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ACLA 2017, Seminar with Richard Hibbitt: "Other Capitals of the Nineteenth Century"

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Paris and Stockholm in the novels *Illusions Perdues* de Balzac and *The Red Room* by August Strindberg

I propose to study the conceptions of Paris and Stockholm in the two realist novels *Illusions Perdues* by Honoré de Balzac (1837-1843) and *The Red Room* (1879) by August Strindberg, perhaps the first modern novel in Swedish literature. In both cases, a young man, Arvid Falk and Lucien de Rubempré, starts a journey in the capital at the beginning of the novel, not just a geographical one – from a rural context to a city context in Balzac's case and within the capital in Strindberg's – but also an existential journey. The hero's movement from the local milieu to the global, cosmopolitan context represents a transformation of values and it means that many illusions and prejudices are exchanged for truths and insights, for instance about the corrupted world of artists and journalists.

In both novels the hero becomes very attached to the capital, despite the dangers and harsh realities it represents – as if it were a person, sometimes a stranger, in the end an intimate friend.

My observations focus on the main characters, and the impressions and emotions that the city – and the rural context – arise in them. From the point of view of for instance Walter Benjamin, I will also look at this theme of the capital in a larger context and make some comparisons with non-fictional accounts about the two capitals by contemporary intellectuals and writers in Scandinavia and France.