, cast in the same period as *Quentin Durward*, the reign of Louis XI in the fifteenth century.

A second influence in the détente between literature and history was the existence of another popular genre, the historical drama or, rather, melodrama. Alexandre Dumas made his first reputation by writing history plays such as *Henri III et sa cour*, set in the Wars of Religion and the basis of a later trilogy of novels, one of which (well known today in its movie version) was *La Reine Margot*. Dumas, of course, had his collaborators and research assistants, and adopted a cavalier attitude to the material they provided. "History," he said, "is a nail on which I hang my novels." Hugo wrote a long history play about Oliver Cromwell, which, like my novel, had too many characters based on real personalities from the past to be performable on stage. When published, it had a long preface setting out his views of history and his doctrine of the grotesque. Another writer who, like Dumas, made his early reputation as a dramatist, and later achieved fame by publishing one of the best historical novels of the period, *Chronique du règne de Charles IX*, was Prosper Mérimée. His play, *La Jacquerie*, put on stage a vivid depiction of what life was like for the unprivileged in the mid-fourteenth century. It tried to bring the audience into direct touch with popular culture in the remote past, and its hidden message, like Hugo's very obvious one and the more sophisticated theme of the historians Thierry and Jules Michelet, was the development of democracy. *La scène historique* attempted, as Michelet put it, to "resurrect" the past. A third bridge between history and the novel was an attempt to make the past speak for itself without the intervention of the author. The technique was to string together extracts from memoirs and chronicles in a narrative that could read like a novel. The best example was Prosper Brugère de Barante's history of Burgundy.

Let me illustrate these generalizations by brief mention of three historical novels of the 1820s and early 1830s. Alfred de Vigny's *Cinq-Mars* concerned an aristocratic plot to remove Cardinal Richelieu, the first minister of Louis XIII, from power. Cinq-Mars the leading figure in the conspiracy was executed, and died for what Vigny called his noble ideal. Vigny was an aristocrat himself, and his thesis was that the old régime had been a contented and reasonably stable society until the crown had undermined the nobility and installed bureaucracy that corrupted the people, eventually resulting in the Revolution. A novel with a thesis indeed!

To read his preface one would not have expected a thesis of this sort in Mérimée's *Chronique*. Like *La Reine Margot*, this novel featured the massacre of St. Bartholomew's Day. The preface stated a preference for historical anecdotes rather than grand explanation, and treated the massacre as a spontaneous and fanatical uprising and not a conspiracy orchestrated by the great. There was, however, a hidden agenda - the deplorable nature of religious enthusiasm and the need for toleration. This is depicted through his two main characters, the Mergy brothers --one a Protestant and the other a kind of agnostic Catholic. No literary genre was foreign to Mérimée. He was also a serious historian who wrote some respectable Russian history and was an inspector of French historical monuments. *Notre-Dame de Paris*, like Mérimée's *Chronique*, showed the influence of Scott. The only historically real character of importance is the "Spider King," Louis XI, who appears briefly in the book as the cruel and ruthless avatar of modernity - the same legendary guise he had assumed in *Quentin Durward*. Nearly all the other characters are symbols of social forces: the sinister priest Claude Frollo represents a corrupt and

characters are symbols of social forces: the sinister priest Claude Frollo represents a corrupt and evil-minded clergy; his brother, Jehan, the carefree medieval student; Phœbus de Châteaupers the effete and irresponsible nobility; Clopin Trouillefou the destitute poor; Charmoloue the superstitious and pitiless magistracy. The gypsy Esmeralda is the face of innocence upon whom the world preys. Her deformed would-be protector, the misshapen dwarf Quasimodo, is the embodiment of Hugo's theory of the grotesque. He is also the spirit of the cathedral to which he adapts "as a snail takes the shape of its shell." Sitting sphinx-like in the midst of the old city, the cathedral is in a way the main character in the novel. It also represents for Hugo a cultural revolution. The forbears of the mob who try to storm the edifice to rescue Esmeralda were its builders, for the common people, Hugo would have it, raised its towers skyward in their aspiration for freedom. In the past architecture was the cultural symbol of civilization. Now "the stones of Orpheus" are being replaced by a new symbol, "the leaden letters of Guttenberg" (the printing press). Theses abound in this chaotic and entrancing novel.

Such are the mental constructs that bear upon relations between historian and novelist in the Romantic era. I do not pretend to compare my amateurish effort with the literary works I have mentioned, and I have spoken here about them merely to show the context from which *The Muskets of Gascony* supposedly was born. One of the most difficult problems was to fill in the gap when Audijos had taken refuge in Spain for several years. This involved another series of explorations on the south side of the Pyrenees. Through the work of a friend I learnt that there had been an international plot centered in Spain in the early 1670s to detach the southern provinces of France from the rule of Louis XIV, and turn them into republics. It seems likely that Audijos was involved in these intrigues, and disclosed them to the French government. At any rate he was granted a pardon, invited to raise a regiment from his partisans with the rank of colonel, and returned to France to marry Jeanne-Marie. This actually happened and there the novel ends. I enjoyed writing it, and hope that some of the pleasure I had in its making may rub off on the reader. I have not sought to teach history lessons or develop grand explanatory themes like Scott, Vigny, Mérimée or Hugo, but simply to bring to lie a fairly true story of adventure and romance.