

**POUZET-DUZER VIRGINIE**, PhD. Candidate in French, Department of Romance studies, Duke University, Spring 2008 (dissertation to be defended April 14th, 2008)

## **L'IMPRESSIONNISME LITTÉRAIRE: CAPTURE DE L'INSAISSABLE**

**Dissertation's director:** Professor David F. Bell

**Dissertation's committee:** Professors Paol Keineg, Peter McIsaac & Jean-Jacques Thomas.

My dissertation is a rethinking of the categories commonly used by critics to describe the literary creations published in the last thirty years of the nineteenth century. This work has been an ongoing project of mine since I realized that British and American literature crossed a period of literary impressionism, German and Austrian canon mentioned "*Impressionismus*" in literature, but "*impressionnisme littéraire*" was nowhere to be found among all the "*isms*" commonly required to describe the literature of that time. As a matter of fact, as I discovered and show in my dissertation, "*impressionnisme littéraire*" was mentioned by Ferdinand de Brunetière only a few years after the official group of painters was born. Yet that name did not prevail and literary critics did not keep a word whose vagueness, uncertainty – and femininity – was actually the best possible description of its own positive and effective subjectivity.

Three distinct yet organically connected moments are to be found in this dissertation. Evolving from the whole to the parts – hence voluntary dismembering the unknown body of the impressionist's writer – focus goes from the portrait to the hand and then to the eye, with the purpose of establishing what is grasped in between. At the same time, the progression goes from painting to writing and finally reading, from the initial construction of the figure of the artist towards the literary death of the subject.

The first part sets the scene and is a historical overview of the Paris of the years 1870-1900. Instead of following a strictly chronological order, I follow Barthes' idea of texts and images creating a web of signs by considering the portraits impressionists painters made of writers of their time, and by comparing them to the elegiac texts these writers wrote about the painters. The second part focuses on the writer's hand, which can capture and write. Taking into account the fact that stylistics is the decoration of a text, I question the usual canonic boundaries in "*isms*" before inquiring genres issues such as poetry and stream of consciousness. The third part takes the synecdoche of the impressionist's eye as a point of departure to consider the fragmentation of city life for men and women of the nineteenth century, and shows how strolling through an exhibited Paris was connected to the matter of reading. In the end, it reveals that structure (frames & windows) is used by painters & writers to capture femininity, but also to help impressionism blossom.